

Pine Hollow Series  
BOOK III

A Goddess of  
ICE  
&  
DAWN

K.M. Moronova

# *A Goddess of Life & Dawn*

*Pine Hollow Series*

**KM Moronova**

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# Content Warnings

*The contents of this book may be disturbing or triggering for some readers. This is a dark romantasy novel and the overall mood/atmosphere of the book is gloomy and depressing. I touch on some very emotional topics around characters that question their reality and mental health.*

*This book contains: explicit sex, threesomes, orgy, chase kink, biting kink, blood kink, explicit gore, violence, death, pet loss trauma, mental illness, bullying.*

# Playlist

Six feet under - Bille Eilish

Haven't I given enough - gilded lily sped up

Angel by the wings - Sia

To die for - Sam smith

Afterlife - Illenium

No Rival - Egzod, Maestro Chives & Alaina Cross

Royalty - Egzod, Maestro Chives & Alaina Cross

Rescue - Lauren Daigle

What I've done - linkin park

Running up that hill (Kate Bush) TOTEM Remix

Last Resort - falling in reverse (Arulius fight scene song)

See you again - wiz khalifa (boyce avenue feat Bea Miller)

Flying - tom odell

Overcome - Skott

Long, long time ago - Javier Navarrete (Ascension chapter)

# Also by KM Moronova

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# In the Dark

## Rune

Her eyes are the last beautiful drops of light I see before falling into the dark.

It's empty and cold here. The tendrils of hope are already being pulled from me. But I'd do it again.

I would do it a million times over for her. My sweet Elodie—she'll be okay. I *have* to believe that she'll be okay. She has Wren and Kastian and, as much as I hate him, Arulius too.

I was never a permanent part of her story... I know that now. But gods, what I'd do to kiss her one last time.

Dark water rises to my neck, and the chill sets deeper into my soul. I wrap my arms around my knees and hold my breath. I'm not sure if I'll actually drown in the ocean of darkness that is my conscience, but I try to send one last desperate thought to her anyway.

Please hear me—*please*.

# I

Elodie

**D**ust whirls over the rubble of the fallen city. Nesbrim is on its knees, and my precious Rune stands before me with my blood coating his skin. The silence that falls upon us all is deafening.

No one saw this coming—I did not see this coming.

I was ready... I was prepared to die for all of them. My heart races as my hands curl around Rune's black shirt.

Take it back.

*Take. It. Back.*

*"Take a breath—you will be okay, pup. You never needed me—I was the one who needed you."*

The tattoo on my spine warms for what might be the last time, and the ice that follows burns straight into my core.

Rune's soft crimson eyes slowly lose the affection and warmth they've always held and an unfamiliar, murderous gaze overtakes them.

*North.*

I'm immobilized with denial. This cannot be happening. Why... Why did Rune have to do that? Does this change anything? We do not have the means to destroy the War God. Dying with him in my vessel was the only way to send him back into his slumber.

Tears stream down my cheeks as a blur flashes by me. Wren's translucent leaves lash in the air with his speed and pulse with a bright glow from the power that thrums through his veins. He reaches out to Rune's neck and barely manages to tap his throat. A crimson Vernovian Thorn wraps around his neck securely.

Rune smirks sinisterly and snaps his fist up, punching Wren without hesitation and sending him flying back. His power is irrefutably horrifying, and it tears my heart from my chest to watch as the darkness of the War God takes over my beautiful drop of blood in the snow.

He gives me one last look before a shroud of black aura consumes him, and just like that, Rune is gone.

Everything is fucking gone.

My breaths are labored from the ache that has burrowed itself in my chest. Aura exertion pulls at my muscles, begging me to fall to my knees. My bones are weary, and as I slump to the ground, I can't help but wonder if anything we've done has mattered. It seems like we have only made things worse.

Much, *much* worse.

Maybe if I sleep, I'll wake up from this horrible dream.

Tears continue falling from my cheeks as I stare at the space where Rune just stood. Wren groans in pain beside me. He fell valiantly after placing the Vernovian Thorn around Rune's neck. The Cypress sits up and rubs his head. His own blood spills from some of the cuts on his face and torso. His dark cloak is now more crimson than charcoal gray.

Arulius is still unconscious and undergoes healing from Kol. My golden god lies so still, I'd think he was dead if not for his friend desperately trying to fix him. Rune's brother's eyes meet mine for a moment, and all the fear and heartache I feel is reciprocated in his gaze. He's lost his dear little brother and is hardly keeping his comrade alive.

The only sound is that of my heartbeat, frantically trying to find the silver lining in all of this chaos.

A hand intertwines with mine, instantly calming the storm in my head. I gaze up to my side and find Kastian's calm ocean eyes comforting me as best he can. His neck is still healing from the severance... I look down at my hand in disbelief. *I* was the one to hurt him and Arulius. My skin is sticky with dark blood—proof that I beheaded my beloved Death God and nearly killed him.

*Thank gods for Borvon, and thank gods for Talia too.*

The chest-heaving sobs finally take over as I press my face into Kastian's chest. He wraps his arms tightly around me and follows me into the depths of my turmoil.

“Shhh, it's okay, Elodie. It's... It's all going to be okay.” His voice breaks as he gently rocks us and I wail as the pain settles deeper into my soul. The only thing I have left of Rune is the tattoo on my spine. I cannot hold him anymore.

I can't do this—I *can't* do this.

How much pain and suffering must my heart endure for the Rhythm... I never wanted any of this suffering. I never asked for all this sacrifice.

Kastian's tears fall on my cheeks and I barely manage to look up at him. The anguish in his eyes is as tender as my own. His teeth grit tightly, and words seem impossible to conjure.

Wren struggles to his hands and knees, crawling over to us and wrapping himself around me as well. He gives Kastian a hopeless yet stern glare. “Stop fucking crying, Death God.” His voice sounds shaky as he caresses my head and soothingly rubs my temple with his thumb. “Elodie, I need you to sleep. Your aura has been depleted and you're suffering so much right now. Can you sleep for me?”

Wren's magic gently ebbs into me from his fingertips, and I can already feel the calm they bring, trying to coerce me into sleeping. I shake my head though. There's so much to do—I can't just rest while everyone else picks up the pieces.

“Elodie, please do as he says,” Kastian murmurs against my forehead, pressing somber kisses across my skin.

Even as I fight against it, my head starts to bob, and the universe seems to hush around me. My eyelids are so very heavy. Surely it's okay to close them for just a second. I begin to shut my eyes, and as I do, I see Rune crouched next to me, smiling and promising me forever.

He guides me into the dark shallows of my dreams. I'd stay forever if I could.

## 2

### Wren

I'm the only fucking voice of reason. I swear to gods.

Kastian's lost hold of his emotions and is putty in Elodie's hands. Arulius is an inch from the second death and everything is a full-on shitstorm.

Elodie's head bobs one final time before she's finally resting, and a nostalgic expression consumes her features. She's probably dreaming of *him*. I tried to infuse as much of his comfort into my magic as I could to get her to go down.

My sweet goddess. I'm torn up inside seeing her hurt like this.

As much as it pains me to leave her side, I have to get things moving. We can't sit out here waiting for something to look up.

Moro stands with a sorrowful look on his face as he gazes down at the ruins of Nesbrim. Stones still tumble from the cottages. Even from this distance, I can see civilians scrambling to move to the safety of the northern part of the city.

I stand and ignore the searing pain in my bones as I charge at Moro. He turns to meet my gaze and doesn't try to block the punch I land across his face.

"You *motherfucker*. Why did you let this happen? This is all YOUR fault!" I yell with a raspy voice. My throat burns



like I've consumed acid, but my rage burns far hotter.

Why didn't he come out and tell us he was Lucius? Why would he let this happen... Why?

Kastian watches with confusion. He missed that part of the absolute hell today has been while fighting with Arulius. If he knew, I think Moro would already be dead.

Moro hits the ground and stays there, propping himself up on one arm and spitting blood. He looks up at me and frowns. "The Rhythm... I couldn't jeopardize it."

I summon vines from the ground, and they wrap around my old friend's throat. He's been in Tomorrow for centuries, the wisest of us all. Even if he didn't fully come to terms with it until he met with the God of Memories, why would he let this happen? Violet only wanted *him*. That was all she longed for. This chaos could have been completely avoided.

"You're such a piece of shit—it disgusts me." I tighten my fists and the vines follow suit. I'm not sure I even want to hear him out. Moro doesn't scream *villain* to me, but with all the shit that's happened, Elodie's not the only one with trust issues anymore.

"I've wrestled with this guilt in ways you'll never understand, Cypress, but it had to unfold this way. The Rhythm is not in sync and *never* will be whole without North. It's been written in the stars, and no amount of interference would've made anything better. Keeping my identity silent was the only way to let things naturally play out—don't you see that? We *must* see this through."

I grit my teeth and curl my fingers tighter, beckoning the vines to strangle the life from him. We don't need the War God to have a complete Rhythm. The world is better off without all the carnage that is North. Violet falls to Moro's side, and the mere touch of her fingers disintegrates my magic.

"Leave him be!" she hisses at me and tries to hug Moro—*Lucius*. Shit, I don't even know what to call him anymore.

Moro shoves her away and stands with a painful wince. Violet hesitates at his side. I can see the agony this wreaks on

her soul, but karma is a bitch, isn't it? If anyone deserves to suffer, it's her. And honestly, I'm not sure we can let her live. I glance over to Kastian, who's standing and limping toward me with Elodie in his arms. I won't decide who dies or gets cut from our group until she's awake. We owe her that much, and we're all exhausted.

"Kastian, can you fly?" I keep my eyes on Moro and Violet. It hurts not being able to trust someone you thought was your friend... He's been through so much with us. This one stings even more than Arulius's betrayal did.

The Death God nods and stretches his wings slowly. He looks weary, and I pray to the gods he can make the flight back to his glades. I glance at Kol and Arulius. It's going to be a pain in the ass to bring him back, and honestly, I really don't want to, but Elodie made it clear that she wishes to repair things with him. He *did* help to try to save her in the end, so maybe we can figure out what the fuck is going on.

*Such a fucking godsdamn mess.* I run my hand down my face. Gods, I'm tired.

"Moro... we're going to the Death Glades. I can't stand the fucking sight of you right now, but you better show up in exactly one week. You'll have to explain this thoroughly if you truly are a salvageable soul." I glare at him and shift my eyes to Violet. "You come along too. Save us the hassle of hunting your pathetic ass down, *your highness.*"

Her brows knit as she lowers her head. She is wholly defeated, isn't she? I see the shell of the woman she once was before me. She was ruined in a mere moment.

*Good.*

Moro nods and starts limping toward the northern gates of Nesbrim. The thought of him hobbling all the way to the Keeper's village doesn't make for a good image in my head, but this can be part of his penance too.

Kastian takes to the sky and shouts down to me, "I'm taking her back now. Do you need me to come back for you?"

My blood boils, and I can't keep the venom from my lips. "And leave our goddess alone? *No.*" I don't miss the slight glint in his eyes that say he appreciates my nasty attitude. Someone has to be a godsdamn adult around here.

I watch him fly steadily into the sky, and when I no longer see him, I return my attention to Arulius. I have no clue how we will get to the glades... And what about Marley? Fuck, Marley is still with the Hollows at the Keeper's cottage.

I groan and fist my hair. We set every single Hollow free. Arulius can't fly. I'm *not* carrying him.

"Have Willow take Arulius. I will take you where you need to go."

My shoulders flinch at the sound of Kol's voice. Turning to gaze at him, I narrow my eyes. "Why would you wish to help? Haven't you done enough?" Kol's face is smothered in dirt and blood. His dark hair and black horns are almost hard to tell apart.

He looks worriedly at the golden god. "He is my closest friend, and after hearing all of that... He needs to be close to her when he awakes. My High Lady no longer reigns here, and Nesbrim has fallen. My brother is *gone.*" He clenches his fists in the dirt and lifts his eyes to mine. "I need to make things right."

I raise a brow. "I find that hard to believe, but I'll take the help. Then you can fuck off—got it?" Kol considers me for a few moments, then nods. Well, this is working out better than I thought it would.

He waves an Eostrix over, and I'm assuming this is Willow. Her dark hair and ivory wings are untouched—dead giveaways that she took no part in the shitshow.

Kol tells her to take Arulius to Kastian's glades. She obeys him without hesitation and flies easily with Arulius limp in her arms.

"Don't tell me, you have an invisible weird creature that you ride around on," I grumble as I take out a well-deserved joint from my pocket, sparking it with Elodie's pink lighter

and taking a long inhale. The crisp, woody smell wraps around my senses and brings a wave of calm over me.

Kol keeps his face expressionless and ignores me as he wipes the blood off his hands. Arulius's blood, probably—he sacrificed his own flesh in an attempt to save his cherished goddess. I've never witnessed a display of power like that from him before.

I clench my fists and shake the thoughts from my head. He still betrayed us, and I'm pissed no matter how much he got his ass kicked.

“Of course not. It's Violet's Hollow,” Kol mumbles and shoots me a wry grin. I frown and take another hit from my joint before he drops the veil over the creature. My eyes widen, and my joint hits the dirt.

“Great. The only Hollow I'll never like.”

# 3

Elodie

Feathers—I'm entirely wrapped in beautiful ebony feathers tipped with gold. *Kastian*. My lips curve into a smile as his sage scent swells around me, consuming me and urging me to burrow further into his nest of black feathers. His arms hold me loosely, and his deep breaths tell me he's still far away in his dreams.

My nightmares begin the second my eyes open—into a realm where war has taken peace. My heart clenches painfully in my chest. The tattoo on my spine has never felt colder. Did that all truly happen? I'm reluctant to move. Wouldn't it be nice just to sleep and pretend the bad things never came to pass?

I lie in *Kastian*'s perfect nest for a few minutes. I carefully slip from his arms and wings after I accept that I won't be able to go back to sleep. The crisp air settles on my skin, making me shiver. I rub my arms as my eyes drift across the dark room.

It's familiar. I've slept here before—many, many times. *Kastian*'s large bed is draped in black blankets and pillows. Moonlight drips in through the open windows, and my gaze catches on an *Eostrix* in the corner of the room, sitting on the edge of a couch with his hands gripped tightly together and holding his head down as if he's praying.

Arulius—my somber golden god.

I hesitate to speak or move. What would I even say? Are there words for times like this? I meant what I said before he passed out. I forgive him. Nothing lasts forever. This cruel realm has proven that to be true time and time again.

I don't want to let our unfortunate past ruin what *could* be. The realms need us now more than ever. The human realm cannot be thrown back into the chaos of war. I fist the sheets and clench my teeth.

I will *never* give up on Rune. If his sacrifice taught me anything, it is that love will persevere, even through the darkest of times.

“Love, you should rest.” His voice is a mere whisper, and my heart sinks with the grief I hear in it. I glance down at Kastian. He's still fast asleep. I know how they must feel about Arulius, but he's here. That in itself is a testament to how much my gods care for me. They'd let the one who hurt all of us remain this close solely because I wished for it.

I shift off the bed and walk over to Arulius. The cold tiled floors take the heat from my feet, and the chill in the air spreads goosebumps across my skin. He lifts his head and gazes at me with sad amethyst eyes.

We share this moment of silence. The only luminance comes from the moonlight between us. It is as though half of my soul has been torn away, and Arulius looks at me like he believes it's entirely his fault.

He lifts his hand for mine. The silken, pale light kisses his skin as he waits for me. His golden-tipped hair glints like lost gems in a dark sea, and his beautiful gilded wings arch behind him. I smile, and as I do, tears immediately start falling silently down my cheeks. His eyes soften, and he bites his lip to keep whatever it is he's thinking to himself. But I want to hear it—I want to hear everything—because anything is better than the horrible silence that Rune's left me with.

I reach for his hand, and the warmth of his palm pacifies the blood in my veins. He pulls me down to his lap and wraps his arms around me delicately, brushing my dark hair over my shoulder and carefully guiding his fingertips across my

jawline. His touch is soft, as if I will break under any more pressure.

Our eyes meet, and he gives me a soul-crushing smile as he murmurs, “Everything’s going to be okay, love. I swear to all the gods in every realm that I will fix *this*.” He presses his hand down over my heart, and my tears flow more with the weight of his promise. “I won’t let my existence stain your beautiful life anymore.” He grits his teeth and leans down, pressing a long, forlorn kiss against my forehead.

I shake my head. “You’re not a stain, Arulius. You’re a part of me, as I am you.” I choke back the sob that threatens to break me. “I’m me *because* of you.” I weave my fingers through his hair and take in his sweet scent. I’d never have become *me* if it weren’t for Arulius. Talia lives within me somewhere, perhaps I am her, but this consciousness I bear would never have been created if our pasts hadn’t collided.

“You’re not angry that I exist?” His beautiful eyes lift to meet mine.

“Stop talking like that. Is that truly how you see yourself?” I guess I thought Arulius was always so strong... I never took the time to think about the battles he fights within himself.

He shrugs, letting his eyes drift to the window. They reflect the star-filled sky, and I want to pretend for a moment that everything is as it was the first time he and I came here together. The weeks that we spent sharing each other’s emotions and mourning Kastian. We’re right back at square one. As heavy as my grief is, I’m so grateful to have Kastian and Wren by my side this time around. Speaking of which, Wren isn’t in the room. Did he make it back safely?

I shift in Arulius’s lap and lift my head to the door. He seems to read my thoughts.

“Wren is downstairs with Kol and Willow. A few others as well. They’ve been up all night trying to get a few things sorted.” I look back at him and he furrows his brows because he knows he’s being entirely too vague. “There’s some shit that went down with Moro. Apparently, Kastian and I missed it while we were fighting over Nesbrim.”

I flinch. The memories I have of North controlling my body feel more like a dream than anything. They are blurry, but I recall some of the things that happened, one of which being that *Moro is Lucius*.

“Gods... He’s Lucius, isn’t he? But if he knew, then why didn’t he help us?” My heart sinks. I don’t want to think of my dear friend as someone who’d betray us. I know Moro—he’s the wisest of us all. There has to be a reason for his actions.

Arulius slides me off his lap and sits at my side, letting his wings slump wearily behind him. “Who knows? Wren only filled me in briefly after he arrived. He’s sort of taking charge right now.” He rubs the back of his head like he’s annoyed with that fact.

I glance down at my hands. They are clean of dirt and blood. Kastian took the time to care for me even though he must’ve been so tired. He sleeps soundly even as Arulius and I whisper. Borvon bringing him back from the cusp of death was no easy feat. He must be exhausted.

“Is Moro *here*?”

Arulius shakes his head. “Wren is having him meet us here in one week’s time. To plan what we do next, I’m guessing. Shit—everything is chaos right now. North is...” He stops himself and tightens his lips, meeting my gaze with remorse.

*Rune.*

North has his body and will bring absolute horror to the realms—the likes of which we’ve probably never seen. I set my palms on my knees as a wave of despair consumes me. I take a steadying breath before I mutter, “North is going to destroy the human realm.”

Arulius gives me a grim nod. “We have to do something.”

The air is dense with our dread. I raise a brow at him and try to lighten the mood.

“So, are you on *our* side again?”

His eyes widen and his mouth parts briefly before relief spreads through his features. “I was only ever on the side that



kept air in your lungs, love. I don't care what others think of me. I'll continue to only ever be on the side that keeps you alive. No matter the cost." I narrow my gaze at him and he smirks. "And Violet has Lucius back now, or at least is no longer searching for him, so I'm not concerned that she wishes ill of you any longer."

I tilt my head and try to recall the blurry memories, but nothing surfaces.

"Moro rejected her. Not really surprising, is it?"

It's not. So why do I have a pit of sorrow festering in my chest for Violet? To have longed for your other half for centuries, only to realize they no longer yearn for your affection. The same poison that ruined her brought death to the love they once shared too. It's poetically sad, though wrought from her own doing.

Kastian stirs and jolts up, scaring the shit out of me and making Arulius flinch as well. His white tousled hair carries the evidence of a brutal rest, but his eyes are alert as they search for me. His ocean gaze lands on me and I watch as his body visibly relaxes. He lets out a weary sigh.

"Sorry—I couldn't sleep," I mumble, guilt tugging at my smile. Kastian wrapped me up in his nest for a reason. All of our senses are on high alert right now.

The War God is awake, and there's no telling what he has planned for us.

"No, don't apologize. I'm just having a hard time resting." Kastian runs his hand along the back of his neck and slumps his wings.

"Sounds like we're all fucked up now." Arulius laughs. My black-winged Eostrix shoots him a death glare, but I see agreement in his gaze.

We *are* all fucked up.

I move toward the door. I'm dressed in a simple white nightgown, but what I'm wearing is the least of my worries at the moment. Wren is downstairs planning everything out, pulling all the weight while we recover.

Kastian is at my side in seconds, draping a black silken cloak around my shoulders. I glance up at his eyes as he mumbles, “Let’s help the Cypress before he loses all his hair.”

My heart warms with how much we all seem to have grown in such a short amount of time, but then again, I guess we are like, what, thousands of years old or something?

Arulius moves to stand behind us. His presence is dimmer than it once was. Like the fire in his soul has diminished through the night.

*You’re not angry that I exist?*

I reach back and take his hand. Arulius twitches, his eyes meeting mine with a flicker of surprise. Kastian observes him but doesn’t butt in.

“Come on, Wren’s waiting for us,” I murmur. My golden Eostrix smiles sadly before nodding.

The cold marble of Kastian’s manor is oddly welcoming. It’s been almost a year since I’ve been here, and it’s never quite felt this... *alive*. The hallways arch high, and dawn is already peeking through the onyx-framed windows. Our steps echo through the second floor until we reach the curved staircase that leads down. Wren’s voice is loud through the foyer, and I quicken my pace to get to him.

The three of us round the double doors to the dining room and see familiar faces that instantly lift my spirits. Kastian’s long table is as immense as I remember, though the air of loneliness that guarded this place has faded.

Wide eyes and relieved smiles greet us as we stand in the doorway. Tears brim in my eyes the second I see Naminé and Greysil. I’m shocked to see Kol and Willow, but I don’t let their presence draw me out of this moment. Wren’s amber eyes warm on me as he stalks over and pulls me into a tight hug.

“There you are. We’ve been waiting for you.” His deep voice spills into my soul, and I take a deep breath of *him*. His pine scent consumes me and everything he sends through the space between us is filled with calm energy.

“How long have I been asleep?” I ask, not really wanting an answer, but Wren’s reassuring hold soothes me.

“A few days. We’ve been letting you rest up. Fuck, we have all been trying to rest as much as we can.” He releases me and steps back to the table. Naminé crashes into me and hugs me so viscously that I’d think it was an assault if I didn’t know her.

She cries and I can’t hold my tears back anymore either. We both sob in one another’s arms. “I was so worried about you, Elodie. And Rune... I’m so sorry. I’m so, *so* sorry.” She squeezes me and I press my face into her shoulder to muffle the wail and heart-shattering pain I feel rip through my chest at the mention of his name.

“He’s... he’s gone, Naminé.” She strokes my back comfortingly, even though she herself is trembling from the raw emotions—he was her friend too, after all. The three of us made more happy memories in Nesbrim than I’ve had in all my time in Tomorrow.

Naminé shakes her head. “He’s not gone. North can’t have him. We’ll cross any gods in our path if it means bringing him back.” She pushes me an arm’s length away, keeping her hands on my shoulders. Fury now flashes through her sad eyes. “I *won’t* let him take our friend.”

I hold my lower lip firm between my teeth and nod. “Thank you... all of you.” I look at every creature in the room. They’re all here for a reason, whether to restore the Rhythm or because they don’t know what’s right anymore. Nesbrim is wholly ruined. Violet isn’t here, so hopefully she’s helping fix the city she destroyed. My eyes land on Kol and Willow and instinctively narrow with distrust.

Wren motions for all of us to take a seat. I sit in the chair next to his at the head of the table. Kastian takes one on my other side while Arulius moves to sit at the end of the table, far from everyone.

“All right, basically, we’re at rock bottom right now, but you know what the good thing about that is?” The Cypress flicks his gaze to me like he has the answer from the gods and

it will fix everything. I shrug. “This *should* be as bad as it can get.”

I raise a brow. “And that’s your opening speech? Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I can’t help but give him a wry smile because he looks so sure of himself right now.

Wren laughs, pulls out a joint, sparks it with my pink lighter, and presses it between his lips. “Yeah, it was supposed to.” Kastian shakes his head disapprovingly, but I can’t help but laugh too. My Cypress nudges me with his elbow as he continues, “Kol and Willow feel like assholes now that they see what serving the High Lady has gotten them. Over half of Nesbrim has been reduced to rubble, and thanks to you, not a single person died, but the effects of the ruined city are detrimental.” Kol and Willow bow their heads. I’ve never seen either of them so humbled. “They’re willing to help correct what’s been wronged. I’m not asking anyone to forgive each other, but we need to work together if we’re going to stop the War God.”

I nod. Honestly, I’m so tired I don’t even have the energy to bear ill will toward these two. “What of Moro?”

Wren’s expression hardens as Moro’s name leaves my lips, and he intertwines his fingers on the table. I wonder if Kastian ever thought his dining area would turn into a war room like this.

“Moro is arriving in five days. He’s promised to aid in correcting the Rhythm. He may be twisted and secretive, but I don’t think we’re in a place to refuse his help. He, unfortunately, has answers that we need.” Wren’s amber eyes darken. It’s obvious he has mixed emotions about Moro, just as we all do now.

I notice a small pair of shoes in the corner of the dining room. “Is Marley here?” My worries diminish as Wren grins and nods.

“Kol and I picked him up on the way here. Marley is in bed, as we all should be at this hour.” He picks up the mug before him and takes a long sip of tea. “We also brought Margo and Brevrik back with us.”

I'm relieved that Margo is here, at least that takes one worry off my mind. I lean over the table, grab Wren's mug from him as he sets it down, and take a sip of the bitter liquid. The hot tea feels amazing on my sore throat, and I already feel the effects helping me wake up.

"Well... What are we doing until Moro arrives?" Naminé speaks up beside me, setting her hand on my shoulder supportively.

Wren's gaze warms on her. "We're going to take a breath and re-center ourselves because everything going forward won't be easy. We all need to rest while we can."

Arulius taps his forefinger on the table, drawing all our attention to him. He's been so quiet I almost forgot he was even here.

"Was any of this ever easy?"

# 4

## Kastian

**M**y glade seems to have changed overnight, not because of all the extra bodies here, but because of the life that has sprouted from the ashes.

We all stand in the terrarium, one of my favorite rooms in the mansion. The walls are made of huge panes of glass and the space could hold three stories worth of ballrooms. Elodie reaches up to one of the glass walls and presses her hand delicately against it. Our eyes all fill with awe and confusion.

My glades... they are *alive*.

Fresh blades of grass are just starting to peek out from beneath the ash that has laid claim to my home for, well, *forever*, at least for as long as I've been here. The blackened trees bear buds of pink and white flowers.

"But... these are the *Death Glades*," I mutter as chills run up my spine. "How can... How—"

"Life has returned here." Wren wraps his arm around Elodie's shoulder. The sleeve of his dark sweater easily engulfs her small frame. She looks up at him, her beautiful honey-brown eyes searching his for any sort of answer. "Your forest in the human realm turned to ash along with you. It's rising here with its rightful goddess. It has been reborn in Tomorrow as you have."

She lets out a breath that catches on her smile. It's the first full smile she's graced us with since waking up. Elodie moves from under Wren's arm and moves into my own, knocking the air from my lungs as her eyes shimmer their beautiful wonder, staring into mine with enough hope to light the darkest night.

"I knew your glades were my home from the moment I arrived here. I could sense it in my bones, whether it's filled with ash or not." Her breath warms my lips and I can't help but grin. A chuckle slips through my lips because her warm heart is so fucking contagious.

"I knew *you* were my home the moment you said you didn't hate it."

She laughs and I set her back down. Arulius crosses his arms beside me and keeps his stern expression. It's obvious he prefers his lavish manor back in Nesbrim. My Death Glades are subpar to him, I'm sure. He's welcome to leave whenever he wishes, but we all know he won't leave Elodie's side.

Nor will any of us—she's finally home.

My smile widens as she opens the glass double doors and the chill of early spring touches our skin. Puffs of air swell from our lips and lift into the cloudy sky.

I follow her outside, as do Wren and Arulius. Marley races past us, his baggy gray coat blending with the ash. Willow and Kol remain inside, staring dumbfounded at the life that brims within my land of bones. The crisp scents of a chilly spring day and rain greet my nose, forcing a smile that sends goosebumps up my arms.

I've never experienced anything like this in my glades before. It's as breathtaking as it is somber. These lands took *everything* from me. The companions banished here with me all suffered a terrible fate. The ground is rich with their bones and left me with an immeasurable amount of loneliness and reluctance to seek others... but now, it's as if Elodie has cured the very soil, transforming it from poison to an elixir.

My goddess spreads her wings and takes to the sky, looking back at us with a little hope brimming in her eyes.

She needn't even ask—my wings spread and I'm taking to the sky within seconds, leaving Arulius behind. I glare back at him to ensure he doesn't join us. I soar past her quickly and stretch my muscles. The wind ruffles my black feathers and new breath is forced into my lungs.

“Show-off!” She laughs and the sound of her wings beating reverberates through the space between us. Elodie catches up faster than I thought she could. Arulius taught her well, I'll give him that. Her short wing doesn't seem to affect her ability to fly at all. I don't know what I'd do to that cruel Cypress if it did.

Elodie circles around me and I turn my body so we're swirling in the air as if in a silent dance. My black feathers nearly touch her beige ones. Together we reach new heights above the waking forest. It's still dark beneath us as dawn hasn't quite reached over the mountain peaks in the distance, but up here, the sun collides with my skin softly. It's a morning I will not soon forget. I'm not alone anymore and am not afraid to be either. She's brought me friends, love, and so much more.

A smile pulls at her lips and she tilts her head to the side, her brown eyes catching the dawn's light as she murmurs, “What?”

I smile back at her and press my head against hers. She takes a deep inhale and wraps her arms around me. Her pine scent consumes me—I wonder if she knows that she and the Cypress have the same scent. It's bothered the fuck out of me since we met, but now it makes sense. They have a strange bond, just as we all seem to have with her in one way or another.

He is her forest. A Cypress among the pines. I am death, her stark opposite, yet we meld so completely.

I laugh and run one hand across the back of her neck and the other around her lower back. Her goosebumps send shivers up my spine as I bend down so my lips meet the soft flesh of her throat. “I was just admiring how beautiful you look in the dawn's light.” I run my tongue along her artery. She breathes



heavily as she burrows her face into my neck, but she hesitates to drink from me. “Don’t worry, North broke the curse Violet placed on you. You’re free to drink Eostrix blood again.”

She pulls away and shakes her head. I pull my brows together at the sight of the tears building in her eyes.

Elodie’s always been one to wear her heart on her sleeve. Rune undoubtedly is heavy on her mind. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand her pain completely, but I lost her for seven fucking months. So, I know what it’s like to lose the one you love. It’s not something you can easily express.

You simply endure it.

I nod and shift my eyes back down to my glades and she follows suit. “I can’t believe the forest is growing. I wonder what this place will look like in a few weeks.”

She wipes her tears and the flicker in her eyes tells me she’s grateful that I’m changing the subject. “We should make accommodations for the Hollows since Moro is coming and staying for what sounds like a good while.”

I tighten my lips at the mention of his name. I’m not sure how things will go once he arrives, but I’ll behave for her sake. I need to hear it from him myself, to look into his silver eyes, to know if he speaks the truth.

She smiles when I nod, then turns her gaze toward the trees below. Two Hollows are playing in the freshly budding grass, Margo and Brevik. Marley climbs a nearby tree and laughs as the Hollows bark and circle him.

My chest warms. Somehow my glades have become a home for all of us.

And the family I’ve yearned for grows with it.

# 5

Elodie

I *want to stay here forever.* That is my only thought as I walk barefoot through the ashen grass and black-barked trees. Their pink buds contrast against the gray glades so magically. Dawn peeks over the mountains in the distance and the sunbeams chase the shadows behind the dark woods.

Wren and Kastian walk beside me through the world forgotten. The silence holds us in a pact of sorts, but I think we're all still trying to *breathe*. My dark-winged Eostrix isn't his usual doom-and-gloom self and Wren seems oddly chipper today.

I guess Arulius didn't want to join us. Wren and Kastian can be intimidating, and they didn't get as much time to forgive him as I did. My eyes trace the barren trees until I see my golden god leaning over and inspecting some of the new growth by the base of the mansion.

Greysil and Naminé hold hands as they walk through what used to be the gardens on the far side of the estate. Old black vines twist and turn on the white stone walls that line the grounds. It's beautiful in a haunting, sorrowful way. Their harmonious stride settles my nerves and gives me hope that our futures can be full of this peace.

Who knew I'd find so many wonderful friends during my time in Nesbrim?

“Well, I guess these Death Glades aren’t so bad after all,” Wren mutters and Kastian raises a brow at him but nods in agreement.

“I’ve always loved this place. It’s centering in a nostalgic sort of way, you know?” I smile up at Kastian as his wing brushes against mine.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re both too sad for my liking.” Wren grimaces. I frown at him because *obviously* we’re fucking down in the dumps. My drop of blood in the snow has been stolen from me, and there’s no hope yet of getting him back or stopping North from killing unknown numbers of—

Wren steps in front of me and wraps a hand around the back of my neck while the other grips my chin. My heart leaps as his soft lips brush against mine, whispering, “Let’s have some fun for once. We can worry about the Realms when Moro gets here.”

His lips crash against mine and the weight of his kiss sends heat through my veins. My body reacts to him in such a euphoric way, a craving that has yet to be sated. He deepens the kiss and our tongues explore each other. He fists my hair and I can’t hold back the moan that follows.

I almost forget Kastian is with us, but my moan beckons to the Eostrix. His fingers glide down my spine until he reaches my hips, gripping my thighs and pulling my ass into his hard cock.

*Oh. My. Gods.*

My back arches as their greedy hands trail up and down my body. Wren palms my breast with his free hand while Kastian starts to lower us down to the fresh bed of grass. My heart rate quickens as Wren follows our bodies down, our lips never leaving one another until he pulls away and his amber eyes flicker at me with lust.

He starts to pull down his pants as Kastian tugs my leggings down. I help him along and take them off completely. My lips part as Wren’s erect cock springs free, his gaze hungrily set on my wet pussy.

I've waited so long for him.

"You're not going to make me chase you first?" My Cypress's brow raises and heat thrums through me. A smile pulls at my lips, and a lightness I haven't felt since everything went to shit a few days ago fills my soul.

Kastian lets out a low growl but releases me from his bruising grasp, letting his fangs brush against the tender flesh of my neck as he whispers, "Run. If we catch you..."

Wren bites his lower lip, his eyes hooded as he devours me with a ravenous gaze and murmurs, "We'll fuck you."

Adrenaline unlike anything I've ever experienced pulses through my blood like acid. Kastian's lips turn up against my neck, and he whispers once more, "*Run*, little goddess."

My body is on autopilot and I've never run so desperately in my entire life. The short grass and ash are slick beneath my feet, but I manage to take off at a pace I'm sure they'll have difficulty keeping up with. The sweet aroma of the forest fills my lungs with brisk air and pollen. I laugh as I lead them deeper into the woods.

The gods will damn us if the others catch us in this act of passion.

I turn to risk a glance behind me. Wren's already chasing after me, butt-ass naked. My cheeks heat and a giddy, excited laugh breaks from me.

I know he's going to catch me—he always does.

But this is *so* much more fun.

The woods thicken as we run farther into the forest, but the visibility is still pretty good. There's nowhere I can run or hide. The land here is flat, so I can only try to evade them for as long as possible.

Wren's gaining on me with his long strides, and I let out a thrilled shriek. My eyes search for Kastian. I can hear his footfalls to my left and when I turn to look he's charging full speed at me. I duck as he pounces with his arms wide open and black wings unfolded. He goes straight over me as I dip at

the last moment, his ocean eyes meeting mine and a wide grin playing on his lips. I roll on the ground a few times and laugh as I take off in the other direction.

“*Almost, Kastian!*”

He growls his frustration as Wren easily passes him. The woods themselves seem to root for the Cypress. His form is majestic, smooth, and calculated. His raw, naked beauty distracts me and I trip on a large root. I’m instantly thrown into the memory of our first chase, when I fell the same way and he caught me, pinning me to the ground ruthlessly.

This time though, as he wraps his arms around me, I only feel the comfort of his hold. Deep vibrations roll through his chest and his breathy, enchanting laugh rings through me.

We roll through the grass, our foreheads pressed together and his swollen cock between my thighs.

“Fuck, Elodie, you’re already so wet for me. Did the chase get you all worked up?” We stop rolling and I lie on top of his taut chest. He starts pumping his hips between my thighs, his shaft rubbing my clit.

I moan and lean down to him, our eyes softening on one another before he kisses me deeply. One hand fists my hair as his other pushes my ass down for more friction as he rubs me.

“Oh, gods,” I cry out. The adrenaline from the chase is thrumming through me and all I want is for my cruel Cypress to fuck me.

Wren pulls away from the kiss and offers me his neck, and an insatiable hunger pulses through me. I haven’t tasted my lovely male in such a long time. My heart aches at the thought of drinking from another after Rune, and I’m wary of losing the rose-infused taste he left me with. But I indulge, running my tongue over Wren’s artery. He shudders beneath me, surely recalling how absolutely carnal this ritual of blood-taking is.

My teeth pierce his flesh as his engorged dick thrusts into me. We moan in sync, and his ambrosial flavor fills my soul as I drink his blood. He grabs my ass so hard it burns, making me feed with more frenzy than I’ve felt the need for in a long

time. His dick fills me entirely and I'm not even sure he's all the way in yet. All I know is that I've wanted him for so long, and finally having him inside me fills a small void.

Wren pulls out of me and then thrusts deeper. The pain and pleasure of him fucking me ruthlessly pulls a scream from my throat. His precious blood spills from my lips before I can compose myself and I return to feasting on him while he pumps my pussy as if it belongs to him.

His grip tightens on my ass as he presses into me a few more times, each thrust sending me further toward my release until a wave of pleasure consumes me. Seems like the chase worked him up as well.

"Wren." I pant as I release his precious neck and draw our eyes together.

His amber eyes are filled with lust and warmth I've never known him to have. My heart throbs just as his dick does, filling me with his come, and gods, I want to always remember us this way.

"Yes?" He breathes heavily as he brushes my hair from my face and leans up, pressing a feverish kiss to my lips.

Our eyes meet as he pulls away, touching our noses together.

"You've always been chasing me, haven't you?" He raises a brow and a smirk pulls at his lips. "Please, don't ever stop," I murmur as I trace his chin with my thumb.

His eyes widen momentarily before they brim with endearment beyond words.

"I love you too, Elodie."

We share this space in time for a few blissful seconds before he pulls out of me, still hard and not quite looking satisfied yet. Kastian hands my Cypress something before moving in on me, pressing his taut stomach against mine.

Wren's brows pinch together with mischief and his wicked smile comes back to play. "*We're* not done."

Excitement swirls in my stomach as Kastian presses sweet kisses up my neck, his canines brushing against my flesh, making me shudder as the anticipation builds.

“The Cypress can’t compete with me,” my Eostrix whispers in my ear as his beautiful moonlight hair skims across my cheek.

Wren laughs and moves behind me, caressing my skin softly as he teases my ass with a very slick cock, tossing a small glass vial onto the forest floor. An oaky and minty scent entices my nose and piques my interest.

“What’s that?” I try to pull back and look, but Kastian is needy with his kisses as he groans deeper with each one.

“Even in Tomorrow, we need oak oil for *this*, goddess. I don’t want to hurt you.”

My pulse quickens. I’ve never had two at the same time, and as exhilarating and sexy as it is, fear takes hold of me. “Wait—I don’t think you’ll both fit.” My heart rate peaks as Kastian gently crowns himself inside my pussy, pushing himself in slowly until he’s pressed in to the hilt. I drop my head back on Wren’s shoulders as he kisses the back of my head and teases my ass. His cock is lubed with the oil and it relaxes my muscles.

“Shhh. It’ll feel good, goddess. Don’t be afraid, we’d never do anything to hurt you,” Kastian murmurs as his teeth edge the flesh of my neck. “Don’t you trust us?”

I don’t have time to respond before his fangs sink into my skin and ecstasy runs savagely through my veins. I cry out and Kastian starts to pump into me slowly, waiting for Wren to fully enter me before picking up the rhythm.

“Such beautiful sounds you make,” Wren murmurs as he pushes into me and slides his length all the way inside. I’m full, completely and entirely filled with my darling gods. Kastian’s long lashes hood his eyes as he watches me come undone by them.

I moan and let my head drop to Kastian’s chest. He starts to pick up the pace as Wren slowly pulls himself out to the tip

and pushes in to the hilt in agonizingly slow but hard thrusts.

Kastian nudges my head toward his neck and coaxes me to drink. Wren thrusts into me harder as I stare at my Eostrix's artery with a feverish thirst.

*Oh gods. What are these men doing to me?*

My Eostrix's pomegranate-flavored blood blooms on my taste buds as my orgasm builds again and they find their rhythm. Our moans mix in the dimly lit forest. I don't even care if someone hears us. Let it be known to all the gods—these men belong to me as I do to them.

Wren throws his head back and groans. The deep vibrations of his sound enter my bones as he releases himself inside me once more. Kastian pulls away and his blood drips down my lip and chin as he lifts me off my Cypress. My Eostrix thrusts into me roughly, pushing my back against a tree and kissing me deeply.

He's always trying to take me away from Wren, isn't he? A smile pulls at my lips at the thought as my eyes find Wren, panting and naked on the forest floor. His eyes are heated as he watches Kastian fuck me.

His gaze is enough for me to catch fire.

Kastian's sage scent fills my lungs as I rest my head on his shoulder, his teeth brushing my jugular artery.

I know I escaped my prior bond... but something feels right about this. Kastian is my Rhythm God, my other half, and I want us to have this connection. Should we ever get separated again, we'll still be in one another's hearts.

I want to share it with him. It should've been him to begin with.

"My Death God, will you share eternity with me?" I murmur, letting my hand glide down the nape of his neck.

His thrusts slow and he pulls back to look into my soul. Surprise and vulnerability shine in his ocean eyes.

"Elodie..." He presses his forehead to mine and his dark brows knit with anguish. "I would never ask that of you, but I



would walk to the end of the Realms and forever into the endless abyss with you. I'd share more eternities with you than I've been granted—in this life and all those that follow.”

My chest warms, and I brush his beautiful white hair from his face. “We’ll dance forever in this chaos then—all of us.” Tears brim my eyes but I dip down and bite his neck again before he can see the proof of my emotions. This moment is one I will cherish for eternity and is filled with so much intimacy. It’s overwhelming, but I’m also saddened by the hollowness inside the walls of my heart that yearns for Rune and Arulius.

One god at a time—Wren and Kastian are my two guiding lights right now. I’m set on having them all back soon. Our grief will surely bear fruit of a promised and blissful fate.

Kastian’s lips touch the soft skin of my neck and his fangs pierce my flesh. A fire as cold as ice stings my veins.

Then our souls soothe into one another, blending until I cannot tell where he starts and I end. His grip around my waist tightens and he groans as the blood bond rushes through us. I moan as his rich blood spills from my lips. Kastian starts slowly pumping into me again and it doesn’t take long before we climax. He thrusts up a few more times, so hard I cry out and fist his ebony feathers.

With me still in his arms, Kastian slumps to the ground and clutches me tightly, burying his face into my shoulder as he whispers, “I will worship you until the end of time, my Goddess of Life.”

A familiar sensation pools inside me. It’s as it was when I bonded with Arulius, only with Kastian—I’m assuming since we are Rhythm Gods—it’s warmer. More fluid. A sense of belonging moves through my veins, as if we’re circling one another in a frolic of give and take.

We are whole.

“For fuck’s sake, you two make me wish I was a bloodsucker too.” Wren laughs and I can’t help but let his wry comment pull me from the moment.

Kastian's deep laugh surprises me because he's always so gloomy and serious, but there's a lightness in his eyes now. Like our bonding has lifted a weight from his shoulders. I have no doubt he feels the same immense warmth radiating inside him as I do.

I never knew how passionate love could burn through the bond. Arulius's was filled with immense pain and anguish. Kastian's is clear, nothing but his affection and love for me—and that revelation tears me apart.

“Shut up, Cypress,” he says with a smirk. Wren barks out a laugh and our happy moment in the Death Glades will forever stay imprinted in my heart.

## 6

Elodie

Wren throws a bag of nails over his head toward me and I barely manage to catch it as it comes flying at my face.

“Hey!” I grumble as I set the bag down.

“Oh, don’t. I’ll have Marley help instead if you’re just going to keep complaining,” he snaps as he hits the last iron nail into the frame of the shelter we’ve been building for the Hollows. I ignore him and roll my eyes.

We still have so much to do. Good thing Wren is handy at literally everything he does. He built the trusses, knew exactly what material was needed for the roofs, and thankfully is adept at using his thorns to lift the heavy stuff. I analyze the roof material and bricks for the walls. Once we’re done, it will look like a cottage, only larger and meant for many Hollows to rest in.

They’re all arriving tomorrow. Nerves twist my stomach at the thought. What will Moro have to say? And Wren tells me that Violet will accompany him... Are they lovers again? Is there hope of saving Rune? Has North begun killing humans already?

I sigh and let my shoulders slump. There’s nothing that I want more than to stop all of this. I wish I were that strong and all-knowing.

I wish things were different.

Margo nudges the back of my arm and I smile at her. “I’m not complaining,” I mumble back to Wren, but I guess Margo needed to hear me say it too. Her white fur is soft and wispy as I brush my hand over her neck. She grunts and pads over to sit next to Brevik.

The two Hollows have been helping us with the beams and moving wood to this part of the glades. I can barely see the top of Kastian’s mansion from over the trees. The leaves and flowers are growing faster than they would in any real forest in the human realm. It’s only been a few days but the buds are opening and foliage spreads along the canopy.

I pick a few pale pink flowers at my feet and twine their stems together as I wait for Wren to finish with the frame he’s working on.

He wipes his hands off on his black pants and backs up to my side to look at the progress. He’s shirtless and my eyes keep traveling over to his exposed chest. His muscles gleam with sweat. I’ve never seen this working side of him before but I like it.

The stables are still far from done, but we should at least be able to get the walls and roof up before they arrive tomorrow.

I place the twined pink flowers behind his pointed ear. My smile widens as his brows pull together in a grumpy scowl. “*There*, now at least you can be a grumpy-sunshine type of Cypress.”

His scowl is quickly replaced with amusement. “If I can’t smoke it, it’s not the type of flower I want.” His hand brushes against the flowers tucked between his ear. “But if it’s from you, I can’t find the will to part with it.” He pulls them down and slips them into his pocket.

Our eyes stay connected and my chest warms with the soft spot he shows me.

“Hey—the stable looks great.” Arulius’s voice startles us both, and Wren’s vulnerability is instantly washed away and

replaced with disdain.

My golden Eostrix brushes his fingers across my short wing as I turn to look at him. “Wren’s been working his ass off all week.” I smile warmly at him, wrapping my arms around his chest.

Arulius laughs and bends down, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “You have been too, love.”

Wren’s expression is flat as he pulls a joint from his pocket and lights it with my pink lighter, taking a long inhale of smoke before retorting, “She’s been more help than *you*. Have you and Kol finished preparing the war plans yet?”

“More or less, yes. We still need to hear Moro and Violet’s part in this—from what Elodie’s told me, she has extensive knowledge of the War God. I think they will know where he’s going and what he plans. They’re the only ones who really remember him before his death.”

I glance up at Arulius and he notices, shooting me a wry smile. He still has pain in his gaze, but I think his freedom from Nesbrim and Violet has been a miracle for his mental state.

Kastian and Wren have been the ones warming my bed at night, keeping *him* far away. But he’s been adamant about staying close. The sofa in the corner of the room has become his unfortunate bed.

“Well, ready or not, they’ll be here tomorrow,” I murmur. Uncertainty clouds my mind as I think of Moro’s actions. He has a lot to explain... “I don’t want anyone fighting unless Violet acts out.”

Arulius releases me and stalks over to the stables, running his long fingers across the beams. *Did he not hear me?*

A forlorn look fills his eyes. “Murph should be here.” He lowers his head and turns toward Wren. “Words could never express how much I regret that day. How sorry I am for the loss of your Hollow.”

My chest fills with the weight of our fallen Hollow, and I hold my breath for the wrath that Wren will invoke on Arulius.

But he surprises me.

Wren's eyes soften on the golden god, and a smile as somber and silent as his speechless nod brings tears to my eyes.

I hope he's forgiven Arulius somehow in the mess of all this. Hearing the apology was something he needed.

Arulius and Wren hold a stare that says they'll agree neither to be on better terms nor be on worse—yet somehow, the air is significantly lighter.

“Let's grab some lunch. Kastian has practically turned into the lady of the house keeping us all fed,” Arulius says, breaking the silence, laughing as he stretches his wings. Wren lets out a few deep chuckles and a smile also tugs on my lips.

“Maybe now that life has returned to his lands he can get a proper staff established here,” the Cypress grumbles as he mounts Brevik, offering me his hand, but I shake my head. I stretch my wings and take to the sky. Part of me believes it's because I enjoy the air between my feathers so much. But another, more traumatized part says it's because I fear another invasion from the sky. I wonder if I'll ever feel safe beneath the canopy of a forest again.



Kol and Willow bicker over a fresh piece of bread as I stare out into the glades from the dining-room window. Marley asks Wren a billion times why he can't help with the stables and why he has to help Kastian with the mansion instead. I turn my head and smile at the young Moss Sparrow, his gray sweater rolled up to his elbows as he prepares to dine.

“We all need to do our part, Marley. I'm sure Kastian really appreciates your help.” I try to help Wren out and he

shoots me a thankful glance. The Moss Sparrow sinks in his seat and crosses his arms but nods anyway.

I smile and return my attention back to the window. Clouds have rolled in and the cold spring air is sharper than it was a mere hour ago.

Crickets fill the once-quiet forest with their constant chirping. The dark green of the underbrush and trees swell around Kastian's mansion like an enchantment of sorts. I absolutely adore this place. It's no longer haunted. Instead it's a mansion of hope and comfort—our sanctuary.

Our home.

Wren elbows me and draws my attention to Arulius as he dozes at the table. His head keeps dropping to his chest and lifting in an effort to thwart sleep. I smirk and try not to laugh as Wren clearly finds amusement in the matter too.

“He should sleep with us tonight. He's so tired,” I whisper as I reach for a roll, breaking open the hot, buttery loaf. My mouth waters instantly and my stomach protests that we're not eating the main dish yet. Kastian's cooking is impeccable.

My Cypress gives me a scowl. “It's been almost a week and you're ready to let him join our bed crew already?”

I grimace at his words but he smiles anyway as he waits for my response. “It's been a week since we arrived *here*—Arulius has been mending our relationship for far longer than this.”

“Well, if he wasn't so damn charming.”

I choke on my water and turn wild eyes on him. Wren breaks out laughing, Arulius, Kol, and Willow perk up to listen just as Kastian enters the dining room with a tray of food.

Arulius was right—he *has* become the lady of the house, gray apron and all.

“What's so funny?” Willow's green eyes flash with curiosity as she leans forward on her elbows. Her lips curve into a smile and I find it odd how different everyone is now

that Violet no longer reigns, which is another issue of its own. Tomorrow needs a High Lady... and I don't think anyone wants to see her back on the throne.

“Wren thinks Arulius is—” Wren's hand is pressed against my mouth in a split second, his eyes pleading that I spare him from the embarrassment.

“Hey, knock it off. Save that for the bedroom.” Kastian's brows pull together as he sets the food tray down before us, but his eyes reveal his amusement. Greysil and Naminé walk in after him with more trays and baskets of bread.

Naminé sets down her platter and sits next to me. Her blonde hair is straight with a bit of a wave to it toward the ends, her Cypress ears are pointed, and her white Vernovian Thorn looks like a beautiful pearl necklace. She leans over and whispers, “Don't eat the squash. Greysil tried to help but she burned it.”

I bite my lower lip to force the smile away, but it doesn't help that she's giggling. Wren heard her and now he's looking at the squash dish like he'd rather eat poison.

My dark-winged Eostrix pulls the lid off the other trays and my stomach growls with the roast he's prepared. I want to ask him who taught him how to cook, but I think better of it as I recall that he's been alone here for years. Of course he would learn to cook for himself. His loneliness is apparent in every detail of this place.

Wren snatches the corner piece with crisp breadcrumbs and seasonings generously coating the edges. “Death God, I'd hire you as a chef in a heartbeat if I could.”

Kastian grunts as he cuts more pieces from the roast and serves it out to everyone. Naminé elbows me and gives me a warm smile, her brow raised with *your man can cook* written all over her face.

Before I can mutter anything to her, Arulius speaks up. “Moro and Violet will be arriving early tomorrow. The Hollows will have their stables, thanks to Wren and Elodie.” My Cypress just grumbles with food in his mouth to dismiss



the notion. “Kol and Willow have successfully coerced many Eostrix guards to help with the restoration of Nesbrim.”

Kol runs a weary hand down his face. He looks like he’s been negotiating and arguing with people for days—because he *has*, apparently.

I dislike the Dreadius, but he is my precious Rune’s brother. And I see a lot of my lost god in his features. They share the same dark hair and sharp jaw, three horns, and permanent furrow to their expression.

I slump in my chair as I poke at the roast on my plate.

*Where are you?*

## North

This body rejects me entirely.

The human realm is far colder than I remember it being. It's early spring, yet the world feels as frigid as the chambers of my heart. Barren, a wasteland of dead things.

The rock I'm sitting on rests at the water's edge and the stars and moon reflect depressingly off the lake's surface. The light itself is pale and dim in comparison to that of Tomorrow's.

I gaze down at my reflection, disgusted with the way things have ultimately turned out. The face that stares back at me is the Peace God's, not my own. His heart aches horribly for the Rhythm Goddess. It's been wearing on me for several days now and it's beginning to really bum me out.

His emotions spill into my head like a river of poison, dredging up feelings that I don't have anymore.

And it hurts to remember.

*It hurts.*

"Why won't you just be silent?" I sigh, clenching my jaw and fisting my hair. I should be ruining worlds by now, destroying this mortal realm as I almost did centuries ago.

But this incessant god will not quiet. This body won't be able to bring the ruin I used to wield.

Images of *her* bleed into my mind unwanted. He yearns terribly for a goddess whom I'm certain does not reciprocate his love.

The Goddess of Life and Dawn.

What a *fucking* joke.

Talia is the scorn of the realms—the harbinger of tricks and manipulation.

“She. *Used*. You,” I bite out and he quells for a moment like he can't believe how cruel of a god I am.

Is he truly surprised?

I am war. I am *ruin*. I bring... nothing but dread.

And I will never let that lovely goddess wrap her threads of poison around me again.

A warm glow in the distance reminds me that I've nearly caught up to the soldiers I've been tracking. The northern lands here are not as brutal and vast as I remember them being.

The only thing I remember about this realm is how easy the humans are to sway into war.

Their ruinous hearts can't help but crave darkness.

The God of Peace rebels inside the recesses of my mind. He doesn't want this. But he's going to watch. I've slept long enough. Even if his vessel is not as strong as my own, it will do to wreak at least a little havoc.

I stand and march toward the camp through the fields of wheat. And with only the moon as my witness, I whisper tidings of hatred and greed into the humans' ears. By this time tomorrow, they'll be arriving in the next village over and starting to spread my poisonous thoughts.

A crooked smile spreads across my lips as I watch the humans sit up from their sleep one by one. Their eyes are fueled with false rage and vengeance that I planted within them. I'm only a suggestion, a seed. They are the ones that truly crave and water the heinous things I propose.

They are the ones that shed the blood of their enemies.

I sense a cold thread weaving through my chest and know that Rune is in despair.

Surely even he knows what shall unfold if the Rhythm is not mended.

Let them burn—let Tomorrow crumble as I have.

## 8

### Elodie

At least we meet in my dreams.

Whether they are real or not is beyond me. But as I was once told, it doesn't matter if it's real because it matters so much to me. Rune's heart flutters against my cheek and my spine tattoo is warmer in his presence.

"Where are you?" I lift my fingers to brush back his dark hair. His red eyes are soft on me as he presses kisses to my lips longingly, cherishing every moment we have in this state of bliss.

"I don't know... It's dark here, pup." His voice is somber. Tears threaten to fill my eyes but I refuse to cry in my dreams. Not when he's here.

I press my face into the crook of his neck. His heavy rose scent invades me and I can breathe easy for once.

"We're coming for you. I'll find you—I swear it. My soul isn't as bright without you."

He lets a few deep chuckles out. They reverberate through me softly and the ache that they instill in my soul won't fade until he's in my arms once more.

"The ocean is dark and vast, an endless night to be traveled through a sea of stars and moonlight. His flesh rests there. In the depths of it all."

I snap my head up. Confusion pulls my brows low at his odd riddle.

*“What?”*

But his face is fading, my spine cooling as he disperses into fireflies that ascend into the darkness around me. My dreams shatter like black glass and blood spills from every crack that’s left behind.



I sit straight up and blink at the walls of Kastian’s room.

Wren and Kastian groan beside me as they roll around, not fully waking from my movement. But Arulius’s eyes across the room burn like purple gems as he lifts his head.

“What’s the matter, love?” he whispers, alarm flooding his sleep-drunken voice as he quickly sits up.

I carefully stand on the bed and softly jump off the end toward Arulius. He stands, shirtless and ready for the fear he must sense rising within me. His body is sculpted perfectly in the dim light, but the confusion my dreams have left me with keeps me from thinking too much about it.

I motion for him to follow me to the window, opening both panes as quietly as I can as I leap into the sky. My golden god follows and silently glides beside me until we hover over the glades.

Arulius’s golden wings glint in the moonlight as he flaps them slowly. He doesn’t say anything, he only waits for me to explain what we’re doing out here at this hour.

“Rune’s been visiting me in my dreams.” I hesitate, knowing I sound absolutely mental for thinking they’re real... but the ones I had with Bruno telling me to run turned out to be somewhat helpful. “He gave me a riddle and I don’t know... I think we need to go to the ocean.”

His amethyst eyes flicker with surprise, no judgment or *you're crazy* written in them. He looks so fucking tired though. The dark circles beneath his eyes make his skin look paler than it should.

“What’s this riddle?”

I’m stunned for a moment that he’s just going with it. I shut my eyes and try to recall Rune’s exact words.

“The ocean is dark and vast, an endless night... through a sea of stars and moonlight. He rests there—in the depths of it all.” I open my eyes and glance at Arulius reluctantly, unsure what I’ll find in his expression.

His eyes widen but he keeps his features schooled perfectly.

“*A Sea of Stars and Moonlight*... I know that place,” he whispers, disbelief and worry etching his frown. This sounds like a bad place by his tone and hesitance.

I quirk a brow but remain silent.

His eyes search the empty airspace between us for words.

“That’s where I first woke up in this realm.”

My heart sinks and my wings falter. Where he was created? I always assumed he had awakened in Nesbrim.

He looks vacant, as if he’s revisiting a horrible dream that he’d once forgotten.

“*Arulius*, we have to go there. Rune wouldn’t have said anything if it was nothing.” I’m wearing only a baggy black shirt and leggings, but I have urgency in my veins. This *can’t* wait. And as much as I want all of us to stick together, something tells me it might be better if it’s just Arulius and me on this journey.

He shakes his head, his golden-tipped hair glinting in the light. “*No*, we can never go there, love.”

My gut twists. It’s not like Arulius to refuse me. “Why not?”

His gaze fills with sorrow. “We just can’t.”

He won't say. I'm not sure if he's cursed against saying what lies in wait there or if it's a painful memory that keeps his lips sealed, but clearly, he knows something.

I grit my teeth and fly closer to him so our noses are a mere breath apart. "You owe me," I say with a glare that carries all the rage and anger I've held onto for so long. He owes me this much, after everything he's stolen from me.

His jaw flexes and he shuts his eyes like this is the worst idea ever. "It's a long journey, love. We cannot derail our plans here. Moro and Violet arrive in several hours."

Arulius raises his hand and smooths my wild hair behind my ear.

Fuck... He's right. We don't have that kind of time.

*Wait.*

What about the glass that the Gremitie can create? Those are essentially portals. The ones in Nesbrim were magnificent. There has to be one somewhere that leads to the Sea of Stars and Moonlight. Arulius sees the hope dancing in my eyes and he crosses his arms with his sarcastic brows pulled together.

"Gods, what have you thought up now, love?"



# 9

## Wren

I'm not always woken up by a gorgeous goddess, but when I am, it's her. And that's not something I'm complaining about.

A weary grin pulls at my lips as I wave her to return to bed. It's still dark so there's no need for us to get up quite yet.

"Wren, Arulius is taking me to the Sea of Stars."

I snap up in bed and Kastian stirs to my right as well. "What the fuck are you talking about?" For all that is holy, can't a guy catch a break? It's not even dawn and I'm already needing a joint to deal with this godsforsaken day.

Arulius and Elodie stand at the side of the bed fully dressed in their golden armor and black underclothes. Gods, if I never saw those gaudy bone brackets ever again, it'd be too soon.

Anything in gold seems to beckon for war.

"Rune spoke to her in her dreams, and this doesn't seem to be a matter that can wait," the golden asshole mumbles. I inhale and sigh as I fling the sheets off and stand.

*Starting early today, I guess.*

They sit Kastian and me down in the dining hall as Elodie explains her dream. A riddle, to find what? The Sea of Stars and Moonlight is indeed a far destination. But our clever

goddess tells us of her plan to use the Gremitie glass magic, the portals that can contain other places within them.

Surely there is one already existing that will take Elodie to *that* place. I have no doubts the sea is a precious location for Violet, given that it's where the High Lady rested for so long. Where apparently Arulius woke into existence as well.

Still...

"Were you aware that the Sea of Stars is where Violet was trapped when she first arrived into the realms? And there's no way in hell I'm letting you two go alone." I side-eye Arulius and fist my hands beneath the table. "Take Kastian or Naminé with you."

Elodie frowns and shakes her head. "Beneath the sea?" She looks sorrowful. I've no doubt Violet told her of when she drowned as a human and awoke beneath the sea. Utterly alone and lost.

"How Moro found her beneath the sea is a mystery to me, but I do know that the Sea of Stars was a manifestation of their auras connecting, like the world parted for them and left a constellation beneath the ocean. A secret place of hers where apparently she hides things—smart. I'll give her that."

Elodie's beige horns peek through her messy bed hair, and her honey-toned eyes fill with resolve. "I don't know what she's hiding down there but we cannot wait. I won't put Naminé in harm's way. Not again. And Kastian is needed here. I promise we'll be okay. It will be a quick trip and we'll be back before you know it."

I deepen my glare. "I swear to gods, Elodie... Fine. I'm coming with you two then, end of story." She doesn't look completely thrown off by my stance but still looks concerned. My eyes trail to the Death God, who looks just as perplexed as I am. "Kastian, should we return later than midafternoon, follow my vines. I'll leave a trail that will guide you to the portal, *if* we find one."

He hardens his jaw and darts a distrustful glance at Arulius. "I have a bad feeling about this." Kastian's eyes

soften on Elodie as he murmurs, “I’m not staying behind. Either we all go—or none at all. That’s final.”

*Damn*, it’s about fucking time he got a backbone.

Elodie’s eyes fill with warmth as she sighs and grins. “You gods will be the end of me.”

“And you, us,” I whisper loud enough for her to hear.

As the words leave my lips the ground quakes violently. I’m thrown to the ground and screams sound from upstairs. Elodie and Arulius cling to the doorway while Kastian manages to hold onto to the table to avoid falling.

An earthquake? Here in Tomorrow? It’s impossible.

The tremor slowly ceases and just as one crisis ceases, another begins.

Kastian’s eyes widen and he cries out, clutching his chest painfully as if he’s been cut down by a sword. Elodie grasps her chest with as much pain in her features, their bond sharing whatever the Death God is experiencing.

“What the fuck is happening?” I stand on wobbly legs. I press my hand on Kastian’s shoulder. He’s trembling, sweat soaking through his shirt already. His eyes are staring at the table unblinking and with fear dripping through him.

Arulius picks Elodie up and cradles her desperately. “Are you okay, love? What’s wrong?” He tries jostling her a few times but her body is limp in his arms.

“Kastian, can you hear me?” I grab his face and turn it so he looks at me.

Tears spill from his eyes. I haven’t seen him cry like this since we lost Elodie.

“Kastian...” Arulius murmurs with his brows pulling tighter with worry.

The Death God stands straight and looks out the dining-room bay window as his tears drip endlessly onto the floor. “He’s killing *them*—so many of them.”

“Who’s killing—” I stop myself. He’s talking about North. So he is truly waging war as he promised. Shit. *Shit, shit, shit.*

Elodie gasps and her eyes are wide with fear and pain I cannot fathom, but her scream lets me know a little.

*“He’s killing them! He’s murdering all of them! Oh gods, Kastian we have to save them! Please. PLEASE!”*

Arulius sets her down. It’s like she’s awake but still asleep somehow, in a delusion and panic that is very much contagious and settles deep into my veins.

I’m paralyzed with fear.

Arulius shouts at me and it snaps my attention back.

“Wren, get Kastian in control, I think he’s sending everything he’s feeling straight through their bond!” He coaxes Elodie gently and strokes her hair back so she stops screaming. It’s working.

I grab Kastian by both arms and shake him until sense returns to his eyes. “You need to calm down right fucking now.”

He sways a few more times before stiffening his stance and regaining control of his expression.

His shirt is torn from how tightly he’d been grasping at it. What the hell? I’ve never seen this reaction to humans dying before.

Kastian looks over to Elodie and she seems to come into herself as well. They both move to embrace each other and their tears fall silently while Arulius and I stare at one another, completely baffled at the events that have unfolded.

After a few moments Kastian pulls away from the embrace, keeping Elodie tightly wrapped in his arms but looking from Arulius to me.

“We need to hurry. At this rate, I think all of Tomorrow is at stake.”

# 10

Elodie

Wren's face is molded into a permanent scowl as Kastian carries him.

There's no time to ride Hollows. Three of us have wings, so it wasn't a hard call to make. But gods, did he fight it.

We fly silently. The horror of the tremors rippling through the realms was devastating... My mind weighs heavily with what is now unfolding. There's a fresh urgency to save my drop of blood in the snow and stop the realms from crumbling.

A few of the ancient, god-like trees lie on the ground as we fly overhead, their roots unearthed and shimmering away like dust. Can the trees not exist if they are felled? They disintegrate as if they were only stable when rooted in the grounds of Tomorrow.

"Don't look, love."

Arulius swoops silently next to me and his expression is both grave and afraid. I nod, and we don't speak again until we arrive at the fallen city.

Nesbrim is a ghost of its old majestic self.

The only lights in the destroyed city are those of the makeshift camps in the far field to the south and the northern districts that evaded most of the ruin. It brings an air of dread around us as we glide toward the rubble left of the High Court.

We all seem to have memories of the horrid battle resurfacing in our minds.

I land on cold cement that's stained with blood. I know I was able to save everyone that day, but the chills come regardless.

"*Gods,*" Arulius mutters as he lowers his golden wings.

Kastian sets Wren down and we look at the rubble with sorrow in our eyes for a moment. I don't even know where we could possibly begin to look for the Gremitie portal, especially in all the wreckage.

"All right, golden asshole, show us the way," Wren snipes, crossing his arms and waiting for Arulius to show us the way.

Arulius flattens his brows and shakes his head. "I don't know of any existing portal... but I do know Violet had a secret building she would frequently escape to." We all animate and hope trickles through my veins. Did Rune know of her secret building too? My thoughts stagnate as I think of him. I can only hope that he's unaware of what North is doing with his vessel—hurting all those innocent humans.

"Hopefully it's in the untouched part of Nesbrim." Kastian frowns at the blood-stained rocks around us. It's hard to believe a mere week ago I was running through these very walls with Rune. We really thought we could take the Rhythm back, didn't we? I thought the only Rhythm Gods were Kastian and me back then. But Peace and War make it so much more difficult.

Arulius guides us down cobblestone roads toward the north end of Nesbrim, thank gods. Slowly the piles of stones turn back into the cute cottages I remember. The vines climb their walls and the vintage lampposts are lit, casting warm light on the empty streets.

I breathe a sigh of relief and make an internal promise to fix all of this. Violet abandoned her people when they needed her most. Her own love always came first, and she chased it like bourbon.

A wave of warmth thrums through my chest and I instantly look over at Kastian. His ocean eyes are settled on me and his affection flows through our bond easily. I smile at him and he wraps his hand securely around mine.

Wren and Arulius are a few steps ahead of us, bickering about something as usual. Watching them fight so much makes me worry they'll never truly get along.

"I hope we find whatever it is Rune has us searching for," Kastian mumbles softly. There's a hint of doubt in his voice but I think it's more because of how quickly this is all happening. By now he should know I'm not the type to wait.

"He wouldn't have given me that riddle unless he was sure," I say slowly, brows pulled down like I'm not entirely certain either. All I can do is hope.

We approach an old building in what I consider to be the slums of Nesbrim. Violet truly came here often? My heart flutters with anxiety and excitement. She was definitely hiding *something* here. The cobblestones that make up the walls are cracking and the wood-panel door is hardly holding onto its hinges. Only one small, circular window peeks through the overgrown vines a few feet above the door.

"This place looks..." Kastian pauses, unsure how to describe it.

"Chilling. Haunted. Like you might catch something from it." Wren's nose wrinkles with his disdain for the building, but he's smirking. "It looks like a trap. Her special prison where she keeps secret lovers—"

"*Oh my gods*, Wren." I cover his mouth and Kastian lets a few chuckles out. At least he knows how to lighten the mood. I'll give him that.

Arulius kicks the door off its hinges and we all step through the small doorway. Arulius and Kastian fold their wings and keep them close to their bodies. Even I must tuck my wings in tightly to fit through the small door.

A moldy and musky scent invades my senses. I wrinkle my nose as my eyes adjust to the dimly lit room. We barely all fit;

this space seems fit for children or a shorter species like the Moss Sparrows.

“Why would she hide anything here?” I ask with bated breath.

Wren sparks my pink lighter and lights a joint, providing a dim, warm light in the room. “Because who the fuck would look here?” He laughs as he places the joint between his lips and steps forward to look around.

He has a point.

The room is filled with small trinkets, tables with dusty rags draped over them, and spiderwebs woven in the corners. It’s been a long time since *anyone* has been here.

Arulius moves to the far wall and as he steps closer to inspect some items on a desk, the floor beneath his feet makes a hollow, empty sound. We all freeze and look at the rug he’s standing on.

Kastian raises a brow. “Well there’s definitely *something* down there.”

My golden god pulls the rug back and reveals a hidden door.

*Oh my gods. What is with this lady and dungeons?*

Wren takes a pull from his joint and exhales, muttering, “I vote Arulius goes down first.”

Arulius shoots him an annoyed look but curtly nods nonetheless. “I’m sure it’s fine. I’ll signal you shortly,” he says as he pulls back the dungeon’s door by the round iron handle. His eyes briefly meet mine before he slips beneath the floor.

I lean against Kastian and let out a weary breath. Saying I’m tired would be a lie at this point—I’m fucking exhausted. As I’m sure we all are.

But Rune and the realms come first. We can’t let our weary minds sway us.

So I can’t rest now that we have this small sliver of hope. Not when he’s out there waiting for me. Not while North is out



there wreaking havoc and killing so many.

After a few silent minutes, Arulius whistles for us. Wren jumps down first, reaching his arms up to help me down.

“You don’t need to help me down,” I mutter, not unkindly, but still. I’m not a weak little girl anymore.

“You sure? There’s like, a *ton* of gross bugs down here around the door.”

That shuts me up.

My eyes widen with disgust and Wren barks out a laugh as I reach for his extended arms, grateful for him to guide me down safely.

Kastian hops down after me and tightens his wings against his back as I do. This space is even smaller than the cottage above. We can only stand with our backs hunched. The walls are tight too—it’s a tunnel that leads to a dim light at the end.

Single file, we walk down the path and find that the end opens into a sort of cave. It’s just a bit larger than the main floor. The rocks are framed with thick beams of dark wood that hold the shape of this room. The ground is only dirt, no cobblestones or wood for flooring.

We stand and take in the space. It’s a strange room that has eight doors. They line the walls like a cage. Each door has a different engraving in its center, but each one is made of the same type of metal that is as black as night.

“What the fuck is this?” Wren growls toward Arulius, who stands in the center of the cave, but I think he’s talking to himself.

Arulius looks around, as confused as we are. “I knew she was hiding something down here, though I didn’t think it was this.”

“And what exactly is *this*?” Kastian glares at him with steady eyes. His sage scent fills the space around us as he flexes his feathers.

“Can we *not* fight? You’re proving why I didn’t want anyone else to come with us.” I cross my arms and Kastian

gives me an apologetic glance.

Arulius ignores him as a wry grin pulls at his lips. “This is a Gremitie station.”

“A what?” Wren runs his finger across the top of one of the doorknobs as he brings his attention back to my golden Eostrix.

“A Gremitie station. Due to the resources and aura required to create them, they are uncommon, but leave it to Violet to get it done. It’s essentially a hub for their important places in the realm.”

Kastian crosses his arms as he glances uneasily at the eight doors. “And how do we know which one will take us to the Sea of Stars? If it’s even among one of these doors.”

Arulius’s eyes grow distant as he stares at one door in particular as if it’s a distant memory. “She used one in the castle to bring me back centuries ago.” He walks up to the black door with the blue-tinted engraving of a dagger in its center, stars surrounding it. He rests his hand against the metal. “I thought it was a dream, but here it is.”

Wren, Kastian, and I share a look. Well, at least that didn’t take long to find. It’s eerie being in your enemy’s most sacred place. This is her heart, filled with the things she cherishes.

“Let’s just get this over with.” Wren drops his joint and snuffs it out with the heel of his boot. The air grows heavy as we hesitate.

There’s no telling what lies beyond the door.

## II

### Elodie

**A**rulius opens the door. The creaking sound breaks the silence of our breaths, and then the room is instantly flooded with icy water. My lungs seize and panic sets into my bones as the dark water invades the small cavern. Our heads are quickly submerged and I can't see anything. It's pitch black and there's no telling which way is up or down.

In my hysteria, a hand grabs mine. It's too dark to tell who it is but they guide me through the freezing water. We swim until my lungs are catching fire and I'm sure I won't reach the surface.

A light blossoms like a moonlit flower from above. With widened eyes, I tilt my face to the surface and my heart drops like an anchor to the sea floor.

A million orbs of starlight paint the world above the water's surface, with four crescent moons at its center—purple, cerulean, and magenta colors—all dancing in a rhythmic song.

The Sea of Stars and Moonlight.

Arulius tugs my arm and we swim up to the surface, breaking the veil into a place made entirely of dreams.

We take big breaths and pant as Wren and Kastian surface just after us. Our eyes are all focused in on the sky above. I look at my golden god and my chest warms in the icy embrace

of the sea as I watch his gaze turn nostalgic at the sight of his birthplace.

“What are your first memories after you awoke here?” I ask as I tread water; wings apparently make swimming increasingly difficult. They feel like weighted blankets, trying to drag me further into the depths.

Note to self: Eostrixes don't swim well.

Arulius keeps his somber gaze on the stars, his amethyst eyes reflecting the universe of pastel colors like a fallen god.

“The first memory I have is staring at this sky. The peace that flowed through me was unlike any other. I was happy... content.” He looks at me and draws me close, wrapping his warm arm around me and pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Then Violet was standing above me, blocking the view of what beauty the realms could have held for me. Her fury and hate burned any hope I had for keeping that contentment.”

I fist my hand against his chest.

“She told me I was the *God of Wrath*, born of her hate for you. And just like that... I was a monster before I even knew who I really was.” His deep voice cracks with emotion. “All I'd ever wanted was to look at the beautiful stars and be any other god than the one I'd been created as.”

Arulius only ever wanted to exist like anyone else. To be free and choose his own path.

“Arulius... I—”

He loosens his grip on me until we stare into each other's eyes. The cold water laps at our chins. “There's no need to pity me, love. What's done is done. Now let's find whatever it is Rune's having us chase.”

Wren clears his throat to break the air of melancholy around us. “There's a beach over there. I'm sick of swimming, so unless you want to keep freezing your asses off, let's get out.”

Kastian leads the way as we swim over to the violet-colored beach; it's made up of small crystals and as we reach

the shore, I realize it's an island made entirely of amethyst. The surface is glassy and smooth, untouched, as if no feet have passed over it in centuries.

Did Arulius get his beautiful eyes from this place?

Our bodies are soaked, and my feathers are heavy, lying slumped to the ground. But even so, my spirits are light.

*What are we looking for, Rune?*

I don't know if I'm hoping my tattoo will heat with his presence or not, but when it doesn't, I can't help the sorrow that slips through my bones. The ache that he's left behind won't mend on its own.

"One of us should stay put just in case we run into any problems," Arulius murmurs.

Wren frowns at his drenched box of wrapped tobacco as he sits up. "What kind of fucking problem are we going to run into? Crystal monsters? Whatever, I'll stay here. Just hurry up." He looks pointedly at Kastian and my dark-winged Eostrix nods to acknowledge him.

We walk for what seems like hours.

Each step is more punishing than the last. My wings are still damp and they make my shoulders hurt. Time here behaves oddly. The moons are neither rising nor setting, and there's no breeze, no clouds. It's like we're stuck in a paradox of space. Nothing feels quite right here.

I glance hesitantly behind us. The path is straight, yet I worry we won't be able to find our way back to Wren. "What is this place, Arulius? Something feels... off."

Kastian rubs the back of his neck and nods. "Yeah, I feel sort of weird too."

Arulius doesn't bother looking back at us as he keeps walking ahead. "It's like a pocket in the realm. Things can *be* and *not be* here. Be brought into existence, hidden, or removed altogether."

"Let's pretend like that makes sense." Kastian furrows his brows and lowers his shoulders like his wings feel absurdly

heavy as well.

I look around at the timeless stars above. “A place for things to be hidden away... What would Violet be trying to hide down here?” If we are truly beneath the sea, we can’t possibly be looking at the real sky. Was this created as a sort of illusory place for her? My thoughts stagnate as I think of Violet. What kind of a person was she before? Because looking at all of this... makes her seem like someone who only wanted to look at the sky. Whose favorite color is purple.

Arulius stops and I walk straight into his back. He turns and looks down at me with a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. I rub my nose and take a few steps back as I mumble, “What?”

“*He rests there, in the depths of it all,*” Arulius mutters as his eyes search mine like he’s piecing everything together. “Do you think he means... North’s body?”

“That’s not possible. Elodie crushed the skull back in Nesbrim.” Kastian’s tone sounds unsure.

It couldn’t be North’s body... Even if it is, what does that change? Would it bring Rune back?

I stop walking and look into the dark, cold water. *In the depths.* “Would I be able to resurrect his body even if it’s missing a head? He’d have his vessel back... and if he took it back we’d save Rune.”

The tattoo on my spine warms and my heart skips a beat.

*In the depths, you’ll find him there, pup.*

“Rune?” I cry out. His voice lingers in my head and my spine cools as his presence drifts away. “Rune!” His voice sends urgency through my veins and I chase the trailing threads of our connection as I sprint toward the sea without another thought.

My wings tighten to my back as I dive headfirst into the black water. I can’t see a godsdamn thing but I swim ferociously toward the seabed. I don’t know how deep or long I’ll have to swim. But I don’t care, I’ll hold my breath for as long as I have to.

“Elodie!” A muffled shout comes from the surface and two big splashes tell me that my gods are chasing after me.

My eardrums start to hurt and my breath seizes, but I keep going. No amount of pain can stop me from getting back to my drop of blood in the snow.

*Nothing.*

The dark water explodes into light as my body falls and I enter a pink-hued bubble, dropping a few feet to the seafloor. As I glance up toward the ceiling of bubbles, I watch as Kastian and Arulius break through the veil as well, landing on top of one another in the process and looking as confused and awestruck as I feel.

“You have to stop doing that, love.” Arulius rubs his head and Kastian crouches so his ebony horns don’t pierce the bubble veil.

“What is this?” my Death God murmurs like he can’t believe we keep stumbling upon odd things here.

“The depths,” I say absently, a smile pulling at my lips. A warm pink light swarms on the sea floor where we touch it. It’s a bed of dark green moss but it responds to our presence like it’s enchanted.

I really expected this place to be more... I don’t know—scary? Not a place that I’d never want to leave.

Kastian sends warmth through the bond and my eyes catch his. The lights flicker in them and he looks like he’s having a bit of fun too.

“There’s something over there,” Arulius mutters as he crouch-walks over to us. He nods his head over to a distant glow. Besides where we stand, the sea floor is a shroud of dark moss and shadows.

We all look at one another excitedly as I’m sure the same thought flurries through our minds.

That has to be it—whatever *it* is.

Kastian tests the bubble veil with a few feathers, when it doesn’t pop he stands and his horns don’t affect the magic of

it. He grins and takes off running first, the pink light illuminating his steps as he races toward the glow. Arulius chuckles as he chases after him. His grin is genuine and the burden he always seems to tug around is gone.

I take a deep breath before I smile too and charge after them.



## Arulius

I pass Kastian easily; he's all muscles and no real speed. He growls as I get a few strides ahead of him. Elodie's laugh rings like blissful music to my ears.

My head instinctively swings back to see her bright smile and the hope that radiates from her eyes.

I'd do fucking anything to feel her joy again. The warmth of her heart that we once shared through our blood bond is now a dark hole in my chest.

Kastian has that part of her now.

And no matter how much it hurts, that's where her heart belongs. I know he's her eternity. Same with Rune. Fuck, even Wren. I was simply the mistake that was thrown in to muddle things up.

I turn my head forward and stop as I reach a body. She was right, it's North's, hidden from the realms by Violet. But why did she hide him here? I kneel down and hesitate before I touch him.

He's pure evil. There's a dark aura that resonates around his untouched flesh. If he wasn't missing his head I would have thought he was still alive. Even his battlefield attire looks practically new besides some dried blood that coats the collar and shoulders.

Elodie and Kastian stop at my side, their breaths heavy from the race.

“Is it him?” she asks between her pants.

I shut my eyes before meeting her gaze. “Yeah, it is. Do we really want to do this? He’s strong in Rune’s body... but I think he’ll be near unkillable in his own flesh.”

The Death God frowns like he’s mulling it over but Elodie’s eyes are fierce and sure. She nods. “That’s not even a question.”

As I lift the War God’s body from the seabed, I can’t help but wonder if she’d ever do something like this for me.



Wren’s waiting for us by the portal. It’s a long fucking walk and I just thank the gods that whatever curse Violet used on North kept his body preserved. Obviously he’s headless—Elodie and Rune took care of that part of him. But regardless, I’m thankful that I’m not carrying a rotting corpse. Hopefully this will work like they want it to. I’m not convinced that North can take his body back without the head, but here’s to hoping.

The Cypress’s eyes catch on the lifeless body in my arms and widen with the realization that this is actually happening.

“*Shit.*”

Kastian grunts his agreement and I ignore both of them as I drop into the water and try as best I can to swim toward the portal with a limp body in my arms. My wings drag in the water behind me, not making my cause any easier.

We reach the cavern and once everyone’s in, Kastian shuts the door. The water is pulled back beneath the door, as if once the veil is shut, the water follows. Pretty crafty, I’ll give Violet

that. We stand in damp clothes and take deep breaths before climbing back to the main cottage.

Gods, what a fucking pain in the ass today has already been.

We fly silently through the morning sky. I reluctantly look back at the city I once cherished more than anything. Well, almost anything. My gaze shifts to Elodie, her beige wings catching the sun's rays, warm with an orange hue.

I may have loved Nesbrim, but it was never truly my home.

The sun is already high in the sky by the time we return to the glades. My bones are weary and my feathers are stiff from being drenched and not drying properly before flying.

As we reach the Death God's white mansion, we pass a herd of creatures below, hardly visible through the sprouting leaves and flowers. I never thought I'd see the day when this place of ash found a new flame.

I glance at Elodie, expecting to find her overjoyed to see her beloved Hollows, but instead, her eyes are uncertain and filled with mixed emotions. It makes sense, since we have no fucking clue what's going to happen with Moro and Violet.

I grit my teeth at the thought of seeing the High Lady again.

She's been the master of my fate since the moment I took my first breath. I don't suppose I'll ever truly be free. She's my creator—the one that crafted the god after all gods.

The sun warms my feathers as I land. Kastian sets Wren down as Elodie drops beside me. Her rosy cheeks glisten against the spring chill in the air. Her honey-toned eyes meet mine and I try to give her a sure smile that says everything's going to be fine.

Of course, she doesn't buy it. So I go with the sure way—being a sarcastic asshole.

“Let's hope they're done with their honeymoon.” I wriggle a brow at her and she can't help but laugh.

Even Kastian smirks at that comment, Wren rolls his eyes as he walks past us to open the enormous ebony doors to the white castle. I turn and follow him in while Elodie and Kastian remain outside. They're probably going to wait out there to meet Moro, so I don't bother holding the door open for them.

"Where am I putting his body?" I shift my hold on North's body as I ask Wren. My arms are well past being numb at this point. A god can only do so much in one morning, for gods' sake.

The Cypress spares a glance in my direction and shrugs. "I don't think there's any place in particular, as long as it's hidden from Moro and Violet." He stops and turns to face me completely, not exactly looking pleased. I pause and try not to act like North's body is growing heavier by the second on my shoulder. "Why did you stay?"

I raise a brow, not sure I want to even entertain what he's trying to stir up. Not now at least.

"You know... Why stay with us? You know we don't trust you. The only reason you're allowed to stay is because you've somehow crawled your way back into Elodie's heart. If it were up to me, you'd be dead already." His amber eyes hold nothing less than an inferno of hatred.

It's fair. I didn't expect my apology to mean anything the other day.

I consider my words before muttering, "I only want what's best for Elodie... I'm trying, Wren." My voice falters at the latter. I'm trying to find my way back to grace. I know the acts I've done are unforgivable—but I'm *trying*. Is that ever going to be enough?

The fury in his eyes doesn't let up, but his voice isn't unkind as he says, "The best thing for her is to get Rune back and for you to *disappear*. Got it?"

I clench my jaw and try to dismiss his words the best I can.

"Yeah."

Wren levels his gaze with mine before turning and walking toward the kitchen.

My shoulders slump with the anguish that fills my chest. It's not hard to understand their hatred. I fucking get it.

*Maybe it would be best for her if I didn't exist.*

I shake the dreary thoughts from my head as I set my mind on finding a place to hide North's body. The first floor is way too high-traffic to hide anything safely. I readjust my hold on North's body and start climbing the stairs to the second floor.

Looking down each hallway, I don't think there's a good place on this level either. My eyes lift to the third floor. We aren't supposed to go up there—Kastian's probably hiding weird shit up there.

*The perfect hiding place.*

By the time I reach the third story, I'm leaning over and panting like I haven't done anything physically demanding in years.

The air is thick up here, the walls dark, and the halls long. Does Kastian *ever* come up here? One look at the dust on the white tiles tells me no.

Perfect, I can hide North in one of the rooms up here then.

I walk by at least ten doors before I reach the end of the hall. An arched window pillars the end of the corridor and allows plenty of light in. I stop and face the door to my left.

It's made out of dark oak wood, not unlike the majority of the doors here. But this one has some engravings along the edges that look like arrows. I try the handle and it opens.

The room is dark and the chill in the air sends goosebumps up my arms. I set North's body on the floor and lean against the door until it clicks shut.

I open my wings and focus my aura to my feathers. A golden light warms the room and casts the shadows back into the corners.

As soon as my eyes land on what he's hiding here, I wish I hadn't come at all.

Bones of Dreadiuses, Moss Sparrows, Eostrixes, and who knows what else lie slumped against the far wall beneath boarded windows. A few are sprawled out on the floor with their arms crossed over their chests, as if they're sleeping peacefully. Dried flowers have been brought here and set before them long ago.

Are these the banished creatures that arrived here with Kastian all those years ago?

My jaw tightens and an unbearable weight of sorrow consumes me. I'm sinking into the dark, endless pit inside myself.

I'm burning for the things I've done.

So much grief—so much fucking pain that I've caused.

I was the one that forced them all here. I kneel to pick up one of the flowers, a perfectly dried poppy. The yellow-stained petals still hold on to the proof of their short life beneath the sun.

I hold it between my forefinger and thumb, and let my head drop. My wings slump behind me like a curtain of gilded light.

"I'm *sorry*." Tears trickle to the floor beneath me. "You didn't deserve this—none of you did."

The weight of Wren's words sink into me, drawing an ache deep inside my chest. Why did I ignore all the bad things... It's easier just to simply pretend things aren't happening, isn't it? Turn the other way and only focus on what *you* want. The part that sickens me the most is that I wouldn't hesitate to do horrendous things again for her.

I stand and make for the door. North's body will be fine in this room. But I have to leave *now*.

My steps become more erratic the closer I get to my room. I've been resting in Kastian's room in the evenings like everyone else, but we each have our own rooms should we need them, and I'm thankful for it at the moment.

The wails and cries of every single person I've ever killed reverberate through my bones and send goosebumps across my skin. *I'm burning*. I stumble into my room and lean against the door, covering my mouth as the hiccups of a guttural cry rise in my throat.

*What have I done? What have I done...*

And it was all in vain.

I look down at my hands. The blood is forever stained on my palms. The burden of their souls will forever strangle me. Every fucking breath is agony.

A mirror stands across the room, reflecting a God of Wrath back at me. He's disheveled. Evil.

I don't recognize the cry that leaves my throat as I charge at the mirror, smashing my fists into it and sending shards all over the floor and into my arms.

"Why, gods?" I cry. "Why couldn't I be anyone else but *me*?" Tears stream down my cheeks and the million shards of broken glass stare back at me from the floor. Blood leaks from my arms and my tears crash on the irreparable pieces.

I stare until the tears stop and my eyes turn dry—until I remember myself.

I've always been good at masking my emotions.

Today cannot be any different.

# 13

Elodie

Kastian and I sit on the white stone steps of his mansion while we wait for Moro and the Hollows to make their way through the forest. I lean against him and he wraps a strong arm around me.

“Thanks for coming with me this morning.”

His ebony wing blankets me, and our bodies’ warmth soothes my soul.

“We lucked out with that Gremitie doorway, didn’t we?” He laughs quietly. “I’m never letting you out of my sight again,” he murmurs, his lips brushing the shell of my ear.

I look out into the glades as the Hollows become visible from the forest’s darkness. Their paws are wide, crushing everything in their path. Margo and Brevik wag their tails and trot over to meet them.

“Do you trust Moro?” My expression deflates as one rider becomes visible on the back of the lead Hollow, the familiar black one that Violet rode the day I was captured. Its fur is a pool of ink. The beast’s neck and forearms are invisible, as if it wears brackets that provide such an ability, but I wonder if that’s just how her hollow is—ghastly and terrifying to look at.

Kastian hums with thought. “To be honest, I don’t know what to think. But what I do know is Moro has wisdom beyond all our years. He’s methodical in nearly *everything* he



does.” He narrows his eyes as he catches sight of them as well. “He was able to get Wren to consider hearing him out though, wasn’t he? So that’s worth something.”

I nod, blinking with heavy eyes as our long evening catches up with me.

“Listen with your heart. We’ll figure it out from there.” His ocean eyes flick down to mine and he gives me a crushing smile.

I lean in and kiss him. He holds me tighter and my thoughts and heart lighten with the warmth he pushes through the bond. I pull away and stare into his eyes, murmuring, “My heart has always wanted you.”

“See? It always knows best.”

We laugh as Wren steps out of the mansion with a fresh joint between his lips, staring straight out toward our arriving company.

“Moro,” he calls out loudly. Our old friend lifts his head, pulling down his dark brown hood and gazing at us with those wise silver eyes of his. The sun kisses his dark skin and the crown of light blue aura that circles his head can be seen from here.

He looks like the true king of this realm. I suppose in a way he was, once upon a time. By Violet’s side, he was the High Lord—she, his High Lady.

Moro rides an enormous gray Hollow, its paws double the size of Margo’s. Its fur wisps like cold smoke rolling off dry ice. The eyes are two dark coals. Violet rides on her black Hollow beside him.

“Elodie, I’m pleased to see you are well,” Moro says as he dismounts and takes a few steps closer. Kastian stands, immediately stopping Moro in his tracks.

I’m shocked for a moment because I’ve only ever seen Kastian act this way with Arulius and Rune. The distrust in his eyes is apparent.

Moro nods with understanding. “Apologies. I’d almost forgotten our circumstances,” he mutters.

My eyes connect with Violet’s and I instinctively look down. All the torture and horrors I experienced in her court scream through my bones and I want to vomit as the scent of iron fills my memory.

She doesn’t say anything and seems to try and shrink behind Moro. He doesn’t acknowledge her presence at all. In fact, he appears really annoyed that she’s here.

We all stand awkwardly in silence.

The ebony doors open behind us and Arulius steps out. His golden wings reflect the sun’s light. He’s as beautiful as he was the first day I laid eyes on him. Water drips from his golden-tipped gray hair. Did he shower?

He smiles coyly at me before he looks at Moro and Violet.

“I wish I could say it was good to see you two.”

Wren cough-laugh beside me and I shoot them both a look to try and coerce them to behave. Arulius seems tense, but his smirk makes me believe otherwise.

Violet perks up for once, seeing him. “*Arulius*,” she says with hope.

My golden Eostrix’s jaw flexes as he scowls at her. My heart stings with what he must be feeling right now.

Her brows pull together as she looks back at me. “Elodie... I know there are no words to be said between us. I’m not going to apologize, nor do I expect you to.” It takes all my willpower to hold back an eye roll. I suppose this is her way of saying, “*Let’s just get on with it.*”

I settle for a curt nod.



Kastian sets tea in front of each of us at the dining table.

Wren ordered Naminé and Greysil to stay in their rooms during this meeting since they don't have any key part to play. Nor do I want them to. The memory of them both dead and lying on the stones of Nesbrim send chills up my spine. Plus, they are plenty helpful here. Marley's really taken to them too.

I fiddle with my cup uncomfortably as I feel Moro and Violet's eyes on me from across the table.

After Kastian sits back down the silence is finally broken.

"The floor is yours, Moro." Wren leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. "And skip all the shit you told me. I've already brought everyone up to speed." Kastian takes a long sip of his tea, but I catch him slightly shaking his head at Wren's attitude.

We sit quietly, waiting for Moro to say something.

His silver eyes are distant as he stares at his tea. "We all serve a part in our path, wouldn't you agree?" Moro's gaze lifts to mine. "But the Rhythm Gods are the key to everything—they alone keep the melody of Tomorrow going."

Arulius's brows pull lower and his jaw muscles flex. "Enough riddles. Just get to the point."

Violet stares intently at her lost lover, almost like she craves his answer as desperately as the rest of us.

*Why did he stay hidden all this time?*

"Please... I need to know, Moro." I can't help the desperation in my voice. My heart can't endure another betrayal.

He shuts his eyes and nods solemnly.

"When I first regained my memories... and fully understood who I was, my first instinct was to tell everyone." His eyes darken with grief. "But Riah, the God of Memories, is an insightful man. He reminded me that the Rhythm is not whole and will never be truly right until the four gods that bear the weight of it are in sync. The chaos has been spinning, and if it's not righted, all of Tomorrow may be in danger. The

scales can only tip so much to one side before there is ruin. No doubt you felt the tremor this morning?”

My veins chill and I nod.

I swallow the lump in my throat. How can North even be a part of the Rhythm... It's going to be difficult even to confront him, let alone beg him to join us.

“Elodie, I swear to the heavens that my loyalty is only to the restoration of our realms. It was never my intention to wrong any of my friends. You recovered North's vessel, yes?” Moro asks.

Violet's eyes widen and she searches my expression with fear. Everyone in the room stills, because how could he possibly know we retrieved it this morning? Kastian sets down his cup and an uneasy sensation sinks through me.

I nod. “Just hours ago, in fact.”

Moro smiles. “Just as Riah said you would. Wonderful. Now we go to the Cave of Origins so you and Kastian can have your memories restored.”

How would Riah know that? I'm not exactly keen on merging with my past life. One glance at Kastian tells me he feels the same way. How else should one feel about recalling centuries of time they've lost?

Wren leans forward on the table and almost knocks over his cup of tea. “What does being restored have to do with us dealing with North?” His brows pull low in an intimidating glare.

The room hushes and Arulius stands abruptly and sets his hands on the table.

“Isn't it obvious? Because there is no reality in which we can beat North in his true body without the Rhythm Gods being at their full power,” my golden Eostrix mutters as he looks between the two Gremitie across the table.

“What about Rune?” I ask.

Moro stands as well, though much less aggressively than Arulius did. “He'll be with us there too. Though there is no

need for his memories to be restored, as he is whole. I need you to tell Rune when he visits you in your dreams tonight. North will likely try to stop us from restoring you two. He knows that he's not strong enough against the two of you in the Peace God's vessel. So when he arrives and sees his body, he will—"

"Exit Rune's body," Kastian blurts and hope shines in his eyes. Moro nods and an optimistic smile brims on his weary face.

Tears fall down my cheeks. "And when do we set out for the Cave of Origins?" My chest tightens with the thought of Rune wrapped around me once more and his thoughts warming the tattoo on my spine. Maybe once this is all over we can finally rest a while.

Wouldn't that be nice.

Moro tightens his lips as he shakes his head. "In two weeks, once Riah has awakened. He cycles, and nothing can wake him during his rest. We'll need this time to formulate a plan to contain North once he's in his own flesh again."

Wren flashes a concerned look at me as I fist my hands against my lap and nod painfully. "Two weeks. Then we'll put an end to all of this."

## Rune

I wake up curled around my little pup. She takes deep breaths as if she's asleep. It's funny—we are in our dreams, somehow miraculously connected through the tattoo I gave her. My fingers glide down her spine and I smile nostalgically.

The Pine Hollow I put on her skin has grown. It's almost full grown now. It once only took up a quarter of the branch it rests on.

She stirs and I hold her a little tighter. It only lasts a few minutes each night. I'm unsure if it's due to North's power overriding my own or if this is just all we get, but I cherish every second of it.

“Rune,” Elodie whispers into my chest. The softness of her voice warms my cold soul.

“Hey, pup. Your skin feels cold tonight, and your wings are wet. Is everything okay?”

I hate this.

There's nothing in the realms I want more than to be with her again. I'm fuzzy here—not quite myself. My thoughts are short and I cannot remember things from our prior meetings. I only recall that I get to see her.

“I'm okay... Rune, I need you to tell North to go to the Cave of Origins. Tell him that the Rhythm Gods are regaining

their memories in two weeks' time, and he'll be forced to try and stop us. We have a plan to save you." She pulls away from my embrace to look into my eyes and I get lost in her honey-toned gaze. Her smile is intoxicating, like a dagger to the chest.

"The Cave of Origins?" I mumble, trying to place it in my memory.

She nods. "We have North's body. Once he goes back into it, you'll be free, my darling." The hope that shines in her eyes hurts me.

"Please don't get your hopes up. Nothing seems to go as planned, and I don't know if North will act as you presume he will. He's wary—I can feel it."

Elodie's smile falters but she hugs me tighter. "This plan *has* to work. We're getting you back no matter what. We will be there two weeks from today." Her voice sounds distant and I know that our time is already ending.

I nod against her beautiful dark hair and brush my hand down her beige wings. "You look so fucking beautiful. I wish I told you that more," I murmur. The sound of my voice is blurry as her form wisps into black smoke and I'm cast back into the darkness.

"I love you, pup," I whisper into the void, alone and slowly drifting back into a state of rest.

## Elodie

“E lodie, wake up, love.”

My eyes open slowly. A tear rolls down my cheek as Rune’s words warm my spine. My heart aches unbearably for him, so much so that I don’t think anything could ever dull the pain except having him back in my arms.

Arulius strokes my forehead and I realize I’m in his lap. We’re out in the hallway and the sun has yet to rise. The corridor is cold and soft snores emanate from the bedroom doors.

“How did—”

He brushes my cheek and sits me up, saying, “You were running down the hall, chasing ghosts it seems.” His purple eyes are weary with sleepless nights.

“Sorry... I managed to get Rune the message.” Strange that dreams seem so fresh the moment you awake, only to fade into a delirium of things you cannot be sure actually happened. His touch already seems so distant.

Arulius smiles and he holds me tighter. “Good. Are you hungry? I can whip us up something,” he offers and as he does my stomach growls, making him smirk. “Gods, why do I even ask.”

The kitchen is cold but the air quickly warms as Arulius brews fresh tea and heats the oven to bake some of the dough



Kastian was planning on using today. I'm sure he won't mind.

He sets down two cups and pours the steaming liquid into each, dropping two cubes of sugar in mine and one in his. We sit and sip our tea silently while waiting for the bread.

It's nostalgic, how normal this feels. Him and I not being at odds. If I clear my mind, it's easy to forget the heinous things he's done.

“Do you remember when we first met?” He sets down his cup and rests his head on his palm. Those amethyst eyes stare at me and burn into my soul.

I force myself to look away, gazing into the dark tea as I murmur, “Of course I do. Why?” The image of Kastian and me falling from the god-like trees to our deaths resurfaces.

Arulius laughs. The deep sound of it makes my lips curl into a smile too, even though the memory was definitely *not* funny. “You bit my neck before you were even an Eostrix. I thought you were *absolutely* feral.”

I laugh and shrug. “You asked for it. I had no other choice!”

“I suppose I did have it coming.” His laugh falls and his expression softens as he stands from the table and walks behind me. His musky scent falls over me soothingly and floods my memories with the times we were in this very kitchen, late into the night, trying to learn how to cook. He'd wrap his arms around me and hold me tightly.

My breath catches in my throat as he runs his fingers across my collarbone and his lips press on the tenderness of my neck.

His breath is hot on my skin as he whispers, “Care to entertain me?”

Heat rushes to my core and I instinctively lean my head back against his shoulders. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

Arulius always keeps me on my toes. I love that about him—I always have.

His fangs break through my skin and hot blood slips down my neck. His tongue catches it and follows the stream back to the wound. I bite my lip against the urge to moan.

“Bath snack?” His lips turn up and I can feel his smile.

I laugh and lean against his head. “Who’s snacking on who this time?” Arulius pulls away excitedly and walks over to the stove, turning off the oven, pulling the baked bread out, and setting it on the counter before turning and giving me a nefarious grin.

“It’s my turn, love.”

He scoops me up from my chair and holds me close against his chest as we exit the kitchen. He leads us into the enormous bathroom on the main floor. *Good thing everyone is upstairs and hopefully still sleeping.* Excitement claws at my heart. He’s recreating a night I’ve long since wished I could erase with him.

Arulius sets me on the gray accent chair next to the clawfoot tub that’s big enough to fit four full-grown Eostrixes.

The faucet turns silently and he looks at me, nodding his head toward the tub.

“Aren’t you getting in?” I murmur as I pull my shirt off over my head. He seems hesitant now, and I can’t help but wonder if this is difficult for him. There’s vulnerability in his eyes. I know he wants to mend our relationship. I guess I thought it was always so easy for him to push emotions away, but maybe his mask hides more than I thought.

He smiles weakly at me and nods.

I slide into the tub first, relief flooding me as the hot water covers my flesh. My wings soak instantly, making it hard to hold them up, so I let them slump comfortably at my sides.

Arulius slips in behind me, his arms wrapping around my stomach and pulling me in close. His skin burns against mine, his taut chest makes my cheeks warm, and the heart that had forsaken him beats a bit louder.

“I’ve missed you, love,” he whispers between the kisses he dots against my shoulder. Each one is more tender than the last. “There’s nothing I’ve craved more than to simply spend time with you. Even if the world is crashing down around us. Don’t we deserve that much?” He clutches me like he’s scared I’ll disappear.

“You’d truly choose me over all else?” I smooth my hand over his flexed arm, leaning back into his chest as the water cradles us. He nods against the back of my head, strands of his golden hair reflecting in the water. I inhale deeply and the aroma of his sweet honey scent fills my senses, mixing with the lavender salts he added to the water.

“I’d burn the realms down if I had to. As long as you are safe, I don’t care about the cost.”

I let out a deep breath. “That’s pretty callous.” A sad smile stretches my lips.

He shrugs, gripping my chin and tilting my head toward him. His eyes narrow as he murmurs against my lips, “I don’t care.”

Then he kisses me.

His soft lips are bruising as he deepens our kiss and I devour every second of it. One of Arulius’s hands slides down my stomach, circling my clit and building my orgasm as his other hand grips my throat possessively.

I moan as his dick hardens at my back and my merciless god’s fingers tease my entrance. He pulls away from my lips and looks down at me. His fingers stop moving and everything else in the realm seems to pause.

My brows crease. “What’s wrong?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing.” He tries to resume teasing my entrance as he looks at me with those beautiful purple hooded eyes, lips chasing mine like he’s starving.

But I pull away and lean forward, turning to face him. My golden god leans against the tub, his muscles taut and the tight V that lines his lower stomach enticing. But something ails his mind and the very thought makes pain spread into my chest.

“You can tell me, Arulius,” I murmur softly and reach my hand up to cup his cheek. He leans into my palm and shuts his eyes. His dark lashes kiss his rosy cheeks with dreary thoughts.

When he opens his eyes they’re filled with torment.

“Will I ever be anything but a monster?”

My heart sinks. “I’ve forgiven you... I know you didn’t want to do all the things that you did. *I know* our past sucks.” I nudge his face so he looks up at me. “But you’ve never been a monster in my eyes, Arulius. *Never.*”

His mental state has been deteriorating so much since we’ve arrived at Kastian’s glade... I don’t know what to do. I hate seeing him this way. And the fact that he’s always the one that’s awake at these early hours with me tells me he isn’t sleeping either.

The small smile that crests his lips makes me want to cry. Because I don’t think he believes me.

“You are kind, love. Don’t let that part of you ever die.”

Tears burn in the corners of my eyes. Why is he talking like this? Like he won’t always be at my side?

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and he catches me, letting out a small, surprised breath.

“*Please*, let your weary heart rest. You deserve happiness, Arulius, no matter what your inner demons are whispering to you. If you’ll listen to them, please listen to me.”

He lets out a low laugh and glides his hands down my back until they rest on either side of my hips. His dick is hard beneath me and he gently lowers my hips until he’s buried inside me.

My tears fall as I hold him tightly.

“Who says I’m not happy?” he says with a shaky voice. His teeth sink into my shoulder as he thrusts himself softly into me.

I fist his hair with one hand and the other splays out across his back, above his wings. He fucks me passionately, hard and slow. The pull of each sip he takes of my blood sends heat through my entire body.

We burn together, like fire and gasoline.

But as his cold tears roll down my back, I know that my God of Wrath is lying.

# 16

Elodie

**K**ol and Willow are assholes—end of story.

I duck under the fierce Eostrix's arc of magenta aura and try to kick her legs out from beneath her. But of course she sees it coming and easily hops over my sweeping kick as she slashes my shoulder with her other hand. It's not a big enough cut to bleed terribly, but it still stings.

"You're still way too slow." She sighs and offers me her hand. I take it and she helps me up. "Kol, I don't think she's worth training. I've pushed her on her ass at least twenty times in the last half-hour."

Gods, I hate this.

I brush my pants off and glance up in time to see Kol charging straight for me. I gasp as he tackles me to the ground and pins both my arms without even flinching. The weight of his body on my chest pushes all my breath from my lungs and fear sinks into my heart. His eyes are as dark as night and his resemblance to Rune crushes me.

"Get your shit together, Elodie. This isn't going to be easy. North was a fucking nightmare in *your* body. Can you imagine him now?"

I grit my teeth as anger bubbles in my chest. "I'm *trying*," I snap back at him, but he doesn't seem convinced.

“Rune was a complete idiot. He should’ve known you wouldn’t fight for him as he did *you*. My brother deserved far better.” Kol sneers at me and disdain drips from his lips.

A surge of undiluted anger thrums through my veins and I throw Kol off of me. His eyes widen only for a moment before he’s coming at me with his onyx sword, the same one he slew Kastian with the first time we met.

I summon both my aura blades and cross them in front of me, catching his attack and flinging his sword from his hands. While he’s caught off guard I land a hard kick straight to his sternum and he flies back, landing on his ass, and my blade cutting his cheek as I glare down at him.

“Say that again and I will do more than wound your pride.”

Kol looks pissed for all of a moment before he sighs and relief spreads over his features. “Thank gods you’re stronger than you’ve been letting on. I guess we only needed to piss you off first.”

I scowl at him but release my aura. The blades vanish into the air and Willow nudges me with her elbow.

“Nice.” She grins at Kol and he looks away. I look between them for a few moments before deciding I don’t really want to know if they are fucking or not.

Kol stands and pats my back as he walks toward the mansion. “We’re done for today. We’ll pick up tomorrow with Arulius and Kastian.” Willow follows behind him and I’m left taking up the rear.

My body aches from head to toe after getting my ass kicked all morning, but as much as I don’t like him, Kol’s right. I need to be more angry when I fight. I *am* angry... but I’m also just distracted. We’re just sitting here waiting while North has Rune’s body and is destroying the human realm piece by piece.

I head straight to our room and fall face-first into the sheets.

We know that he's still in the human realm, thanks to Wren's quick thinking when he placed the Vernovian Thorn on North. He isn't traveling too far each day, but he's killing mercilessly nonetheless. He just wants to cause as much pain and suffering as he can.

I hate sitting here and waiting. I know we have a plan, and I know the training and preparations are important, but every second that passes is another moment that North is hurting and killing innocent people.

I groan and haphazardly kick off my boots and strip off my bone armor, letting them fall to the floor. I roll onto my back and stare at the dim ceiling.

What happens if we can't convince him to quell his rage? He's angry with a goddess I don't even remember. It's not fair to either of us, I suppose.

The adjoining bathroom door opens and I lift my head just in time to catch Kastian stepping out from a bath. His white hair is wet and only a towel is wrapped around his waist.

"What are you doing?" He smiles as he looks to the floor and surely sees my boots and armor tossed carelessly there. "Did Kol push you too hard again?"

I groan and sit up. My arms are throbbing and my ass hurts.

"Yeah, those two just enjoy beating the crap out of me."

Kastian slips his black pants on and I'm sad that he seems to be in a hurry to get somewhere. "Well, I think it might continue until you can defeat them. They may be callous, but they're preparing you for war."

I nod sullenly. "I know. I just feel so distracted and restless."

He slips his dark wings through his tight ebony shirt and his feathers bristle as he shakes the remaining water from them. His ocean eyes find mine as he steps over and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Don't let your mind wander. Focus on the plan and your training. I can help you if you'd like? I'm



actually heading to the edge of the glades to work on *inner peace*. Moro said it will help with our technique.”

I quirk a brow at him. “You? Working on *inner peace*?” I say with a sarcastic tone and he smirks at me as he wraps his arm around me and tosses me over his shoulder.

“Sounds like we both need to work on it.” He laughs and I do too as he carries me out of our room.

We fly over Wren, Moro, Violet, and Arulius on our way to the edge of the glades. They all huddle around the model Wren put together for our plan to surround North. Moro detailed out the Cave of Origins for us, telling us which tunnels were effective for an ambush and where we are to each hide within them. We’re going to lure him in and once he takes his own body back, we’ll detain him.

It’s our only shot at getting Rune back and saving the realms.

Another tremor shakes through Tomorrow and a few more of the god-like trees in the distance crumble to the ground. Dust clouds bloom where they fall and my heart sinks deeper in my chest. Kastian winces with the pain that flows through him—the amount of souls passing through is too great. I bite my cheek as the pain flutters through me as well. He keeps most of the sting from traveling through the bond. I cannot imagine how intense it must be for him.

We’re running out of time.

“Don’t let it cloud your thoughts, Elodie. I know it’s hard, but we have to have clear minds. This is what North wants. He wants us to be frightened and desperate.” Kastian lands silently on a rock formation that juts up from the earth. His black wings tipped with gold ends flutter as he tucks them in behind himself.

My feet meet the ground moments after. The pebbles beneath us quake with the last of the tremors. The fear is poisonous—and impossible to keep out.

My Death God sends waves of reassurance through our blood bond and it soothes my nerves. He takes my hand and

sits with his legs crossed. I follow him down and sit the same way, facing him and waiting for this *inner peace* training to fix all my problems.

We stare at one another for a few moments before I crack a smile, and he leans forward and gently brushes his fingers over my eyes so that I close them.

“If anyone is a distraction, it’s you, little goddess,” he mumbles, but I can hear the grin in his voice.

“Well, how are we to find our peace?”

He’s quiet for a few moments and then mutters, “Moro said to imagine a large, deep pool of water. One that is clear and still. Then picture a single drop falling in its center.”

As he speaks the words, the pool he’s describing forms in my mind instantly. The water is azure and the depths seem to reach the center of the realms. Have I seen this place before? I ponder the thought as a drop of water drips onto the water’s surface and waves of power thrum through my bones.

My eyes shoot open and Kastian’s do the same a moment after. The energy that tantalizes my skin dances on my fingertips and feels easier to summon. I test it out and picture my aura blade. The three-foot blade of light forms in my palm with a power I did not know to be mine thrumming through it.

My Death God stands and his wings glow with dark aura, proof that he is experiencing the same oddity. “Why was that place so familiar?” His brows pull together and he looks at me with hesitance.

I shrug. “I’m not sure... but I know I’ll be kicking Willow and Kol’s butts tomorrow.”

## Elodie

Naminé carries the same buckets of treats I do beside me. Greysil helped her make them for the Hollows this morning. My hands hurt with the weight of each bucket, but excitement pulls at my smile.

Today's the day the Pine Hollows can finally use the stables.

We've worked every day on it, trying to burn time by keeping as busy as possible. It's been exhausting building, training, and trying to coexist with my former enemy, but I'm glad for the distractions. Rune hasn't visited me since the night I told him about our plan. I'm sure it's because North cut the connection after he relayed the message I gave him.

My mind has been heavy with worry.

"Okay, what's the frown for?" Naminé scowls at me. She set a *no-frowning* policy in place after Arulius and I were caught crying and having sex in the tub almost two weeks ago. I'm just happy *she* woke up and caught us, not my other gods.

Though I'm sure Kastian senses my distress about it, he hasn't said anything, and I appreciate that.

"I was just thinking about Rune." I glance up into the sky. The weather has significantly warmed in the last several days. The leaves on the trees are completely grown and the pink blossoms are in full bloom. Petals have been falling here and

there since this morning. Violet mentioned that they will all scatter by nightfall in a big display.

Naminé stops walking and sets down her buckets. I pause and raise a brow at her.

“Don’t frown when you think of him. Smile. He deserves that much, don’t you think? I know he’d be pissed if I let you frown about him.” Her blonde hair is braided and swept over her right shoulder. Her warm amber eyes soften on me with sympathy. “Smile for him. Smile for Arulius. Heck—smile for *me*. Gods know we could all use it.” She smiles cheerfully at me, and I return it.

“You’re right. Thank you, Naminé. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” I hug her and she laughs.

“You’d probably fly straight into a tree.”

We both laugh and her grasp tightens around my shoulders. “Promise you’re okay?” she asks more seriously.

I nod and glance up, seeing Arulius and Kastian walking our way with a few more buckets.

“Is something the matter?” Kastian asks, his dark brows knit with worry as he searches my face.

“No, we were just talking about the cherry blossoms falling,” I lie. Naminé catches on immediately like I knew she would, because she’s amazing.

“Yeah—it’s sad that they’ll be gone tonight.” She looks longingly at the flowers and even I believe her charade until she shoots a wink at me.

But I am actually sad that they’ll be gone tonight.

Arulius looks up at the flowers like he hadn’t even noticed they were losing their petals. My dark-winged Eostrix sets his buckets next to mine and reaches for my hand. He gives me a boyish grin filled with the same giddy light I once had in the human realm when my parents and Aunt Maggie would take me to watch the fireworks in Barkovah.

“Elodie, would you like to watch the petals’ descent with me tonight?” Kastian whispers against the shell of my ear. My

heart thrums and my eager smile tells him everything he needs to know, but I nod anyway.

Arulius furrows his brows at us as if we're plotting against him or something, but Naminé is close enough and she heard plenty.

"I want to watch too!" she blurts out and looks between Kastian and me. "Greysil will be so surprised, *please?*" My lovely God of Death smiles and nods. Naminé brightens and picks up her buckets, quickly moving toward the stable as if hurrying will bring night sooner.

We follow her, and Arulius takes pace beside me.

"You know Wren won't sit this one out either," he mumbles, keeping his gaze steadily ahead.

I nudge him with my shoulder, and his purple eyes flash down at me. "And you expect me to believe you won't?" He grins but glances back toward the stables without replying. I slow my stride and fall behind. Arulius continues walking until he catches up with Naminé and Kastian. Wren and Marley are already tossing handfuls of treats out to the Hollows and more are running past me to join the frenzy.

Sometimes it's nice to stand in the back and watch the world spin for a few moments without your presence.

A long tail that wisps with long white fur curls around me. I smile up at Margo as she settles beside me. Her blue eyes pierce through me, instilling calmness into my veins. She watches me expectantly, like she knows something is wrong. Funny how dogs know these things. They feel it with everything in their being, I suppose.

"Not you too," I mumble, eyeing Naminé to ensure she doesn't see me over here frowning again. Gods help me if she does.

Margo nuzzles the back of my head with her snout and grunts. I pet her beautiful white fur and she pushes me toward the others. "Okay, okay. Alone time can be healthy too!" She walks beside me, wagging her tail, and by the time we reach Kastian, Margo is already taking one of his buckets for herself

and trotting off to her own spot. Brevik follows over to meet her by the forest line to share.

“I guess Margo has more friends than just you now,” Kastian says as he helps me toss the last of my treats out to the waiting Pine Hollows.

“She’s already got Moro in her back pocket too. I don’t think there’s anything he wouldn’t do for her or any other Hollow here,” I mumble as I help throw treats. Kastian brushes his white hair from his forehead as he looks at me. His black horns point toward the sky and his wings are tucked behind him.

“Poor Violet. He’d choose a Hollow over her.”

“I’d choose Margo over any of you.” I shrug and glance at him to see his reaction.

Kastian bursts out laughing, drawing curious looks from Wren and Arulius. Naminé just smiles widely and seems content with the grin on my face. “I set myself up for that one, didn’t I?” Kastian leans down and grabs the empty buckets.

“So... have you ever watched the petals fall before?” I pry. I’m excited to be a part of something that’s apparently sacred here.

He shakes his head. “I’m not even sure when it starts. We’ll have to ask Violet. And by we, I mean *you*.”

I pinch my brows and groan. “*Gods*.”

“I’ll leave it up to you then.” Kastian bumps me playfully with his ass before running toward the stables.

I chase after him; I like this side of my Death God.



I find Violet in the garden. When she and Moro arrived, it was nothing but thorns and dead branches. But she and Greysil

have been working diligently to get it back into a usable state.

The cobblestone wall is three feet high and lines the perimeter of the large area. Shrubs that used to pillar the entrance are still budding with their new life. Small bundles of green are sprinkled throughout the bushes. Little birds the color of an orange sunset hop between branches and chirp happy tunes.

Violet is on her knees planting seeds in the rows of turned soil, and as I approach her she looks up at me. Her expression turns to concern. What, is she afraid of *me* now?

“Hi... um—we’d all like to watch the petals fall tonight. Do you know what time it starts?” As I speak, I look off to my side because this is already too awkward.

We’ve been avoiding each other like the plague. This is our first real one-on-one interaction.

She stands and pulls her gloves off. I reluctantly glance at her, and she stares at me with her red eyes. Her universe-tinted black hair is pulled up into a tight ponytail and there’s a smudge of dirt on her cheek. Outside her Nesbrim castle, she looks like a normal woman.

An ordinary person who enjoys gardening and has a crush on one of the soldiers. How I wish I could see her with new eyes.

“Yes—come with me. I’ll show you,” she mutters indifferently and walks past me toward the tree line beyond the garden walls. I follow behind her and thank the gods that she’s keeping it blunt and not trying to have small talk.

We stop at the closest tree. The branches are heavy with pink blossoms and impossible to not be in awe of.

Violet reaches up and plucks one of the flowers. She pulls it close to her face and inhales the sweet aroma. Peace falls over her features and her shoulders relax.

“You can tell by the scent. Right now they are still sweet, not yet turned bitter, so they still have about six hours or so. We can check again later to get a closer estimate.” She looks at

me with kindness in her eyes for the first time, handing me the flower and offering it to me to smell.

For a moment I almost take it from her, but doubt clouds my heart. I turn coldly from her and walk back toward the mansion.

“Thanks,” I mutter without looking back.



Kastian tries to sneak me away for himself come nightfall, but it's no use. Wren and Marley are waiting at the foot of the steps with a blanket for us to all sit on and Arulius lingers near the dining hall doors too.

Naminé and Greysil hold hands and beam at me as I step into the foyer with Kastian. Kol and Willow are already stepping outside to get a head start. Moro enters from the terrarium and Violet follows behind him. He appears to be still ignoring her but he has less annoyance in his gaze. What a strange evening filled with my closest friends and enemies, yet tonight, we all have excitement in our eyes and my heart warms at that thought.

“Well, are we all ready?” Kastian smirks. Even if he wanted a private night with me, it's clear that he's overcome with joy that everyone is here.

We walk to the center of the forest, where the trees part just enough for a small clearing. Wren and Marley spread out a quilted blanket that's large enough for us to all fit on. The Moss Sparrow's eyes are wide and filled with excitement beyond words.

“Calm down, they're just petals,” Wren snips at him, but the grin pulling at his lips tells me he's also excited. The Cypress sparks a joint and wraps his arm around my shoulders, bringing the joint to my lips and holding me close.



I take a deep inhale of the piney smoke, feeling my senses heighten and my worries fade. We can deal with North and all the hell he's bringing tomorrow.

Tonight is for us—all of us.

Violet and Moro take their seats at opposite sides of the blanket. The distance between them is tangible and a small sliver of sorrow slips through me for her. She stares at the flowers with a glint of hope, the same hope and wishes I once saw in my precious Rune's eyes.

I wonder what she's wishing for tonight.

Arulius sits at my left side and Wren at my other while I'm between Kastian's legs. He's wrapped around me tightly and his sage scent encases me in everything that is him.

"You ready?" my Eostrix whispers against the shell of my ear. Goosebumps crawl up my arms and I lean further into his chest. Wren slips his hand beneath Kastian's arm and holds my hand sweetly.

"Yes," I murmur as warmth bleeds from my veins. My eyes wander to my left to look at Arulius. He's a few inches away from us and holds his knees to his chest. His eyes are dull and set on the trees, waiting for something to happen.

I wish he'd open up to the rest of them like he does with me.

"Oh my gods—look!" Naminé springs up from the blanket behind us and I perk up as the leaves surrounding us start to glow with pink brilliance.

Kol and Willow stand as well, their eyes wide with awe. Marley shakes Wren's arm with giddy excitement.

My breath leaves my lungs as the air brightens. As if the wind itself is visible, waves of magic twirl through the forest. The petals fall a few at a time, then all at once. Like water being dropped from a bucket or confetti falling from the sky. The pink magic sweeps them up and threads them around as if in a tragic dance.

The petals are dying, but they dance so beautifully that it draws tears to my eyes.

*My wish is to be with all of them forever.*

Another tremor shakes the ground and my heart lurches in my chest. Kastian sends pain through the blood bond as he takes on a huge wave of fresh souls entering Tomorrow.

He gasps behind me and I clutch my shirt in agony. Sweat beads down my forehead and it feels as though our time is running out.

Everyone stares at us in horror as the beauty of the petals fade and all that's left is the weight of our despair.

## Elodie

We ride our Hollows all day due to the non-winged gods outnumbering the winged gods. I'm not complaining, though. I get to spend some time with Margo and she's positively glowing with the attention.

I wish I had more time to be with her though. Maybe once this is all over we'll finally be able to play fetch again or build another shed like we had in the human realm. Wren can help out since he's so good at building things.

The memories of my family rise and I dance with their ghosts for a while.

We'll all find one another someday. This *is* the afterlife, isn't it? Our times will align again, I'm sure of it.

Moro and Violet ride between Kastian and Arulius at the head of the group. Wren and I follow behind to ensure everyone—Violet—stays in check.

"Brevik's a good Hollow." Wren smiles as he pats the Pine Hollow's large gray head. It grunts in response and my Cypress laughs beside me. Margo lifts her head to look at him and huffs.

"I think she agrees."

Wren shakes his head, still laughing. "I think he told me to fuck off and so did she."

Kastian and Arulius turn around and raise their brows at us giggling back here. I know our situation is dire, but Wren pulls the humor out of me every godsdamn time. I'm thankful for it too. Otherwise, I might be as gloomy as Kastian once was.

We reach the mouth of the cave by the time the sun is setting.

The Cave of Origins is as creepy as Moro made it sound in his stories. The trees darken around it, the leaves crimson rather than a lush juniper color. The mouth of the cave has teeth, stalactites that have long turned black from the colors of the stones hanging from the cave ceiling.

I frown at the unsettling sight.

The cave is on the edge of a cliffside. The ocean spray is cold and dreary, matching the clouds that darken in the sky with the fading suns. The gray stones that line the entrance are wet and daunting. My stomach sinks thinking about descending into the earth. Even the forest seems to keep itself at bay from this place.

I dismount from Margo and pat her neck softly as I wait for Kastian and Arulius to untie North's body from the cargo Hollow.

*Rune. Please meet us here.*

I worry my lower lip, hoping that he was able to convince North to return to stop us from being restored. He hasn't visited me since that night so I'm taking that as a sign that he'll be here.

"Wren, can you tell where he is?" I try to keep the desperation out of my voice but it's proving to be more difficult than I thought.

His eyes tell me everything as he mutters, "I knew placing the Vernovian Thorn on him was a long shot. We know that he was in the human realm, but that's the last place I could trace him. Though I'm sure it's not hard for the God of War to rid himself of a Vernovian Thorn since he was able to break the curse Violet placed on you so easily. I'm sure he's on his way. Try not to worry."

I nod and watch as he walks over to see if my other gods need help.

Wren says something to Arulius and I watch my golden god's expression darken. Are they still being cruel to him? Is that why he's been so down and outcast? My chest hurts at the thought of that.

I don't think I can exist in a world without Arulius—without any of them.

Violet meets my gaze and I flinch under her red eyes. She doesn't even look like herself anymore. The soul I knew that was once filled with so much hatred and rage is now a lake of misery filled with regrets and longing. Last night she watched the blossoms like any other woman would have—just like *I* did.

She walks to stand beside me and I can't help but stiffen my muscles. I know she won't hurt me anymore, but the fear still lives rent-free in the vault in my mind.

“I hope you know what you're doing.” She sighs and crosses her arms. I snap my head to look at her. She looks tired from the long ride but there's ire in her eyes.

“We are getting Rune back,” I say with confidence. “There's no other way.”

She nods once, slowly, as she considers my words. “But what will it cost?”

I grit my teeth and grab her shirt by the collar. Her eyes widen with shock and I make damn sure she knows I'm not fucking around anymore.

“Enough of your fucking bullshit! Every time I have a sliver of hope, you come to stomp it out. Moro hates you because of your actions. *Because of your reluctance to be good.*” Her eyes narrow with the pain of my words. “So instead of trying to cut me down, why don't you try being pleasant for once in your life.”

I release her shirt and she staggers back a few steps as she seems to take it all in.

Then she looks up at me with burning eyes before her gaze lands on something in the distance.

My blood chills as her eyes widen with horror, and I know we're fucked.

The sky explodes into an inferno.

The torrential fire heats the air around us faster than a lighter can spark. I hear Wren shout for me just as *he* becomes visible from the charcoal smoke that rolls on his heels like a black sandstorm.

My beloved Dreadius wears an ebony vest and pants, clad in crimson flames unlike I've ever seen, and he might as well be walking straight from the gates of the underworld. A smirk so dark and wicked pulls at his beautiful lips, and his red eyes land on me with an abhorrence that singes my heart to cinders.

*Rune.*

## Arulius

He's back. Like a god resurrected from the dead, he's back.

And gods, is he angry.

I toss North's body at Wren and the Cypress barely manages to catch it as I take flight. There's no time to devise an alternate plan—everything we'd thought of involved us already being in the tunnels.

*Shit.*

Rune walks slowly toward Elodie like he's in a trance with hell on his heels. His aura is tainted, mixed malevolently with that of the War God's poisonous power. She looks completely taken aback at seeing her beloved Dreadius guard. Can't she see the wave of smoke coming? The darkness of it is all-consuming.

"Elodie!" I roar as I fly as fast as I can toward Rune. My wings hurt as I push them to their limit but I don't have a second to spare.

Both of their eyes flick over to me and she snaps out of her daze, taking to the sky in a heartbeat to evade Rune as he reaches out for her. Kastian rears behind her and pulls his dark aura blade from the very fabric of this realm. It wisps with shadows and death. Good, he needs to be ready to fight to the end.

As do I.

I summon my aura like a river of electricity. My veins illuminate from within as the golden aura spreads through me. I envision a sword opposite of Kastian's—a blade of light. A blade that can end this once and for all.

Rune looks between Elodie and me from the ground and his mouth stretches abnormally large as he starts to laugh wickedly. Chills crawl up my neck.

What's the fucking plan?

Kastian's eyes flash with fear and confusion as well.

We aren't supposed to be fighting him in Rune's flesh—we have to get him to take his body back. I risk glancing over my shoulder at Wren, and lo and behold, he and Moro are already on it. The Cypress holds the limp, headless body up for Rune to see.

“North! Your vessel is here. Let the Peace God go!” Moro shouts over the black flames that lick at their ankles. His dark skin glistens with his blue aura teeming just beneath, ready to wage war if North won't obey.

We might actually manage to do this.

The Cypress, God of Death, me, Moro, Goddess of life, and fuck, even Violet.

North seems to come to the same conclusion—even though powerful, he's no match for us in Rune's body.

His smile fades and a darkness unlike any I've ever seen in another's eyes takes hold as he walks toward his headless body. The black smoke behind him begins to move in a large circle around us all, like a sandstorm that is too high and wide to escape. Moro and Wren drop the body and step back just as an air of negative energy sparks throughout the fields. Static jumps from each blade of grass and the field becomes charged with fury. My feathers catch each vibration of it, and my breaths catch in my lungs as fear sets in.

*I think we fucked up.*



Rune reaches the War God's lifeless body and bends over, letting black, oily liquid seep from his fingertips and coat North. Wren and Moro take a few more hesitant steps back. I can see the fear in their eyes even from up here in the sky.

Anything too easy is probably a fucking trap. Even if you're the one setting it.

Elodie flies up beside me, her beige wings beating silently against the reddening sky. The clouds fill with a vengeance of their own. "Something doesn't seem right... I don't like this." Terror flashes in her bright brown eyes. I wish I could do something to comfort her, but there's not a godsdamn thing I can do to calm her.

I grit my teeth and nod. "I don't either—"

A mist of darkness, a curtain of night and blood falls around us before I finish speaking. The smoke has completely wrapped around us and holds a crimson hue. The air becomes thick with iron and my wings can hardly hold me in the sky with the weight of North's aura.

It's too dark to see more than a few feet in any direction. Panic sets in my heart as Elodie screams. My entire body reacts to it.

*She can't stay airborne with the short wing.*

I follow her voice and catch her as I glide toward the ground. Her heart is thrumming erratically and my own wars against it just as furiously.

*We are in deep fucking shit.*

Elodie clings to my chest tightly. I crash into the ground, using my wings as a cage as we roll a few times.

My senses are all over the place. The shroud of darkness fucks with my sense of direction and the sounds of the world around me are muffled.

Wren shrieks like he's been stabbed and Elodie's head snaps up toward the sound of it. She stands and charges blindly through the mist to help him.

“Elodie, don’t!” I try to grab her wrist but she disappears into the shroud before I can reach her. I can’t hear her footsteps—the mist mutes everything around me into a hush. My heart hammers in my chest as my eyes frantically try to see through the smoke, but it’s no use, there’s nothing. “Fuck!”

The crackling of aura colliding vibrates through the air and the muffled sound reaches me. I take off sprinting toward the waves of energy clashing over and over.

Summoning my golden aura sword back into my hand, I slash at the mist, and a bubble of light breaks through the darkness.

Kastian and Moro are fighting the fully intact God of War. North, in his own flesh and blood.

His presence alone sends shivers through my bones. I slow subconsciously as I take him in. His black hair is a shroud like a starless sky, short and perfectly styled as if he was never headless or dead for centuries. His war attire is a few hundred years outdated, but terrifying nonetheless. Black leather, with onyx metal strapped over his chest and shoulders.

North’s dark eyes flick over to me and that manic smile spreads across his lips. “Ah, Arulius, right? God of Wrath, won’t you join me in this madness? It wouldn’t be fun if I nearly killed you again, now would it?” His voice is deep and seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. My fingers thread through my hair of their own accord and I’m fisting the strands painfully as his voice echoes through my mind *repeatedly*. He was already too powerful when he possessed Elodie, he brought me to a thread of my life like it was nothing.

Kastian and Moro only spare me a single glance that says they don’t trust me and they’ll fucking kill me if they need to. Do they really think I’d switch sides like this?

My betrayal in Nesbrim stings my heart once more and I shake sense back into my head. *Of course they do*. I made myself the monster they now perceive me to be. It’s probably why even North thinks he can get me on his side... because I’m a traitor.

My chest hurts, but what the fuck else can I expect after all the shit I've pulled?

They both try to land an attack at the same time. Kastian's black wings are loud as they crack with his speed. He readies a blow to North's neck, while Moro conjures blue aura spikes to rise from the ground.

North takes a reverberating stomp toward them and they're blown back by wind like their strength is nothing. The dust storm that his heel creates blasts through me and smoke fills my lungs.

I shut my eyes and focus on my aura, opening all the inner gates and tapping into my soul aura. My grip tightens on my sword, and waves of light pulse from me, instantly disintegrating the shroud he trapped us in.

North's eyes widen only enough to tell me that he's impressed.

He jumps wickedly fast at Moro and Kastian as they land on the ground a few hundred feet away and he slashes both of them with dual short blades made of his black mist. It drips like venom to the ground and hisses as it disappears in thin air. As my gaze follows the drips, I see Rune lying unconscious in the dirt. He's on his side and dust pelts his face viciously.

Kastian grunts as he rolls just in time for North's blade to pierce his side rather than his heart. Moro takes a gruesome slash to his chest and coughs up blood as North thrusts his blade and throws him back.

The War God watches them groaning on the ground and seems bored by it, readying his weapons to inflict fatal blows without a second thought. They are nothing to him.

They are everything to *her*. And perhaps to me as well.

"Stop!" I shout, and his attention snaps to me.

*For Elodie. I'll do whatever it takes to keep all of them safe.*

North cracks his neck. His three white horns are a stark contrast to his black hair. He's the most horrific Dreadius I've

ever laid eyes on. He adjusts the swords in his hands and kicks off the ground at a fucking speed I can't even follow with my eyes.

I barely lift my golden sword in time to block his double blades. The aura wave that shakes my bones from the clash instills fear unlike any I've ever experienced. Is this what it's like to know without a doubt that you are doomed? To endure every fiber in your flesh screaming at you to run? My jaw trembles and North grins sinisterly at the weakness he sees in me.

I swallow hard at the obvious conclusion this battle will have. None of us are going to escape here alive. There's not a fucking chance.

Unless.

"North—we have Rune now and you have your own flesh once more," I grit out as he puts more pressure down on the blade. "We can settle our differences another day." I try to reason with him even though there's a dark pit of hatred burning in his eyes.

He adjusts his hands and cuts through my blade easily. North slashes my chest in an X and blood spurts out of my flesh. Adrenaline shoots through my veins and I don't even feel the pain. I only have the belligerent fear that's running rampant through me.

*I'm going to die. He's going to kill me. Run. Run. Run. Run.*

"I've come for blood. I've come for everyone, little god. You will all perish here today, and I will make *her* watch," he snarls at me and my teeth clack together with the rage that burns in my gut.

Blood coats my tongue and my throat itches for me to cough, but I hold it down.

*For Elodie.*

I shift on my feet and spin, ducking simultaneously as North throws a fatal blow at my neck. I try a low sweeping

kick but North jumps before I even come close and lands a jaw-breaking knee to my face.

My body is flung like a rag doll across the ground, dirt and dust entering my mouth as I roll over and over. Bones snap with every tumble I take. Excruciating, devastating. By the time I stop moving, I'm not sure I can even open my eyes. Each breath is wheezy and contorted. I'm filled with so much agony I can hardly watch as the steam rises from my spilled blood.

*It hurts.*

Everything hurts.

Blood pours from my mouth as it hangs open. The hot liquid burns my hand as I struggle to get back up. I can't close my mouth and my tongue hangs loosely off to the side where my jaw dangles. Flesh from my face lies a few feet from me and it doesn't take long for me to decipher that my jaw is nothing but bone and blood. Tendons hardly hold it to my head.

Footsteps approach me, but it's all I can do to simply lift my head. I didn't even put up a fight against him. None of us did.

North's menacing aura seizes me, his mere proximity making it even harder to breathe.

His black eyes stare down at me with the rage he's been holding onto for centuries. What *have* we done? What have we unleashed into the realms?

*Gods, help us.*

The War God's boot lifts, slowly closing down on my neck, the crushing weight of death close on his heel.

As the pressure increases, Elodie crashes into North, tackling him like I've seen Wren do so many times to her. I lie helplessly as I watch her take him to the ground.

Her hands fly to his throat and he cackles like a madman at her attempt to choke him. Even her aura glowing around his neck, adding additional strength, does nothing.

“Please stop! North, we need you to be a part of the Rhythm!” she cries as he reaches up and grabs her forearms so violently they both snap.

Her blood-curdling scream hollows out my soul and somehow I manage to force my destroyed body to stand.

I’m broken and defeated, but I won’t stop until one of us has stopped breathing. He cannot be saved.

North glares at Elodie. “*Talia*, you bitch, I can’t wait to waste all the life you’ve given those worthless worms in the mortal realm. I can’t wait to destroy everything you care for.” His words drip with disdain.

Wren’s black vines wrap around North’s neck and he pulls the War God back enough for Elodie to escape his grasp.

North grabs the Cypress by his neck and slams him into the rocks over and over until his blood coats everything beneath them. Elodie cries and the sound breaks my heart. Violet’s screams roll through the heavy air as she surely finds Moro mortally injured along with Kastian.

I’m the only one left.

The world around us hushes and Elodie’s tear-filled eyes meet mine. She’s so beautiful. Everything I’ve ever wanted and more.

A nostalgic grin curves my lips. Gods, what a ride this has been.

What an existence I was able to share with her... with all of them.

I close my eyes and take in the soft hum of the horrors around us, focusing what little healing I have left into my wings.

I manage to reach Elodie, and I can’t help but brush her cheek one last time. Her beige wings and ears sway as North’s aura creates a torrent of darkness around us. I want to open my arms and take her flying for the first time again. I want to teach her how to fight and see that fire in her eyes again. I want to apologize over and over until I can speak no more.

Elodie's gaze falters, hopelessness taking the part of her I love most. She sobs as her eyes inspect my hanging, bloody jaw and the wheezy drawls my lungs are forcing me to endure.

There are so many things I'd like to say. Things that I will never mutter. Perhaps this is how it was always meant to be.

Men like me don't get last words.

We don't get to say goodbye.

We don't get to go home.

I dip down and press my forehead to hers, holding her desperately for a few blissful moments. What I'd give to kiss her one more time.

*Goodbye, my love.*

Her mouth parts a bit and her eyes widen with immeasurable despair as she seems to understand what I'm trying to convey.

But before I can listen to anything she has to say, I use all the aura in my being to fly toward North. I tear him away from Wren and fly with the last of my fury into the sky as high as my broken wings will carry us.

As a golden light engulfs my vision, I shut my eyes.

*You were never mine to love. Find your happiness in this life and the next.*

Pain flows through my veins, and the war cry that leaves my mouth is throaty and guttural as the gold aura engulfs everything I am. My flesh burns and the agony is unbearable. My thoughts are scattered and I desperately cry for the release of death.

I don't know if I took North with me.

I'm not sure if anything I've done in the past will ever be mended.

But I do know that I was here, and I mattered, even if I was the villain for a while—real or not.

It's hard to tell if I'm seeing things clearly, but the sky erupts into a beautiful storm, darkened blues in the centers of the clouds, and the outskirts an amber orange. I see two gods flying through them, the golden-winged one holding the lamb-eared goddess tightly and their arms extended out into the clouds.

Tears wet my eyes and if I could, I'd smile. I hope they can feel the rain kissing their skin.

The pain fades from my bones and an airiness consumes me. Bright beams of sunlight fall around the storm and caress me warmly.

*What beautiful light.*



## 20

Elodie

A golden beam of light crashes down from the heavens over Arulius and North. The aura shakes the gravel beneath me as I pull a battered and bleeding Wren into my lap. My forearms sting from the breaks but my body heals them slowly.

I can't manage to pull my eyes away from the beam, searching for Arulius desperately in the light. The dark shroud of North's aura completely fades, and just as instantaneously as all of this started—it stops.

All the energy in the air vanishes and Arulius's light slivers into small shards as the last of it slips between the folds of the realm, leaving in its wake a somber orange sky.

Two bodies fall from the heavens.

My wings, no longer weighted down by North's ominous aura, carry me wickedly fast toward my golden god as his body falls like a bird that's been mortally wounded.

Kastian shouts up at me from below but I don't hear him. I can't hear anything except my erratic heartbeat thrumming in my ears. He was hurt so badly, I don't know how he even managed to drag North up here. Tears stream down my cheeks as I envision his wounds. Blood coated his entire body and his jaw... There was so much fucking blood and his bones were

bare. I smash my teeth together to keep the cries in. He was trying to tell me something before he flew up here.

I extend my arms, ready to catch him.

This close, I catch sight of a faint smile spreading across Arulius's healed lips. His amethyst eyes stare steadily at the orange clouds above like he sees someone there.

*Tell me what you were trying to say.*

*I want to hear it. A million times, I want to hear it.*

My fingers touch his wing, and as I ready myself to bear his weight, his eyes shift slowly to mine. His gaze is soft and all-consuming, filled with longing and regrets.

Then his body shatters like a million shards of golden glass, weightless and glowing as if his warm light spreads within each piece. My heart stops and a lump knots in my throat.

For a moment, I watch as the flickering shards of light dance through the blazing amber sky.

Before my mind goes into the depths of the dark thoughts that pound at the doors I desperately hold shut, I raise my arms and summon my aura to bring him back. I'm the Goddess of Life. I've done it time and time again.

But the shards continue to drift away and the tendrils of his aura that touched my skin moments ago fade from the air.

*No.*

I try again, this time harder. Talia's presence surfaces inside the walls of my conscience and when she sends grief through my chest, I try to shake it.

*"Arulius?"*

I frantically search the sky, but I'm the only one here.

Kastian glides up beside me and watches the fragments of light drift into nothingness. His worry sits heavily next to Talia's through our bond.

“Where is he?” my Death God murmurs so quietly I’m not sure he wanted to speak it.

I shake my head, biting my lower lip so hard that blood spills from my lip and drips off my chin.

I won’t say it. *I can’t say it.*

He flies silently next to me for a few seconds, seeming to be at a loss for words.

Wren calls up to us with urgency in his tone, “Get down here!”

Kastian sets a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “North—we still need to deal with him.” His ocean eyes are filled with hurt, the same pain he threads into my soul.

I let my eyes return to the sky. Kastian brushes my cheek with his hand as if he understands, then closes his ebony wings to dive back to the ground.

“Arulius,” I whisper to the amber clouds as tears fall hopelessly from my chin. My spine heats and my darling Dreadius’s deep voice curls around me.

*“You up there making wishes, pup?”*

My hand flies to my mouth as a cry escapes my lips, and I look to the ground, catching eyes with my precious Rune.

The space between us closes in a mere moment. He catches me as I fly into his arms, and his metallic rose scent invades my senses.

“*Rune.*” I sob into his chest as he holds me tightly. A sad laugh stirs from him and my soul wrenches with everything I can’t process right now. My shoulders shake and I can’t stop the tears from crashing to the blood-covered ground.

“I’m here.” He strokes my hair and holds me so tightly I don’t think I’ll ever be able to let go. “I know you’re hurting, but we have to finish this, pup. We can talk all night if you’d like, but we must keep our heads about us.” Rune pulls away from me and his eyes warm on mine. I nod and wipe my tears with my forearm.

There's no time to waste—no matter how much this hurts.

Wren and Kastian are crouched on the ground over what I presume is North's body. He must've fallen while I was chasing after Arulius. Agony threatens to spread through my mind but I grit my teeth to focus.

Rune and I run to their sides and kneel beside them.

“What's happened to him?” My eyes widen as I take in the War God's state.

He's completely entrapped in a translucent golden crystal, as if sealed away with magic—frozen in gilded tree sap.

North is... not what I expected.

His eyes are closed and his expression is peaceful. Long dark lashes crest his cheeks, dark circles line beneath his eyes, and his black hair is not so different from Rune's. His three Dreadius horns are as white as snow. Not translucent like ice as Greysil's are, but opaque like ivory bone.

Asleep, he doesn't look like a God of War and Ruin. He looks like one of us.

Maybe he used to be.

My hand unconsciously reaches for his cheek. He looks so melancholic, even in a state of rest. The inner chambers of my heart call to him.

Wren grasps my wrist and gives me a death glare. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

That snaps me right out of my trance. I shake my head. “I don't... I don't know.” I rub the back of the hand that was reaching for him before addressing the odd amber that encases North's body. “Did Arulius do this?”

Kastian's expression is grave. “I think so.”

Wren stares at me with confusion, waiting for me to tell him where Arulius is. Rune's eyes are set on the sky above.

“Is that what you were—” My Dreadius pauses and his brows pinch as he seems to connect what I was wishing for up there. “He used the soul curse.” Rune looks back at me with

immense grief in his eyes. My heart seizes and I want to cry again, but my eyes are dry. I don't know if I can face this.

Kastian and Wren share a shocked look.

“The soul curse, wretched and forbidden. He's holding the doors closed on the God of War. Keeping him sealed with his own life force.” Rune looks at the gilded sap coating North's body. “Though I've never seen the caster of the curse shatter as he did. It's as if—”

Violet stands behind Kastian, and all of our eyes snap to her.

“He was never truly real.”

## Violet

The Goddess of Life's eyes fill with horror as the cursed words leave my lips. But she said she wanted the truth. Well, here it is. Not sugar-coated or served with tissues.

The truth—cold and damaging.

My soul is heavy inside my shell, and I'm so tired of keeping the horrid things inside.

“Arulius was created from my hatred—born of my wrath.” I pause and take a steadying breath, closing my eyes against judgment. Moro is barely able to lift his head but his silver eyes watch me. “I forged him against all odds beneath the Sea of Stars. He is the only god to be granted a soul outside of the Maker God's will. I broke the divine rules.”

Elodie's desolate eyes seem to sink further as my story unfolds. The pain surely hollows out her chest by the way she grasps desperately at it, as if she could ease the pain. Kastian winces as their bond shares her heartache.

“He was bound to me by design and I'm not sure if he ever truly had his own soul... if he ever really existed. His very existence defied everything.” My eyes falter with memories of my first moments with him. He was a hopeful man back then. He used to ask me if he was real every day, and I told him if the sun warmed him and he could truly feel it, that I was sure he was real.

“He existed!” Elodie staggers to her feet, rage scorching across her features. “He was real. Arulius... He was... He *is* real!” she screams inches from my face, her breath hot against my cheeks.

I shut my eyes.

I’m so very tired.

“There isn’t a stone I’d leave unturned for that to be true,” I murmur. Elodie clenches her jaw and her warm eyes search through my cold ones.

“Where is he?” she asks on a shaky breath. “Where? I can bring him back, I know I can.”

I shake my head and glance back down at North. The golden light around his body... If that’s the soul curse... “He’s gone. This is all that remains of him.”

She bends over and clutches her stomach as if she’s been struck with an arrow, releasing a guttural cry that builds a knot in my throat. She pounds at the ground and none of us can muster words. Our brows are pulled in with pain and Kastian starts to weep along with her, grabbing at his heart and shaking his head.

If I’d known all those years ago that this would happen... that I’d become this darkness that plagues the realms... Would things be different? I desperately wish for fate to be altered.

Rune holds her tightly and hushes her with kisses to her forehead. The Cypress drops his arms to his lap in a defeated slump as he stares, bewildered, at North’s encased body.

“I told him he didn’t fucking belong with us,” he whispers his confession. “I... I told him to fucking disappear.” Tears drip from his amber eyes and he bows his head with remorse. “I didn’t mean it... I was angry... I didn’t mean it, you golden prick.”

Kastian stands and faces me, eyes shifting just enough to tell me that Lucius is now at my side.

“What now?” he asks, not bothering to wipe away his tears.

I can't bring myself to look at Lucius. The disdain he shows me is irreparably heartbreaking.

“We must continue as planned. You two need to merge with your past lives.”

Elodie continues to sob, not seeming to hear anything. Wren is right along with her, only guilt stains his eyes.

I nod, meeting both Rune and Kastian's eyes.

“Riah awaits us.”



## Kastian

After a few minutes of coaxing Elodie to no avail, Rune carries her down through the tunnel. I help Wren walk to the cave until he regains his composure enough to walk down on his own.

What a godsdamn nightmare today has been. I use my forearm to wipe away the last of my tears.

I drag North's crystalized body behind me on a tarp as I bring up the rear of the group. My wings are heavy with the unbearable grief Elodie is experiencing. The bond is beautiful at times, but I'm engulfed in enough pain to know that one can truly die of heartbreak. I can't imagine how she must be hurting for it to be this dreadful through the bond.

Moro leads us through the dark tunnels, deep into the earth and far from the only exit. Violet trails close behind him. She seems a bit torn up by Arulius's fate as well. In a way, he was a part of her.

"Why did you say those things to Arulius?" I ask in a hushed tone to the Cypress. Sure—I get it. We were all still pissed at him. I can't say that those thoughts didn't swell in my mind too. But I'm shocked he actually spoke them.

Nothing good can be wrought from digging a deeper hole and throwing someone in its depths.

Wren looks disheveled, his dark hair messy with blood. “I wanted to make him feel bad. *Fuck*, of course I say abhorrent things to the godsdamn bad guy and then he goes and... *fuck*.” He shakes his head and looks over at me. “Do you think my words bothered him?”

A frown digs deep into my lips. “He looked as if his mental state was crumbling the last few weeks, don’t you think?”

He stops walking and stares at the ground. “He was staring at the blossoms last night with weary eyes. Desperate for his wish to come true.”

We walk in silence the rest of the way. The damp, cold cave feels more like a prison than the home of the Memory God.

Moro comes to a stop where a bright light glistens around a sharp stone wall, and turns to face us. “Are you ready? Don’t be alarmed by him, he’s odd but methodically kind.”

I walk past Moro. I need to set North somewhere. The stone he’s trapped in is heavy and my wounds are still slowly healing.

My eyes widen once I step across the lip of the cave.

The dark and damp rocks have transformed into a cylinder of open space that extends far into the air above us. A waterfall crashes down from the top of the cliffs, misting the air with bright flickers of light. The walls of the cave are made of nothing but bookshelves stocked with novels, leaving no space for more. This place makes absolutely no sense, yet I find myself wishing to never leave.

A pool of water so clear and calm takes up the space in the center of the room. Large fish the size of full-grown men swim in slow circles around one another, four in total, their rhythm erratic and not in sync as they try to avoid running into one another. This is the pool I saw in my vision when Elodie and I were practicing our inner focus techniques.

“This place is so familiar,” I whisper. Borvon’s presence looms close beneath my consciousness. He’s been here before.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

I flinch and look over to the right side of the cave. A long desk almost the length of my dining table in the glades sits oddly on the stone floor, so misplaced here in a world beneath Tomorrow. Honestly, everything here doesn’t quite fit in any sense of reality.

A man in a black cloak sits at the desk, leaning back casually with his arms behind his head. His hair is like starlight, not quite white nor gray, but it illuminates the space around him. His eyes are dark and intensely survey me, making my skin crawl.

Moro walks up to him and they embrace one another. “Riah, I wish I could say it was good to see you again. But given the circumstances—” He turns and looks back at me. “You should go first... perhaps Elodie will have calmed by then.”

I hesitate.

Who’s to say I’ll still be myself after I merge with my past life? That thought is incredibly disturbing—I’d place it next to the fear of death. Remembering a life longer than the one you’re currently living... I don’t like it.

What did Arulius feel in his last moments? I wonder.

“And you’re certain this will fix our problems? What if I’m not the same afterward?” I glance down at my hands. “During our battle in Nesbrim, North said that Borvon once stood by his side at war. I cannot bear the weight of that.” I fist my hands and grit my teeth, snapping my eyes back to Moro and Riah. “What if I’m as evil as the War God himself?”

Rune steps beside me. His crimson horns are sinister in the airy gray ambiance of this place. “You’ll be fine, so be strong for her. She needs you, Kastian.” His eyes are steady and send a wave of calm through me. He loves her more than anything. I’m certain he’d sacrifice us all for her if it came down to it, which is unsettling, to say the least.

I close my eyes and nod. “Thank you, my friend... I needed that.” My resolve has solidified, and fear has been

cleansed from my soul.

Riah waves me over casually. he's much more... modern than I thought he'd be. I mean, gods, I think he's been here for several centuries, right? He must spend time in the human realm from time to time.

I walk up the few drenched steps to reach the plateau he's on. Water drips from the top of the cave like rain. My senses feel robbed because although the entire space around me is filled with water, the air is dry. Not humid at all. In fact, it feels dryer than the air outside did.

The God of Memories tilts his head as he looks at me. "None of you are evil—what an outlandish thing to say. You are all still so lost. Bad things have happened, sure, but your hearts grew in the process, did they not?" Riah's dark eyes are like onyx stones, intimidating and raw.

"I—I guess so," I murmur. I'll find out how my heart has grown in mere moments.

Riah extends his pale hand out to me. "Ready?"

I take a deep breath and nod.

His cold fingers touch my skin, sending an icy sting through my flesh. Pain that burns like acid flows through my veins for one second—then I'm standing on a black lake. The water is glassy beneath my feet and the air smells of sage, not burning but freshly picked.

It's dark here—the water is only noticeable by the slight glint that shimmers off the surface. A single moon shines down in the distance, reminding me of my short days lived in the human realm.

"Borvon, are you here?" My voice echoes through the vast emptiness of this world.

"It's about time." Borvon's familiar voice sounds behind me. I turn and am faced with a god who mirrors me in image, just slightly different. His eyes are a darker blue and he has a sternness to his expression like he's never enjoyed a laugh a day in his life. The hollowness in his eyes beckons to the fear

within me, that my past self was callous and not sympathetic as I am now.

My feet instinctively move me back a few steps.

“Were you ever on North’s side?” I harden my exterior as I face my old self.

He cocks his head to the side a bit, seeming slightly surprised by my audacity to accuse him of that.

“North wasn’t always so war-bent. The Rhythm was never truly in tune, young god. Partly, but always off by a beat. We didn’t know it then... but now with Rune it makes more sense. You’ll understand soon.” His cold blue eyes are daunting, sending nothing short of terror through my bones.

“Did you ever have to do this before? You know... with a life before yours?”

Borvon gives me a weak smile and shakes his head. “No, I was the first. And I am not *someone*, young god, I am *you*. I’m you, just as you are me. I’m merely a ghost—a past you’ve long forgotten.”

I stare at him, and the longer I do, the more he starts to look exactly like me. The small differences begin to meld and fade.

I’m looking at a reflection of myself, and I can’t help but wonder if that’s how this works, if we lose little pieces with each reincarnation only to be molded back to our original selves in the end.

“Let’s get this over with,” I mutter while I still have courage scorching my heart.

Borvon nods and extends his hand. I reach out and take it. A gray light swarms from the contact and washes everything away.

It’s so bright I can’t see anything. My eyes slowly adjust to the blinding light and I realize I’m looking at Elodie.

She’s lying in a pool of white liquid, opaque and thick like syrup. Red rose petals are scattered around her, making it look

like she's bathing. Many black horns, not unlike mine, lie scattered on the tiles in no particular order.

"Elodie?" I brush my thumb across her cheek but she remains asleep.

What is this place?

I look around, and as I do the walls form like watercolor paint brushed on a canvas, slowly illustrating this white void into a place I remember.

This... was Nesbrim's High Lord's bathroom. I spare Elodie another glance before standing and exiting to the adjoined bedroom. Extravagant drapes the color of the darkest roses hang from each side of the three bay windows that line the far wall. Two double doors are open onto a balcony overlooking the city below. Dark green vines cling to the railing and a soft breeze flutters in.

A figure stands on the balcony, leaning over and watching the clouds drift by. The light is so bright it stings my eyes. I can't quite make out who it is.

"Hello?" My voice echoes and blurs in this odd place.

The man straightens and turns to look back at me. He wears a lavish white imperial war jacket and black pants, a wine glass in one hand and wrapped tobacco in his other. His medium-length black hair is slicked to the side and his eyes are dark as they pierce through me.

"Borvon—join me, won't you?" He motions for me to come stand on the balcony beside him. With each step I take toward him, my fears and doubts suddenly start to fade, replaced with the dread and nostalgia of the past.

"North, what are you doing out here?" I ask. It feels like *déjà vu*, almost.

He smiles and tilts his cup at me before tossing back his head and drinking the remaining red liquid in one swig. "Oh, you know me. Just trying to stay perishably drunk until we leave this godsforsaken city."

I nod. Everything is flooding back to me now. That's right, North hated Nesbrim. He despised being seen as a symbol of terror and fear. So he locked himself up in this room until Talia finished her business with the Maker. The Rhythm was still new back then. I'd just been created and joined the two of them...

*"Kastian?"* Elodie's voice rings through my ears and bright light shrouds me.

Elodie

**K**astian stands facing Riah on swaying legs. His eyes are distant, as if he's in a trance and dreaming of some far-off place.

Riah wears a cloak that's as dark as night itself. He tilts his head and looks past Kastian and at me. I flinch in Rune's arms but my Dradius soothes me with a soft caress to my cheek.

*"It's going to be okay, pup."* My tattoo heats on my spine and his warm voice settles into me.

"I'm not sure anything will ever be okay ever again." I whisper the painful words as I stand from his embrace. I wish I had time to properly mourn and let Rune hold me until the end of time, but we don't have such luxuries.

Rune lifts his head and watches me from beneath hooded eyes. His tattoos line his jaw sharply, red horns tilting as he turns his head slightly to kiss my cheek.

"It won't be okay for a long time, but we'll carry the weight of it together."

My chest warms with his words and I nod. I retreat from his hold and press my lips against his. The roses I remember invade my senses as he deepens our kiss and fists my hair momentarily before letting go.

His crimson eyes are filled with worry, and it hurts to turn away from him and toward Riah.



The Memory God smiles at me and reaches out his hand. “Talia, my goddess, it is time to wake up.”

I don’t give myself time to worry or withdraw from the inevitable. I clasp his hand tightly, and the chill of his skin makes my gut churn as I close my eyes.

A cold breeze coasts across my skin. Mist and sea salt tantalize my senses and my mind whispers for me to open my eyes.

I’m sitting on a beach of black sand. The ocean beyond is made of white liquid. A red moon as dark and rich as blood rises on the sea line.

“It’s awful, isn’t it?”

My head snaps to my side and I find a goddess so beautiful she makes this odd dream less horrifying. Her dark hair sways behind her, long beige horns pierce the sky, and her ethereal wings are twice the size of mine.

Talia.

She turns and gazes at me with sadness tugging at her gaze.

“This is the essence of what’s left of us,” she murmurs and looks out into the white sea with longing. “This is the brittle wall that remains.”

I look back out to the waves and let my fingers weave through the black sand. The grains are cold, not inviting like one would think the shore should be.

“Are we truly the same person?” I ask, analyzing her again with clearer eyes.

Her beige wings flutter languidly and her brown eyes find mine as she looks over her shoulder.

“Are you so surprised?” Her voice is not unkind. “What are lost memories but a person you’ve forgotten?”

“I would never be as cruel and evil as you are.” I glare at her. Anger swells beneath my skin at the very thought. I wouldn’t be... right? It’s all become so muddied and twisted.

She smirks and pulls her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them delicately and resting her chin on her forearm. “Evil and cruel? Is that what you make of me? I could say the same about you, you know. Have you never been painted in a different light than you were? What of Violet? That poor goddess didn’t deserve the pain she suffered, and yet it happened. The tragedies of long, *long* ago still ebb into our lives, never to be scrubbed away.”

I don’t respond. The way she speaks of Violet tugs at my own sympathy for the High Lady.

Talia’s smile fades and her gaze turns melancholic as she murmurs, “I wanted to send her with Lucius, truly I did. But Tomorrow has a balance that must be upheld—push it too far, and Bresian, the path between, will collapse. The realms would face utter chaos, trembling until everything is ruined. After sending Lucius, there was nothing I could do.”

I narrow my eyes at her and fist my hands in the black sand, the cold grains cooling the heat in my palms. “Then why does everyone paint you as the monster? They said you were cruel... malicious. Yet I felt the tremors myself. North unbalanced the rhythm and the realms began to crumble. Why, then, did Violet blame you?”

Her light-brown eyes are dull and weary, as if she’s been here on this desolate beach for far longer than anyone should have to be, just reminiscing on her past all this time.

“Did you know that if you are told something enough, over and over, by many others, you start to take on their projections? If you were undoubtedly kind but were told day after day for years that you were abhorrent and cruel, would you not believe the words? No matter what your heart knows.”

She pauses and grips her arms tighter.

“I told her repeatedly what would happen, the unbalance that it would cause. But seeing is believing. I’d rather be the villain in her eyes than let the realms fall. It was easier for me to surrender my heart to the cruelty. Simpler to be callous and unforgiving. I didn’t want to do many of the things I did, and yet here we are.”

I take a few moments to digest her words. “And what happened with North?”

“Let’s find out, shall we?”

Talia nods her head over to the white sea and I’m assuming she wants me to wade in. I suppose there’s no reason to deny her, so I stand and go to the shoreline. The waves crash at my feet and on them is the scent of pure pines.

The water is cold and thick. It sends chills up my spine as I wade further in. I turn to look back at Talia but she’s no longer on the beach. Instead, she’s at my side, a brittle smile keeping her features from being too ominous.

I bite my lower lip to hold back the urge to move away from her. She brings her hand out of opaque water and offers it to me.

I hesitate before reluctantly taking it.

She plunges into the white water, pulling me down into the sea with her. I take a last breath before my head is beneath the veil. But just as she pulls me under, I’m rising, as if I was under the water the entire time and am now just breathing.

Kastian sits before me, waiting for me to wake. When his ocean eyes meet mine I’m relieved for a moment.

“Stay lying down, Elodie.” His expression is filled with concern.

“Why?” As the word leaves my lips a sensation crawls down from the nape of my neck and spreads through every nerve in my body.

Memories from the dawn of the realms spill into me. Visions of Borvon and I making love in the glades, flying in darkened skies with Arulius in Nesbrim, refusing Violet’s wishes because—

“Because I wasn’t able to... It’s not that I refused to reincarnate her. I *couldn’t*.”

Kastian brushes my face adoringly. He still has the same light in his eyes but there is a longing there that seems to be

reflecting this moment. He looks a bit different, not in his appearance, but in the way his soul flickers in his eyes.

Talia is no longer in my head or in the back of my conscience.

I am her.

I had merely forgotten—let all the skepticism and curiosities of the world get to me after I passed on.

There's one more god I remember too. I look past Kastian and see a man leaning against the balcony of the imperial room. North. We were all here together at one point in time. Is that why we've returned here in our awakening? At this moment... this moment.

He's dressed in his beautiful ivory war attire, always primed and ready for battle. His lapis lazuli eyes flick back at me and my heart patters in my chest. I remember him, not as a figment of my imagination or a long-forgotten memory. I remember him as if I'd just kissed his soft lips moments ago.

"North." I beckon to him and everything else fades away. Kastian and the bathroom disappear and it's just North and I lying next to one another in a beautiful field of flowers. Poppies and foxgloves dance in the breeze and the warm summer air carries their heavy floral scents.

"You've come back, my sweet lamb," he mutters sadly. The distance in his eyes makes my heart ache horribly.

"Where was I?" I brush my hand across his cheek but he pulls away and sits up, staring out across the fields upon fields of flowers.

"You no longer need me. I left long ago and you only now found me. It hurts, Talia, it hurts more than you could ever know." North clutches his shirt just over his chest and winces with pain.

I don't remember what he means. I only remember missing him terribly. "North, I'm here. I—"

He stands, and as he does, the fields catch fire. An inferno scorches the flowers to ash in a mere second and I stare at

barren hills, blackened by his hatred.

“You are too late.”

My mind is fuzzy and I shut my eyes. I reopen them to find I’m back in the tub and staring at Kastian. This place is confusing and twisted, but this entire process has been odd, as if it is a well of dreams and lost things.

I brush my fingers gently across his cheek. My dear Death God leans into the affection and closes his beautiful eyes. I’m lying in a pool of white liquid, rose petals and golden feathers scattered throughout the surface. Two golden daggers lie on the floor amidst black horns and poisonous thorns. Everything is altered, though the bones of this memory are solidified.

This is a little piece of each of us—all my precious gods.

Kastian sits naked in the tub with me, pulling me closer and pressing a soft kiss to my lips as he murmurs, “There are no gods that could ever keep us apart. My love for you will never die.”

This place... it is Kastian’s birthplace, but where was I before this... It still seems distant in my memory. I look back at the balcony and North is no longer standing there. The crimson drapes flap as a gust of wind blows through the open doors.

“There is no world where I exist without you. Our love will never see rest.” His eyes soften on me, pulling me in for a tight embrace.

My heart and everything in the universe stills—and my eyes open.

Moro, Riah, Wren, and Violet stand around me with surprise widening their eyes. Rune is on my opposite side and giving me an uncertain smile. I’m still hugging a warm body as I was in my dream state.

So then, why is Kastian standing next to Wren, staring at me with a shocked look too?

My eyes widen and I pull back. Who am I holding?

A child around the same age as Marley lies in my arms. He can't be more than eight years old. Hair as white as Kastian's, three crimson horns, and pointed ears.

He opens his eyes slowly as if he's been trapped in a long, dreary dream, and I gasp at the amethyst eyes that gaze back at me.

I don't know what this is. *Who he is*. But I do know that he is mine. Two beige wings peek out from just over his shoulder blades, one a little shorter than the other.

My arms instinctively curl tightly around him and my heart casts another ache through my entire body. He may be the last piece of Arulius I'll ever have. And I'll never let anything hurt him.

"Who... is that?" Wren mumbles, glancing at Riah with confusion. Kastian stares at the boy with distrust as Rune kneels beside me. My Dreadius's eyes warm on the child and he grazes his fingers across the boy's small red horns.

Riah steps toward me as another god enters the Memory God's cavern. For a moment, I have the delusional hope that it is Arulius, but it's a young man and not one I recognize immediately. My chest deflates and I clutch the boy a bit tighter.

Wren flinches at the sight of the man and mutters, "Bruno?"

My eyes widen and I recall that Wren mentioned a god approaching him in Caziell the night I traveled back to my home with Rune after that horrible dream.

The old man I remember is now young and beautiful, his disheveled brown hair every bit of the crazy he always had about him. Two short brown horns curl up from the sides of his head, freckles dot his cheeks, and his eyes have a green tint to them.

"Elodie—it's been such a long time." He grins at me as he sets down a block of wood and a carving blade on Riah's ridiculously long desk. "You've been busy, I see." His mint eyes trail to Violet and Moro, narrowing as he seems to know

their history. I've seen his face before, long, long ago. I can't place the memory, but we've met in Talia's time.

"Bruno... I'm sorry I came to you that night. You were killed unnecessarily because of me." My memories of him are strange, fuzzy in a way. The night he was murdered by my family is still fresh, but when I envision that night, or any time I spent with him for that matter, he's not old. He looks as he does now.

He shakes his head and shrugs. "It matters not. I was never really human, my dear. Just an illusion, a short skit in my eternal play." Bruno walks up to me and kneels beside Rune. My Dreadius's brows pull together with uncertainty about him, but I have a strong sense of tranquility as Bruno gazes down into my eyes.

His green irises are haunting, almost as if darkness and light meet there, seeing all and nothing at once.

"Bruno... who are you *really*?"

Riah leans casually against his desk as he inspects the block of wood Bruno set down earlier, not seeming interested in the conversation at all.

The boy in my arms looks up at Bruno and smiles.

Bruno murmurs, "I am the Maker. Creating gods all the way back to the beginning of the realms, even you." He sets his hand on mine and looks at the boy before patting his head. "This here is Fellius."

Did he say the *Maker*? I frown as I remember why he seemed familiar. He was there on my first day.

Wren squeezes his way into the fast-forming circle around me. "As in *the* maker? The God of Creation? The one that abandoned the realms a hundred years ago to explore life as a mortal?"

Kastian pulls back on Wren's hood, making him fall on his ass. "We remember, Cypress. Shut up."

Bruno nods and a few laughs slip through as Wren glares up at Kastian.

“Did... you create Felliis? He looks... like all of us.” I stare sadly at the purple eyes that sparkle with light. Not one bad thing plagues this young god. And I plan on keeping it that way.

“Not hard to see, is it? He was created by the ache in each of your hearts—the sacrifice each of you has given. You moved me, and I saw that my creation of Tomorrow was indeed flawed. A god was missing. Felliis, the God of Love, of Hope.”

I stare at Bruno for a few seconds, the pain in my chest still raw and tender. “I tried to bring Arulius back, I tried, but he—”

Bruno’s eyes darken and his grip on my hand intensifies. “Arulius was not my creation. He was never meant to be here—he wasn’t—”

“*Real*,” I mutter hollowly, feeling the darkness, the absolute cruelty of my existence. “He said he... felt the sun warm his skin, and the rain... He had a soul.”

Rune’s eyes are filled with pain. My spine warms as his deep voice curls around my mind. “*At least he was happy for a short while, pup. He loved you. Evil or not, he loved you.*”

Tears brim in my eyes, but there’s an unexplainable shift in my soul. Eons of existing make you understand the cold way things play out. I understand my actions more, looking back. However, everyone feels that sense of *why did I do that*, don’t they?

“I wish we had a better ending. Though I understand us gods will never truly see an end—*he did*. And as sad and mournful as I will always be for him, I envy his rest. Are we not tired? Weary from this fate?” I clutch Felliis tighter. “Are we not cursed for eternity?”

Bruno frowns thoughtfully and stands, walking back to stand beside Riah.

Wren lowers his head and shakes it, trying to chase something in his mind back to the dark corners, it seems. He



changes the subject. “What do we do about North? He’s not going to stay in the soul curse forever.”

Moro nods. “No, nor can the Rhythm be corrected without him. Look.” He points at the pool in the cave’s center, the water of which is azure and pure, deep, like an entire cavern lies below. The four large fish that swam erratically before Kastian and I merged with our past selves are now in partial rhythm together. An ebony one and a white-scaled fish have synced, leaving the red and dark blue one to swim to an offbeat.

*That’s right.*

“I don’t think he’ll submit to the Rhythm.” I stand. Rune takes Fellius from my arms and holds him with care. My gaze hardens as I look at Moro with regret that runs rampant through my veins. “I betrayed him long ago, and he will never forgive me.”

No one speaks. They all look a bit surprised, except Bruno and Riah.

“I was the one who destroyed the Rhythm.”

## Wren

I stare at Elodie with disbelief. There's an air of change around her now—she's stronger. Every hair on my neck rises with the intensity of her aura. Not only her power, but the steadiness of her gaze too.

She's the true reckoning of the realms, isn't she?

“What do you mean, you *destroyed* it?” I step closer to her, desperately wanting to pull her close and fucking roll around in the grass in the glades again, but her desolate eyes tell me our lives are about to go from shitstorm to complete chaos.

“I killed North. That was the true start to the ruin that followed. Violet just so happened to be the collateral damage,” she says hollowly, her brown eyes dull as she stares at the ancient fish.

“Is *that* what we're calling Violet's reign now?” Rune furrows his brows and glances at me.

Violet's shoulders slump and she nervously glances at Moro. “This is news to me.”

Riah steps toward the pool of magnificent fish, walking on the water's surface easily. *Gremitie*. Sure, stepping on liquid is cool, but gods, they're not good during a fight.

He stops in the center, his starlight hair casting light around him like a fucking halo. “How will you fix the mess you've made, Talia?” The beasts rise to meet him, easily the

size of Riah, and the mother fucker is at least six feet tall. “What will you give for him to forgive you?”

Kastian’s jaw flexes. He looks perplexed by the riddles too. *Moro must get his annoying way of speaking from Riah. Gods.* “Enough of the riddles—what must we do?” he growls between his teeth.

Riah reaches down and touches the dark blue creature, shutting his eyes and smiling blissfully. Is he talking with it somehow?

The Gremitie looks back at us, his black eyes glimmering. “You’ll need to break him down and convince him that war doesn’t stand above or below the other Rhythm Gods.”

Elodie walks to the pool’s edge. The white stone beneath her feet is bright from the moisture. “How?” she asks, desperate for the answer.

Riah shakes his head. “You already have the answer. You don’t see it yet, goddess. After all your years, you’re still so naive. Go back to the glades. Once he awakens, you’ll find your answers.”

She stands steady, but I don’t miss her clenching her fists with rage, perhaps at her own mistakes. My mind dallies and drifts as my eyes focus on her short wing.

We’ve all made mistakes we wish we hadn’t.



The new little god rides with me. Elodie sits with Rune on Margo, and he holds her like she solely belongs to him.

Gods.

I glare down at the boy, not entirely sure I’m on board with just bringing along a new recruit. Our fucking home is going to be the new Nesbrim soon, for gods’ sake.

He hasn't spoken a word yet—and while his ears are pointed like mine, he has purple eyes that make me think of Arulius. I don't know if it's the guilt or resentment, but I don't want to like him.

What if Marley doesn't get along with him? My adopted son would never make friends with... whatever this god is. He's a little bit of each creature, and I'm sure that will make for a tough upbringing. Our kinds tend to stick to their own, besides our little band of misfits, I guess.

Maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps he'll fit in perfectly.

I let out a long sigh. Brevik grunts as if he can tell I'm being a grump, and you know what? Why can't I be?

The boy, what was his name... Fuck, I don't remember. He looks at me and raises a curious brow.

"*What?*" I snap at him. Those big innocent eyes flash with fear at my harsh tone and I instantly feel like an asshole. "If you have something to say, then just say it. Staring is rude."

He nods quickly and turns to face forward again.

Then I hear his small voice. "You just look so sad." He raises his hand and presents a small bow made of Brevik's hair. "I thought you could use something to cheer you up."

*You fucking little bastard.* And just like that my heart caves and my jaw tightens as I take the small bow.

"Thanks, kid."

He turns his face enough to glance back at me once more, a bright smile on his face. "It's Fellius, sir."

"You little brat, I knew that." His grin only widens and he laughs.

And gods be damned, I laugh too.

## 25

Elodie

The second Kastian's glade comes into view a weight lifts from my chest. I've never had a place that felt as much like *home* as his court. I glance over at him, riding on a Hollow with Bruno.

I pat Margo's head as she comes to a slow trot. Her white fur wisps around me like fresh snow. Rune tightens his hold around my waist and I can't help but smile. It still doesn't feel real that he's back—nor that my golden god is gone.

"I missed you so much." I let my head fall back onto his chest and shut my eyes as his heartbeats fill my soul.

He nuzzles his lips into my neck and nips my flesh between his teeth. "You promise?"

A laugh stirs in my chest. "Yes—it felt like an eternity."

"I missed you too. And it did... I lost track of time in there. But I did learn more about North than we ever figured out in that dusty library."

I tilt my head toward him and quirk a brow. "Really?"

His muscles loosen and he slumps with thought, resting his chin on my shoulder. "Yeah. I could hear his thoughts and he could hear mine. He's angry for many reasons, but mainly because he has so much pain from a betrayal... one he accuses you of. Though I couldn't figure out why he's filled with such resentment for you, I think I have an idea. He craves war and

ruin just as I can't fight my purpose of chasing peace. You cannot deny your draw to life. Kastian is never to separate himself from death. We never got to pick what we became—and I think he's tired of being pushed to the bottom for what he is."

I nod. I get it—really, I do. But we cannot let him wage war.

The memories of the horrible Fernestian War surface in my mind. The bloodshed during those dark years was harrowing.

"We have to find a different way. I refuse to allow another war."

Rune remains silent while we make our way through the glades. As the haunting white manor becomes visible and illuminates with the light of the four moons, he finally murmurs, "Will you forbid people to die as well?"

I flinch. He's not wrong, but it's unlike him to talk like this. Has North gotten into his head?

"That's impossible, Rune. Everyone dies. It is inevitable."

His voice seems almost cold as he mutters, "As is life, right? There will always be new creatures coming to life. It can't be thwarted. Are war and peace so different? Humans will fight—it's what they do. Humans can also find peace after such battles."

My chest sinks. Is he angry with me for not wanting such horrors to be sent upon the human realm? How am I not the voice of reason in this?

"Rune... I'm not trying to say that your purpose isn't important—"

"But it *is* what you're saying. Not only for me but especially North. Is this not the same issue that was at hand the first time around?"

My heart starts to pump faster and my cheeks heat with the ire I catch in his tone. "Margo, *stop*." I slide off her back and look up at Rune. He's brutal against the moons surrounding his figure in the sky, his tattoos are dark on his pale skin, and his

red eyes track me like a predator. “I need to clear my mind. Go on and ride ahead.” I try to force a soft smile but I know it doesn’t reach my eyes.

I’m tired.

Really fucking tired. And I don’t know... I thought Rune and I were always on the same wavelength. The last thing I want to be doing right now is fighting with him. It’s his first night back.

Rune watches me with heavy eyes for a moment before tapping Margo’s head and letting her know to move forward again. She looks at me with hesitance but I wave her on.

I stand in the glade and try to calm my warring heart. I walk beneath the lush trees, pines and oaks, and a few cypress ones as well. The grass is soft on my ankles as the breeze moves it. My eyes are set on the stars above. The world is silent around me.

“Arulius, what would you do right now?” I whisper to the sky, hoping he’s somewhere listening, even if I can’t see him.

There’s no response. Obviously, I knew there wouldn’t be. But I think it’s normal to wish for one.

“Hey, you all right?” Wren and Fellius ride on Brevik’s back and the dark Pine Hollow approaches me. It’s dark, well past midnight I’m sure, and it makes Brevik’s shadowy fur near impossible to see.

I throw on my fake smile and nod slowly. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just needed some air.” Wren’s brows pull down and I know he’s already seen right through me. Kastian and the others ride a few groves over on the main path, not seeming to notice us as they pass by.

Fellius watches me with big, curious eyes—Arulius’s eyes. I look away. The ache that looking at him sends through me isn’t fair. I both mourn and find hope in his gaze.

Wren hops off Brevik and wraps an arm around my shoulder, nudging me to walk beside him as he motions for Brevik to walk ahead so we can talk privately.

“Did you talk Rune’s ear off? That motherfucker smacked me the first time I rode a Hollow with him too.” He huffs like he’s still holding onto that grudge. I can’t help but let out a laugh.

A boyish grin pulls at his lips and my walls melt. Wren’s good at that—making me laugh, even in the darkest times.

“All right, what’s really going on?” He hands me a joint and I take it without question.

I could use a pick-me-up and apparently I used to smoke this shit all the time, so why break the habit after a twenty-year break?

The wrapped tobacco smells like fresh sap and pines as I place it between my lips. The scent brings nostalgia through my senses and relaxes my muscles immediately.

“Finally giving in to my toxic side, huh? You need this more than I do.” Wren laughs as he sparks the end of the wrap with my pink lighter.

I take a deep breath and let my body get lost in the euphoria that the smoke thrills through my veins. My Cypress wraps his arm back around my shoulders and we walk out of earshot behind Brevik and Fellius. The little god is curious and keeps peeking back at us like he’s worried we’ll abandon him out here.

“How was he on the ride?” I blow out smoke and Wren takes the joint, placing it between his lips.

“The kid? He’s pretty great, actually.”

I jerk my head at him and raise a brow. “Really? I believe the part about him being great, but *you* admitting it? Here I thought you’d be calling him a brat and forgetting his name.”

Wren tilts his head back and barks out a laugh. It’s entirely contagious and I can’t help but get swept up in the lightness of it too.

“I swear to gods, you know me better than anyone else. I may have done both of those things.” His brows knit together innocently.



I pluck the joint from his lips playfully. “Why am I not surprised by that?” I shake my head but the smile on my lips is genuine.

“Hey—really though—tell me what’s wrong... You know, other than Arulius. I can tell something else is bothering you.” Wren’s amber eyes darken, letting me know he’s serious. His pointed ears catch the moonlight. The light makes his Vernovian Thorn look more gray than black.

“Rune and I... We disagreed on how to proceed with North and I think I upset him.” I stare ahead at the white manor growing closer with each step. Dread fills me because once we arrive I know I won’t be able to go to bed like I want.

I could sleep for a fucking month. But there’s so much that still needs to be done.

Wren stops walking and his firm grip around my shoulders makes me halt as well. I look up at him with surprise. We’re close enough to the mansion now that Brevik continues on without us. Kastian can tend to Fellius until we get back.

“He just awoke from a darkness unknown to us. I’m sure he’s just groggy and tired—as you are.” He brushes his thumb across my cheek tenderly as he takes the joint from my hand, tosses it to the ground, and steps on the ember.

“You can’t litter.” I scowl at him.

Wren ignores me and presses on. “Give him some time and a bit of slack. He’s your precious god, isn’t he? Don’t let a small disagreement get you down.”

He always makes my heart flutter. He’s always acting tough but has the kindest motives behind those snarky lips.

I reach my finger up and brush the pad of my thumb across his lower lip. His eyes widen like he’s so surprised I’m showing him affection. Did he think I’d change after merging? I thought I would too... but the only thing that’s different is my undying soul that is tired of all the pain I cannot seem to escape.

Tired of the fighting. Weary of the loss. Sick of the bullshit.

The worst part is I think a part of me wished I'd be a bit more callous toward the realm, as I thought Talia was—but now I know she was just like me. A woman who only wanted love and a place to call home.

“Let your mind rest, Elodie. You're waging a war on your inner peace that cannot be won.” Wren grips my hand and tugs me toward the Hollow stables. I glance back at the mansion, worried the others might begin to worry, but my bond with Kastian is calm right now. I'm sure I'm sending him mixed feelings at the moment so he probably can assume I'm having a crisis as per usual.

“Who says I deserve *inner peace*,” I mumble as he guides us into the stable. “Why are we here?”

“*Shhh*.” Wren's eyes glimmer with mischief. “You'll ruin the surprise.”

I laugh and nod. I'm always down for a Wren adventure.

His dark cloak waves behind him as he leads us up some stairs that lead to the second story. The stairway is narrow, and the wood walls and beams have that freshly cut scent of sawdust. It's pitch black and before I can ask if he can see, Wren sparks the lighter and uses the low light to find his footing.

His hand grips mine tightly as we reach the top. I can feel his heartbeat against my palm.

He's excited—clearly, he's planned whatever this is.

“You ready?” he whispers. I can't see his face but I can make out a door in front of him.

“Yeah.”

“If it's stupid—”

“It's not going to be stupid.” I laugh and urge him forward. “Come on, you've already got me all excited.”

He takes an audible breath and opens the door.

The starlight is ten times brighter up here above the canopy of leaves. Blues and purples dance in the sky. My

breath leaves my lungs as I keep my head looking up toward the stars. How many times have I seen this view, yet it never falters? It's always just as alluring and ethereal. My throat tightens and I bring my attention back to Wren, his amber eyes brimming with tears.

“Wren? What’s wrong—”

“I said horrible things to him,” he chokes out and dips his head, resting it on my shoulder. I set my hands on his shoulders reassuringly and close my eyes to stave off the stinging of my own tears.

“I know... we all did at some point.” I try to reassure him but Wren shakes his head and fists my shirt, his guilt heavy.

“He’s such an asshole. Why did he have to go and die on us? Why... There were so many more pranks I was going to pull on him as payback.” His tears fall and together, we collapse to our knees on the flat roof.

We don’t say anything else after that for the better part of an hour. Our hearts cry out to the stars and we hold each other desperately.

“No one else,” Wren whispers as he wipes his eyes with his black sleeve. His breath rolls in the cold night air. “No one else is dying—I’ll see to it myself.”

I nod against his chest, my tears long dried. Wren’s cloak is wrapped around us like a blanket and we lean against the edge of the roof. I don’t know how long it’s been, nor do I care. My body is warm against my Cypress’s and my chest is lighter after our heart-to-heart.

Wren’s thighs are off to each side of me, his arms around my chest. He presses kisses to my forehead every few minutes and takes deep, steadying breaths.

“I don’t know how we’re ever going to convince North.” I break the silence.

Wren pulls me in closer and brings his lips to the shell of my ear. “We’ll find a way. Riah and Bruno seem so certain everything will just play out—so I’m not sure what choice we have other than to wait.”

“I know North—we were close in the beginning.” I stare into the melancholic sky as I remember dances and nights in cold fields, kisses, and a promise that we once made. *I had to kill him—he was too far gone.* At least, that’s what I tell myself.

“Really? Close how?” Wren has suspicion pulling at his words.

“For a long time it was only the two of us... My memories are still coming back slowly... but we were inseparable.”

Wren leans up and I scoot forward and turn to look at him. His scowl is comical.

“Of course he loved you. As we all do.” He smirks and reaches up to my cheek, brushing my hair softly. His eyes are narrowing, sleep chasing after him. “Tell me what you thought of me when we first met.” He lies down and beckons for me to follow. I nuzzle in close and he uses his cloak to cover us.

I smile and raise a brow. “Why would you want to know that?”

He presses his nose against mine, and a glint flickers through his sly eyes as he says, “I want to hear about how dashing I was. You must’ve been pretty impressed to have followed me into Tomorrow.”

I laugh and he follows. Once our laughter falters, a slumber falls upon us and his warm breaths keep my heart afloat as I sail into the sea of dreams.

## Rune

Where is she?

I pace around in my designated room over and over, glancing at the window and waiting to see Elodie emerge from the forest. I shouldn't have been so angry with her.

*Fuck.*

Kastian arrived back shortly after I did and he pointed out my room. I wasted no time dragging my sorry ass in here to sleep off my irritation. I thought it'd be a quick nap and I'd be awake before Elodie returned, but it's been hours and she hasn't come back yet. Since then, I've just been pacing.

It's early in the morning. The suns have not risen yet but the sky is warming and announcing their imminent arrival. Kastian is already down in the kitchen with Greysil and Naminé getting food prepared for everyone. He didn't seem concerned when I asked him a few hours ago where she was, and Wren is nowhere to be found, so I'm guessing the two of them didn't come back from the forest last night.

Fear pulses through my marrow.

I know she's probably with him—that I'm the last person she wants to see right now—but after everything we've been through... After the darkness I've been trapped in, I have to make sure she's okay. We don't need to fight over stupid shit.

I don't give a fucking shit if it's possessive.

I'm still her guard, no matter what.

My steps are loud on the stairs as I head back down. The Death God's mansion is wondrous. I'd only ever heard rumors of how haunted this place was, of all the lost souls that are stuck here, but this place is anything but that. It's beautiful, and in a strange way, it feels like home. Vines cling to the exterior stones and the interior is impeccably magnificent. The white tiles and walls hardly scream *haunted* to me, but I won't forget the warnings.

When I reach the bottom I'm glad to find the room empty. Voices emanate from the dining hall. I'm relieved no one is up my ass to do anything, because the only thing I care about right now is her and I can't do a godsdamn thing until I know she's okay.

The front doors are ebony and open without a sound. I'm not sure where to start looking, so I start with the path we parted on last night. The forest is dim. A chilly wind flows through the branches, rattling the leaves and making my teeth chatter.

She said it was only a little under a month, yet it feels like I've been gone for a millennium. My body is foreign, my mind foggy. More than anything though... I have a deep sorrow buried in my chest. Infected, it seems, by North himself. Perhaps that's why I sympathize with him so much. His pain and melancholy are an anchor in a bottomless trench, the likes of which I can't seem to shake.

What the fuck are we going to do if he refuses to hear reason? I sigh and tilt my head back to listen to the forest.

I walk a few minutes further until I hear Elodie scream.

My heart hammers against my ribs as adrenaline and urgency flush through me.

*He's hurting her!*

Fire encases my fingertips as my fury runs rampant through my flesh. I sprint into the forest blindly, following the

direction of her scream. A structure appears and Elodie's cries are louder now that I'm nearby.

I'll fucking gut this Cypress if he's hurting her.

The building is a stable of sorts. The Pine Hollows look at me with tilted heads as I search frantically for stairs. Her cries are coming from the roof.

Rage builds in my chest as it takes me a few wasted minutes to find the godsdamn stairs, but once I do, I charge up them, fists ready to beat the shit out of Wren.

I pause as I reach the door at the top. *What if she's still angry with me?* I shut my eyes as a growl swells in my chest. *Maybe I should reach out to her first through the blood on her spine.*

A sharp cry sounds on the other side of the door and my body instinctively moves. I open the door with no regard and it smacks loudly on the wall. A cold spring breeze rushes through me as I stand in the opening.

My stomach curls and relief washes over me.

I gaze down at Wren and Elodie. Blood trickles from the Cypress's neck, and my pup stares up at me with shocked eyes. Wren has her on her side and his dick is buried deep inside her, only stopping the moment he sees me before a smirk smooths over his expression and he continues to ruthlessly fuck her.

Elodie cries out again and I feel like a fucking idiot.

Yet I cannot will myself to look away.

I watch as he fucks her as the sun rises. Her breaths curl sweetly in the air as he builds her orgasm. My dick swells in my pants, which become uncomfortably tight as I watch them come undone together.

Wren leans forward and kisses her affectionately. I've seen it in all their eyes. My chest warms with the thought that our beloved goddess is worshipped with nothing but adoration.

It's my turn to show her such love.

I slowly walk up to them as Wren pulls himself from her. She watches me with hooded eyes, panting and writhing in the Cypress's arms. I know she wasn't trying to upset me earlier, and perhaps I was being a little too sensitive on the subject.

"I don't want to fight, pup. I just want to love you forever like I promised I would." I lower myself to her and pick her naked body up gently.

She nuzzles into my neck and presses sweet kisses along my flesh.

"Show me your love, Rune," she whispers against my skin and my dick throbs painfully in my pants at the lust-filled tone she's using.

I nudge her arms up around my shoulders so I can free my needy cock.

"I'm going to wash that Cypress out of you," I murmur into her ear as I press my tip against her entrance. She's seeping wet and I want to fuck her until she forgets about everything but us.

Elodie moans at my cruel words and wiggles her pussy over my dick, eager for me to fill her up.

Who am I to deny her?

I thrust up hard, not holding onto her, so she practically falls on my cock. She cries out and throws her head back at my intrusion inside her tight pussy. She grips me like we'll never part and I can't help the groan that rolls from my throat.

"You like it when I fuck you hard, pup, don't you?"

I tease her by moving my hips while fully immersed inside her. She moans and nods like she's drunk from the way my dick fills her.

"Say it." I grab her ass bruisingly and slowly pull myself out of her until only my tip remains inside her.

Her lips part and she whimpers, "Fuck me hard, Rune. Fuck me until our hearts can no longer stand it."



A smile curves my lips and I embrace her tightly. “Such a good fucking girl.”

I pull down on her hips and my dick thrusts into her heat. She cries over and over as I take her like a feral animal. I want her to think of me for eternity. For the rest of Tomorrow.

A sharp pain spreads across my shoulder and that familiar pull of her drinking my blood tugs at my veins. Ecstasy falls over my body as I continue to pump into her.

“*Fuuuck*. You keep sucking on me like that and I will come inside you before I’m even satisfied.”

She pulls back, her cheeks red and lust dripping from her eyes as she gazes into my soul. So fucking perfect. I’d lay down my life for her again and again if I had to.

Her lips press against mine and my grasp on her hips loosens. My thrusts slow into a steady, intimate rhythm. I deepen our kiss and think of the first time I saw her in Nesbrim. I knew then our fates were going to be tangled. Call me a hopeless romantic, but I always knew it was her.

“Mind if I join?”

My eyes flick up. Wren’s mischievous smile is brimming behind Elodie.

*Gods.*

## Elodie

Ear drips into my veins.

I've taken Kastian and Wren at once. But Rune and Wren?

My Dreadius already stretches me as far as I can bear. I'm not sure I can handle both of them. Rune's eyes fill with heat, and a smile pinches at the corner of his mouth.

"You can take us, pup. *Relax.*"

Rune continues to pump me slowly as Wren wraps his arms around me and gently starts kneading my breasts and teasing my ass with his dick. The scent of the oil eases my mind and relaxes my muscles.

Liquid fire spreads through my core. Excitement, fear, and pure pleasure roll through me. Wren's chest is warm against my back and I let my head rest on his shoulder as he starts to crown my ass.

"So beautiful, you're everything, Elodie. *Everything.*" He rests his forehead on my shoulder as he slowly pushes into me. I moan and close my eyes against the slight pain as I'm filled to the brim. Rune keeps up his slow pace, allowing Wren to fully settle inside me.

Wren groans so deeply his chest vibrates against my spine with need. His fingers start teasing my nipples as he finds his rhythm with Rune.

I'm lost to any thoughts—my body is thrumming with two of my most cherished gods and only lust and peace exist in my soul right now.

I know it won't last, these moments of pleasure and happiness. So I let myself get swept up in them. We deserve to enjoy what little light we can bathe in.

Wren's breaths are sharp and his fingers slip down to my clit, building my climax and sending euphoria through my core. I'm on the verge of coming, and with their quickened paces, I know they are too.

"Oh gods," I moan as my orgasm tips over the edge and I'm coming so hard every part of me is on fire. My muscles go limp and Wren groans for a few long seconds as he holds my ass down on his throbbing dick.

Rune pumps me a few more times, harder and faster. "We are *your* gods, pup. Only yours. To worship you—to serve. Anything you want, I'll be on my knees," he rasps as he pulls me close. Wren pulls out and lies on the roof, breathing like he's never chased me so vigorously before.

"My heart is yours, my drop of blood," I say beneath hooded eyes, admiring my beautiful Dreadius. Ebony tattoos line his neck. Those red eyes bore into me. "I love you as violently as the realms clash. No matter what qualms we have, no matter the problems that arise. We'll only be as one, my Rhythm God."

Rune's lips curve into a weightless grin. His eyes brim with so many emotions I can't even begin to pick them apart. He thrusts into me one final time, his dick throbbing inside my pussy as his arms tighten around me and he slowly sinks to his knees. One of his hands slides up to the nape of my neck and cradles my head delicately.

"You've grown so much." His other hand smooths over the tattoo on my spine as he holds me. "Your strength will carry us all into a better Tomorrow."

My brows knit with his admission.

“I haven’t been carrying anyone.” I look back at Wren. He’s pulling his pants up and has a pointed *that’s bullshit* look on his face.

My Cypress walks over to us and presses a kiss on top of my head. “We’ve all carried each other... I think that’s the only way we’ve been able to continue to push forward.” He glances at Rune, who nods his agreement. My heart swells with how well the two of them get along. “But you’ve definitely pulled your weight, Elodie. You still have much further to go, and I can’t fucking wait to be standing by your side once we finish all this North shit.”

“Thank you, Wren.” I brush his cheek with my hand and look at Rune. “Let’s head back to the manor before anyone else joins in.”

Rune’s lovely laugh rings through the air, and even though my chest is heavy with the loss of Arulius, it is filled with love.



“So, how do we wake North?”

I sip on my tea as Kastian interrogates Bruno and Moro. Kastian’s black horns are sharp against the light that trickles in from his three-story terrarium room.

Sage-colored vines crawl up the glass and are pleasant to admire, unlike the conversation.

Bruno looks to Moro, his expression blank, as if the matter at hand is not one of utmost pressure. I mean, only the Realms are at stake, no biggie.

It’s still weird looking at Bruno and knowing that he’s the same old man who lived just across the forest from me in the human realm. He’d tell me stories unlike any I’d ever heard. The Moss Sparrows who’d sneak into his house... He knew all

along what he was talking about. Was he there on purpose? Did he know who I was?

He must sense my eyes on him because he looks over at me and smiles. I flinch and take another sip of my tea to avoid eye contact.

“Elodie, you have questions, I’m sure.” He leans back in his chair and the others glance my way as well. I hate having the room’s attention, but they all deserve whatever truths the Maker holds, just as I do.

I nod. “Bruno, you remembered the creatures here in the human realm. Why is that? Why were you... a part of my journey in the human realm for that short while?”

His brown eyes soften with understanding. “I’m afraid I am a bit of a cheat.”

Wren pulls his joint from his lips and sighs. “Gods, *what* a surprise.”

Bruno laughs lightheartedly but Kastian seems suspicious of him. “How so?” my dark-winged Eostrix asks with a grimace pulling at his features.

“Well, being the Maker, I cannot be reincarnated. Nor can I die. I may pass into whatever form I wish, just as I can create new gods, like Fellius.” Bruno looks at the young god sitting beside me. My eyes follow and Fellius shrinks down in his seat.

I give him a reassuring smile and his fear dissipates a bit. Rune pats him on the head and murmurs, “Sit up straight.” Fellius nods with seriousness in his eyes, taking Rune’s advice to heart as he straightens his posture. Rune grins and nods approvingly.

“I was there to keep tabs on you, I’m afraid. Though I don’t want you to think for a second that I knew what would unfold.” His eyes narrow at Violet at the other bistro table. She lowers her gaze but remains stoic. “After *that* night, I decided that it would be best to watch things play out for a while. But of course everything started to really amount against the

Rhythm... North, the human realm falling to ruin... your parents.” He pauses and frowns.

“It’s okay.” I firm my lower lip. “Please continue.”

“I found them by your grave, your father barely alive as he spoke his last words to me. I buried them and wished them well on their journey to Tomorrow. It was then that I could no longer stand idly by.”

He leans on the round tea table and his expression hardens. He’s been quite aloof this entire time, but now it’s as if his entire demeanor has shifted.

“You sent me the dream,” I murmur, recalling the dream I had, running through the woods and him yelling over and over for me to *run*—to go home.

He nods. “It was more difficult finding the Cypress in Caziel, but I let him know to head to the forest, where he found you. The pieces were finally coming together. Our tragic game coming to an end.”

My fists clench beneath the table, but I doubt that stops my anger from showing, judging by a few raised brows. Wren smooths his palm over my thigh reassuringly but I ignore it.

“Bruno, this isn’t a *game*.” I stand abruptly from the small, round bistro table. The Maker doesn’t even flinch. His eyes are cold, calculating my emotions. Unmoving, as if he’s truly seen it all. “These are real lives that are on the line. All those in the human realm and us here in Tomorrow... We’ve lost so many.” I grit my teeth to hold back the tears that burn the backs of my eyes.

Bruno’s gaze softens and he sighs, closing his eyes with solace. “My apologies, Elodie—things become muddled when you’ve existed as long as I have. I’ve met you and your friends time and time again. Watched people die and said hello in just a mere short century or two.” He rubs the back of his head and gives me an embarrassed smile that seems false. “I thought this twist was rather interesting, so I indulged and followed along. It was so different than all the eons that came before.”

He twirls a block of wood in his hand and still seems to not understand the gravity of how all other beings are affected by this. How Arulius sacrificed himself for us... I tap into the well of endless aura inside my bones. The best part of regaining my memories is that I know exactly how to use my powers to their full extent now.

I hold my hand out toward Bruno as he tosses the block a few times, catching it and tossing it again. An image of light slicing the block surfaces in my mind, and just like that, the wood is cut in half in a split second. A sliver of light flashes briefly and then vanishes as if it'd never happened.

I narrow my eyes at the Maker. He watches the block fall to either side of him and throws his head back, covering his face with his palm as if trying to compose himself.

“I was using that.” He sighs, not exasperatedly, but with a hint of annoyance. Wren grabs my arm and pulls me back down into my seat. I shoot him a glare, but my Cypress only hardens his own.

I calm the inner rage that builds at his insolence toward our pain before returning to the main point. “How do we wake North?”

Bruno bends over, picks up both pieces of the block, and puts them together as if they'll stick, frowning when they don't. “We wait for Arulius's aura to fade. There is no other way to get rid of the soul curse,” he says bluntly, and it sticks my side like a dull blade.

My heart sinks. I lean back in the chair and bow my head in defeat.

“And how long can that take?” Kastian snaps. He sounds as tired of all of this as I am. It makes sense. After regaining our memories I have this insatiable weariness that pulls at my soul.

Bruno shrugs. “Since he was never truly a god created properly, it's hard to say. But I would estimate at least a few months, if not more.”

I keep my head bent and shake it slowly. “What are we supposed to do until then? The Rhythm is in chaos...”

Rune stands and approaches Bruno, his mannerism every bit the guard he’s always been to me. Stoic and silent, with a set jaw that could unnerve any god.

“Can he be coaxed into falling back in line?” he asks, his gaze burning with determination.

Bruno nods. “He once was a very eager Rhythm God. I think he’ll fall back into place if we can find his trigger and fix it. You spent the most time with him, being his willing vessel. Do *you* believe he craves belonging once more?”

Rune nods with certainty, the same confidence I saw in his eyes last night. My Dreadius places his hand over his heart. “His pain is deep—distrust and hatred guide him. I believe if we show him that he can belong once more, then he’ll concede.”

Wren crosses his arms and snorts. “At the price of war.”

Rune doesn’t bother looking over his shoulder, but the air seems heavier as we all remain silent and digest that gruesome thought.



## Elodie

A month can be cruel when you and everyone you live with are walking on eggshells.

A slumbering War God who could wake at any second. The woman I hate more than anyone else in the Realms sleeping just down the hall. The wisest gods in all of Tomorrow downstairs making plans to right the realms. Old warriors I used to have qualms with sit in the dining room, reviewing blueprints for repairing Nesbrim.

It's been torturous.

Yet the time has also been a blessing.

Kastian's estate has completely evolved into a home filled with laughter and life. There isn't a hallway you can enter here without hearing joyful chatter or children laughing.

Marley and Felliis are inseparable. The two are uncommon friends, given that they are so different from one another. But then again, Felliis is a mixed god, the first of his kind. At least, I think he's the first. I haven't forgotten that Eostrixes do not have lamb ears as I do. It's unheard of. So in a way, we're both outcast creatures, yet we seem to have the most joyful friends and family.

I sit in the foyer and watch as everyone goes about their business. It reminds me of my time in Nesbrim, and there's a sort of peace in simply watching the flow of things.

“Elodie?” a small voice chirps to my left. I turn with a smile already pulling at my lips.

“Yes, Fellius?” I open my arms because he always rushes in for a hug.

The God of Love is as precious and kind as his name suggests. His white hair and red horns remind me of my Rhythm Gods, his pointed ears of Wren, and his beige wings of me, one shorter than the other.

He lunges into my arms and I laugh as he wraps his little arms around my neck. “I was hoping you could teach me to fly today?” he begs with that innocent voice Marley taught him, the one that always works on Wren (and as much as I hate to admit it, me too).

“Fellius, I’m not sure your wings are ready yet.” I set him down and examine his wings. They are still short, which is not surprising for a young Eostrix.

His purple eyes grow sullen and my heart breaks. Arulius shines in those eyes. The young god is like a son to me. Marley too. And I can’t stand the idea of him being sad over this. I cherish the day I learned to fly, so I know the excitement that comes with it.

“Okay, how about we go find Kastian and see if he thinks you’re ready?” I say with a grin. His eyes grow wide and he shakes his head. “Why not?” I quirk a brow.

“Marley told me Kastian is a tough teacher and he never smiles.” He furrows his brows and looks certain that he only wants me to teach him.

I laugh and tousle his hair. I suppose Kastian can be intimidating with his perma-sowl. “Well, until you get brave enough to ask him, I’m afraid you must wait.” He puffs out a breath but finally laughs with me. “Where’s Marley? I thought you two were helping Greysil with the garden this morning.”

Fellius gasps, turns on his heel, and runs toward the front doors. “Sorry, Mom, I totally forgot!” His little beige feathers are the last I see of him before the doors shut and my heart warms at his slip-up.

That's the first time he's called me *Mom*.

And I hope it's not the last.

Bruno steps out of the glass terrarium room and his smile widens as it lands on me. I try to seem cheerful when he sits next to me but he sees right through it.

It's not that I'm angry with him or upset over his passiveness. I'm sure this is his role in everything, but I can't help feeling like we've all been cheated by him.

"Elodie, something seem amiss with us. Please, ask me whatever it is that ails your mind." He folds his hands together in his lap and watches me with eyes that are all-knowing.

I consider my words and look up at him. "What are we all to you? You know... Are we your toys? Just things that you send out into the realms and watch for fun? I don't understand anything about you, Bruno."

He shows no emotion as he listens and stays silent for a moment before responding. "What are you all to me... Hmm. Well, I think of you all as my friends first and foremost." He stares up at one of the large forest paintings hung in the foyer. A nostalgic smile shapes his lips. He doesn't look one bit as unhappy or tense as the rest of us have been.

"Were you all alone in the beginning?" I recall things being... empty and vast when I first awoke.

He nods and takes a deep breath before turning his dark eyes toward me. "Very much so. You and North were the first friends I'd ever had, though it probably didn't really seem like it to you or him."

"Yeah, because you were always watching from afar. It was sort of creepy." My brows pull together, but I can't help the smile that forms on my lips. Those memories are ancient. Thinking back, he was always weird.

Bruno laughs. "Well, I'd never had friends before. You two were perfect together though, as you shall be again." His eyes are warm and promising.

We were far from perfect... but back then, when it was only the two of us, North was my soulmate. We were absolute magic together. “Why did you think War and Life were the perfect Rhythm Gods? It seems odd to me to have those be a pair.”

He hums in thought and stands as if he’s forgotten he’s expected somewhere. “You know, I didn’t think humans needed a god to die. I thought they only needed war to spur on fights and life to be reborn to fight more.”

My stomach twists. “That’s really fucked up, Bruno.”

He only shrugs and heads for the front doors. “We learn from the things we do. I only hope you can do the same.” he nonchalantly leaves and the foyer becomes quiet again.

I suppose I never expected grandiose answers from Bruno. He’s been odd forever, even when I was human. Such an aloof man.

“*Achoooo.*”

I’d recognize Violet’s sneeze anywhere.

My eyes narrow as I stare up the curved stairway. I thought she was with Moro in the Pine Hollow stables today. My stomach curls. Anything Violet does in secret can’t be good. I stand and start toward the stairs.

The second-floor hallway is empty. I angle my ear to listen to the third floor and hear feet pattering. *We’re not supposed to go up there.* My brows knit tightly. I think she and I have mutually decided it best that we avoid each other like the plague, but curiosity stings my mind.

I take the steps two at a time until I’m standing on the white tiles of the third floor. The air is ominous up here—stagnant and long abandoned, without breath. An entire balcony and two halls stretch into each wing of the mansion. Plenty of room for more people should they come to stay here, but Kastian has been firm that no one sets foot on the third floor.

*What is she doing?*

The door at the end of the dark hallway is open a crack, and tiny beads of sunlight dapple the floor. I carefully walk over, making sure not to make a sound. I know spying isn't morally acceptable, but fuck Violet.

I peek through the crack and cover my mouth as a gasp rolls up my throat.

Violet sits on the dusty floor, her black velvet dress pooling around her as she lays freshly picked flowers in front of a row of skeletons. Some have horns piercing through their skulls, others have wing bones scattered around them.

*Were these Kastian's friends when he was banished here?* My heart drops and chills crawl up my spine. The horrors he must've faced here... He kept them because he was alone. The pain in my chest surfaces and is utterly unbearable. I cannot picture my beloved Borvon, the powerful and callous Eostrix, being reduced and broken like this. Will we ever surpass our traumas? Or will we forever be stained with the agony that was wrought upon us?

I swallow the bile that tries to rise in my throat and nudge the door open. Violet doesn't bother turning around. She doesn't seem surprised at all that I've found her.

"Hello, Elodie," she murmurs, not unkindly, as she spreads out poppies and daisies across the floor. The bones aren't any less haunting with the pops of colors she's brought.

Disgust consumes me and I can't keep the bite out of my tone. "How *dare* you try to give your condolences to them." I fist the back of her hair and throw her back against the door.

Her body is limp and frail, like she's not even trying to resist my wrath. Somehow that just pisses me off even more. The villainous High Lady I once knew is dead.

Violet momentarily remains lying on the floor before she slowly picks herself up and looks at me. Her dark hair, which once held the colors of the universe, is now faded. The blood red of her eyes has been distilled into a muddied brown.

Her eyes are somber as she looks past me at the fallen spirits and gods she sent to their deaths.

“I didn’t know they’d all die here,” she whispers. Her voice is so raspy it gives me goosebumps.

My rage diminishes quickly and is replaced with unwarranted pity. I suppose you expect your arch nemesis always to be your equal—you never really foresee watching their downfall firsthand.

Tears fill her eyes and she drops her head.

“I just wanted Lucius... so venomously that I lost sight of all else.” She fists her hands on the tiles and bows to me, placing her forehead on the ground as her back shakes with sobs. “*Please... Goddess of Life... Please* bring them back. Bring everyone back. Forsake me if you must—imprison me at the bottom of the dark sea. But *please*, I beg you, fix the mess I have made.” Her cries wrench at the deepest part of my soul.

Of course, I’m going to resurrect these poor souls. Of course, I will fix her mess... That’s what we’ve been doing this entire time, is it not? So why does my chest feel heavy with her begging me as she is? Is this not what I always hoped for her?

*Gods.*

The worst part is that I remember her begging for years and years to be reincarnated with Lucius. The pain that stems from my denial is irrevocable. She’s my villain, yes, but first I was hers.

I stole her love away.

I let out a weary sigh. “Raise your head, Violet.” She sits back on her haunches and stares emptily at me. Gods, this is long past due.

Her eyes widen as I lower to my knees before her. I look at her as the broken god that she is and wrap my arms around her shoulders, embracing her tightly and shutting my eyes.

“It’s long past time we settled our sins. Don’t you think?”

She’s so skinny beneath her dress that every bone I touch scorns my flesh. Tears roll down my cheeks. *What have we*

*become?*

Violet finally nods, her tears quickly wetting my shoulder.

I pull her back and tilt her chin up so she looks at me. Phantom images of her long ago take their place over her dull skin. She was once so extravagant and kind before all this chaos started.

My eyes trail to Kastian's fallen friends. I cannot bring them back here. Too much time has passed and their souls are long lost in the dark seas of Tomorrow. But I can send them on their path once more.

I close my eyes and focus on the warmth inside my chest. The air grows light in the space around me, and when my eyes flutter open we're surrounded by shimmering, amber-hued light. Like enchanted glitter, it swirls and finds its way over to the bones.

Violet's red eyes reflect the light as my power settles on them. The bones turn into the same shimmering dust, glowing brightly before disintegrating to the floor in a wave of glitter, and just like that—they are gone.

The flowers Violet picked lie on the floor as the last of the light fades into the walls around us. Their petals hold traces of the shimmering dust and they somehow bring me great solace.

“Are they—” She looks to me to finish her words.

I nod and murmur, “They've been reincarnated in the human realm.”

We sit silently for a few minutes, neither of us wanting to move or speak. It's pacifying, in a way, to share this ritual with her.

The door creaks open beside me and I look over with weary eyes. Resurrecting takes so much out of me. It siphons a large amount of aura each time I perform the blessing.

Kastian's gaze warms on me, chilling once his attention finds Violet beside me.

“Thank you for releasing them from this grave.” He stares sadly at the flowers left on the floor before lowering to help

me up.

“I won’t leave a single soul here. Please show me where you buried the rest of them.” I take his hand and he easily lifts me up. His fingers twine with mine as he guides me out of the room. My legs pause and I half-turn to Violet as I speak to her. “Would you like to come help us?”

Her head lifts and the sadness morphs into a sliver of hope—of redemption.

“Yes... Yes, I would love to.” She stands and brushes off her black velvet dress. Kastian raises a brow at me and his curiosity thrums through our bond. I only smile and push the reassurance and peace that flows through my bones to him.

“*Ah*, I see,” he says with a grin pulling at his lips. My dark-winged Eostrix dips down and presses a kiss on my forehead. “Your heart is an endless sea, Elodie.”

I remember Fellius’s request to learn to fly this morning and think this might be the perfect time to bring it up.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Kastian.”



## Kastian

I'm uncertain about this young god.

Fellius clings to the largest boulder on the cliffside and visibly shakes as he stares at the sheer drop.

*Gods, Elodie, you owe me one.*

“Come on, Fellius. I swear it’s much easier than it looks. I won’t let you fall, so please refrain from holding onto the rock.” I try to say it with a calm voice. I’ve never really been one to have patience for children, perhaps due to my own lack of childhood. I had to do many things independently, including learning how to fly.

The young god nods and his expression hardens into a determined mask as he releases the boulder. I quirk a brow and watch as he carefully steps over.

“Are you truly that afraid?” I try to keep the amusement from my tone.

Fellius shakes his head. As the breeze caresses us, his three crimson horns are revealed beneath his white hair. His beige wings ruffle. They are the spitting image of Elodie’s—one’s even shorter like hers.

“Are you okay?”

I flinch, realizing I was lost in my own thoughts. A deep sound rolls through my throat as I clear it. “Yes—right, so

flying—”

*Shit. How do you teach one to fly?*

My wings spread open, reaching far past each shoulder. Fellius gulps and does the same. His small wingspan is just barely long enough to fly.

“Ready?”

He nods.

I push his back with my left wing and he falls off the side of the cliff. His purple eyes flash at me with horror. I bark out a laugh and jump right after him.

Elodie told me about how Arulius did this to her—now I know why.

He didn’t know what else to do either. A nostalgic grin pulls at my lips. I will teach the young god to fly in his stead.

I’ve learned this past month that it’s incredibly hard to stay angry and hateful toward those who are gone. Their weight is no longer with us. It was easier when I could glare at him and go on with my day.

Now I just look at the empty sofa he slept on each night as I fall asleep and find that rest is much harder to come by without him around. The loss of him will forever break Elodie’s heart. I see it in the way she walks the halls of my mansion with less joy. Her eyes don’t gleam quite like they used to and the sorrow in our bond is painful, only muted in the moments Rune, Wren, and I hold her.

I suppose that’s what pain does to us. It takes the light from our eyes—and when we finally get the flicker back, it’s not quite the same.

Fellius screams as his body rolls in the air, his wings angled in a way that continuously spins him. I laugh again and swoop beneath the little god. The gust of air rights him and his wings catch.

“Whoa!” He gasps as he starts flapping them awkwardly.

“Fun, right? Glide, it’s easier than trying to use your new muscles to keep you airborne.” I show him by flattening my wings and gliding forward. He copies me and the biggest grin forms across his face. It’s contagious, but I manage to keep my features indifferent.

He twirls and laughs. “I want to show Mom!”

My eyes widen and my breath catches. “*Who?*”

He looks at me like I’m the dumbest god he’s ever spoken with in his short time here. “You know... Elodie.” He looks down, embarrassment pinching his cheeks.

My expression softens. I didn’t know he thought of her in that way. My gaze falls back to his wings. He seems to have been made in our images, so it only seems right. A warmth spreads through my chest because I’m sure him calling her that would light her heart with love.

“Yeah—let’s go show her. She’ll be so fucking happy.”

His eyes brim with joy and he dips his wings. We head toward the Pine Hollow stables where she’s working on feeding and training new Hollows with Wren and Rune.

When the stables are in sight I spot Elodie combing Margo and feeding Brevik some treats. Fellius shouts and waves, throwing off his focus and balance.

Elodie looks up just in time to see him falling from the sky. Shock shoots straight through her features and impedes our bond as she takes to the sky to catch him.

I swoop down and cast some air beneath him once more, and he’s able to catch his balance again. I hope I can save the poor boy some embarrassment. He was so excited to show her how well he’s been flying.

He corrects his posture and yells, “Look, Mom!”

She stops flying toward him in a rush and the proudest grin forms on her lips. Heartbreakingly so. Then she opens her arms and Fellius flies straight into her embrace.

“I’m so proud of you,” she coos, and I can’t help but smile along with them.

Wren and Rune gaze up at us from below and share a grin that warms my glades down to the coldest roots.

How odd that in a time of war and uncertainty we should find this place a happy home with more love than I ever thought possible.

## Elodie

The evenings are warm and the food on our table is hearty. Naminé spreads a helping of rich butter over her loaf of bread and grins from ear to ear as she bites into it. Marley and Felliuss sit at the end of the long table and make plans for the new tree fort they've been building these past few weeks.

Now that Felliuss can fly, he's more trouble than we bargained for. Marley too. The little Moss Sparrow has Felliuss fly him up to the fort that's at least eighty feet in the air so that they can have a hideaway from the adults.

At first, Rune was about to cut the tree down, his worry-filled nights imagining one or both of them falling finally getting the best of him. But Wren and Kastian talked him out of it, saying it was good for them to learn and play.

I was on Rune's side, but we lost that battle.

Greysil and Violet bring in baskets of steamed veggies and place them on the table as Kastian follows behind them with the main dish. Roasted potatoes and savory meat entice my senses and my stomach growls. We flew to Nesbrim today to see the progress on the rebuild, not breaking for lunch once.

Kol and Willow make great leaders. They've somehow rallied all the citizens and soldiers into an orderly and effective restoration team. I have a suspicion that they are star-crossed

lovers who refuse to admit their feelings to one another, both being so hard-headed and all.

Violet and Moro sit next to one another. His disdain for her has faded as she has relentlessly tried to amend her wrongdoings. I can still see the ache he has for her in his silver eyes, and I can only hope that he has space in his heart to forgive her as I have.

Rune and Naminé are at my sides and the two of them keep merriment around me.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to you talking,” the blonde Cypress mutters between mouthfuls of bread. Rune takes a long drink of his black coffee and narrows his eyes at her.

“Don’t you ever get *tired of* talking?” he shoots back at her and she snorts a laugh. Rune smirks as his crimson eyes flick over to me and fill with mischief.

“Come on, you two, do we have to do this every night?” I lean into Rune and he wraps an arm around me, pulling me close.

The chatter in the dining hall is cheerful and light, making it impossible not to find happiness in this life of ours, no matter how fleeting it is. The tremors ceased once North was captured. Kastian, Rune, and I were able to catch up with the strain that North had inflicted on the Rhythm, yet Tomorrow still crumbles slowly, the damage dealt. We can’t correct it until the War God returns to the Rhythm.

After supper, Naminé and Rune forcefully take me to the third floor, claiming they have to show me something special that they’ve been working on. As tired as I am, I cannot deny them. I hold onto Rune’s hand tightly as he guides me up the stairs, Naminé leading us through the hall opposite the one I found Violet in a few weeks ago.

“I’m glad Kastian’s agreed to us making use of this floor,” Naminé says with a proud smirk.

“Agreed to, or grew weary of you fighting for it?” Rune mutters under his breath. Naminé glares at him but grabs my hand and tugs me away from him possessively.

“Some things are worth fighting for,” she remarks back. I laugh at the two of them. Rune grabs my other hand with a scowl but doesn’t say anything back to her, coming to terms with the fact that it’s pointless to argue with a Cypress. He should have figured that out with Wren.

We keep walking down the long corridor with arched white ceilings and white tiles. It feels more like a tunnel than a hallway. At least Kastian’s eyes seem less heavy now that all his former housemates have been sent back to the human realm to live new lives. The mansion has a light air to it that matches the cheerful hearts beating within.

Naminé stops at a set of double doors, ivory, in stark contrast to the rest of the doors here. A sole oak tree is engraved into the wood, and traces of gold are flaked in as leaves. It bears a resemblance to the impossibly tall trees here in Tomorrow.

Rune steps ahead and takes one doorknob as Naminé grabs the other, smiling with secrets behind their lips as they push the doors open simultaneously. My breath catches in my throat as I’m met with familiar rows of books, tall, two-story windows that arch at the top, and the cozy balcony that overlooks the lower floor. Nesbrim’s library...

“But how?” I mumble in a daze as I step into the room. I watched the castle crumble firsthand, so how is this possible?

Rune nods his head toward the last row by the windows and I can make out someone’s shadow there. I hesitantly look up at him, hoping he’ll just tell me.

“Sorry, pup, my lips are sealed,” he whispers, lips brushing the shell of my ear. I glance at Naminé, hoping she’ll help, and she simply shakes her head.

I take a deep breath and walk toward the back of the library. It’s so odd. The air is filled with musk and dust, the same mildewy and nostalgic smell that this place has always had.

This isn’t a recreation, it’s the same library.

My fingertips glide across the tops of the books on the ends, and as I turn the corner, my eyes meet Violet's and Bruno's.

“Why—*how* did you do this?”

Violet stands, fumbling her hands like this whole thing has her nervous. “I wanted to share something nice with you. I cherished this library for so many centuries before my undoing... You three brought life to it again. The night I found out you were sneaking in here I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Surely you and your friends were up to no good. And yet, I found myself filled with wonder that I hadn't felt for a long time.”

Rune and Naminé step beside me but I keep my gaze on Violet. The tension that used to exist between us has all but vanished.

The High Lady tilts her head and smiles brightly. “I set an enchantment on this library many years ago, just in case anything should happen to Nesbrim's court. This library survived the chaos beneath the rubble because it was encased in my magical glass.”

My hopes rise. “Violet—”

“No need to thank her, it's the *least* she could do.” Naminé flips her blonde hair and casts a grin at Violet. To my surprise, the High Lady laughs. Bruno sets his block of wood down with his whittling knife and smiles too.

Rune nods his agreement and sets both his hands on the long table he, Naminé, and I used to use for all our research. We'd sit in this very spot and share laughter in our darkest times. “We still need to find out North's weakness,” my Dreadius mutters as he picks up a few books that are labeled *Gardening and Herbs* and sets them on a stack on the floor.

Bruno lets out a long sigh and rubs his face. “I'm such an idiot for not writing things down during my eternity of observation. But to be honest, I don't recall North having any,” he says gravely.



“What about us?” I raise a brow, having difficulty believing anyone could have no soft spots.

“Your heart. You care too deeply and hesitate in crucial moments.” he points at me and I frown. “You are also the weakness of every one of your gods. Rune’s already proven that.”

Rune crosses his arms and his tattoos become more prominent as he flexes his muscles with irritation.

Violet laughs, and gods, I still don’t think I’ll ever get used to the sound of it. “Well, no point in getting ourselves down. Let’s just do our best to find something helpful.”

I furrow my brows and glance at Rune and Naminé. “But we’ve already searched this library high and low in Nesbrim. What we found was limited and nothing that would allude to defeating the God of War.”

Naminé pushes her sleeves up, determination blazing through her blue eyes. “I’m not letting you talk me out of sorting through every godsdamn book,” she snaps and Rune smirks as he looks at me.

*“She’s right, you know. We must have hope.”* The tattoo on my spine warms and I nudge my guard gently with my elbow.

“I know,” I grumble.

Violet shakes her head at us like we’re all idiots. “You didn’t think I kept all my best books out here in the dust, did you?”

Oh my gods, of course, she has a secret book room.

Bruno’s eyes glint with interest and so do Naminé’s. The High Lady guides us to the second story, where she heads toward the back wall. A black ladder on rollers leans against the far shelf, completely covered in dust from the rubble.

She hikes up her black dress and climbs the ladder to the top shelf. We wait below as she reads the spines of at least five books before finding the one she’s looking for.

“I, unlike you gods, have always had style,” Violet proclaims proudly as she blows the dust off a gray book and

pulls it off the shelf. Sounds of mechanical gears turning come from the other side of the wall and one of the book columns pops out an inch.

We all look at the secret passage and then back up at Violet. An excited grin forms across her lips and she smiles brightly. It's fun seeing this side of her and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting a bit caught up in her excitement.

"Well, *this* is certainly interesting." Bruno pulls the hidden door back and inspects the frame with awe as he steps through. Naminé links arms with me and Rune rolls his eyes as he steps ahead of us.

"This is sort of creepy, don't you think?" she whispers as her brows pull down with suspicion. My Cypress friend has a point.

"After you, Violet." I motion for her to walk ahead of us so Naminé and I carry up the rear.

Violet smiles and moves past us easily. Naminé has every right to be wary of her. A part of me still is too... but I can sense the weightlessness the High Lady has about her now. Our thorns of rage have been severed.

We step into the dark room and gems embedded in the walls light up with deep purple and emerald-green light. It's every bit of Violet's flair and I wonder how much time she's spent in here, in this little corner of the world she made for herself.

Naminé releases my arm as her curiosity and awe steal her doubts away.

I stand next to Violet as I look at the small table in the center of the room. Black candles, half burned, the wax melted onto the dark oak, are spread out on the edges of the table. Torn pages and messy scribbles of her notes from long ago are scattered across the surface.

"Why show us this?" I ask honestly. This is her personal space, a place she surely considers special and where she keeps things that are precious to her locked away.

Violet watches as Rune pulls a few black books off the shelves. I know he can't read them but he looks at them like he can.

"Because I want to help. Does it really need to be more complex than that?" she says as she lights the ebony candles on her desk. A crisp and leafy scent floods my senses. It smells similar to the candles I used to light in my shed.

"I suppose not." I smile and step beside Rune to help him sort through the books.

"This place is a trove of information!" Naminé's tone is raised like she's having the time of her life looking at old books. She's already collected six in her arms and Bruno has grabbed a few as well.

We spend the better part of the evening reading books, finding a handful to add to our pile of ones that hold promise. Violet and Bruno come to the conclusion from what we've found that the War God could be vulnerable to acts of love. It's a stretch, but Bruno said that the only time North was docile was when he was *in love*.

My act of betrayal is what brought his wrath to this level... but what act of love will stop a War God?

That's the real question.

Rune has me read some pages out loud to him from one he thought looked interesting. I'll have to teach him how to read. I picture him and Fellius sitting next to one another and being the only two who don't know how to read and I try to hold back my smile at the thought.

"*What are you thinking right now?*" Rune's dark eyes search mine and I shake my head as my spine warms with our connection. We're the last to leave the library, heading down the curved steps and through the second-floor hallway.

"Nothing," I lie and smile innocently. Rune narrows his eyes and sweeps me up in his arms. I squeal as he bites my neck gently and growls.

"Liar."

Rune holds me tightly in his arms, the tattoos on his neck begging to be bitten. I yearn for a taste of his blood. He carries me into our room. Kastian and Wren aren't here yet, so he gets me all to himself.

“You don't believe me?” I bat my eyes at him and he lifts his lip in a lustful smirk as he throws me on the king-size bed. I roll in the sheets, my hair and wings instantly tousled. Soft giggles escape my lips as he chases me into the silken sea of our bed.

Rune pulls his shirt off and stares at me with a deep hunger in his eyes. My beautiful Dreadius, tattoos covering his entire taut chest and stomach. My core heats with just the sight of him.

“I'm going to devour you, pup. Until you're screaming—until you can't come anymore,” he says beneath hooded eyes as he crawls across the bed slowly toward me.

My heart thrums loudly in my ears and I try to evade him—I blame Wren for my chase kink—but he grabs my ankles and flips me, dragging me until I'm beneath him and his skin is hot against mine.

I bear my fangs and mutter, “What if I devour you first?”

A dark grin consumes his expression. “You'll be too dizzy from my dick inside you.” He bends down and starts pressing kisses along my breasts, sucking in my nipple and kneading the other with his palm.

I writhe beneath him and moan, his needy cock already pressing hard against his pants and rubbing against me. Gods, this man knows how to worship a woman.

Rune licks my breast and runs his tongue up my neck and chin, his red eyes boring into me before his lips are taking mine, his tongue desperately lapping at my own. He grinds into me for a few moments before his hands slip between us and he unbuttons his pants, easily pulling them down and freeing his hard dick.

He breaks the kiss and tugs my leggings off in one clean pull, groaning at the wetness he finds. I nearly scream when he

dips down and bites my inner thigh. He grips my hips bruisingly as he releases me and starts stroking my clit with long, languid licks.

I throw my head back and fist the sheets, moaning and trying to keep as quiet as possible, knowing others are just a few doors down. Thank gods the boys are camping out in their treehouse tonight.

This isn't like my secluded room in Nesbrim, which somehow makes this more thrilling. Rune thrusts his fingers inside me as he swirls my clit with his tongue.

“Rune, *oh gods*,” I cry out. My thighs close together a little tighter around his head. He looks up at me from where he's settled between my legs, desire burning in his eyes. My orgasm is right at the edge. He thrusts his fingers at an angle, hitting my G-spot and making me yelp as my pleasure releases.

I pant and fist his black hair as he laps at my pussy, groaning deep as he squeezes my ass tighter. “Oh, *little pup*, you taste fucking amazing.” He lifts his head and kisses up my stomach, running his fingers bruisingly across the skin of my ribs. “Are you ready to come again?” His swollen cock presses at my entrance as he leans up to look at me.

“Yes,” I whisper and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down to me and burying my teeth in his flesh.

“Oh fuck,” he growls and thrusts his hips into me ruthlessly. I moan from my chest as I gulp down his thick, rose-flavored blood. Drops trickle from my lips as Rune keeps his pace, fucking me so hard and deep that I pull my teeth from him to cry out.

“Yes, oh gods, yes,” I pant and he pulls himself from me, grabs my hands, and places them on the wall before lining his dick back up with my pussy.

“I want you dripping down my balls. I want you to scream my name over and over.” He bites my shoulder, wraps a hand around my throat, and pumps into me again, this time fiercer,

and I know everyone in the mansion can probably hear us, but gods, it's hard to care right now.

My breaths come hard and short. He loosens his grip around my neck and I take a deep breath. He's intoxicating, all-consuming, dominating, and I bask in every fucking second of *him*. My orgasm builds up again until my pussy is so sensitive that when Rune's fingers start to swirl my clit I can't hold on any longer.

"I'm coming, baby. Time to soak my dick like only you can." He nips at my ear, thrusts into me once more, and holds me at the hilt as his dick throbs inside my pussy. I come undone and my pleasure does exactly what he asked of me. "So fucking perfect," he grunts as he guides my back against his chest, keeping us connected and close.

"Gods, we'll need to replace the sheets before the others come back," I murmur, caressing his taut arms. He's wrapped around me so affectionately.

Rune chuckles and pulls his dick slowly from me, pressing kisses to my forehead as he sits back. "I'll grab the spare sheets. You hit the bath, pup." He smirks at me and hops off the bed, pulling his pants up before heading out to the hall.

I watch him leave and can't thank the gods enough that they brought my precious Rune back to me.

## Elodie

Mid-summer suns rise over the east mountains as Greysil and Naminé walk back from the garden with armfuls of vegetables and melons.

Life has fallen into a normal rhythm.

We no longer wait anxiously for North to awaken like we did the first two months. Each day that passes sets ease into our veins, reminding me that time can indeed heal and mend most things.

I kneel in the dark basement of Kastian's estate. Lit by only candles, it's ominous down here, the walls dark and floors sunken. The air is heavy and has a moldy-stone scent that embeds itself into my clothes.

It is morbid. Somber. Dreary.

I shiver as the chill sinks into my bones. I wrap my cream shawl tightly around my shoulders as I stare at North's beautiful face, still and frozen with Arulius's soul curse.

"I remember you as well as I did the day we parted," I murmur to the sleeping god. "It's funny how cloudy things become once we die, isn't it? We reset, like watches or burned-out candles, only to remember our tragic pasts as if we'd never forgotten... I wonder if it's for the best. That we get that brief moment of peace before we're forced to remember the horrible things. For all I hold now is pain."

I clutch the shawl over my chest and take a low breath. “I think the damndest thing about all of this is that I certainly never felt like a goddess. My mind is human, through and through. As all of us are, I think. We’re just humans with power. It doesn’t make our hearts any stronger nor our actions any more just. We feel and endure just as any others.”

North’s thick, dark lashes curve perfectly against his cheeks. His black hair is not unlike my dear Rune’s. Three opaque, white horns peek through his hair, indicating his Dreadius lineage.

I brush my forefinger across his cheek softly. “Remember when we first woke up in Nesbrim, my dear?” A somber smile lifts my lips. “Though I suppose it wasn’t really Nesbrim back then, was it? Just some stone altars and onyx sand. Things were so unclear for such a long time. Though we found our way... you and I.” My words trail as I’m taken back to the days of old.

North.

Talia.

At first, we were the only Rhythm Gods—Bruno had not quite figured out the balance yet. War and Life. For how long was it just me and him, I wonder? Time was so fleeting then. Like water that rushes over slick stones in the riverbed, it’s impossible to know where each drop goes.

But it was just us two.

I lean down and press a kiss to my forsaken one.

“I’m sorry for what I did. You don’t need to forgive me, but I need you to know.”

Footsteps echo in the chamber behind me and I don’t need to turn around to know who it is. His aroma spills over my shoulder and I take a deep breath of him.

Blood and roses.

“What are you doing down here, pup?” Rune kneels beside me, reluctant to look at North’s body.



“Trying to mend some old wounds, I guess,” I murmur. Rune slides his hand into mine and his brows pinch together with concern.

“Tell me.” He brushes my hair gently behind my ear.

I spare a few moments to take him in. His eyes are patient, his touch understanding.

“Did you know that North and I were the first Rhythms?” I whisper as if I’m worried and should speak in a hushed tone so as not to wake North.

Rune’s eyes widen and he shakes his head. I’m sure he’s a bit surprised I didn’t bring this up sooner. It’s not like I haven’t had plenty of chances to, but some things are too painful to say. Kastian hasn’t uttered a word on the matter either. We both understand more than anyone else ever could.

“We were—until Bruno realized that death was life’s true counterpart. Then it left war to the wind, lost in a sea of uncertainty. You came much after. We’d never truly met before I reincarnated, had we?” I smile innocently at him and his grasp tightens on mine. “By then, Borvon and I had created these glades. They weren’t called the Death Glades back then—it was called the Cadence of Souls. The center of Tomorrow, where Kastian brought the dead, and I sent others back home.”

My Dreadius frowns. I wonder if it’s for the time he’s missed in our existence or for the way things used to flow here in Kastian’s mansion. “What happened to cause... all of this? North only let me feel his emotions. He never spoke about what happened, nor why.”

I take a deep breath, gazing regretfully at the War God.

“North... felt discarded. We welcomed him here in the glades but there was no purpose for war in Tomorrow. He stayed for decades—and I watched him slowly go mad with the uselessness he felt. The calling that you and I have in our veins, we can call on them whenever we like because they’re praised—everyone loves peace and life. He, on the other hand, could not. It was frowned upon for obvious reasons.”

My chest sinks as I prepare to tell him the rest.

“One day, he just left, and by the time we had the good sense to go out and find him, we were devastated by what he had done.” Chills crawl up my arms at the stench of blood and soft whimpers of dying humans echoing in my ears. “He’d single-handedly set off the most *atrocious* war the gods had ever seen. He made a deal with an evil human, and they almost annihilated everything together.”

“That’s... awful.” Rune looks at North with new eyes. I’m guessing North didn’t share his sins so easily with his captive host, but perhaps this will help Rune understand my reluctance and hesitance with North.

“It is awful. Even worse, many of the strongest gods were in their human cycles at the time, which certainly didn’t help. We were lost on how to proceed. So Borvon and I took matters into our own hands—like fools.”

Rune stands, surprising me. “He met me before he left for the human realm. Bruno told him of my creation. I was younger then, but I remember.” My brows knit together and my chest aches. “He stole me from Nesbrim before I knew for certain who I was, placing his curse on me to never speak. He knew what I represented, his counterpart, but he’d already made up his mind to wage war.”

I fist my hands on the stone, rage coursing through me for everything I overlooked. So many fucking mistakes.

“I’m sorry, Rune... If I’d known.”

He brushes my hair back and lets his palm warm my cheek. “How could you have known? It is not your fault.”

I shake my head. “I drove him into madness. Even after he started the war—Borvon and I handled it by beheading him and cursing him to an existenceless sentence. I never thought I’d see him again, nor did I desire to. And that’s so fucked up.” I pause and lower my chin, recalling the hurt that gleamed in North’s eyes as my blade sliced through his flesh. His last words echo through my mind like a wicked curse, “*You’ve betrayed me,*” and the despair will forever afflict me.

“He made his own decisions and he has paid the price. We can only try to learn from our mishaps, can we not?” Rune mutters. I lean into his chest and he strokes my head softly. “There’s no sense in reliving such pain, pup. I know he’ll forgive you. He still yearns for your love, however angry he remains. I felt it deep in my own chest—the way he watched the glassy morning lakes and the dagger he’s kept close—he always thought of you while looking at it.”

“The twin daggers,” I murmur, a little surprised he’s had the other all this time. I didn’t know it then—but the golden dagger Bruno always had lying around his house, the one my parents attacked me with...

It was mine.

After staring at the golden dagger on North’s side for a few minutes, I stand to leave and Rune follows. We don’t speak another word as we exit the basement, and I don’t spare a glance back at the sleeping god.

Elodie

Kol and Willow pant on the ground like rabid dogs. I've laid them out twenty times each at this point and the only thing that seems to be keeping them going is their pride.

"How?" is the only word Kol can manage to utter as he gasps for air. His cheeks are covered in cuts and bruises. Rune barks out a laugh from the tree he's leaning on. Kastian and Wren are watching a little off to his side, sitting on tree stumps and smiling with pride at my improvement on the battlefield.

"Inner peace." I laugh because it sounds so dumb, but it works. I don't mention that I'm also fully restored to my former self now, so I know fighting tactics well beyond their years. "And a healthy amount of fear after our last encounter with North."

The Dreadius groans and lets his head drop.

"Care to spar with me?" Wren steps into the dirt arena. We've unintentionally made one with all of our practice and use in these past several weeks.

I don't respond verbally. Instead, I take my fighting stance, inhaling a deep breath. The small drop of water I envision falling into a pool clears my mind. My blades form easily and burn hot with power.

Wren's eyes widen slightly and a nervous flicker dances through them before he takes his stance too, one hand out toward me and the other reaching down at the ground.

I only think about it for a second before my wings instinctively thrust and I propel into the air. His black thorn-vines burst from the ground and chase me into the sky.

“Quick reflexes, Elodie, but you'll have to be thinking further ahead,” my Cypress says with his brows pulled tightly in concentration.

Before I can turn my head, vines of his prickly thorns are wrapping around me, each barbed end piercing into my skin and feathers. I cry out and struggle in the grip of his vines, but it's no use.

Holy crap, Wren is way stronger in combat than I've ever given him credit for.

The barbs start to pull my aura from each point of entry and my body instantly feels weakened.

“She's had enough.” Kastian stands and stalks into the arena with a worried expression.

Rune follows after him and grips the Eostrix's wrist with a glare that even I fear as he mutters, “You don't get to say when she's had enough.” My drop of blood looks up at me and my entire body warms with his words.

I breathe out sharply and focus my strength on my wings, setting a small blade on each feather as I slice easily out of Wren's vines.

My Cypress gasps from below and his jaw is open as I dive through the air and tackle him to the ground. My hand curls tightly around his throat and I'm straddling him as dust curls around us.

I *may* have overdone that.

Wren's eyes are locked on mine, and for a second, I think he's mad. But he bursts out laughing, reaches his hand up and pulls me in for a heated kiss.

“That was sexy as hell. *Gods*, I didn’t know how fun it was to be thrown around like that,” he whispers against my lips and I let my body slump into his arms, releasing the grip I have on his throat.

“It’s more fun when I’m the one tackling you.” I move my lips to his neck and bite into his flesh, refilling my aura and healing the small wounds he managed to get on me. He groans beneath me and fists my hair.

“If you keep sucking on me like that, we are going to need to move this inside. Then I will show you what’s *really* fun.” His voice is low, deep with desire. I pull my fangs from him and brush my tongue across the wound but before I can respond, Kastian and Rune step beside us and give us a curious look.

I stand and help Wren up. His boner is apparent and my other gods take notice.

“Oh don’t act like her teeth buried in your throat doesn’t give you a rager too,” Wren snipes at them and they both share a look before all three of their eyes find mine.

I shrug. “Come on, Moro starts his briefing in an hour. We need to get ready.”

They all nod and Kol and Willow stand from the tree stumps to follow as well.



Rune and Kastian sit on either side of me as Wren and Moro stand at the head of the dining table. Marley and Fellius are with Greysil and Naminé in the gardens so they don’t have to hear all the war talk.

Violet, Bruno, Kol, and Willow sit across from us. The air is tense, as it usually is during these meetings.

Moro sets both his hands on the table and looks at each of us before speaking.

“There have been signs that North will awaken in a month’s time. The amber crystal he’s encased in has begun to crack.”

I shift uncomfortably in my chair. We’ve been preparing for this very news, yet we still don’t know his exact weakness... an act of love.

That could be *anything*.

Wren straightens his posture and clears his throat. “We’ll be much better prepared this time. Tomorrow we’ll travel to Nesbrim with Kol and Willow to find a safehouse for the kids. Naminé and Greysil will take care of them until we settle things with North.” His eyes meet mine and there’s a flicker of hurt in his gaze. “I know it will be hard to part with them, but I won’t risk their safety.”

Kastian nods in agreement and so do I. However, my chest sinks with the thought of our boys being away. At least Marley is used to being left in times of crisis. I hope once this is all over, we can stay together as a family.

Rune presses his hand on my shoulder and warmth spreads through my spine. “*It won’t be forever, pup. They’re good kids, they’ll be fine. Plus, Naminé will keep them in line without fail. She loves them just as we do.*”

I reach up and set my hand over his, squeezing my thanks. He knows how much I love and appreciate him. I don’t need to say the words.

Kol sits up in his chair as he asks, “Should we bring Eostrix forces as backup against North?”

Moro shakes his head and glances at Bruno with a knowing look in his eyes. “They would only get in the way. We don’t need any more casualties than we’re already anticipating,” he says grimly as he fists his hands against the table.

The room goes hauntingly silent. I look at every face in the room. Every single one of them is my friend, lover, or enemy

that I'm still mending relationships with. I cannot lose a single one of them.

“No casualties.”

They all look at me like I'm not ready for the truth of what this battle will bring, and maybe they're right. But I can't bear it.

“I cannot lose any of you.”

Willow's green eyes narrow at me. “Elodie, as touched as I am, some of us are expendable. We'll all do our best, but the odds were never in our favor.”

“She's right,” Bruno speaks up and stands from his chair. “We will do our best to safeguard everyone. You, Rune, and Kastian stand the best chance at fighting him, being Rhythm Gods and all. Have you thought of an act of love yet that might work on him?”

Everyone watches me expectantly.

I should know. I *should* and yet I do not. I've known North the longest. All I can try to do is prove my loyalty to him once more.

“I think the only thing I can try is to convince him that I do care for him. To tell him how much I regret the things I've done and show him that I love him as fiercely as I did the day I killed him,” I murmur as I lower my eyes to my hands. “I don't know what other act will suffice.”

Rune wraps his arm around me protectively. “Will it be enough?” he asks Bruno. I raise my gaze to see him shrug. It seems none of us truly know—but we have to try.

*We have to try.*

Dinner is quiet tonight. Even Marley and Felliis seem down about the news that they'll live in Nesbrim for a while. I only eat half of my plate before I excuse myself and head up to our room.

The dread of our peaceful time coming to an end has my stomach in knots. I cannot look at my friends and wonder which of them will not return. Arulius surfaces in my thoughts



and I stop in the middle of the long, dark hallway for a moment before taking a deep breath and continuing toward the bedroom.

I crawl to the center of the bed and stare at the ceiling until I inevitably find rest.

Sharp teeth brush against my wrist and stir my mind back into consciousness. Three warm bodies surround me, our limbs tangled and breaths low.

Kastian drinks blood liberally from my wrist. The pleasure sinks into my veins and I let out a soft moan. Rune, on my other side, noticing that I'm awake, cups my cheek with his palm as he pulls me in for a kiss. His tongue coaxes my lips open as he deepens our kiss and his grip tightens across my neck.

I only wonder where Wren is for a moment, then I feel his hands spreading my legs as he bites my inner thighs and presses kisses over the marks he's leaving.

*Oh my gods.*

Rune's hands trail down to my breasts as Wren pulls down my underwear. My pulse quickens and Kastian pulls his fangs from my wrist, stroking the wound with his tongue before it heals on its own.

My lovely Death God pulls my chin toward him and away from Rune. He takes my lips between his and I taste the sweetness of my own blood blooming on his tongue. My Dreadius presses kisses down my throat and nips my skin with his teeth, making me cry out with each one.

My body is in full overdrive, and the touch of all three of them has my skin melting in each place their precious fingers, tongues, and teeth glide over.

It's ruinous.

And I want every moment of it.

Wren runs his tongue over my clit slowly, torturously soft, as his amber eyes lift lazily to mine. I moan as he presses harder, pumping into me with his talented fingers.

Kastian bites my lower lip, blood spreading on my taste buds, and my Eostrix greedily chases after it. My mind is whirling, overstimulated nerves taking over my flesh. I cannot concentrate on only one of them.

Wren's working up my orgasm closer and closer until my breaths are shaky and I pull away from Kastian's kiss to moan as the pleasure rolls through my body. Rune's biting my nipples and rubbing his dick along the side of my ass.

My Cypress laps at my pussy and groans like a dying man. "Fuck, Elodie, you perfect little goddess," he mutters with hooded eyes as he lifts his head and licks his lips hungrily.

I can't even respond because Kastian is back to devouring my mouth. Rune nudges Wren out of the way and slides his dick up and down my slit a few times, feeling the evidence of my pleasure, and a wicked smile forms across his lips.

"I hope you know what you signed up for, pup."

I had *no* idea I signed up for this. But I'm one hundred percent here for it.

Rune takes over, pulling me from Kastian and cradling my neck as he thrusts into me. I cry out as he pumps his dick in and out, each push sending heat through my entire body.

The scent of that familiar oil fills the air and my heart beats faster as I know exactly where this is headed. My flesh has been trained to the scent of it.

Kastian's slick fingers run over his cock and he shifts beneath me so my back rests on his stomach. He gently coaxes my ass with the tip of his dick. I lie my head back on his chest as he presses sweet kisses to my forehead.

Rune's buried deep inside me and dips his head down to my breasts, taking my nipple between his teeth. I moan and arch my back as the two of them consume me. Kastian crowns my ass and my breath gets stuck in my throat as I'm slowly filled by both of them.

"Oh fuck," Kastian groans in my ear. "You're so godsdamn tight for us."

Rune's thrusts become deeper and harder, his breaths hot as he pants on my chest.

Wren brushes my cheek softly. He's on the right side of me and his brows are pulled in tightly like he's too shy to ask for my mouth.

I reach over and fist his swollen cock in my hand, pumping him in rhythm with my other gods, and he groans, tilting his head back. The sight of him makes my mouth water.

My orgasm is already right at the edge, so I take Wren between my lips and hollow my cheeks, taking him deep in my throat. "Fuck, baby, what are you doing to me?" he whispers through his breaths.

All four of us are panting and moaning, hands grasping at my skin, and the gorgeous, beautiful faces of my ethereal gods kissing, watching, devouring *me*.

Wren holds my head tightly against him as he spills down my throat. My eyes roll to the back of my head as I find my pleasure again and come undone over my gods. Kastian and Rune thrust in and stay pressed to the hilt as their dicks pulse inside me.

"You belong to us, as we do to you," Rune murmurs with a smirk, bringing his lips to my neck and pressing hot kisses on my skin.

Wren pulls out and the saltiness of him is left on my tongue.

We all lie together and breathe in silence. I cannot speak for us all, but my heart tells me to cherish this moment, for tomorrow brings an unknown future. I want every night to be made only of this.

Of tender kisses and fierce love.

"Everyone stop thinking so much—it's making my joint taste bad," Wren grumbles as he exhales a plume of smoke, and we all share a laugh.

## Wren

“Please, Wren! Marley and I can ride our own Hollow!”  
Fellius’s big eyes are enough to kill a person, I swear.

My downfall is that he and Marley know I only act tough. I was cursed with a heart as soft and malleable as butter.

Godsdamn it.

I sigh and let my shoulders fall with defeat. “*Fine*. Fetch a smaller Hollow though—Marley, show him how to stay on one,” I grumble as the two light up immediately and scamper off toward the stables.

They are moving to Nesbrim today, hopefully only for a short while, but my heart aches all the same.

A smile crests my lips as they excitedly talk about Nesbrim. Fellius hasn’t been yet and Marley hasn’t seen the city for years. I’ve told him not to be too excited since the castle fell and is in ruins, but he still is excited to see everything. Fuck, I am too. It’ll be a nice break from the glades. I love it here, really I do, but the city has cafés and food options.

I made them a promise that we would visit weekly. That made them less sad about the ordeal and perked them right up.

Kol and Willow have been working diligently to rebuild the city, so the two boys will have people they’ve come to

consider family around constantly, not to mention they will be staying with Greysil and Naminé.

Violet and Moro make trips to help often too. It is her city, after all, even though she's no longer the High Lady, or rather not regarded as such due to the people's disdain for her.

I caught her and Elodie laughing over tea the other morning, sitting in the terrarium room. Seeing the two of them acting as friends was odd, but the relief I found in Elodie's eyes was enough for me. The library was a nice peace offering from Violet, though I think Naminé and Rune persuaded her more than anything.

Rune rides up alongside me with Elodie in his arms, mounted on Margo. Brevik grunts a greeting to the beautiful white Hollow and she nods in turn. I think of Murph often—it's hard not to when you're always around the magnificent beasts. They all have the same carefree and jovial temperaments, but none of them could ever replace him.

I long for the day when I will meet him again.

I tap out a joint from my pack and light it before giving Elodie an apologetic grin. "The boys are riding on their own Hollow. I couldn't fucking say no." I laugh.

"Go figure," Rune deadpans while giving me a disapproving look.

Elodie laughs and nudges him with her elbow. He nuzzles her and I have to look away so they don't see my eyes rolling into the heavens. They are way too mushy-gushy for me.

"Hey, be careful!" Marley calls out, the little moss balls on his head bouncing as he chases after Fellius. The twerp is riding the smallest Hollow we have, a little pup I call Crabby because he's fucking feral.

"*Seriously?* No, absolutely not. Fellius, get off Crabby right fucking now. That one isn't rideable yet." I dismount from Brevik and chase down the Hollow before it can get out of hand.

Marley catches up to me, his breaths out of sync. "Sorry, Mr. Bartholomew. He rode off before I could stop him."

Fellius laughs and points at Marley. “No, you said *‘This one is fun, here, I’ll help you up,’* and then Crabby took off running.” The Moss Sparrow shoots him a look of betrayal but bursts out laughing.

I take a long inhale of smoke before tossing my joint and ruffling up Marley’s hair. “All right, you think you’re tough shit. Go ahead, ride Crabby, and if you can tame him by the time we get there, I’ll let you order whatever you want for lunch. How does that sound?”

Marley’s eyes light up and he nods. I help him up before heading back to Brevik. Elodie reaches over and presses a kiss to my lips, sparking a feral desire to take her back to the rooftop, but we have shit to do, so maybe another time.

“You’re so good with them,” she murmurs and leans back into Rune.

“Yeah, yeah.” I smirk as I pat Brevik’s neck. “To Nesbrim, my friend.”



The ethereal stones that once held up a city of the gods now lie crumbled on the outskirts of the great wall that encases Nesbrim. They’ve been getting a lot of work done. The last time we were here was during our recon mission to get North’s body. Seeing this place in the daylight is sort of glum. The castle was the heart of Tomorrow, once my home too, during my days as Violet’s Intake Commander.

“Is it supposed to look like this?” Fellius asks innocently. All the excitement he showed earlier is distant in his eyes.

I frown at the magnificence he’s missed out on, but perhaps a better kingdom will be built in its stead years from now.

“No, Kastian and Arulius destroyed this place while fighting a war that you are much too young to worry about,” I say in a low enough tone so Elodie and Rune don’t hear me. They hate letting the kids know even the slightest bits of information about the war, but they’ll find out one way or another. It might as well be from me.

Fellius’s eyes widen. “Kastian fighting with Arulius? But I thought...” We’ve all talked about the golden god, usually good things, reminiscing on the friendship we had before his betrayal. Fellius knows enough about Arulius to know he was family, but we haven’t spoken about what truly happened to him... and why.

“Yeah, Arulius isn’t here anymore... but it’s in the past now. We’re fixing the city, so you’ll get to see the castle someday. Don’t worry.”

Marley frowns and looks down as he says, “I wish Arulius didn’t have to go.” His big brown eyes hold sorrow. We haven’t explicitly told them that he’s dead. Or gone. Or that he never was truly a god or a being meant to walk this realm... but Marley knows me enough to see when I’m suffering. I haven’t had this much grief in my heart since we lost Elodie.

“I know. Me too,” I bite out and keep my eyes forward, worried that if I meet his eyes I’ll lose my composure.

“Wren—up here!” Kol shouts, waving his arm in the air. The ivory-winged Eostrix, Willow, stands by his side with her arms crossed, not looking particularly happy to see us. Does she ever smile at anyone except Kol?

Moro and Bruno lift their heads from a table with a fabric canopy over it. Elodie and Rune hop off Margo and greet them. Greysil and Naminé ride ahead toward the cottage they’ll be staying in.

Rune’s smile is genuine as he clasps hands with his brother. I’ll always be cautious around Kol after that day in the Hollow Grove, but since the poison that is Violet has been plucked from the city, all the inhabitants, including Kol, seem to have come to their senses.

I hang back with the Hollows while Elodie and Rune check in with Kol on how things are going with the rebuild. It looks like things are still just being picked up at this point, but I don't really care enough to join the conversation. They'll fill me in later, I'm sure.

*Gods, what I'd do for a cup of coffee right now.*

I stare off toward the northern districts that are still intact, wondering if some of the shops I love evaded destruction. Maybe I can persuade our goddess into a little stroll through the city.

I *did* promise the boys lunch.

After a few minutes, Elodie trots down the hill toward me, her smile brightening everything it touches as she takes my hand and steals my breath. Her dark hair comes down to her back and her beige horns are at least three inches long.

"Think we can sneak off to the café now?" she says with a smirk, glancing back at Rune and Kol to ensure they didn't overhear her.

*Oh, thank the gods.* I smile and whisper, "The one I chased you to last winter? But Greysil no longer runs it, it might be closed down."

She shrugs. "Let's go find out."

I turn and examine the two boys. They look famished. "You two hungry?"

"Yes!" they both say at the same time. I don't want to get their hopes up in case the café isn't open, but oops, too late.

They both take off running down the road toward the café while Elodie and I take our time walking. It's not often that I get a moment alone with her anymore. Our lives have been entangled with tiring tasks while we wait for North to wake up, which is apparently now very imminent.

I'm just happy that we no longer live in a perpetual sense of waiting. He's coming soon. Whether we win or lose, at least it will be over with.



I wrap an arm around Elodie and pull her in close. Her pine scent fills my senses and a wave of peace falls over me. I'm home wherever she is. Caziel is no longer where I'll find my place in the realms, I only crave to be by her side. My old cottage is filled with nothing but books anyway. Perhaps it can serve as our vacation home.

Dreadiuses and Eostrixes work together, clearing the streets of the larger debris. Even a few blocks into the city, it's still a mess. Moss Sparrows, with their different shades of green moss balls, take smaller buckets of debris to the outer wall. I wonder if Violet is here helping somewhere. I thought she'd accompany Moro today, but he was with Bruno at the tent. Maybe she hung back at the mansion with Kastian.

"So are we throwing everything Violet did to the wind? Where are you two at friendship-wise? I want to make sure I have the right attitude when I speak to her," I say in a playful tone.

Elodie sighs at my humor. "I don't think anyone will ever forget what she's done. But she's not the only god to blame for the mess we're in." I raise a brow. She must be talking about her past with North. It certainly makes more sense now after she explained it to us all. But I hate the thought of her feeling guilty. North went berserk. I think we'd all have done the same if we had been in her shoes.

"Right—I've shit on a few lawns too."

Her eyes flash with surprise before she starts laughing, a beautiful sound that I can't help but be a fool for.

"I actually like her—we have many similar interests, like books and stuff."

I smirk. "Hey, I started the book club first. Remember the ones in my cottage? So we're naming it what I want," I jest. She wraps her arms around my chest tightly.

We deserve a nice afternoon filled with laughter.

## North

Talia and I sit along the black sands of Nesbrim. It is a desert of onyx dust that makes your skin feel chalky and dry.

This is where we awoke.

Where we were created from the ashes of Tomorrow.

Where I first saw *her*.

Is this a dream? I wonder for only a moment before I decide it does not matter.

I press my hand over hers. It's been such a long and dreadful life. My chest floods with the warmth she's always placed inside me when I look at her. She smiles at me and brushes my cheek softly.

*"I'm so sorry,"* she whispers, though her voice sounds oddly distant. I look down at her hand momentarily and her body fades as if I'm hallucinating. When my eyes shift back up to her face, she's gone.

And I'm alone again.

Cold.

Why is it always so cold in my dreams?

My mind feels fuzzy here—I can't recall how long I've stared at the black sands that stretch for miles in each

direction. Sometimes I get up and walk, but I cannot tell if I move at all. Each step feels more damning than the last.

So I sit. And I wait.

I don't know what I'm waiting for. I think I remembered once but I've long since forgotten.

I hear a snap behind me and turn, not really sure what to expect, but anything is better than the dark, cold nothingness I endure.

My dream shifts and the world around me alters. I'm transported to a battlefield. Bodies paint the ground red, and many humans clash with one another. They wield power like the gods and they slaughter each other ruthlessly. The stench of blood is heavy—it mists the air with long threads of death.

*I've been here before.*

Rage seeps into my marrow and realization comes to me. Why am I so confused? So disoriented? My mind has forgotten but my flesh remembers. The hatred and anger thrum through me like a war drum.

I clutch my head and try to clear it.

I am North, God of War... of Ruin.

I descended on the human realm to answer the call in my veins. The call that *she* denied so many times. They all did.

That's right...

My mind is blurry, but I manage to find myself again in the haze.

I'm disappointed because this is, in fact, a memory of sorts. I've lived this moment so many fucking times in my head it has rotted my soul.

And I know what comes next.

As my eyes settle on the approaching Goddess of Life, I grit my teeth with the fire of hate that burns through me. My last breaths were before my beloved.

My best friend.

My first sight.

My *everything*.

“Talia—I will never forgive you,” I growl. She forsook me, sent me to a death I’d never wake from again, to waste in eternity alone.

Her honey-tone eyes fill with grief and sorrow as she pulls her bright aura blade from the air itself.

“I know.” She whispers the words so painfully that my own heart lurches.

*“You’ve betrayed me.”*

Her blade cuts my neck clean. I don’t feel anything as I watch the world fall. Her desolate eyes and tears stain my last thoughts with torture.

*How could you? It hurts... It hurts more than dying, it hurts.*

My eyes open slowly, as if I was only napping.

It’s dark here. Only a few candles light the small room. Where am I?

Was it all... just a dream?

My hand slides instinctively to my side where I find my twin dagger, and for a foolish moment, I believe this has just been a cruel trick that one of the gods has played on me, cursing me with nightmares only to wake up dizzy and confused.

I shift off the stone I’m lying on and stagger through the basement until I find a flight of familiar stairs.

This is Cadence of Souls Estate.

Pure relief fills the shallow wells of my heart. *It was only just a dream. A nightmare fit for devils of the realms.*

I reach the foyer and everything is as I remember, the white walls and tiles, the long black drapes that hang to the floor. My lips curve into an uneasy smile. I didn’t smile in my dreams. Not once.

*Thank the gods. Thank the gods,* I pray as my heart lightens and my grin begs tears to fall from my eyes. I'm not a monster—I didn't do all those heinous, blood-curdling acts.

“Talia?” I call out, my voice raspy from disuse.

Clasping my hand over my throat, I notice a mirror on the wall of the far corner. I walk over to it and inspect myself. It really is me. Dark hair, tousled from rest. White horns, and my eyes as dark blue as lapis lazuli.

I have to cover my lips when I laugh because the sensation is so odd.

“I dreamed I was cursed for centuries. My body is mine. Talia has not forsaken me.” I say the affirmations to myself, still giddy with the euphoric high that surges through my veins.

A short gasp cuts off behind me and I whirl, expecting to find Talia or one of the servants.

My eyes widen and my smile dims a bit.

“Borvon?” I take him in. It's unmistakably him, but he stares at me with eyes filled with petrified horror. “Where's Talia?” I ask, choosing to ignore his odd demeanor and resume smiling brightly. Nothing could dampen my mood in this precious moment.

He takes a hesitant step back, unable to find his words, it seems, as he studies me with terror he can't shake.

I frown and take a few steps closer to him. “Borvon, what's wrong? Has something happened to Talia? Where is she?” My chest tightens as the nightmare's toxicity rises back in my blood. Fear that something has happened to my beloved goddess tantalizes my skin.

“North... I—” He pauses and shakes his head, forcing a tight smile that I don't buy. “She's out right now, but you should join me in the glades for a walk. You've been asleep for some time.” His voice is low, quiet, like he doesn't want anyone nearby to hear.

Something's not right... I follow him slowly as he walks out the doors of the estate. The trees are as I remember them, filled with leaves and flowers in the fields.

A place not fit for a god like me.

Borvon heads toward the forest, but my feet stop at the bottom steps of the mansion.

Pain like a needle prickles in my brain, spreading like a sickness until I realize that my dreams perhaps were my reality. Blurry memories of taking a vessel come ashore in my mind, of fighting a golden god, him trapping me in a soul curse.

This is real, isn't it?

The darkness of knowing you're cruel and rotten makes your soul sick. It sucks any light that you have and transforms it into dark despair.

That's right—I'm the ruin of the realms.

Despised by all and damned for my dark, damaged heart.

There's only one way to be sure. I fist my hands at my sides, wishing this fate was written differently. *Please don't turn around. Please let this be a lie.*

“Kastian.”

He freezes and looks over his shoulder at me, wide eyes flickering with fear. His fists tremble and the air between us sparks with my black electricity of despair.

A sly, crooked smile curls my lips. The crackling of my aura ripples through my veins. *My* veins.

So be it.

Tears brim in my eyes—for I do not want this fate. Then the realms quake beneath my malevolent fury.

## Kastian

The ground is fucking shaking as North's eyes turn from a dark blue into onyx black. My breaths quicken and my heart hammers in my chest to an erratic beat. I mute the bond so I don't send distress to Elodie.

Either I will die here or he will—I doubt there will be any in between.

North pulls his golden dagger from his belt and it extends with his black aura, long and lethal. Blue flickers of hatred lash at the ends like cold fire.

“North, we wish you no harm. We've been waiting for you to wake up all this time. Please, at least hear me out, old friend,” I beg with him.

His clenched jaw loosens but his malevolent eyes still hold me viciously in a death glare.

“Tell me then. It won't matter, but I'll hear you plead with me nonetheless.” North's voice is dark, contrasting to how it was moments ago before he realized where and *when* he was.

I take a few unsteady steps toward him. His aura is so harrowing that my flesh fights against each move I make. His expression is a mask of corruption, unmoving and steadfast in his stance. Gods, I don't know why I'm even trying. But what other choice do we have?

“I’m sorry for aiding Talia in your death. I’m sorry we damned you and forbade your purpose in the realms. We have come to terms with the mistakes we’ve made. Please, for the sake of all those in Tomorrow, please come back to us.” I reach out and set my hand on his shoulder firmly. His power thrumming beneath his flesh sends goosebumps up my arms, but I hold fast. “Please, my brother, I will spend centuries repenting. Let us be in rhythm.”

North stares at me in silence. His eyes search my face for lies or deceit, and his expression softens a bit when he doesn’t find it. A somber frown tugs at his lips. “You know, I always wished we could be true brothers. I wanted to be happy, I desired it more than anything... and I had it once. When it was just Talia and me, we had it all. She didn’t look at me like I was a monster and she didn’t try to hide me from the world. But once you came along, all of that changed.”

His gaze meets mine, and the hatred in his eyes returns as he pulls my arm from his shoulder by force.

“She harmonized with you better, it makes sense. But my heart was left to the wolves. You two built Nesbrim with that insufferable Ruling Goddess. *And things. Got. Worse.* They kept getting worse. And no one cared. Not you. Not Talia. No one.” His voice raises as he says the latter, and his fist tightens around his blade. “You think things will be different now? Why, because you *need* me? Well, where the fuck were you when *I* needed *you*?” He shoves me back and grimaces.

I stagger back and summon my blade reluctantly. My heart wars in my chest with undiluted fear. I don’t want this. I don’t want to fight with my old friend, my brother. “I’m sorry, North. Please show us the mercy we didn’t show you.” I bow my head to him. I don’t know what else I can do—I cannot defeat him alone.

“Raise your head and die with dignity, Death God.”

I flinch, and when I hear his feet kick off the ground I leap forward and roll to evade his wicked cut. The end of his blade nicks the tip of my horn and cuts through a few of my feathers.



“At least you’ve learned a few things since our last encounter,” he shouts as he takes his second fighting stance and lunges for me again.

I struggle up quickly and meet his blade with my own. The clashing of our power thrums through my bones, setting my teeth on edge. North’s grin is wide and sinister as he leans in over our blades, close to my face. His anger makes the air thick. His slicked-back hair is disheveled and a few strands hang over his forehead.

“You’re such a self-serving asshole, you know that?” I growl and bare my fangs at him, thrusting my arms down to force him back a step before I slash his side deeply.

North groans and starts laughing like a psychopath as blood spurts from his side. Red tears start to fall from his eyes and it looks like he’s crying. I know Dreadiuses heal this way, but it’s an unsightly thing to watch. The blood drips down his chin and coats his torso.

“I’ve missed pain—it’s so much better in my own flesh. To hurt. It hurts. It *hurts everywhere*.” He laughs shakily, gripping his chest, and I wonder how many of those tears are for healing. He stops abruptly, dragging his hand up his face, through the blood, and using it to slick his disheveled hair back in place.

I strike him repeatedly with my black blade, only able to inflict flesh wounds, none of which break his bones or bring him to his knees. He only laughs as his blood soaks his clothes.

“Kastian!” Violet screams as she runs toward me from the mansion. Her hand is extended at the War God and North snaps his head at her in time to witness the large crystal formation encasing him.

Violet charges straight past him, grabs my arms, and pulls me into a dead sprint alongside her. Her red eyes are traced with fear. “We have to warn the others!” she hisses, looking at me desperately.

“We’ll lead him right to them,” I choke out. My mind buzzes with rampant thoughts and panic.

Violet shakes her head. “We haven’t a choice,” she shouts as the leaves of my glade bristle violently with an unnatural wind. I dare glance back and see North shattering the crystal around him as if it were nothing.

“Fuck!” I growl and scoop her up in my arms as I take off as fast as I can. My wings beat urgently and we take to the air, breaking through the forest’s canopy and into the open sky. Branches snap and splinters jut into my wings.

“You can’t fucking run from me!” North bellows from below. My blood is bursting through my ears so erratically that I don’t hear Violet screaming until she grips my chin and forces me to look at her.

“You’ve been struck!” she says repeatedly until my eyes flick down to where the black end of an aura sword pierces my chest. My wings falter, then we’re falling back toward the ground from a fatal height.

My ability to mute the bond comes undone and the pain sears straight through to Elodie. I wish I could speak to her as Rune can through the tattoo, but there’s no doubt in my mind she will know for certain what this fear and pain means.

Violet grips my wrist tightly and a brave fire burns through her eyes. “We aren’t dying here, Death God, hold onto me,” she bites out as she releases me and puts both hands in front of her, facing the fast-approaching forest.

I do as she says and wrap my arms around her.

The High Lady’s skin glows magenta and an amethyst wave of power bursts from her hands, crashing into the treetops and creating a dark purple hole, as if space itself has been separated.

*A Gremitie portal.*

I tuck my wings so we fall faster toward the portal entrance. North watches us fall and sees her portal as well.

“You’re a genius, Violet—can you close it behind us before he follows?”

Her teeth grit so hard I hear them gnash together. A temporary portal like this takes a great deal of aura to keep open, even for a goddess as powerful as Violet.

“I’ll try!”

We fall through the hole and all the wind and heavy air vanishes with a breath. The sky isn’t red here and the familiar scent of the city fills my senses. Baked goods and coffee, the cheerful chatter of those who do not yet know the hell-bent destruction that is on its way.

Violet lands on her feet as we enter from the cobblestones, toward the sky. I, on the other hand, am disoriented and topple over on my side.

Citizens gasp and murmurs quickly spread like wildfire through the street, surely at the sight of my bloodied body. I’d almost forgotten I’ve been wounded because my entire body is numb.

“Close it!” I shout. “Violet, close it!”

She snaps her hands together and the portal closes in the blink of an eye.

I take a deep, steadying breath and allow a relieved smirk to crest my lips. “Thank gods—” I pause as Violet’s eyes quake, staring at something abhorrent behind me.

I tilt my head back. The God of War, clad in blood-soaked clothes, stands behind me with a cold, cruel grin.

## Elodie

**M**arley holds up a crisply baked bread bite to each of his ears. The pastries are shaped like triangles, giving his ears a pointed look like Wren's.

Fellius throws his head back laughing and Wren's scowl is getting deeper by the second. I try to smother my laugh with a bite of my sandwich.

"Fellius, why are *you* laughing? You have pointed ears just like a Cypress," Wren growls, but the young god doesn't seem to mind one bit. I hold my cup of hot coffee to my lips, steam curling as I inhale the bitter scent of my favorite drink.

Today has been *magical*.

I wish Kastian could've joined us in Nesbrim, but he insisted on staying at the mansion. It's probably smart that one of us stays there at all times to keep guard over the sleeping god. Especially since Bruno thinks he will wake in a month's time, now that Arulius's soul curse is fading.

Arulius's last moments greet me in my dreams each night. Beautiful and unforgotten—I will hurt from the loss of him until the end of time itself.

Dread swirls in my stomach and I don't want to spoil our last day with the boys so I shrug off the thought.

Love never dies, no matter how you try to destroy it. Small pieces of it are forever embedded in the walls of our hearts.

I fist the shirt over my heart. *Arulius guides me no matter where he is. Because he was real. The rain kissed his beautiful skin, the sun warmed him anyway. His smile will forever haunt me. It's a ghost I welcome and cherish most of all.*

The new café owner stops by the table and refills our drinks, pinching the boys' cheeks as she mutters, "My gods, these two are adorable!" Her emerald-green moss balls atop her head have small flowers embedded in them and her smile is warm.

Wren narrows his eyes. "Really? They're trouble, that's what they are," he grumbles, but he smirks. The Moss Sparrow laughs and walks over to the other tables.

When I don't share in their humor, the boys pick up on my mood shift and stop laughing. Wren leans in and is about to ask me what's wrong when a sharp ache stretches through my chest.

*The bond*—something's wrong with Kastian.

My heart races and sweat beads down my forehead.

"Oh my gods." My throat seizes and my blood chills. Wren grabs my arms and shakes me a bit, yelling something, but it sounds muffled through my ringing ears. My lips part and with widened eyes, I whisper, "*He's awake.*"

Wren's pupils dilate. His panic is tangible. He slams his fist down on the table, our plates of food and coffee spilling everywhere, as he screams, "Get down!"

His thorns bristle like angry snakes bursting from the floor and walls, caging us in a black, venomous ball of vines and spikes. Each vine is thicker than my legs and dripping with dark green aura. Wren wraps me and the boys protectively in his arms as the café blows down as if a gust of wind has swept it off the face of the world.

White noise sears my ears and my head pounds ceaselessly.

The boys are pressed tightly between us and are as silent as lambs.

My initial shock at this happening passes and I grit my teeth, furrowing my brow as an indescribable amount of aura fills my veins.

I'll stop North no matter what it takes.

The sound of lashing wind dies out and the air is eerily quiet for a few moments. "Wren—get the boys out of here," I say as I stare into his deep amber eyes.

Reluctance and worry flash through those fiery gems of his but he nods, taking the boys in each arm, and lowers his thorn shield. I don't spare a second to watch him take them to safety. I trust my Cypress to keep them from harm.

My eyes are locked with the devil himself.

North stands in the center of what was the cobblestone street leading to the café. Now a radius of nearly two blocks is completely wiped out. Cold rage burrows into my heart. The souls that were lost in the blast rise, invisible to everyone else, but I see them.

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I reach one hand into the sky and pull down as if tugging a rope down from the sky. Every last one of their souls is thrust straight back into their bodies. I flex my jaw at the volume of power it takes to sew their souls back into their flesh.

North's smile twitches.

The man I once knew as my closest friend, my intimate lover, my first beloved god stands wicked against the spiraling black dust of crimson and aura. His onyx hair is slicked back with blood and his attire is entirely drenched with red. Fresh blood smears down his face from his Dreadius tears and that damning, villainous grin crests his lips.

His fury matches my own—but I have so much more to lose.

"I'm saddened to see you've chosen this path yet again, North."

His grin deepens and his gaze darkens into a sinister wish—one of more bloodshed and pain to be brought to the realms.

To be brought upon me.

“Elodie, Talia, my *sweet little lamb*. You cannot behead me—*betray* me—and expect everything to be fine. I’ve slept for hundreds of years, dreaming of you and your bloodied hand.” He spits venomously as he stalks over to me. Each step he takes shakes the ground. My blood screams for me to run, but I hold my ground.

My hair lashes as his power spirals around us. His nose is a breath away from mine and our eyes are deadlocked.

“You are not the same god I awoke with. My beloved god would *never* have done what you have. Look at the beast you’ve become, the beasts we’ve both become. The path you’ve chosen is not one that will last.”

His eyes hold mine with hostility before shifting into a softer malevolence.

“I am the same. You only ever kept me in a bottle—capping my evil because you didn’t wish to see it.” He brings his hand up to my cheek and touches me adorningly. His icy hand sends goosebumps up my arms, but the gentle darkness he holds in his eyes breaks my heart.

He is as handsome as they come. Sharp jawline and a cruel smile. Cold to all but warm for me.

“You were never evil, my darling. These are the lies you tell yourself. I cannot kill you again, I refuse to. So I beg you—please stop this senseless bloodshed,” I plead with him, pressing my hand flush against his high cheekbones.

He tips my chin up so he’s staring straight down into my soul. His scent of firewood and ash rushes through me like smoke follows the flame.

His eyes are somber and the lashing wind his aura creates ceases. Debris smolders and falls around us like the burning pages of our story.

“You know I can’t do that,” he whispers sadly.

“Rune understands... He’s helped me understand. We can make the Rhythm work once and for all.” My tone is

desperate. “You are who you *choose* to be. I know your heart is worth saving. We need you. *I need you.*”

His dark eyes remain dull, unmoved by my plea.

“I’ve given up every part of me that was worth saving, my sweet lamb.” He brushes my ear but his other hand reaches behind himself. I glance down as he pulls out his golden dagger. The twin to my own suffering blade. “Now it is time you feel the cold grasp of death and hate me as viciously as I do you.”

I close my eyes. He’s never going to come back. Lost like a bottle at sea, he’ll never be found. There is no act of love that could shake this man.

“Very well,” I whisper as North presses the cold blade to my chest. The sting of the metal on my skin chills my bones.

He grins as he lowers his beautiful lips to mine—a villainous kiss from the dreary past.

I grip the collar of his war jacket, pulling him in harder and kissing him like it will be our last. I cross my arms so each hand is on the opposite side of his neck. He pulls away from the kiss and gives me a sinister smile. I summon my long golden aura blades like swords that burn with the sun’s bright light.

North leans back as I cross-slash with the intent to mortally wound him. I hardly nick the soft flesh of his throat as he evades my fatal blow and jumps backward. His ominous wind and hateful aura lash instantly like a swelling storm around us.

“That was a dirty trick.” He laughs manically, extending the twin dagger with his dark war aura and running his thumb over the cut on his neck, licking the blood from it.

I don’t waste another second. My wings flex and the air seems to flow with me as I soar through it with speed only desperation can achieve. My arms sync and I spin through the air as I land a double strike against his onyx blade.

The ground below our feet tremors with the aftershocks of our power colliding, the reverberations from which shake



through my bones and send pain riveting through me.

“Not bad, Elodie.” He sneers as he throws me back with his blade. I fly higher to gain a better angle on him. North doesn’t have wings on his natural Dreadius body, but it doesn’t stop him from crafting his own wings from his aura. He was always too clever.

Horror fills every empty space in my heart as I watch his black bat wings form from the shadows, lifting him off the ground and toward me with murder flickering in his eyes.

A wall of crimson fire erupts from the stones before me and cuts between me and North. The flames lick violently at the sky and hiss as North collides with the fire head-on.

“Rune!” I shout and fly down to his side. He embraces me so tightly I lose my breath for a moment.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he cries and pulls me back, sweeping my hair out of my face to ensure I’m okay. His red eyes are frantic and filled with fear. “We must run. We’re not ready. We weren’t fucking ready.” He speaks urgently, fear mixed in his tone.

“Rune. We cannot run—”

“I’m not losing you, pup.” He flexes his jaw and grips my arms, pleading almost.

“I’m not leaving.” I return my eyes to the dissipating wall of fire. “Let me handle this. Get Moro and the others,” I say as I draw my golden aura blades once more.

He hesitates for a moment, but then steadies himself. “I’m not leaving your side. Not now—*not ever*.” His power thrums around him and dances on his skin. Rune’s tattoos illuminate with bright red light and scorch with flames.

I nod to him, weaving my fingers with his, and our auras meld into one another. His red tattoos travel up my arm and swarm around my skin, covering both my arms. The warmth of it sends a fresh wave of his power through me.

His eyes flicker with the same realization as mine: we are connected. We are one.

“Let’s fuck him up,” he growls and my heart beats wildly in my chest with adrenaline.

A dark arc of power slashes through the fire and Rune’s wall of magic is washed away. North stands with only a few scuffs on his cheek—a horror to behold in all his magnificence.

“Rune, don’t worry. I’ll put you in the ground with her.” North throws one of his blades straight through my precious drop of blood in the snow, as fast as a lightning strike, and blood spurts from Rune’s shoulder.

I charge North and cry out as I lash one of my own arcs of aura out at him. He dodges it as easily as I expected he would. I follow his movement and thrust my golden blade through his side.

“You fucking bitch.” North laughs and cracks my cheek with the back of his fist, the force of which sends my body rolling through the rubble, only stopping once my back smashes against the wall of a building.

Blood spurts across my lap as I cough. Air evades my lungs and my vision blurs. That was just one hit... How are we going to stop him?

Fear and despair swell in my heart.

I stare at the blurry forms of North and Rune as they fight, each blow sending waves of power rippling through the air. One of Rune’s arms hangs limply at his side, but he fights viciously.

Footsteps approach me quickly from my left and familiar faces come into view. Violet, Moro, and Bruno kneel at my side, Kol and Willow standing above them.

“Gods help us,” Kol mutters, sounding as scared as Rune did.

Violet smacks my face hard and my vision clears, my focus returning. “Elodie, stay with us,” she hisses as she takes a blade from Bruno’s hand and slices her arm. Blood drips from her arm as she holds it up to me with a ferocious gleam in her eyes. “*Drink.*”

I take her arm and accept her blood. The taste of a Gremitie is airy, so different from that of Dreadius or Eostrix blood. Her aura is strong and flows through me, healing my internal injuries swiftly.

Bruno takes back the blade from Violet and holds it up so I can see it.

My eyes widen and I drop her arm from my lips. “My golden twin dagger.”

The Maker nods and his face is grim. Dust and scratches are etched on his skin. His clothes are dirtied from the storm of chaos North has brought.

Rune cries out as he fights North ruthlessly. My heart stops as the War God kicks my Dreadius in the chest and readies a fatal blow. Kol and Willow don’t waste another second as they race toward him.

Kol chucks his sword and strikes North’s blade, knocking it to the side enough to stop it from landing in Rune’s chest.

“Move, brother!” Kol shouts as he tackles North to the ground.

Bruno grips my chin and pulls my eyes away from the chaos. I stare at his face with wide eyes, my heart racing so fast that I find it difficult to catch my breath.

“Elodie. You must take this dagger.” Bruno places it in my hands, closing my fingers over the golden hilt. “You must *stop* North. If you can pierce his heart with the twin blade, then I can reset him.” A painful smile pulls at his lips. “I must fix that which I created. I thought we could convince him, but he’s beyond that I’m afraid.”

I look down at the cold steel in my hand and tighten my grip around it. The pain sears hot as it cuts the flesh of my palm.

“I tried... He wouldn’t listen.” I stare at the blood that pools in my hand. My heart is heavy. Memories of North walking with me through fields of flowers and picking our favorite ones to dry together echo through my sea of thoughts

—his soft, affectionate gaze and the precious kisses we shared under the stars.

Violet looks at Moro and then back to me. She grabs my hands and I'm surprised by the warmth they bring.

I meet her red eyes as she speaks. “He’s as lost as I once was... but if there’s anything I know, it’s that a heart can be brought out of the darkness. I couldn’t see sense until I saw Lucius for myself.” Her eyes flick over to his and I watch as pain settles in the air between them. “I couldn’t face the things I’d done... until I realized that what I was doing was all for nothing. Less than nothing. I made mistakes that couldn’t be righted. But I kept telling myself that there was a justification.”

Her grasp tightens on my hands and she closes her eyes.

“Because when you’re the monster—the villain—you don’t see what everyone else does. You only see your own suffering and the things that were taken from you. I believe he can be persuaded, we just need to find *his Lucius*.”

I look back up at the gods fighting with all their might. Their blood spills on the cobblestones as they relentlessly attack North.

“But what could it possibly be?”

## Rune

**K**ol and Willow fight with every ounce of aura they have. My eyes are dripping with tears of blood, falling to my body rapidly, but my wounds are still slowing me down.

*Fuck.* What are we supposed to do?

I sit in a puddle of my own blood, some tears, more from my wounds that have yet to heal. My shoulder throbs, and my tongue is doused in the metallic sting of the carnage in Nesbrim's atmosphere.

My brother fights North head-on—two Dreadiuses of very different power levels. Kol doesn't stand a chance against the War God and my gut twists as he continues to take hard blows to his face and chest. North's hardly even breaking a sweat.

Willow lands on North's back and tries tearing at his wings, but it's useless. They are made of his aura alone, so her strikes pass right through them. Realization flickers in her green eyes and she decides to bury her teeth into the back of North's neck instead.

His black blood splatters on the ground and across Kol's eyes as Willow spits it out like poison that burns her throat. Her hands fly to her neck and she falls to the stones, squirming and gasping as if she cannot breathe.

"You can't drink the blood of a War God like me, you idiot." North cackles and kicks Kol to the ground while he's

blinded.

I force myself to my feet and block the blow intended for my brother with my forearm. My bones crack with the weight of his blade, but they hold.

“*Rune*,” Kol groans as he sits up and takes a fighting stance, his eyes still shut with black blood smeared across his lids. “Get away while you can... I can’t bear the thought of losing you again.” He coughs and lifts his head to North.

He’s blinded, he cannot fight like this.

The vile god grins sinisterly, his teeth bare and shiny. He looks like he’s growing bored of us by the way he keeps glancing over at Elodie.

Willow’s body stills on the ground, her eyes wide with tears drying on her cheeks. Her veins are black beneath her skin and look like webs of evil.

She is dead.

Panic itches in my throat as the pain in my arm worsens. North puts more weight down on his blade and my bones shake with the pressure.

“I won’t give up,” I bite out, wincing as I stand and grip North’s throat tightly. The War God’s eyes widen with surprise, but when I try to crush his windpipe, it doesn’t budge.

“All right, enough playing around,” North says dully.

He rips my hand from his throat and throws my body with a force that sends me tumbling through the rubble as he sent Elodie. My bones snap, and my heart dies a bit as I watch North cut my brother down. His cry sends chills into my spine and as my thwarted body gives out—so does all hope.

We were foolish to think we could stop him.

Elodie

Violet and Moro stand on either side of me. I know not what either of them looks like in battle, but gods, I hope they have something realm-shattering up their sleeves.

I fist the golden dagger tightly in my hand. It's not like he'll be gone forever once I stab him with this... but a part of me worries that we will live in an endless cycle of hatred and misunderstanding one another if we cannot just make it through this.

What if he forgets and everything is fine for a while? Until one of us slips up and mentions the past, or the abhorrence in someone's gaze makes him question why, only for North to find out he's been wiped clean and wage war all over again.

That can't be the best solution—but it may be our only option.

“You can do this.” Moro smiles weakly at me. His silver eyes are steady and sure. I'm glad one of us has that much confidence in the outcome of this battle.

Willow lies motionless on the battlefield and I watch with disgust as North cuts down Kol. He severs both of the Dreadius's arms before striking through his chest. I cry out for my two fallen friends. They laid down their lives without a

second thought. My precious Rune is gravely injured but at least he's still breathing.

My chest hurts and twists. I do not have enough strength to catch their souls before they're gone. Perhaps that was North's plan all along—to force my hand and make me mass-resurrect to weaken me before our fight actually begun.

Cruel.

“We *have* no other choice,” I say as I take to the sky, not bothering to look back at Moro or Violet. North's eyes instantly snap to mine and he takes to the sky after me.

“Where are you going, my sweet lamb?” he shouts, eager for a chase. With the wind on his back, he gains on me with wicked speed.

I stay focused on flying higher and higher, until the air is hard to breathe in, and the cold atmosphere clutches my lungs like a snake. My feathers are dancing in the sun's rays and I twirl to avoid the arcs of black aura North whirls at me. We're trapped in an epic trance of the past, this being the somber song we'll soon end on.

North is in reaching distance when I duck swiftly, evading Moro's great transparent sword summoned from the stars themselves. The blue aura strikes North true and takes him a few hundred feet closer to the ground before he shakes it off.

His power is menacing—his devotion to see me dead greater.

“You are as radiant as the day I woke up by your side, my goddess.” North sneers at me.

I'm running out of options, fuck. He's still far too strong to attempt stabbing.

The clouds catch the sun's soft colors, tender hues of pink and yellow. It distracts me as Arulius surfaces in my mind. What was he thinking in his last moments, so high up in the sky?

Was he thinking of death? Was he scared, as I am now?

Arulius... my lovely god.



I let a few tears roll down my cheeks as I watch the monster that was once so gentle and kind race toward me with hellfire on his heels, his face coated in blood and eyes filled with mania. His dagger gripped so tightly in his fist his veins protrude from his pale skin.

How did I turn your warmth to ice, my dear God of War?

*Does the sun warm you, my love?*

“It did for a while, Arulius. But it’s been so cold without you,” I whisper, wishing and hoping that somewhere, perhaps he can hear me.

The fight leaves my body and I welcome the wrath North wishes to inflict on me—is that his Lucius? Destroying me? Could letting him hurt me be my act of love? I’m running out of ideas. Should this fail... I’ll stab him and make him forget.

North crosses his arms and roars as black electricity thunders down to meet his call. He cuts through the beautiful sunset sky with darkness, bitter and silent.

My wings instinctively close around me to block his assault, leaving a small gap for me to see the anguish and shock that falls over North’s features when he realizes I won’t dodge out of the way.

Blood sprinkles hot across my lips and my beige wings fall gracefully back to the ground, blown clean off my back. Feathers blanketed with my blood swarm the airspace. They fall like snow, heavy with warm amber rays of dissipating sunlight.

I watch with weary eyes as I descend with them.

There is no pain. No sharp despair.

Instead, there is peace—watching the sky grow farther away and the clouds beckoning with illusions of Arulius dipping my hand into the clouds, whispering to me that I’m real.

*Is this what you saw, Arulius?*

Is this truly what North desired more than anything? More than a place to call home?

The clouds are dark now.

The suns have set.

Arulius isn't here anymore.

*Are you angry that I exist?*

I was never angry for your existence. I only wish we were granted longer days in the sky, flying and smiling, however brief of a time it was. I wish you could have met Fellius and taught him to use the aura as you did me.

I wish for a lot of things.

Kastian sends pain and weary dreams through the bond. He's still here though... still breathing. Wren has the boys and is safe somewhere, hopefully far, far away. Rune will heal from all of this.

My body is falling one moment and swept up in the next.

For a second, I think Kastian has saved me, but it's North's dark eyes I'm staring into.

Pain and confusion bleed through his soul. His grip is trembling.

"North..." I rasp, my back drenched and throbbing. It drips down his elbows as he holds me preciously. "What are you doing?" I search his eyes for answers and I find torment in the depths of them.

"Elodie—" His voice shakes.

Why did he save me if he wished to kill me?

Blackthorns encase North's body and pull us to the ground before I hear his heartfelt words. My mind clears as Violet catches me.

"You okay?" she bites out, concern pulling at her eyes.

I nod but keep my eyes on North.

Wren wraps his body in his daunting blackthorns. His power takes the shape of a prickly dead tree, branches long and leafless. North's body juts out from the trunk, leaving only his chest and head bare to us.

My Cypress looks back at me with Bruno at his side. Kastian lands beside me and falls to the ground, bleeding profusely from multiple wounds on his torso.

“Elodie...” he rasps, relieved that I’m still breathing, though his eyes turn desolate as he finds my wingless back. My shoulders throb painfully as hot blood streams down my skin.

Rune hobbles over to us and leans against Moro for support. We’re all here. We’ve barely made it, but we’re here... and I can’t help but think it’s not an accident either.

North had me—he had all of us.

Yet none of my dear gods or I are dead. Only the two friends whom he found expendable.

All eyes shift to me.

The dagger in my hand is heavier than any burden I’ve ever had to carry.

Wren’s eyes are sunken and weary as he murmurs, “It has to be you, Elodie.” He walks to my side and Violet sets me down.

“I know,” I say with bile rising in my throat. North’s head hangs low. He’s far from defeated... so why has he stopped fighting?

I limp over to the tree of thorns, leaving a trail of blood in my wake. My black shirt and pants are torn and tattered.

I stare into North’s hollowed eyes and he gives me a weary smile.

“You’ve betrayed me, my sweet little lamb.” He says the words with an almost wistful tone, not accusatory like the first time he spoke them. There’s affection in his eyes, and perhaps regret.

The weight on my chest deepens, and as I brush his cheek with my hand, he leans into it. Quietly, softly.

“I won’t betray you again, my beloved. My dagger will not find your heart.”

His eyes reignite with distant flames and his tone turns cold. “I’ll kill every last one of you if you do not. There’s no hope for a god like me.”

“North... I’m trying to save you. *Please*,” I beg him once more. “I once loved you as the sea adores the shore. We can dance again in the sea of stars. Pick the poppies in the fields and place them in books we once carried together. We can do all of those things again. *Please*... Please don’t let our story end like this.”

He considers my words for a moment before letting his head drop, shaking it slowly.

“You *never* loved me. You hated what I was—hated my existence and my purpose. It drove me to madness. I only ever wanted you to accept me. Not change me... I can’t live with the memories in my head. They infect my core with a venom I cannot retract. So either you kill me—or all of you die. I will not speak it again.”

My fingers tighten around my golden dagger.

“Fine. I shall be the first sight when you awake then. I swear it. And I will love you for who you are no matter what. I will never betray your heart again. This is my promise to you. I will remember it for the both of us.”

His grimace fades into a relieved grin and his darkened eyes flicker back into their former lapis lazuli color.

I hold my golden dagger to his chest, waiting only a moment before pulling my arm back for the strike.

“Mama, *no!*”

My muscles seize and my gut curls as Fellius runs onto the battlefield and blocks my path to stabbing North.

Shock fills me and my chest seizes. I stare at Fellius with widened and horrified eyes before I grip his shoulder and try to push him out of the way with a hushed whisper.

“Fellius, this is for all of us.”

He glares at me and firms his stance, unmoving and defiant. His amethyst eyes burn and singe my soul with guilt.

I glance back at the others, not knowing what to do.

Rune limps forward and kneels before Fellius. “Young god, these are matters you cannot understand just yet...” My Dreadius tries to pry Fellius away from North but the little god refuses.

“Why must you do this? I demand that you stop!” Fellius’s brows pull tightly together and he looks to me with desperation.

North studies Fellius with confusion pulling on his brows.

“Fellius—”

“No! This is an endless cycle of hate, don’t you see it? I won’t let you continue. Mama, please don’t hurt him, he loves you.”

Rune frowns and looks up at me with sorrow in his eyes.

“A God of Love...” North’s lips part, seemingly in disbelief. “What are you placing in my heart, little god?”

“Hope.” Fellius’s voice is so gentle it hurts.

North’s eyes soften with anguish. “A God of Hope.”

Fellius reaches his hand up for my dagger, palm up and waiting for me to give it to him. I hesitate, looking at North, whom I know can break from Wren’s binds whenever he chooses, and then back to Fellius.

Is it so wrong to have hope?

“I love him too,” I whisper. North’s eyes brim with tears at my confession and an expression of heartache swarms him.

I place the dagger in Fellius’s hand and tears fill his eyes as well. “Thank you,” he cries and hugs me tightly and I embrace him the same. Rune tousles the boy’s hair and smiles at him, nodding his approval as well.

North watches with brows pulled down as if Fellius’s act hurts him.

I approach the War God unarmed, injured, and so fucking tired I could collapse.

“Elodie, wait,” Wren snaps behind me but I ignore his call.

The choice has been made. Wrong or not, this is the end. I’ve chosen this path; whatever happens next is in the gods’ hands.

I set my palm on the tree of thorns and it unravels as my power disables it. North remains standing, his shoulders straight and the twin dagger still gripped firmly in his hand.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders. He flinches beneath my touch but does not resist. I pull him in close, my heart pounding so hard in my chest that I cannot tell whether or not his beats to the same rhythm.

“Forgive me. I forsook you. Hate me if you must—but please allow the Rhythm to be complete. I wish you to stay in this life, my beloved. I cannot bear another day without you.”

His chest heaves and the weight lifts from my sinking heart as he threads his arms through mine and hugs me back desperately, his heart melding with my own.

“The sea and shores hardly amount to what my heart holds for you. Perhaps... hope does still exist for a god like me.” He pulls from our embrace and looks at Felliis. The young god smiles fearlessly at North. His chin is tilted high and his eyes look at the War God with high regard.

That’s all he ever wanted, isn’t it?

To be looked at with eyes that take him for the man he is—not the god he’s been damned into being.

Felliis places one hand in mine and the other in North’s.

“Can we go home now?”

## Violet

The selfless act of a child.

Is that truly all it took to bring North to his senses? I stand next to Lucius as Elodie and all her gods make arrangements to return to the glades.

I glance at Lucius hesitantly and find his silver eyes watching me carefully.

“I’m relieved that this is the outcome... It certainly could’ve been much worse,” I say somberly as I crouch down to Willow’s body. “Though my heart is saddened by those we must say goodbye to for now—even if it’s not for forever.”

Lucius kneels beside me and closes Willow’s cloudy green eyes as he mutters, “We both know that the time apart can be more painful than a permanent goodbye. The waiting for the lost to return, not knowing if you’ll be able to find them again or if they’ll be as you remember them. That’s what hurts the most.”

I flinch and meet his eyes, surprised to find some solace there, burning like a candle that nears its final breath.

No words can be spoken between us to repair the damage done, so I lower my head and nod. Lucius stands and walks over to Elodie and the others. My mind is too bogged down to listen to what’s being said between the others.

I stand and move to Kol, my loyal Dreadius who served me for centuries. His mangled body is hard to look at but he deserves to be seen for his sacrifice. Bruno takes a seat on the stone across from me as I try to sort Kol so he looks like he's sleeping. Rune will soon see him, and though Elodie will send him along his way to the human realm, he will need a proper send-off—both he and Willow.

Bruno whittles at the block of wood he's been carrying around. Such an odd man with strange hobbies—bringing them to the battlefield is even stranger.

“I've been meaning to ask you, Violet,” he murmurs, not bothering to look at me. I sit back on my haunches and stare at him expectantly. “How *did* you manage to create Arulius? After all this time, I still can't quite figure it out. You're an anomaly, a mystery beyond my reach. So tell me, I tire of guessing.”

Discomfort crawls beneath my skin. I fist my hands on my lap. “It's not an anomaly and I didn't do anything special. I stole the War God's body and my hateful wishes crafted him using the aura I stole from North... That's it.”

Perhaps the Sea of Stars and Moonlight granted such a heinous wish?

He stops whittling and looks at me with an unreadable expression. “Wishes, huh?” Bruno ponders the thought for a few moments before smiling and nodding like he should've guessed it. “Next time, just ask me.” He winks and tosses the block of wood to me.

I jolt but manage to catch it. My brows pinch together with confusion but Bruno nods toward the wood, so I look down at it.

It's a small sculpture of a man with brilliant wings and bone armor, face as sharp and perfect as someone I once knew.

*Arulius.*

My eyes snap up to Bruno's, goosebumps spreading up my arms. Bruno smiles widely. “It's a bit tricky since he wasn't



originally mine. There's a price to pay to make this work though."

I stand and walk around Kol's body, invading Bruno's space as desperation claws at my heart.

"I'll do *anything*."

He wraps his hands around mine, still holding Arulius's statue tightly. "You must be reincarnated—be sent to the human realm to live out a human life away from Lucius. You must give up that which you fought so viciously for."

Will this be enough to cleanse my soul?

Will it ever be enough... for the things I stole?

"I'll pay it—"

Bruno swipes his hand across my neck nimbly. And like a dream, my vision blurs into an array of colors. He catches me as my knees give out and guides me to the ground.

It's so fast, yet slow. Death. The tenderness of it, the long-feared but yearned-for bitterness of its cold embrace.

Take me into the dark. Take me deep into the endless night.

*It's okay.*

I'll soon forget. Live a carefree life not knowing what horrors I've wrought on friends in another life—in another realm.

It's okay.

*It is okay.*

I drift into a dreary sleep. Sweet cherry blossoms are fluttering somewhere, their scent making me smile. Bruno's melancholic frown is the last glimmer of Tomorrow I see before the dark curtains close on this chapter of my existence—of my life. It's okay that I do not say goodbye to my Lucius.

It's only for a short while anyway.

Maybe he can love me once more—should we ever meet again.

*I'd like that.*

## Elodie

The Ascension Ceremony is adorned with flowers from all over Tomorrow. Poppies, daffodils, and daisies. Foxgloves and lavender, violets and blue shooting stars. Blossoms of Annabelle hydrangeas and daylilies.

None of which seem to be enough to hide all our grief.

The glades have never been so filled to the brim with creatures before today. All of Nesbrim and the outskirt villages like Caziel and the Hollow Keeper's residence have come. It is both a happy and joyous ceremony, yet one filled with immeasurable pain.

Today we celebrate the Rhythm of Realms becoming whole, and mourn those to whom we must say goodbye.

The trees dapple sunlight onto the forest floor, lush with green grass and blue mushrooms. The white mansion we call home stands tall beyond the ebony caskets. They are lined up and waiting for me to send them on their way to a new life.

So, why am I so saddened to send them away?

Rune sits beside me on the Pine Hollow stable's roof, dressed in his beautiful formal guard attire. His black jacket is sleek and fits him well. He never wore his guard uniform in Nesbrim, but it makes sense for his brother's ascension. Margo lies next to me with her eyes closed, dreaming of peace, I

hope. I pet her head and a sad smile coasts my lips, remembering the journey we've been on.

We sit in silence. It's comforting to take in the sky as twilight approaches. The harsh orange colors turn purple and blue. I lean my head on his shoulder and he tilts his head so it rests atop mine.

The tattoo on my spine warms and his voice eases into my mind.

*"Do you think Kol will be the same when he returns?"*

My heart is tight in my chest for my dear Rune. I look up at him and give him an uncertain smile. I can't bring myself to mutter words that have no truth behind them.

"We don't ever return the same, it seems. But my heart tells me we will always become who we need to be."

His crimson eyes fill with sorrow and he nods with understanding. *"I hope he comes back less of an asshole."* His voice is light in my mind and we both smile, not quite a laugh.

At least there's hope.



Kastian and Wren stand side-by-side, wearing the same sleek black cloaks that Rune wears today. My Dreadius stands on the other side of the aisle beside North. They all look ethereal and beautiful, bathed in the pale moonlight. Kisses of somber stars speckle across the sky above and even the wind hushes for the ceremony.

I take a deep breath as I walk down the aisle, filled with creatures of Nesbrim, here to send off their High Lady into the next life. Kol and Willow too.

Because of them... we were able to save the Rhythm.

Tonight, the realms will dance to the lullaby of our hearts.

Every face is turned toward me as I make my way steadily to the caskets. Some smile, others weep silently, and my beloved gods stand tall and firm upfront. They're all waiting for me—well, almost everyone.

*Arulius—I hope you're watching.*

I take my place in the center of the arch Wren made with his thorns. Beautiful red roses grow from them, hanging low as if whispering their goodbyes to those who rest.

“I, Goddess of Life and Dawn, stand before you all today as a complete Rhythm Goddess.” I look from Kastian to Rune and North. Each of them smiles proudly and stands a bit taller. Wren rolls his eyes, because unfortunately he's not a Rhythm God, but his smirk stains my heart anyway. “Thank you all who join us tonight for the Ascension. We will return them to the human realm with warm arms and full hearts.”

Fellius smiles up at me from his seat between Moro and Bruno in the crowd. His bright amethyst eyes give me the strength to continue with purpose.

“For it is only goodbye for now. We shall meet again, here in Tomorrow.”

“Here in Tomorrow,” voices from all in the crowd say in unison. Then the air falls deathly still.

My spine warms and Rune's deep, beautiful voice curls in my mind as he hums the same lullaby he did in Nesbrim. That seems like so long ago now, doesn't it?

*Long, long time ago* is the name of the hymn—I finally placed it in my memory. North must've taught it to him in their short time together, when he placed the curse. My War God hummed this sad lullaby to me each night as we chased one another into our dreams.

I shut my eyes and let his sad song fill my heart. Kastian's love spreads through my chest through the bond and when I open my eyes, he is at my side. His ocean eyes meld into mine as he threads our fingers together and faces the caskets. Rune squeezes my other hand tightly while North stands tall behind

me, setting his hand on my shoulder to lend me his support and strength.

“Rise. Lift into the stars, and find your way back to us after you dance in the sun a while.”

My aura is warm as it flows from my body like gold liquid, pooling at my feet, spreading across the entire forest floor of the glades. An audible gasp rushes through the creatures behind us as the blades of grass shimmer with gilded light. The trees illuminate and their leaves dance in the moonlit sky.

“May the rain kiss your skin, should you ever doubt if you are real. Let the sun warm you anyway,” I murmur as the gold aura encases the caskets, and a burst of light pulses through the night.

It’s too bright to look at, but I feel the hand of someone brush against my cheek. My eyes shoot open even though the light is blinding. I barely make out the figure, but I know it’s *him*.

“*Arulius*.”

His hand fades from my cheek and I catch only a brief glimpse of his soft gaze. Tears fall from my eyes as he ascends to the universe above with the others.

And I smile, crying as my gods hold me tighter.

“Thank you, Violet. I’ll see you all again soon.”

## North

I'm not much of one for parties. Usually I am the odd god out, standing in the corner away from everyone and minding my own business. But Elodie ropes me in and I somehow find myself having the time of my life as creatures of Tomorrow dance in the glades.

They welcome me and don't stare at me with abhorrence.

The Cypress is drunk, his cheeks flushed and eyes drowsy. But that doesn't stop him from singing loudly and swaying with the music, waving his bottle of wine in the air like a madman.

Elodie laughs when she notices me observing Wren and squeezes my hands tighter. My chest is light—so weightless and free. How she and her friends can come to terms with all of this so easily is cruel.

Though I suppose we're all weary of carrying around our dreadful pasts. Our sins and betrayals.

There is one god I do owe an apology to though, and as I search the glades and the dancing gods, I find him leaned up against a tree with his arms crossed, watching Elodie and I dance together.

I stop moving and my sweet one looks up at me with confusion. "What's wrong?"

Her dark hair is soft on my fingertips as I sweep it behind her lamb ear. “Nothing—give me one moment, okay?” She hesitates but nods just as Kastian takes her hands and starts dancing with her in my stead. Her bright smile spreads across her lips.

Rune ignores me as I approach him. He’s the only one that’s been reluctant to speak with me. I understand why, and I’ll respect the time he needs to find peace with me.

I took his voice for so many years. It’s unimaginable, what his curse did to him, how hard his life must’ve been growing up and wondering why I stormed into his life one day, placing such a terrible curse upon him. Then I took his vessel, and soon after, his brother’s life.

I’m cruel, a monster.

He keeps his arms tightly crossed and his crimson eyes won’t meet mine as I stand beside him. For a few minutes, we both watch Kastian and Elodie dance and laugh, Wren singing and swaying not too far away.

“Does he always drink like this?” I ask with a grin, neither of us looking at one another.

“Only when he’s happy. Usually, he’s smoking himself silly instead,” Rune retorts. There’s a lightness in his tone that gives me hope we can mend things.

I chuckle and nudge him with my shoulder. “I’m not good at this... but I think I have to say it.”

Rune’s eyes flick over to me. His jaw flexes like this is making him uncomfortable. I take a deep breath and dip my head.

“I’m sorry.”

When he doesn’t respond, I look up at him and find kindness warming his eyes. Somehow that hurts more than if he’d said he hated me and didn’t forgive me.

It hurts, because I was never so kind.

“The past is the past. We won’t get anywhere if we try to carry it along with us.” Rune returns his eyes to Elodie and I



glance over to her again as well. “We can’t let that Eostrix dance with *our* girl all night, can we?” His voice fills with mischief and I think I like him the best out of our harem.

“No, we certainly cannot.”



The Ascension Ceremony was beautiful. Celebrating the Rhythm afterward was *ruinous*.

I wake up with a pounding headache and groan as I lift my head. Wren has a bottle of Greysil’s popular wine still in his arms, his brows pulled tightly together like he’s got a raging migraine as I do. Kastian is sprawled out like a dead man with Rune beside him, head buried in pillows to keep out the noise of the two young gods running up and down the hallway.

Elodie is wrapped tightly in my arms, her breaths long and peaceful. Her wingless back puts a dull ache in my chest. I’ve been given this second chance and shall not waste it.

I’ll teach her to fly as I do.

I set my head back down on the pillow and press my lips to her forehead. I’ll teach her today after we sleep off this bittersweet hangover.

Elodie  
Ten Years Later

The god-like trees that arch in the sky like pillars grew like wildflowers in the glades. Beneath their immense canopies, my own forest of pine trees forged their way in here.

It's a beautiful, magical blessing.

Time is a fickle thing.

Especially to those who don't bear any debts to it. Our skin never wrinkles, our smiles only grow. The Hollows cycle the quickest—I'm already missing our sweet Brevik, though it's just for a short while. Margo's the only anchor Pine Hollow. She never wishes to leave Tomorrow as long as I'm here, it seems, and I'm happy for it.

I shall never part from her again.

The grass snaps beneath my bare feet, and cold dew sprinkles on my ankles as I walk through the dark woods, taking a deep breath and smelling the crisp pines, searching for my Cypress among them.

"Why is he so good at hiding?" North grumbles as he pushes his dark hair from his face. His expression is soft and unbothered as we seek out Wren.

I shrug. "He's good at everything, I swear to gods."

North stops, still as the trees as his black eyes focus on a space between two tall cypress trunks. He turns and looks at me adoringly, his grin dredging up all the bad things I know he's capable of.

"Through there," he whispers close to my ear and sends heat through me.

I raise a brow at him. Everyone's been acting so weird today.

First, Kastian left the bed before dawn, and Wren soon after, which is odd because neither of them have been morning people since Nesbrim was rebuilt. They love sleeping in, me cozy in the mix of them.

Rune's been trying to keep the two unruly boys in order after they accidentally caught the mansion on fire last week, but today he's really been on top of it, and North's been glued to my side since I woke up this morning.

It's nice to have this odd day break up the rest. I don't normally get to spend much time with each of them alone. Though I think North is up to something—he's *never* agreed to play hide and seek with the boys and the rest of us, so why today?

"What are you really up to?" My brows pull together with suspicion.

North's eyes glimmer like deep-sea gems. "You'll see, come on." He grabs my hand and tugs me toward the two trees. I hold my breath as an eerie sensation settles over me.

The two cypresses are taller than the rest in the forest, dark and ominous. The air between them is tinted an off-blue. We pass between them and I find myself in an open pasture of golden wheat, the tops waving in the wind and glinting with the three suns' rays. A sliver of a stream cuts through the field, leading into a clear pond that blends endlessly with the sky. Heavy rose and marigold colors wash the clouds and fireflies rise from the ground with each step we take.

Chills spread over my arms and I can't breathe.

My family stands by the pond waiting for me—both of my families.

Wren, Kastian, Rune, Felliuss, Marley, and Naminé wave cheerfully at me with bright smiles. Next to them are my mom, dad, and Aunt Maggie.

A cry leaves my lips and tears follow as I run through the golden field toward them. I jump the small stream and open my arms wide. My mother and father catch me, crying as we sink to the ground and sob. I couldn't form words if I tried, so I'm thankful they just cry too. My aunt wraps her arms around all three of us and mutters, "Oh heavens, it's so good to see you, dear."

I look over to my lovely gods. Wren has a relieved smile on his face and I have a feeling this was his doing.

"You found them?"

He kneels down and offers me his hand. I take it and wonder what he's doing.

"I found them and more." Tears prickle in the corners of his eyes and my throat tightens as he steps aside.

*"Murph."*

I run to my old friend and throw my arms around the Hollow's neck.

His black wisping fur is just as I remember, cold and haunting. He grunts as I look back at Wren.

"You found all of them." I bawl, tears spilling down my cheeks.

He rubs the back of his head and nods. Rune and Kastian have boyish grins, giddy with the happiness that bounces in the air.

North leans back against one of the cypress trees, a soft smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"North, come meet Murph and my family!" His eyes widen with discomfort but he pushes off the tree and moves

toward me anyway. The darkness once within him long washed away, his heart has found its home.

Kastian lifts Fellius on his shoulders and the young god laughs. “This is the only way I’ll ever be taller than North.” He grins from ear to ear. Rune straightens and frowns when the War God still stands taller than him too.

North wraps an arm around me and bows to my parents and aunt.

“The Rhythm is happy to meet you again.”

# 43

Arulius

Eighty years later

**T**ime.

It passes by both agonizingly slow and faster than we can bear.

But time has always been the root cause of everything, don't you think? Birth, life, rest.

Time keeps us relative.

I've had enough of it to last many lifetimes. However, life on the human side is different. Warmer and melancholic. Fleeting and fun.

I was born in Tomorrow of hate and wrath. Never to really know what a breath of air feels like in mortal lungs, that struggle to keep warm flesh alive for a lifetime.

I remember everything.

*Everything.*

An uncommon thing for the reincarnated, but I can't help but wonder if I am an exception to this rule. Since I was a false god, perhaps I was blessed—or cursed—with this small thing.

*Memory.*

I remember her—I remember all of them.

The feel of her skin and the smell of her soft dark hair. I remember the nights I held her so close that I thought we'd always be together.

But I also remember the things I've done.

The betrayal of a lifetime that I can never take back. Something I can never, for the eons I may or may not have after this human life, be able to live down.

I stare into the small circle mirror that leans against an old plaster wall, the white paint stained yellow from the cigarettes I've spent my entire life smoking, trying to speed up my own demise. Because, quite frankly, I don't want to be here anymore, without her.

Without them.

I can't help but wonder if I've given myself a bad habit as Wren did. Does he still have that stupid pink lighter? I wonder.

I close my eyes and reminisce on how the air felt between my feathers. The armor I wore and the power I held.

My eyebrows are white now, a long life worn proudly in my reflection. Wrinkles meet in the corners of my eyes and lips. My human eyes were once a light brown but are now hazy and droop.

I've lived a long full life.

I had a childhood for the first time. An ancient mind in the body of a small child was interesting. I excelled in all my classes and had many friends. I made my family proud of me during my time here. though I always felt distant, not quite right, knowing that I never truly belonged to them.

College was fun, though I never had an interest in love. My heart has forever been crushed into oblivion for one soul and no one compares to her. I dream of her often. My parents worried about me well into their old age. I hope I didn't cause them too much pain in their lives. I could never give them the family they wanted to have.

I already have one in another realm. One that I'm not sure I'll ever get to meet again, but I like to hope.

I can't help but wonder what comes next for me. I'm different from the other beings, and I'm not sure how I ended up here. The last thing I remember was falling from the heavens and watching illusions of Elodie and me in the sky, touching the clouds and smiling.

So, after I pass, will I wake up in Tomorrow? Will I dream with my friends once more or will I rest in the glades as so many others did under my wrath so long ago?

Either way, I made my peace with it long ago. No matter what happens. I will be satisfied with everything I've experienced. What more could I possibly ask for? I don't deserve half the things I've received in this life or the last. I just pray to the Goddess of Life that she will remember me.

If I can wish for anything, it will be that.

I miss my golden wings and how the sky felt under my fingertips. The way my feathers could glide through any storm. Ones that I will always miss enduring with her.

I often wonder if that boy I saw briefly at the Ascension before awakening here has flown yet. He looked just like Elodie—like all of us. It ails my mind to wonder if he will ever know my name or if I'm simply the villain of Tomorrow that will be scorned on the walls of Nesbrim.

A soft breeze wafts in through my cracked window, filling my old shack of a home with the strong scent of sage. I sit back into my maroon recliner, knees shaking with pain as I lower myself down and inhale deeply.

*Sage*—I know someone who once had this scent. Nostalgia shudders through me and goosebumps prickle the skin on my arms.

*Kastian.*

A smile curls across my chapped lips. How long has it been since I've come face to face with my old enemy? Ninety years or so... Will he recognize me in this state? I open my eyes slowly and let my weary mind take in the ethereal god before me.

He looks just as he did nearly a century ago.



His white moonlight hair covers his forehead, and his ebony horns are just as magnificent as they've always been. His blue eyes pierce through me and a smirk forms across his lips. His canines are sharp and his black wings are haunting as they slouch behind his wide frame.

Borvon. Kastian. Whatever name he goes by now, The God of Rest has finally—*finally*—come for me.

I've waited for such a long time.

“Do you remember me?” I croak, wincing at my raspy, shaky voice, hating that I'm not how I sound in my head, the way I remember.

He takes a calm step toward me, the small room almost not big enough to accommodate him. Kastian kneels before me, an old, crippled man, and gently takes my hand. His sun-kissed skin is smooth and eternal—rich with the magic of Tomorrow. My pale, elderly hand rests in his, wrinkled and speckled with liver spots and veins.

I fight the storm of tears that press my eyes. The emotions sting my heart because my time here is finally up. But what comes next?

“Arulius.” Kastian's voice rings in my ears and my lip quivers with memories of young Eostrixes fighting to the death. His eyes hold no wrath though, only kindness and pity. “I could never forget you, my old friend. *We* could never forget you.”

My teary eyes widen and I feel one spill over down my cheek. After everything I've done, he still considers me his friend.

“Will I be able to re-enter Tomorrow?”

His blue eyes flicker with amusement. “I think so, but I can't be sure until we go. Are you ready?”

I still for a moment, deciding if I've left anything undone. But I have no kids to call and say goodbye to, no animals to miss me, and my parents died long ago.

I give him a curt nod.

Kastian smiles in return, pulling my hand and helping me up.

I stand easier than I have in years, my knees without pain and my heart light. I glance behind me, and I see what I'll leave behind in this realm. An old man rests in his recliner, offset to the side like he's sleeping.

My human body and soul can rest now.

Tears threaten as I stare down at my shell. This was me. This was all I had in the human realm. I shake my head and return my gaze to the God of Death. He smiles and leads me through a black door that was not there before. Mist spills out of it and it cools my skin instantly.

Bresian, the path between.

I haven't felt its magic thrum through me since that night I killed Elodie.

My steps falter as I hesitate to follow him through. Kastian turns his head back at me and cocks it to the side.

“What's wrong?”

“If I disappear, or something happens... can you tell Elodie how sorry I am... how much I regret everything I've ever done to her. To you. To everyone.” I hang my head. There's dread in my heart. I don't know if I can face everyone again. Wren's cold words still sting my soul. What if I just disappear? Never to have fucking mattered? I crush my teeth together, drawing blood from my lip.

A hand presses firmly on my shoulder and I don't lift my head. I only let out a sigh.

“You can tell us yourself.”

But the voice isn't Kastian's.

My eyes spring open and I lift my chin swiftly, meeting honey-toned eyes. My heart fucking spills open and my entire body trembles.

“*Elodie.*”

My voice is smooth and filled with emotion, making me blink and cast a glance down at my body. I'm wearing my black uniform, the same one I died in, and my hands are youthful and eternal, glowing with Tomorrow's magic.

I'm *me* again.

My eyes lift hesitantly back to hers. We are alone in the mist that shrouds Bresian. I take endless seconds to take her in. To take in everything I've dreamed of for a lifetime.

Her dark hair waves over her olive skin, much longer than I remember it being, and she keeps a soft expression on her face. Her eyes are kind and filled with affection. She is without wings, but her features are light and she doesn't seem bothered by it.

I blink past the tears that begin to spill from my eyes.

Elodie lifts her hands to my face, cupping my cheeks softly. "I've missed you, Arulius. So many nights I've waited for the sun to rise, to bring me one day closer to you."

My heart breaks. "I've waited a life longer than I could bear to see you again, my love. I wasn't sure I'd be able to rejoin you... but the gods have blessed me." Her eyes brim with tears. We pull each other in for an embrace, and I squeeze her tightly, never wanting to let go.

"We've been waiting for you," she murmurs into my ear, her lips brushing against my skin and sending shivers down my spine.

I can't hold my emotions anymore and I begin to sob.

"You should have forgotten about me. Why... Why did you wait all this time? I never deserved to be missed and mourned. I never should've existed," I choke out.

She pulls me away and smiles at me with deep pain. "And yet, you do. I'd be lost without your existence, Arulius."

I dip down and press my lips to hers. She kisses me just as fiercely and our tears trickle down to my hand. For a moment, only one, it's as if we are in the sky once more, flying between

the clouds and finding our rain. It kisses my weary soul and mends me together again.

We pull away and she brushes her thumb under my eyes, wiping away my tears. “They’re waiting for you.” She turns and pulls my hand.

“Who’s waiting?” My chest feels lighter than it ever has before. It reminds me of the first day I woke in the Sea of Stars and Moonlight.

We step through the last of the mist and into the brightness of Tomorrow. It blinds me, making me wince and narrow my eyes, trying to see where Elodie is pointing. I raise my hand to block out the light. Was it always this bright here? My skin hums under the three suns’ rays.

Just as my eyes adjust, I see who’s here for me.

I see all of them.

The Hollows, Murph and Margo, stand next to one another with their tails wagging happily. Violet’s here and Moro too—they stand with arms wrapped around each other, smiling so warmly. Their hearts are one again.

Wren sits atop his Hollow’s back, a wicked grin playing across his face as he nods his head at me, his eyes apologetic and wiser with the years. Kastian and Rune stand near Margo’s side. Next to the Dreadius is a young boy, maybe ten, with white hair, crimson horns, pointed ears, and amethyst eyes that stare at me. The biggest smile plays on his expression and he races toward me. Marley chases after him, looking excited to see me too. Gods, the Moss Sparrow doesn’t look like he’s aged more than a year. Some souls are meant to remain young I suppose. Innocent and light.

I stop walking, I suppose from shock. Elodie’s hair twirls with the wind as she gazes back at me with a smile.

“That’s right, you haven’t met him yet. Fellius... he’s the God of Love.”

“And Hope.” A deep voice sends chills up my spine and I’m shocked to find North lingering off to the side. My blood turns cold as I recall fighting to the death with the War God.

He raises a brow at my expression and throws his head back, laughing. Wren chuckles a few times too. “That battle ended ninety years ago, my brother. I have no quarrel with you.”

Relief floods through me and my muscles relax.

I take everyone in. They’re all so calm, content, and starkly different from my time here.

Perhaps, Tomorrow can be beautiful. I’ve never felt such peace in my entire life.

This—*this* is happiness.

Fellius steps up to me. His beige wings are the spitting image of what Elodie’s once were and his amethyst eyes... It’s like looking into a fragment of my own soul.

He hugs me and murmurs, “Welcome home, father. I’ve heard many tales about you, and I’m honored to finally meet you.” My entire heart crashes into me and I hold him in my arms. He’s like a part of me melded with the others. My love, my friends.

I don’t deserve this.

“What’s wrong, Arulius?”

I glance up at Elodie, who smiles with so much fucking pride it hurts. Her gaze caresses every last feature of my face like she’s memorizing me in case I disappear again.

“Nothing’s wrong.” I try to pull myself together.

Fellius looks up at me with large purple eyes, so pure and beautiful I can’t believe he’s real.

“You could use some time in the clouds.”

I raise a brow at him and he reads my confusion immediately.

“You need the rain and the sun...” Fellius thinks momentarily like he’s lost the rest of his sentence.

“To feel alive,” Elodie coos behind us.

Fellius nods and smiles. “It will fix you right up if you’re sad.” He spreads his small wings. They are the perfect cream

color.

I glance at Elodie, eyes shifting to her back with sorrow tugging in my veins. “You lost your wings—”

Elodie smiles and spreads golden wings made of aura. They burn like the sun and are breathtaking. A goddess more beautiful than anything in the realms.

“I’ve learned a few tricks.” Her eyes flick over to North lovingly and he grins, spreading onyx bat wings made of aura as well, and flies easily into the auburn sky. She laughs and follows him, Fellius flying swiftly after her. Kastian also takes to the sky, his black wings tipped with gold carrying him higher than I ever remember being able to fly.

I watch for a moment, stretching my golden wings and wondering if I’ll be able to soar through the clouds as easily as I once did.

Wren walks up beside me and pats my back. “You know, Fellius was created by the Maker, just after you passed.” I raise a brow and the Cypress continues: “The Maker said *he was inspired by the acts of love we showed, the sacrifices we made*. And in the end, it was the boy who saved the Rhythm.” His amber eyes warm as he watches the four of them frolicking through the sky.

“I only sacrificed what I could. I owe much more.”

Wren furrows his brows and gives me a stern look. “I know this is ninety years late, but I’m sorry for what I said to you. You do belong with us, and your debts are long paid, my friend.” He clasps my shoulder.

I dip my head. “Thank you for saying that.” My chest feels light, my conscience clear, and my hopes are high.

Rune stands beside Wren and nods his head up to the sky. “Go on. That little rascal is grounded for a month for killing Greysil’s entire garden, so you better enjoy flying around with him. This is his only day pass.”

I laugh and take off into the sky. My wings are strong and carry me into the sky like I’ve yearned them to do for a

lifetime. I circle Felliis and catch Elodie in the air. She giggles and I clutch her tightly in my arms.

“*Love...* That was always the answer, wasn’t it?” I say breathlessly, pressing my lips to hers. Pine fills my senses and she laughs. My feathers are blinding as they reflect her golden light and my breath coils deep in my lungs.

Her voice is a mere whisper, yet it may as well ring through all of Tomorrow.

“Always, my love.”



The Pine Hollow Series

The End.

# Tomorrow will live on!

The Pine Hollow Series may be over, but rest assured that there will be many more stories that play out in the realm of Tomorrow. I already have a few stand alone books planned for some side characters and who knows what will come to me in the future.

For now, I will announce the title of the first stand alone of this world...

*Rhythm of the Realms*  
*-The Original Story.*

Coming 2024



# Acknowledgments

This has been such an emotional journey for me.

First I would like to thank all my readers who continue to support me and love the sad, dark stories I tell. I wouldn't be here without you and there could never be enough words to describe how grateful I am.

I'd like to thank those who've believed in my journey from the start. It's not easy being a debut author with no books under your belt. So to those who never doubted me: thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I would like to thank my arc readers. Your reviews always blow me away and reignite the fire in my heart to write. You are such a big part of the publishing process and I adore each and every one of you.

Thank you to my editor, Leanne, who pushes me to write better and stronger with each book I release. I would be lost without your insight and wisdom.

Thank you to my beta reader, Jay, for being the first trooper to read my mess of a first draft. You help me believe my story isn't a complete mess and point out things that would be fun to add!

Thank you to my proof reader, Cierra, for being so sharp-eyed and precise. I'm amazed at the smallest things you catch and know my book is all the better for it!

Thank you to my husband for convincing me to leave the corporate world and to dive head first into my dreams.

# About the Author



K. M. Moronova is a very dark-minded creature. She primarily writes dark romantasy books that are tragic and sad—often with mentally ill characters. She lives in the forests of Montana and craves adventure solely in her mind. She can be found most days drinking coffee and listening to sad songs as she dries flowers. Once the sun sets she brings out her laptop and writes all her woes away. She also has a knack for drawing an outrageous amount of fan art of her characters.