

IMMORTALS DESCENDING: BOOK THREE



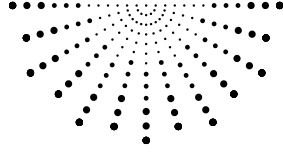
# DAYBREAK



IRIS FOXGLOVE

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IMMORTALS DESCENDING #3

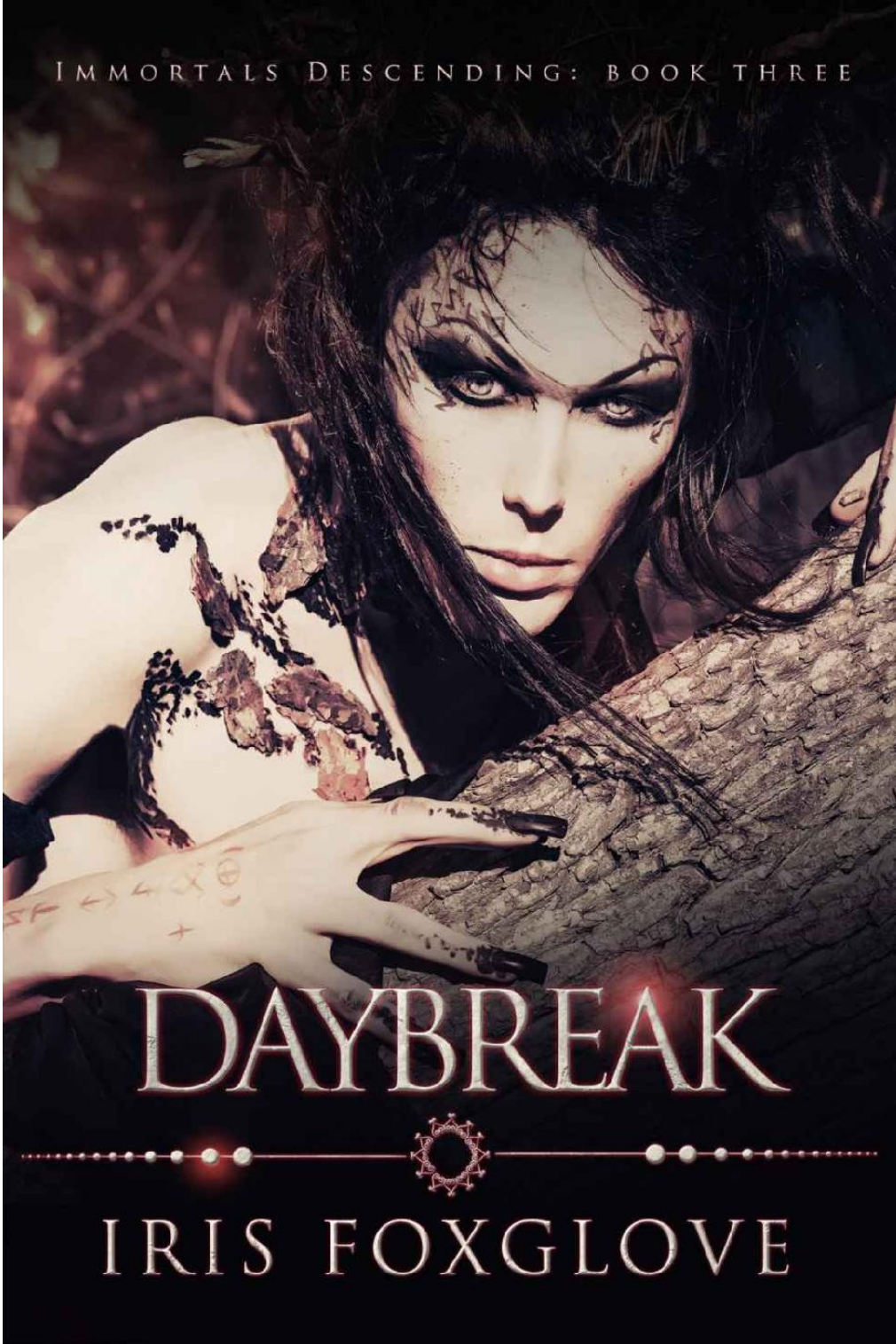


# IRIS FOXGLOVE





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## DAYBREAK (IMMORTALS DESCENDING BOOK THREE)

Cillian Aislinn is elated when he receives an invitation to dance for a renowned patron of the arts, Lady Thora, in a beautiful lakeside manor in the hills of Kallistos. But all is not as it seems at Cladach Manor. By the time Cillian discovers the horrifying truth hiding behind a glamour of luxury, it will be too late. Cursed to suffer an immortal existence without the comfort of restful sleep, Cillian becomes the leader of a nomadic troupe of dancers, seeking what joy he can in the art that he once loved. When a series of prophetic dreams lead Cillian to a forest in search of a way to banish his curse, he encounters Astra, the god of dreams, who reveals who Lady Thora really is: the corrupted former god of art, now a spirit of decay whose influence is beginning to spread into Astra's realm.

A child when he was summoned to the Dreamer's Throne, Astra has spent centuries asleep, weaving dreams in the safety of a realm he can control. But when Pallas's ire threatens his dreamers, Astra is forced to brave the waking world. With Cillian as his guide, he must find a way to defeat Pallas before her malevolence snuffs out all inspiration and art.

As they travel across Iperios, Cillian and Astra also navigate the growing attraction between them. Despite his centuries as a god, Astra knows little about mortal life, and Cillian's curse has kept him in a state of numb exhaustion. As they awaken to their mutual desire, they learn the truth of who Cillian is and why Pallas is so determined to destroy him.

Featuring a very tired immortal without a natural alignment, a brat of a dream god who has forgotten how to be human, an evil spirit with a grudge, and a wild dash across Iperios to restore the balance between art, inspiration, and dreams.

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Editor: Alicia Z. Ramos

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Poem Freydis Moon (used with permission)

*No Oath, No Spell* lyrics by Murder by Death

Art: *Dancing With the Stars* by @Natendo\_Art on Twitter (commission, used with permission)

✿ Created with Vellum

We won't be broken

There's no curse we haven't spoken

There is no oath, there is no spell

That could deliver us, make us well

Murder by Death *No Oath, No Spell*



*Iris would like to dedicate this book to her mom, who always encouraged her to follow her dreams, while chasing away the bad ones. Thanks Mama, for everything, always <3 The forsythia is in bloom!*

*We'd like to thank our editor, Alicia Z. Ramos, our cover designer, Garrett Leigh at Black Jazz Designs, our PA Kim Licki, and Freydis Moon for the poem that accompanies this novel.*

*Thanks also to Night, for "null-aligned" as a title for Cillian's lack of natural alignment.*

*Thank you also to our first readers; Justy and Rinnie Lazarowski. We appreciate you!*

*Thanks to Natendo\_Art on Twitter for the beautiful scene of Astra and Cillian dancing in the dreamscape that appears in this novel.*

*Thank you also to our patrons for your generous support!*

## A NOTE TO READERS

Please be advised that the biological kink imperative/natural power exchange dynamic in this title is not intended to be a factual representation of BDSM as practiced by consenting adults in real life, nor should it be considered a guide to any activity contained herein. The biokink dynamics depicted in this story are fictional, and are not meant to be realistic outside of the fantasy setting in which they appear.

Content Warnings for this title include: depictions/discussions of insomnia, mild references to substance abuse, mild references to torture/violence, grief/loss, minor character death, mild body horror, horror/dream gothic imagery and graphic on page sexual situations and kink.

This title is intended for adults.

Thank you for reading!

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Also by Iris Foxglove

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## DAYBREAK

the waking hours are a waste  
why tear through the fabric between *when* and *how*  
when you                      are here  
when i am strung in the pitch where light ignites at  
your fingertips  
where color bends to  
your bidding  
where reality shifts for  
your smile

i will wrap myself in the satin backdrop of your  
mind

richly spun and woven with ease                      my feet  
on

floorboards shaped like

starlight

oh, how fortunate

oh, how stunning

oh, how nightmarish

from the mouth of a waking hour                      envious  
of what

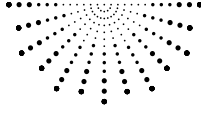
you've      made

jealous of what

i've          found

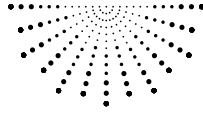
**freydís ☽**

# PART I



*The Moon*

## CHAPTER ONE



**C**illian Aislinn was a *sensation*.

When he danced, the audience would fall silent as if spelled ... and then some would weep, some would laugh, but by the end, all would applaud so loudly it sounded like a thunderstorm breaking overhead. One woman swore that when he danced the “Weaver’s Veil,” she felt again as she had the day she married her true love. One man declared it was his son’s untimely death by drowning that he felt like a newly woken ache, and another spoke to any who would listen about how Cillian’s dance made them remember the first time they saw the sea—the wonder and the beauty of it, so great that they cried from sheer delight and awe.

Cillian never knew what strange magic gave him the ability to pull so much emotion from those who watched him dance, but he couldn’t say he was sorry about it. It was the reason he’d been summoned to Cladach Manor, a sprawling estate nestled in the hills of Kallistos that overlooked a sparkling mountain lake. Lady Thora was well-known for her support of artists who met her rigorous standards, but so far, every dancer who’d performed for her had been sent away after one night with a cool kiss to the cheek and a “Thank you for coming, darling.” None had ever been invited back.

Cillian was determined to be the first dancer to win her patronage, and when the invitation came—his name inked in perfect calligraphy—he smiled, thinking, *If I can charm her into letting me stay at least a week, I’ll sell out every performance for the rest of my life.*



Cillian was Kallistoi, but he'd never been to Cladach Manor. Like most Kallistoi, he was superstitious, and there was a crumbling ruin of unknown origin at the base of the hills, a place the locals swore up and down was haunted. Cillian's best friend's sister claimed she'd been foraging for wild mushrooms near it and heard music, and Cillian's uncle said he'd seen a ghostly man there, dressed all in black, with long white hair. But Cillian's uncle was drunk more often than he was sober, and his friend's sister might have made up a story to hide that she hadn't been foraging as much as idling the day away with the baker's daughter.

Either way, Cladach Manor was up a winding hill that could be treacherous in bad weather, and in Kallistos, bad weather could spring up at any time, turning a beautiful day stormy and cold without warning. More than one cart had been washed down the path, usually carrying some artisan seeking Lady Thora's favor *without* the benefit of an invitation.

But the late-spring sun was shining as Cillian leaned back in a carriage that was far more luxurious than the ones he usually took around Kallistos and Thalassa. This one had been sent by Lady Thora herself, and it had velvet seats, sparkling wood that smelled of citrus polish, and even a little jar of sugared orange slices and rich, dark chocolates, paired with a sweet, bubbly wine. Cillian smiled at the lap blanket he'd been given, a soft fur in pure white, and sipped his wine, nibbling on the sweets. As the carriage made its way past trees and hints of a sweeping vista, he could see the edges of the ancient ruin just down the hill, growing smaller and smaller as the carriage climbed higher.

He wondered if Lady Thora knew what it was, the ruin. Or what it used to be. He couldn't quite remember when she'd moved into Cladach Manor, and if he thought about it, he didn't know when he'd first heard of the manor itself. Considering he'd grown up nearby, that was odd. But the concerns slid away as he heard the driver humming some unfamiliar melody, and he found himself reaching for another sweetmeat, imagining the dance he'd perform for Lady Thora.

He must have drifted off, because suddenly the carriage didn't seem so nice anymore. The velvet was torn and stained, the wood chipped and dull, and the driver wasn't a man at all but a puppet dressed like a court jester, guiding horses made of nothing but bone. The little glass jar of candies was cracked, and there was mold on the chocolate, and the fur blanket on his lap was matted and rough like it'd been pulled off a rabbit without being cleaned.

The driver's song sounded wrong, too: flat and almost sinister where before it had been jaunty and light. But then the carriage wheel must have hit a stone, because the whole thing jostled and Cillian jerked back to full awareness. The carriage was the same as it had been when he got in, with the plush velvet seats and the chocolate, and the driver was just a driver, whistling a cheerful tune.

Cillian sighed. Maybe the dream had been about his fear that this wouldn't work, that Lady Thora would simply applaud politely and turn aside, sending him on his way without her patronage. That had to be it, right, drifting off and seeing ruin instead of opportunity? Which was ridiculous, if he thought about it—he knew he could dance. That wasn't a question. If Lady Thora didn't enjoy his dancing, she didn't enjoy *any* dancing. It was as simple as that.

Cladach Manor was a beautiful home, with sparkling windows looking out on the crystal-clear lake, wide columns, and whitewashed stone that made it look like a diamond amidst the green and blue of the landscape. The landscaped yard featured hedges trimmed into fanciful shapes, stone pathways, and an ornate fountain with nymphs frolicking in a constant spray of water. The interior was equally impressive, with marble floors and wide doorways, silk curtains, statues tucked into nooks, and artwork on the walls. Cillian was shown to a luxurious west-facing suite with floor-to-ceiling windows, a lake view, and his own private patio with a charming wrought iron table and chairs. The bed was piled with furs and pillows, and an adjoining bathing room boasted a sunken tub and a waterfall.

“Lady Thora apologizes for not meeting you, but she says she’ll see you this evening,” the servant told him. There was something familiar about her features, a tilt to her eyes, maybe, that made him wonder if she was related to the carriage driver.

“Please enjoy the amenities and relax until dinner.” The servant bowed. “It will be served at half past six in the east dining room. Lady Thora apologizes that she won’t be able to join you, but others will be there, and she promises they are charming and agreeable company. If you’d prefer to eat in your rooms, simply let me know what you’d like, and it will be brought to you.”

Cillian was used to dancing for dignitaries and nobles who considered it beneath them to dine with the entertainment, and he didn’t mind holding on to his mystique a bit when it came to meeting the lady of the house. But it wouldn’t be a bad idea to meet anyone else who might be trying to impress Lady Thora, would it?

He indulged in a nice long bath and a nap, reveling in the feeling of silky sheets on clean, bare skin. Luckily, the dream lord didn’t send him dreams of decay and ruin—indeed, he slept so deeply that he didn’t dream at all. When he woke, he found his belongings had been neatly put away in the dressing room.

“Must be nice to be so wealthy.” Cillian padded over to his dancer’s bag and set it aside as he began to dress, choosing a pair of loose silk trousers that gathered at the ankles and a sash of midnight blue to wrap around his waist. He wore his hair in the traditional style of a Kallistoi dancer, woven with ribbons in a lovely teal that matched his eyes. He stretched his muscles a bit to warm them, then slipped sandals onto his feet and tied the soft leather laces up his calves. His scarves he kept in a bag with a strap that went across his chest. He’d heard other dancers claim that the scarves were spelled, and that was why people cried when he danced—or laughed, or did both, one after the other.

Lesser dancers who were jealous, that was all. Cillian’s talent was his own, and the scarves were ordinary things of

tulle or silk, some edged with bells, some feathers, some lined in velvet. They had no magic other than what he gave to them. For tonight he selected several transparent scarves in shades of green and blue—he thought that would look nice with the lake and the green hills. These scarves didn't have bells, nor did he pick the sash with the tinkling decorations or the pair of pants with bells sewn into the ankle hems.

For some reason, when he'd thought of his dance for tonight, for Lady Thora ... he kept getting the impression of *silence*, like the water of the lake under the moonlight. Of secrets, like the ruins near the river in the valley below.

The home was grand, beautiful, and quiet in a way that felt almost oppressive. It reminded him of his dream in the carriage: the moldy chocolate, the matted fur stained with old blood. A prickling of unease went up his spine, but before he could think about it too much, he found the dining room and the other guests.

They rose to greet him and introduced themselves: a painter, a weaver, a musician, and a sculptor. He was the only dancer, which was lovely. He noticed that everyone but the woman named Carys—the violinist—resembled the servant who'd shown him to his room *and* the carriage driver. They all had the same smile and similar mannerisms, and as Cillian took his place at the table, they seemed to move as pieces of a well-oiled automaton, as if they were—

“Don't,” a voice said softly, and Cillian blinked and turned.

“I'm sorry?”

“You were staring,” Carys said into the glass of wine she'd raised to her lips. “At them.”

Cillian realized that he had been. “I was only wondering \_\_\_”

“Don't,” she said again, firmer this time. Dominance threaded her tone, though it did nothing for him, because Cillian was one of those extremely rare individuals who had never manifested an alignment. Perhaps he wasn't meant to

have one because dance had aspects of both: the music to which his body submitted, the audience who wept as if by his command.

What was natural dominance or submission to that?

“So you’re the dancer?” The painter, whose name Cillian didn’t know, smiled at him. Next to him, a woman smiled, too.

“I am,” Cillian said. “And you paint.”

“I’m a sculptor,” said the woman.

“And I weave,” said the man on Cillian’s other side, in a perfect rhythm that maybe wouldn’t have been so evident to anyone who wasn’t a dancer, for whom rhythm ran alongside the blood in his veins.

Cillian noticed, and it was clear that Carys noticed, too. But he smiled politely and said nothing, merely ate the food that was placed before him and tried not to feel as if he were in the audience at a puppet show, watching something scripted playing out before him.

A performance, but not the kind he’d expected to see.

Luckily, the last course was served before long, and after that, one by one, the others stood up and took their leave: first the painter, then the sculptor, then the weaver. Once they were alone, Carys looked at him for several seconds before asking, “Can you leave? Do you have to dance for her?”

“Why would I leave? They say if she chooses to be your patron—”

“Who says?” Carys demanded. “Who says that good things will happen if she chooses you? Because I ... I heard that, too. I heard it, but somehow, I don’t know who I heard it from.”

Cillian stared at her. “She’s a well-known patron of the arts, and—”

“Is she?” Carys asked pointedly. She took a deep breath and put her glass down. “I can’t remember who told me about her, and I’ve never met anyone who’s come here and earned her favor. I’ve only heard of people who *haven’t*.”

“Well, then maybe no one has,” Cillian pointed out. “And we’re just the next two who are here to try.”

She smiled, but there was no warmth in it. “Two? What about the others who were at dinner? Did you even catch their names?”

His breath caught as he realized she was right. He’d thought of himself and Carys as visitors and the rest as ... permanent residents, but he couldn’t explain why. The servant hadn’t called them guests, had she? Why couldn’t he remember?

“I do think Lady Thora is looking for someone,” Carys said, pushing away from the table. “But I don’t think it has anything to do with being their patron.”

“What does she want, then?” Cillian, too, stood up. He wasn’t inclined to finish his dessert, unable to erase the image of mold-covered chocolate from his mind.

“I don’t know. But if I were you, I’d be careful.” Carys raked her hair out of her face.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Cillian said, slowly, while his thoughts raced. “But if you’re so worried, why are you still here?” He wondered if this was some trick, if she knew that Lady Thora would only be offering patronage to one of them. If she was trying to make him doubt himself or leave before he ever danced a step.

“Because every time I decide to leave, I pack my clothes and my violin, and then when I try to find the carriage driver, or a servant, or one of the other artists ... I can’t. I can’t find Lady Thora. I walk the halls of this house like a ghost with no one to see me. When I go back to my suite, my things are put neatly away, and my violin is out and perfectly tuned and waiting for me to play it. So I have dinner with artists whose names I can’t ever remember, and I watch dancers come in, one after the other, and I play for them in a room I can’t find later, and the dancer is always gone in the morning. And then it starts all over—and Cillian, I don’t know how long I’ve been here. If I think too hard about it, I realize I don’t remember where I’m from, or how I got here at all.”

Cillian didn't know what to say. On the one hand, some things about this place were strange if he thought about them too hard—how he'd lived nearby his whole life but didn't remember when Lady Thora took up residence in Cladach Manor ... or even when the manor was built, because wasn't this just a lake with space to camp or have a picnic during the day? And *did* he remember the names of the other artists?

Did they even *have* names?

A chill washed over him, but before he could grab Carys's hand and pull her out of the house and into the growing dark ...

A voice rang out, warm and inviting, chiming like a bell through the hushed quiet beyond the empty dining room. "Darlings, do come join me! I'm so looking forward to the performance!"

Cillian glanced at Carys, but she was moving toward the door as if she had no other choice ... as if something were pulling her strings, leading her onward.

Cillian followed.

By the time he'd joined her in the reception room, he'd forgotten all about her strange words and her warning, and they became just another uneasy thread, a cobweb like the dream he'd had earlier, fading away.

Lady Thora was a beautiful woman of indeterminate age with hair that was a striking blend of crimson, bright golden-blond, and a shade of black so deep it looked blue in the magelights strung up behind her chair. Her eyes fairly sparkled, shifting colors that were impossible to define. She was draped in a simple gown of pure white, with a rope belt of gold braid like some Katoikos senator, and unadorned apart from a spray of pure-white roses woven into her hair like a crown.

The room was, Cillian assumed, a ballroom, with Lady Thora the only one who'd taken up a place on the stage, framed by the lights like an actress delivering her lines. Other



spectators sat in chairs on the side of the floor where Cillian stood, and up near the stage was Carys, holding her violin.

“I am so happy you are here,” Lady Thora said warmly, smiling at him. “You’ve simply no notion how thrilled I am to see the famed Cillian Aislinn dance, and just for me! What an honor. Truly, I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to come here.”

*Did I?* Cillian felt the soft throb of fear like a heartbeat, but the thought fluttered away like the unsettling dinner. “I am honored to have the opportunity to dance for you, Lady Thora,” he said, bowing neatly. “It is always a pleasure to perform for one who loves art as you do.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice echoing, making him wonder just how cavernous this poorly lit room was. The space behind Lady Thora’s chair seemed like a maw, dark and open, waiting. “I am always thrilled to welcome those who know the value of art, who strive for perfection. Tales of you have reached me from as far away as Staria, and I had no notion those barbarians knew enough of art to recognize it at all.”

Cillian thought of the fields of wheat that he’d seen on his one trip across the mountain range to the western continent; the little towns and villages where they welcomed him and his fellow dancers with smiles and wreaths, where they clapped and sang folk songs that he didn’t know the words to but could dance to all the same. He didn’t say that, though, merely smiled at her and bowed again, pressing a hand briefly to his heart. “They know a different kind of art. They’re learning, my lady.”

“Perhaps they are. But I’m pleased to welcome you, all the same. The accommodations are to your liking?”

“They are beautiful.” Cillian almost mentioned something about how he was from a village not far from here—but what would a noblewoman care about that? He was here to entertain, not to bore her with a tale of a village boy born with a love of dance so intense, he was doing it before he knew how to walk.

“And is it true,” she continued, leaning forward as if sharing a delicious secret, “that you do not need music to perform?”

“I, ah.” Cillian opened his hands in acknowledgment. “I do not. I can count the beat in my head as I move, that is true.” He’d been a junior dancer in a traveling troupe—the youngest, at the age of eleven—before he’d learned that wasn’t true for every dancer. “But as you know, my lady, dance is nowhere near as lovely without the music that inspires it.” Those weren’t simply pretty words meant to flatter and charm. Cillian loved music almost as much as he loved dancing.

Her laugh sounded like the bells on the scarves he hadn’t chosen to wear. “Indeed. I’ve *also* heard that you can dance to any music, whether you have heard it before or not. Is that true as well?”

Cillian nodded. “Yes, my lady. All music has rhythm, and when you find it, you can dance to it.”

“Then I should like to see that for myself. Carys, darling, by now you know the song I want you to play, hmm?”

“Yes, of course, Lady Thora.”

Cillian startled; he’d forgotten she was there, Carys. But now he saw she was staring at him, something wild on her face, in her eyes.

“I’ll need but a moment to prepare,” Cillian said, and Lady Thora waved a hand.

Cillian didn’t need to do much to get ready for his dance. While Carys tuned her violin, he was acutely aware of Lady Thora staring at him, and he had the unsettling feeling that it wasn’t just his companions from dinner who were watching but that there were ... others, in the dark. Focused on him even if Cillian couldn’t see them.

The servants, he decided, as he took off his sandals and removed the bag from across his chest. They were probably told to stay out of the way, in the shadows. There were more of them, he imagined; there had to be—Lady Thora couldn’t live in this opulent manor with only a house servant and a carriage

driver. Yes, that's probably who it was, peering at him from the dark. Eyes unblinking, still and staring ...

Cillian shook out his scarves and went to stand before the stage again. "Whenever you would like to begin, my lady. Carys."

Lady Thora smiled and clapped her hands.

There was a moment of quiet as Cillian drew in a deep breath, and then the first notes of a song filled the room. It was not one he'd heard before, but he began to move slow and easy, teasing out the rhythm, discovering its secrets. It was a strange melody, and the arrangement felt ... old, somehow, like it belonged to a different place, a different time. As if it should be played on an entirely different instrument. Something older than the violin.

Cillian let himself fall into the music, like a submissive going to their knees for a dominant. It was a thrill to perform to a piece he'd never heard, and for a few beats he was simply finding the music like a wave he could ride safely to shore.

The rhythm of this particular song made Cillian think of the people of the desert country, the Arkoudai, who stomped and sang in sharp, pointed chants when they marched to war. But there was something almost mournful about the tune, though he did not know if that was the way it was supposed to be, or if it was Carys adding her own emotions to the piece.

Then he began to use his veils. This was the part of the dance that usually made his audience weep and remember something powerful—whatever drove them the way the music drove Cillian.

And that's when he saw it.

The artists who watched from the sidelines ... his glimpses of them through the translucent fabric made them look strange, their expressions wooden—and no, wait, that wasn't ... that wasn't merely their expressions. They *were* wooden: stiff things with painted eyes and slashes of red for blank, smiling mouths, and were those *strings* on their wrists?

And so many of them. Three, four, *five* rows deep ... all the same, identical blank faces staring, staring, empty as glass

---

Cillian twisted and leapt with the music, and he couldn't help but look through the fabric again.

The ballroom was softly illuminated by the magelights, but it was falling apart. Gone were the beautiful polished floors—beneath him, the wood was cracked and split, and the pillars surrounding the dance floor were trees. In fact, the entire manor seemed to be nothing but plaster, cracked stone, and rotted wood.

And on the stage sat Lady Thora.

Her hair was not a *mélange* of rich color but muddled like dirty paint water, lank and hanging in a face that looked like a blur of pigments smeared over a canvas, or a pencil sketch erased one too many times, or clay whose unsatisfied sculptor had dragged irritated fingers over features they didn't think good enough to keep. Her chiton was made of torn rags, filthy and stained. Her eyes were flat and dull, and her mouth twisted into a sneer as she watched him.

When the veils fluttered away, she was smiling sweetly, tears sparkling on her lovely features.

When he looked through the scarves, she was not smiling—she was *snarling*.

And that was when he understood. He wasn't seeing some hallucination. This wasn't a dream or a fear of failure on his part. The lie was everything around him: the puppet people with their blank faces and wooden bodies wrapped in the strings that moved them, the beautiful house that was nothing but a shell of something else, the woman on the throne who was not a woman at all but a husk of a thing, rabid and malicious, radiating displeasure and malevolence with each note of the violin, Cillian's every leap and twirl. She sat not on a chair but in a mess of twigs and mud and branches, moss-covered and smelling like rotted earth.

Her fingers were twined around dirty strings that led to a jester puppet, which sat beside her, and she was making it jerk and clap as if it were watching.

And he could see, when he looked at Carys, that while she, like him, was a living person ... shadows of the same strings were starting to form at her wrists, on the fingers that flew over the neck of her violin.

This was the truth. Everything else, what he saw without his dance and the veils, *that* was the lie.

*You are in danger here.*

Cillian finished his dance on his knees, with his back arched and his head on the floor behind him, body bent into an impossible shape. One arm was outstretched, and the hand holding the veils was on his chest, the single red scarf he'd tucked into the others spilling out like blood.

Cillian lay there as the music faded, hearing wooden applause, Carys weeping softly, the dying notes of the violin, his own breathing ... and Lady Thora, screeching like an untrained bow over strings painfully out of tune.

And then the sounds were gone, and Cillian was on his feet, bowing to a smiling woman and trying not to turn on his heel and *run*.

“That was simply beautiful, darling. I can see why your talent is celebrated,” Lady Thora said warmly, but Cillian could hear that shrill, angry *other* beneath her words, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose as a chill trickled down his spine.

“I am happy you think so, my lady,” Cillian said, bowing, schooling his features as best he could into a mask of polite appreciation. “Dancing for you was truly an honor.”

He wondered whether she could tell that he'd seen the truth of her, and decided that it didn't matter. He would leave here tonight either way. Carys had said she couldn't find anyone to take her in the carriage when *she* tried ... but he'd do it somehow. He'd grown up here, knew these hills like he

knew the steps of his first dance, and he didn't need a fucking carriage.

Cillian went through the usual pleasantries as he tied the straps of his sandals and shoved his scarves back in his bag. He plastered a smile on his face as he faced the throne again, trying not to think of the chocolates covered in mold, the artists who were puppets and who had probably once been people—*like Carys*—and what it would mean for him if he couldn't leave.

Whatever Lady Thora was, he now knew the truth Carys had tried to tell him. Carys, who was putting her violin away, pointedly not looking at him.

“That was quite exciting. I look forward to discussing your talents and how I can support you, tomorrow. Please enjoy our hospitality for the rest of the evening, won't you?” Lady Thora rose from her seat, and all Cillian could think of was the strange jester puppet that had been beside her but now was nowhere to be found.

She swept off, and Cillian headed through the darkened ballroom, trying not to wince when the house servant—a *wooden puppet*—came over with a placid smile and blank-eyed expression to show him the way back to his suite.

*Were you a person, once? Did you have hopes and dreams of your own? Or have you always been this vacant thing, no more than a puppet to dance on her strings?*

“I'm so sorry, but I can't remember if you gave me your name,” Cillian said.

The servant didn't falter, merely kept walking, passing rooms that Cillian knew without looking were empty shells of plaster and stone. “Oh, it's all right. You don't need it. If you desire anything, just let me know.”

“I'd really like to be able to call you by name.” Cillian reached out to touch the servant's shoulder. “Please.”

Beneath his hand, the servant's body felt not like flesh, but wood.

The servant turned, slowly, and Cillian dropped his hand. “I don’t have one anymore,” the servant said, with that same meaningless smile. “It’s so much better this way. Breakfast is at nine, in the east salon. Is there anything else you need?”

Cillian almost said, *A carriage back home*, but he knew better than to even suggest he wouldn’t be there in the morning. “No, that’s all. Nine in the east salon. Thank you.”

The servant turned. For just a moment, Cillian thought he saw ... something, perhaps a flash behind the eyes, some hint of a *person* there beneath the wooden expression. “We all enjoyed your dancing,” the servant said softly. “Well. Not all of us. One of us *hated* it.” She looked confused, head tilted unnaturally, but then she smiled again and let him be.

Cillian grabbed his hair, breathing shallowly, looking wildly around his room.

*One of us hated it.*

There was little he needed to take with him—nothing, really. But remembering what he’d seen while dancing, he knew he couldn’t leave. Not yet. Not while Carys—

*She had them, too. The strings on her wrists. Maybe they weren’t as fully formed as the others’, but they were there.*

Before he could start to pack his traveling case—or decide if he should even bother—he heard footsteps in the hall. The door opened, and Cillian went tense with apprehension until he realized it was Carys.

“I should have listened to you,” he said as she glanced over her shoulder and pulled the door closed behind her. “I’m sorry.”

“We don’t have time for that. You need to leave. *Now.*”

“I know.” Cillian raked hands through his hair, making up his mind that whatever he’d brought with him, it could stay here. Let it rot with everything else in this place. “We don’t need a carriage. I grew up here; I know how to get back down to the valley—”



She put a hand on his arm. “Cillian. What did you see? When you were dancing, I— The look on your face. You realized something.”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Cillian said, grabbing her hand to pull her to the door, but he stopped when he heard her sob. Worried he’d hurt her in his haste, he turned back. “I’m sorry, I am, but I think we should go—”

“Tell me what you saw, and I’ll tell you if I can go with you or not.”

“The—the others, the ones we had dinner with. I think they were people, once. Real people, like you and me. But they had ... strings, like puppets. The ... Lady Thora. She was ...” Cillian shuddered, unsure how to describe her.

“What did you see when you looked at *me*?”

He didn’t want to say, but he knew he had to. The longer they tarried here, the less chance they would have to escape before daylight.

*If we even can escape.* He shoved that worrying thought aside and said softly, “You have some of the—strings. Not many. Only a few. But they’re there.”

“I thought so.” She lifted her hands, staring at them. “When I play, I can feel them. The song she had me play for you to dance to? It’s nothing I’ve ever heard before. I think it’s old, ancient. I don’t think it’s supposed to be played on a violin. And yet I ... knew it perfectly. Like I’d played it all my life.” She swallowed, hard, looking bereft. Then she straightened her shoulders and nodded. “You need to go. I think that’s why I can’t—the strings. But you won’t have them yet. It’s only the first day.”

The urge to turn and run out the patio doors was strong, but Cillian didn’t want to leave her. “But maybe, if you’re with me—”

Then they both heard the door opening. Carys turned white, and Cillian had half a second to think of what to do. There wasn’t time for her to hide, so instead he slid into a cheerful voice and said, “Maybe we could try and choreograph

something. I'd love to do a dance to a traditional Arkoudai war march, but I've never met anyone who can transpose music like that to the violin."

She stared at him, but then said, "Yes, of course. I've heard some of it."

"There you are," Lady Thora said, swanning in, looking lovely in a deep blue dressing gown painted with bright red flowers, her thick, multihued hair in an elegant braid draped over one shoulder. "Oh, Carys. Lovely playing tonight."

Carys wasn't as good at hiding her emotions as Cillian, but she managed a weak smile. "Thank you. I was just speaking with Cillian about what music he would like to dance to."

"And here I thought he could dance to anything," Lady Thora trilled, but there was something calculating in her expression as she glanced between them.

Cillian bowed. "Of course. Carys was only asking if I had a particular favorite, or something I'd like to try. I've always wanted to dance to an Arkoudai war chant."

"That isn't music, darling, that's ... brutality to a beat."

Cillian gave a careless shrug, but inside he was screaming. He should be running for his life, not arguing with this *thing* about musical styles. "Music—and dance, for that matter—are born from many things, my lady. War is one of them. Death is another."

Lady Thora met his gaze, and Cillian couldn't help but see the edges of the sickly, wraithlike thing she really was beneath her lovely smile and fashionable appearance. "I'm well aware. The song Carys played so wonderfully, that you danced to, tonight? It was an old tune from the Iperian empire. They played it to ward off pestilence, it was said."

"The empire fell," Cillian said flatly. "So maybe it didn't work."

"It wasn't disease that did them in, darling. It was something else." Her smile was brittle. How had he missed it, before, when he'd thought her beautiful?

“War, then?” He had no idea why he was having this conversation with her at all. He should be politely wishing her a good evening, yawning, trying to get her to *leave* so he could make an escape. Instead, he was debating the end of an empire that fell hundreds of years ago, leaving barely a trace of its existence.

“Love, as it happens. But War followed and then the Tempest, with Death at their heels as always. Nothing mortal endures enough to achieve perfection, little dancer. Never forget that.” She kept staring at him. “Carys, if you would be so good as to give us a moment?”

Carys, without a word, left the room. Cillian didn’t want to take his eyes off Lady Thora, so he didn’t turn to see Carys go, but he *did* notice the way she moved: jerky and stiff, unnatural.

Lady Thora waited until the door closed behind Carys, and then her smile faded. “I’ve been looking for you for quite a while, you know. I’d almost given up. I didn’t expect it to be you, to be honest. I thought you’d be a pleasant diversion for a bit, nothing more.”

Cillian blinked. “I— You brought me here to dance and didn’t expect me to be any good at it?”

“That isn’t why I brought you here, Cillian.” She reached down and pulled the sash of her robe, and Cillian stood there, caught like a rabbit before a snake as she shrugged it off her shoulders. “Perhaps I was simply in need of a handsome young man to entertain me.”

Her body was beautiful as a sculpture—or it should have been. But it was as if once he’d seen the truth of her, and this place, the illusion wasn’t strong enough to hold. Because her hair looked like the muddy paint water again, and her skin was dry and cracked, her cheeks gaunt. Each flash lasted only a moment, but they came again and again as she moved closer, so that by the time she wrapped her arms around him, he could smell the rot of her, the decay beneath her sickly-sweet perfume.

*That song didn’t repel pestilence. I think it summoned it.*

“Lady Thora,” he began, struggling to control his revulsion and behave as if she truly were the beautiful woman she was pretending to be. “I am, ah. Not inclined toward women that way.”

She laughed. “No? And here I thought that was why Carys was in your room. Never say she was really asking you about your musical preferences.”

“She was, and if she’d offered more, I would have told *her* no, too.” He could barely breathe; the stench was too much, and there was something ... dripping ... from her hands, down the back of his neck. “I—you might have noticed, my lady, but I do not have a natural alignment.”

“I did notice,” the thing purred, and even her voice was shifting now, like a piano out of tune. “But that’s all right. You don’t need to kneel to enjoy me, Cillian.”

The rot scent was so strong now, he was afraid he was going to be sick. When she leaned in as if to kiss him, he felt bile rise in the back of his throat and quickly pushed her away, turning from her as if embarrassed and breathing shallowly.

Cillian was a dancer. He knew how to use his body to convey a story, but he had no idea if he could do the same with his words. He was no bard, no actor, but he tried to infuse his voice with regret when he said, “You’re so very tempting, Lady Thora, but I regretfully ... am promised to another.”

A pause—and then the thing that was behind him started to laugh. It made Cillian desperate to turn around, even if he didn’t want to. He wasn’t sure what was worse: seeing it, or imagining it.

“You can stop pretending. We both know you can see me.”

And with that, the illusion fell away. Cillian saw that while the ballroom had been made of something earthy and rotten, this was, at least, a real structure. The polished floors were gone, though. The walls were drab stone with discolored spaces where paintings used to be, and the furniture was old and rough. The bathing room was just a simple copper tub, and he could feel a breeze, meaning that there wasn’t even a door

leading out to the patio, only a space where a door should have been.

He turned around, and there she was—the wraith-woman, snarling at him, eyes black pits in a decaying face. While Cillian knew it was better to face the truth, he almost wished he could go back to the pretty fantasy.

“As I said, I have been looking for you for quite some time. And here you are.”

“Why?” Cillian asked, swallowing his fear. “You wanted a dancer to add to your set?”

She—*it*—laughed, and Cillian couldn’t hide his wince. “Oh, no. It’s not that. But I’m not going to tell you, Cillian. Then you’d know, and I’d prefer that you didn’t.”

“Let her go,” Cillian said. “Carys. If you want a dancer so badly, let her go, and I’ll stay.”

She laughed again, wild and high, and it felt like something shattered in his eardrums. “How *noble*. Not yet tainted by the world, are you? So willing to offer yourself in her place.” She shook her head. “It’s too late for Carys. It’s always been too late for her. She’ll serve me as the others do. She’s slept here, and in dreams I have bound her. You’ve slept here, too. But your dreams were locked to me. They won’t be, after this.”

“What?” Cillian stared at her. “Are you some ghost, then? A spirit I wronged somehow?”

“Oh, no. You’ve done nothing but be what you are, I’m afraid. I have all the answers, Cillian, to every question you’ve ever had. Why you dance the way you do. How music bends a knee to you, as a submissive kneels for a dominant. And I could give you those answers, if you stayed. But I don’t want you here. I don’t want you anywhere near me.”

“Then—I can go?” Cillian had heard enough stories about vengeful spirits to know that it was never quite so easy. “Just like that?”

“You can go,” the wraith said. “It was never about keeping you here.”

“Then what is it about?” Cillian demanded. “Tell me that, at least.”

“Certainly. It’s about making you suffer. I don’t want to enslave you. I want to *break* you.”

“*Why?*”

She studied him, and the air grew heavy, thick with the odors of rotten fruit and spoiled meat, a sick perfume that made his stomach roil again. “How’s this: I’ll tell you, *or* I’ll let you take her away with you. You may choose only one, so consider carefully. For while I am letting you leave this house tonight, I will never let you go. You cannot be bound like the others, not yet. But I can destroy you. I am the thing the tune was played to repel. I am Pestilence. I am Decay. I not only kill, I *rot*. And I am very, very patient.”

“Give me Carys, and rot away in this place for all I care,” Cillian snarled. He would figure the rest of it out later.

“I wonder if you’ll make the same choice in two, three, four hundred years. I am going to *enjoy* watching you rot from the inside out. Oh, how I have waited to see it. The only pleasure I have left is watching you suffer.”

“Fuck you,” Cillian muttered, turning toward the lake—but it wasn’t a lake, was it? It was a stagnant pond, grown over with scum and algae that trapped the sunlight, killing whatever might have once thrived there.

“Then wait here, and we shall see each other again soon. In your dreams, if you ever sleep long enough again to have one. If those dreams come, they will never be pleasant, no matter how much incense you light at my brother’s shrine or how many sweet prayers you whisper in the middle of a sleepless night.” With that, the thing turned and walked away, and the floorboards rotted beneath her steps, the sound of them snapping and breaking loud in the quiet night air.

Cillian waited, and waited ... but Carys never did come to him. Instead, he heard a shriek, the shout of his name—*Cillian!*—and the wraith, laughing, louder and louder until it was a symphony of broken notes and shrill refrains.

“You said I could take her with me!” he shouted, running through the empty house, down hallways that seemed to stretch and grow with each stride.

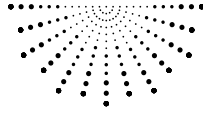
“And you will,” the wraith said, her voice coming from everywhere and nowhere. “You will take her, and the memory of her, to the grave you will one day beg me to send you. May her face haunt your dreams; may the sound of her dying be the only song you hear in the long nights you lie awake, seeking the peace of dreams you will be denied.”

She had lied. Of course. Cillian cursed as he ran through the house, which was now full of detritus, heavy furniture under dusty white sheets. He tripped twice, trying to follow the sound of the wraith humming the tune Carys had played on her violin, the one to which he’d danced himself to ruin.

He found a clearing in the woods, but it held nothing more than a jester puppet standing unnaturally in a bed of moss, holding Carys’s violin and playing a warped, twisted version of a melody—the song the carriage driver had sung, Pestilence’s refrain.

And, from somewhere close and yet impossible to find, he heard Carys begin to scream.

## CHAPTER TWO



**T**here was a man in the forest.

Astra tried telling his parents. For most of the year, he lived with them in a shepherd's hut high on a mountain overlooking the border of Staria and Arktos. It was a lonely little shack, far from the village in the foothills where they spent the winter, but Astra loved the freedom of the mountainside. He could run as fast and as far as he wanted, shouting orders to his father's dogs, Berry and Plum. They never listened, of course—like his parents, they were hard workers and didn't much care for a small boy running wildly through the fields—but he liked to imagine they would, one day.

Sometimes, his parents would put the shepherd's hut up on stubby stone wheels and push it around the mountain midway through the grazing season, and Astra would climb to the outlook above the grazing fields and gaze out at the deserts of Arktos. On those days, he would imagine falling down the mountain and being adopted by the strategos, who would make him a trusted advisor and marry him off to a prince. On his mountaintop, with the world stretched out below him like one of his mother's knitted wool blankets, Astra could go anywhere.

The only place he couldn't go was the forest.

Technically, there were forests all around, but the one on the south side of the mountain was different. The sheep refused to graze nearby, and Plum and Berry growled and snapped and backed away when they had to come close. The



trees there looked strange—darker, almost purple under their grayish bark, and their leaves were the color of wine.

Astra's father took him to the edge of that forest when he was old enough to walk around on his own. Astra's father was a lanky man with a worried face and shaggy black hair, and he didn't bother with Astra any more than Plum and Berry did. Still, he seemed to think the forest was important enough to mention.

"This forest kills people," he said, standing a few yards away from the line of ancient trees and gripping Astra by the back of his wool sweater. "See that? There, in the grass?"

Astra squinted. Something, maybe an animal, was slumped in the shadow of the trees. Someone had draped a flannel sweater over it, and bits of yellowed bones stuck out of the earth.

"Don't know his name," Astra's father said. "But he took one step into these woods, and the woods took him. Put him to sleep, and ain't nobody could get close enough to drag him out. So he died there, boy. Starved to death in his own dreams. No one survives this forest."

"What about him?" Astra had asked, pointing through the trees. Astra's father looked perturbed, clearly not expecting a question after his brief lesson.

"What about who, boy?"

"The man in the woods," Astra said, and his father followed his pointing finger toward the dark heart of the forest where a man stood, his eyes glimmering with a light of their own, watching them.

"Don't be foolish, no one's there," Astra's father said. "Come. There's work to do."

There was always work to do. Astra didn't do much of it, most days. Instead, he ran about, coming up with wild stories and adventures. He rescued princes from trees on the Starian side of the mountain. He befriended a talking owl who turned him into a shooting star for the evening. He spoke to tree sprites and crafted elaborate worlds and boundaries over every

place he could see, turning them into his own private dreamscape.

At the end of the day, he would tell his parents his stories until they inevitably interrupted to ask about boring, everyday things, like how much wool he'd spun or whether he'd gathered enough kindling while he was out. And when he inevitably disappointed them, they'd make him find a switch. Then they'd whip him soundly and dispassionately and proceed to forget about him until morning.

The man in the forest didn't forget him.

He was always there when Astra came to check on the woods. He never came any closer than the thick shadows deep in the forest, but Astra could see him clearly enough. Sometimes he'd be walking among the trees. Other times, he'd just stand there, looking out. Astra waved to him once, and he raised a hand in response, his bright eyes glimmering.

When Astra told *that* story, his father didn't bother with the switch.

That night, Astra huddled in the corner of the shepherd's hut, sucking at his cut lip and watching his parents sleep under their patchwork quilts. He didn't understand why they seemed so *frightened* of stories. They acted like Astra was spitting out spells, not telling them about made-up adventures with owls and princes. He knew he'd have to give it all up one day and become a shepherd like them, but he didn't want to, not yet. The world was so much more beautiful in his head than it was on the outside.

That's when he heard it. A soft voice called from outside the hut, low and gentle. *Astra*.

He got up. He left his parents asleep in the warm hut and walked past the sheep drowsing on the mountainside, past the dogs that were curled up when they should have been alert and watchful. The world was quiet and dark, and the voice that called to Astra came from the ancient woods full of sleeping bones.

When Astra reached the forest, he didn't hesitate. He walked into the trees, and despite the remains of those who tried to enter ringing the woods like a sunken wall, Astra didn't falter. This felt like a dream, and dreams couldn't hurt him.

The man in the forest watched Astra approach, then sank farther into the gloom. Astra kept walking. The grass turned to rich blue flowers. He knew there was a special, secret magic to them. They were sacred, and they called to him almost as much as the voice did.

He sank to his knees to touch them, and they turned their blossoms to face him. "You like me," he said, smiling.

*Astra*, the voice called. Astra got up, and the flowers bowed to him as he passed, tickling him. He lifted a fallen blossom and tucked it behind his ear, and the dark wrapped around him like a comforting embrace.

He stopped under a small dome made of curving trees. The canopy was touch-shy, here—the branches stopped just before they could join, so strands of moonlight cut through them in curtains to make wobbly lines over the grass. In the center of the clearing was a chair made of stone and covered in the magic blue flowers. A man slept there, chin resting on one hand.

He was odd-looking, with long black hair that reached his knees and a cloak with constellations sewn onto the fabric. His eyes fluttered open when Astra approached, and he smiled warmly. He leaned forward, and Astra gasped as his form shifted—and became that of a woman, the cloak molding around her to form a gown.

"Hello, child," she said. "Do you like my forest?"

"It's beautiful," Astra said. "Were you the man who waved to me?"

Her smile broadened. "Yes. I was. And it was I who gave you that lovely dream a week ago, the one about the puppy."

"Oh. I liked that one. Thank you. Does that mean you're the dream lord?" Astra watched as she shifted again, becoming

someone other than a man or a woman, but with the same long hair and cloak spangled with stars. They drew a silver coin out of the air and walked it over their fingers as they spoke.

“I am the keeper of dreams, yes. Somnus. I speak for this forest—this sacred place where dreams were first born, when a young woman slept in this grove and gave the dream world a home.”

“Why does the forest eat people?” Astra asked. “My da says it does.”

“The forest protects itself from those who would do it harm,” Somnus said. “And when it needs an avatar, I am here. But I grow tired, Astra. Even gods need their rest.”

“Oh.” Astra hadn’t thought about that. His parents didn’t believe in gods, but Astra liked to think there were thousands of them, holding dominion over flower fields and water mills. “What happens when you’re tired?”

“I find a new dream lord.” They shifted into a man’s form again. “Someone with imagination. Someone who loves dreams enough to walk through my forest unscathed. I find you, Astra.”

Astra stared up at the dream lord, heart racing. “You want to make me in charge of dreams?”

Somnus stepped down off the throne and took Astra’s hands in his. “It is time. I am old, and dream lords do not age so gracefully as other gods. We were mortals first, all of us dream keepers, and we are closer to our mortal forms than the god of death, who was also a mortal once. The forest has told me that I need a successor, and you are the one I would choose.”

“Can I look like you?” Astra asked. “Change back and forth whenever I want to?” He thought he might like that—maybe not as often as Somnus, but to see what shape fit him best. There wasn’t much room for shaping himself in the hut on the mountain.

“In dreams, you can be anything,” Somnus said.

“Will it be lonely?”

“Never.”

Astra looked over his shoulder, but the world beyond the forest was dark, and he could no longer see the mountainside. “Can I go home?”

Somnus tilted his head. “What if I told you that you would never leave this forest? That you must walk only in dreams and forget the taste of food, the warmth of the sun on your skin, the shape of your parents’ faces, the scent of flowers in spring?”

Astra thought of the summers spent running wild through the woods, the clear streams he splashed in while the sheep grazed on the other side of the mountain, the sound of birdsong and the taste of bread baked over the fire pit outside the shepherd’s hut.

“Then I’ll have to go home instead,” he said. Tears pricked his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

But Somnus didn’t seem upset. He only pushed Astra’s tangled hair out of his face. “That is the correct answer. We can never forget who we are, Astra. As the keeper of dreams, you must remember what it is to wake. That makes us unique among all the gods.”

“So I can ... I can do it?” Astra looked to the throne behind Somnus, where dappled moonlight slid over the flowers. “I’ll be the next dream lord?”

“Yes. And it will be beautiful, and wonderful, and you will find many things to love.” Somnus knelt in the grass to face him properly. “But you should know, Astra, that there are other gods in the world. One in particular you must avoid for now, until you are stronger: Pallas. Art. I thought I would be enough to save her from corruption, but she has become something new, something terrible. Perhaps one day you can do what I could not, and guide her to our brother Death’s quiet waters, but she is too powerful for you at present.”

Astra nodded. He knew art existed as a nebulous activity that other people participated in, but he didn’t think it would

be hard to avoid. His parents had lived their whole lives without art that wasn't knitting or quilting.

Somnus was petting Astra's hair, which felt nice—his parents never touched it except to shave it when the tangles got too dirty. “Then again, she may have a successor somewhere. Perhaps I should have sought them— Ah, but it is too late now. I can sense my own corruption at the edges of the forest. The trees say it is time for me to go.”

“The trees can talk?” Astra asked. He twisted around to look, wondering if the trees would sprout faces, but they were quiet save for a slight wind in the branches. When he turned back to ask what Somnus meant, the dream lord was gone. All that remained was his cloak, folded neatly on the stone chair.

Astra climbed into the chair and shook out the cloak. It was nice, but if *he* were the dream lord, it would be made of crow feathers and silk. The stars would be better off in a crown, anyway.

As he thought this, the cloak rippled, the stars peeling back and rising into the air, hovering around his brow before settling in his hair. The shoulders of the cloak bristled with glossy black feathers, and when Astra put it on, it was as soft and lovely as a cloud.

Before him, the trees of the dream forest rustled and groaned, and a chorus of ancient voices rose in the wind.

*Hail, Dream Lord.*

*Hail, Dream Lady.*

*Hail, Dream Keeper.*

Astra kicked his heels on the throne as the night air swept about him, filling him with the voices of the forest. He felt himself change, then, like breathing in deep only to find he could go deeper still, and beamed as the wind whipped his hair into his face. When the breeze settled down once more, Astra was asleep on the throne, a little god in a cloak of feathers and silk, walking in the dream world.

It was everything he'd always imagined.

Still, he remembered what Somnus had said, and after a while of dancing with nightmares and making delightful visions for unsuspecting dreamers, he jostled himself awake and slipped off the throne. His hair was no longer tangled and matted but silky soft and dotted with the stars of his crown, and his clothes were fine and black as the space between dreams. He called for one of his nightmares—Peppermint, the first one he'd made—and she flew down from the dark like an enormous crow before transforming with a whirl of starlight and shadow into the shape of a mare. Her mane curled and twisted like smoke, and she shook her head and stamped her hooves in the flowers.

*Hello, boy,* she said. Her voice sounded like an old woman's in his mind, a bit shaky and eternally bemused. *You are awake. It's funny, watching your face go all pink when you breathe. Mortals are so small and full of color.*

"I'm not really a mortal anymore, you know." Astra climbed onto her back.

*Of course you are. You are a mortal and a god. That's what it means to be the dream keeper. Where will we go?*

"Not far," Astra said. "There's a shepherd's hut nearby. It ... might have moved. I've been gone a while." He winced. "They're probably going to whip me for it."

Peppermint looked scandalized. *No one whips my boy.*

"Thanks." Astra leaned forward to kiss her head. She didn't smell like a horse, or even feel like one—it was more like he was sitting on a current of wind or water. He'd ridden her often enough that he only fell occasionally now, and she was reliable and loyal, shoving herself between him and unpleasant dreams until he was brave enough to face them. He'd made many friends in dreams, but none were as true as her.

*I will bite them if they so much as look at you disrespectfully.* She took off through the forest without another word. Astra held on tight to her mane, and while he did almost fall once or twice, he hung on until they burst through into the sunlight.

Peppermint looked less substantial in the sun, her form flickering and shifting between the image of a horse and the dream creature she truly was. She trotted across the grassy side of the mountain, and before long, Astra spotted the old shepherd's hut. It was sunken and small-looking, now, and the wheels were dug into the earth as though they hadn't been moved in a while. But Astra could hear barking, and he followed the sound until he found his parents standing beside their flock, holding—

Holding the hand of a little girl.

“Ma?” Astra's voice sounded very small in his own ears. He slipped down off Peppermint's back, and his mother turned around, stared at him, and *screamed*. Astra jumped, clutching his feathery cloak tight to his chest like a blanket, as his mother swept up the girl and his father's face went pale.

“A changeling,” his father said. “From the forest. Gale was right. Stay back, keep Lily safe.”

“Lily?” Astra stumbled forward. “Is that my *sister*?”

“Keep away from her!” his mother cried, holding the girl tight. The girl started to cry, and Astra looked from her face to his mother's, wondering if she'd ever protected *him* like that.

“It's me,” he said. “It's Astra. I was gone for a while, but I'm back. I'm *back*.”

*Boy!*

Astra only had time to register the sound of Peppermint stamping before pain struck him hard as a hammer blow, sending him reeling. He looked down at the crossbow bolt sticking out of his side, then saw his giant of a father adding another bolt to his bow.

“I'm your son,” Astra said.

“Our son is dead,” his father said. He leveled his bow not at Astra but at Peppermint, who was snarling and pawing at the earth. “And you and your demon beast can go back where you came from.”



Peppermint snapped her teeth, and Astra's father narrowed his eyes.

"Don't hurt her!" Astra shouted, and despite the bright sunlight and the weakness in his limbs, he felt the power of the dream world—of the forest—rolling through him. It rushed toward his father, and the crossbow fell from limp fingers as his father collapsed on the ground in a dead faint.

Astra's mother scrambled to her knees at his side, howling, "You monster. You *monster*."

"I didn't mean to," Astra said. Fat tears slid hot down his cheeks. He tried to remove the enchantment on his father, but he couldn't—the man had threatened the dream lord, and by association the dream world itself, and the forest would not forgive. Astra backed away as his mother scrambled for the crossbow, and he grabbed Peppermint's neck. "Take me back," he sobbed. "Take me *back*."

*I have you*, Peppermint said, curling around him, changing her shape into that of a massive bird. She flew him toward the forest, away from his mother's sobbing and his father's sleeping body, and set him down before the throne. The flowers surged around him like a wave, and when they receded, the crossbow bolt was gone and his body healed, leaving just a pockmark of a scar.

Astra wept as he climbed onto the throne. "I don't want it anymore," he said. "I don't want it."

*What don't you want, my love?* Peppermint shifted into the form of a black panther, joining him in the chair.

He wrapped his arms around her and sobbed into her beautiful fur. "I don't want the outside," he said, and his wonderful nightmare purred and lay a heavy paw over him. "I don't want it."

*Then come with me into dreams, my sweet*, Peppermint said. *I will protect you, as this forest protects you. And you will be loved and cared for and precious.*

Astra nodded, wrapping his cloak around both of them like a blanket, and cried himself to sleep on his throne in the dream

forest.

And there he stayed. There he grew, horns emerging from his glossy black hair, stars shining and fading and swirling at his brow. He forgot the taste of bread, the scents of honeysuckle and fresh dew, the warmth of the sun and the chill of autumn. He forgot the touch of a mortal hand and the faces of his parents, forgot even the words of Somnus and his warning about the former god of art. He walked in the dreams of the other gods, making a new family there. But he never walked with them in person. He never left his throne. There was enough to love in the dreaming world, where he was safe.

In the world beyond the forest, for the first time in centuries, people began to speak of a god of dreams showing himself. While other dream keepers had stayed in the shadows, Astra moved among mortal sleepers, listening to them, shaping their dreams. Temples to him appeared in Kallistos, Thalassa, and Katoikos; a small shrine was built in the northern fields of Arktos, by a man Astra took as a lover in visions for a time. He inspired his followers, and artists who no longer frequented Art's crumbling edifices slept on scented pillows in Astra's temples and walked with him in visions.

Mortals loved Astra. They left sacrifices to Death and the Tempest, asking them to stay their hands; they begged favors of Avarice and called on War to support them in their campaigns—but they saved their love for Dreams.

Then, one night, while Astra lay with a sleeping worshipper, the dreamer vanished.

He tried to find them again, sorting through the invisible pathways of his realm, but they were missing, plucked from dreams, not awake but *gone*. And there were others, too, he realized—once-bright spots of light in the starry sky of the dream world, snuffed out in one terrible instant. Astra reached for them, hundreds of them, and a wind rolled through the dream and forced his eyes open where he lay on the stone chair in the forest.

A wind howled through the woods, and the trees were *screaming*.

Visions came to him, scattered images flickering by so fast he almost couldn't grasp them: A woman with strings around her neck and wrists, pouring oil over the steps of his temple in Kallistos. A man with skin gone ashen with rot, red twine around his wrists, dying with sightless eyes and a vapid smile as a Thalassan temple burned around him. A teenager sobbing as they struck flint to light kindling in a small Katoikos shrine. The wind brought the smell of decay to mingle with the scent of the flowers on Astra's throne, and Astra heard the forest speak in its ancient chorus.

*You have brought artists to your side, Dream Keeper, and Pallas does not forgive.*

Pallas. Astra knew that name from somewhere—one of his godly siblings had mentioned her, long ago. The former god of art, so corrupted that she'd become decay and rot, the opposite of creation. What did it matter to her if he let artists sleep in his temples?

*She resents us, the forest said. Dreams. We loved her, once, as we loved the Art who came before her. But now, in her hatred of what she was and who we are to her, she will strike at the heart of dreams if you do not stop her.*

"She killed them," Astra said. "She killed my people. I'll send my followers to find her—"

*It must be you, the forest said, wind whirling around Astra's face and whipping his long black hair about. You are the dream keeper. You must leave this place, and find her, and bring her to Death.*

"How?"

*That is your path to make. But we will deliver a guide. Someone to help you through the sunlit world.*

As the wind died away, Astra clung to his throne, staring out at the quiet forest. His nightmares gathered close, sensing his terror, but Astra could think only of that teenager in Katoikos, weeping as they set fire to the temple. Unlike past dream keepers, Astra remembered what it was like to be a child, and few children in Iperios had unpleasant dreams under

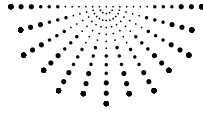
his eye. That child should have been in bed. They should have been safe. Dreams should have protected them, as they'd protected Astra, keeping them from whatever was pulling their strings.

From Pallas.

Astra shrank back on the throne. Soon his guide would come, and for the first time in hundreds of years, he would have to set foot in the waking world.

He drew his cloak around his long, slender body, and the flowers covering the throne trembled as wind came again—from Katoikos, Kallistos, and Thalassa—bearing the acrid scent of fire.

## CHAPTER THREE



Cillian hated sleeping.

Well, that wasn't quite right. He hated its necessity, the way his eyes became weighted and his head fuzzy when he didn't get enough of it. Hated the tumble into the oppressive darkness that fell over him like a blanket of stone when his body was too exhausted to stay awake another second. Even that was preferable to those times he slept through more medicinal means, either the sticky-sweet smoke from a wild herb that his troupe swore was from "long ago" and "used to honor the god of dancing" (patently untrue; there was no god of dance, and Cillian himself was from *long ago*—and the herb had been used for the same thing then as it was now) or too much Starian whiskey or Diabolos rum. Sleep came more easily then, but it never lasted ... and when he dreamt under the influence of whatever substance he'd used, those were the worst dreams of all. As if the god of sleep was taunting him, punishing him for daring to invoke his realm with herbs and alcohol instead of falling asleep naturally.

Cillian didn't believe in gods anymore, but if there was a god of dreams, he was probably a fucking *brat*.

Sleep was his persistent enemy; nightmares its weapon of choice, wielded with daunting precision. Cillian dreamt often of the woman the wraith-spirit had tortured, in visions so real it seemed as if he weren't asleep at all. She would be there in his tent with him, her broken body and tormented wails filling his mind with terror. On particularly bad nights, he'd be unable to move and she'd be sitting like a cat on his chest. The

worst of all had her simply standing at the foot of his cot, pointing at him, mouth open and soundless, her eyes plucked out, teeth missing—and then he would start to choke as if her missing teeth were in his mouth, and he would wake with a start and go right for the whiskey.

Whatever that thing had done to him over six hundred years ago, she hadn't lied when she said she was going to torment him. The last easy, peaceful sleep he'd had was the nap he'd taken in her house. Despite the centuries he'd had to hone his talent, it went mostly to waste. It was too dangerous to make a name for himself when that name would be linked to a dancer who never aged and rarely slept. Even the delight he found in his troupes was taken from him through the curse she visited upon them when it seemed that some part of Cillian might be *happy*.

But lately, something new was happening. He still couldn't fall asleep without whiskey or herbs, but instead of nightmares of the eyeless woman and a mouth full of her loose teeth, he started to dream about woods. A grove of trees, and a cold fire of white-and-blue flame. Normally, when Cillian dreamt of fire, it consumed and destroyed, burning everything and everyone in his dreamscape to ash.

This fire did not burn. It flickered, and it *beckoned*, and the hint of music he caught amidst the images was not the melody he associated with the wraith—"Pestilence's Refrain," as he'd come to call it—but something else. Sweet and simple, like a lullaby.

*Yes, lullaby. Lullaby and good night. Come to the forest, dreamer.*

Cillian did not have pleasant dreams. And these still weren't *pleasant*, exactly, as there was a scent of something acrid, the hint of cinder in the air, but they were better than any he'd had in centuries, so he'd take it. Except that the dreams were fucking relentless, that same cold-bright fire beckoning him, urging him, *summoning* him.

Cillian had ruined his life—many times over, by now—by answering a summons. He wasn't about to do it again, thank

you. But the dreams persisted, night after night. Moreover, as unsettling as they were, they weren't nightmares, and when he woke up somewhat well-rested, Cillian buried his face in his pillow and wept for the first time in what must have been a hundred years.

If he still believed in gods or kind spirits, he would have lit incense the way he used to as a young dancer, when he thought that he pleased them by dancing at their shrines, in their temples.

Now, the only god he prayed to was the Gentle Boatman, despite knowing very well that his ship would never carry Cillian forth. It probably didn't help that Cillian's prayers were liberally sprinkled with curses like *You fucking asshole, just pull up and let me hitch a ride on the side*. But the Boatman didn't bring dreams, and the other gods, if they were real, were assholes who didn't care, so Cillian didn't know *what* to do about this strange turn of events. He was too mistrustful to let himself believe it would last, but every member of his troupe knew something was up.

His latest dream began the same way as the one he'd had for a week straight: himself, standing in a lush forest, but this time he was facing a throne of hewn onyx set beside a tree with black wood. On the throne, a figure slept under a cloak of black feathers.

"Fine," Cillian said in the dream. "Rub it in, you jerk." He padded over to the sleeper, who seemed to be a young man with long, silky dark hair and an elegant and nonsensical pair of horns wreathed in stars. Cillian crossed his arms. "Why is the nicest dream I've had in ... a long time ... literally staring at some pretty boy sleeping in the forest?"

The boy, delicate of features and slender, opened his eyes.

Cillian went still. This was no young man. This was something else in the shape of one, just like—just like *her*. The wraith. Pestilence, Lady Thora, whatever she was.

Was this some new way to torture him? Because the thing before him had eyes of endless dark, and a power radiated from him that Cillian immediately mistrusted.

Then the being on the throne yawned. “What are you doing in my dream, mortal?”

“Mortal? *Mortal*. Who talks like that?”

“I can talk however I— I don’t need to explain myself to *you*,” the being said. He squinted, pushed himself up, and stretched like a cat newly woken from a nap. “Oh, wait. You’re *you*.”

Cillian would take insomnia, he decided, over this. “I am me, yes.”

The being tilted his head, shifting on his throne. There was an unnaturalness to how he moved, how he tilted his head and looked at Cillian, that had Cillian fighting not to take a step back. Still, this was a dream—and it wasn’t a nightmare, it was merely disturbing. That was a huge improvement.

“I’m waiting for you,” the man said. “I’m Astra. You’ll find me in the forest. Could you hurry up? You’re late.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Late? It means you should have been here by now. How long does it take mortals to travel these days? Don’t you have contraptions with wheels?”

“Who *are* you?” Cillian demanded as the image shimmered like a painting viewed through water.

“Weren’t you listening? I’m Astra.” There were tiny pinpricks of light in Astra’s midnight-dark eyes, the same color as distant stars. “I’m a *god*, can’t you tell? Seriously?”

“There’s no such thing,” Cillian said. “Unless you count Death. But, sure, okay. I’m asleep, what does it matter? You’re a god of ... what? The forest?”

“Wow. Are you being obtuse on purpose? You’re going to be smart when you get here, right? I don’t think it’s going to work if you’re this hapless.”

Cillian stared at him, fighting against looking too long at the lights in the being’s—Astra’s—eyes. “I don’t know where ‘here’ is.”



“You’ll find it, don’t worry. It’ll bring you here.” Astra yawned again. “And I’m the god of dreams. Obviously.”

“I knew you’d be a dick,” Cillian said. “I *knew* it.”

Astra stared at him, radiating a power so strong, Cillian’s dream self felt it. Before he could stop himself, he stepped back and made a warding sign.

Astra smiled at him. “Come see me, and you can berate me in person ... Cillian, yes, that’s your name. Pedestrian, but it’ll do.” He waved a hand, then curled up under his cloak again. “Come to my forest, Cillian Aislinn, and we’ll introduce ourselves properly.” With that, he closed his eyes, and the feeling of unnatural, heavy *power*—a thousand times more intense than any dominant Cillian had ever met—eased, though it was by no means gone entirely.

Astra didn’t stir or speak to him again. Cillian turned to leave but hissed sharply when he saw something *else* was in the forest, too. It wasn’t a person, but it was in the vague shape of one—a being of moss and branches and leaves. Cillian thought of the *nest* that had formed Lady Thora’s throne, and fear arced through him like lightning, the edges of the dream world blurring as his body tried to wake him up.

“Do not fear, young one,” the being said, its voice deep and rich, holding none of Astra’s brattiness or the wraith-woman’s manic ire. “This forest is not tainted by decay. I am not hers. I am the Weaver’s shelter, old and ancient and without malice.”

Cillian didn’t know what to say. He probably couldn’t have said it, anyway—he realized he was crying, the way he had the morning after the first of these dreams, when he’d been something close to rested for the first time in centuries.

“Poor sapling,” the thing said, its hair of moss framing a face of branch and stone. “I know why you tremble before me, but this forest is a sacred place. A safe place. It is where good dreams are born.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Cillian whispered, hating his tears, the way he shook like—like a leaf on one of these trees, pelted by

a relentless, unending storm.

“You will,” the being said. “We would see her influence halted, and you will halt it. With him, our child, our sweet dream lord, who loves us and sleeps among us. The bramble must be cleared, sweet sapling. If you do this, if you help him ... you will rest beneath our branches once more, just as our sweet Astra sleeps so peacefully now. We know what must be done. Won’t you help us, Cillian Aislinn? Won’t you heal us?”

“Why can’t I just dream about fucking, like normal people,” Cillian said, and the thing laughed, the branches around him shaking along with it. It was a real laugh, warm with amusement, and Cillian felt himself smile a bit in return.

“Your dreams will never be ordinary, for you are not ordinary. But they will be peaceful, as long as he is with you.”

Cillian looked over at the god asleep on his throne, breathing deep and even, stars twinkling around his horns, in his night-black hair.

He sighed. “The last time I believed ... something like you ... I ended up cursed. An immortal insomniac. I’d say it couldn’t be worse, but I know it could be. I’ve danced *King Cadoc’s Folly* enough times to know you should be careful what you wish for, and even *more* careful when a god promises to bestow riches upon you.”

“We are no god, Cillian of Kallistos. We are the forest. We shelter all who seek us. We will shelter you. Cut the rot from us, and we will do the same to your dreams.”

Cillian sighed, but before he could say anything else, the man-shape made of moss and twigs fell apart, and a warm wind stirred his hair, drying the tears on his face. Cillian sank into the sublime feeling of pure rest, the sort he hadn’t had since that nap in Pestilence’s lair. Sleep didn’t come like a wall of bricks falling on him or the haze of too much rum, but like gentle waves on the sea, as if he were lying in the prow of a great dark boat, the Gentle Boatman leading him safely through dark waters.

Cillian slept for six hours without moving, a rest so deep that when he opened his eyes, he half expected to find he'd died in the night and been taken across the river after all. But no, he was in his tent, wrapped in the expensive and luxurious bedding he'd collected in his endless attempts to combat a curse through human comforts, a gentle rain tapping on the canvas roof. He stretched his muscles, feeling as if he'd been reborn, basking in this unexpected gift that everyone else took for granted.

When he stood up, he saw something in the corner. Frowning, he went and crouched down to look at it. A small pile of stones and twigs had been arrayed in a fashion that made no sense until he looked at it from a distance. It was a map. The stones were mountains, and the twigs were an arrow, and leaves next to the stones were likely meant to represent a forest. And in the center, holding the leaves in place, was a single piece of obsidian.

Cillian picked it up and felt again the rush of warmth from the dream, the sleep that had been given to him. "For that, I'll travel farther than ... the edge of the border with Staria, aye? Where you can see Arktos like a sea of sand below?" No answer came, but he slipped the piece of obsidian into his pocket and ran a hand through his hair, thinking.

The troupe was heading that way anyhow. It would be easy enough to slip away after they set up camp, find this forest, and see what waited among the trees. If it was nothing, well ... at least he'd had a decent night's rest for once. That in itself was a bit of a miracle. And if he found a dream god on a throne, Cillian would like to have a few words with that bratling.

\* \* \*

ASTRA KNEW the moment Cillian Aislinn entered the forest.

Astra's body remained asleep on the throne in the quiet clearing, but a piece of him drifted, as it would in dreams, through the twisted trees surrounding him. He took the shape

of a starling, a bird that could mimic human speech and, in Thalassa, was said to carry dreams to Astra's favorite people. He darted silently through the dark branches before setting down just at the edge of the forest, where a man had one foot in the soft, high grass at the border.

The man was as lovely as he'd been in Astra's dream—lovely as a nightmare, with his eyes sharp and dangerous and his chin tilted in defiance, body honed like those of the priests of the Green Man who once roamed Staria with their sickles and their crowns of moss and meadowsweet. Behind him, a red-haired woman stood with a drum under one arm and a baton in her other hand. Her face was thick with freckles, and she wore an old-fashioned Kallistoi dress in deep green that wrapped around her torso, leaving her breasts exposed.

"You can turn back if you like, Roisin," Cillian said, peering into the darkness.

Roisin shifted from foot to foot. "They say this forest eats you. Draws you in, and you can't come out. Puts you to sleep. I know you don't need a rhythm to dance to, Cillian, but I'll at least give you something to guide you back."

Cillian twisted round to look at her, and while Astra couldn't see his expression, Roisin's softened somewhat, and she nodded. Cillian turned back to the woods, and Astra wondered if the forest's magic was already working on him, trying to pull him farther in.

Then, loud enough to startle Astra where he perched on his branch, Roisin let out a ululating cry and struck the drum.

Cillian took a step into the forest.

Roisin sang between drumbeats, her voice rough but oddly compelling, and Astra realized with some amusement that it was a washing song, meant to set a rhythm when scrubbing clothes. He'd heard Kallistoi women singing it in dreams often enough, and the words were familiar: a story about a girl who left her lover and went to sleep in a forest, where she was captured by a dark spirit. The song was from the perspective of the lover calling her girl back from the woods, and the drumbeats were heavy and even.

Cillian moved with it, gaze fixed on a point in the distance, traveling swiftly and smoothly. Astra flew past him to keep up, watching Cillian swing himself around trees and jump over upturned roots. His expression remained stern, but his body flowed like a river's current. When Roisin's voice grew faint and only her drumming remained, Cillian kept to the beat, and even when the drumming faded away, he didn't slow or falter.

Mimicking Roisin's song, Astra flew low around Cillian as he danced. Cillian followed Astra with his gaze but didn't stumble, and when Astra flew toward the clearing, singing the next verse about how the girl's lover could feel her heart breaking with every beat of the drum, Cillian followed him.

Astra stayed with him, swooping around him, until they reached the edge of the clearing. Then Astra flew his bird self to the body lying on the throne. He burrowed into the feathery cloak and disappeared, sinking back into his body.

Cillian took his time. Astra tried not to stir under his cloak, horns tangled in the throne's flowers, legs tucked up under him. Stars fell over his brow as a light wind tickled his hair, and he opened his eyes just enough to see Cillian standing before him, a hand on his hip.

"Most supplicants would kneel," Astra said, unfolding slowly from his sleeping position. Cillian looked him up and down.

"I'm not a supplicant." Cillian's brogue sounded different out loud, less pronounced than in dreams. "Your trees sent me here. Something to do with cutting out the rot."

"Mm, yes." Astra stretched. When was the last time he'd truly woken? A few years, at least, when his brother Azaiah had walked the forest, flirting with his trees. They'd spoken of nothing else for months. "The one who follows you. Only a god can aid you with that. But oh—I forgot, you don't believe in gods, do you? I suppose I'm simply a hallucination."

"You could be," Cillian said, eyeing Astra's horns.

Astra smiled and leaned toward him, letting his silky black hair fall over one shoulder. "Go on. You can touch. I'm real

enough for you, Cillian Aislinn.”

Cillian gave him a dubious look, then stepped forward, one hand up. He touched the curve of Astra’s right horn, and the brush of his fingers sent a shiver through Astra’s body. It was warm and startling, and unlike anything Astra had felt before. Cillian slid his palm over the horn, and another shiver rolled through Astra like a wave.

“It feels like glass,” Cillian said, rubbing his thumb over the surface. He tugged on it, just a little, and Astra felt a lurch in his stomach that made him want to gasp and lean into it. Instead, he twisted out of Cillian’s grip and stood.

“Now you know,” he said. He tossed his hair back, making his crown of stars tremble, and adjusted his cloak. “So you’re willing to help tear down the one who plagues my realm? She’s been at her work for centuries.”

“I’ve lived for centuries as well,” Cillian said, which was news to Astra. He tried not to let it show. Cillian sighed heavily, and Astra wondered why he was still standing after so long in the clearing. Most mortals collapsed after a single step. Even a human summoned by the forest would be kneeling by now. Astra stepped forward, but when he tried to touch Cillian’s jaw, Cillian jerked away.

“I won’t *hurt* you. You’re too useful,” Astra said.

“Wonderful. That’s always been a personal dream of mine, being *useful*.” Cillian moved away again. “Don’t touch me.”

Astra frowned, letting his hand drop.

Cillian took a deliberate step back. “If our interests align, then aye, I’ll help you find the woman you’re looking for. If you want to wring her neck, I’ll make you a garrote. But you don’t get to touch me, and you don’t get to magic me. Not without my say.”

He didn’t speak with any dominance, but he didn’t give Astra the impression of a submissive, either—which was curious. Astra liked to play with dominance and submission like a child jumping from a hot spring to a cool pool of water, amused more by sensation than purpose, and he let a bit of

submission run through his voice, earnest and aching. “I let you touch *me*.”

Cillian narrowed his eyes. “Don’t. How do we get out of here?”

Astra let the submission bleed away. “We don’t,” he said, ignoring the wind that swept past him, pushing them toward the edge of the forest. “Only I can give you permission to leave this place.”

“Oh, yes, I see that.” Cillian bowed deep. His eyes flashed again, wicked and cold, and Astra felt that strange lurch in his belly, like a drop of heat sinking through him. “I am at your mercy, dream lord. I’ll be sure to grovel at your feet appropriately.”

With that, he turned and walked off—in the *right direction*.

Astra hurried after him. His foot stuck against a clod of earth, almost tipping him forward, but he righted himself before Cillian could look back. “I can see why you’re on her bad side, if you’re this polite to gods with whom you’re allied.”

“That’s a thought,” Cillian said. “Maybe I should’ve been polite. Then she wouldn’t have cursed me. She would’ve just turned me into a puppet on a string.”

Astra shivered again, but this time with an unpleasant chill. He thought of the teenager in his vision with the strings around his wrists, weeping in the fire. “Red string?”

Cillian glanced his way. “Maybe.”

Astra fell silent. So Cillian had seen her, the woman so infuriated by Astra sheltering artists that she would send children to burn down his temples. The thought made him want to tear through the dreaming and rend her to pieces himself. It made him hot, made his face warm, his throat tight, his—why was his body *reacting* in such a way? He stopped, breathing hard, and lay a hand on his throat. Cillian looked at him, brows furrowed.

“What?”

*You are mortal and god both*, Peppermint liked to say, when Astra woke on his throne and had to remember that he needed to breathe. This was probably a part of it. In dreams, he wanted for nothing. In the waking world, his body seemed tied to his mind, reacting as water would to a creature swimming through it.

“It’s nothing,” Astra said. “Nothing that would concern a mortal.”

Cillian shrugged, which was not what Astra had expected. Was he so uninterested in the inner workings of a god?

“You know,” Astra said, catching up with him as they walked through his forest, “when I grace a mortal with my presence in dreams, they tend to be grateful.”

“Never graced mine,” Cillian said. “Unless that was you who sent the dreams about teeth, in which case— Actually, was it you?” He stopped, looking at Astra with something almost wild in his eyes. Astra tried to focus, calling on his power to drift along the edges of Cillian’s dreamscape, but it was unfamiliar and unpleasant, like a wall made of thorns.

“No,” he said. “I have not walked in your dreams.”

“Good,” Cillian said, and Astra caught his hand flexing as he turned away.

“Wait. Were you about to *hit* me?”

“Only if you’re the one who gave me those nightmares,” Cillian murmured, and Astra stared at him, open-mouthed. “People don’t appreciate them so much, you know.”

“But nightmares are beautiful. They’re merely wild— though your dreams seem less hospitable than others,” he added, when Cillian got that look in his eye again. “I would like to see them.”

“Only if you’re getting rid of them.” For the first time, Cillian smiled. Astra could hear a drum and Roisin’s voice, thinner now with fatigue. His heartbeat drummed along with her, unnecessarily forceful. He hadn’t left the forest in centuries. The waking world was ... painful, he remembered. Sharp. Cold. Cruel. He touched his side, where the scar from



being shot had stretched over the centuries, and felt his whole body *shaking* as they approached the edge of the forest.

*Do not be afraid,* the forest said, wind whistling around him. *You are ours. Beloved and precious. We will shelter you again.*

Astra felt like his legs were weighted with lead as Cillian stepped out of the trees. Roisin dropped her drum to hug him around the neck, and he awkwardly patted her back as their embrace lifted her off the ground.

The sun touched the grass at their feet, turning it a bright and vibrant green.

“Yes, I found him,” Cillian was saying in Morrey. Roisin was still hanging on him, looking over his shoulder into the forest, and Astra struggled not to wrap his cloak around himself for protection. Instead, he took a deep, steady breath.

And walked into the warmth of the sun.

It was impossible. That was the first thing that came to mind as Astra tipped his head up to the light, eyes closed: *impossible*. It was like being touched without touch, sensation spreading over his body in a gentle rain. It spilled across his neck and his arms, teased his fingers, and warmed the tops of his feet. He wanted to strip down and lie in it, swim in it, open his mouth and let the sunlight tip down his throat like warm water. He smiled, holding his palms up to catch the warmth in his hands.

“Dream lord?”

He opened his eyes. He’d seen so many colors in dreams, but the sky had an odd mix of blue and white to it, like a painter couldn’t quite decide what they wanted. It took a moment for him to remember that someone had addressed him, and he looked down at Roisin, who was standing a few feet away.

“Yes,” he said, voice soft. “I am the dream keeper.”

Roisin bowed. Behind her, Cillian made a face, but Roisin slipped a hand into her bag and pulled out a sprig of lavender

—a plant Astra’s followers left in his temples. She held it out to him, and he took it gingerly, shocked by the coarse touch of the plant against his fingers.

“Thank you, Roisin,” he said, and Roisin blushed and stepped back, twisting her hands together. Astra lifted the lavender to his nose and breathed in the scent, which he’d never smelled as a mortal. “Tonight, I will give you your favorite dream.”

Roisin bowed again, and Cillian rolled his eyes. Roisin backed up toward Cillian and whispered to him in Morrey, but her words carried on the breeze. “I didn’t think it would actually be *him*.”

“Don’t grovel. You’re Kallistoi. We don’t bow and scrape for anyone.”

A bee flew by, and Astra turned, delighted, to find an entire field of wildflowers creeping up the side of the mountain. He wondered if they all smelled like lavender. Perhaps he could pause a minute and check. He leaned down to pluck a blossom at his feet but stopped, unsure. It would be wrong, perhaps, to kill a flower just to see what it smelled like.

“If Your Majesty the dream prince could please direct your attention to the path,” Cillian said, and Astra looked up, brows furrowed.

“You are very irreverent, for a man chosen by the gods.”

Cillian laughed. “Chosen. Oh, yes. An honor. Come, dream prince.”

“I’m the dream keeper, actually,” Astra said. “Though I take many titles and many forms. Man, woman, neither, both.”

“Then if your dream *everything* could please follow me?”

Astra glanced at Roisin, who looked like she was caught between horror and amusement, and strode over to Cillian. “I’ve walked this mountain before.”

“Aye? Then maybe you don’t need a guide.”

“I didn’t say I— Why are you so combative?” That strange hot feeling bloomed low in his belly again. Perhaps Cillian

was making him ill, somehow.

“Spend a century in my shoes and you’ll figure it out,” Cillian said, and started off down a small animal track down the other side of the mountain. Astra frowned at him, but Roisin appeared at Astra’s side.

“Don’t hold it against him, Dream Keeper,” she said. “The curse weighs heavy, is all.”

“Ah,” Astra said. “Yes. The curse. It’s something of a mystery.” He twisted round to look at the forest, but it provided no answers. “I would like to hear about it from someone who is more objective, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh. Oh, sure. I don’t know much, understand, but I’ll try. I hope it isn’t rude, but ... are those horns real?”

“Yes,” Astra said. “Would you like to touch them?” Perhaps her touch would be different than Cillian’s, less ... disconcerting. Astra leaned down, and Roisin, who was a good head shorter at least, reached up to touch his horns.

“We’re wasting daylight,” Cillian said, and Astra narrowed his eyes and straightened up again. Cillian had no right to look like that, with his dark hair tossed in the wind and his well-toned body warmed by the sun, when he was so ... so *ungrateful*.

“Wasting daylight is preferable, in my forest,” Astra pointed out, following Cillian with his cloak catching on brambles and twisting around his legs. “I can’t imagine why mortals bother with it.”

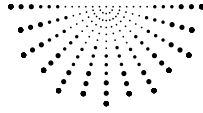
“Well, we can’t sleep all the time,” Roisin said.

Cillian barked out a laugh. “If at all.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Astra snapped, trying not to trip over his own cloak yet again. It just didn’t move right in the waking world.

“You’re the dream god,” Cillian said, without turning around. “Find out yourself.”

## CHAPTER FOUR



This was a god? This ridiculous person with his horns and a cloak of feathers and eyes that—that looked like the onyx throne on which he slept? Really? And people just ... worshipped him? This one, and the others, who had to be equally—equally—

“Um.” Roisin cleared her throat. “Is everything ... Is he really ...?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know.” Cillian glanced at Astra, who was looking around with wide, dark eyes and stopping every two or three seconds to look at something. A tree, a bird, and once, *a nest of hornets*, which both he and Roisin had shouted at him to leave alone. At present he was smiling at the sun, face uptilted like a flower, and Cillian found himself *angry* for no reason he could fathom. Maybe because he couldn’t remember the last time he’d done that, stood with his face tipped toward the sky, just for the pleasure of it.

“Where are your shoes?” Cillian asked, feeling his jaw go tight. “Hey. You’re going to need those.”

“Hmm?” Astra turned his attention to Cillian, his strange, black eyes glittering. Despite the heat of the day, Cillian found himself shivering when he remembered Astra in his dream—the power he’d exuded. There was an echo of it even now, but it was hard to find a god imposing when he was stopping every two seconds to exclaim over the way the grass felt beneath his bare feet.

“Your shoes,” Cillian said. “The things you wear on your feet so you don’t step on something.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to step on this? It’s delightful.” Astra smiled, as if he didn’t have a care in the world, but a few moments later, he winced. “Oh. The grass can be ... sharp? That’s annoying.”

Roisin gave a soft laugh. “Why doesn’t it surprise me that a god wouldn’t know there are rocks and twigs on the ground?”

Cillian shook his head, but Astra at least produced and slipped on a pair of sandals that had been in fashion a few hundred years ago. He was still too fond of stopping and looking at things, and it was bizarre to hear someone who looked like they were a young man of twenty or so saying, “Oh, that’s right, I forgot about bugs. Buzzy, aren’t they?”

He wasn’t quite as smiley and eager to stop for every new bug, branch, and bird after about an hour, though. Cillian expected whining about walking and feet that hurt from the hike over the low hills, but other than a few muttered curses in an old Morrey dialect that Cillian alone understood, Astra was mostly quiet. It would probably be worse later, when his muscles really started to ache. And, Cillian noticed, he seemed to know where they were going.

“Do you all sleep somewhere like a magic forest?” Roisin asked Astra. He was twirling a flower in his fingers—they were long, elegant, like a harpist’s—and as the sun began to set, the *weight* of Astra’s presence that Cillian had felt in his dream resurfaced. Or maybe not weight, exactly ... but he went from looking like a slightly sunburnt young man to the otherworldly thing that had blinked starlit eyes as if Cillian were barely worthy of standing before him.

Like *she’d* done, when he’d seen the truth of her—

“Hmm? Oh, you mean gods? No.” Astra’s voice was the same as it had been during the height of the day when he’d been pontificating about birds and exclaiming over wildflowers, musical and warm. “My sibling Ares is napping in the desert, but my big brother Avarice says it’s because

they're having a temper tantrum or something. I guess Death did that, too, for a while, but he's— What?"

"I wish I hadn't asked," Roisin said. "I believe in gods, but I ... temper tantrums and naps, that's a lot."

Astra shrugged. "Some of us were mortals, once. Some of us weren't. Where are we going? I'm enjoying the sojourn, but haven't you people figured out how to make your horses fly yet? Do you even have horses?"

He was changing the subject, maybe, but that was all right. Cillian wasn't entirely in the mood to talk about gods, either. "Yes, we have horses, and no, they don't fly. They pull the carts. You know about carts, right?"

Astra stared at him. "Yes, Cillian. I know about carts. What I don't know is why we're not *in* one."

Cillian and Roisin exchanged a look. "It seemed unwise," was all Cillian said. He jerked his head in the direction they were walking. "The carts, and the horses, are at the camp. It's right over there. See the fire?"

"Everyone is nice," Roisin said, with a kind smile at Astra, who had leaves and brambles in his hair.

Astra glanced around, falling in step with Cillian, who noticed that Astra's stride had picked up considerably as the sun continued to set. "I know this place," he said, sounding almost surprised.

"Maybe you visit the thrilling dreams of shepherds."

Astra made a face. "You're aware I left my forest for you, right? Walked out, stepped on *rocks*, and I think something *bit* me, because it *itches*." He made a face. "And what is my stomach doing? It's ... making a sound, and I don't like it. Could you be slightly penitent? As a treat?"

"Why would that be a treat?" Cillian asked. "I can think of any number of treats I'd like more than that."

"I didn't mean for *you*," Astra huffed. "It's a treat for me."

Cillian smiled despite himself. "You're hungry, Lord Sleepyhead. That's why your stomach is grumbling. Gods

don't eat?"

"We can," Astra said. "But we don't need to."

Astra sounded distracted, and Cillian didn't really have the energy to deal with it at the moment. "Go, uh, warn the others," he murmured to Roisin as Astra went down on his haunches to look at something on the ground.

"Should I tell them he's a—a god?"

"We don't really have a choice," Cillian said. "If we don't say it, he will. He doesn't strike me as someone who would bother lying about who he is. I'm not sure he *could*."

Astra scowled, rising to his feet and putting a hand on his hip. "Why would I say I was anyone else? Just *look* at me."

Cillian did. Astra had dirt on his cheek and twigs in his tangled hair, and he didn't understand that he was hungry. "Yes, you're quite ... something." He was already dreading what the troupe's barker, Dante, would say when he heard someone was claiming to be a god. Dante didn't believe in gods, curses, ghosts, or anything that wasn't logical and backed up by two or three primary sources. He might be a former opera singer from Gerakia, but apparently Gerakians thought everyone needed to be as educated as a professor, even if all they did was sing loudly.

Roisin darted off like a rabbit, and Cillian raked a hand through his hair and tried to think of what to say to Astra. "How much do you even ... know ... about food?"

"What."

"I— Do you know what types of food you like?" Cillian had no idea why he was bothering to ask. They had the food they had ... but suddenly he wondered if gods ate only berries, if eating animals was somehow a sin. Astra was the god of dreams, but he lived in a forest. Maybe he wouldn't like the idea of eating something that also lived there. "Is there anything you can't eat?"

"Probably not. Why would there be?" Astra narrowed his dark, starlit eyes at Cillian. "What do *you* eat? I'm sure it will be fine."

“Some people like different things, that’s all,” Cillian said, aware he was stalling, trying to give Roisin enough time to explain exactly who was coming back with him. “If you don’t need to eat, why are you hungry?”

“I suppose because I’m awake,” Astra snapped. “I spend most of my time in my realm, mortal. Lead onward to the food, would you? This sensation in my stomach isn’t one I like, and I don’t care for these *things* in my hair, and my feet are cold.”

“That’s why we wear warmer shoes,” Cillian said, slowly, like he was speaking to a child. So gods got cranky if they didn’t eat? Wonderful. This was going to be worse than being cursed, wasn’t it? “Come on.”

“I just said that— Oh, never mind,” Astra huffed, and fell into step next to him. It hadn’t been long enough for Roisin to have warned everybody, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Right before they reached the clearing where the troupe was camping for the night, Cillian put a hand on Astra’s shoulder. It was ... thin, bony, but it felt like a regular shoulder, even though Cillian couldn’t shake the slight, sick thrill that he was touching a god. As much as he didn’t want to believe it. “My troupe isn’t ... they’re not going to bow and worship you. Some of them don’t believe in you at all. Not just you—any of you. Gods, whatever else.”

Astra stared at Cillian’s hand on his shoulder and then up at Cillian. Even though he looked like a disheveled oddball of a young man, his eyes alone made it clear he wasn’t. They had a Mislian in the troupe, a mage named Theodore, and his all-black eyes were unsettling, but they weren’t like this.

“That isn’t my problem,” Astra said. “Plenty of you do believe.”

A chill ran over Cillian again, and he dropped his hand. “All right,” he said, sighing. “Just be ...” He had no idea how to finish that. Normal? Wouldn’t work, and it wasn’t like there were a lot of normal people in Cillian’s troupe, anyway. Kind? Gods weren’t kind, or Cillian would be long in the grave and



not still dreaming about Carys screaming in the dark. Quiet? Cillian was certain Astra wouldn't be able to help himself. "Just try not to be insufferable."

"Insufferable? *Insufferable?* Mortal, I think you don't— Ohhh, what's that *smell?*" Astra blinked, then wrinkled his nose, looking human enough to make the hackles on Cillian's neck ease. "Part of it makes me want to put something in my mouth, and part of it makes me want to throw it back up again."

A throb of something ran through Cillian at the *put something in my mouth*, but he ignored that and gave the air around them a cursory sniff. He smiled despite himself. "That's because you're smelling dinner ... and also horses."

"Why would you have them both at once?" Astra asked, pushing tangled hair from his eyes.

"It's not a choice. It's just how it is. We're cooking dinner, and horses ... exist. I don't know what to tell you." How would Astra not know that? "You've never smelled two things at once?"

"Don't treat me like a fool, Cillian. Of course I've smelled two things at once. But they should be complementary. I do like horses, though." Astra pushed onward, and Cillian decided to leave off asking him how on earth he was supposed to arrange things like *the scents of living* to be "complementary."

Mael, their hostler, was leaning back on a bale of hay when Cillian and Astra found him at the edge of the camp. He was chewing on a strand of hay, reading a book, and he glanced up when they approached. "Cillian. Ah. Astra, was it? I'm Mael."

Astra gave Cillian a superior sort of look. "So you know who I am."

"Well, yeah." Mael shrugged. "Roisin came by a second ago. Said that's what you were called." He nodded toward the cooking area. "Think dinner's ready."

"You're not having any?" Cillian asked.

Mael, who was the most easygoing person Cillian had ever met, lifted a shoulder, his attention already back on his book. “Sure. Just finishing this chapter first. There’ll be plenty. Nice to meet you, Mr. Astra.”

Cillian had to hide a laugh in a cough. Astra, for his part, inclined his head like a prince who’d gone tumbling down a hill into a woodpile and said, “Likewise.”

Mael did not look up.

“The thing you should know,” Cillian said as they passed the horses and the carts, waving a hand to Sparrow, the man who did the majority of the manual labor at the camp and who, as far as Cillian could tell, had a limit on the number of words he could use per day, “is that this is a group of people from all over.”

“Yes, that’s the impression I’m getting,” Astra said before being distracted by a flash of fire in the sky. “What’s that?”

His curiosity sounded genuine enough, which made Cillian answer honestly. “Manon. She spins fire.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s art, Lord Sleepyhead, why do you think?”

Astra smiled. “I want to see it.” He started that way and nearly tripped over a hitch for one of the carts.

Cillian caught him by the elbow. “You can’t just— You have to look where you’re going.”

“Being human is tiresome,” Astra said, glaring down at the hitch. “You have so many obstacles between you and the interesting things.”

Cillian laughed. He laughed, and then he laughed some more, and he realized he was losing his grip. “Yeah. We do. Whose fault is that?”

“Not *mine*. I didn’t make people.”

“Who did?” Cillian asked, once he’d reined himself in. Tiredness dragged at his eyes, but that was nothing new.

“Hmm? Oh. I don’t know. Why would I? You’re here, you dream, that’s all I care about.” Astra glanced at him again. As evening approached, Astra was losing some of the human disarray from their walk. His obsidian eyes seemed to glow, their starry pinpricks hinting at brighter lights. “Even my brother Death doesn’t know where everything came from. We aren’t meant to, I think. Can we go where the smell is less horse, more food?”

The camp’s colorful tents surrounded the central fire, and the troupe members were engaged in activities from practicing their dances and tuning instruments to mending clothes or ... Oh, no.

“Cillian!” Vai, their temperamental brat of a dancer, stormed over. Her boots were unlaced, and her skirt was torn at the edge, her dark red hair in two uneven pigtails on her head. “You have got to tell Dante that if he wants to have opinions on dancing—”

“I am *allowed*,” a voice bellowed, and Cillian winced.

“Also, I think someone stole me dancin’ bells! It was probably Jas. She told me, once, if you buried bells beneath a full moon you’d get the demon lord to be your lover and— Oh, is this Astrid?”

“Hello, Vaila,” Astra said. “No. I’m Astra.”

“Did Cillian tell you to call me that? Fucking hell, Cillian, I don’t *like* me full name. Will you ask Jas about me bells, then? I dinna want her cursing me to trip and break me neck or something. She said she could bring the dead back to life, but —”

A small wraith of a girl floated out of the tent to Cillian’s left. She had hair the color of snow and eyes just as pale, with skin so fair you could see her veins. She was dressed all in black with little skull earrings and had painted her lips with black berry juice.

“I didn’t say that,” she told Vai. “I said it was *possible*, not that I’d bother.” She looked at Astra ... and then she did what

Cillian had said no one would do, and *bowed*. “A true god has come to us,” she intoned.

“Astrid?” Vai tossed her hair. “He’s some weird bard Cillian found in the forest, Roisin said.”

Cillian stared up at the sky. “Vai, Jas wouldn’t steal your dancing bells. She doesn’t even use them.”

“The spirits prefer silk,” Jas said to the ground.

“They don’t prefer nothin’, weirdo,” Vai sniffed. “They’re *dead*.”

“Both of you, go to dinner,” Cillian said, and despite his lack of natural dominance, Jas straightened, gave an ethereal nod and a mysterious smile he knew for certain she practiced in a mirror, and went off to the fire with Vai asking about her bells. That were in her tent under a discarded costume, most likely. That’s where they’d been the last time.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Cillian said to Astra. “Jas once pretended a tree was an old king who used to throw his children into a fire to gain a crown—”

“It was a well, actually.” Astra looked around with interest. “There are quite a few mortals here.”

Cillian had no idea what to say to that. “How did you know her name? Vaila, I mean.”

“Was I not supposed to?” Astra was staring up at the top of Saoirse’s tent, where colorful scarves were tied to the tent pole, fluttering in the breeze. “Are names sacred here?”

“I—well. I wouldn’t say that. But they can be important. Sometimes people have different names. One they’ve chosen, and one they don’t use anymore.”

“Of course you don’t call someone by a name that isn’t theirs,” Astra said patiently, as if Cillian were a child. “But that’s not the same as a full name and a shorter version of it.”

Most of the troupe was there when Cillian climbed onto the wooden stump near the fire and held up a hand, whistling sharply. He clapped, and answering claps and whistles spread

through the camp until even Mael was standing in the circle around them.

“I don’t want to argue about it, but this is Astra,” Cillian said, by way of an introduction, adding, “and I said *I am not arguing about it*,” when he saw Dante open his mouth. “Believe whatever you want, but I’m ... You all remember what happened to Gilly.”

He heard a soft sound and knew it was Tay. Roisin was emotional only through the notes of her fiddle, but Tay wore her emotions on her sleeve, and she had loved Roisin’s sister.

“I’m trying to make sure it doesn’t happen again, but ... I don’t know how to stop it. And he can help. Astra. So whether you believe he’s a god—”

“Don’t be absurd, lad,” said Dante, who didn’t believe Cillian was older than twenty-five and therefore assumed he could call him that.

“I am,” Astra said. He smiled. “If you doubt that, you’ll see me in your dreams tonight. As an audience member booing your performance of *The River and the Gale*.”

“I’ll have you know I was offered a *barony* in Staria for that performance!” Dante boomed.

“As I was saying,” Cillian said, though it was nearly impossible to shout Dante, “he’s here and he’s ... getting used to being awake. Just trust me, he’s weird.”

“Who isn’t, around here?” Griffith, their choreographer, asked.

“Me,” Dante said, looking offended.

“Me,” Saoirse said, sewing ribbons onto her dance shoes, backlit by the fire in a way she had to have arranged to look like a painting.

“He said normal, not boring,” Vai said.

Saoirse didn’t even look up from her sewing. “You’ll have to try harder than that, sweeting. Welcome, Astra.”

“Yes, of course,” Dante boomed. “Welcome. Just don’t go assuming I believe in something as absurd as gods walking about with twigs in their hair. Not the god of good grooming, are you?”

“I don’t think I like you,” Astra said. He glanced at the sky. “Take care, or in about twenty minutes, I’ll prove it.”

“Tidier fellows than you have tried, lad.”

Astra’s eyes were starting to glow.

“He’s not lying.” Ruben’s statement surprised Cillian, who saw Ellie nodding from her place near the cooking pots.

Astra’s eyes dimmed, just a bit, and he smiled. “Thank you, Ruben. And you, Ellie. My children know me.”

Cillian gave him a sharp look but said nothing. Ruben wasn’t one to speak up about strangers. He was more likely to pull a knife than to vouch for someone.

“Aren’t we all supposed to be your children?” Cillian asked as the group disbanded and the sun sank farther, hopefully taking Astra’s need to figure out *stew* along with it.

“Not like they are,” Astra said. “Now hurry and show me to this food, Cillian. Before the sun sets, I want to try whatever is in that pot with my own two hands.”

“With a spoon, you mean.”

“As you say, mortal,” Astra said. “And then I want to see that fire dancer. And tell that opera singer that if he doesn’t want to dream about rotten tomatoes for the rest of his days, he’d better learn some *respect*.”

Wonderful. Not only did Cillian have to suffer nightmares every night in his tent, now he could live in one when he was awake.

\* \* \*

OUT OF ALL THE strange things Astra had experienced since stepping out of his forest, food had to be the most bizarre.

He knew he'd eaten when he was a child. He didn't have any memory of it, but he couldn't have survived otherwise. But when he sat down at the fire and Ellie—a dominant with ribbons twisted in her hair and a patchwork vest—handed him a plate, he found himself quite at a loss as to what to do with it.

People ate all the time in dreams, of course, but Astra wasn't certain what they did with the food when it was in their mouths. He glanced at Cillian, who was slumped on the other side of the fire, looking tired and worn. It was no use asking him. He'd say something sarcastic again.

Carefully, Astra lifted a stuffed pepper to his mouth and took a bite.

After a few seconds, Ruben cleared his throat. "You're supposed to chew it."

Astra couldn't imagine letting it go so soon. It was *hot* and fragrant and something he couldn't quite place, and his eyes were already starting to water. He only swallowed when the food had turned to mush in his mouth, and he lay a hand on his chest. "That," he said, "was the best thing I ever— I've never —"

"All I did was add paprika," Ellie said.

"You are a queen among chefs," Astra said. He set the plate down and took Ellie's hands. She blushed. "Allow me to give you a dream."

"Oh. You don't have to," Ellie said. "The paprika, it was just—" Then she stopped, her expression going slack as Astra pushed a touch of his power through their joined hands. It was a waking dream, there and gone in an instant, and while she wouldn't remember the details, it would give her a feeling of quiet delight. She smiled and blinked.

"Hey." Cillian's voice was tight with tension. "Don't work magic on my people."

"It isn't magic," Astra said. "And it's nice. She liked it."

"People like the cold when it kills them, too," Cillian said. "When it tricks you into thinking you're warm and

comfortable, while you're really freezing to death."

"It was like when my mother was still alive," Ellie said in a soft voice, and Cillian went quiet, looking at her intently. "And she took me to that nobleman's garden and made a wreath for my hair. The day I had my second naming."

Astra gave Cillian a pointed look, but Cillian was still trembling, flexing his fingers.

"Don't do it again." Cillian got up from his seat and strode off, disappearing beyond the light of the fire.

Astra raised his brows. "What a disagreeable man."

"He's all right." That was Ruben, picking at his fingernails with a knife. Like Ellie, he was one of Astra's: people who were a different gender than the one everyone assumed they were at birth. Their presences glowed in Astra's mind's eye like twin flames. "He just doesn't like unnatural things. Not that you're unnatural, Dream Keeper."

"I am to him, perhaps."

"Yeah." Ruben shrugged. "But he's a good person. Tough as nails when we're practicing, but ..." He went quiet for a few seconds. "I don't know. He took us in when we were kids. Thibault and Cedric and me. Didn't have to. Probably shouldn't have. But he did."

Astra wasn't sure how to feel about that. It was easier to think of Cillian as a heartless cynic who lived to annoy him, not a man who went about rescuing children.

A shadow passed over his shoulder, and Astra twisted round to look up into the eyes of Tay, the woman whose heart had ached with grief during Cillian's short introduction. He'd felt the nightmares pushing up against the front of her mind, and he'd seen flashes of a young woman barely out of her teens, dancing slowly on a hilltop while Tay tried to reach her. But the ground fell like a rockslide, and by the time she scrambled to the top, there was a wooden puppet where the girl used to be, slowly spinning on one foot, its mouth a slash of red paint.



“It’s on account of the curse,” Tay said. “Cillian being ... grim, sometimes.” She crossed her muscular arms over her chest, but it mostly looked like she was hugging herself. The others around the fire went quiet, but Tay’s expression was mulish. “I know I’m not ... not the brightest candle in the bush —”

“I don’t know if that’s a saying,” Ellie whispered.

“But it’s real, and it’s following us.” Tay’s fingers clenched. “It’s following the boss.” Her mouth worked as though she wanted to say something else, but she only looked down, pink blooming in her cheeks.

“It’s all right, Tay.” Roisin got up from her spot across the fire. “You don’t have to tell him. Astra, if we could ... walk, maybe.”

Astra wasn’t sure he wanted to walk again, not after the trek from his forest, but he stood anyway. Now that the world was going to sleep in this part of Iperios, his cloak swirled around him, the tangles smoothing out of his hair and the dirt falling away from his face and sandals. The feathers on his cape rustled in a wind that wasn’t there, and he could feel the power of the forest pulsing inside him like a second heartbeat.

He turned to follow Roisin away from the fire. She led him to a nearby tent and ushered him inside. He bent to enter—he was taller, now that he could control his shape more—and knelt on a plush pillow while Roisin stood in the center of the tent like a petrified tree.

“Right,” she said. Astra could see better in the dark, it seemed, than he had as a child, and he could tell that Roisin was keeping her expression level through a great force of will. “So. Gilly was my sister.”

“I’m sorry,” Astra said. “Was she a dancer, like Cillian?”

“No.” Roisin’s voice was soft. It was fear, Astra could tell, but she’d forced it so far inward that even her dreams were of ice and stone, of lying still while armies marched over the place where she’d been buried alive. “Gilly made instruments. Violins, mostly. My family is famous for it. I took more of an

interest in playing than the others, so I ... I left with her. She was always following me around. Mimicking me. The only time she wasn't at my heels was when she was with Tay. But then she started humming this song when she walked. Kind of like—" Roisin froze again. "It's nothing. I won't repeat it."

Astra nodded. "You loved her."

"That isn't important," Roisin said, but Astra could see the dreams building in the air around them—daydreams, this time, of Roisin grabbing her little sister, holding her until she stopped humming. Dragging her down from the crest of a lonely hill. Gilly wasn't unimportant; she was everything.

"She died," Astra said.

"No, it was worse. Her skin started to feel cold. Hard. She kept dancing, even though she didn't know how before. Cillian tried to make her leave the troupe. He told both of us to go, put us on a cart and everything. But Gilly got up in the night and said she had to go back. She said ... Cillian had to *see* it. I think she was already too far gone. Then we got to the foothills out by western Staria, and she wasn't human anymore. Just a ... a puppet. Her face all wrong. Tay tried to get her to be herself again, but I knew she wouldn't. Couldn't."

Astra moved his hand through the darkness, stirring her daydreams. They were thick in the air, regrets clouding Roisin's mind. He swept them aside, and Roisin rocked on her heels, blinking fast. A tear fell, and she jerkily wiped it away.

"Cillian told me the truth that night. I could tell when Gilly left us that he'd seen this happen before. Apparently he's much older than he seems. Hundreds of years old. And when he was young, he was invited to this woman's house in the country ..."

She told the story slowly, with no embellishments or artifice. Astra leaned back on the pillows as she spoke. It was no wonder Cillian didn't want him using his powers on mortals, not when Cillian been afflicted by the worst a corrupted god could visit on him. According to Roisin, hundreds of people from Cillian's troupe had fallen to the

curse over the centuries, dragged away to be Pallas's puppets while Cillian tried in vain to stop them.

"Why didn't he shut down the troupe?" Astra asked. "Why put you all at risk?"

"He's tried to close it down, once or twice," Roisin said. "But it's our choice what we do. We choose to stay with him."

"Even though he's abrasive, cynical, and irritable?"

"Because he's brilliant," Roisin said. "And even though he's been dogged by that curse for so long, he's still kind. Perhaps it doesn't make sense. Perhaps Tay and I, at least, should have packed up and headed far away after what happened to Gilly. But we didn't. Bad things can happen wherever you are, can't they? And here, at least, we all have each other."

Astra drummed his fingers on his knees. He still felt shaken over the boy Pallas had used to burn his temple; he couldn't imagine having to deal with that again and again for centuries, watching people—people Cillian knew and worked with, people he cared about—fall victim to a power they couldn't fight. In dreams, he didn't have to consider mortality. Everything was present, possible, and new.

"Thank you, Roisin," he said, after some time. "Do you want me to make it easier for you? To put your nightmares to rest for a time? I can lock them away in a small part of your mind where they can't touch you."

"No." Roisin might as well have been a statue. "No, thank you. I need them."

"To remember her?"

"You should go." Roisin closed her eyes as though that could make him disappear. "Cillian's probably looking for you."

"I'm not beholden to him, you know." Astra got up, and he raised his hand to touch her cheek before thinking better of it. "But I'll go. And the offer stands. I can give you better dreams of her, if you like."

“Good night, Dream Keeper,” Roisin said, voice inflectionless.

Astra left her in the tent with her nightmares and let his power drift out over the camp. He could sense sleeping people in other tents, bits and pieces of their dreams, but in one tent a light still burned and the echoes of old dreams felt like nettles and thorns. He approached that one and was unsurprised to find Cillian there when he lifted the tent flap. Cillian was lying on his back with his hands clenched and his teeth grinding together, his hair spilling over an embroidered pillow.

He turned to give Astra a dull look. “I see you have enough magic to fix your hair.”

“Yes, hello to you, too.” Astra entered the tent and sat down. The place was tidy enough, but the amount of mending, books, and little tools in baskets around the edges of the bed made it clear that Cillian had no intention of sleeping through the night. Astra draped his cloak over his legs like a blanket and tossed his silky hair. “Despite the fact that you’ve been terribly ungrateful, I’m willing to keep my forest’s promise to you.”

Cillian’s expression didn’t change. “What.”

“A night’s sleep, Cillian. Without unpleasant dreams. You do know who I am.” Astra tried not to sound like a sullen child. He wasn’t used to being underestimated. So, before Cillian could fuss at him or say something unpleasant, Astra cast a heavy sleep over him with a wave of his hand.

Cillian lay there, blinking at him. “What are you doing?”

Astra frowned and waved his hand again. “Be still,” he said, and got up. Cillian flinched as Astra crawled atop him, straddling his hips, but Astra just tutted and took his face in both hands. “Don’t be a baby. I’m not cursing you. I’m *helping* you. *Let me.*”

“If you’re doing something that’s going to change me ...”

“If I could make you a penitent delight of a fellow, I already would have,” Astra snapped. “I’m the god of dreams, not ... emotional issues.”

*“Emotional issues?”*

“Be quiet and let me work.” Astra pressed his forehead to Cillian’s. He let the power of the forest sink into Cillian, weaving through the brambles of his mind like the persistent, steady current of a deep river. He drowned the brambles and pushed past them ... and as he did, a strange, discordant melody started to emerge.

Cillian thrashed in his hold, grabbing Astra by the arms. “Stop. *Stop*, it’s getting stronger. It’s *here*, you fool, *you brought it here!*”

“I have you,” Astra said, pressing down harder still. That melody shouldn’t survive in his realm. He picked at it like a weaver undoing a faulty thread, and Cillian clawed at him in a panic, his breath coming short and fast, his eyes wide and too bright.

“Go away,” Astra said, and the melody wavered. “This is *my* realm. His dreams are *mine*. You do not belong here.”

The melody retreated into the dark like a fish swimming to the depths, but Astra knew it was still there—the song that had taken Gilly, that had taken so many others, snaking its way through Cillian’s immortal life. It would not be so easily undone.

Cillian was panting as the melody faded, his nails digging into Astra’s skin. Astra kept their foreheads pressed together. The candlelight went on its own, and Cillian took a shivery breath. Astra cupped a hand to Cillian’s jaw, another to his shaking shoulder. “I have you,” he said again, and pulled Cillian gently into dreams.

They crossed the river of brambles and entered Astra’s realm together, with Astra holding Cillian to him like a lover. The dreaming world enfolded them with its familiar comfort and affection, and when they emerged, they were standing in a field of pale blue flowers. Clouds took the shapes of dancers above them, and while the sun shed no warmth, it was peaceful and gentle, caressing Cillian’s face.

Cillian blinked up at the dancing figures in the sky. “This isn’t my usual kind of dream,” he said.

“It isn’t mine, either. Mine are far more exciting.” Astra let go of Cillian in the dream, though he was aware that his body still held him in the waking world, and unpinned his cloak. “Put this on. It will give you a deeper sleep.”

“Is it safe?” Cillian took the cloak. “A mortal wearing a god’s clothes?”

“I don’t see why not,” Astra said. “I’ve let many people sleep in my cloak, over the centuries. Lovers, friends. Demons. The dreams of demons are always lovely. They’re so abstract and colorful, and they’re far more open to interpretation.”

Cillian put on the cloak, then staggered, blinking hard. “Oh. How ... how do I feel tired in my *dreams*?”

Astra gestured at himself. “Magical cloak, Cillian. You should probably lie down.”

Cillian stumbled to his hands and knees, then collapsed with a groan. “Oh, fuck. Fuck, this shouldn’t feel so good.”

Astra sat next to him. He was dimly aware that Cillian’s physical body was weeping in relief, and he made his own body move to brush the tears away. In the dream, Cillian turned his face to the flowers.

“It’ll come back,” Cillian whispered, and Astra raised his brows, impressed. Most humans barely lasted a moment under the influence of his cloak.

“I’ll hold it at bay,” Astra said.

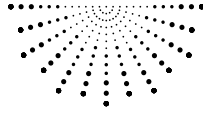
Cillian hunched in on himself as he sank into a deeper sleep, fingers clenching on the flowers. Astra sighed and reached around him, rolling Cillian to his side.

“You’re so needy,” he said, prying Cillian’s hands loose. He held Cillian gently, letting the cloak fall over them both, and Cillian responded by clutching Astra tight. He pressed his face to Astra’s shoulder and hooked a leg around one of Astra’s, and Astra stroked his hair, making soothing sounds.

“This would be easier if you weren’t so contradictory, you know,” Astra said. “Or combative. Gods aren’t all terrible. Some of us are lovely.”

Cillian didn’t answer. He was too deep in sleep to notice, and clouds waltzed above them as Astra held him there in the field of flowers, trying not to think of the curse lying in wait.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Cillian woke up completely disoriented, unsure where he was.

His body felt strange, heavy and too warm, and something was tickling his face and drifting into his mouth. He frowned, confused ... and then realized it was hair. Hair that belonged to the god of dreams, who was fast asleep with his limbs tangled around Cillian.

Cillian didn't move. He couldn't. Even though Astra wasn't a physically large man—god?—he was clinging to Cillian like a lamprey. As Cillian lay there, he realized he felt better than he had in years, and the fuzzy tiredness that was his constant mental companion was ... gone.

Oh, one good night's sleep couldn't make up for several centuries' lack, but he felt *amazing*. Even his dreams of the forest where he'd found Astra hadn't provided this sort of revitalization. He felt so good that he laughed, quietly, and felt tears prickle in his eyes. People did this: slept a full night and enjoyed peaceful, pleasant dreams. If not every night, then most nights. How extraordinary that this was most people's reality.

Cillian could have lain there for hours, luxuriating in the sensation of being fully rested, but eventually the god responsible for his first real sleep since that fateful day in Lady Thora's decrepit manor stirred, lifting his head and blinking wide, dark eyes down at Cillian. Astra looked vaguely confused, and the starlight in his eyes had dimmed, since it



was morning, but as Cillian watched, awareness sharpened his gaze.

“Thank you,” Cillian said, too overwhelmed to be sarcastic. “I— Thank you.” It didn’t seem sufficient, but he lacked any other appropriate expression. *I would worship at your altar for that one night alone* seemed perhaps a bit hyperbolic, even if, in that moment, he meant it.

“You’re welcome.” Astra disentangled himself like a cat uncurling from a nap, sitting up and running fingers through his silky, dark hair. His horns glowed, but as he adjusted to being awake, some of that unearthly otherness faded. He still looked almost too beautiful to be real, but his godlike form was becoming more human as the sun’s light grew stronger. As Cillian met his gaze, Astra frowned. “We have a problem.”

Cillian laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Aye, Lord Sleepyhead. We do.”

Astra’s expression didn’t change. “I know who cursed you.”

Cillian pushed himself up, sitting cross-legged on his comfortable bedding, and reached for a skin of water. He took a long swig and offered it to Astra, who stared at it in vague confusion. “It’s water. For when you’re thirsty. That’s when your mouth is dry, maybe you have a headache.”

Astra gave a huff and snatched the water. “Being mortal is ridiculous. How do you stand the constant need to—to give your body things? To know what it wants?”

Cillian flashed him a grin. “You get used to it. And I know who— Ah. You have to swallow,” he said as Astra upended the skin into his mouth, water spilling out and over his chin. How he managed to look lovely while *failing to drink water* was beyond Cillian. “Like you did with the peppers.”

“I know that, I was just ... enjoying it first.” Astra shifted his gaze away, pouring more water into his mouth. He swallowed and then smiled. “That tastes nice.”

*That tastes nice.* About water. Cillian felt that prickle on his neck, the one that said, *This thing in the tent with you is not*

human, but it wasn't nearly as disconcerting as it had been yesterday. "It does. It's better cold. You don't ... remember that? Water? Or food?"

"No. I was five, six, something like that, when I took up the dream lord's mantle. A few years of knowing how to eat and drink doesn't last after centuries where you don't do either." Astra passed the skin back, wiping his chin. He still looked far too serious. "But my point is, we need to talk about who cursed you."

"Ah. Roisin told you about Gilly?" Some of the peacefulness from his good night's rest ebbed as he thought of Tay's sobbing, Roisin's grim expression, Gilly's blank eyes. "I know who it was. Hundreds of years ago, I was mortal, too. I went to dance for a noblewoman in Kallistos, and the nap I took in her house was the last decent sleep I had. Well. Until you came calling." His brow furrowed as Astra shook his head. "That's who it was, who cursed me. Lady Thora."

"That's what she called herself, maybe, but that's not who she was." Astra was quiet for a moment. "How much do you know about the gods?"

Cillian blinked. "I barely believed in any of you until now. Well, that's not true. We have a ferryman, Jimmy—you'll meet him later. And I ... met Death, once. He sat with me on a hill, told me he was looking for someone. I almost begged him to take me with him."

Astra smiled. "My brother Azaiah. Yes. He's Death. He has a companion now, Nyx, a former soldier from a forgotten empire. They're disgustingly cute, really. But there are others. My brother Arwyn, who was once Avarice and lived in a well off Diabolos—"

"The *Wish-Giver* is real?" Cillian leaned back on his hands. "Huh. I should have tried dancing for him."

"You wouldn't have been able to, I don't think. Well, maybe? I don't know quite how the time has passed, but he left the Well with his companion, and he's more ... Desire with an edge, now. And there's my brother Leviathan, who's called the Tempest."

“Lord of the Deep.” Cillian nodded. “I’ve a Thalassan here, Iwan. His family are fishermen, the ones that dive into the waves in a storm to find the best fish? He leaves a token for the Lord of the Deep whenever we’re near the sea. He’s real?”

“He is.” Astra shook his head, which didn’t seem to fit with his words until Cillian realized he was shaking some blanket fuzz from his horns. “We used to have a sister. Her name was Pallas. She was the god of art, and she was very close with the one who bore the cloak of Dreams before me. His name was Somnus, and I think he might have loved her.”

Cillian thought about this. “I don’t remember there being a god of art. Just ... muses. And the spirit they call the Unluck where I’m from. The one you make wards against, before a performance. It’s what makes your violin strings snap or your ankle twist the wrong way when you’re dancing.”

Astra’s smile was cold. “That’s her. Now, anyway. Something happened to her. This was long before my parents’ parents’ parents were born, you understand. But I’ve heard the story. She used to have a temple in Kallistos, Azaiah told me. A wide stone porch, atriums, done in the style they favored in Katoikos.”

Cillian went still, thinking of the ruins by the village where he’d been born, just down the road from Cladach Manor. Surely that wasn’t—

“In her time, artists came from all over to worship her through their creations. Azaiah thinks it was those artists who founded Kallistos, and that’s why the whole place is so inclined toward artistic pursuits. Weavers at their looms, sculptors in the atriums, musicians on the lawns. And she, Pallas, fell in love. Gods need companions, you see. It keeps us ... tethered to humanity. If we don’t have them, we stop caring about you.”

Cillian was fascinated, though he was also very afraid he knew where this was going. Still, Astra’s voice—while not imbued with any godly resonance at the moment—was lulling, the words woven together like a tapestry.

“If we can’t find someone who wants to be with us as an immortal and share our mantle, we can ask Death to take us beyond. That’s what Somnus did. He found me, his successor, and then he left for Death’s shores. Pallas chose someone to be her companion, but it was too late. She’d already started to care more about perfection than art. And she— I’m not sure how it went, exactly, since I wasn’t the dream lord then. But Azaiah told me she became the corrupted version of herself, so far gone in her search for perfection that she turned her companion into a living statue, trapped in marble until Death found her and released her spirit.”

Chills ran up and down Cillian’s spine. “Are you saying ... Lady Thora ... is a god?”

“No, I’m saying she *was*. She was Pallas, who became corrupted and lost her godhood. She became the opposite of art, of creation—but as long as she doesn’t have a successor, she endures.”

“Isn’t the opposite of creation death?” Cillian asked, but then he remembered the rotting walls of Cladach Manor, the tumbled stones of the old temple in Kallistos, the scent of spoiled fruit and the pond full of sludge that trapped light before it reached the depths, and he knew the truth. “No. It’s ... decay.”

“Do you know the language they speak in Arktos? It’s called Senex.”

“A little, simply from traveling through there. It was already out of fashion in Katoikos before I was ... made what I am. Why?”

“That’s what it means, her name. In Senex. Thora is Senex for decay. She’s corruption and ruin and—your Unluck, I would imagine.”

Cillian didn’t know what to say. It was surprising, in some ways, and in others ... maybe he’d always known. “I’m cursed by the former god of art? *Why?*”

“That’s what I don’t know,” Astra said. “But art and dreams, they were always close. I think I ... was told of this,

before I first took my place on the throne of night. I don't ... It's hard to remember. I was a child." He looked so serious, which made the reality of the situation sink in, because what was Cillian supposed to do against a former *god*?

"You said you called me because she's starting to corrupt you, too?"

"My realm," Astra said. "Not me ... but I think, in time, it won't matter. I've seen my dreamers controlled by something, forced to do things they would not. I don't know how, but she's found some way into my realm. I need to stop her, or I'll be corrupted, too. Without a god of art, humans can still dream and be inspired to dance, to make music, to make art. But if they don't have dreams ..."

Cillian stood up to pace. "This sounds ... like a fairy tale. A legend." He didn't know what to say. This version of Astra, though disheveled and less perfect than when he was in the full height of his power, was somehow more frightening to Cillian. This was a god telling him about ... about legends that were real, about gods that had been corrupted, about the end of humanity's passion and drive to make things beautiful. About the end of dances to celebrate the wind in the trees, music inspired by the great storms on the coast, weavings done to mimic the setting of the sun into a swiftly flowing river. "Why doesn't she just— She's killed before. She could kill me. Even if I don't know why she wants to." He grabbed at his hair.

Astra smiled grimly. "She can't end the world, or humanity, that way. Azaiah, he could have. And maybe she was hoping that he would, if he didn't find his Nyx and make a bond with him. But he has, and he's *ridiculously* happy, and even Avarice is remembering what it was to be Desire and not only Greed. She's desperate, and she's bereft of her creativity and her power, but art is still *here*. Even without a god, creativity exists—your troupe is proof of that. Imagine being cast out and having to watch others dance, make music, sing, paint, whatever else. Still inspired by what you lost. *That's* what she wants to kill, Cillian. *That's* what she's trying to do, by infecting my realm with her rot."

Cillian thought of what it was like, night after night, caught up in his insomnia and bad dreams. Walking the perimeter of his camp, smoking clove cigarettes, listening for the bells he'd set up to warn of any intruder. How it was, year after year, hearing that foul melody first in nightmares, then in the rustle of the limbs of barren trees, played out of tune on his troupe's instruments. Until they started to hum it, over and over, and the sound grew until it was all he could hear.

And then some poor soul smiling blankly with wooden eyes and stiffened limbs, until they collapsed ... wrists, ankles, neck, and elbows wreathed in blood-red strings. This had been his personal hell for centuries. The idea of others—of *everyone*—experiencing it was appalling. Astra was right: it would destroy art, in time. It would suck all the joy out of the world until no one had the energy to sing, or paint, or dance. There'd be nothing left but empty shells.

Puppets.

“She said she was Pestilence,” he said, forcing the words through a dry throat no water would soothe. “That that music was her song from some forgotten empire. A warning to keep her away.”

“The song is warning, maybe, but she's Decay, Cillian. What is a warning when you corrupt it?”

He thought, closing his eyes as the truth broke clear as dawn in his mind. “An invocation. A prayer.” He opened his eyes. “And you saw this in my dreams, last night?”

“I heard the melody, and I knew it was wrong.” Astra got to his feet. “I think I can use your dreams to find her.”

Cillian's laugh was sharp and bitter. “You need me to go back to having nightmares? That shouldn't be too hard.”

Astra shook his head. “No. Your nightmares are how she finds you. Whatever gave her entrance to my realm, we need to find that and close it, burn it—I don't know.”

He sounded frustrated. Cillian had pissed off one god and frustrated another. What was next? Anger Death? Make the

Tempest a cool spring breeze instead of a hurricane? Who was he, to have any effect at all on *gods*?

“When you sleep easy, she’s still there, but I think it’s harder for her to track you. I can keep your dreams sweet, Cillian, and search for her in them. It will give you the sleep you need, as I promised—”

“No,” Cillian snapped. He held up a hand at Astra’s affronted glare. “I— Don’t get me wrong, I want to sleep well. But you can’t. You’re the *god of dreams*. Why should she bother corrupting your realm from some—some mystical back door, if she can get to you directly through me? It’s too dangerous. I’ve endured it this long; I’ll keep doing it—”

“No,” Astra said quietly. “No, you won’t. I saw the threads in your dreams. Faint outlines, but they’re there. She’s wearing you down. I don’t know why it’s taken so much longer than with the others, but it’s happening. I am at the height of my power at night, and dreams are my realm. She is just an interloper, there.”

“Then I’ll help you,” Cillian snarled, thinking of all the people he’d lost—for whom he’d grieved alone in his tent, sleep denied to him while friends and loved ones of the afflicted escaped into dreams, easing their sorrow for a time. He thought of how Roisin’s music turned darker, angry, the notes of her violin aching and sad in a way she could not allow herself to be in front of others. Of Tay pleading with Cillian to let her go with Gilly to wherever the puppets went. Of Jimmy solemnly shaking his head when Cillian demanded to know whether the Gentle Boatman came for their souls.

He thought of Carys’s screams in the dark, fish dead beneath suffocating algae, that horrible melody an omen.

He straightened his shoulders. “You won’t do it alone. If you can give me rest, I can help you. I won’t let her keep taking my people. If it’s me she wants—”

“She wants you and everyone else.” Astra studied him. “Have you ever tried giving up, letting her have you?”

“No,” Cillian said, jaw clenched. “Besides not wanting to end up a mindless puppet, being contrary felt like the only power I had left. But if it would save everyone—”

“It wouldn’t,” Astra interrupted. “Not in the long run. That kind of obsession ... it doesn’t end. But she is focused on you. Something about you being hunted and tormented is important to her.” He thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Having met you, I don’t think you could give in if you wanted to—but that doesn’t mean it isn’t dangerous to be around her.”

“Even so, that doesn’t give you an excuse to go traipsing after her in my dreams without me,” Cillian said, hands on his hips. “I can be as contrary to you as to her, you know.”

“Would you believe, I’d already figured that one out.” Astra was starting to sound like himself again, the version who’d nearly wept over a pepper at supper. “Be as contrary as you like, but I can just as easily make us fly on a magic pony to find her as anything, so remember who controls the dreamscapes, mortal.”

Cillian rolled his eyes. “I don’t think I could forget. What now? We just ... sleep?” He glanced down at his bedding. It would figure that the one morning he’d woken up rested, he’d have to go back to sleep.

“No. Though don’t worry, Cillian. I’d give you rest tonight even if you didn’t want to help me, I find your suffering such insomnia an insult.”

Cillian stared at him. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

Astra tapped his finger on his chin and tilted his head, miming deep thought. “Try ‘Thank you, Astra’?”

Cillian smiled. “Thank you, Astra. So, what are we going to do?”

“I think we need to find a seer,” Astra said. “They’re mortals who can peer into the realm beyond: waking dreamers, we call them. We need to know why Thora wants you so badly and find out how she’s getting into my realm. Then we’ll know how to stop her.”



“A seer?” Cillian blinked. “We have a Mislian here, with a demon. Should we ask him?”

“We don’t have to. Seers are mine, too, like the moon children. And I know where one is. I’ve been in his dreams before. He’s in Staria.”

“That’s almost convenient,” Cillian said, “since that’s where we’re going. Which means there has to be a catch, aye?”

“Aye, laddie,” Astra said, in a terrible attempt at Cillian’s accent. “Of course there is. The seer is the prince of Staria.”

“Of course he is.” Cillian sighed. “Of course he is.”

\* \* \*

ASTRA LEARNED a great deal about humanity that morning.

First, there was breakfast. The act of chewing, which had been a delightful novelty the night before, became mildly mortifying as soon as oats entered the scene. They kept sticking to his teeth, which he then had to *brush* with a stick that oozed something viscous that stung his tongue. And everyone did this, apparently. It was part of what humans had to do to function without their teeth rotting out of their mouths, which Astra thought was a joke until Ellie pulled him aside to explain.

Then there were the boots.

At Cillian’s direction—one might even say *insistence*—Astra went looking for Evar, the company tailor, and found him sitting on a rock outside one of the tents near the edge of camp. He was a small fellow, slender and wide-eyed, with messy black curls and a lovely dressing gown embroidered in red and gold. He nodded when Astra approached and made the sign for “Sit down.” When Astra sat, Evar smiled.

“You know sign language?” he signed. He half spoke the words, too, likely in case Astra couldn’t understand. As a god, Astra had no such difficulty. He nodded, and Evar went to

signing alone. “Good. I can hear a little, but not well, and not on my left side. Signing is easier. How can I help you?”

Astra explained that Cillian had told him to get “something more appropriate than those sandals” before the troupe started the next leg of their journey.

Evar nodded and ducked into the tent, returning a moment later with some wooden contraption. “Give me your feet, please.”

Bewildered, Astra lifted one foot, and Evar took it, placing the tool against it and compressing and extending bits and pieces seemingly at random. After doing the same to Astra’s other foot, he frowned, looking Astra up and down.

“Wait,” he signed, and disappeared back into the tent. Toward the center of camp, tents were being broken down in preparation for the troupe moving out, but the outskirts were as yet untouched. Returning with a pair of boots and heavy woolen socks, Evar set them down next to Astra. “They’re Cillian’s spares. You’re his friend, yes? The one everyone is saying thinks he’s a god?”

“I am the god of dreams,” Astra signed. Evar looked unconvinced. “Do you want me to prove it somehow?”

Evar blushed a furious pink, and Astra almost laughed at the sudden influx of daydreams drifting in the air. They were so powerful he could see them despite the sunshine, and they all involved Evar kneeling at Cillian’s feet or gazing fondly at him while he— Was Cillian surrounded by *horses*? Why was he running with horses? How was that attractive?

“My dreams are private,” Evar signed quickly, even as said dreams coalesced into one featuring silk bedsheets strewn with roses. Astra tried not to look at it too closely.

He wobbled away from Evar in boots that he was told fit him perfectly, but he kept tripping over the raised heel and tangling himself in his cloak. He finally had to fold the cloak over an arm so he could totter over to Cillian, who was helping a man named Sparrow break down a tent.

Cillian smiled faintly at Astra as he approached. “Still getting used to shoes?” he asked.

“The heels are very high,” Astra said, somewhat defensively. “And it seems you have an admirer in your camp.”

Cillian glanced at Sparrow, who was working on the other side of the tent, and lowered his voice. “Evar, yes, I know. He’s like a puppy. Falls in love with someone new every week. Watch out, he’ll be writing you poetry soon enough.”

“I’ve slept with my fair share of poets,” Astra said, and Cillian’s smile dropped like a stone. He turned, giving Astra his full attention, and Astra felt a tug in his belly like a physical pull, urging him to ... to what? Go to his knees? Yes, that was it. His body wanted to kneel, just because someone was glaring down at him with a stern expression and his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows.

In dreams, dominance and submission were largely about play. He liked to throw his dominance around at times—it was fun, and he enjoyed having a submissive worship him well into the night. He *could* submit, but it didn’t suit him. He was used to dominance and submission being somewhat fluid, though, and perhaps that was why, in the waking world, his alignment was proving similarly flexible.

“Don’t lead Evar on,” Cillian said, as that pull in Astra’s stomach burned with an unnatural heat. “We can’t help it if some pretty fellow in the audience breaks his heart, but he deserves better from us than to be picked up and easily discarded.”

“I wasn’t *talking* about picking anyone up.” Astra wasn’t sure he liked his body reacting this way. He ordered it to stop, but it clearly wasn’t listening, because as soon as Cillian reached out to take Astra’s chin in his hand, Astra wanted to drop his gaze.

“Don’t make games of my people, dream lord,” Cillian said.

Astra tried to infuse his voice with the dominance he wielded so easily in dreams, but it wouldn't come. "I had no intention."

Cillian let go of him and turned away, and Astra took a step back, trying not to let his confusion show. What was *happening* to him?

"And don't just stand there," Cillian said, as Astra tried to keep his heart from beating too fast and his cheeks from going pink. "We need to be on the road before noon. Unhitch that tent pole."

"That isn't why I'm here," Astra said, again trying and failing to push his dominance out through his voice.

Cillian cast him a dry look over his shoulder. "You're here to help, Lord Sleepyhead."

This time, Astra did blush. He furiously worked the tent peg loose from the ground and tried to shove the unnatural feeling from before far, far down as Cillian barked out orders and corrected his *tent-folding technique*. As though it mattered how someone folded a tent!

Astra nearly dropped a pile of canvas on his borrowed boots when he felt something tickling at the back of his neck. He touched it, and to his horror, his fingers came away wet. He turned to Cillian in accusation. "You've made my body expel something!"

Cillian snorted. "If I had a copper for every time I made someone do *that*," he said, and Roisin, walking by with an armful of pillows, grinned.

"I'm *wet*," Astra said.

Roisin barked out a cough, and Cillian smiled at her. "If I had a copper for every time I did *that*, too ..."

"You're in a mood," Astra muttered, wiping his hand on his thigh.

"A nice one," Roisin said. "It's been a while since I heard you laugh, Cillian."

“Not everyone can say they’ve made a god expel something,” Cillian said, and he and Roisin both made choked sniggering noises. Cillian only just managed to get himself under control before Astra was ready to shove his face into the dirt. “It’s called sweating, Astra. It’s what happens when you work.”

“It’s disgusting,” Astra said.

“Then take off that cloak. You’re walking around in about five pounds of feathers—that can’t help.”

Astra gave Cillian a wary look, then unpinned his cloak. To his chagrin, Cillian was right. As soon as the cool breeze touched his back, Astra felt better. He tried not to let it show, carefully folding his cloak and setting it down in one of the carts. He doubted anyone would try to steal it. In any case, if someone other than him touched it, they’d be asleep in seconds.

The camp disappeared like magic. The ring of carts and tents became an empty stretch of grass, and even the fire pit was covered in dirt and smoothed clean. The horses stamped and shifted as drivers hopped onto the carts, and everyone else took up positions to walk alongside, chatting quietly to each other. Cillian stood at the front of the line, looking far more aware than he’d been the evening before, and let out two sharp whistles that set the entire group in motion.

Astra had to admit that humanity had a point about boots. He missed feeling the grass tickling his toes, but the touch of leather on his skin was strangely comfortable. He’d never felt so much at once before, and it was nice to take a minute to process each sensation by itself, spreading his awareness up his body as his muscles strained and the cool mountain air caressed his cheeks.

“Look.” A young man was sitting in the back of one of the carts, a stack of papers on his knees. He pointed at something. “It’s a house in the grass!”

“Don’t tell tales, Jimmy.” Dante’s voice boomed from somewhere behind them.

“No, he’s right,” said the man walking with Ruben. He was a few years older than Jimmy, with dark hair and a scar across his mouth. “You can see it just over there.”

Astra walked around the cart to look, curious, and stopped when he saw the lump sticking out of the field. The stone that made up the ancient shepherd’s hut had been worn down by centuries of rain and snow, and the windows were collapsed, the round door just a pile of rubble. It looked small and lonely, far too tiny for a family to live in, and Astra stared at it as wind stirred the vines creeping over the walls.

“Hey.” Footsteps thumped behind him, and Astra turned to see Jimmy running in his direction. “You’ll get left behind.”

“I think I used to live here,” Astra said. “When I was young.”

“Oh.” Jimmy squinted at the house. “But it has to be a hundred years old.”

“More than that,” Astra said.

Jimmy looked at him for a minute, hands in his pockets. “Do you want us to say something for them? The people who lived here? I’m a ferryman, you know; I know a few words.”

Astra could see a touch of his brother’s influence on the boy, overlaying his spirit like a cloak. “No. They’ve already left this place, I’m sure. Thank you, though. That was kind of you.”

Jimmy shrugged and looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. “Oh, well. The Lord of Storms says you have to be kind.”

Astra smiled and followed Jimmy back to the carts, which were slowly moving down the mountainside. “He’s right. I can see he chose well with you. But aren’t you young to be a ferryman?”

“You’re pretty young to be the dream lord,” Jimmy said. Astra rolled his eyes, and Jimmy grinned at him. “I’m almost eighteen, anyhow. Or I will be next year. Sort of. Next year and a bit. But my parents take care of the dead for a living,

right? Crypt keepers. I'm just doing it a little differently, that's all."

"So you grew up near a crypt?"

"Not near one. *In* one. And can you believe I wasn't haunted once?"

"That's just insulting." Astra caught Cillian looking at them from a few yards away, where he was walking with Roisin. "You'd think you'd see at least one ghost."

"That's what I kept saying! But everyone said it was too morbid and I had to focus on school or whatever."

"Adults," Astra scoffed.

Jimmy nodded. "You're telling me."

"Astra!" Cillian called. "Quit corrupting the youth."

"I'm already corrupted," Jimmy shouted back.

"Hold your tongue," said a man near Jimmy's cart. He was covered in tattoos and piercings, and a gem glimmered on his tongue when he spoke. "There's only one bad seed in this walking circus, and it's me."

"Keep dreaming, Lochlan," said one of the men walking with Ruben.

"Quit eye-fucking me, Thibault, it's embarrassing."

The man next to Ruben—Thibault, Astra assumed—whipped out a knife and started twisting it in his fingers with a meaningful look at Lochlan. Lochlan winked, and Ruben grabbed the knife.

"He wants to fuck me so bad, I feel sorry for him," Lochlan said, tossing his hair.

"Lochlan, don't antagonize Thibault." Cillian glanced at Thibault, who looked away. "And you know what we said about knives."

"They're useful," Thibault said.

"Yeah," Jimmy said, jumping back onto the cart. "But maybe the dream keeper is the corrupting influence, after all."

Maybe Ma and Dad are right, and I *will* come back from this covered in whores and tattoos.”

“We can all only dream of such a life,” Lochlan said.

“I don’t,” Sparrow said out of nowhere. He spoke carefully, slowly, as though weighing each word. “I dream about cats.”

“Oh.” Lochlan cleared his throat. “That’s nice, Sparrow.”

“Always wanted a cat,” Sparrow said, and nodded once before walking on.

“Well,” said Roisin. “Now we’re going to have to get him one.”

Astra had never been around so many people at once before. People didn’t share dreams without Astra’s intervention, and while he could populate a dream with figures who moved about and spoke, they were more like actors in a play or shadows on a wall. They didn’t really exist. Astra was overwhelmed by the interweaving dynamics within the group of musicians, artists, and dancers. They were like a family, but not quite—and it made him think of his own family, strange as they were.

He only spoke to Azaiah in his river or through his companion, Nyx, when Nyx slept for the sheer pleasure of it. Arwyn loved sleeping as another form of excess. Levi’s dreams were wild and creative, and he’d taken Astra under his wing when he was young, urging Astra’s dream creations on to new heights. Ares’s dreams were quiet and somber, and Astra had spent centuries trying to make them laugh. But his siblings were never all together in one place.

Astra thought of the little shepherd’s hut sinking into the mountain, and he stumbled as a physical pain squeezed his chest. He blinked, eyes stinging, and pushed the image away.

He barely made it an hour on the road before his legs started to ache.

“Don’t be a baby,” Cillian said, as Astra collapsed in the back of a cart with his calves *screaming* in pain. He tapped Astra’s leg, and Astra glared at him. “We have a long way to



go to make it to Duciel, and you can't spend the whole time in the back of the cart."

"I'm covered in that horrible *sweating*, and my legs are burning," Astra said, flopping onto his back. "Living is *torture*."

"Yeah, kind of." Cillian smiled when Astra glared at him again. "I guess you have been sleeping on a chair for centuries."

"And yet all I receive is derision."

"Mm." Cillian sat on the edge of the cart next to him. "Let me see your legs. Did you stretch before we set out?"

"Stretch *how*?"

"Oh dear." Cillian placed both hands on Astra's right leg and started massaging the sore muscle. Astra made an involuntary sound, going still, and Cillian looked at him. "Did I hurt you?"

Astra buried his face in his elbow. "N-no."

After a moment, Cillian kept working at Astra's leg. His touch was firm and sure, and relief rolled through Astra like cool water. "I'll show you some stretches tomorrow morning. We won't make a dancer out of you, but you'll walk longer."

"I dance quite well in dreams, I'll have you know."

"Do you? You'll have to show me. How have you managed to cramp every muscle in your leg?"

"See? I'm not being unreasonable, I'm in *pain*." Astra bit back another sound as Cillian moved higher up his leg until he pressed his thumbs into the tender muscle behind Astra's knee. Astra did let out a faint moan at that, but Cillian didn't comment on it.

"Maybe you're being a *little* unreasonable," Cillian said. He patted Astra's thigh. "Let me see the other leg."

"I'll be fine," Astra said.

"Sure. Roll over, Your Imperial Sleepiness."

“You’re so *irreverent*.” Astra didn’t realize he’d rolled over until Cillian had already started to work on his other leg.

“That’s it,” Cillian said, and Astra felt a strange rush of pleasure burn through him, bewildering and lovely all at once. Why was he *pleased* to be obedient? Astra was never obedient. His brother Arwyn used to say if he cut Astra open, he’d find the word *Brat* engraved on his skull.

But Astra stayed still as Cillian massaged his leg, sinking into the sensation, and didn’t move again when Cillian got up. He lay there in the darkness of the cart, one hand on his forehead, his cheeks hot.

When he finally got up to walk again, the sun was starting to set. He could feel the first tendrils of his power returning to him, but his hair was still a mess and he was drenched in sweat, which made his clothes stick to his body and his boots uncomfortably hot. He staggered in the grass at the base of the mountain, trying not to look like he was in pain, and almost tipped over when Ruben bumped his shoulder.

“Dream Keeper,” Ruben said, in his slightly scratchy voice. “There’s a lake near here if you want to wash off. We’re all going for a swim before we set up camp.”

A swim? Astra had swum in dreams often enough. “Of course. Thank you.”

Ruben shrugged and hunched his shoulders. “Yeah. Okay.”

“That’s a glowing endorsement,” said one of the men who’d been walking with him, a slightly bigger fellow who looked about Ruben’s age. He held out a grubby hand. “Cedric. I keep Ruben and Thibault out of trouble, most days.”

“Do you?” said Thibault, passing by with his shirt over his shoulder. “That’s news to me.”

“Shut up, don’t ruin my chances in front of the hot new guy. Sorry,” Cedric added, smiling at Astra. “But you know, if you ever *do* want to experience the best Staria has to offer—”

“I can’t watch this,” Ruben said, grabbing Cedric by the collar of his shirt. “We’re done.”

“What the fuck, Ruben!”

Astra smiled as Cedric was dragged off, cursing. Cedric was a nice fellow, but Astra had a feeling Cillian would snap if Astra bedded one of his people. Very protective, that Cillian.

The lake came into view half an hour later, pristine and clear. When the others unhitched the horses and started stripping down, Astra wandered toward the lakeshore, looking for Cillian.

There. Cillian was already wading into the lake, hair hanging loose and his clothes neatly folded in the grass. Astra watched him as he dove and came up with a shout, and Astra stepped out of his sweaty clothes and eyed the water.

It seemed harmless enough.

He waded in, unbothered by his nakedness. There was no need for modesty in dreams, so why have it in the waking world? He let the water rise to his waist, cool and lovely against his hot skin, and mimicked the others by diving under the surface.

A minute later, a giggling dancer dragged Astra, flailing, to shore.

“Don’t know how to swim, do you?” she asked, slapping his back as Astra coughed lake water. “Poor lamb.”

“Perhaps I tried it wrong,” Astra wheezed, and the dancer cooed at him and patted his damp hair. In the lake, Cillian was treading water and clearly trying not to laugh. “I didn’t say I was the god of the ocean, you know.”

“The ocean doesn’t have a god,” Dante said, swimming past. “It is governed by science, not mysticism.”

“Oh, I’ll tell Leviathan that the next time I see him. He’ll be elated. Though he might also decide to eat science.”

“Stop antagonizing Dante,” Cillian called. “He likes it too much.”

Dante let out a gasp of outrage and swam over to Evar, who was scrubbing Sparrow’s hair.

Astra tried to fix his own hair, but it was hopelessly tangled, and he had to wait for sunset to straighten it out again. In the meantime, he wore a new set of clothes from Evar's stores, a flannel shirt and loose sleep pants, and ignored the looks Cillian kept giving him from across the fire.

"I know I don't look like a god," he said at last, when Cillian sat next to him.

"I don't know. The god of dreams wearing sleep pants seems fitting."

"Well, I'm glad I can amuse someone." He tried infusing his voice with dominance and found that he could draw on just a touch of it. How strange. Was his dominance like his godhood, receding with the sunlight? But that didn't happen to the other gods, surely. Why would it happen to him?

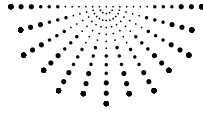
"How much longer until we reach Duciel?" Astra asked.

"Oh, another few days," Cillian said. He must have seen Astra's face fall. "What?"

"And we have to walk the whole way there? That's ... that's torture."

"That's life," Cillian said, clearly unbothered by Astra's plight. He patted Astra's leg. "Don't worry, Lord Sleepyhead. You're a god. I'm sure you can handle it."

## CHAPTER SIX



**T**he first time Cillian visited Duciel, it had been a much different city.

Oh, there'd been a palace in the middle with concentric rings of other districts surrounding it, but the city had still been in the planning stage, with very few buildings apart from the palace, the nobles' townhomes, and the merchants' district, which at the time housed the builders and lower classes who were responsible for the building *and* the commerce, allowing the nobility time to obsess over fixtures and sunken baths. In Kallistos, they didn't have nobles, and Cillian was never sure why anyone would. Maybe it was better than what Staria started out with—chieftains constantly at war over their wheat fields—but honestly, were the constant squabbling and inequality any different?

What interested Cillian—then and now—was the square in front of the palace. It had once been full of musicians, food carts, colorful stalls selling silk scarves and other artisan goods from all over Iperios, and even dancers. At some point the ratio of food to artisans began to switch, as the culture of Duciel trended more toward drawing room quartets than outdoor festivals, and in time, the square had become something else entirely.

Now, though, it seemed to be undergoing something of a renaissance, with ribbons and flags on the posts and a freshly painted fountain of nymphs with sparkling blue glass on the bottom. It was a busy location, Duciel being the largest city in Iperios, and it was always a coup to be able to perform there.

Their troupe mostly stuck to the smaller towns and villages throughout the country, which spanned most of the western continent. For a time it seemed the populace had found their sort of entertainment too *provincial* for the capital, but things had changed, as they always did, and now, here they were.

They'd had to set up camp outside the city proper, of course, since you couldn't camp in the Ring of Stars, the fanciful name for the nobles' district that surrounded the square. The palace was a gleaming gold structure rising like a sun on one side of the square, glowing in the morning light as they finished setting up for the performance.

It had been almost too easy to acquire the permit. After their performance near the Chastain dairy farm, he'd sent Dante and Griffith to Duciel to see what could be arranged. Dante was pompous and thought he was right about everything, but he'd been educated at the Two Sisters in Gerakia and still had contacts from his brief time as a professor of vocal studies. Those contacts came in helpful when the troupe wanted to book a last-minute performance or two while traveling.

He sent Griffith along because, despite Dante knowing three languages and his elocution being loud enough to rouse the dead, he was rather impossible to deal with. Griffith was, like Saoirse, from a long line of Kallistoi dancers and knew very well that their livelihood depended on impressing both those who loved dance and music for their own sake ... and those who loved art and were willing to pay to see it. Dante's connections could get them an audience, and Griffith's sincerity and reputation often got them the booking. Still, it was somewhat surprising that their booking was for the main square. Cillian hadn't danced there since the palace was finished.

As he stood in the early morning light, directing the troupe where to set up and hearing Roisin lead the musicians in tuning their instruments, he looked over at Astra. It was far too early for His Imperial Sleepiness to be awake, clearly, as he was huddled in his cape of feathers, trying to look as if he hadn't been alarmed the first time he'd yawned. Astra had

been as good as his word the last few nights, easing Cillian into dreams that didn't startle or frighten, ensuring he had a full night of rest and woke up refreshed. One night of that was a gift; several in a row felt like a miracle. And Cillian couldn't help thinking about Astra standing naked on the shore of that lake, pale skin glistening as he waded into the water. He'd been painfully beautiful ... right up until the moment he'd almost drowned.

If a god could drown.

He shook himself. It was only natural to find such a gorgeous being attractive, really. Astra was a god, even if he'd thought boots were a revelation and still had to occasionally be reminded how to chew. Every bite of food seemed to send him into paroxysms of joy. Ellie was both pleased and slightly confused by his effusive praise over her cooking, which was good but not shuddering-in-pleasure good.

Cillian turned to see the others stretching, already in their costumes for the performance. Cillian was also dressed for the show, barefoot as he always liked to be when he danced—after making sure there were no stray nails or broken glass on the surface. Dante, in his lovely tailored suit and top hat, was speaking animatedly to Evar, who kept nodding while trying to finish a last-minute alteration on his coat.

With everything going according to plan and the sounds of drums, Roisin's fiddle, and Cole's flute brightening the square, Cillian smiled and tilted his head back, letting the sun warm his face. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so good, and maybe that was why he found himself thinking about Astra's naked body and its warmth when he wound around Cillian in bed. When was the last time he'd been *awake* enough to feel desire for anyone? How ironic that it would be the god of dreams who stirred such feelings to life again.

Not that he'd do anything about it, of course. He'd already given Cedric a stern talking-to about flirting with gods, and given that he'd told Astra not to make romantic overtures to his people, he couldn't very well do anything about the low burn of attraction without seeming like a hypocrite. Besides, it was probably just the novel sensation of being well-rested and

alert that was making him feel this way—the same reason he ate more at breakfast and dinner, had barely touched his whiskey, and left the sweet herbs that he sometimes used as a last resort tucked away in his trunk. Astra was the one responsible, so likely this was gratitude, combined with appreciation for someone beautiful. Cillian *was* Kallistoi. His people gravitated toward beauty.

“You sure this prince is going to be here?” Cillian asked when Astra wandered over, disheveled in the way he always was in the morning.

His answer was a yawn, which again made Astra startle though he tried to hide it, and then a shrug. “There’s a palace behind you, Cillian. That’s where princes live.”

Cillian shook his head. Right, good to remember that when Astra wasn’t glowing with his godly power, he was a disaster who sneezed once and demanded to know why people didn’t do that all the time, and how precisely could he make himself do it again? Lochlan had said something about black pepper, and Roisin had thankfully intervened mere seconds before Astra snorted some up his nose.

“But we can’t dance our way into it,” Cillian said, foot tapping along with the music. He was half aware of it as he always was, listening for that sick melody, for Lady Thora’s—no, Pallas’s—refrain. It wasn’t there, now, just the run-through of the first piece they’d be playing for the crowds today.

“Then what good are you?” Astra sniffed, but he smiled—the effect diminished by the tangle of his hair.

“You need to braid that before you go to bed, Dream Lord,” Cillian said. “You’ll wake up with less knots in it.”

“There are so many things to *do* to keep this form presentable, I really don’t know why you all don’t just give up,” Astra whined, sounding less like a god and more like a cranky, spoiled nobleman.

He wasn’t, though—or he hadn’t been. Jimmy had taken Cillian aside after Astra’s first full day with them and told him about the little hut they’d passed, how Astra said he’d once



lived there. The hut was the only thing around for miles. Whatever other buildings might have been near it had disintegrated entirely, and Cillian had shivered at the thought that as long-lived as he was, Astra had been alive for centuries at the time of his own birth a few hundred years ago. Immortality had to be easier as a god than as a cursed mortal, but that didn't mean it hadn't been lonely. No wonder Astra eschewed the waking world for the realm of dreams. Cillian couldn't say he wouldn't have done the same, if his dreams were pleasant instead of nightmarish.

"I've visited this prince before," Astra was saying, the sun turning the bridge of his nose red. Cillian didn't bother pointing it out. He'd already noticed that any sunburn on Astra vanished the moment the sun did. "He has remarkable dreams. Most of them are about sex, which is pretty normal for humans, but some are about the future, about distant shores, and he won't remember them when he wakes."

Cillian blinked. "If he doesn't remember them, how are we going to get to speak to him?"

"My ways are not for you to know, mortal."

"You don't know yet, do you."

Astra tossed his head—then put his hands on his hips when the gesture merely left more of his knotted hair in his face. "Just go look pretty and jump around, and leave the rest to me."

"Look pretty and jump around? This from the man who almost drowned in the lake. Oh, excuse me," Cillian intoned, bowing with a hand over his heart. "The *god* who almost drowned."

"I might enjoy your company more when you're too tired to be irreverent," Astra said, sunburned nose tipped in the air.

Cillian smiled. "I don't believe you. I think you like this. I'm going to stretch, so do whatever planning you need to, but try doing it under the tent over there. I know your sunburn goes away at night, but it's a fair bit until then, aye?"

Astra frowned at him, touching his finger to the tip of his nose and wincing. “Fine.” He waved a hand, as imperious as a king dismissing a courtier ... if that king was surreptitiously trying to drag his fingers through his hair and untangle it.

Cillian sighed. “Hang on.” He went over to where Evar had finished Dante’s alterations and tapped him on the shoulder. Evar was listening to Dante monologue about how they’d made the Starian palace look like it was made of gold, and the look on his face made Cillian groan inwardly. If Evar’s newest crush was on Dante, though, at least Dante would be too oblivious to notice.

Evar glanced up at him, and Cillian tried to forget how Astra had mentioned the man’s dreams of Cillian and silk bedding. He knew Evar had carried a bit of a torch for him; many of his dancers did until they learned that sharing a bed with Cillian meant very little sleep—and not for any particularly enjoyable reason. “I need some ribbon and a comb, if you don’t mind.”

Evar nodded and turned to rummage through his sewing box, producing both a ribbon and a heavy comb. In addition to tailoring, he was often busy styling the dancers’ hair before a performance. Cillian returned to Astra with the comb and the ribbon and almost handed them over before realizing Astra probably wouldn’t know what to do with them. “Kneel and let me fix your hair, Dream Lord, or you won’t be able to see the prince even if he does show up.”

A strange feeling zinged up Cillian’s spine. Blood rushed to his head, like when he first smoked after a long time. His fingers tingled, and he felt a deep thrum in his chest, his stomach, and his cock. He had no idea what was happening, or why, or what it meant that his words felt so *weighty*. It was as if he’d walked into a lightning storm, all his nerves alight with sensation. His mouth went dry, and his focus sharpened to nothing but Astra, who stood wide-eyed before him, still in a way no human could be.

Cillian realized that what he’d just felt was natural dominance. It had to be; there was no other explanation, and he’d heard plenty of doms talk about it before. But Cillian,

who had no alignment and simply knelt or gave orders as his very occasional partners wanted, had never experienced it. Why now? Why would a *god* be the one to draw it out of him?

*Because that's how it would end the worst, of course, and that seems to be your alignment: self-destruction.*

To Cillian's shock, Astra went to his knees there on the stone, quiet and unresisting. Which meant he didn't see Cillian respond to being obeyed: the delicious warmth that overtook him, the bone-deep pleasure of having Astra submit.

"I'm just combing your hair," Cillian said when he regained his voice. "That's it."

"I know that," Astra snapped. "Get on with it."

Cillian swallowed hard and set about combing the tangles out of Astra's hair. Astra howled at the first pull of the comb as if Cillian were torturing him, kicking his boots and making a ruckus that should have had Cillian annoyed and shushing him, telling him not to make a scene, but somehow ... didn't. "Just be—just be still," he said almost desperately, when he realized with horror that Astra's bratty behavior was making it *worse*.

Astra went quiet, and Cillian nearly dropped the comb twice as he tended to Astra's long, silky hair. By the time it was smooth, Astra was quiet, shoulders having relocated from up around his ears, breathing easy. It reminded Cillian of the strange way Astra had responded to Cillian's leg massage in the cart. He made short work of braiding Astra's hair back and away from his face, then tied it neatly with a black silk ribbon that somehow matched his cloak perfectly.

"There," Cillian said gruffly. "That should be, ah. Better."

"Yes." Cillian couldn't quite read Astra's voice. "It is."

Astra remained on his knees. Cillian finally had to clear his throat. "You can get up now. That can't be comfortable."

Astra got gracefully to his feet, his back still to Cillian. "Thank you for torturing me and tying my hair up. That's so much better than waiting until nightfall."

“Great.” Cillian curled his fingers around the comb until the teeth bit into his palm. He shook himself, realizing he still needed to stretch so he could lead the dancers in their practice.

Cillian drifted over to where the dancers were going through the rigorous stretches that would limber their bodies, thick swathes of silk wrapped around the arches of their feet to pull them and provide resistance. He grabbed a length of fabric and sat down, still dazed.

“Getting pretty cozy with the dream lord, there, boss,” Vai said, leaning forward and folding herself in half as she grabbed her toes.

Cillian scowled as he wrapped the silk around his ankles and started to warm up his muscles. Just to see, he said, “Stop that.” It came out firm enough, but no electric zing accompanied the words, and he knew there was no natural dominance behind it—it felt like it always did when he told his dancers to behave.

Saoirse and Griffith exchanged amused looks, while Iwan grinned at him and Thibault elbowed Cedric with a knowing smirk.

“I mean it,” Cillian threatened. “I was fixing his hair because he’s too much of a disaster to know how to comb it.”

“What’s your excuse for why he has to sleep with you, then?” Vai said sweetly, batting her eyelashes at him. “His hair seems pretty messy when I see him coming out of there in the morning.”

“He’s the Lord of Dreams,” Cillian said, with a warning look. “If you think I won’t gladly share a tent in exchange for a night’s rest, you don’t know me.”

“Stop being a beast, Vai,” Saoirse said, giving her fellow dancer a glare of her own. “You know if anyone deserves a good night’s sleep, it’s the boss, here.”

“Thank you,” Cillian said dryly. “I appreciate it.”

Talk turned to the performance, but as they stretched, Cillian occasionally glanced around to see what the others were doing—and he would see Astra, his fingers reaching up

every so often to run down the braid Cillian had woven into his hair, like he still wasn't quite sure how it'd gotten there.

\* \* \*

HUNGER WAS A STRANGE THING.

People spoke as though it had one form, and a utilitarian one at that. They brushed it off during the long walk to Duciel—"You're just hungry; we'll stop for a meal soon"—but they didn't mention the other ways hunger could manifest, insidious and sly but no less ravenous.

Astra stroked his braid and watched Cillian give orders to the other dancers. He'd never been touched so much in his life. His parents, what little he remembered of them, had treated Astra like a storm: best left alone until he wore himself out. In dreams, there was no need for physical touch. He'd always thought his cloak was enough, together with the quiet hum of pleasure that came with navigating the space between dreams.

Cillian's touch lingered like the scent of smoke on his skin. A firm hand on his shoulder. Fingertips brushing a speck of dirt from Astra's forehead. The weight of Astra's hair being moved and brushed; the warmth of Cillian's body over him as he smoothed the braid. Everywhere Cillian had touched him ached with a hunger that made Astra's eyes sting and his thoughts stutter.

Did every mortal feel this way? Was all touch a form of provocation, stoking some need Astra had never felt before? He watched the others in the troupe. Every now and then, someone would reach out and pat their friend's shoulder or ankle as they stretched. Sparrow was lacing up Evar's boots for him by the edge of the platform while the musicians and dancers got ready, and there was something like hunger in Evar's eyes. And Cillian was touching everyone: straightening someone's posture here, fixing a ribbon there, arranging them all with careless ease. Astra watched them to see if they responded as he did, but they only nodded and went about their work, unmoved.

The crowd in the square grew. The sun was at its zenith, making Astra oddly aware of his mortal body—even his horns were warm—but people were wandering around as though they had nowhere else to be in the middle of the day. If they were nobility, he supposed, they could fill their time as they chose. Astra was jostled into a corner, and he hunched there like a ragged crow while Dante announced the troupe. Jimmy had already set up a puppet show for children a little ways off, and laughter drifted on the air as the first strains of music began to play.

Astra fell still as the dancers took the stage. He'd seen some of them practicing on the road, but nothing like this. They moved as though they were parts of a larger organism, stopping and starting in such a fashion that, together, their bodies formed unique shapes. There was a dragon on the crest of a wave, a flock of birds, an enormous tree bending and swaying in the breeze. Astra leaned forward, curious, as the first dancers parted to reveal a new set. Cillian was in the center, twisted up in ribbons held by the others, so tangled that Astra wondered for a moment if something had gone wrong.

Then Cillian started to dance.

At first, it looked like a struggle—Cillian trying to get free while other dancers tugged and shoved him about the stage. But then Astra saw the deliberate way Cillian moved, each step in time with the music, his arms tensing as he used the ribbons to direct his body. The other dancers were making a good show of pretending they were controlling him, but it was Cillian who was moving them, instead. It was subtle and beautiful, and Astra could barely breathe.

Then, rising at his back like a tide, he felt the dreaming world stir. The crowd was dreaming—all awake, all watching Cillian, but dreaming. Their dreams unfolded like flowers to the sun, dozens of visions of Cillian tied in silk or rope or chain, kneeling prettily on soft cushions or standing over them with a leash in his fist. They wanted him, these Starians. They craved him, yearned to possess him. And Astra lacked the power to brush the dreams away. He could only sit there, a strange sensation rising hot in his throat, as Cillian brought the

other dancers close and dropped the ribbons with a flourish, ending the dance.

Applause broke out over the plaza. Roisin came onto the stage as another dancer pretended to be entranced by her fiddle, but Astra couldn't look away from Cillian. He wasn't even sweating—or *expelling*, as half the troupe jokingly called it now—and he smiled as he helped tie up Vai's boots. He was tapping his foot to the sound of the fiddle, and instead of the irritable, exhausted man who'd danced like a spirit through Astra's forest, he was a young man in the height of his power. He was alive—awake—in a way Astra couldn't quite understand, and all Astra wanted to do was to cross the rope barrier between the audience and the stage and stare at Cillian until he figured out *why*.

Cillian looked up to meet his gaze, and Astra turned away.

“Excuse me.” Astra nearly jumped out of his skin as someone touched his shoulder. He turned to see a young man with reddish-brown hair and a wary smile who was clearly trying not to look at Astra's horns. “Sir. I have an invitation for you and, ah, the gentleman there”—he nodded toward Cillian—“to a private meeting with my friend.”

He gestured behind him, and Astra saw a young man with dark red hair, leaning on the arm of an older man who looked politely bored. It took Astra a second to recognize Adrien de Guillory, but only just—Adrien's dreams were so ambitious that they stood out among the many thousands of sleepers' thoughts Astra had experienced. At times they'd even leaked into Desire's realm.

“I can't deal with this one,” Arwyn had said, sneering in disgust. “He thinks just *wishing* is enough. At least other people offer me something, even if it turns to trash. Keep him in dreams, and let me fucking rest for once, Astra.”

Astra had thought Arwyn was being contrary, as usual, but then he'd stepped into Adrien's dreams, sat down in an unseen corner, and stared into the middle distance for nearly a week's worth of dreams. Adrien dreamt indulgently, recklessly, throwing half-formed ideas into the ether to become

enormous, rickety giants pushing at the borders of his mind. He not only had the imagination to let his dreams run wilder than most, he also had the power to make them reality—and with the magic of a seer flowing through his veins, that should have been overwhelming. His mind should have blocked his dreams out of self-defense. But it hadn't. Instead, it drove him, a mortal vessel for dreams bigger than himself, a man on the cusp of inheriting the throne of Staria.

Astra followed the messenger to Adrien, who inclined his head. The man at his side raised a brow when Astra didn't bow, but Astra was hardly going to bend the knee for a mortal, even if that mortal was a prince.

The fact that he'd knelt for Cillian was different. That was hair brushing. It didn't count.

"I believe we've met," Adrien said. He extended a hand, and Astra took it. "Adrien de Guillory. This is my husband, Isidore de Mortain, and my dear friend, Sabre de—"

"Rue," Sabre said, and for a second, his daydream was so vivid it was all Astra could see: of Sabre shoving Adrien into a duck pond, locking him in a room labeled "No," and climbing into bed with a lavender-haired man in a velvet suit. "Adrien."

"Yes, I have noted your look, tone, *and* eyebrows," Adrien said, letting go of Astra's hand. "And yours, Izzy. This is a magic thing." He turned his attention back to Astra. "Are you a demon, by any chance? Something related to Tanis or Summer?"

"I don't know those people," Astra said, as Sabre's daydream expanded to include two more ponds and a horse trough. "And no, I am not a demon."

Adrien looked pointedly at Astra's horns.

"It's an aesthetic choice." Astra doubted the prince of a country notorious for skepticism would believe the truthful answer. "But you could say my expertise lies in dreams."

"Wonderful," Isidore muttered in Adrien's ear. "You're inviting a dream demon to tea."



“He’s harmless,” Adrien whispered back, which stung a bit. Adrien raised his voice. “Please bring your husband when the show is over. We’d love to—”

“He isn’t my husband,” Astra said.

Adrien blinked slowly. “He isn’t? Oh. Oh, of course he isn’t. Silly me. I mean your *friend*.”

Astra peered at Adrien suspiciously. Why would a seer make such an obvious mistake? “We’re reluctant allies at best.”

“Naturally.”

“He’s simply a mortal with ... particular attributes that are relevant to a goal of mine. Nothing remotely special.”

“Of course,” Adrien said, looking at Cillian, who was dancing onto the stage like a fucking wisp of cloud on a goddamned lake of crystal. “Quite ordinary. I see that.”

Had letting Cillian braid his hair make it seem like they were something more? Was that a symbol of something in Staria? Surely Adrien hadn’t *seen* it. Cillian might have been brightening somewhat thanks to a few nights’ rest, but he was still irreverent and bossy, and Astra responded poorly to bossiness.

He tried not to sulk through Cillian’s next performance, which involved a scandalous lack of clothing and evoked the kind of daydreams Astra would rather kick aside, and stomped over as soon as Cillian was done.

“Well, you look like a crow who fell down a chimney,” Cillian said, pulling on a shirt and then sitting to lace up his boots. “What did the prince say? I saw him speaking to you.”

“I didn’t fall down a *chimney*.”

“Would you rather I say that you look like a brat in a sulk?” Cillian’s smile wasn’t unkind. “I can talk to them if it went wrong. I don’t know if I can arrange a meeting, but ...”

“He invited us to tea,” Astra said, “if you must know. I didn’t ruin it whatsoever, but I suppose your opinion of me is so poor that you expect me to burn bridges wherever I go.”

Cillian got up, and Astra tried not to notice that he had to look up to meet Cillian's eye without Astra's power giving him an extra inch of height. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry."

Astra stared at him, mouth open. "Oh."

Cillian tapped Astra's chin to shut his mouth. "We can go now. Jimmy and Roisin have a comedy thing next, and then it's a reel from Diabolos. They don't need me for that." He paused to say something to Dante, who puffed himself up and started strutting around, giving orders to dancers who promptly ignored him.

When they reached Adrien, Cillian bowed prettily, which made Astra want to kick him. Everyone in the waking world was so ... blasé about gods. Cillian certainly hadn't bowed to *him* that way.

But flattery seemed to work with royalty, because Adrien's watchdogs let them join him on a stroll through the palace, which was hardly as expansive as it was in Adrien's dreams. Everything Adrien dreamt of was bigger, it seemed. Even himself.

"No one should disturb us here," Adrien said, leading them through a doorway framed by wooden roses. The room they entered was small and cozy, full of plush blankets and pillows for kneeling, and instead of ringing for a servant, Adrien got up to take out the tea service himself. "Please, sit down and tell me why you're here."

Cillian opened his mouth, probably to say something diplomatic, but Astra spoke first.

"We need to speak to a Mislian seer," he said, and Adrien stilled as Sabre and Isidore each gave him a sharp look.

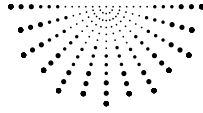
"And you believe I have access to one?" Adrien asked.

"I know you are one," Astra said. "Just as you know I'm not a demon."

Adrien sighed, set down the teapot, and turned around. "I suppose the pretense is unnecessary, since I've been seeing both of you in my shaving water for the past three weeks. All

right, then.” He picked up a pitcher of water and a bowl and brought them over to the table in front of the squashy floral couch. “Let’s see what you’re here for.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN



**D**espite having seen the palace in Duciel practically being built, Cillian had never been inside it. He'd never had a compelling reason to try, and the concept of nobility still made him nervous, given the circumstances under which he'd been cursed.

Cursed by a former *god*. It was incomprehensible, but if he dwelled too long on what he must have done to draw her notice, he'd never be able to think about anything else. And it didn't matter, not really. What mattered, now more than ever, was stopping her. Because Cillian had been given back the knowledge of what it was like to dance without the weight of exhaustion dragging him down, and with the combination of his renewed passion for his art, nights that weren't haunted by nightmares, and a renewed determination to find the wraith—the *god*—who'd cursed him ... for once in his long, long life, Cillian thought there just might be a way out of this whole predicament.

Except he couldn't worry about that right now. He had to focus instead on the fact that they were sitting in a palace with a future king who was *kneeling* next to the dark-haired man with the stormy gray eyes and neat beard. Cillian could tell the prince was a submissive and the man in the chair a dominant, and he glanced at Astra, wondering whether the dominant was affecting him as Cillian had, earlier.

Adrien poured water into a silver bowl, and the man—Isiodore de Mortain, his consort—cleared his throat.

“If someone would be so kind as to fill me in on what’s going on here, and by *someone*, I mean my husband.” The dominance threaded through his voice did nothing to Cillian, and he noticed it did very little to Astra, either.

“I told you,” Adrien said, staring into the water. “They’re the ones who were showing up in my shaving water. A dancer and a demon. Terribly sorry that I didn’t ... realize that wasn’t what you were.”

“Of course.” Astra sounded somewhat mollified. “Your nation isn’t used to my kind existing.”

Isiodore was staring at him, but then he switched his shrewd gaze to Cillian. “And you’re the dancer. Are you a god, too?”

Astra huffed, and Cillian couldn’t help it—he laughed. Loudly, and sharp, the sound so surprising that it startled *him* to hear it. “Hardly.” *Just cursed by one.*

Isiodore’s stormy gray eyes looked like chips of ice, and they didn’t warm, even a little, when he leveled a polite smile at Cillian. “Only asking, you understand. One wants to know how many immortals are about, in one’s palace.”

“I thought it was *his* palace,” Astra said with a nod toward Adrien, and Cillian wondered whether Astra understood that while *he* was a god, Cillian’s brand of immortality probably didn’t include being beheaded. Maybe hanging wouldn’t kill him, but he wasn’t exactly interested in finding out.

“It belongs to the royal family,” Isiodore said smoothly. “And while my husband might have a tie to forces beyond the, ah, mundane ... I am skeptical when it comes to strangers claiming to be gods.”

“I’m the only one who’s a god,” Astra said. “I thought we’d been over this.” He leaned forward, squinting at Isiodore. “I think I know your people. From Diabolos. Fond of cats?”

“I’m Starian,” Isiodore said. “My family has been here since the first king—”

“Yes, yes, but they were somewhere else before that.” Astra smiled at him, horns glinting in the light. He looked

human enough, but the horns were a distraction, as were his black eyes with their slight starlight glimmer. “I know the family. Stubborn assholes who might serve, but never bow.”

Prince Adrien gave a little clap of his hands. “That sounds exactly right.”

“My people can’t be from Diabolos,” Isiodore said, but there was a bit more warmth in his eyes. “I burn far too easily in the sun.”

Astra waved a hand. “It wasn’t Diabolos back then, and Declan still burns in the sun even though he’s—ah. Never mind.”

Isiodore and Adrien exchanged glances, and then Adrien gave Cillian a quizzical look, as if he weren’t quite sure what to make of him. Cillian returned the gaze, because hell if he knew, either.

“You’re not a god.” Adrien frowned. “No, but ... you’re something, aren’t you?”

“I’m a dance troupe master from Kallistos,” Cillian said. “I’ve just been around for a while. It’s probably that.”

“Hmm,” Adrien said, but left it at that. “Well, all right. Let’s see what you came here for, then.” He stared into the bowl on the table.

The room went silent, apart from the ticking of a nearby clock. Cillian found himself leaning forward and was amused to notice that Astra and Isiodore had done the same. He’d seen scrying before. Jas had been known to do it during festivals, with a mirror painted black and an old set of tarot cards. He assumed she, like most people who did such things for entertainment, was mostly making it up.

She certainly didn’t take as long at it as Prince Adrien, who was frowning into what, to Cillian, looked like normal water in a bowl. The clock ticked, and then, just as Cillian was beginning to wonder if this was a prank, Adrien started humming under his breath. His eyes were wide as he stared unblinking into the water.

“You’re searching for someone,” he said, which made Cillian roll his eyes because ... really? If not for the fact that this was the future *king of Staria*, he would be certain they were having him on. But why would a prince pretend to scry for a dancer and a man with horns who claimed to be a god?

Honestly, why had they even let Astra and Cillian in here in the first place?

“Yes,” Astra said, voice giving nothing away. “We are searching for someone.”

“But this someone ... No. It’s someone, but it’s *something*, too. They’re the ... same?” Adrien hummed some more and squinted at the water. “I see a festival somewhere nearby, in ... d’Hiver, I think. Yes. Near a tree by the ocean, a little village. Someone making a broom?” He looked up at Isiodore. “Do they do that in d’Hiver?”

“Make brooms? I’d imagine, if they want to keep a clean house.”

Adrien huffed, but a smile played around his mouth. “The festival. It cleans out the old in the spring, right? It’s a folk ritual.”

“Yes,” Isiodore said. “They have a lot of those up there. It’s a fairly isolated community and has ... older traditions that, I’m told, predate Staria itself.”

Adrien went back to his bowl. “There’s also stones, rocks ... and dragons, someone with a drum? And in Thalassa, waves and the fishermen who dive in after them ...”

“I ... see,” Cillian said, very carefully. He had no idea what this had to do with anything. It didn’t seem helpful. The prince was telling them about, what, folk traditions all over Iperios? How was that supposed to help them find Pallas?

Before he could ask, Adrien started humming again. Louder, and this time, the hairs on the back of Cillian’s neck stood up in alarm, because while it was vague and a little too slow ... he knew the tune.

He gave Astra a sharp look, but Astra was clearly ignoring him on purpose, and something was glowing in his eyes.

Adrien didn't notice, but Cillian was certain that Isiodore did.

"Now I see both of you," Adrien said. "There's water, a lot of it ... between two hills of green, flowing fast. A ... river?"

Cillian thought of the river in Kallistos, the decaying manor and the algae-filled lake, and tried not to shudder.

"There are—wooden people," Adrien said, voice going soft, almost dreamy. He kept humming, and the song was taking shape now, the familiar, twisted refrain making sweat break out on Cillian's brow and his heart race unpleasantly. "And both of you, yes, and ... snakes, I think they're snakes ..."

Astra looked at him, now, stars bright in his fathomless, night-sky eyes. He recognized the song, too.

Adrien's humming grew louder, and the song was unmistakable. "Pestilence's Refrain," whatever the fuck it was, Cillian didn't think he could sit still another minute, but he found himself incapable of moving. He dug his nails into his palms and tried to breathe, tried to get his muscles to work to stand up, stop this, do *something*—

"Wait," Adrien said. "It isn't snakes. It's—*string*." With that, he plunged a hand into the water, and for just a heartbeat ... Cillian saw something reflecting in the water before it rippled under the sudden disturbance, something like a grinning face in the curtains behind Adrien, and something long, thin, and red in the water, like a ribbon of spilled blood.

His body finally moved, out of sheer terror. He reached out and knocked aside the bowl, sending it crashing to the floor and spilling water all over the table *and* the prince. "We need to go. I'm sorry. We never should have come here."

Adrien jumped to his feet, and for half a second, Cillian wondered if he was going to call for a guard to have them arrested for ... what? Aggressive water spilling? Of course, Adrien was a prince. He could have them arrested for breathing wrong, if he wanted.

"Is my prince in danger?" Isiodore demanded, one hand on the hilt of his sword, which Cillian doubted was ceremonial.



“Have you wrought some dark magic?”

“No,” Astra said, his voice pensive. “It’s what we’re looking for.”

“My humblest apologies,” Isiodore said icily, “but I think you’re running *from* something, not trying to find it.”

“Yes,” Astra said. “That.”

Isiodore opened his mouth again, but Adrien said in a firm voice, “You’re chasing something, and someone is chasing you because they don’t want you to find it. I don’t know what that means, but I hope it helped.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Cillian said. He bowed, though he wanted to be out of this room and his body was still covered in lingering chills from the adrenaline spike that hadn’t quite eased yet. “We appreciate it. Astra? Any other questions?”

“No.” Astra rose to his feet, tugging idly at the end of his braid. “Thank you. We’ll find our way out.”

“You will not,” Isiodore said. “I’ll escort you. Protocol, you understand.”

His steely gaze made it clear that he didn’t care whether they understood or not. Cillian didn’t argue. He simply headed toward the door, eager to be out of there. A glance at the curtains showed no wraithlike face, but he could still hear that fucking melody as Isiodore led them down the marble hallways. It echoed in their footfalls, in the opening and closing of doors, the murmurs of nobles speaking in small groups, servants passing by with trays.

The prince’s consort brought them to a side door, pushed it open, and waved them through. “Don’t come back.”

Astra looked affronted. Cillian, unable to help himself, barked out a sharp laugh. He said nothing, though, and the door shut behind them, quietly but with all the finality of a war cannon.

Astra whirled on Cillian, nose in the air, and Cillian pretended not to notice he had freckles on it, or that he’d

somehow ended up with a string of greenery caught on one of his horns. "I'm a *god*, and they threw me out like a house cat!"

"House cats live inside," Cillian said. "It's right there in the name. And they threw us both out. More like roaches, I think."

"Who throws out roaches? You step on them. Your metaphors are bad," Astra said, as if he hadn't started it. "Anyway, now I know where we're supposed to go, at least."

"What? Where?" Cillian followed him down the steps and out onto the street that ran alongside the square. It would soon be time to meet the others outside Duciel; he didn't think the prince's hospitality would extend to a night within the city walls. Or, rather, the prince's husband's hospitality. They were lucky it had extended to the palace door and not the dungeon.

"Didn't you hear him? Prince Adrien. He said we were searching for something, and someone was chasing us. It's a cat-and-mouse game, unless you have a problem with that metaphor and want to scold me again?"

Cillian reached up and snagged the greenery from Astra's horns. Astra batted at him like an actual cat. "No, because that one makes sense, even if what you said doesn't."

"It's not my fault you're not as smart as me. Didn't you hear what all those places had in common?"

Cillian shrugged. "It sounded like a tour across Iperios, which I've done enough times for it to have lost its novelty."

"You're being very dense, and I suspect it's on purpose." Astra narrowed his eyes, which weren't quite so otherworldly now, and snapped, "What was everyone doing, in the visions the prince told us about?"

"Sweeping with handmade brooms, fishing ...? We're supposed to take up folk customs?" He stopped. "Folk customs? Is that what you're trying so poorly to allude to?"

"It's not *my* fault your human brain isn't as clever as my godly one," said the man who'd dragged a fern out of the palace on his head. "Yes. Folk traditions that involve sympathetic magic and making things: artistry with a practical

purpose. Pallas would have hated that. Arwyn always said she only liked art that existed for its own sake.”

“So we go make brooms and, what? Sweep her into a pile of leaves at the doorway?” Cillian raked a hand through his hair. “That can’t possibly work.”

“I don’t *know*, Cillian, but we should at least see what happens. The timing is good, because that practice, in d’Hiver? It’s a spring ritual. I know, because people make herb sachets for sleep during it.”

“Great, so we go somewhere *cold* and make brooms. Hey, don’t glare at me, Lord Sleepyhead. I’m willing to try it. Besides, Jas is from d’Hiver. You met her—one of my dancers.” He thought about it. It would be chilly still in d’Hiver, which was in northern Staria, close to the winter sea. But people there didn’t often get a chance to see dancers, and they always turned out for a festival, even in cooler weather.

“What about the song?” Cillian asked. “Adrien was humming it, and the thing with the string ...”

“It means we don’t have time to stand around and argue, I think,” Astra said. “Let’s go to d’Hiver and see if we can find anything.” He tugged at the end of his braid again, which Cillian noticed he’d been doing a lot.

“All right.” Cillian wondered if Pallas was out there, smiling in the edges of rotted trees and lurking in gutted buildings, watching them, tying threads of red into knots, waiting, waiting. If anything they’d learned from Adrien would help them defeat her.

The melody echoed in his head, discordant and sickening, and Cillian dragged in a slow, even breath. Somehow, he had to find a way.

“Stop that,” he told Astra, who was tugging on his braid again. “If you want someone to pull your hair so badly, just ask me.”

Astra tripped, and Cillian grabbed his arm to steady him.

“I didn’t think gods would be so clumsy. Maybe I should teach you to dance. It might help you learn how to walk.”

“Someone’s going to have a *very* unpleasant dream about spiders and fire ants tonight.”

“You didn’t even know what fire ants were until two days ago, remember?” Cillian snorted, taking the lead, since it was clear Astra had no idea where they were going and was heading toward what Cillian was almost certain was the pleasure district. “You said we were making them up when we told you about them.”

“They sound fake, Cillian. Even you have to admit the idea is absurd.”

“You’re walking around with horns,” Cillian pointed out.

“That are *far* more useful than fire ants,” Astra snapped. “And don’t you dare ask how, because you’re too ... unimportant to know godly secrets like that.”

Cillian was struck by a vivid image of what exactly he could do with those horns—namely, hold them for leverage while he fucked Astra. The thought nearly made *him* stumble, but he was a dancer, and luckily, Astra didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary.

Cillian had no idea why, after what he’d just witnessed in the palace, he was thinking about fucking Astra. But he remembered that morning, when Astra knelt and he felt that odd stirring of dominance ... and honestly, what else would those horns be *for*?

It had been a long time since he’d thought about sex at all. He’d blame it on all the sleep he’d been getting.

\* \* \*

ASTRA WAS DISAPPOINTED that they couldn’t stay in Duciel—the dreams he touched in the city were always so varied and strange that he was curious about what kind of place would house so many conflicting dreamscapes at once—but he was slowly getting used to setting up tents with the others, and his muscles didn’t ache as much as they used to. It was almost pleasant, not that he would tell Cillian that. Cillian had a habit

of arranging something he called *chores*, which Astra felt was a form of torture mortals used to abuse their power over others—specifically over Astra, who shouldn't have been *under Cillian* in the first place.

Most of the troupe shared tents, and Astra was starting to get a grasp of the complex social politics that determined who slept where on any given night. If someone insulted another person's costume or interrupted them during practice, they were shunted off to another tent until they apologized properly. Dante called that "needless dramatics," but Astra noticed that he hopped tents more than anyone.

The only person who slept alone was Jimmy, who was the youngest person in the troupe and tended to stay up all night with his puppets anyway. Astra helped him set up his tent outside Duciel, and Jimmy shrugged when Astra asked him about the situation.

"It's a rule, since I'm not of age where I'm from, yet." Jimmy rolled his eyes as he hammered in a tent peg. "I don't mind, but it's weird sleeping alone sometimes. My family all lives in one room, you know. In the crypts." He paused. "It's not that strange when you grow up with it."

"I used to live like that, I think," Astra said. "All in one room, not in a crypt. My sibling sleeps in one of those, though."

"You have a sibling? Oh. Right. My lord Death." Jimmy made a gesture over his heart, an odd ritual Astra hadn't seen before.

"I have several siblings, actually. But the one I meant is War. They've slept in a tomb in Arktos for centuries, now. Since before I came along."

"War is sleeping? Can they ... wake up, or ...?"

"I think they can. I tried to wake them up a few times, when I was young, but they insisted they weren't ready yet." Astra sighed.

"Yeah, I get you." Jimmy nodded somberly. "It sucks being the youngest, doesn't it? Nobody listens."

“Sometimes they do if you give them dreams of seagulls shitting on them for three weeks straight.”

Jimmy laughed. “See, that’s cool. Can Lord Death teach me how to do that?”

Astra shook his head.

“Really, only you?” Jimmy thought for a moment. “Can I be a ferryman *and* a dream-keeping apprentice?”

“Stick to one god at a time,” Astra said. He smiled when Jimmy shrugged.

“Oh, well. It was worth a try.”

Astra watched Jimmy disappear into his tent, then turned to make out Cillian’s, sitting a little way down the line. A light glowed from inside, and when Astra clambered in, he found Cillian surrounded by pillows, marking out lines in a battered notebook. He glanced up at Astra, then returned to the book, as though Astra were no more than a wind pushing the tent flap aside.

“It’s our pay schedule,” Cillian said, before Astra could ask. “And the cost of repairs ... and supplies, and more food ...”

“That sounds like a perfect way to bore yourself to sleep,” Astra said, flopping down next to Cillian. His power was returning with the growing dark, but he hadn’t undone his braid, though it was starting to frizz around the edges. “Do you often take in people as young as Jimmy?”

“What?” Cillian blinked a few times. “Oh. No. Sometimes kids try to join up. They’re usually running from a bad situation at home, or they have nowhere else to go. There’s nothing you can really do to help them, since if you did take them in, you could get charged with kidnapping. Jimmy’s parents signed off to let him join the troupe, but it took some doing. The terrible three—that’s Thibault, Ruben, and Cedric—they were thieves when I met them. Three scrawny orphans trying to pick my pockets, like I couldn’t tell a ruse when I saw one.” He smiled fondly. “I told them to come back in a few years and try out for a place in the troupe, but they

wouldn't listen. They kept following me around until I gave in."

"Then there's Gilly."

"Ah." Cillian's smile faded. "Yes. She was an adult, at least. Just ... young, like Tay. Barely old enough to get away from her family without being dragged back, not that anyone could drag her far from Roisin." He went quiet, turning the book around in his hands. "I shouldn't have let any of them in. Not with *her* following me."

Astra reached out, tentatively, and touched Cillian's arm. Cillian turned to look at him. "You said most of them were running from something. Maybe what they're running from was worse."

"Nothing is worse than this," Cillian said.

"They don't know that." Astra touched his stomach where the crossbow scar was and thought back to his dim memories of fleeing the mountainside on Peppermint. "Maybe even a cursed shelter can still be a haven, for some."

Cillian stared into the distance, his gaze vague. "Gilly and Roisin never talked about their family, but you learn to see the scars others don't notice, after a while. I offered to let Roisin go with a pension after Gilly ... changed, but." He looked at Astra, and his expression sharpened. "You understand why they didn't want to go home, don't you?"

Astra tried to sound detached. "You see many things in nightmares, over the centuries."

"Right." Cillian's gaze lingered uncomfortably long. "Nightmares." He stretched out on the pillows, and Astra couldn't help but notice his lithe form, the way the muscles of his legs tensed and relaxed, the arch of his back. Astra climbed over him as usual, but he felt too warm, and when he touched Cillian's cheek, he thought of Cillian offering orphaned children a place to stay, caring for young, desperate people who had nowhere safe to run. It was hard to remember that this was the same man who'd backtalked him as they left the palace, and Astra called on his power before he could blurt out

something unwise. Cillian's eyelids drooped, and Astra sank with him into dreams, where they landed in the familiar, quiet hillside covered with flowers.

Astra plucked a blossom, which burst into purple fire that flew away in the shape of a bird, and Cillian looked up to follow its path across the sky.

"You should really try doing something in your dreams," Astra said. Cillian gave him a dubious look. "Most people do. You never had dreams, normal dreams, before the curse?"

"Nothing I can remember," Cillian said. "I always thought dreams were out of our hands."

"Hardly. You've never flown in a dream?" Astra hovered a few inches above the grass, and Cillian stood up, looking as skeptical as he had when Astra first introduced himself as a god. "Just be aware of yourself. Acknowledge that you're dreaming, and that you have control, and you'll be able to do it."

"Right, yeah, sounds simple." Cillian looked down at his feet.

"You aren't even trying." Astra moved his hand, and Cillian yelped as he was lifted a few feet into the air, limbs flailing for balance. Astra grinned and drifted over to him. "Very elegant, dancer." He twirled his finger, and Cillian started to slowly rotate, head over heels. "Take over if you don't want me to keep you upside down all night."

"You're doing this because I called you clumsy, aren't you?" Cillian asked, but he was smiling as he tried to right himself. It was almost adorable.

"Yes. Also no. Just move like you would when you're swimming."

"You don't know how to swim."

Astra narrowed his eyes. "I can summon a shark right now, you know. Twenty sharks."

"I'm terrified," Cillian said, still moving at Astra's command.



“Sharks with knives.”

“Knives where? Tied to their heads with rope?” Cillian snorted. “On their fins? Sharks with little knives on their flippers?”

“You aren’t taking me seriously.”

“Sharks made of knives?” Cillian laughed. “Knife sharks. Gods. The horror. The sea will never be safe again. Please make a knife shark. That’s all I want in the world right now.”

“Why are you like this?” Astra asked, then drew back in surprise as Cillian finally did start to influence his bland, unchanging dreamscape. A mass of blades appeared in the sky, floating in the vague shape of a fish, and Cillian burst out laughing so hard Astra could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks in their physical bodies, dampening his fingers.

“It’s so beautiful,” Cillian wheezed, and Astra sullenly had a cloud swallow the shark whole. “Oh my gods. Oh gods. Do that again.”

“This is supposed to be instructional,” Astra said, but he couldn’t help smiling. He turned Cillian right side up again. “Do something else. What do you want to dream about?”

“I don’t know,” Cillian said, still chuckling. “I can dream anything?”

“So long as it isn’t a knife shark,” Astra said, and Cillian snorted again.

“A knife whale,” he whispered.

“No.” Astra squinted at him. “You aren’t like this when you’re awake, most of the time.”

“I’m not exhausted at the moment.” Cillian took a shaky step across the air. “Interesting. I think ... Yes, I know what I want.” He smiled at Astra, who narrowed his eyes. A laughing, joking Cillian was unsettling. But when Astra took a wary step back, his foot landed on a hard surface, and he looked down to find himself in a blue chiton and laced-up boots with heels that clicked on a marble floor.

Which was impossible.

Mortals had power over their own dreams. Some of them didn't know that or couldn't properly harness it, but it was true. However, they couldn't control Astra. They couldn't change his appearance or make him appear or disappear. They couldn't alter one of his dream creations if he put his power into it. Astra tried to shift his outfit back, and Cillian frowned—and that odd feeling from earlier returned, heat building low in Astra's belly, pulling him toward Cillian.

"Maybe black is better," Cillian said, clearly misreading Astra's alarm, and the chiton became the color of the night sky, dotted with glittering spots like stars. Astra stared at Cillian, who just took his hand while amorphous shapes appeared around them. Music played where Cillian stepped, and when he pulled Astra after him, Astra stumbled.

"What are you doing?"

"This isn't right?" Cillian tilted his head. "You said I could control my dreams."

"Yes, but—"

"And I did say I would teach you to dance," Cillian said. Astra felt that tug again and took a step back.

Cillian gave him an odd look, but Astra just drew himself up, pulling on his power. "If you can find me," he said, and let his magic sweep over Cillian's dance floor. The other dancers turned from gauzy shapes into realistic, lifelike figures in elaborate costumes. Some wore enormous ball gowns in the Starian style, others sleek dresses and suits, and still others sported Thalassan festival outfits or the cloaks sewn with bells that people wore in Diabolos. Everyone wore a mask, some resembling the faces of animals while others sprouted feathers or spiked crowns, and Astra slipped among them, shifting his form as Cillian peered at each dancer in turn.

The music changed when Cillian took a dancer's hand. It was a waltz, something Astra had heard in the dreams of a musician in d'Hiver, but of course Cillian seemed familiar with it. He moved a few steps with his companion, shook his head, and passed on to another. Each time, Astra gave Cillian's partner a touch of his own appearance—his smile, his eyes, the

haughty tilt of his head—but Cillian moved between them fluidly, never once disrupting the rhythm of the dance.

Astra followed him, hiding behind a mask shaped like a bird's beak. What *was* Cillian? How could he affect Astra? Was it a gift from the forest? Whatever made Pallas curse him? Was he special, somehow, a dreamer so rare even Astra had never met another like him?

Astra startled as Cillian turned to face him, and Cillian smiled. "There you are," Cillian said, taking Astra's hands.

"How ..." Astra staggered after him. Cillian moved him with the music, and that heat started to build again, throwing Astra off-balance. "How did you know?"

"Easy." Cillian tugged on Astra's horns. Astra gasped, and Cillian stopped. "Does that hurt you?"

"No, I ..." Astra couldn't explain the thrill that ran through him at the touch of fingers on his horns. "You're ... holding them in the tent. In the physical world."

"I am?" Cillian slid his hands along the horns, then tugged them again. Astra let out a sound, then, involuntary and mortifying, and Cillian's brows knit together. He pulled Astra lower still, so Astra was bending over him. The other dancers still spun and stepped around them, moving with the music that wound through the dream, but Astra was unable to look anywhere but at his feet, too aware of Cillian's grip on his horns.

"Why won't you look at me?" Cillian asked. "I thought you were a dominant."

"I am," Astra said, but it was ... it was wrong, somehow. "I was. I don't know. You're doing something to me."

"You told me to take control," Cillian said, something odd reverberating in his voice. "Look at me, Astra."

Astra looked, unable to resist, and Cillian leaned in to press his lips to Astra's.

Fire burned through him. The dancers fell away, the dance floor crumbled, and Astra found himself reaching for Cillian

with that hunger he couldn't name. He returned the kiss, drawing Cillian closer with a hand low on his back, and when gave his horns another tug, Astra moaned into his mouth.

He hadn't realized he'd closed his eyes until Cillian's voice rang in his ears again, echoing with that odd magic—with dominance. "I told you to look at me."

Astra opened his eyes.

He was in Cillian's tent, awake despite the late hour, with Cillian's hands on his horns and Astra's cock hard against Cillian's thigh. Cillian looked up at him, then let go of Astra's horns to push him onto his back against the pillows.

"You're a submissive," Cillian said. "Or you can change ... Is it because you're the dream keeper?"

"You just used dominance," Astra said, breathless and overheated. "What's your excuse?"

"I don't know." Cillian searched Astra's face.

"I don't know, either. This only started when you came to the forest."

"Oh, right, it couldn't have been you. It had to be the meddling mortal." Cillian tipped Astra's chin up with a finger, and Astra shivered. "You'd think a god with an ego the size of Iperios would want to be a dom."

"You're saying I want—"

Cillian slid his hand to Astra's throat and held it there, and Astra went still. "Yes," Cillian said softly. "I think you do. I think maybe ... this is what you are, underneath. Not the puffed-up pigeon strutting around with his ruff sticking out."

"A puffed-up pigeon?" Astra cried.

"Exactly. One of the expensive ones nobles keep as pets. But you're really something else."

"So are you," Astra said. "I just can't figure out what, yet."

"That's called being mortal. We spend our whole lives figuring it out." Cillian moved over him, and Astra gasped as

Cillian's thigh rubbed his cock. "You're sensitive. Have you never done this before?"

"What? Of course." Heat rose in his cheeks. "I've had many lovers."

"In dreams," Cillian said, as though to himself. "Did they touch you?"

Astra couldn't think properly. Cillian kept moving against him, making his thoughts scatter and fail to re-form. "I ... no. Yes. Sort of."

"So they didn't." Cillian paused, and Astra swallowed a whine. "You've never been with anyone, really, then."

Astra gaped at him, trying to drag together an ounce of dignity, but it all fled when footsteps thumped in the grass and the tent flap opened. Cillian and Astra sprang apart as Roisin blinked at them, her expression dry.

"Right," she said, as Astra grabbed a pillow to cover himself. "Cillian. One of the horses got out, and he's being a tricky little ass. Can you help? Sparrow got kicked, and Evar's crying—it's a whole thing."

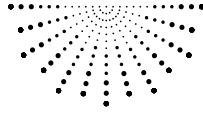
"Sure," Cillian said, looking about as embarrassed as Astra felt.

"You're not too busy?" Roisin asked, looking between the two of them.

"No," Astra and Cillian said at once, and Cillian got up, smoothing his hair.

"All right," Roisin said, drawing back as Cillian started putting on his boots. "Anything you say."

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Cillian had been telling himself the same thing the entire way to d'Hiver: that it didn't matter that Astra was—technically, in the waking world—a virgin. A god, and a virgin. Who'd nearly melted into a puddle when Cillian grabbed his horns, which told Cillian very clearly that he needed to be careful. Because the look on Astra's face that night outside Duciel, when Cillian pressed his thigh against Astra's cock—

*Stop thinking about it.*

Normally, this would be easy. Cillian wasn't celibate, but the time between his lovers had increased over the years. It was simply too difficult to court anyone when he traveled so much, and he had a strict *no troupe members* rule ever since a liaison had gone south, oh, twenty or thirty years ago. Most people in his troupe wanted no more than a night or two in bed with him, but some, like Evar, had other ideas. Ideas about relationships, moonlit nights, and romantic declarations that Cillian had no ability—or desire—to make.

He knew what would happen if he ever fell in love: the whisper of that insidious melody growing into a symphony, the wooden smile, the red strings. And even if his partner *weren't* targeted by the wraith—or former god, though he hadn't known that at the time—what future did they really have with him? Cillian would never grow old, and his partner would. Who would accept that? Being mistaken for Cillian's parent, or *grandparent*, because Cillian was cursed never to age? Not to mention Cillian's constant insomnia, which meant

anyone who slept beside him for more than a night or two would also suffer the trials of restless sleep. And in the end he would watch them die, while he looked the same as he had at thirty-two. No, it was an all-around bad idea, having someone for more than a night or two. And even that faded away when it seemed the reward was no longer worth the effort.

Until an absolute brat of a dream god made a cloud swallow his knife shark, and Cillian's libido woke up just as his body and mind finally had a chance to *rest*.

His life was ridiculous. There was no other word for it.

Astra was also— Well. He was a lot of things, but apparently the horns did it for Cillian, even if he would rather die than admit it. And Astra *was* the reason he was rested enough to want to fuck something that wasn't his own hand in the first place ... but Astra was a *god*, and a rather annoying one, at that. Was the Tempest as much of a brat? Death, when Cillian met him, had smiled kindly and spoken of his lost love. The former god of art was a corrupted wraith with some sort of vendetta against him, but Astra was—Astra was—

*Infuriating. Clever. Beautiful. Ridiculous.*

It didn't matter. Astra was a god, Cillian was a cursed mortal trying to thwart a corrupted god, and the last thing this situation needed was his own indecision over wanting to have sex with a man who was astounded by black pepper and didn't believe in *fire ants*.

“Are you okay?”

Cillian startled as he positioned a box of supplies in the cart. Manual labor wasn't his favorite pastime, but he'd hoped moving around would help get his mind off Astra, who still, days after that dream kiss and abortive waking exchange, slept curled up next to him like a cat with no sense of personal space—so, a cat—who could also make him dream about a lake full of monster fish that wanted to chomp his dick off if he chose to.

“Sure,” Cillian said, banishing the thought of dick-munching fish before Astra somehow figured it out and used it

against him. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Roisin squinted at him. “You— Do I need to say it?”

“Yes, if you want me to know what the fuck you’re talking about.” Cillian smiled at her. “I’m sleeping. Aren’t you happy about that?”

“Of course.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Astra. That’s why you’re sleeping, right?”

Cillian shrugged. “Depends on what you mean by that.”

“Cillian. I’m not a fool. You’re fucking him, aren’t you?”

*No, sadly.* He tried not to scowl. “No.”

“Oh. Right. So you were ... wrestling? That night, when I walked in.” Roisin smirked. “You don’t have to lie.”

“And I don’t have to answer your questions about my personal life.”

“Hard to answer a question about something that doesn’t exist,” she replied without wasting a beat.

“That’s what I’m saying,” he said, forcing his voice to be light. “I don’t have a personal life, so there’s nothing to ask me about.”

It didn’t help that she looked so much like Carys, the musician he’d heard torn to pieces by Lady Thora’s rage. Though Cillian suspected that in Carys’s place, Roisin would have broken her violin and tried to strangle Lady Thora—Pallas—with its strings. Maybe taken her bow to the former god’s eyes. Roisin didn’t give up, and she spoke her mind, and Cillian was horrified to realize that he thought of her almost as a daughter.

Roisin threw her hands up in the air. “You’re ridiculous. If you weren’t kissing him—”

“Roisin,” Cillian said warningly, but though he tried to call on the dominance that he’d used with Astra, it was nowhere to be found.

Roisin, though, *was* a dominant. Her eyebrows raised. “Did you just try and *dom* me? I thought you didn’t have an



alignment.”

“I don’t, but I do have a schedule, and we need to stick to it.” Cillian raked a hand through his hair. “I’m fine. I ... Astra is helping me. I sleep now. Haven’t you noticed my sparkling personality is a lot more ... sparkling?”

“You mean haven’t I, and everyone else, noticed you *have* a personality?” She grinned at him, dimples flashing. “Yes, of course.”

“And, all right, Astra is ... Well, look at him.” Cillian waved a hand, indicating their resident dream god, who was watching Cedric show off the knife-juggling skills he’d learned from Thibault. “He’s a god. And he’s very *pretty*. And he sleeps curled around me like a lamprey ... What? I’m only human.”

Roisin nodded.

Remembering what had happened with Gilly, Cillian softened his voice. “He’s also the only one who can help me end this. And if he can, maybe we can help ...”

“My sister is dead,” Roisin said, face stony, all her earlier good humor gone. “I don’t want you to run yourself ragged, or—or let the Unluck get you, trying to get her back. I don’t want to ... lose you, too.”

Cillian’s eyes went hot, and he almost hugged her—but Roisin hated to be touched, especially when she was emotional. So he shoved his hands into his pockets and gave her a faint smile. “I know. And I’m not lying. I haven’t fucked him.”

“Maybe you should,” she responded, her pert tone only a little forced. “Anyway, Jas is having a *moment* about going to d’Hiver for Besom Day.”

“Be-what day, now?”

“Besom Day. That’s the name of the festival they’re celebrating. It’s this old, pre-Starian thing where you sweep monsters out with brooms and wear masks and yell at them. Weird, right?”

“It’s no stranger than the spring festival we have in Kallistos,” Cillian said. “Painted jars to catch the dew on the day after the first spring storm? What’s that, if not weird?”

“Charming? Quiet? Doesn’t involve shouting?” She smiled when he stuck out his tongue. “She’s being very *Jas* about it. I just wanted you to know.”

Cillian had spent more time in d’Hiver than Jas had, but he doubted she knew that or would believe him if he tried to explain it. Then again, maybe she would. People from that area of Staria were strange, given their proximity to the abbey. It had once served as the summer house for the Starian court, but before that, it’d been something else: a Mislian enclave of black-eyed mages who were keeping something there—something that shouldn’t have been kept. It had been a prison.

“Thank you,” Cillian said. “I’ll keep it in mind. Anything else I should know about?”

“Evar is on the outs with Dante, *again*.” She wrinkled her nose. “They’re a terrible couple.”

“They’re not a couple,” Cillian said. “Evar falls in love with everyone on a rotation. You know how it goes. It was you a few months ago, remember?”

“Yes, but now it’s Dante, and Dante ... I think he’s overdoing it about Astra. He’s determined to disprove the existence of gods. And, well, Saoirse and Lochlan are back to sharing a tent, but who knows if that’ll change when we arrive in a city with actual, ah. Clients, for Lochlan? Anyway, you know how she gets.”

Cillian kept working as Roisin caught him up on troupe drama. There wasn’t anything particularly shocking—relationships on the road bloomed and wilted like early spring flowers—but it made him smile nonetheless. And while Roisin was clearly eager to get some information about Astra, it seemed she realized she was barking up the wrong metaphorical tree.

Speaking of their resident god, Astra came up when they were finished, his messy hair making Cillian’s fingers twitch

with the desire to braid it again. Astra had pulled his weight with the troupe, having figured out how to load carts and carry things that weren't *too* heavy. The troupe had accepted him easily enough, being used to newcomers with strange life stories. It was fifty-fifty which of them truly believed he was a god.

A few people had taken to him from the beginning: Jimmy, as well as Ruben and Ellie. No one was overtly *rude* to him, but they were starting to tease him, treating him like any other troupe member. Astra was taking it in stride, though really, what other option did he have? Even if Cillian had worried that Astra might curse Dante when he tried to pry off one of Astra's horns.

Remembering how it had felt to grab those horns himself made Cillian flush hot, and he told himself sternly to calm down. Astra was a god, even if Dante and a few others thought he was just some eccentric young man spending his nights in Cillian's tent. All of them probably assumed they were fucking.

If they only knew the Lord of Dreams was a virgin. Or at least inexperienced enough in the waking world to tremble like a fawn when someone brushed against his cock and touched his horns—

Fuck, he was doing it again. Cillian wasn't usually at the mercy of his libido, but then again, it had been some time since he'd had one to speak of. While Astra was a brat, there was no denying he was beautiful, and he *was* the reason Cillian was getting actual sleep for the first time since Pallas cursed him. He'd even been having actual *fun* in his dreams, designing wild dreamscapes and flying all over them. He'd forgotten dreams could be so enjoyable. But gratitude was a terrible reason to fuck someone—as he'd told Cedric when he tried seducing Cillian—and besides, he already had one former god cursing him; what would an *actual* one do to him if things went south? No, he didn't need to fuck—figuratively or literally—with any more immortals, thank you very much.

That hadn't stopped him from stroking himself off in the lake the morning after they'd been interrupted. But no one had

to know about that ... as long as he didn't accidentally dream about it.

Cillian joined Astra in the cart when they were ready to head out, settling back against the side and pulling out a clove. He rolled his eyes at Astra's wrinkled nose and offered him the pack. "Live a little, sleepyhead."

"That's *Lord Sleepyhead*, and no, thank you." Astra frowned at him while Cillian lit his cigarette and tipped his head back, exhaling that first breath of smoke. "Why do you do that? It can't be good for you."

"Lots of things aren't. But I'm a dancer who can't die, and — What? What's that look for?"

Astra's expression had turned oddly serious. "It's not that you *can't* die, it's that she won't let you."

Cillian took a drag, long and deep, holding the smoke in his lungs. "Well, then, fuck her," he said on the exhale. He smiled. "Worried about me, *Lord Sleepyhead*?"

"I don't care for the smell, and I have to sleep next to you at night, you know." Astra looked pointedly away, not that there was all that much scenery to look at. "Why is it cold? Isn't it supposed to be warm now?"

Cillian shrugged. "It's spring, but we're going north, so it's colder. You really didn't get out of that forest much, did you? I mean, besides in people's dreams."

"People's dreams have all kinds of weather, often at the same time," Astra said. "If non-dream weather could kindly pick one temperature for at least a day, that would be wonderful."

"Don't you have some relative who can arrange that?"

Astra opened his mouth, then closed it. "Maybe. He mostly stays in the water."

Astra shivered, and Cillian sighed. He finished his smoke and ground it out on the side of the cart. Then he rummaged through a trunk and pulled out a blanket, tossing it to Astra. "If you're cold now, you'll be more so when we get to d'Hiver."

“Wonderful,” Astra muttered, but he nodded and tucked the blanket around his shoulders. His hair caught in the wind, and he pushed it away, seemingly without thinking.

Cillian’s fingers twitched with the need to braid it. It would be better for everyone, wouldn’t it, if he offered? “Do you want me to braid your hair again?”

“No,” Astra said, just as a few strands got caught in his mouth. He scowled. “Fine.”

Cillian told himself he could do this. It wasn’t seducing a god, it was simply giving one presentable hair. Not a problem. He shifted, scooting carefully toward Astra. He did a little *turn around* motion with his finger, and Astra positioned himself with the blanket on his lap, his dark hair falling down his back.

Right. Cillian gathered the mass of it in his hands, wondering how it was that someone who spent so much time asleep in a giant tree had such soft hair. He didn’t have a comb, so he had to make do with his fingers, and once, when he worked out a particularly knotted tangle, he heard Astra make a soft sound that went straight to Cillian’s dick. This was just a side effect of being rested. He repeated that over and over like a mantra as he worked the strands into a braid, then found a piece of twine to fasten it at the bottom. He should have a ribbon. It would suit Astra better than something so plain.

“There,” Cillian said, his voice gruff. “That’s got to be better.”

“Mm,” Astra said, shifting the blanket a little higher up on his lap. “It’s. Fine.”

Cillian had mostly ignored Astra’s horns when he’d been braiding, but with his hair pulled back, they were far more pronounced. It was hard to ignore them, or the memory of how they felt under his fingers. He couldn’t quite stop himself from running a finger up one.

“Cillian,” Astra snapped, whipping his head around. His midnight eyes flashed.

Cillian smiled at him. “You’re the one who gave yourself horns.”

“I didn’t do it so—so common *mortals* such as yourself could just *manhandle* them.”

“That wasn’t manhandling,” Cillian said. “This is, though.” He grabbed them with both hands, pretending to use them to wrestle Astra to the floor of the cart. He had no idea what was wrong with him.

“This is how you end up cursed,” Astra snarled, batting at him, a tangle of dark braid and limbs and flashing eyes.

“Probably,” Cillian agreed, leaning back once more as Astra scrambled to sit up and pull his blanket protectively around himself. Cillian sighed. “Sorry. I don’t know why I did that.”

“I do: you have some kind of ... fetish for being annoying.”

“Do you even know what that word *means*?” He laughed as Astra threw an apple at him, which he caught nimbly. “Thanks.”

“You play a dangerous game with a god who can make you dream—”

“About knife sharks?” He winked.

“Cillian, I swear to all my siblings—”

The cart hit a rut in the road just then, and Cillian nearly choked on the piece of apple he’d just bitten off. He swallowed quickly—Astra would never let him live it down if he asphyxiated on fruit—and once the road evened out, he rose up on his knees to peer around the horses.

“We’re almost there,” Mael said from the driver’s seat. He smiled at Cillian. “The apple was for the horses, sir.”

That would explain why it was a little too soft. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Mael nodded. “We should be there soon. Jas rode on ahead. She hasn’t shut up about this Bosom Day.”

“Besom,” Cillian corrected. “Besom Day. Bosom Day would be a whole different holiday.”

“Yeah, that.” Mael pulled gently on the reins, clucking to the horses. “Hey, there, buddy. Cinnamon, no.”

“Oh, is that one Cinnamon?” Astra popped up next to him. “I have a horse, you know. Her name is Peppermint. She can fly.”

“You sound like a toddler,” Cillian told him.

Astra didn’t seem bothered. “I found her when I was new to my realm, all right? I’m sorry your sense of childlike wonder only extends to sharks with culinary weaponry.”

Cillian laughed. The sound was bright, warm, and Mael turned to give him a surprised look. It made Cillian wonder just how dreadful his mood had been for... the last century, really. Fear and anger only fueled someone so long. Roisin had a point: until recently, he’d been too exhausted to have much of a personality at all.

He had Astra to thank for the change. Cillian turned to him. “I’m sorry for doing that. Grabbing your horns. I shouldn’t have. Your body is your own, and consent is important. Even for bratty gods who don’t know they should comb their hair in the morning.”

“You’re very bad at apologies, did you know that?”

“Sure. If you’re too good at them, no one believes you mean it. But I won’t do it again.”

Astra looked away. “I was only— I know your people believe in ... light physical teasing. I’m sure that’s what it was.”

*It’s more that I want to pin you down and fuck you and maybe suck on one of your horns while I do it.* “Right. But that ... Look, I don’t know, maybe it hurts when people touch them. I didn’t even ask.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Astra bit out, sounding like *he* was strangling on a stray piece of fruit.

“But you can feel it?” Cillian prodded. “I mean, you could tell, earlier, and I barely touched it.”

“Yes, I could tell— Can we stop talking about my horns, please?”

Cillian grinned. “I said I’d stop pulling on them, not teasing you about them.”

Astra sighed as if he were the most put-upon god to ever ride in a cart with a cheerful, cursed dance troupe master—which, to be fair, he probably was—and Cillian pulled out another clove, though the wind had picked up, and it was difficult to light it. He could tell they were close now, from the increasing chill in the air, and when they crested the top of the next hill, he pointed north. “Look, there’s the Cheimon. The Winter Sea. Sometimes, if it’s clear enough, you can see chunks of ice floating in the water.”

“Yes. And past that is Lukos. Where it snows for six months straight and people spend a lot of time dreaming. Very interesting dreams, too.”

“Huh.” That was intriguing. “Are they all about snow?”

“Mostly, yes,” Astra laughed. “Variations on a theme. It’s funny, how many of them have different dreams about the same thing. My brother Azaiah’s successor is from there: his favorite ferryman—don’t tell Jimmy. He lives in Arktos now.”

“From Lukos to Arktos?” Cillian’s eyes widened. “That’s a change.”

“It’s where the Lukoi came from, originally,” Astra said. “Azaiah told me about it.”

“The old empire, yeah.” He shook his head. “It’s hard to imagine someone who’s still around was really there. Will you live that long?” He winced. “Sorry, that might not have been how you’re supposed to say it.”

“No, it’s fine. And yes, if I want. I’ll be here until I choose not to be. When I grow weary, Azaiah—or his successor—will take me across the river to rest.”



“And what’s after that?” Cillian asked. “Across the river, I mean. Can you tell me?” He used to think it was just sleep, the longest rest of all, but maybe that was a common thought for habitual insomniacs. Heaven was a peaceful nap, even if it lasted forever.

“I can’t tell you, because I don’t know,” Astra said, drawing his blanket around his shoulders. Cillian’s eyes were drawn to his jawline and sharp cheekbones. “Even Azaiah doesn’t know. All he knows is, the souls he takes, most of them come back a few times. Apart from that, the other shore is a mystery, even to him.”

Cillian sat with that for a moment. “That’s good, I guess. People like mysteries. Knowing everything there is to know ... It would be hard to be immortal, I imagine, if nothing surprised you anymore.”

Astra gave him an odd glance. “That’s an interesting way to look at it. My brother Arwyn thinks he knows everything, and he’ll endure until the world ends.”

“Does he?”

“Know everything? Of course not. He just acts like it.”

Cillian shook his head. “I’m not sure I’m ever going to recover from the strangeness of talking about gods like they’re normal people.”

“They’re not people, even if some of us started out that way. And they’re definitely not normal.”

“Present company included?” Cillian asked, and Astra laughed.

It was a strange sound, like a regular human laugh combined with something else—maybe bells, the sort the dancers wove onto ribbons or strings to wear around their wrists and ankles. Astra’s face was also looking less sunburned and more that ethereal, otherworldly sort of pale, with the faintest hint of starlight in his dark eyes.

“The sun is weak, this far north,” he said, as if he could read Cillian’s mind. “Until we approach midsummer, the days

are short. I suppose my powers will manifest earlier than usual.”

Cillian shivered, and it wasn't from the air temperature. It was easier to talk about Death and the river of souls with a man with a sunburned nose and tangled hair. Those human imperfections lent an air of unreality to the conversation, but when Astra looked more like a god, Cillian couldn't help but think about what it meant that gods apparently walked around, took lovers, made storms in the sea ... and cursed mortals for dancing in falling-down Kallistoi manor houses.

But she hadn't been a god then, had she? She was already corrupted.

Cillian almost asked Astra more about that, but the horses came to a stop as the village loomed in the distance. They always set up camp in the same spot in d'Hiver: a low-lying valley of mostly flat grassland where the tents wouldn't be crooked and the wind wouldn't destroy the cookfires. Cillian hopped out of the cart, ready to help unload and begin the process of setting up, but was surprised to see Jas heading his way with a serious look on her elfish features.

Theo, the Mislian, was right behind her.

“Cillian,” Jas said, wringing her hands, an urgency in her voice that was different from her usual dramatics. “Something's wrong.”

“What is it?” He knew she'd taken a horse and ridden ahead, so maybe the animal slipped a shoe or something.

“In the village,” she said, and Cillian and Astra looked at each other.

“What about the village?” Cillian asked, fighting to keep his voice even. He tried not to think about being in his tent, listening to the wind and hearing that *fucking* melody beneath the rustle of the trees.

“It's almost Besom Day, and there's ... nothing! No one's decorated, no one is outside weaving brooms to shoo away the monsters, there's no one doing anything!”

“Did we get the time of year wrong?” Astra asked. At her look, he shrugged. “I sleep through entire months. It happens.”

“Not to me.” Jas shook her head. “Something’s wrong. Come with me, and I’ll show you what I mean. Everyone looks ... like you used to, Cillian, before the dream keeper showed up.”

Cillian and Astra exchanged another long look, and Cillian said, “We should probably go and see what’s going on.”

“Oh, more walking, how wonderful,” Astra muttered, but he sighed and shrugged off his blanket, at least remembering to put it back in the cart. “Fine. But you’re going in front and keeping the wind off me.”

Cillian wasn’t sure that would work, given the direction the wind was coming from, but he kept that to himself. It wasn’t too far, and once the sun finished setting, Astra’s godly powers should keep him warm enough. “Let’s get going.”

\* \* \*

THE VILLAGE in the heart of d’Hiver was quiet, but it was not sleeping. Lights flickered in the high-roofed houses and cast a warm glow over small vegetable gardens and grasses thick with dandelions. A group of people gathered on a porch with guitars and banjos discarded nearby, their gazes lingering on Astra, Cillian, and the few other troupe members who’d followed them to the village. An old woman with a dulcimer on her lap ran her fingers over the strings too quietly to make a sound. Even the crickets in the bushes were muted, and Theo jumped when a dog barked once before someone hurriedly drew it away.

“This isn’t right,” Jas said, for what had to be the hundredth time. “There should be chalk marks on the roads and dolls in the windows. Brooms on the fences. Garlands. But there’s nothing.”

“They aren’t dreaming,” Astra whispered, and Cillian moved closer, his arm brushing against Astra’s. Astra tried to suppress his shiver and focused on spreading his awareness

over the village street. Despite the late hour, no one slept. No one daydreamed. It was like cracking an egg only to find it empty, and Astra felt the stars start to shine around his horns as he called on the power of the forest. It came to him on the breeze, his lungs swelling with it, and Cillian stepped ever so slightly away.

“I can smell the decay,” Cillian said, as Jas led them toward a spot where a performance stage was supposed to be. “It’s not strong, but it’s here. I think ... I think she is here. Or she was.”

“Yes.” Astra glanced at a woman standing in her doorway. She was staring at him, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy, something accusatory in her gaze. “We need to find the source of the problem. It’ll be someone central to the way art is created here. Jas, where do people make the brooms? Is there a specific place, or is it just at home?”

“Everyone makes them at home,” Jas said. She kept wringing her hands, her pale eyes troubled. “But the people who grow the broomcorn are in charge, I guess. The Lathmonts. Their house is up there.”

Astra followed her pointing finger and saw a three-story building with brown beams and red brick on the first floor. It looked like it had been built in sections, growing with the family, and candles burned in almost every window. Astra started up the slope toward it, reining in his power like a cloak.

“Stay with the others,” he said, but Cillian ran after him, brows knit in concern. “That has to be where she started. I can learn more there.”

“You’re not going alone,” Cillian said. Astra turned to look at him, and Cillian fixed him with a stern glare. “The forest—the place that called us together—it wanted both of us. And I know her. I’ve met her. Have you?”

Astra hesitated. “No.”

“Then we go together.” Cillian walked on ahead, and Astra lengthened his stride to keep up. Doors opened as they passed,

hollow-eyed people watching them, silhouettes against the light. “You don’t think she’s made puppets of them already?”

“No. I don’t think so.” Astra caught the gaze of a young man with lovely black hair and a heavy cloak. “But they’re aware of me. They’ve been touched by something strange, and they’re ... sensitive.”

When they reached the Lathmont house, Astra paused. Something was wrong there—wrong in the way a dream could go wrong when a familiar place had something slightly off about it, like a door that wasn’t supposed to be there or a friend with an unfamiliar smile. He lifted the latch of the iron gate and crossed onto the lawn, looking up at the windows glowing like eyes above him.

“Starling!”

Astra turned as a figure emerged from a barn door and sprinted across the overgrown grass. It was a young girl, fourteen at most, her short hair braided with ribbons and a clean pinafore over her dress. She ducked down and uprooted a handful of the grass at her feet, then flung it at Astra, who was too startled to move. Cillian made to stand in front of him, but Astra shook his head, and the girl reached down to grab another clod of earth.

“Why are you back?” She was crying, her eyes red and her face haggard with misery. “Why are you back now? You said you were my friend!” She threw the dirt at Astra’s chest, and it slithered off his clothes. “You said I was special!”

“Astra.” Cillian looked toward the house, but no other doors were opening, and there were no shadows or figures in the windows. “Do you know this girl?”

“I’m not sure.” Astra stepped forward, and the girl froze like a rabbit, her entire body going tense. With his power growing, he could see the glimmer in her spirit that he recognized in Ellie and Ruben. He’d touched her dreams, once. She was one of his moon children ... and she hadn’t slept in days.

Her name came to Astra as he approached her. “Gwen.”

Gwen let out a strangled sob. “I thought you forgot us.” Astra reached for her, and she fell into his arms, crying bitterly. “When you came to me before, you said I was one of yours, so I prayed and prayed, and you didn’t come, and now it’s all gone wrong and I’m so tired ...”

Astra caught Cillian’s look, but he knelt with Gwen instead, letting her weep into his shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t come fast enough. What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” Gwen said. “My grandmother was teaching me how to weave, and then she ... she just stopped, and when I asked her why, she”—Gwen took a shaky breath—“said that I was a meddling child who didn’t understand what it took to keep our traditions alive, and I might as well be with my no-good cousin in Duciel. And I *tried* to be good, I’ve worked so hard, I tried to love it like she did, but she didn’t believe me and all she does is sit in her workroom and count ribbons and pick at her hands. And Daddy says she’ll have to go live with my aunt because she isn’t herself anymore, and I’m the only one who knows something’s really, really wrong, and I’ve tried to tell them but no one believes me.”

Astra held her until she stopped shaking. “I believe you,” he said. “I’m still your friend, Gwen. I’ll always be your friend.”

“Everyone says you were just a dream I had,” Gwen said, and Astra pulled a tendril of his power loose, letting it roll over his hand and wind its way into her mind. Children’s dreams were powerful, but she was already feeling the crushing weight of adulthood, and without even daydreams to call upon, she was on the verge of breaking. Astra heard Cillian step back as the shadows lengthened around them, a shape forming behind Gwen like smoke.

“I want to tell you something,” Astra said. His voice rang with the shifting possibility of dreams. “There’s a forest in the mountains. In that forest, there are trees older than Staria, as old as the first dream, and grass soft with nightflowers.”

“Oh.” Her voice was heavier now, and her eyelids drooped. “I know those flowers. They’re ... they belong to

people like us. Moon children.”

“Yes. If you follow them, you’ll find a chair made of stone in the middle of the woods. Do you see it?”

She nodded slowly, and kept nodding. “There’s a boy in the chair.”

“It’s your Starling.” Astra caught her as her knees buckled. “You can stay there, for now. Until it’s safe. He’ll protect you.”

“I said he was real,” Gwen whispered, her eyes finally closing. “I told them, but they didn’t believe me.”

“I believe you,” Astra said again, and Gwen fell into dreams, crumpling in his arms. He lay her on the grass and draped his cloak over her, then looked up to find that the shadows had taken the form of a nightmare with bright eyes and a flowing mane.

“Hello, my darling,” Peppermint said, and Astra stroked her neck. “You are not in your forest.”

“The horse talks,” Cillian said softly. “Of course the horse talks.”

Peppermint’s eyes narrowed.

“She doesn’t like being called a horse,” Astra said. “And we’re both far from the forest, old friend. Will you protect this child for me? She’s one of mine.”

“Poor thing.” Peppermint shifted in a whirl of shadow and smoke, turning into a black cat. “She will be safe, my love. But you should be wary. There is something strange in this place. It feels dangerous, and I would prefer you on your throne with your power around you.”

“He isn’t in this alone,” Cillian said, sounding defensive. Peppermint hissed, and Astra wondered whether he would have to explain to Cillian that nightmares, while being lovely creatures, could hold grudges for centuries.

“That is right,” Peppermint said, curling up in the crook of Gwen’s arms. “Because I am here.”

Astra gave Cillian a stern “Don’t argue” look, and Cillian raised his hands in acquiescence. “Thank you, Peppermint. I’ll return soon.”

“Of course, my dear.”

“My dear?” Cillian whispered, as Astra turned from the watchful nightmare and her charge.

“She thinks she’s my mother,” Astra whispered back. “Or grandmother. It’s hard to explain.”

“His father shot him, and his mother was a coward,” Peppermint said, and Astra stiffened as Cillian gave him a curious look. “Grandmothers are preferable.”

“We should go inside,” Astra said. Thankfully, Cillian didn’t press him for details and simply followed him to the door. Astra looked at the knocker, considered it, and turned the handle instead.

“Oh, we’re doing this.” Cillian’s voice didn’t rise above a whisper. “That was nice, what you did for the girl, but are you planning to knock out everyone we meet?”

“She’s young. She doesn’t need to be involved.” Astra glanced around. The owners of the house were clearly well-off, the rooms holding sturdy furniture, with cups and other pottery on display in addition to those in the kitchen for daily use. Brooms hung on the walls, the bristles decorated with colorful ribbons and beads, and some of the handles had been carved to depict monsters and other beasts. Cillian stopped to examine one as they walked through the empty living area, and he whistled low.

“This is well done,” he said. “I thought ... I don’t know what I thought. But you can see the skill in this.” He touched a broom handle with a wolf’s head carved at the end. “This one is over two hundred years old.”

“How can you tell?”

Cillian frowned. “I don’t know.”

“But you’re certain?” Astra could feel the forest inside him, pulling him on and toward Cillian at once. There were



multiple strange things happening here, and one of them seemed to come from Cillian. That made no sense. Cillian was ... frustrating, perhaps. Sometimes ridiculous. Always beautiful. But just then, as Cillian looked at the broom, he felt ... familiar.

“Yes,” Cillian said. “It’s two hundred and thirty-six.”

A shiver rolled through Astra, and he stepped away from the broom. “We should find Gwen’s grandmother. I think she’s important.”

Cillian nodded, his gaze vague. He kept looking around as they walked, touching broom bristles and the feathers of costumes hanging on the walls, but when they reached a stairwell leading down, he stopped. His face went pale, and he swayed. Astra put a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

“I can smell it,” Cillian said, voice gone hollow with dread. “It’s strong.”

“You can go back to Peppermint,” Astra said, but Cillian shook his head and took a slow, steady step down. It struck Astra that Cillian was braver than he was. Mortals had to be. They couldn’t afford to avoid their fears for long. They couldn’t sleep in a tomb for centuries or curl up on a throne in the middle of a forest.

“I’ll go ahead,” Astra said and, before Cillian could stop him, reached out to take Cillian’s hand. He gave it a squeeze, and Cillian looked at him with his eyes gone wide and his lips slightly parted. It tugged on something in Astra’s chest, and as he descended the stairs, he twined their fingers together.

The basement had probably been cozy, once. It had squashy chairs and a couch, sturdy worktables, and basket after basket of broom bristles, ribbons, and staffs. But even Astra could smell the decay now. There was rot in the baskets and dust thick on the floor. In the middle of it all sat an elderly woman with her thick hair in a silk scarf and her fingers caked with dirt, counting a tangle of ribbons at her feet.

“I told you to go away,” she snapped.

“I’m not Gwen, Margaret.”

The woman looked up. It had been hard to find her name, her mind obscured as if filled with mud, and her gaze darkened when she saw Cillian and Astra. “You,” she said. “I know you.”

“Of course you do,” Astra began, then stopped as he realized she wasn’t looking at him. She was looking at Cillian, who was still holding Astra’s hand, his mouth tight with fear.

“You,” the woman spat again. “All this time, I carried my ancestors’ work on my shoulders. Mine. I have the craft in my bones. I didn’t need you. I didn’t ask for you. I didn’t leave blessings at your temple. I’m a Starian. A Starian!”

“I ... think you might be ... very tired,” Cillian said.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” Margaret said. “I didn’t ask for you, and I didn’t ask for her, and I won’t beg or bow or scrape when we of d’Hiver do not even bow to a king! We are older, we are *older*, so you should tell her to let us go and let us rest.”

“Her.” Astra stepped closer, but Cillian hung on, holding him back. “Who is the woman you’re talking about?”

“You know her.” Margaret started plucking at her wrists, dirty nails pinching the skin and pulling up. “She thought to fool me. Said I was an artist. Said I could be one of her court. I told her no. Starians have no use for gods, especially ones that pretend to be lovely and beautiful when they smell like a midden. So she took my dreams from me, and now she’s taken my craft, and soon she will take the others, too. And I didn’t pray for you to come,” she added, snapping her gaze back to Cillian. “That girl Gwen did, maybe, but not me. I have ... I have carried my ancestors’ work ... I have carried them ...”

“Pallas has her,” Cillian whispered. “Her wrists. I think I can see it—the string, that’s what she’s trying to pry off.”

Astra narrowed his eyes, but he could only just make out a flicker of something around Margaret’s bony wrists. He stepped forward, letting go of Cillian’s hand. “I’ll have to walk in her dreams,” Astra said. “It will be easier for me to see it in my realm.”

“You’ll walk nowhere,” Margaret cried, and her voice echoed with another, lower, richer voice. “Somnus!”

Astra snapped his fingers, calling on his power, and Margaret slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

“Who is Somnus?” Cillian asked. “What was she talking about?”

“Somnus was my predecessor,” Astra said. “Pallas was speaking through her. She’s controlling her.” He turned to Cillian. “Stay here and make sure nothing happens to her body. If something goes wrong, run and find Peppermint. She can take you and the others to safety.”

“You’re not walking into this alone.” Cillian grabbed Astra’s hand. “We do this together, remember?”

“You don’t have to be brave, Cillian. I’m a god. I can do this.”

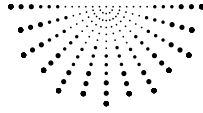
Cillian just stared at him, stubborn and resolute as only a mortal could be, and Astra sighed.

“Fine. Stay close. I can’t promise what this will look like.”

Astra drew Cillian down to their knees in front of the slumped woman, then touched her cheek with his free hand. He could feel her dreams just below the surface, wild and terrible, and he braced himself for the fall.

“Be ready,” he said, and threw them into the roiling chaos of her dreams.

## CHAPTER NINE



**T**hey were in a room.

It wasn't remarkable. It looked like the upstairs of the house, mostly, with a roaring fire that produced no heat and a table with two chairs, piled with craft supplies. There was a pie on the windowsill, and outside was a vague suggestion of a sunny afternoon. Nothing was out of place or nightmarish, and he only knew it was a dream because of the brooms standing seemingly by themselves all around.

Then he saw the woman sitting before the fire, and the innocuous scene changed. It was Margaret, but her features were twisted in agony as she attempted—and failed—to weave the broomcorn in her hands. Her hands, which were rubbed raw, bleeding all over the material.

Her wrists, and every one of her fingers, were encased in red string. Next to her was the jester puppet, the one Cillian had seen so long ago in Lady Thora's manor, a blank-faced automaton that made him take a step back in alarm as he realized the things binding the dreamer's extremities weren't red threads after all. No, simple white ribbons stretched between the broom she was trying so desperately to weave and her hands. As Cillian watched in horror, the jester puppet wielded a pair of comically large scissors and cut at the ribbons, which bled as they were sliced.

Cillian glanced at Astra. He looked *furious*. Cillian had seen Astra annoyed more than a few times, but he'd never looked like this. His eyes were pure white, and he looked more

godly than ever, his power radiating from him, stars swirling around his horns.

“Stop it,” Astra said, and for half a second, Cillian thought the words were directed at *him*. But then Astra took a step toward the dreamer and the puppet, his voice heavy, all the dominance he never used overlaid in his command: “*Stop it, right now.*”

The puppet turned its head toward them, unnatural and slow, and the scene paused. Then the puppet started to laugh, a wild, high-pitched sound that Cillian *also* recognized from his time at Cladach Manor. The puppet kept snipping the ribbons, and then it started cutting Margaret’s fingers, blood pouring out and soaking the reeds that were supposed to become a broom to brush away monsters.

The laugh was so loud, Cillian could barely hear anything else. It echoed like a broken bell, shrieking, and he felt helpless as he watched Margaret wail, unable to stop what was happening to her.

“Look at this,” the puppet crooned, startling both Cillian and Astra. “Would you like to hear my song, dancer? Somnus, what about you?”

Astra stepped forward. “I’m not Somnus,” he said. “And you’re going to stop. You have no place in my realm.”

The puppet shrieked, brandishing a second pair of scissors, one in each hand. “You can’t stop me, Somnus. And you, *Cillian*,” it hissed, cackling like a fire. “You’re as useless now as you were before. Remember Carys, Cillian? Do you hear her screams when you sleep? I hope so. I had so much *fun* with her.”

The puppet’s voice changed, becoming that of the long-ago woman who’d tried so hard to warn Cillian away from the manor. It was pained, tortured. “Stop, please don’t hurt me, I’m sorry, please make it stop!”

“I kept it up for *days*, little dancer. She was begging for death by the time I was finished, and she was still so *afraid* at the end—”

“Pallas,” Astra interrupted, thrumming with power. “I am not Somnus. And you are in *my* realm, and I won’t let you do this.”

“Stop me, Somnus, if you can.” The puppet turned back to Margaret and began shearing the ribbons, the strings, Margaret’s fingers, cutting gleefully as a child with colored paper.

“I said *stop*,” Astra commanded, and even Cillian felt the influence of his voice, dominance and all his power as the Lord of Dreams.

His words only invigorated the puppet. The cuts came faster, the blood too much to be from one person, and Margaret’s screams were so like Carys’s—

“No,” Cillian said, forcing himself out of the memory. “I won’t watch this anymore.”

“Cillian—”

He ignored Astra and strode over to the puppet. “You’re not real, and I don’t give a fuck what you want to taunt me with. If you want to keep reminding me how much I hate you —”

“Yes,” the puppet said, in a voice more terrifying because it was no longer wild but calm, collected. “Yes, hate me. Remember why every day, and let that hate follow you into dreams. They won’t be safe for you forever. There’s nowhere you can go that I won’t *hunt you*, little fox.”

“What the fuck did I ever do to you?” Cillian demanded. “If you didn’t like my fucking dance, you could have just *said so*.” With that, he moved fast, reaching to grab the puppet with his bare hands.

The puppet laughed and laughed, the volume increasing while Margaret wept and tried, with the bloody stumps that were all that was left of her fingers, to gather up her materials and weave her broomcorn. “She’ll give up, they’ll all give up, and then I will have *won*, Somnus!”

Cillian ignored whatever Astra was saying, focusing instead on fighting the puppet. “You’re not real. You’re not

real, *this* isn't real, and you can do whatever you want in dreams and it doesn't matter, because it's *just a fucking dream.*" He pulled at the puppet, trying to wrestle it to the ground.

"Cillian, this isn't helping," Astra said, but Cillian didn't care. He wasn't going to stop, not until this thing was in pieces on the floor. No, even better—he'd tear it to pieces and then throw them all into that dream-fire. See how it liked *that*.

He managed to get the laughing puppet down on the ground, but just as he went to wrench its wooden head from its neck, it plunged one of the bloody pairs of scissors into his arm. Cillian shouldn't have felt pain—this wasn't real—but his body wasn't quite as convinced, because he jerked, hard, and felt himself waking up. "No, no, no, I'm not—"

Cillian's eyes opened. He was in the basement, Margaret asleep on the floor, Astra sprawled next to her, also asleep. Everything looked the same as it had before they'd followed her into her dream, except—

The puppet was there. It was there, and instead of scissors, it held lengths of barbed wire that it was trying to wrap around Cillian.

"You're not real!" Cillian yelled, batting at the wire, and he cried out when he felt it break his skin. How could it? How could something from a dream follow him, and why was Astra—Astra—

No. He wasn't going to call out for the dream lord, not now. If this fucking thing was here in the waking world, Cillian could end it. For all of them.

He threw an arm up to shield his face from the barbed wire, which was still slicing and cutting him, that awful laughter ringing in his ears.

"You can't be here," he snarled, heart racing so fast he thought his chest might burst. To his horror, he realized a wire was snaked around his upper arm, and the puppet was gleefully pressing the barbed edges into his flesh. "You're a construction, you're nothing."

The puppet's blank eyes stared at him as it lashed another length of wire—where was it getting it from?—around Cillian's shoulder, then his left thigh. It was tangling him up in it, like a spider with a spiked web, with him the moth thrashing to save itself.

“Do you know whose wires these are, little dancer?” the puppet cooed. “Mine. Why have a thing of wood and paint, when I can have you? Let me take you, and I'll leave your little friends alone.”

“Fuck you,” Cillian answered. He knew better than to make deals with things like Lady Thora—Pallas. He should call for Astra, he knew, especially as the puppet—horrifyingly now pulling wires from its jaw, its knee joints—kept tangling him up in the barbs, making what he was sure had to be a bloody mess of his skin—

Wait.

Cillian went still, ignoring the puppet as it mocked him with another wild laugh and slammed a wire into the back of his neck, the barb biting deep. It should have hurt more than it did, and the more he focused on it, the more he felt it as an echo of pain, too muted to be real. And there was no blood.

The puppet started to sing, off-key and too fast, but Cillian recognized the tune.

“How wonderful it will be, kit,” the puppet snarled, while music played all around them like some sick, cacophonous symphony of broken instruments, making Cillian want to press his hands over his ears. “To take sleep away from you again. The best way to torture someone is to let them think it's over ... for a while. That's what I did to Carys. That's what I'll do to *you*.”

The song grew louder and louder, and Cillian told himself *You're dreaming, you have to be*, but it was getting hard to remember that. The song was muddling his thoughts, slowing him as if he were truly tangled in wires.

Just when the puppet started to shriek in triumph, dangling the last bit of barbed wire over Cillian's chest and saying



sweetly, “The last one goes in your *heart*,” Cillian glanced at Astra.

His eyes opened. They were still blazing white.

Astra rose from the floor, looked around, and said, in the same voice as before, imbued with power, “You’re dreaming.”

“Yeah,” Cillian grunted, kicking the puppet aside. “I figured that out all on my own.”

Astra stared at him.

“Eventually,” Cillian added, struggling against the wires wrapped around him, which were now just strings, harmless and no longer barbed ... but they still turned his stomach, and he clawed at them, trying to get them off. They wouldn’t move, though, and no matter how he fought, he couldn’t untangle himself from them.

Astra moved closer to help him or wake him up or *something* ... and the strings jerked, and something started to pull Cillian across the floor. “Astra, what—”

He turned and saw the strings extending to a door that hadn’t been there before and certainly didn’t exist in the waking world. It was open, and darkness lay beyond it ... darkness and the scent of decay, sickly sweet like a deer carcass left to rot in summer.

There was a shape in the darkness. It looked like a woman, and she was hauling on the strings, dragging Cillian toward the gaping maw that waited beyond the door.

Terror filled him, and no matter what he did—told himself to fly; tried to, fuck, conjure up another knife shark—nothing helped. He grabbed desperately at the stones of the floor, but he still slid closer and closer to the woman.

She began to hum.

“Astra!” Cillian shouted, flailing, caught up in what felt like thousands of spiderwebs. It didn’t matter that they weren’t barbed. They hurt all the same.

“Cillian,” Astra said, calm as a ghost drifting over a grave. He reached down and took hold of the strings, stopping

Cillian's progress across the floor, but he didn't pull on the threads or try to yank them out of the woman's hands. "Do you trust me?"

"What?" Cillian could barely hear over the sound of the woman's humming, which was soft but somehow still thunderous. The floor beneath him was turning slick and damp, and the smell of rot and ruin grew more overwhelming with every passing second.

"Do you trust me," Astra asked, eyes white, stars gleaming above his horns.

"Yes," Cillian said.

Astra let go of the strings.

And Cillian slid through the doorway into the waiting dark, the sound of laughter sharp as broken glass in his ears.

\* \* \*

ASTRA SLAMMED through the barriers of the dreaming world with the force of a fall from a great height, but without the resulting burst of pain and cracking bone. Cillian fell with him, dragged by the strings winding around his body, and collapsed in a tangle of thread and shaking limbs on the marble floor of a temple. The temple was beautiful, adorned by statues of people in varying states of repose, but the stench of rot was thick in the air, and mold crept up from cracks in the marble. Water dripped brown and sickly from a frieze in the corner, and on a central throne, holding the wires of a puppet that clutched Cillian's strings in its wooden hands, was Pallas.

She wasn't the lovely woman Azaiah had described during one of his rare talks with Astra. Her hair was lank, the dyes faded and muddy, and her skin seemed to hang off the rotted frame of a person rather than a living, breathing creature. But as Astra looked at her, he could tell she wasn't truly there—only the puppet was fully in the dreaming world. Pallas was somewhere else, controlling it, seeing through it, a specter in Astra's realm.

That was how she did it. She couldn't control multiple people's dreams at once the way Astra could. Instead, she found one person, then used their connection to others to spread her influence like a disease. Through Margaret, she was poisoning the dreams of the people of d'Hiver, and Astra shivered as the forest's power within him stirred with anxiety. Deep in the mountains, fear was rippling through the trees of the dream wood, roots clenching in the earth at the thought of poison.

"Somnus," Pallas said. "Come to grovel again?"

"Somnus is gone," Astra said. "Azaiah took him across."

"Nonsense." Pallas twitched a finger, and Cillian grunted and scabbled at the floor as he was dragged a few feet forward on the marble. Astra wanted to yank him back, but he forced a look of mild disinterest and stepped over Cillian instead, walking toward the throne.

"Look at what I've found." Pallas giggled, like a cruel child torturing a small animal. "It took me ages. I killed the first one, you know. She was a weaver. I fed her through her loom piece by piece—but then another appeared, and that wouldn't do. So I found him, and I kept him, and look at how he trembles." She jerked on the strings again, and Astra's stomach lurched as Cillian tried unsuccessfully to gain purchase on the slippery tiles.

"What do you mean?" Astra asked. He inched closer. The puppet glowed in his vision, far too powerful, its magic warped and sickening. "Why is this mortal important? He's just a man. A dancer. No one."

"Oh, Somnus, don't feign ignorance." Pallas twisted a string between her fingers, and the puppet jerked in her lap. "He's a pretender. A usurper. You understand. You haven't chosen a successor, either. Why would you? You're a perfect dream keeper. You know how to control your realm, just as I know how to control mine. What would another do but sully it, dilute its purpose?"

Astra thought of Cillian dancing in Duciel, evoking dreams throughout the audience. Cillian examining the brooms in the

hall. The way Margaret had addressed him, speaking of temples and prayers.

He'd had it all wrong. They both had. Pallas hadn't been searching for artists to favor or curse when she'd taken up residence as Lady Thora. She'd been looking for Art: the new god who would take over her old realm. Someone like Cillian, who drew artists to him like a lodestone and cherished them, nurtured them.

"I can't kill him," Pallas said, tapping her foot to a rhythm Astra was only just starting to find familiar. "But I can keep him weak. I can break him—and, Somnus, when I do, and he's pliant and obedient and wretched, perhaps we can kill him together."

"Somnus is dead," Astra said, suppressing the feeling of horror threatening to rise from his stomach. "And you are trespassing in my realm."

Pallas smiled fondly. "Oh, Somnus. You're just taking on another form, as you so often do. Let that one go, and show me the god who always spoke so kindly of my power."

"Astra," Cillian whispered, and Astra took another step forward, over the river of strings binding Cillian to the puppet.

He couldn't banish Pallas, not now. He could feel the power emanating from the puppet, and it was too old, too withered and gnarled for him to break. He could only sever the strings, and even that would take all the power he had. More, it would expose him, revealing too much, beyond even what he showed to his godly family.

But Cillian trusted him. Astra couldn't let it end here, with Cillian broken, never knowing what he could have been.

"I cannot say it will be what you desire," Astra said. "But I will show you another form."

The dream world shifted. The temple fell away, and a night sky filled the emptiness it left behind. A lump of shadows stirred in the distance, crawling closer. It was a youthful figure with long black hair that fell over their pale limbs, and they

wept tears of light that spilled into the darkness and settled among the stars.

“What is that?” Pallas asked, leaning over the puppet in her lap. The figure reached for Astra, and Astra saw his own face, the curve of horns, and the ruffle of a feathered cloak.

“They left me again,” the figure whispered. “So many stars snuffed out. Dreams vanishing. They left me. I loved them. Ares says I shouldn’t. But they’re so beautiful, and they left me.”

“I know,” Astra said.

“The forest will leave me, too, one day,” the figure said, clutching Astra’s legs with both hands like a frightened child.

“Hush.” The stars fell, leaving the weeping figure at Astra’s feet as sand spilled over the edges of the dream realm. A younger Astra was sitting a few paces away, next to a sleeping Ares who wore simple, polished armor. Astra’s horns were shorter, not quite as curved, and Astra was petting Ares’s hair.

“I think I’m like you, sometimes,” Astra said. “Every now and then. I don’t feel like a man or a woman for ages, and then I do ... and then I don’t again. Is that a god thing, do you think, or a human thing?”

“I am not human,” Ares whispered. “Not like you are.”

Pallas’s frown deepened. “Why is Ares here? Shouldn’t they be frolicking in a battle somewhere?”

“I’m not human anymore, either,” young Astra said. “That scares me. I wish I was.” Their voice cracked, and they leaned over Ares, shoulders hunched. “I don’t even remember what my parents looked like anymore.”

“You’re mortal,” Ares said. “You’ll always be mortal. The forest gave you its power as it did the dream keeper before you, and before him. You are the dream *keeper*, not dream itself. Mortals, all of you. You call me sibling and promise to stay, and then you find your rest, and another mortal comes. I am tired. Tired of death.”

“I’m not—” Young Astra swallowed something uncomfortably like a sob. “I’m not going to leave you like the others did.”

“All mortals make promises they can’t keep.”

“But not me. I’m not like them, I’m like you. You’re supposed to be my family.”

The sand started to fall into the darkness beneath them, but young Astra remained, kneeling in empty space. After a moment, they got to their feet and walked over to Astra, reaching out, and he took their hand.

He couldn’t risk looking at Cillian. He’d spent so long insisting on his godhood, it was mortifying to reveal that he was only a god so long as the forest willed it.

The dream plunged into a wave, which crashed and rolled over them even as they stood in place, Pallas sitting on an invisible throne with her hands clenched around the puppet. Cillian flinched as Levi, the Tempest, broke the surface in dragon form, laughing with the sound of thunder. A much younger Astra followed him, whooping in delight.

“Good job, kid!” Levi shouted, and the dream Astra laughed. “You’re a natural!”

“Let’s do it again, but we should try it in Arwyn’s dream this time,” the dream Astra shouted back. He paused, noticing the others watching him, and pushed wet hair from his face. “Oh. Hey. Do you need me?”

“Yes, if you would,” Astra replied.

Pallas half stood, eyes narrowed. “None of these are Somnus,” she said. “Where is he? What have you done with him?”

“One more,” Astra said as the wave passed, and Pallas whirled to look at him as the dream shunted to the side, changing so quickly it was barely a flicker of color and light.

“You replaced him,” Pallas said, watching blurry figures move around a small, cramped shepherd’s hut. An Astra so young his horns were just nubs in his tangled hair sat at a table

with an indistinct baby in his lap, smiling tearfully at the two hazy people walking around him.

“Do you need anything to eat, Astra?” his mother asked, in Peppermint’s voice.

“I’m so sorry about that mess before, son,” his father said, in Azaiah’s.

“It’s okay,” little Astra said. “You didn’t mean to hurt me.”

“You shouldn’t be in his realm,” Pallas said, stepping down from her throne. “This was Somnus’s.”

“It was,” Astra said.

“Do you want me to brush your hair, Astra?” the dream mother asked. “And tell you a story before bed?”

“You aren’t angry that I left?” little Astra asked. “And I can come back if I want to?”

“Of course, darling. You can always come back.”

Pallas took another step closer, and Astra closed his eyes. The miserable, sighing creature who remained after his favorite dreamers passed his brother’s river and left his sight forever was the first to lend him power. Next was the one who sat with Ares, trying to figure themselves out in a world too vast for introspection. The Astra who went barreling through dream oceans with Levi laughed as he faded. Then there was a burst of delight, and the first Astra, the one who still dreamt of parents who wanted him, took Astra’s hand and melted into him just as Pallas reached out with grasping fingers.

Astra bent to take the strings in his fist, drew on the power of hundreds of years of sleeping on the Dreamer’s Throne, and severed them.

The dreaming world folded in on itself, swift as a door slamming shut, and Astra gasped as he was thrown to the floor of the broom-weaver’s basement. Cillian fell with him, batting at his arms as though to remove the strings that were no longer there.

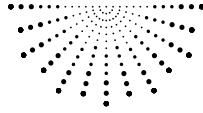
## PART II



*The Star*



## CHAPTER TEN



Astra couldn't stop shaking. He barely made it out of the basement where Margaret now slept peacefully, curled on the comfortable couch. Cillian had to carry him up the last few steps, and when they reached the yard, Peppermint arched her back, trembling with nerves until Astra went to his knees in front of her, assuring her he was fine.

"What did you do to him?" Peppermint asked Cillian. Cillian, looking dazed, didn't reply.

Astra shook his head. "Not him. I'm fine. The girl is safe. I need you to ... I need ..."

"I know, love." Peppermint changed into her horse form, and Astra fumbled with his cloak until Cillian tied it for him. Cillian helped him onto Peppermint, but when Astra offered Cillian his arm to mount behind him, the nightmare whinnied and contrived to make her body shorter out of spite.

"That's all right," Cillian said, giving Astra an exhausted smile. "Probably not safe, anyway."

"Not for you," Peppermint snapped.

Oddly enough, Jas and Theo were the perfect troupe members to have brought with them, because they took in Peppermint's half-spectral form with interest so mild it might have been insulting, if Astra had the energy to be insulted.

"Oh," Theo said. "A demon horse."

"She's beautiful," Jas said, and Peppermint preened, tossing her head to show off the stars in her mane.

Lights were going out in the houses down the street as they passed. The woman with the dulcimer was asleep on her porch, the musicians sprawled on swings and wooden chairs, people slumped in doorways or on front steps. The quiet that settled over d'Hiver now was comfortable, without the stench of decay or the unease of sleeplessness, and Astra almost nodded off twice before their group reached the narrow path leading to the field where their tents were. He slid off Peppermint, who took the form of a bird and flew above him in tight, anxious circles while Astra leaned heavily on Cillian, and he didn't even mind when Cillian wrapped an arm tight around his waist.

"Thank you," Cillian whispered as they walked slowly through the grass, "for earlier. Is she ... gone?"

"No. Just the strings." Astra stumbled, and Cillian righted him. "The puppet, it's a dream creature. I think it's made of wood from the forest. That's how she can enter dreams—but thankfully, it seems she can only do it one person at a time. She finds a central figure, someone tied to art, and uses them to infect the people around her. D'Hiver should recover now. But that puppet worries me. She twisted it out of its true purpose." He looked up at Cillian. "She's been trying to do that to you, too, you know."

"I know. I think corruption has warped her reason. The things she was saying ... feeding a weaver to her loom? They didn't make sense."

"No, they did." Cillian gave Astra a dubious look, and Astra shook his head. "Do you know how a god is created? I mean, how a human becomes one? How I did?"

"I don't think you mentioned it." Cillian looked sidelong at Astra, and Astra wondered what he thought of the different versions of Astra they'd just seen.

"It's not that dramatic. Well, it was for Azaiah—he was sacrificed, and the former god of death chose him. For me, I just had to accept it. I promised Somnus I would keep the dream world safe, and I sat on the throne. But I had to make that choice, you know? So did Azaiah."

“Uh. Sure. I can see that, I think.”

“You can’t become a god without consenting,” Astra said. He collapsed on the pillows as soon as Cillian hauled him into the tent. He looked up at Cillian, at his bright eyes and his ageless face. “So if a potential god dies before they ascend, someone else becomes the new potential god. It’s what would have happened if Azaiah or I said no. It’s what happened with you.”

Cillian squinted at him. “What?”

“She killed the next Art after her,” Astra said. “The weaver. But when there’s a vacuum, something has to fill it, so she knew another potential god of art would appear. She had to find them before they could ascend. So she created a new persona for herself: Lady Thora, a patron of the arts, seeking only the best from every creative discipline.”

“Wait,” Cillian said.

“Eventually she finds this young dancer. And he’s charming and lovely, I suppose, and he draws other artists to him, and he’s right there in her chambers—”

“Astra. Perhaps you need to sleep,” Cillian said. He was paler than he’d been when he descended the steps of the basement, and his hands shook as he pushed Astra’s shoulders down on the pillows.

“I’ve slept plenty,” Astra drawled. “But, until recently, you haven’t. Which is the point. She cursed you so you could never ascend. You’d always be too exhausted, too tied to her, too human. You wouldn’t be able to become the new Art until you were free of her, and no new potential god would appear as long as you’re alive, so she’d just keep you like that forever —”

“Astra.” Dominance boomed in Cillian’s voice, and Astra blinked, falling silent. Cillian seemed as startled as he was, staring at him for a few seconds before he found his voice again. “You can’t mean what you’re saying. I’m not— I can’t be— I was just a dancer she hated.”

“You’re more than that,” Astra said. “Look at you. Hundreds of years, and you still smile when you dance. Who does that?”

“Loving to dance isn’t the same as ... as being a god!”

Astra gave him a rueful look. “Neither is loving to dream. But it helps. You saw me, Cillian. What I was—what I am. A kid whose own parents didn’t ... I wasn’t anyone. But I loved dreams so much it ached. I still do. And when you have the energy for it, you love art just as much. Think about the broom in the Lathmonts’ house. How did you know how old it was? Why did it make you smile like that—like it was an old friend?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“Why do people keep signing up for your troupe?” Astra asked. “Why would the former god of art, who doesn’t want a successor to take her place, curse you to never reach your full potential? Why would she hate you so much she’d want to break you—but not let you die?”

Cillian took a step back. “I need a minute,” he said.

“The broom-weaver knew who you were.”

“I said I need a minute!” Cillian’s voice rang with dominance again, and Astra gasped, heat blooming in his belly. Cillian gave him one last, fearful look, then fled through the tent flap, disappearing into the dark.

\* \* \*

HE COULDN’T BE A *GOD*.

How on earth could something like that even be possible? Gods weren’t dancers from Kallistos. They just *weren’t*.

*But they are*, a little voice whispered. *You believe Astra is a god, and he’s the son of a shepherd. You saw the house he lived in. You saw him in those dreams.*

But wouldn’t he *know*? Wouldn’t he have suspected? The only thing Cillian had ever noticed that was markedly different

about himself was his lack of natural alignment, and his mother had told him that wasn't as strange as he thought.

"Sometimes people don't have it," she'd said, so many years ago that the image of her face was a distant memory. But he'd never forgotten her words, when he'd asked why he didn't want to kneel or to serve dessert when it was his turn, yet he never felt good about bossing people around, even in dance class. "It simply means you have a unique ability to be someone without it. It's not good or bad, darling boy. It just is."

That kind of ability was a far cry from being a god. The mere idea made him laugh, but the sound was so wild—reminding him uncomfortably of Pallas—that he shoved his own fist into his mouth. No. Astra couldn't be right.

Because what the *fuck*? What use was being a god—potential god, whatever—if he couldn't save Carys? Couldn't drag her and all those other people away from that manor? Couldn't even tell what had been waiting for him up that twisty road, in a manor full of rot?

*But you did, that same voice whispered. You saw it that morning in the carriage. You thought you dreamt it: the driver, the moldy chocolates. Maybe if you'd known what you were, you would have realized it was a sign. Danger.*

And what did Astra mean about ... accepting it? Was that all it took? Cillian tipped his face up, shivering in the cold air—d'Hiver in spring was barely distinguishable from early winter in Kallistos—and stared at the sky, its stars obscured by clouds. "If saying yes makes this stop, then sure, I'm a god."

He didn't feel any different than he had a moment ago. Maybe it wasn't that simple. Maybe he had to say it *to* someone? But who? Astra? No, that didn't feel right. Though neither did the idea that he was supposed to be a god. And did it really matter? It didn't change anything. Pallas wanted to break him, god or mortal, and that was what he needed to deal with. What was the point of some potential godhood if he was too exhausted to do anything but stare off into the middle distance and wish he could take a nap?

Cillian had no idea what to do with any of this. The dreamscape with the puppet and Margaret and her bloody fingers ... thinking about it still chilled him to the bone. He'd felt helpless, both in the first dream and the second that felt so real—and if he was really some kind of god, why hadn't he known, when he thought he'd woken up, that he was still dreaming?

“Cillian, are you all right?”

Cillian heard Roisin's soft voice and wondered if he should bother answering. What the hell could he even say?

“Yeah. No. I don't know.” He shook his head. “Astra just told me I was a god. A potential god.”

Her eyebrows went up, and she clapped her hand over her mouth, trying—and failing—to stifle a giggle.

Cillian scowled at her. “Not *that*. No, it was ...” He gave her a quick rundown of the situation, what had happened in the village and in the dream world.

Her smile faded as he talked, and by the time he was finished, she looked downright worried.

“You— Do you believe him?” Cillian asked, surprised. “I would've thought you might have, you know. Laughed.”

“I might have, if you hadn't told me about the blood and the puppet and the *wires in your face*,” she snapped. “I—I don't want— This happened to Gilly, and I can't—”

He winced. “I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything.”

“It's all right. You're so kind, Cillian. I can see how maybe you *could* be a god.” She smiled at him, only a little sadly. “It does explain a few things. Why you don't age. Why someone would hate you enough to curse you, just for dancing.”

Cillian sighed. “You weren't supposed to agree. I thought you'd be able to talk me out of thinking I was ... that maybe I ... could be. The god of art.”

“Well, I'm certainly not going to call you *your godship* or whatever, but ... is there a better explanation?”

Cillian thought about it. "I'm just unlucky?"

"But you're *not*," she said. "You're the most beautiful dancer I've ever seen. You're a good man who cares about people. I've never seen you turn anyone down who wants to join the troupe, and you ... you respect their talent, even if it isn't dancing or playing music. You see artistry in everything. That isn't unlucky, even if the Unluck is the one who cursed you."

"Thanks," Cillian said. "That's ... nice to hear. And honestly, I'll be the god of chopping wood if it helps keep everyone safe."

"Please don't. I saw you try that one time, and I was convinced you were going to lose a limb."

Cillian reached out and ruffled her hair. "To bed with you, mortal. Leave me to my godly pursuits."

"Staring at the sky and asking, 'Why me?'" She laughed and ducked, but before she walked away, she sobered and fixed him with a look.

Cillian sighed again. "What?"

"If you are a god, remember I was always your favorite. I'll have some requests. But also, I know you feel like it's your fault, what happened to ... people we've lost. But it wasn't. Even if you're just an unlucky mortal like the rest of us, it's not your fault."

Cillian's eyes burned, and all he could do was nod. It was nice to hear, but he couldn't help thinking, if he really was supposed to be a god ... then it was even *more* his fault.

The night grew colder, and no answers came down from the clouds, so Cillian headed back to his tent. He pushed open the flap and said, before Astra could speak, "I have a lot of questions."

"I bet you do." Astra was cuddled up amidst the blankets, and he'd taken his hair out of its braid so that it fell softly over his shoulders.

Fuck, he was beautiful. And Cillian suddenly didn't care about questions anymore, or gods, or the horror of what he'd seen with the puppet and Pallas. The knowledge he might be meant for something greater.

"I'm not going to ask any of them. No, that's wrong. Just one. You were a dominant in the dream world. I felt it."

"Of course," Astra said. He studied Cillian. "You're out of sorts."

Cillian snorted. "You could say that." He went to his knees on the bedding. "I don't want to talk about that right now. I want to talk about why you want to kneel for me."

There was a flash of something in Astra's starlit eyes, his pale face flushed, and Cillian's entire body went tight with lust. "I don't know what you mean," Astra said, disingenuously.

Cillian called on the strange power that somehow was only accessible when speaking to Astra. "Kneel."

Astra smiled. "As if it would be that easy. If you want me to submit to you, Cillian, you'll have to do better than that."

Cillian's fingers twitched, his eyes straying to Astra's horns, which were ringed with softly glowing starlight. "I've never wanted anyone else to," he said. His newfound dominance was just as much a mystery as godhood, but at least he could muddle through this one. Hopefully. "And I think you've never wanted to kneel, either."

"Certainly not." Astra had been sitting cross-legged, and now he drew his knees to his chest, like he was fighting his own response, his own need. "For a mortal? Never," he scoffed.

Cillian shuffled closer. "Thought I was a god, too."

"You? You're a potential god. That's not the same thing, but at least it makes it less demeaning that I—" He frowned. "Don't find you hideous."

"Uh-huh," Cillian said. "Don't think I didn't notice how you got hard when I braided your hair."



“It’s a flattering style on me!”

“Yeah. It is. You know what else is flattering on you?”

“What,” Astra asked cautiously, his shining eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Cillian gave a little bow from the waist, making a dramatic flourish with his hand. “Me.”

“That was bad. You should feel ... bad about that, you really should,” Astra said, but he sounded perilously close to babbling, and it only made Cillian smile wider.

“Probably, yeah,” he agreed. “But I don’t.” With that, he reached out, but he stopped before touching Astra’s head. “Can I touch your horns again, Dream Lord?”

“Oh, no,” Astra breathed, his eyes very wide. “I mean ... Fine, I don’t care.” He tossed his head, dislodging some of the stars encircling the horns.

“What is this?” Cillian asked, edging closer, hovering his fingers over the sparkling glow that surrounded Astra’s left horn.

Astra gave a full-body shudder, and triumph surged along with the desire in Cillian’s veins. “Aesthetically pleasing.”

“Is it— What happens if I touch it?”

“Try it and see.”

Cillian gently dragged his fingers through the glow, pulling back when some clung to his skin. He examined it, then brought his hand to his mouth and looked at Astra, who inhaled sharply but didn’t say anything. Cillian licked his fingers, tasting whatever the substance was. It was sweet, a bit like spun sugar.

“Now you’re going to fall asleep and dream about candy,” Astra said.

“I want to suck on your horns.”

Astra closed his eyes. “What are you—what are you *doing* to me?”

“Kneel,” Cillian said, enjoying the press of his dominance, new and thrilling. “If you want me to. That’s all you have to do.”

They stared at each other, and then Astra rose, slowly and gracefully, to kneel in front of Cillian. It was— There weren’t words for the feeling of *rightness* that burned through him.

“There, are you happy?” Astra, for all that he was trying to find the bratty tone he wielded so well, was too breathless for it to be believable. “I’m kneeling.”

“For me,” Cillian said, reaching out again to touch Astra’s horns.

“Well, there’s no one else in here.” Astra swayed slightly. “Is that all you’re going to do, after that—that display?”

Cillian leaned in and pressed his mouth to the curve of Astra’s horn. It was cool against his lips, and he took his time tracing its shape. The starlight substance still tasted like candy, but he forgot all about that when he heard the noise Astra made when Cillian sucked on the tip of his horn.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.” Cillian swirled his tongue around the pointed end, and Astra *moaned*.

Cillian kept at it, moving to lavish the same attention on Astra’s other horn, boldly licking up the curve and sucking at the tip. “Feel good? Or do you still want me to fall asleep?”

Astra made a soft sound, and Cillian pulled back to look at him. Astra looked surprised, and there were so many stars in his dark eyes, they shed a soft, silvery glow over his cheeks.

“Gods, you really are beautiful. Infuriating and a brat, but beautiful.”

“Stop.” Astra sounded desperate, but he clutched at Cillian’s shoulders when Cillian made to move away. “Wait. No. I didn’t mean that. I don’t know what I mean.”

Cillian put two fingers under Astra’s chin and tipped his face up. “Do you want me to stop touching you?”

“I don’t think ... quite yet,” Astra answered, and they were so close, it was easy for Cillian to lean in and kiss him.

How strange that even though they both were kneeling, knowing Astra was doing it in response to his dominance made it feel so different. Astra kissed him back, making an eager sound into his mouth.

“You want me on top of you?”

“Just shut up. Yes.” Astra bit at Cillian’s lower lip, tugging him forward.

Cillian gave him a push, and Astra went to his back on the bedding. Cillian climbed on top of him and kissed him again, settling his weight over Astra gently to give Astra time to stop him if he wanted to.

“Why is there so much of you,” Astra whispered, fingers curled in the fabric of Cillian’s shirt.

Cillian pressed his lips to Astra’s neck, then lifted his head. “Didn’t I have to pull you down to kiss you, last time?”

Astra scowled at him. “Maybe I’m taller in my dreams. Maybe you’re shorter. Let’s not make it a thing—ah, *ahh!*”

Cillian had shifted, pressing his thigh to Astra’s cock, which was already hard. Cillian slid a hand up Astra’s chest, tipping his head back to expose his throat. He kissed and licked Astra’s neck, up the side of his lovely face, and then went back to the horns.

“You have a fetish, I think.” Astra’s censure lost much of its impact, given how he was grinding against Cillian’s thigh. “I don’t really ... This isn’t the same as it is in dreams. Maybe you did something to me.”

“Mere mortal—oh, I’m sorry; mere *potential* god, me?” Cillian braced himself on one arm and tugged on a horn. “What could I have done? This is lust, Astra. Desire. Don’t you have some sibling who’s in charge of that, who explained it to you?”

“He has—a lot to answer for,” Astra managed, then ran his fingers down Cillian’s chest.

“You can take my shirt off,” Cillian said.

“You can take it off faster, probably.”

In response, Cillian shifted his weight, but he didn't reach for his shirt. Instead, he palmed Astra's erection, which was clearly visible through his loose sleep pants. He squeezed gently. "I bet if you were motivated, you could—"

He fell silent as Astra bucked beneath him, cried out, and came. The fabric went damp against Cillian's palm, and after a few seconds of delighted surprise, he rubbed a little more, trying to give Astra pleasure even as he writhed in the throes of it.

Astra's eyes were closed, but that silvery light was still seeping from under his eyelids. He was so beautiful, awash in his power and still on his back for Cillian. It made Cillian feel powerful enough that he was half convinced he could shout Pallas to the river of the dead if she showed up. But he didn't want to think about Pallas.

"That's it, there, good," Cillian murmured when Astra finally stopped twitching. He pressed two fingers to Astra's mouth. "Can you taste yourself?"

Astra opened his mouth without protest and sucked on Cillian's fingers. When he blinked his eyes open, they were more stars than night. It reminded Cillian of how he looked in dreams, eyes blazing white.

Cillian's own cock was aching, and he was about to strip down so Astra could easily return the favor ... when Astra gave him a little shove, and Cillian, surprised, moved back.

"Thank you, that was enlightening, good night," Astra said, all in a rush, then turned his back to Cillian ... and went still.

Cillian stared at the sleeping god and swore under his breath. "Are you— Astra, that's— You *brat*."

Cillian flopped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep without doing something about his erection, and he didn't *want* to do something about his erection without Astra, and of all the absurd situations Cillian had found himself in during the entirety of his long life, this one was the most frustrating ... and possibly the most embarrassing.

He closed his eyes and thought about sheep jumping over a fence. Maybe he could find Astra in his dream and explain why exactly you didn't just *vanish off to sleep* after you got yours. The sheep turned into visions of spanking an errant dream god with a hairbrush, which didn't help him sleep *or* calm down his raging erection. Cillian groaned.

It was going to be a long night.

\* \* \*

“THE FUCK IS YOUR PROBLEM?”

Astra burst through the veil of dreams and into the sleeping mind of his older brother Arwyn, emerging wild-eyed on a dream beach at the eastern edge of Thalassa. The waves were quiet where they rippled against the shore, fruit trees swayed in the breeze, and Arwyn was lying in a sunken pool in the white sand filled with gold, pearls, and paste jewels. He looked up at Astra. “The fuck is *my* problem?”

“Yes.” Astra kicked sand at him, and Arwyn rolled over, spilling a pile of coins onto the beach. Some of the smaller ones stuck to his skin, and his blond hair was messy, hanging to his shoulders. “You, your realm. Desire. It's horrible. It makes no sense.”

“Oh, darling, did puberty finally hit?” Arwyn smiled. “It's all right, Astra, I hear it's perfectly normal, a growing god like you—” Astra kicked more sand, and Arwyn cackled. “You're in a mood, bratling.”

“Of course I am.” Astra threw himself down at the edge of Arwyn's pool. For all that Arwyn was a sarcastic, snarky shit at best, he was still the sibling Astra felt closest to. Azaiah barely slept unless Astra wanted him to. Ares was ... Ares. Levi was great, but he didn't really care for untangling things like emotions. Azaiah's companion, Nyx, was more likely to soften the emotional blow, while Arwyn trusted Astra to handle the truth—even if it was mortifying.

“Tell me,” Arwyn said, tossing a fake ruby into the air. “I must know.”

Astra dipped his feet into the pool, stirring coins and strands of gold necklaces. “It’s ... You’re going to laugh.”

Arwyn’s smile broadened.

It all came out in a rush. Pallas, the forest, finding Cillian, watching him dance ... realizing he was meant to be a god. The fact that his touch made Astra feel like he was going to explode, or cry, or both. The rush of pleasure that came too fast and too hard, all at once and yet not enough. Cillian’s tongue on Astra’s horns.

“And then I looked at his face,” he said, as Arwyn stared at him, “and I wanted to ... I felt like he was ... I felt soft. Like I was broken open and spilling out everywhere and it was all Cillian’s fault and I didn’t even mind it that much. How does that make sense? Why would he do that to me?”

Arwyn’s voice was oddly strained. “He touched your cock, and you came.”

“He touched my clothes, actually,” Astra said. Arwyn made a strangled sound. “Stop. This is important. I think there’s something wrong with my body, or with his. Or maybe it’s his potential godhood.”

Arwyn started to shake.

“So I came here, because obviously it’s your realm doing this to me, and I want you to make it stop.”

Arwyn sank down into the pool. Sound emerged from the pile of coins and jewels, and it took Astra a moment to realize Arwyn was laughing. Not just laughing, *howling*. He let out great, helpless barks and hoots until he started to wheeze, at which point he thrust one arm out of the pool to drag his shaking, sobbing body out onto the beach.

Then he looked at Astra, panting heavily, and burst into another round of laughter.

It happened *six times*. Every time Astra thought Arwyn was done, Arwyn would look at him, or mutter something to himself, and then he was rolling in the sand, tears streaming down his face. When he was finally able to speak, he was

lying on his side, still stopping every few breaths to laugh like a man cursed with incurable hiccups.

“So you. You came immediately.”

“I told you that.”

Arwyn made a sound like a goose being stepped on. “And then you came here.”

“Obviously.”

“You came, said thank you, and then passed out.”

Astra stared at him, and Arwyn started hooting again, like an owl choking on a child’s flute.

“You did hear me when I said he could be the new god of art? And that Pallas—”

“I am going to use this for *centuries*,” Arwyn sobbed, covering his face with both hands. “Give me a moment. One moment. Hold on. Wait, no. Summon Levi. He has to hear this.”

“I’m not summoning anyone.”

Arwyn snorted. He kept his hands over his face, still shaking slightly, and his voice came out muffled. “You’ve been taking lovers in dreams, Astra. None of them have ever actually touched you before.”

“And what does that have to do with whatever is happening to me?”

“It means you’re a virgin,” Arwyn said, lowering his hands. “Pure as the fallen snow. Little ... *pff* ... baby Astra ...”

“Coming to you was a mistake,” Astra muttered as Arwyn devolved into laughter again.

By the time Arwyn had laughed himself out, Astra was almost ready to turn tail and try to summon Azaiah. But Arwyn sat up and dragged Astra toward him, a hand on his shoulder. “It’s lust,” he said. “It’s physical as well as emotional; you know that. This Cillian, he might be a god?”

“He could be. He has the potential, but he hasn’t ascended.”

Arwyn frowned. “I don’t think I’ve heard of that happening. But Pallas was selfish, so I can see her doing this. You said Cillian reveres folk art and practical creations? She’d hate that. She was all about perfectionism.” He rolled his eyes. “She hated me, and Somnus wasn’t much better. Always at her heels, trying to please her.”

Astra tugged on his hair, but it didn’t have the same effect as when Cillian did it. “You don’t think it’s just ... like that? That the dream keeper is drawn to Art, and that’s why Cillian can dom me? Why I want to ... kneel for him?”

Arwyn shrugged. “Maybe. Ugh. I don’t like using my power on my own brother, but sit still and let me ... rummage.” Arwyn braced his hands on Astra’s shoulders, and Astra felt a slight tug, scented brine and iron in the air. Arwyn’s voice echoed with the sound of whispers in a deep cave. “Art brings the dreaming to life. It makes it more real—gives it a shape humans can see. You bend to Art because it’s in your nature. Hmm. Strange. I didn’t think gods could influence each other that way, but Dreams and Art always were weirdly close.”

“So I’m compelled to want him?”

Arwyn snorted. “No. You’re just a sexual freak like the rest of us, kid.”

Astra glared at him. “Your next dream—”

“Will be wonderful, because I’m helping you.” Arwyn looked far too smug about the whole situation. “If Pallas has a hold on him, and he can’t ascend without breaking the curse, you’ll need to get rid of her. Send her to Azaiah.”

“She won’t go, and you know he doesn’t take people across until they’re ready.”

Arwyn sighed. “Yeah. He’s too nice, really. But that doesn’t mean you have to be. Look, right now you’re evenly matched.”

“She ... might be more powerful than me,” Astra admitted.



Arwyn's brows rose. "Huh. That Cillian taught you humility, too? All right. You know what you do when you're at a disadvantage? Trip your opponent. Find places where she's latched her gross little claws, and take them away from her. She's obsessed with keeping her old realm out of anyone else's hands, so if you weaken her power and strengthen Cillian's, you might be able to break the curse by brute force."

"So I have to make Cillian more of a god? By ... making her less of one?"

"Weaken Pallas's grip on art, and you'll give yourself a fighting chance. You might even annoy her into going to Azaiah; you never know. The rest of it is your problem."

"The rest of it?"

Arwyn gave Astra a knowing look. "You need to work on your stamina."

"My— Arwyn! He was ... he was skilled."

"Mm. Right. Maybe he'll give you the spanking you deserve."

Astra got to his feet. "You're being unhelpful again." He was not going to think about Cillian's hand on his ass. He refused. "Enjoy swimming in gold."

"Oh, I have every intention of enjoying myself after what you just told me," Arwyn drawled.

Astra flipped him off, and Arwyn waved serenely, like a monarch greeting their adoring citizens.

"And remember that you need to get your partner off, too," Arwyn called, as Astra stomped out of his dream and into the dark. "If you want him to suck on your horns again."

"It was a mistake to confide in you," Astra snapped. He shut off contact with Arwyn's dream and sank back into his own body with a jerk, eyes slamming open, trying not to gasp as all the physical sensations rolled through him again. Only a few moments had passed—he was still coming down from the onslaught of pleasure. He turned to look at Cillian, and Cillian's eyes narrowed.

“I know you’re displeased,” Astra said, before Cillian could open his mouth. “I had to talk to someone.”

“So you ... passed out.”

“Yes.” Astra felt a blush creep to his face. Why did his body get so warm every time Cillian spoke, lately? “It wasn’t particularly helpful, but apparently Art shapes Dreams, so you’re ... you have an influence. An overwhelming one.”

Cillian didn’t look particularly mollified. “So you checked out as soon as you came, with no explanation.”

“I came back,” Astra said. “I’m trying to ...” He closed his eyes for a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Hmm?” Cillian braced himself on the pillows. “You’re what?”

“Sorry,” Astra muttered. “I should be ... less of a ... No, I’m not saying it. Sorry is enough.”

“I think you should say it.” By the stars, was everyone set on embarrassing him tonight? “You should be less of a what, Astra?”

Astra looked at him sullenly and whispered under his breath. Cillian tugged on a lock of his hair, and pleasure rushed through him again, sharp and short.

“Say it, dreamer,” Cillian said, dominance creeping into his voice.

“Brat,” Astra said. “Less of a brat. There.”

“I don’t think you’re being sincere.” Astra shot Cillian an outraged look. “I think you need incentive. Come here.” Cillian patted his lap, and Astra frowned at him. “I have to admit I’ve wanted to do this since I first met you.”

“Do what?”

“Over my lap, Astra.”

Then Astra understood, and warmth rose in his belly. His spent cock twitched, but he tried to hide the reaction behind a veneer of indignation. “I’m not letting anyone spank me! I’m the god of dreams.”

“And I’m apparently supposed to be the god of art,” Cillian said. “Doesn’t make you less of a brat.”

“Don’t ... tell anyone,” Astra managed to say, and for a second, Cillian’s expression went soft, almost fond. Then Cillian snapped his fingers, and Astra, hoping Arwyn’s control over his realm didn’t mean he could just ... just know what people got up to, draped himself over Cillian’s lap.

“I’ll stop when you’re properly sorry,” Cillian said, and Astra gasped as Cillian yanked down his sleep pants. He pulled them to Astra’s thighs, effectively locking his legs together, and Astra covered his face and breathed hard into his palms as Cillian ran a hand over his backside.

The first slap of Cillian’s open palm burst through Astra like one of the fireworks he’d seen in the dreams of the Katoikos, bright and sharp. It was mortifying to be so helpless, but it made Astra’s stomach lurch in a way that wasn’t entirely unpleasant, and he didn’t have time to analyze it before Cillian brought his hand down again.

Astra jumped. His ass *bounced* with the impact, and he made a sound against his palms that made Cillian hum appreciatively. He’d never been so desperate in his entire life, and by the time Cillian spanked his skin sore and impossibly warm, Astra was gasping and moaning, hair falling over his face.

“How sorry are we?” Cillian asked. Astra whimpered. “Not enough, I think.”

Astra squeaked when Cillian spanked him again. “Mmmfmhm,” he said into his hands, and Cillian’s warm chuckle went right to Astra’s dick. “I’m sorry.”

“Not yet,” Cillian said, and spanked him again.

Tears formed in the corners of Astra’s eyes. He squirmed on Cillian’s lap, panting, and after another few smacks, he let out something that sounded horrifyingly like a sob. “I’m *sorry*,” he said. “What are you doing, why is this, why does this feel like ... I’m sorry, fuck, fuck, Cillian ...”

Cillian rubbed his hand over Astra's raw, stinging ass. "Do you think you can show me how sorry you are with your mouth on my cock?"

Astra groaned. He nearly tripped over himself maneuvering in Cillian's lap, tangled in his own clothes with his hair in his mouth and sticking to his damp cheeks. Cillian smoothed Astra's hair back with one hand and took out his own cock with the other.

Astra tried to suck it down all at once, too fast, and choked as his throat spasmed around it. Cillian used Astra's hair to pull him up, and Astra looked at him tearfully, hands trembling as he braced himself over Cillian's lap.

"Use your tongue," Cillian said, and lowered Astra down again.

Astra could barely take it. He felt so full, his eyes watering, saliva pooling under his tongue as he tried to do more than just let Cillian fuck his mouth. Cillian tightened his grip on Astra's hair and held him as far down as he could go, watching Astra intently. Astra's own cock was going hard again, and he rutted against the pillows while he let Cillian control him. He was a mess, drooling and crying and choking, but Cillian didn't seem to mind.

After a few minutes, Cillian moaned and pulled Astra up by a horn, making pleasure ripple through Astra like a wave. "Mouth ... open," Cillian ordered. Astra could barely think, blinking up at him as Cillian worked himself with his free hand until he came with a sharp cry, spending over Astra's throat and face, and Astra collapsed between Cillian's legs. Cillian ran his fingers through the mess he'd made, then slipped them into Astra's mouth. Astra sucked instinctively, tasting Cillian, and Cillian sighed.

"There," he said. "That's sorry." Astra looked at him, not sure whether he should beg for his own release, but Cillian shook his head. "No, you don't get to come yet. You need to learn to wait."

Astra whined. "But I was good. You came."

“You can keep being good.” Cillian drew Astra up onto him. He kissed him again but was careful not to touch Astra’s cock. “I feel like you have a lot of bratty behavior to make up for.”

“Arwyn’s never going to let me live this down,” Astra said, and Cillian patted him, wrapping him in his arms. “Can I come ... later? In a few minutes?”

“Not that soon.” Cillian smiled when Astra suppressed a whimper. “But yes, later. We should sleep first.”

“This is torture,” Astra whispered, but he obeyed, pressing a hand to Cillian’s cheek. They sank into dreams together, and Astra made a point not to stray from the hillside.

After all, Arwyn didn’t need to know *everything*.

They woke up late. Astra was mortifyingly human, messy and sweaty, his hair a disaster, and when he tried to sneak out to the river, Roisin and Tay immediately spotted him. Tay’s eyes widened, and Roisin’s grin went wicked as Cillian appeared at Astra’s back, looking far less disheveled.

“Good morning,” Roisin said in a singsong voice.

“None of that,” Cillian said, but he sounded far too pleased with himself.

Astra slunk to the river before anyone else could notice, but he needn’t have bothered trying for stealth. Gossip spread through the troupe like wildfire, and it wasn’t long before everyone and their horses seemed to know that Astra had been thoroughly debauched by the troupe leader.

“Told you,” Evar signed to Thibault as Astra passed them by the fire, and Thibault handed Evar several coins. Astra opened his mouth to protest, but Cillian came up behind him, sliding a hand along his spine.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “They’ll find a new scandal soon enough. Let’s check on the broom-weavers.”

“But you never let me—”

“Later,” Cillian said, and Astra shivered.

He didn't expect much to have changed in the village yet. Humans were only mortal, after all, and they'd need time to rest and recover from the grip of Pallas's influence. But when the troupe headed down the main road, he had to stop several times to stare.

D'Hiver had transformed overnight. There were garlands on the fences. Elders sat on porches with brooms in hand, carving intricate designs with little knives and odd tools. Children ran down the streets with handfuls of chalk, making markings on stones seemingly at random. Teenagers and younger adults, dressed as monsters in costumes of woven reeds, dried flowers, scraps of leather, and thin branches, lumbered through gardens and doorways. And at the three-story house on the hill, Gwen and her grandmother were sitting on the lawn with their hair tied up and their fingers stained with dye, weaving ribbons into the bristles of their brooms.

"Starling," Gwen cried, waving an arm as they approached. "I've been allowed to make my own this year!"

"Don't talk to them," Margaret said, but her tone was more wary than sharp. She gave Cillian a cautious nod, and Cillian nodded back. "They're ... odd people. No one to concern yourself with."

"Will you stay for the festival?" Gwen asked. She got up, clearly unbothered by her grandmother's warning, and draped her arms over the fence where Astra had stopped. "It's not as grand as last year, but everyone's doing their best. Was that you who fixed it?"

"Oh, ah, that was probably more to do with Cill—"

"You just needed a little rest, most likely," Cillian said, and Margaret looked up with a grunt of grudging respect. "But we'd love to stay and watch."

"Good, because it's so fun. Our ancestors made the first brooms for the first festival, you know," she added. "That's why we carry on the tradition."

“Stop speaking to degenerate strangers and finish your broom, child,” Margaret called. Well, then. Perhaps not all her mean-spirited behavior was Pallas’s fault.

Gwen shrugged. “Nice seeing you again, anyway.” She smiled at Astra. “I’m glad we’re still friends.”

Astra gave her a little wave as she turned to go, and Cillian huffed out a laugh. “What?”

“You’re not bad with kids.”

“Well.” Astra rubbed the back of his neck. “Their dreams are always so vivid, before the world tries to box them in. And someone has to look after them. Azaiah does, when they pass, but there’s no one to support them before that.”

Cillian tilted his head. “In the basement,” he said. “That last dream, with the little boy in the house with those people ...”

Astra hunched his shoulders and tugged his cloak a little closer. “I was young. I thought I could be a god and a mortal at the same time, I suppose. Foolish, really.”

Cillian looked at him, his gaze too perceptive. “I’m sorry you weren’t able to.”

“It’s all right.” Astra turned away from the grandmother and girl sitting in the grass. “It wasn’t like I was alone, anyway.”

Cillian was silent as they made their way to the village square. A cobbled-together festival was forming, with people bringing out barrels and tarps to make stalls, kids running about with flowers and chalk, and a collection of locals tuning their instruments. Some of the troupe’s musicians joined them, and there was a clamor of cheerful voices as Roisin struck up a reel on her violin.

It was almost like a dream. The festival started with costumed monsters crawling and stamping up the street to the sound of pipes and drums while people shouted and waved bundles of flowers at them from the windows. Kids ran alongside, whooping and chanting a rhyme about spring and monsters in wheat fields, and a line of elderly women formed

at the entrance to the square. They all wore kerchiefs over their hair, and they held carved brooms with ribbons and beads woven into the bristles. As the monsters approached, the women stepped forward with their brooms and started sweeping, making the monsters retreat with howls of fury and terror. A few tried to tease the women, reaching for the brooms' staffs or bristles, but they were knocked back and sent running. Fiddles played in the square, and people followed the old women as they chased the monsters out of town.

“This is what we need to do,” Astra shouted to Cillian over the din as the last costumed monsters fled into someone’s garden. “It’s what Adrien saw in his visions. We have to weaken Pallas.”

“What, with folk festivals?”

Astra gestured. “Can’t you see it? Don’t you feel stronger here? Like this?”

Cillian paused, looking down at his hands as though to check if they’d changed somehow. “I don’t know.”

“I do. Once we’re done here, we’ll go one of the other places Adrien talked about. We’ll take art away from Pallas and make her weaker. Maybe weak enough to let you go.”

“To let me ascend?” Cillian asked. He still sounded skeptical, but he kept looking around, taking in the people dancing, the grandmothers with their brooms, the monsters shedding their costumes.

“If that’s what you want. But at least you’ll be able to break free.”

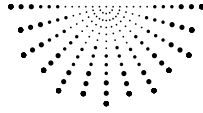
Cillian was silent for a long time. He looked almost lost, there in the heart of the festival, but now that Astra knew what to look for, he could see the potential god. It was what the forest had seen when it called Cillian, what Pallas saw when she cursed him. Cillian was at home here—not in the pristine halls and temples where Pallas used to hold court, but with common, workaday things, with art that lived and breathed and was sometimes haphazard and strange.



It was beautiful. *He* was beautiful, and for a few seconds, Astra could scarcely breathe.

“All right,” Cillian said at last, as the village rang with music, laughter, and the stamp of dancing feet. “Let’s find art.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Can I have a word?”

Cillian looked up from sewing a costume and was surprised to see Sparrow standing in front of him, expression grim. The latter wasn't the surprising part—Sparrow usually looked as if he were an executioner walking a condemned man to the gallows—but seeking Cillian out to *talk*? That didn't happen very often.

“Of course,” Cillian said, nodding to a blanket spread out near where he was sitting on the grass. Astra had been lying on it, sunning himself like a lazy cat, until Cillian told him to go be useful and help with something. He set the sewing aside, careful to tuck in the needle, and gave Sparrow his full attention. “What's up?”

Sparrow sat and took a moment to collect his thoughts. Cillian studied him, this man who'd shown up after a performance in southern Staria, near the Gerakian border, with three fresh cuts on his face and a pathological need not to divulge any information about himself or why he was leaving. He mentioned having worked at the quarries as a laborer, but Cillian had wondered whether that were true, or if maybe he'd been a guard. Cillian didn't ask, but he'd once seen Sparrow bathing, and there'd been far more of those vicious-looking scars all over his chest, arms, and back. So either he was a guard who'd run afoul of someone who didn't want to be there, or whoever he was working alongside had problems aiming their pickax.

“Is it true, what everyone is saying?”

For a second, Cillian wondered if Sparrow was asking him about Astra. “What everyone is saying about what?”

Sparrow leaned back on his hands. “D’Hiver. How it was ... fixed, on account of you and the dream keeper.”

Cillian thought of how best to answer. “We did ... maybe influence a few things. About the festival, and some widespread insomnia. Since I’m the expert.” He smiled, but Sparrow’s expression didn’t change. “Why?”

“Heard you were talking about where to go next.”

Cillian nodded. The timing of Besom Day had been convenient, but that didn’t mean they could walk into any village or town and stumble across a folk tradition that had been corrupted. “We were thinking Gerakia, maybe, or crossing over into Kallistos at Naimi, heading up to Mislia.” There was a revolution still smoldering in Mislia, though, so maybe not.

“Is it that you need to fix something?”

“In a way, yeah.” Cillian studied him. “You know I’m cursed, right? The curse is ... complicated.” He didn’t want to go around claiming to be a god. Dante would never let him live it down, to begin with, and they already had one deity traveling with them; they didn’t need a second. Cillian was also still not sure he believed it. “It has to do with a wraith that feeds on decay, and it’s trying destroy ... art, I suppose, but the kind that ordinary people use to brighten their lives or chase away the things that frighten them. Folk art.” It all sounded like a melodrama when he put it like that, but it was the truth.

Sparrow didn’t crack a smile, though. Instead, he nodded. “That’s what I figured. Something to do with people, art that ... keeps them safe. Even if it’s just pretend monsters they’re chasin’.”

Cillian blinked. “Art that keeps people safe,” he said carefully, remembering how Astra had said he gave shelter to those who needed it. “Yeah, I guess that’s about right.”

Sparrow fiddled with something in his hand. It looked like the broken-off end of a stick, a nub worn smooth by his thumb

rubbing it over and over. A bit like a worry stone, the kind Thalassan fishermen wore on a string around their neck when they went out into the storm-tossed waves. “I think I know where you could go. Next. If you need to keep doing that, fixing things.”

Cillian leaned forward, the cool breeze ruffling his hair. “Where?”

“You know I came from the quarries, yeah? Where they mine the marble for the nobles and such.”

This was more than Sparrow usually said in a week. Cillian nodded. “I remember, yeah.”

“The scars on my face. On the rest of me. I know what people say. I was a guard who got rushed by some people who didn’t want to be there, and they cut me up. Or I was in a rockslide.”

Cillian cleared his throat. “People make up all kinds of stories, especially a bunch of creative people with too much free time between performances.”

Sparrow shook his head. “It don’t really bother me. But that’s not how I got hurt. There are dragons in the quarries. Little ones, like they got in Arktos. But these don’t eat fire, like they do there. They eat rocks. They live in the quarries, and they ... they’re not as nice as those Arktos dragons. These will kill you. They hear the miners, and they know what the sound means, people tearing stones from the ground. Their nest.”

“I’ve heard of those,” Cillian said. “Rock-eaters, we called them.”

Sparrow shook his head. “Yeah. They don’t eat them, though. They break up the rocks and use the pebbles for their nest, or to bury the nests of other dragons. Real mean, petty things. Figures nobles would insist on gettin’ their marble from there.”

Cillian snorted. “It does.”

“The way we deal with the dragons is, we have drummers. Big drums. You set them in a circle, and you drum until you

get the right rhythm. The one that makes the dragons think you're tunneling into the ground, so they come after you."

"Is ... that wise?" Cillian asked, trying not to look at the scars on Sparrow's face.

Sparrow did smile, then, though only briefly. "Probably not. But there's something about the drumming—you do one rhythm to call them, and then you do another to make them settle. Somethin' about mimicking the patter of rain, I don't know. But it would draw them away from where people were working and keep them docile, sleepy."

Sparrow was still holding the little wooden nub—it looked, Cillian realized, like the head of a drumstick. He met Sparrow's gaze.

Sparrow nodded. "That was me. I was a drummer. It's an important job."

"I imagine so," Cillian agreed.

"But one day I ... forgot the rhythm. I was standing at my drum, marking the call in the morning, and then my fingers ... went wrong. I forgot the patterns, I forgot everything. It was like I'd never known it. The dragons were already there, and they ... There was a man next to me, a laborer. They went after him first. He was screaming, begging me to play, and I tried, but they ... pinned him and tore him apart, right there, and then they turned on me. I tried to remember, over and over, but whatever I was playing, it just made them angrier. I fought one off, and then the guards came, finally, and took care of another one. It was too late for my face and way too late for the man they'd killed."

Cillian had no idea what to say.

"I thought it was me. Something off in my head. So I left. I couldn't handle seeing my friends, the looks they gave me. No one blamed me, but I blamed myself. I'd played that rhythm every morning for five years. I thought I could play it in my sleep."

"And had you been sleeping?" Cillian asked, when he found his voice.

“No,” Sparrow said. “The few nights before, I had these nightmares. Dragons tying me up with red strings and carrying me off to eat my vitals, like that fairy tale from Katoikos. About the man whose liver gets eaten every day.”

Cillian would argue that wasn't exactly a *fairy tale* as much as a morality lesson, but now wasn't the time to argue over semantics. Besides, he was stuck on *dragons tying me up with red strings*. “Go on.”

“Anyway, like I said. Thought it was me. That I was defective, like a broken drum, a broken stick.” Sparrow shoved the little nub of wood into his pocket. “Then I heard it happened again, and again. Most folk say the dragons got smart and figured out what we were doing, but I don't think that's it. I met up with my friend Hugo in Duciel, when we was there last. He used to be a quarry laborer; now he does odd jobs, digs graves, stuff like what I do for you. Well.” Sparrow paused. “Ain't ever had a reason to dig no grave, yet.”

“Let's hope it stays that way,” Cillian said, thinking of that morning, when he'd watched Vai storm out of Saoirse's tent, the other woman throwing a pair of shoes at her, and Vai's inspired curses after what he'd assumed was a night spent together. The way Thibault, Ruben, and Cedric would glare at anyone in the audience who took a shine to a performer and got too close after the show.

“Hugo said there were plenty of former quarry guards and laborers comin' to the city, lookin' for work. The guards, now, that made sense. I figured that was because they made some reforms, that prince did, the one you and the dream keeper met with? Not sending aged-out courtesans to the quarries—or prisoners, either. So no need for guards, and the folks who used to be guards don't want to do the quarrying work itself for a pittance, you take my meaning?”

Cillian smiled. “I do.”

“He said that weren't it at all, though. That they're paying three, four times what they used to, enough that the hard work would be worth doing. But still, no one wants the job, not even

laborers who'd be earning more than they ever expected. The dragons are too bad, and there aren't any drummers anymore, 'cause no one knows the songs. And I guess people aren't sleeping, so there's accidents from bein' sloppy, even when the dragons don't show up."

Cillian considered this. It did sound like Pallas's influence, but he had a bit of a problem with the idea of riding in and trying to fix it. Quarrying was dangerous work, and they *did* use to condemn debtors to work off their debts there, and maybe the prince had changed things, but who could say whether that would last? All of that for—what? Nobles to have fancy baths?

Sparrow leaned forward. "Look, I know what you're thinking. And yeah, it's not always ... Some of it was bad, even worse than the dragons."

That seemed like an understatement. "I was only thinking maybe it would be better for the quarries not to ... function."

"There's a town," Sparrow said. "Generations of stoneworkers. And it ain't just for nobles. That might be the main thing, but it's ... gravestones for common folks, foundations for schools that the new prince is building—lots of new things on account of him, actually. No more courtesans or prisoners, and stones that won't just be used for baths but practical shit, and *now* we can't mine it?"

Cillian hadn't thought of that. Of course all the new building Adrien de Guillory was doing in Staria—and that was merely as crown prince—would require stone. "I'm sorry, that wasn't ... I didn't mean to suggest it was useless work. I know it isn't."

"It ain't, and it's not *any* kind of work right now. Nobles don't need that marble, but kids need schools, and I don't think it's right they can't have 'em on account of some bitch goin' around cursing folks to forget how to drum."

"You're right. So you think if we fix things there ..."

"You get the drummers back, they'll keep the dragons at bay. And this time? Without the kind of setup where you get

guards that just want a personal fuckfest with former courtesans who'll do anything to get a few hours where they don't have to break rocks, maybe my people can ask this new prince for better conditions. Make quarrying a proper, respected job like it should be. Masonry ain't just for spoiled folks to take heated baths with sixteen other people, y'know."

Cillian coughed. "I never knew you had the soul of a revolutionary, Sparrow."

"Ain't a revolution to want your labor respected."

Cillian wasn't so sure about that, but he couldn't disagree with the sentiment. "Is that why you came to me? Because we have drummers?" He'd never once seen Sparrow go near a drum.

Sparrow looked away. "I liked hearing the rhythms. Reminded me of what I ... was, once. Thought maybe bein' around you people, all artist-like, would help me get it back." He shifted his gaze back to Cillian's. "Maybe you still can."

"I'll do my best, but if we can fix things, are you going to want to stay there? You can, of course—anyone is free to go whenever they want—but you'd be missed."

Sparrow shook his head. "It'd be enough to know it was all right, you know? I ain't gonna forget what happened with the man and the dragons anytime soon. I still ... dream about it." He shuddered, and Cillian made a note to mention it to Astra. Sparrow, who must have sensed his thoughts, held up a hand. "Don't go meddlin' on my behalf, Cillian. Always figured I was owed those dreams, on account of my forgetfulness. If that ain't what happened, well, then the dreams'll go away when it's all fixed up proper."

He sounded so sure of that. Cillian hoped it was true. "All right. We'll head to the quarries, then."

"Thank you. I like working for you. You're a good man. Ain't sure why anyone would want to curse you. I wouldn't have asked this for myself, you know. But if it helps you ... You gave me a place and never did ask me any questions. I'd like to pay that back, if I can."



Warmed, Cillian gave him a nod. “You don’t owe me anything. You’re an asset to this troupe, and I’d want to help even if it didn’t dispel the curse. Which, don’t get your hopes up. We’re kind of making this all up as we go.”

“Sure. That’s what art is, ain’t it? You’re inspired, you do shit. Thanks, boss.” Sparrow got to his feet. “Even if it doesn’t do anything, at least you tried.”

Well, there was a motto to live by.

“Let me get this straight,” Astra said, later, perched atop a crate while Cillian finished folding bedding to load into a trunk. “We’re going to go beat some drums to summon vicious dragons?” Cillian had already told the crew the plan for their next stop. That had gone exactly as he expected, with Dante insisting there was no “magic rhythm” to calm a dragon and Theo interrupting him with folktales from Mislia about light mages who first learned the technique, which turned into a lively discussion about myths and local traditions that would probably end with a few tent switches followed by mumbled apologies in the morning.

“We’re going to help them remember how to *calm* the dragons,” Cillian corrected. “Also, Lord Sleepiness, do you think you could do something useful while perched there like a crow of ill omen?” He tossed a blanket at Astra.

Rather than folding it, Astra wrapped it around his shoulders. “Caw, caw. And why are we packing up the blankets? We still have to sleep.”

“We don’t need this many. You’re warm enough to make up for two blankets.”

“Oh, well, I’m so *sorry* that in addition to letting you sleep, I provide warmth and comfort!”

“Astra,” Cillian said, infusing a little of that new dominance into his voice, “stop being a brat, or I’ll make you bring me the hairbrush.”

“It’s nighttime, Cillian. My hair doesn’t need to be brushed, thank you very much.”

Cillian gave him a pointed stare. “I wasn’t going to use it on your hair.” He laughed when Astra turned red and tilted his nose in the air, sniffing disdainfully. “If you fold that blanket, maybe I’ll let you come tonight.”

“Maybe I don’t want to,” Astra retorted, but to Cillian’s delight, he took the blanket from his shoulders and folded it. Then he promptly ruined the work by throwing it at Cillian, so it landed rumpled at his feet.

“Do you *want* the hairbrush? You can just ask.”

Astra examined his nails, kicking one heel against the crate. “Certainly not. I would never make anything that easy for you.”

“Then I guess someone doesn’t want to come, do they?”

“I guess not,” Astra said sweetly.

That, of course, lasted until they were wrapped up in the blankets Cillian hadn’t packed. They had to be in physical contact for Astra’s dream power to mitigate the curse, and Cillian made sure they were pressed up against each other, front to front, so he had easy access to Astra’s horns. “Good night,” Cillian whispered, and brushed his fingers over the curve of the horn closest to him. He stifled a laugh when Astra’s starlit eyes flashed at him in the dark. “What?”

“You *know* what that does to me,” Astra whined. “And it isn’t fair. You don’t have anything I can touch that makes *you* want—” He cut off the rest of the sentence. “Good night.”

“Oh, but I do have something you can touch,” Cillian murmured, finding Astra’s hand in the dark, tugging it down between them and pressing Astra’s palm to Cillian’s half-erect cock.

It was ... pleasant to lie there in the dark, teasing a lover. Even if the curse still loomed over them, even if they were about to go try to drum dragons into napping peacefully, even if said lover was a brat who couldn’t just ask for what he wanted.

Astra’s hand curled around his cock and rubbed through his sleep pants. Cillian gasped at the pleasure coursing through

him and drew Astra close for a kiss, his other hand playing with Astra's horns while he urged Astra to slip his hand beneath the waistband of his pants. "Go on, you can touch me."

Astra was uncharacteristically quiet. His fingers were warm on Cillian's bare cock, and Cillian hissed as Astra quickly began to learn the shape of him.

"I've touched it before," Astra reminded him. "When I was between your thighs and sucking on it."

Cillian shivered, and Astra—clearly enjoying having this sort of power over him—moved his hand faster. There was really only one way to combat that, so Cillian slipped his own hand into Astra's pants. "Then let's see how yours compares."

"It's not a *competition*, you—ohhh." Astra melted as Cillian took him in hand, bucking his hips, his fingers tightening around Cillian's cock enough that Cillian sucked in a sharp breath and muttered at him to be careful. Astra complied—he was clearly no sadist. His cock, which Cillian had barely felt before Astra came the last time, was hot and hard in his hand, smooth, and when Cillian ran his thumb along the vein, Astra gasped and shuddered.

"Do you want to know what it feels like? Having someone suck you?" Cillian asked while they worked each other.

"Yes," Astra moaned, clearly too lost to pleasure to tease. When he added, "I want to feel you everywhere," Cillian had to close his eyes, forcing himself not to come all over Astra's eager, stroking hand.

"I think you're too close," Cillian murmured, once he'd gotten a semblance of control back. "I think you'd come the second I breathed on your cock. Should we try it and see? Or do you want me naked, on top of you? You choose."

"You're mean." Astra pushed at Cillian and wriggled away. "And I can't think with you mauling me."

"Which you like," Cillian pointed out, shifting his pants off his hips—he had a feeling he knew what Astra was going to choose.

“I didn’t deny that, I just said it made it hard to think. Anyway,” Astra continued loudly, when Cillian laughed, “I choose whatever makes me feel good and you do all the work.”

That was fine with Cillian. He pulled off his shirt, then tugged at Astra’s. “All right, my pillow prince. Get naked.”

When Astra was bare, he lay back on the bedding, and Cillian took a moment to appreciate him, spread out, beautiful and radiating his power. Starlight glimmered between his horns, motes of light in his eyes, making him look like—well, the god of dreams who wanted Cillian naked, who wanted Cillian to touch him, who wanted Cillian to make him come.

“It’s probably just as well I was an insomniac,” Cillian said. “If I’d seen you in my dreams, I’d never have been willing to wake up—and then where would the troupe be.”

Astra blinked, and Cillian felt his face heat. He hadn’t meant to say that—but Astra was exceedingly distracting. Then Astra smiled—a small, crooked thing that looked more human than his otherworldly nighttime appearance should allow—and reached up to play with his horns, catching stardust from them before moving his fingers to his mouth. He made a show of licking them, and it was so—so *much*, erotic and gorgeous and vaguely ridiculous, that a warmth spread through Cillian that was different from the very natural urge to fall on Astra and fuck him mindless.

“You know exactly what you’re doing to me,” he accused.

“Of course I do. Mostly.” The honesty was surprising, but Astra had enough of an ego that his admission did nothing to change his behavior. “I didn’t know you had tattoos.”

“Yeah. I used to get them in this place in Katoikos, near the—”

“That’s fine, thank you,” Astra interrupted. “If you keep a god waiting, you’ll be sorry.”

That was a fairly hilarious statement to a man who’d been living with a curse for centuries, but Cillian let it go. Instead, he braced himself over Astra, holding his weight on one hand

while he bopped Astra on the nose with a finger. “Big threat from the god who’s going to come the second he feels a cock against his own.”

Astra narrowed his eyes. “Very funny. I’m mentally and physically prepared this time, Cillian. Get to it.” He still wasn’t touching Cillian, and Cillian wasn’t sure whether he was uncertain how to and therefore wouldn’t, or if he was waiting to be told to.

“You’ll like this,” Cillian said. “I’m going to make you come, but you’re going to ask first, and you’re going to tell me what you like. I wouldn’t want to disappoint the god who’s deigning to fuck me, after all.”

“That isn’t— I’m not— You are *impossible*.” Astra’s eyes were very wide. “Are you holding your entire body weight up with one hand?”

“Yup. I can do push-ups this way. Learned how one of the thousands of nights I couldn’t sleep. Wanna see?”

“No, thank you.” Astra paused. “You can show me tomorrow.”

Cillian laughed and finally lowered himself onto Astra. Astra was warm—Cillian hadn’t been lying; his body ran hotter at night—and all lean muscles, smaller than Cillian when he wasn’t subtly altering his stature, and ah, but he felt so good beneath him. Cillian let himself enjoy the sensation for a long two seconds before he started to move, rutting his cock against Astra’s. “Well?”

“That’s— Thank you, I’ll allow it.” Astra grabbed at Cillian’s shoulders. He wasn’t breathing. Could gods accidentally suffocate themselves? Cillian hoped not.

“Breathe, Astra,” he commanded, and the dominance made Astra shudder beneath him even as he hauled in a breath that was saved from sounding inelegant only by his nighttime resplendence. Cillian kissed him, rubbing against his cock, and wondered how long this would last as he reached up with one hand to stroke Astra’s horns.

Astra moaned into his mouth, and then he wrapped his legs around Cillian's hips, canting his own upward.

That made them *both* moan. Cillian wondered idly where the oil was, if he even had any, because he wanted so badly to fuck Astra—

*He'd never had anyone touch his cock until two nights ago; calm down.* Cillian kissed Astra's neck and shoulder before shifting higher to lick Astra's horn.

"You're—obsessed— Ah, suck on it again—"

Cillian did, and Astra bucked and moaned, hot all over. Cillian was surprised Astra hadn't come yet, especially since he could feel how wet Astra's cock was.

"Lie on top of me," Astra demanded. "All the way. Leave the horns alone; I—want to feel you. You said you would."

"Ask nicely." Cillian licked the horn again, tasting the sweet stardust there.

"Cillian, get the fuck on top of me, *please*."

That would have to do. Cillian shifted down a little, then rested his entire weight on Astra, who wrapped every limb around him and buried his face in the crook of Cillian's neck.

They were—hugging? Cillian went still, unsure, because Astra's entire body was trembling, but it wasn't from orgasm. "Astra?"

"Why does it feel so good?"

The words were whispered against his skin, and something tight and hot unfurled behind Cillian's eyes. He remembered what Astra had said about wanting to be mortal *and* a god, remembered how young he'd been when he'd taken the mantle of Dreams.

If sex didn't count in dreams, neither did hugs.

Cillian might have disentangled himself at the thought, but Astra started moving again, restless and demanding, and punched Cillian on the arm. "I didn't tell you to stop. That's not what *it feels so good* means, you dolt."

That was more the Astra Cillian knew. He didn't point out that that wasn't what Astra had said. He just filed away the part that wasn't about sex—*Astra needs to be touched more*—and turned his attention to getting them both off. “Want to try it on top of me?” He thought Astra might like that, having some semblance of control.

“No,” Astra whispered. “Not—not now. Don't stop.”

Cillian gasped as his cock hardened further, and he found Astra's wrists, took them in one hand, and pinned them over his head. He stared down into Astra's lovely face as they rutted together, the movements coming easier as their cocks grew wetter, as they slid together smoothly. Astra's eyes were closed tight, but starlight still peeked out from beneath his lids, and he was biting his lower lip as he writhed under Cillian.

“If you don't let me come, I'll—I'll turn you into a fruit fly in your next dream. I'll make you dream about stubbing your toe every night, or all your—”

“You just have to ask, brat,” Cillian interrupted, his voice rough with desire. “Try that before you threaten a man with absurd nightmares.”

“You say that, but do you know— Oh, fuck, fuck, Cillian, fine, how do— Do I just ask you, or—”

Fuck. Cillian had to press his face into Astra's shoulder to regain his control. “Yes, ask nicely. Try saying please, and see what happens.” He pulled back to look at Astra's face. “And open your eyes.”

“You're so bossy,” Astra bit out, but he did, starlight spilling over his cheekbones. “Cillian, please make me come because it's been long enough and I would prefer not to wait any longer.”

It was the most absurd entreaty a submissive had ever made—though Cillian wasn't sure Astra was a submissive as much as he liked submitting to *Cillian*, but one thing at a time. He slipped his fingers into Astra's mouth, teased him by slowing the motions of his hips, then grabbed Astra by the

horns and started rutting harshly against him. “Come for me, then. Go on.”

It only took a few more thrusts for Astra to cry out, cock pulsing against Cillian’s, and the sound was impossibly—inhumanly—lovely. Cillian drank in Astra’s cries, the way he thrashed, how his perfect hair never tangled even as it fell over his face, the way stars flared like suns in the inky depths of his eyes.

Cillian had never, in all the long years of his cursed existence, thought about someone’s *eyes* when he was on top of them, making them come.

He almost told Astra to suck him off before he could, oh, fall asleep and vanish again ... but Astra smiled at him, that same crooked smile as before, and dragged his fingers through the mess of his release, caught between their bodies. He carried his fingers up and sucked them clean.

That was too much for Cillian, who fucked against Astra’s hip until he came with a loud groan. When he pushed up on his arms, they met each other’s gaze, and neither of them said a word. Which meant something, though Cillian wasn’t quite sure he wanted to think about what.

He found a cloth and the waterskin, and they cleaned up quietly. Astra didn’t make any pointed comments about *Aren’t you proud of me for staying awake this time*, and Cillian didn’t tease him, and then they went back to the bed to sleep. They didn’t bother dressing, and Astra folded himself around Cillian, and that hot tangle of warmth bloomed in Cillian’s chest again.

Until Astra turned his head and Cillian very nearly got the tip of a horn up his nose. He could have told Astra to move, or rearranged himself so his back was to Astra’s chest, but instead he just shifted slightly and closed his eyes, letting Astra pull him deep into dreamland, where he was safe.

\* \* \*



AS THEY TRAVELED ACROSS STARIA, Astra contemplated dreams. While no dreamer could walk in another's dreams without him, their dreams nonetheless bled into each other, influenced by the world around them. A girl on a farm they passed in central Staria dreamt of descending a ladder into the earth, where local folklore said a prince slept encased in amber. A few miles away, a man watching sheep daydreamed of tunnels under the noble estate in the east. Travelers on the dirt path through the wheat fields imagined spades in loamy soil, a leather case bursting with stolen gold, fingers undoing clasps and locks. Dreams in central Staria were of the earth.

Tay bought honey from the farm girl, who eyed her muscular arms and stammered about discounts for talented dancers, and laughed when Astra managed to get honey in his hair. Jimmy wrote a children's song that caught on like wildfire, to the point that Dante cursed every time he started humming a few bars. The mood of the troupe seemed to shift with the landscape, people taking things more slowly, smiling more, idling as they walked alongside the carts. Something had changed in d'Hiver—perhaps Cillian's power was growing, because some of the unease that had pervaded the troupe before seemed to have lifted.

"I should make them practice more," Cillian said, sliding his hand up Astra's back as they passed Tay and Roisin playing a whistling game on either side of a cart. He was always touching Astra, lately—teasing his hair, caressing his hip, walking close enough their hands and shoulders brushed. "They'll start to think I'm easygoing."

"Not a chance, boss," Tay said with a wink.

"See? They're having too much fun. They don't respect me anymore."

Roisin giggled and gave Cillian a mocking bow. When he pulled a face, she laughed outright. "Don't bluff, Cillian. You're a terrible liar."

"You and Azaiah would get along," Astra said. His hair was braided again, since the air was warmer this far south, and he could feel a sunburn starting on his ears. "He doesn't like

people bowing, either. His successor—the ferryman in Arktos—is even worse. I went into his dream once to see what the fuss was about, and he kept challenging me to make things *weirder*.”

“I’ve met Death—or Azaiah, I suppose. I think I told you. He was friendly enough. A bit troubled, I think.”

“Yeah, he was mooning after Nyx for a while. They’re both much happier now that they’re companions,” Astra added. “Nyx treats me like a kid, which ... well. He is several hundred years older than I am, so I suppose I can’t fault him. Arwyn, the god of being fucking annoying, is with a guy he doesn’t remotely deserve. Really nice, dreams about cats a lot.”

“He isn’t actually the god of being annoying,” Cillian said, smiling.

“He might be.” Astra sighed. “It’s desire, actually. Our realms are closely aligned, in a way, so he thinks he knows better than I do despite the fact that he’s actually a dramatic little prince.”

Cillian gestured at Jimmy, who was trying to climb on top of a cart. Jimmy started making his way back down, red-faced. “What about War? There’s a god of war pretty much everywhere. Do they have a companion?”

“Oh.” Astra hunched his shoulders and was startled when Cillian drew him in closer, holding him around the waist. It was a surprise, but it felt nice, and Astra didn’t pull away. “Ares is different. They thought they had someone, but ... he didn’t want to make a companion bond with them.”

Astra suspected he might know more about it than anyone else, apart from Ares himself. Azaiah and Ares were as close as Astra and Arwyn, but Azaiah didn’t see into dreams. When Astra was young, he’d walked in Ares’s dreams in a desperate bid to gain their favor—they were so mysterious and beautiful, so old, and Astra craved their attention like air. But then he came across their dreams, where Ares begged Atreus Akti to stay with them, to love them, to be their companion through the long years ... and Atreus chose to die, every time. Astra

could tell that Ares had relived Atreus's death thousands of times before Astra's ascension as the dream keeper, and he soon took to sneaking into Ares's dreams and changing them to focus on arrows darkening the sun, armies marching over hot sand and down mountainsides, or simply wind whirling through an empty tomb. Anything to avoid the sound of Ares's broken gasps as Atreus died in their arms again.

"Knowing we could have a companion can make the loneliness worse, sometimes," Astra said. "Still, Levi—the Tempest—I know he, at least, has refused to take one."

"What happens if you don't choose a companion?"

"You eventually lose your connection to humanity. You fade. You fall to corruption. It's what happened to Pallas. I think Levi doesn't get corrupted because he was here before people existed—there have always been storms and natural disasters. But dreams, war, desire, art, even the idea of an afterlife, all those rely on people. So we do, too."

"That's a humbling view on godhood from a god with an inflated ego," Cillian said, but his tone was teasing, not cruel.

"I can be humble."

"Mm. Penitent, almost," Cillian said, and Astra blushed. Just the night before, Cillian had made Astra beg until he was nearly sobbing for the touch of Cillian's hand on his cock.

He thought it might be becoming a problem. Astra didn't know how much he could crave touch before it became unhealthy, but he was constantly aware of Cillian's presence. He hadn't been willing to ask Arwyn again, but it was as though Cillian could just ... play him, like an instrument, or move him around like one of his partners in the ribbon dances. It was thrilling and frightening at once. It would be hard, he realized, to go back to the forest and sleep alone on his throne, with just his cloak to keep him company.

"Do you think, when this is done," Astra said carefully, "and you decide what you want to do ..."

"Be a mortal or a god, you mean."

“Y-yes.” Astra cleared his throat. He felt so frustratingly awkward in the daylight. “That. If you stay with the troupe, even for a while ... maybe I can visit. Just now and then. If you don’t mind.”

Cillian looked at him in mild alarm, and Astra blushed.

“I mean. Clearly I need to leave the forest once in a while. I can’t just leave my worshippers to wither in my absence.”

“Of course,” Cillian said slowly.

“So I might as well.”

“Right.” Cillian rubbed his back in gentle circles. “I wouldn’t mind. You could travel with us. The rest of the troupe have already accepted you as one of them.”

“Oh.” Astra fell silent for several steps. “That’s. That’s nice.”

Cillian was looking away, so Astra quickly raised a sleeve to his stinging eyes. When he checked again, Cillian was still staring into the distance, but he kept his hand on Astra’s back.

Astra expected the Starian quarries to be enormous, ugly pits in the ground, full of miserable miners and dust. Instead, he encountered what looked like a small city. The quarry was sectioned off in levels of white, striated stone, which had been cut in perfectly straight lines. Carts ran on rails on some levels, and there were lifts and, here and there, neatly painted wooden houses. There were piles of dirt, sure, but they were just as tidy as the small houses and the clean, smooth walls, and Astra squinted as the sun made the entire area look like an elaborate ice castle.

“They’re not even mining Vein 14,” Sparrow said, standing like a statue with his hands on his hips, his scarred face even grimmer than usual. “Not a good sign.”

Evar waved to get their attention and pointed, and Astra caught sight of a small group of miners walking along the edge of the quarry. The one in front held a heavy stick in one hand, and he banged it on the ground every few steps, making a hollow thump that echoed across the quarry. After a while, he

froze. Everyone stopped moving, and after a moment the figures all retreated back down the line.

“Is that supposed to mean something?” Cillian asked.

“Dragons,” Sparrow said. “One of them must’ve come out to see what was making that sound. The person in front, with the stick? It’s his job to look out for movement. No mining today, I bet.”

He was right. The miners were already climbing into one of the lifts, leaving the quarry empty and clean as an abandoned dollhouse.

Sparrow looked around, seemed to shrink in on himself just a touch, and walked over to whisper something in Cillian’s ear. Cillian nodded and raised his voice. “Everyone be careful as we walk around. If you hear or feel movement in the ground, unhitch the horses and run.”

An unsettled hush fell over the troupe as they drew closer to the quarry, and Jimmy kept the largest cart far from the edge, eyeing the ground like it was liable to explode.

“Do you sense Pallas?” Astra asked Cillian. He kept his voice down, as though he were afraid to disrupt the stillness. Which was ridiculous. This was a place where people dug out rocks and shipped them off to be made into houses. It wasn’t sacred. But there was something odd about it, all the same, and Astra kept looking into the shadows, searching for a sign of dragons scrambling over the stone.

“No, but anyone can tell something’s wrong here.” Cillian, too, spoke quietly. “Hopefully it’s something we can help with.”

The mining village on the other side of the quarry was almost as silent. The houses were as simple as the ones in the quarry itself, clearly built to the same design, but they were largely empty when the troupe made camp nearby. Most of the villagers were in the public houses along the main dirt road, and a number of them came out to watch the troupe set up their tents.

“You’re in the wrong place if you want to do a fair,” a woman said to Astra, coming over with her arms crossed and her jaw set at a mulish angle. “Nobody ever comes here. You have to go to Duciel if you want to make money.”

“One of our people is from here,” Cillian said. “And we recently played in Duciel, so we thought we’d stop by. He was a drummer,” he added, and the woman’s expression darkened.

“Oh. And he was willing to come back?” She let out a heavy gust of air. “Most of our drummers haven’t. Don’t blame them.”

“Why?” Cillian lit a clove, then fished another out and offered it to the woman. She took it with a nod of thanks and let him light it for her. It was an odd, very human sort of magic. It was as though Cillian had said some secret spell that allowed him into her confidences, with nothing more than a clove cigarette and a knowing look.

“We’re haunted.” The woman said it plainly, with no drama or artifice. “Drummers most of all. Something doesn’t want us digging down there, and none of ’em can sleep more than an hour at a time, if that. Maybe it’s the ghost of a courtesan who died—plenty did, back in the day.” She took a drag on her cigarette. “I used to be a courtesan myself.”

“Tough luck,” Cillian said, which seemed to be another piece of mortal magic, because she nodded, blowing out smoke.

“Yeah, you can say that. I was nineteen.” She laughed, but there wasn’t any humor in it. “It got better for a while, but now ... I don’t know. If I’d died, maybe I’d want to haunt someone, but I wouldn’t haunt the miners or the drummers. I’d go back to Duciel and haunt that piece of shit Julien, what ran the House of Gold. I’d haunt him to his fucking grave.”

“Noble, I guess.”

She spat. “Yeah. But you’re, what, Kallistoi? They don’t have that shit there. Lucky you.”

“We have rich patrons who think they deserve a private dance every time they toss you a coin.”

The woman smiled, and it looked genuine. “I bet. Will you dance, if you’re staying?”

“Maybe.”

She took another drag. “Then maybe I’ll come watch. Been a while since I’ve had a pretty man dance for me.” She finished her cigarette and walked off.

Astra eased in next to Cillian. “You do that very well.”

“What?”

“Connect with people. She looked ready to kill us when she first showed up.”

Cillian shrugged. “She’s probably tired. It’s something I’m familiar with.” He ran a hand through his hair. “But she—Pallas—has been here, too. You know. I can see her everywhere. I wonder why she’d pick a place like this.”

“Because the art’s practical,” Astra said. “And it’s ... human. The way Arwyn talks, she hated humanity. It was like they were faulty conduits for art, or broken tools.”

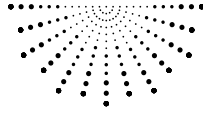
Cillian grimaced. “And here I thought I couldn’t like her any less.”

“Yeah, she grows on you like a fungus, doesn’t she?”

Cillian snorted and tossed his cigarette butt down, grinding it under his heel. “So where do we start? Ask at the bar? Go into the quarries? I wouldn’t want to do that,” he added. “Not unless we have to.”

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Astra said. “She’s using that puppet, still. That means she’s working through people’s dreams. So that’s where we’ll find her. I know it happened all at once, last time, but we’ll do it carefully, now we know how she works.” He looked around the quiet, haunted town at the edge of the quarry. “Tonight, we’re dreamwalking.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



“So, how do we do this?” Cillian asked, as they settled in for the night.

They were camping out of range of the dragons, or, at least, Cillian hoped they were. According to Sparrow and Theo—whose demon could sense them—it would be fine, but, for once in his life, Cillian would have been happy not to plan to sleep that night. He couldn’t escape the image of waking up to find a ring of angry rock dragons circling him, teeth bared, ready to bite.

They’d have to sleep to dreamwalk, though. On top of the dragon issue, he still couldn’t shake the feeling of *wrongness* when he thought of intentionally entering someone else’s dream. It was one thing to see Astra’s dream world or have Astra in his own ... but just showing up, like an unannounced visitor? It seemed wrong. Or if not wrong, *rude*. But maybe that sort of thing didn’t bother Astra.

“It’s easy,” Astra said, shimmering with his power. No hint of sunburn remained, and his hair—which had been in a sloppy braid most of the day—was perfect waves of inky black, spilling over his pale shoulders. He was wearing only sleep pants, and his bare chest was distracting enough that Cillian had to focus on the horns ... except then he remembered licking them, sucking on them, stroking them with his fingertips until Astra was a sobbing, desperate mess—

Not the time.



“You just concentrate, and you’re there. You can’t do it alone, obviously, because you’re not *me*.” Astra smiled, bumping his shoulder against Cillian’s. “But I’ll show you. Take my hand.”

Cillian hesitated only a moment before reaching out and taking Astra’s hand in his own. He felt a pleasurable rush at the contact, which he could pretend was because Astra was a god, though he knew it had nothing to do with that, not really. He still wasn’t sure if he believed that *he* was—all right, maybe he’d admit to the possibility, but that was as far as he was willing to go. If, when this was over, he did choose godhood ... would he have to find a human companion? He didn’t want to end up like Pallas, cursing future would-be gods out of spite. But he couldn’t imagine finding a mortal who would want to get mixed up in all ... *this*.

Again, not the time. He closed his eyes and only just remembered to ask, “Whose dream are we visiting?” before the pull took him, drawing him into the Weaver’s realm.

He and Astra were standing on a hill. It looked very much like the one near the forest in Kallistos where they’d first met. Astra, two inches taller than Cillian and preening with it, clapped his hands together. “We’re going to visit one of my siblings first. So you can see how it works, before we have to worry about also dealing with *her*.”

Cillian stared at him. “We’re going to just ... show up in a god’s dream? Without asking?”

“Yes? That’s how it works. Azaiah’s not an option, because he only sleeps when I set it up with him first—that’s a whole *thing*. Nyx does, his companion, but he dreams about things like plants growing. It’s the worst. Levi would be fine; if he’s in human form he’s usually just surfing. If he’s a dragon, sometimes he eats seals or ... it doesn’t matter, it’s not real.” Astra’s starlight eyes went a bit shifty. “He’s awake now, anyway. And Ares ... their dreams are too painful. It’s all they have right now, since they’ve been asleep so long, and ... well, they’re War. You can probably imagine.”

Cillian winced. “Yeah. I wouldn’t want to bother them.”

“Arwyn’s companion, Dex, was my first choice, except I guess he’s awake now, too, which means ...” Astra sighed dramatically. “Just don’t believe everything he says, okay?”

“Which—Arwyn?” Cillian blinked. “The god of desire?”

“On his good days, yeah. He’s technically Avarice. But he calmed down when he fell in *loooove*,” Astra singsonged, then cleared his throat and wouldn’t look at Cillian. “Anyway, look.” He gestured, and Cillian saw five structures at the bottom of the hill that hadn’t been there before.

One was a temple that looked familiar—the crumbling ruin from Kallistos. Brambles had grown up around it, choking ivy that barred anything resembling a door.

“That was Pallas,” Astra said, mouth a grim line. “I’ve never been able to get in there. I did try, a few times, wondering if I might find her.” He pointed to a different structure. “That’s Ares.”

It was a tomb, the sort they used to build in the old empire that now lay beneath Arktos. A rounded top; a cyclopean door made of stacked, heavy stone. A dragon slept in front of it, and it raised its great head and snuffled, fire wisping from its nostrils, before it curled up again and went back to sleep.

“The dragon lets me in,” Astra explained. “But like I said, let’s leave Ares to their dreams.” He sounded wistful, and it struck Cillian that, as strange as this talk of gods seemed to him, these beings were real, and Astra cared about them. Astra felt sorry for War, because their dreams were sad.

Cillian might have been a bit harsh on Astra, at first. He had spent the equivalent of four mortal lifetimes unable to sleep, after all. He’d held a bit of a grudge.

But that wasn’t Astra’s fault, was it? His gaze went to the temple covered in weeds.

“There’s Levi,” Astra continued, pointing to a pool of clear, blue water. “As I said, he’s awake. Next up, see that?” He pointed to a single tree, barren, with black branches stretching up like bones against the sky. “That’s Azaiah. I tried

climbing the tree once, to see if I could get to him that way, but it didn't work."

"How can you talk to him, then?"

"I ask Nyx, his companion, or else I do this." With a sparkle of glitter, Astra produced a card bearing an image of Death. "Did you know this was a game, once?"

"Life and death? I figured it was always a game, to the gods."

"Ha, ha. No, this specifically." Astra wagged the card.

"That's from a fortune teller's deck," Cillian said. "According to Dante, it's all 'cold reading, asking leading questions, and separating a sucker from his money.'"

Astra laughed. "Well, before that, they were used in a game called Winter. It's before my time—my mortal self's time, I mean. Nyx and Declan play it. If I need to talk to Az, I put this card at the base of the tree or throw it into a river." He snapped his fingers, and the card disappeared. "And that's"—he pointed to the last structure—"where we're going."

The fountain Astra was indicating must belong to the god of desire. Or greed—Cillian still wasn't sure which was right. He found himself frowning as they headed toward it, moving quickly in the way of dreams.

"I expected the god of desire would have a palace of gold, like in Staria. Or some kind of floating castle."

"This is what he started as, I guess: a fountain for simple wishes. Which grew, through humanity's desires, into something ... else. Before he fell in love with Declan, his companion, his portal looked something like Levi's. Rougher water, and there was all this trash at the surface. It's because of the whole thing with King Cadoc—"

"Wait, he was *real*?" Cillian whistled. "There's an island in Diabolos, Cat's-Eye. Every summer, when we visit there, we do a dance about Old King Cadoc, who wished for enough gold to rule the world—only when he got it, it weighed his ship down so much that it sank to the bottom of the ocean. He

tried to escape, but he refused to let go of the gold, and he drowned. It's a morality tale: be careful what you wish for."

Astra smiled, but his eyes were cold in a way they almost never were. "He wasn't a morality tale, just a shitty human who thought he deserved to have whatever he wanted, and others should pay the price. That's sort of true, though, about the gold. He did drown, but what he was trying to get was a crown. It was in my brother's old lair; they call it the Demon's Well."

"We've seen that," Cillian said, somewhat awed. "We took a day tour from Abyssian, the old pirate island? And the tour showed us the Well and said if we dared, we could throw something in and make a wish. Manon, the fire twirler, wanted to toss a coin down there, but Jimmy told her not to. He said it was disrespectful."

Astra shrugged. "Not really, but Arwyn wouldn't have answered anyway. These days he only grants wishes from, oh, kids who want to live in Lukos or Starian princes who want to marry their father's best friend."

"You're not saying Prince Adrien—"

"I'm not saying anything. Let's go before he wakes up." Astra produced a dream coin, silver with no discernible markings. "Throw it in."

"You do this every time?"

"Usually without the history lessons," Astra said pointedly, and Cillian took the coin. Astra produced another from the folds of his cloak, and they both tossed them in at the same time. The fountain shimmered, and then there was that sensation of falling, though it lasted only a second before the world came into focus again.

Although that didn't make what he was seeing any easier to understand.

They were in a room that held no furniture or décor save an immense bed piled with pillows, easily big enough for Cillian's entire troupe to share if they wanted. At the center was a slender blond man draped in gold and silver chains—

and nothing else—and surrounded by six identical dark-haired men. Two of them were fucking, one was sucking off another, and the last two were looking worshipfully at the blond man while working their cocks.

“Wow,” Astra said dryly. “Declan know about this?”

“Yes, of course,” the blond man said. His accent was completely foreign to Cillian, and when he turned his strange eyes—green, with slitted pupils like a cat’s—on Cillian, Cillian felt the overwhelming presence of a god and a very strong dominant. “Who’s your friend?”

“That isn’t necessary.” Astra sounded a bit strangled. “But why— Shouldn’t you just fuck Dex, if you want to?”

“I did. He’s busy, and I wanted to fuck him again, so I am. Six times, probably, if not more ... provided my little brother stops spying on me. But I’m more interested in who this is.” The man smiled.

And then Cillian saw it. The echo of a crown on his brow, an almost skeletal sharpness to his features, a slight red glow behind his green eyes. The thing on the bed was, and was not, a man.

“Ah,” the god of desire said, leaning back. His smile was a rictus grin, the red in his eyes bleeding through. “So you’re the one who made Astra come by touching his cock ... once, was it?”

The six men on the bed all wavered, becoming a different man that Cillian realized he recognized—though he couldn’t have said how.

“Astra, you brat!” The god of desire—Arwyn, Cillian supposed—swung his legs over the bed. He approached Cillian, still naked, and the closer he got, the more Cillian could see the cracks in the foundation of the form he wore.

It made him think of Pallas, and he struggled not to blanch. “Lord.”

“So polite, and yet you’re with my baby brother,” Arwyn said. He inspected Cillian from head to toe. “He’s better

looking than Nyx, maybe because this one seems like he might know how to smile.”

“Nyx smiles when he dreams about plants,” Astra said. “And Azaiah.”

Arwyn rolled his eyes. “Of course he does. So you’re the one my former sister wants to drive to the brink of insanity, eh?”

“Seems like it,” Cillian agreed. He was still trying to figure out what Arwyn truly looked like and what was illusion.

“I’m Desire and Greed both,” Arwyn said, and then the blond man disappeared entirely, leaving only a skeletal creature wearing what at first looked to be gray, tattered rags ... until Cillian realized that was skin. He was tall, draped in faded velvet and torn lace, with a crown of rust and what appeared to be red cut glass for eyes. “Desire more often than not, nowadays. Are you horrified by me, Art? Your predecessor hated my form.”

Cillian studied him. “No. First of all, I’m not the god of anything. Second, you look exactly like a painting of Greed. I appreciate the aesthetic.”

The smiling blond man was back, standing before Cillian. He grinned, and it was the most disconcerting smile—outside of Pallas and her puppets—that Cillian had ever seen. Yet he smiled back, though he didn’t know why.

“Good. Astra, make sure this one sticks around. Dex will like him. Why are you here? Does he—Cillian, right?—know how you *slammed into my dream* two seconds after you left him with a hard-on?”

“Shut *up*,” Astra snapped, “or it won’t be Dex you’re fucking in a dream, ever again. Or Nyx. It’ll be ...” He glanced around wildly. “King Ca—”

“Hush, you,” Arwyn said, sounding cheerful.

Cillian turned on Astra. “You left my bed to tell your brother, the Lord of Desire, I got you off?”

“We’re not discussing this. I’m just giving Cillian here a demonstration, so if you’d please stop ... talking to Cillian. Or about Cillian. And you should definitely stop laughing at me.”

Arwyn scowled for a moment, then flashed back to his skeletal form, which put him a few inches taller than Cillian. His voice was odd, deep and rough, making Cillian think of underwater caves, water rushing over stones. “You badgered me and Dex enough, Astra. Big brother Avarice is repaying the favor. Look at me, Cillian Aislinn. I want to see something.”

“No,” Astra snapped. “No!”

“I don’t remember you asking me if you could show up in Declan when he was asleep in my bed,” Arwyn said, pleasantly enough.

Families were families, it seemed. This was just like having dinner with Jimmy’s family in their crypt. Complete with the skeleton.

“Not a skeleton, darling, but nice try.” Avarice stared at him, something ancient behind the cut glass eyes, and Cillian looked back, caught despite himself by the red gaze. A moment later, Avarice laughed, and it sounded like stones cracking, glass shattering. But there was nothing cruel about it, and Cillian really did appreciate his commitment to the aesthetic.

Arwyn stood where Avarice had been, coming up only to Cillian’s shoulder. “It’s hard to say what will happen, but you have the potential. And you do love art, don’t you? But not like *she* did. She loved perfection. I think you love beautiful things, even with their flaws.” Arwyn’s smile was sly, a hint of that rictus grin still underneath. “Astra’s very pretty, isn’t he?”

“We’re going now,” Astra said, grabbing Cillian’s hand. “I just had to show him how to dreamwalk.”

“Fine, fine. It was nice to meet you, Cillian Aislinn, and if you ascend to your godhood, you’ll see more of me.”

“How could he see any more? You’re naked,” Astra said.

Arwyn’s smile was wicked. “I can say with the absolute certainty of the god of desire that he doesn’t care about that,

Astra. Appreciating my form—this one or Avarice—is entirely an aesthetic exercise for him.”

“I’m not turning them back,” Astra threatened, pointing to the bed. Instead of the oddly familiar man, there were four donkeys, a chicken, and something that looked like no animal Cillian had ever seen.

Arwyn’s laugh was loud and bright, but the image was already fading. “I’m waking up so I can tell Declan *all* about this, little brother. Come visit us. The ship’s docked near Thalassa. Bring your man. As long as all he does is appreciate Dex, he’s allowed to lay eyes on him.”

With that, the dream flickered, and Cillian felt a pull as he opened his eyes ... to find himself sitting in his tent with Astra. “So that’s your brother Arwyn.”

“Yes,” Astra said, pushing his hair out of his face. “He’s a menace.”

“Why do I think he’d say the same about you?”

Astra’s expression eased into a smile. “He would. He used to be ... confined to the Well. The one you saw, off Diabolos? I visited him a lot when I was young. I might have ... meddled, a bit, with Declan. Dex.” Astra waved a hand. “It all worked out. Really, he should be thanking me. But now we’re going dreamwalking again.”

“Wait,” Cillian stopped him, his mind whirling. “I need a minute. I just met the god of desire, who’s part short blond sex fiend and part a skeleton wearing torn velvet.”

“That’s ... a fairly apt description, yes. But he’s only a sex fiend with Dex. Declan. His companion.”

“And you dragged me, uninvited, into his dream, where you turned his lover into donkeys, a chicken, and ... what *was* that thing? The one with the ... flippers?”

“I don’t know. I think I made it up. Ready? We don’t have a lot of time, you know,” Astra said, not meeting his eyes.

“Did Pallas really hate him? Arwyn. Avarice.”

“Yes. She only approved of art if it was perfect.”



“I thought Arwyn looked pretty perfect as a skeletal representation of greed— What? Are you jealous I didn’t find your brother hideous?” Cillian smiled. “You’re prettier than he is, in either form, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not.” Astra still wouldn’t meet his gaze. “Let’s go find someone to fix whatever is happening here. Levi will never let me hear the end of it if I get eaten by a dragon.”

“Whose dream are we going into, then?” Cillian asked, his hand hovering above Astra’s. “A townspeople?”

“We need someone who is asleep but has a tie to this land—and I suspect Pallas is keeping these people from sleeping the same way she did in d’Hiver. I suppose we could go into town and force someone to sleep, like Margaret, but I think that’s why Pallas was able to trick you with that false awakening. The thing where you thought you’d woken up when you were still dreaming? We need to sneak in.” Astra snapped his fingers. “Sparrow dreams about rocks and drums—don’t get mad, it’s my realm, Cillian. Is he from here?”

“Yes,” Cillian said. “But I don’t ... We’re not just showing up in his dream and potentially drawing her attention to him.”

“But he’s under my protection, don’t you see? It’s perfect. What? You’re looking at me like it’s *not* perfect. I’m not going to give him donkeys and made-up bird-fish creatures to fuck, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It may be normal for you to visit other people’s dreams, but it’s not for me. Even if you can protect him, I don’t think it’s very polite.”

“So you’re going to, what? Stay cursed? Let dragons eat all these nice stonemasons?”

Cillian got to his feet. “You are so fucking dramatic, Lord Sleepyhead. No, we’re going to do the nice thing and *ask* him.” He held his hand out to Astra. “Then you’ll do your thing, and we’ll go in. No surprises, no donkeys, no six versions of the same person Sparrow might be fucking, none of that. People should have privacy. Especially in their dreams.”

Astra let Cillian tug him closer. “I wonder what he saw, my brother, when he looked into your heart. That’s what he did, you know. Should I ask him?”

*I could probably tell you. I wanted you in every one of those positions on the bed, for a start.* What the hell. “I did think about fucking you while you were on all fours.”

“Your timing is terrible, Cillian. *Terrible*. Don’t distract me with your promises of sex and one-armed push-ups—”

“I never said anything about push-ups.” Cillian smiled. “I imagine that’s what your brother saw. You’ll have to ask him. I’m not lying, though. I think I’ve made it clear I want to fuck you.”

Astra shivered at the dominance in his voice, though he hadn’t, Cillian thought, responded at all to Arwyn’s. Neither had Cillian, beyond noticing it. Interesting.

“Six of me?”

Cillian snorted. “One of you is enough.”

Astra smirked at him. “So you say now. All right, let’s go ask Sparrow for permission to enter his dreams.”

Sparrow was in his tent, bent over a slate with a piece of chalk. He hastily shoved it under his pillow as they entered, and Cillian remembered Evar was teaching him to read.

“We need to ask you something,” Cillian said. “And you’re allowed to say no.”

“But you shouldn’t,” Astra added. “It’s going to be a lot easier if you— Ow, Cillian, that was my *foot*.”

“As I was saying, you can say *no* when I ask you if Astra and I can ... borrow your dreams for a bit.”

“Borrow ’em how?” Sparrow asked. He glanced between them, clearly undecided.

“We’re trying to find someone in your village who is affected by the curse,” Astra said. “But we ... need to sneak in, so that the, ah, wraith doesn’t know we’re here.”

“Uh-huh,” Sparrow said, as if they were describing the plot of a particularly nonsensical melodrama, or a stage play written by a child. “And you’re gonna use me?”

“Your dreams, if you’ll allow it. And if you know another drummer from the village? I think that’s probably who we need.”

“I do,” Sparrow said. “His name’s Basil. He’s got a bit of a reputation nowadays, though.”

“For being an incredibly good sleeper?” Astra asked.

Sparrow smiled sadly, the expression pulling the edges of his scar. “Being drunk in the pub by eight, so, kinda, yeah. Anyway, sure, if it helps, go ahead.”

“Perfect. Thank you.” Astra bowed. “We’ll go into your dreams now ... but tell me, Sparrow of Staria, what do you want to dream about tonight? Anything you want. You can just think about it, if it’s too personal to say. I’ll make sure it’s what you dream of, when we leave you to it.”

“Anything?” Sparrow looked intrigued, and Cillian found himself wondering what his request would be. After a moment, Sparrow said, in a voice far more cautious than usual, “Can you make it so I’m reading a book? A proper book. Maybe with a cat in my lap.”

“Bless.” Astra nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you, Dream Lord. Good luck, boss.” Sparrow settled back on his cot, hands folded over his chest. “Go on, then.”

Cillian took Astra’s hand, and they were back on the hill, only now there were many other buildings at the base. One looked like a Starian noble’s house, one was a Gerakian theater, one—which appeared as they watched—was a Mislian cottage. “Are these—my people?”

“Yes. Can you tell which one is Sparrow?”

Cillian scanned the structures and pointed to a small cabin with a warm light behind the windows and smoke rising from a chimney. “That one.”

“Good guess.” Astra smiled at him.

Cillian smiled back, and together, they walked toward the cottage.

Sparrow’s dreamscape was a small living room with a roaring fire, a comfortable couch, and books everywhere. Sparrow, who couldn’t read. It made Cillian’s chest ache, especially when he saw Sparrow on the couch with a large orange tabby on his lap and a tortoiseshell on her back next to him, a rotund little creature with wide green eyes and all four paws in the air.

“This is Yuffie,” Sparrow said, pointing to the tortoiseshell. “And this cat here, this is Renard. Mouse is around somewhere. She’s very fluffy.” He looked down at the book, which from where Cillian stood looked blank, but he grinned and flipped the pages. “And this story is about a man who finds cats and takes care of them.”

“How pedestrian and adorable,” Astra drawled. “I’m glad it’s working for you.” He scanned the room. “The pub, that’s where your friend is? Where is it, when you leave your house?”

Cillian didn’t know how Sparrow would answer that; this wasn’t his house, it was a dream house. But then Sparrow said, “Two doors down from here. Past the lamppost.”

“Thank you.” Astra leaned over and petted Yuffie. She meowed loudly and tried to catch his arm, then rolled off the couch and immediately hopped up again, going right back to her supine position and showing her belly. “Cute cat. Let’s go.”

Cillian followed Astra to the door. He noticed none of the books on the shelves had titles, and when they left Sparrow behind with his cats, he put a hand on Astra’s shoulder. “How is he reading if there aren’t any words?”

“Noticed that, did you? Mortals can’t read in their dreams. But he thinks he’s reading, so he is. It’s a dream. Don’t look for too much logic.”

Speaking of which, Cillian glanced at their surroundings and felt a chill of unease. “This looks ... strange.” It was a street, and there was a lamppost, and two doors down, a building with a sign that would have the pub’s name hanging over the door. But the other buildings were vague impressions, as if drawn by a child, and there were no other lampposts. The street stretched off into fog and disappeared, and Cillian found he didn’t want to look up and see the sky.

“It’s because it’s Sparrow’s mind, and he didn’t even have anything outside of the cabin until we asked him where it was. I’m not influencing his dream—beyond the cabin, I mean.” Astra looked completely at home there, in a half-formed landscape, his black cloak rimmed with same stars that brightened his eyes.

“It’s ... unfinished,” Cillian said, unsure why that was so disconcerting.

Astra raised his eyebrows. “Yes, it is. Does that offend your godhood or something? Want me to fill in the details?”

“No,” Cillian said quickly. “It’s strange because I haven’t seen it before. But it’s Sparrow’s dream, his idea of what’s outside his house, and if he’s happy, it doesn’t matter what I think about it.”

Astra was staring at him. “Is that so?”

“It’s like your brother,” Cillian said. “He thought I’d find him, what, hideous? Terrifying?”

“Dex likes fucking him in that form,” Astra said. “Maybe he was flirting.”

Cillian snorted. “I doubt that, but his form was appropriate. It was his. And I wasn’t lying, it was a nice aesthetic. Jas would have been into it. She might have flirted with him.”

“I think this is why you’re not *her*,” Astra said, stepping close, his footfalls silent on the dream stones. “Why she hates you. She saw art as flawed because it wasn’t perfect. You’re fine with half-finished landscapes and signs without words, as long as the person who made them that way is happy.”

Cillian shrugged. “That’s the point of art. You’re inspired, you make something, and that’s what it is. Sparrow thinks this is perfect, so it is.”

There was a sound, then—like something shrieking, a creature caught and devoured, screaming in terror.

“What’s that?” Cillian asked, reaching instinctively for Astra’s hand. “The dragons?”

“No.” Astra shook his head. “It’s her. Pallas. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t like what you just said. Let’s hurry.”

Together, they walked to the nameless pub and pushed open the door. There was a man sleeping at the bar with the remains of a beer next to him. The other people in the pub were shadows, with only the vaguest hints of faces and hair an indistinct color that resembled dirty dishwater.

“That’s still Sparrow,” Astra said. “He knows a pub has workers, other patrons, but he’s only thinking specifically of one person. Basil.” He nodded toward the sleeping man.

“All right,” Cillian said softly. “But how do we know he’s not just one of Sparrow’s dream people?”

“You don’t, but I do.” Astra’s eyes began to glow, whiter and whiter, until they burned like the hottest part of a flame. He put a hand on the sleeping Basil’s shoulder, then reached for Cillian again. “Let’s see what hideous puppet creature we get this time.”

“It’s going to be dragons,” Cillian said. “I just know it.”

The world tilted and fell away, leaving Sparrow’s happy little house and cats, his wordless books, and his empty street and pub full of shadows behind.

\* \* \*

ASTRA WAS FALLING.

He couldn’t feel the wind that whipped his cape into a twisted ribbon of stars and feathers at his back or tossed his night-dark hair, but he smiled at the familiar lurch. The dream

world around him was black as pitch, but he'd spent almost a year this way when he was young, tumbling between dreams and catching bits of them in his fingers, listening to his nightmares shriek and laugh as they galloped around him and learning to see through the firmament of dreams.

Cillian, however, was not doing quite so well. He let out a hoarse cry as his hand started to slip in Astra's, and Astra held him tighter, pulling him close. Every now and then, shapes glittered in the formless dark—shale, possibly, or mica, jutting out far enough to break a bone or crack a body's neck. Somewhere above them, Basil was also falling, too terrified to scream, his mouth open in a breathless gasp. Every time his body struck a piece of rock, a string wound around his flailing limbs, snaking up from the bottomless pit below. Astra pulled Cillian aside as a string shot past them.

"I love falling dreams," Astra whispered.

"Of course you do." A string sliced a shallow cut along Cillian's cheek, and he winced.

"It's not real. It hurts because you expect it to hurt." Astra touched Cillian's cheek, and the wound closed.

"You've had centuries to figure that out," Cillian said, his voice strained. A sickening crunch sounded above them, and two strings went wriggling upward.

"Oh, gods," Basil cried. "Gods, no ..."

"We can't let her do this to him," Cillian shouted, and a heavy wind rose from the pit, an enormous set of lungs breathing out. The sound of rain followed, a rush of it rising until Astra realized that it was the clicking of hundreds of rock dragons, surging toward them like a nest of snakes.

"Well, looks like you were right." Astra reached out to change the dragons into something else—butterflies, perhaps, or snow. But Cillian grabbed his wrist.

"No. I think ... I know what to do." Cillian took a deep breath. The dragons wound their way upward, clicking and hissing, rattles shaking at the ends of their gray tails. "Let go of me."

“Let ... You’re sure.”

Cillian’s face was ashen, but he nodded. Another string rose between them, and Basil sobbed brokenly. “You trust me?”

Astra smiled. “Anything I can do, or should I sit back and watch?”

“If you could give me drums,” Cillian said as the sound of the dragons rose to engulf them, “that would be nice.”

Astra nodded and raised Cillian’s knuckles to his lips before letting go.

Cillian whirled away from him, buffeted by the wind, and the air around them reverberated with the sound of drums. It was the rhythm Roisin had drummed when Cillian danced in Astra’s forest, and Astra could have sworn Cillian laughed as he reached out and grabbed one of the strings. It sliced his skin, but while Cillian winced and gritted his teeth, he used the thread for leverage, weaving his body between the rising strings.

Then the dragons came.

Astra changed into a starling, too dark for the dragons to see, and followed Cillian as he danced through the strings tethering Basil’s body to the pit. Cillian moved with the drumbeats, his brows furrowed, hands bleeding as he used the strings to propel himself through the dark. A dragon lunged for him, and Cillian spun just out of range—and the dragon’s jaws closed over a string, severing it.

Astra flew up toward Basil, wings stretching, body expanding until he was a hawk made of starlight, and he clutched Basil’s body in his talons. Basil cried out in terror, and Astra let his voice carry, soft and gentle, above the sounds of the dragons and the drums. “We have you, Basil.”

Beneath them, Cillian danced between the strings. A dragon narrowly missed his neck, another his ankle. A second thread snapped.

“My legs,” Basil cried. “My legs are broken.”



“No, they’re not,” Astra whispered, and he stirred through Basil’s dreams, taking a new shape. His body became human—still winged, still clutching Basil, but softer, with curves Astra only took on now and then, and his hair was light brown streaked with gray.

“Abigail.” Basil reached for Astra, and Astra let the man weep into his neck.

Cillian cried out as a dragon tore a strip of flesh from his arm, but he kept dancing, hair whirling in his face. He was beautiful and fey and powerful, even in a dream he couldn’t control, and Astra watched him, rapt, as another string snapped, and another, and another. A miserable wail rose from the pit, but it was too late—the strings connecting Basil to Pallas were slackening, and Cillian laughed as the dragons bit through the last three, letting them fall into the dark.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stop them, Abby,” Basil whispered as Astra swept his power over the dragons, turning them to dust. “I couldn’t remember the song.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Astra said. “Cillian, take my hand.”

Cillian reached for him, and as Pallas’s cries started to fade, Astra grabbed Cillian’s hand tight, drew him close, and pulled them all out of the dreaming world.

Astra woke in Sparrow’s tent. He was still holding Cillian’s hand, and while Cillian wasn’t bleeding from dragon bites, his face was pale, and he was breathing hard.

“Did it work?” Cillian asked. “Is he safe—are the people here safe?”

Astra pulled Cillian into a kiss. “You were beautiful,” he said. “I’ve never ... I’ve never felt, when I saw someone dance ...”

“Are they safe?” Cillian repeated, and Astra would have kissed him again for that, but he forced himself to focus.

“They’re safe,” he said. “Because of you, Cillian. You broke Pallas’s hold on him. That was you.”

Cillian let out a ragged laugh and rested his forehead against Astra's. "We need to find him, though. Just in case."

"Tomorrow. Once he's had time to recover. His dreams will be quiet tonight." Astra took a moment for a kiss. "You were afraid of the pain, and you did it anyway."

"And you ... turned into someone else. A woman?"

"I've been one before." Astra smiled. "I'm usually a man, I know, but haven't you ever wondered what it's like to shift between?"

"Not particularly, but ... that was kind of you, is what I mean to say. To comfort him."

This time, it was Cillian who leaned in to kiss Astra. He ran a hand along one of Astra's horns, and Astra shivered, drawing closer.

"Um. This is sweet and all," Sparrow said. "But maybe not on top of me?"

"Oh, fuck." Cillian flung himself back, and Astra grinned, looking down at Sparrow.

"Sorry. Actually, Sparrow, if you don't mind, before we go, can you show me that rhythm you told Cillian about? The one that soothes the dragons?"

"It's an easy one," Sparrow said. "Three knocks, two, three, and then four, two, and four." He drummed it on the floor with his knuckles, then stopped, brows knit together, staring into the middle distance. When he spoke again, his voice was vague, slightly bewildered—or perhaps awestruck. "That's right. It's ... easy." He tapped out the rhythm again, then looked up at Cillian. "I'm not the kind of man to kiss someone when he's grateful, but that was ... very good, sir. Whatever you've done. Very good." He sounded like he was on the verge of tears. Cillian lay a hand on Sparrow's shoulder, and Sparrow closed his eyes. "Sure would like that dream again," he said after a moment. "With the cats."

"You can have it as long as you like," Astra said, and reached out with his power. Sparrow fell back on the cot, his

face going lax, and Cillian spread a blanket over his broad shoulders.

It took all Astra's determination not to drag Cillian back to their tent. As it was, he followed, constantly lifting a hand to touch Cillian's arm or hair, unable to stop smiling.

Cillian clearly noticed it, since he kept glancing over every few seconds. "You're acting like a lovestruck—like a puppy."

"I think I understand Evar on a personal level now," Astra said, bouncing onto the bed on his back and grinning when Cillian tossed a pillow at him. "You were beautiful. No one else can dance in someone else's dream. With dragons."

"It was terrifying," Cillian said. "I'm surprised I'm not still shaking. Fuck, I wonder if we shouldn't find Basil ..."

"You care so much about people," Astra said.

Cillian raised his brows. "Why did that come out sounding like 'Fuck me, Cillian?'"

Astra just looked at him. Cillian smiled at last and knelt over him, taking his face in his hands. His fingertips were slightly callused, and Astra tipped his head back as Cillian started scratching the roots of Astra's hair.

"I love how you touch me," Astra moaned, and Cillian leaned down to bite and suck the sensitive skin of his neck.

"I can't believe you like to fall in dreams." Cillian's voice was a rumble of sensation.

"It's one of the first things I learned," Astra said. "It's easy."

"No one was there to teach you?" Cillian trailed a hand down Astra's chest, and Astra jumped when strong fingers brushed over his nipple. Cillian flicked it, and Astra dug his own fingers into the bedding and tried not to fall apart.

"Can we not ... talk about who was or wasn't there when I ... Oh, fuck, Cillian. Fuck."

"I think I can make you come on my cock untouched tonight," Cillian said, and why was that suddenly all Astra

wanted to do? “I wonder how many times. Gods don’t need to wait in between, do they?”

“If I wait any longer, I’ll die,” Astra gasped.

Cillian laughed softly. “Maybe I’ll use your horns to pull you back on my cock. Or I’ll tie them to the tent post, mm? I bet that would feel nice. I could use silk scarves.” He traced a finger over the tip of a horn, and Astra moaned again.

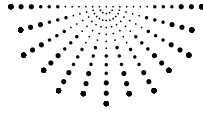
“Please, just fuck me.”

“I didn’t even have to work for that one.”

Astra met Cillian’s gaze. “You did. In the dream, when you danced with the dragons. When you had me let go of your hands so you could save the village.”

Cillian looked at Astra for a long time, as though searching his eyes to learn whether Astra’s words were true. When he spoke, his voice rang with the strange, heavy dominance that sent a hot shiver of pleasure through Astra. “Strip for me and get on your knees, Astra, and I’ll give you what you want.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



**A**fter dancing with Pallas's dream dragons, Cillian's adrenaline was so high he had no idea how he'd ever come down. His entire body was buzzing, his nerves were rattled, and it felt like he'd just danced in a performance with the highest possible stakes and the audience's applause had shaken the rafters.

Having Astra so eager for him added some kind of fizzy wine on top of the adrenaline rush. And fucking was the best possible way he could think of to work off his restless energy. The fact that he'd been wanting to fuck Astra for weeks was only a bonus.

Astra stripped without a single teasing comment, hastily pulling off boots, socks, pants, and shirt to stand gorgeous and naked, his starlit eyes gleaming. Cillian's dominance was a tide inside him, or floodwaters pushing at a dam, eager to break through.

"Kneel for me, beautiful." Cillian let his dominance filter through the words, and when Astra shivered again, Cillian felt as powerful as a god in a way that had nothing to do with his potential to actually be one. Anyone would feel that way, he imagined, having the god of dreams looking at him with such undisguised lust.

Astra went to his knees the minute Cillian spoke, and the look of startled pleasure on his face made Cillian's lust flare even hotter, his cock tenting out the front of his pants. "Do you like that? Does it feel good?"

“It does,” Astra said, tossing his hair, as gloriously bratty as ever, and Cillian realized he secretly liked it. Maybe not so secretly. Maybe not such a recent realization, either. “I’m not sure what I should think about that, but right now, yes.”

“Feel how you feel, and let that be enough.” Cillian ran his fingers over Astra’s horns. “I think you’re right. I do have a fetish for these.”

“I noticed,” Astra murmured, but his eyes fell half-closed and he tilted his head, seeking more of Cillian’s touch.

“Can I fuck you?” Cillian asked, rubbing his thumb over Astra’s bottom lip and inhaling sharply when Astra gave it a little lick and a quick bite.

“Ten minutes ago,” Astra huffed, and Cillian smiled, dragging his wet thumb up Astra’s cheek.

He went to a trunk in the corner and rummaged impatiently through the contents until he found a bottle of oil. Mostly he kept it for himself, on those nights when he tried to use his hand on his cock as a way to get to sleep. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d needed it for someone else. He tossed it onto the bedding and then stripped, padding naked back over to where Astra was kneeling for him so prettily.

Astra’s eyes went immediately to his cock. Cillian laughed and took himself in hand, stroking lazily, letting Astra see how good he was making himself feel. “I noticed something, when you sucked me off. Wondered if it was a godly power, or what.”

Astra tossed his head, smirking, looking as pleased as any submissive praised for their skills. “How good I am at it? Natural talent.”

“Your lack of a gag reflex,” Cillian clarified, sliding a hand around one of Astra’s horns and pulling him closer.

“Oh, that? Probably because it’s night. I might choke if the sun was up.”

Cillian shivered, cock hardening even more in his hand. “I might not mind that.”

“And you say I have an ego.” Astra shuffled forward on his knees.

“You do. And when it comes to cocksucking, you’ve earned it.” Cillian laughed at the look that got him, then rubbed his tip against Astra’s mouth. “Show off for me, yeah?”

“Fuck, you’re being so hot,” Astra said, and then opened for him.

Cillian slid his cock in, groaning at the tight, wet heat. He did like the idea of Astra choking on him, tears on those fair cheeks as Cillian fucked his throat, but he had to admit it was thrilling to slide so deep and have Astra just *take* it.

He held Astra’s horns, fucking in and out of his mouth. He heard himself making inarticulate sounds and didn’t try to hold them back. His thighs were tense—he was close already, and he knew he’d have to stop if he wanted to fuck Astra. It might be worth becoming a god if he could come and then fuck Astra immediately afterward.

Astra’s tongue rubbed against him, and Cillian could have come all over that pretty face as he’d done last time, but he made himself stop and pull out, gasping for breath and gripping the base of his cock to regain some control. Astra smirked, looking far too smug, though Cillian couldn’t deny he deserved to.

He knew, if he fucked Astra now, it would last all of two minutes. So instead he took hold of Astra’s horns and tugged again, lightly this time. “On the bed, on your back. I *do* have a gag reflex, and you have an ego, so you’ll probably like it if I choke on your cock.”

“*When* you choke on my cock.” Astra settled himself on the bed, where he sprawled on his back like ... well, like a god ready to be worshipped.

That was fine with Cillian. He took his time, kissing Astra’s mouth, his neck, down his chest, then biting and sucking his nipples. It was intoxicating how fiercely Astra reacted to every new sensation, the unmitigated honesty of his

responses making Cillian desperate to fuck him. Astra had a thin trail of dark hair running from his belly button to his cock, and when Cillian traced it with his tongue, Astra grabbed at him, body arching up in anticipation.

When Cillian took Astra's cock into his mouth, he had to clamp his hands on Astra's hips to keep him still. Astra thrashed and moaned so much the whole camp could probably hear them, and while it wasn't unusual in the slightest for troupe members to enjoy each other's company, these sorts of sounds hadn't emanated from *his* tent for quite some time.

Cillian wasn't inclined to worry about that just then.

Astra's cock wasn't as thick as Cillian's, but it was long and curved, and Cillian took it deep enough that he *did* choke, and Astra liked that maybe a little *too* much.

"Cillian, you're supposed to make me come on your cock, not in your mouth," Astra complained, though the strain in his voice was enough to appease Cillian's dominance.

He gave one last, long lick up Astra's flushed length and then sat back, admiring what he'd done to the god of dreams—who looked like a dream himself, the kind you woke up after with sticky sheets. He kissed Astra's mouth again, hot and insistent, his ardor ratcheting up further as Astra kissed him back, making needy, eager sounds.

Cillian flailed around and found the vial of oil, then unceremoniously picked up Astra's ankles, draping them over his shoulders. "This doesn't hurt, does it?" he asked once Astra was splayed open for him, cock bobbing on his stomach, pushing up on his elbows to see what Cillian was doing between his legs.

Astra shook his head, hair messy, eyes wild. "No." He sucked in a breath as Cillian coated two fingers carefully with oil, then used his other hand to rub Astra's heavy balls while stroking gently over his hole. "Ah, Cillian—"

"If you don't like it, tell me." Cillian made his dominance as gentle as he could. "There's a lot of things we can do to feel good."



Astra smiled. “I know. Sometime I’ll take you in my realm, and you’ll see why I thought I knew all about pleasure before I met you.”

They stared at each other, and the hot, nameless emotion bloomed like a flower again in Cillian’s chest. “All right. And right now, I’ll show you everything I forgot about pleasure until *I met you*.”

“See that you do,” Astra said imperiously, but affection suffused the words with a warmth that made Cillian want to kiss him.

That would be difficult in their current position, so instead, he carefully pressed one slick finger inside Astra. He was tight, and Cillian drew in a shaky breath as he started to slide in and out. Astra didn’t seem to be in any pain, so Cillian added a second finger, which allowed him to go deeper, to seek out the spot that would drive Astra wild. He knew when he found it, because Astra cried out and arched up, nearly kicking Cillian in the face.

“What— Ah, fuck!”

“That’s how I’m going to make you come,” Cillian said, rubbing against Astra’s prostate. “I’ll fuck you so my cock hits you right here, over and over—” He fucked against that spot with his fingers, merciless, making Astra cry out again as starlight spilled from his eyes, and the stardust in his horns grew brighter, sparkling in the tent.

God he might have the potential to be, but Cillian knew one thing for sure: fucking a mortal would never be nearly as satisfying as this. He drew his fingers out and cleaned them on the bedding before picking up the vial again to coat his cock with the oil. When he braced himself on top of Astra, he caught him around the throat, wondering if he might like having his breath restricted. “Put your legs around my waist if it’s too much having them on my shoulders.”

“Don’t presume to tell me what’s too much,” Astra said, but his voice was thin, and Cillian leaned down to kiss him as he’d wanted to, earlier.

“One day I’m going to rim you, use my tongue on your ass, and you’re going to lose your *mind*,” Cillian murmured against Astra’s mouth. When he straightened, the dazed look on Astra’s face made him grin. “Didn’t do that in dreams, did you?”

“Shut up and fuck me already—” Astra’s words caught in a gasp as Cillian gently squeezed his neck, and then Astra *whimpered*.

“Oh, I thought that might work for you. So in control of everything all the time, aren’t you, Dream Lord? Is that why you like kneeling for me? You get to give up control, for once?” He squeezed a little tighter, careful even though he didn’t think he could truly hurt Astra.

Astra nodded wildly, but when he touched Cillian’s wrist, Cillian let go.

“Did you like that?” he asked, letting himself, for a brief moment, consider how gorgeous Astra would look in a collar. Cillian’s collar.

“I think so,” Astra said, hands running up and down Cillian’s chest, his arms, as Cillian teased his hole with the tip of his cock. “I don’t know *why*, though. You can’t suffocate me.”

“I wouldn’t want to,” Cillian said. At Astra’s raised eyebrow, he chuckled. “Not anymore. Maybe at first, yeah.”

“You were no prize, either, Master Grumpy.” He yelped when Cillian tweaked a nipple, but it changed into a groan as Cillian, in answer, breached him and started pressing his cock in. “Ohhh, that’s— Yes, more of *that*.”

“Ask me,” Cillian demanded, though he was eager to be buried to the hilt in Astra’s tight, hot body. “Ask me for it.”

“Your cock, now.” Astra hissed when Cillian didn’t immediately comply, then added through gritted teeth, “*Please*, you utter bastard.”

Cillian kissed him and pressed all the way in, and Astra’s body took him beautifully, without a single second of resistance. Considering it was nighttime, Cillian probably

hadn't even needed the oil, but it felt good, especially when he started to fuck Astra in truth.

“This is—better than—I’ve been led to believe,” Astra panted. His face was flushed, and his eyes were as close to white as Cillian had ever seen outside of dreams. “Why do mortals do anything *else*? Can you do it harder? Can you do it *faster*?”

“Yes,” Cillian said. “But not yet.”

Astra kicked him on purpose this time, but Cillian just laughed and fucked him harder, gradually increasing his pace, and knocking Astra’s hand away when he tried to stroke himself. “You’ll come on my cock, remember?”

Astra didn’t answer in words, just snarled something unintelligible and tossed his head, his dark hair everywhere.

Cillian eventually leaned forward enough that he could grab Astra’s horns. Astra dropped his legs to wrap around Cillian’s waist, holding him tight, and the only sounds in the tent were their breathing, Astra’s soft cries, and Cillian’s muttered words of encouragement: “Yeah, that’s it, you like my cock, don’t you. Gonna make you come, get you so messy for me.” Astra’s horns were slick under his fingers, cooler than the rest of Astra’s body, which felt like a furnace.

“Try the—choking again, please,” Astra moaned, and Cillian dropped one hand to curl around Astra’s throat, careful even as he fucked Astra into the bedding.

Cillian knew he’d found the right angle when Astra bucked wildly beneath him and thrashed even more. Cillian held on as long as he felt he could, far longer than a human would be able to have their breath taken from them, lost to how perfect this was. Sex always felt good, but this was transcendent. Maybe it was a side benefit of fucking a god. He suspected, though, that it was more about Astra himself.

When he finally relaxed his grip on Astra’s throat, Astra dragged in a ragged breath ... and then came all over his stomach. His body tightened so much around Cillian’s cock that Cillian moaned, falling forward and bracing himself with

his hands on either side of Astra's head, stilling so he could savor the feeling of Astra coming on his cock. Cillian fucked him a few more times, considering whether he should pull out and come on Astra's stomach, his pretty face, or those horns of his ... when Astra opened eyes gone white, stared up at him, and said in an absolutely *wrecked* voice, "Come inside me. Let me feel it."

Cillian came with a shudder, the pleasure barreling through him like a lightning strike. It went on for a long time, all his muscles tense ... then relaxing gradually as his release ebbed and his breathing began to even out. His shoulders were shaking, and it took all his remaining energy to roll onto his back and pull Astra with him, his cock slipping free as he arranged Astra on top of him like a blanket.

Astra's hair was *everywhere*, in Cillian's mouth and tickling his nose, but Cillian didn't mind. He stroked Astra's horns, his other hand idly rubbing over Astra's back and his firm, pert ass.

"Was that better than a dream?" Cillian asked on a yawn, realizing that for once, he might not even need Astra touching him to fall asleep. Though he wasn't going to say that; Astra felt too good right where he was.

"Yes," Astra said, an odd note in his voice. "Yes, it was."

"Good. But we can do it again, there, if you want," Cillian managed before his eyes fell closed and he drifted into sleep with his dominance settled and his body more relaxed than it had been in years. All the rest could wait until tomorrow.

If he dreamt that night, he didn't remember it.

\* \* \*

WHEN DAWN BROKE over the small quarry town, Astra had absolutely no intention of getting up. It had to be a crime, he thought, to be forced to wash off and dress and be presentable when one could be fucking on plush pillows until noon. Unfortunately, Cillian believed in rising early, so Astra had to groan and drag himself over the bedding like a bedraggled

street cat while Cillian transformed into something resembling a human being.

“How do you do this,” Astra moaned, dragging his fingers through his hair. It was tangled after a night sleeping wrapped around Cillian, and something about that rankled. Astra reached for his clothes, stared at his trousers for a good minute, and tried, without success, to use dream magic to transform them into something better. “I’m not existing today.”

“Fucked you that good, did I?” When Cillian smiled, his whole face glowed.

“Nnnhng.”

“Yes, we all feel like that, sometimes. Maybe you’re ... fuck-drunk? Is that possible?” Cillian tossed him a cloth. “I brought in a washbasin. We’re going to check on Basil and the others today, and I need you in this plane of existence for that.”

Astra muttered into the cloth as he scrubbed his face, and he could practically hear Cillian smiling.

There wasn’t as much of a change to the quarry town as there had been in d’Hiver. Things were quiet, and no one was making any moves toward the quarry. While the power Astra was able to drag up during daylight confirmed that severing the threads in Basil’s dream seemed to have allowed the others to sleep, there was still an air of unease as they entered the pub—which was full despite the early hour.

Sparrow, who’d been a shadow at Astra’s and Cillian’s backs throughout the walk from camp, spotted Basil immediately. The man was tucked into the corner of the pub, tearing bits of bread into pieces on his plate, and he looked up with a shaken expression as they approached.

“Fuck, Sparrow, is that you?” Basil’s hands shook as he tried to get out of the booth. He hugged Sparrow tight, closing his eyes as Sparrow held him gently. “Didn’t think you’d ever come back here.”

“Only passing through,” Sparrow said. He pulled away and looked at the empty table, and Basil’s expression went pained.

“Abby struck a nest last autumn,” he said.

Sparrow gripped his shoulder tight. “I heard. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. It was ... Well. You should sit. Have a drink with me.”

“Can’t,” Sparrow said. “I don’t, anymore. Just wanted to know where you put the drums—I didn’t see them on the cliff.”

Basil grimaced. “You don’t want to see those.” When Sparrow didn’t reply, Basil ran a trembling hand over his forehead and sighed. “Fine. Fine. They’re in storage. I’ll show you. But it ain’t worth it, Sparrow. You’re a good kid. Don’t want you to get hurt.”

Sparrow just squeezed Basil’s arm and let go, which apparently said all he needed to.

Basil led them to a shed on the edge of the small village, and in it they found six enormous barrel drums covered with tarps. Sparrow pulled the canvas away from one and tapped the skin over the top. Disregarding Basil’s flinch, Sparrow nodded, turned the drum on its side, and started rolling it out.

“Hey.” Basil followed Sparrow, coughing as the drum kicked up dust. “I know it fucked you up, kid, what happened, but you can’t just—I won’t let you throw yourself away.”

“I’m not,” Sparrow said, rolling the drum into place overlooking the quarries in the distance. Astra caught a glimpse of a familiar daydream: the quarries full of singing, people working in organized lines, drums shaking the dust at Sparrow’s feet. “It’d be better with more.”

Basil took a step back. “I can’t.”

“That’s all right.” Sparrow unhooked a pair of sticks from the side of the drum. Basil watched him for a few seconds, cursed, and stomped back toward the shed.

“I don’t know if I can protect us if the dragons attack,” Astra whispered.

Cillian glanced at Sparrow, who was still gazing over the quarries. “Maybe I can dance them to sleep?”

Astra didn’t answer. Basil returned a few minutes later, rolling a second drum next to Sparrow’s, and Sparrow nodded as he unhitched his sticks. A few people emerged from the houses and pub, hanging back at a safe distance, and it seemed as though the entire town were holding its breath.

Sparrow struck his drum, and the sound boomed over the grassy cliff leading to the quarry. It shook the air like thunder, and Astra looked to Cillian, whose gaze was as sharp and keen as it had been when he was appreciating the artisanship of the brooms in d’Hiver. This was his realm, Astra thought, and a thrill stirred in his chest as Basil took up the rhythm with Sparrow, drumbeats rolling across the quarries.

After a few minutes, someone screamed, and Astra squinted as a cloud of small, ribbon-like shapes rose over the edge of the cliff. They were dragons, just like the ones in the dream: grayish and snakelike, with rattling tails and sharp, silvery teeth, winding through the air like a school of fish. Basil was sweating, and Sparrow’s mouth was tight with fear, but as the dragons came closer, Sparrow gave a rough, gravelly shout, and the rhythm of the drumbeats shifted. Pebbles bounced at Astra’s feet, and the swarm of dragons hesitated, watchful, swaying slightly in the air.

Then, one by one, the rock dragons of Staria’s quarries sank to the grass.

Someone behind them was crying. Basil’s face was ashen, but he kept up with Sparrow until the last dragon was asleep on the grass not twelve feet in front of them.

Sparrow set down his sticks. The others in the town were still watching—some weeping, others holding each other, fear so thick in the air that it was like a living creature winding through them as Sparrow walked slowly past the drums. He stopped before the pile of sleeping dragons, and Astra heard a woman’s muffled scream as Sparrow reached down to slide his fingers under one. He lifted it, and it sleepily wrapped itself around his forearm.

He turned, looking out over the collected miners and townspeople, and nodded. “That’s all right, then,” he said. He gently set the dragon back down, stored his sticks in the holder on the side of the drum, and walked slowly and resolutely back toward the tents.

Chaos ensued.

The town erupted into a susurrus of whispers as Astra and Cillian tried to follow Sparrow out. Since Sparrow wasn’t answering, most people went to Cillian instead, asking how it happened, who had made it possible, why they’d all fallen asleep at the same time the night before.

“Was it your friend?” one of the townspeople asked. “The demon, with the horns?”

Astra sighed. Starians.

“It’s nothing,” Cillian said. “Just some bad luck that’s over now. You should be fine after this, that’s all.”

“So it was Sparrow,” someone said. “Sparrow went out and broke the curse.”

“Well,” Cillian said as they turned aside to spread the news. “That’s one way to view it.”

“Sparrow’s done it,” the people shouted, and the crowd devolved into loud whispers, all of them watching in awe as Sparrow continued down the road toward the rest of the troupe.

“I think we started a folk legend,” Cillian said.

Astra grinned. “Probably.” He startled at a touch on his arm and turned to see Basil.

Basil still looked a little unsteady, but his hands weren’t shaking, and he had his shoulders hunched like a child admitting to a falsehood. “Just wanted to say thank you,” he said, after a few seconds of awkward silence. “Both of you. For last night. Couldn’t see much, you know, but I recognize faces.” He met Astra’s gaze. “Even when they’re pretending to be someone else.”



“I was telling the truth,” Astra said. “What happened wasn’t your fault.”

Basil’s shoulders rose higher still. “Well. Appreciate it anyway,” he said.

He walked off toward the drums. A few other people were rolling the remaining drums out of the shed to join the two already standing in front of the dragons, and several miners were pulling horses and donkeys out of a stable at the edge of town.

Cillian let out a heavy breath and ran a hand through his hair. “So it worked.”

“She’ll be angrier next time.” Astra reached for Cillian, who took his hand without looking. “Fighting her the first time was a surprise. Now she knows we’re after her.”

“Good.” Cillian’s tone was hard, an echo of how he’d sounded when they first met. “I hope she’s terrified.”

Astra thought, as he watched Cillian glare into the distance, perhaps she should be.

When they got back to the tents, Astra was surprised to see that Evar was the first to grab Sparrow, his eyes wild as he spoke and signed at the same time. “They said you’re leaving,” he told Sparrow, as Astra tipped dust out of his boot for what felt like the tenth time. “That you’re going back to working here. Are you? We need you.”

Cillian gave Astra a sidelong glance, and Astra shrugged. The sun was high—he could barely call on his magic, let alone see what kind of daydream Evar was having.

Sparrow waited patiently for Evar to finish and then, in careful movements, made the sign that meant “to hold.” Evar frowned, and Sparrow blushed, trying it again.

“You can sign?” Evar’s ears went red.

“Dante’s teaching me,” Sparrow said carefully, then made the gesture again. “I’m staying.”

“Oh.” Evar grinned. “Oh, then you’d do this,” he said, and showed Sparrow another sign, which Sparrow copied.

“Yes. Staying.”

Evar looked, for a moment, as though he were about to burst into tears.

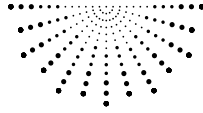
“We’re all losing it,” Roisin said later, as they broke the tents down again. “We can’t believe it. Thibault’s ranting to Ruben about it right now.”

“We just helped some drummers,” Cillian said. Roisin eyed him incredulously. “Isn’t that ... what you meant?”

“What? No. I mean Evar and Sparrow. Where on earth have you been, Cillian?”

A god would have been outraged. A few months ago, Astra would have been angry enough to curse someone with a sleepless night if they’d been so oblivious to one of his blessings. But Cillian, who was unlike any god—or potential god—Astra had ever met, just tipped his head back and laughed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



**T**hey entered Arktos a few days later, after crossing the mountain path that had been created to make travel easier between Staria and the eastern continent. Cillian was deeply amused at how *furious* Astra was about the weather.

“It doesn’t make any sense, is all I’m saying,” he informed Cillian, stomping over to the cart where Cillian had just loaded the last of the crates. The heat was relatively tame at this time of year, this close to the mountains, but Astra had already declared it *unbearable*. “It was cold in d’Hiver! Cold!”

“These are called seasons and geographical differences,” Cillian teased. “We mortals are subjected to such things.”

“You’re not a— Whatever,” Astra muttered, pulling his braid up so the scant breeze could cool his neck.

“It’s really not that hot,” Cillian said. In truth, he was looking forward to the dry, early-spring heat of Arktos. The trip through the mountains had been plagued by heavy rain and thick fog, and he was convinced Astra had only liked that because it meant they had to spend an extra night on the road and an entire day cooped up in the tents ... with Astra riding Cillian’s cock and Cillian sucking him off after. “You just don’t want to be in the cart.”

“I don’t want to be *outside*,” Astra corrected. “I hate Arktos.”

“We’re barely even *in* Arktos,” Cillian said. “Do I need to draw you a map?”

“Do you need to go fuck yourself?” Astra smiled. “I do like all these mortal expressions. One I learned from Vai was ‘Sit on it and spin,’ but I’m not sure what *it* is, only that I’m assuming it was meant to be unpleasant.”

Cillian snorted. “She was talking to Saoirse, I imagine? They have a very ... heated ... romance. In each other’s bed for two nights, at each other’s throat for two weeks.”

“I’ve noticed that. So many dramas play out when people are awake. I used to think being awake was dull.”

“And now?” Cillian asked, tweaking one of his horns.

“It has some benefits,” Astra said loftily. “But only a few.”

“Speaking of ...” Cillian pulled a loose white tunic from one of the still-open crates. “You need to wear more clothes, Your Imperial Sleepiness. You’re going to burn to a crisp when we really *do* hit the desert.”

“That has *long sleeves*, Cillian. Do I hate myself? No, I do not.”

“The sleeves keep the sun from your skin,” Cillian explained. “If you think a sunburn in northern Staria is bad ...”

“It will go away at night, if I get one,” Astra said, inspecting the tunic. He made a face. “No, you’re trying to trick me. If I’m already hot, adding more clothes is nonsensical.”

“Suit yourself,” Cillian said, shrugging. “But I promise you, if you get a sunburn in the desert, you’ll hate it more than any single mortal thing you’ve had to endure up until now.”

“I could not possibly hate it more than ...” Astra’s voice went quiet, as if he were sharing some deep, dark secret, “waste excretion.”

Cillian had to struggle not to laugh. When Astra had realized that the food and drink he consumed during the day needed to exit after working its way through him, he’d nearly turned and headed back to his forest throne. Who knew pissing behind a tree was enough to give a god an existential crisis?

“Imagine waste excretion plus a thousand fire ants on your arms,” Cillian said. “That’s what it’s going to feel like. And there are scorpions in the desert. Fire dragons. Snakes.”

“I like those things, Cillian. Scorpions and fire dragons and snakes.”

“I notice you left off the fire ants.”

“Those serve no purpose; of course I did.” Astra eyed the tunic again, sighed, and then snatched it. “Fine. But if I get too hot, you’ll be hearing about it.”

“I have no doubt.” Cillian pulled him close, an arm around Astra’s waist, and kissed him. “You’re bossier in the daytime, and I figured out why. You hate feeling out of your element.”

“Wow, how astute of you,” Astra muttered, but kissed him back. “Your troupe will see us, you know.”

“My troupe has *heard* us.” Cillian shrugged. “I have to listen to everyone else’s sex and drama; they can listen to mine for a change. Only fair.” He gave Astra’s ass a light smack. “Up in the cart, Pillow Prince. We’re heading out.”

Arktos was a beautiful country, though Cillian thought he might feel that way because it was so very different from his homeland of Kallistos. Rolling dunes of sand instead of green hills, and squat trees with canopied leaves and bright yellow flowers. The desert was dotted with little oases, and there was a quarry north of the capital city with an emerald green lake in the center that was said to be bottomless. Then there was the Needle, an enormous sundial that had been built by the empire that fell before the Arkoudai marched from Katoikos and crossed the Evrys Bay to found their country.

That story was the subject of the dance they would be doing in Axon. This visit wasn’t about fixing anything that had gone wrong—it was a regular stop on their itinerary every year. Astra had dream-hopped a bit the night before, spending some time with Azaiah’s chosen successor, who just so happened to be the submissive of the Arkoudai strategos.

According to him, Arktos wasn’t experiencing any issues with Pallas. “She probably won’t come here because of Ares,”

Astra had said. “They never did get along. Art and War typically don’t. And I think now that she knows what we’re doing, she’s going to try for something ... personal.” His starlit eyes had looked troubled. “Somewhere closer to the seat of her power.”

“Kallistos,” Cillian said. Of course. The country itself had been founded by artisans. Its very purpose was wrapped up in art, sustained by it. He thought of the ruined temple, the crumbling manor, and tried not to shiver.

“Most likely. But I could be wrong, you know,” Astra had warned. “It might be worth going to Katoikos. They’re always having some kind of festival celebrating how great they are.” He thought for a moment. “Then again, maybe we don’t need to go there after all. They’re too full of themselves to let insomnia get in their way.”

“The irony of *you* saying that,” Cillian had teased, and Astra had tackled him, and that had been the end of that.

So they were going to Arktos but not Katoikos—which was good, because it was difficult to cross the bay without express permission from the strategos and a ferry to carry the carts. They usually went to Katoikos by way of Diabolos, catching a ship heading for the old Great Port, which was no longer a center of commerce but rather tourism.

The landscape changed all at once, the mountains giving way to desert hills, the dunes falling out into long, flat stretches of sand. Astra was sweating, but he’d left the tunic on, clearly understanding that it *was* better than suffering a sunburn but unable to say Cillian might have been right. Though he did give Cillian a begrudging nod when he returned from *waste excretion* without having been bitten by ants or scraped by acacia branches.

The sun hadn’t yet set when they reached the first of the Arkoudai outposts and two soldiers approached their retinue. Cillian hopped off the cart, followed by Astra, with Dante and Griffith joining them in front of the soldiers.

“Welcome, travelers,” the soldier said in heavily accented Iperian. “State your travel purpose, please.”

Cillian was impressed. Usually Arkoudai soldiers spoke only in Senex, the ancient language of Katoikos that had become Iperian over time. That they were speaking in the shared common tongue was new. “Thank you,” Cillian said. “We are a dance troupe from Kallistos, traveling to Axon by invitation of your strategos.”

“And here we have the missive inviting us to your city to perform,” Dante boomed, in perfect Senex—languages were one of his many talents.

The soldier took the scroll, looking a bit confused at the black bow tied around the parchment, which Cillian highly doubted had been on it prior to it showing up in Dante’s possession. Linguist and skeptic he might be, but he was a dramatic bastard at heart.

The second soldier gave a little *I don’t know, just open it* look to the first, who shrugged and pulled off the ribbon. It was all a formality, and everyone knew it; they wouldn’t be here without an invitation. But maybe, like the language, that was changing.

It made Cillian think about immortality, how much change he’d seen over the years. Astra was technically older than he was but had spent so much time asleep that what he knew of the world was primarily through the dreams of those who lived in it. But what would it be like to be Death, that kind man with the gentle smile who’d once shared a smoke with Cillian on a hill in Kallistos? To have seen empires rise and fall, over and over? If Arwyn really had encountered King Cadoc—a mortal man, not the myth—had he, oh, seen the Great Port of Katoikos when it was the jewel of the land, guarded by the ancestors of the very army Cillian’s troupe was here to dance for?

Cillian’s own longevity was too tied up in fear and sleeplessness for him to have focused on how the places he visited were evolving. But if—*when*—they defeated Pallas, would he be willing to take on that mantle, be a god, walk through additional centuries of the world growing and changing? Would he still have friends, lovers, other dancers to brighten his long years, or would his existence be solitary?

Could Art *be* solitary? Was there anyone who could tell him the answers to any of this?

The soldier finished reading the invitation and handed it back to Dante, then held up the ribbon. “May I, this token, keep?”

“You may, of course,” Dante said, bowing at the waist.

The soldier smiled. She folded it neatly and tucked it into the breast of her uniform. Then she saluted.

The soldier next to her cleared his throat, then leaned over and whispered something in Senex. He frowned, then glanced at Cillian’s group and cleared his throat again.

The first soldier opened the rations bag at her side, rummaged through it, then pulled out a bundle of letters tied with twine. She slipped the twine off and handed it to Dante. “We, a token, return to you.”

Dante accepted the piece of twine as if it were a—well, a silk ribbon. He bowed. “Thank you, soldier of Arktos.”

The soldier didn’t smile, but she saluted again, as did her companion. Cillian didn’t return the salute—he’d learned very early during travels through Arktos that some of the soldiers thought you were mocking them—but he, too, gave a respectful half bow, and with that permission, they were on their way. Dante gave Cillian the twine at his request, and Cillian slipped it into his pocket for the next time Astra lost the one he’d used to tie up his hair.

“I was thinking,” Cillian said as they headed toward the capital, which they wouldn’t reach until well after nightfall, “about what I’m supposed to do after we defeat her. Pallas.” He went tense, expecting to hear the song, but there was no haunting melody, no discordant refrain. Just the buzz of a fly, the sound of his troupe playing instruments and laughing in the caravan behind him. “What if I don’t want to be a god?”

“Then you won’t be,” Astra said. “It can’t be forced. If it could, Pallas would be long across the river and whoever she fed into that loom would be Art.”



“Strange to think I only got the job because of that,” Cillian said. “It’s like the story of the dancer who wanted the lead, so she put glass in her rival’s shoes, but it only made her rival dance better than ever. So she put glass in her own shoes, thinking it would help, but all she ended up with were bloody feet and a smaller role.”

“That is literally nothing like anything I just said.” Astra stared at him. “I’m disturbed about your comprehension skills if you think it is.”

“Fortune coming on the heels of treachery, I suppose. It makes more sense as a dance, all right?” Cillian shrugged. “It’s interesting, what you said about Ares keeping her away from here. I hadn’t realized—I mean, why would I? But I never felt as ... hunted in Arktos. Still, I couldn’t stay, because until very recently, they weren’t that big on immigrants.”

“Ah, yes. It’s like that story about the canary that stole a mushroom and ended up becoming a bear,” Astra said, nodding. At Cillian’s look, he smiled. “What? It makes more sense as a dream.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Cillian closed his eyes, letting the warm air and the rumble of the cart soothe him. He realized he was looking forward to being able to dance without worrying about Pallas’s influence spoiling it like milk left in the sun. He’d loved dancing, before the curse took him. Thinking he could do it again, free of her ... “I don’t know what to do as a god of art, though. It wouldn’t be only dancing. Like you’re not only the god of dreams.”

“What?” Astra blinked. “I’m not? Is this about how good I am at sex?”

Cillian rolled his eyes, but he smiled. “You’re the patron to the moon children. You know about daydreams. You ease insomnia. You said it yourself: dreams and art are connected, so you ... inspire.”

“That’s right, don’t forget how vital I am to humanity’s continued happy existence.” Astra sniffed. “Think about *that* the next time you want to make fun of me for hating bowel

movements.” He gave a delicate shudder, then looked over his shoulder at the sun. “Hurry up and set.”

“Is there a god of the sun?” Cillian asked, suddenly curious. “Are there ... gods of things like that? What’s the thing in the forest that called to me, if not a god? Are there gods of trees?”

Astra didn’t seem bothered by Cillian’s questions. “There are forces beyond gods, but I don’t know their source, or if they have ... a concept of their own existence, I suppose. Levi probably started out as one of them, but then people started sailing and growing crops and caring about the weather, so he became a man when humans gave him a name. Sometimes Ares is revered as the Sun, since war very rarely happens at night. Sunflowers are their favorite.” Astra’s voice went wistful.

“Do you want to see them, while we’re here?”

“I can see them in dreams anyway, but maybe. I don’t know. Let’s see if we have to sing fire dragons to sleep, first. Just because I don’t feel Pallas here doesn’t mean she doesn’t have some kind of sick hold on *someone*.”

Cillian felt a chill, but that could simply be the sun setting and the air growing colder, as it did in the desert in the spring. They stopped to make camp just outside Axon, with a regiment of soldiers welcoming them and bringing host-gifts. They gave their own in return, trinkets to show they understood the custom, and Cillian smiled, thinking about the length of twine in his pocket.

It was suppertime by the time the camp was set up, and they’d have to rise early to practice for the performance. Cillian spent most of the evening addressing last-minute issues with choreography and settling no less than four minor disputes and two serious ones, after which he took a pile of sewing to do by the fire. Astra sat next to him, pristine again now that the sun was gone, though he was still wearing the white tunic.

That night, Dante sang an old Gerakian song about a wizard who summoned a demon, with Theo’s demon, Ember,

providing special effects. Vai and Saoirse, on the ins again, apparently, did a very seductive dance while Manon, in her element, twirled fire, accompanied by Ellie's drumming and Cole playing the flute, and the whole troupe broke into applause when Sparrow, at Evar's patient urging, took up two sticks and kept time along with Ellie.

Evar was smiling at Sparrow with the same lovesick look he'd once given Cillian and everyone else, but Sparrow looked back with something similar, so maybe that was all right.

Jas told an incomprehensible story about the spirit of Atreus Akti seducing a maiden into having his war-ghost-baby, and Cedric did backflips behind her. Cillian sat on a crate by the fire, watching with a smile, and Astra sat before him, leaning back against his knees.

It was, Cillian realized, the happiest he'd been since the morning he'd climbed into that cart to head to Cladach Manor. He was in his element, surrounded by creative people, and for once there was no fear of hearing that horrible song ... and he knew that when he went to his tent at the end of the night, he would sleep. Eventually. He ran a finger up the curve of Astra's horn, laughing along with the rest at Jas's antics and insistence that "Fine, maybe Atreus didn't have a ghost baby, but in d'Hiver, people marry ghosts all the time. Our duke married a demon, kind of."

It wasn't until things were winding down that he realized he hadn't seen Roisin since supper. "I'll be right back," he told Astra, then went to look for her. She'd been unusually quiet since Staria, but he hadn't focused on it. He felt bad; he and Roisin had always been close, but he was distracted not only by Pallas and the curse, but by Astra.

He found her on the edge of the camp, playing her fiddle. It wasn't one of the dances she would play tomorrow or the bawdy songs she played for the others at camp. It was a haunting piece, mournful, and loneliness echoed in every note. His heart ached for her, because she was crying while she played, and he knew she hated that. He also knew the only way she *could* cry was through playing.

He'd never heard the piece before, but he felt it all the way to his bones. It reminded him of all the nights he'd lain awake in his tent, staring into nothing, too exhausted to even weep. The dreams where he watched Carys being tortured in front of him, begging to die, blaming Cillian for not saving her. Or the dreams where he was walking up a road in Kallistos and saw a cart pass, driven by a life-sized jester puppet, with his younger self in the back, ignorant of what waited for him at the manor to which he was headed.

And it reminded him of the pain of seeing someone stand up from the fire, smile blankly, and wander off into the forest. Tay's screams of agony when Gilly left. The tainted dream in d'Hiver, with the puppet digging barbed wire into his cheek.

It was good to be reminded that this was only a reprieve. A hint of the life he could have, if Pallas were gone, but they still had to get rid of her.

"I know you're there," Roisin said eventually. "You can stop pretending." She lowered her bow but didn't turn to look at him.

"I'm sorry," Cillian said.

"You're allowed to listen; it's not a secret," she said, but her tone was leaden, hollow.

"No, I'm not sorry for listening. I'm sorry that I've been so distracted lately." Cillian pulled out a clove, lit it, and headed over to her. He offered her the pack, but she shook her head, clinging to her fiddle.

"You're trying to help," she said. "I get it."

"Yeah, well, I also ... maybe am distracted by something else," Cillian admitted.

"I know." She turned to him, then, her lips curved in a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. "You deserve it. You laugh so much more. I hardly recognize you, honestly—you're so much more ... *alive*." With that, her face crumpled, and she started to cry.

Cillian had no idea what to do. "Ros?"

“It was a year ago,” she sobbed into her hands, and Cillian felt like a complete ass for not having realized.

A year ago, Gilly had finally given in and walked away from life to be Pallas’s puppet. Even being in Arktos hadn’t been enough to save her, not that he’d known at the time that it might have made a difference. He should have remembered, not been distracted by Astra and physical pleasure when it was trying to keep his people safe that brought Astra to the troupe in the first place.

“I know what you’re doing.” Roisin sniffled, lifting her head. “And you can stop. I don’t blame you. Tay remembered. She got drunk two seconds after setting up her tent. Everyone else, including you, knows I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I could still have been more attentive.”

“You could, and I would have been annoyed. Just like I was when it happened. I—I’m sorry. I’m glad everyone is having fun; I just ... couldn’t. Not tonight.” She breathed in, slow and deep. “I wrote that song for her.”

“It’s beautiful,” Cillian said. It was. He could see a dance for it, in his head. Something with flowers, about sisters who became constellations, maybe. “I’d like to create a dance to go with it.”

She smiled weakly. “I’d like that. But maybe ... a little more time, yeah?”

“Of course.” He paused, then opened his arms. “Hug?”

She surprised him by shifting her violin to her other hand, then stepping in and letting him hug her. “I like him. Astra. Good for you. I mean that.”

He held her close and stroked his hand over her hair. “I know. I’m still sorry I didn’t realize what day it was.”

“Trust me, I wish I could forget.”

That didn’t make him feel better, but what could he do? They walked back to camp, which was mostly quiet, now, as the performers had taken to their beds. “Do you want to play tomorrow? If it’s too much—”

“I’m going to perform,” Roisin said. “Gilly loved performing here, remember? She always ... always wanted to pet a ribbon dragon.” Her voice went heavy with tears. “I think I need to ... be alone. Can you—can you ask—” She stopped, turning from him, shoulders rigid. “Never mind.”

“Is it a dream of her you want, or no dreams at all?” Cillian asked softly.

She sobbed, just once, then said so quietly he could barely hear, “A dream where she’s. Happy. And she says she doesn’t blame me.”

He blinked. He never would have guessed Roisin blamed *herself*. It was his fault, not being vigilant enough. But all he said was, “Of course, Ros. Sleep well.”

When he entered his tent, all his earlier joy was muted, overshadowed by guilt for having been so happy on a day that brought Roisin so much pain. He was quiet as he got ready for bed, and Astra, sensing his mood, simply watched him.

“What’s the matter?” Astra asked, finally, when Cillian lay on his back in the bedding and made no move to reach for him.

He didn’t want to talk about it, but he had to keep his promise. “My fiddle player, Roisin? It’s the first anniversary of her sister, Gilly, being taken by the curse. I’d forgotten.”

“Ah,” Astra said. “I see. Would she like a dream?”

“Yes. She asked for one of her sister, being happy. Not blaming her, which I never realized she thought Gilly would.”

“It’s a sibling thing.” Astra moved closer to him. “She probably knows it wasn’t her fault. But she’s going to feel that way, because she couldn’t stop something bad happening to someone she loved. Arwyn and Levi, even Ares, told me the same about Azaiah, when he was suffering over Nyx. They knew they couldn’t do anything, but they still felt bad.”

“I know.” Cillian swallowed and put his arm over his eyes. “At the fire, earlier. I was thinking how nice it was, to feel ... happy again. That maybe I could be the god of art and enjoy—or even inspire—creations like those we were watching, for

hundreds more years. Then I realized I'd forgotten about Roisin, and how can I be a god if I can't even remember when my own friend might need me?"

"That's neither here nor there, Cillian. Azaiah doesn't lead every soul to his river himself. He has ferrymen to help him. What's important is that he's kind to the ones he leads—and you *did* go to her, didn't you? That means something."

It was a nice thought, even if he wasn't sure he could believe it. "I guess I thought gods were supposed to know everything."

"We don't," Astra said. "Even if we act like we do."

Cillian took his arm from his eyes and gave him a look.

"I'm referring to Arwyn, obviously, not me." Astra paused. "Or ... fine, right now I don't know what to do. With you. When you're sad."

"I've been sad since you met me," Cillian pointed out, though maybe that wasn't quite true.

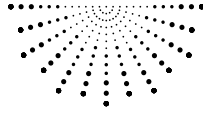
"Fine." Astra moved close, climbing halfway onto Cillian, curling around him and wrapping him in his arms. His eyes started to glow. "Then I'll do the one thing I know works. Go to sleep, and have gentle dreams. You will, and so will she."

"Thank you," Cillian whispered, hugging Astra tight. "I'm sorry I used to curse you when I couldn't sleep. You really are a kind god."

"And you would be, too." Astra drew his fingers lightly down Cillian's face, closing his eyes. "Sleep now."

And so he did.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Cillian was too busy in the morning to linger over what had happened the night before. He'd slept well, dreaming of inconsequential things, and he wrangled Astra's unruly hair into a braid that he tied with their gifted piece of twine since, of course, Astra had lost the other one.

They arrived at the square early, to set up before the worst of the heat set in, and were met by Evander Akti, the strategos, a tall man with dark hair in a neat, military haircut and a trimmed beard. Next to him stood a dark-haired woman with a baby in a sling across her chest and a man with honey-blond hair worn loose around a smiling face. On the strategos's other side were two soldiers who looked enough like him that Cillian assumed they were his children.

Cillian bowed politely. "Strategos Akti. Thank you for allowing us to stay within your borders to bring you our performance." He said it in perfect Senex, which he'd picked up over the years of his long life, though Dante still thought he'd been the one to teach Cillian the language.

"Thank you, Cillian of Kallistos, for sharing your talents and those of your troupe with us today, honoring our sacred stories." Strategos Akti had a deep voice and enough dominance that it was clear he was keeping it in check so as not to overwhelm any submissives into kneeling. "This is my wife, Elena; my husband, Aleks; and my children, Kataida and Theron."

Of all the assembled Arkoudai, only Aleks and Theron smiled. Aleks looked at Astra with recognition, and Kataida



was watching Astra suspiciously, not even bothering to hide it.

Theron's smile was for Cillian alone, and Cillian knew immediately what it signified.

After the formal greeting, Cillian went to oversee the performance setup. He could feel Theron's eyes on him, and Theron wasn't the only one. Quite a few soldiers stopped to watch or politely ask questions, but they were in no way a nuisance. Performing in Arktos was difficult to arrange, what with travel restrictions and the routes that were necessary to get around the country without falling into quicksand, but it was relatively easy once they were there. Arkoudai were still soldiers. They acted like it, despite fighting no war in—Cillian didn't even know how long.

As he was finishing with the ribbons for his costume, Roisin approached and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I told the dream keeper thank you. And ... you, too, Cillian. I ... it was a nice dream." Her eyes were shadowed but clear.

He patted her hand. "Good." He didn't ask her again if she wanted to skip the performance. She would take it as an insult—as would he, if their positions were reversed.

Jimmy was standing at the side of the square, talking animatedly with Aleks and Astra, which was not something Cillian would have expected. When he joined them, Astra said, "Aleks is my brother's successor. For now, he's a ferryman, like Jimmy."

"That's right," Aleks said, grinning. He had a bright smile and kind eyes, and an air of playfulness about him. "Just a regular *we who serve the god of death* reunion around here."

"Aleks is from *Lukos*," Jimmy exclaimed. "Lukos! Can you imagine?"

"It's as cold there as it is hot here," Aleks said. "If that helps."

Astra shook his head. "Mortals should live places that are more temperate."

"Gods should make more of them for us to live in, then," Aleks retorted, which made Cillian laugh.

The performance wasn't anything complicated; they donned dark uniforms and beat drums to simulate battle marches, and the Arkoudai soldiers in attendance cheered and clapped in unison when the dancers representing them broke through the swirling ribbons of blue that represented the Evrys Bay, the thin strip of water that separated Katoikos from Arktos. Cillian, who was playing Atreus, let himself drift on the sheer joy of performing. He forgot about last night, about Pallas, about everything. He leapt and twisted with the music as he led his troops into Arktos, and he found himself falling into the role as he danced. A powerful soldier who refused to leave a single soldier behind—*not even one*, so the Arkoudai motto went—made him think of his own battle.

*You won't get another one of mine*, Cillian thought as he brandished a sword to fight the lingering bandits from the old Iperian empire who threatened Atreus and his soldiers. *You've taken enough*. He felt powerful and strong, like he had when he was young and mortal and didn't know his talent would doom him to centuries of sleeplessness and lackluster performances.

Nothing about this was lackluster. He was in his element, slaying invisible dragons and feeling the steady presence of his dancers at his back as they settled into one of the rhythmic marches that the Arkoudai favored. No wonder Pallas never came here. It wasn't just that art and war were at odds with each other—no, it was that Arkoudai art *was* war. And here in a place where he need not fear her tendrils of decay, Cillian gave himself over to his dancing. He danced around Manon, enticing her and her fire, mimicking Atreus supposedly giving his soul to the Gracious One. Which meant Ares, probably, but Cillian wasn't thinking, was simply letting his body move with the drums' rhythm.

When Atreus Akti died before a great dragon in a sea of sand that had turned to bloody glass, the assembled Arkoudai cheered so loudly, Cillian could barely hear. Other than Kataida, with her suspicious eyes and her severe angled haircut, everyone in the audience was smiling. Warmth flooded Cillian, the same ecstatic sensation as when danced through the dragons and cut Pallas's strings.

*You'll never take this from me*, he thought, climbing to his feet as the troupe took their bows. *This is what I have always been and what I will always be, even if you hunt me until the world dies.*

In that moment, Cillian felt like he *was* Atreus Akti. Like there was no battle he couldn't win. It made him feel powerful, and when he went to bow to the strategos and his family, he gave a fierce smile, more a baring of teeth than anything else.

"Strategos Akti," he said, "I hope our performance did your ancestors proud."

"That was fucking badass," Aleks said, clapping.

"It was wonderful," Elena agreed. "I would clap, but the baby." She chuckled, patting the back of the infant cradled in her arms. "Malik slept through it, but I'm sure he would agree."

"There were a few ... historical liberties, I think," Kataida said.

Cillian raised his eyebrows. "If you let me know what they are, Soldier Akti, I'll see that we address them."

"Kataida." Evander gave his daughter a look. "Art is fluid, daughter. So are myths."

"Ask your companion," Kataida murmured, clearly not chastened. "He will know."

Cillian looked sharply at her, but she didn't meet his eyes. He'd ask Astra later, he thought, and then he wondered why he assumed that's who she meant. An odd choice of words, *your companion*. It made him think of Astra's brothers and the men who walked with them through immortality. Aleks was also giving him an interested sort of look, as if he were trying to work something out.

Aleks, who would—if Astra was correct—one day walk the earth as a god. Would his husband and wife walk with him? Would they have to watch as Aleks took the souls of his own children across the river? What a strong man he must be, to know such a fate awaited him and still take the baby from his wife when the little one began to fuss.

“That was ... great,” Theron drawled, pulling Cillian’s attention from Aleks. Theron, unlike his sister, looked slightly disheveled in a way that Cillian knew was intentional, from the undone collar of his uniform to his hair, worn a little too long and falling over his face. He had a full mouth and the typical Arkoudai eyes, dark and appearing as if they were lined with kohl. He clearly knew how attractive he was *and* how to look up at someone and smile from beneath his lashes.

“Thank you, Soldier Akti,” Cillian said, amused. Cillian had been to bed with Arkoudai in the past—including Strategos Akti, though that had been some time ago, and Evander certainly hadn’t had a wife or a husband, nor had he introduced Cillian to his older children—and they were very direct when they wanted something, submissive or no.

“Evander,” Aleks said, “may I go speak with Astra?”

Evander’s expression didn’t change, but his voice was fond when he said, “Yes, of course.”

“Thanks.” Aleks took the baby from Elena and wrapped the sling around his own neck. “Don’t worry. If he starts being fussy, I know exactly who to charm into making him nap again.”

“If he naps too long, you can stay up with him tonight,” Elena said.

“Deal.” Aleks kissed her, then Evander, and then he turned to Cillian with an easy smile. “Mind if I tag along?”

Cillian shook his head. “Of course not. You knew him before we came here, didn’t you?” They made their way through the throng of Arkoudai, who were now speaking to the dancers and performers in small groups. The Arkoudai were always very appreciative audiences.

“Yeah, just like you know who I am.” Aleks winked at him. “I know the dream lord for a few reasons. One, I’m, ah. One of his moon children. You’re familiar with the term?”

“I am,” Cillian said. “We have a few in the troupe. I notice you’re speaking Morrey. Very well, in fact. How does a man of Lukos know the language?”

Aleks flashed that same irrepressible smile. He was, Cillian realized, impossible to dislike. “That’s the other reason I know who he is. I’m a ferryman.”

“No.” Cillian shook his head. “Not just a ferryman.”

Aleks glanced at him, his warm brown eyes sparkling with good humor. “No,” he agreed, winking. “Not just a ferryman. Or, yes, actually. For now, I am. But I’d like to say thank you to the dream lord. He’s a good protector to his children.”

Cillian thought of Ellie and Ruben, of Gwen in d’Hiver, and smiled. “He is, yes. But I should tell you, when the sun is high, he is ... more mortal than god.”

“Huh.” Aleks started laughing. “That’s why he looks like he’s dying after eating a spiced pepper.”

Cillian found Astra, red-faced and teary-eyed, waving a hand while he tried to finish eating something on a stick. A wide-eyed, apologetic Arkoudai soldier stood nervously next to him.

“He asked to taste it—I wouldn’t have given it to him otherwise,” the soldier said to Aleks. “Don’t tell Strategos Akti—I only *just* got off brazier dragon duty!”

“It’s so—so spicy—” Astra coughed, hopping up and down. “Can I have—another—”

“No,” Cillian said.

“Of course,” Aleks said at the same time. “Soldier Myron, go see about another pepper, and bring along a cold glass of goat’s milk, won’t you? Use my credits at the tea house.”

Aleks was a submissive, but the soldier saluted anyway and wouldn’t leave until Aleks returned it. Aleks sighed. “I’m not a soldier. I don’t know why they insist on *doing* that.”

“You’re a—future god,” Astra managed, clearly trying to breathe in and let air cool his mouth. “Cillian, if I weren’t a god, I think that pepper might have made me see one.”

Cillian cast his eyes heavenward, and Aleks laughed loud enough that the baby started to cry.

“Shhh, Malik, shhh, we don’t cry when gods eat hot peppers. Your uncle Azaiah didn’t speak for two minutes when he tried one, remember? Then he said it was *as transcendent as dying*.”

Astra wheezed out a laugh. “That sounds like Azaiah. And this is your son?”

“Malik, yeah. I wanted him to meet you.” Aleks took the baby from his sling and held him up, turning him around. He had light-brown skin and dark hair, and his little face was as red as Astra’s as he started to wail. “Malik! This is the dream lord, and he’s your uncle Azaiah’s brother. But I don’t know whether we can use his name.”

Cillian watched, amused, as Astra tried to make himself look deserving of such a level of respect, instead of like he’d shoved a hot fried pepper in his face without realizing spices in Arktos were nothing to joke about. “Yes. Of course. Aleks, hello. Aleks is one of mine *and* my brother’s,” Astra said to Cillian, trying to sound smug about it, but he was still wheezing.

“That’s what he said,” Cillian answered, amused. “Does he know you can’t handle spices?”

“Ignore him; he’s irreverent,” Astra said. He smiled at Aleks. “Thank you for letting me walk in your dream, Aleks. It was helpful.”

“Yeah, of course. My life is so weird, what’s one more god poking around?” Aleks’s smile dimmed a bit, and he turned to Cillian. “Speaking of, I’m sorry for Kataida being suspicious about you and your whole, ah, performance. She has ... thoughts, about Atreus Akti. Because she, ah. Was him.”

“What?” Cillian peered at him. Aleks had the air of an unrepentant joker, but was he *serious*?

“She was.” Aleks shrugged. “That’s what Azaiah told me, anyway, and I believe him. He’s not so much with making up shit for no reason.”

“No,” Astra said, finally sounding somewhere close to normal. “He isn’t. Why, did she critique your performance,

Cillian?”

“She suggested we took some artistic liberties,” Cillian answered smoothly. Kataida was far from the worst heckler he’d ever had, that was for sure.

“Art does that,” Astra said, with a shrug. He turned his attention to Malik, who was still fussing. “Give me that baby.”

And Aleks, without a second’s hesitation, did. Cillian watched as Astra collected the little boy and patted his back, then held him up to look at him. He squinted. “Ah, yes. You’ll grow up to be perfectly normal, I think.”

The baby tried to grab his horns, and Astra laughed. Cillian didn’t realize he was smiling until the soldier returned, holding another fried pepper on a stick and a tin of cold goat’s milk.

Cillian nimbly grabbed the pepper, since Astra had his hands full, and took a bite before anyone could stop him. He nodded his thanks to the soldier and collected the tin of milk, which he held out to Astra without a word as he finished the pepper. It *was* spicy, but Cillian was used to it; spices were a rare pleasure for a man who felt like he was going through his days half-dead.

Astra ran a hand over the baby’s head, then gave him back to Aleks and accepted the milk. The baby was settled and asleep, and he stayed that way as Aleks affixed him to the sling in some manner that was a mystery to Cillian. Astra, for his part, drank the milk with an obvious expression of relief.

“Milk is better for spicy food than water,” Aleks said. “Soothes your taste buds.”

“What an interesting fact no one bothered to tell me.” Astra shot Cillian a pointed look.

“If you’d told me you were going to eat an Arktos pepper, I would have mentioned it,” Cillian said.

“Lord,” Aleks said, clearly trying not to grin at them, “would you walk with me? I mean no disrespect, Cillian, but there’s ... something on my mind, and my lord Azaiah can’t really answer, I don’t think. It’s about your ... sibling.”

Astra nodded, going serious. “Of course. Cillian, will you excuse me? Go get me something to try that doesn’t make my throat feel like it’s on fire.”

“As my Lord Sleepyhead commands,” Cillian intoned.

Aleks grinned. “I like you. Dream Lord, I like him.”

Astra sighed. “Don’t give him more of an ego than he already has.” While Cillian choked on his outrage, Astra winked at him and hooked an arm in Aleks’s.

It was only because Cillian knew Astra worried about Ares—and maybe whatever Aleks wanted to discuss would help with their current situation—that he kept his opinions about certain people’s egos to himself as he watched them walk away.

He was looking around for Kataida—was she really Atreus Akti, reborn? Could that happen?—when he was found by the other Akti sibling. Theron sidled up with a smile, holding something that looked like flavored ice on a stick, which he licked outrageously as he gave Cillian a long, thorough once-over.

“My father says you’ve been here a few times, Cillian.”

Cillian regarded him, wondering if that meant *I know you fucked my father once*, but he was familiar with brash young men like Theron, playing with submission and their own attractiveness like a weapon. Being Arkoudai, Theron was better with weapons than most. “I have, yes.”

“I do like a man with experience,” Theron said, sliding the popsicle farther into his mouth ... and then farther still, until it disappeared completely.

Impressive, but he wasn’t Astra. Cillian smiled. “Is there something you wanted to ask me, Soldier Akti?”

“Theron, please. I’m a terrible soldier. Better at other things. Wouldn’t mind showing you.” Theron licked his frozen treat, which was turning his lips a deep red as if he’d planned it.



“I’m afraid I have, ah. Other commitments,” Cillian said. “If you are referring to what I think you are.”

“Sex? Me on my knees for you? Yeah, that’s what I meant. Even if I can’t quite ... Are you a dom? You have to be. But I can usually tell. Are you null-aligned? I hear that happens, but I’ve never encountered it before.”

The forthrightness was all Arkoudai, and combined with Theron’s sex appeal and knowledge of how to use it ... he was going to vex some poor unsuspecting dom to death, one day. Cillian nodded. “I am. And you’re beautiful, and you know it, but I’ve got someone and I don’t know if we’re at the point where we’re thinking about sharing.”

“The hot, pretty man with the horns? That who snapped you up?” Theron turned the frozen ice, catching a drop of red before it fell.

It was such a performance, Cillian almost applauded. “Yeah.”

“I respect your choices, of course, but maybe talk to him, see what he thinks. I’m not asking for a marriage proposal, just a night on my knees. I could show you both some real Arkoudai hospitality. I can take two at once, trust me. I’ve done it before, no complaints.”

Cillian couldn’t remember how many years ago he’d gone to bed with Evander. Evander had asked Cillian very sincerely if he was interested in coming to bed with him for the evening. Cillian, thinking being fucked by a hot, dominant soldier in an actual bed might help him sleep, had agreed easily. It had been a fun night. Evander was very good, even if he wasn’t a submissive. But Cillian hadn’t slept, and he’d left before dawn.

And now, Evander’s son was trying to get him and Astra to fuck him. “Like I said, Soldier Akti. You’re beautiful, and I’ve never seen anyone eat a popsicle that, ah, neatly before. But I will have to decline, for both of us. You might have better luck with someone else. In fact, I’m positive you will.”

“Yeah?” Theron flashed a smile at him. He looked disappointed, but Cillian had a feeling he’d get over it quickly enough. He was absolutely Lochlan’s type, or maybe Manon’s. Cillian had a feeling Theron could be just about anyone’s type, if he tried hard enough. “All right. It really was a great performance. Don’t let my sister being weird keep you from coming back.”

“We won’t,” Cillian assured him. “But if you really want to spend the night with one of my troupe members? Just go get another popsicle, and you’ll have more invitations than you know what to do with.”

Theron snapped the laziest salute in history at him and wandered off ... probably to acquire another popsicle. If he ever wanted to leave Arktos, Cillian figured he could get a job eating those during a burlesque performance.

Cedric appeared at his side, eyes wide. “Who the fuck was *that*?”

“The strategos’s son,” Cillian said. He cleared his throat meaningfully. “He’s a submissive, and remember, in Arktos —”

“You can only ask once, yeah, yeah, I know.” Cedric sighed. “Wait, can I ask him and his hot sister? Does that count as once, or is it one per individual, or ...?”

“I don’t think she’s for you,” Astra said, joining them. Aleks wasn’t with him, so they must have finished their discussion. “But if you want a sadist to make you weep, find whoever makes these peppers, and marry them.”

“On it,” Cedric said, waggling his eyebrows, and took off.

“Did you have to say that?” Cillian sighed. “He might actually do it.”

“They’re very spicy peppers, Cillian. Here’s a question, since we’re asking them: was that pouty young man propositioning you?” Astra narrowed his eyes. “I saw what he was doing to that popsicle, and I’d like to remind you—”

“He was. I said no, I already had someone. He figured out it was you, and then he offered to kneel for both of us.”

Astra stared at him. “At one time?”

“Your eyes are huge. Perhaps I shouldn’t have told him no,” Cillian teased. “Was it the seductive popsicle eating? Are you that easy?”

“No, I’m only ... curious. I’ve been in his dreams, I think.”

“Are they him being fucked by sixteen hot people at once, while eating ice cream?”

“No,” Astra said, shaking his head. “He dreams about storms. The popsicle was far more interesting, but he seems to have found Saoirse and Vai, who look like they might fight over him. People are fascinating.”

“I fucked his father, once. Evander. Or he fucked me, I should say. It was a long time ago.” Cillian had no idea why he was telling Astra this.

“Oh? Is that why you said no to his son?”

“I said no because of you,” Cillian said softly.

“But he said he’d like to be with both of us,” Astra said, and it was clear that this was one of those times his experience in dreams didn’t translate.

“Yes, but you almost cried when I tongue-fucked you the other night,” Cillian reminded him. “I think adding him into the equation would be the sexual equivalent of that pepper you pretended wasn’t too spicy.”

“Excuse *you*,” Astra huffed. “I’m going to go get one of those popsicles and not let you watch me eat it.”

He’d last about two seconds before he realized just how cold they were and how that felt on your teeth, Cillian thought, but he said nothing. Some things it was better to let people find out on their own.

\* \* \*

ASTRA COULD SEE why Ares liked Arktos. The borders had been quiet for a while, with Staria attempting diplomacy for

once and the people of Katoikos squabbling among themselves like a box full of cats, but the Arkoudai respected war enough for Ares to be at home there. It was like coming back to a freshly made bed in a ghost town—there was nothing to do, but it was still home.

He considered visiting Ares, but he had the feeling that his sibling wouldn't appreciate someone walking into their resting place in person. They were a private god, or they had been for all the time Astra knew them, stirring in dreams just enough to have slow, muted conversations while Astra drew in the sand at their feet.

Aleks, of all things, had been *worried* about them. He wanted to know if they were comfortable—if some cultists Astra had absolutely no idea about had roused them; if they were waiting for someone to wake them. Astra had smiled and shaken his head, but in truth, no one knew if Ares would ever wake again.

As night fell over Arktos and the city of Axon went quiet and cold under the starlit sky, Astra went to the edge of the troupe's camp and sent a dream winding through the pathways of his realm. It was a quiet one: stars wheeling over the desert, the sound of someone washing dishes in a basin, voices muffled through a wall. For a god who laughed in an arrow storm and danced in muddy battlefields, Ares liked simple dreams.

As he turned back to the camp, Astra smiled at the scattered dreams pushing against his awareness. A number of the troupe members were sleeping with Arkoudai soldiers wrapped in their sheets or sprawled over them, dreams blurring at the edges. Roisin and Tay slept alone again—Astra glanced through their dreams for less than a breath before changing them into something calm and easily forgotten—and Theron, the man who'd eaten a popsicle at Cillian like some kind of sex demon, was keeping more than one troupe member awake, by the sound of the voices coming from Vai's tent.

Cillian, though ... Cillian wasn't even trying to hide his fantasies.

The vision drifted out into the cool night air, making Astra hesitate a few paces from the tent. Cillian was daydreaming of Astra on his knees in front of him, falling apart on Cillian's cock with his hair a mess and tears in his eyes. Cillian had a lead tied to Astra's horns, forcing his head up, and Astra's ass was pink and striped with markings from a cane.

"I'm not putting a leash on my horns," Astra said, opening the tent flap to find Cillian sprawled on the pillows, lazily stroking his cock. He stopped, arrested by the display, and his gaze slid up Cillian's toned body and lingered on his flushed cheeks.

"Not with that attitude," Cillian said, and Astra slipped inside. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do first—kiss him, maybe, or take his cock in his mouth, or try to convince Cillian to fuck him while Astra reclined on the pillows—but Cillian just laughed softly and tugged on Astra's hair, pulling him over Cillian's lap. Astra kissed him, ignoring how his hair kept getting in the way, and Cillian rolled him to his back.

"We should stay in Arktos longer next time," Astra said, when Cillian finally let him up for air, "if this is how you are around the Arkoudai."

"The summer would destroy you."

Astra made a dismissive sound. "It's much cooler at night, at least."

"For now." Cillian licked along one of Astra's horns, and Astra's entire body shuddered. Cillian smiled at him, far too pleased. "In summer, you're swimming in sweat even at night. Imagine someone touching you then. We'd stick together."

"Ugh. Don't say things like that when you're fucking me."

Cillian's eyes flashed, and his voice was tinged with dominance as he murmured in Astra's ear, "I'm not fucking you yet."

"Yes, why aren't you?"

Cillian paused his caresses, and Astra whined, arching up until Cillian held him down with a hand on his chest. "Maybe because you haven't asked nicely."

“I don’t ask nicely, Cillian. Don’t you know me?”

“Then ask like a brat,” Cillian said, still smiling despite his stern tone. Astra tried to move, but Cillian was unnervingly strong, even with Astra’s nighttime power wrapping around him. “Go on. You can do it.”

“Come into dreams with me,” Astra said, flopping back on the pillows. “Fuck me there.”

“It feels nicer in person.” Cillian slid his hand down Astra’s chest, and Astra sighed.

“Sometimes I can feel it both places. I think we might ... mimic what we do there. Not entirely,” Astra added, grinning. “Not when there are three of me—or six of you. Or when you’re fucking me under a dream ocean, or while we fall—”

“No more falling,” Cillian said quickly. “But ... we can try it. The rest of it.”

“You’re welcome,” Astra said, and before Cillian could roll his eyes or leave the tent in mock disgust, Astra took his face in both hands and pulled them gently into his own dreamscape.

Astra’s personal corner of the dream world was in constant flux. There were oceans spilling into glass bowls on a table that then sank into clouds soft as featherbeds before the clouds took the form of birds that darted through the windows of houses so tall they shattered the sky. Nightmares slept in a distant valley, and when Astra and Cillian materialized in a bed of flowers, the petals started singing to them.

Cillian looked around him, hands on Astra’s shoulders. “I feel like I’m going to float away if I don’t focus hard enough.”

“It happens,” Astra said. “But not right now. One night, I need to show you the rope ladders. I made them in my first century—they go to recreations of my favorite early dreams.”

“I’d like that.” Cillian sounded genuinely curious. Astra was glad he didn’t blush in dreams—he hadn’t shown anyone but Azaiah the rope ladders, on one of the rare occasions he convinced Azaiah to sleep long enough to enter his realm. Azaiah had loved them so much that Astra let him keep an

artifact from one—a dream marble that existed only in Azaiah’s river, glinting and bobbing as it moved on the waves.

“You’d be the second one to see them,” Astra said, and Cillian looked at him sharply. “Other than Azaiah.”

Cillian’s gaze softened, and when he stroked Astra’s hair, Astra felt the touch of his hand in the waking world. “Thank you.” He kissed Astra softly, and Astra let his power slide over them, making him a few inches taller, just to be safe. Cillian had to break their kiss to laugh, then tugged on Astra’s horns.

“I’m used to taking a certain form,” Astra said. Several mirror copies of him appeared, naked and lovely, fawning over Cillian. “You said something about begging?”

“Oh, Cillian,” a mirror Astra said. “You’re so strong and attractive.”

“You should fuck me first,” another said. “I’ll be so good for you.”

Cillian’s mouth twitched.

A third Astra appeared, twirling his hair in his fingers. “I’m so submissive and hot for you, Cillian, please fuck my needy hole.”

“You have to stop.” Cillian barked out a laugh. “Why are your copies all more polite than you are?”

“Don’t you want polite?” Astra asked, as Cillian laughed into his bare chest.

“Ooh, Cillian, your cock is so big,” one of the copies said.

Cillian snorted. “Never do this again.”

“Well, I tried,” Astra said, pleased. “How would you really like me?”

“Gagged,” Cillian said.

Astra didn’t have to look into Cillian’s daydreams to imagine how. He waved a hand, and another Cillian was there, watching silently, cock hard and flushed. Astra rolled over, flashed a smug look at Cillian, and took dream-Cillian’s cock down to the base in one smooth movement.

“Make it bigger,” Cillian said, at Astra’s back. In the real world, Astra was dimly aware of Cillian slipping three fingers into Astra’s mouth. “I want to see you choke on it.”

Astra could have told him that choking was hardly attractive, but that must have been the point, because when his mouth stretched wider over dream-Cillian’s cock, Cillian took Astra by the horns and moved him back and forth along it.

In the waking world, Cillian finger-fucked Astra’s mouth in deep strokes. Astra was moaning around his fingers, and Cillian was gripping one of Astra’s horns in his free hand, sending ripples of pleasure through Astra’s body.

“Strange, seeing myself fucking you,” Cillian said, and Astra let the dream shift again. He was in a comfortable, padded booth in one of his favorite salacious dreams, and instead of taking Cillian’s cock in his mouth, he was taking a stranger’s cock through a hole in the wall. Cillian made a soft, surprised sound, and his grip tightened on Astra’s horn. “A glory hole?”

Astra couldn’t very well answer, but he knew what Cillian wanted, because Cillian was rutting against him, cock hard along Astra’s ass. The sense of being entered disappeared from his mouth as Cillian pulled his fingers out in the waking world, but he continued sucking the dream cock as Cillian turned his physical body over on the pillows, gripping Astra’s hips.

“Will you be ... will it be too tight?” Cillian asked, and Astra drew back off the cock with a slick sound that he knew made Cillian shiver.

“Hardly,” he said. “I’m a god, and the night is mine.” Another cock appeared through the hole in the wall, and Astra moaned as he took it down, just to tease Cillian a little more. Cillian dug his nails into Astra’s hips in the waking world, and he felt Cillian’s cock press against his hole, finally, *finally*. Cillian pushed in, and there wasn’t any pain, just the heavy fullness of being taken. When Cillian drove into Astra, Astra made himself choke on the cock in his mouth, saliva spilling onto the floor of the dream world.



That seemed to spur Cillian on. He fucked Astra harshly, fast and hard and deep, just as Astra liked it, and Astra let the experience blur into the pleasant, fragmented sensations of the best kind of dream sex: impossible angles, the flicker of focus from Cillian's cock slamming into him to Astra's tearstained face, then to Astra's hands clenching on the floor, Cillian's breath steaming in the cool air. It was just touch, sound, and sight, more an impression of sex than a full picture, and it was so perfect and delicious that Cillian thrust Astra face-first into the pillows, waking them both.

"Oh, fuck," Cillian said, and Astra braced himself, all too aware of how he must look—facedown, on his knees with his hair spilling over his bare shoulders, shaking with pleasure on Cillian's cock. Cillian gathered a handful of Astra's hair and tugged as he thrust again, and Astra moaned.

"Oh, Cillian," he said. "Your cock is so b—"

Cillian smacked the side of his thigh, and Astra's laugh broke into a groan as Cillian resumed his relentless pace. Astra knew he was probably being loud enough to wake the strategos in his tidy little house in the city, but he didn't care. Cillian's cock was a gift to the gods.

Or to one god, anyway.

"They'll think I'm killing you," Cillian said, his tone fond. "Do you want to come, beautiful? You do, I know you do. Can you come on my cock for me?"

Astra didn't even have the sense for a witty response. He just gasped and writhed under Cillian until the wave of pleasure crested and Cillian had to hold him up by the hips while Astra shook beneath him. Astra could barely keep himself on his knees, but Cillian kept fucking him through it, leaving him oversensitive and desperate, his voice high and broken.

"Good," Cillian gasped, letting go of Astra's hair to hold him properly. "You were so good, love."

Astra opened his eyes, startled, but then Cillian was pulling out, easing him down on the pillows. Astra rolled onto

his back to look up at Cillian, searching his face as Cillian stroked his cock over Astra's heaving chest. When Cillian came, it was with a soft sound that wasn't quite a moan, and his face was beautiful, vulnerable. Astra didn't want anyone else to see Cillian like that. He wanted to—wanted to keep him. To hold on to him, even after this was all done.

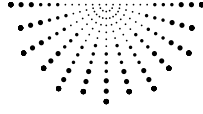
He didn't want to go back to the forest if it meant never seeing Cillian's face above his in the dark, his eyes warm with pleasure, his touch gentle on Astra's skin.

*Did you mean that, he wanted to ask, as Cillian leaned down to kiss him. Did you mean what you called me?*

But he didn't ask. The moment felt too fragile, too ephemeral, and Astra pulled Cillian close, seeking the warmth of his embrace. If they managed to break the curse and drag Pallas from both their realms, Cillian would have to make a choice ... and if he became a god, he'd probably take a companion one day. Astra didn't know all the details of a companion bond, but he doubted it could be with him—after all, however close Dreams and Art were, they'd always been apart, hadn't they?

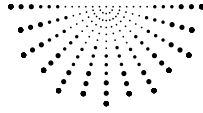
So it was fleeting, whatever this was. But for now, in this brief moment, Astra could hold Cillian and imagine it would last.

# PART III



*The Sun*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



**T**he melody came back when they crossed into Thalassa.

It was subtle at first, just a hint in the breeze, notes from instruments that needed to be tuned. Cillian knew it was inevitable; they'd brought the fight to Pallas, and she wasn't going to give up and turn tail. But it was still a sobering reminder that they had a job to do, and that until she was driven out of the world, people were in very real danger.

Cillian would have loved to spend another few days, weeks—hell, a year or two—in Arktos, free from Pallas's influence, free from the sick refrain that made his mood deflate like a child's balloon pricked by a pin, but letting her wreak havoc all over Iperios while he hid in Arktos wasn't an option, no matter how much he longed for a chance to focus on his new, unexpected feelings for the god of dreams.

And if Pallas's corruption spread to Astra ... what would happen to a god of dreams whose realm was nothing but sleepless nights and terrors made from someone's worst memory? Would there be anything left of the man—the god—Cillian had come to love?

Of course he loved Astra. How could he not? Astra, with his fondness for spicy food he couldn't handle, his kindness, his brattiness that drove Cillian wild, the way he looked in the moonlight at the height of his powers. The freckles on his nose when he got too much sun. The way he held Cillian at night, letting him sleep, enabling him to spend his days fully awake, aware, and far more engaged in his own life than he had been

in hundreds of years. How ironic that it was the god of dreams who finally helped him wake up.

He looked at Astra now, as their caravan meandered its way to the shore. Astra was dozing, his face peaceful, slumped in the cart with a folded blanket for a pillow. Cillian wondered if he was dreaming—if he was seeking someone out or simply napping for the pleasure of it—but either way, he let him sleep.

The desert of Arktos was behind them, the landscape changing to low grasslands, and temperate breezes carried the hint of salt. Cillian loved Thalassa, even if it rained more there than he'd prefer. The sea there was always dramatic, far more so than the southern sea, though it was warmer than the frigid waters north of Staria or the storm-tossed, perpetually angry sea around Mislia. He also appreciated that it didn't get as hot in the summer as Arktos or Diabolos, and while the green hills of Kallistos would always hold his heart, he could appreciate the beauty of a rainy Thalassan beach with its rocky shores and the fishermen darting in and out of the waves in pursuit of the best catch.

From a few carts behind them, he heard a flute ... and the first dreadful notes of Pallas's refrain, which sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the sporadic drops of rain falling on them as they traveled. He glanced at Astra again and found him still asleep, but there was a slight frown on his face, and Cillian had to clench his hands into fists to keep from waking him up. Astra was the god of dreams. If he was having a nightmare, it was because he wanted one, right? Or was Pallas reaching him, somehow?

The thought had Cillian reaching over and shaking him before he could talk himself out of it. "Astra. Astra, wake up."

"Hmm?" Astra's eyes opened, soft and blurry, and he blinked at Cillian. "Wha ... what?" He yawned, sat up, and stretched like a cat before looking around. "We're in the cart. Why did you wake me up? I was sleeping through the drizzle."

"You looked like you were having a—" Cillian stopped himself. He sounded ridiculous.

“Bad dream?” Astra flashed a grin at him. “Aw. How sweet. But I was just visiting Levi. Thought I’d let him know we were nearby, and *he* thought it would be fun to toss me into the water like a seal. Dragons. They have weird ideas of fun.”

Cillian smiled, but he was still unsettled. “Yeah. Sorry, it’s only that I can tell we’re out of Arktos, if you know what I mean.”

Astra wagged his eyebrows. “Ah, yes. That old euphemism, *out of Arktos*.” His teasing smile faded as he realized what Cillian was saying. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Cillian made a vague motion with his hand. “Someone’s tuning, and I can hear the song.” He didn’t want to say her name, and he hated that. Hated being afraid, now that he was learning how much better life was without her and her *fucking* curse.

He held fast to his resentment. Being angry was better than being afraid.

“Oh, we’re near the shrines!” Astra scrambled to his knees, hair blowing everywhere, bracing his hands on the edge of the cart. “There are ones to some of us—me and my siblings—here.” A strange look passed over his face. “Can we ... take a quick detour? I want to see something.”

“Sure, but is everything okay? You look troubled.”

“I had a dream some time ago ... I think maybe something happened to my temple.” Astra leaned up to give Mael directions, then returned to sit next to Cillian. He looked like a bedraggled cat in the wet weather, but it did nothing to diminish his attractiveness.

Cillian heard the faint tones of a violin drift their way, and he and Astra looked at each other. “You recognize it,” Cillian said carefully.

“Yes.” Astra drew the blanket he’d been lying on over his head, then leaned on Cillian’s shoulder. “I asked Levi if he could just eat her. He said no.”

“That’s not very— Well, maybe it *would* be nice, but you can’t eat ghosts, Astra.”

“If anyone could, it would be Levi. Not that she’s a ghost, anyway.” Astra turned his head, and Cillian had to tilt to avoid his horn. He did it almost without thinking, a clear sign how comfortable he was with Astra, how ... natural it felt for Astra to be there, next to him.

“What’s he like, your brother Leviathan?” Cillian asked. “I know he’s revered here.”

“Sea-Father, as they call him ... revered, yes, but it’s more like, hmm.” Astra yawned. “A healthy dose of fear. Thalassans live and die by the sea—literally. Before the place was full of rich tourists from Staria and Katoikos, they survived by fishing. And the best fish come with the rains, so they had to be careful to appease Leviathan, but not make him, you know, like them so much that the water stayed calm.”

“Would that even be something he could do?”

“I don’t know, but maybe? He made it snow in Mislia for the last however many years, because of the dragons. The people there killed them, and he was mad about it.”

“Were they ...” Cillian didn’t even know how to ask. “Family?”

“No, Cillian. They were dragons.” Astra smiled at him. “Levi is the Tempest, so obviously he affects storms on the sea. And sometimes the storms that he creates travel over land, but I don’t know how much that’s him and how much it’s just ... weather. He isn’t my only sibling who affects weather, either. Azaiah brings storms without rain, since it’s said the thunder is like a herald of his presence. And sometimes storms happen because they’re storms.”

“That is all very confusing, you realize,” Cillian pointed out, gently tugging on a horn. He smiled at the sound Astra made.

“Yes, of course. The ways of gods are not for you to understand.” Astra paused. “Mainly because if we don’t know all the secrets, mortals don’t get to, either.”

Cillian was about to ask him what would happen if he became the god of art—would he have a temple?—but then

Astra sat up, so quickly that Cillian didn't quite get out of the way in time and caught the edge of a horn on his face.

So much for familiarity. "Watch where you're pointing those, Your Horniness."

"We have to work on your nicknames," Astra said, getting to his knees again. He frowned. "I feel something."

A chill ran up Cillian's spine, taking the rest of his curiosity and relatively good mood with it. "Is it—her?"

"It's ... Mael, can you stop here?" Astra asked, gripping the side of the cart as Mael brought the horses to a stop. He was vaulting to the ground before Cillian could say anything.

"Astra!" Cillian scrambled after him, boots sinking into the wet grass. He saw the rest of the carts slowing, but he didn't want to lose sight of Astra, so he didn't try to explain, merely hurried to catch up with the black-haired blur of a dream god. "Astra, where are you *going*?"

He found Astra near the edge of the sea grass, where the dunes rolled gently into the seashore. He was kneeling in the sand, shaking his head and muttering.

"What is it?" Cillian went down on his haunches next to him.

Astra was looking at a collection of sea glass, nets, and fossilized fish bones. The sea glass was broken and chipped, the nets torn, and the fossils strewn with kelp. There was also a dead jellyfish—which seemed impossible, given they were a ways up from the shore even at high tide—and something that looked like a dead crab and gave off an unpleasant odor.

"This is meant to be a shrine for Levi," Astra said, making a face as he reached out to take the crab shell in his fingers.

"Should you—not touch it?" Cillian felt the same sense of wrongness that he did when he heard the notes of Pallas's melody, or when they'd walked into the stonemasons' village. That first pass through d'Hiver, with the indifferent artisans on their porches. Margaret picking at invisible threads.



“It’s been desecrated. He won’t like that. Help me clean it up.” Astra looked angry, so Cillian did as he asked. They cleared away the crab and the dead jellyfish, along with the dried seaweed, then arranged the sea glass into little piles.

“Let’s find some seashells. He likes ones that aren’t chipped or that look interesting,” Astra said, standing up, covered in sand. He *must* be agitated, or he would have already complained about that.

For that reason, Cillian kept his mouth shut and went to hunt for seashells. There were quite a few, most of them common and chipped, but he did find a whole sand dollar and a shell that was a perfect fan shape and glimmered black like a crow’s wing. It made him think of Astra, so he took both of those back, along with a seabird feather that seemed appropriate. Astra had found a few shells and an old bottle, and they finished setting the collection up together in silence.

When it was done, Astra sighed and put a hand on Cillian’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he said. “I don’t know why this happened, but it can’t be for any good reason.”

“Are there more?” Cillian asked. “I seem to recall there are a lot of shrines to the Tempest around here.”

“Yes, but this one—see the dune, there? There’s a hoard under it. Trinkets of Levi’s that he used to bring up onto the beach. He buried them, so I guess this shrine is more connected to him than some others, because he started it.” Astra exhaled slowly. “Okay. Let’s see what else we have to deal with. Come on.”

This was a lot of energy for his pillow prince to expend during waking hours, and it was starting to rain harder, turning the sand to sludge beneath their feet. Cillian followed Astra a few feet up and away from the shore, to a small stump of what appeared to be a dead tree. Scattered around it were coins and dead flowers, rotten fruit, and fish carcasses. On top of the stump was a lantern, its glass broken, lying on its side.

Cillian wrinkled his nose at the smell. “Is this Azaiah’s?”

“Yes,” Astra said, his voice tight. “Help me, Cillian.”

Cillian paused, uncertain. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful,” he said carefully, “but if this is a shrine to the god of death, what exactly is ... out of place?”

Astra whirled on him, and Cillian thought if it were nighttime, his eyes would be blazing white. Astra seemed to realize that Cillian’s question was honest, though, and calmed a bit. “Azaiah’s a guide. His shrine isn’t to celebrate death but to ask for his gentle hand to lead souls to the river. This shrine should have a lantern with oil that stays lit, gold coins, and fresh flowers.”

Cillian didn’t point out that any flowers would be dead eventually. Perhaps they wouldn’t be; maybe there was some magic associated with the god of death that kept them fresh. Who knew? He and Astra set about cleaning up again, and Cillian used his hands to dig a hole in the wet, marshy earth and bury the fish, which wasn’t pleasant, but it clearly made Astra feel better.

“I don’t know what to do about this,” Astra said, with the mess of the glass lantern gathered up in his hands.

“I think we have one like it in our supplies,” Cillian said. “I can replace it with that, and we can get another one in the next town.”

Astra nodded, uncharacteristically quiet, and they headed back to the caravan. Everyone was looking around, confused, and it was Roisin who stepped up to ask. “Everything all right?”

Cillian looked at Astra, unsure how to answer.

“Some of my siblings have shrines here,” Astra said. “They were desecrated. I wanted to fix them.”

“Oh,” Roisin said, blinking. “The—one to Lord Tempest, by the dune?”

Astra nodded. “It’s all right now.”

“We’re looking for a lantern to replace this one,” Cillian said, holding up the mess of broken glass that he’d taken from Astra. “For the Boatman.”

“I have one,” Jimmy said. “I’ll take it to my lord’s shrine.”

“Some flowers, too,” Astra said bossily, then added, “If you would. Thank you, Jimmy.”

“Sure. Can’t imagine who’d want to fuck up his shrine, though. He’s so nice. Is someone mad at the gods?”

“Always, but that isn’t a problem. People are allowed to be angry. Someone ... did this while under the influence of another.” Astra clearly didn’t want to say her name any more than Cillian did.

“We’ll stop here for a bit while Jimmy takes a lantern to the Boatman’s shrine,” Cillian said, dumping the broken lantern into a bag Evar held for him.

“And you and I have one more errand,” Astra said, heading to the cart. Cillian watched as he returned with a blanket and a pillow.

“You’re ... going to build a pillow fort with Astra? Aww. Cute.” Vai giggled.

“I have one more shrine to visit,” Astra said. “Mine.”

That seemed to stop any conversation. Cillian realized, as he headed out with Astra—holding the bedding, because of course Astra made him carry it—that his troupe probably tended to forget who Astra really was. Not because Astra wasn’t godly enough, but he was just ... one of them, now.

As they walked through the marshy grass, Cillian felt a pang as he wondered whether Astra would go back to sleep on the Dreamer’s Throne when this was done. “Is your shrine outside? I feel like you’d hate that.”

“You do know me,” Astra agreed. “And no. It’s a little ... house,” he finished, stopping dead in his tracks. “Or it *was*.”

Ahead of them were the charred remains of what appeared to have been a wooden beach house on stilts. Now it was just beams and ashes—and, horrifyingly, the burned body of a person, unrecognizable in its decay. But one hand was outstretched, and wrapped around the sickening remains of the

wrist was a single red string, lurid and bright amidst the cinders.

Astra fell to his knees there, before his temple. “I dreamt of it,” he said softly. “Before you came to my forest. She made him do this. She made him burn it.” Astra put his face in his hands. “He was one of mine. And she made him burn himself alive in a temple meant to bring rest.”

Cillian swallowed a lump in his throat. He’d never seen Astra like this, not once, through the whole of their long, strange adventure. He didn’t know what to do. What could a mortal lover do in the face of a god’s sorrow?

*You’re not exactly a mortal, though, are you?*

Cillian moved closer to the body. It was horrifying, empty eyes in a blackened skull, but he reminded himself that this person had been a supplicant. Maybe an insomniac like him, coerced by a vengeful spirit to destroy himself along with a temple meant to allow people to rest. Cillian gritted his teeth and gently covered the body with the blanket, then put the pillow beneath the skeletal head.

Then, while Astra wept by the ruins, he unwound the string from the corpse’s wrist and shoved it into his pocket. He hated having it near him, but he wanted to burn it, and while the rain had stopped for the moment, he didn’t want to light any fires around Astra, his burned temple, *or* the dead body. He went and found some flowers nearby, which he carried back and placed on the body, and he found two Kallistoi coins in his pocket to put in the empty, staring eye sockets.

Then he went a bit farther down the beach, toward the water’s edge. It took a few tries to light a match in the breeze, but at least he didn’t have rain to contend with, too. He held the string in the flame and watched in satisfaction as it caught and burned, only dropping it at the last second so that the ashes blew away into the water. “Fuck you,” Cillian said pleasantly.

Astra was waiting for him, composed, though his eyes were still red. He nodded at the body. “Thank you for that.”

Cillian said nothing, merely drew him into a hug and held him tight. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can fix the shrine, but when we get to our next stop, I can see if I can hire someone to rebuild it.”

Astra reached up to touch Cillian’s face. “You did fix it,” he said. “You made his rest beautiful.”

Cillian didn’t think adding some coins and a few flowers was enough, but he was happy that it cheered Astra up. They turned to walk back, taking the path overlooking the beach as if by unspoken agreement. Just then the sky rumbled above them, the clouds thicker, darker—yet no rain fell.

He stopped. Maybe it was a coincidence. But they’d just repaired the Boatman’s shrine, so ... “Is that for the worshipper in your temple?”

Astra turned around, the wind swirling his unbound black hair around his horns. “No,” he said, voice strained. “Azaiah would have taken his soul immediately. That’s for ... someone else. Look.” He pointed.

Cillian turned and saw a circle of people farther down the beach—he’d been so intent on burning the string that he’d missed them entirely. He couldn’t see what they were gathered around, but behind them ...

A black-cowled figure stood, the silver edge of a scythe glinting at his back.

\* \* \*

THERE WAS no dignified way to climb down the dunes to the beach. Cillian walked carefully, but the sting of panic tightened Astra’s chest, and he staggered and slipped, sand filling his boots. Cillian grabbed for Astra’s cloak to steady him, but it slid through his fingers, and Astra landed on his side in a clump of wet sand.

Heavy boots came into view, and a gruff voice called out over the rumble of thunder. “Careful, kid.”

Nyx, Azaiah's companion, reached down and picked Astra up by the arm. He was a big fellow, broad-shouldered and scarred, with one side of his head shaved short and an ordinary traveling coat hanging off his shoulders. He adjusted Astra's cloak and brushed his face clean, then looked past him as Cillian's footsteps stirred the sand.

"Oh. Cillian, this is Nyx." Astra blushed, caught off guard. Nyx and Azaiah were new to their bond, but they acted as if they'd been companions for centuries, and Astra always felt a little sheepish every time Nyx called him *kid* or *dreamling*.

Nyx took Cillian's hand in a firm grip. "We've met, actually. I had a different name then."

Cillian's eyes widened. "You did. I remember. You were a Misthotos."

"I was," Nyx said. "Not anymore."

"What happened here?" Astra nodded toward the group of people, though he was more than a little curious about how and why Nyx would have met Cillian when he was a Misthotos. Nyx and Azaiah had been entangled long before they became companions, of course, so perhaps something about Cillian's potential godhood had led him into contact with others who were linked to immortals. "Azaiah's taking someone across?"

Nyx's brows furrowed. "Mm. Yes. A man went diving for fish earlier, but he hadn't been sleeping well, and then his board cracked on a stone ..." Azaiah was kneeling over the body, but no one else seemed to have noticed him, though a few had turned to glance at Astra and Cillian. "There have been several deaths like that around here lately. This isn't even the first Azaiah's carried across today."

Astra felt Cillian touch his back, though he suspected it was more for Cillian's benefit than his. He wrapped an arm around Cillian's waist in return, and of course Nyx noticed.

"I. Um." Astra felt oddly defensive of Cillian. It struck him that he wanted Nyx to approve—of Cillian, of Astra's relationship with him. Astra had been a god far longer than

Nyx had been a companion, but Nyx was twice as old as he was, and he was so ... so stable. “Cillian helped sort out the shrines up there.” He gestured. “He’s been fixing things Pallas has done, and he’s ... well, he’s ... You know how Art needs a successor—”

“Astra and I are currently allied,” Cillian said, before Astra panicked fully and ended up talking about how impressive Cillian’s cock was.

“That’s good,” Nyx replied. “He can be a little sheltered, but his heart is in the right place. It looks as though Azaiah has finished his work. Let’s go talk to him.”

“Sheltered?” Astra squeaked. “I’m not sheltered.”

“Not at all.” Cillian smiled. “Unless we’re talking about your exposure to spices.”

Astra was certain his face was beet red by the time they made it to the group of Thalassans. They were talking to one another, and an older man was covering the body with a coat while someone else examined a long, broad paddleboard.

“It shouldn’t have broken like that,” they said. “Look. The inside is rotting, like there’s a fungus in the wood.”

“Again?” A woman asked, but the others hushed her, looking sidelong at Cillian and Astra.

“I apologize,” Cillian said. “We don’t mean to intrude.” He pulled Astra aside, but not before Astra smelled the decay coming off the broken board.

But that didn’t make sense. Fishing wasn’t an art, was it? Maybe it was the way the board was crafted, or something they did before they fished. Lost in thought, he almost missed Nyx and Azaiah walking up to them.

“Little brother.” Azaiah’s smile was warm, and his silvery hair blew in the breeze as he wrapped Astra in a tight embrace. “How wonderful to hold you in person for the first time.”

“Azaiah.” Astra glanced at Cillian, who was covering his mouth with a hand and looking pointedly away. “Please.”

“I didn’t know you could get freckles,” Azaiah said. “Are you cold? You must be, so far from your forest.” Mortifyingly, Azaiah adjusted Astra’s cloak the same way Nyx had. “What brings you here?”

“The former god of art.” That stopped Azaiah as probably nothing else would have. His smile faded. “She’s developed a grudge against my realm and against ... my friend. Cillian.”

“Ah. Yes.” Azaiah nodded to Cillian, who nodded back. Then, like he’d never been interrupted at all, he continued fussing with Astra’s cloak. “She has been evading me for some time. I can sense her, now and then, but she feels weaker of late. I doubt she’ll let me come close, not now. The draw of the river would be too strong.”

Astra tried not to choke as Azaiah tightened the clasp of his cloak. “What? What do you mean?”

“Spirits don’t cross unless they wish to, but their will erodes over time. Some only need to see the river to be swept away by it.” Azaiah sighed. “I would have taken her by the hand, if she’d let me. If you find her, tell her I harbor no ill will toward her. I would greet her as a sister, as I did once before.”

“You’re too kind,” Astra said. “I want to strangle her after what she’s done to Cillian. To my people.” He thought of the corpse in his temple, the teenager sobbing as the little house that should have been a sanctuary burned around him.

Azaiah pressed a thumb to the line between Astra’s brows. “She will come to me eventually. And this Cillian, he is your ... friend, you said?”

“Potential Art,” Astra whispered. “So don’t ... assume. He probably can’t be more, even if I wanted it.”

Azaiah’s perfect face creased in concern. “Why not?”

“Because—because gods can’t. Right?”

Azaiah was lovely even when he was bewildered. “I don’t know. Arwyn might. But it is good, brother, that you have found someone you can open your heart to. Is he kind to you?”



Astra covered his face with both hands. “Azaiah, please.”

“I only want to be sure he’s gentle. Your heart is very delicate, Astra. I remember when you were a child and you cried because you couldn’t find your friend’s dreams anymore —”

“We should get back,” Astra said. “Find out more about what’s happening.”

“Oh.” Oh, gods, why did Azaiah have to look like such a kicked puppy?

“But I’ll see you again soon.” Astra took a step closer. “And it was nice of you to ... you know, with the cloak and all.”

“I love you very much.” Azaiah wrapped Astra in another embrace. “And I’m happy for you.”

Astra made a strangled sound and wriggled until Azaiah let go. When he staggered back to Cillian and Nyx, Cillian was gesturing toward the burned-out house.

“Just between those two dunes.”

“I’ll see him buried with the proper rites,” Nyx said. He turned to Astra. “Azaiah, you tied his cloak too tight.”

“He looked cold.” Azaiah smiled and held out a hand to Cillian, who took it carefully. “It is good to see you, Cillian. I hope that when we next meet, it will be under more pleasant circumstances.”

“Yeah,” Cillian said, looking at the mourners on the beach. “Me, too.”

“And I hope Astra is behaving himself,” Azaiah added, before Astra could stop him.

“Behaving is subjective.” Cillian winked—winked!—at Azaiah and took Astra’s hand. “We’ll be on our way, then.”

Azaiah smiled. Astra knew it was sincere, but it probably came off as unsettling to Cillian, who kept a tight grip on Astra’s hand as they trudged back up the dunes. Thankfully, he

waited a minute before he looked Astra's way and spoke. "So. I take it they're like ... father figures, then."

"What?" Astra sputtered. "No. Never. Not at all. Gods, I mean ... no. I wouldn't. I had a father, you know."

"Mm."

"They're just fussy, and they know too much about me," Astra said, tugging at his cloak collar.

"Of course."

"A father fig—Nyx? He just made his bond with Azaiah."

"Merely an observation," Cillian said breezily. "But your face is rather red."

"It's all the walking."

Cillian gave him a mild, blank look. Astra stuck out his tongue. "Classy."

They found the troupe gathered around the carts. Someone had opened a barrel of raisins, and Cedric kept picking them out with his bare hands instead of using the scoop, staring directly at Dante's horrified face every time.

"Cedric, stop antagonizing people," Cillian said. "Before we get back on the road, does anyone know what people use those enormous paddleboards for? Is it just for fishing, or something else?"

"Mostly fishing." That was Roisin, sitting on the back of the cart with Evar and holding a piece of clothing while he mended it. "Anglers go out in storms, usually, because certain fish only come out then. It's a whole thing—they make their own boards, and when they're of age, they have to design their own route for the first time and everyone critiques it. They're usually the ones you see skimboarding on the beach with all the shark teeth, too." She noticed the curious looks she was getting and shrugged. "I'm from here. Everyone picks up a board at least once ... unless you're from my family." She rolled her eyes.

"Oh, yeah, Gilly used to say ..." Tay faltered before continuing. "She snuck out with a skimboarder once."

“That went over well,” Roisin said, and she and Tay exchanged wary smiles. “Anyway, be careful with the people who fish on the paddleboards. They’re thrill seekers.”

“Right,” Cedric said, taking another handful of raisins. “Sounds like my kind of folks.”

“Permission to lock Cedric in a cart for his own safety,” Dante said.

Cedric leered at him. “I’d like to see you try.”

“No one’s locking anyone up before the performance,” Cillian said. “I need Cedric to be able to do his aerial show.” He clapped his hands and started pulling the troupe into gear. Astra glanced back at the beach a few times as they got on the road, but Azaiah and Nyx were gone, and the mourners had already carried their friend away.

So Pallas was going after people who used the sea, now? Now that he’d thought about it, Astra supposed that there was art to surfing and fishing. There was when Levi did it in dreams, cutting across the waves on a board or crashing through the water to disrupt Astra when he tried to copy him. Levi liked to talk about how different boards were shaped: the kind that could cut through the water fastest or lifted off a wave using small wooden fins. It was the one human invention that seemed to interest him.

They needed to find the person at the heart of the decay, like Basil or Margaret. Astra considered asking Roisin for more information about the area, but she was sitting between Evar and Tay now, hunched forward as though trying to block out the beaches and salt grass. Cillian walked over to speak to her, and after a little while, she almost smiled.

“I wouldn’t have taken an engagement here,” Cillian told him later, as they walked at the back of the troupe, well out of Roisin’s earshot, “but it’s one of the few places you can get silk for an affordable price, and they were willing to pay enough for the performance to keep everyone happy for months.”

“Is something wrong with this place?” Astra asked. “When ... *she* isn’t here?”

Cillian tucked his hands into his pockets. “Roisin’s family still lives here. They’re instrument makers. They ... have a bad habit of showing up. When they found out about Gilly, they said it was Roisin’s fault for taking her away from home.”

Astra frowned. “So I’m hearing that I should give them nightmares until they apologize.”

“Don’t do that. It’d be better if they could just ... sleep through it. Not contact her at all. I already spoke to Maeve and Sparrow about keeping an eye out for them.”

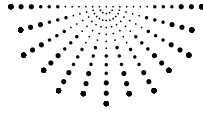
“You’re a better family to her,” Astra said, taking Cillian’s hand. “And a truer one. I should know—I have a second family, after all.”

“And you know you’re always welcome with the troupe, too,” Cillian said. Astra looked at him, startled. “If you need us.”

It took Astra a second to find his voice, and when he did, it was too shaky, too human. “Thank you. I do.” I need *you*. “It’s ... nice, to be out in the world. To feel it. I’m glad I could be a part of it.”

Cillian squeezed his fingers. “So am I.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



**D**iscovering what was wrong was fairly simple, but it was a situation that called for a delicate touch. Thalassans were proud people who treasured their beaches and had a love-hate relationship with the tourists who came to enjoy them. Cillian and his troupe weren't exactly tourists, but that didn't make them locals.

Still, it only took a few conversations to find out that the boards used by the anglers in their surfing competitions were considered sacred art—and that recently, the carpenters who created them had found themselves uninterested in the entire process. The anglers, gearing up for the start of the busiest fishing season, went out on their older boards and half-heartedly attempted the daring stunts they usually embraced with enthusiasm. It was a similar story to d'Hiver: lack of sleep left everyone cranky and exhausted, doing the bare minimum.

Cillian learned the head of the board makers was named Pádraig and—according to gossip—was part siren. Pádraig made various kinds of boards, and some surfers favored one style while others swore by another, but his talent was praised by all. He, too, had been suffering from a brutal bout of bad dreams that had stifled his creativity and left him too drained to do anything.

With Astra's help, it was easy enough to find him in his dreams that night: a tall, tattooed man with braided hair who couldn't work because a lightning storm kept blinding him. Astra changed the surroundings so he was in a softly lit

workroom with a tin roof, the rain a gentle patter that soothed rather than agitated. Padraig, who seemed only tangentially aware of their presence, watched calmly as Cillian danced through the dreamscape with shears that cut the red strings wrapped around Padraig's wrists and fingers.

"Oh," Padraig said, after it was done. "That's that, then. Thank you, Dream Keeper. And you—I don't know you, but your eyes remind me of the sea. I'll make a board with a fin that cuts the water like you cut my bindings, and if you would but tell me your name, that's what I'll call it."

Cillian almost told him, but then he heard the music. It swelled up like it was being played by a symphony, a full one of strings and winds and drums, and it was so loud it would have drowned out the earlier thunder. Padraig didn't seem to notice it, humming at his worktable as he sanded a board to perfection.

Cillian looked at Astra, who could clearly hear the music as well as he could. Together, they watched as the red strings rose into the air, undulating like lazy ribbon dragons as they flew out the now-open window.

"I don't think she's done with us yet," Cillian said, as the music grew louder and louder.

"No." Astra's eyes gleamed white, radiating power. "I don't think so, either."

They left Padraig's hut, following the floating strings. The surroundings looked a bit like the street in Sparrow's dream: just a suggestion of dwellings and, beyond, something that might have been a distant sea. As Cillian watched, the strings paused as if they were waiting. "She's leading us."

"Yes." Astra frowned and pointed to the sky. "Look," he said. "The stars are all wrong."

Cillian looked up. The sky was a dome of inky black, but the stars were in no formation he knew—and he'd been all over Iperios more times than he could count, spending night after sleepless night staring up into the heavens. "They're not twinkling," he said, a chill going through him.

Astra lifted his hand and the stars wheeled overhead, turning like a sky chart until they looked more natural. “I think we’re being distracted *and* summoned.”

“Fuck the stars,” Cillian said, grabbing Astra’s hand. “Let’s go.”

As they followed the strings, the music continued, as insistent as a storm, and the landscape remained vague and formless. Astra would occasionally brighten it with something frivolous: a peppermint-stick lamppost or a rainbow-colored cloud, touches of whimsy to soften the oppressive darkness.

It helped, but only a bit; the music grew faster, like a cart rolling downhill, out of control. The melody thrummed in Cillian’s blood like poison. It was distracting, and while the strings were still easy enough to see, his thoughts seemed to fall away like rain on glass.

But then he heard another sound beneath the cacophonous refrain. A voice, calling out in desperation.

*Lord of Storms! Do not forsake me! Please, I’m your ferryman! Please help me!*

“Fuck,” Cillian said, terror breaking over him like a wave. “I know who that is.” He took off running, cutting through amorphous shadows, only dimly aware of Astra close behind. The red strings continued drifting, just far enough ahead that Cillian couldn’t reach out and grab them. He thought of himself standing by the surf, lighting the red strings on fire. *Fuck you.*

Somewhere, in the midst of the loud, jarring music, he thought he heard a woman laugh.

“Cillian!” the earlier voice cried. “Cillian, please, *please help me!*”

“Cillian,” Astra called. “You don’t need to run. Be where he is. *Be where he is.*”

Cillian came to a stop, even though every instinct in his body told him not to. “Take me there,” he whispered, and then ... the world tilted and rearranged itself, and he and Astra were standing on the edge of a river.

Dark water wound through a landscape of black sand, and a small boat bobbed, tied to a dock. A single lantern on the prow revealed a figure in a robe and cowl struggling against a tangle of red string.

“Jimmy,” Cillian shouted. The landscape was a vast expanse of nothing, and he had no idea what to do. As he watched in horror, the strings they’d been following merged with the ones already wrapped around Jimmy’s arms and legs, pulling him off the boat and dragging him struggling and kicking across the riverbank.

“Astra,” Cillian said, clutching at his hair. Down the shore he could see a figure, the outline of something small. A puppet. “She’s here.”

“Please!” Jimmy cried. “I told her I couldn’t go! I belong to the Lord of Storms!”

“Oh, he doesn’t care, darling,” a voice cooed, coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

“He does,” Astra shouted. “You repulsive thing, he does care! So does Cillian. The only person who doesn’t care is you.”

Cillian shot him a fierce grin. “We’ll show her. Come on.” He had very little time to think, but suddenly, he remembered Jimmy taking the broken lantern and finding a new one to set up for the Gentle Boatman. Remembered Azaiah—his kind smile, the way he’d embraced Astra and fixed his cloak.

Yeah. Fuck her.

Cillian ran to the boat and grabbed the lantern, then remembered he didn’t need to run and imagined himself next to Jimmy, who was now being pulled toward a pit in the ground. Just beyond it stood Pallas’s conduit, the puppet, raising its arms as it dragged Jimmy closer.

“She’s afraid of the river,” Astra said, beside him. “That’s why she wants him off the boat.”

“What will you do, I wonder?” Pallas called, her voice like breaking glass. “Save your dancer, or throw my puppet into the river? That might save you. But your darling ferryman



won't be dancing for anyone's pleasure but mine, if you do. Choose wisely, Cillian. Choose *quickly*."

"He's not a fucking dancer," Cillian snarled, advancing on the puppet. He didn't need to choose. "And you're just a washed-up wraith who has a long-overdue appointment with the Boatman." He whirled on Astra. "Speaking of your brother, I need a storm. A lightning storm."

"Anything for you when you're being so hot, darling," Astra said with a grin, and raised his hands. The lantern glowed, brighter and brighter, and then it began to spark.

Cillian smiled, held it aloft, and walked forward. "Don't worry, Jimmy. I won't let her take you. Her time is coming, and she can't stop it. But I can stop *her*." He started to dance. "Astra, if you would."

"My pleasure," Astra said, and the lightning poured from the lantern, bright flashes flashing through the dark.

Cillian used the lightning as he had the shears in Pdraig's workroom, the dragons in Basil's dream, slicing through the strings connecting the puppet to Jimmy. The puppet howled, but he ignored it and found a song to dance to that wasn't Pallas's sick refrain—instead, he conjured Roisin's mournful, sweet song of longing and grief. He let that tune be his guide until the sound of it in his own mind was louder than the music in the dream.

When he was done, Cillian reached down to haul Jimmy to safety. "Go to your boat, Jimmy. You aren't hers, and you never will be. Whatever claim the Boatman has, or the dream lord, or anyone else—no one has any greater claim on you than yourself. Go." He held out the lantern, which was now a simple thing of glass and oil and muted light, and Jimmy took it from him.

The lantern's soft yellow glow illuminated Jimmy's face, and Cillian saw that his eyes weren't their normal blue, but were gold coins.

Jimmy took the lantern and headed back to his boat.

Cillian looked at the empty pit and the place where the puppet had been. It struck him that the music was gone. He looked at Astra and smiled. “I think we showed her.”

Astra smiled back and took his hand, eyes glowing white. “When we wake up, I might blow you. That was a very dashing rescue.”

Cillian grinned and pulled him in, kissing him there on the dream shore with unreal stars twinkling above. “Why wait until we wake up?”

Astra opened his mouth ... but then they both heard it: the discordant melody hiding in the sound of the river, overlaid by a triumphant laugh.

“I’m not blowing you here. She doesn’t deserve a show,” Astra muttered, and Cillian snorted, and then the dreamscape fell to pieces like an overturned puzzle.

When he opened his eyes, they were in their tent. Astra blinked his starbright eyes at Cillian. “Okay. *Now* I can blow you.”

Cillian laughed. “Who knew dancing got you so hot, sleepyhead? But let’s go check on Jimmy first. Then maybe I’ll blow *you*.”

“Why do you make me wait for things? I don’t care for it,” Astra said, climbing off him.

“There’s your answer.”

Astra stuck his tongue out and made a rude gesture before stomping barefoot out of the tent. Cillian almost told him to put shoes on, then decided, since it was nighttime, it probably didn’t matter all that much if he stepped on a bur or a twig.

He followed Astra into the cool, humid evening air. Most of the troupe was asleep—or engaged in other activities—but as they headed toward Jimmy’s tent, Jas called out to them. Her pale hair was a mess, her eyes wide and frightened, the kohl around them smudged.

“Cillian!” She grabbed his arm. “Thank the spirits—I was just coming to find you. Hurry! Something’s wrong!”

“What?” Cillian let her pull him along. “If it’s Jimmy, he should be okay. We—”

“It’s not!” She was surprisingly strong for such a small thing, and her sharp nails dug into his skin. “It’s— Look!”

They rounded the corner and saw Tay, sobbing, struggling to hold someone still. “No, no, no, no!” she cried. “Not again! Not *you!*”

The person she was trying to hold wasn’t Jimmy. It was Roisin. Roisin, who turned her head and saw Cillian. And smiled.

It wasn’t Roisin’s smile.

In the moonlight, Cillian could barely make out the faint hint of red string around her wrists.

In the air, he heard the melody, soft like a whisper ... and the same laugh as before, triumphant and cruel.

“Her time is coming,” the voice said, the same words Cillian had spoken in the dream world. “And you can’t stop it.”

\* \* \*

ROISIN SAT in the center of camp, humming. Cillian had had to bind her arms and legs to stop her from dancing. He’d insisted on doing it himself, gently tying the knots while Roisin gave him that unnatural smile, and even now, she was moving in time with the rhythm of her tune, rocking and shifting her shoulders. The rest of the troupe hovered a few paces away as if waiting for a drowning person to breathe after being pulled from the water, but Astra knew it wouldn’t happen.

Roisin was too far gone. He could see the curse working under her skin, creating a barrier around her soul, giving Pallas room to possess her. It would be less than a day. Maybe a few hours. There was nothing anyone could do.

“This is it,” Cillian said. He stood in front of Roisin, his expression flat and unflinching. Only Astra could see what lay

underneath: desperate visions of Cillian rescuing Roisin, peeling the puppet's wooden skin back to find her whole and unbroken, watching her play on some future shore. "You've all seen this before. You won't see it again. I'm going to the source—to the woman who started this—and I'm going to end it."

Roisin giggled, high and sweet, and Tay turned her back, hands over her eyes. Jimmy was shaking, and Theo took him by the shoulders.

"You can stay here and wait for me if you wish. Or you can go elsewhere—I'll have referrals drafted up for all of you, no matter where you're heading. But Astra and I will go alone."

Astra wanted to reach out to Cillian, offer some small comfort, but he suspected that Cillian couldn't bear to be touched right now. It was as though he were made of broken glass carefully pieced together, and any contact would shatter him.

"Afraid—" Tay looked around the group, her face red from weeping and her hands clutched tight around her waist. "Afraid not, sir."

"I wasn't opening this for debate."

"That doesn't matter, sir, because I'm going with you." Sweat gleamed at her temples.

"You need someone who knows how to throw a knife," Thibault said, and Ruben quietly, deliberately, opened his jacket and handed one over. The blade gleamed in the firelight.

"We aren't leaving you," Jas said.

"No." Cillian looked to Astra as though he could somehow convince them. Astra shook his head. Humans, he suspected, were far more stubborn than they seemed. "No, that isn't an option. The woman who did this is older than you. More powerful than you. I could lose *all* of you, and I won't—I *can't*."

Astra finally gave in and put a hand on Cillian's shoulder, and he felt Cillian trembling.

“We’re not losing you, either,” Tay said.

“Or Roisin.” Jimmy cleared his throat. “I can ... see her spirit. It’s a thing I can do,” he added, not meeting the others’ eyes. “She’s still in there. Just hidden. She isn’t gone.”

Cillian swayed, and Astra gently pushed some of his power outward, giving him a burst of energy. To Cillian, it would feel as though he’d just slept several hours.

“I reckon none of us are leaving you behind,” Sparrow said in his slow, careful manner. “Not after what you’ve done for us.”

“I don’t have any patience for supernatural nonsense,” Dante added, “but whatever’s causing this, we won’t let you tackle it alone. Roisin is one of ours.”

“So’re you,” Jimmy told Cillian. “You pulled me out of the dark, sir. We’re just people, maybe, but ... people make gods, don’t we? None of them would be around without us. Just like we wouldn’t be here without you. So we’re coming. And you’ll be all right, Cillian. You’ll see.”

Cillian stood silent, eyes bright as he looked out over the troupe. Jimmy was right, Astra realized. This was how gods were made. Perhaps a long time ago, when the first Art stepped out of the air to inspire their people, it was triggered by something like this. Ordinary mortals, connected by a common thread, shaping the world.

“All right,” Cillian said at last. “But when we find her, you’ll wait. And if I ... if it goes wrong, you’ll—”

“We won’t be running, boss,” Sparrow said. “Thanks all the same.”

“How do we find her?” Tay asked. “The one who did this.”

Cillian turned to Roisin, and she laughed. It was brittle, like clay shattering, and her eyes were dull and cold. “I’ll lead you, little dancer,” she said. “Just as you were led before. And when you break, we’ll dance together, and the dreamer will bow for our mistress.”

“No one approaches her,” Cillian said, and Roisin laughed again, too loud and too high. “No one speaks to her. And if you sleep ...”

“I’ll watch them,” Astra said quietly.

“Then I guess I can’t stop you,” Cillian said.

Roisin smiled up at him, tilting her head in a way she never did before. “Poor little dancer,” she said. “Trying so hard to be brave.”

Cillian closed his eyes for a long moment. Then he said, “We’ll go in the morning,” and sat down a few feet from Roisin. “I’ll watch her until then.”

Astra sat next to him. The others drifted away but didn’t return to their tents, lingering just within view.

Cillian didn’t look at any of them. Even when Astra wrapped an arm around his shoulders, Cillian didn’t look away from Roisin. “Jimmy said she’s still in there,” he whispered.

“I know.” Astra’s heart ached at the pain in Cillian’s voice. “We’ll find a way to get her out. I promise.”

“Couldn’t get Gilly out,” Roisin said. Astra looked at her sharply. He couldn’t see souls as a ferryman or Azaiah would, but he could sense dreams, and Roisin was dreaming. She was dreaming, trapped in string like the threads of a spiderweb. Whatever was speaking now wasn’t Roisin.

“That’s her,” Astra said. “Pallas. It isn’t Roisin.”

“So confident, little dreamer,” Roisin said. For a second, her smile was garish, a smear of red paint on a wooden face. “Your predecessor was a fool. He thought himself in love with me—thought he could be my *companion*. He gave me two boughs from your forest, did you know? What do you think I made from those boughs, dreamer?”

“The puppet.”

“Mm.” Roisin wriggled, trying to dance. “I knew I had to use it when I saw you were stealing artists from me. Naughty boy. But when I have used my puppet to make enough of my

own, my servants will walk into your forest, sleepless and unafraid, and your precious trees will burn.”

Astra tried not to shiver. Roisin laughed, and Cillian grimly got up, unwinding the scarf from around his neck.

Just as Cillian was about to gag her, Roisin’s voice changed. Her eyes went wide with terror, and she looked up at him beseechingly. “Don’t go to her,” she said. “Cillian, you can’t. You have to let me go. I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough.”

“Roisin.” Cillian dropped to a knee, his face twisted in pain. “I’ll get you back.”

“She’s still dreaming,” Astra warned, seeing dream-Roisin struggling in Pallas’s web. “That isn’t her, either.”

Roisin lunged forward to try to bite Cillian’s outstretched fingers and laughed when he drew away. “Cilly-Cilly-Cillian,” she singsonged. “Lost a girl named Gillian. Little Gilly ran away; he lost her sister, too, one day. Whose curse are they really in? It’s Cilly-Cilly-Cillian.”

“Did the puppets always talk in rhyme?” Astra asked, as Roisin started humming the discordant tune again, rocking back and forth.

Cillian’s expression was grim. “No, this bullshit is new.”

“All is still inside my head,” Roisin sang, closing her eyes. “The world is funny when you’re dead.”

“She isn’t,” Astra said. “You aren’t. Shut up.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t talk to her.” Astra turned to see Tay standing nearby, not quite looking at Roisin. “Gilly talked riddles, too. It’ll just get inside your mind, stay there.”

“She didn’t even love you,” Roisin said, and Tay went pale. “You’re a plodding, weepy little *cow*, and she *hates* you.”

Tay still didn’t look at her. “Don’t listen, Cillian. That’s all I wanted to say.”

They ended up having to use the gag after all. Roisin hummed through it, incessant and unsleeping, and as dawn

approached, Astra used another touch of his power to soothe Cillian's mind, hopefully making him feel as though he'd had a full, if not entirely restful, night's sleep.

"I didn't know you could do that," Cillian said.

"It's not the best idea." Astra stood, feeling the ache in his knees now that the sun was rising. "Your mind isn't meant to operate without sleep too long; it isn't healthy. But if you have to stay up, you might as well be physically all right."

Cillian looked as though he might want to kiss Astra, but he pulled back when Roisin started to giggle again.

They followed Roisin out of Thalassa. She danced on ahead of the troupe, her movements stiff, and as the sun rose high and the scent of the sea faded, her skin took on a waxy sheen. Her hair was too glossy and fixed in place, and when she smiled at Astra, he could sense the real Roisin being locked farther and farther away.

By midday, she was no longer in a human form. She was a life-size puppet made of wood, dancing too lightly over the grass.

"When the forest burns," she said, spinning mechanically, "I will dance in the embers. We all will. And then we, too, will burn—but not before Cillian sees your forest die."

"Sure," Astra said, as Cillian looked resolutely out over the sloping hills that formed the border of Thalassa and Kallistos. "I'll keep that in mind."

At night, Astra kept Cillian awake as they sat by the fire, watching the Roisin puppet mutter to herself. Then, while Cillian gritted his teeth and pretended not to hear what Roisin whispered to him, Astra sank into dreams and kept the troupe members from falling under Pallas's grip.

Every time he thought he had one dream sorted, he had to chase the sound of a discordant melody to another. On the third night, he called his nightmares for help, and while the troupe members murmured about unsettling dreams the next morning, none of them sported strings around their wrists. The nightmares remained with them during the day, wheeling



overhead as birds and casting strange shadows across the ground.

“And now we’re being followed by crows,” Dante said as they walked through a field of pale blue wildflowers. “That would be an omen, if I believed in that sort of thing.”

“They’re only dreams,” Astra said. Dante scoffed. Peppermint, walking alongside Astra as a black horse with stardust in her mane, cast Dante a critical look.

“I can eat his ambitions for you,” she said.

Astra patted her neck. “Leave him alone, he’s just an atheist.”

Roisin skipped ahead of them, twirling in front of Cillian like a broken piece of a grandfather clock. “You’ll feel so much nicer when she breaks you,” she told him, though her red-paint mouth didn’t move. “I know I do. I was so sad before. Flesh betrays you. It’s soft and weak and horrible. You can cut through it so easily. How easily did your future mistress cut through Carys, Cillian?”

“She’s no one’s future mistress,” Cillian said.

“And you should stop pretending to speak for Roisin,” Astra added. Roisin laughed again and danced toward Peppermint, who pawed at the grass.

“Little dream,” Roisin sang. “Little dreamer. Do you know why dream keepers begin as children?”

Astra didn’t reply.

“Because children are replaceable,” Roisin said. “Did this girl’s parents care? They used to beat her before she left for Cillian’s little artistic project. They couldn’t care less if she died. They had other children they liked better.”

“She has a family who loves her,” Astra said.

“What do you know of family? I saw your ‘family’ in your dream. Can you describe their faces? You’re just an interloper, an unwanted half-mortal brat warming a throne you don’t deserve.” She inched closer, and Astra tried not to retreat. “Do you think *he’ll* love you? How curious, the looks you give him

when you think he isn't looking. Poor dreamer. Just like Somnus, you crave the perfection of Art but are unworthy of its affection."

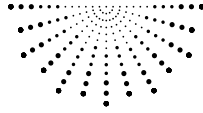
"I think I'll bite this one," Peppermint said, and Roisin danced away again, giggling.

Sometime after midnight the fifth day, the Roisin puppet—which had stopped struggling once it became clear they were going where it wanted to lead them and was no longer tied up at night—rose and headed out of the place they'd made camp. Cillian, who'd never seemed comfortable letting the rest of the troupe put themselves at risk in the first place, didn't hesitate to follow, and Astra, exhausted and wishing he could have risked just half an hour's sleep, sighed and hoped this at least meant the whole thing would be over soon. As they walked through the darkness, Astra silently boosting Cillian's energy, Cillian hooked his thumbs in his belt and cleared his throat. "I know where we're going."

Astra raised his brows. "Is it much farther?"

"Just another hour or so," Cillian said. In the predawn gloom, he pointed to a rise where the decaying, broken ruins of an old house overlooked a sickly pond. "Cladach Manor. Pallas is leading me back where it started."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Cillian hadn't set foot here since the night he'd run away, leaving Pallas laughing—and Carys screaming—in the dark. That had been hundreds of years ago ... yet it seemed as if no time at all had passed, the manor house caught in a strange, timeless decay that somehow looked no different than it had long ago.

“Is this really here?” Cillian asked Astra as they made their way up to the ruined porch. He remembered the beautiful landscaping, the soft grass, the pristine white stone and sparkling glass windows. All of it had been a lie, but shouldn't it be in even worse shape now?

Astra tilted his head. “It is, and it isn't.” He frowned. “I can't exactly explain.” He sounded troubled.

“Can we destroy it?” That's all Cillian really wanted to know.

“I'm not sure,” Astra admitted. “But this place feels like *her*. As if her spirit is tied to it.”

“It must be,” Cillian said, refusing to shiver at the sight of that pond filled with detritus, algae thick on the top, the rancid smell of rot all around. “Every puppet needs its master.” He stared at Roisin's figure making her—*its*—jerky way up into the yawning dark of the manor itself. “And every puppet master needs a stage.”

In the distance, Pallas's refrain echoed, a sick symphony that mocked and beckoned in turn.

Cillian closed his eyes. He'd come here before as a young, naive mortal with no clue of the potential for godhood in his spirit ... just a deep love for dance and the desire to win a patron to sponsor him so he could keep doing it. He'd fled that night terrified and racked with guilt, and he'd never wanted to see the manor again. Even the thought made him shudder with revulsion, and in his nightmares, this place always played a starring role.

And now he was starting to wonder if that was on purpose. Or, rather, if the purpose wasn't merely to torment him and keep him exhausted and pliant, but ... to keep him *away*.

Because he could feel something else, now. With Astra standing beside him and a sense of what he could be, what he could *give*, if he ascended to godhood ... he was aware of more than just the decay and rot. This was a terrible mockery of a beautiful manor, but there was artistry in it, too. The way the vines cut through the stone. The gnarled trees bent like old men, knobby branches covered in moss. Even the slime on the pond was beautiful in its own way.

"This is what needs to go," Cillian murmured, as the truth of it dawned like the sun. "This place. She's using the puppet to move in dreams, yes, but this was the last of it. The last of her power to create. That's why it's the same as it was when I left. That's why she's tried to keep me away."

"But she led us here," Astra pointed out.

"A practical gambit." Cillian shrugged. "We either continue our world tour of fixing her assaults on art in every nation in Iperios, or she fucks with someone I love and brings them here. This is more personal—and I'm more apt to make a mistake if it's personal." A new vitality was thrumming through him, making him bounce on his heels, fingers tingling. "That's what she did last time. She tortured Carys to make me run, but I didn't know it at the time. Because I didn't know what I was. What I could be."

"And now you do." Astra smiled grimly. Stars glittered around his horns and in the depths of his eyes, but the night was coming to a close. It would be dawn soon. That was all

right, though. They didn't need Astra's powers. They needed Cillian's.

"Now I do. If this bitch wants to fuck with a god, she can fuck with two of them." His chin raised. "I'm done running, and I'm done letting her keep me from being what I was meant to be. And that? Isn't one of her fucking puppets."

There was a pause, breathless and weighted, and then the sound of a long, slow clap.

There, on the crumbling porch of the dilapidated manor, was a puppet. Its blank face and painted smile shone in the moonlight, and the sight of its little hands clapping would have been chilling ... but Cillian wasn't impressed. This was all a temper tantrum thrown by a former god who needed to cross the river, to rest, to *leave*.

"I appreciate the artistry that goes into making puppets, into storytelling—but I have to say," Cillian said conversationally, as he made his way up to where the puppet stood, "I've never really liked puppet shows."

Cillian leaned down, picked up the puppet, and dragged it into the manor. "Astra, I need a fire."

"I need a minute," Astra called. "You're being very attractive right now."

Grinning, Cillian tossed the puppet to the floor and planted his boot on its neck. "Good; that's definitely my ultimate goal. You know, after I send our unwanted visitor across the river, I think I'll make this place my own. Fix it up so it's a true reflection of what art should be."

The puppet shuddered, and Cillian laughed. "You failed, you see, because, yes, I'm worried about Roisin ... but I also figured it out. Why you came here, all those years ago. Why you put your horror-house in my hills. Kallistos and its art are *mine*. Maybe you brought Roisin here to hurt me. Maybe it was a gambit. Maybe you're just tired. But it doesn't matter. One way or another, Pallas, your time here is done."

There was a soft sound and a flare of heat at his back. Cillian picked up the puppet and handed it to Astra. "Would

you like to do the honors? It's wood from your forest, after all."

"I'd be delighted," Astra said. He threw the puppet into the fire he'd just created, and together, they watched as it lay there for a moment ... and then began to burn.

But only seconds later, the flames faded, as if they were being *drawn into* the puppet. The horrid thing was smothering the fire, just as the algae smothered the pond, and something was growing on the surface. Small, spongy masses that looked like fungus were sprouting all over, moss and the sort of fuzz that overtook spoiled food coating the puppet's once-black wood.

A sound emerged from the puppet, a wild shrieking that turned into a laugh as the puppet jerked upright and began to *bubble*. The bulbous, stinking mass peeled off like skin from a baked apple, and in its place ... stood a woman, beautiful and perfect, with hair the colors of a rainbow and eyes of the same vibrant hues.

She stepped like a queen from the impromptu funeral pyre, the puppet now nothing but ash smoldering on the ground, and smiled.

Her multicolored eyes were cold as ice, and her smile held all the warmth of the Winter Sea.

"Hello, Cillian," she said, her voice as lovely as a wind chime. "It's been quite some time."

\* \* \*

THE SUN WAS RISING.

Astra could feel it, his power fading as light shone through the shattered windows of Pallas's temple. He drew back into the shadow of a pillar, clinging to what was left of the dark, but as Pallas stepped into a halo of predawn light, he saw that they weren't alone.

The temple was full of puppets. They were human-sized, most of them, frozen in varying poses like an artist's wooden

mannequin or a clockwork dancer with broken gears, and they formed a grim, quiet audience ringing Pallas, Cillian, and Astra. Gilly was in there, somewhere, and the others who'd walked away from Cillian's troupe over the years, dancing that awful dance. Some of them had probably been Astra's worshippers and temple guardians, taken by Pallas for serving a god who would dare to inspire art. Dust covered their wooden bodies, save for one, which stood at the inner ring of the circle with her painted eyes trained on Cillian. Roisin.

"I'm not interested in talking with you," Cillian said as Pallas moved toward him, slow and smiling. "I'm here to finish this."

"I can certainly give you an ending." She glanced toward Astra, and her hair shimmered in the sunlight. "But shouldn't my little brother say hello, first?"

Astra breathed in deep. He could feel the forest at the edge of his awareness. He called on it, dragging its power out and into the air around him. It was sluggish, resisting being drawn out into daylight, and he reached out to Cillian for support.

"I don't consider myself your brother," Astra said. But before he could grab Cillian's hand, Pallas took his instead, and the puppets moved in unison. They swarmed around Cillian in an almost military formation, sweeping him farther into the temple. Cillian snarled and wove between them, but there were so many that Astra lost sight of him in the mass of wooden limbs and smiling faces.

He lunged toward Cillian, but Pallas yanked him back, her grip inhumanly strong.

"Don't say such things," she said. "You're the god of dreams. Dreams and Art are always drawn to each other. You make formless little fantasies, and I make them real. I perfect them."

"You haven't been Art in a while, Pallas," Astra said. "And you've been avoiding Azaiah too long."

She let go of Astra's wrist to grab his left horn instead, twisting his neck at a painful angle. "Down, boy. Listen to

your elders when we speak to you.”

“Astra!” Cillian’s voice echoed through the temple, and Astra drew the dregs of his power closer. Shadows slithered along the walls, converging under his feet, and he felt the dreams of every mortal who’d been trapped in Pallas’s smiling puppets, a chorus of voices crying out in pain.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and nightmares formed out of the shadows at his feet, diving into the minds of the puppets that surrounded Cillian. As the mortals inside them thrashed and howled in terror, the puppets broke from their orderly procession. They stumbled and tripped, falling over each other in trembling piles, and Cillian dragged himself out from beneath them as a thin, miserable wailing shook the air. Even Pallas’s beauty was gone, pulled from her to feed the nightmares tormenting her servants. She loomed over Astra with her dishwater hair hanging limp over her eyes, her skin pallid and gleaming with the soft sheen of fungus.

Pallas’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, dreamling,” she said. “That *was* foolish.”

She closed her fist, and Astra screamed as his horn was crushed in her grip. Pieces of it clattered to the ground, and the broken stump throbbed like an open wound. But even that was eclipsed by the wave of agony that radiated from his chest, where Pallas had driven a wooden knife through his tunic and into his breast.

“Somnus gave me two boughs from his forest, dreamer,” Pallas said, as the world started to blur at the edges. “Do you know what happens when a piece of your forest begins to rot? More importantly, when that rot reaches the heart of its avatar?” She leaned down, her breath hot with the scent of curdled ink. “Don’t you want to find out?”

Astra sank to the floor, and Pallas kicked him aside. Cillian ran to him, crouching over him with a hand on his chest. “Astra,” he said, and there was fear in his eyes, and Astra could barely think over the sound of the forest screaming in his mind.



The rot was there, traveling through Astra's body. If it reached his mind, it would be able to use him to infect the forest itself, turning it into another branch of Pallas's power. There would be no stopping her then, with the dream forest in her grip and Astra under her heel. Cillian wouldn't stand a chance.

"I have to do something," Astra said, trying to shut away the thrashing of branches and rattle of leaves as the rot burrowed through him, emerging from the tainted knife in slick black tendrils that crawled over his skin. "Cillian. She was right."

"No, she wasn't. We'll fix this."

"Cillian." Astra tried to grab his hand. "She was right. Art makes dreams real. I can call on Azaiah's river in dreams, but it's just a dream river. If you had the forest—if I gave it to you —"

"That's enough," Pallas said, and Cillian grunted as a thin red string wrapped around his neck. It dragged at him, trying to pull him back, but he wouldn't let go of Astra. A line of blood welled around the string.

"Bring the river to her," Astra said. "Shape it like you do in dreams, or when you ... when you dance and I feel like ... It feels so wonderful, Cillian, when you dance."

Pallas was approaching, her shadow sliding over the dirty floor. Astra didn't have time. The forest didn't have time.

*If you do this, the forest said, its usually calm voice tinged with pain, you will be mortal until the forest is returned to you.*

"You've protected me long enough," Astra told it, as the rot brushed the edge of his consciousness. "Cillian, take it."

"What?"

"Take it," Astra said, and just as Pallas's sickness made his skin go slick with sweat and his eyes glaze over, the power of the forest rushed out of him and into Cillian.

For the first time in hundreds of years, Astra couldn't feel the forest sleeping in his head. It was gone, and Astra was

mortal, gasping for breath as poison ate him from the inside.

It wouldn't be long now.

"I love you," he said, even though he knew Cillian could feel it, now that the forest was sinking into him, lending his own power the strength of the dreaming realm. "Bring the river to her, Cillian. You're the only one who can."

\* \* \*

*I LOVE YOU.*

Cillian stared down at Astra, who was wheezing weakly, and the power inside him was almost too much to bear ... along with the knowledge that Astra loved him, that he loved Astra, and that Astra was dying.

There was a sound outside—thunder, a quiet rumble in the distance, and Cillian's skin went cold. Gods couldn't die unless they chose to go, or so Astra had told him, but was Astra a god anymore?

Cillian was. He could feel it, as he faced Pallas with Astra gasping on the ground behind him. Could feel the power to change the crumbling manor around him into something beautiful. And he knew he could bring the river if he reached into the dreamscape with the power Astra had given him combined with his own, pulling the true river of the dead from Jimmy's dream and into the waking world.

*Art has the power to make dreams real.*

"I don't know why you won't leave," Cillian said as he settled his new power around him. "But you've overstayed your welcome, Pallas. Go to the rest that awaits. You've kept me from rest for long enough; I know how it feels. You want to sleep, even if you insist you don't. You're not a god, you're just a toddler in need of a nap."

She smiled at him, teeth yellow and stained, eyes cold and sunken in a face ravaged by decay. Perhaps less a toddler and more a corpse overdue for a grave.

The song started, that sick melody of pestilence and rot, and Pallas said in a crackling voice, “Look at all my pretty puppets. Why would I want to sleep when I have such nice toys to play with?” She grabbed one and wrapped bony fingers around its arm, and Cillian watched as a wave of some kind of insect swarmed the puppet, turning it to sawdust. “Who should I play with next? Your Roisin? Her sister? Or, ohhh, maybe one you haven’t seen in a while ... remember Carys?”

Cillian couldn’t think about Carys or Roisin or Gilly at the moment. He couldn’t even think about Astra, who was still behind him, dying with her poison in his veins. “Playtime’s over.”

Pallas let out her shattering laugh and snarled, “I’ll kill him first, I think. Your dreamer. As much as I’d rather you watch him suffer, let’s not have you think there’s a chance.”

Cillian closed his eyes, shutting out the fear engendered by her words, his dread of losing Astra, the unfamiliarity of the forest’s power thrumming through his veins.

Pallas’s refrain was still playing, but that was all right. When Cillian started to dance, he ignored her increasingly frantic melody and thought instead of the mournful, beautiful piece Roisin had played on her fiddle that night in Arktos. He let the memory of that song carry him as he leapt into the air and twirled between the puppets, who moved as if they were going to stop him ... but they wouldn’t. Decay might have created them, but that made them works of art, and Cillian could control their strings.

Or cut them, which he did as he danced, letting Roisin’s music carry him, buoy him.

Cillian danced, as graceful as if he were in one of Astra’s dream worlds. He thought of Jimmy’s dream of the boat, and he danced to the rhythm of the thunder that grew louder and louder with each passing second, joining with the notes of Roisin’s lament: Death’s accompaniment for Pallas’s last dance.

The river was there, quiet and dark. A boat with a lantern on the prow bobbed gently, and down the shore was a figure

robed and cowled in black, walking toward Cillian at an unhurried pace.

“I need your river,” Cillian said, because this was Astra’s realm but Azaiah’s river, and it seemed as if he should ask before bringing it forth.

The figure nodded, once, and Cillian imagined the river as two long black ribbons studded with rhinestones, for the stars that shone in its dark waters, the souls that rested there. The starlight in Astra’s midnight eyes, the silver stardust in his horns. He pulled the ribbons with him into the waking world, shifting easily between, and heard Pallas’s snarl as he danced with it around the puppets, winding them in the ribbons of the river of the dead and freeing them from their confinement. Roisin was there, and Gilly, and amidst the sea of puppets who were once again people, he saw Carys.

She saw him and raised her violin. Cillian nodded, and she began to play.

“Go away, go away, go *away!*” Pallas was shrieking, being eaten up from the inside so she turned into a husk, like a tree destroyed by rot. Cillian said nothing, lost to his dance, weaving his ribbons until the puppets were all people and Pallas was caught in the center with no way out, clawing at the earth with nails that tore and broke.

Pallas’s former prisoners moved aside to let him through. Cillian ended the dance on his knees, his back arched, and flung the ribbons up in the air.

When they fell, they weren’t ribbons anymore, but a river. It washed through the manor, and some of those who’d been puppets fell into its waters willingly, letting it take souls that had been trapped too long to want anything but peace.

Carys smiled at Cillian as the water rushed toward her. She bowed, her fiddle held close to her chest, and Cillian nodded as she relaxed into the wave that rose to take her home. The thunder was directly overhead now, and the river flowed around Cillian, answering his call.

When it reached Pallas, she screamed once, high and loud, and in a flash of lightning, he saw her anguished, furious face—and the man who stood before her dressed all in black, the cowl pulled over his head, the curve of his scythe glinting at his back.

“Come with me, sister,” he said, his voice kind. “Come with me and rest.”

Pallas did not go gracefully, but she did go. Though she tried to flee, the water was at her ankles, then her calves, rising and rising until it enveloped her whole. And then it was gone, and Azaiah turned to him.

The thunder rolled, and Cillian raced to Astra. He could hear Roisin and Gilly crying and holding each other, but all he could see was Astra, weak and panting, his skin sickly yellow and his breathing labored.

“You—did it—” Astra managed, when Cillian went to his knees by his side.

“*We* did. I wouldn’t have known how if you hadn’t told me.” He smiled, but tears stung his eyes, fear for Astra rolling through him. “I love you, too.”

“Even—right now?” Astra let out a weak laugh.

“I love you when you’re a brat, when you make me dream about falling, when you won’t let me dream about knife sharks. I love you when you eat hot peppers and think cinnamon is worth more than gold. I love you when you’re a god and I love you when you’re a mortal, and I’ll love you even if the pain is too much and you want to cross the river. I’ll always love you. For bringing me sleep, for reminding me that I love to dance, for being ridiculous and gorgeous and brave.”

He took Astra’s hand. “But I’d rather love you with you still around to be a brat, so ...” He found the power of the forest inside him, and then he kissed Astra, over and over, letting the forest flow from him back to the god of dreams, where it belonged.

When he opened his eyes, Astra was kissing him back, whole and hale, starlight in his eyes and his horns curved and gorgeous and no longer broken. Astra smiled. “You can dream about the knife shark once. As a treat.”

“I think I could make one myself, if I wanted,” Cillian said, pulling him close again. “I love you. You know that, right?”

“I do. I can feel it.” Astra blinked, holding up his hand, the one Cillian had gripped when he gave the power of the forest back to him. “Look.” On his palm, inked in a dark blue like the night sky, was a crescent moon with two stars.

Cillian’s hand bore a tattoo in the same place: the sun, inked in a bright, cheerful gold. Two stars also flanked it.

“You’ve made a companion bond,” Azaiah said from behind them. “How nice for you both. Nyx will be so pleased.”

Astra got to his feet. He saw Roisin and waved.

She waved back, smiling widely, her arm around her sister. “Hi. Look who I found.”

“Cillian!” Gilly cried. “That bitch better’ve drowned.”

Roisin laughed, pulling her sister close again.

Cillian looked at Azaiah. “She’s—gone, right?”

Azaiah nodded. “Yes. And I think she was glad, in the end. If you need more ... visceral? ... proof, use your powers. Change this place into what it was meant to be.”

Cillian nodded, then held a hand out to Astra and bowed. “Want to dance with me, Lord Sleepyhead?”

“Why not,” Astra said. “But remember, keep the knife sharks where they belong. Roisin? Do you have a song for us?”

“Something cheerful, this time,” Cillian said.

“This time?” She stared at him. “And I don’t have my—oh.” A violin was in her hand, and she blinked.

“The song you played a few nights ago. That’s what I danced to, with the ribbons.” Cillian pulled Astra to him, dizzy with relief that he hadn’t lost him to Pallas’s decay—one final *fuck you* from a god who Cillian didn’t think had been at all relieved to go, no matter what Azaiah said. But it was all right, because Roisin launched into a reel and Cillian started to dance, whirling Astra around and feeling his power rise like a tide.

It didn’t take him over like the river had. But as they danced, the ground beneath them turned from earth to smooth tile, the walls went from rubble to straight, freshly painted wood, and the windows were no longer empty but covered in clean, clear glass. Rooms burst into being as Cillian and Astra danced through the halls of Cladach Manor, turning what was once a monument to ruin into a beautiful home. It wasn’t a palace of marble and gold but a comfortable place like Sparrow’s dream cabin: a fire in the hearth, bread baking in the kitchen, enough furniture for the entire troupe to sprawl on and share a meal or a game, or play their instruments and sew their costumes before catching a peaceful nap.

The house was art, but it was for people. That’s what Pallas had forgotten in her pursuit of perfection. Art was imperfect because it was made by people who were also imperfect, and that was just as it should be.

They finished their dance outside by the pond, which was blue and sparkling in the morning sun. The house was a reassuring presence behind them, true and lovely and *real*, and Azaiah sat on a rocking chair on the new porch while Roisin and Gilly talked with the others who were emerging into the sunlight, puppets no longer.

“Not a knife shark to be found,” Cillian said, smiling at Astra. “And look. Your hair isn’t a mess like it usually is during the day.”

“I think our bond ... I think now that Art is back in the world, Dreams aren’t only for the night anymore. Maybe my power is stronger during the night, just as yours will be during the day. But I think the forest is part of us both, now.” Astra’s eyes gleamed. “I hope I can still eat food, though. Those

peppers were really something. And I never did get to try whatever *trifle* is. Jas kept telling me it was delicious.”

“Jas was having you on.” Cillian turned his face up to the sun, felt its warmth on his skin, and heard the sound of a caravan in the distance. “The others will be here soon. We’ll have to explain what happened. Somehow.”

“Art came back.” Astra shrugged. “That’s probably all we need to say.”

“And what about this?” Cillian asked, raising their still-joined hands with the new, matching tattoos etched on their palms.

Astra’s smile went wicked. “I think they’ve heard enough sounds from your tent that that won’t need an explanation.”

“I will let you have your time with your friends,” Azaiah said, startling Cillian. He smiled that serene, calm smile that seemed as much a part of him as his scythe. “Brother. I welcome you to our family.”

“You know what this means.” Astra smirked. “I’m not the youngest god anymore.”

“You’re not calling me your brother,” Cillian said sternly.

“Why? It’s kinda kinky.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t call you that,” Azaiah said, and embraced him.

Cillian leaned into the embrace. He could feel the power emanating from Azaiah, the thing that made him *Death* shimmering around him like his robes; see the glimmer of the scythe that wasn’t visible to mortal eyes.

“You’ll tell the others, of course.” Azaiah caught Astra up in a hug next. “Levi will be happy for you, and of course Arwyn will want to introduce him to Declan.”

“Do I have to?”

Azaiah smiled, the sunlight sparkling in his hair like snowflakes on silver. “Yes.”



Astra let out a long-suffering sigh, but he turned in delight when they heard Tay cry out with joy at the sight of Gilly on the porch with Roisin. When the two women fell into each other's arms ... and then onto the ground, kissing, Cillian and Astra cheered.

Azaiah pulled his cowl up, covering his hair, but he did raise a hand in greeting to Jimmy, who was the only one who noticed him standing there with Cillian and Astra.

“Are you going to tell them you're a god?” Astra asked, after Azaiah bid them farewell and vanished entirely.

“Do you think they'd believe me?” Cillian put an arm around Astra's waist. “I was afraid that Azaiah was here for you, when the thunder didn't stop. But it was ... all the others. The puppets. Most of them went into the river. I can't blame them, not really, knowing how long they'd been trapped.” He shuddered, but then he remembered Carys's fond smile as she bid him farewell.

*I'll make a dance for you, Cillian thought, as he watched his troupe crowd around Roisin and Gilly. A song. Something to remember you by. Something alive, and musical, and beautiful.*

A warm breeze caressed him, rippling the clear water in the pond. There were no phantom refrains, no vicious laughter, no smell of spoiled ink or rotten fruit. Just the wide expanse of a lawn and a large, sprawling manor, with windows and porches and—Cillian assumed—plenty of space for everyone to sleep.

And a room for him and Astra with a door, thick walls, and a *very* big bed.

“Hey, Cillian!” Ruben whistled sharply, drawing Cillian's attention from Astra's horns—and how much he wanted to lick them, touch them, check and make sure there were no lingering effects from Pallas's torment. “Quick question: who the fuck lives here?”

Cillian thought of all the years he'd spent traveling, trying to outrun this place and the memories it held. Of Pallas

chasing him all over Iperios, stealing his sleep and his talent and his *purpose*. Or trying to—because, in the end, it hadn't worked. He'd come back, he'd faced her, and together, he and Astra had defeated her. He'd found who he was meant to be and who he was meant to be *with*.

“This place is ours,” Cillian said. “All of us. And anyone who needs it, really.”

“Filling your temple with worshippers already?” Astra asked, voice low and warm.

Even though he knew Astra was only teasing, Cillian shook his head. “No. This isn't a temple, and there's nothing here that will be worshipped—including you, Lord Sleepyhead —”

“And including *you*, Lord Dancy-Shoes—”

“That was terrible, even for you,” Cillian said. “But yes, no worshipping me, either. It's not really a temple at all.” He thought of Mael and his gentleness with animals, Sparrow carrying trunks to and from the carts without complaint, Evar sewing missing buttons onto trousers and straps onto shoes. Ruben and his brothers; Tay and Gilly. Roisin refusing to do what her family wanted and striking out on her own.

Astra sleeping for years on a throne, alone and *lonely*.

“Art needs people,” Cillian said. “And people need a place they can come back to. A place to rest. To dream. People need that more than they need gods, I think.”

“I think maybe that's right,” Astra said, as they watched the troupe filter in to explore the house. “I know the forest is there if I need it, but I no longer feel like I need to sleep in it to be ... alive.”

“And I no longer feel like I'm going to die from lack of sleep,” Cillian said. “Right now, wanna guess how I'm feeling?” He tugged one of Astra's horns.

“Horny, I know,” Astra said, rolling his eyes. “Come on, god of art. This may not be a temple, and we may not be setting ourselves up to be worshipped, but I wouldn't mind

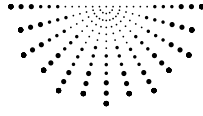
finding the bedroom with the nicest bed and making a little altar of our own.”

Cillian grinned. “I think we can do that, yeah.”

As they headed inside, into a place that for so many years had harbored only venom and rot and was now teeming with happy people and cheerful chatter, Cillian thought about Pallas’s old edifice in the valley below. He could restore it if he wanted—the knowledge of how to do it was clear in his mind—but perhaps he wouldn’t. It would be good to remember, he thought, what happened when you valued perfection over people. Ultimately, all that would be left was a ruin, stone pillars toppled in the grass, vines and weeds breaking through the flagstones on steps that led to nowhere.

Cillian could hear someone playing music, but he didn’t recognize the melody—and that, along with Astra’s hand in his and the tattoos they now shared, felt like a victory.

# EPILOGUE



“It won’t be much farther,” Tamir said. “I promise.”

Hannah pulled her coat over her curls and peered up at the dark, thundering sky. “I really wish I’d remembered to bring my spell-box. We’d at least know what time it is.”

Tamir tried not to roll his eyes. Hannah came from a rich Starian family—her father was a senator, or something like that. They could afford things like spell-boxes, water-repelling boots, and illusory face-lifts. Before she ran off with Tamir, she used to go to school every day in a glossy black car that hovered a few inches above the street. She had cashmere coats and designer dresses, spell-boxes and watch-phones.

But none of that mattered when her home was a battleground.

So now she was with Tamir, having taken the mail cart all the way to Kallistos while kids who *weren’t* running away took the train on weekend trips to the sea. They’d slipped through the border with the help of Tamir’s demon, Hellebore, and lived off what Tamir could steal from shops and outdoor markets. At night, Hannah told stories from a book she’d brought from home, and Tamir and Hellebore made illusory shapes in the stars.

She wasn’t that bad for a rich girl, but she did tend to complain.

“It’s late,” Tamir said. Hellebore, a fuzzy little weasel with crimson fur and eyes that shone with starlight, huddled in his shirt. “That’s all that matters. But I know where I’m going.”

“Right.” Hannah squeaked as the first drops of rain fell from the clouds. “Oh, I knew it! I knew I should have brought an umbrella!”

“You were in a rush,” Tamir said, towing her down the hill. They’d barely gotten out of her house intact—especially Tamir, who’d thrown himself at her father like he wasn’t eleven and skinny as a rake, and was probably on a wanted list somewhere. They’d been too busy running for their lives to think about things like umbrellas.

But Tamir knew where to go. He’d known for weeks, since before he’d run away from home and Hannah asked why he stopped bringing lunch to school, and he whispered his secret to her in the park during recess.

Tamir had been having dreams. They were usually similar, the dreamscape shifting halfway through when a starling flew by, sailing into the dark toward an enormous house in the hills of Kallistos. It was a grand place, with a big porch and warm light shining through the windows, and the starling perched on the roof and called out in a man’s voice, “Come find me! Come find me!”

So there he was, dragging a rich girl through a thunderstorm in a country he’d never even visited before, mud in his sneakers and rain seeping through his Arkoudai Fighters comic book shirt. Hellebore, whose magic lay with fire, grumbled, and Hannah nearly tripped over herself as they reached the crest of the hill.

And there it was.

The house, as inviting as it had been in his dreams, sat nestled by a little pond with rain lashing its simple garden. Music wound through the drumming of the rain and the boom of thunder, and as he and Hannah stumbled down the hill, Tamir could have sworn he heard someone laugh.

“I can’t believe it’s actually real,” Hannah said, and Tamir nodded, hugging his demon through his shirt.

They were covered in mud by the time they made it to the porch. Hannah was shivering, and Tamir felt sick to his

stomach, staring up at the big double doors in front of them. What if it was all wrong? What if whoever lived there thought they were thieves or turned them away?

What if they had to go *back*?

Tamir stood there, trapped in a spiral of anxiety and fear, but Hannah reached for the doors. They opened before she could touch them, and light spilled over the porch. Tamir could smell bread baking inside, and the music was stronger now, cheerful and light.

Two men stood in the doorway. One was Kallistoi, by the way he styled his hair and the old-fashioned kilt he wore. The other man had long black hair and curling horns, and he was dressed all in black, with stars in his hair. Tamir drew back, startled, as he realized the man had the same eyes as the starling in his dream.

“Hello,” the horned man said, smiling.

“You must be hungry,” the other man said. He stepped back, gesturing behind him. “My name’s Cillian. This is Astra. Let’s get you inside and find you something to eat.”

Hannah reached for Tamir’s hand, and Tamir took it, squeezing her fingers tight.

“It’s okay if we stay?” he asked.

“We don’t have anywhere to go,” Hannah added, blushing pink when Cillian turned to look at her.

“Of course you do,” he said, reaching down to take her other hand. “You found it.”

And with that, he led them both inside, into the warmth of a dream made real, as the rain fell gently on the roof of their new home.

THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iris Foxglove is a shared pen name between two longtime fantasy readers, Avon Gale and Fae Loxley, who are committed to writing fun, escapist queer fantasy featuring decadent, kinky stories, intricate worldbuilding and unforgettable characters.

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