

CHARLIE GODWYNE



AWARIYE

AWARIYE
DANUBIAN BOOK TWO

CHARLIE GODWYNE



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To Bob

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HISTORICAL NOTE

Dear Reader,

Suspend your belief for these pages...

Imagine a future in which history moves like a sine wave, with crests and valleys. The sloping journey up and down is sometimes shallow and sometimes steep, marked by periods of advancement and decline that can be gradual or swift.

This is the future I have imagined for Austria in the 25th century, about 400 years from now. It is neither a prediction, nor something I hope will come to pass (not in the least!).

I took the fall of Rome and mapped it onto our current modern industrial civilization, then sped that forward under strict natural resource constraints. The Danubian region has always fought the risk of invasion, with some places safer than others; the Alps are historically much more defensible than the wide-open flatlands.

Helvetica to the west is former Switzerland; Vienna to the east is now a city-state surrounded by farmland and military outposts. Technological advancements and material wealth are unevenly distributed, with the protected Viennese city-state capable of higher levels of civilization than the alpine regions where our story takes place, where the Danube dips into Austria.

What inspired this story was Mary Stewart's Merlin trilogy covering the Dark Age invasions that lead to the rise of legends about a brutal warlord named Arthur. Her books *The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, and *The Last Enchantment*

are the reason I started writing fiction. Though Stewart has moved on to the next world, I owe her a great debt. And though I could never dream of achieving her level of writing, I hope to honor her with my best effort.

Charlie Godwyne

AWARIYE

If you fight for the lantern gods, then I will sing for them...

Awariye is a traveling bard from the Diana Monastery in Helvetica in the year 2448. Down on his luck and without a patron, he petitions at the castle of the Danubian High King in hopes of finding gainful work, only to instead find Wren, his friend and former monk from their days at the monastery. Wren lives with his boyfriend at the castle and invites Awariye in.

But Awariye's health fails, and he sinks into a fever. Throughout this time, he is helped by the king's top warrior, Igor, who graciously shares his life force with Awariye to help him heal.

Through a dark winter and a slow but steady recovery, Igor and Awariye fall together, even as their professions require them to take separate paths. As they search for a way to remain with one another, and the seven lantern gods guide the king into battle, Igor and Awariye embark on their destinies while protecting their fragile love.

Awariye is a 45,000-word MM paranormal romance with magic, bardic mages, dark age warriors, steamy love scenes, only one bed, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

The Danubian Series contains MM love stories of the Danube River region, past and future, featuring the magic of this world and deeply spiritual men who find homes in each other. Although *Awariye* can be read as a standalone, it is a

continuous storyline and thus is best read after Wren and Uli's story *Lantern*.

LIST OF TERMS:

Lower self/Higher self: A human soul that is incarnate on the material plane is made of two parts. The lower self is the physical human, living in the world; for the most part, they only remember their current lifetime. The higher self is the immortal soul of that human, which remembers every lifetime they have ever lived. The goal of spiritual evolution is to learn the lessons of the human stage, so that the lower and higher selves can reunite, and the immortal soul will never need to split itself again.

Planes of existence: There are seven planes of existence. From lowest and densest to highest and least dense, they are: physical/material, etheric/life force, astral/aura, mental/consciousness, spiritual, causal, and divine.

Bodies: Our bodies must be built. Humans have only thus far built bodies on the three densest planes: physical, etheric, and astral. At this stage in our evolution, humans are trying to build a fourth body on the mental plane of consciousness. We only have a starter sheath, which is why people only appear to be fully conscious for brief periods, and such a state is tiring and difficult to maintain.

Magic: Dion Fortune's definition of magic is "the art and science of inducing changes in consciousness in accordance with will." John Michael Greer's definition of magic is "the art and science of participation in the spiritual forces of the cosmos." This differs from prayer, which is speaking with and listening to the divine.

Magical ethics: In this system, it is considered unethical to perform magic, even blessings, on someone or on behalf of someone without their consent. Curses are thought to also curse the caster. Therefore, those who practice blessing magic

for their own spiritual evolution do not perform curses and leave others to their karma.

Human evolution: In this story's view of the world, one of many Western esoteric views, humans are thought to be about halfway through an evolution that stretches from the tiniest microbes at the bottom of the ocean all the way to unimaginable beings that can walk alongside angels. Thus deities who choose to interact with humans tend to be patient ones, so long as you're respectful and polite. Would *you* lose your temper with the puppy who is trying to get your attention by doing tricks?

CHARACTER LIST:

Awariye: main character, a bardic-mage from Helvetica.

Igor: top fighter for the Danubian High King.

Wren: a mage from Helvetica and Awariye's close friend.

Ulbrecht: a warrior king in the central Danubian region that was formerly Austria.

Ceredigion: an older bard who trained Awariye.

Evelyn: Uli's former fiancée.

Sören: Ulbrecht's best friend.

Ingeborg: Ulbrecht's court magician and Wren's mentor.

Cyfrinydd: an old mystic who kept the lantern shrine previously.

Bello: the old mystic's dog, now Wren's.

Marit & Corbi: Wren's former lovers at Diana Monastery.

Mindi: the castle dog trainer.

CHAPTER ONE

AWARIYE



The lodge stood on the border between what was once the Republic of Austria and the Republic of Slovenia. The contended area had seen better days but wasn't as badly off as the Central Danubian region or Helvetica, in the alpine valleys between where Austria and Switzerland once stood. The area itself suffered no direct raids but was in a region where the net of protection from the Danubian High King Ulbrecht the Great was somewhat thin. The risk of insurrection was, therefore, very real.

Pandemonium and blessed warmth greeted me when I opened the door of the lodge and located the owner behind the counter, the one man in the room who kept a sharp eye on the entrance. I approached with a friendly smile, surely in my current state looking quite harmless.

“*Grüezi*,” I said in greeting, identifying myself as someone from Helvetica, then gave one of Ceredigion's many aliases. “I'm looking for an older tradesman, a writer named Ceridor.”

The grumpy old man greeted me in Danu-Slovenian. “*Pozdravljeni*. Had a bard here a couple of days ago. Went by the name of Ceridwen or Ced, if I recall.”

I swallowed down my excitement. That had to have been him: those were the names of Celtic goddesses we learned about at Diana Monastery. Though the last Celtic language spoken here died out two thousand years ago, a bard's sharpest tool was his memory. I knew the legends of Ceridwen and Ced like the back of my hand.

“That’s the one, a mentor of mine,” I replied. “Is he still here? I’d agreed to meet him.”

The man shook his head and a drop of cold sweat trickled down my spine as he rummaged for something below the counter. “He isn’t, but he left a message for someone he said would come looking for him. In a right state he was—injured.”

He produced a folded piece of dirty paper, and as I opened and read it, a stone dropped in my stomach.

*Not quite Kat of Alex,
but I must return to the archer,
or bid you farewell.*

I read over it several times standing there, the chaotic tumult of an evening lodge house falling away. Kat of Alex was clearly referring to Saint Katrin of Alexandria, a Christian martyr who was tortured to death by a Roman emperor. Returning to the archer meant he must get back to our home of Diana Monastery, named after the famed archer of classical legend. My eyes rested on the final line: *or bid me farewell* rather than *and held* a dark meaning. If he didn’t get to Diana Monastery soon and receive medical assistance, he would not only bid *me* farewell, but also this world and his current incarnation.

He’d been attacked and was battered to the point that he could not afford to wait for me to arrive. He had to get through the mountains to our hidden nook of the Alpine forests before the snows locked the passages.

I was in trouble.

“Thank you, *vielen Dank*,” I said to the lodgekeeper, folding the paper and tucking it into my breast pocket. “He did not, by chance, leave any funds for my stay?”

The lodgekeeper shook his head. He didn’t hesitate, but all the same, he could still be lying and have pocketed any money Ceredigion might have left for me and planned to shake me down once I arrived.

I haggled for a place to rest. I had little coinage left, so he put me out in the stables next to the cows and pigs, with only food scraps he'd usually give to the dogs and the last of the broth he'd intended to toss. The scraps were bread crusts and some leathery root vegetables. The stock was warm, and—though old—such stew broth tended to be packed with nutrition. I would survive another night and live to see a new day. I huddled on the straw next to the animals and shook from hunger pains, my stomach protesting that I'd not given it near enough.

That night as I lay in the stables I brainstormed what I would do. The bards from Diana Monastery were few and far between. It wasn't a profession the large monastery in Helvetica usually trained for, since it was so difficult for them to make a living. In fact, it was only done in exceptional cases like mine, where my voice was such that my soul clearly intended to sing in this incarnation and would stop at nothing in order to do so.

What that meant was that aside from Ceredigion, I had no idea if anyone who would help me out was even in the area. This central Danubian region had been destitute from political instability and raids for so long, it wasn't a place where one might find a rich sponsor willing and able to pay for a bard's living expenses. The bards that had trained at Diana Monastery usually sought patronage in richer places: further west, deeper in Helvetica, or further east in the city-state of Vienna.

That I had stayed in such a troubled and blood-soaked place was likely unwise, but having grown up without a home, I didn't want to stray too far from the monastery, even though they'd warned me that they were unwilling to take me back in once I came of age and flew the nest. I'd stopped back several times but had taken care to always make those visits short so as to not be seen to abuse their generosity. And this time, I'd pushed it too far and strained my health to the point that I wasn't sure I could even get back at this rate.

Ceredigion had been my last chance, and now I was left with scarce few options, my stomach and hands empty. As the

night grew colder and the animals huddled close, I pulled my worn blanket tight around me and forced my mind to think.

I prayed to my body to sleep, even though it taxed my energy reserves to truly rest and recharge. If this area was unstable enough that a harmless looking bard like Ceredigion had been violently mugged, then I needed to have my wits about me tomorrow.

I fell asleep to thoughts of my life before things got so hard. Then for the first time in years, I dreamed of my mother leaning over me, telling me that she had to leave, and that I was to go to the front door of the monastery and sing to the monks in the windows until they let me in.

I woke with a start, gasping as one of the cows mooed that she needed milking. Rustling sounds outside indicated someone might be coming to do that soon, so I gathered my pack and made my way back out into the dark, still an hour or so before the dim light of predawn might grace the skies. With most of the rest of my money, I hired a relay horse to take me to a mountain pass that could get me to Diana Monastery, deeper in the alps. I had to hope that this upcoming visit would be seen as an exception to my usual short stay, considering I was at risk of starving.

As my horse, slow but sweet, plodded along through the hungry day, I expended what energy I had to ignore my hunger and keep alert, not knowing how or where Ceredigion had been attacked, since it could very well have happened on the road rather than in town. I consoled myself with my knowledge of history. Bards had gone hungry before, during the bottoming out of previous dark ages, and the current troubled times surely could not last forever. A time would come in which bards would once again be adopted by kings to sing legends in their courts and create stories and art. My profession would flourish anew, marking a transition from tumult and near-constant instability from invasion into what might be considered a form of Middle Ages.

But for Ceredigion to end up on the receiving end of aggravated assault? We were not on the upswing yet, not even close. A bard, thankfully, was not likely to utterly starve to death, even in these times, but many still died young. Often on the roads, skewing the statistics—if you were so hungry you were weakened and only half-awake, an armed mugging could very well leave you dead.

I jolted awake, about to fall off my horse who kept plodding along. Glancing at the path, I realized she was taking me to the castle of the warlord king here in this Danubian region.

“Come, honey, we’re going back this way,” I soothed, guiding her to turn around, though thankfully we hadn’t gone too far. “I’m sure you think you’ll find good food at the capital, *hm?* But we’re going to the stopover lodge at the base of the mountains. I bet they at least have oats for you, my dear.”

Through the cloudy, patient day we plodded along, stopping just for feed and water for the horse, using my last coins for my sweet-natured gal. I was feeling so lightheaded I could faint, but I simply didn’t have it in me to make an animal suffer.

By afternoon we reached the lodge at the base of the mountains, but dark, looming clouds signaled the weather was ominous. I released the horse to the stable keeper, giving her one last friendly pat in thanks, but the mountain was covered in a snow so thick I could barely make out the deep greens of the pines.

The lodgekeeper, a woman, cocked an eyebrow in question at my shabby clothes.

“Madam, *Grüezi*,” I said in greeting.

“*Grüß Gott*,” she replied in the more Austrian manner. “How can I help you?”

“Do you know if the mountain pass is still open?”

Her eyes widened and she looked at me as if I were absolutely crazy. “That pass has been closed for nearly two

weeks now. You'd be lucky to even get through at the southern border this late in the season."

Her words doused me in cold water, and despite all my spiritual training, my vulnerability overwhelmed me and flooded me with shame. In my current state, despite my best efforts, I hadn't been thinking clearly. Of course these mountains would be impassable by now: it was past the winter solstice and even the new year. If Ceredigion had made it through, he would have done so at the southern border just as the lodgekeeper had suggested, right where I'd just come from. Now I didn't have the funds or the physical wherewithal to get back. I had been so stupid.

"You could try singing at the castle," she said when I didn't reply. She crossed her large arms and nodded east.

My brain could barely put thoughts together I was so exhausted. "The local petty king? Could you give me directions?"

"*Nein*," she said firmly. "The High King."

King Ulbrecht. I now needed to approach the castle of the brutal warlord who had conquered and united the central Danubian region, from the border of Helvetica in the west to as far east as the boundaries controlled by the Viennese city-state.

I pulled in a shuddering breath. "*Danke*, madam."

Back out to the stable, seeing as I had no remaining funds on me and I could thus not ask for a rest and a meal, I haggled with the stable keeper and convinced him that once I arrived at the castle, the fee for the horse would be paid. That took some negotiating. Understandably, in my shabby state, I did not look reliable, but at that point I didn't have much choice but to fall on the generosity of a king who might allow me to entertain him for the evening.

Back on the road, I brainstormed. I had one thing left to try.

This region held a story, often talked about by the common people. There were mysterious gods living up in the

mountains, who had been brought there by a mystic. These unnamed gods represented by seven lanterns were said to have aided Ulbrecht the Great in securing this region and establishing a timid and feeble peace that had lasted already several years against long odds.

Though this was something everyday people talked about, as of yet there were no songs written for these gods, nothing yet for bards to carry through the valleys and sing to other warlords. Yet if some divine force had indeed helped High King Ulbrecht conquer this area, they deserved all the songs of this world and more for the sake of this precious peace.

It was a long afternoon's ride to the capital, but maybe I could sing for this Danubian king and offer my services to his lantern mystic.

Feeble hope blooming in my chest, I smiled at the early afternoon sun.

Mystics were strange creatures, people who—unlike the rest of us—had given up everything in their lives in order to live with their gods. They often embraced brutal poverty so that working would not distract them from communion with the divine. Their acts (especially that of the Christian mystics who became martyrs) were sometimes so extreme they were lauded as supernatural and became legends in and of themselves. I would hedge my bets that this mystic was something of the sort. I would ask the king if I could serve him or this lantern mystic of his. I would then sing about this king and his lanterns if said gods wished for it.

I had forgone work in order to preserve my voice, usually singing in lodges for room and board and prioritizing opportunities to sing to potential patrons. This mystic had likely starved in poverty throughout his life in order to serve his gods. In that sense we were kindred spirits, so maybe he would help me, though surely that was where our similarities ended.

I couldn't imagine forsaking everything and choosing such a calling. Even Wren back at the Monastery had been an oddity to me, a young monk about my age whose seemingly

innate spiritual talent led to the instructors educating him on a very theurgic path, reaching upward with all his strength.

The thought of my friend filled me with happiness. I hadn't made it very far as a bard out in the world. Despite years of searching, I'd yet to find a patron, and I'd already sung myself toward vocal-cord pain, which wasn't something bards normally dealt with until much later in life, by which point they'd hopefully have patronage at least, and thus some sort of retirement plan in place that would allow them to reduce their singing yet still survive.

I didn't have that, but I had helped Wren, and that was one of the things I was most proud of. I might not go down in the legends—I was no Merlin, or Taliesin—but if this was it for me, then at least I had that.

As the afternoon on horseback wore on, I fought away despair even as adrenaline coursed through me just to keep me from fainting. I remembered that night many years ago, where Wren's spirit had left his body and the monastery instructors had gone looking for him in the Otherworld. The doctor had pulled me into the room and asked me to sing. All in the monastery knew—as we were spiritual and magical men—that song had the power to entice wayward souls back into the land of the living.

That long night, in which I'd sung from dusk through to the dawn, was an experience that had taught me about my own inner strength. I was now at a flashpoint in my life, plodding over to the capital of a tumultuous and war-torn land with the intent to beseech the graces of a vicious warrior king with the last shreds of my health wrapped around my soul like tattered rags. But if I could sing through that dark night to save my friend, then deep in my heart I knew that I could do anything, so long as my body survived.

As my horse and I got closer to the capital and the mild day wore on into evening, I noticed signs of life getting a bit

better compared to the areas further out. Buildings had been repaired; shared farming areas seemed to be thriving, from what I could tell in their post-harvest state of midwinter. The people in the towns appeared well-fed, enough to have rosy cheeks and not look as gaunt as I would surely find if I leaned over a stream. And there were children running around and playing, which always bode well for the future of a region.

The prosperity spoke well of this king. To have conquered this area and held it for several years was already quite the feat, and for the people to appear to be thriving was very hopeful indeed.

I could respect a king like that, one who protected his people and allowed them to live their lives.

The part of me that held onto sunshine optimism despite my circumstances wondered whether this king was looking for a court bard.

We crested one last hill, and the castle came into view just after a shallow valley. My horse took me the final stretch. At the gate I offered my services, and the messenger returned to let me in.

I relinquished my horse to be returned to the relay station. The messenger informed me that the king and his close fighters and family members were just finishing up dinner, but Ulbrecht was willing to have a bard come and sing and would thus pay to care for the relay horse.

Patting down my clothes, I pulled myself together. With the last of my energy, I followed the guard and strode into the hall with all the pride and dignity my vocation commanded.

“The bard, my king,” the guard announced, and as the room quieted down, I planted my feet.

Inhaling slowly, I summoned magic from the air around me and set my life force billowing through my body, fueling one last blow of force. This was my chance. If this fell through, my goal would become to simply not die by the side of the road.

“Your name, bard?” a member of the dinner party asked.

“My name is Awariye, from the Diana Monastery, in the forests at your border with Helvetica,” I replied, projecting my voice to fill the hall.

The chatter quieted down while I gathered what remained of my resolve. Lungs full, I lifted my eyes and began to sing.

CHAPTER TWO

IGOR



I was seated next to Evelyn as she and Sören attempted to keep their little ones entertained and eating their dinner when I noticed someone being let into the hall. My training kicked in, even though I knew there was a guard and a guard dog on both sides of the door. Amid the din of people talking and plates being removed, the guest announced himself as Awariye of Helvetica.

A few people heard it and looked around while everyone else carried on eating and conversing. What caught my attention was the gasp of the man sitting across the table from me, right next to his lover, Ulbrecht the king. Wren was also from Helvetica, a mage from a monastery there, and from the way he grabbed Ulbrecht's arm and flew to standing, he seemed to know this Awariye.

Following Wren's gaze to a young man about our age in his mid-twenties, my breath caught at his sheer beauty. Then worry suffused my surprise when I scanned his form and noticed how skinny he was beneath his robes and cloak. He was tall, nearly as tall as myself and our warriors, with muted brown hair that held waves and flopped around.

His eyes were of a beautiful shape, but I could not make out their color at this distance. He had high cheek bones and a chiseled jaw, a pert nose that made me want to pinch him and tease, and beautiful, shapely lips. I just wished he didn't have those dark circles under his eyes, and though his bone structure no doubt highlighted it, the worn-out hue of his lean form just made me want to feed him.

Yet despite his evident exhaustion, he planted his feet and straightened his back, puffing his chest out and taking a deep breath, clearly at home in a theatre or on a stage. Though I knew next to nothing about his discipline, this man was clearly a bard. He was the kind of person who could command an entire hall full of courtiers and petty kings, so at home in his own soul that he did not question whether he deserved the honor of attention from our precious Danubian High King.

Projecting to the back of the hall, so powerful he could have been standing right next to us, his voice filled the chamber and took my breath away. The sheer force of it echoing off the stone walls astounded me, and yet he made it look effortless. In just a moment, everyone ceased their conversation to listen to his sung words, rendered with such skill we had all likely never heard someone of this caliber before.

If the man himself was handsome, then the beauty of his voice was divine. Indeed, just sitting in the presence of such artistry seemed to lift me upwards, beyond the common worries of everyday existence and into a black night glittering with stars, in which the distant, still gods watched coldly over us. The imagery conjured in my mind's eye from his singing had me wishing for the warm protection of the lanterns burning elsewhere in the castle.

A rich tenor, if I remembered that term correctly, undulated in an evocation of our mighty king, comparing him to the Winter King who, like ours, had defended his land from invaders. To liken Ulbrecht the Great to King Arthur of Wales was no small compliment. Yet it was richly deserved if my humble opinion were anything to go by, for I had followed Ulbrecht and fought for him for eight years.

Ulbrecht tugged on Wren, who leaned down and whispered in Ulbrecht's ear. I watched as my king brightened in surprise and then joy, and an eager hope filled my chest. If this Awariye was indeed a friend of Wren's, then maybe he would stay for a while, and I might find the chance to meet him and get to know him.

CHAPTER THREE

AWARIYE



When the bards from the last dark age, after the fall of Rome, sang to a brutal warlord and likened him to a righteous king of legend, that was done for a layered, magical purpose. Singing to a vicious warrior and calling him as noble and gracious as King Arthur did not mean the statement was accurate, as it often wasn't. What it did do, however, was challenge the warrior or petty king to consider himself in the light of such a mighty and benevolent High King, which could not only orient his personality toward such heroic aspirations, but also magically align him on the more subtle planes of existence.

And thus I chose a tale from legend to sing to Ulbrecht the Great.

The story was that of the twin dragons, one red and one white, that revealed the young Merlin as a magical being who told the northern Welsh king Vortigern of the coming of Arthur. Merlin had beheld two dragons fighting on Vortigern's land and, rising in the astral planes, had tapped into the divine current which usually is too potent for a human body to bear. Young Myrddin Emrys in Welsh, or Merlinus in Latin, had burst into tears as the divine current touched him, and he had foretold the coming of a great king.

Would that we could have such a great king here two thousand years later, and in such troubled central Danubian lands.

My voice filled the hall with a strength I had not known in months. My life force billowed with fervor and suffused me

with a vitality that was all but impossible given my recent impoverished rations. There were secular bards that focused on their memory techniques and specialized in paid performances, along more theatrical and entertaining lines, but I had been trained at the Diana Monastery of Helvetica, and thus I was also a mage.

Bardic mages were more rare compared to poetic bards who did not combine spirituality with their craft. We who trained ourselves in magic and gave our lives over to the spiritual forces of the world dedicated ourselves to guiding the cascading current of the divine light down into physical manifestation in human society. I not only sang of the virtues of a noble king, but I guided down the spirit of such force and funneled it through myself and into the hall. By means of mythological symbolism, if the audience opened themselves up to that influence and if they were ready, they would be lifted upward toward that divine light.

I had sung to powerful people before and had developed a process. I never dared to look them in the eyes in the beginning, instead sweeping my regard across the hall and bringing their friends, family members, and guests into the story. Casting my gaze over the long table, I had some idea of who the people here might be, based on rumors in Helvetica and the coming-and-going conversations among the everyday people here in what was once western and central Austria.

The first person I recognized was Evelyn. Hers was a story I had heard among the common folk. Evelyn was not only clearly beautiful but joyous, laughing as she struggled to hold onto the little girl in her arms that was doing her darndest to wriggle out of her mother's grasp and come to me. From the dark, wild curls on the little girl, I could tell it must be her father across the table, with an arm slung around each of his boys, who were watching me with surprise. The father, Sören, smirked, bemused that his kids could be so enraptured by Merlin's story.

Sören was Evelyn's husband, and that already pointed out the fact that Ulbrecht was no ordinary king, and his likeness to Arthur among his people was not unfounded.

According to the medieval romances, as opposed to the older Welsh texts that originated closer to the fifth century of the historical Arthur, the Great Bear's queen and his top soldier had fallen in love. In that time, there had been no socially accepted resolution, and due to the fact that Arthur had no heirs, his hard-fought peace did not outlive his death.

But Ulbrecht had found a way to circumvent this potentially devastating challenge to his reign.

Evelyn had been betrothed to Ulbrecht to become his queen, but Ulbrecht's best friend and foster brother, Sören, had fallen in love with her, and Evelyn had felt the same way. Rather than succumb to jealousy, Ulbrecht had allowed them to marry and had not taken a wife.

He'd instead given them to each other, and as such, he already had three potential heirs. It was rumored that Ulbrecht had only taken a fiancée out of duty, and that he had rather always hoped for a husband but knew the pressure for heirs would not allow it.

Evelyn and Sören's marriage was something the people seemed to accept, and if my reading was accurate, I thought the people of this area were more concerned with whether their ruler could defend and protect their homeland rather than the particulars of his sexuality. I'd also not heard a single rumor that Ulbrecht was licentious in his proclivities.

As I came to the end of the tale, when young Merlin the wizard-bard sang his own hymn, prophesying the coming king, I swept my gaze across the audience one last time and then dared to address the end of the table. Ulbrecht had his head cocked toward another man who whispered in his ear, the king's expression one of mirth and delight. He wasn't listening to my story at all, but as I finished with a flourish and everyone else at the table clapped, the king turned smiling eyes on me, and his companion straightened and caught my eye.

Everything else vanished as I zeroed in on the beaming face from another life. "...Wren?"

CHAPTER FOUR

AWARIYE



Wren of Helvetica dashed around the table as I stared in shock. I barely had time to prepare myself before he flew into my arms.

“Awariye!” he exclaimed. “I’ve been dreaming about you—I can’t believe you’re here!”

I couldn’t believe it, either. The jaded part of me wondered whether I was actually crossing the threshold to the Otherworld, seeing a friend in such an unexpected place.

And to find him whispering in the Danubian King’s ear.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as he said the exact same thing.

Wren laughed and pinched me in jest, then pulled back enough to cup my face. “It really is you, Awariye. I have so much to tell you.”

“*Ja*, you do,” I concurred, even as the adrenaline rush came crashing down and worry pressed upon me that I might faint. “Was that really you talking to Ulbrecht...am I in the right place?”

Wren laughed, but his joy popped like a bubble on water when his hands grazed my back and he gasped. “*Why are you so thin?*” he whispered.

“I’ve been singing sparingly to save my voice,” I said softly, not in shame but just to protect my own privacy. “My vocal cords hurt these days, which is a sign of damage. I can’t entertain a crowd for an evening just to get a hot meal. Then I

thought I'd meet up with Ceredigion, but he got mugged on the road, and by the time I got to the lodge, he was already headed back to Diana."

"Which road?" a deep voice demanded.

I looked up to find King Ulbrecht glaring at me, his arms crossed and his expression hard. But I still had Wren in my arms, and thus I couldn't bow to him respectfully.

"It was south of your lands, sir, past the Slovenian border, a day's ride from here," I answered.

He clenched his jaw and nodded, clearly not liking that answer but also not able to directly act on it.

Then his eyes softened as his gaze fell on the man holding me. "Wren dreamed you here. I've already heard of your connection. Welcome, Awariye. Stay the night."

"No, stay the winter," Wren said against my shoulder.

"Thank you, sir," I responded, thrown by this rapid turn of events.

My friend sensed my fatigue and thankfully pulled my arm around his shoulders and helped me out of the hall. I gave him some of my weight as he led me to a back kitchen and into a blessed chair.

A sharp-looking woman with white hair pulled up in a bun peeked in. "Dinner for the guest?"

"I can't," I whispered, in fear that I wouldn't be able to hold it down.

Luckily Wren saw the stress on my face and nodded, squeezing my hand in reassurance. "Just soft bread and some broth, thank you, Sigrid. My friend is also from the monastery—we're not used to eating rich foods."

The woman didn't argue and disappeared into the kitchen, calling a couple minutes later for Wren to come get the food.

"That's Sigrid, you'll get to know her I'm sure. She runs the whole castle. Nothing gets by her," Wren explained as I

drank the hot spiced wine that soothed my throat but startled my stomach.

“I pushed it too far,” I said softly. “I didn’t mean to.”

“You’re all right,” Wren assured me with a soft pat to my shoulder. “It’s winter, time to rest up. I’m sure Uli’s arranging a place for you to sleep as we speak. Eat what you can handle now, take your time, then you can have a bath and a good rest. I’ve heard stories about the bards walking off their bellies when times get lean. You’ll be back to your regular self in a couple of weeks.”

Who was Uli? Either way, I was so grateful for Wren’s optimism that tears burned my eyes. “Thank you.”

“Your voice sounded amazing just now,” he said in awe. “You filled up the whole hall like it was nothing. And to have captured the undivided attention of not just the adults, but the kids! Awariye, you’re coming into your stride.”

I smiled at him, knowing such praise was not given lightly, but the reality of my situation still made me ache. “I can still sing, I just have to preserve it. I can’t work the way I need to...I’ve gone three weeks without singing, and barely speaking. If I can’t do bardic work...I have no other training.”

I stood at a crossroads that had already proven it could drive me into brutal poverty. I’d spent my whole childhood singing with a traveling theater group until my mother was forced to leave me at the monastery in hopes that I would at least be fed. Then after leaving my life as a monk and going into the outside world to seek patronage, like any other bard, I sang over rancorous crowds in community halls to entertain and earn my room and board for the night. But because of such a childhood, I had stressed my vocal cords to the point that it put a deadline on such arduous work, and now despite my decade and a half of magical training, I had no mechanism with which to earn my keep or make a living.

“What brought you here?” Wren asked.

“I hadn’t intended to come,” I answered. “After missing Ceredigion, I tried to get through the mountains and back to

Diana Monastery. The passes were closed. Then I thought to sing to the king and offer to work for him and the elderly mystic who looks after the shrine to the lantern gods. Surely you've heard of him? The common folk believe it was these gods that helped Ulbrecht the Great, that their king was chosen by them."

Wren gave a small, knowing smile, and I recognized a kind of magic in his eyes, that of a person who had dedicated his life to theurgy, of connecting with the divine forces living in the natural world. "I have heard of him, yes. This is how I dreamed you here. I see it now."

I waited, but he didn't elaborate.

Instead, Wren pushed the bread and broth in front of me, so I laughed and dug in. "Tell me what you're doing here while I eat."

But Wren stared off at something unseen as I cautiously slurped down the delicious broth and soaked my bread in it.

"I don't know where to begin, to be honest," he said.

"Who's Uli?" I asked, thinking it was another one of the maintenance staff like Sigrid.

Wren's smile was soft. "Uli is Ulbrecht, but only those close to him use that."

That sent a spark of fear down my spine, and I recalled them leaning close, the king listening as Wren whispered in his ear while I sang. Such a powerful and dangerous man could harm my friend on a whim. "Wren...are you close to him?"

Wren gave a bashful laugh and scratched the back of his neck. "He kept coming up to visit me at the mountain hut before I knew who he was. We fell together, I guess you could say."

"You fell together," I echoed him, the pieces slotting into place, my food forgotten as the enormity of Wren's truth covered us like a thick cloud. "You mean he's taken you as a lover?"

“I am not here against my will, Awariye,” Wren said. “I am still a free citizen of Helvetica. I can leave whenever I choose. Uli found me and was there for me in a vulnerable moment, when I was missing my life back at the monastery fiercely. Then the lanterns...”

Everything stopped. “What do you mean, the lanterns?”

Wren held my gaze. “They led me here. The old mystic you’ve heard of has died. I now guard the shrine in the mountains. I am the mage of the seven lantern gods.”

CHAPTER FIVE

AWARIYE



A wave of vertigo hit me and I reeled, covering my mouth and trying to get the earth to stop spinning.

“Whoa,” Wren squeaked and pulled me into a stabilizing hug. “*Alles okay.*”

“*Danke,*” I managed as my body thankfully course-corrected.

“What do you need right now?” asked Wren.

I considered what I could possibly handle. “A bath—I slept in a stable last night so I didn’t spend the rest of my money before the relay horse north.”

My friend chuckled indulgently. “A bath, and then rest.”

With Wren’s help I made it to a room adjoining the kitchens where Sigrid heated water over a wood stove. She set up a bath for me and added some rosemary for good measure. Wren helped me to strip and scrub myself down first with a sponge and soap in a bucket, then gave me a quick rinse so my dirt and grit wouldn’t immediately spoil the bath.

“I’ll go find you a bed to sleep in tonight,” said Wren with a pat on my shoulder as I settled into the deliciously comfortable tub, content to process Wren’s heavy truth later when I could think more clearly.

“Igor has the guest bedroom, Wren,” said Sigrid.

“Yes, madam?” A man charged into the bathing room, one of the warriors I’d noticed at the dinner table earlier, eating

next to Sören and his kids. He had medium brown hair shorn short, a strong jawline, and powerful physique, but what I immediately noticed was the bandage around one shoulder. He swept the room with soft blue-gray eyes that landed on me and then widened.

“*Entschuldigung*,” he squawked as an apology and took a step back out the door.

“*Kein Problem*,” I reassured him, giving probably a dopey smile at such a handsome man. The tub was high enough to conceal me, and growing up as a theatrical performer, I’d learned to not be bashful about nudity anyway.

“Igor, this is Awariye,” Wren said, waving him back into the room but quickly getting to the point. “He needs a bed for the night, but Sigrid says you’re in the guest room?”

“I can move back to the lodging house,” Igor replied, his voice calm and steady.

Before I could protest ousting him, Sigrid spoke up. “Not while the doctor is tending your shoulder, young man. It’s easier to have you in the castle than trying to hunt you down at the lodge.”

“Awariye can sleep in the bed with us, then,” said Wren.

I leveled tired eyes on my friend. “Who’s us?”

Wren blushed. “I mean with me and Uli.”

Sören passed by in the hallway and quipped, “Uli, Wren is leaving you for the bard.”

“What?” Ulbrecht yipped from further down the hallway.

“I can sleep on the floor,” I said just as Igor said the same thing.

“Sören, don’t make things hard for me!” Wren exclaimed with humor, not realizing how much this stressful conversation was ruining what could have been a relaxing bath.

“You’ll not sleep on the floor with an injured shoulder, Igor,” said Sigrid, her tone brooking no argument. “You and

the bard will share the guest room. The king will have Wren in his bed, and if Wren is happy, then everyone is happy.”

I didn't think my friend was quite expecting the strict old woman to say something so affectionate. Struck silent for a moment, he eventually stammered his thanks. As Wren fumbled through his words I glanced over to Igor.

From the surprised then bashful look in the man's eyes, I surmised his meaning: there was only one bed.

We could be gentlemen and share.

“It's fine, Wren,” I pleaded with him. “I don't mind sharing the guest room with Igor. I'll be okay, and I'll see you in the morning.”

Wren blushed and tried to stall, but the king was already in the doorway with love in his eyes, and once my friend noticed, he gave in.

Blessed silence stretched through the room for a long moment.

“Igor, you'll stay and see our new guest to your room?” Sigrid prompted.

“Yes, madam,” Igor replied immediately.

Closing my eyes, I reached out with my mind and cupped his words in my palm, searching in my memory for the home of that accent. “Vorarlberg?”

His eyes flew wide. He nodded. “*Ja genau*, I'm from the valley west of there.”

“*Hmm.*” I fidgeted in the soothing bath, my body and brain wrung out from exhaustion, but I knew I could find a song from the area and offer it as an olive branch to someone generously sharing his room.

I had been to some of the valleys around there, and a stone dropped in my stomach when I realized why. Back when I had just graduated from the monastery and was new to being a traveling bard, I'd naively delayed seeking out a patron and instead visited some of the most war-torn areas that bordered Helvetica, thinking I could collect songs and folktales where

they might be at risk of dying out. I'd found things much worse than I'd even imagined, with both the people and their stories nearly extinct.

That was where I had seen the hunger stones for the first time.

Whenever a river in this region got low enough to cause famine, the people would carve into the stones of the riverbed at that level to warn the generations in the future, and mark the date along the list of other decades and centuries in which this terrible fate had occurred. The one I had seen had shattered me, a permanent visage marked in my memory. It had simply said, "If you see me, cry."

Then one thought led to another, connecting fluidly like water cascading over riverbed stones, and I remembered what the hunger stones reminded me of in Vorarlberg. Further north into the Danubian plains, at a river that itself was named after the Celtic mother goddess Danu, another stone had been revealed in recent centuries that likely had not been uncovered for thousands of years before that.

It was written in Gaulic, the umbrella language of the continental Celts that had once been the richest civilization Europe had ever known. Their culture and language ran through deep veins in the land, even though the people themselves had been all but obliterated when they suffered genocide at the hands of Julius Caesar, the Roman emperor. Though the tribes of the Celts had been fierce fighters and had thrived for centuries, Caesar had used their differences to pit them against each other to successfully divide and conquer. Had the Celts been able to face the Romans as a united front in the Gallic Wars just a few decades before the birth of Christ, they would have been unstoppable, and the landscape of Europe would be very different today.

The stone revealed a message, written using the Greek alphabet, which was how the continental Celts had rendered Gaulic in the rare occasions they'd needed to write it down. Immediately after word got around of the river dipping low enough to reveal the stone, the message had been picked up by

the bards, and by said bards it was titled “The Hymn of the Conquered”:

*Please,
If it's my death you seek,
Take me away.
And please,
As I'd kill you,
But not your weak ones,
I beg you let them stay.*

That was of course not what had happened. The men had fallen in battle, the boys were murdered, and the women and girls were sold into slavery.

“How about something happier, bard?” Sigrid prompted softly.

I snapped out of my reverie with a gasp. “*Oh nein*, I apologize for singing something so sad. I was just thinking about my travels in the area...”

I chanced a look up at Igor, mortified that I could have brought up horrific memories for him. He was now a full-time fighter on behalf of a warlord on the other side of the mountain range, after all. That did not bode well for his home village. Any community would keep a strong young man if they could. The fact that he was so far away from home could very well mean his home did not exist anymore.

I apologized again. “*Entschuldigung*, Igor.”

It took a long moment for him to meet my eyes, and indeed my song seemed to have sent him somewhere far away and painful. “*Alles okay*,” he replied, his voice hollowed out.

All three of us fell quiet a moment, the feelings that had been evoked so intense I didn't have an answer until they abated at least a little bit.

In shame, I fidgeted around in the bath and hummed a note here or there, searching in my tapped-out mind for memories

of any folk songs from his local area that I could sing instead. I had to believe that the reason I couldn't find any was my own exhaustion, and not the tragic option that these songs no longer existed because the people who sang them had been driven into the night without anyone left to carry on their story.

“There was a song, taught to us by a bard that came through before my village was raided,” said Igor, his tone soft. “His name was Ceredigion.”

Though still surrounded by warm water, a chill ran through me as another synchronicity linked up and more pieces fell into place, delineating the flow of magic through the world. “You remember his name? That must have been some years ago now. Ceredigion was one of the bards that taught me, back when I was training. I was actually planning to meet with him when I wound up here.”

Igor nodded. “I remember his name because of the song he taught me, and because his name was so unusual.”

Indeed, it was a Welsh name; bards that trained in non-Germanic language traditions tended to take a bardic name to represent that, though of course everyone in this region could also sing the Germanic folksongs and epic poems such as the “Nibelungenlied.” I remembered Ceredigion explaining to me that he'd chosen a place name from Wales as his bardic name because it was a hilly region that reminded him of his home in Alpine Austria.

“Which song was it?” I asked, hoping I knew it.

After a pause, I glanced up to find Igor furrowing his brows in a way that was so cute it would have made me chuckle if the moment weren't so heavy.

“He said it was from a tombstone, and it was the oldest song in the West, from Ancient Greece,” said Igor, clearly unsure. “I remember the way he sang it. Translated into German, it put me at ease.”

“The ‘Seikilos Epitaph,’” I answered as recognition thrummed through me. “I know it. And you're right—it was

on a tombstone dated around two hundred years before the birth of the Christ of a Thousand Ages.”

Igor’s expression filled with hope, and I found it hard to tear my gaze away and focus on what I was doing.

Furling my fingers through the water as if I had my Gallic harp with me, I summoned my inner strength and began to sing:

As long as you live, be happy.

Do not grieve at all.

Life’s span is short.

Time exacts the final reckoning.

“That one’s better, young bard,” Sigrid encouraged, and I beamed under her praise.

Igor’s expression had softened, his smile almost disbelieving as he seemed to draw strength from the song. “That’s it. I remember it so clearly now.”

I hoped that recollection did not bring him pain.

“*Danke*,” he thanked me.

“*Bitte bitte*,” I answered in kind. “You do not need to thank me.”

Sigrid saved me by declaring my bath over and soliciting Igor to help me out and into the guest room. The heat from the water stayed in my body long enough for me to get into some clothes Wren had brought for me and into the hallway, hopefully out of earshot of Sigrid.

“Faster, please,” I whispered as Igor helped me along. “I’m about to catch chill.”

I didn’t know how else to describe it, but I could feel it coming, and fear coursed through me.

Igor didn’t comment, but thankfully he listened and hustled us along.

Just as we got into the guest room and a guard dog plopped outside our door, a piercing cold slammed into me like a wall

of water and I groaned. “*Ugh, nnggh.*”

“What is it?” asked Igor.

“Bed, now. Please, I’m so cold.”

This was something I’d experienced on my travels: not just of being unable to keep warm, but of not getting enough nutrition and medicine into my system for my body to be able to maintain a comfortable temperature in a healthy way. These chills *hurt* and became inescapable once they got started, then took a long time to abate. It was impossible to sleep through them.

“*Agh!*” I cried as Igor rushed me to the bed, threw the blankets aside, and allowed me to scramble onto the mattress. Then he covered me with all the layers in the room and slid on top of the bed himself, hugging me from behind to trap the heat in.

“*Danke, nnggh,*” I thanked him and swore between rounds of heaving shivers that made me quake.

“*Alles okay,*” he repeated over and over, squeezing me and forcing the warmth into my chilled limbs.

Blessed comfort began to trickle in oh so slowly, and with that tiny relief, I passed out.

CHAPTER SIX

AWARIYE



“He was groaning like he was in pain, but I couldn’t wake him,” I heard Igor say.

“I came to check on him, and he looked like this, doctor,” said Wren.

I opened my eyes, but I was not in my body. I was floating above my body, my consciousness still attached to physical incarnation by means of a silver string stretching from my solar plexus, the energy center where the sides of my rib cage joined. Indeed, I did look the worse for wear. I’d known I was in trouble because I hadn’t eaten well for a good handful of days. But having not seen a mirror in quite a while, I didn’t know I looked so wrung out and had such dark circles under my eyes.

Then I took in where I was in surprise. Igor was sitting up on the edge of the bed and held me in his lap. He looked up at the elderly doctor next to Wren, Ulbrecht, and Ingeborg with worry on his face. Wren’s mentor Ingeborg was someone I had met previously whenever she’d visited Diana Monastery to see Wren. Now serving as Ulbrecht’s personal magician, she locked bright green eyes on me and gave a smile and a wink, conveying that she could see me but would keep my secret.

The doctor touched my forehead, and I marveled that although I was watching everything from an arm’s length above Igor’s shoulders, I couldn’t feel what was happening to my body.

“He has lapsed into a fever and will likely hallucinate and dehydrate, which could end him if it lasts for too long,” the old doctor said frankly, causing Wren to gasp. “Keep him as hydrated and comfortable as you can. Give him broth, juice, medicinal wine, and water infused with what herbs you have—I will make a list—then come for me when his fever breaks.”

Ulbrecht thanked the old doctor and saw him out while the rest of the party waited quietly for the king to return.

The men were silent a long moment, anticipating that Ingeborg would offer input.

She crossed her arms and nodded at my worn-out body. “I will prepare concoctions if you can get them down him without causing him to choke, Igor. Those of us trained in alchemical processes can create medicines that are mixed with our etheric bodies. When consumed by another, the preparer’s life force can help nourish them. I can teach you, Wren.”

“I’ll do it,” Wren said immediately. “I can stay in bed with him too, Igor. You don’t have to feel like you need to.”

“I don’t mind,” Igor said softly, and I wondered at the kind way he was looking at me, with not just concern but also gentleness.

“I’d caution you on that, Wren,” said Ingeborg. “Anyone who sleeps next to him right now will likely have their life force drained, though someone with the spiritual training one can get from Diana Monastery might be able to prevent it. It depends on how conscious he is on the subtle planes. Considering the state his physical body is in, it might be too much for him to control himself to the point that he wouldn’t drain any life force nearby in an effort to revive and live. I’d think about that carefully, Igor.”

She glanced up at me again, the look in her eyes accessing me, gauging my comprehension. With all my might I tried to shake my head to tell her no, I didn’t want to drain anyone, least of all my precious Wren, or Igor, who was so kind without hardly knowing me. Her eyes lit up and she smiled, so maybe she understood.

“Awariye can have my life force,” Wren asserted, his tan cheeks flushed in worry. “He helped save me during my crisis several years ago when my spirit left my body and the instructors had to go find me in the Otherworld. He sang poems and hymns through the night to lead me home. This is the least I can do; I owe him so much.”

“No,” Ulbrecht said.

Wren whipped around. “That’s not your decision to make —”

“*Nein*, please *Schatz*,” pleaded the king, his tone filled with fear. “What if he hurts you? He’s not awake enough to keep himself from doing it.”

“Uli,” Wren argued, “Awariye is my friend.”

“I can stay with him,” Igor cut in before those two could get to bickering at my bedside when I needed peace and quiet to rest.

Ulbrecht seized on that chance. “Igor is strong—he is my strongest fighter, Wren.”

That got Igor to stop looking at me and snap up to behold his king. Igor’s posture totally changed, from curved around me in concern to puffing up with pride at such an acknowledgment.

I tried to take his tenderness from earlier and reframe it for self-preservation. Igor wasn’t concerned about my health because he cared about me. He just wanted to serve Ulbrecht...right?

But then Igor gazed down at me again, and his countenance once more changed. He held me carefully, and my heart clenched because I could swear it looked like he held me as if I mattered to him.

“Your life force isn’t lost when you give it to him, if Awariye is awake and healthy enough to be able to cycle it back to you,” added Ingeborg. “If he handles this correctly and doesn’t turn vampiric, it will feel like you slept in the cold without enough blankets, the way your body revs up to keep you warm and burns more energy than usual in the process.”

“*Das ist kein Problem,*” said Igor, reassuring her that it would be fine.

“You can do that, Igor,” said Ulbrecht. “It shouldn’t even slow your recovery with your shoulder, though I’ll ask the doctor when he expects you to be fully healed.”

Igor nodded.

Wren brushed the hair out of my face and cupped his palm along my cheek. It made me smile, though I couldn’t feel a thing from up in the air above them.

“Now it’s time to pull him back down, assuming he still wants to come,” said Ingeborg, humor in her tone.

Then Wren gasped, his brown eyes locked right on me. “Awariye! I can see him!”

Ulbrecht and Igor looked in my direction in confusion while Ingeborg smiled with pride at her student and Wren giggled with delight.

“You’ve been watching this whole thing, haven’t you?” said Wren. “Did you understand what the doctor said?”

Again, I tried with all my might, this time to nod, and it must have worked because both Wren and his mentor smiled.

“Igor will stay with you,” said Wren.

“And don’t vampirize him,” Ingeborg warned. “You’ll feel a huge source of life energy nearby, but just let it flow over you and mix with yours. That alone will heal quite a bit and strengthen your life force enough for it to take things from there. Don’t—I repeat—*don’t* pull on that energy. Just let it come.”

I nodded again, then Igor looked up at me, curiosity in his eyes, but he clearly couldn’t see me there.

“Tell him it’s all right with you,” encouraged Ingeborg. “Permission and consent hold great power on the subtle planes.”

Igor swallowed and scanned the area, clearly wishing he could see me but also believing Ingeborg and Wren that I was

there.

“It’s all right,” Igor said. “You can have my...energy.”

I grinned at him not understanding magic but trying so hard. His earnest effort warmed my heart.

Wren told Igor that I had smiled.

“*Genauso*, Awariye,” said Igor, healing me with his kind words. “*Alles okay*. We’ll have a good rest, and you can get better.”

Then Wren reached up to me, both hands latching onto my arm. “Time to reenter your body. You can’t stay out for too long or you might snip the string and leave.”

Poor Igor’s eyes filled with fear, but Wren just smiled and tugged on me. “Ready, Awariye? Let’s go—come here.”

“*Komm*,” Igor said softly, and I smiled at him beckoning me too.

I was certainly wary of getting back inside a body that was so wrung out—that wasn’t going to be fun whatsoever—but I had to admit...I wanted to feel Igor holding me like that. Ever since being left at the monastery by my mother, no one had held me, not aside from the men I’d quickly dallied with before giving up because it bruised my heart to have flings. I’d never had a partner...no one had ever held me like I mattered to them, not since I was very young.

I wanted to know what that felt like. I wanted to feel it again.

Summoning my will for the challenge ahead of me, I steeled my nerves and grabbed Wren’s wrist, nodding at him to keep pulling.

Wren smiled. “Very well. Hang on, here we go.”

He pulled me down.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IGOR



F eeble groans woke me with a start. By the light of the moon through the window slats I caught Awariye trying to get out of bed.

“Need a hand?” I asked so as to not startle him.

“Need to piss,” he slurred with sleepy urgency.

I came around the bed in a flash and helped him down the hall to the lavatory, standing outside the door since the toilet stall was small enough that if he stumbled, he’d just hit the wall.

I helped him back into the room after washing his hands. “Now, time to drink more medicine. Both the doctor and Ingeborg said you should drink an entire glass every time you wake up.”

Awariye growled in frustration. “That’ll just make me have to piss every half hour.”

I shook with quiet laughter at him being grumpy, when in truth it just came out cute.

“Laughing at me,” he said with a playful huff.

“Maybe so,” I agreed.

I sat beside him on the bed and made sure he wasn’t trembling while he held the cup of tea mixed with medicine.

“Could we have some light?” he asked between sips. “I came out of a nightmare.”

“*Natürlich*,” I assured him, getting a candle and lighting it.

In the flickering light, I checked him more closely. He still looked exhausted and a bit haunted, but the clarity in his speech and the look in his eyes told me that he was mentally here, though that might get foggy again with more sleep and medicinal wine.

“Do you want to talk about the nightmare?” I offered gently.

He shook his head, drinking more. “No, it’s all right, thank you. Just a random one, nothing to process. Probably because my mental guards are down when I’m under the influence of these medicines and my body is so focused on healing.”

I nodded agreement, then waited him out when he looked like he was deliberating on something.

“Igor,” he said finally, looking me straight in the eyes. “Why are you being so kind to me?”

My heart jumped into my throat. “Is this all right? I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I don’t know how much you remember; sometimes you’re foggy and you repeat things. Wren offered to stay with you, but Ulbrecht was against it. He worried you might pull life force from Wren, so I offered since I’m big and strong as we all know.”

I left out the part how attracted I was to him, how his beauty and the gentle heart that shone through even during his illness made me want to stay close and help him regain his strength.

That made him giggle and popped the tension. “I remember that much. At the moment I’m thinking clearly. This medicine seems to be working, but I hate that it messes with my cognition.”

“At least it’s working; you’ve really improved,” I concurred, relieved as he grew stronger by the day.

Awariye nodded. “If I make it through this and recover my health, then I’ll know why. At the monastery, we study the western concept of the higher soul, which is one’s immortal soul that survives from life to life. We do magical practices that work to bring the lower self, the human incarnate, and the

higher soul together. I know mine is close when I sing, especially ever since the instructors at the monastery taught me how to use magic and spiritual force to sing up the planes and to the gods.”

“You think your higher soul wants you to keep living so you can continue to sing,” I surmised.

Awariye slurped the last bit and handed me the empty cup as proof. Rather than letting him off the hook after the medicinal tea, I then poured him a cup of wine mixed with more herbs. He sent me a look, clearly not wanting to keep drinking, but he took the cup and didn’t argue, knowing these orders came from the doctor and not from me. After this would be a drink of water, then he could sleep. And when next his bladder woke him, we’d get up and do this again.

“It’ll clearly be a sign that I’m to sing through this lifetime, even with my spent vocal cords. I can’t remember if I’ve told you, but the reason I wound up in this mess is because I was foregoing work to spare myself, after singing my whole life and getting my throat into a state where I’m now in pain if I push it. I might have nodes on my vocal cords, which will only get worse if I’m not careful.”

That broke my heart. “You said something along those lines, but not that much detail. Now I understand. Thank you for telling me.”

He leaned against me, and I leaned back, like we were friends sitting together at a tavern in town, having some drinks and a chat. I wanted to be that friend to him, wanted to mean something to him. I already knew he meant something very special to me.

“So that’s what I’ll do,” he said. “I’ll keep singing. I don’t envy my future incarnation either, as a woman in a dark age. Our tradition holds that we go back and forth, alternating male-female between lives. To be a woman whose higher soul wishes for her to sing her entire life will require a constant struggle to maintain her safety. I don’t remember my parents much from the traveling theater group I grew up in, but it clearly wasn’t easy, and we lived in poverty.”

“If I’m a woman next time, then I hope the Danubian king has an archer’s league that takes females,” I said.

“To be fair, a warrior’s soul might not adhere to the alternating genders premise, or your lives spent as a woman in between fighting might be for the sake of getting a break before you head back into battle.”

A woman’s life was hardly a break, but I nodded that I was following him.

Awariye drooped next to me. “I’m fading again, but I want to keep talking to you. I know I’ve asked you before—it’s on the edge of my memory—but you don’t have a lover, right? I’m not sleeping in bed with you and dreaming about you when you have a woman or a man out there waiting for you, am I?”

“*Nein*,” I confirmed. “I told you about Kristoff before, but it was while you were so disoriented from the medicine. He was my best friend, my lover, and my shield mate. He died a couple of years ago in battle, and he is the reason I now believe in the Unseen. You offered to help me learn how to pray, to connect to the gods he believed in. But I haven’t had anyone since then. I believe he would want me to, and I’ve wanted to, but I haven’t found anyone yet.”

“I remember now, yes. I’m so sorry about Kristoff.”

“It’s all right. And you?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Bards can’t afford families, not unless they strike it lucky and land a generous patron. I’ve never wanted a wife and children. I’m gay, like Wren. Had a couple of quick affairs while training at the monastery, but nothing ever stuck. Flings, sure, but not partners.”

I wanted to try something with him. I wanted him to stay the winter, but all of that could wait. First he had to recover, so we could have more of these conversations, and so I could confirm that he was remembering them around the medication.

One last trip to the lavatory and then we piled into bed again. I lay on my back and my chest ached with longing when he so easily curled against me and dropped off. I lay awake a

while, just listening to him breathe, praying to the empty room that his beautiful light would remain in this world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AWARIYE



I passed in and out of consciousness. Countless times I remembered waking in pain only to realize it was just my bladder screeching at me. Igor helped me get up and each time he insisted I drink the glass that was prepared for me by Ingeborg and Wren all the way down.

“I know,” I croaked, my throat parched even though I felt like all I was doing was drinking, peeing, and sleeping. “I remember.”

“That’s good,” said Igor; even in the candlelight his eyes were bright with hope. “I’ve been having to remind you, but if you remember now, that’s a sign you’re getting better.”

I drank down the medicinal tea, recognizing not just the handful of herbs, but Wren’s life force also, a golden glitter that tasted like the sugar crystals on top of a pie, crunchy and sweet. I felt like garbage still, but I did feel a bit better. Slightly less potent garbage was definitely a good sign.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Your fever broke two days ago,” said Igor, a bit more worry in his voice now that I had probably just repeated a question whose answer I kept forgetting.

Then it was back down, onto the bed that was soft, but I longed for the strength to get up and around and eat solid food. Igor pulled the blanket over me, tucking it into my sides. I could tell while sleeping that he was there, always there, either spooned behind me or at my side. This man had given of himself in ways I couldn’t possibly understand, having never

received such generosity before from someone not related to me.

He'd been quite the gentleman also, to give me my privacy by means of the blanket around me and then hugging me through that. This was a good thing, considering if I could more directly feel his body, then I would start getting carried away with other ideas. If I could feel the contours of those muscles, the hair on his arms and legs, and—bless me—his cock nestled up against my bum, I wouldn't be able to think about much of anything else.

Igor leaned over me with affection in his eyes. He reached up and brushed my surely wild hair away from my forehead. “Still awake? You've been dropping off to sleep as soon as you drink the medicine.”

I would fall asleep soon, I could tell. But I had to air some things out so I would have something soothing to occupy my dreams.

“Why are you so kind to me?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

Igor looked sad, his brows furrowing together. “You keep asking that. *Warum*—why—is this wrong?”

I shook my head. “No—I love it. I just...you don't know me from some stranger on the street. I've never had anyone be so kind to me, not since my parents when I was really little.”

The instructors at the monastery had certainly raised me up, but they were hardly parents; more like teachers who were fair to me and invested their time but never let their emotions get involved.

“Wren loves you,” said Igor gently, still caressing my hair.

I nodded, smiling sleepily. “I love him too. We're friends from way back.” Igor's smile held such gentleness in it, it made me ache. “But you don't know me, Igor. Why are you being so kind to me?”

His hand stilled as he deliberated his answer. “Can you blame me?” he finally said, voice soft as a whisper. “I have a

beautiful man in my bed, and I'm in a position to help him return to health, give him something he needs."

I held back from reading further into his words, even though I really, really wanted to. "That must be rare, *hm?*"

"It's a first for me since Kristoff," he replied easily. "I will remember this forever."

I warmed at his honesty, then reached up and cupped his cheek in my palm. His stubble scraped my skin and thrilled me. I wanted to feel that stubble against my lips. I wanted to feel it brushing my chest, my stomach, the insides of my thighs.

Igor's eyes widened in surprise as I petted his face somewhat awkwardly, but I wanted to touch him so badly I didn't care. Then he melted and smiled down at me, indulgence in his gaze that melted me too.

"You're so sweet, Awariye," said Igor, and I smiled at the way my name bumbled around in his mouth, like he'd been practicing saying it, but it still felt foreign to him.

I skated my fingertips down his jaw and neck to his chest, where I clenched my fist in his linen tunic. "I don't want to sleep now," I complained, fading fast. "I want to talk to you."

Igor chuckled with his whole body, rumbling deep in his chest and grinning with mirth. "Sleep for now. When you feel better we can talk more."

But my heart forced me to say more. I couldn't bear to keep this inside. "Thank you for everything you've done for me, Igor. I feel so safe in your arms."

It took a moment for him to reply, and I was shy enough about it I couldn't look up and check his face. Then he tightened his arms around me and hugged me tight. "Thank you, Awariye. Don't worry, I will stay. Sleep now."

He left the candle going, and as I lost my grip on consciousness and sunk into the bed, boneless, I felt him wrap around me and kiss my hair. Begging my mind to remember that kiss, I dropped off.

CHAPTER NINE

IGOR



Down the hall from our room, I heard the joyful tinkling of laughter and recognized Awariye and Wren teasing each other. Just the sound of their delight lifted the heavy worry in my chest over the warm winter and what that might mean in terms of border raids. Pushing that thought aside for now, I rapped my knuckles on the door and went in, wanting to smile and laugh with them if I could.

Sigrid was changing the bedding, so I moved over to help her and caught sight of Wren and Awariye off to the side. Awariye looked exhausted but happy, leaning against Wren with his head tilted onto his friend's shoulder. The two held hands, their fingers interweaving. Wren was telling some story about the stodgy instructors at the monastery and how the younger monks would poke fun.

I watched how the two friends loved and adored each other, and something clicked into place that I'd taken notice of the past few weeks with Awariye here. Ulbrecht, my king, whom I watched like a hawk and loved with every part of my being, had also taken notice of things like this and would watch for a long time, never saying anything. It was no secret that Ulbrecht was absolutely, wholly in love with Wren. To see Wren so ecstatic to have Awariye here, and being so close with him, must bring some inner conflict to my king. Ulbrecht surely wanted his lover happy, and yet these intimate gestures between the two monks might make him wonder, or at least the thought must cross his mind, whether he should step aside.

At that moment, Ulbrecht came into the room, but unlike me, who still hesitated in front of them, not wanting to intrude and instead helping Sigrid with the bedding, Ulbrecht settled on the bench next to his lover and draped an arm around Wren's shoulders. The two monks allowed it easily, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"We're just having a bit of fun chatting," said Wren, "plus Awariye's had both the medicine and the medicinal wine..."

That explained his pink cheeks and bubbling glee. Rather than helping Sigrid, I had to keep moving out of her way, I was so entranced.

"See, there he is, Wren," Awariye gestured to me, but the movement was loopy and uncoordinated. "I told you he's real."

Wren laughed. "Igor? Yes, he is real, you silly thing."

I quirked a brow up in question, crossing my arms and planting my feet with a look that said *Did you forget I exist?*

Awariye's mouth stretched into a smile and his eyes shone with such mirth that I could not help but echo it back to him. "You see, Igor, at the monastery, we trained to hold certain images in our minds as we fell asleep, so the subconscious has a symbol to ponder and work on while we rest."

Wren perked up at that, going nerdy. "*Ach!* Yes, indeed. For those of us doing more advanced training, we go through a long system of breathing exercises before bed, pulling life force into certain energy centers in our body. Then we review the day's events in reverse order, which helps the immortal soul process the current incarnation and makes things easier between lives. *Then* we focus on a symbolic image as we drop off to sleep. But what does that have to do with Igor?"

Awariye waved his free hand like *wait your turn, I'll get there*. "There are many different images one can use to drop off to sleep. Care to name some, Wren?"

I smiled at Awariye indulging his bookish comrade. Wren gladly jumped in, bouncing in his seat. I caught Ulbrecht

smiling privately to himself at Wren's enthusiasm, rubbing his palm on Wren's thigh in encouragement.

"Some eastern traditions have practitioners imagine a lotus blossom blooming within their bodies as they drop off to sleep. It's a metaphor for the unfolding of their enlightenment," Wren explained. "Our western tradition has quite a few. One is to imagine the sun shining over water. It's a metaphor for the One Life, the Absolute or the Manifest, awakening the Unmanifest from within the cauldron of Annwfn, at the dawn of each Cosmic Day."

I glanced at Ulbrecht and found him looking at me, a perplexed expression that likely mirrored my own. Those two had clearly gone off into the woods and left us behind, but we didn't have it in us to tame their joy.

"And another one we use is to imagine our higher souls with us," said Awariye. "As larger humans nearby as we hand over our consciousness and succumb to sleep."

"Well, only some branches of our tradition hold that our higher souls are humanoid, but yes..." Wren trailed off.

"*Or...*" Awariye interjected. "If you're a lonely bard on your travels, you can take that exercise and instead imagine a partner in the bed with you, and *that's* why I keep getting startled when I wake up and Igor is actually there."

There was a beat of silence, and then everyone in the room burst into giggles, Sigrid included.

Awariye sobered first, furrowing his brows with a memory clearly dimmed at the moment by all the medicines rushing through his system. "But you have a lover, don't you? And yet, there's something I never seem to remember..."

As Sigrid bundled up the last of the bedding and carried it out, waving me off when I offered assistance, I came to stand in front of my beautiful bard and knelt at his feet to look up at him. "You remember because we've talked about him a couple of times before, but always when you wake in the night and your tired mind might have sifted the information elsewhere in favor of your healing."

As if on the edge of that memory, making contact with the emotions associated with it, even if the information was still suppressed, Awariye's skin turned blotchy around his eyes as they filled with tears, red-rimmed.

"He was my lover, my best friend, and my shield mate," I supplied.

Ulbrecht drew in a heavy breath. "Kristoff. By the light of heaven, we all miss him. He was a good fighter; you two were unstoppable together. Sören was always saying how Igor and Kristoff reminded him of the way he and I fight so well together."

My king's statements filled me with pride and power, remembering the strength Kristoff had always given to me and I to him. What we'd shared had fueled us both, had made us men. I was as strong as I could be today thanks to him, and I hoped he carried my love for him into the beyond. Just in talking about him, I could see his smile and hear his laugh, his dark red hair flying wild and his brown eyes twinkling with delight.

But now Awariye's eyes spilled over with tears, and I could not let him be in pain. Releasing Wren's hand, Awariye beckoned to me, and I went to him, leaning in so he could hug me. He spread his knees apart and I moved in even closer, my head against his chest as we wrapped our arms around each other.

"I'm so sorry, Igor," said Wren as Awariye sniffled and cried into my hair, resting his cheek against the top of my head.

"It's all right," I answered truthfully, because it was. "Kristoff is the reason I now believe in the Unseen."

For a moment I relived those memories, and thankfully my king spoke for me. "That's right. You said his spirit stayed close to you for a couple of battles because he wanted to make sure you weren't leaving your back open, expecting him to be there. That was why I had you come closer to me. Even though it's an unusual formation, with Sören at my side and

now you at my back it still works. Though that's what got you injured this last time."

"And also why I don't regret it," I replied. I would die for Ulbrecht, but the harder struggle was to keep living for him, to keep this king alive through such bloodshed.

Awariye had calmed somewhat, no longer trembling as his emotions rolled through him. Yet still I held him close, not wanting our embrace to end.

"Kristoff would have loved you," I told him softly.

"One day, in the beyond, I hope to meet him," answered my sweet bard.

"There will be time between lives to reconnect with your loved ones," added Wren.

"And if he has gone ahead to his next life, then I await the chance to fight with him again," said Ulbrecht.

I felt Awariye slump against me, his weight getting heavy as the moment ended.

"How about a nap?" I suggested. "Fresh blankets on the bed sound nice."

Wren and Ulbrecht stood, Wren catching his lover's elbow. "What are you up to now, Uli? Shall I go check on the lanterns?"

In reply, Ulbrecht stooped and in a flash hauled Wren over his shoulder and carried him off to a chorus of surprised squawking.

Awariye and I had both jumped at the sudden change of events and stared in shock, but as the door closed, Awariye looked down at me with fire in his eyes.

"I could give that to you, if you wanted," he offered, sending a bolt of desire through me. "Ulbrecht tells Wren he loves the ache in his muscles from getting fucked. If you want me to fuck you, to have you feel me when I'm not there..."

I stared at him in wonder. It had been so long since I'd felt a lover's touch, and holding Awariye as he slept for two weeks

had brought home to me how lonely I was. I had been hiding that realization from myself.

“And you?” I asked softly. “You could have me, but could I also have you?”

He smiled gently, locked onto me, and I preened under his attention. “Sure. You can have me also.”

Before I could ask when or inquire as to his health to get an idea of a time to come soon, his face drained of color and his eyes widened in shock. “I did not mean to share such intimate information about the king.”

I shook my head. “Everything you tell me stays secret. I know that you and Wren talk. You’re close friends. To be honest, Wren is isolated here, in completely new surroundings, right after losing everything from his life before at the monastery. I’m so glad he has you for the winter. Though he puts on a brave face, we could all tell he was struggling. I could see that Ulbrecht was distracted and worried about him, stressed that Wren wouldn’t like it here.”

Awariye ran his fingers through my hair, then leaned down enough to kiss my forehead, making me close my eyes. It was a return of the caresses I’d give him as he drifted away into sleep.

Nothing more was said. Awariye got up and his fatigue was apparent. I stood nearby as he wobbled around, brushing his teeth and using the facilities down the hall. By the time he slid under the fresh sheets, he looked utterly exhausted.

He flopped onto his pillow, the beautiful waves of his hair splaying out a bit and tempting me to comb my fingers through it. I settled alongside, propped up on an elbow and above the blankets for the time being since I tended to overheat. With practiced movements we fit against each other, Awariye’s eyelids already shuttering as he struggled to stay awake.

“I wish you could travel with me, when I go,” he whispered. “You could be my guard. We could stay together.

But I would never dream of asking you to choose me over Ulbrecht, not to mention I can barely afford to feed myself.”

I cupped his cheek and kissed his brow, just a peck. “I will not leave my king, not until we have held this ground and earned a lasting peace. But in those days of peace, if they should come, I will go with you. Even when I am not there, my heart will be at your side, sweet bard. You have reminded me of the love that Kristoff taught me how to hold and give, my Awariye.”

That seemed to heal him. “Thank you,” he whispered as he drifted off.

CHAPTER TEN

AWARIYE



Something licked my hand, and I pried my eyes open, feeling surprisingly well rested and eager to get out of bed.

The world's goofiest-looking dog slathered my hand with kisses. His eyes bugged out a bit from his wrinkled face and his forearms and shoulders were spotted like a cow. He was very large, like one of those Great Danes from historic records, but clearly mixed with all kinds of other things.

"Leave him alone, Bello," Wren whispered from behind me.

That tickled me and I giggled, my shoulders shaking.

Wren leaned over me, mirth in his eyes. "Sorry, did he wake you? He wants to come up on the bed. Bello behaves himself around Mindi, the trainer. But when it's just me, he's back to being a menace."

"He can come up here if he's not dirty," I offered.

"He shouldn't be," Wren said, though his tone was unsure. "He carries the little princess around on his back all the time."

One tap on the bed and my arms filled with a gigantic dog.

"Bello!" Wren shouted as I shrieked and tried to hold back the wild thing from utterly clobbering me.

We finally got him to settle down and by then I was well awake.

I wanted to get up and have an active day before I crashed again, so Wren stayed nearby in case I got dizzy while I

washed up quick. We had a nice breakfast of warm *Müsli* in the kitchen, chit-chatting about the monastery but not getting deep into things with so many people nearby who could overhear.

“Let me check with Ingeborg,” said Wren as I finished eating. “She might have another round of medicine for you.”

I waited while he went looking for her, gathering my energy around me and relishing in my increased health.

Wren’s mentor came in with a cup ornate enough to remind me of the grail legends. Her sharp green eyes speared me to my seat. “Can you hold down something a bit stronger?”

“Yes, madam,” I replied and committed myself.

I turned on the bench to face her squarely, planting my feet flat on the floor so as to ground myself in the life force of the planet.

“Should I bless it first?” I asked as she held out the cup in both her hands, she too facing me squarely and with attention.

“Not this time. Our traditions are different enough they may counteract each other. But your timing is good. By you sleeping through the last two weeks, I was able to harvest the mint on the full moon. Now, drink it down all in one go.”

I did so, cupping my hands around the glass that now appeared in my astral vision as a cauldron. As I drank her medicinal potion, I had an experience that taught me what the alchemists must have meant when they referred to elixir.

A dark forest rushed in around me and I heard the crisp voices of the trees as the wind rustled their leaves, sifting through their thoughts. An owl hooted in the distance. The soil was damp between my toes, the air wet from a recent rain that still hung on the branches and dripped always out of sight when I blinked. Another breath in and I felt as if I were growing taller and wider, driving my feet deeper into the earth.

“Come back now,” a voice said, but in it I felt a hand grab my tunic and pull.

Wrenched back into the castle kitchen, I pitched forward and grabbed Wren's forearms when he steadied me with a "*Hoppala*, easy there."

"That...wow," I gushed, locking gazes with Wren's mentor, no doubt in my mind now how she had come to her position as the court magician to the Danubian High King. Ingeborg's smile grew, as if she knew what I had experienced.

Her remedy of medicinal herbs had routed me firmly in my body and the physical world, after my consciousness had wandered the astral plane in and out of dreaming for a good two weeks, starting with my fever. Neither of us would say this aloud, however. As practitioners, we knew very well that one of the most important magical virtues was silence. Speaking about a working or spell could diffuse its potency.

"Can I show him the lanterns?" Wren asked his mentor, and I knew why: these new gods were said to inspire visions.

"An introduction should be fine, but nothing more than prayers today," she warned. "Wise to not get lost in your head while you continue to recover."

"*Vielen Dank*, madam." I bowed my head in thanks.

She patted my shoulder, and I almost felt that forest return in my mind's eye, like the essence of it surrounded her, as if her spirit lived there even as she walked in the human world.

Once she left, Wren smiled down at me. "Want to meet them?"

"The lantern gods?" I asked, anticipation running through me.

Wren nodded, his smile turning wicked. "Let's go."

Wren led me through the winding hallways of a castle he explained had only been an outpost when it was built centuries ago, not a place where a king would make his mainstay. But Ulbrecht the Great, brutal and fierce as a warrior, was not a

typical king in terms of enjoying luxury. Instead, he'd set up house here because it was the closest one to the border where he was currently having the most trouble. Quite practical, I thought.

As we turned down a narrow hallway I could feel a presence that weighed on me, forcing me to take notice. Wren straightened and cut a brisk pace in anticipation. I knew this must be them, these lantern gods that had helped a warrior conquer this area and become Ulbrecht the Great.

“Here we are,” whispered Wren.

Large wood doors stood propped open to reveal a private sanctuary with slatted windows and a high ceiling. On a large wooden table, surrounded by cushioned kneeling platforms for prayer, seven bowls burned in seven lanterns.

“I can normally leave the bowls uncovered, but the draft has been strong lately, and I don't want any to blow out,” Wren explained softly.

He guided me off to the side to wash my hands under a faucet. The water was frigid, surely straight from the well and only piped in through an outside wall. I felt my etheric body cleansed in the cold water, knowing this was why the ancients had always washed their hands and often faces and even feet before approaching the gods, in hopes of not only signifying respect via hygiene, but also being able to more closely connect through etheric force.

The lanterns were placed in a formation that reminded me of divine power cascading down the planes into the physical world: two sets of three alongside, then one marking the point of contact with the material plane.

“This is Awariye; he's a bard,” Wren said. “He studied at the same monastery I did—Diana in Helvetica. You might recognize his magic; it surely feels similar.”

He fell silent and I closed my eyes, focusing on that feeling of a large consciousness present in the room. It sent a sensation skittering over my life force, that of being watched, pricking my nerve endings and sending goose bumps

everywhere. As the hair stood up on the back of my neck, I recognized a feeling of what I could only describe as that of pagan gods: neither good nor bad by human standards, since they did not follow human morality. Like the forces of nature, they were simply wild. Terrifying, dangerous, powerful, and wild.

I listened, my eyes hooded though not completely closed, since my mind tended to wander in thought when I had no visual stimuli. The lanterns bled and stretched through my eyelashes. I held still and let them glance over me if they so chose, though I did not feel the presence of consciousness in the chapel change.

As a bard, on the rarest of occasions when I sang outside, especially at a festival with the community out and dancing, a god might tear open the sky for the briefest of moments and take note of the celebrations, a quick smile sent down, and maybe a wink. The times it had happened to me I had been struck silent for that flash, then had to bumble my way into the next lines and catch up with the musicians. It was like suddenly being brought dangerously close to a flame—a popper or firecracker going off too close and whizzing by. That level of powerful consciousness could not be experienced directly by a human at anything close to full power; their body would explode, or they would lose their minds.

“Maybe say a word or two?” Wren suggested softly.

I nodded and considered my words, speaking deliberately and not allowing myself to babble.

“My name is Awariye. I was raised in a traveling theatre group. I remember being loved until things got bad, and my mother was forced to leave me at Diana Monastery. She likely sold herself into slavery after that; I never heard from her again.”

My friend squeezed my hand in sympathy, though Wren’s story was much sadder. He had no memory whatsoever of his family, just of wandering the streets until Ingeborg, a traveling mage woman back then, had picked him up and let him tag

along with her before dropping him off at Diana Monastery so he could receive formal training.

I swallowed and considered how to articulate the next part. “I’m now a wandering bard looking for a patron. I’ve had trouble making a living because my vocal cords are wrung out from singing so much growing up. They hurt when I strain to sing over crowds. I get hoarse quickly and have to rest for days afterward. Sometimes I lose my voice entirely, or it rattles.”

“*Oh nein,*” said Wren softly in dismay.

I shook my head for him to not worry, then focused back on the gods, their firelight commanding my attention.

“If what I am is enough,” I began as inspiration moved me, “I could sing for you. Please let me know; I would be honored to. Thank you.”

Then as was only polite, I held quiet and listened for as long as I had just spoken, careful to honor their time and thoughts just as much as my own.

I listened quietly, then heeding Ingeborg’s warning to not get too far into a spiritual state while my body recovered, I thanked the gods one last time, then pulled out of that mental awareness and fully opened my eyes.

“Maybe just a little something,” Wren put forth, and I smiled at him immediately asking for a song to these strange and unknown gods he had so recently and quickly grown close to.

“How do I know they want to hear me?” I asked since I clearly wasn’t as connected to them as Wren was. Being bardic, I had prayed mostly to the deities I’d met as a young monk, who led me on this winding path. But I of course gave offerings and had memorized songs for the pantheons now worshipped in these Danubian lands, including monotheistic and polytheistic faiths.

“I can ask,” Wren offered, then reached into the cupboard by the central table and pulled out a deck of cards.

I smiled at the tool of oracular divination familiar to me from Diana Monastery. This particular one was based on trees, and could even be practiced with sticks, if you had one from each kind of tree. Toss them on the ground, and you'd tell whether or not they were upright through the use of notches. It was just as effective as shuffling cards.

Wren held the deck to his solar plexus and closed his eyes a quick second. If I knew him, he was greeting the oracle mentally. Any mage lucky enough had more than just a deck of cards and his own intuition to bring to bear when he divined. A fortunate mage also had a guide, someone on the other side of material existence willing to help him.

Since it was a simple *Ja/Nein* question, he drew only one card and placed it face-up on the table. We both registered the card at the same time and laughed.

“Upright Beech tree,” I read aloud.

“Sounds like they want to hear something,” added Wren.

Beeches were one of the most common trees in Central Europe; to pull one from the deck made for a resounding yes.

Humming up and down some scales to warm up my voice, I pondered something respectful but not too long, then thought of just the thing. Planting my feet and straightening my posture, I inhaled and sang:

To thee, the blessed gods, I pray.

Thank you for your thoughts and the rain.

The stone chapel wasn't made for acoustics, though I hadn't expected it to be, this far out from the nearest civilization. But it carried my voice well enough, a humble offering to the power that already brimmed in this space.

Wren snapped out of his pensive, listening attitude, and I held back a giggle at him so clearly expecting a longer song and being surprised at the short ditty. “I liked that!”

I gave a shrug. “It's a prayer I came up with.”

Wren's expression became wistful. “You should hear Uli's story of how he came to power. If these gods want you to sing

for them, you could carry their story along with Uli's everywhere, Awariye."

I nodded, for indeed I could. We weren't the deciders, however. We would need to wait for the gods to find a way to speak to us and convey their will before I sang about them and their king.

"Now that I'm up and walking around, I need to see the natural world," I said.

Wren nodded, then closed his eyes for a long moment, bidding the gods farewell. Once done, he looped an arm through mine and led me outside. "I'm sure you can find inspiration for your songs once we're in the open air."

I only had the tattered rags I'd brought with me, having sold everything else off, so Wren bundled me up in his coats and then piled on Ulbrecht's things for us to head outdoors. The fact that my friend was now lovers with a powerful warlord still hadn't fully sunk in, but as he wrapped a blanket embroidered with the Danubian dragon over his shoulders, that truth stared me in the face yet again.

"I'm happy for you, but I can't believe you're with Ulbrecht..." I trailed off.

Wren blushed, though the chilly air surely contributed. "And you're cuddling with his top fighter. You can kick Igor out anytime you want, Awariye. You're my guest; that bed is yours."

I thought about the handsome man who had taken care of me when I'd been delirious from fever, helping me get to the restroom in the middle of the night and holding me for two weeks. I had only snippets of memories from that time, but I could swear I'd felt his hardness a couple of mornings as he spooned me from behind. I just hoped that wasn't my subconscious cooking up steamy dreams that weren't real.

Wren held a question in his eyes, but I shrugged because I didn't know where Igor and I stood at all.

"I want him to stay in my bed, but he might opt to sleep in the lodge house now that I don't really need him there helping me. I wish I knew what he thought of me...I've been recovering, sure, but I've also been dreaming about us sleeping together as lovers," I said softly. Just voicing this longing and uncertainty aloud made me ache.

Wren squeezed my arm. "Igor is very sweet, Awariye. If you want him there, I hope he stays."

"I do, too."

We walked in silence a while, circling the castle and taking advantage of its ability to block the cold wind.

In the distance we could hear men's voices and feel vibrations on the ground from their running. Wren and I slowed as we were just about to turn the corner where they would come into view. We didn't want to distract anyone from their training.

Wren hummed and I quirked an eyebrow up in question at his mirthful tone. My friend's grin was all too pleased, mischief lighting up his eyes.

"Want to do a review of our training while you're here?" he offered. "It's always a good time to do drills on exercises from the monastery—the dark months are perfect for it!"

I laughed, definitely seeing that he wanted me here for the winter badly enough that he was willing to mentor me. "Twist my arm, why don't you? Of course I'm game, though you will have to keep up with my bardic diaphragmatic exercises."

We ran through our breathing exercises and filled the cauldrons in our bodies along the mid-line, which was where the traditions fostered at the monastery trained to channel the life force. My cauldrons felt pretty empty, to the point where I could barely feel them there, especially the earthen current of vitality and healing. I would need to pay close attention, to refill things slowly as I recovered, so I didn't strain the energy flows and my nervous system.

What responded immediately, however, was my solar plexus, glittering with white light. I pressed my right palm over it, and even Wren noticed in his astral vision and yipped in delighted surprise. Cupping both hands over the juncture where both sides of my rib cage met, I smiled with pleased contentment as my solar plexus sputtered and sprayed colors on the astral plane, like a sparkler on New Year's Eve.

It made sense that my cauldrons were drained from my health issues, but it also made sense that my solar plexus would aggressively try to recover as soon as it could. In magical terms, it was the portal of subtle energies into the body. Breathing white light, the color of balanced spirit, through one's solar plexus brought one's higher self closer to them. For us bards, it was an especially active place, because the solar plexus rested on the diaphragm like a cow lounging in a field, and we loved our deep diaphragmatic breathing.

A large man rounded the corner with his arms full and nearly ran into us. My breath caught when suddenly Igor was standing right in front of me.

Before I could stop gawping and close my mouth, Igor smiled and said, "*Hallo*, Songbird."

"Songbird?" inquired Wren.

Igor looked bashful and glanced my way. "Awariye has started humming while he dreams, like a songbird trying to sing while asleep."

"*Awww*," Wren cooed, hooking his arm through mine as my cheeks burned. "Awariye, that sounds just like you."

"If I'm a songbird, then you're *kuschelig*, Igor," I quipped back playfully.

Wren laughed. "Cuddly, huh, Igor?"

Igor's cheeks were as red as mine felt. "It's good to see you outside. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Thanks to you," I replied, hoping my affectionate teasing wasn't going too far for him.

He met my eyes then and smiled, shifting the bundle in his arms that might've been packed lunch for the fighters. "Anything for my songbird."

"You two are so cute!" Wren chirped, and we all ended up laughing.

We told Igor goodbye and let him return to training. My energy was waning, so Wren and I popped back inside for a quick nap.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AWARIYE



I blinked awake, on my side in the bed, only to feel my spirit lifting from my body a bit—I saw myself lying there. It had only been a couple of weeks, but already I had more color to my skin and more healthy life to my cheeks. My hair was mussed and sweaty, but otherwise I looked to be doing all right.

Wren slept right next to me, and he looked so cute I concentrated and tried to pull myself back down into my body. There he lay in front of me, each breath puffing his bangs from his face. A faint golden light ran over his arms and across our fingers where we connected, then up my forearms to cascade over me. Leave it to Wren to still find a way to nurture me back to health even though his lover had begged him not to, by coming to nap with me during the day while Ulbrecht was out training with his fighters.

But then I noticed someone *was* here with us, sitting up in the bed right behind Wren. Pulling away and up, I found the king watching Wren snooze, a hand on Wren's shoulder and love in his eyes.

The door opened and Ulbrecht glanced up, though he continued petting Wren's hair. "Igor."

"Sir."

"Come to check on Awariye?"

I zipped back into my body skittishly, even though neither of them could see me floating. Having Igor nearby meant I might get some cuddles and I wanted to feel them.

They fell silent as Igor came to stand by Ulbrecht next to the bed, from the sound of it.

The king spoke very softly. “Wren is so glad to have Awariye. I’ve been worried that Wren didn’t want to spend the winter here and would rather go back to the monastery.”

Wren had surely told Ulbrecht that Diana Monastery usually wouldn’t take in her prior students for very long unless they could pay their own boarding. They trained you as a youngster, then sent you out into the world, and only those with further training such as future instructors or doctors stayed.

Igor’s steps circled the bed and the mattress dipped, jostling us enough I blinked my eyes to see Wren through my eyelashes.

Ulbrecht spoke again. “He looks much better these days. I’m sure we could find another place for you to sleep so you’d have your own bed, Igor. You need to heal that shoulder. Don’t feel pressured to keep sharing your life force with him now that he’s going to pull through.”

My heart leapt into my throat and I barely stopped the shout of protest that made it all the way to the back of my teeth.

“*Kein Problem,*” Igor assured the king. “I’ll go when Awariye kicks me out.”

I lurched awake, unable to let that stand. But just as I wrenched my eyes open, I got to see Ulbrecht lift Wren from the bed and settle his lover in his arms. The expression Ulbrecht gave to Wren, of pure contentment and love, was so honest and genuine it struck me silent.

Then Ulbrecht’s brown eyes found mine—I’d unconsciously reached for Wren—and the king smiled and said softly, “You kick Igor out when you’re tired of him, okay?”

“No—I mean, yes, sir, thank you.”

He nodded, then carried Wren from the room.

Now awake, I rolled onto my back to find Igor on his side. Stretched out on the bed with his chin in his hand, elbow propped on the blanket, his eyes held laughter as he scanned me, looking for my thoughts.

“Stay,” I ordered, then reached out and cupped his cheek. “Please stay, if you want to.”

“I want to,” he answered, and the low rumble in his voice thrilled me. I had just enough energy for my body to start running away with ideas. If I continued to get my life force replenished and my health back, it was going to take more self-control than I was capable of to keep from pouncing on this gorgeous man.

Igor’s smile was soft, private. He sifted his fingertips through my floppy hair, pushing it back from my forehead. It seemed a favorite thing of his to do.

“I’ve started dreaming I’m holding you. You said you do that as well, but I’m not sure you remember all our conversations due to the medicine,” Igor said with some humor, self-deprecating.

Igor dreaming of holding me sounded like the best thing in the world.

“Do you kiss my hair sometimes,” I asked, “or did I dream that?”

His blue-grey eyes widened, and it took him a moment to recover. “I did, a few times. And then I scolded myself for kissing you when you didn’t know it.”

Oh, but I knew, and I wanted him to do it more.

“Will you kiss me again?” I asked before shyness could stop me.

He gave a tiny huff and shook his head as if to say, “What am I going to do with you?” Then he cupped my cheek and planted a smooch in the middle of my forehead, but that wasn’t nearly enough.

Clenching my fist in the fabric of his shirt, I pulled on him, wanting him closer, his tongue in my mouth. Igor glanced

down at my fist and huffed a little laugh again, his breath puffing and blowing my bangs from my forehead.

“Igor, please,” I begged, moistening my lips with the tip of my tongue. “Will you kiss me? Do you want to?”

His gaze frozen on my wet lips, he swallowed and seemed to shake himself, struggling to find his words. “*Ja*. I have wanted to kiss you since I first saw you and you told me you are gay. I was filled with worry, but now that you’re getting healthier, I’ve been wanting to kiss you all the time. You said you would embrace me—I want that, if you still do.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I surged up and pressed my lips to his, whimpering when Igor gasped and then reacted, kissing me back. Grabbing his unbandaged shoulder, I pulled him down and pushed my tongue into his mouth.

Igor growled and it vibrated through every part of me.

“Let me suck you off,” I begged, wriggling out from underneath him and sliding off the bed and onto the floor.

“Wh-what?” Igor stammered, even as he scooted to the edge of the bed and spread his legs so I could kneel between his knees.

At my bidding, Igor rucked his shirt off, revealing toned abs which he clenched to lift his hips so I could pull his pants and underwear down and off.

The guard dog sniffed from the doorway when I tossed Igor’s clothes on the floor, but she otherwise left us alone.

I nuzzled my cheek against his shaft, closing my eyes with pleasure at the heat of him. His ball sack was large and hung heavy in my hand as I cupped it, massaging his balls gently while stabilizing him at the base with my other hand and kissing his head, swollen and leaking as his foreskin drew back.

Glancing up, I found Igor staring at me in open-mouthed awe. His eyes on me, I took him into my mouth as he sighed and whispered praises. Swirling my tongue over his tip, I then swallowed him down to the sound of his moans and met his gaze.

“*Hmmm?*” I hummed in question, vibrating the full length of him and causing Igor to swear to the heavens.

“Awariye, oh gods, you’re good at this,” he said with wonder.

I giggled with my mouth full and proceeded to blow him. Igor’s cock was thick and massive. Sensitive as well, which had me very careful not to graze him with my teeth. He responded to everything I did, so I blew him with vigor. Judging by the warning pulses he was already giving, I would have to take the time to learn his likes and dislikes in more detail later.

Igor bucked his hips accidentally and then apologized, but the strength with which he’d flexed had me yearning to get fucked by him. His cock pulsed again as I bobbed up and down, slurping and sucking in my cheeks to envelop him. Igor stuttered out a warning that he was going to come soon, but I just hummed around him again to give him permission, wanting to taste his pleasure and swallow it all. The vibration shuddered through him, and he fell silent, just his panting filling the room, and I switched to blowing the head of his cock while pumping his slicked shaft with my fist.

“Awariye, *ah*, I’m going to, *nnngh...*”

He froze and shot in my mouth, splashing hot on my tongue. I lapped it up, drinking it all and relishing in the bitter taste of another man. And not just any man, but a strong warrior who had held me and protected me through fever and illness. My Igor.

He hissed from overstimulation and I released him carefully, sagging against his leg in a sudden wave of fatigue but still managing to rest my cheek against the inside of his thigh and gaze proudly at his spent cock.

I wasn’t paying attention, my own drive at the moment neglected in favor of closing my eyes and considering a snooze, when suddenly an arm wrapped around my back and I was hauled onto the bed, giving an ungracious squawk in surprise.

“*Danke*,” said Igor in thanks, grinning at me and smooching my lips.

“*Bitte bitte*,” I replied with some snark. “That took it out of me.”

“Blowjob, or nap?” he asked.

I barked a laugh. “First one, then the other.”

I realized he’d one-arm dragged me up there, and carefully touched the bandaging over his other shoulder. “Don’t strain yourself for me, Igor. I’m sorry you got hurt.”

“I’m not sorry,” he said frankly. “I was protecting Ulbrecht’s back.”

I pulled a breath in, then met his eyes.

“Good work, then,” I said in full honesty. He nodded, and we shared a moment of recognizing the weight of what could have happened had Igor not been there to intercept.

Then Igor smirked and the heavy sentiment popped like a bubble. “Your turn.”

We squirmed around, rearranging, and I let him toss a pillow under my hips. Igor grabbed a pouch of oil and settled between my legs on his belly, propped on his elbows. I splayed my legs out and asked him to both finger and blow me.

Igor’s hot tongue lathered my balls as he gently slid my foreskin down, then with lubed fingers he stretched me open, scissoring me and curling upward to try and reach my prostate. I soared back to full hardness and knew I wanted him. “Please, fuck me. You can blow me after if I don’t come. Can you go again?”

“I’m already hard,” he breathed, then shook his head in disbelief. “It’s been two years since I was with someone, and living at the lodge house, I bunk with other men and don’t have much privacy.”

That worked out. “Then fuck me, please, if you can.”

Igor insisted on getting three fingers inside and really stretching me out first, then after a brief discussion of sexual

history in which we surmised neither of us had likely contracted anything, he lubed himself up and began to press inside. Gripping the sheets, I took deep breaths and bore down, sliding my ankles to rest on either side of his neck after confirming it didn't hurt his shoulder.

Igor pushed his way in slowly, allowing me time to stretch and adjust to his hefty size. I was driven wild by how big he was and how much pleasure coursed through me when he slid in to the hilt and his cockhead pulsed right up against my prostate.

“Holy gods, Igor,” I panted, about to pass out from all the stimulation.

“If it's too much I will pull back out,” he promised, his tone filled with concern.

“*Nein*,” I protested, shaking my head. “Fuck me, I need this. I've been dreaming about this. I want you.”

That did the trick. At my urging, he gripped my hips, spreading my ass cheeks with his thumbs, then pulling out and pushing back in to my squeaks and moans. He proceeded to cut a brutal pace, fucking me relentlessly as my gasps spurred him on. Frantic, I fisted my cock and pumped hard, my whole body sizzling with heat and sprinting to the edge. I clenched down on him, and Igor swore to the ceiling, pumping into my ass at full strength, pistoning till his balls slapped against my cheeks.

“*Komm*, Awariye,” he urged, his voice guttural. “Come first, I want to feel it.”

My body tightened like a spring as I pumped harder, faster, then finally flung myself off the edge and came. I groaned and spilled all over my chest, shooting as Igor pounded my ass a few more times before he froze, and I felt his hot cum filling me up.

He withdrew carefully, and the pinch of pain made my orgasm stretch a little longer and my cock jump, a confusing malaise of contradictory sensations.

Then Igor crawled over me and into my embrace. I wrapped around him, hooking my arms across his back and my legs over his hips. He kissed me languidly as we came down, long luxurious moments of feeling totally satiated and lazily enjoying each other.

“I want to be your boyfriend,” I whispered against his lips when he pulled back for breath.

I didn’t want this to be a fling, something we enjoyed but then forgot about when I left come springtime.

Igor touched his forehead to mine. “I’m your lover now, aren’t I?”

That thrilled me. I grinned at him. “You are. And I’m yours.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

AWARIYE



I dozed in his arms, passing out for a bit, rousing when I heard Igor's voice rumbling softly.

"How did you get like this, bard?" he asked. "I thought I'd lose you, that I'd hold you through the night and wake up one morning and your spirit would be gone."

Breathing deeply and drawing on my strength, I pulled myself back out of dreamland. I groaned and Igor yipped and jumpstarted, then returned to holding me and smoothing his thumb soothingly over my arm. He might have thought I was sleeping more deeply, but still, I wanted to answer.

I cleared my throat and deliberated on my words yet found them close to the surface. Going through a health scare sure could put things into perspective.

"I grew up in a traveling theater group. We sang and danced for the joy and delight of others. Although I cannot remember my parents' faces, I remember them being happy and dancing and singing with me when I was very young. That's very different from poor Wren, who has no knowledge of his family whatsoever, and might have been sold into slavery had Ingeborg not found him wandering the streets and adopted him. Though my parents and our traveling group are gone now, at least I know I was loved."

Igor leaned in and kissed my forehead, speaking softly, his voice filled with emotion. "That is true for me too. My village is gone now, and we were not perfect, but at least I know that I was loved."

“Oh, Igor, I’m so sorry.” My heart broke at hearing this. I flattened my palm on his chest in sympathy, giving him room to say more, but he didn’t take it.

“That is how you came to fight for the king?” I asked, hoping my curiosity wasn’t going too far into such painful memories.

He nodded. “Several of the other boys and I got captured and sold, in my case to a band of mercenaries who screamed and ran like cowards when Ulbrecht and Sören tracked them down. Thankfully Ulbrecht saw my situation and believed my story, then took me in.”

We shared a smile.

“What happened to your theater group?” he asked, then said immediately, “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

I chuckled at him telling a bard what to say. If anyone were in control of one’s words, I’d say my profession ranked among the top of such people.

“What I remember is hazy and dreamlike because I was so young,” I began. “But what I can piece together is we likely fell upon hard times financially, and then there was a plague, maybe the yellow fever outbreak that swept through Bavaria twenty years ago.”

Igor’s eyes widened as he remembered that dark time, his breath stilling. He nodded for me to continue.

I fidgeted a bit and he adjusted to my movements. Settling once again into a comfortable position, I told him about the rest of my childhood. “I remember being kept alone and told to stay outside, not to go in certain rooms wherever we were living at the time. That’s why I think it was a contagious disease. My father must have passed because I remember my mother crying all the time, and then the group disbanded, and we went our separate ways. I can still hear his rich voice laughing and calling for me.”

“Did he name you?” asked Igor.

I giggled. “No, actually, I found my own name from among our warmup exercises, and my parents let me keep it. You know how singers go through the vowels, scales, and intervals?”

Igor’s half-smile and the mischief in his eyes thrilled me. “No, what?”

I cleared my throat again and tried to sing, though the conditions weren’t optimal, and it came out a bit croaky.

“A-wa-ri-yeeee, Aaa-waa-rii-yeeee!”

Igor squeezed his eyes shut and shook with laughter. “Your name is the warmup exercises?”

I hooted. “Yes! My parents surely named me something else, but then I began singing my own name and it stuck.”

Igor’s mirth finally bubbled up and out of him and we laughed together.

The happy moment ended, and I tried to think of a way to tie the sad part of my story back in without letting the grief from such memories wrap itself around us.

“After that, Mama and I were on our own. I remember waiting so often in closets and dark rooms, with Mama promising she’d come back, but I had to sit there quietly. I wonder now whether she was forced to prostitute herself.”

“*Oh nein,*” said Igor in sympathy.

I nodded. “There was a brief period in which we lived at a convent and things finally stabilized, but as I grew older they wouldn’t let me stay. Then the last memory I have of my mother is in front of the Diana Monastery in Helvetica, of her leaning down, crying and telling me to sing to the monks until they let me in.

For years I dreamed that she left me there in order to find a rich husband, so she could one day come back for me and we’d all get to live together. I even tracked down the convent to see whether she’d become a nun, but she wasn’t there, and the nuns didn’t remember us. Eventually I came to understand that it likely was a much sadder fate for her. She could have

sold herself into slavery out of sheer desperation; she may not even be alive right now. The Diana Monastery taught me to sing for the gods, but for the rest of this lifetime I will also sing for her, and for my father and those in our theatre group, in gratitude for them loving and nurturing me.”

Igor swallowed, carding his fingers through my hair, combing it out of my eyes.

“Your voice is so pretty, Awariye,” said Igor. “Why were you in such a state when you arrived here? The doctor asked me to stay with you to balance your body temperature, and Ingeborg suggested I share my life force with you. You could have died.”

I reached for his hand that was stroking my arm and twined our fingers together. “I’ve told you about the nodes that grow on one’s vocal cords when they are taxed too much for too long. In the mild cases it merely causes pain, but it only gets worse, and in the severe cases, a person can lose their voice completely. I found in documents at the Monastery library that centuries ago they used to have a surgery that could sometimes fix it, but nowadays I would never risk such a procedure. Maybe the people inside the Vienna city walls have access to such technology and hygienic standards, but who knows.”

“And you strained your voice?”

“*Ja*. I started to notice when I left the Monastery and began working as a traveling bard. Singing over a boisterous crowd, loudly enough to garner their attention, is a massive burden on one’s voice, and I was coming into it after a childhood of singing to survive. I’ve been trying to save my voice for when I get the chance to sing to a potential patron. But that meant I was running low on proper meals, and when I miscalculated on being able to meet up with a friend who might share a room and some meals with me, I wound up in the state you met me in.”

Igor nodded slowly, processing that. “From now on, if your work gets thin again, or whenever you want to, loop back to the capital and come find me. I am only living in the castle

right now for the doctor to see my shoulder; usually I rent a room in town. Ulbrecht gives his warriors a stipend that I will gladly share with you, for your company and friendship if nothing else. And if you want to, I'll gladly share my bed with you."

"I have my pride," I protested, though it sounded weak, and I fought off a wave of shame.

"*Nein*," Igor tossed back. "You are not a beggar, I know. You are a friend—or a lover, if you want it. I do. But if you don't want me in this bed anymore, I will go back to the lodging house in town. I shared my life force with you, and now you look so much better. But you owe me nothing, Awariye."

In my tired state I struggled to follow his jumps in topic. "I want you to stay in my bed, Igor. As a friend or a lover, like you said. I want to get to know you better, and I like having you here with me."

He finally met my eyes again, his soft blue-gray irises kind and hopeful.

"I will stay with you," he said, kissing my cheek and making me close my eyes, "as long as you will have me."

"Stay then," I commanded, though it sounded more like a plea. "I want you to stay."

Then sleep took me, and as he held me close, I dropped away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AWARIYE



My bladder woke me, but after I returned to the bed I tossed and turned, my thoughts whirring like a windup doll on the loose. I had too much on my mind. With my mental clarity returning, and the combination of strong medicine with deep exhaustion no longer sapping my energy in favor of restoring my health, I had a lot to process. Igor slept peacefully, the blanket rising and falling with his breaths. For a long moment I sat and watched him, wishing I could switch my brain off and get back in there and cuddle with him. But I knew from my long years of training that if I put off dealing with my thoughts, they would only pile up until they seeped into my everyday life, a sprung leak at every opportunity.

I suspected these thoughts were due to the baggage I could now see I'd been carrying around with me until I fell ill. In survival mode, I had pushed everything else aside, just trying to get to my next meal. But now I needed to address those shadows if I could.

I wanted to kiss Igor on the cheek and tell him where I was going, but I didn't want to startle him, and although he had never given me any evidence to prove it, waking a warrior unexpectedly might trigger his defense impulse. I left him be, wrapped myself in Wren's quilted coat, donned my thicker pants and shoes, and quietly closed the door behind me. I knew where to go.

The sanctuary that held the seven lantern gods was quiet in the predawn, no guard dog out front since no human was inside. I dipped in, closing the door, and immediately the sheer

presence of the large bronze bowls and the flames within froze me in my tracks. Their force was so strong I could have sworn a human was standing in front of me, pushing a palm to my chest. I breathed deeply, nice and slow, giving my solar plexus time to adjust to the change in power. This was no regular room.

A stone basin off to the side had the faucet with running water, so I washed my hands and face. The cold water chilled me. The closer to freezing it was, the more the water could absorb icky muck from the etheric plane and cleanse me of it. I dealt with my shivers by moving closer to the stone table holding the lanterns.

In the custom of the ancient pagans, I kissed my right palm and held it out to them, greeting these gods. “*Guten Morgen.*”

Immediately, I wanted to do my morning spiritual routine. Over the decade since I’d begun practicing magic, my spirit sensed when it was time to move into ritual and began to rise in the astral plane of its own accord. Having mostly only performed prayer these last two weeks as I was bedridden and in and out of consciousness, the desire to get back into my magical practices and move myself closer to the gods was fierce.

Wren had told me about the space behind the table where he performed rituals to his gods, integrating his practice with the lanterns so he could get to know them better. Wren and I worshipped the old Continental Celtic gods that had thrived here before the Romans came. With their permission, at each gate in his ritual he also invoked one of the seven lanterns.

“May I perform this same ritual here?” I asked, imagining as clearly as I could in my mind’s eye what Wren must look like while performing the ritual and showing that mental image to the lanterns. “I know Wren’s gods and began magical devotions to them at the monastery.”

This was tricky. The sanctuary was meant for the seven lantern gods, to honor them and bring them into this world as much as they allowed. This space was theirs. And yet Wren and I, as monks and mages, had our own pantheons that

guided our spiritual development. Saying other names in their presence could trigger their jealousy and ruin everything. Especially if they pulled away from Ulbrecht and no longer protected the Danubian king. We could lose this hard-won peace that had been so brutally fought for, and in no time whatsoever, become overrun.

I circled the table, checking to see that the lanterns didn't need anything. Then I found Wren's oracle cards and asked if I could invoke my gods in the sanctuary. The cards seemed to think I was worrying too much. No surprise there.

Lifting my arms over my head, I pulled in breath for the invocation and banishing ritual I'd performed every day for thousands of days and began to sing.

I tried to meditate after the ritual, which was always good protocol since the magic of the ritual was designed to clear one's mind from mental chatter. The lanterns, however, were such a strong presence in the room that I kept finding myself fixated on their dancing flames rather than sorting myself out. Not knowing what to do, a memory of the alpine forests surrounding Diana Monastery popped into my mind, and I laughed.

I stood and addressed the lanterns. "I'll return. I need a bit of nature to reconnect."

The guard at the door leading outside was reluctant to let me out, cautioning that it was quite cold and wasn't I the one who had been ill? I explained I would just circle the castle. He let me go on the condition that a guard dog follow me, presumably the animal being capable of letting someone know if I fainted. I relented and set out.

Indeed, the cold wind sent a bitter chill running through me and I immediately revised my plans. The area surrounding the castle was the town and some gardens, but I could see the forest in the distance, and just being outside in the elements for a bit was enough to jolt my connection to my inner

thoughts and get things flowing again. Having learned magic and spirituality in deep nature, I could count on it to do the trick.

Back in the sanctuary, I circled the table, pacing to let my energy course through, and told the gods what I had been struggling with.

“I had gotten very stuck, and due to traveling alone, I did not realize how stuck I was. This continued for a long time and got worse. Not having a partner or friend to echo these things back to me and notice, I was not there for myself and instead dug the hole deeper. I let myself down. But I can’t heap guilt on myself about it or I’ll just get more negative. I’ve got to return to being on my own side.”

I paced around the table, circling it once more, and felt a combination of the etheric force from the lantern fires and my own connection to my gods opening up. This was working. I kept going.

“I’d become fatalistic, thinking that I would never find a patron. I’d be stuck entertaining crowds and trying to sing over them just to scrape by. I began to despair and internalize that rejection as inadequacy. As I strained my vocal cords further, I began to lose hope that I would find a way to dig myself out of that hole. Then as hunger took over, I lost the ability to think clearly and troubleshoot my situation. My health began failing, and then it was just a struggle to stay alive.”

Getting that out, I’d finally expelled enough energy that I could sit down and hold my situation in my mind’s eye and let thoughts come to me around the edges. As they did, I voiced them. “Things got so bad I had trouble seeing the way forward and was in the process of convincing myself I didn’t have a future. There was a lot of shame built up around leaving the monastery. I didn’t want to leave; it was the only place I’d known as home since my mother left me there. I felt safe; I knew I’d have meals and a secure room to sleep in. But the monastery rarely keeps monks forever and I’d specifically trained to be a bard, which meant I had to go out and seek my fortune. Doing it alone, without any of my friends and already having no family, was hard.”

I held still for several minutes, really listening to see what other thoughts would come. One's guide in life, their higher soul, speaks only softly, and is especially difficult to hear when other mental chatter is going on. But I had trained for over a decade to purify the mental space around my subtle bodies, which made it easier to listen. If my tummy growled as it presently did, I acknowledged that I'd go to breakfast soon, and then gently set the thought aside for now.

Before I even recognized what I was doing, I hummed through some lower notes and up a bit higher, then back down. It felt so good to sing. Then I glanced at the lanterns and wondered if that inspiration had been given to me, and if so, if that meant they wanted me to sing for them.

I tried to still my mind once more so I could listen, and while that worked, the stronger urge was to keep humming.

I danced around on some notes, lingering whenever one felt more inspired. This reminded me of one of my early connections to the magic of the earth. As a young monk, I'd gotten caught out in the rain while wandering the forest. Deciding to accept it, I had circled the area around the monastery and let the rain fall on me, singing to the clouds, the puddles, and the sky that had opened up. It had been a late summer rain, and so it was warm enough that I remembered not feeling chilly, so rare in the Alps.

Afterward I had gone inside, the temperature finally driving me indoors to dry off and get warm, when something incredible happened. In the stone stairwell leading up to the monastery living quarters, I'd kept singing the little tune I'd sung to the rain, enjoying how it echoed and bounced around. But then I'd hit a pitch that set the whole stairwell ringing.

Stunned, I'd frozen on the spot, so thrown at the lasting tones, as if the chamber had sung along with me and was just finishing up. Later my instructors would show me how certain materials have resonant frequencies, much like the way a cello player must skate across certain notes carefully in order to not set the whole instrument vibrating. But in that moment, the surprise of such a discovery had set the world alight and

convinced me utterly that with each breath we breathed in magic.

Then my stomach growled again, reminding me to not neglect my health in favor of inspiration. Clasp my hands together, I thanked the gods I prayed to, and thanked the lantern gods for allowing me this space to see and understand the mistakes I'd made, and also eventually find the way forward.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AWARIYE



Giddy on my way to breakfast, I made a mental list of things to ask Wren. Maybe he had some paper I could use for journaling. I needed to get my mental baggage written down so it didn't attempt to disappear into my subconscious and then proceed to haunt me.

These changes I wanted to make going forward, of a new, stronger Awariye, had me more excited about living my life than I'd felt in a long time. In a very practical sense, one of my close friends was boyfriends with a king. That meant that I did not have to fear dying from poverty anymore. Even if I still struggled to find a patron to sponsor me, Wren had made it clear that he would always welcome me at his forest hut, and indeed that he worried about getting too lonely up there. I'd swing by and keep him company, see my friend, cheer up, and restock on nutrition, since Ulbrecht would definitely keep Wren supplied.

That meant I could preserve my voice for when it was really important, and with that strength on call, maybe I could actually find a patron.

Things were looking up for the first time in so long.

And not only that, but Igor...just thinking about him had me grinning like a loon, bashfully hiding it when Mindi the dog trainer greeted me as we passed each other in the hallway. The way Igor looked at me...I'd never felt such care and affection from another man. I hoped the feelings he summoned inside me were being felt on his end, too. I hoped this was more than just tumble-in-bed friends by circumstance, more

than men just finding release in each other's bodies. I wanted Igor to be mine, to be able to consider myself his. We had such a propensity to cuddle and then fall asleep we never got around to seriously talking about these things.

I whipped into the dining area by the kitchen to find everyone already at breakfast, Igor sitting across the table from Wren and the king.

“*Morgen*. Wren, could I have some writing paper; do you have any from the monastery?”

“Sure. Marit sewed me some pamphlets before I left—”

Igor stood up so fast he knocked his chair to the floor, causing everyone to jump. “Awariye.”

Everything stopped when I saw the shocked look on his face. “*Ja?* Is something wrong?”

He stammered, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. “You're here. You were gone this morning.”

Wren gasped. “Oh no—that's why you were so sullen! I'm sorry, Igor, I could have told you. I heard Awariye singing in the lantern chapel when I swung by at dawn. I figured he was praying, so I tabled my morning ritual and left him be.”

“*Entschuldigung*, Igor,” I apologized, finally catching on. “I got up and decided to get back into my meditation practices now that I'm feeling better.”

At a loss for words, he looked around at everyone witnessing his outburst, then his face turned a beet red and he stormed out. As the door fell shut I finally found my feet again, so frozen at this night-and-day change in him. I went after him to Wren's apologies, needing to make sure any hurt I had caused was soothed.

He was charging down the hall, but when I called to him, he whipped around and instead paced, dashing his hands into his hair and seeming to scold himself.

“Igor,” I began. “I'm sorry you thought I'd left. I didn't have any paper to leave you a note telling you where I was

going, but to be honest, that didn't occur to me. I didn't realize how that might look to you."

His eyes locked on me, the open pain in his expression stealing my breath away and making my eyes burn with tears. "You're a bard, Awariye. Now that you're feeling better, it's your job to leave, and it's mine to stay. I thought you'd left in the night to avoid a painful goodbye; that this was how it had to be because neither of us will change our vocations. I'm just a... man to warm your bed, a safe haven for you on your travels."

"*Nein*," I protested. "You're much more to me than that."

He swallowed, his voice hollowed out. "You're more to me than that, too."

I held my arms open and he came to me, rushing in and squeezing me tight, lifting me up onto my tiptoes.

"I'm sorry I made you sad," I apologized again, then rushed forward with my confessions, unwilling to hold back any longer. "I love you, Igor. I want to be with you. When I travel, I will leave my heart here. Take it with you when you go to battle."

Igor squeezed me tight, sniffing. "*Ich liebe dich*, Awariye. I fell in love with you when I heard you sing."

That shattered me, and the tears fell. I couldn't hold myself together any longer. As I cried, I realized Igor was hefting me up in his grip so he could walk down the hall while carrying me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, making it easier. He sent me a watery smile and hugged me around my middle, taking us down the halls and toward our room where we could comfort each other with some privacy.

IGOR

I carried my sweet bard into our room and laid him carefully on the bed, kneeling up to hover over him. Awariye leaned

forward and I met him in a kiss, only interrupted by his stomach growling.

“*Oh nein,*” I exclaimed. “I carried you away from breakfast; let’s go back.”

“*Nein-nein,*” he argued, kissing me again. “I want a different breakfast first. Want you.”

I smirked at him for being silly, then outright laughed as he wriggled out from beneath me. “What are you doing?”

“I want to fuck you,” my lover said, his voice husky as he smoothed a hand over my bum. “Can I?”

“Sure,” I reasoned. “I got to fuck you once; it’s only fair I return the favor.”

He giggled. “Since we’re apparently keeping score, *hm?*”

I shook my ass at him, and he smacked me for good measure. We shucked our clothes off, me yanking Awariye’s drawstring trousers down and off in one fell swoop. Then he had me up on all fours again and hugged me from behind. “You’re so large, Igor. I swear I’m nearly your height but you’re still twice as big as me.”

I shrugged, pleased this wasn’t agitating my shoulder. It didn’t even feel tender these days. “You can lean on me like a table if you like, while you use me to empty your nuts.”

He barked a laugh, swatting my bum again. “The things you say. They make perfect sense, but I’d never think to express them that way.”

I smiled at him, then ordered, “Get to it, or I’ll take matters into my own hands.”

His eyes flew wide. “Don’t you dare; I’m not missing my turn.”

“Hurry up, then.”

Awariye snagged the lubricant oil and worked at stretching me open while I teased him about treating me like a delicate flower.

At the same time, I relished his gentle touches and caresses, his encouragement and praise at how sexy I was and how much I drove him wild. The last person I'd let touch me had been Kristoff, when my best friend, lover, and shield mate was still alive. I shared a very deep vulnerability with Awariye in that moment, reaching back into those memories of loving someone so fiercely I was certain we'd be side by side forever. Awariye did not know the deep feelings I was experiencing as he prepped me, but his caring words and the gentle way he handled me left no doubt that he would prove worthy of my trust.

Then lust sizzled through me as I recalled Kristoff and I trading virginites in the forest as young men, slipping away and stealing any moments we could together. Thoughts of all the rough fucks that got me addicted to his cock tightened my balls till the ache was painful and sent me barking at Awariye that I was prepped enough and needed him now.

AWARIYE

Igor had gone into his own head, but he seemed to otherwise be okay, so I diligently stretched him open, knowing it had been a while for him and also that I was no small man. Igor snipped at me to get going so I slicked us both up one last time before spreading his cheeks and pressing inside.

Igor shouted in surprise and my eyes fluttered shut as I pushed my way in, pleasure echoing across my nerve endings as his hot ass squeezed me so tight. I asked how he was doing and he told me to keep going.

Unable to resist, I released his cheeks and wrapped around him, snuggling my chest to his back and cooing with happiness as he held me up while I speared him. I hugged him tight, the intimate moment turning sweet. My words tumbled out of me. "I love you, Igor."

"*Ich liebe dich*, Awariye," he answered, then, "Fuck me now or you'll lose your turn."

It took a second for his threat to sink in, then I laughed and got to work.

Leaning back, I grabbed his hips, spreading his cheeks with my thumbs and pulling out then pushing back in. Igor asked for more lube, so I withdrew and slicked us both thoroughly. When I pressed inside him again and slid in to the hilt, my hips touching his bum, the grunt Igor made sent a bolt of lust through my system.

Yanking on him, I fucked him roughly, ramming my cock into his ass and only going harder the more he grunted. Igor was large, all corded muscle and athleticism, and to hear him making those noises as I took him drove me wild.

“Faster,” he urged, and I thrust quicker till our balls slapped together, the lurid sounds of us echoing around the room.

My orgasm barreling down on me, I could barely put two thoughts together. “Can I come inside? Do you want me to withdraw?”

“*Nein*, inside now,” he ordered, and I obeyed.

“*Nngh—aaah!*” I shouted at the ceiling as my orgasm rolled through me, my whole body shaking as I emptied myself into him.

He squeezed me tight, milking me for all I was worth and I spasmed, shooting again and really coming hard. Totally empty, I lay against his back once more as I came down, my cock eventually softening and sliding out. All I could hear were our panted breaths, our sweat-slicked skin cooling even as his body warmed me.

“Did you come?” I finally asked, resisting the urge to fall asleep.

“Not yet,” said Igor.

Oh shit. “I’ll suck you off? Or you want to nail me?”

“I have a better idea,” he said, reaching around and grabbing my arm.

IGOR

Awariye dozed against me, and from how heavy he was getting, I reasoned that if he relaxed any further he would be out in no time. I reached over and slid him down and under me, on his back on the bed. He giggled and made a joke about me slinging him around like a rag doll, but even then his eyelids were struggling to stay open, and I just wanted him to relax.

He petted my thighs as I straddled him. "Igor, let me blow you. That felt so good."

I shook my head, taking my cock in hand. "I want you just like this."

When he saw what I was doing, his eyes widened a touch, and his cheeks kept their flush. Scanning his pert nipples, his sexy chest and abs, the long lines of his neck, and his facial structure, that of an artist rendered by a careful craftsman, I thought of all the ways I wanted to make him come. Pumping my cock vigorously, I spilled on his stomach as he smirked up at me, eyes burning with lust.

I flopped onto the bed next to him, still trembling from having shot my load. Awariye cooed and smooched my lips. Then his stomach growled so loudly it made us both erupt in giggles.

"Breakfast," I declared, reaching for my handkerchief to clean him off.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AWARIYE



The next morning, as I slept in Igor's arms, the opening door woke me. Rising out of sleep, I heard the guard dog huff but let someone through. I wondered if Sigrid was dropping off more medicine for me, but she usually didn't disturb us while we were sleeping as far as I knew.

Then Wren's silly dog plopped his head on the mattress right next to me, and I steeled myself for the gigantic dane to come barreling onto the bed with us. Instead, the little girl whom I knew to be Eliana—Evelyn and Söeren's daughter—hefted herself from the dog's back and onto the blankets. Once she settled, she patted Bello's head, and I couldn't believe how still Wren's misbehaving dog stayed for her.

Then she swiveled and leveled those large eyes on me, and I felt pinned in place. She smoothed her dress over her petticoats like a teacher getting ready to start class. "My brothers told me that Siegfried the warrior kills the dragon, then brags about it to try to get Kriemhild for his wife. But that doesn't make sense when you could befriend the dragon."

Oh, bless her. I struggled to think of a way to explain this story from the *Nibelungenlied* to a compassionate child, when some scholars saw the slaying of the dragon as a metaphor for the fall of the old, pagan world connected to nature, and the supposed triumph of monotheism in the West that eventually claimed mankind as the conqueror of nature. For those of us sitting at the bottom of a dark age after civilizational collapse and centuries of turmoil, that lesson came across the decades as both foolish and delusional.

Igor ground his hips and I shifted away from him, not wanting him to get any ideas in his sleep. My scooting up on the pillows prompted him to flop over and fall back asleep.

I lay against the pillows a bit so I could think, but not fully sitting up so I didn't tower over her while she was trying to figure something out. "You think the dragon would make a good friend?"

"He's an ally that's useful," she replied with a prim set to her lips. "He's your banker."

That gave me pause. "Banker?"

"Of course," replied Eliana, smoothing a hand over the dog's nose and snout. "Dragons guard your gold against anyone stealing it. They won't let you spend it, either. That way, with a dragon, you stay rich forever."

That was a fair point. I wracked my brain for what dragon stories I knew. "There are some dragons who are friends of mankind."

She brightened, and I could so clearly see how she looked like Sören and Evelyn together, those sharp eyes her mother's, and that dark hair flopping around definitely her father's.

"This story's from the twentieth century; that's five hundred years ago. The story says people moved to another planet and found little lizards they kept as pets. Over hundreds of years, the lizards grew larger until they became dragons. The people became the Dragon riders of the planet Pern."

She furrowed her dark brows. "How did they fly to another planet?"

That was a sharp observation for a four-year-old. "Back then, as you know, they had planes, machines that flew in the air. But they also had rockets that flew people in outer space to other planets."

"Like Venus?"

I nodded. "Though the planet Pern revolves around another star. Their Sun is not our sun. It is a faraway star."

I saw the gears whirring in her mind. The little princess looked up at the ceiling as if she were viewing a night sky. “The stars are suns for other people.”

“At least for other planets, *ja genau*. Those planets may not have life on them like Earth does.”

“Why can’t we visit them?”

This bright child was hitting me with Fermi’s Paradox first thing in the morning. I referenced a twenty-first century book that had survived: *Aurora* by Kim Stanley Robinson. “The resources it takes to get there are one thing. People back then had high technology and very energy-dense fuel. But the problem becomes the fact that the human body is intimately connected with the biome here on Earth. There are thousands of species of bacteria and other creatures that interact with our bodies to help us stay healthy. To truly venture to a planet around another star would take many generations on a rocket, and even then, they would need to continually maintain all the microbial creatures that keep us alive or else the subsequent generations would get sick.”

I worried I had not simplified it enough for her scientific knowledge at this point, but the princess nodded, seeming to understand. “They would look like you did, when you needed medicine and always slept.”

I smiled. “Yes, indeed.”

She nodded, sticking a pin in it. “I want to hear about the dragons on Pern.”

A stressed, hushed voice came from the hallway. “Madam Evelyn, I think Eliana is in the bard’s room. I’m sorry, she disappeared, and I couldn’t find her.”

“It’s all right; I’ll go get her.”

The woman who had originally come to the capital in order to wed Ulbrecht and serve as the Danubian High Queen came into our room, the jewels glittering in her hair in the netting she wore to connect the virtues of good rulership to the energy centers on the head.

“Eliana, what have we discussed about you entering others’ rooms?” she asked softly while Igor snored.

The little girl didn’t react as if she were in trouble. “Wren tells me stories when I visit him, and I ride in on his dog.”

“And what about our discussion regarding privacy, and you waiting for others to wake up so you can ask them questions at breakfast?”

Little Eliana glanced my way, her pout proof that she recognized she owed me an apology. “*En-shudi-gung*, Awroo. Wren was busy, so I thought I’d ask you. You’re a storyteller.”

This indeed was risky first thing in the morning, because how exactly did she know Wren was busy? And if the guard dogs just obeyed her, then she could potentially stumble upon something not fit for her young eyes.

“*Kein Problem*,” I assured her. “I do know many stories, and I can tell you all of them as long as I’m not in bed or preoccupied, okay?”

Only then did I realize her “Awroo” had been an attempt to say my name, and it took genuine willpower to keep the giggles from bubbling out of me.

The precious little girl must have recognized it was time to go because she reached for her mother, and as Evelyn carried her out, the dog at her heels, Eliana whipped around and gave me a wave.

The door closed and I let out a breath, wondering if I could sneak in some sleep after all that. Igor rolled back over and sniggered. “*Hallo*, Awroo.”

The giggle finally escaped. “That was so cute.”

Igor still seemed sleepy too. He lay on his back, and I cuddled into his side. But he wanted me closer, pulling me so I lay with my head on his chest, my ear over his heart. With nowhere that we needed to be this early on a winter morning, we drifted off.

Sometime later I woke to my errant body humping Igor's side, and with some mental scolding, I rolled away and ran to use the facilities. When I came back, however, Igor had his arms folded behind his head, a bulge in his pants and fire in his eyes.

Bashfully I rubbed the back of my neck. "I think I was humping you in my sleep, sorry."

He smirked. "You did that so much while you were recovering. It took every bit of my self-control to not beg you to make out with me when you needed rest."

My cheeks burned. Even while I was sleeping off a fever and in deep recovery, my body subconsciously knew there was a very handsome man in bed with me.

"Is there anything I can do to make up for it?" I asked with a teasing lilt.

His eyes widened and he opened his arms. I slid back onto the bed and cupped his cheeks in my hands, kissing him and coaxing him to roll on top of me.

He pinned me down and kissed me breathless, just barely propping his weight off me with his forearms as I wrapped my arms and legs around him and whimpered into his mouth.

"Need you," Igor murmured on a growl.

"Anything," I promised. "Want me to fuck you? Or do you want me?"

"Fuck me first," he requested. "Your cock in my ass pounding my prostate is now my favorite foreplay."

I grinned up at him, then kissed his nose and scooted around. Igor got on his knees and forearms, sinking into the mattress while I knelt between his legs and stretched him open with lubed fingers. I loved how his balls hung heavy as his cock leaked, and my massive lover shook his ass in my face

and ordered me around. I'd barely gotten three fingers into him when he insisted he was ready and needed me *now*.

"I want *you* to stretch me," he said, his husky voice making my balls pull up tight and my cock ache with need.

Using the oil, I lubed us both generously and after confirming nothing hurt, I pressed inside slowly, sliding to the hilt with a blessed sigh. "So tight. Baby, you feel so good. Your body is my heaven."

Igor preened at that, his pleased hum sending happiness through me.

"Make love to me, Awariye," he urged. "Fuck me, now."

Those two sentences somehow made sense at the same time, because although we got wild and crazy in the bedroom, it was all filled to the brim with affection as we gave each other pleasure.

Igor growled and squeezed me impatiently, so I smacked his hot, hairy bum, withdrew, and plunged in further. Confirming we had enough lubricant oil, I grabbed his hips and fucked into him lusciously, his hot channel wrapped around me and milking my cock. Igor squeaked and groaned, begging me to hit that spot again, so I aimed for that same angle and hammered him over and over.

I tried to reach around and grab his cock, but he swatted me away. "I'm nailing you next."

"Oh fuck."

That nearly did me in. I increased my pace till I felt myself sprinting to the edge and Igor all but howled for me to fuck him faster and harder. I had no clue how I would survive another round so quickly but with glee and an absolute eagerness to find out I flung myself over the edge and came in his ass, spurting so hard trembles wracked through me.

Collapsing on his back, my hard cock still in his ass though rapidly coming down, I oozed against him and sang his praises. "You're so amazing, Igor. Gods, your body. I can't get enough."

I tried to stay in as long as I could, but my cock softened and slid out, and then Igor had hold of me and I slid off his back and onto the bed with a laugh. He flipped me onto my tummy and speared me open with lubed fingers, his prepping urgent but still thorough, insisting on making sure I could take him without getting hurt.

Then as my poor milked cock tried to rally, Igor hefted me onto my knees, lubed us both, and surged inside to my squeal. After confirming it wasn't too much, he fucked me quick and dirty, our balls slapping together and my startled gasps filling the room. His thrusts were so rough I squeaked with each smack until he found that sweet spot and gave it a good pounding, making me melt into the mattress as pleasure rolled through me and he dominated my ass.

He withdrew, the absence startling, and just as I yelped my protest, he flipped me over and tossed a pillow under my hips. Then he pressed inside again, hooking my legs in his arms.

I reached for him, wanting to hold him if I was flexible enough, this sweet man who could somehow be so turned on by my body.

I proved bendy enough because Igor settled in my arms with ease, our fucking less frantic at the new angle, but it still felt divine. I hooked my ankles behind his back and my arms around his neck, riding the wave from my orgasm and just letting him plow me till he'd had enough. Igor faltered and came on a guttural cry, emptying inside me as I carded my fingers lovingly through his hair and kissed his neck.

Igor growled in satisfaction and slowly withdrew, shifting to the side. I turned and curled in as he wrapping around me from behind. I shivered and he leaned up enough to snag the blanket and yank it over us. Satiated and calm, I drifted off to him holding me and softly breathing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IGOR



Awariye snagged my elbow after breakfast. “Do you have some time, or are you heading off to training?”

Ulbrecht and Sören were discussing something across the hall, so I didn’t immediately know what training they had planned for us. When I lived at the lodging house, usually one or both of them would come get the fighters lodged there in the morning and we’d run and train for the whole day to keep us in top shape through the winter. We generally knew to be up and ready by mid-morning.

Wren linked his arm through Awariye’s and spoke to me. “You said you wanted to get to know the lanterns better, and maybe learn how to pray? We could try a few things.”

I nodded. “I know the lanterns—they watch when we fight, at our backs, above and behind.”

Awariye swallowed, my words surprising him. “They’re that tangible?”

I nodded again. “What I was interested in was maybe praying to Kristoff’s gods. Or singing to them, which I assume is what you do.”

My lover smiled. “Sure. Let’s go to the sanctuary.”

“Uli!” Wren hollered across the hall, apparently unconcerned with interrupting them. “We’re visiting the lanterns; can we borrow Igor?”

Ulbrecht halted mid-conversation and gave an approving nod. “Mind if I pop in later?”

“Please do,” said Awariye.

We made our way to the smaller chapel on the other side of the castle from the main hall, passing our rooms and the kitchen along the way. All the while those two walked in front of me, attached at the hip and chatting and laughing together. Though I knew Awariye was mine—he was orgasming under me just this morning—I still understood why Ulbrecht watched them with a private look.

If I held such a position of power, where anyone could attempt to exploit that position by forming a relationship with me, I’d feel relieved yet insecure at finally finding an honest partner. Awariye had assured me that he and Wren had never been lovers, only ever friends. Wren in fact had shared a bed with his two best friends back at the monastery, and it was during his painful separation from them and the ending of that relationship that Ulbrecht had found Wren and offered love and comfort.

At the entryway to the chapel, all three of us washed our hands and faces in the faucet, cleaning ourselves out of respect for the holy ones within. Then we stepped into the chapel and immediately into the presence of the lanterns, who completely dominated the space. Wren and Awariye both pressed their palms together in greeting, so I did the same. It could be specific to their training, if they worked with energy through their palms, but I too needed a sign of greeting and respect, so I borrowed theirs.

“I know I say this every time,” Wren began, “but they feel completely different down here surrounded by stone than compared to up at the shrine. We’re not in that dense of a city, but it must be enough to change the texture of their energy, at least in my perception.”

I swallowed, concern attempting to curl in my gut. “Do you think that changes what you have to do with them when we fight?”

Both Wren and Awariye whipped around to regard me with wide eyes.

“How do you mean?” Wren asked.

I remembered the old mystic who had brought the lanterns to these lands. Ulbrecht had talked about him a lot and brought him to the castle several times. He'd lived in poverty up at the shrine where Wren was now posted. In the winter he ventured down into the valley and stayed at the lodge to keep warm. Such alpine terrain got far too cold and snowy to weather the winter there, especially under poor provisions.

“The mystic, Cyfrinydd, came here with the lanterns about seven years ago, right around the time Ulbrecht secured the first section along the Danube's banks. The same year that he crushed the mercenary group I'd been sold into and took me as one of his fighters,” I explained.

Awariye came over and took my hand, his brows furrowed with concern. I had already explained to him about my past, and the fate of my family. These conversations had happened while Awariye was still recovering, however, so with the heavy sleep and so much medicinal wine I wasn't sure what parts he remembered.

“The old mystic stayed at a lodge in the valley rather than coming to the castle, usually,” I continued. “As far as I recall, h never needed to tend to the lanterns during a battle while not up at the mountain shrine.”

“So we don't have his experience of attempting it somewhere else,” Wren concurred, the gears clearly turning as he pieced my story together.

Then I voiced something that had been niggling at me. “It has been a mild winter down here on the plains. The most recent battle—your first with the lanterns, Wren—was unexpectedly late in the year, and all kinds of things went wrong. We fought them back, but the entire time it felt like our footing was off. I'm not one to make the kind of oversight I did that led to me getting injured just to cover Ulbrecht's back.”

Awariye glanced to his friend. “That sounds like astrological influences; we could check. So both the weather, and possibly other forces, were contributing to something strange.”

“And it was a very late autumn, even up in the mountains,” added Wren. “The villagers nearby had an early frost and that prompted everyone into a preemptive harvest, but then autumn returned and lingered. I wasn’t snowed out of the mountains until that battle right before the winter solstice.”

We normally didn’t have to worry about border raids in the dark months because the cold contributed to the danger while fighting. Unless starvation was imminent, one might as well wait for spring to try to steal territory. But with temperatures remaining relatively mild, I’d noticed Ulbrecht and Sören discussing it more than once.

“Wren, you should possibly be prepared to handle the lanterns during battle while you’re still here,” I suggested, “if skirmishes at the border start before the mountain passes clear for you to get up there again.”

Awariye stepped into my space and I wrapped him in my arms, comforting him. I was used to life as a warrior, of leaving my fate in the hands of the gods and following my king straight into hell. It was easy to forget how it must look to an outsider like my newfound lover. But just as Awariye spoke of connecting to his higher soul when he sang to the gods, I too felt connected to a higher power when I defended these lands and the precious peace here, as if I were doing exactly what my immortal soul wished for me to do.

Wren crossed his arms, his face pinched in consideration. “Frankly, I wouldn’t want to do the channeling of power I did last time down here. These stone walls protect us from the weather and invaders, but they are hardly absorbent material for what came barreling down the planes. The thick forest in the mountains, rushing straight down to the river, all of it helped me get that power flowing through and on to somewhere else. Awariye, that’s when the memory of you singing to me all those years ago saved me; when you helped bring me back from the Otherworld. I thought of the poem you sang out of the *Golden Book of Vienna*; that was my saving grace when I felt like my body would explode.”

That did *not* sound good. My gut filled with worry, for Wren was not only a beautiful person but my friend. The

skinny, quirky mage before me was a desperately important friend to Awariye and was of absolute importance to my king. If we rode to battle and came back to find that something had happened to Wren, Ulbrecht would be utterly shattered. In horror, I tried not to think of what that would do to all of us who loved Ulbrecht and risked our lives for him.

“That might answer an important question,” said Awariye, pulling away from my hug enough to regard his friend, thankfully not catching my distress. “Everyone keeps asking who the lanterns gods are and what they want.”

That struck me as strange, since as warriors we already knew: they were gods that did not feel the need to tell us their names and merely gave us lanterns—as well as a mystic, and now Wren—to serve as symbolic representations for them. What they wanted was for the warriors to fight as hard as they could while they watched. That is what Ulbrecht told us and what I too could feel during onslaughts. Whether they continued to bless us in the future did not matter. What mattered was that they blessed us now, and so we fought. Evelyn and Sören’s kids were proof of our peace. They had been born in the calm created behind our shields.

“What does it answer?” asked Wren, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I went through an entire vision and fainted, just to come out with scrambled letters that don’t seem to form any kinds of names for them.” But he blinked, something occurring to him. “It was after that, though, that I pieced together who Uli is.”

“Maybe the vision was not for the sake of the letters, but for the power coming through,” I told him.

“And in your case, Wren, you have trained your mind enough that it also manifested as a change in consciousness and allowed you to make that connection about Ulbrecht,” said Awariye, piling onto my reasoning and making me proud.

But Wren was not satisfied with that. “Am I only a spigot? Fifteen years of training, and I’m just a faucet for them?”

Awariye and I moved as one, unwilling to let that kind of thinking take hold. Awariye disentangled from me and pulled

Wren into a hug while I patted Wren on the shoulder, unable to give him any more detailed reassurance, because ultimately we did not have a clear account of what these gods were thinking, nor did humans ever seem to when it came to divine powers.

“That’s why I think this points to an answer,” Awariye continued while hugging his friend. “You said their power is absorbed by the mountainside and the forest, then rushes to the valley into the Danube. Maybe the power you are helping to bring down is meant for Nature, and these gods have supported Ulbrecht because he protects the lanterns and the mystic who channeled the power down.”

That seemed to heal Wren. He drew in a shuddering breath and hugged my boyfriend tight. “If it’s for Mother Nature, then that’s a higher calling I can get excited about. Thank you, Awariye. Let’s work on that assumption and see where it takes us.”

“*Wunderbar*,” Awariye replied.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IGOR



“Do you remember the names of the gods Kristoff prayed to?” Awariye asked after we enjoyed a quiet moment together.

I dug back in my memory, so easily summoning Kristoff’s happy face when he talked about gods and the magic running through the world. I tried pronouncing one of the names, but I couldn’t be sure it was exact.

Awariye cocked his head to the side and regarded me. Wren tried out a couple of variations of the name to see if they rang any bells, but I didn’t know.

“He was from around here?” asked Awariye.

I nodded. “The same region as me.” That just added to the confusion, because the people throughout our area were predominantly worshippers of the Christ of a Thousand Ages in the past, but in recent decades things had diversified.

“So it could be Germanic, or Celtic,” surmised Wren. “Doesn’t exactly sound like either linguistically, however.”

“At least it isn’t Greco-Roman, so we can rule that out,” said Awariye.

“I thought they were local,” I protested. “Kristoff said he first heard of them in fairy tales as a child, and when he spent long strings of days in the forest, the trees and animals told him about them.”

Wren brightened. “And he was a warrior? He sounds like a mystic!”

I shrugged, feeling outnumbered. “There’s nothing wrong with a boy going into the forest to learn how to become a man.”

“All kinds of initiations into adulthood happen in a similar way, especially in cultures like ours that pride ourselves on a deep connection to the wild,” said Awariye, backing me up with a smile. “Let’s try our Gallo-Celtic gods we met at the monastery. They are local to this area, the Alpine Gauls from twenty-five hundred years ago, and for many centuries before that. If there’s a local god walking through the forest with antlers on his head, I bet they’ll know and can direct us.”

With all this talk of Kristoff’s story of finding divine people in the forests of our home, and Awariye’s conviction that the lanterns might be pouring their power into the world in order to benefit Nature, I glanced to the fires on the table burning in their bowls, and wondered whether that name I could not quite remember from my former lover was one of theirs.

“I could sing our invocation and banishing ritual for them,” offered Wren. “Or Awariye could sing it or offer a hymn. Then you could pray, Igor, just introduce yourself?”

Ulbrecht slipped into the chapel and sat off to the side while Wren and Awariye got into position. Awariye quickly tuned his Gallic harp that he held with one hand and plucked with the other. Wren needed to check some things with his oracle, then he was ready.

Wren lifted his hands to the heavens and began the invocation. Awariye hummed along with him, and plucked certain notes on the harp, what must be chords if I understood correctly, that helped Wren have a baseline over which to sing. Wren circled around Awariye, stopping at each of the cardinal directions; then returning to the east, he did three invocations of spirit, for a total of seven stations. Then holding his hands open, prior to closing the ritual, he ceded the space to Awariye, announcing the Universal Prayer, and my lover began to sing.

Grant us, O Holy Ones,

Thy protection.

And in protection, strength.
And in strength, understanding.
And in understanding, knowledge.
And in knowledge,
The knowledge of justice.
And in the knowledge of justice,
The love of it.
And in that love,
The love of all existences.
And in the love of all existences,
The love of Earth our Mother
And all goodness.

Then they both looked at me and nodded, encouraging me to pray. I'd been so engrossed in Awariye's voice, having their attention turned on me was startling.

"*H-hallo,*" I stammered, then froze up, realizing that Wren and Awariye could sense something that I couldn't, that clearly they knew the gods were here right now, and if it had been left to me, I'd have no idea. I had no choice but to shoulder those insecurities aside for the moment and leave them to look at later.

"My name is Igor. My best friend Kristoff prayed to you, I believe. If you would like me to, then I...*ahm*...I could bring wine and bread for you, and light incense, and..."

I trailed off as my mind lost all words and I proceeded to freak out. As a human and a warrior, I thought of myself as the top predator unless I was caught unawares or outnumbered. But if these gods were actually listening to me speak right now, they were enormous. That knowledge made me lose my nerve. If I said something wrong, they could squish me like a bug.

"And you'll pray to them," whispered Wren in encouragement.

I jumped. “*Ach-ja genau*, I will pray to you and try to listen. I don’t know what I could say that would be interesting to you, but—I’ll stop talking now. Thank you for your time.”

In fear, I checked with the mages and found them both with their eyes lidded. I realized they were listening, so I breathed deeply and tried to calm myself and listen too. No way could I hear anything with my heart pounding like this.

When my nerves finally stilled, I could feel the power of the lanterns filling the chapel. It was a wonder that they were willing to share this space, but since their mage Wren was already dedicated to his Celtic gods before he met the lanterns, maybe that only made sense. I was too familiar with the customs of the Abrahamic faiths, of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, since they were still quite popular. But theirs was a jealous god, and as far as I knew, said god did not allow for plurality like this. Yet even in these Danubian lands, there were already multiple iterations of Jesus—the Alpine Christ, the Christ of the Forest, and the Christ of a Thousand Ages—so maybe even Christian faith was branching like a tree these days.

With a jolt I realized my mind had quickly wandered astray, so I brought my thoughts back and tried to listen again, the task proving harder than I’d anticipated. I reasoned that even if they didn’t want to tell me something, they could at least see me right now. They could see I was a warrior, in love with the bard before me, even if said bard maybe didn’t fully know yet how much. They could also see Kristoff in my past, how I had loved him and he’d protected me from the beyond until I’d learned how to fight without him next to me on the battlefield.

They would then see the person I fought for: Ulbrecht, the king of these Danubian lands. Ulbrecht’s ferocity had brought a rare and young peace to our blood-soaked soil, and he fought with the backing of these lantern gods on the table before me. Ulbrecht fully believed—had been convinced by the mountain mystic that brought them here—that if he fought with everything he had, gave it his all, then the lanterns would at

least honor us by watching, and their power might aid us in protecting this peace for a little longer.

If the Gaulic gods invoked in this chamber now wanted what they saw in me, then in great humility I would pray to them and bring them things. I just hoped they were the ones Kristoff had prayed to, and that they wanted to know me too.

The sounding of Awariye's harp brought me out of my meditative state, so I quickly mentally closed the prayer with a thank-you while Wren cycled through the last steps of the ritual to close the space.

Once finished, my lover whipped around and smiled at me, filling me with light and joy. "That was a good introduction, Igor! Now we can see what they do and if they want you to continue."

"How do I know it worked?" I asked, unsure.

"Your life will get worse," Ulbrecht tossed in, catching me by surprise.

At my questioning look he smirked. "Trial by fire: karmic culmination. If the gods see that you're willing to work hard on a spiritual path, the first thing that happens is any unaddressed baggage you've been carrying around with you and refusing to look at will smack you in the face. Get through that baggage, however, and then you're ready."

"The path opens before you," both Awariye and Wren said at the same time, clearly quoting an instructor of theirs at the monastery, then giggled.

I shook my head with mirth and found Ulbrecht smiling at the two friends with a pleased look. These two were good for each other, and I couldn't be happier that their paths had crossed this winter.

Ulbrecht opened his arms and Wren sat next to him, then promptly squeaked when Ulbrecht relocated him to his lap. The two cuddled and watched the lanterns, but I surmised it was only a matter of time before Ulbrecht scooped Wren up and carried him off to their bedroom to ravish him.

Awariye appeared at my side, his harp packed away. He took my hand. “Want to go for a walk outside?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IGOR



“I need to spend more time outside and refill my stores,” said Awariye, breathing deeply and inspiring me to do the same.

We’d bundled up and gotten Awariye into a borrowed set of snow boots so we could tromp around in the forest and not get cold or wet. I’d wanted to hold his hand, but it was just cold enough that he crammed his mitts in his pockets, his breath puffing out in a white mist. He’d said he needed time in nature, but he was still recovering, so I planned to keep a close eye out in case his energy waned.

“I have done my prayers,” I began, “but now I want to talk about you.”

He quirked a brow at me. “Oh?”

I chuckled at him, then calmed as we hiked further into the woods. “What do you dream about?”

“The hot stud in my bed,” he replied immediately, making me laugh and throwing me off.

“*Nein-nein*,” I protested bashfully. “I mean, what do you dream about for your life?”

He sobered at that, looking far off, though at least he seemed to be seriously considering the question. “I can’t afford to have dreams, Igor. I nearly starved to death a few weeks ago.”

Though I knew that to be true, as I’d witnessed it and had been there with him every step of his recovery, hearing the

defeat in his tone shattered me. Here was the darkness he'd hidden deep down that I had to pull into the light so he could fix it. "If you could afford to have a dream, what would it be?"

He barked a laugh, but it was a bitter thing. "Before my vocal cords got so strained, I dreamed of training in the opera halls of Vienna."

He shook his head, then shrugged and stamped off ahead of me on the path, but I sped up and kept pace.

So he'd had bright-shining dreams back before he'd gone into the world to seek his fortune, and the brutal reality of our dark age had hit him hard. But Awariye's voice, albeit injured, was still so beautiful, I wouldn't give up on him having some kind of dream, even if it had to change.

"What would your dream be, with the current state of your voice kept in mind?" I asked.

"Igor..." he said in desperation, shaking his head again and stamping off.

Yet I followed and pressed. "I want to support you, Awariye. I love you. I get a salary from Ulbrecht, fighting for him as his soldier. Other than the lodging house, I have nothing to spend it on. My mother and sister are gone; if I can ever find them again, then I'll support them, but for now, I don't have anyone and I don't spend my money on anything. Ulbrecht could hire you as a bard—he'd be foolish not to—but even if he doesn't, I want to know what your dreams are, what you want to work toward."

"I won't be a burden!" he shouted, then growled in frustration. "Not on you, not on Ulbrecht or Wren, not on anyone."

I caught up and grabbed his arm, pulling him to a halt and forcing him to turn to face me. "*Oi.*"

AWARIYE

My heart in my throat, with courage I met his eyes, even as my cheeks burned in shame and every cell in my body told me to run away from this.

“I don’t want to face it,” I managed to say, my voice trembling, “that I might lose my ability to sing. As a bard, that’s everything. All my training is for the sake of transmitting the legends of the past to people. So much is lost when cities get sacked and the invaders burn the libraries. Entire civilizations have winked out of history that way. But bards train their minds to memorize and sing gigantic stories. You’d have to somehow find and kill all the bards for their stories to die. Even then, the children who listened to those legends will remember the fantasies of their youth and tell them to their children.”

Igor tilted his head and sent me an expectant look. “You just solved your own problem, Awariye.”

I blinked. “What?”

He shrugged, tugging me along with him, back down the path we’d come. “So you sing while your voice is still with you, and if it continues to get worse, you can begin training other bards for the future. You could take a student around with you on your travels, and if you enjoy teaching, then you could start up instruction in town for the select few that fit the bill and have the dedication.”

I squeezed his hand as we walked, taking a few deep breaths and letting that option really sink in. “The monastery was able to train me in memory techniques, ceremonial magic, and prayer. They trained me to be a mage, in other words. But my musical training came from my childhood, and from any quick notes I could get from bards that passed through. The monastery is ultimately not a music school. I could pick up the slack there, send students back and forth if I find one that wants to train as a monk in addition to bardic training with me.”

Igor’s smile was so pleased. “*Genauso*, Awariye. Just like that. You are poor in money but not in tangible skills. Now

that you've found a home here with us, you can use this as your foundation to make your dreams come true."

I met his eyes, seeing the sincerity there, but I had to look away as mine burned with tears. I had gotten stuck for a good long while and had struggled to find solutions to get myself out of my situation. Now this sweet, generous man was offering to help me build a new path. All I had to do was slough off the fatalism and desperation that had been plaguing me. It made sense how that negativity had come to settle in my thinking—I had been going through a hard time and it felt like everything I tried didn't work—but such patterns no longer served me, if they ever had. Maybe it would be easy enough to let them go, since I'd never wanted to feel that despair to begin with, but if they'd become ingrained as habits, then I would have to notice and put in the hard work to unbind and release them.

"Thank you, Igor," I said with my whole heart. "I have so much more life to live."

"Of course," he replied. "You struggled, but you made it through."

That evening, after dinner, I jumped up before the king could leave the hall. "Ulbrecht, could I have a moment of your time?"

Wren was in the process of being scooped up into the king's arms and blushed. "Should I give you two some privacy?"

"Either way," I responded.

Everyone cleared the hall, helping Sigrid and the kitchen staff by bussing the table as they went. Wren slid to the ground with a bashful smile. Then Ulbrecht met my eyes and I got to the point.

"I would like to offer my services to you," I said, my heart pounding with nerves. "After winter is done, I would like to

travel your lands and sing of you to the people, and also listen for what they think of you, and any songs of you that might already be forming. For that I would need your financial sponsorship, your patronage. If you'd like to try something temporary at first, I can do that."

As I spoke, Ulbrecht's expression filled with mirth. "Awariye, you are my lover's close friend. Did you think I would let you go? The only reason I hadn't spoken with you yet is because Evelyn was trained to serve as High Queen and thus runs a lot of the statesmanship mechanics, and I haven't had a chance to talk with her about it."

Wren gasped, then shrieked with joy and leapt into my arms. I caught him, laughing despite myself.

"Spend each winter with us," suggested Ulbrecht. "I know Wren and Igor will be happy about that. Travel to the monastery and learn what you can about how to write the songs yourself. When the time is right and the lantern gods are ready, you can sing about them, too."

Today I was so raw I felt like I was always on the verge of tears. "Thank you, Ulbrecht."

"You're family now—call me Uli," he said gently. "And though you Helveticans have no obligation to consider me your king, make this your home. Come under my protection."

That was too much. The tears escaped and I started shaking. Wren held me close, cupping my head against his neck.

"Thank you, Uli," said Wren, his voice choked with tears also.

"You don't need to thank me, *Schatz*," the king replied.

The tears cycled through, and I calmed, so grateful but also tired from the exertion. I scrubbed my eyes and tried to think, this conversation too important to end early. "There are some things I think would be wise for me to listen for on my travels, while I think of ways to present your story. The people are unclear about why you don't have a High Queen. I've heard them talk, and it seems they know that Evelyn was given to

Sören instead, but I sense an anxiety for their lonely king and what he will do.”

“Evelyn mentioned this to me,” said Ulbrecht with a nod. “Let the truth speak for itself, and be keen to not let rumors get out of hand. I did not give my best friend my fiancé because she cheated or betrayed me. I stepped aside because my two most beloved people fell in love with each other.”

What a kind man. It was so noble when phrased that way.

“Nor do I plan to ever take a queen now,” he continued. “Evelyn’s skills at statecraft are all we need, and her children are my heirs. There is my sweet Wren, but I don’t want a target on his back up at the mountain shrine. Our priority is giving the gods what they ask, a place in nature. “

My best friend nodded against me, still in my arms.

“Furthermore, Wren holds no political position, and never will.”

“That is our duty, in the vows we took as monks,” I supplied, and Ulbrecht nodded agreement. “A gay king is unconventional, but I’ve never heard anyone imply that it makes you weak. That, at least, is one thing the people are clear on: your strength.”

“Good.”

Wren untangled from me but squeezed my shoulders, his brows furrowed in concern. “Ingeborg’s a mage, but what if people start saying the king’s giving an ear to a dark sorceress? That could go in all kinds of terrible directions.”

“If things transform from petty gossip into something more potent, I’ll keep an eye out,” I promised. Those who studied blessing magic diligently and quietly had to always keep in mind that the general populace could brand them as evil witches to find a scapegoat.

Ulbrecht clapped his hands and nodded. “Evelyn will handle your salary, Awariye, and I look forward to listening to you in the future. I know the kids have been gunning for a story, and the dark winter months are the perfect time for it.”

Wren beamed at me, and I bowed to the king. “Thank you. It is an honor.”

I’d just rounded the corner from the great hall to find Igor leaning up against the wall, arms and legs crossed, head bowed like he was sleeping standing up. He jumped when I touched his elbow, perking up immediately with a question in his eyes.

I nodded, confirming Ulbrecht’s patronage, and Igor scooped me into his arms, hugging me tight.

“This is how you can stay with me,” said Igor, his voice filled with emotion. “We can stay together. You can have your dreams, and I can come home to you, whenever you’re in town.”

I ached to think that he meant coming home from battle, not just from a day job. But we would have to face that when it came. He was on his path, and I was on mine. We would find our way forward together.

“I want that,” I answered, my heart so full of love it hurt. “I want to stay with you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AWARIYE



ONE MONTH LATER

I melted onto Igor's back, my soft cock slipping out of him, my body completely and totally sated. "You're so good, Igor. Fucking you is the best."

My lover's back vibrated with his chuckling. Then as had become our beloved custom, Igor grabbed my arm and slid me down to the bed, hovering over me. Usually now he either let me blow him or jerked off above me, but this time he grabbed the dampened rag and wiped off his hands.

I reached for him, squeezing his forearm, fighting the urge to pass out. I always came so hard when I topped him, and I topped him a lot. "Let me blow you."

He huffed a laugh. "I came, Awariye."

What? "You did?"

He finished wiping off his hands and met my eyes. We grinned at each other.

"Look at you, coming on my cock," I praised because my man couldn't get any more perfect.

"Look at you, not noticing," he snarked, and I yipped and apologized.

Igor snuggled in my arms, and we made out languidly, relaxed and ready for sleep. I must have dozed off a bit because Igor coaxed me awake and we cleaned up and got dressed before getting back into bed. Ulbrecht had met

recently with his warriors out of concern over the unusually mild winter. In the event that incursions at the border might happen even during the dark months, he wanted his men ready at a moment's notice, so no sleeping naked.

Over the last month, my health had improved substantially. Wren and I had put each other through the paces in an epic review of all of our disciplinary techniques learned at the Monastery, as if we were novice monks again, starting at the beginning with breathing exercises and nourishing and cleansing the etheric and astral bodies.

I'd begun tutoring Evelyn and Sören's kids in the legends, but it was hardly tutoring, more like story time, since I told them any tale they wanted to hear, and so many times over, they were starting to memorize them. This was humanity's oldest and most durable form of information transmission. Take a story, make it fantastical, find children of that age where they want to hear it countless times while imagining it, then you can count on them still knowing those magical tales when they themselves aged. Literacy could be lost in a community, all the libraries burned as civilizations collapsed and cities got sacked, but these stories would persist so long as people lived to tell them.

Wren and I also spent our time going for long walks outside when it was warm enough, and on the cold days, going through the library and making a list of its contents to send to the monastery, in case they wanted a copy of anything. There were a couple of manuals on magic and esotericism that we were already copying, and I'd found an alternate translation of the Icelandic *Eddas* that I was slowly copying down so the Diana Monastery library could have it.

Then in the evenings, once the day's training was done, Igor joined me.

He'd taken up a daily prayer practice at the chapel that he did by himself before coming to find me each day, and from the light air about him, I could tell spending time in the presence of the lanterns and Kristoff's gods was good for him.

He pulled the blanket up and over us and settled on his back. I sidled up against him, resting my head on his chest, my ear over his heartbeat, which was always so comforting.

My lover wrapped an arm around my back. “*Gute Nacht.*”

“Goodnight,” I answered. “Love you.”

“*Liebe-liebe,*” he whispered, and we both dropped off.

Tucked away, warm and safe in his arms, I was sleeping deeply when a commotion pulled me out of my slumber, rousing me slowly and then all of a sudden when the king’s voice boomed as he dashed down the hall.

“Igor!”

My lover flew from the bed and in no time threw on his boots, grabbed his belt and sword, and sprinted down the hall after Ulbrecht. I’d shouted in surprise, ripped from sleep and only managing to catch sight of his back whipping around the corner by the time I made it to the hallway.

I scanned the area to find Wren down the hall in the doorway to his and Ulbrecht’s room, his hair disheveled and clothes barely on. Wren met my eyes, and that was when I heard the clamor of the men and their shouts, then the horses as the band sped away. Behind everything, like the sound of a steady wind that goes unnoticed, were the distant bells and horns of the relay stations on the mountain, lookouts for these alpine lands.

“That’s the alarm,” said Wren. “There’s a border raid. They’re going to fight them off.”

Sagging against the doorframe, I could barely remain standing as fear shot through me, panic drenching my nerves and soaking me in paralysis and terror. Igor, my precious Igor, was

about to go into battle and fight for his life and that of the king's.

Wren's voice pulled me out of my fear. "I've got to get to the lanterns. Awariye, will you go with me? I'm worried how strong they'll be in that stone chapel rather than up on the mountain."

That snapped me back to the situation at hand. "*Ja, okay.* Let's go together. I want to see how it works."

We rushed into better clothes, and I tried to get myself calm and focused, oriented toward a spiritual state of mind. In a brutal sense, someone other than Wren should know how to invoke these lanterns and channel their power, because being isolated up in the mountains without a bodyguard put Wren at all kinds of risk. Should some vagrant harm the monk who had given himself to the lanterns, those gods might withdraw their mandate for the king.

Who better to train as Wren's backup than another monk from the same monastery, who knew the same magic? Especially a bardic one like myself, considering Wren reported having succeeded in funneling their power by means of a sung prayer, a centuries-old poem whose words had become an ode.

I left our room with resolve, carefully keeping my eyes away from our bed, where Igor and I had just been sleeping, the blankets thrown back in such a hurry. Wren led the way and we hustled to the kitchens for bread and wine to offer the gods, then Wren fretfully searched high and low for his dog, claiming Bello absolutely had to be there, that he'd served a purpose last time. This had only happened once before, a trial by fire where Wren was alone with the lantern gods when Ulbrecht and his men fought back a raid.

We finally located Bello, who had been sleeping in the little princess' room. Our arms laden with bread (including some we could bribe the dog with), we set off for the chapel.

I found it rather anticlimactic that the lanterns burned normally as if nothing unusual were going on.

“We still have some time,” said Wren in answer to my unspoken question. “They’re still riding.”

“How do you know?” I asked, helping him set the bread on the table and out of reach of the dog, arranging our things.

“I have a phantasm on Uli’s shoulder, a little wren,” he explained. “It happened without my choosing last time, so I’ve been practicing doing it on purpose from now on. I can hear what happens near him, the hooves of the horses and what Uli says. The phantasm even survived me passing out. I still don’t know what fully happened to me or why I lost consciousness. The magic came too quickly and was just too powerful for my mind to fathom.”

A stone dropped in my stomach, and all my collected calm scattered to the wind. “Do you hear him fighting?”

Wren nodded.

My strength left and I sank to the bench, bending over and pressing my face into my hands, elbows into my knees as I proceeded to lose my shit.

Immediately Wren was at my side, rubbing his hand up and down my back. “What’s happening?”

I bent down further, forcing myself to slow my breathing, but it still came in shallowly and then sped up again. I pushed words out of my mouth because the breath needed to form them necessitated deeper and slower pulls of air. Our tradition taught that the act of breathing reconnected a person to Nature because every breath we took was of Earth’s atmospheric body. In magical terms, exhalation released stuck points, hangups, and spiritual clutter, whereas inhalation could be used to breathe in one’s higher soul.

Just the thought of my immortal soul coming in through my solar plexus as my lungs expanded served to put me back in touch with my emotions, not fully out of the panic, but also no longer so lost in my own mind. “How do you handle this? I’m in love with Igor, and I could lose him.”

“Don’t even think it,” urged my friend. “Uli feels me there with him, so I have to keep my mental and emotional state

level. Even while I perform this invocation and care for the lanterns, I have to believe in him with all my strength so he can fight without worrying about me.”

That got me to look up at him, and I found determination in his eyes.

“We are in the hands of our gods,” he reminded me. “Live or die tonight, they are with us, and always have been. There is an angel, a mighty being, standing with your higher soul, Awariye. Your immortal soul is sleeping in that angel’s arms until you fully invoke him and finally come awake. You are never alone. All of us have people who love us, who will help us across the river, should we step through the veil tonight.”

How could he be so strong? And yet I saw the way he looked at me, that he needed me to be there for him, too.

“I will help you with the lanterns,” I promised. “I need to learn how to do this, so I can step in if you pass out.”

He put both hands on my shoulders and touched our foreheads together. “Thank you. Come, the horses are running. There’s still time.”

I concluded we needed a pot of tea if we were going to sing through the night, so we hustled back to the kitchen and kept Bello with us by bribing him with treats.

Sigrid and the other staff were bustling around in preparations for the welcoming party that was custom for when the warriors came back. Evelyn popped in to help; her children were still sleeping but she too was wide awake after having her spouse spring from the bed.

Wren and I made standard tea with the customary alpine *Kräuter* herbs.

“If we can figure out what works tonight,” Wren leaned in and said softly, keeping out of the way of the staff as the kettle came to a boil, “we should record the process and send a copy to Marit for the library at Diana Monastery.”

Wren so rarely mentioned Marit and Corbi, his former lovers and fellow monks. I wondered how he felt about all this; those three had been inseparable back in the day. “I can deliver it once the pass clears. Do you want to see them?”

Wren’s brown eyes widened in shock. “Of course, I want to see them. I miss them like crazy, though I’ve been much better with you here. Part of the reason Uli and I fell into bed together so quickly was because I felt so shattered at leaving them, the hole in my heart so empty.”

I bumped his shoulder and quipped, “Are you saying you did a rebound from two monks with the Danubian High King?”

I thought Wren would lighten up at my teasing, but instead he looked sad. “No, not at all. Uli found me grieving them. He swooped me up with his easy affection, and I handed my heart right over. I don’t regret loving Uli; I’ll never leave him.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” I chided gently.

Then he smiled. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t jump to that conclusion. Sorry, Awariye, I’m not just tired, I think my consciousness is switching toward the task ahead of us and I’m not thinking clearly.”

Clarity of thought was exactly what we needed right now. Our tradition didn’t allow for trance states because it involved a loss of control over the situation and a surrendering of one’s will, something extremely dangerous when dealing with such potent forces.

I tried to bring him back around to the topic at hand, grateful our upcoming tea had caffeine for mental focus. “You three were glued at the hip back before I left the monastery. Did something happen to allow you to separate?”

“No, nothing happened,” he answered, his expression pained. “The instructors always told us not to fall in love with our partners, because our duty to the gods came first. After all this, I think that practice is very flawed.”

“I think so too,” I agreed. “Seeing how happy you were together taught me what a healthy relationship looks like. With

you three to compare my flings to, I eventually just gave up on sleeping around.”

He patted my shoulder affectionately. “Corbi, Marit, and I never said those words. As ordered, we followed the rules, and never said that we loved each other. I’d naively thought that we’d kept our hearts in check, but up alone at that mountain shrine, far away from home with only a dog and seven lanterns for company, I realized my heart had made its own decision. I had loved them after all. I don’t know how they felt or currently feel. We never talked about it. I want to see them again, show them that I’m in a better place and I hope they are too.”

“*Sehr gut*,” I said in encouragement just as the kettle began to whistle.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AWARIYE



Back at the chapel, the pressure of the air had changed. Wren and I checked the windows, flinging them as well as the doors wide open to encourage air flow. I drank the tea and allowed my mind to sharpen despite it being the middle of the night. My eyes trained on the flames in the seven bronze bowls and I realized I was seeing them as larger in my astral vision. In the regular, physical world they were just large candles, but if I blinked several times and expanded my consciousness out to the lengths of my arms, dancing fires filled the bowls and leapt several hand-widths upwards.

“How did it go last time?” I asked.

Wren rubbed his temples, the astral pressure in the room clearly affecting him more than me. Something was building, and it would need an outlet to come down into material form.

“Uli invokes all the different gods of his men, as a show of solidarity. Lastly he invokes the lanterns before they leave their cover and confront the invaders. The moment Uli called on the lantern gods, they...it felt like my head was going to explode. On the border of my sanity, I remembered you singing to me, and that poem from the *Golden Book of Vienna* came to mind. That was the only thing that seemed to work. Each time I sang the poem the pressure eased, ever so slightly down a bit.”

“It came down the planes,” I surmised, and he nodded.

What those gods wanted to do in the material world, what they desired, we had no way of knowing. All we could do was

ask and remain open to their communication, but if they *never* saw fit to inform us, then we'd indeed never know.

“They’ve arrived,” Wren said as he sucked down the rest of his cup of tea and set it aside. “Uli is speaking with his men. We need a plan.”

Wren paced and tried to focus, his dog following him back and forth, so I set up shop in the empty space behind the table with the lanterns and began to sing the invocation and banishing ritual, including opening a protective circle for further magical work if necessary. Usually I’d play my harp, but with how stressed Wren was getting, I wanted my hands free to grab him in case he fainted.

Taking a calming breath, trusting that I would hear Wren or his dog if they needed me, I turned my mind to the task at hand and felt my spirit rise.

Gazing at the ceiling, I smiled at the shadowy oranges and yellows flickering on the rafters from the candles in the bronze bowls below. Every time I thought of the gods that guided me, the ones the instructors at the monastery had taught me how to find, my heart filled with gratitude. Some gods were not kind to humans, and quite a few others couldn’t care either way, but the ones who were willing to work with us if we were willing to grow tended to be kind. As a young man, without meaning to, my heart came to love them before I knew it.

Tonight was for the lantern gods, so as I worked my way around the circle, starting in the east, at each station in the cardinal directions I invoked both the Gaulic god of that gate as well as the lanterns.

Finishing the southern gate of fire, an elemental invocation that felt a bit too strong in a stone chapel with seven flames going, I chanced a look at Wren and found him sitting nearby, eyes closed and hands folded in his lap. He was listening to me sing, a calm set to his features, clearly centering himself and orienting his consciousness toward the divine. I smiled, glad

that my singing could do that for him and lift us both out of our worries in order to be strong while our lovers fought off an incursion.

Sensing the need to hurry if I wanted to complete the ceremony before the lantern power ignited and needed siphoning, I worked my way around to the gate of water, then earth, singing their hymns and arriving finally back to the east, wherein I invoked the three forms of spirit: below, above, and within. I twined them together, sent the twin dragons of solar and earth-based currents weaving through my body, then closed with a purifying rotation of a sphere to cleanse the space of any lingering energies.

After closing, I held still for a time, knowing the gods were watching and listening at this moment, since I tended to feel them during the ritual. Being seen, my body tightened when I reflected on what I had been through the last couple of months. I'd survived so much, struggled and suffered so much, but I'd been given a second chance at this life, and I was going to use it. Maybe the whole reason I'd healed was so I could sing for them tonight. I would sing for Ulbrecht and the unknown gods who shined on him; I would sing for this gentle Danubian peace and the natural beauty of this place with what time I had left in this incarnation.

I kissed my right palm, held it out to my gods, and swept it wide to include the lanterns, then sang a little ending I had written myself.

With love this night,

Thank you

For the light that you are

In my life.

I felt the energies dissipate, the soothing yet intelligent calm that greeted me during ritual. In its place, the pressure from the lanterns increased yet again, the flames gurgling in their bowls and popping aggressively, startling us.

Wren whimpered and hunched in on himself, pressing fingertips to his temples. "He's invoking Christ for his men."

I swallowed my nerves. Here we go. “Thousand Ages, and Alpine. The Christ of the Forest.”

He nodded, not looking at me, his breathing growing ragged. “To the pagan gods, ancient and new,” he said, apparently echoing his lover.

I waited, the tension building further, pressing against my skull. My head throbbed in response, threatening a headache. My heart was torn in two directions at not being able to hear what Wren could, through the little phantasm bird he’d cast to sit on Ulbrecht’s shoulder. I didn’t want to hear the fighting about to start, but my heart ached, wanting to know that Igor was safe.

Through the popping of the flames I almost didn’t hear Wren’s whisper: “And to the seven lanterns.”

The flames burst asunder and I shrieked in fright. Bello started barking, standing up on his hind legs and putting his paws on Wren’s thighs. Wren for his part didn’t seem surprised but sweat beaded his brow and his hands shook as he reassured his dog and fed him little tidbits of bread.

Blinking, I could see that the larger flames were mostly in my astral vision, but even the physical flames were leaping out of their bowls and into the air. My body shook from the energy and panic threatened to overwhelm me as survival instinct kicked in and told me to run. Something was building on the planes just above us. When the power reached a terminus, it would come barreling down through whatever opening it could find. If Wren and I didn’t want to be ripped to shreds, we had to find a way to safely funnel it through.

The pressure built till I couldn’t take it anymore. “What do we do?”

“Sing, Awariye,” Wren told me, still comforting the frightened dog. “See if the poem from the *Golden Book of Vienna* that I used last time works again. I don’t know whether Bello needs to sleep for this to work. He slept through the

whole thing last time, had no idea what was going on, and I wonder if he served to ground things while I nearly lost my senses.”

Fear shot through me, not just that our lovers were charging now, but that such a strong force had shot through my friend’s consciousness, knocking him out cold. That was dangerous; it risked his health and sanity. This couldn’t keep happening, with every battle risking Wren again and again. At some point our luck would run out, and then it would be too late. We had to find a solution.

Bello finally calmed a bit, more than willing to gobble up the bread Wren gave him. The air felt too thick. Yet even with the doors wide open, it hadn’t occurred to the dog to bolt.

Wren coaxed him up onto the padded bench and I regretted that our one sleeping spot would be covered in dog hair, but we had bigger priorities. For once Bello behaved and draped himself over Wren’s lap.

Content that they were fine for the time being, I planted my feet, took a deep breath, projected up toward the heavens, and began to sing *The Valley of the Black Pig* by William Butler Yeats.

The dews drop slowly and dreams gather

Unknown spears suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes.

And then the clashes of fallen horsemen and the cries

Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.

We who still labor by the cromlech on the shore.

The grey cairn on the hill

When day sinks drowned in dew.

Being weary of the world’s empires

Bow down to you.

Master, of the still stars,

And of the flaming door.

I'd sung with all my strength, pouring my sole focus into the intentions behind the words written centuries ago, before our present dark age.

Indeed, my lungs expanded fully, and I did feel a tiny bit better. This was the potency of training to sing as a magical act that could reach up the planes, something humans normally could not do unless they trained their minds to achieve higher states of consciousness in the celestial spheres.

"Why does this poem work?" I asked. "We need to find which ones do and don't, have a list of backups in case there's a limit for any one of them."

When no reply came, I glanced at my friend and found Bello totally conked out, like he'd dropped into sleep out of nowhere. Wren leaned over him, petting the back of Bello's head and neck. Only after a long moment of the pressure building up again did he look up and blink, noticing I had stopped.

"Keep going," he urged, a hint of desperation in his tone. "Or do you want me to do it? I sang it a good hundred times before I passed out. I don't know how it worked, but it's slight enough that I had to keep going or it felt like my skull would explode."

The pressure built again, and fear threatened to overwhelm me. "I can keep singing it, but Wren, we need to take this chance to experiment. We've already confirmed that more than one person can do this: I can do it also, though we're both using our magical training."

Poor Wren's nod was slow and belated. Already I felt like I was losing him, that the sounds of battle ringing in his ears and the force pushing against our minds was affecting him, the burden far more upon him than on me, and as the pressure increased yet again, my head started pounding.

I took matters into my own hands and wracked my brain for ideas. "What if I sang the Lord's Prayer?"

Wren's eyes flew wide, and they seemed to clear. "No, Awariye! The Abrahamic god is jealous. What do you think

would happen if you sang his hymns for someone else?”

“But what if the lanterns are aligned with the Christ of a Thousand Ages?” I challenged. “Then we’d have thousands of hymns and prayers we could use.”

Wren shook his head adamantly. “The multitude of Christs or the God of the Muslims and Jews has had months to give me any such indication. I have not so much as dreamt of a cross or any Abrahamic symbolism since inheriting this post.”

That was a solid point. It would be the easiest thing in the world for beings so powerful to plant some imagery in one of Wren’s dreams to nudge him toward them. The Christian mages at Diana Monastery invoked archangels in their ritual magic. As fellow monks, Wren and I would recognize such signs immediately.

I wished for our instructors at the monastery right now. If we messed this up badly enough, we could lose our minds. Yet Wren’s letters had been slow to be delivered, what with the snowy passes through the Alps closed in the winter, and the only response he’d received back so far was from the head librarian, confirming he’d documented Wren’s account and that he wanted Wren to send as much information as he could. He’d also confirmed that my mentor Ceredigion was recovering at the monastery and would pull through.

“I’ll try the Universal Prayer then,” I said to my friend’s jerky nod.

These nature-based lanterns would surely appreciate a polytheistic prayer to nature-based gods.

With all the beauty and grace I could muster, I sang our prayer.

Grant us, O Holy Ones,

Thy protection,

And in protection, strength.

And in strength, understanding.

And in understanding, knowledge.

*And in knowledge,
The knowledge of justice.
And in the knowledge of justice,
The love of it.
And in that love,
The love of all existences.
And in the love of all existences,
The love of Earth our Mother,
And all goodness.*

Wren sighed at the same time I did, as we felt that release. But even through the brief lessening, the next crested wave seemed to roll through.

Maybe I really should just sing William Butler Yeats' poem a thousand times. With how delirious and pained Wren looked, hugging his dog like a raft on stormy seas, I realized in terror that I might be the only fully cognizant person in the room.

Pacing around the table as the lanterns surged, billowing and seeming to eat up all the air despite the windows and doors flung wide open, I resisted the urge to suggest again that I sing one of the many hymns to the Judeo-Christian God. It was just such a waste, since in this area, despite three tumultuous centuries, Christianity by far was the religion for which the most material had survived. In case the lanterns were so aligned, I should at least try it, but Wren would only say I was being too scientific about my testing, and that risked offending the gods. To be truly scientific, the human stood as the subject, with the other being that was undergoing testing taking the position as a passive object on which the human acts, and no living being would appreciate being treated that way.

The best path was to approach the gods with respect, asking for contact and listening intently, then accepting it if one didn't hear anything. Ours were quiet gods that waited for

the person along the path if they continued to put in the hard work.

I looked over the lanterns and pressed a palm over my solar plexus in respect, then held my hands open to them. “Please guide me, us, in what you want. I will endeavor to listen. Thank you.”

As my brain pulsed and I winced, some shuffling came from behind me, and I turned to find Wren shifting out from under his snoring dog. My friend smiled indulgently at the large animal, smoothing his ears down and giving him one last pat before letting him sleep on the bench.

Then Wren met my eyes, and my breath froze in my chest, stuttering out to see the crisp clarity therein.

Wren began circling the wooden table clockwise. I did so as well, keeping pace with him so as to form opposing poles that rotated around the lanterns. Wren sang the Yeats poem first of The Valley of the Black Pig, then the Universal Prayer, and we felt the pressure ease slightly both times, only to be refilled once more. Little by little, the power coming down from the higher planes was getting funneled into the physical world, our world, where our blessed partners fought to protect this land from rape and pillage. I only hoped that the power building up that we were bringing through was benevolent and divine, that even if it didn’t protect our fighters, then maybe it would at least nourish nature and the harvest.

By the time Wren finished the Universal Prayer, I had another song ready, a hymn to the Sun. I sang through it as Wren smiled at the lanterns, knowing from his gaze that this one would work. Again, the pressure eased, another notch siphoned even as it increased again in only seconds. Wren sang it back to me, and since that one had worked, I cycled us through the hymns for the planets and the material elements, finishing with a love song to our home planet.

Although the lanterns of course represented air and fire, there were seven in a formation of balance and directional current. With such powerful forces, it was critical to enforce a balance, and thus we brought in the other hymns for water and

earth to counterbalance. Wren and I would notice, if not also those around us, if we became unbalanced from spending too much time near air and fire. To be too airy was to lose touch with reality and become an “airhead” who was fully scattered and unable to focus. To be unbalanced in fire made it easy to fly into a rage.

While Wren sang the planetary hymns, echoing each one back to me, I tried to focus on the lanterns and singing for the gods, but the fear that set my heart racing demanded attention. I couldn't square how delirious Wren had been just a few minutes ago with how he was now. Here he was, sharp as a tack and pushing me to circle the lanterns with him and sing any nature-based pagan poetry I could find.

Then as Wren sang to Earth, my breath shuddered again as I realized I had asked the lanterns for help directly before this. A chill ran over my whole body, shivering from head to toe and setting the hairs on my arms standing up as the lantern flames flickered between my fellow monk and me while we rotated around and around.

At the monastery, we studied the function of magic and its apparent behavior. Magic, we learned, tended to flow like water and seek the path of least resistance. That was why it was so important to meditate and deliberate on any magical act, because you could ask for something, but you did not get to choose how you might get it. That could put you in a world of misery if you did not foresee possible ways the world might move and shift around you.

I had asked the gods to guide me in how they would like me to sing to them and lead their power into the world. That very moment, their mage had woken from his delirium to instruct me. If that wasn't the path of least resistance, I didn't know what else could be.

Never had I received an answer to a prayer so quickly, and the almost immediate response spoke of these immense powers directly listening. Although I'd gotten what I'd asked for, it still terrified me.

Wren suggested the Orphic hymns, then that we work through the ancient Celtic ones I knew for Nature's forests and springs. I smiled and took a quick sip of tea, my throat soothed and ready to oblige. He did not have all the hymns memorized that I did, but Wren was the mage for these gods, and I would sing them to him so he could echo them back, line by line.

And we did so, through the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AWARIYE



My aching back, hips, and head finally woke me. I gasped with a start as I took in the ceiling rafters. Blinking my eyes clear, I looked around, fearing I'd fainted and passed out on the floor, only to find myself somewhat pinned, and what I saw froze me solid.

Wren lay tucked against me, his wild hair in my face and snoring and drooling on my chest. We lay on a blanket...*on* the table, sandwiched between the lanterns. Two columns of three, at my head, elbows, and knees, then a seventh one at a single point below my feet, representing power cascading down the planes and into the human world.

They were so close to us I dared not move. I did not remember climbing up there, spreading a blanket and lying down. Indeed, I had no recollection of last night except for rotating around the table with Wren for hours as we used our magical training to guide the power down.

Our location struck me as eerie. With a gasp, I feared for the dog, only to hold stock still listening and realize I heard two sets of snoring, so Bello must still be over on the bench sawing logs.

Poor Wren whimpered against me and twitched, sleeping fitfully. I wrapped an arm around his back, hugging him to me and smoothing his hair down with my other hand. He calmed and dropped off again, but I wanted to ask him about the fight, whether it was over. Eager to not wake him, I forced my breath out slowly so I wouldn't sob. Tears burned my eyes and my throat ached.

I was in the hands of my gods, always, but such words were much easier to say than to live their truth. And to also now be in the hands of seven unknown gods represented by these lanterns, for heaven's sake, even lying upon their altar table, frightened me and left me raw. I wanted to know that Igor was okay, that he was still alive and that he wasn't hurt. I wanted my kindhearted lover to come home so I could hold him again.

Silently I prayed for all of Ulbrecht's warriors, and for the precious Danubian king who defended our home.

Though the flames remained in their bowls, the ether of the air seemed to stretch over us, faint yellows and whites covering us as we slept, like a dancing fog. As it swept over me, I felt my tears dry and my tension ease as I dropped off.

A harsh gasp woke me, and I jumpstarted to find Sigrid shaking me awake. "Young man, what are you both doing up here? Good heavens, what if your clothing had caught fire!"

Wren groaned awake as I apologized to the old woman who ran the castle, then explained that we had tended the lanterns through the night and didn't know how we wound up on the table. Poor old Sigrid seemed genuinely alarmed, and I couldn't blame her. My skin still tingled from the etheric flow that had skittered over the both of us when I'd woken earlier in the night.

Sigrid lifted each of the bowls and placed them toward the edge of the table so we had room enough to get up without risking our clothes. "Ingeborg left in the night soon after Ulbrecht and the men did. We haven't heard from either of them, but the preparations for the welcome-home feast are ready to go as soon as we have an idea. We're all going to take a rest until then. Why don't you two get in a proper bed."

"Yes, madam," I answered.

Wren scrubbed at his eyes and murmured that he would try to get in touch with Uli through the magical phantasm he'd

sent as a bird to sit on his shoulder. He massaged his temples, and I was grateful my own headache had dissipated earlier.

Bello woke and bombarded Sigrid, surely smelling the scents of cooking and baking on her clothes. Sigrid shooed him away, and the gesture was so normal after such a surreal night that I giggled despite myself.

Sigrid smiled at me, her joy contagious despite the dark circles under her eyes. Then she cocked her chin at Wren. “Is that a headache? I’ll whip up some medicine and leave it in the kitchen before I go for a rest.”

Wren nodded and I spoke for him. “*Danke*, Sigrid.”

She left with the dog in tow and the room fell silent except for the occasional fizzing of one of the candles. I sat with Wren in the circle of my arms and bent legs, unable to hold back. “Can you hear Ulbrecht?”

Wren nodded and whispered, “I think so.”

I grabbed the last of the tea that had gone cold. Wren drank and focused, whimpering a bit more. I held him, massaging his neck and back, keeping quiet while Wren tried to contact Ulbrecht using his gift of clairaudience, the ability to hear through the subtle planes across great distances.

“Uli’s fine,” Wren said in relief. “Igor too, though his shoulder needs ice and another look from the doctor. All the men are okay, but there are some injuries. They stayed longer in the town to record the damage and arrange for repairs. They’ll be heading back soon.”

My breath whooshed out of me, and I sighed in pure relief. “They’re okay.”

Wren hugged me back, right there on the altar table. “They’re safe.”

We reset the chapel from everything that had happened, then left the lanterns to burn themselves out. Wren and I drank

down the medicine that Sigrid made us in the kitchen. I suggested we loop the castle once before settling in bed for a quick nap before the festivities began later in the day.

We bundled up, but as the fresh cold air hit us, I sensed a change come over me. Unable to explain it, I said nothing and simply observed as we rounded the corner and circled the back part that opened to the forest.

Wren's voice stopped me in my tracks. "Awariye, wait. Look."

I followed where he pointed and stared out at the thicket of trees, pines and beeches and spruce. "What is it?"

My friend's eyes were unsure, his face sallow, exhausted. "Does it not look different to you? There's a green cloud dissipating above the tree line, as if I can see the forest breathing."

I took his hand and squeezed it, grounding him. "There was a yellow mist over us when I woke to find us on the table. Do you remember climbing up there?"

Wren shook his head, eyes wide. "I assumed we passed out during the singing, but there's no reason we'd climb up on an altar. That seems disrespectful."

Indeed. We'd only get up there if someone insisted.

"I feel different; I'm not sure how," I said, rubbing my solar plexus, which likely had been the portal through which said energy had flowed into my core.

Wren scanned me, then eventually nodded. "Something happened last night. After a good rest, we need to write down everything so we can study it."

"*Ja genau,*" I agreed, taking the chilly air into my lungs and resuming our walk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IGOR



We made it back to the capital by mid-afternoon, and Ulbrecht took us straight to the tent where a small crew greeted us. The doctor was ready, so we lined up. He prioritized who to look at first while other preparations happened around us.

Usually after returning we spent the first couple of nights in a tent together to stabilize ourselves before we returned to our homes. Old medical documents referred to it as PTSD, a mental condition where trigger points such as nightmares or loud noises could put a fighter back into the battle mentally. If the hallucination got bad enough, he could think the battle was real and end up attacking people, even his loved ones.

A feminine call came from the door, and Mindi the dog trainer peeked in with a smile, opening the flap to let several of the castle guard dogs come through. They ran up to us, accustomed to this ritual by now wherein they got to be regular dogs who were off duty, and we got the deep and effective therapy of loving on an affectionate animal. Few outsiders were allowed in during these days, usually just Sigrid to help the doctor tend to us and Mindi to corral the dogs.

Mindi's husband Ralf was one of our group. Ralf had injured his hand during one of the campaigns last year, and in the end it had to be amputated. Stubborn Ralf was training his non-dominant hand with his sword, but until he was ready to join us again, he and Mindi had helped develop this program

to reintegrate the warriors back into daily life after witnessing and participating in fighting and carnage.

Ralf had gotten together a group of older men who had fought in the decades prior to Ulbrecht seizing this area. Some of them were willing to come to the tent and be a sympathetic ear if any of us wanted to talk to someone who knew what we had seen. Even if words didn't come, it was encouraging to have them there as proof that you can experience horrible things and still come out the other side with your sanity. It also helped to lessen the shame if some of us did have nightmares, to know we weren't alone and the whole group was in this together.

Mindi and Ralf also put on demonstrations for the spouses and partners of the warriors, in a separate location. They trained our loved ones on what to do if one of us had a bad hallucination or nightmare, how to defend themselves from us if necessary, to never keep an instance of domestic violence a secret and immediately contact the castle. Ulbrecht and Sören did night runs with us when the campaigns were bad, just rounded us all up and jogged around the castle till dawn, then we all slept together again in the tent to get a good hard sleep away from the pressures of family life. After losing Kristoff, I'd been especially grateful for the night runs. Trying to fall asleep had been so difficult back then, because to relax my mind enough to fall asleep meant loosening my grip on my thoughts. Drenched in grief, my thoughts had wanted to follow Kristoff into the Otherworld.

Cleaned up and hydrated, my arm in a sling and the rest of everyone's injuries bandaged, the celebrations could finally begin.

We walked together to the castle, where we'd have a toast and dedication first, then go to the main street in town where we shared a feast and dancing with the townsfolk. Ulbrecht had imposed a ban on wine and beer for these welcome-home celebrations, citing that PTSD did not play well with alcohol. Though the regular seasonal festivals had all kinds of *Sturm*, wine, and beer flowing, these post-battle celebrations had hot spiced juice and tea.

We filed into the Great Hall behind Ulbrecht, who seemed to only have eyes for his Wren standing off to the side. As soon as this toast was finished, I had no doubt the skinny mage was going to do a flying leap into Ulbrecht's arms.

Everyone quieted once each of us got a cup. Someone stood in the center of the hall, feet planted and chest open, ready to project.

My Awariye.

My lungs filled with air at seeing him, as if I had not breathed fully until now. The relief that flooded me at seeing him safe and sound threatened to send me into tears. He looked tired and a little worn, but he was so healthy and vibrant compared to when I had first met him. I wanted to be closer, to see every detail on his face and hold him in my arms.

A slow, deep breath, then King Ulbrecht's bard began to sing.

His rich voice soothed me, even as I wondered at the imagery he wove into descriptions of roots, branches, and leaves. With his song, he painted in my imagination the roots diving down into the living earth, then the trunk standing tall and the branches reaching into the sky, the leaves fanning wide to catch the kiss of the sun.

Awariye evoked the mighty Yggdrasil, the Tree of Worlds from Germanic and Nordic legend, and I knew why he had chosen this ode. The Tree of Life represented the interconnection of all life on Earth, the interdependence between humans and nature. He was bringing us warriors back into the fold, into the warm embrace of love and community after what we had done and seen.

When he finished, his last words ringing through the hall, the beautiful song dissolved into silence, no one willing to make any other sound. Yet Awariye was not dissuaded by the lack of applause or cheer, clearly knowing he had added sanctity and reverence to this moment.

He stepped to the table, took his cup, and lifted it high. "To King Ulbrecht and his men!"

We repeated the toast on a shout and drank. Lest the silence return, Awariye then grinned and called, “Let the celebrations begin!”

The men all but charged out of the castle, eager to see their wives, and while Ulbrecht scooped Wren into his arms and Evelyn hugged Sören, I made my way down to my lover.

Awariye beamed at my approach, then didn’t seem to know what to do once I got close because of my right arm bandaged against my body in a sling. He instead cupped my face in his hands, tears spilling over as he kissed me, his lips so sweet.

“*Willkommen zurück,*” he said, welcoming me back.

I hummed and kissed him again, not wanting to close my eyes and miss any bit of him. With my free arm, I wrapped around his back and pulled him to me. Awariye laughed in surprise and hugged me where he could without jostling the bandages. He felt different, somehow, but I set that aside and relished in the feel of him and the fragrant scent of his hair.

“Did you help with the lanterns?” I asked.

Awariye nodded, pulling back just enough to look me in the eyes. “Something happened. I feel strange, and Wren claims he can see the trees breathe.”

That...sounded like magic for sure. “Are you sick?”

He shook his head, and I exhaled in relief. “Not bad-strange, just different. I think part of the power that came through was etheric and ended up coagulating in the chapel. We really can’t afford to do this somewhere that isn’t an absorbent forest. There were parts where I thought Wren wasn’t thinking clearly; the whole night was one surprise after another.”

I nodded, knowing we would talk about it over the coming days. Awariye and Wren’s spiritual training was a welcome distraction.

He sobered. “Mindi and Ralf told us that you’ll be sleeping out in the tent for a couple of nights?”

I nodded, pleased at his puppy eyes that so clearly wanted me. “Then I can come home.”

His expression turned piqued. “That guest bedroom better be ours from now on.”

I grinned. “We’ll just stay until Sigrid kicks us out.”

Awariye barked a laugh and swatted at me playfully. Then he kissed me again, love so apparent in his gentle touch. “*Ich liebe dich*, Igor. I’m so glad you’re home safe.”

“I love you too, Awariye,” I promised.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IGOR



TWO DAYS LATER

“*Gute Nacht,*” said Sören with a smile and a nod as he turned off toward his rooms with Evelyn and the kids.

“Night, Sören,” said Ulbrecht, and I wished him the same as well.

“What do you want to guess our partners are in the same place?” said Ulbrecht softly once it was just the two of us continuing down the hallway.

I chuckled. “Almost a guarantee.”

“Indeed.”

He slowed in front of Awariye’s and my room, so I knocked softly and carefully opened it. The guard dog roused and stuck her nose in the crack, then realized it was us and let us through. Once inside, I patted her on the head and told her she was a good dog.

Ulbrecht lit one of the candles and lifted the shade enough to see. There was only one lump on the bed, but that could mean our lovers were fused.

Ulbrecht set the shaded candle on the nightstand and leaned over with an indulgent smile. “Well, Igor, should we leave them be, or should I try to figure out which one is Wren?”

“As long as you don’t carry off Awariye,” I replied.

The monks gave confused whimpers and looked around.

“Uli?” asked Wren. “We thought you were doing a third night in the tent.”

“*Nein, Schatz,*” replied Ulbrecht. “We were just briefing the men on protocol for the first night back home. Do you want us to leave you here, and we’ll sleep elsewhere? I guess I could let this big hairy oaf into my bed just this once.”

It took a moment to realize he was talking about me, then I couldn’t hold back my giggles. “I’ll sleep on the floor with the dogs.”

“Not with that shoulder, you won’t,” he answered with affection.

Wren wriggled out of Awariye’s embrace, scrubbing his eyes and disentangling himself from the blankets. “Sure, let’s go—*yeep!*”

Before Wren could even scoot off the bed, Ulbrecht scooped him up and carried him off. As they neared the door, Wren wrapped his arms around our king and hummed happily. I too resonated with that happiness, so glad that the leader I looked up to was in love with a good man.

Once the door closed, I turned to find Awariye smiling at me dreamily.

“*Hallo, Schatz,*” I said, sitting on the edge and rather than leaping into bed with him like I wanted. Our debrief had included being cognizant of the fact that our partners might want us to sleep in separate places for a while if they were worried about us having violent nightmares.

“*Grüezi,*” said Awariye, overly formal and yet so sleepy, making me chuckle again. “Come to bed?”

“*Ist das okay?*” I asked for confirmation.

He nodded, pulling the blanket back and opening his arms.

Gently I slid under the covers and settled on my back, my shoulder not allowing me to sleep on it.

Awariye waited for me to get situated, then curled against my non-bandaged side, pillowing his head on my chest, his ear over my heart. “This okay?”

“*Ja, Liebling,*” I told my beloved. “*Gute Nacht.*”

“Goodnight,” he answered. “Sleep well.”

Though I could have slept longer, the sizzling sensation of Awariye lazily rubbing his hard cock against my thigh was enough to get my body interested in other ideas.

I tried to blink the sleep out of my eyes, since one arm was bandaged to my torso and the other one wrapped around a deliciously sinful bard.

“*Mein Schatz,* are you awake?” I whispered into the pre-dawn room.

He whimpered, again rutting that magnificent cock against me, driving me wild.

“Want to come up here,” I suggested, “let me suck you off?”

That woke him. Dragging a hand across his eyes, he blearily sat up and shucked his shirt off, revealing the beautiful planes of his chest and the soft hair leading from his belly on down. Playfully I dipped a fingertip into his bellybutton. Awariye yipped and swatted me away with a smile.

“*Komm hier,*” I beckoned him over, scooting up on the pillow.

Awariye wriggled out of the last of his clothes and crawled over to me. Carefully, he knelt by my head and I turned so I could worship him with my mouth while not jostling my shoulder. I wished he could straddle my chest and feed me his cock, but that would have to wait for another time.

His glorious dick was at the ready, the purple head peeking out from his foreskin and leaking. I lapped it up, delving the tip of my tongue into his slit as Awariye groaned and combed his fingers through my hair. From the slight bucking of his hips, I could tell he was really trying to hold himself back and

not let loose. I wanted him to fuck me wild, but we'd have to do some workarounds until my injuries got better.

But I sure as hell was going to make my boyfriend come and drink him down.

Sliding back his foreskin gently, I blessed his crown with my lips, massaging and then swirling my tongue around. Awariye did a whisper-sigh that went straight to my balls, which prompted me to cup his and fondle them. I slid the flat of my tongue along his underside, from root to tip, then swallowed him till my nose touched his soft skin. Awariye gasped as I took in all of him, sucking in my cheeks to encase him tight. His cock pulsed on my tongue, and I slathered him everywhere I could reach, bobbing my head a couple of times before pulling off. "Do you want to fuck my face?"

Awariye's eyes were blown wide with lust and wonder. He gave the cutest little shake of his head, as if to clear his brain enough to think. But he had his own ideas. Reaching into the nightstand and tossing me the lubricant, he shucked my pants down and off, then climbed over me and blew me while I worked to stretch him open.

"*Warte, Schatz,*" I called for him to wait, worried I was going to blow and our fun would end early. "What do you want? You can fuck me; grab the pillow."

"*Nein,*" he said, tilting his voice with such sass all I could do was watch and wait for him to reveal his plans.

He patted me and I clenched my abs and lifted so he could toss the pillow under my lower back and hips. Plucking the bottle of lubricant from my hands, he crawled around till he straddled my hips. Slathering both our cocks and his hole, he knelt up, steadying me at his entrance and then slowly sinking down.

I had to remind myself to breathe. He was so tight; it felt like ages since we'd last done this, but in truth I'd been pounding into him just a few days ago.

"*Nngh,*" Awariye groaned, tilting his head back and baring his neck to me. I wanted to go up there and trace my tongue

over every bit of him. I petted his thighs as he adjusted to me; then I gripped him as he rose up a bit and sank back down.

He worked up a pace, so flexible in the hips it was tantalizing to watch him, his muscles flexing and releasing as he rode my cock and drove me insane. Hands on his thighs, I clenched my ass and abs and met him stroke for stroke, pumping into him as he squeezed me tight.

Awariye began to tire and his pace faltered. Without hesitation, I sat up and slid him off me gently, guiding him onto his back. My lover lazed, shivered, and squirmed while I lubed us both up again, then scooted and lifted his bubble bum onto my lap and once again slid inside. Awariye put one leg up on my good shoulder and let the other one bend and fall wide.

I grabbed his hips and after confirming the angle felt okay, started to piston my hips and thrust. Awariye squeezed me with a gasp, telling me I'd nudged his prostate, so I aimed for that spot and gave it a good pounding. Soon he was jerking himself furiously and urging me to go faster. I fucked into him as vigorously as I could, full strokes that landed hard and jostled his balls. He squeaked and then cried out, spasming around me, and that threw me over the edge with him. I emptied my nuts into him and sighed toward the ceiling, panting and pumping just a few more times to milk myself dry and fill him up.

We took a long moment, panting into the silence, luxuriating in how well our bodies worked together and how we made each other feel.

Reverently I pulled out and eased his hips back down to the bed. Awariye's expression was so blissed out it made me grin, so pleased. He opened his arms, and I went to him, lying down carefully because of my shoulder but then nuzzling his neck and kissing his sweet lips, running my fingertips over his neck and chest.

"Welcome back," he cooed.

I smooched him. "Thank you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IGOR



The next morning, Ulbrecht was pensive at breakfast, and even Wren didn't seem to know what was going on with him. The adults ate quietly while the kids interrogated Awariye about dragons and my partner jumped on the distraction from the dour mood.

The kids were asking for more story time after breakfast, but Evelyn explained they needed to study with their tutors first and they could have stories later. Ulbrecht finally looked up as the rest were leaving, touched eyes with me and Awariye, and we hung behind with Wren.

Once the door closed and we had some privacy, Ulbrecht stood and paced for a moment, arms crossed, brows furrowed. "It is spring already here on the plains, warm enough we're having incursions. It's as if the winter did not happen."

We all nodded. Indeed, though we'd had a bit of a chance to rest, we were already fighting again, and it was only early February. On the plains we'd only gotten a hand-width of snow at best. It was as if Mother Nature hadn't felt the need this year.

Then Ulbrecht stopped and turned my way, leveling his eyes on me. "I am sending you to Diana Monastery for them to look at your shoulder."

It wasn't a request. I swallowed, every part of me screaming in protest because it could take weeks to get there if the most direct passes were still snowed in. That was weeks

that I wouldn't be here to guard Ulbrecht's back should the campaigns continue.

I'd never defied him, and I'd never wanted to until now.

He must have read that on my face, for his expression softened. "You've rested it for six weeks, and then just one battle has it back in a sling, Igor. That's a recurring injury that could become permanent. I want the doctors there to take a closer look."

Though it pained me, I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Corbi's a medical student at the monastery; you'll be in good hands," added Wren kindly, though this was clearly news to him, too.

"Awariye," said Ulbrecht, our conversation over. "I want you to go to the monastery and ask the senior monks to research the changes that came over Wren. This takes precedence over your upcoming travels and work for me as my bard."

Awariye nodded. "Yes, sir. I was there for everything. Something happened to me too, though clearly different and not as potent. We'll research it as best we can."

"You speak as if I'm ill," Wren protested. "I'm just seeing more of the subtle planes, etheric at least."

Ulbrecht said nothing, so Wren continued, looking to Awariye for confirmation. "A lot of power came through the chapel, and Awariye and I ended up sleeping there. If more power was echoing around rather than properly channeled, then some of it could have settled in our bodies. In the end we don't know what Cyfrinydd did for the gods. The old mystic never wrote down his methods."

"Magical methods can lose their potency when shared, hence the fourth magical virtue of silence," Awariye added. "And furthermore, he was a mystic, not a mage. His methods may not have been ones we were trained in or could hope to imitate, if they required a lifetime of mystical practices first."

"That is why I am sending you back to the mountain hut," said Ulbrecht. "You've changed, *Schatz*. Just one battle with

the power coming through the chapel and you feel different when I hold you. You see things I can't, and sometimes you say things I don't understand."

The three of us froze and looked at the king. I couldn't imagine him sending Wren away of his own volition.

Wren seemed confused and hurt, scanning Ulbrecht and making my chest ache for them both.

"The lanterns need to be in the mountains when I fight, so the forest can absorb the power," Ulbrecht justified, though this was something we all already knew.

Wren slowly stood, and as he deliberated, I scarcely dared breathe. He was about to reject Ulbrecht, all the while holding my king's heart in his hands.

Wren touched eyes with Awariye and spoke words that would crush his partner. "Uli, you are a Danubian king. I am a free citizen of the Republic of Helvetica. You cannot order me to do anything."

Under the table, Awariye took my hand.

"Nor can you order Awariye, for what it's worth. He too has no political obligation in Danubian lands and can leave his position as your bard at will."

"I plan to stay for now," said my partner, softly and gently, trying to soothe his friend.

But Wren charged onward. "Be that as it may. Ulbrecht."

The king flinched at his lover foregoing his endearment.

"You should be aware of my priorities, but let me reiterate them to be clear," said Wren. "I have accepted a call to these gods, and that includes the fact that they might change me. You never knew Old Cyfrinydd before he became the lantern mystic, but these gods likely shaped him to their will. That said, it does not make sense that they would drive me insane. The kind of magic we monks do at Diana Monastery requires decades of mental training and extreme focus. It cannot be done in an unconscious or trance state."

We could have heard a pin drop in the room.

“What they have given me so far have been gifts,” claimed Wren.

“*Nein, Schatz,*” protested Ulbrecht, his voice choked and his expression aggrieved. “You sleep like the dead now, and sometimes it feels like I don’t recognize you—”

“What would you have me do?” Wren challenged. “I am sworn to these gods that seem to guard you!”

“Wren—”

“Everyone.” Awariye stood and put his hands out, letting the moment stretch and allowing them to catch their breath. “Sit down and let me speak a moment.”

They sat, and when Awariye once more slid next to me on the bench, I took his hand and rested it on my thigh. I hated the conflict, but I knew this needed to get hammered out.

Awariye’s tone was neutral but polite. “Ulbrecht, what Wren is saying is that these lanterns will likely alter his consciousness to bring him closer to them and more able to hear them. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you can support him and still see that he continues to be there for you and still loves you.”

That seemed to devastate my poor king, from the empty look he gave his bard and his hollowed-out voice. “It’s not worth it if I lose Wren. I can fight these battles myself. I cannot take their protection if Wren is the price. That would only kill me in a different way.”

And it killed me to hear him say it, considering all his men and I followed him and fought for him with everything we had.

Wren opened his mouth, but Awariye got there first, holding a hand out to silence his friend. “That isn’t your decision to make. You are the ruler here, but only of the human realm. As you know, you hold no sway over nature, or any divine forces that may choose to manifest themselves through nature, or through Wren.”

“This is ultimately to protect you, Uli, while you protect these lands,” added Wren, his fire gone.

Yet Ulbrecht kept his face in his hands, his chest heaving with labored breaths. “Can you not see where I am on this? I finally found you. I don’t want to lose you, *Schatz*.”

My heart shattered.

Wren got up and hugged Ulbrecht, who turned to bury his face in his lover’s chest. Wren lay his cheek atop Ulbrecht’s head and gripped him in tight.

I couldn’t keep quiet anymore. “If the pass is open, then I suggest we go check on the shrine and make a list of repairs and supplies to send back to you here. You can have it built up to house a human and a dog during harsher temperatures, and the three of us will continue together to Diana Monastery.”

Though Ulbrecht didn’t reply, he was clearly listening. Wren’s sharp eyes met mine, and I could feel Awariye’s gaze on me.

“The way Wren and Awariye have described Diana Monastery makes it sound like it is in very deep forests and quite protected in a number of ways,” I added.

Wren nodded but understandably did not clarify. I’d heard both monks refer to it, but no magical practitioner with a lick of sense would articulate the details of such protections aloud.

“We’d be crossing a border with the lanterns,” said Awariye.

That shifted everything once more.

Ulbrecht finally spoke. “It is worth it if it means Wren is safe. You’ll be with him, Igor. And the lanterns will be surrounded by forest should we face a campaign, even if the forest absorbing the power is Helvetican. They’re an ally, and the Republic is interested in their eastern border being protected and stable. It need not be said that this should be kept an absolute and utter secret. All the sooner that I want Awariye traveling to see what the people know and are saying about the lanterns’ power. Ingeborg has been conducting reconnaissance for me, but I have her focusing in the borderlands and infiltrating villages currently held by potential invaders.”

That sounded extremely dangerous, though Ingeborg was a very skilled mage who could disguise and conceal herself with magic. I was simply grateful that Awariye's assigned tasks were otherwise, though they too were not completely safe.

Awariye squeezed my hand and stood. "We'll leave you two for now, but let's plan to depart as soon as possible."

They nodded, and my lover and I left the great hall.

As soon as we were back in our room, Awariye reached for me and I pulled him in, tucking him into me and letting him rest on my strength.

"We'll be together at the monastery while the doctors look at you, but then we'll have to part ways so you can come back to Ulbrecht and I can begin working as his traveling bard. I don't want to journey without you," he said into the crook of my neck. "I wish you could go with me always."

My heart ached. "I wish I could go with you too. I want to be with you." And I wanted to protect him.

He nodded, then pulled back to kiss me, cupping my face in his hands. "I don't want to take you from Ulbrecht. Your strength is so much more important in protecting him. The doctors at Diana Monastery will tell you how to rehabilitate your shoulder, and you'll be guarding Ulbrecht's back again in no time."

I kissed his nose, so grateful he understood where I was coming from, though now that I loved him I admittedly was torn. "*Danke*, Awariye. I have to stay with our Winter King."

"I understand," he said, then seemed to hesitate, his eyes scanning the door behind us as he deliberated.

"What is it?" I prompted.

When he met my eyes, his irises whirled a moment and I gasped. Yet before I could exclaim in alarm, the kaleidoscopic colors retreated and his eyes returned to his usual warm brown. What in all of heaven and earth was that just now?

He touched his forehead against the door and huffed a sigh. "Whatever happened to Wren that night, some of it

happened to me too. I think it was just the power cascading down and pooling in the stone chapel rather than escaping into the forest. Wren and I were bathing in it. I don't remember how we wound up sleeping on the table, or how we could have gotten up there with the lanterns casing us in so close. But when I woke in the night, there was that light all over us like a mist."

I rubbed soothing circles in his back. "If you change, as long as it doesn't hurt you, I will support it. I cannot abide them hurting you, Awariye, though considering they are divine beings, I doubt there is much I could do about it. I understand Ulbrecht's fear at seeing his lover changing. I too would be worried if you seemed unrecognizable. But I love you, and I understand what you are trying to do. I will try to understand if...magical influences come."

He pulled back to look at me again, and once more I saw that pretty whirling right before the irises stabilized. It was like they started up again whenever my lover closed his eyes.

"And I won't lose you, when I go traveling for the king?" he asked, his tone insecure. "You'll still be mine when I swing by the capital to see you?"

"I'll still be yours," I promised. "And if you worry for Wren, we'll go to see him at the mountain shrine. We can camp outside and make love under the summer stars."

His smile was so beautiful. "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

Then he kissed me, and all my worries fell away.

The End.

Awariye—Danubian Book Two

AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Awariye*. I hope you have managed to stay cool this summer (or warm this winter if you are in the southern hemisphere) and I hope this finds you well.

I have settled into a new job and am trying to learn some additional skills to be able to apply for more advanced work. It's great to make stable money again after being a freelancer. The goal now is to make the most money I can for my time, so that I have the time and space to write more books. We'll see how it goes!

Up next is the continuation of this lantern saga as well as the beginning of another series taking place in contemporary Vienna. Follow me on Amazon for preorder announcements. Join my reader's group on facebook to keep in touch, or subscribe to my newsletter. Best wishes to you and yours this season, and talk to you soon.

Charlie Godwyne

August 2023

EQUINOX

AUGARTEN BOOK ONE



Waking up with no memory is just the beginning of his troubles...

Not knowing who he is or how he ended up naked in a park in Vienna, Gabriel struggles to reclaim his past while still moving forward into an uncertain future. It isn't long before he realizes that not having an identity isn't the only thing that makes him different. Plants and people glow with magic all around him, and he's actually able to speak to his very own guardian angel—even though the angel won't tell him anything about who he really is.

As he tries to learn something about his prior life, Gabriel finds himself inexplicably drawn to two very different men: Solomon, the exorcist priest who found Gabriel and has been helping him try to remember who he once was; and Florian, an occultist coffee shop owner whose own tragic past allows him to accept Gabriel even without memories.

But without the foundation of a past, Gabriel worries the life he's building will crumble around him. As Gabriel's health begins to dwindle—and not even his angel can explain why—

he scrambles to find answers before he's taken away from the happiness he's found and the men he loves.

Equinox is the first in the Augarten series and is an 88,000-word MMM romance with magical realism, an amnesiac willing to try just about anything to remember, a priest with unpriestly thoughts, and lots of espresso.

The Augarten series is now complete and is best read in order: Equinox, Syzygy, Hiraeth, Florian, Newyddian, and Eviternity.

[Get Equinox today!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Godwyne lives in Vienna and loves to walk at Augarten and shop at book binderies. A translator by trade, Charlie enjoys taking train trips around Europe and hopes to one day learn how to play the banjo.

Sign up for Charlie's release-only newsletter and get a free short story that takes place during Equinox, in which Gabriel, Florian, and Solomon take a dip in the Danube.

charliegodwyne.com

Facebook group, [Charlie's Viennese](#)

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