

JAILER

TO THE

DEATH

GOD

DARK RULERS BOOK 7
REBECCA F. KENNEY

JAILER
TO THE
DEATH
GODD

A decorative border surrounds the title text. It features a pair of dark, antler-like branches that curve upwards and outwards from the sides of the word 'GODD'. At the bottom center, there is a cluster of several roses with leaves, rendered in a detailed, shaded style.

REBECCA F. KENNEY

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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TRIGGER
WARNINGS

Plague, pandemic
Death, sickness
Family loss
Murder, violence



“Devil on My Shoulder” Faith Marie
“Godhunter” Aviators
“Change My Ways” Burn the Ballroom
“Lioness” Daughtry
“Break Into My Heart” Daughtry
“Show Me Where It Hurts” Skylar Grey
“Animal” The Cab
“Lock Me Up” The Cab
“Not Afraid Anymore” Halsey
“Jealous Gods” Poets of the Fall
“Desire” Meg Myers
“Rest In Peace” Dorothy
“Supermassive Black Hole” Muse
“Hush” The Marias
“Ghost” Halsey
“Holding Out for a Hero” Nothing But Thieves
“Bang” Armchair Cynics
“Confident” Demi Lovato
“this is me trying” Taylor Swift
“Masquerade” Eric Saade
“The Man” Taylor Swift
“Lay All Your Love On Me” Zara Larsson
“Fearmonger” Jo Blankenburg

[Playlist on Spotify](#)



The girl in my bed is going to die.

She's in the final stage of the plague, the phase from which no one ever recovers. Her eyelids swelled shut hours ago, and dried pus is crusted at the seams where her lashes used to be. Her hair is gone, including her eyebrows.

I was lucky. When I had the plague, my hair didn't fall out. It turned a silvery white.

Some of the plague victims recover. Like me.

Why did I survive, when so many don't?

Why me, and not her?

This girl, this precious girl.

She giggled with me in the shade-dappled grass, when she and Rose and I were fifteen, and we skipped out on combat training so we could read salacious books and munch salmon-paste sandwiches in the palace gardens.

She danced with me at my twenty-first birthday celebration, three years ago.

I used to wonder if our friendship might turn into more. And then she found her partner, her Thistle, right around the same time I realized that in most cases, I prefer men in my bed.

Thistle died last week. And this girl—this precious friend, my Leilani—she cared for Thistle right until the end.

Her love killed her. And I hate it for that.

Her skin is papery, fragile, stretched over boils and spotted with sickly white.

I find two fingers that aren't as afflicted, where my touch won't cause her too much pain, and I wrap my own fingers around them.

"Leilani." My voice is taut cords, fraying, speckled with blood and dread. "Leilani, I'm here."

It's all I can say. All I can do.

Be here.

Both the palace healers died near the beginning of the plague, four months ago. They tried so hard to save our people, but the amount of energy required to purge even one person of this virulent disease was too much. It was practically a life for a life. They died being their beautiful, generous, compassionate selves, after draining their energy to the dregs for my father, and then my stepmother, and then my older brother, and then—

I can't count how many beloved souls I have lost. It would break me to enumerate them all. Friends, family, servants, guards—and so many more beyond the palace gates.

I was crowned in a somber ceremony just three weeks ago, on the day after Aspen's death. Aspen, my brave big brother, who took to his role with a single fierce purpose—to conquer this plague and save our people.

He died in agony, wracked by what he believed to be his own failure.

When will this end?

It must end.

"Vale." A sharp voice at my bedroom door.

I twist around, my stomach dropping. "Rose?"

She stands in the doorway, a lean, spare woman my age—intense dark eyes, ebony skin, and the coils of silver-white hair that mark her as a survivor.

Her tone, her face—they're blades, edged with hope. But there can't be any hope left, can there? All the news I've had lately is wretched—death, and more death. Famine, because no one can work. The plague has eaten its way through our countryside, too, not just our cities.

"Vale, I found it." Rose holds out a book that is barely a book—just a collection of yellow crackling pages stitched together with coarse thread and a cracked binding. "It's the ritual you need. The one for summoning Arawn."

Gently I squeeze Leilani's fingers and lay her hand down. I get to my feet—and nearly topple over. Since I had Leilani moved to my room, I've been sitting at her bedside for hours, waving away any servants who offered me food, only accepting the public statements and supply release forms and

emergency measures I need to sign. Even in my grief, I am Queen, and I have duties to fulfill.

I should probably eat something.

I think if I tried, I would vomit.

“The ritual.” My voice grates over my vocal cords. I probably need water, too. “Rose, that was a foolish outburst on my part. A ridiculous idea.”

But it wasn’t, and she and I both know it.

I meant what I said last night, when I stalked the room and screamed at the ceiling, when I threatened the gods themselves, swore I would tear them down if they did not stop this hemorrhage of life. I vowed to drag the Death God, Arawn himself, out of his pit and demand that he show mercy.

I meant every word.

My grandfather used to swear he saw a god once—a tall man with unnaturally long limbs and copper skin that burned with living flame. But that was in a land far from here—a volcanic kingdom called Bolcan. This is Cerato, a small continent in the center of a trackless expanse of ocean, with no trading partners nearby, and no gods on our shores.

Unless...

There is one place I know of. A place where my grandfather took me at age ten. A gaping hole in the earth, lined with writhing black vines. A pit sunk into the center of the world. One of the entrances to Arawn’s realm of Unlife, Grandfather said.

I felt it back then—the crawling tingle of dreadful magic. The cold, raw, gaping maw of something unnatural, hollow and hungry for my warm blood and my fragile soul.

“You know where the entrance to his realm is.” Rose extends the book farther, her eyes begging me to accept it. “We can’t save her, Vale. But maybe we can save others. I’ll help you do this.”

“It’s insane,” I whisper.

“Your parents and your brother tried everything else. Maybe it’s time for a little insanity.”

With a lingering look at the swollen, mottled thing that used to be Leilani, I take the ancient book from Rose’s hand.

And I open it to the page she has marked with a black ribbon.

“Have you read this ritual? What it requires?” I look up at Rose, my heart pounding with slow dread.

“I have.” She won’t meet my eyes.

“Three lives, Rose. Three souls. We have to sacrifice people to summon him.”

“No, that’s—” She steps nearer and winces, pointing at the scritch-scratch letters and symbols. “Three lives is for power, fortune, and protection. To summon and bind him, you need thrice that many.”

“*Nine* souls,” I rasp. “Rose, I can’t—”

“We have to try.” Her eyes pool with tears. “My little sisters fell ill today, Vale. And my mother’s caring for them—she’ll be next. Please.”

“Oh gods.” I walk slowly away from Rose because if I hug her right now, I won’t be able to be strong for her, for Leilani, for anyone.

I’ll break.

And I *can’t* break. Because if I break, there will be no one left to hold this kingdom together.

The heavy silk of my black gown whispers across the rug. Damn this dress. I wouldn’t be wearing it now, but I have to meet with my council in an hour, and they expect their Queen to maintain some modicum of formality and control.

I bite my inner cheek, hard. I’ve been biting the inside of my mouth a lot lately. Also gritting my teeth until they hurt, and driving my nails into my palms until they almost bleed. Any small pain to center me, ground me, keep me outwardly calm.

“Maybe there’s another healer somewhere,” I say desperately. “I could find someone to treat your siblings...”

“You know there are no healers left. None who will own up to their magic, anyway. Healing someone from the plague is practically a death sentence for all but the most powerful healers.”

I keep walking, cradling the ancient book. My knees bump into the purple velvet of the window seat, and I stare out the arched window, through triangular panes frosted with ice.

Winter. The worst possible time to be trapped in the throes of a plague like this. Our small continent is situated in the northern reaches of the ocean, so our summers are mild and our winters long and dark. Not that any amount of sunshine could cure people of this dire disease, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt.

“We could... use people in the last stages of the plague,” I say hoarsely.

“The blood has to be shed in a circle around one of Arawn’s pits,” Rose says. “You told us your grandfather took you to see one.”

“Yes, I know of one. It’s not far.” I swallow against the cracked dryness in my throat. “I have a meeting with the Council soon. After that we’ll need to gather supplies for the ritual. We can leave as soon as everything is ready. The longer we wait, the more people die. But if I can actually call Arawn—snare him to my will even for a few moments—I can order him to stop this. He’s the god of death. He can halt the flow of souls to his realm, can’t he? A god should be able to do *something* to help us.”

“I fucking hope so,” says Rose. “I’ll work on gathering the supplies for the ritual while you’re in your meeting.”

“Thank you. When I’m done with the Council, I’ll talk to some of the terminally sick people here in the palace. Maybe I can find some who are willing to... to... oh gods.” I press my forehead to the cold stone wall by the window.

Maybe I’ll find some who are willing to die. To sacrifice themselves for others.

There’s no chance of survival once you’re in the final phase of the plague, but still... it’s an enormous request. *You’re dying anyway, so may I slice your throat at the brink of Arawn’s pit?*

Who would agree to such a thing?

A rattling moan from the bed rips my attention from Rose and refocuses it on the sunken figure under the sheets.

Leilani’s hand is lifting, twitching, her mottled finger trying to curl, to beckon me closer. I run to her side, a raw silken rustle.

She seizes my wrist—a spastic grip that must be agonizing for her broken skin. Her lips are cracked despite the hundreds of times I’ve bathed them with water and squeezed drops of liquid into her mouth. She can barely part her lips enough to speak, and I can barely hear the words issuing from her swollen throat.

“Use me,” she rasps.

She has been listening the whole time. I thought she was nearly unconscious, but she’s more lucid than I realized. The knowledge that she’s suffering while alert inside her tortured body—it makes everything so much worse.

“I can’t, Lei,” I choke. “I can’t do that to you.”

“Do—it,” she insists. “I—am ready. Make it—count.”

I turn, staring at Rose.

Just a year ago we were all the picture of youth and health—dark hair,

smooth skin, bright eyes and bright futures.

And now our dearest friend is asking us to sacrifice her on behalf of everyone else.

A strained, manic laugh bubbles up inside me, but it leaves my lips as a hard sob. “Lei, we don’t even know if this will work.”

Leilani’s chest heaves, enough breath for a single word. “Try.”



The pit my grandfather showed me is a few hours’ travel by carriage. I take with me only Rose, a couple of my bodyguards who have already survived the plague, and two servants, also survivors, who can help with the bodies of the sick.

We’re a somber procession—my carriage and a pair of curtained coaches, each one carrying four or five plague victims who have reached the final phase—the point of no return. They were each told what we’re doing, and why. Every single person agreed to the plan with a willingness that broke my heart. Their acquiescence is proof of how torturous their existence has become.

I leave the curtains of my carriage open, watching the line of black trees unfurl past the windows. There’s snow scattered over the royal city, and some here as well, threaded along branches, crusted over the road. The woods form a net of ebony and bone, hemming us in.

Perhaps it would seem more oppressive if I did not already feel so trapped.

Rose sits opposite me, holding the ancient tome wrapped carefully in oilcloth. Between our knees is a large satchel of black leather, containing the candles and incense normally used in the worship of Arawn. She obtained the items from a shrine in the city while I met with the Council.

I didn’t tell the Council of my plan. Didn’t think it wise to say, “Esteemed advisors, I have decided to burn candles around a sinkhole and slit the throats of nine citizens in the hope of raising and trapping an ancient god who may or may not be able to stop this plague.”

It would have been just the opportunity Lord Venniroth and his allies have been looking for—a chance to declare me mentally unfit and have me deposed.

No, best to keep this quiet. By day's end, only Rose, two guards, two servants, and myself will know of my idiotic plan, whether it succeeds or not. And I will have the blood of nine of my subjects on my hands.

“Vale.” Rose lays a hand on my knee.

I pull my gaze from the window and look over at her. The cold, pale afternoon light glimmers on her dark skin. Somewhere above the heavy blanket of gray clouds, the sun will be setting soon, fiery and orange.

My head knows what a sunset looks like, but I haven't seen one in weeks. My heart no longer remembers such beauty—only putrid sores, and racking coughs in firelit rooms, and the sickening stench of death.

“You've done so well with this, Vale.” Rose's voice is warm, gentle.

Tears spring to my eyes immediately. “No.”

“Yes, you have. You've done the best you could, given the horrible circumstances of your reign so far. I didn't know you had it in you, honestly. You've always liked to skip out on the hard parts—swordplay lessons, sitting through high tea with our parents—dancing with Otin Venniroth on feast days.”

The corner of my mouth tilts in spite of everything. Of course Rose said that on purpose, to make me smile. “My right big toe still hurts when it rains, from when he stepped on it at the Evenfall dance last year.”

Rose snorts. “I still think he did that on purpose.”

“I know he grabbed a handful of my ass on purpose.”

“Bastard.” She shakes her head. “And yet he's still here. Hasn't even fallen ill yet, they say. Stays in an isolated suite at his father's mansion. They have a million precautions in place to keep him from catching the plague.”

“Not everyone has that luxury.” Gingerly I pat my own pale, braided locks. “I don't blame him for not wanting to get sick, though. Worst week of my life.”

“My heart still races when I climb stairs,” Rose confesses. “I don't have the strength I used to.”

“When all this is over, we'll train again,” I assure her. “We'll build up our strength together.”

“And we'll dance,” she muses, a dreamy expression floating over her face. “We'll dance with handsome young nobles and fine hunky merchants

with fleets of glorious ships. We'll find you a cultured, well-toned prince, and I'll take someone far more interesting—a pirate, maybe, or a highwayman.”

I know she's trying to cheer me up, to give me hope, to distract me from what we're about to do, so I smile. The expression feels threadbare and artificial against my mouth. I think I have forgotten how to smile and mean it. But I try, because she's the one with two sick little sisters at home, yet she's selfless enough to encourage me.

Precious Rose. I can complete this task, for her sake. I know her sisters—I'll keep their faces in my mind as I do what must be done.

“We must be nearly there,” I say, and even as I speak, the coach jolts and I hear the skittish whinnies of the horses.

When I came here with my grandfather, the horses had a similar reaction. “They can smell death and magic,” he told me.

I slide back the little door that lets me speak to the driver. “Stop here, please, Farley. We're close enough.”

The corruption of Arawn's Pit has leaked into the forest itself, veining the trees with a black darker than any natural shade. Tendrils of inky, otherworldly void creep up trunks and along branches.

The veins lead inward, a serpentine tangle weaving along the ground until they coalesce into a violent, writhing mass in the center of the clearing. They intertwine and then plunge straight down, into the pit.

We've laid our nine people—I refuse to call them “sacrifices”—in a circle around the circumference of the pit, with their heads toward its edge and their feet pointing away. They're all wrapped in thick blankets against the cold—the best I can do for their comfort in these last moments.

Between the bodies, Rose has placed clusters of tall candles and small metal tripods which hold the incense burners. There's a specific blend of incense used for the worship of Arawn—black basil, white sage, frankincense, cedar chips, and myrrh resin. The resulting scent is dark, spicy, and unexpectedly pleasant. Breathing deeply of the smoke helps to quell my nausea a little.

I brought along my brother's favorite dagger. There were so many other knives I could have brought from the palace, but doing this with Aspen's weapon feels strangely right. Like a tribute to him.

He was much older than me, on the path to rule. Our paths diverged more than they crossed, yet somehow he crammed days' worth of deep affection into the short hours when we did manage to get together. We took

horseback rides in the forest outside the city, swam in the palace pools, raced each other through the garden maze. He always had a new book to recommend, or a new musician he'd brought to the palace for me to hear, or a new game to teach me.

Grief stings my eyes, so I swallow down the memories and focus on Rose, who is perusing the ancient ritual, making sure we have all the details correct.

She looks up, resignation and dread warring with the hope in her eyes. "It's all here. We're ready to begin."

I must begin by ending a life. One, and then eight more.

I'm kneeling beside Leilani, my knees aching because of the ribbed black vines. No softness here. No moss grows on these roots—not even a powdering of snow clings to them.

Leilani is moving under her blanket—just barely. She's nearly gone.

"Please," she rasps. "End it."

It's a mercy, this. The only healing I can grant to my childhood friend.

"I love you, Lei," I whisper.

Rose is at her other side, laying the book down, kneeling. "We both do, darling. May you find Thistle in Arawn's realm."

I have never killed anyone before. My hand shakes as I lift the dagger, as I set its edge to Leilani's throat. I want to ask Rose to do it. But she has already done more than her share.

This part, I will bear alone.

"Gods, Vale, make it quick." Rose's voice is choked with tears.

Her desperate urgency spurs my resolve, and I slash, quick and sure, right across the jugular vein. Leilani's blood pours out, scarlet laced with streaks of sickly white.

There's relief in the act, relief in the purging—the thing done, her torment finally over. She can rest now, my Leilani, my sweet girl.

I lean over her, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Rose does the same.

How wickedly arbitrary is death, how fickle. How dispassionately hateful in its choice of whom to take and whom to leave.

I move on, slitting throat after throat. One at a time, all around the circle, in the sharp cold blurred by a haze of aromatic smoke.

My hand and the dagger seem detached from the rest of me. Their actions are mine, and yet not mine.

My two bodyguards and two servants huddle in a knot at the edge of the

clearing and watch the carnage.

Rose follows after me, dragging the bodies nearer to the pit so their blood will flow down, along the vines into its black depths.

My fingers are chilled to the bone now, riven with sharp pain from the cold. I forgot to bring gloves. Even if I'd worn a pair, they would have been soiled.

My dagger slices through the pale, mouldering skin of the eighth throat, and I move on to the ninth.

I bend over him. His neck is a mass of boils, and his eyes stare up into the gray sky, sightless and filmed.

My heartbeat stutters.

Maybe the plague stole his sight. That's why he looks like this, like he's

—

Like he's already dead.

The others were all breathing—I could hear it, the telltale rasp of plague victims. But this one—there's nothing. Not a sound.

I tear open his robe and press my ear to his chest.

Nothing.

"Vale?" Rose's voice carries a strident uncertainty. "What's wrong?"

"He's already dead." I crumple, bowed over, my bloodstained fingers clasping the knife handle, setting its hilt to my brow. "The ritual can't be completed. We'll have to go back to the palace and find nine more, get more supplies—try again tomorrow."

"No. No, we can't start over—this has to be done now. My sisters, Vale—they're so little. You know how fast the plague kills children. No child survives. I can't watch my sisters die, Vale, I can't—"

"What do you want me to do?" I look up, desperate, tears scorching lines along my cold cheeks. "Will his blood still work if he's dead?"

"You read the ritual. Blood must be spilled from nine living sacrifices. The lives must be spent with the purpose of summoning Arawn. This man didn't die bloody, for the purpose of the spell, so it doesn't count."

"Then we must start over. Perform the ritual another day, and this time bring an extra body or two..." I halt, nauseated by the very words I'm speaking.

Rose glances aside, toward the servants and guards.

I swallow hard against the bitter lump in my throat. "I won't ask one of them to die, not after what they've survived, Rose."

“You’re right,” she says faintly. “This is something I can’t ask of anyone but myself.”

She moves before her words solidify in my mind. Snatches a crooked little knife from her belt, one I’ve seen her use a thousand times for cutting blooms in the gardens or chopping herbs for incense.

“Tell my sisters I did it for them,” she says, and drags the edge across her neck while a bloody scream rips from my throat.



The call tugs at my core, drawing the fragments of my consciousness from their wanderings throughout the realm of Unlife, pulling my psyche back together.

I'm being summoned by a human.

Not again.

I've only been summoned successfully a handful of times. You would think humans could manage it more often. But it's surprisingly difficult to get the ingredients and the amounts in the incense blend just right. Harder still to ensure you've actually found one of the entrances to my realm, and not simply a very deep sinkhole. The correct number and orientation of the candles is vital, and they must be lit in a certain order. And then there's the small matter of collecting nine living sacrifices and laying them out in the right configuration, without any of them fighting back or running off.

Even then, not just any sacrifices will do.

I will appear for nine murdered souls, but my appearance will bring no joy to the summoner. If the sacrifices are unwilling, I rise from the Pit and drag down the ones who slaughtered them. Their bodies are broken, and their spirits are left to wander, shrieking, without any hope of eternal rest.

Nine *willing* sacrifices are required to summon and ensnare me.

Fortunately, people who are willing to die for someone else's cause are very difficult to find.

The fact that I can even be summoned at all is a colossal joke played on me by my godly "sisters," Macha, Aine, and Beirgid. Drunk on the raw

cosmic energy of some meteor shower or other, they collaborated to lay this burden on me. They have never liked the fact that I do not take lovers among humans—or gods. No matter how many times my divine counterparts have tried to seduce me, I have never been interested in the least.

The other deities do not understand me. They were born of light, and I was birthed from the darkness. They care only for themselves; I care about fairness and justice. I am the dark balance to their light, after all.

They never interfere in the tragedy or joys of humans. I despise human cruelty, and I punish it without mercy.

When I meet whoever has summoned me, I shall be utterly merciless.

The last vestiges of my mind whiplash back into my body. It's painful, like a taut string being snapped. Throughout the past century, my body has remained on my throne, while my mental influence expanded and governed the workings of my domain. It was easier that way, rather than physically prowling my realm as I used to do.

The summoning wraps a sickening fist around the core of my being, seizes me with a force I can't resist. I'm sucked out of my throne, towed at blazing speed through the roofless columns of my palace, up toward the heavy underbelly of the human world, which hangs like a ponderous sky over my realm. Holes puncture that sky, each one a channel leading to a different part of the mortal sphere.

At the other end of one of those channels, hunched among bloodstained victims, is the evildoer I must confront. I'll dispatch him quickly—it's nearly always a man seeking immortality for himself—and then I will return to my semi-slumber on the throne.

The force of the call yanks me into one of the dark holes. I rush upward, buoyed not only by the summons but by my anger at being disturbed.

I choose a favorite form of mine on my way up—inhumanly tall, swathed in black robes, with a collection of antlers branching from my skull and moss wreathing my black hair. I could make the form perfect, but I like to leave gaps—something to unsettle the humans, like a valley of exposed bone down the center of my forehead, a decayed hole in my cheek, or pupilless eyes that resemble the void of death. Something to remind them that I am ancient as the world itself.

A roaring wind carries me up, through a tunnel lined with black vines that writhe like tortured serpents in the tempest of my passing.

I explode out of the Pit into the bitter cold. I'm not used to feeling cold,

or hot, or anything. Only when I'm summoned do I experience sensation, and none of those experiences have been particularly pleasant. In every case I was able to conclude my business quickly and return to my realm.

Something feels different this time.

The metallic taste of blood hangs in the air, mingling with the aroma of incense, blended properly and burned in just the right amounts.

There are the bodies, nine of them—no, ten. Strange.

I inhale deeply, expecting to taste the bitterness of murder in the air.

But instead the soft fragrance of surrender permeates my senses.

These are not victims, but willing sacrifices. Which means I cannot punish their murderer and depart for my throne again.

No, I am well and truly bound this time.

This is the worst possible scenario for me. It means I am ensnared to the wretched mortal who managed to summon me correctly. I can only hope their request will be easy to complete so I can break this chain swiftly.

I step onto the edge of the Pit, my robes trailing behind me, and I scan the forest clearing, searching for my summoner.

Not the cluster of four shivering mortals hugging each other under the eaves of the forest.

Not the ten dead bodies.

A figure is crumpled at the brink of the Pit, their shoulders shaking. Thin, blood-stained fingers clutch the garments of a corpse, and one snowy lock of hair drapes along the corpse's throat, soaking in the blood. Nearby lies a dagger, gleaming wetly scarlet.

This craven, sniffing, white-haired creature is the person who has summoned and ensnared me.

They cannot even rise to greet a god. Such disrespect.

Nothing in this bargain says I have to be pleasant to my summoner.

So I step forward, and in the hollow, cosmic, deadly voice of a deity, I say, "Well, here I am. What the fuck do you want?"

Towering at three times the height of a human male, I loom over my summoner.

She's so small, crouched below me.

And then she looks up.

A myriad of human faces have passed through my furnace of souls. I've seen the alteration of their features as the divine fire revealed all their deeds in life, good and bad. I've witnessed a spectrum of human emotion, from

cold, unrepentant wickedness to abject misery to grateful relief.

This woman before me—she has the face of a goddess and hair like moonlight.

But her beauty means nothing to me. I've seen the beauty of mortals and deities. Corruption always lies beneath.

No, it's her eyes that make me pause.

They're a pale blue-gray, the kind that tend to shift in hue depending on the light. Two wells of echoing grief, a fathomless ache swirling in their depths. Old eyes. Eyes that do not belong in such a young face.

As I stare, another emotion sparks in her gaze. Cold fire, a fury born of wretchedness.

She snatches the dagger from the ground and stands up, her dark cloak falling into place around her.

She's still dwarfed by my height, but if the difference cows her, she doesn't show it. "Arawn. You came."

"I had no choice in the matter."

"You don't look like your statues in the shrines."

"You mean this?" Black smoke traces briefly through the air, and then my mask appears—the ancient skull and antlers of an enormous stag. It seals to my face, bone to skin.

The girl's eyes widen slightly. "Yes, but I've seen other depictions of you as well."

I dispel the mask and switch to another favorite form of mine—jade skin, long wavy hair like green marble, and a double set of horns, one set sweeping up into points and the other pair curling backward like a ram's horns. Dark feathered wings burst from my shoulders, stretching until they span nearly the entire clearing. "Like this?"

"That wasn't an excuse for you to show off," snaps the girl.

I'm a little piqued that she's not more impressed. Also displeased that she's not showing me the least bit of deference.

"You do understand you've summoned a god, yes?" I stalk toward her, wings still spread, menace in every step.

She lifts her small chin defiantly. "I understand I've trapped you. And now you have to obey me."

"Obey?" I scoff. "You get one request, and once that is fulfilled, I return to my realm."

"Very well. My request is for you to stop killing my people."

Black chains rise from the mouth of every corpse around the Pit, and I watch them warily—but they don't wrap around me like they usually do when a summoner's wish is expressed. They hesitate, wavering like snakes about to strike.

I have a god's consciousness of where I am in the mortal plane—the tiny continent and self-sufficient kingdom of Cerato. A glorified island, really. I've received an unusually high number of souls pouring in from this pit, due to an ongoing plague.

"You'll have to be more specific," I say. "I am not killing your people. A plague is killing them."

"A plague you caused."

I sigh. "Ah, you mortals. Convinced that everything is the responsibility of a higher power. No, little human, I did not cause any plague. Everything that occurs in this world is partly uncontrollable chaos and partly the natural result of human choices and their logical consequences. The gods have little to do with any of it. The only time my kind interfere with human development is the occasional hearty fuck, which results in mortals with magic, like your healers and such. Speaking of healers—why can't some of them help you?"

"This plague is too powerful. I require the aid of a god, and you *will* help me, because we've done everything you wanted for this ritual." Her voice thickens, choked with grief.

"Everything *I* wanted? You think I set up this profane spell? That I *want* to be bound to a sniveling mortal?"

"I don't know or care what you want. I know what I need from you, and that is fewer plague deaths among my people."

That's an open-ended statement, one that could bind me interminably if I'm not careful. The chains begin to move toward me.

"Specificity, mortal," I hiss. "How many lives do you wish me to spare? And be warned, I will not spare souls indiscriminately. I do not show mercy to the unworthy. I will need to determine which ones among your people deserve a chance at longer life."

She frowns. "Fine. You will spare all plague victims you find worthy of longer life, for the next year."

"What?" The chains shoot toward me, coiling around my limbs. Panic vibrates through my body as I feel myself solidifying, taking on a more corporeal form. I shrink from the height of three men to the height of one

man—still head-and-shoulders above the average height for a human—but I can't control the change, and that scares me. "A year? Are you mad?"

"Why yes." She stares me down, a manic silver fire in her eyes. "I think perhaps I am, circumstances being what they are."

The chains cinch tight around my limbs and wings, and I snarl at her through clenched teeth. My fury is boundless. No one has ever dared restrain me for a full year. The longest I've spent in the human world was three days.

It's too late to bargain. The chains have locked in place around me. They disappear almost instantly, but I can feel them, like a ghostly brush of icy metal against my skin—an alien sensation I dislike deeply.

Enraged, I take another step toward the girl.

This time she recoils. And her heel slips off the edge of the Pit.

Eyes blown wide, she flails her arms, but she's already falling.

I could let her fall. She would perish, pass through my furnace into the Unlife, and relinquish her hold on me.

But I am a just god, and as much as I hate her for binding me, this mortal does not reek of evil.

I can save her, and be true to myself...

Or let her fall, and be free.



I'm toppling into the void of the Pit. I'm going to die—
My idiocy is going to make Rose's sacrifice meaningless.

A hand grips my arm.
Hauls me back onto firm ground.

Arawn yanks me farther from the Pit's edge, and I crash against him, gasping from the shock of what nearly happened.

The death god's robes vanished when he gave himself wings, and his bare chest is as smooth and perfect as if he is actually carved from jade. Hard muscle rolls beneath satin skin as he grabs my shoulders and steers me away from the Pit.

"Clumsy, foolish girl," he says, low and angry. "Small wonder you need help. I'm guessing you're some sort of ruler, yes?"

"A queen," I hiss back.

"An incompetent queen who trips over her own feet into death."

"You made me fall."

"I didn't *make* you do anything. You perceived a threat, and you reacted foolishly."

My nerves are strung tight—rage and grief screaming along them, howling in my brain. I want to shriek aloud and tear at him with my nails.

Instead I reach up and slap him hard across the face.

His head jerks aside with the force of the blow.

My chilled fingers are so numb I barely feel it when I hit him.

The emptiness of my hands registers suddenly, and I scan the black vines frantically, hunting for Aspen's dagger. "Oh shit. Oh shit, oh no... no, no..."

I dropped it. I dropped it into that bottomless hole.

My chest is a ball of bloody, red-hot thread, swelling, ready to burst. I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying not to cry in front of the death god.

"Mortals." His tone drips with derision.

"I just lost my dead brother's knife, you asshole." I turn my back on him and walk toward the treeline, where my guards and servants are waiting, their faces rigid with fear.

"It is done," I tell them quietly. "The death god is here, and he is going to help us. You four will say nothing of this to anyone, do you understand?"

They nod mutely.

"We'll push nine of the bodies into the Pit," I continue. "There's no point taking them back to the city—we'd just have to burn them anyway. But Rose comes with us. She'll be buried with the highest honors—"

My voice gives out.

"We'll take care of her, Your Majesty," one of the guards assures me. Then his face changes, eyes bulging.

Without turning I know who's behind me. The death god.

"Thank you," I tell the guard. "You may begin the task now. I will deal with *him*."

The soldiers and servants hurry away, and I turn to face Arawn.

"Can you do anything about those?" I gesture to his black wings.

He folds them up a little, then flares them out again, ruffling the glossy feathers. "Why?"

"I doubt you want to walk all the way to the city. So you'll need to fit into a carriage."

"I'm not getting into a carriage. I'll fly."

"My people have been through enough this year without a horned, green-skinned monster swooping over the royal city," I snap. "You'll ride in a carriage, wings or not."

His eyes narrow, but he makes a mock obeisance to me, arms spread, green eyes fixed on my face. "As Your Majesty wishes, of course. For now."

The low tone of the last two words sends a thrill skittering along my spine. I suck in a breath, trying to conceal my amazement as his sooty wings vanish.

Whatever I expected of a god, it wasn't this beautiful man with striking cheekbones, full lips, and a perfectly-toned body.

Not that any of it affects me in the least.

When he first exploded out of the Pit, in his immensely tall, unearthly form, and he spoke in that great echoing voice, I nearly shrieked aloud. His appearance, crashing against my raw nerves, was too much. I thought I might lose my mind.

But I managed to channel my fear into rage. He's the one Rose died to summon. I'll be damned if I don't master him and save her sisters' lives.

Leaving Arawn by the carriage, I help my servants and guards with the bodies. I handle Leilani myself, rolling her gently to the edge of the hole, tucking her arms over her chest before whispering a final goodbye and sending her tumbling into the dark.

Stray thoughts flit through my head as I kneel by the Pit.

I will have bruises on my knees from these wretched vines.

Two of my nails are broken.

The blood has dried on my fingers, and it's cracking and flaking where my knuckles bend.

I am so hungry I feel sick. When did I last eat?

I'm not sure if I have the strength to stand up again.

None of that matters.

I didn't actually expect the death god to appear. But he did, and now I have to figure out what to do with him. Does he eat? Sleep? Shit? What sort of clothes does he like to wear? Because he certainly can't walk around the palace half-naked.

Before I sort through any of that, I must take him straight to Rose's house. He will spare her little sisters, and maybe then I can begin to grasp the fact that I've lost both my best friends in one day.

The guards wrap Rose's body and lift her into one of the other carriages. I collect the ancient book of rituals from the ground and climb into my own coach, gesturing for Arawn to follow. The tips of his horns slit the padding on the carriage roof when he slides onto the seat, and I vent an exasperated sigh.

"I'm not getting rid of the horns," he says, before I can demand it. "I refuse to walk this plane in a form that could be mistaken for mortal. I am a god, and I expect to be treated with the respect I deserve."

I ignore him and gaze out the frosty window as the carriage jolts into

motion.

“A year,” he snarls, low. “What were you thinking?”

“I’m surprised no one else has tried to bind you for that long.”

“They all made their requests neatly and concisely,” he retorts. “I was able to complete them quickly and return to my realm. That is how this is supposed to work.”

“Your realm, and the souls in it—will they be all right without you?”

“For a while,” he replies grudgingly. “The function of it all is more or less governed by my will, and that doesn’t change even when I’m not there to directly oversee it. But I’ve never had to leave Annwn for this long. I’m not sure what will happen after I’m absent for one week, or two—or a fucking year.”

I can feel him glaring at me. “I suppose when I arrive in your realm someday, I’m going to regret this.”

“Oh yes. I’ll see to the judgment of your soul personally.” Malevolent glee colors his tone.

“Do what you want with me,” I say absently. “As long as this bargain works, and I can save some lives, I don’t care how you punish me later.”



ARAWN

I may not have much interest in sex, but I've learned plenty about it from the deeds of the souls that pass through my furnace. I'm aware of all its variations and shades of preference.

When the lovely Queen leans her head against the carriage window and murmurs, "Do what you want with me... I don't care how you punish me," a twinge of unfamiliar sensation courses through my body. It's a low, vibrant heat, coupled with a sudden awareness of the delicate column of her neck, the corner of her jaw, the soft pallor of her cheek, and the fragility of her thin fingers.

Her frailty against my strength. Her yielding flesh, soft and pliant under mine, while I punish her brutally for enslaving me like this.

The concept sends another wave of heat through my belly, and I shift on the padded bench of the carriage, frowning, displeased with myself.

"Do you eat and sleep while you're in the mortal world?" she asks.

"Yes. My body is corporeal, if not mortal. It functions—" I curl my lip in disgust— "like a human's."

"You despise us, don't you?"

"Only as the stag despises the squirrel."

She bristles at that. "I'm not a squirrel."

"Would you rather be a rat?"

"You're talking nonsense."

I am, in fact. I haven't spoken like this to anyone in—I can't even count the number of years it's been since I had a real conversation. The souls who

arrive in my realm aren't exactly in the mood for a friendly chat. Not that I'd indulge them if they were. And my fellow gods don't care for my company, nor I for theirs.

The Queen and I sit in silence for a while. I chafe at being confined in such a small space. Here in the mortal plane I can't let my consciousness expand freely—it's trapped in this skull of mine. I feel as if I must break out of the carriage, leap into the air, and soar away. Tormented by unbearable restlessness, I move my legs and body this way and that, trying to get comfortable.

"Stop moving around," hisses the Queen. "It's annoying."

"Good," I snarl, shifting my position again.

"You're nothing like I thought you'd be," she throws at me.

"Is that supposed to hurt my feelings?"

"I thought you'd be darker, more terrifying."

In answer, I let magic leak out of me in coiling shadows that climb along the coach's interior, slithering toward the Queen. She eyes them watchfully, but she doesn't cringe when they touch her.

At the same time I reassume my deer-skull mask—a smaller version, since the actual mask would never fit in this space.

"Am I terrifying now?" I intone, in the hollow, depthless voice of a god.

"No," she says, almost as if she's surprised by her own answer, confused by how little she fears me.

I have lost my touch. I used to be excellent at frightening mortals.

Gritting my teeth, I determine she will fear me by the end of this. I'll make sure of it.

We journey in silence until the forest gives way to farms, the outskirts of what I assume is the royal city. Our carriage rattles over a bridge, and then along streets lined with buildings—tenements and shops, poorly lit by sallow lamps. The walking paths along the streets are empty—just one or two people hurrying along, hunched under cloaks, with scarves over the lower half of their faces.

The Queen slides back a small door which permits her to speak to the driver. She gives him instructions—a particular street and house.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"One of our nine sacrifices died too soon," she says, her voice grim. "My best friend killed herself to complete the ritual, so you could save her little sisters. That's where we're going."

If there are any humans I actually like, it's the small ones. The ones who haven't yet been corrupted. The ones with wide eyes, eager smiles, and open hearts. Every child who passes through my furnace receives a place in the most beautiful region of my realm.

Unless, of course, they are truly wicked. And I've encountered a few who had a taste for pain and cruelty from birth.

When the carriage halts, the Queen leans forward. "These little girls are sick," she says, low. "You must soften your appearance. I will not have you frightening them."

I consider defying her, but on this point I actually agree. So I vanish my horns and alter my skin color to a light brown. I leave my hair a dark green, streaked with pale jade. I dispelled my black robes when I switched to my winged form, so I'm only wearing a pair of leather pants, and though I attempt to summon my robes again, I can't. Strange. I suppose my magic is somewhat erratic or partly restrained because of my bondage to the human Queen. My half-naked state will have to do.

"Satisfied?" I ask.

The Queen doesn't deign to answer me. Her mind is elsewhere, probably with her dead friend. As we get out of our carriage, I see the wrapped body being taken from one of the coaches by a pair of guards.

The Queen brushes back a lock of her pale hair. Its end is crusted with dried blood.

Slowly she approaches the door of the house—the residence of a wealthy family, if I had to guess. Like the other streets, this one is empty. Wet black cobblestones reflect the pallid glare of a few streetlamps. Most of the windows in the tall brick mansions are darkened, but a few rectangles of golden light illuminate the gloomy wall of buildings.

The cold gnaws at my bare skin, and my nipples tighten as tiny bumps rise all over my torso. I've never felt a sensation like it.

"Stay behind me, and say nothing," the Queen says over her shoulder.

"I am a god. I don't follow your orders," I retort.

There's no time for her to reply before the door opens, and a servant admits us.

I do not often see grief from this side. I receive the departed souls; I do not deal with those left behind.

Watching the Queen mourn with the dead woman's family is fascinating to me. The parents of the deceased all but collapse in paroxysms of grief,

their sobs and moans ripping through the carpeted silence of the house. The Queen embraces them, pets them, comforts them, while tears course in unending rivers down her own cheeks. She does not scream or wail as they do. She barely makes a sound.

At last she introduces me as a healer from a faraway land, newly arrived by boat. “Rose died to make sure he got here safely,” the Queen tells the bereaved family, and they lift tear-swollen eyes to my face, staring in helpless gratitude. I wonder if they can tell I’m not human. If they suspect as much, they don’t say it.

They lead me to a bedroom where two small figures lie in a huge bed. Their faces are bloated, their arms mottled and blistered from the plague.

“Everyone out,” I order.

“I’m staying,” the Queen says.

I don’t protest.

“It’s all right,” she tells the family, ushering them into the hallway. “We’ll only be a moment.”



The death god sits on the edge of the bed and lays back a tendril of hair from one of the girl's faces. I should have had him cover that sinewy bulk of his with a cape or something—Rose's family must think it very odd that I brought a shirtless healer out of the icy evening and into their home.

Or perhaps they do not care about such things right now.

Arawn leans farther across the wide bed and presses a palm to each child's forehead. After a moment, he nods.

"If I do not interfere, they will die," he says softly. "But they deserve more than that."

"You'll spare them?"

"I will. As I told you, deaths are not fated, and preventing them does not alter some great universal plan, because there is no such plan. Death may be a natural end to life, or it may be the product of unstoppable chaos or the result of unfortunate choices. In this case, both chaos and circumstance have doomed them. But as the god of death, I can refuse to accept their demise just yet. I cannot heal them—they will have to endure the pain of this sickness—but I can ensure they recover and live a normal span of years, barring some other illness or accident."

"You can't heal them? Can't you leave some sign for their parents, some proof that they won't die?"

The death god sighs. "Humans. Always so faithless and suspicious. Very well. I will leave a mark upon them."

He places his thumb on the forehead of first one girl, then the other.

When he moves back, tiny interwoven symbols glow green against their festering skin.

Arawn rises and approaches me. Despite my earlier claim that he doesn't scare me, I can't help a swallow of nervousness when he's this close.

In the confined space of the carriage I noticed his scent—cedar and myrrh, with a hint of sage. I can smell it again now. His very skin seems aromatic—so much so that I'm tempted to lean in and inhale, especially in this room, which reeks of sour sickness.

Instead I spin on my heel and push through the bedroom doors, back into the hall where Rose's parents, aunts, and grandfather are anxiously clustered, awaiting news about the little girls.

"They must pass through the sickness, but they will live," Arawn announces. "I wish I could cure them immediately, but at least I can promise you their survival. If anyone else in the house falls ill, send word to the palace, and I will come."

Rose's mother catches his hand and kisses it. "Thank you, thank you."

The death god watches her tearful face with a detached sort of interest, mildly sympathetic. He draws his hand away carefully.

"Let me know when you plan to have Rose's funeral." The words taste wrong in my mouth. "Anything you need, if it's in my power—" Grief turns my tongue leaden.

Rose's mother embraces me. "We know, Vale. I mean, Your Majesty."

"It's always Vale to you," I whisper against her shoulder.

She squeezes me tighter, the two of us locked in mutual agony.

I haven't had a hug like this in days. Maybe weeks.

After a long moment I force myself to pull away, and we take our leave.

With Rose's family taken care of, I must return to the palace and try to get some sleep. I'll have to order a room to be prepared for my captive god.

It's so strange to even think those words. Rose and I—we summoned the death god himself.

I place my hand upon the ritual book, lying beside me on the carriage seat. Maybe, before I sleep, I'll read some of it. Perhaps there is more information in those pages about dealing with an egocentric god.



ARAWN

The young Queen—Vale, they called her—has fallen asleep in the carriage. Her neck hangs forward at a dreadful angle. It looks almost broken. She’s making a strangled wheezing sound, as if her airway is being partly constricted. Very annoying indeed.

I’m still in my “human healer” form—not that I care if my horns tear up the roof of the Queen’s carriage, but I didn’t like how it felt when the sharp tips grated through the padding against the metal underneath. So many odd and irritating sensations. I don’t remember being so irked last time I was in this realm. Of course back then I was mostly outdoors. I certainly wasn’t being carted about in a coach or subjected to the rasping snores of an exhausted monarch.

How in the Pit does that wretched sound come out of a well-bred girl like her?

Fuck it. I refuse to endure the rest of this ride with that noise going on.

I lean across the space between the seats. Gingerly I extend my fingertips and push against her forehead, shoving her back against the seat.

But her head simply lolls back into its previous position.

Fine. This requires a firmer kind of intervention.

I clasp her shoulders in both my hands and tilt her upper body against the side of the carriage. Despite my attempts to prop her upright, she slides forward, her cheek dragging along the frosty window. The snoring is worse now.

Growling with frustration, I move her ritual book to the bench where

I'm sitting and switch to the seat beside her.

From my new angle, I take her shoulders and adjust her position again. In doing so my forearm brushes across her chest. She's still wearing the heavy cloak, but the swell of her breasts beneath it is obvious. She's gifted in that area.

My heartbeat quickens, and I pause a moment to mentally assess the sensation. I'm not sure why it occurred.

When I'm reaching across her like this, her scent pervades my senses, penetrates my mind. She smells familiar—coppery blood, incense, bodies that have just begun to decay, sweat on fevered skin. She smells like death.

Like home.

An ache forms in the center of my throat.

As I nudge her head into the corner of the carriage again, her brows contract and she gives a quiet, distressed little moan.

Heat roars through my body, instant and overpowering. It's primarily centered in my genitals. Blood surging into my cock, lifting and stiffening it.

Feeling my penis harden and extend is as disturbing a sensation as it is beguiling. A flicker of pleasure traces along its length, coiling in my abdomen, where my muscles tighten with need.

I've been around plenty of human women. Mostly dead ones. Maybe fifty or so live ones during my various sojourns in the mortal plane. None ever made me react like this.

I am having my first erection.

I shove myself away from the Queen, appalled.

Am I no better than a low-born mortal, or one of my lecherous sibling gods? This is the woman who clawed me out of my comfortable resting place and dragged me into her world of sharp cold and tiny plague victims. This is the woman who slapped me across the face, whom I would have punished for that insult had she not been so bothered about losing her brother's trinket.

Why am I reacting to her like this?

She sighs, shifting her body, and sways to her right, toward me. I hesitate for a second too long—she falls against me, her head tucked just below my shoulder.

Now if I move, she will topple right over and wake up. And then she might notice the firm length pushing against my pants.

Better to stay where I am until this absurd physical response abates.

She's breathing softly now, not rasping. Thank the stars for that, at least.

I eye the book on the seat across from me. It's one of only a few that hold the ritual for my summoning. Who knows what other secrets of mine it might carry? I shall have to dispose of it later.

Long minutes pass, during which I fester and seethe, concocting the most vile and disparaging names I can think of for the Queen who rests against me. Unfortunately several of the vile names make me *more* aroused, not less. This form is weak, prone to ridiculous bouts of primal sensation.

When reviling the Queen in my mind doesn't work, I try to alter my form. I can change the color of my skin, switch from antlers to horns and back again, give myself claws and fangs or remove them—but I cannot alter my height or bulk, nor can I change the texture of my skin. I cannot deaden myself to unwanted sensation. I am a raw nerve, stripped to quivering nakedness, exposed to every volatile human feeling.

This bargain is different. The girl-queen has changed me somehow, and I hate it. How did she do this? Was it the time frame of her demand, or something else?

The carriage rumbles across a new surface. A quick glance out the window reveals that we're passing through an archway into a courtyard.

We've arrived at the palace.



“Your Majesty.”

A low, terse voice—a familiar one—Farley, the servant who drives my carriage ever since most of our royal coachmen died.

I’m drifting in a warm blur, unable to parse out where I am or why he’s speaking to me.

“Your Majesty, we’ve arrived,” Farley continues. “I’ve pulled in by the West Tower. No one is around at the moment, but I think we should hurry inside with—*him*.”

Another voice, like thunder and the rumble of rolling boulders, combined into a single dominant sound. “You’ll speak of me with respect, mortal, or I’ll remove your tongue.”

The new voice vibrates through the whole carriage and into my body. Eyes still closed, I frown as my weary mind begins to clarify.

Farley’s voice again, shrill with fear this time. “Forgive me, Lord Arawn, Master of—of Calamities, Maker of Catastrophes, Wielder of—of—”

“Hush, fool.” Arawn scoffs. “Can you devise no better names? For shame. I’ll let you live until tomorrow. I suggest you spend the time making a list of fine titles for me.”

His voice is very near. Much too near.

What am I leaning against? Not the side of the carriage—

My eyes flash open.

I’m leaning against the smooth flesh of the death god’s arm.

Oh shit, shit—

I pull myself upright, my hands fluttering over my face, checking for drool, pushing my hair back.

How did Arawn end up on this side of the carriage, with me draped against him as if he's a feather pillow?

"Your mercy is overwhelming, my god," says poor Farley, bowing. "I will think of better titles with which to praise your name."

He retreats, still bowing, and then flees out of my line of vision, probably to tend the horses.

"You can't kill my servants," I tell Arawn. "You were brought here to save life, not take it."

"Nothing in our bargain prevents me from taking a life if I so choose. Except yours. I'm not allowed to take your life, more's the pity. If you were to die by accident, though—"

"But I almost did," I remind him. "I nearly fell into the Pit. You could have let me die, but you didn't."

"I had a moment of idiocy," he growls.

"Hm." A tiny spot of light winks to life deep in my chest, and in the vast darkness that my heart has become, its heat is addictive as the sun itself. I am ravenously desperate for more of that light, whatever it is—hope, humor, surprise—I can't tell anymore. I am entirely numb and blank, except for that one speck of living, quivering brightness.

I'm watching Arawn, and he's looking at me, until suddenly he snarls and lunges out of the carriage.

"Quiet!" I hiss, snatching the ritual book and clambering out after him. "We have to sneak you inside. I don't want anyone asking me why I was snuggling with a bare-chested stranger in my coach while my people sicken and starve."

"We were not *snuggling*," he says haughtily. "You toppled against me. Just as you toppled into the Pit. You should really control yourself better."

"Shut up and get inside." I push both palms against his bare back, while one of my bodyguards holds open the door to the West Tower. The guard is practically hiding behind the door as Arawn stalks through it.

"First you slap me, now you push me," grumbles Arawn. "I should punish you for those assaults."

I shiver slightly—the cold, perhaps, or fear. "I'll have someone prepare a room for you to sleep in. Until then, you'll wait in my chambers."

We pause at the wash station just inside the tower. Other stations like it

occupy every entrance into the palace. I've had the plague already, so I can no longer carry it or be infected by it, and neither can my guards; so we need not go through the deep cleansing rituals that the uninfected endure every time they leave or return. But we wash our hands and faces anyway, out of habit.

I'm glad to be rid of the blood on my hands. But my cloak is still flecked with it.

The plague is a wicked thing. It travels through air, clings to skin and breath. By some mercy it cannot be transferred on clothing or objects—at least, we don't believe it can. But it's in the air, carried on the wind, and there is no effective defense against such pervasive contagion.

The solitary advantage to most of the palace staff being ill, dead, or overworked is that the hallways are empty and quiet. I'm able to hustle Arawn upstairs to the royal wing of the palace without anyone noticing except another pair of guards, who seem too weary to care.

Farley is still with the horses, but the other servant who accompanied me, Tilda, is following us, trailing behind my two bodyguards. I pause for a moment and fall back to speak with her.

Tilda isn't a talkative sort, and she doesn't seem to have many friends among the other servants, which is one reason I brought her along to the summoning. She's less likely to gossip about what she witnessed in the depths of the old forest.

"You must be very confused and frightened," I say, low. "Are you all right?"

"A little frightened, Your Majesty, but not confused," she says. "I understand why you've done this. But I'm worried for you. He is dangerous."

She nods ahead, toward the broad back of Arawn. He's so much taller than my bodyguards, and his shoulders are immense. When he walks, the muscles of his back surge and shift in the most distracting way. I have the strangest desire to know how those surging muscles would feel under my palms.

"Dangerous," I repeat absently. "Of course he is."

"But you don't seem to feel it as the rest of us do." She shoots me a quick sideways glance. "The way you speak to him—and you struck him in the face! He looked so angry, I thought he would kill you for that. My lady, please, please be careful. We need you. If anything happened to you—"

"Then the Council would appoint a new ruler," I assure her, and I almost

add *perhaps one better qualified than I am*. But I don't say it aloud. A queen shouldn't voice her self-doubt to those who rely on her.

"I'll be careful," I say. "But I must ask you again to keep this a secret, Tilda. No one must know who he really is. If anyone asks, he's a healer from a foreign land who heard of our plight and came to help us. Let's call him Vaughn. We'll say he comes from—" I wrack my brain, trying to think of some far-off land we know little about—some dark place with magic—"Terelaus. Yes, that will do. Vaughn from Terelaus."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Tilda stumbles a little, and I read in her sagging shoulders the same weariness I feel.

"Go on to your quarters and get some sleep," I tell her.

"But your bed, Majesty—I don't know if anyone has changed it since the Lady Leilani rested there. It's soiled, I'm sure. I will check it, and—"

"To bed," I say firmly. "I can change my own sheets for once. Go, now. Your queen commands you to rest. And you two—" I raise my voice, speaking to my bodyguards. "Find a couple of other guards to watch my room tonight. You've done enough labor today. If anyone asks where we went this afternoon, you were helping me retrieve the new healer, Vaughn of Terelaus."

"Vaughn of who?" says one of the guards blankly.

The other guard cuffs his companion's shoulder and nods toward the death god, who has stopped walking and is standing with his arms crossed, glowering at us all.

"Ooohhh," says the first guard slowly, as understanding wakes in his eyes. "Vaughn of Terelaus. The special new healer. Right." He nods sagely.

"Go on, then," I urge them. "To bed, all of you, and send me a pair of new guards."

They each give me a little bow before heading down the hall. I walk past Arawn and take a left turn, placing both palms against the ornate gilded doors of the royal suite.

My father and stepmother shared this suite. They had separate bedrooms, because he was a restless sleeper and she preferred her own space. Their marriage was a happy one, woven of mutual respect and a passion they repressed in public, for decorum's sake. But I interrupted more than one session of stolen kisses and silent groping in alcoves or garden corners. As their daughter, I found it slightly revolting but also warmly reassuring. Nothing gladdens a child's heart more than knowing her parents adore each

other.

Their absence punches me in the face every time I enter these rooms.

When I became queen, I wanted to stay in my old room, but the Council insisted this suite was safer. There are two escape routes from it, and the walls and doors are reinforced against earthquakes, explosions, or similar hazards.

The suite's main entrance opens into a sprawling parlor with a fireplace large enough for five men to stand comfortably, shoulder-to-shoulder. Flames flicker, low and dismal, causing a dance of mournful shadows against the smoke-stained bricks. The broad white-marble hearth is flecked with ash.

The parlor's sofas and chairs are cloaked in dark green velvet, decorated with floral-embroidered cushions or pillows of satiny gold. Immense urns of white marble used to hold an abundance of seasonal blooms, but they're empty now. There simply aren't enough servants to provide all the little niceties of royal life.

Strips of gilded trim divide the creamy panels of the parlor walls. In some of the panels, tiny paintings depict scenes from our history—battles, treaties, romances, deaths.

To my right is my mother's room, where I sleep—where Leilani struggled through the torture of her illness. To my left is my father's room, closed off and darkened. Unused. Both bedrooms also have separate doors that lead into the hallway.

To the left of the fireplace there's another door, leading to an immense bathroom. The sunken marble bath in that room calls to me, but I'm not sure the palace's water heating system has been repaired yet. It's been malfunctioning for a while.

I pause in the center of the room, staring across the expanse of velvety divans and small painted tables, caught in the flicker of the fireplace. Such a small fire for such an immense space. It seems to chill the room more than heat it.

I need to call for more coal for the fire. I need to strip the bed Leilani used and put fresh bedding on. I need to take off my blood-crusted boots and clothes.

I need to put the death god away for the night.

I need to eat something.

I need to wash Rose's blood out of my hair.

I need to wash Rose's blood out of my hair.

I need—oh god—Rose’s blood—Rose—
My Rose, my Leilani.
My everyone. Gone.

The scream that has been building in my soul is swelling in my chest again, bulging against my ribcage, expanding in my throat.

I barely know or care that Arawn is standing behind me, that he has closed the doors to the suite, that he’s muttering something sarcastic about the décor of the room.

I have reached the end of myself. I am going to burst.
Not in front of him.

Clamping one hand over my mouth, I toss the ritual book onto a sofa and run for the bathroom.

I crash to my knees and vomit into the white-marble toilet. Not much in my belly, but my body heaves up what little bile there is.

Shuddering, sobbing, I wipe the sour acid from my lips onto the back of my wrist. I’m coming apart, I’m going to shake into pieces from the violence of the rasping sobs lurching from my chest.

I crawl to the edge of the sunken tub. Reach over with trembling fingers and twist the levers. The water burbles out, and it’s hot, thank the gods.

I need the blood to be gone. I can’t think of anything else.

Frantically I tear off my cloak, then my dress, my boots, my thick stockings, my chemise, my underwear. My chest aches from the force of my grief, and still I want to scream, and still I haven’t.

I can’t, not yet.

With my knees tucked up to my chest, shivering naked on the edge of the tub, I wait for the water to rise a little higher. Breath hitches into my lungs, tiny sips, expelled instantly in long guttural groans, ugly sounds I can’t stop, because *Rose*, because *Lei*.

The shifting scrape of a footstep in the doorway of the bathroom, and my head whips around.

It’s Arawn, sauntering casually into the space.

“What are you doing in here?” I screech, swiping at my dripping nose.

“I thought you were dying. Thought I might enjoy the spectacle of your demise.”

“Fuck you,” I vent in a broken gasp. “Get out.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m naked.”

“Everyone enters my realm naked,” he says nonchalantly. “Believe me, I’ve seen every possible variation of the mortal form.”

“Go. Away.”

“As I’ve told you, I don’t take orders from you, little queen. You left the door open. If you wanted privacy you should have closed it.” He walks through the bathroom, trailing his fingertips over the marble counters, fondling the bronze handles on the sink taps, stroking the edges of the wall tiles. When he comes to a basket of scented soap and lifts one to his nose, his eyes widen.

“By my furnace,” he murmurs. “That smells fucking delicious.”

He inhales again, then picks up another bar of soap. His dark lashes flutter shut. “Stars above, what are these? I want one.”

Somehow I’ve stopped crying. Furious annoyance has temporarily superseded my grief. “They’re soaps,” I snap at him. “You wash yourself with them when you bathe, so you smell like them afterward.”

“Bathe, yes—yes, I know what that is.” His eager gaze fixes on the tub and the gurgling tap. “I’ve never done it. Never needed to. Gods are never dirty. Well... some gods like to get dirty. But I like the smell of death, you see. The smell of rot and bone, of disease and decay. At least... I thought I liked it. This body seems to have different ideas.” He sniffs a third bar of soap.

“Does all of Annwn smell disgusting?” I ask. “I thought parts of it were nice. Peaceful.” Need twists my soul—I must know that my friends will be happy in the afterlife.

“Of course,” replies Arawn. “I reside near the entrance to Annwn, in an area which absorbs some of the odor and decay that souls bring with them from their moments of death. But parts of the realm are quite beautiful. No disease, eternal youth, abundant food and pleasure—those delights belong to the souls of the worthy. The more unjust or cruel you were in life, the less pleasure you enjoy after death. And some souls deserve pain and retribution, not just deprivation. There’s a separate place for them.”

“And you decide all of that. Who gets to enjoy the afterlife, and who gets punished?”

“It’s what I was made to do. To provide balance and justice.”

Still holding a bar of soap, he looks at me. This time it’s not a cursory glance like when he entered the bathroom, but a long, analytical look that makes me blush all over. Since my legs are tucked up to my chin, he can’t

see certain parts. But the snap of hot light in his eyes makes it clear I'm affecting him somehow. He appears to hate what he sees—he's frowning thunderously. Glaring, he lifts the soap to his nose and takes a long sniff. His frown smooths out at once.

The death god, pacified by the fragrance of soap.

A hysterical laugh explodes from my throat, and I cover my mouth, trying to hold it back. But I'm laughing uncontrollably now, and sobbing again, too—snot and tears and laughter and wretchedness. Rather than huddle at the bath's edge and try to manage it, I fling myself into the water, face-down.

And under the water, I scream.



ARAWN

The queen floats face-down in the sunken bath, glossy white marble framing her porcelain body. She's too thin—approaching emaciated, the knobs of her spine forming a chain down her back, ending right between the curves of her smooth bottom. Her snowy hair unfurls around her, twining with her outstretched arms.

The force of her scream ripples the water.

She surfaces, wiping her face with both hands, pulling in a breath and plunging down to scream again.

I stand motionless, riveted, caught in the sucking force of emotional currents unfamiliar to me.

There is a power in her grief, a brilliance to her rage. This is a woman who, if she had magic, could level cities by the sheer violence of her tumultuous heart.

This is a queen who reached into the Unlife, seized a god by the throat, hauled him out, and chained him, only to ask nothing for herself at all.

A slow chill runs over my body as she gasps in a breath and screams under the water one more time.

I don't understand the clash of feelings inside me.

The Queen emerges from the water, eyes of blazing ice, her full breasts heaving, glossy and wet, her long hair a pale waterfall. The bathwater cups her hips, a quivering line across her lower belly. She gives me a withering, dominant glare.

Another chill bursts over my skin.

I should kneel...

Fuck. I've never had the impulse to kneel before anyone.

"Hand me the soap," she says.

I reach it toward her, and then I pull it back. "Not this one." I test two more of the soaps, then toss one to her.

She catches it and sniffs. "Roses and white tea. A good choice. Now are you going to watch me bathe, or are you going to leave?"

It's not a question, though she phrased it as one.

Forcing a haughty scoff, I stalk out of the bathroom and fling myself onto one of the parlor sofas. The ritual book lies near me, so I drag it into my lap and begin leafing through the pages carefully. This tome is incredibly ancient, about to fall apart.

I could burn it now. That way no one can ever use it to summon me again.

As I shift, preparing to rise and burn the thing, the lower end of the book's spine presses into my crotch.

My cock is already stiff from seeing the Queen naked. I don't think she noticed, distracted as she was with her grief.

The graze of the book's edge against my length feels good. But it's not enough.

I slide my hand under the book and cup myself through the supple leather of my pants. Slowly I begin to rub across the distended area, a sharp huff of pleasure breaking from my lips.

I know what it means to masturbate, to ejaculate, to orgasm—I've simply never been interested or aroused in that way. As a god, I am concerned only with my duties, my role in the universe. Justice, balance. I am the darkness to complement the light.

Apparently when I was bound to the Queen, I became a little more human. Because I am very interested in the idea of carnal pleasure now.

I rub harder, more enthusiastically, gasping as thrills skate through my cock and it swells harder, hotter.

Into my mind flashes the image of the young Queen rising from the steaming water, her body gleaming, her face a beautiful storm of pain and power.

My hand moves faster, clumsily, pressing hard against my pants to achieve more pressure against my yearning cock.

And then a wet slap of bare feet on tile makes me jerk my hand out from

beneath the book. I'm breathing hard, my heart thudding hot and heavy in my chest.

A moment later the Queen appears, wrapped in a soft, bulky white robe, like a cloud. Her hair lies in wet satin ribbons over her shoulders. Through the V of the robe, I can see the crease of her cleavage.

Her face is clean now, rosy from the hot bath.

"What are you doing with that book?" Her eyes narrow with suspicion.

"I—was looking at it." I shoot her a scathing look. "It contains my summoning ritual. I have every right to read it."

She stalks toward me, holding her robe together with one hand. "My friend found it. Give it to me."

Teeth gritted, I hand it over—but it's a huge tome with a broken spine, and several pages begin to slip out as she attempts to take it one-handed. She releases her robe to catch the falling pages—and as the robe falls open, I'm assaulted by the rose-and-white-tea scent of her freshly washed skin, and by the sight of her creamy breasts, heavy and full and deliciously round—

My cock jerks, straining against the leather, pumping with an abrupt release. A tingling flush of pleasure surges through it, bathing my lower body in bliss, while wetness pools inside my pants.

Shit.

The pleasure is not fully satisfying, but it's still strong enough that I barely manage not to gasp aloud.

The Queen collects the book in both hands and backs away, tilting her head. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I say hoarsely.

"I'm going to call for some food. It won't be much, because the kingdom is practically starving, but it's better than nothing." She walks over to the wall and opens a concealed cupboard, pulling out a cone-shaped device whose tapered end connects to a thin metal tube that disappears into the wall. She rings a little bell and then speaks into the cone, probably communicating with a servant.

Meanwhile I debate what to do about the stickiness in my trousers.

When she's done speaking through the communication device, I ask, "Do you have any clothing I can wear?"

"Can't you change your clothes like you change your form?" she counters.

"I could. Until you bound me. Now I can do this—" Rising, I switch to

my jade-skinned form with horns, and I let my dark wings unfurl, nearly knocking over a vase in the process— “but I can’t change my form any further than that, or alter my clothing.”

I don’t miss the admiring look she casts at my wings, and I arch them slightly, letting a ripple run through the glossy feathers. But she doesn’t comment on their beauty.

“Very well,” she says crisply. “You may check in my father’s dressing room. Don’t touch my brother’s clothes at the front of the closet, but there should be some old clothes of my father’s in the chest at the back. You can try those. Mind you, they’ll be too short in the torso, the arms, the length... We’ll have to get some clothes tailored for you. You’re very tall.”

“I am.” I step nearer, towering over her, letting my gaze run down the length of her body. She holds the book against her chest.

“I’m going to change the sheets in the other room,” she says, breathless, and practically scurries away.

Wincing, I tug at my leather-bound crotch and head for her father’s closet.



There is a kind of grief that is acceptable among humans. Eyes glistening with sorrow, a slow trailing of tears, a few heartfelt sobs. But to collapse entirely? To scream and roar and groan the agony of one's heart before others? No, that is not permissible, because it makes others uncomfortable in their lesser sorrow, in their helplessness. Your grief interferes with their placid sympathy. They feel as if you are doing wrong, somehow, by unsettling everyone.

That is the kind of grief I have shown to Arawn. Despite my studied control, he has seen me cracked open, bleeding tears, has witnessed the implosion of my soul.

I hate him for seeing it.

When I enter my bedroom and explore the state of the bed, I discover that its cleaning will require more than a simple change of sheets. Which leaves me with a problem—where am I to sleep? At this hour, the few healthy servants will be tending others or sleeping themselves. I can't trouble them for a deep cleaning of my bedding and mattress tonight. And I would hate to ask them to prepare another room. Most of the rooms in this wing have been closed up, their linens appropriated for the use of the sick. Another problem related to the plague—it generates an unfathomable amount of soiled laundry.

I need Arawn with me, so I can keep an eye on him. It seems the only solution, then, is for him to take my father's bedroom—the one my brother used during his brief rule—while I take one of the sofas. He would never fit

on a sofa—much too tall.

After stowing the ritual book in a drawer, I enter my dressing room and switch my robe for a long nightdress. It's one of my favorites—an exquisitely soft pink material with delicate white embroidery along the low neckline. The sleeves are made of lace; they skim along my upper arms and then flare out at my elbows, trailing nearly to the ground in a luxury of delicate craftsmanship.

I look at myself in the tall mirror on the wall. I'm pale as death, my blue eyes glazed with weariness. The flush from my bath is fading, leaving me sallow and sad. I am a shadow of the beautiful princess I once was.

A terrified squeak from the next room startles me. I hurry out into the parlor, just in time to see Arawn rescue the food tray from the nerveless fingers of a kitchen maid. He's wearing different pants, but he's still shirtless, in all his jade-skinned, black-feathered, horned glory.

"Shit," I say. "Hessie, you can't tell anyone about him, do you understand? You must say nothing."

"That's the—that's—" She lifts a trembling finger. "The death god. The death god!"

"Yes, yes, hush! He's here to help us, but you must not speak of his presence in the palace." Dread weighs my heart, because this fluttery little maid doesn't seem very capable of keeping dramatic secrets.

"Shall I kill her?" offers Arawn.

"Gods, no!"

He shrugs. "You seem keen on guarding my identity, that's all. And this one doesn't appear to be gifted with self-control."

"I—I can keep secrets," gasps Hessie. "Truly I can, Your Majesty, I can!"

"It's all right," I soothe her. "Don't go back to the kitchen, not in this state. Go to your quarters and get some sleep."

Arawn looks at me quizzically, but he says nothing.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. The night cook says he's sorry it isn't very nice food," says Hessie. "He made a big pot of soup for the sick and those watching over them, so there are two bowls of that, and some biscuits with jam. We're running low on jam. And flour. And the broth had to be watered down, but—"

"It smells delicious." In fact, the aroma of the soup is making my empty stomach cramp with need. "Run along. And say nothing of what you saw."

Hessie runs from the room, pausing in the doorway for a frightened half-curtsy and a quavery, “My lord,” to Arawn.

He has set the tray on one of the low parlor tables, and he’s inspecting the food curiously.

“I thought you only killed those deserving of death,” I snap at him.

“All humans deserve death, and are hastening toward it. Some deserve it more than others. And sometimes a specific death is the best way to ensure a goal, or to gain respect. My role is not justice in this life, but in the Unlife.”

“A strange set of rules. One might say they’re excuses, so you can do anything you want. How like a god, to use immense power in such selfish, impetuous ways.”

“Careful, little Queen. I may be bound to your purpose, but I can still make your life miserable if you disrespect me. And I can make it a torturous existence beyond the grave.”

“So you’ve mentioned,” I say dryly.

He picks up a spoon and samples the broth from one bowl. “It’s good,” he says, in a tone of surprise.

“The palace cooks are the best in the kingdom. Even with fewer supplies than usual, they manage to create palatable food.”

My limbs are weak with hunger, so I slump down onto the rug beside the table and begin eating, not even bothering to sit properly and hold the bowl. I just leave it on the tray and transfer wobbly spoonfuls into my mouth while Arawn watches me.

“You should take your own advice,” he says. “You keep telling everyone to sleep, when it’s clear you require rest more than any of them.”

At first I think it’s rather kind of him to observe, but then he says, with a curl of his lip, “Humans, so frail and needy. Captive to their fleshy bodies and their base desires.” He takes a large bite of biscuit with jam and hums in delight, almost as if he can’t help the sound.

I feel like laughing again. A brief impulse, swiftly drowned in a fresh wave of pain as I remember Rose making me smile today.

I was already resigned to losing Leilani. I didn’t think I would lose Rose, too.

Over the past months, I’ve learned that pain is a many-colored thing. At times it is raw and red like an angry wound. Other times it curdles, yellow and bilious, in my stomach, or seethes green and poisonous through my teeth. It is sometimes hard and white as bone. Most often, it is an endless pool of

inky sludge, gulping me down.

It feels like sludge now, thick and oily and oozing, sucking me into oblivion.

“What’s this?” Arawn plucks something off the tray and holds it up.

I snatch it from his hand. “A note from one of the palace managers. He must have sent it up with the food.”

Setting down my spoon, I open the note.

“Bad news, I take it,” says Arawn.

“I just met with the Council today about the food crisis,” I murmur. “They want to meet with me again tomorrow morning, about an urgent matter. What could they possibly want to discuss that can’t wait until our scheduled session two days from now?”

The wording of the Council’s note distresses me. There’s something faintly accusatory about it. Or perhaps I’m imagining that tone. But I didn’t imagine the hostile atmosphere during today’s council meeting, when I was bombarded with a myriad of questions to which I had few answers.

They knew I wouldn’t have answers. The council members know I depend on *them* for advice. Yet today they rallied for a verbal onslaught against which I had no defense. If I hadn’t been so distracted, mentally planning the summoning of a death god, their attack might have hurt worse.

I know I’m an ill-prepared monarch for this time of crisis. I’ve had no training for such events—only my own hasty research and my common sense. Not that any amount of training could have prepared even someone as skilled as my father for dealing with this plague. Despite the best efforts at management, the sickness has spread like a brush fire in the dry season. There’s little we can do but wait until it has run its course.

Now that Arawn is in my service, that has changed. But I cannot present him before the Council as proof of my competence. There would be too many questions, too many people wanting to use him for their own personal goals.

I can’t present him as “the death god.” Perhaps I can use the same false backstory I gave the servants—that he’s a foreign healer. But the council members will have more questions, like “How did he travel here? Where is his ship and its crew? What is his family name? What city in Terelaus does he come from?”

Best to save the official introduction until after I find out what they want from me. Perhaps it’s a simple matter, easily resolved.

But my heart tells me it’s more.

If only I had Rose to talk to... she always gave me the best advice. Leilani's advice usually consisted of volunteering to punch someone in the face on my behalf.

I struggle to my feet, waver, and collapse onto the nearest sofa. My head is swimming and my eyelids feel swollen, thick, and heavy.

"To bed, foolish little Queen," says Arawn.

"I'll sleep here." I pull a cushion under my head and tuck my feet up, onto the sofa. "You take my father's bed. In there." I nod vaguely toward the bedroom as my eyes close.

"I thought you were preparing your bed."

"It's too deeply soiled. Needs a thorough cleaning," I murmur. "Sleep."

Arawn's footsteps recede toward the bigger bedroom, but in a few seconds they return. And then his hands shove under my body, scooping me up.

My eyes fly open. "Get off me, or I'll call for the guards!"

"There is plenty of room in that bed for us both. Oceans of space. You may rest on one side, while I take the other. You're a *queen*. Queens do not sleep on sofas."

"Maybe in times of crisis they do." My cheek brushes the hot, smooth skin of his chest as he strides through the parlor. He's back to his human appearance now—no horns, no wings, and skin a light brown. The pants he's wearing are for lounging—loose and silky, purple with thorny black vines embroidered along the sides. I can't remember my father ever wearing them. Perhaps they were a gift.

The death god carries me into the dark bedroom, leaving the doors open so a little light from the parlor fireplace can enter. He dumps me onto the covers.

I start to scramble off the bed, but he's on me in a second, wrestling me down, pinning my wrists—his body hard and unyielding over mine.

"Be still," he hisses. "And rest, little Queen."

My aching body reacts, sudden and visceral, to his weight. I *need* that weight. I crave the heaviness, the pressure of solid muscle and bone and skin. I want all of him crushing me down, holding me firmly, tightly, together. I think his solid self could keep me from drowning in the black ooze of my pain. I think he could calm the vibrating anxiety in my soul.

I go perfectly still under him.

He is also still—tension lining his shoulders. I can barely see his

features in the gloom, but there's a faint jade-green glow to his eyes, even in this form.

His muscles twitch as if he's getting ready to move off me.

I wrap my arms around his waist to hold him in place.

I don't know why. He is death, and divine magic. I can sense the Otherness of him.

Hold me down. Press me back into myself. Soothe me, save me.

My weary brain is spouting nonsense.

"I can't tell if you want to fight me, little Queen," he whispers, "or something quite different."

My arms slip away from his waist. "You may sleep over there," I say stiffly, pointing.

"How generous of Your Majesty." He pulls away, circling around to the opposite side of the bed.

"And humans sleep under the covers, not on top of them. Surely you know that?"

"There are many things I know, but have yet to experience for myself. Gods rest, sometimes for a hundred years or more, but we do not sleep as humans do. Although I find myself a bit heavy in the head just now, as if I'm—dragging a little, and lying down would be pleasant."

"You're tired." I wriggle under the blankets and sheets. They were changed immediately after Aspen's death and haven't been touched since then. They smell a little stale, but they're clean, and at this point I would sleep on a bare wooden floor if I had to.

Sleeping in this bed is painful, too, but I barely feel it. Just one more bucketful in the sea of agony.

Silence falls, oppressive as death, over the room. I don't want to fall asleep, not while I'm sharing a bed with the death god—but my body isn't giving me a choice.

"Don't touch me," I murmur, as I drift away.

"No fear of that. Don't let me wake to your wormy human limbs writhing all over me. I know my beauty is irresistible but really, you must try not to yield."

"Ugh, shut up," I groan, turning my back to him.

And then I'm sliding down a black slope, a sheet of angled rock so steep I can't halt my terrifying speed. I'm flung off the edge into blackness, whirling through a void where bulging, diseased eyes wink out of the

darkness at me and cracked lips yawn, shattering the silence with their choked screams, vomiting scabrous crawling things over me and I scream, flailing and lurching—

My hands contact firm flesh. Fingers grip my wrists, and a low voice says, “Hush. It’s a nightmare, you’re only dreaming.”

But I don’t know that voice. I’m blind, lost in the dark, scaly legs squirming over my body. I scream again, and when a hand presses over my mouth, I bite down, hard.



The Queen's small teeth punch through the skin between my forefinger and thumb, drawing blood.

She's a savage little creature, her soft limbs gone rigid, galvanized into weapons. I jerk my hand away from her mouth and hold her down with my body. My weight seemed to settle her before; perhaps it will work again.

"It's a nightmare," I growl at her. "Calm down, human. You're safe."

A sudden pain shears between my shoulder blades, and I choke, my heart shuddering, damaged, my left lung slit and leaking.

Someone has plunged a sword into my back.

I turn, snarling, choking up blood. Then I'm being dragged off the queen by two overzealous bodyguards, flung onto the floor, stabbed again, this time in the chest—

The Queen roars, "Stop!"

The bodyguards freeze.

"Your Majesty," one says. "Are you all right?"

"You idiots," she seethes. "This is the foreign healer I've brought to help us. And you stabbed him!"

"He was on top of you, Majesty," falters the guard. "You were screaming—we thought—"

"I appreciate your vigilance, but you may go now. Count yourselves fortunate that he can heal himself."

"Our deepest apologies," the guards stammer, retreating.

After a moment the door to the suite closes.

“Oh god,” groans the Queen. She flings herself out of the bed and fumbles around, managing to light a candle. “Now everyone will be talking about how you and I were in bed together. Shit, you’re a mess. You can heal yourself, I hope? You’re a little more human, you said, but still not mortal.”

I can already feel my body knitting its torn flesh back together. “Yes, I can heal,” I rasp. “Fuck, that hurt.”

“You got blood on my side of the bed. And on the carpet.”

“Such gratitude.” I heave myself up off the floor. “You drew the first blood. That’s the last time I try to calm you after a nightmare.”

I touch my chest, and my fingers come away coated in scarlet. The Queen shrinks from me a little.

“You’ve seen plenty of blood, and shed it too,” I tell her. “Surely it doesn’t scare you.”

“No,” she says. But as I reach out with my bloody fingers, she inhales sharply and dodges aside. “Go wash yourself.”

“Why don’t *you* wash me?” I suggest, with a slanted smile. “It’s your fault the guards tried to kill me, after all. I suppose they thought I was murdering you.”

“Or something else.” She averts her eyes.

“Forcing myself on you. Do you think I would?”

“You seem to have no compunction about murder.”

“That’s different. And the number of humans I’ve actually killed is very small. I may toss around the threat, but I prefer to enact my vengeance or justice in other ways. Transformation, for instance. That’s one of my favorites.”

I pace toward where she stands with her back pressed against the dresser.

Her eyes are wide and liquid, the eyes of a fox cornered by hounds, or a doe holding the gaze of the hunter.

A primal, predatory instinct thrums in my veins. With my forefinger I trace her lips, painting them crimson with my own blood.

And she licks it off her mouth, almost instinctively.

A sliver of pleasure traces through my body.

“Tell me, little Queen,” I say softly. “Would I force you to submit to me?”

“You wouldn’t even want me,” she whispers. “So it’s pointless to theorize.”

Do I want her, this gaunt survivor in her soft pink nightdress?
It's not a question I can answer. I don't know myself anymore.
Perhaps I haven't for a long time.

Maybe my uncertainty shows in my eyes. Certainly something shifts in hers—strength and awareness replacing the hunted look she wore a moment ago. She's appraising me, looking *into* me. It's unsettling. No one has ever looked at me like this—as if I'm something other than a god.

She pushes away from the dresser. Takes my bitten hand in hers. The wound is already gone, but blood has dried there.

"Come," she says calmly. "I'll show you how to bathe."



I can taste the death god's blood on my tongue. Salty, with a bitter richness. I'm not sure why I licked my lips. An instinct, I think. There's a part of me that responds to him in a primal, visceral way, beyond rational thought. I don't like it.

Judging by the timepiece on my bedroom wall, I must have gotten a few hours' sleep, but I'm still weary—so weary my head thrums with a low ache, and my belly feels quivery and sick. I need to lie down again, and soon.

But first...

The lamps in the bathroom were lit when we arrived this evening, and I turned them out when I was finished in the bath. When Arawn and I enter, I light a couple of them again.

There's another light source, too. The bricks at the back of the parlor fireplace are not as prosaic as they seem; they're translucent crystal blocks, painted to look like bricks from the front side. Some of the glow and heat from that front fireplace permeates the bathing room as well.

My bathwater has long since drained away, so I turn the water on for the death god. The one resource we're never without in Cerato is clean water. So far, thanks to precautions that my father placed and my brother and I continued, our water supply hasn't been contaminated by the dead or other by-products of the plague.

I test the water against my wrist, unsure how hot a bath the death god can handle. Blazing hot, perhaps?

"Is your furnace actually made of flames?" I ask him. "Does it cause

agony to those who pass through?”

“It is more about illumination than destruction,” he says. “It reveals all the deeds of the person in life. Sometimes viewing those scenes can cause pain to the spirits. But the furnace is not a method of torture in itself.”

Something slides against the floor, and when I turn, I see that Arawn has dropped his bloodstained pants.

He has also reverted to his godlike form—wingless this time, but jade-skinned and wearing those four ridged horns, wickedly sharp at the tips. I’m not sure why he shifted. He seems both angry and unsettled, though he answered my question civilly enough.

I try to keep my gaze pinned to his face, but his jade-colored skin is almost satiny, glowing in the soft light. I can’t help admiring the glossy curves of his muscles—pectorals, abdominals, thighs—

Shit, I looked *there*. I let myself sneak a glimpse at what hangs between those muscular thighs.

It’s long. And um—symmetrical. Attractive. Tempting, one might say.

My gaze snaps back to his face. His eyes are hooded, his mouth tweaked in a half-grin.

“Get in the tub,” I hiss.

He walks toward me, gorgeously naked, and I nearly panic.

“We talked about this, little Queen,” he purrs. “Don’t give me orders. Pray to me, and I may see fit to grant your request.”

“I’ve never been very good at prayers.”

He thumbs my chin. “How about begging? Are you any good at that?”

I move away, under pretense of fetching a washcloth from a drawer. Then I pluck a bar of soap from the dish—cedar and honey, with a hint of cinnamon.

Arawn eases his long, toned body into the water. So tall. Inhumanly tall. Rose’s distraught family bought the story of him as a foreign healer, but I’m not sure how many others will. Perhaps we can convince them that the people of Terelaus are all gigantic.

Eventually the truth about him is going to slip out. And I must have a plan in place for when that happens.

Arawn sinks deeper into the water, inhales sharply, then looks up at me with startled delight.

My grip on the cloth and the soap tightens.

He looks *boyish*, as well as godlike. I would never have thought the

combination possible, and I find it dangerously charming.

“So you rub the soap on the cloth like this, and then you rub the cloth on your skin.” My voice sounds a little breathless despite my best efforts. “Or you can use just the soap. The cloth is better for scrubbing, though. I’m going back to sleep. Enjoy yourself.”

“This feels wonderful.” He doesn’t take the cloth I’m holding out, just stretches to his full length in the water. Large as the tub is, he nearly spans its length. His dark green hair fans out around him. “Stars, I could stay here forever.” His eyes close.

“Hot water is one of the joys of life.” Since his eyes are shut, I allow myself a moment of blatant ogling. He’s beautiful. Unnatural. A form brimming with power over life and death—power I only got a glimpse of at the Pit. He is exquisitely deadly.

I throw the soapy cloth at him, and it slaps onto his upper chest. “I’m going to bed.”

I’m not sure how long he stays in the bath, only that I was asleep and his return to the bed wakes me. I’m in the middle of the bed now, away from the bloodstained part of the sheets. There’s still plenty of room for us to stay apart, no need for our bodies to touch—but he settles in so close to me I can feel the lingering heat of the bath on his skin.

My mind is muddled with sleep, blurry and soft. I shift under the sheets until I’m touching him, my spine aligned with his long arm.

He doesn’t pull away.



When I wake, I’m curled against the death god’s side, under his arm, with my forehead against his ribs and my knees pressing into his hip. The aroma of cedar and honey ghosts from his skin, a delicious blend I inhale with every breath.

Fuzzy and confused, I push myself up to a sitting position.

He’s awake, staring at the ceiling with eyes that glow faintly green. He doesn’t even look at me.

How long has he been awake?

Gods save me, I've known him for less than two days, and already I've used him as a pillow twice.

They say strangers can become intimate friends much more swiftly during a crisis, and circumstances have shoved Arawn and me together in a way I never anticipated. But I wouldn't say we're friends. Wary acquaintances with a side of hostility, maybe. He probably considers me an enemy—and in a way, as the god of death, he is my enemy as well.

He's certainly no one I want to share a bed with again. Starting today, he will have his own quarters, even if I have to prepare them myself.

But I won't have the time to prepare them, will I? Because the chief manager usually comes in while I'm snatching a bite of breakfast, and we go over the status of the palace household. After him, the captain of the guard—or an emissary of his—stops by, and then I hurry to the throne room to hear supplicants for an hour or two. Then I make the rounds, checking on the sick guards and servants. Sometimes I ride into the city, passing out medical supplies, food, blankets, and wine from the palace reserves. There are endless little issues to deal with, tasks to complete, reports to hear, documents to read and sign.

The usual work will have to wait, though. This morning I have my meeting with the Council, and then I plan to take Arawn through the palace and have him set a mark on the forehead of everyone he can spare from death. Then we'll tackle the city, street by street. Perhaps I should have the citizens line the streets with their sick. That would make it easier; he could simply walk between the rows and pass judgment two at a time. But an arrangement like that might also spread infection among people who haven't contracted the illness yet.

With a glance at the timepiece, I climb off the bed, irritated at myself for sleeping this late. I hurry into the parlor and ring the bell to let the maids know I'm awake. Then I sweep into the bathroom to relieve myself and clean my teeth.

When I come back into the parlor Arawn is there, horned and handsome, finger-combing his long wavy hair. He's wearing a black silken robe he must have found among my father's things. It's loosely belted, showing a generous triangle of his chest.

"Little Queen," he says, low.

A thrill runs through my belly.

I'm immediately furious with myself, so I snap, "Do you know where Rose and Leilani are? My friends who died yesterday? You weren't there to oversee the furnace. Will they get to the right place in the afterlife?"

"I can assure you they will be well-placed. As I mentioned, the process operates smoothly without me—or at least it will for a few days. After that, with your permission, I'll return to check on things in my realm. If nothing else I must ensure that my hounds haven't run wild."

"Hounds?"

"Souls who did wicked things, whom I punished personally. They are hounds of shadow and fire who serve me, tracking down other cruel souls whose sins are so egregious they deserve an early death. And my beasts have other duties as well. But they are volatile, and need a strong hand to control them, or they begin choosing prey at their own whims."

I can't let Arawn go back into the Pit. What if he doesn't return to me and fulfill his bargain? What if he's trying to trick me into releasing my hold on him?

He eyes me knowingly, then says, "I'm bound to you for a year, so you need not fear—I will return."

"We'll see how many people you can save in a few days," I tell him. "And then we'll talk about you going back to the Unlife. Get dressed, and change your skin color. And dispel those horns. I don't suppose you can shrink at all?"

He gives me a look of haughty derision.

"Fine. You can have breakfast when they bring it, and then stay here quietly until I fetch you."

With another glare, Arawn disappears into my father's bedroom.

I'm surprised—and a little disappointed—that he didn't fuss at me for giving him orders again.

I return to my room to select my outfit for the day—something elegant yet serviceable. Not quite mourning, since we're bringing hope to the people—but still somber, out of respect for the dead. I choose a dark blue gown, thick and warm.

While I'm pulling back my hair into a simple twist, two maids enter my bedroom, carrying fresh sheets.

"Our apologies for the state of your room last night, Your Majesty." The maid who speaks looks as if she might cry. "And I'm sorry we didn't arrive quickly enough to help you dress this morning. There are so few of us now,

and we didn't realize—”

“Think nothing of it,” I assure her. “Have my guards help you with the mattress—it's too heavy for the pair of you.”

“You are a goddess, Your Majesty,” she says fervently, and the other maid nods with eager gratitude.

“Nonsense. We're all pulling together to get through this, aren't we?” I jab in a long pin and pat my hair. “I have a guest from another kingdom—a healer from Terelaus. He's a very private person, and prefers to remain here in my suite until I'm ready to take him into the city. Don't speak to him, or let anyone else know he's here. We don't want to raise false hopes, you understand.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” they chorus.

I hurry back into the parlor, where the maid Hessie is setting my breakfast tray on the table—toast and porridge for two, with a little fruit. I smear a piece of toast with a thin layer of porridge, dribble some fruit over the oatmeal, and then slap a second piece of toast on top. Cup of tea in hand, and then I'm out the door, meeting the chief manager halfway down the hall.

“Report to me as we walk,” I tell him. “I have a tighter schedule today.”



Last night, before the Queen had her nightmare, I lay in the bed, prey to the sensation of those phantom chains constricting my body, like dark lines of ice.

When I was wrestling with the Queen, and then later, when I entered the hot bath, those sensations disappeared. And during the second half of the night, when she was pressed against me, I couldn't feel the chains at all. Instead my skin surged with tingling heat wherever her body contacted mine. The sound of her steady breathing lulled me to sleep, and though I woke early, needing less rest than humans do, I remained utterly motionless, simply resting in her presence.

My nearness seemed to soothe her, too. There were no more nightmares.

Now, as I walk through the parlor, the glide of the silky black robe against my body mutes my sense of the chains as well. And when I begin to eat the breakfast brought by Hessie, the maid, the chains evanesce entirely.

Apparently human sensation eases my awareness of my own bondage.

I'm not sure that's ideal, though it's certainly an incentive for me to try a variety of new experiences.

First, I need to test my magic more thoroughly, to see how much I've been restricted by the bond. And then I need to find that old book again and see if there's anything in it that would explain why this particular summoning is so different.

"Hessie," I call to the maid from last night. She is busy adding wood to the fireplace while stealing glances at me. "Come over here, little one."

She casts a panicked look toward the Queen's bedroom, where the two guards and two maids are removing the soiled bedding and mattress, toting everything away to be cleaned.

"Don't call to them," I command. "Come to me."

She approaches, trembling. I wait until I'm sure the others have left the Queen's part of the suite, and then I lift Hessie's wrist, tracing the tip of my claw along its underside.

"I need to experiment with you, Hessie," I murmur. "A little test of magic. It might be frightening, but don't worry—all will be well."

"Yes, my lord," she whispers.

First I press a hand to her forehead, reading the stains on her soul. My furnace shows everything in crisp detail, but I can gauge a soul's worth or goodness myself as well. If the furnace is the bright sun, my own power is a lantern by comparison—dimmer, but sufficient to see by.

This girl is generally a good human. A few instances of lying, some gossip, slapping her brother multiple times when they were younger, stealing apples—no, plums—she's a decent sort of human, if a little silly.

Satisfied, I cast the sleep of death on her. She goes gray, statuesque, paralyzed where she stands, with her eyes closed.

I wait a few moments, and then a snap of my fingers releases her. She's a little dazed, but seems to have no knowledge that she was spelled.

I test my shadows next, letting them slide from my body and pool across the room, making them twine up her stockinged legs and around her waist. I'm pleased I still have full control of them.

After recalling the shadows, I test another power of mine—a favorite punishment for those who have wronged me. I can hasten the signs of aging in a human body and then rewind them again. But I cannot turn back the clock any farther into the past than the present day; I can't turn Hessie into a toddler, for instance. I give her sagging skin, wrinkles, age spots, and creaking bones—and then I restore her to her current youthful self.

Finally, I turn Hessie into a cat. Just long enough to ascertain that the power to transform others is still mine, even if I no longer have full control over my own form.

There are a few other minor magicks of which I'm capable, but I'm satisfied, for now.

When I return Hessie to human form, she squeals and begins to scurry away.

I catch her by the arm. “Allow me to thank you for your time. This mark will spare you from death of any kind for the span of seventy years. It’s not something I can give to everyone, but you’ve been good sport.”

I press my thumb to her forehead, and a symbol glows there—a different design than the ones I gave to the two little sick girls. It’s a tethermark, a sign that she is favored by a god. Tethermarks bind a soul to the donor god’s energy for a specified time, granting the human invincibility or other special favors, depending on the god’s powers. The more complex the tethermark, the greater the favor, and the longer it will last. I once granted a tethermark to a man who summoned me—five hundred years of youthful appearance and immunity from death. A simple task, easily completed. Not like the demands of the intense little Queen who has trapped me for a year.

Hessie leaves with a tremulous whisper of thanks, awed by her new invulnerability. When she’s gone, I wander into the Queen’s bedroom, still crunching a piece of toast. Very good stuff, toast. It has an addictive texture, and coupled with the sweetness of fruit, it’s quite incomparable.

I stretch out my other hand, palm outward, seeking out the subtle vibrations of magic in the room. There’s a charmed knife concealed in one of the bedposts. I wonder if the little Queen knows it’s there. Without examining it I can’t be sure, but I think it has been spelled with godsblood, which means it can kill a god or severely injure one, rendering them helpless for decades or longer. A godsblood weapon can only be crafted by a mortal uniquely gifted with metal-working talent and fire magic.

Strange that such a powerful weapon should exist in this palace, and in the chamber of the former Queen, at that. I will have to find out if the new Queen knows of the weapon. If she doesn’t, I’ll leave it be until I can safely neutralize it. Not that my little Queen would try to harm me; she needs my power to save her people. But perhaps she plans to stab me with it at the end of the year.

That would be an unfortunate end to our pact.

Ah, there it is. The tome of rituals, stuffed carelessly into a drawer full of lacy undergarments. My fingers plunge into the silky, lacy scraps, and after I’ve extracted the book, I can’t resist lifting out one of the garments—a satiny scarlet thing, trimmed with black lace. It smells of flowers and honey.

Reluctantly I drop the panties back into the drawer, shove it closed, and carry the book back to the King’s bedroom. Sitting on the bed, I peruse the summoning ritual. I know its ingredients and framing by heart, but there must

be some variable here—something to account for the slight decline of my shifting powers and the increase in my sensibilities.

There is a tiny star and a symbol etched beside the final word of the spell. I flip through the book, looking for those notations. When I'm nearly at the last page I spot them, right above a paragraph of text in an entirely different script than the rest of the book.

A chill of recognition runs over me, punctuated by a surge of hot rage. This is Godspeak. And it's in my sister Macha's handwriting.



My meeting with the Council is not going well.

I'm trying to keep my face placid, while Lord Venniroth expounds upon a long list of grievances and "concerns" compiled by the Council. Of course Venniroth is their chosen spokesman. He has been subtly undermining me since the day I was crowned.

Venniroth has a survivor's white hair, a short white beard, and a face that must have been beautiful once and is still coarsely, heavily handsome. He's broad-chested, and his slight paunch has disappeared over the past couple of months as our kingdom began to suffer deprivation. His thick fingers are weighted with flashy rings, but the edge of his right sleeve is frayed, probably from rubbing against his writing desk.

Shit, I haven't been listening to the last few sentences. I nod slightly, trying to look attentive.

"Please don't treat this as some sort of attack, Your Highness," says Lord Venniroth. "I sympathize with you for being forced into a role which you yourself claim to have never wanted."

I frown. "I never said—"

"Forgive me, Princess, but my son assures me you did say such things, more than once."

Shit.

When Otin was younger and much less obnoxious, he used to hang out with Rose, Leilani, and me between classes. We were all in the same exclusive school for noble children—which no doubt contributed to the

haughty mentality of most of our classmates. I used to think I was the exception, but now and then I have caught myself falling prey to the same mode of thinking—that I'm somehow loftier, more intelligent, or more capable because of my birth.

Since the plague, and coming face-to-face with my own incompetence, I've had far fewer of those thoughts.

But in our schooldays I did occasionally voice my fervent joy that I was born second, that Aspen was heir, and that I most likely wouldn't ever wear the crown. I didn't want it.

I still don't. But it's my responsibility. My birthright. Aspen's last plea was for me to do better than he did. I've already failed in that, but I won't stop trying, and no power-hungry councilman is going to dislodge me from my place.

"What I thought during my teenage years is far different from what I believe now," I say coolly. "And don't think I haven't noticed your lack of decorum, Lord Venniroth. It's 'Your Majesty,' not 'Your Highness.' And it's Queen, not Princess."

"Apologies," he says instantly, with an obsequious little head tilt. "Old habits. A mere slip of the tongue. I haven't been sleeping well—I've been so concerned for the wellbeing of the kingdom."

"As have I. Yet I manage to remember the correct honorifics for my council members."

There's a tiny flash of anger in his eyes. His lips tighten briefly before he says, "Let me speak plainly, Your Majesty. The other council members and I have discussed the matter, and we believe it would be in the best interest of the people if you were to take a husband, someone to help you carry the weight of the crown. There are a number of eligible men of noble birth who would be glad to assist in this matter. You may have heard that my wife passed only last week—not of the plague, but because of her failing heart. Mired in grief as I am, I would be willing to put aside that sorrow and partner with you in the work of healing the kingdom."

His words are honey-smooth, sticky, and cloying. I'm caught in them for a moment, startled beyond speech.

I scan the faces around the table, expecting to find shock at Lord Venniroth's blatant proposal. But instead I find averted eyes, or bland, unsurprised expressions, or nods of support for him.

They've discussed this without me. Venniroth has spread his virulent

influence through the Council, and I'm losing their trust.

I'm losing everything.

When will Fate finally deem that I've lost enough?

"You need not decide at once," says one of the other lords. "Take a week, Your Majesty, to think it over, and to court some of the potential candidates. If, at the end of the week, you haven't found someone else equally suitable, the Council will vote to mandate your marriage to Lord Venniroth."

"You can't do that," I gasp.

"We can." Lord Venniroth's tone is gentle, with the barest tinge of triumph, "if we pass a vote of 'no confidence' in the Queen."

He's right. In our kingdom, the authority belongs to the Crown, but the Crown is checked and balanced by the Council. And in certain cases, the Council may overrule the Crown. There is precedent for a vote of 'no confidence.' One of my ancestors went half-mad and began picking fights with the few overseas allies we had, ordering his galleons to attack their ships, inciting war. Thankfully the Council voted him off the throne before a full-scale war broke out, and his brother took over. But the mad king's actions permanently damaged our relationships with those nations. We became even more isolated afterward.

"I would hate to see you abdicate the throne," Lord Venniroth says softly. "But if you are too weary and overwhelmed to see the wisdom of having a partner by your side, then perhaps you are not fit to rule at all."

This is outright defiance. He's pushing me into a corner, effectively threatening me, yet doing it under the guise of concern for the people. It's despicable, and brilliant.

My position is tenuous at best. I can't overreact in this moment, or I will confirm the suspicion Venniroth has planted in my Council's minds—that I'm not fit to be Queen.

I must move carefully.

"I will consider your suggestions," I tell the Council. "Perhaps I do need more help. But a week seems too brief a time in which to make such a permanent decision. I'm sure you all sympathize with my desire to have not only political support, but love, when I choose a husband."

"Understandable, for a girl such as yourself," says the Duchess of Louge, a dour-faced older woman, one of Venniroth's closest allies. "But in times like these, we must all put our personal desires aside. People are dying.

Surely your desire for romance is not more important than the lives of your subjects.”

She’s turning my simple request into a matter of childish selfishness.

These politicians—they do it so slyly, so smoothly, making me look like an incompetent, girlish fool while smiling with false compassion. I’m not used to this—I didn’t train for this.

They’re right in that respect. I was never groomed for the rulership like Aspen was. I may be smart and strong, but I’m not a politician.

I need an ally against them.

Or at the very least, I need time to figure out how to prove I’m worthy to be Queen.

And time is the one thing I’m not being given.

“Time is of the essence in days such as these,” says Lord Vennirot, as if he perceived my thoughts. “One week, Majesty, and then we will discuss the matter again.”

“I will let you know my decision in a week,” I say, in a tone that intimates the whole thing was my idea. “Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to some other matters.”

I rise gracefully and glide from the room, doing my best imitation of my stepmother’s elegant posture during feast-day parades.

When the Council Chamber doors close behind me, I vent a long, frustrated sigh.

Then I realize, with a dark thrill, that Arawn is leaning against the wall outside the meeting room.

He disobeyed me by leaving the suite. And clearly he has been eavesdropping. Two guards are slumped against a pillar nearby, their faces gray and their eyes closed. One of them is snoring faintly. Two more guards down the hall are also sleeping where they stand.

Arawn is in his jade-skinned god form, clad in a very tight black tunic and pants, holding a half-eaten apple which he tosses before catching it again. “That didn’t go well, did it?”

Seizing the death god’s sleeve, I haul him along the corridor until we reach an alcove. I shove him into it as roughly as I can, despite his height and bulk.

“What did you do to those guards?” I demand.

“The sleep of death. If I left them in that state they would die by day’s end, but—” He leans out of the curtained recess and snaps his fingers. The

guards stir, awakening, rubbing their eyes in confusion.

“Stop it.” I shove Arawn against the back of the shadowed alcove. The tips of his horns knock against a sconce bolted high up on the wall. “I don’t need this, not right now.”

He looks down at me with an infuriating grin, as if I’m a very small, amusing kitten pawing at his pant leg. He holds up the apple. “This is delicious. Care for a bite?”

“I—what? No!”

“Why not? You should eat something.”

“Not that. Not after you put your mouth all over it.”

“Is there something wrong with my mouth?”

My gaze fixes on his lips—perfectly arched, with a lower lip so full I want to bite it—

Shit... Why am I thinking that?

“You have death-god mouth,” I say faintly.

“Death-god mouth,” he repeats, quirking an eyebrow. “I’m not contagious, you know.”

“No, I know that. I—” My fingers curl into fists against his chest. “You shouldn’t be walking around the palace looking like this, all green and horned.”

“I didn’t.” He changes color, his skin assuming a light brown hue while his horns vanish. “See? Now I’m the simple healer from some faraway land who can go from house to house and deal with the sick.”

“Deal with the sick? That sounds ominous. You mean ‘spare the plague victims.’”

“I plan to end things quickly for the unworthy and remove the shadow of death from the worthy. But phrase it however you like. After all, you have other concerns, it seems—like your impending marriage.” Another grin, wider than ever.

“You’re enjoying this,” I hiss.

“Enjoying the distress of the woman who enslaved me for a year?” There’s a savage, almost desperate edge to his tone. He takes another bite of apple and chews messily, humming his pleasure at the taste. “Oh yes. I’m enjoying it immensely.”

“You’re a monster.”

“To a human it might seem so. Are you going to strike me with those, little Queen?” He nods to my white-knuckled hands.

I force my fingers to uncurl. Now my palms are flat against his chest. Right before I remove them, I feel the faint quickening of his heartbeat. Or perhaps I imagined it.

He nonchalantly takes another bite of apple, keeping his eyes averted from mine.

“Come on,” I snap. “We must heal the sick here in the palace before we go into the city.”

It’s only once we’re halfway back to the royal wing that I realize he put on his jade-green skin and horns just for me, right when I left the Council Chamber. I’m not sure whether he was trying to terrify or impress me.

Such a confusing deity.



For the next three days Arawn and I work ceaselessly, going through the city section by section. To save time, we send town criers and guards ahead of us so the residents of each building can bring their sick to the street, or at the very least to a front room where it’s quicker to access them. With so many to heal, every minute counts.

At dawn, noon, and dusk, Arawn and I go to one of the main squares of the city to heal sick children. Parents can bring little ones there for priority treatment, since children die from the plague more quickly than adults.

Arawn isn’t healing anyone, so the beneficial effects of his presence aren’t immediately noticeable. The people he spares still have to suffer through the remainder of the illness. And sometimes he encounters people whom he deems unworthy. Those individuals die shortly after he leaves, and since their inner sins are not always readily apparent or known to their loved ones, the name of “Vaughn the Healer” is a curse in those households.

The food crisis is worsening, as is the unrest in the city. The relatives of the people Arawn has killed hate him, and by extension, me as well. But the parents whose children have miraculously recovered have nothing but praise for me and the foreign healer.

I haven’t met with the Council again; I’ve refused a curt note they sent

me, wanting to discuss the new healer.

I've also been neglecting my throne room hours in favor of traveling around the city with Arawn. Since the supplicants can't meet me at the palace, they follow our carriage—some of them carrying sick loved ones and pleading for help, others shouting cruel names at the man they believe to be “Vaughn of Terelaus.” I've had to increase the number of mounted guards traveling with us each day. It puts a strain on the dwindling resources of the royal guard, but I have no choice.

Late on the third day, Farley halts our carriage in a new section of the city—a few streets lined with tenement buildings, near the north wall.

Two guards are riding in the carriage with the death god and I. When our vehicle halts, one guard leans forward, laying a hand on the carriage door.

“A moment, Your Majesty, while we clear you a path,” he says.

Through the padded walls of the coach, I can hear the clamor of voices, some shrill, crying for mercy and healing—others caustic and strident, demanding the punishment of the “Death Dealer,” as some have begun to call Arawn.

My guards exit the carriage, while I wait inside with the silent god. He hasn't spoken to me much during these three days. We've been starting our work in the pre-dawn chill and not returning until late at night; and when we're in the palace, he keeps to the room across the hall, the one now assigned to him. It used to be the chamber of the queen mother—my grandmother, whom I barely remember.

A guard shouts outside the carriage, and a woman screeches back.

“Soon they'll begin to see it,” I say, almost to myself. “The plague takes about a week to run its course in a healthy adult. The children you've spared are already recovering. A few more days, and more of the adults will start to get better. Then in another week or two the numbers of the sick will begin to go down. We just need a little more time, and then they'll realize it's working.”

Arawn gazes at me, his expression bland, tinged with faint hostility.

His apathy infuriates me. “Why do you have to kill the unworthy ones?” I snap. “That's what people remember, you know—the ones who die immediately after you leave the house. They *should* think about the people you mark to be spared, or the children who are surviving, but no—all they see is the deaths. If you could only spare a few more—”

“You’re asking me to go against my nature.” His voice rumbles through the confined space. “I won’t do that.”

I want to strike him, to kick him. I clench my fists and grit my teeth, struggling against the boiling tide of rage in my chest.

“Breathe, little Queen,” he says. “You’ve barely slept or eaten in three days. And you’ve barely allowed me to sleep or eat for three days.”

“Not that you need it,” I retort.

His eyes spark, and he leans forward. “I need it,” he grits out. “I feel my chains more distinctly when I’m working for you, when I have no time to indulge in pleasant sensations. Just because you can’t see my bonds, Highness, doesn’t mean they aren’t there. In fact—” His eyes glow a brighter green, and suddenly I *can* see them—black chains laced around his limbs. They’re gone the next second, but the glow in his eyes remains, a fierce, vengeful light.

“I know I’m merely a tool in your hand, little Queen,” he says. “But perhaps you should consider that I will not always be your slave. One day, you will be mine.”

At the dominant possession in his tone, a shiver races along my spine. I’m about to respond when my driver Farley opens the carriage door.

“The guards say it’s clear now,” Farley says, with a brief bow to me and a deeper one to Arawn. “You may descend, oh Mightiest of Illustrious Lords.”

I roll my eyes. Farley has been gracing Arawn with new titles whenever we enter or leave the carriage, and each title seems more obsequious and flowery than the last.

“Such a pleasure to know that stubborn little humans can learn to respect their betters,” Arawn says, with an affectionate squeeze of Farley’s shoulder as he descends from the carriage ahead of me.

I nearly succumb to my anger and kick the seat of his godly pants. The bastard knows I’m supposed to leave the carriage first.

But I restrain myself, descending after him and smiling through gritted teeth at the crowd. Though the night is dark and cold, all the streetlamps have been lit in preparation for our arrival. This is our last scheduled stop for the day, and I’m determined we’ll finish this sector before we return to the palace for a few hours’ rest.

Some of the people along the street cheer for us, while others call for mercy. Several shout threats at Arawn, though they don’t dare threaten me

openly. Not yet.

Farley yells back at a few of the protesters. His defense of Arawn is admirable, I suppose, but he's arguably making the situation worse.

"I do believe Farley would suck your cock if you asked him," I mutter sideways at Arawn through my bright, queenly smile.

"Perhaps I should ask," he says, low. "It would be a novel sensation, indeed. And no one else has offered."

He gives me a sidelong look.

My cheeks flush hot at Arawn's comment. I know he sees my discomfort, because he smirks briefly before he moves forward, laying one hand each on the foreheads of two sick men. They are barely able to stand, propped up on the shoulders of relatives.

Ahead, a whole family of plague victims have crawled from their house and are lying in the street, waiting for Arawn's attention. He strides forward quickly, pressing a palm to the forehead of the baby first, then a small boy, then a girl of about twelve. On each of their foreheads, a symbol appears, glowing green. The mark of life.

Arawn marks the mother next. And then he lays a palm to the father's forehead.

The death god hesitates. Turns and looks at me.

I see it in his eyes—the solemn judgment that the father of this household is not worthy of life.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head.

Arawn pulls his hand away, leaving the man's forehead blank.

"What?" quavers the woman. "What are you doing? Heal him! You have to heal him—he's the one who works, who provides for us—without him, we will starve!"

"Better to starve than to endure his presence anymore." Arawn's pained gaze moves to the young girl, and my stomach sickens. Whatever this man did to deserve death, it involved his own daughter.

But the onlookers do not see it. They do not understand. They only note the absence of the life mark from this father, this provider. The voices who cursed Arawn when he appeared begin to castigate him again.

Usually the god seems immune to their verbal abuse, but today his shoulders are taut, his body tense. I can sense the dreadful swell of magic from him, an impending explosion. If the others in the crowd feel it, they don't show any alarm. Perhaps I can only sense it because of the magical

contract between us.

If I *have* been pushing him too hard, it's from a desire to save lives. There are so many lives to save, and we haven't even gone beyond the walls of the city. Soon we will have to travel outside its borders, to save those in the towns and villages beyond.

If only Arawn didn't have to touch them all. If only this could be quicker. If only I'd summoned him sooner.

He's moving forward again, touching foreheads swiftly, still brimming with barely constrained anger. Shadows seem to thicken along the street, curling around some of the streetlamps, dimming their light. A deeper cold sets in—a bone-deep, frozen, cracked cold that makes the air itself feel like knives in the lungs.

The cold of death.

I hurry forward and grip Arawn's shoulder. "What are you doing?" I hiss. "Stop it."

He turns. Looks down at me. Despite the human form he's wearing, he is so enormously tall that I step back instinctively. His eyes are still glowing green.

The eyes of most healers glow golden, and their magic appears as lines of golden light. The green gleam in Arawn's eyes is one more thing for the naysayers to gossip about.

"Control yourself," I breathe.

"Of course, Your Majesty." He grins, showing teeth far sharper than they should be.

With a small gasp I look down at his hands, which are now adorned with savage claws. He's testing me, slowly revealing his true form.

He can't do this. Not here—I can't take the added pressure of trying to explain how and why I summoned the god of death.

"Please," I whisper. "Just this one more section, and then I'll—I'll let you return home to check on your—your pets."

I can feel everyone's eyes on the two of us, a searing pressure. I wish I was taller, so I wouldn't look so physically inferior to Arawn.

The angry chatter and confused murmurs of the crowd blend with the moans of the sick. Under cover of the noise, I whisper to Arawn, so no one else can hear. "When you return, I will ease the schedule a little. More time for the pleasure you want."

"The pleasure I want?" His voice is low, his eyes burning green. "You'll

give it to me?”

Again my heart does a quivering leap. What exactly does he mean by that?

“Any pleasures you desire will be yours,” I whisper hastily. “Now please, put those away.” I nod to his claws. “And the teeth too. Please.”

He smiles, and the sharp points of his fangs recede. “I was right. You beg very prettily. But I think you can do even better, with a little training.”

“Shut up,” I breathe desperately. “For the love of the gods, shut up, and move on.”

His tongue traces briefly across his teeth before he turns away and resumes his progress through the crowd of plague-stricken people.

I’m left to stand alone, struggling to breathe through the pounding of my heart and the unexpected heat centered between my legs.

The way he looked at me just then—it was more than anger.

He looked ravenous.

And I think I might be the meal.

The crowd continues to gather, following our progress along the street, their clamor and shouts slightly muffled by the cloths wrapped over their lower faces—a defense against any plague particles that might be floating through the air.

I don’t like the growing numbers. It’s not safe, either from a contagion perspective or from a security standpoint. The smoky lamps, the cold and bitter dark, the stench of sickness, the snarl of angry voices and the glare of rage-filled eyes—it’s making me feel brittle. I am an eggshell that formed too thin, with only the vulnerable jelly of unprepared life beneath.

I need to be strong. I need to handle this somehow.

But I don’t know what to say. My weary brain has gone frighteningly blank. Mentally I form a few phrases and cast them aside—they sound weak, self-serving, too defensive. What can I say to reassure these people, to convince them to be patient until they can see the positive effects of what Arawn is doing?

“Turn back, wielder of dark magicks, death-dealer, killer!” screeches a woman’s voice in the crowd, and something flies through the air, straight for the death god’s head as he bends to touch another sufferer.

I lunge without thinking, throwing myself between Arawn and the object.

It strikes my cheek, hard-edged and cold, then falls to the cobblestones

and shatters into crystal fragments. A chunk of ice.

Pain blazes across my skin, and when I lift my fingertips to my cheekbone, they come away damp with blood.

Suddenly I'm hemmed in by guards, a protective trio of broad backs, while more guards shove back the crowd, shouting harsh warnings, demanding that the one who hurled the ice step forward for punishment.

I can't see over my guards' shoulders. Can't make myself heard over their shouts and the outcry from the citizens. But I can feel the rising panic, the growing churn of motion among the crowd.

They are going to break, riot, stampede—they will trample the small and the sick. They might even overwhelm my guards and drag me down, crush me under the fists of their terror and anger.

For a bleak moment, that end almost looks like relief.

And then an impossibly tall figure shoulders between my guards, and a hand falls on my shoulder.

"Have you given up then?" Arawn growls at me, his eyes snapping. "Will you not quell this foolishness?"

I look up at him, bleeding and tired and empty.

I am at the end of myself.

Shock and pity flare in his eyes, and he cups my chin, turning my face so he can see the wound.

"They hurt you." His words vibrate with dark intent. "It should have been me. You were foolish to get in the way. But never mind that now. I will handle this."

He breaks out of the knot of guards, lifts both arms, and roars, in the voice of the death god, "Silence!"

The tenement houses along the street seem to tremble at his voice, and the very cobbles rumble with the force of that single word.

A hollow silence falls in the wake of his roar.

Even in human aspect, Arawn is taller than them all—physically dominant, his eyes flashing green, power emanating from his broad-shouldered form as he stalks among the frozen crowd.

"You call me a killer." His voice rings, crisp and loud, along the street, reaching every ear. "*I am.*"

A few people gasp or whimper, but they don't move. They are his captives now, all of them.

"You believe I have dark magic." Arawn laughs, cold and cruel. "*I do.*"

Shadows flood out of him, crawling across the ground, over the frightened crowd, up the buildings along the street.

“You see it now.” Arawn’s tone is menacing, exultant. “It is only by the grace of your queen that I am sparing most of your pitiful lives. And you would disrespect her? You would harm her? For gifting you your last chance of survival? Look at her!”

He shoves aside my guards, draws me forward swiftly to face the crowd. “Look at her, you pack of thankless wretches! She could be in the palace, warm by a fire. Yet here she is, enduring the darkness and the cold with you. Here she has been every day, walking this city with me, showing you kindness while I visit your sick. And this is what you’ve done to her, this compassionate queen who wants nothing for herself. She craves nothing more than the good of her people, and this is how you thank her? Look upon your good work!”

He turns my face aside, showing the blood running down my cheek. A few of the women in the crowd begin to weep.

“No one else will help you!” shouts Arawn. “No one else cares, but she —” he jabs a finger toward me— “she does. You will never understand what she has given up to bring me here, to save you. She wants me to save you. So *I will.*”

His great chest is heaving under his cloak, and his jaw is hard and tight, teeth clenched. He looks at me, furious, hungry, and demanding, and my heart tugs compulsively toward him, captive to the voiceless command in those fierce eyes.

Then he turns back to his audience.

“Children infected with this plague usually die within a day or two,” he says. “But it has been three days since I began my work in your city. Have your children died since I touched them? No. That one fact alone makes you better off since my arrival. So rejoice, you ungrateful worms—rejoice in the survival of the next generation, and do not begrudge the lives of the unworthy few whom I condemn.”

His shadows dissolve into nothing, and it seems as if they carry the people’s anger with them.

The crowd is softened, subdued. Shaken.

Arawn stopped them. Rebuked them. It’s exactly what they needed in the moment, and now they need something else. They need comfort and reassurance from their Queen.

Suddenly, I know what to say.

I grip Arawn's sleeve. "That barrel, there. Help me onto it."

He grasps my waist immediately and lifts me to the perch I indicated. His tall frame, rigid at my side, gives me courage. If I start to fall, he'll catch me.

"I have been raised with privilege," I say, through trembling lips, "so I won't pretend to know how each one of you feels, how you've suffered. What I do understand is loss." My voice is low, heavy, and raw, drenched in the pain of my torn heart. "My parents are dead. My brother is dead. My best friends are dead. So many people I knew and loved—gone."

I have their attention now.

They're listening.

My people. My strong, weary, anxious, broken people.

"I passed through this plague," I tell them. "There was no special magic or royal medicine to save or soothe me. People stronger than me have died from this sickness. I survived by chance, like the other survivors here. Spared, it would seem, by Death himself."

I unpin my cloak and shuck it off, and I drag down the loose neck of my gown, showing the sharp corners of my shoulders and the bones of my upper chest, visible through the pale skin.

"I'm not feasting in the palace while you starve." My tone is sharp as my bones, cutting through the silence. "I survived, but I am not thriving on the dregs of this kingdom's wealth. I am suffering with you. *For* you, because I love you all. This man—" I gesture to Arawn, "his power is not a perfect solution, or a quick one. But it's *something*. And all I ask is for you to hold on, just a little longer, while I do *something*. Something that might save us all."

Murmurs of assent, of support, sift from the crowd. The naysayers drift away, while others bring the sick forward, all the more eager for Arawn's touch.

The energy that suffused me during those moments of bold speech lasts through the next couple of hours, while Arawn and I finish with this sector. We push on a little farther into the next area—one of the last we have to cover—but finally Arawn turns and heads back toward the carriage, which has followed slowly with us. There are sick people still waiting in the next street, and I promise them we will return in the morning.

"Bring any sick children to the Fourth Quarter market square," I tell

them. “We’ll be there at dawn for the first healing.”

The people slowly return to their houses, and my guards escort me to the carriage. One of them placed a bit of plaster over my scraped cheek—a temporary solution to protect the area until it can be washed and bandaged properly.

In the days before the plague, a scrape like this would have been a moment’s work for one of the palace healers. Now I will have to heal in the slow, natural way.

Arawn sits across from me, throwing me glances of disapproval now and then. I’m not sure what I did to anger him. I thought my speech was rather good.

He maintains the dissatisfied glare when we arrive at the palace and head for the royal residence wing. He’s still wearing that expression when we reach the point in the hallway where we usually head for our separate rooms.

I dismiss the guards, and they promise to send up two fresh soldiers to guard my room overnight. As they tromp away, Arawn and I are left standing alone in the corridor. Only one lamp is lit, halfway along the hall, and its dim light casts strange shadows, making Arawn’s frown more dramatic.

I’m reaching for the handle of my bedroom door—but for some reason I can’t go to bed while he has that look on his face. I can’t.

So I pause, and turn back.

He’s still looming in the dark, a tower of stormy displeasure.

“What is wrong with you?” I take a step toward him.

“With *me*?”

“Yes, with you. I suppose you’re twice as furious about being trapped in this kingdom now, is that it? I’m well aware that you hate me for bringing you here, that you’re going to punish me for eternity because of it—” I swallow against the lump rising in my throat. “But I thought, for a moment, when you were speaking to the people—I thought you understood why I summoned you. I thought maybe you hated me a little less now.”

He advances, a tempestuous rush that makes me recoil against the door. “I hate you for binding me this long,” he says. “You’ve done more harm than you realize, more damage than you know. The outworking of this bondage—I don’t yet know what it will be. But that’s not why I’m angry.”

“Are you angry because of the healing I scheduled at dawn, in the square? I know I promised you some time to relax, but I didn’t want to make sick children wait through a whole night and day—I thought you could do

one early healing and then visit your realm briefly—”

“That’s not it,” he snarls. His skin alters, shifting to green, and forked antlers spring from his hair. With a growl of restless frustration he pulls off his cloak and his shirt, while I stare, wide-eyed. Immense black wings snap out, stretching along the hallway while he sighs with relief.

“By the dark, that feels good.” He cracks his neck—and then he moves closer, while his wings curl around, their edges feathering against the wall on either side of me, hemming me in.

“I am angry, little Queen, because you were foolish today. You put yourself in danger. You placed yourself between me and that paltry missile from the woman in the crowd. I would have healed from a scratch like that in seconds, but you—” His gaze drops to my cheek, and he lifts clawed fingertips, delicately prying away the bit of plaster covering the scrape. “You are vulnerable.”

“I know you think I’m weak—” I begin, but he shakes his head.

“Not weak. Vulnerable. There’s a difference.” He surveys me, his handsome face softening a little. “A person can be wonderfully strong of spirit and still vulnerable in certain moments—or certain places.”

My stomach swoops—a terrifying, giddy sensation—as he trails the back of his knuckle down the line of my throat. He plucks free the button of my cloak so it falls away, traces a claw tip along my collarbone, then along my neckline, dipping just beneath the fabric’s edge to glide over the upper swell of one breast.

He looks down at my chest, as if he can’t help it. My breasts are a bit smaller than they were before the plague and the deprivation—they’ve lost weight like the rest of me—but they are still impressive. An old servant once told me I inherited my large chest from my birth mother. I wouldn’t know—I don’t remember her at all.

Arawn’s eyes flash up to my face again. “Apologies,” he says hoarsely. “I’m not used to—sometimes I lose my—*fuck*.” He slams both clawed hands against the wall on either side of my head, his great shoulders bowed and his head bent until his profile is close to mine.

I can barely breathe.

The dot of light in my heart expands suddenly, a glow filling my ribcage, sinking low, lower until it pools between my legs, awakening parts of me I haven’t tended in weeks, maybe months.

I haven’t been myself in so long, I’ve forgotten who I am—who that

other Vale was. I've become an assembly of schedules, worries, meetings, crises, dread, supply lists, and fifty-page reports. I am a mask of encouraging words and firm decisions. I am an endless chain of questions and answers. I am a throne and a crown, the caretaker of a kingdom.

I used to be something else. Daughter, princess, sister, friend.

Now I am a cavernous space, dark, filled with fluttering papers and whispering ghosts and sorrow.

But when Arawn leans in, releases his cedar-and-sage breath against my mouth, and curls his beautiful lips back to show the derisive set of his white teeth—

I wake.

And I'm warm, deeply warm, right down to my bones.

"Don't ever do that again, foolish Queen," he hisses. "Don't ever try to protect me. Why would you, when you know I can heal myself? When you know that I hate you?"

Hearing him say it aloud hurts. To hurt him back, I snap, "It was an instinct, a stupid one. I hate you too. Why should I want to spare you from injury?"

"You certainly shouldn't."

We stare at each other, pain and rage locking our gazes together, heat surging from his eyes to mine and back again, until it isn't only heat, but hunger—the hunger I saw in him tonight when he spoke of the pleasure he wants.

"The guards will come any minute," I whisper. "You should put the wings away and get some sleep."

"We're not done here," he growls.

A delicious shiver travels over my skin. I grit my teeth against it. "Yes, we are."

The muscles of his arms and chest flex, as if he's thinking about backing away—even trying to move, unsuccessfully. "Why do you smell so damn delicious?" The words seem to jerk out of him, unintentional.

I quirk an eyebrow. "I smell like horse, and woodsmoke, and sickness."

He ducks his head, inhaling near my neck. I lift my chin involuntarily, my heart racing.

"You did help me, back there," I whisper. "You stopped the people from rioting. Thank you."

"I did it for my own sake, not yours."

“I saw your face,” I challenge him. “It was a little for my sake, too.”

He lifts his head again, sharply. Looks me in the eyes, while his profile nearly touches mine. I can hardly hold myself still. I have to repeat his words in my head: *You know that I hate you.*

Arawn’s jaw is hard, his arms rigid.

His gaze drops to my mouth.

Distant voices at the corner of the hallway.

His wings and horns vanish instantly—he’s back to his human aspect, scooping up the clothes he shed, disappearing into his room, a few steps from mine, across the hall.

I retreat into my own room, trying not to acknowledge the fact that the night we spent together—the second half of the night, when I curled up against him—was the best sleep I’ve had since the plague began.



The Queen and I ride on horseback to the dawn meeting. There are fewer sick children today—a marked improvement from when we began this effort. Once they’ve all been tended, the Queen and her guards accompany me to a narrow northern gate leading out of the city.

“It’s a refuse gate,” she says.

“That explains the smell.”

“I thought it would be better for you to leave this way. Fewer people to notice your departure and ask questions.”

She’s right, as she usually is. And she looks startlingly beautiful today, wearing a furred cape, her eyes bright and her cheeks tinged pink by the cold. Her left cheek bears red scratches from the chunk of ice, and it’s also deeply bruised.

I want to hurt the person who injured her.

A quizzical frown pulls her brows together. She’s confused by my stare, and the look only makes her more beautiful.

“Don’t stay away long,” she says. “Please. We need you.”

“I am bound to return to you. I’ll be back by nightfall.”

She nods. “Then go.”

“Remember what you promised me when I return.”

“An easier schedule, so you can enjoy some pleasure.” She clears her throat nervously, her cheeks flushing a deeper rose. “I have not forgotten.”

“Good.” The smile rising in my heart finds my mouth, and for a brief second her lips twitch upward in response.

And then I'm spurring the horse onward, charging through the narrow gate at a gallop, streaking down the road between hard-packed snow broken by clumps of stubborn brown grass. Watery sunlight leaks through the gray clouds, and as the wind rushes over me, I feel briefly, brilliantly free.

Earlier this morning, I cut slits in the back of my thick woolen tunic. Once I've gone far past the outskirts of the city I send the horse back toward the gate, and I work my wings through the slits in the tunic. The people of Cerato know I have mysterious, dark magic, but they are still ignorant of my divine status. Best to keep it that way until the Queen is ready for the revelation.

My cloak falls right between the wing joints—a little irritating, but I need to keep it on. I'm not as impervious to temperature as I used to be.

A single glorious bound and a beat of wings, and I'm in the sky, soaring up toward the gray bellies of the clouds. Shafts of incandescent yellow sunlight lance from sky to earth, and I thread between them, darting and diving, swirling and gliding.

I haven't flown in the mortal plane for an age. I forgot how invigorating it can be.

I'm much faster airborne than I am on land, so I reach the Pit swiftly, almost before I'm ready.

The entrance to my own realm has never held dread for me before. But what I read in the ritual tome has shaken me. I'm not sure what I'll find when I enter Annwn.

Wings folded, I prowl the edge of the Pit, my boots crushing the coiled black vines. The smell of death wafts from the orifice. A familiar odor, borne on the cold breath of the tunnel.

"Fuck it," I whisper, and I leap in.

Air races past me as I fall, my wings upswept by its current.

It's a long, dark passage, and when I break out on the other side I catch myself with a swift wingbeat.

Annwn looks the same as it ever did—soft gray mist, lush dark-green foliage, motes of pale light drifting in the air, gray sky overhead. Farther away, in the hazy distance, there's a warmer light—the glow of the pleasant areas of my realm, where good souls wander in eternal peace. Between there and here stands the great arch of my furnace, towering into the sky at a nearly infinite height, a translucent veil of flickering orange fire filling the space between its tall doorposts.

To my right, some distance away, are the black pillars of my palace, also impossibly, unnecessarily tall. My residence is roofless, doorless, open to my realm. Anyone could stride in and take a seat on my throne.

I hurry toward my palace, an echo of doom beating in my heart.

I might already be too late.



Rose's funeral is today. I had almost forgotten.

Convenient that I sent Arawn away. I can mourn my friend alone this afternoon, without his presence looming over me, reminding me why she died.

I ride back to the palace and dismount swiftly, handing my horse over to a stable-boy. Before I've taken more than a few steps inside the palace, four royal guards close ranks around me.

"Apologies, Your Majesty," one of them says. "But we have orders to bring you directly to the Council Chamber."

Ah, the Council. I skipped our scheduled meeting and I haven't answered any of their notices or summons. Probably foolish of me, given my precarious standing with them—but touring the city with Arawn seemed more vital.

"The Council does not give the Queen's guard *orders*," I say coolly. "However, I will accompany you."

"Thank you, my lady." The guard who spoke to me is sweating a little, probably fearful of becoming caught up in some political standoff.

As I glide through the halls and into the Council Chamber, I keep my stepmother in my mind. I don't remember my real mother, but my father's second wife was a true mother to me for fifteen years. She was a princess of Yurstin, a land to the south, and she met my father at a rulers' summit in Ivris. When in the public eye, she behaved with a consummate grace I always admired; but she was much less regal in private—playful, kind, with a

sparkle in her eye. She could be stern at times—anxious or angry about one thing or another—but somehow her love bled through those moments too.

The agony of her absence is a little less when I walk like her, when I speak as she would have spoken, when I let my image of her guide me through my queenly duties.

“Your Majesty!” It’s the chief manager of the palace household, hustling along a corridor toward me, carrying a sheaf of papers. I left so early for the square this morning that I didn’t have time to meet with him yet, either.

“Walk with me,” I tell him. “I’m heading into the Council Chamber, but it shouldn’t take long. You can come in as well.”

“Are you certain, Your Majesty?” His round face flushes, and he looks terrified at the idea.

“Quite certain.” I take his arm, towing him gently along. Maybe I can use him as an excuse to get out of this council session quickly.

I sweep into the Council Chamber, adopting a manner that’s both coolly capable and extraordinarily busy. “Esteemed council members, I can only spare a few moments, since there is much to do today. As you can see I have the Chief Manager with me, and we need to go over some—”

“That’s all very well, Your Majesty,” cuts in the Duchess of Louge, “but this Council is distinctly displeased by your blatant disregard of our communications. You were absent from a scheduled session, and you have not responded to multiple messages delivered to you directly. This Council has grave concerns about two important matters—firstly, the foreign healer who has been traipsing about, dispensing death and false hopes.”

“Dispensing *life*, I think you mean,” I interject. “No children have died of plague since he arrived. And that is a miracle of the gods, well worth celebrating. Let us drink to it, since I see you all have libations at hand.” I nod to the bottles and goblets on the table. One of the councilmen near me has a full cup of wine, so I snatch it and raise it high. “To the lives of the little ones!”

Mumbling faintly, the council members lift their goblets and drink. I take note of which ones seem most enthusiastic. Lord Redglaive, Master Coors, Lady Elanann, and a couple others.

“Good work has been done in the city,” I tell them. “And starting tomorrow, I will be traveling with Vaughn the Healer beyond the walls, throughout the countryside. In my absence I will be appointing Lord Redglaive, Master Coors, and Lady Elanann to handle the day-to-day affairs

of the palace and the city.”

Lord Venniroth half-rises from his seat. “Forgive me, Majesty, but that seems rather impetuous, especially considering there are others better qualified, with more experience in such things.”

“Nevertheless my appointment stands. Gentlemen, my lady, I will meet with you later this afternoon, around five bells, to discuss the details. And now, Duchess, I believe you had a second concern?”

I’ve been speaking swiftly, barely pausing for breath, not allowing any of them to jump in with the questions I can see churning in their eyes—questions about “Vaughn the Healer,” his strange magic, and his origins.

The Duchess of Louge looks taken aback by my abrupt attention. She casts a glance at Venniroth, as if she is an actor on the stage and he is the one giving her cues when she forgets her lines. It would be comical if I wasn’t walking a tightrope in the same show, trying not to slip even though they’ve oiled the rope.

“The matter of the Queen’s marriage,” says Venniroth.

“Oh, yes, the matter of your marriage, Majesty.” The Duchess nods. “Three days have lapsed since we spoke to you of the matter. Four days remain, and yet you have not made any attempt to court eligible men who might join you in the rulership.”

“I have been prioritizing the lives of my people over my personal relationships, as you so wisely reminded me to do during our last meeting.” I give her a brilliant smile. “But as it so happens, I have—um—I have planned a dinner and dance tonight. The Chief Manager and I were just speaking of it, weren’t we?”

I squeeze his arm firmly, and the poor manager squeaks, “We were? Oh, yes, yes, we were. A small dinner—”

“The largest dinner we can manage,” I continue, still smiling, still squeezing his arm. “We’ll be sending out messengers within the hour to invite all the eligible men in the city. Survivors only, of course. It wouldn’t do for me to marry and then have my husband perish from the plague, now would it? Allow me to extend personal invitations to a few of my Council—Master Ward of the Merchants’ Guild, Captain Yerron, Lord Jestin....” I pause, looking around the table as if hunting for more unmarried or widowed men. “Oh, and Lord Venniroth.”

Placing him as an afterthought was intentional, and judging by the flush on his cheeks, he knows it. The Council can force me to choose a husband,

but they cannot force me to marry *him*. I won't. I will find some other man who is palatable to the Council—and hopefully not altogether distasteful to me.



When I land hastily in the courtyard before my throne, I release a sigh of relief.

There is no one here but me.

No interlopers have draped themselves across my throne. It remains as it always has been—a gigantic edifice of bone, antlers, and moss, marked with symbols of my divine power. Atop its peak rests the massive skull of the stag—the first kill of mankind. I could not save that magnificent animal's life, but I keep his skull as a reminder to myself of the cruelty of humans. More than that, it has become an emblem to mortals, a symbol of my merciless justice.

The sheer emptiness and silence of my palace reassures me. But I need more proof that I retain full control of this realm. I need to check on the furnace, and I must summon my hounds, to remind them who their master is.

Leaping into the air again, I speed toward the furnace. Souls drift down from the holes in the sky, from the passages between the mortal plane and this one, from all the kingdoms and unclaimed lands of men. Those souls flow in a neverending stream toward the furnace, though they pass through one by one.

Time has a different meaning here. While I'm in my own realm, I'm conscious of how time is passing in the mortal plane. However, that measure of time has little effect in the Unlife. I can accomplish a week's worth of tasks here, within a single day of mortal time.

But I'm already feeling the pull of the magical bond between me and the Queen. The icy grip of my chains is tightening, constricting my limbs.

I can't spend too long in this place.

I land near the Furnace of Souls, listening to its familiar roar, watching the scenes of each completed life dance across the veil of fire.

Firmly I place one palm against the stone side of the arch, to infuse the furnace afresh with my will and my power. Touching it like this also enables me to quickly read its recent activity. The images streak through my divine mind with a speed and complexity no human brain could grasp.

When it's done, I fall back, breaking the contact and gasping at the overwhelming force of the images. My head spins, and nausea pulses in my stomach.

I'm not myself.

"Macha," I growl. "What have you done to me?"

I could push the question into the ether, have it resonate with divine force. She would hear me, and she might answer. But then I'd be drawing her attention to the fact that I've been bound—and not only bound, but trapped and weakened by the additional parameters she placed upon the ritual.

I've seen two other volumes with my summoning ritual in them. Neither of them had those extra lines in Macha's handwriting. The script resonated with godly power—fresh power—which means the addendum is newer than the rest of the spell. How is that possible, attaching a new condition onto an ancient rite? And why would Macha do it?

A foolish question, I suppose. She is the goddess of war and conflict, after all. When she's bored, she either fuels existing dissension or creates a conflict where there is none.

I stride away from the furnace, tucking two fingers into my mouth and issuing the piercing whistle that will summon my hounds.

From the souls passing into the furnace, I sometimes learn of humans who are still alive, committing particularly egregious sins. To some of those humans, I send the hounds as a warning to change their ways. To others, the appearance of my hounds is an immediate death sentence. My beasts drag their victim to the nearest pit and bring him down to me, where he becomes a new addition to the pack. I am admittedly fickle in my choice of whom to punish with this irreversible doom, but I am a god, after all. I have fewer vagaries than others of my kind, and at least this one is helpful to mortals.

Farther I walk, into fields of dark green grass, beside blackthorn thickets and hollows filled with bones, past tumbled piles of skulls that leak the curling mists of bittersweet memory into the air.

Finally, across the hills in the distance, I see my hounds coming, bounding on crooked legs, their eye sockets and panting tongues streaming with orange fire. In the beginning I had eleven of them, but the number has grown over the years as I found more despicable souls who deserved special punishment.

The original eleven are still the most powerful, towering over the others. Over time they have developed unique traits. One is wrapped in twisting thorns, which can lash out from his body like whips. Another has shed the fur and flesh of his head, until only a canid skull remains. Another grew a tail like a scorpion, and a third has replaced his front paws with the yellow pronged feet of an enormous chicken.

My summons wasn't for the whole pack, but for these eleven—the leaders. As the oldest and most powerful, they are also the most volatile. They have rebelled against me before, in small ways and unsuccessfully. Still, I need to be sure they remain completely under my control, or they could decide to enter the mortal plane and wreak unimaginable havoc.

They're answering my call—racing toward me, all eleven of them.

But my nerves tighten with apprehension when I realize they're not alone.

A twelfth figure is with them.



After the announcement of the dinner, the Council lets me go—reluctantly. I bring the dazed Chief Manager with me into the royal study and apologize profusely for putting him in that position.

“I can’t help it, you see,” I whisper to him earnestly. “They’re going to make me marry someone. Someone important—a noble, one of the high-ranking merchants, or one of our military leaders. I just need one night where I can meet them all and decide which one might be the most bearable.”

“Marriage,” gasps the Chief Manager. “This means there will be an engagement ball to plan for, too—and a wedding—”

“No.” I take the papers from his hands and set them aside. “No, there won’t be any parties or celebrations, and the wedding will be a small one. It would be in poor taste to do otherwise. I know we’re understaffed already, and the stores have dwindled, and the pantries are bare—” My voice hitches, and I pause to breathe, to *breathe*. “Trust me, if there were any way to avoid this, I would. I—I suppose I could simply agree to marry Venniroth, and then there would be no need for—”

“Nonsense.” The Chief Manager squares his shoulders. His uniform is wrinkled, its cuffs shiny from wear, and his chin is unshaven; but a hint of his once-proud manner returns to him for a moment. “You may have to give up the beautiful wedding you deserve, but by the gods, you *will* have a choice in whom you marry. Your father would have wanted that for you, and your mother too, Arawn bless her soul.”

His use of the death god’s name startles me for a moment; it’s strange to

hear it used in a blessing, now that I've come to know the god himself.

"I'll speak to the cooks and the servants," says the Chief Manager. "We will find some way to make a decent dinner with a few decorations. And I'll try to find a few musicians who have survived the plague, whose talent is worthy to grace these halls."

"Whatever you can do will be more than satisfactory," I assure him. "Thank you."

I rush through several more tasks before returning to my room and changing for Rose's funeral. When I arrive at the temple, I discover that Rose's family invited Leilani's last living relatives, her uncle and cousins, to set up a memorial shrine for Lei right next to Rose's silk-draped body.

At the sight, I nearly break again.

But I manage to hold myself together throughout the homily of remembrance, the slow chants of farewell, and the lighting of the incense. I survive the recitation of favorite memories by the dead women's relatives. I even manage to rise, and walk to the front of the temple sanctum, and deliver a couple verses of a poem that Rose, Lei, and I loved.

One of the priestesses is also a fire-wielder, and while viols play and pipes trill softly, she reduces Rose's body to ash. Just a handful of minutes, and my sweet friend's mortal form is gone.

We parade into the frosty temple gardens, where everyone takes a handful of ash to scatter on the icy earth.

No ashes for Lei, and thankfully her friends and family don't ask about them. The ashes of the plague dead are carted outside the city and buried in a trench. They do not know that I pushed Leilani's corpse into the Pit of Arawn while the death god himself watched from the shadow of the forest.

The funeral was smaller than my friends deserved. Survivors only, except for a handful of close family who haven't yet caught the plague, who came with mouths and noses covered.

I barely make it back to the palace in time to meet with Captain Yerron of the palace guard, to discuss travel arrangements for Arawn and me. And I have to cut that meeting short to speak with the three council members whom I'll be leaving in charge of the palace and the city while I'm gone.

"Begging your Majesty's pardon, but do you think it wise to leave just now?" asks Lady Elanann quietly. "With certain people taking advantage of this opportunity to raise themselves higher?"

She's speaking of Venniroth, of course, and I don't pretend otherwise.

“I’m depending on the three of you to hold him at bay until I return. The healer and I will spend three days tending to the nearest villages, and then we’ll return to the city again for my—for my wedding.” I can barely form the word.

Lord Redglaive nods. “You can rely on us, Your Majesty.”

Once I’ve given them further instruction, they leave my study. No time to waste—I leap up from my desk and take the private passage behind the third tapestry, a narrow hallway leading from the royal study to the royal wing. It emerges in the corridor near my chambers.

I hurry back to my room and ring for a maid to help me dress for tonight’s dinner and dance. I have precious little time to prepare, and a lingering fragment of personal vanity insists that I look decent. After all, I’m husband-hunting.

I’m not averse to taking a woman as consort, but I would prefer a man. I think I *need* a man, sometime soon. My body has needs beyond sleeping, eating, and breathing, and those demands are becoming more urgent. The sight of Arawn naked in the bath appears in my mind whenever I have a moment’s peace—which, thankfully, isn’t often.

But while I’m sitting before my dressing-table mirror, watching Tilda fix my hair, I have a few such moments. Moments in which I think of the long-limbed, graceful perfection of the god’s body—his sculpted pectorals, tight nipples, ridged abs, and muscular thighs. I think of his cock, long and limp, and I wonder how much longer and thicker it would be when aroused. I think of his bare chest skimming close to mine when he cornered me in the hallway, surrounded me with his wings, and sniffed my neck.

I’m not sure why he would want me. I used to be beautiful, yes, but I’m sallow now—too pale unless cold or rouge brightens my cheeks. My hair is the silver-white of age. My breasts and bottom are still fleshy enough, but the rest of me is practically bones and skin.

Whether Arawn wants me or not is immaterial. I have no time to spare for such things.

What I need is to marry a decent man. A good man with little to no ambition, but a reasonable amount of sense. Someone I can plant on the throne when I have to be away, someone who can manage things well but won’t try to overrule me. A puppet husband who will say and do what I want, who is wealthy and influential enough to satisfy the Council. Someone who won’t expect me to warm his bed unless I want to, who will understand that

this is a marriage of convenience, of necessity.

Lord Venniroth won't let me choose such a man without a fight. He wants power, and he's determined to have mine.

I need someone strong enough to shield me from him.



So my sister goddess is here, after all.

She didn't miss the fact that I've been summoned. Which means she was watching, waiting for it to happen.

Perhaps she even prompted it.

Macha, goddess of war, is in her favorite form—white skin, a pretty face, large dark eyes that make her look almost childish—a red mouth with a playful smirk. Her hair is a vivid scarlet, half of it piled high on her head and secured with a diadem of bone and ravens' beaks, the rest of the locks falling straight. Flecks of blood decorate her forehead, and streaks of it are drawn from beneath her eyes down her cheeks—messily, like a child might paint with their fingers. The blood on her skin never dries—it is forever crimson.

As usual, she's wearing armor—chunks of wood and metal and bone assembled into an intricate, impenetrable crust over her whole body. A red jewel nestles at her throat.

"Greetings, brother," she says merrily.

"Macha." I keep my eyes on the hounds, two of whom are lingering far too close to her side. As if they owe her some sort of allegiance.

"Oh, this is delightful, isn't it?" she croons, patting a hound's skull. He opens his bony jaws, a tongue of fire lolling out. "I haven't seen you in a century, Arawn. None of the others have, either."

"That's how I prefer it."

"Such a grumpy fellow, always." She pouts. "You never want to have any fun."

I snap my fingers, an imperative to the hounds. Most of them trot over to me, but two of them continue to flank Macha, and one steps in front of her, the poison pod of his scorpion tail swelling and glowing.

It's a warning. For me, his master.

"My hounds are not yours," I grit out. "Nor is this realm yours, no matter what magical schemes you may concoct."

"Ah, you found my little addition to the ritual." She grins. There's blood between her white teeth. "It's just the perfect thing, isn't it? I'm a genius, I really am."

"This place has been my dominion since the dawn of time," I tell her. "No machinations of yours can change that. Why would you even want the realm of Unlife, Macha? Its duties would be too dull for you."

"Perhaps I have a plan to liven things up." She smiles charmingly, girlishly, but there's a manic craving in her red-rimmed eyes.

"Do tell."

"Perhaps I will. If you're a good boy." She prances toward me, reaches up to stroke my cheek. "But I think you're tired of being good, aren't you? You yearn to be free." Her fingers press my hip, shifting inward. "If you fuck me right now, Arawn, I'll consider it a victory in a long war to break you down, and that will be enough for me. The other goddesses and I have placed bets, you know. Which of us can get your cock first. I want to win. You come inside me, and all this ends peacefully."

I pull away from her. "Why would I give myself to you when I have other options?"

"For now," she croons. "You have other options... for now."

"I don't understand how you were able to amend the ritual."

"By using what was already there, silly boy. Nine willing sacrifices have always been required for the binding. Some people offer themselves for such a ritual out of fanaticism, to escape pain, or because they've been assured their loved ones will be well-paid. But when all nine have committed to the sacrifice not only for their own reasons, but out of love and loyalty for the summoner, the dynamic of the ritual changes. And if the summoner sacrifices someone they love for unselfish reasons, my conditions are met, and my spell takes effect."

"You interfered with my magic."

"Your transformative magic is limited, yes, and your connection to Annwn is diminished. That's because you've experienced a partial

incarnation. You're still a god, but you're deliciously vulnerable to sensation, emotion—and a certain kind of death.”

I try to keep my features calm, impassive, as if I have no fear of Macha or her spells. She can't destroy me directly. One god cannot kill another; it is our most sacred law, and its protection extends even to me, the least liked of all the gods.

But if what I read in the ritual tome is true, Macha's magic has tied my existence to the Queen's. During the year I'm bound to her, if the Queen dies, I die as well.

Thank the dark I saved the Queen from falling into the Pit. Back then I didn't realize what I know now: Macha set this up as a scheme to destroy me and take over Annwn.

“If I fuck you, you'll release me from this curse?” I ask her.

“Oh, I can't change the incarnation spell, or unbind you from your human summoner,” Macha says. “If you fuck me, dear brother, I can only promise to leave Annwn untouched while you're away. If you don't—well—I may not be able to mess with the souls who have already passed through the furnace, but I can torment the ones just entering this realm, and I can play with your pretty pets. They already like me, see?” She holds out her hand, and one of the hounds bathes her fingers with his fiery tongue.

“I wish I could kill your human summoner myself,” Macha continues absently. “It would make all of this much easier. But as you know, I can't be responsible for your death, not even by killing your summoner. And I can't order anyone to kill either of you, or the other gods will end me. No, I have to sit back and wait, and hope someone else steps in to eliminate *her*—and by extension, *you*. It's best like this, anyway! You can't imagine how bored I've been. The suspense of this scheme is exquisite by comparison.”

“And what of the rest of your little addendum?” Heat rises to my face as I remember the last few lines of her spell.

“Ah yes! You may fuck whomever you like in the mortal plane—in fact, I'd encourage it if you don't want those chains you wear to become excruciatingly heavy and painful. But you can't fall in love. If you fall in love, then at the end of your contract with your summoner, you forfeit your throne. You'll lose some of your magic permanently, and although you'll still be an immortal god, you'll be a wandering deity without a home, without a resting place, without any authority. And the realm of Unlife will be free for the taking.”

“You’re such a little shit, Macha,” I snarl.

She pushes her red lips into a pout. “I’d be nicer to me, dear brother. You’re not as strong as usual. And you have fewer friends.”

In response, the two rebel hounds shift closer to her. I look into their baleful, glowing eyes with a glare of my own.

“I will give you this one chance,” I tell them. “When next I return, you will bow to me as your rightful master. If you refuse, the consequences will be dire.” I let shadows uncoil from my body—thick, inky, lashing shadows that could quell the beasts’ inner fire forever.

The rebel hounds shrink from the darkness, hissing and whining.

“Think about it,” I tell them. “And the rest of you, see my sister out of my realm.”

The nine loyal hounds stalk forward, heads lowered, growling at Macha.

She rolls her eyes, but I can sense her apprehension. These hounds are to me what Macha’s herd of giant boars are to her realm, the Valley of Blood. My hounds are realm guardians, powerful enough to oust another god when my will is behind them. Macha might creep into Annwn while I’m gone, but as long as my hounds remain obedient, I can kick her out again each time I return.

Macha doesn’t give the hounds the chance to attack. “I’ll see you soon, little brother,” she says, and disappears in a whirl of blood and smoke. A blast of noxious air, redolent with the sharp scent of hot metal and the sick odor of death, hits me in the face as she departs. The smell of battle. Of war.

I gag a little, but I try to stifle the reaction in front of my hounds. The fact that my body recoils from the smell is another sign of my weakness, my incarnation.

The loss of my height is another problem. The hounds are enormous, their heads at shoulder-level on a human man. Usually I can tower over them in my god form. I’m still taller than they are, but I’ve lost that extra physical dominance.

The two hounds I threatened stand together, eyeing me with a malevolence I can feel like a blistering haze over my skin. And I feel the weight of my chains, too—gut-twisting, inescapable. I’m being pulled back toward the mortal plane.

“When this contract is over, loyalty will be rewarded,” I tell the hounds. “And disobedience will be severely punished. Go!”

They bound away, while I hold myself steady, fighting the tug of my

contract with the Queen. Once the hounds disappear into the distance, I let myself go.

My whole body jerks as my chains snap me back toward the human realm, yanking me into the tunnel and up through the Pit, until I'm thrown out into the clearing. I crash onto the black vines, under a cold black sky dotted with white stars and drifting snow.

It's past sunset.

I'm late returning to my jailer.

Swearing, I haul myself to my feet, spread my wings, and take to the air, soaring upward out of the clearing. My body feels heavier now. The invisible chains are trying to drag me down; their links bite into my skin like blunt, icy molars. My breath quickens, and my sense of panic rises again with the awareness that I am trapped in this body, in this wretched skull of mine—unable to stretch and expand to my true godly form, unable to let my consciousness widen and wander.

My heart pounds, fast and frantic, and I struggle to beat my wings harder, as if I could outrun my bondage. The rush of icy wind past my face helps a little, but only the pleasant stimulation of my senses will offer me true relief.

And even that relief is a false safety, because I am carnal. Vulnerable, like my captor is vulnerable.

I had to leave the Queen, to check on my realm, to see if my fears were baseless or justified. Now that I've spoken with Macha, now that I know she intends to end me and take Annwn, I can't help picturing all the ways the little human Queen could die. She survived the plague, yes, but she is so very mortal. A thin, white scrap of humanity with delicate fingers and a soft pink mouth, a creature of brilliant eyes and jutting bones and tempestuous determination.

At least I can be confident of this one thing—there is no chance I will love her, or anyone else in the mortal plane. I've seen love countless times in the souls who pass through my realm. I know what it is, and I could categorize all its variations. But I do not love. I am incapable of the emotion.

My only focus must be these three goals...

To keep the Queen alive for twelve short months.

To check in on my realm occasionally and dislodge Macha if I find her squatting there.

To indulge in enough pleasure to make my residence in the human realm bearable.

I will go to the Queen, stay by her side, and protect her as if my life depends on it. Because it does.



The Chief Manager, the cooks, and the servants have outdone themselves.

The ballroom is a bower of delicate bare branches, cut from the birch trees in the garden. Feathery wintergrass fills the vases instead of flowers, and bits of lace are tied to branches or scattered along the dark green tablecloths like snowflakes.

The lace is likely scavenged from castoff finery, since everything is in short supply here. I'd thought our kingdom self-sufficient until the ships ceased entering or leaving our ports. My father stopped the incoming and outgoing trade himself, once he realized how virulent the plague is. He gave orders for the coastal guard to sink any ships trying to leave Cerato. He would not risk us carrying death to our trading partners.

I don't think he or anyone else realized how quickly our way of life would change once trade stopped. If the plague hadn't severely diminished our workforce at every level, perhaps we could have continued along with minor adjustments to goods and services. But with sickness and death halting the function of every part of our economy, we simply haven't been able to sustain ourselves. We are broken, starving, dying.

Even with Arawn's help, I'm not sure we can survive. Change is coming, but not fast enough.

Still, the ethereal beauty of the ballroom gives me hope.

Tonight's dinner is not a sit-down banquet—the palace food stores are too thin for such a feast—but the tables along both sides of the ballroom are

filled with heaped platters and steaming dishes.

Scattered across the polished dance floor are a couple dozen pale-haired men—men with golden brooches securing their cloaks, men with stiff collars and shiny black boots, men with cascading ruffles and sparkling earrings. Tall men, short men, round men, all of them smiling, all of them bowing as I enter.

My bodyguards linger on either side until I wave them away. They will take up positions nearby and shadow me throughout the evening, giving me space to interact with the candidates for the position of royal consort.

Every single man in this room knows why he's here. The tension, the avarice, the desperate forced charm practically vibrates through the air. These men are sharks, and the promise of a crown is the blood in the water. They can taste power, and they're gleefully maddened by it, though they hide their desire behind neatly pressed lapels and artfully pinned cloaks. Dire as our kingdom's situation is, the opportunity to be *king* is more than they can resist.

I'm not sure any of them actually see *me*, only the title I offer.

Besides their eager smiles, all these men have silvery-white hair. The national sign of survival. They were stricken by the plague, and they lived through it.

For a moment longer I stand, surveying them. Distantly I perceive my own reflection in the polished gold mirrors lining the walls of the ballroom—mirrors intended to make the space feel larger. Mirrors selected, I was once told, by my grandmother, who had a taste for grandeur and a fondness for admiring her own figure.

At this distance, my figure is a slim smudge of green and white. I'm wearing a heavy forest-green overdress with gold swirls of embroidery, belted over a simple cranberry-colored dress. A pair of my grandmother's huge, ornate earrings frame my face, contrasting with my pale hair. It's traditional winter-festival garb—Tilda's suggestion. Maybe she thought it would cheer me up.

It hasn't.

I've been standing here too long, staring and thinking for too long. The smiles of the men around me are beginning to falter—they're casting uncertain glances at each other.

After the whirl and bustle of today, I am an echoing void inside. But I must paint on a smile and try to exude a regal warmth. I must attempt to be charming. I must keep in mind the qualities I need from a husband.

“Thank you all for coming,” I tell them, with what I hope is a gracious smile. “I would love to speak with as many of you as I can this evening, so I crave your patience as I spend a little time with everyone. In the meantime, please enjoy yourselves. Eat, drink, and dance!”

As I lift my hand, a quartet of musicians in the corner begins a lilting tune. The Chief Manager suggested inviting a number of single noblewomen to the event as well, so the consort candidates will have partners to dance and chat with while I’m otherwise occupied. Those women step forward as the music swells, and I exhale with relief as some of the male guests bow and invite the ladies to dance.

But a few of the men approach me, smiling with all their teeth, their voices honeyed and charming. I exchange a few words with them and move past the group, toward a young man who is standing alone, looking rather awkward. I pluck his name out of my memories—Lord Erving. A classmate of Lei, Rose, and I. He was friends with Otin Venniroth for a while, but they have since parted ways—a mark in Erving’s favor.

“Lord Erving.”

He startles when I address him, his blue eyes flaring wide, cheeks flushing. “Your Majesty.”

His blush eases my own nerves, and I give him a real smile. “Would you care to escort me to the food? I’m famished.”

“Of course! My pleasure. I mean, my honor. Most gratified, I’m sure.” He crooks his elbow, and I slip my arm through it.

He escorts me to one of the tables. It’s laden with copper pots and individual cups of steaming tea, smelling of mint and honey.

Mint tea.

Of all the possible flavors—mint tea.

I understand why the cook prepared this for our scanty feast. Mint is a hardy plant, and plentiful.

But Rose loved mint tea.

Rose, my Rose...

I try to adjust my thoughts, try to channel the scent into warm memories of her, but I can’t, I can’t—the smell coils in my throat, clogs it with sudden nausea.

“No tea,” I tell Lord Erving abruptly, and I pull him along the table, away from the copper pots...

Only to encounter cinnamon cakes sprinkled with brown sugar.

Brown sugar, brown sugar...

Leilani used to put brown sugar in everything, on everything. Apples, pears, bread, pudding, even roast beef.

I suck in a ragged breath, the space behind my eyes swelling with the pressure of unshed tears.

It's as if pieces of my friends have been chopped apart and laid out on the table.

Mint tea and brown sugar.

I am coming apart. I'm unraveling. I can't unravel, not here, not here...

"Music," I say desperately. "Do you like to dance?"

Lord Erving stares at me, rightfully confused, poor man. "I...well, I..."

"I'll dance with you, Your Majesty," says a voice.

I force my smile to stay intact as I turn and face Lord Vennirot.

I can't deny him in front of everyone. He is a respected lord, a council member, and to refuse his offer would be a grave affront.

"Thank you for the invitation," I say stiffly. My hand drops into his, and he spins me away into the dance.

He's a skilled dancer, commanding and controlled. If his personality were different, and if he were not trying to seize the throne, I might enjoy this interlude with him, might appreciate the relief of losing myself to the music. As it is, I have difficulty focusing on the steps, and to compensate he grips my hand and waist tighter, practically hauling me along with him.

"There's no need for this charade, you know," he says under his breath. "We both know how it will end."

"And how is that?"

"I'm the best choice, Majesty. I have political experience, economic savvy, and widespread influence. I can help you solidify your position and ensure that your rule lasts a lifetime. You and I—we can make this kingdom great again."

"But at what cost? You support youth labor to supplement the dwindling workforce, and you want to reopen the ports. I can't allow either of those things."

"You are young and idealistic," he says. "Once you've gained some experience in these matters—"

"I hope experience won't make me a more careless person," I say crisply.

"You think me careless?" He scoffs a little. "Tell me, Highness—which

of us brought some mysterious foreigner into our borders and let him lay hands on our people? You say you're against opening the ports, yet he must have come on a ship. On what vessel did he arrive? Where is it moored? And what type of magic does he practice? You call him a 'healer,' yet he does not heal. Do you think we're fools, all of us? Do you think you can act with impunity, that no one will question or curb you because you inherited a title and a crown?"

He's gripping my hand so hard it hurts. His fingers dig into my lower ribs.

I barely notice the pain. I am so full of pain.

Lord Venniroth whirls me sharply, almost violently, through the maelstrom of dancers. Jerks me closer to him, spins us both, while his hand snakes from my ribs, traveling upward along my spine. He clasps the back of my neck, a pinching hold on bone and nerves.

I hitch a tiny gasp, momentarily helpless to his grip. The dancers twirl around us, and their voices seem to echo, laughing and merry, while I'm paralyzed, the fish snared on the hook. There's a world of rippling skirts, shiny boots, and tiled floors between me and my bodyguards—a sea of smiling faces and shining eyes that don't see what Lord Venniroth's hand is doing beneath my hair.

He could kill me in half a second.

I have some training in the defensive arts. But I was never trained to extricate myself from a grip like this—a hold that could snap my neck.

"I had hoped you would see reason on your own," he murmurs, his breath puffing against my cheek. "But you're a stubborn little thing. Arrogant. Entitled. So sure you know everything. Know this, Princess—I am the only one who can help you save this kingdom. And I will do it, despite your resistance. One way or another, I will—"

A voice, deep and dark as the Pit, interrupts. "Unhand my Queen."

My entire body thrills.

I know that dreadful, divine voice.

Lord Venniroth looks up at someone behind me.

"Remove your hands from her. Now." Arawn's command, laced with power, vibrates through my bones.

Venniroth's hold on my spine relaxes. His fingers slip away. "Vaughn the Healer, of Terelaus, is it? I've heard very little about you."

"There's little to tell," replies Arawn. His hands cup my shoulders,

drawing me back, away from Venniroth and into the cedar-and-sage aroma of his presence.

It's a possessive gesture. An intimate gesture. And though part of me loves it, wants to sink into it, another part of me revolts, terrified because everyone can see it, and what will they think?

I pull away quickly. "I don't believe you were invited to this event, Vaughn."

As I turn to face him, words melt away on my tongue.

The death god dominates the room with his sheer height. He's wearing a fine suit of thick embroidered wool, with a fringed cowl draped around his broad shoulders. His long, wavy hair is black now, with the faintest sheen of iridescent green when he moves. His dark brows bend, and disapproval weighs his beautiful mouth.

He's wearing his human coloring, but I find myself craving the satiny jade skin of his godly aspect, wishing for the antlers or the four horns, longing for the giant ebony wings. He would fill this room with his nightmare glory, and these men would crumple and worship him. What a sight that would be!

Arawn's frown is softening while I gaze at him. Quickly I rein in the admiration that must be showing on my face. "Still," I say, clearing my throat. "I suppose you may stay, even if you weren't invited."

"Yes, stay," echoes Lord Venniroth, eyeing Arawn. "Some of us have questions for you."

"Questions later," Arawn says. "First, a dance with the Queen."

He holds out his hand, his body stiff. Cautiously I place my palm over his, and he cups my waist. We move back into the flow of the music, and I'm pleased to find that he understands the steps, though he remains rigidly aloof.

"Did you accomplish your—business?" I ask in an undertone.

"I did."

"And is all well back home?"

"Not exactly." A muscle ticks along his jaw.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear it. But you know I can't spare you often."

"And I'd rather not leave you again unless I have to."

A quivering thrill pierces my heart. But then he adds, quickly, "Because the contract between us makes it uncomfortable for me to be apart from you for long. I begin to feel a strong pull, and then pain."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

“Hm.” Arawn angles us away from the others, toward the far end of the ballroom where three pairs of narrow doors open onto the garden. The doors are closed, their window panes frosted over.

“So you’re going to marry one of these drones, or that diabolical lord with the murderous eyes?” he asks.

“Not him.” I shudder. “Not Vennirot, though he is the Council’s first choice. No, I must find someone more kind-hearted, more malleable—”

“I’ll test their worthiness for you,” Arawn offers. “It will be the work of a moment.”

“No!” I clutch his fingers tighter—long, strong fingers, wonderfully shaped male fingers. “No, you can’t go around touching everyone’s forehead. And I can’t dance with you any longer—I need to speak with the candidates.”

“Very well.” He releases me, turning on his heel and offering his hand to a blushing noblewoman.

I allow myself to be swept away by first one lord, then another. I dance with Captain Yerron, nibble potato dumplings with Lord Jestin, and indulge in two glasses of wine with Master Ward, all the while eyeing Arawn and his ever-changing carousel of giddy partners. He dances with a few men, too, and they seem just as awestruck as the women. If they’re questioning him, he must be satisfying their curiosity adeptly.

I haven’t drunk more than half a glass of wine in months. Foolish of me to drink two glasses tonight. The warm haze of the alcohol spreads through my body, swims in my brain. My skin heats, burning beneath my layered clothes.

Air. I need cold, fresh air.

The musicians dive into a livelier tune, and amid the clapping hands, jiggling feet, and jostling bodies, I’m able to slip away. My bodyguards are watching Arawn dance with two lithe, rosy-cheeked women—he’s bright-eyed, smiling, almost laughing.

I don’t care to name the sour, sick creature that crawls around my heart, tightening with every sly smile Arawn casts over the two women.

I will suffocate if I stay in this room a moment longer.

My fingers find the handle of a door—it gives way, and I slip out into the dark, frosty air of the garden, closing the door swiftly and quietly behind me.

The cold bathes my heated skin as I walk between the dry, papery stalks in the flowerbeds. My dance shoes slip a little on the ice-glazed cobblestone

of the path. Bare trees stretch pale crooked limbs up to the dome of the black sky, where a glowing white moon hangs low and round. Flurries of snow dance through the crystallized air of the night.

No one has lit the lamps in the garden. We have to conserve fuel. The thickly clustering shadows might make me uneasy on any other evening, but tonight I'm too wine-blurred and wobbly to care.

Dimly I know that I shouldn't be out here. I should be in the ballroom, cozying up to my potential husbands. There are a few I think I could stand, but whenever I focus on one of them and imagine being married to him, a sick dread churns in my stomach, sending a swirl of panic through my chest.

I don't want to be trapped in a marriage to someone I don't love. Why can I not simply be myself, alone and enough, until I am ready to choose a partner?

I sink onto a snow-powdered bench, propping my elbows on my knees and setting my forehead against my hands.

I can't do this. I don't know whom to choose.

A frill of icy wind ruffles the loose waves of my hair. Something rustles in the hedge to my right, and I look up, half-curious, not really alarmed.

Until I see a pair of orange orbs glowing in the depths of the hedge.

Is the hedge on fire?

No, that's silly. That's the wine and the weariness talking.

Another rustle, and the snap of a twig, this time from the flowerbed on my left.

That hulking black shape isn't a bush, or a tree. A second pair of glowing orbs shines from it.

Not orbs. Eyes.

My wine-soaked brain glitches, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. A pale canid skull is emerging from the hedge to my right, and a black bulk with disjointed legs is hitching nearer on my left. The second shadow has a bulbous tail that glows orange like its eyes—a tail curved to a wicked sharp tip, like a scorpion's stinger.

Monsters.

I should probably run.

I flee along the dark garden path, cursing myself for not bringing my bodyguards with me. I'm cut off from the entrance to the ballroom, but maybe I can make it to the shrine of the goddess Aine. Then I can put a door and some walls between me and these things, these creatures I'm still not

certain are real...

Something slams against the center of my back, and I fly forward, crashing onto my belly. My palms scuff against rough ice.

Instantly I flip over, just in time to roll aside and dodge another incoming paw.

These things look like dogs. Huge dogs—hounds—demented, deformed hounds, one with an exposed skull and the other with a scorpion tail.

The skull-hound's neck snakes forward, jaws snapping.

I throw myself aside again, then scramble to get up. A blow from a paw strikes my shoulder, sends me skidding into a flower bed. The icy stalks crack and crunch as I struggle to rise.

One of the hounds stalks closer, slavering fire from incandescent jaws, while the second monster lurks in the background, flicking its glowing stinger.

My fingers close on a wooden stake, a prop for some flowering vine. I jerk at it, and it breaks free from the cold ground. Madly I swing my weapon, and it strikes the skull-hound across the snout, snapping in two instantly.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

The hound opens its jaws, yawning fire from its throat.

An inky form explodes out of the dark, and a hand clamps around the beast's neck, forcing its jaw shut. The hound gurgles and jerks, struggling, but the tall, antlered figure doesn't let go. His teeth flash white and menacing in the gloom, and his eyes flicker green.

Shadows pour out of Arawn's fingertips—shadows thicker than clouds, rivers of blackest night. They flow between the teeth of the skull-hound, into its flaming eye sockets. The hound groans and whines, but the shadows keep pushing, a flood of inky void blotting out the beast's flame, quenching its inner fire until it goes lax, hollow and limp.

Arawn tosses the monster aside, where it continues to melt and fade until it is nothing but a wisp of black ash on the path, scoured away by the wind.

The death god strides over to me. Pulls me up, drags me against his chest. He's jade-skinned now, with towering antlers branching from his dark hair and sharp claws protruding from his fingertips. I cling to him, looking over my shoulder at the second hound, the one with the scorpion tail.

Arawn snarls and lifts his hand. Green light glows from his palm—a

threat of dangerous magic.

With a howl, the beast turns and bounds off into the darkness.

Arawn seizes me by the shoulders and shakes me a little. “You didn’t scream,” he says hoarsely. “Why didn’t you scream? I almost couldn’t find you fast enough!”

I stare at him, blinking.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he says raggedly. “How are you so strong and so helpless all at once? By the dark, I swear you’ll be the end of me.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “You saved me again.”

“Don’t flee into the gardens at night anymore, little Queen,” he hisses. “At least, if you must run, take me with you.”

My stomach dips. *Take me with you.*

Take me.

Take me...

My mind is drifting to some very forbidden places. To distract myself, I ask, “What were those things?”

“Hounds of the Unlife,” says Arawn. “Part of my pack. I have many of them, all loyal until now. As for these two, their dedication to me was weakened by—by outside influences.”

“Why were they after me?”

His hands drop from my shoulders, and he looks away. “I don’t know.”

“Is someone trying to break our contract?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then what?”

“There is more happening here than you understand,” he says roughly. “I told you, your summoning of me set certain things in motion—bad things. But they are godly affairs, and they don’t concern you.” He turns, starting to walk away along the path.

“Oh, I think they do.” I hurry after him, grabbing his sleeve. “I think they do concern me, when I’m being chased down by fiery hounds in my own garden.”

He jerks his sleeve away from me and stalks on. “If the other hound appears again, I’ll protect you.”

“You think it will be *back*? Can’t you destroy it, or something?”

“It’s a creature of my making. I’d rather not have to.”

“Oh my gods.” I halt on the path. “You’re attached to those things? Like they’re your pets?”

“None of your fucking business,” he spits over his shoulder.

We’re heading back to the palace by a different route, one that takes us past Aine’s shrine. When Arawn sees it, he hesitates. “Fuck those bitches,” he mutters. “This is all a joke of theirs, you know. My sister goddesses. At some drunken revel they thought it would be amusing to create a summoning ritual for me, and with their combined power they managed to achieve it. Think of what they could do if they actually put their power to good use. But no, they prefer to torment other gods and get drunk on the stars. They also enjoy turning humans into fucktoys and then pretending their gifted offspring don’t exist.”

“Goddesses can give birth?” I quirk an eyebrow.

“In a manner of speaking. When a male god fucks a human woman, she gives birth to a half-divine, a powerful mortal with nearly uncontrollable magic. For many generations afterward, that mortal’s offspring may receive lesser doses of magic, revealed in the powers you’re familiar with—healing, fire wielding, water wielding, and more. Sometimes a generation is skipped, but the potential is always there, latent, ready to appear. When a goddess fucks a human man, that man’s body is temporarily infused with her power. So the next child he has with a human woman will be a half-divine as well.”

Arawn takes a few steps forward, glowering at the pale columns of the shrine. Its ponderous doors are shut, but never locked, in case a worshiper wants to enter.

The warmth of the wine is beginning to wear off, and the wind has picked up, lashing across the garden in great gusts. I know we should return to the party immediately, but I don’t want to face all those questioning eyes and hungry smiles. I nearly died just now. Don’t I deserve a moment of peace, out of the blast of this wind?

I step past Arawn and push one of the heavy doors open, just enough for me to slip through. By blind instinct I navigate through the dark to the little stand near the door, where the priestess keeps a lamp. A few seconds later the light flares up, illuminating the incense burners, the carved motifs, and the statue of Aine herself.

“She looks nothing like that,” Arawn says disdainfully, closing the door behind him.

“Does she care? About us?” I ask. “Do any of them care, or listen?”

“Sometimes.” He walks forward, head tilted in contemplation of the statue. “The gods are nothing if not fickle. At times they can be very kind—at

others, unfathomably cruel. Mostly they are apathetic.”

I brush a bit of dust from the lamp and flick it off my fingers. “What about you? Do you have half-divine children?”

“Have you heard of any humans with shadow magic?”

“Well... no.”

He sighs, still facing the stone figure of Aine. His broad back is toward me, those powerful shoulder muscles draped in the folds of the cowl he wears.

“I have never fucked anyone, divine or human,” he says, low. “I never had the inclination, until recently.”

I gasp softly. “So you’re... you’re a virgin god.”

He growls, and I smile at his back. I’m not sure why the idea of him being a virgin delights me so much.

“You said ‘until recently.’ So you do have the inclination now?” I try to keep my voice steady, casual.

“This time is different, as I’ve told you. I’m more susceptible to sensation. To desire.”

“How interesting,” I breathe. I don’t want to explain or explore the ticklish delight racing between my legs, or the tightening heat all over my skin, or the quickened pounding of my heart. I simply want to *be*. I want to feel something other than emptiness, or anger, or pain. I want that tiny glow in my heart to expand and fill my whole body.

Arawn’s shoulders seem tighter now, rigid with an unspoken tension. Inky strands of his dark hair straggle down his back, and I want to gather them all and bury my face in the waves. I want to clutch those broad shoulders and feel the rolling power of them as he pushes inside me—

Oh gods, that would be a bad idea—a terrible, foolish, incomprehensibly stupid idea.

He’s turning around. Oh shit—he’s looking at me with those intense green eyes, with that same magnetic, ravenous, haunted craving I saw on his face last night, when he quelled the riot.

“We should go back,” I whisper.

“And we will,” he breathes. “In a moment.”



My sister couldn't have sent the hounds after the little Queen, not expressly. By law she's forbidden to attack me like that, even through the human to whom my life is linked. But she spoke in front of my hounds and explained how I could be killed. These devilish souls have been bound to me since the early days of humankind. Of course they would leap at the chance to kill me, even if it only meant a change of masters. They crave revenge for their enslavement.

They almost killed the Queen, and by extension, me.

Non-existence isn't something I've had to face. The end of myself, the cessation of being—it awakens the same raw panic I felt when the Queen bound me for a year—only this panic is worse, stirred by the impending loss of control, the dissolution of the mental faculties I prize. I feel as if I'm being stolen away, carved apart little by little, crushed down into this mortal prison until I am small, I am nothing.

The sensation makes me want to scream, like the Queen did beneath the bathwater.

I catch my lip between my teeth and gnaw it, trying to hold myself still, striving for a measure of control, while my body vibrates with a need I don't understand. It's beyond sexual, though there's an element of that, too. Blood pumps into my dick, and a restless urgency crawls over my skin.

The Queen is watching me with a wretched, reckless yearning in her eyes. Her gaze summons me; I'm moving toward her without meaning to. I'm reaching out—stars, I don't know what I'm doing.

I catch her by the shoulders again, just to have somewhere to put my hands, just to feel her.

“I have to keep you safe,” I say hoarsely.

Her eyes widen, helplessly delighted—and then they narrow again. “Why do you suddenly care so much about my safety?”

For a moment I war with myself. And then I spill the truth. “One of my sisters added something to the ritual. Certain conditions were fulfilled during the summoning, and I was partially incarnated. Not mortal, exactly, but susceptible to destruction by specific means. My life, it turns out, is connected to yours. By protecting you, I protect myself.”

“So when you were upset at me, last night, about getting between you and that chunk of ice—it wasn’t about concern for me at all. It was about you. Of *course* it was.” She smiles, hard and bright. Then she knocks my hand off her shoulder and walks out of the temple, through the garden, back toward the ballroom entrance.

She’s moving fast, for a human. I have to lengthen my stride to keep up.

“That’s why I need to stay close to you over the next year,” I say.

“So we both stay alive.”

“Exactly.”

“We’ll be traveling together,” she says. “Riding in the same carriage. That should be close enough for you.”

“And what about when you marry one of the fawning mortals in that ballroom? The lord I took you from—he seems like the kind to kill you in bed and take the crown. I can’t trust you with someone like that.”

“I told you I’m not marrying him.” Her breath puffs, hot and angry, in the cold air.

“I’m not sure I can trust you with any of them. One or more could be plotting your demise.”

“Unlikely.”

“I won’t take that chance.”

She whirls, looking up at me with those blue-gray eyes, the pale fire of her anger stealing my words.

“Marry me yourself, then,” she hisses.

“What?”

“You heard me. A marriage. We’re already bound by one contract—why not add another? The Council won’t be happy about it, and neither will I, but you’re very convincing—you can get them to approve it somehow.

That way you'll be near me all the time, and no one will question it. You can protect me, and then, at the end of the year, when you return to your realm, I'll be free of you, able to marry again. And it will be my choice next time."

It's a good idea. A compact, convenient solution, for both of us. I struggle to refute it, but I can't.

"Very well," I tell her. "We'll go back to the party. You announce your choice, and I'll help you convince them."

"They won't like it."

"We seem destined to be unpopular, you and I." I give her a grim smile.

"Fucking unfair, I say. We're so charming." Her mouth trembles. At first I think she's going to cry, but then she smiles—a strained, hysterical little smile, but it's there.

"The deal is struck, then?" she says, extending her hand.

I grip hers. "The deal is struck."



I can't believe what I just suggested.

I can't believe he agreed.

It makes sense, and it's also an absolutely terrible idea.

I am going to marry the god of death.

Arawn transitions back to his human aspect and I brush snow and leaves off my clothing as we hurry toward the palace. My bodyguards are outside, peering down the garden paths. Relief sweeps over their faces when they see me coming.

"Your Majesty." One of them greets me, his tone tinged with rebuke.

I give him a vaguely apologetic nod. I make my guards' job difficult sometimes. But there are moments when a girl needs to be alone.

My re-entrance into the ballroom brings with it a blast of freezing air that tosses my hair and turns every face toward me.

I could ease back into the dancing, take the time to chat with more of the men gathered here—but I see no point wasting their time and mine.

My guards close the doors behind me, while Arawn moves to my side. He keeps step as I walk to the center of the room.

If I announce my choice publicly here, as Arawn suggested, the Council will have little opportunity to protest. Arawn and I are leaving tomorrow anyway. I'll give orders for my wedding preparations tonight, and when Arawn and I return, we'll make the marriage official.

With a gesture, I quiet the musical quartet in the corner. In the silence that follows, I sense uncertainty and curiosity from the guests. Lord

Vennirotth isn't exactly frowning, but his features are grim, his eyes like poisoned daggers.

"Honored guests," I begin. "I am so grateful to you all for gathering here tonight, for sparing me a little of your time. I have not been able to speak with everyone, but I do have an announcement to make. I've chosen my future husband, my royal consort. He is someone to whom this kingdom owes a great deal, someone many residents of this city have come to admire. He is powerful, wise, and compassionate. And I trust him with my life."

Arawn shifts at my side. I can sense the restless tension thrumming through his body, and I reach out instinctively, taking his hand.

Quiet gasps whisper through the assembly of guests. Lord Vennirotth takes a step forward, his hands curling into fists.

"Vaughn of Terelaus." I turn to Arawn, looking up, up into his face. His dark lashes blink over those deep green eyes—ancient eyes, the eyes of a being who has existed since time began. My heartbeat stutters at the sudden realization of what I'm doing—promising myself to this cosmic creature, this eldritch lord of death.

"Master of dark magic, savior of my people," I say breathlessly. "Will you accept my offer of marriage?"

His voice, deep and hollow, echoes through the ballroom. "I accept."

A moment of brittle silence.

Then someone claps, inciting an avalanche of applause as Arawn and I face them, hand in hand. My smile stretches my cheeks, but it doesn't ease the roiling unrest in my heart. My stomach is churning, and the nausea only increases when Lord Vennirotth approaches, clasps my hand in mock congratulations, and leans in so close his short white beard brushes my cheek.

"This is not over, Princess," he mutters.

I wish I could have him dragged off to the dungeons for his persistent, intentional failure to title me properly, for his verbal threats, and for the physical threat when we were dancing. But no one has witnessed or heard the threats, so it would be my word against his. He possesses loyalty and influence, while I'm on shaky ground with the Council. I can't risk openly moving against him. Not yet.

Perhaps this marriage will infuriate him enough that he'll make an obviously treasonous move. If he does, I must be ready to seize proof of his treachery and make him pay for it.

The effects of the wine I drank have been counteracted by the peril I

went through. My palms sting from skidding against the ice when I fell, and my shoulder aches where one of the hounds struck it. The scratch and bruise on my cheekbone are stinging, too, under the makeup Tilda carefully applied to that area. My body aches, and my soul aches, and I want nothing more than to return to my rooms and have a bath, or plummet into sleep before I have to rise at dawn again.

But instead of escaping to my quarters I smile, and I drink a few more sips of celebratory wine with my guests. Most of them seem mildly disappointed by my choice of husband, but also invigorated and interested by it. When they begin to ask too many questions about how I discovered “Vaughn of Terelaus” and how he came to our kingdom, I clap my hands and request the musicians to play another dance tune. Then I grip Arawn by his jacket and pull him to me, forcing him into the dance.

“You’re so stiff,” I mutter as we begin to move. “Why can you not dance with me as you did with those other women? You seemed to be having fun then.”

“It’s different with you.” He doesn’t meet my eyes; his gaze keeps traveling over the other guests, skimming everywhere except my face.

I keep my voice low, for his ears alone. “You truly despise me.” I do a slow spin, then my hands meet his again. “What your sister did to you isn’t my fault.”

“I know that.” His hand presses to my lower back, urging my body against his. He bends, his lips skimming the top of my head. I can feel his warm breath there, and a shiver trickles over my body. Then he inhales, long and deep, through his nose.

“Stop sniffing me in front of everyone,” I hiss.

“You smell like wine and warm sugar and fresh air,” he murmurs. “I like it. So many scents from your hair, your skin, and yet underneath it’s always the same. Always you.”

“You’re being very strange.”

“You wanted me to relax. Pleasant smells relax me.”

“Listen to the music,” I insist. “Feel its cadence, its flow. Let it carry you out of yourself and set you free from all this.”

Perhaps I’m speaking to myself more than to him. I close my eyes, allowing myself to drift on the waves of melody. There’s a particular chain of notes in this song that plucks a string deep inside me—a string that quivers in tandem with the tiny flickering flame in my heart. I dance, and I wait for that

series of notes to repeat, and when it comes it's blissful.

When my eyes blink open, Arawn is watching me.

"Can you feel it?" I whisper. "There's something so beautiful about this song. It makes me want to cry and laugh and scream and do incredibly heroic things, all at once."

"I think I feel it," he whispers back. Heat from his gaze spills into mine, stirring delicate sensations low in my belly, melting warm in the space between my legs.

When the song ends, I pull away from him quickly and make the rounds of the room, thanking the guests, making it clear the evening is over. As soon as I can politely manage it, I leave the ballroom and make for the royal residence wing.

Arawn is right behind me, a looming presence, a magnetic shadow at my back.

"You're dismissed for the night," I tell my bodyguards once I reach my room. "Until the next set of guards comes up, I'm safe with him." I nod to Arawn.

The soldiers bow, casting awed glances at him. Neither guard was with me on the night of the summoning—they don't know who Arawn truly is. But he radiates power, exudes magic. And when the guards' figures recede, I'm left alone with that swelling power. Alone in the gloomy corridor, with the torchlight glowing on the darkly paneled walls, and the god of death slowly unspooling shadows across the maroon carpet.

"You're leaking." I point to the magic swirling over the floor.

"I'm tired of holding it in." His voice has changed; it's the deeper, godlike tone he sometimes uses. He's jade-skinned again, and the ram's horns are sliding from his hair, curling in thick ridged spirals.

"I felt the chains less when we danced," he says thickly. "But they're back now, tightening around my body. It's agony, being trapped like this. I feel as if I must tear myself open so I can get out." His claws dent the thick fabric over his chest.

"Sometimes I feel a little like that," I reply softly. "As if I want to break out of this castle, this city, and run far, far away to be free. Maybe leap from a cliff top into the sea. Or soar up into the starlit sky where no one can follow me. And sometimes I feel so numb, I run into freezing gardens or—or I do this."

I open both my hands, holding them out to him. The scrapes from when

I fell are there, but so are a myriad crescent-shaped marks—some bruised into my flesh, others actually cut into my skin—sealed over and healing, but present nonetheless. Marks of my fingernails, driven deep, the pain anchoring me in moments when I couldn't find relief any other way.

Arawn steps nearer.

Traces one of the red crescents with the tip of a claw.

Looks into my eyes.

The air thrums between us, taut and visceral. The light in my chest expands suddenly, illuminating my veins, my nerves, my skin with a fiery craving, one that's mirrored in the ancient green eyes of the god in front of me.

I reach behind me, find the handle, and open the door to my bedroom.

“Come in for a moment,” I whisper.



ARAWN

I follow the Queen into her room.

I can sense the two magical objects in the space: the ritual tome, which I did not burn, but replaced in her drawer where I found it—and the knife spelled with godsblood, hidden in the bedpost. I still haven't questioned her about it. Right now I can't think about anything beyond the warmth of the low fire on the hearth, spreading through the room, and the inviting velvety purple of the blankets on the wide bed. If I could strip down and roll on that bed, feel that velvet on my skin, the sensation might be enough to erase the icy, poisonous weight of my chains.

The Queen is taking pins out of her hair. It was mostly loose anyway—a little of it braided and twisted up—but she takes it all down. A flood of moonlight.

I can't stop myself.

I walk over to her, stand behind her as she faces the dressing table, and plunge my fingers into her hair.

The sensation of the silky locks flowing over my hands sends a moan of exquisite pleasure through my throat.

She's watching me in the mirror. Gripping the edge of the dressing table with both hands. The pins lie forgotten on the carpet.

I take a long lock of her pale hair, separate it gently from the others, and wind it slowly around her throat. Her hair is so long I can wrap it twice around her slim neck.

Her pupils dilate, her cheeks reddening. Delicious cheeks, like warm

apples. I'm leaning over, lowering my mouth to one of them before I can think. Opening my lips, grazing her rosy flesh with my teeth, with my tongue.

I can feel her shaking. Not fear... no... she's holding back, restraining herself. I know that repressed energy, that desperation.

"You taste divine," I say hoarsely against her cheek.

She whirls around, a sudden, volatile rush that brings her mouth near mine. A graze of lips—hot breath mingled, profiles nudging, taunting—and then I grip the back of her head and I slam my mouth against hers with a guttural snarl.

Kissing her is like dying. Like my soul separating from the prison of my body, soaring into a blissful void. Her mouth is soft, rich, eager, responsive—she's bracing her thin arms on my shoulders, on either side of my neck, her fingers clawing into my hair, breathless hums of desire buzzing over my tongue as our lips open to each other, as my tongue ventures into the warm hollow of her mouth. Her tongue glides over mine, curls around it, and that decadent swirl sends a surge of hot blood into my cock.

My hips buck against her, and she freezes at the hardness, but only for a moment. Then she hitches one leg over my hip, urging her center closer to mine. She makes a breathless mew of frustration, because she's too short—she can't position herself like she wants to. I pick her up whole, carry her to the bed, and fling her onto it, like a wolf might sling the body of his wounded prey into his den.

This is almost what I need. I'm getting closer to the release I crave. I prowl over the little Queen's body, my hair draping around our faces, and I sink my lips to hers again.

This time, when I sweep my tongue through her mouth, I taste something tender, swollen, almost bloody. A ridge of wounded flesh along her inner cheek.

Frowning, I pull back.

"I bite my cheek sometimes when I'm anxious," she gasps. "I'm sorry." Her eyes are like frosty stars, icy pools brimming with blue tears.

I kiss her again, deeply, soothingly, and she hums with relief.

But kissing her isn't enough. I need her—I need her skin. Both of us are too heavily clothed. Too many layers.

My claws pick apart the knot of her overdress, and I lay it open. She's wearing another, thinner dress beneath. I want to claw it away, ravage it into shreds until I get down to her quivering flesh, to the source of her true scent. I

need to bury myself inside her—my face, my cock, my fingers, all of me. Maybe then I can find some peace from the crawling unrest in my body.

But I pause, and Macha's words snake through my mind.

You may fuck whomever you like in the mortal plane—in fact, I'd encourage it if you don't want those chains you wear to become excruciatingly heavy and painful. But you can't fall in love.

What I'm feeling isn't love. It's the most purely selfish lust.

Lust for the Queen I have agreed to marry. The Queen I must protect.

She is hurting, wounded by grief, softened by wine, rendered reckless by the attacks of the hounds tonight. She is not herself.

I rock back, kneeling upright on the bed, still astride her thighs. "My apologies, little Queen. I understand this is not part of our arrangement."

She slides out from under me and sits up, rubbing her forehead. "No. It isn't."

"I think it best that I find relief elsewhere then. And you should as well."

"That's the thing," she says. "People will expect us to be faithful to each other. Any rumored infidelity could be a problem."

I clench my teeth, struggling with the impulse to throw her back down on the bed. I have not touched myself since the night I came accidentally—I've been too busy, too weary, too proud to indulge. Perhaps I should find relief that way. But it won't be the same, not without her living body, her eyes, her hair. Her scent.

"If you want to take someone to bed, you may," she says. "You'll need to be secretive about it, though. Put the guards in the hallway to sleep while you're entertaining the woman—or the man—and be sure whomever you choose won't speak of it."

She's staring away from me, into the fireplace.

"And you?" I ask. "You'll invite someone else to bed?"

She pinches her lips together. Shakes her head. "I can't." She slides off the bed, pulling her overdress closed again. "You should go now. We leave at dawn tomorrow. It will be a long day."

Reluctantly I swing off the bed and head for the door. When I look back she's standing rigid, silhouetted against the firelight, gazing into the flames. Alone, trapped, and hungry, just like me.

A pulsing ache throbs through my heart.

But I leave the room without another word.



Arawn and I leave the palace just as sunlight begins to leak into the sky. The air in the courtyard practically cracks with the sharp cold, and inside the carriage isn't much warmer. Before we depart, Hessie runs out of the tower into the courtyard, handing us warm buns wrapped in greasy paper and two bottles of hot tea. I thank her and wave as Farley loads the last of the luggage. Flanked by six guards on horseback, my carriage rolls out of the palace gates and into the city, heading for the west wall.

I open my planning book immediately, and while I'm working, I sip the hot tea. I wore fingerless gloves today for this exact purpose—so I can hold pencils and turn pages more easily. I'll be exhausted later, but for now my brain is buzzing with manic energy, obsessing over the details of the day, going over and over my notes to discern if I've forgotten anything.

I have planned this excursion down to the hour and sent messengers ahead to let the outlying villages know where and when to present their sick. We must keep to a strict schedule in order to have the best chance of saving the maximum number of lives.

Despite my best efforts, I know there will be some people who arrive too late to the meeting points—people who will die because Arawn and I had to move on and give our time to another village. They'll curse me as an uncaring monarch, never knowing how much it grieves me that I must make these choices.

Arawn is sitting across from me. Staring, as usual. His big frame is engulfed in an enormous coat I ordered for him a couple days ago. I decided

it was a priority, since he feels the cold more in his current form. A coat will serve him better than a cloak. Besides which, he looks damn majestic wearing it. Also ridiculously handsome.

“You seem unhappy,” he rumbles. I’ve noticed that his voice is even gruffer and deeper than usual in the early mornings. The roughness of it sends little tremors through very sensitive parts of me.

“Unhappy is my usual state of being, I suppose.”

“We are going to save more of your people. And you’ve just announced your engagement. You should look happier.”

I lay aside my planning book. “If you tell me to smile, I will punch you.”

“That will hurt you more than it hurts me.”

“True. And I suppose it qualifies as ‘human sensation’ and would thus alleviate the weight of your chains.”

He shakes his head. “Only novel or pleasant sensations offer real relief.”

“Oh.”

We’re the only ones in the carriage. I left my maids behind on purpose, so we could take the smallest, lightest coach and travel faster. The inns where we rest will have people to assist if I need any help; and besides, I have no problem caring for myself. The real priority was the guards, for protection and crowd control.

Not bringing servants along means Arawn and I have complete privacy within the confines of the carriage. We can discuss anything.

“Did you find some relief last night?” I ask. And then heat floods my cheeks because *why* am I asking the death god about his sexual state?

He lifts his dark eyebrows. “Did you?”

“No.” I flush deeper. “I went to sleep.”

“As did I.”

“Sleep is important.”

“It is. You get far too little of it. It concerns me.”

“Are you afraid I’ll die from lack of sleep?”

He shrugs. “There are other illnesses in this world besides the plague. Keep treating yourself poorly and neglecting your own needs, and you may fall prey to one of them.”

“Your concern would be more touching if our lives weren’t bound together.”

Arawn shifts his great shoulders, glancing away from me. “Your death

would bring me no joy even if we weren't bound."

My heart leaps, but I say dryly, "And here I thought you were looking forward to designing some creative punishments for me in the Unlife. Tell me, great god of death, what torments will you devise for the queen who has ensnared you?"

He takes a long gulp of hot tea. Then his eyes lock with mine, dark as a deep green forest.

"You would come to me naked," he says quietly, and my stomach thrills. "All souls arrive in that state. I would greet you, because as my nemesis and captor, you deserve special treatment. I'd take your hand in mine and lead you through the Furnace of Souls myself, listening to your sweet sighs of agony as your past was revealed and your wrongdoing exposed."

"Wrongdoing?"

"I have not read your sins, little Queen, but I assume you have some. If nothing else, there is the sin of summoning me—"

"Which was done in the most correct way possible," I interject.

"—and killing eight people—"

"They were willing sacrifices."

He sighs. "Fine. Then you are guilty of inconveniencing a god in the most egregious fashion."

"Doesn't seem like much of a crime."

"Oh, I assure you it is. Once you've passed through the furnace and assumed your Unliving body, I will splay your limbs on a rack and bind each of them in place."

"I'm still naked at this point?"

"Yes," he growls. "Always."

My stomach flutters. Wetness is sliding between my thighs, dampening my panties.

"And you'll hurt me," I murmur, holding his gaze. "When I'm helpless, bound to that rack, at your mercy—you'll cut into me, dismember me, burn me. You'll make me suffer."

"I'll make you scream," he says, low.

I squish my thighs together and try to distract myself by taking a large bite of the buttery bun Hessie gave me. Which reminds me...

"This morning I noticed a symbol on Hessie's forehead," I say. "It's faint, but it looks like one of yours. Not quite the same as the ones you use when you're sparing life."

“That’s a tethermark,” he explains. “It gives her immunity from death for seventy years.”

My jaw drops. “Do I get one?”

“It’s the sign of a god’s favor.” He gives me a disdainful look. “Which you do not have.”

“I seem to remember you offering to kill the poor girl. What did she do to earn your favor?”

His lashes blink slowly at me. “She performed a service.”

“Oh.” A strange, crawling horror coils in my stomach. “So she took care of your needs. I must say, I don’t think her a wise choice. She has managed to keep your secret so far, but I’ll wager it’s been difficult. Besides which, your power and authority might overwhelm her. She would feel obliged to yield to you, even if, in her heart, she would rather not consent. Why did you not mention her to me last night?”

“What in the furnace are you talking about?” He looks utterly confused.

“You—you took Hessie to bed.” The words sour my mouth.

“I did not. I’ve taken no one to bed. Well... I put you *on* the bed last night, but I did not take you.” The low purr of his tone over the last handful of words makes my belly quiver again.

“Then what is the ‘service’ Hessie performed for you?”

“She helped me with a few tests of my magic. I put her to sleep, turned her into a cat, aged her up and then down again, and wrapped my shadows around her. It was harmless, and non-sexual.”

“Harmless?” I gasp. “You turned her into a cat!”

“A very fine cat. And only for a few moments.”

To be fair, the tests he conducted don’t seem to have affected Hessie in any negative way. “So if I submit to a few tests, I can earn your favor, too?”

The moment I say it, I know I’ve made a mistake.

Arawn leans forward, thick forearms braced on his knees, eyes glinting. “Do you want my favor?”

“I... I want to live a long and healthy life,” I breathe.

“Why do you think you deserve a long life, when so many others are not granted it?”

“I never said I deserve it,” I reply quietly. “Only that I want it.”

“And you would submit to me in exchange for such a boon?”

“Submit to you?” I can hardly manage the words.

“To a test of magic, little Queen. What did you think I meant?”

By the way his full lips curve just slightly at the corner, I'm fairly sure he knows exactly what I thought.



ARAWN

It's not as if I haven't thought of gifting the Queen a tethermark. If I could, I would, to protect myself by ensuring her long life. But it's impossible to tether her to me that way while we're already bound by the summoning ritual and Macha's spell. I'd have to do it at the end of our year-long contract; and frankly, I don't feel compelled to reward the little Queen for getting me into this mess.

The carriage we're riding in is incredibly tiny. Two seats face each other, and the bulk of me fills one entirely. There isn't much of a gap between the seats, either. I have to slant my long legs to the right so the Queen has room for her skirts on the left.

We're not even out of the city yet, and already I'm feeling the horrible pressure in my chest, the clawing need to get out, to get free of this confined space. Since I dragged myself away from the Queen's bed last night, I've been prey to a gnawing restlessness. My invisible chains grind into my flesh, into my bones, with a weight so dreadful I want to roar my pain to the sky.

Teasing the Queen offers a slight distraction. But it's not enough. And when she turns her face away to stare out the window, without answering my last question, I can't bear it. I can't let the conversation die or I will go mad.

"You're a liar, you know," I tell her. "We'll add that to your list of sins."

"A liar?"

"You promised to ease the schedule and give me time for pleasure. Judging by that book in your hands, and what you said to Farley and the guards, you have not eased the schedule at all. If anything, you've tightened

it.”

She winces. “I suppose I have. But what do you expect me to do? People are dying, and we can stop it. Every minute is more lives saved. How can we take a break, knowing that?”

Her earnestness, that bright sacrificial intensity in her eyes—it pierces my heart, burning there with an echoing flame. She will scorch herself to ashes in service to these people—deny herself every pleasure, every indulgence that makes human existence worthwhile. She will die for them, unworthy as they are, and they will forget her all too quickly. They don’t appreciate her enough.

She deserves more.

I reach across the carriage and take the planning book from her lap. Her fingers close on its edge, a small tug of protest, but then she lets me pull it away.

“Apparently this hour or two of travel is the only respite I’ll receive,” I say. “So I should make the most of it, and indulge in sensation and pleasure.”

Her cheeks, which have been growing delectably pinker as we spoke, are scarlet now. “And how do you propose to do that?”

“If we were in the palace, I could find someone with whom to pass the time pleasantly.” I stroke my jaw thoughtfully. “Unfortunately it’s only you and I in this carriage.”

Her slim throat moves, a nervous swallow. I cherish that sign of my effect on her. She’s not easy to terrify, this little Queen, but it seems that physical closeness or sexual references unsettle her, and I find that equally satisfying.

More satisfying still is the latent glint in her eye, the way she sucks in her lips and pushes them back out, wet and plump. She’s not entirely averse to my suggestion.

“I did promise you all the pleasures you desire,” she says, with a slow blink at me. “Since there’s no one else here, I suppose I shall have to keep the promise myself. *If* you can remember that it’s a bargain being fulfilled, nothing more.”

“Anything more between us would be impossible and absurd,” I say.

“Entirely absurd,” she agrees.

I lean forward, and she does the same, her eyes hooding, half-closed, her lips parting to accept my kiss. With my mouth a breath from hers, I pause, enjoying the magnetic pull between us, the haze of eager breath.

“I like this part,” I murmur. “Just before we touch. It feels good.”

“It does.” The thin, soft skin of her lips grazes mine. “But this feels even better.”

She kisses me gently, her mouth pliant and relaxed. Delicately she takes my lower lip between her teeth and tugs it, sucking it a little before releasing it.

My dick reacts, a bold surge of heated blood.

“You’re skilled at this,” I tell her.

“I’ve had a few lovers.” Her mouth covers mine, her tongue teasing my lips open, sweeping across the edge of my teeth, gliding wet and slippery over my tongue.

My hand comes up, needing to touch her somewhere. I choose the back of her neck, where that pompous lord touched her last night. Possessively I cup her nape, rubbing my thumb along the soft skin just beneath her earlobe. She makes a quiet sound in my mouth.

We’re shifting closer to each other, her leg pressed against mine. My other hand finds her knee.

It’s not enough. A hot, roiling desire thunders through my bones, and I break our kiss, venting a short growl of frustration.

I need more. But I can’t ask her for more, not when she has already given all of herself to everyone else.

“You don’t like it?” Her voice is throaty, breathless. Beautifully sensual.

“It’s not that.” I bite out the words.

The Queen considers me a moment. Then she draws the curtains over the carriage windows with crisp, decisive jerks. “I am so full of plans, decisions, and responsibilities,” she says. “And I am also full of grief—so much grief it makes me physically ill if I let myself think of it. Yet despite all that wretched fullness, I am empty, too. There is so much that’s dead inside me, Arawn, such pervasive cold and darkness.” She hesitates, then strips off her gloves and places her hand on my thigh. “I need to feel something else. And like you said, we have a little time just now. There are limits to what we can do, because the carriage may stop suddenly. But if you need something from me, don’t hold back on my account. Chances are I need the same thing from you.”

My voice is hoarse and jagged. “But last night, you said—”

“Last night was—confusing. But it’s not as if we plan to do this often. Just once, right now. Then never again.”

“Never again.” My fingers curl against her knee, gathering the fabric of her skirt, bunching it and pushing it up her thigh. She’s wearing stockings underneath the gown, and my fingers skim over the soft wool, forging a path up her inner thigh, into the heat emanating from her body.

Just before I reach the source of that heat, I find the edge of the stockings. Her warm, smooth skin.

This is what I need. To feel her.

I peel the stocking down, all the way to her knee. Her grip on my thigh tightens.

With the stocking out of my way, my whole hand closes on her thigh, sliding upward.

She scoots forward on her seat, adjusting her body to give me better access. At the same time, she reaches in and places her palm over the crotch of my pants.

The heat and pressure of her small hand over the bulge of my cock is more than I can take. This slow, tentative play—it’s not what I crave. I want to strip her body naked and rub every part of her against my bare skin. I want to rut into her like a beast. I want to ravage her, devour her, take payment in passion for her invasion of my life.

I look up, into her blue-gray eyes, all my fury and anguish centered in my gaze, my body quaking with repressed violence.

She returns my look, and her eyes flash with understanding. “Do it,” she says. “But remember I have to appear before the people later.”

I seize the little Queen’s thighs, shove her skirts up to her waist, and jerk her toward me, desperate for the fragrance I can smell between her legs. She stifles a squeal as I drag her center toward my mouth. I position her with her legs hooked over my shoulders, her spine curved against my thighs and stomach, her head propped between my knees. I grasp her rear, lifting her even more, like a cup I’m cradling two-handed.

She’s wearing panties. Silky, soaked. I let my fangs slide out and I tug the moistened fabric away from her sex, biting through it, jerking and ripping until it gives way entirely.

I spit it out onto the carriage floor and turn back to her.

And there she is—two plump lips shining and damp, with tender folds between them. At the top, where the folds meet, is a slightly raised nub, pink and delicate.

“This is not what I expected,” gasps the Queen. She has one hand braced

on the edge of the seat I forced her to vacate. The other hand palms her forehead; she's frowning, flushed, squirming, her hair tumbling onto the carriage floor.

I tighten my grip on her bottom and lift her a little more while I replace my devilish teeth with human ones. Then I plunge my face between her legs.

The flood of exquisite sensation that rolls over my body banishes my chains instantly. With a reckless groan of bliss, I lick deeper, inhaling the scent, savoring the taste. She is like velvety roses, like brown sugar, like honey and salt—the most delectable blend of savory richness and feminine sweetness. I bathe the outer lips all over, then plunge my tongue into her succulent depths as far as I can.

The Queen trembles in my grip, bracing herself with both hands now.

“Godsfuck,” she whispers.

I had almost forgotten about her, even though I'm devouring her. I was so immersed in the flavors I'm enjoying. But her pleasure is important as well, so I refocus my attention to the peak at the top of her folds. I know the function of a clit, and I'm eager to experiment with one myself for the first time.

“Tell me what feels good to you,” I murmur against the skin of her thigh. She tastes good there too, so I kiss the warm skin, a press of open lips, a quick glide of my tongue. The Queen releases a tiny, shrill moan.

That sound thrills through my entire frame, and my cock hardens more.

“Do you like this, little Queen?” I ask, and I bathe her sensitive nub with my tongue.

She mews. No words.

Perhaps that means yes.

That part of her is so tiny, yet so powerful. It renders her beautifully helpless.

I take a moment to enjoy the feel of her small, lithe body against mine, to revel in the spill of her pale hair, to delight in the tortured bliss on her face as she writhes on my lap. Then I squeeze her ass, lifting her sex to my mouth again.

Her clit needs to be kissed, so I kiss it twice, then suck on it lightly, nibbling and tugging.

The Queen is biting her wrist, her skirts scrunched around her waist, all her dignity forgotten.

Openmouthed, I cover as much of her sex as I can and stroke into it with

my tongue, over and over. My eyes close as I sweep the luscious wetness into my mouth, drinking her delight. I forget that I'm enclosed in a tiny coach; I forget that I'm vulnerable, that Macha is after my throne, that I'm bound for a year; all of that rolls away into the darkness of my mind, and I am conscious only of the Queen's arousal filling my mouth.

I swirl my tongue over her peak again, then lap it quickly a few times.

She tenses immediately and gasps, "More of that, please, oh gods..."

My tongue flickers over the tip of her clit, quick and tantalizing.

"Keep doing that, please, please..." The Queen's voice is thin, sweetly desperate.

I'm teasing the climax out of her. I can feel it drawing closer as she pants, frantic and whimpering, as her body constricts in my hands, chasing the summit of pleasure.

Faster my tongue flickers, poised over that spot.

"Ah... ah..." she shrills, and then she comes for me.

Her legs, hooked over my shoulders, jerk with the force of the ecstasy. But I hold her firmly against my mouth, savoring the flutters of her delicate flesh, the surge of fresh wetness over my tongue.

The Queen relaxes, gasping, and I ease her down the slope of her climax with gentle licks. After a few moments I move her body, arranging her skirts and settling her back on her seat. Her fingers quiver over her tumbled hair, resetting pins. She's crimson-cheeked and bright-eyed.

I take a handkerchief from the pocket of my coat and wipe her wetness from my lips, nose, and jaw.

"That's surely not the first time you've done that." Her voice is shaky.

"It is."

"Shit." She presses a trembling hand to her cheek. "I've had a couple men go down on me before, but that—that was—impossibly perfect."

Triumph swells in my chest. I smile at her, settling back against the seat. My cock is still achingly hard, but I'm no longer being driven wild by the confinement and my chains.

But the Queen quirks an eyebrow at me, with a little smile that makes my dick twitch. "Is that it? What about you?"

"I thoroughly enjoyed myself."

"Yes, I got that impression." Her smile widens. "Are you saying that devouring me is enough for you?"

"It is."

Her eyes narrowed, still smiling, the Queen leans forward and cups the bulge in my trousers. “Then what’s this?”

Nothing has ever felt so torturously marvelous as her slim fingers rubbing me through the fabric. She probes the edges of the bulge, then strokes the ridge from root to end.

“Have you ever come before?” she asks.

“Once.” With the friction of a book and my own clumsy efforts—and the sight of her robe falling open.

“Would you like to come again?” Her voice is soft, her eyes wide as if she’s awed by what she’s doing and also enjoying it immensely.

“It’s messy,” I growl. “I don’t want to have to change my clothes.”

“There are ways to deal with the mess.” She removes her hand from my crotch and sits up again, pulling her hair back. “Unbutton those for me while I fix my hair.” She nods to my pants.

Grimly I unfasten the buttons.

“Spread your legs.”

She’s giving me orders again. I don’t complain.

She kneels on the carriage floor between my legs, her body angled slightly sideways because of the cramped space. Her slender fingers enter the flap of my pants and circle my shaft.

At the touch, my muscles jerk and harden.

She slowly guides my cock out—no easy matter, because it’s large and thick. I peer at it.

“Those veins are rather pronounced,” I comment. “Is that normal?”

“Yes.” The Queen glances up at me. “Haven’t you looked at it?”

“Not when it’s in this state. When it’s hard, I try to ignore it.”

She gives a short laugh. “I wish more human men would do that. But there are times when you don’t have to ignore it. Like now.” She strokes the side of the shaft with one finger, almost tenderly. “This is one good thing about your incarnation, Arawn. Enjoy it.”

Her lips contact the head of my cock, parting around it as she pushes me into her mouth.

Shadows explode from my body, flooding up the sides of the carriage, swirling across the curtains, blotting out most of the light leaking through them.

Every sensitive nerve, every bit of thin skin covering my cock has been gloved in beautiful, silky wetness. I can feel the suction of her lips, the light

scrape of her teeth, the pressure of her inner cheeks as they compress around my shaft. The tip of me bumps the back of her throat, and she adjusts, taking me deeper.

I'm seeing stars—my entire body is made of stars, of sparkling white light and blue heat. A deep groan quakes through my chest, and the Queen slides off me to say, "Hush! Farley will hear you!"

I grind my teeth to keep from begging her to take me in her mouth again.

She glances around. "The shadows—are you all right?"

"Yes," I grit out. "I am about to explode. How is this not going to be messy?"

The Queen smiles at me again. "Because I'm going to swallow when you come."



My heart is pounding harder and faster than ever before in my life.

I have the death god in my mouth. And he's being very, very loud, despite my warning.

I reach up, planning to put my fingers over his lips, but he's too tall. I can't cover his mouth and keep sucking him at the same time. So I lay my hand on his chest instead, between the lapels of his open coat, right over his heart.

It's beating as fast as mine.

There's a hectic delight in being the first one to do this for him. He tastes better than any of the three men I've pleased this way—clean and faintly salty, fragrant with cedar and sage. The head of his cock is the perfect size and shape, and the saltiness is more intense at the tiny slit where he's leaking arousal.

He's grasping the seat, claws shredding the upholstery, his shadow magic swirling around me in a storm of power. The shadowy tendrils have a subtle, vibrating energy to them. I wonder how they would feel against my bare skin.

Heavy groans break from the god's full lips, and I lift my eyes to his face while I continue tending to his cock. His head is thrown back, exposing the tense, masculine lines of his throat. The top button of his shirt is undone, and I can see the hollow between his collarbones. Luckily for the carriage roof, he has managed to keep his horns or antlers from appearing, but his skin is turning that lovely shade of rich green again.

I bob my mouth faster on him, rising higher on my knees so I can get more of his length into my open throat. My fingers press firmly over his heart.

His body shudders, muscles contracting, and his cock throbs, spurting some of his release down my throat while he groans, a deep sound of relief. I pull back a bit, letting him come on my tongue, and I swallow carefully. I suck on him, coaxing out every last drop.

As I glide my tongue along his warm length, a strange tenderness suffuses my heart.

I didn't do this because of a promise, or out of a sense of obligation. I wanted it. Craved the sight of him losing control, collapsing under the blissful weight of physical pleasure.

No one has ever devoured me with the debauched enthusiasm of the death god. He seemed to honestly revel in the taste of me. The pleasure that washed over my body was so intense I wanted to cry, because I haven't felt anything that lovely in months.

I suppose that's another reason I decided to pleasure him. Sheer gratitude.

I'm still holding the base of Arawn's cock, thinking about giving it another lick, when his fingers curl under my chin and he tilts my face up.

He's bending forward, his green eyes searching mine. "You swallowed it all?"

"Yes."

"How did it taste?"

"Rich, creamy. Salty. I liked it."

"And you're all right?"

"Of course." I tuck him back into his pants and move to my seat while he takes over buttoning them. My coat has been open since I got into the carriage, so I fasten two of the buttons. I'm not sure why. Maybe to signal the end of this session, to convince myself this door is firmly closed between us from now on.

When I glimpse my shredded panties on the floor of the carriage, I pick them up quickly and stuff them into my coat pocket.

"I have never felt anything so exquisite," Arawn says. "It's a wonder humans are not constantly doing these things to each other."

"Some people do it multiple times a day. That's never been me, but I used to play such games more often, before the plague. Now I'm too busy."

“I knew of sex, of course,” he says. “I’ve seen these activities in human memories, when souls pass through the Furnace. But experiencing it is— incredible.” He draws his shadows back into himself and shifts to his human appearance. “Strange to think that after one year of this, I will return to an existence void of such desires.”

“A pity,” I murmur, opening the window curtains again.

Arawn picks absently at the claw punctures in the seat cushion. “I fear I have destroyed this.”

“It’s all right. I can have someone replace the fabric after our journey. I think we’re coming into the first hamlet we’re supposed to visit today.”

Moments later, the carriage bumps to a halt, and a guard opens the door. After Arawn and I emerge, to the sound of cautious cheers from the gathered citizens, I request water and soap for our hands before we begin.

After the washing, I explain to the villagers how the “healing” works. In every town we tour throughout that long first day, I repeat the same explanation—that the magic of “Vaughn of Terelaus” isn’t the usual healing power they’re used to. He can’t fix broken bones, mend cuts, or repair diseased teeth. Those needs require a regular healer, with the familiar golden magic—if any healers still remain in this land. Otherwise, the injured or sick will have to depend on their own natural healing and the aid of a local physik.

Once the people realize Arawn’s mark is a promise of survival, not an alleviation of their plague symptoms, some of them are a little less enthusiastic, while others recognize the mark for the gift it is. Thankfully there are no seething, rageful crowds, and no riots, even when Arawn leaves some citizens unmarked in each town. Beyond the royal city, people are simply grateful that we have come—happy for any help we can give.

We journey from village to village, sometimes with just a few minutes of travel between stops. News of my betrothal to the Terelonian healer has gone before us, and we’re congratulated by village leaders in every location. A few of them offer small gifts, which I accept with a pained heart. I don’t want to offend them, but I hate to take anything from my struggling subjects.

During our bouts of travel, neither Arawn nor I suggest any more sexual interaction between us. But I think about it every time the two of us are shut into the carriage. I think about swinging astride his lap and putting that thick, warm length of his inside me, or bending over in front of him while he laps through my folds.

Thinking about sex while so many in the kingdom are suffering and

dying is despicable, and as the day goes on I begin to hate myself for it. I try not to look at Arawn, since the sight of him now triggers the most licentious thoughts.

I should never have done that with him. It was wrong. We framed it as the fulfillment of a bargain, as a one-time indulgence, but it has shifted the dynamic between us, the vaguely antagonistic push-and-pull I was becoming comfortable with. And I'm not sure I can handle any more change.



My breath puffs white in the bitter black cold. The horses stamp, shudder their coats, and blow out great breaths while Farley murmurs encouraging words to them in a low tone.

“That was the last village for the day,” I tell Arawn as we climb into the carriage. “We’ll travel half the distance to the next one, then stop at an inn near Hatchell’s Ford. My parents used to go there sometimes, to get away from palace life. Occasionally they would take us along. It’s especially lovely in the summertime. We’d race boats on the river, and swim, and have picnics —”

My throat tightens until I can’t speak.

Arawn watches me curiously, a slight frown bending his brows. “The good memories of your family cause you pain.”

“No... yes.” I press my fingertips to my temples.

“Your mother—did she have dealings with the gods?”

“What?” I frown at him, startled by the abrupt shift of topic.

“Answer the question.”

“I don’t remember my birth mother. My stepmother... she knew a lot about the gods, but she seemed rather antagonistic toward them. Every time my grandfather spoke of them, she would change the subject. I learned to ask him my questions when she wasn’t around. He was a firm believer in the divine—he visited temples regularly. He even burned incense at your shrine. Few people do.” I wince apologetically at him. “Most humans are too afraid of death to worship you.”

“You have strayed from my question,” Arawn says. “Why did your stepmother hate the gods?”

“Hate might be a strong word. She was cautious.”

“Fear is based on ignorance. Caution stems from understanding. Do you believe she knew things about the gods that others don’t? That she had some first-hand knowledge of them?”

“Maybe? Like I said, we didn’t speak of them often. Why are you asking me this?”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest. “I haven’t decided whether to tell you that or not.”

I peer at him, tempted to push him for the truth. But he looks very grimly determined, and I don’t have the energy to extract his real motive tonight. “Keep your secrets then. Let’s talk about your family—about this sister of yours who wants your throne.”

“Macha is not truly my sister—merely a being who came into existence at the same time I did. Many of the gods use human terms to define relationships, but I dislike the practice.”

I tilt my head, surveying him. “You don’t have parents, or grandparents, or ancestors. That seems so strange to me.”

“I’m better off without such attachments,” he says gruffly. “They cloud the mind and chafe the heart.”

Another realization startles and saddens me. “You’ve never loved anyone, have you? That’s why you don’t understand loss, why you have that odd, fascinated expression whenever others are grieving.”

“As I said, I’m better off without emotional connections. Love is torture. From what I’ve seen, it is always twined with agony. You’re living proof of that, little Queen.”

“But I’m richer for having love in my life, for having known the people I lost.”

He shakes his head, frustration edging his tone. “How can you say that, when even your best memories of them make you weep?”

“The losses are still fresh,” I say quietly. “With time, I hope to be able to enjoy our memories with less pain.”

Warmth enters his gaze. “You are an inexhaustible fountain of hope.”

“Far from it. I was nearly depleted before I summoned you. Rose kept the last ember of my hope alive until the ritual was done. And you’re keeping it alive now.”

As I speak the words, a fluttering shyness passes over me, and I turn away from the death god, on pretense of looking out the carriage window. Thanks to the reflected light of the tiny lantern hanging on a hook inside the carriage, I can't see much beyond the window pane. But as I stare into the darkness, I think I glimpse a flash of red. Two red spots, like flaming eyes.

A cold thrill of terror runs through my gut. "Arawn—" I breathe. "Those hounds of yours, could they—"

But a man's shrill scream cuts off my words. A cry so strident, so full of terrified pain, it shears right through the walls of the carriage.

One of the guards riding with us is screaming, and his horse is screaming too.

I slide open the little door that lets me talk to Farley, only to hear a shout from another guard. "We're under attack! Go, go! Drive faster, get the Queen to safety!"

Farley yells to the horses, and the carriage rattles forward faster along the road, bumping hard, knocking my teeth together.

Arawn lunges to the carriage door, throws it open, and roars, "You can't run from it—you'll be picked off one by one! Stop the coach, and I'll deal with this!"

Farley obeys him without question, and the carriage jolts to a hard stop.

Arawn leaps out, and I'm starting to follow when he places a hand on my chest and says firmly, "No. Stay in the carriage."

"What? But I—"

He shoves me inside and shuts the door.

Furious, desperate to see what's going on, I douse the lantern and cup my hands against the window glass, peering into the blackness.

The screams of my guard and his mount have stopped.

My remaining five mounted guards are beside the carriage, weapons ready. One of them is pointing into the night, probably indicating the direction from which the attack came.

We're in a valley between some low hills whose slopes gleam with fresh snow. Jutting black rocks and scruffy evergreens dot the hillsides. Between the hills I can make out some bushes and short trees, just smudges against the snow.

I open the carriage door a crack.

An eerie silence reigns.

"It took Cadz," says one of my guards.

“What the fuck was it?” another asks.

“Silence,” says Arawn.

He’s taking off his coat. Then he removes his vest and his shirt.

When his huge wings unfold, three of my guards gasp and swear. The other two are the guards who came along on the night of the ritual. They already know who Arawn really is.

“The hound is here because of me,” Arawn says, while antlers branch from his dark hair and his skin shifts to jade-green. “I will speak to him.”

I bite my knuckle, centering myself with the pain. This will be over in a moment. Of the two hounds who rebelled against him, there’s only one left—the one who fled last night. Arawn can scare him off again, easily.

But my heart breaks for my dead bodyguard.

Two red dots wink to life in the dark middle distance.

There it is. A rogue hound of the Unlife.

And then another pair of red dots, and another, and another.

I count eight pairs of eyes.

Shit.



Eight of my oldest hounds are out there in the dark on the left side of the road, closing in. I would bet my furnace the other two are somewhere to the right, waiting to attack while the larger group distracts me.

All the members of my original pack have turned on me. I must have angered them by killing the hound last night. I didn't have a choice, but that doesn't matter to them. They consider it sufficient cause to openly challenge me. Not to mention the fact that I'm more vulnerable right now. They've seen their chance, and they won't let it pass.

I face them, standing as tall as I can in this form, my wings outspread. I summon my stag's-head mask, and it seals to my face, adding another set of antlers and a bony visage to my already imposing appearance. The mask is a reminder to them of the day I first turned them from men into hounds.

That was a permanent transformation, not a temporary one like I performed on Hessie. A permanent transformation cannot be undone, though it has allowed each hound to alter certain characteristics of their appearance over the centuries. But I can't turn the hounds into anything else, like beetles I could easily squash. Nor will the sleep of death have any effect on creatures of the Unlife. More's the pity.

The five human guards are practically pissing themselves with terror at the sight of me.

"Your Majesty!" calls one of them, his voice cracking. "Your orders?"

I hear the shift of skirts, the creak of the carriage step as the Queen descends. "Gentlemen, this is the death god, Arawn. He and 'Vaughn the

Healer' are one and the same. His good work among the plague victims is real and true. There is nothing else you need to know in this moment. You will stand your ground until he commands you, and follow his orders as if they were my own."

"Yes, Majesty," chorus the guards.

I dare not glance at the little Queen; I must watch the hounds, listen for their howls, and anticipate their movements. But I almost smile at the calmness of her voice, the masterful way she yields command of her men to me. The act makes her no less their leader, no less worthy and strong. It's a mark of wisdom that she knows when to trust me with her defense.

The hounds are moving, pacing back and forth in the shadows as if they're waiting for something.

"Three of you go to the other side of the carriage," I tell the guards. "Warn me if you see the slightest movement."

They obey at once.

I stride forward a few paces and call out to the hounds among the hills, in my echoing, divine voice. "This rebellion is Macha's doing. She has twisted your minds. Perhaps she has made you promises of how different your existence will be under her rule. But those are false words. Have I not been a just lord to you? You have served me well, and in exchange I have granted you some freedom of form. I've allowed you to hunt in the mortal plane, and to run free throughout large areas of Annwn. After the thousands of years we've shared, you would turn on me now? Go back to the Unlife, and I may forgive you."

A guttural howl, more like a scream, splits the night. The other hounds join in with booming barks or hissing wails of their own.

"You choose death, then," I shout. "Like your brother. He attacked what was mine, and he was destroyed. The same fate will greet you, unless you return to my realm in peace and submission."

More howls, roars, and gibbers from the hounds. With eyes and jaws alight, they charge.

Shadows pour from me, racing along the snowy ground. This is the magic of death—of cold, horror, and weakness. To humans, it may feel like a dismal darkness or a vague threat—or I can intensify it into something soul-sucking, even lethal.

As creatures of Annwn, my hounds are immune to the shadows unless the full force of my will is behind them. To truly destroy one of my beasts,

down to its most basic essence, I have to be touching it. I have to fill the creature with shadow and focus on its undoing. If I'm not touching the hounds, the most my shadows can do is slow them and curb their fire.

I've tested my shadows since my incarnation, but not against this many creatures from the Unlife. The more magic I release, the stranger I feel—thinner, fragile, frayed. I frown, shaking my head, and push harder.

My shadows coil around three of the hounds and trip them up, tangling around their limbs. But try as I might, I can't manage to ensnare a fourth hound. I can cover the whole ground with shadow, but as for giving it force, I am—limited.

This shouldn't be happening. In my own realm, at my full strength, I could hold them all at bay easily while snuffing out their lives one by one.

Fear drives a cold spike into my gut.

If they can get to the Queen and kill her, I will die. And they know it.

I meet two of the hounds head-on. Green light flashes from my palms—life-light, a toxin to creatures from the realm of death. I am its only wielder. It is the antithesis of my being, like Macha's healing powers as the god of war. A balance to the rest of our magic.

The blasts of life-light sizzle through the hounds' fur, chewing into their flesh. From the wounds burst translucent, glowing green vines, crawling and coiling around the beasts.

That's five hounds temporarily eliminated, three more on this side of the coach. The two guards with me are attempting to fight one of the hounds together, but its scorpion tail keeps jabbing their horses. Then the toxic stinger sinks into one guard's leg and pumps a full dose of toxin into him. His limb begins to glow and swell immediately, the glow continuing to spread upward into his body while his flesh balloons outward, skin stretching tight, like a human lantern lit from within.

When he explodes, the Queen screams. But the second guard manages to lop off the hound's scorpion tail.

I'm battling two more hounds with my life-light and my shadows, raging against the weakness that's expanding inside me, the watery sensation in my head. Fuck this curse.

I seize a hound and fill it with my shadows, reducing it to ash. The mutilated scorpion-hound is chewing into the leg of the exploded guard's horse, feeding its own body so it can grow a new stinger. Already the severed stump of the tail is morphing, elongating.

Gripping another hound by its chicken feet, I begin flooding it with shadow. The guards on the other side of the coach cry out to me, a warning that the last two hounds are making a move.

I need to finish off this hound before I can help them.

Still holding onto the beast I'm killing, I survey the scene.

The Queen has her back to the carriage door, and she's holding a dagger. I'm not sure where she got it—I didn't see one strapped to her thigh when I held her upside down on my lap.

The scorpion hound has finished its meal, and it's stalking toward the guard who chopped its tail. The guard is still mounted, positioned between the beast and the Queen. He brandishes his sword, his ebony features taut with fear. He's a brave man, to stand his ground after witnessing his companion's gruesome death.

I stifle the last vestiges of fire inside the hound I'm holding, then glance at the other five hounds, three struggling in their bonds of shadow and two succumbing to the corrosion of life-light.

I need to destroy the scorpion pacing toward the guard and the Queen. And I must get to the other side of the carriage and protect those three soldiers, or all the men who rode with us today will die.



My guards are dying. And it's my fault.

These hounds are trying to get to me, because if they can take my life, they kill Arawn too.

A solitary guard is protecting me—Undale, who was one of my brother's favorite bodyguards. He urges his horse forward, shouting with panicked bravado. The hound facing him hisses, and its scorpion tail arcs over its own head, jabbing toward its prey. Undale skillfully moves his horse aside, then lunges in, lacerating the hound's side.

Arawn has just finished reducing another hound to ash. He looks at me, at Undale—then cocks his great masked, antlered head, as if he's listening to the terrified cries coming from the opposite side of the carriage, where three other guards are fighting for their lives.

"Go!" I shriek at him. "Help them!"

Arawn stands there for a moment, then sends two pulses of green light at the scorpion-hound Undale is fighting. It screeches and writhes, giving Undale the chance to hack at its throat.

The god of death disappears around the carriage to help my remaining guards.

Two hounds whom he poisoned with green light are nearly dead, while three more are still struggling, bound by his shadows. Undale is well on his way to killing the one with the scorpion tail.

We might make it through this.

And then, from the front of the carriage, Farley screams.

I dodge around the corner of the coach to see what's happening.

A great, spiny, hunched bulk, black as night with a maw of fire, has pounced on Farley, pinning him to the driver's seat. The hound is slavering hot mist into my driver's face, while he turns desperately aside, straining away. The skin of his cheek is reddening, bubbling.

A cry of terror and fury rips from my throat, and the hound jerks its head toward me. "Come on!" I yell. "It's me you want, not him. Come and get me."

The hound's baleful eyes narrow, and with a bunching of its thick body, it launches itself off Farley, landing on the road.

I glance from my small knife to that towering creature of flame and shadow.

Bravery is one thing. Stupidity is another.

"Nope," I say, and I flee for the carriage.

I yank open the door and fling myself in, slamming the door just as the hound smashes into it. The wood buckles and groans. With a howl of thwarted rage, the hound recoils, then charges again. Its bulk impacts the little carriage like a battering ram hitting a picket fence. I scramble back against the opposite side of the coach as with a crashing crunch, the hound claws partway through the broken shards of the door.

Yelling, I slash wildly at its muzzle. Inky blood threaded with molten scarlet splatters the carriage interior. The beast is snorting fire, trying to get at me, taloned front paws slashing through my clothes, raking into my skin and flesh. I'm barely conscious of the pain because I'm stabbing, stabbing, driving my little blade home wherever I can. Finally I manage to punch through the burning orb of its eye. My knife sizzles, heating so fast it sears my palm, and I let go of the hilt with a cry. The entire weapon dissolves, and the fire in the hound's eye goes out.

A keening, vengeful wail soars from the beast's throat, and it struggles farther through the wrecked door, snapping its jaws—nearly chomping right into my stomach. I suck myself against the carriage wall, weaponless, a cold, sick fear waking in my heart. What if this creature kills me? Then Arawn will die, and no one will be left to help my people.

The hound lurches, getting its shoulders farther in. I swear it pauses to leer at me, because it knows it can reach me now. One more lunge, one wrenching bite from those massive jaws, and I will be both gutted and burned.

The great beast tenses for the kill.

But shadows lash around its body, wrap it tight, and drag it backward while it struggles and yowls. Through the gap in the broken door I see Arawn hauling his shadows hand over hand until the hound is within his reach. He's still wearing his dreadful deer-skull mask; in the guttering light of the carriage lamps, it makes him look positively horrifying. He takes the hound in a chokehold and roars as his shadows rush into its every orifice, choking it, quenching its fire.

I don't see its final reduction to ash, because I'm suddenly conscious that I'm bleeding in far too many places, and my body is beginning to shake uncontrollably. Pressing my hand to my waist briefly, I lift it and stare at the glistening blood on my fingers.

Then I look down at myself.

The entire front of my coat and gown have been ripped apart, the shreds soaked with my blood. There's a puncture wound from a talon that looks especially deep and nasty. A raw, sucking agony begins to spiral from that spot throughout my whole body. I can feel one of my lungs shuddering horribly with each inhale, as the most piercing pain I've ever felt shears through my chest.

"Shit," I whisper. "No, no, no, no..."

Arawn's deer-skull mask fills the gap in the carriage door. He wrenches the rest of the door out of his way, but his mask's antlers are too wide—he can't get in.

"Fuck," he says, vanishing the mask. His green eyes are bright with alarm as he takes in the extent of my wounds.

"No," I say piteously. "I don't want you to die."

Shock flares in his gaze, then a wretched softness. "You little fool," he breathes, and as my legs give way, he catches me, drawing me out of the carriage and scooping me into his huge arms.

"Where's the inn?" he shouts to my men.

"That way." Undale points. Thank the gods he's still alive.

"I will fly there with the Queen," says Arawn. "You and the others gather what you can and bring the horses that survived. Meet us there."

"Yes, my god," replies Undale, and his words are echoed by Farley, who has hopped off the carriage seat and is holding a cloth to his burned, bleeding face.

"My guards," I wheeze. "The other three—"

“Alive,” Arawn says, readying his great wings. “Their horses took the worst of it. They have minor injuries. Quiet, little Queen, and breathe.”

He takes a great leap into the air, his wings beating heavy as we rise above the carnage.

“Did you—destroy all the hounds?” I whisper.

“Not all. The last three I poisoned with life-light and left there, imprisoned by my shadows. They will either break free and limp back to Annwn to heal, or they will perish where I left them.”

“I’m—sorry you lost your pets.” My words feel thick and wet. From my recumbent position in his arms, I have the perfect view of his broad shoulders, his strong throat, and his dramatic jawline. His dark hair, streaked with jade, flies back from his brow and temples with the wind of our speed. He’s so impossibly beautiful that it breaks my heart. And suddenly I want him to exist, for more than the purpose of saving my kingdom.

“You—you can’t die.” Tears fill my eyes, and my throat tightens.

“Stop thinking about *me*,” he says through gritted teeth. “Breathe, Vale. Keep your eyes open.”

A slow pulse of pleasure rolls through my heart. “You said—my name.”

“What of it?” he growls. “Hush now. Focus on staying alive. I can see the river—we’re nearly there. Hold on.”

But the sucking sensation in my wound is worse. It feels as if one of the hounds has planted its weighty bulk on my chest; I can barely sip the air.

I’m dying. I know it.

I can’t die, because of *him*. I pulled him out of Annwn and enslaved him to me for a year; I inadvertently put his throne and his life in jeopardy. And for him, death doesn’t mean a move to the Unlife, like it would for a human. For him, it means utter annihilation. Non-existence.

Whatever he is, he doesn’t deserve to end. Not when he has just begun to truly enjoy life. There’s a grumbly sweetness, a gruff naivete about him sometimes that tugs at my heart. The universe would be a bleaker place without him in it.

The least I can do is fight to survive this. If not for my own sake, then for his.



The little Queen is fighting, because that's who she is.

I can see it in the set of her chin, the determined way she keeps hauling in breath after breath. Her fingers grip a handful of my tunic convulsively, tugging on it a little with each inhale.

She and I are bound. I cannot block her entry into death, cannot keep her soul from traveling through my Pit into Annwn.

If she dies, I die.

I will end completely. Cease to exist. Which means I won't get to be with her in the Unlife. And I've begun to look forward to that afterlife meeting far more than I should.

The savory sharpness of woodsmoke fills my nostrils, borne to me by a gust of wind. I trace the source of the smoke to a handful of chimneys and a red-tiled roof—the rambling riverside inn the Queen told me about. They're expecting the Queen and her retinue.

Lower I sweep, until we're near enough, and I hit the ground running. I barely have the good sense to vanish my wings and restore my human appearance. Straight into the innyard I run, bellowing for whoever's inside to come out.

The innkeeper and a few others burst from the door and hurry up to us, exclaiming with horror.

"This is the Queen," I tell them, nodding to the bloodied girl in my arms. "We were attacked by wild beasts on our journey. Do you have a healer?"

The innkeeper and a woman who must be his wife exchange glances.

Their hair is black, while the hair of two maids and the two stablehands is white.

“No,” says the woman firmly. “There are no healers left in the land. But you—you’re Vaughn, the healer from Terelaus, yes? Surely you can—”

“My magic does not work like that,” I snap. “I can spare plague victims from death, but they still have to endure through the sickness. I cannot heal plagues or mortal wounds. By the Furnace of Souls, if I could bar her from entering Arawn’s Pit, I would, but it is beyond my power. You have to help her.”

Another look between the innkeeper and his wife.

“Bring her inside,” says the woman. “Quickly.”

They lead me into a parlor off the inn’s common room. A maid drapes blankets over a sofa and I place my little Queen gently upon them. Still breathing. Still fighting.

In one fluid motion, I straighten, seize the innkeeper by the throat, and slam him against the wall. “You know of a healer,” I snarl into his face. “Tell me who it is.”

An outcry rises from the others in the room, and the two strapping young stablehands approach, as if to seize me. I fling a hand toward them, freezing them in place with the sleep of death. The three maids cower in the doorway, whimpering.

“Your Queen is dying.” I tighten my grasp on the innkeeper’s throat. “I will kill all of you if you do not save her. If you know of a healer, send for them at once.”

The innkeeper chokes, straining for air, his face purpling.

A horrible rattle grates from Vale’s lungs, and my heart gives a sickening lurch. I let my godly aspect rise again, my skin shifting to jade, my antlers extending.

Teeth bared, I knock the innkeeper’s head against the wall. “Did you hear me?” I seethe. “Do you know who I am?”

His eyes bulge with terror. “Arawn,” he wheezes.

“That’s correct. I am the god of death. So you understand why I have no compunction about slaughtering everyone in this house if my Queen dies. You’ll be the first to enter Annwn. And I will devise such torments for you —”

“Please,” gasps his wife. “Mercy, please.”

“The healer,” I bark.

“You don’t understand.” The innkeeper’s wife is trembling, tearful. “I can’t tell you who it is. I can’t.”

From behind the woman, a small figure emerges. A boy, dark-eyed and brown-skinned like the innkeeper and his wife, with the same straight black hair. He cannot be more than ten years old.

“It’s all right, Mama,” he says. “It’s the Queen. We have to save her.”

The innkeeper’s wife falls to her knees, her eyes wide and desperate. “If my son heals the Queen, no one can know. You cannot tell anyone, please, my lord, I beg you! If news of his gift leaves this place, they will bring plague victims to us and force my son to try to heal them, and then he will die. His ability must be kept a secret.”

“Agreed. Do all you can, boy. Save her life, and I will grant you my protection and my favor.” I loosen my hold on the innkeeper’s throat, and he pulls away, retching and staggering. In the same moment, I dispel the sleep of death from the two stablehands, and they come to life again, staring at me in awed confusion.

The boy with the healing gift kneels next to the sofa where Vale is struggling to suck in another breath. Her face is a rictus of agony and fear, but when I sink to my knees beside her, she turns toward me, reaching out blindly. I catch her hand, and she grips mine—a crush of agonized fingers.

My chest swells painfully tight with the desire to soothe her. I hunt for words, but I find none. I am not used to offering comfort.

Beside me, the boy stretches out both small brown hands over the Queen’s torn body. His eyes shine with golden light, and from his fingers unspool strands of gold which travel to the Queen’s wounds, delving into her flesh and slowly beginning to mend it.

The boy’s brow knits in concentration as he works over Vale. I’m no judge of human magic, and I’ve never been around Macha long enough to see her use her healing ability—if she ever does. I doubt she exercises it often; she prefers torment and conflict. But sometime in ages past, Macha fucked an ancestor of this child, and now the very healing magic my sister despises will save a life that’s tied to mine. Macha’s own power will prevent her triumph, for now. It’s a delicious irony.

I wonder if a child of mine would inherit my shadow-magic, or my life-light, or both.

An image surges into my brain—small humans with blue-gray eyes and pale hair, cupping green light in their palms. The light of living, growing

things.

My imaginary children look like Vale.

Fuck me.

But they wouldn't have pale hair, would they? Her hair is that color because she is a survivor. What color was it before the plague? For some inexplicable reason, I am desperate to know.

Voices in the courtyard. The others from our party must have arrived.

"That will be the rest of the Queen's retinue," I say. "Some of them are injured. You can tend them in the usual way, with bandages and poultices, except for the driver, Farley. He needs healing for a burn wound, if the child has enough energy for it."

With mutters of "Yes, my god," the innkeeper and the others scuttle out of the room to obey. The boy's mother lingers a moment and murmurs, "Don't push yourself too far, Emitt."

"I won't," he replies.

I glance at her. "The child is safe here. Go."

She nods, tightlipped, and reluctantly retreats, closing the parlor door behind her.

I renew my hold on Vale's hand. Her grip has relaxed, along with her features. Her eyes are closed, lashes painted dark against her pale cheeks. She's beginning to breathe easier.

Mesmerized, I watch the golden lines of light dance over her body, weaving tissues together, linking severed blood vessels, smoothing the layers of skin. The boy repairs everything, from her lacerated stomach to her clawed breasts, with an air of compassionate calm. He is highly gifted, to be this skilled at his age.

The little Queen is whole again, and practically naked from hips to collarbones. I leap up, taking a blanket from a basket in the corner and draping it over her. She seems to be sleeping.

"She will be well now," says the boy healer, with a contented expression.

He doesn't seem frightened of me, though he saw me threatening his father. I feel—not guilty, exactly—but a little uneasy that he witnessed my wrath.

"And you?" I ask him. "Are you tired?"

He nods, looking up at me with clear eyes and a bright smile. "A little, my lord. But I am pleased I could help. My mother hasn't let me perform a

healing for months.”

“She feared for your safety, with good reason. You are fortunate to have her.”

“I know.” He shakes his head, still smiling. “But she worries a lot. I suppose all mothers do.”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t have one.”

His eyebrows rise.

“I’m grateful to you,” I continue. “I cannot express how grateful, or why, but—”

“You love her,” says the boy cheerfully. “I understand.”

“What?” Shock flashes through my body.

“You love the Queen. This morning I heard my parents saying they’d received word of her engagement to you. You’re to be married, yes? So you must love her.”

“Oh... that.” I clear my throat. “Sometimes people marry for reasons other than love.”

“But not you.” The boy tilts his head, eyeing me shrewdly. “You held her hand while I healed her. I saw how you looked, my lord. Like you could not be happy if she died.”

Because my life is bound to hers, because I love myself, because I don’t want to die.

That is all. There can be no more.

I must redirect this child to safer topics. “When did your gift manifest?”

“Last year. We did not speak of it then, either, because my mother wanted to spare me the pressure of a healer’s life until I was older. I practiced on my family, whenever someone had a cut or a scrape. I healed my father’s broken arm once, and when a horse trampled one of the maids I repaired the crushed parts. Then when the plague began, secrecy was even more important, so I couldn’t use my gift at all.”

I nod. “I’ve heard that the healing of a single person from the plague drains all the healer’s energy.”

“And even then it doesn’t always work,” the boy says soberly. “We heard about the palace healers, how they tried to save the King, the Queen, and then the Crown Prince. The healers died trying, and it still didn’t work. The royal family died anyway, one after another. Except her.” The boy pats Vale’s shoulder. “She survived. And that’s good. We need her.”

A dark ache gnaws at my heart. “I was supposed to protect her this

evening,” I tell the boy. “I failed.”

“But you tried, didn’t you? That’s what matters. My mother says everyone fails sometimes.”

“Not me.” My fists clench. “I am a god. I should have been stronger, quicker.”

The boy rises, making a thoughtful face. “I don’t think she’s mad at you about it. She held your hand very tightly.”

“She should be furious,” I mutter. “I’m angry at myself.”

“Maybe you’re hungry. Sometimes when I’m angry, I’m also hungry.”

His matter-of-fact suggestion startles me. I almost laugh.

“Perhaps I am hungry. But before I look for something to eat, I must reward you. Emitt is your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then, Emitt, allow me to give you a sign of my favor.” I press my palm to his forehead, reading what I already know from speaking with him—that he’s a kind-hearted boy who tries to do good. He will save many people during his lifetime.

“Sometimes I give special marks to humans,” I tell him. “They are called ‘tethermarks.’ I will explain the one I’d like to give you, and then you may tell me whether you want it or not. Does that sound fair?”

“Yes, my lord,” says Emitt. “But I would have healed the Queen anyway. Without a reward.”

“I believe you,” I reply. “But I would like to give you this. As I said—” I glance at Vale, struggling with a feeling I cannot name— “I am grateful.”



Once Emitt and I have finished with our arrangement, he and I leave Vale to rest in the parlor. Emitt goes to Farley and mends his burn wound, and when his mother begins to fret at him using magic so openly, he looks at her, his face open and bright, and says, “You don’t have to worry any longer, Mama. Arawn fixed it.”

The innkeeper and his wife eye me with blended subservience and

suspicion.

“I trust you have a meal prepared, since you were expecting us?” I say. “We’ll have it now. I think we could all use some hearty food.”

Eating is an emotional balm as well as a physical relief. My chains have been grinding into my flesh for hours, constricting my body with pain. I suspect they are partly to blame for the weakness of my magic during the fight. Perhaps, if I was freshly invigorated by a dose of pleasant sensation, my magic would be more powerful, less dampened by my chains. But the hounds’ attack came after a long day, when I was feeling my bonds more acutely.

I am an ancient being, used to having all the knowledge I care to possess. I know the basic tenets of Macha’s spell, but *not knowing* its precise effects on my magic, not understanding all the details of its interaction with the summoning ritual—that frustrates me beyond measure.

I’m tempted to devour an inordinate amount of the food provided by our hosts, just to alleviate my own suffering. But Vale has spoken more than once of the deprivation her people suffer. Some of them are mere steps away from starvation. So I limit my portions, instead drinking heavily of the pungent liquor that seems to be available in abundance.

“What attacked you on the road?” asks the innkeeper tentatively, once everyone has eaten and drunk.

“Wild beasts,” says one of the Queen’s guards. “Huge hounds, with eyes of fire. I would call them the hounds of Arawn, but they couldn’t have been, because—because Arawn is with us.” He glances nervously at me.

“The three that I left bound on the road—did they die?” I ask him.

He nods. “They turned to ash, Lord.”

“Then you need not fear them anymore,” I say, with more confidence than I feel. I’ve slaughtered all eleven of my original hounds now. The hounds that remain in Annwn are weaker and newer, nowhere near as large, powerful, or vindictive as the first pack. Without their ancient leaders, I doubt those younger hounds will have the gall to come after me and Vale.

But the death of the eleven means that Annwn lacks its realm guardians. If I return, and Macha is wreaking havoc in my realm, I may not have the power to evict her.

No one seems keen to question me further about the hounds. I instruct Vale’s guards to take turns keeping watch two at a time, assisted by the innkeeper’s stablehands. “I will guard the Queen personally in her

chambers,” I say.

“Of course.” The innkeeper’s wife nods timidly, a flicker of interest in her eyes. “We heard that you and the queen are—that you’re to be married in a few days, so we prepared a room for you to share, if you so desired. That was before we realized who you are, great lord. If we misunderstood the situation, please forgive us.”

“You did not misunderstand. The marriage will occur, and all will become clear in time. But until the Queen and I choose to reveal my true nature to the kingdom, you are all sworn to silence on the matter. To you, and to everyone, I am the healer Vaughn, of Terelaus. To whisper otherwise will result in your immediate death. Am I understood?”

Various assenting and worshipful murmurs travel around the table.

“Good. Then go to your posts, watchmen. And those who are not watching, sleep.”

The four guards, Farley, and the two stablehands leave the table hastily, and the maids hurry to clear away the dishes. They save aside a portion for Vale when she wakes.

The boy Emmitt goes upstairs after kissing his parents. He needs to rest and replenish his magical energy.

But when the innkeeper and his wife start to rise, I halt them with a gesture. “Stay a moment.”

Exchanging worried glances, they sink back into their seats.

“You two and your son do not have the pale hair of survivors,” I say. “None of you have contracted the plague?”

“No, my god,” says the innkeeper, still hoarse from his encounter with my chokehold. Perhaps his son can heal him tomorrow. “We are somewhat isolated here, and we do not accept travelers if they are ill. We’ve taken many precautions, including hiring only survivors to help at the inn.”

“I see.” I survey them both through narrowed eyes. “As I told you, I do not heal humans. But I do set a mark on those who are sick with plague, to ensure that they do not pass into death, but have time to recover naturally. Since you are not ill, I cannot use that mark for you.”

The pair exchange worried glances.

“However, in exchange for the distress of this night, I can gift you something else—a tethermark, which binds your existence to mine. When you wear this mark, death cannot touch either of you for a set time—let us say, ten years. That length of time should protect you adequately from this

plague. With my mark on your foreheads, even if you fall ill, you will not die.”

A sigh of pained relief escapes the innkeeper’s wife. “Thank you, my lord, thank you.”

“This mark does not constitute permission to act foolishly,” I warn them. “If you leap from a cliff, your body will break and you will suffer pain. Your limbs may heal crookedly afterward. But you will survive, even if it’s in a tortured form.”

“We hear and understand, my god,” says the innkeeper.

“For your son, the healer, I have done more than this,” I continue. “His tethermark shall last fifty years, and during that time, not even the draining of his magic can kill him. He may use it to its fullest extent to save lives, without needing to fear for his own.”

The innkeeper and his wife clasp each other’s hands, joy in their tear-filled eyes.

“My gifts are not without risk,” I say. “If my life should end, the tethermarks will fade, and so will the protection they impart.”

“But you are a god,” ventures the innkeeper’s wife. “You are immortal and invincible.”

“I was, until your queen bound me.” I see the questions in their eyes, but I am weary, and I owe them no further explanation.

I make quick work of placing their tethermarks, near the hairline and partly concealed, as I did with the boy. Both of his parents are worthy enough—flawed, but with no extraordinarily wicked sins that would exempt them from my mercy.

“I will take the Queen to the room you have prepared,” I tell them. “Send up hot water and her portion of food. She will want to eat and bathe.”

Without waiting for a reply, I return to the parlor. It’s dimly lit by a pair of candles, and in their glow, the little Queen’s face looks so softly beautiful I have to pause, and clench my teeth, and breathe through a tempest of emotion.

A god should be able to comprehend his own mind. So I try to isolate and name the feelings.

First, relief, because she is healed again. She isn’t dying, and neither am I.

Next, I’m feeling anger at myself, because I was too weak to protect her. I listened to her self-sacrificial impulse, the order she gave me to protect her

guards. I should have followed my instinct and protected *her*, to the ruin of all else. I yielded to her directive. Foolish of me.

A wave of despair then, because this summoning has been so strange. It has upended my existence in the most discomfiting way, and I fear I won't be able to go back to the entity I formerly was.

Weariness, because my chains are so cold, so poisonous, so fucking heavy.

Apprehension is next. I am afraid, and it's because of the final emotion swirling in my chest, the one I will not, dare not acknowledge. The one I scarcely understand because I've never felt it before. It cannot be what I fear it is.

No, that final emotion is simply the warmth of frequent acquaintance, the afterglow of our sexual interlude this morning. It is merely the satisfaction that my summoner is safe, and my existence is secure.

There is no searing, terrifying, exquisite warmth in my heart when I look at Vale.

None at all.



I'm being undressed. Claws are slitting the remaining fabric of my shredded garments, which fall away piece by piece.

I blink, frowning, and shove at the solid, warm bulk of Arawn.

"You're covered in blood, little Queen," he rumbles. "I can't put you to bed like this. Not when our hosts have made everything so fresh and fine for your arrival."

As understanding flows through me, so too does a ripple of tingling heat. He has me stripped bare except for my shoes and my thigh-high stockings.

After a second's hesitation, he takes a knee before me, catching my wrist and placing my hand on his shoulder, a silent indication that I should brace myself. "Lift your foot, Majesty."

I do as he says, and he removes my boot before slowly peeling down my stocking. I tremble, not because of any chill—the bedroom is actually toasty warm, thanks to a gaily burning fire and a steaming washtub. No, it's the proximity of his face to my sex that makes my flesh quiver.

After discarding the first stocking, he cups my other leg under the knee and lifts it. His nostrils flex as he leans forward a little, stripping off my second boot and stocking.

I've been naked in front of him before, when I flung myself into the bath in my heart-stricken grief. Not like this. Not in a warm, firelit space where the light plays across his beautiful face—human in aspect, his tan features tortured with a kind of anguished tenderness.

He stays on one knee for a moment, staring at my torso—the flawless flesh of my breasts and belly. I’m still much too thin, still stained with blood, but I’m whole. He devours the sight, as if he can’t quite believe I’m healed.

“How do you feel?” he asks, low.

“Wonderful.” I gaze at my upturned palms. The old scars from my nails are still there, but the most recent ones are gone, along with the scrapes from when I fell in the gardens. When I touch my cheekbone, it doesn’t hurt, and the skin is smooth. “I forgot how good it feels to be attended by a gifted healer. I assume you found one?”

Arawn nods, a shadow crossing his face. “The innkeeper’s son. They were hiding his gift, but I made them reveal it.”

My forehead puckers. “You were cruel to them?”

“I had to save you.”

“You mean you had to save yourself.” I scoff lightly, stepping away from him and moving toward the bath.

“No.” He’s on his feet, grabbing my arm, whirling me toward him. “No, Vale. I had to save *you*.”

My insides thrill wildly. He’s holding my arm so tightly it almost hurts, his brow furrowed, his eyes pained and stormy, almost angry. As if he hates what he just said, and wishes he could take it back.

“Well,” I say gently. “It’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

He gives a restless grunt of assent and releases me. I step into the round washtub, almost squealing with delight at the sensation of hot water. The tub is small—I have to sit with my knees tucked up—but it’s enough. Immediately I set to work cleansing my skin of the gore from my own wounds.

With every pass of the cloth over my body, my joy at being alive ebbs, and my sorrow rises. Two of my guards lie dead somewhere along the road.

“Did you bury them? My guards who died?”

“My only goal was to get you help as quickly as possible. Your remaining guards took care of everything else. I hope they buried your men, but if not, you can speak to the innkeeper tomorrow, and he can send someone to tend to the bodies.”

“Is Farley all right?”

“The healer took care of his face. He will have no scars.”

“And my surviving guards? They must be terrified—they must have questions about you—”

“Stop.” He advances, kneeling by the tub and gripping my wet shoulders. “Stop thinking about everyone else. Just for a little while. I slaughtered the rest of my hounds—there are more in Annwn, but they are weaker, less malevolent, unlikely to come into the mortal plane without my permission. All the ancient hounds I’ve had since humanity’s inception—they’re dead. Your guards may be afraid of monsters in the dark, but it is a groundless fear. I have given them orders for the night, which is all they need. You—” he grips my chin— “you *will* bathe, and eat, and rest. And *not think*.”

“You can’t stop me from thinking,” I throw at him.

His eyes flash, his mouth quirks—and then he’s kissing me.

The taste of him is scintillating darkness, a swirl of stars and ink over my tongue. His large hand closes over the back of my neck—warm, powerful, gentle. He devours my mouth with the same euphoric zeal he showed in the carriage this morning; and I’m blind to anything else, wordless and thoughtless, transported with him into some liminal space beyond this room, this inn, this kingdom.

Arawn moves to break the kiss, but I rebel.

All of me revolts as a sudden, voracious need roars through my body. I throw my arms around his neck and make a sound of defiant protest into his mouth. He rumbles in response, and his other hand clamps to my breast, sliding over the wet flesh, passing under my arm and around to my back.

Without breaking the kiss he lurches to his feet, dragging me upright with him. I stumble out of the tub, dripping, soaking through his clothes. I dig my fingers into the fabric of his tunic, raking it up, and he parts from me for a half-second to tear it off over his head. We collide again, my bare skin sealed to his, our lips and tongues writhing, breath coming in quick, ardent bursts.

Questions and cautions begin to crowd into my mind, but I shove them far, far back into the dark recesses of my brain and slam a gate across them.

My hungry fingers cup the hard ridges of Arawn’s abs, glide up his sides, wander over his pectorals. His nipples tighten still more in response to my touch.

I drop one hand to his waistband and tug sharply down, a wordless demand for more of his skin.

While he’s shucking off the boots and pants, a couple of stray thoughts leak through that barred gate in my mind.

We said our interlude in the carriage would be the only one. Never

again, nothing more between us.

But we almost died. And the thought of dying without having Arawn inside me, just once, seems suddenly unbearable. I have wanted him since I saw him naked in the bath. And why should I not have one thing that I want? Something to ease the soft, keening sorrow in my heart, the ache I feel over the death of those guards, the brave men who died defending me.

Arawn is naked now, the black waves of his hair tumbling around his glorious shoulders, his divine beauty almost painful to behold. His cock is the largest I've ever seen—light brown, straight, and thick, with that prominent vein along the side.

I raise my eyes to his face—and I'm surprised to see uncertainty in his gaze. He looks—worried.

Of course. He has never done this before.

The light inside me expands, illuminating my face in a smile. His expression softens a little, and his mouth curves in response.

Sweet virgin god. Terrible and deadly and beautiful and all mine.

"I want your true self," I whisper.

He inhales, reverting to his satiny, jade-green skin. His hair shifts in color, too—still nearly black, but with hints of green. Devastating beauty, filling my sight, my mind.

We stand face to face, utterly bare to each other for the first time.

He likes this part. The moment before we touch. So I let it build, allow the heat to rise, let the pull between our bodies grow more keenly unbearable. The death god's eyes are locked with mine, stormy with torturous lust.

I won't break first—I won't—but *gods* I want him so badly. My inner thighs are slick, and not from the bath.

I have never been so wet or so ravenous for anyone.

"Little Queen." The words grate between Arawn's teeth, and a delicious tremor races between my legs. "Come to me."

My body tenses to obey, drawn by the divine command in his voice. But I resist, too proud to yield before he does. My answer is a challenge. "How much do you want me?"

His tall form tenses, practically vibrates at the words. His fingers twitch as if he wants to seize me. But he is also proud. He's the man who has been ignoring his erections, as if they were some unpleasant by-product of his incarnation. The thought makes me want to laugh, and I smile at him.

Green fire ignites in his eyes, and he pounces.

I'm caught up in a storm of hard, hot muscle, flung bodily onto the bed, mauled all over by fervent male fingers. He bites my shoulder, the curve of my waist—not hard, but enough to pinch—trails long wet licks up my skin. He plunges his face into my damp hair, inhaling my scent, while the tip of his cock paints my belly with his arousal.

I have never been the focus of so much passionate violence, and it wakes a visceral, animal ardor in me. I twist my fingers into his hair, bucking upward against his hard body. He groans, lowering his torso against my chest, and I rake my teeth along his neck, then pepper his mouth with kisses.

“How much do I need you?” he says raggedly, hoarsely. “I crave your sweet essence like a tree craves water. I hunger for you, for every soft curve of your flesh. I want to swallow you whole, feel you quiver in my belly and vibrate against my bones. I want to carve you open and crawl inside your very heart and savor the gentle strength of your nature forever.”

His words terrify and inflame me. They are the morbid, impassioned words of an eldritch soul as dreadful as time, unpredictable as lightning, equitable as darkness.

Does he know what he's saying? The depth of emotion he's expressing? He can't, can he? He doesn't understand love, not really—a person cannot know it until they feel it.

He's sucking on my breast now, humming his delight against my skin. My clit buzzes with craven need; I'm going to writhe out of my skin if he doesn't fuck me soon.

“Lie down,” I tell him. “On your back. Now.”

He growls, his voice vibrating through the nipple he's sucking. I smack his cheek, and with a groan of resignation he rolls over. This bed is shorter than the one we shared in the royal suite, and his bare feet hang off the end. I find that ridiculously charming.

For a moment I gaze at the sinewy perfection of him, the godly masculine bulk draped across the sheets. His cock juts upward, and he glances at it before turning his head away, as if the sight of his physical need embarrasses him.

“Look at it.” I run both my hands up his thighs until my thumbs and forefingers meet, forming a circle around the base of his cock. His length bobs, a yearning twitch.

“Look what I do to you,” I croon. “See how hard you are. And this.” I stroke the tip, which is a paler, softer green. My finger comes away

glistening. “Don’t fear it.” My fingertips graze the length of his shaft, and his head tilts back, a moan rolling from his chest.

Crawling forward on the bed, I swing astride him, raise myself high on my knees, and fit his tip to my opening. I move his cock head back and forth a little, through my wetness.

“Would you like me to be your first?” I whisper to him.

His eyes open, green and radiant. “Yes... my Queen.”

“As you wish, my god,” I whisper, and I slip him inside.



As the Queen sinks onto me, a rush of sensation flows along my length, exquisite, mind-melting.

The physical stimulation steals my breath, but more glorious is the deep security of being *inside her*.

Her, fragile with sorrow, yet resilient as dawn.

Survivor of plague, summoner of death, with her fierce determination and her unquenchable hope and her sly smiles, always tinged with guilt because she thinks she should not be happy while her people suffer.

Her, sacrificial and sweet. Tortured and trapped, as I am.

She ensnared me, but she sees me, too—understands me in a way no human ever has.

That is what makes being inside her so acutely beautiful.

I feel no cold chains—it's as if they never existed at all.

Yet despite the relief, I need more—need to be deeper inside her, need to know that I'm connected to her more intrinsically. Why, why, do I crave that link between us so ferociously?

I sit up abruptly and swing the Queen over onto her back in one swift movement, keeping my cock gloved in her heat. I've witnessed the motions of sex—never understood it before, beyond the simple necessity of friction to achieve the desired result—but a primal impulse sears through me now, galvanizing my muscles into a relentless rhythm.

My forearms brace me while my hips drive hard and fast. The Queen lies beneath me, her soft breasts bouncing as I rut into her. Her legs are curled

on either side of my waist. Flushed and starry-eyed, she gazes at me while I take her.

“Stop being so beautiful,” she whispers.

I halt my convulsive rhythm, slide out of her and back in slowly, delighting in the way she gasps and her eyes roll up. I repeat the movement, and this time I lower my face to hers, kissing her deeply.

Vale presses her fingers to her clit. “More, Arawn, please,” she whimpers.

“You beg so sweetly.” I nuzzle against her cheek, then resume my rhythm, a low moan rippling through my throat. My cock is swelling, thrilling, my abdomen tightening, my balls lifting, I... I’m... fuck, fuck...

She vents a tiny, shrill squeal, one I suspect would be far louder if we weren’t at the inn—and her slick, velvety inner walls compress around my cock, over and over. I choke out a gasp, startled by the extra stimulation—and a keen arrow of acute pleasure spears along my length, piercing my belly, exploding into a flood of bliss through my body. My release pumps into Vale’s womb, a hot flood of divine seed.

I panic for a moment, even in the throes of the ecstasy, because I did not consider the possibility of a child resulting from this. Curse my foolishness. I’m no better than the other pleasure-addled gods. They fuck whom they like and take what they want, with no thought of consequences.

It’s too late now. So I remain buried inside the little Queen until my dick has ceased throbbing. She’s panting, flushed, dazzled.

“Gods, that was good,” she breathes. “I needed that.”

Grimly I pull out of her, cursing myself when I see the pearly evidence of my release beading at her entrance.

“What is it?” She frowns. “Did you—was it not good for you?”

“I was a fool. I emptied myself in you, not thinking that a child is the last thing you need right now. You have enough to consider without adding my half-divine spawn into your life.” I sit on the end of the bed, rubbing my forehead. “I would beg your forgiveness, but I fear an apology is not enough.”

“Arawn.” She crawls to me, pressing her warm breasts against my bare back. “I take a daily tonic to prevent pregnancy.”

“Will it work on a god’s seed?”

“It suppresses the cycles of my body, so it should still work. And if not, there are things I could do if I truly didn’t want your child. Which... I think I

would. Want it, I mean. So don't let that worry steal your pleasure. I put my worries aside for this, and I expect you to do the same." She squeezes my shoulder. "Did you enjoy yourself a little?"

"Vastly," I reply, yielding to the pressure of her body. After a pause I venture, "And this was a simple act of lust, a carnal moment between two beings, nothing more?"

Fuck, I wish I had spoken that sentence firmly, as a statement, instead of letting my voice tilt upward at the end.

Vale keeps rubbing my shoulder. "What you said," she murmurs at last. "Is that how you really feel? About me?"

I pull away, rising, picking up my tunic. "I scarcely know what I said."

"I think you do."

I snatch the covered tray of food from the top of the nearby dresser and set it on the bed beside her. "Here. Your food is cold. Eat it anyway, or I'll force it down your throat."

Instead of offense or anger, I see only humor in her eyes, and a hint of pity. Which angers me still more.

I cannot love this woman. If I do, I will forfeit my throne and lose my home. I will have to give up everything I have been or known for thousands of years. All for what? A scrap of mortal flesh with sharp bones and white hair?

She's beginning to eat while I pace the room, but she keeps stealing glances at me. Finally I go into the privy closet just to escape her eyes. I have to relieve myself as well—another disgusting part of my incarnation.

But my need to escape this body was not so intense when I was tangled with Vale, when I was coming inside her. I almost felt, for a moment, as if we had both flown away together, into some realm where no one could pursue us, where there was no bondage or plague, only the crystallized beauty of her pleasure and mine.



I wake in the night, startled upright by the cry of some unfamiliar forest bird. At least I hope and pray that's what it was.

My heart is racing, my skin chilled. I must have kicked off my share of the covers.

Should I go and check, so I can be sure no one is hurt?

The fire on the hearth is burning low, and the room is mostly dark. I listen hard, identifying Arawn's slow, deep breathing, the soft crackle and hiss of the fire, the creak of the inn's timbers, and the distant drone of someone snoring. It must be loud if we can hear it through the walls and our closed door. How clearly could the inhabitants of the inn hear what Arawn and I were doing earlier? My cheeks heat.

In this kingdom, no one is expected to save themselves for marriage, or to refrain from sleeping with their intended before the wedding. But what if these people despise me for having sex on a night in which two of my guards died?

Still, if I waited for a day without any death or sorrow, I would never have sex again.

"Vale." Arawn's deep voice reverberates through the dark. "What is wrong?"

When he says my name I'm instantly alight and fluttery inside. Not the reaction a Queen should have. "I heard something."

"What something? Nightmare? Don't bite me again, for the Pit's sake."

I'm about to reply when the sound reoccurs—definitely a bird crying

somewhere into the forest outside.

“It’s a fucking bird, Vale,” rumbles Arawn.

“So it is.” I settle back onto the pillows, pulling the covers over me. I’m still cold, so I scoot closer to the heated bulk of the death god.

And my arm brushes against his bare hip.

He’s only wearing the tunic he put on after our tryst, and it must have ridden up around his waist.

I freeze, a lustful awareness warming my chilled skin. I enjoyed being stuffed full of his cock a little too much. And I would like him to fuck me again.

But I should sleep.

Biting my lip, I turn my back to him. But I’m just naughty enough to scrunch up the hem of my own tunic and ease back against Arawn, so that the curve of my bare ass is touching his hip. I keep my knees bent, just in case...

In case he wants access.

I lie perfectly still, breathing shallowly.

Has he fallen asleep again?

After what seems like forever he shifts, turning from his back onto his side—his chest aligned with my spine, his abdomen pressed to my rear. When he’s through adjusting his position, his hot length is tucked right beneath the curve of my bottom, the tip touching my entrance.

Tension thrums along my every nerve and shimmers in the darkness.

Slowly I shift my upper body forward while tilting my hips back. The head of Arawn’s cock begins to nudge between the lips of my sex.

His hand splays over my hip, pulling me onto him. Slowly, silently he fucks me, while his hand slides down my thigh and up again in a long caress. Then his fingers plunge into the crevice between my legs, searching out my clit and manipulating it gently.

We don’t speak, probably because he regrets what he said to me earlier. But he obviously enjoys how I feel in his hands, on his cock. And like him, that’s all I need for tonight—pleasure to ease the heaviness in my heart.

I place my hand over his and guide the movements of his fingers until I come gradually, perfectly, a widening circle of euphoria rippling through my limbs. Arawn comes a few moments later, his length flexing inside me, flooding my channel with delicious warmth.

He stays inside me, his hand wrapped between my legs. We fall asleep like that.

But when we wake, we are apart, each on a different side of the bed, with oceans of sheets between us.



Leaving the inn the next morning feels like a much-needed fresh start.

Along with our scanty luggage, my guards brought the damaged carriage with them when they left the scene of the attack last night. Though it's missing a door and one wheel is a little bent, it will do until we reach the next town. Besides, with the door gone, Arawn and I won't be tempted to engage in any illicit activities during our journey.

Arawn tried to mount a horse this morning, but the poor animal went positively wild at his approach and would have nothing to do with him. So the death god is riding with me again. We're bundled up against the bright teeth of the cold day, and when I finally speak to him, my voice is somewhat muffled by my scarf. He doesn't hear me at first, and I have to repeat the question.

"That green light you used on your hounds—what was it?"

"Life-light," he replies. "Since my hounds are creatures of the Unlife, they're immune to some of my darker powers. The sleep of death does not affect them, and for my shadows to overwhelm them I must exert great force, with physical contact. But life-light is the antithesis of death, and as such is a poison to their very existence. Even a small dose can bring about a hound's eventual death."

"But why do you have that magic?" I frown. "It seems contrary to who you are."

"Each deity is gifted with several abilities that correspond to their role in the universe, and one ability that contradicts it all. We call it our antimagic. I am the god of death, and my antimagic is life-light, which promotes growth, specifically among plants. My sister Macha is the goddess of war, and her antimagic is healing."

My jaw drops. "Macha can heal?"

"Indeed. Though to my knowledge she has never used the ability unless

it was to raise up some warmongering general or bloodthirsty king she could use to foment greater destruction.”

“And she wants you dead.”

“Yes, and no. She wants control over Annwn. Because she is ‘bored.’ And she has ‘plans’ to make it more interesting. I can’t say for certain what those plans are, nor do I wish to envision them.”

“We definitely can’t have you dying, then,” I say firmly. “I don’t want some war-happy, bloodthirsty goddess in charge of the realm where my loved ones reside.”

Arawn glances at me, his face shadowed with dark emotion again. “My death is not the only way she can achieve her goals.”

“What’s the other way?”

His full lips pinch together, and he stares out the open side of the carriage at the snowy landscape.

“Tell me,” I murmur, reaching out to lay my gloved hand over his. “Maybe I can help.”

He recoils as if my fingers are tiny venomous snakes. “You can’t help. You will only make it worse.”

“Very well.” I sit back, a little stung by his harsh tone.

After a moment of grim silence he says, low, “There can be no more of that between us.”

“No more of what?” I say tightly.

“You know what. From now on, if I want such things, I will turn elsewhere. And you will not touch me again, unless it is absolutely necessary.”

My heart is sinking, plunging into cold, dark depths, layers of thick, black ice forming over it.

I thought we were—I thought things had changed between us, that they’d grown more exciting, scarcely believable, deliciously sensual, softly intimate.

But apparently yesterday was enough for him.

Enough of me.

I want to be stronger than this, to manage this loss like I have handled the others—calmly, with all the grace I can muster—until I’m alone, beyond scrutiny, and I can collapse in private.

But a question slips out—quiet, pathetic, and foolish. “What did I do wrong?”

Arawn looks at me, alarm and pity in his eyes. “You did nothing wrong. I made a mistake, one I cannot risk making again. One I must try to rectify while I still have time.”

I think he’s trying to make me feel better, but I don’t relish being the “mistake” he must rectify.

The coach jostles suddenly. We’re crossing a bridge, nearing the walls of the next town where Arawn will lay his mark on the sick.

I lean out of the carriage, wanting to catch a glimpse of the town. It’s called Allenaye, and by reputation it’s one of the prettiest places in the region. I visited once with my parents, when we were staying at the inn on the river for a holiday. But I was too young to remember the town well, and I’m eager to see it again.

I scoot to the very edge of the carriage seat and lean farther out the gap where the door used to be.

“Careful,” Arawn says, gripping my upper arm. “You’ll tumble out, little Queen.”

I’m wearing a borrowed cloak since my coat was ruined by the claws of his hound, and his fingers are bands of flame, searing right through it.

I pretend not to feel anything from his touch. Instead I focus on the walls of pale pink brick and the pale stone towers of Allenaye. Rearing over it all is the glistening white dome of Beirgid’s temple.

In happier times, the temple of Beirgid used to draw worshipers from all over Cerato, as well as from nations across the sea. There are orgies held here each year, at the dawn of spring, since Beirgid is the goddess of fertility. My father never approved of them; in fact, I remember him talking about banning them, but my stepmother persuaded him to leave it be. “It’s a tradition dating back millennia, from what I’ve learned in my studies,” she told him. “Besides, as long as there is consent and safety, what’s the harm in a few days of unbridled pleasure?”

Sometimes I forget she wasn’t Ceratan by birth. She devoted herself so enthusiastically to the study of Ceratan culture and history that she seemed native to the land.

Gods, how I miss her.

I stretch a little farther and spy the famous gilded gates of Allenaye. The morning sun reflects so brightly off the gold that I blink and sway, momentarily dizzy. My body starts to tilt out of the carriage, and my stomach drops with the sudden awareness of peril.

Arawn catches me in both brawny arms and pulls me back against his chest. The heavy fabric of my cloak and his coat lie between us, but my body still responds to him with a swift rush of thrilling heat.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp. “I lost my balance.”

Silently he places me back on the seat across from him.

“It’s a beautiful sight,” I tell him. “You should look.”

Tight-lipped, he leans a little way out of the coach.

“Beautiful,” he says quietly. I don’t miss the way his eyes flicker over to me as he says it. He frowns stormily the next second, as if anger can erase the errant thoughts in his head.

He’s still attracted to me. But he’s fighting it, as hard as he can. Of course he would, because there’s no future in a connection between us. Besides which, I’m a skimpy bit of mortal flesh, the one responsible for his recent confinement and discomfort. Not someone an immortal, gorgeous god should want to be with.

“There’s a man on horseback outside the gates,” says Arawn, taking another look.

“A guard?”

“The guards flank the gates and wear gold armor. This man is different. He appears to be waiting for us.”

I move to look out again, and he wraps an arm around my waist. “A preventative measure,” he murmurs into my hair.

“You told me not to touch you,” I tell him. “Shouldn’t you abide by the same rule?”

“It’s absolutely necessary that I touch you, to keep you from falling to your death and causing mine,” he says dryly. “Take your looks, little Queen, and then sit down.”

I peer out, hunting for the man he mentioned. “It’s one of the Reckless Riders! He wears the scarlet cloak and striped armband.”

“Reckless Riders?” Arawn pulls me back inside, and I settle onto my seat.

“Messengers,” I tell him. “Gossip transmitters, essentially, but useful if you want to hear the juiciest news.”

In our kingdom, word of important events travels swiftly—like the news of my engagement to “Vaughn of Terelaus.” The news, or gossip, is most often transported by the Reckless Riders—young men on fast horses who spend their days racing from town to town, passing along juicy bits of

conversation, factual or otherwise. The entire network is a fluidly functioning machine, owned and scheduled by a prominent family in Cerato, one of whose heirs was present at the ball where I courted potential husbands.

Since the plague began, the Riders have become cautious about contagion, and they've taken to shouting their news from a safe distance or flinging missives at those who want more comprehensive information. They accept payment in coins, which they seal in a jar and douse thoroughly with blistering alcohol or boiling water before they touch it. Some make use of carrier pigeons or hawks to transfer information faster and more safely.

Since they're not official palace couriers, the Riders' news isn't always accurate. However, it is sometimes less sanitized and more revealing than official correspondence via other channels. Before my brother died, he told me to keep an ear to the Riders' circuit—which I've done by scheduling weekly meetings with a well-paid representative of the network.

Seeing one of the Riders outside Allenaye piques my interest immediately.

As we approach, the Rider lifts his hand and calls out, "Hail, Your Majesty! If you could spare me a moment, I'd be grateful. I've been waiting for you."

I order Farley to stop the carriage, and I hop out as the Reckless Rider swings down from his horse. He's young, like most of the Riders, pleasant-faced, with a few pimples marking his skin. His mop of brown hair is tousled from the cold morning wind.

"Greetings, Your Majesty." He gives me a deep bow. "I have a special bit of news, intended for your ears alone. It was given to me by Lady Elanann of the Royal Court."

I step closer to the man, but Arawn's tall frame looms at my side and his deep voice interjects, "First, lay aside any weapons you may be carrying."

The Riders are always armed, and this man is no exception. He unburdens himself of three knives, several throwing stars, and two pairs of brass knuckles. Arawn looks him up and down.

"You'll speak to the Queen in my company," he says.

The Rider looks uncertain, but I nod. "This is my betrothed, Vaughn of Terelaus. You may speak freely in his presence."

The three of us step aside, out of earshot of my retinue and the gate guards.

"The Lady Elanann was afraid to send this message in writing, or by the

usual palace messengers,” says the Rider. “She wishes you to know that action has been taken by the Council—a vote to prevent you from marrying Vaughn of Terelaus, and a motion to force your marriage to Lord Venniroth instead. The moment you return, you will be taken to a chapel and wed to the Lord Venniroth.”

“Over my rotting corpse,” I gasp. “They can’t make me marry him.”

“The alternative is a vote of ‘no confidence,’” says the Rider. “The loss of your crown, your throne—”

“Yes, thank you, I’m aware what a vote of ‘no confidence’ entails,” I say sharply. “Thank you for the information. Farley!” I gesture to my driver, and he descends from his seat at the front of the coach. “Please get my coin-purse and pay this man for his service to the Crown. And for his continued silence on the matter.” I give the Rider a stern look, and he bows again to show his compliance.

“Yes, Majesty,” Farley says.

“Come here.” I grab Arawn’s coat sleeve and tug, drawing him across the snowy grass. The day is so bright it almost hurts to look at the gleaming snow. I squint, finding relief in Arawn’s dark-green eyes.

“When we return I will slaughter those who stand against you,” says Arawn calmly. “It will be the work of a moment.”

“You can’t slaughter my Council,” I protest. “We have to try something else first. They can’t make me marry Venniroth if I’m already married.”

“We are scheduled to return to the royal city tomorrow for our wedding.”

“You could marry me today instead. Here, in Allenaye.” My gaze latches onto the shining dome of the temple. “We can be married by a priestess in Beirgid’s temple. It’s perfect. We’ll have an officiant, and witnesses... Venniroth and the Council won’t be able to dispute the marriage’s legality, especially since I’ve already stated my intentions publicly. And you’ve already accepted my hand.”

I add the last sentence because his features are tightening, darkening.

“Arawn, I need this,” I whisper. “I need to keep my throne, my authority. And you need to stay close so you can keep me safe, remember? Please don’t abandon me, not now. Whatever I’ve done to poison things between us, I’m sorry for it.”

“Things between us have always been poisoned,” he says. “Don’t assume that has changed, simply because I fucked you to relieve my own

discomfort. I hate you just as much as I ever did, for all the trouble you've caused me. Wetting my dick in your slit hasn't changed that."

My anger peaks and my hand flashes—but he's too quick for me this time, and he catches my wrist before my palm can impact his cheek.

"Careful, Your Majesty," he whispers. "We are supposed to be a happy couple, so in love we can't wait until tomorrow for our nuptials.

"You're an asshole," I seethe, tears forming in my eyes in spite of how viciously I try to blink them back. "Don't speak of our time together like that."

His voice burns like ice on bare skin. "I fucked you because I was in pain. Because I was desperate for relief. You were a willing piece of available flesh, leaking your pathetic human lust all over the sheets. I took pity on you."

I'm so angry I can barely hold myself together. I want to rip open his chest with my nails, tear out his throat with my teeth. I want to bite his tongue until it bleeds and he takes back those horrible words.

Arawn smiles, cruel and beautiful. "You look as if you want to murder me. Good. But you must learn to control your expressions, little Queen, or someone will suspect you don't love me with all your heart. Let us enter this town, finish my good work among the plague victims, and proceed with the wedding."



I angered the queen enough to keep her at a distance throughout the day. Which is exactly what I intended, though it pained me to hurt her. She leaves me to lay my mark upon all whom I can spare from the plague, while she arranges the details of the wedding.

The numbers of sick in this particular town are notably fewer than in others we've visited, though its population is significantly larger. The shadow of Beirgid's temple looms over the narrow streets and squares, fomenting a suspicion that's been dormant in my mind since I went to my realm and spoke with Macha.

Strange how none of the sick are Beirgid's devotees. Very strange.

While I visit the sick, Farley keeps me updated regarding the Queen's activities. Vale has given orders that no one may leave town, to prevent anyone from carrying word of our wedding to the capital city. Not that a messenger could get there and back again in time to stop us, but I suppose it's a worthwhile precaution. According to Farley, the town's mayor seems thrilled that Allenaye will now be able to boast itself the site of a secret royal wedding.

By sunset, I am bone-weary, feeling wretchedly human and heavily enchained. Servants come for me and escort me to the temple of Beirgid, where I'm provided with a bath, fine perfumes, and rich clothing. The loose pants I'm given hang low on my hips, and the only piece of upper clothing I'm allowed is a golden scarf draped artfully across my shoulders. My skin is dusted with gold powder, and my hair is braided after the fashion of Beirgid's

priests. The attendants lay gold chains around my neck and clasp thick cuffs around my arms. They remove the tiny green gems I usually wear in my earlobes and replace them with heavy, ornate earrings in the traditional Ceratan style.

Then I am guided into the sanctum of the temple.

The floor is a sheet of water, flat and smooth as glass, tinted gold by virtue of the gilded walls. Waves of molded gold from the walls up to the ceiling, and the roof itself is a magnificent garden of gilded blooms, swirling leaves, and golden fruits.

Countless torches in gilded sconces light the immense space. Paths crisscross the golden water, providing dry places for worshipers to stand and face the head of the room, where a shining dais is flanked by a forest of slim white pillars. Where the pillars blend into the ceiling, the architect designed explosions of golden blooms and swirling leaves.

The High Priestess of Beirgid's temple stands in the center of the dais, robed in scarlet, facing the silent lines of well-dressed citizens who have been invited to observe the ceremony. To her right and left, more priests and priestesses stand, their gold-painted bodies entirely naked despite the chill in the air. They wear rich golden jewelry on their ankles, wrists, waists, necks, and ears.

My mind is a haze of limpid gold, glimmering skin, shining torches, and gleaming jewelry, but in the center of it all one figure stands out in crisp detail.

The Queen's white hair crowns her head in elaborate braids. Her lashes have been darkened, and she wears slashes of gold paint along her eyelids, cheekbones, and collarbones. Her mouth glows velvety scarlet, a match for the blood-red lace gown spreading across the steps of the dais. The gown cups her breasts, barely concealing her nipples, then splits, revealing a wide V of white skin. The tip of the V ends just below her navel.

It's a dress made to be peeled down and tossed away. A dress suited to the debauched worship of the fertility goddess.

Vale is holding a bouquet of scarlet flowers, their petaled throats yawning to reveal phallic tongues.

I should have known that any marriage in this temple would be solely focused on the sexual aspect of mortal union. This is going to be difficult to endure. How will I manage not to touch Vale tonight when she looks so tempting?

“Stand beside the Queen,” murmurs one of the temple attendants. “Repeat the vows.”

Slowly I pace forward, my jaw tight. Though I’m in my human aspect, I feel strangely exposed. I dislike the gaze of so many eyes in this setting. When I am moving among the sick, the attention doesn’t disturb me, but here I am unsettled. My stomach tilts sickeningly and my throat constricts. My invisible chains drag at my body. Grimly I move ahead, fighting the swell of dread in my chest.

Vale has been looking at the High Priestess, murmuring words I could not hear—but now her head turns, and her gaze fixes on me as I come to her, bejeweled and half-naked.

If she looked at me with anger, if she laughed, if her lip curled in disgust, I could not bear it.

But she gazes at me calmly. She sees my discomfort—I *know* she does—without words I know it, I can feel her perception, her understanding.

She smiles gently, a little stiff around the edges because she hasn’t forgiven me. Nor should she. The words I spoke to her were a cruel precaution, to create a barrier between us while I train myself to *not* care for her.

But despite her hurt she’s smiling. A smile that is genuine, welcoming, encouraging.

I mount the steps of the dais and stand at her side, towering over her. She looks up at me, still with that little reassuring smile.

A strange, fluttering thrill passes through my stomach.

Perhaps I am hungry.

The High Priestess opens with the Ceratan pledge to the Crown, during which everyone in the room takes a knee out of respect.

Next she leads the other priests and priestesses in a hymn to Beirgid, full of allusions to carnal pleasure.

Then she recites the vows, which Vale and I repeat, line by line, turn by turn.

I vow to forsake every heart but yours, and seek solace with you alone.

I dedicate myself to your joy, your hope, and your service.

My heart shall be thrall to your love.

I am myself, and you are yourself. Yet I will weave my life with yours, and the two of us shall be stronger, until the day betrayal or death may divide

us.

What is woven shall not be cut, and what is entangled shall not be severed.

Yours infinitely, yours devotedly. Yours in passion and pain, in beauty and blood, in age and agony.

By the goddess I swear it, and by my blood I bind it.

The High Priestess pricks both our fingers with the same knife. The Queen and I press our fingertips together, the blood mingling slick between us. When the High Priestess presents the certificate of union, we mark it with dabs of blood. Then we place our bloodied fingers between our lips and lick them clean.

The High Priestess rolls up the document and passes it to an attendant, who wraps the scroll with a gold ribbon and hands it to Farley. He places it immediately into a leather case, which will accompany us on our journey back to the city tomorrow.

The priests and priestesses begin a musical chant, soft and seductive, while the High Priestess twines two slim gold ribbons around my left hand and Vale's. She weaves an intricate pattern around our wrists and between our fingers, connecting us tightly. The warmth of Vale's palm against my own sends a tingle of desire up my arm, down my spine, into my rebellious cock, which hasn't yet gotten the message about not fucking the Queen again.

The knots the High Priestess designed appear inextricable. Yet somehow, when we're given the signal to step back, the two gold ribbons separate easily. We are no longer joined, yet each of us still bears a neatly knotted design of ribbon woven around our left hands.

"Before the goddess Beirgid and all the pantheon, I pronounce you truly wed," announces the High Priestess. "May I present her Majesty, Queen Vale of Cerato, and the Royal Consort, Vaughn of Terelaus. This union is hereby legal and binding, witnessed by all present. The wedded pair have decided to forgo the public rite of copulation, and instead there will be dancing and drinks in the Winter Nave, down the hall." She gestures to an archway, the long sleeve of her crimson gown brushing the gold-and-white marble floor.

I notice the omission of food from her statement. Another sign of the deprivation this kingdom suffers. Eventually even the liquor stores will run out, since the fruit and grain used to make them is no longer available.

The Queen and I stand on the dais, waiting for the High Priestess and the

witnesses to proceed through the arch to the reception. In her scanty red gown, the bones of Vale's shoulders and upper chest are even more prominent. Her eyes are star-bright, but her cheeks look more pinched than usual. She's staring at the gold ribbon crisscrossing her left hand.

I lean toward her. "Have you eaten anything since this morning?"

"I was busy."

"That's no excuse." I straighten, catching the eye of a naked golden priestess who is just about to descend from the dais. "The Queen needs food."

The priestess bows to me, her ample breasts swinging. I can't help noticing their fullness, and the long points of her nipples. "As my lord wishes. I will have one of the attendants prepare something for her. And you, my lord?" She blinks her lashes at me, with a small smile. "Do you need anything? You've been busy helping the sick, so you haven't had time to perform the Rite of Purging. I would be happy to offer myself for that purpose, to purge your loins so you may have plenty of stamina for your lady tonight."

Drawing back, I frown, scarcely understanding what she means.

"That would be most kind," Vale interrupts. "And my Royal Consort accepts your generous offer. He will avail himself of your services shortly. Thank you."

The priestess licks her lips, bows again, and hurries away.

"What in the Furnace was that?" I mutter to Vale.

"The answer to your problem," she says quietly. "You can take pleasure with one of the priestesses here in the temple, and as long as you say a prayer to the goddess, it won't be considered unfaithfulness. Beirgid's priests and priestesses are open for use by anyone, and there are all sorts of rituals you can use as an excuse to fuck one of them. The rite she mentioned is meant to soften the edge of a man's need, so he can last longer when he takes his new wife on the wedding night."

"So I would fuck *her*," I nod to the round golden ass of the priestess as she disappears through the archway. "And no one would have cause to complain that I was being unfaithful to you?"

"None at all." She's smiling brightly, almost fiercely. "I know your chains are paining you. And since you don't want me, you should take her. Relieve your agony. You have my blessing."

I stare at the little Queen. She's biting the inside of her cheek again; I can see her gnawing the flesh even as she holds my gaze.

“So the vows we spoke to each other mean nothing?” My voice is low, terse. We’re alone on the dais, but her guards and Farley linger nearby, ready to escort us to the reception.

This close, I can smell her perfume—a rich, cloying, floral aroma, something they sprayed generously on her pale skin when they were preparing her for the ceremony. It’s pleasing, but more tempting still is the scent beneath it—her delicate natural fragrance.

The red lace flutters against the curve of her breast with each quick inhale. I yearn to trail my palm down the valley of her exposed skin, slip my fingertips beneath that lace and tease her small nipple, or dive beneath the point of the V and discover if she’s wearing anything beneath the dress.

Impulsively I shift nearer, and her breath quickens.

“This is a marriage of convenience, or had you forgotten?” she hisses. “And even if it wasn’t, the rules are different in this temple.”

“And you wish me to fuck that priestess?”

“If it will stop you from looking so gloomy and agonized, yes! You can’t possibly have any objection. She’s beautiful.”

“Why don’t *you* fuck her then? Are women not allowed a Rite of Purging? Or are you averse to taking women to bed?”

“I’ll take anyone to bed,” she says stoutly. “But I prefer men, and I don’t need any such rite. You need this because of your chains. I will eat something if you will promise to fuck someone later.”

“Fine,” I snarl. “After the reception, I’ll go plunge my cock into that priestess. Would you like to watch me come inside her?”

“No.” Her cheeks are red, her eyes viciously bright.

“A pity you’ll miss the show, *wife*.” I cherish the shock in her eyes when I speak that word. “Come, we have guests waiting.”

I seize her bare arm, suffering a pang at its thinness. Her skin feels cold, so I remove the gold drapery from my shoulders and wrap it around her roughly and clumsily. She doesn’t thank me.

The Winter Nave is a huge hall with roaring fires and merry music. Once again I notice a strange disparity between this gathering and the one in the royal city. There, the guests all had the white hair of survivors. Here, most still retain their natural hair color. The gaiety isn’t forced, and no one is covering their lower faces. It’s as if they know that here, in the temple of Beirgid, the plague cannot touch them.

Why should these people be safe while others are not?

The High Priestess greets the Queen and me as we enter. She hands both of us goblets of wine and points out the gilded, fur-laden chairs she has prepared for us when we tire of dancing. “You honor us deeply with your presence here! Beirgid is sure to bless our holy temple as the Queen’s royal blossom accepts her consort’s mighty tower and his virile seed!”

I choke on my wine, and Vale sputters, too. The High Priestess does not seem to notice.

“Whenever you are ready to consummate your glorious union, you may take those stairs to the second floor. Two of your guards are already posted outside the room we’ve prepared for you. May your feminine petals be soaked with the dew of desire, Your Majesty, and may your consort’s pleasure spew hotly into that royal flower! You shall be like two rivers, meeting in the wood!”

With a farewell flourish, she moves away to greet a cluster of guests.

“Good gods,” Vale gasps, covering her mouth. “Why does she talk like that?”

“Perhaps some people enjoy it.” I take a sip of wine and mutter, “I can’t imagine who.”

“Nor can I.”

We stand awkwardly, side by side, until Vale’s food arrives. While she eats, I dance, finding relief from my tortured thoughts in the movement of my body.

Perhaps Vale is right. Perhaps I should fuck the priestess tonight and salve the ache of my chains. There’s another ache in my soul, too—a deeper one. A craving I fear I will never be able to sate.

My gaze keeps finding her, over and over, whether she’s sitting in her chair or dancing with the other guests. When the whirl of the golden crowd hides her from me, I hunt her down again, glad of my height since it lets me see over the heads of everyone else.

If I cannot indulge in touching her, let me at least look at her.

Between dances, I toss drink after drink down my throat, until my limbs are buzzing and my head feels hot. The sensation is new to me, and it helps with the weight of the chains.

The hazy glow in my mind makes the mortal forms around me seem more beautiful, the music more irresistible. Many of the guests have removed their clothing, and there is so much human nakedness all around me. My cock stirs, bobbing under the loose pants.

I catch sight of Vale again. The gold material I gave her is tied around her throat, its folds covering her chest as she dances. A good thing, because I don't believe that dress was made to stay in place very long, and I dislike the thought of anyone else seeing her breasts. The long train of her gown has been detached or pinned up somehow—a strange device of human ingenuity, permitting her freedom of movement.

The little Queen's presence calls me, compels me to thread through the crowd until I reach her. She's dancing with a naked priest, a fine specimen of male beauty. His erect cock is swinging much too close to her body for my liking.

I have never much cared for my sister-goddess Beirgid. And I care even less for her temple and its debauched denizens.

Roughly I shove the priest aside and take his place, catching Vale's hands.

"Arawn!" she gasps, casting a worried glance at the priest, who is picking himself up off the floor. "Be more careful."

"I don't like this temple or its people," I growl.

"Hush." She places her left hand over my mouth—the hand wrapped in gold ribbons. Softly she says, "I don't care for it either. But we must respect the customs of the temple."

"But he wants to fuck you."

"He wants to fuck everyone," she whispers. "That's why he's in service here. But he would not pressure me to engage in one of the rites with him. That's not how it's done."

"Humans are fools." The words feel slow and heavy on my tongue. "This is foolish, all of it."

"Araw—I mean, Vaughn—are you drunk?" She peers at me curiously.

"What if I am, little Queen?"

"You are! Shit." She seizes both my wrists and tows me out of the milling crowd of dancers, toward the golden spiral staircase the High Priestess indicated earlier. "Come upstairs this minute. I can't have you going godlike and feral in front of everyone."

"Feral?" I chuckle, allowing her to propel me up the steps. I like the feeling of her hands pressed to my ass as she pushes me. "I could show these mortals much worse than feral." I let a spiral of shadow slither from my palm.

"Stop it, Arawn," she whispers sharply. "Go! Move!"

She hustles me up the remaining steps, past two of her bodyguards, and into a room where a forest of crimson candles stand around a bed swathed in creamy sheets and red silk. A scarlet canopy drapes the gilded bedframe.

“Behold our bridal chamber,” I say. “How very fine. How eminently royal.”

The Queen closes the door behind us. “What is wrong with you? You’re supposed to sleep with the priestess soon, and you can’t do that in this state!”

“Give me a moment.” I fling myself onto the bed, enjoying the cool slide of the sheets against the hot skin of my bare back. “I think I feel it passing already. This effect can’t last long with someone like me. I heal, you see. The poison of the alcohol will soon be gone, and then I can fulfill all my desires with the buxom priestess.”

“I’ll go and fetch her for you,” says Vale haughtily. “Don’t leave this room.”

My mind clears while she’s gone. The effect of the alcohol was interesting, but after consuming it in such large quantities, I have a desperate need to piss. I relieve myself in the bathing room of our suite, returning just in time to see Vale entering with the priestess.

The woman’s gold paint has been smudged during the dancing, and her brown skin glows through it. She’s beautiful. Desirable.

“I’ll just—go somewhere else until you’re done.” Vale says thickly, clutching the gold drapery of my scarf to her chest.

Before I can speak to her, she leaves the room.

“Let us begin the Rite of Purging, my lord,” murmurs the priestess. She reclines on the bed, propped on her elbows, with her thighs parted. Every bit of her is on display, soft folds and glistening center. She is wet at the thought of taking me.

My pulse pounds in my head, and magic roils beneath my skin, shadows pressing to the surface, yearning to explode. The crunching, chafing, gnawing weight of my chains would disappear if I took out my cock and slipped it inside this beautiful priestess. A rite spoken, a climax achieved, and I would have relief for a while. Relief, without the terrifying, visceral connection I felt yesterday when I was intimate with the little Queen.

When we were joined, she and I, my heart clenched with the fervent desire to protect her, hold her, be with her always. I cherished her in those moments.

But cherishing is akin to love, I suspect. I cannot allow myself to love

Vale, because if I do, and if the emotion remains intact at the end of my year-long contract with her, I forfeit my throne to Macha. And Macha will do terrible things with the power of Annwn.

“My lord.” The priestess is playing with herself, a gentle smile on her full lips. “Come and complete the rite. I will say the prayers while you take your pleasure.”

The wine I drank hums at the back of my brain, a lingering blur. It would be so easy to yield, to sink into this woman who means nothing. To breathe easier as the weight of my chains is lifted. To have no worries of love and such foolishness. To attach no meaning to the carnal act.

But my little Queen is wandering somewhere in the temple, alone.

She is always alone. And I cannot bear it.

I cannot take joy with anyone else, when she is my joy, my relief, my peace.

My wife.



I think the god of death might be falling in love with me.
Which is truly unfortunate.

I think he suspects it. The way he put distance between us today, closed the door to any further physical intimacy—it's clear whatever he's feeling for me is distasteful to him.

So much the better. I've lost everyone who loved me, and he would be no exception. As long as we both stay alive through the end of our year-long contract, he'll be returning to Annwn, reversing his incarnation and going back to a dispassionate existence in the Unlife. He will continue to exist for thousands of years, and I'll be lucky if I'm a tiny scratch on the glossy expanse of his memories.

I wander through the columned hallways of Beirgid's temple, taking care to stay far from the night's festivities. Two of my bodyguards trail behind me at a respectful distance. The other two and Farley are still reveling with the wedding guests. Earlier tonight I saw Farley kissing one of my guards while sitting on the lap of a priest. The sight gladdened me, because my men deserve a dose of joy and pleasure after all they've been through.

My fingers trace the cold marble edge of a bubbling fountain as I walk through a quiet parlor filled with couches and nude statues. Beirgid's temples are always richly furnished. The devotees of pleasure are nothing if not generous.

I suppose, in a way, the priests and priestesses of Beirgid are essentially prostitutes. Worshipers are expected to bring offerings to the temple, which

could be considered payment for the carnal rites.

Far be it from me to judge Beirgid's devotees for enjoying themselves. But I can't help the nauseating pulse of jealousy in my stomach as I think of Arawn, who is probably balls-deep in the priestess right now.

Was I foolish to suggest this? What if he loses control of his shadows while he's fucking her? Will he have the presence of mind to explain it away?

I have no right to be angry with him. I encouraged him to do this; I went and found her for him. I brought her to our room.

My reasoning was two-fold: firstly, because I can't bear to see him suffering under the weight of the chains with which I bound him, and secondly, because I need to let him go. I must practice releasing him now, before my sore heart becomes too hungry for his love.

If he *can* love. As he told me himself, gods and goddesses often have trysts with humans, but they move on quickly. I've never heard of a deity actually *loving* a human in any permanent way.

Frankly, I always had difficulty believing in the pantheon. I thought the gods might be imaginary. I wavered frequently in my belief, right up until the moment Arawn exploded out of the Pit and startled me as I mourned over Rose's body.

I will never forget that first sight of him—impossibly tall, crowned with antlers, looking down at me with supreme disapproval. Then he began to change his appearance for me, trying to identify which of his forms I'd expected to see.

I think that's when I felt my first bit of warmth for him.

I haven't been in love before, but I've been fortunate enough to witness true love in those around me. I've seen it in its first romantic blush—in its heady, hot summer—and in its steady season, still passionate at times, and more secure than ever.

Arawn has seen love reflected in the souls of his realm. But I've watched it up close. Like the plague, I recognize its symptoms in myself. Love is a lyrical sickness that lacerates the unsatisfied heart with pretty wounds, singing through bloody whispers until the victim realizes they are dying. By then, it is far too late.

I've been standing by the fountain too long, motionless, lost in thought, while my guards linger nearby.

I need to stop thinking about love. I need to avoid picturing Arawn's toned body, taut and gleaming, hovering above the priestess's lush curves

while he thrusts between her legs, while she moans with delight at the feel of him because he feels wonderful... he feels like solid, satisfying, comforting wholeness...

Damn me.

I dig my nails into my palms, but the pain isn't enough this time. It can't settle my tumultuous heart, my churning thoughts.

Crossing the parlor, I hurry into a gloomy sanctuary, along a colonnade of pillars decorated with lecherous paintings. Lamps are few and far between here, and pitch blackness swathes the ceiling.

I'm halfway down the hall when behind me, beyond the footsteps of my guards, I hear a deep voice.

"Little Queen."

At first I think I imagined it.

But when I turn, there he is, barefoot, shirtless, green eyes glowing. His long black hair is tousled, as if someone's fingers have been writhing through it. The top two buttons of his pants are undone.

My guards barely have time to turn and look at Arawn before he lifts both hands and casts the sleep of death on them. They go motionless as statues, a gray cast falling over their faces and bodies.

Arawn strides toward me, teeth bared, a violent passion in his eyes.

My stomach flips.

I pick up my skirts and run.

I don't know why. It's not as if he's going to kill me. He'd be killing himself.

What does he *want*?

"How now, wife?" His voice echoes through the hall. "You would flee from your husband? Does the doe flee from the stag?"

"I don't want to hear about any of it!" I throw the words over my shoulder in a breathless screech. "I don't want to know what you did with her!"

"It took me some time to find you, little Queen. I did not expect you to wander so deep into the bowels of this place."

A gust of wind, a ruffle of feathers, and then his voice comes from somewhere far above me, among the clustered shadows cloaking the tops of the pillars.

"What do you want?" I shout. "Can't we return to the room like reasonable people and go to sleep? Why must you spell my guards and chase

me around?”

“You ran. I pursued.” His deep voice is followed by another burst of air, a flap of wings. He drops lightly to the floor directly in front of me and vanishes the wings.

I bolt away, fleeing among the pillars, but his shadows snake around my ankles and I fall on my stomach. I twist, flipping over to my back, trying to pry the shadows off my ankles, but Arawn hauls me in, hand over hand, dragging me along on my butt until I reach him.

He seizes my shoulders, lifts me up, and sets me against a pillar. The gold scarf he gave me has fallen off somewhere, and I can feel the heat of his bare skin through the plunging V of my scanty gown. It’s all I can do not to lean into his warmth.

I scrunch up my shoulders, turning my face away from him.

“Don’t tell me about it,” I whisper. “Please. I can’t bear it.”

“I haven’t come to *talk* to you, little Queen.” He takes my throat, right under my jaw, and forces my face toward him. His other hand runs along my ribs, sweeping over my breast, boldly peeling back the lacy dress until his hot palm contacts my bare flesh, my beaded nipple.

His mouth descends on mine, a burning onslaught against my lips, an invasion of liquid fire as his tongue plunges in.

Tears are seeping from my eyes, but I can’t help kissing him back.

He breaks the kiss. He’s breathing hard through his teeth, his hips pressed tight to my lower belly, the thick prominence all too tangible beneath his pants.

How could he want me so soon after *her*? Unless...

“I couldn’t do it,” he whispers.

The tiny spark in my soul quietly surges into a flame, bright and eternal.

A chain snaps between us. A bond that held both of us back, broken by those words.

A moment, crystallized.

And then he’s raking my dress down my body until it falls and pools around my feet. I’m bare beneath it—nude, as the temple’s bridal customs dictate. Arawn’s hands map my skin greedily, sweeping over every part of me until I’m caught up in the storm of him, whirled into delirium by his ravenous fingers and his hot mouth.

My own fingers find the band of his pants, loose already, hanging temptingly low. He helps me push them down, kicks them aside and lifts me,

one huge hand cupping my ass cheek, the other gripping his cock, aiming it toward my center. I hook one leg over his hip and he presses me against the pillar for leverage—slick, hot flesh and urgent fingers and panting breaths—and then he's inside me.

I exhale sharp relief.

He utters a ferocious groan.

In, in, in he thrusts, while I clasp his massive shoulders like I dreamed of doing that night in Aine's shrine. The angle is marvelously right—it's just enough pressure on my clit each time he slams home. In, in, in and I'm hitching broken breaths, my nails digging into his back.

His pace increases, and in the frenzied speed I sense the desperate confusion of the emotions coursing through him. This is a man—a god—who feels deeply for me, and is wretchedly distressed by it. I cup my hands around the back of his neck, and I moan softly into his ear while he fucks me. His hair smells like woodsmoke and wine, like rich, heavy cologne, and like *him*, sage and cedar and bones coated with winter frost.

My clit pulses, the pleasure intensifying, tightening into a bright, quivering bead—and I burst, bliss cascading through my lower body, flooding my mind. I press my lips to the side of Arawn's neck and whimper my delight against his warm skin.

He thrusts up, into me, a compulsive surge as his body tightens. He comes hard, flexing inside me, over and over, and the sounds he makes are almost sobs, deep and true, a confession he can't yet put into words.



She feels right.

There is no other way to describe it. That other woman, beautiful and worthy in her own way, is not right for me like Vale is.

An exquisite chill raced over my skin when I came, and I'm still feeling the heady haze of the ecstasy.

I pull back a little, seeking the Queen's eyes, yearning for that link with her.

Her eyes shimmer with tearful gladness, and my chest tightens with shared emotion. I want to kiss her delicate features, over and over. I want to be joined with her like this for eternity.

"What is this?" I whisper. "What am I feeling?"

"That was an orgasm," she says primly.

"Don't mock me." My voice is raw and thin, drawn from a place in my consciousness I've never opened to anyone. "You know what I mean, little doe."

"I'm sorry." She presses a palm to my cheek. "I know what you mean. I feel it too."

A loud, lilting voice shears through the moment, cracking our fragile intimacy in two.

"Well, aren't you both just *darling*."

Macha stalks out of the darkness between the pillars, her bloodied face split in a wide, playful grin. She is dressed entirely in white bones and crimson rubies, a fantastical gown that looks as uncomfortable as it is grand.

I wrap Vale in my arms, instinctively shielding her body as I ease my dick out of her.

“How cute.” Macha giggles. “No use covering her now, brother. I’ve already seen everything.”

“Shit,” whispers Vale. “Oh shit, is that—”

Macha’s eyes snap to Vale’s face, her smile gone. “I am Macha, goddess of war. Kneel, puling mortal. Kneel like the naked little worm you are.”

Vale sinks a little as if to obey, but I hold her up.

“She is a queen, and my wife,” I say. “She need not make obeisance to you.” Magic flows out of me, clothing Vale in a gown of shifting shadows. I switch to my jade-skinned form, complete with a large pair of antlers.

“Have it your way, brother.” Macha saunters nearer, ogling my cock just before I swirl a skein of shadow around my hips to conceal it from her. “Incarnation suits you, doesn’t it? If I could touch her without killing you and thereby angering the other gods, I would slay her in a second, for the sin of enjoying that beautiful cock before I could.”

“As if you had a chance,” I reply. “You’ve been trying for millennia, without success. Why don’t you explain why you’re here?”

“To celebrate your nuptials with you, of course!” Macha raises both hands above her head, giving her hips a little shimmy. She beams at Vale and me. “Did you really think *you*, the god of death and Lord of Annwn, could be married in Beirgid’s shrine and she would not notice? Did you honestly think she wouldn’t tell me about this new adventure of yours?”

“I know that you, Beirgid, and Aine gabble like a trio of foolish geese,” I mutter.

Vale’s eyes widen, as if she’s shocked I would dare to compare three goddesses to geese.

“So you don’t want to party with me then?” Macha pushes her full red lips into a pout. “Very well. But you must tell me, brother, is her pussy as good as her mother’s was?”

Vale’s pale face goes bone-white.

Macha drinks the Queen’s shock greedily, her grin expanding. “Oh yes, worm, I knew your mother. Well—your stepmother, if we’re being precise. The fucking Princess of Yurstin, so regal and beautiful. She and I were quite the pair for a while, until she objected to me having fun.”

“I know what you call ‘fun,’ Macha,” I say. “I’m not surprised she objected.”

“Stars, Arawn, you’re so *dull*,” Macha groans. “Yurstin was already at war with Thannira. I just made it a wee, tiny, itsy-bitsy smidge worse. That’s all, I swear. I thought the kingdom would be far more interesting that way, you see. But then my beloved Princess went behind my back and—” Macha closes her eyes, teeth gritted. A shudder runs over her. “Suffice it to say, she left me and came here, to this godforsaken island that calls itself a continent, and she started fucking the idiot king. She was far too smart for him, of course. Smart enough to protect herself from me, until I found a way around her schemes. Can you guess how I finally got to her, in the end?”

I have suspected the answer. I wish I could protect Vale from hearing it, from realizing it, but I cannot. So I speak my guess, gently as I can. “Beirgid’s antimagic. She is the goddess of love, fertility, and pleasure—but she can also create the most virulent of plagues. You persuaded her to start a plague here in Cerato, didn’t you? And she agreed. But she spared the denizens of her temple, and her most fervent worshipers.”

The sound that breaks from Vale’s lips cracks my heart.

“Thousands dead,” Vale says, staring at Macha with grief and growing anger. “Whole families slaughtered, because you were angry at the woman who jilted you?”

“No mortal has the right to reject a deity,” Macha spits. “Your very existence is consent enough. It is license for us to perform any act we please upon you. If I want to take male form and fuck your brains out, and then eat them, it is my *right* as your god. If I want to ravage a kingdom to soothe my rage, I will. And I have.”

“You’re a fucking bitch,” hisses Vale. “A petulant, selfish, scheming, putrid asshole!”

“I would kill you in an instant if I could,” seethes Macha. “If you survive the year, the moment your contract with Arawn is over, you will die by my hand, you reeking little shit. I vow it.”

My heart clenches with horror. Macha will fulfill that vow. She never forgives or forgets.

But Vale stands tall, gowned in my shadows, her white hair giving her the ethereal beauty of a star. The hand wound with the gold marriage ribbons is clenched. Her voice rings out, silver and steel, a musical madness echoing through the hall.

“And I swear to you now, Macha, goddess of war, that if a deity can be killed, I will take your life in vengeance for my people. Justice will be done

upon you, whatever it may cost me.”

The queen and the goddess glare at each other while I stand by, grappling with the tempest in my heart.

“And you.” Macha whirls on me suddenly. “You will die with her before the year is up, or you will live to see your throne lost and your mortal fucktoy lying dead at your feet.”

“Your throne lost?” Vale looks at me, confused.

“Didn’t he tell you?” Macha bares her teeth in a rictus grin. “If he falls in love with anyone during his incarnation, he loses Annwn at the end of your contract. Which means I get his throne either way, mortal scum, whether you survive the year or not. Because he has already fallen in love.”

Vale’s fingers press over her heart. Her face goes still as marble.

“I haven’t fallen in love, I swear.” My voice is a hoarse scrape of darkness over bone.

“Still in denial then? Poor, foolish, naïve, vulnerable, virginal Arawn,” croons Macha, circling me, stroking my shoulders. I shudder away from her touch. “You fell so much faster than I anticipated. So hungry for love, after all those centuries of cold, lonely existence. Maybe if you’d fucked once in a while, you wouldn’t have been so susceptible to the first oozing mortal pussy you found.”

Macha gives me a final pinch. “I’ll be going now. I simply wanted to wish you well on your wedding day, and to remind you of certain realities. I truly didn’t mean to tease you quite so much, but it has been fun. Oh, and you may have survived the hounds, but I’ve found an entirely different dog to send after you. Stay alert, Arawn darling. You might be able to keep your new cock-glove alive for another week or two. But I doubt it.”

And then she vanishes.



Stricken, I gaze at the spot where the goddess of war stood a moment ago.

“You knew,” I whisper to Arawn. “You knew she was responsible for the plague, and you didn’t tell me.”

“I wasn’t sure,” Arawn says quietly. “Until we came to Allenaye, I did not realize that Beirgid began the plague. But when I saw how she has protected her temple and her worshipers, I remembered her antimagic.”

“So we’re at the gods’ mercy, all of us,” I breathe. “They could wipe us out anytime they please. Do anything to us, just like Macha said.”

“Not exactly. We do check and balance each other, just as your Council checks and balances the Crown. The gods generally take little pleasure in human death—they are more amused by live mortals, when they bother with this plane at all. Macha is the only one who truly revels in destruction and death. Beirgid is occasionally cruel, but I’ve never known her to concoct a plague so virulent. Macha must have bargained with her, convinced her to make it happen, and since Cerato is an isolated location, she agreed. If the location had been different, I doubt Beirgid would have conceded. The plague could have run rampant over the globe, and gods generally don’t like losing significant amounts of their worshipers. Hurts their vanity. And... there is another effect, as well.”

“What effect?” I bite out.

“Losing our worshipers drains our energy and makes us weary, more prone to sleep or disembodiment. I have never had many worshipers, so I am

not as active or lively as the gods who enjoy throngs of devotees. Before you called me, I had rested on my throne for a long time, allowing my consciousness to expand and wander throughout my realm, doing very little but existing in a vague, dreamlike state.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“It was peaceful.”

“Yet you’re still angry with me for summoning and binding you,” I say, lacing my fingers together to still their trembling. “That’s why you didn’t tell me your suspicions about the plague. Or about the other condition Macha added to the ritual—the one where you lose Annwn if you fall in love.”

He winces. Looks away.

He’s still naked except for his gold marriage ribbons and a wisp of shadow. His skin is jade-colored satin, while his wavy black hair tumbles around his antlers and cascades down his back. I can’t imagine anything more stunning than the statuesque beauty of his body as he stands there in the dark hall of the temple, unconsciously posed, his elegant profile turned aside and his lips curved downward with guilty unrest.

“My stepmother dallied with a goddess in her youth,” I murmur. “I never would have guessed. I’m not surprised it didn’t end well. I’m sure such connections never do. Not for the human, anyway.”

Arawn exhales, but he still won’t look at me.

I’m angry with him for keeping things from me—things that affect my life as well as his. But I understand why an immortal god who has been alone for millennia might find it difficult to confide in someone. So I focus my anger where it belongs—on Macha—and I take a deep breath, and I step nearer to Arawn. His shadows flow around my legs and body, a humming coolness. They’re not entirely unpleasant, though I feel an increasing dread if I look at them too long.

“You can’t love me,” I say gently, touching the death god’s arm, sliding my fingers around his wrist. “I understand. Maybe we can be—just friends.”

“Friends who fuck?” he says darkly.

A quiver runs through my lower belly. I desperately want to say *yes*. “No, we should probably leave the fucking out of it, if we don’t want to become too—entangled.”

“I can’t have sex with anyone but you. I don’t want it from anyone but you. Which means I can never do it again.” He snatches his pants from the floor and pulls them on, jerking them into place around his hips. I squirm

back into my lacy red dress, trying to ignore the liquid slipping down my inner thigh. His wetness and mine.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

“I will be fine,” he growls. “I’ve gone without it for generations. I am a god, not some feckless human male obsessed with carnal pleasure.”

“I have to warn you—not having sex won’t ensure that you don’t fall in love with me,” I tell him.

“I know,” he retorts. “I’ve watched the outworkings of human affection, obsession, and lust for—”

“For generations, yes. That doesn’t mean you understand any of it.” I’m still holding his arm, still touching him, and I shouldn’t—but the contact is comforting to me, despite his gloomy mood.

“How do I control my emotions?” Arawn is staring at his wrist, where my pale fingers lie against his green skin. “How do I keep from loving you? Or—or how do I stop it, if it has already begun?”

I search his face, wanting what I can’t have, what I’ve no right to ask of him, when so much is at stake. An entire realm could be placed in jeopardy and subjected to the will of a mad goddess, if Arawn allows himself to love me.

“Has it begun?” My voice sounds fainter and more wistful than I intended. “You swore to Macha that it hasn’t, that you didn’t—you don’t—”

“I will tell you how I feel,” he says urgently, gripping both my hands so suddenly my stomach dives and flutters. “And you will tell me what it is.”

“All right,” I breathe, nodding.

“When we are in a crowd, I look for you.” His thumb rubs over the gold ribbons binding my left hand. “The sight of you settles my heart—the mere assurance of your presence is like the anchor for a ship on a raging sea—security and safety. When all else is unpredictable, you are there, hopeful, indomitable, beautiful, strong. And yet, strong as you are, I have a deep-seated need to protect you from any harm to your body or heart. My bones, my flesh, my magic, my soul—I would place all of it between you and danger. I crave the brush of your skin, the light of your eyes. When I’m buried deeply inside you, I am closest to being my true self—my better self. The work I am doing with you, for you—it is the noblest, most worthy thing I have ever accomplished in my millennia of existence. When I think of being apart from you, of never tasting you, kissing you, or speaking with you again, I feel as if I am sinking into a great void. It feels like a fate worse than death.”

He stops, his green eyes brightly pained, sweetly passionate. I suck in a slow breath through my teeth, trying not to burst into tears.

“First, I will tell you that what you describe—it’s exactly how I feel about you, too.” I swallow. “And second, yes. That emotion you’re trying to define—it’s the kind of love everyone wants to have, the kind of love all of us are seeking, all our lives. Some mortals die without ever finding it. Others find it, but it’s not returned. To find that love in a person who returns your devotion—that is the most exquisite magic two people are capable of creating together. And it cannot be stopped, except by cruelty or betrayal, or death—and sometimes not even then.”

Arawn draws a shuddering breath and pulls me against his chest. His heart is a hectic drumbeat.

“So what you’re saying then, little doe,” he murmurs, “is that you and I, and the entire realm of Unlife, are well and truly fucked.”

Arawn frees my guards from the sleep of death, and we return to our chambers. I sleep nestled in Arawn’s arms, and in the morning I fight the urge to order the demolition of Beirgid’s temple, in retribution for the goddess’s role in the plague. But we need the goodwill of the people during these troubled times, and it isn’t the humans’ fault that their goddess spared them when she incited this terrible sickness.

Since my carriage was damaged, the High Priestess lends me her personal coach—a gaudy, gilded thing that I have to admit looks quite fine, especially when we roll into the royal city late that afternoon. A pair of well-dressed criers, also borrowed from Allenaye, ride before our coach, alternately trumpeting and shouting our arrival—and proclaiming the news of our marriage.

Citizens pour out of doorways, their bodies and faces wrapped against the cold and the plague. They cheer for me loudly, but their most vociferous cries are for Arawn.

While we were gone, the people have begun to see the results of Arawn’s work—more recoveries from the sickness, and far fewer deaths. He is hailed as their savior, and the crowds who nearly rioted a few days ago are screaming their gratitude now. I make him look out the wide carriage window and wave to them as we pass. Some of the people fall to their knees and bow at the sight of him.

“All this, and they don’t even know you’re a god,” I mutter to him. “Imagine how they’d react if they knew.”

“With slightly more terror, I suspect,” he says dryly.

We pause for an hour in one of the city squares so Arawn can lay his hand on those who have fallen ill since we left. A few angry, weeping mothers, whose children died in our absence, push forward and shout at me, so I leave Arawn to work while I speak to them.

“We had to go,” I tell them, my own eyes brimming at the sight of their grief. “We had to try and save some children in other towns, too. I know that doesn’t make it better. I wish I could fix all of this, bring back everyone we’ve all lost. Your little ones are in a good place, a beautiful place. I believe that with all my heart.”

Even as I say it, my heart sinks. Last night, after we returned to our room, Arawn told me more about Macha—about her lingering in his realm while he’s absent, and about her threats to torture the new souls entering Annwn. I hope she hasn’t made good on those threats. I hope the children who passed in the last three days are safe.

Once I’ve pacified the mothers as much as I can, after Arawn is through with the plague victims, we return to the carriage. Word of our wedding has had a chance to spread even farther throughout the city, and the carriage is showered with winter blooms and bits of colored rags—the best my people can do to show their joy at the union.

“Wave with your left hand,” I tell Arawn. “Show them the ribbons.”

“When do we take them off?” he asks.

“Tonight. It’s customary to wear them for a full day after the wedding.”

He lifts his left hand, the one with the ribbons wound around his thick, strong fingers. I could look at that hand for days.

The crowds are practically screaming now, wild with hectic joy. They needed this. Needed something to celebrate, after months of despair and death. And their adulation of Arawn makes me happier than I’ve been in a long time.

His eyes meet mine, and he touches his chest wonderingly. “I can feel it,” he says. “Their worship, fueling my power. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

“Does it lessen the pain of the chains?”

“Somewhat, yes. But it’s deeper than that.” He shakes his head, a puzzled, pleased expression on his handsome face.

“You need to return to Annwn tomorrow,” I tell him, while I wave and smile at a cluster of white-haired children. “You need to check on the souls

who have passed while we were away. I hate to think of Macha tormenting them.”

“Once they pass through the Furnace, they have their unliving bodies and their assigned place in Annwn,” Arawn says. “She can’t touch them after that. But she can prevent souls from going into the Furnace, thereby causing them distress. I will go tomorrow, as you say, and ensure that the souls find peace.”

“Thank you.”

“I was planning to go anyway.” A faint flush colors his high cheekbones. “To get your wedding gift.”

“My—wedding gift?” I blink at him.

“Is it not customary for humans to exchange such gifts after they are married?”

“It is, but I did not expect anything. I have nothing to give you in return.”

“I need nothing but your existence.”

My own cheeks heat at those words, delivered so simply and sincerely.

We’re approaching the palace, and my stomach twists at the thought of facing the Council. They will already be gathered, of course, since they planned to intercept me as soon as I arrived and hurry me off to marry Venniuroth. By now they will know that I’m already married.

“You’re chewing your cheek again,” says Arawn, hooking an eyebrow at me.

“I need to deal with the Council when we reach the palace.”

“Not alone.”

“No.” I reach over and take his hand. “Not alone.”

He weaves his fingers between mine. “This feels good.”

“It does.”

“Things like this feed love instead of starving it.”

I squirm. “Well... yes.” I start to pull away, but he tightens his grip.

“We have a year in which to break this bond,” he says, a faint desperation in his voice. “Grant me the indulgence of loving you a little while longer.”

My heart tugs toward his, and I lean forward in the carriage, while he bends to meet me. Our lips seal softly, and the kiss slides along my throat like warm honey, drips through my veins, saturates my bones with an incandescent joy.

Through the carriage windows, the onlookers outside see us kissing and erupt into cheers.

In the palace courtyard, an assembly of guards and servants greet us with more cheers and applause. HESSIE dances forward and hands me a bouquet of winterbloom, while Tilda advances sedately with one of my crowns nestled on a velvet pillow. She fixes it in place for me, whispering, “I thought you would want it, before you meet with the Council.”

“You’re a gem,” I tell her.

“And this is for the Lord Consort.” Tilda motions, and a serving boy steps forward, presenting Arawn with a circlet of woven silver leaves. “It was Prince Aspen’s before his coronation. I thought the Lord Consort might wish to wear it, if he is accompanying you to Council.”

“It’s perfect.” I take the circlet and turn to Arawn.

He’s already sinking to one knee before me, on the snowy cobblestones of the courtyard.

I settle the coronet into the dark waves of his hair, and then I take his chin and lift his face to mine. He’s in human aspect, his green eyes shining beneath his dark lashes. Tiny green gems wink in his earlobes, and his long black hair spills over the shoulder of his coat. He looks less godlike today, but every inch a king.

“Rise, Lord Consort, my beloved husband,” I say softly. “And escort me to the Council Chamber.”



“It’s an outrage.” Lord Vennirot is practically shaking with anger. “The sheer arrogance, the disdain for this Council, the obtuse, childish insistence on making an inappropriate match during this time of crisis—it’s foolishness on a nearly monstrous level!”

“An inappropriate match, you say?” I raise my eyebrows. “Yet you, Vennirot, would have put yourself forward for the role of consort, when you are old enough to be my father.”

“Indeed I would. Because you need restraint and guidance, Majesty.

Nothing has made that more obvious than your hasty marriage to this foreigner. You are little more than a lovesick child, playing with lives as if they are toys in your nursery.”

Murmurs of assent travel around the table, though a few council members shake their heads at his words.

“You forget yourself, Venniroth,” says Lord Redglaive coldly. “Mind your words when you speak to the Queen.”

“Queen?” Lord Venniroth throws up his hands. “And why should she be Queen? This Council can no longer ignore the incompetence and childish willfulness of this monarch. She has brought in a man of indeterminate origin and suspicious magic, and within a week of his appearance, she has already made him Lord Consort. Can no one else see the shadow of malice here? We are being invaded and overtaken, my friends. In this our darkest hour, our enemies have seized the opportunity to charm and beguile our young princess, and through her, claim the throne. If we are to survive as a sovereign nation, we must band together and put a stop to this foolishness. It pains me to say it—” he splays a hand over his heart— “but I move for a vote of ‘No confidence’ in Queen Vale of Cerato.”

Arawn has been sitting at my side, a looming yet silent presence. But when Venniroth lifts his hand high, Arawn rises, impossibly tall, black-robed and dominant. “Enough.”

The hand Venniroth raised begins to change. The knuckles swell, brown spots appear on the thinning skin, and the fingers go slightly crooked as if with the pains of age. In a few seconds, Venniroth’s hand transforms from the strong hand of a man in his early fifties to the hand of an eighty-year-old.

Exclamations of shock fill the room.

“Would anyone like to second the Lord Venniroth’s motion?” Arawn asks, his green eyes raking the assembled council members.

No one moves or speaks.

“The Queen has been attempting to talk sense into you for the past hour,” Arawn says. “Since that has not worked, I am trying something else. Suspicious magic, I think you called it.” He nods to Venniroth.

“What have you done to me, devil?” squawks Venniroth.

“Nothing that cannot be undone, should you choose to see reason,” Arawn says coolly. “Honored members of the Council, I should think you would be more grateful for my presence and my new role. As Lord Consort, I am uniquely positioned to assist you, should you ever need my help—if, let

us say, your spouses, children, parents, relatives, neighbors, or friends fall ill with the plague. Take comfort in the fact that I hold your loved ones' lives in the palm of my hand."

It's a threat, thinly veiled. He's saying that unless the Council supports me, he won't be inclined to spare their sick relatives.

This is the kind of politics I don't have the stomach for, the kind from which I would usually cringe. But a wounded, vengeful part of my heart purrs with dark glee at Arawn's statement. I don't rebuke him, or rescind the threat. I simply rise at his side, surveying the people around the long meeting table.

"You wanted me to marry someone strong," I say. "Someone who would support me and help me bring this kingdom back to life. Someone to help me carry the load of responsibility. Well... here he is. And here we both will stay. You are all dismissed. Guards, please escort Lord Venniroth out of the palace. He is banned from Court and from Council until he learns to respect his Queen."

The council members disperse like scolded children, with awed glances at Arawn. The guards hustle Lord Venniroth out of the room, despite his undignified protests. Lord Redglaive, Lady Elanann, and Master Coors, along with a few others, pause to congratulate me on my nuptials before leaving. I arrange a meeting with them for tomorrow, to discuss how the city fared in my absence.

When the room has emptied, I turn to Arawn, a jubilant glow in my heart.

"Without your magic to back me up, I would never have dared to do that," I say. "Thank you."

"That is what divine husbands are for." His mouth curves up at one side.

"And what else are they for?" I shift nearer, my fingers toying with a button on his jacket.

He leans in, inhaling the scent of my hair before he whispers, "They're for fucking."

A tingling pulse between my legs. "I could have dinner delivered to my suite. It's late, and we've just returned from a long journey. Now that we've tended to the sick and met with the Council, no one else will expect our attention tonight. We could do as you suggested... enjoy ourselves for a little while before we have to... separate."

"You said untying this knot between us might not be possible," he murmurs. "And that physical contact will only strengthen it."

My fingers curl convulsively into the fabric of his black robes before I force myself to let go. “You’re right, of course. You can take my father’s old room tonight, and I’ll sleep in mine.”

He nods, resigned, and we return to my chambers in silence. Hessie serves us our private dinner, with many wide-eyed glances at both of us. She doesn’t try to hide her fascination and delight over the fact that we’re married now.

Halfway through the meal, the Chief Manager of the palace stops by my rooms to congratulate us—and also to voice a subtle rebuke, because all the preparations for tomorrow’s wedding are now useless.

“I understand why the wedding had to happen quickly,” the manager says. “Still, it’s a shame. We had some fine things planned.”

“We could still have a party, if you like,” I tell him. “A celebration of the union. But it will have to be short. Vaughn and I have more sick people to tend, and we must prepare for another journey to more outlying towns—a longer absence this time.”

The Chief Manager brightens. “Yes, yes, I believe a party would be just the thing. We can make some minor adjustments to the plans—tomorrow noon, then, Your Majesty. Lord Consort.” He bows deeply to Arawn, who is chewing a bite of pie contemplatively.

Shortly after the manager departs, Hessie clears away our empty dishes and tends the fire. “Ring for me if you need anything else, my lady. Have a pleasant sleep.” She looks from me to Arawn and makes a little sound of delighted wonder before breezing out of the room.

When the door closes behind her, I rise abruptly, brushing a few stray crumbs from my skirt. “I’m going to bathe, then sleep. You can use the bath when I’m done.”

Arawn is sprawled on a sofa, his long legs crossed and a cup of wine in his hand. He doesn’t reply, only tips wine into his mouth while watching me over the rim of the cup. His gaze sends a bolt of hectic heat through my chest.

Steeling myself against the waves of desire flooding my body, I go to my room for fresh nightclothes and a robe. Then I cross the parlor again, conscious of the death god’s stare.

I close the door to the bathing room and breathe a sigh of relief. I make quick work of relieving myself and stripping down to my bare skin while I wait for the bath to fill. As I stand beside the sunken tub, I press my fingers to my sex, trying to still the buzzing need there. But my fingers come away

slippery, and I can't help the tiniest whine of yearning.

Sighing, I step into the bath. I shave the parts that have gone untended for a few days, and I wash the grime of travel from my body and my hair.

And while I bathe, I think of my husband.

Arawn is a blessed relief from the ever-present ache in my soul. But he's more than just a balm. I admire him and respect him. He intrigues me, surprises me. Despite his vast age and his odd view of the mortal world, he is startlingly perceptive, and more compassionate than I gave him credit for at first. He can also be adorably naïve at times. I love it. And I hunger for him, for the divine beauty that's so far beyond anything I could have imagined in a man.

But there can be no lasting happiness for him and me. This thing between us could lose him the throne of Annwn, and Macha would leap in to take his place. Which would give her license to do anything she likes to my stepmother, my father—to everyone I love.

I can't do that to them.

I must not tempt Arawn, or lure him to abandon the only life he has ever known. I can't ask him to yield the guardianship of the world's souls to a warmongering goddess.

Once again, I must give up what I want so badly, for the ultimate good of others.

It's wretchedly unfair.

But unfair or not, I must find a way to break the death god's heart and destroy his love for me.



My desire for the Queen is like the fire of my Furnace, ever-burning, unquenchable.

It's all I can do not to rise from the sofa, walk into the bathing room, and drag her out of the tub. But I manage to stay put. I reward myself with another cup of wine, to celebrate my strength of will.

And then she walks out of the bathing room.

She pads across the carpet toward her room on small bare feet, wrapped in the same fluffy robe she wore that first night.

Her hair is a waterfall of silvery moonlight. She turns her face just slightly, her gaze darting in my direction. As if she can't quite bear going to her room without one more glimpse of me.

That tiny glance cracks my control.

I slam down the wine-cup and leap for her.

With a squeak, she flees into her bedroom and tries to close the door, but she has the strength of a frail bird compared to mine. I force my way in, grip the collar of her robe with both hands, and jerk it down, off her shoulders. She's wearing a thin nightdress beneath.

"Arawn," she gasps, eyes wide. "We can't. I have to give you up."

"Do you?" I grip her chin and kiss her mouth, savoring the plump swell of her lips. "Why?"

"I—um—"

I kiss her a few more times, cupping her breast through the fragile fabric.

“I—I had some reasons,” she pants. “Good reasons—very morally upright and—self-sacrificing—”

“Go on.” I toss the robe aside, scoop her up, and drape her on the pillows of her bed. “I’m listening.”

“You’re a monster.” She’s gasping, half-laughing, but there are tears in her voice too. “Think of everyone we’re risking by doing this. Think of your responsibilities to the souls in your realm.”

I’ve shucked off my clothing by now, and laid aside the silver circlet I was wearing.

“Those souls have had their lives,” I say savagely, dragging her nightdress up to her waist. “They ate, drank, and fucked. They had a thousand human experiences. I’ve had so little by comparison. I’ve been so focused on my role, on remaining true to my purpose.”

“Me too.” She sobs out a breath. “I’ve had good experiences, but I can barely remember them, Arawn. It’s as if the past four months have blurred and soured the memory of every good thing that came before, and I can’t bear it. All my beautiful years, Arawn—the plague has ruined them. I hate it for that. For so many reasons, I hate the gods—Beirgid, and Macha—”

“Don’t say their names.” I press my mouth to the soft skin of her belly. “But yes, I hate them too.”

“They’ve stolen so much from me. From us.”

I rise, my palms propped against the mattress on either side of her trembling body. Her eyes glimmer with tears, anguish and rage mingled.

“But they can’t take this,” I say fiercely. “They cannot steal this moment from the two of us. This is a good thing, and it has happened *because* of them, and *in spite* of them. Let us defy them together, you and I. Defy the gods, defy the laws of ritual magic, defy destiny itself. By this act we declare ourselves allied, together against the universe. I swear to you now, my darling, my Queen, that I will not rest until I find a way to circumvent Macha’s plan.”

“Do you think there’s a way?” Her eyes widen with hope, and I almost laugh out of sheer love for her unquenchable spirit.

“If there is, I will discover it. Now will you let me taste you, little doe, or must I beg for the privilege?”

A slow smile curves her mouth—the smile of a queen and a rebel. I love her, this creature of roses and steel, this soul of moonlight and shadow.

She spreads her legs wider, accepting my love.

I bathe her sex with my tongue, savoring the thickness of the outer lips, sweeping aside the dainty, pliant inner folds. I stroke her slit, nibble her delicate bud, coax her toward the peak until she is panting, shining, surging, whimpering—begging for me.

And then I sheathe myself deep in the blissful welcome of her body.

I have been asleep and waiting for her since my consciousness emerged from the dark heart of the universe. And in this moment I do not care if I lose my throne, my home, and all the souls in Annwn, if only I can have *her*, forever.

It's as if she knows what I'm thinking. As if she can read my thoughts in my eyes. She grips my face in both her hands as my hips rock faster, as my body melts into hers.

"I love you, Arawn," she grits out. Tight, forceful words. Blades on which I gladly impale my future.

I burst, a fountain unleashed, jetting my release inside her. Vale's head falls back against the pillows, her lashes closing as she comes undone for me, as she quakes through the violent ecstasy.

My body sinks against hers. She holds me wrapped in her arms, her cheek pressed to mine.

Into her ear I breathe the words I have not spoken to any being, living or dead, since the dawn of time.

"I love you."

After a moment I move to lie beside her, and we enjoy each other's skin and heat awhile. It is a simple pleasure I could never have imagined before my incarnation.

"I've been thinking about that other power of yours," Vale murmurs. "The life-light. Besides poisoning creatures of the Unlife, you said it helps plants grow."

"Yes."

She presses her lips together, as if she's trying to hold something back.

"What is it?" I prop myself on one elbow, drinking the sight of her, rosy and sated, soft and strong and thinking, always thinking. "Tell me, little doe."

"It would be wrong of me to add more to our bargain," she says.

A chuckle rolls through my chest. "We have already added this. What's a little more?"

"But it's not fair to you. I can't expect you to fix everything."

"Other than the handful of times I've been summoned, I have not

involved myself in human affairs at all. I'm overdue for a little interference." I lie back, folding my hands behind my head. Vale sits up, and I'm instantly captivated by the globes of her breasts. But I force myself to focus on her earnest face.

"My people are starving, Arawn. When the plague began in midsummer, sickness robbed our farmers of strength. The food supply suffered, especially when harvest came and there were few laborers. Whole crops sat in the fields and spoiled. It's winter now, but we're a small northern continent—we are used to augmenting our cold-season food supply. In most large towns, there are greenhouses designed for the production of midwinter produce, but their planting season also passed us by during the worst of the plague. And the perennial plants, the fruit trees and such within the greenhouses—they suffered neglect."

She takes a deep breath, giving me a moment to respond. When I don't, she continues. "When my brother took the throne, he prioritized the sowing of the greenhouse beds and the care of the other food-bearing plants and trees. But the vegetable beds were seeded too late, and by the time those plants reach maturity, the kingdom will have already starved. Could you... would it be possible... But I can't ask, because you've already done so much, and there are so many more villages we need to reach—"

I sit up, placing a finger over her lips. "As we tour the rest of the kingdom, tending to the sick, we will also stop by these greenhouses you mentioned. I will use my life-light to speed the growth cycle of the plants and bring them to maturity quickly. I cannot promise to be very skilled at it—I rarely use my antimagic. But I will do all that I can. When spring comes, I will cast life-light over the fields as well."

Joy bursts over her face, a glorious, shining hope. "You are the savior of my people, truly. I feel as if I should worship you."

Despite my recent climax, heat swells my cock at her words. Vale notices the telltale movement, the lifting and stiffening of my length.

She gives me a sly smile, her lashes hooding her eyes. "I think I know how I can thank you."



Sometime in the night, I'm roused by the Queen's other maid, Tilda, tapping gingerly on the half-open door of the chamber. The night guards stand behind her. One of them has his hand splayed over the chest of a cloaked man, blocking his progress, preventing him from entering the Queen's room.

"What is it?" mutters Vale sleepily from beside me.

"A sick child, Your Majesty," says Tilda. "An infant. They are asking for the Lord Consort to come and lay a hand on the little one, otherwise she will not last until morning."

"We'll come." Vale struggles upright, but I'm already out of the bed, pulling on my clothes.

"Stay," I tell her. "Sleep. I will see to the child."

"Are you sure?"

I kiss her forehead. "Sleep."

I follow Tilda into the hallway. The guards close the Queen's bedroom door and resume their posts on either side of it. I'm pleased to see another pair of guards a little way down the hall, guarding the parlor entrance.

"This is the man who brought news of the child," Tilda points to the cloaked man, then pulls her robe more tightly around her. "He will take you there."

"Forgive the intrusion, my lord," says the man. His eyes are red-rimmed, his lips chapped. "My wife and I tried for years to have a child, and this one is our treasure, our miracle. Please help her."

"Show me where she is."

Leaving the guards and Tilda behind, I follow the man along corridors and down steps, into an area of the palace I've not yet visited. We must be heading for the servants' quarters.

The man I'm with is walking very quickly, almost running. He must be fearful that his child will die before I reach her. He turns sharply down a dark hallway and begins to run in earnest, disappearing around another corner.

I dash after him, but when I round the corner he is nowhere to be seen.

The hallway is pitch-black. My divine eyes can pierce darkness better than a human's, but they are not all-seeing.

Fuck. Which way did he go?

"Where are you?" I shout.

The tiniest scraping sound. Leather heels on stone.

A whisper of fabric, of motion.

Alarm flares through my mind—too late—as figures surge from the darkness around me. Excruciating pain streaks through my body as blades bite into my shoulders, my back, my arms—one pierces my chest, slips between two of my ribs, and spears the thick, pumping muscle of my heart. A sword slashes across my face, cleaving it, cracking my jaw and teeth. A keen edge whips across my throat, and my blood spurts out, a hot fountain in the dark. I choke on the blood, my skull so full of pain I can't think, can't focus on magic, on defense.

I crash to the floor, and the figures continue to stab me. Pieces of my flesh and fingers have been hacked entirely away.

Through every wound, a gnawing cold spreads, an acidic burn dissolving into my veins.

"Do you think that's enough?" someone whispers.

"If the wounds don't get him, the poison will," another hoarse voice responds. "Healers can't purge poison."

"Someone slashed my arm," complains a third.

"What do you expect? It's dark," snaps the hoarse voice. "There's bound to be accidents. Chop off his hand, one of you. We'll bring it along as proof and get our pay."

Someone grips my wrist, sets a cold edge to my skin, and begins sawing into my flesh.

But those few moments were enough for me to recover from the shock and the avalanche of pain. I'm already healing, already destroying the poison racing through my body.

Jaw clenched, I let myself explode.

Green light ignites in the hallway, flashing across the startled faces of my attackers. They're flecked with my blood, holding weapons that drip gore. The light holds, and in its unearthly green glow I rise, cracking my neck from side to side, wrenching my broken jaw back into place. My wounds seal, my fingers reform, and my stuttering heart renews its steady pumping.

"Not fucking possible," breathes one of the attackers.

My double set of rams' horns curls from my hair. I let my fangs and claws glide out. Shadows writhe from my body like serpents, poised to strike.

The men whirl and run.

It's all too easy to send my shadows after them, to drag the men back to me through the pool of my blood. They're screaming, pleading. I am deaf to it all.

One of them I turn into a cockroach. His tiny legs become swamped in the blood, and I crush him under my heel. Another I transform into a cat, while a third becomes a small gray mouse. With my shadows, I pry open the cat's mouth and stuff the mouse down its throat.

Three men remain, writhing in the grip of my shadows. I urge a poisonous, icy despair into their bodies until they are moaning, weeping, and begging for death.

I advance and grip one of them by the throat. "Who hired you to kill me?"

"Lord—Lord Venniroth," he wheezes. "He told us to cut you up and poison you, too. Healers can't counteract poison. You shouldn't be alive. What are you?"

"I am the fucking god of death," I snarl. "And when you reach Annwn, you'll wish you had refused this particular job."

"Mercy," chokes the man. "My family is starving."

For a moment I hesitate. "Other families are starving, too. Yet they are not so foolish as to murder the one who is trying to save the kingdom."

My fingers clench and twist until I hear a snap, and the man's head lolls aside.

I transform the remaining men into worms and leave them squirming on the floor of the hallway. Dressed in the fluttering tatters of my clothing, painted in my own blood, I stride back the way I came.

The servant who lured me down here escaped. No matter—if I ever see him again, I will age him by twenty or thirty years. That should teach him not to be complicit in murder.

When I return to the Queen's suite, the guards and Tilda are aghast at my appearance. I give them strict orders not to wake the Queen, but to double the guard outside her room for the rest of the night. Quietly I wash and dress in fresh clothes. Then I meet Tilda in the hallway and hand her my ruined garments for disposal.

She is the one who brought the man here and woke me. Before I let her

leave, I must be sure she has no treasonous intent.

I press my hand against the brown skin of her forehead, just beneath her white curls.

She trembles, but stays still.

In her soul I read no harm intended toward me or the Queen. Tilda knew nothing of the assassination.

But I see something else. Something concealed.

“You are loyal.” I remove my hand from her forehead and step back.

Tilda eyes me, likely wondering if I discerned her secret. I don’t see any point in pretending I did not notice.

“The Queen doesn’t know what you can do?” I ask.

Apprehension washes over her features. “It’s scarcely worth mentioning, my lord. I keep to myself, you see. My silence harms no one.”

“I suppose not. It shall be your secret to keep, for now.”

I turn away, but she catches my sleeve. “My lord—one of the guards mentioned something about the Queen being injured during your journey.”

“It is true. She nearly died.”

Tilda gnaws her lip. “I would like to accompany the two of you next time you travel to outlying villages. The Queen would not permit it before, but perhaps next time, if you spoke with her, she would agree. That way I’ll be close, in case she needs me.”

“I think that would be an excellent idea.”

“Thank you, my god,” she whispers, bobbing a curtsy.

“I have somewhere to go now.” I lower my voice so the guards do not hear. “I hope to return by dawn, but if I do not, tell the Queen I went to the Pit.”



I find the thing I’m looking for where I last saw it—lying in the misty grass of Annwn far beneath the opening of the Pit that leads to Vale’s kingdom.

Tucking it into my belt, I scan my surroundings.

More mist than usual swirls in the entrance to Annwn. Thin, haunting voices twine through the mist—wails of unrest and grief.

It is as Vale and I feared. Macha is preventing souls from passing through my Furnace into their eternal rest.

Denying these souls their peace is an unfathomable cruelty. I will not suffer it.

“Souls of the mortal realm,” I call out, in my echoing, divine tones. “Follow me to your eternal rest.”

Eager whispers and sighs shiver through the misty assembly, and as I stride toward the Furnace, the souls follow me.

Macha has set up a throne of sorts before the Furnace—a seat crafted of blood-crystal, rusted shields, and skeletons. She’s sprawled on it, legs kicked up over the armrest, nearly naked except for a loincloth of bloodstained rags and a brassiere of close-set human rib-bones. With a long black staff, she bats away any souls who attempt to enter the Furnace.

She calls to me as I approach. “Tired of your mortal bride’s pussy so soon, brother?”

“Far from it.”

“I must admit I’m surprised to see you.” She bites one of her sharp nails. “I gave that lusty Lord Venniroth very specific hints on how to secure the throne he wants.”

I’m momentarily startled that she would move so openly. It’s risky for her, blatantly giving a human the information required to bring about my death. I suppose she hoped if her trickery succeeded, the other gods would overlook it, since she didn’t attack Vale or me herself.

“Venniroth did send six men after me, with poisoned blades,” I say. “They caused me pain, but were easily overcome.”

“Fuck. I told him killing the girl would end both of you. I suppose he spared her and went after you directly, the fool. Perhaps he’s infatuated with her, like you are.” She thrusts out her lips in a pout. “I don’t understand *why* any male would want her.”

Words flood onto my tongue, words about Vale’s goodness, kindness, her courage, her dedication—but those words of praise would be wasted on Macha’s ears, so I swallow them down again.

“I’m not sorry to see you again.” Macha’s lashes flutter as she eyes my form. I’m wearing a thin tunic, too tight for me, with slits cut in the back for my wings. The pants I put on are also too tight.

“Since you survived,” Macha continues, “perhaps we can discuss my earlier proposal again. You like commitment, it seems. What if, instead of a one-time shot at the ultimate pleasure that is my pussy, I offered you the chance to rule at my side for eternity?”

A mocking laugh bursts from me. I can’t help it. After all my sister has done to me, after what she knows of my relationship with Vale—that she would even propose this is absurd.

Macha’s sly grin shifts into a glare.

“I don’t understand why you can’t see it. How similar we are, the two of us. Your domain is death, and mine is war. The two are intimately linked. If you weren’t so stubborn, the two of us could share Annwn. Think of what we could do! Why, you have an entire ready-made army at your disposal, brother. An army of the dead! We could overrun the entire mortal plane—or any of the other gods’ realms.”

Alarm sparks in my heart, drowning my amusement. “You are speaking of a war that would destroy the universe.”

“I’m tired of mortal wars. They’re so—little. I need something bigger, Arawn. I’m so dreadfully bored. Aren’t you?”

“No. I was at peace before my summoning, and now I feel—awake. As if my true existence has just begun.”

She straightens on the throne, staring at me. “All because of that mortal? She’s nothing but milk-skin and bone-sticks, brother.”

“This isn’t about what she looks like,” I growl. “Though I happen to find her beautiful. This is about who she is. Beauty of soul. Something you do not possess, if you ever did.”

I hold her gaze, and suddenly I see deeper into Macha’s nature than I ever have.

She isn’t just bored, as she says. She is hollow. Empty. Barren and aching—a vast, seared wasteland, an expanse void of pity or passion. A ravaging wilderness.

“What happened to you?” The question breaks from me before I can stop it.

Her eyes and face go instantly, blankly dead. So much *nothing* stares out at me from those eyes that I feel a crawling horror, a dread beyond death. I want to scream. I, the god of death, am momentarily terrified.

“The bitch-princess of Yurstin collected some of my blood once.” Macha’s voice is as hollow as her gaze. “I thought it was merely bloodplay

during sex. But she kept some, and paid someone to spell a knife with it. When she said she was leaving me, I attacked her, and she grazed me with the knife's edge. Barely a scratch, but you know what a godsblood knife does to one of our kind. Instant annihilation if it pierces anything vital. Even a brush with our skin sends us into immediate unconsciousness."

She drags her fingernails down her own face, opening deep grooves. She doesn't seem to notice the pain.

"I was blown back into my realm, where I lay unconscious for several years of mortal time. When I finally recovered and woke, I was—different. Something had been taken from me by that knife. I'd lost who I was. I went to wreak my vengeance on my ex-lover, but she had protected herself too well. It took some thought and planning to devise this scheme and take her life. I wanted to get into her palace and watch her die—to let her see my face so she would know who killed her. But she had some ancient ritual laid about the place, so I could not enter. I still can't. But no matter—she isn't there anymore. She's here."

"You don't merely crave excitement and an undead army," I say slowly. "When you're the ruler of Annwn, you will be able to reach the souls beyond the Furnace. You want that power, so you can find your old lover and tell her of your great vengeance."

"Now you understand." Macha smiles at me, brightly, falsely. "I must look her in the eyes and tell her how many people I killed just to secure her doom. I must tell her the dreadful fate of her adopted kingdom. And I must ensure that she suffers exquisite torture for eternity. I want all of these things, *and* I crave a war to end the worlds."

She tips back her head with an exultant, almost orgasmic sigh, and her body shudders. "That would be perfection. And I want you, Arawn. You and I could bring a cataclysm of ruin upon the universe, then rise as Queen and King of a new age. We will make our own race of gods, design new creatures to populate new worlds. Then I will be full again." White fingers clutch her chest, spastic and clawed, while her eyes gleam with a manic brightness. "Then I will be—something. Not this echoing void, Arawn, not this endless *nothing*."

My chest tightens. I think I pity her.

My sister may not realize it, but she and Vale are similar in one key respect. They have both experienced great loss.

The difference is how they responded to it.

“This is not how you reclaim yourself, Macha,” I tell her. “Wreckage and ruin, vengeance and violence—it can be satisfying when wrought upon those who have truly wronged you. But your princess of Yurstin made a fair choice, one that was hers to make. She did not hurt you until you attacked her. And you have slaughtered far too many innocents on your way to avenge the wound she gave you. No wonder none of it satisfies. It is unjust, unruly, and unforgivable.”

Macha rises from the throne, slamming her black staff on the ground. Her dark eyes flash suddenly scarlet.

“Always the judge,” she sneers. “Arawn the Just, the Great Balancer and Decider of Eternal Fates. You have always thought yourself better than the rest of us. That’s why we hate you, you know. We can feel the judgment rolling off you in sickening waves.”

“I am better than you, but not for the reasons I once thought,” I reply. “And what I am does not absolve you of responsibility. If our sibling gods would think less of their own glory and pleasure, and more about the needs of the humans—”

“I am so *sick* of humans.” Her upper lip hitches in a snarl. “Frail, mewling, faithless, paltry creatures. They disgust me. And you reek of humanity, Arawn. You reek of the slime from your whore’s sloppy gash. You smell like her ever-rotting flesh, like her plague-spotted tongue.”

A tremor of thunderous rage races through me. My bond with Vale tugs at me, growing stronger with every passing second, but I stand firm.

“Leave my realm, Macha,” I say.

She smirks, lying back on her throne again. “Why don’t you make me?”

I had thought myself weaker than her. And I am weaker than usual, suppressed by the summoning ritual and its added effects. But I’ve seen inside the goddess of war, and I know the emptiness that lies where her strength used to be.

Gods draw power from many places—our realms, the stars, the darkness, our intrinsic nature, the fulfillment of our assigned roles in the universe.

And we draw power from worship.

I have not been worshiped in ages. A handful of followers here and there—mostly murderous, depraved, twisted types. Not devotees to boast of.

But today I have drunk the praise and gratitude of the people of Cerato. I have absorbed it in greater quantities than I ever dreamed possible, as Vale

and I passed through the royal city after our marriage.

I could feel it then—fresh power pulsing through my body, despite the chains.

I feel it now. A reserve of fullness, of might.

I return Macha's smirk with one of my own. "You think you've won, that you've trapped me. You think you'll be able to kill Vale, thus killing me—or that I'll be forced to abdicate my throne because I love her."

The words thrill through me. I can still scarcely grasp the wonder of them.

"I will protect her," I say. "I will be at her side every moment. You cannot destroy her directly, and anyone you might send will have to get through me. She and I have a full year to find a way out of this spell you've added to my summoning—and believe me, we will find a way out. I will keep Vale *and* maintain control of Annwn."

"You're ridiculously optimistic," sneers Macha.

"I am hopeful," I say. "It is a blessed trait of my indomitable Queen. With her at my side, I can do anything. I can find a way to reverse your spell. And I can do this."

I lift both hands, palms out.

Green fire laced with writhing shadows blasts outward from me in a searing arc.

I get one glimpse of Macha's shocked, terrified face before she, her staff, and her throne shatter into fragments, which melt into wisps of smoke and disappear.

She's not annihilated, only banished back to her realm for the time being.

I stare at my hands, excitement pounding in my heart. I banished her myself, without the aid of my hounds.

Such is the power of true, grateful human worship.

The power of mortal love.

I step back and watch as the crowd of misty souls surges toward the Furnace, passing through one at a time into their eternal destiny.



Despite my bold words to Macha, I am not confident in my ability to keep Vale safe.

She is such a caring queen, always diving in amongst the people and speaking to them face-to-face, meeting the naysayers with kindness and understanding.

Her compassion is dangerous. And I would beg her to be more careful if I thought she would listen.

But she believes her people need her like this—accessible, listening, walking with them.

She's so fragile. A single arrow could end her, or a scratch from a poisoned ring. What I wouldn't give to be able to set a tethermark on her, somehow. But I can't. The existing contract and the life-connection between us will not permit it.

Fortunately, the people in Cerato seem more inclined to trust the Queen, now that my work among them is beginning to show fruit. The primary danger to her life lies with her rival, Lord Venniroth, the other "dog" Macha sent after us.

My sister goddess has already escalated this conflict beyond what I thought she would dare to do. And after being banished so violently back to her realm, she will be ten times as angry with me. Perhaps I should not have antagonized her.

For a short while, she'll be weakened by my attack. In the meantime, I must deal with the immediate human threat—Venniroth.

As Macha said, it is odd that he didn't go after Vale herself. He sent assassins after *me*. Which seems to indicate that he still wishes to marry her, and he simply wants me out of the way.

Marrying into the throne is far easier than killing the Queen and taking the throne by violence. The people are less likely to accept him as a ruler if he murders her.

But Venniroth was willing to sacrifice me, Cerato's last chance for salvation. Either he does not truly care for the well-being of the kingdom, or

his personal need to triumph has clouded his judgment and made him reckless.

I believe Lord Venniroth and I need to have a talk.

I ponder all this as I fly back up through the Pit, across the snowy forest and fields, back to the royal city. The icy claws of the pre-dawn darkness sink into my skin. While flying I could only wear my tunic; I did not want to damage the new coat Vale gave me. But when I'm near enough to the city, I land, vanish my wings, and locate the place where I hid my coat. It's cold from lying over a tree branch in the freezing night, but I pull it on anyway and button it.

The guards at the refuse gate saw me leave, and they don't question my return. In fact, they open the gate to me quickly and bow low as I pass.

"Hail, Lord Consort." Their voices are respectful, with an undercurrent of excitement.

"Hail to you as well," I reply.

I could get used to this kind of delighted awe at my appearance, instead of the petrified horror or abject fear I usually experience in the mortal plane.

Granted, none of the Ceratans know who I truly am. But that does not make their respect and worship any less pleasant.

Snared by an idea, I pause and turn back. "Do you know where I can find the home of Lord Venniroth?" I ask the guards. "And do you have a horse I can borrow?"

They seem all too happy to give me both directions and a horse. The horse is none too keen at having to bear the god of death, but I discover that the application of life-light around his eyes and nose renders him much calmer. The green glow does him no harm; rather, it seems to remind him of pastures and summertime. Or so I assume, for he accepts my presence without screaming and bucking.

I shall have to practice more with life-light. I always considered it a rather useless ability, but in the mortal plane, it may be one of my most helpful traits.

What has become of me, that I care about being *helpful* to living humans?

At last I arrive at Venniroth's home, a stately mansion in one of the wealthier sectors of the city.

A night guard patrols the street, but he is easily overcome by the sleep of death. After looping my horse's reins over a gatepost, I stride up the walk to

the entrance.

My shadows make quick work of the lock, and I send a wave of death-sleep flowing through the house, to ensure that I will encounter no one and raise no alarms.

After a short search, I find Venniroth's rooms—an opulent suite with an enormous bed, nearly as large as the one in the chamber of the former king. Venniroth lies in its center, gray and motionless, propped upon pillows. The curtains around the bed are open. This is a man who forgoes warmth in favor of being able to see what might slink into his room at night.

I light a single candle, and then I lift the sleep of death from him alone, leaving the other residents of the house in its thrall. Taking up a post at the foot of his bed, I rattle my claws along the polished wood.

Venniroth wakes instantly. His hand dives beneath his pillow and comes out with a short dagger. He grips it in his aged fingers first, then winces and switches the hilt to his other hand, the one that is still strong and healthy.

When he recognizes me, a look of stricken disbelief passes over his face.

“I met some friends of yours earlier this evening,” I tell him.

“You fought them off,” he says hoarsely. “But that’s not possible. Six trained men...”

“They chopped me to pieces. Poisoned me. Yet here I stand.”

“Not possible,” he repeats. Then he shouts, “Malen! Vor! To me!”

“Your guards and servants cannot hear you.” My voice fills the room, darkness incarnate. “They are asleep. The transformation of your hand was a warning—one you did not heed. Clearly your desire for the Queen and the Crown is stronger than I thought.”

“Sorcerer.” He brandishes the knife at me. “Invader. You are some foul thing from that land of unholy magicks, from Terelaus. I have heard stories —”

“I am not what you believe me to be. Nor will I grant you the satisfaction of the truth. I intend no harm to your people, or to the Queen. But I believe you do.”

I stalk around the corner of the bed, my claws dragging at the curtains. “I punished the men you sent after me. I would be unjust to absolve you of guilt in the matter. After all, you instigated the attack on my life.”

“You cannot touch me.” Venniroth's voice rises. “I am the most influential member of the Queen's Council.”

“I am well aware of that. As I said, I did warn you.” I nod to his aged

hand. “Apparently you require a more thorough lesson. I should have cut off that hand the first time you threatened my Queen with it.”

Vennirotth scrambles out of the bed on the opposite side from me. I give him a grim smile, the smile of a predator who has cornered his prey, who allows it to believe it might yet escape, when in fact there is not the slightest hope of that.

“You cannot touch me,” he repeats. “I have allies—”

“But they are not here.”

He swallows. “I have—I have money.”

“I do not want it.”

“What then? What do you want?”

“The truth. Why did you wish me dead?” I pace toward him, and he cringes in a corner, half-shielded by a large wardrobe.

“I want this kingdom to be ruled correctly, by a man who grew up here, not some foreigner.”

“You want the throne.”

His eyes dart frantically, as if searching for a path to escape.

“And what else do you want?” I’m nearly within reach of him now. “Say it. Speak the truth, and it may save you from death.”

“I want—” Vennirotth’s mouth twists under his short white beard. He was handsome once. Still is by mortal standards, I suppose, although age and overly-rich living have caused his face to swell and sag in places.

I reach for him.

He slashes my wrist, blood spraying over his clothes and my coat.

“Fuck,” I growl. “I like this coat.”

The wound heals almost immediately, and my fingers slam around his neck. With my other hand I twist his knife away.

“What else do you want?” I hiss into his face.

He spits at me, writhing and reddening.

“You lust for her. Admit it. The full truth, and I swear I will spare your life.”

But he will not speak.

So I press my palm to his forehead.

And I read his sins—deeper and more vile than I had imagined.

In his memories I see Vale, dark-haired and laughing, playing with her two friends in one of the palace fountains. She is not more than twelve years old, I would guess. Her shift and pantalettes are plastered to her skin, nearly

transparent, while Lord Venniroth, caught by surprise at first, lingers behind a hedge to watch.

That is the first time, but he watches Vale for years. And since he cannot have her, he takes other girls—young maids, frightened and wide-eyed, overwhelmed by his power, too timid to deny him.

His most recent sin is the poisoning of his wife so he can be free to marry Vale.

And his son is being forcibly held captive, under the excuse of protecting him from the plague. In truth, Otin Venniroth knows things his father would rather keep hidden. That is why he has been confined in this house.

With a sharp exhale, I snatch my hand from Lord Venniroth's forehead.

"What are you?" he whispers.

"You gave me the truth, albeit unwillingly," I say. "So I will not kill you. But I will shorten your life."

Even as I step back, he begins to change, stooping over, shrinking down to knobby bones and spotted, translucent skin. He blinks at me blearily through age-glazed eyes and vents a thin, cracked shriek of horror.

"Your body is that of a man nearing his hundredth year," I tell him. "Your dick will not work, except to dribble urine when you least expect it. You will no longer have a seat on the Council, or any say in the workings of the kingdom. When you die, which will be quite soon, your son will inherit your fortune. Nothing can prevent him from spilling your foul secrets. All your machinations and wretched plans are at an end. You will never touch Vale or any other woman again. You are finished."

I stride to the door, but I pause on the way out. "When you perish, and you pass through Arawn's Furnace of Souls, do not expect a pleasant residence in the realm of Unlife. There are places of torture prepared for the likes of you."

The last I see of Lord Venniroth is a feeble shadow of a man tottering toward the bed, wailing his misery and rage. But he is toothless, feeble of tongue, and his wail is a wordless thing.

I leave the house, lifting the sleep of death as I mount my horse again and ride for the palace.



I wake as Arawn eases himself into the bed beside me.

“Where were you?” I mutter. “Oh... I remember... the sick child.”

“Hmm,” he murmurs. “Sleep, love. It is not yet dawn.”

I doze again, and rouse later to find him lying wide-eyed on his side of the bed, staring at the ceiling. I sit up, bleary-eyed. I’ve been rising at dawn so often lately, my body instinctively knows that the time is near sunrise.

Muzzy from sleep, I stumble to the washroom. When I return, I light a lamp. Then I plop down on the edge of the mattress and begin dragging a brush through my long white hair.

The sheets rustle as Arawn sits up.

“I went to the Pit last night, after my other business was concluded,” he says. “I brought you something.”

I’m not sure why he refers to sparing a child’s life as “business,” but I turn to see what he brought me.

He’s holding it between his thumb and forefinger. My brother’s dagger. The one I accidentally dropped into the Pit on the day I summoned the death god.

It has made the journey in the Unlife, and it has returned to me.

Illogically, it feels like having a piece of Aspen back again. My sweet brother, with his vast kindness and his earnest good intentions. He could be ridiculous sometimes—could make me laugh until my sides ached—but he was wonderfully serious when he needed to be. Decent with a blade, but not a warrior. Not violent. I don’t believe his dagger ever tasted blood before I

used it.

“You found it,” I breathe. “Arawn...”

I clasp the hilt and kneel on the bed, scooting forward on my knees and throwing both arms around the death god’s neck. The blade of Aspen’s knife catches on a lock of Arawn’s dark hair.

“This means so much to me,” I whisper.

He’s holding me, encircling my body with a gentle reverence and warmth that melts my heart.

I pull back a little and look into his green eyes. “You really do love me, don’t you?”

“I do.” But his smile is sad, his gaze edged with concern. “And now, wife, I must ask for something in return.”

“Anything in my power.”

“Burn the book Rose gave you. The one you used to summon me.”

A week ago, I would have denied his request. But I understand it now. Even though I haven’t had time to look through the tome myself, I don’t wish to keep it.

“Destroying it won’t break my contract with you, or end Macha’s spell, will it?”

“No,” he admits. “I simply don’t want anyone using it again.”

“I understand.” I slide off the bed, laying Aspen’s knife on the sheets. I yank open a drawer, take the ritual tome in my hands, and walk to the fireplace.

For a second I hesitate, running my fingers along the crumbling edges. Touching the imprinted runes on the cover.

“Did Rose tell you where she got it?” Arawn asks.

“From somewhere in the city. A little book shop, perhaps, or a magic dealer. You know, I don’t think she told me exactly where.”

“I suspect whoever gave it to her was Macha in disguise,” says Arawn.

The thought of the wicked goddess being so close to my friend makes my stomach turn. “You think she wanted me to summon you?”

“I believe her scheme had many layers. She is a complex being, ancient and intelligent. But intelligence is not wisdom, and her mind was deeply gutted by the wound your stepmother gave her.” Arawn rises from the bed and begins working at one of the large, carved bedposts with both hands.

“Do you mean a literal wound, or a figurative one?” I frown, tilting my head. “What are you doing?”

He gives a final wrenching twist, and half the bedpost detaches, coming loose in his hand. The post is hollow inside.

“What on earth...” I step forward, half-forgetting the book in my hands.

Arawn extracts something from the dark space inside the post—a beautiful dagger with a golden hilt. Its sheath is exquisitely crafted, inlaid with semi-precious stones and mother-of-pearl.

Gingerly Arawn lays the dagger on the bed, next to Aspen’s knife.

“This is a dagger spelled with godsblood—Macha’s blood, to be precise. When your stepmother declared her intention of ending the relationship, Macha attacked her, and your stepmother scratched her with this. A scratch sends a god back to their realm and forces them into a deep sleep.”

“That’s why Macha delayed her revenge,” I say. “She was recovering from the scratch.”

“Yes. Had your stepmother pierced her flesh, Macha would have been annihilated entirely.”

“How did you know this dagger was here? Did Macha tell you?”

“I don’t believe she knows of the dagger’s existence. Legend says that once a dagger is used on a god, it disappears. But perhaps since it only grazed her, it remained intact. Macha probably thinks it was destroyed. But I sensed its presence.” Arawn eyes the weapon with more caution in his eyes than I’ve ever seen from him. “This knife can kill any god. But to the god with whose blood it was spelled, it is more potent, and also undetectable. Even if Macha were standing in this room, as long as the dagger was hidden, she would be unaware of it.”

“My stepmother knew Macha would come back.” I tighten my grip on the ritual tome. “She was ready to protect herself.”

“As you should be.” Arawn’s voice deepens, dark with warning. “I want you to know where this dagger is, in case you need it.”

“You would trust me with something that could kill you?”

“I would trust no one else with it.”

My heartbeat quickens at the words, at the confidence in his tone. Taking a deep breath, I turn my back to him and toss the ritual tome into my bedroom fireplace. The embers do little more than hiss, so I take the poker and urge them back to life, until tongues of golden flame lick at the book, chewing its edges until they are black and curling.

“Macha mentioned that if she attacked you directly, by her own hand, the other gods would be angry.” I look back at Arawn, searching his eyes. “If

I gave you the godsblood dagger, and you killed her with it, would the pantheon come for you?"

"They would end me, yes. There is a law preventing gods from destroying each other. It is our most sacred rule."

"Yet your three sisters were able to create that summoning and binding ritual for you. And Macha was able to add a condition to it."

"Yes, because that ritual is not lethal. It is an annoyance, a divine prank. Macha's added spell is more serious, to be sure, but it only renders me vulnerable, given certain conditions. It does not kill me."

"So it's a loophole." I chew my lip. "What if Macha died? Would her spell break then?"

"It would."

"How do you know? Have gods died before?"

He chuckles roughly. "You ask many questions, little doe. Yes, gods have perished before. In addition to myself and my siblings, there is a lesser tier in the pantheon, made up of minor gods."

I nod. "My grandfather taught me some of their names. Granus, Mawr, Taliesen, Lleu, Ermae..."

"Yes. A few have met their end, and when they did, all their active rituals or spells ended as well."

"It's so simple, then." I rise, holding the godsblood knife. "We have to kill Macha. Then the life-bond between us will dissolve, and you can keep your throne even though you love me."

He tosses a hand through his long hair. "As I said, I can't kill Macha without suffering immediate vengeance from the other gods. And you are human. Strong in spirit as you are, you are too weak to face her. She would kill you, causing my death as well. And the other gods would forgive her if she acted in self-defense. Besides, you could never get close enough to wound her with that blade."

"My stepmother did," I murmur.

"They were intimate. And even if you tried to seduce Macha, I do not believe she would be foolish enough to succumb. She has retreated to her realm, for now, and you cannot go there—you'd go mad instantly."

"Then we draw her out, somehow. We tell her we want to bargain."

Arawn winces. "She won't agree to that. Not after the encounter she and I had in Annwn last night. I defied her, insulted her, and threw her out of my realm." He rises, sighing. "Leave the blade hidden. We will think of

something. Right now, we must have some breakfast and prepare to visit the sick.”

“And then our wedding celebration.” I trace the beautiful inlay of the godsblood sheath. “You should search my father’s closet for something appropriately fine to wear. You need your own wardrobe, though. Perhaps, while I’m holding court this afternoon, you can visit the palace tailor and order some things.”

Arawn looks intrigued by the idea. He leaves my bedroom to find clothing, and I step over to the hollow bedpost, intending to hide the dagger again.

I hesitate, biting the inside of my cheek lightly.

Then I pick up Aspen’s dagger and drop it into the hiding place. And I strap the godsblood dagger to my thigh.

Swiftly I layer my body with thigh-high stockings and garters, tall boots, a petticoat, a gown, a belted overdress, and a scarf. No one will guess I have a godkilling weapon hidden beneath it all; yet, if I want access to the weapon, I have only to reach beneath my skirts.

Arawn can sense the weapon. He’ll know that I have it with me, but I’m determined he won’t talk me out of this. If I ever have the chance to get close to Macha, I must be quick enough to slay her before she sees the knife. If she thinks I’m a threat, she will kill me, resulting in Arawn’s death.

I won’t use this dagger in any foolish, flailing attempts to annihilate the goddess. I wouldn’t risk Arawn’s life like that. But I won’t be unprepared, either, if fate should grant me an opportunity to free us both.



I sense the presence of the godsblood dagger beneath Vale's skirts, though I don't mention it. Let her carry it if she so wishes, if it helps her feel safer, if it gives her a small sense of control over our situation.

The weapon's presence festers like a splinter in my consciousness as Vale and I travel by coach to one of the city squares. It's in an affluent sector of town, not far from where I confronted Lord Vennirot in his home. The hour is still early. I wonder if Vennirot's servants have discovered the state of their master, if they recognize him at all. He can barely speak, though his mental faculties should still be fully intact. A true horror, to be trapped within an aging husk, barely able to form words, yet internally capable of keen thought. It's the perfect revenge for the violent attempt on my life, and it prevents his lordship from doing any further damage. Elderly humans seem to be capable of very little, from what I've observed.

This morning, Vale wears an overdress of luscious, deep red, embroidered with blue and gold, over a dark blue velvet gown. A cloak is pinned to her shoulder with a fine brooch, topaz and gold, and she wears fingerless gloves. Her white hair is partly pinned back, mostly loose waves, with a few tiny braids in it. She crouches beside a couple of sick children, her breath puffing clouds into the sharp cold.

I have never seen anything so beautiful.

"Stay close," I warn her, leaning down to place my sign on the little ones.

As I straighten and scan the group of plague victims, I see no threats,

just miserable people lying on the frozen cobblestones, wrapped in blankets, with their heads in the laps of their loved ones.

It's a much smaller crowd today. My work is having a noticeable effect, which pleases me. I draw in a lungful of the crisp, bright air, nodding to the people who reach for me with trembling hands and beseeching words.

I glance back at Vale, still crouched near two children. Three of her guards are right beside her, so I move on, placing my palm on forehead after forehead. One woman I pass over, because she broke her son's fingers once in a fit of anger, and she strikes her husband daily. But on the others I set my mark, sparing them from death by this plague.

A sharp cry echoes behind me. A man's cry—one of Vale's guards. His shout is echoed by more cries of alarm, and I whirl around, my stomach plunging with dread. Never before have I heard such sounds from Vale's men.

She's bending over one of the sick—no, slumping over them. Her body jerks, even as her guards reach in and pull her back, away from the plague victim.

As they drag her off the bundled form on the ground, I see a large spot of blood on the plague victim's blankets.

For a moment I don't understand. I can't make sense of it.

But then the sunlight glints off a knife in the aged hand of the plague victim... who is not a plague victim at all.

His hood falls back, and I see the wrinkled face of the elderly Venniroth.

He was here. Lying in wait among the plague victims. Knife in hand.

And Vale—

My gaze whips to her, to the hand she's pressing to her chest, to the blood leaking between her fingers.

Her guards are holding her, shouting for help, for a physik. Farley is running to us from the carriage, carrying the medical kit he keeps under the driver's seat. It has some bandages, some soothing creams—but I can tell by her altered scent, she needs more than that. She needs a healer, immediately. The miasma of death is already beginning to gather around her.

And I am standing here like a statue, like a fool, while a sickening weakness begins in my belly, twisting my gut.

She is dying. And then I will die.

For a blinding moment I can see nothing—nothing but the shriveled, rictus grin of the aged Venniroth, who lies at Vale's feet, still clutching his

knife. After I left, he must have crept from his home and waited here—waited to deal out death to my Queen. To finish the task Macha set for him.

I underestimated the strength of wickedness, even in such a frail body.

I lunge for him, seize his head in both my hands, and snap it sideways. His spine pops, and it is done. He is gone.

I should have killed him last night. Why didn't I end him then?

My fault, my fault.

I whirl to Vale, desperate, wracked by the same terror I felt that night on the road, when one of my hounds tore her with his claws. But no—this is worse. This is happening faster. I can feel her sinking quickly.

“Someone get a healer,” I choke out. “A surgeon, a physik—”

“There are no more healers, Lord Consort.” The guard who speaks is white-faced, half-holding Vale while Farley unrolls bandages with trembling hands.

I snarl at the guard and take hold of Vale myself, sinking onto the cobblestones and draping her across my lap, her head on my arm. “One of you take a horse, ride to the palace, and fetch the Queen's maid, Tilda. Now!”

Two of the guards dash off to obey, while Farley places bandages over the stab wound in Vale's chest.

She's wide-eyed, struggling to breathe, staring up at me with her blue-gray eyes, her black lashes stark against her pale skin. “I'm sorry, Arawn,” she chokes out. “I didn't—wasn't careful—I didn't recognize Venniroth until he—”

“This is not your fault. It is mine. I should have told you what I did to him last night. If I had, you might have known—you might have seen—” I groan, bowing over her, pressing my forehead to hers. Hoarsely I grit out words, useless words, powerless against the ritual that binds us. “I do not accept this death. This soul is not for the Pit. I do not accept this death...”

A clear, cheerful voice rings out nearby. “Oh good! I'm not too late for the show.”

Before I even lift my head I know who I'm going to see.

Macha stands nearby, her face blood-flecked and merry, her hair in two wild bunches. She wears black furs matted with blood. Her feet are bare, coated in blood that leaves scarlet footprints as she approaches.

“So the old fool managed to finish his task.” She kicks Venniroth's body. “I shall have to reward him somehow, in the Unlife. Perhaps I'll let him lead my armies when we move out to conquer all the realms.”

The humans in the square are cringing away from her, cowering. Some may recognize her, but even those who don't can sense the aura of dire malevolence, of careless, brutal power that emanates from her.

I want to spring at Macha, to battle her, to crush her into oblivion. But Vale would die while we fought, and I would perish immediately afterward.

No, my pride and power are not the answer here.

"Your antimagic," I say hoarsely. "You can heal her."

"I could." Macha tilts her head, taps her chin. "But why would I do that, when her death gives me what I want? It keeps the two of you from having enough time to worm your way out of this, you see. So I win, sooner than I expected."

"But you don't win everything." I force the words out through clenched teeth. "You want me, too. And you may have me. Heal her, and I will yield Annwn to you. I'll come to you at the end of my contract, and I'll be yours entirely, body and mind. All of me, at your pleasure. Think of it—the god of death, your devoted slave."

My body is shaking. My incarnate form can sense the end approaching—the end of my beloved, and of me.

"Please," I whisper. "Please. Do what you like with me, only save her. I beg you."

Macha purses her lips as if she's thinking. "Very well. Give her to me."

Every fiber of my being resists as I hand Vale's body over to the goddess of war. I can hardly bear to let her out of my arms, much less allow Macha to touch her.

Vale seems to be unconscious. She's utterly limp and pliant in my sister's arms.

"You should lie down, Arawn," Macha says, blowing a strand of hair back from Vale's face. "You don't look well at all."

"Heal her. Please." I bow with my face to the cobblestones.

"Oh, brother mine." Macha chuckles. There's a snap and a gust of air, and I look up as great leathery wings explode from her back. "I don't think I will heal her, after all. But I will dump her into the Pit myself, and follow her down, and see to her first torture session in the Unlife. And then I'll have a seat on my new throne. You see, I don't want this human girl's leftovers. I don't want a god-slave who pines for his rotting mortal while he's fucking me. You had your chance, brother. It's too late now."

With a powerful wingbeat she rises into the air.

Roaring my rage, I leap up, extending my own wings, intending to follow her. But my wings appear for only a moment before they evanesce, and a ripple of horrific weakness shudders through me.

This is not like the night of the hound attack. Vale was fading slowly then, but this time she is standing on the very brink of death, already tipping over the edge. And as she falls, my powers are leaving me.

I cannot follow through the air, nor can I ride a horse without the calming effect of life-light. But I can run after Macha and Vale until my heart gives out. Until my beloved dies, and I vanish back into the darkness from which I was born.



I am not unconscious.

I feign it though. It isn't hard to pretend, because my body is shutting down.

All the systems that work in perfect synchronicity to keep me alive are stuttering, slowing. I'm fairly sure that blade nicked my heart. It's only a matter of time before my soul detaches from my dying form.

Everything happened so fast. My mind barely had a chance to collate the facts.

The aged man who raised a shaking hand to me, whom I knelt to comfort—the one who stabbed me in the chest—it was Lord Vennirot, but with a body aged to match his hand. Arawn must have dealt that punishment when he left during the night. And he didn't tell me about it. Probably because he knew I wouldn't approve.

Macha was waiting to confront us. Infuriated because Arawn banished her. Eager to witness my demise, to ferry me to the Unlife herself.

I force my limbs to remain limp, even though I'm struggling to breathe. It doesn't help that the goddess reeks of sourness, old metal, and decay.

Soon I'm going to pass out.

I can't make a move against Macha from this high up. I don't know how quickly the knife will act on her, and if she disappears and I drop from this height, I'll smash on the ground below.

No, I have to wait until she dips lower.

Wind blasts my cheeks, chilling my flesh until I can't help trembling

with the cold, despite my efforts to appear unconscious. Thankfully the Pit of Arawn isn't far from the city, and the journey there is much quicker by air.

Macha wheels over the forest, banking sharply, nearly letting me tumble from her grasp. She dives into the clearing, sweeping low along the tangled black vines, heading for the Pit.

I have to make my move. Now or never.

But one of her arms is across my back and the other is wrapped beneath my knees, pinning my skirts in place. I can't access the dagger in this position; I need to force her to carry me differently.

I stir, moaning, pretending to wake a little.

"Oh good," Macha says. "You're awake. I want you to know what's happening to you, worm. I can't throw you into the Pit yet—I can't be the one who kills you, you see."

She dumps me onto the hard, twisted mass of black vines and roots that cover the ground. "You have to die first. So you'll die here, just beside the Pit, and then I'll kick your body in. And then..." She inhales, long and deep, like she can smell the most satisfying meal. "Then our fun will begin. Well... *my* fun, your torment. On the bright side, you'll get to see your dear stepmother and your father again, while I torture them. A little family reunion. It's really all about family, isn't it? I've always thought—ow!"

She looks down, startled.

The godsblood dagger is sticking into her bloody foot, between the bones. My nerveless fingers slip from the hilt, unable to hold on any longer.

Macha's eyes flicker red. "How do you have that?" she gasps. "I—"

But she can't speak any more. Her form is dividing, separating into disparate pieces like a puzzle—and the next second she implodes, all the pieces sucked inward, toward an invisible fixed point in the air, suctioned into that spot and then *gone*.

The godsblood knife, its tip still embedded in a black root, trembles. Its hilt and blade begin to flake away, carried like dust on the wind until there is nothing left.

Macha is gone. The goddess of war, annihilated by my hand with my mother's weapon.

Arawn is free.

I will die, but he will survive. I will see him again—we'll be together in Annwn. It won't be the same—his incarnation will have ended, and I'll be a ghost—but it will be something.

When I die, our contract will be broken. He'll leave Cerato behind and return to his role, and his realm.

I wish I could have saved more of my people. But I did my best.

I gave everything I had.

It's over. Why should I struggle to breathe anymore? I need to let myself go.

It's time to rest, with Rose and Leilani. With my family.

I lie splayed on the vines, staring up at black trees and blue sky.

Not a bad place to die, after all. Fitting that I should perish in the spot where I sacrificed so many lives to summon the god of death. These vines will drink my blood like it did theirs.

When I turn my head, I can see the lip of the Pit, the edge over which the black vines disappear, plunging into it. I can feel the gruesome, sucking pull of its power, the irresistible lure of death—so close now, mesmeric and overpowering.

Give in.

Breathing hurts too much.

Time to let it end.

No.

No.

I won't.

I drag in another breath.

No.

I'm not done.

Another breath.

No.

This isn't over. I will not go.

I will not go.

I do not accept this death.

I breathe it aloud into the cold air, into the crawling dread of the death-magic seeping from the Pit. "I do not accept this death."

My heartbeat is slowing. I will it to continue, with all my might, with every bit of strength I ever gleaned from my beautiful childhood, from the friends of my youth and the family who loved me.

I am the last, and I. Will. Not. Go.

I will not accept this death.

A shadow crosses the bright sky. Huge wings, feathered and dark.

A shape plunging down toward me. But my eyelids are heavy as stone, and I cannot keep them open.

A thump of a body landing, and two pairs of feet running to me.

"She is breathing." Arawn's voice, stricken with pain and relief. "Heal what you can, Tilda."

"It won't be much, my lord. I told you my magic is weak."

"Do your best."

I want to speak to Arawn, to tell him all the things... everything... But I can only take one more breath. And one more.

My head is lifted, cradled against something firm and fabric-covered.

“Little Queen.” The death god’s voice is deep and rich. Velvet darkness soothing me into my eternal rest. Warm fingers stroke my hair back from my forehead. “Stay with me.”

A flicker of warmth begins in my chest, and a golden glow shimmers through my eyelids.

Arawn bends nearer, murmuring words to me as the soft buzz of healing magic passes through the muscle of my damaged heart. “I am myself, and you are yourself,” he says softly. “Yet I will weave my life with yours, and the two of us shall be stronger, until the day betrayal or death may divide us. What is woven shall not be cut, and what is entangled shall not be severed. Yours infinitely, yours devotedly. Yours in passion and pain, in beauty and blood, in age and agony. By myself I swear it, and by my power I bind it.”

I can breathe more easily now. I’m breathing, and my heart is beating more strongly. The leaking of my life has halted.

There’s a faint gasp, and a rolling thump.

My eyelids blink open, heavy and thick.

Tilda lies on the knotted ground beside me, unconscious.

“Oh gods,” I rasp. “Is she—Arawn, tell me she didn’t die to save me. I couldn’t bear it.”

“No, love. Look.”

He points to her forehead. On her brown skin is a faint mark, identical to the one Arawn placed on the forehead of the boy healer at the riverside inn. “The moment you killed Macha, my powers returned. I was running through the city at the time, but your guards had caught up with me on horseback—they had Tilda with them. I seized her, and we took to the skies, to follow you with all possible speed. While we were flying I set this mark, so she could use her full power on you without risking her own life. She will need to rest and regenerate, but she will live.”

“She’s a healer,” I murmur. “I never knew.”

“Her magic is small and weak,” Arawn replies. “She has repaired your heart and your lung, I think, but your flesh is still broken, and you’ve lost much blood. I’ll take you to the palace to rest, and then I will send for that boy healer. He is far more powerful than Tilda, and he can mend your wound completely.”

“What about Tilda? We can’t leave her unconscious in the forest.”

“Your guards are riding after us. I told them where I was headed. They will be here soon, and they can retrieve her.”

Arawn lifts me carefully, spreading his wings again. There’s a lurch when we take off, and I grimace, but the pain is bearable.

“You’re always having to fly me around when I’m wounded,” I mutter, leaning my head against Arawn’s shoulder. “It makes me feel weak.”

“You just killed a goddess. You are anything but weak.” His voice is tight with emotion. “We are still contracted, you and I, but I no longer have to fear for my life, or for the fate of my realm. I am grateful to you, little Queen.”

My chest still burns with pain, but I manage to reach up and touch his cheek. “How do you feel? Are you less incarnate now that Macha’s spell is broken?”

“I could be if I wanted to change forms, I suppose. But I rather like this body.”

“Oh, good.” I nestle against him. “I rather like it too.”



While Vale lies in bed, resting, I cancel the midday celebration (to the great chagrin of the Chief Manager) and meet with the three nobles she previously left in charge when she and I were traveling.

First, the three nobles and I deal with the wild speculation running rampant throughout the city. Many people witnessed the assassination attempt, and some managed to identify Lord Venniroth's body, despite his aged appearance. They saw me kill him, listened to the conversation between me and Macha, and watched me pursue Vale and Macha in my winged form. Word of who I am is already spreading. There is nothing for it but to admit the truth.

So I tell the three nobles everything. Lord Redglaive, who is clever with words, writes a letter, which is copied by scribes and sent out via the official palace messengers and the Reckless Riders. In it we provide the people of Cerato with a shortened form of the truth, softened in places at the suggestion of Lady Elanann. Master Coors meets with the guards of the royal city and advises them on how best to manage the questions and concerns of volatile citizens without heightening panic.

As I speak with the trio of nobles and note how their different strengths complement each other, an idea begins to form in my mind. It is too new to speak of it to Vale, but worth contemplating as I consider our options for the future.

The boy healer arrives late the next day to finish mending Vale's wound. She speaks to him and his parents afterward, offering a fine residence here in

the palace and the best of education for the boy if they will stay and let him become a royal healer.

“Forgive us, your Majesty,” says the innkeeper’s wife, twisting her fingers together. “But we love our inn. It has been in the family for generations, and we would like to remain there. I fear the pressures of being a royal healer would be too much for our son at this young age.”

“I understand,” Vale says. “I would never uproot your family if that isn’t what you want. Please know that this invitation will remain open.”

When the family leaves her chambers, she looks at me. “You’re very gloomy, standing there with your arms crossed. What’s wrong?”

“I am thinking,” I tell her.

Her eyes twinkle. “It looks dreadfully unpleasant.”

“I am going to send out a decree, for every healer who may be living in hiding, and offer them the same mark I gave to the boy and to Tilda,” I tell her. “The healers may not be able to purge someone entirely from plague, but as long as their lives are safeguarded, they can help mitigate the symptoms until I can reach those who are sick.”

She nods thoughtfully. “It’s a good plan. But between that, and the tending of the plague victims, and the life-light in the greenhouses, when will you rest?”

I cock an eyebrow at her. “This from the woman who has scheduled every spare moment of my days since she summoned me?”

She wrinkles her nose adorably and gives me a sheepish grin. “Fair point, Lord Consort.”

“I will rest when it is done,” I tell her. I’m about to speak further of my idea, but Tilda and Hessie enter the room. Tilda is a little pale, but otherwise well. Hessie is rosy with excitement.

“I told everyone in the kitchens that I knew about Lord Arawn all along,” she bursts out. “I told them how you turned me into a cat.” She’s beaming with so much pride I can’t help a half-smile, which only makes her blush more.

“We’re here to dress you for the public forum, Your Majesty,” says Tilda. “The Chief Manager says the courtyard is already packed full of people.”

“Very well.” Vale swings her legs out of bed and stands upright. She wobbles a little, but then she finds her footing.

The sight of her alive and standing shears through my heart. Sweet pain

swells in my chest, tightening my throat. I stride out of the room, pressing my thumb and forefinger to the bridge of my nose. I kick the door between the Queen's room and the parlor, and it swings nearly shut, giving me a little privacy.

Tears are pooling in my eyes, beading hot on my lashes.

I almost lost her.

She was nearly gone.

If I had arrived a few minutes later...

I sink onto one of the sofas in the parlor, weeping silently and listening to the melody of her voice as she speaks with her maids about what she should wear and how her hair should be done.

Blinded by my tears of relief, I almost don't notice the change in the air—the breath of a new scent, heady and floral.

My head snaps up, my cheeks still wet.

My sister Beirgid, goddess of fertility, stands before me, her long pink hair flowing down to her feet, partly concealing her pale nude form. Beside her stands Aine, goddess of youth, beauty, and love. Her yellow gown, like living sunshine, contrasts beautifully with her brown skin and dark hair.

My first thought is that they have come to avenge their sister by killing me, or by slaying Vale. In truth, I've been expecting some response from my fellow gods.

I rise, increasing my height and letting my horns and claws emerge. "You will not touch my wife."

"We haven't come to harm her," says Beirgid. "You two were bound in my name, in my temple. Frankly I enjoyed watching the ceremony—and what followed."

I clear my throat and glance away.

"Oh, come now, brother. You are no longer a virgin. No cause for embarrassment. You know I can see everything that passes in my temples and shrines. You knew I'd be watching."

"I did not think of it," I answer, low.

"He's telling the truth." Aine steps forward, peering at me. "He thought only of his little mortal love. It's too sweet, Beirgid. I can't resist a true romance, you know that."

"And I can't resist such all-consuming passion," says Beirgid. "Especially in one who resisted all intimate entanglements for so long."

I want to shout at Beirgid, inciter of plagues. I want to roar my fury

because she was so pliant in Macha's hands, because she began the sickness which caused so much death in this land.

But the last thing I want is to anger her. Stirring her wrath could put Vale at risk, or spur Beirgid to create a worse plague. So I crush down the angry words, and I force an expression of lazy calm onto my face.

"You've come to gloat, then." I resume my place on the sofa. "Go on, have your fun. I won't protest. But I'm surprised you can brush aside Macha's death so easily. The three of you were close."

Aine and Beirgid exchange glances.

"Macha hadn't been the same for a while," Aine says with a pout. "Not much fun at all, always talking about cosmic wars and blood vengeance. That mortal princess ruined her. Toward the end she kept making veiled threats at us and our realms. It was better for her to return into the light of the universe."

I had no love for Macha, but it surprises me to see how callous her sisters are about her death. Perhaps it's for the best, if their selfishness and apathy work in my favor and protect Vale from retribution.

"When your contract with the mortal has ended, what will you do?" asks Beirgid. "Remain here, or return to Annwn?"

There's a shadow in her question, and I search her eyes, trying to discern its true source. Neither she nor Aine have any interest in death. In the past, they've made it quite clear they despise my realm.

"You're not the ones asking," I say. "*He* is."

Aine glances away and Beirgid purses her lips. "Perhaps."

"Tell him I will retain full control of Annwn and continue to run it as I have always done," I say. "I have a plan for its governance in my absence."

Beirgid looks satisfied at that, and with a few more quips about my new sexual freedom, the pair of them disappear.

I stand up again, exhaling my relief. When I turn toward the Queen's bedroom door, three faces are peering through the gap. Vale and her maids.

"Those were goddesses," Hessie breathes.

"Beirgid and Aine?" Vale asks, her eyebrows lifting.

I nod.

The three of them release a collective sigh and varying murmurs on the theme of, "So beautiful."

A chuckle escapes me. "I suppose they are."

The maids hurry back into the Queen's bedroom to tidy things up, while

Vale glides toward me. She's clad in a gown of rich blue, with puffed shoulders, sleeves of silver lace, and silver threads running all over it. Her white hair has been gathered into a loose, elegant knot, and she's wearing a silver crown.

"Are the goddesses angry?" she asks, low. "They didn't seem to be. They were—teasing you."

"They are not angry." I take her hand.

"Thank the stars," she breathes.

"My brother sent them, to ensure that I will continue to take my duties in Annwn seriously, even though I'm now married to you."

"Your brother?"

"He's a bastard. We don't need to speak of him. I've given him reassurance, and he will leave us alone now."

"That's good." She squeezes my hand. "And now, Lord Consort, we must give my people some reassurance about being ruled not only by me, the ill-prepared queen, but by the god of death."

"Ill-prepared?" I raise an eyebrow. "You were the one who dared step beyond the lines and do what was necessary to save this rabble."

"Maybe don't call them 'this rabble,'" she says, patting my fingers with her other hand. "And you must admit, nothing like this has ever been done in the world before. We're breaking all the unspoken rules, you and I."

She smooths the shoulders of my suit, and then we leave her chambers. The Chief Manager meets us in the hallway and guides us through the corridors until we reach a long room which opens onto a balcony.

"That balcony is where you will stand to address the people." The Chief Manager motions us forward. "Gods bless you, Your Majesty. Although I suppose—they've already done that." He gives Vale a tentative smile.

"It's the other way around," I tell him. "The Queen has blessed me."

The manager smiles broadly, bowing. "Just so, Lord Consort. Just so."

As we move toward the balcony doors, a pair of servants opens them. The sound of the crowd waiting in the courtyard grows louder.

Vale leans toward me. "I read the letter you sent out."

"Did you?"

"It was very good. I might have made a few small changes, but on the whole—well done."

"Thank you, my Queen." I lift her knuckles to my lips, relishing the blush that tints her cheeks.

We step onto the balcony, approaching the balustrade.

Vale lifts her hand and mine together. Her voice rings out, strong and true. “People of Cerato, may I present to you your God and King, my beloved Royal Consort, savior of our kingdom and Ruler of Annwn, the Lord Arawn.”



It has been a year since I summoned the death god.

A year since I wept over the bodies of my friends.

Arawn has truly been our savior, setting his tethermarks on our healers and his sign on the victims of the plague throughout the entire kingdom. There have been no new cases of the sickness for almost eleven months. Arawn isn't sure whether that's entirely due to his influence, or whether Beirgid regretted what she had done and took measures to halt the spread of the plague herself.

Arawn's life-light hastened the maturation of the crops in the greenhouses, and when spring came he spread life-light over the fields as well. We've had two bountiful harvests this year, enough to stave off starvation and replenish the storehouses. The crops surrounding Allenaye have been the best and most flavorful Cerato has ever seen. Another small sign of the goddess's regret, perhaps.

We will never forgive her, Arawn and I. But she is his family, and we must learn to coexist.

My people have adapted to Arawn's presence surprisingly well. Perhaps, after living with death every day for so long, they learned to manage their fear of it. And who wouldn't, when its embodiment is as beautiful and glorious as Arawn? Thanks to their worship, he grows more powerful every day. Shrines to his name have sprung up across Cerato, and some of the northern towns have banded together to build a temple for him. He claims he doesn't want it, but I see the flicker of pleasure in his eyes whenever it's

mentioned.

Trade has resumed, but when foreigners are around, my people are silent on the topic of Arawn. As we've requested, they faithfully guard his true identity from outsiders. And if a rumor of his real nature should slip out, few of the visitors to our shores would believe it, since Arawn generally maintains his human guise when appearing in public.

On this day, the first anniversary of our meeting, he insists on flying me outside the city to his Pit in the forest.

He's bursting with nervous energy—I can feel it thrumming through his bare skin with every surge of his powerful wings.

Since his wings are out, I'm holding his new coat—one I had made for him as a gift on this day. He has a new crown too, but we left that behind, since he wanted to fly in his god-form. Crowns don't pair well with horns or antlers.

A family is traveling the road outside the city. As we soar overhead, toward the forest, the parents wave to us, and the children scream with delight, jumping up and down.

Tiny flakes of snow imprint wetly against my skin as we fly. When we reach the clearing where Arawn's Pit lies, he sets me down and dispels his wings.

"I like a scene of corruption and death as much as the next girl." I hand over his coat, and he shrugs it on. "But I confess I pictured something a little grander and more romantic to celebrate the breaking of our contract. Unless you plan to leave me immediately once our bond dissolves."

"Little doe." He grips my shoulders with those big hands of his. I tip my head back to look up at him—so tall, so divinely beautiful, crowned with antlers. His green eyes, wild and fervent and ageless, seem to pierce my very soul. "Beloved wife. I will never leave you, unless you request it."

I release a long breath. "In what world would I ever want you to leave me?"

He smiles. Grips my hand, and turns both of us to face the Pit.

"Arawn, my friends died in this place," I say quietly. "Why are we here?"

"Trust me." He inhales, closing his eyes. "Here it comes. The moment of release."

"Sounds naughty," I whisper. "I like it."

"Hush, O insatiable one."

I compress my lips and wait.

When it happens, I feel it—a subtle unlatching of something deep inside me.

Arawn groans, and when I glance at him I see the black chains, invisible and intangible for so long, lifting away from his body. One by one they snap, whipping backward, recoiling from him. And then they dissipate, flaking away, their residue carried off by the cold wind.

“Free,” he breathes. “You cannot imagine how wonderful it feels.”

“I’m truly sorry.” I loop my arm through his, squeezing it repentantly. “So sorry I had to put you through that pain. But I had no choice.”

“I know. And without all of that—the ritual and Macha’s spell—I would never have known how good an incarnate body can feel.”

“But you can’t disappear and reappear like the other gods when you’re incarnate.”

“I’m happy to give that up in exchange for the other benefits—sensation, emotion.” He cups my cheek, his thumb stroking across my lips. “And now that I’m free, I have two gifts for you, little doe. Stand here, closer to the Pit, and shut your eyes.”

“I’m not sure I will like anything that comes out of the Pit,” I say doubtfully. “I did like the knife, but that was originally from *this* plane.”

“Hush.” He kisses my mouth lightly. “The first gift is one I’ve spent much time pondering. I’ve considered how I could best divide my time between my duties in Annwn and my place here in Cerato. And I decided I would rather be here. Which means I needed someone to assume the responsibility of governing Annwn in my absence. While you were traveling with me, you appointed a trio of replacements, each with their own strengths. So I decided to appoint six human souls to rule in my stead. Keep your eyes closed, my love.”

“You chose great rulers of the past, I assume,” I say. “It’s a wonderful idea, Arawn. I’ll admit I was worried you’d have to keep leaving me every few days to check on your realm. I heartily accept the gift of your time.”

“That isn’t the gift, darling.” His voice has shifted; it’s slightly farther away. “Only gods can rule Annwn. So I awarded these six souls with the status of lesser deities. They now have a place in the lower tier of the pantheon. They can even visit the mortal realm for short periods of time.”

“How nice for them,” I say faintly. I’ve grown to know my husband very well over the past year, and something in his tone makes my stomach

soar into a heady, impossible, glittering cloud of hope.

“Open your eyes, Vale,” says Arawn.

But I don't. I can't, because if I'm wrong, if the six people he has appointed are not the ones I hope they are, I won't be able to bear the disappointment.

Arawn comes to me, sliding his hand along my neck, bending to whisper in my ear. “Love of my existence, open your eyes.”

I do.

And I sob, short and harsh, cupping both hands over my mouth.

Because they're *here*. Standing on the brink of the Pit, more beautiful than they ever were in life, and yet just the same, perfectly themselves, perfectly recognizable.

Rose, standing side by side with my brother Aspen.

Leilani, whole and untouched by plague, holding hands with her wife, Thistle.

My father, tall and regal, wearing his familiar kind smile.

And my stepmother, elegant, poised, looking every inch the queen she has always been.

“How did you make this happen?” I whisper.

“With the worship of Cerato,” Arawn replies. “The adoration of your people filled my well of power to the brim. And I had special permission from the other gods. Beirgid and Aine spoke on my behalf, and the other gods finally listened, after months of persistence.”

I stare at the six tall, newly-minted deities. So familiar. So different.

“Can I—can I touch them? Talk to them?” My voice trembles.

“Fuck yes,” says Leilani, breaking free of the line and running forward. She catches me in a violent hug, and a second later Rose's arms close around both of us. I'm sobbing, laughing, breaking apart.

Long minutes later, I've hugged them all, kissed them all, laughed with them all. I've gripped Rose's hands and thanked her for her sacrifice. I've thanked my mother for the dagger she hid in her room. I've said things I barely remember, because it's all a glorious, heart-pounding blur. Apparently Arawn has been keeping my family and friends apprised of all the goings-on in the mortal plane, ever since he first devised this plan. They understand everything that has passed on this side, and they congratulate me heartily on my marriage.

“We could not have left Cerato in better hands,” says my father.

I can't speak, so I hug him again.

When I release my father, Arawn draws me a few steps away. "Remember, my Queen, I have another gift for you. I cannot make you into a goddess—that is for souls who have already relinquished this life—but I can give you the next best thing."

"I can't imagine anything better than this, Arawn." My voice breaks. I grip the lapels of his open coat, pulling him close to me, and I lay my palm against his bare chest, over his heart. I want to say something that will communicate to him how much it means to me, what he has done. But he's already speaking.

"The second gift," he says, pressing his thumb to my forehead, "is a tethermark. It is the only eternal one I have ever bestowed, and it ensures that you will have youth, beauty, and health for as long as I exist. Since this mark channels a large portion of the power I have amassed, I will not be able to bestow tethermarks on anyone else, ever again. This is the last, and the best."

I'm weeping once more, blinking at him while my lips tremble and tears slide down my cheeks. "All this, for me?"

"You are worth everything," he whispers intensely, his green eyes burning into mine. "And you have given me everything."

I kiss him fervently, tearfully, barely conscious of my parents, my brother, and my friends watching us. But then a thought occurs, and I pull away, frowning.

"Wait... Arawn, does this mean I have to be Queen of Cerato forever?"

"No, my love. Only as long as you wish it, and then you and I will leave this kingdom in capable hands and travel elsewhere in the mortal world. We will see every sight you've dreamed of, everything I've observed in the memories of souls but never witnessed with my own eyes."

"And we'll be together, you and I." I lock my hands behind his neck. "Immortals, roaming the globe."

He smiles. "The plan pleases you?"

"Very much so."

We kiss again, heat melting from his lips to mine. I want to strip him bare and press myself wholly against him, feel him inside me, synchronize my heartbeat to his, revel in his moans and gasps as I dismantle his calm and make him entirely mine.

But that can wait until tonight.

Softly our mouths part, and we turn to face the six new deities of

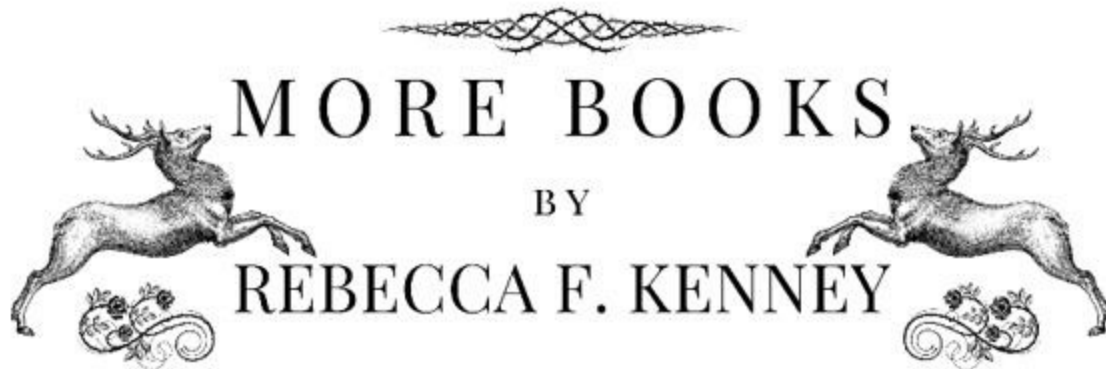
Annwn. My loved ones, reclaimed by the cosmic entity I summoned as a last resort, the dreadful god I claimed and ensnared, the lonely soul who, without knowing it, was waiting for me to bring him to life.

My love, my husband, my partner.

God-King of my heart.

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