



An Intimate Excerpt from the Diary of Our Lady: Including an Account of Her Captivity Under Orcus

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I never meant to ruin the world, yet here we are regardless.

When the Lady created the world of Timonde as her own private dollhouse, she condemned millions of people to the cruel rule of an evil empire and its dark god of death, Orcus. Upon realizing the horrors she's committed, the Lady decides to slumber for a thousand years as penance.

Orcus has been obsessed with the Lady since he was created to be her ultimate nemesis. Disappointed in both her original act of creation and the solution she deems acceptable to atone for it, he determines that only he is qualified to mete out her punishment.

When she wakes alone in Orcus's bed, the Lady has no idea what to expect. His touch is entirely too sensual for punishment, but he seems determined to own her, body and soul. Submitting to his control might be the worst mistake she'll ever make, because she risks losing the one thing she's never really had... herself.

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Chapter one

IN WHICH THE LADY CONVENES THE CONCLAVE OF GODS... WITH ONE NOTABLE EXCEPTION

They stood before me, a collection of my most trusted deities, though what I trusted them with varied. Of course, some I would trust to care for my world as I would, others I would trust to run it into the ground.

I had yet to decide which I actually desired.

When I'd created this world, I'd wanted nothing but to amuse myself. Envious of older gods and goddesses and their individual playgrounds, I willed my own into being. 2 As children are wont to do, I pleased myself first, creating an entire planet full of beings based on what I thought might be fun.

In hindsight, I wish I'd done things differently. But all I could do was move forward and give the world an opportunity to grow without my machinations.

Which led us to the line of deities in front of me.

One of them would be responsible for my planet, and another would be responsible for my exile.

It was potentially the single most important event this planet had seen since its creation, and all I could think about was how annoyed I was that one of them couldn't even be bothered to show up.

Mentally, I sorted them into buckets. First, the simpering attachés.

If my guess was correct, they would do everything in their power to see the world maintained just as I left it.

At least, until they realized that no one was coming to check their work.

At that point, each and every one of them was unpredictable, to say the absolute least.

Next were those power-hungry deities who resented that they were modeled after gods on other planets. Always jealous that they were nothing but a facsimile, they were eager for an opportunity to assert themselves. They wouldn't mourn my absence and take any opportunity to grab for power.

Those that were too wrapped up in themselves and their power, for example, those that ruled over the realm of sleep, didn't fit nicely into either category, as they tended to be too distractible to hunger in such ways. It was this lack of drive that made me worry for my plan.

Ideally, I'd have one god to handle all that I needed done, but my options weren't looking promising.

The death gods were, ostensibly, those most fit to the task, but though they were varied in their motives and techniques, they were also invariably secretive.

I could not count on what I knew of any of them.

Their shapes were multitude, from humanoids, anthropomorphic or chimeras, monsters from planets I'd visited, to formless suggestions hanging in the air. Frowning, I noticed one missing.

Orcus.

Fashioned after a death god from a culture known as Roman, he had been my primary foe these many years, whether he wanted to or not.

4 I'd created him, my most terrifying foe, to lead the forces of evil against my heroes, the scrappy little humans.

He may not have liked the role I'd cast him in, but he'd never complained.

In fact, I shouldn't have been surprised that he hadn't shown. Why would he? Did I not manifest him to be the very bane of my existence? Of course, he hadn't heeded my summons. Still, I wouldn't risk him claiming favoritism, wouldn't allow him to suggest an unfair choosing.

I might have been giving my successor a whole mess of problems, but Orcus was one I'd take care of now if I was able.

With a thought, I snapped my fingers and summoned him.

I opened a portal facing toward the floor and dropped him through it, smiling to myself as he smacked onto the ground, his signature tattered black cloak fluttering about.

I might have been naïve when I designed my world, but even I had to admit that I had style.

The man who stood up, however, was not what I was expecting.

Last I saw him, Orcus had been wearing the form he'd worn for years, since his creation.

Instead of a shadowy suggestion of a body, with wicked teeth and glowing gold eyes, something blue and hulking stood.

Through the threadbare clothing he wore, I could tell he was built thick with muscle.

Two large white tusks jutted up from his bottom lip.

He bore the pointed ears of an elf, and the heavysset brow was reminiscent of an ogre, but altogether, this form was entirely unlike any other creature walking the face of Timonde.

A thick tail lashed behind him and his body was covered in scales and horns that jutted from every joint.

His feet were cloven hooves and great horns curled back from his head, wrapped in black and blue shadows that hovered around him like hair.

"What have you done with Orcus?" I demanded. I didn't know who the hell this was, but I couldn't believe he'd managed to escape my whim and replace himself with whoever this was.

"Princess, I'm affronted. I'm shocked that you don't recognize me. Have I been downgraded from your arch-nemesis?" He looked around, holding his arms wide, as if searching the crowd of assembled entities for whoever usurped his place.

But this couldn't be Orcus; he was at least a head taller than I was. The voice, though, that gravelly bass grated along my nerves as it had so many times before. And no one else had the gall to call me princess.

"Am I to believe that you are Orcus, then?"

"None other, my lady."

I would know that tone anywhere, the way he could make my name, my title, sound like a curse rather than an honorific. It must have been him, though why he looked different was beyond me.

"Don't toy with me, Orcus, you know very well how different you look. What are you playing at? "

He sidled over to me, looming. "I've simply decided that if you're determined to leave us, I'd like your blessing to make some changes first. My people have suffered enough without —"

"Your people will be free of my influence soon enough. You don't need my approval for anything where they are concerned.

Isn't what I've done to them enough?" I turned my head in shame because if anyone had a right to hate me for all I'd done, it was Orcus.

"I have no right to say anything about what they do or what you do with them. "

"Oh, but my lady, that is where you are mistaken. Everyone in this room would agree that you've made mistakes, but thinking you can just wash your hands of them and be done is your biggest. It will take more than removing yourself from the situation to fix it, but I have a few ideas to get you started. "

Rearing back, I screwed my face up in anger. The light in the room darkened with my rage. "How dare you! I am trying to make this right!"

"By leaving!" he roared.

The room had gone silent around us, everyone I'd called watching with bated breath as the two most powerful beings on the planet truly squared off for the first time.

"You don't fix things by running away like the spoiled princess you were when you created this world.

You fix them by making it right . "The walls of the room flexed around us as he squared his shoulders.

He grabbed my wrist, hard enough that I was unable to twist away, and turned his snarling gaze to the room.

"Your services will no longer be needed. "

With a snap of his fingers, the room faded away, and I was left floating in nothingness. 5

1. As best I can estimate from our records, this takes place roughly 100 years before we began counting our current time. As such the date should I assume, correctly be counted as approximately YPS 1083 rather than YPS 983 as there have, in truth, been 1083 years post slumber.

2. There are, of course plenty of alternative creation myths on the beginning of the world. I am unsure, if at the start, anyone knew the actual truth of it. I cannot help but wonder though, about these other worlds, and if we shall ever see them.

3. Some of these, I can map to gods or goddesses represented in current religions, others... are more amorphous. Further, the suggestions of other worlds validates several controversial theories.

4. It is unclear if Orcus's looks, personality, or only his name were fashioned after

this society, as we have no records of them to speak of.

5. It is shocking to me that Orcus had enough to power to do this. I'd have figured that none of the Lady's creations would have been able to affect her personally.

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Chapter two

IN WHICH THE LADY IS KIDNAPPED, CONFRONTED, AND PROPOSITIONED

I spun in a circle until I saw Orcus standing, rather than floating, a smug smile on his newly gorgeous face.

I had no idea what was going on with him, what possessed him to change his looks, but it was unbelievably distracting.

If I squinted, I could see vestiges of the old Orcus in him—an unnervingly focused gaze, a stance that was too still, and a disregard for his clothing.

Not to mention a complete disinterest in heeding instruction, and a knack for infuriating me.

"What in the world do you think you are doing?" I'd have transported myself back immediately, but I couldn't have him causing havoc in light of my plans. I would deal with this now if it killed me.

"Things were getting heated, and I thought it might benefit us if we moved the discussion somewhere private."

"Oho! How thoughtful you are!" I bit out.

"Air your grievances, Orcus. Make your point. Since admitting my fault, issuing a

formal apology, and trying to make it right is clearly not enough, I'm prepared to listen to what it is you have to say.

" 1 With a thought, I conjured a dome chair and sat on its plush velvet seat.

I might have been anticipating the harshest dressing down of my long life, but I would be damned if I showed weakness to Orcus, of all people.

It would be one thing, if I didn't deserve it, but I did. I made the world, and in doing so, made him my villain. For years, he had judged me, played the part of the perfect villain, thwarting my plans at every turn, and now he had the temerity to insult me in front of all of my subjects?

"So this is your grand plan then? To sleep? To avoid your problems until they are different enough that you feel you don't own them anymore?"

"Was it not you who pointed out the many flaws in my actions? Was it not you who said you were surprised that I'd made so many missteps? That it was unfair for such a young goddess to have such power? Well, as you'd have it, I grew up, Orcus.

"And now that I have grown, it's become abundantly clear that my machinations have created a world where people's lives are dependent on the whims of a goddess."

With a smirk, Orcus conjured a chair and sat, his foot thrown across his knee nonchalantly. "And so, your solution is to remove yourself from the equation? What good does that do?"

"It gives them time, if nothing else. This way, they'll have time to become whatever they want. When I wake up, I figure a thousand years should be sufficient; I'll assess."

"A thousand years?" He shot out of his chair, his face stricken. "A thousand years is a long time, even to us! Think of what happened to the world during those brief stints you were away!" 2

"I've fixed things since then. I might have had little concept of the laws of physics when I created this world, but I assure you, it's been in balance for the last two centuries without any intervention. I promise, the world has achieved equilibrium. It doesn't need me any longer."

He crossed his arms before holding up a triumphant finger. "Well then, what about me?"

"What about you?"

"Who is going to control me while you are gone? Who is going to protect your precious humans from my hordes?"

"Well, I've removed the elves' access to magic, for one thing. I've erected a barrier between the continents.

It will hold for the course of my slumber.

3 Your hordes will have plenty of time to mature on their own.

To see that I led us all astray. The orcs, on the other hand, have drifted to align with the current perception of them on Earth.

I don't know if you've noticed recently, but even their culture seems to be shifting. "

"They're my people. Of course, I've noticed. You don't think I noticed when it was happening to myself? When my shroud of shadows began to evaporate around me?"

"You could have stopped it," I said with a shrug. If he didn't want his looks to change, he needn't play the victim.

"Honestly, Orcus, I had hoped you would be an ally in this. I figured you'd like nothing better than to see me removed from the world.

Though it seems we must adhere to our roles, eh? "

Orcus stood so still; a bowstring pulled within an inch of its limits.

His muscles were bunched beneath his tattered clothing, flexing and twitching as if barely restrained.

He tightened his jaw and tilted his head to the side, a muscle in his jaw flexing.

"I have been," he started, each word an effort, " everything you wanted. "

I squinted at him, mouth agape. Confusion and anger warred within me. The audacity of this man knew no bounds it seemed. "You can't be serious."

"Of course I am. "In the blink of an eye, he was before me, clutching my jaw in an iron grip, held just on the edge of hurting. He always had such a tight rein on everything he did, it made me want to scream.

"I have been nothing but what you wanted, what you made me to be. You wanted a villain, princess, and then whined when that is what you got. Oh, you may complain, but without me, where would your precious games have been? How would you have amused yourself if my armies hadn't given yours someone to triumph over?

When you grew bored, I launched a new attack.

When you were tired, when your forces could take no more, I'd conveniently have a catastrophe. "

His hand loosened on my chin and, like a whisper, his thumb glided across my cheek. If it were anyone less precise, I'd assume it was a mistake. But as far as his body was concerned, Orcus was all restraint.

I could have twisted out of his grip then, as easily as a thought... and yet... it was the most alive I had felt in years.

In my chest, my heart beat out of control, and I felt no compulsion to slow it.

Instead, I wanted to drown in that feeling, allow the thrumming in my veins, the confusion in my mind, and the warmth that emanated from him to consume me.

I wanted to bask in the feeling of helplessness he gave me.

For a moment, I wasn't a goddess, in charge of an entire planet I made on a whim.

I was simply a captive, transfixed by the black eyes boring into me and the euphoria I felt building within.

I studied his face, unfamiliar and yet, so entirely fitting. Was this what he looked like underneath the shadows that always clung to him? He had always been so terrifying, and even now, as I saw his shadows coalescing behind him, I felt exhilarated.

Orcus blinked at me, as if confused. His hand shifted from gripping my jaw to my neck. His finger pressed gently into my pulse, surprise flashing across his face before he pulled his cool mask of indifference across.

"I think, princess, I may have just found us a solution to your little problem."

1. I must admit to a distinct disappointment at never seeing our Lady in her power. She sounds like a force to be reckoned with.
2. Here, Orcus refers to the trips our Lady made to the planet Earth and others to study their balance. During those times, the world we now know descended into utter chaos, sometimes at a metaphysical level.
3. To say that this is both a cause for concern and jubilation is an understatement. The find of this text has set all of Sanctuary in a flurry. If this is true, the slow decay of the barrier could indeed be a countdown to her Awakening.

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Chapter three

IN WHICH AN AGREEMENT, A FAREWELL, AND THE LADY ENTERS HER LAKE

I stared up at him, this man, this god, that I knew so well.

And yet, until today, I'd never seen his face.

He stared so intently, his focus tangible on my skin.

His plan was a mystery to me, but the idea of it terrified and tantalized me.

A liquid, pulsing heartbeat that I couldn't suppress.

Surely, if I somehow managed to do so, I'd die just as quickly.

I gulped and watched as his face changed. I could see him feel the muscles in my neck move, the power it gave, despite the inaccuracy of the scenario. He couldn't kill me if he tried, unless I allowed it, but whatever passed between us was the closest I've ever been to true danger.

When I spoke, my voice was a rasping whisper, certainly not what I'd intended, and far more vulnerable than I was comfortable with. "Why do you call me that?"

I should have asked him about his "solution." Instead, the question bubbled through my lips before I could stop it. I'd wondered for years. "Princess" had always been his

favorite condescension, but it had never stung quite the way I thought he meant it to.

"Ah, now there's a question," he said. He smirked as he said it, and I realized that in this form, he was taller than I was by a fair bit. Why had I allowed that to happen? I'd always been careful to avoid putting myself at a disadvantage, especially with him.

"I decided long ago that if I was to be what you needed, if I was truly your greatest adversary, I could not allow you dominion over me.

If I addressed you as Lady, or my Goddess too frequently, I'd inherently internalize a power differential.

To me, you could not be more powerful. I needed to know, to believe to my very core, that we were equals.

Otherwise, you'd surely prevail every time. And that's no fun for anyone, is it? "

"N-no." My breathing quickened. Perhaps I'd made a mistake when I'd fashioned my body.

I modeled it on the humans I so loved, and subjected myself to the weaknesses such a body would impose.

So, I breathed. My heart raced. Blood pumped through my veins along with magic, displaying the way he affected me plainly.

"Now, to my idea..." he flexed his fingers again, running his thumb along my artery.

"You want to atone for your mistake, to give the world time to mature without your influence?

I propose you submit to my punishment, with guidelines, of course, and I will help you make amends.

I've an idea where I could execute this "slumber" you mentioned in your original missive.

Because I'd be overseeing it, I'd remain in contact with you, in complete control of your keeping, wellbeing, protection, progress, and schedule.

Perhaps, by the time your self-imposed exile was over, we'd have learned a few things, and you'll emerge the goddess I know you are capable of being. "

The idea should not have excited me. I should have screamed in horror or lashed out at him, showing him what a ridiculous notion it was that he should have dominion over me. I should have burned him to a crisp where he stood, or at least transported myself back .

And yet, I did not. I stared up at him, my mind whirling faster than my human body should allow.

I couldn't comprehend what was happening to me.

Here I was, being held so gently, so firmly, by my greatest enemy.

I was shivering all over... and it was the most thrilling experience I'd had in years, perhaps my entire life.

I hadn't felt as exhilarated since I had learned of the planet Earth and conceived of my own. Since then, for years, I had tried to recreate the adrenaline-fueled euphoria of my discovery.

And so, instead of burning him to a crisp or fleeing the situation, I tilted my head and pursed my lips. "What sort of guidelines?"

"Everything will be negotiated in advance, and I will not keep you beyond what you've agreed to. In fact, we should put safeguards in place to ensure that you can wake up, should you be ready before then."

It solved several of my problems quite tidily. I wouldn't have to worry about Orcus interfering with whoever I placed in charge of my slumber, because he would be in charge. For some reason I couldn't quite explain, that thrilled me.

I'd always felt I was someone who knew her own mind. But I was slowly learning how wrong I was. I had somehow created layers to Orcus and with his shadows gone, I'd apparently made him astoundingly beautiful, in the most dangerous way.

Days of careful preparation and planning later, I stood shivering inside my mountain.

I'd needed to do everything I'd done, certainly, but I can't deny that I delayed more than needed.

I might have hurt the people of this world, perhaps beyond repair, but I still loved them.

It was because of this love that I needed to leave them.

I'd made them for me, selfishly, and though I knew they deserved the chance to grow without my influence, I desperately wished that was not the case .

The cavern, though it would seem vast to a human, was snug for me, as I knew it would be for Orcus when he arrived. To one side was a small overlook where my people could, if they wanted, observe me.

A singular winding tunnel served as the opening to the valley beyond, to my perfect hamlet I'd created for my most steadfast supporters.

On my trip to Earth, I'd observed a village that was perhaps the most magical place I'd ever seen, and I'd recreated it, with a few improvements, for my people.

Inhaling, I closed my eyes, squeezing back tears.

I'd not see the beautiful settlement for a thousand years, at least not with my own eyes.

Orcus had indicated that he disagreed with my intent of total isolation. He'd ensure that I had updates on their progress. It wasn't clear if this was a kindness or punishment—perhaps both.

Gunna, the leader of my people in this place I'd called Sanctuary, huffed at my side.

She'd been a valuable voice of reason for her short eighty years of life. To her, I still appeared perhaps twenty. This was something I'd been planning her entire life. It likely seemed like something she'd never actually expected to happen.

Truthfully, she'd spent the last forty years trying to dissuade me from my course.

Though in the face of my preparations, the reality seemed to have settled.

She'd never been anything but respectful, though she'd admittedly challenged me more than anyone else on the planet.

She'd earned her place at the forefront of my people by questioning me when I'd needed it. My humans' lives were so short, barely two hundred years, worse, in many parts of the world, but I was still intimidating and timeless to most.

"All preparations have been made, my Lady." Gunna set her shoulders and lowered her voice. "Are you certain? I mean, Orcus? Must it be him? Surely one of the other—"

"No." I cut her off. The last thing I needed was to question my choices. "It must be him, I'm quite sure. "It was a query I'd wrestled with enough of my own. On the face of it, it seemed absurd. To submit myself to my greatest enemy.

And yet. I knew I must. No mortal could undertake the task of keeping me asleep, could keep me, no matter how I railed, from touching the world. While I'd certainly harmed his people the most, they were incapable of exacting my restitution, such as it was, and so he'd undertake it on their behalf .

In the brief moments I'd had to discuss it with him, I'd begun to worry that Orcus might not be quite as stern as I'd like, that he'd relent. But every other of the lesser gods would break long before he did.

He was my best option, whether I liked it or not.

Perhaps more concerning were the strange feelings that welled up inside me when I saw him without his cloak of shadows. Wrapped in them, it had been easy to make him my Dark Spectre, the terror of my nightmares. Without them, though he was still wickedness incarnate, I found the fear exhilarating.

Perhaps that was part of my punishment. I'd developed some sick fascination with the man I'd warred with for centuries. Now, I'd have to submit myself to his whims.

"It must be him." We'd debated it ad nauseum, and Gunna knew my mind. I refused to explain myself further.

With perhaps perfect timing, Orcus coalesced, his shadows wrapping around him

once more.

"Leave us," his voice rumbled through the cavern like thunder, rolling over me and caressing my insides until I shivered. A week ago, I'd have snapped at him for speaking in such a tone, but I needed to get used to his dominion, to trust his judgment.

So instead, I turned to Gunna and nodded. She held her hand out for me, then kissed her fingertips, settling it over her heart with silent tears running down her face.

Perhaps, if I was very good, Orcus would pass messages along for me.

Gunna stepped away, and in seconds, she disappeared. Orcus's shadows wrapped around us, and it struck me how odd it was to feel comforted by it. Instead of oppressive, they cocooned us, sheltering me from the outside world in a way I'd not experienced since the very beginning of my experiment.

Within his shadows, Orcus appeared as I'd come to know him, instead of the shadowy specter of my nightmares.

"I'll ask you again," he said. "Is this truly what you want? Do you freely submit yourself to my dominion, to make me your lord and master in all things, of your own will?" he said, his words whispering across my skin.

"I do." I breathed. My entire body hummed with anticipation. A tether stretched between us. The oath we'd begun tugged me to him, though he could not extract such an agreement from me without reciprocation, our power imbalance, even now, too evenly matched .

"And you? Do you swear to ensure my punishment is enacted with the best interests of the world at heart, seeking restitution for those I've wronged and rehabilitation of

your charge?"

"I do." The tether of our connection pulled tight, binding us together in a magic more ancient than even my mother's.

The corner of his mouth hitched in a smirk, making me shiver. The feeling zipped through me, stimulating and sensitizing my entire body. With a nod, he held out his hand and escorted me into the aquifer.

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Chapter four

IN WHICH ORDERS ARE ISSUED, POWER IS EXCHANGED, AND A BOND SNAPS INTO PLACE

The cool water of the lake lapped at my naked feet and suddenly I realized how much larger than me Orcus was. To a human, I was a giant, towering over them. I'd grown so used to being in the position of power that I was entirely unfamiliar with the vulnerability I felt next to him.

His hand though, was sure and steady, gently leading me deeper until the light linen dress I wore clung to my body.

"This is a good location. Peaceful," he noted. "Your body should be well protected here, though your mind will be with me. "

"Yes," I whispered. I knew some of what to expect. We'd negotiated certain aspects of my captivity, some he'd insisted upon, a timeframe rather than an indefinite period, for example, and some that had been my idea, like ensuring there was a focus on my pain being productive.

We hadn't discussed what exactly I would endure, instead, we'd discussed a framework in which to work.

Those I'd harmed by assigning them to the forces of evil had not had a choice as to what pain they'd receive by my orders.

Orcus hadn't had a choice as to what pain he'd been forced to inflict.

Even now, I wondered if he had a choice in this.

Soft fingers tipped with claws settled on my shoulders, and with a gentle nudge, he indicated that I should lie back.

Vaguely, I was aware of how the wet dress clung to me, sheer with the water.

I wanted to cover myself, lest he see my form.

It was a silly worry, a silly realization.

My body could appear however I liked, and it was not as if he was unfamiliar with the human form.

I floated atop the water, seeing past the craggy ceiling of the cavern, the stalactites that hung there, to the valley I'd created beyond.

Out there, I knew, the villagers, my protectors, huddled in their thatched roof houses, were eating a somber feast in my honor.

Their prayers, and their attention, would aid Orcus in harnessing my own power to initiate my ritual.

My own power would keep me bound, and once he held it, I'd speculated that I'd not be able to regain it unless he relinquished it. Closing my eyes, I cast my mind out, checking the many wards I'd put in place.

The barrier, spanning the globe, would separate the peoples of magic from the humans.

And the bubble over my valley, that regulated not only passage in and out, but their environment, granting them a temperate climate instead of the harsh polar weather.

All of it was in place. Orcus and I were positioned at the exact magnetic north of my planet, harnessing the very fabric of magic I'd used to craft the world for our work.

It was not easy, what I'd asked him to do, though he was nearly my equal in power—I'd made him to be my match, after all—our powers did not mix easily, and this would take both.

Once I was settled, arms floating out from my body, Orcus slipped his hands up through my hair to cradle my head.

"Open, princess," he prompted.

Perhaps someday, following his orders would be simple, something I'd do without thought, but that order, so deceptively simple, initiated an internal battle fiercer than any he and I had ever waged.

Tentatively at first, I reached my power toward him, the blue green of my magic appearing around me as tendrils.

I focused on opening myself to him, on connecting.

Another part of me, however, a baser, and perhaps more powerful part, resisted, whipping the tendrils of power away from him.

I was a god. I'd created this world, and him with it.

What was more, I'd created him to be my opposite, my exact balance, and my very nature rebelled at the notion of offering myself to him.

What we were doing disrupted the natural order I'd created so carefully.

But that was the entire point, so I struggled.

With effort, I harnessed my power. Vaguely, I was aware of his hands wiping sweat from my brow and massaging my temples.

I lost track of time, and eventually there was nothing but the feeling of his hands where they grounded me, and the battle within.

I'd fought Orcus for years, wielding my powers against him, and it was not ready to be mastered by him.

He wiped tears from my eyes and hummed to me when I wailed, my screams echoing through the cavern.

He never spoke past the initial command.

He could feel, I think, the struggle within me.

It was a test of endurance in the end, that of my will against the magic I held.

For perhaps the first time ever, I proved myself worthy of the power I'd been granted as my birthright. When my power's resistance finally broke, it flowed out of me, rushing to fill what it saw as the empty vessel that was Orcus.

What I failed to expect was the corresponding rush of Orcus's magic, and how it flowed back into me.

Where my magic was vibrant and energetic, nearly bursting out of me with its exuberance, his was slow and intentional, molasses weeping out to impart its rich,

deep flavor.

It was dark, of course, but I was surprised to find how it didn't suffocate me.

It filled me, seeping into the space opened by the absence of my own, and somehow finding crevices that I hadn't even known existed within me.

In the space of a few seconds, they settled, the initial rush of the power exchange slowing to a churning equilibrium.

Our magics danced inside me, inside him, between us, a slow, swirling mass of the purest power.

I could feel them both. I held them both, and I opened my eyes with a gasp, blinking his face into focus.

During the time I'd fought my battle, I'd imagined Orcus would be annoyed at the length, but now his mouth fell open, and his hands trembled where they held me.

A tentative touch brushed along my magic, gently nudging it to replace the light of the lanterns in the room.

Their fires snuffed out, replaced with a glowing teal light that pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

"Mine," he whispered. A ghost of a smile crept onto his face, and his eyes sparkled with the reflection of my magic. I felt him explore it, explore me, with the softest touch—no, caress. His physical fingers slipped through my hair, cradling my scalp, the fingers of his magic skated over my body.

Perhaps it seemed odd, a goddess with knots, but I can assure you, I've plenty of

stress, and each firm press felt like a revelation. With deft fingers, he was unraveling a thousand years of worries.

And yet, I knew what was to come. With each knot he teased out, a new one formed.

The slow realization hit me... this was part of my torture, my punishment.

He wanted me languid and pliable; to lull me into a sense of complacency so he could break me all the quicker.

It was an odd realization, because it brought with it a sense of peace.

After all the wrongs I'd committed, unwittingly or no, I would atone for them, emerging at the end with a new outlook, and hopefully, a people who'd forged their own path.

"Relax."

It was a command. One which he emphasized with his fingers and magic.

I squeezed my eyes shut, dragging in a deep breath and willing myself to do so.

After all, if I wanted to make things right, to truly atone for my wrongs, didn't I want to submit to his punishment?

Didn't I want him to break me as quickly as possible?

For a thousand years, people had died at my whim, waging a series of wars for my enjoyment at the triumph.

It didn't matter that they'd all be reborn without my influence over the period of my

sentence, they'd still experienced the pain I'd caused.

I wanted whatever he would bring me. Somewhere within, I craved it.

He was right; I was his.

Chapter five

IN WHICH THE LADY WAKES IN A LOCATION MOST UNFAMILIAR

Once it was done, I descended into nothingness for a time, until eventually, vaguely, I realized I could sense my body.

The cool water buoyed me up, and my dress had dried.

I tried twitching a finger, but the connection was so tenuous that my body didn't respond. Similarly, when I attempted to reach out using my magic, it resisted my direction, slipping through my fingers with a playfulness that reminded me of a pixie's.

I could almost hear the giggles, see the finger wave as it skittered away.

I retreated from my physical body, and found that wherever I was, I had some semblance of a body here.

Soft blankets and a plush mattress enveloped me, and I yawned, stretching in the bed.

For the first time, I experienced the hazy confusion of waking from sleep, because somehow, I'd slept.

For the first time in my life, I'd experienced something I'd seen my people do so many times, their fragile, mortal bodies needing respite for the inundation of life's sensations.

I'd never needed it, always assuming it was for those weaker than I.

And, after all, it looked entirely boring.

Nothing happened whilst one slept, I'd thought, or worse, things did happen, but one would miss it.

I was a goddess. I couldn't afford to miss anything.

At first it was because I didn't want to miss a second of my entertainment playing out, but as I'd increased my people's autonomy, it had been because every time I diverted my attention they'd do something foolhardy.

Couldn't they see that if they crossed that mountain pass, they'd be trapped before winter was over?

Especially not when there was another not two weeks south that would be preferable?

But of course, they couldn't. Or perhaps they'd make a discovery while I was averting a crisis elsewhere, one that would lead to technological advancement on the scale which I was not yet prepared to deal with.

Couldn't they see that if they forged ahead blindly, they'd end up exactly like that poor planet Earth?

They needed me, I'd thought. Needed my guiding hand to set them back on track. On the slow, steady path of advancement that would lead to a more sustainable future. In hindsight, of course, I could see what hubris that was.

The surrounding room was dimly lit, so it didn't hurt my eyes. The bed I lay in had a large canopy, swathed with deep green curtains. Beyond them, the light of candles

flickered, and the sounds of a popping fireplace told me I wasn't alone.

Sweeping the curtains aside, I saw I was in a room that looked as if it had been carved from the cavern where my body floated.

In front of the fire, a pair of high-back chairs sat with a table between them.

The table held a flagon, a pair of goblets, and a cloche.

After scanning the room, I decided that while Orcus was obviously around; he wasn't currently in the room with me.

I padded across to the table, removing the cloche to find a steaming bowl of chowder, a hunk of thick, crusty bread, and a dainty cupcake.

I frowned, immediately suspicious. I was a prisoner, and he fed me my favorite foods, complete with dessert? It had to be a trap.

The flagon proved to be wine, which smelled like a vintage I adored.

It was all too perfect. While the room didn't adhere to my personal preference, it appeared designed to comfort me.

One wall was covered by floor to ceiling bookshelves, with books looking to be arranged by age.

Farthest left, I could see some of my favorites from Earth, near the middle, more modern books from Earth that I didn't recognize, and to the far right were a selection of books written by my own people.

In front of the shelves sat a large, dark wood desk.

It was neatly adorned with a bunch of moonflowers, a selection of papers, writing implements, and a typewriter.

Flipping through a notebook I found, I could see that all the pages were blank, though some had patterns swirling at the edges.

Opening the drawers revealed an array of journals, sketchbooks, and sealing waxes.

Perhaps I'd be given homework as part of my rehabilitation. Did Orcus not know that I adored study?

He could mean to use it against me, or he could always use it as a reward. Yes, that must be it. This room was designed to tempt me, an incentive he'd dangle over my head for good behavior. It was smart, really. Though I shouldn't be surprised, he'd been made to be cunning .

The click of a door opening startled me, making me gasp and spin around. I was more nervous than I'd like to admit. Orcus sauntered in, leaning on the bedframe nonchalantly and leveling his dark eyes at me.

"Is everything to your liking?" he asked.

As if it mattered. Then again, if he meant to use it as leverage, I suppose it did.

"It's quite cozy." I allowed.

"You haven't eaten. Come, sit, you should eat—keep your strength up—you'll need it."

"I don't need to eat. Surely you know that."

"Ah, your body doesn't need to eat, but here? I assure you, you'll need to. I designed it that way, after all."

Hm. Well, what was it, but another hook ensnared into me? I'd trusted him to enact my discipline, my exile. I suppose I couldn't complain if he did so by plying me with the things I loved most, and then ripped them from me. Again, cunning.

With a grace that defied his size, he crossed the room and settled into one of the large chairs.

"Come." He waved me over, but when I was close, he patted his large lap.

"You can't be serious." I shook my head. What in the world was he playing at?

"Serious as death. Now, do as you're instructed. I'd hate to punish you before we've even truly begun."

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Chapter six

IN WHICH A MEAL IS CONSUMED IN A FASHION MOST UNFAMILIAR

Rolling my eyes, I did as he bade me. The chairs were larger than I'd realized and even still; he filled it completely.

Confronted with our size difference, for the first time, perhaps ever, I was intimidated by Orcus.

I'd been afraid of him, certainly, but I'd never fathomed that he posed me any true danger.

As much as I wanted to atone for my wrongs, I wasn't exactly looking forward to it.

What use would be punishment if it were pleasurable?

With a hop, I settled into his lap, trying to appear obedient.

Beneath me, his lap was strong and broad; he felt stable and sure, in a way that I don't know if I had ever felt before.

I was a goddess. I was not born into a loving family the way most children are.

I burst into existence from my mother's mind, based on an idea fully formed in that second. Beyond that, she'd shown mild interest in me, but it was almost academic.

My mother had created me to see if it would work, not out of want of companionship—certainly not someone to care for.

So Orcus's stability was the first time I'd ever experienced such a thing.

Instead, sitting on Orcus's lap was the first time I've ever truly felt that I could place my weight upon someone else and they would hold it.

It was nothing short of a revelation. The feeling of relief was so intense that I shook my head to remind myself where I was.

Because I was not there to feel relieved, I was there to pay the cost of what I had done, for doing to my people what my mother had done to me, and to try to learn to do better.

I didn't have long to wait to discover what Orcus meant for me. Reaching across my body, he picked up a morsel of food and placed it to my lips.

"I am capable of feeding myself, you know," I said.

Despite my protests, he didn't move the spoon away from my mouth. "That remains to be seen. "

I opened my mouth to receive the food, though what I really wanted was to say something in rebuttal.

It was vibrant and citrusy, as if this flavor had been specially crafted for me.

To soothe me, or, I considered, to lull me into complacency and obedience.

With that in mind, I straightened my shoulders as I chewed.

He was so close to me, I could feel his breath skating over my neck.

As soon as I was done chewing, another bit of food was presented to me.

He continued feeding me for several minutes, until I finally waved my hand in front of my face, pleading for him to stop.

"All done?"

"Yes, I don't think my stomach is ready for large portions," I gasped out. "This—is not like what I expected."

"I imagine not." He set the remaining food down and picked up a napkin. To my shock, he raised it to my lips and gently patted them.

"That is as it should be. I've found that what we expect, or assume we deserve, is rarely what we actually deserve."

"And what do I deserve, then?" I asked. I needed his answer, but I was terrified to know. After all, I couldn't forget that this was my punishment .

"Growth."

"Growth?" I echoed. I hadn't any idea what that might entail, but I hoped he'd tell me.

As afraid of what was coming as I knew I should be, he'd already convinced me.

The firmness of him underneath me, the gentle way he'd fed me, all of it had added up to make me more pliant than I would have liked.

I wanted this punishment; I needed to pay for my wrongs, and so, perhaps, I wanted

to be vulnerable to him.

"Yes, growth. You didn't mean harm when you created the world, and yet you did harm.

I understand your impulse to remove yourself from the situation, but I think instead you must endeavor to make it right.

The way I see it, there are several steps that will require.

First, you don't seem to think much of yourself anymore. "

I scoffed at him. "Could you blame me? I don't see how I could have possibly harmed people more than creating them to live and die at my whims, then making them inherently evil and removing their choice in the matter."

"Exactly." He reached over and tucked a long strand of my brown hair behind my ear.

"I understand your dislike of yourself, but you must learn to see how the situation you were put in made you who you are.

You had too much power, without any idea of how you should use it, though you could wield it with a thought.

"Further, I think you should learn to experience things as mortals do." He paused, inhaling deeply. "I believe it was those experiences where I felt most mortal, most vulnerable, that taught me my most valuable lessons about ruling my own people."

"And how, pray tell, am I to do that? What did you experience that helped?"

"I fell in love."

I gasped, unable to contain my surprise, and I was certain my face was written with it.

"Love? But who could we fall in love with?

A mortal?" The very idea seemed preposterous.

They lived such short lives, and as much as I loved them, I knew I loved them in the way that a mother loves her children.

The very idea of loving one of my people was ridiculous.

"How can you fall in love with someone who isn't your equal? "

"You can't." His eyes bored into mine and somehow, in that moment, I knew. He hadn't fallen in love with one of his subjects, an orc or an elf. No, he'd fallen in love with another deity. The question remained if it was someone from our own planet or elsewhere.

I'd positioned Timonde far from any of the other worlds, fleeing their influence as I'd seen what the other gods had become. I didn't want that for my world or myself.

"Who?" It mattered to me more than I liked. But he'd been mine, after all, for so long. My enemy, yes, but I'd decidedly been the most important person in his life, just as he had been in mine. To find out that there might have been someone who surpassed my importance to him was a felling blow.

He waved his hand. "It's of little consequence.

My love was not returned, but it taught me what exquisite torture loving someone could be.

It opened me up to the multitude of pleasures and pains one could know.

My plan, such as it was, is to give you a mortal experience.

You'll require everything they do: food, water, sleep, as here you truly inhabit a human body.

You retain your immortality, but only if you properly care for yourself. Part of my job is to see that you do."

"Just because I haven't been mortal doesn't mean I don't know how to take care of a human body." I rolled my eyes and moved to stand.

"Ah, but you failed to do so, and so I must assume the task.

Now, I fear some of my methods may be quite different from what you were expecting.

So, I have an agreement. As I swore that I truly have your best interests in heart, you must trust that I'll do everything in my power to ensure the best outcome for all of us.

I ask that you remain open to my methods. "

His voice lingered on the word method, caressing it with his tongue, drawing my attention to his lips and the sharp teeth they hid. This Orcus was no formless phantasm haunting my nightmares, but an imposing figure that would surely dominate my days.

"I—I can do that." I whispered.

"If you disagree with anything I do, and in certain cases, if what we do makes you

feel uncomfortable in any way, it's important that you tell me."

I nodded, somehow relieved that he hadn't made me agree to never be uncomfortable. I didn't see how I was meant to learn without being uncomfortable.

"Now that we've gotten some food into you, your first assignment should be simple. Unless I'm mistaken, you, princess, only have a title. You are more than a goddess, you are less than a figurehead. You need a name."

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Chapter seven

IN WHICH A NAME IS CHOSEN

After showing me the bookshelves and explaining how they were all arranged, Orcus left me to contemplate my name.

After being identified by my titles for so long, I could see the need for a name, but hadn't any idea of where to begin.

In my mind, I had modeled my looks on an Empress I'd admired on Earth.

She'd had gorgeous long hair, and a terribly sad life.

In the face of it all, she'd defied her mother-in-law, society's expectations and even her husband.

Sisi had been an inspiration to me, but I already knew how different we were.

I was not strong in the same way; I was soft and only imagined myself a hero.

For hours, I flipped through the books of the library and set a few aside that I wanted to read.

I was especially interested in those that had been written after I'd left Earth.

I was curious to know how it had changed in my absence.

When I'd observed it, their planet had seemed on the cusp of a great deal of change, some of which had already begun while I was there, but even the summaries of the books I'd picked up led me to believe that a great many changes had happened in an extremely short period of time.

I also found a book of baby names among them, and I shortly had a list of contenders.

The meaning of the name mattered to me, and I focused on those that had meanings that resonated with me.

I explored names that meant dawn or rebirth, dreams and the moon and rolled a good many around my brain and off my tongue.

Gloren was a contender, especially as it shared origins with the town I'd based Sanctuary on, but it felt too close to Gloria, a name I felt I could not live up to.

I wrote them down on a list, said them aloud, and imagined someone calling me that and responding.

Ayleen, Lunette, Eislynn, Celenne, Eloise, Aviva, and so many more that I've forgotten or lost.

Eventually, I arrived at Aviana. It had an origin that referred to birds and meant to breathe. Because while I was currently contained in a cage, I felt as if I truly might fly after all this was done. More than anything, it felt like "me."

As if on cue, the door opened, and Orcus swept inside, carrying another tray of food. Instead of sitting in the large chair by the fire, he settled the tray on the desk and knelt next to me.

"You've a lot of good options here," he observed. "Have you chosen?"

"Yes, Aviana."

He seemed to consider it a moment, pursing his lips and moving his mouth as if rolling it around and tasting it. "It fits."

"Thank you, I agree."

"Well then, let's get you some food and then we can progress."

He said it so nonchalantly, as if he wasn't reminding me that it was time to continue my torture. Or rather, begin it, as it hadn't been much torture as of yet.

With a flourish, Orcus scooted the food over and made room so that he could sit on the table. Once more, he fed me, and once more, it was some of the most delicious food I'd ever tasted.

"Where are we?" I asked between bites. I'd assumed that I would spend my time in my own mind, but if Orcus was here, that didn't seem likely.

"The Underworld. "

"And you've given me a suite?" I tilted my head to the side. It seemed there were plenty of others who deserved better treatment than me.

"Of course." He placed another bite of food in my mouth before I could speak. "For the next thousand years, you're mine. All mine. I've no other obligations or demands on my time. I've cleared my schedule."

"Your schedule...as in people dying?"

"Yes, actually. There is no one else here but the two of us. For the next while, anyone

who dies will just be put in the back of the line to be born. I worked it all out with... oh what is her name? The one who is obsessed with keys and sewing? Always sucking up to you about the moon?"

"Frigg?" I couldn't help but giggle at his description.

"Yes, her. She's handling it." He waved his hand like it didn't matter. "Apparently she's enlisted a couple of the other life and death themed gods. They are all very excited. It will be good for people, I think. I figured they all deserved a chance at life without us."

"They do." It was an offhand comment, but it cut me to the core. They did deserve a life without our interference. A chance to grow and learn without me creating wars for them to fight in.

"So!" Orcus jumped off the desk, startling me. "It is time for the next step." He held out his hand to me, inviting me to place my own within.

Without a thought, I did so, and it occurred to me that it was so nice not to think about such things. For the past several hours, I had considered nothing but my own name. Even if the rest of my captivity was torture, I was grateful for that small moment of peace and focus.

Orcus pulled me to stand and led me to the bed. My fleeting moment of peace fled, replaced with the clanging of anxiety, of uncertainty.

"Next, princess, we'll explore more human emotions. Starting with vulnerability."

I was admittedly not keen on being vulnerable with Orcus, of all people, but he pressed on.

"From as best I can tell, vulnerability is one of the keys to true human connection.

When they open up with one another, when they show the parts of themselves that they don't like, mortals seem to forge bonds stronger than any I've ever known.

Though, of course, I cannot expect vulnerability without giving it first."

Without further ceremony, Orcus removed the robe he wore and climbed onto the wide bed. The surrounding curtains dimmed the light so that I could scarcely see him.

"For many reasons, beds seem to be a place of vulnerability. Will you join me?"

All things considered, perhaps I did not have a choice, but I felt as if I did. In the darkness, I could see only his eyes and by the pain there, I could see that somehow, that question—that invitation—had cost him.

I climbed onto the bed, lying on my back next to him.

The swags of the fabric surrounding the bedspread from a circular point in the center, and I focused on it to calm my nerves.

I didn't look over at Orcus, but I could feel the heat of him next to me.

After several minutes of silence, he drew in a deep breath and began speaking.

"I think we have always had a complicated relationship, you and me.

You made me, presumably, to be your greatest foe.

In doing so, I think, you created the only person who could ever hope to be your equal.

What I don't think you intended is that you also made me incredibly eager to please you.

After all, you'd made me to be what you wanted, and since the moment I came into existence, I have always done as you wanted. "

I opened my mouth to protest, but he carried on.

"Oh, I know it might not seem like it, but you wanted excitement.

You wanted a good story... and every good story needs a villain.

So, I became what you wanted. I became your ultimate adversary.

At first, I didn't consciously realize my desires.

I simply wanted to do as you bade. I followed orders and surpassed them where I could.

I found new ways to surprise you, to shake up our battles.

I didn't realize how much it mattered to me until I actually tried to win.

It was fall, outside Berggeheimnis, you remember? "

I did. Of course. It was the only time I'd ever truly wondered if I would lose.

If this was the time that Orcus would best me, once and for all.

I remember being so afraid of what he, or his forces, might do to my people.

I'd had the entire settlement of dwarves holed up in their deepest tunnels and had needed to leverage my dragons to scorch the earth around to break the siege, though it had taken them weeks to arrive.

"In that moment, when it should have been my finest triumph, a thought struck me, shook me through and unseated my beliefs. I remember thinking: Will this be enough? Have I finally completed my task? Am I what she wants yet?"

I still stared up at the fabric. My hand at my side was inches from his, and the pain in his voice made me want to reach out and hold it .

"And then I saw your face. You weren't happy, you weren't proud.

Because as much as this had been a game to us both, I could see that it wasn't a game to you any longer.

You looked down at your people, your heart in your eyes, tears streaming down your face.

And I realized: I would give anything for you to care about me half as much. "

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Chapter eight

IN WHICH ORCUS PRACTICES RESTRAINT

I blinked at the ceiling, stunned. What was I to say? I wasn't even certain I was fully comprehending what he was saying, so instead I traced the lines of the swagged fabric as it flowed from the center of the bed to the edge of the canopy.

"That's when I started thinking more critically. About my relationship with my people, about you with yours, and most importantly, mine with you."

"You—delivered a ten-page essay about my wrongdoings. About how much I'd hurt the world.

" I gasped out. I knew the battle he spoke of.

It was over four hundred years previous, but it, and the subsequent essay that followed a year later, shook the very foundations of my life.

I was not so proud as to refuse to see reason, even when presented by an enemy.

Even when it cast me in such a horrible light.

The essay, I was loath to admit, is what had truly made me consider how my actions, naive as they may have been, had done real harm.

"I did, didn't I?" he chuckled. "I was disappointed. To me, you were the pinnacle of

all that was good. The antithesis of the evil I was so constantly surrounded by. I think I was more than a little angry when I realized how much you'd hurt m—my people. Once I started seeing you as fallible, I started seeing you more completely, I think. Whatever fascination you'd previously held for me paled before what grew.

Before, you were an untouchable ideal. A shining beacon of light and goodness that would forever outshine anything I could accomplish or hope to be.

Once I saw the cracks—in you, in my logic—they were all I could see... and they were beautiful."

His essay had sent me in a spiral for several years, the most painful period of my life that had induced my entire current plan. It was comforting, somehow, to know that it had been just as disruptive to him as it was to me.

"Did you imagine we'd end up here?" I whispered. Had this all been some plan? Had he purposely made me doubt my entire life's work to—take control of me?

"Never in my wildest dreams." The bed shifted beneath me as Orcus rolled over.

"At most, I hoped you might listen to me.

I believed in you. I saw the cracks, but it made me realize that if you were struggling with things, just like I was, that perhaps you could change, you could do better, let the world be better.

And you are." I could hear the smile in his voice, and it sent vibrant frissons through my body.

After a millennium of striving to be perfect, of hiding any flaws I found in myself or swiftly eradicating them, Orcus had seen them...and liked them?

"You've made a lot of progress, more than I have, maybe, and I can't help but to think that you are being too hard on yourself."

"What?" I burst out. "Orcus, I ruined people's lives!"

And for what? My own petty amusement? Because I wanted to stage battles like the 'big kids?' My breath huffed out of me. "I'm starting to worry that you'll be remiss on my punishment. I need a firm hand, not this permissive fiddle-faddle you've been doing. "

"No." Orcus's voice was a boot grinding on gravel, stopping me in my tracks. "You're convinced that you need to be punished, but what, pray tell, could I do to you that will bring you more pain than the knowledge of what you have done?"

"I —" I stuttered. I hadn't any idea. It had eaten at me for years. I'd created people to suffer. I'd watched them live and strain and fight and die, all for me. I'd raged at the knowledge for years, and then spent longer finding ways to sustain my planet without my influence.

"Well, I suppose that might be true...but what are we doing here, then?"

Orcus sighed next to me. "We are...figuring out we are, who we want to be, and figuring out how to forgive ourselves."

"Ourselves? What did you do? You were only doing what I made you to do." I sat up to look over at him.

"Ah, but princess, you gave me free will. I didn't need to do any of it.

I've almost as much responsibility as you have in this.

Perhaps more, because I realized first what we were doing and did it anyhow.

" He smiled, the corner of his mouth raising to reveal a sharp fang.

"But we can't change any of that. We can only move forward, which is what we will do. "

"We will?"

"Yes," he reached a clawed hand out toward mine on the bed, hesitating just beyond touching me. "I think...if we can be vulnerable, we could do, create, experience, some amazing things."

I was mesmerized. I couldn't speak. My senses were full of him, overwhelmed with the heat of his fingers so close to mine. Of the scent of him as it wafted across to me. Of the tenderness reflected in his eyes.

Most of all, I was mesmerized by the way I felt.

For the first time in hundreds of years, perhaps ever. I didn't feel as if I needed to make sure I had a plan. I didn't worry about how I would right my wrongs or atone.

Instead, I watched his clawed hands where they hovered over mine, consumed by the anticipation of wondering if he would touch me.

And then, with a shock of heat and the slightest drag of his claw, we were touching in the most intimate gesture I'd ever felt. I'd been hugged, I'd held people, but that one small finger consumed me.

It was so slight, so gentle that I could almost convince myself that I had imagined it if I couldn't see it with my own eyes.

He touched me like the slightest amount of pressure could break me. Like I was something precious. Not to the world, but to him.

"So," I breathed. "How do we begin? "

"I'd like to show you, if you'll let me."

His hand trailed up my arm, tickling along its length and making me shiver. Every follicle on my body stood at attention, as if my entire being were reaching for him.

I still wore the thin linen dress I'd worn in the lake, yet it seemed years ago.

Though I was wary, I was interested in seeing where Orcus would lead me.

"Show me," I whispered.

Leaning on his arm, Orcus shifted toward me, his weight depressing the mattress, so I rolled toward him. The heat of his skin radiated through my dress, permeating my body and warming me through.

With aching tenderness, he reached up and brushed the hairs off the side of my face.

The candles flickered outside of the canopy, but the curtain shielded us from much of their light.

At first, I thought that was the only reason the room seemed dark, but as I watched, tendrils of smoke raised from Orcus's shoulders, it surrounded him, a miasma—no, a halo of darkness that stretched toward me with grasping fingers.

Though I couldn't see Orcus's face, shrouded as it was, the tendrils reached for me, greedy.

I felt hot all over, my skin sensitized to bed sheets beneath, and the singular place he touched me.

"I'm going to restrain you now," he spoke barely above a whisper, so I had to strain to hear him. "This will be your first lesson, Aviana."

The slightest touch of his tendrils ghosted over my wrists.

"You are mine." The tentacles of darkness solidified, wrapping and lifting my wrists above my head.

" Everything you have will be because I gave it to you.

Every sensation you feel, every sound, every cry you release belongs to me.

Your first lesson, princess, is what it feels like to lack agency.

When it comes down to it, your pleasure, your frustration, your very power are mine.

When you well and truly learn that, perhaps we can move on. "

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Chapter nine

IN WHICH EXPECTATIONS ARE FURTHER SUBVERTED DURING THE FIRST SESSION

I nodded my head, shocked at how easily my submission came.

For more than a millennium, I have lived only to please myself, my creation consuming me in my efforts to make it as perfect as possible.

I am, after all, a storyteller at my core, and I demand perfection from both myself and my creations.

Testing my bonds, I jiggle my wrists. There is a small amount of give there, but only enough that I feel no pain.

My brows draw down in a frown and I squint up to see Orcus's face, but still, he hides from me.

"What is it, princess?" he whispers, his words cascading over me in a wave of warmth .

"I expected something different."

"I imagine so," I can hear the smirk in his voice rather than see it. "But you've never really known what to expect from me, have you?"

He shifts, depressing the bed so that I roll toward him. "When you created me, I think you got more than you bargained for. Such is the problem with such instinctual acts of creation. That's been our problem from the start. Yes, mine too."

I raised a brow at his statement. How was it his problem? He'd not done anything but what I'd expected of him.

"You willed things into being without any real idea of what you'd made. Take me, for example," he continued.

A tendril held my head firm so I stared at the ceiling, but I could feel his breath caressing the skin of my neck as he spoke.

"Did you know that you created me to be obsessed with you?"

To do everything in my power to please you, to give you the story you so desperately wished for?

Do you think it was a mistake, for example, that in all of our battles, I only ever won once, even though every time you felt as if you were on the verge of defeat? "

His hand—or his tentacle, I had no way of knowing which, lifted and twined around a strand of my hair.

"Did you intend to make someone who knew you so completely that he could anticipate your every move?"

Orchestrate complex battles to give you an epic win?

To mature, for example, just the slightest bit faster than you so you wouldn't need to learn these lessons on your own?

"Don't you see, princess, in making your perfect enemy, you've made me your perfect jailor, your perfect teacher, and ultimately, your perfect partner? You've been the light to my days for centuries, but it's well past time I show you the darkness you've wrought."

With that, a tendril wrapped itself over my eyes and I was plunged into darkness.

My heart beat erratically, blood rushing through my veins.

Again, the bed shifted, and I felt the absence of his heat.

Without my sight, every place he touched me was enhanced.

The pair of tendrils that wrapped my hands now seemed to pulse in time with the one covering my eyes.

I breathed deep, steeling myself for whatever came next.

He left me there for a long time until my ears were picking up the slightest rustle and my skin was practically aching from trying to feel something.

By the time he did touch me, I was so sensitized that I gasped at the smallest brush.

It was the briefest touch, only a whisper on my ankle, and yet it lit me up.

The next touch was a long, tickling glide down my arm, stopping level with my head. Orcus hadn't jostled the bed in quite some time, so I assumed that he could manipulate his tendrils from a distance.

He touched me all over, my legs, my hands, my toes, my neck, my knee, my shoulder, my stomach.

Each one gently stoked a fire I couldn't say I'd ever felt.

I knew that mortals felt desire. They required it to procreate.

But because I'd never needed that, never seen anyone as my equal, I'd never felt the slightest bit of attraction prior to what I felt then.

After a while, my breath grew ragged, and I bowed off the bed, searching for sensation that came far too irregularly.

A brief whisper on my neck, a slow, sensual drag underneath my breast. I was gasping for air, mentally begging him to touch me more.

I craved his touch in ways I had never craved anything before.

I'd never wanted for anything, never needed anything at all. For the first time ever, I needed something.

His touch.

Between my legs, my pussy tingled with excitement.

Each bow off the bed squeezed my legs together and brought delicious pressure.

My body thrummed with wanting, to hear his voice, to feel further touches, but each was just as fleeting as the past. Each one taunted me with its ephemeral bliss until I writhed on the bed, tears gathering at the corner of my eyes.

Thick tentacles wrapped around my legs, and I moaned at his touch.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was more than he'd given me before.

Sobs burst from me, punctuating the air with my cries.

"I think that's enough for now." Orcus's voice was raw, as if he was the one who'd cried out. "Sleep, Aviana."

At first I was shocked, confused by his words and the touches that ceased. Though I felt his weight leave the bed, and a blanket was drawn up over my body, his tendrils on my wrists didn't release me, though they relaxed. "Orcus?"

"Sleep." The door clicked shut.

"Aaaaagh! That blasted man! Orcus! Get back here and... well, I'm not quite—well, you see, I—Damn you!"

I sputtered out, my arousal cooled by my anger.

I was so frustrated that I could feel it thrumming through my body.

I tested my bonds, and they stretched to allow me to shift my position, though they wouldn't let my hands stray past my waist. I curled up on my side, blubbering and feeling quite sorry for myself.

But no—this was just as it should be. This was one of my lessons, likely something about denial, and so I curled up on my side, shocked at how tired I was.

I yawned, realizing that I'd only ever felt tired from magical exertion before.

In this case, I hadn't actually done anything.

Still, I drifted off quickly, into a blissful dream of tentacles writhing all over my body.

Chapter ten

IN WHICH A DEBRIEF LEADS TO AN ALTERNATE FORM OF REHABILITATION

When I woke, Orcus held me upright with a glass to my lips. I guzzled the cool water, surprised at my thirst. Muscles that I hadn't ever paid attention to ached, and I groaned as I stretched. My arms were still encircled by Orcus's bindings, though the one blocking my sight was gone.

"How do you feel?" he asked after lowering the glass.

"Sore," I said. "Confused."

"As it should be." Thick tendrils wrapped around my midsection and flipped me onto my stomach. After, they shifted and pressed into my body, kneading at my sore muscles in the best hurt I'd ever felt.

"Thank you," I said, my voice muffled into the bed.

"You need to be ready for your next session," he said. "Now, I'll remind you of our need for vulnerability and honesty between us. How did you feel during your first session?"

I licked my lips to buy time. "Frustrated, helpless, needy... I wanted you to touch me, but you never quite did what I wanted."

"Very good. Was any of what you experienced painful or frightening?"

"No, I felt quite safe, if frustrated."

"Good. I didn't want you to feel scared.

You see, it is impossible for you or I to ever truly know what it is like to be one of our subjects.

However, we can make suppositions and sympathize based on our own experiences.

I do not see the need for you to feel pain in our lessons.

I am confident that you did not intend true pain or harm to any of your creations. "

I shook my head violently. "Never, I just... didn't really understand."

"Just so. And we cannot expect anyone to know things without being taught, not even a goddess. I learned through my own experiences, and you will continue to learn through yours." He dug into a particularly troublesome knot, and I groaned.

"So, no, the goal of this is not for you to feel pain. It is for you to learn, to understand, and for me to do the same. If we can gain this understanding through pleasurable means, I think we will not lose anything in the process by doing so."

"Alright," I said. "I'm certainly not opposed, as long as you think it will be effective."

"I think it will be more than effective. I think it will be the single most important act either of us ever undertake."

His thick tentacle flipped me onto my back and began massaging my front.

I much preferred this angle, because I could see his face.

His brows were drawn in concentration, his tongue toying with one of his fangs.

If the massage was meant to relax me, it only partially served its purpose.

Instead, he drew pleasure from me as easily as a harpist would draw a melody.

Desire flooded through me, dampening between my legs and spreading heat throughout my body.

"Does that feel good, princess?" he crooned.

"Mhmmm," I hummed. It felt better than good in truth. It felt magical—freeing in a way I'd never experienced.

"I think," he said, working his way up to massage my thighs. "That you like being taken care of. I think you've spent so long holding an entire planet together that it's time someone held you together."

I doubt he had any real idea what such a statement would do to me. A riot of emotions burst to life inside of me, so chaotic and clamoring that I could scarcely identify them. I tensed under his hands.

It felt so right.

It felt like an attack.

It sounded wonderful.

It sounded vulnerable.

I didn't make a sound, but he must have known that it had done something to me, because he switched from deep massage to light circles.

My breath came fast and wracked my body, panic surging through my veins on the wings of adrenaline.

I squeezed my eyes shut, perhaps in a feeble attempt to block out a small part of him.

Orcus overwhelmed me. With his newly revealed face, his demanding hands, and his gentle voice that spoke words I was terrified to hear.

I was a goddess . I didn't need anyone to hold me together—I held an entire planet together through sheer force of will.

How dare he suggest I was anything but capable.

I'd botched parts of it in my ignorance, but it had worked!

I opened my mouth to speak, brows drawn in anger.

Anger was safe. Anger was an emotion I could harness.

Orcus pressed a finger to my lips. "I don't mean to undermine you, only to suggest that you deserve a soft place to land. We all do. I want to be your soft place."

A soft place to land. That sounded... different. More reasonable. It wasn't an admission of weakness, if anything it was one of strength. Of a need to rest after hard work.

With a slowness that spoke of my reluctance, I nodded. His finger brushed along my lips, dragging across them so each raised line of his fingerprint lit me afire.

"And you?" I asked, only partially to feel that friction again. "What is your soft place?"

"You. You've always been my soft place."

Chapter eleven

IN WHICH... PERHAPS...

" Perhaps I need to be more transparent.

" He shifted his hands to the outside of my hips, resuming his kneading and pressing into my curves.

"I think you made me to want you. For years, I knew nothing but pleasing you, of fulfilling our wishes.

Perhaps the method given to me was unconventional, but I lived for stolen glimpses of your face after a battle well won.

The sneer you'd make to my face when you'd thwarted my plans would sustain me for months.

It might not seem logical, but it was everything I needed. "

Of course, he did what I asked; he was my subject, my creation, he had to do what I wanted. As time went on though, I could see, in hindsight, how instead of his machinations growing more complex as he tried harder to win, perhaps instead they could have been to find new ways to challenge me.

Did he understand then? That my greatest enemy, the bane of my existence, wasn't him—it was boredom.

When a mere thought could create whatever I wanted, it never took long for almost anything to lose its novelty.

It was why I spent so much of my time poring over our 'games' as I'd called them.

Our contests were the only challenge I'd ever experienced.

And as much as they infuriated me, they gave me reason.

As my creations grew their own thoughts and opinions, they stretched my mind and my abilities, but never anything, anyone, as much as Orcus.

He was a puzzle to me, and for centuries I'd cursed myself for creating him so perfectly.

But maybe...

Just perhaps...

I'd made exactly what I needed.

I finally opened my eyes and gasped at the vulnerability I saw in his eyes. He wasn't only asking for me to open myself; he was laying himself bare, too. I opened my mouth, attempting to speak, but it was too much, too soon, and I knew not what to say.

Instead, I nodded the slightest shift of my head, but I watched him see it. His eyebrows raised, his eyes opened just a bit wider, and his cheeks rose, softening the fierce lines of his face in awe.

I'd seen awe before, been looked at with it plenty of times, both real and feigned from

my many subjects, but this was something entirely different.

This wasn't reverence of a god. It was the pure, astounding shock of joy at the realization that something you'd thought lost to you might be within our reach.

No, this wasn't the distant, impersonal worship I was so used to. It was intimate. It was hope.

Perhaps letting him be my safe place and being his in return wasn't an admission of defeat. Perhaps it was a gift .

I tilted my head and looked at him, and like the spark of creation that came so easily to me, I could see the beginnings of something. I could see the edges of me, where they ended and where he could fit. I could see the holes within myself he'd fill, and even how I could do the same for him.

I'd given him my magic, but when I touched it now, it didn't feel any different.

It still felt like me. Creating him had been one of my first ever challenges.

It had taken several tries. Time and time again, his predecessors had been flat and eventually, I'd needed to carve off a large portion of myself to give him enough life to truly be a worthy foe.

Perhaps then, it wasn't weak if I needed him... perhaps we were each other's soft place because with each other, we could be truly whole.

1. More puzzles, stories to research, at face value, I know nothing of these and have found no references in the library of Sanctuary. Perhaps I need to cast my net further afield.

Chapter twelve

IN WHICH ORCUS'S PLANS BEAR FRUIT

"Y es," I whispered.

Immediately, as if he was barely holding himself back from touching me, his shadows were on me. The massage, as seductive as it had been before, took on a decidedly ravenous tone. Shadows and fingers roamed my body, only distinguishable by the faint drag on his claws.

"What do you want from me, Aviana?" he asked. He shook his head. "I mean, tell me if I do anything you don't like."

The shadows on my wrists tightened, drawing them above my head once more and again his movements shifted.

His touches were purposeful now, it seemed, pressing and kneading in places designed to draw pleasure from me.

They skated down the sides of my neck, toyed with my thighs, and skirted my breasts.

Through it all, he watched me with an intensity I'd never seen before.

Or rather, it was an intensity I'd never seen directed at me.

My subjects needed to have sex to procreate, so of course I'd seen such a look, but never had I been the object of such desire, and I'd certainly never felt the appeal.

But now? It was as if he was reflecting my own feelings back to me, amplifying them.

Our magics thrummed between us, alive with our heightened state, and I was awed to see that his shadows, though still black themselves, emitted the blue-green glow of my own magic. While I'd given him control of my magic, and it still felt out of reach to me, it originated from me.

I'd created millions of beings, and never had I seen my own magic behave the way it did then. Like Orcus himself, my magic steamed out of my skin, wisps of it grasping and reaching for him where my hands could not.

I moaned underneath him, writhing as his shadows moved to caress my lips. I'd seen all of this happen, but it was nothing to feeling it. Desperately, I chased his shadows with my lips, letting out a growl of frustration when they slid out of reach.

Orcus chuckled, as if this were the best game he'd ever played, as if his own desperation weren't written plainly across his face.

"Orcus, please!" I cried, bending my back off the bed as he teased my breast only to retreat before he touched my nipple.

"Do you want something, princess?" he asked.

"Please," I gasped. "Please, kiss me." I must have surprised him, because his mouth dropped open momentarily.

"Of course," he whispered. He lowered himself so that he lay next to me, the length

of his body a decadent heat against my own.

Vaguely, I was aware that I'd been sweating, my gown was damp with it, but my conscious mind was solely focused on his lips.

He licked them with his dark tongue, making them glisten in the low light.

I barely had time to ponder their beauty before I was assailed with the feeling of them.

Soft, slick, plush, and so, so decadent, I moaned at the feeling of him.

When I opened my mouth? I was done for. Lost to the sensation of his tongue as it slipped against my own.

I'd never quite understood kissing before.

It had always confused me. It was unnecessary to procreate, though admittedly, my people did mate much more often than they needed to produce young.

And many for no purpose at all except their own pleasure, occasionally with the express intent not to produce young.

And yet, it had always been a conundrum, a mystery of mortals beyond my ken, and I'd assumed, never to be understood.

Now, I understood.

Kissing Orcus was essential, as integral to my well-being as my own magic, as food or water now were to my mortal body.

There was a playfulness to the way his tongue parried with mine. It echoed our years of battles, and I gasped when he retreated.

"Wha—"

"I needed to see your face," he replied.

I was confused for only a moment, for his hands, with their long, wicked claws, finally slid over my breasts, claspings the fullness of them, kneading as if testing their heft. My back bowed and I gasped in shock. I chased the sensation, pressing into his hands like I could affix them there.

Because I never wanted them to leave.

His hands on my nipples felt like bliss.

I was so incredibly sensitive I could hardly comprehend.

Moreover, the sensitivity zinged down to my cunt, as if the two were directly linked.

My mouth fell open, though I didn't make a sound.

I was too shocked. This, this was the perfection of two beings created perfectly for one another, the ultimate joining in a symphony of sin, though there was truly only glory to be found.

Yes, the way he touched me, the way he lowered his lips back to mine to kiss me, was nothing short of worship, the most sacrosanct act ever in this entire solar system. Together, we were pursuing bliss, but simply by virtue of who we were, we also consecrated the very room we occupied.

I squirmed beneath him. His lips on mine, his hands on my nipples, were the sweetest sensation I'd ever known and yet, I wanted more.

His shadows teased me all over, but it wasn't enough.

It was building something I could not yet quite grasp, but could feel the start of.

I chased a tentacle with my hips, trying to get it between my legs, where my pussy tingled to wakefulness with a heated insistence.

After centuries of neglect, she was demanding her due, and Orcus, bless him, finally gave it.

With careful gentleness, he slid a lone tentacle along my folds, testing and gathering the slickness there. It hadn't all dripped to dampen my dress, it seemed, because the tentacle slid with so little resistance as to be laughable.

Chapter thirteen

IN WHICH THE SINGLE MOST PERFECT WORSHIP

A shock of pleasure zinged through me, making me gasp for air. While this was all new to me as an experience, I obviously understood how it all worked.

And it worked.

So much of my initial creation had depended on the magic to fill in the blanks, and I said a tiny prayer of thanks to my own magic for giving me a clitoris even though I would have never dreamed I'd need it.

In the darkness, Orcus's eyes glowed and, though they'd always been golden in the past, they now carried the teal of my magic. When he smiled, the glow lit his teeth, and even though it was menacing, I liked it. His grin made my blood rush in my veins and my pussy pulse between my legs.

My legs kicked out, only to have more tentacles wrap around them, steadying me.

It was like he knew that I was on a journey, a ride that I'd never experienced, and he was here to steady me as we progressed.

I squeezed my eyes shut, because there were more sensations than I could possibly comprehend.

I, who had once been omniscient and in charge of an entire planet, was overwhelmed

this easily.

But right now, I had a human body, and I was experiencing things I'd never known before.

The tentacle of shadow toyed with my clit, brushing each side and dipping inside me to gather more of my slick.

Just when I thought I had habituated, had gained a hold on the situation, his tentacle.

.. changed. Instead of being a smooth slickness, it had raised bits.

I was too out of my mind to notice what shape they might be. All I knew was that they drove me wild.

Each section that passed over my clit caused me to convulse uncontrollably.

Orcus's breath came fast and heavy, the only consolation that I wasn't alone in this.

When I ventured to open my eyes, I realized that he'd removed his shirt.

He knelt between my legs, his nipples hard and jutting out from his well-formed pecs.

I had no idea what I'd been thinking of when I'd made him, but thank fuck, I had.

He was sex and sin, perfection and danger all rolled up into one deadly package, solely designed to bring me to my knees.

"Oh, princess, you look so beautiful coming apart for me. You're such a mess. You almost act like you've never—" he cut off and squinted at me. "Aviana, have you never come before?"

"No," I whispered. Trying to focus on what he was saying, but I was entirely overwhelmed with where he touched me. "I've seen it happen plenty, though. I know how these things work."

An expression of shock flashed across his face, only to be replaced with a grin so predatory, so sexy, that I thought I might melt.

"You're telling me that no one, not even you, has wrested an orgasm from this gorgeous pussy?"

"No, what reason would I have had to—"

"Because it's the single most perfect cunt in this galaxy, perhaps this universe!"

"Well, yes," I allowed. "But until now, it hasn't exactly been serving me especially well. It's been lying dormant, perhaps collecting dust?"

"A tragedy," he said, shaking his head. "Well, I'll be damned if you come on my tentacle for the first time, then."

I frowned, unsure what he meant, but screamed in surprise when he lowered his head to nip at my clit.

His tongue differed from my own, not modeled entirely on a human tongue, but more closely to the creatures of the dark forces I'd seen in my travels to Earth.

Split at the front, like a snake. The sections moved independently, taking the opportunity to drive me mad as they tickled my clit from either side.

It didn't end there, though. The onslaught continued with the discovery that the pads of his tongue were raised, as if each taste bud held a small bead inside.

The combination was enough to make me quiver.

I lost all sense of where I was or truly what was happening, my consciousness focused down until I was unfamiliar with anything but where his tongue caressed me, where the twin tips of his tongue drove me past the edge of sanity and plunged me into a land of pure bliss.

The longer he played, the tenser I became.

I knew what was coming, but couldn't possibly have anticipated what it felt like.

Every muscle in my body tensed, drawing tight like I might squeeze the pleasure from the experience.

The tension, the tightness, rose and rose, until I felt the whisper of a tentacle at my opening, teasing back and forth as if asking for entry .

"Please," I screamed, begging to have it inside me.

Orcus acquiesced with those dark chuckles.

He must have tapered it, because what he inserted first was small, barely the size of a finger.

It swelled though, pulsing larger with each second until it filled me.

It skated across something inside me. At the same moment, he wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked.

My muscles tightened, ripples of pleasure pulsed through my body. They originated in my cunt, but moved through me in a wave. Vibrations through my clit made me

scream aloud, and shake within the bonds of Orcus's tentacles.

For a few moments of bliss, I didn't worry, I didn't think, I didn't even breathe. I blinked back to consciousness, intimately aware of Orcus's intense gaze on me. He smirked, and I loved being able to feel his move against me.

Pulling back, he licked his lips. "Was my worship satisfactory, princess?"

Chapter fourteen

IN WHICH THE LADY IS GIVEN A NEW ROLE

"Satisfactory? Satisfactory!" I shrieked. "That was—I don't even have words. I have no real comparison for what I just experienced!"

I blinked at him, aghast that he would honestly doubt my enjoyment when I was a puddle on the bed.

"What is next?" I asked, greedy for more. This whole sex scenario was absolutely delicious and I was ravenous.

Leaning back, Orcus stretched his arms and yawned. How could he possibly yawn at a time like this? Was I so boring? I'd thought he was interested, I'd thought that he was enjoying himself, but if he could yawn, then perhaps I was alone in my sentiments.

If I was alone... my face colored as I felt myself blush. This was horrible, humiliating, surely this was part of my punishment. It made sense, really. This embarrassment, this shame was more than any physical pain could ever accomplish—I'd been so silly, assuming that my mortal enemy could—

"Aviana, come back to me," Orcus's hand cupped my face. "Where did you go, princess?"

"I understand why you are doing this, it's just... different than I anticipated."

He laughed, his smile seeming crueler, considering the circumstances. "Of course. It's meant to be very different. You anticipated pain, I'd hope that you were enjoying this more ..."

I frowned. He'd utterly confused me now. "I had been, but then you yawned... like it hadn't even meant anything to you..."

Orcus laughed again, though I truly didn't find the situation very funny.

"I'll leave you now," he whispered. "But I promise you, it meant the world to me."

He pushed himself off the bed and turned to go, standing at the doorframe.

He'd left the tentacles holding my arms and legs in place, though he lifted the blankets over me telepathically and smiled.

"Sleep, Aviana, and think on how frustrating it is to not be in control of your life and your experiences. " 1

H ours later, days later, I knew not, I woke.

Time seemed to pass strangely in this place, though I was ravenously hungry.

Tentacles of shadow held my arms in place, now alongside my body.

I smacked my lips, conscious of how dry my mouth felt.

I'd screamed plenty during our previous.

.. encounter? Session? Lesson? Who knew.

And my now mortal body was experiencing wear and tear in a way that my normal body did not.

Heavens, what must I look like? I'd not attended to my hair in days, and with its length and curl, I was fairly certain that it should have required some maintenance.

Regularly, I could just manifest it however I pleased, content with the knowledge that it would be stunning because I'd willed it to be.

Now, I needed to brush it, I supposed, if I wanted it to look any semblance of nice, but I hadn't the mobility.

The creak of the door drew my attention as Orcus strode in, carrying another covered tray.

Was it to be more treats, or was it time for the true torture to begin?

He wore a cheery smile and there was a pep in his step I'd never seen before.

It seemed there was a lot I'd never seen of him that this adventure had revealed.

"Hungry, my pet?" he asked.

I should have protested. 'Pet' was no way to address a goddess, even one who deserved such punishment as me, but a shock of arousal burst through me at the name.

He'd called me princess more times than I could count, but "pet?

" Pet marked a new phase of our relationship, and I found that excited me more than anything.

Orcus wanted me to learn what it was like to lose all control of your life, and I understood his reasoning.

I had done that to so many, forcing them to wage war for my benefit.

In comparison, being Orcus's pet was nothing to the atrocities I'd committed—in ignorance, yes—but atrocities none the less.

Further, the nickname struck something deep within me, some tired, lonely part that wanted so desperately to be claimed. To have someone choose her, not because of what she was, but instead because of who she was.

Of all the people on the planet, in our section of the universe, I realized, Orcus knew me best. He had extensive knowledge, but more than anything, he'd seen me at my worst and still decided to give me that orgasm.

He'd still introduced me to this new side of myself that I scarcely knew how to deal with, let alone embrace.

Not to mention... I'd been alone for so, so long. But if I were his "pet?" He'd need to care for me, wouldn't he? He'd have to see to my needs. For my entire life, it had been me, by myself. Even at birth, my own mother had only claimed me as her experiment, but Orcus wanted to own me ?

It was possible that I was reading into things.

Perhaps, I took an offhand term of endearment and extrapolated things from it that were not true.

.. and yet... I wanted them to be true. I wanted, more than anything, to be owned by him.

I wanted—for once—to surrender responsibility to someone else and allow them to determine the course of things.

Was that so terribly wrong? To want someone else to take the lead. .. for once?

No. I decided, it was not. I'd worked hard, disastrous as my efforts may have been, and either way, the answer was the same. Someone else needed to steer the ship that was my planet—or at least my life, for a while, while I took a break to learn. To grow. To... heal?

I'd made mistakes, and they weighed on me, and I wanted to learn, I wanted to be better, but Orcus hadn't been wrong when he'd protested that I was running.

I also wanted a break . I wanted to only worry about myself and my immediate surroundings, and not worry that the second I let my guard down there might be some great tragedy that needed attending to.

That the second I turned my head, my beautiful children would get into mischief I would need to set right.

A 'pet' didn't need to worry about the needs of others, they were cared for. And though I was perhaps a wee bit ashamed of it, I wanted that.

So, instead of issuing a dressing down, I answered.

"Yes, I am hungry, rather," and relaxed into the bed.

1. As someone who is passionate about normalizing the myriad glorious ways a life can be enriched by sex, I feel obligated to mention that Orcus's actions here are widely regarded as being in bad form.

Generally, one in a dominant position should always take the time to ensure their submissive partner(s) are well cared for after an encounter.

However, it also strikes me that after pining for Aviana for nearly a thousand years despite her mockery of him, Orcus likely enjoys a hefty dose of degradation, and as such, I expect had not previously been in such a position.

It's a pity the Lady did not make such a discovery during the time she chronicled here.

Chapter fifteen

IN WHICH LESSONS IN PATIENCE

A wide smile spread across his face at my words. "You seem... different this morning."

"I feel different," I said.

"A good orgasm will do that to you," he said, sitting next to me on the bed. He removed the cloche to reveal much more food than I would have previously been capable of eating, though today, it almost felt reasonable.

"Am I allowed to feed myself today, then?"

"No," he said, spearing a slice of grapefruit drizzled with what looked to be honey. "I quite liked feeding you the other day. Plus, I think it is a good reminder."

"A reminder? Of what? "

He popped the bite into my mouth, his eyes focused on my lips. "That you're mine. That you are entirely in my control. That I am entirely responsible for you... and that I think you quite like it."

I blushed, refusing to meet his eyes. Admitting it to myself was one thing, but aloud? It wasn't likely to happen anytime soon.

He hummed as he fed me, and over the course of twenty minutes, cycling through every hymn in one of my religions that discussed my beauty or framed me as innocent.

1 There were several religions that included me, and they often each focused on varied aspects of who I was.

There was perhaps not even one of my people who saw me for all of what I was.

.. there was perhaps no one, save Orcus, who was anywhere close to doing so.

It still baffled me how he, of all people, saw me in the way that he claimed.

No one had ever looked at me like he did, or sought to know the real me the way he did.

It was easy to fall into the role he'd cast me in, because it was the only role that had ever been created with me in mind, rather than what someone wanted of me. Or maybe he was just the first person whose wants of me coincided with who I truly was. Perhaps it wasn't truly a role at all.

He only expected me to be myself, which was infinitely better. 2

Either way, it was easy for me to sit quietly with him feeding me food, to watch his face as he indulged himself. It was an easy sort of silence that I'd rarely experienced with anyone else.

"So, my lord," I said. "What is on the docket for today?"

Orcus raised an eyebrow at the title, but didn't protest. To me, it was only logical. If I was the Lady, he was my Lord. 3

He tilted his head and smiled at me, though he didn't comment on my new moniker. "I thought we might further explore the extent of your submission. After all, we've only just begun. And I wanted to debrief after last time, but you were quite fatigued. "

"That... might be accurate," I said, smiling and turning my head to hide my blush.

"So, princess," he said, setting the food on the bedside table and taking one of my ankles in hand. "How did you feel during our last session?"

With strong hands and firm pressure, he massaged me again, and I wondered if this would be the sort of treatment I could expect every day.

"As I said, I was surprised, of course. But I also found it quite... enjoyable."

He raised his eyebrow and smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. Do you feel that I've betrayed your trust in any way?"

"No, I was scared about how this would manifest, but all in all, it's been an enlightening and enjoyable experience."

"As it should be. And what were your thoughts on your lack of control? Was it concerning to you? Irritating?" He raised a brow and smirked, the insufferable man.

"It has been... in many ways, freeing. I might have needed it. It's frightening—that you know me so well. I feel like, in comparison, I know you not at all, and you see into my very soul."

"I'm not so hard," he said. "Really, all you need to know is that I was made to please you, to be what you needed, and to... stretch you in the ways you needed."

His lips bloomed into a smile on the word stretch, and a wave of heat flashed through

me. I'd some inkling of what he might mean by stretch, but I couldn't wait to see if I was right.

His strong hands continued up my legs, stoking the fire within until I was panting. My pussy felt swollen and hot, begging for his focus and attention, greedy to repeat his previous "lesson."

After my legs were thoroughly relaxed, he crawled up my body, pausing when his lips hovered over mine. Shadows bloomed around his head, reaching toward me. He ghosted over the planes of my face, tilting my chin up until I met his eyes.

"You are being so perfect, pet," he spoke against my lips, so that I was sure he felt a puff of air when I moaned at his words.

I reached for him, desperate to touch him.

I'd felt the skin of his fingertips, the smoothness of his shadows, but the rest of his body was foreign to me.

I craned my neck, desperate for our mouths to touch, but he pulled back and smiled.

"So perfect, but you are not in charge here. You do not get what you want. You get what you need." He wrapped my arms again, denying me the ability to touch him when I was only a breath away.

"I need to touch you!" I whined.

"What you need ," he whispered. "Is a lesson in what it is like to lack control. To be unable to get what you want because someone else determines that."

I squeezed my eyes shut, because this wasn't just about the two of us. As much as I

hated it, this was also about my growth, and in that, I needed to trust him.

"Yes." The word was barely audible, but it brought a smile to his face that was worth what it cost me to say.

"See? Perfect, pet." A shadow tendril caressed my lip. "Now open."

1. I cannot help but wonder if a thousand years later, we still have echoes of these melodies in our existing hymns. I can think of several that reference the Lady's innocence.

2. Largely, Orcus is still regarded as a god that is inherently evil. Further, he's still worshipped by the Elves of the Empire. Only the orcs, his chosen people, have ever seen him as even a morally grey or complicated god. Perhaps this work will alter perceptions.

3. Religions worldwide shall tremble. I am laughing uncontrollably.

Chapter sixteen

IN WHICH THE LADY COMPREHENDS THE EXTENT OF HER SUBMISSION

I opened my mouth, and in seconds he'd filled it.

The tentacle writhed and expanded, filling my mouth and slipping over every surface.

It was so much like our previous kiss, provoking and sensual, but the slick surface of his tentacle undulated in ways I doubt his tongue could.

Instead of overwhelming touches across my body, he focused on my mouth, on my lips, leaving the rest of me bereft, straining for hints of his touch.

I could feel the heat of him, so close to touching me, but remaining just out of reach.

My tongue danced with his tentacle, slightly annoyed that it wasn't his tongue, but enjoying myself too much to stop.

I wanted more, so much more, but I would take whatever dregs he gave me, because even those were bliss.

I whined around his tentacle, hopeful that he'd remove it and allow me to speak. But he only smiled and licked his lips.

He raised a brow. "What's that, princess?"

" he taunted. "I can't seem to hear you.

Do you need something? If you think you know better what you need, please feel free to tap my shadows and I will release you to explain.

But I assure you, my plan will be far more fun if only you can be patient. If you can trust me."

With a whimper, I nodded my head. I may want a great many things, but I was not in control here, and I'd agreed to that. I'd wanted that.

"That's my perfect princess." As if in reward, he leaned down and kissed the edge of my mouth. I turned my head, chasing it, but he fled once more, tutting at me.

"Now, let me set the rules of today's lesson." He said, sitting back to lean on his heels.

"It's past time that I marked you as mine. We will begin simply and progress from there." With a snap, his pants were gone.

"Your touch is regulated, doled out and administered by me. You will not touch me until I am well pleased with you. You can please me by following my rules. If you are obedient and apply yourself, you'll find I am not stingy with my rewards. Now, first, princess, you will bring yourself to orgasm."

I blinked at him, for surely he'd been speaking that entire time, but he'd also revealed his cock to me for the first time.

How could he expect me to pay attention after he'd unveiled something so intriguing ?

Now that I'd had my first taste of what sex could be, I was ravenous.

Staring at him, I suddenly saw the appeal of being filled, for I was so abysmally empty.

Surely he'd taken his pants off to fill me?

The shadows around my hands loosened and directed them to my sex, but still, I could not tear my eyes from him.

With one powerful hand, he wrapped the long, thick cock in front of me.

Apparently, I'd made him perfect in every way without knowing what I was doing.

He had a slight upward curve, and a network of thick veins that peeked out between layers of.

His cock was bluish-gray like the rest of him, but lighter, almost glowing, at the tip, as if flushed.

When he shifted, I saw that the rim of his head was dotted with round nodules, bumps that seemed to be vibrating.

A line of them ran down the top and bottom lengths of his cock, ending in a trio of them at this base.

I could only imagine what he would feel like inside me.

"Whimpering now?" he asked. "Perhaps I should have waited to show you?"

I hadn't realized that I'd whimpered, but it was certainly possible. I shook my head

frantically, not wanting him to take away the glorious sight in front of me. I could focus. I could be good for him.

"Now, love—" he looked surprised for a moment, but continued. "I want you to play with your cunt. Explore yourself with your fingers and find what feels good. I'll provide some motivation, perhaps some suggestions, but ultimately, you'll be the best judge."

Eager—no—greedy for his praise, I plunged my fingers between my slick folds.

I was so swollen there, so alive . Everywhere I touched seemed hyper sensitized, plush and giving.

I was... intricate, a maze of dips and wrinkles, caverns and ridges.

For a moment, I forgot I was with Orcus, forgot about the gorgeous monster between his legs, and lost myself there.

I stroked and circled, varying pressure and tempo, lingering on my clit and marveling at how full it felt.

Orcus's chuckle drew me from my total focus, but he was smiling when I looked at him.

His eyes were lost, focused on where I touched myself, though his hands were busy.

He cupped his heavy sac and gently pumped himself with the other.

My mouth fell open, watching him, and my fingers sped.

A steady flow of pre-cum dribbled from his tip, an iridescent black liquid that seemed

designed to fascinate.

At first, he swiped his hand over it, slicking it down his length until he shone with it.

After, he raised himself on his knees, so the strand of it stretched to fall on my lower stomach.

Desperate for it, for him, I ran my fingers through it, quickly returning them to my pussy, spreading it through me.

And oh, how it slid over me perfectly. He was warmer than I was, I realized, for it was hot where it pooled.

"Yes, princess," he gasped. "Use me. Chase your pleasure. You look so fucking gorgeous beneath me, so pretty with my cum on you."

I was glad he liked it, because it was driving me to madness in the most delicious fashion. The heat of him warmed my skin in ways that his shadows had not, and it only made me want him more.

Before I quite realized what was happening, my body tightened, the solid grip of my orgasm cloaking me in rapture. I bowed off the bed, holding my breath as my cunt squeezed, reminding me how it was still so empty.

"God, Aviana, you'll be the death of me," he growled, his hand a vise on his cock.

I panted, momentarily sated, but entirely focused now. "Orcus," I started, careful to request rather than demand. "Might I touch you now?"

Perhaps I'd truly obeyed well enough, but I imagined it was because he was as desperate as I was. The shadows on my hands relaxed, leaving me bound but able to

move freely. My hands flew to him, frantically caressing his body.

Had I been waiting to touch him for days now? Weeks? Hours? Time passed so differently here, it was impossible to tell. Regardless, it had been too long, but there was a gravity to it, for I'd earned this. This was pleasure so pure, so encompassing, that it was beyond what I'd ever felt before.

I massaged his thick shoulders and twined my fingers through his hair.

His horns were thick and curved, and would be the perfect handholds for the next time he used his mouth on me.

For there was no question of it, he would, again.

The pleasure we wrought was a sensation so pure I knew we'd drown ourselves in it for millennia.

I reached down, skimming my fingers over his pronounced chest, his hard nipples giving me a rush of pride.

I ran them down further still, over his stomach until I reached the tuft of hair at his apex.

Before I could touch him, though, the shadows on my wrists tightened, lifting my hands to settle on his shoulders.

"Not yet," he said. His eyes were fire, burning his hunger into me, searing me through. He lowered himself, one elbow on either side of me, and stole my mouth in a consuming kiss.

I nearly pouted after being denied, but the feeling of his lips... and then his cock,

interrupted me. At first, I didn't understand what the pressure was on my clit, but as he shifted, I felt slick bumps bounce along my clit.

And then, a gentle but insistent pressure prodded at my opening. Thin and rounded, I realized that it must be a tentacle. Did he mean to deny me his cock? Was this part of my torture, settling for his tentacle when what I wanted rested not inches away?

I was not so picky as to deny it, but I still pouted. "Only a tentacle?"

"There is no way I am fitting right now. We need to get you ready. So yes, for right now, only a tentacle." He frowned down at me, his face stern. "Who is in charge here?"

"You," I huffed, looking away.

"And who is going to take care of you? "

"You."

He met my eyes as the tentacle slipped inside me, his gaze focused and intent. My mouth dropped open in shock as I saw what he meant. Though it was small and smooth, the tentacle felt like it was spearing me full.

He didn't say anything, but Orcus did raise his brows in a way that felt very much like he knew exactly what he was doing, and was gratified that now I did too.

"Someday," he whispered, suddenly so tender. "I will truly earn your trust as well as your obedience."

Tears pricked at my eyes. "I'm trying."

"I know." He smiled, at first tender, but I caught a glint of mischief just as his tentacle writhed within me.

It was... everything. Obscene, decadent, teasing and insistent.

He stroked along my inside walls, finding a spot so sensitive I shuddered.

He pressed into me, grinning wide, his sharp teeth glinting in the firelight.

I clung to his shoulders, desperate and hungry for more.

I wanted whatever he deemed came next, whatever he would give me.

It should have been baffling to me that he acted as if he knew my own body better than I, but, considering I'd never done this before, perhaps he did.

Inside me, his tentacle pumped, filling me fuller and fuller until I felt like I might burst, or combust, though I knew not which might come first. Another began stroking my clit again, pairing with the pressure in my pussy in perfect harmony.

They worked in concert, breaking down my walls, baring me before him like I'd never been.

Orcus knelt between my legs once more, backlit, so at times he was only an outline. "Yes, princess, let go. I've got you."

Inside, I was as full as I could possibly be, his tentacle pulsing insistently. They worked me in tandem, in time—I realized—with where he pumped his cock. Two others tugged at my nipples until the tempo built to a crescendo I could not hold back.

"Orcus, Orcus, Or—" I chanted, cutting off as I shattered. I screamed as I came,

everything more intense than before.

When it was over, his tentacles... moved—melted?—into me, leaving me empty. Though of course, I wasn't truly empty. Before they hadn't left me, instead, they'd somehow absorbed into my body, sinking into me until I felt pressure inside me, like he was stroking my clit.

"Now," he whispered, "now you're ready."

Chapter seventeen

IN WHICH A PROMISE, A MIRACLE, A PRAYER

Once more, Orcus lowered himself, so our faces were within inches of one another. Until now, he'd been so composed that if I'd had a second to think, I might have wondered if I was the only one truly affected.

Now though, with his lips hovering a breath from mine, he showed me more of that vulnerability that he'd insisted on. His eyes darted across my face, searching me for something.

"You're everything I've ever wanted," he whispered.

His voice cracked, and he brought a claw up to swipe a lock of sweat-soaked hair from my forehead.

Laid against me like he was, I could feel his cock's insistent jump on my thigh, but he looked to be in no hurry.

"Do you see now? That together we are more than we could ever be apart. "

"Yes," I nodded. I did see. Perhaps when I'd made him, I'd used more of me than I'd realized, broken off parts of me, and in doing so, created the only person who could ever complete me, understand me in this way.

Wrapping my hands around his horns, I tugged his head down to me, pressing my lips

against his like they were the last gasp of air left to me.

I must have surprised him, unsettled him, because Orcus relaxed, and I realized just how much of his weight he'd been holding from me.

He pressed me into the bed. The weight of him atop me was grounding, tempering the euphoria I felt with a deep, profound knowing of how right this was.

Finally, inevitably, like I was true north and he, a magnet, he slid inside me.

It was only a bit at first, the width of him stretching me even after I'd been so full with his tentacle.

The ring of nodules that circled his head stretched and slipped into me, where they dragged and pressed at my inner walls.

He held my gaze, eyes and mouth wide with wonder, as I sucked him in, each nodule along his shaft popping inside me as he pressed.

His hands tangled in my hair, clasp on as if otherwise he would fly apart.

He pulled back and sank in again, this time going deeper.

In and out he worked me, until, with a growl, he ground his trio of nodules against me.

My mouth hung open, short nonsensical noises pulled from me like prayers to our lovemaking.

"Mine," he whispered into my temple.

"Yours," I replied.

For I was. Though he was ostensibly my jailor, my captor, I saw now that we held one another. In giving myself to him freely and fully, he'd become mine, too.

He breathed through pursed lips between kisses, his entire body, and truly, the room itself, pulsing with magic, with our magic. It swirled and flowed between us, a rushing cyclical whirl that grew with our pleasure. It connected us, more deeply than I ever imagined possible.

As he shuttled into me, grinding into me at the apex of each move, he bored into my very soul.

With each movement, his very being sank into mine until we were barely separate beings instead of one writhing, pistoning system intent on pleasure and connection.

We rose and rose, riding the sensation until, with sudden clarity, I felt his mind brush mine.

Mine, all mine, it said.

All yours , I sent back .

With a look of shock, our magic and our pleasure peaked in a shaking, gasping explosion that shook the chamber we were in.

My eyes flew open to see shadows lifting from our bodies, separating from us and drifting away, disappearing before they hit the ceiling. I stared at them, awed, as the realization hit me.

We'd not only come together for ourselves, but our congress, our union, our magic had combined to make something entirely new, shades. 1

The word manifested in my mind like a revelation. A promise, a miracle, a prayer.

After, Orcus held me to him, our bodies and magics still intermingling in the afterglow. I traced my fingertips along his chest, and he toyed with my hair.

"What now?" I asked.

"Now? We grow. We learn. We do better."

"And more of this?"

"So much more of this." He rolled us over, so I lay fully atop him.

"But what does learning and growing look like?"

He furrowed his brow and kissed my forehead. "Well, I think, perhaps, we should look in on our newest creation, see what we've wrought. I want us to take some time to double check your preparations—"

"Do you think I wouldn't have—" I gasped, affronted.

"No. No, it's not that." He ran a placating hand down my back.

"You didn't plan for me to be away. I was thinking that, perhaps we might make sure they don't need either of our intervention, so we could take, oh I don't know, the next few hundred years or so for ourselves."

"Oh, well, I suppose that sounds alright," I smiled. "But what shall we do?"

"I figure we'll do what we never got the chance to do.

.. we'll live. You cannot access your body from here, or Timonde, but there's an entire universe to explore.

A universe of knowledge to learn about how we should run this confounded planet.

Once we're done with our little honeymoon, we'll come back and get to work. What do you think?"

"You're asking me? Aren't you the one in charge here?"

He placed his wickedly sharp claws under my chin and looked deep into my eyes. "Only because you put me in charge."

He kissed me, soft and chaste. "They can have you back once I'm no longer starving for you round the clock. Right now, you're mine. All mine. "

"All yours."

1. Honestly, I am speechless. A first, I know.

2. This visit is chronicled in Gunna the First's Logbooks. It contains an account of a physical visit from Orcus as well as a spectral visit from the Lady, an extremely rare occurrence, only possible with his assistance.