



Tavern Tale

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Category: LGBT+

Description: What if the side quest is really the main quest?

Divine, a healer of the Goddess of Souls, has chased the thief who stole her talisman across half of Trelvania. The talisman is the key to accessing her magic well, and without it, she is powerless. While chasing her betrayer, former girlfriend, and servant of the Goddess of Condemnation, Divine meets Saph, a flirty tavern owner with an eyepatch and a proposition. Saph will help Divine locate her talisman if Divine helps her complete a mysterious quest in a chest.

Total Pages (Source): 13

CHAPTER ONE

A brass-fastened chest thumped on the bar of the Sultry Sapphire in front of Divine, the wood-on-wood sound muffled in the din of voices and cutlery of the tavern. Divine frowned into her frothing mug, then looked up.

The bartender smirked, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear, revealing a hoop pierced into her helix. “I hear you’re looking for an adventure.”

“You heard wrong,” Divine muttered, tipping her glass mug for another vanilla-flavored gulp, eyeing the woman over the brim. Her skin was the medium brown of the liquid Divine swallowed and she had a purple bobble pierced into her left nostril with a matching eyepatch over her opposite eye.

The raven-haired woman bent forward, wiping mug rings from the lacquered wood beside the small chest. “Well, you’re not here to drown your sorrows like the regulars, otherwise you wouldn’t have ordered tarrow-root beer.” She tapped her nose on the same side as her eye patch then whispered, “There’s no alcohol in it.”

Divine paused, her mug half upturned for another swig. Of course the bartender knew every drink, but Divine didn’t expect to be accosted about it. She had a right to drink whatever she damn well pleased. She downed the rest and set the mug heavily on the counter.

“What of it?” she grumbled.

The woman leaned on the bar, the motion pleasantly squeezing her breasts together at

the edge of her shirt. Divine's eyes traced the line of the blouse, the breasts lifted by some sort of bodice underneath. Her right hand was unusual—complete fusion of the long and ring finger.

“My guess is you're here looking for someone, or something. Information perhaps? You'd need to keep your wits about you for that.” Her warm voice cut into Divine's thoughts.

The genuine texture of the woman's ensuing smile almost made her admit, “Actually, yes. I'm here looking for someone who stole something important from me. And if Madeline saunters in, I can't afford to be addled. She has a colorful tattoo of a rainbow bird on her shoulder blade. Looks like it could fly right off her skin. Lines her eyes with charcoal. Have you seen her?”

Instead, she nodded toward the woman's hands, “Accident or birth?”

“Blessed by birth,” she replied, her brow creasing as she pushed herself from the bar and took Divine's empty mug with the opposite hand.

A little late, Divine realized her question could be considered rude and braced to soothe a confrontation with her magic. Then she tensed, rubbing her neck, painfully aware of her missing necklace. Her Soulshield assignment was ready to heal emotional wounds even if her ability to do that had been taken from her. Her current quest had brought out bitter qualities in herself she would rather not have adding fizz to her usually calm surface. The necklace would have helped her soothe herself. Currently, she couldn't even calm a bug.

“Might or magic?” the bartender asked.

Divine frowned at the counter. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t see an obvious weapon, but that could be easily hidden in that long coat of yours. Or you could wield magic. I’d like to know what your tactics will be on our little quest.”

“I didn’t agree to any—”

“Ah, but you didn’t outright refuse it. Means there’s a chance. I just have to convince you.” She winked with her left, uncovered eye.

The woman sat on the edge of the counter with a short hop, deftly bumping the chest out of the way with her hip. She swiveled her legs around to face Divine, who had to lean back to avoid planting her face between the woman’s legs. Not that she hadn’t been in a similar place before, but Divine preferred to know the person between whose legs she was sandwiched.

The bartender grinned. “I can be very convincing.”

Divine swallowed. “I’m sure you can. But why me?”

“I don’t know.” She waved her hand as if she was shooing bugs. “I got a feeling about you. Like we could work well together when things get a bit...heated.”

Warmth rose on Divine’s cheeks. She hoped they weren’t as deep crimson as her shoulder-length curls. Either the tarrow-root beer was spiked, or this woman was unabashedly flirting with her. She didn’t mind. The attention gave her a rush like using magic, though it lacked the floral scent of roses Divine alone would smell. The memory of the fragrance, determined by the construction of her talisman, was beginning to fade. Maybe that was just the despair of five months whispering from just beyond the next hill. Images of transportation offices, record books, and long roads coughing dust from turning wheels danced in her head.

The woman jumped down, landing next to Divine's chair. "Let's go somewhere private and I'll show you what's in the chest."

"Don't you have to work the bar?" Divine gestured at the rows of bottles, rainbow bangles clinking as they slid up her forearm.

"Nah, I do it 'cause I'm bored. Sylus!"

Divine recoiled at the shout. She saw the woman's left eye focus across the tavern and turned. Between a line of windows with frosted glass, and tables and chairs that appeared to be pieced together from every home in Trelvania, stood a man with spiked brown hair. He wore a brown apron over his red shirt, which was opened so wide the muscles of his chest were visible.

"Got it, boss," he called over the din flashing a broad smile.

"Boss?" Divine tilted her head as she swiveled back.

The woman blew on the nails of one hand before turning her green eye on Divine. "I own the place. I'm Saph."

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m Divine.” She held out her hand but pulled it back, wiping the sticky remains of her frothy drink on the soft and stretchy fabric of her pants before reaching again to shake Saph’s hand.

“A lovely name. I imagine your parents pride themselves on choosing a moniker that matches your attributes. This way, darling.”

Sweat beaded on Divine’s neck and she fought to keep from plucking the front of her shirt in a makeshift fan. She glanced around for the source of the heat, but nothing had changed, and the fireplace was empty. She stood, removing her knee-length jacket and draping it over her arm before following Saph.

“It’s just what I go by,” she clarified. Divine wasn’t really her name, but she had gone by it for twenty or so years and her birth name didn’t seem hers anymore. Besides, the last person who’d called her by her birth name was her mother.

Saph veered toward a table near the fireplace, setting them on a path to the stairs. Somewhere private was apparently up in the living space.

“Why did your parents name you Sapphire? Your eye is green,” Divine blurted.

Saph laughed, throwing a look over her shoulder. Her left eye sparkled such that Divine couldn’t look away.

“Both eyes are green. No, my parents named me Saph. But Sapphire made for a better

logo to have carved over the tavern door.”

Divine glanced to the side out of the door’s windowpanes, barely catching sight of the swinging sign. She’d noticed the enchantment—which made the sign sparkle with rays of purple —immediately on arrival. The cut sapphire, like a multifaceted eye over the name of the tavern, was a nice touch.

“How much were you charged?” Divine asked, referring to the enchantment.

Saph paused at the first step, grasping the railing. “Do you usually inquire into finances before quests?”

Divine rotated a ring around her finger with her thumb. “Call it a tendency to want to solve problems. I know how the Tricksters typically operate. If you don’t haggle, they’ll charge way more than it’s worth.”

“Had your own run-in with them?”

Divine shrugged. “So is the way of the God of Day and Deceit.”

“I see. But don’t worry. I asked around and the fee was within reason. But that does explain the blinking.”

Saph ascended the stairs and Divine followed, careful not to bump into the tavern owner’s back side as she noted how the woman angled her head to watch her steps.

“What blinking?”

“I swear it blinks in the shape of a woman’s nether regions...well, only at midnight. God of Deceit huh? I could have used your knowledge before paying for the enchantment. How did you know the source of the handiwork?”

“I...” Divine hesitated as they reached the top of the stairs, not wanting to reveal anything that would elicit questions about her Goddess. Come to think of it, why didn’t Saph know? “Despite being the only servants with the ability to manipulate light?”

“Ah. You make a point.”

Saph’s response seemed off, but Divine was thankful the woman didn’t inquire more about her own connection to the Holy District as they moved into a warmly lit hallway.

The sounds of a full establishment below were muffled through the floorboards of the second level. Divine’s calf-high boots thudded as they walked, the sound deadened by the light hallway rug over the wooden floor. She shifted her jacket to her other arm.

Though autumn had begun to make its mark on the world like a painter dotting colors randomly across the landscape, the weather was just at the point of encouraging a light jacket. In the Sultry Sapphire, away from winds, the temperature had been comfortable—until Saph gave her attention. Divine dreaded the cold that followed the change in seasons. Her jacket’s dark brown, velvety fabric would not keep out the winter winds. She was glad she even thought to bring it. Madeline might have gone north instead, and these autumn days would nearly be over.

Saph led them to a wooden door with a simple brass knob. The door had the company of only two others in the hall. With so few rooms, the Sultry Sapphire was not one of the bed-and-beer variety. Once they were both inside, Saph closed the door and removed her blouse.

Divine froze, her gaze locked on Saph’s purple overbust corset, briefly acknowledging her guess that the woman was using something of the sort to enhance

her features. Apparently, this was Saph's bedroom.

"Be a darling and loosen these ties, would you? They're dreadfully hard to manage with only human hands." Saph had turned her back to Divine, sweeping her long black locks in front of her shoulder out of the way.

Human hands? Did she often have ursavara assisting her? Divine imagined claws shredding the back of the corset and cringed. Likely the woman was simply thinking of a random creature of Alistraysia. Though, the ursavara was more prominent here in the south. No. Divine shook her head. She imagined the woman's right hand had more to do with difficulty in managing the strings.

With nervousness trembling within her, Divine almost preferred the creature with its muzzle full of fish-filleting teeth asking for assistance instead. Divine reached for her well to combat her unsteady extremities but found emptiness where her magic used to be; the subsequent floral scent missing like a garden in winter. The abilities of a Soulshield now withered.

Throat dry, Divine reached out, her fingers brushing the woman's shoulder blades and the length of her spine before finding the offending ribbon tied at the base of the corset. Her heart thumped quicker as she imagined sliding her hands around to grip Saph's hips before spinning her around. Thankful her beer had not been spiked, Divine scolded herself for entertaining such thoughts about someone she had just met. Instead, she took her time, gently pulling the cross-woven ribbon loose at each hook like a weaver crafting a tapestry.

Despite her own reservation of what in all the lands of Alistraysia was happening, Divine didn't want the moment to end.

"Thanks, darling," Saph said finally, walking across the room to slip behind a privacy screen.

Articles of clothing began draping over the top. Divine consciously rooted her boots to the floor but watched the shadow of Saph's figure play on the screen.

"There's still the matter of your strengths..." Saph's voice seemed to linger on the screen as well.

Had Divine gotten so tangled in ribbons that she'd missed a question?

"Uh—"

"Might or magic. It's magic, isn't it? Your pants are far too tight to hide anything deadly, though I suppose you could hide poison just about anywhere. Are you an Apothecary?"

"Umm, no. I do wield magic. Well, did."

"Personal choice?"

Divine sighed. It was bound to come out eventually. "My talisman was stolen."

Saph peeked her head around the edge of the white partition, her chin tilted to angle her vision on Divine. "You're kidding!"

"It's complicated." Divine touched just below the notch at her neck where her locket used to hang, feeling for the raised moon and sword on its surface.

She saw herself, fifteen years old, sitting among roses and floundering with the generic advice given by her temple on talisman creation. It made sense not to receive any direct help, to keep the item secret, but it was a lonely undertaking. It became a test of the Goddess, to see who She blessed with which strengths. Divine was tired of being alone.

The woman disappeared again. “Judging from your clothes, I’d guess you’re from the capital. Long journey.”

“That’s right. You’re very perceptive.” From her home city of Arosia to the smallest hovels, the various bar workers all seemed to have that trait in common. Divine glanced at her mermaid belt buckle on her close-fitting pants and wondered what exactly revealed that she came from the northernmost city-state of Trelvania; the seat of the Holicratic Ruling Council that kept the hagiocracy functioning across the sovereign provinces. Trade happened with all of the provinces in Trelvania, therefore Divine thought everyone had a little bit of everywhere on them.

“And you’re a servant of a deity,” Saph continued. “Blessed for your devotion and all of that?”

Rubbing her finger over the grooves in her rose stud earring, Divine debated how much to trust this tavern owner, then thought, to Condemnation with it .

“The Goddess of Souls. It’s why I’m here. I tracked my...the thief here to Iramont.”

“Bold of them to steal from a prominent Goddess.”

Divine flinched. “She’s from our rival Goddess, Condemnation.” Why was she telling Saph all this? But Divine knew the answer. Since leaving her home city, she had confided in no one. The untold story churned inside her like a sickness. Eventually it would need to be expelled.

“I get the popularity challenge. Acquire the most followers, be the best. But why all the animosity between your temples?”

“You know what the Goddess of Souls does, right?”

“Something about ‘guiding souls into the afterlife.’” Saph’s voice dripped with light sarcasm.

“And the Goddess of Condemnation?” Divine asked, trying not to bristle at the negative response.

“Law enforcers and punishment dealers? Ah, much better,” Saph sighed. “This reflects my mood more.” She stepped around the privacy screen wearing a billowing peasant blouse with sheer sleeves and a rainbow of colors tracing the neckline in flowered embroidery. It was paired with a dandelion-patterned, ankle-length skirt. Three layers of beaded necklaces jangled from her clavicle to her breasts, still lifted. She crossed her arms, jostling a double-headed axe that poked over her right shoulder.

Divine swallowed, her eyes fixed on the axe. Perhaps she had trusted too quickly. “You, uh, say that like you don’t know for sure.”

“I haven’t stepped into the Holy District since I was probably ten years old. I couldn’t tell you which Gods and Goddesses people care for these days.”

Divine chuckled, then sobered as Saph’s face remained impassive. “But the tavern. Surely you hear things there?”

So much of Divine’s life had been within the arms of her Goddess. It was hard to imagine that there were still people within a city—a city that had the second largest population, and therefore the second largest Holy District, in Trelvania—who didn’t have a general understanding of the deities.

“I try to avoid it.” Saph shrugged, the weapon on her back hopping. “I don’t need the weight of their morality. That’s something for them to wrestle with.”

“Let me catch you up, then. The Goddess of Souls cares for the souls of the living and sees they find their way into the afterlife after death and then new into births, even if it is an unfathomable number of years later. I wasn’t strong enough to guide the souls directly.”

Saph’s eyebrow raised. “ Wasn’t? ”

Divine stiffened. “Let’s just say I’m not on good terms at the moment. I don’t really want to talk about that right now, if that’s alright.”

“Fair enough. And your magic?”

“What some forget is that care for souls includes the living. I had empathic influence, healing, protective shields. That sort of thing.”

“Empathic influence sounds interesting.” Saph adjusted the strap of her eyepatch.

“Imagine a brawl breaks out in your tavern. I could cool the heated tempers.”

“Handy. Just don’t use it on me, unless I ask you to.”

Divine nodded. If she ever got her talisman back. As Saph took a step toward her, Divine retreated, her eyes locked on the sharp blade.

“What’s that for?” Divine pointed.

“For our quest with the chest, of course. If I help you get your talisman back, will you go on an adventure with me?”

Divine bit her lower lip, watching as Saph shifted one hip higher than the other, her ale-brown skin peeking out. She placed her arms akimbo, waiting. The blouse fell

loosely on her shoulders and Divine wondered if a draft would slip the fabric from them completely.

“There’s maps. And maps in chests always lead to treasure,” Saph said into Divine’s hesitation.

Divine touched the bag of friggons strapped to the small of her back beneath her sleeveless shirt; a third of the size it was starting out. Not enough to keep staying in inns and have food to eat.

“I promise nothing but fun,” Saph said as she tapped her purple nose piercing, “no other promises.”

It had been a while since Divine had fun. Chasing your betrayer through a dozen cities for five months certainly took it out of you. But without her magic well, Divine wasn’t sure how much advantage she could truly add.

“You any good with that?” Divine pointed.

Saph reached over her shoulder and brought the weapon out, spinning it in one hand. She shifted her stance and her grasp on the sapphire-blue wrapped grip, and before Divine could blink the woman raised the double-headed axe over her head. Turning her head slightly to align her eye, with two hands on the forearm-length shaft she launched it. It whizzed past Divine to thunk somewhere behind her. Divine spun, finding a large wooden target on the room’s door; the axe lodged into the exact center, the free edge winking with sunlight.

“I’ll bring the might, you bring the magic.”

Divine turned her head back to Saph. “Why not.”

* * *

After Divine's hasty agreement, Saph opened the wooden box as they sat on the edge of her bed. Whatever was inside couldn't be that bad, right? As Saph explained it, the previous night a man clothed in all black with a matching sharpshooter hat came into her establishment. He didn't have coin and as she was in a generous mood, Saph offered to see if anything he carried would be fair trade for a couple mugs of ale. That's when the chest came out.

"He said he wasn't tied to it as he'd stolen it from someone along the road here. He hadn't had a chance to appraise the items inside but the man he'd taken it from was a dealer in unique items. He was 'sure it would more than pay' for his drinks." Saph shrugged.

"You're all right with him having stolen it?"

"As long as he didn't steal from me, what he does when he's outside of my bar doesn't matter. We've all got to survive somehow."

"And if I didn't have money to pay, what would you take in exchange?" Divine twisted an emerald ring on her right middle finger.

"A little adventure gets my heart all fluttery. I'm sure I could think of something. But you had money, and you've agreed to a quest, so I'm rich this evening." She peeled open the chest's maw, the brass connectors creaking.

Divine leaned closer, her shoulder brushing Saph's as she peered into the container. She let their arms remain in contact and Saph did not move away. Inside rested two hand-drawn maps, three crystals, and a note.

Saph handed the note to Divine. "Read it, would you, dear?" She plucked the crystals,

one each colored yellow, blue, and translucent, and held them aloft. Catching light from the window, one crystal refracted a rainbow on the wall as Divine read.

Excuse me, traveler. I need your help.

If you have found this box, then the last of my magic has succeeded. I'm embarrassed to say that one of my experiments went wrong and I have trapped myself inside my house. I can explain when you arrive and free me. Use the maps to locate my home and place the crystals where designated. I'll make it well worth your while.

"This can't be serious." Divine waved the note before folding the paper in half and handing it to Saph.

The tavern owner put the last, dark blue crystal back into the box. She flopped back, her hair fanning around her head like she lay in water. She held one of the maps over her head.

"I think I've been here before." She poked the map with a finger. "I recognized these farms." She lowered the map to her lap, angling her head on the bed to look at Divine. "I used to drive a wagon out that way to get my own supplies for the bar, if you can believe it."

Divine wanted to lie down beside her, let their arms touch as they held the maps aloft. But she pushed the reaction down. Too soon, for many reasons.

From this side of the map, a faint outline of ink shone through the parchment in the bottom left; a figure standing on its back paws, front paws raised with exaggeratedly long horns distinct to the ursavara. Interesting that the map maker drew doodles of forest fauna. Divine recalled the entry into the temple's bestiary as she waited for her mother to finish talking with the First Servant of Souls.

It was about a year before she had confirmed with the temple. Purple and gold foil traced the edge of a teal book, the remaining space covered in gold outlines of creatures, laying on a pedestal. Divine had flipped through the pages until an illustration of a creature standing on its hind legs caught her eye.

The entry for ursavara included advice for avoiding being mauled—something about food scraps, though Divine couldn't remember if it was to bury them or that a certain type of food kept the creature away. The entry also stated the beast was associated with confidence and strength but warned too much of either was a cause of conflict and aggression. To negate someone with these emotions, a Soulshield should try applying sensations of compassion and friendship. Divine wondered what the other temples' bestiaries included, as empathic influence was specific to the Goddess of Souls.

The book had also contained a map colored to show distribution of the ursavara for the known realms of Alistraysia. Divine had noticed that Trelvania had been colored for most of the entries. Situated between two other continents, the book explained, gave Trelvania a diverse population of non-sapient creatures. The southern half of Trelvania was colored darker than the northern to match the higher level of ursavara population.

Divine smiled. She had memorized nearly the whole book.

Saph handed her another map, breaking the memory. "What do you make of this?"

The map showed a clearing with a house just beyond another glade. Several markings were made around the house. At the bottom corner with a cluster of poorly drawn trees were the letters "REDLE" written in a shaky, red script.

"These might be the locations to place the crystals the letter mentions." Divine handed the map back. "And maybe the mapmaker doesn't know how to spell riddle?"

“Well, we’ll find out when we get there.” The woman sat upright and Divine recoiled, catching herself before she slid off the bed. “I don’t bite,” Saph said as she laughed, “unless you ask me to.”

Divine’s stomach flipped.

“All right,” Saph continued, “we’ll discuss what to pack later. First, we have to track down this mystery thief for your talisman.”

Madeline was more than a thief, but Divine didn’t correct her; while the stealing part was true, Divine didn’t want to prompt questions. Those tended to rip open her hastily sutured wounds. Crying all night into a pillow in the first town where she’d followed Madeline taught Divine she was better off keeping the memories locked away.

“I actually have some experience in hunting individuals with obligations,” Saph said. “Don’t ask. It makes for a much more interesting second date if I keep some secrets.”

“Second...date?”

“Did you not enter my sleeping chambers and remove my corset?” Saph jumped off the bed, one hand on her hip while the other gestured to the room. “Lie on my bed?”

“I...but—”

Ruffling Divine’s loose curls, Saph’s hearty laugh filled the room. Divine couldn’t stop her echoing smile. The woman picked her axe back up, took a step toward the door and motioned for Divine to follow.

“Come on. I know how to get the locals to talk. Let’s find out if anyone has seen your bandit.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am

CHAPTER THREE

“Any idea what the thief is going to do with your talisman?” Saph asked as they entered the hallway again.

“Beyond messing with her rival temple? Maybe selling it.”

“All the way down here instead of in the capital?”

“If she’s here, I have a theory. She’s heading toward the southern coast. To find a pirate captain to sell it to.”

Saph began to descend the stairs. “I’ll think of some strategic questions then when I’m serving the customers and they’re already prone to gossip. Why don’t you stay in the Sultry Sapphire this afternoon and listen to conversations at the tables?”

“Thank you for the invitation.” It was certainly better to have the tavern owner’s blessing than her original plan of trying to go unnoticed while watching for Madeline.

Saph hung her axe on a support beam next to the bar, its silver blades undulating with newly lit firelight from across the room. Divine wondered if the arm-length weapon was to remind the drinkers to behave.

After describing Madeline’s physical traits, Divine watched for anyone coming from the day’s services in the Holy District. The God of Storms and the Deity of Love and Fire’s followers worshipped on Wind’s Day. Though she didn’t know the layout of this city, typically those deities’ temples were on the way to the temple of the

Goddess of Condemnation.

She could enter the Holy District herself, enter the sacred structure of the Goddess of Condemnation—Madeline’s deity—but the longer she hid, the more Madeline would feel comfortable. Safe. Like she’d thrown Divine off her trail. And therefore, less likely she would bolt before Divine could find her.

And she could delay having to look into her honey-colored eyes lined in charcoal. Divine’s stomach churned.

She wandered to the community board, wood planks inside of a frame, and stared at tacked advertisements for midnight poetry recitations and a greasy map of Iramont that had so many creases, the parchment must have been rescued from a waste bin.

If they were lucky, Saph said the owner of a nearby Palfrey Post would stop by; he came in a few times a week to “hear his own voice.” The afternoon progressed as Divine watched from one corner of the tavern or another, with a twinge of inexplicable jealousy every time Saph laughed with someone at the bar. As Saph wiped the countertop, Divine admired the muscles of her upper arms through the sheer fabric of her sleeves and how her layered necklaces accented her neck. She wondered about the life she led to wield an axe.

Divine was nodding off into her third cup of tarrow-root beer, a bowl of bar snacks beside her, when the tavern door opened to a rush of laughter and leaves blowing in, like apple trees’ dresses crumbling at the end of summer’s dance. Sylus leapt up to sweep the offending brown mess back to the street.

A man in a brown leather vest and matching wide-brimmed hat spoke loudly to two men, a woman, and an Iguion with vibrant pink scales. The party accompanied him as they made their way through the tables. Several patrons eyed them warily before returning their focus to their own conversations.

“Viktor! Make yourself at home!” Saph called, pouring dark liquid into a grey-haired man’s stein. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The group navigated like salmon in a familiar stream, the Iguion looping their green and black spiked tail over their arm as they sat at the table next to Divine. After a moment, Saph appeared beside them. Divine watched Saph sit on the edge of their table and lean in, bracing herself with one hand. Her other hand twirled the teal and blue beads of her necklaces.

“Drinks? Cards? Drinks and cards?” Her head rotated as if angling her good eye on Viktor.

The man pointed to each of his companions around the circular table. They nodded in turn.

He raised his chin so that he looked up at Saph beneath the edge of his hat. “Both. The usual.”

The Iguion lifted a thin finger with a long, blunt claw. “Make mine a greenflutter,” their voice vibrated.

As Saph turned away, Viktor palmed the back of her dress, seeming to squeeze her backside. Divine rose from her chair, taking one step forward. Flashes of a man in a dark side street groping another woman crept up from her memory and she balled her fists.

Viktor turned, flicking the brim of his hat. “Ah, a newcomer. Care for a game of Crossroads George?”

Divine caught Saph’s subtle nod and a touch to her nose bauble before she hurried away. Divine’s mother used to touch her nose like that when she was letting someone

in on a secret.

Divine locked eyes with the man. “I’ve never played, but I’d be interested in watching.”

“Well then, you’re about to see the best card players in southern Trelvania!” He beamed, leaning back in his seat with his hands behind his head. “Pull up your chair.”

Divine took a seat and listened to the members of his crew recount interactions with customers from the day, laughing at what they deemed ridiculous requests.

“And then he asked to go south”—one of the men clapped the other on the back—“as if the horses had anything to eat that way.”

Divine sat straighter. “Do you get a lot of travelers at your establishment?”

“Sweetheart,” Viktor said, leaning forward, “we get all of the travelers. Why, we’re the biggest provisioner of single-rider mounts in the city.”

Saph returned, handing a deck of cards over Viktor’s shoulder. He took the stack, patting her hand.

“Are they letting people out of the south gate yet?” Saph asked, stepping behind Viktor and wiping her hand on the back of her dandelion-print dress.

“Nah”—Viktor shuffled the deck, the purple and gold foil rotating in a blur—“not even the caravans are approved, and they can carry more supplies in their wagons. This dang black spot is hurting my business.”

If the city wasn’t letting anyone travel south, that eliminated one route Madeline could take. If she was here. This black spot conjured images of arms with lesions in

need of healing, though she'd never heard of it. Divine opened her mouth to ask more questions, but Viktor tipped his hat up and began laying the cards out. Her eyes followed each placement.

He made a line of five cards; their backs had four navettes drawn in shimmering gold, intersected in a cross over a background of stained glass in blue shades. The cards' edges were traced with a purple double line. They reminded her of the temple's bestiary. Then Viktor placed two more cards on either side of the middle card, creating a cross. All cards faced down until he flipped the center card over. A figure covered in cloth stood on sand dunes, the sky purple, and a decacacti with its ten spiked stems extended. A number and a symbol decorated each card edge.

"Terrain is barren." Viktor dealt the cards around the table to his friends until each had six cards. He leaned his head closer to the female to his left as he fanned his cards out with their faces hidden. "What alignment?"

"Dark. Shadowbone." The woman answered without removing her eyes from her cards.

The Iguion issued a hiss layered with a low-timbred vibration that reminded Divine of air passing over accordion reeds before rearranging the cards in their hand.

"Sorry to sabotage your plan."

"That is not the issue." The Iguion angled the side of their pink head closest to the woman. Divine imagined that their golden eye skewered her. "You rarely choose anything different."

A whisper in Divine's right ear made her jump.

"Find out anything interesting?"

Half turning, Divine saw Saph's eyepatch and relaxed her shoulders. "I know where she isn't, and that's a start," Divine whispered back.

"I'll ask him another question or two when he gets going with the game. He has to be in the throes of enjoyment, though, otherwise he's as forthcoming as a wulf with its muzzle sewed up."

Their cheeks nearly touched, and Divine fought against an urge to close the distance.

"What's this black spot they're talking about?" Divine asked.

"A disease of the crops. The leaves get these black blemishes, and the plants don't bear fruit. Watermelons from the south were decimated this season. Ooh I could sink my teeth into a juicy watermelon right now."

"Do they know what's caused it? I haven't heard of a black spot around Arosia."

"They aren't sure. It maybe started in the south since it has spread so far there. Nothing will grow. There are cases east, and west of us to the mountain valleys, but at least they are still able to grow something ."

Nodding, Divine thought about the checkpoint at the entrance. If they didn't know what caused the disease, making sure plants didn't enter or leave might keep it from spreading and protect the gardens within Iramont. Many of the window boxes had herbs and spices growing within.

"How does this game work?" she asked as Viktor flipped over the card furthest from the woman.

It revealed an image of vines swirling among pink flowers and plump red berries. The third player in line frowned then plucked a card from his hand.

“Each card has a number and a symbol on the card edges. Since Syka selected Shadowbone, the dark cards are Outshines; zombies, assassins, poisoned blades. Things like that. Outshine cards never get terrain penalty. There’s a one-point penalty with a desert starting terrain without using a Shadowbone type.”

The man next to Syka placed the image of a woman at the left edge of the berry card. This placed the right edge, and number nine, next to the berry card’s number seven. The woman on the card had hair made of wheat flowing across a card covered in a rainbow of fruits and vegetables.

“The Goddess of Fields?” Divine guessed.

“That’s how we’ve always seen her. Since Edward used her as resource card to gather resources, no one else can use that type of action during this round. The goal is to be the one that reaches the crossroads first. The center card.”

Edward reached the card one closer to the T from the berry card and flipped it over. The image showed birds of various sizes layered over a river. Viktor dealt Edward one more card.

“With the terrain desert, the players must play the earth edge, the right edge. There’s fire, water, air, and earth which are the little symbols there. If your number is higher than the table card, you get to flip over the next card and get one more card dealt to you. Edward had a nine, minus the desert penalty, it was eight. Eight beats seven. If your card isn’t higher, well, you get nothing.”

Divine’s eyes glazed, but she nodded and watched the next moves. The Iguion gnashed their small, serrated teeth as they shook their head and sat back. The sleeve of their billowy grey tunic pushed back as they crossed their arms, flashing shades of bright pink scales in a pattern like a woven rug.

A player tried to use lightning bolts—perhaps summoning the powers of the God of Storms—on the card with the birds and the river but all Divine could think about was Madeline’s bird tattoo. Each day she didn’t get her talisman back meant reconnecting to her well could be as hard as sailing a ship in a storm-rage created by the God of Storms.

The game circled the table again, Sylus filling mugs for everyone, as Divine’s eyes kept being pulled to watch the Iguion. They touched Sylus’s arm before whispering in his ear. Sylus nodded and retreated, and when the turn moved to Viktor a second time, there were four cards flipped face up. Several players had lost on their turn. Divine wondered what the Iguion had asked for, but her thoughts were cut short.

“Good thing I own a stable because bam!”—he slammed his card on top of the wulf card on the table, a failed last play—“I’m gonna ride that beast like a horse tamer.” His hand lifted, revealing a Kellas’ nose and whiskers beneath a hood. The figure was in a darkened alley, holding a dagger in each black spotted furry hand.

“A feline on top of a wulf? You’re really stretching your imagination, Viktor,” Edward scoffed.

From the previous rounds, Divine gathered that the images were open to interpretation; as long as the image could be argued to represent a thing, theme, or action you could do, it could be played. It made the game creative.

“I agree,” the Iguion added. “Kellas does not subjugate any creatures.”

Divine noted how the vowel sounds held an undertone of susurrations, like a rasp of wind through autumn leaves.

Syka groaned. “Do we have to listen to another ‘human-adjacents are great’ speech?”

The Iguion placed their cards face-down on the table. They clasped their long fingers in front of their chest and the large round scale on each cheek seemed to puff larger. “I am simply pointing out that our races continue to be misunderstood and blatantly misrepresented—”

“There are literally Kellas pirates, Liz,” Viktor replied. “They conquer others all the time.”

Divine couldn’t tell if Liz was the Iguion’s name, or a nickname similar to lizard. And if it was the latter, it wouldn’t be the first time one of the human-adjacents was reduced to degrading nicknames.

“That is a symptom of the circumstances. If people understood both Kellas and Iguion better, we would not have to take up...odd occupations.”

“Yeah, well, if your people would let us into your city more than once a month maybe we’d know,” Syka countered.

The Iguion’s sigh sounded more like a hiss. “You’re just sour you missed the boat with me last winter.”

Syka slunk in her chair, which made her small stature seem tinier. “It gets so freaking cold here. I need warmth and beaches and—”

“You are welcome to pitch a tent anywhere beyond our cities on the island.”

“Really. It’s like you don’t know me at all. Do I look like a campfire kind of gal? I want the beaches and then get to go back to a nice bed where I can buy my food from other people.”

“Stop daydreaming and focus,” one of the players interjected. “That card is clearly

some sort of assassin or rogue and it would be sneaky sneaking around alleys and not galloping around.” Divine bristled at using the word it to describe another rational being. What she wouldn’t do to bathe the table in a wave of empathy right now. “I challenge the placement.”

“It’s an interesting strategy,” Saph said loud enough for the table to hear. “Taking inspiration from somewhere, Viktor?”

Viktor collapsed his fanned cards into one hand and turned toward Saph. “As a matter of fact, yes. Had to get the patrols to escort a male Kellas out of the city. The fool managed to slip in riding a harvester wulf.”

Divine tried to imagine anyone riding the large canis. Half as high as a horse, a harvester wulf was the height for children to ride, but none would. The fangs in its muzzle guarded against creatures threatening to eat a farmer’s crops, and as their name eluded, harvester wulf taming had made them plowers of fields as well as guards.

“Wanted to trade it for a werewing,” Viktor continued. “Had the ridiculous idea to fly to the floating continent.”

Saph tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I bet you get a lot of interesting people who’d never enter my tavern. People who drink tea with fried sandwiches.”

People who thought they could get to Zenith, land of the Dieties .

Saph leaned an arm on the table. “People who just have one tattoo.”

“It’s true,” Viktor said. “A very lovely lady yesterday with a bird tattoo came by, too sophisticated for standard ale. Never seen such good ink work. Feathers looked real. Probably cost her a fortune for all those colors.”

Divine sat forward but when Saph's hand patted her knee she relaxed. Viktor continued. "Wanted to reserve a horse for a companion to travel west. She didn't know when he'd arrive so it was sort of a long-term deposit. And I gave her my deposit last night!"

Viktor elbowed Syka as if to ask if she caught his innuendo. To Syka's credit, her black lidded eyes barely narrowed as she remained focused on her cards. Divine grimaced as Viktor's companions laughed.

"How will you know who to give the horse to?" Saph asked.

"She paid until the end of the week and said she'll either escort them for pick up herself or pay to extend the reservation. Whether the horse is used or not, I'm getting friggons."

"And if she doesn't show?"

"Oh, she'll definitely want to see me again. Besides, she asked about the Market District and seemed interested in the city's autumn festival. She's probably here a few days at the least."

Someone else spoke and Viktor changed topics. The tattoo sounded like Madeline's, but bird tattoos were not unique. She didn't want to get her hopes up, but Divine sat straighter, pleased, and turned her attention back to the card game. Madeline was likely here, and maybe not going to the coast as Divine had thought. Divine was tired of the chase.

"You can't play that card!" said the other male, pointing to a card with a scepter of fire on a background of glowing orbs.

"And why not?" the Iguion asked, the scales on their puffed cheeks quivering

flashing a metallic glint from the scales' bottom side.

“Because your kind can't even use magic!” the first speaker cackled into their cards.

Divine searched the Iguion's expression, though the scales hid minor fluctuations like brows wrinkling for humankind. Their claws retracted marginally before extending again from their slender fingers.

“This is a card game. It is not governed by reality,” the Iguion replied, scratching the loose skin at their neck.

Divine wondered what role they had chosen for themselves in their society, remembering her mother wistfully commenting, No distinctions made between male or female, they just are. They get to be who they want to be. Iksarsis, the one I stayed with the first night, they decided they wanted to become the life-giver and...I don't know how, but their body transformed to make it so.

“If it were based on reality,” Saph whispered, “we'd have all sorts of treasure boxes popping up any time we completed a task; not that I'd complain.”

“How do you know so much about this game?” Divine asked, leaning back in her chair. She had leaned forward often during the rounds as if that would grant her a better understanding of the game and the ache in her back was now persistent.

Saph placed one arm on the back of her own chair and leaned her head on her fist. “I've played a lot. Won some good games.”

The relaxed position made Divine feel like they'd known each other for more than a day. Divine yawned. It had been a long day. She had arrived at the entrance to Iramont, where they checked her bags for any prohibited items, including seedlings or seeds, a few hours after sunrise. She thought the bag check was odd, but she also was

road-delirious; she'd left Oberon before the sun rose which gave her four hours of sleep since the previous wagon ride.

Viktor scoffed. "Go on, tell her. I'm over it."

"To Condemnation you are!" Saph's smile grew wide, and Divine found herself unable to look away from her lips as the woman leaned in conspiratorially. "I won this tavern in a high-stakes game."

Divine's eyes widened. "You're kidding! Who bets their tavern?"

Saph nodded her chin toward Viktor. Make yourself at home . The phrase Saph used clicked.

"It was the best thing that's happened to me. My Palfrey Post is much more profitable, and I don't have to deal with the drunks. As frequently." Viktor remained focused on the table.

Divine admired how he paid attention to the card game and the conversations. She scanned the table; mugs of ale, scattered cards, yet no coins or tokens next to Viktor. "But you don't bet anymore, do you?"

A brief pause ensued before he replied. "Where'd you pick up this inquisitor, Saph?"

The bar owner laughed. "No, he doesn't bet anymore. He learned his lesson."

"Hmph." Viktor stared intently at his hand.

Saph leaned close to Divine. "People say I take risks," she whispered, lips brushing Divine's ear, "but they usually have intense...payoff."

Her emerald eye drew Divine's attention like the greenflutter cocktail before the Iguion. She licked her lips. The players erupted in laughter, but Divine's attention couldn't be pried away.

Saph grinned. "I could show you how I play." She tapped Divine's nose lightly. "I have a deck in my room."

Divine's pulse quickened. She imagined Saph's room and the bed, cards laid out across Saph's body; a trail to the crossroad at Saph's—

Divine's chair screeched against the floor as she rose.

"Er, not right now. I...I'm going to get some air."

She excused herself and exited to the street where the light from the fading sun cast long shadows and illuminated places in orange.

* * *

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am

Pacing in an alley, Divine rubbed her forehead and swallowed. What was she thinking? She needed to find Madeline and her talisman. Playing cards and flirting with a successful gambler were distractions. But it felt like a breath in a garden to enjoy the moment; to forget her vengeance, even if the scent of the flowers was imagined.

She sighed and decided to explore the city in search of clues before everyone ended their day. At least she would be attempting to find her talisman. The act would clear her head. Small progress was still progress. And if Viktor had really seen Madeline, she must be on a mission to sell Divine's talisman. There had to be some shops still open at this time of the evening.

The scent of horse excrement told her she was near the Palfrey Post before her eyes did. Viktor's venture sat catty-corner to the tavern. As much as he boasted that he'd moved on from his bar-managing days, he seemed to want to stay close. Divine wondered if it was hidden jealousy, or a desire to keep his eyes on Saph. She huffed. She couldn't stop trying to see into the soul of everyone she interacted with. A Soulshield's want left to itch.

Recalling the map pinned to the wall of the Sultry Sapphire, Divine strolled toward the opposite direction of the Holy District and took in the city.

Iramont was nearly as large as her home city of Arosia. She admired how the past Iramont leaders had planted fruit trees along the streets, ready for anyone who needed a snack. Abundant gardens filled the city with fresh vegetables and herbs available to everyone. It was so unlike her familiar Arosia, where nearly all edible items were imports. Arosia was a major crossroads of continental trade routes, though, and

offered a variety of goods from surrounding continents, nearby provinces, as well as the islands.

As the evening breeze brushed her skin, Divine found herself panting along an incline before reaching the summit. Food, lodging, and transportation behind her, the Essentials District morphed into living areas. Window boxes with yellow daisies and mini orange sunflowers hung from most of the windows, aerial gardens on the multilevel habitspaces shared by families. Blossoms made of fallen leaves hung from doorways and other seasonally appropriate decorations, some enhanced by a servant of a deity. The Goddess of Fields was always popular in Arosia as well, people often crafting large displays of wheat and late summer berries lashed together with twine on a window.

In the center of this Living District, an iridescent pool shaped like an elongated quatrefoil sprayed from three fountains. A tiered main that cascaded down levels of metal leaves was flanked by spouts arching out of the vine-encircled pool; the work of a Hydromancer serving the Goddess of Standing Waters. It was easy to envy the followers of the Tranquil Gods, their magic rarely used to impact a person's state of being directly. How simple a life they must lead, never burdened with tempering anger or cheering sadness.

Divine drew closer to the pool, the allure of hydromancy pulling her body like a drink to her parched well, though she knew she needed to stay to her task. She peeked over the edge. Instead of her red curls, accented with a feather hair clip made of labradorite, Divine saw in the rippling water a vision of seagrass waving in front of pink sand and high turquoise waves. Solhavn. Divine's mother had been to the island once, when Divine was twelve, but she always said she was like her garden flowers. My roots need strong soil to grow, not rough sand that shifts with the slightest breeze. But strong soil didn't matter. No amount of sea breezes could cure her body.

Divine blinked as deep laughter echoed against the buildings, pulling her out of the

image and the shadow of sorrow. She looked up at families conversing, then surveyed the layout of the Market District. Three additional streets branched away, and Divine's feet chose the one that lead her further away from Holy District. She was moving before her mind caught up.

The path she chose soon turned into specialty shops. Among the carved leather messenger bags and the flower-embroidered skirts, Divine watched for her locket as an item sold secondhand in the window displays. The same sign of her Goddess, a sword piercing a crescent moon, appeared on various items next to objects with symbols of other deities, but so far no pendants. As she bent closer to one window displaying jewelry, a reflection in the glass caught her attention. She turned around.

Across the avenue, a servant of a Tranquil God in a long plain robe, the autumn-colored folds draped over one arm and the opposite shoulder like a half-made coat, gestured in supplication to passing citizens. Divine watched but tried not to stare.

"Righteousness cannot be obtained by punishing deeds manifested from the soul," he called. "It is only by goodness that a soul is enriched. Charity. Understanding. Love. The God of Virtue seeks those who would see their neighbors' souls blessed with such an existence."

A young man, perhaps fourteen years of age, stopped as he passed. "What kind of magic do you get at confirmation?"

The servant beamed. "The God of Virtue is more concerned with promoting kindness than displays of power."

"You don't get anything?"

The Goodly One bowed his head. "Guiding others into righteousness is a gift, but we are ourselves a source of power."

The boy crossed his arms. “What does that mean?”

“How we treat others has far more impact on how they live their lives than igniting fire upon things. With a kind gesture or word, we can infect happiness that spreads from soul to soul. Too easily can an unkind act cause others to act vengeful to those near them, spreading like a disease.”

Other denizens passed, some avoiding eye contact with the servant of the God of Virtue as they hurried past. Judging by the boy’s interest, he hadn’t yet pledged devotion to a God or Goddess. And if Divine’s estimate of his age was correct, he still had a year if he wanted to become a servant of a deity.

“You don’t have magic?” the boy asked, tapping his foot.

The servant sighed. “Not every worshipper is able to use magic, regardless of confirmation. It is the same as all the deities. For those who are blessed by His Hand of Virtue, we are granted large magical wells, but we cannot access them. Only those we allow can draw from our power.”

“Then...you’re like a talisman?”

“In a way.”

“That’s useless. No wonder no one ever wants to join.” The boy shook his head and left.

The Goodly One rubbed his nose and began quoting from his creed again.

An idea formed and though it was likely to fail, Divine steeled herself and walked to the Goodly One.

As she drew closer, she could see a thin chain around his neck. His God's pendant lay against the fabric below his collarbone; a circular base made of silver with a raised kite-like shape containing a stone of rainbow hues, the pair hugged by a nest of interwoven links.

"Good evening," she said. "Not having much success in converting followers tonight?"

"It's not really the gathering of souls that we seek, but to...save them from errantly devoting themselves to unkind causes. But you already know what I speak of," the man added, displaying a knowing nod.

"Your temple is often seen as an extension of the soul-guiding aspects of the Goddess of Souls. An opponent to the Goddess of Condemnation."

The man smiled. "I think opponent is a strong word, but we do try to avoid the agents. Soulshaper?"

"Soulshield." Divine glanced at her feet. "One who has lost her talisman."

"Or do you mean to say stolen."

Divine's eyes shot back to his face. "How did you—"

"Several of our servants have had their talismans forcibly removed."

"What? Why?"

The man shrugged, shifting the autumn-colored folds of one shoulder. "Ever it has been the goal of the deities to amass power. What better way to force a servant to abandon their chosen divine than to rob them of the well that ties them to their God?"

The God, then, receives none of the boost of their well. A weakened God is not appealing to new followers. Less followers, less power...”

He let the statement hang in the air like a hovering bird, an ending trill to its song on its beak. The power of temples usually referred to the amount of servants wielding a magical blessing from their deity—the reach of their influence and presence in the provinces. But he almost made it sound like the God himself would gain more power from a person aligning themselves to him through confirmation. Divine suppressed a shudder thinking about the God of Storms creating something more akin to a hurricane over the mountains with that extra power instead of a regular thunderstorm.

“But what could they do with the talismans? Even if the person sold it to a Kellas pirate, they only turn them into magical—though incredibly potent—munitions.”

“Ah, this is where I’m afraid you’ve been misinformed.”

Divine chewed on her lower lip. Despite their soul-focused purposes, she hadn’t interacted with servants of the God of Virtue much. They didn’t seem to harbor the anger and resentment that poisoned interactions like some of the temples. Was it possible that he had more information about talismans than what had been shared with her by her temple?

The Goodly One leaned closer. “There are some who are able to manipulate talismans for their own purposes, not just the Kellas.”

“You mean, they can access our wells?” Divine’s stomach felt sick. Her well was her sacred space.

“I have heard some have found a way to use them as secondary talismans. And some sever the connection completely.”

Divine gasped. “But how could they use them? The longer the talisman is out of contact with its creator, the weaker the connection is.”

“Servants of the God of Virtue are, at its basic level, access points to magic wells. Talismans. Do you think we grow weaker when we are not used by others?”

“This was not how I envisioned this conversation going.” Divine ran a hand through her curls.

“You had wanted to ask about using a Goodly One’s well.”

“Yes...but how could you possibly know that?”

“I can, in a way, feel your intent. Like a bump from a swell of your well’s water.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Goodly Ones are more connected to the source of magic than you’ve probably been told. We are all more connected. And you are not as disconnected from your well as you might think. Or you are a...” he shook his head, “no, ignore my musings. Go ahead. Ask.”

Divine took a shaky breath, her mind whirling. She couldn’t recall a time in her life that the God of Virtue’s servants had allowed themselves to be the extra well for another magic-user. But she had to try.

“I’ve promised to go on an adventure of sorts. But I’m useless without my magic, so I’m looking for my talisman but...I’m afraid where it is will bring me more harm than good. What if—you know that my temple exists to do good for others. I’d only use the well for that. Protection, healing. What if one of your Goodly Ones”—the man shook his head but Divine plowed on—“or you. What if you accompanied me?”

“We have all taken a vow. We let our wells be used, long ago, and corruption resulted. The Goddess of Condemnation wasn’t very happy about it either. Your temple isn’t the only one out of favor with her.”

Divine’s stomach sank. She would have to find Madeline and retrieve her talisman if she hoped to use her well again. Divine turned her back to the Goodly One. It was a pointless idea. Just a way to continue to avoid facing the knife that cut her the deepest.

“May His Hand of Virtue treat you fairly,” Divine said softly, recounting a common phrase of his temple.

“I’ll tell him you asked for his blessing on me when I see him next,” the Goodly One intoned.

Divine turned around. A playful smile danced on the man’s lips.

“Now you’re going to tell me that you see your God?”

“The deities don’t always stay on the Zenith.”

“You’ve really seen yours?”

“Well, yes.”

Divine furrowed her brow. “He, what, just shows up sometimes?”

“Mostly on Wind’s Days. He likes to check in with the God of Storms. You have not seen your Goddess, I assume?”

Divine thought. “There are times, when I reach into my well where I feel that I’m not

alone or I hear a whisper of a voice that is not mine. But to see her in the flesh—no, I have not had the fortune.”

“Hmm. Does it make you feel more powerful when you feel this?”

“I guess? Yes, maybe a little.”

“Some would say that feeling is unique to an Old Soul. If you find you have more questions later, do seek me out. I think I could help.”

“You know, you know an awful lot about all of this,” Divine said, pretending she knew what he meant by the first part of his statement.

“Let’s just say I’ve been here from the beginning.”

“You’ve been here since your temple was built?”

“Something like that.”

Running her gaze over his clean-shaven face, Divine searched for lines that would give away his age but only found creases at the corners of his mouth. There was no way he had been here since his God’s temple was erected. And if he was wrong about that, maybe she shouldn’t take all of what he had to say as truth. Though, his openness and confidence had her nearly believing him. Again, she wished she could use her magic to search for hints of lies in his emotions. But if he could shield himself like Madeline did, she wouldn’t be able to discern his level of candor either.

“I should let you go. Maybe they”—Divine thumbed to the side where some other shoppers were milling about—“will think I’ve signed up since I’ve lingered here so long. I hope it helps your recruitment.”

“Even though it means less souls for your Goddess? You are exceptionally kind.”

Leaving the Goodly One, Divine looked for a shop to continue the search for her talisman though her thoughts spiraled into examining everything he had told her. Before her, three shops closed their doors nearly in sync. Even the doors were rejecting her.

Shadows now carpeted the street. Above, the sky was a darkened blue with muted clouds. Sunset came so earlier this time of year. Soon the lampposts would burst to life, enough light stored in the Trickster crystals to pierce the dark. Divine would have liked to explore some of the other areas before they closed. Maybe another day—when she had her magic, and her dignity back. All this talk of deities and magic weighed her steps. She turned back in the direction of the Sultry Sapphire.

The sweet and tart smell of apples ready for picking filled her nose as she passed a community garden between family dwellings. She partook in the crisp fruit, groaning at the sweetness with a hint of sour as the juices pooled in her mouth. She savored the distraction.

A birdbath stood between two trees, across from a bench where Divine sat to finish her apple. A child held hands with her mother as they strolled past, one of the last summer roses in her hand, all thin petals of pale pink—roses like her mother had grown under their windowsill.

An ache sat on Divine’s chest, of love, loss, and connection, and she switched her gaze to the trees. What did she really know of life and the world? Hidden truths, secrets, trusts broken. Panic coiled in her, ready to send her breaths to a crescendo.

A rainbow bird landed on a branch with leaves painted with fire, puffing its teal and purple chest feathers. A bird like the inked shoulder Divine had trailed kisses, lips climbing a sand-colored ladder, to Madeline’s neck; hot breath and fingers in her

chin-length hair. When the wind blew, it would toss Madeline's icy brown strands, revealing a glimpse of her clipped undercut and etched pattern placed behind her ear, hidden from a casual view, like her true character.

Divine squeezed her eyes shut and took a shuddering breath. She told herself the emptiness inside her chest was her missing the connection to her magic well. The months she'd been without her talisman wrecked her body like the absence of alcohol to someone suffering withdrawals, or someone with an empty well sitting in a city with a large Holy presence.

But lying to herself was easier than admitting she'd lived a lie; easier than thinking she continued to choose the wrong path at every crossroad; easier than trying to put back a heart given away.

Divine dropped the apple core, covering her face and the hot tears.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Divine opened the door to the Sultry Sapphire, sounds collided into her. Thumps of hand drums, the twang of a jaw harp, and the bright arc of vibrations from a bow, accompanied laughter and singing. How did they have the energy to be so merry so late? Her eyelids felt heavy. If the person Viktor saw wasn't Madeline, she had lost valuable time and energy.

Saph looked up from the bar and smiled, waving. Divine nodded.

"You look exhausted, darling," Saph commented.

Divine slumped against the bar. "I feel it."

"I know there's more to your story but"—she held up a hand—"rather than question you, I'd like to offer you a place to stay."

Divine glanced at the patrons; several pink-scaled bodies danced on tabletops. Iguion. Their green and black spikes from head to tail broken only by the pillowed clothes they wore. She wondered if these lived in the district with the Iramont pool that showed her their home island. Flopping onto an open stool, she searched Saph's face. Without her talisman and her magic well, Divine felt no vibrations of emotions against her skin in the air between her and Saph and had to read the sincerity within her face. She did need rest.

Saph bent, aligning their faces. "About earlier. If I made you uncomfortable, I apologize."

Divine shook her head. “I’m just...I’m still working through my emotions. I’ve been chasing her for five months.”

Saph leaned against the bar and rested her chin on her hands. “You let down your guard. Maybe even found yourself enjoying the evening?”

Divine nodded.

“You deserve to enjoy things.” Saph straightened, wiping the bar.

When in Oberon, she hadn’t even ventured to the riverwalk, instead opting to stay at the inn with other travelers, though even they participated in games and music while Divine watched for Madeline. She missed playing her accordion, but bringing its suitcase size on the road was ridiculous. Not to mention how the dust would cause havoc in its bellows.

“Do you have musicians here often?” Divine asked, casting a longing look at the music-makers.

“Just about every night after sundown. Do you play?”

“Some. I find clarity and a sense of calm through music.”

“Feel free to join any night, though the racket back there is less than calm. Though on Soul’s days, we read poetry at the magic hour so they have to be done early. There’s just something about the time midway between sleeping and rising that seems powerful. Like you’re here but you’re also elsewhere.”

Divine cocked an eyebrow. “We?”

“I write poetry.” Saph pointed a thumb at her chest.

Sylas had loaded up a tray of mugs nearby but paused to lean closer to Divine. “Don’t let the weapon scare you, the boss is really a softy. Ask her to read you the one about how love is like an axe.”

“Sylas, I will make you clean the latrine with your tongue if you reveal any more of my secrets.”

“Well, now I’m curious.” Divine crossed her arms and leaned on the bar.

Saph mirrored the action, bringing their faces close. Divine could feel Saph’s breath on her lips and her stomach fluttered pleasantly.

“That’s a fourth date trade,” Saph said, then pushed away.

Divine tried to keep her disappointment from showing by turning to watch the musicians again. Their song had ended, and the audience alternated between raising their glasses and gulping their contents.

“What did you mean about offering a place to stay?” Divine asked.

“I have blankets. You can sleep on my bedroom floor, no charge. And I really mean just sleep. Don’t get any ideas.” Her uncovered eye winked. “I’ll keep asking around until I close, and in the morning, we take to the streets. Someone is bound to have seen this thief since Viktor.”

“That may not be Madeline,” Divine mumbled, her gaze blurring as she stared at the bar.

“Ah, she’s a notorious thief, then?”

Divine’s gaze slowly focused on Saph. “What do you mean?”

“Since you know her name.”

“I—it’s complicated.”

“These things usually are.” Saph reached below the bar and pulled out a jar. Where Divine would usually hold a container in her hand, Saph nestled it into the crook of her arm then used her five-digit hand to unscrew the cap. She scooped out a sticky substance that might have been honey and dropped the spoon into a mug. She filled it up from the closest keg for a nearby patron. “I know I promised to resist questioning you but, why do you think she’s not who Viktor saw?”

Divine shrugged. “Madeline’s not the only one with that tattoo. And there were two major directions from Oberon, not to mention any number of small villages in any direction. I bet that she’d come here. Disappear in the larger crowd. If she went another way, I’m so behind I may never pick up her trail again.”

Saph wiped her hands on the sides of her long skirt and hopped onto the bar. She swiveled so that her legs hung off the front to the side of Divine. She could get used to Saph’s favorite position.

Saph’s hand lightly touched Divine’s. “I am eager to see if she’s selling in the market like Viktor implied, as it means you and I will get to follow the instructions of the mysterious letter without delay. A deserved vacation from your endless hunt. Give us two more days to find this Madeline before you abandon hope, hm?”

Divine held her breath, fighting back a surge of emotion. She didn’t need to move with the singular urgency of one who had only herself to depend on anymore. But could she trust Saph? The free lodging was definitely tempting.

“Wool makes me itchy.” Divine rotated her hand and squeezed Saph’s fingers gently, hoping to convey her appreciation.

“You’re in luck. I gave my last wool blanket to Viktor.”

* * *

In the morning and slightly less fatigued, Divine exited the tavern with Saph, who left the Sultry Sapphire in the care of Sylus. Not many patrons came until lunchtime, and he wouldn’t really need her until the evening rush. The hunt for her talisman could begin. Divine nearly quivered at the prospect.

As they closed the door behind them, Saph touched Divine’s elbow and steered them toward the rising sun. The city already bustled.

“I have half of an idea to convert the Sapphire to a teashop in the mornings—bake some apple bread and buttered rolls, and brew hot leaves with splashes of milk or honey. Think it would be popular?”

Divine looked back at the shops around the tavern; next door a business had crates and barrels in various states of disassembly stacked to the roof of its small porch and a sign that said “Temporarily Closed” stuck to the door’s window. On the other side, a sign larger than the Sultry Sapphire flashed “Exotic Meats” in gold from the wood carving. Smoke swirled out of a chimney and Divine wrinkled her nose as the faint stench of burnt animal fat wafted on a gust of wind.

“I’ve never seen a place to sit and drink tea. Could work.”

“Perhaps the novelty will draw interest. But, to the task before us. What you said about the Kellas captains got me thinking. We should step into the autumn street market. This time of year, everyone is trying to get rid of the things they didn’t sell earlier. Many vendors, with some coming as far as Pariatan. The regular shops open a bit later to give them an hour of non-competition. Rare Iramont hospitality. Though I think it’s so the shop owners can enjoy the merriment.”

The pair walked in silence until they turned down an alley near the Palfrey Post which led into an open square. Divine wasn't sure how she missed the alley last night. However, looking closer, canopies swam over carts full of apples, miniature animals made of straw, displays of dried flower wreaths, and colorful quilts serving as living paintings. Children ducked beside their elders as they haggled the price to pay for the last harvest of fresh bustleberries.

In the dashing children, Divine saw herself in her mother's garden, ribbons in her hand as she made a tail ripple behind a fish made from twigs. There was something there, hidden in the joy of the emotion. A fish that had stopped moving on the bank of a river, Divine touching its smooth scales and the fish leaping to life and into the sparkling water. Or was it just the disarrayed child memory of the ribboned toy and the encouraged pretend play in the safety of her mother's presence? A tap on her shoulder and Divine looked away from the children, and her memories.

"There's a jewelry seller over there." Saph pointed and together, they danced around the shoppers. Divine bumped into a woman as an ear of corn materialized in her hand, the green husk accenting her brown skin.

"Five friggons an ear," the woman said, tapping her wide nose.

"Uh, no thank you," Divine mumbled.

The woman, a Nelithorian she now noticed, wore a wide band of orange cloth on her head, distinct to the humans of the northern province. She grabbed Divine's forearm. "You won't find a better price in the city."

"It's robbery."

Divine leaned to the right. Behind the Nelithorian, a woman and the apparent source of the insult frowned; a baby snuggled in her arms and a small child gripped her free

hand.

The seller rotated to her. “I merely charge what it’s worth.”

“You stand there and create an ear of corn,” the woman replied. “You didn’t labor in the fields to harvest it like the farmers. How dare you charge that price!”

The merchant placed the corn in a woven basket secured in the crook of her other arm. “The nearby farms have been plagued by the black spot. If you want to buy from a farmer, go then. Go north to Oberon just to get some corn and tell me how much you save after you pay for transportation. Or find a farmer who’s traveled here. They are selling for six or seven friggons each.”

The other woman shifted her baby up her shoulder. “You undercut the farmers’ prices. It’s not right. How hard is it for you? You just wave your hand.”

“Ah, confrontational and ignorant. If you had wanted snowshrooms, that requires travel to the northern edge of Nelithor. Do you know how long it takes to travel the length of our land? How much practice it takes to recall a precise image in our minds to then reach through our wells and grab the exact cluster of grain or fruit from the vine that we need? You pay for the skills of a Harvester of the Goddess of Fields as well as the item.”

The mother squinted her eyes and pressed her lips together before whirling away. Divine slipped past the hawker, thankful she couldn’t feel the tension in the air without her talisman, and turned her attention to the jeweler’s booth.

Saph peered at the racks festooned with necklaces swaying in the breeze, their chains and charms tinkling softly.

“Don’t they want to get more followers?” Saph mumbled from the side of her mouth,

picking up a bracelet with flutterwing charms made from the pink shells of Solhavn.

“Generally. But she has a point. Exact memory recall is practiced, not a gift from her Goddess. Their memory training starts very young. And they travel to locations they need to memorize. It’s very demanding.”

“Does everyone know this much about the other temples?”

“I needed to know as a Soulshield.” Divine hesitated. “Let’s keep looking.” She kept her eyes on the seller’s wares despite wanting to see Saph’s expression. Could the woman tell she was avoiding the topic?

“Something special I can find you ladies?” The older woman lifted a t-bar display with necklaces dangling. “Two for one special today on all summer blossom pendants.”

“Do you sell any locket?” Divine asked.

“My specialty is charms and pendants. But,” the woman said, then tapped a finger to her mouth, “I could craft something for you. Add a sliding panel to the back of a carved-out stone, perhaps.”

Divine shook her head. “Thanks for the offer. I was looking for something I’d seen up north.”

“If there’s nothing here to your liking, there is a pawn shop in the Essentials District. But Otto has been out of town. I think he gets back tonight. Bet he has a thing or two from all over Trelvania.”

“I know the place. You probably saw it. The mess next door.” Saph elbowed Divine.

Divine chewed on her lip. The building with the haphazard stack of containers.

“He probably opens up after sunset tonight,” Saph continued. “If she hasn’t already sold it elsewhere, we can catch her then.”

Divine’s heart hiccupped. “Or, or scare her off,” she fumbled, turning from the stall.

“If she goes to Otto’s, he likely wouldn’t sell it until the next night. Otto likes to tidy up any trails, I mean ‘clean up’ whatever he gets for resale.” Saph winked. “We’ve got several hours to occupy. Let me show you one of my favorite autumn traditions.”

Before Divine could protest, Saph hooked their elbows and veered her through the market toward several carts. Divine smelled their contents before she saw them; honey drizzled over apples with cinnamon crumbles and sugar-coated flatnuts. Her mouth watered. Beyond the food vendors, thin blue fabric soared over rows of benches between trees. At the back sat a stage where a partition painted with a meadow scene bracketed either edge.

Saph leaned closer. “There’s this delicious old woman who’s been doing this for ages. Only in the fall. I can’t let you miss it. Then we’ll get back to chasing talismans. My parents brought me here every year when I was a child.”

A Kellas, his whiskers twitching over his cream and grey fur, shook a bag at them from the nearest cart. Unlike the Nelithorian woman, the Kellas seemed to be enjoying himself and his pink lips curled into a feline smile. How different the two races from the same province seemed.

The tavern owner reached into her bodice and removed a small coin purse and held up two fingers. As he touched the white starburst on his chest, Divine protested with a stuttered you-don’t-need-to but Saph insisted, turning her nose up as if that blocked her from seeing anything more from Divine. With a bag of roasted flatnuts in each of

their hands, they found a bench near the middle. The pair crunched the sweet morsels as the rows filled with children and adults, their packages and globes swirling with winter and autumn scenes clutched in their sticky hands.

Soon a long, thin bill topped by two protuberant black eyes peeked out from behind the screen.

“Ah, good, good. They’re here,” a voice in falsetto spoke from behind the partition.

The brown and beige speckled head bobbed, attached to a wooden cross by strings and a hand moved above it. Then the hooweet’s webbed feet walked, the feathered body moving forward. A woman followed, bent over as her arms manipulated the strings attached to the wings and feet, though in reality, the bird was flightless. Wrinkles tattooed the performer’s rough skin, a sign of many days in the sun, and her hair shimmered with grey.

“We can start, Mezerie,” the woman, Mezerie, Divine assumed, said in the voice of the island bird. “Does anyone know how many tickles it takes to make a decacacti laugh? Ten-tacles!”

Children’s giggles bubbled into the air. The desert creature popped out from behind the screen, the prickly tentacle-like stems waving.

The creatures continued to interact with the children closest, eliciting laughs and some chuckles from the adults alike. Eventually, both puppets left the stage, and two others appeared; one playing a piano while the other flew around on a fabric book. The woman continued to voice life into each character and Divine found herself grinning.

“Such interesting creations,” Saph whispered after another change in characters. “I wonder where she comes up with them.”

“That one,” Divine said, leaning closer as Mezerie stroked the pink and orange hair that grew from its head down the length of its back, “is a boradain. It is said to be a demon by some of the temples, though it’s just a mythological creature used to tell morality lessons.”

“Spoken from experience?” Saph asked, words brushing Divine’s ear.

Divine glanced over to see Saph’s grin and raised eyebrow. She smiled back, returning her gaze to the show. “That, and I’m a voracious reader.”

“What else are you voracious at?” Saph’s whisper seemed tinted with huskiness.

Divine bit the side of her lower lip, containing her nervous laughter and inward trembling as she fought every urge to face Saph and kiss her.

“There’s this book of creatures, a bestiary, at my temple. But some of them must be made up as I’ve never encountered anyone who’s seen them. Those ones are usually paired with human traits and emotions and instructions for Soulshields on how to influence them. The humans, that is.”

The puppeteer moved the boradain’s four arms with sticks as it walked upright. It looked almost human, though its mouth protruded as if stuck in a forever pucker, and its arms slightly tinted blue. It was large enough for the woman to use one of her arms inside it to open and close the mouth and move its head as it talked, adding another level of reality to the theatrics. If such a creature ever existed, it probably wasn’t prone to hugging with its muscular tetra-arms.

“What does the entry for the boradain say?” Saph asked.

“It’s a lesson to be mindful of your limitations and not to seek more power. I think the connection to the boradain is that four arms are not better than two.”

Saph snickered. “Every tavern owner would argue that is completely false.”

After more puppets, some as large as the puppeteer and others as small as her palm, the show concluded to the sound of laughter. Saph and Divine returned through the market as the crowd disbursed to the vendor stands.

“What’s your favorite creature from that bestiary?” Saph asked as they stepped inside a booth with dried flower arrangements and designs burnt onto wooden bowls and plates.

Divine thought for a moment before the image of a page with a purple stone came into her memory. “One of the more interesting entries was a morality lesson. A water drop and a watering can tended to a garden. One day, they asked the Goddess of Souls to make them a companion who would appreciate their kindness.”

“The watering can talks in this story?”

Grinning, Divine continued. “The Goddess of Souls took a returned soul—a soul that has passed after death into her care and is ready to find rebirth—and gave the soul new life in a bright yellow flower. At the center glowed a purple stone, a soul gem. The flower told them how much it appreciated their care at tending the garden. The yellow flower grew larger and would shade the other flowers on hot days and would use some of its stored water to rain down on the garden. The flower became a guardian, watching out for pests and letting the water drop and watering can know what the garden needed. The flower saw many cycles within the garden grow and watched over them, talking and being friends with its creators.”

Divine’s hand hovered over pink dotted sprigs and bundles of fragrant lavender spindles sticking out of a wooden vase.

“A lesson of...friendship?”

Swiveling, Divine found that Saph stood nearly toe-to-toe with her.

“That Gods and Goddesses working together can create good. I think the water drop was supposed to be the Goddess of Standing Water.”

“And the watering can?” Saph slipped a sprig behind Divine’s ear as she tossed a coin to the stall’s owner.

Averting her eyes, Divine touched the dried flower—she thought she’d seen a blur of yellow—her breath catching at the thought of Saph’s touch.

She swallowed. “I...I’m not sure. The entry was about beings called Elders. Non-sapient creatures like birds, or plants and trees granted some of the powers of a God or Goddess.”

“Talking birds that zap you with lightning before stealing your sandwich. I’m glad that’s not something you see around here.”

“Thankfully they all seemed to be powers of Tranquil Gods, so I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that.”

They did see birds in the market, swooping from tree to building top, but none with the power of storms. Saph’s earlier comment made Divine wonder if coming here since childhood meant she’d always lived here or the general southern half of Trelvania.

“That you’ve memorized so much of that book is remarkable. I often forget my notes for what I need to buy at the grocer for tomorrow’s meal.”

“I had to know about the empathic influence mentioned in the pages,” Divine expanded, feeling more comfortable around the tavern owner the more the day went

on. “Between understanding the goals and motivations of each temple, and which emotions branched into other emotions, knowledge was a requirement of all Soulshields.”

“But they didn’t memorize the migratory patterns of black-tailed swillers, did they?”

Divine’s mouth dropped open. “I didn’t tell you—”

“I saw you watching them. It’s not hard to guess. You seem to spend a lot of time up there.” Saph tapped Divine’s forehead. “I think I’ll focus on what makes Divine divine on our next trade of personal knowledge.”

Divine had forgotten how much she knew about the creatures of the Trelvanian continent and surrounding islands until Saph’s compliment. The praise ran through her like warm tarrow-root beer. True, the creatures themselves weren’t something she’d been required to study in the halls of her Goddess, but she had discovered an early interest, nonetheless. Her mother had encouraged her from that first bestiary page.

Eager to think more of Saph and less of the absence of her mother, Divine motioned with her shoulder back out of the tent as an unspoken, “ Shall we?”, and the pair returned to the market’s flow. Divine wanted to know more about the tavern owner.

“Are you originally from Iramont?” Divine asked.

“Yes, I was born here. Had I lived elsewhere, I might have avoided some of the unpleasantness that comes when you are different . People don’t like different.”

As the interaction with the Iguion at Viktor’s tables had shown, the lack of respect for human-adjacents was pervasive everywhere. But Divine didn’t need her magic well to know Saph meant something else.

“You mean your hand, don’t you?”

Saph glanced around long enough Divine thought she was avoiding the question. Scratching the piercing at her helix, Saph spoke again.

“I had the hardest time opening packages as a child, to the amusement of others. I believe children are the products of what they are around. They learn to be mean because they see it. I got tired of answering the same questions, ‘why is your hand different?’ ‘what happened to your hand?’. Then there were those who’d get grossed out if they had to touch me. One time, some of the kids I played with decided to try to make me do things with my hand that they knew required five separate fingers. Stupid things like musical instruments. I never played with them again. They’d get back what they put into the world, I believed. Eventually.”

The autumn festival was even busier as individuals and families ducked in and out of vendor stalls, some admiring while others loaded their arms with bags that contained purchases. Saph pointed out interesting items, but Divine found she stared more at Saph than the wares. Despite her humor, there was a softer side beneath it all.

Hungry bazaar-goers stood in line for fire-roasted meats on a stick and toasted sugar puffs that were practically melting off their spears. Divine noted that the variety of food seemed less than what she’d seen at other years’ fall markets in Arosia.

“Seems many are impacted by the black spot.” Divine nodded to a large smoker wafting grey musical staves into the air. “What about your tavern?”

“It has caused my prices to increase. It’s harder to find some of the food, as you saw with the corn kerfuffle. But overall, I’m not too impacted. Most of my alcohol is made in the north. And I’ve switched my menu to roots.”

“Just...roots?”

“Most of the root vegetables seem to be fairing better right now. So, roots are on the table. Some of the other restaurants get their stuff further north, but they need different ingredients. People going to drink their sorrows in beer aren’t looking for a flaky pastry with berry jam and scrambled eggs.”

Someone bumped into Divine’s side, and she staggered forward, bouncing into Saph.

Saph’s grinned and her hand wrapped around Divine’s, pulling her through the crowd. They were opposite where they had entered and Divine could see another alleyway that exited onto an unknown street. But Saph paused in front of a stall where a woman was explaining her merchandise to a small group.

“You can write or draw whatever you want to,” the woman said as she brushed strokes across a canvas on an easel. “No one would see it.”

The woman swiveled away, arm stretched in presentation, inviting everyone to look. Her canvas remained blank.

“Only with this”—she held up a yellow triangle frame that stretched from her chest to the top of her head and poked her head through the shape—“will the ink be revealed.”

Lowering the frame, she placed a crystal within a slot at each vertex. As the last one was placed, the empty space within the triangle lit with orange light like the thin fabric of a veil. The woman held the triangle over her canvas and within the light a painting of the God of Storms’s symbol appeared: a swirling vortex over a wagon wheel that had the head of an anvil for spokes. Several people uttered appreciative oohs.

“Now of course, you won’t need a large one if you are just writing secret letters to your friend. Which is why I offer this handheld version. Pocket Secrets , thirty-five friggons a piece.”

Behind her, Divine heard another merchant giving a similar demonstration. She rotated and watched as a man placed a large mirror upright on parchment laid across a table.

“Each piece I craft is unique and to your specifications,” he said, withdrawing several pens and brushes from his gray apron.

While she couldn’t see what he was writing on the paper, she saw the reflection in the mirror. Ornamental letters took the shape of buildings and creatures in black ink. The Y Divine was convinced looked like a mermaid tail. The artist added shimmering gold and purple to the design, then stepped to the side.

In the mirror it read imaginary . But on the paper, the curved descenders of the letters pointed the opposite way than they should, and the word started with the letter y. It was backward. The writing felt familiar but Divine couldn’t place it.

“This would be clever for writing arousing love letters.”

Saph’s voice in her ear made Divine turn.

“Hm?” Divine questioned, trying to focus. Did Saph just say something about arousal?

“You could write exceptionally specific compliments about how someone’s nether regions are as sweet as honey and never fear someone seeing those private messages.”

“Unless the person also had a Pocket Secret.”

“Oof, and half of the people watching are buying one. Good point. What’s over there?”

“Calligraphy? I think.”

“Well, I’m starving. Let’s get some of that meat on a stick while we wait for Otto’s shop to open.”

After food, the two women checked stores Saph identified that would purchase instead of make their goods without success in locating Divine’s locket. Eventually, they made their way to the main street as the sun tilted low. At Saph’s suggestion, they approached the pawn shop. Thuds and clinking seeped out of the shop in a mermaid song for collectors. Saph rapped on the door.

“Not open!” a muffled yell answered. “Come back tomorrow.”

“Otto! I’ve missed your sounds of clutter. Have a nice journey?”

“Yes, yes. But I’m busy.”

“I hear that. Look, I wanted to see if you’ve gotten any—”

A crash like cymbals exploded from the shop.

“Is this normal?” Divine questioned quietly, hoping no injuries accompanied the racket. Even without her well, she wanted to do something to help if he was hurt.

“Excessively so,” the woman whispered back, then cupped her hands around her mouth. “Chat tomorrow?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Great! Come by anytime, drinks on me.” Saph thumbed over her shoulder, and they turned toward the tavern. “He’ll come by. The man can’t resist free drinks.”

Divine nodded, her feet slowing. The day was ending. If the Goddess of Souls still watched over her, soon she'd have her talisman. A quick quest then she would follow the Spine of Trelvania back north, the white of its peaks beginning to spread to lower elevations this time of the year.

Her stomach tightened and flipped as Saph moved a few steps ahead. If she was this close to placing her talisman back around her neck, why was she nervous? This was what she wanted. The mountain to her west pointed homeward. Back to her life as a Soulshield of the Arosian Temple of Souls. If she could successfully appeal their judgement that she went renegade.

But as Saph paused, the outline of her face turned into the setting sun backlit like a painting enhanced by the Deity of Night and Art's Creators, and her uncovered eye searching over Divine, Divine realized the flutterwings in her stomach weren't all talisman related.

"I really appreciate all this"—Divine scratched the back of her head—"helping me find my talisman and everything."

"The sooner you do, the sooner I can get that reward I'm promised."

Divine nearly melted from Saph's smile. "I know. But...the show, the sweets. You didn't—I just—I had a wonderful time."

She took a deep breath, staring into Saph's eye. Taking a step forward, her hand unsteady, she reached for Saph. The raven-haired woman took Divine's hand in hers. Her blood raced around her chest like bugs scurrying before a storm. In unison, they stepped closer to each other, their faces a mere breath away. Divine licked her lips and swallowed.

"I did as well," Saph said quietly. "It was a pleasure. One I hope to...outdo on our

third date.”

Divine wiggled a booted foot before replying, “Was this our second date?”

Saph grinned. “I keep surprising you. Very well, for a third date I will leave the inviting up to you. This way you cannot possibly be bereft of knowledge of it occurring.”

“I have enjoyed your surprises so far.” Divine hesitated. “Please don’t stop because I’m out of practice.”

Saph brought the back of Divine’s hand to her lips. “Practicing is the most fun.”

Divine’s muscles quivered as Saph pressed a kiss to the knuckle below the moonstone wrapped in silver leaves around Divine’s index finger. Her mouth parted as her breath quickened.

“If I recall, I made a promise to share a secret on this date,” Saph continued.

Divine raised her eyebrows but couldn’t pry her gaze from Saph’s lips.

“Are you adequately intrigued?” Saph questioned.

“And can’t recall the promise.”

“How I once chased down people for a living. I was a mercenary. You know, jilted lover wants her husband found and his balls ripped off. That sort of thing. I was rather high-ranking before I quit. Chased people like your bandit.”

Stiffening, Divine looked toward the Holy District’s connecting street, though Saph continued talking. “Though yours hasn’t left us many clues, I feel we are about to

find her.”

Divine let her hand drop from Saph’s grip, a stone tumbling down the mountainside.

“And I probably shouldn’t have brought her up. Shit. I’m sorry,” Saph apologized.

Divine looked past the buildings to their side. Over their vined and mossy roofs, the various temples’ domes and towers peaked. The Goddess of Souls and the Goddess of Condemnation rising higher than all the others. The God receives a boost from their well.

“It’s possible she means to keep it and is back at her Goddess’s sanctuary,” Divine said at last, thinking of the Goodly One’s experience with stolen talismans.

“I thought she wanted to sell it?”

“I learned something last night that has me second guessing.”

“Go on.”

Divine bit her lower lip and her stomach flipped at the way Saph’s eye focused on the action. “I dismissed it at first as the words of someone who’d jump at their own shadow. But as I’ve thought about it, it makes sense.” Divine told Saph what the Goodly One had said about stolen talismans.

“So, this thief is partnered with your rival temple.”

“You could say that.”

“Hm. Let’s rule out the selling idea with Otto and then we can look into this, yeah? Staying on one trail always helped while I was a mercenary. First rule of mercenaries,

beware the side quests.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Divine flicked her eyes to her walking companion, yearning still lingering to have their lips meet, but the moment became paint washed from a canvas by a thundercloud, pooling beneath their feet to cling in droplets to their soles; perhaps evidence would be left as footprints.

* * *

As the setting sun bathed the tavern in an orange and pink glow, Saph signaled (a series of eyepatch scratches and adjusting of her bodice previously determined by the bar owner) for Divine to join the patrons at the tavern.

With the steps of someone who simply wanted a drink, Divine slid onto an open stool and saluted with two fingers. Saph approached and poured a frothing mug of tarrow-root beer while indicating with a side nod two men down the row. Divine listened while attempting to appear focused on imbibing herself.

“She tried to sell me a holy relic, of all things. Bad luck to deal in relics of the Goddess of Souls,” one of the men said.

“How did you know it was a relic?” Saph prompted, leaning forward with interest.

“It was a classic pendant of the followers, you know the one—a waxing crescent with a sword.”

“Very astute, Otto.” The raven-hair woman bopped the man on his nose with a finger for emphasis.

Divine choked and sputtered into her mug while the man next to her thumped her back for good measure.

“But it was a locket. Never seen one as a locket.” The man shrugged. “Anyway, I told her to take it to the temple of Souls. Good riddance.”

Saph turned her attention to another patron but not before winking at Divine.

“Don’t want to offend the deities. Especially not the top five.” A woman next to Otto said signaling Sylus for a refill. “Had a cousin visiting the Dagal Hot Springs up in Spine of Trelvania. He’d recently broken up with his girlfriend. She’s a follower of the God of Storms, you see. Anyway, a blizzard came out of nowhere. Stranded him up there a whole week. She claims she wasn’t involved but...” she took several gulps from her mug.

“Potato soup. Again?” the man who’d patted her back bemoaned into his bowl.

Sylus leaned his hip on the other side of the bar. The posture gave Divine and the man a wide view of his chest muscles through the opening of his shirt. “It has turnips and carrots, too. It’s still tasty. Unless you’d rather eat veggie bread?”

“No, no. Condemnation on this black spot. I’m just tired of the same root vegetables every day.”

“I’ll put it in a pot pie next time,” Sylus said, slinging a cloth over his shoulder.

“Different shape doesn’t change the taste.”

“You’d be surprised. Gravy makes everything better.”

The conversation near Otto veered toward the weather, and satisfied with the information, Divine downed the rest of her drink and retreated to a corner table for the rest of the evening, the contents of her stomach churning as much as her thoughts. Tomorrow she would close this book of suffering.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Divine and Saph headed on foot to the Holy District. Despite Divine wanting to get in and out as fast as possible, one did not disrespect the Holy District. A gallop on horseback was out of the question. As were axes. Saph had left her weapon on the tavern wall. Besides, rousing the agents of the Goddess of Condemnation to arrest them for lawbreaking was not the best way to keep Madeline unaware of Divine's presence.

"You're cute," Saph had said with a wink as they departed the tavern, "but not I'd-break-you-out-of-jail-cute. Besides, we can talk along the way."

With some hesitation on Divine's part, the conversation remained on local buildings and the weather, but she owed the green-eyed woman something more for helping her retrieve the source of her magic than participation on a random quest. One she didn't even know if she could contribute to. Divine's magic was a huge part of the latter half of her life, and the talisman had...sentimental value as well.

"I know I'm not well versed on the pantheon, but let me take the lead on this," Saph said as they walked. At the edge of the visible street, light shined through thinning fog, like a breath from a harvester wulf's howl. Droplets clung to leaves and stems hanging a cold wetness against the skin. "I know the hearts of lonely servants. I can get us what we seek."

"Head for the biggest temple. That's the Goddess of Souls."

"That part I've gathered. Why did they, whoever they are, have to divide the magic

up by Goddesses and Gods? Would it have been too much to have everyone with all the magic? Seems unnecessarily complex.”

“They say the division of Gods and Goddesses allows for balance of power and keeps any one deity or one following from growing so powerful as to subvert the general population.”

“But the Goddess of Souls has the biggest tower.”

“Yes.”

“And the Goddess of Condemnation is our law enforcement.”

“I’m starting to second guess some of our axioms myself.”

Divine’s thoughts turned to the servant of the God of Virtue and reconciling her truths against his.

“How’d you track Madeline to Iramont?” Saph asked as they turned onto the cobbled street.

Before them, the violet archway in triplicate, one after another, stretched as tall as the trees and extended wider than the street. The stones were decorated with extravagant imagery and augmentations nearing art by the deities’ servants, as was customary. But each city’s gate was different. Here on Iramont’s, a waterfall fell from the highest corner of the third arch and ended before it could splash against the ground; painted birds and flutterwings moved against the stone on the second arch; actual snow fell and piled on vines that climbed the wall’s edge, while on the first arch a mechanical mermaid flicked her metal tail as the gears rotated in her torso.

The two women stepped into the hollow of the archways and crossed the threshold

into the Holy District.

“It wasn’t hard. Every wagon, carriage, and horse are tracked leaving from or entering the city. Arosia gets a lot of traffic and trade, being nearly the center of the known map, and it makes it easier to find criminals and other undesirables with a meticulous log. I knew she’d leave as soon as possible, so I waited a day after her theft to make sure she didn’t suspect I was tracking her. I followed her for months. Never closer than a day behind her, though not for lack of trying. The smaller towns don’t keep great logs, so at any crossroad it was a guess which way she had gone. Maybe I was lucky, but I guessed right.”

Saph nodded politely. “I think we make our own luck. We see patterns in moonbeams and we take a leap toward the most favorable. Sometimes we land on pillows.”

A servant of Virtue, stood outside his temple gate shaking dust out of rugs. He didn’t look up. Besides dressing mundanely, the servants were also known to be reclusive. Except for that Goodly One Divine talked to the day before. She tried not to think about the prospect of more stolen talismans and what that could mean for other temples, but her mind kept wandering there.

“How did you know she’d flee the city entirely? I think I’d disguise myself and disappear right under your nose.”

“With an eyepatch?” Divine blurted, immediately cursing her lack of deliberate tact.

Saph tilted her head. “There are ways to blend in. What, don’t think I could pass as a harlot for hire?”

“No! I mean, yes. I mean, you’re very nice to look at, should someone, but they shouldn’t—”

“Aww, flustered already and the sun isn’t over the buildings. Don’t worry, darling, I don’t sleep with everyone who looks my way. Just the ones I want to look back at.”

Saph’s eye traced Divine from her red hair slowly down her body, but the former magic-wielder averted her gaze by looking at the temple gates. The sun might not be fully up, but Divine felt hot, nonetheless.

“You didn’t answer my question, though. Your deflection as defense may mislead others, but I listen to people every day, remember.” Her voice then took on a more soothing tone. “Tell me what happened, hm?”

Divine lowered her head. She had been dreading the moment this came. The bar owner had been empathetic enough so far to not poke into Divine’s past, but curiosity was a decacacti thorn in someone’s walking shoe. Embarrassing as it was, it couldn’t hurt to tell Saph. She’d hoped the woman wouldn’t think her unworthy of “looking back at” after knowing the story. Divine liked Saph’s gaze, even if it made her stomach dance and her hands tremble.

Divine took a deep breath, pausing to look at the temple buildings around them. “They try to gloss over this with the general worshippers, since conflict with another temple isn’t exactly a selling feature, but the Goddess of Condemnation is more of an enemy than just a rival for followers of the Goddess of Souls.”

“She always sounds like the life of the party,” Saph muttered.

“Usually, the banging of heads is reserved for those pledged as servants. What the worshippers are told is that the conflict is more...theological in nature.”

“Naturally.”

“That balance I told you about—between the care of souls versus their punishment.

But the deeper lore you get as a confirmed servant says that, long ago, the Goddess of Condemnation had been watching a terrible soul, craving the day he died as she would exact her punishment for his sins in life. But the Goddess of Souls swept in to protect him before the Goddess of Condemnation could chain him to eternal suffering. A deific battle ensued, and the Goddess of Souls won.”

“Such secrecy for two birds squabbling over a piece of bread.”

“The Goddess of Condemnation never forgot, and never forgave. There resulted this constant struggle to save the souls from the punishment the Goddess of Condemnation promises for those she deems evil. Her priests”—here Divine hmphed—“if you can call them that—their order calls them agents—they actively work to undermine the effort of the Soulshapers.”

“Soulshapers?”

“Sorry.” Divine grimaced, remembering that Saph didn’t know much about the pantheon. “The ones who have the strength to guide a soul while it is in a living body, and after death. Swords of the Goddess some call them. They guide the Soulshields—what I was—and bolster our power to accomplish greater magic than we could do alone. Say I needed to mend a punctured stomach as well as several broken bones, and the emotions that come with it. Two Soulshields can do the mending and the emotional balancing if they have a Soulshaper for that task.” Thankfully the Soulshields used their larger wells to amplify the healing in these cases and only in the direst circumstances did they cut the thread of life to transition the sufferer to the life beyond.

The temples around them grew bigger; classic hierarchy of the faiths, with the ones that organized the biggest following of believers boasting the larger sanctuaries. Invisible hands clenched her lungs. They were near the Goddess of Souls temple and finding her talisman. She could almost smell the scent of rain on rose, the familiar

sweet perfume with a hint of lemon, which filled her senses whenever she drew from her magic well.

Divine looked over at her companion to see her waiting for the story to continue.

“The way to my home every day took me past a brothel. One day I saw a woman being pushed roughly up against the side of the building. The man was hurting her, a vice grip on her arm and her face a painting of pain. I knew she wasn’t a willing participant in what was about to happen. So, I used my magic. I shielded her, and myself, from the man. He tried in vain to get at us and eventually left. Her name was Madeline. She cried her thanks into my shoulder, and I offered to heal her bruises. She asked me to take her to my home as she didn’t feel safe at the brothel anymore. I knew I could protect her if the man returned.”

“And she stole your talisman as thanks,” Saph guessed as she stopped walking.

The temple of the Goddess of Souls loomed ahead; its golden gates open to a garden fully in bloom. Like souls, always growing, so the garden was tended by the servants of her name. Beyond the flowers lay the black door into the shrine, the sword of the Goddess painted in gold down the length of the center over a crescent moon.

“It would have been better if she had that day,” Divine said softly. “It took months. Magic wielders don’t shout what their talisman is for good reason. And we have multiple diversions.” She raised her wrist, jingling four rainbow-hued bangles loose from her coat sleeve and in turn pointing out a mermaid belt buckle, three gemstone rings, rose-shaped stud earrings, a labradorite feather hair clip, and a dozen charms on her boot laces. “At least I made her work for it. We developed a...relationship. She stopped working at the brothel. The Goddess of Souls takes care of her own, so I could support us both. I thought we had something.”

Divine shook her head and gazed at the sun peaking over the temple’s towers, as if

that offered a better explanation for the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. A hand rested gently on her shoulder, and she took strength from the gesture.

“One night when we...we were in bed, she tried to take off my Goddess pendant. I never took it off. I never took off my diversions. Every worshipper gets a pendant so it shouldn't have seemed special. But that night she wanted...unhindered access to my neck. I stopped her hands and she looked at me with such curiosity that I told her. Inside the locket was my talisman. The real talisman. Worshipper pendants aren't lockets, but mine is. Inside, it held rose petals from my mother's garden. My mother has been dead for ten years.” Divine swallowed. “I woke the next morning with the locket gone and on her pillow a pin of the Goddess of Condemnation.” A hooweeet wrapped in thorns, its long nose pointing like an arrow as if to say, “ Go that way. It is too late for me .”

“Did you at least show her a good time?”

Divine flinched and stopped. “Did I what ?”

“Well, if you're good in bed, she'll have to lie to her agent buddies because if she admitted she enjoyed it, they'd think she did have feelings for you. She'll have to lie, and her own Goddess will frown on her sinful nature .” Saph's voice held an ounce of sarcasm as she deepened her tone for the final delivery.

Turning her shoulder, Divine walked through the garden's opened gates.

“I don't know that the Goddess of Condemnation cares about the behaviors of her own servants. Just everyone else.” She rubbed her neck before remembering the reason for her story. “There's no temple for her Goddess in Arosia. Same as there's no temple for mine in Pariatan,” Divine explained, an image of the southern coast of Trelvania just before its peninsula tail coming to mind. There were rumors of a pirate cove and mermaids there. “Some long-lost reason determined that one city each

would be missing the other Goddess's shrine. We aren't welcome where our temples are missing. And when I told my high priest, Arosia's First Servant of Souls, what had happened to my talisman, they thought I knew what Madeline was all along and harbored her. They cast me out of their service. That's when I decided to chase Madeline and take back what is mine."

"A bit harsh for one mistake."

Heat rose to Divine's cheeks. "It wasn't the first time I...failed to completely follow the rules."

Saph dipped her shoulder and bumped into Divine. "I knew you were a feisty one when I saw you."

"I'm not, really. I just...it was shortly after I had created my talisman. I was young and this plant in the temple entryway was not responding. I'd practically memorized their books on flora. It was wilting and wouldn't bear any flowers. Fertilizers failed and then I...I just healed it. Bright pink flowers opened the next day. The First Servant of Souls asked about the plant, but then said that they had put fertilizer on it from Solhavn, as if that was supposed to convince me Soulshields couldn't heal plants too. They told me to stick to approved composts."

"I bet the Goddess of Fields would like a word with your First Servant."

Divine laughed, the heaviness of the approaching temple door lifting briefly. "There'd only be bountiful harvests if the Goddesses combined their powers."

"Endless bags of honeyed nuts." Saph paused, tapping a lavender bloom that swayed on its long stem. "I haven't always operated within the strictest interpretation of the rules myself."

“Oh really?”

“Oh no you don’t. You don’t get a new nugget of information from me until you finish your story.”

With the reminder of why they were walking the stone path of the garden, Divine’s smile faded. “After my mother died, I got really focused on healing. By the time I was granted the title of Soulshield, about three years after shadowing others—so maybe eighteen—I was making myself available any hour. My magic was always running dry, and I was so tired all the time, healing even the smallest of cuts.”

Divine paused, expecting Saph to have a question but the woman simply held her gaze, as if Divine was the most interesting thing in the garden.

“I overheard a request get turned down by a Soulsage who took them after worship hours. And I followed the beseecher. There was a young Kellas who’d gotten a fishhook caught in their muzzle. I soothed their emotions, withdrew the hook, and healed the hole. And promptly passed out. I’d been too weak from other healing that day and they had to send for help.” Divine sighed. “The First Servant of Souls was livid. We are to save our magic for ‘those that matter.’ I was told I’d be watched closely by the temple. Kellas are unaligned with any of the pantheon and therefore receive no blessings. I’ve followed their guidelines since...mostly. But now they think I’ve aided an enemy.”

“That’s what you meant when you said you weren’t on good terms.”

Divine focused on a flutterwing on an orange blossom but nodded. She felt her shame rise with the flutterwing’s opening and closing wings. She tried to push it away.

“Does no one ever leave a deity? I’m pretty sure Syka was really into the one with passion—” Saph waved her hand around at the other buildings as if the temple would

stop her on the right one.

“The Deity of Love and Fire. Yeah, they are one that gets a lot of fluctuation in worship membership.” Divine pointed back near the district’s arches. She pictured the short Syka with dark-painted eyelids, who had argued with the Iguion during the game of Crossroads George.

“And now she’s all in with the God of Storms.”

Divine tilted her head knowingly. “Post-breakup?”

“Aren’t you as discerning as you accuse me of being. Anyway, as far as I know, the temples didn’t punish her for switching.”

“It’s not the same when you’ve become a servant. Not when you’ve gone through the whole talisman process. You’re locked in. Even if you could get the temple to cleanse the talisman and sever the connection, after the age of confirmation the well will dry up quickly before you can create a new talisman. It’s just not done.”

Yet, the Goodly One had said that there were some who could use another person’s talisman. If she got accepted back into her temple, she had several questions for Arosia’s First Servant of Souls.

“And you can’t relocate your well from one deity to another?”

“I’ve never heard of it. The servants tend to look down on someone who’s abandoned their Goddess. What’s to keep you from leaving them, too? You’re basically an outcast of the pantheon at that point.”

“I don’t see why she should care about a switch here and there. There’s plenty of worshipers.”

Divine paused. Normally she would have shrugged and said it was just the way things worked. But after the conversation with the Goodly One...“They’d want to keep the power. A deity gets power from the magic wells aligned to them.”

“That can’t be right. Even I would know that if it was common knowledge. Everyone says the deities’ powers are augmented by the number of people offering their prayers.”

“I just learned that might be half of it. From a rather chatty servant from the God of Virtue. He’s the one in the Merchant District near the fountain.”

“Ah, the artisan section. Don’t know that I’ve seen one there, but I don’t usually pay attention to any of them. If we don’t find it, could you remake your talisman?”

Divine shook her head. “The Goddess only blesses you once. I just...I want to get my talisman back and show the temple I still want to be a part of the greater good. I don’t want to be templeless.” Divine fought to keep her eyes from betraying her. For months she had been alone. Even before that, since her mother’s passing, she’d had various friendships and eventually romantic relationships, but they were short lived. Having a temple felt like she was among others like herself and she was never truly alone. To not have a temple...

Saph’s hand rested at the small of Divine’s back, Divine’s knee-length coat shifting with the touch, and Divine took a slow inhale as Saph’s lips brushed her rose earring in a whisper.

“Then let’s go get your talisman.”

Divine’s eyes turned to the ebony door; its golden sword raised from the rest of the wood. Saph grasped the vertical blade and heaved.

A figure burst out of the entry and bumped into Divine.

Divine caught herself in a bush as the figure mumbled apologies, tightening their dark cloak around them with thin, clawed fingers.

“It’s all right,” Divine said, peering into the hood to see bright pink muted in shadow. She recognized the voice. “You were with Viktor, weren’t you? I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name the other night. Liz, was it? I’m Divine.”

“It is all right. I am Listhinci.” The Iguion glanced over their shoulder.

“You look like you are in a hurry. I won’t keep you.”

Listhinci sighed. “I asked the priests for healing but they…”

Divine nodded, pressing her lips together. “It’s a ridiculous stance.” Then glancing at Saph she added, “Just because they can’t access magic wells, that shouldn’t mean the deities don’t grant blessing to them. After I healed that Kellas...the Soulshapers wouldn’t even let me near any visiting human-adjacent when one came into the temple requesting a Soulshield.”

Listhinci took a step forward. “You are a healer?”

The hope in their voice pressed like a dagger to Divine’s throat. For a breath, she couldn’t speak.

Listhinci continued, “It is my hand,” and held out their left claws: blackened instead of the usual pink scales.

“What happened?” Saph asked. “You didn’t have this at the table.”

“Would take too long to explain. Can you help?”

Divine’s chest clenched. “I would try, if I could. I...lost my talisman.” She surveyed the garden and noted the door remained shut. She leaned closer and whispered, “Can you wait here? I’m going to retrieve it. I hope it is in there. And I would try to heal you, I promise.”

Listhinci looked around again. “I have been here too long already. I cannot risk being caught. I have a child.”

Listhinci’s role was life-giver. “Caught?” Divine looked from Listhinci to Saph and back.

“Iguion are not allowed within the district any longer,” Listhinci said, bowing their head.

“But the Goddess of Souls lets everyone enter her walls,” Divine protested. They might not bestow their gifts on human-adjacents, but the servants typically weren’t opposed to supervised worship.

“A new city law this year,” Saph added, “if I recall.”

Divine clenched her teeth. If the agents of the Goddess of Condemnation found a human-adjacent in the district, they would surely jail them for breaking the law, if not worse. Divine silently cursed Madeline and her sect’s role as law enforcers for the thousandth time. Gentle was not in their vocabulary. Beyond mind muddling, the agents wielded an assortment of pain-inducing mental abilities.

While Arosia possessed the Holicratic Ruling Council, the highest court in the collective provinces of the hagiocracy, each city-state was free to create its own laws which carried throughout their province. It would take a majority appealing at Arosia

for a decree to overrule the city-state's sovereignty. Which was an idea that could not help Listhinci at this moment.

Before Divine could say anything more, Listhinci stepped past.

The haste not unlike when Divine's mother, coughing in the rain, had kissed her cheek and left her at the temple to live. Divine had watched her scurry between raindrops, wishing she was old enough to access a magic well and heal her.

Now, Divine watched Listhinci hurry down the Holy District's avenue, feeling like a shadow of her magic tied itself to Listhinci's footfalls in the faintest tug of entreaty.

* * *

"Thank you so much for showing us around. I do so love all of the different temples. Why, this is the best Souls' temple I have seen yet!" Saph beamed at the Second Level Soulsage, the western Trelvania accent she was applying making her words more drawn out. She'd used it through the whole tour. "How big is your temple?"

The pendant and religious texts keeper mumbled a reply as he struggled to process the praise. Requests for soul-saving and healing would be normal, but it wasn't often that someone paid their order compliments on its architecture. And knowing Saph's phrasing, her question had a double meaning.

Divine hung back, thumbs in her belt loops pushing her coat wide, watching Saph work her charm. Next to her she noticed a familiar teal book traced with purple and gold foil. When Saph looked her way, Divine angled her head at the book and mouthed, "Bestiary". To add effect, she opened her arms wide to mimic a boradain, though she only had two limbs .

Rolling her eye, Saph gently placed a hand at the middle-aged man's elbow, just

below the yellow band of his Second Level adornment. “You know, I’ve heard that, for the right price, a pendant can be purchased even by a non-believer. Now, I believe in all of the Goddesses,” she leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, “and even some of the Gods,” then she said as she pulled back, “but I don’t worship one above the other. Do you think I could buy a pendant of the Goddess of Souls? I would so love to add it to my collection.”

“The Goddess appreciates your affiliation.” The Second Level Soulsage recoiled slightly. “But the pendants aren’t for sale. They are only given as part of the devotion ceremony.”

Saph tilted her head back and laughed. “Oh, naturally, naturally. You can’t fault a girl for trying. I’ve only ever seen one from a distance, you know, but they are my favorite design of them all.”

“Well”—the Soulsage glanced behind Saph and only seeing Divine, shrugged—“we do have a few pendants in the side chapel. We’re expecting three devotions on Sabbatday and have just had new ones forged.”

Three new souls who chose the Goddess of Souls as their primary deity. Three more life energies in worship to the Goddess, elevating her status higher and granting all of her followers supposedly stronger benefits. It was a contradiction, as Divine’s well never seemed fuller, no matter how many people confirmed their devotion, nor did the minor protection the pendants offered seem to grow in strength. If something as universally accepted as how pendants and talismans worked was actually as the Goodly One said, what else was half-truths?

“Do you ever reuse ones?” Saph asked.

Her voice sounded so sincere that for a moment, she seemed genuinely interested.

“We do, but they must be cleansed first. We actually got one in yesterday. The pendant has been modified, though.”

Divine rooted her feet before her eagerness betrayed them. Modified. It had to be her talisman. Her fingers twitched.

“I’m not sure that we can reuse it,” the man continued. “Poor woman. Her husband passed away last week. Fell into a lake nearby and couldn’t swim.”

Divine clenched her hands. Husband. Dead. More Madeline lies. But if the Soulsage had known the locket was a talisman, he would have cleansed it right away. For that, Divine grudgingly was thankful that Madeline had not shared the truth.

Saph shook her black locks and flicked her eye Divine’s way, as if to say, Don’t do anything stupid. To the reciter of religious texts, she said, “How tragic. And the pendants are similar to the other temples?”

“Better. Every pendant is blessed by the Goddess and grants Her followers protection. Fewer chances to get sick, better luck, those sorts of things. But only those who have gone through devotion. Are you sure I cannot convince you to pledge your devotion?”

“Oh, Gods above, you sure do make those pendants sound enchanting.”

“Would you like to see them?”

Saph clapped her hands together. “I would like nothing more.”

The Soulsage led them a short way back into the central chantry then down a hallway to the aforementioned side chapel. Divine took a deep breath through her nose. If the pendant was untouched by cleansing magic, recreating the connection to her magic

well would be like tying knots at the severed section of rope that allowed her to pull magic into the world. As difficult as it was to bind her magic and talisman the first time, she didn't want to think about the daunting task of doing it with fraying rope. She could only hope that the five-month separation had not degraded her connection beyond repair.

A click resounded in the otherwise quiet room as the Soulsage unlocked a desk drawer and pulled out a tray lined with black velvet. On top rested three pendants, their carvings treated with black polish—the waxing crescent moon pierced on the tips with a vertical three-dimensional sword. The fourth one, however, was slightly thicker.

The scent of rose reached Divine before the pendants came into view. It took everything within her to not leap across the desk and take what was hers. There was no mistaking it. The power electrified the blood in her veins. She inched closer, eyes fixed on the locket.

“Now, you can't touch them, but you can look.” The Soulsage set the tray on the desk with a half-grin.

Grasping her hair to keep it out of the way, Saph leaned forward to get a closer look. “The filigree work in the moon is exquisite. And the sword—it looks real enough to cut me. Oh, these are beautiful.”

The man beamed and reached for the tray when Saph's hand shot out to grasp his wrist.

“Since we are alone here I...I was hoping you could help me.”

The servant's brow raised. “What is it, my dear?”

“You see,” Saph started, gently tugging him to move around the desk and come closer, “I have this spot on my breast.” Dropping his hand, she unlaced the top of her bodice. “And since the servants of the Souls Goddess heals...”

Divine knew what she should be doing but she froze, watching Saph’s breasts slowly reveal as the fabric fell away. The man mumbled something about not being qualified, which was half true. While First Level Soulsages functioned basically as clerks with little magic, a Second Level healed minor wounds. But they stayed in the temple and did not venture beyond the soft chairs as a Soulshield; they either didn’t want to or lacked the confidence to deliver under pressure and at a moment’s notice. One typically scheduled an appointment with a Second Level, which likely accounted for this one wringing his hands.

Divine caught her counterpart’s quick head jerk in the direction of the tray. With effort, Divine pulled her attention to the protective pendants and slowly drew closer.

She wasn’t supposed to be in a temple of her Goddess until she appealed to the Arosian Order of the Goddess of Souls for readmittance as a Soulshield. The biggest temple got the final say. If she drew attention, the Soulsage would ask questions, and Divine knew from memories of her mother’s tilted head, that any attempt at fibbing was painted on her face. Masquerading as Saph’s employee under the heat of interrogation was out of the question. She needed her magic. No Soulsage was going to take that away.

Divine rubbed her nose then swiped her locket.

Lightning-like shock coursed through her body. She swayed and almost knocked the tray down. The room filled with the sweet aroma of rose blooms. So intoxicating was the return of her magic that Divine had to take several steady breaths to fight back laughter, eventually dropping the necklace into a coat pocket at her thigh.

By this time, the Soulsage nearly had his head in Saph's bosom in examination. Divine took a step forward, brows knitted, but the other woman nodded toward the door. Quietly Divine made her way out. She heard Saph's voice as she approached the main chapel.

"But it was there this morning! Do you think it's deadly? I don't want to die." And then, "Well, if you say so. It's certainly a relief. I thank you for your time. It's been a pleasure."

Divine was halfway to the door when Saph caught up, still attempting to tie her bodice back into place, and a weak voice called after them.

"Excuse me. Excuse me! I believe you've, well, you've taken one! Come back at once!"

"Run," Saph whispered.

The pair took off, crashing through the black door back into the full blazing sun of mid-morning. They raced down the main street of the Holy District until they reached the first alleyway between temples. Divine knew the hooweet and vines symbol over the gate: the Goddess of Condemnation.

"In here," she said between heavy breaths, "they wouldn't dare look here."

They veered into the alleyway and stopped far enough from the street that a passerby wouldn't notice them. Divine glanced around, finding nothing but a songbird perched high overhead. Breathing heavily, they grinned at each other.

"Well, that was fun. Did you get it?"

In answer, Divine fastened the locket around her neck. Her veins teemed with magic,

building as if she could explode with power. Had it always felt this good? Looking at her partner in heist, Divine took in all of Saph; her cheeks lightly flushed, her mouth parted, her breasts still somewhat exposed and heaving with breaths. Divine took a step closer.

“Can I kiss you?” Divine breathed.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

In one motion Divine grabbed Saph’s hips, pushing her back against the stone of the temple, and pressed her lips to hers. Saph’s mouth opened in response and Divine tentatively brushed her tongue against her lower lip. She was met with an eager probing of her own. The woman smelled faintly of wood, which barely broke through the cloud of rose and rain that flooded her senses. Divine pushed their bodies closer, so every feasible part was touching and released one hip to slide her hand behind Saph’s head. Saph moaned into her mouth as Divine’s other hand moved underneath her shirt, touching Saph’s back. Divine trembled.

But the woman pulled her lips away. They both breathed heavily while Divine searched Saph’s eye for a hint at what was wrong.

Saph’s voice broke the silence in a whisper, “I think we should head back to my tavern, darling...before we expose ourselves in the Holy District.”

* * *

The finger that traced the space between Divine’s shoulder blades made her quiver. She lay on her right side in Saph’s bed, gazing into the light beams that stretched from the upper window. Her talisman was back. She almost couldn’t believe it.

Saph placed another kiss on her exposed shoulder.

“Will you tell me how it works?” With the question, Saph’s hand slid between Divine’s breasts to touch the pendant.

Divine rolled over, and once again, moving on top of Saph, holding herself up to kiss the woman once more. Pulling away, she grinned down at her and grasped Saph’s hands up by her head, pinning her arms.

“Will you tell me why you wear the patch?”

“Rogue.” Saph nipped at Divine’s lip, missing.

Hungrily answering with another kiss, Divine rolled to lie on her back next to Saph.

The axe-wielder already knew what her talisman was, so explaining how it worked wouldn’t hurt her anymore. It was...personal. But if she wanted this—whatever this was—to go any further, Divine knew she needed to push past her recent betrayal.

“Are you sure you want to know? This is treading into temple territory and might be boring.”

Saph’s hand moved to caress Divine’s stomach. “Not if you’re the one speaking.”

Divine nodded. “When you create a talisman, you are trying to lock your intentions into the talisman—with the Goddess’s will—and connect to a well of power that is uniquely yours. It helps to have an item that reflects your desire or has a positive emotion attached to it. That might have been where I went wrong.”

“How so?” Saph asked.

“I was sent to the temple when I was ten, as my mother’s health had become increasingly poor. She spent some time at the temple as well, hoping to have the

healers work their magic. She had a few months here and there that seemed better, but when I was fifteen, she passed away. And it is about that time in life a novice is asked to either confirm or seek out another career. I returned to my childhood home, gathered petals into the locket she had given me for my birthday prior, and made it my talisman. To disguise it, I took my temple-given symbol of my Goddess that everyone wears, and had a Maker of the Goddess of Construction fuse the two parts. But I think the grief of my mother's death, or the desire to have had the power to heal her, bound itself to the petals and the petals to the pendant. Thus, I have a shallow well."

Saph was silent for a moment then said softly, "It takes great strength to see the pains of the world and heal them, rather than do the easy thing and turn away."

Divine shrugged and sat up. "I should clean up and prepare for tomorrow. You still want to leave for the place on the maps in the morning?"

The woman sighed behind her. "Yes. Washroom is down the hall on the left. But do put some clothes on first. Don't want to shock poor Sylus. I need him to work the tavern while I'm gone."

Tugging on her knee-length coat that had been tossed on the floor in haste, Divine nodded and slipped into the hallway, clutching the opening together. Even if she'd been fully clothed, she would have still felt naked—her soul bare for even mortals to see.

CHAPTER SIX

Saph was no longer in the room when Divine returned. Divine couldn't stop the nagging thought that she hardly knew Saph. Trusting someone this early in a relationship—was it even a relationship?—was liable to leave her broken when Saph inevitably left or tired of her. But, Divine had felt so connected to the woman during their autumn market festivities, like Divine's Soulshield abilities were present even though she didn't have her magic well. And that morning's successful retrieval of her talisman connected them more than she would have ever predicted. Divine blushed at the memory.

Sitting on the side of the bed, Divine used the time alone to begin repairing her talisman's connection. To recreate the feeling of its original creation, Divine closed her eyes and imagined her mother's garden. She took a deep breath and smelled the perfume of her mother's favorite rose. It had a scent nearly able to give someone wings, sprinkled with the citrus of Solhavn. The effort to get that perfect, distinct scent was easier than Divine expected.

She reached a mental rope into her well, then pulled it up and inspected the connection. She found spots where the magic felt frayed, but it wouldn't take her long to mend those areas. Divine couldn't wait to tell Saph. She froze.

Would Saph regret their entanglement, or say it didn't mean anything? Divine took a breath to steady herself, then descended the stairs, feeling like her locket emitted a noticeable glow through her skin. Or maybe that was the remnants of intimacy. Divine swallowed, feeling completely unprepared for how to start a conversation with Saph, if the woman hadn't left.

The tavern was empty, chairs laid upside down on tables from the night before, while a fire blazed, wafting warmth from the fireplace. Maybe it would do well as a breakfast option for Saph's business.

A swinging door behind the bar opened at the far corner and Saph entered, carrying a woven basket. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and Divine's heart skipped a beat.

"Ah, here she is. I picked up some mince pies from down the street. Crunchy cheese and fluffy eggs. They're delightful for an early lunch. Or a late breakfast." Saph motioned to a box on the countertop. "I figured you might need to get your strength back from..."—Tangling in the sheets? Divine's thoughts interjected. She pulled on her rose earring and sat down at the bar—"our earlier adventures. The tavern doesn't open for another few hours. Sit down and keep me company, hm?"

Divine slid on to a stool near the box and withdrew a small pie. It was still warm and the top looked like it had baked in butter, judging from its golden crust.

"Are you preparing for an evening rush?" Divine asked, watching Saph disappear below the counter.

"I can't say they rush so much as lumber in. But no"—Saph's dark hair barely peeked over the edge—"I'm taking inventory of what we'll need for our adventure."

Divine relaxed. Her insides had coiled tight at the idea that Saph might want to cancel their adventure after Divine's indiscretion. It wouldn't be the first time she misread an attraction as mutual. She debated apologizing for being so...insistent in the alley when Saph placed two large sacks on the counter and leaned on her elbows.

"Been thinking about those maps." She reached into her pocket and withdrew the two map pieces. Laying them on the bar, she twisted them around, a hand on each, to face Divine. "The creatures in the marionette show and this ursavara drawing. Maybe it's

a warning.”

Divine leaned forward, breakfast paused in her hand. “Could be. It would probably be a good idea to stay away from that area. Might be a cave or known hunting ground for the creatures. Definitely don’t want to get close to those claws.” Divine shuddered. “What’s this?”

Divine pointed to a scrap of paper that had fallen out with the map. There were some letters she could make out like “o” and “l”, but then there were dashes and arch-like scribbles.

Saph grabbed the paper and put it back in her pocket. “It’s my shopping list. I use short symbols for writing because fun fingers here”—she held up her hand with fused fingers—“make it difficult to write.”

“You never learned to write with your non-dominant hand?”

“Too much effort. If this is to scale from here to here”—Saph drew her finger along a road moving west to southwest from Iramont, effectively changing the topic—“is about a day’s journey. I haven’t been on a horse long-distance in a long while. You?”

Divine shook her head. Wagons did not qualify.

“Then we’ll take frequent breaks. I’m guessing it will take us two days, then. There’ll be plenty of grazing areas for the horses, so it’ll just be our supplies to match the journey. We could stop here, and here the first day. Does that sound good?”

“I’ll lean on your knowledge,” Divine said, biting into the hand-sized pie. Sweet and savory and warm. She almost moaned. “These are delicious!”

“Then let’s stop at The Dragon’s Egg on our way out in the morning and get some

more. Traveling doesn't mean we can't have some good food along the way."

"Is that why you're packing that?" Divine pointed to the basket. She couldn't stop imagining Saph stretched out on a blanket while Divine fed her fruit from the woven container, the pair on a hill overlooking a cluster of orange-leaved trees. Divine pressing a kiss to Saph's temple...

"This? Oh no, this is for donation. I've got some leftovers from The Dragon's Egg and Flutterwing Inn. Oh, and I made some potato bread with the stuff that was about to go bad yesterday. I'll pack our bags next."

Divine beamed. "You help those in need?"

"The less fortunate. The forgotten. The unblessed. Do you approve?"

"Yes! I, uh, I'm glad to see you're helping."

"Aligned hearts, you and I."

Divine's heart danced like the boradain marionette, coaxed into motion by Saph's tug on the strings. The tavern owner disappeared into the back again while Divine finished her breakfast. She was licking her fingers when Saph returned. The woman paused, watching Divine, then approached. She took Divine's hand in hers and used a cloth to gently wipe Divine's hand.

"I want to find Listhinci," Divine blurted. "I'm sure I could help their hand. It seemed blackened but not immobile."

"And go against the rules?" Saph bumped her lightly with her hip then passed behind her. "How adventurous."

Divine blushed, hiding her smile with another bite of another pie. “I don’t know what happened, but Listhinci needed help. And those are ridiculous rules.”

Divine hoped Saph couldn’t see the half-truth plastered on her face. With every good part of her she wanted to help the Iguion. But she selfishly wanted to test her talisman’s connection to her magic well. If Divine couldn’t wield the magic she used to have, she was going to be of little use to Saph on their quest. A burnt hand seemed a bit more difficult than healing a papercut but not as taxing as mending a bone. Testing it here at the tavern didn’t seem possible. Especially with Saph’s presence consistently making Divine’s thoughts turn to romance.

“Viktor probably knows where they are. Want me to come with you?”

“I can manage. Besides, you have some preparing to do. Want me to ask Viktor about securing horses for tomorrow? At least that way I could be of some use.”

Divine popped the last bite into her mouth. Saph halted behind the bar and reached her hand to Divine’s chin, gently brushing several crumbs away with her thumb.

“I can think of other ways I could use you,” Saph said quietly. Divine thought she might choke on the food. “Yes, ask him for a horse each. Just don’t tell him what we’re doing. He’s liable to invite himself along. Oh and here,”—Saph placed a small box on the bar—“a treat for the little Iguion.”

Trying to suppress the tremble Saph’s touch elicited, Divine gave a small wave and headed to the street.

* * *

At the Palfrey Post, Divine arranged for the horses as planned and managed to redirect most of Viktor’s questions into the general category of “just helping Saph”.

He seemed to accept the lack of details, which might have been influenced by Divine blanketing his curiosity with a calming mental push. Her emotional regulation ability seemed to be working, though she was afraid to dip too far too fast into the depths of her well. She remembered passing out those first few times after creating her talisman.

From Viktor she learned Listhinci was staying in temporary housing in the Living District's outskirts. Divine followed the familiar path to the fountain and sat at its edge. She hadn't used her healing abilities for nearly two seasons and expecting to help the Iguion without firmly reestablishing her connection with her talisman would be a disservice to them both.

The gentle crash of the water created a calming atmosphere. The illusion of being alone behind a waterfall and that close, shut-off-from-the-world feeling was just what she needed to dip her toes into the depths of her magic well. Just her and the magic. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Divine dipped into her magic, as if she stood at the edge of her well, ascertaining its depth by submerging her toes. The familiar cool weight trickled over her, and she dipped again, deeper into her well of power. An ankle. Then a knee. The space carved out for her magic was still there, still blooming with the scent of sweet roses. It existed in her mind, yet through her talisman it connected to a plane of magic somewhere between the physical world and the afterlife where the Gods and Goddesses dwelled. Supposedly.

Divine's focus wavered and she threw her arms out, feeling like she tumbled through water. She steadied herself and tried again.

She stood at the edge of the metaphorical well and grabbed a channel of energy, like a rope that would bring buckets from the bottom. She let the bucket sink and pulled it back, imagining a gentle wave washing over herself. Immediately she felt more

relaxed.

She repeated the gesture, each time tossing the bucket further into the well, repairing the connection between her talisman and the magic like one who repeated squats to build leg strength. Satisfied that she, at the least, could access the well, Divine opened her eyes and stood.

Turning left from the pool, behind some of the more lavish doors and window boxes of the main street, there was a tighter lane. Connected homes made the length look like the long tail of a black-tailed swiller. Divine stopped in front of one home with a pink door.

As she knocked, Divine noted the peeling paint on the door's wood and the dead flowers in the window box. It leaned to one side like a screw was loose. Divine wondered if the disrepair was by choice, or if the property-owner hadn't put in the effort.

The door opened a crack and a yellow eye surrounded by scales peeked out.

"It's Divine. I'm sorry to disturb you," Divine said placing a hand over her chest, "but I wanted to make good on my statement from earlier. That I would try."

Listhinci's golden eye blinked, the vertical pupil constricting, then they opened the door wider and stepped aside, allowing Divine to enter the home. As they closed the door behind them, Divine noted Listhinci's blackened arm was in a sling.

"This is from Saph," Divine said, thrusting the small box awkwardly. "For your little one." As Listhinci clasped their claws around it Divine heard a chorus of chirps from inside.

Divine followed the Iguion through the front room. Tables were scooted close to the

front window, lined with trays growing various stages of green growth in small pots. On the table in shadow, a crystal cascaded light from where it was held aloft in a mechanism not unlike a metal Iguion arm over its tray of sprouts.

They passed through the home's kitchen into a short hallway. A closed door stood at the end, which Listhinci opened and stepped through. They scooped a travel bag from their path with their tail and plopped it on a small bed by the right wall.

Articles of clothing stuck out, but a soft sneeze captured Divine's attention.

Against the far wall sat a woven basinet, a green vine trailing up its light brown canopy. An orange bee made of felt dangled from a stick above the base. And nestled in the cream fabric within the basket, Divine could just see the green spikes of a small head and body. A silver disc with red-orange material pointed over the bassinet, suspended from a hooked pole and bathed the reptilian's scaled body in a warm glow.

"May I?" Divine whispered.

Listhinci made a short click noise and motioned their hand, claws up, toward the bassinet.

Divine leaned over the edge. Heat emanated from the glowing disc against her skin as Divine watched the baby Iguion's soft belly rise and fall. Their eyes were shut and their tail curled around their legs.

"Your baby is beautiful," Divine whispered.

"Thank you. It is difficult to hold them with my injury. But feeding is simple, so I am managing."

Divine marveled at how the Iguion seemed to effortlessly decrease the volume of

their voice, somehow layering articulation within the susurrations. Turning from the baby, Divine examined the remainder of the room.

Books and papers covered a table which contained instruments Divine didn't recognize and one large one that looked familiar. There was a canister as long as her arm and as wide as her head, but what looked like a telescope was pointed down at the table. A cord ran from the back into what appeared to be a scrying pool—a transparent dish filled with water. Listhinci grunted, interrupting Divine's wonder. She swiveled to the Iguion.

"Are you in pain?" Divine asked. She chastised herself for not immediately engaging in the reason she had come here.

"It is like ice and tingles, but I have felt worse."

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't feel better. Here, sit down."

Divine led them to the single chair by the table with the scope device. Looping their tail over their uninjured arm, they sat down. Untying the sling, Divine inspected the smaller scales of their hand and forearm and the gradual increase in size past their elbow. She tried to talk as she examined.

"Viktor and the others...how did you end up with them? If you don't mind me asking."

"They each have something to offer, as do I. It is a beneficial arrangement."

Divine tried to detect emotions from the Iguion but struggled to find more than a sense of ease. The pink shades of their scales were either blackened or dull gray. Divine didn't see any signs of crusting, but it was difficult to see the skin beneath the scales.

Skimming the top of her well, Divine breathed in the sweet perfume of rain on rose and pushed the feeling over Listhinci like a blanket. She imagined drops soaking beneath their scales and exhaled.

“There. Does that feel better?”

“It still tingles but the cold is gone.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could do better. I don’t know much about Iguion physiology. Nor do I have experience healing your kind.”

“It is alright. I appreciate your efforts.”

“But I’m not done.” Divine smiled. “I’ll try to heal you. If you could just sit right there,” Divine’s voice trailed off as she closed her eyes.

This would be the true test of her abilities and if she had repaired the connection to her well. She pushed the bucket down, deep into the darkness, imagining several on a rope like a waterwheel, retrieving magical energy and condensing it into a salve. As she pulled the last container, she thought she heard an echo in her well come to her from further away, as if the walls of her spring were further back than she thought. Divine mentally shook her head, dismissing the observation. It had been months since she had plunged within the depths. It was logical that her memory would not be as precise as a Harvester’s map.

“Should something be happening?”

Divine’s eyes snapped opened, the magic energy dwindling to a drip. Her throat constricted as she took in Listhinci’s scales; as black as they had been.

Divine let out a breath. “If you tell me how this happened, it might help how I

approach the problem.”

Listhinci rotated their head toward the table as if reading their response from the contents.

“Now I’m wishing I had asked my mother more questions about her visit to Solhavn. She was around your kind for at least a week.”

Listhinci’s dewlap quivered. “Your mother was allowed into the city?”

“Yes, she stayed with an Iguion named Iksarsis. I guess now that you ask, it does seem out of the ordinary.”

“It is not often that we let outsiders into our homes. Iksarsis is a great healer.”

Visitors vacationed at the island—it never suffered winter. But entrance to the boardwalk city of the Iguion was often reserved to specific days. Divine’s mother had gone two years before her passing. Now that she thought about it, her mother had one of her remissions after coming home.

“Huh. All this time I thought she had visited the island for its natural healing properties. You know how they send people to the Dalga Hot Springs. I never thought she could have gone to see a medicinal healer.”

“Not only medicinal.”

Divine’s hand froze as she turned over the Iguion’s arm. “Are you saying they had magic?”

Listhinci blinked. “Many do, do they not?”

“Humans yes, but...”

The Iguion leaned forward. “Do you believe what they say about us?”

“I’ll believe what you say about you.”

“Iguion cannot heal Iguion...” Listhinci clicked their long fingers together in front of Divine.

“But they can heal others,” Divine finished.

“Some of us. Others have...different gifts.” With this, Listhinci bobbed their head at the equipment on the table. “I am a researcher. An experimenter. Somewhat like your apothecaries. I was working with an item when I...misjudged.”

“What kind of item?”

Listhinci curled their fingers until one remained pointed and gestured to Divine’s throat.

Defensively, Divine clutched her locket. “A talisman? Is that what you got from Sylus at the bar?”

Listhinci snuffed in affirmation. “I can dissolve the connection between talisman and magical energy. But it can be dangerous. Done improperly it becomes corrupted. A contaminate instead of a charm.”

Divine’s mouth fell open as she fumbled for words. Her interaction with the Goodly One came rushing back in images and she could nearly hear his revelation of those who can use other’s talismans. If Kellas could drain talismans of their magic for cannonballs, then Iguion could block the connection?

“Why?” she asked at last. “Why would you do that to someone’s talisman?”

“The intent is not harmful. The talismans are given freely. Of more, I will not say now. Does this help you help me?”

Divine’s mind reeled. Human-adjacents had magic. Despite the vehement preachings of every temple.

The temples are lying .

Divine searched the Iguion’s face; their scales were not showing their silvery side, their dewlap remained flat. Everything Divine had noticed about their emotional responses was missing, calm. The hint of emotion Divine detected matched. Then there was her mother who trusted the race enough to seek out their help for her illness.

“I think so,” Divine said, releasing her grip on her talisman. “If I think of it like a poisoning or an infection, then maybe. Yes, let me try.”

As if it would help her focus, Divine pressed her palm into the top of her locket and closed her eyes again. She repeated her earlier effort, focusing on the scent of the rose her mother always said hid a hint of lemon behind the sweet petals. This time, she poured her magical energy like a rinse over the tissue beneath the scales of the Iguion.

“Anything?” Divine asked, searching for the return of color to the blackened scales.

“I feel...more tingly.”

Divine groaned. Gray and black remained. “I’m sorry. I really thought I could help you.”

A soft squeak issued from the bassinet followed by another. Listhinci touched Divine's shoulder and moved passed.

"You have helped. See? It no longer hurts."

Turning around, Divine saw that Listhinci held their baby on their shoulder, their injured arm bracing the young one as they opened Saph's gift.

"I will be returning to Solhavn for the winter season," Listhinci said, feeding the baby a small insect. "I invite you to come stay with me."

"Oh, I'd just be in your way."

Their cheeks puffed. "There are things I could tell you there that I dare not risk here. The deities have eyes and ears in many places. Come. And at the gates of Zax Solhavn tell them I sent you, 'by the old ways.'"

"Thank you for your kind invitation." There was something there, either in the unreadable face or the words of the Iguion that promised answers. "I will consider it. Take care of your baby, I'll see myself out."

"Please. One moment."

Listhinci glided to their table and opened a drawer, bending at the hip to balance the baby on their shoulder as they reached in. They withdrew an object and deposited it into Divine's hand. A shiny, black stone flattened in the shape of a triangle.

"Use it like a talisman but to...sever your connection. If you ever have the need. And thank you, Divine. You are among the finest humans."

Heat rose in Divine's eyes at the compliment. She blinked to discourage any leakage,

and bent her head in thanks. Confused why she would ever need to detach herself from her talisman, she said no more and returned to the sunlight of Iramont's streets.

She looked at the sun overhead. It was time for lunch and the tavern was open. If Divine was to help with the preparations for Saph's quest she should get back. The map and the mysterious destination awaited. Hopefully she could sneak a moment between Saph's tavern duties to talk about the morning's bed sheet action. She wanted a distraction—needed a distraction—from the ideas the Iguion put into her head.

Turning onto the main street, she glanced at the sun again, the domain of the God of Day and Deceit, and wondered if the biggest trick of all was that anyone held the truth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Divine woke with a start, grasping for her locket. She found it still around her neck. She closed her eyes and exhaled before looking over to the bed. Saph was already up. Divine groaned, feeling like a pile of ursavara dung for thinking Saph would betray her like Madeline.

The tavern owner had packed their bags and left little for Divine to do after returning from Listhinci's. The evening was full of food, drinks and music. Divine even participated in singing Boats to Borderlands with two Kellas who draped their heavy paws on her shoulders while Saph danced with some rather wobbly patrons. Divine had bristled when one had kissed Saph's cheek. But the music lifted her spirits.

They had turned in early for an early rise, Saph insisting on sharing the bed. Staring at the ceiling, Divine spent the majority of the night stressing over whether or not to proposition Saph for a repeat of their morning passion but ended up stiffening her body to make sure she wasn't touching any of Saph's soft skin—no matter how much she imagined doing just that. She kept remembering their exchanged hungry kisses and caresses over each other's bodies. Saph hadn't spoken about their intimacy either. Sure, she flirted, but Saph flirted with everyone and Divine began to wonder if it was all a mistake, just like with Madeline.

Quickly rubbing a lavender-scented thread-cleansing square over the underarms on her sleeveless shirt and undergarments, Divine focused on the task at hand. Her small travel pouch attached to her back contained her necessities. She grabbed her jacket. Chewing a refreshing spinetooth leaf from Saph's window pot, Divine descended the stairs, her pendant slowly radiating energy within her, and out to the pre-dawn street.

Saph held a familiar mince pie box from The Dragon's Egg and the pair crossed over to the Palfrey Post.

"We're here for the mounts," Saph called into the stables.

Viktor, wearing his wide-brimmed hat, led two tarrow root-beer colored horses out to the street.

"The finest the Palfrey Post has to offer," Viktor said, handing over the reins.

"They better be," Saph replied, patting the flank of one.

"Did you say where you were going?"

"Nope. And it's none of your business."

"By the Gods, you're spirited today. Well, you two have fun."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Saph said, turning her horse.

Divine caught her wink and mirrored Saph's smile.

They exited the west gate as the sun began to peek at their backs, munching on warm breakfast pies.

"Do you pay for the horses when we get back?" Divine asked, eyeing the road in the pale early morning light. The road looked disused, with taller weeds overtaking what used to be a well-worn path, disappearing into foggy mist. Divine wished she had gloves against the chill autumn air.

"We have a trade. He gets free beer, I get horses to ride."

“Beyond poetry and charity, your free time involves horse rides?”

Saph laughed. “I used to ride toward the mountains”—she gestured widely to the west where the Spine of Trelvania’s peaks were barely visible on the horizon—“I liked to hike.”

“I didn’t take you for a lover of nature.”

“What, because I spend most of my time in the city?”

Divine held up her hands. “I shouldn’t have assumed. I love nature.”

“I like that we have a lot in common.”

Divine’s stomach fluttered and her tongue tied itself in knots.

Failing to find a suitable topic, Divine’s thoughts turned to reflecting on yesterday. Divine’s attempt at healing Listhinci hadn’t given her the confidence that her magic well was working as it always had, so she wasn’t sure she could simply heal any sore legs and hips if they pushed themselves, but she would find ways to test her well as they rode.

The first hour was uneventful. There was no one else on the road as it slowly bent south, and given the black spot cases it made sense. Though they rode side by side, neither woman said much beyond comments on the landscape and weather. Divine wanted to reach out and take Saph’s hand, see if the urgency to press their bodies close was just a fluke. Divine squirmed in her saddle.

“About yesterday morning. After my talisman. I’m sorry if I, uh...” she blurted, then trailed off.

“Wildly pleased me by ravishing my body?”

“Er, umm, yes?” Divine blushed. “I’m not sure what came over me. I’m normally not so bold.”

Saph scratched under her purple eye patch and fixed her uncovered eye on Divine. “You don’t often pin women in alleyways? Or you regret taking me to bed?”

“Yes. No! I have never pinned someone in an alleyway, that’s the thing. But I don’t regret what came of it.” A half-smile tugged at the corner of Divine’s mouth.

Saph whistled. “Good. I certainly don’t regret it. It’s not often that I get to be seduced so earnestly, and I didn’t have to do much of it myself. Our third date was a success. Now, with that out of the way, are you going to be more conversational, or do we have to have a roll in the thicket over there,” she said as she pointed off the road to a clump of trees, “to get you relaxed again?”

Yes? Divine almost replied. The prospect of pleasing Saph all over again was a great temptation but she pushed it down; they had to make it at least to their planned stopping point, otherwise they’d never get to their destination. But, if the pauses were all bodies tangled, Divine wasn’t sure she minded. With her talisman back, she had all the time in Alistraysia for diversions.

Divine looked the woman over from the axe blades peeking over her back, to the billowing pants she’d chosen for riding. There was so much she didn’t know about her.

She cleared her throat. “I didn’t want to ask before as it seemed rude, but,” Divine’s words rushed from her mouth before she could stop them, “why do you wear an eyepatch?” Divine’s eyes widened at her own comment and she hurried to correct it. “And, uh, why did you choose an axe for a weapon?”

“My goodness, she wants physical and mental intimacy. No, don’t look away, darling. I like flustering you is all. It’s refreshing, your questions. Men after the first night generally become very interested in whether I have a husband or otherwise who will be coming to chop their balls off, or want a list of all of my previous lovers and how they compare. I’ll volunteer the latter—you’re the best I’ve had in ages , darling.”

Even though Saph had asked her not to, Divine looked away, trying to hide her red-hot cheeks.

“I think I can bend my rules for you,” Saph said.

“Rules?”

“Certain information requires a certain amount of connection. I can’t be revealing my secrets before we’ve had a bit of fun.”

“You mean our dates?”

Saph nodded. “Childhood memories are at date number four.”

“With the poetry?”

“You got it.”

“Then I guess I’d better hurry and decide on our fourth date so I can hear that composition Sylus mentioned.”

“I can’t wait to see what you come up with. Our third was exhilarating. Alright, your questions. My eyepatch...just a childhood injury. Nothing special.”

Divine felt the disquiet in the air as tingling vibrations. That dismissal was not all fact. She wouldn't break Saph's wish and use her empathetic influence, but she couldn't stop feeling the emotions from others. She signaled her horse to veer off the road to a tall patch of grass and dismounted. Saph followed, watching her with a quizzical stare. Approaching the mounted rider, Divine offered her hand to Saph and the woman dismounted. The horses could graze, as they had been two hours on the road.

Once on the ground, Divine kissed the back of Saph's hand. "You do what makes you comfortable, but I want you to know that you don't have to hide parts of you from me. I like all of you. Even if you confessed character flaws, who am I to judge? We are all different. The greatest gift we can give one another is acceptance and support."

"There's the Soulshield healer-protector. I wondered if she'd come back to you." Saph rested her hand on Divine's cheek. "Well, since you like all of me—would you mind if I rode the rest of the way naked?"

Divine grumbled as she pulled Saph close, "You enjoy tormenting me?"

"A little," Saph said then kissed her deeply before pulling away. "The axe seemed like a great weapon. Solid weight without being overly cumbersome. Smaller blades than a full-sized battle axe. Larger grip that worked well for my hand. Visibility when I wanted those I was searching for to know I was serious. And it looks breathtaking, doesn't it? Like bare curves by the moonlight."

The image sent a shiver over Divine. "It is. But not as breathtaking as you."

"Keep talking like that and I might delay this quest."

"Would that be so bad?" Divine squeezed Saph's hand.

“No, but I’m not a fan of straw in my underthings.”

They held hands as they strolled through the green grass, keeping the horses close as they grazed beneath a tree with a skirt of orange leaves. Divine always thought the grass held on, refusing to admit that cold weather was coming, when the trees celebrated by waving their colors early and high.

Divine swiveled, eyeing the grass, but finding nothing more than the fading of color that would be typical of the season as the grass dried out. The spring would better show if the fading indicated the black spot.

“I do so love this weather,” Saph said, spinning around with her arms wide, her black braid hovering like the end of a kite. “My legs are adequately stretched. Shall we continue our journey?”

Divine noted how the tavern owner still hadn’t answered the seemingly more personal parts of the questions. She understood that. Surrendering your body to another felt easier than surrendering your memories; a window into who you are, or were, open to interpretation like a piece of art out of your control. Divine wasn’t who she was before her mother returned to the Goddess, in more than name. Maybe it didn’t matter. It mattered who she was right now.

“I’m ready. Adventure awaits.”

* * *

They’d had a snack of cheese and bread before continuing, and stopped every few hours after for the horses and for their own legs. No matter what was discussed for the rest of the afternoon, Divine couldn’t stop imagining Saph riding naked, or what she wanted to do with her once they stopped to make camp.

Divine strove to reaffirm the ties of her talisman to her well. If she had been separated from it too long and she could no longer use magic beyond empathetic influence, she needed to know. But most of her practice had been calming the heat that rose at her thighs, which was not always related to horse riding. Saph continued to throw sideways glances and winks her way, which made it indefinitely difficult to focus.

The pervasive scent of roses had been growing in her senses for the last hour. Having never been separated from her talisman, was this its way of reconnecting her to the well of power, or something different? But she felt like she'd taken a strong breath after waking to find the year's first snow—refreshed and ready to conquer any task.

They found a clump of trees that would provide shelter near a stream. They refilled their water and built a fire, though Divine glanced at the clouds with each brush of a breeze on her neck. Thin tendrils of white flowed across the grey-blue sky in increasingly larger bundles.

“Can I see that map of the clearing?” Divine asked, her mind wandering to what awaited them tomorrow.

Saph withdrew the chest from one of the sacks they took off her horse and handed over the crinkled paper.

“It looks like they need to be placed in order.” Divine pointed to an X with a dot at the bottom vertex, placed near the bottom left of the map on top of a tree, then to an X with a dot in two vertices placed at the bottom right near a well, then an X with a dot in three vertices placed at the top over a...

“Is that a basket? Whatever it is, maybe there's a recess of some sort and we place the crystals in them to unlock the person who wrote the letter. What did it say? ‘ I have trapped myself inside my house. ’ If the crystals are of a Trickster, I bet they create

light in these locations. It would connect them in a shape. And maybe lead us to our next clue.”

“Oh, like that Pocket Secret device in the bazaar.”

“Exactly.”

“How do we know which goes where?”

Divine reached for the chest and Saph relinquished her grasp. Withdrawing the yellow cube shaped crystal, Divine turned it to look at all angles.

“In this light it almost looks like a lightning bolt is inside. There, this one has one dot.” Divine gave the crystal to Saph. “This one should go where the tree is on the map.”

“Do you still think the letter writer is a Trickster?”

“It’s my best guess so far. But the magic they use is often to play tricks on others. We’ll want to be cautious if this person is a follower of the God of Day and Deceit. This whole thing could be a ruse for them to get a laugh.”

“I assume the Goddess of Condemnation doesn’t like them either?”

“They certainly don’t approve of the deceit part. But really the Tricksters’ magic is so inconsequential that the agents turn their noses up and go about their day.”

“I’m starting to think my staying out of the Holy District entirely has been a good life choice.”

They packed up the crystals in a pouch, folded the maps and placed them both in the

chest and set to making preparations for the evening.

It seemed natural to let Saph work on dinner arrangements, given her tavern background, and Divine set up bedrolls and returned to the horses, making sure they had water from the river and grass to nibble near the woods. Tasks completed, she returned to a blazing fire and a waiting meal.

“That smells good,” Divine said, sitting up-wind from the fire. No sense adding smoke to her eyes as well as the dirt all over. “Better than the dried meat and fruit I lived off of to get here.”

“It’s rabbit. And crushed peppercorn with a dash of sweet lemongrass.”

“Did we bring rabbit?”

“No.” Saph inclined her chin at her axe propped near the fire.

“Oh.”

Saph brought over a piece on a stick with a roasted apple. “Eat up.”

Divine twisted the stick over three times before setting it down, the image of the rabbit’s demise souring her stomach. How easy it was, buying premade food, to separate the means from the end result.

“How close do you think the turn-off from the road is?” Divine asked, taking a bite from the apple.

Saph took a mouthful from her stick, her words less annunciated. “I think I recognize the lake from a farm not too far from here. It’s shaped like a crescent moon. Your Goddess would like it.”

“So we might be there late morning?”

Saph took another bite but swallowed this time before answering. “I think we might even reach our destination by lunch.”

“Good, we’ll likely get rain tomorrow.”

“Really? How do you know?”

Divine pointed to a clump of trees that hadn’t yet gotten the message that they should be showing orange and yellow leaves. “Those trees. Their leaves are upturned. They are thirsty.”

“They don’t look any different to me.”

“They’re lighter in color. Can you see it? Usually, they’re a darker green.”

“Nope. I see nothing different.”

Divine frowned, searching Saph’s face for a hint of jest.

“But my long distance eyesight is not as good as yours.”

Divine stiffened. The eyepatch, of course. How could she be insensitive to ask Saph to see minute details like that? The slightest touch of wariness came from Saph, and Divine tried to divert the conversation.

“How long ago did you say you were last out this way? You used to get your own supplies, right?”

“Three years. I would save money by coming out to the farms instead of having them

deliver to me. Then the black spot hit and, well, they aren't selling in bulk anymore, as you know."

Divine nodded, then pried the lid open on the chest between them, pretending to study the maps again. She didn't trust herself to stray into new topics. Not with blurting stupid questions that involved eyepatches.

The women finished their meal and began settling in for the evening. The fall nights grew chilly, so they let the fire burn through the night, hoping to keep any critters away as well. Their location looked far away from the drawing of the ursavara so it would hopefully be an uneventful night. With the food scraps piled up, Divine excused herself to finally wash away all the dirt. Divine was amazed at how much dust had accumulated on her face and hair from a road semi-reclaimed by nature. She was glad she left her accordion in Arosia and hoped it would still be there when she returned.

The sun was setting at her back as she approached the stream and removed her jacket and other articles. The trees provided a buffer against wind and it felt almost like a washroom at an inn; a giant, private washroom with a gentle fire at her back. She dunked her clothing and scrubbed them with soap before setting them, rinsed off, on a large rock.

The clouds over the trees at the far bank caught the last lights in brushstrokes of pale purple, orange, and yellow. Divine considered how everyone always focused on the sunset before them, but if one would turn around, the reflection is even more beautiful, a secret to be revealed if one paused to look. Zenith almost glowed where it floated among the clouds, an upside-down mountain peak reflecting the sun's goodbye.

The stream was deep enough that she waded out to her waist and dunked her head beneath the cool water, giving her shoulder-length locks a good scrubbing. Standing,

she pushed the strands back from her eyes as water cascaded down her back. Then a hand followed the streams of water.

“May I join you?”

Divine turned toward the familiar voice. Saph looked radiant, the rays of the setting sun streaming out from behind her as if she created the light, her glorious brown skin as bare as Divine’s.

Without hesitation, Divine stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her, pulling her close, kissing her with the hunger that had built throughout the day.

Divine gently bit Saph’s lip and trembled when Saph repeated the action. She lost herself to the dancing of their tongues and caressing hands until finally she pulled away, and staring, Divine saw her own desire echoed in Saph’s eye.

Saph raised an oval block of soap, a crooked grin promising mischief. “We should probably finish this before starting something else.”

Divine’s body wanted to protest but she surrendered. They took turns brushing their hands against each other’s skin, removing the grime of the journey as they studied every inch of one another. By the end, the last light of the day peeked over the horizon.

Divine shivered from the cool breeze and the way Saph’s fingers trailed down her stomach and paused inches away from promises of pleasure.

“Let’s dry off by the fire,” Divine said, her voice hitching into whisper.

“Oh darling, I can’t hope to be dry after this.” Saph spun her around and kissed her hard. Grabbing her hand, she pulled Divine into a rapid walk back to the light of the

fire.

* * *

Divine sneezed. Wiping her nose with the back of her hand, she opened her eyes. Everything was that darkness before dawn, where the blackness took on a grey quality and the stars seemed to be fading into the air, as Divine woke to sounds of horses whining and... tree limbs breaking? In their exhaustion they must have slept through the fire dying down; it was barely an ember.

Listening, Divine remained motionless, though her legs ached to be stretched. She'd only awakened twice with stiff limbs, the minimal comfort provided by the blankets beneath her as good as some of the beds she'd slept in on the journey south. At some point, the buzz and chirps of insects had ceased.

Hearing nothing new, she closed her eyes but snapped them wide again with the rustling crack of many wings taking to the sky, filling the silence. Out of sight birds cawed, the sound diminishing further from the tree line.

As Divine shifted, unwrapping her arms from Saph's bare body, the woman mumbled, "What is it?"

Divine shushed gently in her ear then whispered, "I think there's something by the horses."

She pulled the blanket up to her chin as she sat up, a curtain over her exposed skin, and hoped what had spooked the birds from their perch wasn't bandits. She took a deep breath and stifled a cough, eyes watering, on the rose scent like an entire store had its perfume bottles smashed.

This was definitely new. She wasn't using her magic.

Horse squeals punctuated the darkness, followed by the rumble of hooves. Divine reached for Saph, but the woman was already crawling from their blankets over to the dying fire. She picked up her axe. The moonlight highlighted her naked curves and the blades flashed muted silver. Divine rose, her skin prickling with the chilled air, and she drew the blanket around her like a cloak.

Beyond the crest of a dark hill, Divine saw a set of glowing yellow eyes inside a towering figure. It roared and Divine took a step closer to Saph as the woman readied her weapon. Shadows seemed to slink along the ground on either side of the figure. Confidence tickled the air from Saph and Divine straightened, the emotion comforting her churning stomach. Her eyes watered as the citrus undertones of her talisman's scent assaulted her senses. Why was her talisman affecting her like this?

The shadows merged. Eyes focusing, Divine made out a creature that looked like a cross between a bear and a boar, at least eight feet tall with horns and claws. Ursavara . It dropped to its paws and thundered toward them.

Divine gripped a rock by her feet and launched it. It bounced harmlessly against the creature's side before another rock cracked into its long muzzle from Saph. The ursavara shook its head, loping closer. Saph shouted; curses and insults about the creature's parentage. But it kept coming.

Saph dove to the side, her bare skin scraping against the dirt in a somersault as the creature roared passed. She righted herself as it rounded for another pass.

Divine remembered she had her talisman again and reached for the mental rope, tapping blindly for her well. She chastised herself for not testing her ability deeper after the months-long separation. Too late.

Saph swung and missed. She angled her head so her eye had a better vantage, then raised her axe again as a clawed arm swung at her. Her axe clattered on stones at her

feet as she shrieked and fell to her knees.

Glancing between the creature now baring serrated teeth and Saph, Divine dropped the blanket and raced to the woman's side. Saph stood cradling one arm against her stomach and gripping her axe in the other like a shield between her and the ursavara. A shield!

Divine dipped into her magic, as if skimming her hand to test the temperature of a bath. The familiar cool weight trickled over her and she dipped again, deeper into her well of power, envisioning droplets cascading to form a barrier around them as Saph struck the creature on its upper arm. It bellowed, took a step back, then raised its opposite arm to swipe at her. Its claws bounced off from the invisible shield and it growled in frustration.

The creature tried again, but failing, it ripped the axe blade from its bicep with a clawed paw, dropped it, and lowered its muzzle to sniff the ground.

Divine thought she felt tremors of anger from it in the air, but that wasn't possible; Soulshields only felt human emotions. Still, Divine drew magic from her well and envisioned a cup of water turning to cool vapor; a breeze across the creature.

The ursavara pointed its snout to the clouds, sniffed, then dashed away on all fours. It, and a smaller, similar creature, disappeared into the forest.

Divine leaned on her knees, her body trembling. The remains of their dinner scattered over the ground, and she remembered they hadn't done anything with the scraps. The scent likely attracted the beasts. Or that of the horses.

"I don't feel well," Divine muttered, sure she was going to heave from the aftereffects of increased stress. Or her magic. The first major use of her well since regaining her talisman and she was going to lose her dinner over her bare feet. A pain not her own

seemed to grip her head and she turned in time to see Saph collapse to the ground.

“Saph!” Divine darted forward and knelt next to her. Then her eyes widened. “By the souls!”

Saph groaned. Blood flowed across her body, black in the gray light, from where her hand used to be. Saph’s eyes closed and though Divine called her name and shook her shoulders, she did not respond.

Divine held her hands over the wound without touching it, and began to pray.

“Goddess of Souls, grant me the strength to heal this wound so that her soul may continue to experience life before it is time to join you.”

Divine plunged into her well knowing she’d have to scour its shallow depths if she hoped to stop the bleeding. Never had she healed a missing body part; major damage needed a partner Soulshield. She reached for every ounce of power, scraping the very bottom of her well. Again, like with Listhinci, Divine heard an echo that should have resounded closer. But she focused and pulled a line of buckets on a pulley, dumping their contest on Saph.

Pausing, Divine examined Saph. Her hand was still missing. Still spurting blood. It wasn’t enough.

She needed more.

Divine roared and dove back into her well. It felt thinner; she had drawn so much magic already. But at the bottom, she touched the edges of her well.

She pushed. And pushed.

A crash reverberated in her mind and Divine felt herself slip deeper, past the walls she thought was the bottom of her pool.

And she pulled, channeling energy like a waterwheel as fast as she could, their loads dumping over and over again on Saph. Each time, Divine reached deeper until all she heard was the echoes of the well walls around her and all she saw was the dark shimmer of magic.

The scent of roses, like a full garden in bloom with every color, filled the air and her vision tinted black. A faint pulsing white light timed to Saph's heartbeat speckled the darkness like notes on sheet music. As the light grew brighter, stretching a quintet of segments with each throb, all senses faded, and Divine collapsed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Divine's eyes opened, squinting at the sun peeking over the tree line. For a moment, she took in the brilliant sunrise splaying out from the branches.

Then everything came rushing back.

She rolled over to find Saph sleeping next to her. The tavern owner's chest rose and fell with each breath and Divine mouthed a silent thank you to her Goddess.

Divine touched Saph's face and spoke her name; softly at first then louder until her eyes opened. She bolted up on her elbows and looked around.

"The ursavara—"

"It's gone."

"It bit me..." Saph trailed off as she examined the blood stains.

Divine nodded. "I healed you. Passed out but looks like I stopped the bleeding—"

"This is a lot of blood—"

"But, I think our horses are gone."

"Damn. Viktor is going to be furious." Saph pushed herself upright. "I might be a little rusty at adventurers, but I didn't think it would be this bad on our first night."

Glad I picked you for this adventure, though. Note to self, always bring a healer.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve only ridden on wagons organized by travel firms. Or horses between close towns. I didn’t think...” Divine hesitated as Saph studied her hand, turning it over slowly. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you do this?” Saph wiggled her fingers.

Divine frowned then realization struck like a thorn prick. She beamed at Saph. “Your hand! I didn’t think it was possible to regrow! I was only trying to stop the flow. I’ve never reached so far into my well—”

“It’s normal.”

“What do you—”

“It’s normal,” Saph snarled. “What, was my deformity too much for you that you had to fix that while you were at it?”

Divine looked at the two hands Saph held up before her. Ten perfect fingers. Her eyes went wide.

“I...no, I was trying to save your life,” Divine pleaded as Saph rose. “It just happened. You were bleeding out!”

She reached for Saph’s hand, but the woman pulled back.

“I’m going to clean myself off at the river. And hopefully nothing ate our clothes, too.” She turned and stalked away.

Divine took no pleasure in watching Saph’s muscular legs and bare buttocks walk

away. She busied herself with rekindling the fire, cleaning up their campsite, and rolling up their blankets.

Divine's mind wandered in her tasks. She couldn't believe her magic had regrown Saph's hand, but she'd seen the result with her own eyes. And her magic well had far more depth than she remembered. Using magic had always smelled like her talisman, or specifically the rose petals within. But it had never smelled so overwhelming; the citrus hints were always minor. Ever since being reunited with the necklace, the scent had been strongly present, growing obnoxiously more potent at times even when she wasn't using her well. She wondered if her magic was warning her something bad might be on the way.

As Saph approached with slower steps than when she left, Divine didn't turn around. The warmth of the fire in front of her gave contrast to the cold at her back. Travel bags thudded on the ground by the flames, throwing dust into the morning light like glitter.

"Horses bolted. Supplies were eaten or unsalvageable. Our clothes were still there, thankfully." Saph's voice held less of her earlier venom as Divine's clothes dropped in a heap next to her. "Dried and river-scented. At least we won't reek." Saph plopped herself on the ground next to Divine.

Divine glanced out of the corner of her eye at Saph as Divine tugged on her pants and boots. The sun stabbed her eyes as it rose further over the treetops and she looked away. Finishing with her own jacket and fully clothed again, a mental barrier as much as physical against the world, Divine was ready to try to explain herself. Before she could open her mouth, Saph spoke.

"When I was little, my parents tried to hide how my hand looked by making me wear gloves everywhere. Custom made for fused fingers, they had built in attachments that made it look like I had five separate fingers. My parents told everyone my skin was

sensitive to the sun. That everything had to be covered. The expression people made, looking from my brown face to my obviously lying parents..." She shook her head, then examined her new hand. "Once, while playing in the alley near the market, some made-up game, I took off the gloves. The kids noticed. There was shrieking and laughter and no going back after that."

The fire popped, sending sparks into the air that fizzled into ash; less brilliant now in the daylight. Divine remembered Saph mentioning mean children when they were in the autumn market.

"Not long after, I wandered into a smith's shop. He had lost the last two fingers on his hand from a forge accident. Probably not a very good smith to have that happen but, I was drawn to him. For days I stalked his shop, watching how he moved nearly as fast and as precise as any other smith. His products just as good despite his hand. Whether he took pity on me or felt a camaraderie I don't know, but he invited me in and eventually, I worked for him. Years passed and I became good enough to craft that." She gestured with a flick of her wrist at the blue-gipped axe on the ground.

"My parting gift." She shook her head. "I'm getting ahead of myself. When I was sixteen, I had an...encounter with three boys. They told me my hands were only good for pleasing girls, because..." she made a suggestive gesture into the air, her fingers together as if they were still fused. "Anyway, I attacked them and well, three against one was roughly an even fight. Won this prize out of it." She pointed to her patch. "By the time I was able to peel myself from the ground to get to a healer, it was too late to save my eye. And the loss of accurate vision and woeful depth perception made it impossible for me to continue my work with the blacksmith. Too dangerous, he said. He didn't have time to watch everything I did for my safety and the quality of his work, so he dismissed me."

Divine nodded, earlier pieces of the story starting to fall in place. "And that's when you started playing cards?"

Saph snorted. “Almost. My parents meant well, but they were overprotective. Wanted me to stay inside. Find some sort of trade I could do without having to step out on the street. But that wasn’t who I was. I couldn’t stay with them anymore. I had some acquaintances from the shadier side of town and figured, ‘who better to help me take advantage of my situation?’ I stayed with them. They used me, of course, but I learned from them. People’s wallets are loose when they find you alluring. Flaunt what you have, add an intriguing eyepatch, and suddenly you fulfill their pirate fantasies.”

Divine’s eyes narrowed as invisible hands clinched her chest.

“Flirting got me a long way, darling. Dancing across tables and around poles was the majority of what I was doing. Don’t look so jealous.”

Divine almost laughed. Although she was jealous—every inch of her skin bristling—Divine was glad to see Saph’s attitude slip back more into herself. She also recognized the privilege of intimacy given.

Saph continued, glancing at Divine more and more, causing flutterwing flips in her stomach as her story continued. “I got a bit of coin stored up, but I wanted more. That’s when I thought maybe mercenary work would pay well. I trained with my axe. There’s this group of melee experts from Thosporium, west side of the mountains, that the mercenaries all use. They have a training ground near the south gate.” She thumbed the direction. “But there was too much drama in mercenary work and too many times the guild wanted me to travel to other cities. And the paperwork. ”

Divine raised an eyebrow. “I thought mercenaries were allowed to exist outside the laws?”

“To some extent,” Saph said. “A hand of justice accessible to the people.”

“Law enforcement without involving the agents of the Goddess of Condemnation,” Divine muttered.

The Holicratic Council certainly loved to document everything in each city-state. Arosia as the government’s nerve center, was a prime example of tracking the daily goings-on.

“Oh, it wasn’t the city council’s records. The guild wanted to rank each member on a set of standards. How much notoriety you instilled being one of them. That’s how I know I was one of the best. Really, though, I’d grown up here and traveling all over Trelvania, or the whole of Alistraysia, wasn’t something I wanted to do then. Then I happened upon a bar one night, while locating a thief who stole a scrying bowl that looked into the bedroom of a...” Saph waved her hands. “That doesn’t matter. The tavern was full of people. People with weird scars, a missing ear, normal people, and people who fidgeted too much. There was laughter and music and, in the corner, an animated game of Crossroads George.”

Saph’s paused, the unspoken acknowledgment Divine already knew the rest hung as silence between them. The woman wove her black hair back into a braid as she rotated toward Divine and looked her in the eye. “What I’m trying to say is...how I was born has shaped who I’ve become. All the actions I took were influenced by the shape of my hand. And for that to be taken away...it’s like it’s erased that history. It invalidates my struggles, admits that something was wrong with me, even changes what makes me who I am.”

“Saph, I didn’t realize.” Divine stretched a hand out tentatively, looking for an appropriate place to rest her hand but pulled back.

Saph nodded. “How could you have? We haven’t gotten that far in our exchange of personal history.”

Tentatively, Divine brushed her magic and opened herself to feel Saph's emotion. There was still hurt there, but anger was merely a coiled shadow. Given the wrong response, it could spring up again.

Divine swallowed. "Still, I am sorry. I never meant to reshape you. I didn't want you to die. Your wounds were..." Divine blinked back tears.

"And the wounds of my past were not buried as deep as I had believed. My response to you was spurred by that soreness. You healed me and for that I am thankful. I do have one request, however."

Divine nodded vehemently, leaning closer. "Anything."

"Return my hand to how it was. Well, before it was bitten off, I mean."

Divine's heart caught in her throat like a bite of an apple too large to swallow. "I...I don't know how I did it. But I can try." Divine held out her hand and with the briefest of hesitation, Saph placed her hand palm to palm.

Divine reached into her well, poking as she searched for the furthest reaches of the dark. Despite her attempt at a calm approach into her magic, she foundered like she was flailing in water. What she was attempting to do was not healing and without any knowledge of the power of alteration, her mind snapped up like a bucket on a string, empty.

"I don't know what I'm doing." She shook her head. "But I'll keep trying. Just...I don't want to make it worse so maybe I should practice on something that's not flesh and bones."

Saph nodded once then pushed hands against her knees and stood up. "I guess we better get walking. There should be a few farmhouses along the road. Maybe we can

see if they would be willing to part with food to get us back to the city.”

Divine saw Saph’s disappointment in the way she turned her back to her, gazing back toward the overgrown road.

“You don’t think we could make it to our destination?”

“I don’t like the idea of relying solely on my axe to provide the food we need. Unless you can conjure up some bread and tomatoes?”

Divine’s shoulders sagged. “That would be the Harvesters of the Goddess of Fields.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Saph stepped forward, leaving Divine to follow. Groaning at her stiff legs, Divine rose and trailed Saph at a distance.

* * *

They didn’t have to wander down the dusty road far before a house appeared. It stood on the horizon behind a lake, which wafted a morning haze like steam from a cooking pan.

The fields were mostly picked bare and, where larger vegetable vines and plants would have been, grew sparse weeds. Divine couldn’t see anyone tending the fields, which wasn’t surprising given the last harvest was likely past. She wondered if they suffered from the black spot and motioned for Saph to veer with her into the plowed rows.

The air smelled of dewy earth and underneath it, she detected the faint scent of rose from her talisman. Nothing like it had been earlier this morning. Divine found a

clump of pumpkins rotting black, their tops caved in. A few leaves on the vines had black spots. Across the field several other clumps appeared the same, but not widespread. Divine shrugged and led them to the lane to the dwelling.

The two women approached the farmhouse, its winding path lined with trees beginning to show burgundy and yellow amidst their green leaves. Saph knocked at the door a step above the ground while Divine stood behind her, letting her take lead.

They waited several minutes, whispering about whether to try a back door or if it was too early, then as Saph raised her fist to rap again, the door squeaked open.

Divine couldn't see who opened the door, but a distant male voice came from within, inquiring who was at the door this early.

"Just a traveler, love." Another voice, closer and just behind the door, made Divine's body rigid. Her breath caught in her throat. Though Saph blocked her view, she knew brown hair was tucked behind an ear, revealing the shortened layer at her scalp.

The familiar voice spoke from the door, "What can I do for you?"

"It's a long story," Saph replied with a dramatic sigh, "but in short we are without our supplies and our horses, and we're hoping you have a spare meal or two to help us get back to the city to try this misadventure again."

"Us?" The voice rose.

Divine found she could breathe again, the scent of sweet velvety petals filling her nose. She pinched her nose against a sneeze before stepping to the side, coming out from behind Saph.

"Hello, Madeline," Divine's voice dripped with ice.

The woman's thin brows raised, sculpted nearly into oblivion over honey eyes. "What are you doing here? You should be further—" she glanced toward the road.

"Ah, so this is Madeline." Saph leaned forward, nearly poking her head through the door's threshold. "Tell me, should I prepare myself for a surprise or do you do all of your betrayings at night?"

Divine could see Madeline's defenses go up, as her sun-kissed face moved from shocked wide-eyes into a furrowed brow. Now that she knew what Madeline was, Divine prepared herself for the attempts at persuasion and mind-muddling—characteristics of the agents of the Goddess of Condemnation. She touched her well and took a drink, letting the cool water wash over herself like a protective glaze, hoping to have anything villainous bounce off. She stretched the thin layer over Saph as well, the usual garden perfume delicately accenting the air she breathed.

Madeline looked down her thin nose from the higher step of the house. "We have plenty of stores from the harvest. We could part with them easily enough." She paused, flicking her charcoaled eyes to Divine then back to Saph. "You could even take enough to reach your destination."

Saph's eyebrow raised. "And what would we owe for this...convenience?"

Divine clutched her talisman before she realized what she was doing. Madeline glanced at her then rolled her eyes as if to say it was worth nothing to her. Her brown hair shifted as a breeze blew across the threshold, revealing the twin line and downward V etched into the short hair behind her ear.

"Let's say the equivalent meals at your tavern, plus drinks, when we want them."

Divine blinked. The trade seemed reasonable, though more in the favor of the two

women questors as they'd be getting their food immediately. Did Saph already tell Madeline she owned a tavern? Divine wracked her brain to find what she was missing, what angle was being played by the agent of Condemnation. She couldn't put her finger on it. Every time she thought her mind was focusing, the thought slipped away. What had she been thinking about?

The proposal accepted, Madeline disappeared into the house and returned with two sacks filled with potatoes, oats, other longer lasting legumes and root vegetables. Before long, they pulled and bumped their way down the lane.

"You didn't tell me she was a farmer," Saph commented, back on the road.

Divine shrugged. "I didn't know she was. Not that anything she ever told me was true, but something seems...off about this. Like she knew we'd be on the road."

Divine looked back at the wagon behind them, trying to remember what they had agreed upon for the fair use of a cart usually pulled by horses. And had they really not spoken to Madeline any more than what her memory was telling her? There were so many things she wanted to say to the woman who had stolen her heart for spite.

Saph's voice interrupted her thoughts. "It was suspect that she assumed she had enough supplies to get us where we are going. We didn't tell her...did we?"

Divine groaned. "I think we've been muddled. I tried to place a ward over us, but I must have stretched it too thin and some of her magic seeped through. We'll likely remember more in the next few days."

"Hopefully we'll solve the mystery of the chest and have our reward and nothing of this will really matter."

"Hopefully." Divine brushed her nose, though she wasn't filled with much hope. And

pulling a supply cart by their own muscles was not on the original list of adventures.

She looked behind them. The road had turned slightly, and the horizon was a line of colorful trees. Soundlessly, dark brown specks rose from the branches and gathered like a cloud above the foliage of yellows and reds. Divine always forgot the natural magic they seemed to possess this time of year. The flock undulated—a murmuration—connected by that unknown force that birds had like an invisible string between them, dancing as if they were a ribbon whipping on the wind or caught in a rippling current of a river, waving for help as they surged closer to a precipice.

CHAPTER NINE

“Dammit!” Divine hissed, dropping the stone—now in two pieces—to the boards between her legs with a thud.

“I take it that attempt didn’t go as planned either?”

“No.”

Divine leaned back against the seat boards, turning her chin to the sky. Grey clouds floated mistily above, as if the world had slowed down even though urgency tickled Divine’s muscles. Rain was in the air; she felt pressure in her forehead.

This was her third attempt at reshaping two separate rocks to be conjoined like the letter V. Either she fused them incorrectly or failed to fuse them at all, while the magic singed her fingers. The latter was this last attempt. At least they had found the horses again, gnawing on a clump of yellowing grass further toward their destination, which meant they could ride in the cart rather than pulling it.

“If I might make a suggestion.” Saph bent from her hip, leaning toward Divine without taking her eye from the horses. “I’m no healer but perhaps you should try material that is more...bone-like.”

While her tone was teasing, it still stung like when Divine and other Soulshields were reminded that their wells were shallow; that the Swords of the Goddess were better suited for the task. That she didn’t know what she was doing.

“Ah, there’s the beauty.”

Divine straightened at Saph’s statement, looking ahead once more. Forward and off to the left, deep green and reflecting stabbing rays at them from the sun, sat a crescent-shaped lake. It reminded her of her Goddess’s symbol, though this one was in the opposite direction: a waning moon.

“You think that’s the lake on the map?” Divine nodded toward the reed-encircled water.

“Only lake I know of that’s this shape. If there’s one elsewhere, it’s too far away to be worth my trouble; though traveling with you would certainly be a welcomed diversion.”

Divine tucked her hair behind her ear. She’d thought the sparks flying between them had been all but snuffed out, at least on Saph’s end. Finding out Saph was still attracted to her lifted a weight that had settled unnoticed on Divine’s shoulders. Perhaps Saph’s affections did not depend on Divine’s success at finger fusion.

The cart turned off the main road onto an even more disused lane, keeping the lake to their left. Divine could barely spot the worn tracks in the soil beneath the grass and wandering weeds. Now closer, she could discern the green tint of the water was from an abundance of long green hydrilla whorls. The worn tracks led into a copse of trees painted in burgundy, the first entry point into a larger wood. She sniffed the air once, then again deeper.

Saph raised her eyebrow. “Do I need another spinetooth leaf?”

“No! It’s nothing like that. I’m just smelling my talisman. It’s a good result.”

“I’ll trust you on that. Could you imagine if others could smell talismans and you got

stuck with the one that smelled like wulf shit?”

Divine chuckled. “I’ve started to wonder if I can...sense danger? It sounds stupid saying it out loud.”

“Does your talisman smell differently at times?”

“That’s what I’m not sure about. When the ursavara attacked, the scent was intense. But it could just be normal for reconnecting to it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t dismiss messages from the universe. She’s always communicating, but we don’t always listen. We’ve forgotten how.”

The cover of the branches made the air chillier as they pressed forward, and Divine was glad for the warmth of her long jacket.

A few minutes into the wood, they encountered a fallen tree in their path and stopped while Saph chopped the trunk with her axe into manageable pieces. Divine snagged an armful of branches and put them into the back of the wagon.

“Planning our evening fire?” Saph asked, back in the wagon, clicking her tongue at the horses to send them on a steady pace.

“Yes, but mainly wanting to have a supply. What you said earlier made sense. I think wood might be better for mimicking bone.”

“Glad to be of some use in the efforts to get my hand back.”

Guilt grabbed Divine’s chest before receding in the wake of Saph’s smile.

They drove on, the trees creaking and the leaves rustling in a symphony of minute

sounds. The pair chatted about the scenery rather than anything of consequence. Saph thought, based on the crude map, they would reach a clearing by early evening.

“Is there a deity of creatures in your pantheon?” Saph asked. “If so, I’d like to offer some prayers to not have another encounter with ursavara or the like.”

“That would be prudent, but no.”

“A shame. Maybe there’s one in a far west undiscovered land who just hasn’t come by to build their tower.”

Divine scoffed. “Deities don’t just show up all of a sudden.”

“They came from somewhere. Though I doubt it’s that continent in the sky.” Saph tilted her head back as if she could spy the landmass through the trees. “I have half a mind to go on one last quest after this. Do what no one has ever done. Set foot on Zenith. I’ll get a really long rope, shoot it from a Kellas canon, and then find one of those four-armed creatures of myth—boradain, that’s the name—and have it use its multi-arms to pull me up in a basket.”

Divine didn’t have the heart to remind her that boradains wouldn’t understand her request as they were creatures without sentience, and since Saph’s expression radiated mischievous excitement. She looked like a pirate in search of treasure with her gleaming green eye and her purple eye patch.

“The healers. The ones who couldn’t fix your eye. Is that why you’ve never chosen a deity? Not that you have to pick a Goddess or God to worship.”

The silence lingered long enough that Divine thought Saph wouldn’t respond. “My parents followed the old ways—”

“The old ways?” Listhinci had used that term as well.

“Before there were Gods and Goddesses, there was one force in all of Alistraysia. So no, we never attended any of the temples. But time taught me that there was no benevolent force, or Goddess, out there. Not with the way I was treated, by strangers and family alike. No disembodied ethereal voices, no apparitions of immortal bodies came to me.”

“But the magic,” Divine began, her mind juggling multiple counter arguments like a minstrel learning to sing while playing.

“Oh, I don’t deny there’s some sort of magical energy out there. But why not from just being ? Why must its source be something requiring worship?”

“I guess...I guess my experiences with my well had always been proof enough. Not everyone can access magic and—”

“Not everyone can wield an axe or write a song. But those are not attributed to religious devotion.”

Divine stiffened as if she could buffet Saph’s words by making her muscles into armor. But rust had already begun to form. If Divine was honest with herself, it had happened even before she met the Goodly One and the Iguion. It made no sense that human-adjacents would be abandoned by the pantheon, to exist as forever unblessed. But if magic could be used by anyone, did that mean Divine had other powers, but had somehow gotten locked in to only having a restorative type? Did it have to do with the talismans? Divine’s hand slipped into her pocket and she squeezed the smooth gift from Listhinci. There was a connection between what the Goodly One and the Iguion had told her but she didn’t know enough.

“Why do they live on a floating continent anyway?” Saph asked, seeming oblivious

to the war raging in Divine's thoughts.

"They only do sometimes. When they want to be close to us or have a task. Most of the time they are in a place beyond our world. The afterlife where souls go."

"The domain of your Goddess. Nice of her to let everyone in."

"It's more of a place for all of them, but only she has the power to send souls back. But you don't believe any of this so nevermind."

"Hm." The tavern owner exhaled before her gentle hand rested on Divine's knee. "Don't let my doubt distress you." Saph's hand caressed her leg at the knee. "I hide it away most of the time. Those who believe in the old ways are few. But something about you turns my words into a confessional, when I would much rather engage in actions that cause...pleasure."

Saph's hand had worked its way up Divine's thigh and her fingers trailed the inside of her leg. Divine's stomach tingled as a similar response grew between her legs. But Divine couldn't shake the thought Saph didn't believe Divine's magic came from her Goddess. And maybe Divine didn't either. It would invalidate half of Divine's life.

She squeezed her hands together. "I think I need to stretch my legs."

A grin grew on Saph's lips. "I can help with that."

Divine twisted a ring on her finger. "I think I need a little walk."

The amusement faded from Saph's face, and she nodded. "Sure. The horses could use a snack." Then the grin was back, large and teasing. "Don't stray too far. I don't think I can expose my breasts at the trees to save you if you run into trouble."

Divine couldn't suppress her laugh and shook her head, remembering the Soulsage while they were retrieving her talisman. As she climbed out of the wagon, her thoughts turned to the heated kisses shared in the alleyway after, and a shiver coursed through her body, recalling how that event ended with Divine in Saph's bed.

Forcing herself to not turn around for a repeat, Divine stepped off the path and into the trees. She let her feet carry her, though she didn't know where she was going, crunching through leaves as she worked to calm her mind. What Saph said creased her brow as she examined why she believed what she did.

With a huff, Divine kicked a fallen branch.

"I don't know anymore," she grumbled, then flipped the tail end of her coat out of the way so she sat on her pants beneath a tree.

Two tree roots sprawled on either side of her like knobby knees, the white bark shedding from the blanched trunk behind her. She thought it might be diseased, as this type of tree usually had smooth bark. Divine picked up a stick and began snapping smaller pieces from it, though they crumbled more than popped. Focusing on one problem could calm her mind.

She was no closer to understanding how she'd restored Saph's hand, nor how to put it back to the way it was. Something extraordinary had happened at her behest.

She let her head fall back with a dull thud to the trunk behind her. Nothing to do but breathe, like the early days of exploring her magic. Divine took a slow breath through her nose, the scent of earth and leaves attached to the cool air around her with a hint of sweetness beneath it. The rosy scent of her magic. She wasn't using it at the moment.

Divine looked around, remembering the teeth and claws on the ursavara and the

choking scent of her magic that had woken her. She held her breath as she searched the trees and branches for anything warning of imminent disaster. Nothing stirred, just the natural swaying of branches and the twitching of leaves. She relaxed against the tree. Maybe she was too hopeful, thinking her well had grown. The overpowering scent of rose during the ursavara fight might have been a coincidence and not some newfound harbinger of impending danger.

Focusing her flutterwing trails of thoughts, she picked up the smaller pieces of the white branch she'd snapped near her boot heels. She held two pieces together an arm's length away and narrowed her eyes.

She dipped into her well, finding it cool and calm, and like scooping her hand, she brought back a palm full of power. She imagined pouring it over the sticks like melted wax, hot with magical energy. The sticks melded, blurring at first, like haze on the horizon of a boiling summer day, then became one thicker stick. Divine let the corner of her mouth tug up in satisfaction. At least she could do a simple melding. If a fractured bone needed fusing, she might be able to do it without a companion healer now.

The musk of a fresh bloom filled her senses, the fruity undertone barely detectable, but undeniably the perfume of her magic. Divine's chest swelled, as if the air was feeding her more power. She snatched up the remaining sticks from the ground and held them in her left hand, a broken bundle. Again, she dipped into her well, but this time she tried to meld two sticks of the group. A lump of wood formed in her fist before it dropped from her hand to the ground, disappearing into the leaves.

She expelled her breath in a puff, but searched the ground, quickly finding a branch with several lateral branches attached. Instead of breaking them off, she held the stick before her as it was and tried to remember how she had remade Saph's hand in the first place. Divine searched her memory and the unseen weight in her chest for the exact thoughts and emotions of that moment. There was helplessness; a complete

emptiness that there was nothing that could stop the inevitable, like with her mother. There was fear; fear that Saph would die—the same fear she had in the final days of her mother’s illness. And a fear of losing how she felt around Saph.

But there was a caring strength, knowing something must be done to help her. Divine had known she needed to act. She pushed herself further without planning or questioning and she did it because she cared for Saph. She would have done the same for her mother if she had been able to. In that moment, Divine knew her mother wouldn’t have blamed her. Why had she blamed herself all these years?

Divine focused on the pale branch and thought of Saph; of the expressions dancing from her eyebrows to her lips, her whip-crack sarcasm and wit, the muscles in her arms as she chopped wood, the curve of her breasts and the weight of her hips pressed against Divine’s, the taste of her mouth.

Divine plunged into the depths of her well, inhaling the magic until her lungs might burst. The depth seemed infinite. She willed a lateral branch V-ing on the right side to bend toward one another and they responded. As they neared, Divine no longer looked at white wood but the white bones of a hand. Golden threads spilled out like spiderwebs and lashed the two bones together, disappearing into its pores. Divine blinked and the bones turned back to a branch. The former V now a thicker single offshoot.

Grinning, the Soulshield pushed herself from the ground, dusting bits of leaves and earth from her pants. Magic coursed through her veins, hot and urgent. The world smelled like a garden, and she swayed under the invisible blanket of blooms before regaining her balance.

As Divine grew closer to the road, she noticed an intermittent thudding sound. Stepping around a tree, she saw the source. Saph raised her arms over her head, dropping the double blade behind her head, then launched her axe. It spun through the

air, blades over handle, before wedging into the trunk of a fallen tree. Divine took careful steps as Saph pulled one of the four-inch blades of her weapon free.

After the next launch, Divine leaned her shoulder against the smooth white bark of the nearest tree, crossing her arms and legs in her best nonchalant pose. The tree was one of the few nearby that wasn't crumbling or half on the forest floor.

"Hey, beautiful."

Saph spun around, her eye wide before relaxing into a smile.

"Hey yourself," she said, stepping toward Divine. "Look, I'm sorry about earlier. All that stuff about Gods and Goddesses. I didn't mean—"

Divine waved her hand like brushing moths away. "Never mind. I think I've figured out how to get your hand the way it used to be."

"I know." Saph held up her hand, with the long and ring fingers fused.

Divine's mouth dropped open. The bones she had seen were real.

Divine picked Saph up at the waist and twirled her around. "I did it!" she laughed.

"Yes, but how? You weren't anywhere near me."

"I think the boundaries of my well are imagined," Divine said, setting Saph back on her feet. She grasped Saph's hand, weaving their fingers together. "I had a revelation."

Saph tilted her head. "That sounds ominous. Did you eat one of those tree mushrooms and I should watch out for you as you suffer hallucinations?"

“I’ve been so tied into the past of what could have happened with my mother that I haven’t given permission to myself to make things happen now.” She kissed the back of Saph’s hand. “In situations right in front of me.” She kissed Saph’s wrist.

Saph brushed a strand of Divine’s hair behind her ear. “Give me more of this Divine.”

“I let go of imagined limits and focused on what I wanted.”

“I like it when you’re spontaneous...and wanting.”

Growling, Divine grabbed Saph’s waist and rotated her so that her back pressed into the smooth white tree trunk. She followed with a kiss pressed urgently to Saph’s lips. As their lips parted, Divine whispered against Saph’s mouth, “I want you.”

Divine leaned forward for another kiss but Saph’s hands pressed gently against her shoulders.

Divine scanned Saph’s face, holding her breath.

“I’m sorry about my reaction to my hand. You didn’t deserve the guilt I put on you.”

“You had every right.” Divine kissed Saph’s neck.

“But the phrasing I used when you healed me and talking like that about your faith. I could have expressed how I felt about my hand, and my opinions, in a way that informed you but also respected you.”

Divine trailed kisses down Saph’s shoulder before responding. “Your questions made me think. If some of it doesn’t make sense, then maybe I can make my own sense of it. All I know is that you filled my mind and I did it. You’re all I want to think about

now.”

Saph moaned as Divine bit her earlobe.

“I still feel bad about how I approached it. Let me make it up to you.”

“What did you have in mind?” Divine grinned.

Saph spun her around to where Divine’s back was now pressed against the tree and planted kisses from her neck to her chin, stopping a breath away from her lips, mouth open and tempting.

“I have ideas,” she intoned, her eye locked on Divine as her hands found the clasp at the front of her pants. Slowly she untied the strings, the vibration along the path through the eyelets teasingly coursing through Divine’s skin. Saph nipped Divine’s bottom lip between her teeth as one hand slid inside the front of her pants and the other slid up the side of her shirt.

Divine moaned, taking Saph’s top lip between hers. They traded warm lips and tongues as Saph’s hand cupped Divine’s breast, squeezing in rhythm with the light finger brushes between her legs.

Divine’s fingers entwined in Saph’s black hair, but as she moved her hands slowly down toward Saph’s breasts, the woman caught her hands in her own and shoved them over Divine’s head against the bark.

“Can’t I,” Divine whispered as their mouths parted for breath, “touch you as well?”

“Uh uh,” Saph breathed her hot decline against Divine’s neck as she leaned in to bite her earlobe, her tongue playing with the rose stud there. “Later, darling. I want to please you until you can no longer stand.”

Divine moaned, tilting her chin up. She took a trembling breath, the familiar scent of sweet wood tickling her nose from Saph's hair. The other woman trailed her hands down the length of Divine's body as she knelt in front of her. Divine trembled with want. Saph slowly tugged her pants down to her ankles, followed by her undergarment. Her hands free again, Divine ran them through Saph's hair, grasping strands tighter as another shudder coursed through her body at the movement of Saph's tongue between her legs.

"What if someone sees?" Divine whispered trying not to moan too loudly.

Saph's tongue paused and Divine nearly shouted to keep going.

"The road hasn't been used in years. And if someone does come, let them watch. The world needs more pleasure."

Saph's tongue again, warm and wet, mixed with her own growing wetness and Divine could only breathe heavily in response. Her head rolled back as more moans escaped her lips and she spread her legs wider, Saph's hands squeezing her buttocks.

Through the trees above, she saw sluggish clouds caressing the sky. Birds darted overhead as Divine's body bucked against the bark and she cried out to her Goddess.

* * *

Still levitating above the trees though they rode in the wagon, Divine glanced sideways at Saph's profile as they passed into a clearing before the next forest, amazed such a beautiful woman found her interesting.

"Stare all you want, darling. It gives me power," Saph said, still facing forward.

Divine twisted her moon stone ring and looked down at the scrawled map from the

unknown magic user. “The map looks like our destination is the other side of the trees. Not much further.”

“I agree. We probably have a few hours of light left.” She jutted her chin at the horizon where the golden clouds hung. “Between our morning walk, cutting fallen trees, and spreading limbs,” Saph said as her hand slid up Divine’s thigh, “we made terrible forward progress.”

“At least we have supplies. We don’t have to hurry back.” Divine cringed at the desperation in her voice and stared at the cracker she was spreading jam on with a knife.

Saph rotated and placed a hand on her cheek. “Don’t worry, love. Just because we complete our quest doesn’t mean we have to go our separate ways. Unless...unless your temple needs you back?”

Divine squeezed Saph’s hand. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going. And with being on review with the temple, I don’t know if they would have just given my habit space to someone else. I don’t know how to prove I wasn’t hiding Madeline.”

“Do you have any other family waiting for you?”

Divine crunched the cracker in her mouth. “My father left shortly after my mother returned from Solhavn, when her illness turned worse. Apparently, I have a half-sister. I heard my mother crying over a letter from him. Never met her. And I don’t care if I never see him again.”

Divine nearly stabbed the map with the jam knife, then placed the map into her pocket out of harm’s way.

Several moments of silence passed and they drew to the forest's edge; a line cascading weeping branches bent under an invisible weight, like rain frozen in time. Saph slowed the cart beneath a canopy of thin, dangling branches. When the wagon stopped, she faced Divine.

“What is it with families, hm? You'd think unconditional love and support would naturally be part of their nature. Well, you can stay with me if I haven't made that clear.”

Divine sneezed into her elbow. “You have an extra room?” She glanced above at the still-green leaves, hunting for the late apple blossom pollen her nose detected.

“My bed can fit two, darling. I thought date number four back there would make that evident. Unless you prefer Sylus. He won't mind either.”

Divine laughed. She inhaled the scent of honeyed flowers, like the pink-striped rose climbing the trellis near the door of her childhood home, and coughed. She was about to ask for a poetry recitation when there was a pressure on her ribcage, her feet left the wagon, and she was flying. She gasped, wrestling her hand against...she frowned down at her stomach. Boughs laden with yellow wrapped around her torso. They pressed her back against something solid.

Divine heard Saph shout as she pried her hands against the unyielding bark.

“You felled my brother,” it grated, its voice lined with the sound of rustling leaves as it reverberated through Divine's body. “Now I will fell you.”

Divine squirmed, wriggling in the tree's grasp, which tightened, digging into her ribs.

“This is a sacred grove. How dare you enter!”

“We didn’t know,” Divine grunted, pushing against the branches. Several yellow leaves dropped, floating below, dotted with a few dark spots or holes. “And we didn’t fell your brother.”

“You chopped his remains to splinters!”

Divine’s tipped her head to the side. “You mean the tree across the path? It was already there! We needed to pass and cleared our path. If that was your brother, I am sorry. His soul would have already been released.”

“We can’t be blamed for his death, you bumbling oak,” Saph grunted, a soft thud accenting her proclamation.

“By the color of the leaves, I think it’s more of a poplar.”

“Darling, this is not the time to boast your plant knowledge.”

“Knowledge...danger on the map. Who said that?” Divine mumbled, shaking her head as a thought fluttered just out of reach. “There was red text on the map here...” Divine muttered.

She shifted one arm and pushed it down between the branches and against her side. She was just able to reach her pocket and withdrew the map. It was even more crinkled, but she placed it on the branches like they were a table. The reflection of leaves in her spreading knife made her think about the artist in the bazaar.

Divine’s breath hitched. She placed the knife on its edge, just like the mirror the artist had used. She yelped as the e’s righted themselves in the reflection. “R-E-D-L-E...is Elder, backward!” Divine rotated her shoulders in the tree’s grasp, searching for a face but finding gnarled branches and bark. “Who is your God?” she called, tilting her head back.

A thud below made Divine lean forward. She saw Saph raise her axe in a wide grip and swing it horizontally, followed by another thud. The tree roared.

“Don’t hurt it! It’s a servant of one of the Tranquil Gods.”

“Tranquil?” Saph’s voice cried. “Doesn’t seem very tranquil to me!”

“They’re supposed to be guardians or scouts.” Either something was wrong with this one, or Divine was drawing the wrong conclusion from the memories of ornately illustrated pages.

The ground boomed and the tree shuddered. Divine swiveled and saw Saph rolling out of the way, a large branch falling as the tree moved the opposite direction. Straight out of myth, the Elder continued to rumble variations of its previous accusations.

“Look out!” Divine called.

A root shot out of the ground and snaked toward Saph. The woman dove over the growth and rolled out of the way. She spun and hacked her axe at it like chopping firewood.

“Look for a glowing purple gem! It should be its heart. You can hit it and stun it.”

“How do you know this?” Saph called as she ran out of sight beneath the tree.

“It’s the tree’s soul, sort of. Remember that story I told you of Elders? From the bestiary—” The branches tightened around Divine’s waist, squelching her breath out.

“Just look for it!”

As she reached into her magic well, Divine wondered how much stronger the tree’s

grip would be without her Goddess's protective charm. Though she couldn't see Saph, Divine focused on creating a shield against the Elder's swinging boughs, like with the ursavara. Divine envisioned Saph's body, then a hazy barrier rising like a miniature waterfall.

The magic flowed from her well and she hoped her first attempt at a barrier from a distance wasn't a failure. But the air smelled as if her head lay on a pillow of roses, and she straightened her shoulders; she could do anything.

"There's a black one!" Saph called.

Divine frowned. "Black?"

"And I'm hitting it, but this walking paper ream isn't taking the hint."

Divine wracked her brain. If one of the Tranquil Gods helped create this, how could they stop it? Her mind blanked on potential deities and she shook her head. "See if you can cut it out."

Divine flared her nostrils as if the extra space could grant her a fuller breath, and dipped into her well again. The faint sound of steel on wood filtered through the leaves. As the sound ceased, so did the Elder's movements. Divine pushed herself out of the wooded grasp and climbed down.

Saph stared at her hands where rested a fist-sized multi-faceted onyx. "What is this?"

"I think another Goddess or God asked the Goddess of Souls to grant sentience to this tree." Divine cupped her hands before her and Saph placed the gem in her hands. "But flora souls aren't really souls. Not like yours or mine..." her words trailed off as she thought about what her temple said about human-adjacents, and how agitated the First Servant of Souls had been at Divine healing that plant. "But if I can heal plants,

they must be—”

“All Souls. Bound in Old Magic,” Saph finished. Then to Divine’s stare added, “Everything has a soul. Even a tree or a bird. All Souls. And trees have ancient souls from living for so long. So my parents always said. I always thought it was just folklore of our belief system.”

Divine nodded. “Remember the water drop and the watering can story? It’s all real. It must, it must”—Divine stumbled, piecing Saph’s knowledge into the framework of the bestiary stories— “grant the tree consciousness borne of the Old Magic within. It became an Elder. Here I thought they were just morality lessons.”

Turning the dark gem over in her hands, she pressed it between her palms and closed her eyes. Like healing a bramble slice in a leg, Divine focused on pouring her well’s magic over the gem. When her eyes opened, she rested her gaze on its purple facets and beamed.

Together, the women returned the jewel to the knot in the tree’s side. The branches quivered and the leaves rustled, holes mending and spots disappearing on the waxy yellow foliage.

The Elder groaned. “My apologies, rootless ones.” The vibrations of its voice were gone, but the rustling seemed to carry the words, surrounding them. “Thank you for treating my dark spots.” Leaves brushed the top of Divine’s head and she ducked. “The scent of a Goddess is on you. Who do you serve?”

“I serve the Goddess of Souls,” Divine answered, scratching the part in her curls. Could he smell the roses, too?

“She and my master made a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” Saph asked.

“None were to pass through the Willow Way. Though someone tried.” Its branches sagged like the willows behind it. “Or many. I do not remember. My brother and I,” the tree said as his leaves shuddered, “turned away many wanderers. But these, they cut my brother.” The tree uttered sounds like branches tapping and bowing against each other, “And I pursued them but did not find them. I don’t think.”

A muddled memory. Saph and Divine exchanged looks, the tavern owner tapping her nose bauble.

“Remind me not to ask you to remember what wines I need to order from Nelithor. Do you recollect why you were trying to kill us?”

“Yes...yes, I was still looking for them when you came. I mistook you.”

“Hey, no worries, Leafy. Sorry about your brother. Stay safe.” Saph walked toward the wagon but Divine lingered.

“Who is your creator?” Divine asked.

“The Goddess of Standing Water I believe is the name she chose. Her lake is an eye to Willow Way for your Goddess.”

The crescent shaped lake. Why would either deity need to keep watch on this place?

“Can you remember anything about the people who were here before? The ones who...hurt your brother?”

The leaves rustled on an intangible gust. “One was a human female. The other”—the tree seemed to reflect—“had a trace of the God of Storms. But it is all like clouds in

the sky.”

“Well, I have a guess who the female was. And if I’m right, she muddled your memory. More should return in time. But I don’t know why she would be out here. Do you know how your soul gem became corrupted?”

“It is difficult to say. A rage grew within me slowly over the seasons. I do not remember when my reasoning ceased. Perhaps it is natural for one who has been enchanted since the grove was shoots.”

“We are seeking a house on the other side. Do you think we could...” Divine swept her hand toward the willows.

“The clearing beyond the grove is what I protect. Why do you seek it?”

Divine told him about the quest in the chest and the maps.

“I don’t remember a human going into the house. But perhaps it is part of this muddling. I owe you, rootless-one. You may pass. And if you have need of me...”

Divine nodded. “I know where to find you. Do you have a name?”

“I like what your other one called me. Leafy.”

CHAPTER TEN

Brilliant yellow lit the edge of the horizon as they exited the grove into a clearing. The grass grew tall at the tree line, with fading yellow autumn flowers that were more dried husks than blossoms. The rest of the vegetation looked burned, like the Goddesses and Gods had sat around a massive fire made from their followers' prayers.

"What in the piratical nonsense?" Saph muttered, slowing the wagon.

Divine followed her gaze. "It looks like it will fall down any minute," she whispered.

In the middle of the blackened shoots leaned a small house. It appeared to be made from a ship flipped upside down, wooden hull pointed to the sky, over a regular house, warped and leaning with age. An arched doorway was the sole entrance. Windows existed as port holes on what was the top layer, but multiple wood planks nailed the lower-level windows shut. The sounds of birds had quieted.

Divine leaned closer to Saph. "This place is creepy. Maybe we should wait until morning."

Saph wrapped an arm around Divine's shoulders. "While I'd love to sit here and comfort you, let's release the magic user, Trickster or other servant, and get our reward. We'll be done before the sun finishes setting."

"What if it's a trap?" Hundreds of scenarios played out in Divine's mind. None ended cheerfully. This was a bad idea. Especially if Madeline had been here. Something was

missing from the story.

“You’ve got your magic. And if you recall, I’m a trained mercenary.” Saph swung her legs over the side and dropped out of the cart, the twin edges of her axe flashing with sunset hues. “Now, the crystals.”

Glancing at the house, Divine rummaged in the pack at her feet and withdrew the pouch with three crystals. She jumped down, her boots crunching on the dried vegetation, then lifted one foot, expecting to find crumbled bits, but the growths remained. She bent down and noted the ash-like dusting of the soil. The fire-blackened appearance of the plants was numerous blackspots. She thought of Leafy’s appearance before she healed him and joined Saph at the back of the wagon bed.

They laid the small map across the dusty floorboards.

“Should we tell the letter-writer we’re here?” Divine surveyed the house again. With no open windows, it seemed abandoned. The carpet of black around the structure was equally unwelcoming.

“I doubt they want to tell their tale through the keyhole. Let’s introduce ourselves when we can give the good news.”

Divine nodded, wondering how the magic user had managed to get crystals, a chest, and maps out while remaining trapped inside.

“The first spot is a tree...there.” Divine pointed to tree covered in vegetation. “Let’s be careful. This whole quest is starting to feel off.”

The crystals clinked into her hand and the pair walked to the first location. Night-blooming snow pinwheels vined up the remains of a tree trunk, their fragrant blossoms filling the air with a rich scent drizzled with tang. Divine searched for a

crystal-sized nook in the length of trunk, but everything seemed ordinarily tree-like, though the leaves were so blotched with black spots that barely any green remained.

“The black spot has infected even out here. I thought it was only the crops,” Saph mused.

“The whole ground is black. It’s not contagious to people, is it?” Divine brushed her nose then settled on placing the yellow ice-cube-shaped crystal at the base of the tree.

“I haven’t heard of it doing anything more than damaging our food sources.”

The pair followed the map to the next location, a well overgrown with climbing roses so uncultivated the thorny stems crisscrossed over the stone structure like a woven basket. Its glossy leaves were pitted with holes.

“Whatever this black spot is, it’s worse here,” Divine reflected, “the grass is dead and this ash is just...weird.”

Divine saw her mother’s garden, festooned with blooms that climbed along fences, bushes stretching toward her ankles and elbows on the meandering paths. Her mother—a large brimmed hat casting her face in shadow—clipped the stems with decided snips to shape the bushes for the next growing season. She smiled, looking up as Divine plucked a sunset orange blossom to take inside.

Divine blinked quickly, the blue crystal placed, and rose from the fount. The translucent crystal’s location was near a wheelbarrow. None of the sites seemed interesting enough to be magical, but they created a triangle around the house in their placement.

“I guess that’s fulfilled.” Saph brushed her hands together like brushing off dirt. “I half expected a sound or flash at the completion. One way to find out if we did the

ritual correctly.”

The cool air in the clearing smelled like a perfume shop. Divine tilted her nose in the air. “Do you smell that?”

Saph lifted her chin. “Apple blossoms and...snow pinwheels. I haven’t been out of the city at dark for some time, and I forgot what autumn nights can smell like...other than the scent of nightly pleasures.”

Divine’s shoulders relaxed. At least she wasn’t alone in noticing the stronger scent of the flowers.

“Let’s try the door,” Divine suggested.

They approached the boat-shaped house and its blackened threshold. The oval door, the wood burnt along the edges, gave no hint as to what, if anything, was inside. Divine hung back, letting Saph approach.

The tavern owner knocked. Silence answered and after several breaths Saph tried the door handle.

“Locked,” Saph grumbled.

Divine took a step back, eyeing the building. “I think I have to connect the crystals.”

“With magic?” Saph looked down at the map shaking her head. “I don’t see anything about connecting them.”

“It’s odd.” Divine looked to the roof where a familiar rainbow bird perched on the bottom of the upturned boat. In fact, she’d seen that type of bird several times since arriving at Iramont. “I just have a feeling.”

Saph shrugged and Divine retraced their steps. As she walked the charred ground, she dipped into her well, trying to drip magic from the last crystal to the previous one; a droplet trail. But her magic struck something else, like the presence of another Soulshield when mending a broken bone together. Magic between them that she hadn't felt in Iramont was already connecting the crystals. That meant something here was affecting them. The unknown servant inside the house?

Divine tried to pull at the invisible string. It didn't budge. Deeper into her well she plunged, bringing enough magic to create a rope wrapping itself around the other tendril of magic.

She tugged hard, drinking from her well to give her strength. The magical string snapped from the crystal. Divine staggered back, panting.

"You ok?"

Divine waved her off. "Just need to catch my breath."

Amber light illuminated the house from the three locations. The air hung...lighter, as if they had been walking on the bottom of the ocean before and had reached the bright shore.

"That's more like it," Saph jubilated.

Divine nodded to Saph and as the last light of the sun filtered through the trees, the pair approached the entrance, pausing on the threshold.

Saph swept her hand toward the oval door.

"What?" Divine raised an eyebrow. "You're the one who wanted this quest. After you."

“Fine.” Saph straightened the waistband of her billowy pants. “What’s with you and approaching doors?” Her knuckles rapped against the wood. “You should be able to come out now, unknown magic wielder.”

Light blazed into Divine’s sight, and she raised her arm over her eyes.

Muffled voices reverberated in harmonic tones, like a choir in a cave: You needed the separation...to know how deep you could drink.

Images rushed across her vision. Saph knocking on the farmhouse door. Madeline answering. Divine’s defenses going up too late.

What are you doing here? You should be further—

Ah, so this is Madeline.

Muddle them.

A man’s voice. Familiar. Threatening. The man from the alleyway who attacked Madeline. No, a ruse .

He’s right. You won’t do what we need knowing we wanted it. No, it’s better you think this was your own idea. Was it the bird that gave me away?

I don’t know what you’re going on about.

Madeline turned her back to them, looking over her shoulder. The tattoo of the songbird quivered, a wing extending from Madeline’s skin in blue feathers before it flattened again into ink.

You were so in tune with creature souls. There’s no deity for them, yet—it’s why I

chose you for this. Your mother poking around in the archives was just the clue I needed.

What do you want, Madeline? What haven't you already stolen from me?

I'll tell you. You won't remember this conversation until you play your part, and then it won't matter anymore. But perhaps a shadow will remain, enough of a memory to guide you the right way. So that you don't get off course. Again. Our agents have hunted the location for ages. Finally, I found it. And I found you. Your lineage had signs. But I had to watch you to be sure. You healed a bird's wing, do you remember, that had hit your window? And you have a well just deep enough I didn't need to approach someone of more...skill. Less likely I'd fool them.

You stole my talisman to get me here. To the southern reaches. You knew I'd chase you.

An artifacts dealer was to 'encounter' you on the road with your talisman and the chest, but he went and got himself killed. And the chest stolen. So, we improvised. Ehmin followed the chest to Iramont's tavern, and I took the talisman into the Holy District. The tavern wench inserted herself into the plan before we could figure out how to get the chest back and in your path again. But the Goddess of Condemnation was with us as you found the chest anyway.

There are others with a well as 'shallow' as mine. Why me?

I needed someone with an affinity to non-humans. We want to control him, not just release him. And no magic wielders are as willing to aid others as a Soulshield. You have the perfect combination of abilities. Did you like my riddles? You can't say no to someone in need, can you? Besides, only a servant of the Goddess of Souls will work. I already tried to free him.

Free who?

Why, the very soul your Goddess and mine still wrestle for.

The light faded and Divine lowered her arm. She blinked as Saph's hand raised to the door's handle.

"Saph, stop!" Divine grabbed her wrist. "Madeline wanted—"

Overhead a songbird twittered merrily as the door seemed to expand in size. Divine plunged into her well but flailed within its dark recess. The door caved in and swallowed them.

* * *

Divine blinked. Water dripped into a small puddle at the center of a room; a table and chair against the far wall completed the sparse furnishings. She spun toward the door but found no outline. Above them, walked a man on the ceiling, or what would have been the bottom of an upright boat.

"Hello, magic user!" Saph called, cupping her hands around her mouth. When he didn't respond she called again. "We have freed you and patiently await the treasures you have for us."

Divine's chest tightened. She closed the distance between them and placed her arm around Saph's shoulders. She tried to shake off the feeling of failure so she could protect them both now. Thankfully, the figure continued to pace above them.

Saph twisted toward Divine, one hand on her hip as she pointed above. "Doesn't seem keen to get out of here, that one."

“I just remembered some of what Madeline said to us at the farm. She wants us to free him.” Divine looked away from the figure. “Some of her muddling is righting itself. Are you remembering anything?”

“Not yet, I don’t think.” Saph tilted her head back. Divine’s gaze traced her neck to the chain of beads colored in the hues of water.

“I’m inclined to do the opposite of anything she wants.” Divine locked her gaze on Saph’s green eye as the woman looked at her again. “The reward is probably a ruse, too. She wanted me to be here.”

Light pressure from Saph’s hand rested on Divine’s shoulder. “There’s definitely a trap. But you’ve got me now, gorgeous. Bet she didn’t plan on that. What do you remember?”

“Madeline said that she had already gotten an Anvil of the God of Storms to release a crystal. And a Hydromancer I think. It’s still fuzzy but together those crystals created a lock around this place. To keep something, someone, here.”

Divine craned her neck. Something seemed off about the air, like a haze hung between them and the man. Why would their Goddesses be fighting over this person? And why didn’t the other Gods or Goddesses seem to care? Her eyes trailed down to where a normal ceiling should be, following the blank wall to the floor, until she focused on the puddle.

She walked over to it and squatted. Within the water floated shadows, but they weren’t reflections from above. It was as if she stared through one of the portholes, watching the man walk upright.

“This water is like a scrying pool,” she said, “only...”

Saph squatted beside her. “But it’s looking into the same place?”

Divine shook her head. “It doesn’t make sense. Scrying shows you somewhere else. Unless”—she looked above them—“that isn’t really here. Maybe that is the projection, like the fountain in Iramont.”

“If that’s not here, where is it?”

Divine shrugged. “But I have a feeling this is more than a viewer.”

“A portal? Is that possible?”

“Possible, yes. The Harvesters can pull an ear of corn to them from elsewhere. Maybe a Hydromancer can create a portal to the place in a scrying pool?” Divine thought about her interactions with Listhinci, and the odd scrying dish that sat on her table. And how the Goodly One said some people could use other’s talismans. “It’s possible I may know less about the temples than I assume. Because I think they have been hiding some of their abilities.”

“If it’s a portal, let’s go get our reward, then.” Saph stood, lifting her foot over the puddle.

Divine yanked her back, catching the woman against her as she toppled off balance. “I don’t know if we can get back. With Madeline involved, I don’t trust this. I think she wrote the letter.”

“We’ll, if there’s a chance we get rewarded I say we take it. And we mess up whatever plans Madeline has along the way. What do you say, take a leap with me?”

Divine’s heart fluttered at Saph’s wide grin. “You do love adventure. I don’t smell a stronger flower scent, but let’s stay close so I can shield us if needed.”

She grabbed Saph's hand and, squeezing it, they stepped forward. The puddle splashed around her boot. The air rippled, then they stood at the bottom of the boat. Out of the nearest porthole a fish swam past in a murky liquid.

The charms on her laces tinkled as Divine shook her foot, but only the soles of her boot were wet. She held her breath in the silence, grasping the cold steel of the bangles around her wrist.

Something scraped against wood.

Divine whirled.

The man stood a step behind them, the shadows of the room tinting his skin pale blue. At least she thought it was a man, though he stood as tall as the ursavaras. His hair, gradient pink to orange, cascaded down his back. His clothes had holes—no, black spots—and the ends trailed threads.

He grinned, his teeth narrower and his mouth slightly protruding more than normal Trelvanian physiology. And he blinked abnormally fast. “Ah, someone from the living realm. Thank you for breaking the seal.”

“Living realm?” Saph tapped the piercing at her helix. “Where, deities tell, do you think you’ve been?”

He cracked his knuckles in front of his chest. “In between. But her net is severed, and I can taste the magics seeping in.”

Divine coughed, the scent of roses palpable on her throat, stinging her nose. Her magic's warning. She clenched her jaw, then dove into her well, drawing enough magic to place a barrier around herself and Saph before the man lurched forward. He bounced off the invisible barrier.

“Give me the crystals,” he growled, flexing his fingers in the air over the barrier.

Another pair of arms unfolded from behind his back. Two pairs of hands. With the top pair, he reached behind his back. When he pulled them forward, he was clutching an axe in each hand.

A sigh huffed from Saph. “Why do they always think two is better than one?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Divine saw Saph shift her two-handed axe before her. The man lurched again, the axes ricocheting, and he staggered back.

“Blessed by three, cursed by three. They created me then abandoned me.” He rubbed the blade edges together, blue sparks jumping between them.

Magic . Divine gasped. He wasn’t human, yet he was using magic.

“Once I have the power,” he growled, “I can wield all of my gifts.”

Source of power... “They’re talismans!”

“What?” Divine asked, shifting the weight of her axe more to her abled hand.

“The crystals. They’re talismans. I have to get back to them.”

“He has three?”

“That or he’s using someone’s power through their talisman. He said her net was severed. I cut the magical bonds that was keeping him from accessing the magic well...I think.”

“Then I’ll hold him off.”

Divine turned, “I can’t leave you.”

“Darlin,’ I survived on my own before you came along.” Saph’s mouth curved in a lopsided grin.

Her heart seemed to swell in her chest for Saph. “It doesn’t have to be like that. You shouldn’t have to do it all alone.”

“Nor you. We’re working together. I’ll entertain this walking arm-a-pede. Now, go and save our asses.”

Divine took a step toward the woman, her indecision halting her steps like not knowing the movements of a dance. Decision made, she spun away. Her eye caught the image of long hydrilla whorls swaying in the rippling surface of the puddle. She stepped in, stretching her magic into a thin stream to feed the protective sphere around Saph as she exited.

Then she was falling. No, floating. Her eyes stung and she knew she shouldn’t take a breath. Unfathomably, the puddle had led her not to the previous room. She was underwater. Divine pumped her arms and kicked her legs, but her boots were like rocks lashed to her feet.

As she tugged off her boots, she saw the boat from the clearing below her; upright and resting on the silt of a hydrilla-filled lake bottom. The pool had shown her this, but she had moved too quickly to understand the image it had shown her. Saph was in the sunken wreck. And this must be the lake shaped like a splinter of the moon. Would the water surge in at any moment and drown Saph? And Divine would watch, helpless to save someone she cared for. Again.

Let go of your guilt. A voice bubbled through her thoughts. The same voice which had said she needed to know how deep she could drink.

Divine listened.

Focusing, she found the tendril of power that connect her to Saph, and the protection Divine had left for her. At least it was still in place. What was it that Madeline had said? An affinity for creatures? She grasped her talisman which floated before her and closed her eyes, seeing the creatures of the lake, calling them to her with a shout echoing in the depths of her magic's well.

She started to swim in the direction she hoped was up. Her body rushed, propelled by fish, through the water, hair floating behind her. She tightened her eyelids against the fast flow. Then she erupted through the lake's surface, fish spouting beneath her. Divine and the creatures cascaded back into the water with a splash. With easy strokes she resurfaced, gasping, and swam to the shore.

Divine coughed, spitting out water and saw the path she and Saph had traversed in the wagon, now lit by the golden morning rays. How much time had they spent inside the boat? She shivered as water from her hair dribbled down her face. The path back to the boat house would be longer on foot. It was almost like it existed in two places at once; the lake and the clearing. Tossing her water-logged jacket to the ground, she ran as fast as she could in her soaked clothes and bare feet from the crescent-shaped lake.

She reached the familiar, burgundy-leafed forest edge. Panting, she leaned on her knees. She had felt ecstasy in this forest, and now...Divine focused on her well, checking the tendril was still there connected to Saph; thin, more of a trickle, but it existed. She wondered how long before the protection she offered left Saph vulnerable.

"Elder! Leafy!" she called. "I need your help!"

Silence answered but for the faint buzz of insects.

She pictured the Elder, and touched the nearest tree. The leaves trembled as she sent out her plea for help through its bark and down into its roots. Her breath slowed to a comfortable level and Divine ran again, into the forest.

The ground quaked before Divine heard the rustling of many trees. Then Leafy's branches parted the smaller saplings and his trunk emerged beside her.

"Rootless one. The soil sang your name."

"Can you move quicker than I can run?"

"When I have the need."

"I need your help. I must get to the clearing after Willow Way. We released something...something I don't think we were supposed to set free. It must be what you were protecting."

"If that is the case, then I have failed in my purpose. But I promised you aid. Climb into my branches. Let us mend what is broken."

Divine did as instructed. As she sat in the crux of Leafy's branches, leaning against his trunk, the Elder's roots bent. Some stretched forward, like tentacles on a sea creature or a decacacti, and the pair moved. The roots alternated, pulling them as fast as a galloping horse.

"I remember now what happened to my brother," he began, the surrounding trees blurring into Divine's periphery. "It was several sunrises ago. A woman and a man came to the forest. They had a box and wanted to pass through to the dwelling-in-three-places. We denied them entrance. The man had the power of lighting and struck"—he made the sound of tapping wood again for his brother's name—"down. I snapped his branches and tossed him into the Goddess's lake."

Divine nodded. Her mind wasn't completely clear of the muddling, but events were starting to make sense. Not Madeline's husband, as she had told the Soulsage with the pendants, but an associate of hers had drowned. Madeline's lies seemed to always be rooted in some truth. With lightning, he had to be a servant of the God of Storms. Madeline had said an Anvil had released a crystal. If the Goddess of Souls created another of them, who created the last one?

"Do you know why they wanted to reach it?" Divine rested a hand against the bark, sending soothing energy as she would send as a Soulshield to comfort a human's loss.

"Who am I to know the hearts of the rootless ones? Evil has spread out from that being. All should stay away from its disease."

Divine thought of the black spots on the Elder's leaves and his corrupted soul gem. They passed into the glade where they first encountered Leafy and plunged into the willow trees barrier.

"What is it? Do you know?"

"After I was created, I heard the Goddesses talking. The Goddess of Souls had bound a returned soul to a boradain. The Goddess of Condemnation was angry."

Divine's eyes widened. Creatures didn't have magic wells, and this one was using magic. They created an Elder, like Leafy. "But boradains are just myths. Even if it was real, it already had sapience. A soul is never bound to something with sapience."

"Perhaps that is true. But it was done. At the bequest of the God of Storms."

"The blue sparks," Divine whispered. "It must have a soul gem to access the power granted it."

“The creature that was created had been uncontrollable. Heinous acts against humans. The God and Goddess planned to seal it away.”

“That would explain the stories.” Divine narrowed her eyes, trying to see through the branches for their destination. The boradain puppet had been harmless in the hands of the Iramont performer, as cuddly even as a child’s night snuggly. Such a false interpretation. “Instead of a myth, boradains must have been a real creature. Why do I feel this is true? If so, others of its kind were likely hunted until extinct out of fear of this one’s...augmentation.” That would explain why she’d never heard of anyone seeing a boradain. Divine frowned. “But you were created the same way and didn’t immediately go bad.”

“I do not have the gifts of three deities inside me.”

They exited the trees into the burnt clearing. It looked even more desolate in the growing light, the dirt a sooty-grey with inky-black streaks swimming between the dead stems. Though she wanted to hear more of Leafy’s tale, Divine hopped from the branch and dashed toward the first crystal.

Wind rustled the surrounding trees before Divine felt its cold touch—a warning whip in her hair. She tilted her head back. The sky held heavy grey stretched beyond her sight, and rapid wisps showed the bulky puffs moved swiftly.

“Let me know if you see anything,” she called to Leafy, dropping to her knees.

Divine cupped the yellow crystal in her hand and closed her eyes. Her chest tightened, finding the thread to Saph gone. She listened, hearing a woman’s shout and a thud, and hoped Saph had delivered the blow. There was nothing she could do about that now but complete her task.

Slipping her hand into her pocket, Divine’s mental fingers gingerly touched the space

she found within the Iguion's object. Where Divine's well felt smooth as water, this felt sharp and cold as ice. She focused down into her own well, bringing a bucket out to pour over the crystal. Her magical energy washed over the talisman, how she imagined a Second Level Soulsage would do to cleanse it. Then she wrapped strands of sharp ice from the black triangle in her pocket around the magical strand that tethered the crystal to its magic. She lashed it tight. Tighter.

The tether splintered and Divine fell over. Breathing heavily, she charged to the next location.

She repeated the exercise, the weight of the next pull from her well heavy and slow.

"You!" the Elder bellowed.

Divine spun. On the roof of the boat where the rainbow bird had been earlier sat Madeline, deliberately applauding. The charcoal lines made her eyes look hollow.

"I knew you could do it!" Madeline called.

Divine frowned. "Leafy, keep her busy. She can't muddle you a second time so soon."

Twisting back, Divine dropped to her knees. The weight of a wagon pressed into her shoulders and she breathed like she'd ran through the forest. But with some effort, her magic finally flowed where she wanted it.

Behind her, sounds of creaking limbs and thumping branches filled the clearing. Divine stood, hand clutching her locket, and spun to face the noise.

Madeline stood in her way.

“I’ll take it from here.” Madeline held out her hand.

Divine released her locket, clasping the crystals in both hands. “What is that...thing in there?”

“It’s the soul your Goddess stole from mine. Its atrocities must be punished.”

“And you think it will just let you?” Divine’s head burned. “If she locked him away, he must be dangerous to us all. He’s likely the source of the black spot.”

“He is. I traced the spreading corruption back to here. It’s what happens when some deities think they can do things on their own. But don’t worry, my Goddess always punishes the wicked.” Madeline tilted her head.

Divine straightened. “Maybe she should start with you!”

Madeline looked at her feet, the gesture incongruous with her other actions. “I’m sorry I deceived you. I was sworn to secrecy in my mission.”

“You could have asked for my help. I would have—” Divine caught herself before she admitted it. She would have followed Madeline anywhere. Drops burnt her eyes and she blinked hard. A shadow of the feeling she once had for Madeline fell on Divine as she stared at her lips. But this guilty display was just another ruse.

“I know that now.” Madeline’s tone dripped with poisoned honey. “But it was so important that I find the soul stolen from my Goddess. To end the black spot for Trelvania. I just...I hate to ask this of you after all I’ve put you through. I need you to release the soul. It has been banished to a place between living and the afterlife. You aren’t a Soulshaper, but he is not in the beyond. And he’s not human. I have faith you can guide him back to our dimension. And I will shackle him for the Goddess of Condemnation so that he may be eternally punished.”

Divine sniffed. “The roses of my mother say you’re a lying sack of horse—”

“Fine.” Madeline snatched Divine’s locket, the chain snapping, scratching the back of her neck. “I should have tried harder to access to your well when I had it.”

Madeline stepped out of Divine’s reach. Clutching where the chain had cut into her neck, Divine staggered back.

“Enough of the lies, Madeline!” Divine shouted, punctuating her words with a stamp of her foot. “Tell me what you are really after or I’ll, I’ll—”

“You’ll what? Heal me?” Madeline cackled. “I’ll tell you the truth, but you’re not going to believe it. Three created this creature and hid it from my Goddess. The First Elder. He’s an Anvil, a Hydromancer, and a Soulshaper. Only it went wrong. Other Elders after were made with only one gift. This boradain wouldn’t listen to their commands and the destruction it created nearly exposed what the pantheon really was. But the advantage? It became a massive source of power. Power that my Goddess needs to once and for all defeat the Goddess of Souls.”

“You’ve been stealing other people’s talismans,” Divine breathed, her hand dropping to her pocked and closing around Listhinci’s gift. She couldn’t let Madeline access her well. Yet she didn’t want to lose her magic by severing the connection. “Your Goddess can use them.”

“You’re half right. I’ll give you credit—you’re more observant than I thought you were. You’re just so gullible. Every magic well is a source of power to a deity it’s tied to. Why do you think they compete for followers? Us agents are just redistributing the access points.”

It was true. What she’d been questioning was actually, awfully true. She gripped the triangular object tighter and focused her mind on entering whatever void or well was

within it.

Madeline held up Divine's locket. "This contains access to the Goddess of Soul's powers. I'll find a way to use it, with or without your help." Her eyes flashed as she skewered Divine. "You think I'm full of lies, but you don't know the half of it. I can open your eyes to the truth. Help me, and the knowledge is yours."

Cold filled her blood and Divine was sure she would breathe out fog at any moment. Madeline stepped forward as Leafy stepped between them.

"The soil is restless, rootless one. Something grows, but not here. You are an Old Soul. You can feel it, can't you?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Divine debated. Something was calling to her, but not from the echoes of her well. And what in Trelvania was an Old Soul? Old Souls and Old Magic. What did it mean?

A drop of rain landed on her wrist. She'd told Saph it would rain. Saph.

Taking a deep breath, she sprinted to the door of the house, the sound of Saph's muffled voice just beyond. Dark triangle in hand, Divine grabbed hold of freezing magical threads as she dove at the door, the same wintry shards she felt severing the crystal talismans. She let the door swallow her as she squeezed the triangle. A wave of magic shattered painfully behind her eyes, echoing before a lid snapped shut on her well, the sounds ceasing in deafening silence.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Divine blinked. Saph ducked, narrowly avoiding the horizontal arc of the boradain's right-handed blade.

“Ha! Missed me again, you ninny.”

Divine opened her mouth then closed it, not wanting to take Saph's attention from the boradain-turned-Elder. The woman spun away, putting distance between her assailant, her eye narrowed at her foe.

But Divine couldn't speak. It felt like her body was tossed in a sea squall, magic spinning out of control and tugging every part of her in a different direction. Her ears felt clogged and she wanted to simultaneously retch and wrap her arms around Saph. She dropped the Iguion's object into her pocket and searched for another item she could anchor her power to.

“Your kissable lips are a welcomed sight.” Saph nodded in Divine's direction as she continued. “I've been staring at this ugly for too long.” She shoved the shaft of her axe up into the boradain's nose with a resounding crunch. “Love that flushed look to your cheeks, too, darlin’.”

The boradain grabbed his nose with his free pair of hands.

“Saph, this is serious. Leafy's helping keep her but—”

“Where's your locket? Oh no.” Saph's head dropped to the side. “Madeline's here,

isn't she?"

"She wants him." Divine pointed with a ringed finger. "But I'm not going to let her."

Divine's rainbow bangles clinked. She lowered her arm, clasping the bracelets with her free hand and focused on funneling all of the whirling, invisible energy into them. She focused on what she wanted. Freedom from lies. Freedom to be what she wanted to be. And to help those she cared for. Someone her mother would be proud of. A Sword of the Goddess.

Saph swung her axe at the demon's legs. He jumped back, a cut appearing on his calf as blue blood trickled down.

"Seems you cleared his magical connection," Saph grunted through clenched teeth. "He's slower, at least."

Divine's ears popped and she focused on his axes; lightning flickered on the blades but it was no longer blue as he swiped at Saph's chest and waist simultaneously. The soul gem would have his remaining power. Past the fighting pair, the windows were unbarred.

Windows. Not portholes.

Divine surveyed the room. They were right-side-up in the front part of the house. She hadn't noticed before, the creature was no longer in the arched roof of the boat's hull above them. She had no time to figure out how the puddles worked.

"Ah, he's already freed himself," a sickly sweet voice intoned from behind them.

Divine spun to find Madeline standing just beyond the door's threshold, rocking back on her heels.

“He’s going back,” Divine spat, searching the floor for the puddle, but it and its portal to his prison was gone.

“Step aside. You can have the bar wench”—her hand waved dismissively then she pointed—“and I’ll take him. We’ll each have what we want. No fight. No fuss. No mess...unlike outside.”

Divine tightened her fists. Narrowing her eyes, she stayed silent. What had she done to Leafy?

Madeline strained her eyes up and blew out a breath. “Even if you have the lineage, I don’t know what you think you can do, since I have your talisman. Again.” She swung the locket by the chain, the charcoal around her eyes creasing with her smirk.

A laugh bubbled from Divine’s stomach to her lips. Sweet florals filled the air: roses and honeysuckle, irises and daffodils. Flowers of all seasons at once. Her chest swelled. She felt confident. Powerful.

“How does it feel to be on the other end of a false narrative, Madeline? You hold nothing more than a pendant.”

The woman’s smile faded as her gaze transferred to the locket. She shook it, then yelled, fingers prying at the clasp as if she could find out if Divine’s magic was inside.

Divine plunged into her new well, deeper and deeper, until her vision clouded with water like the depths of the lake.

You needed the separation to know how deep you could drink. That voice again. She sent a surge at the boradain as she drew out a sequence of buckets and as if they were there, Divine saw them hovering. As with Saph’s hand, Divine created the images she

wanted to have transpire.

She saw the wave strike the creature and knock him to the floor. Saw the buckets pour a wave behind him that folded on itself to create a tunnel stretching through and beyond the room, halfway to her Goddess's realm. In it, she saw dots of life, souls that belonged to buds yet to be bloomed, eggs yet to be hatched. She saw Leafy, a gash smoldering in his trunk and knew that Madeline's accomplice from the farm had arrived. She tossed healing energy through the column; a poultice that wrapped around the Elder, regenerating the natural deep fissures of his bark.

Divine pressed magical energy into each palm of the boradain, forcing them together and fusing them useless.

"Take its soul gem!" Divine cried to Saph.

Saph tore open the demon's shirt. In the center of his chest glowed a black gem like Leafy's had been. She used the edge of her axe's blade to pry the gem loose.

"Now get back," Divine commanded.

She released the creature's hands—for that is what it was now, just a boradain—and Madeline dashed, crossing the distance to the fallen boradain as Divine collapsed the tunnel on itself in a burst of foam.

Divine blinked.

The demon and Madeline were gone. Where they had been was a small puddle. Divine's chest heaved and she realized she'd fallen to one knee.

"How did you do that?"

“I...I don’t know. I think I just guided living souls. To a place between here and after.”

And Madeline was gone. She couldn’t hurt her anymore. Divine’s shoulders shuddered as she fought back a sob.

She stood and approached the puddle. Within was an image of a boat and a figure with sand-toned skin gesturing wildly, as if yelling at the creature with pink and orange hair approaching her. Divine snickered, then covered her mouth as tremors coursed through her extremities. Her body was catching up to the volume of magic she had just wielded.

She glanced at Saph.

The raven-haired woman bent her chin toward the scrying puddle and shook her head. “Guess we aren’t getting a reward.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“From what you’ve told me,” the First Servant of Souls said, “the boradain could have been locked in a transdimensional space. There’s the living world, the afterlife, and then this...in-between space. The crystals could have acted as anchors.” She bounced the three cleansed talismans in her hand. “Though, this is all highly improbable.”

It was early in Iramont, but Divine had already told their tale to the Third Level Soulsage before being granted an immediate visit with the highest servant of the Goddess, and acting member on the Iramont’s Holicratic Council, the First Servant.

“Let’s entertain the idea is true. Each crystal from a different deity to keep this boradain Elder—let’s call him the First Soul—neither in the living nor passing to the beyond. Likely, the talismans were from our Goddess of Souls and the God of Storms, his original Elder creator. The third one is anyone’s guess. Over time, he must have gathered enough water to create a portal through the power granted at his creation by the Goddess of Standing Waters. This is all speculation, of course. Regardless, he must have sent the crystals in the box your lady friend found to the bottom of the lake.”

“She’s not my friend,” Divine grumbled. “You knew about the Elders being real?”

“Not this one, but of course I know of them. All First Servants are aware. However, we no longer create Elders. It is forbidden.”

“No wonder,” Saph muttered.

If the First Servant knew of Elders, what else did she know that the other ranks of servants did not?

“When we talked afterward,” Divine continued, “Leafy said he remembered some of what the deities said after they had exiled this First Soul. And it aligns with your theory. I got the impression from Leafy that they sealed the crystals with the boradain because they couldn’t be used there—only where they were created. Our world. The First Soul couldn’t let himself out, and no one would have access to let him out. And the boradain’s soul-gem-given magic could not be used in the talismans’ presence.”

“Yeah, but wasn’t Leafy a sapling then?” Saph raised one hand, palm up. “It would be like trusting the memory of a toddler.”

“Non-human souls are...different. It’s why a Soulshaper cares for only human souls. We servants have no power over creatures.” The First Servant motioned with her crystal hand at Divine, eyes narrowing. “Though, you were able to send him back to his in-between prison. How is that possible?”

Divine shrugged. “After remaking my talisman, my well felt...almost wall-less.”

“Making another talisman is also...curious.” The First Servant scratched a pencil over a parchment, the Goddess symbol tattooed on her wrist visible as the dark sleeve of her robe fell back. Divine decided to keep Listhinci’s gift and what it did secret. “And the soul gem was sent with him?”

“Yes. Maybe I should have tried to heal it, but everything happened so fast. Do you think Madeline could use the gem somehow in that...place?”

“This is beyond me, but if the First Soul couldn’t influence our world before then I doubt the gem could be used now. But it is better to have the opinions of the Arosian temple than wild speculation. I’ll send this on the next courier to Arosia. And petition they reinstate you as a Soulshield. Perhaps you’d be interested in seeing if your well

is deep enough to become a Soulshaper? You'll need to provide evidence of some of these claims, of course. Repeat your displays, as it were."

"I'll have to think about it."

The First Servant nodded, scrawling further notes. "And you think the Goddess of Condemnation's agents are stealing other talismans. This is concerning. A war is coming."

Divine leaned forward, trying to catch the last mumbled statement. "What did you say?" Surely Divine had misheard.

"Anything else I should report from your encounter?" the First Servant asked, ignoring the question.

Divine crossed her arms. "Do you know what an 'Old Soul' is? Leafy called me that." Then, thinking of the Goodly One she added, "I think I've heard it somewhere before."

The First Servant sat her pencil down. "A vague reference." She tilted her head, seeming to think. "There are some who believe in what they call Old Magic, but I think I read 'Old Soul' in something unrelated. Really, just cultists and superstitions."

She picked up her writing implement and seemed to transcribe something fervently. Divine almost thought she and Saph were dismissed when the woman spoke again. "The temple at Arosia may have the true origin story of this First Soul in the archives. If our Goddess helped create and imprison it, that is. It is quite the claim of this Madeline. The soul our Goddess saved from Condemnation at the beginning of time was nothing but a creature? The capital is responsible for all of the other city temples and records and our order of servants. If anyone can corroborate the details, it is there."

“I’ve got something. How did Madeline know the chest was in the lake?” Saph asked.

Divine shrugged. She felt the First Servant was hiding something and no longer felt like being forthcoming herself. “She followed some clues to the lake and found it. She was hunting for the source of the black spot.”

“Some luck! I could have used that earlier in life.” Saph threw up her arms.

Divine felt tired, like she’d been awake for days. She walked from the desk and stepped through the doorway, feeling Saph follow.

“Did this Madeline say how her, uh, tattoo worked?” the First Servant called after her. “Or why she thinks you have powers over creatures?” The First Servant’s laugh sounded forced.

Without stopping Divine replied, “She did not.”

* * *

Divine plucked a flame-colored fruit from the Iramont tree by the Holy District’s gate, droplets from the morning rain clinging like tiny mirrors on the orange and yellow streaked skin. The apple popped between her teeth, tart juices mixing with a hint of sweet. Hot cinnamon and sugar wafted from the open door of a nearby bakery. Though she couldn’t see it, Divine guessed it was the one two doors down from the Sultry Sapphire. Between the events since setting out, and the ride back to Iramont as the God of Storms wrung the clouds on them, it seemed like forever since Divine sat drinking tarrow root-beer in the Sultry Sapphire.

“What do you think Madeline’s doing in there with old blinky-eyes?” Saph asked.

Divine shrugged, taking another bite of her apple, then held it before her lover. Saph grasped Divine’s hand and took a bite. Shivers coursed down her spine.

“I can’t believe the story has been a lie all this time. The Goddess of Souls didn’t save a man from condemnation. She locked a soul away.” Divine shook her head. “Because she and the other deities couldn’t make the soul suitable enough to return to a new body. Their failure to make the boradain an Elder corrupted the soul used.”

A cart filled with bright orange and white pumpkins clattered past from a conjoining street, splashing through a puddle and breaking Divine’s thoughts. She watched it bump along the main thoroughfare.

With the black spot starting to fade from the leaves it had infected, the harvests next year would be much more bountiful. As they traveled back from Willow Way to Iramont, the women saw the downpour seem to wash the black spot from the vegetation. The burnt ground around the boradain’s prison coalesced in rivers of black, and the peeling white bark looked better attached to the trees in the forest. Even the blackened pumpkin Divine saw in the field looked less grotesque. Its leaves had regained some vibrancy. Their elation that the crops would recover outweighed their discomfort of huddling under a soaked blanket in their feeble attempt to stay dry.

Droplets still fell, but infrequent enough that Divine and Saph could walk leisurely without needing shelter.

“Are you going to find out more about your Old Soul’s power from the Arosian temple?” Saph asked as they reached the end of the street connecting to the Essentials District.

Divine halted and faced back toward the Holy District, tracing her eyes over the violet archways. “It feels good to know I have a power that the great Soulshapers don’t. But...I think I need a break from Goddesses and Gods for a while. Especially those who lie.”

Saph’s fingers entwined in Divine’s free hand as they stepped onto the main street

and said, “Not that I’m defending the wench, but the origin tale was spun by humans. A narrative that would endear others to her cause and, dare I say it, elevate her power to be even greater.”

Divine shot Saph a sideways look. “Are you admitting that you believe the deities exist?”

“Do you think your Goddess spoke to you back at Willow Way?”

Divine huffed. “Not sure. Someone’s voice was speaking.”

Saph pursed her lips. “I don’t admit to understanding the new ways. But I promise to keep an open mind.” She squeezed Divine’s hand. “You could try becoming a weather predictor. I’ve seen that in action. Speak to trees. Warn the travelers. Unless a servant already does that.”

Divine squeezed her hand back. “The Anvils create some storms, but even they don’t always know when the God of Storms is going to spread gentle or volatile weather.” Divine paused. “Leafy said the crescent lake was like a scrying pool. Do you think the deities saw what happened yesterday?”

“Madeline said she tried to unlock that four-armed-fur-ball before luring you here, right? That was two seasons past. If they were looking, they chose to not involve themselves.”

“Or they didn’t see. These deities are something...but they aren’t omniscient.”

The deities have eyes and ears in many places. The words from Listhinci came rushing back. “I want to check in on Listhinci. If I can heal trees and banish boradains, I’m sure I could help them now.”

“You care so deeply. And I love that about you. How are you doing, though, darling?”

Goddess revelations, Madeline betrayals, kicking your ex into damnation...”

Divine took a larger step, avoiding a heap of wet leaves and their slippery surface. Words Madeline had said about researching Divine’s ancestry vied for her attention. Her mother had researched something that had set Madeline in her path. Then there was the Goodly One who knew about the true use of talismans and wells by the deities. Madeline was gone, Divine had a new talisman, and the mysterious quest in a chest was completed. Yet many questions still remained. Divine twisted her rainbow bangles, eliciting a pleasant tinkle.

“My life this last half-year has been a windstorm...but it brought me to you.” A small smile tugged Divine’s lips. “And in that, I feel like I’ve followed the right path.”

Divine halted as resistance pulled against her arm. Saph’s gaze held Divine rooted in front of the woman, as a breeze waved dark strands that had danced loose from her braid. A wide smile plumped her face as she placed a hand on Divine’s cheek. “You sentimental, romantic soul.”

Their heads tilted as they drew closer, noses brushing as their lips parted. Divine’s hands cupped the back of Saph’s head as they pulled their bodies close, their lips pressing gently together.

Saph clasped Divine’s hand and pulled her toward the Sultry Sapphire. The apple core dropped from Divine’s hand and rolled toward the soil at the edge of the street, its core bare to the world, and a seed within ready to grow.