



# The Crow Games (Coven of the Crow #1)

**Author:** *S. L. Prater*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Defy the gods. Win the games. Trust no one with your heart.

Maven is going to make the gods pay for killing her little sister. But when her desperate plan backfires, the avenging witch is captured by Death himself. Her sentence: she must compete in the Crow Games for the amusement of the divines.

Those forced to participate are trapped on a train which travels through a gritty, gaslit Otherworld. Each stop is a new trial and means certain death for those who don't make it to the next platform in time. But Maven is not the only vengeful witch on board. Soon she and her new coven of misfits hatch a greater plan: break out of the Otherworld and beat Death at his own game.

Not all her allies are what they seem, however. The greatest mystery of them all is Asher, the menacing reaper who wears his secrets like a cloak. Maven shouldn't trust a man who might be a spy for the vindictive gods, but she's the only one his touch doesn't harm. And the more she sees of the poet's heart beneath his dangerous exterior, the more she suspects that Asher might be her fiercest ally ... or her downfall.

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Many insist devils are the most fearsome of creatures. But I tell you, no fury burns hotter than that of an avenging witch.”— Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

The gods hated witches like us, but one look at my sister was enough to fool most into believing we were blessed. Lisbeth had a light to her as bright as the gift the goddess Berhta bathed the world in every morning.

I peeked in through the front window of the hat shop we owned and let out a rueful sigh. My breath fogged the glass. Lisbeth leaned over the counter inside, flirting unabashedly with the two chaps who delivered our coal.

I needed to ruin her fun again, but I didn't want to. Her comely kindness brought new friends to her in flocks. The goodness in her should be shared. Even now it outshone the gas lamps in that dim little room. The eligible bachelors of Kosh were especially besotted with her, poor clueless creatures that they were. They never recognized the great threat we posed to them all.

Feet inert in my boots, I stood in my oversized apron and tall green witch's hat, doomed to soon be a wet blanket again.

Avoiding the inevitable, I fussed with my hair. The weight of it in a tight knot under my hat made my scalp sore. I plucked free the pins one at a time, combing out the kinks in the long bronze strands with my fingers. Overhead, Mirk—god of dusk—gathered the fading light together in fat purple clouds, and the autumn air grew colder, crisper.

I swept the walkway free of fallen leaves and chased street children out of our bins.

We sold rare herbs and roots alongside our hats. The spoiled concoctions I threw out could kill a small person. Sweet Lisbeth wanted to do more for the littles that haunted our alleyways, but keeping a free spirit like her safe in an unforgiving city was enough of a chore.

A sharp wind bit at my cheeks and nose, reminding me of the late hour. I could delay no longer.

A bell tinkled above the shop door as I pushed inside. The earthy scent of dried herbs and fusty felt teased my senses alongside the peppery fragrance of the perfume our guests wore. We sold a similar product. The luxury probably cost them both more than a month's wages.

Bram, the taller of our guests, turned to me and removed his woolen cap politely. He was fair-skinned, his cheeks and nose turned ruddy by too much sunlight. "Miss Elder," he greeted.

I hardly recognized him without all the soot. He appeared older all cleaned up, more dignified. Thirty-five, or near it, if I had to put a number on him. Bram was handsome in a crisp shirt and floral-printed waistcoat, chestnut hair in a sweeping part over hazel eyes. He threw an elbow into his partner's side.

"Oi!" Seb, the stocky blond spun on his heels and fumbled his own hat, a sheepish smile crooking his mouth. "Oh . . . evening, Miss Elder."

"It is in fact evening now, gentlemen," I said, doing my best impersonation of a patient hostess.

"There are no gentlemen here," Lisbeth teased, and her guests guffawed.

My sister and I were similar in composition, short in stature and solidly built. We had

the same dark hair lightly gilded by the sun, sandy skin dusted in so many freckles. But I did not have the effect on people she did. The light in her was hers alone.

I put out a shadow.

“It’s time,” I said, and Lisbeth let out a whine like I’d bent her fingers backward. “We’re locking up for the night. You lot don’t have to go home, but you’re welcome here no longer.”

I softened my words with a smile, but it twisted on my lips before vanishing. Their faces fell into forlorn frowns. Guilt twinged in my belly, and I buried my hands in the deep pockets of my apron to busy them.

I remained conflicted. Lisbeth was an adult—had been for a few years now. She should be allowed to have innocent fun with the men who came calling. But I couldn’t shake off the worry that these two were only kind to us because they believed we were pretty green witches, harmless with our herbs and crafts and cute little hats.

What would happen when they lingered too long and discovered we were something else?

Fearmongers chased after our kind in mobs armed with flaming torches. I’d been protecting Lisbeth from the pitchfork-wielding sort since she was a scrawny child, smiling up at me with gaps between her teeth. In this I would never fail her. I couldn’t. We didn’t have anyone else.

“See you tonight,” Seb promised my sister, his crooked grin impish as he made his way toward the exit.

Following behind his partner, Bram hung back as our paths crossed. He always talked

at me in that way of overly polite people, and I always dismissed him in that way of people who weren't polite at all.

This time was different. He reached out a hand and ran a finger briefly down the bronze strands that hung over my shoulder. His touch lingered, and my cheeks warmed. "I hope I get to see you later tonight, Maven."

I stared at him for an unseemly amount of time, trying to spot a clue that would shed light on his request. Then it dawned on me: he was still waiting on an answer. Thrown off-balance by his interest, I nodded. His face lit as bright as Berhta's favorite morning star, and the crinkles near his eyes deepened. Suddenly it didn't matter what I'd just agreed to. My silly lips grew a mind of their own and quirked.

"See you soon," Bram said. The bell chimed over the door as he and his partner departed.

I waited for their retreating backs to disappear down the alley before turning on Lisbeth. "What did I just agree to?"

She came around the counter, her mouth in a pleading pout. "There's a harvest festival tonight at—"

"No."

"Maven, don't be like that." She stuck her lip out even farther.

"Don't make me be like that," I groaned. "You know it isn't safe for us. I don't mind you flirting with them a bit, but having a night out with those two—"

"Not just those two. The whole city!" Mischief gleamed in her sable eyes, and her smile filled her cheeks. "Bram likes you," she cooed.

A fluttery heat warmed my stomach, a sensation I hadn't experienced in longer than I could remember. It made me feel centuries younger, an unwelcome reminder that even I was still susceptible to loneliness sometimes. "I'm quite certain they're both smitten with you . . ."

I admired her magnetism, but I didn't envy it. It was safer for witches like us not to draw attention.

The twist of her lips was smug. She leaned her hip against the counter behind her. "That's not true. I have it on good authority that Bram's mind is full of you ."

I scoffed. "He talks to you when he visits. Not me."

"You won't let Bram talk to you. As soon as he comes around, you growl at him and shuffle off to do chores."

"Exactly. How can you be so sure that he . . . ?" My jaw went slack as realization dawned. Fluttery hopeful butterflies died slow deaths in a pit in my abdomen. "Did you possess him? You didn't! Please say you didn't. Oh, you can't do that, Lis!"

Chewing her cheek sheepishly, she didn't deny it, and every overzealous survival instinct I'd honed over our years in hiding took over, narrowing my vision. The pulse at my throat surged.

Our powers left a mark for those with the ability to see. They drew unwanted, divine eyes. The gods weren't omniscient, but their spies could be anywhere. My gaze snapped frantically from one corner of the shop to the other, searching for signs that shadowy nightmare spirits or beastly garm hid between the shelves.

"I can't always help it." Lisbeth slid away from the counter, palms up like she was surrendering to a gunman. "He bumped into me, and I bumped into him for just a bit .

. .”

I pressed my fingers over my eyes. “Oh, please tell me they didn’t notice!”

“It was for a heartbeat, no longer than that,” she insisted. “You saw him. Perfectly undisturbed, he was. Bram didn’t notice a thing, and neither did Saul.”

I raised a brow at her. “His name is Seb. Not Saul.”

“Is it really . . . ? Never mind that.” Lisbeth crossed to me, steps measured as though she were approaching an angry crocodile and not her very ancient and very cranky sister. When I didn’t try to bite her—an act of great restraint on my part—she tugged puckishly at my arm. “Bram was too distracted by you to notice a thing. I saw it. His thoughts were full of you. You treat everybody like they could turn on us at any moment, and apparently he likes that in a woman.”

I repressed a grin. Then my nose wrinkled. “He’s awfully young though, isn’t he . . . ?”

She waved my words away. “Everyone is young compared to a witch like you. They’re both adults and very pretty all cleaned up. Didn’t you see them?”

“I saw them, but—”

“It’s just for a bit of fun, Maven. He’s a strong arm to hold on to, to dance with, to stay warm beside on a cold autumn night. If you’d prefer to dance with a woman, I’m sure the festival will provide many lovely options. Don’t overthink this. It’s not as though we’re going to keep any of them.”

“We’d better not,” I grumbled. “Witches have been hanged for much less than keeping someone against their will.”

“No one would hang me for that. No one would tell on me.” Her lips curled villainously. “Who would complain if I kidnapped them?”

A chuckle snuck out of me. Leave it to my sister to charm someone she’d imprisoned. “Perhaps they wouldn’t . . . Let me think on it.”

“I’ll give you ten whole minutes. Six hundred seconds to think on it, come to the correct decision, and dress in what I’ve laid out for you.” Lisbeth’s pushiness made her an excellent salesperson. When it was time to add up the books, I appreciated that about her. Now, it grated.

“I don’t know, Lis.” I put my back to her. That little frown of hers had wielded a merciless power over me since she stood no taller than my hip, and I busied myself with the sideboard display of oils and perfumes, straightening them and avoiding her.

She cut into my peripheral with that powerful pout of hers. “Maven,” she cried, “put away your tired excuses, I beg you. I adore this place, but I’m sick of being a sad hermit trapped inside it.” Lisbeth gestured dramatically at the shop like the walls were made of prison bars instead of peeling wallpaper. “Aren’t you sick of it too?”

“About that—”

“I already know you want to leave. You’re as subtle as a dull ax with your heavy hints.” Her sigh was long-suffering. I moved to refill vials from the supplies in the drawer below, but she took my jar captive. “Three years in Kosh is probably longer than we should linger this time, but just hear me out.”

“Much, much too long to linger.” I snatched back the jar. Lavender water sloshed out the opening, coating my hand. I wiped it dry on my apron.

“Give us this one night of fun—real, reckless, ruleless fun. Don’t make me pack a

bag that weighs more than I do in case we have to flee,” she said, counting off her points on her fingers. “ Don’t demand that we stay on the outskirts of the festival. Don’t refuse to talk to anyone. Dance with me, for the sacred Crone’s sake! Do this, and tomorrow after it’s all done and we’ve recovered from drinking far too much, we’ll make plans to move.”

I abandoned the lavender oil on the sideboard to squint at her. The soft, sweet scent clung to me like a cloud. I rehashed each of her words, searching for a trick in there somewhere, but I didn’t immediately spot one. It seemed she was being more than fair, and her excitement was catching. It had been too long since we’d truly lived. Even I was getting stir crazy here. The unchanged routine of running the same shop, working the same garden, pinning back the same cuts of fabric—it dulled my brain too.

I bit at my lip. “Just this one night?”

She let out a victory cry.

“That wasn’t a ‘yes’!” I howled, but that didn’t stop her breaking out into dance. “I didn’t agree yet, you tosspot! I’m just nailing down the details.”

“Your gown is in our room, and it’s gorgeous,” she sang, and I might as well have been talking to the walls with all the good it did me then. She lifted one end of her skirt and twirled about, coming perilously close to knocking a set of bonnets off their stand. The sideboard rattled. Oils sloshed in their containers.

“Promise me,” I ground out, and my cold tone stopped her prancing.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“I solemnly vow it.” With her finger, she drew an earnest dash over the bodice of her sage-colored dress, a gesture that meant one was swearing with their whole heart. She’d adorned her ensemble in shimmering beads and forest-green ribbing, a much more formal piece than what she usually wore around the shop. I should have known she was up to something. “I’ll let you move us again, Maven. Just give me this one night. Drink and be silly with me. Gods take you, let me dance a few times with Saul—”

“Seb,” I corrected.

Her shoulders lifted dismissively. “I’ll call him whatever you like.”

“His name will do best, I think.”

“Oh, please!” She squeezed her hands together as though in prayer. “Just come to the festival with me. Please !”

Head back, I huffed at the ceiling. “All right.”

Lisbeth let out a delighted squeal. She skipped to the broom we kept in the corner, and she curtsied to it with all the dramatics of a skilled performer. Plucking it up into her arms, she danced with it. I hid my grin as I shucked my tall hat, letting it fall on a stack of poetry books in a box on the floor. I’d been meaning to resell them. I missed the old Friar language, the fluid flow written right to left crafted by talented priestesses long ago, a language of scribes made only to be read, not spoken. It broke my heart when it fell out of use. Verse just wasn’t written like it used to be, and I tired of these new books quickly.

“If you break something, you’ll have to clean it up all by yourself,” I warned.

She ignored me, humming an upbeat melody loudly to herself, practicing her steps.

I unlocked the side door that led to our small apartment and pulled my apron off over my head. Our room was small and untidy—fabric patterns and discarded cuts of wool scattered about—but it was home. We tried not to hoard much in case we needed to abandon it all in a hurry.

I couldn’t let us stay long in one city. I did a much better job of avoiding eyes and was more difficult to age at a glance than Lisbeth. On the streets, I was called ma’am more often than I was called miss, but it wasn’t in my sister’s nature to behave the same. Eventually the locals would notice how her youth never faded. The apples of her cheeks would remain ripe always, not at all like a witch from an elemental coven. People would talk. Talk was dangerous.

The gods hated witches like us—witches with a power that could rival their own. I lived in constant crippling fear that if I was less than vigilant even once, a vindictive deity might take notice and send trouble our way. Or an ambitious warlock like the one I had to cut into pieces and hide in the bin before we fled to make a new home in Kosh. If another came sniffing about, that could turn just as deadly, and I’d rather not have to fillet a person. It was very messy work.

My sister insisted the gods didn’t pay any attention to nobodies. They were too distracted by kings and warlords, battles and courts and the like, to harass two shop women only passably good at pretending to be common green witches.

She had a point.

That didn’t stop my stomach from sinking, though. I’d lived long enough to know how evil and unexpected the world could be. What if she was wrong?

“If you’re trying to talk yourself out of going, quit it!” Lisbeth shouted through the door. “We’re doing this! You’ve already agreed, and I’m holding you to it!”

A chortle slipped out of me that I smothered, pressing my lips together.

She knew me too well. And truthfully, the greatest risk to us was staying in Kosh much longer. She was a young witch, enthusiastic but still learning. The more familiar she became with the people here, the more likely it was that she’d have another magical accident and possess someone again. It hadn’t taken her long to regain control of her spirit, but it wasn’t worth the risk. If one night was what she needed to leave the shop and the neighbors she’d grown too attached to, then I could give her that.

“Tell me how beautiful your dress is,” Lisbeth cooed through the crack in the door.

“It’s stunning.” I ran my fingers over the burgundy taffeta draped over my bed.

Lisbeth let out another victorious squeal. Based on the energetic beat of her steps, she’d gone back to dancing. Excitement bubbled up inside me, quieting my worries. We deserved a night like this, a night of foolish fun. Didn’t everyone?

I lowered to my knees and reached under the mattress, pulling out the heavy pack I kept loaded in case of an emergency. We wouldn’t carry bags tonight, as promised, but she’d lost her mind if she thought she could talk me out of going anywhere unarmed.

I tucked an unloaded pocket pistol into the makeshift holster I’d sewn along the fur lining of my right boot. It had been a gift from Lisbeth, a pretty thing with an intricately engraved barrel. Should the need arise, I could kill someone and look fetching while doing it, she’d said.

The tinkle of shattering glass interrupted my reverie.

“Stop dancing out there with the broom like a loon,” I called over my shoulder.  
“You’ll bring the whole store down!”

Lisbeth gave no response. Another thud and a cascade of breaking glass followed. The bell over the shop entrance chimed sharply.

I shot to my feet. “Lis?”

The silence that answered sent my heart up into my throat. I ran for the door, throwing it open with such force it slapped against the wall and rebounded. Heavy quiet greeted me. The scent of hot bricks hit my nostrils, the smell so thick it gagged me.

“Lisbeth!” I choked. “Lisbeth, say something!”

I rushed to the entrance, my pulse roaring in my ears. The door hung wide open, and the wind beat against the glass. I searched the store front for an intruder or signs of Lisbeth, but the street was empty.

I screamed for my sister. When she didn’t respond, I ran back inside. On the ceiling, a bright red sigil in the shape of a flame burned overhead amongst the tin tiles, the source of the strange heat. It was a garm-summoning symbol, a powerful one that radiated divine energy.

I sprinted around the next shelf, sliding in fallen herbs and spilled oil, and then I froze. My stomach plummeted to my boots.

Lisbeth lay broken on the floor directly beneath the sigil, right where a nightmare-born beast pulled straight from the Otherworld had done their worst. Her big brown

eyes stared at nothing, unseeing. Crimson trickled out of her mouth. Her legs bent at the knees at an unnatural angle. One of her slippers was missing.

Her lips were parted, but she hadn't even been given the chance to call for help, to speak at all.

"We can fix you," I rasped, falling at her feet, my voice pitching high. "It's all right, Lisbeth . . . We'll fix you up . . ."

I scooped her into my arms, and her head lolled.

"Don't be gone, don't be gone, don't be gone," I chanted. My eyes burned.

Blood caked her hair, mixing with shredded roots and shattered bits of glass. The mess of it dripped between my fingers. I cupped the back of her head, and a sharp bit of bone pricked my palm. A pitiful sound squeaked out of me. I shook her gently, trying to rouse her, frightened down to the bottom of my soul I'd never wake her again. Her light, the brightest, most lovely light, was snuffed out.

My vision flooded.

"Lisbeth!" I shut my eyes, squeezing tears out in hot little streams. "Don't leave me!"

But she couldn't really be dead! Any minute now I'd wake up in my bed in a panicked sweat. Lis would be fast asleep, safe and sound. In the morning, I'd yell at her for her terrible dream behavior and for scaring me . . .

But I didn't suddenly wake up. Lisbeth remained broken before me.

Lifeless. Gone.

A sob shook my shoulders. Clutching her body to me, my fingers caught in a delicate chain. I pulled the amulet she had hidden under her bodice free, and fresh misery streaked down my cheeks and squeezed my lungs. The amulet was an old thing I had given her years ago. Made of copper, an image of a blazing torch decorated its center. I hadn't realized she still wore it.

Hands trembling, I removed it from her neck and put it around mine, tucking the amulet beneath my chemise so I could wear it closest to my heart. My chest, right where the cool metal touched, ached. The words to beg Lisbeth to return to me tangled on my tongue, impossible to press out of quaking lips. My nose ran.

Where had the garm who'd hurt her gone? I hoped it came back so I could rip its damned head off.

I lost track of how long I sat there, holding my sister, rocking her lifeless body the same way I used to rock her to sleep after she had bad dreams as a girl. Overhead, the heat began to cool, the sigil fading, its power waning with it. Her body too—it cooled in my arms.

I reached up toward the symbol but not with my hands. Claws made of gray mist burst from my chest. I grabbed the summoning spell with my spirit, trapping it in an ethereal grip. The image vanished from the ceiling as though it had never been there. I reeled the lingering god power to me, hauling the fiery magic into my body, tucking it between my ribs to fuel me.

It hurt a little. It heated my blood and made my skin smoke, but it felt right there.

As careful as though my sister were made of fragile glass, I slid her shattered body off my lap, onto the floor. I crossed her broken arms over her chest. I closed her lifeless eyes. A knot in my throat formed as I kissed her cool forehead one last time, the same way I had all those nights I'd tucked her into the bed right next to mine

when she was small. My lips trembled, but I did not cry.

I was finished with tears.

My fingers curled into fists of fury. If the fool god who'd sent a beast to crush my innocent sister thought her powers were threatening, I'd show them real power. If it had been jealousy that had guided their hand, I'd give them a reason to feel envy. Lisbeth had had only a portion of the forbidden energy I possessed. The guilty god would tremble on their knees before I'd finished with them.

I'd been so careful to conceal what I was from the world for years while I'd raised Lisbeth, but I let all of that fall away, every cautiously crafted barrier that kept my powers in check like a stall for a wild stallion. I shed each lock, knocked down every mental door, and my skin steamed in the autumn air. My blood heated. I fed the god-fire in my chest my wrath, and energy sang in my veins, lighting me up from the inside out. I adorned myself in that rage like armor. Here grief and fear couldn't touch me.

My enemies' pleas for mercy would be in vain.

They would scream Lisbeth's name before I ended them.

The whole world would know my pain and would cry out for her as I did.

I would kill the ones at fault slowly, I decided, the thought soothing to my burning soul. The garm who'd done this would die in pieces. I would rip Hel asunder to find them. The gods who'd crafted all of their wretched kind would die for this day, too. They were all guilty. Not even Death, The Old One himself, was safe from me for ferrying my dear sister's soul to a place I could not go.

I didn't know who had done this. But if I killed them all, I couldn't miss.

The entire city of Kosh would burn for Lisbeth. For three years we had worn their clothing and followed their rituals, minded their rules, and all I'd ever asked for in return was that they hid her for me. They had failed her. They had failed me .

I was no fucking harmless green witch descended from an earth coven. I had no coven. I had no one at all now and nothing to lose. I was a witch even the divines feared.

A gray witch.

Spirit magic pumped through me alongside the god-fire fury boiling in my veins, and the new trapped sigil flared in my chest. It turned my belly molten. Its ashy soot gathered in my throat. Beneath me, the pooling blood dried in the heat my rage radiated.

I rose slowly to my feet, and when I took a step forward, one pace closer to glorious retribution, the floorboards cracked beneath me. A splinter shaped like a bolt of lightning appeared between my boots. I reached through it with spirit and wrath and the fire in my chest.

Down and down and down I reached, gray claws of magic coiled with iridescent flame.

I stretched myself past my limits, determined to pierce the Otherworld, to travel farther still, to find Hel at its belly and rip open its icy gates, to punish every beast I found there in an ethereal assault. The god Nott, Lord of Night and Mischief, would die first. His twin who ruled Hel with him, Mara, Lady of Nightmares, would die too for housing the foul garm who lived amongst them. I cared not whether they'd sent the one who'd murdered my sister. They were all to blame now. Every god in every realm that had made us live in fear would pay.

But a shadowy power blocked my way. Death himself had responded to my magical assault on his realm. Still, fear could not touch me. If he would not let me pass through his Otherworld, then he would die now.

I grabbed him up in my magical grip—as much of him as I could gather. He was massive, a never-ending stretch of midnight, but that did not slow me. I would make him smaller. I would tear and tear at him until his divine soul was tiny enough to squash beneath my boot, and then I would consume whatever remained. With his power added to mine, no force in existence would be able to stop me.

Cosmic energy poured out from the rip in the world I had created, an inky darkness dotted in tiny stars. It broke into pieces and swarmed around me like angry black flies. The buzz of it echoed and crackled in my ears. Flames shot from my feet and caught the floorboards.

The shop Lisbeth loved would be her funeral pyre.

Somewhere in the distance, a voice screamed, “Fire! Fire!”

A faraway part of me, a part shrinking by the second, recognized Bram. More shouted voices joined his, calling for buckets and water. That tiny shrinking bit of me worried what would happen to my shop, my home, the people outside, the street children that might be too close, the nearby buildings I would scorch to the ground, my beloved sister’s body . . .

Through the path of my reaching powers, Death grabbed me back, and I fell out of my realm and into his. His ethereal grip was icy and oily and so strong his might was suffocating. The fire in my chest went out with a spark and a sizzle.

I had a moment to ponder the end of my mortality, to wonder if it would be difficult to find my baby sister in the life after.

All at once, everything went dark and cold.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“A ticket aboard Death’s train cannot be purchased. Passage on the Schatten is secured with magic and blood and regrets.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

“Lisbeth!” I came to with a gasp.

Bursting upright, I knocked my head on the bunk above me. I rubbed the ache out of my scalp. My heart was a war drum in my chest, ready for battle. The fabric of my skirt was too heavy for the hot, dry temperature here. I yanked on my high collar to loosen it, and my fingers snagged on the delicate chain of the amulet I’d tucked under my shirtwaist. All at once the horrors of the evening returned to me.

I looked about for Lisbeth, but I was no longer in our shop.

A sob caught in my throat as my mind cruelly replayed the source of my grief. Closing my eyes, I pressed my palms over wet lashes, willing the visions away. My throat burned, and I lost the battle against my tears, weeping loudly into the bedding.

I sobbed until my throat hurt and my eyes were crusty with salt, fingers digging into the unfamiliar blankets.

Sacred Crone save me. I’d gone mad. The divine fire in my chest had burned out only after it had turned me dangerously reckless. The gods deserved to pay for their many crimes, but a full-frontal assault aimed at Hel had been utter lunacy.

It’s a wonder I was still alive at all.

I sucked in a breath, fighting back the next current of tears. The floors and walls

resembled limestone, but the surface was too smooth and there was a yellowish hue to it under the gaslights. Like bone. The gentle sway of the small cabin and the rumble of the tracks below confirmed my worst fears. I was no longer in Kosh. I wasn't in the Upper Realm at all.

I was aboard Death's train, the Schatten, made of the dead for the dead.

Bile burned the back of my throat. I used my hand to shield my eyes from the bright glow of the wall sconce, blinking until my gaze readjusted. My skin was clammy and paler than its usual sandy shade.

"Don't panic," I whispered to myself, but my body ignored the command. My heart took off at a mad gallop, and my skin pebbled and prickled.

There was blood on my clothes. Lisbeth's blood. She was all over me.

I wanted to curl up and cling to the last of my sister's essence. I'd sleep there and never wake. Rest forevermore. Let the Schatten carry me straight to the life after and whatever awaited me beyond its ethereal gates. But Lisbeth would hate me like this. She would shout at me for wallowing so shamelessly that I'd put myself in great danger. I could almost hear her voice, my memories of her were still so fresh and vivid.

Knock this off, she'd say. Pick your sorry self up right now. You've things to do.

She was right. There was a guilty god I needed to end and a murdering garm to rip apart. I couldn't accomplish either of those things here.

I took in air through my nose and blew it out past dry, cracked lips, retraining my lungs to breathe normally again. When my thoughts tried to stray toward my grief, I imagined the pain inside me as the dark green herbs I worked with in the shop so

often. I dumped my sadness into a mental mortar and crushed those sour feelings to smaller more manageable bits with an imaginary pestle, grinding my fist into my open palm.

Down and down, I stuffed my grief until the sinking sickness softened and all I felt was numb and hollow. I let the survival instincts I'd honed after years in hiding stitch me back together into something resembling composed. If I dwelled on Lisbeth even a little, I wouldn't have the strength to avenge her.

You need a coven , the voice in my head said, sweet and crystal clear.

I needed off this train, and I couldn't do that alone.

"Oi! Is anyone up there?" I asked, voice weak and small like I hadn't used it in ages. I prodded at the bunk above me with my boot.

No one responded. I eased off the bed, rising slowly on legs that felt like pudding. I lifted onto my tiptoes to peer over the railing. The top bunk was disappointingly empty, no potential ally in sight. I dropped back down on my heels, deflated and alone.

A wooden plaque stretched across the ceiling.

" Judgment ," I read the single word aloud. "Well, fuck you and your judgment," I ground out.

Headed for the window, I swayed on my feet like I was walking across the deck of a ship being tossed by the sea. I hadn't yet found my equilibrium here. I pulled back the brocade curtains, and faint unnatural light poured inside. There was no sun in the sky, just a strange gilded glow interspersed with puffs of clouds.

A city blurred by, or the image of one did. The longer I stared at the brick and gabled buildings, the more alien and unreal they appeared. There was no life out there. No traffic on the streets, no carts or horses or pedestrians. A massive clockface sat inside a large central tower. Only, this clock had thirteen hours, not twelve. Whatever the train was circling, it wasn't some peaceful cityscape. Wulfram, the ancient legends called it. A place of arbitration.

I shut the curtains.

The sliding door that separated my small sleeper cabin from the rest of the train had a fading mark melted into it. Shaped like Death's crow, an oily sigil lingered from the divine magic used to bring me here.

My fingers scraped roughly across what remained of a dark wing. I didn't dare grab for this power with my gray magic, remembering how easily Death's essence had smothered me before. After it faded, I tried to turn the brass handle on the door, but it was locked.

"Hello?" I shouted, knocking my fist against the wood. "Is anyone out there?"

Where were the others awaiting judgment, the magic-rich people who had infuriated the gods as I had? How strange it was to spend so much of my time these last few years shoving people away as hard as I could. Now here I was, desperate for any one of them.

When no one replied, I gave up on the door and went searching through the luggage tucked under the bunk, looking for supplies. I didn't know what would come next, but I wouldn't be caught unprepared.

I braided my hair into a long plait to get it off my neck. Not sparing a thought for who owned what or where it all came from, I pulled out a traveler's chest and found

assorted clothing inside. Most of it was nonsense: lone stockings and shoes without a partner. The brown trousers I found were too long for me, but they would serve me better than my shop-wear.

I pulled off my thick skirt and the crinoline beneath it. After stepping into the trousers, I tucked the lengthy pantlegs down into my boots and adjusted suspenders over my shirtwaist to keep them in place. I'm short but hardy. Cut for a man, the fit was tight around my thighs, but the fabric was light. It gave me more range of motion and was better suited to this heat.

I still had a pocket pistol at my ankle, but it wasn't loaded. Wanting it closer at hand, just in case, I slipped it into the waistband of my new trousers, against the blood-soaked cotton at my navel. Perhaps I'd find ammunition somewhere, if there was such a thing in the Otherworld.

The door clicked.

I hurried to it, and this time it slid open cleanly. I eased out into a brightly lit hall that smelled of kerosene. Across from my room, a woman hunkered down near another bunk. Perhaps she'd been the one to free me. In her fifties with light rosy skin and sunken cheeks, she picked through luggage, throwing clothing and bed linen behind her and out of her way. Brown hair shot through with silver peeked out from a blue-green scarf.

She was attractive. The more years I saw, the harder it was to find anyone appealing unless they at least had crow's feet at their eyes and some silver in their hair. They looked like children to me otherwise. Her tattered dress was a sea-shade favored by water covens.

"Hello?" I whispered, and the woman's head snapped toward me.

I showed her my palms in a gesture meant to be reassuring, but she rose into a fighting crouch, flinty gaze bouncing from my face to the crimson stains that made my shirtwaist stick to me.

“I’m called Maven,” I said, struggling to keep a calm tone. The way she glared at me had my twitchy fingers wanting to grab for the pistol at my waist, but that was no way to make allies. I couldn’t be the only one who wanted off this train. Witches were strongest together.

“There’s no point in bothering with names here, girl,” the blue witch said. Girl? I was centuries older than she was, though Lisbeth said I looked about thirty-five, depending on how well I’d slept the night before. I didn’t bother correcting the witch. Though her tone was terse, she rose out of her fighting stance.

“I had hoped—”

“There’s no point in hope either.” She rushed out of the cabin then, jogging down the hall past more sleeper compartments, steps hollow echoes against the bone floors.

I frowned at her retreating back. Another plaque stretched across the ceiling. Serve the gods. Win the games , it read, and my stomach plummeted.

What games?

I was a stranger to the Otherworld, but it was no secret that the gods who resided here could be so cruel they made the divines in the Upper Realm seem diplomatic in comparison. But what exactly was it that they did to the prisoners sentenced to the Schatten?

I tried not to dwell on the what ifs, focusing instead on being as prepared for the worst as I could. The rest of my scrounging was somewhat fruitful. I found a satchel,

a thick blanket I could roll up to fit inside, and a knife that was too dull to be very useful in a fight but would do as a tool until I had the means to sharpen it. No ammunition unfortunately.

There were plaques near every bunk. Most of them held words like lawfulness or restitution or related synonyms. The next one brought me up short.

Earn your freedom , it read. The rest of the wood had been broken off. Beneath it was a swatch of bright red blood that dripped from the ceiling and turned my insides cold. I didn't bother searching that cabin at all.

Movement echoed down the aisle, and I poked my head out of the compartment, hoping to try my luck with another prisoner. But the person pushing a cart of refreshments toward me—if they could be called a person—had no face. Smooth pale skin stretched from chin to their shorn hairline.

I leapt back with a gasp. They shuffled by, dressed like a train car attendant in a coal black uniform with bright brass buttons. A shiver rippled down my spine. I crept into the aisle, glancing back to ensure the sinister attendant continued in a direction that would take them far away from me.

I finished with the sleeper cars after that, making for the dining cars. The first was empty, but glasses of water sat beside plates of half-eaten food. Mouth parched, I helped myself to the water. I drank until my belly was so full the liquid sloshed inside me when I walked. In the next car over, more faceless attendants cleaned plates off scattered tables.

Bile rose in my throat. I stepped quickly past them into the next cabin, a lounge car with cushioned chairs. The central standing clock had thirteen hours instead of twelve like the Upper Realm. Another plaque hung under the clock. The words the Crow Games are coming were the only parts I could make out. The rest of the message had

been chiseled away.

Other passengers huddled together in this car, people with faces, so I lingered. In the corner, a yellow-haired young woman clutched her knees to her chest and wept. Her slender body shook. I was too hollowed out to feel anything for her but a shared fright.

Opposite her sat the blue witch from earlier. Her hands folded in earnest prayer, lips moving with her silent words, pleading with the gods. Between her fingers she clutched a pendant. Based on its color and the clam shape, it was a symbol of Unger, god of the sea.

My attention returned to the plaque and the parts of it I couldn't read.

"Ignore it. It was all a lie," the blue witch groaned, "so I tore it down."

"What did it say?" I asked.

"The winner of the games would be given divinity and made to rule the Otherworld, and other such nonsense. The gods would never bow to a mortal, of course. It's a trick to encourage prisoners to fight. Only one coven can win the games, and the god who blesses them will take the throne and set the winners free. Nott probably put up the sign to cause mischief."

"Good that you took it down, then," I said, then I sighed. It was no surprise at all that the divines were fighting over a throne. They usually were. And it was even less surprising that instead of risking their own immortal bodies, they settled their differences with the blood of the prisoners who had wronged them.

I needed allies, and I needed them fast. Surely I wasn't the only one aboard desperate not to stand alone here. I'd throw myself at any of them at this point. Perhaps if I kept

the blue witch talking . . .

“Her. I want her.” The voice made me turn.

Lounging at a side table were two witches, their bodies curved toward one another in hushed conversation. I wasn’t certain who had spoken until she did so again.

“Let’s invite her to travel with us,” the witch said. She was dressed in an aged leather waistcoat dotted with scorch marks, her skin a cool medium-brown with autumn undertones. The knapsack at her back bulged. Her boots were mismatched. The violet scarf braided into the witch’s midnight hair showcased her allegiance to the pursuit of knowledge. A scribe’s scarf.

The witch beside her remained seated, weighed down by her own heavy pack. Between long fingers, she balanced a shot of clear liquor. Tawny hair cropped short around her head, her complexion was a light shade of fawn. She wore the woolen uniform of a soldier. The jacket was so frayed and battered, most of the blue color had seeped into gray.

The soldier considered me over her drink, cobalt eyes narrowed. “No, Ruchel. Not her.”

I shuffled closer, clutching the strap of my new satchel to me tightly.

“You’ve said no to every new prisoner who’s walked out of that hall. We can’t afford to be so choosy,” Ruchel ground out. Around her neck hung a copper pendant with the same torch symbol worked into its center mine had. That symbol had meant many different things over the ages and had often been favored by witches labeled as rebels and anarchists. Now, it was a symbol wielded by magical folk who had no allegiance to any god.

I liked this Ruchel immediately.

“She’s covered in blood,” the soldier grumbled. Thick fur lining peeped out around the edges of her tall boots. In the northern reaches of the Upper Realm, in a country called Sebrak, the land was colder in the hills and there was an ongoing civil war over limited resources. “We need coven members who can help keep us alive in the coming games. Not witches who require a nurse.”

Neither of them bothered lowering their voices, despite how clearly I could hear them. I picked at the strap of my bag, trying to think what Lisbeth would do. If she were here, she’d already have a whole flock of new allies ready to band together to plot their escape from Death.

“She can’t be that hurt, Nola,” Ruchel said. “She’s walking fine, and she’s the first new witch we’ve seen come out of that hall who didn’t look like they were about to vomit.”

“Perhaps I already vomited,” I offered, tired of being talked about instead of to.

Ruchel grinned at me. Nola scowled fiercely into her glass.

“I’m called Maven,” I said.

“We’re not looking for new friends,” the soldier retorted, cutting Ruchel off.

“Sounds like you are,” I countered. “And I’m not hurt. All this on my clothes—it’s not my blood.”

“See there? She’s fine.” Ruchel extended her slender hand, and I took it. We shook briskly. “I’m Ruchel. I’m a mind witch from an air coven, or I was before I got dumped here. Admittedly, most of my divination abilities are best suited to academia,

but I have unnatural instincts. I'll use them to keep you alive so long as you listen to me out there during the trials."

Out where? What trials? I wanted to ask, but my mind took off like a shot and began to whirl.

Ruchel nudged Nola's arm encouragingly.

The soldier rolled her eyes, drained her glass, and plopped it onto the table. "I'm Winola, a witch of none-of-your-business, from a coven of—" She pointed both middle fingers up at me.

I liked her immediately as well. I didn't need her to like me back to want her help, and she didn't have to share who she was. The crimson pendant at her collar gave the red witch away.

"What about you?" Ruchel asked me.

"Oh?" I rubbed a hand down the back of my head, fingering my braid. "Right . . ."

"Coven of origin?" Ruchel prodded. I was slow to respond. Now Nola was staring at me too.

I swallowed. "I don't have one."

The soldier snorted dismissively, then returned to her drink, refilling it from the decanter on the table.

"Anymore," I added briskly. My sister had been my coven. It was an odd witch who didn't have a proper one.

Ruchel's ochre eyes softened. "You lost them?"

Absentmindedly, I ran a hand down my blood-soaked shirtwaist. "Garm attack."

I had to be careful of my words around a mind witch. She'd sense it if I lied to her. But I couldn't go telling her the full truth of what I was either. Gray witches were feared by all, and Nola was already uncertain of me. Too many gray practitioners had become warlords and murderers and worse with their spirit magic. They'd be convinced I was a villain who'd earned my place here committing horrid atrocities. Sadly, that wasn't entirely off-base.

On the floor of my old shop with my sister's corpse cooling in my arms, I nearly had become a villain. If Death hadn't stopped me, an entire city would now be ash.

"And what's your specialty?" Nola demanded, looking me over.

"I . . ." Instead of spirit, I wanted to say I practiced green magic, but my limited skills in that area wouldn't impress these two. "I've dabbled in this and that . . . I know some earth spells and some—"

"Throw her back, Ruchel," Nola groaned. "She'll be of no use to us."

"No." Ruchel's gaze trained on me so hard I could feel the weight of it. "I sense she'll be useful."

"That's the one I want," Nola said, loud enough to interrupt the prayers of the witch in the corner. "We'd still take you with us, Blue, if you'd stop being so pig-headed."

The blue witch sat forward, releasing her sea pendant so that it clattered against the other baubles draping her neck. Her flinty eyes trained on Ruchel. "I won't partner with a woman who insists on insulting the divines by wearing the symbol of a dead

goddess. We need the blessing of a god to win the games, not their contempt.”

Ruchel squeezed her torch amulet in her palm. “You lack loyalty, Blue. It was Fria who made you a witch, and I will always honor her sacrifice.” The passion in her words stirred me. “If her symbol upsets the gods, so be it. It’s Fria’s tears that fuel your abilities, not the hungry sea deity you insist on serving even as he abandons you here. What has Unger ever done for you? What have any of them ever done for us?”

“At least Unger comforts me,” the blue witch huffed. “He may one day decide to save me from this place. A dead goddess can do nothing for no one. Keep talking like that and you’ll win the favor of none of them.”

“I hope this symbol angers all of them.” In solidarity, I pulled free my amulet and let it fall against my chest. Lisbeth’s blood had dried upon it. “The gods already hate us. That’s why we’re here. They can all go suck an egg, I say.”

Ruchel beamed at me. Nola’s laugh was low and sounded more like she was clearing a stuffy nose than expressing mirth, but I took it as a promising sign.

The clock on the wall struck the 13<sup>th</sup> hour and a bell chimed. The melodious peal seemed to come from everywhere all at once.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Time to go,” Ruchel said as the bell sounded again. “Are you traveling with us or not, Blue?”

The witch shook her head with enough vigor her scarf slipped, revealing more lovely silver-streaked hair. She left the lounge, headed for a door into the crowded car one over.

“Stubborn woman,” Ruchel bit out. “Come on. Get in line.”

Taking the lead, she guided me toward an exit at the bottom of a small set of bone stairs. The bell chimed a third time, and the train began to slow. More prisoners gathered at various doors, falling into queues.

“Trial number three isn’t so terrible. It’s not the best, but it’s a decent one to get started in,” Ruchel said. Her reassurance did nothing to calm my nerves. I felt thrown to the wolves, with more questions than answers. So many questions, in fact, that they all tangled on my tongue before I could voice any of them.

Ruchel called over her shoulder, “Hurry up, Winola!”

The soldier climbed slowly to her feet, broad-shouldered and impressive at her full height. “I still haven’t agreed to let the new witch travel with us.”

“Stop being a little shit and get over here,” Ruchel rumbled.

“All right, all right.” Nola trotted up behind me. “We’ll see how she does at least.”

Being boxed in by the two of them settled me a little, quelling some of the worry and chaos trying to take root in my chest.

“I’m surprised you let anyone boss you around,” I said to Nola, masking the anxious tremor in my voice with a playful tone. Perhaps if I acted unafraid, the rest of me would follow suit. “If I was a soldier, maybe I’d grow accustomed to following someone’s orders, too.”

Nola’s mouth tugged up at the corner into a handsome grin. “I served in the Sebrak Republic army, but that’s not why I follow her orders. I’ve always had a tender spot for pushy women.”

The sniffles of the fair-haired girl drew my notice across the cabin. She was Lisbeth's age, a young twenty-something. Leaning around Nola, I watched her curl into herself. She lifted her chin to wipe her nose, and a scaled tail whipped out from behind her, a sign of garm heritage. The pain radiating from her mirrored my own loss, and for a moment the hollowness inside me cleared just enough that I ached with her. I tapped Ruchel's arm and pointed at the beast-born.

"I already tried. She's not coming," Ruchel said quietly. "She lost her whole coven last trial. They'd gotten large enough to attract the attention of one of the more established covens. That's why it's best to travel in smaller groups. It was brutal. She's giving up."

My stomach dropped. "Maybe we could—"

"Not you too," Nola said sourly, pressing me closer to the door as brakes squealed and the bone train came to a hard stop. The grainy scent of the alcohol on her breath mingled with the smell of kerosene from the lanterns. "I already have to deal with one irrationally soft-hearted witch. Let that girl be."

"But what will happen to her if she stays aboard?" I demanded.

Just then, one of the attendants pushed a cart through the lounge, another faceless creature that turned my stomach.

"That's a Schatten revenant," Nola said, in answer to the unspoken question that had my blood roaring in my ears. "And that's what happens to you if you stay aboard. Soulless servitude to the dead and damned. She's chosen that fate. Now get off or join her."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Before there were humans, the gods made the garm. They fashioned them from lost nightmare spirits called shades and the bones of the great beasts of old.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

We exited onto a platform made of ebonized wood. A signpost that hung below a dull burning gaslight numbered it trial three of seven. Dark boards lined up before a foreboding set of cast iron gates. Shaped in the metal to form jagged letters were the words Crow Games .

Despite the heat, a full-body shiver started at the back of my neck and cascaded down my spine, pebbling my skin.

Behind me, Death’s ghostly pale train stretched as far as my eyes could see in each direction, but the platform was only wide enough to hold the few hundred prisoners who exited the cars around us. Soon it was so crowded, I could barely see over the press of bodies.

The train whistled. Steam billowed into the air, and it was off again, moving at such a high speed the bone cars blurred by, leaving us all behind. While I was on the train, my goal was to get off, but now I felt lost and oddly weightless, like whatever anchor had been pinning me to this plane was gone now.

I peered past the platform to the tracks, searching for an escape, breathing through this new vertigo. Beyond the railway, there was nothing but sand, a forebodingly barren wasteland.

“It’s not worth trying,” Ruchel warned me, her tone hushed. “You wouldn’t be the

first to think the desert would serve you better than the trials, but you'd be wrong. There's nothing but hungry giants out there."

My heart thundered in my chest. Giants were extinct in the Upper Realm. We'd killed them off ages ago to stop them from feasting on the rest of us.

The hushed crowd increased the intensity of the balmy heat. Wulfram sprawled behind the gates: quiet building after quiet building of black wood, white trim, and high gables. This city of the unliving felt entirely wrong. It was too clean, too still, its buildings too uniform. Not a place crafted by mortal hands. The eeriness brought to mind the moment I'd opened the shop door and discovered my sister, the quiet horror that had greeted me.

My stomach churned, and I put a hand over it.

"See the central tower there with the clock?" Ruchel said in my ear. She wasn't much taller than I.

I shook my head to clear it. "I see it." Impossible to miss, the clockface was a massive snow-white oval against a golden sky.

"To complete the trial, we stick together," Ruchel said, "we stay alive, and we reach that tower. Sometimes there's a god or two waiting at the end, demanding a tribute before they'll let us back onto the train. We'll gather a few things along the way just in case to try and win their blessing."

"What if we don't want back on the Schatten?" I asked, as a restless crowd herded the three of us closer to the gates.

"We want back on," Nola said quietly. "We have to reach that tower and the second platform it conceals before the 13 th hour, or the bone train leaves us behind."

“The trials of Wulfram are challenging during the day,” Ruchel warned, “but at night they’re hopeless, crawling with nightmare creatures. You need the support of a massive coven to attempt such a thing. Otherwise, the train is the safest place to sleep. There’s good food. There’s water and—”

“There’s liquor,” Nola said.

Ruchel rolled her eyes. “And there are other comforts. It’s not ideal, but it’s better than whatever else you’ll get in this realm.”

“You have allies?” I asked hopefully. “A coven that could shield us?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Nola hissed. “Survive the trial first, then we’ll see.”

But I still had so many questions! When did the games start? If we didn’t form a coven now, what chance did we stand to win our freedom?

Win the games , I remembered the plaque saying. Serve the gods . This was our punishment: trials designed to pit us against each other and please the deities who spied on us for their amusement. They claimed to want a champion, but I suspected they just wanted entertainment.

I hated it. I hated this Otherworld and its horrid gods with such passion I clenched my teeth until my jaw ached. Just beneath my rage, grief haunted my spirit. It scratched at me, reminding me of its might. I ground it down, calling to memory my mental mortar and pestle. I couldn’t fall apart again. Not here. Not if I wanted to live long enough to bring down the guilty god.

The clock chimed as the hand reached the first hour. My stomach swooped, and the gates parted with a loud screech of metal.

Witches and warlocks and assorted beast-born rushed the opening. I tried to follow suit, to keep up with the push of bodies. Surely there would be strength in numbers—we all wanted the same things here, didn't we? We could stay together, shield one another, and better our odds against whatever evils lay hidden in this city. An army was stronger than a unit all by itself.

“Hold on there, ducky.” Nola caught me by the strap of my pack and hauled me behind her, interrupting my efforts to cling futilely to hope. “Let the eager new ones try their luck first.”

Where Ruchel and I would have been trampled, the crowd made way for the tall soldier, weaving around her and us by extension.

There was no unit here. No army. Small groups parted from the collection of prisoners. Desperate loners broke from the pack, dashing down side roads, and the spark of hope in me died a quick death.

Half the group made it through the gates when the screaming started. I pressed my palms over my ears, trying to shut out the gut-wrenching sounds. Hostile garm—creatures more beast than man—charged out from behind the large buildings. They snapped at prisoners with sharp teeth.

I watched, feet inert, as more scales and hooves and claws appeared beside whipping tails and gnashing fangs and so much blood. Ruchel's face blanched, but otherwise she and Nola seemed unaffected by the fighting and fleeing, the thud of bodies falling, the crunch of bones, the wet sounds of slaughter.

It was too much for me. My stomach plummeted, and the pulse in my ears became a dull roar that made everything sound far away.

I needed to get out of here. The fear that seized me went bone-deep and turned me

cold.

I'm going to die.

Windows shattered. Wood splintered. The resounding crack of a revolver pierced the air. Its sulfur scent stung my nose. I tried to retreat, but Nola slung her solid arm around my shoulders and kept me in place.

"Running attracts them," Nola warned, and I froze, throat tightening. "Best to hold still, save your energy, and fight only if you have to."

Garm built like huge animals dragged screeching prisoners down alleyways and into buildings while I shut my eyes and resisted vomiting. In the Upper Realm, garm were Frid—half human. They had families. They joined covens.

These creatures were the nightmare-born beasts of Hel.

The last of the garm retreated or were killed. Silence followed—an unsettling, hopeless silence—and the crowd began to move forward once more, sprinting around the fallen bodies, their pace panicked. My heart raced, the thump of it so strong my pulse surged at my throat and wrists. Prisoners knocked into me in the rush.

Nola steadied me.

Lisbeth's voice was in my head again. I was so accustomed to having her with me, I knew immediately what she'd say. What are you doing being afraid? A powerful witch like you—they should be the ones scared.

"There's usually a few hungry garm waiting near the entrance of this trial," Ruchel said gently. "But now we can go."

“I need a minute,” I said, shaky on my feet. I wanted to do Lisbeth proud, and vomiting on my shoes seemed like a terrible place to start.

Nola prodded me forward. “When Ruchel says go, you go. Don’t think. Never second-guess her instincts. Just do it and thank the sacred Crone later that she kept you alive.”

I dipped my chin in solemn agreement. Hand pressed to my churning stomach, I took up a jog to fit the pace of the crowd. We passed shops with glass fronts and fully stocked shelves, though there were no workers inside, no signs of civilian life at all.

Prisoners looted the buildings for supplies, which seemed like a wise idea to me, but Nola and Ruchel urged me onward. I didn’t dare question them. We pulled quickly ahead of the group. I’d been awake all night. Already my feet were tired, but neither of my companions looked as worn and drawn as I suddenly felt. Their hardened gazes were fixed ahead on the tower, their goal, even as more chaos erupted behind us. Prisoners fought over their finds, and more dead littered the roads.

I dug inside the lip of my satchel, preparing for battle. More and more of the crowd thinned as groups broke off. The knife I readied belonged on a kitchen table, not in war, but it would have to do.

“Now you’re just embarrassing me.” Nola snatched the dull blade and threw it over her shoulder. She removed a dagger from the inner pocket of her lapel and shoved the hilt at my chest. I fumbled it a moment as we picked up speed, headed for a four-way intersection. We’d finally broken free of the larger group.

“Oh, but this is pretty,” I cooed, examining the curved blade. It glinted in the ambient light. One side was serrated, the edges as sharp as shark’s teeth. Lisbeth had loved pretty things that glittered and could be worn in her ears. I liked those too, but this was my personal favorite kind of shiny.

Nola flashed her teeth at me. Ruchel gestured for us to slow, and we fell in behind her. At the center of the intersection, a massive olive tree blossomed, its winding trunk as thick as the overturned horse carts nearby.

A skirmish broke out down the street between a group of warlocks and a gang of witches. Arcane fire and storm magic flew in wide arches, adding heat to the dry air. The warlocks marked themselves as one coven, wearing red hoods pulled over their heads like executioners.

I needed no context as they battled over the body of a fallen witch and the dead garm she'd taken down with her. Though many warlocks were male—as they all were in this coven—it wasn't their sex that made them warlocks. It was their ability to use relics. Witches created power sources by overexposing absorbent items to their magic. Items like copper and bone.

Unfortunately, this meant that witches often became such relics. Our skin and bones were sought after for just that.

At a safe distance, we watched the fight play out. The witches were cornered, outnumbered. But if the three of us joined them . . .

Nola caught me by my pack again. I hadn't even realized I'd charged forward a step.

"Not our fight, ducky," she scolded.

But witches were strongest together, I wanted to protest. And wasn't the goal of these trials to make allies to survive the games with? If we didn't help now, it could be us, our bones those warlocks defiled someday soon, our skin they harvested while we still lived to increase the vigor of their castings. Ambitious warlocks like these had forced my sister and I into hiding just as readily as vicious gods had.

Heat burned in my chest, reigniting the faint memory of the god-fire that had once been there. They all deserved to pay.

I opened my mouth to argue with Nola, but a shadow fell over the battle. A hush descended across the street. The fighting broke apart, and witches fled. Even the most eager of the warlocks rushed for cover. As they retreated into buildings, they pulled the hoods from their heads, an effective means of concealment for when they were once more amongst the crowd. Just like Nola and Ruchel were concealing their allegiances.

Perched on a gabled roof, a mass of curling and unfurling darkness cast a growing shade over the cobblestone streets.

A gasp caught in my throat as the shadows parted, revealing Death's favored.

"Reaper," Ruchel breathed.

Nola grabbed our arms and yanked us into the intersection. We crouched behind the trunk of the great tree.

"What's a crow doing here?" Nola whispered.

I peeked through the tangle of thin limbs and found the reaper, an ageless force of nature, staring right back at me. Hiding was doing us no good. He knew exactly where we were.

"Perhaps he's a prisoner like us?" Ruchel whispered hopefully, then she shivered. "I can't sense whether he means us harm. I can't read him at all. He's too . . . not human."

Nola shook her head. "In the months I've been stuck down here, I've never seen a

crow anywhere but on the train. If he's not a prisoner, it's more likely he's a—"

"Spy," I hissed through gritted teeth. "Death's spy."

Was he here for me? Did his vengeful maker want to know how I was faring with my punishment? I gripped my new dagger so tightly that the metal fixtures in the hilt bit into my palm. If this crow had come for me, I'd show him and his god exactly how I was faring. Gray magic stirred in my chest, my spirit readying itself.

A shadowy hood hid most of his hair, but a few strands of bone-white fell across his brow. There was no wind, but full of Death's gifted magic, his cloak billowed and rippled like angry waves caught in a maelstrom.

We waited for him to act, but the reaper didn't flinch. He perched like the crow he was named for, sharp chin cocked to the side.

The glow of the unusual sky brought out the blush undertones in his fair skin. A leather waistcoat, double-breasted from a fashion era long past, covered his chest. Bottomless black eyes stared straight through the web of branches to pin me in place. In an instant, I felt picked apart and seen through. My skin pebbled. I wanted to disappear into the sandy dirt under my feet.

I tried to be as formidable as he under the press of his scowl, but my bravado was forced. It was sheer spite that kept me from withering.

I glared back.

A trail of sweat dripped down my neck, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. I grew tired of this standoff. Nola had pointed her middle fingers at me earlier, but there was a more ancient way to show disdain that seemed appropriate for an ageless being like him.

I crossed the middle and forefinger of my left hand and waved them at him, a gesture wishing bad luck and treachery upon its target.

“Have you lost your mind?” Ruchel caught hold of my sleeve and jerked my hand down. “Don’t antagonize the crow.”

Nola chuckled. “Stop making me like you, ducky. The odds of you surviving your first trial are not in your favor. I prefer to like you less.”

The crow’s back pulled up straight. For a split second his cloak stopped rippling. It reminded me of the way a feral dog’s tail went still when the animal became agitated. The shadows returned, billowing up from the bottom of his cloak to cover him fully. Then his darkness melted into the gables like mist evaporating under the burn of the sun.

In a blink, he was gone.

We didn’t move for several long seconds. It was Nola who stood first, parting from the tree to better search the area for danger. She beckoned for us to follow. We took the path where the skirmish had broken out between the warlocks and witches. Out of respect for the dead, Ruchel did not touch the fallen.

Nola and I had significantly less respect.

Nola found a better set of boots. She kicked her worn pair off and gifted them to Ruchel, whose mismatched set wouldn’t do much longer. I found a half-empty canteen and a revolver in the coat pocket of one of the warlocks.

“That’s a great find,” Nola said, a hint of envy in her tone.

“Did you want it?” I offered, eager to create more goodwill between us. If they had

allies, I wanted to be amongst them fully.

“I don’t need one,” Nola said, her smile smug. “I’m my own firearm . . . Does it have any rounds?”

Aiming the short barrel safely at the ground, I slid back the latch and swiveled the cylinder free from its frame. “Four cartridges,” I told her before locking the cylinder back into place with an audible click.

“Use those very sparingly,” she cautioned.

I moved the pocket pistol my sister had given me back into my boot where it belonged.

“That’s a pretty thing,” Nola said, eyeing my boot longingly.

“No ammunition, though,” I told her. “It’s hard to find specialty rounds small enough even in the Upper Realm. I bet I’ll have a Hel of a time finding more down here.” I tucked the loaded revolver into the front of my waistband, keeping it close at hand.

“It would make a decent tribute if there’s a god at the end of this trial,” Nola said. She removed her woolen coat, then the shirt beneath, stripping down to her camisole before trading for the fresher linen of the fallen warlock at her feet.

I flinched. “It was a gift,” I said softly. My stomach turned at the thought of handing it over to a god to play with like some trinket before tossing it aside, bored. Too many of the gods had the temperament of a child. “My sister gave it to me, and I haven’t much left of her . . .”

The metal amulet hanging from my neck felt suddenly heavy.

“Staying alive beats being sentimental,” Nola said, and though I knew there was wisdom in that, her words cut anyway. “If we need it to get back onto the train, then—”

Ruchel grabbed Nola’s arm, silencing her. “We’ll find something else,” she said, ochre eyes full of a warmth I felt in my chest.

“Irrationally soft-hearted,” Nola muttered under her breath.

“Stop making me like you, Ruchel,” I teased.

She winked at me.

It didn’t feel right picking through corpses like carrion birds, but the warlocks would have done much worse to us if they could have. Ruchel sang a prayer over the dead witch, wishing her spirit a safe journey to the life after. Beside the body, a Hel beast who resembled a lion lay motionless, a fat purple tongue hanging out of the creature’s mouth between teeth as big as daggers. I shifted closer cautiously, afraid it would leap to life and go for my throat, but I wanted to be near. Ruchel’s soothing song washed over me, reminding me of a time long gone. I stood as witness in honor of the fallen.

The creature stayed dead, thank the Crone.

And as Ruchel sang the ancient words to wish the witch well on her next journey, I wondered if she hadn’t been a priestess. Temples of old had been replaced with great libraries. Over time, priests and priestesses traded their stoles and statues for books and scrolls. Priestesses were scholars and academics now, much like this mind witch.

But what god had she served, and who had scorned her by sending her here? It was hard to imagine an academic doing anything dangerous enough to be sentenced to a

place like Wulfram. A soldier I could imagine well enough, especially if the damning divine had made themselves patron over the opposing side.

But Ruchel? Warm, inviting Ruchel? It was a mystery.

We marched for hours down streets that were too quiet and clean, the air balmy and unforgiving. Nola removed her uniform coat and stuffed it into her knapsack. I untucked and opened my shirtwaist to cool myself.

I was rarely idle around my shop, but my body was unprepared for this type of exertion. My thighs chafed. My feet ached. It never got this hot in Kosh, even in the summer, and I finished off my new canteen trying to cool myself. My satchel had felt so light at the beginning of the trial, but during the journey it had doubled in weight.

We kept to the outskirts of the city. It would take longer to reach the tower this way, but the route was safer, Ruchel assured us.

The splash of splattering water caught my ear, and my mouth went dry. I hadn't had a drop to drink in over an hour, and I needed more. Ruchel and Nola were accustomed to all this marching. I was slowing them down, and the water sacks they carried at their belts were nearing empty as well.

I needed a rest.

I needed to dunk my entire face in whatever was making that delightful splashing noise . . .

But when we broke away from the back roads to make for the flow of moving water, the city grew busier. We hid from other witches, uncertain of their intentions. To avoid a coven of warlocks, we cut down an alley and spotted a Hel beast shaped like a giant scorpion. His face was eerily human, and his arms were massive claws. He

scuttled about on great scaled legs. From behind the cover of two rubbish bins, we watched the garm prowl.

In the open square, a water garden and small fountain burbled temptingly. We were so close I could almost taste it on my sticky tongue. The air was cooler here. I licked my cracked lips.

That nightmare creature was all that separated me from relief, and my irritation and discomfort grew so great I considered taking the garm on all by myself. My spirit stirred weakly in my chest as my fingers formed into fists. The heat and exhaustion had gotten to me. I'd worn myself ragged. All this straining and sneaking about had made me weaker still.

The beast must have sensed us in some way, because he patrolled the roadway, protecting the water at its center, unable to spot us with his beady eyes.

"What if we took it on? What are our chances?" I asked Ruchel, dagger ready in my left hand, finger on the trigger of the revolver in the other. Images of ripping the creature's head off firmed in my mind.

"Terrible," she whispered, and the violent images in my head evaporated.

"There's three of us and one of him," I insisted, though I lacked all confidence. My spirit was too weak.

"It'll pick its teeth with our bones," Ruchel said. "We won't last a second."

"It doesn't move very fast," I noted. "We could flank it."

"It doesn't look like it moves very fast," Nola cautioned.

Sweat dripped from my hairline, catching in my brow. There were hours still to go before we reached that damn tower. The clock leered at me from its great height, bathed in golden light. I didn't want to be more of a burden on these veteran survivors. Especially not when what I really needed was a moment of peace to dunk my whole head into that crystalline pool of free-flowing ambrosia.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "Then we should just keep going."

"See, this is why I'd rather not like you." Nola heaved a sigh. "We should just keep going. I should save my energy for when I need it next and let you collapse from heatstroke . . . But why don't I create a distraction instead. When the beast fucks off, you can make a quick run for that fountain."

"Aw, Winola," Ruchel cooed, "who knew you could be so—"

"Don't you start with me," Nola snapped, and Ruchel hid a secret smile in the twist of her lips.

"Will a distraction work?" I asked eagerly.

The mind witch squinted off into the distance like she was reading something written in the air I couldn't see. Then she nodded. "I feel much better about that than I do about trying to fight that thing, but I'm more attuned to what puts me at risk than I am others, you see."

"I'll take it," I told her.

"If you get caught," Nola said, "don't expect us to stick our necks out for you. Not even red magic is getting through that beast's thick shell. If it catches you—"

"I get it, I get it," I chanted, eager to start while I still had the strength to stand.

Nola swiped a bit of sweat off my cheek. She rubbed the salty moisture between her cupped hands, then she blew into them like she was warming her fingers. Hot air built between her palms, adding to the humidity coating my skin. Red magic—pure arcane heat in all its forms—built between her fingers. She stretched the crimson puff of cloud into a red-tinged storm small enough to fit in her palm. It crackled and sparked.

Nola waited for Ruchel to give the word, then the soldier leapt to her feet and launched the cloud off down the street, away from the fountain. She dove back behind the bins, and her magic doubled in size before erupting into a fit of lightning and thunder. It flew off between the buildings, making a ruckus like sheets of metal being slapped together.

The scorpion garm screeched and hissed. He shot off after the storm, moving on his many limbs at a blurring speed my eyes could barely follow.

“We’ll keep an eye on that one and whistle for you if there’s trouble,” Ruchel said. “Now be a dear . . .” She stuffed her water sack into my arms.

Nola gave me hers, too. “Go on,” she said, shoving me to my feet.

I stumbled a step, halting when I reached the corner of the alley to watch for the return of the garm. When I was certain the way was clear, I made a mad dash for the fountain. I dropped to my knees before the burbling water garden and dunked my entire face directly into it.

The water against my dry, cracked lips was bliss. I drank exuberantly, slurping and sipping, sucking it down until my throat was soothed and my body felt full. I refilled the water sacks and my canteen quickly, then I dropped my braid into the fountain, letting it soak the back of my neck, darkening the bronze strands.

A whimper parted my lips, the relief was so sweet. Gray magic warmed my chest,

revived by my lifting spirits, replenishing some of my lost energy.

A sharp warning whistle cut through the air.

I burst upright, wet braid whipping over my shoulder. Dagger at the ready, I launched to my feet. I expected to find the garm scuttling toward me, but no. What came for me was so much worse.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Only the worthy one who sits upon the crow throne shall rule the Otherworld.” –  
Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

The crow perched on the fountain’s stone edge, arms folded over his wide chest. Crystalline rivers cascaded around his boots, creating ripples in the water garden below. He cast a formidable shadow, the shade so dark and gloomy it was as if a funeral pall had been thrown over me. I could smell him: woodsy leather, salty sand, and the sweet, tart tang of powerful magic.

I reached for the revolver at my waist.

“Don’t,” he warned, and my fingers stilled. His low baritone struck parts of my ears I wasn’t certain I’d ever used before.

Spite kept me from cowering, but it was a healthy fear that stopped me from attacking. Followed swiftly by an unhealthy terror that rooted my feet in place. A bullet was a poor weapon compared to a crow’s death magic, a wilted flower against a broadsword.

“If you have something to say to me, spy, then say it.” I spoke with a strength I didn’t feel in my heart.

His dark gaze sharpened under his midnight hood. “What are you?”

The question threw me off-balance. I blinked at him, fingers flexing around the hilt of my dagger. “I’m a prisoner here. A witch.”

Wasn't that obvious?

He shook his head slowly, and strands of snowy hair fell across his brow, catching in his pale lashes. "The women you travel with are witches. But you . . . ? You're trouble."

I swallowed hard. Could the crow sense my gray magic with those piercing eyes of his? At full alert, my spirit stirred under my skin, pressing at the cage of my ribs.

"But I am a witch," I insisted, my voice shrinking in my throat.

"Why did you come to the Otherworld, Trouble?" He stepped down off the fountain. His shadows billowed under him, lifting him above the pool so that he glided over the water's edge.

I slid back a step, but his shadows pursued me. They crawled out from under his tall boots. Rippling like waves, the darkness lapped at the sand, drying out the earth until it hardened and cracked. It stopped just short of touching the tips of my feet. My spirit filled me to bursting, pressing against the barrier of my skin, wanting to push back at the threat of his nearing magic.

I lowered my dagger and straightened out of a fighting crouch. "If you want to know how I got here, go ask your god."

"We know how you reached the train," he growled. "What we don't understand is why you breached the Otherworld in the first place."

Then I was right. He was a spy gathering information for Death, not another contestant in the trials. My jaw clenched. "What I did before . . . I wasn't myself. That assault wasn't meant for your maker. He just . . . I only intended to pass through his realm. He didn't need to damn me to this place. I'm willing to make reparations

for the trespass.”

He scoffed. “That was more than a trespass. Be honest now. What would you have done if an intruder had ripped the roof off your home, then attacked you?”

Honestly? I would have pointed my revolver at their face and pulled the trigger. If Lisbeth had still been alive, I’d have squeezed the trigger a time or two more, just in case.

“I wasn’t myself.” The explanation felt even weaker the second time around. I rubbed at the space high on my abdomen, remembering how the god fire had burned behind my ribs, how it had fueled my fury.

“Which brings me back to my first question,” he rumbled, glancing down at the amulet hanging around my neck. “Besides trouble, what are you?” His dark eyes roved over me, not entirely black. Flecks of browns and cerulean blues fed into that bottomless darkness, the hue so deep I couldn’t find his pupils.

Gooseflesh prickled my skin.

“Are you going to kill me?” If it came to a fight, I wouldn’t make it easy for him. He’d find my soul particularly difficult to collect.

His shadows pulled back, suddenly reluctant, but his expression remained stony. His head cocked to the side, a raptor considering its prey. “We haven’t decided yet.”

“Would your god accept reparations? Would you tell him that I’m sorry?” It was a long shot, I knew. “Truly, it was not Death I was after. Not his home either. I was trying to get at Hel and the garm who wronged me.”

“Reparations?” His lip twitched. “But that’s exactly what this place is. Justice for the

crime you committed against the Old One.”

My spirit shrank into my gut. Gray magic tightened my stomach, tugging my lips down into a deep frown. “Look around you. This place will kill me. What justice is there to be had in that?”

“But you’re not dead,” he said flatly, his expression impossible to read. If he decided to attack me, I wouldn’t see it coming. He was too stoic. “You should be grateful.”

“Perhaps it’s your god who should be grateful. If I had been after him, I would have . . .” My words fell away. Haughty, empty threats wouldn’t save me. I let out a slow breath, caging my temper. “Well then, if and when you do decide to kill me, you know where to find me.”

I sheathed my dagger in my waistband. The reaper watched me gather the water sacks into my satchel, motionless and silent. His shadows rippled and rolled beneath him, an angry black ocean crashing against pale, indifferent stone. I put my back to him, a grave insult to those of us old enough to know better, but he didn’t protest the gesture.

His shadows crept after me again, keeping close but never touching. My spirit was frenzied inside me at its nearness. His magical pursuit stopped as I rounded a corner into the alley. I reached the rubbish bins, and my spirit shrank inside me.

Nola and Ruchel were gone.

I couldn’t blame them—they’d warned me—but my heart pinched anyway. I checked high and low to make sure the spy wasn’t following, then I retraced our earlier path back to the main road, the most direct route to the clock tower. Without a guide, it was my best chance of not getting lost out here.

A whistle cut through the wind at my back. My head snapped side to side, looking for its source.

“Maven!” Ruchel hissed.

I spotted the taller Nola first, peeking around the doorframe of a stout building with a glass front, and I let out a breath. They waved me over. I jogged to them, my heart and steps lighter.

Ruchel hugged me around the neck, the gesture so warm and welcome I held on to her, stealing an extra moment of comfort.

“Did the crow follow you?” Nola demanded.

“I don’t think so, but it’s hard to be sure. There are plenty of shadows about for him to hide in.” I handed Ruchel her water. “Just out of curiosity, how many times did Nola suggest you leave me behind?”

The soldier snorted.

Ruchel’s grin went crooked. “Only twice. You must really be growing on her.”

“Just keep moving, you two,” Nola huffed. “No more delays. We’ve been lucky so far, but Hel beasts will awake in larger numbers the closer it gets to nightfall, and there are too many warlocks sniffing about as is.”

We set off at a brisk walk, keeping close to the buildings and the cooler shade they cast.

“What did the crow want with you?” Ruchel asked, lowering her voice as though speaking too loudly might summon him.

I could have told her I didn't know. Omitted the truth. I could have avoided lying to the mind witch by remaining vague, but meeting her eager ochre gaze, I no longer wanted to hide parts of myself. I'd lived like that for years with Lisbeth, and look where it had gotten us. If we were ever to become a proper unit, a real coven determined to win Death's games, we had to have trust. We had to be true to each other.

"The crow is here to spy on me because I tried to kill his god," I confessed.

Nola had her sack uncapped and at her lips when she stumbled and choked. She coughed out a chortle, water dribbling down the sides of her mouth. Ruchel's burst of laughter carried on the air. Their mirth stoked the smoldering ember of my spirit energy into a healthy blaze.

"If you don't want to tell us what really happened," Nola said, wiping her chin dry, "next time just say so."

"I don't think she's joking." Ruchel's bright smile faded. "Crone take you. You really tried to kill the Old One, didn't you? What would possess a person?"

Nola's cobalt eyes went wide. "Are you mad? For the Crone's sake, he's the god of death."

"I am a little mad, I think." My boots crunched over loose stones and hot earth. My toes were rubbing a hole into my stocking. "I'd just lost my sister to a garm. I worked a wild spell trying to get at the one who'd hurt her. Death got in my way . . . Now here I am."

Ruchel laid a hand on my shoulder, the touch light and soothing.

"Fucking gods," Nola muttered. "I understand the impulse, mad as it is. Thirteen

months ago, my outpost was attacked by an overwhelming force of Sebrak Nationals. It was our job to keep a village out of harm's way during the conflict, but the Nationals surprised us in the night. I barely made it out of the encampment in one piece. I could hear them then, all the suffering and dying. That sound doesn't leave you. It sticks to your bones and clings in your ears. And then I too cast up a wild spell. At least the villagers would survive, I thought, even if the rest of us wouldn't."

Nola kept her eyes ahead as she spoke. Her tone was unfeeling, but her expression sharpened, jaw hardening. Her fingers dug into the leather of her water sack.

"And that's how you ended up here?" I guessed. "All those dead soldiers?"

Her laugh was short and breathy and bitter. "You'd think that, wouldn't you? That's what I assumed when I was suddenly out of the cold and on a fucking bone train. The goddess Irmina loves soldiers. Surely it was her who thought it unsporting of me to murder so many with brutal flame. But no. The sigil burned on the door of my sleeper car was the goddess Elke's great linden tree."

"Hang it all," I groaned sympathetically.

"Your lips to their divine ears," she rasped, voice gone throaty. "The gods don't care when we slaughter each other. They don't lift a finger when the innocent die or the resources don't stretch far enough to help the desperate. But how dare I scorch a few trees trying to protect a village full of war widows and school children."

"Fucking gods," I said.

Ruchel went oddly quiet. I caught her staring at me, studying the amulet around my neck. I wanted to ask for her story but sensed the question wouldn't be welcome.

The lunch hour came and went. We marched on, stopping at a dry goods store that

had already been looted, searching for scraps. A small canvas bag of salt was the only item of value I managed to scrounge. As versatile as the substance was, I hoped it would make a decent god gift at the end of this trial.

Ruchel did much better, her instincts leading her straight to an overturned basket with two dented tins of packed biscuits hidden inside. She shared them with us. Nola ate hers greedily, food being the preferred method red witches used to replenish their energy.

I used the empty tins to safely store my new salt, and I carried my biscuits in my satchel for later. The relentless heat had soured my stomach.

Buildings grew fewer and farther apart, this area of the city dominated by a forested park. An earthen path shrouded in trees guided us around a large lake. From the cover of shade, the water appeared black under a citrine sky. Dark waves lapped against the bank. The image reminded me of the crow spy, and I peered over my shoulder, suddenly suspicious of every hovering shadow.

We stopped to rest at a collection of caves that jutted out from a gravel shore. Nola rinsed the sweat from her face and neck, hunched near the dark waters. I found an overturned log to rest upon.

“Not there!” Ruchel shouted a moment too late.

I crashed through the rotted wood, and tiny Hel beasts came pouring out of its base. No bigger than pixies, their fingers were full of needly claws, their feet talons. Blue manes wrapped their sharp little faces. Iridescent wings buzzed furiously.

They set upon me in a swarm, and all at once they buried claws and talons into my arms and legs. I screamed.

Nola breathed out a ball of flame and cast it at the creatures. Fire caught in the overhanging canopy of a spruce tree, and the tiny garm scattered. Ruchel rescued me, yanking me to my feet out of the wood splinters. One of the flying creatures dug a barbed talon into her cheek. Yelping, she swatted the garm down. Black smoke billowed, the fire spreading.

The buzz of angry beating wings grew to a roaring drone. Darting beasts gathered en masse to circle back between the trees.

“Get in the water,” Ruchel shouted, sprinting for the lake.

Nola hit the waves first. I dove in behind her.

I wasn’t much of a swimmer, but the cold against hot, stinging skin was an instant relief. We cut across the lake, searching for a new path to follow, and—thank the Crone—the beasts gave up on us. They swarmed in the air between the lake and fire, spitting water on the blaze, fighting to save what remained of their home.

Ruchel and Nola floated their heavy packs beside them as they swam. The water was shallow, or my satchel would have sunk me. Wading along behind them, I stubbed my toe on a rock and repressed a groan.

Nola outpaced us with her longer strokes. We slowed when Ruchel spotted a new road through the park. Blood oozed from the small punctures in my arms, clouding the water around me.

“Out of the lake!” Ruchel screamed, her punctured cheek so swollen it slurred her words.

We thrashed furiously toward the shore. When I hit the bank, the silt swallowed up my right boot. Ruchel and Nola tossed their packs onto the grass and sprinted to my

side.

“Leave me—I’m right behind you,” I told them, but they ignored me.

Ruchel slid under my arm, bracing me with her shoulders. Nola grabbed me up around the waist and hoisted me. The pull stretched my foot at an odd angle, and I cried out. Together they ripped me out of the muck. I limped after them as fast as my strained ankle would allow.

We hid in the foliage strung between moss-covered oak trees, waiting out the threat that had Ruchel on edge. Waterlogged, I dripped all over. I used a stick to scrape off the sludge weighing down my right foot. My aching ankle puffed up, pressing against the lip of my boot.

Something heavy moved through the trees off in the distance, ruffling leaves and snapping branches. Birds stopped singing. With great caution, I leaned my weight against a slippery, lichen-coated trunk, filling my lungs with the earthy scent of silt and loam. My heartrate slowed to a steady patter as the sounds of movement trailed away. The big creature moved on, none the wiser. The birds sang to one another in the trees.

Large bubbles broke the surface of the dark lake, and my pulse surged. A blue scaled face, eyes yellow and deep-set, peeked out between the ripples. I shivered knowing the water devil—a type of garm—was making a meal of the blood I’d left behind. The creature patrolled the shore not far from us, but it made no effort to pursue.

We retreated to the edge of the park. The nearby buildings were cobbled together with crude stone columns and broad archways. Wet trousers made the chafing at my thighs worse, forcing me to walk with a wide gait. We marched on until the earthen path turned to pavers and my boots and clothes were almost dry again.

My limp slowed us, but we still made it to the clock tower with three hours to spare.

The street was clear. We rested on the stone steps of a great library dedicated to Alwin, just outside the entrance to the tower. A larger coven of witches had taken shelter inside the atrium of the library. They paid us no mind, and we did the same.

The clock was so large, I could hear it ticking above us. Images of the gods in their giant forms were etched into the tower's dark stone facade.

"Are you hurt?" Ruchel asked.

"The bleeding's stopped," I told her. I rolled the sleeves of my shirtwaist up to my elbows. Blisters dotted my arms from the stingers, but none of my shallow injuries seemed worth fussing over.

Ruchel wasn't so lucky. Her cheek had only gotten worse, now puffy and pink.

I gave Nola the damp biscuits from my satchel, payment for saving me with her red magic. She munched on them enthusiastically, replenishing some of her spent energy. I wiped down my revolver and pocket pistol thoroughly.

Nola and Ruchel emptied their heavy packs, laying out items to dry in the heat. Most of what Nola carried were weapons: daggers, throwing knives, and hatchets. The blanket in my satchel would need to be left behind. It had already started to mold and would be worthless even cut into bandages, but the salt had been spared from the lake by the tins. I kicked my boots off, checking on my torn stockings. The skin was rubbed raw in patches across the tops of my toes.

Ruchel saw the state of my feet and handed me woolen socks from her stash.

"I don't want to take things from you," I said, shaking my head. "Keep them. You'll

need them soon enough.”

“Shut your trap, duck,” Nola ordered. “People die out here when they don’t take care of their feet. Good socks are better than gold in Wulfram. Put them on. Now.”

“We’ll find more,” Ruchel reassured me, pushing the set into my arms.

I pulled them on. They were damp but soft. Emotion burned in my throat, the gesture so considerate that it stung me. I was supposed to be proving that I was worth keeping around, and it didn’t feel like I’d done that at all. I wiped at my wet eyes, grateful when neither of my companions commented on the tears I couldn’t stifle. I was too tired to check my grief, too weak and wrung out to conjure up a mental mortar and pestle.

I missed Lisbeth fiercely.

I miss you back, love , her voice said in my head.

Why are you dead? Who took you away from me, Lisbeth? Please just tell me, I begged.

You’ll figure it out. You always do, she said.

Her voice was one of my own making, but it made me cry anyway. I wept until my nose ran. Ruchel and Nola kept to themselves, quietly letting me get it out. Blubbing likely made me less desirable as a coven mate, but I couldn’t stop myself now that I’d started.

Memories of Lisbeth’s early years spun behind my wet lids. We’d had more time together than most, but now none of it was enough. It had passed by much too quickly. I wanted more. I needed it! I needed her! The gods couldn’t do this to me. I

didn't even know who I was anymore without Lisbeth.

I hated it here. I hated everywhere without her.

When the tears finally ceased, my head hurt, but there was a new clarity to my thoughts that hadn't been there before. My spirit had revived, still pitiful compared to its usual state but replenished even more so than it had been at the start of the trial. In the distance, black smoke streamed up steadily from the trees, tarnishing the golden clouds to a dull bronze.

Nola chuckled. "Choke on that, Elke."

When the quiet continued, I interrupted it with all the questions that had been whirling through my mind since my arrival. Finally, there was peace enough for me to take a breath and catch hold of some of them.

"When do the trials end and the 'Crow Games' start?" I asked.

Nola shrugged. "Your guess is as good as anyone's."

"According to Otherworld legend," Ruchel said, testing the dampness of one of her violet scarves by rubbing it between her fingers, "the games will begin when the moon is finally full and the orb remains visible in the sky during the day, the seas drain, the desert fills with water, and blood rains from the clouds. Then the war for the throne begins."

I scoffed. "Well, at least there's no chance we'll miss it."

Nola chuckled, but Ruchel appeared pensive, shifting her weight against the stone step, her expression unsettled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Ruchel shook her head. “Those same legends swear the gods feast every night with the damned so that they might choose their favored amongst them and shower them with treasures. It’s all nonsense.”

“We’ve been waiting for this war to start for months now,” Nola said. “It gets to you after a while—that sense of hurrying up to wait for what’s next. It starts to press you flat and test your mind.”

“I don’t look forward to it,” I said with a sigh. “And there are seven trials?”

Nola nodded. “Each trial takes place here in Wulfram but in a different district. The goal stays the same. We have to reach the center of the city and that clock tower before the train leaves. Every trial is terrible,” she warned. “But stick with us and we’ll see you through them. Eventually we’ll introduce you to our other allies. It’s our job to recruit more to our side. Soon it’ll be your job too.”

“Until the sky rains blood,” I said broodily.

I didn’t want to just wait around for the games to start, like another plaything for the gods. In fact, I wouldn’t put it past the divines that these Crow Games were a hoax of some sort. A means to make us all fight for their entertainment.

No, I wouldn’t be building a coven for war.

I would build a coven until we were powerful enough to escape the Otherworld together. I’d torn a hole in it once already. I could tear a way out of it, too. I just couldn’t do it alone. Then , once we were free, there was a guilty god to kill.

“Forget the gods and their games,” I told them. “I’m getting us out of here.”

Nola snorted.

“It’s a nice sentiment . . .” Ruchel started.

“It’s not an empty promise,” I said sternly. “I’m getting us out of the games. Out of the Otherworld.”

“Yes,” Nola said playfully. “Death can go suck an egg with Elke and her trees.”

She wasn’t being sincere, but that was all right. I’d prove myself capable just as soon as I had my bearings. Food and rest would go a long way to renew me. Then we could grow a coven so powerful, Death and his crows wouldn’t know what hit them.

They’d mentioned that sometimes the gods collected a gift at the end of the trials. If I could get my hands on another divine sigil, I could turn things around . . .

Our belongings were dry an hour later, and I was ready to travel again, renewed by the start of a plan formulating. A number of prisoners had entered the tower well ahead of us, but no one had interacted with us. We repacked our bags and headed for the archway. Inside, a stone tunnel lined in metal torches inclined steeply. The walls were decorated with engravings that depicted the gods in their animal and plant forms: Death’s crow, Nott’s black cat, Elke’s great linden tree . . .

In one startling image, the crow feasted on the stars in a vast night sky. According to a legend that reached even the Upper Realm, the Old One had devoured a sky full of stars before the god king Alrick had intervened, forcing him to the Otherworld.

My stomach chose then to rumble.

“Please tell me there will be food on the Schatten,” I begged.

“It won’t arrive for boarding until just before the thirteenth hour, but there will be food,” Ruchel promised.

Nola picked up the pace. “Excellent food! And the tracks are another safe place to wait for the train. Hel beasts are afraid of the Schatten and its reapers.”

The tunnel forked. Voices echoed up from the bottom of the incline. We slowed to a halt, leaving a yard between us and a coven of three huddled before a barrier of black stone.

“What do we do now?” the green witch asked. She was Lisbeth’s age, copper-gold hair tucked under a tall conical hat. The witch beside her with worn paper flowers sewn into her bodice had to be her younger sister, they were so similar, same pointed chin and dimples in both cheeks. The third was the blue witch I’d met that morning, the woman with the lovely silver-streaked hair who’d refused to trade names.

Blue shook her head, knocking together the baubles and amulets hanging around her neck. She carried a torch above her. It cast a long shadow across the floor. In her other hand, she held a forked branch water covens used as wands. “There’s only one thing we can do now . . .”

“Oi,” Nola called. “Why’s the barrier shut?”

The witches spun to face us. Blue lowered into a fighting crouch and brandished her wand like it was a sword. The older green sister grabbed a vial from her satchel and palmed it. The youngest readied a wooden baton.

“It was just a question,” Ruchel soothed. “We aren’t here to fight. Tell us what’s going on.”

“Not your allies, I take it,” I said.

“Actually, they are,” Ruchel whispered.

Well damn. With allies like these, who needed enemies?

“Path is blocked,” Blue retorted, wand still raised. “No one gets in or out unless Nott allows it.”

“Is the god demanding a gift?” Nola guessed.

I reached inside my satchel and touched the tin with my salt inside. Salt had a lot of value. It was such a versatile substance, especially for earth magic. If the Lord of Night and Mischief didn’t take that in exchange for lowering the barrier and giving us a blessing, I’d offer up the pocket pistol from my boot, though parting with it pained me. I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

The sisters shared a dark look. The youngest lowered her head, rubbing sheepishly at her arm.

“It’s not a gift they want,” Blue explained, lips pursed. “Nott brought his twin Mara, and they have a—”

A roar echoed up from the depths of the tunnel, the sound so violent it shook the walls. Torch flames flickered, the scent of sulfur tinged the air, and my heart leapt into my throat.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Reapers once served as messengers between the gods. Made of shade, they are the only beings capable of moving with ease between the shadows inherent in every realm.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

The great Hel beast roared again, the sound bouncing off the stone walls and reverberating through my bones.

“It’s entertainment Nott is after,” Blue explained. “He’s drawn a combat circle in the chamber over yonder.”

“Fucking gods,” Nola hissed.

“And every coven must provide a combatant or stay and risk the night in Wulfram while the train circles back,” Blue said somberly.

“We wouldn’t make it overnight in Wulfram,” Ruchel sighed. “But there’s no sense in sending two witches to their deaths either. Why not combine forces, at least through this trial?”

I perked at the idea of growing a proper coven. What good were allies if they were always ready to turn on each other? The green witches shared a glance, speaking to one another with only their eyes in the way of sisters.

“It’s the sensible thing for the time being,” Blue said. “A group of six shouldn’t attract unwanted notice from the established covens if we travel together.”

“But how do we decide who faces the beast?” Nola demanded.

“You’re a soldier,” Blue noted. “You’ve more combat experience than—”

“Not a chance in coldest Hel,” Nola ground out. “I’m not dying for you.”

The older of the sisters fished inside her leather satchel. Glass jars clinked together. “I’ve a sigil. A powerful one. It took me weeks to make the blasted thing. It’ll give the wielder the strength of a grizzly bear, but it won’t last more than an hour or two. A soldier could make good use of that.”

Nola scoffed. “What did I just say? Unless you’ve got another blasted sigil in that pack of yours with the strength of twenty bears, you can fuck right off with that idea.”

“We’ll roll for it,” Ruchel said somberly. “It’s the only fair way. We roll for it and the winner . . . loses.”

The sisters whispered to each other. I overheard the youngest called Liesel and the oldest, Emma. Blue tried to calm them, her words hushed, but Liesel fell into a panic. I was new to these trials, but I was not new to the way of people. These desperate survivors made and broke alliances much too easily, eager to do what was needed to last just one more day, no vision for the future, no thoughts toward freedom. They’d forgotten what it was that made a witch truly powerful. Their covenant.

And I wouldn’t risk watching sisters torn apart. My heart wouldn’t tolerate it.

Resolved, I rested a hand on the hilt of my dagger. “I’ll do it.”

Spirit stirred in my chest, and my heart thudded heavily. A new pulse of pain pumped in my aching ankle. Nola may be a soldier, but I had the best fighting chance of any of us in single combat, even injured. This was my chance to prove to them that I could help. If they joined with me, we could do more than stay alive a while longer.

I was a gray witch—an out-of-practice gray who had spent too much time hiding herself—but there was no moment like the present to regain some of what I’d lost, to find myself once more.

“You’ve gone mad again, duck,” Nola said.

“I’m always a little mad, I think.” I offered her a small smile that she didn’t return.

Ruchel scowled. “When I sensed you’d be useful to us, I didn’t think it meant . . . I don’t like it, Maven. I didn’t drag you along with us to offer you up for slaughter now. We should roll for it. At least that way it’s in the fate weavers’ hands. Let the goddesses Wyrð and Norna decide who fights.”

“Doesn’t seem fair to play a chance game with a mind witch, though, does it?” Blue said, her torch flickering above her, cutting shadows down her sunken cheeks. “The new girl is willing to do it. I say we let her.”

“Of course you’d say that,” Nola snarled. “She’s not one of yours.”

“I’ll do it. But I have conditions,” I warned.

“Stand down, mad woman,” Nola ground out. “I don’t like it, duck. You should shut your trap and let us veterans handle this.”

“I may be new here, but I’m far more veteran than I appear,” I said sternly. “We form a true coven first. A blood oath will do best, and then I’ll step into that combat circle on our behalf.”

Ruchel snorted. “Oh, wait . . . you’re not joking?”

“Deadly serious,” I said.

Liesel's little nose wrinkled. "Blood oaths? How archaic."

I ignored their rumblings. What could they do but accept? Unless they wanted to risk facing the roaring Hel creature themselves.

"We'll have to appoint a high witch first." Blue returned her torch to the metal fixture on the wall. The image it illuminated was of Death's crow ripping its own wing off. In the legend, the god Alrick ordered Death to tear himself in two so that he could fit inside the Otherworld after consuming too many stars.

"Blue has survived down here the longest," Ruchel noted. "But Nola has the most combat experience of any of us."

"Coven or not, I'd leave most of you for dead if it meant saving my ass, so don't make me your high witch," Nola said. "It needs to be you, Ruchel. You're the only voice anyone should be listening to out here. Your instincts are our best shot at staying alive."

"I'll vow to you, Ruchel," I said. "I'd vow to you gladly."

She looked me over, from the messy state of my braid down to the swollen ankle tucked into my boot, and her scowl deepened. Her ochre eyes went glassy, throwing the torchlight. Her throat bobbed. "If anyone has a problem with me taking charge, you'd better speak up now." She glared pointedly at Blue.

"If it gets this sordid business done, I'll swear to you," Emma said, and her younger sister echoed her agreement.

Blue's flinty gaze settled briefly on the amulet hanging under Ruchel's throat. "As long as it keeps me breathing," she said softly, "I'll swear to you."

Ruchel pulled a thin silver blade from her belt. She ran it across her palm without flinching, letting the blood pool there in the creases. “I vow by my blood and by my magic to serve the good of my coven, to stand in unity with my sisters until Death ferries me to the life after.”

In the way of witches, we accepted her vow. “We hear you, sister,” we chanted. “Together we hold you to your word.”

Ruchel pressed her palm against the wall, just under the image of the broken crow, leaving a bloody print behind. Emma and Liesel went next, adding their essence to the same handprint. Then Nola and Blue. I went last, but before I added my palm to theirs, I ran my fingers over the bloodstains on my shirtwaist. Lisbeth was gone, but I wanted to make her part of my new coven too. Adding her blood to ours made that so.

“I vow,” I said with feeling, “by my blood and by my magic to serve the good of my coven, to stand in unity with my sisters until Death ferries me to the life after.”

In my head, Lisbeth’s voice echoed the words. As my new coven accepted us, a shadow fell over the mark we’d left behind. The blood on the wall coalesced and changed.

An image of a crow appeared in the darkening crimson stain.

“Oh fuck,” I groaned.

“Is that a . . . ?” Liesel whispered, her voice small and bell-like. “But that’s a good sign, isn’t it?”

Emma pulled off her tall hat and scratched at her copper hair. “Doesn’t that mean a god is blessing the coven when it makes a symbol like that?”

Liesel let out a cheer. “It’s finally happened,” she squeaked. “We’ve been chosen by a god.”

“Not a blessing,” I growled.

It was a taunt. It had to be. The Old One would never choose me for anything after I’d ripped the roof off his home and attacked him.

“It looks like a blessing,” Blue said wistfully. “I suppose we’re the coven of the crow now.”

“Like Hel we are,” I grouched. “Nola, what would you say to Elke if she came down here and tried to bless you?”

Nola’s expression darkened, and her hand grabbed for the hilt of the dagger at her belt. “I’d tell her she can take her blessing straight to Hel and stay there until her tits freeze off.”

“My feelings exactly.” I folded my arms over my chest, but the crow mark remained stubbornly on the wall. I glared at the shadows.

“Don’t insult the Lord of Death,” Blue said under her breath, then she added in a hiss, “especially when he’s listening!”

“Our backgrounds are diverse, our elements and specialties blended,” Ruchel said soothingly. “It’s best we don’t name a divine patron.”

“Especially not that one,” I bit out.

Emma retrieved her sigil. The image of a bear was engraved into a block of pale ash wood. Balanced in her palm, the engraving glittered green.

“Keep it,” I said, gently brushing the offering away.

Emma’s brow furrowed. “Are . . . are you sure?”

“I’m a dunce with elemental sigils.” I had no connection to the earth. Lisbeth and I were able to mix basic potions because the ingredients themselves had the correct link, but our concoctions were poor substitutes for what a true green witch could do.

To make use of it, Emma would need to cast the sigil, and then I’d have to steal the magic from her with my spirit once the sigil was active. They wouldn’t be able to see me casting with gray, not in the way I could—unless they were like me—but Emma would feel it.

If my new coven had any sense at all, the moment they knew I was working spirit in such a way, they’d panic. She could keep the sigil. I didn’t want to get bashed in the head with Blue’s wand or stabbed with one of Nola’s many daggers.

I turned to leave.

“Maven,” Ruchel protested, following me.

“I don’t want an audience. Stay put here and wait for the barrier to open.” I patted the handle of my revolver peeking out of the waistband of my trousers. “I have everything I need right here.”

“Maven . . . live,” she said somberly. “That’s an order from your new high witch.”

“Yes ma’am.” I took her hand in mine and squeezed it with all the thanks and affection I had in my heart, but grief lingered in her eyes. Her lips trembled like she longed to say something else, but she kept them shut. I wanted to offer more words of comfort, but nothing came to mind. Lisbeth had always been better at that sort of

thing than I.

I headed back toward the fork in the tunnel. Another roar shook the stones under my feet and blew out one of the torches. My spirit turned to lead in my chest.

“You can do this,” I whispered to myself. “Keep moving. One foot in front of the other. That’s got you through far worse things than this.”

Make the beast shit himself , Lisbeth said, and my magic stirred back to life sluggishly.

The walls were cracked and moist in this part of the tunnel. Down and down I went until the pressure shifted in my sinuses and my ears popped. The image of the broken crow decorated the dripping stones around me. Engravings of feathers fell from Death’s torn wing. The images evolved farther down the hall, the feathers stretching into cloaked shades, the making of the Old One’s reapers. The broken wing that remained was skeletal, and in the next engraving, the bones had been crafted into the train.

“Hold up there, duck,” Nola called.

I jumped. I hadn’t heard her footsteps coming up behind me.

“I really don’t want an audience,” I told her.

Nola slid her arm around my shoulders and fit me against her side. “I wouldn’t want an audience either if I thought I was about to be on the wrong end of a bad thrashing, but let me walk you at least.”

“I’m not planning on getting thrashed,” I grumped.

“Well, that’s a good start,” she said. “Let me have a look at this basher anyway.”

Her sturdy presence steadied me. And when the beast roared again so loud I felt it rattling through my bones, my spirit didn’t shrink.

The tunnel ended in an ancient courtroom built on dark flagstones and lit by flaming braziers. The ceiling stretched into a dome vast enough for a god in his giant form to easily fit inside. We stopped at the edge of the hall, where the archway yawned wide.

I couldn’t yet see the beast. A bend in the wall and a row of columns hid him from view, but stomping hooves and scraping chains against stone was enough to bring nightmare images to mind.

“If you’d have let us roll for this, you wouldn’t be here now,” Nola whined. “Ruchel would have handled it with a little mental suggestion. She’d have let the fate-weaving sisters choose someone from the other coven with her dice.”

“Their coven is now our coven,” I scolded.

She rolled her eyes. “Aggravatingly soft-hearted . . .”

“I appreciate you coming, Nola, I do, but don’t say farewell to me. This isn’t goodbye.” My words were an encouragement for myself as much as for her. If I pretended to be overconfident, I hoped the rest of me would soon follow suit. It worked that way sometimes.

But apparently now was not one of those times. My stomach plummeted.

Crouching low, I removed my pocket pistol from my boot. I took a quick drink from my canteen just to wet my lips, then I stuffed everything into my satchel and handed them over. She was so tall she had to duck her head so I could slide the strap around

her neck.

“Don’t let anyone have my things,” I instructed. “I’ll get them back from you on the train.”

Nola leaned out around the edge of the archway. The beast roared, and she leapt back into the hall. Her face had gone ghostly white, and my belly sank further remembering how unaffected she’d been by the slaughter at the start of the trial. If one look at that beast had her worried, well, that didn’t bode well for me.

“He’s built like a man,” she said, clearing her throat, “so he’ll have weaknesses like one too. Don’t waste precious rounds on his thick hide. If you’re a bad shot, get in close enough you can’t miss and shoot him where he’s soft. Eyes or testicles. Get a bullet or a blade in there and it won’t matter how big the brute is. Understand?”

I rested a hand atop my revolver where it pressed against my belly. “I’m not a bad shot. That’s just what I’ll do.” It was poor luck that we didn’t have enough rounds to practice with. I’d be an even better shot if I could take a moment to get more familiar with the revolver.

Chin down, Nola started to turn away but hesitated. “I didn’t want to like you,” she said solemnly.

A smile stretched my lips. “Sorry.”

The crinkles near her cobalt eyes deepened. “It’s rude of you, really, being likable in a place like this.”

“I could kick you in the shin right now if you want. I’ll keep doing it until you like me less.”

Her grin went crooked. “Just come back to us, all right, ducky? Then you can kick me all you’d like.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

I watched her walk away. When she was almost around the bend, she stopped. Eyes and testicles , she mouthed, pointing at the corresponding locations on her body. I raised a hand up to her in a vow. And then she was gone. It was for the best, but I felt the absence of my new coven like a chasm opening wide in my gut.

I filled my chest with a heaving breath. My palms were already sweating. I stepped out into the courtroom, and when the monster charged at me, straining against his chains, spots popped before my eyes. His roar shot straight through me like a javelin, nearly knocking me off my feet.

He was as tall as two Nolas. The garm had the face of a boar, blood dripping from his tusks, and the torso and arms of a powerfully built man. His skin was thick and leathery. He walked upright on fleece-covered hindlegs, and his hooves were cloven like a great bull’s. Made of bone powder, a narrow combat circle was drawn tightly around the beast. The only thing keeping him from charging out and killing me was the chain around his neck, secured to the floor with an iron spike.

Nott sat on a stone throne in his mortal form. The throne was so massive it dwarfed him physically, though there was something in the secret smile that crooked the corner of his mouth, something that made him seem Otherworldly and larger than life. I doubted anyone would mistake him for a regular man. The God of Night and Mischief made a beautiful mortal, though: golden skin and a waterfall of raven hair. His amber eyes were accented with kohl, and he wore a ring on every finger.

On the throne opposite him, his twin, Mara, Queen of Nightmares, curled up in her cat form, her coat as glossy and black as volcanic glass. She was a very large cat,

bigger than a panther.

Three more giant thrones were arranged in a semi-circle behind theirs, empty. Beside them, the biggest, bone-white throne remained equally unoccupied. It looked like the Schatten, possibly made of limestone but too off-white and yellowed with age. It dominated the courtroom—throne room, I corrected. This throne was decorated from base to head in images of flying crows.

Nott's eyes dragged over my messy braid and my torn and punctured clothing, and he snorted. I was a stranger in the Otherworld but not unfamiliar with the bad behavior of gods. I ignored his indifference, drawn to the divine heat I sensed radiating from the nearest column.

"No, sister dear," Nott said sulkily, "I don't think we will get much of a show out of this one."

Mara stretched up next to him, and he scratched behind her ears. Whatever she said to him, she sent it straight to his thoughts. He chuckled over the words I could not hear, though I sensed they were at my expense. His laughter was unkind.

The sigil that Nott had used to summon the monstrous garm remained on the wall in the shape of a shard of ice, the same frost that formed the gates to Hel. Below it, a pile of gifts were strewn about. Supplies mostly. Gifts of fresh fruit, bags of ingredients crucial to spells, things of great value from the desperate in Wulfram. Things Nott and Mara had grown tired of quickly, so they'd summoned themselves something more entertaining.

I drew in closer to the sigil. Its magic was so cold it made my skin pebble. This was not the divine energy responsible for killing my sister. It burned differently, so frigid it stung. I filed that information away for another time when my life wasn't in immediate danger.

The garm raged at his chains, startling my spirit into alertness. This was my chance to crush this beast to mush, to send him straight back to Hel in pieces. I readied my magic. It gathered in my palms, pressing at the pads of my fingertips, darkening my hands to gray. I reached for the sigil greedily.

A shadow fell over it, blocking my way, and the sigil went out with a sizzle.

The darkness lingered there, wafting the spicy scent of powerful magic and leather. I made a rude gesture at the crow spy hiding in the shade.

“If you and your god have decided to kill me,” I hissed, “at least have the courage to face me yourself.”

Hands in fists, I moved to the edge of the circle. Anger crackled and sparked through my spirit. I wasn’t practiced enough anymore to make my spirit act on my behalf with any sort of certainty. Not depleted as I was, and not without stolen god power to add to mine. Nola didn’t want me to waste precious bullets, but I fired a quick shot straight at the beast’s heart.

The bullet pierced his meaty flesh just right of my target. He let out an angered yelp and leapt away. I charged the circle, aiming the next shot at his right eye, adjusting for the sights.

The lumbering creature moved with a speed I could barely follow. The injury had been an act, lulling me into coming closer, and I’d fallen for it. The beast struck at my arm, and my gray magic reacted instinctively, thank the Crone. It surged just enough to absorb most of the blow.

The strike that should have taken my arm off knocked the revolver from my hand. My fingers throbbed. I went for the garm’s eye with my dagger, and the great beast lunged low, dodging the strike. He swiped my legs out from under me and knocked

me onto my back.

I hit my head and lost my wind. My vision swam. It was over already. The garm loomed above me, his gaze on his god, waiting for permission to end my life. He pinned me to the ground with one of his bulky hooves on my stomach. I groaned under the weight of him.

But Nott wasn't paying attention. He picked at his nails, and Mara slumbered in her throne. Not even my death was enough to hold their interest, they cared so little for me.

Fucking gods.

I saw red and roared. Energy churned through my belly, pumping up into my heart. A blast of gray burst from my chest, knocking back the beast. I leapt to my feet, fueled by a righteous fury that lit me up from the inside out. The garm snarled, and the stench of sulfur burned in my nostrils. He lunged for my face, tusks and teeth bared.

With claws of gray magic, I reached into his chest, passing straight through thick skin and bone and sinew. I grabbed his heart and crushed it between my palms. He spat blood in my face. His shriveled little soul was next. I ripped it out through his throat without tearing any of the muscle. His spirit clung to me, delicate and sticky as spider silk. His soul was a messy, broken thing with no magic to speak of, but I was so starved for energy I was tempted to eat it, to replenish a little of what I'd lost.

But I could think of nothing more wicked to do, even to a garm. I tossed his misty essence into the ether for the crows to fetch. His soul screamed as it vanished.

The garm's empty body swayed on his hooves. He fell forward, his weight too much for me. My spirit surged again with the last of the energy I had left, just a silvery puff of light. It kept the beast from crushing me flat, but his massive body caged me

against the ground.

I squirmed my way toward freedom and barely managed to get my face out from beneath his broad chest, I was so depleted.

“I can’t . . .” I gasped.

Nott threw back his head and cackled at the ceiling. His mirth echoed off the walls. “Did you see that, sister dear? How spectacularly unexpected.”

The big cat licked a paw. At least she wasn’t sleeping now.

“Can’t breathe,” I panted. “Help me out from under here. I fought him like you wanted, didn’t I . . . ? I gave you a good show.”

“Yes, my bloodthirsty little pet,” Nott purred at me. “I’ll help you out of there if you ask me nicely.”

The beast stank like sulfur and piss, and I missed being able to fill my lungs. The back of my head hurt where I’d knocked it against the floor. My body was sore and growing more uncomfortable every moment I remained trapped. I swallowed my pride. “Please. Please, glorious Lord of Night and Mischief. Aid your servant, I beg you.”

Nott vanished from his throne. The garm’s weight lifted, and I gulped air into my lungs, grateful for every single breath. The god moved his monster one-handed, tossing him aside like he weighed nothing. A stone paver cracked where the Hel creature landed in a heap of hooves and limbs.

“Servant,” Nott cooed. “I do like the sound of that.”

I smelled the crow before I spotted him forming from the shadows between the columns, the tart and tangy scent of his death magic much more pleasant than the reek of sulfur. Gritting my teeth, I climbed to my feet.

“Don’t be fooled by her good manners,” the reaper cautioned, his baritone curling into my ears like smoke. “She’s a vicious little troublemaker.”

Nott chuckled. “But I love troublemakers. How long has it been since you’ve seen a gray witch, Asher? They don’t visit us in the Otherworld nearly enough. It’s been centuries for Mara and I. We’re delighted.”

Asher. The crow had a name.

A midnight hood hid most of the reaper’s face, but I felt his piercing eyes fall on me. “I’ve never met a gray before.”

“What a treat for you, then, my friend,” Nott said.

I swayed on my feet, my energy was so low. The fumes of my spirit sputtered in my chest. “The barrier,” I panted, remembering myself, “is it down now?”

“It went down the second you stepped into the circle.” Nott played with his rings, twisting them on his fingers, his fascination with me already at an end. “If you’d like to have a few of the useless things from the gifts in the corner there, help yourself, darling.”

I collected my revolver first, dusting it down with the only part of my shirtwaist that wasn’t caked in dirt or stained with dried blood. Then I hobbled over to the pile of supplies and gathered what I could carry. My limbs felt like rubber, so it wasn’t much: a bag of garlic cloves, more salt, a fresh apple, a bristled tool that would come in handy when I needed to clean the revolver. Then there at the bottom of the pile, I

spotted a pair of thick socks. Good, clean woolen socks. I snapped them up.

“Better hurry, pet,” Nott purred. “The Schatten departs soon.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Items lost by mortals in the Upper Realm are said to be found again in the luggage compartments aboard Death’s train.” –Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

My coven gathered in the same lounge car I’d met most of them in before the trial. The sight of them renewed me. Ruchel crowed excitedly when she spotted me, an herbal poultice plastered to her swollen cheek. She threw her arms up into the air, grabbed Nola beside her around the neck, and shook her.

“It’s good to see you, old duck,” Nola said, chuckling. “We didn’t doubt you for a second.”

“Oh, you didn’t?” I quipped. “Then that’s not my things you’re dividing between you on the table there?”

Nola swept my belongings swiftly back into my satchel. “Certainly not.” Her smile turned sheepish.

“Don’t fuss. I know it’s good sense. I’m glad you didn’t give anything away, though.” I dumped the new supplies in front of our high witch, then returned my pocket pistol to the holster in my boot. “These are gifts from Nott. May they be a blessing on our new coven.”

Blue and the sisters huddled in the cushioned chairs beside me. Blue’s eyes had widened in delighted surprise when I entered the lounge, but now they narrowed to suspicious slits. Liesel whispered something hurried and anxious in her sister’s ear.

“You made it?” Blue said, the statement sounding too much like a question one might

hurl in an interrogation. “You’re a witch with no chosen elemental specialty. And yet you made it . . .”

I picked out the socks from the pile and handed them to Ruchel. Her grateful smile stirred up my weak spirits, renewing a pinch of my spent energy.

“I made it,” I said cautiously to Blue. That witch was much too clever for her own good.

“But how did you make it?” she demanded.

“Did you go after the basher’s eyes or his testicles?” Nola offered. “I told her to do that.” She winked at me, chest puffed out with pride.

“I went after his eyes,” I said honestly. They need not know how it had all ended. That sort of magic would only get me killed by an anxious witch in my sleep.

Blue protested, “But how does anyone—”

“I’m very lucky to be alive. I realize that’s not enough for you,” I said, struggling to keep my tone diplomatic, “but I’m exhausted and starving. Let me recuperate. I’ll share all the exciting details another time.”

Blue opened her mouth to argue further.

“We owe Maven our lives,” Ruchel said, an edge of command in her voice that brooked no argument.

Blue closed her mouth and kept it shut. Our high witch had spoken.

The train chimed three times before setting off through the underground tunnels.

Food was served thereafter. Blue and the sisters didn't join us in our dining car. The slight irked me. I wanted a true coven. We all needed it, and their distrust would only get in the way of that. But I was too spent to put any effort into growing a bond just now.

Different foods were served in each car. Nola moved between them, overfilling her plate, trying everything, putting away dishes in that way only a red witch could, renewing her energy stores to bursting. Ruchel ate with me in a car that was nearly empty.

"They serve a cuisine similar to Ashkish's here. Food from my province," she told me, her words muffled by her swollen injury and the dried herbal paste on her cheek. "The cars that serve meat are more popular."

I knew Ashkish. My sister and I had traveled through it on a number of occasions, though we'd never made our home there. The population was small, but Universities were plentiful. They were credited with making great advancements in academia, with a particular interest in ethics and astronomy. Their flag was decorated with the great ash tree constellation, believed to always point a traveler north.

Faceless revenants filled the tables with a feast. I kept my eyes on the ground as they worked. When they were gone, the fruit alone had my mouth watering. I helped myself to it before I even bothered grabbing a plate, standing over the buffet like a goblin, shoving food in my mouth from the serving trays. Bright burgundy grapes, sliced apples, iced pears and peaches. Everything was ripe and fresh, not a speck or wrinkle or distortion in sight. It was nothing like the dried things my sister and I tolerated in Kosh. It was too perfect, like Wulfram. Divinely made.

My sweet tooth summoned me next. I ate a doughy bread that was braided, the inside smeared with chocolate. I consumed it until my fingers were sticky, and my spirit soared. I could have eaten my weight in that bread, but Ruchel pushed a plate of

crisply fried patties made of shredded potato at me. She showed me how to dip them in tart cream, and I never wanted to eat anything else.

“I don’t have the stomach for meat,” she said as we shared a cheese plate and a bowl of roasted almonds and chestnuts. “But if you want it, Nola knows where they serve the best fish and pheasant. They’re her favorite.”

Sated, I wrapped up the rest of the nuts and hearty slices of bread in cloth napkins and stowed them in my satchel—all food that would keep well to aid me in the next trial. Ruchel did the same. We replenished our water supplies from the pitchers. As soon as a pitcher was empty, a revenant came to replace it.

I saw the girl I’d met before the trial, the young yellow-haired woman with the beast-born tail. She was faceless, her soul gone, nothing but an empty shell animated by death magic. My stomach plummeted at the sight of her refilling pitchers.

“Thank you, Hilda,” Ruchel said to the girl, though the revenant paid her no mind at all, her movements brisk and mechanical.

The train made its way out of the tunnels. Night had fallen. Darkness turned the desert dunes outside a brilliant shade of purple. A quarter-moon lit the sky, and millions of glittering stars winked down at us from between the clouds. Ruchel regaled me with her favorite historical facts and read a book out loud from her knapsack, a history on the Otherworld by a folklorist named Esther Weil. The chapter she read from was a reflection on how one realm impacted the calendar system in another. Sharing knowledge renewed her mind energy best, she explained.

“And it helps if you pretend to be interested,” she instructed.

“You’ll never think for a moment I’m not riveted,” I said, and I fulfilled my promise, nodding along and making listening noises as needed. She had a soothing voice. I

didn't mind it.

When she'd finished the chapter, she shut her book with a snap. Her ochre eyes found mine and trapped them. "The legends say the moon will be full the day the Crow Games finally begin and the covens battle to the death."

"I thought you said those legends were nonsense."

Her gaze flicked out the window before settling on me again. "It's strange, is all. All the months I've been down here, the moon has been a pale sliver in the sky. The faintest crescent. Now look at it."

I glanced at the fat quarter-moon, a vibrant shade of silver more luminescent than the stars around it. "Hm."

"The first night you're here, and it's the fullest I've ever seen it."

"Coincidence, of course," I said casually. My stomach knotted at the implication. My mouth went dry, but I didn't dare finish my glass of water. I didn't want the revenants to come back to refill it.

"Of course," she said, her smile faint and unconvincing.

I tried to smooth things over with Emma and Liesel by gifting them the salt and garlic I'd gathered during the trial. They'd make better use of such things anyway. Emma accepted them with polite reluctance, but Liesel wouldn't look at me.

When it was time for sleep, I selected a compartment across from the one Ruchel and Nola shared. Mine was smaller than the others, with only a single bed. Blue and the sisters declined to sleep near us.

“You made a blood vow,” Ruchel reminded them.

Nearness to one’s coven had a restorative effect. We replenished our energies faster, healed quicker, and the spells cast together were stronger.

“We did,” Blue said. She waved off the sisters, and the green witches continued down the aisle without her. Her flinty eyes glanced my way before meeting Ruchel’s head-on. “We don’t intend to break that vow.”

“Then start acting like it,” Ruchel bit out.

Blue’s jaw set. She turned on her heels without saying another word.

Inside my cabin, behind a closed door, I found clean undergarments amongst the random items stored in the luggage compartment. Changing into them made me feel like a whole new person. It renewed my spirit better than even the food had. Kicking my boots off was lovely too. Nola had warned me to sleep with them in my bed to deter thieves from taking them. The doors only locked from the outside. I did so, tucking them under the blankets, dirt and all.

“Goodnight, Lisbeth,” I said to the empty room. After twenty years, it was still a habit.

Why do you have to be dead? I wanted to say it out loud, but the words caught in my throat. Who killed you? Did you show your gray accidentally by possessing someone again? I won’t be mad. I just need to know.

If a god had killed her because she was a gray, then why had I been spared? Spirit magic ran in families, just as elemental specialties often did.

My long life had taught me that it was always those in power who had the most to

lose, the ones who hoarded authority and refused to share it who were the ones quickest to hurt innocent people like Lisbeth. King Alrick was the greatest of the gods. He wasn't known for being cruel, but he was also a god I had never interacted with. I hadn't recognized the sigil that burned on the ceiling of our shop, so all the gods I did not know remained high on my murder list, gods who spent all or most of their time in the Otherworld. Alrick now took the lead. By reputation, he had the most power, and he never shared it. He had the most to lose against a gray like Lisbeth and myself . . .

But how could I get my hands on a sample of Alrick's magic so that I could test my theory?

Before my thoughts could go racing off out of my control, Lisbeth's sweet voice visited me.

Goodnight, love , she whispered just like she had every other night.

I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

\* \* \*

A heavy weight pressed me into the mattress, and I jerked awake, unsure of the time. Something sharp gleamed at my throat. My spirit surged. It burst out of me, coating the walls in tiny glittery lights that shimmered silver in the dark. My magic was still far from fully renewed, but there was more of it now after resting.

"Don't take this the wrong way, ducky," Nola said, oblivious to the magic around her. It was her weight on my body, her blade at my throat. "We're genuinely glad you're not dead."

"The placement of your knife suggests otherwise," I huffed, the jut of her elbow

constricting my lungs.

“But how the Hel are you alive right now?” Ruchel demanded, her stance stiff beside my bed, slender arms folded over her chest. “And don’t lie to us. I’ll know it if you do.”

Silver spirit magic glittered against the walls and bedding like starlight. They couldn’t see it, but it coated them as well, shining in their hair.

“I’m a gray witch,” I rasped. Stunned into silence, they didn’t respond. This wasn’t at all how I’d wanted them to learn the truth, but what choice did I have now? “I tried to shoot the garm basher in the eye with the revolver, but the brute disarmed me. I’m alive because I reached into the beast’s chest, ripped out its soul, and cast it into the ether.”

Horror widened Nola’s cobalt eyes. I waited for her to drive the dagger home, fingers digging anxiously into the sheets at my sides. Confusion melded with reluctance in her tightening features. The line between her tawny brows deepened.

I hoped she wouldn’t try to kill me. I hoped they’d hear me out, hoped the connection we were building could continue into something more. Something greater. Something strong enough to tear down these horrid games and claim our freedom. Whatever answer she’d been expecting, it wasn’t that. Her grip slipped ever so slightly on her blade.

I braced myself for her response. She blinked, mystified. Then her gaze shifted to her partner.

Ruchel’s mouth pressed into a firm, unyielding line. She worked her throat. “If you’re gray, then you’re not human. Not completely. So what are you?”

“Beast-born?” Nola guessed when I didn’t immediately supply an answer, her tone hopeful.

“You’re heavy,” I rasped.

“And you’re welcome for that,” Nola said. “We didn’t want you jerking upright and cutting yourself. Not yet anyway.”

“Thoughtful,” I coughed.

“Enough of that,” Ruchel snapped. “Answer the blasted question.”

“I’m not beast-born,” I sighed. “I’ve no garm blood.”

“God-born,” Ruchel hissed. “Then you have god blood.”

“That’s so much worse, duck,” Nola groaned. “Entire civilizations have fallen under god-born grays. There’s a crater in Northern Sebrak with the last known gray witch’s name on it, for fuck’s sake. The barrens in the south are barren and haunted by revenants because of a gray.”

“I’m not what you think,” I insisted.

“I don’t yet know you, but I know history,” Ruchel ground out. “I’ve studied it for most of my life. There’s not a gray witch in all of the texts who didn’t murder countless—”

“But we don’t all make history,” I growled through gritted teeth. “Believe what you want of me, but my baby sister was a god-blooded gray witch too. Yet you’ve never even heard of Lisbeth. She lived and died a sweetheart, and she won’t make a single page in any of your scribe texts for it. She was so considerate of life, when moths got

into her fabric, she caught them in jars and set them free outside. Lisbeth just wanted to feed street children and dance at festivals and make pretty things. She never ruled over an army of the undead or feasted on the souls of her enemies or . . .”

Lisbeth never would have attempted to turn the entire city of Kosh to ash. She was the better of us. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I blinked them back.

“I am sorry for your sister,” Ruchel said gently, “but that doesn’t mean—”

“I won’t hurt you,” I vowed, scowling up at her. “I’m not after armies or kingdoms or riches, and I’ve no interest in eating either of your souls. I may have god blood, but I don’t have god ambition. The only person who has anything to fear from me now is the deity responsible for murdering Lisbeth. Ruchel, look at me and tell me I’m lying. You’re a mind witch. Who could fool you?”

Ruchel chewed at her cheek. Nola’s brows lifted toward her hairline, waiting on her partner’s answer. I held my breath, eager for the same.

“You’re not lying,” she said softly.

Nola climbed to her feet and lowered her blade.

All at once the breath rushed out of me. “Now that you both seem less intent on murdering me, there’s something else I should tell you . . . Don’t panic, but that’s not a knife in your hand, Winola.”

She lifted the braided pastry suddenly clutched between her fingers. It was covered in my silvery magic. “What in Hel?” She sniffed at it.

“When you woke me in such an abrupt fashion, my spirit overreacted. It grabbed hold of your consciousnesses and pulled your minds inside mine,” I explained. Though

Nola appeared to be standing, I still felt her weight pinning me to the mattress. Her body drooled on my neck. The actual knife had fallen somewhere between the sheets.

Spirit and consciousness were two sides of the same coin. Lisbeth had a bad habit of possessing the bodies of others with hers, but I've always been more inclined to do the opposite in those rare moments when I was drastically caught off-guard.

"Sacred Crone," Ruchel breathed, and the puncture on her cheek vanished. I didn't like seeing her hurt.

Nola brought the bread up toward her mouth, inspecting it. It looked like the braided Ashkish pastry I'd feasted on earlier. It was so delicious some part of me was still dwelling on it.

"Don't eat it," I warned her. "You might wake up having chewed on your fingers."

Or on me, considering how close her mouth was to my face at that moment. They were lucky I was so depleted it was only their consciousnesses my magic grabbed and not their souls. Consciousness was weaker than spirit but flexible and more accustomed to wandering. Severing their mortal souls was not something I could have fixed.

Behind them, the walls glittered brilliantly and changed. Ruchel turned in a circle, taking in the transformation.

We were no longer in a sleeper car. The room resembled my old apartment in Kosh. Behind them, Lisbeth's bed sat, the sheets turned back, a dent in the pillow from where her head had recently rested. One of her favorite earrings remained on her nightstand, missing its match just like I now was forever missing mine.

My eyes stung.

Lisbeth and I shared the same divine father. I almost never heard from the louse. Then twenty years ago he'd dropped in out of the blue to tell me I had a little sister by some poor mortal woman who needed my help. He was too busy doing as he pleased to assist, and my life was forever changed.

"If you truly mean us no harm, then you'll keep answering our questions," Ruchel said.

"I'll do my best," I croaked around the lump growing in my throat.

Nola bent over me to skim a finger along the chain at my neck, the soft shink of the delicate metal a whisper in my ear. "This amulet, where'd you get it?"

That was a loaded question indeed. I stole a long breath, borrowing myself some time to organize my thoughts.

"I've seen ones like yours before," Ruchel pressed, squeezing her torch amulet in her palm. "The originals that belonged to the first priestesses of Fria are kept under strict lock and key at the temple of God King Alrick. They're relics. Powerful ones. Warlocks kill for them, and warlords have gone to battle just to hold one. Mine is a simple replica, but yours appears very old. I would know. Taking care of artifacts like that one was part of my job."

"It's old because I'm old," I said, tone level. It was a bit of a relief to finally have it out in the open, to be able to speak freely.

They shared a look between them, brows furrowed.

"How old?" Ruchel demanded.

"Ancient," I said. "I don't think anyone keeps track after the first century or two. A

millennium ago, the common calendar system drastically changed—you reminded me of it when you read to me earlier—so there's that issue as well. I couldn't tell you correctly how old I am."

"For fuck's sake," Nola breathed. "A millennium?"

I shrugged. "Two or three depending on your calendar of choice."

"Were you . . . ?" Ruchel's words softened into something reverent. "Maven, are you saying you're one of Fria's witches?"

"The very first one." I lifted the amulet high for her inspection. It shone in the false lantern light.

"By the Crone's saggy tits," Nola gasped. "Don't sell me a dog here, Maven. Be truthful."

"She's not lying," Ruchel whimpered. Her hand came forward, fingers outstretched. She stopped just short of touching the bronze. Her arm dropped back to her side. "The goddess of magic owned this? She wore it?"

I nodded. "You sensed I would be useful to you, Ruchel. Remember? So use me but don't fear me. We're on the same side here. We're a coven now."

"Coven of crones," Nola teased. "I may not be as old as you in years, but the trials make me feel just as ancient."

I snorted a laugh. "Coven of ruthless bitches who are going to get the Hel out of these games. Together. Come what may." Then all the mirth died out of my tone. "I know you're frightened of me, but we have a common need here. I broke my way into the Otherworld after Lisbeth was murdered. You could help me break us out."

Nola's responding bark of mirth lifted my spirits.

But Ruchel wasn't laughing. Her easy smile was gone. "I don't often agree with Blue, but there's one thing she likes to say that always rings true: Hope is a dangerous business, and it doesn't belong in the Otherworld. It'll get you killed here just as swiftly as having too kind a heart."

It broke something in me to think of all she'd endured as a prisoner to believe such a thing. It broke me even more that there were parts of me that found the sentiment relatable. "Ruchel, I won't—"

"I'll do it. I'll use you," she said. Her lips pursed, and a muscle jumped in her cheek. "At this point, I'll use everyone I've got to if it keeps me out of the dirt. That's the only true choice any of us have left down here. Live or die."

Ruchel ordered us not to share the revelation of my true nature with the others. She felt they weren't ready for it, and I agreed. She was also worried that if news spread I was a gray, the established covens would either wish to recruit me by ruthless means or wish to annihilate us all immediately to quell the threat I posed. I would need to be careful in the trials.

In more detail, I told them how I had earned my place in the games. And I explained why they shouldn't surprise me in the night with blades anymore. It wasn't my intention to add to Ruchel's discomfort with what I was capable of, but it needed to be said.

"I'm out of practice," I confessed, and Ruchel's face fell. Nola looked a bit green around the gills. "I've been in hiding a long time, but I'll get better. I'll have more control again eventually. Be patient with me and keep your blades to yourselves in the meantime. That goes double for you, Winola."

\* \* \*

When I woke again, false light shone in around the curtains. I'd made a mess in my compartment searching through the luggage before bed, but all of that was gone now. Curious, I went looking through a chest and found all-new items that hadn't been there before, items worth adding to my satchel. The fresh shirtwaist was my favorite find, even if the linen was a cream color that would show every stain.

I pulled back the curtains and gasped at the sight before me. Giants as tall as trees walked the sandy dunes dressed in leathers and moss-covered furs. Great cloaked crows swooped around them, herding them away from the train and back toward the desert. The way their magic billowed and moved, the reapers looked just like massive black birds.

A coven of green witches bartered with others for goods in a dining car just beyond the sleeper cabins. Boots and fresh linens exchanged hands. Then a fight broke out between two men over a pair of socks, one a horned beast-born and the other a blue witch wearing a water amulet. Fists were thrown. Revenants swarmed the car, and I was shoved against a wall in the panic. Witches took refuge beneath the tables.

The aggressor who'd thrown the first punch was dragged kicking toward the exit by the faceless attendants. He grunted and bellowed and thrashed. The bone doors opened wide, hot sandy wind whipped against my face, and the water witch was thrown from the moving train. I watched out the window as we sped by, his body suddenly a speck in the distant sand.

While the blood was still pounding in my ears, the green witches went right back to bartering. My heart was trying to beat its way out of my throat, but the others were unfazed.

Was this my future? This indifference?

Prisoners gathered with their covens in various cabins, eating what had been left out from the feast the night before. I found my coven bickering in the last dining car and knew immediately I had been the topic of the spat. Whatever story Nola had invented to cover for me regarding my battle with the beast must not have been well-received.

“Hold your noise,” Ruchel ordered the group, and a reluctant silence fell.

Young Liesel made a hasty retreat into the lounge. Nola sent me a reassuring wink, then went after her. Emma bristled at my nearness, but she was too busy reapplying a garlic and oil poultice to Ruchel’s swollen cheek to escape me. The puncture had worsened in the night.

Blue emptied a glass of water into the nearest pitcher and held it out toward Ruchel. “Go piss in this and bring it back to me.”

Ruchel blinked at her. The blood vessels around her injury had burst, dotting her cool brown skin in burgundy splotches. “You want me to what?”

“Are you being thick-headed or is there something wrong with your ears too?” Blue shook the glass at her. “I need to read your urine. Go relieve yourself into that cup. The more piss, the better.”

Emma rubbed the last of the pulpy mixture onto the wound, then cleaned between her fingers with a cloth napkin. “Leisel and I were in training to become midwives before all this mess. I can help you, but I need to know if the poultice is working. Perhaps you need different ingredients.”

“And we need to know if you’re going to drop dead anyway and we’re just wasting our resources,” Blue said flatly. She acknowledged me then with a sidelong look. “You were attacked too by the garm pests, weren’t you? I saw your arms yesterday.”

I plucked at the sleeve of my new shirtwaist and shuffled my feet. “I was, but I’m not having the same reaction. I wasn’t hurt as deeply, I suppose.”

God blood likely had more to do with it. I didn’t age. I healed quickly and was rarely ill. The limp from my injured ankle was already gone. I pretended to favor it when I thought they were staring.

She sniffed at me scornfully. “Hm. You were stung several more times, but you’re not sick. That’s just more good luck, though, I suppose.”

“Blue,” Ruchel groaned, “didn’t we just talk about how you weren’t going to be a cunt this morning?”

She lifted one sculpted silver eyebrow. “We did.”

“So why are you being a cunt, then?”

Blue shrugged her shoulders. “Better to be a cunt than a fool. Now go piss in this cup before I change my mind. Maybe I’ll save my energy for something more worth my while.”

Ruchel struggled to stand. I helped her back to her car so she could relieve herself privately. When she was finished, I carried the half-full glass back for her. Ruchel shambled behind me weakly. It took her ages to reclaim her chair.

Blue wrinkled her nose and accepted the glass, careful not to touch my fingers with hers, like I was contagious. Emma and Blue left us to our breakfast in the dining car to go and work the water spell.

I did most of the eating, my satchel clutched beside me to deter others from stealing my goods.

Ruchel picked at the fruit on her plate and watched the migration of the giants out our window. “They’re getting bolder,” she said, worrying her lower lip. A sheen of sweat built at her brow, evidence of her growing fever.

“I don’t think giants stand much of a chance against reapers, though,” I said reassuringly. More cloaked crows gathered, floating like wraiths to herd the lumbering creatures farther away from the tracks. Their billowing shadows were as black as night and as big as houses.

I felt the darkness approaching before I saw it crawling along the window glass. The hair on my arms stood at attention. Shadows crept from the corners of the room to coat the cabin floor. I propped my boots up on the empty chair next to me to avoid the pooling magic. The scent of leather and cedar oil filled my nose as a cloaked figure billowed up from out of the shade.

Ruchel choked on the piece of apple she was nibbling.

“You,” I stammered. My tongue failed to come up with anything more useful or coherent.

Asher stood so close I could reach out and touch his cloak. His overly curious magic circled my seat, running shadowy veins up the chair legs. My spirit sputtered in my gut, too weak to make much of a showing after the events in the night.

“Trouble,” he greeted in that baritone of his that was as deep and dark as the death magic rippling all around him. Then he stared at me with the patience of an ageless man who never had to hurry.

My heart thumped against the cage of my ribs in the rudest fashion, ignoring my internal commands to appear brave and collected, to behave formidably before our foe. Sweat gathered in my palms. “What do you want?” I prompted.

“You,” he said softly, and the pulse at my throat jumped. “You and the rest of my little coven.”

At that, my misbehaving heart came crashing to a halt.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“The god Unger created the giants to hold up the skies during creation to keep the clouds from crashing into his beloved seas, but the creatures have lost their purpose since then. Now the giants wander the wilderness wild and hungry.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

Ruchel spluttered out a curse word.

“I must have misheard you,” I said, once my heart jolted back to life again. “You said ‘my’ coven when clearly you must have meant ‘your’ coven.”

“You didn’t mishear me, Trouble.” His placid expression cracked ever so slightly, quirking the side of his mouth. “This is my coven too now. I joined yesterday with my blood. Didn’t you see me?”

Slack-jawed, Ruchel spluttered out another curse.

“You know damn well we couldn’t see you hiding in the shadows. You made sure of it.” I glowered at him, my neck and ears running hot. “You’re the reason the blood darkened and formed a crow. That wasn’t a blessing at all.”

His lips twitched. “I suppose that depends on your definition of blessing. I’d like to think of myself as a boon rather than a curse.”

“You’re worse than a curse,” I bit out. “You nearly succeeded in killing me yesterday.”

His pale brows furrowed, and his dark magic rippled and roiled like an agitated sea.

“Killing you? I did no such thing.”

“You did,” I insisted, and Ruchel watched our exchange with interest, scooting to the edge of her chair. I had to be more careful with my words when I spoke about the god sigil he’d smothered. Ruchel wasn’t the only one who might be listening. “You took away my . . . means of protection.”

He let out a breathy laugh. “Your death wasn’t what I was after. It’s your magic I was interested in. If I disarmed you, well, that wasn’t my intention. Clearly that wasn’t the only weapon in your arsenal.”

Hands in fists, heat warmed my chest, and my spirit stirred to life, readying itself. “You’re not in this covenant. You didn’t speak the words, and you weren’t accepted.”

Adding his blood was all that mattered to seal the vow—the rest was ceremony—but I would cling to every technicality if it thwarted this Death spy.

“We can fix that right now.” Asher pushed back his midnight hood. He wore his silvery-white hair pulled half up into a knot. Casually, he scratched at his cheek, the hint of a smile growing in the corner of his mouth. “What was it you all said again . . . ? Oh, that’s right. ‘I vow by my blood and by my magic to serve the good of my covenant, to stand in unity with my sisters until Death ferries me to the life after.’”

I snorted. “Fat lot of good that’ll do you—”

“We hear you, brother,” Ruchel said quietly.

My gaze snapped to hers. “What are you doing?” I hissed.

Ruchel sagged in her seat like her head was too heavy to keep upright. “We hear you, brother, and we hold you to your word.”

“Clearly, fever has made you delirious,” I protested.

Asher flashed a smile at me that was as bright as Berhta’s morning light. “Our high witch has spoken.”

“She’s not done speaking,” Ruchel let her head fall against the back of her chair, and she squeezed her eyes shut. “The giants are growing bold again.”

Crouching down, Asher peered out the window behind me. “They do that every so often when they tire of the desert. We’ll herd them home again.”

Ruchel squeezed the bridge of her nose, brow furrowed. Her ochre eyes opened, red-rimmed. “When they leave the desert, the death toll in Wulfram doubles. But now that you’re one of us, you’ll see to it that no giant threatens the safety of your covenant.”

Asher bowed his head in overly polite deference—a deference I wasn’t buying for one minute. “Of course I will.”

Then Ruchel’s breathing slowed like she’d fallen asleep right there in her chair.

I rose to my feet to face my foe head-on, pleased when my knees didn’t buckle. I kept my footing even when his formidable magic billowed around me so close its cool energy brushed over the skin of my arms and neck and cheek. A shiver touched my spine, and it was . . . not entirely unpleasant. “You’re a fool if you think I’ll fall prey to whatever trick this is, god spy.”

He dropped his chin to meet me eye-to-eye, bringing his nose inches from my own. “I’m no one’s spy, Troublemaker. God or otherwise.”

“Don’t toy with me. Just tell me what you want.” I lowered my voice in case he wasn’t the only spy around. “We’re both too old to tolerate the silly political games

the gods love to play.”

“No games. I need to learn your ways. It’s as simple as that.” The corners of his dark eyes crinkled, another fine crack in an otherwise stoic countenance.

“Then may the Crone always send me enemies as foolish as you,” I ground out.

“See you again soon, Trouble. For now, I’ve giants to chase off.” His cloak billowed up around him until he was one with the shade. Wraith-like, he melted into the shadows and was gone.

I sat in my chair so hard the legs scraped the bone floors.

“Does he know what you are?” Ruchel rasped. I’d thought she was asleep, but she peeked out at me through the slit of one eye.

“He does,” I whispered.

“That’s a complication, then.”

“We need to get rid of Asher, not encourage him,” I huffed. “It’s not clear what he wants, but when he gets it, he’ll do away with us. Or his god certainly will when he forces us to go to battle for him. What use are mortals to the Old One except as fodder for a war machine?”

“Then you’d better not let him get whatever it is he wants.” Smacking her lips together, she gestured weakly at the pitcher of water between us.

I poured her a glass and pushed it into her reaching fingers. “What does Asher gain from joining our covenant? He can’t be telling the truth about wanting to learn our ways.”

“I can’t read him.” The glass shook as she lifted it toward her lips. She sipped at the water. Then she set it down hard as though it were too heavy, and I wished I hadn’t filled it so full.

“You don’t need mind magic to see he’s just using us for whatever—”

“Of course he is. I’m not telling you you’re wrong, Maven.” She waved my words away, then let her arms fall at her sides, tucked out by the gesture. “I’m telling you to use him back.”

“And if I can’t?”

She pointed at my satchel and the curved blade poking out the lip of it, the handle of my revolver right beside it. “Do you know how to kill a crow?”

“No. I’m not even sure if that’s possible.” They weren’t divine, but they weren’t mortal either.

“Then we’d better find out, hadn’t we? Just in case.”

Our coven mates returned shortly thereafter to tend to our high witch. Liesel kept her distance across the cabin, but I took it as a good sign that at least she was willing to be in the same place as me. Nola claimed the chair beside me, her solid presence an instant reassurance.

“Good news,” Blue said flatly. “You get to live another day.”

Emma held the glass of urine out in her hands, her tall green hat tucked under her arm. Small, brown, trimmed roots floated inside the concoction. The scent of ammonia stung my nostrils.

“We mixed a detoxing potion, combining Blue’s water spell—made from your water—and my earth magic to ensure you’re cleansed as quickly as possible. But . . .” Emma bit her lip.

“But you have to drink it,” Blue said bluntly, “and then your insides will feel like they’re trying to become your outsides. It will only get worse from there before you have any relief at all.”

Ruchel took the glass between her trembling fingers. She sniffed at it, and her nose wrinkled. “I think I’d rather die.”

“Oh, come off it,” Nola said, chuckling. “I’ve drunk beer that smelled worse than that swill. It probably tasted worse too. Chin up. Then when you’re done, we can talk strategy for the next trial. The train will stop soon.”

“Pinch your nose when you do it,” Liesel chimed in. I glanced at her, and her cheeks went pink. “It helps me when I have to swallow my medicine.”

Ruchel choked the concoction down, her lips blanching. She slammed the glass onto the table when she finished. Her chest heaved. “Ack. I was right. I’d rather be dead.”

\* \* \*

The fourth trial had yet to start. Prisoners gathered on the platform outside Wulfram’s cast iron gates. The clock tower remained the same, but this part of the city of retribution contained larger buildings of dark brick spaced well apart. Tall sandstone walls turned the city into a great maze.

Ruchel and I warned the others about Asher’s sudden appearance and claim to our coven. The green sisters were relieved at the idea of a powerful crow ally. Nola took the news in stride.

Blue was as suspicious as I was. She voiced her skepticism boisterously, and I'd never liked her more.

Ruchel wobbled on her feet, too weak to carry her pack. All she had on her was a dagger and a water sack, and that seemed too much for her.

"I could carry those," I offered.

She shook her head at me, her hand pressed to her belly. Then she vomited onto the platform. Bile and urine splattered my boots and the ebonized wood beneath my feet. A circle of space formed around our coven, separating us from the anxious mass of bodies pressing at Wulfram's gates.

"Good. The detoxing potion is working," Blue said. "You can pay me for it later."

Ruchel wiped her mouth with her shirtsleeve, her glassy ochre eyes narrowed to angry slits. The clock struck the first hour, and the gates parted with a screech of metal. We moved slowly for Ruchel's sake. She vomited again, which thankfully discouraged other prisoners from crowding us.

The sandstone walls stood tall and smooth. Unclimbable. Narrow passages and dead ends created dangerous battlegrounds for covens harboring grudges against other groups from trials past. Ruchel guided us away from the bloodiest of conflicts with her sharp instincts, but by the time the clock reached the third hour, her pace had slowed to a dangerous degree.

"At this lousy speed, we'll never make the tower before the train leaves us," Blue grumbled, not for the first time.

Nola turned on the stubborn witch, hands in fists and nostrils flaring. "I've had about enough of you!"

I stepped between them, arms spread. Liesel gasped and hid behind her sister.

Ruchel collapsed in the sandy soil, and the fight ended as quickly as it had begun. Liesel dropped down beside her, making a pillow for Ruchel's head with her lap. Emma fanned her face, trying to cool her. Nola wet a red scarf from her pack and used it to dampen Ruchel's lips and neck.

Her ochre eyes fluttered back open.

"There you are," I said to her softly. "You scared us."

"Leave me," Ruchel rasped, and my heart sank into my boots.

"Stop talking nonsense and get back on your feet, you bricky bitch," Nola barked.

Ruchel shook her head sluggishly. The swelling on her cheek was down, but she looked even worse than before. Her skin had gone waxy. "Leave me. I'll catch up with you after the toxin passes."

"We're not leaving you for a passing warlock to find," Nola said.

"Cover me with something and go," Ruchel whispered, arms and legs sprawled out in the dirt like a starfish. She closed her eyes. "Your high witch commands it."

Heavy silence fell. Emma and Liesel climbed slowly to their feet.

"Get. Up. Ruchel," Nola said through gritted teeth. Her lip trembled.

Ruchel didn't move. I lowered myself down beside her, using my body to shade her face.

Blue and the sisters shuffled away.

“We’re not leaving her!” Nola charged after them, stomping across gravel, kicking up sand.

“Our high witch has spoken,” Emma said gently, eyes on the ground.

Blue hesitated then, full lips pursed. She fished her wand out of her satchel and used the forked end to dig in the loose dirt, drawing a rough map. “Up ahead, there are two options, here and here. Both wells are good for refilling a canteen. Our high witch is going to need all the liquids she can get to clear her body of toxins, but be careful of the garm water devils.”

“Help us,” Nola begged.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Blue snapped. She drew more paths. Mimicking the maze ahead, then a broad square. “Here, there’s a statue of the warrior goddess Irmina in a courtyard. You’ve seen it before, I’m sure. Covens like to barter there for things they need, trade spells and supplies. It’s a safe space. The green witch Talia runs it like a market. We’ll wait for you for one hour when we reach it. Just one hour while we rest our legs. Get her there or we go on without you.”

Blue pulled the strap of her bag up higher on her slender shoulder and marched on, never looking back, Liesel not far behind. Emma sent us an apologetic smile before she too departed.

We let Ruchel rest for a time, her head in Nola’s lap. I wet her lips with a damp cloth and made her sip water. She drank, half-conscious.

“We have to go,” Nola said, scrambling to her feet.

I followed her gaze behind us. “Warlocks,” I gasped.

A coven of four drew near, taking the collapsed mind witch in with hungry eyes.

“Fucking vultures.” Nola dropped her pack and pulled Ruchel upright. She dragged her weight across her broad shoulders and hoisted her into the air. Nola wore her draped along her neck like a yoke for an ox, holding her thigh with one hand, the other grasping her arms at the wrists to keep her in place.

I slung Nola’s knapsack onto my back and followed. We hurried around the bend, slipping between two brick buildings to lose our tail, but the sandy soil was soft. Footprints gave our direction away.

The warlocks kept their distance but wouldn’t leave our trail, never too far behind us. I roused Ruchel with a gentle tap on her uninjured cheek when we needed to know which path through the maze was best. We were moving so slowly we didn’t run into anyone else. Other prisoners had wisely kept up the pace and were much farther ahead.

During their pursuit, the warlocks hid their faces with red hoods, the kind executioners wore during a beheading.

“They’re a part of a large coven,” Nola huffed. “Their high warlock is a nasty beast-born who makes all his loyalists wear hoods like that. They only recruit warlocks and beast-born. He calls himself Master.”

“Master ?” I said sourly, hating the taste of the offending name on my tongue. “Well, that’s all I need to know about him.”

“He’s a mean bastard. He took over the second trial long before I arrived here, and he still holds it, last we were there. Blue has had the most run-ins with his lot. I keep

hoping someone will hurry up and put a knife in his back, but he lives on. I'd rather face devils and garm over vermin like him."

"I could put a bullet in one of them right now," I offered, as the warlocks edged nearer. "That'll send the right message."

"I like the way you think, duck, but save your bullets. We might need them," Nola said breathlessly, her steps growing heavier.

I was puffing just with the extra pack on my back. Our pace dragged, and the warlocks grew more daring, pulling within a yard of us. We took refuge in a building that looked war-torn. The windows were blown out, the steps littered with broken glass. Scorch marks darkened the archway, and the door had been knocked down. We had to step over it to enter.

The building was just a shell, nothing inside but bare floors. Nola laid Ruchel down cautiously on the checkered tile, and she stole a drink from the water sack she kept at her belt. I dropped our bags at my feet and drank my fill.

We made Ruchel hydrate too quickly, and she heaved her stomach's contents onto the floor.

I helped move her away from the mess, her skin clammy and too hot to the touch. She lay curled on her side, clutching her belly, her lavender scarf slipping off her forehead. I fixed it for her. Eyes squeezed shut, she was breathing shallowly, half-conscious moments later.

I readied my revolver, wishing my spirit didn't feel like lead in my belly. The heat drained me of energy like sand through a sieve. I was in no condition to battle anyone, let alone warlocks, but that wouldn't stop me from trying my damndest.

“With a short barrel like that,” Nola said, jutting her chin at my weapon, “you’ll want to aim for the widest part of their chest. If you miss a little, you’ll still hit something important. Let them get good and close and make it count. I’ll be right behind you.”

She rubbed her hands together and blew into her palms, growing a crimson cloud between her fingers. We waited in silence, nothing but the gentle crackle of her building storm and the blood rushing in my ears for company. I didn’t move an inch. A bead of sweat made a slow trail down my neck, and I didn’t even flinch to wipe it.

The drag of a footstep in sandy soil neared, a boot landing cautiously in the dirt just outside.

I slid out the archway, ducked low, and aimed squarely for the warlock’s chest. The hooded men called a warning out to one another. I adjusted for the sight and squeezed the trigger. The crack of the revolver left my ears ringing. My shot struck the warlock’s shoulder and down he went.

Two bullets left.

Nola charged out from behind me and flung the growing storm. It landed with a powerful burst of red mist and a boom of thunder that shook the earth and sent the vultures running for cover. Bursts of lightning shot from the cloud, scorching the sand and striking against the walls of the maze.

“That’ll make them think twice,” Nola said, winded.

“You’re too spent,” I said. “I’ll get Ruchel.”

She didn’t have the breath to argue with me. Nola struggled with our bags, chest heaving, and I fumbled Ruchel up to her feet as best I could. I pulled her up onto my back, using her arms like straps. The rush of my racing heart helped, the panic fueling

me and making me stronger. I wore her like a knapsack and carried her out of the building.

“You idiots should just leave me,” she groaned into my neck.

“If a giant shows up,” Nola said, jogging up beside me, “we’ll leave you in the street as bait while we make our escape.”

“Do you mean it?” Ruchel asked hopefully.

Nola snorted.

“Go back to sleep,” I told her. “You’re stuck with us.”

She mumbled something incoherent and was snoring against my neck moments later.

I was not as muscled as Nola. When I tired, we found another building, not far from the eastern well Blue had directed us to. Both Ruchel and Nola needed a rest. Nola ate the food from her knapsack. I gave her mine as well, fueling her back up as best we could.

I emptied my satchel of everything but water containers and went after the nearest well, revolver at hand in case I ran into trouble along the way. I was foiled by a dead end in the maze and had to backtrack, cutting through a building that looked like it had survived a terrible storm, windows gone, shattered glass everywhere. I climbed dilapidated stairs to the second story and spotted the well in the distance through a gaping hole where the brick had caved in.

The well was busy. A coven dressed in matching black uniforms I hadn’t seen on the train before took turns drawing out a bucket and rehydrating. The group was made of a strange pairing of magical beings. Witches with their scarves and amulets worked

alongside warlocks wearing bone relics pinned to their collars.

A water devil sprang from the depths of the well. I saw a flash of blue scales, webbed claws, and flailing finned feet. The creature bit the face off the nearest warlock. A spray of blood wet the sand. The warlock fell dead. Gunshots rang out, and a burst of flame brought the devil down.

The coven cleared the pockets of the fallen and marched off, taking his firearm and leaving his body behind.

If there was another devil in that well, I didn't stand a chance. Not weakened and alone. But then I recalled the way Nola always aimed her energy into her hands with her breath to make it more malleable. I opened the cylinder on the revolver. With the little magic I had left, I blew it onto the bullets, coating them in gray. Perhaps this way I could aid the bullet into causing some proper harm even against garm while still concealing my abilities.

I raced to the well. A close-up of the dead man turned my stomach. I had to roll him onto his side so I couldn't see the damage done by devil teeth.

I drew out the bucket in an anxious frenzy. Shooting glances over my shoulder, I refilled our water supplies. I wet my face and neck to cool myself and double-checked that there was nothing useful in the pockets of the dead warlock. All I found was lint. I took his boots and stockings for trade, the discomfort I felt over raiding the dead already lessening in my heart. I ran back inside the building for cover, grateful no garm presented themselves.

I couldn't leave Nola and Ruchel for long. There was no way we would make Blue's timeline at the market, but the train was still well within our reach. We had water now. We could survive this. Things were looking up. I slowed inside the building, lulled into an easier pace by the cooler air in the shade.

And then I smelled him: leather, cedar oil, and magic.

The god spy was watching me again.

I aimed my revolver at the shadows where they grew darkest and fired a gray bullet at the crow.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“The White One, the god of frost and snow, lost a battle of wills against Fria, the goddess of magic. She turned him to stone inside his mountain fortress, damning the North to an eternal cold.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

A sher materialized with a grunt of pain. His pale face contorted under his midnight hood.

“That. Hurt,” he growled. A singed hole marred the leather of his waistcoat, right where his heart should be, if reapers even had such a thing. Angry black smoke billowed out of the tear.

Apparently, a crow could not be killed with a bullet. Even a magical one. If I survived this conflict, I’d tell Ruchel later to cross that off the list.

Just to be sure, I aimed my last shot at his face and cocked my revolver.

His shadows grabbed me from behind. A tendril of night wrapped my waist and both arms and pinned me against the brick wall hard enough to knock the air from my lungs. The darkness disarmed me. It swallowed up my revolver and the dagger at my hip. Asher crossed to me, steps brisk against the wooden floors, black eyes glowering, and he jerked the strap off my shoulder. His shadows opened wide like the yawning jaws of a great beast. He fed my satchel to his darkness, and it ate it all up.

For a moment I was too shocked with this show of magic to protest. This was power I’d never seen before in all my centuries. His magic was wintry cold and smooth along the hot surging pulse in my wrists. I struggled briefly against the dark bonds to test their strength, a futile effort. They were as solid as steel. Wasting anymore

precious energy on them wouldn't be prudent.

Based on the vehement way he glowered, shooting him hadn't been prudent either. It sure sent a clear message, though. I would not be spied upon.

"I would like my things back," I said, mustering calm. Hopefully he couldn't hear the panicked patter of my heart. The organ insisted on giving me away.

"You've been a villain," he tutted, brow wrinkled in pain. "You don't get to make demands of me now."

My stomach fluttered with nerves. If he was going to kill me, I'd rather he just got on with it. "You were a villain first, and you were spying on me again."

He moved in so close I could feel his breath, hot and angry, against my lips. "You're not turning this around on me, troublemaker. You shot me, a member of your coven."

"You're only a member through deceit and technicality. You tried to have me killed yesterday, you lout!" My vision narrowed on the threat before me, and the pulse in my throat jumped. "I had good cause to shoot you. If you don't want me to do it again, you should stay far away from me."

"I wasn't trying to murder you, you little monster," he rumbled. "I didn't know how your powers worked—still don't understand them. That wasn't sabotage. I'm a ferrier of souls. I deal with death enough as it is. I don't add to my load by killing people."

"And Hel is hot," I said with a laugh that had no humor. "You're full of it."

"I admit I attempted to mislead you the first time we spoke. You're a vicious thing. I didn't think you'd answer my questions unless you believed I was equally vicious. And then . . ." His words trailed away, and his multicolored eyes sharpened, deep

browns and dark blues melting into the black. He chewed at his cheek.

I thought for sure he could hear my heart. It was making such a racket in the quiet. I swallowed. “And then what?”

“And then you just walked away from me. The nerve of you.” His stony expression cracked into a crooked grin that was more appealing than it had any right to be. “No one walks away from me, Trouble. They run. They hide. They don’t walk.”

“If you enjoyed that so much, let me go. I’ll show it to you again.”

“It made me more curious about you than is strictly good for my health. Clearly.” The singed bullet hole continued to leak billowy death magic. He stuck his finger in it, stoppering it. “Now, where is the rest of our covenant?”

“Oh, I’m not telling you anything. Did the bullet I put in your chest not make that clear? You’ll get no cooperation from me. You or your god.”

Asher growled something unintelligible under his breath. He pulled me unceremoniously out of the building by the same shadows that bound me, back into smoldering heat and endless sandstone. The soft sand betrayed me. He tracked my boot prints easily.

When I tried to thwart him, he pulled me down to the ground and dragged me behind him through the dirt on my back, my arms and shoulders and hips tethered to him by his cool shadows. Defeated, I warned him when we were coming up on the dead end, but full of reciprocated distrust, he insisted on seeing it for himself.

“This is humiliating,” I grumbled. My shoulders ached, and my bound fingers were starting to go numb.

Asher didn't slow. "Then maybe you should apologize for shooting me."

"I'm sorry I shot you," I said flatly.

He stopped. Turning on me, he looked me over slowly, then one pale brow cocked. "I don't believe you."

We continued like that in silence, him towing me behind him like I weighed nothing, retracing my footsteps. I might as well have been a slab of dead venison he was hauling home after a hunt.

My prints led us straight back to the brick building we'd picked to hide in. Nola filled up the doorway. To my great relief, Ruchel was on her feet beside her, worn and rumpled but very much alive. They seemed not to know what to make of the picture we presented: a reaper lugging his coven mate like meat from the butcher.

"She shot me," Asher proclaimed petulantly, coming to a halt at the bottom of the stone stoop.

"Did you just tattle on me like a child would?" I groused, struggling to sit upright with my hands bound. "How old are you?"

Asher didn't seem to realize the question was facetious. His brow scrunched. "Does anyone bother to keep track of their age after the first few centuries?"

"I found the well," I called up to Nola and Ruchel, "but the god spy stole my things from me."

Asher reached into his cloak and pulled out their water sacks. "I've got them here for you."

Nola helped Ruchel navigate the stairs. At the bottom, she took her sack in both hands and drank greedily.

Asher let me hydrate, but I wasn't allowed to do it myself. He poured the water directly into my mouth from my canteen, splattering my chin and nose. Like a fool. I needed to remember to mask my irritation better because all evidence of it delighted him.

"Aren't you going to help me?" I asked my coven mates, lifting my bound hands to them.

Ruchel's lips were pale, and purple splotches hung beneath her ochre eyes. There was no patience or sympathy to be found there. "Did you really shoot him? That's a waste of a good bullet, Maven."

It wouldn't have been a waste if it had killed him.

"I did shoot him a little," I confessed with a sigh.

"Are you going to let her go?" Ruchel demanded.

"Eventually," Asher drawled.

Nola shrugged her broad shoulders. "No offense, duck, but if it means he'll continue to keep the giants away from all of us, I'd let him gag you."

Asher's laugh was as thick and deep as his baritone and as threatening as smoke before fire.

He let me rise to my feet, an extra challenge with my wrists bound. There was so much sand in my trousers now, I felt ten pounds heavier. Grit slid down my pantlegs

into my socks. Winola handed over her pack and the rest of the things I'd left behind, and Asher stored them in his shadows—sending them away to wherever shadows went.

“You could stop fussing with me and help us carry Ruchel,” I suggested.

She was moving on her own, but not without lots of help. As we walked, she hung off Nola's arm and slowed our pace to a near crawl.

“The living can't well tolerate the touch of a ferrier of spirits,” he said. “She would find my magic very unpleasant.”

His shadows curled around my wrists, cool and silky. Not at all unpleasant.

“Hm. Maven doesn't seem to mind it,” Nola noted.

It felt like a spotlight had been turned on me. My cheeks burned.

Asher sent me a smug grin over his shoulder. “No, but she's an unusual exception. It wouldn't be the same for someone less villainous, like our high witch.”

“Let's not talk about how unusual Maven is,” Ruchel ordered, her breathing labored. Sweat beaded on her brow. “No mention of villainy or gray magic either. Especially not in front of the others. Got that, Asher? Other witches will be less openminded than us about partnering with a gray.”

“As you wish,” he said, sending me another self-satisfied smirk.

If I could get my hands around his neck, I'd squeeze until his face turned purple. I'd poke at the bullet hole I put in his chest. I'd kick him in the shins . . .

I considered telling him all this, but then Ruchel tired and couldn't walk on her own anymore. She vomited again, mostly dry heaves, there was so little left in her stomach. Asher released me so I could assist. We took turns lifting her.

Nola carried her across her shoulders as we neared the marketplace.

"You need to keep out of sight, Asher," Ruchel instructed, her cheek resting on Nola's shoulder. "Or you'll scare off everyone at the market."

He gave us back our things, including my weapons, before he melted away into the shadows. The tart, tangy scent of his death magic lingered in the air, a vast improvement on the smell of sweat and bile.

The statue of naked Irmina was so tall I spotted her peeking out over the top of the maze walls. Made of bronze, she carried a spear, her sculpted hair spilling over and around her shoulders to fall to her waist.

The market proved to be less crude than I'd imagined. The stalls were well-built, the wares top quality. This had to be the work of a powerful coven—possibly several were needed to make such a sophisticated thing.

"Everyone underestimates green witches," Nola said, guessing correctly where my thoughts were headed. "Greens are the most common around Wulfram, and they've done the best job establishing themselves as neutral forces. The other larger covens are convinced they're not a threat with their crafts and their healing tonics."

I scoffed. "The larger covens are fools, then."

If all the greens banded together, they could win the games with sheer numbers and cleverness.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Nola said. “That’s why we do what we can to make them our allies when we encounter them, not our enemies. Blue thinks they only pretend their group is broken into several smaller covens, like we do, and I suspect she’s on to something there. Behave yourself here. We want to join with them, not turn them against us.”

The scent of cooked animal fat and roasted vegetables carried on the breeze. People bustled about, many of whom I’d never seen on the train before. The strangers wore matching black uniforms.

Blue and the sisters were still there. They’d waited for us. The sight of them sent my hopes soaring and warmed the renewing magic in my chest.

I spotted Emma’s tall conical hat first, then Liesel beside her. They were taking a dust bath like hens to replenish their energies, buried up to the neck in loose dirt and sand. Blue sat on a stool beside a makeshift wheelbarrow fashioned from the broken pieces of horse carts. The extra wheels and parts the crafty green sisters hadn’t used remained scattered about.

Nola reached them first, carrying Ruchel across her broad shoulders. “It’s been a lot longer than one hour,” she said to Blue, a happy glint in her cobalt eyes.

Blue snorted dismissively. “Yes, well, the girls needed a pick-me-up after making that, and I had business with Talia.”

“And you’re not always a cunt,” Ruchel added as Nola lowered her into the wheelbarrow. “This was a very clever idea. Thank you all.”

“Shut it,” Blue hissed. “Someone might hear you carrying on. The sellers will think I’ve gone soft and try to stick me with higher prices.”

The expansive market filled out the courtyard and spilled into the streets. Nola showed me around and we bartered at various stalls. I traded the boots I'd scavenged for roasted potatoes and a roll of bread, a proper holster for my weapons, and three more rounds for the revolver. Good food and better company replenished more of my spirit. I asked discreet questions and learned the black uniforms represented a coven who called themselves the Guardians, self-proclaimed servants of God King Alrick.

"They say they're fighting to end the trials, but it's yet another power play fueled by a god to grab another throne. That's all," Nola droned. "This coven is more organized than the Master's group of bashers, but I don't know who their leader is. The last rumor I heard, the god king himself was at the helm, but that's probably nonsense. The Guardians are growing rapidly, though, turning prisoners into soldiers. Transforming the maze into their territory. That's not just rumor."

"Could they bring the games to an end before they even start? Isn't that what we all want?" I asked, working through my own ponderings out loud. This coven certainly looked impressive standing all together. There were so many of them. "Are they a way out of the trials and off the Schatten for good?"

"That's nothing but a dream, and they'll all die for it," Nola said bleakly. "Blue's been here longer than anyone, and she'll tell you the same. Groups like this one crop up claiming they're the answer. Then rivals rise to power beside them like weeds. They kill each other and there's panic and anarchy and more death than ever before. It's covens like ours willing to keep their teams small and smart who survive. That's what matters most. Stay unnoticed, avoid god politics, and you stay alive."

But freedom was what I wanted. Freedom so I could have my revenge. A guilty god still needed to die, and if I needed to kill all of them to get at the one responsible, I'd do that.

"You could risk the nights here and remain in the maze," Nola continued. "You could

pray the giants and the garm don't get you. Declare Alrick as your god and fight beside warlocks who wear hexen bones made of our defiled dead on their clothes."

My nose wrinkled. "No thank you. I'll stick to our new plan: finding a way out of the Otherworld."

"Agreed. I've had enough of war. I won't be used again like a weapon to bring more power to already powerful men, whatever the reason," Nola said. "I've been approached before by the Guardians. My answer is always the same."

"'Fuck off' with both middle fingers raised?" I guessed.

"Exactly."

More Guardians flooded the market, and Nola and I were ushered to the outskirts to make room for them. Someone of import had arrived, based on the sudden din. We huddled under the overhang of a stall that sold boot repair services. I wished I was a few inches taller so I could see who it was that had everyone acting excitedly.

The shadows darkened around me and the air cooled. Asher remained hidden, his wraith-like shade concealing his body, but the silky touch of his magic grazed my shoulder. It didn't bother me. I appreciated that he was making his presence known. It felt less like spying that way.

And then the crowd shifted just enough that I caught a glimpse of a tall man with chestnut hair and a bronze circlet worn like royalty. Bronze and bone were preferred items for relics, marking him as a warlock.

His profile came into view just for a heartbeat, and I forgot how to breathe.

"Bram?" I gasped. My eyes had to be deceiving me. "It can't be . . ."

“You’ve seen him before? How?” Nola asked.

But Bram was a coal delivery man in the Upper Realm. I’d known him for months. He’d visited us every week. What was he doing down here dressed in fine button boots that wouldn’t last a day in a trial and a brocade jacket that belonged on a prince?

He shook hands with a witch from the train, a beautiful woman with dark umber skin and tight, jet-colored ringlets, the curls at her temples shot through with silver. She was the high witch of what appeared to be a modest green coven. Talia, I’d overheard her called, the woman who ran the market.

They smiled at one another in that disingenuous way of the politically-minded, a reserved showing of teeth that didn’t reach the eyes. My fingers tightened into fists that shook, my body recognizing the threat before my muddled mind could catch up.

Bram was a warlock. Not some coal delivery man—never just that. It had all been a lie.

“He was there the day my sister was murdered,” I told Nola, my voice turning breathy. “He visited our shop all the time. I didn’t know he was a warlock. I wouldn’t have . . .”

Nola laid a hand high on my arm, her large palm swallowing up my shoulder. “That’s hard, duck. I’m sorry. Damn. If you’re sure that’s him—”

“It’s him,” I bit out.

“What sort of power would someone need to have to portal between here and the Upper Realm whenever it pleases them?” Nola asked. Then she answered her own question. “God power.”

I didn't know how he did it, and I didn't care. Lisbeth accidentally revealed herself to an ambitious warlock, and that same night she was dead. That wasn't a coincidence. My hands made fists that shook. Revenge was mine, and it demanded I act now, ask questions later. Rage made me feel as powerful as if I still had god magic burning in my chest.

Go make him spit blood , Lisbeth's voice said in my head, and that sounded like an absolutely brilliant idea.

Bram was gone as quickly as I had spotted him, swallowed up by the crowd, but I'd seen enough. That was undoubtedly him dressed in silks, surrounded by desperate people who had nothing, being fawned over by a starry-eyed coven.

I pushed what magic I had into my hands until my fingers went gray, and I reached for my dagger.

Nola grabbed my elbow. "What're you doing?"

"I'm going to go shove my hands inside his chest and demand a few answers," I said coldly. Smoky death magic wound anxiously around my sleeves, darkening my dirty clothing. "I'll make him confess his crimes in front of all of his followers—the ones that don't flee in fright at the sight of a gray. Then he'll shout my sister's name, beg her for forgiveness, before I cut his tongue out. Just as a start."

Nola jerked my elbow, rattling me until I let go of my dagger. "You promised you wouldn't hurt us."

I blinked at her, my vision red-tinged and narrowing. "Get the others and go. I'll wait until you're gone."

She pulled me closer. "You promised you didn't have god ambition." Her voice

broke.

“That’s not what I’m—”

“If you attack him here and now,” she whispered, her breath warming the shell of my ear, “the Guardians will come for all of us. Then you’re just another one of the weeds that crops up down here. Another powerful bastard who starts a war no one wins.”

“Nola—”

“Was I wrong about you? Are you one of them?” She pulled away from me and adjusted her belt, tucking her shirt in where it had lifted, her movements curt. “It’s your move now, ducky. Either way, I’m getting the others and leaving here. I hope you find your senses and come too. I hope I wasn’t wrong about you.”

I watched her push through the crowd, frozen. The fire in my chest had been smothered once again. My arms went inert at my sides.

Of course, I knew exactly the sort she was describing. Hadn’t I watched people with too much might sacrifice those beneath them to gain even more in the Upper Realm? Wasn’t that exactly who the gods I hated were? Too powerful to answer to anyone. Too selfish to be useful.

Asher’s magic touched the back of my neck, and a shiver cascaded down my spine. Muscles low in my belly trembled. The scent of woodsy leather hit my nose moments before I felt him whispering directly into my ear out of his darkness.

“Always so vicious,” he drawled. “I especially liked the bit about cutting out his tongue.”

“Bram is the one person in this realm I’d like to put a bullet in even more than I’d

like to put another one in you,” I told him. There was no heat in my words, just truth.

A husky chuckle curled into my ear. “Should I be jealous?”

“There’s just so much I don’t understand,” I breathed, needing to get the anxious thoughts out no matter who my audience was. “I don’t even know where to begin. How is he here? Why did he pretend? How do I get at Bram now when he has such a massive coven?”

“What if I helped you get at him?” His darkness shifted behind me, moving so I heard him over the opposite shoulder. “I don’t kill, mind you. I meant that. I won’t be putting a bullet in him, but I could be helpful in other ways.”

“What ways?”

“You need information. I need information too. We could stop trying to get one over on the other and make a fair trade instead.”

“I don’t see that working out well.”

“You won’t know until you try. Come on, Trouble. You tell me something, and I’ll go and get you something useful as payment. A fair trade. No games.”

I bit my lip, trying to think out my options, but my mind wasn’t being helpful. It just kept replaying images of Lisbeth dead, the coppery scent of phantom blood stuck in my nose. Me with my hands shoved inside Bram’s chest and the world on fire all around us. “What do you want to know?”

“Why do you call yourself a witch?”

I scoffed. “Because I am one. Haven’t I answered this before?” I moved away from

the stall, and Asher's shade followed me out into the street, keeping me cool in the heat. I didn't want to lose pace with my coven completely. I needed to catch up to them, but walking away from my new target made my feet heavier. It hurt me putting my back to Bram, leaving him behind.

What if someone else killed him before I could? Nola said coups were common in Wulfram. That would crush me.

"You've got more in common with me than you do the other witches," Asher said. "You don't age. Mortals change just a fraction all the time. You don't, and I saw you touch that garm's soul. You held it like only a ferrier can. Yet I sense no connection to the elements in you. Nothing that would explain such power."

My power didn't come from any element. It flowed from my god-born spirit. "I'm not a reaper. I don't belong to the Old One."

"I know that. I just want to understand you. I need to learn your ways." His pause came with a lingering exhale. "I need your help."

I stopped then, sliding to a halt in loose gravel, surprised by the admission. "Help with what?"

"Keep answering my questions, stop plotting my demise, and I'll tell you."

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“The sea is a hungry creature made by a hungry god.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

I caught up with my coven near the edge of the forested park. The maze ended and the tower was close at hand. We took turns pushing an exhausted Ruchel in the wheelbarrow.

When my turn ended, I kept my distance from the group. We marched through rows of linden trees, the black lake on our right. The skies were starting to darken, the unnatural light fading to gray. We’d taken too long fighting through the maze.

Our pace quickened.

Asher stayed near me, always letting me know he was close with a brush of misty shadow against my shoulder or cheek. In the heat, with the forest filling with frightful movements, I didn’t mind him near. He drilled me with questions, unraveling the aspects of my life I was willing to share.

“Your father was a god?” he clarified, his voice a cautious murmur in my ear.

“The god of travelers,” I whispered.

“I’m not familiar with him. I mean no disrespect. I just know very little about the gods who live in the Upper Realm. They don’t often visit here.”

“That’s all right. Except for a few legends, I don’t know anything about the Otherworld, and my father doesn’t matter. He never stays in one place long enough to

be worth remembering. You can disrespect him all you like.” None of these inquiries revealed his motivation for the interrogation. On that front, I was growing impatient.

“Mind you, I don’t doubt that you’ve got blood,” Asher muttered in my ear, like he was thinking through an equation with a solution he couldn’t solve for. “You’re too powerful to be anything else. And yet I sense no divinity in you. Not even a drop.”

I’d already answered all of this. His incessant questioning was going in circles now. “How is any of this supposed to help you?”

He went quiet for so long I thought he’d gone, then another silky brush of magic tickled my neck. “You did something I’ve never seen done before. Something I was convinced was impossible. Now that I know it can be done, I’m hoping I might be able to do the same.”

I stopped and searched for him in his darkness. Billowing night curled around me, grazing my hip, but I found him where it pooled darkest. I couldn’t see him, but I sensed the intensity of his gaze there. “What did I do?”

“You ripped a hole into the Otherworld. You even made it look easy. Ripped the roof right off and came in with your spirit. I seek to do something similar.”

“But you’re a crow. What do you need a hole to the Upper Realm for? There isn’t anywhere in any realm you can’t go. Your kind bounces from shade to shade with a thought. You . . .”

His shadows shifted, the movements uneasy. “That’s true for most reapers. But I cannot leave the Otherworld.”

My eyes went wide. “You’re a prisoner here.”

“I am,” he confessed. “I’m a traitor. Not a spy.”

A traitor? Unless he was lying to me—and that certainly was still on the table—that changed everything. I’d thought we were on opposite sides, but if we both just wanted freedom, the possibilities were endless. “Which god did you betray?”

“All of them.”

A thrill shot through me. “How?”

Though it shouldn’t have been feasible, his shadows grew darker, colder. “The gods think of reapers as servants. Glorified messengers with no concern for where they send us or how we’ll be treated once we get there. They force us into the center of their disagreements and care not if we’re hurt for it.”

“That sounds exactly like them,” I admitted. Crows weren’t known for telling lies, but that mattered little. They weren’t well-known period. Especially not in the Upper Realm. As tempting as it was to believe him, I was no fool. He’d have to prove himself first.

“I grew tired of their indifference,” he said, “and stopped doing as I was asked. Now the Otherworld is not my home. It’s my prison.”

A thousand more questions flooded my mind at once. It was difficult to pick which to voice next, though none weighed heavier than this: If the gods were his enemy as well as mine, then what did that make us?

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” I demanded.

“Well, you shot me in the heart,” he said, “and I didn’t destroy you.”

He had a point there. But that wouldn't be the end of it. What if this was a trick to get me to serve his god in some battle over a throne I cared nothing about? Perhaps reapers were as gifted at mind games as the divines were.

But the possibilities were so tempting. A gray and a reaper working together—who could stop us?

On the train during the feast, Asher watched me eat in his mortal form, his shadows gathered beneath the table in the dining car that reminded Ruchel of home. I was too hungry for conversation, and I didn't particularly like being watched so closely. His eyes felt like a spotlight. But he insisted on staying, and I was too depleted and starved to eat politely.

The gaslights flickered. Darkness crept along the windowpanes. A nervous murmur carried across the cabins, and passengers fled, leaving me alone in the dining car with Asher. Not even Ruchel, starved as she was, stayed behind.

I licked butter off my lip, glancing from the shadows that ebbed and flowed at my feet to the cosmic darkness frosting the windows. The midnight shade spread and shimmered like oil, blotting out the desert beyond. The temperature dropped. I immediately recognized the suffocating hum of power growing all around me.

I worked my throat. "Is the Old One on the train?"

Asher's brow furrowed like the question confused him. "The Old One is always on the train."

"What does he want?" I whispered, certain Death could hear me anyway, but it seemed more reverent to drop my voice at least a little.

"You make us curious. He's never had anyone try to kill him before . . . That makes

two of us now.”

I assumed that since we had an audience, Asher wouldn't want to discuss our plan, but he was better at playing god games than I was. He behaved as though nothing was amiss. Unaffected, he openly vowed that the next time I saw him, he'd have answers to my questions about Bram.

\* \* \*

Trial number five took us to a part of Wulfram that was mostly forested. Belching geysers and sinking sand littered the narrow walkways. A rapid river carved the path we followed toward the heart of the city. Garm shaped like giant lizards slumbered in the mud. Tall trees blocked out the view of the clock tower, which made navigation a challenge, but between Ruchel's excellent senses and water magic placed in the maps Blue drew into the earth with her wand, we made it safely through.

The sixth trial was a stretch of thin sandy isthmus that separated the Schatten's platform from the city. Sea waves lapped at both sides of the narrow path, and hungry water devils prowled the shores. There wasn't a good way to fight them off except to run with all your might and hope you didn't get caught in a crowd of them. They were fast, but they couldn't breathe out of the water, which made them reluctant to chase us far.

I wasn't built for sprinting, but we made it no worse for wear, back into the forested part of Wulfram's great park. A waterfall emptied into a basin of brackish water that trickled into the black lake. We took turns bathing in the waterfall with soaps Emma and Liesel had made for trade.

If it weren't for the devils, this part of Wulfram could have been a paradise. The basin glittered, full of colorful fish. Citrus trees grew a vibrant red and yellow fruit I'd never seen before in the Upper Realm, some god experiment abandoned to grow wild

that delighted my senses. The tart taste was ambrosia on my tongue, and the smell reminded me of the tangy scent of powerful magic.

The seventh trial was my least favorite to date. Heights made me nauseous. Thin rope bridges were the only path forward from a high platform down into Wulfram. The ropes jerked and moved as more bodies mounted them behind me. They were slick in places, moss and mold growing on the fibers in unexpected patches.

Weight suddenly left the ropes and screaming rang in my ears. The witch in front of me lost her footing and pulled her coven mate down with her. Prisoners dropped to their deaths in the dozens.

My coven made it safely to the ground and into a district dominated by tall industrial buildings. Thick, sticky webbing caked every corner and alley. It was full of dead garm of all kinds, including the same insects that spun the webs. They feasted on whatever they caught, including each other. As small as we were in comparison, we attracted little notice, allowing us to move quickly toward the center of the city.

“Never. Touch. The webs,” Ruchel warned me.

I had no intention of doing so. The sticky masses couldn’t have looked more treacherous if lava had dripped from them.

My revolver came in handy twice. I shot two mantis-like creatures in the face with gray bullets and killed them. We used their corpses to distract a larger spider garm away from the road we needed. I only had two rounds left.

Thankfully, the fate-weavers smiled on us. We made it to the train without using another bullet.

That night in the lounge car after the feast, I removed my pocket pistol from my boot,

then I took it apart piece by piece. I cleaned it thoroughly. It didn't need to be taken apart for that, but there was something wonderfully distracting about putting it all back together again like a puzzle. Something I hoped would renew my spirits better. I was never fully replenished, forced to battle at half my capabilities. But renewing my gray was more complicated than consuming food or favorite liquids or rest. It helped to meet my needs. It just wasn't enough.

A good poetry book written in the old Friar language would do wonders for me.

Or a hug from Lisbeth. She gave the best hugs.

Asher materialized in the chair across from me then. Witches and beast-born outside of our coven fled at the sight of him. I appreciated how Blue's disapproving glances immediately shifted off of me and onto him. It was a nice change of pace. Blue didn't flee exactly, but she chose then to abandon her teacup and excuse herself for bed. The green sisters packed up their knitting hastily and followed her.

"Trouble," Asher said, pushing back his smoky hood, his bone-white hair a stark contrast to the shadows that clung to his shoulders.

"Traitor," I greeted amicably.

He reached for the pistol pieces I was reassembling with interest. I was about to swat his hands away, but then he began lining them all up neatly. The screws and springs he put in order by size and shape and purpose, and I was hypnotized momentarily by his big hands working over the small parts. It was like having someone scratch an itch in the center of my back I couldn't quite get at.

"Bram has taken over the Alwin library as his headquarters," he told me.

I dropped the revolver's hammer down into the frame, lining it up just right before

replacing the first screw. “The library’s not far from the clock tower. I could visit there tomorrow. Nola says the next trial is manageable. It shouldn’t exhaust me.”

“You could. I’m familiar with Bram’s schedule. He’s a man who keeps a fixed routine and expects his coven to do the same,” Asher said, handing me the small tool I was using to tighten the screws.

“What else did you learn?” I hoped there was more. He’d been gone for most of three days.

“There’s a rumor Bram is god-born and has the power of all the elements,” he said. Behind him Nola did a poor job of pretending she wasn’t eavesdropping.

I snorted. “All the elements? That’s nonsense.”

“It is. But he lets the rumor fly because it’s good for recruitment. He’s a mind warlock with a powerful god-made relic he wears on his head. He has a talent for suggestion, and the circlet amplifies it. His instincts are unmatched, according to his admirers, of which there are many. In any conflict, he stays several moves ahead of his opponents, of which there are also many.”

“But is he actually god-born?” I worked the springs into place next. Wrestling the main spring was the worst of it.

“The circlet puts out so much divine energy it’s hard to decipher what’s natural and what’s not. He never takes it off. Even to sleep.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?” I asked, securing the pistol’s trigger piece in place.

His lashes lifted, and the crinkles near his eyes deepened. “Helping you get to Bram, of course.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” And because I was not a fool, I added, “And what will you need in exchange for such a service?”

He lowered his voice to a murmur that not even snooping Nola would be able to hear clearly. “Teach me to tear an exit into the Otherworld.”

Biting my lip, I set the pistol down. “I don’t think I can.”

“Why?” He frowned at me.

I disliked the impact his disappointment had on me, tugging down my own mouth to mirror his. “Death magic isn’t compatible with others.” I rubbed at the phantom sizzle in my abdomen, remembering the way the Old One’s magic suffocated the fire in my chest. “What you touch, it smothers. It dies. The magic we want needs to be amplified, not put out. I’m the amplifier. You’re . . . the opposite of that.”

Scooting to the edge of his chair, he rolled the last of the screws between his fingers. “Then you’ll just have to do it for us.”

“I don’t know if I can do it again . . . I’m too depleted all the time just trying to survive the trials. Even if the conditions were right, it’s not like the gods leave their sigils lying about for me to use as I wish.”

Nola whispered into Ruchel’s ear like a gossiping hen.

“But you’ll try. If I secure a god sigil, you’ll try?” He rolled the screw backward and forward and backward again.

“I’ll try.” Of course I would. I needed out of here so I could plot my next move against the guilty god, whoever they were.

“In the name of our new partnership, I’ll help you with Bram, and then you’ll owe me.”

I squinted at him. “I’ll owe you what?”

“Cooperation.” In his baritone, the simple word sounded absolutely filthy, and my stomach tumbled.

The singed bullet hole in his leather waistcoat leaked a smoky essence faintly when he moved. Now that he was possibly, probably, maybe not my enemy, I didn’t like seeing it there. I placed my palm over it, stifling the leak.

He looked down at my hand, his sharp chin at a tilt like the crow he was named for, a faint smile on his lips.

The shadows that slid between my fingers were warmer than the death magic pooling around my feet, grazing my shins, brushing over my knees. “Does it hurt?”

“Like Hel,” he said fondly. “Your bullet is still in there.”

“Oh?” I blinked at him. “Should . . . should we get it out?”

He shook his head. “It’s mine now. You can’t have it back.”

I wanted not to find his brand of peculiarity charming, but there I sat, vaguely and reluctantly pleased with this enemy of my enemies. My lips twisted trying not to smile.

I reassembled my pocket pistol. Then we all shuffled off to bed and Asher followed. Nola and Ruchel said their goodbyes, disappearing into their compartment. He lingered at the doorway of my bunk long after the others were gone.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“Sleeping near my coven to assist their recovery,” he said. He peeked over my head, frowning at the single bed.

I pushed him backwards, away from my compartment, discouraging any notions about sharing. There were plenty of empty cabins elsewhere. “Reapers sleep?”

“When we want to. I don’t need to, but I enjoy dreaming.” He moved one door down and knocked on it.

“That one’s taken,” I told him.

Asher shoved the door open. “Get out,” he rumbled.

A beast-born with ram horns fled the cabin, half-dressed. I shook my head at Asher, bemused.

He helped himself to the bottom bunk. I watched him sink onto the mattress and ready his pillow, the act making him seem oddly human. His shadows draped like a rippling waterfall over the edge of the bed, rebounding in puffs of cloud as they touched the floor, and the effect immediately wore off. He was Otherworldly again.

I returned to my room. Our beds were separated by a thin bone wall. My previous neighbor had snored terribly in his sleep. When he woke me in the night, I had unkind thoughts about him not surviving the next trial. I turned down the gas lamp and crawled under the covers, glad that at least I would no longer have to wish an innocent man dead.

Asher knocked against our shared wall in three quick successions. My fist hung there, tempted to knock back, unsure if I should encourage . . . whatever this was. I tapped

once against the wall in compromise.

“I hope you don’t snore,” I said.

“Goodnight, troublemaker,” he replied.

\* \* \*

In the morning, my sleeper cabin was not empty. Ruchel sat at the foot of my bed and Nola paced the small quarters in front of the pitcher and basin for washing.

They waited until I sat up and stretched before pouncing—a small blessing.

“What’s this about opening an exit to the Upper Realm?” Nola demanded.

“Could I at least have breakfast first?” I asked.

“No,” they shouted at me in unison.

While I dressed, I told them in more explicit detail how I’d ended up on the Schatten, explaining the hole I’d torn into the Otherworld. Ruchel helped me fasten my corset over my chemise while I shared my plans for revenge and for Bram.

A shimmer of hope lit Ruchel’s ochre eyes. She sat down heavily at the foot of my bed. “If you kill him, could that help you get in a better ‘condition’ for opening this exit? Would it raise your spirits enough?”

Nola had different worries. “If this isn’t handled right, we’ll put a target on all of our backs.”

I hated disappointing them, but I wouldn’t lie. “I don’t know if it will fix me, and I

have no intention of starting the games early and aiming all the trouble at our coven either. If Bram can't convince me he didn't kill my sister, then he dies today. Either way, I vote we keep working toward our exit plan as best we can."

"In and out, one man dead, no witnesses," Nola said, already plotting. "This is much smarter than a public assault in a market square, ducky. We'll help you make sure things stay that way."

I shouted at the wall I shared with Asher and invited him over. His shadows poured in through the corner vent. Our plotting had just started when it was interrupted by a rapid knock at the door.

"Nola, is that you I hear in there?" a male voice called from the hall. Another round of knocks followed in rapid succession, a thunderous sound that rattled the wood.

"Brick?" Nola jumped up to answer it, sliding it open wide.

A young man leaned against the frame. He wore a woolen cap over short autumn hair, and his waistcoat was a thick tweed favored in Sebrak. The crimson amulet around his neck marked him as a red witch.

"Why, hello there, beautiful," the young man said for my benefit, his smile filling out his freckled cheeks. "The name's Brick. Thief of the gods, they call me, but you can call me whatever you'd like."

Nola snorted so loudly it echoed. "No one calls you that, Brick. You can drop the act. Maven's one of us now."

"Ah, good. Another one for the 'secret alliance,' eh?" he stage-whispered, nudging Nola with his thin elbow.

Nola pinched the bridge of her nose. “For the love of the Crone,” she groaned. “You’re not supposed to say it out loud. It’s not a secret if you blabber on about it all the time.”

“This is why I keep telling you to cut all the rogues loose,” Ruchel grumbled. Glaring from the foot of my bed, she crossed both arms over her middle. “They’ll give everything away.”

“Oi! Who you calling a rogue?” Brick protested.

“Don’t act offended. We’re all crooks, thieves, and troublemakers here on Death’s train.” Nola cast a glance my way and winked. “There isn’t a virtuous one amongst us. There’s no need to pretend otherwise. Now, get to it. What do you want?”

“I’ve decided to bless you lovely ladies with my company today. I’m going to travel with you instead of the insipid bumlbers you stuck me with.” Brick flashed another wide smile. “No need to thank me all at once.”

Nola shook her head. “Absolutely not. Have you already forgotten how they went for you last time? Or do I need to stick your ginger head inside another flush toilet until the point swims into your ears?”

Brick huffed at her. “You can’t keep shoving me off with the red crew. They’re a bunch of whiny tosspots.”

“What’d you steal from them this time?” Ruchel demanded.

“It’s unfair to assume that,” Brick said, blue eyes going soft and puppy-like. “The other reds are so short-sighted and irritating I can’t bear the thought of facing another trial with them. You can’t make me. I’ll go on strike.”

“There’s no union of crooks in the Otherworld,” Ruchel ground out.

“Stop picking their pockets, maybe?” Nola said, gesturing broadly. “I bet then the other reds will become more agreeable.”

Brick did a double-take, suddenly noticing the intimidating reaper playing a statue in the corner. “Well, aren’t you a tall drink of water,” the red witch said, dragging his gaze appreciatively up and down Asher’s cloaked and hooded form. “Almost didn’t see you there. You’re not half bad-looking for a crow.”

“You’re a child,” Asher replied dismissively.

Brick sucked in a breath, appalled. “I am not! That’s a lie, that is. Why is everyone in such a rotten mood this morning?”

He was only a bit younger than Lisbeth but certainly a child compared to Asher and me. I chuckled at him. I didn’t have the energy to like anyone else—my quota on that front was overly full—but I didn’t dislike this Brick fellow. He seemed harmless to me.

“We don’t have time for your troubles today, Brick. Go make up with the other reds,” Nola said, ushering him out the door. “Whatever you did this time, try saying you’re sorry for once in your foolish life, and maybe people will stop threatening to stick your head into the toilet or worse.”

\* \* \*

The first trial opened into a residential district, the main road lined with brownstones and gaslights. The streets were decorated with colorful mosaics depicting Hel, a goddess of terrifying beauty who once ruled the Otherworld. She was overthrown by her children Nott and Mara, her essence transformed into the icy realm now bearing

her name. A home to lost malevolent spirits made by nightmares, the shades, and vicious garm beasts.

Shades haunted a phantom fog that hovered between the buildings. But the mist was not a problem for us. Emma and Liesel had made a special wax which we used to plug our ears to prevent the beings from entering our minds to drink our energy and haunt us with bad dreams. Candles were plentiful on the train, and the roots to cast the earth spell were easy to find.

Nola and Ruchel told the others that they would be meeting with Guardian recruiters at the Alwin library near the clock tower to arrange a trade for more ammunition, something we dearly needed. Blue was not favored by the Guardians because of how often she discouraged others like Talia from taking up their cause.

She excused herself from joining us, and the sisters followed her as usual.

We arrived at the library with hours to spare. Nola and Ruchel used the time to make themselves more familiar with the place, drawing eyes to the atrium of the building, away from me.

Asher and I holed up near a back entrance.

Thanks to him, I was dressed in black broadcloth, blending in with the others who happened by. Asher didn't kill people, but he thought nothing of stealing from them. The pockets of my borrowed trousers contained a pouch of tobacco, rolling papers, and a lighter. I wore my hair in a coiled braid like the other witches did, pinned just above the nape of my neck, and I smoked a rolled cigarette slowly.

The crowd dispersed, and Asher materialized beside me, seated on the cobblestones to wait for the prime moment. He removed a leather journal from his waistcoat and wrote furiously to pass the time. He was writing right to left.

“Are you journaling in Frian?” I asked.

“I am,” he said, without looking up from his work, propping the journal up against his knee. “I’ve always liked Frian best, though books written in it reach the Otherworld less and less often now. Those priestesses knew what they were doing.”

Pride warmed my chest. Then curiosity made worse by the slow passing of time got the better of me. “What are you writing?”

It was none of my business.

I was dying to know.

“Just my thoughts. A few verses here and there,” he admitted. I chewed on my cheek, resisting the urge to attempt to read over his shoulder.

When I leaned closer, he shuffled away, a white brow raised in a question I didn’t have a good answer for. The dying light cast his fair skin in a warm glow.

“Just curious,” I told him.

“You’ll have to remain curious,” he said dismissively.

The crowd thinned further. Guardians departed for their homes to take shelter from the beasts that ruled the night, and the skies darkened. It was time.

“Stay near,” I told him.

He melted into his wraith-like form and bathed me in his shadows. “Right behind you, Trouble.”

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Every god in the Otherworld has fashioned their own set of rules for the Crow Games. As a result, the contestants know not how to win.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

Mosaics plastered the halls, depicting the rivalry of the divine brothers Alwin and Alrick. Alwin had always been the wisest of the gods, but Alrick’s gift of command brought deities to their knees. No god could easily resist an alluring suggestion from Alrick. His power of influence was legendary.

Every realm had its ruler, but Alrick remained the gods’ sole monarch, damning Alwin to live forever in his brother’s shadow. The images captured this plight, pushing the god of knowledge with his robes and scrolls and stoles to the background.

The tick of a clock overhead sent my pulse surging. We had to move quickly in order to carry out the plot and return to the Schatten before the thirteenth hour. The tea trolley was placed in an alcove exactly where Asher had predicted it would be. Asher made the gaslights flicker, and right on cue, Nola and Ruchel caused a ruckus, arguing loudly over prices and hassling the recruiter, pulling attention to the atrium at the front of the library.

I walked off with the tea trolley, and distracted coven members didn’t fuss with me. Asher moved between the shadows. I was growing accustomed to the way shade flickered and stretched when he joined with it.

According to Asher, Bram was in a back study replenishing his mind magic with reading. The locked door was manned by a warlock with a green witch’s fingerbone

pinned high on his collar. To prevent interruption, earth magic cast upon the door kept it sealed shut.

“Oh?” the guard said as I pushed the cart near. “But the high warlock has already had his tea.”

“Perhaps he wants more tea?” I suggested.

“I don’t think so.” Then he opened the pot lid and showed me it was empty, the inside dusted with damp leaves.

Apparently, our timing wasn’t so perfect.

I had no skill for clever improvisation. Instead, I did what came naturally to me, pinning the warlock to the wall with my weight and shoving a dagger at his throat. Asher joined me in his shadow form, draping around me like a cloak made of night. His halo of intimidating darkness more than made up for the size difference between me and the guard.

The warlock’s eyes went wide, taking in the death aura all around, and a panicked yelp caught in his throat, my dagger a harsh reminder that he’d live longer silent.

“Open the door,” I said. The serrated teeth of the curved blade bit into his fawn flesh.

A grunt. He shook his head.

“Open the door,” I ground out. “I won’t kill you. I’ll do worse. I’ll cut out your tongue and carve my name into your cheeks. I’ll sever your limbs and rip out your nails and wear your broken bones on my clothing even though they’re worthless and . . .”

His eyes grew wider and wider. It was as I described the method I would use to extract his entrails that he stretched out his hand, palming the door. The grain of the wood shimmered green and groaned before falling open.

“It’s charming how frightening you are,” Asher cooed in my ear, and my stomach fluttered for reasons I didn’t have time to dwell on.

A tendril of reaper magic brushed over the guard’s cheek. His eyes rolled back in his head, a full body tremor wracked him, and the warlock spilled to the floor.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

“I don’t kill,” Asher reminded me.

I pulled off the fingerbone pinned to the warlock’s collar and pocketed it to dispose of respectfully later. Then I rolled the tea cart over his body to help conceal him.

“Don’t let anyone in,” I said to Asher.

He spread his shadows wide, blotting out the cart and the fallen guard.

I pushed inside. The study smelled of vellum and old books and lantern oil. Lost to his reading, Bram lounged in a wingback chair beside a leaning tower of volumes that threatened to topple.

I shut the door behind me with a snap, and the tower fell. Bram jumped to his feet, startled. His silk shirt was rolled to his elbows. The lapels of his brocade waistcoat hung open.

His brow smoothed, and his smile was breathtaking, evidence of his mind magic already hard at work. I holstered my dagger.

“Maven,” he breathed, closing his book and setting it aside on the arm of the chair. “I so hoped you’d find your way back to me.”

I charged across the room, shoved him down into his seat, and he put up no fight at all. My spirit stirred along my veins, pooling in my fingers to turn them gray. I pushed my hands into his chest.

He watched them disappearing into his body with a gasp and a breathy laugh. His heart pumped violently at the ethereal invasion and then calmed.

“I knew it,” he said, his hazel eyes intent on mine. “I knew you were so much more than you pretended to be.”

“Lisbeth is dead,” I said, and her name tasted like ash in my mouth. “You have seconds to tell me who killed her and why, or when I take my hands back out of your chest, I’m bringing your heart with it.”

His placid expression never changed. His eyes, verdant greens and browns like a forest floor, never dimmed. “I didn’t hurt your precious Lisbeth. I liked her. I wanted to recruit you both for my cause, but you were a difficult case, so frightfully resistant. You wouldn’t let me close. I thought I was finally getting somewhere with you and then—well, you know the rest.”

His heart in my palm didn’t falter. It beat on in a steady patter.

Like he was telling the truth.

“Fuck you and your cause,” I rumbled. “Who killed my sister?”

Bram had the audacity to study the backs of his hands instead of responding. He glanced forlornly at the books that had fallen open, their pages bent.

“Am I boring you?” I demanded, giving his heart a pinch.

His hazel eyes flickered back to mine, and his mouth curled at the corners wolfishly.

“Never that, darling. But I know you won’t kill me.”

“Watch me.”

“You won’t, because I have everything you need right up here.” He tapped his temple. “You want to know who killed her, but you can’t have that if I’m dead. And I’m not giving that away for free. If you want something, you’ve got to give me something in return.”

“I’m giving you the chance to keep breathing,” I said, dropping my hands to his lungs and squeezing until he wheezed.

Bram’s smile went crooked. He let his long legs fall open, his posture loose in his cushioned seat. “As much as I love a bit of rough play, if I don’t let you go soon, you’ll miss your train. I hate to see you leave. This is the most I’ve gotten you to talk to me in months, and it’s so much better than I ever imagined. I never could have guessed how wonderfully spirited you are. You hid yourself and Lisbeth very well.”

Anger and grief caught me by the throat, and suddenly it was like someone had their hands in my lungs, not the other way around. “Stop acting like you care about her,” I hissed.

“But I do care.” His eyes softened and his hands cupped my jaw, his touch satiny smooth. Too flawless. He swiped his thumb across my cheek, chasing away a tear that broke free. “I care very much for you and that vibrant little sister of yours, more than I ever wanted to. Caring this much about anyone is a perilous risk in the Otherworld. I’d give my concern away if I could.”

It was too tempting thinking there was someone out there in the world other than me who missed Lisbeth. Someone who understood even just a little bit how lovely she was and didn't want her dead for being dangerous. I wanted someone else to want the wrong of it all made right. I didn't want to be alone in that anymore.

Bram couldn't be that someone else. He may not have murdered Lisbeth, but that hardly made him innocent.

"You're lying," I bit out. "Your circlet is making me want to believe it, but I won't be tricked. This is all just more god games. Do you know you're just a pawn to them, or have they got you fooled that you're a king?"

Bram pulled the circlet off his head and tossed it onto the messy pile of books on the floor, ruffling the part in his chestnut hair. "I didn't kill your sweet sister. I'm sorry she's dead. I know exactly where I stand with the damn gods. Help me, and together I swear to you we'll make them pay."

"Make who pay?" I begged.

"All of them," he whispered. "All of the gods."

His words were a seductive purr. It was exactly what I wanted to hear and more. But I'd been alive much too long to be fooled by any of it. Words so wonderful were never what they seemed.

"What do you want in exchange?" He wasn't going to be upfront with me, but I could learn a lot from hearing what he was after at least.

He smiled at me the way a patient teacher might at a particularly stubborn pupil. "There's a secret lower level to the library here. The god Alwin hosts a trial of his own, and only the worthy win. I seek the prize, but I am ineligible."

“Why?”

He pointed down at the bronze circlet. “I’ve already won a prize from Alwin. He never awards a second, but I need the book he’s holding. It’s a relic so powerful it can end the games for good. Maven, there is no one in any realm more worthy than you. Get me this boon. I’ll tell you everything and grant you your freedom from the Otherworld. How could you say no to that?”

My nose wrinkled. “Free me how?”

“Bring me the relic, and I’ll show you.”

He knew exactly what would motivate me best. I pulled my hands out of his chest and stepped back, certain that keeping my distance from him while negotiating, given his gifts, was more pertinent than threatening him with gray magic. “Is it a hexen relic?”

“Yes, but the witch it’s made out of is quite dead,” he drawled. “I don’t think she’ll mind now how we use it.”

My nostrils flared. “Let me just make a book out of your flesh and blood, then we’ll see if you mind.”

“They say it’s made from the remains of Fria after the goddess relinquished her divinity and broke it into pieces for her priestesses.”

I shook my head so vehemently my braid slipped out of its coil and spilled over my shoulder. “Lies.”

“You sound so certain.” His gaze fell to the delicate chain around my neck and the torch amulet dangling from it, and I realized too late that he’d been goading me—a

trick I hadn't seen coming. In a few minutes, I'd given him more than I ever had in months of his spying, and he didn't even have the circlet on his head. "But how could you possibly know it isn't the goddess of magic, Maven? You haven't even seen it."

I wasn't foolish enough to answer that question, but I sensed the damage was done. I'd revealed something I hadn't meant to. Bram truly was several steps ahead in every match.

"You knew I would come for you," I said.

"How could I? I'm not a prophet," was his coy response. "I couldn't know, but I hoped you yet lived. I hoped you'd find me, or I'd never have you. All that time chasing after you proved that. Coming to you never works, does it, Maven? The harder I tried, the further you retreated and the thicker you built walls around yourself and your sister."

"Stay away from me, and my coven," I growled, "or I'll do more than just threaten harm next time."

I hated that he was right and my threat was an empty one. The information in his head was too precious to me to kill him. I couldn't have the name of the guilty god if he was dead, and he knew it. He may not have been a prophet, but his ability to understand the people he interacted with and read their motivations put me at an instant disadvantage in any negotiation with him.

Bram showed me his palms like I'd pulled a pistol on him. "I have no desire to hurt you or yours. You don't have to sneak about when you come and see me. My Guardians won't harm you."

I caught myself staring at his mouth, watching him form each word. I needed to get out of here. I didn't like what his talents were doing to me, how they made me want

to sit close, hang on his words, and admire his beauty.

And he was beautiful in a fearsomely unnatural way. The way Nott was beautiful. The way the Otherworld was beautiful; Too perfect. Too clean. Too divine.

Too deadly.

He'd changed somehow, was something more down here than he had been in the Upper Realm all covered in soot. He'd seemed so harmless then. But perhaps we were all different down here.

I marched for the exit and made it as far as the door before he spoke again.

“See you soon, Maven.”

\* \* \*

That night after the feast, my coven took over the lounge car, and we included Blue and the sisters in our deliberations over drinks. Things were becoming too serious to make another move without them. We caught them up on the day's events, leaving out any mention of gray magic or my brand of peculiarities.

I was beginning to feel guilty for the deception.

“When we arrived to barter for ammunition,” Nola said, dropping four fresh rounds in front of me beside a mixed drink that smelled like juniper berries, “the quartermaster already knew to expect us, and he gave us these. Gifts from their high warlock. No trade.”

“A recruitment tactic?” Emma guessed.

“They say he’s god-born,” Blue warned. Her flinty eyes flickered toward me. The gesture was subtle but as accusing as always. “It’s like I keep warning Talia: you can’t trust god blood, no matter how little they have. Mortals aren’t meant to wield such power. It corrupts them.”

“Power has corrupted the gods just as readily,” I said.

Ruchel saluted me with her cocktail in agreement, and I wondered, not for the first time, what had been done to this once devoted scribe of Alrick to make her abandon all the gods.

I tipped my drink back into my throat, letting the gin burn its way down before I continued. “I take your point, though, Blue. We can’t trust him.”

“But Bram is promising freedom from the games,” Emma said. She took her sister’s hand from beside her in the cushioned chair they were sharing, and she squeezed it. “How could we turn that down?”

“He’s offering Maven freedom. Who knows what he’d do to the rest of us? And even if that promise wasn’t a lie, it’s a hexen relic we’re talking about,” Nola said, grimacing. “I want my freedom as much as the next witch—but at what cost?”

“Ruchel,” I said, “you’ve been uncharacteristically quiet.”

She swirled her short glass. Gaslight danced along the rim.

“Ruchel?” I asked after the silence grew long.

Nola hushed me. “Let her think it through. It’s best not to interrupt her when she’s like this.”

So we waited.

“We can’t trust him,” Ruchel said finally. “When we saw him at the market, he felt trustworthy—too trustworthy. No one is that true. Everyone holds something back. But if we don’t try for the hexen book, he’ll get it another way. It’s only a matter of time with people like him. Best way to ensure he doesn’t have it is we secure it ourselves. For us.”

“But we can’t use relics,” Nola pointed out.

“We can’t.” Ruchel tipped her glass toward the corner of the room, where Asher leaned against the wall so still and silent he’d been forgotten. “But he can. Is that what you were thinking about, Asher? The more you’re around, the easier it’s becoming to read you.”

All eyes fell on him at once. His spine pulled up straight as a post.

“Can reapers use relics?” I asked him. He could sense them. He’d identified the divinity in Bram’s circlet. If he could detect them, it stood to reason that he could use them just as warlocks could.

“I’m worried I shouldn’t,” he said, his words measured. “If I tried, I might simply smother the magic and kill the relic.”

Blue spoke up next. “There is one warlock I trust.”

“You trust someone?” Nola teased.

Blue pointed her middle finger up at her fondly. Instead of gin, she drank tea flavored with lemon, her favorite for replenishing her energy. “She would meet with us if I asked, but this warlock is a survivor. We would need to make it worth her while to

help us.”

“Freedom isn’t enough?” Liesel chimed in. “We could get out of here if we’re successful. She could come with us.”

“She’ll want assurance that we’ll make it worth her while even if it doesn’t work out,” Blue explained.

My hand dropped to my chest where my amulet hung beneath my shirtwaist, a powerful god-made relic no warlock could say no to. I fingered the engraving through the linen. “I can make it worth her while. If you set up the meeting, I’ll help convince her. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. We don’t even have the book yet.”

Drink won the night. Even Blue was seduced into partaking. Nola kept our glasses full and potent. Grudges and worries were forgotten, and laughter came easily. Even mousy Liesel spoke unabashedly at Asher, telling detailed stories about the pet serpents she kept in her gardens in the Upper Realm.

Emma took the empty chair beside me then, and her stern expression was immediate confirmation that not all worries were forgotten. “Have I told you yet,” she said, “how Liesel and I came to be on the train?”

“No,” I said cautiously. Emma did her best to avoid me, but I bit my tongue instead of pointing that out.

Her blue eyes were glassy from drink, and her neck was flushed. “Liesel stole a cow from a neighboring blacksmith. The family was devoted to the god Hilt. It was his hammer on the ceiling of our sleeper car when we arrived.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I said, uncertain where this conversation was headed.

“I wasn’t looking for sympathy.” Emma crossed one leg over the other. The knees of her trousers were heavily stained. “You see, Liesel is so sweet she couldn’t stand watching an animal be poorly cared for, even if they were only being raised to be eaten. She stole the cow to treat the beast better.”

“She’s sweet,” I said, though I still couldn’t see why Emma was telling me all of this. Perhaps the gin had made her chatty.

Emma cast a glance behind her at her sister, who continued to jabber at a bemused Asher. “The blacksmith learned of it and came to our house. He found her in the garden and confronted her. He shouted and raised his fist at her, and I stopped him.”

“I had a little sister too who was sweet.” I hoped on this point we might finally find common ground. Were our roles reversed, I would have treated me with the same suspicion. I would have kept me at a distance, far away from Lisbeth. “We share a father. I met my sister when she was five, and I raised her. I still remember the way she grinned at me that first day, so trusting and small. Her front teeth were missing, and she had a smile that made me feel like a queen. I knew in an instant that I would never let anyone hurt her. I never wanted to see her frown.”

“Then you do understand,” Emma said, jaw firm. “I won’t see Liesel harmed. Our father was like that blacksmith. He’d shout until he was red in the face, and he was quick to raise his fist, especially at Liesel, who struggles to do her best when she’s nervous. When we got out of his house, I vowed I’d never let that happen to her again. The blacksmith raised his hand at her, and I shot him. Twice.”

Such brutality from the healer surprised me, but I didn’t let my shock give way to judgment. This was precisely why it was so unwise to discount green witches. Their skillset was broad, their capabilities as wild and untamable as nature itself. You never could know what you were really going to get.

“I don’t blame you. I would have done the same, even if I knew it would land us here.” I had done the same, in fact, multiple times.

“And then I shot him a third time. For spite,” she confessed, her tone full of warning. Her lashes lifted, and her blue eyes were ice-cold. “I blasted him right in his face just to ruin his funeral. I’d do it again, Maven.”

Emma was threatening me. Emma, the kind midwife, the crafty green witch who never had a cruel thing to say to anyone.

And I liked her very much for it.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“There is no known way to stop angry shades from whispering nightmares in your ears once their mischief starts.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

That night I had terrible dreams. I watched Lisbeth die again and again and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I woke feeling so depleted it was difficult to get out of bed.

I was growing accustomed to functioning at half my energy, and yet somehow at the start of the day I was already down to a quarter of my magic. Gray sputtered in my chest, mere fumes. Perhaps it was the gin. We had overindulged, made bold by the talk of freedom. It was such a pleasant change to be working toward something new. Something greater than just surviving another terrible day.

Freedom first, then revenge.

It was early. I crossed to Nola and Ruchel's room. They'd pulled their mattresses onto the floor and pushed them together. I climbed into bed between them.

“Shut up and cuddle me,” I told them when they grumbled about the hour.

They listened. It helped a little.

Trial number two was known as Master's territory. We plotted out our strategy as a coven over breakfast.

“We can't keep calling him Master,” Ruchel said. “It's the horrid name he gave himself. Surely we can do much better.”

“Ass-head,” Nola suggested.

“It has potential,” Ruchel said with a shrug. “What else?”

“Bitch,” Blue offered.

Ruchel shook her head. “Too insulting to dogs. I like dogs.”

“Bastard,” little Liesel offered, her voice bell-like and the dimples in her cheeks deep.

“That’s the one,” Ruchel said. “This is the territory of the beast-born brute henceforth to be known as Bastard.”

“Hear, hear,” Nola agreed, and she drank to that because she liked to drink to everything. Cocktails were her favorite breakfast.

Ruchel took the gin out of her hand. She plopped a tall water glass in front of her in its place. “Not another drop until you drink three of those,” she demanded.

Nola groused and groaned and stomped her foot, but as soon as Ruchel wasn’t looking, she did as she was told. I wondered about Asher, who was off doing whatever it was reapers did on the parts of the train where the prisoners did not go. I was curious when we’d see him again.

The Schatten chimed twice, signaling the start of the second trial. It delivered us to the platform and the gates of another residential district. Thick towering walls of unnatural ice circled the trial. The frost was hardy and blue-black, the color of dusk, an unnatural work of the divines that didn’t melt in the heat.

I imagined it was this same fearsome ice that made up the gates to Hel.

The homes in this district were large and luxurious with many stories and steep gables, the intersections decorated in spitting fountains. It was immediately clear why someone like Bastard would claim this space. The wind blew in off the ice walls, making the weather temperate and pleasant.

When the gates parted, Blue took the lead, guiding us to a corner of the great wall. She cast a water spell on the ice, and large divots and notches appeared in the frost. The wall looked like the back of a frozen crocodile when she was finished.

We mounted the ice one after the other. I climbed last. Just over halfway up, I started to feel the vertigo and a weakness in my muscles from my depleted spirit, but I didn't look down. Wind whipped at my face. Teeth gritted, I reached higher than the homes around me. Nola gave me her hand when I made it near the top, and she pulled me the rest of the way up.

The wall was so thick, we could comfortably walk three-abreast, but we kept to the edge farthest from the trial. My boots hit chipped ice and the encrusted stones within, the friction steadying my footing.

This was how Blue made her way out of the district every time the second trial arrived, and I soon learned why it was preferable to the ground.

Not only were the red-hooded warlocks plentiful down below, but they walked the streets accompanied by two-headed, wolf-like garm. I didn't realize the beasts were tamable, but these appeared to listen to the warlocks, chasing prisoners out of buildings for them. Thankfully the creatures couldn't climb, and if they could smell us, they were much too distracted by easier prey on the ground.

"Bastard isn't usually so bold," Blue murmured.

"He's done recruiting, I suppose," Ruchel said softly. "Now they're just eliminating

threats and turning witches into hexen relics.”

“They showed their hand too soon,” Nola said. “Bastard won’t make it to the games at this rate. I look forward to the day every red hood gets wiped out.”

You could wipe them out , Lisbeth said.

The errant thought struck me like a brick dropped onto my head. That’s not the plan , I grumbled at Lisbeth’s memory and my own self for conjuring the thought. In life, she’d had a bad habit of worrying about the less fortunate in a way that frequently put us both at risk, and here she was still trying to rub off on me. The gall of that woman.

Damn it all, how I missed her.

Survive the trials. Escape and murder the guilty god. That was the plan. Liberating the Otherworld was not anywhere on that list. I kept my eyes down, my lips firmly shut, and I marched on.

We weren’t the only witches clever enough to make use of the wall. Talia’s earth coven—or those who openly traveled with her—scaled it ahead of us using a green spell of climbing vines, and just ahead of them was Brick’s smaller group of four reds from the train.

Screams rose up from the streets. A huddle of hooded warlocks untethered their beast. A witch sprinted for his life, the violet scarf of a scribe flapping around his neck. The garm nipped at his heels, and cackles rose up from the warlocks, a bitter sound that hardened my stomach.

The wolfish beast sprang, and I turned away. The sounds were horrid enough—I didn’t need the images stuck in my head forever too. My hands made fists at my sides, nails digging crescents into my palms. My spirit awoke at the horrors all

around, a small rebellion in my chest. But Nola's words rang in my mind and steadied my soul. Not our fight.

Lisbeth was my fight, my reason for being here. I had my coven now and a chance at answers. The rest was just noise.

We walked on in a stony silence punctuated by bursts of violent commotion from the streets: panicked shouts, the hungry snarls of garm, and the cruel taunts from red-hooded warlocks. I drank from my canteen sparingly, the air cooler so high off the ground with the breeze blowing up off the ice. At times it was almost too cold.

We caught up with Talia's coven when we reached the end of the district. Blue bartered assisting them down for drink. She needed to replenish her energy before casting the spell that would create our exit. The sisters steeped tea for her that Nola warmed with red magic until it steamed.

We sat and she drank, the quiet lingering between us, heavy and miserable.

Blue readied her forked wand, aiming her magic at the base of the ice, and the wall sloped into a steep slide we could all safely glide down on our backsides. It dumped us into the wooded park. We separated from Talia's coven; smaller groups made less noise and were safer. We hiked through linden trees, past the gravel beach and jutting caves, around the black lake, back into the heart of Wulfram.

The library and the clock tower were in our sights. Last night we had agreed we would all attempt Alwin's trial to increase our chances at claiming the hexen relic. But now Liesel was noticeably uncomfortable, chattering on about nothing, shuffling her feet when we stopped to rest, unable to be still. Although Alwin was not the most fearsome of gods, I understood her worry.

"It wouldn't be the worst idea," I told Emma, "if the two of you headed for the train

directly. Someone should ensure the barrier opens to us, just in case a god has decided to occupy the throne room and demand a tribute. You could offer one on behalf of our coven and ease the way for us in case we're in a hurry."

Emma latched on to the idea. "I have a pendant with blessed blood inside it. I've been holding on to it for the next time we needed a gift." Such treasures were used by families to honor the gods in many provinces.

"That'll do nicely," I said. I growled at Lisbeth in my head for making me this way. It was a waste, sending them off. The more who attempted the trial, the greater our chances were that we'd succeed.

Nola rolled her eyes at me and muttered something incoherent about "softhearted witches," but she didn't openly protest the idea. Blue pointed out that we only needed one person to prepare our way, but Ruchel agreed to allow it. The sisters never separated. It was a waste of breath to argue otherwise.

Emma accompanied Liesel back to the train. The rest of us headed inside the crowded library atrium. A small market gathered there.

Bram's ability to be three steps ahead showed itself once more. Black-clad Guardians behaved as though they'd been expecting us to arrive, waving us over. One of them was the green warlock I'd met the first time I'd visited their leader. There was a small nick on his neck from my blade, the mark scabbing over.

The warlock glared at me but was helpful despite his broody demeanor.

We were guided to an alcove that hid a set of stairs behind a false bookshelf. The stone steps were lit with metal torches, and the walls were covered in etchings similar to the ones found in the clock tower, with Death's crow and his broken wing, the falling feathers transforming into reapers.

The Guardians pointed the way but didn't accompany us down. Blue questioned them about what to expect, but they either had no idea or chose to remain tight-lipped.

At the bottom of the stairs was a wide room with thick round columns, the ceiling so high our footsteps echoed. Old books gathered dust in the corners. Spiders spun impressive cobwebs between them. Its center was cast in a shadow too dark to see into.

We gathered by the stairs where the torchlight was plentiful.

"Will Asher be joining us?" Nola whispered.

"He said he'd be here," I shared, "but I don't think we should wait on him to turn up. We can't risk running out of time before the train leaves."

"Alwin favors knowledge," Ruchel said soothingly. "He isn't the sort of god who would make a trial that would test our bodies the way the others do. I don't think we need to fear for our safety here. Let's get it done now, and Asher can join us later."

She was underestimating the cruelty of the gods, but I was getting what I wanted so I kept my thoughts to myself.

We collected torches from walls that held images of Alwin's clever fox and headed for the center of the room, lighting more of the fixtures on the columns. When the room was fully illuminated, Alwin appeared in his mortal form, seated behind a round oaken table. A silvery goblet dominated its center.

Nola startled at the sight of him. "Is he a ghost?"

There was something ethereal about him, more translucent than was natural. He dressed in violet robes secured with a thick cloth belt in a shade of deep burgundy.

His golden skin and shaved head gleamed. Long ago, a bald head was seen as a sign of great intelligence, as hair was thought to be a hinderance to the mind, trapping unwanted thoughts. Images of Alwin had started these rumors that were discarded centuries later.

I had never met Alwin before, though he was one of very few gods who maintained a home in both the Upper Realm and the Otherworld.

Seeing his slightly translucent form reminded me of when Lis was little. Her consciousness had liked to wander the room while she slept. I'd have to chase it back into her body come morning.

"It's a projection of him," I said, recognizing the look and feel of one's consciousness and the absence of a sigil that would have been left behind temporarily had he traveled here physically with his divine magic. It was too bad he hadn't traveled here properly. I could have taken that sigil, and then we wouldn't even have needed to compete in his trial.

Alwin motioned at the highbacked chairs scattered about behind him. We each collected one and sat before the table in a row. He took us in with narrowed amber eyes, a line deepening between his heavy brows. His gaze lingered the least amount of time on Blue and the longest on me at the end.

"You, soldier," he said to Nola in a voice that rumbled, "have chosen the path of a warrior. If you think you are worthy of my gifts, drink from the chalice of trials and begin your journey."

Nola glanced at me, seated next to her, then at Ruchel on her other side. "And we're sure this trial won't kill us?" she asked.

"It'll be mind games," Ruchel soothed. "You can't harm yourself in your own mind, I

don't think."

Nola blew out a breath. "I guess we'll find out soon enough."

She stood and took the glowing goblet in her hands. It shone brightly, reflecting in her tawny hair and cobalt eyes. She sipped a red liquid that smelled like wine. Then she set it down and reclaimed her seat beside me.

"Well," Nola grumped, "I don't feel any—" She slumped in her chair, unconscious.

Ruchel yelped in surprise. I caught Nola, steadying her, stopping her from sliding to the floor. Her breathing puffed against my neck. I pressed my ear to her chest and heard the comforting sound of her heart beating.

"Your coven sister lives," Alwin assured me. His gaze snapped to Ruchel next. "You have chosen the path of the mind," he said approvingly. "Drink from the chalice of trials, my daughter, and begin your journey."

Ruchel did as she was bid and didn't make it to her chair before she collapsed, unconscious. Blue caught her and guided her to the floor gently to keep her from striking her head on the stone.

"You," Alwin said to Blue, sorrow dropping his voice, "my poor devout child. You have chosen the path of survival. If you think you are worthy of my gifts, drink of the chalice of trials and begin your journey."

Blue pushed her chair closer to the table and never left her seat while she drank down a hearty swallow. The chalice was so big she needed both hands to lift it. Her head tipped back in her chair, arms limp at her sides. She was slumbering peacefully seconds later.

When it was just Alwin and I, we had a staring match I didn't win. Moments stretched into minutes.

"It is difficult to see which path you are on," he explained. "The years behind you are many. Your path has changed after so many lifetimes. What you want and what is needed are at war within you, but to partake in my trial, you must first choose your journey, old one."

I knew what fork in my road he was speaking of. Long ago I'd learned what mattered most of all. My path was clear. Coven and community had been the pillars of my existence, but then I'd met the little girl with the toothless smile. Lisbeth needed me, and I'd abandoned that path to keep her safe.

I was forever changed now. There was no going back.

"Vengeance," I said somberly. "I am the retribution against those who took the one I love from me. I will not rest until the guilty are gone from this world. I am vengeance."

He let out a slow exhale that left his broad shoulders drooping. "Are you certain that is what you wish, old one?"

"I am certain," I said coldly, and before he finished inviting me to partake of his chalice, I drank what remained in it down, the liquid thick and sour-sweet on my tongue.

I lay on the floor beside Ruchel. The magic took its time working. The alcohol was supposed to relax me and make invading my mind easier, but the divine magic struggled against my rebellious spirit. Sparks popped before my eyes, and my heart sped.

But spirit and consciousness are two sides of the same coin, and eventually mine surrendered to his.

The stone room fell away. I was back on the Schatten, or a place that resembled the train, in the passage of a sleeper car. Everything was too bright, the bone walls luminescent as pearls. Even the rumble of the tracks was different, smoother under my feet.

I explored the compartments, but it wasn't bunks or luggage tucked inside them. Memories played out behind each door. I'd been taken deep inside my own subconscious. I stopped at the car that showed Lisbeth in our old shop. The flaming sigil burned on the tile overhead, and a shadowy creature fell from the ceiling, my mind filling in the gaps I hadn't seen myself before the double of me burst through the door much too late.

I watched Lisbeth die.

The memory started over, only this time, the moment the sigil appeared I charged inside. I attacked the shadowy monster with a surge of spirit. I pursued it around the shop, knocking over shelves and scattering hats, shattering jars. I chased it out of the memory, down the aisles of the Schatten, into the dining cars. It turned over tables and threw plates at me that I dodged. The creature tried to escape me by entering the lounge.

I caught up with it there. The monster left oily slick in its wake, which I slipped in. Striking the creature was like attacking smoke. I chased the beast into another memory—Lisbeth's first haircut—then another. Playing with her in the snow. And another. Baking bread together, smearing flour on my face and pretending I hadn't noticed it there. Her little laughter so sweet my heart squeezed.

I watched Lisbeth die again.

And again.

And again.

I returned to the original memory. I gathered all the spirit I had left and laid a snare for the monster, iron gray claws extended from my chest like a beartrap. The next time the creature dropped from the burning sigil, I grabbed hold of the being with my spirit, and I crushed it.

But Lisbeth still lay on the floor dead at my feet. It mattered not how many times I destroyed the monster.

Depleted and alone, I found another memory of my sister, this one earlier in the day, before she died. I watched her dancing around our shop, practicing her steps in those lovely moments before I'd entered our room and left her alone. It played over and over again, Lisbeth humming a tune to herself, her skirts twirling.

I leaned back against the bone wall behind me, and I slid to the floor, knees to my chest. I pictured the mental mortar and pestle, and I grinded my grief down and down. I lost track of how long I sat there, numb and hollow inside, my spirit spent.

The gaslights dimmed, and a shadow grew before me, casting me in cool shade.

"Asher?" I looked up into the familiar face of the reaper, the sharp features and dark eyes, undecided if he was a figment of my mind.

"Ruchel sent me," he explained, his rich baritone and his death aura too intense to be imaginary. He didn't fit here in this realm of wispy memories and luminescent things. "There is nowhere in the Otherworld I can't go, so our coven asked me to check on you."

Doors up and down the sleeper car slammed shut, locks thrown—all but the compartment across from me barred themselves in an instant.

Asher chuckled. “Relax,” he said. “I won’t leave the atrium of your mind. I didn’t come to pry. The others are worried, is all, and they insisted I check in. You’ve been out a long while.”

Time likely passed differently here. I had no concept of how long I’d been gone, like dreaming. A night could fly by in a blink when I slept. “They’re already awake?”

He nodded.

“And the prize?” I asked.

“None have claimed it yet. Ruchel said she had to figure out a way to outsmart herself to beat her trial, but she proved to be too difficult an opponent. And Nola was given another chance to battle the invaders in her Sebrak encampment, but out of spite she burned even more trees this time around and was thrown from the trial.”

“And you?”

His laugh lacked humor. “I’m not allowed to make an attempt.”

“Right. You’re a traitor,” I said fondly. It was my favorite thing about him. “And Blue?”

“Blue was not comfortable sharing. But she wasn’t successful either.”

I sighed. “It’s all right. I know the lesson the god of wisdom is attempting to impart to me. I put it together some time ago. We’ll get the relic.”

Asher watched Lisbeth dancing for a time, and the corners of his black eyes crinkled. “What lesson is that?”

My throat and nose stung. I swallowed the scratchy feeling down. “He wants me to walk away because, no matter what I do, no matter who I kill, it won’t bring my sister back to me.”

Asher pushed down his hood. His snowy hair spilled loose and wavy over his shoulders. “If you know what Alwin wants, why are you still here?”

My next inhale filled my chest to bursting, and my eyes welled. “Because,” I choked, transfixed on the memory of lovely Lisbeth lighting up our dim little shop, “it’s just really nice to see her again.”

“Ah.” He sat down beside me, crossing his legs under him. Shadows billowed up between us and pooled inky black on the bone floor all around me.

We watched Lisbeth dance together.

“You should talk about her,” he said.

I felt my brows pull closer together.

“Do you remember when the high witch was ill?” he explained. “Remember how the coven took turns pushing her in the wheelbarrow and the burden was less because of it? The concept is the same here and now. You should talk about your sister. Share the burden of losing her.”

The very thought immediately made my throat tight. But who was I to doubt the wisdom of an ageless man who knew grief, loss, and death so intimately?

“She gave the best hugs,” I rasped. “When she hugged you, she used her whole body to do it. Not just her arms. And I miss her laugh. It was loud, and if you got her going good enough, she would snort like a boar and . . .” I chuckled at the memory of it, the rest of my words cut short by the emotion constricting my lungs.

Silent tears leaked from the edges of my eyes.

“I remember her,” he said, chin at a tilt, taking in her dancing with a broomstick.

My eyes snapped to him. “What?”

“She was on the train—the other part of the train. Not the prisoner cars. They all come to the Schatten in the end to be ferried to the life after. I don’t usually remember them. There are so many, but she made an impression. Her soul had a shine to it. She caught my attention.”

“How was she?” Scooting closer, I fired questions at him. “What did she say? Was she all right?”

“She was fine.” He grinned in that lopsided way of his that was peculiarly appealing. “Better than fine, I think. She made fun of my waistcoat.”

A cackle slipped out of me, disbelief and relief mingling to warm my heart. “That sounds exactly like what she would do.”

He brushed a hand down the horn buttons of his double-breasted lapel, his lip in a charming curl. “She was a plucky thing. She told me I didn’t look old enough to be someone’s grandfather so I should stop dressing like one.”

I hung on his every word and begged him for more, even made him repeat the details twice of how he’d spotted her seated in one of the passenger cars at the back of the

Schatten, the glow of her divine blood sunshine-bright against the padded chair. He described her with the elegance of a poet.

Asher leaned back. His shadowy hood pillowed his head against the bone walls. “Usually, the recently deceased beg me for answers about what comes next. Souls on the Schatten are nervous—understandably so. I do my best to soothe them, but your sister didn’t ask me any of those questions. Instead, she told me all about the things she would miss in life. I liked that.” His black eyes softened. “I didn’t realize it until now, but she was talking about you.”

The sob took me by surprise. Surely I didn’t have any tears left, but they caught in my throat and choked off my breath. I pulled my collar up over my face to stifle them.

Always patient and never in a hurry, Asher lounged beside me, unbothered by my small breakdown. After all his millennia with the recently departed, he was inoculated against such things, I supposed.

“Unless,” he added breezily, “Lisbeth has another bossy, overprotective older sister with a very, very big heart?”

I coughed a breathy laugh into my shirt, blotting at my wet lashes. “No,” I said miserably. “Just the one.”

His darkness trickled up my arms and across my shoulders. I released my droopy collar. A brush of his magic cooled my hot cheeks and helped me dry my eyes. Asher pulled out his leather journal from an inner pocket in his waistcoat and worked on his verses, writing right to left, the silence comfortable between us.

I worried my lower lip. “Am I going to miss the train?”

“You have a little time. Visit with your sister a while,” he said.

I stretched my legs out in front of me, letting the dark pool engulf the rest of me in a blanket of night, and I watched Lisbeth. I let myself remember her. It hurt, but the burden did seem just the tiniest bit less after sharing her.

“Would you make a death pact with me?” I asked, surprising myself when I spoke the words without thinking on them much at all. I did feel oddly indebted to him now, though, grateful for the comfort he had shown Lisbeth and me. Considering how often I’d wrongly accused him of being a spy, I wanted to extend him a little trust. A small gesture.

He cocked a snowy brow at me. “You think a crow like me is going to die?”

I rolled my eyes. “Awfully arrogant of you to assume you can’t, considering you’re a traitor to the gods who is actively attempting to defy them all again and flee your prison. That seems like exactly the sort of thing that could get a man—even a reaper—killed.”

“Hm. I take your point. All right.” He tucked his journal and pen away in his inner pocket, then sat up straighter. “What am I trading for?”

“If I die,” I said, my words measured, “I want you to make sure no warlock can have my remains. It’s not just an issue of pride or decency. If some fool got ahold of my bones, even a novice could turn Wulfram into a crater. It’s in everyone’s best interest that such a thing doesn’t happen.”

All pleasantness bled from his face. His expression slipped into that placid mask, and his magic roiled around him, the choppy waves of an angry dark ocean. Despite wanting to leave the Otherworld, perhaps he disliked the idea of his home being destroyed. “I wouldn’t let anyone have at your remains, Trouble. Ever.”

“Not the Old One either,” I said sternly.

Asher scowled. “Of course. Because you hate him the most. But he didn’t make these trials you despise alone, you know. He’s a ferrier like me. His duty is only to the train. The Old One and his crows helped build the Otherworld. Should he now leave it to the other gods to claim it? The gods who make monsters for their amusement or create vicious beings like giants and then abandon them to do as they please, no matter who they hurt? An agreement had to be made to stop the gods fighting. If they didn’t, more mortals would pay a blood price. At least this way only . . .” His words fell away.

“Oh, don’t stop now on my account,” I said scornfully. “I assume you were about to say that at least this way the ones paying the price are guilty, worthless prisoners who earned their lot? Doesn’t matter to me whose games they are or why. The only things the gods have ever been good at is looking after their own interests and making my life difficult.”

“I don’t think that describes the Old One, and I don’t think guilty or worthless describes you. At least the Old One consistently does his job down here. He tends to the dead, and he treats the prisoners with respect instead of malice. He feeds and clothes them. No one is forcing him to do that.”

“He damned me here—and it’s debatable whether I deserved that,” I insisted.

Asher snorted. “You attacked him unprovoked. You definitely deserved it, you villain.”

“That’s debatable .” Whether or not I agreed that the games should exist, Death had taken my sister to a place I could not go. That’s all I needed to know about him. “Either way, I don’t want my body animated to push a cart around for all eternity. If you can’t burn me to ash, don’t let my fate be as a faceless servant who brings you

drinks and fluffs your pillow until the end of time.”

“The souls of every revenant on the Schatten are ferried safely to the life after. They aren’t trapped in servitude. Their essence isn’t on the train at all anymore. It’s death magic that preserves them.”

“I don’t want that. Even if they aren’t the horrid kind of revenant with a damaged soul trapped inside them. Don’t do that to what remains of me.”

“Then I’ll carry your body out to the desert,” he said, expression smooth, magic tumultuous. I didn’t know his voice could be any lower, but it dropped further still. “I’ll carry you to where the hills turn purple at dusk. Out where no one living or dead could reach you.”

“Thank you,” I said, the words sounding weak and inefficient compared to his eloquence. “If you die—”

“And I will visit you there,” he continued, dark eyes squinting like he was imagining it all. “Every night, even after your remains are dust, I’ll come and see you. I’ll talk to you so that you have company. I don’t know if it’s true that your soul will be able to hear me visiting you in the life after, but I like thinking that it is.”

“I . . . That’s very generous,” I said, voice throaty. I swallowed to clear it. “What would you like me to do for you?”

He was ready with his answer. “At the very back of the train, in the last passenger car, the souls of the youngest are ferried. Being with other children helps keep them calm.”

My heart pinched. “Oh?”

“I like to see to them.” The ghost of a smile played across his lips. “If something happens to me, I want you to visit them at night before bed. Just talk to them a little. Tell them they’re safe. Tell them the train always leaves on time and they’ll be with their loved ones very, very soon.”

“I’ll do that if something happens to you. I’ll visit them every night.” Stretching out my right arm, I held my hand up to him in the old way.

Asher laced his long fingers with mine and squeezed my palm tightly, sealing our deal. He peered at me through powdery lashes, inky black eyes flecked in deep blues and browns, lips pursed, his sharp chin at a tilt. I couldn’t help but admire how well he hid his otherworldly prettiness by being so intimidating that it was difficult to notice anything else. Like the sleek beauty of a panther isn’t notable until the predator is safely behind the bars of a cage. Otherwise, all you see when you’re up close is the sharp teeth and devastating claws.

“You know what we could do instead?” I said, resisting the urge to grin.

“What’s that?” He cocked a platinum brow at me.

“We could forget trying to break out of the Otherworld and just kill the Old One instead. Claim the train for ourselves and never go back to Wulfram ever again. Let the gods fight their own wars for a change.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or have just gone insane.”

A chuckle slipped out of me, giving my puckishness away. Technically, I wasn’t joking, but I also wasn’t insane enough to try it. I’d already attempted to kill the Old One once. He was so powerful, just a portion of his magic had been enough to smother me. Even with the help of one of his reapers, I’d never be able to destroy him.

Asher was indeed very handsome, though.

And he was still holding my hand.

In the more southern provinces, they told folk stories about celestial beings whose grace was born of starlight. I hadn't paid much attention to the myths, but studying him now, I wondered if his face framed in long silvery-white hair wasn't exactly what they had in mind.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“No scholar can confirm whether the brothers Alwin and Alrick are friend or foe.” –  
Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

When I awoke, Nola and Ruchel let out a cheer. Asher helped me to my feet, and the others made room for him, careful not to touch his shadows. I wiped drool from my chin, wondering what I'd looked like on my back with my mouth hanging open.

Definitely not like a celestial being, that's for sure.

Alwin sat behind the round table. His chalice was gone. Four gifts lay neatly in a row in its place. The hexen relic made of skin and inked in witch blood was the first. Asher frowned at it.

I pressed a hand to my belly to steady myself. The sight of it turned my stomach.

Beside it was a dagger made of sharpened bone, the handle pearlescent. Another book was next, something old and bound in sheepskin. Alwin lifted the forked branch beside it. It looked as fragile as glass, made of dried-up twigs, but the wiriest wands were always the most coveted by water covens. I didn't doubt this one was something special.

“For you,” Alwin said, handing the new wand to Blue. “May it aid you in your journey, survivor.”

Blue accepted the tool humbly, brow furrowed below her sea-colored scarf. “But I failed.”

Alwin ignored her, lifting the dagger next. With it lying across both hands, he held it out to Nola. “May it aid you in your journey, warrior.”

Nola took it greedily, weighing it in her palm. Hilt and blade balanced evenly on her finger. “It’s not hexen, is it?” Her nose wrinkled.

“It’s made of god bone,” Alwin said, “a tooth given by the Crone of Creation herself to the god Hilt for its crafting. There isn’t a thing living or dead, divine or Hel-born, that it cannot cut through. Use it wisely, soldier.”

He lifted the sheepskin book next and passed it over to Ruchel. “Written by the first air coven and translated into common tongue a century ago. It’s one of my favorites from my personal collection. I thought this gift best for you, daughter of the mind. I wanted to give you a scarf made of my robes that would enhance your magic, but I sensed that you would view such a thing as a curse more than a blessing.”

A curse? That made me curious. Why wouldn’t Ruchel want her powers to be enhanced? She was lovely and warm but as tight-lipped as Blue. Possibly even more so in certain ways.

Ruchel bowed her head. “Thank you for such a thoughtful gift. You are correct about my preference, but I too failed the trial. I don’t understand . . .”

Alwin’s generosity didn’t end there. He didn’t touch the hexen book, gesturing for me to come and help myself to it. “For the victor,” he said, “who won the trial not only for herself but for her coven.”

It was another lesson, another push away from the path of vengeance, back toward the journey I’d once been on where community mattered above all else. A lesson I would ignore. There would be time for such things once the guilty god no longer breathed.

I am vengeance now .

Alwin's consciousness vanished from the room in a gust of wind that blew out half of the torches.

"That relic is an evil thing," Asher warned, his voice as dark and deadly as a tomb.

With two fingers, I pinched the corner of the cover and opened it carefully. The feel of the skin under mine was cold, leathery, and repulsive. I wiped my hands down my trousers briskly. Gooseflesh broke out on my arms.

"The Guardians aren't letting us out of here with it," Ruchel said.

We gave our prizes to Asher. He fed them into his shadows, but he was not willing to touch the hexen relic directly. I couldn't blame him. My fingers still felt filthy. We wrapped it up in our scarves, and Asher finally consented to hiding it in that place where shadows rest, certain no other reaper would come anywhere near it.

He melted away into the darkness, and we climbed the stairs without him.

The Guardians searched us as soon as we re-entered the library. They tried questioning us too, but we kept our mouths collectively shut. Nola pointed her middle fingers up at them when they tried to demand answers from her. Bram wasn't amongst them. Was this some tactic of his, or was he back in the Upper Realm spying for the god king?

"Are we being held here?" I challenged the green warlock I'd once assaulted. He chose that moment to dump out the items from my satchel onto the tile floor, searching my belongings for the third time.

Three Guardians made Nola hold her hands above her head as they patted her down.

They did the same to Ruchel.

“Be polite where you touch my high witch,” Nola growled, “or I’ll pluck out your eyes and burn your tongues to ash.”

“They must have failed the trials,” the green warlock said to the others. There were eight of them gathered in the atrium. “Bram said not to hold them. They’ll be back on their own to try again.”

Like Hel we will.

We hoofed it to the train at high speed.

\* \* \*

Asher was eager to be rid of the relic. He returned it to me, careful only to touch the scarf it was wrapped in. Then he slunk off into the corner of the lounge car, his fair skin gone gray as a gravestone.

We’d taken over the car, with one new addition: Talia sat beside Blue, across the table from our high witch. Nola mixed us drinks at the bar. I abstained from the gin, still regretting my choices from the night before that had led to nightmares and weakness today.

“You’re a warlock?” Ruchel clarified from the seat beside me. The sisters occupied the cushioned chairs nearest the entrance. It was their job to dissuade intruders.

If boxing her in with our coven bothered Talia, she hid it well. Her glossy midnight curls shone under the gaslights. “I am a warlock,” she confirmed quietly. The amulets I’d believed marked her as a witch hung around her umber neck, swaying with her movements. She fingered one of the pendants shaped like a bird in flight. “I do use

hexen relics but only ones made of bronze or copper. I trade for them honestly. I let others believe I'm a witch for their comfort. Please know, we're not all . . ." She searched for the right word.

"Ass-heads," Nola supplied.

"That. Yes," Talia said, her full lips in a droll twist. The deep lines that accentuated her amber eyes crinkled.

I unwrapped the hexen relic from the satin scarves that concealed it, and I pushed it across the table to her.

She touched it hesitantly, and a shiver tremored through her. "It's . . . definitely powerful. I sense its pages are made of the skin of a gray witch." Her throat bobbed, and she flipped through more of the book. "Yes, definitely a gray."

"It's pure evil, then," Blue said, and with great restraint I resisted rolling my eyes.

"Interesting as all that is," Nola said, "can it get us the fuck out of the Otherworld or not?"

Talia turned the pages tentatively. The bloody ink had smeared into a macabre mess, and she snapped the relic shut. Eyes closed, she stole a steadying breath in through her nose. Her nostrils flared. "It is an evil thing, and it's hungry."

If it was made of a gray witch, then I had an idea of how it worked, and I felt the color draining from my face. This book hungered the way my magic hungered. It was just as dangerous as I was.

"It could get us out of the Otherworld," Talia continued, "but the cost is horrid."

“Souls,” I whispered. “It needs spirit to fuel it.”

“That is the function of it, yes,” Talia said glumly. “Feed it the life force of another, and it will eat their soul and perform any number of impossible things.” She slid the book to the center of the table and wiped her hands roughly down her pant legs.

“What if we fed it magic?” I asked. I knew how to take things for myself, not how to give them, but magic and energy were aspects of spirit—I thrived on them as well. Perhaps not all hope was lost. “Energy can be renewed as can magic, yes? Feeding the book that would not be so detrimental.”

Talia shook her head, and her amulets knocked together. “I’m afraid I don’t know how that would work and would be too frightened of the consequences to experiment. I’m not a gray and can’t mold spirit. And I’m not a reaper—”

“A reaper would never ,” Asher said, bristling.

“Of course,” Talia added gently. “Since I am unable to help you at all, I will not accept payment for this reading. Let us part as friends.”

“Friends, yes,” Ruchel said glumly. “We’re grateful to you.”

I really like this Talia , Lisbeth said in my head, and I couldn’t agree more. She was an ally I wanted to keep close. One Blue was convinced was high witch—warlock—of a much, much larger coven than she let on.

Talia pushed up from the table.

I reached for her. “Wait. There’s something I’d like you to have in the name of that friendship. It matters not that you were unable to help us this time. There will be other times we need to help each other.”

She slid back into her chair, her elegant brows knitted. I pulled the amulet from under my shirt, and her amber eyes rounded.

“Please accept this from our coven to yours,” I said. The amulet hung from my outstretched hand.

Tentatively, she touched the bronze and gasped. “This isn’t hexen,” she said, awe in her voice. Then her hand snapped back from it like it had bitten her. “That’s a god-made relic.”

I could feel Blue’s accusing eyes boring into my skull.

“It’s a family heirloom. A Friar relic,” I admitted, letting it rest on the table between us. “And it’s yours now. Please take it.”

Talia bit her lower lip. “It’s too much. There are some things people simply shouldn’t have. Too much power can be a terrible thing, and that relic, I’m afraid to say, is just . . . a lot.”

Lisbeth’s voice in my head cooed excitedly, liking her even more.

“Power corrupts,” I agreed. “I can see why Blue is fond of you, but we aren’t warlocks. It’s a worthless bauble to us. Keep it, Talia. Take it and protect your coven with it. Use it.”

Ruchel squeezed my arm, a show of support for my actions.

Talia stared at the torch amulet for some time, notably avoiding Blue’s gaze. Slowly, she took it, the delicate metal scraping across the tabletop before she dropped it into her pocket. Then she left.

An uncomfortable silence took command of the cabin as Talia's retreating footsteps grew duller in the distance.

Asher stood stoically, a pale statue in the corner, but his shadows were a whirlwind under his feet. Nola swirled her glass, then downed it in one gulp that made her grimace. Liesel sniffled. Her sadness carried in the quiet. Emma murmured at her soothingly, but her sister's misery shook her slender shoulders.

"I thought we'd finally done it," Liesel wept. "I thought that book was the answer."

"It's not over for us yet," Emma said softly.

"Alwin," I growled. He was always teaching lessons, and I'd had more than enough of them today. It occurred to me how pleased he'd be to know I'd given Talia a gift, growing our community. Had it been his influence that triggered it? Was I being manipulated? The notion made me grit my teeth, not because growing support was an evil thing, but because the gods always had a hidden agenda.

"He only gave me this book because he knew I wouldn't use it," I shared. "Bram thought it was because no one in his coven was worthy. He was wrong. This is more god games. Now we're right back where we started."

Liesel sobbed loudly. Emma hugged her to her chest.

"Not right back," Ruchel said, "we've more friends now than we did before. That was smart, Maven."

"We should destroy the book," Blue said.

"No," I snapped, and all eyes turned on me. "We won't use it," I added more gently, "but let's not destroy it. Not yet. There's too much we don't know about it."

I wouldn't risk experimenting with the book either. Feeding it a spell sounded like a good way to get someone's soul snatched, but I wasn't willing to lose my one and only bargaining chip with Bram either. I had questions that needed answers. A guilty god needed to die.

"Asher," Ruchel rasped, "please get this horrid thing out of our sight for now. We'll figure out what to do with it another time."

\* \* \*

After the feast that evening, I was having trouble keeping my eyes open. I was so spent, I barely ate.

"Are you all right?" Ruchel asked, her brows furrowed. "You've looked pale all day."

"I had dreadful dreams last night," I told her. "I thought maybe I drank too much, but I just can't seem to recover my energy. Not even a little. Nothing is helping."

She squinted at me like there was an equation on my face she was trying to solve. "Have you had enough water? Maybe you should piss in a glass for Blue to look at."

My nose wrinkled. "No thank you."

"Then turn in early," she suggested. "Get more sleep."

"That . . . doesn't sound so dreadful." I rose to my feet, and I must have moved too quickly because suddenly the bone floors were coming at my face, and the walls had upended themselves. Ruchel shouted my name, and everything went dark.

A horrid voice cooed at me in my nightmares. I know what you are, it echoed in my thoughts. It shouted other frightful things at me that I couldn't hold on to. One voice

became many voices that creaked and groaned in my ears. The sound put a pit in my gut and made everything feel like it would never be all right again.

We know what you did to the Whitten women . . .

Guilt turned my stomach so sour I thought I might retch. The images were a blur, flashing lights, blood on the floor, the copper scent in my nose. Glass on the ground. My finger pricking on a sharp bit of bone . . . I screamed out. I felt like I was being spun like a top. I reached for the voices, a feeling of dread turning my insides cold, but it was like trying to trap smoke in a butterfly net.

I blinked my eyes open. I'd been rolled onto my back. The lounge came blearily into view. Familiar voices argued over me.

"We can't know what's done it to her," Liesel said sharply, her bell-like voice gone shrill.

"It's the shades that's done it," Nola barked. "Just look at her. She's having nightmares we can't wake her from, and it was your sister who gave her the wax to keep them out of her ears!"

"Don't fight," I slurred, uncertain if anyone understood me. My tongue felt too big for my mouth. A hand grasped mine. I tried to blink to clear my vision. My head was in someone's lap, a person with a violet scarf in their hair—Ruchel, then. Four blurry faces hovered over me. On the ceiling above them, tumultuous shadows rippled like a black ocean caught in a storm.

The hand holding mine wore a sea-colored scarf. Blue. What a surprise.

"If you didn't do it on purpose, Emma," Ruchel said, voice cold as ice, "then stop refusing to answer my questions."

“I’ll not be interrogated like a common criminal,” Emma bit out.

“You are a criminal,” Nola shouted. “We all are! That’s how we got here, you fool!”

“This isn’t a courtroom!” Emma fired back.

“Everyone calm down,” Blue said flatly. “If we let things get too heated, we’ll have revenants in here ready to toss us. If this is shades, we’ll just have to wait for—”

The darkness pulled me under again.

When I awoke next, I was in my bed. My compartment was dark, the curtains pulled shut. I’d tossed the blankets onto the floor at some point, and my body was covered in sweat. I had just enough energy to sit up and no memory of how I’d gotten in here. I leaned my weight against the bone wall, too exhausted to keep upright on my own.

Fist trembling, I knocked on the wall.

Shadows poured in through the vent, and Asher appeared, his silvery white hair the only part of him I could see clearly.

“Shades,” I whispered, and my chest heaved. “I have nightmare spirits in me.”

“It looks like it,” he said gently. His patient presence loosened something in my chest.

Shadows crept up my bed and along my blankets, then up my arms to cool the sweat from my neck. I sighed, leaning into them.

“Shades won’t kill you,” he soothed. “It’s no fun for them if you’re dead. Blue thinks they’ll move on once they’ve drained your energies dry. You’d recuperate what you

lost with rest.”

But recuperating gray magic was much more complicated. And apparently Emma may have done this to me on purpose. I should probably have been mad about that, but if it had been Lisbeth, I would have done the same thing. I would have kept the foe I was uncertain about weak to lessen the threat.

I groaned. “Staying this drained in the games is a death sentence.” I rested my cheek against the wall, soaking up the cool touch of it. “I need the shades out now, but I can’t evict them. Not on my own. I’ve nothing to fight them with in here . . . I hate to even ask you this, but I don’t know what else to do.” I tried to shrug, but my shoulders were too tired to lift.

Consciousness and spirit were two sides to the same coin, and there wasn’t anywhere this reaper couldn’t go in the Otherworld. He was my only option.

“If you let me in, all the way in,” he said, shifting closer to my bed, “I can handle them. I’ll ferry them to the gates of Hel where they belong. Far away from you.”

I didn’t like owing him, but I hated being weak even more. “There are things you’ll see and hear in there . . .”

“I don’t plan to linger, Trouble. I’m not doing this to pry.”

“It’s not that. There are things I haven’t been forthcoming about.” I rubbed fingers down my forehead where an ache was forming. “Things you’ve asked me directly and I . . . Crone save me, I’m too tired to have this conversation. Just, give me a chance to explain before you tell anyone else what you learn in there. Please?”

“Maven,” he said reproachfully, “I’m not going to tell anyone anything . Whatever I see in your consciousness, it’s yours. Not mine to share. Do you trust me?”

“All right,” I sighed, because what choice did I have?

The line of his jaw hardened. “That wasn’t really an answer.”

He wore the night like a cloak, and his dark eyes, glossy in the shadows, captured my gaze and held it. My breaths escaped my dry lips in ragged puffs, and each one left me more winded than the last.

“I trust that we want the same things for now,” I said with a grunt. Talking was an effort.

I’d broken the habit of relying on others while I was raising Lisbeth. I couldn’t take chances. But being forced into these games had changed everything. Every trial, I either had to trust others with my life or chance it on my own and bring about my death all the quicker. I certainly hadn’t thought highly of Asher when we’d met, but somewhere along the way, he’d upended my doubts. I didn’t know what to think of him anymore.

He considered me, his head cocked. “Lie down.”

I did as he instructed, resting on my side, my head on the pillow, the fabric still damp from my sweat. His shadows surged, blanketing me in night. He laid one of his hands across my face, his palm smooth and warm and big enough to cover my eyes completely.

The train disappeared, the rumble of the tracks and the sway of the cabin falling away. The shadows went next. In my mind I was back in the apartment I shared with Lisbeth, her bed across from mine, her earring on the nightstand still missing its match. I sat up, no longer heavy from the weight of my own body.

Cuts of fabric scattered the floor, Lisbeth’s discarded projects. The sight of them

tightened my throat. Asher stood amongst them, but his shadows were gone. I didn't know where my mind had put them. His platinum hair was pulled back in a messy knot, hands tucked in his trouser pockets. A few strands broke loose to fall across his brow. Apparently, I liked his hair this way . . .

It was probably for the best that I didn't dwell on that thought too much.

"Can you feel where the shades are hiding?" he asked. "Is it a particular memory?"

"No," I said, still too exhausted to be very helpful. "Not exactly. They feel big, like they're everywhere."

Creaking voices called through the crack in the door behind him. "Fria," the shades taunted. Their voices expanded to fill the room, bouncing off the walls. "Fria . . . I see you, Friiiiiiiiiiaaaaaa . . ."

I met Asher's eyes and swallowed. "I can explain . . ."

"Fria, Fria," the shades chanted, "daughter of the traveler and the crossroads, we see you. You are ours now."

The only evidence of Asher's surprise was the slight lift in his brows, and then his expression smoothed. "I'll take care of them."

He turned to depart deeper into my mind, and I caught him by the back of his waistcoat. "Asher . . . thank you."

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Nott and Mara were born as one god before their mother desired two children. She ripped their soul and divinity in half and made the Lord of Night and the Lady of Nightmares.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

I awoke in my compartment, the curtains gilded by early morning light. My mind was no longer heavy with the weight of malevolent shade spirits. I had the energy to stand and wash and go searching for a new camisole I could wear under my corset. My spirit stirred weakly in my chest as I dressed.

Asher’s shadows crawled in across the floor. He appeared in the middle of my cabin.

“You should knock,” I said, buttoning up my shirt so hurriedly that I missed one and had to start again.

He stood in the pile of my dirty clothing, my handwashed socks dripping dry on the washstand beside him. His bottomless eyes took me in with a sweeping glance—freshly braided bronze hair, my shirt half-open—and his cheeks turned russet.

He put his back to me. “I apologize.”

There was something deeply pleasing about being able to make an ageless force of nature blush, but I chose not to think on that very hard.

“Back from Hel’s gates already,” I said, eager to change the subject. “You work fast.”

“We should talk,” he said to the door, tone somber.

My heart lurched. I took a seat on the bed, winded from dressing. “All right. Let’s get it over with . . .”

“You’re the goddess of magic.” He whispered the words like they were a prayer.

“No,” I said emphatically, “I was the goddess of magic. There’s not a drop of divinity in me now, according to you.”

“Because you broke it into pieces and gave it all away.” The hint of awe in his tone made my stomach flutter and then harden. “I don’t know much about the Upper Realm, but even I’ve heard of you. I saw it all in your mind. You turned yourself mortal. You made yourself into a witch, the very first one.”

“My priestesses needed a way to protect themselves from . . . another, and I . . . I couldn’t save all of them.”

“I know. I saw.” His head dropped forward. Even though I was dressed now, he seemed intent on keeping his gaze turned away from me. “Why keep it a secret?”

Images of the faces I’d known and loved flashed through my mind, blurry by the passage of time. My first coven. “You’re unfamiliar with the gods of the Upper Realm. Suffice it to say, none of them were happy with what I’d done. Eventually, it was easier just to disappear, let people believe I’d destroyed myself.”

“You aren’t a goddess any longer, but you have god blood. Your own blood.”

“Yes. That doesn’t make me particularly popular either. Neither does the gray magic. That was the one thing I couldn’t give away, my god-born spirit. After that, hiding was the only path left for me. The occasional god spy turned up to make my existence Hel, but otherwise life was peaceful. And then I met Lisbeth . . .” When I glanced over at him, he’d finally turned around. I felt his fathomless gaze on my face, but I

couldn't meet it.

His billowy shadows went suddenly still. "But what about our covenant? Ruchel favors Fria. Why keep it a secret from her?"

My shoulders slumped forward. "Because I'm not Fria anymore. Lisbeth named me Maven when she was 16 because she thought I was such a 'know-it-all,' and that's who I am now," I said, smiling faintly at the distant memory. But the smile was short-lived.

"The fear in you—I can still feel it," he said, flattening his palm over his heart and the tear there in his waistcoat. "You're not a danger to us here. Gods are easily distracted. They wouldn't come to the Otherworld to bother you after all this time."

"I don't want to be a god. Asher, I hate the gods. I can't tell the rest of them," I said quietly. "They'll want me to save them from all of this, but I've nothing left to give. I can't save anyone. Not them, not my priestesses, not Lisbeth. You saw it all inside my head. You know."

"The White One," he said solemnly.

The god of cold and frost.

I cringed at the name and had to shut my eyes a moment. "I don't want to talk about him. Please?"

"I won't make you . . . I just . . ." He worked his throat. "I hate that you blame yourself for what he did to the Whitten women."

I shook my head sharply. "Don't call them that. They weren't his women. They were mine. They tried to warn me about the encroaching cold, about his threatening

behavior, and I ignored them because I was as selfish and arrogant as every other god.”

“I could feel it in your mind,” he said, “and I don’t know how you stand it. All those emotions . . . They’d have smothered me long ago.”

My eyes stung, and I had to squeeze them shut again. “Of course I blame myself,” I said, breathless. “I was their goddess. There’s no one else to blame.”

My thoughts went whirling down into darker places. I brought forward my mental mortar and pestle and ground my fist into my palm, breaking down the sour feelings until the tightness in my chest slackened.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“It’s . . . it’s silly, but it helps.” I showed him the gesture again and explained it.

Staring down at his own hands, he mimicked the movements like he didn’t think it was impractical at all.

“If you’re ready now,” he said after a time, “I have a task for you.”

I blinked up at him. “A task?” I knew he’d have something for me eventually, but I wasn’t expecting it quite so soon.

“I saved you from the shades,” he reminded me.

“And I’m grateful—can’t you tell?” Sitting up had become too much of a chore. I sprawled across the mattress. “Can it wait until I can stand on my own for longer than a minute?”

“I don’t think so. Our coven is falling apart, and I want you to fix it. Ruchel and Emma argued late into the night before you woke. Nola believes the blessed wax you used during the first trial was sabotaged.”

The bed beneath me was feeling too comfortable, even thin as cardboard as it was. My eyelids fluttered. If I could have slept for another decade or two, I would have. “Emma probably did sabotage me,” I said dryly.

“How can you be so certain?”

I shrugged. “It’s what I would’ve done.”

“Remind me never to wrong you.” A chortle rumbled out of him, bringing out the blush undertones in his fair skin. He was handsome when he laughed, less Otherworldly. “Go and fix it. We need our coven whole again, and every time I’ve tried to intervene, I just get all of them shouting at me. I don’t want any more shouting.”

“Fine.”

His amusement brought a lightness to my limbs that hadn’t been there before. His shadows swallowed him whole, and he melted away under the crack in the door.

\* \* \*

My appetite returned with enthusiasm. I was on my second fruit plate, headed back to the lounge with my breakfast, when the arguing reached my ears. I hurried through the next dining car, sidestepping a beast-born with pointed ears and a furry face, satchel bouncing against my hip.

“Stop avoiding my questions,” Ruchel groused at Emma. They faced off in the center

of the car.

“I didn’t bring harm to our coven,” Emma shouted.

“That’s not what I asked,” Ruchel fired back, hands balled into fists. “You can tell me to my face you didn’t bring harm if you believed what you were doing was right. Answer me directly or get the fuck out of my sight! Did you tamper with the wax you put in Maven’s ears or not?”

“She’s fine now!” Emma said. She knotted her witch’s hat angrily, twisting it between her hands. “Let it go!”

“Ruchel—” I started.

“Not now, duck,” Nola said from the bar. “She’s on a tear. It’s her duty as high witch, so let her handle it.”

It may have been her duty, but I didn’t want my coven to fall apart any more than Asher did. We needed them. Secrets had caused this mess, but how did I undo all that now? Wouldn’t confirming I was lying all along just make everything so much worse?

I set down my plate on the bar, and Nola helped herself to it, tossing a burgundy grape into her mouth and chewing it loudly. She settled in on her stool to enjoy the show.

“Wait, Emma,” I begged. “I have a question.”

“Now’s not the best time,” she said through gritted teeth.

Liesel curled up in her cushioned chair, watching the exchange with big eyes, her

knees hugged to her chest. Blue sat beside her, a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“It’s relevant,” I said. “If I scratch at the wax when it’s in my ears, could that let the shade in?”

I could feel Ruchel’s ochre gaze searching my face. The hair on the back of my neck rose under the intensity of her scrutiny, and I lowered my lashes. My words were deceptive, but by phrasing it as a question, it wasn’t directly a lie. Or so I hoped. I was weary of all the lies.

Emma turned to me, scowling. And then her brow softened, realization dawning. “Yes,” she said gently, accepting the lifeline I’d just tossed to her. “Scratching at it could let them in.”

“Well, damnit, ducky,” Nola said, mouth full of fruit, her tongue turned burgundy from the grapes. “She told us not to fuss with it once it was in there. Why’d you go and do that?”

I shrugged my shoulders, then took back my plate before she could eat all of it. “I’ll be fine next time. Won’t I, Emma?” I aimed the question like a dart right at the green witch.

Nola snatched more of my grapes with her long arm.

Emma’s lips pursed. “Yes. You’ll be fine next time.”

Ruchel’s hands loosened from their fists. The tension in the car dropped, and the conversation switched to trial three strategy. Later, I went after another plate of breakfast—Nola had eaten most of my last one—and Ruchel followed me.

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” she asked once we were alone, leaning her hip against

the table by the entrance to the car.

I finished swallowing a slice of iced pear. “Of course I don’t think that.”

“Why’d you let Emma off the hook?” She folded her arms over her chest.

I took a seat in the nearby chair. The food was helping, but I wasn’t at full strength yet. My joints ached and my legs felt soupy. “She’s suspicious because she thinks I’m lying to everyone . . . but I am lying to everyone. How do we punish her for being right? Emma just wants her sister safe. She’ll come around.”

Ruchel sighed at the ceiling. “Fine, but if you end up needing a wheelbarrow today, I’m making her build it and do all the pushing.”

I didn’t argue.

The bell chimed three times, and the Schatten let us off at the ebonized platform. The city streets stretched behind Wulfram, as pristine as it had been my first day here. The damaged buildings had been repaired, the stores restocked, broken windows replaced. An arena reset.

I could hear the rumble of nearby beasts, the growl and the thunder of their heavy feet on the pavers. My stomach plummeted. I readied my revolver.

The clock struck the first hour, and the gates parted. Prisoners rushed the entrance. I was in no fit state for moving quickly, so Nola and Ruchel kept me between them. We marched for the tower at a steady pace.

Eyes wide and head swiveling, I watched for the first onslaught of beasts, but a gathering of shadows appeared on a nearby roof. A foggy mist formed, so dark and dreadful, a patch of cosmic darkness as big as a house and as threatening as a

hurricane. It cast a shade across the streets, blanketing us all. The prisoners raced ahead, pushing between us. Under the cover of that death aura, not a single garm left their hiding place.

I let out a breath, the relief so great it raised my spirits. Ruchel guided us down cobblestone side paths that were less populated. I made it a solid hour before I was winded and needed a rest. My pace slowed further after that, but Nola reassured me we were still on track.

We made it to a water garden that had gone nearly dry, and we refilled our supplies with what remained. When Ruchel suggested a wheelbarrow be fashioned, Emma was willing, but I felt confident I had more steps in me. I wanted to get as far as I could before I put my coven out.

We kept to the shade, weaving down side alleys and backroads, avoiding hot spots for garm. A brush of wintry magic alerted me Asher was near.

He appeared at my side, his snowy hair pulled up in a messy knot. “You’re slowing down our coven.”

“I am not,” I ground out, dragging my boots through loose gravel. My feet felt like lead. My heels had gone numb in my shoes. “Nola just said a moment ago that we’re on schedule.”

“She’s just being nice,” he said.

“Nola’s not nice.”

“I was being nice,” Nola called over her shoulder.

Asher raised a white brow at me smugly. “If I offer to carry you, are you going to be

stubborn about it?”

I came to an abrupt halt on the narrow street. I looked him up and down, trying to spot the trap in his words. “What will that cost me?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’ll think of something. Are you going to let me? I overheard you being stubborn about the wheelbarrow back there.”

I tucked my revolver and dagger into my satchel to get them out of the way. “I didn’t want to inconvenience Emma or waste magic if I could avoid it. Turns out I don’t mind inconveniencing you at all, though.”

“That’s the spirit, Trouble,” he said, squatting down so I could climb onto his back.

Under the leather of his waistcoat, shoulder muscles bunched and hardened beneath the pads of my fingers, and my stomach fluttered. His big hands cupped my thighs, holding me in place against the solid plane of his back, and I became aggravatingly aware of the thump of my heart trying to beat through my chest.

I needed it to stop before he felt it stuttering against his back.

Do try to focus on not dying , Lisbeth’s voice chided me. Just kidding. What harm is there in noticing him? It’s not as though you plan to keep him . . . right?

A layer of travel dust had settled over me, darkening my sweaty skin. Dirt from my hands smeared his satin shirt. I smelled like salt and grime. I thought about apologizing for it, but then his shadows slid over me, dropping the temperature of my overheated body by several degrees.

I laid my head against his shoulder, struggling to stay alert to my surroundings. The heat of the day had zapped me of my remaining strength. His scent of spicy magic

and woody leather wafted to my nose, chasing away everything else. I was so comfortable it was impossible to care much about things I had no control over.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“Beware the revenant that still has their soul.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

I survived nine more days in the games. We saw little of Asher, and it alarmed me how much I noticed his absence. Every night, I knocked on the bone wall between our beds, and my stomach churned when there was no knock back.

Ruchel had him spying on Bram and keeping an eye on the beast-born we called Bastard. The giants grew bold again, and he was busy doing whatever it was that reapers did to push them back. More nights crawled by without a word from the enemy of my enemies.

My friend.

During the fifth trial, we dodged belching geysers and sinking spots in the shade of towering trees. Dark movement caught my eye, and I turned hoping to find Asher perched on the branch above me.

But it wasn't a reaper. The lounging black cat was bigger than a panther, with a spot of white on his chest. His tail drooped behind him, swaying lazily.

“Your humble servant greets you, God of Night and Mischief,” I said, bringing my coven to a startled halt in the bog. My boots sunk an inch into murky mud.

Well, well, Nott purred, directing his thoughts into mine, if it isn't my favorite little pet. How goes the games, bloodthirsty one?

“They're as messy and bloody as always,” I said with forced cheer. Based on the

confounded expression of my coven mates, I was the only one receiving Nott's messages.

His lips spread wider than was natural for a cat, showing off a deadly set of sharp teeth. Have you caused any trouble lately?

"Always," I vowed. I had enough enemies as it was and didn't wish to add this particular deity to that list. His mercurial reputation preceded him, and he could bar the way to the train on a whim and damn us to fend for ourselves against the beasts that resembled giant crocodiles.

Good, good. Running into me here is not a coincidence. I've a request to ask of you.

"I am ever your servant," I said cautiously. Nott and Mara were the first gods I'd met who'd ever responded positively to the sight of a gray witch. And their divine energy did not match that of the god who'd killed my sister, which kept them off my murder list for now, but that didn't mean I wanted to run errands for them.

Nott batted at a stray leaf with his big paw. My friend Asher has taken a great interest in you, and I'd like to know why.

"Well, he's . . . um." My mind went blank. I glanced at Ruchel, who couldn't help me at all because she had no idea what was being said.

She showed me her palms and shook her head.

In my long life, when I felt unsure how to respond, answering a question with a question often served me best to grant me more time. "My lord, Asher is your friend, but isn't he a traitor to all of the gods?"

His chuckle rumbled darkly in my ear. Well yes, but I love misfits and traitors the

very best. And if Asher is interested in you, then the Old One is interested in you. That fascinates Mara and me because the Old One is interested in . . . nothing. Ever.

I stammered out an incoherent response, and my stomach plummeted. Asher swore he wasn't a spy. I believed him, but I disliked the idea of him being bonded to Death even in reputation. What if his loyalties remained divided by his maker? What were weeks he'd known his coven compared to the centuries he'd known his god? "I take it you are aware of how I came to be a prisoner on the Schatten, my lord?"

Yes , he purred. A riveting tale.

"I believe that is the reason for their . . . curiosity."

I suspect there is more to it than that. There's always something more with them. If you and Asher were up to great mischief, you'd tell me, wouldn't you, pet? You wouldn't leave me out, I hope.

I recalled my first interaction with Nott, how Asher had cautioned him about me. I'd thought he was trying to poison the god against me, but I was now certain that he'd said those things to make sure Nott showed me favor. That was the clue I needed.

Play his game and keep him happy , Lisbeth's voice said in my ear.

My demeanor transformed. I attempted one of those wide, Otherworldly smiles. "If I told you what we were up to, it would ruin the surprise, my lord."

Ooooh, I love surprises. The messier, the better. Nott rose up onto his paws, and he prowled from one end of the branch to the other until the limb leaned low. He leapt down from it, landing soundlessly on the soil. My coven mates backed away from him, but I held my position as an act of respect.

“It’ll be messy,” I said.

When do I get to see this surprise? It can’t take too long. If it’s too long, I’ll get bored, he warned . He hit me with another feline grin full of too many teeth. Then he bounded closer, curling around me, rubbing his back against my legs in the way of cats. When I get bored, I get unpleasant. You don’t want me like that.

No, I most certainly did not want that. The skin of my arms pebbled. “How long is too long?”

His tail flicked up to curl around my shoulder and brush against my chin. He made me scratch behind his ears. Hm. Hard to say . . .

“Well then, I’ll . . . be quick.” I’d been trapped in the Otherworld for just over two weeks, and it felt like I’d been imprisoned for decades. Of course I’d move quickly.

Nott stepped in a wet patch of mud and fussed over his dirty paw. I need a nap , he said, yawning in my mind, and he slinked off, disappearing into the brush.

When he was out of sight, I let out the breath I’d been holding, and then I shared a warning with my coven that Nott was poking around about our escape plan. The uneasy silence that followed felt loud. They were all in their heads, blankly alarmed expressions plastered on their faces. I was in no better shape.

“Did Asher tell him?” Blue demanded. “I won’t deny that having a reaper join our coven has been useful, but we’d be fools if we assumed we could trust him implicitly. If the gods learn of what we’re attempting, the punishment would be . . . I don’t even want to think about what’s worse than the games.”

“I thought the same as you,” I told her. “But what else could he possibly be after if not an exit at this point? Hurting us hurts him too.”

Blue's chest heaved. "I don't know."

"That's just it," Ruchel said. "There's nothing worse any of them can do to us now. We're already stuck in the games."

Liesel interrupted the doom and gloom with a brilliant idea that made Ruchel hug her so hard around the neck that she coughed. We took the path away from the muck, closer to the flowing river. We gathered fallen logs and dragged branches with us. Emma and Liesel lashed them together with earth magic, molding the wood to their will with their connection to the element they shared. We built two rafts large enough to lie across, and we let the current carry us downstream.

No more hiking. No more mud sucking at every step. No more geysers spitting sulfur and surprise sinking sand, just a gentle glide downriver.

Blue spotted a collection of tomato vines growing wild by the bank. She sat up so suddenly she nearly caused her raft to capsize. Wood wobbling beneath her, she cheered as Emma and Liesel begged her to be still. Using her wand, she guided us to shore, commanding the water with her gift from Alwin.

The sisters stayed with the rafts to keep them from floating away. The rest of us accompanied Blue to fill our packs with as much fruit as we could carry. They were excellent for trading because they were highly valued as a traditional offering for the gods. They made a perfect addition to the midday meal, and the tomatoes were so juicy, they could help replenish some of the energies of both a water witch and a red.

Green vines crawled across the ground, dotted by the fat little fruits that were small enough to cup in my palm. I picked the tomatoes beside Ruchel but started when she jerked upward, eyes scanning the trees for trouble.

"What is it?" I asked her softly.

Nola dropped the tomato in her hand and readied her Crone blade. Blue shuffled in behind us, clutching her pack of tomatoes protectively.

“I don’t know,” Ruchel said, brow furrowed.

“Hello.” The voice came from a woman dressed in tattered white linen. She appeared between the trees as though she’d been there all along, hiding behind them. Her skin was ghostly pale, and her dark hair lay over her shoulders, lank and oily. Her feet were bare and filthy. Thick mud caked the bottom of her skirt. “Will you help me?”

I recognized her as a revenant—a Whitten woman, they were called in the Upper Realm—and my heart hurt for her. She was not the soulless sort who haunted the train, not a corpse animated by magic, but the sort with their soul, twisted and broken and trapped inside them still where only the god who’d made them could free them.

The dangerous sort.

“We’ll help you,” I told her softly.

Ruchel grabbed my arm and squeezed. “Maven, no,” she hissed in my ear. “I sense great danger from this woman.”

“Trust me,” I whispered. She was right about the danger but not about what would trigger it. “Show her your warmth, Ruchel.” Then I glanced behind me at Nola and Blue. “It’s probably best the two of you just don’t say anything at all.”

“You don’t want to help me?” the woman asked, her expression flat and her head at a tilt.

“Yes, we do,” I said with fervor, and I took a cautious step forward. “Would you like a tomato?”

The woman in white, once a dedicated follower of Fria until the god of frost stole her away, considered the fruit balanced in my palm. She ran her fingers through her lank hair and eyed my braid. “Will you help me?”

“With your hair? Yes,” I said, and I tucked away the fruit and extended my hand to her slowly, carefully, the way one might hold out a piece of food with great caution toward a prowling predator.

She took my hand, her touch as cold as the grave. Her lips were tinged in blue and purple like a bruise, and when she breathed, her breath fogged gently despite the humidity, evidence of the White One’s wickedness. I had to bite down on my lip to stop it from trembling.

Guilt crashed to the bottom of my gut like a stone. There was nothing I could do for this woman. Not really. I’d spent lifetimes trying to help revenants just like her when I was Fria. I was their goddess, and I couldn’t save them.

“We don’t have time for this,” Blue muttered.

Nola hushed her, throwing an elbow into her side.

We washed the woman’s hair in the river. Nola helped me lower her into the water. Blue fetched soap from the green sisters, and we used it until her dark hair shone, glossy and clean.

Ruchel spoke to the revenant kindly as she braided her hair, seated on the bank in the mud just behind her. I cleaned her feet and between her toes too, and she seemed to like that, though she didn’t speak. Her expression remained blank, but occasionally light lit her eyes with awareness as Ruchel shared about the history of the calendar, filling the quiet with a droning gentleness.

The woman stood then and plucked a white piece of thread from her linens. She twirled it in her pale hands a moment, then handed it to Nola with the hint of a smile. “For you.”

“Oh. Thank you?” Nola said, glancing at the revenant, a line deepening between her tawny brows.

The woman stepped behind the moss-covered trunk of the nearest oak tree and was gone.

“Leave now,” I said urgently, rushing back down the bank toward the rafts.

“I don’t sense danger any longer,” Ruchel said.

“Where there’s one revenant, there’s always more,” I cautioned. I jostled my satchel and sent tomatoes tumbling. Blue tried to pick them up.

“Don’t fuss with that! Leave now!” I crowed at her.

Blue grumbled but did as I bid her. We hurried onto the rafts and pushed off.

“Should I even bother asking how you knew that woman was a revenant?” Blue demanded.

I didn’t know how to answer her, so I said nothing.

“Figures,” Blue growled.

Nola lounged beside me, twirling the piece of white thread between her fingers. “She gave me thread?”

I stuck my fingers in the water to clean them as we glided downstream. “She did. Be glad she didn’t eat your face off.”

Nola shuddered. Revenants were dangerous beings who couldn’t be killed. They could be corralled, they could be calmed, but I could never make them who they once were. They hurt their families and had to be sent away, banished to the Otherworld with all the other unpredictable and dangerous beings.

Like me.

We made it through the trial and into the forested park not far from the clock tower in half of the time it would have taken us to navigate the blasted bog.

“Hide,” Ruchel breathed.

We abandoned the rafts, diving for cover amongst the greenery. In the hurry, my hand slid against a muddy trunk, and I smacked my face on a log. Nola ran into the back of me. We toppled under the foliage together. Nola pressed her palm over my mouth to silence my groan of pain, and I froze, my legs tangled around her longer ones.

The footsteps of the nearing creature rattled the ground under my cheek. Nola and I held our breath, waiting for the retreating thud, thud, thud to grow farther and farther away until my lungs burned, begging for release.

The creature stopped. I was tempted to peek out at the beast, to see the massive being that had threatened us inside this park since my first trial, but the desire to live cured me of my curiosity in an instant.

The creature began moving again, rustling the trees with its bulky body. The snap and boom of a trunk breaking in half and striking the ground put nightmare visions into

my mind of the creature's mass. A chill shot down my spine in spite of the humidity. Birds fled the trees. Smaller garm sprinted away, uninterested in us as a meal with the threat of death at their heels.

"We go in groups," Ruchel hissed. "We'll move more quietly that way and we won't be tripping over each other. Nola and Maven are our best fighters, so they'll need to travel separately. We meet at the clock tower."

Nola unsheathed the Crone blade from the holster at her hip, a leather one Emma had sewn for her.

"I'll go with the sisters," I whispered because I knew they wouldn't be parted from each other, and Nola would want to look after Ruchel. No beast in Hel was more fearsome than Nola when someone or something threatened Ruchel.

"Don't engage the creature, ducky. Not if you can help it. It's big and slow and blind. Better to run from it if you can. Fight only if you must," Nola lectured. She grabbed my face, palms flat over my ears, and touched her brow to mine. "And don't fucking die. You hear me? It's rude to die on me."

My heart squeezed. "I'll see you at the clock tower. Alive," I vowed.

They let us leave first. We stepped quietly through the trees. The noise of the beast was so loud in the distance it hid the smaller crackle of twigs and rustling greenery. I didn't breathe normally again until the trees parted and we were back at the columned buildings surrounding the clock tower.

Hanging from the library walls by the neck were five red-hooded warlocks. The dead dangled, arms limp, bodies swaying side-to-side in the breeze. They'd been lifeless for a while; the sour-sweet stench of rot was starting to carry.

It said something that no garm had gotten to them. The size of the Guardian coven had become insurmountable for even Hel-beasts here. They'd outgrown the maze. The street was packed tight with their dark uniforms.

Emma came to a halt, blue eyes taking in the dead. "It's starting again. Another battle of covens fighting over a throne no one can win. Why is there always a fool or two convinced they can become a god? Don't they know gods don't share power—they take it?"

"Hopefully," I said, "we get out of here before the streets are ripped apart by war." Hopefully they kept recruiting, kept killing each other in little bursts, buying us more time to escape.

A line had formed leading down into the tunnels of the clock tower. Guardians manned the archway. They stopped every prisoner attempting to enter, anyone not dressed in uniform, and took something from each of them, reaching inside bags and satchels at knifepoint and adding the goods to a growing pile.

The others caught up to us while we were debating how to best hide our favorite items to keep the Guardians from stealing them. Emma suggested we put something of worth on top, using it to hide what we wanted to keep at the bottom, to encourage them to grab the first and ignore the rest.

"If they try to take my Crone blade," Nola grumbled, nostrils flaring, "I'm going to start stabbing people."

I huffed a laugh, then moved out of arms reach, just in case. Nola had a reputation. Other prisoners shuffled out of her way too.

Blue, usually a woman insistent on not drawing attention to herself, booed the Guardians loudly. Blue had her own reputation, and the line of prisoners joined her,

jeering.

Talia and her earth coven were up ahead of us. They were so mud-splattered from the bog, I hadn't spotted them earlier. I counted them quickly, pleased that there were still nine members. None of them had died this trial. They'd lost two witches to garm earlier in the week.

Brick's group of red rogues were in the line ahead of the greens. They fussed at the guards as their belongings were searched.

I recognized the warlock in charge, tall and slender with light fawn skin and a new hexen finger bone relic pinned to his collar beside a green pendant. He headed up the group theft occurring under the archway.

Blue whispered briefly with Talia, then returned to us to share the news. "Commander Aiden of the Green is letting his recent promotion get to his head," she told us. "They're demanding a tax for the 'protection' they offer us all by killing garm."

The warlock commander called into the crowd, "Pay the tax to board the train or join the Guardians. Pay the tax to God King Alrick or join his army and keep your goods."

"Pay the thieves," Blue hollered back through her cupped hands, "or die in a war you don't want!" Her sunken cheeks went russet with the passion of her words.

The commander tugged on the sleeve of the Guardian at his elbow and pointed her out. "Take two items from that witch."

Blue returned the gesture with one of her own, raising both of her middle fingers at him.

I like this witch who's causing a stir , Nott purred in my ear. I searched the crowd behind me for him but didn't immediately spot him.

A brewing commotion at the end of the line rose to a crescendo, prisoners and guardians alike scattering to make way for the God of Night and Mischief in his black cat form. He prowled toward me, smiling in a manner that was Otherworldly and almost too human, too expressive, with his lips pulling back over jagged teeth.

My coven started to part to make way as well, but I waved them down. In the old days, fleeing in such a fashion or putting your back to another was offensive, a sign of disrespect. It was possible the custom hadn't reached the Otherworld, but I wouldn't risk it.

"My lord," I greeted. "I wonder what you think of these mere mortals gathering tributes for themselves instead of offering them to you?"

The Guardians at the gate seemed unmoved by Nott's nearness. They shouted for the line to press on.

They're scum , he hissed. But Alrick has forbidden me from interfering in his son's attempt to claim the crow throne and start the games.

I couldn't have heard him correctly. My next effort to speak spluttered out of me. "His son?" I said, my attention drifting to the library, the towering stone building hiding Bram inside it somewhere. "Bram is going to start the games for the god king?"

The high warlock was aligned with the king in more than just ambition. Alrick had sired him. Alrick, who remained top of my list of gods who had the most to lose from a gray witch gone rogue . . . I'd already put together that Bram hadn't been visiting my shop just to deliver coal or to flirt. He'd come as a spy for his divine father.

Had he told Alrick who he'd found hiding in the little hat shop in Kosh? Is that why Lisbeth was dead?

And why had I been spared?

I don't like to talk politics, pet , Nott said, yawning inside my head. Politics bore me. Tell me something interesting. Tell me about this lovely witch with the silver in her hair and the starlight in her gaze and the lines of great wisdom on her face. She's glorious.

"Nott favors you," I told Blue to soothe her. Her shoulders had gone taut as a drawn bowstring when he stalked near.

Her flinty eyes shot wide as the great panther circled her, rubbing his neck against her hip, demanding pets. Tentatively, she patted the top of his head, and he purred loudly.

"There isn't much I can tell you about her," I said. "Blue doesn't like to share her name with anyone."

How intriguing , Nott cooed. Tell her to climb onto my back. The scum wouldn't dare collect a tax from her up there. They aren't complete fools. They won't come near me.

"Wouldn't you like to tell her yourself, my lord?"

That would be pretentious, pushing my way into her head like that. No. My servant will tell her for me.

I shared Nott's wishes, and Blue's eyes only grew. Her throat bobbed. A devout witch, she did as she was bid, tucking her satchel against her side and climbing astride.

He carried her through the archway, past the line of thieving Guardians who wisely kept their hands to themselves. We followed close behind. The uniformed coven didn't touch any of our things either. Not even the commander dared.

Nola didn't have to stab anyone.

Nott came to a halt farther down the descending tunnels. Now tell her to get off. I'm not a pack mule.

"He would like you to climb down," I said, but Blue had already jumped off before I finished the sentence.

Come along now, pet. Leave the other witches behind.

"Hurry to the platform," I told them. "I'll meet you on the train."

Nott padded along at a brisk pace, past where the tunnels forked. It's tedious walking with you. You're much too slow.

"I apologize for my mortal deficiencies, my lord," I said breathlessly. I had to jog to keep up with him.

The stone around us was damp. Images of the broken crow decorated the walls, the wing Alrick ordered Death to tear free raining down its feathers to form reapers.

Nott came to a stop so suddenly I bumped into his hindquarters. He swatted me with his tail. Climb on, pet.

"But I thought you weren't a pack mule, my lord?"

Nott hissed at me.

My lips twitched as I slid onto his back. I clung to him with my thighs, hands buried in his glossy fur. He bounded ahead. When I screamed in fright, certain I'd be tossed from his back, Nott cackled.

The throne room was littered with balls of yarn. They touched every surface except for the great crow throne made of bone. I climbed down off his back onto legs that felt like rubber.

Nott charged through the yarn, swatting at the brightly colored red and blue balls and ignoring the earth-toned ones. You weren't very forthcoming with me earlier, pet, so I made Asher tell me what you're up to.

"He . . . what?" My heart took off, worry hardening my gut, but I'd made the mistake of doubting Asher before. I didn't want to do it again. We were . . . friends. I pushed my anxieties aside. He wanted out of here as much as we all did.

He's convinced me to help you.

I blinked down at the mad god. "That's . . . In what way, my lord?"

Nott rolled onto his back, swatting balls of yarn into the air until the colorful threads covered him, the dyed strands stark against his inky fur. You require a sigil, one cast by a god. Or have I been misinformed?

My jaw went slack.

Say something , Lisbeth's voice shouted at me, knocking me out of my shock.

"My lord, were you to grant me such an honor, I would make great mischief in your name," I said, running a finger across my chest, the gesture of an earnest vow. "I would rip a hole in the Otherworld and tear the games asunder. Think of how

outraged the gods would be. Picture the chaos, the panic, the mess . . .”

His laughter was pure villainy, silky and soft in my ears and as threatening as a knife to the throat . . . even tangled in yarn as he was.

And all you’ve got to do for me in return is kill my sister.

My mouth fell open, but no words spilled out. They caught on my tongue and tangled there. “Your . . . You wish for me to murder Mara, the Lady of Nightmares?”

Well, yes. If you’d like my sigil so that you can rain down your messy chaos, you’ll have to do this first. Mara is fussy about her devotion to Alrick. She likes the king’s order and won’t let me help you, my pet. He sighed. She’s becoming more and more like our mother every day. Such a disappointment.

“But . . . can’t you stop her?”

I can’t kill her. I love her.

“No! Some other way. Any other way!” Even the suggestion of it made my blood boil.

Afraid not. We’re twins. Mara can hop into my mind and see my plans any time she likes. With my sigil fueling you, you should have no problem ripping her soul clean out and swallowing her whole. In fact, why don’t we pop over to Hel right now and—

“No! I . . .” Speech abandoned me. Hot angry air blew from my nostrils. “I wasn’t suggesting we kill her. In fact . . .”

Lisbeth’s voice was back in my head. Careful of your tone, love.

My hands formed fists. I didn't want to be careful. I'd had enough of these god games built on little slights that had hurt someone's divine ego. My lips trembled from the effort of stopping myself from shouting. Gray magic stuttered in my chest.

"I am the wrong person for this task," I said, warning dripping from every syllable. My fingers had gone gray. "Possibly the worst person in all the Otherworld you could have asked to accomplish such a wicked thing."

He chewed at the yarn. Colorful red strands hung between his teeth like the intestines of his last kill. But I love wicked things. Why can't you do it?

"I would give anything for my sister to still be alive. I'm not taking yours from you," I bit out.

Spoilsport.

"I won't kill your sister, God of Night and Mischief. Not ever. And I'm deeply offended that you would ask it of me."

Now you're just boring me, pet. I should eat you up for that. A growl rumbled out of him, and he bared his frightful teeth.

My mind whirled. I should have apologized, begged him not to murder me. I should have pleaded for our plan, insisted a different arrangement could be made.

Instead, I picked up a bright little ball of yarn, this one yellow, and I heaved it toward the corner of the throne room. It bounced against the pavers.

He sprung to his paws and bounded after it, and any insult was immediately forgotten.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“The God of the Sea didn’t see fit to fashion a proper spirit for the giants. He animated them with a half-soul easily turned to wickedness.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

After the feast that night, we gathered as a coven in the lounge car. I took my sister’s pretty pocket pistol apart and wished I had a more efficient way to help renew my spirit. Movement in the shadows caught my peripheral view, and the scent of earthy leather and woodsy cedar filled my nose. I closed my eyes, relieved.

“Asher,” I whispered.

He was there a moment later, filling up the chair across from me, perfectly groomed, not a single snowy hair out of place. He set to putting the mess of pistol parts to rights, neatly ordering them.

“Trouble,” he greeted.

“Traitor,” I said fondly.

I was glad to see him, and it could have been my imagination, but the way his magic enthusiastically reached for me had me thinking that just maybe he was equally pleased. And that made me feel . . . things I’d rather not dwell on.

“News on Bram?” Ruchel demanded, lowering her book written by the first air coven. “His rotten tax at the clock tower is going to start off another war that will get us all killed.”

“Bram is not in the Otherworld currently,” he said. “I’ve been searching for him for days, and I’m certain of it. But it wasn’t all for nothing. I caught a conversation between his favorite lieutenants. The god king sent him to the Upper Realm on a mission. It’s unclear when he’ll return. When he comes back, he’s expected to have a massive number of new recruits with him, all sworn to him and Alrick. They’re hoping to overwhelm the red-hooded fools en masse.”

If Bram was the son of the god king, that put Alrick very high on the list of divine suspects responsible for Lisbeth’s death. Although, that would also put any god wanting to interfere with Alrick’s plotting to have his son on the crow throne high as well. I sighed. I needed to talk to Bram again, but with his abilities, I wasn’t certain how wise that was.

Darkness crept across the windows, the temperature dropped, lights flickered, and the lounge emptied.

“Is the Old One feeling curious again?” I asked, holding my ground out of defiance more than respect.

“No,” he said, his lip tugging up at the corner into a crooked grin that had no right to be so pretty. “That was me. I wanted to talk to you alone for a moment.”

Then he went quiet, staring at me in that way that made me feel seen through. Muscles low in my belly quivered.

The weight of his gaze pulled me from my project. I sat the frame of the pistol down. “What are you doing?”

“I got distracted trying to decide whether your eyes are brown or hazel.”

My stomach swooped. “What the devil for?”

“I don’t know.” A furrow deepened between his brows. “Seemed like an excellent use of my time.”

“No,” I said. Briefly my mind went blank before I settled on glaring at him. “You are not flirting with me.”

“Is that an observation or a command?”

“Both,” I ground out.

He raised an ashen brow at me. “Why am I not allowed to flirt with you?”

“Because . . . Because I . . .” I expected the words to come to me easily, but there I was, gaping like a suffocating fish. He was making me think of all those thoughts I’d rather not dwell on.

His grin grew, and my face heated.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes, granting myself a reprieve from the bottomless black gaze that had distracted me from sense. I shook my head until something sprang loose. “It’s self-preservation, of course. How many times have you plotted my demise? How many times have I thought about yours?”

His lips quirked. “You thought about me?”

Speech failed me for the second time that day. I should have just given up, but we had much to discuss. He’d been gone ages, it felt like. I picked up the frame of the pocket pistol and momentarily forgot how to put it back together.

What was he doing trying to flirt with me? Now I couldn’t remember important things like plotting and escape and . . . the names and order of pistol parts . . .

“Nott came to see me,” I said, a burst of intelligence blossoming briefly between my ears amidst the mess he’d created. “He wanted me to kill his sister in exchange for use of his sigil. Whatever you said to him, you probably shouldn’t have. I told him no unequivocally.”

Asher rubbed the space between his eyes. “I’ve known Nott a very long time. Put him out of your mind, and I’ll deal with him.”

Put him out of my mind? He said that so casually, like the act was simple. There were a great many things I would have liked to put out of my mind at that moment. Like flirting. And the scent of him, and his smoky voice curling around me. And eye colors.

And his knee which bumped mine under the table and then just rested there.

Did he like my eyes? Is that what he was saying?

“Are my eyes brown or hazel?” I echoed, and then I scoffed. “Aren’t you supposed to be a poet? You’re always writing verses. Surely you could do better than that.”

The creases at the corners of his eyes crinkled. “You’re flirting back now.”

“I . . . Not on purpose.” My lashes lowered. I pressed my lips together, fighting back a smile and losing.

Maybe it was a little on purpose. I don’t know. I was greatly out of practice with such things.

Another burst of intelligence came to me. I scooted to the edge of my seat. Now both of my knees were touching his . . . and I didn’t dislike it. “I need you to let me read your poems.”

He snorted.

“I’m serious,” I told him. “Replenishing my energy is . . . complicated. I need to recuperate, and I need to do it sooner rather than later. Especially after that visit from Nott.”

“He’s just having fun with you. Don’t let him get in your head. I still think we can convince Nott to help us, no sororicide necessary. He has no allegiance to any god but himself. He’s our best bet.”

“Then we still have the problem of my energy. I haven’t read verses in Friar in ages,” I said, and he squirmed in his seat. “Let me read something of yours. It would be a tremendous help.”

He pushed a hand through his hair sheepishly. “Not if you don’t like them, it won’t.”

“How long have you been writing? Centuries, at least? Surely you’ve some talent after all this time.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “If I let you, are you going to keep flirting with me?”

“I . . .” My mind stuttered to a standstill. “I don’t know?” The statement came out sounding like a foolish question.

His smile grew into something sly and wolfish. I had to squeeze my eyes shut for a second. The backs of my lids were safer to look at than his celestial face when it was being smug.

“I let you see inside my mind,” I rumbled. “Why can’t I get a peek inside yours?”

That got him. He pulled a journal out of his shadows, something older and more

battered than the one he usually wrote in. He handed it to me. When I tried to grab it, he hung on to his end. “If it doesn’t work for you . . . if you don’t like them, I’d rather not hear the details of it.”

“The bullet I shot into your chest is fine,” I teased, “but you can’t handle me criticizing your writing?”

“Exactly,” he said, and his grin went crooked.

My thumb grazed against his over the leather of the case, a gentle reassurance, and he released his journal into my care.

\* \* \*

That night, I found Emma waiting for me in my cabin.

“Can I help you?” I asked her as I slid my compartment door shut behind me.

Emma rubbed her hands down her arms, one leg crossed over the other. Her foot bobbed impatiently. “I need you to promise me something.”

“I’ll try,” I said cautiously.

“I can hear you lot whispering sometimes. I don’t have all the details, but I know you’re up to something.”

“Emma, if you think we mean you or Liesel harm—”

“I don’t think that,” she said, crossing her arms over her middle. “If I did, we’d have left you for another coven already. The Guardians are recruiting everyone who will listen, you know?”

“I know.”

“And as far as I’m concerned, you and that Bram warlock, well, you’re just the same as—”

“We’re not the same,” I bit out. “I’m not some handpicked puppet of a god who wants yet another throne all for himself. When I speak, you never have to wonder whether every convincing word out of my mouth is the truth or mind magic.”

Emma lowered her chin, a gentle acquiescence. “Similar, then, only he admits what he is, at least. But you and the others, you hoard secrets like a mole hoards worms for winter.”

Maybe now was finally the time to put the truth out there and see what Emma did with it. I scooted closer to her, boots shuffling along the bone floor. Sometimes at night when I couldn’t fall asleep, I’d rehearse what to say should this situation finally present itself. “Look, Emma, I . . .”

She raised her hand, and I fell silent. “Hoard your secrets, if you want. Just promise me I’m not making the wrong choice keeping this blood vow you forced on all of us. I don’t much care what happens to me. I know I earned my place in the games. But my sister didn’t. Promise me, Maven, come what may, you’ll get Liesel out of the Otherworld.”

I met her gaze head-on, and an icy shade of determined blue lit her irises.

“I promise,” I whispered, and immediately I regretted it, because when had I ever successfully saved anyone? And I hoped to the Crone herself that I wasn’t lying. That’s what I wanted for all of us. Freedom. And the guilty god dead.

Emma got up and left without another word.

From the comfort of my bed, I readied Asher's journal and began to read. It took a moment for me to get back into the flow of the language my first coven had made in my name. Soon I was sailing along, inhaling Asher's words.

The patient poet was talented. His centuries of careful practice hadn't been wasted. The rapture he expressed toward life, his verses about creation, and his devotion to the craft of words left me breathless. At one point I just lay on my mattress, the journal open to the page I'd devoured twice resting over my heart, trying to absorb it all straight into my soul.

I read late into the night by a dimmed gaslight, renewing my spirit with every line.

The first time Asher knocked at the wall between our beds, I ignored him, too distracted by a poem about the stars and how they talked to each other. The second time, he was more incessant, and I knocked back.

"If you don't say anything," Asher grumbled into the vent, "then my mind will convince me you hate them all."

"Your mind is not very nice." Lying on my back, I grinned up at the ceiling. "But you told me not to say anything."

"I told you not to say anything critical . If you've anything nice to say . . . well, that I'd prefer you shouted." I could hear his smile in his voice.

"I'm not going to shout. People are sleeping."

He sighed. "Fair enough . . . I'll just . . . wait. Impatiently."

I bit my lip, letting the quiet drag on, tormenting him a little for fishing. There was no way he didn't know how talented he was. He would have to be the most obtuse reaper

who ever reaped to be oblivious to such skill.

“It’s brilliant,” I admitted. “You’re brilliant. And it’s working. My spirit has never been higher. I feel like I could win in a footrace against a two-headed wolf-garm. I couldn’t—don’t ask me to try it—but it feels like I could.”

His shadows poured through the vent in a rapid rush, like steam bursting from a pipe. His sudden appearance knocked a chuckle out of me. He stood in my bedroom, stoic and still as usual. The only evidence of his pleasure was his mouth in a droll twist, but his magic gave him away. It pranced and danced and billowed between us.

“Your poems about the little girl,” I said, “the one with missing front teeth who made you play hide and seek in the back of the Schatten . . .” My throat went tight, and I had to clear it. “Those were my favorite.”

“Her smile made me feel like royalty,” he said, staring off, remembering her. “I’d have given her anything she wanted from that moment on. Absolutely anything. All she had to do was ask, but all she wanted was sweets and for me to tell her silly jokes until the train reached the end of the line.”

I hadn’t felt this renewed since Lisbeth was taken from me. Grateful, I gushed at him some more until a flush darkened his cheeks, his smile coy.

“I saw every thought in your head, and I liked them,” he said, and I caught myself reaching for the tendrils of his magic, encouraging them to twine around my hand, between my fingers. “You’re right. It’s only fair you get to have all of mine now too.”

He lined the back wall with his old journals, plucking them one at a time from his shadows and stacking them in neat rows like bricks. Thousands of years of thoughts and verses, all for me.

The intimacy of that, knowing every thought . . . The rush of the games didn't allow for much pondering. Quiet moments were too few and far between, but it struck me then as remarkable that Asher now knew me better than anyone else in all the realms.

Even better than Lisbeth had.

My wicked thoughts had been on display beside the decent ones, pleasant memories and devastating tragedies all in a row for him to peruse . . . and all that knowledge had inspired him to flirt with me. The notion raised my spirits to bursting.

I tried to usher him out of my compartment after that, returning my attention to his journal. But he interrupted my reading, moving his body so close, his shadow fell over me.

I looked up at him and my heart squeezed. His gaze was soft and fixed on my face. "I'm usually a very patient man. There's no reason to hurry because everything will come in its time. I pride myself on that," he said, his voice in a low timbre that curled through me pleasantly. His magic did the same, coiling gently around my finger where it held my place on the page.

"I've noticed that about you," I whispered, throat suddenly dry.

"But lately . . ." he murmured, and I felt the tension in his pause as a tightening in my belly. "I'm not as patient. You make me impatient, Trouble."

I swallowed. "Impatient about your poems, you mean?" I asked, and I don't know why I bothered. I didn't believe for a second he was talking about his poems. Clearly, he was talking about . . . me? Oh no. Now he even had me thinking statements as foolish questions.

"Yes," he drawled. His grin was as sarcastic as his tone. "Yes, I mean . . . my poems.

But don't worry about it, Trouble. I'll keep waiting."

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“When Alrick ordered Death to tear himself in two, it wasn’t a punishment. The god king wished for the oldest amongst them to have a companion who suited him.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

I survived another week.

It was a blessing that Asher’s poems made me feel like I could win a footrace, because the sixth trial was all about speed. The Schatten delivered us to the platform. Salty air filled my nose. Sea water battered the thin strip of isthmus, and hundreds of hungry yellow eyes lined the shores, waiting for the clock tower to chime and the gates to part.

All I carried on my person was my weapons and my water sack. The rest of my coven was outfitted similarly. I checked my revolver, sliding open the cylinder. Only three rounds left . . .

The number of prisoners on the platform had dropped by half in the last week. The efforts of the red hoods and the Guardians to recruit from them had been very effective. New prisoners were dropped into the Schatten every day, and still numbers were down.

The clock chimed. The gates parted. The race commenced.

We sprinted for our lives, Nola at the front with her Crone blade and me at the rear, ready to put a gray bullet in the face of any water devil who threatened my coven.

The devils were hungry today, and the pickings were slim. We got caught in a crowd

of them right at the start. I had to put down two devils with the revolver before we'd even cleared the gates. Nola was a force of nature, though, swinging that bone dagger in a deadly arc that felled two more. And we were off again.

One bullet left.

My boots filled with sand, adding weight to every step. Halfway down the isthmus, Nola pulled too far ahead of the group. Three water devils circled her. Ruchel shouted out a warning.

I fired my last bullet, dropping the garm at her back. Talia's coven sprinted ahead of us, and the garm eyed them from the cusp of the shore but didn't leave the water. They waited until we were near before springing.

Blue flourished her forked wand and cast up a swell of sea water, sweeping away the next attack.

"Are they after us?" Ruchel hissed, too breathless to shout.

It certainly felt that way. We made it off the sand and into the forested park. We were deep in the trees before the devils halted their pursuit. They'd never come so far before. We stopped to catch our breath at the brackish pool we loved to fish in, our little patch of paradise. We took turns bathing under the waterfall, watching for more garm, but none came.

They'd finally had enough of us.

"Maybe it just felt like we were being targeted," Nola offered, running her fingers through her short damp hair, shaking the water out of it.

"There's so few of us now," Blue said, drying her face on the terrycloth we'd left

hanging in the citrus trees for our return. “It doesn’t make sense that they’d pass up the chance at a meal just to pick on us.”

“If it even is possible,” Nola asked, “who could make garm behave that way? Unger?”

“Unger fashioned the devils,” Blue offered, “but he shows about as much interest in them now as he does the giants. The sea god has no stakes in the games that I’m aware of. I haven’t seen him once in the throne room of Wulfram since I was sentenced here years ago.”

“He’s neglectful, you mean,” Nola prodded, “like all the gods are.”

Blue rolled her eyes but made no comment.

“A god-born mind warlock could make the garm behave that way,” I muttered. I pressed my face into the terrycloth and breathed in the tart scent balmy air and citrus had left behind.

“You’re all paranoid,” Ruchel said, joining us under the tree. Then she sighed. “But so am I.”

I helped the sisters repack their soaps, wrapping them in brown paper. We hid most of them under stones that we kept near the trunk of the citrus trees. Blue used her sway with the water to catch fish easily.

Nola stuffed the mouths of the peacock bass with sliced citrus, and Emma roasted them on a spit over a fire lit with red magic. I helped Ruchel hunt for wild greens and pick tomatoes from a vine that grew farther down the basin. We gathered colorful mushrooms—another god experiment abandoned here—and made a salad topped in sliced tomatoes, shredded edible roots, and oil we squeezed from the vibrant fungi.

I ate roasted fish and salad until my gut was heavy and happy and my hair had dried.

“Hide,” Ruchel shouted, and paradise was over. The trial had begun again.

We were no strangers to the massive blind beast that haunted the park. Some trials, we never came across him at all. Others, he lumbered by, and we were able to sneak around him. But the beast was in a mood today.

He threw his weight about, crashing into trees. We broke into our groups of three. The sisters followed closely at my back. We headed in the direction of the black lake before cutting down a path that would take us out of the park. I didn’t have a bullet left, but I’d use my gray to keep us alive if it came to that. I’d deal with the ramifications and explanations later. The others had separated from us to take the opposite path. We’d meet on the train later.

The sisters and I went to ground when the garm came too close, hiding in the brush, and I saw him clearly for the first time as I peered between the saplings and the knotted overgrowth, my breath trapped in my lungs so he wouldn’t hear every panicked puff.

The creature was as big as the giants who dominated the desert, and resembled a bear covered in black fur. His hands were eerily human, with long dark claws. The reddish mane of a lion circled his neck. His ears were furry and pointed like a bat’s, and tall bracketed horns sprouted from the dome of his shaggy head.

The shredded remains of a red hood and a black uniform dangled from his broad mouth, both dripping blood, and I understood now what had enraged him. The beast had been caught in a skirmish between the covens.

Someone had put out the creature’s eyes. Puckered scar tissue had healed poorly over what remained of his lids. A spear had been shoved into his side, his flesh and fur

long grown over it. He huffed out a breath that lit the air with the scent of sulfur, and he charged on all fours, in a rage.

An oak tree came smashing down, narrowly missing me. Its branches scraped my side and scratched my face, and I threw myself out of the way of crashing limbs.

Emma let out a whimper that pierced my heart, a pitiful sound that caught in my chest like a thrown dart.

Was she all right? The fall had knocked the air out of me, and there were branches everywhere. I couldn't find her and was afraid to call out. We didn't need the creature coming after us next.

I shoved limbs aside and found her standing and whole, thank the Crone.

"Emma?" I whispered.

Where was Liesel?

I reached for Emma, but she shoved me off.

Then I saw her sister at our feet, the pale, slender arm sticking out from the heavy trunk, the only part of poor Liesel not crushed beneath it.

No, no, no, no, no. She couldn't be gone. Not like that, not so quickly. My stomach plummeted.

Emma let out a choking sob.

I leapt to her side and grabbed her up in my arms. "Don't make a sound," I begged, covering her mouth with my hand.

Jaw slack, Emma stared down at the ashen hand, blue eyes welling, that limp arm, still reaching for her sister in her final moments. Emma pushed me off, then threw her body against the trunk, grunting with the effort of trying to move it.

It didn't budge.

There was no chance Liesel had survived that, but when I tried to draw Emma away, she took a swing at me. I helped her instead, shoving with all my might at the great fallen tree. The beast wreaked havoc in the distance, felling more forest, sending smaller garm fleeing, taking his rage out on all that happened into his path.

Tears welled in my eyes, spilling over as we pushed and shoved. I lowered my shoulder and heaved with everything I had.

Emma pulled her sigil out of her satchel, the one of the bear etched into a block of pale ash wood. She squeezed it in her palm, and the wood bent to her will. It glittered green. The magic released.

Her eyes, red-rimmed, went vibrant as emeralds. She used the strength of a bear and her connection to the earth to roll the trunk off Liesel.

Was this really happening? My mind was a sluggish thing, refusing to catch up with the rest of me.

Liesel couldn't truly be gone.

Lisbeth couldn't really be gone.

Emma fell to her knees and wept.

I stood over her, powerless to help, crying my own useless tears for my sister. It

might as well have been Lisbeth's broken body clutched in her arms, limp and lifeless.

The beast was circling back.

"We have to go," I told her. "I'll help you carry her."

"No," Emma said. She set her sister down and kissed her forehead, tears dripping off her chin.

"We can't stay," I whispered. The beast was closing in now.

"You go," she said, voice hollow, eyes blank.

I didn't go. I didn't move. She rose to her feet, found a long limb she liked, and broke it off from the oak tree that had claimed her sister. With her connection to the earth, she fashioned it into a sharp spear as tall as she was, the wood glittering green and bending to her spell.

Fueled by the sorrow I saw mirrored in Emma, fueled by the loss of my coven sister and the grief trying to burn a hole through my chest, my spirit boiled within me. I called it to my hands, let it turn them gray, let little tendrils of spirit seep from my fingertips in foggy wisps.

We would be the beast's retribution together. Emma looked ready to murder the world.

When the creature came charging, we didn't back down. A surge of gray took the brunt of his strike, knocking the beast off his path, sending him sideways into a collection of spruce trees. Emma kept on him, stabbing at his belly, swinging for the bear-like face with her unnatural strength.

He reared up onto his hind legs. I leapt for the beast, reaching into his knee joint. He was so tall standing, his knee was as high as I could get. I tore at tendon and tissue. He roared and fell, landing with a crash that shook the earth and sent me sprawling onto the forest floor. I cut my palm open on a rock and sliced my brow against a branch. Pain, sharp and stinging, left me hissing for breath.

I surged back to my feet, battered and shaken, looking for my next opening.

Emma stabbed the beast in his snout. He swiped at her with his devastating claws, tearing into her front, but Emma kept standing. I dove toward the beast's belly and shoved my hands inside.

Her next strike went straight through the creature's blind eye. The beast fell silent. He thrashed once and died, his spirit gone from his body before I could grab hold of it. Emma collapsed. A scream ripped from my throat, one sure to bring the forest full of garm after us.

I climbed over the creature's carcass and found Emma in a heap on the ground. Her eyes were open and wild, her torn clothing soaked through with her own blood.

"Take me to her," she begged.

"I shouldn't move you," I said. I didn't know where to begin to help her, pressing my palms high on her chest and low on her belly where the bleeding seemed worse, but more crimson rivulets dripped from her clothing.

She coughed her life force into my face, her complexion turning pallid. Her teeth were pink with blood. "Take me to Liesel," she rasped.

I lifted her under her arms and dragged her to her sister. Liesel wasn't far. I placed her sister's hand in hers.

“I got him,” Emma told her. I got him , she mouthed the words. And then her head tipped back and her mouth fell open. The light left her eyes.

I knew not what to do for them. Eyes burning and blurry, I gathered stones and heavy limbs and covered them as best I could. It was fortunate no garm came to disturb me after that. I would have ripped their soul out of their chest and eaten it, evil or not. In that moment, I was ready to be wicked.

I wanted to burn down the Otherworld and everyone in it.

But I was alone here.

Just as quickly as the thought came to me, my strength left me and I sagged. “I’m so sorry, Emma . . .”

I never should have made a promise to her. A part of me had always known it was empty words.

My knees threatened to buckle as I carried myself through the trees, back toward the black lake. By the time I reached its rocky shore, Emma’s blood had dried under my nails and between the cracks of my palms.

I was tired to the bone. The sort of tired that pierced the soul and sapped me of spirit.

I dropped to my knees by the water’s edge. Burying my arms up to the elbows, I washed Emma’s blood away. Crimson rivulets swirled in the water, sure to summon a hungry water devil to me soon.

Every inch of me ached, and no muscle was more sore than my battered heart. I sprawled on my back, ignoring the rocks that dug into my spine.

I just needed a moment. Needed to breathe and stare at the clouds overhead and think of nothing that could hurt me. I lacked the energy to summon my mental mortar and pestle.

Swooshing in the water drew my eyes to the lake, and I let out a curse. A small whirlpool sent bubbles cascading toward the surface. I pulled myself upright, readying to face another devil.

If a garm tried to eat me, I was ready to eat it first. What did it matter? I was already a villain. I might as well act like one.

But the creature that burst forth from the dark water was no simple devil.

A great water serpent leapt into the air, rising up on its long neck. Its face resembled that of a dragon with blue armored scales, and a crown of horns jutted from its wide head. Its body kept coming, kept rising up and up out of the water until I thought it might touch the sky and keep going. Then it stopped and lowered its reptilian chin. A forked tongue licked at the air. Big yellow eyes sharpened on me.

“Damn it all,” I whispered, arms and legs frozen in fright.

A low hiss was my final warning that it was about to strike. Its mouth dropped open, revealing fangs bigger than spears. It hurtled toward me, and I knew in my bones these moments would be my last. I covered my face with my arms, waiting for the inevitable strike I didn’t have the energy or the might to defend against.

I couldn’t save anyone. Not even myself.

And then . . . nothing. Somehow, I wasn’t dead yet. Slowly, I dropped my arms.

Darkness had fallen over me like a cold, inky blanket, blotting out the sky above and

the forest all around, and for a split second I thought I had died and a reaper had come to collect me. But the water serpent was still there. It had retreated, neck coiled, ready to attempt a second strike. Shadows billowed above me, then the reaper flew forward, wraith-like wings spread to resemble a massive crow.

The reaper struck the serpent in the head, and both crashed down into the water together, sending up a wall of cold spray. The wave soaked me through, and I gasped. I sat forward, heart leaping in my chest. But all I could see on the surface was rippling waves and bubbling foam.

The serpent's head reappeared. It let out a shriek and attempted to dive away, but a force below dragged its struggling mass back under the water.

"Asher!" I shouted. Waves lapped at my legs.

Blood rose to coat the bubbling foam in crimson.

The serpent floated to the surface, dead on its back, its forked tongue hanging from its mouth. My heart thudded against the cage of my ribs, and my breath caught, waiting for more bubbles to surface, for shadows to rise, for some sign of life . . .

Then Asher appeared. He walked out of the lake, cloaked in night and dripping. He sat down hard beside me and collapsed onto his back, arms spread and chest heaving.

I leaned on my elbow beside him, still gathering my own breath. I didn't have the wind for words, and even if I had, I wouldn't have known what to say. I touched his hand instead, my thumb skimming along his, freckled and sandy beside his smooth and fair flesh, his hand icy cold from the black water. He smelled like silt and wet leather.

I hoped he felt my gratitude in every subtle touch.

My hand rested there beside his. “Is it dead?” I asked finally, shattering the silence.

“It’s definitely dead,” he rasped.

“You don’t kill.” It wasn’t an admonishment. I was glad I hadn’t been made into the serpent’s meal, just surprised. He’d always been so adamant on that point.

“I don’t kill,” he said, and his eyes met mine, black and bottomless and a little lost. “I felt the sisters die, and I was afraid. I don’t like the way fear tastes, Maven. It’s a horrid emotion and one I’m completely unfamiliar with. I had to come and find you. I had to stop them from taking you next . . .”

I squeezed his hand. It must have been a terrible fright, thinking he was about to lose his one and only chance at freedom. And hopefully he considered me as a friend now too—I suspected he did. I didn’t want to be the only one going all soft and squishy for the other.

“I’m grateful,” I whispered. “And I’m fine. Now catch your breath.”

I was more than grateful. My eyes took in the floating carcass of the serpent one last time, awestruck by its size and the implications.

His chest filled, then he climbed to his feet, his gaze narrowing on the floating monster, its pale belly dominating the shore. More and more of its length rose to the surface. It was so massive I couldn’t make sense of how it had ever fit in the lake at all.

“Get back to the train,” he said, expression as placid as the calming waters.

“Aren’t you coming?” I didn’t want to be where he wasn’t just then. If it wouldn’t have made me look like a scared fool, I’d have wrapped myself in his shadows like

they were a security blanket.

“I have to get rid of this water guardian before Unger realizes what I’ve done. He’s already harassing the train with his giants. This will push him over the edge and kick off the games before anyone wants it. The reapers and I have been trying to slow the gods down, stop them from full-on attacking each other. Unger favors guardians. A dead one will undermine all of that,” he said, and though he remained stoic, his shadows moved in panicked waves, jerking this way and that. I hesitated, too many questions overcrowding my mind. “Go,” he urged.

I was on my feet seconds later, rushing back through the trees. If he said I should go, then I should go. I couldn’t trust my own thoughts just then. Intrusive feelings more complicated than gratitude blossomed there beside my heart, things I couldn’t parse or make sense of. Feelings that only made me even more tired and confused.

When I reached the clock tower, my socks had dried in my boots and my hair no longer dripped. The Guardian force had doubled, and some of my rage had dried up and gone hollow. The energy to feel anything but exhaustion had been sapped from me by heat and grief, feet that ached, muscles that had gone rubbery, and the shock of almost dying again and again. I was overly aware of every noise and sudden movement.

A witch I recognized from the train waved at me, and I nearly pulled my revolver on her. Every columned building was full of uniformed soldiers, the same warring bastards who’d angered the beast and caused Liesel’s death with their nonsense fighting. A bustling market lined the pavers, one growing even more elaborate than the market within the maze.

I pushed through the crowd and ignored the line, eager to be far away from them all.

“That’s her.” The voice belonged to the green warlock I’d once held a knife to, the

new commander.

Two bulky Guardians headed me off, forcing me to the side of the clock tower. They patted me down. I was not cooperative. I threatened to rip their faces off and eat their tongues. Sparks of gray leaked from my fingertips, but these warlocks didn't know magic as intimately as I did. They wouldn't see it.

They shoved my cheek against the stone and made me bite my lip. When I fought back, they dragged me to the dirt, pinned me there, and stole my boots.

"Give them back!" I reached for the right one, the one hiding Lisbeth's pistol, the only thing I had left of her.

Commander Aiden the Green fished inside the fur lining and pulled the pocket pistol out. It looked small in his larger hand. "Right where he said it would be."

The guardians that held me down chuckled.

The commander shook the pistol in my face. "The high warlock says if you want this back, you have to come and ask him for it."

Bram had returned to the Otherworld. That explained the surge of new bodies.

"You tell Bram he does not want me to come for him. The witches in my coven are more fearsome than any nightmare creature, and we do not take prisoners. That's the only warning you'll get, sir." My nostrils flared and my fingers bunched into fists so tight my hands ached. "He thinks he wants us to come for him. He doesn't. You tell him I said that."

They sent me down into the tunnels in my socks. My feet were damp again before I reached the train.

I found the others waiting for me in the lounge.

“Where is . . . ?” Nola started to ask, then she took in my face, my missing boots, my torn brow and cut palm, and she knew. Her face fell.

“Fuck,” Ruchel breathed, falling into the cushioned chair.

Blue’s chin trembled. “But you’re alive,” she said accusingly. “You lived again somehow. You—”

Nola caught her by the back of her torn dress and spun her. Ruchel was out of her chair, her arm around Blue’s shoulders a second later.

But Blue was right. It should have been me. I knew that. I couldn’t even argue with her. I belonged in the games, not Liesel. I’d even promised Emma, and now I’d broken that promise . . .

“We need to talk,” Ruchel said, ushering Blue down the aisle. “This conversation is long overdue.”

Nola fell in on Blue’s other side, stopping her from pulling away. Ruchel sent a fleeting look full of regret over her shoulder, and then they were gone. I was alone with nothing but my own feelings of loss for company.

I collapsed into a padded chair. My socks were filthy. I swiped at my brow, and my fingers came away bloody, but I barely felt any of it. My small injuries were nothing to the gaping wound in my soul.

“I wish you were here,” I told Lisbeth, uncertain she could hear me. I liked to think she could, but sometimes it just felt like my words were bouncing off the walls for no one.

Her voice didn't respond. For once, I didn't know what she'd say to me.

I wanted to fight back at the Otherworld, but the will left my body in a rush of weakening limbs. I was too depleted. Too lost. Too heartbroken. I sunk in my seat. I couldn't save them. I'd had all the gray I needed, and I couldn't save any of them.

I had been the goddess of magic, but I couldn't do a thing. What was the point of so much might if I couldn't use it to protect anyone who mattered to me?

The car filled with cool magic and dark shadows. Asher loomed over me, blocking out the light with his shade. He was clean and dry, his hair pulled back. Cold coursed through my veins, and my breaths came in shallow rasps. In my mind's eye, Lisbeth lay on the floor in a broken heap in the shop we loved, her brown gaze open but not seeing.

And then Lisbeth was poor sweet Liesel, her limp arm jutting out from beneath the tree that had claimed her. Then Emma, her body torn, her teeth pink with her own blood . . .

"I found them," Asher said. "I found the sisters on the train, and I brought them to each other in a passenger car."

I was glad for that, but my ability to say so had left me, choked off by the knot growing in my throat. Was I damned to that fate too? Doomed to chase my vengeance until all it got me was dead and gone, searching the life after for my baby sister?

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I hate it here," I panted. My eyes welled, and an ache built and built to a sharp crescendo in my head. I rubbed at my brow trying to relieve the pain, but the sting of it only grew more relentless. "It wasn't fair."

“Lean back and breathe.” Steady and deep, Asher’s voice reached me over the rush of blood in my ears. “Close your eyes.”

I listened, latching onto the sound of him because it was the only thing stopping the spiral. My lungs slowed, and I summoned my mental mortar and pestle, crushing the sour feelings down and down and down, but it wasn’t enough.

I looked up at him. He was making the mortar and pestle too. He ground his fist into his palm, and that sparked something in me, knowing he was just as devastated as I was by this loss. I wasn’t alone in it. Not this time.

I shut my eyes, and his fingers laced in my hair and squeezed. At the sudden pull at my scalp, the tension building in my head lessened. It was like he could see exactly where it hurt. He did it again, and this time the relief was so sweet a groan slipped out of me. His fingers rubbed gentle circles there until the ache eased enough that I could open my eyes.

“I’ve lost my mind, and I don’t know how to get it back.” I pointed at the pathetic state of my feet, reassured by the knowledge that he was a patient soul I could be weak in front of without worry. He was powerful enough to take on the grief that was crushing me, a man capable of destroying the biggest monster I’d ever laid eyes on. And I wanted him to take this pain from me. I wanted him to have all of it. “Bram stole my pistol.”

“The one that belonged to your sister?” he asked softly, fingers scratching against my scalp.

“Yes,” I rasped.

He cupped my chin, his thumb brushing along my jaw. The eyes that met mine were hard and glossy as volcanic glass. “I’ll get it back for you.”

A silent sob shook my shoulders. My next breath left in a whimpering puff. “Thank you.”

But the hole was still there in my chest, mirroring the old wound I’d put in his. I so desperately wanted to feel better, wanted to think about anything other than all the wretchedness churning inside of me. I’d lost my match in this world, and I’d never have her back again. She’d been taken to a place I could not go . . .

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, holding my eyes with his. “It’s not true. You’ve never been all alone.”

I leaned forward, dropping my brow against his side. “I hate it here, and the worst of it is, people like poor Liesel didn’t deserve to be in the games. She stole a damn cow because she wanted to be nice to it. That’s all. She didn’t deserve that death. But me? I deserve to be here. Liesel and Lisbeth were a danger to no one. I’m a danger to everyone .”

“You’re not a danger. You weren’t yourself.” He kept a hand in my hair, combing through the strands, pushing them back behind my ears. “You shouldn’t be here, and we’re going to get you out. You’re not alone.”

My throat burned. Tears dripped off my nose.

“I spent time in your mind,” he reminded me. “I know you felt connected to Lisbeth because she was your sister. Your blood. She felt like a part of you, but you’ve forgotten your covenant. All of these witches, they have a small part of you too. You made that so.”

I swallowed hard. My heart pinched. “They do.”

“They’re all your sisters, Maven. Every last one of them. You are far from alone in

this world.”

I reached up and grabbed his wrist, just needing more of him to touch. He let me lean there and cry on him, as understanding of my feelings as he always was. I’d never thought about things his way, but he was right. I’d broken off all those pieces of my divinity and given them away until there was nothing left. My priestesses became witches, and their children and their children’s children did too.

They were all my sisters, and not just in name. Ruchel and Blue and Nola were my sisters just as much as Lisbeth was.

Oh, but that didn’t solve anything at all. That just made the hole so much bigger. Couldn’t he see that? There was so much more to lose now.

I hissed out a breath, then swallowed the sorrow down and down and down so that it couldn’t drown me. My next lungful of air came more evenly.

I didn’t want to listen to Alwin. He was a deity with god ambition I couldn’t trust, and holding on to my vengeance was what kept me strong. It’s what kept me fighting. Anger fueled me when grief sapped me dry. If I let go of vengeance completely to grab on to my new sisters in its place . . . I didn’t know what would remain of me. Whoever I would become, they wouldn’t be much of a protector.

“Have you got your mind back yet?” he asked.

“I think so? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

He tipped my chin up, his touch featherlight. “It matters.”

I spotted the tear in the leather at his chest. He was so gentle with me, I didn’t like looking at the wound I’d caused him, and I covered it with my palm.

Then his gaze captured mine, and there was something different in it. Something that hadn't been there before. He leaned in so close I felt his breath on my lips.

Comfort. In that moment, he looked like comfort, and I wanted that desperately.

"What?" I asked him, knotting my fingers in his waistcoat, tugging him down even closer. "What is it?"

He licked his lips. His throat bobbed.

"You have to tell me," I begged. Maybe I knew exactly what that look meant. Maybe there was a part of me that recognized the longing there because the mirror of it was flaming to life in me.

"I can't." Asher rose out of his crouch, pulling away from me. "The timing of it is all wrong."

But I didn't want him to go, and I grabbed at the air between us. "If you don't tell me now, my mind will drive me mad wondering. No one is guaranteed to survive tomorrow in Wulfram. You have to tell me."

He dragged his teeth over his bottom lip, considering me. Asher fished his journal out of his pocket. He flipped through it until he found the page he wanted, then tore it free. Folding it in half crisply, he handed it to me.

"I wrote this the day after you let me into your mind. It will explain it all. Don't read it now. Eat. Rest." He squeezed my hand in his over the paper, crinkling it. "Read it later. I'm going to go and make sure Liesel and Emma are settled in for their last train ride. I'll be back tonight."

Their last train ride . . . My throat tightened.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

“The one who sits upon the crow throne shall rule the Otherworld.” – Esther Weil, Renowned Folklorist

I ate but barely, the folded bit of parchment burning a hole in my pocket. I returned to the lounge and curled up on the sofa, waiting for Ruchel and Nola to come back. But it was Blue who found me later.

In her hands she carried a set of dark indigo socks.

“Blue is the color of regret where I’m from.” She handed the woolen pair to me. Feet shuffling beneath her, she chewed at her cheek. “Liesel started making them for you as an apology for the nightmare spirits . . . I finished them up for her just now.”

I took them, rubbing my thumb across their softness. “Blue, I . . .”

She wrung her fingers in the skirt of her dress, and her throat bobbed. “Just take them and don’t make a thing of it.”

I nodded. She padded off, retreating from the lounge. An hour later, Nola and Ruchel joined me. They both looked like they’d been crying, eyes puffy, cheeks ruddy. Ruchel curled up in a padded chair with her book, the distance between us evidence of her desire to be left in peace. She wanted quiet company, I sensed.

Nola brought me a drink from the bar, the juniper smell strong in my nose. I held it but didn’t partake, the socks clutched between my fingers like a lifeline. I thought she was going to ask me about what happened, but she didn’t. The soldier was no stranger to loss. She knew better.

“What did you say to Blue that made her . . . nice?” I asked.

“We told her the truth about you,” Nola said, pulling up a stool and sitting beside me. “And that made everything a whole lot worse at first.” She swirled her glass, a line forming between her tawny brows. Then she tipped her drink toward our high witch. “And then Ruchel told her how she came to the Crow Games. She opened up to her, and it calmed Blue. One buttoned-up witch to another buttoned-up witch, finally undoing their buttons and spilling their secrets. That worked.”

Ruchel read in the corner of the room, her legs pulled up under her in the cushioned chair.

“Is that information I’m going to get to hear anytime soon?” I asked. I’d been curious about Ruchel since I met her. Which god had spurned her? I could make educated guesses, but I preferred to be certain. I wanted to add them to my murder list.

“I don’t know.” Nola’s grin was sheepish. “It took a long time for her to share it with me, too. Sorry, old duck. I’d help, but it’s not my story to tell.”

Nola bandaged my head and the cut in my palm. I turned in early that night and read myself to sleep from Asher’s journals, curious about the slip of paper in my pocket but certain that he was right. It was the wrong time. I was a mess. Whatever he wanted to tell me needed to wait for clearer heads.

I awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of rain striking the window. A storm rumbled, blocking out the subtle music of the train rushing over the tracks. The next boom of thunder sent my heart jolting. I left my bed to ignite the gaslight and turned it down low, comforted by the warm glow of it.

I glanced at the wall, the pale bone that separated my bed from Asher’s, and my hand went into my pocket with a mind of its own. I pulled out the note, unfolded it, and

devoured the words as hungrily as a starved water devil.

Patience be damned. That was his strength, not mine.

I watch life and am in awe of it. I covet creation but not for its power like the hungry gods do. I covet its beauty, its divine splendor crafted by careful, loving hands. For I could never fashion something so lovely. I could only bring an end to what is glittering and bright. This is what I was made for.

Yet still I covet the beating heart of it all. The lushness of rampant life, the like pairs that break off and come together with an intimacy I could only envy from afar. Alone forever. There was never a partner for me in all that majesty, and so I came to believe that life as a whole—a thing I can only watch but never partake in—was my other half. Life is beautiful and vibrant and warm and bright. My opposite. My downfall.

Then finally I met her. I met the one who is like me, and beauty now has a whole new meaning. A new face.

I read the last line again and again and again, then I crushed the paper to my chest and fell back on my bed. Head on the pillow, I closed my eyes tight and let his words renew my spirit until my heart was so full I thought it might burst.

I hadn't realized . . .

But how could I have seen the change in him when I was constantly stuck in my own grief? It was good that he had stopped me earlier. I was reaching for him for a comfort that would mean something very different to me than it did to him.

And that made me feel lighter and a little panicked all at the same time. Anything more than that there just wasn't room for within me. My mind was as stormy and uncertain as the weather brewing outside.

I climbed to my feet on legs that trembled. My stomach tremored as I slid open my door and padded to the front of his, fist up and ready to knock. Nerves froze me to the spot.

What was I going to say?

My knuckles rapped against the wood, the sound amplified by the thunder outside. I jumped when his door opened so quickly he had to have been standing on the other side of it this whole time.

“I saw your light come on,” he explained.

I held up the folded bit of paper, and he stepped aside, letting me in. His lantern was turned down, casting him in a citrine glow that glittered in his silvery hair, highlighting all the things about him that were celestial and lovely. His shadows circled my feet. Tendrils of darkness swiped timidly at my toes in my new indigo socks, the magic more cautious with me than it usually was.

He shut the door.

“I’m not a poet,” I warned him. “Even if I practiced for centuries, I’d never be able to tell you as eloquently as you have that you’ve come to mean something more to me. And no one is more shocked about that than I. Something so lovely shouldn’t be possible in a place like the Otherworld.” I wrung my fingers together, studying the backs of my hands to hide my eyes for a breath or two. Then for a third. Then a fourth . . . “I don’t even know how to do this anymore. You were right before. The timing is—”

“—terrible. I know.” His chortle lacked mirth.

I stole a step closer to him, pleased when he didn’t retreat from me. “But I’m glad

you told me,” I said in a rush. “I needed to know. Otherwise, I would have . . .” My laugh was breathy and uncertain. “I’m not sure exactly, but it wouldn’t have been fair to take comfort from you in that way. I’m a weepy mess half the time, and the other half of the time I’m too wrathful to see straight. There isn’t room between the two for anything else just now. So . . .”

One snowy brow lifted. “So?”

“So, I think I’ll just say . . .” Every word that sprang to mind sounded trite and silly. “Actually, no.”

He frowned. “No?”

I came up on my toes and kissed him instead, a quick decisive peck. His lips quirked against mine, understanding dawning to melt that frown away.

“Thank you for thinking sweet things about me, and I’m sorry,” I whispered, our lips so close I could kiss him again, but I didn’t dare. I felt trapped there by his presence, his warmth, the weight of his bottomless gaze. I couldn’t move. I was at the brink of a precipice and teetering. One harsh gust of wind could blow me over.

We shared a long breath.

“What if I wanted to be your comfort?” he said.

My stomach dropped, then it fluttered. I wanted to reach for him, but I wound my fingers in the bottom of my shirtwaist instead. “I’m not certain that’s a good idea.”

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. That did it. I toppled off the precipice. Helpless to resist, I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my fingers in his silken hair.

I would never be as eloquent, but I could show him what he'd come to mean to me. Even if I was out of practice, I'd gladly learn about such things again with him now. Kissing him was a renewal all its own. A well of replenishment.

My comfort.

His lips were warm, and he tasted like crisp summer sunlight, a compelling contrast to the comfortably cool brush of his shadows down my back. His magic remained light on my skin while his hands were heavy and hot, skimming down my arms, cupping my hips. He explored me in lazy strokes. Never in a hurry.

I wanted to get rid of the hole in his waistcoat. I wanted not to have ever hurt him in the first place, but this was as close as I could get. I unbuttoned the leather and helped him shoulder out of it. He let out a small breath when I kissed his smooth jaw, another when I pressed my mouth to his chin, and the dip of his throat where it met his shoulder. Those sweet sounds shot through me and spurred me on.

I hoped he felt my gratitude in every touch, affection in each kiss. I helped him out of his shirt, and I kissed the round scar I'd put right over his heart.

Reapers did in fact have one. I felt it leap under my lips. My kiss lingered there against his smooth flesh.

And then the careful patience I was so familiar with vanished. Asher lifted me in his arms and pinned me against the wall with his body. He consumed me with slow burning kisses, easing his weight between my thighs.

"May I . . . ?"

"Yes!" I panted, and he unhooked my suspenders, then undid the fall front of my trousers.

He crooked a finger inside the waistband of my undergarments and made my belly dip as he skimmed a knuckle gently across the skin below my navel.

“I want to be your comfort,” he said, his voice a gravelly purr. He opened the front of my shirt with fingers that shook. “I want to be your everything.”

Muscles low in my stomach clenched. “Asher . . .”

He nipped at my ear, then sucked gently at the sensitive skin at my throat, and a whimper slid out of me. His touch trailed from my jaw to my neck to the exposed skin at the top of my breasts. Little tempting touches I felt the phantom of long after they were gone. My nipples hardened, overly aware of the gentle drag of the linen from my chemise.

I bit my lip hard, a pressure building into an ache low in my stomach. It was so tempting to take everything he was offering me and more. But my favorite thing about him was how safe my feelings always were with him. And I wanted his feelings, his heart, to be safe with me too. Accepting comfort from him while offering him nothing in return felt too much like betraying him.

“I can’t just take from you,” I told him.

“Just the once, I’ll let you,” he groaned in my ear, and he moved against me, his desire for me pressing hot and heavy at the thin barrier of fabric that separated us. “It doesn’t have to be a habit.”

“It isn’t fair to you.”

“It’s plenty fair,” he said, his tone light as he teased my jaw and neck with his lips. His fingers returned to curl inside my waistband. “I think it’ll only take the once.”

I chuckled. “Just the once, and then I’ll be addicted to you?”

“That’s right.” He rocked against me, and I moved my hips with him until I was awash with the warmth of him. “I already am. That’s how I know.”

“You do feel good,” I confessed breathlessly. He might just be right. It probably wouldn’t take much at all to make me obsessed . . .

Without a doubt, nothing would ever be the same again if I took all that he was offering.

He claimed my lips with a heavy kiss, encouraging me to wrap my legs around his waist. “You feel good. You taste good. You sound good. The years of my life stretch endlessly before me, and I’ve never felt like this before, like I can’t wait.”

But it wasn’t fair. My fingers tightened around his shoulders. “I want to do right by you.”

“Let me be whatever you need, Maven. Let me have you, and we’ll figure the rest out,” he begged.

I couldn’t. He was giving too much without demanding consideration for his heart. We weren’t in the same place. His feelings had climbed to a lovely peak I was too low and lost to be able to reach right now.

I just wanted the peace chasing bliss with him would offer. I wanted an escape.

He wanted . . . more.

I leaned up and kissed his nose, ignoring every screaming protest of my needy body. Thunder boomed outside, joining in with its own objections. I shook my head. He

smiled at me, understanding in his dark eyes. I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about him now, about everything that would have transpired had I just nodded my head yes.

I'd be pondering the "more" of it all until I drove myself mad. Damn him. I hated being noble. Being kind was stupid. Why couldn't I just be a little selfish?

"It was worth a shot," he said.

"It was an excellent shot," I groaned.

Then he spun me toward the bed, and he stretched me out across the bottom bunk.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Just something I can't stop thinking about," he said, tucking me in under the blankets. "There's not many people in the world who can tolerate my touch. I hoped you'd indulge me. Or would you rather sleep alone tonight?"

I chewed at my cheek, uncertain how to feel. Was I still being selfish if I accepted comfort from him in a different way? I decided this was all right. This was something I could do for him that felt reciprocal. And it was impossible to say no to him twice, not when he was so tempting.

I scooted over so he could slide in behind me.

He undressed down to his undergarments, then he pulled the blankets up over us both and held me, his weight on his side. I felt his chest against my spine, and the solid heat of his arousal at my back.

I clung to the comfort he offered me, more grateful than I could ever express with

words. I felt stitched back together again in his arms. Everything still hurt, but I was whole once more.

When he held me around my middle, I ran my fingers up and down his arm, exploring every knuckle and vein in his hands. I learned the divots and creases of his palm, thrilling as he did the same to every hill and valley along my waist, skimming his touch across the softness of my belly and thighs.

We made a game of trying to trap each other's hands. He chortled at himself when I snared his thumb between my palms.

It was a glorious sound. The rumble of it reverberated through me. Almost as good as every single one of his sighs when I moved against him just the slightest bit. His lips skimmed the shell of my ear, his long legs tangled with mine, and his hands explored me gently until I fell asleep.

I awoke a while later, and his touch was still there, still learning my body. His palm circled my stomach.

"Are you going to sleep tonight?" I asked, voice thick and gravelly.

"Hm. I usually enjoy it, but I don't want to tonight," he said, sliding a hand down the side of my ribs, exploring me like there were still things left to learn, though surely by now he'd touched every inch of me. "Another night maybe." He kissed my neck. "You should go to sleep. You actually need it."

I was so comfortable tucked inside his arms, covered by his shadows, I slumbered deeply.

I didn't wake again until an amber glow poured in around the curtains, turning the shadows all around me charcoal gray. Movement shifted the mattress—Asher

climbing out of bed.

I squinted up at him. “You’re going?”

“Giants,” he said. Leaning over me, he kissed my nose the same way I had his the night before. “Giants first, then I’m getting your pistol back.”

“Still trying to make me addicted to you?”

He kissed me. “That’s the goal, yes,” he said against my lips.

“Thank you,” I said.

Then he was gone, and I felt his absence like a bruise on my soul.

\* \* \*

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:32 am*

Later that morning, Nola found me a pair of mismatched boots. They would get the job done until we could trade for something better.

The seventh trial was made worse by incessant rain, but the smaller number of participants was a blessing on the high platform. The rope bridges were damp, but fewer bodies meant they rattled and shook less.

I felt lighter when I reached the bottom. My palms were chapped from clinging to the cords too hard.

The insect garm didn't like the storm, it seemed. They stayed hidden inside the industrial buildings. We made it through the district sopping wet, wind-whipped, but unscathed. It was well out of our way, but we hiked back toward the part of the park where the beast had been slain.

I showed them where I'd covered Liesel and Emma's bodies the day before. We turned the branches and stones into a proper pyre, and Nola lit it with a ball of crimson magic that burned hot and fast. The magic fire consumed everything quickly. Blue collected their ash into a clay jar she then blessed with her wand and her tears. Ruchel sang a prayer to the Crone for the departed.

I stood together with my sisters as witness. To honor their connection with the earth, we buried the urn under a linden tree.

The streets before the clock tower were eerily quiet. The markets were empty. More red-hooded warlocks hung from the library walls, but the large doors were shut up tight, and there was no one at the entrance to the tower collecting a tax.

“The calm before the storm,” Blue muttered.

I hoped she was wrong about that.

Hello, pet , Nott purred in my ear. Then he bounded into view, and the great black panther wasn’t alone. His sister prowled behind him.

“My lord . . . and my lady,” I greeted with a bow of my head.

The others bowed too.

Nott was distinguished from his sister by the patch of white on his chest. He made me scratch behind his ears. Mara circled each of us, taking us in with sharp yellow eyes.

Tell the other witches to go on , Nott said. My sister and I wish to talk to you.

My coven left me reluctantly. I didn’t like being parted from them either, our shared loss pulling us together tighter. The sisters’ death was a horrid reminder that our end was always around the corner in the games and we were the only force standing together to keep it at bay.

Nott and Mara walked on either side of me down into the stone tunnels.

My lovely sister has had a change of heart , Nott explained.

I glanced at Mara, who nuzzled my hand, demanding more pets.

She knows I tried to have her killed , Nott said, and my stomach dropped, though Mara seemed unfazed. Your adamant refusal has endeared you to her. She has a new proposition for you.

“I’m honored,” I said to Mara. “What is it you need from me, my lady?”

It was Nott who spoke for her. She will grant your request for a sigil, but only if you make amends with the Old One. She's willing to risk the upset of the God King by disrupting his games, but not at the expense of angering the most powerful one amongst us at the same time.

I came to a halt, trying to process the request.

Nott nudged me forward. Will you do it? Will you apologize to the Old One? When you have his favor, you'll have our sigils.

"I . . . I would, but I don't know how." I'd already tried to apologize to him once in the hopes that the Lord of Death would spare me from the games. That hadn't worked.

Oh, but it's easy. You just say—

"No, I mean— Sorry," I added hurriedly when he hissed at my interrupting him. "I mean, I don't know how to contact him."

When I wish to talk to him, Nott said , I simply wait on the train until after the prisoners are delivered to the trials. He'll seek you out then.

"My lord, I can't stay on the train. I'm one of those prisoners. If I do, the Old One will rip my soul out and turn my body into a revenant."

Nott chuckled. He's less likely to do that if you make amends well. Be nice to him, pet.

I shook my head. "I don't know, my lord . . ."

Mara yowled, showing off her ferocious teeth.

My sister is not a patient goddess. The decision is yours, but you had best do this tomorrow before Mara changes her mind. Apologize to the Old One in the morning when the prisoners are gone. Get your sigil. You and your coven of misfits could be out of the games in a matter of hours. How could you say no?

\* \* \*

I contemplated my choices all evening. I ate with my coven. I wished Asher was there, but there was no sign of him and no telling exactly when I'd see him again. Over drinks, we discussed what the goddess wanted from me.

"If you stay on the train . . ." Nola whispered, unwilling to say the horrid part out loud.

"I know," I said.

"But could he rip out your soul?" Ruchel asked. "I mean, being a gray must have some advantages in that regard, surely?"

Blue sipped her favorite tea to replenish herself. "I don't have any advice for you," she said. "I'm as eager to see the back of this place as the next witch, but with the stakes so high, this is a decision you have to make yourself."

But I didn't know what to choose.

Later that night, I paced inside Asher's bedroom, hoping he would appear, knowing it was doubtful I'd see him for a few days, based on his other adventures with giants and spying.

I picked one of his journals at random and read from it until my vision was blurry and my spirit was as full as I could get it with my heart so heavy. I slept in his bed. It smelled like him.

Morning came. Trial one included the mist of nightmare shades, which immediately made me think of Emma and Liesel, and my spirits plummeted. Blue would be able to get the wax we needed from Talia. It was an easy trial. Not one my coven would need my help with.

I could stay on the train. Meet with Death. Apologize. Asher always talked about the Old One as though he were the reasonable god amongst the Otherworld deities, the one who didn't treat prisoners with malice. Death could have killed me, but he hadn't. He'd spared me. I couldn't ask Asher what I should do, but I could make educated guesses about what he'd suggest from the things he'd shared in the past. Asher always stood up for his maker. Traitor or not, he seemed to care for his god.

I could beg Lord Death not to snatch my soul out of my body and damn my remains to his service.

If he didn't listen, would Asher come? Would he collect my body off the train, take me to the desert where the hills turn purple, and bury my remains? Would he visit me every night? Would he sit with my soul in the passenger car after he felt me die?

I believed he would. And immediately I felt like a fool for turning him away last night. That might have been my last chance with him.

But what about Bram? What about answers and revenge? He'd stolen my boots and my pistol to goad me into seeing him. He wanted me to beg him for the truth. Bram wanted to play games with me.

I could go and see him. I could charge further down the path of revenge that had gotten me thrown into the trials in the first place. But I was done with that. The vengeance that had once burned in my heart had died a little with Liesel and Emma. Then it had died a little more when Asher reminded me that Lisbeth was not the only family I had a responsibility to.

They were all my sisters.

I wanted to tear the murdering god apart, but there was something I needed even more than that now. I wanted my family safe. Never again would I watch one of my sisters die. And I only had one day to ensure that.

As the bell pealed once to signal the first trial, Nola and Ruchel and Blue lined up at the exit. I threw my arms around them and hugged them tight.

Nola's chin trembled. "Ducky, I don't know what I'll do if I have to see you as a revenant on this train . . ."

"You'll ask me to fluff your pillow," I teased. "Make me mix your drinks."

Nola nudged my arm. "I hope you're right about all this."

"It'll work," Ruchel said with a false cheer meant to bolster me. She couldn't know it was true. The risk to others wasn't as clear to her as her own, but I appreciated the vote of confidence. I needed it.

"We'll see you soon," Blue said somberly.

I watched them depart without me. The train chimed, and this time the bell sounded like a sharp warning. When the wheels started up, I had the sudden urge to throw myself against the doors, beg the train to open and spit me out.

I swallowed my panic.

The Schatten pulled away from the platform, and much too quickly Wulfram was a blur in the distance. I paced the lounge car. Then I paced the dining car and picked at the food, not really interested in eating anything, just keeping my hands busy.

I returned to the lounge and sat at the corner table, leaning my head back against the window, eyes wide, watching and waiting. My foot tapped out a wild patter.

A revenant appeared in the archway. Faceless and yellow-haired, she was the young beast-born woman with a tail I'd met my first day, or she had been when she was alive. I'd forgotten her name.

"Hello?" I said.

Her chin cocked to the side.

Then another revenant entered the lounge behind her. And another. And another.

My pulse jumped and my heart took off, beating like a war drum in my chest. I slid out from behind the table and sprinted away from them, into the series of dining cars.

They pursued, and others joined them. More revenants dropped their trays and abandoned their trolleys. A burst of gray knocked a revenant with shorn hair aside. I barreled through another into the first of the sleeper cars.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I hissed.

I leapt inside the nearest compartment, and I slammed the door shut, remembering too late there was no way to lock it from the inside.

The door handle jerked. I clung to it, keeping it latched. Revenants beat against the wood, rattling it in its frame. I squeezed the handle shut until my fingers ached, blood pumping loudly in my ears.

"Just stop!" I screamed.

They didn't stop. Nails scratched at the wood. They were all around the compartment,

scraping at the walls, crawling into the vents, the thump, thump, thump of their knees and hands beating in quick staccato as they drew closer.

“Hang it all,” I gasped. My vision narrowed and my fingers paled, trying to keep the damned latch shut.

The door burst open, and I was thrown to the floor. Faceless revenants swarmed the cabin like angry hornets. I was grabbed up by more hands than I could count and dragged cursing, kicking, and thrashing into the aisle, back through the dining cars.

Were they going to toss me off the train?

Spirit surged out of me, knocking revenants down. I fell onto the heap of them, into the tangle of struggling limbs. Fingers gone gray, I stuffed a hand inside the nearest chest of the faceless undead, and it was like shoving my hand into cold stew.

There was nothing in there but smothering magic. Repulsed, I jerked away and was snatched up again by more hands. They carried me into the lounge and threw me into my seat at the corner table, blocking up the exits with their bodies.

I couldn’t catch my breath. My lungs hitched. I searched my arms, touching my sides, checking for injuries. I’d been scared out of my mind, but I was whole.

The temperature in the car plummeted sharply. Cosmic darkness crawled across the windows, blotting out the unnatural skylight. The lanterns flickered, then dimmed. My heart tried to beat itself out of the cage of my ribs. The pulse at my throat surged.

“Please don’t take my soul, Lord Death,” I begged, and this time my words were sincere. I was no fan of the Old One, but I shouldn’t have tried to take my vengeance out upon him. He hadn’t earned it like the guilty god had. “I’ve come to make amends. I’ve come to beg your forgiveness for my trespass and for the attack you did not deserve, and—”

Shadows pooled in the chair across from me. They roiled and rippled, and then they parted, revealing Death's favored.

Asher.

I let out a relieved breath. "Oh, thank the Crone. It's you. Where is the Old One? Nott said that if I apologized to him, we could have his sigil and be out of here by tonight. All of us."

Asher's eyes were black as pitch. His magic had curled all around me and then gone still, like the tail of a feral dog when agitated, right before it strikes. "Maven," he breathed.

Not Trouble, which oddly enough made me feel like I very much was in trouble.

"Where's Death?" I repeated, enunciating with care, because something suddenly seemed very wrong indeed. My fingers clenched and unclenched. My body had figured out the problem well before my mind had, and my thoughts were rushing to catch up.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"Where. Is. Death?"

His eyes slid shut, and he sucked in a pained breath. When he opened them again, his gaze was fathomless and aggrieved. "You're looking at him."

"What? No . . ." I sputtered.

Death. The Old One. All those times he'd answered questions with 'we' . . .

But no. That couldn't be right. He was a traitor to the gods, a reaper they had

mistreated. My traitor. Not a spy. He was my friend, not one of the horrid gods I hated.

The images of the broken crow sprang to mind, the legend of the god king ordering Death to break himself in half so that he would fit inside the Otherworld.

“No,” I whispered.

If Asher is interested in you, then the Old One is . . .

“Nott played you, Maven,” he said. “You’re not supposed to be on the train for this part of the journey. No one is. Only the dead.”

My nostrils flared. Heat spread across my chest and flowed up my neck. My fingers went gray. “Was everything between us a lie?”

“No . Never that. I wanted to tell you . . . I was going to tell you . . .” His chest heaved and his mouth turned down in a grimace. “If I had told you sooner, I was certain you’d probably just . . .”

“I’d shoot you again,” I supplied, voice low. My body was still processing his betrayal, all his lies, sending up the alarm that hardened my belly and sent ice water through my veins. The only thing worse than being a spy for the gods was being one of them . “You knew I thought you were a reaper. Not . . . not what you are.”

“I am a reaper. The very first one,” he said. He rested his elbows on the table, leaning closer to block me in. “The Old One remains on the train. He holds the broken parts of my magic, a piece of my divinity, and a portion of my spirit. We are like Nott and Mara. The Old One is my brother.”

He was admitting all of it, and I still couldn’t process one single bit. The worry growing in me felt misplaced and detached from the rest of me, like a loose bolt in

my machinery. I shook my head. It couldn't be real. None of this was real.

“You're Asher. Not Death,” I retorted, not wanting any of it to be true. Not wanting the man I was falling for to be the man who'd thrown me into the games in the first place. The man who'd pretended to be my ally. Then my friend. Then claimed to want to be my lover when he'd always been my enemy. He would always be the god who had taken my sister to a place I could not go, another one of the deities who had made my life so difficult.

I hated the gods. All of them. I'd made them my enemies, and he knew that better than anyone.

“You're Maven. Not Fria,” he said. “I am a prisoner here. I am a traitor. I didn't lie about that.”

“I let you in ,” I ground out, disdain coloring every syllable. “I trusted you, and all this time you've been playing god games.”

“I don't want to play games with you.” His eyes squeezed shut. His fingers tapped out an anxious beat on the tabletop between us. “I convinced myself the truth didn't matter. What did it hurt that you obviously believed I was just another crow? We both wanted the same thing. I just needed you to get me to the Upper Realm, and I didn't care what you thought about me. But then that all changed. What I wanted changed. I didn't mean for it to happen, but my feelings for you—”

“Don't! Don't you dare go there,” I breathed, nostrils flaring. “Just tell me what you're after. Where do you want to go now?”

“Wherever you are,” he said so sadly that the tiniest part of me, a part shrinking by the second under feelings of betrayal, felt sorry for him.

It was like being back in my shop all over again, seeing Lisbeth broken and not being

able to comprehend any of it. My thoughts had gone slippery. I couldn't cling to any one of them for long before another stole its place. But now, instead of a fury that fueled me, there was a new icy, determined ache. A new desire to set it all to rights again, come what may.

Our shared kiss the night before flashed through my mind. I shoved the image away, pressing my lips together to quell the phantom sensation of his mouth against mine.

Just like that moment all those years ago when little Lisbeth had smiled up at me with a mouth full of missing teeth, that same sense of weighty responsibility settled across my shoulders. Come what may, I wouldn't see my coven harmed. I could bury my feelings if it meant protecting my new family.

No more of my sisters would die. I was getting all of us out of here. There was no going back now. I was ready to face the Old One and conquer whatever the deities threw at me.

I rubbed at my throat, trying to clear it. "Mara was never going to give me her sigil, was she?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders, and they drooped forward. "I don't know, but there are far more pressing concerns we need to deal with first."

The cosmic shadows left the windows to encircle me. Light poured inside, casting him in a glow that made him look gray as the grave. The car filled with even more faceless revenants. They lined the cabin and crowded the archways.

"I need you to understand that what happens next," Asher cautioned, "isn't entirely up to me. There are rules."

I glanced from the smothering darkness to his grimacing face, and my heart jumped into my throat. I shrunk down into my seat, needing separation from the encroaching

cosmic midnight.

“Asher,” I pleaded, my voice small, “are you going to rip out my soul?”

He pinned me in place with those same bottomless black eyes that made me feel seen through. “We haven’t decided yet.”

The End For Now