Four of Wands

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Four of Wands

by dreamsickdev

Summary

In a post-apocalyptic world of mythology and fairytales, the most recent and nonbinary incarnation of Apep (Kaos, primordial chaos, the great serpent, the destroyer, etc. etc.) leaves a safe haven to find out their fate in the fey realm. They go by "Laith" - isn't a river just a type of serpent? Their magic is dangerous and chaotic. They run into their past / on-and-off lovers and the memories thereof as they confront who they are and who they were. There's a lot of yearning and complicated feelings, also hand-holding and kissing. Everyone is a mythological figure in some form or another.

CW for violence, strangling, death (and reincarnations), burning/on fire, family rejection, breathing in smoke, a giant snake

Notes

This is an alternate mythology crossover world. Heavily inspired by Percy Jackson and the Olympians and Loki/Thor from Marvel, but not using enough to tag it as such.

Laith (they/them): the most recent and nonbinary incarnation of Apep (primordial chaos, the great serpent, the destroyer, etc. etc. - goes by Laith currently. (Laith means river, rivers can be serpentine; was raised in the fey realm and they wouldn't name them directly.) They have had many incarnations but are always sapphic. One previous name was Hafsa, another was Stigander, another was Samad. Also called a child of Kaos.

Loki (depends, currently she/her): currently living incognito as a nymph and going by Melia (named after a certain immense and important ash tree), a shapeshifter and trickster deity; husband/wife/spouse of Sigyn

Sigyn (she/her): Loki's wife. Ex wife? She didn't survive the apocalypse. She still loves Loki.

The Phoenix (depends, currently she/her): everyone's dead wife (very awkward because she's also alive right now); has gone by a bunch of names, including Ari, El, and Elskede. Mostly, names that are an endearment or a shortening of a longer epithet. They are genderfluid and have had many different incarnations. Also known as the Firebird.

Anthemis (she/her): a witch and friend/crush of Laith, probably actually a Fate but Laith doesn't know about that. Laith is too busy with Feelings. Her familiar is a mink named Elo.

Vasily (they/he): non binary bard/boyan, a fairytale hero; lover of the Firebird. He's dead. In this world, they're a physically imposing himbo/thembo. They're fantastically lucky, flamboyant, and a talented musician.

Other mentions of gods/deities/giants:
Summanus, evil chthonic deity
Demiurgus, gnostic deity
Sophia, gnostic deity
Thanatos, Death
Morpheus, Dream
Tove, butch giant King (gender flipped Þrymr)
The Summer Queen (fey queen of the Summer Court)
Hermes, messenger god
Thor, god of Thunder, Sigyn's brother, blood-brother to Loki

minor referenced characters, also mythological/fairytale in origin, heroes of their own stories but extremely unimportant here except as support for the above
Foley
Arden
Bran
Sirras
Mosrael
Khrysa
Nerva
Thorunder
Aistulf
Ged
Eileen
Clara
Saufeia
Galena
Fatimah
Mosrael

Laith paused and looked back over their shoulder at the retreating shoreline, at the haven of Korkyro, which had sheltered them from the harsh, destroyed world. They extended a hand and the water suddenly stood still as glass, and an eerie dark aura seemed to emanate from below, with an afterglow that dazzled her eyes when she tried to see what it was. It rang in her ears, too, like the leylines, but without their harmony, discordant. In the aura, as Laith stepped forward onto the glass plane, they seemed to dissolve into shadow as well. Their voice became faint. “Stay well, Anthemis," they whispered. Their friend, the witch, and everyone else they were leaving behind, hung in their thoughts, but then they took another step, and the image of the city and its people retreated from their mind.

Laith’s hand went to the glass pendant hanging around their neck as they walked into the shadows. The leylines shifted around them, warping and changing in their wake. Around them, the path felt like soft dirt, an ancient forest trail, wandering unhurriedly, ever towards the south. The shadows clustered like leaves in a canopy, gathering around and overhead, disturbed only briefly by their passage. The pendant was warm; they could feel the star lightly pressing against the glass, pointing south. How had a witch caught a falling star, and trapped it in glass like a compass? And given it to them, of all people? They walked on with assuredness to their steps, bolstered by the sense of wonder. The leylines unfurling the path out of the darkness ahead, until they came to a bower made of the pattern of leaves in sunlight and shadow, a knot in the leyline that shimmered and writhed. Laith paused and looked upon this strange spot for a long moment, then tread forward carefully. They stopped with their boots at the edge of the knotted place, and sank back through to the other side, letting go of their grasp on the liminal space. The shadows pulled at them, trailing behind them like a cloak, and then dwindled into their shrunken silhouette traced against a paved lane.

The same bower in the fey realm was made of two large hawthorn trees, bending over and framing a small villa which seemed in disrepair. They lifted their head to see what else lay south beyond the paved lane and the villa it led to. The mountains remained in the distance, inscrutable. A woman sang in the tongue of the gods from within the villa, and soon Laith saw her emerge with a basket, gathering hawthorn berries with care. She had golden olive skin; ashen blonde curls; and a lively step. Her dress was not the current fashion - but then again, gods kept their own fashions, didn’t they?

“It’s rude to just watch,” said the woman after she had filled her basket halfway, and Laith remained standing still on the path. The star lifted the pendant slightly from their chest, an insistent reminder of the direction where they needed to go.

“I’m just passing through,” said Laith. “May I cross your path and into the forest to the south? I do not want to trespass on your land without your leave.” The woman smiled with sharp teeth and Laith saw as she shook her head, her curls shifted with the motion, enough to reveal one delicately pointed ear. “I hope you are…. enjoying the summer,” they added with reluctance. “Is the Queen still well?”

“The Queens keep to themselves, all damn three of them and their courts,” said the woman with a disdainful laugh. “I’m just here to lay some old bones to rest, so the children will stop harping on about it. Why are you passing through here?”

“I need to find out my destiny,” replied Laith. “Somewhere to the south, in the mountains, at the edge of Summer, my destiny was changed once, not by my hand, and I can’t see it clearly.”

The woman came closer, resting the basket at her hip, and took Laith’s right hand, turning over their palm and tracing the lines. This close, her eyes were a lurid green, like glowworms. Her lips fell into a natural pout. Her touch was confident and measured. She inspected Laith’s hand to her satisfaction, as Laith’s heart pounded in the silence. Then she finally seemed satisfied, and pressed her lips against the knuckles before letting it go. Laith held their breath at this unexpected motion. Her lips were warm and the touch lingered with them as the woman raised her head. “I will come with you,” she said. “You can call me Melia. While I’m not of Summer, they know me and won’t touch anything of mine. Did you pack lunch, by any chance?”

Laith shook their head in silence, and followed Melia to the villa, where lunch had been laid out for two already. “Were you expecting someone?’ they asked.

“Of course,” said Melia with a laugh. “It’s that time of year, isn’t it?”

“Summer?” Laith said after an awkward pause. Melia’s pout deepened. She poured Laith a glass of wine, and one for herself; it was honey-gold and almost as thick, with the scent of apple. It tasted more acidic than Laith expected. They liked it, and drained it quickly. Melia’s eyes remained on them as she laid out fresh bread, olive oil and vinegar, some kind of unfamiliar folded pastry, and a type of curd, but lavender. She filled Laith’s cup again, pout replaced with a dimpled smile. Laith didn’t ask again about what she meant about the time of year.

“I can’t return your hospitality,” they said. They watched how Melia cut firm lavender slices and saw that the inside was pinker, like some type of mushroom, but there was no cap, gills or rings. They copied the technique. Each bite was dense and deeply savory. The silver fork and knife were engraved with vines; the tablecloth was a pale blue with a black meander around the edge; and the villa did not have matching furniture. The low dining table was cramped between a cracked black cauldron and a ruined burgundy divan, and against the far wall, cluttering the door into the next room, were stacks of firewood and what looked like….. Bones? They were long, curving arcs of yellowed bone, like from the ribs of some great beast. They could imagine the size of the dragon or sea serpent whose heart they had once guarded.

Melia took just a couple of bites, and then sipped from her cup slowly. Those bright eyes were watching their face again. “You’ll have to carry something for me,” she said. ‘Where in the mountains are you headed, Laith?”

“I’m not sure of the exact spot,” they replied. They rubbed the back of their neck, frowning. It felt like something was just on the tip of their tongue, but they couldn’t quite catch whatever it was. “I’ll know it when I get closer. It’s a place where the rocks are clustered together and point to the sky, and they look like a giant claw.”

“A dragon’s claw,” mused Melia. “Sounds vaguely familiar.”

Laith's eyes dropped back to the table, unable to hold her bright gaze any longer. "I don't know if I've exactly been there before, or if it was just a vision. I'll know it when I see it though."

"Of course. I don't doubt you," Melisa said smoothly. "Well, we'll take one of the bones with us. Seems like a dragon peak is the right place to lay dragon bones to rest."

Laith nodded. They hadn't eaten since noon the day before, so they steadily devoured what had been placed in front of them. Everything was delicious. It reminded her of when they had lived in this realm before - mortal food just didn't taste the same after eating this kind of fare. What kind of berries had been used in the pastry filling? Not hawthorn, certainly. Melia set down her cup, half-full, and looked out the window to the path and the trees. "You don't seem prepared for a fight, anyway," she said critically. "Where did you come from?"

"I've been staying in one of the mortal havens." Laith scarfed down another pastry before continuing. "The Phoenix's, " they explained. "Korkyro, they call it. It's at a leyline nexus."

"Aren't they all, these days." Melia seemed unimpressed by the idea. "I hear Seriphos is nice this time of year. Though Atlantis has a better scene."

Laith frowned. "Atlantis was sunk into the sea eons ago. Uh, pretty sure," they ventured.

"Isn't the Phoenix supposed to be some chick in the ashes, too?" returned Melia. "What is she doing these days? Last I heard, she was breaking some poor skald's heart."

"You know her." Laith swallowed and reached for the glass of wine, only to remember that she had drained it twice already.

Melia's smile came back and transformed her intense stare to a warm expression of delight. "I feel like I know you from somewhere too. You lived in the fey? I see you're not worried about being bound by salt and bread."

Laith nodded. They gave a tight smile. "I'm not worried about traveling here. I lived here a long time," they admitted. "Maybe we met at a Solstice gathering…." They trailed off, scanning the woman's face and then looking down again. "I didn't live in the Courts though. I asked for the privilege when I came of age, along with other wandering fey, but the Winter Queen only accepted a few. I didn't have any other gifts she'd be interested in."

"Surely not," said Melia. "No blade, no spells?" When Laith just shook their head, she went on to speculate, drumming her fingers against the table, "what, did you offend her? I heard she's calmed down quite a bit since the last time the Courts warred." When no answer was forthcoming - Laith shrugged - she pouted and swept away the plates and cups, taking them to what was presumably the kitchen in the back of the villa. Laith stared down at the tilework floor, a little worse for wear, tracing the designs of leaves and wines. They could have sworn that the curves of the vines and the way the leaves were arranged, every third or fourth tile held a pair of eyes created by the gaps between the other carvings. The tiles perhaps had once been brightly colored, now faded to green and taupe. They heard Melia's soft steps returning. She had a woven bag slung over her shoulder, like one would carry to a market, and she

picked up the long curving bones one by one and slipped them inside. They shouldn't have fit, but they did. Then she offered the bag to Laith, who took it with a silent nod.

"Well, shall we?" She moved to hang her apron up on a hook and took a cloak instead to wrap around her shoulders. It was embroidered in a northern style that Laith found vaguely familiar, in white and red clusters of thread over the pale blue cloth. The hem of the cloak swirled around the back of her feet like wisps of cloud, and common as it was in this realm, the cloak was probably made from woven cloud, Laith suspected.

"Right," Laith said when they realized they were staring. They stood and followed Melia out. She shut and locked the door with a slender silver key, which she tucked away under the neck of her dress with a grin. She smoothed her skirts, pushed a curl off of her forehead, and led the way beyond her villa, south. Her steps were light and self-assured in a way that Laith envied. They plodded along, their shadow stretching behind them, and as Melia started to hum a tune, wondered what was so familiar about this strange woman. Clearly she was no ordinary nymph.

Laith followed Melia through the woods. Though they glimpsed the occasional silhouette, as she had promised, none of the local spirits interfered with their journey. She took Laith's hand and led them through deer paths, down steep riverbanks, and past brambles and thickets. More than birdsong filtered through the trees. As afternoon turned to evening, a cool breeze rustled through the canopy above and mussed Melia's curls. She glanced back at Laith and smiled. "Almost to the mountains," she said. "I smell something ripe, you'll have to help me out - you're the tall one, so it's your job." She pulled Laith between two crooked oaks and let go of their hand, instead pointing at a tree heavily laden with apples, which were thick-skinned, a dark green-gold, and oddly mottled. But the smell was sweet and floral.

"Right, in the bag," guessed Laith. They were still carrying the weight of the dragon bones. A mortal would have been exhausted by now. Whatever Laith was, it wasn't so bad, but they had a feeling it would get worse by the time they arrived at their destination. They reached for the first apple and were about to drop it in when Melia put her hand on Laith's arm. "Try it," she urged. "These ones are hard to find. These days, anyway." Laith paused and held it up, breathing in the scent of the golden fruit, before taking a bite. Their brows lifted in surprise. Melia beamed up at them. "See? It's a waste to leave them. They're so ripe, they'll rot soon. The nymphs here won't touch them."

"Why not?" Laith asked, offering her the rest of the apple, and moving to pick the others within their reach. Melia didn't answer that, instead with almost a childish greed she took enormous bites of the apple, licking the juice that spilled over her lips. She stole another out of Laith's hand before they were done with their task. "It won't make you sick or something?"

"No, of course not, darling, it's the fruit of the gods," Melia drawled, throwing the core over her shoulder. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know." Laith contemplated that as they reached for the last apple. The taste…. What was that taste? "It's warm," they said finally. They adjusted the bag over their shoulder, which was twice as full but looked identical as before, not one strand of the weave bulging

from its now-doubled weight. “Syrupy?” they tried. “No, that’s not it. But it’s sweeter than anything I’ve ever had.”

“It tastes like sunlight,” Melia said in satisfaction. “The first long day after a dark winter. A hearthfire just doesn’t do the trick after a long winter and a dreary spring, but these apples do.”

Laith found themself staring again as Melia sucked the last juice from her fingertips. “Right. Something like that,” they agreed. “I must have had it before. It tastes familiar.”

Melia laid a hand on Laith’s arm. “You said you were in the area before. Never anywhere else?”

Laith met her gaze with uncertainty. “I was,” they said. “Before. I don’t remember much. I’ve been, uh, reincarnated a few times. Are you saying I’m a god? That you’re a god?”

“I’m a god,” replied Melia. “I don’t know what you are, Laith. Ready to move on?” She glanced around and then meaningful up at the fading sunlight.

Laith took a step back. “You’re a god?”

“When the world was younger, there were a lot more gods,” Melia opined. “These days, I’d be wary too.” Her eyes moved over Laith’s face and she smiled again, cheerfully, gesturing onwards. “Shall we?” She offered Laith a hand, but this time, slowly, her palm turned up, as if the wanderer was a skittish horse or dog.

Laith, despite their misgivings, took her hand. It was small and warm, enclosed in their own, longer fingers. “If you’re a god, what kind of god?” they asked.

Melia laughed. “All kinds of things,” she said. “Some of my favorite things.” She squeezed Laith’s hand and pulled them onwards. The green rushed around them. They edged around a low waterfall and a lower, muddy stream, and then through a thicket of thorns as long as an arm. Her feet somehow always found a safe place to tread. She mused aloud as she led Laith along: “When heat rushes to your face, I invented that. And when your blood pumps fast and your heart pounds, I did that one too. Foxfire - those lights in the sky, that was a fun one. I wove the first nets. I birthed the trolls. I gave mortals their good looks, too. And cooking fire, that was hard won. I could have used the Phoenix’s help with that one.”

“You didn’t know her back then?”

“The world was a different place,” came the simple reply.

“Did you say you invented the way people’s faces flush?” Laith questioned.

“I find it lovely. It looks good on you in particular.”

“I’m not - I -“ Laith automatically protested, then stopped themself. Surely Melia was just teasing. She seemed to be the type that enjoyed joking around and pleasant chatting, unlike Anthemis. “Uh. Thanks, Melia,” she muttered. It wasn’t good to upset a god. Even a strange one like this.

The next stop was at the edge of the forest, an expanse of marsh that spread to the foot of the mountains in the distance. Melia scanned the horizon. “I wonder if there's still any cloudberries, I used to know a spot.” In the middle of the marsh, between where they stood and the foot of the mountains, lay a bulk of shaped stone, covered with lichen that rounded out the corners and obscured what could have once been some massive building. Had it once had a portico or columns like a temple, or a fence around it like some barnyard, or had it been put to some other use? It stood alone; Laith could see no other recognizable signs of inhabitants. Something beyond the building softly glowed with a golden light, hidden behind its mass.

“Come on.” And Laith was pulled onwards again, through knee-high angelica and blue-sow-thistle and low purplish groundcover that they didn’t recognize. Melia deftly avoided waterlogged spots and the hidden rivulets, which wove through the marsh like veins leading to some great heart. Patches of dark berries caught their eye, but nothing that looked like cloudberries. They paused when they saw Melia had stopped short, contemplating the strange stone ruin which was looming closer. The sun was gone by then; only the odd golden glow behind the mass of stone lit up the marsh. “We’ll need to stop for the night,” said Melia. “Look how far the mountains are still. And the waterways lead to a river before then. I’m not fond of crossing a river at night.” Her eyes glowed like a cat’s in the dark, but her expression was severe now, her lips thinned into a tight line. Laith noticed the dimples for the first time. “The tomb is safest, but it won’t be pleasant.”

Laith shrugged. “I didn’t expect a pleasant journey. You can still turn back if you want. I’ll carry the bones and bury them at the peak,” they offered.

“Why would you bother?” Melia asked curiously, turning her critical gaze up to Laith.

“I said I would do it, that’s all.”

Melia shook her head and let go of Laith’s hand, though she stepped over a patch of mud and carried on, her steps aimed towards the ruin. “We’ll stop over there. You see the glow, yes?”

Laith moved to catch up; with their longer stride it was just a moment before they were at Melia’s heels again. “What is that thing? You said a tomb? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Why would I mind?” But she sounded irritable. “It was someone’s home once, and now it’s a tomb. It has this obnoxious glowing memorial. As if the world doesn’t have enough of those. Everyone thinks their sad story is worth remembering.”

Laith almost answered, but caught themself, and focused on where they were putting their boots instead. It wouldn’t do to anger a god, even if she was just the god of blushing and… trolls? Nets? Melia’s accomplishments sounded vaguely familiar. And did Prometheus give fire to mortals to cook with and make sacrifices? But Prometheus was no lovely nymph, and anyway, wouldn’t Aphrodite have claimed blushing? They puzzled over that, distantly noting the mud was getting deeper, and that the glow ahead was getting brighter. Melia didn’t elaborate further on the tomb’s history, so the remainder of the walk was quiet but for the squelch of mud and the distant croaks and chirps of night-time activity from the forest. They could have sworn they saw a hare leaping from one thicket of weeds to the next, but when they looked again, it was gone.

The tomb, when they approached within arm's length, was all of grey slabs of stone, but in the grass nearby, there were signs of life long past - they could see an old nail dissolving into rust, a handful of once-colorful beads, and a curved shard of glass which sheltered a virulently yellow flower. Melia contemplated the stone wall, as Laith paced around, curious about the golden glow emanating from the other side.

The origin was immediately obvious. Laith sat down in the grass to admire the glowing golden statue, pulling the bag of apples and bones onto their lap. Moss had grown on the plinth, but not on the figure itself, which emanated light and warmth, gentle as a low campfire or a banked hearth. Like some sculptors cleverly carved veiled faces in marble, the creator had veiled the figure in flames, as if it was standing within a conflagration. But not as if it was being tortured by being stood over some fire; it stood with its face tilted to the sky and its hands were turned palms up as if to welcome the fire that curled around and over its body. It was a lean, androgynous figure in an old-fashioned chiton, its feet bare, the only other adornment a ring on one forefinger. The chest and hips suggested softness, but the shoulders were broad; the hands were slender; the hair was neither short nor long. The cupid's bow lips were curved in a gentle smile. Laith leaned slightly to check the profile, confirming that it looked much like the ancient depictions of youthful deities like Artemis or Apollo. A curl fell over the statue's forehead, lovingly detailed. Who had this been? Who made a ten foot statue of a gorgeous youth and left it to rot at the edge of Summer?

Melia silently came to sit next to Laith and reached to grab an apple from the bag. Her earlier glee was gone. Her heart-shaped face looked pinched with the same sense of irritation that Laith couldn't grasp the source of. Laith almost didn't notice; their eyes were still catching more details on the statue. Its right forefinger held a signet ring that looked like a real one, sized for a giant's finger, a carnelian intaglio. They set the bag down and went to examine it, stepping up on the mossy plinth to get a better look. Their boots stepped on something that crunched. Looking down, they saw a mess of debris that the moss had grown over. Offerings? Was that bone? Was this some god that mortals had sacrificed to?

"Don't touch anything," said Melia, between bites of apple.

Laith paused in the act of bending down and trying to scrape some of the moss away to see what had been left on the plinth. They straightened and turned. "I already stepped on it."

"That's not touching. Don't touch it." Melia was emphatic.

"If you say so." Doubt came through in their tone. "Do you know what all this is?"

Melia took a noisy bite of the apple instead of answering. The smell of its sweetness permeated the air. Laith could have sworn that when she ate it, some of the fruit's golden hue transferred to her cheeks, painting her cheekbones with an odd blush. Or was Melia doing that herself? She was not even close to understanding this strange god. They turned back to inspect the ring. It was, as they had thought, not part of the original statue. It had snugly been slid onto the carved finger, fitting so well that they wondered if it had been designed for it. Re-sized, perhaps. The portrait looked like a clean-shaven, muscular giant with a generous smile, drooping pointed ears, long braided hair, and one earring. The smile caught their eye, and they resisted the urge to reach out and touch the gleaming amber surface. "I know this face," they realized aloud. "Melia, who is this?" They had a feeling she did. Why else

complain about it so loudly? “Why do I know a giant? I killed giants. I don’t remember knowing one’s face.” They hadn’t thought of those memories, even when Anthemis had started sharing that story about the summoning - memories of warring against the giants were long, long ago. The world had been a different place. It didn’t have anything to do with why they had been in Korkyro, or why they had left.

Melia sucked juice off of her thumb and forefinger, with what Laith felt were obscene sounds of delight, and as before, threw the core away carelessly. She looked up as Laith dismounted the plinth. Then, to their surprise, grinned. “I’ll tell you if you promise me a favor,” she said. “I did know that giant. And the one represented by this gaudy nonsense. And you, Laith. I don’t exactly know what you are, shadows-for-eyes and not-good-enough-for-Winter, but I know you. And I’ll tell it all if you do one little thing for me.”

Laith watched her face. They lowered to one knee in the grass in front of her, that woven bag laying on the ground between them, and bent to meet her eyes on the same level. They searched her expression. That smile. “I don’t like traps,” they said slowly. “When did I tell you my name, Melia? Have we met? I’d like to think you’re a friend, not an enemy. But I don’t have a lot of friends. Never really did. So what exactly do you want from me?”

“I am your friend,” Melia assured. “It really is such a little thing.” When their expression didn’t change, she quickly added, “I really was taking care of some things around the villa today. It’s between here and Seriphos down the leylines. I’ve been staying in Seriphos. I had tea with Foley on the way. He’s one of mine…. Well, they’re a homunculus, so not really, not by blood, but they can’t help that.”

Anthemis had mentioned Foley often had strange fey visitors. They relaxed. Foley also lived down the leylines a distance away from Korkyro, in the forest. Foley and Anthemis also drank tea together. Those were things they had heard before. Laith sank down to their knees and sat back on their heels, their hands on their lap, fists unclenched now. “That doesn’t explain how you know me.”

“Foley scried for me, because I mentioned I was taking a trip in to clean up a few things around here.” Melia laughed. “I told them there was nothing to worry about. But I was delighted to see I would have you as a visitor.”

“Why.” Laith let the word drop flat from their lips. Their face felt hot again as Melia’s laughter. It was a melodious sound. It did really sound like she was delighted. That was not a reaction that anyone had when they saw Laith. It didn’t make sense. What did Melia want from them?

Melia hesitated. “I knew you, before. But I really, truly can’t tell you about it unless you do this one thing for me. A little thing. I promise, no harm will come to you. Then I’ll spill it, I swear.” She reached for Laith’s hand, and they let her take it. She traced the lines again. “I like your hands,” she said wistfully. “They’re strong.” Her touch was warm and her face turned golden in the light from the statue. Laith waited for her to ask what she really wanted. They felt every time Melia stroked the lines on their hand, she was tying a knot around them, tighter and tighter. Whatever she wanted, it wasn’t going to be as easy as she made it sound. Their eyes fell on the embroidery at the neckline of her dress. Runes. A diamond shape with two legs coming from the bottom point. A vertical line topped with a line slanted to the right.

A shape like an arrowhead pointing to the left. A shape like a bull's horns…. Melia's chest rose and fell as she breathed in and out, more slowly and easily than Laith felt their own breath was coming. Her soft golden skin and the curve of her breasts framed by the black border of runes was undeniably attractive. As much as the prospect of whatever she was going to ask seemed very much unattractive.

Melia twined her fingers with Laith's and traced the knuckle of their thumb with the pad of their own. "Laith, carry one more thing for me," she said. "It's a message for the Phoenix."

"What does it say." The words formed leaden on their tongue. They hardly had breath to speak.

"It's a message from the gods," said Melia. "Not me, mind you. It's just - there aren't many left these days. But, we're not on speaking terms these days."

"But what does it say, Melia." Laith repeated the question tiredly.

"I haven't read it. It's sealed. It came from Delphi that way. You know, the gods have an Oracle there holed up in a cave. It's probably about some vision."

Laith hesitated, and then nodded. "I will," they said heavily. They wondered how soon they would regret agreeing. But - their eyes slid back towards the source of that golden glow, that familiar intaglio - surely knowing would be worth it?

"Swear."

"Fine. I swear," said Laith. "By the one friend I have, and how pissed she'd be."

"You have feelings for them?"

"Her name is Anthemis," said Laith. "And - it's not your business, Melia."

Melia's expression closed, and when she spoke next, it was with venom. "When we met last, you were a child of Kaos. You hurt everyone around you. Especially the one they designed this statue after. You should recognize it. It's the Phoenix. And the one whose face is on that ring - Vasily was their name. He was the most talented musician in the world. You broke their heart. You destroyed their music. You destroy *everything* you put your hand to."

Laith's hands were on her neck before she could react. She choked out another damning phrase - "*your fault*" before she managed to slip free. She moved in ways that a body shouldn't be able to. Something tore inside of Laith. The sky and grass tilted around them. Their hands were bleeding, and Melia loomed over them. "You swore you would never lay a hand on me again," she rasped. "Remember?"

Their stomach twisted. Their temple ached. The blood under their nails turned to smoke and shadow, winding around them as veins of that same dark power twisted under their skin. The scent of the grass was fresh and sharp. Something was burning. "I don't remember," they said, stumbling to their feet, their voice weak with nausea. Melia danced easily out of their reach when they lifted a hand again. The shadows pooled around them. Melia backed away.

She seemed taller now, suddenly. Laith shook their head, trying to clear it with little success. “Why would I say something like that? You’re an asshole,” they retorted.

“I’m your *wife*,” Melia snapped.

Something had to have gotten in their eyes when Melia shoved them into the grass.They couldn’t fix their eyes clearly on her. Her face looked distorted, her cheekbones rising, her chin sharpening, the texture of her curls changing. Was it the golden glow of the statue? She looked all gold, like some celestial goddess, like those stories about a deity revealing their true self to a too-curious mortal, too radiant for mortal eyes to withstand. Laith had to look up, squinting, to try and catch her expression, blurred as it was.

Melia smiled, not a kind smile. “You left us. After the Phoenix burned up, you ran off and abandoned us. Vasily. And me. Don’t you remember?” She stared down at Laith, smiling, as they felt cold rush through their body. “The winds gave us the swiftness to find you, after a time. But then your little secret deal came due. You kept it from us that whole time, you know? I never knew…. Not until you *died*. In my arms. Surely you remember?”

Laith saw her suddenly clearly again. Him? Them? Where Melia stood, now they saw the stretched form of a wiry figure with strawberry curls, charming dimples, and numerous scars over cheeks, mouth, neck, hands…. The nose had been broken multiple times and was somehow more crooked than that lopsided, scarred grin. The eyes were the same, glowing and eerie green like foxfire. “I remember you,” Laith said slowly. They offered a hand. The temperature dropped again as shadows wrapped around the two of them. The long fingers, rough with scars, wrapped around their own. The familiarity was painful. “But you weren’t my wife.” They remembered ribbons braided with blossoms and delicate golden chains wrapped around their hands, clasped, and the words spoken, as they so often were in the old tales - *a year and a day*, and no more. “But we *were* handfasted,” they admitted with bitterness.

The hand squeezed theirs, and let them go. “Take your shadows back,” said Melia shortly. “They hurt .”

Laith looked down at the grass. They looked at their hands, which seemed less than material now, but the bleeding had stopped. “I have the right to protect myself,” they said. Their tone was just as short. “I didn’t - I didn’t know it would end that way,” they muttered, folding their arms across their chest and drawing the shadows back to wrap around themself only. The glow of the statue was dulled now, but it didn’t ease their pounding head or heart.

Melia, even in a more masculine form, had the same body language. It was oddly comforting. She rubbed her chin and then set to making a fire. “Get me something better than straw and grass,” she instructed Laith. The dress had become a short tunic and tight leggings that showed off muscular legs. Their gaze wandered up to their chest and the curious pattern of scarring, but, they withheld any further questions. They jerked their head up in a nod and went to find some better fuel for the campfire.

They should have expected no good answers to come out of this journey. The images that lingered in their mind, summoned up by Melia’s words, were not pleasant. They took their

time in their task, and came back with their arms full of sticks, fallen branches and strips of bark.

“You make a good beast of burden,” came the teasing voice immediately when they dumped it next to the place that had been cleared for the fire, stones neatly laid out to keep the fire in, and a shallow pit dug into the soil. Melia’s form had changed again, to something that was not anything in particular, with a softness to the hips and chest that the statue shared, curls hanging only to the jaw, the scruff still present at the chin, with admirable muscles remaining, and those dimples…. Laith caught themself staring and looked away, moving to pick out the best kindling to offer the trickster. “Oh, come now, no retort? You have a sharper tongue than that, or at least you always did,” Melia added with a laugh.

Laith shook their head and scowled. “I’m just going to have a drink and go to sleep. The journey is longer than a night and a day, isn’t it?”

“A drink sounds delightful.” The trickster breathed over the kindling and sparks flew, multicolored, green-orange-blue-white-purple, the unnatural flickers of light like foxfire in miniature, or burning driftwood. Laith looked away, pulling a flask from their belt. A warm hand covered their own. “Let’s share a drink?” the voice was softer now. “For old times’ sake?”

Laith let her take it. “What do I call you?

“Melia,” she said, with a cheerful grin. “Melia. I have other names, but Melia will do. For the great ash, I suppose I would have gone the way of all the others if not for being tucked under its roots. Not many remember the names of the old gods these days, mind you. Or the old stories.” She took a swig and made a face. “You like this strong shit. What’s wrong with mead? A nice, sweet wine?”

“Helps me sleep.” Laith took the flask back. “You don’t have to drink it.”

“But save me some!” Melia returned quickly, watching their throat work. They gave it up again when they had downed most of the flask.

When Laith dozed off, Melia pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, sitting close to the fire, alternately watching the sky and watching her companion. Laith heard her singing at one point, as they shifted restlessly between dreams and waking. It was a folk song about lovers, one that had been popular many eons ago, about a traveling musician from the far north, who charmed the firebird and lost her in the end.

The breeze carried the scent of pine and heather. Laith walked at an easy pace; ahead Melia took those characteristic quick steps, never stumbling or missing a foothold as the rocky slope steepened. She had taken a different form each day. This was the fifth day of the journey, and the trickster spirit took the form of a tall Valkyrie, equally curvy and muscular, with a cloak of pristine white feathers that, when stirred by the breeze, looked like her own set of wings. Her smile was mild today; her long locks the color of candied ginger, hung in intricate braids; and her complexion carried the rosy hues of dawn with deep olive undertones. Her lashes were as long as ever, and her dimples were unchanged. Her broad

shoulders and the muscles in her arms and thighs drew Laith's eyes, and the silken material of her tunic and leggings very much flattered her current form.

They were close to the peak. They walked quietly, or at least as quiet as she would allow. "You know, I thought you were best looking as a Valkyrie," Melia mused cheerfully as they followed her up the narrow, uneven trail, eyes on where they would need to step next. "Though you didn't have those black eyes then. Weren't they blue? Until you came into your full strength. When did it happen to you this time around? At the Winter Court, or….?"

Laith shook their head. They picked their way carefully past an uneven patch of the trail, catching up to her, less than a meter behind. Their eyes followed the neat boots slipping through the underbrush crowding the next switchback turn. "I was attacked, when I came to the mortal realm," they said. "I'm sure the wilds and the fey are safe for you. But places like Korkyro are safer for me."

A thoughtful hum came in response. Birdsong filtered through the trees. "Better to practice controlling your shadow magic in a place like this," she pointed out.

"I'm not looking for help."

"It went quite well before," came the chipper reply. "Only a village or two was decimated."

"I'm not decimating *anything*."

"I can think of some other things we could ruin."

It was impossible to tell if those black voids that took the place of eyes were rolling back in irritation, but the rest of Laith's expression certainly suggested it. They did not answer her. The sun was high up in the sky now, a pale golden chip behind the mist. The mountain air was cool and felt refreshing even as the day wore on. Ahead, the ground finally leveled out, behind a ring of toppled cairns and thornbushes that looked as if it had once been some ritual site. The dirt had been swept recently, and a pale, stranger with long blonde hair stood facing the sky, the edge beyond a sudden drop. Laith stopped just behind a thornbush, tilting their head, trying to pinpoint what was so strange about this. It was not what they had expected, but… The mist shifted above, and a shockingly cold gust of air blew around the clearing, stirring dust and leaves alike. The figure's hair hung still down her back, her dress unmoved. She slowly turned as Laith's guide stepped past a fallen heap of smooth stones. The sunbeam shone through her face; her dark eyes were discolored, like a corpse's. She smiled.

Their stomach twisted as they looked at that face, wretchedly familiar. Melia moved to embrace her and limbs passed through one another with dizzying effect. Blurred, giant shapes moved in the mists, beyond the edge, where it would be impossible for anyone to stand, for any plant or tree to grow.

"My love, my wife and husband," said the revenant. Her voice rushed and retreated like the wind around the jagged mountain peaks. "My sister. My dears." She sighed and gestured for Laith to come closer. Laith hesitantly obeyed. "You remember me? You look so different… Who are you now, love?" Their gaze moved to Melia briefly - her face was uncharacteristically serious, standing next to this ghostly figure. There was a resemblance in

their clothing. This spirit was from the old days, too, when the rainbow bridge still stood and the realms remained unburned. “You look so strong now.” The smile was warm. The faded dress was embroidered with flowers and berries, linked by decoratively curled leaves. Her hair was loose and fine. The clasp on her cloak was in the shape of a stylized torch, the fire rune at its center.

“I’m not your sister anymore,” said Laith quietly, stepping up and subjecting themself to the revenant’s gaze. “Sigyn? Isn’t it?”

“You do remember,” said the revenant with the same fondness and warmth. Her hand moved to brush Laith’s cheek, though Laith did not feel any of her touch. “Yes, Sigyn, once-Odin’s-daughter, once burdened with the world's end in my arms. A very, very long time ago."

“I thought you left with the stars,” said Laith. “I thought you were all gone.”

“I will go soon. The world serpent is still hungry. I have been keeping it sleeping, here, for you.”

Melia smiled, though it was a pained, lopsided expression this time. “You should be afraid of snakes, you of all people.”

Laith grimaced. “Did you know I was coming, too?”

Sigyn shook her head. The once-goddess tried to lay a hand on Laith’s arm, but it passed through them. “I wanted to see you both. I knew you would eventually come. Who else would go all the way to the edge of the world?” Her smile faded. “I wish your blood-brother was here, too.”

“I don’t,” said the trickster god, matching Laith’s expression.

“Follow me,” said the goddess. “There is something beyond the edge, in the mists. The old paths still cross the sky.” She turned, with eerie stillness, hair and dress untouched by motion or momentum. Her feet were bare and skimmed the earth without touching it. At the edge, she made a gathering motion, the mist pouring into her arms like thick cloth. She rolled it out again like a carpet, neat and practiced. Melia looked on with a brand new smile, still crooked, now amused rather than pained - impressed, perhaps, at her erstwhile wife’s new tricks.

“You aren’t angry with me?” Laith asked curiously. “I remember Odin was… more recently…” they trailed off. “Last I remember of him, he cast me out."

“So we were,” replied Sigyn in a matter-of-fact tone. “And my children, and their children, and the monsters they became.” The path rolled out in a ribbon of mist. “It won’t last long. Come, quickly.” She stepped onto the silver path hanging in the air. Her steps were measured, and Laith followed without hesitation this time.

Melia caught up quickly, though sometimes she walked in spaces where the path was not. Her eyes were bright and busy. The mist hung around the path, but cleared ahead, as the ground fell away far beneath. She did not look down, but around in the mist, as if searching for the

dark shapes that had been there before. “Sigyn, we aren’t exactly looking for the world serpent,” she ventured. “We were kind of looking for something else, for Laith.”

Sigyn didn’t answer. Her eyes were set on the path ahead. She said something surprising instead. “I left something for you here, before I faded. There…. wasn’t much left of me after those days. When they called you Prometheus, seeing how you carried the Phoenix’s fire, I was happy that you had a new place, somewhere soft to fall. Someone to take care of you.” Her tone had softened. “I thought, at least, with the rest of our family lost, after the realms burned…..” She trailed off. “But the cave that was ours, our prison for so long,” she started again, haltingly. “It was an anchor for me, even when the stars called me to walk with them. I changed it, little by little, to be a nest, a little hideaway.”

“Were we all lost? What about… our, uh, brother?” Laith couldn’t resist asking. The image flashed in their mind: standing before the tall throne, a muscular figure at one side, familiar strawberry curls at the other, Sigyn standing aside with the other goddesses who were not warriors. Lightning and thunder, voices shouting, Melia’s snide smile hiding fear. The memory of someone waiting for her, a realm away.

“He isn’t lost, but the hammer was, last I remember,” said Sigyn absently. “When the fires spread from Jotunheim, it was all chaos.”

The sky cleared after they had walked for just a few minutes. Laith had expected the ocean, with dark shapes of giant tentacles, or a serpent’s tail, or the same forest-and-meadow landscape that they had crossed before, but instead the sky endlessly fell below them, striations of clouds and fey birds scattered in layers, and below…. It was blurry, but Laith saw it as a strange landscape, dark and jagged, like something volcanic, but the texture was wrong… almost like bark. She smelled salt and some thick, rotten sap.

“We're on the great ash tree,” said Laith slowly. “What part of it? I thought the only branch left was taken up by the Winter Court. How are we here?”

Sigyn smiled. “I can *always* find the way home,” she said softly. “You are my family. Both of you. Regardless of what you have done, or not done, your blood sings to me. The runes speak of your destiny, and the path unfolds for it, and the path winds home again. I keep the hearth warm. I keep our family safe. I have little power, but still, I have this power. The tree was always the greatest part of our home.”

“You’d like the cottage for a home, Sigyn,” Melia mused. “Are you sure there’s no coming back? There are many hearths left. Lots of family. Lots of our blood out there. Haven’t killed all the whelps yet.”

“I am a revenant. The hunger in this place is the serpent’s hunger, and this is the serpent’s home, at the edge of the abyss, at the edge of the world. But away from here, the hunger will be my own, and I will not be a wife to you then. I will consume you.” She said it in the same soft tone as she had spoken about more tender subjects. “If you love me, you will let me go to the stars.”

“That's not fair,” Melia protested immediately. “I can change, Laith can change - and you just fade away? Don’t you have a destiny still?”

“My destiny is with the stars. The seven sisters are already finding new worlds, and new adventures. The old world is gone. We aren't meant to stay, my love. Don't you feel it?”

Laith shook their head, but, in some sudden instinct, reached for the trickster’s hand. To their surprise, the touch was allowed, even welcomed with a slight squeeze in return. A mocking smile, too, but no mocking words for once. “We'll do whatever you need, Sigyn. We owe you everyything,” they said, not looking at the trickster’s face, nor the revenant’s, but down at the expanse of the skies. The path curved and then, gradually, turned into a spiral, cutting through the layers of cloud. The drop down to that strange, immense tree-bark-land seemed like it would take a lifetime. How long had they been walking? The sun was no longer in sight, but beams of light played over the path and their tunics and armor, glinting in fragments as if through some lush green canopy.

“Yes, especially since I see my spouse has fucked one of my siblings again. I imagined it might stop with Thor,” sighed Sigyn - a mock sigh, and she laughed. It was said in good humor. She added, earnestly, “No, I wish you well. Neither of you should be alone at a time like this. We have lost so much. We have lived beyond the end of all things.”

Laith felt their face flush hot. “We - I mean - “ they stammered. Sigyn was so blunt about these things, it was always shocking coming from such a mild and gentle goddess. Yet, she had divulged more scandalous stories in the old days, hadn’t she? She had been one of the few who had deigned to speak of such things. They swallowed, steadied by the memory of hushed conversations in the hall of the goddesses, warm hands working her hair into intricate twists, the regular clacking of shuttles and whirring of looms. Another Valkyrie walking in, with curly strawberry hair falling down her back, a swagger in her hips. Meeting that smile with a glare. She had been different; *they* had been different. “I…. I guess you could put it that way,” Laith muttered. “It was…. It was really *them* we were all in love with. You know? Vasily and I could barely stand one another, most of the time. And I ended up leaving."

“Broke their heart, too,” said Melia, with a sour look.

“As I’m sure you would have, if your lovers had lived longer,” said Sigyn with a smile. “But you still have love, thin shadow as it is.”

“*You* would never be a shadow, Sigyn.” But she clutched Laith’s hand tightly as if needing something physical to hold onto. Laith’s stomach twisted up again. They looked at her face and then away again. The clouds swirled around them and they could feel the electricity building. Their pace quickened. Their shadow stretched behind, a dark ribbon mingling with the silver of the path.

The path turned within a bank of clouds, and when they emerged, shaking off condensation, the mouth of the cave opened wide before them, the path drawing within like the tongue of some huge beast. They entered, one after another, Sigyn’s sure steps leading the way.

Within, a cheerful hearthfire burned, and the pitted stone floor had been covered with rugs, the walls with tapestries and hangings. Cracks radiated from the center of the floor, not quite covered despite the efforts at decorations. Laith stepped inside and looked around appraisingly, their gaze moving to each corner of the little “nest.” The ceiling had once held some kind of brackets or nails; they had a sudden memory of chains and a slow drip of

poison. Not for them, but for the one whose hand they held. Screams had shaken the earth. And Sigyn, she had never been the same.

In that life, they had been too young to understand what they were seeing. The story she had heard from a beautiful Valkyrie's lips when she was older… They remembered the way her finger had repeatedly twisted and untwisted a long strawberry curl, fidgeting as her voice lowered, describing the pain and punishment as if she had known it firsthand. Laith knew why that was now, but then, in that life, it had seemed like mere sympathy.

"The serpent spoke to you here?" Melia asked, a strain in her voice. "Here, of all places? Gods, *why*?"

"It's the heart and belly of the world," said Sigyn. "The weight I carried here, and the curse you bore, it left a mark. This is a place where chaos whispers into the world." Her pale eyes reflected red from the fire. Her voice faded into the static crackle of the flames as she stood in the center of the cavern, hands slipping into the pockets of her tidy apron. It would have been cozy, if not for the remaining signs of the torment that had once been inflicted there, and the way Laith's hand was clutched with desperate tightness. A warmth pressed against their side; the trickster's wing-cloak wrapped around their shoulders as if they were the one who needed shelter. They both stared at Sigyn as she went to her knees by the hearth, curling up by the grate as if this was any ordinary domestic evening, gazing into the flames. In the silence, they heard the whispers that Sigyn had described, echoes of what could be and what never had been, possibility and grief.

I loved you, and you left me. Vasily's melodious, rich voice, broken with tears.

You killed him, and he was the best of us. Odin's deep pronouncement, with finality. *Justice must be done.*

This song is just for you. Vasily, proud and sweet.

Will you come see me? Before I have to go? I want to see you again. Ari, their voice soft with fatigue, begging, but not willing yet to speak of death.

Let's go find her. She's going to do something stupid again. Kill people. She'll listen to you. Her voice, all those years ago, a conversation that Laith had never heard, when they had been called Stigander and had been loved by Vasily.

It's been a year and a day. Would you do it again? Would you stay? I'm not planning to settle down just yet myself. Laith's shadow writhed in the hearthlight and they swallowed back tears. They remembered the handfasting, the first, and never again had they felt that braided ribbon around their wrist. Never again did they submit to be bound.

I have a place for us. You'll love it. A little cottage, a cozy nest for you. No one will bother us. They recognized the confidence in Vasily's voice, and remembered the smell of clover and apple blossoms, the call of a rosefinch and a flock of northern wheaters, and the sight of the little house by the forest that would one day hold the shining golden statue of a beautiful, dead youth.

Aren't those memories just like another life? Let them be the past. We can be happy now. That's all over. We're safe. Comforting broad arms, Vasily holding them close, the smell of cheap wine and warm bread and the sound of song wrapping around them as the room spun with a delightful dizziness, their friends' voices a familiar cacophony in the crowded taberna. Laith grimaced as they remembered deaths that had never happened, and now had, but inflicted only by the passing of time.

You know, I had a few ideas we could try out… Here, take a look, I think you'll really like this one. I wrote it for you. A neatly sealed scroll, a charming smile, and laughs shared between the three of them, as Vasily poured wine and the music came pouring out from deep in their chest.

You're not welcome here, not until you find your honor again. Until then, you'll stay in the mortal realm. Now go! The grave finality in Odin's voice made all three of them shudder, even after all this time.

Laith was lost in reverie until Melia pressed a kiss to their neck, and bit down hard. They yelped and stumbled back, memories of other kisses and other bites, warring with the stinging of their current flesh, the present body in disagreement with the past in their head. They took a deep breath, opening their eyes again. Shadows had swallowed the rugs and ate at the edges of Sigyn's glowing spirit. Laith pulled them back with an effort, breathing harder. Melia sat down by the grate, across from Sigyn, sprawling comfortably, as if to show that she was not shaken by this place, really. Sigyn's eyes were lost in the flames. The warm reflections on the panes of her face made her almost look like a blushing maiden once again.

"What is it trying to tell you?" Sigyn whispered.

"I - I don't know." Laith sank to their knees in front of the hearth. "I just hear Vasily and Ari and - and Odin. And yours, one of them." They looked to Melia, shaking their head. "Did I kill people after Ari - after they burned?" Their voice was shaking, too. "How many?"

Melia smiled up at them, those dimples popping up, always so charming. "Does it matter? That was eons ago. You and I are the only ones that know."

"I - I can't go back like this. Without fixing things," Laith said haltingly. Their voice was thick and the words were hard to make their tongue form. They pushed their hair out of their face with an unsteady hand. "You're right, I ruin everything I touch."

"I've been told the same thing," Melia told them. "Many times. Shouldn't we be happy anyway? Speak to the serpent, have done with it, and then let's leave this place. It's depressing. We can fly with Sigyn for a while, forget this world, see what's beyond those stars." She cast her smile at the revenant, her first wife, and the charm was stronger than ever. The offer sounded tempting, when she said it that way, with that smile. Even Sigyn returned a wan smile.

Laith stared into the hearth. The flames shifted, sparks popping up in the colors of foxfire, as if Melia's words had breathed new life into the fire. "I promised to return to Korkyro. I swore I'd deliver the message from Delphi."

“Life is long, and time is plenty,” Melia suggested. “Why rush back?”

Laith shook their head. “I can’t keep running away. I ran from you. I ran from the gods. I ran from Ari. I ran from Vasily. I ran after Elskede’s death. And then again, even when I summoned her myself. I came back to Korkyro and I don’t want to run away again. I want to make a home.” They surprised themself with those words. “Anthemis is a good friend. I want to keep my word. And I promised to deliver your message."

“Then listen. Breathe in the smoke,” said Sigyn, softly, earnestly. “The serpent has been waiting for you. Free yourself from this place, and us with it.” Her eyes burned red even as the trickster’s mouth twisted with bitterness. Sigyn opened the grate, and though she did not stoke the fire, or put in green fuel, it sputtered and spat out a pale stream of smoke, as silver as the mist that curtained the cavern from the endless sky outside. Laith closed their eyes, letting the shadow and smoke fill their lungs. Where the smoke burned their throat, the shadows followed. The temperature in the room dropped suddenly. If the goddesses spoke, Laith didn’t hear them. They could only hear the fire, and the voices within.

The past came first, and the things that had happened beyond their hearing or sight, then the things that never had been.

*I’ve been helping them, these kids need a lot of training before they can face the monsters out there. Stay with me, Hafsa. There’s room upstairs. Bran especially - you see how they need a challenge, right? And Saufeia, she needs a big sister like you. T*he words that Ari had never spoken, because they had never won that safe haven. The warring gods had driven them to their death first.

I had a vision, Hafsa. A child, dreaming, sleeping, with a sickness of rabid frenzy that will spread to all of us. You need to find the one with a cat’s eyes, born of the earth, a poppet given blood and breath. This one will save the generation of that child, you, and your house. Ari’s sister Galena, born of that second golden egg, blessed with future-sight, had never lived to have this vision. The sleeping child and the poppet had never existed, had never tasted life nor sickness. The frenzy had never spread. What was this life, where Galena had spoken to her with such familiarity, such concern?

Another life, a woman on fire screaming wordlessly, nails bloody against their face. The desert sun drowned them in its light. The wind carried the sound far, across red-brown sand and scrub brush. She pinned them against the acacia, thorns piercing their back and scalp. Still, no words came forth from her mouth, only her fumbling, bleeding hands, sparks flying, red-blue-white. The meaning was clear. “I have you. Finally.” They did not resist again. Black eyes drank in her fiery blue stare. A click of their tongue against the roof of their dry mouth, a nod, and she pressed her lips against theirs, hard. Everything burned. This, too, had never happened. The moment of freedom had never come. The gods’ warring had led to their deaths in that lifetime, too. They had been called Samad for such a short span of years.

Laith let each vision pass, breathing through it, letting their lungs full with the woody smoke of the burning birch logs. Beyond the acrid scent, they found something subtly sweet.

Let me show you. The voice shook the ceiling and reverberated in their chest. The serpent who hung in the abyss, who ate at the roots of the world, had spoken. The sound was

infinitely familiar. They had been formed at its roars and its singing, torn apart by the quakes it caused, and spurred to violence by its cries. Their soul lived within its great primordial chaos, an eddy in a great whirlpool, a gust in a storm. Until -

A small figure, curled up in the grasp of a great serpent's claw, each one the size of a mountain peak, and in the scaled palm, lush dark curls fanned out like rays from the sun. Her features had been the most delicate as Elskede, with a gently sloping nose and full lips, her complexion a warm brown, her face and hands soft and unscarred. The gold adornments shone as much as the dark scales, as the warm undertones of her cheeks and arms, the torque around her neck blazing in the sunrise. She stirred in a flurry of light, sparks flickering in her curls, her eyes opening and revealing twin flames, the blue of burning sulphur, a shocking cold brightness against the warmth of the sun and the massive scales. Her legs folded beneath her, her hands pressing on the hard surface. A slow blink, a smile, and she said, "Apep, I know you will kill me for this, but can I give you something first?" One would expect shyness, but she spoke with confidence, her voice carrying over the mountainous, coiling body of chaos around her. "I know you hate me. Let me do this, just this one time. You have the power here. Am I a threat to you? I'm dying. They all know it. You can see it. I'm weak. What harm will it do?" She did not sound weak; she sounded like she was coaxing a frightened animal, holding out something much-need by it, and hoping by her tone to entreat it to come near.

The claws crushed inwards, and she reacted as if she had not been languorously dozing just a moment before, taking hold of one and heaving herself up to the tip. She perched as if it was a treetop, her hold firm, gazing upwards until she spotted the maw of the serpent above, squinting, as it loomed over the sun. How was it so close and yet so far? She lifted a hand and felt its breath. Her hair was not moved in the breeze, and yet, with the force of its inhale, her dense curls lifted from her shoulders.

The great serpent's voice shook the very sky. Clouds dissipated, birdcalls fell silent, and the distant glint of stars flickered. A flurry of sparks shivered over her skin with the vibrations. ***What can you give me?***

"She's been fighting you. Hafsa doesn't want to come back to you. She doesn't want to be you anymore."

I am she. she does not commune but she is within. she cannot escape us

"She's tearing herself into pieces. She's given up so much already. Summanus took her strength. Demiurgus took her heart. Sophia took her spirit. Odin is trying to take her death, even now. He watches us. Even when I took her to the Court, his ravens follow us. She's not going to fight him. She wants them to win. She'll destroy herself just to try to hurt you."

I cannot be hurt. I am always-forming always-destroying. all her power is from me.

"Hafsa gave me this," she said. She pulled out from her tunic a long chain, hidden beneath the shining torque and the tunic's embroidered collar. At the end, a jagged crystal, webbed in chain, swam with the colors of an oil slick. As it dangled from her fingers, shadows gathered to it, and she shuddered with the sudden cold. Its aura unfolded with a sense of death. The

scales and coils pulsed beneath her; she clung more tightly to the tip of the enormous claw with her other hand.

give it to me

“I could do that.” Her smile waned to a sliver, the cupid’s bow taut. “Great Apep, we made vows, she and I. We are not enemies anymore. I want to have this life with her.”

we will always be enemies

“You can have our next lives,” she said. “When I’m not Elskede, and I’m not Hafsa. But this one, give just this one to us. Give me this life.”

you are already gone from this life. death is in your every breath. I taste your death

“Change that,” she urged. “And I’ll give you what you want.”

The assent came without another rumble from the serpent; the claw lifted her towards the sun and that waiting maw. Her tunic fluttered with the movement. She steadied herself, eyes blazing, clutching the crystal even as it bit into her palm. Only the sun stood between her and the void of its mouth, and as it bared teeth the size of a star’s tail, the immense pull of its gravity drew her into the air. She herself was blazing like a newborn star, wreathed in a halo of blue and red and white, the dark jagged crystal at its heart. “Take me if you must,” she called out, facing the darkness looming over the sun. “We can try this again next time!” Such bravado, as if this was some unruly pup that needed her patience.

It breathed a laugh that made sunspots flare and dazzle. Her fiery aura wavered but did not weaken. “I’ll burn out with you if that’s what it takes,” she said again. “But this piece of magic - this piece that Hafsa trusted me with - it’s not yours unless you give me something back! One life! You have every other!”

The coils of the serpent’s great, endless form wrapped around the sun in a brief eclipse. She floated in the dark sky, trailing sparks, as seven eyes opened, all eclipses, rings of darkness and bright. She let it pull her, let its breath surround her. A thread of darkness - a tongue? a tail? - wrapped around the hand that held the crystal, and the cold made her gasp in pain. The oil-slick colors flared at the center of her bright silhouette, painting her limbs with shadow, purple-blue-green, greying the warmth from her cheeks. The darkness squeezed at her, choking out all but the barest hint of light. Only then did it take the crystal, ripping it from the chain, pulling it into the depths. She clutched at her chest, where the shadows clustered, where the pendant had hung, breathless, unable to speak, her expression twisted in agony.

Then suddenly the sun blazed again and the coils of the serpent were thrown down again. Elskede fell with it, a roiling mass, that strange starry darkness eating at the brightness of her still. Sparks trailed, the colors the same as the crystal had been, that deep iridescence, but it was gone. Her voice, when it returned, was a thin ribbon of a scream. A layer of woolly clouds attempted to catch her; a gust of wind swirled weakly around her head; the spirits of the lower air were buffeted by her passing.

Laith watched helplessly as the burning woman fell to a strange, barren, rough landscape. Ridges and spurs burst up in regular intervals. Where she fell, the earth melted into a pit of flames, fire eating into a live tree, more enormous than one could fathom, wet smoke bursting as green sap sparked and sizzled, pouring out from the wound. She lay there unmoving. Laith's vision blurred with tears. How long did she lay there? The sap, the blood, the chaos magic eating at her inner fire…. They saw the nymphs stirring, those ancient ones, more bark than limb, stemming the tree's wound, the sap running down their arms and legs as they waded into the crater. Moss and lichen grew like a scab. Then, as clouds passed overhead, the nymphs scattering back from the center, flowers bloomed: purple clusters of blodberg and bruise-colored fjallagros. They retreated, calling to one another in their own language.

The flowers made a soft blanket, hiding the smoldering remains, as night fell, this time a true night, the sunset softening the rough landscape. The nymphs slumbered once again. The wind was cold and no creatures stirred in the night here, at the edge of the world.

But the moonrise came with song, voices raised with cheer. They were as familiar as the other voices in this vision, but out of place. This chant was from the Summer Court, a song about springtime and sunlight. The spirits called the earth to grow in the moonlight, to reflect the sun, to dream of dance and desire. Nymphs of flowers, hamadryads, the cloudnymphs, burbling naiads and tall oceanids, followed by satyrs with pipes, all traipsed to the edge and back, but not before pausing to encircle the new discolored patch.

Hooves stomped and hands clapped. From their midst emerged a gaunt figure, olive complexion deepened by the sun, braided hair bleached bone-white by magic more than time, shaved at the sides, dressed in winter layers with thick furs and a green tunic beneath. Beneath a heavy hood, her face was hawkish, with high cheekbones, a mouth too wide and thin to be pleasant, and dark pits of eyes that held neither whites nor iris. The narrow nose had been broken more than once. She stumbled drunkenly, or perhaps with desperation. Gloved hands scrabbled at the lichen and flowers as she dug down into their bed.

Laith remembered this part. *Their hands, meeting cold flesh finally, pulling the limp body loose from roots and leaves. They remembered begging, but refusing to cry out in front of so many eyes. Those lips, trembling, biting them until blood broke through skin. Clutching her close, refusing to let go even as the crowd reached to take them back into the procession. Furred limbs and leaf-scaled fingers and skirts of ocean water swept them up again. They cradled her in their arms.*

When the revelry had carried them back to the other side of the skies, to the green isle, to meadows of ebenus and daisies. She had little thought of giving offense. The dance carried on in a more disorganized fashion, as they called the star-sisters down to join them, and even a few lampades emerged from their deep caverns. When her eyes opened, Hafsa had her cradled in her arms beneath a spreading oak, thick winter cloak spread out beneath them as a blanket in consideration of the dew. Her long, dark lashes fluttered, the flames behind flickering like guttered candlelight. "El, can you hear me?" she breathed.

A rattling breath, then a sigh, and the smaller woman pressed her cheek against Hafsa's chest, and pressed a hand against the oak's trunk, reaching behind, to heave herself into a

sitting position. “I’m here,” she whispered back. “I promised I wouldn’t leave you just yet. I’m sorry I scared you again. I’ll be okay.”

“When you went through the ring, where did you go?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how to describe it…. I’m sorry, I know your brother will be angry. He didn’t even want us to come to the summer festival.” Her voice was reedy with hoarseness. Sap and tree-ash still coated her arms and legs. The barest, weakest sparks flickered in her curls, in new iridescent tones. Her other hand clutched the folds of her tunic where Hafsa’s crystal had hung beneath. Hafsa brushed some of the ash from her cheeks with her thumb, and El turned her face to the touch, smiling faintly. “We’ll go home tomorrow. I can open the summer gate in the morning. I’m still their summer maiden for another day.”

“Tonight,” said Hafsa firmly. “I’ll fly us back. Save your strength, El. You’ve been ill.”

El’s smile was sweet. “I’ll be okay. I’m sorry I scared you, love.” Her grip tightened around the stained cloth of her tunic. She took a deep breath and moved to stand, Hafsa’s hands steadying her. When she coughed, she gave out gray smoke and purple-black-copped sparks. Hafsa’s concern didn’t extend to those details. Her stare followed the dimpled smile instead. “I’m ready,” El reassured her. “I just got knocked out, I think…. the fairy wine got to my head.” It wasn’t a lie. They both had it on their breath.

Hafsa’s arms encircled her and she swept the cloak around the two of them for warmth. “Will you let someone look at you?” she asked. “You were gone…. I don’t know how long.”

“I don’t know how long,” agreed El.

“Hold on tight, all right? El?” Hafsa pulled her close without waiting for an answer.

Laith remembered this, too. Bones warping, wings of shadow, the revelers dispersing with shrieks and laughter; then, she had been stronger, able to take another shape with ease. El was cradled again in clawed, scaly limbs, this time with utmost care, held close to the thick-plated chest. The dragon’s long tail whipped out as she took to the air. Dark scales and an aura of shadow hid them from sight as they flew on. El shivered and burrowed deeper into the thick winter cloak against the night air. She whispered what she remembered to the wind, the dragon hearing little of it.

“Apep spoke to me. It ate the sun and it was going to eat you and me next. I don’t know if I did the right thing. I don’t want it to have you.”

The shadows swallowed them, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she was being laid in their bed, and the dragon arched her back over it, twisting her length and exhaling the chill of death, as El shivered, watching Hafsa shed her scales. The sheets would be ruined by the sap and soot, a problem for the morning. Soon Hafsa slumped next to El, who drew close and looped her arms around the taller woman’s neck. “I love you,” she whispered. “I won’t disappear like that again.”

The embrace was returned, though with the slowness of fatigue. Laith remembered those soft lips, the warmth of her, and the days after, how El had revived. After Hafsa’s concern and her

brother's anger had passed, they reluctantly thanked the summer court for whatever their festivities had sparked anew. That next week, Hafsa noticed how El's fire magic had changed, both in color and ferocity. El admitted the loss of the crystal, and spoke again of strange visions, but any concern was dismissed - there were other worries, other quests, friends in trouble. Elskede was never ill again.

Laith felt a hand holding each of theirs, left and right. They took a deep, shuddering breath. "What do you want from me? Are you telling me it's come due? Or do you want me to disavow what she did? Because I'm not going to do that. El did that because… she did it out of love. I won't take it back. It's not right."

But the only answer was another vision overwhelming them again with a wave of darkness.

The throne room was empty of the gods who should have been seated in judgment over the waiting dead. Shades thronged at the edges and piled out into the courtyard and halls, listless, waiting to be guided to a destiny that might never come. These were not revenants, Laith remembered. The shades were grey, weak in both substance and memory, moving as if blown in the wind. Neither vengeance or regret drove them. They only shied away from the dais, where the Reaper stood in chains before the thrones: Thanatos, son of the night, guide of the dead, the psychopomp, the inexorable one. The chains were forged of a dark stone, glimmering with faint violet and emerald like a raven's feathers, but something much stronger than the feldspar or labradorite it resembled. The scythe he should wield lay at his back, before the empty thrones, scattered to the tiles.

He was not alone. A youth who wore the fashion of a princeps gone to war, with gilded cuirass and greaves, lay bloodied, struggling to stand. The chest of the cuirass was deliberately molded into a shape ambiguous of breasts or pectorals, though the muscles below were overly-defined in the traditional style. Beneath the cuirass, their white tunic was longer than fashionable, too, and embroidered with lavender and orchid blossoms. The pale colors did not flatter their ashen complexion, which looked as if it had once been bronze, but had not seen the sun in months or years. Their nose had been struck, along with the backs of their hands and legs, and right cheek and temple, all dripping sluggishly with ichor. Their dark curls were damp on their forehead with ichor and sweat. Their eyes were set on the thrones. On the throne that had been Hades's lay a twisted iron crown.

Thanatos surged forwards, pulling at the chains to no avail, as the youth managed to raise their blade again. That piece of equipment was standard issue, and well-worn. "I have to do this," they said, and their voice was hollow.

Laith remembered that voice, those odd pale eyes, and the well-trained movements. They had, after all, helped train Bran, in another life. When their safe haven had been destroyed, Bran had been saved at a high cost. And then, when Summanus rose… No one had been there to protect them. Ari had been reborn far away, and they, as Stigander, had given away too much of themselves, just as Elskede had tried to prevent Hafsa from doing. Melia had not become herself yet; the trickster had been lost to the burning realms, father of the wolf and the wolves and serpent alike suffering from the cataclysm they themselves had caused in their rage against the gods. This, too, Hafsa and Elskede had failed to prevent. What was one princeps, when the realms were dying?

“Showing me my failures doesn’t help your cause,” Laith said aloud. “I don’t regret going down to the Underworld. It kept you out of my life. Why do you want back in so badly? I’m not fighting your war against the gods. I’m not going to be part of that again.”
They clutched the hands of their two companions tightly as another wave of vision came over them.

Two figures emerged from the mass of shades, a third following. Vasily, Stigander, and following, Ari. The giant musician, Vasily, whirled and drummed among the columns and statues, who he almost met the height of, which came to life in answer to his song. The shades who were slow to scatter were trampled, grey wisps dispersing in the air. Stigander charged ahead, her form hardly human, spikes of bone protruding from her worn leather, teeth too many now for her mouth to hold. Consuming shadows and deathly cold spread across the throne room with her every step. The only one that the shadows did not touch was Ari, a silhouette of flame, the only source of brightness left in the room. They strolled towards Bran and Thanatos with the confidence of a friendly visitor. They had been familiar with the palace and the paths around it. How many times had they paused here for a chat before finding their way to rebirth? Would the gods have greeted them with fondness, were they present?

The desperate Bran did not give in, and managed to land a few more blows to Thanatos, slashing his arm and chest. The god did not cry out, but said in a voice that echoed in their heads, “My lord may be absent, but I will not neglect my duty. I cannot let you take his crown. Neither you, nor Summanus. Stop this foolishness, or you will die.” The deep hood of his robes hid his expression. His voice was flat with inevitability, showing neither sorrow nor anger. While he could not reach the scythe, it didn’t seem that he needed a weapon. When Bran made contact, their complexion greyed further, and they looked more and more like a shade.

“You have to stop this,” Stigander’s voice was a bestial growl, the words mangled by changing teeth and tongue. Her claws dug into Bran’s arm and shoulders as she hauled them back. Vasily’s dancing statues formed a barrier, though with a cry of anger, Bran summoned vines that pulled them down at the feet of the columns that now crowded close as well. The ground quaked, tiles breaking and statues cracking into pieces.

“Please?” Ari slipped between the columns, a sliver of light, their smile kind, their hand extended as Stigander grappled the princeps with difficulty. Shadows consumed vines which burst forth again and seeded more of their kind, golden pollen floating in the air. Bran’s sword was caught in Stigander’s now-scaled side, tougher than most armor, as she gasped in anger and pain. The coldness was eating at Bran, their limbs starting to become heavy, their lips now paled and their muscles seizing, but it was too slow, too slow….. ichor as thick as tar poured from her side, as Vasily’s wild song reached its height. All hearts pulsed to the beat he set. Wounds began to knit, but was it enough?

They locked eyes. “I’m sorry, I was too late to help you,” said Ari softly. “Will you come with me?”

The sword dropped. “I have no choice,” said Bran. “I’m his vessel. Summanus. He’s going to take me tonight.”

“We’re going to get you out of here before that. I promise.” A few more steps, slow and careful, across the cracked tile floor. They were all breathing at the same interval. The drumbeat was steady.

“No one can stop him. I tried.” Their voice broke. “The raven warned me I would die. He’s too strong.”

Ari nodded. “He’s too strong for anyone alone. But together….. let me try. I’m a friend, remember?”

Laith remembered how the recognition lit up the princep’s face. The trust. The love. She hadn’t known it at the time. Of course, who couldn’t love them? Ari was beautiful. Elskede was beautiful. “Are you trying to make me jealous?” they said - but bitterly. “I don’t own her. Anthemis cares for her too. What does it matter? She can do whatever she likes.”

Their hands clasped, and Stigander let the princeps go to Ari and be wrapped in arms of flame that did not burn their flesh like her caustic shadows had. “I’m sorry,” Ari repeated. “I should have been there. I should never have let them take you away.”

Vasily and Stigander approached the chained god; their shadows and song soon freed him. He first retrieved his scythe, and then gave a formal bow. “You have my thanks, and the thanks of my mother Nyx. I understand you have aided my siblings too.”

“Yes. Morpheus,” said Stigander. “Consider this a debt paid.”

Thanatos paused and seemed to look her over. It was not a pleasant recognition. “Ah, yes.”

“We were just leaving, my lord,” said Vasily quickly, throwing an arm around Stigander’s shoulders. “We’re going to find him and Persephone, and free them from whatever Summanus has done to them. But here, if you get bored waiting for Hades to return…” He fetched a scroll from within his pack and offered it to the god before steering Stigander back towards the others.

“Was that a good idea?” questioned Stigander, when her mouth was more human again.

Vasily laughed and took Ari’s other hand, leading the way out to the palace halls. “I have a reputation to uphold!” He tossed his long braid back and puffed out his chest. “Besides, Stig, he looks like he appreciates some fine poetry. Don’t they have all the best poets down here? I want a warm welcome when I come back!"

B ran was silent, following Ari as if they were the only thing they could see in the world. Stigander rolled her eyes. “He’ll come take your soul early when he sees what you wrote about him,” she muttered. She didn’t have love in her eyes for Vasily, then, only irritation.

Laith’s lips trembled, paradoxically, though the memory of their bickering was something they now knew to treasure. Their heart pulsed in their ears like the memory of the drum. “I didn’t come here just to reminisce," they muttered. “Get to the point already.”

“Listen,” whispered Sigyn again.

The taberna was the only one in the small Dalmatian village. They crowded in, following the elders into the wavering orange candlelight and the fragrant smell of slow-cooking pašticada. Vasily was already drunk but that only meant he was singing as they walked in, and no one was upset at his beautiful voice. He knew all of the traditional songs. Stigander had managed to find a cloak to hide the more unusual features she could no longer transform back. Ari's fire was well banked within their skin. The others - Mosrael and Arden - were late, and slipped in while drinks were being poured.

Most had not come. Nerva was missing, and Khrysa had always followed her. Melia had vanished. Thorunder and Aistulf quested to the north, following a raven's warning - Odin's hold on them was as strong as ever. Clara had returned to her home to help her sisters rebuild the town, with Ged and Eileen pitching in where their wizardry could be trusted. Bran and Sirras were helping the recovery efforts in the east. Arden had invited Matthias, but he had stayed with the ravens, citing that he was more comfortable in that form now.

"To the ruins of Rome," toasted Mosrael, dark eyes flashing, laughter in her voice. There had only been one white streak in her hair when they first met; now there were as many white streaks as black locks. She was strangely small without her armor, and she spoke of a new apprentice from the south, Fatimah, who had a singular talent at healing.

"To the emperor's death," Arden added, knocking their glass against Mosrael's, settling on the wooden bench next to her. Ari gave a soft laugh. They were draped over Vasily's thigh, reclining in their sizable arms. Their eyes were drowsy with drink after just a cup. They wore white and purple robes, silken stola, gold rings and torque, and tasseled sandals that made every step look like a dance. Vasily wore the heavily embroidered tunic and jacket of a bridegroom from his homeland and a crown of marigold, cornflowers and poppy sat askew over his braids.

"To the hottest one of us," proposed Vasily, and sputtered with mock outrage when every name was shouted out but his own.

"To the monsters," Stigander said with a mocking, bitter look of her own, draining her tall glass all at once. Ari's besotted smile stung, and she looked away as the others fell into familiar chatter.

"That never happened," said Laith. "We weren't enemies. We aren't, anymore. Those memories aren't true. We changed them. We changed our past. Melia, and the tree - and you. You took that past from us. I saw it."

They both laid in his arms, supported by the muscle only one born of giants could have developed. Even Vasily couldn't tell which one was which. She had taken the iron crown, and used its power to deceive Summanus in the end. But she had kept the crown after, and kept the disguise, not wanting to see her own monstrous face. This form had no malformed vestigial wings, no ill-fitting fangs, no twisted muzzle or patches of scale over pitted flesh. She could forget her anger for a time, her irritation with him, and the bitterness against them both. What wasn't a deception: in this body, she felt beloved. After a time, she set the crown aside, and let them love that face, too.

“If you’re trying to humiliate me, I don’t really care what you think,” said Laith. “Everyone knows we were together like that.” They thought of the serpentine images carved into the plinth below the golden statue, and the intaglio ring with Vasily’s portrait. “Apparently,” they muttered. Melia chuckled next to their ear and pressed their lips to the small of their neck. Laith shivered at the touch but they found themselves smiling suddenly. “Melia was there too. Unless you wrote that bit out, Great Apep?” they challenged.

The memories surged again and they choked at the sudden overwhelming stench of blood.

Arden, before the Summer Court, bowed as the queen commanded her Champion step forward. Behind Arden huddled a group of youths who only seemed related in the loosest pattern. A gangly centaur clutched a book to his chest, a slender nymph closed her fist around foxfire, a giant with long braids was humming to themself nervously, and a diminutive figure with eyes like a cat hid behind his siblings.

“It isn’t their fault their magic is like this. We’re teaching them to control it. We’ll keep them from doing it near anything flammable in the future. I’ve already healed the trees.” Arden hardly looked aged. They had always had that calm tone in moments of distress. “So if anyone is going to take punishment, it’s me, I’m the one who’s teaching them. It’s not them you want!” Their voice did raise slightly as the Champion approached, a faceless thing of leaf-armor and bark-helm, and a sword blazing as bright as the summer sun. The Court ringed them as if to prevent escape. The Queen sat on a throne of mahogany carved with countless blossoms.

At her right hand, a familiar nymph watched the proceedings in the make-shift arena. Her hair hung in loose waves, the color of ginger candy; her simple shift was made of apple blossoms and cloud-silk. Her feet were the paws of a dark-furred wolf. “Let them fight, it will be such a great show,” she agreed with the Queen, her smile full of mischief. She crooked her finger as the Champion made the first swing at Arden, splitting their shin open.

But when they opened their mouth to cry out in pain, the roar of a great bear emerged, and the fur and claws immediately followed, a wave of transformation more elegant than most could manage as they leaped at the Champion. The returning blow ripped open its leafy chest and sent puffs of pollen through the air. When it spoke, it spoke like the wind through the trees, and it rose up like it was a puppet on strings.

When the bear rose from its haunches, it didn’t get up again - but it managed to get the sword between them just in time. The crowd tittered. “First blood! First blood!” cried a satyr with donkey ears.

“I wasn’t there for that,” said Laith. “I left. Ari was dead. I didn’t want to see any of them. Not Vasily, not Melia, no one.”

A necklace of bone ringed the Queen’s neck, broken pieces of some once-enormous beast, joined in clever new patterns with resin and gold. Melia deftly parted the clasp, and laid it on a lacquered wooden table, before returning to assist with dress. “My Queen, your wisdom as ever impresses me. Shall I send word to….?”

“No. I’m sure he’s heard already. King Tove will take heed, or risk the treaties she’s worked so hard to make. Still, those were ninety year oaks. If it happens again, I’ll water their seedlings with blood.” The Queen’s hair was manicured juniper and she fastidiously tidied a furled cluster of leaves before turning away. When court robes had been put away, she moved to the adjoining suite, Melia following with an admiring look at the back of her calves. The Queen sat in her shift at a massive desk woven of living roots. “Have we had any news about the location yet?” She sifted through mundane leaves of parchment, of course, less mundane materials like actual leaves. Her hand hovered over a tightly sealed scroll for a moment - the seal was a firebird encircled by its own flame and tail feathers - before moving to a report from the nymphs of the outer reaches.

“No, my Queen,” said Melia. “Stigander went into the Night after Mosrael, that was the last news. She is yet to emerge. Mosrael was dying, so I suspect that was how she wanted to go. I sent a message to Lady Persephone.”

“She has never been regular about her correspondence in springtime, or winter, for that matter,” said the Queen with a wrinkle of her nose. “What of the excavation of Rome?”

“Nothing but ashes,” said Melia, with perhaps too much satisfaction, and belatedly added, “my Queen.”

“Anything of Olympus?”

Melia smiled. “I met with Lord Hermes, as you requested, my Queen. He reports they continue to weed out traitors in their midst. There are comings and goings, but no new births, no deaths.”

“It isn’t death we are watching for.” The Queen tossed aside the report and summoned a broad monstera leaf to write upon with a quill carved from the same bone as the necklace. “Are you still on speaking terms with Vasily, my dear?”

“Of course, my Queen,” replied Melia easily. Her eyes followed the movement of the quill, but she didn’t seem to care about the words being written with it.

“I’ll be disappointed when I’ve run out of favors that you owe me,” the Queen sighed. “How will I find another lovely girl to wait on me?”

Melia grinned. “I can think of a few ideas.”

“I know I didn’t finish the clean up job. Because I left,” said Laith. “I know dragonbone is on the black market. How was I supposed to know Hafsa’s body - *my body* - was scattered in a million pieces? To the four winds? I can’t undo that. What do you want from me? Do I need to go find the damn bones?”

Quiet.

Laith’s head spun.

make your choice

be whole again

be lost again

“I did make my choice,” said Laith. “If I’m lost, that’s just the way it is.” They said it without thinking. “That Queen is long gone. Anyone else who had a piece of me - they’re all in the stars now. I’m not going to chase them. I’m going home to Korkyro.”

A rapid in-drawn breath and the darkness receded. The room shook. Laith collapsed to the floor before the hearth. The fire had gone out, and Melia was blowing on the coals. Sigyn was taking a golden apple from the woven bag that had slipped out of Laith’s hands some time ago.

“We’ll go home tomorrow,” said Melia, when the fire had sparked up again. It burned green and blue and violet like the foxfire. “I’ll show you the way.” When she looked up, Sigyn was gone. The great serpent did not speak again. Melia’s expression darkened, but she managed to pull Laith into their lap, carding their hair between her fingers until they stopped shaking. The pad of their thumb brushed the shaved temple with a pleasant roughness. “Should’ve packed more wine,” she reflected with a sigh. “Spiced wine by the hearthfire. Do they have that in Korkyro?”

“I dunno. I’ll find some,” Laith said in a hoarse whisper. “Stay with me.” Their eyes dipped closed.

“Don’t take it back when you wake up, darling.” Melia gave a ghost of a smile, looking at the place where the revenant had disappeared.

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