as kindling

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by cloudycats

Summary

Thou'rt yet to become me. Thou'rt yet to become a god.

Melina's waking.

Chapter 1

They wake to a furred snout nudging their cheek.

They raise a hand, rest it against a warm and heavy shape above them, and open their eyes – their eye. They can't feel the left one.

They can't feel much of anything. Calm veils them like a burial shroud. One's heart resides in the body, not the soul, and they don't have the luxury anymore.

“Torrent.” Their mother's steed, as familiar to them after all these years as their mother herself. They find a horn and pull themselves one-handed to a sitting position. He bears the treatment without complaint, dark eyes fixed on them with an intensity unlike him. “You're worried. For me?”

He snorts softly.

“Don't be,” they murmur. They? No. She. For now, at least. “Should I take a name?”

A new one, she means, because she has one already. Although, like the rest of what once belonged to her, it fits oddly, a set of armor meant for a different person.

But shedding the name so quickly seems a waste. The rest she can let go of, but *Godwyn the Golden* was more than the sounds that comprised it. She can hold onto it for longer. She's the daughter of Marika and Godfrey, friend to Fortissax, sister to Miquella and Malenia and Radahn and Rykard and... Ranni.

In her right hand she holds the knife that killed her. On her left gleams the ring that houses Torrent's ashes.

In the darkness beneath Leyndell, nestled between the Erdtree's and Greattree's black and poisoned roots, a flame of waning grace flickers. Her own hollow sockets peer down at her from above it, and she meets that shadowed gaze and feels nothing at all. There must be a purpose for why she yet lives, with her eye cut by her uncle's black flame and her body left to fester undying.

There's no need to ask *how* she survives, only *why*. The *how* is obvious. No person but one could have passed Torrent on to her, and, besides, she has a memory that belongs to her and her alone, not to her other self. Marika, impaled but shining still, brushing her hair aside to press a kiss to her brow.

She lets out a long breath. “Shall we go?”

Torrent lowers his head and disperses. She reaches for the site of grace, for the presence of the Erdtree it links to, for the city that rests in its light. Home, and perhaps an answer –

NO.

– she recoils. Gold bleeds across her palm from a hundred pinprick wounds, as if she tried to grab a fistful of thorns.

Someone has sealed Leyndell. She caught a signature – Morgott the Grace-Given – but the name rings unfamiliar. Her father is exiled, her mother imprisoned, her stepfather... well. And the title of Grace-Given does not belong to a demigod, nor even to any of their aliases. A powerful usurper reigns in the capital.

She purses her lips. In this state, she cannot face them to reach the Erdtree and her mother inside of it.

She needs an ally. Better yet, a friend. Someone who might face an army for her, and she for them. Someone who has, as well, their own reasons for seeking the Erdtree, and who she can aid to accomplish that goal. Someone who can survive insurmountable hardships and rise again and again in the face of failure.

How convenient. She turns her fingers over, letting Torrent's ring catch the grace's light. She already has someone who fits those conditions close at hand: her mother's loyal steed. “Shall we go on a journey, Torrent?”

Chapter 2

A problem becomes apparent.

The once-prince of Leyndell cannot stray from the sites of grace where the Erdtree's roots breach the surface. When she attempts to scout farther she falls apart, her soul shattering to reform at the last site she rested at. And, beyond a certain distance from the tree's trunk, holding her shape grows taxing even near abundant grace.

Her body has bloated and sunken itself into the base of the Erdtree, so near the Erdtree and the linked Greattree is where she must remain. She can break the tether, but doing so would take with it her ability to affect the world. She would reduce to a wandering spirit trapped in a single, unchangeable moment. After all, memories, too, reside in the body – or, for the dead and returned, the Erdtree. If she cuts her connection to both her body and the tree, she will lose herself.

It would be counterproductive.

Torrent cannot bear the weight of her task alone. He cannot see grace to show him the way through the stretches of land she cannot manifest in. She needs to find a third member for their band.

With that, she'll need a name of her own, too. *Godwyn* belongs to her, but it cannot anymore serve for her only name. The separation of her body has changed her. She is more than Godwyn, and she is less. As a description, it no longer suffices.

Melina will do. On the nose, but she's always liked the sound of it.

(Would Godwyn recognize her should they meet? Would he care for her, this strange, cold shadow he's cast?

Torrent treats her no differently, but she is different. She should feel wroth. She would have felt wroth before. She has done nothing for her stepsister to bear her such a grudge as to cut her throat in the night and discard her body in the dark. Godwyn will never be as he was nor as he should have become. What remains of him is not him.

Ranni stole the Rune of Death from Uncle Maliketh to commit the act – and how, indeed, did she accomplish that, either?

Melina does not doubt Marika's love. Marika loved Maliketh when she left him to pace restlessly in the city with little meaningful responsibility to occupy his thoughts, and she loved Melina's father as she stood before him to dictate the terms of his death. Love is an emotion first and foremost. Emotions need not match to actions.

Love means as much as you allow it to.

For Melina, it might mean Marika will have a reason.)

Torrent chooses an unknown, maidenless Tarnished. In accordance with his decision, Melina passes on his ring, although she withholds her own judgement until she can see more of them than their unconscious body broken at the base of a cliff.

The name they introduce themselves with seems made up on the spot, and they remember so little of the world that their first glimpse of the Erdtree stops them dead in their tracks. She watches them from beside the grace, formless and unseen, while they inform the white-masked Tarnished that the tree is very large and very far away and they should very much like to go to it.

So would Melina.

This might work out.

Assuming they stop sidetracking, at least. Somehow they end up stranded in a land of red skies and bleeding earth, where the air lies rancid and heavy with rot. When they discover Sellia, Melina finally recognizes the lay of the land as Caelid's. Sprawling, ancient Caelid, home to great trees rumored by the dragons to have been old before the Erdtree sprouted from its seed. But the dragons have fallen, too.

The Caelid in her memories is beautiful.

Should she feel some way about that?

...It's no matter.

The Tarnished returns eventually to Limgrave and the merchant at the Church of Elleh. A new voice beckons them on arrival.

Renna the witch, the woman calls herself. A vestige of Destined Death marks her right eye. She speaks of Torrent and carries a pouch of ashes Melina can hear howling from when she focuses – judging from what Renna says, those must be Marika's wolves who passed on when Godwyn was a child. However did she get her many hands on them? At the last moment before she disperses into the glimmering blue of Carian sorcery, her gaze finds Melina's unseen one and the corner of her lips turns up.

Melina has been stranded out of the loop for far too long. She doesn't recognize the new players. Renna, Morgott, the Lord of Blood, Godrick the Grafted, Gurranq...

...no, that final one is familiar, even if he's draped himself in robes large enough to drown in. Best not to show herself near him. Godwyn was fond of him, but, half-dead spirit that she is

now, he would move to finish what Ranni began. She wouldn't begrudge him for it, but she has a mission to complete.

Chapter 3

The Tarnished dies quite a lot on the path leading into Stormveil Castle. They die quite a lot everywhere, so Melina thinks little of it until, finally, they traipse to the mouth of the tunnel, gesture rudely at someone on the bridge, turn around with the intent of returning to the grace, and topple over as a pair of golden swords thud into their back. The force sends the body sliding a few feet before it dissolves into light.

Certainly Torrent must have chosen well.

They go on to spend most of two days throwing themselves at a runebear in a cave in the Mistwood. Melina doesn't comment. She's in no great rush, and she's asking much of them.

They do get to Stormveil again. Past whatever foe vexed them on the bridge, through the portcullis and its many, many mounted crossbows, and eventually to a Great Rune. At the grace in a sunlit graveyard, Melina finds them singed and battered but alive. A woman in similar condition is leaving through the throne room across the yard.

The Tarnished speaks to a man, a castle servant who's having a gleeful time stomping on... that must be Godrick. She can't see his face, but the hair looks familiar. It's styled after Godfrey's.

When the Tarnished has moved on and Gostoc has finally left, Melina manifests, crouches by the corpse, and turns it onto its back. Godrick's features are ashen and sallow, nothing much like her father's and less like Godwyn's, but if she imagines the wrinkles less deep, the cheeks filled out....

She doesn't remember fathering a son. She doesn't remember marrying. But Limgrave sits far from the Erdtree's base. The memories might yet find her.

Or they might not. It'd be no loss. Perhaps Godwyn could have felt pride for his offspring no matter what Godrick became, but Melina does not. Her grip tightens on the corpse's shoulder before she lets it go. What a waste.

Boc cries on occasion. He does it quietly into his arm, even though he thinks no one is around. She would frighten him by going to him, but there nonetheless seems something perverse about watching without acting.

So she tells the Tarnished, who listens, nods, and goes wildly out of their way to do something about it. *Wildly* out of their way – rather than telling Boc what he would like to

hear, they hunt down in an isolated village upon Mount Gelmir a fetish housing a record of a demihuman mother saying it to her child.

Melina hasn't the words.

They've developed considerably since she and Torrent found them. They're not the sharpest blade in the armory and have a tendency to go along with whatever they've been told by people they met thirty seconds previous. (Or to *not* go along if the instructions involve avoiding danger.) But they appear to have acquired a goal of their own at some point, their own image of what the world should become. When they push open the gates of Leyndell, they do so with intent.

They've grown more than Melina has.

Make of thyselves that which ye desire. Be it a lord. Be it a god.

Godwyn could have become both. Godwyn... might be in the process of becoming both. Melina is so disconnected from her body that she can't tell its state, and returning to examine it accomplishes as much as judging the progression of a cancer by looking at a person from the outside.

But should ye fail to become aught at all, ye will be forsaken.

Was that what happened? Did her other self not hold enough ambition? Certainly he was content with what he possessed, but was that unjustified for the prince of a golden empire?

Is that why her mother sent her father away? To unsettle her into action?

No, Marika was not... cruel. Godwyn would have known.

He would have known, and he would have overlooked it, for his mother was the sun about which the world revolved. But Melina was born in the shadows at the foot of her own corpse. The love she holds for Marika comes secondhand.

She bids the Tarnished farewell and paves her own way into Leyndell. This near to her goal, anticipation claws at her and ushers her on. She hasn't the patience for the Tarnished's detours.

Although she does take one of her own to check the sewer passages. A path into them has survived, an air hole in the ashen grave that buries the lower portions of the capital. She verifies it can access the underground road of the shunning-grounds, then moves on. It's not important. But no one chooses to be born cursed, and nothing should die trapped alone in the dark. There should exist a way out even if it isn't meant for use.

Up Gransax's wing and the Erdtree's roots, towards her parents' – towards her mother and Radagon's bedchamber. Of course, she doesn't expect to step into the Erdtree Sanctuary and have *her father* appear in a shimmer of gold. She backpedals, aware of her eye widening and her breath catching – surprise isn't an emotion, only a physical reaction.

This isn't her father, but an echo. Who would dare entreat of grace to sully the memory of the first Elden Lord? She sprints out of the room, shimmies up the wall, and climbs around the building instead to reach the bridge to her mother's chamber.

An assassin sits on the steps to the Elden Throne. Melina watches from the doorway, brow furrowed, but the woman doesn't appear to be paying attention.

Revenge would be pointless. Rather, Melina would know what the Black Knife intends in this place. But since she can't simply ask, she's left without expedient options, and she does not imagine there is any reason so important that she cannot delay finding it out for a while. She loosens her grasp on her form and walks up the stairs invisible; the assassin maintains her watch undisturbed.

The courtyard now. Ghosts linger at the corner of her eye: her father on the Elden Throne, her mother praying inside of the tree. A trail of gold beckons her on. She barely notices breaking into a run.

Though she certainly notices stopping.

Half of the courtyard still remains between her and the throne, but someone has stepped out of the passage from the tree.

Chapter 4

Recognition hits as he moves into the light. She's seen him once before, wrinkled and blood-soaked and wailing in a brightly lit room, before her father steered her out and shut the door.

The Omen coming towards her is a grown man sure in his movements, though there's a beastly poise to how he holds himself. The Erdtree's shine colors in the features that lie buried in her memory as stagnant shadows. He halts by the largest throne, and before he can speak Melina stutters a step forwards and says, “You're the one Mother and Father abandoned.”

Despite the distance between them and the whisper of her voice, he chokes on whatever he meant to say.

She runs her words by herself again. Oh. “I apologize. That was uncalled for. But how did the ruling of Leyndell fall to you? Should Miquella not have... he could not be persuaded to leave the Haligtree.” Morgott the Grace-Given. An Omen, but one recognized by the Greater Will.

By the law of regression, all things yearns to converge. Curses and blessings might, too.

Still, there really must have been no one else at all to take the position. An Omen to rule the golden city. A shardbearer of divine blood, lone eye alight with grace. The younger brother she would have wanted to meet were she still wholly Godwyn, or whole at all. Beneath the curse, she finds much of their father in his features.

But he's in her way.

He hunches faintly, similar enough to Maliketh before a jump that Melina tenses. The cane creaks in his grip. “Which branch of our bloated family spawned thee?”

“I am Melina, but, before this, I was called Godwyn the Golden.”

His expression clears, and he straightens. “*Godwyn*. Should I hail thee sibling?” He approaches again, languid, measured and unhurried. Backlit by the tree, his shadow stretches long across the courtyard. “How many have sought audience claiming themselves Queen Marika returned, or my lord father, or Godwyn the Golden? Now thou shalt order me aside that thou mayest claim thy rightful crown. The Erdtree doth not admit the unworthy, *Melina*.”

She retreats, four steps to each of Morgott's. “I haven't returned to contest Leyndell or the Elden Ring. Only to speak with my – our mother. I've no desire to stand against you if it can be avoided.” None of which applies to the Tarnished who brought her, but she won't say so now.

“Thou carest not for a crown, merely for a meeting with the long-lost queen none have laid eyes upon ere the Shattering. Because thou art Godwyn.”

“What would you accept as proof?”

His mouth twitches without settling into a smile. “Nothing. I've not met him. Thou shouldst have chosen Lord Godfrey's name to sully.”

“Then allow me to speak of our father – ”

“Queen Marika is not even inside of the tree. Whence didst thou learn otherwise?”

She halts at the archway before the stairs, and Morgott stops as well, resting the end of his cane on the ground and watching her as a cat might a particularly offensive bird. Does he not know, or is he lying?

Lying, or he wouldn't have stayed his hand this long. He's fishing, and not very well, for how much she knows. If he wanted information, he should have pretended to believe her claim from the beginning, but maybe his pride couldn't accept that – he *is* the lord of Leyndell, and humility is no virtue for a monarch.

She answers, “From our mother.”

Morgott's lip curls. He starts forwards again, still that easy pace that offers her a handful of seconds before he reaches her, and in the face of it she stands her ground. “Spoken echoes linger here, words of Queen Marika. Shall I share them, what she said to you?” He makes no move to reply, so with time drawing short she says, “'Lovelorn son.'”

The first syllable stops him in his tracks, though nothing of his expression changes.

When she makes the same offer to the Tarnished, she means it as, if not kindness, then preparation, and only that. They haven't the background to understand how unusual the ability is. To the Grace-Given Omen, however, it won't prove her as Godwyn, but it will at least prove her as someone uncommon.

Into the long, aching pause, he demands, “And the rest?” A wartime ruler. Every interaction a conflict; every hesitation a loss. It should not have come to this, sibling pitted against sibling, but Morgott was never allowed to be her brother.

“'Reign ye well in Our shadow,'” she finishes. The words seem unlike Marika: she was rarely so sentimental as that, offering well-wishes with no addendum attached. It must have happened, but Melina doesn't... surely it must have happened.

Morgott purses his lips.

Then he sighs, and, without further preamble, gold coalesces into a giant-slaying hammer in his off hand, he props its weight on his shoulder, and he leaps.

Melina throws herself back, and the hammerhead comes down on her previous position like a falling star. She's never before seen grace employed as a golden replica of the highest levels of Carian sorcery. She grabs the railing as the impact shudders through the stairway, and with her other hand she draws her knife and gathers a remnant of Death's power along the blade.

“Ah,” Morgott says, “I missed.”

Melina flings her curse, the glow of it blending into the fading vestiges of Morgott's weapon, but he leaps aside with little fanfare, turns as he lands, and starts prowling back in the direction of the tree without so much as a break in his stride.

Melina keeps her blade raised, but he neither initiates another murder attempt nor even looks at her. “Thou dost not act like Godwyn,” he calls over his shoulder. Melina bites her tongue to refrain from pointing out that they've never met. “Lofty reputations make disappointments of us all.”

She narrows her eye. “What did you do that for?”

“I was within my rights, little trespasser.” He stops walking, planting his cane. “Whoever thou art, thou camest in vain. Thou wilt find nothing here for thee, so be *off* while I still have a leash on my temper.”

Oh. Their father's moods passed Godwyn by in order to end up here. “I have no wish to fight you, but I did not come this far to fail.”

“Thou hast no say in thy fate. Even should I admit thee” – he doesn't add *over my dead body*, though she hears it loud and clear – “the Erdtree denieth passage to the unworthy. Thou art no *exception*. Leave. Perhaps thou art the ghost thou claimest; Godwyn did not die a true death. But thy time as heir has passed and gone, and thou'rt yet another pest come to bear maggots in Queen Marika's eternal legacy.” He turns to look at her, pressing heavily down on the cane. “I would prefer... *not* to commit fratricide. But thou art an imbecile if thou wilt gamble on my missing twice.”

No negotiation here. If she stays another minute, he'll come for her again. She thought she might have a chance once he believed her, but he won't give her the chance to talk him aside because he doesn't *want* to back down.

“You won't give me a choice,” she says, and means it as a question.

“A relative of mine after all. Not one of you can take being told *no*.” A sword takes form in his hand.

She cannot match him in battle when nothing of divinity remains to her. She finally takes a step back and lets her shape disperse. Even with her unseen, Morgott's eye tracks her unerringly as she retreats through the archway.

Chapter 5

Unless the Tarnished sits down to commune with grace, it takes her time to determine which site they've traveled to. Melina was still tracking them when the elevator in the next room reached the ground floor and someone said, “I worried I might miss thee.”

She glanced up to Renna the witch passing through the doorway. She hesitated, then willed herself into form – no one else was here who Renna could have been speaking to.

“Renna,” she greeted. “We have not met.”

“I believe we have,” said Renna. She remained standing a moment longer, looking down with her head tilted faintly, expression unreadable. Then she gathered her robes and folded her legs beneath her on the other side of the wavering grace. The Death-mark bordering her eye shone silvery blue. “I am Princess Ranni of Caria.”

Melina jolted. “*Ranni*?”

“Godwyn.”

Her words choked in her throat, all of them variations of the same question. She rose to one knee and found her knife, though she didn't draw it. *Why did you – ?* “You cannot kill me again.”

“I would not dream of trying. I have come to talk, and only that.” Ranni frowned, resting her hands in her lap. A nice little show of peace if Melina hadn't already witnessed her casting advanced sorcery with neither a catalyst nor so much as a gesture. “I must ask, why art thou speaking as if we stand in court? It's odd to hear thee refer to me as *you*.”

“It should not be, as I am not Godwyn. You have seen to that. And you look – different.” Unrecognizable. “Did Maliketh leave that scar?”

“Art thou hoping that someone avenged thee?” Ranni traced a thumb along the branching lines down to her cheek. “I inflicted this upon myself. The Black Blade is a sword without a wielder and a shadow without a caster; he doth not act of his own accord.”

“You possess a body.” As Melina did not, despite their modes of death having left the same scar.

Ranni had done that to *herself*.

“A doll, but yes. I took more care with mine own death than thine.” She clasped one pair of hands beneath her chin. “Thou'rt not wroth with me. How strange. Thy shortsighted propensity for forgiveness was renowned, but I wager I have overstepped even thy limit. Did the blade burn against thy throat?”

Melina didn't move and hardly breathed, frozen with her palm still on the knife's grip. Ranni watched from beneath her hat's brim, anticipating. The Death-mark glimmered in the shadows.

“What more would you have from me?” Melina said softly. Damningly softly, a lion declawed. Emotion was no longer a means available to her, and resolve alone could not substitute for it any more than a hammer can replace a toolbox. Although she did try.

Ranni hesitated before she replied, “Thine ear for a moment.”

No, she considered saying. Ranni had done quite enough already. She let go of her insubstantial form, and Ranni, despite grimacing, didn't move to stop her as she dispersed.

“I have offended thee after all,” Ranni murmured into an empty room. “Thou hast wondered, I presume, what my motivations were. Thou wert a means to an end and little more, but 'twas not by chance that I chose *thee* out of us all.” She let out a breath. “Some of those reasons seem shallow to me now, though the truth of them hath not changed.”

Some guilts could only be confessed to the dead. Melina listened without ears and watched without eyes, and she did not judge with a heart she no longer had. She could leave if she liked, following the path of grace to anywhere else, but Ranni had waited both of their lifetimes to relay this message. In light of that, Melina could afford her a few more minutes.

This was not forgiveness. Melina would not offer it on Godwyn's behalf, and Ranni had given no indication that she desired it.

Ranni closed her eye. “Since thy return, how often hast thou inquired after thine old acquaintances? The twin prodigies? You were close, I heard. The archdragon Fortissax?”

Fortissax... could take care of itself, if anyone could at all. Miquella and Malenia were Empyreans both, and they had each other. As for the others, worrying after them in her state would not help them.

“Thou dost not need to ask. They can all of them manage their own affairs without guidance, or else thou wouldst not have loved them as thou hadst. And... of course, thou hast not asked because thou dost not *care enough* to.

“This doll's body is a first, flawed iteration. I intend to improve upon the next, but this one lacketh aspects I did not think to include. Certain subtleties and sentimentalities. Residing within it, I have at my disposal only so much as I brought along.

“When the black flames took me, I did not think of love, nor of... family.” She laughed quietly, a frozen, petulant thing. “No, I thought of – offense. Rights and wrongs and the reasons I had striven to such lengths. I held in my mind the dark and lonesome path of the Empyrean. Not an instant hath passed since that I have lost sight of that moon-struck road; the world without seemeth dim in comparison, much as I suspect it doth to thee. This is what we are with all pretense stripped away: the leading edge of a blade in flight. Desire honed to an unbreaking point.

“I am in little position to ask after thine ambitions, but if thou wilt take one piece of advice, even after my crimes against thee,” she said, opening her eye. The edge of it wrinkled as she offered a furtive smile. “Let it be this: nothing anymore guardeth thee from what thou canst become. Not anyone else, and certainly not me. Death keepeth no dominion over ghosts and gods, and a purpose is as much as one can hold in one's hands. Do not see it escape thee.”

Chapter 6

The Tarnished arrives at the courtyard eventually. Morgott, visibly fed up with one intruder after another, burns the Erdwood from his sword in an act of wanton blasphemy and leaps upon them. They die. Melina beats a retreat before her brother can turn his full attention to her.

This repeats. She doesn't worry over the Tarnished growing discouraged – they once spent a week hurling themselves from the balcony in the Roundtable Hold to challenge an invader spirit who killed them in a single blow – but Morgott shortens the pauses between his strikes by a little more on each attempt and spits his parting words at their corpse with more vitriol.

He also takes to speaking to himself after the body fades.

“The site in Marika's chambers,” he says after the sixth or so failure. On the next: “Queen Marika would scour them into a husk. I might well be doing them a favor.” The one after that: “Still here?”

Melina pauses on the threshold, waiting, but there's no one else he might be talking to even though he isn't looking at her. She materializes to say, “You could build a cage around the site they recover at.” Not that she means to give him the idea, but she can't fathom his not having already considered it.

Morgott replies, perpetual frown deepening into a scowl, “And resist the guidance of grace.”

Melina stares at him. “Does it point you to them?” And if it does, and if he's following it so scrupulously, is he a fundamentalist? Being what he is, and with *that* weapon for a catalyst? Morgott glances at her with his eye half-lidded, and she asks, “Is that why you ignore me after you slay them?”

“I would not count on any death taking for thee.”

She doesn't know the answer to that and has little interest in testing it, but, either way, the Tarnished's inability to perish certainly hasn't stopped Morgott from killing them repeatedly. “Do the Tarnished you hunt normally die?”

“Eventually.”

“Grace fades for them when they lose faith in their goal.” Death by despair, and Morgott's made something of an art out of it. It's... not far from what their mother might have done. Less effective, perhaps. But she *is* a god, so he never will measure up to her in any comparison. “That won't do for this Tarnished.”

“No?” asks Morgott.

Melina hesitates and looks back down the stairs. “They aren't....”

Morgott says, sounding tired for the first time, “Should they lose any further mental capacity, they will no longer retain the necessary brain function to breathe.”

Kinder than how Melina would have put it.

She doesn't intend it as disparagement. Godfrey and Radagon had considerably more going on up top than the Tarnished does, but they were named Elden Lord first and foremost for martial prowess. Conquerors, the both of them, just as the Tarnished is striving to become. Though Morgott isn't wrong, either, in saying that Marika would strip them down to the bones of what they were.

A person can't learn to live without Marika again once they've beheld her. The world itself has restructured around her absence.

Morgott raises his sword if Melina lingers too long in the courtyard after the Tarnished's death, but before that he allows her between ten seconds and one minute of dawdling depending on his level of irritation. She only avails herself of it a few times. Morgott wants nothing to do with her – though he seems, once or twice, on the verge of saying something anyway – and she in turn has little to ask of him.

He will not let her through without a more convincing argument than she has the ability to make. Information beyond that – their shared parentage and differing childhoods, Morgott's rise from the sewers to kingship, Godwyn's fall from grace, whatever crumbs of commonality they might find if they try – is extraneous. All of it.

Although maybe it wouldn't be if she dug into his disappearance a little harder when they were both younger.

Godwyn ventured into the shunning-grounds once and once only. He spent a day underground, making as thorough a round of the place as he could, knowing as he did that he wouldn't recognize the lost sibling if he found them. Melina doesn't remember why he chose to search; only that, upon his return, Marika sent for him to tell him that there was nothing for him beneath the ground. He had already chosen the sky, after all.

The Tarnished makes their breakthrough with very little warning. Between one loss and the next, something clicks for them.

The only blow Morgott lands that round is the one that kills them. They've begun to read him.

He stands over their fading corpse for a long while after, face twisted and eye staring at nothing. Melina doesn't speak. She retreats from the arena and waits out the hours until the Tarnished comes bounding up the stairs again.

The next battle proceeds much closer to a battle than the one-sided butchery it's been up until this point. The Tarnished scrambles aside from thrown blades, hurls themselves away from golden greatspears, and flails to safety when Morgott chains a pouncing strike into a diagonal slash into a leaping spin with a blade in each hand. He lands and stabs a conjured sword into the ground. Gold light fills the air above the courtyard.

A sprout of the same glow as Morgott's incantations grows from the cobbles, thickening, forming bark, unfurling branches. The Tarnished takes shelter beside it while swords fall in a shimmering rain, and Melina finishes her prayer and steps away from the tree.

Morgott's focus shifts to her. He hasn't seen her cast the healing miracle before; the Tarnished typically dies too quickly for her to find the time or opportunity. As an attacker, she's a distraction, but as a healer she has become a danger. Clerics and battlefield perfumers left unattended quickly compound problems.

Godwyn's fighting style hasn't translated well into this form – he stood eight feet tall and took more after Godfrey in musculature – so she's adopted a clunky copy of the one her mother demonstrated on a handful of occasions. Since she prefers not to test it against an opponent of Morgott's calibre, she concentrates on keeping her distance and channeling magic to throw at him.

Sensibly, Morgott isn't inclined to let her. He chases her down in seconds, hammer on his shoulder and poised to swing –

– he doesn't notice it. Melina sees his face, and there's not a single strand of awareness in it of what he does then.

He doesn't seem the type to remember often to analyze his own actions and the reasons behind them. There's too much in his mind that he doesn't want to find. Melina recognizes the signs: Godwyn shared the trait, though not to Morgott's apparent extreme. Or perhaps he did. Melina's recollections are far from objective.

She's in the air still, caught in the middle of a poorly timed leap. Her course is set. Morgott has free reign to land the strike that will dissipate her, but he doesn't because he *hesitates*.

He meant what he said about not wishing to commit fratricide.

The Tarnished comes at his back, and he spins to bring the hammer down on the spot they just vacated. Melina narrowly avoids the spikes on his tail as he turns, and as she beats a retreat she gathers and hurls another curse from her knife.

Once upon a time, Godwyn engaged Fortissax in battle for three days and three nights. When he emerged victorious they understood each other down to their souls. Godwyn held a blade to the dragon's throat and then sheathed it, because to slay Fortissax by that point would have been akin to murdering his own bonded sibling.

The choice took his mother so thoroughly off guard that she had no argument to muster against it, even after she had him spend several hours explaining his reasoning to her. She

stared at him through the whole of it like he was some changeling child the spirits had finally traded back to her once grown, a foreign creature with a face she should have recognized.

Though this was before she sent Godfrey away, Godwyn feared she might disown him. He did not think he could survive her disdain. But he did not think he could live with himself if he struck down Fortissax, either.

Melina is not Godwyn, and Morgott is in her way. He crumples to his knees, choking on his own curse, and rises bloodied and burning and incandescently furious. The first burst of delayed fire from his sword sends the Tarnished tumbling, but beneath the boughs of Melina's prayer their burns fade and they roll back to their feet.

Their bull-headedness makes the difference that it always does. They kill Morgott in the end. Melina doesn't hear his last words; she's turned away already and started towards the passage into the Erdtree's interior.

A passage blocked by immortal thorns.

Chapter 8

But time is an illusion, and the Tarnished does like their mimic veil.

Melina doesn't object to the increasingly far-ranging detours. On some level, the Tarnished might understand they're bringing forth the end of an era. It's natural that they would resolve any business left unfinished and any curiosities left unfulfilled before taking the final plunge.

She only wishes they would choose other locations for it.

The deathwoods on the surface, directly above her corpse far below, are discomfiting. While the Tarnished takes Torrent to go look for phantom crests, Melina, incorporeal, paces the woods near the site of grace.

They've come close enough to her body that she worries she might rejoin it in its eternal dreaming if she lets herself rest. She spent the however many thousands of years after Godwyn's death asleep, and she would have remained so had not something – she assumes the same call that rouses Tarnished from their graves – woken her. Fragile as she is, dormancy might be her natural state. If she returns to it, she doesn't know what will have the power to reverse her entropy again.

Godwyn's traces, entangled deeply as they are with the Erdtree's roots, have snaked their way across the Lands Between, contaminating sites they had no business reaching. They've crept into Erdtree avatars, obviously, unavoidably, twisting the spirits' forms and natures until their wounds drip blood like he did in place of sap; into catacombs, where they expel or reject the souls the Erdtree would have claimed for sustenance; into graveyards and forlorn remnants on the surface, where they leak saltwater and ghosts and senseless, thoughtless blight.

Death, broken and bloated, asserting itself in his mother's deathless world.

In this form, it's no more a natural part of the cycle than Malenia's untamed rot in Caelid is.

And, as with Malenia's affliction, the other members of their family have been working to suppress it. The scarlet rot has not escaped Caelid thanks to the Redmanes' efforts, but Godwyn's corpse is a kingdom-wide plague. Every living creature has a stake in its containment.

The deathwoods sit heavy with Miquella's interference, and in the areas overlooking it Melina spots Rykard's influence, too, and the enigmatic Lord of Blood's. Morgott had his own efforts in place as well, in Leyndell itself and in Stormveil Castle with presumably Godrick's cooperation. Her uncle Maliketh has been sending Tarnished to slow the spread of Godwyn's taint through the Erdtree's roots.

But they cannot extricate it anymore. Godwyn's corpse has had too long to fester, and the Erdtree has had too long to drink of its decaying bile, for the corpse to be safely extracted. Melina expects it could be removed, still, but doing so would require cutting out each root

touched by the sickness. At least ninety percent of all of the Erdtree's roots, at a conservative estimate.

Autumn arrived in the Eternal Queen's kingdom the instant she chose to bury her eldest son's dreaming corpse in the foundations.

The Tarnished slays Rykard. The Tarnished slays Radahn. Ranni makes no more move to stop them than Melina did when the Tarnished arrived before Morgott or Miquella did when Malenia marched against Radahn or Marika did when the Black Knives found Godwyn.

In a desert country across the sea, the symbol of eternity is a snake devouring its own tail. Godwyn never gave it much thought, but Godwyn never lived long enough to remember his own death. The divinity of the Lands Between eat their own, and even as a former member of their number Melina cannot explain why.

Then again, she no longer believes Godwyn was made to comprehend eternity.

She thinks of Morgott, of Radahn, of Rykard, of Godrick, of long-lost Godfrey and of his calloused hands around Godwyn's own as he adjusted Godwyn's grip on the spear that would become his favored weapon. As they've come closer to the Erdtree's never-beating heart, more of Godwyn's memories have crept through the fog of her memory, thoughts and sensations scattered like stars in the sky for her to map into constellations. Marika's hands on her own, unyielding as stone but in that moment almost gentle, as she taught Melina how to wield the knife she does now –

– no. That never happened.

Melina's first memory of her own came *after* Godwyn's death. Melina met Marika only once, at her birth, and she wasn't nearly coherent enough at the time to grasp ahold of anything.

A displaced memory of Godwyn's? A hallucination? An entirely separate person's past that slipped out of the Erdtree and into Melina by a mistake?

But who else would Marika ever have…?

Malenia's memory, perhaps. Somehow. Despite Malenia not being dead and the Erdtree possessing no dominion yet upon her soul. Accidents occur.

Nevertheless, Melina rubs the recollection over with charcoal, filling in the shade of her mother and the shade of her. Her mother's touch was gentle, as much as Marika ever was. Stone that had chosen for a moment to forget how to crush. Would she have remembered again if the person she was guiding stopped following her teaching? Would she not have?

A hammer dents itself to some degree whenever it strikes hot metal. How much must a hammer love the ore beneath it to willingly scar itself in the forging of a blade?

Boc's mother left him a legacy and little else, and yet he weeps for her. Melina cannot find it in herself to do the same. In this, at least, she does not think herself different from Godwyn, who shed no tears either when his mother banished his father. Perhaps the difference between the divine lineage and mortality is that eternity is too long a time to waste on grief.

Perhaps the difference between them is that Boc can understand his mother's decisions without needing to isolate them from her first.

A hammer, a tree, a war, the sun blazing bright. A queen and a god and a mother, three roles braided so tightly into one that neither Godwyn nor Melina has found where each ended for the others to begin. Even as she encounters new memories washed up along the shore of her mind each time she chances to check, she cannot recall a single instance when Godwyn thought of his mother as a person.

Marika was his mother. She has done no wrong in all her reign because a force of nature cannot be judged by any creature below a god, of which the Golden Order admits to only one of.

In that moment, Melina is… not *glad* that she is not wholly Godwyn, but… it is for the best that he is not her.

Godwyn would be shattering along his fault lines if he was entertaining the thoughts she is. But Melina is a ghost, burned and bodiless. Unlike him, she is not solid enough to bleed.

The Tarnished encounters Shabriri in the forbidden lands, and they –

– they listen to him.

They listen.

To him.

To Shabriri.

To *Shabriri*.

Melina greets them across from the flickering grace the next time they rest. She tells them, "My purpose was given to me by my mother. But now, I act of my own volition." If her own volition happens to align with the course her mother may have intended, then that is not the Tarnished's to deny her. "I have set my heart upon the world that I would have. Regardless of my mother's designs. I won't allow anyone to speak ill of that."

Godwyn was once the crown prince of the realm, so, in the midst of anarchy, Melina does not consider herself entirely unqualified to attempt to decide the fate of her mother's kingdom. Godwyn's corpse requires a true death, the Lands Between cannot persist in abeyance, and her mother…

…Melina cannot say what a storm deserves, nor a hammer midway through a swing.

She might have been too subtle in her speech, however, because the Tarnished nods consideringly, not the slightest trace of comprehension in their eyes, and then follows Shabriri's instruction and warps to the site of grace before the Great Caravan's grave.

This would be an excellent moment for their habit of heeding the most recent person to speak to them to reassert itself, but apparently in a choice between that and a locked door they find the locked door the more irresistible. "Please, leave the Frenzied Flame alone," Melina says – pleads, in truth, and the meager amount of emotion she succeeds in lacing her words with makes enough of an impact upon the Tarnished that she believes it might take.

It does not.

What becomes the Lands Between's saving grace: the Tarnished never realizes the key to opening the door is to strip naked before the attempt.

Melina removes her hand from her dagger when the Tarnished, dejected, abandons their spirited efforts to strike through the seal. It's nearly a relief when they turn down the side passage leading to her grave instead.

Chapter 9

A kingdom without death prized few qualities so highly as its people's collective ability and inclination to have children. One doesn't go to the effort of producing a child without a purpose behind the intention, so the existence of a younger generation is what marks a civilization that believes in its own future well enough to raise new lives to see it.

Although the dragons, like the fire giants, originate from an older world order.

"It is arrogant," Fortissax said once, "the presumption that thy kind beareth so vital a position in the world that thou must force more of thy kin upon it."

When it put it that way, childbirth nearly sounded unneighborly.

Godwyn had not considered that a sexless race might take reproduction as an *attack*. Before the war and the treaty, the dragons and the golden kingdom had had no peaceful relations of any sort. They had neither understood each other nor sought to.

Godwyn took a moment to frame into words his implicit understanding of the concept. Certainly, he told Fortissax, a parent brings a child into the world for a reason, but the reason is far less grand and more self-centered than what Fortissax suggested. A child is not meant to inherit wholesale a parent's position in the world, nor to prolong their influence should they somehow pass on, but simply to claim a newly opened role that no one yet exists who could fill. A marriage, for instance, might require a trueborn child to demonstrate the strength of the union.

However, Fortissax did not entirely grasp the idea of marriage, either. If a relationship explicitly meant to exist between two people requires the introduction of a third, unknown individual in order to function, then that alliance was tenuous from the onset – at which point Godwyn had to correct it: the third member is implied in the definition.

Fortissax absorbed that. "I see," it said. "I see what I have been missing. Then the reason a marriage requireth the creation of a wholly new being, rather than an exchange of any thing less profane, is…."

Godwyn answered easily, "Nothing but a child can ever bear the obligation of repaying its parents for its existence."

"How blessed that Leyndell hath thee, brother," Miquella said on a different occasion. "*I* am a dreadfully poor son."

The Haligtree rose around them, yet growing into the shape that would become Elphael. Miquella had not abandoned his work to meet his visiting brother; instead, a retainer had greeted Godwyn's small retinue at Ordina and led him alone through the passage, down the tree's branches, and to the stairway that led around a corner to the flowered arbor where Miquella crouched with a pair of pruners and dirt-stained gloves up to his elbows.

Godwyn did not mind the lack of welcome. Through no fault of anyone else's, walking across the Haligtree felt more like venturing into a hostile country than the invasion of the giants' lands had. If Miquella and Malenia went to the extent of *treating* him as a welcomed guest rather than merely allowing him to *be* one, visiting his younger siblings' home would have rubbed too closely to treason.

It was too obviously blasphemy, this living, changing mimic of the mountainous Erdtree, and watching Miquella care for his little hobby garden in a sheltered corner of the tree perturbed Godwyn in ways he could not define.

The bustling varieties of flowers and fruits in the alcove, encompassing every sort from anemones to roses to strawberries to begonias, bloomed vibrant and overwhelmingly red, even those that should not have thrived in this season or climate. Gold held a significance that no other shade could match, but Miquella's favored color, when he had the opportunity to choose, had always been red.

Godwyn had coaxed out the reason for it when Miquella had been younger. He was glad he had, because Miquella at this age would not have given him the same answer.

Miquella wanted, he had told Godwyn then, to collect beautiful things in red to show to Malenia, so that she would not associate the color of her own body with only rot.

Each of the demigods had their clear strengths and weaknesses, but lacking love for his family was not among Miquella's few shortcomings.

Godwyn replied, "Certainly not." Miquella made a small skeptical noise, demonstrative enough that it placed him closer to his physical age. He had never grown out of certain habits, and Godwyn, in turn, had never been certain of to what extent they were an affectation. "If Mother disapproved of thine activities, she would not have allowed them to come to fruition."

Miquella paused and looked up at Godwyn seated on the bench. His eyebrow was raised. Godwyn kept his expression earnest. Miquella could survive a spot of uncertainty about whether a pun had been intentional.

"How fareth Leyndell these days?" Miquella asked, turning back to the cranberries.

Godwyn smiled. "The queen is eternal. Thy lord father is…"

"…attempting his best," Miquella murmured, "as ever."

Peace had reigned for centuries, and still the current Elden Lord did not seem to understand what to do with himself off of a battlefield. Godwyn knew well enough that Radagon was

not *all* of Marika's bloodthirst, nor her bloodthirst alone, but sometimes the man himself did not seem to believe he was anything more than that.

Godwyn could not have claimed for certain whether Miquella had divined Marika and Radagon's relation. Malenia, at least, Godwyn did not believe had. Godwyn saw her as akin to her blade: direct, unyielding, and possessed of proficiency she had earned through her own dauntless effort and commitment, but also somewhat lacking in nuance and, unfortunately, not particularly skilled at improvising outside of her established sword forms. Between the twins, Malenia was not the one who enjoyed solving mysteries.

Miquella, meanwhile, put Godwyn more in mind of a butcher's blade. Only intended for cutting one set of materials, but far more versatile despite that than a weapon of war could become. And less precise, sometimes, with where he aimed and what he struck than his younger sister was.

"Our uncle sendeth his regards," Godwyn continued. "He wisheth to see you more often." Maliketh wished that Miquella and Malenia would tear down the Haligtree and return to roost in Leyndell, but if he could not have that he would settle for this compromise.

Miquella sighed, nasal and deeply put-upon. "My sister can arrange a schedule."

"Shall I inform him, or wouldst thou prefer it to remain a surprise?"

"The former, if thou wouldst."

"Of course," Godwyn said, but he added, "Miquella, thou *dost* understand that you are always welcome at home, and that nothing of that changeth if you should choose to arrive unannounced."

Miquella clipped a branch and plucked several fruits from another before he spoke again. "Is Fortissax well?"

"It is."

"Thou shouldst invite it if thou decidest to visit again."

"It doth not enjoy traveling far from its sister."

"Of course Lady Lansseax must come, too. We have the space now to accommodate even two dragons, I should think."

Godwyn ran a thumb across a whorl in the living wood of the bench. The first time he had seen the tree, it had not been half the width of a wing in Leyndell's palace. "How large dost thou imagine the Haligtree might grow?"

"As tall as the mountains," Miquella said flippantly, "with a breadth greater than the entire Altus Plateau."

From the beginning, he had meant it as a competitor to the Erdtree.

Then he said, after picking an insect from a redcurrant leaf and crushing it between his teeth, “We did not establish a counterfaith cult in hopes the queen would *approve* of our course.”

“Even so.” Gently, Godwyn told him, “She doth not *dis*approve.”

Miquella pouted. Several hundred years old, Empyrean and aspiring rival to a god, heretic and polymath, inventor of his own branch of incantations, and he was pouting. It was a little much.

Steadfastly ignoring it, Godwyn continued, “Thou must never doubt that she loveth thy sister and thee.” The words carried force, for they were an echo of Marika’s, and Miquella hunched his shoulders as the truth of them fell upon him like a hammer blow. “She is your mother. She would not have brought you into the world if she did not have a plan for your existence.”

“What plan would that be? For us to establish a counterfaith cult against the Golden Order? For me to cure my sister with none of the queen’s assistance?”

“For you to flourish,” Godwyn replied, a word choice which earned him another side-eyed glare, “in whatever manner suiteth you. I am the firstborn. It is enough that I be a good son and heir” – a fully ceremonial title when the reigning monarch would never abdicate – “and whatever other roles might yet be required.”

Elden Lord, he meant and did not voice. Miquella had never seen one Elden Lord cast aside for another, so Godwyn did not wish to raise the possibility of that future to him. If Marika should decide that Radagon no longer served her purposes, and if she had no worthy candidates in line to claim the title after him, Godwyn expected he himself was the first of her reserves.

“But *you* must discover your own place in the world,” he said, “a task more difficult by far. I cannot envy you for it. I will not lie and tell thee I am wholly supportive of the path you have chosen, but if our mother harbored objections she would not have kept them hidden.”

Miquella groaned. He tossed a strawberry over his shoulder at Godwyn’s head, and Godwyn caught it and popped it into his mouth.

Once he swallowed, he said, “The taste is different from the fruits thou grewest in Leyndell.”

“Improved?”

“Different.” As ripe and as sweet, but sharper on the tongue. It reminded him of the smell of his forge, heat and iron, which was a remarkably queer taste to ascribe to a fruit.

“Improved.”

No use trying to reason with Miquella when he got like this. Godwyn asked, “A new strain?”

Miquella’s braids swayed as he shook his head. “The soil conditions are merely different so far north.”

Godwyn spun the strawberry leaves in his hand, then let them go and watched them flop to the ground.

The soil they lay upon looked and smelled and felt unremarkable. It was brown. It was fertile. Innocuous.

He did not ask to see Miquella's arms beneath the gloves, and he did not ask whose blood fed the Haligtree. Miquella looked hale enough, sweaty and dirty and ruddy-cheeked, steady with his hands and clear-eyed, and Godwyn was his brother, not his keeper.

Eventually the Haligtree would require more sustenance than Miquella alone could offer, and then the problem would likely become Godwyn's, among others'. There were only so many factions in the Lands Between for Miquella to go and start a war with, and none with borders the Haligtree's roots extended to. Without even that much, any conflict they began would serve no purpose but to water the Erdtree, whose roots *did* cover the land.

When the day came to pass, the twins would require help they would not ask for. Godwyn could not have said he looked forward to the prospect, but he would bear a duty to them still.

He let that settle and said instead, "Wouldst thou like to hear a secret?"

"A true secret?" Miquella asked without looking. "Or is this the *children are more frightened of thee than thou art of them* again?"

"Miquella," Godwyn said, "am I the one thou art upset with?" Godwyn had attempted one failed ploy to convince Miquella to overcome his distaste for children, and five hundred years later Miquella still took every opportunity to unearth it from its grave whenever Godwyn acted too conciliatory for his tastes.

"…No." Dragged forth like Miquella had had to draw the word kicking and fighting out of a thorned thicket. "What didst thou wish to share?"

Godwyn tipped his head back enough to find the sun's silhouette through the Haligtree's canopy. This far north, it shone paler in the sky. Almost silver more than gold. "Mother," he said, "is not a god of prosperity."

Miquella yelped, a pair of trimmers dropping from his hand, and sprang upright, spinning towards Godwyn in the same motion. His eyes were blown wide, and his face besides his cheeks had gone nearly white.

Godwyn drew his attention back down to Miquella. "Prosperity doth not lie within her domain. She is a god of war and blood. And eternity doth not quickly nor easily adjust its nature. Yet she built a kingdom, despite that. Grew it from a sapling to the ruling empire that is all you and I have known it as. The sort of love that would lead a god of war to raise two of her children in an era of uninterrupted peace: that belongeth to you."

"…I suppose it doth." The shock was fading, but something else Godwyn had not expected seeped forth to replace it, some realization Miquella had pieced together and which Godwyn

could not discern the shape of. “And what sort of love,” Miquella said faintly, “must he require for a god of peace to march to battle in a war god’s name?”

Godwyn tried to parse the hypothetical and failed. “What dost thou mean?” It might have been a private reference between Miquella and Malenia. Godwyn was their older brother, but they were not half as close with him as they were with each other.

Miquella bit his lip, then he turned away and sank slowly back into a crouch beside his fruit basket. For a long moment he did not respond. Godwyn allowed him his quiet.

Miquella trimmed another handful of buds, then tucked the tool out of sight into a pouch at his waist and spoke two incantations. The first was a minor healing miracle, to no obvious effect, and the second a simple spell meant for purification. The dirt on Miquella’s skin and clothing lost purchase and fell back to the garden. He stripped off his gloves, folded them away alongside the rest of his tools, and wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

“I do understand. I love her, too,” he said, picking a berry out of the basket. He nibbled at it, then lowered his hand. “Of course I do. Even if, for gods, *love* and *worship* might be too similar to pry apart.”

That was true. “Doth it bother you?”

Miquella took a full bite of the berry, chewed, swallowed. “No,” he said, rising to his feet with the basket held loose. “I wonder if it should, but no. Not at all.” He turned to Godwyn. He resembled very much, as ever, their mother, even smelling of green things rather than stone, and with a softer body and his hair left largely loose in the style of those who did not expect to step upon a battlefield. “Malenia will conclude her practice session soon. I typically bring this down to her just as she doth. Shall we go?”

A cultural exchange extended in both directions. Just as Fortissax had not experienced certain human realities, Godwyn did not fully understand dragons. He confessed to Fortissax, “I cannot imagine how it would be to live without a parent.”

Fortissax considered that and considered Godwyn with eyes tinted a shade of gold Godwyn only saw in dragons. He had never been looked at in the way Fortissax always looked at him: as if, to it, there was no one else in the kingdom more important.

“If any human could,” it said finally, “it would be you.”

Chapter 10

A thick sheen of rot colors the air about the Erdtree's roots.

Melina doesn't follow the Tarnished to her own grave. Visiting it herself is one thing, but she would rather not be present for a third party to witness the divide between her soul and her body, regardless of whether they understand it or not.

There's little danger to their going alone, besides. The most that might happen to them is contracting deathblight, which might even encourage them to stay away from it in the future. (She would be more concerned were they any other Tarnished, but Torrent's chosen has suffered deathblight on multiple occasions and sprung back each time none the worse for wear. The Greater Will favors them to an unlikely degree.)

Still, she watches their journey from afar, as she has since the beginning.

Silver-blooded pagans live in the moonless night below the Lands Between, driven there long before Godwyn's birth. The race sought to challenge the Golden Order and, as with others before and after, was smited by the heavens for their hubris. Less figuratively than usual, in their case: the Order hardly needed to lift a finger before the nightfolk's own gods fell from the skies and decimated their cities.

The remnants established a relationship with Liurnia. A notable portion of Liurnia's population throughout Godwyn's life consisted of nightfolk mongrels, though it was never appropriate to mention as much in polite company after Radagon married into House Caria.

The Black Knives, too, come of that race.

And the magic of the spirit beasts, though originating from the ancestral worshipers' rituals, was claimed by their nightfolk neighbors as well.

Melina knows, of course, what Torrent is. She knows what spirit beasts are. But there is something strange, still, in seeing Torrent navigate the lands of a people Marika buried with as much ease as he does the empire she built atop their graves.

He springs from root to outcropping to thin air as naturally he bounds across solid ground, following his own sense more than the Tarnished's attempts at pathing.

Godwyn knew little of his mother's history beyond what was written into scripture. He had only what contextless fragments she chose to gift him, strange shells unearthed from stretches of earth the sea has never touched, bones without form. After the exile of Godfrey and his warriors, Marika became the entirety of Godwyn's heritage: Godwyn possessed no ancestors, no distant relations, no cultural background beyond the one his mother, once a foreigner to the shores of the Lands Between, shaped from the aether by her own will.

Marika might never have existed at all before her apotheosis and the birth of the Order. Her lineage began from nothing and will end in nothing, her descendants petering out like sparks

from a carefully tended flame.

If not for Torrent.

Before cremation was a sacrilege and a horror, Marika burned her steed's body and forged the ashes into a ring. Torrent predates the Golden Order, and one day he might outlast the eternal faith. His existence is the only proof that Marika did not coalesce, fully-formed, at the instant the Order's golden star struck the earth.

What a strange choice it was, for Marika to leave him with Melina.

Limited in her physicality as she is, Melina would always have required a Tarnished to enter Morgott's sealed Leyndell. Because her sole companion upon waking was Torrent, the Tarnished she bound herself to could only ever have been of Torrent's choosing, and the warhorse would never have settled for a master who might accept defeat upon discovering the path into the Erdtree barred. No more than Melina would have settled for accepting Marika's silence as an answer.

Their journey could only have ever ended in the Erdtree's burning.

What kind of world does Melina want?

The only world she has ever known is the one her mother built. The only people she has ever been are the ones her mother made of her. Her mother is a god of war. The only peaces Godwyn has ever won were at swordpoint, and Melina's first memory is of her hand gripping the knife that killed her. A living person might have been able to learn, and to grow, and to become more than they were meant to be, but Melina is a ghost tethered to her corpse, and her corpse is a cancer and its growth a horror.

Perhaps these things were true from the start. Perhaps Godwyn was always a stagnation. If Marika had done the unthinkable and died, his kingdom would have looked very much like hers, and very much like Morgott's, because Godwyn could not imagine any other set of rules by which to allow reality to exist.

Melina will burn the Erdtree. She will burn herself with it, breathing ghost and dreaming body, as kindling for the new age. Then the Tarnished will find Marika the Eternal, and they will wrest from her the answer that her children could not.

The choice for what comes afterwards Melina lays fully at their feet, because whatever decision they make will be one Godwyn could not have. It does not matter what she wants. She did not come this far, watering the Erdtree with the blood of her own kin, out of concern for what comes after.

The Tarnished rides past the ruined townships of the Zamor, the people who Godwyn promised an alliance with and who Marika discarded in the snow once the war against the fire giants came to an end. Up the mountainside, through the soldiers' graveyard that Godwyn's death has unsettled, between the frozen corpses that remain of the fire giants, and to the last living member of that race, who yet guards his people's greatest work even as the pain of old war wounds leaves him screaming upon each movement. The Tarnished kills him, and one might almost call it a mercy.

The Age of the Erdtree began upon this peak. Melina will end it here, too.

The Tarnished has already come farther than she imagined they ever could when Torrent first led her to them. Just one final request.

"Are you prepared," she asks quietly, "to commit a cardinal sin?"

The Tarnished is. Of course they are. They did not traverse the entirety of her mother's realm to fail here, at the pivotal choice, and, perhaps even more than that, they have always viewed locked doors as a challenge to overcome. The seal upon the Erdtree has turned the Erdtree into the most locked door in the land. Cardinal sin means little to them in the face of an unsatisfied curiosity.

She rests her hand upon them. With the same power she uses to strengthen them, she robs them of all she has given them, leaving them again that unconscious body Torrent found at the base of the cliff.

Their power will return to them once she burns, but until that comes to pass they will not see what she does. They will not stop her.

She cannot know what kind of age their ascension to Elden Lord will bring. But if that strange, raw honesty of theirs survives their meeting with Marika, then whatever era they shape will be different from the one that is all Melina and Godwyn have known. Melina can hope for no more than that.

Even so –

"I will not ask for this. The world that you create will be wholly your own, for good or for ill," she says to the Tarnished.

She speaks her next words to herself, and to the golden prince she once was: "But I... would like a world where mothers do not harm their children."

The Tarnished cannot hear her, which is as it should be. Only Torrent can, so for a moment, there at the end, she finds herself back at the beginning: waking up beside her corpse with the spirit steed as her sole companion, understanding nothing of herself but the questions she will kill a brother and a descendant to ask and the path she must take forwards to reach an answer.

Here, over the giants' forge at the end of her mother's lands, Melina takes the final step upon that path.