A Quartet of Myths: Four Connected Stories

by

Sage Gentry
Class of 2019

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in English

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2019
“Fantasy affords the luxury of close examination—of the self, and of society—laid within a framework of escapism. It can be a commentary, a conversation, and it can simply be a refuge.”

V.E. Schwab
(Anteros Map made with Inkcarnate Worlds)
Part I: Rhiannon

Nine years ago, they found her in the field by her childhood home.

A young girl of nine, Rhiannon sat there. Her mother's old crow, Janus, was perched on her shoulder.

The soldiers paused not ten feet from her, their polished armor reflecting the razed fields, the charred husk of a once brilliant estate looming behind her.

Rhiannon stared at them—stared through them. The crow squawked, a warning to leave.

She remembered now how a brave one reached a hand out to her, how she looked at that hand. How she moved to reach it, fingertips brushing the cool metal, and let her magic loose.

He was thrown one hundred feet with the force of her flame.

Rhiannon didn't trust them—she barely trusted anyone now.

They waited in front of her. Still.

A man, older and with a face weathered by the winds birthed of the hills and forests that made up their homeland, stepped forward. Rhiannon noticed the tiny scar on his cheek, the red wound puckering together to form a small mountain range across his cheekbone. Janus gripped Rhiannon's shoulder, then flew, landing on the man's arm.

She got up.

*
Light flooded into the room, outlining the plush red couches and highbacked chairs. Small glass vials of sea stone littered the vanity, leaving spots of light dancing on the paneled wall. Rhiannon watched with sleepy eyes as that light stained the walls of the Queen’s quarters, her quarters.

She stared at her hands, an inky gray swirling under her skin. It started at her fingertips. Two days ago, Rhiannon dismissed it as remnants of the Gift of fire she wielded—thought it would go away.

Now she knew she was wrong.

Rhiannon always knew death would come for her in her youth.

Marzanna, her maid, let herself into the room, heels echoing across dark wood floors to the large French doors that opened onto her balcony.

Rhiannon plucked the golden shawl off her footboard, careful to cover her fingertips as she rolled her shoulders, letting the fabric unfurl down her back. She felt her magic still sleeping within, felt the purr of its power brush the inside of her heart, her chest.

Wordlessly, Marzanna laid out three black dresses. For today was the Coronation and her eighteenth year.

Rhiannon padded over, glancing to Marzanna who looked at her with green eyes set in a round face and nodded, slipping out the door. The first dress was of the sheerest chiffon, the bodice beaded in a delicate pattern of flowers that flowed and expanded into a cape that would drape down to sweep the floor. The second was only a blur as Rhiannon's eyes slid to the third dress, a deep velvet of a midnight black. The skirt pooled out from the waist, the bodice of velvet wrapped and weaved
together so that when the eye reached the smooth mass of the skirt, it lingered at the sheer calm after the chaos. She grinned.

Holding the fabric in her stained fingertips, Rhiannon turned as she heard the ruffle of feathers. Janus landed on the wrought iron balcony outside her room. She gently pushed one door open, a gust of wind rustling her deep brown hair.

He was holding a necklace. She snatched it from Janus' beak, giving the bird a perfunctory pet and piece of stale cornbread before he became a speck of black in the dawn painted skies. Rhiannon flipped the necklace over in her hands. At the end of the long silver chain, there was a pendant of murky gray flecked with white. In the middle, a rose bloomed. It reminded her of a gift from a friend long ago, but that necklace had burned in the house along with her mother. As she undid the clasp and wrapped the gift around her neck, she remembered a boy her age with skin like a colorful night sky veined with gold. She remembered playing tag in the hills during summertime and picking berries until her fingertips were stained red. She had always looked back on that time as the blur that was childhood, sometimes even questioning whether the boy was real or some figment of her lonely imagination. As she held the pendant between her thumb and forefinger, something within settled and soothed.

Janus was never one for gifts, instead he gathered little bits of information here and there: notes written, letters stolen. Janus was a crafty, wicked thing. So, this—this Rhiannon would accept—if only because the crow had always been her good omen.

Rhiannon walked back to the dresses and into the warm. A long breeze billowed in, shutting the doors to the balcony with a clatter. She picked up the velvet.
The dress was immensely heavy. Not that Rhiannon cared. She loved the way it fit her, almost gave her bones some structure, her muscles guidance. Marzanna had come back into the room carrying a bowl of citrus and honey, had put it down to wrap Rhiannon in that velvet dress. If she had noticed the necklace, she didn't say. If she noticed the black lace gloves Rhiannon had discretely tugged over her hands, she did not say.

Marzanna nimbly plaited the hair on the back of Rhiannon’s head to the nape of her neck, releasing into a long ponytail that swept her back. It was a warrior's hairstyle, reserved for the commanders she was soon to oversee. Rhiannon swallowed.

Anteros was a relatively large country. With spread-out regions, it experienced all seasons. It had exports in fish and crafts in the region of Southkeep, lumber and sturdy grains in the cold of Windermere, perishables like fruits and vegetables in the large region of Fernridge, and metals and fabrics in Wyndell—well, mainly in the capitol of Wyndell. The rest was made of forest land and the castle where Rhiannon resided. Right beyond Wyndell Castle was the capitol—the epicenter of culture and history. It was a downhill city of museums, theaters, artisans, and townhouses for the wealthiest of citizens. In a world where everyone is Gifted with magic, few starved or lived on the streets. Being Gifted was a blessing, and a blessing that must be repaid through compassion. The possibility of ruling such a place had been foreign all these years, but the responsibility was slowly starting to weigh on Rhiannon’s shoulders.
“Come along,” Marzanna nodded, satisfied with her handiwork, inclining her head for Rhiannon to follow her out into the hallway where large windows tinted the color of sunlight opened to the view beyond. Aspens as far as the eye could see surrounded her little palace on a mountaintop. She felt so small in this place.

As archways made of aerial creatures carved into soft stone towered above them, Rhiannon thought about her mother. It had been nine years since her death and she still couldn’t quite imagine her mother walking these halls, below the archways of two dragons, or stealing pastries from the basement kitchen or visiting the city with her tutor to see the ballet. She couldn’t see her smile in a place like this.

Marzanna turned down into a turret of spiral stairs, small windows burning with the yellow of the fall aspens. Rhiannon followed, picking up her skirts, her muscles straining.

Within the small room at the bottom of the staircase were one hundred and eight crowns. Rhiannon only knew because Alastor told her the story many times as a young girl, especially in those first few days after her mother’s death.

“A room of crowns. Filled to the brim. Some made for Anteros' Queen’s, others ripped from the heads of those we have conquered.” He said gently, calloused fingers tracing the air as if he could bring the room to life in front of her eyes.

Now, Rhiannon ventured into the small space, the cabinets pushing her dress in on itself. She reached for one that was more headdress than crown. It looked like the sun, its rays shooting from the sphere of her head. Alastor had told her the story of this crown time and again. It was the one she always asked for. That first crown.
The story of a Saint, not a Queen. A woman of legend, not royalty. A vessel of the Goddesses’ will.

Saint Astraea. The one who created the very kingdom she was to rule.
Rhiannon pictured the woman and her light hair streaked with gray bundled atop her head. Myth said she was lightening personified. That she scorched these lands to rebuild.

Hundreds of years ago, when the Dark Storm that ripped across the continent approached, threatening to decimate all she had made for herself, Queen Astraea walked into that storm, starburst crown on her head, lightening crackling on her fingertips as she stared ahead, ready to face its impact.

The records of what happened to the Queen were sparse at best. Some said she never made it out, that only her children survived her, while other records indicated she had children after emerging broken but victorious from the Storm. The only consensus seemed to Rhiannon to be that Astraea gave herself completely to the Dark Storm, that force nature had violently sent their way, saved her people, and was thus named a Saint.

Rhiannon thought of that Saint now, placing that crown on her head and walking into the darkness, a similar darkness, she imagined, that now lingered beneath her fingertips.

She nodded to the crown, perched on the top shelf of the back wall. Marzanna looked at Rhiannon as if she were remembering the old legend herself, as if she knew just why Rhiannon had made her choice.

*
They waited till night fell, when the castle was lit with candles, wax melting from the large iron chandeliers that filled the cavernous ceilings. A chill seeped into Rhiannon’s bones, clung to the stone walls. She wore the dress Marzanna fitted her in that morning and stuffed her stomach with roast meats and vegetables at dinner. While they ate, Alastor asked about the necklace, only raising a brow when she told him its origin. Mouthful of roasted squash, he only said, “That’s one crafty bird—always has been.”

Rhiannon chuckled. Alastor served her mother before she perished in the fire that ripped her home apart. Her fire. Rhiannon shook the thought from her head, spearing another carrot onto her plate.

Kept in seclusion during her childhood, Rhiannon knew nothing about the Queendom or her role in it. All she knew was her Gift of flame and the lull of her mother’s singing voice. She learned later that it was a tradition of sorts, to let the child grow up freely, without a care. The only drawback was its seclusion, Rhiannon thought. Alastor was like a father to her, and Marzanna was as close to a friend as she had now. The oldest and only child of her mother, Rhiannon was used to the isolation.

“Are you ready for the Ceremony?” Alastor asked Rhiannon who just gestured to her complete outfit and raised an eyebrow.

“You know what I mean,” Alastor put down his fork, the fire in the great dining room roaring, coloring his scar. “There is a weight that comes with it.”

“Nothing I’m not ready for,” Rhiannon wiped the corner of her mouth, thinking about the swirling darkness under her gloves. At what that meant. She tried not to think about it growing, overtaking her. She breathed out through her mouth.
Alastor rose from his chair, napkin tucked under the corner of his plate, and made for the door. Reaching Rhiannon at the other end of the table, he put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing slightly as he whispered, “You’ve always been fearless.”

She wasn’t quite sure she believed that.

Now, Rhiannon waited by the door, shifting on her bare feet, letting the chill creep into her bones, her legs, to cool the flame slithering through her stomach. Marzanna entered through a set of double doors—holding a group of tapered red candles. She shoved them into Rhiannon’s hands as she inspected the hem of the dress and the tilt of the starburst crown now set atop Rhiannon’s head.

Rhiannon gathered the red wax candles in her hands and Marzanna lit a match, quickly kissing each wick with flame. She pinched the match with her fingers. The warmth spread through to Rhiannon’s stomach, the heat so vibrant it melted through the velvet of her dress to her bare skin beneath. The flame within her begged to mimic that flickering of candles in her hands, but her magic was to be contained for this Ceremony.

The Ceremony was what other kingdoms to the South and West would call a Coronation. Instead of being watched by one’s peers, Rhiannon would be magically tested for true heredity and mental stability. This generally included reliving a selection of memories. Enacted by the Priestesses, the Ceremony was described to her as a formality with minor after effects.

Wax dripped down the tapered candles, the red swelling as it gathered more and more, as it crawled over her fingers, stinging, claiming.
The doors opened. Rhiannon ventured out into the star-speckled night. The only sound was that of the wind howling between the mountains that protected her home and the train of her dress clawing the ground. Alastor told her for years which way to go—had made her practice even.

*

The first time he took her to the lake she looked at him like he was crazy. About thirteen, she took one look at the body of water and laughed at him, doubling over as a flock of birds abandoned the nearby tree.

He only looked at her sternly, rolled his eyes, then shoved her into the water.

"Child—do not laugh, it is not funny." He'd said as she emerged from the lake, mouth agape.

"But, this—" He chuckled, offering a hand to help her out, "is funny."

Rhiannon pulled him in with her.

Now, she walked that path they both took back all those years ago, soaked to the bone. Wax sealed her hands into a bouquet of flames. Foliage rose up around her as bushes turned into small pines into the tall aspens she so dearly loved. Small tins filled with candles lined the pathway, curving as the trail rose to reveal the lake surrounded by the Priestesses in their black dresses of sheer chiffon, dragon scales lining the hem of the trains that flowed in the cool night breeze. Rhiannon breathed. She breathed and breathed. The fire within curling towards that memory in her mother's ancestral home. Towards the moment she walked in the dining room and lit all the candles at once. The slow smile that spread across her mother's face, the
delight dancing in the reflection of flame in her eyes. The way her mother’s smile faltered and shifted to something within for a second—missed only if Rhiannon blinked. Towards the fire, the flame. Always the flame.

Her Gift was power. *My Gift is a curse.* Rhiannon approached edge of the water. She felt the burning of the wax less and less, her hands encased. She swallowed. An old calling filled her bones with each breath she took.

*Burn it. Burn it all my dear.*

Her mother's words rung in her head.

*Run.*

She reached the water's edge.

Rhiannon stepped into the lake, feet sinking to the muddy bottom, moonlight illuminating her path, the water weighing down the velvet. Sinking deeper.

Reaching the middle of the lake, Rhiannon submerged herself fully, water dragging black velvet, swallowing it, and guttering the candle flames.

The last thing she saw were the priestesses surrounding the lake, candles reflecting like lanterns in the water. *Under.*

* *

She remembered when she first met Alastor—well, really met him. He loomed above her—his forty-year-old height towering above her nine-year old frame.

Rhiannon stared at him.

He told her years later, soft quiet in his voice, “When I saw you there—you were a slip of a girl. Purpled and bruised, that crow always hovering. My heart broke. But as soon as you looked me in the eyes, I realized. You were going to be okay.”
A girl not born to be Queen but raised into it.

At nine years old, she stared at him. And turned right around, Janus on her
tail. Forced Alastor to rush after her, a sight that he hadn't yet lived down in the
guard’s quarters. When he finally caught up to her, he only huffed out a laugh and
nodded his head towards a stairwell.

Rhiannon tentatively walked down the stairway, peering for any sort of danger
around the curved wall. But she only found the kitchens. Alastor guided her to a large
wood plank table before the main hearth.

He stepped away, walking back over with two pastries in hand, sliding one in
front of her before wolfing down his own.

“If you're not going to eat it—I will.”

Rhiannon took a bite of flaky pastry.

Her mother was beautiful—honey gold curls, with aureate eyes that matched
her daughter’s. She kissed Rhiannon's eyelids, whispering *For the everlasting Sight.*
Tucked the covers around her body, *To keep the warmth in and the chill out.*

Rhiannon was about to argue that she was never quite cold when her mother's
face had tightened, the woman quickly getting up, brushing a stray lock of hair behind
her ear and smiled at her daughter before blowing the single candle out.

Rhiannon knew her mother had a secret before she died. She did not know
what until that day when she had roared to the young girl, *Burn it all.* When her
mother looked Rhiannon in the eyes with such intensity, she had done nothing but her
mother’s orders. She did not think about the consequences. She only thought to make her at peace. She burned her own mother alive.

Rhiannon was nestled between the roots of a tree, eating a roasted meat sandwich. The boy of starlight ate next to her—she had shared. Breathless, Rhiannon licked the stray breadcrumbs from her fingers and leaned back against the rough bark.

“What do you think it’s like to be old?”

The boy paused, sandwich halfway to his mouth before he rested his hand on his lap.

“I think it is to have the weight of the past on your shoulders. But it is also to carry that same weight in your heart.” He spoke like this often. In abstract riddles. He seemed as though he had leapt out of a book and into her hands. Her friend. Rhiannon nodded thoughtfully, although at eight she barely understood what exactly he meant. When he finished his food, they pretended they were knights off to save a dragon and her princess.

A nine-year-old Rhiannon sat in the living room, on the green velvet couch her mother adored. She kneeled before Rhiannon now, hands gripping her bony shoulders. Her mother looked at her, wild eyed. Burn it. Burn it all my dear. They will come for you, I promise.

Rhiannon gasped upwards, breathing heavy, water-logged. The lake was gone. Mud dried to the bone. The priestesses gone.
The only evidence of the ritual was her headdress staked into the grassy shores. A figure loomed beyond the trees, within the forest. Rhiannon squinted, peering, dragging a muddy arm across her forehead. The darkness shifted, the figure disappearing, perhaps shadows shifting back into place. Rhiannon lifted herself up on weakened arms, the velvet of her dress still damp with lake water. She padded towards the shore where her crown was, waiting for her.

When Rhiannon woke, she found herself in fresh night clothes. The sun was beginning to peek over the forest beyond as she rolled over. She had no recollection of how she got back to her room, only grateful that she had.

Flipping her legs over the bed, Rhiannon placed each foot firmly on the floor. She almost couldn't believe it. She raked her hand through her dark waves. Queen. Her hand. Rhiannon stared at her hands, at the gray swirling under her skin—ink in water. The mark had grown, from fingertips to the whole of her fingers, seeping down into her palms—laying roots. Yanking the door to the nightstand next to her bed open, she pulled out a pair of gold riding gloves from a far corner, tugging them over each finger.

Rhiannon pulled a gloved hand through her hair and breathed through her nose, letting her hands get caught in the tangles, work through them to calm her shaking.

She knew this was coming. Words from long ago. Her mother whispered a story to her in the dark of a girl claimed by darkness. Fully consumed. Guttered. A Death God come to collect his debt. A myth—her mother told her. An old folk tale.
But it stuck with her, throughout all these years. In the back of her mind, tinting the
world around her. She thought her mother would have been here. To help her stave
off this threat of death. Nine years. Nine years was a lifetime and a blink ago. *Beware
the darkness, Rhiannon. For it will come to claim bright and loved things.*

Her stomach churned. She made herself get up. Slide on her training gear.
There would be no celebrations. No formalities. Only work. As she got ready, she
couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched—of the thought of that dark figure in the
woods.

*

Rhiannon threw herself into riding, sword training, and the diplomacy books
her tutor left on her desk that morning. When she walked into the rotund work space,
her groan echoed as she grabbed the largest of the tomes to bring with her to the
stables. She tried to fill her mind with facts of foreign rulers and their assets and
preferred trading partners, trying to forget visions of that shadowy figure. During her
riding, her studies, Rhiannon caught glimpses out of the corner of her eye, trying to
dismiss the feeling lingering in her gut, tingling in her fingers.

When Alastor finally found her in the late afternoon, Rhiannon was practicing
her magic in the old greenhouse. Vines pushed their way through ancient glass panes,
the world outside warped and tinted green. A cool draft slipped through the cracks,
cooling Rhiannon’s forehead. She was working on a large sphere of flame that took
up the entire space. Focusing on keeping her energy evenly applied, flame pushing in
on flame, Rhiannon was completely absorbed when she noticed the old man leaning
against the doorframe eying the sphere. She smiled slightly, eyes shifting to her
gloves, thoughts shifting to what lay beneath. The ball of flame flickered. Rhiannon tried to refocus, apply her magic evenly but her mind raced. Images of her body covered in the inky gray whorls, completely consumed. Paralyzed. Unable to use her magic. A dark figure.

Gone. The ball of flame was gone.

Alastor nodded, “You okay?”

Rhiannon swallowed. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She pinched the bridge of her nose, breathing. Hand out, a sign that she needed space. It was their signal.

Since the day Alastor found her at 14, pacing her room, rambling about needing time, more time, needing space, needing something, how it was all her fault, everything was her fault. He tried to grab her, ground her, stop her.

She struck out, flame barely missing his face.

Since then, this was their way.

So, Alastor stopped as Rhiannon breathed, feeling her magic swirl within, focusing it into the pit of her stomach, heart rate lowering. She looked him in the eyes.

“I wanted to check in, see how you were holding up,” Alastor gestured to the greenhouse around them, entering the main space to pat Janus who was perched on an old potting table in the corner. “You’ve been keeping yourself busy.”

"Alastor," Rhiannon paused, side eying the older man, gloved hands gripped together to stop her shaking. "Have you heard anything about a monarch having—"

She wrung her hands together.

Alastor stared at Janus, eyebrows raised, murmuring, "Out with it, child."
"Visions?"

He snorted.

"Only if that monarch is a Seer. Being queen does not give you any more powers than the ones you were born with—even though it may feel like that." Alastor grinned turning to her, and patted her shoulder gently. Rhiannon just nodded, staring at her boot clad feet. Janus squawked, landing on Rhiannon’s other shoulder, feathers ruffling, caressing her hair.

"Though, if anything is going on—" Alastor examined her eyes, her face, concern causing the scar that cut across his cheek to wrinkle further.

"Nothing," Rhiannon smiled softly, "Nothing is going on. I thought I saw something. It must have just been residual from the Ceremony." She tugged her gloves a little tighter, the seams digging into the underbed of her fingernails. She was forewarned of exhaustion.

“Did my mother ever tell you what she was thinking?” Rhiannon asked quietly. “That day—what she was planning?” They rarely ever talked about her—Rhiannon’s mother. She was a distant body in the back of her memory. A tapestry of before. She could see her mother as a ten-year-old with frizzy blonde curls, frustrated eyes rolling as tutors explained who she was, what she was to become. Rhiannon wondered in dark nights what it would have been like to come here with her mother. To live here with her laughter filling the halls, to not be alone.

Alastor shifted.

“I did not.” Were his only choked words.
Flame filled Rhiannon’s vision. Screams, the pounding of her heart. Memories. That overwhelming guilt. Guilt that pressed on her chest most nights, milked tears and gasped cries.

“I could have done something else.” Rhiannon whispered. Alastor looked into Rhiannon’s eyes. Sturdy brown staring into her own gold.

“You could have done nothing else.” He took her gloved hands, squeezing them, then tucked her into a hug.

“You did everything you could,” he whispered into her hair. “It is not your fault.”

Rhiannon breathed in the words, letting them spread across her body, never quite reaching her heart.

* 

Those words Alastor whispered so kindly felt bitter in her mouth. *It’s not your fault.* Marzanna drew her a warm bath, to wash away the grime of training. Rhiannon was grateful for the chance to sit with her thoughts. In the large bathing room, Marzanna filled her favorite tub in the corner. Tapered candles melted in their large lanterns, giving the walls a soft glow. Shadows shifted as Rhiannon examined the mark which crept its way further up her arms, now elbow length.

Submerging fully underwater, Rhiannon held her breath, feeling the beat of her heart in her ears. She wondered when it would take her over completely—the inky marbling. Already she felt its pulsing beneath her skin, crawling up her throat—the air slowly being pushed out of her.
Rhiannon never thought it would happen so suddenly. The premonition of her death. Her mother told her stories of queens future and past visited by a Death God. *Beware the darkness.* Rhiannon shuddered. She never truly knew if it was truth or fiction, though now she suspected the former.

Surfacing from the water, she let air enter her lungs, a greedy gulp.

She hadn't told a soul. Not even Alastor.

*You never would have made a good Queen anyway*, a voice in the back of her head sneered. Rhiannon pulled a brush through her hair. *Couldn’t save your mother. Never wanted this. Not good enough. Can’t even figure out what is ailing you. You’re alone.*

Her heartbeat quickened.

*Are you okay?* A voice echoed in the large chamber, the candles guttering for an instant.

Rhiannon stood, the water around her sloshing over the edge of the inset tub. The sound of water dripping off her body filled her ears as she inspected the shadows to find nothing. She only stared at the darkness pulsing beneath her skin, watching as it crawled up to her shoulders.

*  

Rhiannon felt the presence as she entered her room, silk sleeping pants rippling in the breeze, the lavender fabric bright against the dark woods. She expected it after today.
When she saw the dark figure in her mirror, she did not scream, she did not startle, she only stood staring Death in the face, heart in her throat, not quite breathing.

When this day would come—she told herself—she would fight. She would jump out the window, escape. She would cower and beg forgiveness for what she did. A million little escape plans hatched from thoughts between waking and sleep. But he did not come near. He only stood there. Before, she imagined death as a woman--poised and vengeful—ominous and breathtaking. But now he stood before her—broad forehead and high cheekbones, thin lipped and long lashed. Skin stained blue and gold and black and white. Pulsing darkness shimmered, reminding Rhiannon of the inky gray tendrils beneath her own skin, reminding her of a friend from long ago. She did not plan for this scenario. For the quiet, the stillness.

So, she decided to be honest.

"I am dying." Rhiannon said to the figure behind her, tugging her gloves off finger by finger until the swirling gray of the tips shone in the moonlight.

"Who said that."

Rhiannon ignored his question, instead turning to face the Death God, arms lifted before her.

"This swirling—what is it?" He stepped closer, flipping her hand, gripping her forearm, tracing a path up to her elbow.

"This is power, my dear old friend."

He let her go. Became smoke and wind and the gathering shadows. On ash left behind Rhiannon heard one word.
Death himself had a name.

*Nero.*

* 

In her dreams Rhiannon screamed. She screamed and screamed until her throat ached with the force of it. She pulled at her hair, dragged her hands down her face, leaving large welts in their wake, she gasped for air when the tears choked her, drowned her, burned it away. She screamed. From the loss, from the burden of it all weighing on her heart.

She was meant for more than a young death at the hands of an unknown power. She was meant to burn.

She screamed until the darkness claimed her.

In the morning, Rhiannon found herself curled in the dirt, aspen leaves providing little cushion beneath her body. Mouth like cotton, eyes heavy, she unfurled herself to the chill of the wind and got up.

* 

Rhiannon went to see Alastor.

She walked the maze of hallways, through arches of herons and wrens, crows and hawks, sea dragons and wyverns. She needed him to see it. The mark. To ease her mind. Rhiannon gathered the deep green silk of her gown in her hands as she walked up a small tower.

She needed someone to see it. She couldn’t take the possibilities playing in her head over and over. Whorls overtaking her back, choking the air out of her, freezing her in place like a statue. Killing her. Taking her over. Endless. Insatiable.
Rhiannon took the large brass knocker in her silver gloved hand and let it fall with a thud.

“Enter.” Rhiannon obeyed.

Alastor sat at his desk, pen in hand, document lifted by a forefinger. Rhiannon remembered running around the large rugged space as a child, grabbing books off the shelves, reading chapters here and there—tucking little pieces of history and information into her brain.

“Rhiannon,” Alastor looked up, gently setting his pen down on the desk.

“I need you to look at something.” Rhiannon breathed, and before Alastor could say anything or get up from the chair he occupied for all her childhood, she pulled the silver glove off her right hand.

“What is it?” Alastor came around the table, staring at her ungloved hand.

“I—I don’t know,” Rhiannon started, gesturing towards the patterns lacing her arm, “It’s reaching my shoulders now. I—”

“What are you talking about?” Alastor gripped her arm, turning it over slowly, brows kneading together.

“What do you mean—” Rhiannon’s voice jumped, “The whorls—”

“Whorls?” Alastor looked in her eyes, “Rhiannon. I don’t see any whorls.”

Rhiannon paused. Stared at him, and back at her marked arm, the patterns writhing beneath her skin. The room collapsed around her. She felt it, the bookshelves rattling, her world quaking.

“It’s there.” Rhiannon breathed.

“Rhiannon—”
“Please—” Air gathered in Rhiannon’s throat. “You need to believe me.”

“Maybe you’re stressed—”

“It’s real.”

“I trust you—but you’ve been through a lot.”

“No—” Rhiannon backed up, holding her bare arm. “You have to trust me. It’s here.”

“Child,” Alastor stepped towards her, reaching a hand out towards her.

“You don’t believe me.” Rhiannon shut the door to the stairwell behind her.

Rhiannon sat on her balcony; Janus nestled on her shoulder. The crow came as soon as she stepped outside, looking at the forest beyond. She absent-mindedly pet the crow as she conjured hares made of flame, chasing each other in circles. Their fiery forms shifted and shimmered as the wind tousled the curtains in her room. I am alone. Is it me? Is that why? Am I not good enough? Am I ungrateful? Have I not taken responsibility for my fate? Rhiannon molded the hares into horses circling and then galloping across the balcony. Janus eyed them warily, nestling further into the crook of Rhiannon’s shoulder. Did I not do what she told me to do? Do I not smell the acidity of my mother’s flesh in my sleep? I did what she told me to do and I still imagine other ways out. Is this my punishment?

Rhiannon closed her fist, the fire vanishing. Closing her eyes, enjoying the scent of citrus in the air, the scent of her magic. It wasn’t fair. She shouldn’t have put that on me. I was only a child. A child. I didn’t survive that. Rhiannon stuck her hands
in the pockets of her dress, feeling the silky material and rubbing her frozen thighs beneath for warmth.

Rhiannon felt it then. The mark. Pressing down her back, up her throat. Claiming her.

A rustle of wind was the only thing that announced Nero’s arrival. The Death God stood on the balcony, staring at Rhiannon. Wordless. She only stared back at him.

“So,” she started, voice raw, “Power? Are you sure you’re not here to take me away?”

Nero only glanced at her before leaning against the balcony. She wondered for a moment if shoving him off it would solve all her problems.

“My mother,” Rhiannon spoke, “She told me story. Of a Queen plagued with writhing darkness, taken to Death’s door. Some would think it wise to heed her warning.”

“I wouldn—don’t you remember me?” Nero spoke into the wind. Rhiannon looked up at him. She remembered her friend. She remembered the boy.

“You remind me of a friend I once had, but that was just childish whimsy—that wasn’t true.” Rhiannon waved her hand.

“It wasn’t true—“ Nero’s forehead crinkled in confusion, “Rhia—we used to be friends. You were my best friend.”

Rhiannon, stricken, looked once more up at the Death God. The way he said her name did it. The lashes, the nose—Nero was the boy from her childhood.

“But you weren’t real,” Rhiannon whispered, rising now.
He scoffed.

“That’s absurd.”

“I never saw you after it all burned.”

“And I thought you to be dead.”

Rhiannon had no response to that.

“Rhia— we are of the same star that burst, of the same matter and beginnings. We are similar—” There he went, speaking in the abstract. It was real. She felt it in her gut. “I only knew you were alive when I felt you call out to me.” He grinned, skin swirling with the purples and blues of unobstructed nighttime.

“I remembered the sandwiches.” Rhiannon mumbled, piecing it together. She looked at Death in the eyes for the first time. “I need help.”

Rhiannon shoved her sleeve up, “You said it was power—what do you mean?”

“You have some control over them.” Nero examined the marks warily. “That is all. I recognize the power. The feeling.”

At that, Rhiannon looked up at the Death God, flipping the necklace Janus gave her between her fingertips, question puzzling her face.

“All these years I blamed myself for your death. I blamed myself for being unable to save my one friend in this world. I thought, if I were the harbinger of the end, why didn’t I see yours coming. I understand now why that was.” He spoke with a wry twist of a smile and gestured to her fully alive self.

“So, I recognize a feeling. Deep within you. A warring.” Nero grabbed Rhiannon’s hand. “And it is okay.”
Rhiannon felt a swelling in her throat, traveling to the backs of her eyelids.

“I must have answers.” She whispered, eyes watering.

“We can find them,” was Nero’s reply as he squeezed her hand.

*

As she and Nero wandered into the forest, the smoke curling from the thurible hung on delicate chains, Rhiannon was glad of his presence, for his droplet of understanding of her guilt. For his knowledge of this power that lurked within.

*Answers*. The word repeated over and over in her head. As Rhiannon and Nero spoke in hushed whispers of their pasts and her mother’s premonition of her death due to the markings, Rhiannon had a thought. If this was a war within, she would look within.

So, she and Nero went back to the place where she called for him—a place with enough inherent magic that she could do just that, using very little of her own magic.

“What are you doing again?” Nero chirped behind her, hands stuffed into pockets, darkness shifting beneath a translucent layer of skin.

“I don’t exactly know.” Rhiannon held tight to the pole, cleansing incense unfurling. Something from one of the books she read in Alastor’s office as a child. It would purify the area, for whatever it was she was about to do. “I just, I have this feeling.” He told her she might be able to control it, the power. If she was able to control it, then she might be able to find answers within. She turned to look at Nero then. He only nodded.
“I need to fix this,” Rhiannon said to herself, the words hollow in the forest surrounding them. She thought of Alastor, of how she left him in that tower. He was only trying to help.

They reached the clearing, Nero standing close, shifting away from the cool air surrounding the body of water. Rhiannon gestured to the middle of the refilled lake. Nero paused.

“What’s wrong?”

“I am not sure this is a good idea.”

“Are you afraid of a little water?” Rhiannon grinned then, the joke running flat in the seriousness of what they were about to do. She reached out her hand. Nero took it.

They waded into the cool murky water, until they reached the middle. Rhiannon pulled a red ribbon from the pocket of her green dress, the silk twisting around her calves. She wrapped their hands together, the red ribbon tight around their wrists and arms. It would act as her anchor to this world, her kingdom and the bustling streets just past this very forest. She looked at Nero, wide eyed.

"Do not let go," she whispered hoarsely, hand clamped down on his.

Rhiannon closed her eyes and felt her magic, found it, and tugged.

* 

She stood alone in the lake,thurible in still in her hands, the smoke growing. She took a step towards shore, another, examining the forest beyond. Rhiannon reached the sandy banks.
"Can you help me?" A voice whispered on the wind. Rhiannon turned, thurible swaying on its chains as she did.

"Where are you?" She squinted into the dark forest, the white of the aspen bark providing the only light for miles.

"I did it—" The voice came closer now. Rhiannon turned but no dark figure or shadow appeared in the clearing.

Echoes of I did it surrounded her, filling her ears. Rhiannon turned, scanning the forest, magic writhing to be let lose, find a target.

The leaves rustled behind her.

Turning, she saw a young girl with fair hair reaching out a hand, a starburst crown, much like the one she wore on her own head, gracing her slight curls. Rhiannon paused, looking at the girl’s small hand, the darkness of the forest around pressing in. Take it. She smelled her magic all around her. Felt the pulsing of it surround her. The darkness of the forest before her blurred.

Rhiannon gripped the girl’s hand and fell.

Hundreds of years ago, Saint Astraea stood in the clearing before a large forest of oaks and pines, a winter wind rustling dead leaves. Only about twenty-five years, the then-Queen stood, feet planted in the soil, electricity crackling around her, bursting at her fingertips. The roiling darkness racing toward her, swallowing the forest in large swaths. The Queen did not waver, she did not bat an eye. She stood there, the diamonds in her starburst headdress shining against the inky dark.
Astraea lifted a sheer sleeved hand, taking that darkness head on. Lifting her chin an inch, defiance glittering in her eyes.

The breeze turned violent as the storm reached within touching distance. A bright flash blinded the land, noise so loud it was only a sharp ringing of the ears. Lightening. Astraea stood there, hand out, the inky gray uncoiling beneath her skin, crawling up her arms, her neck. She fell to her knees.

Rhiannon gasped, slamming back into her body, kneeling in the thick of the woods, her own whorls wrapping around her. Hands grasping fistfuls of soil, she caught her breath, tearing her gloves off to stare at the markings beneath her skin, the marbling that now reached her neck. The same writhing gray that moved like ink in water beneath Astraea’s skin all those years ago.

Hands shaking, she reached for her neck, just to be sure she was breathing.

"I did it—" A choked sob behind her.

Rhiannon twisted to find a young girl standing behind her. Dark brown hair plaited down her back, dressed in a cream gown with laced sleeves.

She knew her well.

Still kneeling, Rhiannon looked the girl head on.

"Yes, yes you did." Rhiannon whispered, offering an outstretched hand. The girl took it, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Behind the girl, the shadows of the forest shifted into small frames like the one in front of her. Emerging from the folds of darkness twenty-five girls stepped forward. Wild curls of honey and dark brown. Eyes of gold and blue. They emerged.
Arms and hands, fingertips, necks, and feet kissed by the same inky darkness that now lapped at Rhiannon’s own collarbone.

They all had this—this darkness. This thing that killed her mother and her mother before her.

*Power*. The word whispered through her head.

A young Astraea stepped forward. Her voice was years older, filling the space of the forest around her. The girl beside Rhiannon, her brown hair plaited down her back, tucked herself into the folds of Rhiannon’s dress.

*The darkness claimed us, dear one. We lived in fear of this swirling thing beneath our skin, our veins—this thing even our loved ones couldn’t see.*

Rhiannon thought of Alastor, brows furrowed, concern lacing his eyes. Stepping out of his grip.

*I took on the Dark Storm and came out, scarred. We all did.* She gestured to the young girls around her. *It traveled, from generation to generation. It isolated us.*

*Ate away at our souls.*

*Your mother—she thought she could take things into her own hands.*

Rhiannon felt hollow.

Astraea’s eyes slid toward the girl next to Rhiannon, *We never made peace with what consumed us.* She gestured to the girls behind her. *We lived in its fear—of what we couldn’t do, couldn’t accomplish. Learn from our mistakes dear one.* At that Astraea stepped forward, patting the girl next to Rhiannon on the shoulder, squeezing Rhiannon’s hand. And vanished with the rest of the girls.
A shudder loosened next to her. Dried tears crusted the young girl’s face. Rhiannon gripped the girl’s shoulders.

"It's not your fault." Rhiannon said, voice steady, clear. Rhiannon looked back into the girl’s eyes—her own eyes.

“I did it—” Her younger self only whispered, staring down at her hands slowly being consumed by the darkness. Rhiannon lifted the girl’s chin, a fluttering of hands.

“You did what you could." Rhiannon whispered, tucking the girl into the crook of her body. "You did what mother said.”

The girl made a small, high-pitched noise as sobs wracked her small frame. Rhiannon held her tighter.

"You don't have to be so strong anymore." Rhiannon, feeling her own eyes dampening, ran a hand down the girl's plait and pulled her out to look at her worried face. She reached a hand behind her neck to unclasp that necklace Janus held in his beak only two days ago and reclasped it around her younger self’s neck.

"I have this now. We’re not so alone anymore." Rhiannon gave a small smile, trying to make the feeling reach her eyes, her cheekbones. Her younger self contemplated for a moment, staring her straight in the eyes, gaze unwavering.

It was in that moment she saw what Alastor must have seen all those years ago. A girl, shaken and scared but even in such a state, critical of who she could trust.

Her younger self nodded, wiping a forearm across her face. She took Rhiannon's hands palm up and placed something small and cool in her hands.
She left Rhiannon kneeling in that clearing, smoke gathering around her knees, damp crawling up her dress. She opened her hand to reveal a carved wooden crow.

*

Rhiannon found herself, red ribbon wrapped around her wrist, around Nero's own wrist. It came as a gasp, that awakening. Because all around them the lake went up in steam, water turned mist slipping through trees, the scent of her own magic wrapping around her.

Tucking the crow into her pocket, she unwrapped the ribbon in swift movements.

"You were right."

"About what?"

"It was power." Rhiannon smiled slightly, the feeling not quite reaching her eyes. She wandered ahead, letting go of Nero’s hand. The cool air brushed her palm.

“T have to burn it,” She whispered. “I have to burn that darkness.”

Calling the flame within her, she burned. And let go. A body of flame, blue hot and flickering. The inky darkness writhed beneath her skin, building and separating. It sprung from Rhiannon’s form, a wisp on the wind. She reached a hand of blue flame out to touch the darkness—cool and charged. It reached for Rhiannon, curling around her neck, her arms. She let it.

Fear embodied slithered around her. She was not afraid. Not now. She was born of fire and sweat and tears. She lived through the darkness, her darkness. It was

She grabbed that darkness, searing through its hold on her neck, her arms.

Flame sparked from her, catching on the aspens.

The world went up in flames around her. She would not be paralyzed anymore. As fire ripped through the coil of darkness, Rhiannon knew it would always be there, deep within, deep within her daughters and their daughters. But she would not let it win.

So Rhiannon, fire embodied, and Nero, darkness made, stood there in the raging flames, watching the world burn around them.

*

The fire burned down the forest and the grass surrounding it. The castle was only charred, its cream walls stained black as though roots reached up to drag it underground. A few weeks passed, Rhiannon slowly growing into her duties, following in the footsteps of her ancestors before her. She carried them with her, a reminder.

Now, Rhiannon walked through the grove of charred aspen trees. Nero walked silently behind her. Hands shaking, Rhiannon squatted to inspect the greenery growing from the dark ash covered soil. Running a finger along a tiny sprout, she let out a tiny sob as she sunk to the ground.

As she ran her fingers over all of the greenery.

Tiny aspens. Growing amongst her ashes.

Out of all that was destroyed—
"They are quite resilient." Nero smiled, staring out at the forest beyond.

Rhiannon followed his gaze.

To find miles upon miles of small green shoots with yellow buds reaching towards the sky, from the ashes of the world she burned.
Part II: Helin

Helin weaved through the narrow streets of Southkeep, wings tucked underneath a light cape, as she plucked apples from stands and gold from pockets. Dressed in the rich silks of the aristocracy, Helin looked inconspicuous, curly blond hair pinned to her head like the Goddesses of old, small dragon curled around her neck. Slipping a diamond bracelet into her pocket, she purchased a fresh brioche for Asra. The dragon uncurled herself from Helin's neck and gently sniffed the roll, taking the bread in her mouth and settling for a spot perched on her master's shoulder. Giving the dragon a quick scratch, Helin made it a point to smile and exchange pleasantries with the stall owners as she pilfered items here and there. Known as the model customer, never haggling—except for the fish that was always overpriced, they never suspected her. Instead, the shop keepers looked after the young urchins, trolling the streets for food to eat and wares to trade.

On the slanted tin rooftops above, Adeena crouched, moving from tower to tower, on the lookout for trouble. Helin glanced up, eyes squinting in the sunlight. She could barely make out Adeena’s form clad in gray leather and breathable mesh. Her second in command hadn’t been in the job long but Adeena had long been a close friend. She was there to pick up the pieces after Oryn left.

Asra snapped at Helin’s ear bringing the girl’s attention back to the market, to the fish the dragon was salivating for. Rolling her eyes, Helin walked up to the booth to where Leven, the son of the fisherman who stocked his family’s booth, stood. Well, really, lounged. The people of Southkeep were always in need of fish, so Leven never really made the effort to get attention. Customers just came to him.
“Two salmon fillets and one trout for Asra.” Helin nodded at Leven to take her order. He nimbly wrapped the fish in brown paper, tying it all up with a piece of twine. It reminded Helin of her work with knives. The way she wound the blade through her fingers, from one hand to the other. There was a calm in it.

“That all?” Leven shook his outstretched hand holding the wrapped fish. Helin blanched, and reached into her coin purse to pass him their agreed upon price. She took the fish without a word.

*

“We need money.” Helin dropped her satchel, slipping the pins out of her hair, letting it fall to tickle the small of her back. Adeena closed the large oak door behind her. Stepping around her mess, Helin nimbly unbuttoned the back of her deep blue dress while Asra released her master’s shoulder to nestle herself in the covers of Helin’s bed. Dragons like Asra existed all throughout Southkeep. Mostly owned by fisherman to look out for schools of fish, they were small things even when fully grown, not the large beasts of the past. Asra found Helin shortly after her mother died. The dragon chose her like all dragons do. As for why, Helin never knew, but loved the small creature nonetheless. Adeena plucked up the pins from the cool stone floor, her hands swift as they were with her twin swords. Helin walked behind the floral protective screen--one of her many homey additions to her cavernous room that looked out onto the sea.

“I can’t keep up appearances forever.” Helin referenced the visit to the market.
The building in which they resided was known to Southkeep as a school for girls. Made of five pillars that arched into the sky, connected by glass staircases overlooking the ocean, the structure wasn’t a very inconspicuous location for a band of thieves, but it was simple to keep up the guise. Even though the Keep had boys—though they were few and far between—girls were less suspicious in the eyes of the public. Soft, impressionable things impossible of stealing. It made the act even more validating. The boys just used the underground tunnel system Helin’s great-grandfather used as an escape route. While the great home was bequeathed to Helin’s mother when he passed, it was not given willingly. Helin’s grandmother was born out of wedlock and her great-grandfather’s children passed from disease and famine. He grew up in a prosperous time, when magic still existed. Now, magic was rare, a thing found in secret and sold in an underground market. So, the place became Helin’s mother’s, and now Helin’s. When she was a child, the group was run by Helin’s mother and thieves she took in from the streets. As time passed, more and more of them were found out or left before they could be found out. Which left Helin in charge—including overseeing finances, which they desperately needed. With their dwindling community and increase in girls interested in training, their resources were limited and money tight.

“I have an idea,” Helin could hear Adeena’s smile behind the screen. When she emerged, her friend was petting Asra who nestled herself in the sky-blue quilt Helin’s mother stole as her first act.

“I think I know what that idea is,” Helin plopped down next to Adeena, stretching her legs out across the girl’s lap. Adeena slipped her short dark hair behind
her pierced ears, staring out at the clear ocean view Helin’s room provided. Their little home, a home of thieves and assassins sat on the edge of their world, where the ocean broke and sewed itself back together. The crashing of the waves was the background noise of their lives. Adeena looked at Helin, eyebrows raised.

“The answer is no.”

“Oh come on, Helin—we could sell it—you know people pay for magical artifacts.”

“No,” Helin ran a hand over Asra’s scales, lifting her focus only to give Adeena a deadpan stare.

“Hel—” Adeena started, Helin took her legs off the girl’s lap and got up. “It’s your mother’s legacy.”

“A legacy that got her killed, Deena.”

“Yes, but—”

“It’s not worth the risk.”

“I beg to differ.”

“It’s not worth risking lives, Adeena, I can’t lose anyone else.” Helin’s voice broke slightly at that, as she turned to lean against the large stone pillar separating her room from the beginning of the balcony. Adeena gave Helin a sad smile as she got up and grabbed the girl’s hands in her own.

“We won’t leave you—intentionally or unintentionally.” Adeena gave her a wry smile. Helin felt numb. All she felt was the absence, a wall between her and Adeena, Adeena being so kind, so thoughtful.

“But—”
“Helin.” Adeena got up and took Helin’s hands in her own, a serious glint crossing her gaze. “I know what goes on in that head of yours. You forget we’ve known each other since we were just babes. And I know you and Oryn were closer. I know it Helin. He left you. But I won’t.” At that, Adeena gave a small smile, giving Helin’s hands one last squeeze before leaving Helin standing in the middle of her bedroom, feeling and not feeling all at once.

*

Oryn was her best friend. She barely remembered him now. It was strange—Helin thought—that loss. She remembered glimpses. The sweep of his cheekbones, blond hair ruffling in the salt air, the sound of his laugh. Any full images of him were blurry and never within reach.

She missed him though. She missed his quick wit and endless positivity. She missed his clumsiness and strong-headed will. Adeena was many of those things, but things were different with Oryn. He was an Almost.

Her mother thought it important to leave her words behind for her daughter and described Almosts in her extensive journals. Almosts were people who could have been Somethings. Somethings to you. Something More. That was how Helin felt about Oryn. Even if that Something wasn’t romantic by any means, she thought of him as her soulmate. Someone inseparable from herself. But then he left. Simply disappeared with a note that read, Goodbye.

His absence triggered something deep within. Voices trailed behind Helin, whispering words picking her apart, piece by piece. Maybe he left because of that
joke you made. Why did you think you’d ever be good enough? Don’t you know, people leave you. They always do.

Adeena found Helin by the shore late one night, about a week after Oryn left. Knees sunk into the sand, Helin covering her ears, screaming, screaming into the roaring wind. *I understand. I’m not good enough. I’ll never be. Just stop.* Adeena ran up behind her, dragging Helin away from the shore, Asra following close behind, hovering above Helin.

They stayed in the sand for a while: Helin staring up at the sky, the wet of her tears cooling in the night air, Adeena sitting beside Helin, staring out into the sea.

“You are more than enough. Helin, more than enough. I understand.” Adeena looked at her leader then, “I hear those voices too.”

* 

Helen made her way through the tangle of halls. Walls of plain glass looked out onto the beach below.

When I saw it. I knew. I knew it was home. For me and the people I loved. Helin’s mother told her the story so many times as a child. A bedtime story. One of found family and the dreams of a young girl who wanted more for her daughter than to thieve. But Helin followed in her mother’s footsteps. It was her mother’s way of surviving, but Helin’s way of coping. It made her feel close to her mother. Sometimes she lay awake at night, wishing for anything to want other than stealing some pocket watch she couldn’t care less about. But it was an impulse now.

Helin pulled her fur-lined cloak around her, wings tucked behind her back, the chill seeping through the glass walls. Oryn told her of a palace in the West where
ornate animals were carved into stone and large iron chandeliers hung from cathedral ceilings. But the Keep, her mother’s endearing name for their so called school, had its own charms.

Helin turned a few corridors, gray stone towering above her as she took the spiral stairs down to the dining hall, a cozy space filled with candles and the smell of food—stew for tonight. Eden greeted Helin with a bowl filled to the brim, the girl holding her own bowl in the other hand. Helin accepted greedily. Eden was in charge of food preparation with Vasar, her younger sister. The two were left at their doorstep as young children. All they remembered were the lush forests of Fernridge and the sweet fruit given to them by their father. Taking her seat next to Adeena, Helin shoveled a spoonful into her mouth, letting the rosemary and savory carrots fill her senses. The two sisters sat across from them, Vasar looking like a younger image of her sister. Eden’s dark hair was pulled back into a long, messily done braid, her deep brown eyes glowing in the candlelight of the hall. She took her apron off, throwing it to the corner of the table, revealing her own training leathers. Known amongst their group for her use of small knives and ranged attacks, Eden was the perfect partner for Vasar who focused her skillset in using a singlehanded sword. The girl was so enraptured with a sword design a merchant from Wyndell brought that she’d started an apprenticeship with the local blacksmith to be able to make the sword that now hung at her side. The handle was covered in vines and thorns leading to a cluster of roses that bloomed at the pommel. Using some chemicals—Helin didn’t know the specifics—Vasar shaded the blade to reflect the sunlight in arrays of pinks and reds. It fit her bright spirit.
“Helin?” It was Eden, eyebrows raised, blowing on a spoonful before she took a bite.

“Sorry, Ead.” Helin glanced up from her food.

“I asked what the plan was,” Eden looked to Adeena.

Obviously, they had talked. Helin sighed, her spoon hitting the bowl with a resounding clink. She felt the room still. The fifty or so other thieves sat quiet for a millisecond, then resumed their conversations and dinnertime noise.

“Eden.” Vasar hissed, throwing a perfect curl behind her shoulder as she did.

“I told you not to bring it up.”

“But—” Eden started as Helin lifted a single hand. Adeena shifted beside her.

“We’re going to go for it.” Helin said, scooping a piece of potato up out of the mix. “But first we must eat, and then we must research. We will not go into this blind.”

*

Helin didn’t know why she agreed to do it. At first she thought perhaps she was worn down by the constant stories. Not just from Adeena, but Eden and Vasar too. Then, perhaps she thought it was the idea of continuing what her mother started, and eventually died for. But when she lay on the floor of the small rounded library, slippers warming her feet that kicked the air, she realized it was only for herself. She was curious what could bring such destruction upon her mother—her childhood. Helin wanted to know if she was stronger. It was an awful thought at first, but the more Helin sat with it, the surer she was that this was her reason.
Adeena and Vasar sat at the small two-person table fitted to the wall. The red wallpaper filling the space was faded from time and age. Besides the large white marble fireplace Asra planted herself in front of, the only light in the room came from a large chandelier made of bones. Helin found it odd as a child, but it grew on her as she aged. She also learned that it wasn’t made of human bones like Oryn teased as a child, but of sea creatures the locals had captured.

Eden slid down from the oak ladder she wrapped herself around, a single book in hand, the ladder sliding away on its rail as her feet touched the ground.

“Anything, Eden?” Helin turned her head, laying her mother’s journal on her chest. Eden just shook her head, procuring a roll from her tunic pocket, and slicing it with open with a knife she slid from a hidden sheath on her forearm.

Helin turned back to her own reading material. It was one of her mother’s later volumes, after she tried to go after the book they were now searching for. It was a book of innate magic, one that was rumored to even have a spell to bring magic back—but that didn’t matter to Helin. Maybe it mattered to her mother, before it destroyed her. Her mother’s looping cursive shifted into scribbles, the writing cramped on the page—words repeated like they were chasing her down.

Helin tucked her own wings around her like a shawl, a hand absentmindedly going to stoke the edge of her feathers. Pink and orange, like sundown. Her mother’s were deep as midnight, starlight swirling within velvety darkness. The last magic of a dead world. Their wings, a family trait, contained a small amount of magic, just enough to sense shifts in the atmosphere or be forewarned of danger. She even could determine whether an object was magical itself, which would be useful in finding that
book. Although, whatever it did to her mother, it broke her. Gone was the woman who wrote so fervently of ideas for a better world, for her and her friends. Dreams of a sanctuary, like the ones of the Crones in Windermere. It all turned into something darker, some desire to pull herself apart like her mother did. They found her washed up on the shores, the remnants of her once brilliant wings drowned in saltwater, feathers strewn across the sands that overlooked what was now Helin’s room. She was thirteen.

Tucking a blonde curl behind her ear, Helin turned the page, but stopped. It was thicker than what she was used to at this point. After hours of scanning through her mother’s journals, she knew the wisps of pages, how thin they were. This was different. Rolling up to sit cross legged, her wings folding in behind her, Helin thumbed the page. Over and over until the corners separated from each other. Sucking in a breath, she slowly, carefully pulled the pages apart. The edges were worn—having been glued together—but Helin smoothed it out, letting out a low whistle as she beheld a map. It was sketched in a hurry, lines messy but the monuments were undeniable. The book was in Southkeep itself.

“Hey,” Helin unfolded herself, standing up in a fluid movement. She could feel her curls sticking up in the back of her head, but she held steadfast to the book, padding over to the two person table. “Look at this.”

Vasar and Adeena turned in their seats, Eden coming up behind Helin to peer over her shoulder. Adeena’s brows creased, the tight dark spirals of her hair bouncing as she went back to the book she had open on her lap.
“Give me a second,” She murmured, flipping through the pages of her own book. Vasar leaned back in her chair, settling her lilac slippered feet on the table’s edge.

“So, according to this,” Adeena flipped the book to show the cover, *A History of Southkeep*, “that location should be at the old winter townhouse. Helin, it used to be your great-grandfather’s.” Adeena turned the page, pulling the sound of that s as she did. She raised her eyebrows, “It looks like your mother might have been able to access it through the tunnel system. We can’t now, it’s a part of the the caved in path.”

Vasar tipped back in her chair, shifting back and forth as she balanced herself.

“I mean that makes sense, right?” She used her hands to sketch out the scene. “It’s easy enough access if you knew the way. No one would really notice a book that’s been hidden—they’d only look for something were it missing.”

“Is anyone living there now?” Helin questioned, the plan already formulating in her head.

Adeena flipped through a record book next to her, finger running down a list of properties. “Yes, a family of the name Faber, bought the property about 14 years ago.”

“Do you think they found it?” It was Eden, a mouthful of bread making her words nearly incomprehensible.

“I mean, it’s possible.” Adeena replied, shrugging.

“When can we retrieve it?” Vasar’s wicked grin was slowly growing across her face.
“The Festival.” Helin bolted upright. “Everyone will be at the Festival of Lights.”

The Festival of Lights was their one holiday dedicated to the Goddesses of Old, specifically dedicated to Aine, the Goddess of Sunlight, from the time of royalty. Food and flowers lined the streets, games for the children and religious services in the large basilica at the heart of Southkeep. Lanterns were released at midnight, to rise with the wishes of their owners to the stars.

Adeena closed her book, smiling as she gave a single nod to Helin.

*

Before her were a plethora of dresses. Adeena brought them in that morning, trains dragging on the ground behind her. She threw them on the bed, ordering Helin to choose one for later as she gave a dismissive wave before going to do some training with her quarterstaff. She picked out dresses in varying shades of blue—gauzy and tulle covered things, flowing satins and silks that would cling to her very form. Helin waded through her options, throwing a deep blue velvet dress aside—too heavy. She pulled out a satin dress of blue-gray with straps that would fall across her shoulders. The bodice was fitted until the waist where it flowed outward. She could fit quite a few weapons beneath—maybe even ask someone to make a pocket for some thin knives in the boning of the corset. The back of the dress was a hard v, leaving room for her wings to curl aside for a shawl. Helin grabbed a coronet of feathers, which she would affix atop her head. She was sure Vasar would help her, the girl took any and all jobs requiring a ball gown. Helin hung up her choice, dragging the other options to the foot of her bed.
Yesterday, in a visit to the local records archives, Helin skimmed through blueprints in the guise of a descendant of the original owner—which wasn’t a complete falsity. She found that the tunnel entrance would likely lead into a cellar. While they wouldn’t use the tunnels because, as Adeena mentioned, the section with access to the townhouse—the East side—hadn’t been cleared away since the cave-in when she was fourteen years old. They would have enough time in the evening to walk to the townhouse and get in and out before anyone would come home.

But now as she walked over the edge of her balcony, the sea pulling strands of hair from her bun gathered at the nape of her neck, Helin felt an old uneasiness spread throughout her stomach. They still didn’t know exactly what kind of magic the book would hold. Only that it would take care of their problems—that is was valuable enough to be sold. She didn’t like going in blind. But they were desperate. They had mouths to feed and confidence to retain. Her mother’s words clung to every gust of wind as Helin sighed and turned back to her room to prepare her weapons. Down with the undertow.

*

Adeena wore a dress of bright orange. She looked like flame incarnate, the bright color popping against her dark skin. Asra circled her, weaving between her legs like a house cat. Vasar went for a dress of the lightest pink, the fabric curling like sea foam. Eden chose a simpler look: dressed in a long cream shift, her hair was wrapped around her head, and her knives weaved throughout. Disguised as small decorative flower pins, she stood like a titan on the edge of the earth. Helin joined the others in her blue-gray dress, wings stretching behind her. They stood at the entrance
of the tunnels that would lead them to the streets of Southkeep. Adeena pulled two maps from the pocket of her dress, a sketch of the one Helin’s mother drew in her youth, and the blue prints Helin “borrowed” from the archivist. The tunnel was made of stucco—stained glass orbs alight with flame cast a prism of color. They walked softly across the marble. No one but Helin, Adeena, Eden, and Vasar knew of this mission. For the rest of the girls, this evening was a holiday and nothing more.

Reaching a large set of stairs, Helin turned and pressed a hand against the wall, a click resounded throughout as a compartment popped open, revealing a weapons cache. Swords, bows, quivers, daggers, and knives lined the velvet interior. She tossed a few extra knives to Eden, a backup dagger to Vasar who already hid her own sword down the strait of her back. The gauzy pink fabric was tied in bows to cover the shape of the weapon. Helin could barely see it now, and in the shadows of darkness it wouldn’t even be visible. She tossed Adeena the collapsible bow and a quiver shaped like a picnic basket. Normalcy was their friend in these situations. Adeena tested the bow strength, adjusting the string tightness, then collapsed it and stuck it in the sheath attached to her back. Helin herself grabbed a set of daggers, feeling envious of Eden’s hair pins, and slipped them into sheaths attached to her thigh through her dress pocket.

*

As they walked up the steps, the soft glow of light dissipated the shadows. Coming out from a small alleyway, they stuck to the shadows until they slipped into the rush of people. Lanterns were hung everywhere the eye could see. Draping from one window to the other, neighbors collaborated to decorate the streets of Southkeep.
Vendors lined the streets, selling sweets made of caramelized pecans and sweetened pistachios soaked in rose oil. The smell was intoxicating. Eden gripped Helin’s arm, leading her in the right direction—she was heading for a flaky pastry soaked in honey. They separated, parting ways, walking at different paces. It was the first thing they learned when they were children. Separate to avoid rousing suspicions. Generally two were fine but more than that drew unwanted attention. Helin linked up with Adeena, letting surprise and genuine excitement fill her face, as Adeena waved, smiling back.

They pushed against the crowd heading towards the water. Moving uphill against the downhill rush. They timed their arrival at the Faber’s for the release of the lanterns. Little kids raced each other past their parents, paper lanterns in hand. Fathers cried out, warning their children to not rip their lanterns. They didn’t listen. And in that moment, Helin was reminded of her last Festival with her mother. She brought Helin and Oryn down to the docks and gave them lanterns. At that time, her mother found Oryn on the streets and brought him in. It was her kindness to the old Goddesses on the last sacred day they had left. The two children were awkward around each other, not quite looking each other in the eyes. But then Helin’s mother handed them each a lantern and Helin bolted, giving Oryn a grin as she whipped past him. That was their beginning. What she thought was her mother’s last gift.

“Helin. We must keep moving.” Adeena’s soft whisper in her ear brought her out of it. She twitched, a full body motion as she nodded, letting Adeena half drag her through the streets. Off in the distance, the first lantern lit the sky, bright against the deep night. It was gorgeous, breathtaking even, but Helin felt nothing.
Eden and Vasar got there first. Vasar lounged by a door that was only open a sliver, examining her nails. Her face lit up as she saw Adeena and Helin approach from the shadows.

“There you are,” She nodded to the partially open door. “Eden’s already inside, trying to pick the lock to the cellar.” Adeena shouldered her way into the house. The place was lit by low light, decorated entirely with sea glass lamps and furniture of aspen brought in from Wyndell. It was gorgeous but no trace of Helin’s great grandfather and his penchant for gaudy light fixtures.

Eden was working on a lock with her floral hairpins, her face knit tightly in concentration. She only grunted in acknowledgement of Adeena and Helin’s entrance. Vasar was to keep watch while the three wandered inside.

With a light click, Eden’s face relaxed, slipping her hairpins back into place as she gripped the lock and slid it free. She placed it on the floor and gestured for someone else to open it. Helin’s stomach turned, doubt crossing her mind in a fog.

Adeena reached out to open the door.

“Wait—” Helin swallowed. “It should be me.”

She gripped the handle, thoughts rattling through her mind. And as she opened the door, she wished how she could talk to her mom, how Oryn could be here, and how those she loved eventually left her, so it wouldn’t be a tragedy if she were to do the leaving this time around.

The room was small, damp, and dark. Adeena lit a long match, the flame growing as it crawled towards her bare fingertips. Helin nodded to two lanterns barely
visible in their shadows, and Adeena reached up to light them. The room was, in fact, quite small, and filled with wine bottles. Racks upon racks of alcohol.

“This would be an atrocious place for books,” Eden murmured.

“It’s obviously not here.” Helin replied, eying the covered walls.

“What makes you say that?” Adeena stepped across the wooden floors, listening carefully. “It could be under a floorboard.”

“There’s no magic here,” Helin’s wings flared out, the muscles aching from hours of being pinned to her back.

Helin felt Adeena roll her eyes. She turned, giving her friend a sheepish grin.

“Well, why didn’t you mention that earlier?” Adeena poked Helin’s shoulder, who just replied with a shrug.

“Thought I’d feel it when we got in here,” She gestured to the whole room.

“I guess we’ll have to look everywhere.” Adeena nodded.

“I’ll go get Vasar,” Eden was already walking out the door to grab her sister.

* 

They looked everywhere in that house. Eden and Vasar took the upstairs while Adeena and Helin combed the downstairs.

Through loose floorboards and books and bookcases, cabinets, and behind portraits, they searched. Helin felt no source of magic, and plopped down on the couch. Exhausted. It had been at least an hour. The festivities wouldn’t keep people out for much longer now. She tried to imagine her mother in this house, hiding a book and even as a young child, had things been different. She tasted a bitterness at a future
that could have been, one without thieving and most importantly, one with her mother. But there was nothing she could do now.

“Maybe my mom hid it again,” Helin let her chin fall into her hands as Adeena looked up from securing the floorboard she pried up.

“She wrote it in her later journal, Hel,” Adeena crouched, a small hammer in her hands-hair askew. The gorgeous sheer dress of orange and yellow looked out of place. They all did. “Your instincts were right about this. I know it.”

Helin nodded, feeling tears pool in her eyes. She wiped them away, not wanting them to make their mark on her face. She would not cry. Crying was a weakness. So Helin sat there, forcing her breathing to relax, to stay normal, to not cry.

Showing your weakness is a virtue, my dear. Not everyone is brave enough to show theirs. Her mother’s words rang in Helin’s head. It was a day on the beach, when she ran too fast across the sand, skinning her knees on an unexpected patch of rocks. Her mother’s smile blinded her now, echoing its way past all her memories. Her wings were fuller then. She was her mother then, not a woman driven to madness who found her only solace in the sea.

Adeena put her hand on Helin’s arm. It was then that she felt the tears on her hands, rolling down her own cheeks. And it was then that she felt a rush of magic.

“Are you okay,” Adeena whispered.

Helin bolted upright.

“It’s here.” She looked at Adeena wildly. “I feel it. She must have locked its power away.”
Helin wandered across the house, letting her mother’s magic pull her through rooms, upstairs and down the back until they stood in front of a long-abandoned fireplace. They stared at it.

“Under the bricks,” Adeena pointed, and they scrambled forward, pulling two loose bricks to reveal a chest enclosed with a feather lock. At Helin’s touch it popped open, and she took that moment, one moment to experience her calm before the probable chaos.

*

Helin touched the book, skimming her fingers along the rough leather of its cover, awe slowly creeping its way across her face. She didn’t notice the change, not at first. Only after she pocketed the book in her bag, did Helin realize the numbness that settled over her. In a haze, Helin noticed Adeena putting everything back in place, gesturing to Helin to follow. The world felt distant then as she took a single step forward. It was then that she saw him. It was then that she understood.

Oryn stood before her, as clear as that last day she saw him. The lines of his face became familiar again, the blurriness all gone. A small voice within warned, *It’s all a cruel trick.* But did she care? Honestly? She wasn’t quite sure. Helin kept her distance, the world around her blurring as she reached out to grab something, anything to retain her balance. Her hand gripped the empty air, swaying and falling to her knees.

*Pathetic.*

*I always pitied you. Knew you were doomed the first time I laid eyes on those wings.* Oryn jutted his chin, eyes narrowing.
“This isn’t you,” Helin gasped, the world was pressing in now. “This is just a trick.”

*You can keep telling yourself that.* Oryn crouched to lift her chin, to stare her in the eyes, as he said what she told herself since she found herself alone all those weeks ago.

*I left because of you.*

Helin lifted herself up, turning from this figure of her imagination.

“He doesn’t exist if you can’t see him,” She whispered to herself. It became a chant.

*But we do.* And as she turned, she froze. Because right in front of her was everyone she knew, a wide vast wave of bodies.

In that moment she knew what her mother endured.

*"

She snapped out of it. Adeena stood by the door, waiting as if Helin hadn’t even been distracted. She shook her head and followed. Eden and Vasar followed out the door, locking it, exchanging giddy looks of glee while Adeena only gave her concerned looks with eyebrows raised to which Helin responded with a close-lipped nod.

The entire walk home—as the last lanterns filled the sky—Helin saw him.

Over and over. Out of the corner of her eye. She heard the words whispered, *Pathetic.* *Useless.* *Weak.* The world existed in a blur of lights and happiness and she felt numb to it all. The worst part was that she knew it. She knew she felt numb. She knew those feelings—anger, distress, happiness, elation—were just behind a thick curtain that she
couldn’t quite reach yet. Adeena stopped her as they pushed through throngs of people into the shadows of the alleyway.

“Helin—”

“I’m ok.” Her first lie. Her wings flared in the shadows between the cobbler and the local seamstress.

“I don’t—”

“I am.” Helin gave Adeena a tight-lipped smile, her stomach churning as she said the sharp words. She didn’t deserve that, a voice within whispered, but Helin brushed it away as Eden and Vasar picked up their skirts to open the passageway and made their way down the stairs.

*

In the morning Helin took the book to a market beneath a bridge at the river’s edge. Helin felt Asra nudge her cheek as she held out the book to the rare goods merchant whose jaw looked as if it were about to drop. He reached out to touch it and Helin flinched, almost dropping the Goddess-forsaken book into a puddle she hadn’t even realized she was stepping in. The world was closing in now, as she nodded to words she wasn’t quite processing. Taunts rattled through her head, ridiculing every misstep she took on the way here, her outfit choice for being too expensive looking for the venue she was to act within, even how she was listening to these very words.

“I think I could sell it through some important channels.” The merchant leaned against the rough gray stone of the bridge, kicking at the debris beneath his feet. Helin nodded, clawing her way back to focus.
“Listen,” His voice was rough from a lifetime in the salt air. “I can get it sold for you within days, for more than enough to keep a family going for generations.”

Helin let the meaning of those words in. Asra huffed into her ear, the young one impatient to see more of town, feel more of the breeze along her scales. Helin shoved the book over to the merchant, sliding it across his table, eyeing him warily as he took the book with no effect. It was the same with Eden and Vasar—even Adeena. So, Helin puzzled as to why she felt so numb, why the book elicited the darkest things she had ever thought about herself. She walked back up the winding path to the market where just a couple days ago, she bought Asra some trout and came up with this plan that came to fruition too soon.

*

Nighttime fell over Southkeep before Helin realized. She dozed off that afternoon, nimbly braiding her light curls into a messy braid, before the sun set. Lifting the heavy covers off, Asra protesting groggily, Helin held her head in her hands. She needed something to dull the ache, to lessen the thoughts racing through her head. All the little missteps she took, simple gestures questioned. But most often: Worthless. The word repeated in her head. The unrelenting beat to a strain of insults that she absorbed within.

It was those stupid wings that allowed her to open that box, that last kernel of magic. No, Helin thought, a moment of clarity. But the word just kept repeating in her head, memories of the past taunting her, the what-ifs weaving possibilities long gone by. She needed something to drown it out. If she could submerge herself in hot water,
letting the stinging pain of her boiling skin take out the sharpness of the words, she
would—*The ocean."

Helin’s feet touched the cool slate floor before Asra’s eyes opened fully.

* 

She wound her way down the rickety stairs built into the side of the cliff,
leading to the rough sands of the beach. The roaring, the pull and push of the waves,
dulled the noise in her head as Helin clung to the railing, making her way down,
barefooted and wild-eyed.

Behind her, Asra screeched into the night, and Helin whirled to see her small
dragon hovering above her, tugging at strands of her hair, pulling her back into the
warmth of the Keep. She shook Asra off, tumbling down the next few steps, wings
flaring to keep her balance.

When her feet hit the shore, Helin felt a weight lifted off her shoulders. She
still heard the words that taunted her relentlessly since she touched that book but they
seemed further away now that the crash of waves filled her ears. She let her wings
unfurl as the wind rippled through them, as she walked towards the water, letting the
brine swell over her feet, encasing them in sand. She stuck her hands in the frigid
water, the chill the first thing she felt, *really felt* in weeks. *Weeks.* The word rattled
through Helin. *This noise,* Helin thought, *isn’t new.* She sunk slowly to the ground,
letting the water soak her nightgown through and through. She shook, dragging a
saltwater hand down her face, and let that smile break across her face. Delirious.
"I'm not okay," She laughed. Letting go, of that pretense, of an old lie she told herself to make herself feel okay. Instinctively, her wings surrounded her, blocking her now frigid skin from the wind.

She remembered a day where the sun was bright and she and Oryn lay on the sand.

"What do you dream of?" She whispered then.

"Getting out of this life." He said, looking over his shoulder. "You?"

"Something I barely remember," Helin looked up, eyes fracturing for a millisecond.

“But take me with you when you do.” She turned her head to look at her best friend in the eyes. “Go, that is.”

Oryn turned to look at her then, and nodded, looking back up into a rare bright blue sky.

Laughter bubbled from deep in her stomach at the memory. Desperation laced the edges of that laugh. Alone. She was alone. Alone as she always was. Even with Oryn, she'd been alone. Moments of sunlight and the warmth of his hands tugged at her smile. She missed his warmth. She missed more than that. But she missed that most.

Helin felt a wet cry rattle through her lungs. As she wiped an arm across her eyes, she brushed a feather. She felt an intense need to pull it out and stare at it. A piece of her visible, tangible, something that wasn’t numbness. Something. She brushed a single pink feather, fingers grasping it firmly, and tugged.
A firm grip on her shoulder stopped her. A moment later, Helin felt the wind from a flap of wings above her, nudging into her cocoon. The grip tightened on her shoulder, throwing her backward, wings splayed on the sand.

Adeena. A furious look graced her features, her tight curls pulled into twin braids that fell down her back. Helin swallowed.

“Helin,” Adeena hissed as Asra landed on Helin’s stomach, walking up to stare into her eyes.

“I’m hearing things, Adeena. I am seeing him over and over. My Goddess-damned mind won’t let go of it.” The words tumbled out of her mouth as she gazed up at her friend. “I want it to stop—the noise. I need it to stop.”

Shame flared on her cheeks, tears stinging her eyes as Adeena waited for her to continue.

“I just—” Helin shifted her gaze aside. “I feel so alone.” She looked back up at Adeena. “I hate myself for it. I hate myself for the things I do, for the things I say, for the things I don’t say, for making Or—”

Adeena’s sharp gaze cut Helin off. “You didn’t make Oryn leave. You didn’t do anything to do that. He left on his own. Paint him the villain, not yourself.” She pulled Helin away from the incoming waves and sat down in the sand.

“Helin,”

“I knew it,” Helin whispered, “That he wanted to leave.” She laughed, tears clogging her throat—a wheezing sound— “I didn’t say anything. I was so desperate to be loved, to have a home—so desperate to not be alone.” She hid her face in her hands, still sticky with saltwater.
Adeena leaned over her, elbows on her knees, “It’s not stupid, Hel. It’s human.”

“I should have expected it.”

“He should have told you.”

Helin paused.

A wave cracked on the boulders down shore, thunder rippling through the air. The words still pulsed against her brain, Asra’s weight a welcome one on her chest.

“Helin,” Adeena’s voice rung in the quiet aftermath.

“Yes.” The words raw, creaking with use. The noise in her head still pulsed, though not as greatly now.

Adeena looked out at the sea, a wry smile tugging at the edges of her lips. “It would have been a shame for you to have picked yourself apart only to find out you already have a family.”

Helin gasped out a wet laugh. Asra jumped back, wings flaring in surprise. They sat there, in the quiet night, the sound of the waves just barely covering their laughter.
Part III: Lelia

Lelia kneeled on the cool white tile of the temple, a flake of snow landing on her very cold nose. The spherical ceiling was constructed entirely of branches grown and woven together. Beside her, the Mother Crones knelt on the floor, their deeply colored veils swaying as they breathed their weekly prayers. Despite the cold winters the region of Windermere provided, the temple was sufficiently warmed by the large hearth in the middle of the room. The Flame Eternal grew constantly, a magic so old, some said the temple was grown and built around it.

The silence rang in Lelia’s ears as she lifted a hand from her thigh to brush a dark strand of hair back from her face. Unlike her Mother Crones, she didn’t wear a veil, her view unobstructed by a gauzy haze. However, she did have their horns. Currently, her hair was wrapped around them in two buns, away from her face.

A cacophony of footsteps sounded behind her as the congregation, those who came to worship with the Crones as the sun graced the sky with another morning, left to go about their daily business. Lelia could only imagine their plans—going to the market, visiting their neighbors, maybe ice skating. The villages surrounding the Mother House were small and only mildly prosperous due to their vicinity to the Crones who provided for them during the harder months. As the trickle of steps quieted, Lelia herself got up, leaving her three Mother Crones in silence. Slipping on her boots near the exit, she made her way to the Mother House. Standing tall above the snow, the building of cream yellowed with age resided, stained glass shining sharp in the bright winter sun.
The interior of the house was a masterclass in woodworking. Deep mahogany was the choice for the floors, grand railings, and a carved ceiling. Stained glass candle holders reflected shades of green and pink and yellow onto the deep wood. Outfitted with the latest technology from the capitol, Wyndell, hot water ran from every faucet in the house, along with a brand-new drainage system. Simplicity was not required of the Mother Crones of Windermere. They provided not only religious comfort, but often medical and food assistance to the locals who lived through harsh and long winters. The lavish monastery was a reward for their work and a reminder of their long history. The building itself was the oldest of all the Mother Houses in Anteros, built with no expense on the part of the Mother Crones. Grateful pilgrims travelled to make their mark on a building they knew would outlast their own lives, and that it did.

Lelia shouldered open the door, discarding her shearling-lined cloak and mittens, leaving her boots at the door.

Making her way upstairs, Lelia shook the remainder of the snow off her hair and horns. Her feet sunk into the plush carpet, as she made her way to her private rooms—made of brilliant white walls that served as a canvas she enjoyed painting. Most recently, she copied the lilacs that graced the large circular stained-glass window of her bathing room. The painted flowers traveled from her ceiling to the tops of her walls, sprouting from the large silver chandelier filled with candles almost down to the nubs.

Lelia unwound her hair covering her horns and peeled off her winter clothing stuck to her with sweat. Her bathing room was quite like her bedroom, a color scheme
of white and purple. She turned the faucet on, staring as warm water filled the clawfoot tub, steam rising and opening her pores.

As she submerged herself in water, she remembered the feeling of lungs filled with river water and a deep wet chill down to her very bones. It was how she woke most days, her lifelong nightmare reminding her of its presence. She couldn’t remember when it began or why, it just was. Sometimes she even thought it was prophecy, a vision given to her from the Goddesses. But none of it felt right. Or like her. So, she lived with it.

At first, Lelia thought it to be her magic Settling, but it was always the same and she could never control it. Now at seventeen, she came to terms with never having a Gift. The mother who left her at the doorstep of the Crones could have been from anywhere around Anteros, could have had any seedling Gift. For all she knew, her power could be that she was really good a falling asleep. It was the way of Gifts. Not all were powerful and big, some were small but useful.

Letting the warmth seep into her bones, Lelia gently reached to wash her curved horns. Reaching five inches above her head, Morena—one of the Mother Crones—called them her crown, to which Enyo would scoff and mumble that they were not quite that and to stop filling Lelia’s head with thoughts that she was a Goddess-given gift. A princess, she would roll her eyes, sweeping her long golden locks over a shoulder with a dissatisfied twist to her mouth. They often got into little verbal scraps.

Lelia’s thoughts drifted to the morning’s service. The fire kept her mostly warm as they prayed to Eira, the Goddess of winter and snow, for calm winds and a
merciful cold. But it was mainly meant for parishioners, the flame licking only at her
back while her nose grew red with cold. It was a gift, to feel that cold, said the
Mother Crones. A connection to the elements. It was something lovely and primal,
Morena had argued over dinner the night before, sliding a piece of dried salmon onto
her plate along with some spiced soaked beans.

Lelia winced at the memory. She started that conversation arguing to go to the
market, to leave the walls of the Mother House with Enyo to pick up an order of silks
for the Spring Festival of Aine, Goddess of light. She wanted to be around other
people, to be with them, to which Morena simply stated, “You’ll see people
tomorrow.” Which wasn’t the point. The parishioners never talked to Lelia anyway;
instead they all eyed her suspiciously, the girl who had been left for dead to the
Mother Crones. A Devil Child they called her: *A Devil Child harbored amongst
Saints*. Or would be saints, once they passed. The Mother Crones lived a very
particular life cycle. As one of the few kinds of people without magic in a world filled
with it, the Crones were given a long life, one that could last five hundred years.
Morena was the oldest of her three Mother Crones at approximately 300 years old,
though she didn’t like to admit it.

Lelia dried off, letting the lavender scented water funnel down the drain into a
trough somewhere far below her rooms. Changing into a pair of lined breeches and a
tunic of the lightest pink. Lelia laid back on her bed, the white of her comforter
darkening from her still wet hair. All she wanted was to go outside and meet people.
Maybe even have friends her own age. She had long ago mourned the mother she
never had. She even made peace with Nemesis, the Goddess of revenge, for a life she
would never have. Instead, she cherished her adoptive mothers. But it didn’t help the
gaping hole that filled her stomach while she fell asleep.

*  

At dinner, Lelia was quiet, Morena chiding her for leaving her hair wet in a braid—telling her of a girl who once froze at their gates, her hair a block of ice.

“It’s why she died,” Morena, spoke with warning lacing her tone as she shoved a forkful of beans into her mouth. Enyo rolled her eyes, in a rare conspiratorial glance towards Lelia. The second eldest Mother Crone had long avoided Lelia, even flinching away from her at times. She knew she loved her, Enyo gave her gifts of paints and brushes, though she never knew why she avoided her touch. The dinner itself felt normal but removed. Lelia loved her Mother Crones and was thankful to the Goddesses every day for them. But sometimes she longed for more.

As she lay in bed that night, woolen socks warming her toes where the fire roaring in the grate could not, Lelia imagined going to the market. She knew she would not go. She would not disrespect her Mother Crone’s wishes. But she imagined, nonetheless.

*  

That nightmare tugged her under again. A man holding her shoulders underwater, vision blurring until all was a blinding flash of white that faded into black. Lelia felt the moment she breathed in lake water, lungs seizing up and eyes stinging. She trashed against the hands that held her firmly down.
Bolting upright, Lelia retched into the pot she kept by her bed. She retched until the dream left her gasping for air.

The bluebells in the North sprouted from pockets of snow. Lelia plucked a handful from the ground as she ran her hand along the frozen wall of the Mother House. While generally quiet, Kirsi, the youngest of the Mother Crones, but with at least 30 years on Lelia, told her the story of how the wall was built over a roaring fire when she was around six or seven. At the time, Lelia was obsessed with finding every passageway, every nook and cranny in the House. She craved history—perhaps a history to call her own, and Kirsi obliged eagerly. The woman travelled to be a scholar in Fernridge but found no pleasure in studying without application.

“While the House was gifted from artisans across our country, the wall surrounding our great House was made by hand by one of the first inhabitants, Mother Crone Beira. Funded by Queen Rhiannon, stones of silver and the slightest pink were sent to our land. Day by day, Beira slathered on the mortar and set each stone. It took her a year to build just the front wall. She was asked by many why she took the time when she could have called in a favor, when a tradesman could have done the job twice as well, when there was already a magical barrier that kept most intruders out. Her response was simple. She felt a need to put something on this earth that was permanent. She could have no children, leave behind nothing of her own that wouldn’t be lost to time. But there would always be a speck of rock that she touched left on this earth, even if it crumbled to dust within her lifetime. Many called her
selfish because she wanted the world to remember her, but I’ve always found it particularly human.”

Lelia leaned against that same wall now, a bouquet of winter blue belles gathered in her mittened hand, feeling that very same desire to be remembered when her bones returned to the earth. A cold breeze cut through her thoughts, leaving her shivering yet happy for the warm coat Morena made for her. It was in a folk style with a pattern of tulips and rising suns of reds and blues and yellows quilted into it. A Solstice gift. She should be grateful and happy. Yet, that gnawing feeling opened yet again in Lelia’s stomach.

Something within the very essence of the air around her shifted. The barrier. She looked across the field to see a figure running through the snow towards the temple where the Flame kept strong. Lelia stood for what seemed like years, eyeing the house, considering just calling for the Mother Crones, but her curiosity was too strong—a current pulling her towards the figure heading in such a rush. She dropped the bluebells as she ran, the petals submerged by white fluffy snow.

As she ran, the cool filled Lelia’s lungs, she could feel them then, feel all her insides. It was one of her favorite feelings, that. She felt alive. Alive and frightened. Questions pummeled her mind, thoughts of how and why as she followed the figure towards the temple. She slid to hide behind a tree, watching the figure—a woman—stop in front of the temple door. Whatever strength the intruder seemed to have gave out when she approached the temple entrance. The hood of her raspberry cloak rippled in the wind, a hand reaching to still it. Lelia watched as she took her first step
across the barrier and then followed—pressing her back against the woven trees of the temple.

Peering around the edge, Lelia watched as the woman went to the Fire and circled it. She raised her bare hands towards it, her back towards the entrance. No one except the inhabitants were allowed in the estate after worship hours. But the Mother Crones wouldn’t have denied a young woman seeking shelter. Over the years, many a folk stayed with them, slept in the rooms next to Lelia’s own, and eaten beside her. Everyone knew.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched the figure circle the fire, hands close to the flame—absorbing it. Lelia stifled a gasp, to absorb the fire—there hadn’t been a magic user to summon flame in years, not since Queen Rhiannon. To steal the flame—would be to steal life itself. The Fire was eternal. Were someone to absorb it—

"Wait," Lelia gasped, tumbling forward, placing both hands on the shoulder blades of the shadowed figure.

She saw everything.

* 

Lelia woke up to find heaps of homemade quilts covering her, a dying fire in the grate, and Enyo sinking into the large yellow wingback chair, book in hand. If the Crone realized she was awake, she certainly didn't show it. Lelia yawned, stretching her limbs, and flipped the quilts over to place her bare feet on the hardwood floor. She was in the sunroom. The floor to ceiling windows let in vast amounts of light, without the heat. The panes were of a scalloped design in a beechwood, reminding
Lelia of what the ocean might look like. She went to go add a log to the fire, to stoke some of the warmth when Enyo spoke.

"We tried to be careful with you," She said, clear as the bells in the garden used to call the crows for their food and messages. The woven patterns of the temple walls filled Lelia’s thoughts. The girl. The fire.

"When Morena found you as a babe, she let you grab her hair, her nose, anything. She was in love with you as if you were her own." Enyo cleared her throat, "We all were."

Lelia stared at the back of the Crone’s head, her golden horns spiraling into the air. Lelia’s own hands shook ever so slightly.

"One night, I picked you up. You had been crying. There was a storm." Enyo put the book down now, hands tugging at her veil. "I was holding you, rocking you—everything was fine. Then you," She swallowed thickly. "You reached up—under my veil, you see. You had been calm. You had been fine. But when you touched me, you screamed." Enyo turned to look at Lelia. "You screamed, and you shook, and I—"

Silence.

The room was stifling, heat rising into Lelia's cheeks. All she wanted to do was wrap her arms around the Crone. But she remembered—she remembered what happened when she touched that girl.

"I gave you my worst memories." Enyo looked up into Lelia's eyes, the outlines of the Crone's face gilded by the sunlight coming through the windows. "I have been haunted since that day." She gripped the book, the whites of her knuckles peeking through her gossamer gloves.
It was then Lelia understood Mother-Crone Enyo’s indifference towards her, the way she shifted out of Lelia’s reach, flinched at the brush of a hand. It was also then that Lelia remembered her dreams.

“The man—” She spoke not above a whisper, her head aching. “The water—it was you.”

Enyo just stared at the last dying embers in the fireplace. A wave of pain hit Lelia, and she doubled over. The Crone stood up suddenly, rushing to her side, the sound of her book hitting the floor echoed in Lelia’s ears—along with a cacophony of other noises.

“I don’t understand,” Lelia whined, the ringing in her head growing louder, even though she believed she did quite understand.

Enyo hauled Lelia back on the couch, wiping a stray hair from her face with her gloved hand.

Lelia started, gasping—images of the girl no more her age draining the Eternal Fire, “The girl—”

“Is taken care of.” Enyo simply stated, though her eyes told Lelia otherwise. A stern look that indicated while the girl was alive, she was within the hands of others.

“She was,”

“Trying to absorb the powers of the Fire. We realized.” Enyo interrupted. “We were lucky you were there to stall her.” Enyo clutched Lelia’s hand tightly.

Lelia flinched, staring out the window at the snowbanks that drifted to create slopes against the French doors. The crunch of her footfall chasing the girl, the way the Flame flowed towards the girl’s hands, the way—Lelia’s head spun, a thousand
little images sneaking their way through. Coins to a man selling dried meat in the village, hands embroidering flowers on a skirt’s edge, and an unspeakable dread that filled the very marrow of one’s bones.

Enyo put her hand on Lelia’s back as she doubled over, keeling from the sheer pain of everything all at once. She only whimpered as memories that were not her own flooded in.

* 

Laying in her bed, white duvet clutched between her fingertips, Lelia stared at her ceiling. She was trying to concentrate on the sweeps of plaster, focusing on the minute details to ease her mind of the burdens of another. She remembered all sorts of things now. A floral edged dress, and running around a maypole during the Spring Festival, the brush of a mother’s breath as she bent down to kiss her forehead, the first call of flame to fingertips—the way little scars formed like crescent moons from using the Gift—but the worst was the darkness. It lingered, a mass of dark, negative energy that thrummed with power. She tried to avoid thinking about that. That and many of the other girl’s memories. It became hard even now to distinguish what belonged to her and to the girl. It became hard to long for the memories that were her own when a mother’s touch awaited her in the recesses of her mind.

A knock sounded at her door, soft and gentle. Morena entered, her gray veil swaying as she closed the door behind her, and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Lelia focused very hard on the ceiling.

Morena placed a sheer gloved hand on Lelia’s knee.
“Have I told you about how we come to be?” Morena asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Lelia gave a relieved sigh to be focusing on something other than the scrambled collection of pasts in her head, but found her brows knitting together.

“You see, my child,” Morena swallowed. “We were not always Mother-Crones. Once we were young women with dreams of our own. Some of us found the world to be not as welcoming as we once thought—”

Lelia thought of Enyo, the air pushed out of her lungs by the sludge of lake water.

“We were brought back through an old magic, a source from the waters of the forest surrounding our home. Cleansed of our former lives and Gifted with new ones filled with the burdens of belief.”

Lelia never heard the Mother-Crone speak this way. She always thought the eldest crone to be a most fervent servant of the Goddesses.

“When I started my new life— you needn’t know how long ago that was—” Morena’s mouth twisted into a slight smile, “I had a hard time thinking of the two as continuous. I felt as though an intruder’s memories were being set upon me, no matter which way I considered it. I had to follow what my heart, what my instinct told me was true.” She glanced at Lelia with an appraising look. “You will find your way. No matter if your own memories are lost amongst the many—you will find your way back home again.”

A shaky breath escaped Lelia’s lips as she nodded, trying to let Morena’s words penetrate, to feel them as she so desperately wanted to feel them, to believe them. She felt Morena’s stare as she closed her eyes and let the memories flood in.
Grass and flowers and a shining wall, veiled mothers and the brush of sheer netting on her cheek, the flame of the fire, and horns spiraling towards a blue sky in wintertime. Gloves and mittens and stews in a small house on the edge of town, a brother’s laugh, a mother’s scream, a deep dark chill seeping into bones. Darkness. Screams and blood—too much blood everywhere, and an ache for the half of a soul she’d been birthed with. Not her. Her. Lelia gasped, eyes flying open, the bright of her room burning, the whites and lavenders contrasting with the darkness slithering through her memories. She felt nothing—numb from the everything of it.

"It's too much," She reached shaking hands up to her face, fingertips caressing her temples. "I feel too much." Lelia moaned, the last part coming out as a high-pitched whine. Her head ached, she could feel her heart in her throat. Morena’s hand drifted from Lelia’s knee, her gray veil shifting to outline the soft features of her face beneath. She gripped Lelia's wrists, the girl fighting against the Crone—a dance itself.

"Breathe." Morena whispered. Lelia shook her head, gasping, fighting against the Crone's touch. The darkness, the blood—

"Breathe." Morena repeated, louder. Lelia opened her eyes, staring at the outlines of the Crone's face. Salty wetness soaked her lips. She breathed. Lungs expanding, struggling against the tightness of her ribcage. For one second, all she felt was her breathing.

"Good girl," Morena mumbled, running a gloved hand across Lelia's head. 
"Let's get you a cup of tea." The crone took Lelia's hands, pulling her up from the soft safety of her bed, and led her downstairs.

*
That night Lelia dreamt of a life that was not her own. She dreamt of that dark force lying in wait. She ran—breath labored, the thud of her quick steps rattling through her. All she felt was the dread knotting itself in her stomach. The surrounding was a blur of greens and blues, browns and oranges. She slowed, approaching a bend in the path where waters flowed black, and a dark electrified haze hovered above. As she slowed, the screams of a drowning boy filled her ears and the person that was her but not her scrambled to the water’s edge reaching for her twin’s arms as they were sucked under an invisible current. The guttural howl filled the air as Lelia finally realized where, exactly she was.

Moonlight filtered through the window as she woke, feeling as though her soul just slammed back into her body.

She knew what she had to do.

* 

Trudging through the snow at night was a foolish thing to do. Lelia cursed herself as she tugged on her warm boots, the fleece lined leggings and tunic, shrugged on her coat, throwing her fur lined cloak over shoulders for extra warmth, and grabbed a sharp knife out of the loose floorboard under her bed. Kirsi gave it to her for a birthday—meant for her adventures around the property, sawing through the thorns of blackberry bushes, or slicing open an apple in the throes of fall.

Enyo would give her a good ear boxing if she wasn’t back by morning. The fickle Mother-Crone pulled out one frightening tale after the next at dinner every year as the seasons changed. It seemed she had an endless supply of tales with the sole
moral of never venturing out into the cold and dark unless you wished for Eira to freeze you for your sheer foolishness.

Lelia opened her balcony door, walking down the steps that lead into her small snow-covered garden. The moonlight reflected, creating stark shadows across the smooth swath of ground. She took a deep breath, starting towards Beira’s low wall.

As Lelia walked, she thought about all that Morena had said, about their deaths and dying. About being reborn as what they are now. She wondered how Morena died. About that trauma—of having to live in a world where you were sacrificed or beaten or forcefully drowned. She shivered.

Letting the girl’s memory guide her, she climbed Beira’s low fence, a struggle not to get wet in the snow—and as Enyo always mentioned—*the wet would kill you in the cold*.

When her feet touched the other side of the Mother House wall, Lelia felt the magic of the barrier release as though steam were sliding off her shoulders. It was a weight she didn’t know existed, but it was a comfort. A protective shell. Lelia thought of how when she was little—and even admittedly now— that she thought if she were to lay under enough blankets nothing bad could touch her. She felt naked out in this world beyond the wall—a place she couldn’t quite call home.

Through the forest, Lelia wandered, knife at her side, moonlight guiding her way. She retraced her steps—the girl’s steps—around trees, scrambled up rocks. Until she reached the point she suspected she would reach.
The Mother-Crone’s stream was pitch black in the moonlight. Swirling and rough, the current thrashed amongst rocks even in the wintertime. Lelia backed away, the screams, the loss coming back to her, a cacophony of horror filling her ears. Crouched she held her ears with her mittened hands, watching the dark water rush through its ancient paths. *I need to think clearly.* She thought of Morena. She focused her breathing. Then she got to work.

* 

By the time Lelia returned from the river, the sky was pinkening with the rising sun. She spent the night walking up and down the banks of the river, trying to find the source, the well of its power to no avail. In a moment of curiosity, she reached a brightly mittened hand towards the haze that lingered over the rushing water, only to flinch backward and fall in the snow. What she felt was enough. The dark energy was palpable. It seized her heart in the way that she thought only Death himself could. With her clothes wet and her progress no-where near made, Lelia picked herself up out of the snow, giving the river one last look, the memory of hands reaching up in one last attempt at life lingering in her mind long after she exited the forest.

“Dear Goddess, Lelia.” Enyo boxed her ears with a ferocity that was unmatched by Andraste, Goddess of Battle, herself. Kirsi stood behind Enyo, her bright yellow veil swaying as she gave Lelia a slight smile that could be seen through the gauzy fabric. Lelia stood not quite dripping yet in her bedroom. Apparently, Enyo and Kirsi were in the sunroom, enjoying a cup of tea and the morning fire when they
Lelia cursed herself when they barged into her room.

“I just went for a walk.”

“You could have frozen to death,” Enyo broke off, about to start on one of her lectures when Kirsi interjected.

“Perhaps it’s a good time for her to get dressed into some warm clothes,” She pushed her way out from behind Enyo into Lelia’s room proper, rubbing her bird like hands against Lelia’s shoulders. She bent to pick up a winter dress with a high collar and sleeves lined with what a peddler proclaimed was white wolf fur. Not one of them believed him, but Lelia liked it well enough. Kirsi nodded and pushed her way out of the room, past Enyo, giving Lelia a little wave before she went out into the hallway. Enyo lingered by the door.

“I just want you to be safe,” Enyo looked at her, horns shining in the morning light. “I don’t want you freezing on me—it’s a horrible way to go.”

Lelia realized then it wasn’t the water that killed her. She wanted to reach out to her forever distant Enyo. Instead, she swallowed and said, “Do you know why I have—” She gestured to the horns atop her own head, “these.”

Enyo paused, reading Lelia’s face, then moving out of the doorway to sit in the yellow chair.

“Morena told you.” She folded her hands together. “About us, how we—” she winced, “come to be. Mind you, you don’t have the horns because you’re one of us. You were just a baby when we found you, and we can sense Death’s touch, even on each other. But you—” Enyo paused as if remembering something from long ago.
“We never knew why you had the horns. Suspected your mother could have been one of us from another region. But it was only guessing at that point. I know it matters. Where you come from. That longing pull of finding out what stuff you are made of. In my lives, I have realized that it is the person I am at any moment that matters more than where I came from. I am who I am in spite of where I came from and what happened to me.”

Lelia sat down on her bed next to the clothes Kirsi laid out for her while Enyo spoke to her. She hadn’t thought about the implications of the horns. The origins of her life. She had wondered about her mother—but more like what it would have been like to have the comfort of her, the emotional and physical part. Not the history of it nor the lack of that history. She gave Enyo a considering look, from the edge of her bed, she could almost reach out and touch the Mother Crone’s hand. She did. Enyo gave her an unreadable look from beneath her veil, then got up to leave, smoothing the folds of her dress.

* 

Dinner was a normal affair, stew with carrots and lamb simmered with an array of warm spices a trader brought from a Southern country Lelia just learned about in her lessons. Morena gave Lelia a once over to make sure she was okay. Having changed into the light blue shearling lined dress and leggings, that morning Lelia regained the warmth she had lost from the fall. After she put the fur lined dress on, she rushed down to the kitchens, grabbing a bowl of warm oats to sustain her before her lessons started. Desperately tired, she convinced Kirsi to take a mid-afternoon break, where they sat on the couches in the bright sunroom in silence.
Besides having been up all night, it was exhausting trying to sort through the memories. She still got flashes every now and then. What was new were the headaches. They traveled down her spine and spread throughout her body. Lelia felt as though she were shedding her own skin. As she bit down on a morsel of spiced lamb, Lelia was glad they seemed to disperse, even if she couldn’t quite escape a lingering uneasiness about them. She debated bringing up the river to her Mother-Crones. Lelia looked towards Morena first who met her gaze with concerned eyes.

“What is the matter?” Morena wiped her mouth—meal times being the only time the Mother Crones could wear their half veils that only covered their faces up to their noses.

“There is something you should know,” Lelia started, Kirsi and Enyo put down their silverware and listened attentively. They all did, as Lelia went into the story of the memories and of the river Morena mentioned. When she was done, the afore-mentioned Mother Crone was red faced, Kirsi sat in stunned silence, and Enyo worried at a strand of blonde hair come free from her braid.

“You left these grounds—” Morena hissed, “Do you know what could have happened—”

“Of course she does Morena.” Enyo snapped. “She knows of her power—we can no longer protect her from herself. But listen to what she does say.”

“It’s concerning,” Kirsi started, the only words that were able to come out of the usually witty woman’s mouth.
Morena sat in her seat, staring at Enyo across the table, then got up, the scratch of her chair across the floor a stab in the heart to Lelia who gazed only at her half eaten bowl of stew.

“We will examine the scene tomorrow.” Morena spoke steadily, the only sign of her still simmering anger.

Once Morena left the room, Kirsi and Enyo got up as one, leaving towards the drawing room where they would no doubt discuss the issue and failed dinner conversation.

Lelia sat frozen in her seat, wishing she could apologize to Morena, explain that all she wanted to do was help. But she didn’t seem to be capable of doing that much these days.

*

Mildly aware of being tucked under covers, nestled in her bed, Lelia tossed and turned. A voice slithered in the darkness, reaching out, offering up memories of those who drowned in its waters. She tried to outrun its power. She could do nothing but scream voicelessly as millions of horrible memories flooded her mind.

They played over and over in her head. Drownings. All of them. The water sucking her under the current over and over and over. She didn’t just see the twin boy. She felt deaths. New deaths. She felt struggles and reluctant gulps of water. She saw the darkened river a thousand times over. She saw too much. Much more than that one girl’s memories.

*
When she woke, Lelia barely registered she was in her room—the brightness dull and wavering. All she felt was the rumblings of that energy awakening.
Mechanically, she got out of bed, pulling on the now dry clothes from the evening before. She grabbed the fur lined cloak, not bothering with the coat hanging in her wardrobe as she slipped out the door into the cool frost night.

Lelia retraced her steps, flashes of memories flickering through her mind, hands reaching out, small towns, the woods, and through it all a pull—as though a thread tugged on a spot deep in her core, pulling her along.

Each step was a struggle through the snow, her boots soaking through with damp. Get to the river. Past, present, past blurred together in front of her. Snow turned to darkened water, snow again. The line between Lelia and the memories of those who drowned blurred. Dizzying. She—or the girl—reached a hand out, breaking a fall. Snow. Lelia. She got up, clothes wet as they were the night before—or was it the night before that?

As she approached the sound of running water, Lelia slowed from a run that left her breathless, her calves burning, and left the jolt of her body thrumming through her bones. She vomited, the nausea of memory after sickly memory playing in her head.

She vomited again.

On her hands and knees, she crawled to the water’s edge, letting that invisible string pull her closer and closer. Then up. She crawled along the river bank, half delirious, letting that pull guide her to an open body of water crackling with swirling darkness. Within the dark fog that lingered above the water, Lelia almost thought she
saw shapes: hands, feet, heads bobbing up and down. She couldn’t tell if it was real or not, so she just ignored it. The pull stopped, let loose of her soul, and vanished on the night’s wind. Lelia was shivering now, the cloak doing nothing to protect her from the elements.

Hoisting herself up onto two legs, Lelia shuffled towards the water. As she got closer, her head pounded with a dull ache. Without stopping herself, Lelia reached down to touch the inky water only to snatch her hand back as though she were bitten by something viscous and cruel. More memories flooded her vision. Most were drownings, the feelings of last breaths, of suffocation—her nightmare, or Enyo’s reality, come to life. But some were precious moments, the joy of holding a newborn baby, the smell of freshly baked bread braided with cinnamon, the sweep of a lace veil, honey drizzled into tea by gnarled hands. Lelia felt as though a blow was placed on her chest, the feeling of the air being kicked out of her sending her tumbling with the sheer force of it.

Only the sound of rushing water surrounded her.

The fog grew thick around the water as Lelia gasped for new breath. There was only one thing to do.

Once she took a few gulps of cold air, letting the chill fill her lungs whole, Lelia let herself fall into the river.

*  

It was the only rational thing to do. Amidst the memories, the darkness, and the brightness, one thought pierced her mind, a piece that was truly her own and not someone else’s. For that one moment, she forgot about the fear. The fear of losing
herself to all these others. The pain of taking on their last moments, their frantic last
gulps of air. She only thought of her Mother Crones. She thought of the patchwork
coat and her crocheted mittens. She thought of the knife Kirsi gifted her and Enyo’s
begrudging love. She thought most of Morena and a night when she was seven.

It was the first of many Lantern Festivals she was able to partake in. She
remembered holding the thin sphere of paper in her hand, of Morena smiling slightly
as she touched the match to a ring of rope within. Lelia lifted it up, her small hands
reaching for the sky. Morena whispered that she was glad. Glad she was able to
impart something of herself to the girl. That she was happy the Goddesses sent a baby
girl with horns to their gates. The words ruffled Lelia’s hair as she only stared at the
lanterns floating higher into the sky. Imagined how they burned as they hit the top
layer of the atmosphere turning to blue ash, rebirthed as falling stars. Even at seven,
she wished that someone out there felt the same way—

Now, it was those memories Lelia held onto as the waters rushed around her.
Like sparks of light, she gripped visions of the happiest memories, letting the death
and destruction rush past her in the ebb and flow of the current. She tried to sift
through and think of her own memories, letting the undiluted happiness flow through
her whole body like starlight. She felt too much. She worried she wouldn’t be able to
find herself in all the memories she held onto. She knew who she was. She knew who
loved her. Letting every good memory shine through her, the light of it began to
drown out the dark of the river. So, Lelia continued to think of her family and all the
love she contained until the current slammed her head against a rock.

*
There was a large explosion. The trees surrounding the river were pulverized, the view to the Mother House clear in the morning. Beira’s wall was separated by a large crack in the foundation. Three Mother-Crones pulled a body out of the now crystalline water. A wail rose from one who fell to her knees, gray veil billowing in the violence of her motion. The one with the tall horns that spiraled towards the sun laid a hand on the other’s shoulder until the youngest of the three spoke clear—only what remained of the forest their witness.

*

The sky was a brilliant blue, snow long ago melted to the beginnings of spring time breeze. Lelia stood on the last step of the staircase outside her room in the great convent, staring at the once whole low stone wall Beira built with her hands many years ago. From a pile recently imported, she picked up a yellow toned stone, with pestle and mortar in hand, and went to join her Mother Crones, her own pale pink veil billowing behind her as she took her first step.
Part IV: Nemesis

In her dreams, Nemesis saw a woman wearing a gown of red satin with a corset of golden armor. She wore a headdress of the sun rising above the mountains atop her head. Nemesis watched at arms-length, following her through gothic hallways and tiny corridors. Whoever she was, darkness trailed her, gripping her shoulders, grasping her neck, whispering in her ear. Whoever she was needed the darkness and its star flecked warmth.

Waking in the early morning, Nemesis threw back her handstitched quilt and grabbed her light blue wrap dress, dagger, and slippers from the footboard of her bed.

* 

Nemesis took each step with purpose, the burnt orange of her cloak covering her silvered hair from the early morning sun. She meandered towards the small, golden fixture in the middle of the forest. Meandered because, as legends told, one could never find it on a direct path. Golden leaves clung to the soles of her shoes and the rough edges of her cloak.

They said it was Goddess protected, that small shrine of gold. She didn't care about that. Not now. Sinking to her knees in front of the engraved fixture, all she cared about were answers.

Nemesis did not pray, she did not whisper their names. Nemesis wanted answers. Absolution. Something, anything to give meaning to the visions that plagued her.

She was left Ungifted for many years after her thirteenth, the general time one’s power Settled, so Nemesis gave up on having a power. She instead fell into the
lull of faking it. In a world where everyone had an inherent power, Nemesis had to find something to be relatively good at. When she said her “Gift” was potion making, no one was surprised. A craft taught generation after generation in her family, and Gifted to the women tenfold, it was easy to believe.

Waiting on her knees for Goddess knows how long, Nemesis took each shaky breath she could to steady her nerves. She heard that the answers might take days to arrive, weeks for any kind of sign, meaning. The shrine was local legend. A lower Goddess of answers said to bless those in need. Nemesis was religious by no means, only faithful to herself and those potions she crafted with her own hands. However, she was desperate for some kind of understanding—even if it were all a trick, a sheer rumor. She had had enough. Months of visions, interrupting her daily work, her meals, her daydreams. Of people who were her but not her. She heard of a girl who could absorb the memories of others, but this was different. A kind of premonition hung in the air afterwards—a warning. Was this her magic? After all this time, Nemesis had given up, thought the Goddesses forgot her or worse—forsaken her. It had been a shame to live with—a marking of “otherness” that she wasn’t quite so fond of. After so many years of faking her powers, only the thought that this was some cruel punishment clunked through her thoughts. She could not be sure.

"For Goddess given sake, would you stand up?" Nemesis started, hand going to her calf for the dagger affixed there. "Your dress is getting soaked."

A girl, no more her age stood behind her, a grin slowly spreading across her face. Nemesis' hand twitched away from the dagger as she slowly got up, brushing the golden leaves off the damp silk as she did so. She appraised the girl with a quick
glance, took in her clothing, the fighting leathers, and the array of weapons adorning her hips.

"Do you have my answer?" Nemesis asked, raising her chin, slowly moving to circle the girl.

"Perhaps," was the reply, quick and ringing.

"These visions—" Nemesis started.

"Prophecy." Was the short reply, annoyed almost.

Nemesis' brows knit together in confusion. Mouthing that word, Prophecy—it sounded clunky, unrealistic.

"For what purpose?" Was all she could say. The girl, however, just raised her eyebrows. Nemesis knew she was pushing it, that to ask too many questions may be unwise.

"To save those who cannot save themselves." The girl said, lifting a single hand to point into the shady forest. Nemesis took the bait and looked into that shade. The girl behind her disappeared.

*

Nemesis and her sister, Freya, lived at the edge of the forest in a cabin that was their mother’s and her mother’s mother’s before her. The two-story cottage was a home of riotous color within. Filled with mementos from generations past, the sitting room, which Freya currently sat in, was Nemesis’ favorite. Full of furniture of varying shades of green, the prize jewel was the large fireplace in the shape of a dragon with its mouth open to the fire pit. No fire was roaring on the slightly balmy
autumn day now, but the thought of flames filling its mouth in winters past brought a slight smile to Nemesis’ face.

Dropping the basket of neatly wrapped eggs from the open-air market on the large oak table in the attached dining room, Nemesis almost ripped the curtains open to let sunlight flood in from the large circular window.

The girl's words still rung in her head. To save others who cannot save themselves. Nemesis ran a hand through her shock of white blond hair, odds and ends sticking up from the static. A wave of uneasiness washed over her. The first sign of yet another vision.

"How was the market?"

Nemesis turned to find Freya had moved from her place on the couch to sit on the large oak table, finger tracing a deep knot in the wood. She glanced up, red hair curling at the ends, eyes shifting from the basket to Nemesis' own green eyes. As old as the forest. Her mother sing-songed when she was young. Named after the Goddess of Revenge and Retribution, Nemesis wasn’t always sure of her mother’s specific choice. With the emphasis on Retribution, as her mother always reminded her. Retribution is earned. It is fair in the eyes of the Goddesses. Freya, on the other hand, was named after the Mother of All Goddesses due to the gold strands of her copper hair.

"It was good," Nemesis gestured to the basket of eggs, giving Freya a tight smile as she crossed the open living area to the iron spiral staircase. She needed to get to her room.
"Are you okay, Nem?" Nemesis' hand paused on the railing, shaking slightly. Swallowing, she turned and nodded, giving Freya a once over—that sunlight giving her a halo in the afternoon warmth. Her sister always was attuned to emotions, a Gift that made her adept at figuring out which customers needed which potions at the Underground. An Empath, Freya was called.

She only nodded, gaze focused on the curving stairs.

*

The landing to the second floor was full of lush carpets covering creaky wide planked floors. Sunlight streamed through skylights of stained glass depicting ferns and other forest greenery, coloring Nemesis' hair. Tugging off her slippers outside her bedroom door, she held the pair between two fingers as she shouldered her door open, revealing the large space she diligently carpeted with 14 rugs from wall to wall. Made of rich turquoise wool threaded with gold silk, the carpets took the brunt of the fall of her deep blue muddy slippers. Picking up the edges of her light blue dress, Nemesis crossed the room to open the wall of windows, letting the fresh forest air in. The uneasiness subsided as she took in a breath only to return with an exhale.

Collapsing on her bed, she reached into the bottom of the green wicker basket she kept under the hand painted bed frame, pulling out three vials to place on her nightstand. Her mother carved and painted each woodland creature decorating the bed frame: doe, blue bird, stag, bear. Nemesis ran a fingertip over the doe, remembering her mother showing her how to drop lemongrass into a cauldron. She always smiled as she sprinkled it in, focusing to make sure the contents wouldn’t bubble over.
Now, Nemesis dabbed the contents of her vials under the dark circles of her eyes. She loosened the ties of her silken dress, sliding it off so only the under slip remained.

Throwing back her covers, she plopped into bed. Staring at the ceiling, Nemesis knew what was to be next. They were coming quicker now, these visions. *To save those who cannot save themselves.* Nemesis pressed two fingers to her lips, touching them to that painted doe, and rolled over, those words ringing in her head.

* 

Nemesis didn’t know what she was chasing. What she did know was that it was important. Urging on her midnight mare, Persis, Nemesis brushed a strand of white hair behind her ear. Forest flashed by, spooling into a smooth blur of color that made her think of the roaring ocean—or at least the stories her mother told her of it. She rode to the shores of Anteros, the coasts of Southkeep. The sun bled through the trees, light of deep green reflecting off her tan gloves. Nemesis hadn’t visited the ocean since her mother passed only three years ago. The elder witch left for a pilgrimage through the mountains. She left Nemesis and Freya with vast amounts of supplies, a whisper of a kiss, and enough butterscotch cookies to last a lifetime. However, they did not fill the hole left in her when word was sent by raven of her mother’s accident. The elder witch was brewing the contents of a new kind of magic. One that could very well improve upon their communications system of ravens and pigeons when the cauldron bubbled over, her mother gone in quick explosion that rocked the mountainside.
In her vision, Nemesis tumbled off Persis’ back, bare feet sinking into the moonlight cooled sand. She paused. A girl stood by the edge of the water, lightweight trousers billowing in the evening breeze. And around her—around that girl was a dragon. White as ash, underbelly of midnight. Both stood staring out at the water, tide rushing over her feet and its paws. Dragons were known to have existed—but to see one, to really see one this large, was impossible.

Nemesis took one step forward. The girl turned as moonlight hit her wheat colored curls. Tears stained her cheekbones as she met Nemesis’ gaze and her dragon curled around her, to stare straight at the potion-maker. Eyes of amber, of molten gold, bore into Nemesis. She stared and stared, trying to decipher what was in those beautiful eyes, what she was trying to say. Her breath curled in the cool, warm tendrils of air dancing between the two. Nemesis reached out a hand. The girl just stood, wide eyed, looking between the potion-maker and her dragon. Her grip loosened on whatever she was holding, and it hit the ground—a book. Nostrils flared and Nemesis collapsed to both knees.

The dragon crept closer. It sniffed, examining her, talons scraping the sand, the weight of her footsteps reverberating through the ground and into her skull. Nemesis looked up and straight at the end of the creature’s pointed snout.

Both paused. Nemesis felt a large shuttering as the behemoth rested its front and then its hind legs on the sand, collapsing and curling. She nudged her muzzle against Nemesis’ face, rough but gentle for a dragon.

Electric were Nemesis’ veins as she let her shoulders curve and her breathing regulate. She only stared at the girl still enveloped in the dragon’s side.
The girl took a quick look behind her—one last peek at the oncoming waves before gingerly stepping over the dragon’s tail and making her way towards Nemesis. She offered a softly calloused hand.

Nemesis took it.

*

Nemesis jolted back to her body. Laying in her bed, covers thrown aside, her room was now too cold. As she got up to latch the window, the smell of freshly fried eggs and some of the toasted multigrain bread she baked weekly enveloped her. Moonlight filtered in through her window, the only light in the shadows of her room. *Freya. She must be getting ready.*

Nemesis quickly changed into some light gear—a pair of grey trousers, black tooled leather boots adorned with a pattern of wild overgrowth, and a deep blue tunic lined with grey fur. Raking her hair back into a small bun, she tumbled down the stairs. That vision was longer than the rest. She never missed a whole day. Never. The scent of the ocean lingered with her. The feel of that dragon still evident in the pounding of her heart.

Reaching the bottom of the wrought iron staircase, Nemesis caught a glimpse of Freya at work over the oven, flipping a set of eggs. Shoulders curved, red hair braided around her head, Nemesis smiled, starting to walk over, to sit down at the table and wolf down some eggs before having to go to The Underground. But another girl. One with dark hair streaked with copper and horns that graced the top of her head. The girl was dressed in thick clothing that reminded Freya of Northern attire, running through a field of wilted wildflowers. The scene would look beautiful were it...
not for the look of sheer panic lining her face.

A hand on her shoulder, Nemesis felt the world shutter back into place. Freya held her shoulders, concern drawn on her eyebrows.

“You’re not okay.” Freya spoke softly, the way she did with all her broken customers. Nemesis looked into her sister’s eyes, “I’m not okay. Visions,” Nemesis licked her lips, her mouth feeling as though she stuffed a thousand cotton balls in her cheeks. “Visions. I keep having visions.” There was no need to lie. Freya would ferret out the truth eventually, as she did with most things.

“You’re Gift?” Freya asked, hands having moved to her sister’s forearms only to fall limply at her sides.

“Yes. Maybe?” Nemesis searched past her sister, to where the eggs could be, We need to get ready. We can’t miss a day of work. She couldn’t quite look at her sister. Not now.

Freya stood in the middle of the kitchen and the living room, a room divider herself as Nemesis pushed past her to grab the plate of eggs and utensils.

“Just be careful, Nem.” Freya turned to look at her sister with weary eyes, then came to plant herself across that large oak table and shove a forkful of eggs into her mouth.

*

Nemesis slid her wicker bag onto the table top of their stall. It was a raw edged piece of wood, shined and polished once a week before they left to sleep heavily at home. The Underground. Stalls much like their own surrounded them on either side. The lights above flickered on and Nemesis sneezed with the shift in
brightness. The wide tunnel was kept up by age old magic, tree roots sweeping the walls, and the small glass orbs which now held the power of the Light Gifted hung from roots above them. While the open-air market was for general errands: food, housewares, goods from neighboring lands, The Underground was meant for Magic and Magical items. Eugene sold dragon scales across the way with his father, and Sylvie sold blankets woven with enchanted yarn meant to calm the nervous system, lulling a buyer into sleep.

She and Freya, well, they sold potions and readings. Freya with her Empath powers and Nemesis with her so called “Gift” for potion making were quite successful even after their mother passed.

The magic she used for the potions hadn’t come without a cost. It requested something personal from the creator. Eyelashes, hair, blood. Anything to tie the magic to something real—of flesh and blood. It hadn’t been that much, Nemesis thought. She made love potions. Things to heighten emotions, to let the truth tumble out more easily. It wasn’t altering the truth, but making it easier to voice, to bear. It was a vocation she loved. She helped others where she knew she was lacking. Perhaps, that was what the girl was talking about. Her potion making. Perhaps that was how she was to help those in her visions.

Nemesis shook her head, the thoughts all blurring together. She couldn’t think about it. Not now. She had to sell some potions. Nemesis pulled her box of goods from under the table, adding new vials to their collection, sorting by use, lasting effects, and color. Potion still in hand, Nemesis looked over at her sister dragging a hollowed out stump from beneath their stand to sit on. The orb light caught the copper
strands in her sister’s hair, the same copper strands she once had before she made her mistake.

Two years ago, in a fit of desperation, she tried a new love potion—one just for herself. However, she put too much of herself into it—the effects bleached the color from her hair and wrenched the contents from her stomach.

Nemesis finished arranging her potions, watching as her sister weaved her way through the vendors getting ready towards Sylvie. She knew Sylvie had a massive crush on Freya, the girl sidled up to her last week only to meekly ask about a few potions Nemesis was selling while she side eyed Freya who was giving a young couple a reading. And Freya, well she had an inkling due to her Gift, but refused to use her powers outright without being invited to. She was polite that way. Nemesis didn’t know if she could resist the temptation if she were her sister. As she put the last of the vials out, she watched the awkward dance of emotions playing out across the way, a lump forming in her throat. She quickly looked away, plastering a smile on her face, seeking out her next customer in the thickening crowd.

*

She sold 20 vials of her truth serum, 5 vials of a potion that would make one’s own feelings clearer, and 1 vial of nail polish. The nail polish went to a young girl with wide eyes that Nemesis recognized.

The girl asked for a love potion. A true love potion. Not the other stuff she sold. Nemesis paused before she decided upon the words she needed to say.
“It is unwise to dabble in potions of love—” She thought back to her own trials then, “—despite what I sell, there is no true potion to cause one to fall in love, nor would one want that. Potion-induced love is but a shell of what love could be.”

Nemesis’ eyes shifted slightly as she looked at the girl standing in front of her once more.

“And that, my dear is not worth it. But this,” she held out the vial of red nail polish, “might help. Think of it as armor. Think of it as a simple wish each time you apply a layer.”

As a young girl, Nemesis’ mother gave her vials of colored polish. Vibrant hues, mostly reds and pinks, but her favorite was a green the shade of the ferns that grew on the moss-covered side of the cottage. When the first pangs of love settled in, her mother plopped the green polish in front of her and painted her nails. She told Nemesis of her own woes of love.

How Nemesis longed for love. It had been a while since she herself had longed for romantic love, but it had settled in the dust of her chest when she saw Freya make her way towards Sylvie. There was something about the promise of something new that brought it out, that rip-roaring desire to feel the kindling of her own heart.

Now, Nemesis walked behind her sister who wheeled her cart of supplies over roots of trees and through puddles of mud and leaves. As though Freya felt her gaze burning between her shoulder blades, her sister turned around, giving Nemesis a quick smile.
“Want to race?” Freya’s smile turned mischievous, as the autumn sun started to peek through the low hills and plains beyond the trees.

“What?”

“Oh come, on—you know, like when we were kids.”

Nemesis did know. She vividly remembered running through the very forest they now carried their bags through. As she was about to say yes, Visions of another girl—no girls—running through the forest came to her. They did not chase each other. No joy of being carefree laced their features. They merged into one only to prism back out. Nemesis felt her body give out beneath her, the rough root of a tree scraping her knee. She felt her sister’s hands flutter to her head, her knee, her arms to shake her. Nemesis heard the thud of the cart handle in the distance. All she saw, all she really truly felt was the isolating feeling of being lost in one’s own skin, of the panic that sometimes clawed its way up her throat until she had to scream into a pillow to feel even the slightest relief. It came from them. *Those who cannot save themselves.*

* 

At home, Freya gingerly placed a salve on Nemesis’ forehead before going to get a pot of tea, Nemesis’ shock of silver blonde hair pulled to the top of her head in a bun and out of the way of the green herbs. How Freya got Nemesis back, she barely remembered. The gash in her knee spiderwebbed pain across her thigh where her dagger was still affixed. Groggily, Nemesis reached down to unbuckle the blade, depositing it on her turquoise nightstand that matched the rugs she diligently puzzled
across her floor. She turned over, taking a towel to wipe the salve from her forehead as Freya shouldered open her door, a tray of tea in her hands.

“Back in bed.” Freya ordered—when she wanted, she could sound very much like their mother, even if she was the younger of the two. Nemesis just gave her a look from beneath the sweep of hair that fell into her face, making her way over to the oak wardrobe. Her head ached, her body protested against the movement.

“Nem—” Freya’s tone gentled, “You must rest.”

“Get out—” Nemesis hissed, gripping the edge of the wardrobe—perhaps the only thing that was keeping her up. Freya only nodded, fuming beneath her mask of calm, placed a cup of tea on the night stand, and pointedly slammed the door behind her.

Nemesis had no idea why she was so vicious. There was no need. Freya was only concerned. But that did not change the way she felt on the inside. She did not want—could not be infantilized right now. She had something to do, she knew it.

With all her strength, Nemesis opened the door, and pulled the long red wrap dress off its hanger.

*

Getting dressed was a task she did not want to relive. She knew her muscles could work, could feel it as she laced the dress closed, but there was a film of exhaustion that made it more difficult than usual. As she looked at the now cooled tea sitting on the nightstand, Nemesis tasted the bitterness of regret. She could apologize later. Now, she needed more answers. But when she made her way to the forest, she found no girl. She found nothing.
So, she sat in front of the shrine, teeth gritted, barely restraining the guttural scream of frustration that threatened to emit from within.

* 

Perhaps she shouldn’t have been so preoccupied with these Visions. Perhaps she should have taken them as they came. But she felt some responsibility. A connection. They were given to her to protect. How, Nemesis had no idea. It was that sense of no control that sent her to the edge. Why give me these Visions, this Gift, if the only thing I can do is sit back and watch?

These were the thoughts that came to her as night spread its moonlight across their homeland. Those and others. She thought of Freya, of the anger she felt towards her sister. The jealousy, if she were being honest. The exhaustion broke down the carefully built walls she maintained to avoid these very thoughts. In all honesty, Nemesis wished she'd experienced love by now. Something, anything. Instead of the all-encompassing aching she felt once every few months that only lead to the wet gasps of tears in the star speckled night. That voice in her head told her, you're not meant for this, if no one has loved you now, no one will, worthless. It was on those nights that she let that voice run rampant in her head, corrupting her heart, her soul. It seemed that this might be one of those nights. A bitter taste would coat her mouth, as the voice in her head whispered, no one, you are no one. She would let it fill her. Believe it just to feel something.

She'd wake the next morning, that bitter desperation, self-disgust, wiped clear from her mind, the palate of her tongue. She'd hold her chin a little higher, recognizing that hollowness as strength, a passing of pain.
So now, joining the helplessness and regret, she let herself be overcome by that tidal wave.

*

Answers did not come in the morning. Nemesis dozed on and off, wishing dearly that she brought a cloak as the chill of nighttime settled. By midday, her stomach growled. She wondered how it could be that no one crossed her path. Magic, probably. A compliment of the Goddess. Who knew? Blowing a strand of hair from her face, she desperately wished for a morsel of bread, or even better, a butter cookie.

Gone was the emptiness of the night before, the guilt, the desire to fix. She felt nothing but the pangs of hunger and the hollowness only crying could bring about now. The numbness was welcome.

The crunching of leaves was the only indication Nemesis was being watched. Her hand flew to the place her dagger should be, her body groaning as she turned, as she moved after remaining still for so long.

“You look quite a mess.” The girl behind her had the same voice as before, the same clothes, everything the same except for her face. Her face matched Nemesis’ own.

“Stop gaping.” The girl—no Goddess, Nemesis was sure of it now—rolled her shoulders. “I can take whatever form I please. Today, it is convenient to look as you do.”

Nemesis closed her mouth, thinking of just the words to say.

“I have been wracking my brain, trying to devise the meaning of your words.” Nemesis started, standing, facing the Goddess fully. “These Visions—my Gift—are
driving me towards insanity. I cannot do anything. I have no idea who they are, what they desire, what they need.” Nemesis’ hands fluttered to her hair, finally forming fists to refrain from covering her face.

“I have no natural power besides.” Nemesis whispered. “I have what my mother gave me and what my mother’s mother gave me. That is all.”

“Girl, you are not powerless. Even if you were—” The Goddess walked closer, the feeling of staring into her own face foreign. “We are not the sum of what we have been given. We are the sum of what we have learned and done with our bare hands.”

The Goddess turned, Nemesis fearing she would disappear altogether.

“You have what they need. You know what they need.” The Goddess turned to give her a nod, then vanished with the leaves.

Nemesis stood in the forest for a moment longer, chewing on the words she was left with and made her way home.

*

Nemesis rolled out the dough, taking a cup and pressing it in—leaving an imprint of a starburst. Freya was gone when Nemesis got home, a massive wreck in need of a bath and new clothes.

She scarfed down the last of the butter cookies she desperately dreamed of and decided to make more. Adding sugar and flour, and large amounts of butter to the mix was calming. The numbness which gripped her in the forest had not lessened, and as she placed the cookies on a baking sheet, Nemesis considered what she could do. From her visions, she knew of a woman wrapped in darkness, a girl encircled by a
dragon, and a third in a field of flowers and snow—even if she knew what to give them, how to do so was beyond her. Sighing, she placed the cookies into the burning oven, and went to lay on the green couch. Staring up at the star flecked ceiling—another of their mother’s creations—Nemesis understood what she had to do next.

* 

When Freya came through the door with jars of strawberry jam, Nemesis launched herself off the couch, eyes wary as she took in her sister.

“I’m sorry."

Freya placed the jars in the small pantry. Ignoring her.

“You were trying to help.” Nemesis continued, “I shouldn’t have lashed out like that.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

Nemesis wandered up to her sister, dressed in a deep yellow dress with three quarter sleeves, one that was their mother’s, and poked her in the arm.

Freya turned, hands on hips and the last jar of jam left on the table.

“It’s just—” Nemesis knew what that look said, “These Visions I’m having—they’re of these girls. I don’t know how to help them.” Her voice broke. “I—I barely know how to help myself.”

Nemesis pulled out a chair, folding in on herself as she sat down.

“I feel so alone sometimes.” The words tumbled from her mouth, Freya’s stance softening. “I—I am engulfed by the fear that—”

Nemesis broke off. You have what they need. You know what they need.

Nemesis held up a hand.
“I know—” She gripped her sister by the shoulders, “I know what I’m meant
to do.”

Nemesis ran down the hallway and down a set of stairs, locking the door
behind her as she did so. The jar of jam spilled broken across the floor as the sound of
her footsteps echoed in her sister’s ears.

* 

She was out of breath as she entered her potion crafting room. Shelves lined
the walls, the small windows of the basement let in the little light that illuminated her
cauldron in the middle of the room. Hung above a fire pit, the cauldron was copper
blue with age. Her sister’s fists banged on the door at the top of the stairs.

Nemesis knew what they needed.

She knew what they felt.

They needed what she needed. I am engulfed by fear, by a churning, by the
never-ending noise.

Maybe then she would be exactly sure of how she could save herself.

She placed her base ingredients into the cauldron, the flame starting to grow
as she decided on what to add of herself. Nemesis cut her hair, plucked her eyelashes,
and placed all the power, all of the Visions of the girls’ future and past into the vat.
Nemesis put her hope and love and power into their creations.

For a queen she summoned darkness in human form.

For a thief she weaved a dragon.

For a girl, a gift that would save her and those who became her family.

For herself, though, Nemesis did not yet know.
She saw a Queen take her throne, a forest reborn. A thief laughing by the sea, newfound friends by her side, and a horned girl reborn with wisdom she neither asked for nor cursed. The constant ache, the worry, the anxiety of it all vanished, though not all of it. Not the part she called her own.

Nemesis did what she had to do.

“Nem—” Freya came tumbling down the stairs, bringing the sunlight with her tangled hair and frantic eyes. The door swung closed, wood splintered by an ax.

Nemesis lay on the ground, cauldron empty and fire out.

“I saved them—I feel nothing—” Her voice rose in pitch, wobbling back down as she spat, “Nothing, I still feel so empty—Freya—I am so very tired.”

“Of what,” Her sister’s voice cracked, tears pooling in her eyes, standing just a foot away.

“Waiting to be loved.” Nemesis spoke to the ground, her shame blossoming on her cheeks. “The impossibility of being loved—I don’t know.”

“Nemesis, I love you.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s not.”

“I feel this hollowness. Sometimes, I wonder if I’m even real.” Nemesis cracked a smile, her throat dry.

“I see you,” Freya whispered fervently. “I know what you feel—did you think I could restrain myself that much? I feel what you feel every time I place my hands
on your shoulders. That emptiness, that hollowness—” Freya pointed to Nemesis’ heart, “that can be helped. You just have to let me in.”

“It’s hard—” Nemesis knew she sounded like a child, foolish.

“It is,” Freya agreed, her bright eyes boring into Nemesis’ own green, “But we all have our own little secrets. More than we know. Just because you feel alone doesn’t mean you are—you saw those girls. You knew what they needed. They felt what you feel.”

Nemesis nodded, the words trying to penetrate but sliding off the surface.

“Nem—don’t you see? Don’t you see that by saving them, you have found your own salvation? You know—you know there is a way out.” Freya sounded almost hysterical, her hands leaving marks on her sister’s shoulders. “What if you saved yourself this time?”

*

Freya supported her sister on the walk back upstairs. The words she spoke, slowly melting Nemesis into something moldable, human, of life and blood and loss—and also joy. So she felt as the Potion Maker with silver blonde hair made her way up to her room. As she bent down to grab an empty journal from her bookcase, one with rough leather, one her mother made for her as a baby—to put happy memories within—and wrote. She wrote for the pain inside and the possibilities of her future. She wrote until the pain within lessened. Until she was no longer fearful of criticism for all she bore on her page was her heart and her soul and that could never be trite.
Acknowledgements

For my mom, who believed from day one that I was a storyteller.

To Professor Anne F. Greene for your endless support and love. There are not enough words to describe how lucky I feel having known you for the past two years. You made all the pain worth it. You leapt into the unknown for me, helped me feel confident in the work I produced, and elegantly poked at all the flaws. I am forever grateful for your guidance.

To Ryan Launder and Molly Bogin for dealing with the grumpy editing days and providing me with endless laughs.

For Sarah Durkin, Hannah Einstein, and Catherine Kiall for being my endless champions. You believed in me and my work, fueling me for the rough writing days.

For my writing teachers: Professor Lisa Locascio for making me feel comfortable writing in the genre I wanted—you allowed me to continue writing Fantasy fearlessly throughout my time at Wesleyan and for that I am forever in your debt. Professor Matthew Burnside for your kind words of encouragement, love of Fantasy writing, and introducing me to creating in New Media which this project was originally based on. Professor Douglas Martin, you made me consider the beats and feel of my work. For reminding me to ground my writing and pushing me to explore writing outside of my comfort zone. The piece that started all of this came from that, no matter how far removed now, and I appreciate that greatly.

For the librarians who encouraged me to read and the teachers who believed in me throughout my formative years.
To Ms. Joyce Lynch who fearlessly and passionately place books into my hands.

To Mr. Peter Colaccino who believed in my writing and took my 20 (or was it 40?) page Epic story and only encouraged me.

To Ms. Jenna Martin for believing in the Literary Magazine and giving me an outlet for my work and for every single bit of encouragement along the way.

To Mr. Timothy Rankin for sparking my love of Mathematics and believing I could. If I could do one thing I once thought impossible, I could maybe do another.

To Mrs. Shaylene Krupinski who found me after my belief in myself was drained and helped me back up again.

To Mr. Jeff Blanchette, I will always look to the stars because of you. I was your right hand, but you were everything.

Every single one of you had a hand in molding me into the person I am today—the person able to write this thesis. I have so much love and respect for each and every one of you.

For the valuable advice and grammar edits: Sarah Durkin, Susan Gentry, and Catherine Kiall.

For the friends and family I have yet to mention, thank you so much for your support and friendship. You are my support system and I cannot “person” without you. To Kathy Gunkel, Bob Gunkel, Sharon Lynn, Leslie Mroczek, Katie Bernier, and Zoe Wellner.

To the lovers and readers of Fantasy and Science Fiction: I see you and I believe in you—go and create your magic.
Works Cited
