

Reweaving the Branches: A Practice-Based Inquiry into an Accessible
Adaptation of *The Mabinogion's* Four Branches for a New Adult Readership

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Philosophy in Cultural Studies

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DECLARATION

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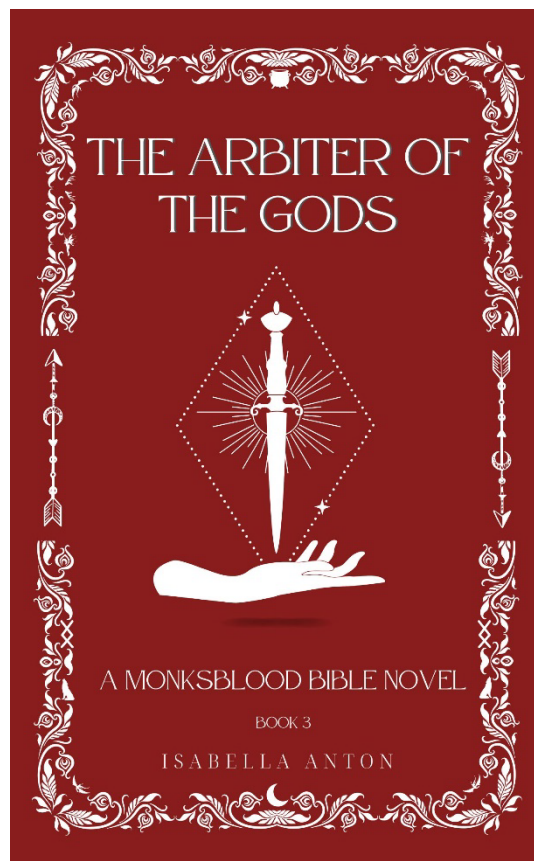
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The Arbiter of the Gods

A Monksblood Bible Novel

By Isabella Anton



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*To the woman who said, “There’s no way I can write this book.”
Look at us now: fuelled by caffeine, held together by determination,
and thriving on sheer audacity.*

Map

(to be designed)

Mundane World

(Front side to be a regular map of Wales)

Llansteffan

Narberth

Gwydir Forest

Annwfn

(Back side to be a fantasy version of Wales)

(Realistic place names in brackets below for reference to their position)

Arberth (Deheubarth)

Elendi (Powys)

Aber Alaw (Gwynedd)

Hafren (Rhwyng gwy a Hafren)

Tintern (Gwent)

Brecon (Brycheiniog)

Abertawe (Morgannwg)

Waesfjord (Ireland)

Eryri (Snowdonia)

Imlyn

‘For the sake of the man you love most, wait for me.’

- The Four Branches

1

Anwen held her breath as she passed her hand over the unlit candle before her. She wanted nothing more than to see the flicker of fire at the base of the wick. Jade had made it look easy... as if controlling such a wild beast meant nothing. She had come from a faraway future and told them many things about what the world would become. Now, Jade was off fighting, becoming an Exalted Witch, and Anwen still couldn't light a simple fucking candle.

She shook her hand out, stumbling over her words. No magic, as usual. She threw the candle into the smouldering hearth. She didn't know why she bothered.

Defective.

It was a term her brothers used for her ever since she'd been able to understand speech. As a noble woman, she should've had more magic in her body, more skill to call it forth, but even the most knowledgeable of her teachers, Master Lewis, couldn't get her to manifest it.

Her mother pushed open her bedroom door with a solemn look on her face. Joan spied the candle in the fire but said nothing of it, the grief of their current situation overriding the pity she felt for her daughter. She placed her hands in front of her, back straight, as she hesitated in the doorway.

"The Tree of Life is dead," she said. Her voice hung in the spring air.

The Tree was something no Man could kill—*shouldn't* kill—yet the sharpness in her eyes and the quiver of her frown as she held out her arms beckoning Anwen towards her...

Anwen rushed into her arms, her face buried deep within the silk brocade of her mother's dress. If the Tree were dead, then Jade, the strongest of them all, had lost against the Brotherhood.

Anwen pulled away, Joan wiping at her tears.

"We must stay positive and help the [cantref](#)," Joan tutted. She smoothed down her daughter's brown hair in a gesture of comfort. "Jade will come back. I know she will... She is

stronger than any of us.”

Anwen wasn't sure of that. If Jade had lost, then there'd be no hope for the rest of them. She shook her head and dug her nails into her palms. The Tree of Life created world order and had held it together for millennia.

Anwen's already bleak world was crumbling further.

Who'd care for her now? Would she go hungry? Their crops fail? And what if the people taking care of her no longer had their magic...?

Joan seemed to be able to read her mind. Having had three children before Anwen, it was an easy thing to do, even without magic. “We can only determine our own futures and hope the Gods will look after us.” Joan gazed at her intently. “Come. We must see to your father and the others.”

They gathered their heavy skirts as they made their way down the passageways and into the Great Hall, where Anwen's father, Rhys [ap](#) Gruffudd, and Tristan and Bowen had convened. Sadness deeply etched their faces. Bowen was unable to stand with the others and sat, still in shock, on a low stool.

Rhys glanced up at his wife and daughter's arrival, his hand waving them forward to join them. He wore his deepest colours, already in mourning for their future.

“We didn't think this would happen,” Tristan mumbled. His bloodied hand tightly held the hilt of the sword on his hip.

Anwen saw that Bowen's tunic was ripped and soaked in blood. She ran towards him, her hands flying over the wound that should have been seeping between bandages, but found him clean, a small scar just turning pink.

“What...? How...?” Questions rattled her brain as she took in the fine detail. Even she could tell how well healed the puncture was, for it to be almost invisible to the eye, and how delicate the magic would've had to be.

Bowen sat dead still, unable to lift his head. The strength she had once witnessed in countless sparring matches and duels was lost from him. His honey-brown eyes, that once held her affectionate attention, were now as dull as the mud under his boots.

The bloodied tome in his hands was as battered as the man himself.

Anwen turned to Tristan.

"Jade." The sorrow in the one word was like ice shattering.

"No, no, no. She... She's stronger than us all," she said, looking at her mother, "that's what you said! She... can't be... *dead*."

Bowen and Tristan winced as she finally uttered the word, their shoulders taut with grief.

"The Tree of Life is gone," Tristan said in a whisper. "When we went to Lampeter's fort, we found her in the hands of the Brotherhood. Edward of Woodstock was leading them." Surprise lifted all their faces. "They forced her to..."

He couldn't finish, but they all guessed. It had been the sole purpose of the Brotherhood to rid the world of magic. They had spread spies all over Britanni and succeeded in destroying the Tree of Life.

"They did something to her... dark magic I'd never witnessed before," Tristan explained. "She fought hard, but when Bowen was fatally wounded... Jade used all her powers to bring him back."

"At the cost of her own life," Bowen barely whispered, distraught.

Rhys balled his fists, the general in him taking command. "We can't tell anyone yet."

Joan's head snapped up. "Rhys, the people have the right to know."

"No, we wait," Rhys commanded. He nodded his head towards Anwen, who was still in tears, giving his wife a knowing look. Joan stood there resigned.

"Jade is *dead*, and all you can talk about is whether we should tell people or not?" Anwen cut in. "Who cares what's going to happen to them..."

Her mother warned her with a steady hand on her shoulder.

"What?" she asked, unsettled by the glares of the others. She hadn't said anything untrue. She shook her mother's hand off, crossing her arms in defence. "It's not like they will lose their magic overnight. And as I'm so often reminded: having no magic doesn't mean you're useless."

The sharp sting as a hand was slapped across her face burned hot. Anwen stared into her father's raging blue eyes. She quickly gathered her skirts and ran out of the Hall, her mother calling after her. She didn't want her secondhand apologies nor excuses for her father's behaviour.

There was nothing for Anwen. Her mother and father had each other; Tristan, she was sure, had someone who would always be there for him; and Bowen... She could plainly see he had lost his other half in Jade.

There was no one waiting in her chambers as she opened the door and flung herself onto her bed. The sun-warmed sheets were all that comforted her, but their warmth faded as the sun sank below the horizon.

No one came for her in those hours of despair, her maids not daring to knock, nor try the latch on her door, knowing it'd be locked. They were used to her outbursts. As a child, she'd been scolded repeatedly for them, and the only thing that ever seemed to calm her was a minstrel's song. She'd learned to sing from a young age, her parents boasting to those who visited court that their daughter sang as gracefully and as true as a nightingale; but that night her voice failed her. Her sobs did nothing but strain her vocal cords until it felt as if sand had been poured down her throat.

Parched, she grabbed the pitcher at her bedside and found it empty, the last dregs of wine collected at the bottom. She threw it across the room, shattering it against the wall, making the torches spark.

Nothing was going right.

A sharp knock came from the door.

"Don't fucking think I'm apologising!" she shouted, venom coating her words.

There was a hefty sigh from the other side. "It wasn't my intention to call you out, but for me to enter."

She recognised Tristan's voice.

Her hand was steady as she unlatched the door; his red and white Captain's uniform was now pristine. "I'll not apologise," she reiterated, softer now that she knew it was Tristan and not her mother or father.

He moved with a heaviness she'd never witnessed before as he sat down on a stool. He interlaced his fingers, his blue eyes holding an ocean's worth of worry and sorrow.

The silence was unbearable. He finally found his words. "*She was the strongest of us.*"

Anger heated her cheeks. "If she is so fucking strong, then why is The Tree dead? Why is *she* dead? If she were as strong as all of you thought, then the world wouldn't be in danger

of changing!”

“Strength doesn’t equate to winning, Anwen,” Tristan shot back. He glanced out into the night sky; the plumes of smoke from countless chimneys hid the constellations from view.

“You know nothing of the sacrifices people make every day... You worry that life’ll get harder for you, but those thoughts have passed through our minds as well. My mother used to say, ‘Worrying is for those who are weak; those not strong enough to do something about it themselves.’ I never agreed with her. Worrying pushes us constantly to do better, to *be better*.”

Tristan stood, towering over her as he made his way to the door; the shadows beneath his eyes accentuated by the flickering torches in the room.

“So, you’re saying that I’m being selfish?” she asked, hurt tingeing her voice.

“It’s not a matter of whether it’s selfish, but whether it’s helpful.” He placed his hand on the doorlatch, bowing his head as he bade her goodnight.

Anwen felt as if her life was still worth so much less than the people around her. Her father treated her as if she still played with dolls and had ribbons streaming from her hair; while her mother was strict, as any mother should be, but her strictness held a note of indifference that Anwen’s older siblings never experienced. And her brothers... Constantly tortured by their ridicule for not having any magic... Anwen had only ever found solace in her sister, whose visits had been few since Marged’s marriage five years ago.

Anwen knew more than anyone that the world was an unfair place; if it weren’t so, she wouldn’t have been born with no magic to speak of.

2

Dawn broke as Anwen's maids came to ready her for the day. The fight with her parents had left her drained, her body stiff, and her mind clouded. She slipped her arms into the waiting fabrics of her dress. It was made of fine silk; its dark violet hues were perceivable only when standing close to it. The cuffs bit tight into her wrists, save a small slit that let blood flow, and at the hem, silver embroidery detailed the cycles of the moons. Her hair was loosely braided, a length of silver chain with a similar crescent-moon pendant hanging at the end, entwined between the plaits.

Anwen would have to face her father again that day. She'd received word from Dakarai (one of her father's guards) to go to his study when she was ready. "He regrets what he did more than you know," Dakarai had said.

Anwen had scoffed and shut the door in his face. It took all her strength now not to lock herself in her rooms and pretend she had never received the message, but she knew she couldn't keep her father waiting forever.

Resolved to appear confident, she completed her outfit with a pendant necklace of polished silver and quartz. The butterfly that was suspended within the stone sat between her breasts, frozen in mid-flight. It was a treasured keepsake that Marged had gifted her on her thirteenth birthday.

Marged had spun a tale of a butterfly that had once been a woman so beautiful that a god had trapped her within the stone so he could always admire her. As a child, Anwen thought it was a wonderful story. Now that she was older, she understood how the world truly worked and wore it only as a token to remind her of her sister.

At times, she felt just as trapped as that butterfly.

The castle was quiet as Anwen moved through the long halls and into the courtyard that had baskets and netting ready for the next catch. The lingering smell of fish assaulted her nose, while the ever-present sound of the water below was like matrons shushing babies to sleep.

As she came to stand before her father's door, she couldn't fight the queasiness. In her

younger years, she'd sometimes snuck in and sat in the large chair that had felt like a throne to her. She would look over the number of parchments strewn about, pretending she could read whatever instructions filled the pages and give orders to imaginary generals at her side. She had only been caught once in her monologue and had cowered as she watched her father stride up to her, only for him to lay his large hand on top of her head in comfort, a smile pulling up the whiskers of his grey-streaked beard.

Now, that memory held no more love in it than the man himself. He'd changed.

Everyone had changed.

Anwen knocked on the heavy door. She waited until she heard her father's deep voice call for her to enter.

His office was still the same. Rhys sat at his desk, which faced the door; the far-left wall held rows of leather-spine books, their smell permeating the room, while the right held dull weapons he'd retired. Behind him was a large window through which the estuary could be seen, its majestic waves and undulating tides giving life to the otherwise inanimate room as well as any tapestry.

In one corner, a small lounge area with pillow-strewn stick-back chairs and a small tripod table was set up; Rhys always prepared for visitors.

Just as the Olde Hall housed a beautiful map table, the floor in front of his desk was carved with the same detail, giving him a god-like view of Britainni.

Rhys looked up from the parchment in front of him, setting his quill onto an ornate gold plate that was gifted to him by one of the Irish kings whose name was lost in Anwen's memory. He motioned for his daughter to sit, and pulling at the hem of his brown doublet, made himself more comfortable. Black circles hung under his eyes.

Anwen sat with her back straight, waiting for him to speak.

"You know why I called you here." He didn't pose it as a question, but Anwen answered with one.

"Is it because I had the audacity to speak my mind yesterday?"

His eyes squinted with warning, his mouth puckering ever so slightly. It was a face she'd become accustomed to these past years. She'd first witnessed it when she bested a potential suitor in horse riding. Her initial shame, then guilt, at what she had done meant

nothing anymore. Now those expressions did little but encourage her to push back harder.

"It's because you don't understand the gravity of the situation," he replied.

"And you seem not to understand how I feel!"

"Enough!" He slammed his hand down onto the desk, making the ink pots shake and Anwen jump. "We're going in circles."

On that, at least, they could both agree.

Rhys heaved a great sigh and rubbed at his brow. "We're going to hold a festival in the coming fortnight."

Anwen's ears perked at the news. "A festival? Really?"

"Between me and the Gods, I wouldn't lie about this." He stood from his chair and gazed out into the open water, sunlight breaking its way through spring-grey clouds. "Your mother and I believe that as one of the Chief Courts, we have an obligation..." He shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "We need to show the people that whatever may come, our court and our lands will still stand strong. That we are... *unified*."

Anwen smiled. "If this is what you and Mother had in mind all along, you should've spoken sooner. A fortnight will pass quickly."

If there was one thing she had confidence in, it was her skills in throwing an event, skills her mother had forced her to learn, but Anwen liked the glamour of it. The dresses, costumes, and accessories she would need would be endless.

They had held a festival right before the Brotherhood had descended upon their lives. It had lasted for seven days, and the nightly revelries only ended when the rooster crowed to drown out their merriment.

She hoped this would be the same.

Rhys could see the glimmer in her eye. He understood her foolishness. There wasn't much he could do for his daughter, but this... at least he would be able to secure her in a powerful household where her magic wouldn't be missed.

"We'll make it grander than our last." Rhys mustered a weak smile. "The other Chief Courts will be in attendance, and I want everyone to look their best."

"You mean Branwen will be here?" The name of her childhood friend sent longing through her every bone. She hadn't seen her in years.

Anwen flung her arms around her father, childish glee compelling her to pepper his whiskered cheeks with kisses.

“As well as your brothers and sister,” he said, ruining her mood. “I know you’re not fond of your brothers but at least try to stomach their visit. For my sake, for your mother’s sake, and... for your sake as well.”

Anwen didn’t want to have to compromise her happiness for theirs, especially not her brothers: Rhys and Henry. Their wives and children were just as wretched. She was looking forward to seeing Marged, the one person in their family who always listened and understood her.

She plastered a large smile on her lips. With so many people coming, it would be fortunate that she wouldn’t have to spend a single minute in the company of her own family.

3

The weeks leading up to the festival were filled with meetings and arrangements. Not only was there to be a grand feast for the whole of the gathering, but each day there was to be a special event: hunting, [*Tawlbwrdd*](#), [*Cnapan*](#), and many other games the townspeople of Llansteffan could enjoy.

The halls and rooms of the castle were decorated with lengths of fabric of bright yellows, purples, and greens. Candles and flowers adorned every surface, and robin-blue ribbons streamed from the latches on each door.

Anwen's siblings arrived three days early and took up the top floor of the west wing, leaving the other wings free for other guests. Rhys, as the oldest and namesake of their father, took the largest of the quarters. Despite this, he seemed dissatisfied, which made Anwen hate him even more.

Marged, the second oldest, was as lovely as the spring day that greeted them. Her mere entry into a room made everyone relax and breathe more evenly. Her husband was much older than she was, but they had found balance in their lives.

The second youngest, Henry—a military man through and through, like their father—came with his straight-faced wife in tow.

On the first day, Anwen joined her father to welcome the guests. The Gruffudd's stable hands were already juggling where to put all the horses and had to take over a part of the outdoor training field to accommodate everyone.

The first to arrive was Branwen. Anwen's girlish squeals could be heard throughout the castle as she flung herself at Branwen and stretched to kiss her cheek. She was surprised, as always, by how tall Branwen was... much taller than Tristan.

Branwen's shock-white hair was short, the spikes sticking up as they pleased. She'd always been a rough woman. She had manners, but whether she decided to display them depended entirely on the moment. She wore her usual burnt-orange leather garment, though thankfully had pulled a skirt over the short bottoms for the occasion. It made her outfit mismatched, but no one dared correct her.

“You could have stayed at the castle during the festival,” Anwen said, pouting that her best friend didn’t want to sleep under the same roof as her.

“The tavern in town is holding its annual drinking competition early, and I wouldn’t miss that for anything.” Branwen gave Anwen a last squeeze and zipped off through the gate. Knowing that Pryderi would be in attendance, she didn’t want to be anywhere near him if she didn’t have to be.

As the sun rose higher, their next guest, whom Anwen had never met before, was welcomed warmly by her father.

His name was Efnysien. He wore extravagant clothing that clung to his imposing muscles. His build suggested that the only thing he ever did was fight, and that he never enjoyed anything else in life. His blonde hair was cut short, and his sage-green eyes were as true as the herb.

He didn’t say a word to his host and only nodded his head in greeting as a carriage came to a stop in front of him. He held open the door as King Pwyll and Queen Rhiannon of Dyfed stepped out.

Rhiannon’s divine beauty stopped all activity. Her blonde hair flowed freely behind her, beads of different coloured gems interrupting the strands. She wore a white dress, its silks like water dripping from her form as she stepped down from the carriage. The jingling of crystals followed her, her necklace and bracelets refracting the sunlight.

Whispers about her past treatment still circulated: how she had been wrongly accused of killing her son when he was a babe and was exiled to the village gates. She was forced to tell those who passed by what she’d done, reliving it over and over. Rumour was that she’d even carried a man on her back up to the castle as extra punishment. She’d been exonerated years later, but Anwen would never forget the tale. Her brothers used it to threaten her when she displeased them.

Her husband, Pwyll, was of a husky build. His black hair was heavily streaked with grey, his matching beard close-shaven. He wore a golden crown, the jewels matching the ones in his wife’s hair. The top of his tunic was unfastened, letting the spring air cool his chest.

The last person to leave the carriage was their son, Pryderi. His dirty blonde, shoulder-length hair was nothing impressive next to his parents’. His clothes were of fine quality, the

forest green of his tunic rich. On his hip, he wore a simple sword, and there were calluses on his hands, letting any potential opponents know he was well-versed in its use. His dull green eyes seemed to zero in on Anwen with something she couldn't place. Kindness?

Endearment? Indifference? The feeling of not knowing unnerved her.

Efnysien bowed deeply to him. Pryderi turned to him, and Anwen was thankful to escape his stare. She saw Bowen mounting his horse just outside the gate, Tristan by his side. She quickly slipped away to join them. Bowen's spirits hadn't lifted with the festive mood, not that she could blame him. Loss could do terrible things to a person.

Anwen watched as he hurriedly rode away. "I didn't get to say my farewells," she frowned as she came up behind Tristan.

"I don't think he wanted to make them," Tristan answered truthfully, looking down at her. "We'll see him again someday."

Anwen patted his arm with sympathy. She'd pushed aside her own sadness, focusing on the final preparations for the welcoming banquet. Skirting her way through the courtyard and around men who were already deep into their drinks and on the last verse of a risqué ballad about a hen and an egg, she was making her way up the stairs in search of her mother when she felt lingering eyes on her back.

Pryderi's gaze stopped her in her tracks. There was something different in the way he looked at her now, softer. She turned away and made her way up the remaining steps to find her mother on the landing.

"Was that Pryderi I saw spying you?" Joan asked her daughter, a smile lifting on her lips as she adjusted the basket of flowers on her hip.

"What of it?" Anwen replied as she picked up a stray flower that had fallen from the sill, fiddling with its petals.

"He likes you," she said.

Embarrassment reddened Anwen's ears. "I've not spoken one word to him. How could he like me?"

"Oftentimes words get in the way of everything, but a look... Not even the best of storytellers could mimic a look like that."

Anwen looked out of the window into the courtyard below, where Pryderi now seemed

to be engaged in conversation with Efnysien. His brow was pinched in a glare as he stared into the lighthearted crowd of guests.

“You’ll not find anyone more suitable than him,” her mother said, leaving Anwen with her thoughts.

4

The first night of the festival went without a hitch. It was a time to forget the world's woes and celebrate their lives. The Olde Hall was packed with friends and family, and their friends and their family. Fresh food and drink filled the tables, the partygoers gobbling it down as fast as the servants could replace each dish. Hounds chased around people's legs and raced in and out of the room. Lit candles hung on enchanted spiders' webs, allowing the festivities to go on into the night.

A fire roared from the other side of the hall where a suckling pig was being roasted with wild garlic and fresh thyme, yet Anwen could barely feel the heat. She felt smaller than she had in years, her place far from where she usually sat. Her hand stilled on her goblet, and the wine within was shining like rubies as it caught the candlelight.

She disliked many things about her home: the constant watchful eyes of her parents, the boredom of her lessons with her mother, and the memories of her childhood.

She wanted to be rid of them all.

Yet it was times like these, when she found some form of happiness and hope, that she wouldn't have minded staying there forever.

"May I sit?" Pryderi asked. He had excused himself from his parents' conversation to join her. He wouldn't miss the opportunity to get to know her better.

Anwen saw he had changed into a sea-foam tunic for the evening, which brought more life to his features. White, tight-fitting trousers that clung to his muscular legs made him look as if he had swept up with the tide.

"By all means." She wore her usual smile.

He took a stool from a neighbouring table and made himself comfortable in front of her. Joan and Marged peered and smiled in their direction. Anwen felt her stomach drop as she realised what was happening.

"It seems we have been matched." Pryderi took a sip of his wine, a coy grin playing on his lips.

"And who says I'm looking?" Anwen tried to remain calm. After all, she was speaking to

a prince.

"Well, for one, your father." Pryderi nodded his head to where Rhys was sitting by Tristan, the two of them engrossed in conversation with Pwyll and Rhiannon.

Anwen cursed her father in her mind. "It's true that I'm without a husband, to my mother's dismay."

"So, you are a spinster," he joked with a soft laugh. "I can see the crow's feet about your eyes from here..."

Anwen was drawn in by the sound of his laughter; the rest of the room drowned out. Her smile faltered. There was something about the way he sat with his shoulders slightly forward. His eyes never drifted from hers, keeping her attention on him.

"What is the cause? No one good enough for your family?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"It seems that every man who's called on me in the past seemed more interested in jumping into bed with my father than with me." She got her smile back in place. "And you?" she asked, "Is there no wife in your life?"

Pryderi had to school his face, the reminder of his lost love biting deep into his heart. "There was someone in the past," he said truthfully, "but she was murdered."

Anwen was about to place her hand on his to console him when Branwen roughly banged her flagon of ale down, its contents sloshing, interrupting their conversation. She pulled up a chair. She had forgone her skirts, sticking to the burnt-orange leather garment that the men kept eyeing, and the women sucked their teeth at with distaste.

She stared Pryderi down across the table as her grip tightened on her drink.

In an instant, he stood. This wasn't the time to get into it with Branwen. "We must talk again." He bent at the waist and, with a last glance, left them.

"That was rude!" Anwen said as she sipped her wine, trying to collect her thoughts.

"He'll get over it," Branwen said.

"Really, Bren, he's a guest of the court, the highest court, and deserves our respect."

Branwen swirled the contents of her almost empty flagon, more preoccupied with its movement than with what Anwen had to say in Pryderi's favour.

"You're—"

“—being an arse?” Branwen flashed a cheeky grin and took the last gulp of her ale.

Anwen rolled her eyes. “To say the very least.”

Branwen’s smile turned cold. “The things that creature has done outweigh anything on my conscience.”

Anwen was about to question her when Llwyd stumbled up to them, his eyes glazed over from drink. His shockingly red hair was plastered to his forehead. She’d seen him earlier with Branwen, the two betting on who could finish their ale first.

Branwen, of course, had won.

“Are you joining the hunt, Anwen?” Llwyd slurred, trying to keep steady.

“Though I won’t be taking part in the sport, I’ll accompany all of you as you wish.”

“I believe the lads will enjoy that.” He took her hand and planted an excessively long, sloppy kiss on it. Branwen slapped him away harder than Anwen thought appropriate, and he stumbled in a daze back into the dancing throng.

Branwen chuckled.

“Men really do have a way of irritating you, don’t they?” Anwen giggled.

“Only the ones who act without fucking permission.” Branwen’s temper suddenly flared white-hot. She thought she had seen Efnysien in the corner of her eye. She shook her head, trying to calm herself. She knew that bastard wouldn’t degrade himself by travelling to the mundane world. “Trust me,” she said, huffing out a calmer breath, “when I say that you should choose someone who chooses you.”

It wasn’t only the fact that their names were similar; Anwen and Branwen had known each other long enough to have formed a sisterly bond. It was only after Branwen’s mother, Penarddun, had died and she went to live with her brothers far up north, that they rarely got to see each other. Branwen wanted to make sure Anwen found her right match.

“Isn’t that obvious?” Anwen asked.

“No.” Branwen took her hands, her grip tight, and locked onto her eyes. “They may want you, and you may want them, but if you both haven’t *chosen*, then you don’t belong together.”

Sadness pulled down the corner of Anwen’s lip. All she could think was that no one would ever really want a useless woman without magic as their bride.

5

The start of the hunting event proceeded without delay, and the first group was already celebrating their kill of a pheasant as Anwen corrected the straps on her horse, Poppy. The stable boy had hitched her incorrectly. Again. The only thing he seemed to be capable of was brushing out her black mane and plaiting it to keep it out of her eyes. Anwen was wearing a dress of brocaded yellow silk, the upper tunic dyed in pea green with a pattern of birds stitched into the bodice.

"You're looking lovely today." Joan complimented her.

"Thank you," Anwen mumbled, securing the last strap. One of the boys held out his hands, his fingers interlaced, waiting to push her up onto Poppy's back to ride side-saddle. She grabbed the pommel and, with his leverage, lifted herself up gracefully, conscious of the watchful eyes of their guests as she adjusted her skirts to flow behind her.

Their party consisted of herself, Pryderi, Branwen, Tristan, some guards, a gaggle of guests, and, sadly, her brothers, who took too much pleasure in the sport. Llwyd was nowhere to be seen, probably still sleeping off his drink-induced headache.

Tristan and several guards took the lead, leaving a couple at the back. Anwen felt no fear as they made their way out of town and into the forest, her body swaying to the rhythm of Poppy's stride.

"Do you come this way often?" Pryderi asked as Anwen let Poppy guide her under the canopy of trees that led to a wide plain, weighed down by clouds.

"As often as bees collect honey," she replied. Even during the Brotherhood's terror, she never stopped riding. It always gave her the chance to get out from under her mother's watchful eye and to ride free. "It gives me time to think."

"What do you think about?"

"My life," she answered honestly, "and what I want from it."

"Is your life not providing you with what you want?"

"It rarely does." She shook her head in annoyance. "I want to be rid of this place."

Pryderi stared at her, waiting for further explanation.

“My family doesn’t understand me,” Anwen said. “It’s hard to live in a household where I’m brushed aside... made to feel like everything I do and say is wrong.”

He nodded. “When I was reunited with my parents, I was so young that I did not know that I had been kidnapped. I thought they did not want me.” —Anwen’s eyes grew wide. She had never heard *this* side of the story. —“It took me years to realise they held true love in their hearts for me.”

His words made her stomach drop. It had been a while since she had last felt that kind of familial love.

At that moment, the hounds picked up their victim’s scent and barked in triumph. Pryderi broke out in a wide grin. Anwen’s heart raced, and she wondered why she had ever believed him to look dull.

“Looks like we have caught our first prey,” Pryderi said, straining to see the trophy. His steed chased after the dogs.

Servants and guests shouted encouragement as they raced towards their prize. The world seemed to fall into place, their worries drowned out by laughter and merriment.

Anwen stretched in her saddle, her back and legs numb. Were she by herself, she would’ve taken more walks. Much of hunting was waiting, an activity she had no patience for.

Branwen and Dakarai were engaged in a heated debate with her brothers, each taking different sides as to the best way to continue, when Branwen pulled on her horse’s reins to trot by Anwen’s side.

“We’re going deeper into the woods. One of the servants has spotted a stag,” Branwen vibrated with excitement. She had only agreed to accompany them for Anwen’s protection, distrustful of Pryderi’s intentions, but the event was proving much more fun than she would admit.

She heard Henry shout for her to hurry up, Branwen’s responding glare holding so much wrath in it, he actually flinched. Witnessing that moment was worth the trip in Anwen’s eyes.

Anwen followed slowly behind, letting those who found the activity more engaging take the lead. She tried to find a new position on her saddle to get some feeling back into her

lower half but was unsuccessful. She couldn't fight it any longer. Finding herself alone and unable to keep steady on her mare, Anwen dismounted ungracefully, thankful that everyone was preoccupied. Her legs dangled as she slid to the ground, pins and needles running up and down them.

Unsteady, she walked to the edge of the forest and tied Poppy to a birch tree. With the greying day and so much water nearby, their trunks were as white as if heavy snow had fallen that morning. The thick grass that the sea wind had battered was green and lush and littered with spring flowers.

Anwen could hear her party in the distance, the hounds and calling trumpets muffled against the rustling of leaves and the creaking of branches. She sat on the soft grass, feeling the long blades between her fingers. Her mind wandered with the wind.

She closed her eyes as the hum of a melody came to her and absentmindedly plucked at the notes, singing only for herself and Poppy. It was a trick Marged had taught her to calm herself—one she used often.

Time passed slowly, the serene field washing away the tension in her body until she was ready to rejoin the others on the hunt. She was pushing herself from the ground when she heard the snap of a twig behind her.

"Hello?" Anwen called out into the thicket of trees. She took the length of her skirts and draped them across her shoulder to make it easier to walk.

Another snapping branch caught her attention as something moved too quickly for her to catch.

"Is that you, Tristan?"

She waded her way through the grass, and in the distance, she spied a hare wiggling its bum as it hopped into a patch of dandelions that had sprung late. Anwen followed it as it made its way further into the grove.

"Aren't you happy..." she commented as it nibbled a long blade of grass.

The hare's ears pricked up at her voice, its head swinging around.

They were staring at each other when a howl ripped through the air, reverberating off the trees. The hare ran, startled at the ferocity of the noise, and Anwen raced after it.

"Wait! Come back!" she called.

The hare sped towards the cliffs nearby, where its burrow would be. With one last hop, it would have been out of the trees and home to safety, when a large muzzle clamped down onto its soft midriff.

Its pained squeals, then silence, halted Anwen in her tracks.

It was a large wolf. Its coat was stark white except for its dagger-pointed ears that were as bright as the blood that coated its muzzle. If Anwen hadn't been in fear for her life, she would've marvelled at the majestic animal and how astoundingly powerful it was.

It glanced up at her, its red eyes calm as it took in that she was no threat.

"Shoo!" she commanded, waving her hands. "Put it down!" She looked around her and found a fallen branch. She picked it up and held it out towards the wolf. "I said put it down!" Anwen held her ground, hands shaking as she carefully moved closer to the predator.

A low, warning growl built from its chest, its teeth bared between the folds of fur in its mouth. With a hesitant thrust of the branch, Anwen struck its snout, making it drop its meal. She hit it once more to frighten it away. Her bravery worked; the wolf cautiously backed off into a tangle of bushes.

Sweat soaked into the collar of her dress. She'd never been one to put her life in danger, especially not for such an insignificant reason. Her legs shook as they gave way underneath her, and she fell into the long grass.

She glanced up to where the wolf had thrown the hare, its body lying lifeless and bloody. With trepidation, she crawled towards it.

"I'm sorry, my little friend." She stroked at its head where the blood hadn't yet wet it, knowing it did little more than comfort her and not the animal itself.

"If you were truly sorry, then you wouldn't have interrupted my wolf," a deep voice said from behind her.

Anwen wheeled around to find a huntsman sitting tall on his horse, which she'd not heard approach, the wolf by his side. His tunic of cheap grey linen was well hidden beneath a brown leather vest, with an assortment of knives neatly arranged in the pockets. An axe and ivory horn were attached to the side of his belt, while a bow and its arrows were secured tightly to the saddle.

Not that he needed any of it.

To Anwen, he looked to be her father's age. His ginger hair was pulled back—half-up, half-down—and his close-cut beard was peppered with white. If he hadn't been intimidating enough, a deep scar tore its way across the bridge of his nose.

Anwen sprang to her feet, startled. "I... You... You've no right to kill this animal. It hasn't done anything to deserve such a death."

"And I suppose the hunting group beyond these woods has better knowledge of that practice? Who're you to speak of how one should die?" He dismounted, gliding his leg over his horse's neck, slipping soundlessly to the ground, and made his way towards her.

His rough tone took her aback. Only her brothers had ever spoken to her with such disdain. "I am Anwen *ferch* Rhys *ap* Gruffudd, whose lands you're on."

He towered over her. His wolf followed him until he snapped his fingers, and it disappeared, as if it had never been there to begin with.

Anwen stepped back, eyes wide with caution. "You have magic..." she said in surprise, presuming he had no right to possess such strong sorcery.

She was interesting. He liked the way she spoke to him... without caution, as so many did. He surveyed her, assessing her own abilities. "You don't," he smirked. "No manners either."

Anwen stepped further back, her ankle hitting the fallen branch, making her trip rear-end first into the grass. He paid her no mind as he crouched, took hold of the hare, and placed it into his satchel. When he turned back, he held out his bloodied hand to help her up.

She shrank away from it.

"It's not my intention to harm you." He spoke softly now.

Anwen hesitated for a second before clasping his strong hand in hers, but she let go the second his voice boomed overhead.

"Fuck!" he yelled. He felt it... His face had changed, reverting to its original form. For only a split moment did his hair go as white as his wolf's, and his eyes, which had been hard and unyielding, became even more so, morphing from brown to red in a sea of black. His skin went as thin as paper, ready to crumble at the lightest of touches, and his fingertips were dipped in black pitch. The pigment ran under his palms and melded into Welsh Celtic

knots, runes, and other designs that adorned his hands and forearms. They disappeared under his shirt, then collected in front of his heart.

The sign of a true god.

He let go of her, but not before Anwen saw him. Dread was all she could feel as she took in his form, as if the tide below had swept onto the cliff to drag her under.

With his guise quickly set back in place, he could only stare at her with genuine surprise and intrigue. She was something he hadn't encountered since the beginning of time...

Arawn chuckled.

He wanted her.

"Who are you?" she asked, a tremble in her voice as she rubbed her hands on the hem of her dress to rid them of the filth he'd left on them.

He smiled, composed as he took the reins of his horse and started leading them out of the trees to the cliffs, where the grass dropped to the beach below.

"I'm Arawn, Ruler of [Annwfn](#)." He dipped his head at the introduction. It was the first time he had ever *had* to introduce himself.

The name scratched at an old memory from Anwen's childhood, when her mother had told her bedtime stories about the gods in the Otherworld. It'd been so long since she had listened to them that she couldn't remember much more.

"I've never heard of it," she whispered and lowered her gaze, terror stiffening her back.

"It's a world beside this world," he said. "One full of magical creatures you humans wouldn't be able to imagine. And gods that reign as they please."

Her fists balled; lips pressed tightly together. If there were truly gods in the world, they wouldn't have forsaken her to this hellhole without any magic.

"You don't believe me," Arawn stated, amused. "You have no magic, and yet..."

"Yet what?" she replied hotly, forgetting herself.

He shook his head in amusement and changed the topic. "[Annwfn](#)," he continued, stifling a cough, "is a world that is governed by the [Saith Duwiau o'r Annwfn](#). It is a paradise... used to be..."

"Those are nothing but children's fables," Anwen said.

Her comment wiped the smile from his face. She really didn't know.

"It's known to the Chief Courts. Only a few can still cross the boundary between this world and *Annwfn*. Like here," he generally motioned to the sea and woods and town, "we have hit hard times. Though the Brotherhood had nothing to do with it. They're... *insignificant* compared to what awaits in *Annwfn*."

A cough ripped through his chest, mucus and saliva and blood collecting in his mouth. He spat into the grass.

"You still don't believe me?"

"There are many things I believe, but this isn't one of them," she scoffed. But she understood there was something about Arawn that felt old... ancient... as if he was burdened with the weight of a world, a weight that was now becoming all too heavy.

Arawn wiped his mouth with his sleeve, ridding his lips of the taste of blood. "There are many doubts in the world, and one will encounter them often, but this shouldn't be one of them."

He sighed, his scar stretching as he looked back towards the forest.

Anwen followed his gaze.

"There's a greater change coming, and you may play a role in it," he teased.

"What type of change?" she asked, her interest piqued. "To *me*? Is something going to happen to me?"

They could hear muffled shouts being carried on the wind. Their conversation was going to be cut short. The moment Arawn realised what she was, what he would do with her... There were so many things he wanted to tell her, and many more he wanted to find out.

"Meet me by those rocks in two days' time," he said, pointing at an outcrop of the beach where a wooden dock created a path. He knew he had her hooked. "To answer your questions," he confirmed. "And for you to make up for what your earlier manners couldn't."

The sound of people approaching grew louder, her name echoing toward them. Arawn cocked his eyebrow, waiting for her response. She seldom went down that far from the port on the other side, but if he was going to give her the answers to secrets that her whole family seemed to know but her, then she would take his offer.

"I'll be there," she promised.

He snapped his fingers and, once more, his wolf, with its white coat and pointed red

ears, appeared by his side. He mounted his horse. "I'll see you there before the sun sets."

Anwen turned as she heard her name being clearly shouted behind her, Pryderi's voice easy to distinguish from the others.

"Anwen!" Pryderi rushed towards her, pulling her away from the edge of the cliff she had not realised was just a step away. "What are you doing?"

"I was just talking with..." Anwen turned back to where Arawn should have been. He was gone without a trace of hoof or paw prints.

"Who? Was someone here with you?" Pryderi's eyes searched the area, trying to find whoever had disturbed her. "You should not have wandered alone."

"You're right. I should've called one of you to stay with me." She patted down the fold in her skirt, hiding the realisation that even he thought she was powerless and had no worth.

Pryderi led her by the hand back into the line of trees as rain started to splatter their faces, their horses' saddles already slick as he lifted her onto Poppy.

Anwen kept her mouth shut as they joined the rest of the party; their sighs of relief and her brothers' snide remarks were enough to tell her she had been more than an inconvenience.

She rode back to the castle in silence, curiosity eating away at her.

6

In the dining hall, men and women roamed about, singing and drinking. Gwydion roared out for everyone to be quiet. He was a lanky fellow, with short brown hair and glowing grey eyes. He was known throughout Britainni to be the best storyteller, his tales woven with such emotion and intrigue that not one man would be left without a tear in his eye or a laugh in his belly. Silence fell over the room, and the candles above dimmed with the anticipation of a tale.

"This is a tale as true as the moon shines," Gwydion began. "It is a tale of a woman, no less." He gave a pointed wink to Rhiannon, who sat across the room with her husband. Everyone around hollered with glee.

"On a day when the sun was hidden from the ground, a woman went out into the woods to collect mushrooms." Gwydion threw white powder into the air, his spell simple as they watched his tale unfold before them. "She came upon a man, bathing in the natural spring. She spied on him as he bathed and saw that he had hair as black as the raven. The man turned around, feeling as if he were not alone. 'Who's there?' the man called, readying his sword as he stepped out of the spring. She transformed herself into a rabbit, hoping her weak appearance would disarm him. She hopped out of the bush, her tail wiggling, and her eyes big, as she stared up innocently at the man. He sheathed his sword, since it was only a lone rabbit that couldn't hurt him. Before he could capture her, she quickly bound away.

"The next day, she went back to the spring and found him again, bathing. Again, she turned herself into a rabbit and hopped over to him, this time letting him stroke her once. Then she ran away again. On the third day, she changed into the rabbit and went to the spring but found that the man was nowhere to be seen. She hopped over to the water and felt a snare trap her leg. She squirmed and squealed. The man came up behind her with a knife. Quickly, she undid her spell, and the man fell back in amazement at the naked woman before him.

"What would you have done with that knife?" she asked. 'I would have killed you,' he replied. 'And why would you think that your right?' she asked again. 'It is in my nature,' he

answered honestly, 'as it is the nature of a huntsman to kill a rabbit.'

"She looked at him in anger. 'Do you not think the rabbit has a right to live?' she asked. 'I do,' he said, 'but I also believe I have the right to eat.'"

The crowd laughed at the sentiment. Anwen held tight to her goblet, taking a hitched breath.

"She took the knife from his hand to cut herself loose. When she stood, she brought the tip of the knife up from her thigh to her belly, luring the man closer and closer to her. With a swipe of her hand, powerful magic cut from her fingers, spilling the man's blood into the spring. 'I believe I have the right to eat as well.'"

Gwydion clapped. "And so ends this tale of the Rabbit and its Prey." He swiped across the image, destroying the spell.

Cheers rang out. The stabbing tension in Anwen's back became unbearable. All she could think was how easy it had been for the rabbit to kill her prey.

Only because she possessed magic.

Anwen made her way out of the hall, the cool night air hitting her when she felt Marged clutch at her shoulder. Anwen's childhood flashed before her: the times her sister consoled her after their brothers had called her names like *useless*, *peasant*, or *laughable*.

"Something is bothering you," Marged said, her voice calm. She looked more like their mother than Anwen did, though her soft brown eyes hadn't hardened yet like Joan's, and her auburn hair was free of any white.

"I'm fine," Anwen lied with a smile.

"Come now... Have I stayed away too long that you can't confide in me anymore?" Marged hooked her arm around her sister's as they continued their walk.

"You know what's wrong..." Anwen squeezed her closer. "I want to be free of this place."

"Freedom comes in different forms."

Anwen rolled her eyes. "I want the type of freedom where I'm not stuck under Mother and Father's rules... Where I can live without a care and do anything I want. I want to be happy."

"And how will you obtain this?" Marged asked. "Your idea of happiness? You may have

to make some difficult decisions..." Always the pragmatist.

"Then I'll make them," Anwen replied boldly. "I'll do *anything* if it means I'm not stuck here for the rest of my days."

"Even marry?"

Anwen's face crinkled in revulsion. She thought marriage would be like giving up one cage only to fly into another. She wanted love, true love, that would make even rose-coloured glass shatter at its beauty, but she knew that love wasn't something so easily attained.

Marriage was bargaining, contracts, and pedigree, and something she had no say in. She saw how her mother and sister lived: content but unfulfilled. Yet, now, if it meant she would be free of this place...

She smoothed her face, resigned. "Even marry," she confirmed. "But hopefully I'll find love first."

Marged stopped their walk to look at her sister, searching her face with worry. "Were there any good times?" she asked, her voice tinged with hurt.

Anwen laid her hand reassuringly on Marged's. "You and Bren made it bearable."

She didn't tell her sister that since she'd left, Anwen's world felt as empty as a dry well, and that the days Jade had been there were ones filled with so much joy she couldn't imagine ever feeling that way again. But she wanted to.

"Come," Marged huffed, pulling her back towards the Hall.

As they made their way back in, their father called from across the room. "Anwen! Sing us a ballad to end the night."

As a younger girl, Anwen had enjoyed performing until it became a way to display her to desirable suitors. She squeezed Marged's hand more tightly. She didn't want to do it, not again.

Marged brought her sister's hand to her lips and kissed it, her head gently nodding towards the centre of the room from where Anwen's voice would be heard throughout the Hall.

People cheered her on as they pushed her forward, her palms sweaty as she turned towards Pryderi and his family.

She put on her best smile.

The musicians in the corner of the room started their melody. It was one Anwen knew well, the sound of a lullaby that quieted the room, readying her to sing. The hall had her attention as the notes rose to the rafters. Pianissimo, then forte, as she belted her emotions into them. She forgot about everyone before her as her eyes closed, feeling the music vibrate her core. As she hit the last note, applause erupted, jolting her from the euphoric state.

She glanced to where her parents should have been, her face falling at the empty seats. She'd only stood there because they demanded her to, and to find they couldn't be bothered to stay for the whole piece drove home to her just how much she loathed the place.

She was about to run out of the room when Pryderi blocked her path.

"That was beautiful," he said. "I hope to one day hear you at my own court."

His sheepish smile caught her once again. He was such an enigma: confident but kind, handsome but modest... Anwen curtsied. "I would be honoured," she said.

Pryderi glanced over his shoulder to where his parents should have been sitting and saw that they, too, were gone. "It seems our parents have retired for the night. May I walk you to your—"

Efnysien tapped him on the shoulder and, without a word, jerked his head towards the exit. Anwen had almost forgotten he was there as she hadn't seen him since his arrival.

"Apologies," Pryderi bowed respectfully, "it seems I have some business to take care of." His green eyes were soft in the moonlight.

She brushed her hair behind her ear. "I believe I can find my way."

7

Pryderi followed Efnysien out of the front gate and past the smithy to where the training ground had been roped off with colourful bunting. No one would be able to overhear them there.

“Are you really planning on marrying that human?” Efnysien pushed his words into Pryderi’s head. He had lost his speech decades ago, but it had never inconvenienced him. The only reason he was in the Mundane was to aid his god, though Pryderi didn’t make it easy.

“Are you against it?” Pryderi asked, amused. *“Does she threaten you?”*

Efnysien punched a nearby tree, the trunk splitting in two as it fell away from them, causing the horses to stir. *“She is no threat to me. I do not see why you need her!”*

“Yes, you do not see.” Pryderi gripped Efnysien by the throat, his face serious as he lifted him from the ground. *“Might I remind you why we are in this mess?”* His human guise shimmered with the godly power it sought to contain, his eyes glowing a bright green.

Efnysien clawed at his hand to free himself as Pryderi’s power rippled all around them like a quiet storm. Were he the creature he once was, he wouldn’t have cowered so much to Pryderi’s power.

Pryderi let him go, recovering his composure. *“That [cythraul](#) gains more followers each day. If we do not get the Cauldron mended before they mount their attack, there will be heavy losses on both sides, when really there is only *one* who needs to die.”*

“Let them come!” Efnysien mentally roared, catching his breath. *“I will beat them all back if needed.”*

Pryderi slapped him hard, his cheek going bright pink, quieting him. *“What we need is Anwen. The perfect vessel. A human with no magic to speak of... That [cythraul](#) will not stand a chance.”*

8

Anwen left the others at the party to roam through the peaceful halls of the castle. She picked at the daisies and daffodils that adorned the archways, spinning the stems between her fingers as she went. The petals were as soft as velvet as she brought them up to her lips, and she couldn't help but think of Pryderi's flattery.

Her thoughts were drowned out by the sound of her father's boisterous laughter. His office door was ajar, a stream of torchlight flickering against the rug-strewn cobble-stoned floor.

Anwen peeked in to see her and Pryderi's parents lounging informally beyond the eyes of Court.

"First the Brotherhood, now this...?" Rhys adjusted himself in his chair, the wood creaking with his movement.

"It was bound to happen," Pwyll replied. "With the fracture of magic, the mundane world will no longer have the power to sustain the portals into *Annwfn*—perhaps they will even cease to exist altogether."

Anwen's earlier questions came rushing back to her. If the Chief Courts knew about *Annwfn*, why had she never heard mention of it before? Was it some secret so precious that she wasn't allowed to know?

Her family seemed to keep secrets as if they were a form of currency she wasn't wealthy enough to possess.

"I was afraid the Brotherhood's actions would bleed into *Annwfn*," Joan said, placing her glass of wine on her lap.

Rhiannon waved the notion away, the moonstones on her bracelet jingling. "My son would never have allowed that. It is bad enough that the Tree was destroyed, but to find that it was the idea of the English...!"

They shook their heads in communal disdain.

"Is his Divine Court holding strong?" Rhys asked.

"No other god can best him," Pwyll boasted. "Though there is one causing uproar..."

Pryderi will come out the winner.”

Anwen’s heart pounded in her chest. She could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Divine Court.

Gods.

Arawn had told her that the gods ruled *Annwfn*, but she had never believed in them.

“Anwen’s marriage to him will greatly help his court,” Pwyll continued as he poured himself another glass of wine. “He needs someone of her... calibre... by his side.”

Anwen lowered herself into one of the decorative pews along the wall, unable to comprehend what she was hearing.

“We haven’t discussed the matter with her yet,” Joan said awkwardly.

“No?” Rhiannon replied, shocked. “Does she not understand what this whole festival is for? Joan, you must tell her before the week is through!”

“I’ve been biding my time, I confess. I wanted her to meet your son before anything was officially announced. My daughter isn’t as simple as she may seem and can be more stubborn than an ink stain on silk. I would like for her to at least find favour with Pryderi if nothing else.” She took a sip of her wine. “Don’t fret, Rhiannon, whether she likes it or not, she’ll go ahead with the match.”

Rhys nodded his head in agreement. “It’ll be a good pairing.”

Anwen was too focused on her parents to hear as her sister came up to her, Marged’s voice cutting through the quiet of the hall. “What are you doing?”

Anwen grabbed her hand and pulled her into a nearby alcove where the torchlight couldn’t reach. They were well hidden by the time Rhys came to his door to look for eavesdroppers. Finding no one, he closed it tightly behind him.

“Were you spying just now?” Marged continued to question her sister.

“They were talking about *me*,” she confessed, her breath hitching in her throat. “They were talking about me *marrying* Pryderi!”

Marged’s face lit up with delight, though Anwen could barely see the lift of her lips in the darkness. “But this is what you wanted. A way out of this place,” Marged pushed. “You said you’d be willing to make the difficult decisions. This is it.”

9

Anwen's room was quiet as she sat reflecting on the past days. There was a small writing desk under her window. Its slanted top provided space to keep her quills, parchment, and sheet music inside its box-like structure, while a gold inkpot was secured to its side. Anwen dipped her quill into the pot, the nib black as she placed it onto the parchment. She'd learned her penmanship from her mother, the frills and swirls of her letters putting even Master Lewis's to shame.

She jotted down her thoughts before meeting with Arawn. From what he had told her, and from what she overheard from her and Pryderi's parents...

Anwfn was real.

And Arawn was its Ruler.

And Pryderi, one of its gods.

She couldn't help but connect the two. That the change Arawn had spoken of was her marriage to Pryderi.

Marriage.

She still couldn't wrap her head around the idea that it would save her from her family, but her heart fluttered at the prospect: to love and be loved by someone who treated her well. Did Pryderi feel the same way? Did he even know he was being offered in marriage?

More questions...

She crossed out the words. She'd promised Arawn she'd meet him down by the outcropped dock and gathered up her blue spring cloak to do just that.

Everyone was still celebrating as she made her escape, the buzz of the halls and courtyard making it easy for her to walk unseen to the kitchens, where a secret tunnel led her down to the beach. She plucked a fresh roll out of a basket on a side bench and made her way to the end of the tunnel, where a steel gate closed off the exit. She'd learned from Branwen how to pick the lock years ago, the skill drilled into her until she could do it blindfolded.

She wondered what Branwen was doing, as she hadn't seen her since their hunting trip.

The one time she'd gone to the tavern to see her, she wasn't there, and the barmaid had been absolutely no help.

Rickety steps led down from the cliff to the wooden slats forming the path over the wet sand. The sky was streaked in violets and oranges.

Anwen pulled her cloak's hood down to shield herself. She seldom went down to the port. Too many people knew her face and would report back to her father that she'd been out where she shouldn't've been, but she was determined to make this meeting.

The wood of the dock held strong as the water lapped against it. The setting sun cast hues of orange and purple against the sea as Anwen hurried along. She didn't want to keep the Ruler of *Annwfn* waiting.

Arawn had instructed her to meet him farther along the path, where the cliffside hid away those who didn't want to be seen, especially from the castle. It was a popular place where couples went to be alone, but Anwen had never used it for that purpose and wondered how Arawn knew about it.

"I'm here!" she called, out of breath as she rounded the corner to the outcrop, expecting to find Arawn waiting impatiently for her arrival. "I'm here!"

A figure walked into view from behind the cliff face, and she was surprised to find it wasn't Arawn, but Pryderi waiting for her.

"What're you doing here?" her voice wavered.

"I could ask the same of you. Are you meeting with someone?"

"I... I..." She took a step back.

"The other day, when we were out hunting, and you fell behind... Did you meet with someone then?"

Anwen froze. She hadn't counted on Pryderi being there, let alone having to answer questions she didn't know how to answer.

He took her hesitation as confirmation. "I see. Is it someone you care about? Someone close to you? A man?" he asked, feigning defeat.

"No!" she blurted out. "Well, yes, but not in the way you're thinking. I'm supposed to be meeting with Arawn—" She clamped her hands over her mouth.

"Arawn?" Pryderi asked. Genuine fear froze his features. "The Great God?"

Anwen looked at him in confusion. “The Ruler of *Annwfn*,” she corrected him.

Pryderi shook his head, shoulders painfully tensed. “That is impossible. No one has seen him for centuries.” He glanced out the corner of his eye, as if expecting the phantom of the god to be just behind him.

“What do you mean? I swear, he was standing in front of me just as you are now. If you’re both from *Annwfn*, then I assume you would know each other.”

Pryderi’s hand shot out and gripped her arm tightly, his fingers biting into her sleeve. “How do you know I am from *Annwfn*?” he asked.

“Ow, Pryderi, you’re hurting me.”

“How do you know?” he insisted.

“I overheard our parents talking about it!” Anwen could feel the blood rushing back to where he’d let go, the sensation unpleasant.

“Shit,” he exclaimed. “Can those old crows not keep their mouths *shut*?”

“It’s not their fault.” Anwen trembled at the god in front of her. She had to look away, her gaze landing on anything else: the sea, an abandoned shell, the different hues of the sand. She pulled the hood of her cloak lower. “The festival... It’s a ruse for our engagement... I didn’t realise... Especially when I spoke to you on the first night.”

His light-hearted laugh sent butterflies through her stomach.

“In all honesty, I thought you knew. You were very forward with your words, so I thought it was playful banter, not naivety.”

He knew it was the latter.

Anwen turned away from him, the sun not the only thing burning her cheeks. “I know I’m a fool,” she pouted.

Pryderi tugged at her cloak, trying to pull her to face him again. “I have never thought you capable of foolishness,” he whispered as he pulled her hood back. He brought his lips closer and, with the gentlest of touches, he ran his thumb across her bottom lip, causing a shiver to run through her.

Anwen closed her eyes as she smelled the hoppy mead on his breath, and her blood raced. She’d never been this close to a man before. Sure, she had tussled and quipped with Tristan and Bowen, and her brothers (when they were less of the bastards they were now),

but she had never been *this* intimate.

Scents of hyssop and summer grass rose from him, making her head go fuzzy. She'd never felt it before, that strange tugging in her stomach that was a mix of nausea and excitement. Her mother and sister had explained to her the finer details of what people did in bed, but her and Pryderi were nowhere near one, which made it all the more thrilling.

His guise shimmered, stalling him for only a second, but her gasp was enough for him to continue. She smelled of fresh cotton and the sea, and as he softly brought his lips down onto hers, he tasted the baked bread she'd stolen from the kitchen. His tongue explored further as it parted her lips, deepening their kiss.

Anwen's knees buckled. Pryderi was the only thing that kept her steady as she grabbed onto the front of his tunic. Beneath it, lean muscle flexed as he brought his arm around her, pulling her closer.

She couldn't escape his hold, not that she wanted to.

They parted for only a second. Pryderi repositioned them so Anwen's back was against the wall of the cliff, hiding them further from view. His hand, dyed in his godly green pigment, snaked its way over her flimsy summer dress.

Sensations rocked through her. The ache between her legs was almost unbearable as he found her clit, his thumb rubbing circles into it.

"Is it what you want? This marriage?" Pryderi whispered into her ear.

She could all but remember what words were as she stood flaming in his grip, forgetting her previous trepidation on marriage and gods.

She didn't hesitate with her answer.

"Yes."

His smile widened. "I look forward, then, to our future."

10

Anwen didn't take long to pack her belongings, knowing that anything she couldn't bring, Pryderi could afford to buy new. She didn't need all the things she'd accumulated while in her parents' household; if anything, she wanted nothing to do with them.

The only things of real value she took with her were the necklace Marged had gifted her and her sheetmusic, which were stored away in a small chest. The rest of it, her dresses and quills and jewellery, all stayed behind.

Anwen took one last look around her quarters. The days she spent writing music or crying on her bed in fits of depression brought on by the taunting of her brothers... She was glad to be rid of it all.

"Don't you want to at least take this?" Joan held out a soft black toy dog she had sewn for her as a child. She'd hoped that one day she'd hear those sounds again of scurrying feet across Llansteffan's halls from Anwen's own children.

"I don't need it," Anwen answered, noticing that its ear was torn.

Joan's face fell, but she nodded in understanding. She carefully placed the toy onto her daughter's bed. "You're welcome to come back here at any time."

That was the last thing Anwen wanted. She folded and refolded a small handkerchief in her lap, looking out the window as Pryderi prepared their carriage below. "You think I won't be able to take care of a husband? That I'll need a place to escape?"

Joan sighed heavily. How many times had they already had that argument? Her daughter was convinced she held only ill will toward her, even though all Joan was doing was looking out for her. It broke her heart. "Please don't twist my meaning."

"You just don't trust me or my abilities. I'll *never* want to come back here."

Pryderi glanced up at her, waving for her to join him. She smiled and stuffed her handkerchief into her sleeve.

She'd hoped to meet with Arawn before she left Llansteffan but had never found a time between playing host and readying to leave. Pryderi had hardly left her side since the beach.

Joan hesitated. "For my sake, and your father's, we hope you find happiness in your new

life.”

Anwen nodded in numbed acknowledgement and, donning her lavender cloak, made her way down the stairs to the courtyard.

The carriage before them was grander than the day-to-day wagons that carted through their gates. The cage was bulbous, like a rose petal, the wooden sides cut with windows and painted in intricate designs. Red drapes were tethered together, giving its occupant the option to feel the warm wind on their face or ride hidden when the time called for it.

Anwen climbed into the waiting seat, a small bag with a change of clothes and her chest sitting comfortably on her lap. Pryderi climbed in after her.

“Is there nothing more you want to bring? We have the space.” He hadn’t thought her capable of restraint.

“This is all I wish to take,” she confirmed, nose held high.

Pryderi accepted her wishes and, with a shout to the driver, had them moving through the front gate.

The drapes of the carriage were open, allowing Anwen one last look at the people of Llansteffan.

Branwen was nowhere to be seen. When Anwen had told her that she and Pryderi were to be married, she’d shouted every single curse imaginable and stormed off. Anwen hadn’t seen her since and had guessed she’d gone home. She didn’t understand why Branwen was so against the marriage. They had chosen each other just like she’d said... All Anwen wanted was for Branwen to be happy for her.

As the carriage pulled further away, Anwen saw that the cheering townsfolk lined the street to the edge of town. She waved at all of those who threw vibrant flowers to litter their way, feeling just as royalty should. The jubilant procession lasted only until the border. Pryderi rested his eyes as they started on the journey to Narberth.

11

Compared to Llansteffan's safe town, the boroughs and villages they passed along their way were grim: full of the sick, dying, and hungry. Where there should have been people selling food in the markets, vibrant and happy as they were in Llansteffan, there was scarcely a morsel that could be seen at these vendors' stalls.

Men, women and children alike grabbed at their carriage as they travelled down the roads, scratching at the wood and often falling over in their attempts to snatch some coins from Pryderi, who was benevolently distributing them.

Anwen watched as dead bodies were thrown to the roadside or left by the riverbanks. The overpowering smell of sick, damp, and piss struck them when they stopped to stretch their backs. She couldn't believe that people lived this way, that they didn't do anything about it.

Pryderi tried his best to distract her from the reality of it all, filling the air with nonsense conversation. He answered her every question about Narberth: how close was it to the sea? Did he have a favourite horse? How many servants were under his care? He told her stories of his childhood: how he'd been raised in Arberth Castle in *Annwfn*, where he trained day and night not only to fight, but in things Anwen never would have thought a god would take interest in, like crafting shoes and saddles and wood.

The time slipped from them quickly until they made it to Pryderi's home. The hilly Narberth streets were full of bustling merchants. Houses and stalls were decorated in bright colours. Children ran ahead of their slow-moving carriage while those who lined the way waved and cheered at their young Prince's return.

Pryderi pointed to each tower of Narberth Castle that stood proud at the top of the farthest hill, giving Anwen a glimpse of her new home. They entered from the North, making their way across the wooden bridge above its defensive ditch and through the gate with dungeons atop. To their left was the keep, followed by the buttery, and at the back, the bakehouse. On their right sat the north-west tower with its living chambers and larder. The courtyard was plain, except for a well that had been dressed in an array of foliage.

Pryderi's parents, who had left before them, were waiting to greet their son and his new bride-to-be.

"My, my, Anwen," Rhiannon cooed, "you look wonderful." She gave her a hug, welcoming Anwen into her hearth and home. Her blonde hair flowed almost down to her knees, only her fringe braided to keep it tidy, with white gems beaded between the knots.

"Thank you," Anwen said, though she knew she looked a wreck. "I can only credit the great care your son has taken of me."

"As he should," Pwyll commented proudly, clapping his son on the back.

Anwen curtsied to Pwyll; the hesitation she'd felt about her future father-in-law melted away.

He acted in kind with a peck on her cheek, his thick beard tickling as he welcomed her to his family.

"We will have a chance later tonight to speak of your travels," Pwyll said. "First, let us get you both cleaned up, and then we will show you around the castle, Anwen."

"A bath sounds wonderful."

Anwen followed her lady's maid to her new living quarters, which were larger than even her parents' rooms in Llansteffan. A canopy bed and writing desk took up most of the space, while a large brass tub, already prepped with hot water and fragrant oils, overlooked the patchwork hills with sheep and cows grazing on them. She'd always known her family to be rich, but viewing her forever-home, she realised Pryderi's was wealthier.

"The Prince wishes you to join him in his study once you have settled yourself," her maid said as she carefully placed Anwen's belongings at the foot of the bed.

"I'll meet with him once I've found my bearings," she replied sharply. She rubbed at her temples, tired. Before she could say anything else, the maid helped her undress, and Anwen lowered herself into the waiting water. Once finished, her maid helped her dry off.

"Her Ladyship had these made for you," the maid said, holding out the undergarments for Anwen to step into. The forest-green brocaded silk of the dress fitted snug to her body, spring flowers and vines sewn at the hem. They were the finest clothes Anwen had ever worn.

Anwen was led to Pryderi's study at the opposite end of the hall. She knocked, and

before she could touch the handle, he opened the door.

Just as she had changed from her travelling clothes, so had he. He wore a simple-cut tunic the same colour as her dress, which enhanced his features. The sword that had seemed permanently attached to his side was now hanging on the back of his chair behind his desk.

There was no need to put on a show anymore.

"Anwen, please, come in." Pryderi held his hand out towards a wooden box chair, its cushions soft as she settled into them. His study was comfortable. Not as grand as Rhys's, but it held a warmth his didn't. "Care for a drink?" He poured them both a glass of wine.

She took it from him, grateful. "Your home is very beautiful," she said, about to take a sip.

"Thank you. It is my father's home," he corrected her, "and he has taken great care of this land. Hopefully, he will find someone worthy of taking it over once he steps down."

Her hand stilled. "What're you saying? Aren't you taking it over?"

He knelt next to her. "I rule in *Annwfn* and am needed there. It was never my intention for us to stay here."

Anwen's heart thumped loudly in her ears. The air around her seemed thin.

He reached over and placed his hand on her knee, rubbing his thumb into the fabric of her dress. "Will you come with me?"

"What?" The glass shook in her hand, and she carefully placed it down onto the low table in front of them before its contents spilt everywhere.

"I cannot be away from Arberth any longer. There are people who depend on me to lead them."

"But... we just arrived *here*," she squeaked in a panicked whisper.

Pryderi moved closer to whisper in her ear, his hot breath making her cheeks burn red. "I know it is a great demand, one I would not make at any other time."

That sticky feeling in her stomach returned as his thumb touched a sensitive area near her thigh, making her shiver. She could only think of the evening on the beach... when his hand had reached down to caress...

This was too much, too fast. She'd imagined her time in Narberth would be sedentary,

that they would take over from his father and mother, and would rule until their children took over from them. She couldn't imagine the even bigger change of travelling to an unknown world.

"There will be so much for you to do there," he tried to convince her. "My castle is the finest, and in Arberth there is never a day when the sun does not shine. The air is so fine, even the quietest of songs can be heard."

"Music? There is music in *Annwfn*?" Anwen asked, astonished.

His smile broadened, knowing he'd captured her interest. He pulled away to look in her star-struck eyes. "Music you have never heard and will never hear twice."

Anwen fiddled with the sleeve of her dress, crinkling the fine embroidery. "When do you plan to leave?"

"Tomorrow."

"*Tomorrow*?" she choked. "But... that... I don't want to."

He put on a mask of pain but said nothing, immediately.

"What's so important that we have to leave *tomorrow*?" she asked.

Pryderi went to his desk, bracing his hands on its top, weighing what to tell her. "As beautiful as Arberth is, there are those who want to see its downfall."

"The Brotherhood?" she asked in dread.

He shook his head. "The Brotherhood holds no influence in my world. Compared to what awaits in *Annwfn*, they are toddlers running around, complaining about a broken toy. There are those acting against me and my Divine Court. I have found a way to quell their bloodlust, but I need to be in *Annwfn* to protect what is mine."

"I thought *Annwfn* was supposed to be a paradise," she said, spotting his contradiction.

"It was, and I am fighting hard to make it glorious again."

Anwen bit her bottom lip, thinking everything through. It was all so sudden. She didn't understand how Pryderi could fight for his home—she definitely wouldn't for hers—but could see that he wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer.

"My love," Pryderi called to her, though to address her as such made him feel sick. "Do this for me... For *us*."

Happiness radiated in her every bone as he said the words. She smiled, dampening down

her worries so he wouldn't see them. This was for *them*. Everything he did was to make both of them happy.

She held her hand out to him in surrender.

Pryderi pulled her to him and kissed her deeply.

She closed her eyes, high on the bliss.

Quickly releasing her, he picked up a small golden box etched with flora from his desk. "It would seem there is only one more thing we must do before everything is official. I had this made before I left *Annwfn*, knowing that our meeting would end joyously."

He opened the box and inside was a lavish ring. Anwen couldn't take her eyes from it. The band was made of polished gold that wove around a set of emeralds as large as her pinky nail. Pure delight softened the crease of her forehead as she took it from him and placed it on her finger.

"Will you become my wife?" Pryderi smiled, eyes crinkling with fake happiness.

He had to keep reminding himself that the end would justify the means.

12

A length of folded parchment was sealed with Anwen's family crest of three ravens, the indigo wax already dry as she placed it on top of the desk in her room.

She had written to her sister, telling her of her journey to Narberth with her soon-to-be husband and the many sights she'd seen along the way, both good and bad. She, of course, didn't mention her next trip, to *Annwfn*. She thought that if her family were going to keep secrets, then she would keep this to herself.

She'd lost track of the morning as she sat in the desk chair, balancing the seal between her finger and the table. She would need to have a new seal made with Pryderi's crest of a sun and crossed swords on it.

There came a light knock on her door, and Pryderi entered without waiting for her invitation. "Are you ready?" he asked.

He wore clothes she'd never laid eyes on before. If what he wore in Llansteffan were his normal clothes, then these were sumptuous. The high-grade silk shone in the morning light, and the gold stitching around the neck and cuffs was as regal as Gwydir Forest. His trousers matched his top, and his shoes were made of the finest mahogany leather. In comparison, Anwen looked like a rag doll in the dress Rhiannon had gifted her.

"I am." Anwen stood, brushing her hair behind her ear. She placed the letter in the fold of her skirts so she could pass it on to the messenger. She was about to ready the chest she had travelled with when Pryderi steadied her hand.

"The portal is not far from here, just at the edge of town." He eyed her few belongings. "We will not be able to take anything with us. Only what we have on. The portals have become unpredictable, so it is best not to strain them with the extra luggage."

"B-but... what about my things?" Anwen stammered. "My sheet music..." She had already left so much in Llansteffan, and he wanted her to abandon even more. "What will I wear when I'm there?"

"I have one of the best seamstresses alive in my Divine Court, and she is always up for a challenge. She will be able to make you whatever you desire."

Anwen tried to suppress the worry that ate at her and smiled up at him. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

Anwen didn’t take much notice when the carriage stopped, and Pryderi held out his gloved hand to help her down. It was a peculiar place to get out, on a path by the side of the road. Anyone would think it nothing more than a place to piss.

The portal in Narberth, known as [Gorsedd Arberth](#), resided deep within the forest. The townspeople knew of the place, but none could ever find it without the portal’s permission. Some believed that if they did, they would become rich beyond their wildest dreams, while others thought it was where the Fae-folk took the people they kidnapped.

A bit of both was true, though of those who had unfortunately stumbled upon it, no one had yet lived to confirm either tale.

Pryderi guided Anwen onto the path as birds chirped above her head, and squirrels scurried along the forest floor looking for their next meal. She was about to complain that her dress was getting dirty, the hem of it brushing by plants and other foliage, when they stepped into a collection of fairy pools.

“Wonderful, is it not?” Pryderi asked as he pulled her towards their crystal-clear waters.

Around the pools' banks, vines, boulders, and beautiful flowers grew. Bubbles popped as they reached the surface of the water. In the centre of the main pool was a set of marble stairs that led from the water up to an enchanted entryway. Its arch was made of dark-grain branches that intertwined, making them stand out against the verdant backdrop of the forest. At its top, a house crest of a wolf with mighty stag antlers was carved, its unnerving eyes looking down on those who would enter.

Arawn’s sigil.

Without regard for his attire, Pryderi stepped into the pool and held out his hand for Anwen to join him. “There is nothing to be afraid of,” he promised.

Anwen stayed on the bank, her feet firmly in place. Leaving Llansteffan was one thing, but this... She was starting to understand what was really happening. She was going to go to another world. The world of the gods... But she felt sure Pryderi would never take her to a

scary place, or one where she could get hurt, and with that resolve, she took his hand.

The knee-high water was cool as they waded through it and up the steps, their clothes coming out completely dry.

Anwen was surprised to see her image reflected as they stood before the opening. Her hand touched her reflection, the surface rippling.

Without ceremony, Pryderi pulled her into the portal. It felt like being underwater, Anwen shutting her eyes on instinct.

Pryderi whispered: “Welcome to *Annwfn*.”

The other side of the portal looked like a shrine, with streamers and ribbons of cloth decorating the rope encircling it. Lavish, hedged gardens and a gravelled path led up to a magnificent castle that was twice the height of Llansteffan’s; though it was hard to tell, as a tree thrice the size of the castle sprouted from its centre, shading the whole structure with flowers, fruits, and leaves. Stained glass in every imaginable colour reflected the summer sun above them, casting its hues across the white marble hallways within.

Spire towers rose on each of the eight sides of the castle, their structures connected by wood and rope bridges that were periodically interrupted by the trees’ branches. Green and gold flags fluttered strongly in the wind that wafted aromatic meadowsweet, earthy hyssop, and the soft scent of the faraway ocean.

“Welcome home, Pryderi.”

A man and a woman knelt at the foot of the portal's steps, their heads bowed in respect to their god. When they raised their heads, Anwen was shocked by their unnatural beauty.

The first creature had exceptionally fine but strange features; his jawline was sharp, his blond hair short, and his long ears were pointed and cuffed with gold. His muscles strained against an exquisite tunic that was cut short at the shoulders.

The woman was just as beautiful, though fine lines around her face indicated she was older. She wore simple clothes, but of the finest fabric; her apron was pristine, with an embroidered tree in the bottom corner.

“Pryderi, who—” Anwen’s breath caught as she saw the celestial being who now stood beside her. Pryderi’s whole person had transformed.

No longer was his hair dirty blonde or his features dull; now his shining golden hair

flowed down the length of his back, his locks intricately woven and braided. His ears were just as long and pointed as those of the creature in front of them, the cuffs of gold cut with a sun pattern. The angles of his face were pronounced and his green eyes were piercing and as strong as peppermint. The clothes he wore, which had looked out of place in the Mundane, now matched his splendour.

And to top it all off, his hands were dyed green, as if he had been mashing basil, the spiral designs snaking their way up his arms in the same fashion Arawn's had.

"Anwen, you remember Efnysien, my aide? And next to him is Matron Goewin, the head housekeeper."

Anwen stared in disbelief at the creatures. The man looked nothing like the Efnysien she had met.

"I am sure my appearance has somewhat changed," he said, surprisingly diplomatic.

"Ah!" Anwen jumped as his words pierced her mind. "You speak! But I thought you were mute!"

"Though my voice no longer works," he said, his words telepathically resounding in her head, *"I have found communicating with others to be as easy as if I still had it."*

Pryderi's eyes widened with understanding as he looked between the two of them.

"Forgive me, I forgot... What I mean to say... I am unsure how to phrase this."

He hadn't forgotten.

"There are not many of your kind who have come to *Annwfn*. In my haste, I neglected to prepare you properly. When we come to your world, we glamour ourselves so we do not stand out. I may have taken my guise too far this time, as I knew I would be spending a long while in the Mundane. I hope you take no offence and forgive my oversight."

Anwen nodded, overwhelmed but relieved that Pryderi had turned out to be even more incredible than she'd imagined, and glad that she'd left Llansteffan for him. She could even overlook his ears.

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly. "Thank you."

"I do not wish to interrupt so soon but..." Efnysien directed his thoughts at Pryderi.

"Of course," Pryderi said. "Matron, please show Anwen to her quarters and get her settled in. Have Rowena sent as soon as possible to get her measured for some proper

clothes.”

Anwen shifted self-consciously, her simple dress looking out of place in the opulent Divine Court. Pryderi led her down the stone steps and onto the path that would take them to his home... *their* home.

Anwen was overwhelmed as they entered. Servants with iridescent wings were flying around cleaning the windows, and she had to squint to see the few who were up in the tree branches, collecting the ripened fruit. She felt as if she had entered a great cathedral and was but a mere mouse intruding on the sanctuary.

Matron Goewin took her hand in a vice grip as Pryderi and Efnysien split from them. “Come now, Pryderi has things to see to.”

As they walked through the castle, Anwen couldn’t help but feel the eyes of every servant and guard watching her. It was no surprise they did, since they’d never seen a living human in *Annwfn* before.

She felt unnerved as a couple of maids giggled as she passed, their eyes raking in the gossip they would spill to the others once back in the servants’ quarters. Another servant jutted his lower jaw out in disgust, while a guard, surprisingly, bowed deeply.

They passed into a chamber where Anwen took in just how astounding the tree that supported the castle’s structure, and its branches above, really was.

“Holy fuck...”

Anwen thought she’d whispered it quietly enough to herself but saw as the Matron’s eyes crinkled. She coughed and tried to hide her blunder.

“Where... is this place?” she stammered out.

In places around the tree’s trunk, Anwen’s fingers inquisitively traced along carvings of Celtic knots and animals she’d never encountered before. She wondered if Pryderi had carved them himself.

“It’s the same place you left when coming here, yet not the same. This is the Divine Court of Arberth.” Matron Goewin steered them up another set of stairs to the next floor. “Your rooms are in the Green Tower, while Pryderi’s are on the other side in the Gold. Don’t wander there unless you want the guards to catch you and drag you back. Same with the sub-levels.”

Matron Goewin sized Anwen up again. "For that matter, don't wander anywhere. You look as if you could cause trouble at the drop of a pin."

"I would never dream of doing so," Anwen said. She felt as if the space around her was beginning to shrink, the air thinning as her shoulders tensed with stress.

The Matron pursed her lips in doubt.

They walked farther and up a flight of stairs until they stopped in front of a pair of double doors.

"These are your rooms," The Matron stated and opened the doors. "Here is your sitting room, to the left your bedchamber; and to your right, the bath and wardrobe. Supper will be held when Pryderi demands it. Siriol is here as your personal maid; use her however you please."

The creature the Matron referred to stood in the corner of the room, her hands crossed in front of her, wings silent, awaiting orders.

"Siriol, make sure she is dressed appropriately," Matron Goewin commanded as she swept out of the room.

As the door shut, Anwen could no longer hold her composure. She took in gulps of air as hot tears trickled down her face to the cool marble below. Pain radiated in her chest as she heaved heavier breaths, her hand trying to soothe the fire within it.

Siriol came quickly to her side, crouching down to rub her back in comfort. "My lady?"

Anwen couldn't respond as she buried her face into the maid's arms; the change was too much.

13

Anwen didn't make it to dinner. The Matron was sitting by her bedside when Pryderi opened the door. He'd heard she'd become bedridden from stress.

"How is she?" he asked, taking Anwen's hand in his as he sat at the edge of the bed. It had been a gamble to bring her here, but without her, his plan wasn't going to work.

"Her spirits are low," the Matron reassured him. She had to school her lip from turning up in disgust as she witnessed Pryderi's feigned worry. "She's only just left her home and country. Give her time."

"Thank you, Matron. You may go."

Matron Goewin reluctantly left the god with his bride. Pryderi only had a moment's peace with her when Efnysien let himself in.

"She is not dead then?" he asked, hopefully.

"Bite your tongue, Efnysien," Pryderi commended.

"Even that will not stop me from speaking my mind. It is why I am your aide, is it not?"

Pryderi smirked. The reason Efnysien was his aide had nothing to do with his tongue and everything to do with his ruthlessness. Pryderi needed him for the filthy jobs no one else would take.

Anwen woke in her chambers to the cool summer breeze that wafted from the balcony of her sitting room. Her eyelids were puffy, last night's fit of tears one of the worst she'd had since Marged had left her alone in Llansteffan. She propped herself onto her elbow and looked around.

The four-poster bed was made of white ivory, the corners spiralling up to silky forest-green curtains that matched the bed sheets. In the corner of the room, by the floor-to-ceiling windows, there was a chaise lounge, and on the other side, a small gallery of gold-framed tapestries.

Anwen pulled herself from the bed, grabbed the flowing robe that had been left on the chaise, and stepped through the pair of open double doors into the sitting room. From there, she could see out onto the balcony that overlooked the green-tiled city below which she hadn't noticed before. The tree's branches were adorned with flowers, offering shade when needed. The scents of pink gardenias and white, bright eyes floated through the air.

In an adjoining chamber, she found a deep tub made of copper and a wardrobe, empty except for one dress and a pair of slippers. When she went back to the sitting room, Siriol was there, wide-eyed as she saw that her mistress had woken.

"Oh, my lady, we were all so worried about you." Siriol grabbed her hands.

"I'm much better now." Anwen shook her off and took a good look at the maid before her.

Siriol was just as beautiful as Matron Goewin, if not more so. Her red hair was short to keep it out of her face while she worked, and the freckles across her cheeks could only be seen if the light hit at an angle. She was much smaller than the Matron and younger, though anyone would be. The Matron was as old as the gods. Siriol had come from nothing, the Matron taking her under her wing from the pleasure house Siriol had grown up in. It wasn't so much her body as her mind they had taken advantage of; her head for scheming was greater than even Efnysien's. The pleasure house didn't dare stand in the Matron's way when she came to recruit Siriol into her services.

"I thought pixies were small," Anwen said, finally figuring out the name of the fabled creature before her.

Siriol's lighthearted laugh filled the room. "Any human would. We don't usually take this size in your world, as it's better to sneak around when you're smaller. See?" In an instant, she was as tiny as a hummingbird, her wings beating rapidly as she zigzagged around Anwen's head.

Once she saw she'd made her point, she resumed her larger form.

"If I were that size all the time, my work would never get finished! And speaking of which, I bet you're famished. God Pryderi and Efnysien have just started their lunch. If you're up to it, would you like to join them?"

"Yes... I would," Anwen answered.

As Siriol put the finishing touches to Anwen's hair, which was braided to match Pryderi's style, the Matron arrived to guide her to where they were eating.

Anwen eyed the Matron to see if she too had wings but didn't spot any. Though she was a pixie like Siriol, they had been ripped off centuries ago.

They walked through the maze of halls that were abuzz with creatures. Anwen realised there were more of them than on her first day, and not just servants, maids, and guards. Noble Elves, with their long, pointed ears cuffed in gold, and High Fae, who would have passed as human if you didn't look closely at their short, pointed ears and large butterfly-type wings, gawked at her as she made her way through.

She was about to ask the Matron about them when they came upon a grand door that opened at their arrival.

Inside was a long dining table with imposing high-back chairs. Pryderi was sitting at one end, plates of food already in front of him, while Efnysien sat to his right. Pryderi stood as she entered, leaving the Matron to curtsy and depart as quickly as possible.

"Anwen, come, you must be famished." The tips of Pryderi's fingers were darker than yesterday as he pulled out the chair next to him for her to sit.

Anwen took it gratefully as a servant poured her a glass of wine.

"How have you been settling in?" he asked, even though he already knew. "I know everything is moving very quickly. My apologies that I could not be with you before."

"I'm better," Anwen said, masking her emotions as she popped a grape into her mouth, its sweetness like nothing she'd ever tasted. "I saw from my balcony the city below. It's marvellous. And your castle... I hope you'll show me more of it."

Efnysien glared, his voice rumbling in all their heads. *"Pryderi's godly duties take precedence over such a frivolous obligation."*

She still couldn't get used to him doing that. When she had seen him at Llansteffan, he only made slight gestures when he wanted something, and she wondered why he didn't use this trick then.

"She is correct, Efnysien," Pryderi laid a reassuring hand on hers. "You must have been overwhelmed with everything that has happened, and I should have taken mind to escort you until you were comfortable. My apologies again." He quickly pulled his hand away,

noticing the fading of his fingers.

They sat in shared silence as they ate, every morsel of food tasting better than the last to Anwen. Plates full of meats, potatoes, and vegetables were laid before them, each picking at what they liked.

“Do you approve of your rooms?” Pryderi asked, taking his knife across a hunk of cheese and bringing it to his lips.

She took another sip of her strong Elven wine. “They’re much larger than even the ones in Narberth. And the view is breathtaking.”

“Yes, Arberth is a prosperous Divine Court,” Pryderi smiled, “though I may be a bit biased.” He played with the stem of his glass as he prepared his next words carefully. “But for the moment, it would be best to keep to the castle. You know I spoke to you of those who are working against me?”

“Yes.” Anwen took a slice of apple that was as ripe as a summer’s morning.

“We work as hard as we can to defend against them, but they have many who fight for them... The Dark Fae.”

Anwen swallowed, the taste going sour in her mouth at the prospect of the threat.

“What have they done?”

“It is none of your concern,” Efnysien butted in.

Pryderi held up his hand for silence. “She will be my wife soon and should understand what her people are facing.”

Anwen fought not to smile. Despite everything, she was excited to have a position that exceeded even her mother's. And now that she knew what Pryderi was, she couldn't help but think that their children would be of a pedigree above all.

Children...

Anwen hadn't given them any thought in her lifetime. If marriage was already such a leap for her, then children were beings even more obscure than the god that sat in front of her.

“The Dark Fae are a race that reside in *Annwfn*, up in the valleys. They are ruled by the god, *Hafgan*,” Pryderi's lip sneered as he uttered his name, “a demon of a man in every sense of the term: the Dark God, The Demonic Ruler. The [*cythraul*](#) seeks to close off the

portals that allow us into your world. In short, cutting off the aid we can offer the Mundane during its trying time. Since the Brotherhood's arrival, we had been in talks with my father and others to form an agreement, but..."

Efnysien repositioned himself awkwardly, his eyes full of guilt as Pryderi continued.

"We cannot defeat *him* without the magic from the Cauldron of Rebirth. Decades ago, it was broken into four pieces that were scattered throughout the Divine Courts."

It was a pretty, little, shitty lie.

"*If only I had known...*" Efnysien's fist balled and the whites of his knuckles showed. He held true remorse for what he had done that night, not that anyone was willing to forgive him, himself included.

Pryderi laid a reassuring hand on Efnysien's shoulder. "The fault is my own. I was too late to stop you, and you paid a great price in exchange."

"What did you pay?" Anwen asked him.

Pryderi answered for him. "His voice and most of his magic were stripped from him."

"*Yet that has not stopped me,*" Efnysien joked, flexing his big muscles, but Anwen saw the worry in his eyes. She knew what it was like to feel powerless.

"It's good, otherwise... to see you in good health," she said. "Is there a way to get your voice and magic back?"

"*The Cauldron can do many things. I hope that along with defeating that cythraul, it will also restore what I have lost.*" He took a gulp of wine.

Every time they said that word... *Cythraul*... Anwen shrank more and more into her chair. She had used the term only once in her lifetime, as a child who hadn't understood its meaning, and she'd been struck by her mother (for the first and only time) for using it.

"I promise you, Efnysien," Pryderi vowed, "we will mend the Cauldron, and your magic, and put our world right before they do any more harm."

"There are others looking for the Cauldron?" Anwen asked, her head spinning with all the information. She'd never been one to sit with her father during his meetings, but now she realised that she would need to if she were to be Pryderi's wife, the prospect both thrilling and frightening.

"That *cythraul* is as well. Bastard believes that getting it for himself will let him be rid of

me and my ideals.” Pryderi glanced to her, his green eyes shining bright—almost emerald—ready for the coming fight. “I will not let that happen.”

“Why not just lock him up? If he’s not helping you, then wouldn’t it be easier to get him out of the way?” she asked innocently.

There were many answers to her questions that Pryderi wasn’t willing to share, the main one being that he would then have to answer to Arawn, and he wasn’t ready to face the Great God just yet. But killing Hafgan...

There were no rules when it came to that.

“Of course it would!” Efnysien exploded, unable to hold back any longer. “Do you not think we would have done so already if we could? That cythraul is still a god! Do you not think we have not tried everything?” He turned to Pryderi. *“Pryderi, I ask you again, should you really be marrying this human? She knows fuck all.”*

Pryderi moved before anyone in the room could act, shoving Efnysien’s face hard enough against the marble table that it cracked. “For someone who has lost his voice, Efnysien, your mouth seems to get you into trouble more often than is wise.”

The spiral designs on Pryderi’s forearms waxed and waned as his anger grew. His eyes turned the brightest green, his form almost shining. It was a reminder to all just what he really was and the power he could unleash at a moment’s notice.

A god.

Anwen clung to the word.

It terrified her.

Her chair scraped across the polished floor as she pushed it away from the table. She ran from the room. For the first time, she feared Pryderi. She followed the hallway to its end, stairs leading down to another hall that held no familiarity to it, then a right, then a left... She had no idea where she was or how to get back to her quarters.

Anwen found a space behind one of the curtained windows, the heavy drapes hiding her from view. She lowered herself to the ground, her hands covering her ears to keep her thoughts from spilling out.

It was all too much.

Anwen had been taught by her mother how to run a household, not a country. She

imagined this was what Jade must have felt, yet she'd never witnessed her breaking down or running away.

She felt as defective as her brothers had made her out to be.

The rustle of the curtains startled her, and she fell back against the thick window glass.

Pryderi gazed down at where she huddled, then squatted to meet her at eye level. The back of his hand softly brushed the tears from her cheek. "It seems the only thing I am capable of doing is apologising. I am sorry I scared you."

"N-No, it wasn't your fault. I know I'm useless... I just never thought..." She couldn't keep her thoughts in order. "You're really a god."

His face softened as a slight chuckle came from his chest. How long had it been since something had made him genuinely laugh? "Come, you have had a long day." He pulled her into his arms and cradled her to his chest as they walked back to her rooms.

Siriol was surprised when Pryderi opened the door with Anwen in his arms. She drew back the sheets on the bed, allowing him to tuck her mistress in gracefully.

"You can go now," he said as he lay down next to Anwen.

Siriol curtsied and made a fast retreat. She hated being in the same room as him.

"Do not worry about Efnysien," Pryderi snuggled closer. "His mouth is always ahead of his mind."

"That's all right." Anwen trembled beneath the covers, her teeth almost chattering from the stress. "We share the same affliction, then."

"Yet somehow you make it seem more endearing." His voice was but a whisper. "We will be holding an engagement party. It may not be as long as the one we had at Llansteffan, only a night, but I wanted to introduce you to my friends here."

"Mmm, that sounds nice." Anwen's love for him was growing with every stroke of his fingers which were tracing the line of her jaw. Her eyes closed in weary pleasure.

"My love, you need your rest. Sleep now." Pryderi kissed her forehead as gently as he could. "We will talk more in the morning."

Anwen had no say in the matter as he lifted himself from her bed and left the room. She had wanted him to stay with her all night, but prided herself on knowing how well cared for she was with him.

14

Morning came early. Siriol swept the curtains to the side and tied them off, the bright light waking Anwen from her sleep. Her body was stiff as she stretched, but she couldn't help but smile, remembering how Pryderi had called her 'my love'.

The only thing that pulled her from the soft confines of her bed was the knowledge that Rowena, Arberth's seamstress, would be coming that day to measure her for her dresses.

She pulled back the covers, leapt out of bed, and made her way into the sitting room. A small tray of fruits, cheeses, and fresh bread sat on the open balcony, which was letting in the summer air. While she ate, Siriol brushed out the tangles in her hair. It was still odd for Anwen to see wings attached to a person, but she knew she'd soon become accustomed to it, as most of the maids and servants had them.

"My lady," Rowena sang as she entered, startling both of them.

She wore clothing that, for a human, would be downright scandalous, but for a [Fflora](#), was modest. Tight trousers made of cambric and dyed bright yellow clung to her legs, while her Saxe damask tunic with floral designs cut deep to her brown belly. It had a train falling from the sleeves, giving her an elegant yet authoritative appearance.

Her short, black hair had been slicked back with oils, and the points of her ears cuffed in gold, as was the fashion in Pryderi's court but not that of her birthplace. Rowena had grown up in the east of *Annwfn*, in Hafren, with her *Fflora* sisters, and had moved to Arberth when she'd been banished.

Rowena kissed Anwen on both cheeks, her eyes appraising her without hesitation. "Come, spin for me." She flicked her wrist, and a piece of parchment and a quill escaped from her satchel to float in the air.

As she spoke, the quill fervently scribbled away. "Brown hair, blue eyes, average height for a human, hourglass"—she poked at Anwen's midriff—"make that pear shaped... white complexion, long legs, shorter arms. We will stick to natural tones, but make sure the season is not lost." Her words tumbled from her mouth. "Are you looking for day wear, evening wear, formal wear, or more along the lines of what I am wearing—and fabulously,

mind you.”

“All of the above?” Anwen asked, barely able to get a word in edgewise. “I’ve come with nothing, so I’m in your capable hands.” She found herself drawn to Rowena’s oddity and felt confident she would design clothes fit for a god’s bride. Her temperament reminded her of Marged: able to take command of the room with a simple wave of her hand.

“Marvellous!” Rowena squealed. When she was satisfied she’d taken all the measurements she needed, she left as quickly as she came, thrilled to begin her designs.

Anwen felt a pang of longing to see her sister and grabbed at the next best thing. Noting that there was no desk in sight, she called to Siriol. “I would like to write a message to my sister.”

Siriol conjured a piece of parchment and a quill into her hands, just as Rowena had done, if with a little less panache. The most she could manage was making sure the quill never ran out of ink. “What would you like me to write?”

Anwen stared blankly at her question. “I can write it myself.”

Siriol’s innocent eyes widened. Her fingers stroked the feathered quill as she looked away. “But that’s not how it is done in *Annwfn*,” she politely protested. “A lady—especially one that is to be God Pryderi’s wife—shouldn’t be writing her own messages.”

Anwen pinched the bridge of her nose. It would be the first in a long line of rules and customs she’d need to learn, she realised.

They settled in the sitting room, and soft chatter drifted up to them from the city below. Knowing that she couldn’t venture further than the castle grounds was the one rule she found hardest to bear. But she understood it was only for her protection.

She spoke of her impressions of *Annwfn* and of the deep love she held for Pryderi. Siriol scratched it all down onto the parchment. By the time she had finished her musings, she had filled four pages’ worth.

“We’ve been at it a while,” Anwen said, noting the sun was at its peak. “You’ll be able to send this to my sister, right?”

Siriol nodded as she folded the pages and placed them into her apron. “I will make sure it goes with the next batch to the mundane world,” she promised.

But first, she would make sure the Matron had a read.

15

The days continued as Anwen familiarised herself with the castle, finally recognising the paths she could take to get to her rooms. She'd discussed with Pryderi when their engagement night would be held and had settled on the fortnight, giving her enough time to plan it.

Siriol never left her side as she met with the endless number of court officials and functionaries that would be needed to make the night a success.

Anwen had found a conservatory on the outskirts of the garden, large enough to host the grand affair she desired, and was amazed by the crystal-clear glass that surrounded its thick, marble columns. She'd never seen such large sheets of glass that were strong enough to hold up the intricate marble... something only magic could accomplish. An open space in the middle of the room was large enough to allow as much dancing and revelry as was expected. The glass parted effortlessly as she and Siriol entered, only momentarily startling her.

"The musicians will be placed here," Anwen motioned to a corner of the room where they'd sit hidden by a jungle of plants, creating ethereal music for the night. "The tables will go on that side, for those who want food, and there will be seating outside. I want the room cleared for dancing."

Siriol nodded as she scribbled everything down. "What would you like as the theme for the night?"

"A Summer's Breeze," Anwen said confidently, going along with the humid weather they were experiencing at the height of the season. "I want everyone who attends to be left astounded at the beauty they witness that night."

Siriol nodded her head in agreement, though she thought the theme a tad too simple for a Divine's engagement party.

They made their rounds with the workers, Anwen dishing out instructions that Siriol had to amend with every other breath. By the time the sun was high in the sky, Anwen was exhausted, her nerves frayed from constantly getting things wrong. In Llansteffan, she'd

prepared for their parties with ease... had known what type of flowers they wanted, when people would prefer lighter entertainment, and had deftly dealt with whatever chaos the kitchen stirred up; but in *Annwfn*... she might as well have been a newborn babe.

"Don't fret, my lady," Siriol reassured her, handing her a handkerchief. "You're still new to our world."

They had hidden themselves among the tall hedges of the garden, Anwen dripping with tears.

"I made a complete fool of myself," she blubbered.

"Of course not. We all know that it's not easy to leave one's home and come to an entirely different world. It'll take time for you to settle in."

There was still so much that needed to be done, but Anwen couldn't face going back. She already knew her running off to the gardens would be the talk of the evening. "Siriol, can you take over the arrangements? I think you'll do better than I would." Her self-confession made her feel even smaller.

Siriol smiled, glad to be of help to her mistress. "It would be my pleasure." She curtsied and scurried away to help set everything in place.

Anwen closed her eyes as she felt the heat of the sun on her skin. Taking deep breaths to calm herself, she began to sing. Her mind wandered through every improvised note. Each held such longing and hope. She'd never composed such a sombre tune.

The breeze picked up, clearing her senses until she felt as if she would float away, when a hand tethered her. She opened her eyes to find Pryderi by her side, her song lost.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked. He could see the red rims around her eyes and stroked his gloved thumbs against her lids to dry them. "You have been crying."

She pushed his hands away, embarrassed all over again. "It's nothing. I looked up at the sun for too long, that's all." Pryderi was already working so hard to protect his Divine Court, she thought; he needn't worry about her tribulations.

"I heard your humming," he smiled, taking her answer at face value. "It was beautiful. Will you be singing something on our night?"

Her body stilled, hearing the hidden agenda in his voice. She shook the unease from his question. There was no reason to deny him, no alternative motive to put her on display for

men to ogle at or engage with. He just wanted to hear her voice.

Anwen placed her hands on his firm chest, grateful to have him there to support her. "Of course."

Pryderi kissed the top of her head and made his apologies as he left her in the gardens. He had only slipped out for a minute from his meetings when he spied her from the window above.

Anwen's steps crunched the pebbled path as she made her way across to a bench positioned among beautiful flowers that bloomed in every corner, each one a variety she'd never laid eyes on before. She sat down and was fanning her face to dry her eyes in readiness to head back, when the sound of a deep voice startled her.

"How are you liking the change?"

Arawn sat leisurely beside her. His hair was still a tousled mess, and the scar across his nose pinker, as if constantly agitated. He wore the same clothes Anwen had first seen him in, which seemed completely filthy compared to the finery she and Pryderi dressed in.

"*Shit!*" Anwen yelled. "*You!* You never showed at the dock!"

"Well, that's not entirely true," Arawn replied. "I did, but Pryderi got to you before I did. And then you went and confessed to seeing me." He *tsked*. "That wasn't the smartest idea, though it was fun to see the colour drain from his face." He chuckled, the act causing him to cough and hock bloody spit into the bushes. "Pryderi has told you what's been happening here, in this world," he said, as if he had been in the room when it happened.

"He has."

Arawn's eyebrow twitched up. "Then there is something I want to show you." He pulled her along with him into the castle, mindful to grab the sleeve around her wrist so he could continue to stay undetected from others, ignoring her protests.

Anwen didn't question how he knew his way around Pryderi's castle as he guided her through secret stairways and rooms that didn't seem to have been used, perhaps for centuries. He showed her where the kitchen was, and the treasury... places she'd tried to find herself with no success.

She relaxed enough to start asking questions as they passed unfamiliar armour or paintings that should have existed only in the Italian regions of the mundane world. Her

curiosity in everything and unabashed queries in his presence reminded Arawn why he had taken such an interest in her in the first place.

He led her down a flight of forgotten stairs, the area lacking in finery and barren of servants, except for two guards who stood at the entrance of the South hall's archway.

"Keep walking," Arawn instructed as a sleeping spell was released from his waving hand. The guards closed their eyes and began to doze where they stood.

Anwen did as he said, her gaze fixed on the window at the end of the hall, where vines and purple globe thistles rustled as fox-bees collected their pollen.

When they were safely in the middle of the hall, he faced her to the wall and, without ceremony, pushed her into it.

Another test to see if his theories were correct.

Anwen yelped but passed through the magical door with ease. Arawn chuckled as he magically unlocked the door and opened it. Inside, he produced an orb spell to light their way in the pitch darkness. The orb bounced calmly at his side as he looked down at her.

"Why did you do that?" Anwen asked, shaken to her core. "I could've been hurt!"

"That magic wouldn't have hurt you," he told her cryptically as he started walking. "This way."

Curiosity made Anwen follow quickly as the light receded from where she stood. Since coming to *Annwfn*, she'd known nothing but sunshine and heat, but in this dark tunnel, she felt the cold nip at her fingers and toes. She rubbed at her arms, trying to produce some warmth.

"I want to go back," she complained.

"We're almost there," he replied.

They reached a fork in the tunnel and veered left into the dungeons.

She heard chains rattling... the sound of scraping across the floor bounced off the stone walls. "Who's there?" she asked as she clung to his arm.

If he were a younger god, he might have blushed at the contact of her breasts, but he had lived more lifetimes and committed every act imaginable, so it did little but annoy him.

He snatched his arm away. "Prisoners, of course. We're in a dungeon."

Anwen had no way to tell. She'd never visited Llansteffan's dungeons, where she knew

many things happened that weren't to her liking. "Why would you bring me here?"

Arawn held out the orb before him, its light shining brighter and Anwen saw what had been making the rattling. She gasped as she stared at the grey-skinned beings before them. Their hands and feet were shackled in irons that bit and left their skin raw. Their black wings were torn in places, some bound completely.

"Please," one of them said, his yellow eyes pleading in pain. "Please let us go."

Unperturbed by the prisoners, Arawn shoved Anwen along up to a metal door. "What I want you to see is in here."

"What are they?" Anwen asked. She'd never seen anyone with that shade of skin or such bat-like wings. They were not like Siriol's at all.

He glanced behind him again, as if he'd forgotten anyone else was there. "Dark Fae. Prisoners of war."

Anwen stared at him in horror. "You brought me here to see this?" she asked, accusingly.

"Fuck," Arawn growled, his patience wearing thin. "Aren't you paying attention? We're here to see *this*." He flung the door in front of them open, and in an instant, all the Dark Fae behind them let out blood-curdling screams. Some tore at the skin on their temples. Others banged their heads against the stone walls and floor. They did whatever they could to try to help get rid of the high-pitched wailing that was driving them insane.

Anwen had put her hands over her ears to muffle the frantic wails but didn't seem to react.

"Interesting," Arawn smiled and pushed her inside. He had thought that it being broken, Anwen would at least feel some affect.

On Pryderi's orders, the walls of the cell had been coated in gold to dull the effects of the magic within.

"What's happening?" Anwen shouted.

"Magic," he answered. "Very old magic." Arawn nodded towards the centre of the room, where a pedestal stood.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's a piece of the Cauldron."

Its edges were jagged, and a line of gold, runic script ran along each side. Judging by its

size, the whole thing, complete, was no larger than a soup pot.

Arawn cocked an eyebrow at her. "I'm glad you can't feel its magic. It's good you came to *Annwfn*."

"Good?" she asked, incredulously.

"Yes, cause now we know you can retrieve the rest of them."

"You want me to find the other pieces of this... *thing*?" She couldn't make sense of what he was asking. "I don't have any magic!"

"That's debatable," he shrugged, "but all in due course. I don't want just *you* to collect the other pieces."

Anwen's mouth was so dry she barely got her next question out. She just wanted those creatures to shut the fuck up. "With Pryderi? You want me to... help him open the portals and rid *Annwfn* of the Dark Fae?"

One of the wailing voices behind Anwen was cut short, and she shuddered to think how they'd managed to silence themselves against one of the walls.

"I want you to save *Annwfn*."

Arawn led her out of the room and closed the door. Her legs were heavy, as if they had been weighed down with sand, a tide pulling her in remorselessly. She could hear groaning, but otherwise, the insanity the creatures had felt had dissipated.

Arawn pushed her past the cells and back towards the entrance of the dungeons, leaving the remaining prisoners to cower in darkness.

"I helped you find this one, but I won't do so with the others. Trust in yourself and those around you will trust in you to." Arawn said.

"I don't want to!" Anwen shouted, the sound echoing off the grimy walls. "I didn't come here to save worlds or battle for cauldron pieces. I came here to be with Pryderi and live my life."

"Can't you do both?" Arawn innocently asked, knowing there was more at stake than just Pryderi's hubris and the Dark Fae's salvation. "What if you *have* to do one to gain the other?" The smile was gone from his face.

"I don't *have* to do anything," Anwen said stubbornly.

"Even if people will die?" Arawn asked.

“People die every day,” she countered.

“Even someone close to you?” he asked.

That wiped the smug look off Anwen’s face. She didn’t want anyone to die because of her, most of all not Pryderi, especially if she could stop it.

16

Anwen tried to wash the haunting images and sounds of the Dark Fae from her mind as she stood in the centre of the conservatory, readying for her engagement party. Servants rushed around the room, their wings fluttering as they levitated vines, candles and lengths of fabric around the columns.

“Not long now,” Siriol gushed, proud of her work. It had been decades since she last helped throw such a lavish affair.

“If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought I was getting married tonight, not just celebrating our engagement,” Anwen teased her. They were becoming fast friends.

“We wouldn’t be doing so much decorating if it were. A wedding day is to be spent with your family and close friends. The engagement party is for everyone else.” Siriol began to list who was coming: “The Giants from the North, the *Fflora* in the East, and... I heard even... Hafgan... might show up.” She covered her mouth at speaking his name so familiarly.

“Hafgan?” Anwen went ashen as Siriol nodded. Was this a ruse to save his brethren in the dungeon?

Siriol shifted uncomfortably and came close. “It’s the ancient armistice. To go against such a rule would be an insult to the Arbiter... the Primordial.” She shuddered as she uttered Arawn’s titles.

Anwen almost laughed, as she herself had many times pissed off the “Great God”. She still couldn’t believe Arawn was as powerful as they all feared.

“There you are,” Pryderi interrupted them, trying not to sound annoyed. “Should you not be getting dressed?”

Anwen hadn’t noticed the hour. The sun was already setting behind the castle. She smiled. “I was just doing a final check.”

“Rowena has come with her band in tow,” he said. “She is waiting for you in your quarters.”

“We will get ready at once!” Siriol pulled Anwen along, both humming with excitement as they made their way up to her chambers to find Rowena and three others waiting for

them.

“Darling!” Rowena squealed as she kissed both of Anwen’s cheeks. “You are going to endlessly praise me once you see what I have brought for you.” She unclasped the chest that sat before them and pulled out a tuft of red fabric.

Her band of stylists attacked Anwen from every angle, slipping the dress over her head and pulling it tight into place.

“Is this... enough?” Anwen asked, in sheer embarrassment. The dress fit too tightly to her curves. Though the skirts covered her legs, the sides of the dress were cut out, revealing more skin than she thought anyone but her soon-to-be husband should see. She’d never seen anyone else wear such a piece, Rowena looking modest for once.

“You will be getting married, young lady!” Rowena shouted with glee. “The dress is to show off to Pryderi what a catch you are! Its colour means passion, fire, love, sex! In addition, this is your debut in *Annwfn*. Everyone is curious about the human who stole the god’s heart. Why not make a statement?”

A statement was one thing, but this...? Anwen could hardly call it a dress, even if it was by *Annwfn*’s standards. “Absolutely not.”

Rowena scrunched her lip in disappointment. “Well, it was worth a try. Not one person in this Divine Court has any sense of fashion,” she muttered as she rummaged in the chest. “Here, I made this just in case.”

She pulled out a floor-length dress that was made with green silk, smoother than any Anwen had ever touched. The cuffs and hem were weighed down by gold thread. It reminded her of Pryderi’s clothes the day they had come to *Annwfn* and couldn’t imagine a more suitable one for the occasion.

She changed into the right dress while Rowena’s stylists finished her hair and make-up. A sentimental thought passed her mind as she looked at herself in the mirror: *If only my mother could see me now...*

She had no idea if her mother would be proud or fuss over every detail that wasn’t to her liking. Instead, she wished Branwen were there. Branwen would’ve ogled the dress with distaste, but she would’ve understood it was Anwen’s prerogative.

She shook the thoughts from her mind. Tonight was going to be a night of happiness, and

no one was going to take that from her.

Staring out from the balcony, Anwen could see the lights of the party below, their glow flickering in the distance as a warm evening breeze brushed past her cheeks.

“Are you ready?” Sirlol asked. “Almost everyone has arrived.”

Anwen nodded. “Let’s go.”

17

Anwen floated rather than walked down the castle steps and into the manicured gardens. She could hear the thrum of laughter and chatter, which melded intricately with the musicians inside the conservatory, their notes carrying through the many open glass doors. As she and Siriol rounded the hedges, she was swept away by how magical it looked at night. Lights floated in every direction, as if they were stars plucked from the sky to dance for her alone.

Partiers lounged all around. Anwen realised that Siriol had purposefully neglected setting chairs for this reason and had instead gone for cushions and throws.

Anwen paused at the door, her nerves eating away at her stomach, her back tense. The people in attendance would be of greater status than her. She would have to be on her very, very best behaviour.

This would be the first time anyone outside Pryderi's castle would see her, and if they were anything like the servants of the castle, she could already hear the judgments they would make of her: too skinny, no magic, no talent, *human*.

She wished hard again that Branwen was by her side.

The main entrance was decorated with flowered vines, opulence exuding from every corner. The smell of honeysuckle, garlic chicken, and strong Fae wine mixed with the earthy twilight.

Siriol had kept most of her original instructions for how the room was to be set up, though there was a raised platform in the middle, undoubtedly where Anwen would stand for everyone to hear her sing.

Anwen steadied herself as she set her shoulders straight and tried to stay calm as she stepped across the threshold.

All conversation stopped as she came into view.

The crowds surrounding her were plainly segregated by their own ilk, representatives of each race in attendance to greet the new, soon-to-be wife.

"Those are the *Fflora*," Siriol whispered at her side, seeing where Anwen's attention

went. “You can always pick them out by their crazy hair colours and the constant aroma of flowers around them.”

Anwen realised they were all women, dressed in flowing gowns that dripped with petals of pastel rainbow colours. If she thought the first dress Rowena had presented to her had been scandalous, then the way the *Ffloras* dressed was downright sinful. The petals hid just enough of their breasts and privates for them not to be classed as naked.

Among them was a voluptuous and regal woman whose dress was adorned not only with petals but with white spotted feathers that complemented her deep-brown skin, making it look as though she had the wings of an owl and could take flight at any moment. Her hands were adorned with pink designs of flowers, vines, and feathers entwined, identifying her as a goddess.

“You’ll always be able to find the Giants, that’s for sure...” Siriol giggled. Anwen tore her attention away from the goddess to the towering creatures across from them. “Too bad God Brân isn’t here. Though he doesn’t have much of a personality, he makes a fabulous Giant’s mead.”

Brân, more commonly known as The Raven God, had sent only representatives during this turbulent time up in the North. With the continued disappearances of his people and the murder of his nephew, he had chosen his side and hadn’t made an appearance in Pryderi’s Divine Court since.

There was only one among them of average size, whom the others weren’t pleased to be in the presence of. Matholwch was like any other man of noble birth, born with power and the haughty attitude that went along with it. It was known that he and Branwen were divorced and never spent more than a single moment alone together—for good reason too, for if Matholwch were to get too close to his ex-wife, she wouldn’t hold back in killing him.

All the Giants wore sturdy clothes, set in deep browns, greens, reds, and oranges, fashioned together to make them look less intimidating (though it didn’t really do the trick).

“The Scholars of Aranhod, the goddess of luck and fate, are a serious bunch.” Siriol tipped her chin towards a group of High Fae clad in white robes; the only thing colourful about them was their wings. “They always know how to ruin a party... And over there, Math’s followers. Downright scoundrels, if you ask me.”

The mixture of creatures in the group and their constant leering at the *Fflora* unsettled Anwen. They all wore silver broaches of a broken staff to pin up their capes and matching axes at their sides.

The deities themselves weren't in attendance, having no interest in the affair.

Anwen and Siriol continued to walk before the other Elves and Fae of Pryderi's court, Anwen letting out a small sigh of relief that there were no batwings in sight.

Pryderi held out his gloved hand to her as she made her way to him. He was more beautiful than ever. His green-and-gold tunic and trousers accentuated every tone of his body, their wardrobes matching for the night. Anwen took his hand, and he led her to the head of the room from where he could address the party.

One after the other, all the creatures in attendance bowed towards them, all except for the other goddess (rightly so), causing Anwen to feel a warm ache radiate from her core. She'd never been given such treatment.

"Friends, guests," Pryderi acknowledged. "I would like to thank you all for coming this night to celebrate my engagement to Anwen."

Applause rang throughout the room.

"I can say with all my heart that these past weeks have shown me the kindness and selflessness she bestows on those around her. I could not imagine a more suitable wife, partner, and lover." Anwen's face flushed as she smiled next to him. "Please join me in welcoming my new wife-to-be, Anwen!"

He raised his glass to a toast, and everyone followed.

"To Anwen," they all cheered in chorus, taking a sip of their drinks.

Pryderi pulled her closer to his side, his voice right at her ear. "Come, I want to introduce you to everybody."

Matholwch was the first in line to congratulate them, clasping Pryderi's arm at the elbow in greeting.

"You must be shocked to see me," he said to Anwen.

She'd never talked with him before. Branwen was usually by her side, so he would keep a wide berth, but Anwen found him enjoyable and didn't see why she hated him so.

"Branwen wanted to come but..." He eyed Pryderi. "As a woman, she is bitter about the

whole affair..."

"We understand," Pryderi said before Anwen could ask what he meant. "We appreciate that you have come tonight."

Matholwch nodded, then introduced the rest of the party, which only gave him snide looks, unhappy to be associated with him.

The next group to come up and greet them was the *Fflora*, their forms graceful as they glided towards them, curtsying with elegance.

"Anwen, this is Blodeuedd: The First Woman of the Wood, Goddess of the Fallen, and one of the Seven Gods."

Blodeuedd smelled of oak, broom and meadowsweet, the fragrances subtle against the rest of the aromas in the room. "Anwen, it is so nice to meet you. Please call me Bloom. And don't let the men intimidate you," she said, a sour look overcoming her features as Matholwch passed them. "Some of them believe the world should stop on their command."

Anwen grasped at the first thing that came to her mind, blurting it out. "Then we must see to it that the world doesn't stop."

Blodeuedd's smile was radiant, if not a tad awkward with pity. "What a graceful answer," she commented. "You'll be wasted here..."

One by one, Anwen was introduced to everyone, their welcomes and well wishes seeming to relax her more and more as the night went on.

She was deep in conversation with a handsome Fae who was telling her about the best bakery in the city when she heard a gasp from one of the entrances. When she looked towards the sound, she instantly recognised who stood in its way. All the partiers and the music stopped as the latecomers stepped through. There were two of them. The one next to the Dark Fae, a spindlier version of Efnysien. Everyone held their breath in horror rather than the marvel that Anwen's own arrival had created.

The purple dye on his fingers, twisted artfully into realistic moons and thorns, was visible from where she stood.

The Dark God.

As the god came into view, Anwen's eyes were stuck on him. He was lean, the muscles underneath his black wardrobe and short cape tightening with ready defence as he moved.

Yet he had a smile plastered to his face, as if he'd just stridden into his own home.

Their eyes locked on each other, and he tipped his nose confidently in her direction, forcing the smile to stay where it was.

He was as gorgeous in his celestial beauty as Pryderi. Yet there was something darker. Terrifying.

His black hair was closely shaved on the sides of his head, fading into thick curls on top that slightly flopped onto his brow. Anwen absently wondered how the short hairs would feel under her fingernails but chased the thought away as quickly as it'd come.

His eyes were as sharp as obsidian and as purple as amethysts. The look in them held a boyish joy, yet there was something there, underneath the surface, which Anwen couldn't place... Sadness? Loss? Fear? Intrigue? His skin was as grey as the skin of the ones she'd seen in the dungeon, giving pause to anyone who would dare approach him. She couldn't see any wings on him.

Hafgan, the Dark God and Demonic Ruler, had arrived.

A dozen questions ran through Anwen's mind. Did he really plan to set his kin free? Was there a need for fighting, or was there another way for everyone to get what they wanted?

There was only one question that was held ready on the tip of Anwen's tongue. It ate at her, her curiosity winning out in the end.

Hafgan's jaw was taut, and there was hesitation in his steps, a sensation he was unaccustomed to. He hid it well, eyes lighting a fraction, and his broad shoulders dipping in feigned relaxation. Moves that'd taken him a century to perfect.

Anwen walked slowly towards him in wonder, afraid that any sudden movement would cause him to flee.

Six more steps.

Anwen couldn't take her eyes off him. The way he moved, the power... the... *defiance* he exuded towards all those in attendance. Yet, there was caution. A strong wall was built around him—a wall she wanted to climb over to peek at what lay behind.

Three more steps.

Her hand rose of its own accord, outstretched towards him. If she touched his arm, would she feel the pain of those thorns? Anwen felt a sort of familiarity in the way he held

himself, but she didn't know why.

He towered over her.

One step.

Anwen's hand settled on his forearm, feeling his smooth skin. It was colder than she expected, as if he'd travelled from somewhere where the sun rarely shone.

Hafgan noted the pigment in his hands softened as he reached up to remove her hand. He hadn't known what this woman was doing and had almost slapped it away when he figured this must be Pryderi's new bride. Clean. Entitled. Doe-eyed. He thought her the perfect match for Pryderi.

A doll he could play with.

A tinge of regret filled Hafgan at the thought. He didn't want to see a Fae, let alone a human, be subject to Pryderi's whims. Just before he reached up to gently take her hand away, her brow creased with curiosity, changing every angle of her smooth face.

"Why did you come?" Anwen whispered only to him, her blue eyes full of genuine interest, something he hadn't witnessed among those of Pryderi's court. She didn't have a drop of malice in her voice. It almost sounded as though she were worried.

Hafgan drew a sharp breath. Anwen quickly pulled her hand away, twisting it behind her back as she remembered where they were.

All Hafgan could do was listen to the sweet tone of her voice.

Pryderi was at Anwen's side in an instant. Everyone around them waited on bated breath. "Anwen," he said, taking her hand in his, all the while not looking in Hafgan's direction, "may I introduce you to the Dark God, another of the Seven. This is *my* Anwen."

Hafgan could say nothing, the spindly version of Efnysien jumping in to bow at the waist and answer for him. Anwen had forgotten he was even there.

"We're honoured to be invited and to present our congratulations to you both." His voice was as smooth as mulberry sap. "I'm Nysien. I believe my brother has not spoken of me from the look on your face." He smiled brilliantly as Anwen collected herself enough to curtsy at the introduction.

"No, I didn't know Efnysien had a twin brother," Anwen said, finally tearing her gaze away from Hafgan.

"I did not think it was necessary." Efnysien's voice resounded in all their heads, coming up behind Pryderi.

"We do look alike, but I believe that's where the resemblance stops," Nysien boyishly smiled.

Anwen couldn't argue with that. It wasn't just their temperaments that differed, but their builds. Efnysien was bulky, while Nysien was slim. Nysien had a calmer look in his eye than his brother's, which was one of constant irritation. And while Efnysien had his blonde hair shaved close to his nape, Nysien had let his flow freely, the sides tied back for the occasion.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Nysien. And... God Hafgan." Anwen's mouth went dry.

Hafgan nodded, his face schooled into a hard glare.

Pryderi took the moment to whisper in her ear. "Anwen, how about a song? To quell the smothering tension?"

Anwen sucked in a large breath to calm her nerves as she nodded in acquiescence. She grabbed some wine as she went to stand in the middle of the platform.

Pryderi announced her performance.

She faced the crowd of people who stared readily at her. Hafgan's eyes never left her as he stood close to the side of the stage, allowing for a better view. Blodeuedd was by his side in an instant, whispering to him. Anwen was surprised to see the two together, but cleared her throat to start her song.

The minstrels gave her the starting note. The conservatory glass enhanced the acoustics. The song began melancholic, then grew into a chorus of yearning... freedom, setting her voice alight until the notes calmed again. It was a tune she'd created for Pryderi, of their first encounter and every moment since and every moment to come.

Anwen's eyes swept over the faces that were mesmerised until she turned her gaze upward. Drawstring satchels hung from each marble column. She hadn't remembered Siriol placing such obnoxious things among the decorations, so it came as an added surprise when she saw that one after another, soldiers stealthily emerged from them and brandished magical bows.

18

Anwen's notes faltered as her eyes grew wide and searched the audience for Pryderi. When she finally found him, he shook his head, jaw flexed as he silently warned her not to draw any attention to them.

He knew. Pryderi knew they were there, and he wanted her to do *nothing*.

Anwen did the best she could, holding her voice steady as the bowmen notched their arrows. Wisps of green magic floated about them. Her eyes followed their every move as they got into comfortable positions. They raised their hands to their cheeks, their arms powerfully drawing back their strings.

All of them aimed at the stage.

Anwen couldn't keep her composure any longer as she went quiet mid-note, her mouth pulling down as fear trembled her lips. Her gaze went to the next strongest in the room, straight to Hafgan, pleading for him to do something. To save her. That this was all a mistake. She shouldn't be the one they target. She was a nobody. No powers. No status. No *threat*.

Hafgan swiftly turned, his body tense and ready as he took in the danger.

Everything around them erupted into chaos. One moment, Anwen was staring up towards the bowmen; the next, their arrows hurtled straight at her.

Hafgan tackled her to the ground, his body heavy on her. Her head bounced off the marble floor, a lump already swelling where it impacted. The wind was knocked out of her as she took the hit. Anwen realised it wasn't the blow to her head that had caused the darkness to dance around her vision but the encompassing barrier of magic that swirled around them, making sure no arrows penetrated his protective, smoky bubble.

He hovered over her, giving her the chance to breathe. His strong arms bit into the ground on either side of her as her world came into focus. Hafgan was only a finger's length away as Anwen felt his body violently tremble with rage. His thorns crept up to his chest, causing his eyes to change in the darkness. Their pigment inverted; his pupils now as bright as polished amethyst, leaving the rest as black as the sky's darkest depths, creating a

terrifying portrait of the Dark God.

Anwen thought Hafgan's wrath was directed at her, that he'd had to save such a hapless, human girl he'd just met. But as her eyes adjusted to the darkness and she searched his face, she saw the worry etched into his godly features.

Anwen wanted to touch him again, to run her fingers over the furrowed lines that creased his darkened brow and smooth them out. Her hands only stayed where they were.

"Are you alright?" Hafgan hissed through clenched teeth. It was the first time he had spoken to her, his baritone voice vibrating in the small space.

Another volley of arrows tried their best to penetrate Hafgan's barrier, their magic pushing him slightly closer. He did his best to stay steady, taking the brunt of their magic, when he saw hot tears pool in the crevice of her neck, sticky and wet.

"I'm okay," she lied, barely audible. "They... were aiming at me."

Hafgan chuckled, amused at the idea. "I can assure you, those arrows were for my benefit, not yours."

"Haf!" They both heard Nysien shout from outside the barrier. "Haf, we need to move!"

"I'm not leaving her!" Hafgan growled back.

Anwen thought the bump to the head was making her mind play tricks. She could barely follow their conversation as she felt a trickle of blood from her nose. She smeared it with the back of her hand, surprised at the bright colour. She didn't want to go anywhere with these people. She wanted to be with Pryderi. The memory of his stern face as he watched, as he warned her not to do anything. Where was he? Did he know that the bowmen would attack her?

It seemed Anwen's life was ruled by questions, and she found it utterly frustrating that she never had the answers.

"Then take her with us! We can't fight off all the guards *and* Pryderi *and* Efnysien. Not here, not now, not when—"

"I know!" Hafgan's voice boomed as his magic swirled around him like a shrouded cloak. Their shield disappeared as he stood and faced the threat, his form towering over those who were left. He pulled Anwen from the floor and steadied her on her feet.

Blodeuedd had made a quick escape with the rest of the creatures, leaving only Pryderi

and Efnysien on the floor. This was not the time for her to fight.

The bowmen notched their arrows again and prepared to fire, their quarrels glowing green with magic, ready to strike.

Hafgan readied his own magic, his hand waving so forcefully that Anwen felt the wind blow through her hair as it passed. Black tendrils of lightning danced within his palm, their bodies flicking and cracking.

Anwen shot her hand out towards him, fearful that the next volley would certainly find her, and in the instant their skin touched, his magic dispelled.

His eyes locked onto hers, filled with fury, shock, and panic. He slapped her hand away, and the lightning reappeared. A second later, it whipped through the air, striking its targets so violently that Anwen could only watch in horror as they all dropped from their perches. Their heads burned and bodies twitched as their blood pooled towards the centre of the marble floor.

“Is this what you wanted?” Hafgan called to Pryderi, who was watching on silently, his voice having a bite to it. “I came here in good faith, Pryderi. With the good faith of Arawn, as we promised! And your family breaks the armistice *again!*”

Pryderi stood poised, the vein in his forehead pulsing as he glared up at him. He knew he hadn’t come out of loyalty to Arawn, but out of cocky arrogance... to throw his freedom in his face.

Pryderi wanted him dead.

Pryderi’s features softened as he made eye contact with Anwen, pleading for some form of understanding he couldn’t give her. He held out his hand to her, inviting her back to him. “Anwen, my love. Come here.”

Anwen had never seen him so docile, as if he’d been watching a sunset for the first time, not an assassination. But he must have done all this for a reason; she wasn’t going to condemn him on one brutal act, not when she knew the happiness he had brought to her by bringing her to *Annwfn*. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and tell him everything was going to be okay. That this must have been a mistake... Her days spent in his castle had been filled with freedom. She wanted those days to continue forever, with him by her side as her husband.

"She's not going anywhere with you." Hafgan pulled her to him, his arm around her waist, restricting her movement.

Efnysien was by Pryderi's side, his face deformed into an angry snarl. *"You speak of broken treaties, yet it was you who did the unspeakable,"* he defended Pryderi.

"Your twisted sense of loyalty will be your death!" Hafgan snapped back. He didn't need reminding of his own sins. "Did you learn nothing from Gwern and breaking the Cauldron?"

Efnysien's agitation grew at the mention of this. He'd never forget his nephew's death, nor the day he lost his voice and magic.

Of all the things to do, Hafgan relaxed his shoulders, a confident smile lifting his face. "Centuries of life and battle and war, and you *still* haven't learned a thing about being levelheaded. Do you think you'll come out alive in this? The Arbiter will see to your death," he warned Efnysien with a jaunty tone.

Efnysien growled in response. *"The Great God holds no power over me! And you have no right to speak to me as such! Cythraul! You who rule with fear and terror!"*

Hafgan's jaw tightened at the derogatory term. "If facing my enemies head-on means I'm perceived as a devil to ones such as yourselves, then I'll gladly take the title."

"Enough," Pryderi stepped in, preventing Efnysien from continuing. His features softened further as he looked back at Anwen. "Anwen, please." His hand was still held out in waiting.

Anwen squirmed in Hafgan's hold, her brain full of cotton and her movements heavy as she unsuccessfully tried to reach for him, the slow-forming concussion incapacitating her. She didn't know where they would take her, but she couldn't imagine a better place than Arberth Castle, where Siriol, Matron Goewin, and Rowena took care of her. Where she hadn't had to lift a finger.

This was where Anwen was supposed to be. This was where her freedom was. She wanted to stay, marry Pryderi, and live a normal life with him.

"I won't give her up." Hafgan tightened his grip further, and Anwen could feel the ache in her ribs as they began to bruise. He didn't want to have to resort to what he'd do next, but all was fair in war. "Any more than this and Arawn will act not only on you, Pryderi, but on everyone in your court. I invoke Cigfa's name."

It was like all the air was sucked out of the room. It was not a common thing to do, to call

on the name of a dead goddess, but it meant that all would cease; that whoever held their cards could not give them away, nor could they be forcefully taken.

Pryderi's hand fell, the look on his face colder than a winter's night. "You dare speak *her* name in my presence?" His lip curled with disgust. "YOU DARE LET HER NAME SLIP FROM YOUR MOUTH!" He huffed with rage, eyes changing as he looked between Hafgan and Anwen. "We will get her back!"

Anwen froze. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.... What she was seeing... She wanted to fight Hafgan, to be free, and to fall into the arms of the one she loved. So why didn't Pryderi fight for her? She wanted nothing more to do with the Dark Fae and wished she could take back the curiosity she'd held for him.

He truly was the *devil*.

The lump on the back of Anwen's head throbbed as the rush of panic hit her.

Hafgan retreated towards Nysien, who stayed vigilant for any further action. "Over my dead body," he threatened.

"It will be," Pryderi promised.

They ran out of the place, Hafgan carrying Anwen in his arms.

"We'll need to take the familiars." Hafgan ran at top speed, both he and Nysien already at the edge of the castle's forest. A large black dog emerged from his shadow, Hafgan jumping onto the back of Nos, while Nysien was already astride his water horse, Willow.

"Hold your breath and close your eyes," Hafgan instructed Anwen as Nos quickened his pace. "We'll be in Elendi in a moment."

Anwen did as she was told, fear seizing every muscle, knowing that she was being taken away and there was nothing she, nor apparently Pryderi, could do. A moment later, they shot through the midnight sky and left her love and her freedom behind.

'What right did you have to my death? I was claiming nothing from you. Nor do I know of any reason for you to kill me; but for God's sake, since you have begun, then finish!'

- The Four Branches

19

Hafgan slid off the back of Nos as they hit solid ground and carried Anwen up to the spare room in his home.

“Get her onto the bed,” Nysien instructed him, pulling back the thin covers as Hafgan set her down gently. “Flying that fast would have made any human sick.”

They swaddled her in soft blankets and pillows. Anwen barely registered anything else as she held tightly onto the sheets, trying to steady herself. She couldn’t believe what was happening.

It went quiet for a moment, the tension in the air broken by Nysien’s huff of laughter. “That went as well as I expected.”

Bile rose to Anwen’s throat, and she moved to the edge of the bed to throw it up; the smell was putrid as it hit the wooden floor.

Hafgan rubbed circles on the top of her back, his tone hard as he glanced at Nysien. “Only your brother would use such a weak pawn against us.”

“He knows where to hit to make it hurt,” Nysien agreed, magicking the sick away so it wouldn’t stain the grain. “Targeting the one person that can’t use magic... You may think him simple-minded, but his strategy worked. By now, they’ve probably told everyone in the Divine Courts that we went rogue and kidnapped Pryderi’s bride-to-be.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Hafgan agreed with a smile. He knew invoking Cigfa’s name was a gutsy move... Now, everyone would understand how far he was willing to go.

Anwen lay back, disoriented and tired from everything. She could hear the harsh wind screeching against a window from across the room and wondered where she was to hear it so well.

“You really think they’d have killed her?” Nysien asked.

Hafgan brushed her sweat-drenched hair out of her face. “Pryderi? No, she seemed important to him. That doesn’t excuse what they’re trying to achieve, though.” He picked up the pitcher and glass at the side of the bed, pouring a helping of wine. He brought the glass to her lips.

Anwen tried to push it away, but her uncoordinated arms slapped him on the shoulder instead. Her stomach turned at the thought of something sloshing around in there.

"You're wrong on one thing," Hafgan stated, catching her flailing arms to keep her still. "She *does* have magic."

Nysien's mouth was set in a skeptical line as his fingers touched her wrist, then her throat, and then the top of her eyelid, assessing Hafgan's ludicrous statement. "Was the wine at the party too strong for you? I feel nothing from her."

"Exactly, Nis, when was the last time you've not felt *any* magic from a creature? Even the mice that run in the fields give off more magic than she does. So how can she have *none*?"

The question stalled them both.

"You think this is why she was brought here? To help them when they find the Cauldron?" Nysien asked.

"I believe there wouldn't be any other reason to bring a human into *Annwfn* otherwise. Now we know why she's lasted this long. You've seen over the years the humans who've, one way or another, gotten lost here in our world. How long did they survive? A week... maybe less?" Hafgan's hand trembled against Anwen's. "She's lucky to be alive."

Nysien didn't know why Arhanrod would intervene in this instance. "It seems luck has no hand in this."

Hafgan tried again to bring the cool glass to her lips, the liquid spilling down her neck and soaking the front of her dress. "Shit," he muttered.

"We'll get Branwen to care for her in the morning," Nysien offered as his friend lightly dabbed at the wet spots on her. "For now, let's let her sleep."

They both left the room as Anwen struggled to keep her eyes open. Had she heard them correctly? Branwen's name sounded foreign coming from them.

Anwen didn't want to sleep and replay Pryderi's expression as he let her go willingly over and over in her nightmares. She'd wanted him to fight... had wanted the party to be successful, and for Pryderi to have visited her in bed afterwards, so they could both revel in the joy they felt together.

But as Anwen's mind calmed and she fantasised about all these things, she found herself

falling straight to sleep.

Black and white stars danced around Anwen's vision as she woke to the room around her and remembered she wasn't in Arberth anymore. Though there was a large fire that burned in the hearth, she felt the place was cold and devoid of comfort. The thick clouds that passed by the window hung low, weighing down the already small room. Stiffly, she pulled herself to the edge of the creaking bed.

"You're awake," Hafgan said from the corner of the room, pushing off from the wall.

Panic shot through Anwen, the feeling like a constant thread pulling at her back since the party. Her eyes froze towards him, the terror of what he'd done to her... to the guards at the party... An unbidden retch escaped her mouth.

Hafgan moved quickly to her side, his palm running methodical circles into her back to help ease her pain.

Anwen thought it felt nice, his hand surprisingly warm and caring and... She shoved him away and scurried to the other end of the bed. "Don't touch me!"

His lip ticked up in annoyance. "I was trying to help."

"I don't want your help. I want to go back to Pryderi."

"He'll do nothing but use you. You know that, right?" Hafgan couldn't understand why she was so blind to what was happening.

"He wouldn't do anything like that! He's been more welcoming and hospitable than *you!*"

"And is that what you look for in a husband? Hospitality?" Hafgan was twisting her words, and Anwen didn't like it. "Do you think he actually loves you?"

Anwen swayed as she moved too quickly from the bed to stand and brought her hand hard across his face, leaving them both in stunned silence. Her palm stung as she lowered it, fearful that her senseless action had just condemned her.

Anwen backed into the other corner of the room, cradling her hand to her chest. She had to remind herself that Hafgan was a god. The Demonic Ruler. She believed any god with that

type of name must have done every evil in the book.

And she had just *slapped* him.

Hafgan strode over to her, wanting to check she hadn't broken her hand.

Anwen squeezed her eyes shut, scared of the punishment that was sure to come, when loud footsteps came up behind him.

Anwen opened her eyes to see Branwen towering over them both.

"Fuck, Haf, what the hell're you doing?" Branwen jerked his collar back to give Anwen more space, half-choking him in the process. "Stop intimidating her."

Branwen's wide smile was enough to pull Anwen from her terror.

"I'm sorry, Anwen. *Someone* was supposed to call for me when you woke up. Not try to scare you unconscious again."

"Bren..." Anwen rushed into her arms, her neck straining more than ever to look up at her face. It was a wonder how she fit through the door, never mind in the room. "What are you doing *here*?"

"I've actually always been here... You know how I've never invited you to visit?"

"No, not here in *Annwfn*," Anwen corrected her, letting go. "Though it explains a lot of things." She glared at the god in the room. "Here with *him*."

Branwen's smile faltered. "You've been lied to, Anwen." She took Anwen's hand, needing her friend to understand that what she'd experienced up to that point was a lie. "You think Pryderi is the good guy? Think again."

"What are you talking about? Pryderi's the one trying to save *Annwfn*. *He* is the one trying to ruin it," Anwen pointed at Hafgan, accusingly.

A chuckle escaped his lips. "You think we're the ones destroying *Annwfn*? And I bet you believe Efnysien a saint."

Branwen's nostrils flared, and a dark look crossed her eyes at the mention of that bastard.

Anwen crossed her arms over her chest. "More so than you are."

Hafgan made to move forward, his body tense at the affront, but Branwen stepped between them, blocking his path. "Go, I'll talk to her."

"How about both of you leave." Anwen was proud, for once, that she was able to get her

father's tone into the command, but still struggled to push them out the door.

Anwen breathed a heavy sigh as the wind outside slammed against the window, making her heart jump. She went to it and gazed at the deep valley they sat in, where craggy mountains and dense forest seemed to enclose the city before her.

This was no paradise.

"Not what you expected, is it?"

Anwen jerked towards the bed, Arawn standing by it. For once, she was happy to see him. "Thank fuck. Get me out of here."

Arawn shook his head resolutely. "No can do," he stated.

Anwen backed away from him slowly. Even he was no longer her ally? Why? Why was he doing this to her? Ever since that day in the forest, her life had done nothing but change. She had thought it would've been for the better. Being with Pryderi *was* better, but now that she was without him, she couldn't see where life was taking her.

And it was all Arawn's fault.

Anwen was on him hotter than the beach sand at midday. "Ever since you came into my life, it has been one thing after another!"

Arawn's face turned sour. "Don't blame me for the path life has chosen for you. I have no control over it. I simply walk beside you. As does Pryderi and your parents and your friends." He motioned to the door, indicating to those who dwelt within the house.

"Then who does?" Anwen asked.

Arawn chuckled, as if the answer were so obvious. "You."

"I've no more control over my life than any other woman. It wasn't my intention to end up *here*," Anwen spat. "I just wanted to be with Pryderi. For us to live in Narberth for the rest of our lives."

Unbidden tears sprang to Anwen's eyes. Why did no one understand what she wanted?

"Then why didn't you tell him that? Why did you stay silent as he led you through the portal? It was your choice to speak, and you didn't."

Anwen's tongue felt red-hot as she answered. "No! I didn't! That was never expected of me!"

"So, you blame your parents, your family, those around you, for being helpless?" Arawn

stayed where he was, but his words hit Anwen as hard as she had slapped Hafgan. “Is your common sense as lacking as your manners?”

Anwen hid her face as it heated. She wanted to argue with his logic. There was no way she could’ve gone against Pryderi’s wishes. She had a duty to him, and all she’d done was carry it out.

Arawn continued before she could answer. “Perhaps if you took the time to understand those around you, the path you are on wouldn’t be to your dislike.”

Anwen readied her defence, but as her head snapped up to rebuff him, he was already gone.

20

For days, Anwen didn't let anyone enter her room. She'd heard no servants shuffling about the place, seeing to cleaning the floors or giggling as they gossiped by. No one came to provide her with a lamp or build a fire in the hearth even as the wind that swept through the valley chilled her to the core. The only time she heard footsteps was when someone left plates of food out in the hall. It didn't matter; she wasn't going to touch the stuff, convinced it was poisoned. She was thankful that she hadn't been chained in the dungeon (not that they had one).

Endless questions rattled her brain, none more infuriating than the words Arawn had spoken: *Is your common sense as lacking as your manners?*

She wanted him to take those words and shove them up his arse. She was a woman in a foreign world. At this point, she wasn't even sure if 'up' was the same direction.

A sharp knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

Branwen poked her head in. "Have you calmed down a bit?" She sat down on the thick rug that lined the floor.

Anwen stubbornly crossed her arms. "Not yet."

"I can explain... if you have any questions."

"Was our friendship a lie?" Anwen regretted the question the second it left her lips.

The corners of Branwen's mouth pulled down with a quiver. "Never," she assured her, eyes glassing over with threatening tears. "I never meant to make you feel as if I was deceiving you all this time. You have no idea how much you mean to me."

"Then what? What happened for you to throw yourself in with this lot?"

Branwen took a deep breath. It had taken her decades to speak of it, and decades more to come to terms with it. But the scars it had left were deep, and she would never be rid of them.

"You remember Matholwch?" Branwen asked.

"Your ex-husband."

Branwen cringed at the statement. "When I went to live with him in Waesfjord, I thought

I had found the one man who'd care for me. As time moved on, I realised I'd lost touch with everyone I cared for. Matholwch's temper started to get shorter and shorter."

Branwen tugged at her earlobe; the bottom of it healed from a tear. "The first time he hit me, it was so hard, I lost most of my hearing in my left ear. It didn't stop there. Every time he was in a bad mood, I'd get the full brunt of it, no matter if it was my fault or not. Soon, most of his court began treating me the same. He made me feel as if it were my fault. It went on for years. It got so bad that at some point I gave up."

Branwen fiddled with a loose thread from the rug, pulling on it until it tore off in her hand.

"When my brother finally heard this news, he stormed over there and rescued me. Somehow Pryderi got involved," she revealed, his name constricting in her throat. "Pryderi said he couldn't stand to see two houses—especially ones that were once on friendly terms—be at war with each other. He tried to act in Arawn's stead... It ended up bloody, Anwen. I thought Pryderi had been there to help us... M-my own son, Gwern, died by Efnysien's hand."

Branwen's eyes hardened. "I'll not be a part of their world. Everything they do is to better only themselves and leave the rest of us dealing with the consequences."

Anwen's voice stuck in her throat as her friend's revelations poured from her. "Bren..." She sat down on the floor next to her, hugging her close. "I had no idea... about any of it." She was hurt that Branwen had never confided this before. "And that you had a son. Why didn't you fight back?" Her size made her more than capable, and Anwen had never seen her lose.

Branwen bit her lip. "I wasn't always this strong... And sometimes physical strength is not enough. Especially when dealing with loved ones. And I didn't want anything to happen to Gwern. In hindsight, I should've beaten down every one of those fuckheads. But if all that hadn't happened, I wouldn't've ended up here with Haf and Nis. I'm really thankful for them and all they've done for me."

Anwen crinkled her nose in disgust.

"Honestly, they're not as bad as they seem; you just need to get used to th—"

"Bren!" Hafgan's voice boomed from down the stairs, startling them both.

“Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.” Branwen smiled, the mischievousness of it not quite reaching the edges of her lips. “Looks like I took too long collecting you. Come.”

She pulled them both to their feet and out the door before Anwen could protest.

The house was quiet except for the muffled voices from down the hall. Anwen and Branwen made their way down the stairs and through the foyer, which held nothing more than a rug and a small table. Anwen had guessed that Hafgan had no servants, yet the surfaces around her were still clean and free of dust.

The air smelled like freshly chopped wood and earth. A large sitting room opened to their right. As they approached, Anwen could hear Hafgan and Nysien in animated discussion.

“Do you think she can do it?” Nysien asked, lounging in a plush chair that had garish mustard-coloured upholstery. It was old, not like the finery Anwen found in Pryderi’s castle.

“I don’t think it’s whether she can, but whether she will...” Hafgan replied.

“I’ve brought her.” Branwen interrupted them, pulling Anwen into the room.

The instant Nysien saw Branwen’s face, he stood, knowing she’d recalled something she hadn’t wanted to. He stretched to give her a reassuring peck on the cheek. “You all right?” he whispered.

Branwen nodded, shaking off the earlier conversation. She smiled and playfully pushed at his shoulder, accidentally sending him toppling over his chair.

The three of them burst out laughing.

Nysien clawed his way from the ground as he rubbed up the length of his arm. Hafgan, who’d had his feet up on a small table, had to plant them firmly on the floor, clutching at his stomach.

“Your face!” Branwen howled at seeing his surprise. She felt better.

They all oriented themselves around one another, so in tune with each other that they picked up on their subtle shifts. And at that point, what they all needed was a laugh.

Anwen thought their actions were an indication of their insanity. Yet, she couldn’t help but feel jealousy redden her ears. She’d never heard a harmony like it before... had never laughed like that in her entire life.

“You didn’t even change,” Nysien said to Anwen as he settled back in his chair.

Anwen still had on her engagement party dress, her face matching the red of her ears with both anger and embarrassment. What she must have looked like to them...

Dishevelled, messy, and completely without pedigree?

Not that they cared about those things.

"No one came to offer me anything." Anwen's words were coated in frost. She saw the condescension in Hafgan's eyes as they lingered too long on certain places, and she hid behind Branwen.

Hafgan put his feet back up on the table. He wouldn't admit it to the others, but she still looked well-kept in the dirty clothes. "If you had any sense, you'd have looked in the wardrobe in your room."

"Now, now," Branwen cautioned Hafgan calmly, aware of the face Anwen was making, "I'll help her pick something out after we talk."

Anwen's stomach let out a grumbling roar, pausing them all.

Nysien waved his hand, and a mound of food and a mug of honey wine appeared on the table in front of them. "Please, eat. You must be starving," he said. He had left food for her on multiple occasions, but each time he went to take the plates back, they were still full.

Anwen hesitated a moment. Branwen nudged her into a chair. Anwen trusted her friend; she had no idea about the other two, but dug in. Hafgan was impressed by the speed at which she was devouring the food.

As Anwen washed it all down with a mug of mead, Nysien cleared his throat.

"Anwen," Nysien leaned forward inquisitively, interlacing his fingers to prop under his chin, "where did you learn your magic?"

"I have no magic," Anwen huffed in satisfaction as she placed the mug back onto the table.

Nysien and Hafgan glanced at each other, then at Branwen, who gave a look as if to say, 'I told you she'd say that'.

"Then, let me ask you a different question," Nysien began again. "What do you know of the Cauldron of Rebirth?"

Anwen tensed at the name, remembering her time in Arberth's dungeon. She could almost smell the damp and dirt. Recalling the wretched feeling in the pit of her stomach as

the prisoners were exposed to the Cauldron's magic made her wish she hadn't eaten so much.

"I know it's broken," Anwen said, her voice small, "and it was your *brother* who did it." She didn't even want to speak his name after Branwen's revelation. "It stole his voice and magic, though I have no idea how that works..."

"The Cauldron is made of dark magic," Branwen jumped in. "As powerful and old as The Tree of Life and The Great God himself. It brings the dead back to life, but far from what you or I would call living. It's been used in the past many times to raise undead armies."

"My *brother*," Nysien also spat the word, "thought if he threw himself in while he was alive, he'd gain far greater powers. For his foolishness, he was cursed beyond measure *and* broke the damn thing. Serves him right."

"But it has another use..." Branwen continued. "If we can get all the pieces back together, mend it, we'd be able to save *Annwfn* from the horrors Pryderi wants to unleash."

"What?" Anwen asked, her voice harsh. She didn't like how they were pinning it all on Pryderi. "*You* save *Annwfn*? More like, drench it in blood. If its magic is as volatile and... and *ungodly* as you make it out to be, why would you do that?"

"Why would Pryderi, then?" Hafgan snapped back. "You think he won't use it for his own gain?"

"He said *you're* the ones wanting to close the portals, so he won't be able to send aid to us! *You're* the problem!"

Hafgan couldn't believe what he was hearing. Did she really believe the lies she'd been told?

Evidently, yes.

"Is that the only reason he gave for our fighting?" Hafgan asked. Pryderi made it sound like they were bickering over who'd skip the first rock over the lake. He shook his head in agitation as he brought his feet down from the table again, elbows coming to rest on his knees.

"No. Since the War, he has had it in for my people and me. He's threatened by our way of life, our *tylwyth teg*, and what we fight for... Because of this, we are treated as *lesser* than the mushrooms that grow in the woods." His harsh words could only tell so much of the

suffering they had endured, his stern eyes making up for the rest. “We will no longer abide by his oppressive views.”

Nysien tried to push Hafgan back against his chair to get him to calm down. “This is where we’re hoping *you’ll* help us,” he said.

“I won’t help you with anything,” Anwen said, appalled at the idea.

“Help us find the missing pieces, Anwen.” Branwen took her hand, trying sympathetically to get her to agree. “Me and you haven’t had a proper chance to catch up! We’ll do anything you ask in return!”

Anwen looked her dead in the eyes. “What I want is to go back to Pryderi.”

As much as she loved Branwen, she wasn’t convinced Pryderi was the bad guy.

Hafgan stood, no longer able to keep still, and paced around the back of his chair. Anwen could see the vein that popped on his forehead, his jaw tightening as he held back from throttling her. *Gods, he is handsome*, she thought, then quickly shooed the thought away.

Would they kill Anwen if she didn’t do as they said? With Hafgan’s reputation, she wouldn’t put it past him. She knew Branwen wouldn’t have a hand in it; hopefully, she’d even try to stop them. But how hard would it be for Hafgan to strike Anwen down with his magic before she could blink?

“If you help us find the missing pieces, then you can go to the fucking moon for all I care,” Hafgan mocked. He wasn’t sure why it irked him so, conflict seeping through his every muscle. One minute, Anwen looked ready to take him on; the next, as scared as a startled hare. She tore at an emotion inside of him he’d never felt before and couldn’t put a name to it even then.

Hafgan gripped the top of his chair, the fabric breaking beneath his deep-purple fingers. “You can go back to your precious life with that monster.”

“He’s no more a monster than you! And besides, how am I even supposed to help you? I’ve told you, I don’t have magic.”

“But you do!” Nysien said. He skirted around to sit in front of her on the table, magicking away the dirty dishware. “One of the best kinds! One of the newest we’ve ever seen! Here.” He put out his hand, and a spark of light filled it.

Anwen flinched, wary that he was going to attack, but he held steady.

“Now, grip my wrist,” Nysien instructed her.

Anwen looked to Branwen, her friend’s trusting eyes urging her to do as he bade. Hesitantly, she reached towards him, her hand clammy as she gripped his cool, white skin. In an instant, the light disappeared.

“See!” Nysien exclaimed. “I told you, Haf, she’s the real deal.”

“I’m pretty sure I was the one who told you,” Hafgan folded his arms against his chest in concentration. He couldn’t figure her out and wished for once to be able to read minds, but only Arawn had that skill.

Nysien swatted the comment away. “Either way, this is our chance.”

“Wait, I’m not following. I didn’t do anything,” Anwen said. She couldn’t make sense of the three in front of her and had no idea how they all fitted together so well.

“That’s the point!” Nysien’s whole frame buzzed. “You negated my magic! Here, try again.”

Nysien enacted his spell again, this time larger than was safe, and when Anwen held her hand against his wrist, his magic was extinguished in an instant.

Anwen pulled away to study her hands, as if seeing them for the first time. They didn’t feel any different from before; her pink skin was still smooth and free of calluses, but a piece that had always been missing inside her had slid into place. Tears ran down her cheeks.

21

It wasn't Anwen's fault. She wasn't defective, or useless, or *lower*, as her family had led her to believe. She was just different. Her whole life, she'd been treated unfairly for something she never had any control over. She felt a glimmer of understanding of Hafgan's words. He fought for recognition and fairness and freedom... things she'd been fighting for her whole life. Yet, she would never truly understand how deeply his differences were rooted in him... in his people... She couldn't.

"You okay?" Branwen asked, tearing her attention away from Hafgan.

"Yes," Anwen answered, her voice shaky, feeling weightless as she let go of Nysien to stand. "Pryderi has a piece of the Cauldron in his castle."

Hafgan gripped the top of his chair again with such force that Anwen waited to see if it would splinter and break off. "Is that true?"

Anwen nodded. "I found it. I wasn't supposed to— I don't think *anyone* was supposed to, since it was so well hidden. But Arawn showed me where it was."

"Arawn?" Hafgan's face went more ashen. The amethyst in his eyes glowed brighter, and a peek of black began to stretch from his pupil, encompassing the whites of his eyes, as he struggled to rein in his anger.

Nysien seemed to vibrate with the same fury.

"You've seen him?" they asked in unison.

"Several times," Anwen confessed. "First in my world, then in Arberth. And again, the day I woke up here."

"Why does he show himself to you?" Nysien asked, trying to calm the tingling in his fingers. He'd only ever met the Arbiter once and never wanted to again.

"I don't know, he just *does*," Anwen answered stubbornly. She'd love to know the answer herself.

"So, he knew from the beginning?" Hafgan threw his chair against the farthest corner of the room, smashing it to pieces. "That fucking bastard."

"What is he?" Anwen asked. She knew he was the Ruler of *Annwfn*, but was he a god like

them, or something... more.

"Arawn is the Primordial," Hafgan explained, simmering. "A being that came into life before any of us. He created *Annwfn*, the mundane world's Tree, and the Cauldron. He is the all-seeing. The Great God." His voice built. "He is the Eighth God of the Seven... The one who governs us. The Arbiter. The one that should be here doing his *fucking* job!" he screamed into the ether, making sure Arawn could hear him.

Anwen trembled. "If he's the one who should be overseeing you all, then why is all of this happening?"

"Good question," Hafgan said, sarcastically. He composed himself enough to sit on the table. "When you next see him, why don't you ask him?" He ran his hand over his mouth, stressed, but calm. "The piece you saw at Pryderi's castle, is it still there?"

"As far as I know."

Nysien shook his head. "It'd be wiser to collect the others first. We just got out of there and stole his bride."

"I agree," Branwen said. "Anwen, when the Arbiter showed you the broken piece, was there anything else there? Did anything happen?"

Anwen felt true guilt puncture her stomach as she recalled everything she'd seen happen to the Dark Fae, how the Cauldron hadn't affected her, and how the gold kept the insanity at bay.

It seemed Hafgan hadn't known about the prisoners, but he hadn't been surprised. It was just one more reason for him to fight harder.

Nysien weighed their options. "No wonder Pryderi wanted you so badly."

"He doesn't know," Anwen defended him. At least she hoped that wasn't the reason he'd fallen in love with her.

"I don't think he would have brought you to *Annwfn* for any other reason." Nysien tried not to sound too cynical but failed. "Your type of magic has never been seen in the Mundane—nor *Annwfn*, for that matter. It could be an omen."

"Good or bad, we'll take it. Where do we start?" Hafgan asked.

Nysien smiled, having already pieced together a plan. "In the mist." His hand waved over the table and a map of *Annwfn* appeared. It was a similar spell Gwydion had used when

telling his story, yet Nysien's magic was far superior, miniature birds fluttering in the image in real time.

"There's a mist that clings near Bloom's border south of here, which never thins." He pointed to the area. "A piece of the Cauldron is hidden there. Napellus has reported that several adventurers have gone in, but none have come out."

Napellus was their informant, a woman of great stealth and just as deadly as her namesake. She was a Woman of the Wood, who found her way into Hafgan's group when Blodeuedd sent her on a mission to spy on him. Suffice to say, the two hit it off well enough that she joined them, Blodeuedd letting her daughter live how she wanted.

"The area's large," Hafgan noted. "She may have missed them coming out."

"Do *you* want to tell her that?" Nysien asked. He shook his head. "More likely they're dead. It's the perfect hunting ground."

"For what?" Anwen asked, hesitantly curious.

Hafgan shrugged, a mischievous smile playing on his face. "We won't know until we get there, now, will we?"

Nysien continued, pointing to the mountains in the North. "Napellus' other scouting area was in the villages around Eryri. She had a bitch of a time. Brân has cordoned off the whole area. No one is allowed in or out. The third piece should be up that way."

Branwen was excited by the fact that she'd be in her territory, though also worried that it was happening so close to her familial home.

"And the last piece?" Hafgan asked.

Nysien huffed a sigh of frustration. "She hasn't heard anything yet but is keeping her ear to the ground."

Anwen glanced at the map again. "Won't Pryderi already know about these places?"

"He would," Hafgan replied, "but he'd also want to make sure that the piece he has now is secure, and he wouldn't leave that job to just anyone, especially if he has no way of collecting the other pieces now." He smirked.

"You're overestimating my abilities," Anwen scoffed.

"Perhaps," Hafgan offered, "but you're all we've got. We've seen the Cauldron's magic first-hand in the War." Branwen and Nysien nodded, lost in the memory of it. "Millennia

ago, we were all vying for each other's territories. It was a bloody war that ravaged hundreds of thousands of lives in *Annwfn*. Arawn used the Cauldron then to quell all our forces. It's hard to fight—to *kill*—when the one you are fighting is a loved one... someone you never thought would be on the other end of your magic. Cigfa was the reason the fighting stopped."

Each of them touched their thumb to the middle of their pointer finger, then brought it to their lips, kissing it lightly. It was a pious action; one made out of respect and honour for the goddess who had died trying to do what was right.

"She was the one who spoke to Arawn and brokered peace on our behalf." Hafgan took a deep breath to steady himself; just saying her name left sour guilt in his mouth. "She was the pride and joy of Pwyll's court, and like a daughter to him and Rhiannon. She and Pryderi were to be married..."

Hafgan watched Anwen's every breath, noting how her weight shifted, and that she brought her arms around herself in comfort. "Oh, they were well matched," he pushed, wanting to see her reaction. "She was the love of his life."

"I don't want to listen anymore," Anwen whispered, her eyes closed against the conversation.

Hafgan was disgusted that she was letting herself be used. If it were him...

"Pwyll was the only one who refused to sign the treaty—thought it unfair that *Annwfn*'s borders should be broken as such," he pressed on. "The war only got bloodier. *Annwfn* was on a path to ruin. But Cigfa stopped it all." He shook his head, trying to dislodge the memory of what he'd done. "The Cauldron's power is not one we take lightly. If Pryderi thinks he'll be able to control that kind of magic, he's an idiot."

Anwen stayed silent.

"Come on," Branwen said, trying to lighten the mood, "we all need to get ready to leave. Especially you, Anwen. I think a bath and a change of clothes are in order." She pushed Anwen towards the stairs, taking her hand as she led her back into her room.

The wardrobe Hafgan had mentioned before sat in the corner, Anwen opening it to, indeed, find a full rack of clothes. Almost all of them were tunics and trousers. She leafed through to find something proper and finally found the only dress in there. It was of sturdy

material, the purple slightly faded as if it had been washed many times. She took it out and held it up to the light to see it better. It held no detail to it, just a plain dress, but she was grateful there was even one in there to begin with.

Branwen had prepared a tub of steaming water with fragrant oils and herbs, though her hand was too heavy when pouring, causing the ratios to be off.

Anwen slipped off her battered dress and folded it neatly into the wardrobe, leaving its cleaning to another day. She washed herself, thinking of everything she'd been told so far, when Branwen's voice startled her from behind the partition, the water sloshing.

"Do you really want to go back to Pryderi?"

Anwen's instinct was to rebuff her; that, of course, she wanted to go straight back to him, but for the first time, doubt crept its way into her heart.

For her, Pryderi was her true love.

But, she wasn't his.

22

Pryderi drummed his fingers on the top of his desk, rage building at Hafgan's impudence for invoking Cigfa's name. He crumpled the parchment that was in front of him, the thought of her sending a pang of sorrow and longing through him. How dare such a defiled being speak it? As if Hafgan didn't have anything to do with why those in *Annwfn* now used it in such a manner.

Pryderi missed her... With every fibre of his being, he missed the love of his life.

A knock came from his study door, Efnysien letting himself in. His shoulders were hunched, knowing he had monumentally fucked up.

Efnysien opened his mouth, an annoying habit he hadn't yet kicked, trying to think of where to begin. Pryderi backhanded him across the face and blood trickled from his lip.

"I had her," Pryderi said calmly. "Years of waiting for someone who held absolutely no drop of magic whatsoever, and now... Gone. All because that *cythraul* invoked Cigfa's name. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU HAVE DONE?" His spit flew, and his green eyes bulged with fury. "You were supposed to have the archers aim straight for that *filth*, not Anwen!"

"It was a strategic move," Efnysien argued, his back straight and at attention. *"You saw his reaction when they met. It made more sense to target the weakest pawn in the room."* He didn't think they needed her anyway. What could a human girl really do?

Pryderi let out a low chuckle, which made the hairs on Efnysien's neck stand. "Weakest pawn..."

To him, she was anything but.

Efnysien hesitated, trying to choose his words carefully, for once, before he spoke. *"I will make it up to you."*

"You will." Pryderi's shoulders relaxed now that his pent-up anger had been released, and he was about to give Efnysien his next orders when Rhiannon sauntered in.

"What happened?" She entered without formality, Pryderi pinching the bridge of his nose in annoyance.

Rhiannon was wearing a white gown with a high slit up the thigh, something she

wouldn't dare wear in the mundane world. Her fingers and arms were covered with iridescent crystal designs that glowed in the soft light of her son's office.

"I come here fashionably late so as not to upstage the bride and instead find her gone and the castle in an uproar!"

"Mother," Pryderi greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. "*He* invoked Cigfa's name."

The goddess brought her hand to her heart, disturbed by the news. She'd loved Cigfa as much as her son, and her murder had enraged her all the same, but time had dulled her anger. Now, she was only there to support Pryderi in any way she could.

"What do you plan to do?" she asked.

Pryderi went around his desk to sit in his chair, the day catching up with him. "What can I do?" he mused. "Every adventurer I have sent has disappeared into the mist... Brân won't let us up North... We have no way of getting to the pieces since Anwen is gone..."

Efnysien slipped from the room as Rhiannon went to console her son. One way or another, he was going to finish what that bastard started, and the only way to do that was to get all the pieces first.

To prove his worth, Efnysien would make his way up North. It was terrain he knew well. With Brân far too busy trying to figure out how to save his people who'd vanished, he'd slip in undetected under the Raven God's watchful eye. He would have to save what little magic he had and go by horse. It would take a long time to get to Eryri, but it'd be worth it to get back into Pryderi's good graces.

Branwen led them out to the cloudy plane behind Hafgan's home that was surrounded by lush, misty forest. Nysien and Hafgan were already preparing their transportation, their familiars lined up: Hafgan's [*gwyllgi*](#), Nos; Nysien's [*ceffyl dŵr*](#), Willow; and Branwen's [*adar llwch gwin*](#), Volmear.

In the mild weather, the portal in Hafgan's Divine Court, Elendi, could be seen from where they stood, up on one of the craggy hills. Unlike Pryderi's, his portal was chiselled from limestone. It still held Arawn's sigil at its peak, and to match it, Hafgan's crest of a ring of thorns with a crescent moon at its centre, though the portal itself was cracked and no longer worked.

Anwen was showing Branwen the dress she'd found, her hands stuck in the pockets with glee since she'd never had pockets in her dresses before, when she stepped onto the grassland and screamed at what was awaiting her there.

"What are those?" Anwen shouted, scaring Nos.

Hafgan did his best to hold Nos back, his sharp teeth snapping at her. "Well, because *someone* can't travel by magic, we just have to do it the old-fashioned way." He grinned.

There was nothing old-fashioned about the massive black dog that stood before them. It was twice as tall as Branwen, its fur long and as dark as ink. Its blood-red eyes bore into a person's soul. He reminded Anwen of Arawn's wolf, though that hellhound was much more deadly than the dog before her.

Anwen's every gesture and mood had Hafgan wanting to tease her. It was just too easy. "You've hurt his feelings. Have you never seen a *gwyllgi*?"

"No," she said in all honesty, smoothing out her skirt.

Hafgan didn't overlook the fact that she'd found the one dress he'd left in the closet but he was a bit disappointed. He thought the colour would brighten her blue eyes, which it did, but the shade of purple simultaneously washed out the subtle pink of her skin.

Hafgan shrugged. "To be fair, they're not the most social of creatures." He reached up and rubbed his belly, placating him.

"Willow here is a *ceffyl dŵr*," Nysien introduced her. The horse was deep indigo with spots of white and moss green around her legs, the perfect size for him. Her angelic white wings spread, letting the morning air flow through her feathers and mane, which constantly dripped with water.

"This is Volmear. He's an *adar llwch gwin*," Branwen beamed. The massive griffon had sharp claws that dug deep into the earth, its wingspan larger than Willow's. He had russet brown feathers, tinged with white and grey on his chest. "You'll ride with me, if that's all right?"

"Rather yours than his," Anwen confessed, wanting to be nowhere near Nos, the animal looking more like he wanted to eat her.

Branwen helped Anwen climb atop Volmear, his feathers as soft as the down pillows she had slept on in Pryderi's castle. Nysien and Hafgan followed suit, gracefully jumping onto their familiars' backs.

"Hold tight!" Branwen shouted, and in a whoosh of air, Volmear jerked them high into the sky. Anwen's screams continued as she clamped her eyes shut until he levelled out.

"Open your eyes!" Branwen gleefully yelled behind her, not wanting Anwen to miss the sight.

Anwen hesitated as she held fast to Volmear, but she was glad when she pried her eyes open to the wondrous view. The valley and town below looked magnificent, the trees dancing in the wind. As they flew higher, dark clouds turned as fluffy as cotton and interrupted their path. When they came out the other side of them, the bright sky spanned to the horizon. Feeling freer than when she rode Poppy, Anwen threw her arms into the air, the currents sweeping past her fingertips.

On their left was Nysien and Willow keeping pace as she trotted on a stream of constant water, her wings barely audible as they flapped, while Hafgan, on their right, was leisurely astride his dog, watching Anwen's every move.

Which face truly belonged to her, Hafgan wondered: the uncaring child or brave human willing to help total strangers?

The sun had barely moved when they spotted their destination. The wall of fog that interrupted their path was visible at a distance. They circled and touched down onto a path,

dismounting as a woman pushed off from a lone spruce and joined them.

The *Fflora* before them had pink and violet ombre hair that ran down to her back, the strands so soft they danced in the summer breeze. Her pastel violet dress was skin-tight, leaving nothing to the imagination of her voluptuous, bell-shaped figure. Each of her fingers had multiple rings on it. She wore sturdy boots but made no sound as she walked up to them.

"Haf, it's good to see you." Napellus' voice was as mellow as sweet honey oozing from the comb. She brought him in for a hug, one so intimate that Anwen glanced away.

"Napellus, beautiful as always," Hafgan complimented.

"You say that every time you see me," she teased, pushing at his arm.

"And every time it's true," Hafgan smiled. "Let me introduce you. Napellus. Anwen. Anwen. Napellus. Don't let her beauty fool you. She can kill a person with a single kiss," he winked.

He *winked*.

Napellus slapped at his stomach. "What lies are you telling?" She giggled, the sound like bells chiming. "Seems I'm still the shortest of the group," she sighed, having to look slightly upwards at Anwen.

Napellus was unimpressed by what she saw in this child, but pity filled her heart, knowing what Pryderi had done. She was surprised by how Hafgan positioned himself around Anwen, adjusting himself every time she moved. Napellus couldn't help but find it amusing.

"Bren was ecstatic when she found out she's no longer the youngest." Hafgan chuckled, recalling the night they had brought Anwen back to Elendi. "We can't please everyone."

"Napellus!" Nysien came up and greeted her with a kiss on both cheeks, which she returned in kind. "You've changed your hair."

"An earlier situation called for it," Napellus said, and ran her fingers through it.

"Who did you kill this time?" Branwen asked sarcastically. She suffocated her friend in a bear hug.

"I didn't kill anyone..." Napellus huffed. "Just left them a bit... incapacitated."

"I'm so proud of you!" Branwen exclaimed as she let her go.

Anwen wasn't sure what to make of them, speaking of killing people as if talking about the weather... She believed something was definitely wrong with all of them.

"Napellus, can you fill us in?" Hafgan asked, now that the greetings were over.

Napellus leaned against Nos; the animal seemed happy to accommodate her as she addressed the rest of them. "I think I know what's been gobbling up the adventurers that go in there, and you're not going to like it," she said. "They're most likely [*gwyllion*](#)."

Branwen groaned. Nysien put his hands on his hips. Hafgan made a stern face.

This wasn't good.

"What's a *gwyllion*?" Anwen asked.

"They're phantom Fae who died painful deaths and roam about killing people in the same way out of revenge," Hafgan answered. "Good thing I came prepared."

He went to the small pack that was slung across the back of Nos and shoved his whole arm into it. "Silver is the best thing for them," he grunted as he pulled out a sharp dagger. "This should kill them if they come for you. Do you understand?" he stressed, making sure Anwen was paying attention as he handed her the dagger. "These beings aren't magic, but born from hate and regret, something even you can't negate. So, make sure to stay close."

Anwen's hand shook as she wrapped it around the cold, stone hilt of the blade. Branwen went to the same bag and pulled out her own weapon. It was a type of flail, with the staff portions connected by silver chains, and a heavy, spiked ball hanging from the end.

Anwen wondered what else he had stored in there, maybe even a whole badger.

Nysien took the small pouch from his waist and opened it. Little silver arrowheads floated out as he expertly controlled them with his magic, positioning them around himself.

"Napellus will hold down the fort. We'll meet back in the town down the way... Hopefully." Hafgan pulled Anwen to the edge of the veiled mist, Branwen and Nysien by his sides.

"Whoa, what?" Anwen panicked, finally catching up to the conversation. "You want *me* to go into *that*?" she asked, the mist a thick wall before them. "With one little knife?"

"Dagger," Hafgan corrected. "And you won't be alone. Nis, Bren and I are here too."

"That's not the point!" Anwen argued.

"No, the point is that you seem to be the only one unaffected by the Cauldron's magic,"

he half growled in her ear, “so of course you’d be coming with us to find it.”

“Haf, be nice.” Branwen pushed him and his arm pulled into the mist. He jerked it back, unimpressed at her smile.

“May Aranrhod guide you!” Napellus shouted behind them. Anwen had expected their familiars to still be there as she glanced at Napellus but found her by herself.

Hafgan patted himself down, checking he had everything he needed. He shrank his bottomless bag to half its size and tied it to his belt, then glanced at Anwen. He wasn’t surprised to see terror on her face. Her arms and legs trembled, and the grip on her dagger was flimsy. It was unfair of him to ask her to do this, any of this, but it would be worth it in the end.

“Are you ready?” Hafgan asked Anwen, taking her free hand in his to steady her. Though her skin was clammy, he could feel the smoothness beneath his own callused palm. Like velvet, he wanted to run his hands over every part of her.

Hafgan reluctantly let go as his cheeks blushed with indecent thought. He repositioned her hand to his cape.

This would be safer... for him.

“Take your time, Anwen,” Nysien said. “But the sooner we go in, the sooner we come out.”

“And whatever happens in between—” Branwen couldn’t finish her sentence, Nysien’s elbow finding its way to her ribs to silence her.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Hafgan finished.

Anwen’s stomach stretched into tighter knots as she stood stared into the abyss of fog. She wasn’t going to die there, not with Branwen and Nysien and Hafgan to protect her. And especially not before she was back in Pryderi’s arms.

24

Anwen took a tentative step forward, then another, until she'd crossed into the thick mist. It was as if someone had instantly pulled a linen blanket over her head, cutting off her every sense. The damp that swirled around them clung to their clothes and hair.

"Bren?" Anwen called as she clutched the hilt of the dagger tighter, the grip biting into her palm.

"I'm here," Branwen yelled, the sounds of their voices muffled by the fog. She could barely make out the figures in front of her, keeping one hand on Nysien's shoulder so they wouldn't be separated. "What do we do now?"

"Move cautiously," Hafgan instructed them. "Let me know the instant either of you feels sick." He didn't want to say it, but already he could feel the effects of the Cauldron, a headache radiating from the back of his skull. The Cauldron was far away by his account.

"What am I supposed to do?" Anwen shouted.

"Don't die before we get there," Nysien replied in a serious tone.

"We'll move further in." Hafgan pulled her along with him as Nysien's warning sank in.

They continued, blindly walking as close together as possible without tripping over one another.

Hafgan stiffened. It wasn't just the headache that thrummed through him that had him on edge. The air around them eddied violently as a piercing screech ripped through it.

Anwen's dagger, which was already slick with sweat, slipped from her fingers and fell to the damp grass.

Letting go of Hafgan's cloak, Anwen crouched down to find it, her hands smearing with turf as she frantically searched for it. Pressure weighed her down as she could hear in the distance smothered grunts and clanging of metal against something solid.

Anwen's eyes stung with tears, blinding her further, as unknown screams, which were worse than the Dark Faes' wails, attacked her senses.

She finally found the hilt of her weapon and brought it close to her chest, huddling over it. She rocked back and forth, trying to calm herself. She wasn't going to die here. It was too

soon.

“Anwen? Anwen!” Hafgan grabbed her shoulder.

Anwen’s terror overcame her, and a scream tore through her as violently as the phantom’s. She abruptly brought the dagger across his hand, slashing at his too-tight-of-a-grip, then at his cheek.

“Fuck! Anwen, stop.” Hafgan pulled her from the ground and held her wrists together. His body pressed against hers, trying to make sure she understood who was standing before her.

Anwen’s body shivered at his contact. “Hafgan?” she whispered.

“I’m sorry I scared you. You let go... I panicked.”

Hafgan had never felt such gnawing dread. To him, the *gwyllion* were nothing more than an inconvenience—like a buzzing fly in summer—but losing sight of Anwen... The prospect of her being separated and killed... He tried to quash the agitation it brought out in him and was glad she couldn’t see his face at that moment.

“You’ve nothing to worry about,” Anwen said stubbornly, still shaking in his hold. “I won’t die before going back to Pryderi.”

She couldn’t help but hear the double meaning behind Hafgan’s words: that the one way of collecting the Cauldron pieces had vanished before him.

Hafgan let her wrists go, agitated, and wrapped her hand around his cloak again. “My apologies,” he sneered, “it won’t happen again.”

The air around them was still once more, and a low-pitched whistle came from twenty paces away, then another at ten. Hafgan returned the sound in kind, its volume almost deafening, so it could be heard in the damp air.

“Looks like they’re still alive. We’ll regroup. Don’t let go.”

They continued their whistling until they had all found each other.

“Bastards ripped my favourite shirt,” Nysien shouted angrily as he came closer, the shredded fabric flapping against his chiselled stomach which was slashed with scratches. He quickly healed himself.

“Better your shirt than your arse,” Branwen replied.

The fog shifted again.

“Quiet, both of you.” Hafgan took a ready stance, brandishing his daggers. Their hilts were looped for a more dexterous grip, giving him options in combat.

Anwen clung to Hafgan’s short cloak, her fingers going numb, trying to make sure she never let go. Another piercing scream tore by them and stopped behind her. She turned and gazed at where the *gwyllion* floated, its body iridescent against the muddy mist.

It had no legs, its ragged clothes hovering in place with it. Spindly arms and hands too long for its body reached towards her, its fingernails broken and pointed. She stared into a face of death, its eyes gouged from its skull, leaving only blood-streaked holes where they should have been.

And its mouth...

Anwen had expected it to be grotesquely wide with rows of sharp teeth, ready to scream and devour her, but instead it was sewn shut, thick black thread stitching it tight. Its scream tore from a slash in its neck, where the muscles vibrated, and black blood oozed.

Hafgan moved between them, slashing his right blade up and the left across his body, trying to put more distance between them. “Let’s move!” he boomed.

Branwen took hold of Anwen’s arm, making her jump. The earlier skirmish left a bead of blood running from Branwen’s temple. She was more out of breath than usual, her eyesight hazy. All three of them fell in sync, their movements fluid as they watched each other’s blind spots.

There were more *gwyllion* out there.

Anwen was amazed at how the three of them seemed unfazed by the challenge before them, as if fighting monsters was a constant in their lives. She wondered if that was how their friendship worked, as she couldn’t imagine them finding similarities in anything else.

Anwen’s legs ached as they all stopped behind a large oak to catch their breath. She didn’t know how long they’d been running, and her lungs couldn’t take much more. Another *gwyllion* swooped down on them.

Nysien pulled Anwen forward, half carrying her until they felt the mud under their feet give way to cobbled stone and the sound of running water below them. They hit a bridge, and all three of them felt it.

As Hafgan dealt the deadly blow to the *gwyllion*, Anwen slipped from Nysien’s grasp as

he slumped to the cool stone. They had made it into a closer range of the Cauldron's energy, which hit them violently.

"We're close," Hafgan said as he stopped to crouch down before Anwen, trying to catch his breath. The fog thinned enough for his godly eyes to see she was pale. Sweat plastered her hair to her temples, and her clothes were so messy he was glad she couldn't see herself.

"Anwen, can you keep moving?" Hafgan didn't have to worry about the other two. Sick or not, he trusted they would get the job done.

Anwen nodded with haunted, tear-streaked eyes.

"Wait," Nysien huffed, using the wall of the bridge for support. Hafgan was covered in so much blood... He held out his hand towards Hafgan and Branwen, mumbling a protection spell. It wouldn't do much against the Cauldron's effects, but he hoped it would be enough to get them there. "Sorry, Anwen," he turned to her, "there's nothing I can really do for you."

Anwen shrugged, unable to find her voice as she held back tears. They all cautiously walked across the bridge.

"This way," Hafgan said, feeling a strong pull from the route on the left.

All of them were on high alert for whatever was to come. Their path was cut short by a thatched house that had become so dilapidated; they could scarcely call it a house. But, if there were houses, then there should've been people.

"A village?" Branwen asked. Her limbs felt heavy as she leaned against the structure. What she wouldn't give to lie down...

"There shouldn't be anything between here and Gwent," Nysien said, biting back the bile in his throat. "An ancient merchant trail perhaps, but-" He wretched to the side, spilling his stomach. His spell wasn't as strong as he had hoped.

"I doubt it's a place we're familiar with," Hafgan concluded, sweat dripping from his brow. The phantoms weren't the only thing the mist had brought with it.

Hafgan blindly felt his way around to the side of the house, the rest of them following him close behind. With each turn they took, another volley of sickness struck them, their clothes drenched in sweat and water.

"Haf, I'm not feeling too good," Nysien finally conceded, another volley of sickness

washing over him.

Hafgan had them quicken their pace, unsure what would be waiting for them.

It was worth it. Whatever they had to face, whatever sickness would ravage them, it was worth finding the Cauldron piece.

They rushed along the paths ahead until, finally, they broke free of the mist and into a clearing.

The breath they all drew as the fresh air hit their faces was easier, the heavy mist no longer clogging their mouths and noses. Branwen's stomach finally got the best of her as vomit poured from her and into the dirt at her feet.

Even though they had made it this far, Anwen felt no effects of the Cauldron's magic. She was about to ask if they could all take a much-needed rest when she saw what Hafgan saw.

His back was tense, shoulders pulled together, and breath shallow as he took in the carnage before them. Rigid caution set his features straight as he waved a warning hand to the three behind him not to move a muscle.

In the clearing ahead, a hoard of *gwyllion* circled the cobbled street. Some resembled the one they had seen earlier, while others were deformed in different ways: their necks bent at a deathly angle or bleeding from unknown wounds, but all of them struck the same terror.

On the ground around them lay a group of bodies, their limbs pulled off and strewn about to make for a gory scene. Though the adventurers were long dead, some of the *gwyllion* were still enacting their gruesome deaths on the poor souls.

"The adventurers," Nysien whispered and counted out five heads... and those were of the ones he could see.

As Anwen took in the shredded flesh, she couldn't hold back her choke of disgust, the bodies black with their blood and guts hanging out.

Hafgan moved quickly to clamp his hand over her mouth.

But it was too late.

25

The *gwyllion* turned their attention to the newcomers, moving swiftly as their cacophony of screams echoed in the clearing.

“Why are there so many?” Branwen shouted, amazed at the number before them, readying her flail.

Nysien magicked his arrowheads around him, his speed not what it should be. “It must be the Cauldron’s doing. They’re probably feeding off its energy. This won’t be easy...” he smiled as sweat glistened off his forehead.

A grin stretched Branwen’s cracked lips. “Understatement of the year!”

Anwen couldn’t understand how they could be smiling at a time like this or why their eyes had lit up with excitement.

Hafgan wore the same expression and didn’t hesitate as he gave out orders. “Nis, you take the right flank. Bren, take the left. Anwen...” He let go of her mouth and slung her over his shoulder, securely tying her to him with what was left of his cloak. He only staggered one step, trying hard not to show how dizzy he was. “Looks like you’re coming with me. We’ll meet up on the other side. Go!”

They each moved into position, slashing at the *gwyllion* as they approached. An explosion of light erupted from the right, scattering them long enough for Nysien to shoot out his arrowheads, taking out three *gwyllion* at once. If he had been in top shape, it would’ve been seven.

Branwen spun her flail and its spiked ball at the end to kick up chunks of earth and pin the *gwyllion* down as she plunged the end of her weapon into their hearts.

The *gwyllion* had no chance against them.

Hafgan was no less dangerous, the god dexterously holding his silver blades as he navigated his way through the clearing to make sure no monsters touched a hair on Anwen’s head. Her body tensed each time he dodged one of the many attacks that hounded them.

One of the monsters swiped at his blind spot. He only had a second to act before it

would kill her. He veered backwards, the *gwyllion* shredding its fingernails deep into his forearm, making him drop his dagger. The pinky of his good hand shot out, catching the loop at the end of the hilt before it hit the ground. He recovered and plunged both blades into the monster's neck, slicing it clean off.

Hafgan disposed of the others in the same fashion, blood saturating his arm and clothes. Thankfully, Anwen came out unharmed.

"Nis! Bren!" Hafgan turned and shouted into the dizzying onslaught, signalling he'd made it to the other side of the clearing. A thick film covered the inside of his mouth, and a blurriness crept into his vision.

"Go!" Nysien shouted. "We'll hold them off! Find the piece!" Another irruption of light blinded them.

Hafgan didn't pause as he turned and took Anwen farther away from the fight. He felt her squirming on his back, coming out of a fainting spell.

"No... Bren..." Anwen incoherently whispered in his ear.

"They can take care of themselves," Hafgan answered. "They've come out of worse." He jostled her into a better position. "Don't pass out on me again. I need you to get that piece."

Anwen couldn't comprehend what he was saying as she buried her face further into his neck. The smell of sweet sweat, mixed with a muskier scent of bergamot and leather, reminded her of her father's study: of the books and furniture, and the sunlight streaming through the large window behind his desk, bringing a nostalgia she thought she'd never feel.

She wanted to go home.

Hafgan set her on the ground against one of the demolished houses. Her head rolled to the side without any support. His hands fumbled as he opened the bag at his waist and pulled out a small vial.

Anwen heard a faint crack, then was aware of the jolting smell of something so foul, so putrid, that she sat bolt upright, her mind clear and her nose burning.

"What the *fuck* was that?" she yelled, adrenaline coursing through her body so fast she thought it would explode at any moment.

Hafgan huffed a laugh, breaking another vial under his own nose. His vision was getting worse. "Well, I think that's the first time I've heard you use such filthy language."

“How can you be laughing?” she vehemently protested as she held her nose, trying to keep the snot from running out. “What did you do?”

Hafgan held up the vial. “[*Sal ammoniac*](#), or more commonly known as smelling salt, with a bit of my own ingredients added to give it that extra kick. It should last long enough for us to find the piece.” He threw the bottle away and tore his sleeve off so the blood wouldn’t dry into his arm hair.

“You should’ve used it sooner,” Anwen commented, high on the buzzing effect. She stood too quickly, and he had to steady her, his bloodied arm stretching towards her.

Anwen was amazed he was still standing. Hafgan was breathing heavily, and black bags hung underneath his unfocused eyes. She realised the cuts she’d made on him were gone, gasping as she witnessed the slashes over his arm heal in seconds.

The ground shook beneath them, Branwen’s barrage of attacks sending shockwaves all the way to them.

“Come on, we should hurry.” Hafgan deflected her gaze; he didn’t have time to explain. Many thought his ability to heal quickly was a gift for the warrior, but in fact, it had been a punishment for what he’d done in the War. He had to be wounded by his enemy twice for it to take effect and he couldn’t harm himself to speed the process. And it definitely didn’t work against the Cauldron; the ringing in his ears made that evident.

As they walked further away from the clearing, Hafgan was prepared to hit the mist once more, but found their path empty, no houses or *gwyllion* or fog to interrupt them. The only thing that stood in their way was a lone structure in the distance.

“What is that?” Anwen asked, squinting as something glinted brightly.

As they walked closer, they could make out a well, fashioned from thick stone, with marblework around it. At the edge of it was a golden bowl fastened to four chains over a marble slab, their length reaching up to the heavens, so far that they couldn’t see an end to them.

Hafgan’s vision was getting worse as they made their way towards it. His knees biting hard into the dirt as he lost his footing. The Cauldron’s miasma was suffocating, and he was glad Branwen and Nysien weren’t with them. The pain that radiated through his body was excruciating. His hands reached for his head, smudging his sweat-soaked face with dirt; nails

puncturing deep into his temples, trying to claw at the pounding that wouldn't cease. He held back his screams and shut his eyes.

"Hafgan!" Anwen knelt beside him, trying unsuccessfully to pry his fingers away.

"Hafgan! Come on! You need to get up!" She refused to go alone.

Hafgan tried hard to stand, but Anwen had to half-drag him over until he slumped onto the marble. As he clasped the sides of the golden bowl to steady himself, he froze, the golden bowl working as a Venus flytrap to keep anyone looking to liberate the well's contents from doing so.

Hafgan couldn't move, nor speak, nor hear, nor see anything around him. It was a fate worse than when they had been left senseless in the mist, but a nice reprieve from the insanity that plagued his body.

Anwen stared across the well, terror gripping her legs. "Hafgan..." she whispered. "Hafgan!" She was reaching out to him, her hand a length away from his face, when she saw out of the corner of her eye a figure lounging before her without a care.

"Hello there," the man said to Anwen, uninterested in the god behind her. "Don't be alarmed... Well, actually, *do* if you feel the need for it." He pushed himself up from his position.

He was as familiar to her as her own shadow. His golden hair flowed out with intricate braids, and his green eyes stared her down with a diamond sheen. It was Pryderi. She knew he would never have left her to brave such a world... that he'd come and save her.

He pulled himself upright, then bowed.

"Pryderi, I missed you," Anwen gushed, eyes watering.

Her terrors were over. She'd be going back with him and putting this whole ordeal behind her.

"Is that how I look to you?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

Anwen brushed her tears away and saw his face change into someone she didn't recognise. Hurt and loss gurgled in her stomach as she stared at the man before her.

He had shockingly red hair, his right eyelid slit through with a scar. He wasn't as young or tall or well-built as Pryderi, but she guessed that meant nothing in the world of the gods. He was dressed in a primitively layered brown robe.

"Who are you?" Anwen asked, voice shaking.

"I'm insulted you don't remember, or perhaps I shouldn't be," he mused. "Llwyd," he bowed again, "or not."

Anwen didn't believe the trickster's words. She'd never laid eyes on the man before and he wasn't going to convince her otherwise. She glanced at Hafgan, his form as solid as stone, then towards the direction of Branwen and Nysien, hoping they weren't too far behind.

"Ah, I don't think your friends will be joining us any time soon," Llwyd/Not Llwyd said.

Anwen's face dropped, eyes going wide.

Llwyd/Not Llwyd held his hands up in innocent defence. "No, no, it's not what you think! They're not dead. Or perhaps they are... Just the same, they'll not come to us for now."

The creature was as infuriating as he was confusing.

"What did you do to him?" Anwen asked calmly, nodding towards Hafgan.

Llwyd/Not Llwyd's grin turned mischievous. "He is my hostage!" He threw his hands up, sparks of light shooting out of them to create flowers in the sky. "All good stories start with taking someone hostage, some not. And then there is the demand."

Hostage? Demand? He was making less sense than the jesters at court.

"You have something of mine," Llwyd/Not Llwyd tauntingly sang.

"Something of yours?" Anwen echoed.

"Yes," Llwyd/Not Llwyd snapped, "it was taken from me when I was in your world a long time ago. I want it back."

Anwen felt on her person for something, *anything*, that didn't belong to her and found nothing. "I've nothing of yours," she stated.

"Lies will not help your situation, and time will not bow to you in this decision. Give me what I ask for, and I shall return in kind," he gestured to Hafgan.

Every second Anwen rummaged around her person, she came up empty. She had no idea what Llwyd/Not Llwyd wanted from her and had found nothing on her travels—picked up no trinkets that could belong to him. She glanced at Hafgan again.

She should leave him... Find her way back to Branwen... Somehow escape.

This was the perfect opportunity.

Sweat pooled around the collar of her dress, and when she went to wipe it away, her necklace fell out.

Llwyd/Not Llwyd spied it immediately, eyes glistening and voice turning cold with greed. "So, you do have it."

Anwen followed his gaze, seeing what he was talking about and clutched the necklace to her breast. "This is mine!" she argued, staggering back in confusion. It was the only thing she'd been able to take to *Annwfn*, and it'd never left her. She wasn't going to give it up easily.

"No, it's mine!" Llwyd/Not Llwyd shouted, then collected himself. "I did say this is a hostage situation, didn't I? So, let me spell it out for you: Hafgan for the necklace."

Anwen couldn't believe the ultimatum he was giving her. Would she have to give up her necklace for *him*? The Dark God that, with his pitiful end, she could return to Pryderi? There was no sweeter deal than that.

Llwyd/Not Llwyd saw her weighing her options, his proposition lacking appeal. His eyebrow ticked up in amusement. "How about this... Branwen for the necklace?"

He snapped his fingers, and a sheet of glass appeared before them, showing Branwen pinned down by six *gwyllion*. Anwen watched as Branwen's knee hit the ground, the pressure of the monsters overtaking her.

Anwen didn't give it a second thought as she jerked the chain from her neck and held it out for him to see. "And the piece?" she bartered, lips tight, remembering what they'd come for.

"Why do you think I have it?" Llwyd/Not Llwyd grinned.

"Perhaps you don't," Anwen countered with the same utterance he had used with her.

Llwyd/Not Llwyd laughed, his belly rumbling, conceding. "It's yours!"

Anwen threw the necklace at his feet. Llwyd/Not Llwyd snatched it before it hit the ground, cradling it in his hands as he would a lover, then snapped his fingers.

The pendant shattered into a million pieces, leaving only the butterfly that had been at its centre to transform into a beautiful woman. Llwyd/Not Llwyd's attention was only on the woman as he brought her into his arms, happy once again to have her back.

"A deal is a deal," Anwen snapped as she watched the *gwyllion* slice one of Branwen's

legs.

Llwyd/Not-Llwyd nodded and snapped his fingers once again, then disappeared.

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Hafgan could move again, the well and golden bowl he'd been clutching, gone. The sickness, on the other hand, still ran rampant through him. "Anwen!" he yelled, his hands covering his ears to try to stop the incessant ringing. He wanted to tear out his eyes, rip every shred of hair from his head... Anything to make it stop.

"Shit!"

Anwen tackled him, grabbing for his bottomless bag. She rummaged through it and pulled out the gold chest they'd prepared. She shoved the piece into it and shut the lid.

Hafgan fell limp to the ground, grateful for the silence.

"What the fuck happened?" Hafgan asked, lying next to her, looking up at the blue sky. His lungs felt like they were still on fire. "One moment I was standing there and then the next..."

Footsteps approached them. Branwen and Nysien were out of breath but in one piece. With the Cauldron piece locked away, the stars that had danced around their vision subsided, and their stomachs calmed. They were grimy and drenched in sweat from head to toe, but it meant little to them.

For once, Anwen was glad as she pressed her face into the cool dirt of the ground. She'd never felt anything better.

"What happened?" Nysien asked. "All the *gwyllion* disappeared before we could kill them."

"The mist and village too," Branwen huffed.

"Fuck!" Anwen yelled, startling them all. Her anger boiled over. "He took my necklace!" She tried to push herself up, her hand slipping on the dry earth. Hafgan caught her before she face-planted into it.

Branwen crouched next to her, her attire almost as shredded as Nysien's. She had bruising on the sides of her arms and scratches all over, the gash on her leg still bleeding. Anwen was surprised they were both still upright after fighting off so many.

"You okay, Anwen?" Branwen went as far as holding her hand against her friend's

forehead to check if a fever had set in.

“No, I’m not okay!” Anwen complained, tears springing to the corners of her eyes as her face crumpled. “Hafgan was frozen, and you both were fighting...! I had to give up my necklace... Marged gave me that necklace!” she whinged. “And it turned into a *woman*!” She couldn’t stop the tears that streamed down her face, still unable to comprehend what had happened.

All of them looked at each other in awkward confusion.

Branwen hesitantly patted her on the back to calm her. “There, there, we’ll get you another... necklace...”

Hafgan and Nysien couldn’t hold back the laughter that erupted from them.

“Oh, never mind us almost dying,” Nysien huffed, clutching his sides.

“It’s not funny!” Anwen tried to stew in her anger, but her smile broke through, their laughter infectious.

They all collapsed onto the dirt, their nerves settling as the exhaustion set in. Nysien set to treating Branwen’s wounds and then worked on Anwen’s small scrapes with a salve he’d brought with him. He checked over Hafgan once, just to make sure, but knew his friend wouldn’t need any to be dealt with.

Hafgan’s triumphant smile beckoned them all to move on. “We’ll head back to town. Let Napellus know that we won this one.”

With the mist gone and the chest packed away into the bottomless bag, their journey back was easy.

Periodically, Hafgan’s gaze fell on Anwen, making sure she was still really there, then quickly looked away.

Something had changed.

Anwen didn’t know what it was, but she somehow felt more at peace being around the three of them, which worried her.

Napellus sat in the corner of the pub with a group of creatures enthralled by her every action as they drank and ate. In the summer weather, the pub doors and windows opened to the street, letting laughter and the aromatics of the food float out. As her four adventurers came through the door, she gave a sigh of relief, then welcomed them.

“Still alive!” Napellus rejoiced and beckoned them to join her as she poured them all a glass of wine. “You all look like shit.”

“I feel like it, too.” Branwen downed her glass as she settled into a stool and called to the barmaid to bring a pint of mead.

“Well? Did you find it?” Napellus asked. They all smiled, indicating the favourable outcome. She squealed with delight. “This calls for a celebration! Everyone, a round on me!”

The whole place broke out in cheers.

“How do you feel?” Hafgan asked Anwen, the amethyst in his eyes swimming with worry as he watched her reach for her necklace, only to grasp at air.

“I’m fine,” Anwen lied. She didn’t know how she was going to break the news to Marged, but she knew that, whatever she told her sister, she’d be proud that she’d given it up.

A group on the other side of the pub hollered, gaining Anwen’s attention as one of them fiddled a difficult bridge on his [crwth](#).

Anwen’s face lit up. “Music!” she exclaimed.

The fiddler made his way around the tables, cosying up to every woman and making them feel special. Anwen couldn’t keep still and jumped into the middle of the floor. The patrons watched as she danced and clapped to the tune, some joining in.

Hafgan stood on the edge of the group, watching her. Anwen started to hum the melody as the fiddler came back her way. As the chorus rang out again and again, she figured out the pattern and took the chance to sing the next notes, throwing them into harmony.

“May I?” Hafgan held out his hand to her in waiting.

She took it, feeling free and full of life. The Fae wine was quickly going to her head.

“It must be the start of the solstice festival,” Hafgan commented, spinning her out and

then back into him.

“Solstice festival?” Anwen asked, pausing her singing. “It can’t be that time already.” Her lips turned down in thought, shocked by how quickly the season was moving.

Time moved differently in *Annwfn*, Anwen unaware that years had already passed in the mundane world.

Hafgan could only agonise over her constantly shifting moods. If only he could fix all her worries.

The dancers picked up the pace, stomping their feet as Anwen was pulled back into the merriment. She sang and danced with whoever grabbed her next, until she ended up back in Hafgan’s arms.

Hafgan’s frame was strong as they moved together. He made sure she didn’t bump into anyone as he twirled her across the floor and back to their seats, where she plopped down, completely out of breath.

“I’ve never seen you this happy!” Branwen commented over the last note.

Another tune was already in the air.

“I never have been!” Anwen answered, buzzing with joy, when an elf asked her to dance. She nodded.

Hafgan clicked his tongue in frustration. The elf’s hands touched her arm smoothly as he pulled her from her seat, while the other clasped her waist.

Every move Anwen made, every word she sang, wove its way deeper into Hafgan. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her... No, not kiss... *kiss* was too gentle a word for how much he wanted to devour her, to bask in her. Something he hadn’t felt for decades. But to live the way he did—to get the job done—he had to throw away a part of himself for the good of his people. Somehow, she was pulling that part of him back to the surface, and he didn’t know how much longer he could hold out.

The late night ended in more laughter and drink, all of them stumbling up to one of the rooms and crammed into it to sleep off their celebrations.

Large hands caressed Anwen's body as she slept, exploring places she didn't realise were sensitive. Gasps of pleasure released from her as she felt teeth nibble at her ear, enticing her to turn around and join him.

She placed her hand in his, intertwining their fingers together, and lowered the other to his thigh. "Pryderi, I can't believe you're here." She kissed his hand, her eyes opening, only to see the contrasting grey of his skin against hers.

"Easy, Anwen..." Hafgan's gravelly voice warned her, his amethyst eyes filled with desire.

Hot panic shot through Anwen as she woke. The covers were pinning her down and an arm was slung over her. "Hafgan?" she whispered, petrified that perhaps it really was him. She was able to get one arm out, then another, and finally turned to find Branwen next to her, still fast asleep.

Anwen's heart pounded. There was no way she'd have slept next to him, not when she hated him so, and he her. And what was that dream? Disgust churned her stomach thinking about it, but there was something else... Disappointment? She'd liked the way his hands felt on her, his every grip and touch...

"No... No, that's wrong," she whispered to herself.

"Good morning." Hafgan leaned against the door frame, dressed in fresh clothes he'd stored in his bag. "If you're awake, there's breakfast downstairs. We'll leave once everyone's eaten."

Anwen brought the back of her hands to her flaming cheeks.

"What?" Hafgan asked, concerned as he pushed away from the door frame. Before he could get any closer, she hid under the covers.

"Nothing!" Anwen yelled, rudely waking Branwen. "Just... Get out so I can get dressed!"

"Haf!" Branwen threw her shoe at him, her sleep ruined. "You heard her."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. I'll see you downstairs." He shook his head in confusion as he left.

Anwen jostled her way out of the bed. She couldn't remember how she'd ended up in it, the heavy flow of alcohol the night before blurring more than a few memories. Her body, on the other hand, recalled the continuous running and dancing she'd done, her legs like gelatin as she struggled to keep steady.

There was a fresh dress folded on top of the chair in the corner waiting for her. She grabbed it and quickly put it on.

Branwen had gone back to sleep, her snoring louder than in the night. Anwen wanted her to go downstairs with her but knew she deserved her rest after all that fighting. Reluctantly, she opened the door and quietly made her way down to the pub.

Napellus and Nysien were already eating at one of the tables, Hafgan at the other end. He watched as Anwen pulled out a stool for herself, as far away from him as possible.

"Seems like you held your own yesterday," Napellus said, impressed by the human. "Not many come across *gwyllions* and live to tell the tale." She eyed Anwen's bare neck where her necklace should've sat. "Did you lose your necklace in the fight?"

Anwen reached for where it should be, crestfallen as she grasped again at nothing. "Yes," she confirmed. "But we got the piece..."

Hafgan reached towards her, wanting to reassure her—that giving up a trinket was better than giving up her life. He didn't think he could bear to ever see that happen. Resolved, he stood and dropped into the stool closest to her, wanting nothing more than to grab her then and there. To taste the sweetness of her lips that her mug so easily had access to. He wished he were that mug.

Anwen pulled away from Hafgan, the dream fresh in her mind. What those hands could do...

"Once Bren wakes, we'll make our way back to Elendi. Breakfast be damned," Nysien said, eyeing Hafgan. His friend was as blind to his feelings as he was to anyone else in the room.

Anwen nodded. "Good." More than anything, she desperately wanted a bath.

"So, you're saying I should starve?" Branwen yawned as she joined them, her white hair sticking up more than usual. "How cruel." She nicked one of the bread rolls off Nysien's plate and stuffed it whole into her mouth.

Anwen pushed away from the table, unable to be in Hafgan's presence any longer.

Hafgan watched as she made her way back up the stairs, leaving him wondering what had changed.

Back in Elendi, they gathered behind Hafgan's house, chairs and settees set out to get as much sun as the clouds would allow. They picked up where they left off in the pub, drinking and chatting.

Anwen was having none of it.

"Should we head to the next piece?" She'd wanted to go straight from the mist to Eryri, where the second piece was waiting. The sooner they got this over with, the better.

"Hmm," Nysien mused, taking a sip of his homemade spirits. "It would be good, but I think we also need to get you some training. If the next piece is going to be anything like this one, I imagine there'll be several obstacles to overcome, especially in the mountains. There are many different monsters that roam around there on any given day. Add the Cauldron's sinister energy, and I believe we'll have to fight our way through the whole time."

"Nis is right," Branwen chimed in. "With the way the Cauldron affected all of us, it might end up that the next time, you'll have to find it yourself. Napellus," she called over her shoulder, "I think you're the closest in terms of skill and magic. Would you teach her a bit? Just enough so that she isn't killed."

Napellus joined the conversation, a beautiful smile lighting her face. "Of course," she said in delight, "I can teach you some of my tricks. Mind you, I'm not one for brute force like these three."

"I don't need to fight. Pryderi said he would protect me," Anwen relayed automatically, confused at herself as the words tumbled from her mouth.

"Because he's doing *such* a good job at the moment." Napellus' words were coated in venom, silencing Anwen.

Anwen shook off the negative feelings as the passing clouds chilled the patio. She clutched her hands over her shoulders. "I don't think I could fight like you want me to," she answered honestly.

"There're different types of fighters," Napellus corrected her. "Not everyone has the same style. Take Haf, for instance. He prefers to kill instantly rather than leave his opponent

in pain. Bren, on the other hand, goes for the rough approach. Nis falls between them depending on the situation.”

“And you?” Anwen asked. “How do you fit in?”

The lighthearted laugh Napellus produced was like sweet music. “I guess I veer more towards Haf’s style.”

“You’re being modest for once, Napellus.” Hafgan reached over to the table and grabbed the pitcher of wine to refill his glass. “I’m sure your ‘opponents’ would rather have your soft touch and face as the last thing they see, than mine,” he smirked.

“Who wouldn’t?” Napellus smiled, then turned to Anwen. “Don’t you worry. I’ll show you how to defend yourself properly.”

Anwen still wasn’t sure if she could do what they wanted. It wasn’t that her father had disapproved of her fighting, but just as with her magic, fighting was something she’d never been very good at. But if Anwen was to survive the next journey, she’d need more than just the dress on her back to get her there.

“I’m in your care.”

“We’ll need to get you some tools, then,” Napellus said.

“Tools?” Anwen asked.

“Unless you’re able to kill someone with your bare hands, which I doubt at this point, you’ll need a weapon.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone!” Anwen yelled. She couldn’t fathom the thought. “Only... protect myself.” She pulled out the silver dagger Hafgan had given her, the blade glinting against the brilliant sun that had reappeared. She’d taken its use for granted. Thought it only a weapon to kill *gwyllion*, something no longer human, and not a person.

“That’s a good start,” Napellus said, eyeing the blade, “but we’ll need a couple of things to go along with it. You know what that means...”

Anwen stared at her, waiting for her to tell her.

“We’ll need to head into town!” Napellus sang. “We’ll all go,” she insisted. “Hafgan wouldn’t miss the chance.”

“Who else is going to pay for everything?” Hafgan joked, sinking deeper into his chair.

The prospect put a wide smile on Anwen’s face. It felt like a lifetime ago that she’d

browsed what the merchants had to offer in Llansteffan's port.

Napellus clapped her hands in celebration.

"He says that," Nysien leaned over to whisper to Anwen, as he grabbed for a ripe berry, "but really he just wants to make sure nothing happens to you."

Anwen lowered her gaze, unsure whether she was happy or uncomfortable with that fact.

Hafgan excused himself, going to the kitchen to grab more wine. He watched Anwen from the window, mesmerised by her smile.

"It's okay, you know," Nysien said, sneaking up behind Hafgan and making him jump.

Hafgan recovered and popped the bottle's cork. "What's okay?"

"To be selfish... to have feelings..." Nysien searched his face, looking for any indication that the god before him might take the hint.

Hafgan stared at him, eyes hard. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Anwen thought that the town Hafgan ruled over would reflect the man himself: hard, uncaring, desolate and dreary. But as they walked through the gates leading from his home onto the clean streets, she was surprised to find it was none of those things.

It was like any other town, with rows of houses and stores on each side. A fountain bubbled at its centre, where the beautiful scenery could be taken in. It was a clear day, and the surrounding valleys towered above them, casting pockets of shade to relieve folk from the summer sun. A waterfall could be seen in the distance, its mist casting rainbows.

Businesses had opened their doors, inviting people to come and go as they pleased. All different types of creatures intermingled without an ounce of spite or ill-will towards one another.

As their group walked through, everyone came out to greet them with smiles and thanks and endless gifts; enough that Nysien had to magically *flitter* them away back to the house.

They passed a small bakery filled with people sitting in, sampling fresh bread and treats.

"Hafgan," a burly Dark Fae called from behind the counter, shaking her hands of the excess flour that covered them. She had shock-white hair, and the wrinkles about her grey face were gritted with perspiration and more flour. She came around the counter, the sunset-orange of her eyes softening as she pulled him in for a hug. Her wings drooped a bit, their muscles not as strong as they used to be.

"I see you've more than Branwen and Napellus with you today," she said, pulling away and clapping him on his back, impressed.

"Fion. Yes," Hafgan smiled, "I kidnapped her on my way back from Arberth."

Fion threw her head back with a laugh. "Stirring up trouble again, eh?"

"Only when I need to," he joked.

"You take care of our God, ya hear?" Fion said to Anwen, laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's not every day he goes around kidnapping beautiful women, so you must have cast a special spell to get him."

Anwen's mouth opened to protest that she didn't have any magic and would never have

done such a thing even if she did, but she shyly nodded instead. She wasn't used to all this, overwhelmed by the love his people held for him and their Divine Court. She was used to the pedigree and pomp that came with being a noble—had worked hard to make sure those around her understood her standing. Yet she never felt more inadequate than she did then.

"Where you headed?" Fion asked them.

"Down to Kylian's," Hafgan answered. "We're going to need some tools to get us through the next hurdle."

Fion *tsked*. "Honestly, you don't rely on us enough," she fussed. "When the time comes, we'll be here for you, Hafgan."

Everyone in the bakery directed their attention towards the five of them, their eyes smouldering, as if a fire was ready to break through at any moment. Anwen had never seen that look in the servants' or guards' eyes in Pryderi's castle, nor at her father's place in Llansteffan, and wondered what he must have done to get it.

"I would never ask it," Hafgan said softly, as if begging for the time to never come.

"You never need to," Fion answered. The other patrons nodded in determined agreement.

Fion ushered them out the door with an armful of treats and they waved gleefully as they said their thanks.

Kylian's workshop was a few streets down from where the bakery was, in the metal district. The smell of ash, dirt and ore rose in the air as they entered the area, leaving the sweet smell of baked goods behind them.

The workshop looked like any other from the outside. A sign with an anvil, hammer, and Hafgan's crest jutted out from the eave.

"Is this your shop?" Anwen asked, spying the insignia.

"No." Hafgan huffed a laugh at the unseen joke. "Though I helped set up most of the businesses in Elendi, Kylian's is special. He's the one I usually go to. He slapped my crest on his sign for bragging rights. Soon, everyone else did as well."

Anwen looked around and realised that every shop did indeed have the barb-encircled crescent moon somewhere on their sign.

Hafgan pushed open the door to the workshop. The heat from the ovens out back made

the room stifling, and the smell of leather and metal settled in the air as they stepped in.

The storefront was littered with weapons, the right wall covered with ornate, expensive swords, while the left was home to accessories: gauntlets, knuckles, throwing knives, and more.

"Is the Master in, Rylee?" Hafgan asked the boy behind the counter.

Rylee wasn't more than eleven, his black hair hiding most of his elven features. He nodded and ran off into the back to find his master, and within seconds, a Giant came up to the counter.

"Really, Rylee, you need to learn to speak with the customers if you're ever going to be a tradesman." Kylian glanced up at the group waiting for him, "Oh, Hafgan, my apologies." I didn't realise it was you." He slightly bowed to him.

Kylian was a hard man, as guessed from any blacksmith and Giant. He walked with a slight limp, and his tanned, bald head was slick with sweat, which he dabbed away with a grimy cloth from his apron, smudging soot onto it.

"That's alright, Kylian," Hafgan said. "I see Rylee still isn't there yet with speaking to anyone."

"The damndest thing," Kylian replied, rubbing at his neck. "He's old enough now to help out in the workshop but still won't speak a word."

"Give him time. He'll get there." Hafgan sympathised. "Anyway, we've come here for some tools. Got anything good in?"

"For yourself?" Kylian asked. "I thought I sold you a blade just last month."

Hafgan smiled. "No, this time it's for my guest." He pushed Anwen forward, giving Kylian a chance to size her up.

Kylian had never seen a human before, but if the rest of them were as lovely as this one... "Hmm, I'd recommend a compact dagger, or knuckles if she gears more towards Branwen's style." He waved a hello to Branwen, who was on the other side of the store looking for something for herself.

"I was thinking something a bit more... elegant," Hafgan said.

Kylian shook his head. "Haven't made one like that in years, but feel free to have a look around and see what you'd like, love," he directed his words to Anwen. "Or if you have

something particular in mind and want made-to-order, we do that as well.”

Anwen left them at the counter to chat as she looked around the shop. She didn’t know the first thing about weapons or whether there were good or bad ones. She remembered the display in her father’s office and wished she’d at least asked him *what* they were for and *how* they were used.

A glint caught her eye.

In a cracked barrel of swords with a wooden sign that hung on one of the hilts, the original price had been crossed out and a lower one added in red ink. She went over to it, carefully moving the heavier ones out of the way, to uncover the smallest blade below.

She hadn’t expected much but was taken aback by its beauty. Its scabbard was exquisite, made of white ivory that was chiselled with fauna, allowing its blue blade to show through.

“I forgot about that old thing,” Kylian said. Anwen held it towards the light of the shop window. It’d been over a decade since he made it. “That one is made from sky rock. Had a bitch of a time getting it—excuse my language—yet no one wanted it. Thought it was too small. Had a guy once ask if it was a letter opener,” he quipped. “It’s lightweight and practically shatter-proof. Should be perfect for you, love.”

Anwen’s hand wrapped around the soft grip of the hilt, and she pulled it from its scabbard. She took in the fine sheen of the blade as it shone an iridescent blue. But as she walked back up to the counter, its shine began to dull, settling into a deep metallic black. She dropped it onto the workbench in front of them, startled at its magic.

“Fuck, Kylian!” Hafgan pulled Anwen away and shielded her behind him. “You could’ve told us it was a Malison blade! When did you start making cursed objects?”

“I don’t!” Kylian passionately defended as he held Rylee back in the same fashion. He didn’t want his young apprentice anywhere near it. “You know me, Hafgan, I’d never.”

Kylian hesitantly brought his face eye-level to the counter, examining the dagger without touching it. “You must be a powerful one, love... for it to react like that. You sure you’re human?” he joked, but Anwen couldn’t find what was funny about any of this.

Panic, fear, and uncertainty washed over Anwen as she clung to Hafgan’s arm. She wasn’t used to this... Magic. She’d never influenced *anything*, and yet, those around her were shocked and astonished.

Hafgan looked down at Anwen. She seemed to be full of surprises. "Pick it up," he told her, curious as to what would happen.

"You first!" Anwen shot back, finally finding her voice.

"With your magic, it shouldn't harm you. Pick it up."

Anwen's hand hovered over the dagger, fingers touching it as lightly as possible, wary that it might bite back. When she found that nothing happened, she took hold of the hilt once again and held it in front of her. She exhaled with satisfaction.

Hafgan let a small sigh escape, thankful as well that nothing backfired. They had all been too absorbed in the blade, not realising they had an audience behind them. Nysien came closer to inspect it.

"Perhaps it's resonating with the Cauldron's energy..."

"What?" Anwen asked, deeply concerned by the hypothesis. She sheathed the thing and gently set it back on the counter.

"Well," Nysien continued, "maybe you're not negating magic as we thought... Maybe you're just storing it and when it finds a suitable outlet..."

"You mean to say... I've been stealing magic?" Anwen went pale. If that were true, then she was no better than those Brotherhood bastards. The thought hitched her breathing. She didn't want that, any of it! She never thought she would miss *not* having magic.

Before Anwen spiralled into complete panic, Napellus clapped her hands together, startling all of them. They had more pressing matters. "Buy it, don't buy it, but we need to make a stop at Isliah's to get you some new clothes. I can't believe you didn't take her there sooner," she scorned Hafgan.

"We had more pressing matters at the time," Hafgan defended again, trying to shake off the conundrum that was Anwen. "How much do we owe you?" he asked Kylian.

Kylian shook his head, happy to part with the blade for nothing. "Take it, it's yours."

Hafgan carefully held out his bottomless bag, and Anwen dropped it in.

Napellus grabbed Anwen's hand and pulled her out of the shop. "Come along! I think this next stop will be more up your alley."

They headed back towards the bakery and into the fabric district. All the shops along that road were draped lovingly in different types of cloths, letting everyone see exactly what

they were selling.

Nysien split off from the group, wanting to buy some ingredients for his potions. Hafgan did the same: first so he could deposit the Malison blade at home, where it would be safe, and then secretly made his way to the jewellery quarter.

Napellus guided Anwen and Branwen through the rainbow colours and into a small storehouse. Unlike the stark feeling of Kylian's workshop, this one was vibrant with customers. It wasn't limited to fabrics. Shoes, hair accessories, necklaces... they were all on display.

"Napellus!" an alto voice rang from across the counter. The man who stood before them was of Nysien's height and had a darker complexion than Napellus, but his *Fflora* characteristics were prominent.

He wore a black blazer over a white tunic, with trousers to match. His hair was an astounding green, with yellow highlights, and intricately pulled back into a braid. A pair of silver-rimmed spectacles sat on his nose, though there was no glass set into the frames. To complete his ensemble, he had draped a silk scarf around both shoulders, making him appear broader than he was.

"Isliah!" Napellus greeted him with the same enthusiasm. "You're looking as handsome as ever."

"Oh, this old thing. It went out of season fifty years ago, but I'm trying to have it come back. What do you think?" Isliah spun to show off every side of himself.

"If you say it will, then it definitely will," Napellus confirmed. She pushed Anwen forward. "She's only been able to wear what we had on hand, and they're not exactly flattering. Can you help her out? We'll need something sturdy but with a touch of flair."

Isliah clicked his tongue in disgust. "You poor thing. Who would do this to you?"

Hafgan popped his head around the door and raised his hand with a smile. "Apologies, Isliah, it's all we had available at the time. We were in a rush."

"I would hope so if you made a lady wear *this*." Isliah pushed Anwen behind a folding partition and threw a robe at her. "For now, put this on, and we'll take some measurements."

Anwen did as instructed, the clean satin a breath of fresh air against her skin.

Isliah's workers surrounded her as they measured every part of her body to his satisfaction. "I'll have a full wardrobe prepared for you before a fox-bee can make honey," he sang with confidence.

"That quick?" Anwen asked, impressed. "Even Rowena wouldn't have one dress finished by then."

Isliah's voice dropped low with caution. "Don't *ever* utter that *bitch's* name in my shop." He pulled out a small bag of salt and threw a pinch over both shoulders, ridding himself of the negative energy.

The outfits Isliah laid out for her were common: some in plain colours, others in patterns. Anwen found that they were all finer than anything Rowena had produced. "They're gorgeous," she commented, brushing her fingers against one of the dresses, its embroidery almost coming to life.

Even the autumnal, orange tunic and trousers Branwen had picked out especially for her were of a finer quality than she was used to, yet to the untrained eye, they looked nothing more than regular street clothes.

"I'm so happy you think so!" Isliah gushed. "It's a trade secret. Now, put on whichever outfit you like. They'll all fit you perfectly."

Anwen chose a deep indigo dress with shells stitched into the neckline and collar. It reminded her of Llansteffan's beach, from where she used to collect shells to show to her mother and sister.

When she emerged from the partition, all eyes were on her.

"Now that's more like it," Napellus complimented.

Hafgan marvelled at the difference the clothes made. He couldn't take his eyes from her as he moved to shorten the distance between them until he was standing in front of her.

Anwen's hair, which always flowed freely, had a brighter sheen than usual as the sun picked up the honey and raven-black tints in it. He caught a few strands in his hand, feeling their softness between his fingers.

"You look beautiful," he said. His voice was low and full of warmth, a warmth that radiated from his chest and spread throughout his whole body.

His compliment sent a shiver of excitement into the pit of Anwen's stomach. Her heart

beat fast, and she hated herself for it.

“But do you really think fighting in a dress is practical?” He purposefully ruined the moment.

Anwen pushed past him to the full-length mirror, admiring herself in it. “I’ve worn dresses all my life and never once have they restricted what I wanted to do.”

Hafgan chuckled, appraising her once more. “No, it seems they haven’t.”

30

Pryderi heard the chains rustling against the stone floor. The Dark Fae that were being kept in the dungeon were moving away from him as he walked towards the door at the end of the hall. The pigment on his fingers glowed brightly in the darkness. With Anwen gone, and Hafgan and his crew undoubtedly gathering the other Cauldron pieces, now was the best time to move his.

“Please...” one brave soul whispered.

Without pause, Pryderi swiped his hand across each cell, mauling the prisoners with slashes of wind until they lay dead in a pile. He didn’t need them anymore, and Hafgan deserved it for invoking Cigfa’s name.

Pryderi remembered seeing Cigfa in that *cythraul*’s arms, dead and bloody. He hadn’t had to ask what’d happened; his father’s demeanour was enough for him to guess. Hafgan had killed the love of his life.

It was then that Pryderi decided he’d make Hafgan’s life, and the life of everyone who served under him, a living hell.

Hafgan lay in bed, the curtains pulled back. He held in his hand the ring he’d made a few days ago and was fiddling with it.

Nysien knocked on his door.

“Come in.” Hafgan hid the ring in his pocket.

Nysien closed the door behind him and went to stand at his side. “I just wanted to see how you’re doing.”

Hafgan pushed himself upright and sat on the edge of the bed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He stood and walked to the windows to look out onto the fields. He spied Anwen below, sitting on the patio and chatting with Branwen and Napellus. She smiled, her laugh reaching up to him.

“Anwen?” Nysien conveyed his question in one word.

“No,” Hafgan replied, turning towards him. He didn’t want to talk about his feelings.

“So, then that ring is meant for me?” Nysien joked.

Hafgan’s hand went straight for it, making sure Nysien hadn’t magically pickpocketed him. He reluctantly pulled it out.

“How well do you think that’ll go down?” Nysien asked.

“I know!” Hafgan yelled, his face red. He wasn’t sure why he even made it. “I just needed something to remind me of her when she’s gone.”

Nysien looked at him skeptically. “I didn’t realise seeing the future was one of your newfound skills.” He sighed. “How about starting small first? Tell her how you feel... have a proper conversation.”

Nysien knew that it was a long shot—Hafgan was an all-or-nothing creature. And with the hundreds of years Hafgan had lived, and the limited ones Anwen had... He understood why his friend thought this was a good idea.

Hafgan shook his head, calming down. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Well, don’t start with a ring,” Nysien said. “Tea, perhaps?” he suggested.

Hafgan sat back on the bed, placing his head in his hands. He was in uncharted territory.

“You can do your best to try and hide these things, but at some point...” Nysien laid his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Not even a God can kill what they feel inside. It usually comes out, and at the least convenient time.”

Hafgan stood and went over to his desk drawer. Carefully, he placed the ring in there and shut it away. “Tea?” he asked, a smirk lifting to his eyes.

Nyisen huffed a laugh. “Come on, they’re all waiting for us.”

They gathered with the rest in the back garden. The grass beyond had been cut short for sparring, while the unmowed fields beyond swayed softly in the wind.

Napellus eyed Nysien, who shook his head, urging her to stay quiet. “Let’s get started then.” She pulled Anwen to her feet, past the field, and into the tree line beyond.

Hafgan, Nysien, and Branwen all stayed in the sparring area, the neighbours already setting out chairs and blankets to watch the event and bet on who’d win.

The incline of the hill made it hard for Anwen to keep up with Napellus, and she couldn’t

help but flinch at everything that moved as they went deeper into the woods. When they finally reached suitable ground, Napellus turned to her new student.

"For now, you're going to observe me, then I'll teach you some of my tricks," Napellus instructed as a deep tremor was felt beneath their feet. Napellus looked back in the direction of the field. "They barely hold back against one another."

"Will Bren be okay?" Anwen asked. *Gwyllion* were one thing, but the thought of her best friend going up against Hafgan, the Dark God, was another.

"Though Haf's stronger than all of us, Bren can hold her own," was all Napellus offered. "What I'm going to show you are moves that I picked up from Haf and then adapted for myself. Listen, if anyone ever tries to teach you something, don't take it at face value. Make sure you take in the information and then adjust accordingly for yourself."

"That doesn't make sense," Anwen argued. She slipped on a patch of dry leaves and braced herself against one of the trees. "Are you saying that even the spells that our ancestors created shouldn't be followed to the letter?"

"Exactly! And you're a prime example of why. You store magic... maybe... so none of the spells created so far would be of any use to you. Use that to your advantage. Here, I'll show you."

One second, Napellus was standing in front of Anwen, then the next, she was invisible. A warning chill ran down Anwen's spine, and fear built in her chest as she waved her arms around, blindly trying to see if she could touch her.

"Napellus?" Anwen hesitantly called, but there was no answer.

The forest seemed to close around Anwen, the birds that had been chirping lovingly in the trees falling as silent as the dead. She backed away from the spot where she was standing, her back against one of the trees, trying to keep her blind spot covered.

Anwen didn't know what was happening, but she didn't like the way it made her hair stand on end.

"Come on, this isn't funny." Anwen reached for the silver blade on her hip and pulled it out, flimsily holding it in front of her. She hadn't brought the Malison blade with her, Hafgan warning her to only use it in a real fight. Now she wished she had it.

Napellus swooped down behind her, as silently as a hummingbird. "That little knife won't

help you here.”

Anwen yelped as she crumpled to the ground, the dagger falling from her hand as Napellus reappeared.

Sweat dripped down Anwen’s back as she sucked in the warm air as fast as she could, trying to recuperate. Her mouth was dry as she tried to form her words. “What was that?”

“That,” Napellus squealed triumphantly, “was a low-level shadow spell. It lets you dampen your presence and sneak up on people. It’s very handy if you need to gather information and for the occasional assassination. But it’s also great to use as a tactical retreat, which is how I’ll be teaching it to you.”

Anwen used the tree behind her for support as she rose to her feet. She shook her legs out, trying to get the feeling back into them so they could continue, and picked up her dagger to sheath it. “If that was only the low-level version, I don’t think I want to see it at full power.”

Napellus smiled. She’d only ever used that spell at its highest in the War against the dead. It’d been a flip-toss to see if it’d really work, and she found that even though they were already dead, their fears still resided in them.

“A step up from the basic spell, it can cause bone-crushing fear; the person it’s intended for wouldn’t be able to breathe, let alone think, and they would end up suffocating. At its most potent, it becomes one of the most brutal of spells, causing its target to hallucinate and turn on themselves.”

Napellus had seen creatures break their own necks, claw at their skin until they hit bone, and even set themselves on fire to try and get rid of whatever they saw inside their own minds.

It wasn’t a spell to use in its entirety lightly.

The rest of the morning was filled with instructions, and the few self-defence moves Anwen could use along with them. Just as with her past lessons with Master Lewis, it wasn’t going well. She struggled as she tried to remember every step, every feeling that was needed in order for her to conceal herself.

“You need to *feel* it more,” Napellus whispered by her side, invisible once again. “Adapt. Don’t just take what I say at face value.”

"I *am* feeling it." Anwen clenched every muscle in her body, trying to *feel* it.

It was no use.

Anwen threw down her blade into the brambles on the forest floor, pin-pricks of sunlight glinting off it. She'd thought to use the weapon as an anchor to focus her energy, but in the end... Nothing.

"I don't want to do this!" Anwen whined.

"Okay," Napellus calmly said, seeing Anwen's frustration as she picked up the dagger. "We can come back to it later. Why don't we try some more defence techniques? At least those use less of your mind and more of your body."

"No!" Anwen plopped to the ground and cuddled her legs to her chest. "I don't want to be *here*! If I'd known leaving Llansteffan would've led to such a hard time, I never would've left."

"You can't live your life without taking risks," Napellus said, joining her on the ground. She couldn't fathom what Anwen was going through. She'd lived a hundred lifetimes—not as many as Hafgan, but enough that time had dulled her sense of what was right and wrong. "I think what you've done so far is brave."

Anwen let slip a snort. "I don't need your pity."

"I wasn't trying to sound patronising," Napellus snapped back, though Anwen's response was understandable. She would've felt the same if Hafgan had said something similar. She sighed. "What I meant was, I've never been brave enough to go through the portal. I knew what was happening on the other side... We all did. So, for you to come here without any knowledge of *Annwfn*... Well, I think that's pretty impressive."

Anwen paused. "You knew? Did everyone know?"

Napellus bit her lip, knowing what Anwen was asking: Did the gods know?

"Yes, some of them wanted to help, others didn't. By the time they made a decision, it was too late."

Anwen felt foolish. Why would the gods help them? She certainly didn't feel the same about their plight. She just wanted to get back to Pryderi. A selfish reason.

"Ah!" Napellus cried, jumping to her feet with an idea. "It was staring me in the face!" She pulled Anwen up and swayed with her to a beat. "One, two, three. One, two, three.

One, two, three.”

Anwen listened, skeptical that this would work, but her body fell in sync with the rhythm. First, in a loose form, getting used to the beat, then gradually adding the defensive moves Napellus had been taught. With each clap, she made the moves ever more precise.

When Napellus thought Anwen was ready, she stopped clapping and made an attack. Anwen deflected it weakly. They continued their dance until it was almost night, Napellus making her punches stronger with each go until Anwen could no longer keep up with her hits and fell to the ground, panting.

“It’s a bit rocky, but you’ve got the basics down!” Napellus squealed with delight.

“Let’s go again!” Anwen said, keen for once. Her enthusiasm was interrupted when Hafgan stepped out from the trees.

“It’s getting late, you two, and we’re going to have a bite to eat. This a good time?” Hafgan asked.

“As good as any,” Napellus said, facing Anwen with her last words of wisdom. “Keep working at what I taught you. I know what you’re thinking: that we’ll always be there to protect you. There might come a time when we’re not. Make sure you can hold your own when that happens.”

Anwen nodded. She had enjoyed her training. Master Lewis was a stickler when it came to the proper form and processes of spells; he never would have broken his lessons down in such a way.

When they returned to the house, there was a plate of food waiting for Anwen when she entered the dining room. Nysien had prepared a simple supper for the cool summer night: a stew with sides of soft cheeses and oily bread, set on the table for sharing. She was getting used to the food and couldn’t help herself as she piled more onto her plate.

Anwen gazed around at the creatures who sat with her, their jovial conversation lighting up the room. She joined in where she could, but mostly listened as they retold stories of how they all met: the time Branwen had punched right through a wall when she’d been trying to fix it, or when Nysien tried his new hobby of cooking mundane world meals, which ended up with all of them half-sick with poison.

Anwen innocently wondered what Pryderi was up to at that moment, a thought that

sobered her enough that she excused herself from the room. She wanted to be back in his arms, safe from all of this. Contrary to what everyone was saying, she still loved him. But being with Hafgan and everyone else...

Doubt had slithered its way into her heart and mind.

The only way she knew to get her life back to normal was to return to Pryderi, and to do that, they needed to find the last pieces as soon as possible.

"Will we be heading off for Eryri tomorrow?" Anwen asked as she reentered the room, cutting their conversation short.

"Tomorrow?" Nysien asked, confused. "It'll be a few days before the storm rolls over. There's only one in the summer, but it makes up for all the rest. We won't be able to travel well in that type of weather on our familiars."

Anwen looked out of one of the windows, the twilight sky as clear as the glass she was looking through. "What storm?"

Nysien pointed to the West. "You can see it just coming over in the distance."

Anwen squinted hard for any sign that a deluge would begin but saw none. "Can't we brave it?" she asked, worried that this would delay her return further.

"Not if you want to come back in one piece," Nysien smiled.

"How long will it last?" Anwen's voice was panicked.

"About two days," Hafgan answered, a bit surprised by her attitude, especially when they'd been enjoying their meal together. "It'll give you the chance to practice some more..." He put down his bite of cheese. Tears welled in Anwen's eyes.

Are they taking me on a fool's errand? she thought. *Was their plan to stall for as long as possible so I won't be able to make it back to Pryderi?* She didn't wait to ask and ran up the stairs to lock herself away in her room.

As Anwen turned towards her bed, she found Arawn lying on it, his hands resting behind his head.

"They're not," Arawn answered her earlier questions, able to read her mind.

"Stop!" Anwen yelled. "Just stop and tell me what's going on!"

"Exactly what I asked. You're finding the Cauldron pieces."

"So, what? Your plan was for Hafgan to kidnap me all along?"

Though he knew it would happen, it hadn't been up to him. "I've no more control over his actions than I do yours."

"Bullshit! You're the Arbiter! The Primordial, as so many keep reminding me. It's your *job* to fix all this!"

It was Arawn's job. As the Ruler, he should have been the one to fix everything, have every answer, but he was tired... oh-so tired of being the one everyone went to, and everyone blamed.

Arawn closed his eyes to further relax.

Anwen pulled the pillow out from under his head as he refused to answer her. She didn't care if he was the Primordial or whatever. To her, he was just a nuisance.

"Do you remember what I told you the day we found the piece in Pryderi's dungeon?" He was speaking, of course, on the topic of death.

"You said a great many things," Anwen replied stubbornly, clutching the pillow to her chest for comfort.

"I did indeed," Arawn agreed, but said nothing more.

This was for her benefit.

If only she could see that.

Anwen lifted the pillow above her head, ready to throw it at Arawn out of sheer annoyance, but he was already gone.

31

The storm Nysien promised gave Anwen time to train. Napellus set goals for her each day: sneaking up on the others in the house to scare them (a personal favourite of Napellus, as she'd hear yelps of surprise); standing as still as possible until someone bumped into her unknowingly (Branwen kept tripping over her whether the spell was successful or not); and dancing (Anwen's preferred method).

When the weather finally cleared, they set out on the backs of their familiars, the four of them heading towards the peak of Eryri.

"We'll land to the East and come from there!" Hafgan shouted from the back of Nos, fighting against the wind's volume. They had to land surreptitiously, mindful that the area was restricted to outsiders.

Branwen was holding up her hands to signal that she understood when Volmear screeched and lurched sideways, sending her and Anwen out into the open air.

Anwen had no time to register what was happening as she fell headfirst towards the ground. No scream tore from her as the air was sucked from her lungs, hair whipping against her face, and limbs stiff.

A hard hand grabbed around her ankle, the rocky forest floor just an arm's length below her.

"Get that *bird* under control!" Hafgan growled at Branwen. She tried her best to restrain Volmear and set him unsteadily down beside the rest of them.

Hafgan set Anwen upright and held her fast in his arms. She could have died. After everything she'd been through, she could have so easily died. He never wanted to let her go.

Anwen pushed away from him to empty the contents of her stomach into a nearby bush as Hafgan continued to bicker with Branwen.

Branwen rushed to Anwen's side. "I'm sorry, Anwen, are you okay?"

"Just a bit... wobbly..." she dry-heaved.

"Of course, she's not okay!" Hafgan yelled over them both.

"I wasn't talking to *you*," Branwen snapped. "Back off."

Nos whined in distress as he retreated into Hafgan's shadow. Willow neighed and stomped his hoofs, kicking up dirt. And Volmear incessantly rubbed his beak against his chest. All their hackles were raised as they withdrew. The Cauldron's energy was messing with them; there was no room of gold or barrier of mist to stop its reach.

A dull headache was already thrumming at the base of each of their skulls, limbs heavy.

Rationally, Hafgan understood what was happening.

Irrationally...

He could have so easily lost her.

Hafgan stalked to the edge of the forest, giving them their space and a chance for him to breathe and survey where they'd stopped. It seemed they were just south of where he wanted to be.

Nysien came up behind Hafgan, hands relaxed behind his back. "They're ready when you are." He'd never seen his friend so conflicted.

Hafgan had always been the Dark God to Nysien. At first, it'd only been in title, a play on words Arawn had thought funny since Hafgan reigned over the valleys where the sun rarely shone in their paradise of a world. But ever since Cigfa...

The killing of a god or goddess is never taken lightly.

Hafgan walked past a small bog as the two of them made their way back to Anwen and Branwen. He crouched down and pulled at a pale purple flower, freeing it from its roots. Plucking the petals off, he left the stem and went over to Anwen. He held it out for her.

"Water mint. It'll help with the sickness."

Anwen was taken aback by his kindness, though it shouldn't have surprised her. He'd only ever tried to help her.

She took the shoot and brought it to her mouth to chew on, the cool taste of mint calming her nausea.

"Where do we go from here?" Nysien asked, breaking the awkward silence in the air. "You're more familiar with the mountains than I am, Bren."

"There's a path up ahead that splits off," Branwen said, pointing in the direction they'd been headed. "If there aren't too many beasts, we'll take the right. It should snake up

directly to the top of the mountain.”

“And if there are?” Nysien asked.

“Then we’ll have to go left. It skirts around and can get dangerous, especially since it rained recently.”

“Let’s hope Aranrhod is on our side, then,” Hafgan said.

The dirt was damp as they trudged their way to where Branwen had said the fork in the road was.

“Doesn’t feel like anyone’s around,” Branwen said as she listened closely to the ground, wanting to lie down then and there. She was already out of breath.

“Then let’s head to the right, but stay alert,” Hafgan ordered.

It was slow going on the trail, sickness and caution at the forefront of their minds. The incline of the mountain was starting to take effect, Anwen’s legs aching, when they all heard a squeal come from in front of them.

The three of them grouped around Anwen, protecting her from whatever was to come. They could hear the beast getting closer, its steps pounding the ground as it shot into view.

The sow was as overgrown as Nos. The rabid animal foamed at the mouth, where tusks protruded, and it dug at the earth. Its eyes were bloodshot as it stared them down, quickening its pace as it barrelled towards them.

“Split!” Hafgan yelled, jumping to the left with Anwen. Branwen took hold of Nysien and pulled him to the right, leaving the animal to overshoot its attack.

Taking advantage of its confusion, Hafgan leapt to his feet, his arm outstretched as his spell quickly took hold of the animal. Obsidian shards skewered it every which way, the thing now more sea urchin than land mammal. The rest of them gathered around its pooling blood.

“A bit of an overkill, wouldn’t you say?” Branwen asked but was impressed with his thoroughness.

“It was feral, Bren,” Hafgan defended. “It wouldn’t have let up until—”

Anwen's scream jolted all of them as her trembling finger pointed at the animal. Hafgan felt bad that he had to kill the beast, but it was better to give it a quick death than to play on its madness. But when he glanced down to where the poor animal should have been, his world tilted as he stared at the naked woman in its place.

Her body was contorted, appendages dislocated from the trauma. Hafgan immediately dispelled his magic, the woman's body flopping hard to the ground.

Nysien approached her slowly, wary that another trick might be at play. He reached for her wrist out of habit and wasn't surprised when he found no pulse.

Hafgan backed away from the body, terror eating at him. It wasn't the first time he'd killed someone innocent, and it wouldn't be the last...

But this was different.

If Hafgan had known the woman had been influenced by magic, he would never have made the lethal choice.

"Not again," he whispered, his past mistakes coming back to haunt him.

Hafgan stood on the battlement, his troops at the ready for his orders. Arawn had been ruthless in his attack with the Cauldron of Rebirth; loved ones were undead, fighting one another.

On top of everything, God Pwyll had amassed his own army on the other side. The presence of his troops hindered what was really important: getting the armistice signed.

"God Hafgan," Nysien hit his balled fist against his chest in salute. "I am afraid there has been no further word from God Pwyll."

Hafgan beat his knuckles against the stone parapet in rage. "Why doesn't he understand?" he yelled in frustration. All Hafgan wanted, all his people wanted, was to be accepted into any town. To walk through their borders without being beaten or run out.

Pwyll had been a natural leader, and his son a shadow of his father, but he had no tolerance for the Dark God and his people.

In an instant, Hafgan had Nysien surrounded with his magic, barbed and waiting to shred Pwyll's messenger. "You tell him that 'he's a piece of shit' and that 'he'll have more than Arawn to contend with by the end of this day if he doesn't sign that treaty'!"

Nysien stood resolute as he listened, though he held caution in his voice as he replied. "I

would rather not have to relay that first part, if that's all right with you."

Hafgan stiffened, then let out a low chuckle, dissolving his magic.

A battle cry raged from the field before them. Arawn's army of the undead descended upon their troops when Hafgan spied someone in the middle of the battle.

Someone who shouldn't have been there.

With a single leap over the wall, he landed on Nos and flew to where Cigfa stood peacefully. Her bright auburn hair was like fire against the muddy chaos of fighters, wind spells flicking it this way and that.

She wore her court colours of white and black, her dress soiled by the field's dirt. The orange of her hands glowed as she held them up, controlling the storm in the sky. The smell of blood and death permeated the air, leaving its foul stench to settle into their clothes.

"What are you doing?" Hafgan shouted over the volley, touching down next to her.

Cigfa stayed silent as her grey eyes stared in the direction of Pwyll's army.

The undead did nothing but skirt around her to attack everyone else. Hafgan deflected one of their blows easily. He grabbed Cigfa's arm, trying to pull her back to safety.

The undead didn't like that.

Agitated, all their attention turned to him.

Hafgan instantly let go of her, and they returned to attacking whoever was in front of them.

"Cigfa, you shouldn't be out here!" Hafgan warned her again. Out of everyone in Pwyll's court, she was the most tolerant and level-headed. She was a woman who stood tall in her beliefs. He'd never had to wonder what was on her mind as she always said what she was thinking, and people always listened. Yet Pwyll thought her still the child he had watched grow up.

As a goddess, Cigfa put even the Fflora with her beauty and kindness to shame.

"None of us should!" Cigfa shouted back. "I will not move until Pwyll surrenders and signs that treaty!" As she said this, the very same god descended upon them.

Pwyll's horse flew to a stop, and he jumped down before her, spying Hafgan. "This is what it has come to? You throw your lot in with them?"

"I side with what is right!" she screamed over the bedlam. "And what you're doing is far

from that. At least Hafgan knows that there's more at stake here than just land. It's the people!"

Pwyll's face went red with outrage as he reached towards her and took hold of her. "You know nothing! I knew Arawn was wrong, making you a goddess so young."

"Get away from her!" Hafgan warned him.

"You have no right to give me orders, boy. You may be a god, but you're still a cythraul."

Blind rage coursed through Hafgan at the term, his magic amassing around him as he locked onto his one and only target. Annwfn didn't need a god like Pwyll.

With Hafgan's magic built up, it raced to where Pwyll stood. Like shards of black ice breaking free from the ocean's surface, it hunted him down without mercy.

Cigfa rushed between the two of them.

The shards pierced deep into her skin and ripped their way through her.

Hafgan would never forget the look on Cigfa's face as she crumpled towards the ground, wearing a smile that held no malice towards him for what he had done. All she'd wanted was for those around her to understand and listen to one another, not to resort to the violence that everyone thought could solve life's problems.

Cigfa tasted the blood in her mouth, its metallic tang overpowering the rest of her senses. She felt no pain, whether good or bad; at least she was happy for that.

Hafgan instantly dissipated his magic, but it was too late; her eyes already dilated and bloodshot.

"No, no, no, no, no. Cigfa. Cigfa!" Hafgan shook her, trying to get her to stay awake.

"Why did you do that? No, you shouldn't have done that."

Cigfa's smile widened, her teeth and lips bloodstained, giving only that as her answer.

Hafgan was slapped hard across the face, Nysien's green eyes full of worry. He knew better than anyone what Hafgan had been thinking about, the sight of the innocent woman hitting too close to home. It wasn't often that Hafgan remembered those days with clarity; he had tried his hardest not to, but every so often a scent or an image would trigger those memories again.

"I'm fine," Hafgan grumbled as he collected himself and steeled his gaze towards the broken woman, pushing his feelings down. He felt as if he were going to be sick. Whether

that was due to the woman or the Cauldron's magic, he wasn't sure. "This is no ordinary magic."

"You think it's the Cauldron's doing?" Nysien asked, releasing his grip on Hafgan's tunic. Sweat beaded down his forehead.

"Perhaps..." Hafgan thought long on it. He couldn't tell anymore what the Cauldron was capable of. When whole, he'd only ever witnessed its power to bring the dead back to life, but broken...

It was unpredictable.

"I guess we know what happened to the villagers," Branwen morosely stated.

A rustling in the bushes grabbed their attention. They regrouped in the middle of the path, their backs to one another as they prepared for a second ambush.

"Move!" Hafgan commanded as a crazed and oversized stallion burst into the opening, its hooves wildly stomping in their direction. It was followed by a parade of rabid animals.

As they ran, Anwen's lungs burned as the incline of the hill increased. Her legs wobbled until her knees bit deep into the rocky ground, scraping them.

Hafgan pulled her to her feet and slung her over his shoulder. For once, she didn't protest.

The air was beginning to thin as they retreated further up the mountain and hid within the foliage of the trees and bushes. Hafgan set Anwen down while Nysien rested on all fours, trying to keep the spinning behind his eyes down to a minimum.

The herd of animals dispersed, their attention easily caught by a broken twig or the scent of fresh prey.

"We won't be able to outrun them forever," Branwen said. She sucked in as much oxygen as possible. They were getting closer to the Cauldron, her stomach somersaulting.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Hafgan whispered. He didn't know what to do. If they'd just been animals, purely *beasts*, he would've had no problem killing them. But they were *people*.

"You know what we have to do if we want to get out of this," Nysien said, playing devil's advocate. "Even if we collect the piece, we don't know if that will turn them back."

"I know!" Hafgan yelled a little too loudly for all their liking. He needed time to think. They could keep running and hope they made it to the piece before being caught by the

horde. Or slaughter every animal in their path and live with the guilt for the rest of their lives.

He wanted desperately for there to be a third choice.

"Better make your mind up quick, because here they come!" Branwen yelled as she spied a monstrous goat.

Hafgan made a split decision and picked up Anwen once more. "Run!"

The hoard was right on their heels. Branwen jumped in time to avoid the swing of a gigantic bear claw to her leg. With the beast off balance, she bounded out of its reach and brought her fist into its side, immobilising it.

She wobbled as she landed, head spinning.

"We won't be able to keep this up the whole way!" Branwen yelled as a stag came too close to Hafgan. "Haf!" she roared with caution.

Hafgan was already aware of the animal on his tail. He threw Anwen high over to Nysien, who caught her mid-air, and they both landed onto one of the low-hanging branches of a cedar.

Branwen pushed the animal away from Hafgan with all her strength, abandoning any thought of not killing the thing as it went flying and broke its back against one of the sturdy trees. It changed back into a man. She and Hafgan collected themselves as they joined the other two in the trees.

The animals below began to gnaw and scratch at the bark.

"Are you all right?" Nysien asked them.

"We're fine," Hafgan confirmed.

"We can't wait them out forever," Branwen said.

Hafgan had been prepared to let people die to get to the piece. Had thought he'd resolved himself to that fact, and had absolutely no qualms when it came to Pryderi and his court, yet when faced with innocent people...

He shut his eyes in resignation and curtly nodded, giving the kill order.

They all tensed, ready to take on the beasts below, when in the distance they saw Efnysien bursting through the massed creatures. He was clad in Pryderi's house colours of green and gold.

A shocked look was stuck on Efnysien's face as he eyed them all. He hadn't thought they would get this far before him.

"Oh shit," Nysien pronounced, looking to Branwen.

Every muscle in Branwen's body tightened as she kicked off from the tree, snapping the branch she and Hafgan had been standing on in two.

Pryderi stood by the large window in his office, his Cauldron piece safely tucked away in a gold chest under his desk. He'd received a report earlier that week that the fog had disappeared and was happy they had procured the second piece.

Four pieces in total.

He hadn't heard anything about the final piece. It seemed no one had. There were no signs, such as the mist or the disappearing villagers; no whispers of where it was or could be.

He imagined Arawn might know but wouldn't expect the Great God to grace him with such knowledge. It still worried him that Anwen had seen him.

What game was the Great God playing? He couldn't make any guesses.

Pryderi sat back at his desk, papers strewn about. Why was everything so messy? "Efnysien!" he called, expecting his aide to come instantly. "Efnysien!"

There was no answer.

He banged his hands against his desk, denting the wood. "Where is that shit for brains? Efnysien!"

A guard knocked on his door and entered at Pryderi's invitation.

It was Unig.

He wore his usual green-and-gold uniform with Arberth's tree sewn over the heart, and an added sword at his side; his usual spear was left in the hall. His black hair was peppered with white, an almost marbling effect.

"God Pryderi," Unig said, saluting him. "Efnysien hasn't been here for some time."

Pryderi's eyebrow shot up skeptically. He hadn't even noticed. "Then where is he?"

Unig swallowed. "We don't know."

Anwen watched as her best friend charged after Efnysien, Branwen's fury palpable as she hunted down the bastard who killed her son.

"We need to go after them!" Anwen screeched.

"Whoa there." Hafgan had jumped onto the branch above him when Branwen had snapped theirs. "If you aren't aware of the predicament we're in, I invite you to look down."

Anwen knew exactly how fucked they were, but that didn't mean she wanted Branwen going by herself. "You need to go after her!"

"And what? Let you and Nysien fight off the beasts?"

"Anwen should go," Nysien said. He'd already thought through all the possibilities before the two even spoke. "She has a better chance of catching up to them. Efnysien wouldn't dare hurt her for fear of Pryderi's wrath, and Branwen can more than take him on." He glanced below them again. Hopefully, that was all the beasts. "It's better if Haf and I hold back the animals here. We don't want them breaking off in pursuit of her."

Hafgan didn't like the thought of it—hated it, actually—but the glare of worry and resolution in Anwen's eye had him agreeing to the plan.

"You make sure you keep your distance from their fight," Hafgan commanded with a growl. "There is no reason for you to get in the middle of it. Once we finish up here, we'll join you. Here, take this."

Hafgan handed her a smoke signal he'd packed in case they got separated.

Anwen tucked it into one of her pockets. "My dagger," she ordered, her hand outstretched. Hafgan handed the Malison blade over and prayed she wouldn't have to use it.

"Once we touch ground, you run. Got it?" Hafgan pulled her up to him, ready to drop them both down. "Close your eyes."

Anwen did as instructed and Nysien produced a blinding light, temporarily scattering the beasts below. The back of her eyelids lit up from the brightness, and then she felt the whoosh of air around her as she and Hafgan dropped.

The instant Anwen's feet touched the ground, she sped off, Hafgan already setting her in the right direction.

A tremor shook the ground, and Anwen could only guess it was from Branwen. She ran through the forest, brandishing her Malison dagger, ready for any straggling monsters. She knew full well that if there were any, she'd never make it.

It took Anwen longer than she hoped to catch up with Branwen and Efnysien. She found them on one of the mountain's many outcrops, just beyond the forest line. Her body was on fire as her muscles strained to a stop and her lungs burned.

She wished she'd asked for Hafgan's smelling salt rather than her blade.

Efnysien hurled a potion bag at Branwen, the explosive aftershock blowing straight towards Anwen, toppling her back into the bushes. She stayed hidden there, watching their fight unfold.

Branwen was on the defensive as a wall of stone shot up around her, deflecting the eruption that sprayed her body with dirt. She counterattacked with a right hook, sending a boulder spiralling towards Efnysien, who jumped out of its way and straight into her left jab. He lost his balance. She took the opportunity and hit him with an uppercut, blowing him further back to the cliff behind him.

Branwen was holding her own, but her movements were sluggish and heavy. Her breathing was laboured as she swung her leg up and then straight down into the ground, trying to sink him into the earth. The tremor didn't even reach him. Anwen made one guess about what was slowing her.

The Cauldron piece was nearby.

Efnysien, on the other hand, wasn't affected. Whether because he'd been in the Cauldron once before and was immune to its madness was unknown.

As they continued their match, Anwen took out the signal flare from her pocket and pointed it up. She pulled the string, letting the black smoke fume against the blue sky. She was hopeful Hafgan and Nysien would see it and be on their way soon, but hadn't thought

that signalling them also meant Efnysien now knew her exact position.

Anwen watched in horror as Efnysien bolted for her.

It was a contest in speed. Branwen tried to slow him, her fist punching through the ground, creating a shockwave through the earth that left Anwen's legs feeling like jelly, yet it did nothing to him.

Efnysien was victorious as he took hold of Anwen, twisting her arm behind her back and holding her neck so that her body became his shield. Branwen couldn't get any closer.

"Another step and I snap her neck!" he threatened.

Branwen's hands shot up in cautious surrender, Anwen struggling under his hold.

"What would Pryderi say if you did?" Branwen asked with a sneer.

A pang of longing shot through Anwen. How her life had changed since coming to *Annwfn*, and not at all for the better.

"He would never know," Efnysien spat. *"I can easily place the blame on you and your friends. He would be better for it."* The inflexion of his voice changed as he spun his story. *"I tried to stop Hafgan from killing her, protected her even, but when Anwen was running to me for protection... He put too much power in his grip... She was dead before I could move."*

A psychotic smile turned up his lips as he gripped harder.

Anwen let out a cry of pain, helpless as the bruises on her neck deepened.

"All right!" Branwen said, her voice threatening. "I couldn't stop you last time. But this... this time, I will *not* let you kill another of my family."

"Gwern had it coming!"

"He was just a child!" Branwen raged. "He didn't know better!"

"Child or no, the insult was intended."

"He was scared of you!" she shouted, swaying with dizziness. "Always had been. You think he never wanted to run up to his uncle in joy? You alienated him, as if it were his fault our mother died. She was trying to protect him from *you*!"

Anwen couldn't comprehend what was unfolding before her.

Efnysien...

Gwern's uncle?

"You're brother and sister?" Anwen asked in astonishment.

"Half," Efnysien corrected quickly.

"Did Gwern really threaten your existence that much?" Branwen asked, begging to understand.

"Enough that I do not regret killing him," he smiled.

Branwen yelled a wretched scream that was drowned out by a snarl coming from where Hafgan and Nysien were fighting.

"Looks as if we should finish this quickly before someone else intervenes." Efnysien threw Anwen to the edge of the cliff, the blow cracking two of her ribs against the rocky surface.

"I agree!" Branwen lunged at him, evident that there was no other way.

Anwen could barely move as she strenuously rolled over onto her good side.

She didn't want to be here anymore. She wanted to be back in her comfortable life, where no one got hurt. To not feel pain and terror lurking around every corner.

The edge of the cliff stretched out before Anwen, so close she could almost touch the air that dropped all the way down to the ravine below.

Her presence was only a hindrance.

Her brothers were right.

She was useless.

A few days of training were nothing. She didn't know why any of that would make a difference in a situation like this. She was egregiously outmatched. Efnysien could use her as a shield again, and Branwen would have no choice but to surrender.

No, Anwen didn't want her life to be used like that.

She gazed out into the setting sun and caught sight of something floating above the valley.

It was Marged.

Joy prickled Anwen's throat at seeing her sister. Marged beckoned her forward, closer to the cliff's edge. A deep scar marred her lip, and her blue eyes shone like sapphires.

Anwen crawled her way towards her, wanting nothing more than to jump into her waiting arms.

"That's right," Marged cooed. "You shouldn't have to worry about anything else. Come closer. I'm here for you."

Anwen wanted to believe everything that was happening was a bad dream. That she would wake in Llansteffan, in her room, in Marged's lap, safe and sound. If she weren't here, nothing would stand in Branwen's way.

Anwen was close enough now that she was reaching out towards her sister, unconcerned about the precipice below, when a gargled shout came from behind her.

Anwen paused and, with a stab of pain, strained her neck to take one last look at her friend.

"Shhh," Marged said. "It's okay. She doesn't need you."

Anwen's eyes bulged in alarm as she witnessed the predicament Branwen was in. Branwen was losing.

Efnysien had his body twisted around her torso, forcing her arm. Anwen could hear the resounding pop as her shoulder dislocated. Branwen's agonising scream tore into her. Her face was bloody, her right eye swollen shut, and a deep gash on the back of her head stained her white hair.

The match had changed so quickly.

"No," Anwen muttered under her breath. She painfully turned her body towards them, trying to get to her feet.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Without letting go of Branwen, Efnysien nimbly swung over to the other side of her and repeated the action, leaving her unable to defend herself.

"No! Please! Stop!" Anwen screeched. She scrambled to her feet, threatening tears pricking her eyes.

"You shouldn't worry about them." Marged stood in front of her, blocking her view.

"They don't need you. And there's nothing you can do to help her."

Efnysien felt no remorse as he positioned himself, pinning Branwen's shoulders and propelling them both forward onto the hard ground. He gracefully somersaulted before he took the brunt of the force. Branwen was thrown a few paces ahead of him, her nose breaking and streaming blood in the process.

They were both almost out of energy, but Efnysien was the first to get up.

Anwen paid her sister no mind as she stumbled around her. "Please..." Her attention was

only on Branwen, her good arm outstretched towards her. “Efnysien,” she begged.

“You can’t help her,” Marged reprimanded. “You’re in the way. If you weren’t here, then Branwen wouldn’t be in this position.”

Anwen stiffened at the statement but continued to limp her way to them.

“Fine!” Marged snapped her fingers, disappearing as quickly as she had come.

Efnysien ignored Anwen’s beating fists on his back as he dragged Branwen by the collar and sat her upright. With one hand, he reached behind him and threw Anwen to the other side, where the forest began. She landed heavily against the ground, knocking the wind from her.

“This... All of this is your fault,” Efnysien said to Anwen, mimicking what Marged had said, his eyes shining with manic mischief. *“What is happening to you, what has happened to that cythraul and Nysien... and what is about to happen to Branwen.”*

With an adrenaline-fueled rush, he produced a short sword from his pouch and plunged its blade repeatedly into Branwen’s chest—more times than Anwen could count.

Efnysien threw Branwen’s lifeless body in front of Anwen.

“This is what happens when you go against Pryderi!”

Anwen could only stare in horror.

Hafgan and Nysien heard the sickening crunch of bone as they entered the outcrop. It'd taken them longer than expected to finish off the beasts—the toll harder on Hafgan than he would ever admit—but they'd hurried as much as they could. They saw Anwen with Efnysien standing over her, and Branwen's broken body splayed between the two of them.

Hafgan's rage built in his chest, the pigment of his fingers darkening to black. His thorns and moons shifted up to his chest and onto his face. His eyes changed as they had before to purple in a sea of black.

He sprinted towards Anwen, who was staring at her friend, his speed not what it should've been. He was ready to protect her from anything else. Nysien moved as deftly as he could, bringing a bolt of white light in between where his brother was and Branwen, then hurried to her side to assess her injuries.

Efnysien stood poised for their next attack.

Anwen crawled around Hafgan to where Branwen was, her vision blurry with tears. "Branwen! Can you hear me?" The blood that gushed from the many places in Branwen's chest wouldn't cease as Anwen placed her shaking hand over her wounds, trying unsuccessfully to stop them.

"Can't you do something?" Anwen asked Nysien.

His hand floated over her, white light emanating from his fingertips. He poured everything he had into her, hoping it was enough, but with the Cauldron so close...

Tears and sweat dripped down Nysien's nose as he continued. He knew there was nothing more he could do. The wound that punctured her heart was the fatal blow.

Branwen was already dead.

Nysien couldn't speak, his shaking head the only indication of what Anwen already knew.

"No," Anwen cried out, tears straining her voice. "No, there must be something you can do!" She held on tightly to Branwen, willing her to stay. She couldn't control the sobs that wracked her body.

Branwen's head lolled in Anwen's arms, her chest unmoving.

Anwen hadn't gotten a chance to say goodbye, nor hear Branwen's final words... How much hope Branwen had seen in her... such friendship that she'd taken for granted...

"I warned you something like this would happen?" Arawn whispered from nowhere.

Anwen knelt, paralysed; her eyes barely able to glance around to see if anyone else saw him next to her.

No one did.

Arawn was uninterested in everyone else, only appearing before her.

"Death can readily find its host at the most unpredictable of times," Arawn said. It was a heavy lesson; one he knew would be the hardest to take.

Anwen never believed it would happen... never wanted it to...

Especially not to Branwen.

Anwen didn't want it, this sadness that could go nowhere but eat away inside of her until she felt nothing but burning hatred. It consumed her every nerve. She wanted revenge. No, more than revenge. She wanted Efnysien to writhe in pain. To suffer as Branwen had suffered. Every thought. Every action. She wanted nothing more than to disappear. To terrify him into submission and make him weep with the fear Branwen had undoubtedly felt in her final moments.

Anwen wanted to *kill* him.

"That's your choice," Arawn said, then vanished.

One second, Anwen was staring down at Branwen, and the next, her body moved as silently as a snake to where Efnysien proudly stood—arrogant at what he'd accomplished.

It made Anwen's blood boil even more.

Hafgan and Nysien were on high alert as they felt Anwen disappear before them. The fear she exuded couldn't be contained and a violent shiver ran down their backs, goosebumps collecting on their bodies.

Both instinctively produced their barrier magic: Hafgan with his wall of briars and Nysien's bubble of water, which was as solid as the depths of the sea. It took Nysien's full strength not to run in the opposite direction, away from the threat. It was a sensation he hadn't felt since his last meeting with Arawn.

Efnysien didn't see Anwen as she got closer to him, just the empty space where she'd

been kneeling. “*Where is she?*” he asked, a pinch of fear in his voice.

Hafgan knew better. Though their time together was short, he at least understood that Anwen cared for little. And that one thing had just been brutally murdered in front of her. He never thought she would use her magic like this—never thought she *could*—but then she always did manage to surprise him at every turn. He could barely make out her silhouette.

Undetected, Anwen walked up to Efnysien, who swung his bloody sword to the right of him, missing her, then to the left.

The variation of the spell Napellus had shown her was child’s play compared to what she was doing now. She stood there silently, watching the fear penetrate Efnysien’s soul as he couldn’t find her. She brandished her Malison dagger, her magic collecting in its blade.

A second later, Anwen made herself visible again.

Efnysien had no time to react as Anwen gracefully swiped her blade towards him, cutting through the air. He was convinced she’d missed him at that range, but then he stumbled back, feeling the wetness of blood drip down his arm. The pain of the cut bit deeper than he imagined. His silent scream grotesquely warped his features, eyes bulging as he understood what had happened.

“*A Malison dagger?*” Efnysien huffed out, astonished. He didn’t think her capable of moving so quickly, never mind being able to wield such a cursed object. He questioned whether the human in front of him was real. The Anwen he had last seen was pitiful and weak.

There was none of that left.

Anwen said nothing as she approached him once more, her eyes as cold and dead as Branwen’s who lay behind her. She swung at the air again, this time slicing through the tendon in his leg.

Efnysien screamed again in unimaginable pain, his unused vocal cords straining with the action.

It was nothing compared to what Anwen was feeling at the loss of her friend—her other sister. She wanted him to understand that.

Hafgan and Nysien stood by, unable to move, as Anwen struck one cut after another.

They were worried that any interference would put their own lives at risk. Compared to her, the beasts they had fought now seemed nothing more than farm animals. They couldn't explain how she was doing it, but the magic that was coming off her, like waves crashing onto a beach, froze them all the same.

There was no way Efnysien would hold up much longer. A part of Nysien felt pain seeing his brother this way. He looked down at Branwen, his sorrow overpowering any remaining concern for his brother.

Anwen raised her arm once more, the dagger steady as she readied to bring it down and end him—to *kill* him.

"Please!" Efnysien begged. The fear in his eyes reflected back at her.

A moment of hesitation slowed Anwen's hand. She wanted to kill him, to exact revenge on the *thing* that had taken everything from Branwen: her son and now her own life.

What a cruel trick Aranrhod was playing.

Efnysien took advantage of her hesitation and pooled the last of his strength. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pouch. He needed to get away... to tell Pryderi what had become of his bride. He tipped the pouch's contents into his bloody, trembling hand and smeared them onto his chest to make a quick retreat.

"Too bad," Anwen heard Arawn's voice in her head.

The dagger slipped from her fingers, thudding to the ground. Before she could make another move, Hafgan had her in his arms, supporting her weight. He picked the blade up and carefully deposited it back in his bag.

The journey wasn't over yet.

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Hafgan carried Anwen back over to where Nysien and Branwen were, setting her feet gently on the ground.

"We can't leave her by herself," Hafgan said, his lips a thin line as he glanced down at his friend.

Nysien nodded in agreement. "I'll take her back to Elendi, you... You and Anwen keep on. Find the piece." He collected Branwen's body in his arms, her legs dangling, almost touching the ground as he walked. He planned to take Willow the rest of the way once he was far enough from the mountain.

With Branwen dead, Volmear wouldn't be far behind. An *adar llwch gwin* dies with its master. Nysien hoped they would be able to fly together one last time.

Anwen couldn't move. She stared at the blood-soaked ground until Hafgan took her hand in his.

"Come on." Hafgan's voice was rough. He hadn't been able to save his friend, but there were still others who needed saving.

He barely felt the pull of the Cauldron as they made their way up the mountain, Anwen also numbly following behind him. The wind grew harsher as they climbed. All that consumed them was emptiness, a hollow rage that could not be quelled.

Anwen looked at the path ahead, catching a glimpse of something. She followed it, floating closer and closer.

They found themselves inside an opening in the mountain, Hafgan already struggling to control himself.

Anwen didn't mind entering the dark cave herself. It somehow felt more comforting than the expansive forest and mountains outside.

Before she could move any further, Hafgan grabbed her. "Anwen," he said, trembling and alert to the possible danger.

She wanted to leave caution at the cave's entrance, where reality was seeped in blood-soaked dirt.

Hafgan struggled to produce an orb of black flame but there was enough to illuminate the path before them.

Anwen had been prepared to face another trial, to give up another part of herself in exchange for the piece.

She gripped for her necklace... She couldn't think of anything more to give than what had already been taken.

She didn't need to.

Sitting in the middle of the floor was the Cauldron piece, its sinister energy permeating deep into the rock. Hafgan was barely able to hold on, the chest already prepared in his hands. Anwen picked it up, its weight nothing compared to what had happened, and locked it away.

"Is it worth it?" Anwen finally asked in a whisper. A second later, she turned on Hafgan. Hot tears streaked her face as she pummelled his chest with what little strength she had left. "Is it worth our lives!?"

"Yes," Hafgan said without hesitation. "Bren knew and understood that. We all do. Now you do too." He couldn't hold back. "Did you think we went into this half-arsed? That what we were trying to accomplish would be so easy? Your world and ours... Every *life* is at stake here and you—!" He caught himself before he could say any more.

She hid her gaze. "I'm sorry."

Hafgan stared at her in astonished silence and hot tears trickled down his face.

"What do you mean you're sorry?" His amethyst eyes pleaded with understanding. "It's not your fault. It's not any of our faults." Hafgan slipped to his knees, his face buried in his hands. Anwen was no better; her anguished cries echoed off the cave walls.

It was a long time before they had the strength to move again. Hafgan's voice was hoarse as he looked at Anwen, who seemed as frail as a rabbit. She'd curled up on his lap, the two of them mourning together. "We need to get back."

They made their way to the mouth of the cave. A clear dawn had broken through, the trees and mountain range throwing shadows over them, with the rest shaded in pinks, purples, and oranges.

Anwen held her hand up to shield her eyes from the low sun and Pryderi's ring glinted in

the light. Pryderi had meant everything to her. They were going to build a life together. And every time she'd pictured that life, Branwen had always been there, with her boyish grin, and cheeky left-hook, and a pint in the other hand...

That was all gone.

With a shaky hand, Anwen pulled the ring off and threw it into the dirt, stepping on it. Never again did she want to see her friends and family die. Never again would she be the one to hold them back. And never again would she trust anything Pryderi did or said.

‘The outrage I shall now commit is one the household will never expect.’

- The Four Branches

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They travelled back to Elendi in silence, despondent as they entered Hafgan's home. The house was unusually well-lit, illuminating their welcome and the summer night buzzed with insects, yet it felt colder without Branwen's cheerful presence to lighten the place.

Nysien had arrived hours earlier, and Branwen was already lying out on the table in the dining room. He'd already wrapped her body in a white linen cloth and laid bunches of fragrant herbs around her. Napellus grabbed the mourning candles that'd been stored in the back of the kitchen cupboard, their wax dusty, and placed them about the room. The drapes had been drawn across every window, as was custom.

It'd been a while since anyone in their family had died.

"We can handle the rest," Nysien told Hafgan. Sympathy and loss reflected in his eyes as he took in Anwen's state. She stood in the foyer, her hair a mess and eyes glazed over from crying.

Hafgan nodded and joined her. He removed his weapons and placed them on the small table in the room, then turned back towards Anwen. There was nothing he could do... nothing he could say that would make the situation any better. He wanted to hold her, to let her forget the past hours. All he could do was gently take her hand.

Anwen made no move to respond to his comforting touch.

"We should get some sleep," he whispered, loudly enough for it to register with her.

Anwen let go of his hand and moved automatically, climbing the staircase to her room, where she softly shut the door behind her before he could enter. She didn't want to see his face pinched in worried pain every time he looked at her.

The door supported her as she crumpled to the ground, fresh tears in her eyes, hiccupping from the strain of emotion.

"I'm sorry." Arawn materialised in the corner of the room, gazing out into the moonlit night.

Anwen stiffened where she sat, no longer surprised by his sudden appearances but shocked at how his voice broke through the eerie quiet.

"You warned me," Anwen simply whispered back.

"I did," Arawn replied. "But I'm still sorry it happened." He left as quickly as he had come.

Branwen's last moments came crashing down on Anwen.

It shouldn't have been Branwen who died...

"If only it'd been me..."

Hafgan was on the other side of her door, listening as the words broke his heart. He swung the door open, Anwen losing her balance as it no longer supported her and she fell at his feet. She didn't have the strength to be mad at him or feel the pain in her ribs. Slowly, she pushed herself up, her neck straining to look at him from the extreme angle.

Hafgan's features were pinched again, in anger this time, though there was understanding in the set of his jaw.

With great care, he helped Anwen from the floor and set her onto the bed. "Do you know the two most useless words in this world?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"*If only*. If only I had been faster, if only I was stronger, if only Efnysien had never been there. If only I had died in her place."

He sat down next to her. He wanted to do the same, to spout *if onlys* until his face turned blue, but it wouldn't do anyone any good. "They're the most *useless* words a person can utter because they erase the reality of the here and now."

"Then, what do you want me to do?" Anwen asked, her voice small.

"Learn from your past, so you can live for the present, and be prepared in the future. That's all we can do." He patted her head, then made to leave.

Anwen held tightly onto the sleeve of his shirt. "Don't go," she pleaded, her voice carrying just far enough for him to hear.

Hafgan lowered himself next to her and propped his back against the headboard. He pulled her into his lap, giving her a more comfortable place to rest. This wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind all the times he'd imagined the two of them in bed...

"I'm not going anywhere," he whispered, settling in further.

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Anwen woke to the sound of people moving around downstairs. Chairs and tables scraped across the floor as laughter fluttered from one room to the next. She glanced out the window that someone had opened while they'd slept, letting the high sun stream onto the bed sheets as the scent of fragrant herbs wafted in.

Anwen didn't know how long it'd been since she'd last slept so well and watched as Hafgan dozed just as soundly under her. She was still draped over him, the rise and fall of his chest keeping in time with her own breaths. She paused only for a second, realising the compromising position she was in, then relaxed.

It felt as if the invisible wall that'd been between them was cracking, Anwen able to peek through and see Hafgan as more than a demon.

She shifted her weight so she could stretch out her hand towards him. His eyelashes were much longer than she'd realised, and his nose flatter and wider than her own. She was tempted to run her finger along its smooth ridge. His grey skin wasn't monotone as Anwen had thought, its richness melding into his thick, curly hair. She wanted to finally feel its softness beneath her fingers. Her thumb brushed his plump lips.

No one would know... *He* wouldn't know if she shortened the distance between them. For her lips to meet his...

Hafgan stirred, eyes half-open with sleep. Anwen panicked, trying to pull away, only for her hand to meet swiftly with his face.

Hafgan sat straight upright. "What?" He asked urgently and clutched her closer. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I-I-I'm fine," Anwen stuttered out. His grip on her was fierce as her face turned bright red. She winced as her ribs throbbed.

He relaxed against the headboard again and rubbed at his cheek, surprised at how much force she'd put into it.

Anwen hadn't meant to hit him, her lip trembling with regret as she reached for him. "Hafgan, I'm sor—"

A light knock came from the door, and Nysien opened it to peek inside. He was happy to see them both awake. “Finally, you two are up.”

“What day is it?” Hafgan asked, waving Anwen off, satisfied that the only threat in the room was the woman herself. From the sounds of things downstairs, they’d slept more than the night.

“It’s been two days since we got here. I only just woke up this morning.” Nysien rubbed his hand on the back of his neck.

“Have we missed the [*gwylnos*](#)?” Hafgan stretched as he finally got to his feet, his body stiff. He wanted to be there for the wake, to welcome those who offered their condolences and celebrations of Branwen’s life.

Nysien’s voice was softer than usual, his shoulders ever so slightly slumped. “We’ve just started. Everyone’s arrived. Napellus sent word to Brân and the rest of the Giants, as well as Bloom and her kin. Even *she* has slipped in. She can’t stay long...”

Nysien was already wearing his pair of black fingerless gloves that stretched tight around his hands. The last time he’d worn them was for his own mother’s funeral. He placed another pair on the stool in front of the bed for Anwen, knowing she wouldn’t have come *that* prepared.

“Give us time to get presentable, and we’ll be down to greet them,” Hafgan said. He placed a reassuring hand on Nysien’s shoulder. The next few days wouldn’t be easy, but he would be there with him every step of the way.

Nysien left them to do just that.

“Sorry, you were saying something?” Hafgan asked Anwen, his hand on the door latch.

Anwen hissed as her sudden movement stung her sides; her earlier regret lost. “Nothing, just that you get out so I can change.”

His smile didn’t reach his eyes as he opened the door into the hall, the voices below becoming louder. “All right, I’ll leave you to it.”

It didn’t take Anwen long to clean herself and untangle her mess of hair. She wrapped her

ribs in a bandage to keep them in place, something she'd learned from Marged once when she'd fallen from her horse. It would be another week before they healed.

Anwen had put on one of Isliah's outfits. It was the orange-and-brown one Branwen had helped pick out, with its autumnal leaf patterns running through it. It was out of season but somehow felt right for the occasion. Lastly, she pulled on the black gloves.

Music had started to permeate the air as she descended the stairs; the fresh herbs she'd smelled earlier were stronger than before.

Many of the townspeople were lined up at the front door, each taking turns to bid their farewells and offer well wishes to Branwen and her remaining family, who stood beside her body.

Hafgan was at Anwen's side before she knew it, taking her hand to steady her as she walked into the dining room where Branwen lay. She couldn't help but stare at Branwen's shrouded body, hoping that at any moment she would wake to scare them all and cackle with glee at her prank.

No such thing happened.

"Anwen, I want you to meet Brân and Manawydan, sons of Llyr and Branwen's brothers," Hafgan introduced them.

Brân was exactly what Anwen would have pictured Branwen's brother to be. The Giant in him was prominent and he had to bend his knees so his head wouldn't hit the tall ceiling. His raven-black hair was long and pulled into a ponytail. His features were sharp, with a hooked nose slightly too large for his face, and his eyes were an oily green with a keen stare. Black stained his fingers that melded into feathers up to his elbows.

Manawydan, on the other hand, took after his sister. He had shock-white hair cut short to his ears and a matching beard. He stood taller than anyone else in the room except for his brother. His crystal-blue eyes seemed able to perceive the smallest gestures, just like his sister's had.

Brân nodded curtly.

"Mana," Manawydan offered her his nickname. "Bren always called me that." His face darkened as he looked over at her.

Anwen defaulted to the many years of training her mother had put her through and

dipped her head to them both. "I'm sorry we're not meeting under better circumstances."

"She shouldn't have been there in the first place," Brân curtly replied. "None of you were. I distinctly restricted the area because I didn't want anyone getting hurt. Yet you come into my domain, kill my people, and my sister ends up murdered by the same pathetic creature that killed my nephew!"

"We needed the Cauldron piece," Hafgan defended quietly, not wanting to ruin the wake.

"I guess that makes it fine then?" Brân spat. Hafgan and Anwen could only keep silent. Brân huffed a frustrated sigh, trying to rein in the anger. Manawydan jumped in before his brother could scold them further.

"Bren always spoke highly of you. Both of you," Manawydan corrected himself, looking at Anwen. "I know that your friendships were worth more to her than family."

Anwen bit her lip, trying to stop it from trembling. "Excuse me." She rushed into the kitchen so she could compose herself.

"It's good to see you're well, my lady." An unexpected voice rang behind her

Anwen whirled around, eyes widening as she found the source of the voice standing before her. "Matron Goewin?!"

If the Matron had made it to Elendi, then Pryderi wouldn't be far behind.

Anwen shifted her weight to the back of her foot, ready to run. She had to remind herself to take in small gulps of air to keep alert.

"No reason to be frightened by me," Matron Goewin waved her black-gloved hand at Anwen, "when there is a more terrifying being at your side." Just as the words escaped her mouth, Hafgan showed up next to them. His hand curled protectively around Anwen's waist. "See," she mused.

"I can be nice when I want to." Hafgan's lip ticked up with a sneer.

"Nice?" The Matron's mocking laugh was dry. "I don't think you know the meaning of the word."

"You'd think an old bat would be more careful when talking to her God," Hafgan said coldly, eyes glaring.

"A god would show more respect to *me*," the Matron countered.

Anwen could feel the palpable tension as they stared each other down, her body tense, when both could no longer hold out in their charade and burst into laughter.

Hafgan's grin reached from ear to ear. "I've missed you," he brought her in for a gentle hug, the Matron seeming to show her wise age in his bear-like embrace. "How have you been?"

"I creak here and there," she flapped her elbows as if to demonstrate the sound, "but I'm still alive."

"And probably will be by the time I'm dead. Sorry to interrupt," Nysien said as he and Napellus came over to kiss the Matron in greeting. "Anwen looked like she was about to pass out, so I thought I'd come save her from you two."

Anwen could barely get her words out. "What...? Why...?"

Napellus put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"The Matron has worked for my family for many years," Hafgan said, smiling, "and has been one of the best spies. I'll never forget the day you traded sides."—he winked at the Matron—"I think it was our best acting yet."

It had been. The day Goewin left Hafgan to work for Pryderi had gone down in history. It was one of the many reasons those who know her as the Matron do not trifle with her. It'd only been a week since Cigfa's death, and the Dark Fae had yet to feel Pwyll or Pryderi's wrath, but the storm was brewing. Hafgan knew it would strike at any moment.

"The Matron," Nysien explained further, "has worked to feed us intel. She's earned the trust of Pryderi and his court at great personal expense. We wouldn't have known you were here in *Annwfn* without her."

Anwen's palms were slick at the revelation, her heart racing. She wanted to scream at the Matron for dropping her into this mess, but at the same time, she was thankful.

Anwen took Hafgan's hand, surprising him.

"Not as great an expense as Branwen has now paid," Matron Goewin mourned as she fussed with her handkerchief, dabbing at the corners of her eyes to wipe away her tears.

They all went quiet until Nysien piped up. "Do you remember the time Branwen took out that golem?" he laughed.

"How about when she switched out our pints for piss?" Hafgan grimaced at the memory.

“You threw up right there,” he jostled Napellus.

“It wasn’t a nice thing to drink,” she countered with a sour look.

“Yes, but because she was laughing so hard, she tripped—” Nysien started.

“—and then hit her head on the table—” Hafgan continued.

“—knocking herself out!” They all finished together, laughing uncontrollably at the memory until their joyful tears turned to ones of sorrow.

Anwen reminisced about when she was a child and the day she’d spent with Branwen, the two hunting around Llansteffan Castle to find anything they could use to practice picking locks. It was only when they successfully infiltrated the armoury that Rhys chased them away with a scolding, the girls smiling and giggling as they ran away, successful.

“It’s not going to be the same without her,” Napellus said.

“But that doesn’t change what we have to do.” Hafgan’s eyes darkened.

They all huddled together in their circle of friends, soaking in reality. The villagers and Branwen’s kin lined through the house with smiles and well wishes and jovial spirits, celebrating what Branwen had done with her life.

They paid no thought to their own future.

A loud crash came as Efnysien *flittered* into the infirmary of Arberth Castle, knocking bottles and potions off their shelves as he passed out on the ground. When he came to, he was lying in one of the beds, Pryderi glaring down at him.

“What happened?” Pryderi asked.

Efnysien sat upright, the many slashes across his body still tender. Under Pryderi’s orders, the physician had only done the minimal amount of healing.

“Pryderi, please, you need to listen,” Efnysien grunted through the pain. “*She is one of them. She has sided with that cythraul and his ilk.*”

Pryderi’s gaze only sharpened. “What. Happened?”

Efnysien told him everything. How he killed Branwen and the change that Anwen underwent, the bloodlust and malice she held within her dagger.

And how Hafgan protected her.

Pryderi grew only more enraged by the time he was finished. “She and the piece were within your reach, and you did not take them?” His hand shot out, pinning Efnysien to the bed by the throat.

Efnysien thrashed under his grip, gasping. The white sheets around him started to stain red, blood oozing from his wounds.

“You disappear from the castle to go find the third piece and not only come back empty-handed, but also do not even try to take back the one thing that is more precious... more powerful in this world? The *one* thing that I need to mend the Cauldron and make my enemy pay?”

Efnysien’s body went limp, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Pryderi finally let go, allowing him to regain consciousness. “I will not be needing your services for the time being. Rot here until I call for you.” He left the infirmary, the door slamming behind him.

Branwen's funeral had passed, but her presence in the house as they went about their routines still lingered. Anwen spent most of her time in her room, leaving the others to handle their duties. Time passed as she sat in the garden, watching the sun lower. She didn't want to have to think about anything, to plan or prepare for what was to come. But their mission wasn't over. They still had two pieces missing; Pryderi's was the only one they knew for certain where it was.

Hafgan, Nysien, and Napellus had been arguing since morning about what to do next, their nerves frayed and no resolution in sight. On more than one occasion, Anwen heard the breaking of glass or wood, Hafgan's temper getting the better of him.

Anwen had come back into the house as the night encroached, their voices louder than ever. They were all on their feet, Napellus red in the face from shouting.

"She! Should! Go!" Napellus belted for the thousandth time. They'd finally settled on a plan: to send someone into Arberth Castle, find the piece, and send word to start the attack. All they needed was to choose who would do it.

The vein in Hafgan's temple was noticeable from where Anwen stood in the doorway. "That's not happening!" he yelled.

Napellus quickly pulled Anwen further in, including her in their argument. "Tell them. I know you'll agree with me. We want you to infiltrate Arberth Castle for us."

"You," Hafgan corrected. "You want her to do this."

Anwen wasn't sure what Hafgan was so concerned about. For once, she agreed. She was the only one who had seen the piece and remembered the way to the dungeon. She was also the only one, according to Arawn, who would be able to get through Pryderi's protection spell over its entrance.

"I'll go," Anwen said. "Pryderi won't expect me to be a spy."

"No. Absolutely not." Hafgan was seething, a black spot creeping into his eye. He wasn't going to let her walk back into that monster's den. He didn't want her in the middle of this. Not when Branwen's death was still so fresh.

He couldn't lose her too.

"Haf, hear her out," Napellus said. "I haven't heard anything about the last piece. This is the next best option."

"Do you have anything to say about this?" Hafgan snapped at Nysien, knowing his second-in-command should have sounder reasoning than the others.

Nysien stared at his friend. "I agree with Napellus. I would imagine if she could, she'd take Anwen's place."

"They know me too well." Napellus tossed her hair from her shoulder. "It seems my reputation precedes me."

Hafgan shot Nysien a warning look. "We'll wait," he argued, realising he was outnumbered, "until we hear something about the last piece. "I won't risk it," Hafgan bit out. "I won't risk *you*."

Nysien took hold of Napellus' arm. "Maybe we should give them a moment," he suggested, seeing where this was leading.

"Whatever he has to say, he should say it." Anwen crossed her arms in waiting. "What? You think I'm weak? That I can't handle myself? That I would go back to Pryderi after everything that's happened?"

"No," Hafgan answered firmly. "That's not what—"

"Then what?" she yelled.

Hafgan couldn't take it anymore, the words leaving his lips before he could think through them clearly. "Because I love you!" The grey in his cheeks fired red as he said it, the weight in his chest almost lifting.

Hafgan grabbed Anwen's hand and pulled her out of the room.

"Get your hands off me!" Anwen tried to pry his fingers off. He lifted her over his shoulder and carried her up the stairs and into his room for more privacy, Anwen kicking the whole way.

Napellus was left stunned.

"What happened to asking her for tea?" Nysien mumbled as he flopped into his seat.

Anwen steadied herself as her feet touched the floor of Hafgan's room. She was ready to rebuff him when she got a good look at his personal space and fell silent. She thought his

room would be barren of any finery... that living his life the way he did meant he wouldn't care for such things, but as she looked around, she found that wasn't the case.

Scrolls and quills, books and clothes... they were strewn about, dropped wherever he pleased once finished with them. His desk was piled with notes and scribbles. The chair that should have accompanied the table was hidden under a discarded cloak he'd yet to hang.

Thick, purple curtains blocked the windows across from them, allowing Hafgan the option of total darkness. The only thing that was well kept was his bed, the corners of the covers tucked tight with precision and the pillows plump.

Hafgan paced the room, agitated, kicking things out of the way in an attempt to tidy. He hadn't meant to say that out loud. Embarrassment heated his face further.

"Why did you say that?" Anwen asked, confused.

"It was a slip of the tongue," he grumbled.

"Really?" she asked, overwhelmed by his comment. She crossed her arms over her chest.

He stopped cleaning and stared her down. How could she not understand that he yearned for her? That she meant everything to him in ways he hadn't thought possible.

"For fucks sake, Hafgan! What do you want from me!" Anwen shouted, hot tears on the edge of spilling. "Just... tell me the truth."

"The *truth*," Hafgan growled back, towering over her perfect form, "is that I *yearn* for you!" His whole frame ached as he finally said it, as if he were a smouldering coal that a puff of wind was igniting back to life. "The first night I laid eyes on you, you somehow tore your way into my life! As much as I wanted *nothing* to do with you, you became the one thing I wanted to see every morning and every night. You became the one thing that made sense, which, I shouldn't have to remind you, is fucked up considering the predicament we're in!"

Hafgan wasn't sure he was explaining himself right.

Anwen stood dumbstruck. His constant jabs and cold demeanour had reduced their relationship to that of guard and prisoner. There was no way he would care for her.

"You are everything," Hafgan whispered, surprising her. Defeated, he backed away into one of the corners of the room and tucked his face into his elbow. "Anwen, I love you."

Anwen's mouth fell open. Nothing in her life had prepared her for this. She didn't even

know how she felt. She stepped closer to him, trying to understand. "After everything I've done... Everything I've said..."

She felt as if her world were collapsing all over again, the pieces scattering as wide as the Cauldron's.

"Even then," he conceded.

This was too much too soon.

Anwen hadn't thought of love past Pryderi. And she wasn't sure what she felt for Hafgan could be considered the same. How could she? Little time had passed since she decided to throw her love for Pryderi away, but she realised what she'd had with Pryderi wasn't love... It was *duty*... Duty to be the perfect wife and have his children. She'd convinced herself that that was what their love was. She'd seen her mother live exactly like that, but she'd never wanted that type of confining love.

She wanted to be free... to *love* freely.

"Me too," Anwen whispered before she realised it.

Hafgan's head shot up.

"I mean... I'm so confused..." She wasn't sure if it was love, but it was something.

Hafgan came and stood before her.

The earlier tears that had threatened now ran down Anwen's cheeks, angry at herself and angry at him for doing this now. "I thought I was supposed to love *him*. That living that type of life was what I wanted."

Hafgan brushed the tears from her eyes, taking in just how clear blue they truly were. "And what do you want now?"

She finally broke, her body wracked with sobs. She'd only ever talked with Marged about what she wanted. "To exist without rules and boundaries and judgements," she hiccupped. "To live as free as you do while still being able to protect those close to me. To shake off the expectations of my parents and the courts and just... *live*... unencumbered."

Hafgan cracked a smile as his shirt mopped up her wail of snot and tears, understanding exactly what she meant. He pulled her in tighter.

"I don't," Hafgan proudly announced, briefly pausing her waterworks. "Want to live unencumbered, I mean. I want you to burden me. For us to fight and work together to get

through things. I want to annoy you to the point where you want to punch me, only for you to miss.” He laughed, the action reverberating deep in his chest. It was the first time he’d laughed in days. “I want you with me through every experience life has to offer... the good and the bad.”

With Anwen still in his grip, he easily picked her up and flopped her onto the bed.

“Why?” she asked, still unconvinced. “Why would you want someone like that? I’m selfish... Rude... I... get annoyed if something doesn’t go right,” she reluctantly admitted. “Like now. I can’t believe you just threw me onto the bed like I was a doll!”

Anwen couldn’t stop trying to fill the silence as he stared her down again. A stare that bore deeper into her soul than anyone had any right to see. His gaze only grew sharper as he roughly pulled at the collar of her shirt, bringing her closer to him as his muscular body towered over her.

Anwen flinched. “You want to hit me, is that it?” she asked with a stubborn pout. She closed her eyes, prepared for it. She thought it was only fair with the number of times she’d hit him. He thought her absolutely adorable. “Well, go ahead... but... give me a moment, though... I need to—”

Hafgan kept his voice steady. “Anwen, close your mouth.”

Her jaw clamped shut, ready for the impact.

He loved her. Not just the way her mouth crinkled in readiness, nor how her cheeks’ rosininess filled her face... He loved all of her. The stubborn set of her brow. The way she talked back without thinking her words through, and everything else in between.

Gently, Hafgan cupped Anwen’s face and brought his lips down onto hers, as he had wanted to do so many times before.

Anwen gasped as she opened her eyes, her pupils dilated with surprise, then closed again. The sensation between her legs left her wanting. She pulled him to her, to feel every part of him, the weight of his body crushing her.

“Anwen,” Hafgan steadied her with a cautious hand.

Anwen kissed him again, throwing caution and her brain out the window. She got on top of him, allowing her better balance as she traced a trail of kisses down his neck. She tried to move slowly, navigating around him, which only made Hafgan want her more.

He breathed another word of love every time her lips met his skin. He wanted to feel her pleasure, to see how his every touch would elicit an arch of her back or a gasp of satisfaction. His hand traced along her breasts, the summer heat adding to the already stuffy room.

Even though this would be the first time, Anwen was completely at ease in Hafgan's embrace. She relieved herself of her clothes, Hafgan doing the same, allowing her to watch and trace her fingers over the ridges of his stomach. She gazed over his cock, the ache between her legs growing. She took one of his hands, the thorns and moons continuing their path where they bundled in front of his heart. Their pigment had faded. His hand reached down and stroked her, the pleasure making her moans escape.

She clamped her hand over her mouth.

Hafgan took that second of vulnerability to switch their positions and lowered himself until his mouth found her clit. He held her firmly in place, his fingers working in tandem.

Anwen felt a rush of heat, her walls constricting as Hafgan moved faster. She was just about to release when he stopped and brought his mouth to hers, moving more slowly to prolong the gratification. She whimpered as she felt him hard against her, her hands reaching down to stroke his cock, his own moan escaping.

His restraint was suddenly gone.

His movements were quick as he stood and picked her up off the bed.

"Haf, what are you—" Anwen's shock was interrupted by another kiss, her legs and arms wrapped around him.

"Take a deep breath," he instructed. He stood by the edge of the bed and entered her.

There was only a moment's pause as Anwen's ragged breath hitched. She tried to reposition her hips, only to push him in deeper.

Hafgan hugged her closer, wanting to melt into the softness of her body, and then he started to move. It was slow at first, feeling the ridges of her walls drag against him, until he gradually picked up speed. Anwen's wet sounds and gasps were like a sweet harmony that he stole with every kiss on her lips. Her nails bit deep into his broad shoulders, her body full of him. There was pain, as she'd expected, but the pleasure overrode every other sensation in her body.

With her legs still wrapped around him, they fell back into the bed, unable to keep the steady rhythm they'd set.

"Fuck." Hafgan whispered in her ear.

Anwen could only remember how to breathe as she took every thrust from him. She tightened against him, both hurriedly moving and breathing against one another, until she could feel her legs shake.

He held her steady as he buried deeper and brought her to full ecstasy. He didn't finish inside of her; instead, he pulled out and cummed over the side of the bed, magicking it away before she could see the mess.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to touch you," Hafgan confessed as he lay down next to Anwen, hugged her close to his chest, and brought her lips to his.

She giggled, biting at his lip. "You know, ever since we met, I always wanted to run my fingers through your hair." She felt the short strands at the nape of his neck, massaging her way up until she could grab a fistful of his curls.

Hafgan growled with pleasure. "Careful," he cautioned, still hard against her.

"What? The big bad god is trying to be nice now?" Anwen jerked her hips, toying with him.

Before she could blink, he had his lips on hers, licking his way around her mouth. She could barely breathe, her head feeling light, until Hafgan finally let her take a breath.

"Humans should be cautious when dealing with gods," he warned.

That was something Anwen hadn't thought of before. What if this was just a bit of fun for him? A god playing with a human. But in all their time together, she never thought him capable of such cruelty.

Hafgan could see the thoughts behind her eyes. He cupped her face in his hands, holding her gaze steady. "I love you, Anwen," he whispered and kissed her again, this time more slowly.

How long had he waited to utter those words? It felt like millennia. He certainly never thought they would be for this human woman who stole his breath with every glance. He vowed then and there that whatever was to come, he would make sure she was safe; that no matter what happened to him, she would survive.

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The morning sun seeped through the curtains of Hafgan's room as he watched Anwen sleep on his chest. He wanted to know more about her. What was her childhood like? What was her favourite food? Did she enjoy being in Elendi, or was she looking forward to returning to the Mundane?

The last question left a sour taste in his mouth. What if she *did* want to go back to her world? What would he do?

Go with her was the obvious answer, he thought.

In such a short time, Anwen had woven her way into Hafgan's heart, yet could he give up everything just to be with her? His Divine Court? His people? Why did it have to be either or?

Before Hafgan's mind could race through every possible scenario, Anwen stirred in the bed, a squeak escaping her as she stretched.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning." He brought her chin up to him and kissed her lightly, once, twice, thrice, until he had her squirming in his hold.

Anwen ground her clit on his thigh, sleep still caught in the corner of her eyes. He could already feel how slick she was from just a few kisses.

"We've woken up late," Hafgan brushed his fingers on her leg, making her shiver. "The others are probably waiting to see we haven't killed each other."

Anwen chuckled. "I think in a house this small, they would've heard if I was screaming for help."

Hafgan lowered his lips to her ear to whisper. "Oh, you were definitely screaming last night. I made sure of it."

Anwen's face went beet red, and she hid within the crease of his elbow. "Oh, gods! I can't believe you!" She was about to slap him when he lifted her onto his cock instead.

Anwen lurched as he entered slowly, and she braced her hands on his chest. A sigh of pleasure escaped her lips as she rocked back and forth, and the way Hafgan was staring up

at her, she could all but keep from tipping over the edge.

She tossed her hair to the side, giving herself better breathing room as she brought her lips to his. He kissed her back, his smile breaking through.

“You’re so beautiful,” he purred.

Anwen moved slowly, her hands brushing at his sides, sending shivers running down to his cock. She tightened in response. She wanted to prolong the feeling of being full, her hips rocking.

Hafgan’s eyes closed. Last night had been a whirlwind of movement, but this morning... this morning, he wanted to bask in her... to enjoy her subtle movements that somehow made every nerve ending in his body more sensitive.

He sat them up, trailing kisses down her neck until he reached her breasts. He took one in his hand, holding it gently as his mouth came down onto her nipple. He sucked on her as his tongue lapped in circles, feeling her harden.

Anwen purred in his grip as every move her hips made brought her closer and closer to ecstasy. “Haf,” she huffed, running her fingers through his hair.

He didn’t break his rhythm, prolonging every feel of her. His hands moved to her arse, squeezing her cheeks as he purposefully picked her up, dragging her around his cock, then brought her down. Anwen’s release was instant, the rush of wetness that covered him satisfying every bone in his body.

“It looks like you made a mess,” Hafgan teased.

Anwen could barely think; every sensation heightened as she felt him slowly pull out of her, leaving her pleasantly exhausted.

“Don’t worry,” Hafgan said, kissing her. “I’ll help you clean up.”

He princess-carried her in one arm as he made his way to the washroom. A black tub, large enough to fit two, sat waiting.

He set Anwen down long enough to conjure steaming water and bubbles, then collected her again. He settled them both into the water, Anwen falling asleep in his hold while he cleaned her, dragging the washcloth methodically over her body. He did the same for himself and was about to dry them both off when Anwen squeaked in protest.

Hafgan used all his willpower not to take her again then and there—they’d just gotten

clean for fucks sake. Instead, he disentangled himself from her, letting her sleepily lounge in the water as he dried, dressed, and sat on the bed.

Moments later, Anwen woke, feeling the emptiness around her. Sudsy bubbles popped as she stepped out, and Hafgan watched from the bed as those same bubbles slipped down from her hips to the floor. He was glad he could appreciate her like this.

He waved his hand before her, expecting to help rid her body of the excess water and soap as he did for himself, but it didn't work.

Anwen gave a chuckle. "I'll have to get ready the old-fashioned way, I'm afraid." She pulled a towel around her body and began wringing out her hair.

Hafgan didn't like that he couldn't help her with something so simple. She appreciated the gesture all the same.

"So," Anwen began, bending over to dry her legs, "I still agree with Napellus that I should be the one to infiltrate Arberth Castle."

Hafgan tilted his head, distracted by the display before him, until Anwen's words registered. "I really don't want you to," he said, the muscle in his jaw tightening.

"I think it's our only option at this point." She pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt, finishing it with a deep violet tunic.

Caution coated his words. "It'll mean war. There's no way Pryderi will let that piece go without it."

For once, Anwen pondered what that really meant. Would Hafgan's people get caught up in it? Pryderi's Divine Court, which seemed so innocent in her eyes compared to the god himself? Siriol? She shook her head, trying to dislodge the image of Siriol and Matron Goewin draped across a bloody field, their eyes lifeless.

Anwen fiddled with the hem of her shirt. "It's worth it, isn't it?" she asked, thinking of Branwen.

Hafgan kept silent. He knew it was, but how could he ask her to do this?

Anwen took this as a 'yes'. Her hand was steady as she reached down to Hafgan, stroking his face and feeling the short hair at the nape of his neck. She kissed him as she held his gaze. "Then war it is."

41

They all travelled to the border between Arberth and Elendi. Nos was tamer with Anwen's new relationship to his owner, though he did periodically growl when she shifted her weight into an uncomfortable position, so she ended up sitting on Hafgan's lap.

Anwen had on the dress she'd worn the night of her engagement party, the fit foreign to her. Her Malison dagger, which hadn't left her side since Eryri, was tucked away in Hafgan's wardrobe, restricted from bringing it on this adventure.

"You'll take a horse the rest of the way," Hafgan said, going over their plan once again, saying it more for his own sake than Anwen's. "The horse knows the way. Keep riding south. By the time you get to Imlyn, Pryderi's guards will have spotted you. You need to insist on seeing Pryderi no matter what. You understand? You stop for no one but Pryderi."

Anwen's shoulders tensed with worry. So much had happened since she'd escaped Pryderi's castle.

Hafgan took her chin in his grip. "Got it?"

Anwen glared at him. "I'll have you know," she said stubbornly, "Pryderi wouldn't stand for his *wife* to be treated as such." She almost vomited at the word but held fast.

Her conviction would've convinced Hafgan if she hadn't pecked him on the cheek. There was one last thing to do, his heart beating loud in his ears.

"I thought that... Well, you were so distraught about your necklace..." Hafgan pulled out a small parcel, the brown paper wrapped in simple twine and handed it to her. "I had one of the jewellers in town show me how to make it."

Anwen pulled the rough string and let the contents fall into her hand. The linked black chain was light yet sturdy, a small ring looped through.

It was dainty—made of hammered silver. Upon closer inspection, she could see the detailed etching that made the metal come alive and look as if a tree's bark had been stripped to make it. On one side of the ring was a moulded point, where she thought a small ruby would've fit perfectly, but noted it would've been too ostentatious for such a band.

Anwen couldn't believe Hafgan had made it, yet... It was simple, and surprisingly

intricate, just like the god himself. She hadn't expected anything like this from him, especially when they weren't sure whether they would be alive at the end.

"Haf, I can't—" This was really too much too soon.

"It's not like that," Hafgan panicked. "Well, maybe it is..." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Who knows what will happen to us, but I want you to know that I'll always be there, fighting for you... fighting for us." He took her in his arms. "So, you can't die before then."

"I can't... take it with me." Guilt had her gnawing on her lower lip. She knew what Hafgan was asking, but they had only just found their footing with each other. And Pryderi would notice it. There would be too many questions.

"I know," Hafgan answered, relieved she hadn't shot him down then and there. He pulled Pryderi's ring out of his pocket. He'd picked it up without Anwen noticing, knowing that they might need it again. "You'll need this instead," and dropped it into her other hand.

Anwen stared at it, mouth pulling into a line of disgust. She shoved it into the small, hidden pocket in her sleeve for safekeeping. "I'll put it on when I get closer," she promised.

She fiddled with Hafgan's again, feeling the smooth ridges of the bark, then held it out to him. He wrapped his hand around hers and brought it to his lips.

"And finally," Hafgan held his breath, knowing Anwen wasn't going to take his next news well. "Your journey will be long, but you need to keep moving. Don't sleep. Eat only enough to keep going. Pryderi will expect our mistreatment."

"I think I can handle—" Anwen was blindsided as Napellus slapped her hard across the face, her rings turned in so that long scratches covered her cheek.

A bruise already swelled to the point where Anwen could barely see out of her eye. She had no time to react as Napellus punched her in the gut. While doubled over, Napellus swept at her legs, causing her to fall into the dirt.

"What the *fuck*, Napellus!" Hafgan boomed, pulling Anwen to her feet. "This is not what we agreed on!"

Napellus easily skirted around him and stomped hard on Anwen's ankle, cutting off the circulation until Anwen could only feel pins and needles. Anwen screeched, trying unsuccessfully to pull away.

"You need to look the part!" Napellus echoed Hafgan's sentiment. "And looking half-

starved won't cut it. It was easier to take you by surprise than have you expecting it."

"Easier for *whom*?" Anwen groaned into Hafgan's chest. The cut on her cheek was smeared with the earth. Her ribs had only just healed, but with that punch, they had re-cracked.

Hafgan glared at Napellus, warning the *Fflora* that any further treatment would be met with equal punishment. Napellus raised her hands, finished. He checked over Anwen once, making sure she hadn't been blinded or worse.

It'd help Anwen's ruse if she looked badly treated, but that didn't mean he had to like it. It took all his strength not to call the whole thing off.

He lifted her into his arms and walked over to the waiting horse. Supporting her back, he hoisted her onto the saddle and handed her the reins. Before Anwen could say any last goodbyes, Hafgan slapped the horse's arse, setting it off at a gallop towards Arberth.

It took her days to ride to Imlyn, heeding Hafgan's words to keep moving no matter what. The cut on Anwen's face was still tender, and her ribs screamed in pain from the jostling of the horse. And her ankle... she couldn't feel it anymore from hanging the whole time. Sleep escaped her mind, but not her body, as she leaned forward on the horse, letting its neck support the rest of her as it trotted along.

Anwen knew that at any moment she'd be found, the thought filling her with dread. She'd be lying to herself if she didn't wish for the journey to end and be in the comfort of a bed.

Only once or twice did she stop to pick berries and take small sips of water. What she wouldn't have done for a proper meal. She was delirious as she imagined Hafgan's room again with him in it. The way his curtains blew in the open breeze as he ran his fingers up her arm... How his face would be pulled into a deep frown of concentration, and when he looked up to see her, how it would smooth in loving recognition. Napellus would be downstairs helping Nysien cook something for supper while Branwen—

A strong hand pulled her from her saddle. At first, she'd thought it was Hafgan, come to

take her back. She'd been a fool to suggest going back to Pryderi and wanted nothing more than to be in his arms again.

Then reality set in.

Anwen had to school her face not to show the revulsion that so readily came to mind as she looked into Pryderi's eyes.

"What have they done to you?" Pryderi stroked at her hair; concern lathered in his voice.

Anwen did the only thing she knew would work, something she'd used time and again since she was a child to get out of arguments and situations she didn't want to be in.

She cried as hard as she could.

The tears teared their way down her face as she theatrically clung onto Pryderi, her exhaustion supporting her role of the damsel.

Pryderi held her steady, relieved that Anwen was finally back with him. He carried her over to his carriage, which shot into the sky without the help of any animals, the enchantment on its wheels strong.

Anwen fought as her eyelids drooped, wanting to stay awake and alert in Pryderi's presence in case he decided her act was no longer convincing.

"You do not need to worry any longer, my darling. You are safe." Pryderi gently positioned her, letting her head fall more comfortably on his chest. "It is all right for you to sleep now."

Anwen couldn't help herself as she imagined she was wrapped in Hafgan's arms. That it wasn't Pryderi's rise and fall of his breath or his heartbeat against her ear, but Hafgan's. It created a melodic beat that was rhythmic enough for her to finally close her eyes and succumb to the sleep she desperately wanted.

Anwen woke to soft bed sheets and pillows. The old scents of gardenias and bright eyes were mixed with the medicinal smell of a salve that'd been slathered onto her cheek, ribs and ankle. She was stiff as she sat up on the edge of the bed. Relief washed over her that she hadn't been killed in her sleep... Relief that was short-lived as she carefully stood and found Pryderi sitting in one of the chairs across the room, examining her every move.

Anwen schooled her face with loving softness, imagining not Pryderi before her, but Hafgan... how his smile would ever-so-slightly crinkle his vibrant, amethyst eyes.

Anwen tested her weight on her foot and found it had healed sufficiently to walk the short distance to him. She didn't hesitate—didn't have the luxury to—as she ran her fingers over his jaw. If she wanted to stay alive and sell her story, she needed his utmost trust.

"Pryderi... You rescued me..." She smiled her most innocent smile.

Pryderi took her hand from his face, holding it tight as he stood to stare down at her. "Did I?" he asked, his voice hard. He let go of her to open the curtains to let in the afternoon sun.

She took a deep breath, steadying her answer. "You came for me. Like you promised."

"Not soon enough, it seems." He stared out into the city, straining the tension in the air until she almost couldn't take it. His words were laced with indignation. "Your ring."

Panic rocked through Anwen as she looked down at her finger and found it empty. She'd forgotten to slip it on. She calmed herself as she tried to stick as much to the truth as possible, as Napellus had taught her.

"It's in my sleeve," Anwen said, her voice small. "I didn't want... *him* to take it, so I hid it. If you know where my clothes are, I can prove it to you."

Pryderi's back was taut as he listened, then jutted his chin towards the bench in front of the bed where her old clothes lay.

Anwen ran to them, rummaging through the fabric, until she found the hidden pocket. She held it up to his face. "See, I kept it. All this time."

Pryderi's brow furrowed. Anwen knew she was going to have to chisel away at his scepticism.

"I wanted you to be the one to put it on me again." Anwen said. "Then it would mean that I was truly back... That I finally made it... home." She felt lightheaded, but it helped with keeping up her harrowing act.

Pryderi moved quickly, Anwen having no chance to react as his lips parted hers in a rush. His tongue snaked its way inside her mouth, hungry. She dampened every instinct not to bite down and closed her eyes and pictured Hafgan, again. The way he'd have held her waist and she would have run her fingers through his ink-black hair, pressing him closer to her so she could feel every part of him.

"Anwen. Anwen," Pryderi whispered over and over as he continued to explore her. "I missed you. You do not know how many times I wanted to go looking for you, but..."

Efnysien's voice crashed into both their minds before he burst into the room. "*Dark Fae whore!*"

The door banged open, Efnysien standing in its way with a crazed snarl, turning up his lip. He sauntered over to them both and separated them, taking hold of Anwen around the throat.

"This time, I am going to make sure you die!" Efnysien squeezed tightly.

Anwen's voice was lost as she scratched at Efnysien's hands in vain to loosen his grip, tearing away bits of skin. Flashbacks to when they were atop the outcrop came rushing back, Branwen lying dead before her. She wanted to break every bone in his body. She glared at him, her gaze thankfully hidden from Pryderi's view, warning of the coming storm that would ensue were he not to let go that instant. Her nails bit deeper, and out of instinctual terror, Efnysien let her go.

Anwen felt a whoosh of air hit her lungs, coughing at the expected release. A second later, Pryderi had Efnysien bound tightly in a constricting spell.

The rage on Pryderi's face was nothing compared to hers. His eyes turned bright green, and the pigment on his arms swirled. Had she witnessed him like this months ago, it would've sent a cold terror down her spine; now she revelled in the fact that Efnysien was doubly helpless.

"If you *ever* put your hands on her again, your voice will not be the only thing you will have lost," Pryderi said, seething. He nudged his knee roughly into Efnysien's groin.

"Pryderi, I warned you what has become of her! Do not believe her lies! She would kill you in your sleep!" Efnysien was manic as he tried to dissuade him, knowing well what Anwen was truly capable of.

"What are you talking about, Efnysien?" Anwen's voice took on a childish tone as she clung to Pryderi's side.

"You cannot fool me, whore! I will not allow you to make a mockery of my God. I told him all that you did! There is no way you are getting out alive from this castle!"

Anwen dropped her hands, putting on an act Napellus would be proud of. She had to steer the conversation to her liking. It was all too easy when the creatures in front of her knew nothing of how far she would go to avenge Branwen, and herself.

"I don't know how you would've seen me while I was locked away in a cell, fearful for my life... waiting for *you* to rescue me," she directed at Pryderi, making sure he felt the guilt. "Everything I did, I did to survive. All I wanted was to be back here."

"Your lies fall on deaf ears!" Efnysien screeched. *"It was you who wounded me so. You who controlled fear as if it were nothing!"*

"Between me and the Gods, I don't know what you speak of!" Anwen hid deeper behind Pryderi.

Efnysien snarled. *"We are the only gods here! And we take no vow from you!"*

"Enough!" Pryderi gripped harder on his spell, silencing Efnysien. How dare he call himself a god when he was nothing of the sort? He glanced down at Anwen. There were many things that didn't add up in Efnysien's story. How she had beaten him in the first place was at the forefront of his mind. Even if she somehow possessed magic, she wouldn't be schooled enough to beat his aide. "Efnysien told me of what happened in Eryri. Are you feigning innocence?"

Anwen tried not to grit her teeth, her voice wavering. "I swear, I know nothing about Eryri. Perhaps what Efnysien saw was magic? As I don't have any, how would I have wounded him? You just witnessed my strength moments ago and saw that the most I can do is tear some skin." She brought her arms around his waist, fresh tears springing from her eyes as she looked up at him. "Pryderi, please, can't we just be happy I'm back and put this whole mess behind us?"

Pryderi let Efnysien fall to the floor as his spell released and brought her face closer to his. "That is all that I wish for," he said, though he could see the coldness behind her fake happiness.

"Pryderi!" Efnysien cut in.

"I will hear nothing more. Obviously, what happened in Eryri was nothing more than magic that tricked your mind. If another insult at my wife-to-be passes your lips, I'll make sure they are cut off as well."

Efnysien roughly got to his feet and bowed deeply, resigned to being made the fool that he was. He left the room as quickly as he'd come.

"I am sorry you had to deal with this as soon as you woke." Pryderi brushed Anwen's long hair back in place. "I had wished we could have talked more about everything; though, from the look on your face, you seem to want to forget the whole ordeal."

Anwen glanced away, knowing she would reveal this particular lie. "They treated me horribly. Locked me away in a room with no windows... I didn't know if it was day or night... They only left scraps for me to survive on... And when he did enter..." She brought her hands around her shoulders, hugging herself with feigned comfort. "I can still feel his touch," she let slip, honestly.

Pryderi didn't want to hear any more. He was playing his part, and she hers. "There is nothing more you need to worry about. You are safe. I will not let anyone take you away again." His eyes grew dark.

Anwen leaned against him. "I trust in you," she replied. "Will you call for Siriol? I'd like to be more decent for our meal later."

"Of course," Pryderi said, brushing at the softness of her unmarred cheek. "I will leave you to ready yourself." He took her hand in his and pressed his lips against the back of it, then left the room.

Anwen's composure broke as soon as the door clicked in place. She crumpled to the ground, tears rushing out as she could barely catch her breath. She held her hand over her mouth, making sure her sobs weren't overheard. She was astounded how Napellus could do this for a living... lying and deceiving those around her with such ease that distrust never entered their minds was remarkable.

A light knock sounded at the door, and Siriol walked in before Anwen could correct herself.

“My lady!” Siriol rushed to Anwen, picking her up from the floor. “What happened?”

Anwen wiped her tears with her sleeve. “I’m sorry, Siriol, for you to see me like this. Pryderi was here... I thought... I could hold myself together...”

Siriol nodded in understanding. “You must’ve had a terrible experience. Come, let’s draw you a bath and wash away your troubles.”

Anwen did just that, letting the soapy water cleanse her. When Siriol laid out her evening dress, she was nostalgic for the tunics and trousers she’d become accustomed to, missing especially the ones Branwen had picked for her.

Pryderi kept a close eye on Anwen, wary of the slightest shifts in her demeanour. The way she ate her meal: devouring her food without hesitation and taking larger bites than usual. Her wine glass had to be filled more than thrice before she'd finished her food. But these were things he could indulge, aware that she wouldn't have eaten well in the past month, as she wanted him to believe.

Pryderi could look past her transgressions. Anwen had helped his enemy to gain two out of the four pieces. Pieces he'd be taking back with his own hands in due course. Now all he needed was the last piece.

He still hadn't forgiven Efnysien for his actions, but granted him repentance for the time being. He would need him in the coming days, the scent of war brewing.

Anwen swallowed the food as best she could, thinking of the simple meals she and Hafgan had shared with everyone, lounging in the back garden while Nysien was inside whipping up dessert. The food in front of her now seemed too lavish and decadent, but she needed her strength.

"How did you escape?" Pryderi asked innocently.

It was the worst question he had asked yet.

Anwen's hand stopped, gripped around a chicken leg.

"Tell him I saved you," Arawn's voice calmly joked beside her, almost making Anwen jump out of her skin. She was already on edge from everything else; she didn't need him popping up as well.

Anwen picked at her meal, trying to come up with a better answer.

"Or feign ignorance," Arawn continued. *"You're good at that."*

She opened her mouth to retort, only to remember she was the only one who could see him. As she was about to give her excuse, Rhiannon walked in, her form elegant as she came to Anwen's side.

Rhiannon was the picture of beauty, in a white brocaded silk dress with gems weighing down the train; her long blonde hair shining against the levitating chandeliers. Godly designs

of pink crystals and geodes ran up her arms.

"My dear!" Rhiannon sang as she pulled Anwen from her chair and into her arms. Her crystal necklace dug into her chest. "You are looking better than when I saw you unconscious yesterday. How are your injuries? We tried to heal them with magic, but it wouldn't work. You must have been absolutely terrified!" She didn't pause to breathe. "No matter, you are safe now."

Anwen was surprised to see Rhiannon in *Annwfn* but thankful that she'd interrupted them.

"*Still as much a firedragon as ever.*" Arawn's smile was genuine as he gazed at Rhiannon, his eyes smouldering.

Pryderi stood and pulled out a chair for his mother. A servant poured her a glass of wine, Rhiannon pushing the food away.

"I didn't know you were here," Anwen said truthfully.

"Well, when I heard what had happened, of course, I rushed over to check on things." Rhiannon brought her cup to her lips and took a sip. "I was not going to let my daughter-in-law suffer more than was needed. And when I heard what happened to Branwen..."

Anwen gripped her knife. She didn't want Branwen's name passing the lips of anyone in Arberth.

"I was sad to hear the news," Anwen whispered, eyes hidden. "They never told me what happened."

"It is of no consequence," Pryderi said. "Matholwch was inconsolable when he heard. He truly did love her, but Efnysien's actions were understandable..."

Anwen's eyebrow ticked up in annoyance. "Both of them can fucking rot for all I care!" She pushed back her chair and, throwing down the knife, rushed from the room. She couldn't believe the gall they all had.

Pryderi caught up with her, snatching her wrist before she could make it up the stairs. "Anwen, forgive me," he said. "I did not think—"

"No, you didn't," she shot back hotly. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. It would do her no good to provoke his suspicions further. "Walk me to my bedroom?" she asked, putting on her best smile.

Pryderi returned her smile in kind, Anwen remembering why she'd fallen so deeply in love with him in the first place. Now that smile swayed her no more than his apologies.

Pryderi walked her to her room, knowing he needed to gain control of her one way or another. Once behind closed doors, he pulled her into him, crushing his lips against hers as he tried to untangle the mess of fabric from her body.

"No, Pryderi." Anwen pushed against his chest, trying to separate him from her. She didn't want to do this, not with him.

He crushed her closer, his hands snaking their way down the front of her dress.

"I said no!" Her palm met with his cheek, the action stilling them both.

It didn't matter to him. The only woman he had ever lain with was Cigfa... To do so with another would almost be a defilement to her memory.

"It was too soon," Pryderi sheepishly grinned. He rubbed at his cheek, the skin stinging. She'd built up a bit of strength in his absence. "You have been through so much and need your rest. I should not have assumed..." he trailed off. "We will have more than enough time for it once we are married."

"Is that why your mother is here?" she asked, approaching the subject carefully.

"Is this not what you wanted? Since we have spent so much time apart, marrying as soon as possible would be favourable for the whole court."

Revulsion churned in Anwen's stomach as anger bubbled to the surface. She wanted to break the slick smile that lit his face and tear out every lock of his sickeningly golden hair for thinking she'd still be willing to marry him. Marriage had been off the table the moment Branwen had drawn her last breath.

Anwen hid her hands behind her back, her nails biting deep into the skin of her palms. "I'm looking forward to it," she quickly lied. "When were you thinking of making the big day?"

"Once you have healed. Mother can whip up a ceremony whenever we call for it. She is very talented in that respect."

Anwen's world spun as she listened, nails digging deeper and deeper until she felt pricks of wet blood touch her fingertips. She kept a bright smile plastered on her face, changing the subject quickly. "Can you send for Matron Goewin before you head off for the night?"

Pryderi lightly kissed her forehead as he opened the door. "Of course," he said, and bid her goodnight.

Anwen didn't have to wait long for Goewin to arrive.

"You're only supposed to call for me in emergencies," the Matron hissed as she closed the door behind her and pulled Anwen into the bedchamber. "And what have you done to your hands?"

Anwen paid no mind to the ache in her palms. "This *is* an emergency! I need a piece of parchment and a quill!" she said, knowing she would heal within the week.

The Matron pursed her lips in stubborn disapproval but magicked the items before her. Anwen snatched them out of the air and scrawled one word onto the page, then folded it and placed it securely into the Matron's hand.

How did she think she could do this without Hafgan? She felt his absence more than ever.

"Please, I need you to get this to him," she begged. "You can be there and back in mere moments! Please, I just need him to know."

"I can't go this instant! I have things that need attending to."

Anwen bit down every nasty retort she wanted to make. "Fine, when you have the time, but please, do it soon."

The Matron pursed her lips again but nodded in agreement. "In the meantime, I imagine Hafgan has instructed you to locate the piece of the Cauldron. Make sure you do just that."

Matron Goewin dipped a curtsy before heading out the door, leaving Anwen alone in her rooms for the first time since she had arrived. All her strength left her as she stumbled into bed, wrapping her arms around her legs and tucking them tightly into her chest. She wasn't sure how she was going to get to the third piece under Pryderi, Rhiannon and Efnysien's watchful eye. But she knew if she didn't, then she and Hafgan and everyone else they were fighting for wouldn't stand a chance in Pryderi's new world.

Hafgan hated this part of being a god: asking others to fight for him. Were he stronger, he would've taken on every army, every enemy that stood in his way, by himself, but only Arawn had that kind of power. There'd been a time in his life when he had enjoyed fighting and would stop at no one's command, but ever since Cigfa...

There had always been something about that woman, who, with the power of a single word, could strip someone or build them up entirely.

Now that same power seemed to reside in Anwen.

"You're worrying again," Napellus said, mindful of Hafgan's leg bouncing up and down on a creaking floorboard, grating on her nerves.

"I'm allowed," Hafgan snapped.

It'd been days since he'd watched Anwen ride off toward Arberth. In that time, he'd visited anyone and everyone who had helped him in the past; the list dwindled to the *Fflora*, Giants, and a mishmash of creatures. Everyone else, the Elves especially, Pryderi had already gotten his fangs into.

Those who lived in Hafgan's court were ready the second he had come to their doors; the blacksmiths, craftsmen, and apothecaries gathering their wares for battle.

"Are we sure she's still alive?" Math said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Math was a burly god and the second-oldest member of the Seven. He had thick, greying hair and a beard that had cuffs of silver entwined in it, holding it all in place. He continued the colour into his wardrobe, varying shades of grey robes shrouding his built body. His eyes were as deep as smoke and just as smouldering. He wielded a long staff, the middle broken and mended with stone. And his arms were covered in grey runes, some purposely burned away over the millennia.

Hafgan hurled a bolt of black lightning at Math, singeing the hem of his robes. "I'm putting up with you fucking being here because you said you'd fight with us, but don't for a moment think I won't take you out myself if I need to," he threatened.

Math stood, unperturbed about his clothes. "I only joined your merry band of misfits

because I sided with Pwyll in the last war... No fun playing the same side every time. So, I would watch what you say, boy. In the next one, we could easily be enemies." Math straightened his shoulders. "Besides, I've heard rumours that human is quite the sight."

"You won't get a *chance* to fucking touch her," Hafgan bit back.

Math held up his hands in surrender. "Fine. I wouldn't want your slag anyway."

Hafgan's arm tensed as he hurled another bolt of lightning at him, but Math vanished from the room before it could strike.

"Why did we invite that bastard again?" Napellus asked as she played with one of her knives, imagining it rammed into Math's eye. She'd never liked the way he looked at her.

"We didn't," Hafgan said. "He just showed up."

"The enemy of my enemy..." Nysien alluded, walking in to hand Napellus a mug of cider.

"Should be killed just as mercilessly," she finished. "Honestly, with all that he's done in his life, perhaps death would be too easy."

Hafgan had heard stories about Math and had witnessed a couple firsthand, but he knew they'd need someone with his strength and experience to overwhelm Pryderi. He was about to explain just that when a rumble came from the cupboard. The clothes inside shifted as someone struggled to move them away from the door.

"Blasted things!" came Siriol's voice from within.

Nysien opened the door for her, offering his hand to steady her as she ungracefully stepped out. Her wings shone in the morning light, throwing rainbows onto the varnished floor.

"Thank you, Nysien." Siriol huffed. "I swear, every time I see you, I think you're about to snap at me for something, then remember which brother you are. You're a breath of fresh air."

Nysien bowed, taking no offence. "It's rare to see you here, Siriol. Did the Matron send you?"

Siriol nodded and rummaged in her pocket. "I have a note from Anwen." She held it out to Hafgan, who snatched it from her, his eyes glued to the paper.

Hafgan had never seen anything written in Anwen's hand before, but the way the frills looped in excess and the script was clear of any blotches, he knew it was from her. There

was only one word written and it tore at his very being.

Yes.

Hafgan knew that with that single word, Anwen had accepted everything he was, everything he is, and everything he would be.

"When did she write this?" Hafgan asked her, holding the paper gently between his fingers.

"A day or two after she arrived," Siriol replied apologetically. "I'm sorry, there was no other time I could slip away without being noticed."

"Did you read it?" Hafgan asked.

"No," Siriol confirmed. "I wouldn't... I didn't..."

Hafgan was too preoccupied with his thoughts as he pictured the way Anwen's mouth would have puckered in stubbornness were she there to answer him aloud. How she would've averted her gaze only to bring it back with a determined fierceness he found he could no longer live without. It was a command meant to spur him into action.

And so, it did.

"We leave now," Hafgan said. He calculated everything they still needed to do before storming Arberth. It would be cutting it close, but he needed to see her.

"What does it say?" Siriol asked, taking the paper back from Hafgan before he could stop her. "Yes?" she read. "'Yes', to what?"

Napellus could read between the lines, a huge smile lighting her face. "Well, I never thought I'd see the day when Hafgan, the Dark God and Demonic Ruler, would blush so deeply."

"Napellus," Hafgan's voice rang out clearly, his shoulders set squarely. "We need to convene a council. Get everyone gathered."

Anwen spent her free time exploring the grounds. Not out of boredom as she'd done in the past, but to properly map a route to the dungeon since additional guards had been posted around every corner. She couldn't risk trying to use shadow magic; the suspicion surrounding her was already too high. Instead, she made mental notes on how the guards moved inside the castle, feigning a joyful smile as she small-talked with them: the weather, their families, or how they came to be in Pryderi's service. She wanted to know anything and everything about the creatures who stood in her way. But another part of her enjoyed their chats, and she was aware they might die in the coming fight. At least she could then mourn them properly.

The thought sobered her. Pryderi had no shortage of fighters. A group of them could always be seen training on the plain beside the castle, putting their strength on display.

She still didn't fully comprehend war. The one between the Black Plague Brotherhood never touched her personally, except for at the end, when the world lost Jade. Now being at the heart of the conflict, the reality of whether she would live or die in the coming battle weighed heavily on her.

It'd taken longer than Anwen wanted to find the best path to the dungeon without rousing the guards' suspicion. When she finally did, she stopped before the threshold of the archway, Arawn not there to magic them to sleep this time.

"We cannot allow you access to this area," Unig said, his shoulders strong as he supported his heavy spear.

This wasn't the first time Unig had barred her entry into a particular part of the castle. She'd tried several times to play at being Pryderi's wife, questioning why she wasn't allowed in a particular part of her 'own home', but was met with the same strict orders that even for her, they couldn't budge.

Pryderi wasn't as stupid as Anwen wanted him to be.

"Not even to view the garden from that window?" Anwen asked Unig, trying to think of something that would throw suspicion away from her. She was sick of using such vapid

excuses, her temper getting the better of her. “Would you treat me as a prisoner as well? You are no better than that *cythraul*.” She regretted the moment the word left her mouth, but could see how it elicited a different reaction from the guards than mere whining and surrendering. Both guards tightened their grips around their spears at the insult.

“Only for a bit,” Unig said. It was his first mistake, and she was prepared to take advantage of it. Finally, she had found her weak link.

As they walked through the hall, Anwen searched for the hidden door that she and Arawn had walked through before. When she’d first been there, the way had been bare of any finery; now tapestries and candelabras and vases filled with flowers adorned every space, making it hard to figure out where to look.

She wanted to run her hands along the walls and find where they would pass through, but knew she wouldn’t be able to do that with Unig watching. She’d have to find another time and way of distracting him and his partner long enough to find the entrance.

They stopped at the other end of the hall, where Anwen could peer through the window at the garden. It was less of a garden and more of an overgrown shelter. From the outside, it would have been easy to miss, its bramble of purple globe thistles growing into an archway.

Longing shot through Anwen. She wondered what Hafgan was doing at that exact moment. The image of him fighting off a bear randomly came to her mind, and she stifled a laugh.

“Thank you, Unig,” Anwen said in earnest, smiling, “for allowing me to find happiness with this view.”

Unig blushed. Only his husband had ever smiled like that at him. “You are most welcome, my lady.” He led her back down the hall and took his place again, apologising that he couldn’t walk her further.

Hafgan called all those who would help him to order. Everyone was gathered around the makeshift war table: Bloom and her *Fflora* sisters, including Isiah (who she hadn't seen in years), Math, Kylian, Brân and Manawydan, with a hoard of Giants, and a mishmash group of other creatures.

"We'll take a page out of Anwen's book," Nysien said, "and hit them with a surprise attack."

Siriol had gone back to Arberth, the Matron taking her place. Goewin waved a firm hand over the table and a model of Arberth Castle appeared before them. She tried not to notice Math's eyes upon her. It had been centuries since they'd been married, yet every time they were in the same room, the chip on his shoulder seemed to smooth over. His attention lingered on where her wings used to be, shame pulling his attention away. It was one of the few things she still liked about him, though that didn't make up for the rest of his character.

"Anwen's rooms are here, Pryderi's here, the dungeons here," Goewin pointed to their respective places on the map. "Anwen's been scouting the dungeons the most. That's probably where Pryderi's holding the third piece." The Matron's lips thinned in worry.

"What is it?" Napellus asked.

"She's not very good at being a spy," the Matron said, speaking from experience. "I've covered for her as much as I can, but the sooner you get there, the better. I don't think Pryderi is as fooled as she thinks. I know Rhiannon isn't. Especially since..." Goewin stayed quiet, lips pressed together. She knew Hafgan wouldn't take her next words well.

Hafgan's shoulders went rigid. He never should have let Anwen go. "Since she what?"

The Matron's voice strained in the company of so many. "Since she won't let him *touch* her."

Hafgan's muscles tensed. Just the thought of Anwen in the arms of another god...

"Isn't that quaint?" Math mocked. "I thought you were going to say something more along the lines of having her mouth around his coc-"

Napellus socked him right in the jaw before Hafgan could, shaking her hand out as he

staggered a few feet. Some around the room shouted in praise; Blodeuedd grinning from ear to ear, while the Matron shook her head in disappointment.

“That’s why it’s better to go now,” Blodeuedd said, laying her hand on Hafgan’s shoulder.

His anger went as quickly as it came. He needed to focus first on reaching Anwen; the rest would follow.

“Our main forces will be positioned here with Nysien and Bloom,” Hafgan said, pointing to the forest surrounding the West side of the castle. It would provide their groups with enough cover and leave the city out of the fight. They didn’t need the extra blood on their hands. “Napellus and I will take position here in the Northeast—closest to the castle. Brân and Mana will take to the South. Math... you’ll handle the skies. I believe Tali is still in your care?”

“She is,” Math confirmed, rubbing at his cheek with a grin. “We’ll be able to help if you’re thinking of a big distraction...” He was already imagining what he could do to get everyone’s attention. Burn the city to the ground? Rain hellfire upon his enemies? Kidnap one of the many virgins that resided there and fuck her in front of everybody? For him, the possibilities were endless.

“*Subtle*,” Nysien stressed, not wanting to imagine what Math had in store. “Napellus, you’re the best at infiltration. What would you do?”

“I’d slip out of their shadows and cut their necks,” Napellus said, matter-of-factly. “Though with our numbers, we wouldn’t be able to take them all by surprise. And many of you don’t know how to use shadow magic, so it wouldn’t be the best line of action. In all honesty, I’d go with Math’s big distraction.”

Napellus couldn’t believe she just agreed with Math.

“While they’re all paying attention to that,” Napellus continued, “Haf and I can sneak into the castle to try and find Anwen and the third piece. Hopefully she’ll have it in hand by then.”

“That’s a big risk,” Blodeuedd countered her daughter. All of them turned to her. “Even if we get past all Pryderi’s soldiers, they have us beat two to one. We are betting that a human girl has managed to get her hands on the piece. What if she hasn’t?”

“She will,” Hafgan stood tall. He had faith in Anwen. Ever since he met her, she’d

surprised him at every turn. Somehow, he knew this time would be no different, especially when she held the same sorrow in her heart for Branwen as he did.

“Then,” Math rejoiced, clapping his hands together, startling the lesser creatures, “let’s go to war!”

“Are you feeling all right?” Siriol asked, as they sat in Anwen’s quarters.

Anwen had taken to keeping the curtains in her rooms closed, unwanting of prying eyes, but that afternoon was particularly humid, and she allowed the balcony doors to stay open to let the summer breeze in.

“Hmm?” Anwen asked, distracted as she pinned her needle into her sleeve. The bandages around her foot and torso had been removed the day before, the areas still tender but healing. Time was running out. “Ah, yes, I’m only tired from my walks.”

Siriol clicked her tongue as she missed a stitch on her embroidery. She’d taken up the human practice, hoping to give Anwen some semblance of normality. What was supposed to be a depiction of a lion was slowly turning into the disembodiment of a sunflower.

“You take a number of walks throughout the day and never allow me to join. What do you do?” Siriol asked. Her question sounded innocent, but Anwen could hear the undertone of curiosity that sent a warning through her.

“Think mostly,” Anwen answered as leisurely as possible, “of how happy I am to be here.”

Anwen hoped the note she’d passed to the Matron had made its way safely to Hafgan and that he was on his way. She was going to find that piece today, even if she had to use every dirty trick in the book.

“I’m going for another walk,” Anwen abruptly announced, throwing down her own embroidery pattern that barely held a stitch. “Care to join me for this one?”

Siriol’s face lit up as she gratefully discarded her own work. Anwen needed to look inconspicuous as she surveyed the window with its globe thistle and vine garden to see if there was any way to gain access to the hall from the outside.

Siriol would make for a great distraction.

They took their time making their way into the gardens, the sky hued in reds and oranges as the sun began its descent, making it look as if the castle was set against a great fire.

Siriol prattled along as they walked. Anwen only jumped in where needed to keep her going while she kept watch for anyone following them.

The guards in that area were due to change, giving Anwen a few moments of freedom to assess the outside. She tugged Siriol behind the vine archway, being careful not to prick themselves on the thistles as they crouched beneath the window.

“What are we doing?” Siriol asked.

Anwen didn’t know who to trust anymore, but she was willing to take the chance.

“I need you to do something for me,” Anwen said, keeping her voice low as she peeked over the sill and into the hall. The window glass wasn’t thick. She could easily smash the corner pane to get to the lock, but she needed someone to cover for the sound. “I need you to keep the guards on the other side of that hall occupied.”

“Why?” Siriol asked.

“Because I need to find something in there,” Anwen answered.

“What do you need?”

Anwen’s patience was wearing thin and her fingers became rigid as she tried to gain control over herself. “A door,” Anwen said through gritted teeth.

“Why do you need a door?” Siriol’s doe eyes stared at her.

Anwen finally snapped. “Because behind that door is a piece of the Cauldron of Rebirth. But to get to that piece, I need to find the door. And the reason I need that piece is so Pryderi doesn’t use it to wipe out the Dark Fae and probably half the Divine Courts. And I need *you* to distract the guards so that I can find that door. Otherwise, Pryderi will have me killed. I need you to trust me!” She huffed with exhaustion.

Siriol straightened her back and her gaze sharpened. Honestly, she thought she would break sooner. She’d never asked such inane questions in her life.

“I do trust you,” Siriol tugged at Anwen’s hand, loosening the vise grip she had on her sleeve. “Just as I trust in Matron Goewin.”

Anwen understood her meaning instantly. Siriol hadn’t been surprised the night of her kidnapping. She never pressed Anwen about her time with Hafgan, nor about the sudden

change upon her return from Elendi.

“Siriol... You knew,” shock coating her words.

Siriol’s wicked smile stretched on her sharp face, her freckles crinkling on her nose. “Of course, I knew. Who do you think recruited me? Most of the servants are under the Matron’s care, not Pryderi’s. It’s my job to feed information to Napellus.”

“How?” Anwen was stunned. “How have you been able to do this for so long?”

Siriol’s smile faded, her eyes pleading as she looked into Anwen’s for understanding. “We are *nothing* here. We are taught to be ghosts who should cling to the walls and make sure Pryderi’s castle stays clean, and his food is made. We are exploited for our magic. If he really wanted to, he could use his own magic; he has enough. But he is a god and believes himself too mighty to undertake labour. No one should be made to work in such conditions... to live that way for *years—decades—centuries*.”

Anwen understood now why Hafgan’s home had no servants, and why it felt more comfortable than any she had lived in before. There was no one suffering at another’s hand.

“Our revolution is coming,” Siriol continued, “and you’re leading it.”

The crunch of gravel as approaching footsteps got closer had both women clamping their mouths shut. The vines were doing their job, perfectly hiding them. The first guard passed, which meant another two would be coming soon.

“I’ll go now,” Siriol said, her neck straining to make sure it was safe.

Anwen tried to tell Siriol the best way to get to the other side, but before she could make a sound, she saw that Siriol was already chatting with Unig and his partner. Anwen actually felt sorry about deceiving him.

Somehow, Siriol had gotten hold of one of the vases from the hall, turning it this way and that for the men to admire with her. Anwen was ready, her elbow against the pane of glass. She held up her other hand for Siriol to see as she counted down on her fingers when to drop the vase.

Three.

Two.

One.

Siriol’s grip on the vase conveniently slipped, shattering onto the marble, as Anwen’s

elbow broke the pane. She could hear Siriol's squeals of feigned horror and emphatic apologies as Anwen slipped her hand through the window's opening and flipped the lock.

The window slid out towards her easily. Anwen was thankful for her small stature as she bunched up her skirts and manoeuvred her right leg, then left, into the hallway.

Anwen didn't lose any time as she groped the wall nearest to her, her hands moving silently from tapestry to stone to painting, the pattern repeating itself. Siriol slowly collected the shards of painted clay that had shattered, slapping the guards' hands away as they tried to help her.

Both women kept stealing glances at each other. The perspiration on Anwen's brow wasn't only from her current situation; the heat of the previously enclosed hallway was adding to the stifling air. The only relief came from the window, the breeze allowing her to breathe in the scents of thistle and grass.

Her hands froze, the realisation dawning on her too late. If she could feel the wind at this distance, then the guards that were only three paces away would as well. It was a stupid mistake. How could she have missed it? Hafgan's face flicked into her mind, annoyed, and his eyes glared as he reprimanded her for her stupidity.

Unig turned and saw the intruder.

Anwen threw caution out the window that had inadvertently alerted the guards and ran in the opposite direction. They chased her, yelling for her to stop.

Siriol was able to trip Unig's partner, his face smashing into the broken vase, as Unig himself went after Anwen.

Anwen wasn't sure she would make it out of this unscathed, and cursed that she didn't have her dagger. She threw whatever was at hand at him—more vases, a tapestry, and a lone sculpture of Rhiannon astride a valiant unicorn—all the while trying to find the entrance.

She glanced behind her. Unig was furious as he raised his spear above his head, then threw it. Anwen jumped out of its way, the long shaft whizzing past as she tumbled into the entrance she'd been looking for.

Nysien was in position at the forest's edge, scouting the area. It'd been the right call for him to team up with Blodeuedd and the other *Fflora*. As he could *flutter* any distance he needed, so too could the *Fflora* travel through the trees to get to their destination, separating from the bark as they took their places behind him.

The field before them was empty, the evening summer breeze clearing the clouds. Nysien could make out the guards as they interrupted the lights that glowed around the castle, letting him see where no one was manning.

Blodeuedd swooped down from a branch and landed at his side. "I'm surprised that warmonger hasn't started preemptively," she said, genuinely amazed that the world hadn't turned upside down.

"Math understands the importance of what we are fighting for," Nysien innocently defended. "He wouldn't—"

A bloody screech reverberated above them as Math and his dragon appeared out of nowhere. Tali's wings flapped powerfully, making every branch in the forest creak under their pressure.

"You were saying?" Blodeuedd said, unimpressed.

Tali swooped down, her tail razor sharp as it plunged into the grassy field and scooped up a chunk of earth. With a flick of it, she sent the lump hurtling into Pryderi's castle, shattering its glass windows on impact.

Branches from the tree that stood within began to grow, billowing over the walls to prevent any further damage. Blodeuedd hated to mar such a beautiful protective spell, but knew, all the same, that it was for the greater good.

Nysien heard Math's booming laughter from the back of Tali, the god standing powerfully on her as she streaked across the darkening sky. "Well, we wanted a distraction..." he smirked as he signalled to all those behind him to ready themselves.

Tali dived once again, her tail whipping in the same fashion as she collected more earth and smashed it against the wall of branches. Its flowers scattered, Tali assaulting it again

and again, until finally, it couldn't keep up with the onslaught. More glass shattered, and stones crumbled to the ground, squashing the few creatures who were unfortunate to be in its path.

Nysien gave the signal to attack. His yell carried over the field to where Pryderi's soldiers and guards had manoeuvred into formation. It took Nysien the length of a breath to *flitter* into them and take them out. His magic curved like a bow, arrows of light arching out of his fingertips to hit their marks in the soldiers' bodies.

The soldiers all fumbled to protect themselves, their reflexes too slow for the dexterous Elf. By the time he had killed ten of them, the rest of Blodeuedd's group had caught up with him, all of them now engaged with the soldiers.

Nysien was about to jump further into the fray when hard knuckles met his jaw, the punch knocking him away from the fight.

"Glad to see me, little brother?" Efnysien asked.

Before Nysien could reply, a raven swooped down, its beak sharp as it slit a cut across Efnysien's cheek.

"Your fight is with me," the raven said as it transformed into Brân. His long black hair was intricately tied behind him, ready for battle. He had black paint smeared over his eyes; his gaze terrifying as he looked down on those before him.

"Come now," Efnysien taunted. *"You are not sore over our sister, are you?"*

Brân moved swiftly as he tore at him, his tall stature well-suited against Efnysien's broader one. Brân pinned Efnysien's shoulders, the pressure buckling his knees, and grabbed Efnysien by the ears.

"Go!" Brân yelled to Nysien. "I've got this."

Nysien nodded his thanks and moved on to the next fight. He didn't have time for Efnysien's antics, not when he needed to help find Anwen. He passed by Blodeuedd, fighting a horde of knights. Roots from the ground gouged their way into their bodies, their screams echoing off each other's chainmail. He would have felt sorry for them if this weren't a war.

Blodeuedd left them to their deaths as she transformed into her sigil owl, as large as Volmear. Her talons were sharp as they ripped through another group of bodies.

Anwen heard the soft thuds as the guards on the other side of the wall pounded on it, unable to make their way through. She didn't dare poke her head out and see if Sirlol had been caught.

It was pitch-black in the tunnel, with no Arawn or Hafgan to cast one of their spells to light her path. Time seemed to suspend itself as she sensed her way through the dark until she finally made it to the dungeon.

A putrid odour stifled the air, Anwen trying hard not to gag as she got closer to it. She'd promised herself to free the captives if she got the chance. She felt for the bars of the first cell, its door creaking open.

"Hello," Anwen whispered, feeling her way further in. "I'm here to help you. Hafgan will be here soon..." Her hand brushed something wet and then something hard.

A light shone brightly behind her, and she saw exactly what she was touching. It was a part of someone's leg, its owner decomposing with the rest of the prisoners.

Anwen screamed as she dropped it, backing out of the cell and into whoever had produced the light.

She turned and found Pryderi. His hands glowed green, throwing sinister shadows over his features.

Anwen made no excuses as she pushed him away and ran towards the metal door at the end of the hall. She fumbled for its latch, mindful as she heard his footsteps follow. All she needed was to get into the room and lock the door behind her; then she would be safe with the piece. As she opened the door, her heart sank into her stomach.

The Cauldron piece wasn't sitting in the middle of the room.

"Did you think I would not have moved it?" Pryderi sneered.

Before Anwen had time to turn and run, Pryderi had a fistful of her hair. His fingers no longer held the bright pigment, but he didn't need his magic to overpower her. Tears of pain pricked her eyes as she tried to pull herself from his grip with no success.

"No, no, no." Pryderi held tighter, shushing her.

"Let me go!" Anwen screeched. Scratching at his arm did nothing. Her vision became

hazy as he pulled harder until she was docile. “Why?” she asked, crestfallen.

“Why?” Pryderi echoed. He pulled her closer, his lips a whisper away. “Because he deserves it. Because I will stop at nothing to take away *everything* he holds dear. Because he killed the love of my life!”

Anwen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Would Cigfa really want all this?”

“SHE CANNOT TELL ME BECAUSE SHE’S DEAD!” Pryderi bellowed, huffing with rage. “Cigfa was a goddess—the best of us. She loved me even though my father threw *Annwfn* into turmoil... I did nothing...” He went quiet, unnerving Anwen. He stood tall, trying to gain understanding from the human in his hold. “Would you not tear apart the world for the one you love?”

“No,” Anwen lied.

Pryderi *tsked* with disapproval. “I know you fell in love with that *cythraul*,” he said, pulling her up to his eye level. “Tell me the truth.”

Anwen gritted her teeth. “Yes,” she truthfully answered this time. “But I’d tear apart my *own* life, not drag others down with me.”

“You cannot do one without the other,” Pryderi growled. He twisted her hair tighter, her scream vibrating around them. “You see, you have no magic, meaning there is nothing else that will interfere with the Cauldron’s magic if you are the one to bring its pieces together. It is your death that will bring prosperity to the other Divine Courts and me, *and* break Hafgan, all at once.”

Anwen glared at him without pity.

“Do not look at me that way. We are better than them.”

Anwen didn’t want to be lumped together with him in any way. She finally saw his true colours and was disgusted. She wondered if her parents had known his intentions from the start—the thought enraging her further—and she cursed Arawn for not stopping this whole mess.

The ground rumbled beneath her, the tremor heavy. The stone floor cracked in places as she heard the deafening sound of glass shattering above them. Another shock jolted her from Pryderi’s grip.

Free, Anwen ran back into the dungeon. She could hear the muffled sound of screams—

their panic infectious. It was now. The battle had started, and she hadn't found the third piece. She tried to get her bearings and steadied herself against the bars of a cell. She was prepared to stall Pryderi for as long as possible, but as her eyes came into focus, she found she was standing by herself in the dark.

"Fucking magical bastard!" Anwen bolted from the dungeon and back along the passageway, fumbling over the uneven treads and stones. She couldn't find her balance as the continued bouts of quakes rocked through the castle.

Finally, Anwen made it back to the entrance and slammed straight into the door. She groaned as she felt her face for any damage. The magic entrance was gone, and in its place was a simple locked door.

Giving a prayer of thanks to Branwen, she pulled the embroidery needle she'd kept in her sleeve and prepared it for the lock. She held her breath in concentration as she pulled and pushed until, finally, she felt the latch click and the door open.

Anwen could only stare in confusion at the display around her. She was sure she'd come through the entrance via a hallway, but now all that was left was a pile of rubble. The only thing still standing was the door behind her.

Creatures ran in every direction, trying to get to safety as brawls broke through the crumbling archways. Mayhem rained down around Anwen as the screams of fighters and servants got louder. She lost her footing again as another tremor hit. She didn't have time to think, only move.

Anwen cut through the flattened gardens—the globe thistles gone from where they grew—and ran to where the battle sounded the loudest. She hoped Hafgan would be there.

She rounded the corner of the castle in time to see a great dragon flick its tail, a boulder the size of a thatched house wrecking into the side of one of the towers where the guest bedrooms were... had been.

A grey-robed man rode on its back and shouted triumphantly as another boulder struck its target. Anwen wasn't sure who he was but was glad to see his runic arms and that he was on their side.

"Hafgan!" Anwen yelled into the disarray. Blood speckled her face as a nearby soldier slit the throat of a Dark Fae, causing her to spill the contents of her stomach. This was different

from witnessing the one-on-one fights Hafgan, Nysien, and Branwen had fought.

Anwen made her way back past the dungeon entrance and to the other end of the castle, hoping to find *someone* who was on her side.

Nysien made it to the castle, Math fervently throwing boulder upon boulder, ripping the place to its foundation. Finally, the rumbling stopped. Nysien gazed up into the dusk to see what had happened and spotted Rhiannon astride her familiar, Morningstar, who carried her up towards the ferocious dragon.

Out of nowhere, Manawydan let out a long whistle next to Nysien as they watched Rhiannon's unicorn take on the dragon.

"That's one gorgeous goddess," Manawydan smiled, smacking Nysien against his chest with familiarity.

Nysien almost playfully pushed him away, as he would have done to Branwen, but held back. The two were too much alike. "You know she's married..." he quipped.

Manawydan ducked as an arrow of ice whizzed past his head, striking one of the soldiers behind him, his smile broadening. "I can wait!"

Nysien could only chuckle as a servant roughly pushed past him, trying to avoid getting roped into the fight. Hafgan and Napellus should've made it into the castle by now.

Hafgan and Napellus crept into one of the servants' stairwells, their forms shrouded in magic, making their presence as unnoticeable as shadows.

"We need to head towards the dungeons," Hafgan whispered. "Anwen should be there."

For all the noise the fighters were making, where they were both positioned, it was relatively quiet. The night was Hafgan's domain—a time when the dark beauty of the world came alive; when all one can do is take in the grace of the stars above, touch the one they love in the most intimate of ways, and dream of a world even the gods had not yet seen.

Napellus nodded. She could hear the worry in his voice. In the time they'd all known each other, she'd never seen her friend fall so deeply in love. "She'll be all right."

"You don't know that." Hafgan's jaw tightened. "But I hope you're right."

They moved quickly through the castle, checking room after room as they looked for signs of any enemies or traps that lay in wait. As Hafgan rounded the corner, something slammed into him.

Siriol's round eyes stared at the empty space in shock. "Please don't kill me," she shrieked in fear, not knowing what had stopped her.

"Siriol, quiet! It's me!" Hafgan put his hand over her mouth, muffling her wails. He undid his spell, revealing himself.

"I'm sorry, Hafgan," Siriol huffed, her wings drooping. She'd flown all the way from the dungeons to the North quarter of the castle, as the Matron had instructed her in case of an emergency. When Anwen had disappeared, it had taken all her might to slip through the guards' hands, her apron torn and hair dishevelled.

"Calm down, little one." Napellus dropped her magic to join the conversation, rubbing circles into Siriol's back. "What happened?"

"Anwen! She hasn't come out of the dungeons yet!"

"That's fine," Hafgan reassured her. If anything, she'd be safer there.

"No, you don't understand! The dungeons are on the South side of the castle... And I'm pretty sure Tali just decimated that section."

All the colour drained from Hafgan's face.

"Right in the middle of the battle," Napellus said, horrified. "They were supposed to keep the fighting in the West! She won't last a minute in that chaos."

Mana and Brân were expected to have that side covered, but with the scope of their endeavour... they hadn't been able to keep the fighting contained for long. The houses that lined the castle gates had already been reduced to rubble. Nothing was safe.

"Siriol, get to the woods. We'll head to the dungeon now." Hafgan rushed forward. "Napellus—" He had only seconds to defend against the impact of Pryderi's fist meeting with his forearms, the sting of the blow vibrating all the way down to his bones.

"It seems there is a rat running around my castle," Pryderi said calmly.

Hafgan steadied himself.

Napellus shielded Siriol and pushed her in the opposite direction of the gods. "Go!" she commanded.

Siriol didn't have to be told twice, taking the chance to change into her smaller form and zip away.

Hafgan shook his arms out to get the feeling back in them. "Napellus," he called over his shoulder. "I'm good here. You go find Anwen."

Napellus paused for only a moment, reminding herself that Hafgan had years on Pryderi, then ran to join Anwen.

"Unless you want to just give up, since we have three out of the four pieces now," Hafgan asked, his tone cordial.

Pryderi smiled. "You think she has *my* piece? You are perhaps even more naive than she is. I moved it the first night she left. It does not matter now. I left her locked away underground with no way out."

Hafgan's grin was wiped from his face. "You really know how to treat a woman."

"It seems so do you." Pryderi cocked his eyebrow in enjoyment. "A little bird told me that you and Anwen have fallen in love. But she is *mine*. I brought her to *Annwfn*, and I will not have you take another away from me... Never again."

Hafgan could hear the underlying meaning in his words. "I made my apologies years ago, right after the mayhem of the War had died down. Don't you remember?"

"I REMEMBER MY *SORROW*," Pryderi roared, "and have not had an easy time forgetting. You took the *one* thing that brought me joy." His eyes had a stare Hafgan was familiar with. It was a look that greeted him in every pond, every window—it haunted him just as much as it seemed to haunt Pryderi. "All she wanted was peace, and all she got was death."

"You'd condemn a whole race for one woman?"

"Why not?" Pryderi scoffed. "A god's sins are its people's sins, right?"

"Then your people will suffer just as greatly as mine have for yours!" Hafgan's magic poured out of him, black lightning bouncing off every surface until the room no longer stood, its walls falling to pieces.

Pryderi shot straight at Hafgan, Pryderi's magic strengthening his body as Hafgan dodged. Hafgan grabbed him and shot them both out into the moonlit sky.

"You should have stayed on the ground..." Hafgan smiled and slipped through Pryderi's fingers in a plume of black smoke. "There are dangers in the night."

Pryderi kept his guard up. With his magic, he flew in every direction, distracted by what was becoming of his Divine Court that was being ravaged by Hafgan's army of rebels. He was jolted from the scene as he felt sharp teeth bite into his leg. Nos had hidden within Pryderi's shadow, his front paws holding him steady.

Pryderi cried out in pain, blood dripping down into his boot. "Mangy animal!"

"You never did get the hang of familiars." Hafgan snorted with contempt. "They can be the best of partners, especially, as you can see, when you need a good distraction."

Out of the black smoke, Hafgan's fist met Pryderi's face.

Pryderi felt the crunch as his tooth was knocked loose. He spat it to the ground below, blood coating his mouth and split lip, and healed himself in an instant. "Right," he huffed, exhausted of Hafgan's voice, "we finish this now!"

Napellus had only made it halfway to the dungeons when she spotted Anwen below in the disarray. "Anwen!" she called from atop the stairway. Napellus had her legs wrapped around a guard's throat, and with a resounding thrust, she twisted and landed lightly on her feet. The guard lay dead behind her. "We were so worried!"

Anwen ran with outstretched arms and clung to Napellus, happy to feel some form of safety. "I did everything you taught me," she cried. "I lied, and I acted, and I watched their every move..."

"Shhh." Napellus hugged her closer. "I know. It wasn't an easy job, but you did it. That's why we're here."

"The third piece," Anwen rushed her words, "I don't have it! It wasn't where Pryderi left it!"

"What?" Napellus pushed her away in time before the tail of a magic whip struck them. It missed and sliced into the marble column behind them, cutting it in twain.

"Napellus, good to see you again," Rowena cooed from the bottom of the stairs. She was in an audacious outfit that allowed her to move freely, and for the men to get distracted to their deaths.

"Rowena, my how... *well* you've aged," Napellus called back, sarcastically. "Anwen," she mumbled to her, "when I move, you run." She slowly reached into her bag and fished out Anwen's Malison blade. "Find Hafgan or Nysien and get that third piece."

Anwen had no idea what was about to happen, but with the way Napellus focused on Rowena, she knew Rowena wasn't just a seamstress. She took her weapon and hooked the strap around her body. Fighting in a dress was not ideal, but it would have to do. She felt better now that she was armed and spared a thought for her mother, who would have disapproved, and her father, who would be shocked at the mere suggestion of his daughter taking up arms.

With a swipe of Rowena's hand, she produced another slash of her whip. Anwen retreated as Napellus counterattacked.

Anwen ran to the other side of the hall, where the servants' stairs led to the East gardens and out to the portal. She only had a moment to glance back to see that Kylian had joined them, gleefully wielding a giant hammer. As he slammed it down, the floor turned to quicksand, restricting Rowena as she struggled to get free.

Before Anwen could witness Rowena's fate, she was jostled farther down the stairs by frantic servants and pushed out into the desolate gardens.

Glass from the broken windows littered the path up to the portal's entrance, which had withstood whatever force had flattened the rest of the area. The trinkets and ribbons that had adorned its archway were strewn about.

She needed to find Hafgan.

"Hafgan!" Anwen shouted again. She was about to make her way further into the disarray when Arawn appeared beside her.

"Enjoying the action?" he asked, admiring the violent scenery before him like a tapestry. This time, he wasn't in his phantom form, the fact made more evident when one of the maids screamed and fainted upon seeing him.

"Did you do this?" Anwen questioned him as she motioned to the wasteland around them.

Arawn shrugged with indifference. Flattening the plains so the fighters had fewer obstacles in their way was easy. "Pryderi had the upper hand. I only made it an even playing field." Pun intended. He snapped his fingers, and his wolf appeared on Anwen's other side. "Come, I'll help you find the piece."

Before Anwen could protest, she was ushered back into the castle by the animal.

"You've done well so far. I'd hoped you'd be able to find the third piece yourself, but life rarely goes to plan." Arawn's cough seemed to be gone, though blood stained his lips and the whites of his fingernails. He wasn't looking healthy. Even his beard was devoid of its ginger red. "No matter, no one can live their life without someone else's help."

He led them through a mass of warriors who parted effortlessly to keep as far away from him as possible—some out of fear, others in awe, muttering words of joyous praise for the Primordial deity.

"Is that what you are to me then?" Anwen asked. "What you've been doing so far is

help?"

"You, Haf, and even little Pryderi. I take no sides, and yet every side. It's a hard life I lead," he mocked.

Anwen didn't like the sound of that type of life, having to cater to everyone's needs. It sounded exhausting.

"It is," Arawn answered her thoughts. "I *am* exhausted. But hopefully by the end of tonight, everything will have sorted itself out."

They climbed the stairs, Anwen realising that they were headed for her chambers. They made it to the landing outside her door.

"Tonight?" Anwen asked. "Then you know where the final piece of the Cauldron is?" She clung to his every word, desperate to know, to be finished with this whole ordeal.

"Yes," Arawn confirmed. "I have it."

Anwen stopped in her tracks, paying no mind to the wolf nudging her to keep moving. Her voice dropped as she glared at him, realising what had been staring at her in the face this whole time.

"*You* have it?" She wanted to punch him, kick him, scream at him until she was blue in the face. "You've had it this whole time, and not *once* did you think to mention it?"

"Broken or not, I'm still the Cauldron's owner," Arawn applauded her obvious statement, "and it still obeys me. Though it can be temperamental at times."

Her blood boiled over, and she charged at him, tackling him hard enough that he lost his balance and they both collapsed through the doors into her sitting room. The wolf growled and nipped at her ankles, but she paid it no mind.

"You! You!" Anwen shook him by the collar, blood trickling from his forehead. "This whole time!" She reached for her Malison blade and had almost pulled it out of its sheath when strong arms tore at her, ripping her off him.

Hafgan kept steady on the back of Nos, his magic easy to control as he didn't have to hold back against Pryderi. His hand shot out towards him, gripping the gravity around Pryderi, pinning him to the star-streaked night.

Pryderi couldn't move, his muscles straining. He ground his teeth as he forced his arm free. Then his leg. He managed to form a membrane of wind around his body to counter the spell, breaking it. He flew away from the barrage and over to the towers, hoping to use whatever was left of the tree's branches for cover.

Hafgan, in a plume of black smoke, hurtled towards him. Pryderi threw up a wind barrier, successfully evading his attack. Those below could feel the impact as black flames shot from Hafgan's fingertip and met Pryderi's barriers, the explosion flinging them both apart.

Hafgan roared out with rage as he brandished his magic, its form fluid until it contacted Pryderi's leg, the magic blade cutting easily into his skin.

Pryderi winced in pain.

They continued their magical combat, each equally landing a blow and evading, when Hafgan heard his name being called in the distance. His ears perked as he recognised Anwen's voice. He would know it anywhere, even among hundreds of people.

Hafgan flew as fast as he could, trying to find where she was.

Pryderi was hot on his tail, not letting up for a second. He took advantage of the distraction and grabbed Hafgan, hurling him away from the castle. "You will *never* see her again. But I will make sure she sees your corpse among the rest!"

Hafgan hurled another bolt of black lightning, Pryderi defending well against his every attack. They flew around the crumbling castle as Pryderi came in closer, his legs powerful as he put all his weight behind them, driving them into Hafgan's stomach.

Hafgan only had a moment to protect his back as both hurtled into one of the towers, glass and stone making for a rocky landing. He groaned as he tried to collect himself again, and black and white stars danced around his vision. "I invoke Cig-"

Pryderi shoved him against the wall, his forearm pinning his neck. "What a fitting place

for you to meet your end,” Pryderi cooed. “You see that room over there?” He nodded towards the bedchamber. “Should I tell you how many times I took Anwen on that very bed?” he lied, riling him up.

Hafgan’s eyes went pitch black and irises glowed purple. He wanted to tear his throat out.

The room rocked as a large boulder smashed into the bedchamber, reducing it to rubble. Pryderi loosened his grip, giving Hafgan the chance to pounce, Hafgan’s magic meeting with Pryderi’s body as many times as possible.

“Has Anwen seen you like this?” Pryderi asked, kicking Hafgan off him.

Hafgan stiffened. He knew she had... He’d never tried to hide this form, but Pryderi’s question made it sound like if she did, she’d be disgusted by his appearance. He didn’t like that. Pryderi knew nothing of the Anwen who faced trial after trial and came out stronger.

Before either of them could continue, the doors to the room came crashing in, both surprised to see Anwen.

Hafgan undid his transformation, and the weight that had been constricting his chest while they were apart finally lifted. But his happiness was short-lived as he saw the god that was beneath her. And that Anwen reached behind her back to grab for her dagger, preparing to take on Arawn.

Hafgan moved quickly to her side, Anwen struggling to hold on to Arawn as she was ripped away from him. She wanted one chance, only one, to stab her blade deep into him. It was only fair for what he’d put her through. This whole time, every step of the way, he’d helped her and yet failed to mention the most important piece of information that would’ve saved her all this grief and pain.

“Anwen!” Hafgan’s deep voice jolted her back to her senses. She lost her grip on the god below her and fell into Hafgan.

She threw her arms around Hafgan and brought his lips to hers, kissing him deeply. She was hungry for his touch, his smell, his everything. She tasted blood on his lips and pulled away to see that his cheek was swollen from an earlier fight, then healed a second later.

Their reunion was cut short as Arawn’s wolf loomed over them.

“If you don’t mind joining us...” Arawn offered, back on his feet. He wiped the blood from

his temple.

Anwen realised it wasn't just her, Hafgan, and Arawn in the room, or what was left of it. The balcony wall had been ripped off, leaving a larger portion of the sitting room exposed to the wind outside. Where her bed once sat was now a sheer drop to the ground. On the other side, her wardrobe and bathroom had collapsed in on themselves.

Pryderi stood tall at Arawn's side, confident since the Arbiter was there, that nothing could touch him. In his arms, he held a gold chest. Anwen's heart raced as she realised it was the third piece.

"I do not know how you got out of that dungeon, but raising your hand against the Great God..." Pryderi shook his head in feigned disappointment. He proudly placed the chest before Arawn's feet and knelt with a respect Anwen didn't think him capable of possessing. "Your Holiness. I have spent an age procuring the pieces and finding the perfect vessel to mend them. I did this all in your name."

His lie was unconvincing as he held his hand to his heart.

Arawn paid him no mind as he walked past Pryderi to the destroyed balcony and looked out at the swarm of people still fighting. Anwen could see Tali battling Morningstar, their riders enjoying themselves. On the other side, Willow charged through the flank, mist collecting to suffocate her enemies.

"Enough of this," Arawn said, vexed at the sight. Power swelled around him, and with a snap of his fingers, the Divine Court went quiet.

Hafgan couldn't keep hold of Anwen as she wrenched herself from his grip and ran to the edge of the wall. She watched as the dragon plummeted dead to the ground. The clusters of fighters that had been at each other's throats lay lifeless in the dirt; each side left at a draw.

"What have you done?" Anwen asked in horror. Her voice sounded too loud in the sudden silence.

"I didn't kill all of them," Arawn defended. With another snap of his fingers, the room was packed with people from both sides: Nysien, Napellus, Blodeuedd, Rhiannon, Brân, Manawydan, Efnysien, Math, and a woman with shockingly white hair, glazed eyes, and arms adorned with white hourglasses—Aranrhod.

Dread fell over Anwen as there were faces she didn't see: Siriol, Matron Goewin, Kylian...

She wished with all her might that Rylee had stayed behind in Elendi.

Pryderi was as distraught as Anwen, looking out onto his decimated court.

Efnysien's temper flared at Anwen. *"Look what you have done! None of this would have happened if you had just done as you were told!"*

"What are you talking about?" Hafgan hotly argued. "This has nothing to do with her and everything to do with your *master's* greed!"

"We are trying to save *Annwfn*!" Rhiannon retorted without knowing the extent of her son's plot.

"And instead, you're destroying it!" Blodeuedd declared.

Everyone shouted at once, each god and goddess trying to argue their point louder than the next. It left Arawn and Anwen to watch in silence.

Math had vanished as quickly as he'd appeared, uninterested in the outcome. He'd only been there for the bloodshed.

Aranrhod faced Anwen, knowing what was to come. She bowed to Arawn, then disappeared as well.

Anwen couldn't understand how they could be arguing when so many of her friends—*their* friends—were dead.

"Silence," Arawn commanded. His power heavily blanketed the room.

One after another, they all fell to their knees. Their hands clutched at their chests in what looked like respect, but as Anwen saw Hafgan wince, she realised it was in pain. It took all their strength to remember how to breathe, powerless in the face of Arawn's supremacy.

"Stop!" Anwen cried out, seeing the fear in Hafgan's eyes.

Hafgan tried to fight against his every instinct and get closer to grab Anwen and run, but his feet were planted firmly.

"It's what's needed," Arawn replied, speaking only to her.

Anwen didn't have the same problem as the rest of them, Arawn's magic unaffecting her. She held no hesitation towards him, as they always spoke as equals.

"Why the fuck do you get to decide who lives or dies? Why are you doing all of this?" Anwen finally asked.

Arawn smirked, entertained by her words. He looked at her with fatherly admiration. "I

remember saying something similar the first time we met. It seems my lessons were worth the time they took.”

“What fucking lessons?” Anwen was sick and tired of his bullshit.

Arawn’s form became hazy as he shifted his mirage. His once-stocky build grew smaller, and his beard receded until Anwen gazed at him in true disgust. Before her stood a man with shockingly red hair, Llwyd/Not-Llwyd, and a butterfly that fluttered innocently around his head. Then his image shifted again, her sister’s appearance reaching out to her in a ghostly fashion, urging Anwen towards her. He finally transitioned back into his huntsman’s form.

“Did you think there was no point to any of this?” Arawn asked. “I wanted to teach you—mould you. You have so much potential...”

Anwen covered her mouth in horror. She didn’t want to hear it. “You did all of this for me? You killed so many people so I could learn...? What?”

“For you to understand sacrifice. And the impartiality that sometimes comes along with having power,” Arawn answered. “That all things come to an end, good or bad, god or creature or human. That life can lead you one way, and though you may find another, you’ll still end up the same as the next being.” He waved at the strewn pile of bodies below them. “There is power in you. And you can use that power how you wish.”

“I have no power,” Anwen said, numbly. She could only stand there, taking in his words.

“It took me a while to figure out... Not an action I’m familiar with...” Arawn bent and took her hand, the illusion of his huntsman guise slowly slipping. His arms grew thinner, and his colour went pale. One eye was as red as a beet, swimming in a sea of black, while the other was the inverse. The red marks on his hands receded from his skin. “Nysien was right. You absorb magic.”

He produced the two gold chests, each with the pieces Anwen had found, their lids shut tight.

“You have a choice...” Arawn said to Anwen. “Save this world or let it crumble away. Go back to the Mundane and forget all of this ever happened, or sacrifice yourself and mend the Cauldron. There is a choice; life always gives you choices, but you need to decide. Would you like me to give you the final piece?”

"Yes!" Efnysien answered for Anwen through gritted teeth. Blood dripped from his mouth as he tried to fight further against Arawn's hold.

"I wasn't talking to *you*!" Arawn lashed out with an invisible hand and slapped him down, squishing him flat to the ground. "You'll be dealt with later."

Anwen looked at Efnysien. Would she end up like him? She wasn't concerned with having no magic; it was nothing new to her, but her voice... She wouldn't be able to communicate like Enysien, or *sing*. She'd already given up so much in *Annwfn*, and it seemed determined to take more. Why? Why was he doing this? She looked again at the bodies below, and then back to Arawn, finally understanding.

"You're dying," she stated, shocked.

The others in the room couldn't believe what they were hearing. Arawn was the Primordial. The Arbiter. The beginning and end of *Annwfn*.

Arawn nodded and conjured a throne behind him to sit on, his body tired and weak from exerting so much magic.

"As with everything else in this world, my time has finally come." As if to lend credence to his words, the floor beneath them abruptly cracked and shifted, ruining the marble. Anwen steadied her stance.

"Now, what will you choose?" Arawn huffed. "I'm not sure how much longer I can hold everything together." He coughed violently, a splatter of blood staining his bony hand as he covered his mouth. The scar across his face turned bright pink as another cough wracked through his body. He wouldn't last much longer, and neither, did it seem, would *Annwfn*.

She stared at the three chests before her. If possible, she never wanted to open them. She knew the power *one* piece held, but *four*... She didn't want to forget her time in *Annwfn*. She didn't want to lose her voice. But she couldn't fathom leaving all those who were still vulnerable in the hands of the gods behind her, especially if there wasn't going to be an Arbiter around.

Anwen glanced behind her at Hafgan. "Is it worth it?" she asked him again.

Hafgan would be okay. As Anwen tried to memorise the features of his face, she could tell he had no bruises or cuts. But those weren't the only things that could leave scars.

"No," Hafgan answered, shaking his head at the horrible choice that lay before her. His

heart broke as he said the word. Selfishly, he didn't want to believe it this time. "No," he repeated, "it's not worth it."

Anwen's eyes crinkled in understanding, tears spilling over as she turned back to Arawn and nodded for him to proceed. Without hesitation, he snapped his fingers. The last chest appeared, and with a bang, all four of them opened.

It wasn't just Arawn's presence that now incapacitated them. Everyone in the room could barely keep upright, letting out audible screams of pain as power hit them like a barreling dragon, driving them to the brink of insanity.

"They'll feel better once it's whole," Arawn said, trying to give her some comfort. His remaining colour faded, and his eyes lazily watched as she reached out a trembling hand towards the first piece. "I understand it is not an easy choice, but your help is greatly appreciated."

"Anwen!" Hafgan yelled, trying to gain her attention. His arm outstretched as he tried to grab hold of her. It felt as if a chasm separated them. He beat his head into the ground, trying unsuccessfully to drown out the incessant buzz of demonic taunts and persuasions. His eyes turned of their own will. His teeth bit into his lower lip, a welt of blood trickling from the puncture.

Hesitation pricked Anwen's mind. What was she doing? Was this what she really wanted? Could she really sacrifice herself for this? She heard Hafgan roar behind her, pain and anguish and fear suffocating his scream.

Anwen never wanted to hear it again. She took hold of the first piece, the metal under her hands scorching her skin, and she almost let go. But she couldn't. She had to do this, for Hafgan and Nysien and Napellus and *Branwen*.

She grabbed the second piece, wrapping her arm around the two to sear them together. For Siriol, who lay dead somewhere on the field. For Matron Goewin.

The third piece almost slipped from her grip. Anwen was barely able to feel her fingers as she tightly held the pieces, fully aware she had broken them in doing so. Her voice had already failed her. This was for all those whom she didn't know but mourned on their behalf.

The final piece sat at her side. She could no longer feel the pain that had burned through

her skin as she brought it closer, fitting it snug into place, nor hear the pleas behind her from Hafgan and the rest of her friends.

This one was for her. For everything she had gone through.

The last piece welded itself into place, completing the Cauldron of Rebirth. Its runes glowed, and magic receded from the world, funnelling back through the top and into its bulbous body.

Anwen only had a moment to feel the weight of everything lift from her chest, then opened her eyes to darkness.

"Hello?" she called out into nothing, surprised that her voice still worked. The burns had disappeared, and her broken fingers were straight and smooth. She felt goosebumps crawl beneath her skin as the sensation of being watched from all directions penetrated her mind. Yet, there was nothing in sight.

The space felt vast yet constricting, the darkness encompassing her to the point where she wasn't sure whether she was standing or floating.

"No..." A voice whispered from far away, or by her side. Anwen wasn't sure as she tried to turn towards it. "Stop..."

"Hello?" she croaked. Her mouth felt sticky and dry as she formed the word, coughing to dislodge whatever was stuck in her throat.

"No! Please! Stop!"

This time, the voice ripped through the blackness, her mind spinning. She coughed harder, her face turning blue until she dislodged it. Blood pooled in her hand, and when she looked down, she found a rabbit's foot floating in it.

"Not what you expected, is it?" Arawn asked, looking as wise and healthy as ever. He wore black robes that shrouded his muscular form. A horn made of ivory was slung across his shoulder, ready to call the dead back to him. "I certainly never thought this day would come, or that I would ever find someone so worthy to take my place."

"What?" Anwen asked. She looked down at her hand but found it free of the blood and foot. She tried to shake away the unease. "What do you mean... take your place?"

"Just that," he answered. The smile on his face faded, his ancient eyes showing his age as they stared at her. "Getting the Cauldron whole again was the endgame, yes, but it's *you*. *You* are the crown jewel. A being with the power to settle all magic. To stand against those who have hubris to think themselves more powerful, then watch as they fall, realising there is still one they would never be able to defeat."

Anwen stared at him in disbelief.

“Will you do it?” Arawn finally asked. “Will you sacrifice your human self and become the Goddess?”

Anwen stood there, trying to comprehend his words. She wasn’t a leader or someone who’d ever taken responsibility for others, but someone needed to govern the other Seven Gods and keep *Annwfn* alive. All so that something like *this* would never happen again.

“Your sacrifice is worth it,” he continued. “And I believe it works out best for you, too. No longer will you be human. You can completely cast aside that life, not having to watch your family die—”

“Stop!” Anwen shouted, her voice echoing far. A while ago, that would’ve been the deal of a lifetime, but it was her human side that grew, that figured out what she’d wanted... *who* she wanted.

“You’d get to spend the rest of your life with him,” Arawn said, knowing where her heart lay.

“Can I still go back to the mundane world afterwards?” She wanted to see Marged, to check on her parents... She felt she hadn’t seen them in decades rather than months.

Arawn chuckled. “Of course. You will be the Ruler of *Annwfn*... You can do whatever you like.”

“Why?” Anwen asked.

“Why, what?”

“Why now?” Why was he dying now?

Arawn sighed as if the answer should be obvious. “A piece of me died, and then a piece of me broke. Do you know how excruciating that was? I thought I had lost all feeling since creating those gods, but that... Even for me, it was too much. That’s why I’m giving it to you.”

“What makes you think I won’t feel that same pain?” she asked.

“Maybe you will. But at least you’ll have someone by your side to share it with. I never had that.”

Anwen saw the flash of regret in his eyes. How lonely his life must have been, and she vowed then and there that she’d never end up like that. She squared her shoulders,

understanding that there was only one answer—the answer that would save her, Hafgan, *Annwfn* and the Mundane.

“Yes.”

Arawn smiled, knowing that he’d chosen the right person. “Then,” he bowed, showing his last respects, “I’m sorry, but there is one last lesson.”

The scene changed instantly. No longer was she in the darkness with Arawn but blinded by the sun above. Fresh air breezed past her. The dirt shifted below her feet as she came face-to-face with a ravine. It was familiar, the dip of the precipice spanning towards the horizon. She’d never be able to forget that place for the rest of her days.

“This... All of this is your fault,” a tenor voice came.

Anwen froze. She knew that voice. That place. Those words. Slowly, she turned to see Efnysien standing over Branwen, his sword brandished in his hand as he purposefully plunged it into her body over and over.

“No,” Anwen whispered, “not again.” She ran to Branwen, trying unsuccessfully to cover her wounds. “Don’t die!” she screamed, but a second later, her hands were clean.

“No! Please! Stop!”

Anwen heard it again, the scene playing behind her.

“All of this is your fault.”

Anwen ran towards the voices. She had to stop him this time. She wasn’t going to let her friend die again. There had to be something she could do. She only needed a second more to reach her. A second more, and Branwen would still be alive and fighting by their side. But Branwen’s blood seeped into the earth again.

The nightmare played over and over and over and over and over and over and over, Anwen forced to watch as Efnysien’s sword stabbed Branwen every single time. And every single time, she couldn’t save her.

Anwen’s screams of anguish had failed halfway. The sound bounced everywhere and nowhere as she stood and witnessed Branwen being continually murdered.

“Please, stop...” Anwen’s voice was but a whisper.

“No!”

Twenty.

"...this is your fault..."

Fifty-three.

"Please!"

One-hundred-and-forty.

Anwen's eyes glazed over as she was drowned by the scene, her mind detaching itself. Time seemed non-existent as they continued, when, finally, Efnysien broke the script and walked up to her. His sword, hands, and shirt were soaked with so much blood. She had given up trying, her knees wet with the same blood and dirt.

Anwen looked up at him, the sun behind him blinding her.

"It's your fault."

Anwen didn't have the energy to speak or raise her hand to shield herself as he lifted his sword towards her. With a thrust of his arm, he cut across her throat, severing her vocal cords.

Then stabbed deeply into her womb.

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Hafgan cried out in anguish as one moment Anwen was holding all the pieces together, and the next she was gone. Phantom strings that had kept them in agony were cut in an instant, allowing all of them to gulp in pure air.

The wailing of the Cauldron was gone.

Hafgan pooled his strength and crawled towards Arawn's throne. "What happened to her?" He threw caution to the wind as he grabbed onto one of the arms and hoisted himself up high enough to get in the Arbiter's face. "Tell me!"

Hafgan was as shocked as the others as they stared at the god's husk, his life over the second the Cauldron was pieced back together.

Hafgan staggered to his feet, unable to think clearly. "It's a lie. It's not real." An unhinged laugh escaped him as he tried to convince himself. Tears burned their way down his cheeks. "It's just a trick. She's going to... Any moment..."

He doubled over, his stomach heaving. He'd seen what happened to those who entered the Cauldron, how their bodies became grotesquely distorted and without consciousness. Efnysien had been a fluke... had strong magic to protect him. There was no way it would happen a second time.

Napellus was at Hafgan's side, holding on to him. "Haf, don't. Don't hold it in." There was nothing she could do for her friends. She wanted to tell him that everything was okay, that Anwen would be fine, but she had no evidence to back that up.

Nysien took to his other side, voicing what Napellus couldn't. "She'll make it. She's strong. Look how far she came... She's too stubborn to die." His voice wavered.

The world shook at the loss of its ruler. Pieces of the castle crumbled further from where they were already precariously close to falling. The field they had fought on fissured, bodies falling between the cracks to be swallowed and never seen again.

"The Cauldron of Rebirth!" Pryderi eyed it with giddy curiosity, completely absorbed in its beauty now that it was whole. Its gold runic script glowed against the black metal.

He had seen what it'd done in the War, and there were enough bodies around him that forming a new army and commanding it into the valleys wouldn't be a problem.

Hafgan's body ached as he gathered his strength to stand. "Get away from there!" He rushed Pryderi, his shoulder meeting roughly with his ribs as he shoved him out of the way.

They barely had any energy left.

Pryderi tried to recover, weakly punching Hafgan in the face. He knew his strength wasn't enough, but with the Cauldron's power... It would make up for anything he was lacking. He clawed his way to it.

"With Arawn gone, I will be the one to rule *Annwfn*!" Pryderi leaned over to peer into it. "I knew Anwen would not be able to survive resurrecting it... Her sacrifice for me was noble."

As Pryderi peered further in, red smoke began to fill the Cauldron. Its thick fumes bubbled over, covering the ground and rising to their knees. He staggered back, his footing unsure as he tripped over one of the many cracks in the floor.

"What is happening? What did you do?" he snarled at Hafgan, but Hafgan didn't know either.

Nysien was the only one paying attention; all the other gods were too preoccupied with fighting one another to see something emerge from the Cauldron's depths.

Until they all felt it.

The same supreme power... no, perhaps even more so than Arawn's, surrounded them.

Hafgan and Pryderi turned to the throne, unsure whether Arawn was truly dead, but it was with Napellus' startled gasp that they realised they were looking in the wrong direction.

Hafgan was mesmerised as he watched Anwen silently walk towards him, though not completely sure if it was her to begin with. Her stature and features were the same, but her long brown hair had turned as stark as fresh snow. Her soft blue eyes that he'd fallen in love with had been dyed red, as bloody as a rose.

She had always walked with an air about her, but now her chin jutted out a bit higher, and her shoulders set straighter. Her fingertips were dipped in vibrant red, with Arawn's Celtic knots and runes and a new design of scales entwining their way up her arms.

Hafgan was left speechless as the elegant curve of her neck enticed him closer, an open

trap for her prey.

And her power... power Hafgan never thought Anwen would be able to wield. The air seemed to choke with her aura, the Cauldron just a hunk of metal in comparison.

"Now, boys..." Anwen's voice sounded the same, but it had a drip of honey. *"What am I to do with you?"*

Anwen observed Hafgan's every movement with her new eyes as he cautiously held up his hands to her—as if approaching a wild animal. Like she was one of those deformities they had met in the mountains: unknown and deadly. She didn't understand why he was so hesitant, not realising the drastic change in herself. Or why Pryderi, who stood beside him, was mortified by her presence.

Her body pulsed as she felt the power within her shift, her blood boiling, and the scream she thought was only echoing in her mind ripped through everyone else's in the room, overcome by her newfound power.

Magic surged through Anwen's every pore as it begged for freedom. She wanted to unleash it, to let it all go and strike down everyone who stood in her path. She understood why Pryderi wanted it, why he would sacrifice anything to get it, and how Arawn could easily use it.

The bloodlust was amazing.

Yet as she gazed onto the battlefield where so many lay dead... She wouldn't be like her predecessor. She didn't want to see this kind of carnage again and regained control of herself, giving those in the room a reprieve.

"Kneel," Anwen commanded, somewhat surprised that her mouth hadn't formed the word. She touched her neck to check if the cut Efnysien had made was open, but found her skin smooth and free of the wound. Then she touched her stomach...

She couldn't linger on the thought as she watched in pleasure as Hafgan, Nysien, and the rest of the witnesses followed her order. Pryderi, as well, astounded and knowingly outmatched, fell to his knees.

Their souls were good, if not a bit tarnished by life.

Efnysien, on the other hand, strode up to Anwen without wavering in her presence. His malice was thick, and his eyes were crazed as he looked down on her short stature.

"Kneel?" Efnysien asked, insulted. *"As if you have any authority over me."*

Perhaps it was because both of them had been overcome by the Cauldron that he held

no reservations against Anwen... It didn't garner a second thought from her as she ignored him.

Efnysien blocked her path. *"What? Too scared to meet my gaze?"*

"This isn't how our eyes should meet," Anwen simply stated, still staring ahead of her out into the masses that had suffered at his and Arawn's hands. She was once again disgusted at the sight. She turned towards Hafgan, who was a little worse for wear. She was happy nothing further had happened to him in her absence.

"I said, kneel."

A whoosh of higher energy blasted into Efnysien; his body as pliable as it had been in Arawn's capable hands. He couldn't control himself as his body became too heavy for him to support. His knee hit the ground hard, impacting the already broken marble beneath it, and he let out a surprised cry of pain.

Anwen stared down at him, her eyes shining as bright as rubies. *"This is how your eyes should meet mine."*

A chill of terror ran up Efnysien's spine.

"Good," Anwen said, applauding him, *"you should be terrified."* She walked with an inhuman grace as she guided herself to where Arawn had been seated, and as silently as a cloud, lowered herself into the chair. Arawn's body was nowhere to be seen. *"Now, what to do with you all?"*

Hafgan, Pryderi and the other witnesses turned to face her, reluctant to have their backs to her out of instinctual fear and respect. Efnysien's body only followed suit because he was still under her hold.

"This is not fair," Efnysien said, his teeth clamped together. *"Pryderi is the one to rule! He was the one to wield the Cauldron's magic!"*

She held up her hand for silence, and he flinched, earning a smile from her. *"Whether it is fair or not is for me to decide. Is that all right with the rest of you?"*

"Yes, Your Holiness," they all agreed in unison, defeated.

"Then, I deem that Pryderi, member of the Saith Duwiau o'r Annwfn, be stripped of his title and rank, and that Nysien, son of Euroswydd, replace him."

Murmurs flooded the wrecked room. There hadn't been a new god made since the War.

Pryderi's face fell, the colour draining from it. His title... His love... His court... Everything he'd worked for was all *gone*. All the fight left him as he shook with sadness, knowing that any further action was useless. The Goddess, and new Arbiter, had made her decision. Nothing and no one could rule against it.

Efnysien wasn't ready to give up that easily. *"You have no right! Pryderi did nothing wrong. I make no acknowledgement of your power! Therefore, you can do nothing! Pryderi has the right to rule! THIS IS YOUR FAULT!"* he shouted with bravado.

Anwen stood, every step she made towards him purposefully powerful as his words echoed her time in the Cauldron. But this time, she didn't have to take it lying down.

The others in the room couldn't look up as she walked past them, too afraid to make eye contact and incur the wrath that seeped through her every stride.

With a wave of Anwen's hand, she allowed Efnysien his freedom. He did well to stand his ground, though Nysien could see from the corner of his eye as his brother flinched at her proximity.

Anwen's harmless smile stretched further on her face as she came to a stop in front of him, her eyes crinkling with pure innocence. It unsettled him. *"That's where you're wrong."* She smoothed the neckline of his court tunic. *"His lack of oversight of you has cost him everything. If anything, it's all your fault."*

Another pulse of magic shot through her, her mind high on the euphoria it created.

Efnysien's gasp of realisation was short-lived as he felt a searing pain radiate through his chest. Anwen's hand had penetrated straight through him. He stared at her in disbelief, her smile completely wiped from her face, and in its place was a venomous gaze that put his earlier fear of her to shame.

She wrenched her arm from his chest and crushed his heart in two. *"I acknowledge your lack of acknowledgement. But that doesn't change my decision."*

No one in the room could act in defiance as Efnysien's body slammed to the ground. No one except Hafgan, who hesitantly stood and cautiously came to stand at her side. Her raging energy subsided at the familiarity of his own. He was like the midnight sky in summer: cool and comforting and full of life.

"Anwen," Hafgan gently called her name, taking hold of her non-bloodied hand.

She felt woozy as her senses came back, following his line of sight to the piece of heart that was still in her grip, blood caked up to her wrist. She gasped and let the organ drop.

"Hafgan... I-I..." Without thinking, Anwen brought her hand up to her forehead, lightly thumping it to get her thoughts in order. Blood marked where she touched, Hafgan having to grip that arm as well to keep her from further marking herself.

"It's a great burden," Hafgan confirmed, seeing what the Cauldron's power... what Arawn's power... was doing to her. "It'll take time for you to get used to it. I doubt anyone here," he directed to the others, "would say you acted unfairly. Especially with what they have done and wanted to do."

She peered out at the gods, all of them nodding in support of her decision. Her sights fell on Pryderi. *"What do you say about all this?"*

"I only wanted to get back at the one who killed the love of my life," he answered reluctantly.

Anwen's patience snapped. *"And yet to do that, you sought to eradicate a race who were only trying to survive!"* She addressed everyone. *"Have you all lived so long that you're no longer capable of stepping back to think and consider what you're doing? If you all had just listened and learnt from one another, you wouldn't be in this mess!"*

"Your view is idealistic." Rhiannon stood; her mouth pressed in a hard line. "Your Holiness." She bowed her head.

"Perhaps it is," Anwen conceded, *"though it seems that forcing your views onto others hasn't worked either. The people follow in your example."* Her deathly glare and rough tone had them all tense. *"So, get your shit together."*

"Yes, Your Holiness." Everyone stood and bowed in unison.

Satisfied that their wrists had been thoroughly slapped, Anwen could start cleaning up after their mess. She snapped her fingers and sent the others back to their respective Divine Courts, leaving Hafgan, Nysien, Napellus, and Pryderi by her side.

"Pryderi." She huffed out his name. She knew what needed to come first and snatched his hands. *"You will be exiled from Annwn. You will be stripped of your magic and live the rest of your life as a human."*

Pryderi watched in horror as the pigment from his fingers was sucked into her firm grip.

He could do nothing. He could say nothing. With the loss of his powers, he could barely think.

Anwen didn't feel too bad about her judgment. Even without his godly magic, Pryderi was exceptionally talented. He would be fine. And Dyfed would still need a king once Pwyll was gone.

"Now, on to you, Nysien, son of Euroswydd." Anwen smiled as he stood tall before her, ready for her instructions.

She took both of Nysien's hands, the power she'd taken from Pryderi flowing into him. A blindingly golden light enveloped him, settling into his hands and eyes. Arrowheads and herbs marked his skin, calling on a new God of Hunting and Gathering. He bowed before her, thankful for the gift.

"I will not let you down, Your Holiness," he promised.

"Anwen," she corrected him, *"but only when we're in the company of friends."* She smiled and took his hand again as they turned to look at what remained of his Divine Court.

Anwen snapped her fingers, and the castle that had been falling to bits was again whole. Outside, where the battle had raged and the field had been broken, she spread her magic over it, making it lush with new gardens and pathways.

"If there's anything more you want changing, let me know," she winked at Nysien. Sadly, the only thing she couldn't bring back were those who were already lost, though she was glad to find not everyone had been killed.

"What's going to happen to the portals?" Napellus asked, seeing the one down below twisted and broken.

"Leave them as they are. By my count, there are only two left. The one in the North and this one." Anwen snapped her fingers, and a portal materialised before them, leading wherever she wanted to go. *"In time, the other one will crumble as well. It's better this way."*

Hafgan didn't mind what would be done; all he cared about was that Anwen was alive, by his side again, and that his people were finally safe. He pulled out the note she'd written, the ring on its chain folded tightly inside so he wouldn't lose either. He brought it up to her.

"Were you serious?" he asked.

Anwen having magic and Arawn's position changed everything, and yet nothing. Even with her new features, he could still see the stubborn woman he had fallen in love with just beneath the surface. The mischievous set of her eyes, the slight lifting of her lips trying to hide her smile... She was still there.

Anwen looked down at the crumpled parchment, noting how the folds had worn in the short time it had been out of her sight. He must have kept opening and closing it to confirm the word on the page.

A new part of her wanted to say *no*, that in keeping with fairness, her marrying would unbalance the scales—they wouldn't be able to have children anyway—but remembered Arawn's lonesome gaze. She could afford to be selfish when it came to love.

Her face flushed, the sensation powerful in her new body. *"If you'll still have me,"* she offered. *"I'm not exactly the person you left on the road in Elendi, and I wouldn't be able to curry favour towards you if the situation arises."*

"I don't care," Hafgan said, finally pulling her into his arms. She still had the faint scents of sea salt and cotton, but there was a new one, a scent of static and power that now mixed with them. "I want you."

The ache between Anwen's legs intensified as he kissed her hard, his lips parting her's and their hot breath intertwining.

"Then, I gladly accept."

Hafgan freed the ring from the chain and placed it onto Anwen's finger, where it belonged. She admired it once more, noting the different hues her godly eyes picked up.

"I can get you another one if you want," he offered, unsure whether she was satisfied with it anymore.

"No," Anwen shook her head. *"No, I don't need anything else."*

EPILOGUE

Anwen sat in the corner of The Curious Tadpole pub, her gaze fixed on Finch Evans and one of the remaining Brotherhood members, Aaron Mannheim. She'd forgotten about their existence, as they hadn't caused her any problems since the Dark Ages.

Finch looked his usual self: smug and determined, but tired. On the other hand, Aaron seemed as if the collar of his suit was choking him. He pulled at it, trying to relieve some of the tension, though the stifling heat of the pub wasn't of great help.

Hafgan set his glass down on the table and another for Anwen in front of her and took his seat. He glamourised himself well this time. They rarely came to the Mundane, but this was a special occasion. He still wore all black, never getting out of the habit, as it suited him. He tried to fashion his look to the twenty-first century, but the leather jacket and tight jeans made him more than a few decades out of style.

"They still at it?" Hafgan asked, taking a gulp of his wine. He found it weak compared to what he usually drank.

Anwen nodded, fiddling with her rings. There was an extra band with an onyx stone, completing the set. Hafgan had been adamant about adding it on their wedding day, which was filled with laughter, copious amounts of booze, and one rowdy fight. Not at all how she had envisioned her wedding to be, but it had turned out better than she ever hoped.

The only thing that was missing was Branwen.

"And we're just going to sit here? I thought you wanted to help Jade," he smiled.

I have, Anwen signed to him. It was second nature to her in the mundane world.

Finch locked eyes with her, then turned away without recognition. No one would recognise her. She glamourised her hair short this trip and, with the fashion, kept it white, emulating Branwen's style. She came to love the colour of her eyes and was adamant in never changing them. Most humans thought they were contacts, which made it easier to fool them.

"What did you do?" Hafgan asked, nudging his chin at the men. "Looks like Aaron's about to pop a vein with the way their conversation is going."

Anwen giggled, hoping to witness it. She sat there happily sipping at her cocktail. *I had Aranrhod intervene*, she signed.

He choked on his drink. "I thought you were trying to *help* Jade, not scare her to death. You always were a bit twisted." He chuckled, bumping her foot under the table.

She shrugged. *Jade's been through worse; she can handle this.*

His smile turned down at seeing the longing on his wife's face. "Don't you want to see her? Jade, I mean. Didn't she mean a lot to you?"

Anwen sighed in dismay. *She's going through a lot right now. I don't think adding my life on top will be helpful.*

"I don't think she'll see it that way. Fuck, she might actually be happy to see you." He brushes a tuft of hair out of her eyes.

Anwen shook her head stubbornly, inadvertently throwing her hair back into place. *There will come a time when we'll see each other again, but now's not it.* She downed the last of her glass and gathered her coat.

"Ready to head home?" Hafgan asked, finishing off his own drink. Taking her hand in his, he entwined their fingers together.

They left the pub and veered into a deserted alley where no one could see them. With a snap of her fingers, Anwen produced the last remaining portal, its command only unto her. She is, after all, The Eighth God, The Arbiter, Ruler of *Annwfn*, the Newborn Goddess... Mother of Magic.

They step back through to *Annwfn*, ready for their next adventure.

CHARACTER LIST

*In order of appearance

Name	Pronunciation	Race	Relevance
Anwen	AN-wen	Human	Daughter of Rhys and Joan.
Jade	JAYD	Human	Exalted Witch.
Master Lewis	MAY-ster LOO-iss	Human	Anwen's childhood teacher.
Joan de Somerville	Ywan deh Som-er-vil-eh	Human	Anwen's mother.
Rhys <i>ap</i> Gruffudd (Lord Whichnor)	HREECE ap GREE-vith	Human	Anwen's father. Lord of Llansteffan.
Tristan	TRISS-tan	Human	Captain of the Guard in Llansteffan.
Bowen	BOH-un	Human	Llansteffan mercenary. Jade's lover.
Edward of Woodstock	ED-werd uhv WOOD-stok	Human	The Black Prince. Founder of the Black Plague Brotherhood.
Dakarai	dah-kah-rye	Human	Guard at Llansteffan Castle.
Marged	MAR-ged	Human	Anwen's sister.
Branwen	BRAN-wen	Giant	Anwen's best friend.
Rhys (Jr.)	HREECE	Human	Anwen's older brother.
Henry	HEN-ree	Human	Anwen's youngest brother.
Matholwch	mah-THOH-looch	Elf	King of Waesfjord. Branwen's ex-husband.
Efnysien	EV-niss-yen	Elf	Pryderi's aide. Nysien's twin brother.
Pryderi	pruh-DARE-ee	Elf	One of the Seven Gods: The Blind God. God of Crafts.
Pwyll	poo-ith	Human	Pryderi's father. Ex-God.
Rhiannon	ree-AN-non	Goddess	Pryderi's mother. One of the Seven Gods: Goddess of Gwent. Equestrian Goddess. Goddess of Beauty.
Gran	GRAN	Human	Llansteffan's cook.
Penarddun	pen-AR-thin	Giant	Branwen's mother.
Llwyd	CHLOO-id	Human	Member of the Chief Courts.
Poppy	POP-ee	Horse	Anwen's horse.
Arawn	AH-rown	God	The Primordial. The Arbiter. Ruler of <i>Annwfn</i> . The Great God.
Gwydion	gwi-DEE-on	Fae	Storyteller.
Matron Goewin	MAY-truhn GOI-win	Pixie	Matron of Arberth Castle.
Siriol	SIRR-yol	Pixie	Anwen's maid in Arberth Castle.

Hafgan	HAV-gan	Dark Fae	One of the Seven Gods: Dark God. The Demonic Ruler. Rules Elendi. God of the Night.
Rowena	roh-EE-nuh	<i>Fflora</i>	Seamstress in Arberth.
Brân	Brahn	Giant	One of the Seven Gods: The Raven God. The Bridge. The Blessed. Rules the North. Brother to Branwen.
Blodeuedd (Bloom)	bluh-DAY-weth	Goddess	One of the Seven Gods: The Fallen God. The First Woman of the Wood.
Math	MATH	Wizard	One of the Seven Gods: God of War. The Brutal. The Lover.
Aranrhod	ar-ee-AN-rawd	Goddess	One of the Seven Gods: Goddess of Fate. The Lucky God.
Nysien	NISS-ee-en	Elf	Twin brother of Efnysien. Hafgan's second-in-command.
Cigfa	KIG-vah	Goddess	Goddess of Purity (Deceased).
Nos	NOHZ	<i>Gwyllgi</i>	Hafgan's familiar.
Gwern	GWERN	Giant	Branwen's son (Deceased).
Napellus	nuh-PEL-uhs	<i>Fflora</i>	Assassin and informant for Hafgan. Daughter of Blodeuedd.
Willow	WIL-oh	<i>Ceffyl Dŵr</i>	Nysien's familiar.
Volmeear	VOHL-meer	<i>Adar Llŵch Gwin</i>	Branwen's familiar.
Llwyd/Not Llwyd	CHLOO-id/not CHLOO-id	Unknown	Trickster.
Fion	fyun	Dark Fae	Baker in Elendi.
Kylian	kee-lee-ahn	Giant	Blacksmith in Elendi.
Isliah	IZ-lee-uh	<i>Fflora</i>	Tailor in Elendi.
Manawydan (Mana)	mah-nuh-WUH-dan	Giant	Brother to Brân and Branwen.
Unig	EE-nig	Elf	Guard in Pryderi's castle.
Tali	TAH-lee	Dragon	Math's dragon.
Morningstar	MAWR-ning-stahr	Unicorn	Rhiannon's familiar.

TRANSLATIONS

*In order of appearance.

Word	Pronunciation	Translation / Definition
<u>Catref</u>	KAN-trev	A county or town.
<u>ap</u>	/ap/	son of...
<u>Tawlbwrdd</u>	Towl-boorth	A strategic board game.
<u>Cnapan</u>	KNAH-pan	A ball game similar to rugby that uses a wooden ball soaked in sheep fat.
<u>ferch</u>	vairkh	daughter of...
<u>Annwfn</u>	AN-oovn	The Otherworld.
<u>Saith Duwiau o'r Annwfn</u>	Say-th Deew-yahy Awr An-oovn	Seven Gods of the Otherworld.
<u>Cythraul</u>	kuh-THRAIL	The Welsh word for the devil or other incarnation of evil in early narrative.
<u>Gorsedd Arberth</u>	GOR-seth AR-berth	The Mound at Narberth is a focal point of supernatural incidents.
<u>Fflora</u>	FLOR-uh	A race of nymphs ruled by Bloom.
<u>Tylwyth Teg</u>	TULL-with TEG	Fairy Family.
<u>Gwyllgi</u>	GWILL-gee	Black dog.
<u>Ceffyl Dŵr</u>	KEH-fil DOOR	Water horse, similar to the Scottish Kelpie.
<u>Adar Llŵch Gwin</u>	AH-dar llookh gween	Giant Griffin.
<u>Gwyllion</u>	Gweeth-yon	Ghost fae creatures.
<u>Sal ammoniac</u>	Sal uh-MOH-nee-ak	Smelling salts.
<u>Crwth</u>	KROOTH	An ancient Welsh Celtic bowed lyre, or stringed instrument.
<u>Gwynnos</u>	GWIL-noss	The night before a funeral, attendees celebrate the deceased.