

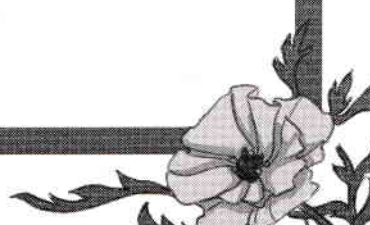
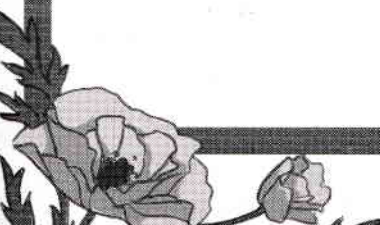


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ACT ONE

THE
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DEATH AND HER HOROSCOPE

Matilda

Once, long ago, I believed the god of war was my father, but only because he was the first to hold me in his arms after I was born. His robes were stained crimson from a mortal battle, his cloak torn to ribbons from swords and morning stars, and his skin—warm from a vernal sun—smelled like salt and sweetened smoke. He had come to visit my mother's burrow, far below where the earth is darkly quiet, to ask for her advice on a skirmish and ended up witnessing my delivery.

I arrived so suddenly that he had no chance to drain his wine and depart, as he would have preferred, for he was keen to return to the battlefield and avoid all matters that pertained to birth. He says that I came into the world with a cry that could have split tree roots and thunderheads, that would have made mortal kings bow. My voice, no doubt, echoed down every Underling passage.

"Hold her," my mother, breathless but rosy-cheeked, had insisted of him.

And so he had, pressing me awkwardly to his bloodstained breast. A god whose heart was rumored to be hard and unyielding as quartzite, who was the goddess of death's only son, and who raked in souls by the hundredfold without remorse.

"What will you call her?" Bade asked, cupping my head in his palm. His hand was large enough, powerful enough, to crush me into dust, and yet he held me like I was a fragile thing. A god-child made of damselfly wings and spider silk and daydreams.

My mother paused, wiping the golden blood from her legs. The air

smelled green and spiced, like freshly harvested sage and the sloe wine she had spilled. "I do not know."

"Her father . . . ?"

"No. I am keeping her a secret from him. At least, for the first few decades. She should grow in her own strength before they meet."

"That is wise of you," said Bade, but then fell pensive, gazing down at me, still crowned in my mother's ichor. "But a little goddess cannot grow up without a name to guide her path."

There was a lull, only punctuated by the fire crackling from the hearth. This memory is not mine, but it has been told to me so many times that it feels like my own.

My mother tilted her head, black hair flowing over her shoulder like a waterfall at midnight, a furrow in her brow. She suddenly seemed troubled, although he could only marvel as to why.

"A name shapes a divine as much as the stars do," she finally said, stroking the fair silk of my hair. I was quiet but scowling, blinking as I took in the haze of the new world. "Perhaps I should wait and see what the horoscope says. To name her after her magic has been defined."

"I would not wait for that, Zenia."

"How come?"

"What if she ends up with some lackluster magic? She could be the goddess of taxes, or patience, or peace, or some other tedious thing."

"Then what would you call her, if she were your daughter?"

"Matilda," he said without hesitation. As if he had thought of what he would name a child, many times, despite the absence of them in his immortal life.

"*Matilda?*" my mother repeated, surprised. "Why?"

"It means *mighty in battle*."

"Of course you would name a daughter such a thing."

"Is it not fitting?"

"For a child spun from your bloodlust? Yes."

Bade offered a half smile, which softened his ugly, scar-flecked face. His shoulders relaxed as he continued to hold me close to his chest. "You know this as well as I do—I vowed to be childless unless they can be made in love. And I would rather be feared than ever be loved."

"As would we all," my mother agreed. "But have you failed to notice it,

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my old ally? War only makes love flame brighter, defiant. It seems to bloom from the bloodshed you leave behind, unfurling from the most unlikely places. From the broken seams of the world. From the graves and the anguish and the fear you inspire.”

“I have not noticed,” Bade said, unable to hide the brusqueness in his gravel-like voice. I became restless, crying once more, stricken by a sudden wave of hunger. “Here, take her.”

I was passed to my mother, who held me for a long moment, gazing at me with unguarded fondness.

“Matilda,” she said again, and the name seemed to fit, even though she had yet to learn what constellation I had been born beneath—what magic hid in my veins, and where my place was destined to fall within the divine courts.

Zenia fed me, and as I swallowed down her golden milk, she resumed her advice to the god of war on his upcoming battle, as if my birth had been an ordinary, slightly inconvenient event.

But the truth is . . . there has been no divine born to the Underlings or the Skywards since.

Zenia cloistered me in her burrow for three days, ignoring the knocks on her door and the inquisitive voices that melted through the stone lintel. The Underling clan was curious about my birth, my unnamed magic, my unclaimed horoscope, and—most of all—who my father was, for the courts below knew he must be an enemy. A god of the haughty, conniving Skywards.

But at last my mother’s own curiosity swelled, and she emerged from her chambers and carried me through the winding, fog-laced passages of the under realm, bundled in sky-blue velvet, to Orphia, the goddess of death and the matriarch of the clan. It might seem odd to take a newborn to visit Death, but the truth is that we measure life by the end of it, or the lack thereof for immortals. Regardless, Orphia was one of the oldest and wisest amongst our kind, and she could read a horoscope, which my mother was now anxious to learn on my behalf.

“Put the child down, there,” Orphia said with a flick of her sinewy hand. She would not dare cradle me in her arms like the god of war had done, and my mother was grateful for that omission as she laid me down on a bolt of sheepskin, close to the hearth where the stones were warm and drenched in firelight.

But there are a few things to know about Orphia's burrow.

Her door is hard to find, and her chambers are a honeycomb of vaulted chambers and marble columns carved into terrifying beasts. There is a hearth, where the fire never extinguishes. There are rafters high above, which are draped in long, dark robes. There is a great loom, with a never-ending tapestry caught within its maw. And there is a crack in the stone ceiling, which invites a pillar of celestial light to stream down to her tabletop scrying mirror. This is where she can keep watch over the constellations and deem horoscopes; the night sky is reflected on the oval sheet of obsidian.

Zenia approached the scrying mirror, betraying her anxiousness. But Orphia called her to the fire, where she was steeping a bundle of white flowers in a copper pan of rainwater. Steam danced upward as the liquid cooled on the hearthstone. There was no fragrance save for a very faint hint of pepper and honey.

Orphia was making a concoction of bittersweet, boiling poisonous flowers down to their essence. Blooms that were harvested from the mortal realm. And my mother was about to drink it.

"Here, Zenia," said Orphia, pouring a small glass. The liquid was clear as water. "You know you must answer truthfully if I am to read the stars for your descendant."

Poison cannot kill a divine or even make us unwell, like it does mortals. But we still bend to its power. To drink it means we can only speak truth while it filters through our veins. A lie would burn our tongue and turn our voices into smoke.

Zenia hesitated. Her face, lovely and pale as a winter morning, was dewy with perspiration. She had her secrets to keep, but she took the cup and drained the liquid, grimacing as the bitterness coated her tongue.

"My heart is open," she said, meeting Orphia's unwavering stare. "Please. I want to know where my daughter falls within the court. If she will grow up safe and unnoticed, or if I must raise her to kill to protect herself."

"You must raise her to be on guard, regardless of which constellation she was born beneath," Orphia said, moving to the table where the scrying mirror rested. "But let us begin. You must answer every query I voice to you. Do you understand?"

Zenia nodded. Her hands trembled as she clutched the edges of her cloak.

"When was she conceived?" Orphia asked, gazing down into the mirror. There was no reflection of her angular, moon-white face. Only black mist, and a shimmer of stars as if she were waking them at eventide.

"It was summer," Zenia replied. "The first fruits had just been harvested. The olives had just been pressed. The sheep had just been shorn. The rain had just abated, leaving the rivers high. The sun had set and the moon was rising as a waning crescent."

"You describe the mortal realm."

"Yes, that is where our couplings happened."

"And who is the father?"

My mother paused, biting her lip. "I cannot speak it, Orphia. Upon our parting, he made me swear an oath. That should I utter his name, even far below where the sun has never touched and he has never trod, he would hear it, and he would find me."

"To reunite with you in love, or to kill you?"

Zenia was silent. "Once, he loved me. I was a secret that he kept, but our dalliance did not last, and our parting was not gentle."

Orphia's eyes, blue and sharp as sapphire hewn from rock, glittered as she continued to gaze into the mirror. More stars melted through the darkness. "Then confirm to me that he is a Skyward."

"He is."

Given the hints my mother had dropped about him—*summer, oaths, the moon, an Underling enemy*—Orphia inferred who my father was, even without his name spoken into the shadows.

"I suppose you do not have anything of his to—"

"I do," Zenia said, procuring a lock of fiery red hair from the inner pocket of her cloak. "I cut it from him when he was sleeping, the last time we were together."

Orphia smirked, pleased. "That will do." She took the hair and dropped it into the mirror, where it vanished, leaving ripples behind on the starry obsidian.

There is unspoken power when it comes to hair, as odd as that might seem. To cut a lock from a sleeping god is a powerful move; my mother could have demanded anything of my father in exchange for those strands, because it would have shamed him to know she had been awake while he had slept. That he had been vulnerable in her presence. But rather than

making a demand of him, Zenia had used it for my horoscope. To skirt around the name she would not utter.

Next, my mother pricked her finger and offered a bead of her blood.

From there, the goddesses waited, quiet and expectant, until a constellation smoldered, brighter than all the others, within the reflection of the night sky.

“Hmm.” Orphia tapped her long nails against the mirror’s gilded edge. Silver rings shaped as small bones gleamed on every knuckle of her fingers.

“What is it?” My mother leaned forward, even though she could not scry. “What do you see?”

“A constellation made of six points.”

Zenia was quiet, but her mind reeled as she sorted where I would fall in the divine courts. “Then she belongs to the Middle Court. And the lowest rung, at that.”

“You’re displeased?”

“No. I’m relieved. The lack of power should protect her.”

“Let us hope that it does,” said Orphia with a slight drawl, no doubt dwelling on the fact that my mother belonged to the High Court, and only because she had killed two other divines to gain more constellation points, rising through the ranks of prowess.

“And her magic?” Zenia insisted.

“The two of you have created a herald.”

“A *herald*?”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I—*no*, I am merely surprised.” My mother fell quiet, no doubt feeling the burn of poison on her tongue, how it would wrench the truth from her. But she was thinking of taxes and patience and peace, and all the other tedious powers I could have had. Herald seemed to fall close to those, and she picked at her nails. “What does a herald do?”

“Your daughter will be a messenger, carrying words and tidings and proclamations from one realm to the next.”

“One realm to the next?” Zenia’s displeasure was now evident. “I do not want Matilda moving through the *realms*. Not even the mortal one. She belongs here, below, with me and our clan. It will be safer for her.”

“There is safety in movement, if you truly fear for Matilda’s well-being.”

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Orphia countered. “And what you meant to say is *this*: you do not want your daughter to know her *father’s* kin, far above.”

“He does not even know that we made a child.”

“But he will, Zenia. When he sees her, he will know she is his, and his fury at you will only wax hotter.”

“When will he see her?” My mother flung out her sinister hand, exasperated. The moonstone ring on her thumb flashed in the firelight, as if concurring. “It will be many years until then, and—as with most gods—time and wine and consorts will dull his memory. She will be known as Matilda of Underling, and—”

“She cannot claim the clan’s name,” Orphia said with a sigh, “no more than she can claim the Skyward one.”

Zenia blinked, a flush creeping up her neck. “No, she must have a clan name. A home. Something to keep her tethered. Allies she can trust.”

Orphia was becoming weary of her present company and glanced back at the mirror. It was impossible to look upon the goddess of death without noting her beauty—her son Bade had inherited nothing of it—but she was comely in a way no other Underling was. Death was moonlight on a sword, an ocean eddy at high tide. Ephemeral and vicious and cold, like frost over iron.

Her expressions were ever shifting, heavily guarded. She only let you see what she wanted you to, but in that moment, a startled frown overtook her countenance. Her eyes flared wide and dark as new moons. Her hands became bone white as she clutched the mirror’s edge, as she bent her head down to study the constellations that continued to burn through the inky blackness.

“Orphia?” my mother said, her voice ringing with fear. I heard it and whimpered, but Zenia failed to notice. “Did you see something else?”

As soon as the moment had come, it was over.

The goddess of death straightened, her face placid, her fingers leaving the mirror’s edge.

“I thought I saw something out of place,” she said, walking to her loom. This was her way of politely dismissing visitors. Once she gazed upon the colorful threads, her attention would be snared by it. Her irritation or delight would heighten, depending on the pattern and the challenge.

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“Another constellation?” Zenia asked, soft with hope. “One greater than herald?”

Orphia did not answer.

She picked up her shuttle, but instead of studying the wefts and the warps, she looked at me, still lying on the wool by the fire.

I quieted, for even I knew better than to challenge Death’s mood.

But Orphia had spoken truth that day.

Movement was destined to be my armor.

I was not fully an Underling, and nor was I a full-blooded Skyward. I was *both*, and this had never happened before.

I was Matilda alone.

Matilda of nowhere and no kin.

I would become the herald of the gods, much to my mother’s chagrin.

And the goddess of death had certainly seen something out of place within my stars.

A SALT VOW

Matilda

I grew quickly, as a goddess must if she wants to survive.

My mother taught me early on that there were some divines who—despite the rare wonder of having a child in their midst—would have killed me to steal the six points of my constellation. They would have devoured my magic, however humble heralding first appeared to be, and made it their own, sending me to the eternal mists stripped of all dignity and power.

There is nothing more devastating to a god than to lose their power and immortality, for their name to be forgotten and blotted out in disgrace.

Because of this constant threat, my mother's closest allies became my own.

Bade, god of war.

Phelyra, goddess of revelry and coin.

And Alva, goddess of dreams and nightmares.

I remember how often the four of them gathered in my mother's burrow at her stone table, sharing wine as they discussed and advised and plotted by the fire. With twelve winters to my name, I listened as a cupbearer, although most of what they discussed was too intricate and obscure for me to fully grasp. They would tease me, ruffle my hair like affectionate kindred. After I had filled their cups with wine—alcohol and poisonous flowers were the only two things we wanted from mortal markets—Alva would secretly slip one of her small scrolls into my hand with a wink, and then the alliance would forget I was amongst them.

I was just a herald, and a god-child with soft skin.

But I swiftly learned that Bade was entangled in a war-weary dilemma,

which he never spoke of when the allied group was present. He waited until Phelyra and Alva had departed, remaining behind to solicit my mother's advice alone.

"She is a *thorn* in my side," he confessed, raking a hand through his ash-brown hair. I had never heard such gloom in his voice, and I remained sprawled on my bed in the nearby alcove, Alva's scroll of mortal dreams in my hands. I worried that if I moved, my mother would remember my presence, and send me away.

More than anything, I was curious to know who this *thorn* was.

"I assume she has outwitted the mortal king yet again," said my mother with a sigh, refilling Bade's cup with a dry summer wine. "Tell me her name. You have never mentioned it before."

"*Adria*." Bade all but spat it out. "They call her the Poet Queen. She came from nothing, from the muck and mire of mortal society. But she was so clever with her words, moving the illiterate as well as the stoniest of lords' hearts by rewriting our myths, that they proclaimed her their sovereign to oust the king. She is garnering prayers, devotion, as if she is immortal. She is stealing supplicants from me, and my power grows weak because of it. This war will end if I fail to do something about her. She has prevailed in the last three battles. The king and his forces grow more disorganized and chaotic by the day."

He tossed back the wine; it dribbled through his beard, dropping like gemstones onto his scarlet robes. My mother was silent, drumming her nails on the table. A sign of her scheming.

I had visited the mortal realm just a few times with Zenia and only with the intention for me to learn where the Underling doors hid. The secret thresholds that connected our world to the one of mankind, so one day I could come and go with ease. But this war between the Ousted King and the Poet Queen had been raging for years now. I had seen evidence of it in the burnt forests my mother and I had walked through, the razed harvest fields, the freshly churned graves, the crumbling castles, and the smoke that perpetually hung in the air.

The destruction seemed to stretch from one horizon to the next, leaving scars upon the earth, and I wondered how Bade, whom I loved like a father, could find pleasure in such devastation.

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"Her being a *poet* is the problem," Zenia stated, "more than her being a queen."

Mortal poets, bards, and writers were often a problem for divines. Such humans were visited by Fate's owls and granted insight into our legends, our myths, our lives. And how easily anyone with a quill and ink could rewrite our tales, shifting them to best suit their beliefs, whether they were truth or not.

"Then I should kill her," Bade said.

"And create a martyr?" my mother countered.

"Her quill would be silenced, and her death could fan the flames of the war, drawing it out for a few more years."

"Yes, but what remaining prayers that were once written in your name will then go to *her*. Death changes mortal hearts in ways that are difficult for us to fathom. This you should know, as you were reared by the matriarch herself."

"Then what can be done?" Bade crossed his burly arms over his chest. The ruby in his right earlobe flashed, reminiscent of a teardrop of mortal blood. "The king will surrender to her soon. A long peace is imminent, for this queen is young by mortal reckoning. I will grow bored, sad, and idle."

"And we cannot have that," my mother said.

Bade's frown deepened. "Are you mocking me?"

"No."

"Then tell me, Zenia. Tell me what to *do*. You are winter as you are fire and cunning, and I need your advice."

I watched from the corner of my eye as my mother rose. Her black dress shimmered as she moved; the net of moonstones sparkled like fallen stars against her dark, unbound hair. She walked to the hearth mantel and took hold of a dagger that hid behind the candlesticks.

"I have heard rumors about this Poet Queen," my mother began. "She bestows golden circlets upon her council members, and those circlets are like crowns. They represent power and respect. They give voice and prestige to the ones who bear them, even if they are humble folk."

"Yes, and what of them?" Bade was impatient. "What does this have to do with me?"

"You, my friend, need to earn one of those circlets."

"She would *never* give one to a god. Those crowns are granted to people in her council whom she deems good and selfless and willing to die for her cause. And I am not good, or selfless. The last thing I would do is expire for a mortal woman, Zenia."

"Are you so certain?"

The silence became thick, tense between them.

"Regardless, I think you should meet with this Adria," Zenia continued. "Alone, in her war tent."

"I thought you told me *not* to kill her."

"Yes. You need to *speak* with her, face-to-face, and you must woo her."

Bade's shocked expression froze on his face, as if my mother had roused her winter magic and touched his shoulder, preserving him in ice. But then he laughed, a loud guffawing sound that was impossible to hear and not feel catch in your own chest. I had to press my lips together, but it wasn't to swallow the mirth. It was to hold my own questions, my own wonders, which this conversation had churned up like an eclipse of moths.

"I have no desire to bed her," Bade finally said, wiping tears from his eyes. "I have slept with enough mortal women. Ones that have been far more pleasing in looks than her."

"This is not about bedding," my mother replied, her cadence sharpening. "This is about you earning her love and trust, softening her heart. If you succeed, you will have the power and influence to direct her. You can sow discord amongst her advisors. You will be a distraction to her; you can fracture her court, which will lengthen the war considerably."

Bade became solemn. But I was staring at them now, wide-eyed, no longer trying to conceal my eavesdropping. I watched his throat bob as he swallowed.

"Look at me, Zenia," he whispered hoarsely. "I am ugly. I am scarred. I wield swords, not words. This queen is a poet. There is no chance of me earning her love in one night."

"It will take longer than the span of one night," Zenia replied, gentler. "You must be clever."

"That has never been my strength."

"Then be strategic." My mother extended the dagger to him. "I can aid you the first few times you speak with her. I will let you borrow cunning from me, for the span of three days. With it, you will know what to say to

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this queen. After the sun sets on the third day, if you need to borrow more magic from me, you will have to return here, and receive the mark again.”

Bade reached out to accept the dagger. I had never seen a borrowing spell performed before. Most divines refused to grant them—we are such a selfish, suspicious lot—and I sat up a little higher on my bed. But he paused, watching the light dance across the steel.

“What must I pay in order to borrow?” he asked. “I imagine your price is steep, to be so generous with your magic.”

That was when my mother’s eyes met mine.

I flushed and looked down to the ledger of dreams, which I began to roll up in white-hot guilt. My mother did not know Alva lent me her scrolls, and Zenia called to me briskly.

“Matilda? Come here.”

I stood and hid the scroll beneath a blanket, my mouth going dry. But I walked to the table, feeling the firelight trickle across my arms. Its warmth caressed my face. *Be brave*, I thought, wrestling with the temptation to curve my shoulders inward, repentant.

Bade turned in the chair to look at me, brows arched until his forehead became a map of deep lines. He had forgotten my presence, tucked away at the periphery. His eyes—a shade of green that could rival the emeralds that grew in the darkest reaches of the under realm—brimmed with both affection for me and a hesitation that might have wounded me had I not already known that he was not my father.

“Zenia?” Bade said, glancing between us.

“You will make a salt vow to my daughter,” she said. “You will be her loyal ally, and will never betray her, even if you and I should become enemies. Even if it costs you your very life, you will aid her whenever she is in peril, in need. You will teach her how to fight and defend herself.”

Bade was quiet, but his jaw flexed, as if he were grinding his teeth.

“This is much to ask,” he said after a long moment, pinning my mother with a fiery stare.

“Is it?”

Bade heaved a sigh, turning his gaze to me. At once, the flames dimmed within him as he held out one of his hands. I took it, tentatively. I could not explain the lump in my throat, or why my eyes stung with tears. But there seemed to be a bruise within me, staining my ribs violet with each breath.

I longed for a father, even though I existed in a realm where fathers often killed their daughters and daughters their fathers, all to steal magic. But I wished that it had been Bade, even with his warmongering ways. I wished that he had not hesitated when it came to my mother's price.

I wanted someone to claim me.

"The truth is, Matilda," he began, "this will be a difficult vow for me to uphold. You are young; we do not know whom you will become yet. What if you grow up to despise me? Would you still desire me as an ally? What if you become a goddess who yearns for peace and strives for it? How could I make a good ally to you then, hmm?"

"I understand," I said, although my voice was muffled. It felt like I was speaking through a strip of cloth. "I would not want you to make a difficult vow."

That was another thing my mother had taught me, alongside the location of Underling doors. That vows were binding. Never to offer or accept one unless I was certain it was not a snare. Wedding vows often fell prey to such danger.

Bade squeezed my hand; it was part comfort, part apology as he looked at my mother again. "She is too soft for this," he said.

"Then make her like iron." Zenia's impatience clipped the words. "She will not have the long, languid childhood most of us did. She must grow up quickly."

Bade returned his attention to me. "Is this what you want?"

I nodded, even though I was not certain what I wanted yet, and what this hardship would comprise. But then I thought, *If I am strong, then I will no longer live afraid of being slain, my magic stolen. I can move through the realms, fearless. I can visit the Skyward halls, where my father dwells.*

I would never have confessed this to my mother, but she was right about two things: I needed an ally of my own, and I could not afford to be soft.

"Very well," Bade said, surrendering. He loosened his hold on my hand. "Bring me some parchment, an inkpot, and a quill."

I rushed to do his bidding, hurrying to the shelves hewn into the wall above my bed. By the time I delivered the materials, my mother had cleared the table, and I set everything down before Bade, curious to see what came next.