

THE GODDESS OF THE UNDERWORLD THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM VIII

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Chapter 1

Raine opened her eyes. Her body felt heavy, her limbs leaden. She was weak and she was in pain. Not a terrible pain, just a dull ache, as if she had been in a brutal fight. Her mind sought to identify where she was, how she had gotten here, but she could remember nothing. She was cold. She struggled to keep her eyes open, and slowly the room around her came into focus.

She was in a bed, a tangle of black silk sheets wrapped around her body. She was wearing a dark purple robe. A thought of her mother flitted through her muddled brain. The frame of the bed was odd, made of neither wood nor metal, but rather of black rock, like some natural formation. Somewhere near was the sound of water, a gentle flow. She tried to lift her head, but it was too heavy. She could see little else around her, so her eyes settled on the ceiling above.

Or what should have been a ceiling. The walls reached upward to where they ended in the night sky. It was disorienting to Raine. It was not as if the room was open to the night air; the chamber was large, but enclosed, almost cave-like. It was as if the ceiling was the night sky. Stars twinkled above her, and the vast panorama filled Raine with a strange, existential dread. These constellations were unfamiliar, the arrangement of stars foreign and unrecognizable. There were no accustomed landmarks, no established positions or angles. A feeling of despair flooded Raine, the despair of one who suddenly realizes they are far, far away from home. Her eyelids grew heavy, she lost the struggle to keep her eyes open, and she

slowly drifted back into unconsciousness.

A few feet away, a demon watched the prone figure in a sullen manner. The handmaiden next to him, pale and coldly beautiful, also observed the brief return to consciousness. Her dark eyes flicked to her Mistress.

The Goddess of the Underworld sat near the bed on a black rock formation. The rock formation was fashioned into a throne-like couch lined with black silk cushions. Hel gazed at the figure in the bed in deep contemplation, her fingers slowly drumming a dirge on the arm rest. Both of her servants watched her closely, trying to glean a reaction from the brief stirring of her captive, but both were disappointed. The Goddess sat expressionless, unreadable, unmoved and unmoving, absorbed in her lengthy vigil. And although Feray and Faen agreed on little, they were united in a singular thought: neither had ever seen their Mistress so utterly and unconditionally patient.

Chapter 2

The dim light of the room began to pierce the total darkness behind her eyelids. Raine's eyes again fluttered open. Her body was still leaden, but her pain had lessened. She was cold, but the robe was snugly wrapped around her form. The foreign stars twinkled mockingly overhead. She could move her head a little and was able to raise up slightly. There was a pool of black water to her left, the smoothly banked cistern giving the impression of a bathing area. Water trickled down the rough rock wall, creating the sound she had heard earlier. An elaborate couch, or maybe it was a throne, sat empty, its design similar to the bed, made of black stone. Even that brief exertion exhausted her, and she lowered her head back to the silk pillow.

She stared up at the stars. Where was she? What was this strange place? And where was—?

Weynild.

It all came rushing back to her. The battlefield, the army of Hyr'rok'kin, a million strong. The allied forces, elves, dwarves, imperials, the Ha'kan, the Tavinter, all stood ready to fight. The dragons had not yet come. Hel appeared before Raine, and Weynild, her dragon lover, had tried to come to her aid, passing through Nifelheim...

Raine closed her eyes. And fallen into a trap. Raine had heard the dragon's cries and followed her into Nifelheim, goaded by the taunts of the Goddess. But she had never found her love. She could only hear her cries of pain, then was in her own battle with a horde of demons. She had slain

dozens, possibly hundreds, but was overwhelmed by sheer numbers and went down in a swarm. The last thing she remembered was that she was being beaten to death.

Faen, his red eyes glittering with malice, saw the expression on the mortal's face and, like all despair, it filled him with glee. He ambled over in his sideways, loping manner and peered down into the beautiful face he already hated. His approach had been silent, but the blue and gold markings rose on her skin. Her eyes reopened.

Raine stared into the ugly, impish face of the demon. His skin was dark maroon, wrinkled, and he had two little horns like those on a young goat. His tail moved around behind him like a separate entity. Right now, it hovered cautiously, poised as if it were more afraid of the creature in the bed than was the demon himself. Raine turned away, dismissing him.

The demon was infuriated. The arrogance of this one would not stand.

“You’re going to get what’s coming to you very soon.”

The raspy voice of the demon barely registered on Raine in her weakened state, and she did not respond. This angered the fiend even more.

“The Goddess will rape you, and when she’s through with you, she will give you to us.”

Raine stared up at the stars, bored. Her insouciance enraged him, and the volume of his voice rose with her lack of reaction.

“The Goddess always quickly tires of her toys!” he said, spitting with his rage. “When she is done with you, she will toss you into the arena where you will be raped by multitudes! Garmr will go to work on you with his great tongue, then mount you from behind!”

This caught Raine’s attention, not because of the demon’s disgusting histrionics, but because it told her where she was. Garmr was the blood-stained watchdog that guarded the Underworld, which meant that she was now in the heart of Hel’s realm. This thought affected her far more profoundly than all of the demon’s frenzied, sickening threats, and she fought the return of the despair. The demon thought that he had at last scored a victory, but when the mortal responded, her tone was utterly calm.

“Strange,” Raine began, and the demon leaned forward to hear her weak voice. “Strange, that you have known Hel for eons, and I, but hours...”

The demon leaned closer so he could catch the words.

“And yet already I know her better than you.”

The fiend exploded, dancing and hopping about in fury, but Raine had turned her head away from him, and before he even finished his jig of wrath, she had already fallen back asleep.

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