

MISTRESS

OF

BONES

A NOVEL

MARIA Z. MEDINA



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group,
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman
Sword illustration © Vector_Line/Shutterstock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Medina, Maria Z., author.

Title: Mistress of bones : a novel / Maria Z. Medina.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2025. |

Audience: Ages 13–18.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024057682 | ISBN 9781250888235 (hardcover) |
ISBN 9781250888242 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Death—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Romance
stories. | Fantasy fiction. | LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Fantasy
fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M46635 Mi 2025 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024057682>

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First Edition: 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Lord Death and the Lord Life stared down at the barren land.

Their creatures would form and rise; they would wriggle and they would try. And then they would die.

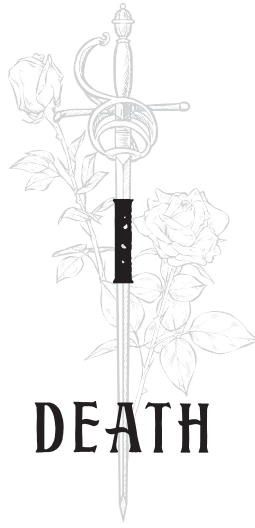
So?

They raised the continents.

And the Lord Life thrived and the Lord Death gained meaning, and so did the other gods keeping vigil. Turning their bones into chains, they anchored the continents and seas in place.

Most agree the gods made the sacrifice willingly.

Some believe they regretted it almost immediately.



NINE YEARS EARLIER

Azul del Arroyo didn't fully know what would happen when she set out to bring her older sister back to life, but since she was ten, she didn't much care.

It took courage to sneak down to the inn's cellar, even more so to saw off Isadora's cold finger. Azul's dagger was too blunt, Isadora's rapier of no use, but Azul did it, and she rolled the digit in her handkerchief before hiding it inside the pouch hanging from her neck.

She waited and stayed silent, because she knew her gift was strange and that nobody would thank her for using it. And she prayed to all five gods, but especially to the Lord Death, to allow her sister to come back from his domain just as the chicken had when Azul was seven, and her favorite cat when she was nine, and the couple of mice and the little snake at some point in between.

The Lord Death must've listened, because a day after she returned home to the small Sancian town of Agunci3n, Isadora was at her family's door, her memories after falling sick with the fever completely gone. The doctor at the inn must've made a horrible mistake and sent her straight home, Azul assured everyone as only a ten-year-old

could. After all, Isadora was alive and free of illness. And if her sister had walked from the meadow of tall grass behind the house—like the chicken and the cat and the mice and the snake—instead of stepping out of a traveling carriage, well, Azul wasn't about to confess it.

Because there was nothing Azul wouldn't do for Isadora.

THE PRESENT

“There’s been a suspicious death, Emissary.”

Virel Enjul, Emissary of the Lord Death, looked up from his sketching—bones, of course, free of flesh and tendons and blood. They were meant to become an armor, and sweat was enough of a stench to carry around.

The messenger at the entrance of the room wore all his corresponding flesh and tendons and blood tucked into snug breeches and a long waistcoat. Sancian fashion, come to intrude into Valanje, as if, unable to conquer its neighboring country across the floating sea, Sancia had decided to invade through clothing instead.

Enjul didn’t care for these fashions, but they didn’t bother him either. They would die, just as this man would, and something else would take their place. The Lord Death was supreme, after all. Nothing escaped his reign.

“Come forth, and speak,” Enjul ordered, abandoning the sketch and focusing his attention on the man. Natural decay had already taken hold of the messenger’s body, death inevitable for everything that was ever born or grown.

All Emissary Enjul ever saw was the death surrounding him.

The man approached the emissary’s desk, a sturdy thing used to the weight of thick, unread volumes and ledgers. He met Enjul’s eyes for a heartbeat, then focused on the emissary’s chest. “A suspicious death was reported on the docks at Diel.”

Diel—Valanje’s Pride, Valanje’s Treasure. The country’s southernmost city built on untouched Anchor—the gods’ bones. Another difference with Sancia, where they had no respect for Anchor and wore it on their houses and their persons as if they had the right to own the gods.

But *that* fashion would never take hold in Valanje—Enjul and others like him would make sure of it. “And?”

“Your . . . your presence has been requested by Rudel Serunje, Emissary.”

All who entered the Order, the service of the Lord Death, studied death in all its forms—divine, natural, unnatural, premature—but only those with a piece of the Lord Death himself, those blessed to see the decay of death and feel the god’s guidance, became emissaries. And emissaries did not investigate petty sailor scuffles, even if they occurred in great Anchor cities.

Enjul’s thoughts must have shown on his expression, because the messenger hurried to elaborate on the request: “Serunje, Valanje’s Eyes, was in charge of an envoy to Sancia’s capital, to Cienpuentes, and had returned home with the Sancian delegates when the death occurred. An emissary was demanded, sir. You are the closest one.”

“A Valanjan’s death?”

“One of the Sancians, Emissary.”

Sancians, Enjul thought in irritation, *bringing their problems and their disrespect of the gods along with their fashions*. He stood, slipping his latest drawing into the leather-bound folder holding the rest of his sketches.

Strange manners of death had always appealed to him, but in his experience, what others considered strange and suspicious only ever amounted to trite and mundane. A *suspicious* stabbing, a *suspicious* poisoning—the death simple enough, the culprit the only thing suspect. Such things were not his purview but a guard’s.

Rudel Serunje had purposely made his message vague, either out of a need for secrecy or to incite curiosity. Since nobody would think to toy with an emissary of the Lord Death, Enjul would honor the request.

“Did you witness this death?” he asked.

“No, Emissary, but there are rumors.” The messenger swallowed. “I heard strange magic was involved. That the body was there and then not. Reduced to green ashes and dirt, they say.”

And just like that, Virel Enjul, Emissary of the Lord Death, found his heart in a tight grip and a growl in his throat.

“A malady?” he demanded, disgust pulling his mouth into a snarl.

The man backed up to the door. “Yes, perhaps, Emissary, sir.”
 “Have a mount ready. I leave within the hour.”

Enjul took his sketches and tore through the hallways toward his quarters. Maladies. Rare, so very rare there had been only whispers of one in his lifetime.

Long had Enjul heard the rumors of the malady taking up residence in Cienpuentes; long had he wished to put an end to it. Sancians didn’t seem to care, just like they didn’t care about defiling the gods’ bones on which they’d built their capital, and he wished to correct their mistake. But his emissary duties belonged with Valanje, the land of the Lord Death, not Sancia, where belief in the Blessed Heart and the Lady Dream reigned supreme. Infuriating that they thought these two lesser gods amounted to more than the Lord Death or the Lord Life. Had Death and Life not created the Blessed Heart, the Lady Dream, and the Lord Nightmare? Had they not plucked the moons from Hope and Despair’s remains?

Now this malady might have arrived in Valanje. Now Enjul might have it within his grasp, and he’d see it erased from this world, thrown into the understars and Void beneath the lands. A spark ignited inside him, spreading warmth inside his body and hastening his steps. His god agreed.

The trip to the Anchor city of Diel took two uneventful days, eastward across the low mountains, and no matter how often Enjul traveled here, the sight still dazzled. For how could a city built on the gods’ bones fail to impress?

Diel rose from the land, a wide peak of glittering blue Anchor covered by houses of all colors and sizes. It stood, alone and magnificent, the high point of an enormous valley of farmland extending from the mountains and the thick forests in the far north and south to the sea at Diel’s eastern footstep.

It was a good thing the sea separated the great island of Valanje from Sancia and the continent of Luciente. The gods’ blood limited the reach of Sancia’s rotten beliefs, the maelstroms making passage across impossible but for narrow routes south and north.

The closer he got to Diel, the more magnificent the city became, the blue rock of its base almost too bright for the eye to take. For someone like Enjul, who was always aware of the signs of death on every person crossing his path—every flower, every plant—such a display of rock was a welcome respite from the rot. That the Anchor was Lord Death’s own bones only made it even more magnificent.

Farmers and travelers walked by the roadsides to make space for riders and carts, their clothing a simple, dustier version of what Diel’s citizens wore. No doublets, no cumbersome skirts for them; no velvety plumes attached to their hats and no half capes. No elegant rapiers or long swords.

Soon the dirt path turned into the intricate mosaics of flagstone covering the streets winding up the peak of Diel. Buildings grew in elegance, the glittering blue of the gods’ bones peeking here and there, undisturbed.

Enjul dismounted and walked toward the grand building topping Diel, where the slopes were so steep it was dangerous for horses to traverse. Valanjians hid at his approach, and guards stood at attention. No words were needed to grant him access into the Great Council House. Here in Valanje, in the land of the Lord Death, an emissary needed no permission.

Rudel Serunje was waiting for him in one of the parlors, tall and lean. He wore a waistcoat over his traditional long shirt, the lower folds falling all the way to the knee. The rings around his golden-brown irises were a warm gray—narrow, friendly. They didn’t clash like Enjul’s wide, thick, deep violet ones. They made him approachable. People in Sancia, used as they might be to the differences in Valanjian eyes, wouldn’t gawk at Rudel as they might at Enjul. *It must have served him well in Cienpuentes, Enjul thought, made him forgettable and easy to underestimate.*

Serunje stood and gave Enjul a slow, respectful bow of his head, belying the sudden tension in his body. “Emissary.”

“Valanje’s Eyes, explain the situation.”

Serunje offered a cup of water. Enjul refused with a sharp move of his hand, and the Eye placed the cup back on the side table.

“First, I must explain how we came to be at Diel’s port, Emissary,” Serunje said with no little wariness.

“Proceed as you see wise,” Enjul conceded, hiding his irritation. His hands itched with the need to find this malady, to have it under his purview. Surely it must be nothing but the shadow of a person, a wraith that had somehow gained flesh and bones. Brittle, like its existence. Easily dispatched under his hands or his sword.

“I was sent to Cienpuentes as one of our . . . emissaries to their court,” Serunje began with a dry twist to his tone. “They are appreciative of our—Valanje’s—success without the need for Anchor and would love nothing more than to learn our secrets, especially after the Anchor mining ban.”

In Enjul’s opinion, about the only smart thing Sancians had done since the raising of the lands, and that only after Girende, one of their Anchor cities, had eaten itself into a hole and fallen into the Void. “I heard they might overturn the Anchor mining ban, now that their queen is dead.”

How long until they took all the Anchor they could reach and the whole of Luciente caved in on itself? The gods’ bones kept the floating continents in place above the Void—without them, they would fall. Why were Sancians so intent on mining their home to its doom?

No wonder a malady had risen there. No wonder the poison of their greed had taken human form and sought to spread.

“Even if they do,” Serunje said, “the truth is that they are running out of Anchor. Those with a brain in their head seek other ways to add to their fortune, improve their crops, or discover other ways to streamline their businesses. They have reached out to their east as well as to Valanje. We find this might benefit us, expand our trade in Sancia and beyond.”

“Free passage across Sancia to the rest of Luciente?” Enjul asked, though if he was impressed his tone gave no hint of it. There was no

going around Sancia, not for Valanje. The sea didn't reach far enough around Sancia for them to access other countries in Luciente, and there was nothing beyond the sea but the free fall of the Void. "You aim high."

"If not free, then at much reduced fees. To this end, Cienpuentes put together a group of representatives to return our visit. One or two with promise, the rest their court's discards. On our way, we stopped at Agunción, where we picked up two additional travelers, and from there we traveled to the coast, where we crossed the sea to Diel."

Enjul hadn't moved from his position by the window. The view of the Sea of Eyes was alluring, but that wasn't the reason he had chosen his spot. Sunlight enhanced the view of his bone breastplate: a reminder of who he was and why he was there, a reminder that one couldn't escape death. "You have explained your arrival. Perhaps it's time we concentrate on the reason I was summoned."

Serunje grasped his hands in front of his waist, the first obvious sign of nerves since Enjul's arrival. "I must remind you, Emissary, this is an extremely delicate matter. The death of a Sancian in Valanje is not a good way to begin a deepening of the relationship between both countries."

"You called me to investigate a suspicious death." *Malady* was on the tip of Enjul's tongue, but he held back. He must not put ideas into the other man's head. Enjul would look at the facts, then decide. His pulse thrummed at the possibility that Cienpuente's malady had truly arrived to his lands. Wishing did not make things true, he warned himself. He had warned himself of this many times since leaving for Diel. "I must know the details."

Serunje gave him a fast look, then focused on one of the paintings on the wall: Diel in all its glory, with the orange and pink farms, the richness of auburn and yellows on the buildings, the deep green of the sea and all the little ships anchored to its docks. And, of course, the brilliant blue of Anchor. "I barely believe it myself, but, Emissary, I would not have requested your help if the matter hadn't been this strange. As part of the envoy alighted from the boats, one of the

young women we met in Agunción turned to dirt right there on the docks.”

Ah. Enjul inhaled sharply. “You were witness to this?”

“I had already disembarked and was organizing the deckhands to take care of our trunks when the commotion made me look. All that remained of the woman was her clothes and a pile of green-brown dirt.”

Enjul took a step forward, and Serunje a matching step back. “Who witnessed this, then?”

“The woman’s younger sister was by her side, along with others from the envoy. The sailors from the boats bringing them from the ship were there as well as a few men from our guard.”

“May she not have fallen into the water? A trick of the light?”

“Everyone swears the woman was on the dock, then turned green and simply . . . crumbled.”

“A lie to push Valanje into a lesser position during these trade talks.”

“No, Emissary Enjul. The guards are loyal. Besides, there is no way someone could’ve orchestrated such a thing, paid all those witnesses.”

Enjul dared not hope, but hope rose anyway. “What is your explanation?”

Serunje tugged at his brown hair, gathered at his nape like a horse’s tail over his shoulder. “I wish I knew. De Mial has been demanding an explanation, so I requested your presence. I’ve kept the group here, isolated those I could.”

“De Mial?”

“The delegation’s leader, an ambassador with some status within Cienpuentes’s court. He is the reason we took on the two women. He grew affectionate toward the older sister while we rested and restocked in Agunción, and the sisters considered the trip some sort of adventure. From what I can tell, they had never traveled to Valanje before. Our envoy made for an alluring prospect—secure travels and engaging company.”

“And you allowed this?”

"I saw no harm to it. They were obvious locals, not spies sent to interfere."

"Is there a suspect?"

"None that I can discern. Everyone was shocked, and the sister, as you can imagine, was beside herself. She's been insisting on returning to Sancia, but I couldn't allow her to leave. She has been restricted to the guest quarters here for the time being."

"Did you secure the dirt and the clothes?"

"They await your inspection."

Enjul gave a curt nod of approval. "Go back to the incident. Describe everything that happened in as much detail as you can."

"We had taken the boats to one of the smaller docks. Myself and three of our escort alighted first. Another boat carrying Isadora del Arroyo—the deceased—and her sister, Azul, along with Ambassador de Mial and his sister as well as Nereida de Guzmán, another member of the envoy, began to disembark behind me. De Guzmán went first, I was told, then the younger Del Arroyo, followed by the elder. That's when it happened. I heard the cries, turned around, and found the pile of dirt and Azul del Arroyo digging into it. I called for order and for the guards to stop her, but . . ." Serunje frowned, as if recalling something unexpected.

"All the details, Rudel Serunje."

"When the guards took ahold of Del Arroyo and brought her away from her sister's . . . remains—no. No," he corrected himself. "She wasn't keen to keep by her sister. She was trying to return to the boat. It was De Guzmán who stopped her. Del Arroyo managed to free herself, but by then I was there. She demanded to return to Sancia, and when I told her she must stay until we investigated the situation, she addressed De Mial and begged for him to do something and allow her to return to Sancia."

"She would leave her sister's remains?"

"Her words were, 'Don't you want to see my sister again? Help me get to her bones.' Or something of the sort."

Enjul took another step forward. "Is that what she said? Are you certain?"

Serunje paled but stood his ground. “Yes, I’m sure of it. She was very distraught.”

Sharp satisfaction coursed through Enjul’s blood. He smiled, relishing the warmth it brought. “Tell me more about this Azul del Arroyo. How old is she? Is she from Cienpuentes?”

“She is about nineteen years of age. I do not believe the family comes from Cienpuentes, although I was told their mother spends most of the year away. The mother is said to be quite beautiful and earns her money as a surrogate. I asked about them before granting them permission to travel with us, naturally. They own a good house in Agunción, and don’t lack for money. The older sister is—was—known to enjoy the tavern and duels at dawn. Good with her rapier, I was told. The younger is never far away, although she doesn’t seem to participate in the sport.”

Serunje’s tone softened when he continued, “I had some talks with Azul del Arroyo on the ship. She’s a curious thing, eager to learn and travel but shackled by sisterly loyalty. I believe if it weren’t for her sister, she would’ve adventured into the world already. The older sister isn’t keen to travel, apparently. Wasn’t.”

Nineteen years. Enjul savored the morsel of age in his mind, intrigued and a little awed. Was that all it took to go against your gods in such an outrageous manner? How reckless the woman must be, how disgusted at everything the gods had to offer. Sancians, showing their lack of true faith once again.

“I will meet with her now.”

Serunje frowned at the hard edge of Enjul’s tone. “Emissary, she’s a distraught young woman mourning her sister. Be gentle, if you must talk. It would do us no good if she complains to Ambassador de Mial. Will you not talk to him first instead? Assure him we are doing all we can to investigate the situation?”

“Del Arroyo first.”

Serunje pursed his lips into a disapproving line, but spoke no further. Enjul followed him through the hallways and stairs of the building, disregarding the muted signs of comfort and riches surrounding

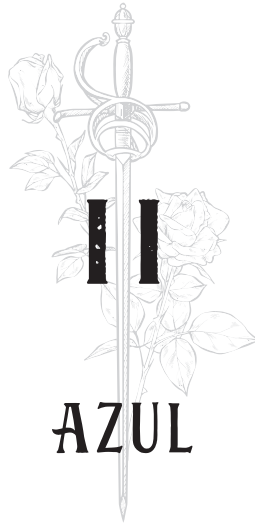
him, until they stood in front of one of the guest quarters. His gaze remained fixed on the door, anticipation rolling his insides. He allowed it, savored it—it did not come often.

First Serunje knocked, of which Enjul didn't approve. He wished to see the malady's reaction at their sudden presence, drink in its shock and surprise and fear.

Then Serunje opened the door, and the young woman—not a wraith or a string of flesh held up by brittle bones, as he'd imagined—stared defiantly back at them, dressed in a shirt and breeches too big for her, brown wavy hair loose over her shoulders and back, a single drop of Anchor hanging from one ear. He watched her brown eyes widen at the sight of him, and forced his not to do the same, forced the shock down his throat to simmer inside his gut.

Virel Enjul, Emissary of the Lord Death, had taken a good look at Azul del Arroyo, and the lands tilted on their Anchor stands.

For she had so much *life*.



Azul del Arroyo had once as a young child sneaked into the kitchen and stolen a piece of chicken. The wing had been delicious, the resulting bare bones a source of guilt. She had sought to assuage it by burying it in the yard—the bone, not the guilt, but perhaps both—and that’s when she had first felt the singing in her heart, the excitement, the *need* to follow this instinct to wherever it led.

So, she had let it happen, curious to see what would come of it. And something had slipped out of Azul—although she wouldn’t identify what until much later. The mud around her sunken hands had turned gray, the nearby weeds brown, as the chicken bone had grown other bones under her fingers. Bones and flesh and skin and *life*.

And then the animal had clucked, shocking Azul into releasing it.

But Azul had gone after it, caught this revived chicken, and brought it back to the kitchen. She meant to kill it and put it back in the pantry so nobody would notice her small theft. She had watched their cook prepare chickens plenty of times. She could do it. But the moment she had chopped its head off, the chicken’s flesh had turned back into dirt and its blood into mud, with not even the original bone to be found. The life Azul had given back on a whim, taken on another.

Azul had told no one, had rarely touched another bone until her favorite cat had run under a cart, until her pet snake grew hungry and then fell limp and unmoving. Until Isadora had died, aged fourteen.

Until now.

Because now she must go back to Isadora's remains—to Sancia and the ossuary keeping them in the city of Monteverde—steal one of her bones, and bring her sister back to life.

Any other option was unfathomable.

But they had locked Azul in a room in one of the huge buildings on the very top of the Anchor city. The room was big, comfortable, with wide windows opening into the valley, the sprawling city a sharp drop of three or four floors below. A cliff of a building, half carved into the mountain itself, even if there was no hint of Anchor in its bare, whitewashed walls.

A big bed occupied a corner near an empty brazier, and a delicate writing desk and upholstered chair graced the opposite side of the room. A wardrobe and a settee around a low table finished the ensemble. Her trunk had been brought in, but Azul hadn't touched it. Instead, she had chosen to dig into Isadora's, changing her dirty travel clothes for one of her sister's billowing shirts and a pair of breeches a tad too big for her slighter frame. Azul had forced Isadora's earring, saved from the pile of green dirt that had been her sister's body, into her own earlobe, discarding the simple hoop their mother had once gifted her.

"We can't accept their invitation," Isadora had said in an uncharacteristically curt tone.

"It would be a waste not to," Azul had mused, like she didn't quite care—as if, after so many years stuck around Agunción, the urge to explore the continents weren't an itch under her skin that had finally blistered open.

"How can we trust them?"

"They come from the Cienpuentes court. How can they not be trusted?" Sensible words. Smooth. Designed to pick at her sister's strange defiance of what was a perfectly sound plan.

"And how will we come back?"

"Diagol told me they'd arrange for guards to come back with us." Azul had kept her irritation under control, willing Isadora to come back to her normal self, to the sister who demanded crossing rapiers outside the tavern if anyone so much as looked at Azul the wrong way. "The route is well traveled. De Guzmán

was once the queen's lover—you've seen her, with her rapier and elegant shoulder plate. Nobody would dare attack her."

Still, Isadora had shaken her head. "I don't know, Azulita. It doesn't feel right, going to Valanje. Not while Mother is away."

Azul had smiled. "Mother said she would take us on trips, and where is she now? Having another baby. We've traveled before, Isadora. What's one more trip?"

"We've never gone that far."

"It won't be far once we're there."

"I don't want to go, Azul," Isadora had finally said.

And Azul had not listened. She had nagged until Isadora gave in. She had put her curiosity above Isadora's wishes.

She should have listened.

Servants came to bring her food, fill her basin, or empty the chamber pot. They refused to answer her questions or take messages. The guard posted outside would turn the lock after they were done.

How was she to make her way back to Sancia if nobody would talk to her? If she couldn't convince them to hand over the key?

Azul sat facing the door, playing solitaire on the low table and getting ready to shove the next visiting servant aside and try her luck with the guard, when the door opened, and Nereida de Guzmán appeared on the threshold.

Azul dropped her cards at her appearance, too surprised to hide her expression. "Sirese De Guzmán!" she exclaimed. At last, someone to be convinced.

Nereida de Guzmán, part of the Cienpuentes envoy to Valanje, watched her with something hard and cold and calculating gleaming in her eyes. A courtier's usual demeanor, or something else? Nobody had been able to explain exactly why she had joined Sancia's delegation, except perhaps as a sign of goodwill—here was a noble important enough to become the queen's lover, part of a Sancian family powerful enough to make things happen both in Sancia and Valanje.

Why was she here now?

Azul clenched her jaw but held on to hope that she might finally get some help. She had been holding on to too many things the last few

days—rage, composure, sanity—and would not fail now. Roughly stacking the playing cards into a pile, she retreated to perch on the chair by the desk and waved toward the settee.

“Please, come in,” she said, as if the woman were an honored guest and these Azul’s quarters.

Nereida sat on the settee with an innate elegance that spoke of wealth and status. It shone on her finely tailored breeches, the fabric of her white shirt, her exquisitely embroidered green vest, the bejeweled hair combs holding her long, curling midnight-black hair away from her tan face. No Anchor peeked from her hair jewelry—only silver and precious green stones.

Valanjians, they had been warned during the crossing of the Sea of Eyes, did not like overly ostentatious displays of mined Anchor. Being from the countryside, Azul and Isadora had been awed by the many heavy blue necklaces, Anchor-and-pearls bracelets, and ornate brooches adorning their traveling companions on the way over. They all rested in the depths of the nobles’ trunks now, as if being hidden under their shirts and linens made their existence any less damning to Valanjians.

What a shock to see De Guzmán now. Everyone else in the envoy had been friendly enough, but Nereida had shown no interest in the trip, her companions, a good talk, or anything beyond the edge of her upturned nose.

“Sirese Del Arroyo,” she said in that cool tone of hers. She turned slightly, her hand reaching for something by her hip but finding only empty space. Abandoning the quest, she focused on Azul. “You are being treated well?”

Unwilling to waste time with niceties, Azul leaned forward and asked, “Why won’t they allow me outside the room?”

“They are suspicious of the happenings at the dock.”

Azul’s nails dug into the fabric of her breeches. “My sister has died. They have no right to keep me a prisoner while I mourn.”

De Guzmán’s assessing gaze seemed to miss no detail, and Azul felt like a strange creature on display, an oddity that had caught some-

one's attention and must be studied and measured to see if it fit into a certain frame.

"A curious end, your sister's," Nereida said.

Azul had expected comments like this from the moment they brought her to this room and had prepared her answer. "An act of the gods." People were happy enough to blame the gods for all their misfortunes, even those who didn't think them real beyond their bones, so why shouldn't they bear this blame as well?

"Is that so?" Nereida asked, calm as the night sky.

"You were there the same as I was, Sirese De Guzmán. Nothing touched my sister. There was no assailant, no bolt or arrow. She just . . ." Azul squeezed her eyes hard, her voice failing under the weight of the fact. "She just passed on to the Lord Death's embrace."

"If there is anything . . ." A rare trace of hesitation entered Nereida's voice. "Anything you want to confess, I will not share it."

"Confess?" Azul inhaled sharply. Did the woman think she had murdered her own sister? Or . . . Cold sweat gathered on her lower back. Did Nereida suspect her secret? How? She had done nothing for years. How could this woman from the Cienpuentes court, so far removed from her and Isadora's life in Agunci6n, have any inkling of what she could do? No. De Guzmán was only digging around. "There is nothing to confess, sirese, and I don't want to speak about the matter any longer. I wish to mourn my sister in front of the Lady Dream, in Sancia, where she spent her life."

And if her voice hitched at that last word, she hoped Nereida de Guzmán hadn't noticed.

"They have sent for an Emissary of the Lord Death," the woman said.

Azul recoiled. "No! Why?"

No other god had emissaries; only Valanjians felt the need to represent the Lord Death with such zealousness.

Nereida's gaze drifted around the bland room until it fell to the stack of cards on the low table and the crude design on the front of one. Isadora had drawn it when she first won the deck on a dare. Oh, how they had laughed at Isadora's lack of artistry!

“Why an emissary?” Azul insisted through the lump forming in her throat.

“They want your sister’s death explained.” The maelstrom of disgust and dread curling Azul’s stomach was nowhere to be seen on Nereida’s expression. She might as well be a piece of flesh-colored Anchor—cold, beautiful, and above mundane concerns such as death. “They will keep us here for a few more days while the emissary conducts their investigation.”

Azul burst out of the chair. “They can’t do that!” She paced between the screens separating them from the bed to one of the windows looking onto the fields and the forest and the mountains. To the screen. To the window. Finally, she whirled toward the settee.

“Sirese De Guzmán, can’t you do anything?” she pleaded. “I need to get back to Sancia. To Monteverde.” To Isadora’s bones. To Isadora. To the end of the dread eating her from the inside out that would only be satisfied when her sister was standing in front of her, alive and safe. “Surely they can’t simply hold us as long as they please? You’re an official envoy, do something.”

Nereida held her gaze, unfazed by her desperation. “There are more important matters involved in this visit than your sister’s death.”

Azul felt slapped. The Del Arroyo name was solid enough, but Isadora and Azul by themselves had not enough value to risk whatever negotiations the envoy had been sent to secure. If one of their half siblings high in Cienpuentes politics had come with them, would her wishes have carried more weight?

Azul lifted her chin. “What is it, then,” she asked, “this matter that is so important?”

The door opened, and the outside guard appeared. “Your visit must come to an end now, miss.”

Nereida stood, giving the cards a last lingering look. “The Anchor ban.”

With those words she exited the room, leaving Azul to punch the mattress until the burning rage had spent itself and dispassionate composure filled its place. Let the emissary come, she dared the city



sprawling under her windows. She would deal with him. What could he find but a strange accident of nature? An act of the gods? People did not turn into dirt. Azul would answer his questions, charm him if needed, then talk her way into freedom.

For could she not bring the dead back to life? She could also make this fanatic of death acquiesce to her will.