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DREAMLESS

JEN WILLIAMS



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor, The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 YC43

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Designed by Jen Edwards

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Williams, Jen (Fiction writer) author

Title: The dreamless / Jen Williams.

Description: First U.S. edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2026. | Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 13–18

Identifiers: LCCN 2026019101 | ISBN 9781250409317 hardcover | ISBN 9781250409324 ebook

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy | Love triangles | Gods | Ability | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.W54635 Dr 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026019101>

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Originally published in the United Kingdom by Pan Macmillan

First U.S. Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

❖❖ PROLOGUE ❖❖

At the beginning of all things

THE CROWS KEPT UP THEIR RUSTY CLATTER, ONLY growing louder and more insistent the deeper the two of them ventured into the sea of hawthorns.

It didn't bother the child. Very little did. Brishta, god of the dawn, balance and all things that shone, paused to hold a branch out of the way for him as they made their way down the narrow, twisting path. He had picked something up off the ground and wasn't looking where he was going, so intent was he on examining it. She smiled fondly.

'What have you got there, Tython?'

'I don't know, Mama.' He held it up for her to see: a small glossy brown object spotted with leaf litter. 'Isn't it fine, though?'

'Ah, it's a horse chestnut. Or a conker.' She looked around, but could see no such tree, just the twisted shapes of the trees that flooded *his* domain. A shadow threatened to pass over her heart, so she plucked the conker from her son's hand as they walked. Overhead, the clouds were dark and low, and she

pictured the two of them as the crows might see them: a woman of golden hair and golden armour, and a boy with skin like polished marble—two points of light in a gloomy landscape. ‘I wonder how it got here. They’re the seeds of the horse chestnut tree, and, I agree, they are very fine.’ The conker shone extra brightly in the palm of her hand, seemingly the only thing in that landscape with any light to it. ‘There’s a game you can play. Perhaps your father can show it to you. Or I could. You pass a thread through the middle, and then you strike your conker against another’s, until one breaks.’

‘Wouldn’t that spoil it, Mama?’ He looked up at her, concern on his face, and in an instant the shadow in Brishta’s heart was back. For a horrible, razor-sharp moment, she teetered on the edge of tears. He was perfect. Such a beautiful, kind-hearted, perfect child. He was everything they had hoped he would be, everything the child of two gods should be, and yet . . .

Brishta squeezed the conker tight in the palm of her hand, focusing on the little knot of pain it produced, and forced herself to smile. As she did so, the sun briefly appeared from between the clouds.

‘It’s just a game, Tython. If we find a conker tree, you’ll see, there will be hundreds of conkers to play with.’

‘But this one feels precious,’ he said, taking it back as she held it out to him. Brishta slid a hand over his golden head, his hair as cool as silk between her fingers.

‘Yes,’ she agreed, looking at him. ‘It does.’

They continued in silence for a little way. It was possible now to see the dark towers they were heading towards, their needle-fine points disappearing into the cloud overhead. It was so different from her domain. Where Brishta lived, the sun soaked all things, and the sky was thick with birds of all

colours. Here, there were only crows, and hawthorn trees, and a growing sense of dread.

‘What is this place, Mama?’

‘I told you, darling, remember? This is the domain of one of our brother gods. We’re going to pay him a visit. And ask him for a favour.’

‘Oh.’ He opened his mouth to say something else, but instead a cough ambushed him, deep and rattling and too big for his small frame. The boy bent double with the violence of it, and she held him until it passed, her own heart thudding sickeningly in her chest.

No, she thought fiercely for the thousandth time. He is a child of gods! I will not stand for it.

When they reached the threshold of the first and largest tower, they paused. The lintel was hung with dried herbs, giving the air a spicy, medicinal scent that set Brishta’s nerves on edge. Up close, it was possible to see that each giant block of black stone that formed the towers was covered in fossils: bones of things long dead pressed into an eternal stillness. Tython ran his fingers over them. The skin around the boy’s eyes was dark with exertion, and tiny beads of sweat marked his forehead.

‘What are these things, Mama?’

‘Don’t worry about them. These are just how my brother chooses to decorate his domain.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Now then, Tython, I want you to be brave for me. Can you do that? Remember, even when there’s darkness all around, the light is still with us.’

The boy nodded. Brishta went to knock on the door, but it swung open before her knuckles could make contact. Inside, there was a vast chamber of grey stone. The walls were lined with tall figures carved from yellowed bone, their arms crossed

over their chests and their eyes shut. Each head brushed the ceiling. In the centre of this open space, there was a simple red chair and on it sat a hooded figure. A long bone-coloured beak protruded from its cowl.

‘Sister,’ said the figure. The Hooded Crow’s voice was warm. This, Brishta knew, was the last thing mortals expected from the god of death, medicine and herbs. ‘I receive so few visitors. How good it is to see you, and young Tython there.’

The boy was pressed against her legs, terrified.

‘I want you to look at him.’ Brishta had intended to sweet-talk the crow, to exchange the usual godly pleasantries of the Twelve, but all at once she couldn’t stand to wait any more. This had been hanging over them all for too long. ‘He’s not himself and I . . . I want you to look at him.’

She propelled the boy forward, too aware of how the pair of them stuck out in this strange, silent room. She was wearing her gold plate, so bright and glittering even in the gloom, and the boy, even diminished as he was, shone like a freshly minted coin. The Hooded Crow was a thing of dust and shadows, and when he stood to meet them—looming much too tall—Brishta felt some of her own courage falter.

‘Mama . . .’

‘Just be still, Tython. For me.’

A long bony hand emerged from the Hooded Crow’s sleeve, and although he didn’t touch the boy, his fingers drifted through the air directly over his head. Within the hood, Brishta could see the faintest suggestion of two black eyes, wet and lidless.

‘Well?’

The Hooded Crow hesitated.

‘Perhaps you should send the boy away for a moment . . .’

‘No. Speak it. Tell me.’

There was a beat of silence, and in it Brishta could hear the crows calling again.

‘He is dying,’ said the Hooded Crow. ‘But you knew this, sister.’

‘Then take it back. Make it stop.’ Tython pressed himself to her legs again, making a small noise of anguish, but she had no time for it. ‘This is your domain, isn’t it? This is your power, isn’t it? He’s a god. A child of gods. How can he be dying? How can he even be ill?’

The Hooded Crow shook what passed for his head. ‘Some things are bigger even than us. You are the god of light, Brishta, but you can’t knock the sun from the sky.’

‘What does that even mean?’ She was raising her voice and frightening Tython, but she couldn’t stop herself. ‘He is perfect. How can he be dying? *Why?*’

The Hooded Crow looked again at the child. To her growing fury, she sensed he was trying to be kind.

‘It is in the nature of some things,’ he said eventually. ‘It is his fate, you might say. Even the gods don’t stand outside the realm of fate, sister.’

She swore loudly then, the forbidden word bouncing around the walls of the Hooded Crow’s sanctum like a trapped bird. Tython was very still; she could tell that she’d briefly startled him out of his fright.

‘It is his nature,’ the Hooded Crow repeated. ‘I cannot change it.’

‘Then I will.’

Brishta knelt and wrapped her arms round her boy, burying her nose in his hair and breathing in the scent of him. He was so thin, so fragile, and it made her want to squeeze him all the tighter. It had to be possible, she thought, to squeeze this fate out of him, like poison from a snake bite. The Hooded Crow was watching her carefully.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked warily.

‘I am a god,’ she said tersely. ‘I will change him.’

‘That’s not within your power, Brishta. Your realm is that of light, the dawn, of beginnings and hope.’

‘*Beginnings* and *hope*,’ Brishta spat. ‘What use are those things if they cannot save him? No. I can change him.’

‘Change him?’ For the first time, the Hooded Crow sounded irritated. ‘How much will you have to change him to save him, sister? At what point will he stop being Tython?’

The boy shivered in her arms, as though rousing himself from a deep sleep.

‘Mama,’ he said, ‘can we go home now? Don’t be upset, please. I feel quite well—’

‘Quiet, Tython.’ Her arms coiled round him tighter, holding him still. She lifted her head to address the Hooded Crow. ‘If you won’t help him, you useless old bird, I will do what I have to do.’

‘And what of your husband? Do you think that the god of purity will approve of what you plan to do to his son?’

‘Trilot will do anything to save Tython.’ As she spoke the words, Brishta realized she didn’t really believe that—there was a coldness to her husband, a shard of clear glass deep inside that would cut before it would break. And what she planned to do would strike against everything Trilot stood for.

‘Brishta—’

‘Enough. We are leaving.’

She shunted Tython towards the doors, which were still standing open, looking out onto the dense landscape of thorns and cloud. As they left, the giant bone figures by the walls turned their heads to follow their progress, and behind them she felt the regard of the Hooded Crow, those lidless black eyes judging her. She vowed then that she would cause trouble for him one day, somehow—a little shard of gratitude for his refusal to help, and his judgement. It was an easy promise to make to herself.

When they were outside again and the doors had closed behind them, Brishta took her son's hand and squeezed it, giving him her brightest smile. The boy regarded her warily.

‘Mama, what is happening?’

‘Never you mind. Come on. Let's see if we can find another conker to match your first. Then we can play.’

❖❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖❖

THE MOON WAS AS BRIGHT AS ELVER HAD EVER SEEN IT, a perfect silver coin in the night sky. She felt the back of her neck prickle as they skirted the path to Sunay's cottage; anyone could see them if they cared to look. She imagined Maura's acolytes hiding behind the tall forms of the chestnut trees, and her poison blood teemed in response.

'There aren't any lights on,' Lucian said quietly. 'I don't imagine Sunay to have the sense to sit in the dark.'

'She's more sensible than she looks.' She glanced at him, picked out as he was in tones of silver and grey. He wore Artair's face, handsome and serious, with a long straight nose and the slash of a scar through his eyebrow—and Artair's body—tall and lean and broad-shouldered—but, as ever when Lucian was home, he moved and spoke like a different person. *Because he is a different person*, she reminded herself. He was sharper somehow, his movements more precise. He'd taken to wearing his hair pulled back in a tail too, making him look sleek and contained.

When they reached the door she rapped on it with her knuckles, wincing at even this soft noise. Somewhere in the trees behind the cottage—where the real temple of Tisk the trickster god waited—an owl hooted as if in response.

Nothing happened. There was no sound from inside, and no lights blossomed into being beyond the windows. Elver eyed the sign on the door. It said: *Sorry, Tisk is closed for business! See you soon!* A fox had been painted under the words in gold.

She knocked again, a touch louder. When Sunay failed to materialize for a second time, Lucian sighed—a little dramatically, in Elver's opinion. She slipped her hand into her pocket and found the conker she had picked up the first time they had visited Sunay's little cottage. Then, she and Artair had been desperately seeking help from a mage in the hope that an illusion spell could outwit Maura, and the shiny chestnut had reminded her of home. It still gave her that warm feeling of comfort.

'She said she'd be here. She said she had something to tell us.'

'She is a mage dedicated to the god of lies,' said Lucian. 'I'd take everything she says with a pinch of salt.' His tone was sarcastic, but she saw him look over his shoulder at the dark behind them. He was worried too.

'Whether she's here or not, we need to get inside.' Elver put her shoulder to the door, and gave it a sharp shove. The cottage was old and she suspected the lock wasn't in the best shape, but she still felt a little shiver of mingled fright and satisfaction at how easily it gave way. Since the Queen of Serpents had replaced Elver's heart—giving her, technically, her third attempt at life—she was stronger than she had once been.

They stepped inside, the shop bell jingling into the dark. Around them, the various wares of Tisk's temple glinted in the

moonlight coming in through the windows. Moving quietly, they searched the cottage—the cosy little room where she and Artair had once drunk tea with Sunay, the chaotic kitchen, the upstairs rooms. One of these had a number of god-tithes hanging from the ceiling, and she noticed Lucian thinning his lips in recognition; of course, he had been bound and locked in this room, once, before the three of them had formed their uneasy truce.

‘The magpie isn’t here,’ he said needlessly.

‘There must be something wrong. Or she was delayed.’ Elver thought of the mage and the young keltraxia cub, out in the night somewhere. ‘Still, we know this place is safe, right? We can at least sleep here, and wait for her a little while.’

Lucian gave a sceptical snort at the idea of sleep, but otherwise didn’t comment.

Elver made tea in the cramped kitchen, then brought it up to the bedroom that looked out over the path. Lucian was standing by the window.

‘I could use magic to find out where they are.’

Now it was Elver’s turn to snort. ‘That has worked well for you so far.’

He gave her a sharp look. ‘It will work eventually, monster girl. I can feel it, burning under my skin.’ He held up his hands, and in the darkness she could see a faint red glow around them, like the embers of a dying fire. The colour of it—red as blood—made her think of Prideful Leap, where she had been forced to stand in a pool of blood to be sacrificed to a god. Mother Maura had intended to take that power for herself, to knock the Bloody Claw from his place amongst the Twelve, but the power had been split, part of it siphoned instead into Lucian. Now, the Bloody Claw’s essence coiled within him, hot and unstable. And unusable, it seemed. ‘I just need to . . . I just need to figure out how to use what my lord gave me.’

Elver shrugged and sat cross-legged on the bed, a cup of tea cradled in her hands. ‘Sure. Knock yourself out. But draw the curtain first. You’ll light this place up like a beacon.’

He drew the curtain—a little more tersely than was necessary—and sat on the other side of Sunay’s wide, plush bed. He cupped his hands in front of him, and the red light that moved restlessly over them grew brighter, bathing his face in a ruby glow.

‘How do you know what to do?’

‘I don’t,’ he snapped. ‘That’s the problem. When I was a mage, before I was trapped in this idiot monk’s body, I asked my god for boons, and provided the tithes he required. Then the power would be mine.’

Elver narrowed her eyes at him, but he was too busy looking at the ruby light. Once, *she* had been a tithe for the Bloody Claw, and it had been Lucian who had delivered her to that fate.

‘Now, though,’ he continued, ‘the power is already here, inside me, but it is . . . unwilling to do what I wish. It’s like it doesn’t recognize my right to use it.’

‘That power is used to being inside a giant lion made of stolen flesh,’ said Elver. She took a sip of her tea. ‘It’s probably wondering how it ended up inside a stringy teenage boy.’

‘Stringy?’ Lucian looked up at her, one eyebrow raised, and she felt her cheeks turn pink. ‘I’ve seen how you look at this body, Elver. I don’t think “stringy” is the word you’d really use.’

She turned away, glad that her face was hidden in shadows. What would Artair say if he heard that?

Lucian continued talking. ‘I suspect you’re not far off, though. I need the power to know that it is rightfully mine, and it should obey my commands. Without the tithe granting me validation . . .’

‘What? Do you need to sacrifice things to yourself now?’

He ignored that. Instead, he brought his hands slowly apart, pulling the red light between them like raw wool on a spindle. Threads of magic began to circle in the gap he’d created, and shadows coalesced between, forming a tiny whirlpool of light. Shapes almost like figures began to appear.

‘It’s working.’ He spoke through gritted teeth.

Elver shuffled closer, her tea forgotten. It was like looking into the surface of a dark pond, where the reflections were painted in blood. She almost believed she recognized the shapes that moved there—surely that lithe shape was Fleet—but it was confusing, stormy. Lucian, meanwhile, was shaking with the effort. Tiny beads of sweat had popped into being on his forehead.

‘Be careful,’ she said. When he didn’t respond, she reached out and touched his knee. ‘You know what happened last time.’

‘No. It’s *working*. Look. Can you see?’ He grimaced with the effort. ‘Can you see where they are?’

‘I can’t even tell if it’s really them. It’s too messy, Lucian.’

‘Wait! No, gods damn it . . .’

The whirlpool of magic blinked out of existence, plunging them into the dark, and Lucian pitched forward, all the strength gone from him. Elver, slopping her remaining tea over the bedspread, grabbed him with her free arm and shook him by the shoulder. For a dangerous moment, his eyes were unfocused.

‘Lucian! Are you alright?’

He placed his hand over hers and held it there. Since he had recovered his memories, her poisonous touch no longer revealed the ones Maura had taken from Lucian before casting him out of his own body. It meant that this kind of casual touch from him was more common, a fact that quietly pleased her.

‘I’m fine,’ he said. His voice was hoarse, as though he’d been shouting for hours.

‘Every time you try to use the Bloody Claw’s power, it wipes you out.’ She realized she sounded angry. ‘It’s dangerous.’

‘Better I try it, then, when I have you here to look after me, monster girl.’ He dropped her hand and stretched out on the bed, his feet sticking out over the end. Sunay was a good foot shorter than Artair. ‘I don’t understand it. When we were in Prideful Leap, I summoned that portal as easy as breathing. But now when I reach for the power it’s slippery. Like trying to mould water into a shape with your hands.’

‘What was different then?’ Thinking about that time gave Elver a slightly cold feeling. When Lucian and Artair had passed through the portal, they had been carrying her body.

‘I don’t know. We were all about to die? I only know that I had a control that I don’t seem to have now.’

‘Maybe humans aren’t meant to have this power,’ said Elver. ‘And if you’re struggling with it maybe that means Maura is too.’

Lucian raised his eyebrows.

‘Gods, let’s hope so. We need every advantage we can get.’ He sighed. ‘If I had my own body, my old body, perhaps the magic would respond better. The monk is no mage. Perhaps the Bloody Claw’s power knows it, and is insulted to find itself in such a place. I know I am.’ He yawned hugely. ‘Gods, I’m knackered. I need to sleep.’ He gave a bitter laugh at that. ‘What passes for sleep for me, anyway. You should rest too. We’ve been walking for hours.’

‘I will in a bit.’

He lifted his head. ‘You’ll force yourself to stay awake. For *him*.’

‘Artair needs to know what’s going on.’ It was too dark to

see the expression on his face, but she could feel Lucian's disapproval like brushing her hand against the thorns of a blackberry bush. 'Go to sleep. We'll keep watch.'

For a second, it looked as though he might say something more, but in the end he let his head drop to the pillow.

A few moments after that, Artair opened his eyes and sat up carefully. All Artair's movements were careful, considered: the movements of a person who had spent much of his life training his body with exercise and meditation. It was one of the ways she told them apart.

'We're at Tisk's place? Where is Sunay?'

'That's the question, isn't it?' She put her tea down on the bedside table and shuffled a little closer to him. 'No sign of her or Tisk. It could be she's just been delayed somewhere, or Fleet has caused trouble. That's what he's good at, after all.'

'She said she had news.' Artair's hand drifted to the cord holding his hair back, and he tugged it free with a little flicker of irritation. His dark brown hair fell loose to his shoulders.

'Lucian tried to find her using the magic, but . . .' She lifted her hands and then dropped them. 'It almost looked like it was going to work for a second.'

Artair stood up from the bed and moved over to the window, his movements as graceful as ever. Elver tried to ignore the little shard of sorrow that blossomed in her chest. When she had returned to them from the sea at the edge of the shadow realm, she and Artair had kissed under the trees. The memory of it was still incredibly vivid to her—the softness of his lips, the scent of his body, the sheer warmth of him—but to Artair it almost seemed to have never happened at all. She wondered now if he'd only kissed her because moments before he'd believed her dead, and if, now that they were back in the world, travelling together, he realized he'd made a mistake. And who

could blame him? She thought of her new strength, her new powers. She grew stranger by the day.

‘I wonder what it was she wanted to tell us.’ Artair used one finger to pull the curtain back a few inches and a slice of moonlight touched Elver where she sat on the bed. He stood up a little straighter. ‘Elver, there’s a light by the trees opposite. It’s moving.’

She joined him at the window. Sure enough, almost dwarfed by the glow of the moon, there was a small yellow light moving at around the height someone would carry an oil lamp. Her new senses prickled: an awareness of danger, sharper than a hunch and less familiar—this was how a monster in the Jih Forest felt when they caught scent of a human. She shivered, trying to ignore the sensation.

‘It’s them,’ she said, already backing away from the window. ‘Shit, how did they find us again so quickly?’

‘You’re sure?’

‘As sure as I need to be to say we have to get out of here now.’

But he was already gathering his things up from where Lucian had left them. Elver grabbed a pencil from Sunay’s desk and wrote a few words on a scrap of paper—where they might go next, where Sunay might meet them.

‘If you leave that here, they’ll just find us again. You could hide it, but . . .’ He looked around at the shelves full of junk that lined every wall. ‘She might never find it.’

‘I’m not a complete fool, Artair.’ She pursed her lips. The truth was, she’d had an idea, and the moment it had formed in her head it had become irresistible. And that sudden need to act frightened her.

On one of the shelves there was a small plant growing out of a pot, a slightly sickly-looking thing with tiny green leaves.

Elver slid the rolled-up scrap of paper into the soil from which it was growing.

‘What are you doing?’

Elver hesitated. She had used this strange new ability a couple of times now; every time, it was exhilarating, frightening, and slightly out of her control.

She touched a finger to the dying plant. ‘Grow,’ she told it. ‘Change.’

At once, the plant did as she commanded. The tiny leaves grew long and glossy, and fresh buds burst into life, opening fleshy pink and purple blooms; each flower had a spiky green tongue. Elver knew from looking at it that no plant exactly like this had existed before. This was perhaps the strangest of the Queen of Serpents’ gifts, and the most alarming. It was like flexing a new muscle; it felt satisfying, yet the sight of the newly jih plant frightened her deeply. Her god had told her that she would be less human than ever, but she hadn’t thought to mention that she’d be changing the world around her too.

What did the Queen of Serpents do to me? What has this new heart got to do with it all?

Artair’s hand brushed her arm.

‘Are you okay?’

She forced herself to smile past the fright. ‘I’m fine. Although I think it was easier when my touch just poisoned things.’

‘It’s a good idea. Sunay will certainly know you’ve been here when she sees it.’ He looked back towards the window, and the moment passed. ‘We should hurry.’

❖❖ CHAPTER 2 ❖❖

IT WAS ALMOST EXACTLY THE SAME AS IT HAD BEEN BACK then. Almost. This was the thought that had haunted Maura since she had arrived in her own godly realm.

The little brick house sat at the back of the field, ringed by the wonky fenceposts Maura's husband had made, the crooked chimney pointing towards the mountain that loomed behind it—this was before the mountain had been shattered in a magical war, pulverizing the little brick house into a pile of rubble and horror. When her home had been real, they had planted all kinds of things in the field—beans, peas, carrots, daffodils, even corn—joking that eventually they wouldn't have to go to the village for food at all. Now, in this strange, broken domain, the field grew only grass. When she woke in their old bed—because she still needed to sleep, despite her supposed god status—the space next to her was always warm, as though her husband had just slipped out of it. Sometimes, she found herself lying there with one hand resting on that faint, warm patch, watching the door. *Any moment*, she would tell herself, *he'll come back in. And he'll be holding them in his arms.*

She stood by the front door, looking out across the grass. The other clue that this wasn't the home she had lived in thirty years ago was the way the world faded to nothing beyond the field. A mist began at the fenceposts and then grew thicker and thicker until there was simply a wall of white. The only thing that existed beyond her home was the mountain, a fact that caused her to smile bitterly—of course the mountain would be here. There was never any escaping it. Not for her.

The high merry sound of children's laughter floated over the fenceposts and Maura felt her whole body go tense. The laughter of children should have been a sweet sound, it should have been a treasured memory, but somehow it felt like a threat.

She turned away and headed back inside, closing the door firmly behind her.

When she had been a mage dedicated to that charlatan Tisk the Trickster, she had done much of her work in a small room just off the kitchen, and that was still there, her ratty old desk taking up most of the space, bunches of dried herbs hanging from the windowsill so that she could always smell mint and sage while she worked. And now she was a god, this was still where she spent much of her time.

She sat down at the desk, running her fingers over its scratched surface, and sighed. They were waiting for her. She could feel it.

'Speak.'

At once, a tiny human figure appeared on the desktop, no taller than the span of her hand. It wore practical travelling clothes and a red hood, on the back of which had been embroidered two white circles, one sitting within the other—this was the sigil her followers had chosen for her. It meant 'Mother'.

The tiny figure offered up his tithe: a scrap of paper, child-

ish words written upon it in thick crayon. It appeared briefly in front of her—the child who had written the note had scrawled: ‘The Mother blesses us all with her love’—and then shivered out of existence. She gestured to him to continue. A woman in his village was worried about her son, he told her, who had married a girl who wasn’t, in her opinion, good enough for him—was there anything the Mother could do?

Maura nodded, and reached out a hand to the figure, touching the top of his hooded head with the tip of her finger. There was a faint glow as the magic he’d requested passed to him, and an answering shard of pain blossomed in her chest.

When that mage disappeared, satisfied, another appeared in his place, and again she accepted the tithe, listened, nodded and granted the power. Again, her heart seemed to try to pull itself apart when she did so.

By the fifth mage, she felt a thin layer of sweat break out across her brow and back, and a dark little smile visited her lips. She was a *god*, one of the Twelve, and all this power cost her was agony and exhaustion. She had always thought that the tithes were what the gods fed on, a kind of spiritual food, yet when she consumed the offerings her mages brought her, she felt nothing at all—they certainly did nothing to cancel out the pain of giving away her power.

When her fingers began to tremble, she stood up from the desk, breathing hard. There were still supplicants waiting, their fierce need grasping at her like the small, sweaty hands of children, but she had nothing left to give—not without a rest, at least. Instead of retreating to her old bedroom, though—with that faint, ghostly warmth on the mattress—she went to another door. This one had never existed in their old house, and when she stepped through it, she found herself standing on a bleak shore, under a bone-coloured sun. This was the space

between the mortal realm and the shadowed lands, the place where the gods could be summoned.

‘I want an audience.’ When the wind snatched the words away from her mouth, she raised her voice. ‘I demand you speak to me! Any of you. Or are you afraid?’

The twelve totems poking out of the surf glistened in the pale light, the silver sea surging around them. The axe that had once represented the Bloody Claw had finally fallen into the water, lost to view, but the others were still there: the shining trident for Trilot the Faceless; the mirror of black glass for the Queen of Serpents; a clay heart for the Threshold; a smiling wooden mask for Tisk the Trickster, painted all over with autumn leaves. Her own totem, the toy bear that had once belonged to her youngest, was still missing its pearl button eyes.

‘Well? Are any of you brave enough to face me?’

The wind surged, blowing her long white hair across her face. When she’d impatiently pushed it back out of her eyes, several strange figures had appeared on the shoreline. One of them at least was unmistakable to her; his orange beard and sharp eyes spoke too strongly of the fox for him to be anyone else.

‘Mother,’ said Tisk, granting her a quick grin that promised both merriment and violence. ‘Struggling with godhood, are we?’

The others just stood watching her, and Maura had to fight against the feeling of superstitious awe that threatened to overwhelm her. These were them, the other gods. Not all of them; no Hooded Crow, she could tell that at a glance, and no Queen of Serpents, but a handful of the others. Here was a figure that had to be Lady Dusk, the god of divination, endings and secrets; she was a tall, willowy woman dressed in owl feathers, a beaked cap on her head covering her long dark hair. Next

to her stood a woman with blue skin and three heads, all facing different directions, and beneath her voluminous skirts the toes of six feet poked out—Enos, the god of sleep and dreams. Standing slightly apart from those two was a broad, handsome man with a beard of fire, which had to be Barleycorn, god of the hearth. Strangest of all was a floating cloud of wolf heads, every set of glowing yellow eyes trained on her. This, she assumed, was the Pack. Maura cleared her throat.

‘I am one of you now. There’s no denying it. I have my own domain, and I can gift my power to the mages dedicated to me, just as the Bloody Claw did to me, once. Just as Tisk did, once.’ She threw him a barbed glance. ‘I see so much. I know so much. And I feel it.’ She pressed a hand to her chest, where the boiling heat of the Bloody Claw’s stolen power waited, just under the surface. She wanted nothing from the gods, after they’d failed her for so long. Yet she had to ask. ‘But using this power pains me. It exhausts me. Why?’

‘You know why,’ said Tisk.

‘That boy has the tiniest fraction of my power,’ she snapped. It was infuriating that Lucian continued to vex her, years after she had cast his soul from his body. ‘A pathetic little scrap, thrown to him by a dying idiot. *I* am a god. *He* is a mistake. I must be doing it wrong.’

‘You misunderstand.’ Lady Dusk’s voice was soft and not without kindness. ‘You are no true god. Not while you’re incomplete. In this moment, you are a broken vessel. The tithes do not feed you as they feed us, so every boon you grant saps your strength.’

Maura closed her hands into fists. ‘What do you mean, *I am no god*? I’m here, aren’t I?’ She pointed to her totem in the surf. ‘The Mother stands as one of the Twelve. The people know it. The people worship me. They love me.’

‘Ah, the people. Whoever thought it was a good idea to listen to them?’ Barleycorn laughed. ‘Even the good ones are fools at heart. Show them a new, shiny thing and they’ll flock after it, thinking it will solve all their problems, even when their problems are things they’ve created for themselves.’ He chuckled fondly, shaking his head, then fixed her with a look that wasn’t remotely friendly. ‘You’re a fad, woman. You won’t last.’

‘This is all beside the point,’ said Tisk. He walked out of the surf, slipping into his fox form as he did so with a flash of orange light. ‘I tried to tell you before, Mother, but listening was never your strong suit. While Lucian has that piece of the Bloody Claw’s power, however small it is, you are a half-formed joke of a creature. You are just a vessel for the power, not a thing wrought from the power itself. So you can use it, you can pour it out of yourself, that power, but it is *not you*. Do you understand?’

Maura said nothing.

‘You can feel yourself dying.’ This was Enos, her three mouths speaking as one. ‘I see it in your dreams, Mother. Every time you use your power, you’re pouring a little piece of yourself away with it. It terrifies you.’

‘Nonsense.’ Maura took a step away from the shoreline. It was growing colder, the wind at her back picking up. ‘You lie!’

‘You feel nothing when you consume the tithes, am I right?’ Barleycorn asked, then grinned when she didn’t respond. ‘I’m right.’

‘Take the power back from the boy and you will be complete,’ continued Enos, ‘and you will be one of us. As much as that may sting us.’ All three pairs of eyes glanced at Barleycorn, who was no longer smiling.

‘There is another path,’ said Tisk, his tail twitching.

‘And what is that?’

‘Renounce this nonsense. Give up your godhood. Return to being human and live out the rest of your life. You already know that this power can’t give you what you want. Give it up.’

‘She won’t,’ said Lady Dusk quietly.

Tisk continued as though the other god hadn’t spoken. ‘If you carry on down this path, Mother, blithely passing out your power to every mage that asks, you will fritter away your godhood and eventually become nothing. Less than nothing. You’ll die. Are you listening to me?’

Maura looked away from the fox to the silver horizon. Sometimes, when she was in the field outside her little house, she saw the ghostly shapes of children beyond the fence, running and laughing, chasing after each other. They looked to be made of the white mist that lay beyond her domain, and she couldn’t see their faces, but she knew what they were. They were her madness given shape, and every day they drew a little closer to the house.

‘I shouldn’t be surprised that you won’t help me,’ she said. ‘I’ll always be an upstart to you, an interloper. But I *will* have what I want. Think of all that I have done already . . .’ She looked at each of the gods in turn. From the unsettled looks on their faces, she knew that they were thinking of how their brother the Bloody Claw had died, choking on a poison sacrifice she had fed him. ‘Ask yourselves if you’d rather have me as a friend or an enemy.’

With that, she turned and walked away from the shoreline, heading towards the door to her kitchen, which still stood on the sand, a window onto another world.

Back at her workworn desk, she summoned Dalesh. The woman appeared, her red hood thrown back and her shoulders

squared. Of all Mother's mages, Dalesh was the bravest, still able to face her without flinching, perhaps because she had known Maura the longest.

'They got away again, Mother,' she said. 'We tracked them to the Temple of Tisk, but they were already gone.'

Maura curled her lip at the mention of the fox's name.

'Never mind that. Dalesh, my firstborn: from now on, you will be my chief mage. You are the only one I will grant my power to. Through you, I will enact my will. All other mages must stand aside.'

Although the figure was tiny, Maura could see the woman raise her eyebrows.

'It'll be my honour, Mother.'

'Instruct the priests to continue with the production of the tithes—it could be that they will still come in handy.' She took a deep breath. 'But for now I will gift you my power directly, from my heart to yours. You, Dalesh, will be my right hand. And, daughter, we have a lot of work to do.'