Dreams of Ruin

SOUL OF SHADOW: BOOK 3

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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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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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www.wednesdaybooks.com

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The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-34302-4 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-250-34303-1 (ebook)

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First Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ÄLVOR—thimble-size, gossip-prone fairy whose song is perilous to humans

BIFROST—the rainbow bridge that connects all eight realms

DRAUGAR—undead monsters with skeletal forms

DÖDSSTEN—the death stone; a gem that opens the gate to Helheim

JOTURRI—a subspecies of giant whose soul exists in two forms at once

MARE—human turned to creature of shadow; servant of Loki; giver of nightmares

MJOLLNIR—name of Thor's legendary hammer

RAGNARÖK—the prophesied destruction of Asgard

THE SEAL—the invisible barrier between Earth and Asgard; tethered to Odin's spear, Gungnir

VALKYRIE—powerful winged female warrior; servant of Odin; carries those fallen in battle to eternal rest in Valhalla

VÄTTE—tiny gnomes who are drawn to humans of exceptional bravery; giving them a name solidifies the magical tether between human and vätte

VITTRA—ugly, bad-tempered, goblin-like creature of the forest

WILL-O'-THE-WISP—small spirit of the dead that carries a green lantern and can lead travelers astray

WIVES OF THE FOREST:

- ASH WIFE (askafroa)—protector of the great world tree; one askafroa lives inside each ash tree
- WOOD WIFE (skogsroa)—mistress of the forest; appears as a beautiful woman with hooves for feet but can disguise herself as any tree or animal

YGGDRASIL—the great world tree upon which hang all eight realms

LIST OF THE GODS

(According to Loki)

ODIN—~~the Allfather~~ "His Royal Self-Righteousness"

FRIGG—~~goddess of beauty and song~~ "Her Royal Frosty Bitch"

THOR—~~god of thunder~~ "god of idiocy"

LOKI—~~god of mischief and trickery~~ "the best and most handsome god"

BALDER (*deceased*)—~~most pure and kind of the gods~~ "the nepo baby"

HEIMDALL—~~protector of the Bifrost~~ "Ol' Rainbow Eyes"

HOD—~~the blind god~~ "Ol' No Eyes"

FREYJA—~~goddess of love and battle~~ "Scary as Hel. Respect."

FREY—~~god of royalty and agriculture~~ "I think he has something to do with plants."

Prologue



THIS IS THE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF the Allfather.

For millennia, chaos reigned over the eight realms of Yggdrasil. The dwarves warred with the elves. The giants warred with the trolls. The Vanir of Vanaheim warred with the Asgardians of Asgard. All wished to rule, but none could seize enough power to do so. Battle after battle brought destruction down upon the realms.

And the spirits of nature took notice.

The spirits—wood wives, ash wives, vittra, älvor, the merfolk in the seas, and so on—exist in almost every realm, in any place where plants grow and water flows. As the wars raged on, the spirits could do nothing but watch as their homes were destroyed, until every river ran red with blood.

One day, a traveler appeared. He emerged from nothing, as if created by the whispers that followed in his wake: tales of an old man in a hooded cloak with one eye and more wisdom than they'd ever encountered. They said he had seen all eight realms. That he knew their histories by heart. That to obtain those stories, he had carved out his own eye. His name was shared on hushed, reverent tongues:

Odin.

The warring species took little notice of these whispers. What

did they care for an old, weary traveler telling tall tales? He posed no threat.

But that old, weary traveler had done something no one had even considered to attempt: he'd visited every realm, not to infiltrate or lay siege, but to learn, to observe, to truly *understand*.

And the spirits of nature took notice.

As fragile as they might seem compared to the trolls or giants, the spirits of nature are not to be trifled with. They are cunning and tricksy and have access to something no one else does: the wild magic of Yggdrasil.

The great world tree is not just the force that holds the realms together; it is a source of immense power. Wild magic hums in its roots, races up its trunk, flows through every uncountable branch. It courses out into all eight realms. It lives in everything—every rock, every tree, the smallest flower petal or the thinnest blade of grass. It is the great connector of the universe. The unseen force flowing through everything, at every moment. While some species possess lesser magics—such as the ability of the dwarves to craft weapons and other items that defy the laws of nature—none can dip into the raw, fathomless well that is Yggdrasil.

None but the spirits of nature.

Only a little at a time, of course, and only in accordance with their individual abilities. But after centuries of destructive war, they decided to do something they'd never done before: to use their combined powers to bequeath one man with the ability to access Yggdrasil's wild magic. And for this, they chose Odin.

The spirits didn't gift him the magic directly. Even if they could have, they would never have done so. They didn't trust any one being to hold the vast power of wild magic—even one as trustworthy as Odin.

Instead, they used their combined power to create a throne.

The throne was made from the ash wood of Yggdrasil. It is far more than a chair. It is a living thing, a seat of power that moves

with whoever lays claim to it. With a wave of their hand, they can sink the throne into the earth, allowing it to rise only when they reach their next destination. It enables the ruler to move their court at will—a necessity, given the attacks that would follow once the warring species learned of the throne's existence.

"The Throne of Ash grants you access to the vast depths of Yggdrasil's wild power," the spirits told Odin. "Including everlasting life. When you sit upon it, you will be the first being to become a god."

They paused, letting the gravity of their words sink in.

"All we ask for in return is your promise to bring peace and order to the eight realms."

Odin dropped to one knee before the spirits and swore an oath.

When he was done, they invited him to sit upon the Throne of Ash.

Odin ascended the steps of the massive throne, holding his head high. Slowly, he turned and lowered himself into its seat.

Around him, the world sprang to vivid life. The grass became greener. The trees grew taller. Flowers of every color blossomed at the throne's base. Vines shot up from the earth, curling around the antler-like branches jutting up from the throne's back and sprouting thorns and honeysuckle and ripe bloodred fruits.

Odin smiled, knowing the glorious display was solely for him and that with Yggdrasil's wild magic now at his fingertips, he had finally become a god.

Part II

THE COURT OF THE UNDEAD



1



CHARLIE HUDSON WASN'T READY TO WAKE up.

Not if it meant leaving this sunlit haven filled with beauty and goodness and possibility and peace. She'd watched Odin take his place on the throne with the satisfaction of someone who had worked all her life for precisely that end. As he'd settled in, establishing his connection to Yggdrasil's endless supply of power, she'd felt an unquestionable sense of *rightness*.

Something she hadn't felt in a very long time.

She sighed, rolling over under the covers. It had been so long since she'd had a good night's sleep. One without nightmares or waking up in a cold sweat. One that actually left her rested. But this sleep . . . mmm, *this* sleep had been delicious. Far from a nightmare, her dream had been like a movie. She'd witnessed every step of the Allfather's journey to the Throne of Ash—the wars, the bargain with the spirits of nature, the ascension thereafter. Nothing could top that final image: a flowering meadow teeming with wild magic.

Wild magic. Even the *words* were beautiful, though she didn't fully understand what they meant.

Maybe, if she didn't open her eyes, she wouldn't have to return to the real world, with its tests and homework and dangerous creatures lurking in the forest. Maybe she would drift back to that delicious meadow.

"Come on," she whispered, burrowing deeper into her pillow. "Why'd I have to wake up *now*?"

"Charlie?"

What the Hel?

What was her brother, Mason, doing in her room? His voice was more hesitant than normal, softer. He never came in to wake her up.

Reluctantly, she let her eyes flutter open.

Mason was sitting beside her bed, his light brown hair and small collection of freckles so familiar. For some reason, she felt disappointed, like she'd been expecting someone else. And why did Mason look so weirdly concerned?

"Morning," she said, voice hoarse. Gosh, how long had she *slept*? "Did Mom send you in here?"

Mason's eyebrows rose in surprise.

She scrunched her nose. "And what is that *smell*? Are you wearing a new cologne?"

His eyes darted back and forth, searching her face for something. What, though? An answer to whether she liked his new cologne? Well, it wasn't the *worst* thing she'd ever sniffed—sort of metallic and coppery, as if he'd sprayed the essence of nickels and pennies on himself. An odd choice. Mason smelled . . . well, he smelled like confusion.

What the Hel am I even saying?

She shook her head, focusing back on her brother. After searching her face, he must have decided that he didn't like what he found, because his forehead tightened as if he was in pain.

"What?" she asked, pushing up onto her elbows. "Look, the cologne is weird, but it's not that bad. If you're worried what Lou will think, we can get you a new—"

Her voice died in her throat.

She wasn't in her bedroom.

She wasn't even in their *house*.

The room in which she'd awoken was actually quite nice, with a queen-size bed covered in numerous quilts, a padded rocking chair with a stuffed penguin set onto it, a worn purple cabinet, and a wooden floor partially covered by a woven rug. But nothing about it was familiar.

"Where are we?" she asked, glancing out the window. All she could see was a cloudy October sky and a few tree branches waving in the breeze. "What happened?"

Mason's forehead tightened further. "You . . . don't remember?"

"Don't remember what?"

He bit his lower lip, glancing around the room. As he did, his cologne seemed to alter somehow, taking on a heavy, halting sort of scent, like that of leather or velvet. Somehow, Charlie knew it was the smell of hesitancy. There was something Mason didn't want to tell her.

What nonsense, she thought. *I'm clearly still half asleep. Emotions don't have smells. You can feel them, or you can see them on the face of another person, but you can't* smell *them. Not unless you're a . . .*

A . . .

With alarm, her eyes dropped to her body.

Her legs were covered by a quilt, and she was dressed in a cotton tank top she'd never seen before. And her arms . . .

Their shape was just as she remembered: lean muscle from years of training in the circus and a few scattered freckles. But what frightened her were the long, round cords that now circled them.

Cords made of shadow.

The shadow cords were perhaps an inch in diameter and had the consistency of thick clouds. They didn't touch her skin, instead floating a few millimeters away, though they were clearly bound to her body. They started at the base of her palm and wound all the way up to her shoulders, drifting slowly in a counterclockwise direction, like snakes winding up a tree. And when she jerked her arm to the side, the shadows followed.

They looked just like the cords that Elias often conjured.

Elias.

With that one word, everything came back to her: The camping trip. The party. The fight with Rattatosk. How they won, actually *beating* him. Except Elias had been hurt. Slashed by Rattatosk's claws laced with deadly venom. He'd collapsed to the forest floor, and when Charlie realized that he was dying, the whole world had become a tunnel. Her surroundings blurred, and she could see nothing but that tunnel's end, nothing but the goal of keeping Elias Everhart alive. It was as if she'd become possessed.

She and Mason had dragged Elias's dying body all the way to Helheim. She'd used her magic—more magic than she'd known she was capable of—to teleport them from the state park in northern Michigan all the way back to Silver Shores. Then they'd used Elias's dödssten to portal to the underworld. They'd run through a maze, faced down undead wolves, and ridden skeletal horses all the way to the Palace of Hel. Once there, she'd lifted the bodies of Mason, Elias, and the helhests using only magic, easy as anything, and stormed Loki's great hall.

Dread seeped into Charlie's stomach. "Mason," she said slowly. "Where is he?"

Her brother didn't need her to clarify who she meant. "Elias is fine. Loki's blood healed him of Rattatosk's poison completely."

Charlie exhaled. A small relief, even as those shadows around her wrist seemed to flicker and writhe. "And how long have I been asleep?"

Several seconds passed in silence. The dread rose higher, reaching for her throat. Mason was looking anywhere but at her.

"*Mason*," she repeated. "How long?"

Able to put it off no longer, he said, "Three days."

Charlie inhaled sharply. "Three *days*?"

He nodded. "Technically a little longer, I think. I don't know. Time is weird in Helheim."

Her heart hit the bottom of her stomach.

In Helheim.

They were still in Helheim.

She didn't know why she had let herself hope otherwise. Sure, the light outside looked like the sky on Earth, not the hazy orange of Helheim, but this was Loki's palace. Anything could be bewitched.

Slowly, she lifted one of her shadow-wrapped arms. "And these?"

When she glanced at Mason, his eyes were almost pleading, as if begging her not to make him say it.

But she needed him to. She needed to hear it spoken aloud, even if, in her heart, she already knew. She knew, and she wished she could un-know. Wished she could turn back time, erase the truth, pretend that she wasn't what she was. But nothing in all eight realms could change the words that came out of her brother's mouth next:

"You're a mare now, Charlie."

2



GHARLIE FELT AS IF THE WHOLE WORLD had tilted sideways. The mattress vanished. The blankets fell away. The floor became the ceiling, and the ceiling became the floor. Her body was suspended in midair, or maybe she was falling.

You're a mare now.

That was it. That was why Mason had been acting so funny. That was why she could smell things she shouldn't be able to smell. She was a mare.

She remembered everything now. Pledging herself to Loki. The Trial in the arena. The pain. A disembodied voice. The gray hillside lined with everyone she loved. An impossible choice that she'd made without blinking. A brief moment of victory. Gungnir slipping from the rings of Yggdrasil. Her consciousness being carried through its infinitely long branches. A pile of unconscious kids at the edge of Muspelheim. Surtur—*Odin, Odin is Surtur, Surtur is Odin*—standing over them. The final return to her body. And then . . .

Nothing.

Three *days* of nothing.

And now she was lying in some stranger's bed in the underworld. No longer human. Or . . . no longer half-human, anyway. She'd survived the Trial. Except . . .

Her emotions should be gone. They should be dammed up

behind a wall of darkness, her morals and conscience evaporated to nothing. That was what happened when you became a mare. But when she looked inside herself, she wasn't numb. She didn't find the cold detachment that Elias had described. The total lack of humanity. She found everything she had expected to find in that moment: fear, apprehension, curiosity, dread . . . even a bit of wonder. They were all there. Every emotion she'd possessed before the Trial, still up and running.

All at once, the room righted itself. The bed was beneath her. The walls and ceiling were in their proper places. Charlie was awake and upright, sitting on a remarkably comfortable mattress, soft sheets tangled around her legs. She blinked twice, bringing her brother's face back into focus.

He watched her carefully, as if she were a wild animal that might attack at any moment.

What had happened while she was asleep? Had Loki finally explained the truth about their family to Mason? Had Elias returned to his duties as a mare? And back on Asgard . . . was their mom safe? Their friends? Gods, she and the boys had made a mess of that state park. Fifty feet of forest destroyed, a dead monster lying in the brush, three more missing teenagers. The school must be frantic. Their *mom* must be frantic. And Lou and Abigail—she didn't want to think about how distraught her best friends must be. They were the only ones who knew the truth about what had happened in those woods. She could only hope they'd found Rattatosk's body before anyone else could.

As if Mason could read her mind, he said, "I don't know anything. When you collapsed after the Trial, Loki and I brought you to Elias's room so that he could heal you with his mare powers. I didn't even know that was a thing he could do."

"Heal me?" Charlie wrinkled her forehead. "Was I injured?"

"Not physically. Psychically maybe? I don't know where the Hel you went when you pulled the Seal out of Yggdrasil, but it was

awful to watch. One minute, you were completely fine, cheering about having completed your Trial. The next, Gungnir came out, and your whole body just seized. Joints locked up, eyes rolling back in your head, arms and legs vibrating. It was some serious *Exorcist* shit, Char. No joke."

She bunched the quilt up in her fist, squeezing tight. *I don't know where the Hel you went.* Well, she did. She knew *exactly* where she'd gone: to Muspelheim, where she'd learned that everything she'd ever read about the gods was a lie.

Odin, the supposedly benevolent Allfather of the eight realms, was really a joturri—a subspecies of giant whose soul existed between two different forms. Even worse? Odin's second form was Surtur, the lava-breathing monster destined to destroy Asgard—aka Earth, aka the home of every single person she loved.

"Elias did whatever he did to heal your mind, and once you were stable, Loki brought you here, to his personal apartments." Mason gestured around the bedroom. "This room is yours for however long you're here. Mine is next door. Honestly, this place is pretty sick. There are three bedrooms, a huge kitchen-slash-living-slash-dining-room situation, and a pantry stocked with all the snacks a guy could ever want. And . . ." He leaned back in his chair, grinning. "No calculus homework." A wistful sigh. "Also, no Xbox, though."

Charlie rolled her eyes, pushing herself back to rest against the headboard. "If we're still in Helheim," she said, nodding to the gray light filtering in, "why does that look like Earth's sky?"

"It's some kind of magic. *A special design request of mine, when this place was first built*. That's what Loki said when I asked." Mason shrugged. "Guess he wanted to feel like he was back on Asgard, not trapped in the underworld." He looked out the enchanted window, sighing. "Not that I've had a chance to ask him details. After he helped bring you here, he bounced. I haven't seen him since."

The god of mischief that Charlie had seen sitting on his throne

presiding over the spirits of Helheim had been callous, aloof, and careless—completely different than the man who had embraced her and Mason before the Trial and promised to explain everything. This information did nothing to tell her which of those men was the real Loki. She would need to spend time with him and decide for herself.

"Interesting," she said finally. "And Elias? What did he say when he visited?"

Mason's eyes dropped to his hands. "He, uh . . ." He tugged on the fabric of his pants—a pair of loose black joggers that he hadn't come to Helheim wearing. He cleared his throat. "He hasn't visited. Not since he carried you here after healing you."

Charlie went still. "You mean three days ago?"

Her brother nodded, glancing up at her.

"That's . . ." She hated how her heart fell then. Maybe she shouldn't have gotten her hopes up, but after everything that had happened between them in the week leading up to her school's Outdoor Education Trip, and everything that had happened during, she'd thought things were different now. She'd thought they were friends. *Real* friends, not just two people bound together by chance and a strange attraction they couldn't seem to get rid of.

"I'm sorry, Char," Mason said, and she was surprised by how sincere he sounded. "I may not like the guy, but I know you . . . care about him." He seemed to select those last words carefully.

"Yeah," she said, feeling unsettled. "Yeah, I do."

Maybe Elias had tricked her into thinking he felt something real for her, again. And maybe she'd been a fool, again.

The thought was enough to make her want to scream.

But no, she wouldn't jump to conclusions. Not until she had the chance to look him in the eye and decide for herself.

"In better news . . ." Mason brightened, scooting his chair closer to her bed. "You seem like yourself. Not humanity-less, I mean."

"Yeah." She glanced down at the shadows ringing her arms,

holding back a shudder when they were still exactly where she'd left them. "I . . . I still feel like myself. I don't know how, but I do."

And yet . . . there was something else, too. Something new. When she *really* looked inside herself, *deep* inside, she could feel it. Something heavy. Something thick and black and constantly moving, quivering, like the surface of a bubble. Or perhaps it was a cloud? Or a dark, pulsing heart? She didn't know. Frankly, she didn't *want* to know. Whatever it was felt dangerous. *Hungry.*

And she had no interest in feeding it.

The Seal will create a second being within you. A being made only of shadow.

That's what Loki had told her before the Trial began. That if she faced down Gungnir and proved herself strong enough to handle the shadows, she would be gifted those shadows to hold within herself. But the *thing* inside her . . . it didn't feel like a second self. It felt contained. Caged, somehow.

Had she felt this thing inside her when she'd first awoken from the Trial? She couldn't remember. Too much had been happening. She'd felt exhausted but elated, fearless but terrified. Fearless because she'd made it through an ordeal that had claimed the lives of many before her, terrified because of what that disembodied voice had said just before returning her to her body:

The bringer of Ragnarök, here at last.

There could be no mistaking the meaning: the voice believed that the prophecy of Ragnarök was about her. That *she* was the one who would bring about the destruction of Asgard.

The voice was wrong. It had to be. Charlie had no desire to destroy the realm that contained everyone she loved. And what did some random disembodied voice know about her, anyway? Nothing—that's what.

Still, she'd been proud when she made it through the Trial alive. Proud as she heard the crowd erupt into cheers, Mason, Loki, and Henry in the front row . . .

"Henry," she blurted, head snapping up. Fear flashed through her, quickly followed by shame that she hadn't thought about the vätte sooner. "Where is he?"

She glanced wildly about the room, but there was no one else there. *Impossible*. Her tethered vätte was always at her side. He couldn't bear to be away from her, nor she him. If she'd been out for three full days, he would have been with her the whole time. And if he'd left for any reason, he would have sensed her returning to consciousness and sent her a message. An **AWAKE?** or **UP NOW?** or **I COME, SEEING YOU SOON**. But she'd received nothing. She *felt* nothing, as if there were an empty hole where Henry's tether should have been.

"Mason," Charlie said, her voice rising in panic. "Mason. Where's Henry?"

Mason laid his hand on her wrist. "He's okay. Take a deep breath. He's alive."

She squeezed her eyes shut, blowing air through her tight lips. "Alive. Thank the gods." Charlie opened her eyes and looked at Mason. "Where is he?"

"Actually . . ." Her brother stood, walking to the foot of the bed. He nodded toward the floor. "He's right here."

Charlie crawled to the end of the bed and peered over the side. There, in a newborn-size bassinet, was Henry. His pointed red hat was pulled down over his eyes as always, and his chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. Soft exhales fluttered the strands of his tiny white beard. There were no shadows around him, thank the *gods*. Maybe her becoming a mare hadn't changed him, the way she feared it would.

"Henry," she said softly, reaching down and tickling his belly. "It's me. You can wake up now."

He didn't stir. His beard continued to flutter with each exhale.

"Henry?" She frowned, shaking him gently. "Wake up." Her heart began to pound. "*Wake. Up.*"

Henry's beard rose and fell, steady as ever. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't waking, either.

She looked at Mason. "What's going on? Why won't he wake up?"

He looked just as confused as she felt. "I don't know. He's been asleep this whole time. We assumed he would wake up when you did."

Panic clutched at Charlie's chest. She was awake, but Henry wasn't. What did that mean? Had her trip to Muspelheim drained him as much as it had her? Maybe that was it. His body was so tiny compared to hers. It must be harder for him.

Their minds were still connected, though . . . weren't they?

"Henry," she whispered, laying her palm on his chest. "I'm awake now. It's time for you to wake up, too." She let out a ragged breath. "Please. Please wake up, Henry."

He didn't even stir.

And something inside Charlie broke in two.

"Hey." Mason rested a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think he's gonna wake up right now, Char." He squeezed lightly. "Why don't I make coffee while we wait? You must be dying for some caffeine."

Charlie hesitated, considering his question. Ever since Charlie turned fifteen and started drinking coffee with her mom every morning, it was the first thing she wanted when she woke up. After sleeping for three days, she should be craving it more than ever. She should need a cup or twelve before she was even functional.

Instead, she felt perfectly fine.

It's not that coffee sounded *bad*. Quite the opposite. She could picture the mug in her hands, warming her skin, the toasted chocolatey scent filling her nose. She just didn't feel like she needed its energizing effects.

I can sleep when I want to, but I never really get tired anymore.

That's what Elias had told her the night they stayed up till dawn training her magic. She'd needed plenty of coffee and energy drinks, but he hadn't needed anything at all.

And now, neither did she.

Because she was a mare.

A freaking *mare*.

Even thinking the word seemed to stir that strange darkness inside her. Making it froth and roil, pushing up against whatever barrier was keeping it contained.

Nope, she thought. *Not today, Satan.*

She looked at Mason. "Coffee would be great."

He gave her a small, worried smile and made for the door.

Once he was gone, Charlie collapsed onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. Henry wouldn't wake up. Mason looked like he was waiting for her to spontaneously combust. And somewhere within Charlie, a dark *thing* resided. Subdued but watching. Waiting. She could tell that it was powerful, and if she didn't keep it on a tight leash, it might put a leash on *her*.

She hated it.

But what scared her more than anything was the tiny voice in her head that whispered that she didn't.

She didn't hate it all.