

THE GODDESS OF THE UNDERWORLD
THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM VIII

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Chapter 1

Raine opened her eyes.

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

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

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

slowly drifted back into unconsciousness.

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

Weynild.

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

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

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

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

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

The demon was infuriated. The arrogance of this one would not stand. "You're going to get what's coming to you very soon."

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

"The Goddess will rape you, and when she is through with you, she will give you to us."

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

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

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

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

The demon leaned closer so he could catch the words.

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

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

Chapter 3

The third time Raine awoke, there was no comfortable period of memory loss. She knew exactly where she was as she stared up at the alien stars. Her limbs were once again heavy and her body was very, very cold. She sensed something else in the room, something far more dangerous than that foolish little demon, something of which she was genuinely afraid.

The Goddess moved to where Raine could see her, flowing with a malign and sensual grace. She stared down at her captive, the glittering emerald eyes assessing the chiseled features, the dark blue eyes, the clenched fists that corded the forearms, further emphasizing the blue and gold markings that stood in bold relief on that lovely skin.

“You know,” the Goddess said casually, “I thought that I would be able to wait.” Her hand drifted down to the muscular leg that lie partially exposed from beneath the robe. She stroked the skin, that mesmerizing combination of firmness beneath softness that was irresistible. Raine looked away from her, desperately trying to maintain control.

“I thought I would be able to defer my pleasure, to delay my gratification.”

The hand drifted upward, moving beneath the robe as Hel settled onto the bed beside her. “But I was wrong.” The hand settled between Raine’s legs possessively, causing Raine to stifle a gasp. It did not move as the Goddess continued her casual conversation.

“Did you know that Arlanians can be forced to climax against their

will?”

Raine stared up at the stars. “It is well-known,” she said through clenched teeth, “that even the most inept lover can make an Arlanian come.”

Hel would not allow her to distance herself from the doomed, beautiful people. “Can make you come,” she reminded her. The hand moved ever-so-slightly and Raine muffled a moan of anguish as the Goddess continued, “and you and I both know that I am not an inept lover.”

This last was a pronouncement of Raine’s fate as the hand began its gentle stroking.

“Look at me,” Hel commanded, and Raine obeyed. Despite the immobilizing control the Goddess was exerting over her, her hips twitched beneath the softly stroking hand. Hel felt the beginnings of the response, and saw the dark blue eyes begin to fleck with violet.

“Ah, there we are.”

And Raine understood what the Goddess was doing. The blue and gold markings on her arms were slowly fading. All of her strength, all of her will, every part of her that was Scinterian was disappearing into the violet of her eyes. Had Hel taken her forcefully, it would have triggered a response that would have kept her Scinterian side at least present. But this gentle, skilled seduction was terrible. Everything that was strong in her was dwindling until only the Arlanian remained. And Hel knew it.

“No,” Raine said, turning her head away.

“Oh yes,” Hel said as she reached down and turned Raine’s chin back to face her. The stroking of the hand continued, but it had done its work. The purple of those eyes was fabulous.

The hand stopped, and Raine knew that her fate was sealed. The Goddess leaned down to kiss her.

For Hel, the touch of those lips was extraordinary. Those who had never experienced an Arlanian before had no idea the ecstasy these creatures produced. Their smell was intoxicating, the taste of their skin was delightful, just touching them produced pleasure so profound that lesser beings might climax instantly. But Hel was not a lesser being and her hands went beneath the robe as she continued the kiss, her tongue probing deeply. She would not risk removing her own robes, for her nipples were already straining the silken confines of their bodice. There would be plenty of time for

that later. No, this was about something else.

Raine bit off another moan that was part anguish, part pleasure. The kiss moved to her neck and throat area while the hands caressed her breasts and stomach. Her hips betrayed her as they sought to press against the Goddess, and it was only Hel's restraint of her that kept her from doing so. The kiss traveled down to the breasts, toying with the nipples, playfully suckling while one hand moved back between her legs. Hel enjoyed the coolness of the Arlanian's skin, which although had warmed with blood flow, still was pleasantly cold. The kiss trailed down the ridged muscles of the stomach, the lips feathering the taut muscles there.

Raine looked down at the progress of the head, knowing that all was lost. Hel sensed her captive's imminent defeat, and looked up to give her one last triumphant stare. And then she bent her head back down, and those lips settled on the soft, throbbing wetness beneath her.

Something inside of Raine exploded and she saw stars, although not those on the ceiling above her. The tongue and lips of the Goddess were merciless as the mouth drove her to orgasm. The mouth was hungry, rapacious, and either Hel had released her control of Raine or Raine had overcome it, for her hips thrust and writhed upward at the Goddess' command. The climax was endless, wave-after-wave of crushing pleasure, every muscle in her body straining to sustain the peak until at last a final peak crashed down upon her. This final wave satisfied her and perhaps saved her, because she might not have stopped until her body ripped apart.

Hel smiled and wiped her mouth on the silken sheets. She had forgotten how good Arlanians tasted. She glanced up at the sleeping, angelic face, her prisoner having already slipped back into exhausted sleep. This one was even stronger than she had anticipated; even wounded she had managed a climax nearly unmatched in Hel's considerable history.

"You are mine now," she whispered.

The Goddess stood, enjoying for a moment the sight of her conquered enemy lying naked in her bed. She composed herself, thoughtful.

Faen, on the other hand, was flabbergasted as he stared from the shadows of his alcove. By all that was dark and unholy, what had that been? He had expected violence, force, humiliation—not whatever that was. His Mistress had not even climaxed herself, merely pleased the woman. He examined Hel. Although, he had to admit, he had never seen such a look

of satisfaction on his Queen's face before. He turned his attention back to the prone figure and smiled wickedly. Now this would be good.

The Membrane floated in from the balcony. The creature was a horrific amalgamation of body parts: breasts, vaginas, phalluses, testicles, anuses, mouths, and lips, all sexual organs that continually kissed, licked, sucked, and penetrated one another. The monstrosity, made up of souls whom Hel had cursed or whom the creature had seduced, was in a state of continual, painful orgasm. It was drawn to sexual energy, and it hovered above the comatose figure in the bed in a frenzy of anticipation. Lips smacked, a phallus grew erect, nipples hardened, and the abomination sought to settle upon its prey.

"No!" Hel said sharply. She had caught sight of the creature out of the corner of her eye. "You will not touch her."

The Membrane whipped about in agony, but it would not dare disobey the Goddess. It darted to-and-fro, then flitted out onto the balcony from which it came.

Hel turned to her Chief familiar.

"No one touches her," the Goddess commanded. "No one but me." The comatose figure in the bed shivered slightly, and her skin had taken on a bluish hue at the presence of the Membrane. Hel waved her hand imperiously and flame exploded in every sconce, bowl, decanter, lamp and alcove in the room. A spiral of hundreds of lit candles surrounded the bed, and the room was awash in flame as the flickering light cast ominous shadows on the wall.

"And keep her warm," she said dismissively as she left the room.

Faen stared after his Mistress in stunned disbelief. He turned to the despised figure in the bed, trying to fathom this unprecedented series of events. His only saving grace was that the Arlanian was unconscious, and therefore could not hear how right she had been.