

DADDY'S LITTLE GIRL

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At first, I didn't recognize the land around me. Blackened ash and burned stumps covered the earth as far as I could see. Saplings and weeds proved at least a year or two had passed since the devastation, but it was a far cry from the thick wilderness I remembered.

"I think he's waking up."

I started to turn around, then froze when I spotted the ruins. Crumbled bricks lay scattered to one side of a broken, six-sided foundation. In the remains of the doorway, I could see huge iron hinges bolted to the floor. The trick entrance was only one of the traps I had designed for Tarzog the Black while he tormented me with false promises to free my wife and son. I had barely eaten or slept for almost seven years as I worked to perfect his temple to Rhynoth, the Serpent God. This was my masterpiece, broken and scattered.

I rubbed grit from my eyes, then stared at my hands. The skin was pale, pulled tight around the bones like dried leather. My nails were cracked and yellow. When I poked my palm with one finger, the indentation remained for almost a minute.

I was bare-chested, dressed in rough-spun trousers and my old sandals, though the straps had been replaced with thin ropes. I pressed a sickly yellow hand against my chest. My heart was still as stone. I had always wondered why Tarzog's dead slaves took their resurrections so calmly. Now I understood. Whether it was a side effect of the magic or my mind's way of rebelling against what had been done to me, I felt nothing but a strange sense of detachment. Looking at my dead body, I felt like a puppeteer staring down at a particularly gruesome marionette.

"I *told* you I could do it."

The speaker was a young girl, no more than seven or eight years old. She wore a dirty blue gown and a purple half-cape with a bronze clasp in the shape of a snake. Behind her stood a slender, dark-haired woman, the sight of whom made my dead balls want to squirm up inside me and hide until she went away.

"Zariel," I said. Tarzog's necromancer looked far more ragged than I remembered. Gone were the night-black cloak of velvet, the silver claw rings decorating her left hand, and the low-cut leather vest. Her skin was rougher, her hair grayer, and she wore a simple traveling cloak lined with dirty rabbit fur. To tell the truth, she smelled rather ripe, and that was coming from a corpse.

"What happened?" I asked. My memories were blurred, full of gaps. Another side effect of being dead. To my surprise, it was the little girl who answered. "This wasn't the *real* temple. Daddy built the real temple about half a day's walk from here, in the jungle."

I stared, trying to understand. "Why would he . . . ?"

"Prince Armand knew about Daddy's plans to summon Rhynoth. So Daddy built this place as a trap. When Armand and his men finally got to the heart of the temple, Daddy was going to collapse the whole thing on their heads. But Armand and his men showed up early. They burned Daddy in his own temple, along with anyone they found wearing his crest." She touched the bronze snake at her throat.

Was that how I had died? No, I would have remembered fire. Death had been quick, but quiet. I clutched my stomach, recalling the pain of my insides twisting into knots. I had a vague memory of stale

raisin pudding, even worse than our usual fare. I remembered dropping my spoon . . . “He poisoned me!”

“Of course he did. Daddy poisoned everyone who worked on his temple. That way only he knew all the secrets.”

If he had killed me . . . Tarzog was too smart to let my wife or son go after that. He wouldn't risk them coming back to avenge me. I closed my eyes and fought despair. Gradually, the rest of the girl's words penetrated my grief.

Daddy. I stared. “You're Tarzog's daughter. Genevieve.”

“Jenny.” She smiled and nodded so hard her blond hair fell into her face. I remembered her smaller and pudgier, a wobbly child with a miniature whip she used on trapped animals, imitating Tarzog's overseers. According to rumor, her mother was a slave girl who had abandoned the newborn baby and tried to flee. She had been caught, executed, resurrected, and gone right back to working on the temple.

“We should go,” said Zariel. “This place isn't safe.”

Jenny stuck out her tongue. Had anyone else done it, Zariel would have had their eyes for a necklace and their tongue for a snack. But Zariel simply turned and began walking.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the other temple,” Jenny said, rolling her eyes at my stupidity. “I'm going to summon Rhynoth, and then we're going to destroy Armand and his people. They all helped kill my daddy, so they can all rot in Rhynoth's belly.”

I stood, barely hearing her words. I kept seeing my family, dead and forgotten beneath the rubble. No doubt by Tarzog's own hand. He was never one to delegate that sort of chore. Without thinking, I lunged forward and wrapped my withered gray fingers around Jenny's fragile throat.

The next thing I knew, I was flat on the ground, a good fifteen feet from Jenny and Zariel. Jenny folded her arms.

“I should kill you for that, but I worked hard to resurrect you. Zariel's been teaching me.” She flashed a gap-toothed smile. “Do it again, and I'll make you rip out your own innards with your bare hands.”

I wiped ash and dirt from my palms. Jenny's magic had shattered several ribs, and the bones ground against one another as I stood. Fortunately, death seemed to have minimized my ability to feel pain. One thing was clear: Jenny was definitely Tarzog's daughter.

We had walked more than an hour before I worked up the nerve to speak to Zariel. This was a woman who had eviscerated children and sacrificed whole families to maintain her power. But I had to understand what was happening if I was to have any chance of stopping them.

“Why did she resurrect me?” I asked.

“You designed the first temple,” Zariel said. “Tarzog followed the same plans for the real one, including all of your traps. If you get us in, Jenny and I can conserve our power for more important things.”

Jenny's power. I touched my ribs. “I didn't realize she had that kind of magic.”

“I'm still a beginner at death magic, but I got all of Daddy's serpent powers when he died,” Jenny said, running back to join us. “I've even got the birthmark of Rhynoth. A snakehead, just like Daddy's, with fangs and everything. I'd show you, but it's not in a place you're supposed to show to boys. Not even dead boys. The prophecies of Anhak Ghudir say only one with the mark of Rhynoth can awaken him from his endless sleep.” She tugged Zariel's robe. “Did you remember the blood?”

Zariel sighed and drew a small, glass tube from an inside pocket.

Jenny turned to me and made a face. “I have to drink the heart blood of a virgin to control Rhynoth. Zariel has to use magic to keep it from getting clotty and clumpy.”

I nodded, remembering how Tarzog had scoured the countryside for virgins in preparation. At first he planned to drain the blood of a few babies, but further reading ruined that plan. The spell required an adult virgin, and those were harder to find than you might expect. Especially once word got out that Tarzog needed virgins. I imagine the midwives were plenty busy the next year. “So which one of you found a girl to—”

“No girls, silly,” Jenny said, chewing a hangnail on her thumb. “They always have lovesick boys who try

to rescue them. I had Zariel kill a priest. They're celebrate—"

"Celebrate," Zariel said, her voice pained.

"Yeah, celibate. All we had to do was find one who had taken his vows before he got old enough to mess around."

Zariel slapped Jenny's head, hard enough to make her stumble. "How many times have I told you to stop biting your nails?"

I glanced around. We had left the scorched remains of Tarzog's land behind and entered the rocky wilds that surrounded Frelan Gorge. Tall pine trees cooled the air, while tangled roots fought to cling to the uneven stone. The insects were thick here, and they seemed especially attracted to my dead flesh, though none were daring enough to bite me. Instead, they orbited my body, buzzing in my ears and darting past my eyes. I began to wonder if Jenny had raised me simply to draw the bugs away from her.

"How did the prince destroy Tarzog?" I asked.

Zariel scowled. "Tarzog was a fool. As Armand's men fought their way into the temple, Tarzog ordered me to take Jenny and flee. Together, we might have destroyed them all. Instead, he stripped himself of my power and wasted precious time on his whelp."

I glanced at Jenny, half afraid to see how she would react, but she only shrugged. "Zariel's right. Daddy was stupid, so he failed. I won't." She skipped ahead, then turned around. "Do you think Rhynoth will like me?"

I didn't know how to answer, so I looked to Zariel.

"The prophecies say the god's gratitude will be like a never-ending fountain upon the one who calls him from the earth."

"I hope he'll let me ride him," Jenny said. "I've never had a pet before. Daddy had a cat, but he burned up when Armand attacked. He was a nice cat. Daddy carried him everywhere."

I remembered the beast, a black, long-haired ball of fur and claws. He used to sneak into the dungeons and piss in the straw.

"I tried to raise him," Jenny went on, "but he bit me. So I crushed his skull and scattered his remains."

Movement to the side saved me from thinking up a response to that. Two men in the green and silver livery of Prince Armand leaped from the cover of the trees. Both had longbows drawn. One kept his arrow pointed toward Zariel, while the other aimed at me. Not that a regular arrow would do much against my dead flesh, but perhaps Armand was smart enough to outfit his men with blessed weaponry. He had fought Tarzog's dead warriors before, after all.

"Speak one word, and it shall be your last," warned the man watching Zariel.

"No!" Before anyone else could move, Jenny ran in front of Zariel and threw her arms around the old sorceress. "Please don't hurt her."

"Get away from her, kid," said the second soldier. "That's Zariel. The black-hearted bitch murdered more innocent—"

"Bitch is a bad word," Jenny said, her dark eyes wide. She held up her arms, and Zariel picked her up, smiling.

Both soldiers now aimed their bows at Zariel. "Put her down, bi—witch."

I opened my mouth to warn them. To beg them to fire. A single shot would pierce both Jenny and Zariel. Jenny's magic might be able to destroy me, but she couldn't stop an arrow in flight.

"Stay back, zombie!" The nearest man fired, sending an arrow through my throat. Pain shot down my spine, and I flopped onto my back. Armand was indeed smart enough to prepare his men. I wondered how long it would take the power in that arrow to penetrate my dead bones, dissolving Jenny's spell. Strange to feel both terror and longing for true death.

Then both soldiers began to scream. I managed to turn my head enough to see that their bows were gone, transformed into writhing, hissing serpents. Already one had sunk its fangs into the man's forearm. As I watched, the other soldier flung the snake away and turned to flee. The snake was faster, darting forward to bite him just above the boot. He hobbled away, and the snakes slithered back toward Jenny. "Follow him," Jenny shouted, squirming out of Zariel's grasp. The necromancer disappeared after the soldier.

Jenny walked over and wrapped her small hands around the arrow in my throat. Flesh and muscle tore as she yanked it free. She brushed her fingers over my wounds, and I could feel the skin begin to seal. By the time I sat up, the holes were closed. My ribs felt whole again, too.

“Pretty good, huh?” she asked. “I like snake magic better, though.” She reached down, and one of the snakes coiled around her arm. The scales were purple, with a stripe of bright pink down the underbelly. “They’re not real, though,” Jenny said sadly. She wrapped her little fingers around the snake’s neck and squeezed. The snake crumbled away like chunks of burned wood.

A panicked shriek told me Zariel had caught up with her own prey. Jenny’s face brightened. “Make sure you cut off the heads,” she yelled. She glanced at me. “Daddy always taught me to cut off their heads or burn the bodies. You have to be sure they’re dead. If you just push them over a cliff or poison them and leave them to die, they always find a way to come back.” She tucked a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. “It’s in all the stories.”

She grabbed my hand and tugged me onward. “Come on,” she said. “Zariel can catch up once she finishes playing.”

Hand in hand we continued through the woods, followed only by gurgling screams.

We stopped near sundown to rest and eat, though my body didn’t seem to need either. Zariel used her magic to lure a pair of rabbits from the woods, then Jenny conjured tiny snakes to bite them. The snakes might have been magic, but the poison was real, and the rabbits spasmed and died before they could hop more than a few feet.

A part of me expected these two to simply rip into the rabbits with their teeth, feasting on the raw and bloody meat. Instead, Zariel swiftly and efficiently gutted the two rabbits, then impaled them on spits over a small fire.

“We have little time,” Zariel said. “When Armand’s men fail to return, he’ll know where we are.”

“Good,” said Jenny. She wiped her face on the sleeve of her gown, then turned to spit out a bone.

Zariel tilted her head. “Good?”

“I summon the Serpent God. Armand and his army arrive. The god eats them.” She took another bite of rabbit. Still chewing, she said, “I won’t make the same mistakes my daddy did.”

“You want him to find you,” I said. I had designed traps for years. I knew how to recognize them.

Jenny nodded. “He killed my daddy. So I’m going to kill him, his family, and his army, and then I’m going to destroy what’s left of his land.”

I didn’t know what bothered me more: the calm, total conviction in her voice, or the fact that when I thought about my wife and son, I knew *precisely* how she felt.

Frelan Gorge was a beautiful sight. Rather, it would have been beautiful, had I been here for any other purpose. The river far below was a ribbon of darkness, sparkling in the light of the moon. Trees and bushes covered the cliffs, transforming them into walls of lushness and life. To the north, a cloud of mist rose from the base of a small waterfall.

Jenny pointed to the fall. “That’s where we’re going.”

“You’re certain?” asked Zariel.

“I can feel it.”

I followed behind, biding my time. It would have been so easy to grab Jenny and fling her down the cliff, but I remembered how easily she had smashed me to the ground the last time I attacked her. She had dragged me from the grave, and she could send me back as quick as thought.

I frowned as I thought about that. “Why me?”

“What?” Jenny asked.

“Your father knew the traps as well or better than me. Why not resurrect him?”

“Yes, Jenny,” said Zariel, a nasty edge to her voice. “Why *him*?”

Jenny looked away, and I sensed I had stumbled into an old argument. “You were nice to me. He wasn’t.”

“I was what?”

“When the slaves were working on the first temple. I wanted to watch them laying the foundation and mixing the blood into the mortar. I wasn’t tall enough, so you lifted me onto your shoulders.”

I couldn’t remember. Either death had rotted the memory from my brain, or else Jenny had confused me with another worker.

Up ahead, Zariel used her magic to burn a tangle of thorn-covered vines out of the way. There was no path, so we were making our own. As I watched the vegetation smolder, it occurred to me that the burned plants would make it easy for Armand’s trackers to follow.

“Besides, if Daddy were here, *he’d* want to summon the Serpent God.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “He had his chance, and he failed. So now I get to be the God Rider.”

I kept my face still and prayed she couldn’t read my thoughts. I might not be able to destroy her myself, but there were plenty of traps in Tarzog’s temple that should do the trick.

Thorns tore my skin as I followed them toward the falls. I could hear the water crashing, and the vegetation was thicker here, forcing Zariel to expend more of her magic. With her smaller size, Jenny seemed able to slip through the thinnest gaps like . . . well, like a serpent.

Finally, the trees thinned, and we found ourselves on a rocky shore. Water trickled over my feet, and I could see how the riverbank fell away a few steps in. So long as we stayed by the edge, we should be safe. Any farther, and the current would toss us down the falls.

“Where’s the temple?” Zariel asked, glancing around. My dead eyes seemed to handle the darkness better than theirs, but even I couldn’t see any sign of the temple. And Tarzog hadn’t built small. His temple had been the size of a modest palace.

Jenny was kneeling near the falls, craning her head. I stepped toward her. A single push, and she would plummet to her death. Jenny glanced up, and I froze.

“I can see something behind the water,” Jenny said. “A door.”

“How do we get down?” Zariel asked.

“We don’t.” Jenny smiled at me. “Right?”

Grudgingly, I nodded. “That would be a decoy, something to delay Armand and his ilk. If Tarzog patterned this temple on the one I designed, that door is nothing but a facade. But with the water pounding down, most heroes will slip and fall to their deaths before they reach it. If not, the door at the other temple had hinges concealed on the bottom, so it would fall open to crush anyone who tried the knob. This one probably does something similar.”

“Which means the back door should be back this way,” Jenny said, wading upstream.

I watched a branch float over the lip of the falls, and wondered how many workers had died building Tarzog’s decoy trap. “It wouldn’t be in the water,” I said.

They both stared at me.

“Tarzog needed men to dig and build.” I pointed to the river. “The riverbed is stone, and the current is too strong.”

“So where is the door?” Zariel asked.

If Tarzog had followed the same plans . . . I glanced back toward the falls. Sixty paces from the front door, and another twenty paces to the right. I hurried along the shore, then turned back into the woods, ripping through the foliage until I reached a lightning-struck tree. Half of the trunk had rotted away. Splinters of blackened wood hung down like fangs. Grubs and worse squirmed within the blackened interior.

“Go on,” Jenny said. “Open it.”

I nodded. It would have been too much to hope for her to go first. Reaching past the fangs, I felt about until I found a small metal lever. A quick push disarmed the trap. On the original temple, rusted nails had protruded through the doorframe. Those nails were designed to shoot down, pinning an intruder in place. An instant later, two steel blades would spring out from either side to decapitate the poor fellow. I had been quite proud of that one, actually. I doubted this tree could house such oversized blades, but I didn’t want to take my chances on whatever Tarzog had substituted.

I stepped into the bug-infested rot, and my feet began to sink.

Seconds later, I was in darkness.

I brushed dirt and rotted wood from my clothes and, without thinking, grabbed the torch from the left wall. Tarzog had been left-handed, and wanted to know he could roam his temple without having to carry detailed notes about various traps. The right torch would work too, but its removal from the sconce would prime a trap eleven feet down the hall, which would spray oil down on the head of whoever passed. The oil itself wouldn't hurt anyone, but if he carried a lit torch . . .

The flint and steel hung from the sconce, good as new. I half expected the moisture in the air to have rendered the torches useless, but Tarzog hadn't skimped when it came to his temple. The black, tarry goo coating the end of the torch caught on the first spark.

I toyed with grabbing the torch that would trigger the trap, but decided against it. Even assuming dust and insects hadn't clogged the nozzles, the oil spray had only a six foot radius. There was a good chance one or both of my companions would survive.

And if truth be told, I didn't want to see Jenny burn. Tarzog had tested the trap on his tailor, who had been caught spying. I could still hear his screams, as clear as the sound of my own footsteps, and the smell would follow me to my grave. Beyond my grave, actually. Why couldn't death have taken *that* memory? I didn't think I could inflict such an end on this little girl.

Besides, there was a better way. A quicker way that would not only take Jenny and Zariel with me, but would destroy this accursed temple as well.

So I did as I had been commanded. I led them on hands and knees through the hall of gods, as the stone statues of long-forgotten deities fired poisoned darts from their eyes, mouths, and in one particularly disturbing case, from his penis. I tiptoed around the edge of the spiked pit with the crushing walls, though not without a moment of regret. I had worked hard to design the system of weights and wheels that forced the walls inward, and I would have liked to know if it still worked after so much time in the humidity of the jungle.

The plan was identical to the temple I had designed, all except that rotted tree at the entrance. I wondered if Tarzog had used a bit of necromancy to keep it decaying yet strong all these years.

"How much farther?" Jenny asked. She was chewing her thumbnail again.

I pushed open a door, ignoring the trapped knob on the right. This had been one of Tarzog's favorites. The hinges were hidden on the same side as the knob, and the door didn't even latch. Friction and a tight frame held it in place. Anyone who bumped the knob would take a poisoned needle to the hand. Actually turning the thing would trigger a spray of acid from the floor.

"We're here," I said, stepping inside.

One advantage to being dead: my body didn't react with the same throat-constricting terror I remembered from my last time in this room, back in the other temple. Or maybe my time with Jenny and Zariel had numbed me to fear. The walls bulged inward, carved to resemble barbed scales on the coils of an enormous snake. Arcane symbols spiraled around the floor and ceiling both.

"It's beautiful," Jenny said. She took my torch and ran to the closest wall to study the carvings worked into the snake's body. In one, dead warriors lay scattered before a giant serpent who had reared back with a horse and rider in its jaws.

The Serpent God was one ugly snake. Curved horns like scimitars grew in twin rows behind the eyes. In addition to the huge fangs, smaller teeth lined the jaws, each one dripping with venom.

"Look at this, Zariel," Jenny said, moving farther along the wall. "Here he's collecting his sacrifice." The snake's coils circled a pit of terrified old men, women, and children.

"Forget the pictures," Zariel snapped. "Armand's trackers are probably making their way through the jungle even now."

Jenny stuck out her tongue, then squatted down, holding her torch close to the floor to read the symbols. I turned my attention to the back of the room, where a thick book lay open on a raised dais. This was perhaps Tarzog's most brilliant idea. If his enemies had penetrated this far, it would mean Tarzog himself had fallen. Vindictive bastard that he was, Tarzog planted the book here to destroy those enemies.

The pages were blank, but in order to discover that, you had to set foot on that dais. Any weight of more than ten pounds would trigger a collapse of the entire temple.

I stepped soundlessly toward the book. No amount of magic or power could save them. With Jenny dead, I would be back with my wife and my children. Perhaps we would all rest a bit easier, knowing—
“Stop that,” Jenny said without looking up.

My body froze in mid-step. Unable to move, I toppled forward. My wrist hit the floor first, hard enough that I could hear bone snap. I ended up on my side, staring helplessly at Jenny as she turned around. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what Daddy did to trap this room, but I can’t let you get to it.”
“How?” It was all I could do to force the word past my dead lips.

Jenny shrugged. “Daddy killed you. He killed your family. I knew you’d try to get me in the end. That’s what I’d do.”

“Clever, isn’t she?” asked Zariel. Something in her voice warned me an instant before she struck, but I couldn’t have stopped her even if I wanted to. She waved her hand, and Jenny began to scream. Black fire danced over Jenny’s skin. She flopped on the floor like a dying trout.

“Such a clever girl,” Zariel repeated as she circled Jenny’s body. “Marked by the Serpent God, heir to the power of Tarzog the Black.”

Zariel snapped her fingers, and Jenny went still. She wasn’t dead. She couldn’t be, or else the magic keeping me in this pseudo living state would have failed. Shadowy flames continued to burn, though Jenny’s clothes and skin were unharmed. Zariel’s fire fed on something deeper than flesh.

“For two years I’ve dragged this whelp from one refuge to another,” Zariel said, her voice growing louder with each word. “Two years of living like a common thief. Two years of her whining and arguing, her stubborn refusal to follow even the simplest instructions.”

She turned to me, her eyes wide. For a moment, I thought she was going to destroy me, but she clasped her hands and said, “That little brat pissed her bedroll every night for six months after her father died. *Six months!*”

Zariel pulled the vial of blood from her pocket. “Well, little godling, Anhak Ghudir said you would be the one to lure Rhynoth from his rest, but the prophecies never said who would command him.” She bit the stopper from the vial, spat it to one side, and swallowed the contents.

Grabbing Jenny by the hair, she dragged the motionless girl to the center of the room. Jenny’s eyes were open and alert. She could see everything that was happening, just like me.

A part of me took some perverse joy at seeing her own torments turned back upon her. I might have failed, but Tarzog’s line would still end.

Zariel began to chant. “She is here, great one. Descendant of your own children, heir to the powers of the first serpent.” The rest was in another tongue, full of hacking, angry syllables.

At first, I didn’t realize when Zariel’s chanting changed to genuine coughs. Only when she staggered back a step did I realize something was wrong. One hand clawed her throat. Blood dripped from her left nostril.

The shadowy flames on Jenny’s body flickered and died. Jenny’s arms were shaky as she struggled to sit up. Hugging her knees to her chest, she whispered, “That hurt.”

Zariel dropped to her knees. Her expression changed from panic to anger, and she raised one hand, but when she tried to speak, only a pained croak emerged.

Jenny crawled over and kicked her in the stomach.

“How?” Zariel asked, her voice hoarse.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “I swiped the blood a week ago. Daddy always told me the only henchman you could ever really trust was one who was already dead.” She pulled a heavily padded tube from inside her dress. “This is the virgin blood. *You* drank a blend of four different sea snake venoms, mixed in bat blood.”

She stood up, her knees still shaking slightly. With her free hand, she took the torch from Zariel, then kicked her again. The effort nearly made her fall back.

“You wanted to know why him?” Jenny whispered, pointing to me. “Because he went to stay with his family in the dungeons every night. My daddy would have let him stay in the huts with the other workers, but he refused. *He* never complained about the smell. *He* didn’t tell his son to stop whining. When his boy fouled himself during the night, *he* didn’t force him to sleep in his own stink!”

She ended her tirade with one last kick, then turned to me. "I used to sneak down to the dungeons to watch Daddy torture traitors. One night I saw you coming, so I followed you."

She unwrapped the vial of blood as she talked. "I'll let you die, if that's what you want. Or you can come with me." She swallowed the blood, then smiled. "I'll even let you ride the Serpent God with me. But I am going to summon Rhynoth. Armand and his men are going to die. I'm going to conquer this land, whether you come with me or not."

She glanced back at Zariel, who had stopped moving. "Who knows," she said. "Maybe you'll help me mend my evil ways." The wicked grin on her face told me how likely *that* was. "You might even get a chance to kill me."

I doubted it. Look at how efficiently she had outsmarted and disposed of Zariel. Jenny was truly her father's daughter. Even more dangerous than Tarzog the Black. After all, Tarzog had failed.

On the other hand, what purpose would my second death serve? I couldn't bring my family back. I couldn't stop Jenny. The only possible blessing I would gain from death was my own peace.

The floor began to shake as Jenny chanted the same words Zariel had. Rhynoth had awakened from his millennial slumber, and he would be here soon.

Jenny's shoulders slumped as she finished the incantation. She began to chew her thumbnail again, wincing as the nail tore free and began to bleed.

"I'll understand if you don't want to come," she said, never looking at me.

I closed my eyes and made my choice.

Prince Armand brought an army. Perhaps he knew what he was about to face. I doubted it would save him, but who knew?

All I knew was that when Jenny rode the Serpent God, her hands clinging to the horns as her half-cape flapped behind her, she didn't look like an evil sorceress. She looked like a little girl, smiling and laughing as she prepared to wipe out an entire land. And seeing that almost made me feel alive again.