



# WHAT MONSTROUS GODS

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*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CRUEL BEAUTY*





WHAT  
MONSTROUS  
GODS

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BALZER + BRAY

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# Dedication

For my grandmother Dolores “Dee” Ramirez  
1933–2021  
Painter, homemaker, iconographer, and mother of readers

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# The Gods of Runakhia and Their Shrines

## **ITHOMBRIEL, KING OF WISDOM AND THE NIGHT**

A dark, faceless god. His head is a ring of pale flesh around a void. The moon and the stars and the night are his domain, and all the wisdom contained therein. His saints grow an ever-widening hole in the center of their foreheads until they die.

*Shrine: Anazyr, the capital city*

## **JUNI-AKHA, QUEEN OF VICTORY AND THE DAY**

A glorious, terrible goddess. Golden horns grow from her head and a golden plate covers her face, which no mortal has ever seen. Power and victory and daylight are her domain. Her saints have golden horns, and slowly a plate of bone covers their faces until they starve.

*Shrine: Anazyr, the capital city*

## **NIN-ANNA, LADY OF SPRING AND HEALING**

A gentle, dawn-bright goddess. She has golden hands, and flowers spring from the earth where she walks. Springtime and healing and new life are her domain. Her saints have golden hands and die of a burning fever as they whisper of flowers.

*Shrine: Ir-Atsakha, a center of pilgrimage*

## **ZUMARIEL, LORD OF SUMMER AND PASSION**

A ferocious, yearning god. Ten thousand red ribbons wrap his body, and with them he binds the hearts of men, inflaming lovers with desire and soldiers with courage. Love and war and the heat of summer are his domain. His saints grow red ribbons from their bodies and die vomiting them.

*Shrine: Nan-Darakh, a university town*



### **NEM-UNA, LADY OF AUTUMN AND SECRETS**

A silent, watchful goddess. She has one hundred eyes and no mouth, and she knows all secrets that have ever been kept. The whisper of falling leaves is her holiest hymn. Her saints grow eyes upon their palms and cheeks and waste away as visions of her secrets consume them.

*Shrine: Zal-Enda, a vast monastery*

### **SARRIEL, LORD OF WINTER AND ENDINGS**

A grim, inexorable god. His arms end in stumps and a blindfold covers the bloody sockets of his eyes; he has no tongue. He rules over all endings, the dead of winter, and the hour of death. His saints die after losing first their hands, then eyes, then tongues.

*Shrine: Undanna, a factory town*

### ***The Two Who Have No Shrine or Appointed Time:***

### **IM-YARA, LADY OF DEVOTION**

A burning, faithful goddess. Flames wreath her hands and heart, and her eyes are made of fire. Every form of purity and loyalty and devotion is her domain. Ghostly flames dance over the bodies of her saints until at last they burn alive.

### **MOR-IVA, KNIFE OF THE GODS**

A dark, bloody goddess. Her chest is a bloody chasm, and she holds her heart in charred, clawed hands. She is the knife of the gods and slays those she deems unworthy. Her saints have clawed hands with skin charred black; they die when their hearts burst under her judgment.

# 1

The gods are silent.

The gods are always silent.

We know this, in the Convent of St. Eruvaun, better than anyone. The gods no longer touch our world. They do not make saints who can work miracles. They do not speak, and perhaps they cannot even hear us.

But that doesn't stop me from praying silently, desperately, as I half trot to keep up with Sister Zenuvan's long strides, my boots slipping against cobblestones that are slick with the morning's rain.

*O Nin-Anna, lady of golden hands and healing, I pray to the goddess of our convent, please let Mother Una say yes this year.*

I've asked on every birthday since I was twelve, and every year Mother Una has shaken her head and told me I'm still too young. But tomorrow I'll be seventeen—old enough to take vows as a nun—so surely she can't make me wait any longer.

*Let this be the year that I avenge you. The year I kill Ruven. The year I bring back your saints and end the plague.*

The next moment I smack face-first into Sister Zenuvan as she stops abruptly. I stumble back, gasping, "Sorry!"

"Daydreaming again?" Sister Zenuvan looks back at me. "Awful danger, to walk and dream at the same time."

Her voice is solemn, but she softens the words with a wide smile that dimples her pale cheeks and reveals all her missing teeth. Sister Zenuvan is only thirty-two, hearty and strong and six feet tall, but she lived on the streets for years before she entered the convent. She sold her two front teeth and lost three more to infection.

She's one of the few nuns who's never doubted me. Last year—the first time Mother Una ever thought it over for an entire day before telling me no—I overheard Sister Zenuvan saying, *She's not too young. I'd gutted three men by her age.*

*Because you were running with a gang of thieves, Mother Una replied. Lia is softer than you ever were. Softer than the last girl who tried and*

*failed to kill Ruven too.*

“I’m sorry,” I say aloud.

Sister Zenuvan pinches my cheek. “Just stay alert till we’re back behind convent walls, hmm?”

I almost laugh. We’re standing on Highmarket Street, the second-fanciest shopping lane in the whole city. The crowd bustling past us is all plump matrons, grim-faced businessmen, and peaky young apprentices. There’s a policeman with a round blue hat leaning against a nearby lamppost; they patrol this street twice daily for beggars and pickpockets.

But I remember what Mother Una told me last year: *You’re still so dreamy and easily distracted. In five hundred years, this convent has found only seven girls with the power to enter the briar and try to kill Ruven. None ever returned. You have to be better than all of them.*

So I nod obediently and follow Sister Zenuvan into a shop whose polished brass sign reads AKHARYN & SONS: HERBS, TINCTURES & RARE EXTRACTS.

Inside the air is filled with an intoxicating mix of scents: herbs and spices, varnish and preservatives, the softness of an herb garden and the sharpness of a hospital room all at once. I draw in a greedy breath. This is my favorite of all the shops we visit; if Ruven were to make an illusion to trap me, it would surely smell like this.

The herbalist, Mr. Akharyn, is a short, pale man with eyes that bulge behind the little gold spectacles perched on his nose. A lot of the nuns don’t like that we get so many of our medicinal supplies from him, for he’s one of the heretics who worship the dead god preached by the Magisterium. A crucifix hangs shamelessly at the back of his shop; it’s carved of pale wood but painted with crimson rivulets of blood that flow down the heretic god’s twisted corpse. Beside it hangs a faded little painting of some heretic saint, a young woman robed in white and blue.

But Sister Zenuvan insists that he has the best herbs of anyone in the city, so we always come here. And while I know I should hate anything to do with heretics, I can’t help loving Mr. Akharyn’s shop: the rows of glistening herb jars, the narwhal horns hanging from the ceiling, the odd specimens displayed in the window.

There’s something new this time: a glass case that holds two dead scorpions, one bone white and the other soot black, posed with their tails raised at each other in silent threat. A shiver crawls down my spine as I stare at them, their jointed limbs and bodies, their delicate pincers. I’ve never seen a scorpion outside a picture in a book before, and they’re a kind of

monstrous that makes my skin crawl, yet strangely beautiful. They almost look as if they're dancing.

A hand falls on my shoulder and I jump, but it's only Sister Zenuvan.

"Wanting a few more pets?" she asks.

"No!" I protest, my face heating in embarrassment as I remember all the creatures—from cockroaches to kittens—that I used to try to adopt.

Sister Zenuvan laughs softly. "I'm only teasing. I know you've outgrown it." She raises her basket to show the restocked jars of herbs. "We're done here."

Silently I follow her out of the shop and through the streets. Most times when I go out with one of the nuns, we stop at half a dozen shops, and my job is to carry all the purchases. This time, all we were sent to buy was herbs, which Sister Zenuvan likes to carry herself. I've come along because we're also going to visit several patients who were recently discharged from our hospital, so I'm carrying a satchel full of medical supplies and the little wrapped packages of oats and bacon and candied nuts that we give to people who have left us.

Our convent is dedicated to Nin-Anna, the goddess of spring and new life and healing. Not only do we care for all the sick and wounded who come to our hospital, we visit them after they leave, until we're sure that they are completely healed and their new life begun.

It's one of the things that I'm most proud of: we don't care for people out of love for money or even duty, but because we love healing. Because we set things right.

That's why I belong in the convent, no matter how many times I doze off at prayers or lose myself in fancies when I'm supposed to be cleaning.

Because I'm going to set things right.

I'm so busy thinking about this—Mother Una would shake her head in disappointment—that I don't notice where Sister Zenuvan is leading us until we're walking out into the great square before the royal palace.

It's not the first time I've come here. Everyone in the city of Anazyr does, sooner or later. The great square has become half marketplace, half carnival, with stalls selling meat pies and dried fruit and little pop-up paper models of what (they think) the palace once looked like.

Nobody has seen the palace itself in five hundred years. At the far end of the square, beyond the massive wrought iron fence, stands the briar: a vast, ever-shifting mass of thorny, shadowed vines, tall as a factory with smokestacks, completely engulfing the royal palace.

When the briar first appeared, hundreds of people tried to find a way through the thorns to free the royal family. None were ever seen again. These

days, nobody believes it's possible to break Ruven's curse. Parliament built the iron fence so that no more people could lose their lives trying. Only the nuns of my convent still hope.

Only *I* can prove them right.

"Surprise," says Sister Zenuvan, smiling at me.

For one wild, hopeful moment I think that maybe it's time—maybe I'm going in right now, maybe she's decided to disobey Mother Una and believe in me when nobody else does—

"I thought you might like to look through one of the telescopes again," she says. "For your birthday."

It's the only thing I should have expected, but a strangely resentful disappointment curls in my stomach. Sister Zenuvan did this for my birthday when I was *twelve*. I'm older now, can't she see that?

But I still manage to smile and say, "Thank you."

We go to the little booth at the edge of the square, where Sister Zenuvan pays two coins for me to look at the palace through a miniature telescope. Sometimes the briar opens up a little, and people glimpse a fraction of an arch or window, but today I only see exactly what I saw last time: dark vines winding over each other like a swarm of ants on a piece of rotting fruit.

For a nightmare moment I imagine that's exactly what lies beyond the briar: a palace rotting and dead and gnawed by insects, the bodies of the seven girls who went before me piled in a putrefying mound at the doors.

Then I push the thought away and step back from the telescope. I'm not a child anymore. I've set broken bones and stitched torn flesh and helped saw off gangrenous limbs. Whatever Ruven has waiting for me inside the briar, I'm not afraid of it.

I will talk to Mother Una tonight.

We go on our way. But when we get to the first house on our list, there's a crowd gathered. As we start to push our way through, I hear the whispers. "*Plague. Death.*" When they notice Sister Zenuvan's white veil, they start to pull away from us—but from fear of contagion rather than respect, judging by their expressions—and then we reach the rope barrier the police have strung across the street.

Icy dread winds through my stomach. The house we were going to visit, where the stonemason had gone home to once his broken leg was mostly healed, has a red plague flag over the open door.

There's only one sickness we don't treat at the hospital: the Red Death. The law won't allow us, and I don't think Mother Una would either. Everyone who gets it dies, and almost everyone who tries to take care of somebody infected gets it too. The only thing that can be done is to lock

afflicted families in their houses until the plague has run its course with them.

It has already finished with this family. A policeman stands watch by the door as two corpse collectors carry out a sheet-wrapped body and heave it into their cart.

“Wait here,” Sister Zenuvan says, and slips under the rope to talk to the policeman.

I squeeze my hands around the handle of my basket, a cold ocean of grief inside my chest. There are no more miracles. We know this in the convent, and I know it better than anyone else.

I was eleven when Papa staggered home from a long day at the factory, shivering with fever. My mother said it was no more than a touch of worker’s lung, that he’d be well again with a day or two of rest. But the next morning he vomited blood, and I was already old enough to know what that meant. Mama tried to go for help, but she was dragged back by policemen who nailed wooden slats across the door.

“Fourteen days,” Mama told me, her eyes bright with tears as she stood at the foot of the narrow stairs. “That’s how long the quarantine is. Lia, you keep Colan downstairs with you. Don’t come up for any reason.”

Then she vanished up the stairs to care for Papa, and I never saw her alive again. When I finally dared creep up the stairs—five days later—they were both already dead, curled together in their narrow bed, puddles of congealed blood around them.

Colan, my little brother, was only five. He didn’t understand what was happening, and I couldn’t bear to tell him what I’d seen. I thought I’d have time to explain it all to him later. But on the tenth day, his eyes started bleeding. He didn’t know what it meant, but I did.

I held him as he shuddered and vomited blood onto my skirt and died. I dragged him up the stairs to rest with Mama and Papa, and I washed myself as best I could, and then I sat down with my back against the front door, waiting to sicken and die myself.

But when the fourteen days were up, and the police broke down the door, I was still alive. I’ll never know why. It wasn’t a miracle; the gods can’t heal anyone now, not with the shrines asleep and no more saints being created. Mother Una explained that to me in my first days at the convent, clearly enough for me to understand even through my haze of grief.

I’m so caught up in memories that I don’t notice Sister Zenuvan returning until she’s right at my side.

“Anyone?” I ask softly. The words *like me* hang unspoken between us. She shakes her head. “No,” she says grimly.

Without another word, she marches away, and I have to run a few steps to catch up. Most of the nuns would have mouthed some platitude to me, but Sister Zenuvan understands grief better than most. It's one of the things I like about her.

There are five more people on our list to visit. They're all healing well and happy to see us, and I smile at them in return. But inside the ocean of my grief is slowly turning to a storm of rage.

If I'd gone to kill Ruven a week ago, that family might be alive today.

As we walk back to the convent, I practice argument after argument in my head. I have to convince Mother Una to let me go.

But in the end, I don't need to say anything. As soon as we arrive back at the convent Mother Una finds me, looks me up and down, and says, "Wash up and get ready to pray, child. You're going to the palace tomorrow."

## 2

This is the story, as I learned it from the nuns.

Of all the countries in the world, Runakhia was once the most blessed. For here alone, all eight of the gods were fully known and worshipped rightly: wise Ithombriel, victorious Juni-Akha, gentle Nin-Anna, passionate Zumariel, silent Nem-Una, inexorable Sarriel, devoted Im-Yara, and bloody Mor-Iva. Their shrines were open doorways into the divine realm through which the gods could hear the prayers of the faithful, and they would choose saints from those who came to worship, granting them the power to work miracles.

Nor was that all. Since ancient days, the kings and queens of Runakhia had been so loved by the gods that they were granted the Royal Gift: they could walk through the shrines into the realm of the gods and survive standing in the presence of unveiled divinity. They used this gift to make pacts with the gods, and to wield divine power even more mightily than the saints.

Thus it was that no plague ever touched Runakhia, for the saints could heal it, and no foreign fleet ever landed on its shores, for the royal family would call down storms to destroy it. Such was the blessing of our kingdom's golden age.

But even in Runakhia, there were those who fell to the lure of foreign heresies like the cult of the Magisterium. Rejecting the eight gods, they worshipped only the corpse of a dead and broken false god . . . and dreamed of someday bending all Runakhia to their will.

And then five hundred years ago, upon a summer's day, a stranger came to the royal court. He strode into the palace wearing a dark cloak, shadows lapping at his feet. Standing before the royal throne, he declared his name was Ruven, a servant of the Magisterium, and that he had come to break the rule of the royal family and end the age of saints. He boasted that he would do it before their eyes, using such powerful sorcery that the whole royal family together could not stop him.



The queen said he was welcome to try, and all the court laughed with her. None of them had any fear, for the gods' ancient blessings assured that nobody could ever harm the royal family within their palace.

But raising his hands, Ruven called upon the unholy powers of sorcery to cast unending sleep upon them all, and that power answered.

He spared only one person, a minor duchess, whom he commanded to tell everyone what he had done. He proclaimed that the palace was his domain forevermore, that he had silenced the gods and ensured there would be no more saints made ever again. For the same sleep that had taken the palace had also fallen upon the shrines, breaking the link between the human and divine worlds. Only somebody with the Royal Gift could breach his spell, and he had already captured the entire royal house beneath his power. As the duchess fled, a dark briar sprang up behind her, walling off the palace from the rest of the capital.

And so the golden age of Runakhia ended. With no more saints to work miracles of healing, the cities grew clogged with disease. The shores of the kingdom were no longer protected by the magic of its kings and queens, so other countries began to cast greedy eyes upon it.

At first, the people of Runakhia did not forget their gods, nor their beloved royal family—not in the first years after Ruven, when the Red Death killed a third of the entire population, and not in the bitter century that followed, as they fought for freedom against Zémorine invaders. Nor did they give up hope, for now and then somebody of entirely common blood would be born with the Royal Gift. That person would go to the briar and attempt to enter the palace, defeat Ruven, and break the spell.

But none succeeded, and none ever returned. And as centuries wore on, and Runakhia grew strong and glorious again—as Parliament negotiated treaties and built a navy that could defeat any foe before they reached our shores—

Runakhia forgot.

The holy shrines changed from centers of pilgrimage to mere tourist attractions. Fewer and fewer people vowed their lives in service to the gods. Instead of remembering that Runakhia was favored beyond all other lands, they chased the fashions and technology of Zémore, an atheist nation that had abjured all gods.

Until at last only one convent of nuns still hoped that things could be set right. Every time they found a girl born with the Royal Gift, they raised her and trained her and sent her into the briar to kill Ruven. Seven girls they had sent, and none ever returned.

The eighth girl is me.

I spend my seventeenth birthday, from sunrise to sunset, kneeling in the convent chapel and praying. The gods may be silent, but that doesn't mean we should cease to honor them.

We remember that, here in the convent, even if nobody else does.

When I started the vigil, in the pale, cold hours of the morning, those thoughts were enough to keep my heart racing. The last notes of Lauds, which I had chanted along with the nuns, still rang in my ears. My heart thrummed with excitement.

Now the chapel is full of a bone-dry silence. A shaft of afternoon sunlight falls through one of the windows, hot and heavy on my hair and shoulders. I'm hungry and tired, my heartbeat a sluggish trudge.

Wearily I raise my eyes to the painting above the altar: Nin-Anna, the goddess of springtime and healing—and of our convent. *My* goddess.

She looks like a young woman, barely older than me. Her warm brown skin is flushed as if she's just finished dancing, and her jet-black hair swirls around her as if caught in the wind. She stands in a forest glade, holding a sheaf of flowers in her golden hands, and flowers blossom in the grass around her feet.

Her eyes, staring out of the painting at me, are a shimmering, luminous gold.

I remember the first time I saw those eyes. I had just arrived at the convent; I was still numb with grief and could still feel Colan's fevered weight in my arms, still hear the echoes of Mama's agonized retching. Several of the nuns fussed over me with mugs of tea and whispered comfort, but none of them seemed real. Nothing *was* real, except the Red Death.

Then Mother Una took me into the chapel, and I looked up into Nin-Anna's golden eyes.

My left eye is brown, but my right eye is gold. It used to make other children call me cursed and Mama frown in concern, but Papa told me it was a sign of good luck, and I'd always believed him. When I sat alone in our house, waiting to die, I wondered if my eye really was a curse, and that was why the Red Death had come to us.

There in the chapel, Mother Una explained to me the truth: my golden eye was a sign that I had the Royal Gift. "You belong to the gods as no one else does in these degenerate days," she said, and then she started to explain how I might kill Ruven and save us all—but that part was too much for me to take in just then.

All I could think about, as I stared up at Nin-Anna's golden eyes, was simply that I belonged to her. And she was mine. She understood my grief,

and she hated the Red Death as much as I did, and she wasn't going to let me be alone anymore.

A rush of gratitude fills my heart, and I lean over, pressing my forehead to the ground in a full prostration.

"Thank you," I whisper. "Thank you, *thank you* for giving me a new home. Please . . . let me pay you back. Let me serve you."

The words shiver out of me, tiny and yet frighteningly bold. I swallow, and then take refuge in the words of ritual: "O lady of the golden hands and healing, grant me thy strength. Give me thy blessing. Help me to avenge thy people and set them free."

And then I rest.

I don't mean to. But the tile against my forehead is cool, and the sun is still warm on my back, and the air feels peaceful and holy around me. I think, *Surely Nin-Anna is pleased with me*, and it's such a sweet comfort that I rest in it. I don't sit up, and I don't pray; I listen to my breathing and think that I will move in a moment, just another moment . . .

*I am kneeling in the convent garden, sunlight on my neck and the hum of bumblebees in my ears, the scents of lavender and rosemary heavy in the air. Little wisps of white clouds fleece the blue, blue sky, and it's such a beautiful day that I could stare up at the clouds and smell the air forever.*

*But I know there's something important buried in the garden, so I begin digging. The damp, dark earth crumbles easily under my fingers, and with every handful my heart pounds a little faster, because I'm so close, so close, I'm going to find it—*

*I scrape away one more handful and there it is: a pair of hands that stretch as I free them from the dirt, pale fingers reaching up toward the sky.*

*It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Impulsively, I reach down and clasp the hands. The strange fingers tighten around mine, dirt gritting between our skin, but the roughness only makes me want to weep because that means it's real, this comfort and relief and promise of future joy is real.*

*I know I must keep digging. There's a whole person lying buried, waiting to be free—but I linger because this moment is too sweet to relinquish, this feeling that I have claimed somebody who is claiming me in return—*

The sound of a door opening startles me awake.

I bolt upright, my head still fuzzy with sleep but my heart pounding with fear and shame. What am I doing, falling asleep at a vigil like some spoiled child? Half the nuns already don't think I'm strong or brave enough. What if

this is the final straw that makes Mother Una decide to have me wait another year?

I dare a glance back over my shoulder, and the fear curdles into something sourer. It's Anabekha, wearing the dove-gray veil of a novice.

We came to the convent within a few months of each other: the only two foundlings the nuns have raised in decades. *She's just two years older than you*, Mother Una said when Anabekha arrived. *You'll be playmates. Like sisters.*

But those two years might as well have been ten. We never played together, not really; Anabekha was too busy learning everything the nuns taught, just a step faster and a little better than I ever could. When she asked to take the veil six months ago, nobody expressed a single doubt.

"Don't worry," she says, smiling at me. "I won't tell."

I nod mutely. I should say thank you, but instead I want to hiss and spit like a cat. I know it's just my jealousy that makes her kindness feel like condescension, but I still feel it.

Another way she's better than me: she's never been the slightest bit jealous that I have the Royal Gift and she doesn't. Even though so many of the nuns think she would have been the better choice.

*Maybe they're right*, I think glumly as I watch her walk forward to light the candles ringing the altar. Even her stride is perfect: quiet yet confident, graceful and measured. When she halts by a candle, her slender hands make lighting it into a dance.

The dream rushes back to me suddenly: the pressure of those fingers wrapped around mine, the hard lumps of the knuckles. I realize they must have been the hands of a man—they were large enough to cover mine—and my face heats, but for a few moments I can't stop turning the memory over in my head.

Nin-Anna requires her nuns to be celibate. I never thought of that as a sacrifice before; the pimple-faced errand boys I saw in the marketplace hardly seemed worth more than a goddess. So it's foolish to feel that way now, just because I had a dream of feeling wanted, chosen—

*You are chosen by the gods*, I remind myself. *You are wanted by Nin-Anna, and you are needed by the kingdom. Not Anabekha. You.*

So I drag myself into perfect posture, fix my gaze on the painting of Nin-Anna, and try my best to pray as Anabekha lays out the psalters and the nuns file in to sing Vespers. I don't look away from the goddess's golden eyes until I hear the heavy *step-step-thump* of Mother Una approaching with her walking stick. Then I can't help glancing back.