



THE
ETERNAL
WARS

KISSED
BY
THE
GODS

CATY ROGAN



KISSED BY THE GODS

The Eternal Wars Series
CATY ROGAN

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*For the girls who've been told they're too much.
For the women who've been told they're not enough.
For every time you nearly gave up—
and chose instead to whisper, to shout, to rage:
I'm not finished.*

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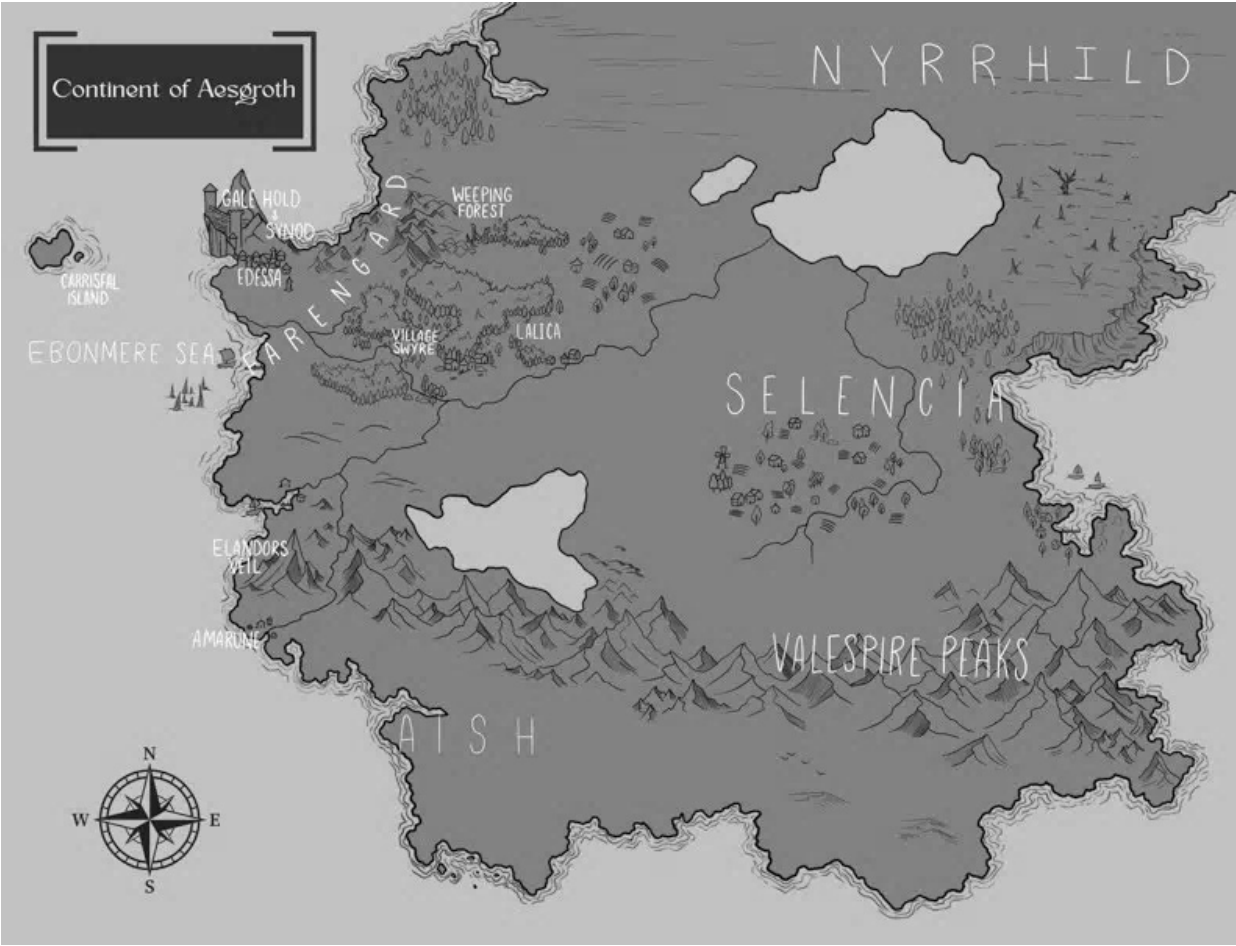
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CONTENT WARNINGS

Kissed by the Gods is set in a brutal, unjust world shaped by war, oppression, and divine power. This book includes mature and potentially triggering content such as:

- Graphic violence and battle scenes
- On-page deaths
- Systemic oppression and sexism
- Slavery and forced servitude
- Kidnapping
- Attempted sexual assault (not by the love interest)
- Power imbalances between the female main character and male main character
- Loss of close family members (including parents and a sibling)
- Explicit sexual content
- Death by fire/burning (off page)

Please read with care and prioritize your wellbeing.



PART I
THE GROUNDED



“Selencia, granted the protection of Faraengard’s shield against the Kher’zenn, owes its survival to the strength of its betters. Their grain and labor are a small price to pay for existence.”

- Letter from the King of Faraengard to the newly instated Overlords of Selencia in Year 36 of the Eternal Wars

CHAPTER ONE

YEAR 987 OF THE ETERNAL WARS *PROTECTORATE OF SELENCIA*

WHEN I REMEMBER IRIELLE, I think of lace. She wore it when she burned to death on her wedding day.

I remember how she carefully slipped into her gown six years ago, eyes bright with unshed tears as her fingertips traced the hand-worked floral designs.

How the decorative overlay browned and curled inward long before the flames lit it on fire. My vision narrowed and went grey, until all I could see was that meticulous pattern, even as I heaved out tears and snot and vomit into the dirt at my sister-in-law's feet. Then, when her dress finally started to burn ... I don't think I'll ever forget the smell. The assault of it choked me—that stench of charred lace.

It's a moment I can't escape. Not in the bright light of day, where the memories loom, hazy and throbbing. Certainly not in the darkness of sleep, where they come to life in nightmares so real, so vivid, that I'm trapped reliving it night after night.

Mother says it's because I'm cursed, like Irielle. She's right, of course.

Sweat drips down my face when I finally stop swinging my scythe and raise my eyes to the deep blue sky. The scalding heat from summer has long since faded, but the autumn breeze tangling the wisps of curly hair against my neck isn't enough to cool me off.

I wave at my youngest brother, who runs over with a bucket of water.

None of us—not even my mother loading the wheat in the two-wheeled cart behind me—comments on the water sloshing to the ground as five-year-old Leo skids to a halt in front of me, his crooked grin lighting up his face as he hands me the ladle.

“Thanks Leo,” I gasp between gulps. His chest puffs with pride.

“I’m a very good helper until I can be strong like you and Seb,” he tells me.

“You are.” I nod, serious. “The best helper.”

I take a full, deep breath. The vaguely sweet smell of the wheat is overwhelming, but I still pick up dozens of other smells, like the tangy musk of my 19-year-old brother, Seb, in the row next to me. A hint of tobacco clings to my father’s shirt, though he’s way out in the back of the field. Even the smell of the clean water in the bucket wafts to my nose, crisp and fresh.

Suddenly, the entirety of the landscape crashes into me in a torrent. It makes a swarm of bees buzz in my mind until my eyes start to blur from the biting pain of it.

I take another breath and focus on our cottage. Just our cottage.

How the thatched-roof slopes down the sides; how the door is slightly ajar and hangs crookedly; how the brown curtains, fashioned from old grain sacks, blow gently against the white-washed stone. How the lavender Mother grows underneath the windows waves at me, the sweet smell a soothing comfort. The sameness of it brings me back into myself, and I’m able to calm my racing heart.

With measured calm, so I don’t trigger another episode, I widen my focus to take in more of my surroundings. Our cottage sits on the west edge of the property, backing up against the Weeping Forest that runs from here to the Kingdom of Faraengard, not that I’ve ever been.

I’ve only ever been to Lalica, the city that’s a two-day walk to the east from our little village, to help father deliver our crops to the market. Mother only lets me make that trip so that I can pray in the temples and beg the gods to change my fate. She doesn’t know that I’ve never actually set foot

in a temple. The priests are uncompromising about the votive offerings, and the price is steep. Father and I spend the few coins we have on extra supplies, instead, to help us last through the winter.

I turn to the east, toward the overlord's manor house. I shouldn't really be able to see it. Six years ago the manor was a tiny speck on a horizon of waving wheat. Now, I can see it in all its glamour, with marble columns framing the large wooden door and a roof of black slate that wouldn't dare leak. Three levels of luxury built and sustained by generations of free labor. It's pretentious and vain, like the lord himself. From here, I can even see the termites that have taken up residence under the veranda. I hope they eat through every beam, pillar, and rafter.

I rub an unsteady hand over my face, and the sweat smears my forehead, gritty and rough.

Sometimes it's like this, where all my senses open like flood gates and immerse me in wave upon wave of sensation. What I smell, touch, feel, hear, see, and even taste, until I'm drowning in our field of waving wheat.

A large, brawny hand reaches out to grasp my shoulder. "Leina? Are you alright?"

Seb's deep voice should be a comfort, but I startle and drop the ladle into Leo's bucket, causing water to spill.

That does merit a response from my mother.

"Leina! Be more careful!" The command is sharp, angry. She's on edge.

I can't blame her. We all are.

I turn to Seb, who is staring at me with worry lining his young face. He's the only person I confide in since these episodes started. It's not that my parents haven't noticed. Of course they have. We simply never speak of it and won't start now. They won't acknowledge that I've somehow managed to harvest three times as much wheat as Seb and two times as much as my father, though they both outweigh me by a solid 100 pounds of muscle. Six years ago, I couldn't keep up with either of them.

The changes have been drastic. Unnatural. It's one of the reasons I'm 24 and unmarried. No one outside of our family can be trusted.

But Seb shouldn't be the one comforting me, not with what is coming for him. And soon. Wheat isn't all that's harvested in this kingdom every autumn.

The Collection has begun.

My nightmares have flared up again, forcing me to relive that cursed day six years ago when the Faraengardian soldiers came. The day they killed Irielle and dragged my twin brother, Levvi, and my beau, Alden, away in chains. The day we lost all three of them forever.

I force a smile. "Of course! Only tired." I reach to put my hand on the small of Leo's back to nudge him toward our father but pull back before I touch him. I haven't had physical contact with Leo since I accidentally broke his arm last summer. If Mother wasn't such a skilled healer, it might have killed him. It was a nasty break.

I nod in Father's direction, instead. "I think Father needs some water, Leo."

"Okay!" He says, eagerly scampering off across the field.

Seb studies me, head cocked, gauging my truthfulness.

"You're lying," Seb says after Leo is out of earshot.

Seb always knows when someone is lying. It's an uncanny knack that makes him unbeatable at card games, not that Father allows him to play with the villagers very often. That would draw unwanted attention, so he only plays when we're really, truly desperate. The last time was when we couldn't afford to feed even Leo.

I sigh and wave a dismissive hand. "It's worse today."

His lips pull back in a grimace. "What happened this time?" He's not quite whispering, but he's still quiet.

I allow myself a small smile. "There're termites under the lord's veranda."

Seb's face freezes in surprise, no doubt marveling that I can somehow see a bug smaller than a fingernail when he can't even make out the marble columns from here. Then his lips pull back in a small grin. "I hope they eat the whole damn place."

A snort of laughter escapes before I can contain it.

"Seb! Leina! Stop fooling around. We have important work to finish here."

We turn toward Mother, whose voice has gone beyond sharp; it's almost hysterical. Her face is drawn tight in grief and pain, her mouth pulled back in a straight, bitter line. She was beautiful once, before they took Levvi in the Collection. Her face was softer then. She was softer. Now, she's all sharp edges and hard corners.

I glance at Father, who's staring at our mother like he does when he thinks no one will notice—it's a weary kind of love he carries for her, and for us, too, I think. Sometimes, he seems small. Not because he's physically small; he's a very large man, standing a full head over most of the men from the village, with defined muscles in his back, arms, and legs from a lifetime of hard labor. But his confidence was shattered long ago and he keeps his head down. It's what kept him alive in the Faraengardian mines when he served in the Collection.

He shakes his head at me and Seb, a silent command of *don't*. Don't push back. Don't raise your voice. Don't question.

My rage, always perilously close to the surface, churns, so I turn to start harvesting another row. I swing my scythe with all my might to exhaust my wrath on the wheat, but my arm stops a hairsbreadth from the waving stalks in front of me. I could've sworn a horse neighed, but we don't have a horse. No serfs do. I squint my eyes toward the north, where our little dirt path meets the main cobblestone road leading into the Kingdom of Faraengard, and my heart pounds in my chest. Sweet Serephelle, no. The soldiers are here.

"Seb." I whisper it, but the helplessness weighing down his name makes it land like a thunderclap in our little field.

Everyone freezes. My father stops his own scythe mid swing. Mother drops the pile of wheat she'd gathered, a groan of despair rising from deep within her. Leo drops his bucket, water quickly soaking the earth.

Seb walks back over to stand next to me, both our gazes locked on the horizon.

"I don't see anything, Leina," he says, his voice calm.

My hands clench on my scythe. "They're here."

My mother's moan turns into a wail as she breaks. She gathers her skirts to run toward us. "Run, Seb! They can't see you yet. You can hide in the woods. You know the woods so well!" She's nothing but a flurry of hands, pushing against his chest. "Run! I've already lost one son and I can't lose another. Run!"

She's screaming it as she pushes with all her might against him. He's only 19, but Seb takes after our father and is already a mountain. He doesn't budge. He brings his hands up to hold her, restraining her with surprising gentleness for someone of his size. I'll never understand where he finds the strength to nurture that inner peace.

He leans down to kiss her forehead. “You know I can’t.”

And he won’t. Seb would never leave us here to face his punishment. Each of us in turn would be strung up in the village center and left to die of thirst or exposure, whichever came first. The soldiers would eliminate our whole family and then work through every man, woman, and child in the village until Seb turned himself in.

Little Leo’s lips are quivering now. He doesn’t understand. But then, I don’t understand the cruelty of the Collection, either. The soldiers take all the boys before they reach maturity and force them to work the Faraengardian mines. Some of them, like Father, come back to the farms five years later. They are changed, beaten, and defeated—but home. Others, like our older brother and my beau, die in the mines, and their bones rot in the depths of the earth.

The Kingdom of Faraengard tells us it’s our debt to pay for their protection from great evil. From the Kher’zenn, people whisper in low tones, like saying the name of the death demons from across the Ebonmere Sea too loudly will summon them to your doorstep.

I return my gaze to the horizon, where the four riders steadily approach. I imagine everyone has spotted them now, but I see the two swordsmen and two archers in perfect detail, even from this distance. The man in front already has a smirk on his face, like he’s going to enjoy wrenching us apart. He carries a sword sheathed at his side, but the shield he’s holding is what draws my eyes. It displays the royal crest of Faraengard. A faravar—the divine winged warhorses the Altor warriors ride—rears between two lances crossed at the top. That hot rage flares.

Father leans down and whispers something to Leo, which sends him scampering into the house. He’ll hide under the bed like he’s been taught. Failure to run to our hiding spot fast enough is the only time Father has ever taken a switch to any of us.

Father turns to me. “Leina, take your mother back to the house and stay with Leo.”

Mother is weeping helplessly now against Seb’s chest, her hands twisting great fistfuls of his shirt. Yes, Father is right. I should take her back to the house, so she doesn’t have to watch. The king’s soldiers won’t tolerate insolence.

Nevertheless, I can’t tear my gaze from the approaching riders. *Threat*, something whispers from inside me.

“Leina!” My father shouts it at me, and I startle. It’s so unlike him to raise his voice. “Now, Leina!”

Yes, I need to help my mother. She’ll be hurt if she’s out here when the soldiers take Seb.

Seb sends me a soft smile. “It’s alright, Leina.” He starts to pass Mother to me, but he’s having a hard time escaping her grip.

I’m frozen to the spot. Seb lets out a mirthless laugh. “Come help me,” he says and nods his head toward my hand. “And let go of your death grip on the scythe. It won’t do us any favors if they think you’re holding a weapon.”

My gaze falls to my scythe. It’s as long as I am tall, with a blade I sharpened myself until my fingers bled. A sharp blade cuts through the wheat faster, I reasoned as I sat hunched over the whetstone hour after hour grinding the blade into a razor. But ... I relax my fingers and roll the snath around in my hand, sending the bladed hook at the end swirling.

A weapon. Yes.

It’s the key unlocking this new, dangerous part of my mind, and I start moving.

But not toward my mother.



“The Selencians are a sullen, stubborn breed. They work the fields well enough when driven, though they complain of hunger as if such things matter in baseborn creatures. Best to keep them busy; idleness breeds discontent. How are the children? Tell little Warren to mind his lessons and kiss Kaelis for me.”

- Letter from Captain Vorrine Lance to his wife Lastelle in Year 582 of the Eternal Wars