

NOBODY'S GODDESS

NEVER VEIL

BOOK ONE

AMY MCNULTY



PROLOGUE

WHEN I HAD REAL FRIENDS, I was the long-lost queen of the elves.

A warrior queen who hitched up her skirt and wielded a blade. Who held her retainers in thrall. Until they left me for their goddesses.

Love. A curse that snatches friends away.

One day, when only two of my retainers remained, the old crone who lived on the northern outskirts of the village was our prey. It was twenty points if you spotted her. Fifty points if you got her to look at you. A hundred points if she started screaming at you.

You won for life if you got close enough to touch her.

“Noll, please don’t do this,” whispered Jurij from behind the wooden kitten mask covering his face. Really, his mother still put him in kitten masks, even though eleven was too old for a boy to be wearing kittens and bunnies. Especially ones that looked likely to get eaten for breakfast by as much as a weasel.

“Shut up, I want to see this!” cried Darwyn. Never a kitten, Darwyn always wore a wolf mask. Yet behind the nasty tooth-bearing wolf grin—one of my father’s better masks—he was very much a fraidycat.

Darwyn shoved Jurij aside so he could crouch behind the bush that was our threadbare cover. Jurij nearly toppled over, but I caught him and set him gently upright. Sometimes I didn’t

know if Jurij realized who was supposed to be serving whom. Queens shouldn't have to keep retainers from falling.

"Quiet, both of you." I scanned the horizon. Nothing. All was still against the northern mountains save for the old crone's musty shack with its weakly smoking chimney. The edges of my skirt had grazed the dusty road behind us, and I hitched it up some more so my mother wouldn't notice later. If she didn't want me to get the blasted thing dirty, she should have let me wear Jurij's trousers, like I had been that morning. That got me a rap on the back of the head with a wooden spoon, a common occurrence when I was queen. It made me look too much like a boy, she scolded, and that would cause a panic.

"Are you going or not?" Darwyn was not one for patience.

"If you're so eager, why don't *you* go?" I snapped back.

Darwyn shook his wolf-head. "Oh, no, not me."

I grinned. "That's because you're scared."

Darwyn's muffled voice grew louder. He stood beside me and puffed out his chest. "I am not! *I've* been in the commune."

I poked toward his chest with Elgar, my trusty elf-blade. "Liar! You have not."

Darwyn jumped back, evading my blow. "I have too! My uncle lives there!" He swatted his hand at Elgar. "Get that stick away from me."

"It's not a stick!" Darwyn never believed me when I said that Elgar was the blade of a warrior. It just happened to resemble a tree branch.

Jurij's quiet voice entered the fray. "Your uncle lives there? That's awful." I was afraid he might cry and the tears would get caught up in the black material that covered his eyes. I didn't want him to drown behind the wooden kitty face. He'd vanish into thin air like everyone

else did when they died, and then we'd be staring down at Jurij's clothes and the little kitten mask on the ground, and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to stop myself from giggling. Some death for a warrior.

Darwyn shrugged and ran a hand over his elbow. "He moved in there before I was born. I think a weaver lady was his goddess. It's not so strange. Didn't your aunt send her man there, Jurij?"

Jurij was sniffing. *Sniffing*. He tried to rub at his nose, but every time he moved the back of his hand up to his face, it just clunked against the button that represented the kitten's nose.

I sighed and patted Jurij on the back. "A queen's retainer must never cry, Jurij."

Darwyn laughed. "Are you still playing that? You're no queen, Noll!"

I stopped patting Jurij and balled my hands into fists. "Be quiet, Darwyn! You used to play it, too!"

Darwyn put two fingers over his wolf-mask mouth, a gesture we had long ago decided would stand for the boys sticking out their tongues. Although Darwyn was the only one who ever did it as of late. "Like I'd want to do what some *girl* tells me! Girls aren't even blessed by love!"

"Of course they are!" It was my turn to put the two fingers over my mouth. I had a tongue, but a traitorous retainer like Darwyn wasn't worthy of the effort it took to stick it out. "Just wait until you find your goddess, and then we'll see! If she turns out to be me, I'll make sure you rot away in the commune with the rest of the unloved men."

Darwyn lunged forward and tackled me. My head dragged against the bush before it hit the ground, but it still hurt; I could feel the swelling underneath the tangled knots in my hair. Elgar snapped as I tried to get a grip on my attacker. I kicked and shoved him, and for a moment, I won the upper hand and rolled on top of him, almost punching him in the face. Remembering

the mask, I settled for giving him a good smack in the side, but then he kicked upward and caught me in the chest, sending me backward.

“Stop!” pleaded Jurij. He was standing between us now, the little timid kitten watching first one friend and then the other, like we were a dangling string in motion.

“Stay out of this!” Darwyn jumped to his feet and pointed at me. “She thinks she’s so high and mighty, and she’s not even someone’s goddess yet!”

“I’m only twelve, idiot! How many goddesses are younger than thirteen?” A few, but not many. I scrambled to my feet and sent my tongue out at him. It felt good knowing he couldn’t do the same to me, after all. My head ached. I didn’t want him to see the tears forming in my eyes, though, so I ground my teeth once I drew my tongue inward.

“Yeah, well, it’ll be horrible for whoever finds the goddess in you!” Darwyn made to lunge at me again, but this time Jurij shoved both his hands at Darwyn’s chest to stop him.

“Just stop,” commanded Jurij. Finally. That was a good retainer.

My eyes wandered to the old crone’s cottage. No sign of her. How could she fail to hear the epic struggle outside her door? Maybe she wasn’t real. Maybe just seeing her was worth twenty points after all.

“Get out of my way, you baby!” shouted Darwyn. “So what happens if I pull off your mask when your *queen* is looking, huh? Will you die?”

His greedy fingers reached toward Jurij’s wooden animal face. Even from behind, I could see the mask tip dangerously to one side, the strap holding it tightly against Jurij’s dark curls shifting. The strap broke free, flying up over his head.

My mouth opened to scream. My hands reached up to cover my eyes. My eyelids strained to close, but it felt as if the moment had slowed and I could never save him in time. Such simple things. Close your eyes. Cover your eyes. Scream.

“DO NOT FOOL WITH SUCH THINGS, CHILD!”

A dark, dirty shawl went flying onto the bush that we had ruined during our fight.

I came back to life. My head and Darwyn's wolf mask spun toward the source of the sound. As my head turned, I saw—even though I knew better than to look—Jurij crumple to the ground, clinging both arms across his face desperately because his life depended on it.

“Your eyes better be closed, girl!” The old crone bellowed. Her own eyes were squeezed together.

I jumped and shut my eyes tightly.

“Hold that shawl tightly over your face, boy, until you can wear your mask properly!” screamed the old crone. “Off with you both, boys! Now! Off with you!”

I heard Jurij and Darwyn scrambling, the rustle of the bush and the stomps of their boots as they fled, panting. I thought I heard a scream—not from Jurij, but from Darwyn. He was the real fraidycat. An old crone was no match for the elf queen's retainers. But the queen herself was far braver. So I told myself over and over in my head.

When the last of their footsteps faded away, and I was sure that Jurij was safe from my stare, I looked.

Eyes. Huge, bulbous, dark brown eyes. Staring directly into mine.

The crone's face was so close I could smell the shriveled decay from her mouth. She grabbed me by the shoulders, shaking me. “What were you thinking? You held that boy's life in your hands! Yet you stood there like a fool, just starin' as his mask came off.”

My heart beat faster, and I gasped for more air, but I wanted to avoid inhaling her stench. “I’m sorry, Ingrith,” I mumbled. I thought if I used her real name, if I let her lecture me like all the other adults, it would help me break free from her grasp. I twisted and pulled, but I couldn’t bring myself to touch her. I had this notion that if I touched her, my fingers would decay.

“Sorry is just a word. Sorry changes nothing.”

“Let me go.” I could still feel her dirty nails on my skin.

“You watch yourself, girl.”

“Let me go!”

The crone’s lips grew tight and puckered. Her fingers relaxed ever so slightly. “You children don’t realize. The lord is watching. Always watching—”

I knew what she was going to say, the words so familiar to me that I knew them as well as if they were my own. “And he will not abide villagers who forget the first goddess’s teachings.” The sentence seemed to loosen the crone’s fingers. She opened her mouth to speak, but I broke free and ran.

My eyes fell to the grass below my feet as I cut across the fields to get away from the monster. On the borders of the eastern woods was a lone cottage, home of Gideon the woodcarver, a warm and comfortable place so much fuller of life than the shack I left behind me. When I was near the woods, I could look up freely since the trees blocked the eastern mountains from view. But until I got closer...

“Noll! Wait up!”

My eyes snapped upward on instinct. I saw the upper boughs of the trees and almost screamed, my gaze falling back to the grass beneath my feet. I stopped running and let the gentle rustlings of footsteps behind me catch up.

“Jurij, please.” I sighed and turned around to face him, my eyes still on the grass and the pair of small dark boots that covered his feet. Somehow he managed to step delicately through the grass, not disturbing a single one of the lilies that covered the hilltops. “Don’t scare me like that. I almost looked at the castle.”

The toe of Jurij’s boot dug a little into the dirt. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Is your mask on?”

The boot stopped moving, and the tip of a black shawl dropped into my view. “Oh. Yeah.”

I shook my head and raised my eyes. There was no need to fear looking up to the west. In the distance, the mountains that encircled our village soared far beyond the western fields of crops. I liked the mountains. From the north, the south, and the west, they embraced our village with their jagged peaks. In the south, they watched over our fields of livestock. In the north, they towered above a quarry for copper and stone. And in the east, they led home and to the woods. But no girl or woman could ever look up when facing the east. Like the faces of men and boys before their Returnings, just a glance at the castle that lay beyond the woods against the eastern mountains spelled doom. The earth would shake and threaten to consume whoever broke the commandment not to look.

It made walking home a bit of a pain, to say the least.

“Tell me something important like that before you sneak up on me.”

Jurij’s kitten mask was once again tight against his face, if askew. The strap was a bit tangled in his dark curls and the pointed tip of one of his ears. “Right. Sorry.”

He held out the broken pieces of Elgar wrapped in the dirty black shawl. He seemed very retainer-like. I liked that. "I went to give this back to the—the lady. She wasn't there, but you left Elgar."

I snatched the pieces from Jurij's hands. "You went back to the shack? What were you going to say? 'Sorry we were spying on you pretending you were a monster, thanks for the dirty old rag?'"

"No." Jurij crumpled up the shawl and tucked it under his belt. A long trail of black cloth tumbled out immediately, making Jurij look like he had on half a skirt.

I laughed. "Where's Darwyn?"

"Home."

Of course. I found out later that Darwyn had whined straight to his mother that "nasty old Noll" almost knocked *his* mask off. It was a great way to get noticed when you had countless brothers and a smitten mother and father standing between you and any form of attention. But it didn't have the intended effect on me. I was used to lectures, and besides, there was something more important bothering me by then.

I picked up my feet to carry me back home.

Jurij skipped forward to join me. One of his boots stumbled as we left the grasses behind and hit the dirt path. "What happened with you and the crone?"

I gripped the pieces of Elgar tighter in my fist. "Nothing." I stopped, relieved that we'd finally gotten close enough to the woods that I could face forward. I put an arm on Jurij's shoulder to stop him. "But I touched her." Or she touched me. "That means I win forever."

The kitten face cocked a little sideways. "You always win."

“Of course. I’m the queen.” I tucked the broken pieces of Elgar into my apron sash. Elgar was more of a title, bestowed on an endless number of worthy sticks, but in those days I wouldn’t have admitted that to Jurij. “Come on. I’ll give you a head start. Race you to the cavern!”

“The cavern? But it’s—”

“Too late! Your head start’s over!” I kicked my feet up and ran as if that was all my legs knew how to do. The cool breeze slapping across my face felt lovely as it flew inside my nostrils and mouth. I rushed past my home, not bothering to look inside the open door.

“Stop! Stop! Noll, you stop this instant!”

The words were something that could easily come out of a mother’s mouth, but Mother had a little more patience than that. And her voice didn’t sound like a fragile little bird chirping at the sun’s rising. “Noll!”

I was just an arm’s length from the start of the trees, but I stopped, clutching the sharp pain that kicked me in the side.

“Oh dear!” Elfriede walked out of our house, the needle and thread she was no doubt using to embroider some useless pattern on one of the aprons still pinched between two fingers. My sister was a little less than a year older than me, but to my parents’ delight (and disappointment with me), she was a hundred times more responsible.

“Boy, your mask!” Elfriede never did learn any of my friends’ names. Not that I could tell her Roslyn from her Marden, either. One giggling, delicate bird was much like another.

She walked up to Jurij, who had just caught up behind me. She covered her eyes with her needle-less hand, but I could see her peeking between her fingers. I didn’t think that would actually protect him if the situation were as dire as she seemed to think.

“It’s crooked.” Elfriede’s voice was hoarse, almost trembling. I rolled my eyes.

Jurij patted his head with both hands until he found the bit of the strap stuck on one of his ears. He pulled it down and twisted the mask until it lined up evenly.

I could hear Elfriede’s sigh of relief from where I was standing. She let her fingers fall from her face. “Thank the goddess.” She considered Jurij for a moment. “There’s a little tear in your strap.”

Without asking, she closed the distance between them and began sewing the small tear even as the mask sat on his head. From how tall she stood above him, she might have been ten years older instead of only two.

I walked back toward them, letting my hands fall. “Don’t you think that’s a little stupid? What if the mask slips while you’re doing that?”

Elfriede’s cheeks darkened and she yanked the needle up, pulling her instrument free of the thread and tucking the extra bit into the mask strap. She stood back and glared at me. “Don’t you talk to me about being stupid, Noll. All that running isn’t safe when you’re with boys. Look how his mask was moving.”

His mask had moved for even more dangerous reasons than a little run, but I knew better than to tell tattletale Elfriede that. “How would *you* know what’s safe when you’re with boys? You’re already thirteen, and no one has found the goddess in you!” Darwyn’s taunt was worth reusing, especially since I knew my sister would be more upset about it than I ever was.

Elfriede bit her lip. “Go ahead and kill your friends, then, for all I care!” The bird wasn’t so beautiful and fragile where I was concerned.

She retreated into the house and slammed the door behind her. I wrapped my hand around Jurij's arm, pulling him eastward. "Come on. Let's go. There're bound to be more monsters in the cavern."

Jurij didn't give beneath my pull. He wouldn't move.

"Jurij?"

I knew right then, somewhere in my mind, what had happened. But I was twelve. And Jurij was my last real friend. I knew he'd leave me one day like the others, but on some level, I didn't really believe it yet.

Jurij stood stock still, even as I wrenched my arm harder and harder to get him to move.

"Oh for—*Jurij!*" I yelled, dropping my hands from his arm in frustration. "Ugh. I wish I was your goddess just so I could get you to obey me. Even if that means I'd have to put up with all that—*yuck*—smooching." I shivered at the thought.

At last Jurij moved, if only to lift his other arm, to run his fingers across the strap that Elfriede had mended. She was gone from my sight, but Jurij would never see another.

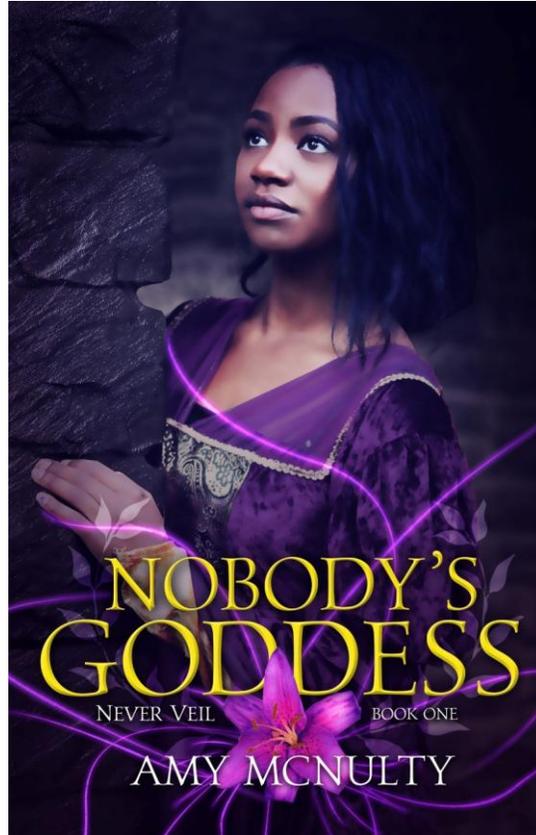
It struck them all. Sometime around Jurij's age, the boys' voices cracked, shifting from high to deep and back again in a matter of a few words. They went from little wooden-faced animals always shorter than you to young men on their way to towering over you. And one day, at one moment, at some age, earlier for some and later for others, they looked at a girl they'd probably seen thousands of times before and simply ceased to be. At least, they weren't who I knew them to be ever again.

And as with so many of my friends before Jurij, in that moment all other girls ceased to matter. I was nothing to him now, an afterthought, a shadow, a memory.

No.

Not him.

My dearest, my most special friend of all, now doomed to live or die by the choice of the fragile little bird who'd stopped to mend his strap.



Nobody's Goddess, [winner of The Romance Reviews Summer 2016 Readers' Choice Award for Young Adult Romance](#):

In a village of masked men, each man is compelled to love only one woman and to follow the commands of his “goddess” without question. A woman may reject the only man who will love her if she pleases, but she will be alone forever. A man must stay masked until his goddess returns his love—and if she can’t or won’t, he remains masked forever.

Seventeen-year-old Noll’s childhood friends have paired off and her closest companion, Jurij, found his goddess in Noll’s own sister. Desperate to find a way to break this ancient spell, Noll instead discovers why no man has ever chosen her. She is in fact the goddess of the mysterious lord of the village, a man who refuses to let Noll have her right as a woman to spurn him.

Thus begins a dangerous game between the choice of woman and the magic of man. The stakes are no less than freedom and happiness, life and death—and neither Noll nor the veiled lord is willing to lose.

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