



To Sway a Rogue (Tempting Thieves)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A thief queen, an undead rogue, and a vampiric assassin walk into an inn...

A thousand years ago, Talyria was a queen of thieves. Robbed of everything by a nearly eternal sleep and a powerful necromancer who is still on the loose, she vows to reclaim what she once lost. But that's easier said than done when faced with the crippling fear of that necromancer finding her again. Especially since a new crime lord seems to have taken her place as the ruler of the criminal underworld, and he won't be giving up his power easily.

Forced to lay low while she plots her revenge, Talyria finds an unwitting innkeeper's son to marry her and pass her off as his brand-new bride. He has no idea of her secrets. But Victor has secrets of his own. Like that he's actually a thief, and the fact that he isn't fully alive anymore. Or that he's now the host of the demigod of chaos.

Corallin is the daughter of the famed crime lord Elvis the Eel and she is on the hunt for a spellbook. Her quest has brought her through a blizzard to the door of Talyria and Victor's inn. Little does she know; she isn't the only thief who is staying the night.

Or the only killer.

With a terrible snowstorm brewing outside, everyone finds themselves trapped in the inn until dawn. But as bodies begin piling up within Victor, Talyria, and Corallin realize that they aren't the only ones harboring a secret.

And one of those secrets is going to get them all killed.

May the best thief survive.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:38 am

Chapter One

Talyria

“Well, Mrs. Andreev, here it is,” Victor says proudly with a grand wave of his hand. “The Sea’s Bounty please forgive the name; it was my sister’s idea, and she was five years at the time. Honestly, I don’t know why father even let her name it.”

He turns to me, his brown eyes twinkling excitedly as the corner of his mouth turns up. “But I suppose you can just call it home.”

Surprisingly enough, Victor’s words actually cause me to feel a pinch of guilt rather than the usual smugness I feel when I’ve gotten the better of someone. As the queen of thieves, I’ve done many dark deeds and I’ve stolen many things, but never a heart.

And usually, I don’t have to look my mark in the eye afterward. I certainly don’t go home with them.

To Victor, I’m his wife, somehow, he has decided that I’m the great love of his life in such a short amount of time, and to me he is just an easy way out. Although it does help that he is fairly easy on the eyes.

Not to mention that he’s kind, his eagerness to share his home with me is endearing, even if it does make me feel emotions that I’d rather avoid, like guilt.

I glance toward the building that Victor gestured to. The inn does look like a fine building. It’s large and the exterior at least appears well put together. Ready to stand

against the winds and storms that come from the sea here at this bustling port town.

Considering that just days ago, I was penniless, on the run, fearing for my life, and seething—I know that I could have done much worse.

Victor's heart and my hand in marriage were a small price to pay to have a place to call home. I married the heir of a successful inn for security, stability, and anonymity which are all things I need desperately right now.

Fortunately for me, he was smitten enough to marry me immediately. Although I'm beginning to gather that's a human custom linked to their shorter lifespans.

"I hope you'll find it to your liking," Victor continues, blissfully oblivious to being used by me. "I know it looks quite large, but we don't live in the whole building. Have to have room for the guests. And of course, we'll be sharing with my dad and sister as well as my cousin. But we'll have our own room."

I reach out a hand resting it on his forearm. More to get him to cease his nervous prattling than anything. "I'm sure it will be lovely."

He hesitates a second before he reaches up and awkwardly pats my hand. "Only the best for the Andreevs."

I don't know if I'll ever get used to being called Mrs. Andreev. Especially since the passing on of a family name is a largely Lowlander custom. The Highlanders carry the name of their parents, and the elves either choose or earn their name.

I am Talyria Undying, but I suppose since I'm trying to not be discovered I'll just have to accept the name Andreev as it is offered to me. Even if Talyria Andreev is a fairly lackluster name. At least I can keep my first name. With a last name like Andreev, no one will expect the Talyria to be me.

Not that there is anyone out there looking for me save for one.

The necromancer .

Creed Kotov. I've been his prisoner for nearly twenty years. I don't know how I came under his control; I was trapped in a collapsed cavern for so long that I fell into a coma from not having anyone to satiate my vampiric thirst for blood. When I woke up, I was in his prison. Not only did he keep me locked away for so long, but he also somehow found a way to sap my vampirism out of me.

I hadn't known that it was even a possibility for someone to no longer be a vampire. Such a blessing, or curse depending on who you asked, was believed to be irreversible.

One bite and then forever.

Without it, it feels as though I'm missing a part of myself. I've lost so much I don't even know how to start rebuilding. All I know is that I must rebuild. To admit defeat is to allow men like Creed Kotov to win, and I could never let such a thing happen.

However, while I come to terms with my lack of vampirism, and this strange new world around me—much altered from how it was before I fell into my coma—I need a place to stay and someone to be.

And so, I'll be Victor's new wife, hiding in plain sight.

"Talyria?" he asks, his voice holding a small waver of uncertainty.

I blink, realizing that I have been staring at the inn wordlessly. I turn a smile to him. "My apologies, I was just thinking."

“Happy thoughts I hope?” He raises his eyebrows as he smiles at me.

“Would you expect anything less?” I say, trying to match his hopeful, slightly shy, and yet eager expression. I’m not quite sure if I manage it.

Victor places a hand against the small of my back, a featherlight unsure sort of touch as he steps forward. With his other hand he gestures to the streets. “I grew up in this town. We are the last, largest port city before the spice islands. Many a guard passes through here.”

I press my lips together. He glances at me, tilting his head. “What is it?”

I debate a moment what to say but decide that the best lies are usually concealed by truth. “I don’t like guards.” Then because that sounds too much like what a criminal would say, I hurry to add. “I find that they usually abuse their power and have little care for the people that the laws they are upholding are supposed to protect.”

Victor’s eyes dart to the side, an evasive gesture if I’ve ever seen one, before he says, “Not all guards are like that.” I’m considering asking him why he is suddenly so shiftier when he clears his throat. “Anyway, we also get our fair share of sailors as well as just the regular townsfolk to patronize our inn. Not to sound too sure of myself, but it’s a fine establishment. My father does a wonderful job running it, and someday, I’ll take over.”

I note that he doesn’t sound confident or pleased by this assessment. More resigned to his fate.

“Are you glad to be home?” I ask as I turn to him, wondering not for the first time about the man I married. Our courtship was a whirlwind to say the least. We met on the road; Victor was traveling home and I lied and said I was going in the same direction. Our journey took us some days, and in that time, Victor must have decided

he liked my company well enough because he asked me to marry him.

I've heard that the humans have short courtships and hasty weddings, something about their belief that marriage continues into death and their fear that they will die before they are wed and thus separated from their beloved in the next life. Elves are not so, at least not my people the Higher Elves. We typically live twice as long as humans, so long as we aren't being murdered.

As such, we usually take at least a year to make certain that we have chosen the right partner. But I didn't have a year and marrying Victor gave me a place to live, an income at an inn, and food every night.

If it turns out I dislike him, well that's fine too. I'll outlive him anyway so at least I'll get out of this marriage without a broken heart. Unlike my last one, which still causes me pain even a thousand years later. Perhaps it is proof that mortals, even elves, were not meant to live forever, but I have spent much of my life as an unchanging vampire. Even without that, I'm not certain I can age because I am half Lower Elf and they are known for having such long lifespans that they are considered immortal.

An inheritance from a father I never knew, I suppose.

The corner of his mouth turns up. "I'm always glad to be home again. I enjoy being able to travel and see the world, but I'm only able to do so knowing that I can return to my father, sister, and our inn whenever I choose. Speaking of, I think it's time you meet your family by law."

I smile slightly at that. It's been so long since I've had a family. Although for me, it does not feel that way. I don't remember anything that happened in the thousand years I slept, but that just means that the pain of the loss of my family is still fresh.

A sister-by-law won't replace the sister I lost just like I don't expect Victor to replace

Petrov. But something is still better than nothing, and it's a start to rebuilding the life I once had.

I will settle for nothing less than everything that was once mine.

"We had better get hurrying," Victor says, oblivious to the turn of my thoughts.

I pause, frowning as I glance at a man in a knit cap as he places boards on his windows. "What's going on?"

"What isn't these days?" he asks with a snort. I turn to him startled, and he shrugs. "There's a necromancer that has been reanimating the dead in these parts. The constable can't seem to catch him so there's a curfew now. Anyone out after dark will be arrested."

"Really?" I ask surprised.

Victor nods. "At least that's how it was before I left, and given the way that the constable handles things, I doubt it's been resolved anytime soon. Sometimes it seems like the entire world has gone jetting insane."

That's something we can agree on at least. What Victor doesn't realize though is that it went mad a thousand years ago when my people's halls were raided by allied men and Lower Elves that wished to eradicate us. I was forced to watch in horror as I lost everything, and suddenly nothing made sense.

I try to tamp down the horror I feel at the mention of a necromancer. There are many necromancers, so it isn't necessarily him. Besides, from the way that Victor spoke it sounds like this necromancer has been practicing in this area for some time.

Unless Creed moved just after my escape this couldn't be him.

“And to top it all off, there’s a storm coming in off the sea,” he continues as he raises the collar of his shirt up as a nippy gust of wind blows over us. “It will be a bad one.”

Sure enough there are dark clouds rolling in. I’m not sure if I would have noticed them if Victor hadn’t brought up the weather. “How can you know that?”

“I grew up off the sea,” he replies with a smirk.

I glance up at the hazy sun, still visible even though it has sunk far lower in the sky than it was when we stopped at a lone temple outside of town and asked a priest to wed us. The day is almost over. My first day married.

Red light reflects on the mountain peaks visible over the village, they jut into the sky like upside down fangs.

“But never you worry, there’s the inn just ahead. Let’s get you inside,” he says with a smile. “It’s time to meet the family.”

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Chapter Two

Victor

“What a lovely inn, burn it all to the ground.”

I ignore the voice as I push open the doors to the inn, holding it open as Talyria steps through. I follow her in and am met by the sound of the lute. Oncoming storm or not, my father's inn is still the only real place to spend your evening in this town. With plenty of flowing drinks and the companionship of other patrons, many people visit here nightly, even those who live just down the road.

I immediately spot Estelle, sitting in her usual spot, her long brown hair wrapped once around itself to keep it out of her face as she works in the bakery all day with her parents.

I give my head a hard shake when I realize that my eyes immediately sought her out. I'm a married man, besides Estelle has had since we were children to ever reciprocate my feelings. I wasn't enough for her, no one in this small town is. She dreams of a daring swashbuckling adventurer who will sweep her off her feet. I think it's part of the reason why I kept throwing myself from place to place. I went from the Academy of Magickers to join the guards, all in an attempt to be interesting enough for Estelle to see me as more than just a friend.

My desperate attempt to win her love is what brought me right into the path of that kraken and probably the reason I married Talyria so suddenly. After my death experience, I'd promised myself I'd stop trying to become the man I thought Estelle

wanted. I was only putting myself in dangerous situations anyway. However, it's still hard to get over the woman I'd pined for since I was six, so I figured what better way than to marry the first stranger I came across who seemed remotely interested in me.

As an aside, I do blame Likho for my poor decision-making skills.

One of Estelle's hapless admirers is sitting across from her, another regular. Lev was a few years younger than Estelle and me, although his brother was our schoolmate. His older brother Gregory and I always clashed. He'd pick on me, but then I found out it was just because he was being loyal to his younger brother and knew I liked Estelle too. Gregory and I eventually reached a sort of comradery. Perhaps not quite a friendship, but it was him who got me into the assignment I had in the guards after my stint at the college failed as it proved I had no magical aptitude.

He died on that ship too...

Lev looks up as I walk in, and I give him a small nod. He presses his lips together and then turns back to Estelle. "Are you going to be heading home soon?"

"And be forced to help clean the bakery?" she asks with a laugh. "Skyhold no."

So, Estelle will probably be staying the night. It certainly isn't the first time she has, after all we are an inn and even though she lives just down the street, she likes the independence of staying anywhere than under her parents' roof. Hey, it will be more coins in my father's coffers.

I just wished it wasn't so awkward to have to spend my wedding night under the same roof as the woman that I've pined for most my life.

I quickly turn my attention to the rest of the inn. We have two town guards present who are so deep in their cups that they will likely not be making it to their quarters

before curfew.

Other than them, there are a few other people that I don't recognize. A massive Highlander man, sitting alone in the corner with a book open in front of him. It's a bit of a strange sight. He looks like a barbarian, a follower of his people's old ways with half his head shaved and the rest bound up in a braided bun. Despite the cold, he is sleeveless giving credence to what I've heard that Highlanders don't properly experience the cold, and one whole arm is covered in ink as a pattern of tattoos weave their way up his arm telling a story that probably only he can understand.

There's also a short, nervous looking man wearing orange robes as he sits at the bar. Orange is normally a color reserved for the priests, so I wonder which god he serves, and why he is here instead of spending the night in someplace that has less iniquity.

And of course, our bard. My cousin who took a few lessons before my father hired her. I do think she is getting better... finally.

We have certainly been busier, but I suppose the storm can be blamed for that. Many of our customers are locals who spend the evening here, drinking and socializing with their neighbors like Estelle and Lev. However, most of our other regulars have enough good sense to be holed up at right now.

The other half of our customers are usually sailors, and there are no ships coming in with a storm like that.

It makes me glad that I took this trip. After the disastrous end to my career as a guardsman, I've been between jobs. So, I picked up a hobby of liberating other people from their coins.

My father has no idea that the money I've been sending home is stolen or what my little trips have actually been to travel to Reglagrad and other places where everyone

has too heavy of coin purses.

What he doesn't know won't hurt him, and what would hurt him is if I don't send money home to him.

It's Likho's fault, anyway, that I turned to such a dishonest trade after being a guard. He's the one who suggested it. He said that being honest never got me anything but a broken neck and a childhood friend who flirts with every sailor that docks in our town.

"I'm just the voice inside your head. You're the one who acts on it."

Sure, because it's so easy to refuse a demigod. Let alone one that has taken up residence in your mind.

Still, he sometimes has some half-decent ideas even though I do have to sort through all his crazed comments to try to get me to cause as much chaos as possible.

I pull my coin purse out of my satchel and step up to the bar, placing it just in front of my father who is hunched over scrubbing vehemently at a stain on the grainy wood. He startles and glances up, his bearded face breaking into a wide grin as he sees me. "Victor, my lad! Your timing is impeccable; you beat the storm."

I hold my arms out, "What can I say—?" I begin, but my father is already done greeting me and is back to his role as an innkeeper. He thrusts a flagon full of a frothy drink in my hand.

"Good, you can make yourself useful. Our guest Lief needs another drink."

I turn in a half circle. "And Lief is..."

“He’s the only Highlander here who isn’t a regular, you dolt,” my father says as he returns to scrubbing the table. “He’s the golden-haired fellow in the corner.”

“Oh, the one who looks like he drinks out of skulls,” I reply.

“Keep your voice down, lad,” my father hisses even though no one can hear anything over dear cousin Vera’s lilting voice. “Besides, I’m sure they don’t keep up that barbaric practice anymore. We live in a civilized age.”

“Yeah sure,” I reply with a snort. “The dead have an unfortunate habit of walking around now, but at least we’re civilized.”

“Lucky for you, eh?”

I take a step forward, but trip and nearly spill the drink when I see Talyria standing there with her hand on her hip.

“Oh,” I say after a moment.

She gives a little nod. “Oh, yes.”

I wince. I’d blame Likho for the holes in my memory. After all, it’s exhausting to share a whole other entity in your mind. Things are bound to slip through the cracks. The only problem is that Talyria doesn’t happen to know about Likho.

Or the fact that I died because I was a guardsman.

And on the subject of what she does or doesn’t know, she also doesn’t know that I’m a thief.

Really, all she knows is that I’m the son of an innkeeper and it would probably be

best off keeping it that way.

“I want to make a comment for future reference that lying to your wife was not my idea. You came up with that all on your own.”

Sure, because it’s so easy to distinguish between thoughts in my head all the time. Sometimes I can’t keep track of where Likho ends and I begin.

“Who is this?” father asks, leaning forward on the bar. “Need a room and meal, miss?”

“I was kind of hoping for something of the sort,” she replies dryly.

“That will be six crowns—” father begins.

I whirl on my heel, moving so fast that this time the frothing liquid spills out on my fingers. “Actually, this one will be on the house.”

“On account of what?” father demands. “You know this isn’t good business, no matter how pretty you think she is. Although I’ll admit it’s a relief to see you starting to notice someone other than—”

I clear my throat, cutting my father off before he brings up how many times I’ve given Estelle a discount. “On account of her being my wife.”

Naturally as soon as I state that, Vera stops singing and the whole inn is quiet. Quiet enough for everyone to hear. It takes every ounce of my willpower to not glance over at Estelle to see how she reacts to this. After all, what she thinks doesn’t matter anymore.

I smile slightly, swallowing hard at my father’s shocked face. “Surprise.” Then like

the coward I am, I turn quickly and hurry to give our guest his drink. After all, the man has waited long enough for his ale, and it just isn't good business to keep a guest waiting.

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Chapter Three

Talyria

I glare after Victor as he scurries off, leaving me to deal with the aftermath of his statement and to meet his father officially as his daughter-in-law.

The man—I don't even know his name—stares at me with his mouth agape. I muster what I hope is a smile, I'm a bit out of practice, but before I can think of something to say he lunges forward.

For a second, my hand flies to where I would have kept a dagger in the past before I realize that I only just recently escaped from my imprisonment. Getting a new knife should have been the top of my list of priorities, but instead I wound up with a husband.

However, the man simply wraps me in a hug. I stiffen a bit at the unfamiliar contact, but he doesn't seem to notice. Instead, he pulls back bracing his hands on my shoulders. "That boy of mine," he says with a laugh. "I swear by the gods I can't keep up with him every time he changes things. But at least, this time it is for the better. Hello, hello!" He pulls away resting a hand on his chest. "Oh, but where are my manors. My name is Sasha, I'm sure my son failed to mention his old man's name. And Mika...."

He trails off and turns his head, giving me a better view of his impressive sideburns. I certainly hope that Victor sticks with the beard. "Mika!"

“Coming!” I hear a small voice call and then a little brown-haired girl comes racing out of one of the back rooms, a broom in hand. “Just cleaning out the spare room, Pa; what did you need?”

“I wanted to introduce you to your new sister!” Sasha booms, clearly more excited about this than the rest of us combined.

He places a hand on my shoulder, clapping it so hard that it rattles my teeth. I force a smile.

Mika wrinkles her nose, clearly confused.

“I married your brother,” I supply since apparently Sasha is too busy offering drinks to the whole room to celebrate.

Mika doesn’t look convinced, but with Sasha’s generous announcement the whole room is now paying very close attention to me.

“Victor married?” a girl asks with a snort. “Who can imagine it. I’m surprised he found someone willing to take him.” She holds up her tankard as if to toast me. “You’re a better woman than most.”

Victor chuckles slightly, but the sound is strained as he steps up beside me, resting a hand on my hip. “That’s my friend Estelle. We grew up together. She’s practically my sister .”

“I thought I was your sister,” Mika replies with a pout.

“Oh, yes how could I forget!” Victor says as he steps past me and sweeps his younger sister up into a hug. She lets out a squeal and kicks her legs as she buries her face in his shoulder.

I feel a slight pang as I watch him. Despite Sasha's words, Mika is not my sister. I had a sister. And she is lost like everything else I once held dear.

Victor places his sister back to the ground and finally turns to me. "Everyone, this is my wife Talyria."

I force another small smile as all eyes in the inn remain focused on me. I'll admit, I didn't expect to be introduced to an entire inn. It's not exactly the lying low I was expecting, but now that I'm here seeing the Andreevs and their establishment, I can tell that it will be a good cover. It will be easy to blend in as just another Andreev, another person in the inn.

"Cheersish, I'll drink to that!" a man at the bar says, clearly intoxicated. His armor under a cloth overcoat stitched with an insignia gives him away as a guard. I feel my nose wrinkle at the thought. I'm glad I married an inn keeper's son at least.

Nothing is worse than a guard.

Mika scuttles away, getting the extra drinks for everyone. I'm not sure what I think about such a young girl handling alcoholic drinks, but she seems to know what she's doing. Sasha wipes his hands off on his apron as he turns to me. "Now, girl let's talk. You have to tell us more about yourself."

"Yeah," the bard says as she steps over, depositing her lute behind the counter and taking a cup from Mika. Given her resemblance to the other Andreevs, I would say that she is probably a relative although I don't know how closely related. "How did you meet our Victor?"

"Well..." I begin. I glance over at Victor, but he's picked up Mika's broom and is now working to sweep the floor like he hadn't just been traveling for days on end.

Like it isn't our wedding night.

Like there isn't anything else he should be doing, such as—oh, I don't know—introducing me to his family.

I turn back to his family. “We have a pack of wolves to thank for bringing us together actually.”

“Wolves?” Mika breathes.

“How romantic,” the girl Estelle sighs. I notice that Victor looks up at that. So, I suppose he's paying more attention than he seems.

“What do the wolves have to do with it?” the bard asks, wrinkling her nose in a manner that looks just like Mika's expression from earlier further confirming my suspicion that they are related.

“It was due to their savage nature and how they had been attacking other travelers on the road that we decided to travel together.” I shrug and Victor doesn't correct my simplification of the events. “I suppose after a while on the road, we started to fall in love and that's that.”

“That's most certainly not that, lass,” Sasha says. “I'm an innkeeper, I live off the gossip. Give me all the juicy details.”

I blow out a small breath as I look into each of their eager faces. They aren't going to settle for a half-told story. It doesn't look like I'm going anywhere until I've sated their curiosity.

This is going to be a long night...

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Chapter Four

Victor

Water surrounds me, I am held suspended in it. And yet I feel nothing.

“Such a pity... such a waste.” The voice doesn’t come from the outside world. Instead, it seems to permeate from within, rattling around in my skull. As if it was my own thought, maybe it was...

But yet at the same time there is also a sense of otherness to the voice.

I know it doesn’t make any sense, but then not many things make sense. After all, I’m dead. And that in itself is madness.

This does not look like Skyhold...

Suddenly I have a thought that would jolt my heart if it still beat. Am I a ghost now? Was my death so sudden and so violent that not even my spirit will find rest?

“An intriguing idea, to think that my all-powerful father would allow lost souls to slip through his grasp. Do you ever consider that? Would that not make him malevolent? That is unless he is not as all-powerful as he leads you foolish mortals to believe.”

I’m confused, but I can’t speak.

“But listen to me prattle on, you are probably wondering what I’m doing here.”

If I had a body, I would nod. But somehow my spirit mimics the motion and whatever entity I am speaking to seems to be able to see my spirit because he continues.

“I am Likho, the demigod of chaos, but more importantly for you I’m also the patron of dark fates. Of sudden deaths. Of shall we say... you .”

Suddenly, I see myself as if I am looking through a mirror, only I am viewing from above. My body lies in the water. I can see the shore as my body bobs against the sand. We weren’t close to shore when I died, but somehow my body has made it back.

It only makes the pain all that much worse. Would I have lived if not for that prisoner who broke my neck? I could have survived the shipwreck, even the kraken attack, only to fall by violent hands.

I avert my gaze from my body’s neck, his head twisted at a horrid angle. I can still hear the snap.

The last sound I’ll ever hear. I hate it. It haunts me now even into death.

That is until the entity, this Likho speaks again, its voice drowning the sound out.

“But now that leaves us in a precarious position where we are actually able to help each other. You see, I have long been imprisoned, and you have only shortly been dead. It’s a perfect pair, because why else would you have died so suddenly, so violently, at the hands of one who was meant to save you—”

My confusion is rising, but still, I can’t speak. If I could, I’d shout, “what?!”

“I need a host to be able to exist beyond my own death. My power is growing, but my father is still more powerful than me,” the bitterness in the voice is clear. It echoes

my own bitterness I feel over my fate.

“And I’m sure you’d like to not be dead anymore.”

I whip my gaze up, forgetting for a moment that I’m not actually speaking to a being. Just the voice in my head, and yet I can’t seem to stop paying attention to it as it says, “Here’s a deal, Victor Andreev, you unlucky guardsman. Be my vessel of chaos, be my living host, and I’ll make you, well, living. What do you say, little mortal? Will you cheat mortality for me?”

I can’t believe what this voice is saying. That it is a demigod, one of the most feared and revulsed beings in existence? So horrid were they that their own parents killed them at the dawn of civilization so that humans could live...

And it’s offering me my life?

It’s giving me a chance to see my father and sister again; to make it so I’m not a name on a list of casualties?

Even though I can’t speak, I find myself saying yes. As if my very soul has reached out to wrap around the word and just in case the entity cannot hear my silent cry, I nod my proverbial head in affirmation.

“I had a feeling you would be reasonable. Something tells me that this is the beginning of something great. Even if it is only until the end of the world.”

Before I can question that, my neck snaps back into place with another horrendous cracking sound, and suddenly I feel my spirit jolted downward, back into my body.

I sit up with a gasp, nearly falling out of my chair. I grapple for a second until I manage to catch the arm of the chair. I lean over it, heaving for breath as I struggle to

figure out where I am. Slowly as my senses return to me, I realize that I'm in my father's inn. Sitting near the fire, the dry crackle of the wood in my ears and the heat against my face.

A stark contrast to the memories I was lost in.

I reach up, rubbing my forehead with a groan. No matter how far I try to get from that day, I can't seem to escape what happened to me. If it isn't Likho's voice in my head, then it's the dreams that haunt me in my sleep.

I sit up further, allowing my hand to trail down my face. The scruff of my beard prickling the palm of my hand as I glance around. It must be late, no one else appears to be up in the room which was far busier earlier.

Well, no one except for Talyria and my father. She is still seated at the bar, listening to my father give my whole life history. Give or take a few details that he doesn't know, such as my death and my more recent less than noble thievery exploits.

I push to my feet stretching as I twist my face into a frown. Ah, yes that's right. I fell asleep because I was waiting for my father to stop talking to my wife so that we can actually have a wedding night. If I'd known that he was going to stay up all night talking to her, I would have rented a room at a different inn.

I press my palm against my forehead as I try to figure out how to tell him that I'd like some time with my wife now without dying from the mortification of it all.

"So, your father was a Lower Elf?" my father asks, leaning forward his eyes earnest, and I realize that the conversation has moved to Talyria. Things that I don't technically know. I lean closer, to catch her response.

"Yes, and that's where I get my coloration from," she says reaching up to run a hand

through her hair. It is black as the night despite the blue tone of her skin distinguishing her as being of Higher Elf decent as well. It's obvious that this is a conversation she has had many times.

I'll admit that I wondered myself, but I hadn't wanted to pry. I flex my jaw as I realize the ridiculousness of it all. I married the woman, and yet I didn't want to seem like I was prying by asking about her past and family.

"But I thought the Higher Elves hate the Lower Elves," my father presses. "And vice versa."

Talyria shrugs. "Oh, they do, but that was a long time ago. And my parents' marriage was arranged. It didn't necessarily end well. I have a half-sister who can attest to how little my mother loved my father."

My father's eyes widen. "How long ago was this?"

Indeed, there are many arranged marriages in Ruskhazar, especially between the noble families, but the animosity between the Higher Elves and Lower Elves is so strong, so deep, and so steeped in blood that I'm not sure if any High Elf has married a Lower Elf in, well.... centuries. Even if it was arranged, I think that either participant would rather die than be forced to marry each other.

Talyria tilts her head enough that I can see the mysterious smile that graces her lips. "Some time," she says simply. I think she will leave it at that, but then she adds. "I got my father's lifespan it seems."

It's true that Higher Elves live longer than humans; they have about twice our lifespan. Lower Elves are actually virtually immortal. After they reach maturity, they will not age and remain untouched by time no matter how much of it passes them by.

I feel my eyes widen as I suddenly wonder just how much older my wife is than me. Likely a detail I should have found out before I married an elf...

Ah, well, we live and learn.

Suddenly I can see why Likho thought I'd be a good vessel for chaos.

Apparently, I need to work on thinking through my actions.

I'm still standing there wondering if it's worth enduring all the wedding night jokes my father can hurl my way, or if I should just call it a night and retire now. When suddenly the door bursts open.

Howling wind rushes into the room, bringing a flurry of snow with it. I stare in shock as a hooded figure steps into the room and struggles against the wind to push the door back shut. Just as the wood clicks back into place and the sound of the howling wind is muffled on the other side, a scream sounds from somewhere in the inn.

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Chapter Five

Corallin

I was wondering if I'd found the right establishment in the storm, but as I hear the scream, I realize that I must be in the right place.

After all, in a quest for ancient power, someone's bound to get hurt. I just figured that it would all happen after I got here, not necessarily before.

Despite the late hour, there are still a few people in the inn's front room. A man with impressive sideburns who I assume from his stained apron to be the innkeeper. There is a woman sitting at the bar in front of him and a bleary-eyed bearded man, who given the resemblance between him and the other man, I take to be the innkeeper's son.

They all stare at me for a second in confusion, but then another scream pierces the air of the inn, and it quickly draws the attention away from me.

I feel the corner of my mouth turn up as the two men and the woman all rush to the back of the room in the direction of the scream. A useful distraction all the same.

As a Higher Elf, I'm usually immediately viewed with suspicion due to my people's legacy as criminals and vagabonds. But as a vampire, sorceress, and assassin, it's a necessity to not draw attention to myself. I usually utilize that by hiding amongst shadows, remaining unseen and unheard. Unfortunately, the storm forced me to enter the front door. I could barely find even that in the cold.

I shake out my cloak, dislodging the snow stuck to it and slip down the hall following the other people. Time to find out what I just walked in on.

My vampiric senses catch the smell of blood before I round the corner and find a gathering of people in the hallway. My heart sinks when I see that there are far more people at this inn than I would have liked. It will make it harder to locate my query and the spellbook he carries. It will also make it so there are more witnesses in case things get messy.

I've been tracking my prey for months, following a trail of mysterious cures to ailments until it brought me here.

The last healing happened just yesterday in this very town. With the storm, the healer could not escape with his spellbook, instead he must be staying the night here at the inn. But just who is he... or she for all I know.

I push to my tiptoes, trying to catch a glimpse of what is going on the other side of the crowd of half-dressed hysterical inn guests. I hear one girl sobbing and someone else trying to comfort her. Other people are asking, "Who could have done this?"

Unfortunately, I'm too short to see anything.

I feel a shadow pass over me and turn my head to see a latecomer to the commotion. It's a tall, rugged looking man with half his head shaved and an entire arm inked with tattoos which I have an unobstructed view to because he is completely shirtless.

He towers over me, all toned muscles and golden hair.

He gasps, clearly not having a tough time seeing over the crowd. "By the gods," he breathes.

“What is it?” I find myself asking.

I’m not actually asking him specifically, but he glances at me out of the corner of his eye and raises a brow as he takes me in “I’d offer to let you climb on my shoulders to see, but I’m afraid it’s not a pretty sight.”

I clamp my teeth together and press into the crowd. I shove aside an old man dressed in an orange robe and a shocked looking woman with her brown hair hanging loosely around her shoulders. Until I finally get a look at the scene before me.

It’s a man, and he’s dead. He’s a human wearing a uniform with an insignia of a guard. His eyes are wide and staring blankly at the ceiling until the younger man, who I presume to be the innkeeper’s son, leans forward and closes them.

The dead guard is lying in a puddle of his own blood. The copious amounts of blood seem to stem from several stab marks that have torn through his tunic and his flesh beneath. Whoever did this was sloppy, the stab wounds are uneven and there are far too many of them.

I count at least fourteen.

A skilled killer could have ended him with only a single thrust.

But skilled or not, it is obvious that there is a killer here with the rest of us. And it isn’t me.

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Chapter Six

Victor

The sun is almost blinding as it reflects the greenish blue water of the sea. It's a calm day, not a lot of wind. We will need to use the oars today to get the ship rowing.

I turn my attention to the vessel in question and find myself frowning. I hate traveling out to sea. I much prefer to have the steady solid ground under my boots than the rocking and swaying boards of a ship.

Yet here I am, ready to transport more prisoners to the Spice Isles. It's not a short voyage to reach the nearest islands off our western coast where the most notorious of prisoners are kept.

I hate transferring them. It's a dangerous business to deal with those who have escaped the death sentence but have still been exiled to work in the Spice Isles.

Petty thieves get jail time and have to pay a fine. The vilest killers are put to death. Sorcerers are put to death. Everyone a step below them are sent to the Spice Isles.

I'm dealing with bandits, manslaughterers, and ruffians day to day, and if anything were to happen on board the ship, I'm not sure if I'd like the outcome.

Oh, Estelle... the things I do for you.

If she wants a man who is widely traveled and full of adventure, then that is what she

shall have.

I just hope that I live long enough to get home to sweep her off her feet with the grand stories I'll soon be able to tell.

There's a dead body in our wine cellar, and I have a pounding headache.

Likho isn't happy that someone died suddenly and violently, and I had nothing to do with it. As his vessel, I should be dropping bodies left and right to remind the world who he is the patron of.

"At least you assume it wasn't you..."

I freeze at that thought, pressing my fingers against the wood of the bar top.

What do you mean, Likho? I demand silently.

"I only mean that you were asleep, you do not know what I made you do while you were in such a state."

Likho's chuckle echoes through my skull, and I have to force myself to keep my breathing even. He is lying, simply trying to get at me for not being the perfect host he wants me to be. Likho couldn't make me kill someone without realizing it... could he?

"I can do whatever I want."

If I killed him, I'd be covered in blood. It was everywhere. There is no way I could have gotten it all off myself, least of all asleep.

"The killer obviously changed their clothes."

“Ha!” I say. Father looks up startled as does Talyria, and I realize that I said that out loud. I press my lips together with a sheepish smile. Now isn’t the time for such an outburst, but I couldn’t help it, I may have the demigod of chaos in my head, but I have enough presence of mind to know that I’m wearing the same outfit I had on this morning.

So, it couldn’t have been me who killed the man.

“Unless I used sorcery to kill him. Then you wouldn’t have even had to get close.”

I feel my smile slide off my face. I don’t believe anything Likho is saying, and yet, there is a part of me that fears that he is telling the truth. It’s the part of me that wonders if I should have ever made the deal at all.

Sure, I like living especially since it gave me the chance to get married which I’m sure will be a more than pleasant part of my life once I actually get a single solitary moment alone with my bride. But then I think that perhaps there was a good reason that the demigods were killed, locked away, and that their followers were slaughtered.

It occurs to me that I’m meddling with forces far out of my control.

“Oh, you have no idea... do you truly think you can contain me?”

I’m not even trying to contain him, Likho can do what he wants. Just not with my body and certainly not things I disagree with.

“I think you misunderstand what my host is supposed to be.”

And I think that you should have picked a better host.

“Oh, I chose well. You are living chaos. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

I give my head a firm shake and turn my attention back to the matter at hand. Namely the murder that I definitely did not commit, no matter how much Likho tries to gaslight me into thinking that I did.

Ibram, the other guardsman who was staying the night here, paces the floor fuming. He is demanding justice, going on a tirade about how he is in charge of the matter since the storm makes travel impossible. I fold my arms; this is my father’s inn. Ibram has no jurisdiction here, and if he thinks he can demand the authority he so clearly craves he has another thing coming to him.

I’m done taking orders from power mad guardsmen.

Estelle steps forward, placing her hand on her hip. “Listen to yourself, Ibram, as if we have no idea who did it. Most of us grew up together.” She turns to Lek who hurriedly nods before she turns her attention back to Ibram. “It’s obviously one of the strangers here.”

Father steps forward, holding up his hands in a placating manner. “Hey, let’s not go around accusing all my guests here of being murderers.”

“Well, one is,” Talyria grumbles, folding her arms. She looks disgruntled over everything that has happened. With a jolt, I realize that is probably because someone is dead.

I am no stranger to death, I’ve faced it with myself before, but that doesn’t mean that the others are capable of handling it so callously as I.

Vera is sitting behind the counter, holding Mika close and whispering to her. Probably to distract her from what is going on. I notice that my father has set himself

up between the rest of the room and the girls, except for Talyria who is standing in the middle of it all by herself.

I glance down at the ring of my finger, realizing that it's my role to be by her side now. I let out a little grunt as I ran a hand down my face. I'm turning out to be a rubbish husband, aren't I?

First thing after such a horrific murder, I should have been checking on my wife. Instead, I was left wondering if I'd committed it.

I step up to Talyria, wrapping my arm around her waist in what I hope to be a comforting manner.

"What about her?" Lek asks, raising a hand to point to the newcomer. She's standing apart from the crowd with her hood still up. I'll admit I haven't gotten a good look at her since she came in here. She is certainly a mysterious entity, arriving here in the middle of a near impassable snowstorm, but that doesn't mean that she's a killer.

I find myself shaking my head. "No, she arrived after the murder had already been committed. Just before Vera found the body."

My cousin snuffles at my words, and I find myself grimacing as I glance toward her and my sister. Not exactly the best conversation to have around young women.

"That isn't exactly proof she didn't do it."

We all turn to the Highlander, who despite his size had been very quiet, sitting at one of the tables near the bar. He stands up when he sees that we are all looking toward him and clears his throat. "What I mean is that until we rule out all possibilities of forced entries into the back of the building, she could have broken in, did the deed, and then slipped out before coming in through the front door as if she were entering

for the first time.”

The newcomer snorts at this. “Why would I enter a building after killing someone inside?”

“It beats freezing to death,” he says shrugging, showing off his bare arms. They say Highlanders are nearly immune to the cold. It’s not something that I understand. Even inside, I’m wearing an ankle length coat, and I’m still chilly. At least he finally put a shirt on even if it is sleeveless.

She snorts. “Are you really going to listen to him? By the gods, he looks like a killer.”

“If I had killed him, the stab wounds would not have been so shallow,” the Highlander says, raising his chin high. “Nor would there be so many. He was murdered by someone physically weaker. Perhaps a woman. Or a cowardly man. Either way, whoever it was, they were unskilled with a blade.”

There is a murmur in the room as everyone glances among themselves. More than half the room is comprised of women, but I don’t think any of them would do it, especially since half the women here are related to me.

I look over the men here, noting their form. It’s true that the Highlander is likely the strongest here. There’s my father and Lev, but I don’t think either of them are capable of it. Especially since my father was in this room the whole time. Not to mention the nervous looking man dressed like a priest, he will probably have to go high on my list of suspects just because I don’t know anything about him.

Ibram could also have done it. He was drunk when he went to bed. Perhaps he got into an argument, and his natural strength was impaired by the drink.

“Or perhaps he was simply killed by someone who was asleep...”

I press my eyes shut to try to block out the grating noise of Likho’s voice.

“And how do you know so much about stab wounds?” the newcomer demands.

“Because I’m a w—” he cuts himself before quickly saying, “Wanderer. I’ve been all over Ruskhazar, I’ve seen many things.” He reaches up, stroking his beard as his eyes dart around nervously.

Well, he certainly has something to hide, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that he is the killer. Indeed, looking at this room it’s hard to imagine anyone here being killers.

“Save for you .”

I’m probably the only one here who consorts with demigods. Not to mention my poor habit of stealing. I’m a scoundrel, a rogue even.

Who is to say that I’m not the killer?

“That’s what I’ve been saying .”

The nervous priest steps forward. “Listen, it seems to me that half the room is at a disadvantage since you all appear to know each other, and we are the strangers. So, let’s all introduce ourselves and go from there. I understand that some of you are scared, but it will hardly do for you all to go pointing fingers blindly at each other. You’re more likely to accuse an innocent than the actual murderer that way.”

Father nods to him. “Thank you.”

Ibram looks like he is about to explode with rage over his demands of immediate and

swift justice being ignored which causes me to nod along with him. “Yes, I agree. No one here is guilty until proven so. If we all play it safe and keep our heads, we will get through the night. And when we dig our way out in the morning then the guards can handle it.”

“I’m handling it!” Ibram thunders.

I reach out, patting his arm. “You’ve been through such an ordeal, my dear sir, that I’m sure you aren’t thinking straight. Don’t worry, we will take care of things for you.”

I quickly duck my head to hide my smile from Ibram who looks like he is considering punching me. I notice Talyria watching me and throw a quick wink in her direction. She raises her eyebrow in turn, but if she hasn’t realized how impetuous I can be by now then that’s not my problem.

I mean, I married a woman I just met.

“My name is Valentine,” the priest continues. He presses his hand against his chest. “I’m a healer.”

This gets the hooded newcomer’s attention. She steps forward, moving a bit too decisively and threateningly for my liking. It takes me a second to place where I’ve seen that type of movement. From hunters I’ve seen stalking their prey during my travels across Ruskhazar.

But then the Highlander speaks up. “I am Lief. Lief Jottason.” He presses his hand against his shoulder. “And though you may not think it, I am at your service.”

Father claps his hands. “This is excellent. I am Sasha. My son here is Victor, and my daughters...” he begins rattling off the names of everyone he knows. Which is almost

everyone here.

The non-locals, glance around as if trying to determine who else is an outsider. I turn to the hooded newcomer. Last to join us and last to reveal her identity. I'm beginning to think Lief has a point in saying that we shouldn't be so quick to declare her innocence.

She sighs when she realizes that we are all staring at her. She reaches up, pulling off her hood to reveal a Higher Elf woman. "I am—" she begins.

"Corallin?" Talyria demands, she staggers against me, and I have to keep a hold of her waist, so she doesn't fall.

I turn to her, looking her over with concern. "Are you all right?"

At the same time, the girl steps forward. She is younger than I thought, but then she is also an elf so perhaps she is also older than she looks. Her starkly white hair is piled up on her head in a bun. Her nostrils flair slightly as she stares at Talyria. "How do you know who I am?"

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Chapter Seven

Corallin

“F ather, you wished to see me?” I ask as I come to a stop beside the dark form of Elwis the Eel. He is known by many titles. Assassin lord, vampire, criminal mastermind, innkeeper... but most important to me, my adoptive father.

He is standing in his chambers in the stone halls where the assassin Family of Night of which my father runs is based. He is leaning over a table, his long dark hair falling across his face.

I hear humming and glance to the side to see Fedor, a creepy little poisoner who is undyingly loyal to my father. He doesn't trust anyone in the assassin family, except for me, so when we stay in this hall, he never leaves my father's side.

When we stay at the inn, he is our cook because his skill in mixing deadly roots is only matched by his skill in seasoning meat.

Elwis the Eel straightens, and I see what it is that has his attention. It's two books, they have worn covers signifying their age and frayed ends of their papers. They don't look like much, but I know that just like my father, looks can be deceiving. They hold untold power.

They are the spellbooks of two of the four founders of the Academy of Magickers, magic wielders who were unequaled in their Spellcraft. Both in their day and all the centuries that followed. It has become my father's personal obsession to claim as

many of these spellbooks as possible.

My sister Bronwyn went to the Academy of Magickers itself and disturbed the rest of Petrov Hansimov who wielded a powerful control over the water. The other belonged to Boris the Conjuror, a renowned summoner of what was said to be near sentient magical creatures who would fight his battles for him. That one was found by my other sister Natasya.

If Elwis has summoned me here, I can only think that means he has found another spellbook, and that he intends to send me to get this one.

I straighten feeling a strange sense of pride. Though most members of our family cannot read the spellbook, it feels nice to be a part of something bigger than the hacking and slashing side of the family business. We are collecting parts of history, and if they serve to make our father that much more powerful? Well, then I'm glad to help however I can.

It also serves to note that my sisters both found the loves of their lives while seeking out these spellbooks. I doubt I will find that which I'm not looking for, but it's something that I can use to my advantage when I return. Elwis will likely expect me to bring back a man and I intend to oblige him.

"I believe that I have a lead to a new spellbook; although it is only a vague lead." Elwis glances up at me as he presses his fingertips against the nearest book. "Which is why I have chosen you for this assignment. You are the best tracker in our family, and I don't trust anyone outside of it with the importance of this mission."

I smile, glowing at my father's praise. "I learned from the best."

Elwis smiles dotingly at me, while Fedor starts chanting through a list of his favorite natural grown poisonous plants. "The next spellbook once belonged to Devalen Tine;

he was a renowned healer. It was said that he could even bring back a soul after they'd been briefly dead. Well... I have been tracking a series of unnatural healings, wounds, and illnesses that the academy claims not even magic can heal.”

“And you think this is due to our spellbook?”

Elwis reaches out, resting his ice-cold palm against my cheek. “That, my dear, is your job to determine.”

If there is one thing I would boast in, it is that I have always had the uncanny ability to go unseen and unremembered. It has been a handy gift to have while as an assassin.

I have my father, my mother, my sisters, and now that both my sisters have fallen in love, I have Wilder and Evengi in my life as well. Apart from them, I have not interacted with anyone outside of the people I was sent to kill in longer than I can remember.

Certainly, there are my fellow assassins, but despite our organization being known as the Family of Night, I am set apart for being the daughter of the leader. It's well enough, Elwis doesn't trust most of them, and I'm the only member of our family other than them that they have even met.

And before that...

Well, before that is a blank space. My first memory is seeing Elwis the Eel for the first time as he pulls me out of the rubble of a half-collapsed mountain. I was a nobody, all I had was a name I somehow still remembered. He took me in and made me his daughter. He made me a somebody.

I have no idea how long I was trapped in that mountain, I don't know who I was

before that, I don't even know how I became a vampire. And for the most part, I've made my peace with the missing parts of my past.

That is until this woman looks at me as if she knows me and says my name.

The innkeeper's son standing next to her, who I take to be her husband, given the gleaming silver ring on his index finger which matches her own wedding band, glances between us with confusion. "You know each other?"

To answer the woman strides toward me, her arms outstretched. I pull back, but she ignores it and grasps my hands. She stares into my eyes. Hers are as dark as the night, and they fill with tears. I wonder if she can tell that my eyes are red. As a Higher Elf, my eyes have a slight glow to them which can mask the crimson that distinguishes me as a vampire.

Most people miss it, but most people don't get this close.

And for that matter most people don't survive an encounter with me.

"I thought you were dead," she whispers.

I stiffen, pulling my hands out of her hold. "Clearly I'm not."

She tilts her head, confusion dancing across her features. "It's me, Talyria. Don't you remember me?"

Talyria .

The name feels like it should have some familiarity, but it just doesn't. She must see the answer in my eyes before I am able to speak it out loud because I watch her face crumble.

Suddenly the husband is there. He glances back to the others in the room before leaning closer. “Perhaps we should take this conversation somewhere more private?”

Talyria reaches up, swiping a rogue tear that streaks across her face. She gives her head a sharp shake. “No need, Victor. Clearly, I was mistaken. I thought for once the gods might show me some favor, but that was silly of me.”

I watch her straighten her shoulders as she turns away from me. Does she genuinely believe that I’m not the person she knew? If not, then how would she know my name?

I want to grab her, demand that she tells me who Corallin is to her. Ask why she thought I was dead. Find out about my past, but I’m trapped here immobile.

My present wars with my past. What if I don’t like the person that I was? I’m fine as I am now, why should I seek to change that for a past that was obviously not worth remembering?

And yet I cannot escape the curiosity either.

I’m left feeling torn in two entirely different directions. And being double minded like this is dangerous. It’s distracting me from my true purpose for being here, a purpose named Valentine.

The remaining guardsman narrows his eyes as he looks at us. “I think we are all straying from the matter at hand, namely my murdered associate.”

I work my jaw. There is that as well. Another distraction, but this one is dangerous. I can’t afford scrutiny. The vampiric sorceress and assassin is an easy scapegoat to pin the crime on. Even if I wasn’t in the building when it happened.

Nothing is going to stop me from returning to my father with Valentine's spellbook in hand. Not a murder, not a group of individuals who could lynch me, and not this Talyria who claims to know me.

I turn my glare to the Highlander who is watching me closely. And certainly not Lief and the distraction he is.

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Chapter Eight

Talyria

This cell has been my only abode for longer than I'd care to know. Fourteen paces to the right and then fourteen paces right back to where I'd been before. There is a small window that lets in a scant amount of sunlight.

The sunlight is an unfamiliar sight, I'm a stone elf, I spent most of my life underground in our cities deep within the mountains not to mention that I spent so much time as a vampire. I think he was trying to do me a kindness, allowing me to occasionally glimpse the birds in the sky.

As much of a kindness that someone like this Creed is capable of.

Still, as far as cells go, I suppose I could have done worse. I have mobility, I have some loose straw. I even have a cot raised from the ground, so the rats don't chew on me in my sleep. Not that I've seen many rats here. My cell is connected to Creed's laboratory, and he keeps a clean room.

The door to the laboratory opens and Creed strides through, his long robes disguising his form as he seems to almost glide across the floor.

He stops in front of my cell. "It's been an interesting twenty years with you as my specimen, vampire," he says as he folds his hands behind his back. "But I'm afraid I have no more use for you. This is where we part ways."

His face is stained black as the night, but his eyes are white. He did not always look like that. When I was first his prisoner, he looked unassuming enough, a Lowlander man with blue black hair, but now he looks monstrous, like one of the dead that he reanimates.

The transformation came after he absorbed my vampiric powers in a necromantic ritual. However, that did not turn him into a vampire himself. Instead, it seemed to give him my nightly powers with none of the faults of vampirism. He claims that he absorbed the energy of my vampirism and that my powers extended his lifespan for as long as I was a vampire. I'm not even sure how he managed to do that, I was not aware that such a thing was even possible, but then necromancy was always so feared even amongst my people who did not fear to worship the demigods.

However, if this necromancer's words are to be believed my people are gone.

A thousand years... that's how long he said I was trapped in the stone before he found me and locked me in this cell.

So, for a thousand and twenty years, I've been trapped. I'm fortunate not to age, even with my vampirism gone or else I'd be an old woman by now.

But I'm still young. Young enough to plot my escape.

I will not die this man's prisoner.

I snarl, silently daring him to try to end me. As this man's prisoner for the past twenty years, I've known him to be a merciless killer. One does not become a necromancer by keeping their hands from being bloodied. Especially since power can be brought from bloodrights. Like stealing life force from vampires apparently.

However, Creed does not deliver any blow. I stand there, ready to call upon my own

sorcery, even though he has proven to be far more powerful and fight for my life. Instead, he turns and strides out of the room the way he came, closing the door behind him.

I grasp the bars, pressing my forehead against the metal bars as my eyes land on the nearest wooden table. It is covered in neatly stacked scrolls and glass alembic supplies.

And the key to my cell. Just sitting there.

I feel the corner of my mouth turn up. I'm getting out today. Creed is right, this is where we part ways.

My carefully laid plans to lie low are crumbling around me. It seems I married the wrong innkeeper's son.

I bury my face in my hands as I struggle to get a handle on the swirling turbulent emotions within me. I don't even know what to feel first.

Panic or grief?

Because pretty soon Victor and his family are going to realize that I'm just as much of a stranger as the other people staying at this inn. They'll start asking questions, ones that I don't have an answer to. I was a prisoner for two decades as my vampirism was drawn from my body. And before that? I was trapped in a stone tomb.

And before that? Well, I had it all, but that isn't exactly something I want them to find out either. That I was once known as the Thief Queen and ran a thriving criminal empire. Besides, Victor probably doesn't need to hear about the fact that I was married previously right now.

That past haunts me even if I can never allow anyone to see it. Especially now that there is a woman here with the face of the sister I thought died a thousand years ago.

I press my hand over my mouth as I sit next to the fire. I feel a shift as Victor's coat brushes up against me. He kneels down in front of me, peering into my eyes. His brown eyes filled with concern. "Do you wish to talk about it?"

"About what?" I ask, arching a brow. So much has happened in such a small amount of time that I think we could take a week and still be talking about it. A man is dead. We are married. We haven't even kissed once. Oh, and his family is lovely, if a bit boisterous.

And my family is dead... or undead. I glance in the direction of the woman who looks like my Corallin. She's a vampire, I was a vampire long enough to be able to recognize one, even if her lighter eyes do mask the red they are supposed to be, and her blue-gray skin is not as pale as the pallor of humans.

Corallin was a vampire; I bit her myself. Could it really be her? But if so, why doesn't she remember me?

He smiles slightly, likely realizing the same thing. "Whatever you want to."

I look down at his hand which is resting on the seat of the chair near my leg. I reach out, trailing a finger across the silver wedding ring, I have a matching ring given to me by the priest who married us. The weight is unfamiliar on my finger, it feels like it is weighing my whole hand down.

It's a human tradition, I did not have a ring for my first marriage, but then it seems the whole valley and all the mountains have been touched by the human traditions. I suppose that's what happens when you win a war.

Victor's breath hitches as I trail my hand over the back of his knuckles. I pull back curling my fingers, wondering why I even decided to do that. "Is it usually this chaotic here?" I ask, desperate for a change of subject.

My heart skips a beat as it fills with dread and pain. I'm not ready to fall in love again, least of all to a human man. They are so easy to lose, so quick to die. It will be easier if my marriage to Victor remains one of convenience... at least a convenient place to hide.

He huffs a small laugh, not seeming to notice my sudden shift in mood. "Oh, you have no idea. Chaos... it has a way of following me around nowadays."

"Now you tell me," I mutter as I reach up, rubbing my own hand, twisting the ring around on my finger.

Victor shrugs. "Not all chaos is bad. Like for instance, if the dead started walking, that would be chaotic but not necessarily bad. The dead are living again after all."

"No, that would be necromancy, and it's a vile practice," I say sneering.

Lek glances in our direction with a frown, and I realize that I said that last part too loud. "Why are you discussing necromancy?" he asks.

"Necromancy?" Estelle demands, her voice growing shrill. "Do you think the necromancer is here?"

Corallin—if it is indeed her—whips her head around, her starlight white hair nearly falling from the sloppy bun she has it pinned up in. "What necromancer?"

"You should do more research when you travel. Everyone knows that this town has a necromancer problem. It's part of the reason for the curfew that you broke." Lief

chuckles as he says this as if he finds it amusing despite his words. He has been sitting at the far end of the room all by himself. Indeed, most everyone has gone off on their own or in pairs. Vera and Mika are sitting near the bar while Sasha has wandered off to nervously clean the tables. Estelle is sitting at a different table and Lek is with her. It's obvious the man is besotted with her. He won't take his eyes off her.

The other three, Lief, Corallin, and the guard, are scattered to the opposite ends of the room. While the orange robed man, Valentine, is sitting almost directly in the center of the room, twiddling his thumbs.

Victor pushes to his feet. "I'm sure it wasn't the necromancer. The killing doesn't look like it was ritualistic. It's likely we just have another heartless killer in town."

Lief rubs his beard with his thumb as he pushes to his feet. "I for one don't like just sitting around. It's as if we are allowing the killer to have a chance to make another move. Soon enough sleep will take us and then what? He slits our throats while we slumber?"

Mika starts crying, and Sasha throws him a glare as he rushes across the room to where she is sitting with her cousin to comfort her.

However, the guardsman steps forward, his eyes locked on Lief. "What are you suggesting?"

"We find the killer and stop them." Lief holds out his arms. "We normal folk here outnumber the killer."

"And how do you plan to find the killer?" Lek asks, his voice shaky.

"They killed a man. There must be evidence somewhere to point to the fiend." Lek

holds his hand. “Besides there are only two places for the killer to be.”

At this, Victor straightens. “What do you mean?”

Leif holds up his fingers. “Either the killer is hiding somewhere in this inn because he could not have very well escaped into the night in this storm...” as if to punctuate his words the wind howls outside, causing the shutters to rattle. “Or,” he continues, his icy eyes moving over the group. “The killer is one of us and they are here in this room.”

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Chapter Nine

Victor

I pace across the length of the lower deck of the ship. The boards creak under my feet. Outside I can hear the lapping sound of the still water.

I'm fortunate that this is my patrol route or else I would look ridiculous and nervous. But I'm being paid to pace, which is just as well because my mind is uneasy.

I try to keep my gaze focused straight ahead, but every few seconds I find my eyes turning to the woman towards the back of the ship, sitting next to a redheaded man who doesn't look like he has ever done a day of manual labor. The woman is unassuming enough, I might even say that she is beautiful if Estelle had not ruined me for all other women.

She has short black hair, a tad unfashionable, especially for a Lowlander, but it seems to compliment her features well. Her eyes and mouth are both wide and they frame her small button nose. Gold eyes of a powerful magic wielder flash with panic.

Meruna Kotov.

That is what she said her name was.

She is not supposed to be here.

That's all I can think about. I had thought that these prisoners looked different when

we were loading them aboard, when I confronted my superior, I'd learned the ugly truth. There had been an epidemic at the Spice Isles, and with so many dead, the jails along the coast had been emptied of all their prisoners so that the spice quota could be met.

That meant that everyone who was in jail was being shipped off, even angry drunks who were cooling their heels after a raucous night.

I'd tried not to let it bother me, after all they were still criminals, but then I saw her. There had to have been some sort of a mistake for someone like her to end up in prison, let alone being shipped to the Spice Isles.

She is clearly a gentle soul; her hands are unmarked by harsh labor. If she is to be believed, she is a noble lady. There's absolutely no way she will survive a day on the Spice Isles.

I give my head a sharp shake. It isn't my problem.

But it feels like my problem. This young woman, who must be only just in her second decade, is going to die out there. What a waste of potential. She told me she was going to the Academy of Magickers, hallowed halls that she will now never see. All she will see are the dust riddled caves of the mines on the Spice Isle, before a more dangerous prisoner takes her life, or a cavern collapses, or she dies of a lung infection... honestly, the list could go on.

But on the other hand, there isn't actually anything that I can do. I'm just a lowly guard who hates his job and is trying to impress a girl. I don't control sentencing. that comes from far above my head.

As I'm trying to deliberate the moral dilemma, suddenly the ship comes to a jolting halt. I pitch forward, managing to catch myself on the bench where two women

prisoners sit. Now unlike Meruna, these women both look like they should be here.

While one is a fair skinned, light-haired Highlander with cold blue eyes and the other is a dark-skinned foreigner with ebony black hair that cascades down around her shoulders there is something that these women seem to have in common.

An unmeasured fierceness that they both share.

But at the moment I have a larger problem than these two prisoners, namely what caused the ship to stop. For a second, I think that the prisoners had stopped rowing, but then I look over and see that some of them are still pushing on the oars. Besides, even if they had stopped oaring, we would have gradually glided to a stop, it would not account for the abrupt stop.

Have we run aground on some coral reef?

I hear a shout above deck and tilt my ear trying to listen. It sounded like whatever word was shouted ended in “and” perhaps a brigand attack? But that still wouldn’t account for our sudden stop.

Suddenly the door below deck bursts open, I have just enough time to see the terrified eyes of one of my fellow guards as he shouts, “Kraken!”

I don’t even have a chance to process how ridiculous his statement is that we could possibly be attacked by a creature that went extinct a thousand years ago. I see something move out of my peripheral vision as a strong grip wraps around my head.

There is a sharp snapping sound.

And then absolutely nothing.

I don't think that our wine cellar has ever been this crowded.

Really, it's a popular time to be a fermented drink. Or a dead body.

I stuff my hands into the pockets of my coat. It's too cold in here for my liking, but apparently, we are all amateur guards today, and we are going to do the town watch's job for them by apprehending the killer tonight.

The dead man is laying sprawled across a table in the wine cellar, one of his hands dangles off the edge while the other is carelessly draped over his bloodstained chest. We are all in here except for my father, and Vera and Mika who thought it was best to wait just outside so they didn't have to see the body again.

We have a nicely sized wine cellar, enough to store the drink needed to keep our patrons happy, and to keep our extra food stores. Along the wall are barrels full of salted meat and dried herbs hang from the ceiling. Still, I don't think our cellar was meant to hold eight people and a dead body. We are all standing shoulder to shoulder as we are gathered around the corpse.

I hope no one gawked at me like this while I was dead.

I feel someone grab my arm and look down to see Estelle there. "He bought me a drink just earlier this evening and now..." She gives my arm a squeeze as she stares in horror at the body. It's a familiar gesture, one I'm sure I've received many times as we grew up, and I made sure to always be there for her. Every broken heart she experienced from lying sailors and I was there, lending a shoulder for her to cry on. But now it's a bit different.

I notice Lek giving me the evil eye. Once I would have relished it, took it as a sign that I had a chance with her, but the truth of the matter is that neither he nor I ever stood a chance with her. She craved the exotic too much to ever consider the boys

from her hometown.

She will only turn to turn to us when the going gets rough, then she turns those deep brown eyes our way before she sits back and waits for us to do everything in our power to make it right.

It took dying to get me out of that cycle, but I sure as the jetting gods am not going to let myself fall back in.

“Who could do something like this, Victor?”

I pull my arm out of her hold, ignoring the hurt look she throws my way as I step around Talyria to my right, situating her between me and Estelle. Talyria watches me with a raised eyebrow. When she sees me watching, she quickly glances away but not before I catch a smug smile pull her lips upward.

Estelle notices it too, drawing her lip in between her teeth as she stares after me.

I turn my attention to the matter at hand. The body. His skin is so pale, and for some reason, his eyes are back open even though I’m sure that I closed them when we found the body. The front of his tunic is riddled with many stab wounds, they range in depth. Valentine leans over them, examining them closely, his stringy gray hair almost falling into the dried blood staining the victim’s clothes.

I’m so engrossed in the study that I jump when I feel a new set of arms wrap around my arm. I glance down to see Talyria. She gives my bicep a slight squeeze, and I can’t help the smile that sprawls across my face. It’s nice to be someone’s first choice for once.

Hey, at least I did manage to get married today. It’s not a complete ruination of a day.

“I do think...” Valentine says straightening. He clears his throat when he sees us all looking at him. “That I can determine the blade that did this.”

“How could you do that?” Talyria asks, her eyebrows furrowing.

“I’ve been a healer for a long time,” he says with a soft smile. “In that practice, I’ve become very familiar with wounds and what weapons cause them.” His eyes roam over us, and there is something about them that I failed to notice before, an intelligence but also an agelessness. It makes me wonder what this man means when he says long time .

Because despite him being a human it almost makes me think he means more than the forty or fifty years that he must be.

“I notice that many of you have daggers on your belts. If you will permit me to see them then I can ascertain whether or not any of them are the murder weapon.”

“Of course!” Ibram says with a clap of his hands. “It may not immediately identify the killer, but who knows, maybe they were dumb enough to keep the murder weapon on them. After all, whoever did this was dumb enough to mess with a member of the guard.”

I notice Talyria roll her eyes at the guard’s words and swallow nervously. She really doesn’t like guards, does she? I doubt her nervousness if because of Valentine’s words. She doesn’t even have a dagger.

I pause, trying to figure out how to hide the fact that I was once a guard. It’s a ruse I’ll have to somehow keep up for the rest of our lives, but I guess that’s a small price to pay to make sure that that my wife doesn’t hate me.

It may prove difficult when I have a father as talkative as I do.

Valentine holds his hands out. “I’m ready, just show me your knives and this can all be over fairly quickly.”

Ibram places his hand on the sword at his hip. “I suggest you listen to the little man.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s your same height, Ibram.” I step around Talyria as I pull my dagger out of my sheath. I always keep it on me; indeed, it would be folly to not keep some sort of knife on you around here. Especially with guards like Ibram on the job.

Not that I probably need it now that I have Likho in my head. I wouldn’t know for sure though since I’ve always done my best to keep all the chaos at bay and not unleash it upon an unsuspecting Ruskhazar.

But I may be the most powerful being in this room.

May? Don’t insult me. You certainly are, without a doubt. Even if there is another sorcerer, I guarantee that they don’t have the same connection to their demigod patron as you do.

I hand Valentine the knife. It’s a sign of good faith so that people won’t start trying to back out of this, but also so that I can go about clearing my name as quickly as possible. Anything to put aside the doubt that Likho placed on my mind that I could actually be the killer.

Valentine bends over the knife studying it. He turns the blade to study the edges. “Hmm,” he says. He looks toward me and opens his mouth, but whatever he is about to say is cut off by a dagger flying through the air as if moving of its own volition. It slams into the priest’s throat, cutting his words off into a gurgle.

I feel my eyes widen in horror as I lunge forward grabbing the priest by his shoulders and gently lowering him to the ground. Did Likho do that? Or someone else?

Ibram yells. “Sorcery!”

Estelle screams like that is going to help the situation.

I look up, feeling the heavy cloak of shock settle over me followed closely by panic. Last time I was in a panicked situation like this, my neck was broken.

Worst day of my life.

Although this is trying really hard to claim the second spot.

I feel something nudge against my hand and look down to see that the priest is still alive. If just barely. He hands me a book that appears to resemble a spellbook. It has a neatly bound yellow cover with embellished corners.

I take it from him, a bit confused as to why he is handing it to me. His mouth moves, as if he is trying to say something, but nothing comes out. No words can make it past the dagger embedded in his throat.

I open the book, feeling my eyes widen as I scan over the spells. I was a terrible study at the Academy, but I know enough about Spellcraft to recognize these bear the markings of healing spells. They are not like any I have ever seen, extremely complex, far more than any spells that I learned.

Perhaps even strong enough to heal a mortal wound?

However, with my entanglement with sorcery I can’t just go around spouting spells unless I know that they’ll actually do some good. Spellcraft and sorcery are not meant to mix, and I’d rather not test my tenuous sanity, but I will if it’ll save him.

My eyes flick back to the man as I take in his empty gaze. Is he gone? Gently, I pry

my dagger from his grip and hold it under his nose. No breath clouds the metal.

Inside my head Likho hisses in pleasure at another sudden and unfortunate death.

I gently close the spellbook. What a pity. He carried with him a book that could heal but was unable to save himself in the end.

Still, the poor man's death has proved at least something.

The killer is indeed a sorcerer. And the killer is in the room with us since sorcery only works as far as the caster can see and sense.

Suddenly, there is a rattling sound, and I look up to see the wine rack shaking. I feel my eyes round as I leap to my feet. I whirl, pausing when I see that Talyria is just behind me. I grasp her arm and yank her along with me just as the wine rack falls over.

Costing my father a fortune.

A loud crash rings through the air and Estelle screams again, although I'm not sure why she thought that was necessary. We all heard her the first time.

I glance around, trying to determine who is doing this, but that's the thing about sorcery, you can cast it without speaking a word. One has only to look at an object to control it, and once a sorcerer has control over an object another sorcerer cannot wrest it away,

Which leaves me in an awkward predicament as I turn to see the broken shards of the bottle begin to rise. They float there for a second and I set my teeth in frustration just as they shoot toward us.

I have only enough time to make one move. I throw myself in front of Talyria to shield her from the shards of glass flying through the air.

Chapter Ten

Corallin

Down the hall I can hear murmurs; they are low and yet clearly angry. I tilt my head as I stride toward the sound of the argument. We are currently in the halls of the Family of Night, the abandoned ruins in the mountains where the assassin order my father and I are a part of are based.

And down the hall is my father's personal study. Who could possibly be speaking to him in such a manner? I can only think of a few fools brave enough to directly confront my father.

I place my hand on my dagger as I creep down the hall. However, as I get closer, I recognize the second voice, and it starts to make sense. Evengi Ichabod. My sister Natasya's suitor.

Only Evengi would dare to speak to Elwis like that because Evengi is the only one here who isn't at least a little bit afraid of my father.

I'm not sure why, it could be because he has no survival instincts. Or simply because he is clever enough to have figured out that if my father hasn't killed him already, he likely won't. After all, it's obvious that my father despises the man. In fact, I think it would be harder for him to dislike him more.

Unfortunately for us all, the arrogant priest and all his holy ways is currently untouchable. If not just because Natasya loves him, but because he is brother to a

woman, who by all intents and purposes, will likely be our next queen. If her current relationship with the newly crowned king is anything to go by anyway...

It's likely that Natasya is the only one in the family who hasn't noticed the tension, but she is blinded by love for them both.

And so Elwis the Eel and Evengi are locked in an unspoken feud where neither one can make too great a move over the other because Natasya stands to be hurt either way, and they will not risk that.

I make it to the entrance of my father's study. The door is partially open, so I squeeze through, my slight frame not even brushing the door. Neither of the men in the room seem to notice me so I move to a darkened corner of the room and welcome my friends the shadows.

Elwis is sitting at his desk, Evengi is standing on the other side with his hands planted firmly against the smooth wood.

"When will you begin trusting me?" Evengi demands. "Or is a lowly priest such a threat to you that you must have men trail me through the streets? You won't let me see my sister yet. I am not your prisoner to be kept at your whims."

"Not my whims, no," Elwis says dismissively. He glances up at Evengi. "But what of Natasya?"

"Natasya wants me to get along with you. That goes both ways, Eel."

"Your guards are for your own protection," Elwis says dismissively. "The same goes for your seeing your sister. Kingmaking is an interesting and messy affair. It's best to stay out of it till the very end. After all, if someone wished to hurt me, they need only to do something to you and deliver me an irreparable blow."

Evengi snorts at that. “I think we both know that you would recover.”

“My daughter’s wellbeing is worth more to me than any gold in this world.”

“I would never hurt Natasya,” Evengi claims. He is earnest, and in that at least, I believe him.

Elwis the Eel folds his hands leisurely over his desk. “In that you and I have a commonality. Because I would never hurt my daughter either. It’s why you’re still breathing and why I must be so invested in ensuring that you remain so.”

A weaker man would flinch at Elwis’s threats. However, if Evengi has one redeeming quality it is that he is not weak, and when he looks Elwis dead in the eyes and squares his shoulders, not the least intimidated, I can almost see why my sister loves him. “And my sister’s connection to our new and illustrious king, may the gods bless his reign, has nothing to do with that?”

Elwis lifts a shoulder. “You are convenient, Fyodorov, but there are other ways to influence a king.”

“Then I suggest that you start finding those ways because you will get nothing from me. I won’t let you use Alya through me.”

Elwis nods his head, glancing down at his desk. He begins straightening some scrolls lying across his desk. Likely assassination contracts that he still needs to go through and choose which assassins to assign to them. “Indeed. Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask, has Natasya said “yes” yet?”

Evengi clenches his jaw. “I’m waiting for the perfect moment to ask her.”

“Yes, of course. I was surprised that you would ask my blessing, but I suppose if we

are to be family, we should begin trying to get along now... shouldn't we, son?"

"So, it would seem," Evengi manages to get out past his clenched jaw.

Elwis smiles, revealing two of his teeth are slightly more pointed than the others. He lifts a crystalline chalice with a swirling red liquid inside. "To family then."

"Ugh," Evengi grunts as Elwis tosses back the drink of blood. He turns and storms out of the study.

Elwis lowers the glass as he leaves. The smile quickly slides off his face as he releases a sigh.

"Are you all right, father?" I ask, choosing that moment to reveal myself.

Elwis doesn't startle, but he does throw me a second glance showing that I surprised him at least a little bit. "Your skills are growing, my dear."

I smile at his praise.

He leans back in his chair and folds his pale fingers across his chest. He is dressed in a black tunic which matches his ebony black hair that hangs down around his shoulder. Likewise, his eyes are dark, in the same manner that mine are light, evidence that we are two different races of elves. Our people are supposedly enemies, but Elwis took me in and raised me as his own, not caring for a second that my skin was the color of stones and his the color of gold.

There is nothing I wouldn't do for him.

Elwis reaches out his hand, the rings on his fingers reflect in the flickering candlelight from the candelabra on his desk. He trails a finger over the rim of his

glass before he glances at me. “Do me a favor, dearest. When you bring a boy home, bring home one like Wilder. Not an insufferable fool like Evengi.”

I stare in horror as Valentine hands the spellbook that should be mine to the innkeeper’s son.

I have been tracking that priest across half of Ruskhazar, following the trail of his past healings so that I can find him and find a way to convince him to give up that spellbook. And I missed my opportunity by not being the one standing closest to him?

Now that man has it, he has no idea the power he holds.

I comfort myself with that fact; hopefully, I can convince him to give it up peacefully if he doesn’t know what it actually is.

Suddenly strong arms wrap around my waist and lift me off my feet just as the wine rack collapses, seemingly of its own volition.

“What are you doing?” I demand as Lief drags me backwards and out of the room.

“Making sure that you don’t die,” he says with a grunt.

Sasha is just on the other side of the door. “What is happening in there?”

Before I can think up a response, the guardsman Ibram stumbles through the door behind us. He is clutching his arm which appears to be bleeding heavily. His eyes round when he sees us already out in the hallway. He stumbles back, clumsily grabbing at his sword. He draws it from the sheath and points it to us. “Stay back!” he barks. “I can’t trust any of you.”

Then without another word he takes off down the hall. Lief grabs me again and pulls me down the hallway toward the entrance room. He yanks me behind the corner just as the other Lowlander man, a local I think the others called Lek, races out as well, and Sasha bursts into the wine cellar with the two girls in tow.

Once the coast is clear, Lief grabs my arm and hoists me to my feet. “Ow, I can walk by myself!” I snap as he half drags, half carries me down the hall before he turns into the nearest room. Lief shuts the door and then sags to the ground, shaking all over. “S-sorry,” he gasps out. “I guess I got carried away.”

He offers me a faint smile which I return.

I tuck a loose strand of hair back behind my ear as I begin pacing in front of him. “While I appreciate the gallant rescue, I need to get back out there. The spellbook—”

“Give it a moment, love,” Lief says, pushing to his feet. “People are dying, we need to play this safe.”

I draw in a sharp breath, glancing around to make certain that no one overheard us until I remember that we’re alone.

Lief lets out a chuckle, he always seems amused by my paranoia, but then he hasn’t met my father yet. He doesn’t know my reason for being paranoid. He had this same look on his face when I’d told him that anytime we are in public together we must act like we don’t know each other and any interaction should be antagonistic. He thought it was overkill, but he has no idea just how far my father’s reach extends. “Relax, it isn’t as if the walls have ears. We’re alone.”

I chew on my lip. It seems so strange to drop the charade, and actually acknowledge Lief, let alone that he is the man I love, but finally I nod. I look him over with concern. “Are you all right?”

He nods. "I think we got out just in time. Did you see Ibram's arm?"

I blow out a long breath and press the heel of my hand to my forehead. How did this job get like this? It was supposed to be a simple hit. I steal a spellbook from an unsuspecting healer. I sent Lief here ahead of me so I could tell my father that he was instrumental in helping me claim my spellbook. Just like that Lief would have a way into my father's good graces.

Then I could finally be free to love him openly without having to worry that my father might be plotting to kill him.

I just wanted to introduce the man I love to my family in a way that would make it so they wouldn't immediately disregard him for his profession. Instead, I put him in danger.

How could I have known that I wouldn't be the only murderous sorcerer staying the night in this inn?

Lief steps forward, encircling his arms around my waist. "I'm sorry I'm not a warrior," he whispers as he leans down, his beard scratches at my cheek as he nuzzles me. "Then I could have gotten your spellbook and stopped any sorcerers, and you wouldn't be ashamed to have your family meet me."

"Oh no you don't mister," I snarl as I lean back. I rest the palm of my hand against his cheek. "Don't you ever wish to change and next time you accuse me of feeling shame of you, I'll gut you like I have an assassination contract on you."

His lips turn up as he smiles at me adoringly.

"We have been over this. I want my family to be able to see you as I do, and they won't if I introduce you to them as a..."

“A writer?” Lief asks, arching his brow.

“I think it’s a noble occupation,” I hurriedly add,

Lief shrugs slightly. “Or at least it will be once I finish my Skyhold jetting book.”

“It will be a great book when it’s done.”

“I certainly hope so,” he says, his eyes turning bright just like they do whenever he mentions his bookish passions. “I’ve dedicated half my life to writing it.”

I push to my tiptoes so that my head is a bit closer to his, but there’s still a gap between us, so I grasp the front of his shirt. “We are going to get that spellbook and stop any bloodthirsty sorcerers that try to stop us. We are going to do it together. And then I can finally bring you home to meet my family and we no longer have to keep our love a secret. I promise, Lief. Tonight is the last night we act like strangers.”

Lief closes the distance between us, pressing his lips against mine. They move tenderly against me as his large hands encircle my waist and pull me closer. For just a moment, I don’t care about spellbooks and assassins or even my family expectations.

I just want Lief here with me every day, holding me like this.

He pulls back, pressing his forehead against mine. “For luck,” he breathes. “Now let’s regroup and figure out how we are going to get that spellbook, because now we have a different mark. The innkeeper’s son.”

“Look at you talking like a thief, you’ll make a fine addition to my family yet.”

Chapter Eleven

Talyria

I reach down, smoothing out the wrinkles of my dress. It's a deep violet in color with silver embroidery. My hair, which I normally wear down around my ears, is pulled back with a braid across the crown of my head.

I spend a lot of time in the shadows, but for once I will have eyes on me and I intend to look my best. After all, it isn't every day that a Thief Queen gets honored by the governor of her stone hall.

For tonight, I'm an honored guest, welcomed to a feast in the governor's magnificent home of carved stone with her family and the other members of nobility from our hall.

None of them know that I'm a criminal, that I run a ring of thieves, that I've been known to assassinate if the money is good.

I've been hired by some of them but all through dead drops or my masked emissary who acts as the official face of my organization.

I smile to myself. It's ironic really, I am to be commended for driving out a corrupt commander of the guard. The man got in my way one too many times, so I put an end to his career. I had the least pure motives imaginable and yet these people would honor me when I'm surely much worse.

I pause as I spot a familiar face. It's Petrov, the second in command who I turned the captain of the guard over to. He had not been without his suspicions but did not have evidence on his commanding officer until I conveniently stole them from the man's chambers. Right under his nose while he was in the other room.

Petrov smiles as I come closer. He's a nice-looking man, if you're into the straight cut noble sorts. His face is cleanshaven, and his brown hair is kept pulled back in a neat ponytail. Despite having been born Lowlander, and the tension growing between our two peoples, he has dedicated his life to making certain that these halls are safe.

There are many Higher Elves who do not appreciate the Lowlanders having garrisons of guards within our halls, but I don't mind. After all, men who aren't fighting for their homes and families are easily bought. Lowlander and Higher Elf alike are corruptible. I don't care who I'm dealing with. Good business is just good business whether or not you are born in the valley or come out looking like the stone walls of the mountains.

I know it's trouble to flirt with such a man, but I can't help it. I slide toward him. "You should be better dressed, Captain, after all this feast is to honor you as well."

He drops in a short bow, glancing up at me over his brows. "I could dress however I want. No eyes will be on me with you in the room. Also, it's Commander now." I notice the extra shining buttons holding up his white lapel and feel my eyebrows raise.

So, he got the old commander's spot? I can make use of this. It would be useful to have the commander of the guard in my back pocket. And if it means that I don't have to say farewell to this charming captain—I mean commander—just yet then so much the better.

I find myself smiling as I meet his eyes. "Well, then, Commander, are you ready to

celebrate our victory?”

He straightens, extending his arm to me. “After you, my lady.”

I give him a flirty wink. “How about beside you, my lord? After all, we brought down this man together.”

“Indeed,” he says after a moment. He hesitates for a second but then throws a smile my way. “I look forward to seeing what else we can accomplish together, Talyria.”

“Victor!” I cry as horror pulses through me, deadening my limbs. Am I a widow again? Already?

I haven’t even had a chance to get used to the idea of having a husband and now I have to come to terms with the fact that I lost him?

Pain comes crashing into me, but not necessarily for Victor. I’m taken back to another time. I see Petrov in front of me, three swords protruding from his torso as he gives me a weak smile. “I don’t suppose now is the best time to say that I want to start again,” he had whispered, blood dribbling down his chin as his arm carefully cradled his chest.

I let out an angry cry. It’s a hollow, feral sound, and it echoes through the wine cellar as I grip Victor and roll him off of me. He is a dead weight in my arms which are shaking so hard that they almost give out, he sags back into me.

When suddenly another pair of hands appears, grabbing Victor’s arms and helping to roll him off me.

“Gods, Victor, are you all right?” Estelle gasps from where she is kneeling next to us. She raises shaking hands to cover her face. She looks miraculously unharmed despite

the glass shards that flew absolutely everywhere.

I sit up, turning my attention to Victor who is lying there with his head lolled to the side. Dark locks of his hair fall across his pale face. I reach out a hand, fearing what I'll find when suddenly Victor's eyes fly open.

I gasp and fall backwards as Victor groans and reaches up to shove his hair back. He glances between me and Estelle and frowns. "What are those looks for?"

"Victor!" Estelle says, smacking his arm. "We were sure you were hurt."

Hurt? I was certain that he was dead.

It may have just been glass, but I know the power of sorcery and how quickly a person can take a regular object and make it become a deadly projectile.

By all accounts, Victor should be dead unless this sorcerer is a fool who does not know his own craft. Somehow, I find that hard to believe. The sorcerer knew how to create his own weapons with the shards of glass only to fumble now?

Victor sits up, and he doesn't even grimace. "As you can see. I'm not."

I reach out a hand, resting it against his jacket. I run my hand up and down his back and when I pull it away, I see crimson.

Blood.

Victor's deep brown eyes lock on my hand before they raise to me. "It was just a scratch."

Before I can press further for the truth that this man is clearly withholding from me,

the door bursts open and Victor's father rushes in. It takes me a moment to realize that everyone else must have left the room in the panic of the flying glass because it's only Victor, Estelle, and I here kneeling on the floor.

"Sweet Thyre's merciful breath!" Sasha cries out as he takes in the room.

"We're all fine, father," Victor says reaching up to rub his head with a grimace. "Well, except for the priest."

I glance over to the man in the orange robe, I'd forgotten about his unfortunate passing in the chaos. The wine rack hides his fallen form. Dark liquid leaks out from under it although I don't know if that's actually blood or wine.

"My wine supply certainly isn't either," Sasha says with a sniff.

"That's a few thousand crowns down the drain," Victor's younger sister says stepping in behind her father.

Sasha quickly reaches back, grabbing his daughter and ushering her out of the room. I hear his voice echo back. "Not that it matters compared to human life."

"It's going to set us back months!" his daughter protests.

I glance at Victor who just smirks and shakes his head. "Sometimes I think she is better suited to inherit the inn than me." He pushes to his feet. Glass falls out of his coat as he moves. I eye it up, but the dark material hides any bloodstains. Still, I notice several tears in it that causes the fabric to gape slightly. Victor holds out his hands to Estelle and me and pulls us both to our feet.

I shake off the folds of my own tunic in case any extra glass got on me, but it seems as though Victor's human shield kept me safe. Miraculously it kept him safe too, but

he couldn't have known that.

I reach out, smacking him in his stomach.

“Ow!” Victor cries in shock. “What was that for?”

“For you trying to sacrifice yourself for me. Don't do that,” I snap at him.

In response, he holds up his hand, spinning the silver ring on his index finger with his thumb. “I'm your husband. I think I'm morally obligated to.” Victor gestures with his head toward the door. “But we can discuss this in more detail later. Right now, we need to figure out what to do about the sorcerer.”

“To do?” Estelle asks, her voice going high. She pulls her hands to her chest, twisting her fingers together nervously.

Victor glances at her out of the corner of his eye. “I can't very well allow him to keep killing people in my inn.”

“Or her,” I say, frowning. My sister Corallin is a sorceress. Could she have done this? It's true that she was a part of my criminal empire in the past, she was a vampire, but her skills revolved around thievery and stealth. She never much had the stomach for killing.

I sent my other men for those jobs.

Still, there's no knowing what she has become in the past thousand years. For all I know, my sister is gone, and she has been replaced by someone else entirely. Someone who would deny me?

Someone who might even kill.

I shudder to think of it, but that isn't something I can rule out. Especially since I saw the look she gave Victor when Valentine handed him that book.

If my sister thinks she can get away with trying to kill my husband, then I'll give her a family reunion she'll never forget. I lived without her for a thousand years. I spent two decades believing that she was dead, I can keep on believing that if she crosses me.

Just after I make certain that it's true...

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Chapter Twelve

Victor

It's a sunny day, and to be frankly honest, there is nothing wrong with the world.

Except for the demigod of chaos in my head, but on a day like this, he's an annoyance at most.

I draw in a deep breath, squaring my shoulders as the crisp air, filled with flowery perfumes and the smell of grass and dirt, fills my nostrils.

This is a good day to be alive.

Makes me glad that I'm not decomposing in the middle of the ocean where fish and krakens can feast upon my remains.

That is until an inhuman cry of pain pierces through the air, interrupting the happy chatter of the birds and breaking through my appreciation.

I let out a sigh, my shoulders slumping. It may be nice to be alive, but this is still a merciless and unforgiving world. One where, if you aren't careful, you can be cruelly murdered in the blink of an eye.

Which is why I find myself veering off the path and toward the sound of whimpers and yelps. After all, just because I met an untimely end doesn't mean that someone else should.

“That’s exactly what that means,” Likho hisses in my head. “Untimely ends to go around!”

I ignore him, I think I’m getting pretty good at it, and focus on my path ahead. I catch the sight of flashes of fur through the trees before I hear the short snappish bark of wolves.

It’s unusual for wolves to hunt during the daylight hours, but then I did just recently see a kraken, which is a species that has been extinct for a thousand years. These are unusual times.

I wonder if perhaps they were driven from their home by some other ancient horror that hasn’t seen the light of day for longer than we’ve had a capital city.

I give my head a sharp shake. What a ridiculous notion.

I’m literally jumping to the least plausible explanation. And yet... it no longer feels like it would be a less likely than any other scenario. I’m not sure what this world has come to, but it’s definitely changed.

Maybe all that talk about the “end of the world” isn’t just rot.

I draw my dagger from my belt and quicken my pace just in time to see a black and gray wolf leap at a beautiful elven woman. She sidesteps him easily, moving with a practiced grace. She swings a large stick out and whacks it across the side. The wolf lets out a yelp and limps to the side.

She seems to be holding her own pretty well. The wolves have met their match, and they clearly know it, but one wolf, this one larger than the rest—perhaps the alpha—doesn’t seem ready to accept defeat.

It pushes back to its feet and turns to the woman, snapping its teeth at her.

I pull back my hand and send the dagger flying, pretending that I'm throwing it. Instead, I allow Likho's power to fill the dagger, taking control of it and sending it straight to where I want it to. It pierces the wolf's side, and the wolf lets out a wounded howl. It stumbles back several steps, and while it writhes, I quickly use the sorcery to pull the dagger out of the wolf's side.

Only this time instead of the sorcery taking complete control of the dagger, the small form of a kraken appears on the wolf's back. It's Likho in as corporeal of a form as he can manage, a being of pure energy and in the shape of the very thing that led to my death.

I know he does it to tease me, get back at me for not being the ideal vessel he wants.

The kraken pulls the dagger out of the wolf's side and drops it to the ground. The alpha lets out a short howl before it turns and limps off and the other wolves follow along behind it. I'm glad to see them walk away. It's why I pulled the dagger from the wolf, giving him the best chance of survival.

I turn to the woman who fortunately doesn't seem to have noticed the little kraken that came out of nowhere and then disappeared into the wind.

She flips her short black hair as she turns. "That was quite a throw," she says, her tone sounding impressed.

I'm about to make some smart remark about how saving damsels used to be my day job—when really hauling damsels to the Spice Isles and then being murdered by said damsels was actually my day job—but then I find myself looking into her eyes. They are black like a night before the stars come out. They seem to pierce my very soul, and I find all logical thought driven from my mind.

Which is my only explanation for why I find myself saying. “Hello, my name is Victor. Will you marry me?”

Well, at least I know that I wasn’t the sorcerer. After all, I can hardly expect that I flung glass into myself, now, can I?

“Actually, now that you mention it...” Likho begins, deciding to rear his ugly head. I was hoping that he would stay in whatever place demigods go when they’re dead. It had been so quiet in my head for a while. It is respites like these that make me think maybe it wasn’t so bad to bargain with this entity for a second chance at life.

After all, Likho is a busy demigod, and without a physical form. His powers are finite. He actually has people who worship him, who he has to help when they pray to him and such.

So, he isn’t always tormenting me.

He just does that most of the time.

What is it, Likho? I think as I look over my father, sister, and cousin assuring myself that they’re all right.

“ Don’t you think that it is perfectly in my chaotic right to throw those shards to you. Especially since I know that you’d survive it?”

The demigod has a point. After all, with him inside of me and his power coursing through my every sinew, I cannot sustain an injury, at least not one that lasts very long. He keeps me alive in the same way he healed me and brought me back, with some sort of dark power that only a demigod could control, and in doing so, ensures that he doesn’t need to find a new vessel anytime soon.

And it would be like Likho to attack me and then heal me. It's the very chaos that he adores.

I don't acknowledge that because I'm still almost certain that I wasn't the sorcerer who has been killing these people.

Likho can't be so powerful that he could channel his power through me without me even feeling it. Sure, he could channel it outside of my control, but in a manner that I don't even notice?

That's never happened.

"That you know of."

Thanks for the lovely thoughts, Likho.

I could swear that Likho smiles at this. If an undead spirit of an evil demigod can indeed smile, which I don't think it can. But I can still sense his smugness.

I give my head a sharp shake. I won't be getting anywhere with him, so I turn my attention back to my father.

"What are we going to do, lad? People are dead, our wine is all over the floor, and there will be one Skyhold of a mess to clean up in the morning."

"If any of us make it that far," Estelle says folding her arms. Awfully pessimistic words for a woman who was not skewered by glass today. I may have healed from it, but that doesn't mean that I didn't feel it when that glass sliced through me as if I was paper. And I have the bloody tears in my favorite coat to show for it.

But I need to stay focused. I can mourn my coat, and my father can mourn that wine

when the sorcerer has been stopped.

I reach into the inside pocket of my coat and pull out the spellbook. “This is our key to finding the sorcerer.”

“Valentine’s book?” Talyria asks, frowning.

I wave the book, the pages fluttering slightly. “This is not just any book, it’s a spellbook.”

“Victor spent a year at the academy,” my father states proudly as if that bit of information is necessary right now. Still, I guess it’s nice to know that he’s proud of my academy days. I remember him saying that innkeepers didn’t have any need of magic, but I guess deep down he thought well of it.

Only for me to find out that I had no magical inclination whatsoever and wind up as a guardsman who had to make a deal with a demigod to avoid being a kraken’s lunch.

“So... how will that spellbook help us?” Estelle asks, her eyebrows furrowing.

“It’s simple really. The sorcerer won’t be able to cast any spells from it,” I declare proudly.

It’s a well-known fact that sorcery and magic don’t mix. A person cannot serve both a demigod for their powers and the goddess Meruna, patron of magic. There is a price to be paid for such a sacrilege and such faithlessness. Those who try to wield both could very well be struck dead on the spot. And those who survive are driven mad by the power they were never supposed to wield.

It’s why I’ve avoided spells since my deal with Likho. With the demigod keeping me alive, I doubt I’ll die, but my mind is in a fragile enough state that I wouldn’t want to

risk any magical backlash causing me to go mad.

Or maybe a part of Likho's hold over my subconscious is driving me mad already... after all, I did use spells and then I switched to sorcery like a jetting turncoat.

For all I know, Likho's voice in my head is actually my own.

I wait for some sort of smart retort from Likho, but only silence rings in my ears.

I swallow hard as I run my hand down the spellbook. "We make any potential sorcerers read from this book and just like that, we know whether or not they are sorcerers."

Father raises his eyebrows and then shrugs. "I doubt I'll be good at it, but I'll give magic a go."

I pull the book away as he reaches for it, a strange territorial urge overcoming me when it comes to this random spellbook. I clear my throat as my father looks up at me confused. "You weren't in the room with us. You are not in question right now."

Father reaches up to scratch his sideburns. "Well, I guess that's good."

"Which leads us to the second matter of business. Where are you and the girls going to hide while we do our sorcery hunting?"

"Me?" father splutters.

"Someone has to protect them," I say my eyes darting to Vera who is sitting behind the counter with a far-off haunted look in her eyes. My carefree cousin has seen too much for a girl her age. My aunt and uncle entrusted her to our care, and we are failing them. Mika lies curled up in her arms, blinking sleepily and probably trying to

calculate the loss of the wine.

That should be the only loss she experiences tonight.

Father glances at the girls, and I know that I said the right thing. I'm a grown man. I don't need him like they do, and he knows it. He turns to me. "You'll be careful, son?"

"The carefullest."

"That isn't a real word," Talyria grumbles. She apparently has it in her head that my throwing myself in front of some glass shards to save her was a poor move. I'm not entirely sure what she expected me to do, watch her get cut to pieces? Especially since I knew that I would be fine after a little bit of pain.

"You should go with them, Talyria, I would rest easier—"

"Shut your mouth right now, Victor Andreev. You're mad if you think I'm hiding away while you're out here risking your life to find a sorcerer." She folds her arms and gives me a look that says that if I want to move her, I'll probably have to lift her up and carry her off.

I release a frustrated sigh. "Estelle?"

"Not on your life," Estelle says, her eyes are starting to spark with enthusiasm. "This is the adventure I've always craved."

I definitely made the right choice when I stopped pursuing her. She would have driven me to an early grave, again. No matter what Likho's power does to keep me alive, that girl would have found a way to get me killed a second time.

She's a madwoman.

I turn back to my father. "Where should you and the girls go? It has to be somewhere the sorcerer wouldn't think to look."

Father glances around as if determining that we're still alone in the room. The other straggler guests have not returned to this main room and I don't think they intend to. We'll probably have to search the whole inn to find them and get them to read a spell to prove their innocence. I suppose it's well enough, it gives us a chance to confront whoever the sorcerer is alone without other innocents in the room.

"I know a spot," he whispers then he steps behind the bar.

I reach up to rub my brow. "You can't just duck down there, it's too easy to spot—" I trail off as my father bends over and pulls off a plank of wood. Then another one. My mouth drops open as Mika hops out of Vera's arms and rushes over to help. They clear enough space to reveal a cavern there under our inn floor. It's very clearly a...

"A smuggler's stash?" I choke out. "Why do you have a smuggler's stash under your inn?"

Estelle looks just as stunned as me, but Talyria looks impressed. "I'd wager it's because they're smugglers."

Father glances at me and shrugs apologetically. "It was a good business opportunity, what with us housing so many sea faring travelers. We would have told you, but we just didn't want to put you in an awkward situation on account of your being a guard."

Talyria whips her gaze to me, and I straighten. Skyhold, I forgot she wasn't aware of that fact.

My ears are ringing, I'm not sure what to say or do. My family are smugglers. My father, my kid sister, and from the lack of surprise on my cousin's face, I'd say she probably isn't innocent either.

And all this time I thought my father would die of shame to know that I was a thief now, but he had been a smuggler the whole time!

I swallow hard, but nothing goes down. Father climbs into the hole and helps Vera down. Mika looks like she is going to step down after them, but then she races toward me and wraps her arms around me. "Be safe, Victor!" she says and then she turns and jumps into my father's arms. He begins pulling the boards over top of them, and in a second, my family is down below our feet, buried like a secret.

Chapter Thirteen

Talyria

This man had saved my life. And to top it off he was handsome. And asking me to marry him.

I could work with this. I offer him what I hope is a flirtatious smile. It's been a while since I've had to do this, being imprisoned for twenty years doesn't leave one with many opportunities to flirt.

And before that, my husband and I were at odds and had been since he learned that I was running a criminal empire on the side. So, I dearly hope my smile looks coy and not like I'm nauseated. "How about we start with getting your real name and go from there?"

"That isn't a no," the man says, pointing at me.

"You're incredibly astute."

"No, actually I'm Victor," he replies smoothly.

Poor puns? I'm beginning to see why he is proposing on the road to random women, but there is something about it that is actually endearing. So much so that I find myself holding out my hand. "I am Talyria."

"A lovely name for a beautiful woman," he says as he bends over to pick up the knife

that he threw at the wolf. I add brave to the list of qualities of this stranger.

I'm not sure that just anyone would have helped me. Not that I needed help, but I enjoyed that he put the effort in.

"Your name is very strong, I hope it proves true."

The corner of his mouth turns up as he twists the dagger in his hand, he keeps his eyes on it. He doesn't immediately boast to being strong, so I also add humble to my imaginary list. He inhales deeply and looks up at me. "Where are you heading?"

"Isn't that a bit of a personal question?"

His eyebrows raise. "More personal than asking you to be my wife?"

"Fair enough," I say with a small chuckle. "Then you won't mind if I ask you the same."

"I'm going back home," he replies as he reaches up, brushing a curl off his forehead.

"And home is...?"

"On the coast, it's a small town."

"What a coincidence," I lie. "I was just heading for the coast."

Victor is silent for a long moment as he bends over, wiping his blade off on the grass to clean the blood off, but then he leaps to his feet after he has sheathed his dagger and is all smiles. "Well, then I think we're both in luck. You should come with me."

"I should?"

“Well, these are dangerous woods. Don’t you know, there are wolves about?” He leans toward me and winks. “I could use the protection, and you could probably use the company.”

I decide to cross humble off my list, but hey. Handsome, strong, brave, good natured... he seems to have many good qualities. So, I find myself nodding.

Who knows? Having a guy with those qualities willing to marry me could come in very handy.

“So, you lied to me.”

Victor pauses, the door he had just opened swings back toward him but is stopped by his foot. “I didn’t lie,” he argues, placing his hand on his hips. “I just... didn’t give you all the details... immediately.”

I arch my brow. “You knew I hated guardsmen, and then you failed to tell me that you were a guardsman.”

Victor turns his attention back to the door and pushes it open. We’re in the middle of searching the other rooms of the inn for the scattered guests. Then Victor has the grand idea of making them all read from a spellbook to make certain that they aren’t sorcerers. I’m not sure what he plans on doing when we find the sorcerer, but I guess I should just be glad that he hasn’t thought of having me read that spellbook.

As a sorceress that could end poorly for me.

I don’t have it in me to feel glad, I’m just too jetting frustrated. After all this time, I am back to the same mistakes of the past. Married to a guardsman?

I married a guard once and I’ll take the blame for that. I thought our love could

overcome our moral differences. But to be fooled into marrying a guard again? That's Victor's fault.

"What was I supposed to do?" he protests. "You only informed me of hating guardsmen after we were married. I can't change what I was, I'm not actually a guardsman anymore."

"Once a guardsman, always a prat."

"You aren't honestly mad at me over this are you?" Victor demands, whirling towards me. "It was a former employment. I never even liked being a guard. Besides, me being a guard never came up and when it did—"

"You lied to my face. You had the chance to come clean and you chose to keep me in the dark."

"Um... maybe I should go check a different room," Estelle suggests as she gestures down the hall. I ignore her as I stride after Victor.

"I never lied," he argues. "You just never asked, and don't you think we have more pressing issues right now?" He reaches up, running a hand through his hair, clearly agitated.

I feel a quick pang of guilt over being so angry. It's true, I didn't actually ask Victor if he was a guard when we met. Victor isn't Petrov. I can't very well place my first husband's transgressions on him.

And yet, aren't they the same? They are both guards, they'll always put their first love—the law— before me. I learned that the hard way when Petrov learned of my criminal undertakings.

I had thought that he had sworn to stand by my side forever, but that was apparently only if I was a law-abiding citizen. Instead, he sold me out, led to my downfall, and then got himself killed before we had a chance to make things right.

And if given half the chance, Victor will do the same thing.

He already has Petrov's ridiculous self-sacrificing tendency, just proving that these guards are all the same. They're too good, too righteous for a sinner like me.

Somehow, I've wound up bound to yet another one. I'm not ready for another thousand years imprisonment only to wake up as if it all happened yesterday and to feel the heartache as fresh as ever.

I jab Victor in his chest. "It makes me wonder what other secrets you are keeping."

This takes Victor aback, the frustration in his expression is quickly replaced by panic. "What? Nothing!" he says too hastily, too desperately.

Estelle pauses on her way down the hall and away from our drama. She lets out a snort. "Please, just because Victor is a guard doesn't mean that he is leading a secret life. He's too straightlaced for that. If there is one thing that you can always count on, it's that Victor will be the same old person he always was. It's a bit boring, but hey at least he's dependable like that."

Victor whips his head to Estelle, his eyes narrowing. "Precisely," he says even though the words seem to pain him.

I work my bottom jaw as I study him. "Take off your shirt," I say after a second.

Victor backs up a step, clutching at the fabric of his shirt as if scandalized by my suggestion. Estelle's eyes widen in shock, and she turns, taking off down the hall

finally making good on her suggestion to leave us to our marital disagreement.

“Now is hardly the time, dear ,” he protests.

“You should be dead; you should be bleeding everywhere and yet you’re not. I want to know why. Now. Take. Off. Your. Shirt.” I tilt my head, arching my brow. “Or should I remove it for you?”

His eyebrows shoot up, and he pauses a second as if seriously considering my offer. But then his fingers tighten around the collar of his shirt as if he is really concerned that I’m about to rip it off him. His knuckles whiten as he turns his brown gaze to me. “All the ways I imagined you saying that tonight, I never thought it would come out sounding so threatening.”

I ignore him and lunge at him, grabbing at his coat. “How can you be all right? That glass should have killed you; sorcerers don’t miss.”

He jerks his coat out of my hand. “Don’t sound so disappointed, honey.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’re lying to me.”

“I think you need to calm down,” he says holding up both his hands.

“ Don’t tell me to calm down. I demand some honesty. I’m your wife, you owe me that much at least.”

Victor looks like he is about to give in, but then his eyes flash with something I can’t quite place. It isn’t an emotion, more like a shimmer of green in his very deeply brown eyes.

I don’t know how to describe it except for a second it almost seems like something

else was in there with Victor.

“Why are you so paranoid?” he demands.

“Because that’s exactly how my last marriage ended,” I blurt out. I inhale sharply as my words hang in the air between us. Victor stumbles back like I physically slapped him. To be honest, I’m a bit surprised myself. I’m not sure if I had intended to say that, but now that it’s out in the open there’s no point in continuing to be secretive. “Secrets got between us, and he wound up dead.” I tilt my head, forcing a smile to try to hide the pain behind an even tone and a nonchalant act. “We wouldn’t want that to happen again, now, would we?”

Victor’s mouth pops open in shock and I make the split-second decision to utilize that shock. Now is my chance to get the upper hand and force him to tell me what he is keeping from me. “What do you mean previous marriage?” he asks. “Talyria, what—”

I drop to the ground, swinging my leg out under his. Victor isn’t prepared in the least for my move, he hits the wooden boards in a second. I crawl onto him before he can have the chance to respond and pull his dagger out of his sheath.

He chokes on a breath, the breath obviously driven from his lungs. I tilt my head as I study him. “What? Did you really think that you were the first?” I ask.

His eyes find mine only now the green flash is gone, all that remains are soft brown orbs betraying a wounded nature, and I wonder if perhaps I went too far.

But then I remembered what Petrov did when he couldn’t accept me with all my imperfections, and I decide that it doesn’t matter that I hurt Victor. Better than he hurt me first.

And if he can't accept me the way I am then it's better to learn now.

"Marriage is built on trust," I say as I press the dagger to his cheek. "I'll have the truth out of you, or I will have nothing at all."

Victor clenches his jaw as he regards me in a challenging manner as if daring me to cut him. I glance down at the knife. I hadn't been expecting him to call my bluff. I certainly was not anticipating that he would be angry and hurt enough to not be afraid of me.

I think I need to get some help because I keep ending up in situations like this with my husbands, where I wind up pointing weapons at them.

But I've already showed my hand, I can't pull back now. I stare down at him, wondering if I should give him a real quick shave to show him that I mean business when suddenly that green flash is back.

In a second, a small green tentacled creature is on my hand.

"What?" I gasp out as it wraps its suctioned tentacles around me.

Victor's eyes round, and for the first time since I put a dagger to his cheek, he actually looks afraid. "Likho, don't!" he cries out just as the creature pulls back its head and sinks a tiny beak into my skin.

"Ow!" I cry leaping back, losing my hold of the dagger as I do.

I stop a few paces away, holding my hand to my chest as the sea creature leaps from my arm and wraps its tentacles around my dagger. If I'm honest, it looks like the illustrations of krakens I have seen in bestiaries before the great collapse of my people. But much smaller.

And krakens are supposed to live in the water.

“What is that thing?” I hiss as Victor pushes to a sitting position, holding the side of his head. He looks at the miniature kraken then back at me. “Uh... this is Likho. He doesn’t like it when someone threatens me. Someone who isn’t him, that is.”

I furrow my brows. The name Likho sounds familiar. As I think about it, I realize that the name is from the pantheon of demigods. He is the demigod of chaos and ill fates. One of the winter months is named after him.

I always served Jarus, the demigod of shadows, just as my sister did, but I am aware of who Likho is. When I came of age, I was allowed to choose any demigod to be my patron. It was a Higher Elf custom that the Lowlanders and Lower Elves of the valley hated. They said that the demigods did not deserve our worship.

As if the gods did. The Lower Elves’ god was dead, what made him any more worthy than a demigod?

Victor holds out his hand and the kraken crawls onto it, leaving my dagger behind. The kraken grows smaller and flatter until it seems to be a mark on his skin, inked there but then even that fades until I’m left wondering if I ever saw it or if I’m perhaps going mad.

It’s just like Likho to make me doubt my sanity.

“No, I suppose I haven’t been entirely honest,” Victor says quietly. “But I don’t think you have either.”

To answer, I hold out my hand and use Jarus’s power to take control of the dagger on the ground. It slices through the air, landing hilt first in my hand. I quietly slide it into my belt.

“Are you...” Victor begins, pulling his knee to his chest as if afraid to ask the question because of what the answer might be. “Are you the sorcerer who killed those men? Who tried to kill me?”

I give my head a sharp shake. “No,” I say quickly. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“But you are a sorcerer.” It’s a quiet phrase. Not quite an accusation, but he does sound disappointed.

“So are you,” I counter defensively.

He shrugs halfheartedly. “In a sense.”

“I’ve never seen sorcery manifest like that,” I say, gesturing to his now empty arm. “What was that?”

“I’m not just a sorcerer who worships Likho, I’m his vessel. I died a few months ago and made a bargain with Likho. I would be his tether to the physical living world, and he would keep me alive. It’s why I wasn’t killed by the shards of glass. Technically, I was already dead, and the same power of the demigod that had brought me back has been keeping me alive since.”

I can barely believe his words. It all rings of madness, but there is a sincerity in his confession that makes it impossible to doubt him. I find myself wanting to tell him a secret equally huge.

“I’m a thousand and sixty-year-old ex-vampire,” I admit. I reach out rubbing my finger against a stain on my tunic. I wonder if it is blood, although whose I have no idea. It’s been a long night. “You may have heard of me; I was the fabled Thief Queen.”

Victor's eyes shoot up at that. It's clear that he's heard of me. I wonder what stories lasted all these years. I wonder how true they are.

"I dabble in thievery," he says after a moment. "I was just coming back from robbing some manors off the capital when we met."

I exhale slightly. It feels like a weight I didn't even realize was there has lifted off my chest and now I can breathe fully. I hadn't realized just how exhausting my ruse was, but now I find myself realizing that I don't have to keep lying. At least not to Victor.

I don't know why I was so worried about him being an ex-guardsman. He is like me. Perhaps we are more compatible than I'd first realized. He is someone who has lived passed what he should have, has been touched by sorcery, and now lives with thievery in his blood. I may have actually fallen in love with him before our vows instead of marrying him for the convenience of it all.

"Talyria?" he says softly after a long moment. It's as if it's painful to even say my name.

"Yes?"

"Were you really married before?"

I press my eyes shut, remembering Petrov's face, the light in his eyes, the way his smile made me feel. "That was a long time ago."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks, softly.

"Probably for the same reason you lied to me. I was scared you couldn't love who I truly was."

“You were right,” he says quietly. He reaches up, I think to fiddle with his wedding ring like I’ve noticed him doing quite a bit before. But instead, he pulls it off. “Marriage is built on trust.”

I feel my mouth drop open, but I’m not sure what to say. I won’t beg him to have me. Suddenly the weight is back. I was completely right in all my fears after all.

Victor won’t meet my gaze as he drops the ring and pushes to his feet. “How could we have expected to start a new life together when we both had so many lies?”

I watch him, trying to find a reason for the cavernous pain I feel opening up inside of me.

I barely know Victor, he barely knows me. Clearly, we were wrong about who we thought the other was.

And yet... is he really going to walk away just like Petrov did?

I bite down on my lip hard, trying to keep from crying as I pull off my own ring. I fling it down onto the ground, it makes a slight ringing sound as it lands on top of Victor’s.

Another failed marriage and this one didn’t last nearly as long as the last one had.

I think it’s time to face it that people like me don’t get eternal love. That’s the price of power. Even the power that I no longer have creates a vacuum that sucks at everything in my life. Leaving no room for love.

Chapter Fourteen

Corallin

The fire of the inn crackles as I stop near the front. This inn is one of the smaller ones that my father bought out after killing the owner.

Elwis the Eel takes his innkeeping very seriously. After all, it's quite a cutthroat business. At least... he makes it that way.

The first inn he ever owned was originally bought for my mother as their wedding present, but when father isn't off running a criminal empire, he's helping her run the business. And it's his love language to make certain that mother's inn is the most successful in the whole country.

If that means he has to murder his competition and feed their guests rat poison, then that's just how it is. Then afterwards father can buy another inn and gift that to my mother as well. This inn is one of their more recent acquisitions and still has the old signage out front.

It's romantic, in a bit of a twisted way. Leaves me wondering if I'll ever find that kind of love. It's a question that I've been dwelling on especially recently since Natasya and Bronwyn have both brought home suitors.

It's hard because my sisters are both so much younger than me. Due to my lapses in memory, I don't even know by how many years, but since elves age twice as slowly as humans, I know that I lived for at least thirty years to be the age I am now. And

then there's no knowing how long I was a vampire.

But the difference is that I'm trapped always at this age, and I had to watch as my sisters passed me and blossomed into full grown women while I'm trapped forever frozen at this state of my life.

My younger sisters are now older than me— in the equivalent of our ages by maturity.

They're moving on with their lives, they've both found someone, and they seem so happy.

My father and mother are happy.

I wonder if I'll ever find that happiness, but I can't help but wonder who would fall for a vampiric Higher Elf sorceress. My hands are stained red with the blood of the assassination contracts I've fulfilled. Anyone I bring home will have to come to terms with my criminal family and they in turn would have to accept him.

It's too much to ask of anyone to take me as I am.

I'm not even sure why I'm thinking about this. It's been a long day, another soul has been sent to Skyhold, and tonight I'll return to my father. I'm just stopping at this inn because I need a place to rest until the sun sets.

I'm about to tell the innkeeper whose daughter I am and demand a room where I can rest till evening, but then someone catches my eye.

It's a man, a Highlander sitting at the table in the back of the room. I'm not sure what draws my attention to him. Perhaps it is the aura of mystery that he exudes of why he would be staying at the inn during the day instead of traveling on his way. We aren't

in any city; the weather is pleasant enough for a non-vampire. This is the type of inn that is just a stop in the journey, not somewhere you stay long term.

Or maybe it is his rugged exterior, with golden hair pulled back in a bun and a thick beard that covers half his face. Rippling muscles and an arm tattooed to resemble the sleeve of a shirt only with smaller pictures tell of a life of adventure.

Or maybe it's the fact that despite how he looks, he is sitting at a desk hunched over an open book furiously scribbling into it, but I find myself striding toward him.

I pull out the chair across from him and slide into it. "Hello," I say after a moment. "I'm Corallin,"

He looks up, clearly confused by my presence, but he still manages to muster up a polite smile and nod. "Lief," he says and then he returns to scribbling.

"What are you doing?" I ask, leaning forward and resting my hand on my chin.

Lief looks up startled. I wonder if he thought I'd left after our little introduction. He's clearly absorbed in that book that he is writing in. He glances down at it, and his cheeks grow slightly rosy.

I tilt my head. "Are you embarrassed?"

"No," he says hastily followed by a muttered, "Maybe. I don't see how this is any business of yours."

"It might not be," I say offering him a small smile so he will stop being so on edge. "But humor me, it isn't as if your profession can be any worse than mine."

After all, I kill people. Not even for a living, I kill because it runs in my family, and

it's expected of me.

Lief closes the book, placing the quill to the side. "I think I should go," he says as he grabs the ink.

I'm not entirely sure what possesses me, but I reach across the table, resting my hand on his. "Don't go. Please."

Lief pauses, his eyes locked on my hand over his. I wonder if he notices how cold my touch is—a byproduct of being a vampire. I curl my fingers, pulling back.

Finally, he nods and sits back down. He sets down the ink quill and opens the book. "Fine, if you must know. I'm an author, but please don't tell anyone."

"Why not? Are you ashamed?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions," he mutters as he studies me.

I shrug in response.

"No, I'm not ashamed," he says with a sigh. "But that doesn't mean my father isn't."

I exhale a breath as I slump into my chair. That much I understand. "I know the pressures of family expectations better than most."

Lief nods in commiseration before he sighs. He turns back to the book. "Well, I had better get on with this..."

"Lief?" I say as he picks up a pen. He looks up at me and I give him another smile, this one feels more genuine. "I think it's nice that you're a writer. It's a noble trade. It must be a peaceful life."

Lief gives me a look like, should we interrupt them ? But I can't get over what that woman Talyria said.

She is over a thousand years old? She claims that she was a vampire? How could she have lost the night kiss? I hadn't realized that such a thing was possible. I thought that a vampiric state was inalterable.

And to claim to be the Thief Queen?

My father has been obsessed with stories of the Thief Queen, even coming to fear in recent years that she may have somehow come back. Even though the Thief Queen's reign was over a thousand years ago, such a thing was a possibility. After all, the famed original uniter of the thief and assassin guilds was a vampire, and therefore, immortal.

Elwis modeled his own rise to power after the stories of this Talyria Undying.

He even found me while trying to locate the Thief Queen's burial place.

Is it possible?

But how can it be....

This woman clearly believes what she is saying. So, either she is raving mad or she's telling the truth.

Could she have been also telling the truth about being my sister from a different life? Is she the key to my long-lost past?

As I ponder it, I realize I'm not actually very surprised. Of course, I would be in a criminal family in both my past and my present. A life of stealing and killing seems

to be something that I can never escape. I was born for it, whether I want it or not.

Lief places his hand on my shoulder, getting my attention back to him and our current predicament. We are hiding underneath the bed, we both ducked under it when we heard the commotion in the hallway only for it to turn out to be Talyria and Victor.

We came here for that spellbook, it's essential to me being able to earn favor for Lief. Who Talyria is and how she relates to me is of secondary importance. Even if my soul longs to know more about my past, my mind knows that no matter what it was and who I was, it cannot be changed.

My future though? It is very much on the line, and my actions now will determine what future I get. Will it be a future with Lief?

Or a future where I am the daughter who failed my father?

But maybe who I was can answer the question of who I want to be. Because I've lived my whole life up to the point unsure of what I've been doing and what I even wanted from my life. I don't think I want to kill or steal my whole life, always striving to be more powerful and three steps ahead of everyone else. That may be fine for my father, for my whole family really, but I've never been satisfied with this life.

And maybe the only way to learn what sort of life I'd be interested in is to figure out who I was before Elwis the Eel found me.

I roll toward Lief until my chest is pressed against his shoulder. "Trust me," I whisper to him, a soft phrase that I'm not even sure if he heard.

Until he nods and says, "Always."

I find myself smiling as my hand moves through the shadows under the bed until I

find his hand. I give it a quick squeeze and then I roll out from under the bed. I leap to my feet, the agility of practiced years guiding me more than any conscience thought. Lief lumbers slowly to his feet on the other side of the bed, his knee making a popping sound as he stands.

Both Victor and Talyria whirl at that.

“How long have you been there?” Talyria asks, her eyes widening.

“What exactly were you doing down there?” Victor demands, his eyes narrowing.

Lief naturally betrays himself by allowing his cheeks to go bright red. “I assure you it isn’t what it looks like.”

“Oh, really?” Talyria asks, jutting out her hip and resting her hand on it. “Because it looks like you were eavesdropping on us.”

“Then it’s exactly what it looks like, Thief Queen,” I reply as I fold my arms and study her.

“Watch it, sister,” Talyria snaps. “I’m not in the mood for your teasing.”

“So, I was a teaser?” I ask, tilting my head. I lower my arms. That doesn’t sound like me. I’m so quiet, so serious.

Talyria arches her brow. “Do you truly not remember any of it?”

I glance down at my boot as I rub it against the floorboards. I spot two rings lying on the floor, but then I decide that those aren’t important. I glance up. “I want to listen to you and trust you, but given all the secrets you have been keeping I’m not sure if I can.”

Victor hides his face behind his hand at that.

“Except...” Talyria prompts. “You have an angle, Corallin. I know that. I know you .”

“Show me an act of good faith,” I say as I glance at Lief out of the corner of my eye. I watch his eyes light up as he realizes what I’m doing. The corner of his lip turns up, visible by his beard shifting slightly as he watches me proudly. “Give me Valentine’s old spellbook.”

“Very well,” Talyria says.

“Not very well,” Victor protests, I watch as his hand goes into the pocket of his coat. Where he must have put the spellbook. He moves back, strangely possessive over a spellbook. He couldn’t have figured out the significance of that book, could he have?

Talyria looks back at him then turns to me. “Tell me this one thing, Corallin. Are you the killer?”

I watch as Victor’s eyes widen as he takes me in. “So, you’re a sorcerer too? Is there anyone here who isn’t a sorcerer?”

“Says the sorcerer,” I counter.

Lief slowly raises his hand. “I am not a sorcerer.”

I can’t help the little chuckle at his interjection. As a Highlander, it’s impossible for him to use sorcery even if he had wanted to. And I’m not sure he would have. Lief is a good person, I doubt he would willingly choose a life of revulsion and defiance of the gods. Which makes me wonder why he willingly chose me, but then I suppose people act in crazy ways for love.

“I’m not the killer,” I state when I realize that Talyria is waiting for my response.
“Truly I’m not.”

Lief steps closer to me. “I can vouch for her.”

Talyria gestures between the two of us. “Since when have you been so friendly? He was the one who was initially accusing you.”

I peek at Lief out of the corner of my eye. That was just a part of our ruse to be strangers so that no one would suspect our illicit love. Of course that was before this all got out of hand. Apparently, my sister is here—and not either of the two I knew I had— and more people died. “We made up,” I said as an explanation. “Now are you going to give me the spellbook?”

“No,” Victor says just as Talyria begins to nod. She turns a sharp glare his way, and he levels her with a pointed look. “We need it to find the sorcerer.”

“We will help you find the sorcerer then,” Lief interjects before an argument can break out. And given the stony glares that Talyria and Victor are giving each other, an argument is coming. “Then you can give Corallin the spellbook and we all go on our merry way.”

Talyria finally peels her gaze from Victor and looks me up and down. “Why do you want the spellbook anyway? It isn’t as if you can use it.”

“My reasons are my own. Will we help each other or not?”

Talyria begins to nod, but Victor looks dangerously close to saying no when suddenly the door bursts open. We all whirl on it, reaching for our weapons but Estelle is the only person to step through. “Look who I found hiding in a nearby room,” she declares as she steps aside to reveal Lek.

Victor straightens as he reaches up to stroke his beard. “That means only the guard is unaccounted for.”

The guard? It’s true that he is a Lowlander and thus capable of sorcery, but is he actually capable of doing the deed? I suppose it’s time we found out. After all, once we get to him, I’m one step closer to getting my hands on that spellbook. And to possibly learning a bit more about my past.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:38 am

Chapter Fifteen

Talyria

This is ridiculous. So, what are we going to do? Just search every room in this inn till we find the guardsman, and then what? Accuse him of being a sorcerer and be on our way?

I don't think Victor has much of a plan, but if he wants to wander around in meaningless circles, then who am I to try to counsel him?

We're practically strangers anyway.

Corallin falls into step beside me, and I straighten as I glance at my sister out of the corner of my eye. Her appearance, at least, has remained completely unchanged even after a thousand and twenty years. Her blue skin is pale and her eyes glow with a reddish light. Everything about her is light and softness from her gently curling white hair kept up in a loose bun to the angle of her nose.

My sister, my partner in crime. I suppose I should just be thanking whatever gods would help a criminal like me, or maybe our demigod patron, that she is alive, and somehow, we have been reunited at long last.

"How did I wind up trapped in that stone chamber?" Corallin asks in a low voice, obviously not wanting the others to overhear her.

I slow my pace and glance at her. "Is that where you were?" I ask. "Trapped in a

stone chamber as well?”

All this time I thought that maybe she had been roaming free while I was sleeping, but what if she never made it out of our stone hall that fateful day? What if she wound up trapped in a tomb of rocks as well, buried in the mountain that was once our shared home?

Corallin presses her lips together. “Yes, my adoptive father found me in basically a stone tomb, I had no memory of who I was save for the name Corallin . He took pity on me and took me in as his own.”

“You’re lucky,” I say as I rub a hand up my arm. I was found by a necromancer who held me prisoner while Corallin got another family out of the deal. I always told her that she was our patron’s favorite. She didn’t believe me because I was the one with money.

“Do you not know what happened to me?” she asks, the disappointment weighing heavy on her voice.

I shake my head slowly, glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. “No, I’m sorry. There was so much happening. The war, it was not going well, we had been under siege for so long and our city was crumbling. And in the meantime, my own personal empire was crumbling. I was betrayed by my second in command, stripped of my power. Locked away. Petrov, he was killed trying to help me.”

“Who is Petrov?” Corallin asks, tilting her head.

Flashes play through my mind. His blue eyes, his laugh, the first time he told me he loved me. When he walked away after finding out who I was, I wish he had stayed gone. If he hadn’t returned and tried to fix things with me well... he wouldn’t be alive today. But maybe he could have lived to a ripe old age, remarried someone who

would not make him choose between his conscience and his heart.

“No one,” I say simply. “At least not anymore.”

Corallin draws her tongue across her lip before she steps closer to me. I realize that we’ve stopped walking. I’m not too worried about the others getting too far ahead of us. It isn’t exactly a huge building; it’s just an inn. “You mentioned a war?”

I nod. “The war of the valley as we called it. The Lower Elves and Lowlanders had united against our people. It was the valley against the mountains, and we were not able to join forces with the Highlanders to fight them off. We were too individualistic, elven cities and Highlander clans alike. And so divided we fell. I do believe that they had been intent on wiping us out, at least it had seemed that way at the time.”

“The unification of Ruskhazar,” Corallin whispers, her red eyes widening. “I’d read of it, how our culture fell, and the Higher Elves were nearly wiped out before the Lowlanders called for an end of the bloodshed. They then took the Highlanders and the Higher Elves that were left and united them under one country which has flourished for a thousand years despite its bloody start.”

“Very bloody,” I mutter.

“I have heard so much about this era of time,” she says softly. “I never realized I lived through it. I can’t believe that I don’t remember.”

“Count your blessings,” I tell her as I place a hand on her shoulder. “Memory is pain.”

Corallin looks like she is going to say more but then I hear Estelle gasp up ahead. I look up and take off racing down the hall toward the others. They are easy to spot

since half of them are still in the hallway. Victor has stepped through the door into another room. I move forward, elbowing Lek to get past into the room behind him.

I come to a skidding halt when I see the guardsman Ibram lying on the floor with bloody wrists. He's clearly dead. There's too much blood for him to have survived. Victor kneels beside him, pressing the man's eyes closed.

"What happened to him?" Estelle gasps.

"He must not have been able to live with himself after all he had done," Lek replies, his voice heavy.

My eyes stray down to the knife held in the guard's limp grip. Could he have truly done this to himself? If he was indeed the sorcerer then he wielded a great power, but clearly that wasn't enough for him. Did it leave him feeling empty and alone?

I watch Victor out of the corner of my eye as he straightens.

"I... guess it's over?" Lek says, but his statement sounds more like a question than a statement.

Victor doesn't say anything, he looks stunned. Estelle lets out a small squeak and rushes forward wrapping her arms around Victor. He totters a bit under the force of her throwing herself in his arms as she starts crying. Victor stares blankly ahead as he reaches up to rub her back. "Shh, it's okay."

"Will it be?" she demands back. "There's been so much death. How do we live on when so many have died tonight?"

Victor sighs heavily. "We just do." He pushes to his feet, keeping his arm around Estelle. She moves with him as he walks out of the room without another backwards

glance at the body.

I drop my gaze, feeling my heart sink. I don't know why I would feel so affected by seeing another woman in Victor's arms. It isn't as if he is actually mine. Our whole marriage was built around a lie.

It isn't as if it was much of a marriage anyway. We never even kissed.

I rub my thumb across the part of my finger where my ring was supposed to be resting. I let out an exhale as my eyes flick back to the guardsman.

"He didn't seem the sort," Lief says from the door. I look to see that Corallin is standing just in front of him, he has his arms encircled around her as if trying to shield her from any remaining dangers of the night. It makes me wonder if there's perhaps more going on between the two of them than they'd initially let on.

Corallin rests her hand on Lief's forearm as she eyes me up. "Talyria, what are you thinking?"

I suppose I should be happy, at least I'm not completely alone by the end of the night. I start to turn to leave, but something catches my eye, and I freeze. It's just visible on the other side of the guard's arm, half hidden behind his corpse.

I step around him, kneeling to get a better look.

I feel my breath catch. My heart races up into my throat as I feel horror begin to flood my system.

Because there, scrawled out in blood, by a desperate hand likely while he was bleeding out is a word. Just a word. One word, only three letters long.

But they change everything.

Lek.

Chapter Sixteen

Victor

This senseless killing is really starting to drain me, no matter how much Likho tells me that I should be happy to see someone's life cut suddenly short. I can't help thinking about my own fate and how suddenly it was cut off.

The only difference is these people didn't have a dark bargain they could make to retether themselves to a slightly corrupted mind and body.

What they do have are family members. Parents? Siblings? Sweethearts? People who will be waiting for them to come home, people who will be waiting for all of eternity now.

The worst part is that the rest of the world has no idea what happened in this inn tonight. With the storm still raging outside, we are locked in here, isolated and left to deal with our own problems.

Our neighbors have no idea the bloodshed that has happened just the next door over. Estelle's parents don't know that they should hug her extra hard the next time they see her. It's as if the outside world is peacefully asleep while we are left to survive and bear the burdens of what has just happened.

Three men are dead. Where will the senselessness end? Why did it even begin?

Why would Ibram kill his friend? I mean, the priest I get, he was saying he could

discover the killer. But then to end himself after it all?

It doesn't make sense, but then I guess these things aren't supposed to. They exist only to remind you that you need to cherish life for as long as you have it. To remind you to tell your dearly beloveds that you love them because you never know when you might lose them.

I pat Estelle on the arm as she lets out a little snuffle. The poor girl. She has never experienced death like this before, not like I did on the prison ship.

I'm about to offer some platitude that is honestly useless in the face of a tragedy like this, but then something catches my eye, bouncing off a light that lands right in my face. I turn my head to see one of the inn rooms. The door is wide open, and the light is somehow bouncing off one of the rings lying on the floor.

I'm not sure how, or how it broke through my hazy thoughts, but I take it as a sign. I give Estelle one last pat on the shoulder before I tell her, "Why don't you go get my father and the girls? Tell them the nightmare is over."

She nods, sniffing loudly. She's a strong girl, she'll be fine. Especially with a task to occupy her mind. She races off toward the front of the inn to tell my father that he, Mika, and Vera can climb out of their smuggling hole.

I do fully intend to have words with my father about his smuggling under the table and never telling me, but first, I have some unfinished business. Those rings are a sign.

A reminder that I'm lucky. I'm alive, and so is Talyria, even after this blood-soaked night. So, what if we lied to each other? That just means that we're more alike than we realized. I'm already on my third chance at life after surviving that killer in the wine cellar. I don't think I should waste it by being mad at my wife for a crime I also

committed.

I stride into the room and kneel down, picking up the rings. I slide them into my pocket, rising as I feel a soft smile across my face.

Mr. The Thief Queen .

It's a bit of an odd ring to it. I hope she doesn't mind being called Mrs. Innkeeper's Son .

I turn with my hand buried deep in my pocket, just to see Lek standing there. I'll be honest, I had expected him to follow along after Estelle like her second shadow. But here he is standing uncomfortably close to me.

I feel my eyebrows rise. "What are you—" I begin but I don't get the rest of the sentence out because suddenly Lek is swinging his arm around, plunging a knife into my chest.

My mouth drops open as I draw in a sharp inhale, one that dissipates before I'm even done. I watch in shock as Lek rips the knife out of my chest and plunges it into my stomach. He rips it upward, slicing through my skin and sinews and organs.

I raise my eyes to meet his, they seem to be the only thing I'm capable of moving. Fortunately, it is as if I am disconnected from my body altogether. It's as if I am watching this happen to another person. While this state of disconnect it leaves me useless to respond, at least I don't feel it. Because gods that looks like it would jetting hurt.

"It was over, it was supposed to be over. Ibram was going to take the fall, but then you had to mess it up. You couldn't keep your hands off of her, could you?" Lek's spittle flies all over my face as he speaks, adding insult to quite literal injury.

“What?” I splutter, it’s half a word and half a cough. I can feel a thickness filling my lungs just as something warm dribbles out over my chin.

“Estelle!” Lek gasps, his eyes wide. “I’ve done this all for her. To show her that I’m someone interesting, but she goes for you instead. She always goes to you instead.”

I want to tell him that Estelle has never seen me that way. I’ve only ever been a shoulder to cry on, but I’m too busy gagging and choking on the fluid filling my lungs.

I can feel Likho’s magic rushing to heal me, but there is so much internal damage. It’s sluggish. To be honest, I’d likely be dead already if it weren’t for him literally forcing me to live.

I stumble backwards, hitting the floor before I realize that I’ve dropped. My head is ringing, but not loudly enough that I don’t hear the scream. “Victor!”

Chapter Seventeen

Corallin

“Talyria, don’t!” I cry, but my sister’s scream echoes through the hall.

Lek whirls at the sound of us, his hands going up in a pacifying gesture. “It wasn’t me! Victor was the sorcerer. He was going to kill everyone here if I hadn’t done what I did.”

“You,” Talyria snarls as she stalks toward him. “You killed Ibram, you killed them all, not Victor.”

She draws her dagger and flicks her finger. The dagger goes flying through the air toward Lek far too quickly and smoothly to have been thrown. His eyes widen for a second, showing his surprise in discovering that Talyria is a sorceress and that he wasn’t the only one hiding a deadly secret.

However, he quickly recovers and thrusts his hand up. A book goes flying off the shelf and blocks the dagger. It embeds up to the hilt, the blade quivering only an inch from his nose.

“I’m going to kill you,” Talyria hisses. I grapple with her, trying to hold her back. I can feel her quivering with anger, but we need to be smart. Most of the room Lek is in is obstructed from view. There is no knowing what he already has at his disposal with his sorcery while we only have this mostly scarce hallway. There are a few pieces of furniture against the wall. A table, a candle, and a mounted head of a wolf

on the wall. We need to be careful when dealing with another sorcerer.

A fact that he proves as he raises his hands.

“You fool!” Lek cries as a green mist forms around his fingers, a physical manifestation of his power. Since sorcery is illegal, many sorcerers refuse to allow their powers to take this form. I think it only goes to prove that he has grown unstable or has stopped caring who learns what he is. Either way it’s a dangerous position to be against. “I am the necromancer who has plagued this village. With every one of you that I kill, the more powerful I get.”

The green smoke spreads out around his feet, pooling there for a second before it shoots off, moving faster. It races past Lief and me and veers off in two directions. One toward the back of the inn and another down the stairs just behind us toward the wine cellar. I move back, not allowing the smoke to touch my boots.

Down the hall, the door bursts open, and Ibram strides out. I hear footsteps coming from my left and look down to see the two bodies coming up the stairs.

Lief inhales sharply as he glances over at me. Despite the situation, his expression is oddly calm. He picks up a small round table in the hall, taking the candle that had been resting on it in his other hand. “Corallin, my love, you take care of that necromancer. I’ll make sure that you aren’t disturbed.”

I reach out, giving Lief’s arm a brief squeeze. It’s in this moment that I realize that I had nothing to fear about bringing Lief home. I don’t care that he isn’t a warrior or a criminal. He is willing to fight off the dead with a table and a candlestick.

That’s the quality of the man I want to marry.

If we make it out of this alive, I’m making sure that my family knows this.

I step away from Lief as he lets out a war cry that would make his Highlander ancestors proud while he swings the table by one of its legs at Ibram who tries to lunge at him. I bend over and pull a dagger out of the hidden sheaths in each of my boots.

I turn to Talyria. “We will take him together.”

“Just like old times?” she asks with a faint smile despite the tears dried on her cheeks.

I don’t remember old times, but sure. I just got a new sister, and I don’t intend to lose her. The brother-in-law.... Well, that was regrettable. Especially since I think I would have liked Victor more than Evengi at least.

I stride forward, calling on my demigod’s specific ability to draw the shadows closer to myself. I cannot create darkness since that is the goddess Neltruna’s domain, but her son can deepen what darkness there is.

Which is a skill that has come in very handy as an assassin. I also use my sorcery to take control of my daggers despite the fact that they are still in my hand. If there’s something I’ve learned from assassination contracts against other sorcerers, it is what sort of tricks they will use.

They will go for whatever is the sharpest object first, even if it is your own. I’m guilty of it myself, I’ve cut down many a man with his own sword.

But only one sorcerer can control an object at a time, so with my own power wielding it I don’t have to worry about Lek trying to wrest my knives away.

I flip my knife over in my hand so that the hilt is out to Talyria. “Here, to replace your other one.”

She raises her eyebrow probably sensing my control already on it, but she takes it without an argument. I race forward, diving for the wall on the other side of the door while Lek flings the book with the dagger embedded in it my way. It crashes against the wall where I had just been.

I can hear Lief grunting as he tries to keep the dead back. It's a difficult position to be in, dead cannot be re-killed. My father claims that necromancy is the most powerful form of sorcery, as does my sister Natasya, but I like to think that any demigod patron can bring you great power if only you know how to wield it.

I press my shoulder against the door frame as I peek into the room, taking in the potential weapons that Lek has at his disposal. The first thing I notice is a bookshelf bearing several books and a model ship that could be used to bludgeon. There is a small writing desk in the corner where the quill could likely do some damage. And then there is the fireplace, although this late into the night it is really more of scorched embers. Still, they could be trouble in a sorcerer's hand.

Either way, I can't see anything too risky in the room unless Lek tries to rip apart the support beams and bring the ceiling down which I doubt he would do since he is in here. Not to mention that it would take an incredible amount of power to do so, and his power is already redirected in reanimating the corpses that Lief is fighting.

Talyria races across the hall and throws herself against the wall next to mine. She peers around the corner, but her eyes skip over all the potential weapons that could be flung her way and instead go directly to Victor.

A detail that Lek doesn't miss.

"Allow me to reunite you with your husband," Lek says as he conjures another wave of green smoke. Four bodies? He must be half mad if he thinks that he can sustain that sort of power.

As if to remind me of the threat that this necromancer poses, Lief cries out down the hall. I whip my head around my eyes widening as I see him stumble back just as Ibram swings his knife to where he had been standing. I need to act quickly and defeat the source of the necromancy because that is the quickest way to ensure that the dead are stopped as well. Short of complete dismemberment there is no other way to kill that which is already dead.

“What?” Lek gasps out in shock as I turn my attention back to him.

The green smoke is pooling around Victor, but nothing happens. He doesn’t rise to attack us, and it’s clear that Lek was expecting that. Instead, the smoke dissipates, heading back towards his hands.

“Surprised?” Victor asks, weakly. “Yeah, it turns out I’m a bit hard to kill.” He raises a finger and taps it against the ground. It’s obvious that he is still in bad shape, in fact I’m as surprised as Lek that he is still alive.

I need to take advantage of his surprise. I glance at Talyria to see if she is ready to strike but she is just staring at Victor with shock and hope written across her features. I don’t have time to signal her, I have to take advantage of Lek’s surprise. I race across the room, my dagger drawn. Lek whirls in time to see me and his eyes widen. He raises his hand, calling on the model ship just like I knew he would. I’m about to dive to the side to avoid it and let it crash into the wall. It will create wood splinters but hopefully I can deliver a blow before that happens, but then suddenly a small green creature with eight legs—a miniature kraken?— appears out of nowhere and lands on Lek’s face.

The necromancer lets out a cry of surprise as tentacles wrap around his ears and tangle in his hair. I am easily able to duck under the ship that has stopped midair with Lek’s attention divided. I reach his side, sweeping my leg out and kicking his ankle while I deliver a blow to his neck with my elbow at the same time.

His scream is cut off halfway through as he drops to the ground hard, the kraken still there wrapped around his face. I flip my dagger over, ready to deliver the final killing blow but suddenly Talyria is there. She lands on top of him, straddling his body with her own. She cries out and plunges her dagger into Lek's chest.

His back arches for a second and then he lets out a loud gasp and goes limp. The kraken disappears, and I am left looking into his blank gaze.

Dead, the necromancer is dead at last. But not before he did his damage.

I came here to steal a spellbook, I shouldn't care about any of these people except for Lief and yet, I can't help but feel an acute heaviness in my soul for the loss of the night.

I turn toward the door just as Lief stumbles in. I race toward him, wrapping my arms around his waist in a tight hug before I pull back to study him. I run my hands down his chest as I take him in.

"Lief, Lief, thank goodness. Are you hurt? Oh no you are!" I gasp out as he moves his hand to reveal a long scratch on his arm.

"I'll live," he says softly. "Which is more than can be said for most." His eyes are locked on something over my shoulder. I turn to see Talyria there kneeling over Victor.

"Victor? Victor?" she asks as she rests a hand on the side of his face.

"I knew it was going to jetting hurt, but not quite this much," he says as we approach. Up close I can see that Victor is in a bad way. There is blood everywhere, his chest is completely soaked in it. More blood runs out of his mouth, trailing down his lip and disappearing into his beard.

I feel a lurch in my stomach reminding me that I haven't fed in a while. I will have to satiate that thirst later, right now we have a very big concern.

I kneel down next to Talyria who has dropped to her knees next to Victor, her eyes empty save for the tears welling up in them. "What can I do?" she asks softly.

Victor looks like he wants to say something but begins gagging. His body shudders before he groans, his eyes rolling up in his skull as if he is going to lose consciousness, but then a second later, they roll back into place and glance around confused.

Against all odds, he is still breathing, and where there is breath, there is hope.

"There is one thing," I say. I can't believe what I'm actually saying. My father sent me to retrieve the spellbook and now I'm about to tell the Thief Queen about one of the most powerful known relics in our land.

But then I give my head a sharp shake. Not the Thief Queen. Talyria, my sister, even if I have a hard time accepting that fact.

I draw in a shuddering breath before I force myself to continue. "The book—Valentine's book— it's a powerful spellbook full of healing spells. It has the power to heal anything, even mortal wounds."

"It's okay," Victor gasps out, his breathing coming out heavy. Blood splatters his lips as he speaks. "I'm not actually dying."

"He's in shock," Lief whispers sadly. He reaches out to pat Victor on the shoulder but seems to pause when he realizes that he might hurt him more if he does so. "You'll be all right, we will figure this out."

Victor shakes his head. His fingers clutch at the floorboards as he tilts his head back gasping for air. “No, no . Likho will heal me... eventually .”

“What about the spellbook?” Talyria asks, not looking up. She is holding Victor’s hand in both of her own.

“The problem is, no one here can read it,” I admit at last. “I’m a sorceress and so are you, we cannot touch magic. And Lief is a Highlander, the spells wouldn’t even work on him.”

I reach out my hand, resting it gently on his hand that is clutching his bloodied arm.

Talyria turns to me, her dark eyes swirling with grief and another emotion. Resolve?

“If I read this spellbook, he won’t be in pain anymore?” she asks after a moment.

“I’m fine, Talyria,” Victor chokes out, his nostrils flare as he struggles to draw in air.

She ignores him, her eyes focused solely on me. I give a single nod. “The spellbook can heal any wound.”

Talyria bites down on her lip before she nods. “All right then.” She leans over Victor, reaching for his pocket. Victor lowers his wrist to grab her hand.

“No, you’re a sorcerer,” he rasps.

“I know the risks,” she says as she bats his hand away and pulls the spellbook out of his pocket.

“No,” he says but then stops, his whole face crumbling with pain as a hiss escapes his teeth.

Talyria pauses, her hand on the spellbook. She glances at him. “If you don’t want me to use it, then stop me.”

In response, Victor balls his hand in a fist as he lets out what appears to be an involuntary gurgle. Blood and spittle fly out of his lips.

“That’s what I thought,” Talyria says as she crosses her legs and opens the spellbook. “Forgive my mispronunciation. This is my first time reading magic.”

“Nooo ,” Victor tries again, but Talyria cuts him off as she begins reading.

To my ears, it sounds like utter gibberish, but the effects on Victor are almost immediate. He draws in a sharp gasp as his eyes open wide. He raises his head, patting himself down as if trying to find any resemblance of the damage. All that remains is the blood he already spilled before and the jagged tears in his blue green vest. He looks up, narrowing his eyes as he looks at Talyria.

“You shouldn’t have done that. It was danger—”

“Oh, shut up,” she gasps out as she lunges forward, wrapping her arms around him. Her fingers clutch at the material of his shirt as if she is afraid someone will try to take him away. Her shoulders shake as she buries her face in Victor’s chest, not seeming to mind the blood still staining the front of his tunic. Victor wraps his arms around her, throwing me a bewildered look over the top of Talyria’s head.

I can’t help but let out a little chuckle of relief. Well, she didn’t drop dead immediately upon casting a spell so at least there’s that. Even though I do not know her like I know Natasya and Bronwyn, I still didn’t want anything to happen to her. I think a part of my heart accepts her and holds her in the same place as my own sisters.

I stare at the spellbook discarded by my sister's boot, but I leave it there. For now.

Instead, I scoot toward Lief, allowing him to wrap his unhurt arm around me and pull me close. I rest my head against his chest listening to his heartbeat and relish the fact that he is still alive after this blood-soaked night.

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Chapter Eighteen

Talyria

I don't feel too different despite having used magic as a sorcerer. At least I'm not immediately dead. I don't want to say that I got off free, after all, the warnings against mixing sorcery and magic are there for a reason, but so far, I haven't noticed any adverse effects, so I'll take it.

Better than watching Victor bleed out, even if he claims his demigod would have healed him eventually. I tap my finger against the table as Victor's father strides by with a mop and bucket in his hands. He heads toward the back of the inn. Vera and Mika have finally gone to bed... now that it's daylight out.

Estelle is sitting on the far side of the inn, a blanket wrapped around her shoulder. She seems to be having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that her longtime friend Lek was responsible for this and that he killed all these people for her in his own sick twisted way. Although she does admit to having flirted with both the guards earlier that night, she had no idea that it would lead to their untimely demise.

A chill wind blows from the open door where Victor is working to dig a path out. The snow fell hard last night, and it got so high that it blocked part of the door, but hopefully we'll be able to leave soon enough.

I turn to Corallin and frown at where she is sitting across from me. "Are you sure you need to go now? It isn't exactly good traveling weather."

“I’m a vampire, and he is a Highlander,” she replies with a smile. “The cold won’t be too much of a problem. Besides, if I’m gone for too long my father will come looking for me.”

“And we can’t have that,” I mutter. We’ve already agreed that we won’t be telling her father Elwis the Eel about this. I’m not sure what to do about Elwis, especially considering that he now holds the power that I want, but obviously straight up displacing him is off the table now that he is my sister’s father.

I suppose I’ll just have to start up my own empire, from scratch. Find the thieves that slipped through Elwis’s net and make him have to share some of the power.

He won’t like that, but I was here first, so he is just going to have to find a way to cope. And in the meantime, we will have to find some way to coexist with each other for Corallin’s sake.

“Are you sure that I can’t convince you to come work for my father?” Corallin asks, tilting her head.

I offer her a small smile. “I’m not very good at taking orders. Are you sure that I can’t convince you to stay here?”

“I have a family that I love.”

I reach out and rest a hand over hers. “You had better visit.”

“I’ll figure out something,” she says as she gives me a crooked smile. She glances up as Lief walks into the room, two books balanced on his open hand. His other hand is wrapped up in a sling from his wound.

“Are you done, my dear?” Corallin asks as she glances over her shoulder at him.

“We are lucky the arm they cut was not the dominant one.” He drops the two books on the table. The top was the one he brought with him that he had apparently been penning a story in it. The other was Valentine’s spellbook. While we had worked on cleaning up after the evening, Lief had been transcribing the words in Valentine’s book into his as well. It was a compromise that Corallin and I came up with. I wasn’t willing to give up such a powerful spellbook, especially since I have it to thank for the fact that Victor is up and walking around, but she couldn’t return to her father empty handed. Now there are two copies and already I feel a bit like I’m returning to my old position of power.

Corallin reaches out, grabbing Lief’s book. She casually flips through the pages and then looks up. “I wonder who Valentine was and how he got the spellbook. You don’t suppose....”

“What?” Lief asks as he braces his good arm on the table as he settles in behind Corallin.

“I was just wondering if Valentine was actually the original writer of this spellbook. Devalen Tine himself.”

“But Devalen was one of the founders of the Academy,” Lief says, which is something I’m learning for the first time. I’m going to need to start brushing up on my history, especially if I want to be able to beat Elwis at his own spellbook finding game. After all, Corallin had mentioned that there was still one more spellbook that Elwis didn’t have. “That would make him what? Five hundred years old? No human can live that long.”

“Try me,” Victor says as he steps up behind me. He wipes the snow out of his hair. “I’m pretty sure I can’t age as much as I can’t die, but I guess that’s only a theory right now.”

“Hey, if the demigod fails, there’s always vampirism,” I say as I turn to look at him over my shoulder.

Victor’s eyebrows rise in surprise, and he lets out a small laugh. “So, you’re not in a hurry to be rid of me then?”

I smack his stomach in reply. Victor smiles and grabs my hand before I can pull away, holding it in place. He turns to Corallin. “So, what is this about five-hundred-year-old humans?”

“I was just conjecturing that perhaps Valentine was the one who penned the spellbook that he was actually Devalen Tine and that his healing magic somehow kept him alive all these years.”

“Until last night,” Victor says with a sigh. “Poor man. He probably gave me that spellbook so I could heal him. I had no idea it was that powerful that it could bring back from the brink of death or else I’d have done it for him.”

“Then I would have had to make three copies of the spellbook,” Lief says. “I can write fast, but maybe not that fast.”

“Oh well,” Corallin says as she pushes to her feet. “I suppose it will just be a mystery.” She holds the spellbook to her chest. “Are you ready to go, Lief? I want to be on our way before the law arrives.”

Lief throws her a smile. “Always, my love.”

Victor steps around to clap Lief on the shoulder as I push to my feet to hug Corallin. “I’ll see you soon,” I tell her and it’s a promise that I intend to keep.

I may have lost a lot in the past but not everything. And that which I have I intend to

fight to keep.

We wave them off and I can't help but feel oddly empty as Corallin closes the front door behind her. Leaving me in the inn.

I turn to Victor to see that he is watching me closely. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine?" I ask tilting my head. "Shouldn't I be the one asking that question though? You're the one who was gutted."

He bites down on his lip as he studies me before he reaches around me to grab the book. He balances his fingertips on it as he slides it towards him. I lean back, bracing my hands on the table to keep from falling over. Victor is standing so close that I have nowhere to go except over the table if I want to get away. I don't feel trapped though, a bit thrilled though as he looks me in the eye as his brown ones sparkle with green. "Just no more magic for you. I think it is best if you leave any madness to me. All right, wife?"

"So, am I still your wife?" I ask arching my brow. My voice comes out abashedly breathy.

Victor holds up a single finger. "About that..." he says.

I swallow hard, feeling my heart begin to sink. I had known that this was likely coming. After all, nothing had truly changed. We were still just a pair of liars. I draw in a shuddering breath as I remind myself that I'm right back to where I was before. A new start, but not hopeless. I'll find a way to make it in this new world.

Victor pulls away and I feel the absence of his presence and warmth acutely. I ball my hand into a fist to keep from reaching out for him. But then he drops down to his knee in front of me.

I feel my eyes widen as he reaches into his pocket. He pulls out two small silver objects. I recognize them almost immediately. The rings.

He holds my gaze as he slides his ring back onto his finger. Then he holds up the other one. “You’ll always be my wife. What do you say, Mrs. Andreev? Can I still be your husband? You are still the most enchanting woman I know, even though I know most of your secrets now.”

“Only most,” I say with a smile as I reach out and grasp the ring. It slides into place on my finger, it never should have left in the first place. But this time, at least I mean it.

I started out thinking I was marrying a handsome yet desperate stranger. I thought I had stolen his heart, not realizing that Victor had stolen mine instead. I’d thought that while he might someday come to love me, I’d never love him in return. I’d always have to be holding back a part of myself.

Only to learn that all my broken jagged pieces fit perfectly with his.

He is my thief. A vessel of madness, an innkeeper’s son, a brother, and the man that I would face the threat of insanity for.

“Oh, and husband?” I say as I lean forward cupping his cheek.

“Yes?” he inquires.

“You may kiss the bride,” I breathe but then I don’t give him a chance to comply to my wishes. I lean forward, closing the distance between us and finally claim my first kiss.

Victor wraps his arms around me and pushes to his feet, lifting me with him. He spins

in a circle and I kick my leg. I move my lips across his, tracing them and getting to know every curve and bend. His mouth is a feature that I'm sure I'll get very used to.

I let out a little laugh as he squeezes me tight and then he starts laughing until we're both chuckling between kisses.

Yes, I know exactly what I got.

Not just the great love of my life, I got a perfect partner in crime.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:38 am

“The Thief Queen?” Elwis asked as he lowers the book that Corallin had handed him. He turned, tossing it onto the desk. New binding, this was not the original. He couldn’t believe it; he had a copy.

“Indeed, she is back and returned to power,” Corallin said, folding her hands in front of her.

“This is a disturbing turn of events,” Elwis murmured. He had always feared this day would come. It was why he had set out to find the Thief Queen all those years ago on the rumor of her survival even a thousand years after her downfall. Instead, he had found Corallin so he couldn’t find it in himself to regret never finding Talyria Undying.

Still, it would have been better if he had managed to get his hands on the Thief Queen all those years ago and gotten her to work for him before she had gained any sort of power.

“How powerful is she?” he asked as he began pacing across his study. His eyes darted to the Highlander man who his daughter brought in, but the boy remained silent.

“It’s difficult to say, but I would advise against raising her ire before we know the full scope,” Corallin replied. “She asked me to join her ring of thieves, I think that I should make use of her offer. That way I can spy on her and report back her strength.”

Elwis reached up, stroking his chin. “Very well, I’ll leave you in charge of this Thief Queen business. You will report to me and allow me to get a better grasp of her

numbers. Then we can determine what sort of response is necessary.”

Corallin nods, stepping forward and wrapping him in a quick hug. “Of course, father, I won’t let you down.”

Elwis straightened feeling odd. There was something about her mannerisms that told him not to trust her, but that was ridiculous. This was his daughter. The only people he truly, implicitly trusted were his family. Indeed, the only thing he truly feared losing was them.

There was no crime they could commit against him, even if they destroyed his empire so long as they were safe.

So why would Corallin lie to him?

He gave his head a sharp shake. Ridiculous, it’s absurd. Out of all his daughters Corallin was the one he relied on the most, she was his business partner, same as his wife Vala. Whereas Bronwyn and Natasya were still so young and were only just being introduced to the family business.

He straightened, turning his attention finally to the Highlander. “And who is this?”

“This is—” Corallin began but the man stepped forward holding out his hand.

“I am Lief,” he said.

Elwis stared at his hand, his own arms remaining at his side.

“Father, Lief is my Wilder,” Corallin whispered. This got Elwis’s attention. He raised his gaze looking at the man more closely. How come it was that every time he sent his girls out to get a spellbook, they always came back with a man?

Still this Lief looked strong enough, Elwis would, of course, have to look deeply into his family history and everything he could find on this man. But he had hopes that this man would at least stay out of his way. Unlike Evengi.

He doubted he would be as helpful as Wilder, who he saw as the son he never had.

Corallin cleared her throat. “Lief is the reason we have the spellbook. When I managed to steal it from the Thief Queen, briefly he was able to transpose the spells so I could return it to its place, so that Talyria was none the wiser of my treachery. It’s because of him that I’m able to continue undercover work for you.”

Elwis studied Lief, there is that untruth in his daughter’s tone again, but he didn’t think it had anything to do with that young man. She seemed to genuinely be fond of him. Enough to bring him home with her. That’s always quite a large step, especially after she likely saw the reception Evengi got.

No, there was something about her time with the Thief Queen that she didn’t seem to be telling him, but he decided not to pry. Corallin had her reasons. She would tell him when she was ready.

“You have my thanks then,” Elwis said when he realized that Corallin was waiting for him to respond about her paramour’s part played in claiming the spellbook.

“Oh, and, sir,” Lief said, clearing my throat. “I hadn’t extra pages on hand, so I had to use the book with my novel inside of it. I do ask that you allow me to copy that over at some point.”

“Novel?” Elwis asked, raising his brow.

Lief nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Elwis frowned. “Hmmm.”

He turned to the three spellbooks on his desk as he pressed his fingers against the wood. Three spellbooks written by three of the most powerful magickers in the world. But one is just a copy and there's still a spellbook out there.

And now he had competition.

But the fourth founder's spellbook was not the prize. No, the prize was what the spellbooks were able to unlock once they were together.

Because with them he would finally be able to enter the tomb the master of the four founders of the academy a man by the name of Junis Antonov. Junis held more power than any of his four pupils combined and his spellbook contained his life's work.

Within it lay the secret of how to combine magic and sorcery and not lose your life or go mad.