

# ONE

Tanna Beauvallet sat at a table tucked into a shadowed corner of the Moonlight Tavern, waiting.

She toyed feverishly with a silver coin that had a poor rendition of her father's face minted into it. Even on a bustling night, no one cast her a second glance. The Tavern's patrons were used to her lurking in the slums of Cesere, the very bottom levels of the City on Stilts.

She twirled the coin on the table and sent the thing spinning on the rough wood like a top. She watched the King's face and the royal seal—the face of a fox—twist and blur and conjoin in the dim yellow lighting.

To the merchants that ignored her, it was just another night of drinking away the meager extra coins made over the course of the week. A temporary but effective means of forgetting the despair taking place outside on the streets. Those were things that Tanna could never manage to forget—not even in her rarer moments of true peace, or when she finally drifted to sleep at night.

And for Tanna, this night was long anticipated.

She checked the door again. The flow of heads entering and exiting the crowded space revealed nothing to note.

The Moonlight was nothing impressive in terms of wealth or finery, but it had its own distinct charm for a tavern at the bottom of the city. Except that labeling the Moonlight *charming* at this particular time felt more like a joke than anything else. The usual clientele—men already drunk off their asses, women willing to put up with their shit, couples nearly groping each other atop tables—had made themselves known quickly tonight upon opening.

The noise and chaos was a worthy concealment—if not an equally bothersome distraction.

She caught Cecelia's eye behind the bar, and the barkeep shot her a stoic smile. Tanna could only imagine the vile things the men were saying to her. Cecelia's temperament and resilience were two of the many things Tanna respected about her, and the reason she trusted her to look out for her tonight. Even if she couldn't exactly call Cecelia a friend. Ally out of obligation, perhaps? Ally, nonetheless.

Cecelia's eyes shot towards the door, and Tanna's gaze followed.

A hooded figure had pushed its way through the throng of customers. By his gait and figure, Tanna immediately placed him as male. And he didn't casually take note of the bar scene and scope out a seat as the other patrons did. Without lifting his hood, his path was set towards the back corner of the bar. Straight for her.

Exactly where she'd told him she'd be.

It hadn't been easy to get into contact with Cesere's most elusive and notorious criminal. A hero to the common folk and a mere bedtime story to most, "Cesere's Divine" traded in whispers, riddles, and rumors. Locating him had been enough of a challenge that Tanna had begun to question if he'd ever existed in the first place. In the end, it had taken the full force of Tanna, Cecelia, and Ben—Tanna's brother in everything but blood—to track down someone who had contact with Cesere's Divine, convince the shopkeeper to pass a note to him, and pass enough persuasive notes in this manner that he'd finally shown up at the right place and time.

The cloaked man finally reached her table in the shadows of the corner. He pulled his seat and sat at the table in swift, methodical movements. He almost moved as if he wasn't quite human—his grace dripping of power, and precision.

He leaned back in his seat, a bit of orange light revealing a shit-eating grin from under the hood he wore. His teeth were a bit crooked, and he had dimples and a shadow of stubble. It was almost boyish. Tanna began leaning down to get a closer look at the face lying under the hood, but the Divine followed the movement with her and met her eyes.

“Your Majesty,” he greeted. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Tanna’s blood boiled at the mention of her discarded title.

In a way, she was naked—completely exposed while he had the comfort of his cloak and shadows and anonymity. She was instantly conscious of every trait—her blue eyes, her unruly head of dark blonde curls, her smattering of freckles and rounded face and features—that marked her as a member of the royal family. They were traits that perhaps appearing separately meant nothing, but in their totality became distinctly recognizable. Anyone in the city could place her royal blood. She was simply fortunate enough that the people of Cesere hated her father enough not to turn her into a castle guard. And were distracted enough by their own shit not to pay her much attention, on most days.

She shot his grin right back at him. She refused to back down. “Perhaps we could speak face to face, Divine?”

He let out a low chuckle, but reached up to brush the hood off of his head nonetheless. It revealed a shockingly young face and a head of loose black curls that looked rather unbrushed. His gray-tinted eyes seemed to glow silver in the low orange lighting. Cesere’s Divine wasn’t some old, wise man as the myths suggested. He was just... a guy. Some kid playing rogue same as she was.

“I find it funny for you to call me Divine, when that’s a trait we both share.”

Tanna’s gut rolled. He wasn’t wrong.

Divinity—a coveted set of four magical gifts, each more difficult to master than the last—was a genetic magic, and one that had been present in the royal bloodline for centuries. Divinity was regarded as a sign that one was holy. For a royal *not* to be Divine would've been a grave insult to the crown. Merely being born a conduit for Divinity was perhaps the only thing Tanna had accomplished in her life that was *not* a grave insult to the crown.

She was certain that long before her time, and even her father's, Divinity had been tied to some ancient religion in this world. Often in Cesere's little trinket shops or witch's carts one could find figurines and depictions of long-forgotten Gods—one to represent each of a Divine's four gifts. But whatever they had been called, whatever they had meant to her people, those tales were lost in her family's reign. There was only one thing worth worshipping now.

Power.

The magic was exceedingly rare, though most who possessed it tended to flood towards Cesere in hopes of becoming a castle guard or finding some other work that exploited their Divinity. Out of the hundreds of thousands of people living in Cesere, perhaps less than one thousand of them were Divine, and only twenty out of them capable of demonstrating a lick of ability beyond moving small pieces of metal.

Because of that, Cesere's Divine had risen to fame for near-mastery over his power. Every freed prisoner, every food shipment disrupted and spread to the poor, *every* rebellious act that took place in Cesere was pinned on his name. Looking at the boy in front of her now, Tanna wondered how many of those incidents he actually took credit for.

And she was starkly aware of how little power she wielded in comparison to him. None, to be exact.

“What name should I call you by, then?”

His smile tilted sideways and his eyes flashed. “I wouldn’t be a very good rebel if I was handing my name out left and right, would I?”

Tanna rolled her eyes, drumming her fingers on the table. “Do you always answer your questions with questions?”

The Divine leaned back in his chair, the old wood creaking in protest with the movement. He was the image of causality. Either this meeting was of little significance to him, or he was a very talented actor. “Hardly. But you’re making it so easy. Try asking the right questions and see if I answer them.”

Frustrated, Tanna found her focus flicking to Cecelia at the bar. Unsurprisingly, Cecelia’s icy gaze was trained on her and the boy. Ben was beside her now, wearing an apron smattered with grease and flour. He offered Tanna a weak smile when he noticed she was looking. She could always read Ben’s face, and she knew that he was urging her to push through this challenge. Out of the shit they’d faced together, enduring the taunts of Cesere’s Divine hardly ranked top ten.

The Divine leaned sideways, cutting off Tanna’s view of her friends. Tanna wasn’t very talented at hiding her true thoughts on her face. Her forced calm demeanor fell into stiff aggravation.

“It seems you’re not a very good rebel, either,” he teased, “giving away your allies at the first sign of trouble. You’ve been hiding away in this bar, then? A bit of a risky move, isn’t it?” Indeed, the Moonlight Tavern was one of the most well-known and beloved bars in the lower levels of Cesere—the City on Stilts. It wasn’t rare for sympathizers of the crown to refer to it as a rebel’s meeting spot, though they had little evidence to support that claim.

But Clyde Haven, the establishment's owner, had been Tanna's first and only option for refuge when she'd barely escaped the castle with her life. It had all been thanks to Ben, really. Tanna had no way of making connections in the city, but Ben had seen far more of the world than her, and Clyde was an old friend of his parents' before they'd been separated.

Tanna didn't know how, exactly, Ben came to reconnect with the man or explain what he planned to do. But after one night of sneaking out of the castle and tasting the world outside—meeting Clyde, glimpsing true kindness even at the heart of a desperate city—Tanna had known precisely what was needed of her. And Clyde had been eager to take them in, despite his endless grumbling about them distracting Cecelia from her duties.

So the Divine was right—there was the entire country of Rothaid for her to explore, start over, become unrecognizable. But that had never been an option for her. Tanna would never leave her city.

“They say the best hiding spots are in plain sight.” She said, not keen on giving away much else.

The Divine quirked an eyebrow. Tanna hated the assessing stare he had yet to drop. Hated the otherworldly feeling leaking from him, as if his Divinity was an overcharged electric current ready to zap her at any moment. He didn't even seem to be aware of it. If this was his baseline... God save her.

“Maybe you're smarter than I thought, then.” He hooked his hands behind his head, elbows in the air. “I live at the top of the city myself.”

“How did you master Divinity so quickly?” The question burst out of her.

If he was content to tease her with trivialities, it was only fair that she be able to do the same to him. Even if that was far from the reason she'd asked.

Tanna *did* have the gift of Divinity tucked somewhere deeply inside her. It was something that she reminded herself of every morning, every night, and several times throughout the day should she need to. She knew it because she remembered as a child discovering that she could move coins and utensils without laying a hand on them. She knew it because in some of her lowest moments, she'd felt the slumbering power soothe her core, as if reminding her that when everything else was gone, *it* was there. Biding its time.

Despite that knowledge, Tanna could not for the life of her demonstrate an ounce of Divine power. She'd screamed till her throat was raw, trained her eyes on coins and spoons and other small metal things until they stung, but to no avail. Ben—who could barely move a coin himself but at least possessed *that* small ability—had tried to coach her. She'd determined that she was unteachable. Divinity was one of the thousands of things her father had ripped from her in cold blood.

So perhaps, staring at Cesere's Divine sitting across from her now, she was a bit impressed. Or perhaps that was the feeling of resentment causing that airy feeling in her stomach, the thickness in her throat. Not that she was soon to admit either of those things to him.

“A lot of practice.” He drawled. “Looking for pointers?”

Tanna sighed. She leaned forward, ready to cut to the chase. One reminder of her incompetence was more than enough for the day. “You're sure you weren't followed here?”

He matched her lean, propping his chin up on the table with an elbow. Their faces were unnervingly close now. She could almost read the curiosity and intrigue in his, like he was a cat toying with a bit of string. His eyes dashed up and down her face and that teasing smile persisted.

“You insult me, Princess. You don't get a reputation like mine by being followed unknowingly.”

She ignored the arbitrary title he'd tossed out. He was entirely aware it did not belong to her anymore. He just wanted to see how much further he could twist her into blind anger—if she was easily broken, or something worth considering.

“Good,” Tanna said instead. Quick to anger, yes—that much could be said about her. But Tanna was not easily broken. “Then I suppose we should cut to the point.”

That roguish grin was moments away from causing her to back out of this entirely. “Enlighten me.”

Her gaze held his with grim determination. For that moment, they were the only two people in the room. Men yelled orders at the counter, others egged each other on to chug mugs of ale next to them, and a woman was practically on a man's lap in the adjacent corner—a perfectly expected night of debauchery at the bottom of the city. And tucked purposefully behind it all: two of the most powerful faces in Cesere, eye to eye, unbeknownst to the transient nightlife around them.

“I've called you here because I want to request your services. I want you to help me kill the King.”