

Chapter 1

The bejewelled statuette of Seatra regards me coldly, indifferently, in the way that stone does. “Please,” I whisper, on my knees.

Nothing happens.

Dropping the illusion that covers my face, I fall prone and grasp her carved feet. “Please!” I beg, louder, touching my forehead to the ground, “it’s been eighty years!”

Nothing.

“I’m different now—can’t you see?”

Maybe she sees my heart, my frustration and anger, and isn’t satisfied with the balance of regret. The air is thick. Is that only the incense, or does a divine presence also fill this room? If the latter, then once again she’s failed to answer—not even with a ‘no’. Gritting my teeth, I stand and brush dust off the knees of my tailored pants.

Curtains swish, and I throw the illusion back up.

“Oh, Mr. Gryson, I’m sorry to disturb you!”

Suppressing a sigh of relief, I turn and bow to the priestess. “It’s your temple, Malora.”

“You wouldn’t believe who’s visiting!” she says, scattering spices into braziers on either side of the statuette. They spark and pop, the smoke tickling my nose. “The patriarchs! Of Allmother!”

Muffled voices echo from down the hall, behind the curtains, and my neck prickles. “They’re here? In the temple? Today?” The voices grow louder. Men’s voices. My anxious heart thuds one long, spasming beat, before falling still again.

“Mm-hmm,” she hums, distracted, buffing the statuette with the hem of her white toga.

A pitcher of water rests on a table, near the exit. “Why have they come?” I ask. My voice is steady, but my hands tremble as I fill a glass. Melora’s response is lost to the thudding in my ears. My heart’s beat more these past seconds than all week.

A hand parts the curtain, and I drop the glass into a brazier. It hisses and spits, and the room fills with billowing steam.

“Gryson!” Malora shouts, “what are you doing?!”

“Sorry! Was an accident!” I cry out, as I push through the curtain and past a series of broad shoulders.

Rushing down the hall, I turn a corner, and then another. The men's surprised shouts fade. Thank the gods, they don't pursue me. I burst into the main chamber, and force my steps to slow. Be calm, be cool—don't draw attention. It takes everything in me to stroll rather than run.

Three stories below, the main floor is filled with tourists. Their murmurs echo through the chamber. I lean over the railing. There's no sign of foreign priests. Were the Patriarchs in plain clothes? Now I wish I had checked.

Across from me, frescoes stretch from floor to ceiling, depicting scenes of bloody massacre. Half-man-half-beast monsters gore humans with horns or beaks, and trample them underfoot.

And to my left, carved into the stone wall, stands a relief of Seatra, holding the saints in her palm and, with her other hand, brandishing a flaming sword. Her stone eyes gaze past me, tilted slightly towards the heavens.

Brushing off a shiver, I descend to the ground floor and carve a path through tourists. It's easy enough, with them clustered about the many relics and works of art. I walk nonchalantly, but my instincts scream to run. If anyone sees me—the real me. No. No one will look unless I give them reason to.

Fifteen feet of tiled mosaic floor stretch between me and the westward arch that leads outside. As usual, I toss a fat purse into the brass tithing bowl. It spills, coins clinking heavily in flashes of gold, mixing with lower denominations.

“The goddess of compassion bless you,” a priestess says. She stands by the exit and watches over the tithes, sorcerous tattoos covering her hands.

Strangely, Seatra's priestesses do not practice the divine magics of high clerics. As such, they're not able to see through illusions—not like some of Allmother's priests. Projecting an illusory smile over my face, I give a slight bow as I pass.

The din of overlapping voices fades as I walk out of the temple's shadow. With each step my polished shoes clack on the cobbled street, and nearby waves break rhythmically against the pier. Gulls squawk, fighting over scraps, and then scatter as I approach. No one's followed me out, and no one watches. Nevertheless, my heart flutters erratically. It's been decades since I've brushed shoulders with someone who might see me as I am. Despite the tropical heat a shiver runs down my spine. I glance around again, paranoid. But no, still no one watches or follows. Well, just in case, I'll pass through the market. No one could follow me through *that* chaos.

Sounds of people pick up again as I close the short distance. A cacophony of voices from every age, gender, and station compete to make themselves heard. As I rub shoulders, two spice merchants on opposite ends of the lane shout their prices, trying to drown each other out. Adding to the chaos, young children shriek and laugh as they chase each other through stalls, between couples, and under ladies skirts. Occasionally, little hands slip into pockets, and steal whatever they can get away with.

I'm already feeling better. Being around crowds does that to me. Fills me with ease. Makes me feel camouflaged. I glance around, one last time, but no, no sign of religious accoutrement. No one pays attention. Except—a grubby child approaches, her hand raised expectantly. Her mousy hair is matted, and her face and clothes are streaked with dirt. Smiling, I stoop down to press a few gold coins into her palm. She gawks at them, and then at me, before darting into the crowd. She was expecting copper, no doubt, but I don't carry copper. I barely carry silver. Drawing a deep breath, I consciously release the tension in my shoulders. I'm okay. Time to get on with my day.

A rack of silks catches my attention, and I slow to check them over. The merchant watches me from the corner of his eye, pretending to inspect other inventory. Good cloth is important, it hides everything my illusions cannot. I can't afford any tear. All sorts of questions would be raised—questions I'm not ready to answer—if someone caught a glimpse of the grey, leathery flesh underneath. This cloth is excellent quality, but I'm not ready to commit. Turning away, I step towards the throngs of people.

"You have a discerning eye," the merchant says, closing the distance and grabbing my arm, "these are the highest quality." Tugging, his haughty smile slips to confusion when I don't budge.

I shake my head, and wrench my arm free from his grasp.

"Eight silver per foot!" he insists, jumping into my path, "you won't find a better price!"

I turn and pretend to study the fabric as a smile touches his lips. "Two copper," I say forcefully.

The man's face flashes with anger. "You fucking—" He shoves at me, but I dodge with unnatural speed. Unbalanced, he falls prone, and his swearing cuts off with a pained grunt.

A whistle shrills, and I melt into the crowd. No officer would accuse me of brawling once they saw who I am, but it's best to not put them in that uncomfortable position.

Hustling to the edge of the market, I cross a bridge and leave the temple district. The wizard's tower, with its twisting, gravity-defying spires, rises above the city skyline. It's directly in my path, though what I'll do once I arrive is anyone's guess.

The cantankerous old men and women who comprise the council of magi are rumored to keep a relic that perfects illusions. The feyish relic, it's called. Rewriting all senses, it foils the true sight of gods and their clerics. According to legend, even the illusionist might lose track of what's real and what's not. Wouldn't that be nice.

I can't steal it, though—can I? It's suicide. If I go into that tower, I'll never come out. At this point, do I care? I do. But I can't keep living like this, looking over my shoulder and worrying I'll be found out.

Shouts erupt from an alley on the other side of the street. Four teenage boys burst from the early morning shadows, one of them sprinting to get away. He's an urchin, and even more dirty than the girl before. The pursuers are no less squalid. They catch up, jumping on him, and tackling him to the ground.

Everyone stops to watch the spectacle, but no one makes a move to stop it.

The victim kicks and flails to no effect. Against three others he doesn't have a chance.

Two of the boys get a grip on his shirt and pin him to the ground. Then they hoist him to his feet and take turns holding his arms, as the third wails on his stomach. "That's the last time you'll—" Ooph. The victim's pained hollering drowns out whatever the other boys are yelling at him.

"Let me go let me—" they hit him again, knocking the wind out of his lungs, and he gasps like a fish on land.

Still, no one gets involved, though the gathering crowd murmurs with nervous energy.

The sight is sickening, and I start crossing the street to intervene. Whatever the boy had done, this is excessive.

Gasps erupt and my stomach flips. The victim wrenches his arm free, pulls a knife out of nowhere, and slashes at the ones holding him. The boys are screaming, all four of them. Screaming loud enough to wake the dead.

Now people are moving, most hurrying away. I sprint forward, not afraid of a knife.

I'm halfway when the fight turns again. Grabbing the brandishing arm, they twist it and turn the blade back into the throat of its wielder. Blood erupts, spraying down to speckle the cobblestone street.

A cry tears from my mouth and I rush forward. Everyone else is running away, feet pounding pavement, grim-faced and no doubt fearing they might be next.

The boy grabs at his throat and falls to his knees, then down to his side. He curls around himself, writhing on the ground.

Dropping beside him, I clamp my big hand over his to staunch the flow. But it's all in vain.

"Help!" I shout.

No one comes.

"I am a doctor! I need help!" I was a doctor, in a past life. Then I was a soldier. Then cursed. *No—focus!*

My hand keeps slipping; puddles of red pool between my fingers. The boy has fallen still. I let his hand drop away and get a better hold, but the wound leaks lethargically. By my old instincts for triage, I know it's too late.

The boy's eyes flutter, staring through me. His mouth moves as he exhales shallow breaths. Something resembling words escape his pale lips. I move my ear to his mouth.

"She did you—wrong," he mumbles, barely audible. "I can help—get vengeance."

"What do you mean?" I ask, pulling him into my lap.

He doesn't answer.

"What do you mean?!" I shout, slapping his face, gently at first, and then harder, "no—no, wait! What are you saying?"

The boy hangs limp in my arms, his lips still and drained of colour.

"You're not talking about—" No. No way. He couldn't know about the curse. If my secret was out, I'd already be run out of town, or in a cage, or dead—as dead as anyone could make me. Dismembered, at least, if not dead.

I grind my teeth. *Stop it. Stop thinking about yourself. What can you do for him?*

But there's nothing to do. Except—I'm still close to the temple district. If the boy's spirit holds on by even a thread, a high cleric could bring him back.

I gather him in my arms and stand. He weighs hardly anything. The street is empty, doors are shut, and curtains are drawn. I am his only hope, now.

Seatra doesn't have high clerics, hence why I'm safe in her temple. Allmother's priests are powerful, though. The most powerful. If it can be done at all, they would do it with ease. But those same people might see through my illusion. I can't risk that—can I?

What should I do. Oh gods, what should I do?

Gritting my teeth, I run in the wrong direction. The constable's office has a mid-grade wizard on staff for emergencies. Not so effective as divine intervention, but neither so likely to see through an illusion. It's the compromise between my head and heart. Hopefully, they can both live with it.

My frantic strides devour lengths of cobbled pavement, and soon I'm standing in front of the police station. I thrust my shoulder into the heavy wood door and burst into the office. The door thuds against the wall and nearly bounces back to close behind me. Officers across the room startle from their paperwork, gawking with wide eyes and slack jaws.

"Healer!" I bellow.

No one moves.

I take a second to gather my thoughts. "I need a healer, quick, for the boy!"

The room jolts into action. People rush forward and take him from me. I slump into a chair near the door, letting out a sigh.

My exhaustion is entirely mental. I'm not out of breath because I don't need to breathe. My body doesn't sweat, and I hadn't thought to project that image. Oh no. I must look as if I had been casually standing around before barging in. Too late to change that now. It'd be even more suspicious if I shifted the illusion in front of everyone.

"I'm a—really good runner." I cringe as I hear it come from my mouth. Only guilty people need to justify themselves. Change the topic! "I saw him get stabbed near the temple district, and carried him here to get help."

A uniformed officer comes over. He crosses his thick arms and inspects me with a furrowed brow.

Another joins, holding a pad of paper, and she starts scribbling. "Why did you bring him here when the temples were closer by half?" she asks.

The illusion projected over my face doesn't flinch. "I have no standing with any god but Seatra, and her people can't handle this."

The officers' mouths turn down at that. Damn it, my face could easily sell the lie if my brain could only think of the right thing to say. Maybe I'm projecting too much confidence. I bend the illusion to show concern, instead.

"Is the kid going to be alright?" I ask.

The officer with her notepad studies me before responding. "Probably not, but the mage is looking at him now."

They're not buying it. I should leave. Gripping the armrests, hoist myself up.

The male officer grabs my shoulder and pushes me back down. "Hold on, we're going to need you to wait while we sort some things out."

I could knock him on his back, him and every other cop in here. Instead, I fold my hands in my lap. "Am I in trouble, sir?"

The other officer's eyes narrow. She's been studying me this whole time. Probably trying to figure out why her instincts are flagging me. I've seen it before. Some are more insightful, and can tell something's off even if they can't say what. Usually, in this situation, I walk away.

The door on the far side of the room swings open, and a short man with a round belly steps out. "There's nothing I can do. The lad's dead."

I press my fingers to my eyelids and exhale deeply. Swamped with guilt, and facing scrutiny, my face gets hot and eyes start to sting. I feel as if I might cry, though I have no moisture to give up. "I hoped something could be done," I mumble.

Pulling my hand down my face, I catch the female officer looking at me with a cocked head. Yes, this is the first genuine emotion I've shown. I bet she can tell the difference.

Another officer walks over and mutters something ominous. The other two take my arms and ask me to stand. They're not rough, but they pull me to my feet.

"You are under arrest," the third officer says. He is calm, his expression almost bored.

Is this normal for him?

"We'll have to hold you until you post bail, or we're able to check your story."

"I can pay the money," I mumble, "but I don't have it on me".

The officer shakes his head. "You don't even know the price. Besides, you cannot pay your own bail. Someone else must be on the hook for you."

The mage watches through slitted eyes. Can he see through the illusion? If so, he says nothing about it. I try to calm myself. It's just not likely.

The officers lead me to a back room with six dingy cells. They ask me to enter one and I comply. The door swings closed behind me with a clank. I turn around and grip the bars. They're thick; even I couldn't break through them.

"My bail," I say.

The last officer to leave pauses at the door.

"I have a friend who can pay my bail."

"Sure," she says, and pulls the pad of paper out of her trousers' back pocket. Holding a pen, she nods for me to go on.

"Ask for Lady Borea, at the Nightingale House. Up on fourth street in the Heights."

The officer scrunches up her brow as she jots the information down. "Isn't that—"

I nod.

"—a brothel," she finishes, smirking. "You're calling for a companion?"

"No, just—tell her what happened."

"Don't you want to know the price, first?"

"Whatever it is, I trust that she'll pay. I'll only feel bad if I know how much."

She shrugs. "Alright, I'll put someone on that." Lingered in the doorway for a moment, she says, "look, hopefully your story checks out and we can cut you loose. Might take some time. If you need something, you can ask. Water, food, we can supply it. You're not officially in trouble yet."

I nod and thank her. I don't need food or water, but I make a mental note to ask for some. Maybe use the bathroom too. It'd be weird if I didn't eventually need that.

She leaves me then, swinging the door closed. A metallic click marks the turning of a lock. I'm alone but for my regrets. They play through my mind, unwanted.

I regret not breaking up the fight from the start. Why did I hesitate?

I regret not taking the boy to a cleric. I should have, and my secret be damned. That was a selfish choice. It was the wrong choice.

I regret not getting my thoughts straight before talking to the officers. All this time, I've considered myself a silver-tongued liar. I guess it's only the illusion, giving me an advantage. Well, of course it is. I'm a fool to have ever thought otherwise.

A groan slips past my lips. It sounds like the groan of a dead thing to my ears.