

Orion is Lying: Carina

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Chapter 1: Carina

The Apothecary's wooden bar top gleamed in the light of EverFlame candles, their steady glow lending warmth to the room's orderly chaos. Shelves behind me overflowed with tinctures and neatly labeled vials, their contents perfumed the air with the calming blend of lavender, rosemary, and a whisper of juniper.

Usually, the familiar rhythm of grinding herbs and measuring powders was enough to settle my mind. But tonight, my hands trembled against the cool stone mortar. I adjusted the pestle, trying to focus on creating a water-breathing elixir for a waiting customer. A mindless task, but the tight knot in my chest refused to loosen.

Orion is lying.

"You've been quiet today," Argo Blackwood said as he leaned against the bar top, the only person who remained in the main area after hours at the Apothecary. As a member of the Veran City Guard, his training armor was scuffed from guard drills, the dark leather stretching across his broad chest and shoulders, emphasizing the sheer power of his physique. He was built like a fortress, like he belonged in the middle of a battle rather than a tavern filled with herbs and tonics. The vow he'd made to my mother—to protect us sisters no matter what—hung in the air between us. It was a promise he carried with the same seriousness as he carried himself.

"It's been busy without Vela around," I said, wiping down the bar. "She's off on her romantic getaway with Trevin." I tried to keep my voice light, but the words tasted off.

Argo scoffed, setting his empty glass down with a little too much force. "Yeah, well, let's hope she comes back in one piece. Trevin's about as reliable as a snapped bowstring."

I shot him a look. "You don't have to like him."

"I don't," he said flatly.

I hesitated, swirling the rag over the same spot on the counter. "Once she passes the guard exam, she'll be gone for good." The thought sat heavy in my chest. "I'm not sure what I'll do when it's just me running this place."

"She's got the skills and she's likely to pass. It's smart to plan ahead. Maybe hire someone new?" Argo leaned back, arms crossing over his broad chest. "The Apothecary is still yours, though. It always will be."

I resumed grinding the herbs, letting the rhythmic scrape fill the silence.

"What else is bothering you? Your sister being gone doesn't usually make you scowl at your own handiwork," he said, raising an eyebrow.

The grinding of the herbs became uneven as my thoughts churned. "It doesn't matter."

Argo leaned a little closer, resting his corded forearms on the bar top. "If it didn't matter, you wouldn't be grinding those herbs into dust."

I looked down, realizing I'd crushed the mixture far more than necessary. I quickly busied myself with brushing the excess into a vial.

"It's Orion," I said.

"He trusts you. He's just—," Argo said.

"Cryptic?" I finished for him.

Argo gave a small smile. "I was going to say stubborn. But yeah, that too."

“It’s his turn to walk me home tonight.” I reached for a bottle of spirits, my hair slipping over my shoulder like a chestnut colored silk curtain. “I will just talk to him then.”

As the golden liquid filled his cup, I absently tucked a section of hair behind my ear, only for it to slide forward again. I slid the glass towards Argo’s waiting hand. “This one’s on me.”

“Thank you.” He squeezed my hand as I handed him the glass, his touch steady and reassuring, like the older brother I never had. Argo had always known when I needed him, especially when the weight of the world threatened to overwhelm me. He leaned back in his chair, the liquid swirling in his glass, the ice making a soft, familiar clink, as though the sound itself was meant to steady me, too.

“Go find your answers. I’ll hold down the fort here and lock up when it’s time.”

“You’re sure you can handle it? It’s wild in here tonight,” I said as I gestured vaguely to the empty room. He gave me a look that comment deserved.

I smoothed down my bar apron, forcing my hands steady as I reached for Orion’s journal. The leather was cracked with age, rough under my fingertips, the weight of it heavier than it should have been. I had barely slept since taking it—my mind ceaselessly turning over the pieces I could translate, which was most of it. But there were some things I didn’t understand. The Enthralled. My mother’s name. Blood Magic. Fragments of some truth I knew in my bones I needed to know.

My mother had always carried an air of certainty, an unshakable presence that made even the impossible seem within reach. She would have known what to do. She would have acted. But losing her to an Enthralled had left a wound inside me that had never closed, only deepened with time. The Enthralled were once ordinary people—victims of an ancient curse, transformed into twisted shadows of themselves. Their bodies were animated by a dark magic, no longer human

but driven by an insatiable hunger to destroy, and they were coming closer to Veran City every day, but they weren't here yet.

My mother had been out of town gathering ingredients for the Apothecary, unaware of the danger lurking in the shadows. When the creature attacked, she was alone, and didn't stand a chance. By the time Orion and Argo had gotten to her it was too late. No amount of potions, no careful planning, no practiced precision could stitch over the hole in my heart she left behind. And now, after years without answers, I was staring at proof that her death was not just some tragic misfortune. That there was more. That Orion knew *something*.

My grip tightened around the journal. I needed to know the truth. I needed the answers only he could give me. I needed to finally win the argument we have had over and over. This was my proof.

I snatched the book from the bar top and turned on my heel, barely registering the way Argo's eyes flicked toward me in quiet concern. The weight in my chest made it hard to breathe, my pulse hammered as I crossed the room and reached the stairs.

One step. Two.

I counted them as I climbed, like a rhythm meant to keep me from unraveling.

Ten. Eleven.

By the time I reached the top, my carefully planned words swirled in my mind, the conversation playing out exactly as I wanted. I would be calm. Logical. I would demand answers, and Orion—whether he liked it or not—would give them to me. Easy.

But as my fingers curled around the door handle, I hesitated.

Because deep down, beneath the frustration and righteous anger, a darker fear lingered.

What if I don't like what I find out?

I swallowed hard and pushed the door open.

The room reeked of failed alchemy, a weird combination of burnt herbs, scorched parchment, and the sharp tang of metal. Orion hardly seemed to notice, as if he had long since fused with the very essence of his workshop. He stood rigid behind his workbench, glacial blue eyes fixed on me with the calculating intensity of a man who dissected problems, not emotions. His eyes were cold and piercing, like shards of ice that had never known warmth.

Deep lines cut across his forehead and mouth, from years of scrutiny, sleepless nights, and burdens he refused to share. His mind burned with a relentless, obsessive fire, leaving little room for anything beyond his work. Sentiment had no place in him, nor did pleasantries. And the truth? He had even less use for that when a lie would serve him better.

The calm, steady look he gave me as I stepped through the doorway was infuriating. It was the kind of look that said he knew better, like the entire burden of the world rested solely on his shoulders and no one else's.

"You're hiding something from me," I said, barely able to keep the tremor out of my voice. I placed the journal on the workbench between us with a deliberate thud. "Something important. About the Enthralled. About my mother."

Orion didn't flinch, he only placed the vials he had in his hands carefully back on the table. "Carina, you don't understand what you're meddling with."

"Meddling?" My laugh was bitter. "You think I'm poking around for fun, Orion? She was my mother."

"And that gives you the right to steal from me?" His voice was low and seething. "You went through my things, read my notes—without my permission?"

My stomach twisted, but I lifted my chin. “You weren’t going to tell me. You never tell me anything.”

“Do you have any idea what you could have misread?” Orion snapped, raking a hand through his hair. “What you could have set in motion?”

“You don’t trust me.” The realization sank in, bitter as my most potent poison.

Orion let out a sharp breath. “This isn’t about trust. It’s about you not understanding what’s at stake.”

“Of course it’s about me!” The words burst out before I could stop them. “It’s about all of us. The Enthralled are crossing the Tropic lines. They’re coming further south. They’ll be in our city in no time, and we have no plan.”

“You don’t understand, Carina. The Enthralled, they’re not just monsters. They’re a force, a plague, unlike anything we’ve faced. Ordinary methods won’t stop them. At least not for good. They are trapped in their madness, driven by a hunger that can’t be sated.”

“Why won’t you let me help you?” I snapped. “You’re desperate for answers about them, and I’m standing right here. I’ve been standing here, Orion, waiting for you to see me as more than someone who needs to be protected. I’m a Potion Master, there are only two of us in this whole city. Or have you forgotten that?”

“You know I haven’t,” he said quietly, but his calm tone only stoked the fire in my chest.

“You keep telling me to stay out of it, to let you handle it, but it’s my life too. And if you think I’m going to stand by while you shoulder this alone, you’re wrong.”

“Carina, stop,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I know *exactly* what I’m asking.” My voice rose, and I didn’t care. “I’m asking you to trust me.”

My words lingered, heavy and as sharp as shattered glass.

Orion turned away, his dismissal louder than any answer he could have given. I deserved to know what happened to my mother. It was cruel of him to keep me in the dark.

Frustration roiled in my chest, tightening my throat and forcing my breaths into sharp, shallow gasps. My hands curled into fists, nails biting into my palms, but the pain did nothing to steady the heat rising under my skin. This was going nowhere. I stormed out, each step fueled by the words I wanted to hurl but refused to waste on him.

Orion is lying.

It had been the same argument a thousand times before. Why had I thought tonight would be any different? Because I had some piece of stolen truth he could dismiss? Frustration locked my body rigid. He had kept his truth buried, veiling it with a devotion that had fueled his obsessions. But after tonight, I would make it my life's mission to uncover what he hid—from my sister, and from me.

I slammed the hefty wooden front door behind me as I left the Apothecary, avoiding Argo at all costs.

He was supposed to escort me home. To hell with that. There was no way I was waiting around for him. My breath escaped, hot in the frigid air, curling into thick clouds around my face. I pulled my oversized cloak tighter against my slight frame, bracing against the evening chill. Before setting off, I checked my belongings, making sure I had everything in my rush to leave. House keys. A pouch of hard-earned coins. Spare clothes. A belt heavy with tinctures and flash potions. Everything was in order.

Despite the bright moon, a strange darkness clung to the alley beside the Apothecary, as if a light had gone missing from the world without me noticing. A jagged line of cold fire raced

down my spine, settling like a weight in my gut. Every hair on my body stood on end as instinct took over. My body angled, one foot forward, fists up. I had trained for this. I had forced myself to learn the defensive stances from Argo, even if my heart had never been in it.

A figure shambled at the alley's edge, grotesque and wrong. It stumbled into a row of metal bins outside the back door, sending them crashing to the ground. Glass bottles shattered, their shards glinting in the moonlight. The racket was deafening. Shit.

Surely, Argo would hear and come running?

But this was no man.

The Enthralled had crossed the tropic lines. And now, one had me in its sights.

It lurched forward, its face pallid, the skin stretched too thin over decayed bones. Its breath came in putrid, gasping wheezes, sickly sweet and nauseating. The uneven remains of its teeth crumbled in its mouth. It snarled as it lunged, seizing a fistful of my hair. A sharp, sickening snap echoed in my ears as strands tore from my scalp. Tears sprang to my eyes, blurring my vision. I gagged on the scent of vinegar and decay.

My chest heaved, breath wild and ragged. I swallowed back the acidic burn clawing up my throat. Kicking at the creature, I twisted, trying to break free, trying to recall the countless drills Argo had put me through. I threw a punch, but it landed off-mark, glancing harmlessly off its rotting flesh. Then a kick. Miss. I had never been in a fight where something really wanted to hurt me. All those hours of training—wasted.

Pain flared sharp and hot as its nails punctured my arm, blood dripped from the gashes. My hands fumbled at my tincture belt, fingers shaking as I scrambled for anything useful.

The Enthralled yanked me closer, its rancid breath nearly making me retch.

My hand closed around a vial. A flash tincture.

I gripped it tight, pressing it against my chest for leverage. With a desperate, twisting pull, the stopper popped free. The scent of bitter herbs and oil filled my nose as I dumped the contents onto the creature's face.

Flames erupted in ragged blue tendrils, clinging to the creatures remaining flesh. The Enthralled let out a shrieking wail, clawing at its face as the fire spread. The alley filled with the acrid stench of burning rot. My legs nearly gave out, but I shoved myself off the wall, gasping for air.

It should have dropped. The flames should have consumed it. But it didn't fall.

It kept coming.

I stumbled back, slamming against the Apothecary's stone wall, the impact knocked the wind from my lungs. The Enthralled lumbered forward, its face a melted ruin, its blackened gnarled claws still reaching.

I should have waited for Orion.

I should have trained harder.

I should... I should...

"Enough."

The voice cut through the night, commanding and smooth. The world around me blurred, my mind a tangled mess of panic and pain, but I had just enough clarity to know. *That voice did not belong to the monster.* It couldn't have. My potion had mangled its tongue, reducing its growls to inhuman gurgles.

"Let her go."

The words carried an authority that sent a shiver down my spine. A figure stepped from the shadows, his presence slicing through my panic. Relief surged through me as he grabbed the Enthrall by the throat.

I tried to focus, to see past the haze of tears and the sting of my torn scalp. The crisp lines of his Veran City guard uniform accentuated his athletic build. Dark, tousled hair framed a face I could barely make out in the moonlight—sharp angles, rugged features. His movements were precise, controlled, the kind of skill that came from years of training and knowing exactly what these creatures could do.

The Enthrall loosened its grip, my hair slipping from its grasp. I staggered, my body shaking, my face damp with tears, sweat, and snot. My stomach churned, but I forced my eyes open, focusing on the sounds of the fight. The sickening thud of fists against flesh, the scrape of boots against stone.

The Enthrall collapsed, run through with the guard's blade.

From its crumpled form, thick black smoke curled into the air, twisting unnaturally in the moonlight. It didn't dissipate. It writhed, as if it had a will of its own, reaching skyward.

Something about that smoke was *wrong*.

The guard yanked his blade free, its metal slick with blackened blood. His shoulders rose and fell with measured breaths, his sleeve darkened by the remnants of the creature's final struggle.

Whoever he was, this wasn't his first encounter. And from the look in his eyes, it wouldn't be his last.

I turned to the man, trying to speak, trying to *thank him*, but the world tilted, my vision tunneled, and darkness swallowed me whole.

The Enthralled weren't coming. They were here.