

DEATHMASK

A Novel

By

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Chapter Four

“Polianna!”

The voice lanced like a beacon through the dark coldness around her, the sound of it entering her like a draught of scalding brew that made her realize the chill that had entered her bones. Then a wavering heat gripped her arm, searing her skin, pulling her from the chill, wrenching her to the surface of the icy waters that had closed over her head. Her eyes flung wide, and her lungs drew a blistering breath of the clear, crisp night air.

“Polianna!” Judd whispered urgently, his forehead wrinkled with concern.

“Wha --? Judd?” Her eyes would not focus on him, even though the stark points of his own stabbed at her like spears of green fire. She was suddenly wracked with shivers, and realized she was freezing cold. Her skin was clammy with sweat, and her covers and furs were strewn about as if she’d been thrashing in her sleep. Judd’s warm, brown hand felt like a furnace on her skin. It felt good; dry, warm, alive, and reassuringly solid after the horror of the nightmare, but she brushed his hand away and pulled her blankets around her. “My watch?”

“No, Polianna,” he said, withdrawing his hand slowly, his slim fingers rubbing together as if testing the texture of the moisture from her skin. “Kir relieved you of your watch duties, remember? You were dreaming. Your voice was low and harsh, but the words were strange to me. I feared you would wake the others, or perhaps draw attention from the wilds, so I woke you.”

“Th-thanks.” Her quivering hands rubbed hard at her eyes, as if pressing the foul memory from her mind’s eye. “I dreamt I was drowning, and cold. Guess I threw my blankets off in my sleep.”

His head cocked sideways, like a dog’s when it is looking at something that does not match its scent. “You are shivering. Kir has ordered a cold camp, and wisely so, but I have made a pot of blackbrew with our heat stone. A cup would warm you, though it might trouble your rest.”

“Blackbrew sounds good,” she said, trying to keep her teeth from chattering. She accepted his hand and stood. “And I won’t be able get back to sleep anyway.”

Their steps took them away from the other sleeping forms, the soft snores and snorts escorting them to where a black iron kettle popped and bubbled on a bed of cold stones. A fallen log had been moved for a convenient seat, and Judd sat there and retrieved a tin cup from the large satchel of cooking supplies. Steam wafted from the spout as he filled the cup and held it out to her. Her shivering hands curled around the scalding metal like a drunkard’s lips are drawn to the neck of a bottle. Heat seeped into her fingers as she drew the cup to her lips and inhaled the life-giving aroma of blackbrew. She hazarded a sip and burned her tongue, then made a face at the bitter, over-strong flavor.

“Gods! Who made this dragon spit?”

“I made it at sunset, about three glasses ago. My father used to say that if blackbrew could be swallowed without chewing, it was not too strong.” His teeth shone in the moonlight like rows of pearls between his brown lips. “I thought I would be the only one drinking it, so I made it to my own taste. I have something to sweeten it if you would like.”

“No, no, this is fine. Thanks.” She sipped more carefully and made a lesser face this time. “It just always smells so much better than it tastes, you know?”

His head bobbed sagely, and a long excruciating silence settled on the cool night air. Polianna occupied herself with the steaming cup, passing it from one hand to another until it was cool enough to drink instead of just sip, and Judd returned to his watchfulness, his keen eyes scanning the dark forest tirelessly. When her cup ran empty and her shivering had subsided, she let the night’s silence seep into her, staring into the darkness without really seeing anything. Worry had plagued her since the attack: worry about more westerner patrols, worry about the map of troop movements Kir had shown her, worry about the damnable black mask that seemed to be speaking to her in her mind, and of course, worry about getting killed. Though her sleep had been brief, and evidently tumultuous, she felt like her mind had made some order of these things. Things made more sense now. There were things she could control, and other things that she could prepare for, and still others that she had utterly no control over. She would change the things she could, remain vigilant over those that might affect her, and forget the things that she could not affect even if she wanted to.

Just don’t get killed, she said to herself, reiterating her primary goal in this whole ridiculous situation. *Just don’t get killed, and you’ll get what you’ve worked for.*

“Another blackbrew?”

Her head jerked around like she’d been stung by a hornet, her cup thudding to the soft bed of pine needles at her feet. Her eyes blatantly registered the surprise that Judd was still sitting next to her, then lowered in embarrassment that she had reacted so.

“No thanks,” she managed, scooping up the fallen cup and placing it next to the pot, “this one’s already got my ears ringing. Why don’t you go get some rest. I’ll take the rest of your watch for you.”

If her eyes had not been evading his gaze, she would have seen the anguish that her offer brought. All she noticed was that he stood up rather suddenly, then stooped and emptied the rest of the steaming blackbrew onto the ground. He retrieved the heat stone from within it, dried it efficiently and stuffed it into a satchel all without a word. His motions were jerky and quick, not at all his usual fluid grace, but she reasoned that it was probably just fatigue. They had all been pushing pretty hard lately, and Judd and Ulnek, the two scouts, had been drawing double duty since the attack.

“Keep a careful watch, Polianna.” His slim hands slipped the string from his bow with a practiced ease, and he slung it over his shoulder and picked up his staff. His eyes met hers once again, but they were flat and emotionless now, which could easily have been another sign of fatigue. “Wake Kyle in two glasses or so. He’s got midnight watch.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod and a smile that did not receive one in return. “Sleep well, Judd.”

“I am sorry I disturbed yours, Polianna. Goodnight.”

He turned without a smile before she could ask about the curious tone in his voice. His words had sounded more like a declaration than an apology, but sarcasm was something she had never heard from Judd, and it didn't seem likely from him now. She watched him walk to his bedroll as fluidly and silently as a summer zephyr, and lay himself down, his eyes glittering like jewels as he gazed up into the stars.

Polianna pulled her blankets around her against the chill of the night air and scanned the woods. She looked back at Judd occasionally, and his eyes still shone open and staring. She began to wonder if he was sleepy after all. But if he wasn't tired, why did he take her up on her offer? A curious thought entered her mind, a thought she hadn't entertained since the decidedly uncomfortable disappointments of her youth.

Judd? she thought, watching his lithe chest move rhythmically with deepening breaths. "You're fantasizing again, Polianna," she concluded, turning back to her watchfulness. When her gaze swept over him again, the glittering orbs were doused.

She banished the foolish thoughts and settled in, pulling her knees up and wrapping her cloaks and blankets close to conserve heat. Her eyes slowly closed, but her vision sprang to life with the mental words that empowered her with the seeing. Twelve glowing bundles lay like smoldering coals around the camp, their heat making them visible to her mind's eye. With a thought she shifted the sight to the spectrum of magic, then regretted it as the searing glow from Kir's packs nearly blinded her. She changed the sight to one of essence, and the bright flare died to a glow that matched the sleeping rangers'.

The forest assaulted her ears with the usual cacophony of chirps, cheeps, hoots and howls, which was reassuring. If something were about, something as large and clumsy as a man, the twittering noises would hush to silence in a heartbeat. Right now, everything was exactly as it should be; she was alert and reasonably rested, and enjoying the solitude and the comforting acuity of the seeing. Her magic was wrapped around her in a cloak far more insulating than the wool and fur that kept out the chill, and, for a moment, she let herself drift back into the warm, exciting fantasy she had enjoyed that afternoon. Kir's broad, strong hand rested on her shoulder, and she could feel it from her hair to her toes, a warm fuzziness that centered at the pit of her stomach and radiated up to her nipples and down between her legs. She shifted on her seat a bit, and let a thin smile play across her lips with the sweet thoughts of what might have been if only she were more like Tolya.

"Tolya..." she grumbled deep in her throat. The two lay there, their intertwined silhouettes glowing through their blankets, Kir sharing himself with her, as he often did. "The lucky bitch!"

The shock of her own venomous thoughts hit Polianna like a slap, shaking her from her reverie. She'd known Tolya for years, and liked her, or at least didn't dislike her, not like some of the others who joked and whispered behind her back. They were even friends, she supposed, though they rarely talked more than necessary to complete their duties. And Tolya did always seem to draw attention to herself, and away from Polianna. So were they really friends? Did she owe Tolya anything simply because she'd known her and traipsed around the wilderness with her for a few seasons?

She stared down at them through closed lids, suddenly surprised that she'd gotten up and walked over to where the two lay huddled under their furs, but unable to look away from their glowing, warm shapes. The seeing allowed her to see through the thick

coverings as if they weren't even there, to detect the warm outlines of arm and leg and hand cupping flesh. Her breath came in slowly, shockingly cold as she imagined herself in Tolya's place, in his arms, against his skin, feeling his flesh against her own, his breath on the nape of her neck.

"You can be there, Polianna. You will be the one!"

She whirled at the now-familiar whisper. She hadn't heard it all afternoon, and had almost forgotten her plight with the fatigue of the march and the warm fantasies of the moment. Even as she turned, she knew there would be no one there. There was nobody attached to that voice, nothing but an essence, an essence that wanted her as badly as she wanted Kir, that could read her desires as plainly as she heard its whispered voice. So when she turned, and there was a familiar figure standing there in the moonlight staring back at her, her breath caught in her throat.

"You *will* be the one, Polianna," Lyso said to her, his dead eyes staring at her, a black smile on his dead lips. The horrible gash below his chin bobbed open and closed with each whispered word, and his pale, stiff fingers lifted from his side toward her.

She stepped backward, away from the horrible dead thing that had been the man she'd known. Her hand groped for her flame stick, but as it advanced without walking, its wispy feet gliding over the soft bed of needles, her mind told her it was a useless defense against this thing. It was a being of essence only, but what had brought it from its slumber to plague her, and why was its voice the same as that which she had heard during and after the fight? She took another step back, summoning the courage to converse with this apparition, to find out what it really wanted, but her heel encountered a heavy bundle, and she pitched backward over the pile of dark leather packs.

"Wha --!"

Tolya was up and disentangled from the blankets and brandishing a dagger even before the word was out of Kir's mouth. Several others stirred from their sleep, some brandishing weapons, others merely cursing and rolling over when their eyes told them there wasn't any danger. Tolya put the dagger away and snatched up a blanket to cover herself before she let her own ire solidify. By that time Kir had lurched up and was glaring full force at the prostrate sorceress among his packs.

"What in Hades is going on here Poli?" he growled, rubbing his eyes and glaring even more effectively.

"I saw something," she confessed, righting herself and looking among the packs as if she'd dropped something.

"Saw something?" Tolya's hand rested on her dagger, her ire gone immediately, her eyes scanning the trees. "You mean *someone*? Or was it an animal?"

"I don't know. Er, no, it wasn't an animal, but it wasn't a man either. At least not, uh..."

"Calm down, Poli." Kir cinched the drawstring of his trousers tight and nodded to the other rangers. "Everybody back to sleep. I'll take care of this."

He turned back to her like a father ready to explain the facts of life to a slightly dim-witted child, but a sudden thought flared to her mind, like an escape route to a fleeing rabbit, and she plunged down that route heedlessly.

"It was that damnable mask, Kir! There's more to it than I thought. It's interfering with my seeing and might even be having effects on the rest of us that I can't see yet."

“What?” he gaped, glaring skeptically at the packs lying at her feet. “And it made you see something?”

“Yes,” she admitted quite truthfully, steeling herself with a gusty breath. “I’ve got to have a closer look at it Kir, before it becomes dangerous or attracts unwanted attention. A competent wizard could see something this powerful from a league off. In fact, it could be how that patrol set such an effective trap for us. I might be able to douse its signature somehow. You’ve got to let me try!”

He looked at her quizzically for a moment, then back to Tolya, who simply shrugged and sank back to their bed. “Go ahead and have a look at it then, Poli,” he relented, waving her away with a shooing motion, “but do it over there, okay?” He joined his bedmate, and the covers heaved and bounced as they jostled to find their previously agreeable position of entanglement. “Just don’t touch the damned thing Poli! I don’t need my only wizard burned to cinders!”

“Don’t worry, Kir, I’ll be careful,” she assured him, her hand dipping into the mound of his packs to recover the satchel of black leather.

Her fingers worked at the knots with a shakiness that could have been anticipation or trepidation, but by the time she reached the log perch and sat to rest her bundle on the ground the outer bag was open. Her hands became a bit clumsy as she pulled the inner bag free and fought to loosen the cinched strings. The leather had tightened upon itself, binding the knot into a torturer of fingernails that she could not defeat. A tiny, curved blade flashed into her hand, and the leather parted like water before a reaching ship, the cut ends falling in her lap. Suddenly, her motions became slow and deliberate. Her fingers no longer quaked, and her grip was firm and sure. She rolled the bag back carefully, inch by painstaking inch, until the prize within lay upon a soft leather bed before her.

“*We meet at last, Polianna,*” the soft whisper said from those motionless gilded lips. But this time the voice held no fear for her, and she peered down at the glossy black porcelain with eyes that were slitted with scrutiny instead of wide with horror.

“Yes,” she whispered so quietly that even her own ears strained to hear her words, “at last...”

Across the tiny clearing, a pair of narrowed green eyes watched covertly as Polianna drew back the coverings from the black porcelain mask. His ears could not pick out her words from the busy noises of the night forest, but his keen sight saw that her lips moved, and in his equally sharp mind Judd wondered why she was talking to the thing. Then her hands moved in a graceful sweeping gesture across the black features, and he realized she must be casting some type of magic upon it. He pushed himself up from his sleepless rest, crossed his willowy legs tailor fashion and silently watched her weave her art. He sat as rapt as she, his eyes riveted to her delicate features furrowed with concentration, his nose straining to catch the faintest whiff of her scent on the breeze.

Her face then went slowly slack, her skin paling and her eyes going wide. His fingers remembered the cool slickness of her panicked sweat, tasted the terror in it, and his brow creased with worry. But her features were painted with awe, if anything, not horror or panic. *It is the power that draws her,* he realized suddenly, and not without a pang of sorrow that no man would ever receive a gaze so intent, a stare so enthralled, from Polianna than that cold bit of ceramic was receiving right now.

“Not even Kir,” he whispered silently, his slim jaw clenching until his pulse bounded in his ears. “And certainly not I.”

His sharp, half-woodling eyes stared at the motionless sorceress as the night slowly drifted past. When weariness finally took him, he stirred himself and woke Kyle, then lay down and took his rest. But before he surrendered to sleep’s enveloping hold, Judd gazed once again upon the sorceress Polianna, still bent over the dark mask of porcelain. Her form swam in his vision, becoming blurry and wavy, but he just wiped the bothersome tears away and rolled over, allowing sleep to take him.