

DEATHMASK

A Novel

By

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Chapter One

“Down, you idiots!”

Kir’s harsh command brooked no argument, though the term he used for his team was as inaccurate as it was unnecessary. All save one of the fourteen members of his reconnaissance detachment was a ranger of many years experience, more a home in the rough country than anywhere else in the realm; they vanished into the outcropping of jumbled stone as if they had never existed. The afternoon sun cast long shadows in the escarpment of dark stone, an aid to their concealment, but the enemy contingent Kir had spotted was advancing out of the setting sun, and might have spied them before they could scramble to cover. He risked a careful glance, but the squad of soldiers was still moving parallel to the cliff face, apparently unaware of them. Kir let himself breathe a sigh of relief and mumbled a quick thanks to Eloss the Defender, then signaled Judd, the stealthiest of his scouts, to take five of his squad up and around in a flanking maneuver. The slim, brown-skinned fellow nodded once and vanished, his hood drawn down over his curly green-blond locks that belied his half-woodling blood.

The flanking maneuver was just a precaution, not a prelude to attack, and they all knew it. Kir would be stupid to take on a two-score squad of enemy soldiers in chainmail backed with five lancers and a mage on horseback, and if it was one thing their brawny leader was not, it was stupid. They all watched silently, gripping bows and fingering the fletching of their arrows, as the enemy squad continued on their way. When they had rounded the slope of the hillside, Kir hissed a command to his other scout Ulnek to follow and make sure they did not double back. The man’s long, hound-like face nodded once and he trotted away, his torso low and his bow strung but held down.

“Okay, relax people,” Kir said, standing and heaving a sigh. “Good eyes Tol,” he complimented, smiling at the bronze-skinned woman who had been on point. Spotting the soldiers first had saved many lives.

“Fargin’ right!” she replied with her usual confident smirk. Tolya could be insolent at times, and a bit of a bitch on occasion, but she was quick and quiet and deadly with a dagger. “If we’d been caught out in the open instead of in these rocks, those westerners would’ve had us for supper.”

“I know,” he grumbled, scowling up at the sun, then southward at the wide expanses of low, rolling hills that typified the landscape.

The Ironwall Peaks, and the dwarf kingdoms within them, ended here. To the south lay the Great Wood, once the dwelling places of elves it was said, though none dwelt there now. The elves had moved on long ago, leaving only the lofty pines and firs as their legacy. Men had claimed the wood, built towns, and hewn down the trees for lumber. And even though the land was vast and largely untamed, opposing empires of men clashed over it, spilling each other’s blood throughout the verdant hills. The Great Wood was split down the middle by an arid, mountainous region known as The Barrens.

The empires of Sofro to the west and Tira to the east had fallen into a bitter conflict over the long-disputed border.

“It’s this damned open country around here. We’ll hold up here until dark before crossing the rest of it.” He glanced around at his group and nodded to the cooler shadows of rock above them. “Might as well bed down while you can, people, we’re going to be marching all night.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Kir,” a woman’s voice said tentatively from behind him. He turned slowly and scowled at the nondescript woman in the brown robes. She carried no weapon and, unlike the others, she walked awkwardly along the uneven footing. Her plain, freckled features avoided his direct gaze as she approached. “This place feels strange. Cold somehow. I don’t know if it’s safe.”

“One of your premonitions, Polianna?” he asked skeptically. She was the only wizard in the group, and although competent enough and an undeniably valuable asset, she was clumsy and drab and a little pudgy despite their daily trekking. Kir often wished she were not assigned to his team. “There’s nothing here but lizards and rock, Poli, take my word on it.”

“I don’t know, Kir,” she said, drawing her cloaks around her and shivering despite the heat of the day. “It feels like --”

The shrill call of a hawk drew their eyes up toward the cliff face where Judd had taken his flanking team. He stood there atop a great tipped slab of ebony stone, waving one thin arm for them to join him. Kir looked at Polianna; their eyes met for just a moment before she looked away. There might have been the faintest flicker of effrontery in those prosaic grey eyes, but she quickly hid it behind her usual shy indecisiveness, which was one more problem Kir had with her. How could he trust a wizard who was too timid to tell him when she was right and he wrong? What he knew of magic could fit in a thimble with plenty of room for a fingertip, a fact he had never denied, so he wasn’t going to bark at her for telling him he didn’t know what he was talking about when it came to matters supernatural.

“Well, I guess we’d better go see what Judd’s found, eh Poli?” He smiled when her eyes came up, trying to encourage that flicker of steel he thought he’d seen. “Something besides lizards and rock, if I don’t miss my guess.”

Her lips quirked into a smile for an instant before she studiously examined her boots. But as the others turned to go, her face came up again, and the worry there was thicker than any satisfaction. She shivered against the chill of the stone beneath her feet and followed them up the tilted mass of broken black rock.

Polianna watched a light sheen of sweat break out on Kir’s broad shoulders as they ascended to Judd’s position. With Ulnek’s assurances that the enemy patrol had indeed kept on their eastward track, they had doffed their heavy cloaks for the climb and some, like Kir, even stripped off their shirts. All save Polianna of course, who always wore the same heavy brown cloaks. On the occasions when they bathed themselves in streams or ponds along the trail, the others often joked that her skin was probably so pale it would give them away to the enemy if she ever showed more than her arms. This time, however, though the others were sweating in the heat, Polianna was huddled and shivering.

“So what’s this about, Judd?” Kir sighed, stretching his back and looking about at the broken and heaved up stones.

“This used to be a structure, Kir.” The half-woodling cracked his alder staff against the tumbled blocks of stone beneath his feet. Judd wore neither sword nor knife, but that staff could flick so quick it seemed to strike like a snake in his grasp, and he was the best bowman in the team. His emerald-green eyes flashed with intensity at his commander, though his voice was even and as melodic as wind through the branches of a willow. “See the rust in these rocks, and the ‘I’-shaped pins to hold the stones together?”

“There’s never been a city here!” Kir scoffed, frowning at the irrefutable evidence under his boots. Iron binding pins were not commonly used in such construction, only when metal was cheaper than mortar or immense strength was needed. “At least not to my knowledge.”

“Well, there was something here, and from the look of the rust on this iron, it was long ago.” Judd’s slim fingers groped along the flaky, decaying metal and pried off a thick bit of rust scale. “Maybe the dwarves had a keep here once and it fell in on itself, or came under siege.”

“If dwarves built this, they’ve changed their stone working practices. I don’t know if they ever used --”

“Kir!” someone called, waving their commander over to a narrow cleft between two slabs. Kir vaulted up onto one and looked down to where the man pointed.

“Eloss’ Hand! Is that a sword hilt down there Ferdy?”

“It looks to be, and a gold one at that, but I don’t think it’ll ever come out’a there. Not without a hundred men to lift that slab off it.” The swarthy man squinted down into the foot-wide crack. “I kinda doubt it’s in one piece after this thing landed on it, anyways.”

“You wouldn’t want it if you could get it.” Polianna’s voice was a bit shaky, as if she were ill or frightened. The men looked at her skeptically, but she just shook her head. “It’s a fell-blade, Kir. I wondered what I was feeling, and this explains it. They’re evil things, cold and hungry weapons of power that haven’t been forged in any of the southern realms for centuries.” She shuddered and drew her cloaks closer. “If there are many buried here, it would explain the chill I’m feeling.”

“But if the thing’s broken, at least the gold and gems in the hilt could be salvaged.”

“It is never safe to handle such things, Kir,” she said, more apologetically than in disagreement. “The worshipers of the Dark Gods were said to put the spirits of foul demons and such into their weapons. I don’t know what would happen if you chose to dig that one out, but I’m not powerful enough to save you from a menace like that.”

“Fine.” He turned to his men and gestured broadly. “Have a look around, but don’t touch anything. If you find so much as an shard of steel, call Poli over to have a look.” He smiled down at the shy woman. “Satisfied?”

She nodded rather weakly and watched him stalk off to join his men in their search, then jumped slightly when Judd’s calm voice sounded right at her shoulder.

“You are troubled,” he stated matter-of-factly, those piercing eyes peering at her from his nut-brown features, plainly drawn with concern. He was as close a friend as she had among the rangers, but he was always popping up at her elbow without a sound, which made her nervous, and she felt like those green eyes of his looked right into her soul.

“I just wish we’d leave this place, that’s all,” she confessed. “I don’t like it here.”

“I do not feel whatever is troubling you, Polianna, but the subtleties of your art are beyond my senses. Perhaps if you spoke to Kir of your concerns, he would consider making camp elsewhere.”

“Why would he listen to me?” she said with a short, humorless laugh. “He doesn’t want to hear about my stupid premonitions, didn’t you hear?”

“Poli!” one of the men called, waving her over to a jumble of dark stone.

She moved down the tilted slab of rock and hopped over the narrow cleft. Judd’s brow furrowed with concern at her hunched shoulders as he stepped over the cleft and followed her down. Neither noticed that deep in the dim crack, a pale hand scrabbled against the stone, its white, dead flesh long since scraped away from its broken fingertips. It strained futilely for the blade it had not held for centuries, and would continue to do so until time reduced it to dust.

“What do you make of this?” Jovek, one of the younger rangers asked, poking at a hand-span thick slab of heavily rusted iron with a steel-shod staff. The slab was wedged between a heavy stone and what looked like a casement or some kind of framework. The rust was so thick on the metal that it cracked and crumbled away easily under the prodding of his walking staff.

“Part of a door maybe, or even the main gate?” Kir had come over and immediately started pushing and lifting experimentally, to no avail. The slab of iron still weighed tons despite the advanced state of decay. He peered into the gloomy hole at the corner of the casement, shielding his eyes from the sun with a broad hand and squinting. “I can’t see anything in there. It could be a passage or even a hidden chamber.”

“Or a nest of chatter vipers,” Tolya warned with a snort of laughter, her lithe curves bobbling firmly as she dropped down onto the rusty iron slab. “You might want to have Poli light up the inside before you stick your arm in.”

“I wasn’t going to stick my arm in, Tol,” he snapped at her. She often thought him too brash, and never missed an opportunity to remind him of it. “But we should at least see how deep it is.” He looked to Polianna, who was looking past him to Tolya, envy plainly written on her round features. “Could you throw some light in there so we can see, Poli?”

Her eyes jerked to him, and then down, embarrassed at having been caught looking at Tolya’s admittedly impressive physique. “Sure,” she mumbled with a shrug, fumbling in a pocket as she stepped forward. A pinch of something rolled between two fingers and a quick phrase in a language that none present but her understood, and a sphere of glowing white light appeared in her hand. She stooped to the narrow crevice and dropped the glowing mote in. It fell like a bit of fluff on the breeze. “It won’t last long,” she said, stepping back as the brawny warriors crowded forward to crane and peer inside.

“Dirt!” one said dejectedly, snorting in disgust.

“Looks more like ash than dirt, Lyso,” Kir corrected, poking a long staff down the hole to stir up its contents. Polianna cringed, but remained silent. “Might be some bits of metal or something there. I see a reflection down the other end.” He reached farther in, and all present plainly heard the clink of the staff’s metal shod tip contacting something of glass or ceramic.

“Careful!” Polianna snapped, unable to keep silent any longer. If these buffoons smashed a hidden store of potions or a spirit flask, they would all be blown into as many pieces as this keep. She cringed at her own tone, wringing her hands with the choice

between standing up to Kir or risking him getting them all killed. Prudence finally won out, but only barely. “There may be things that are best not disturbed, Kir. Potions or crystals of power might detonate if you poke them too hard. Let me try. Please.”

He glanced down the still-glowing hole skeptically, then took a step back. Such an outburst from Polianna was as rare as a pearl in a bowl of oyster stew and, as mentioned, Kir was not stupid. “Go ahead Poli,” he said, motioning her forward while he took another step back. “Everybody else, back off. If something happens I don’t want to lose every ranger I’ve got.”

Polianna clenched her jaw at the implication that it might be acceptable to lose the company’s only wizard before risking one of his precious rangers. She felt their eyes on her as she stepped tremulously forward, her hands shaking as they fished the proper spell materials from the many pockets of her robe. She thought there might be just a bit of greed in some of those eyes, and the thought that whatever might be behind that rusted iron slab could be immensely valuable suddenly struck her. Her lower lip stiffened at the thought that they did not trust her with such a find, that they thought she might take the treasure for herself. They were rangers, and she was the wizard in the woodpile, someone they had been told to protect but who had not shown her own value, and as yet had not earned their trust.

“Don’t worry,” she told them, managing just a touch of sarcasm, “whatever’s inside is all yours. I don’t want anything from this place. There’s nothing here but death.” The last bit surprised even her; she honestly didn’t know where the thought had come from, let alone why she’d put it into words.

“Be careful, Polianna.”

She turned to Judd, surprised at his tone. Usually so melodic and calm, there was something else in it now, almost like he was afraid for her. She smiled at his concern and turned back to the dark crypt, banishing whatever thoughts might have evolved from the look of anguish on Judd’s face.

At the edge of the now-dark hole, she closed her eyes and stretched her mind out for a brief seeing. One of the simplest exercises any wizard learned, it enabled her to see not only by light, but also by heat and essence, and even detect strong emotions if she concentrated hard enough. Right now, however, she was simply scanning for danger inside the dark stone container. What she met was utter blackness.

“That’s strange,” she muttered, gnawing at her lower lip. She made another light sphere and dropped it in, but this time she made it hover in the center of the space within. Another simple spell and a careful motion of her hand, and the relatively thin layer of dust and corrosion that littered the crypt’s interior was swept neatly into the nearest corner, leaving the contents bare for all to see. A few small animal bones, several bits of shiny metal and a half-sphere of black porcelain were revealed. The glittering metal she gathered up with a wave of her hand, receiving them in her cupped palm one by one as they levitated up to her.

“Treasure!” someone spouted greedily.

“If you’re a tailor,” Polianna countered with a smile, dropping the thirteen gold buttons into Kir’s outstretched hand. “But there’s something else in there I’m not so sure about. It looks like a black bowl from here, but I can’t see it very well.”

“Can’t you just float it out like you did these?” he asked eagerly, dumping the buttons into his belt pouch.

“Yes, I can,” she said carefully, bringing her eyes up to his for a brief moment. “But I’ll only retrieve the thing if you promise me you won’t just grab it as soon as it’s out of there.” Her gaze dropped back to her feet. “I have no idea what it is, and it could be dangerous.”

“Of course, Poli,” he agreed, surprising her. “I don’t want to be turned into a toadstool any more than you do.”

She smiled thinly at him and turned back to the crypt, carefully bending her will to the glimmering black treasure within. It levitated as easily as the buttons, yet when it floated into the light of day, she felt her heart begin to hammer in her chest as if she had just peeked into a dragon’s lair. An ebony mask floated out of the crypt like a dark harbinger of doom, its pristine surface glinting in the sunlight while thin gold highlights flared like sigils. The rangers murmured and gasped, crowding around as she let it settle down on top of the rusted iron slab.

“Stay back, all of you!” Kir warned with a voice as sharp as his sword. “What in the name of the Five Good Gods is it Poli?”

“You mean other than a mask?” Her nerves were as tight as a bowstring, and made her voice shrill and whiny. “I have no idea!” She cast the simplest divination spell she knew, and the result hit her hard enough to knock her back a step. Strong slim hands gripped her, steadying her on her feet.

“Are you all right?”

“Yea, Judd, I’m...” He was looking at her strangely again with those damned sharp green eyes. She shrugged off his grip with what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “I’m fine. I just wasn’t expecting such an overwhelming result to my spell, is all. Caught me a bit off guard.”

“What caught you off guard?” Kir demanded, his gaze flickering between Polianna and the black mask. “What did you find out?”

“Only that it’s just about the most magical thing I’ve ever seen,” she said easily, secretly enjoying the awe her words evoked in the crowd of strong, capable warriors. “That’s all I’ll risk.”

“Is it safe to touch it?” Kir was shifting like a warhorse before a battle, one hand clenched on his sword, the other wiping sweat off on his trousers.

“Absolutely not!” she said, managing a hint of ire in her voice. “It could be possessed by a demon for all I know, or a star spirit for that matter, neither of which I’d like to release.”

“How are we going to handle it if we can’t touch it?” Tolya asked, squatting a step from the glossy black thing.

“It shouldn’t have been disturbed,” she muttered just loud enough for the others to hear. “Why would you want to take it with us?”

“If it’s as magical as you say, we have to take it, Polianna.” Kir’s massive shoulders were squared in a position that said this was the final word. “It could be a valuable asset if it can be used properly. Lord Gilthain must have it. His mage will know how to crack its secrets.” He took a step closer to the ebony mask and peered at it, as if his eyes could delve beneath its lustrous finish to ferret out its mysteries. “Just tell me how to carry it safely.”

“That’s like asking how to pick up a fire scorpion safely, Kir,” Polianna said, her nervousness once again edging her voice. “The best thing would be to leave it, but if you

must take it with you...” Her eyes cast about the group and settled on some of their packs. “Tip it into a food bag with something made of stone or wood, then put that bag in another.”

“Fine.” Kir turned to his team, but before he could even give the order, two black leather bags were thrust into his hands. He placed one open on the rusted iron slab and flipped the glinting mask into it with an arrow from his quiver. When the drawstrings were double tied, he placed that bag into the next and cinched it closed. He held the prize aloft for his team to behold.

“At least this time we will bring something of value back to Lord Gilthain!” The allusion to their own woeful lack of success at gaining any useful information on enemy troop movements broke the tension of the moment, shifting their worries from the foreboding black artifact to the war, which boded every bit as darkly.

“Get some sleep if you can, people. We move at dusk, and I don’t want to stop until we’re back in the forest.”

Murmurs of ascent and the usual muttering and complaints swept through the company, but none of it touched Polianna’s ears. Her eyes were still welded to that dark niche from which she’d taken the mask, her mind awl with dread as chill as the stone under her feet. She jumped with a start at the slim brown hand that settled on her shoulder.

“Gods, Judd! I wish you wouldn’t do that!” She smiled nervously at him, avoiding his eyes. “Especially in this place!”

“I did not mean to startle you, Polianna,” he said, laying his hand on her shoulder again, this time more firmly, “but to lend comfort. I see how this place disturbs you. If you wish it, I will accompany you off this escarpment and keep watch so that you may get some rest.”

“Thanks, Judd, but I don’t think Kir would let anyone camp out in the open.” She patted his hand and let it drop from her shoulder, studying the lacings of his tunic instead of meeting that gaze that she found so disquieting. “But it’s just as well. I don’t think I could sleep within a league of this place. I’ll tell Kir I’m taking the watch.”

She turned and ascended the dark tumble of rock to where the brawny leader was laying down his blankets, and the half-woodling’s eyes followed her there. As she talked to Kir, receiving a heaving shrug and a nod, Judd brought the fingers of his hand to his lips. He breathed deeply of the spicy warm scent that lingered on his hand where she had touched it, and let his lips wander over the delicate saltiness that was so unlike his own deep, woody scent. With a sigh, he folded himself and sat, eyes closed, his face turned up at the life-giving sun, and felt with his hands the solidity of the stone under him. There he wished, not for the first time, that Polianna would just once look into his eyes for more than a glance.