

# ONE

The witch moved through the crowded restaurant, drawing the eye of everyone she passed. She had long, dark brown hair, pale white skin, and lips as scarlet red as the dress that hugged her slim body. Diamonds sparkled at her ears, throat, and wrists. She could easily pass for the young wife of a politician or businessman, meeting her friends for dinner. Most would view her as beautiful, elegant, fashionable, and entirely harmless.

They'd be dead wrong.

She didn't look to the left or right. Her attention was fixed on only one person.

Me.

I didn't try to smile. I didn't wave my hand in greeting. Instead, I focused on hiding my fear, since it wasn't the least bit helpful tonight.

My gaze shifted from the witch to the tall young man who accompanied her. Black eyes. Dark hair. Broad shoulders. A tense, square jaw. The tattoo of a dagger on the side of his neck, visible above the collar of his black leather coat. Contrary

to the witch's benign appearance, most casual onlookers would immediately assume Jericho Nox was dangerous, and instinctively want to run in the opposite direction. For me, however, the relief at seeing the Blackheart stole the air right out of my lungs.

Shortly after we'd arrived in Cresidia, a city six hundred miles north of Ironport, Jericho had disappeared without a word. And then five long days had passed in utter silence. I'd convinced myself that his evil boss had punished him for failing his latest mission. Or worse . . . killed him. But then, earlier today, I received a message to meet him and the witch here tonight. Alone.

Jericho scanned the restaurant vigilantly, his expression impenetrable steel. The table I'd been taken to upon my arrival was in a private alcove set slightly apart from the rest of the restaurant, through a carved stone archway. Just beyond the archway, the restaurant bustled with waiters and, most importantly, a dining room full of patrons. There was no way I'd ever meet with this witch without knowing there were a hundred witnesses present.

She took a seat across from me, and I tensed. I'd be perfectly happy if tomorrow this witch was executed for her long list of heinous crimes. I'd make sure I had a front-row seat. Tonight, however, her death would do me no good at all. Elian needed her help. And, in more ways than I cared to admit, so did I.

"Jericho, please make the introductions." Her voice took me by surprise—it was as sweet and smooth as honey. I guess I'd expected her to sound as shrill and cruel as her reputation.

The Blackheart took the seat next to his boss. I tried to read his expression, but it gave me no clues as to where he'd been for five long days.

"Valery," he said evenly, and his familiar deep voice betrayed not even a whisper of emotion, "this is Josslyn Drake. Josslyn Drake, this is Valery."

He'd called me simply Drake so many times that my first name sounded strange on his lips. Not strange in a bad way. Just strange.

Valery gestured for a waiter to approach. He had a bottle of red wine already in hand, and he poured two glasses from it without being asked—one for me and one for her.

"I took the liberty of ordering this for us," she said.

"How thoughtful of you," I replied dryly. "No wine for Jericho?"

"I prefer that my employees don't drink alcohol."

"It's fine," Jericho said. "I'm not thirsty."

I wished that we'd had time to talk before this, to help me get my bearings when it came to meeting his boss. What she knew, what she wanted, what she planned to do next.

"Have you visited Cresidia before, Josslyn?" Valery asked when the waiter moved away from the table.

Small talk didn't seem to suit the occasion, but I'd do my best to endure it.

"No," I replied. "I've rarely traveled far from Ironport all my life. At least, not until recently."

Ironport was in South Regara, and Cresidia was in North Regara. While Ironport was straightlaced, business minded,

and highly respectable with its gray-and-silver skyscrapers, and meticulously groomed green spaces, Cresidia was known more as a vacation destination—with luxury shopping, glittering hotels, and sandy beaches. I'd spent most of my time since our arrival on one of those beaches, staring out at the sparkling blue sea, piecing together everything I'd seen and learned over the last month that had shattered the life I'd always known into a million jagged pieces.

"The life of a prime minister's daughter," Valery mused. "How very limiting that must have been for you."

I fought to hold on to my calm expression. "Actually, my life felt quite limitless. Until last year, of course."

She nodded, her expression serene. "Yes, of course. My deepest condolences on your father's death."

My fingers itched to grab the steak knife in front of me and shove it through her eyeball, straight into her evil brain.

"I'm trying very hard to be polite to you," I said tightly. "Really, I am. But I'm sure you must understand why that's going to be a challenge for me."

She studied me for a moment, a glass of wine poised in her perfectly manicured hand. "Jericho tells me that you know everything."

"I know enough," I bit out. Then I chose to ignore her and focus on the Blackheart for a moment while I gathered my poise and control again. "Where have you been for the last five days?" I asked him bluntly.

Jericho blinked, his jaw tense. "There was something I needed to take care of."

“What?”

His black eyes flicked to mine, a silent warning in their depths. “*Something.*”

“I needed Jericho to retrieve this for me,” Valery said as she reached into her handbag to pull out an object, which she placed on the table. It was a small golden box covered in geometric etchings.

My breath caught at the sight of it, and my confused gaze shot to Jericho.

“You may explain,” Valery said to him with a casual wave of her hand.

Something tight in his expression eased just a little as the Blackheart nodded. “Val wanted me to pay a quick visit to Tobin to get the memory box back. She’d heard through the grapevine that he was planning on selling it. He’d already put feelers out to see how much it was worth on the black market. I got there just in time to retrieve it.”

“I thought you said it didn’t matter,” I said, my throat painfully tight. “That the memory magic could be contained inside any object.”

“I was wrong,” he replied.

I glared at him. “You were wrong?”

He shrugged. “It happens occasionally. Apparently, the symbols on the box are specific to this piece of contained magic in particular. Live and learn.”

I realized then that the black leather coat Jericho currently wore was the same one that Tobin, a Queensguard who secretly worked for Valery—aka a traitor to the Empire—had forcibly

taken from him. The box had been in his pocket at the time.

“Nice coat,” I said.

“It sure is,” he agreed. “Glad to have it back.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to ask my next question, but I really wanted to know the answer. “And is Tobin . . . still alive?”

Jericho didn’t speak for a moment. “I’m sure he’s still alive in the hearts of the people who loved him. If those people actually exist, which I highly doubt. But generally speaking? No. Tobin is very dead.”

I didn’t have to ask how Tobin died. I could guess. By Valery’s command. It was how she dealt with difficulties. She’d wanted the memory box stolen from the Queen’s Gala by any means necessary. And now she had it, only three weeks past the original deadline. Missing its valuable and vitally important contents, of course. But she had it.

The witch watched me carefully for my reaction to all of this. Perhaps she expected me to be appalled or squeamish or frightened at the suggestion that Jericho had killed someone on her orders. She would be disappointed.

Tobin had shot Jericho in the chest and then shoved both of us into a walled prison without sparing a moment of concern for either of our fates. And I wouldn’t spare a moment of concern for his.

So, now I had my answer about where Jericho had been for five days. Time to deal with the present and what it meant for my future.

“What did you tell her?” I asked Jericho.



## LEGENDS AND LIARS

He met my gaze directly, his expression now unreadable apart from a nearly imperceptible tightness along his jawline.

“Everything,” he replied.

The single word held a mountain of gravity.

“Everything?” I repeated as calmly as I could, my heart pounding.

He nodded. “Part of my job, Drake. I told Val about our meeting with Rush, consulting with Lazos in the Queen’s Keep, then learning about Elian and his rather unfortunate curse . . . and, of course, about you. She knows the memory magic’s stuck in your head and that we haven’t found a way to get it out so she can deliver the intact merchandise to her client. Also, that you’ve seen a variety of disturbing scenes of Lord Banyon’s sordid past, including the night he burned the palace city to the ground.”

Well, great. That pretty much summed it up.

“That’s . . . a lot,” I said uneasily.

“Indeed, it is,” Valery agreed. “It must be fascinating to get such deep insight into the warlock’s infamous past.”

I almost laughed at that. Luckily, I wasn’t in a laughing kind of mood.

“That depends on your definition of the word fascinating, doesn’t it?” I replied.

“I suppose it does,” she allowed with a nod.

I hated that my deepest, darkest secrets were already out on the table, and I hadn’t been the one to control the narrative. Of course, I didn’t blame Jericho for this. Valery controlled

him with her magic—magic she'd literally carved into his skin two years ago—giving him very little free will when it came to resisting his boss's command.

"What exactly have you seen?" Valery asked.

"Lots," I replied, taking a moment to center myself. I watched the witch, trying to read her reaction to the revelation that the magic she wanted was stuck inside of me, but saw nothing alarming or reassuring. "Jericho told you that we tried to find a solution through Rush. Through Vander Lazos."

She nodded. "He did. But you still failed."

I bristled. "I didn't ask for this to happen. It's the last thing I ever would have wanted. Only three weeks ago, I believed that all magic was evil."

She raised a brow. "And now?"

"Now I know that magic is like a knife, only as deadly as the witch or warlock who uses it." It was an analogy that Jericho had used, and I found it helped me understand it much better. Elemental magic was benign, neutral. But people could choose to be evil.

"Mages," Valery said. "We call ourselves *mages*—both collectively and individually."

"Sure. Whatever you say." I didn't come here to be lectured. Still, I tucked the information into my constantly expanding mental file on the subject.

Valery now studied me with the curiosity of a hungry cat who'd cornered a helpless rabbit. "How frightening all this must be for someone who's been so protected from the world of magic all of her life."



“It’s definitely been an education,” I allowed. “Jericho said that he’d mentioned Elian to you.”

“We’re not talking about the prince right now. We’re talking about you, Josslyn. You, and the problem you’ve created for me.”

I bristled. “Not on purpose.”

“That doesn’t matter at this point. The result is the same as if you’d willfully stolen from me.”

I took a breath and raised my chin. It required a great deal of effort for me to pretend that this woman wasn’t ready, willing, and able to literally carve this magic out of my body. But I wasn’t going to cower before her and beg for mercy. I knew how power worked, and if I showed her any fear, she would know she could control me as easily as she controlled Jericho.

“To me, there’s a bigger problem than an impatient client,” I said evenly. “If Jericho told you about Prince Elian, then you know that Queen Isadora is a liar, a hypocrite . . . and a murderer. She executes witches and warlocks—*mages*—who don’t deserve to die.”

Valery studied me. “I don’t really care what Queen Isadora does or doesn’t do.”

I didn’t even try to conceal my shock at this statement. “You don’t?”

“No, I don’t. What I care about is my business, my clients, and my reputation. I plan to meet with Prince Elian tomorrow to discuss his rather curious situation.”

*Well, that put it rather mildly, didn’t it?* I thought.

“Can you help him?” I asked aloud.

“I can’t answer that question tonight. Tonight is about you,

Josslyn. More specifically about what you've witnessed of Lord Banyon's past."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Consider it a test."

I hated tests, always had. Especially ones I hadn't agreed to take in the first place.

"If you're so curious, you'll have to hire a witch—or mage—that has air and earth elementia to properly extract this magic," I told her evenly. "Then you're welcome to experience an echo or two for yourself, if you like."

"There's a problem, Drake," Jericho cut in. "Mages like that are incredibly rare. One in a million. Actually, more like one in a billion. The last one who fit that profile got himself killed during the raid on Banyon's compound two months ago. We think he was the one who created the box in the first place before it was confiscated with the rest of the warlock's treasures. Lazos was stringing us along, making us think there was a way out, and keeping us from learning he'd lost his magic after what happened with the prince. But Banyon's memories . . ." His expression turned grim. "Seems like they're stuck inside of you."

While I had accepted having a front-row seat for occasional, random flashes of the warlock's fascinating and frightening past, the thought that this was an ongoing issue without an end date wasn't welcome news.

"Shit," I whispered. I took a deep drink from my glass of wine, draining it in one gulp.

I already knew there was an alternate way to extract these

memories from me. My death. The unspoken threat of it now hung over the table like a foul odor.

“We’ll find an answer,” Jericho said. “I just need a little time. Where’s your client right now, Val?”

“Here in Cresidia,” she replied, sliding her index finger around the rim of her glass.

“Who would even know a box like this exists? Who would hire you to steal it in the first place?” I’d been trying to figure out the answer to this very important question since the very beginning. “If Banyon made this box, he would have kept it secret. He wouldn’t want his memories falling into the wrong hands. Unless . . .” I kept coming back to the same hypothesis, again and again, since it clicked for me. “It’s him, isn’t it? Your client has to be Lord Banyon himself.”

“Is that what you think?” Val cocked her head, seemingly amused by my guess.

“I’d know if Banyon was Val’s client,” Jericho said darkly.

“Would you?” I challenged.

“Yeah, I would.”

Valery shook her head. “This only proves how very little you know about my world, Josslyn. How interconnected it is, how deep the valley goes. There are dozens of people, if not hundreds—including the queen herself—who would pay a fortune to access Lord Banyon’s captured memories. The chance to see what he has seen; experience what he’s experienced. All the delicious truth and none of the useless lies.”

“Yeah, it’s been a real treat for me so far,” I replied dryly,

then lifted my chin to meet her gaze directly. “Are you going to kill me to extract the magic for your client?”

Immediately, I felt the heat of Jericho’s glare. I’m sure that he didn’t like how blunt I was, but I needed to know, and dancing around questions like this wasn’t going to get us anywhere.

“I’ve promised Jericho that I won’t do any such thing, Josslyn,” Valery replied. “He assures me that he will find a solution to our mutual problem.”

“I will,” Jericho confirmed.

He sounded far more confident than I felt, especially since his boss had all but confirmed she’d been considering murdering me.

Jericho knew Valery much better than I did. Two years ago, she’d literally given him a second chance at life, but indentured servitude had been the price. I wanted him to have the freedom to choose his own path, his own future, without being magically coerced to be a Blackheart—a thief, assassin, and general errand boy—for an evil witch with a long list of rich, corrupt clients.

An evil witch who was rumored to be an immortal goddess of death.

I wanted to scoff at such a fantastical and frightening possibility, but after everything I’d seen, everything I’d learned, my scoffing days were long over.

“Well, thanks,” I allowed as casually as I could. “In the meantime, you need to help Prince Elian. You have that special dagger that makes all the difference when it comes to death magic. That’s why I think you can help the prince break his curse.”

“You told her about my dagger,” Valery said.

“Didn’t I mention that?” Jericho replied.

“No.”

“Must have slipped my mind.”

“Clearly.” Valery was silent for a moment. “Josslyn, why do you care if the prince is cured of his unfortunate . . . ailment?”

Many reasons, but I wasn’t going to go into all of them here and now. “Because he’s the flesh-and-blood proof that the queen has done exactly what she condemns others to death for.”

“You want to destroy the Empire.”

I considered that for a moment. “No, just the queen.”

“And then, what? Prince Elian will take the throne and ensure that the hidden truth about mages and elementia is finally revealed to the world?”

I shrugged. “I’m not thinking that far ahead at the moment. Right now, all I want is for Elian to be restored to his former princely self. And I firmly believe you can do that for him.”

Valery poured herself more wine. No food had come to the table, not even any bread. I could smell braised chicken and roasted garlic, delicious scents just beyond the curtained alcove, as tables of patrons enjoyed meals that would make my mouth water if this had been any other night. A violinist strolled casually through the restaurant while playing a pleasant melody that I barely heard. My focus didn’t stray from the witch for a single moment as I waited for her to speak again.

“Tell me about the echoes, Josslyn,” she finally said. “Tell me exactly what you’ve witnessed. The fire sixteen years ago? I’ve never personally dealt with memory magic before, and that infamous night fascinates me. Let’s start there, shall we?”

We were back to this. It felt like I’d seen everything from

Banyon's past, but I knew it was only bits and pieces of the gigantic puzzle of the queen's fiercest and most dangerous enemy. A warlock who'd pledged his life to destroying the Empire and giving power and freedom back to those who could channel elemental magic.

I glanced at Jericho to see that his expression had tensed at the mention of that night—the night that claimed the lives of his parents, who'd perished in the blaze, orphaning him and his younger brother.

My gut told me to hold back, to not reveal much to this witch. She knew too many of my secrets already. "He summoned fire magic to escape his imprisonment. It got out of control. The queen says that Elian died that night, but he didn't. He was resurrected by Vander Lazos two weeks prior to the fire. That's pretty much it."

"I see. That is a start, I suppose. Now, I'd like to show you something." Valery reached into her handbag again, pulling out a dagger, which she placed next to the memory box in front of her. It was fully gold, and the length of a dinner plate, with symbols etched deeply into the sharp blade.

For a moment, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Is this it?" I whispered.

"Yes," she confirmed.

The confirmation momentarily stunned me silent, and I sat there in sudden and utter awe of this ancient piece of dangerous magic. I felt something from it—a tingling sensation that I could only compare to static electricity, but more of a pleasant awareness than anything that could ever be described as painful.

It reminded me of what I'd felt when I'd first come across the memory box at the Queen's Gala.

"This dagger's true origins are a mystery, even to me," Valery said. "All I know for sure is that it helps to strengthen and hone my natural-born magic. It also works as a useful tool to pull the truth from unwilling lips."

I shook my head to clear it, drawing in a deep breath as I placed my hands on either side of my untouched plate, and forced myself to meet the witch's gaze. I had to keep my head clear and not allow myself to become distracted by shiny, golden things.

"The truth is my goal, Valery," I said firmly. "And, I believe, if you'll help Elian—"

I didn't even see her move until it was already over. And I didn't feel any pain until the blood began to flow, bright red in the candlelight.

*My blood.*

I stared down at the golden blade that now pinned my hand to the table.

Jericho was on his feet. "Valery, what the hell are you doing?"

"Sit down," Valery hissed. "Now."

Jericho sat down heavily in his seat, as if he had no choice.

I frantically met his gaze. "Wh-what—?" I managed, but I couldn't raise my voice above a raspy whisper. I couldn't summon the breath to scream for help.

"Look at me, Josslyn," Valery said.

Not a single person even glanced over toward our alcoved section of the restaurant. Conversation continued without

missing a beat. Waiters delivered platters of food and drinks to tables without slowing a step. No one realized what had just happened to me.

I tried to speak again, but now I couldn't find enough air to form a single word. I only felt the searing agony of the sharp blade impaling my hand.

"Enough, Valery," Jericho snarled. "You said you wouldn't hurt her."

"No, I said I wouldn't kill her," Valery said evenly. "I command you to be silent, Jericho. You know it's torture to resist, so don't bother trying." The witch then met my pained gaze. "Tell me everything you saw the night of the palace fire and leave nothing out."

Hot tears splashed to my cheeks. I grasped my wrist, trying to hold my pinned hand steady. The pain made it hard to think or process anything. I couldn't stop shivering, and black dots swam at the sides of my vision. For a moment, I was sure I'd pass out, but the irresistible pull of Valery's voice kept me conscious.

I'd had no intention of telling her more about the echo—or series of echoes—I'd experienced from the night of the fire. But her words now had weight to them, a weight I could feel down to my very bones. A razor-sharp sensation dug into my throat, wrenching my attention away from my hand.

The words gushed out of my mouth as I told her what I'd seen—watching as Banyon moved down the streets of the palace city, leaving fire and carnage behind him. And earlier, before the fire, when he'd still been imprisoned—faced with the



queen who hated him for refusing to raise her heir from the dead as she believed he could.

“Elian is Lord Banyon’s son,” I told her. “It’s the queen’s darkest secret. One of them, anyway.”

“Jericho told me that already,” she said, dismissing this epic revelation with a flick of her hand. “You said that Lord Banyon’s wife and infant daughter were brought before him.”

I jerked my head in a nod. “It was her revenge—she had High Commander Norris cut his wife’s throat in front of him. And—the daughter . . . Banyon’s daughter . . .”

*Stop!* I told myself. *Don’t say any more!*

“Did the queen have the child killed as well?” the witch asked.

Fighting the urge to reply was like holding fire in my mouth and allowing the answer to burn straight through my tongue.

“No,” I gasped as hot tears slid down my cheeks.

Jericho gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles white. “Damn it, Val. Stop this. What difference does it make sixteen years later?”

“I’d think that you’d want to know everything about that night, Jericho.”

“Not like this.”

“Tell me more about the child.” Valery’s words penetrated my mind just as her dagger penetrated my flesh and bone.

“She had a birthmark—a heart-shaped birthmark.” I couldn’t stop myself from brushing my fingers against my neck.

“Like yours,” Valery said.

“Exactly like mine.” I coughed and felt a trickle of hot blood

slide over my bottom lip. “It was me. I’m Banyon’s daughter. He believed they killed both me and my birth mother, so he lost his mind with grief and burned down the city and everything in his path. That—that’s all I saw of that night.”

Jericho’s eyes were wide with shock. Tears blurred my vision, and I had no strength left to say another word. I’d said enough. So much more than enough.

Valery nodded. “Remember this lesson, Josslyn, and it won’t have to hurt this much in the future.” She stood in a single graceful motion, sweeping her long dark hair over one shoulder. “Bring Prince Elian to me tomorrow, Jericho. I look forward to speaking with him.”

Jericho didn’t say anything for a painfully long moment. “What about Lord Banyon’s daughter here?”

The edge of a cool smile touched her lips. “Bring her too.”

With that, the witch yanked the golden dagger out of my flesh and bone, turned her back on my shriek of agony, and left the restaurant.