

Chapter One

From a distance, this castle looked like so many others to which she had been summoned. The Seer approached, and the prickle down her back reminded her, things are not always as they appear. She stopped to enjoy the warmth of the sun – a sun she knew she would never again see. For a brief moment, she considered turning back then shook her head and smirked. She of all people knew, one could not escape fate. Still, she hoped her plan might be able to alter it, just a little.

She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath and passed through the gate.

In the courtyard, an aura of evil permeated the very air she breathed. She pitied those without the Sight, unable to understand the fear and anxiety they constantly felt.

She paused at the castle steps. The evil now palpable. The Seer shivered and tried to imagine coming face to face with the King of Aelden. A ruler that despite his relative youth, was already renowned for his cruelty.

At the top of the stairs, a massive hulk of a man, clad in the same somber gray and black livery the messenger had worn, blocked her path. The guard, like everyone else she had seen in this place, looked grizzled and world weary. She presented the King's summons. The guard inspected both it and her, as if he did not believe this person could possess such a thing. Or, was she just imagining that degree of intelligence behind his dull eyes? He shook his head and barked at his subordinate. The second man jumped at the summons and led her through a massive door.

The Seer followed the guard through the maze of corridors meant to confuse and frighten. The man stopped. He pointed a shaking finger towards the large black door that stood before him.

She advanced and saw the source of his fear. The door was covered by a mass of hissing black snakes. *Childish illusion*, she thought and wondered how powerful this young King truly was, if he felt the need to employ such tactics. Or, was this a ploy to lull her into a sense of false security?

The guardsman nodded to the door, cringing as he watched her reach through the hissing snakes and turn the knob. The door was barely open before she felt the guard's boot press against the small of her back and impel her inside. The door slammed behind her.

The Seer peered into almost complete darkness. Then, as her eyes adjusted, she saw a dim light at the far end of the room.

She strode across the room, easily sidestepping the low benches and tables purposely placed in her path. The room exploded with light revealing the young king seated on the throne.

More games, she thought and bowed her head ever so slightly.

The King was not prepared for the what stood before him – dull, mousy brown hair falling in strings across nondescript facial features, clothes just this side of tattered and, most surprisingly, youth.

Her appearance was a long-standing illusion, never penetrated over these last seventy plus years.

“I have come as directed,” she said, showing neither reverence nor fear.

“I sent for a seer not a street urchin,” he growled. “You? You are the great seer I have heard so much about?” He quickly masked his surprise. “You look nothing more than a common street whore, one even the lowliest brothel would turn away.”

She ignored his flimsy effort to rile her. “And you appear kind and gentle.” She gazed at his long curly blond hair, cherubic face and large blue eyes that gave him a look of child-like innocence. “Looks can be deceiving.”

He jumped up. “How dare you speak to me so?”

She smiled.

“You will address me as King, or you will not live long enough to regret your impertinence!”

She watched as he tried to regain his composure.

“King? You? Ha! A child who murders his father and eventually the true heir as well, is king in name alone.”

“I could have your head for such accusations.”

“Ah, but they are not accusations, they are truths.”

He drew in a breath. No one, dared speak to him with such insolence.

She continued, “How may I be of service to you?”

He sneered.

She did not respond.

“You know what I want. Even if you were not a seer, my messenger gave you the details of my request.”

She nodded. “Ah, yes. Your message. ‘Tell me of my brother and how to get all the power in the world.’ Such broad requests, so childish and ordinary. Nothing more than drivel.”

“Do not toy with me,” he growled. “You accepted the commission, therefore, you are bound by the rules of your Guild to divulge all that you see lest your so-called gift be

wrested from you, in what I have been told is a deliciously painful manner.”

“Yes, it is true, I am bound to do as you have stated.”

She strolled to the fireplace on the side of the room and stood with her back to him.

“Stop this foolishness, woman, and tell me what you see.”

“You succeeded in killing your brother and, there is no way to possess all the power in the world. I have now fulfilled my oath.”

She walked toward the door.

“That is neither answer nor fulfillment of the contract,” he shouted. “Tell me the details I paid for, or I will make you suffer far worse than any oath-breaking could.”

She turned to face him and laughed. “At last, the viper appears.”

“Enough,” he commanded. “Tell me how my brother met his fate.”

“If that is your wish.”

He grumbled.

“My, my dear boy,” she began, knowing her irreverence would further irritate him. “You have indeed led a most despicable life, have you not? Even in the womb, you were causing your poor mother such problems.”

The young King jumped from his seat and roared, “I know my past. That is not what I have brought you here to discuss. Get to why you were summoned.”

He glared and settled back onto his throne.

“Without the past, one can speak of neither the present nor future,” her coy smile deliberately meant to further rile him. “Shall I continue or are you dismissing me from the contract?”

So, that is her game, trying to provoke me, he thought.

“No, you are not dismissed. Continue with your prattle if you must, but do so quickly and get to what I paid to hear or I will make sure you do not see the next sunrise.”

She pondered, already knowing there would be no tomorrow for her. But, his future was unclear to her. She could not see him beyond this day. Would he, too, perish with her? It was times like this, she wished the Sight was more exact in what it showed her. Perhaps, if she could incite his rage to the point that both of them would succumb to his wrath, she could save the world from this monster. The Seer cleared her throat and began. She spoke of his childhood, of the merits of his father and brother, as well as the cruelty he inflicted upon those around him.

His ire grew as she chastised him for his wrongdoings.

“You are in no position to speak to me so.” He snorted and waved his hand for her to go on.

“You must have thought yourself quite crafty, murdering your father and pointing the finger at your brother, the true and honorable heir to the throne. Oh, but how it must have eaten away at your soul, when the one you thought to be so dim-witted slipped through your fingers time and time again,” she snickered. She thought a moment and added. “Or, do you not possess such a thing as a soul?”

The King leapt from his seat, “His escape was only temporary and he suffered more in the end, did he not?”

She nodded, sickened at the pride he displayed in his cruel victory.

“He and many others. But, did your victory over him come too late? Has your fate

been changed, not only by those you destroyed, but by those you did not?"

He flew across the room and seized her by the throat. He lifted her until her feet dangled inches off the ground.

"Do not try my patience any further, woman, tell me what I want to know, all that you have seen, or I will snuff out your sorry life right here and now."

He snarled and tightened his grip around her delicate throat.

She smiled, unaffected by his actions, and whispered, "If that is your wish. But, your anger will not change what is to come."

He squeezed his fingers a bit harder. "You are not the only seer in the land," he said, enraged that her smile remained.

She touched his hand and, to his shock, his grip fell away. She landed softly on her feet, took several steps back, straightened her hair and looked into his eyes.

"You may rail to your heart's content, boy," she said with as much disrespect as she could muster, "but you will not intimidate me. True, I am not the only seer in the land and from what your messenger told me, you have consulted many. Yet, even two years after your heinous act, you sought me out. Why is that? Have you yet to hear what you want?"

She watched him mull over her words.

"Tell me, when was the last time you confronted someone you could neither control nor intimidate? Was it your brother?"

A look of shock and rage crossed the King's face.

She laughed aloud. "But, that was another time. And, the only way you were finally able to defeat him was to do so was through subterfuge. That continues to eat at

you, does it not? You, the one with all the power, still had to resort to trickery when you so wanted to watch him suffer in front of you until you extinguished his life force with your own hands.”

She did not look at the King. She did not need to. She knew every word she spoke increased his anger and hatred for her.

“Yet, in the end, he fell at my hand.”

She nodded.

“Enough of your nonsense, tell me what I want to hear. Tell me the details of his death. Tell me what the others could not.”

“I doubt if you will enjoy what I have to say.”

He waved her off. “I have yet to enjoy anything you have said.”

The smile left her face. “It was as you wished. Slow and painful, physically and emotionally. He saw the other humans become ill and eventually die.”

She paused hoping he would show something other than satisfaction at the atrocity he had caused to so many he did not even know.

He did not.

She continued. “He, and his beloved, were forced to watch their only child fall ill. Then, he bore the sorrow of seeing his love succumb to the plague you had set upon them. Finally, he too died, yet another slow and painful death at your hands.”

The young monarch was almost giddy at the thought of the horror his actions had wrought down upon his unsuspecting brother.

His reaction sickened her.

“So, all in my brother’s idyllic sanctuary fell to my power and strength? How

splendid!”

“You are mistaken. Only the humans perished, the others were not affected.”

“What? How?” he asked, but did not wait for an answer. “That does not matter. They are mere beasts. Things of no consequence to me.”

He thought a moment.

“Did my brother realize I was the source of his suffering? Did he have even an inkling that it was me?”

“No. He, and the others, thought it no more than a cruel twist of fate. Nothing more.”

A look of disappointment crossed his face. “Too bad. It would have been like salt in an open wound had he at least suspected I was the source of his suffering. You have done well, Seer.”

“There is more, I am obligated to tell you,” she said.

“More? What more can there be that is of any interest to me?” he asked. *Ah, the silliness of morality with its rules and ethics.*

“One human did survive. One that will surely be of consequence, as you call it, to you.” The Seer’s tone again sparked both his anger and his curiosity.

“What?” he demanded.

“Did none of the others you consulted tell you of this, either?” she asked, confused by his ignorance.

He snorted, “Most of them could not tell me if my brother had even died. Frauds, all of them.”

She thought a moment and then nodded. “Of course, I understand now. You

controlled the minds of all around you to gain the throne. But, when you did the same to those seers, regardless of the skill they possessed, their gift was silently stripped away, without them ever being aware of their loss.” She shook her head, “How many did you punish for sins that were of your own making?”

“Apparently, just enough to bring you before me. I am, at last, fortunate to have found one whose mind I can not control,” he said and grinned.

For the first time since she had met him, his words, his attitude, his entire demeanor frightened her. But, years of practice had taught her to mask her emotions and, the young King never realized he had at last touched a nerve within her.

“Enough of your stalling. Tell me of this survivor and why it should matter to me. NOW!”

“It is a child, a girl of some six years.”

“What?” he roared. “Why would you think a mere child would matter to me?”

The Seer shrugged. “She is no mere child. Already she possesses a strength and power that surpasses most full grown magickers. How else could she have survived the hell you set upon them?”

She felt the air crackle as his anger was rekindled.

“I cannot even imagine how powerful she will be when she matures. Oh, and just think what even the slightest amount of training will do for her.”

She was bound to tell him all she knew, but, perhaps she could force him into an uncontrollable rage that might quicken her fate and alter some of the things she could and could not foresee.

“I think that will make her unstoppable. Do you not agree?” she continued.

His rage, now red hot, caused the flames in the fireplaces to whoosh upward, their tendrils barely contained within the massive structures that tried to hold them. She turned to face him, her smile broad.

“And just who is this wonder child I should so fear?” he seethed.

In a near whisper she replied, “Is it not obvious?”

His rage reached new heights when she fell silent.

“If it were obvious, would I be asking?”

She strode to him and stared directly into his eyes. “I have said all I intend. All the contract between us required.”

The Seer felt his attempt to take over her mind.

“End your little parlor tricks, child. Neither you nor anyone else in this world or the next will ever hold mastery over me.”

The King’s rage was almost beyond control. He flew at her; she stepped out of his way sending him crashing to the floor. She threw back her head and laughed.

“How could you not have expected me to avoid such a feeble attack? Could it be that your power is nothing more than illusions and parlor tricks you lay before visitors?”

“Woman, you will tell me more of this child or else...” he shouted.

“Or else what? I have already fulfilled my commission. I told you of your brother’s demise and it’s aftermath. I am done.”

She took a step toward the door as he rose from the floor.

“You will do as I say!” he growled, his voice more bestial than human.

She ignored him and took another step. He let out a massive roar rattling first the furniture and then the walls.

The door burst into flames as she reached for it. She turned to face him and saw his face contorted into the visage of the demon he truly was.

The Seer knew he could no longer control himself as first the room and then the rest of the castle became fuel for his rage. Her ears were filled by the shrieks of the others in the castle who, like her, would not escape the flames of the King's fury. But, unlike them, she was not afraid.

She laughed and spoke to him, but, her final words went unheard over the screams of those trapped in the fiery palace.

The Seer did not live to see the anger in the young King's eyes upon the realization he had killed her before she revealed all she knew.

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Sevich's wrath continued until everything for miles in every direction was destroyed.

He screamed in rage at what he had done, at how he had allowed himself to be manipulated by the Seer. His anger continued to feed the flames. Flames that now consumed the last of their fuel — him.

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With a great deal of effort, he opened his eyes. From the little he could see, his flesh was burned and blackened, as was all around him. He tried to move, but the pain that wracked his body was unbearable.

For the briefest of moments, he could not recall what had befallen him, but then he remembered. It was her! That witch! That seer! She had done this. He tried to curse

her but found neither voice nor breath.

“This cannot, will not, be my end!” he screamed and then he slipped into unconsciousness, his mind drifting to memories of his past.