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**WE
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WILL DIE**

STACIA STARK

MICHAEL



JOSEPH

CHAPTER ONE

Magnus brays like a donkey when he laughs. He lounges back in his chair like it's a throne, idly gesturing for a barmaid to fill his cup as he peruses his cards. She sends me a wry look and makes her way from the bar, a bottle of wine in her hand.

The barmaid is responsible for serving both men.

I'm responsible for keeping one of them alive.

And so, each week as I stand in this exact spot, I focus on the money I'll earn. Money I desperately need.

Heat radiates from the fire on the wall to my left, turning my eyes heavy-lidded. I shift on my feet, boots clinging to the sticky floor as I force myself to stay alert. My position is a strategic choice. I can see almost the entire tavern, *and* it's the best view of the clock hanging above the bar.

Fifteen minutes, and I'll have earned enough money for a trip to the apothecary. The half tonic I left for Evren isn't enough to ease the anxiety that gnaws on me day and night.

Magnus stops laughing, and I hear more than one sigh of relief from the patrons sitting at nearby tables. On Magnus's left, Gaius nods at the barmaid to refill his cup, rolling his eyes as Magnus gestures broadly, immediately knocking the cup with his large fist. The barmaid's bronze sigil flares across her brow, and the cup rights itself, the arc of the wine reversing to splash back in.

The barmaid looks young enough that her power must still feel like an unexpected gift she's only just begun to unwrap.

Gaius studies his cards, his brows slamming together. When he reaches for his own drink, I catch a glimpse of his hand.

Fold.

But he won't. I sigh.

I used to love this game. I relished being underestimated, delighting in the way I could swipe piles of coins from players unaware of my reputation. By the time I was old enough to take a seat at the backroom

tables of the Thorn's most notorious taverns, I was winning enough to supplement my mother's meager income.

Some part of me still misses the thrill of studying my opponent, of keeping my own expression carefully neutral while I surveyed my hand . . . even though I know it attracted too much unnecessary attention.

At least fifty people linger over wine, ale, and mediocre food. Tables are packed tight, forcing strangers into reluctant intimacy as they jostle for space. It's a typical crowd for this time of night—late enough that anyone still here is relaxing after a long day of work or planning to stay until last call, unwilling to go home to their own loneliness.

From behind the bar, Yorick meets my eyes, his bald head proclaiming his sigil-less state. I shake my own head. Stubborn bastard. No matter how many times I tell him he should refuse Gaius entry, he insists he won't turn away a paying customer. It's difficult for mundanes to eke out a living anywhere in this city, and Yorick knows that better than anyone.

One of these days, that collection of high-quality wines he's so proud of will end up in pieces on the scarred wooden floor—along with the mirrored wall behind him. The customers who have been his regulars for the past decade will find their night ruined, and his reputation will be shattered along with his wine.

Another glance at the clock. Ten minutes.

At the table, Gaius still hasn't folded. Magnus has the better hand. He throws his cards down with a grin, and Gaius curses.

I crane my neck. If he'd played smarter, he could have won.

Gaius's shoulders tense, and he shifts his attention toward the door. All my senses go on high alert.

When he first hired me, I'd assumed my presence was a way to display both his wealth and his sense of self-importance. I soon learned he had good reason to fear for his life. If I'd known how many men would attempt to kill him for sleeping with their wives or cheating them in business, I would have negotiated a much higher wage.

At least I would have *attempted* to negotiate a higher wage. Everything they say about beggars and choosers is true.

Gaius's beady eyes are intent, and his wiry body stiffens. His hand slips beneath my side of the table as he keeps his attention on whoever is walking toward us. Two fingers tap against his thigh.

I suppress an eye roll.

This little signal is something he insisted on early in our business relationship. Apparently, for Gaius to look my way would be an intolerable admission of fear.

I drag my gaze across the tavern to the well-dressed man striding toward us.

“Gaius Panthen,” the man shouts, and patrons move out of the way, giving him a direct path toward my client.

He’s taller than Gaius, and his wide shoulders are thick with muscle. I’d put him in his early sixties, but he’s moving with the ease of a man twenty years younger. His silver sigil sweeps out across his forehead, ending at the middle of each of his eyebrows.

Murmurs pick up at the tables nearby. Sigilmarked mix with mundanes in Yorick’s tavern, but it’s not often we see a half-crowned silver.

A newly awakened bronze sigilmarked might barely stir the wind—just enough to send leaves skittering across the ground. But as their power matures, so does their command over that power. If they were lucky enough to become a bronze-crowned, that same wind could tear the roof off a house with a single thought.

Silver- and gold-crowned are on an entirely different level. With the flick of their wrist, a silver-crowned could summon a vortex of wind and rain—while a gold-crowned could create a tornado powerful enough to raze an entire town.

A tidal wave of adrenaline crashes across my every nerve. Gaius forgoes any attempt to pretend indifference, shooting me a wide-eyed look. You’d think someone with so many enemies would have learned to swing a sword by now.

I stride across the tavern, and Gaius trails after me. “Orson Norcross,” he mutters.

Orson’s eyes flick up to my sigil, and I know what he sees.

Wasted potential.

His gaze slides dismissively from me and slams into Gaius. “*You.*” His meaty fists clench.

“Ahem.” Yorick cuts into the sudden silence, and Orson slowly turns his head. Yorick’s hand trembles, but he points to the sign on the wall to his right.

No power.

Orson sneers and takes another step toward us, drawing so close I can smell the wine on his breath. “I have no need to use my power,” he

snaps. "I would much prefer to feel your bones breaking beneath my fists."

A hand slams into my back, and I stumble forward. Gaius *pushed* me. The coward.

Orson bares his teeth at me. "Out of the way."

"You know I can't do that." At least not for the next few minutes. If Orson had arrived just a little later, I'd already be on my way to the apothecary.

His gaze slides clinically over me, lingering on the sword hilt above my shoulder and the knives strapped to my thighs and biceps.

"I know who you are, champion."

I stiffen. No one else in this tavern would address me that way. They know better. But Orson lifts an eyebrow, waiting for my response.

"Arvelle *is* a champion," Gaius boasts from behind my back. "My champion. And she'll kill you if you attempt to touch me."

It's Gaius who I'd like to kill. I fantasize daily about shoving my blade deep into his throat. Unfortunately, poverty and desperation go hand in hand.

Orson studies me. Amusement flickers across his face.

"I see how it is," he says, returning his attention to Gaius. "I may not be able to kill you *now*, but I'm betting your little *champion* isn't with you every minute of every day." His expression is one of dark promise. "You took my wife, and I'm going to make you suffer before you die."

"Not tonight you're not," I say.

He nods slowly, never taking his gaze from Gaius, who ducks farther behind me. "No," Orson agrees. "Not tonight."

He stalks from the tavern, patrons scattering in his wake.

Silence reigns until Yorick's voice booms across the tavern. "Music!" he demands, and someone strikes up a cheery tune just as the clock on the wall hits 4 a.m.

Finally.

I reach for my satchel beneath the table.

"You can't go." Gaius catches my arm. "Didn't you hear the man? He'll kill me!"

"Sadly, our time together is finished tonight. Try not to make anyone else want to murder you before I see you next."

His hand tightens. "If you think I'm paying you—"

Our eyes meet and the color drains from his face. I know what he

sees in the wasteland of my eyes, and it's not pretty. Slowly, Gaius releases me, shoves his hand into his cloak, and pulls out a gold coin.

I pluck it from his palm. "I'll see you next week." If he's not dead by then.

With coin in hand, I tug my cloak around my shoulders and head out into the frigid night.

The moon hangs pregnant in the sky above my head, barely piercing a dense shroud of fog. This part of the city isn't the *worst* . . . but it's close. Fog's Edge was originally named for the heavy mist that clings to the streets here, wrapping everything in a damp cloud. But centuries ago, a magistrate drunkenly referred to the district as the thorn in his side. The name stuck.

I hurry down cobblestoned streets, each worn by time and thousands of booted feet. I'd memorized the bewildering maze of alleys and shortcuts before I was old enough to know my own name. I know which brothels the sigil-crowned like to slip into through discreet entrances. I know which taverns cater to vampires with darker interests. And I know which streets I wouldn't dare walk down without risking a slit throat.

Laughter cuts through the night, sudden and sharp. Near a crumbling fountain at the end of the street, a group of youths heckle one another, the glowing sigils on their brows bathing their faces in light.

I turn right, keeping my strides measured, unhurried, my head lifted high. Two city wardens cross the street, their leather boots thudding heavily with each step. The moonlight glints off darkened steel helmets, the city's insignia stamped into the steel.

The wardens' leather breastplates have been embossed with the same emblem, as have the hilts of their short swords. Midnight blue cloaks announce their presence in any crowd, while the plume of dark horsehair extending from the tops of their helmets is more than a little ridiculous.

I'm not foolish enough to draw their attention. The wardens aren't strolling through the Thorn because they're here to *protect* us. They're not here to investigate the recent murders or ensure business owners can work without fear of extortion schemes and shakedowns. Most of the time, *they're* the ones lining their pockets with coercion and intimidation.

Pressing myself into the wall, I wait them out.

Within moments they're gone, and I'm on my way again. A scuffle

sounds to my left, and I cut my eyes to the alley. Two men and a woman stand crowded together, most of their bodies hidden within the shadows. The woman lets out a low moan, her cheeks tightening as she sucks on one of the men's fingers. Her veins glow faintly through her skin, like a highlighted map, the luminescence morbidly beautiful.

Glister. It's a short-lived high, but a popular one in the Thorn. The woman's eyes roll, mouth parted in bliss. The man pulls his finger free and smiles as she slumps against the stone wall. His gaze shoots to me and he presses his finger into the powder cupped in his hand. With a grin, he lifts that finger and beckons for me to join him, the glister glowing like a star.

"Want a taste, beautiful?"

The empty euphoria stamped on the woman's face is all too familiar, and bile burns up my throat. Turning, I continue walking down the block, ignoring the low, taunting laugh behind me.

As usual, Perrin's apothecary is open. And as usual, it's hot and humid, despite the chill of the air outside. I step inside, untie my cloak, and nod a greeting at the older woman standing by the counter, her eyes heavy with exhaustion.

When Perrin finishes measuring out a handful of sleeping berries for her, she turns to go, and I step up to the counter.

"I need a lung tonic," I say.

He grimaces, displaying crooked yellow teeth. "Can't. Someone came in and bought the last three this morning."

My gut twists. That *someone* must be truly desperate if they're buying so many tonics at once. But I can't find it in me to care about their misfortune. I've got more than enough of my own.

"When will you get more?"

"Next delivery isn't for three more days."

I can feel the blood draining from my face. Perrin leans against the counter between us and sighs, the lines of his craggy face softening.

"Try Golinth. He'll charge ten percent more, but he gets deliveries three times a week from his supplier. He'll have it in stock."

"Thanks."

Except Golinth doesn't have it in stock.

And neither does the next apothecary, five blocks west.

Panic beats at me. Someone has been buying up the exact lung tonics my brother needs.

All of them.

I would've heard if the Thorn was facing a sudden outbreak of lung disease. So who is taking all the tonics? And why?

By the time I make my way home, the sun is creeping above the city to the east, the Thorn slowly coming to life around me.

In this district, families are wedged into insulae, with up to fifty people housed in the apartments—some of them stretching seven stories high. A ground-floor apartment is a luxury, and one I've never taken for granted. Thanks to my mother's father, we were able to grow up without the threat of eviction.

The familiar silhouette of our home appears among the haphazard structures of our street. Tucked between two taller insulae, the facade is a blend of weathered stone and wood, ivy clinging stubbornly to the cracks in the stone, as if nature itself is trying to hold the building together.

Behind the dark, wooden front door, my brother waits for the tonic I don't have.

Dread expands in my stomach. Up until this moment, the greatest risk to Ev's life has been our poor financial situation. I've managed to handle that—barely—by taking as many jobs as I can. But without the tonic . . .

Evren is dead.

My head spins, my lungs so tight I almost miss the man leaning against the wall of my house, his body half hidden in the shadows. From the look of his elegant overcoat and polished boots, he's not from the Thorn. The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

"Who are you?"

He smiles, flashing fang.

Vampire.

An old, powerful vampire if the chill emanating from him is any indication.

Evren's cough rips through the night, audible even through his wooden shutters.

The vampire's smile widens. "My name is Bran. I serve the emperor."

My stomach clenches. While sigilmarked powers are visible and visceral, vampires command the unseen. They bend shadows to cloak their movements, create illusions that blur reality, use telekinesis to

strike without warning . . . their powers span from subtle, quiet manipulations to the kind of overwhelming control that makes their victims question everything they thought they knew.

I change my position, planting myself firmly between the vampire and the door. Bran can't get in unless invited. But he could still attempt to lure my brothers out.

"And what exactly do you want, Bran?"

The vampire lifts one pale hand, revealing two glass vials of vibrant purple liquid. Every hair on my body stands on end.

Lung tonics.

It's all I can do not to lunge at him. But my speed is nothing compared to his, my strength insignificant. And if Bran truly serves the emperor, he's likely even more powerful than I'd first assumed.

He smiles, cheeks creasing, eyes empty. "I find I need your particular skills."

"I have no skills. I'm an occasional bodyguard. That's it."

He raises an eyebrow at my flat tone. "And yet you won the Sands six years ago."

My vision wavers and I barely refrain from reaching out to lean against the door.

Winning the Sands is dangerous. I did it anyway, because I had no choice. In the process, I announced to anyone watching that I was a trained killer. Winners' names are public record. And killers are valuable in this empire.

The vampire has been spying on us. He knows exactly what we need, and he's the one who has been buying the tonics. I'm sure of it.

My lips are turning numb. "You need to leave."

Bran takes a step closer, and my head clears, my pulse steadying. I may not be able to kill him, but I can make him hurt before I die.

He goes still, slowly lifting his hands in front of him as if I'm a cornered animal. "Complete the Sundering and I'll save your brother's life."

More coughing from inside the house, as if to punctuate the vampire's offer.

"Not interested."

"Your brother is very sick. You're barely keeping him alive."

My hand tightens on the hilt of my dagger. Typical of a vampire to discover exactly what I need the most and then offer it to me under the pretense of benevolence. This isn't the first time someone has tried to

bribe me to fight. But it hasn't happened for years. And no one has attempted to make me swing my sword for the *emperor* before.

Making it through the Sundering is the entry point to the Praesidium Guard—formed to protect the emperor, his vicious family, and the Sigil-marked Syndicate.

To conquer the Sundering, gladians must enter the emperor's arena three times in what is known as the *tria proeliis*. I wouldn't survive the first. I haven't fought for six years. I'm slower, and my ankle . . .

I shake my head, taking in the vampire in front of me. This doesn't make sense. Thousands of people train day and night for a chance to be one of the one hundred gladians to enter the Sundering each season.

"Tell me what you really want."

Bran smiles, carefully hiding his fangs. A nice, nonthreatening vampire.

"You will make it through the Sundering, and then—when the time is right—you will kill someone very important."

"Who?"

Hatred glitters in Bran's eyes. "Vallius Corvus."

A laugh bubbles out of me before I can prevent it. This has to be someone's idea of a terrible joke.

"The *emperor*? The most powerful, well-protected man on this continent?"

"I will help you achieve this task."

"Oh, that's fine then," I say. "Sounds like a plan."

He gives a short nod and then narrows his eyes. "Sarcasm."

"Look. I'm not an assassin. I'm sure you know many people far more qualified for such a *task*."

He smiles, but his eyes remain hard. "Believe in yourself, and you can achieve almost anything."

"Your motivational speech could use some work. You want me to conquer the Sundering, join the Praesidium Guard, and kill the most powerful man in this kingdom in exchange for a lung tonic?"

He frowns at me. "Of course not. Fight for the emperor, kill him when it is time, and not only will I give you these tonics, but I will send your brother to the healers in Nesonias."

Rolling up his sleeve, Bran holds out his arm, displaying his wrist. Two interlocked triangles. The emperor's mark.

My fists clench before I can control them, and I have no doubt Bran

has noticed. Nesonias is my brother's only chance for a cure. It's why every move I make is with the goal of moving all of us north. Bran's mark proves that the vampire can easily ensure Evren is healed. All it would take is a simple order.

Bitterness floods my mouth. It's been a long night. The next few days are likely to be worse. And the vampire taunting me with my brother's life is like a handful of salt rubbed in an already festering wound. "I won't even get close to the emperor. I step foot in that arena, and I'll die."

"I don't think so," Bran says. "I saw you fight once, champion."

"I was younger then."

"Give yourself some credit."

My head aches. I want nothing more than to go inside, check on my brothers, and take a short nap before breakfast.

"I attempt to spy for you, attempt to kill the emperor, and I'll wish I was dead. If I die, what happens to my brothers?"

"I'll make sure the sick one is healed. Completely. As soon as the emperor is dead, I'll free your brothers and you may join them. With enough money from your time in the arena to start a new life."

"Good night, Bran."

Black eyes narrow, and a chill crawls up my spine at the malevolence in his eyes. I can practically feel his years pressing on me. Three hundred at least.

"That's not how negotiations work."

"This isn't a negotiation. I said no."

"You're killing your brother."

I barely hide a flinch. My entire body turns hot. "We both know I'll have a target on my back from winning the Sands all those years ago. I'm all my brothers have. If I die, they're both dead anyway. Now get away from my door."

His gaze lands on my brow, and I know my sigil has flared. "It must be difficult," he muses. "Feeling the gap where your power should be. Becoming a gladian would likely help with that. It may not give you power, but it will give you respect." Tucking the vials away, he smiles at me. "I'll give you until midnight to think about it."

"I don't need it."

"Midnight," he says as if I haven't spoken. In a movement too fast to see, he's gone.

CHAPTER TWO

There's no worse feeling than watching someone you love die. The helplessness slices you into pieces. And grief sets those pieces on fire. Until you're nothing but ash.

My brother's coughs rip through the early morning silence. Wheezy, pain-filled, exhausted coughs.

I push the door shut behind me and reach for the salve, the tonic, the crystals. Stumbling into the wall, I curse and reorient myself, aiming for his door—left open while he sleeps for exactly this purpose.

Evren's already sitting up in bed when I reach him, his thin body shuddering as he fights for each breath.

"I'm here."

Pushing his shirt open, I spread the salve on his chest and neck, give him a crystal to hold, hand him the last of the lung tonic, and begin chanting.

He reaches for the tonic, his eyes miserable.

"We can't . . . afford . . . this," he gasps out.

"Shhh. Drink it, Ev."

Evren swallows. I keep chanting, urging the crystal to glow just a little more. To eke out just a little healing power.

I rub his back, and his coughing begins to ease, each breath deeper than the last.

"That was a bad one."

"I'm sorry."

I ignore that. "Do you think you can rest a little now?"

He nods, eyes already drooping. When he nestles into his pillow, I'm lightheaded with relief. These attacks are coming closer than they ever have before. And we can't afford not to have more lung tonic on hand.

An image of Bran's face fills my mind, making my head pound with barely suppressed wrath.

Poking my head into the next bedroom, I find owlish brown eyes staring back at me. "He's fine," I tell Gerith.

His mouth twists. At fourteen, he's already reached the age where

he will no longer let me see him cry, but his eyes are still swollen some mornings.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask him.

Gerith shakes his head. But he moves his leg aside. Hiding a smile, I enter his room and sit on the side of his bed.

Long, thin fingers brush his woolen blanket. “Do you ever wonder what our lives would be like if Uncle hadn’t taken your winnings?”

Every fucking day.

I can’t look at the table in our kitchen without seeing the note my uncle left. The words *I’m sorry* just as hollow as the empty space in my closet where I’d carefully hidden the money we needed for a better life.

Less than a day after I’d won the Sands, our uncle was gone. And so was our future. A healer for Evren. A small but comfortable house on the coast in Nesonias. Fresh seafood every day. Vegetables from the small garden I’d learn how to tend. An education. Not just for my brothers . . . but for me too.

“There’s no point looking back.”

“I’m not looking back. I’m looking forward.” His chin juts out. “One day, I’m going to find him, and I’m going to kill him.”

“You won’t be able to,” I tell him, mock seriously. “Because I’ll find him first.”

Gerith smiles, but it’s shaky. “How could he do it? I just . . . I don’t understand.”

Of course he doesn’t understand. *I don’t understand.*

“Ger—”

“You risked your life to win that money. We had everything we needed.”

“I don’t like to talk about that time,” I say.

His eyes are solemn. “Because of her. And because of him.”

Grief rips into me like a talon, stealing my breath. He’s not talking about our uncle now.

Occasionally, I think I’m doing fine, that I’m moving on with my life, and then I hear her name. Or I’m reminded of *him*.

“Yes.”

Gerith studies my face. “One day, when I’m big, I’ll fight in the Sands. We’ll get enough money to cure Ev. And we’ll all leave.”

My smile freezes on my face.

I’ll die before I let my brothers step foot in any arena. Every move I

make is with the goal of getting both of them far from Senthara, where the emperor's delights are no more than a distant memory. But I know better than to say such a thing. As the twins have grown, so has their male pride.

"Time to get up."

He nods, and I leave him to dress. Pulling off my boots, I keep my sword strapped to my back, still . . . perturbed by my vampire visitor.

Perturbed is a good word. It implies I'm feeling slightly unsettled. A little uneasy. Not dry-mouthed, slick-palmed, and dizzy with fear.

The lung tonics from Nesonias are keeping my brother alive. What else is Bran willing to do to make me fall in line?

I push the thought away. I'm used to being on the defensive. I do it every day while guarding the kinds of people who make enemies simply by breathing. I don't enjoy being reactive, but I know better than to wring my hands, worrying.

If I travel to Mataras this morning, I'll be back within a couple of days. The apothecary there will have the tonics we need. I'm sure of it. I hate the thought of leaving Gerith and Evren, but I doubt the vampire cleaned out the apothecaries in nearby towns.

Padding into our tiny kitchen, I open the cool box. The crystal inside is dull, and the aether keeping our meager food chilled is a faint hum. After I replenish Evren's lung tonics and pay the emperor's ever-increasing taxes, I'll have just enough to fill the aether crystals. Gerith desperately needs a new pair of boots, but they'll have to wait.

My chest pangs. He'd never complain, but I know his feet became soaked last time it rained. I heard Evren and Gerith murmuring about it when they thought I wasn't listening.

The milk ran out two days ago, so I make the porridge with water, seasoning it with a pinch of salt in place of sugar or honey.

The twins are grumbling at each other in one of their rooms, their voices muffled by the door. Neither of them enjoys mornings. By the time they slouch into their chairs at the table—Evren pale and drawn, Gerith wincing at the sight of the thin porridge—faint sunlight streams through the window. The first light of dawn makes Gerith's blond hair glow, while Evren's hair is so dark it seems to swallow the light. Born just minutes apart, they couldn't be more different—in both appearance and personality.

When Gerith turns his head, pale ribbons of sunlight brush his