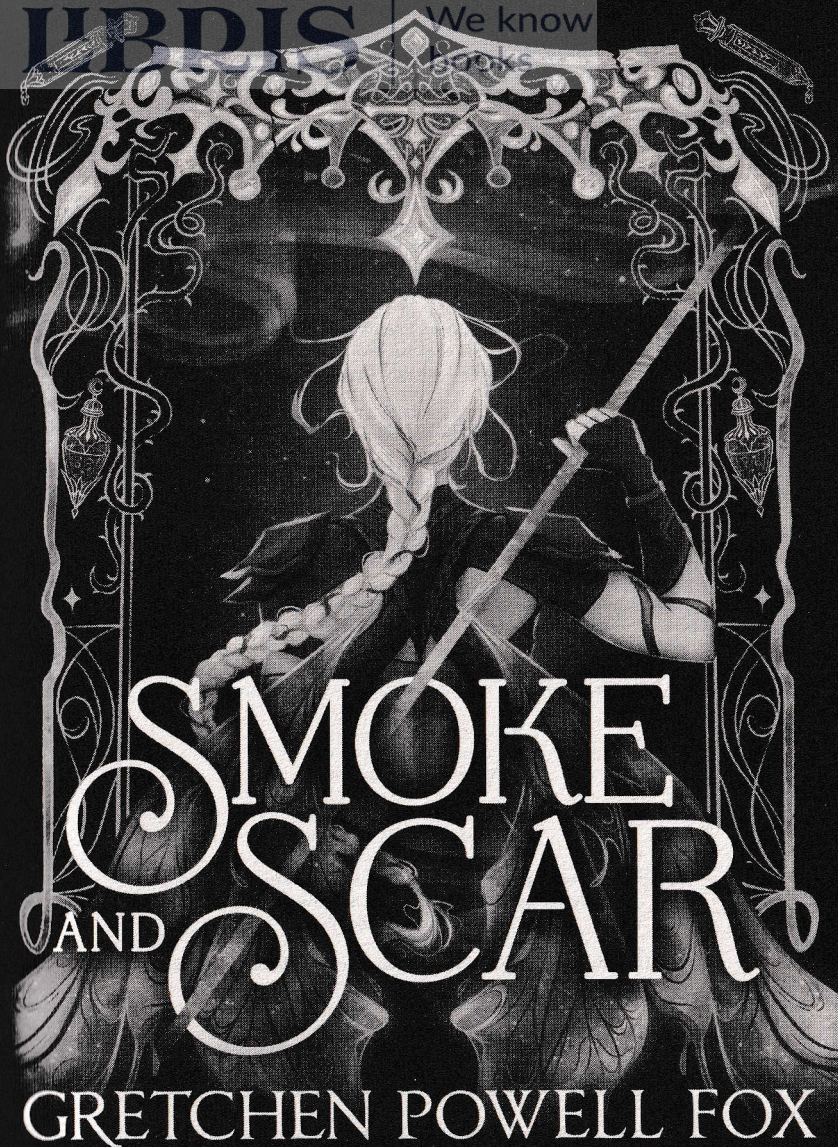


A SHATTERED CROWN NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1  
THE REVENANT



*Elyria*

Glass shattered on the wall behind Elyria's head, sticky amber liquid spraying across her neck.

"Not the cider, you fools." She pulled her feet from the stool they'd been resting on as she took a long swig from her tankard. Swaying, she dipped her head to appraise the pieces of the broken bottle that had landed on the bar top beside her.

*Waste not*, she thought, picking up what remained of the bottom half of the bottle and gingerly tipping it over her mouth. A few drops of cider, sweet and tangy, dribbled onto her tongue.

The tavern was a cacophony of shouts and clashing bodies, though that was nothing new at the Sweltering Pig. Falling mugs clinked and crashed, ale splashing across the floor and nearby tables. Elyria ducked,

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narrowly avoiding a silver flagon whizzing past her ear. It hit the dark wood of the tavern wall with a clang, more cider spilling out in a wave across the cobblestone floor.

She shook her head—*such* a waste—and caught sight of Artie. The dwarven tavern master shouted unintelligibly as he attempted to break up a pair of wrestling patrons. Broom in hand, Artemicion Bonejaw was every bit the crotchety, if diminutive, proprietor. And he was glaring at Elyria like this was all her fault.

Her skin prickled as she glared back. Sure, energies had run a bit high during the final few songs of her nightly performance. But it wasn't as if she'd been chanting war anthems. If anything, this was Artie's own fault. Surely the crowd would be far less likely to drink themselves into a frenzy if this tavern didn't serve the best cider and third-best ale in Coralith.

And *Elyria* certainly wasn't to blame for the group of six brutes who had barged into the Sweltering Pig during her encore, practically trampling half the patrons on their way in.

So, no, she didn't think it fair for Artie to act like it was *her* fault fists had started flying. This time, at least.

The sound of more glass shattering rang in Elyria's ears, setting her nerves on edge. She'd pay for this in the morning, no doubt. Elbow on the counter, she braced her head in her palm as someone hurled a stool at the bar and it exploded in a shower of splinters. Her eyes darted back to Artie, whose jaw hung open underneath his woven beard, his brow creased with outrage. He'd whittled that barstool himself.

Elyria grimaced. Yes, she would be paying in more ways than one.

"Come on then, Revenant," a man's deep, resonant voice drawled over the chaos. "We've gone through a lot of trouble trying to track you down."

Elyria drew her heavy-lidded eyes—not without effort—toward the man. A strong jaw with a cleft in his chin. Gray eyes. Blond hair that fell to his shoulders. Elyria supposed he was handsome enough, though the garish golden hoop dangling from each of his pointed ears immediately soured her interest. A single ruby-red bead hung from each earring—one of Tartanis's men.

"All this for me?" Elyria taunted, placing her hand over her heart. "I'm flattered, truly."

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The man rolled his eyes. "Not our fault you got the crowd all riled up during your little performance." He waved a hand toward his lackeys standing at his back—three men, two women—then to the stage in the corner. "And now you're coming with us."

"Am I?" Elyria sighed, setting her tankard on the bar top with a *thunk*. "And here I thought I'd have a quiet evening."

He had the gall to smirk. "Well, I leave it up to you to determine if that will remain the case."

"How do you figure?"

His eyes narrowed. "You can come quietly, or we can take you . . . *not* quietly."

One of the man's greasy henchmen chortled. "You tell her, Raefe."

"Raefe, is it?" Elyria wobbled as she rose from her seat. She was not precisely the pinnacle of sobriety herself at present, she would admit. Not that it mattered.

Raefe's brow arched. "It is, *Revenant*."

Elyria rolled her emerald-green eyes. Half the people who used her moniker to address her hurled it like an insult. The other half said it like a prayer. She didn't care for either.

"Well, Raefe, your nose is bleeding," she said matter-of-factly.

Raefe's eyes widened. He dabbed at his nose with the back of his hand, then peered down, his brow creased. "No, it isn't."

She cracked her knuckles, giving him a pointed look. "It will."

Raefe scoffed and signaled his men forward. "Have it your way, then."

A duo of brawling patrons tumbled close. Elyria stepped away from the bar, and Raefe sprang into action. He levied a wild swing at her head, another at her gut.

She spun, dodging both blows and managing to stay upright with a wobbly sort of grace. A proud laugh escaped her lips. Even with more than her fair share of cider in her system, Elyria was still a formidable fighter. Anyone else would likely have been flat on their ass by now.

Still, the liquid courage was of no help when it came to the second opponent waiting to her right.

The woman's viridescent hair was pulled up in a tight series of braids, her leathers cut to showcase her shimmering wings and the

swaths of pearly skin on her shoulders and arms. She flexed her hand, and a focused gust of air swept Elyria off her feet.

A stormbender. Wonderful.

Elyria flailed toward the ground. As she fell, she couldn't help but take in the woman's sharp features: her pointed jaw, the regal slant of her nose, the jut of the bones in her cheeks. A classic fae beauty, so unlike Elyria.

Were it not for the pointed ears and periwinkle hair that greeted her each day in the mirror, Elyria might wonder if she was fae at all. She couldn't help but compare her own face, with its soft cheekbones and button nose, to the woman's harsh beauty.

Made all the harsher from the sneer on the woman's lips as Elyria's back met the floor. Not for the first time, Elyria was glad she kept her own wings cloaked, that the magic that kept them from view also protected them. She knew all too well the pain that came with unceremoniously crushing a fae's wings.

Elyria was back on her feet in an instant, steady enough despite the way the room seemed to sway around her.

She slammed her arm into the woman's chest—perhaps harder than she'd intended. With a sputtering cough, the woman was on the ground, wheezing as if all the air had been knocked from her lungs. Elyria supposed it could have been.

*Poetic, she thought, for a stormbender to lose their breath.*

Elyria Lightbreaker was not known as "the Revenant" for nothing, after all. She had earned her wartime moniker, hadn't she? Whether she liked it or not. And it was good she was drunk, all things considered. This was the most fun she'd had in ages. Were she sober, she knew it would be coming to an end all too soon.

Raefe lunged at her once more. Her fist connected with his nose, eliciting a satisfying crunch. He stumbled back, colliding with a group of thrashing men, who bowled over as if they were ninepins.

Sadly, there was no time to savor the sight.

A young nocterrian surged forward, their hands outstretched as if meaning to grab her. She darted out of the way, her brow furrowed. The nocterrian wasn't even part of Raefe's gang. They were merely getting caught up in the brawl.

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Elyria grabbed one of the thick horns on their head, swinging them around as they screamed in outrage. Her boot swiftly connected with their ass as she sent them careening toward the tavern door. When they finally regained their footing, they were staring at Elyria with wide eyes.

"Boo," she said, and the nocterrian fled into the night.

A cold sting scraped down the back of Elyria's neck. She whirled. Another one of Raefe's people—the *other* fae woman—stood in the middle of the tavern, eyes narrowed.

"Did you just—was that a snowball?" Elyria pawed at the back of her head. Sure enough, her hand closed around remnants of snow. She squirmed as slush slipped down the back of her vest, dancing over her spine. The icy bite sharpened her senses.

"Points for creativity, tideweaver." She hooked her boot through the rung of a nearby barstool. "A snowball in high summer. Can't say I expected that." She kicked her foot up, launching the stool into the woman's face. The collision of wood and bone sounded eerily similar to ice cracking.

"Put that one on my tab, Artie," Elyria said.

A disgruntled grumble came from near the bar in response.

With a crash, a table was overturned to her right. She leapt up, landing on the thin rim with a dancer's grace. "Come on, then." Her voice was bright as she teetered back and forth along the table's edge on the tips of her toes. "Who's next?"

Another tankard soared through the air, aimed at Elyria's skull. She caught it midair with a laugh, took a hearty swig, and tossed it aside. It was cold but stale—she grimaced as she felt it slide into her belly.

Her next laugh died in her throat as her vision went suddenly blurry. For a moment, she saw luminous golden eyes, a curl of dark hair across a strong brow, wings of deepest black and glittering gold.

She grasped at the image as if she could cement it in her mind. As if it weren't a picture of a ghost. A pang of longing stabbed her chest, sharp and painful. She could almost feel Evander's breath, warm on her skin. Could almost hear the whisper of his voice in her ear. It cut through the drink-induced haze in her mind.

The sound of the tavern door slamming snagged her attention, and

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Elyria cursed. In the few seconds she'd lost herself to whatever vision had overtaken her, most of the tavern's patrons had fled.

Most, but not all.

Raefe and three of his thugs remained—the men. Something uncomfortable pricked at the back of Elyria's mind. She wondered where the women had gone. Standing watch outside, she supposed. Or maybe Elyria had wounded them badly enough that they had simply fled. As she observed the four men, huddled by the door, leering at Elyria, she regretted that.

The gold links in their tapered ears gleamed in the firelight as they traded tense whispers. Elyria frowned. The men were clearly strategizing about the best way to bring her down. Ten minutes prior, she would have welcomed the challenge. She had wanted to draw this out, give them a good show, have a little fun.

But that vision was . . . unexpected.

And Elyria didn't feel like fighting anymore.

Her eyes found Artie's, and she made a show of looking deliberately at the tavern's back door. As irritated as his constant scoldings might make her, she was fond of the old dwarf. He needed to clear out—she didn't want him getting hurt when she did what she had to do.

Artie rolled his eyes but took cover behind the bar.

*Good enough.*

Power hummed in her ears as Elyria raised a hand, calling upon her wild magic to bring this to a quick end.

The ground shook. Wood groaned. Dust drifted from the rafters.

And that was it.

Elyria looked at her hand and sighed. Perhaps she'd had one too many after all. The earth below the tavern floor was refusing to answer her call.

A taunt cut through the din. "This is the might of the Revenant?" jeered Raefe. "We're truly to believe this waste of wings took down three dozen cultists during the Battle of Luminaria?"

"Guess the tart's become sloppy over the decades," said one of the men, cracking his knuckles as he leered at Elyria.

She bit the inside of her lip to keep herself from snorting. He wasn't nearly as intimidating as she knew he was trying to be.

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Raefe, on the other hand, was a walking column of menace. He huffed a laugh, teeth bared in a bloodstained grin as he stalked toward Elyria. Blood dripped from his nose—the effect of her previous punch.

At least she'd made good on that promise.

He didn't seem to care. "When word reached Master Tartanis that the mighty Revenant had been spotted back in Coralith, he couldn't believe his good luck. Neither could I believe mine, when he sent me to track you down. Imagine my disappointment to instead find a waif spinning musical yarns onstage before getting pissed in this hellscape of a tavern."

Elyria tamped down the growing discomfort in her gut and forced a grin. "You should be thanking the stars the cider tonight was so sweet, or this would have been over before it began."

She hopped off the table and planted her feet on the ground, bracing for the rush of bodies that were surely about to come her way.

They didn't.

Instead, Elyria felt the air around her grow thin. She suddenly couldn't take in breath fast enough. Her vision started to go black at the edges. She reached out to grab hold of something, to steady herself, and recoiled when her fingers found nothing but the sweaty arm of one of her attackers.

Through her bleary vision, she saw two of the men with their hands outstretched—Raefe had brought a near army of stars-damned storm-benders with him tonight.

"Ch-cheater," she stammered as the tavern spun around her. Then, without warning, air whooshed back into her lungs as the men let their magic die down. Elyria gulped down a greedy breath, unable to do anything more before the man nearest to her took hold of her wrists. She yelped as another wrapped his meaty hands around her ankles. The third righted the upended table, and Elyria was slammed upon it, the wood groaning under her back.

"Such a disappointment," Raefe said again, towering over Elyria as he stood next to the table. "Not only have you dashed our dreams of witnessing the legendary Revenant in all her supposed glory, but the fight barely even lasted long enough to count as entertainment." He dabbed at his nose again, his expression darkening. "Sing for us again,

then. Your power may have underwhelmed, but I concede I rather enjoyed your performance earlier. You do have a *lovely* voice."

Something about the way he said that made Elyria never want to sing another note again.

"Maybe another time," she managed to grit out. "I think I've had just about enough for tonight." Her glare roved over the faces of the men pinning her down, committing each of them to memory. "And I don't think your boss will be too happy with you roughing up his prize," she added.

The way Raefe's lip curled up at the mention of Tartanis only confirmed as much.

"Get her to show us her wings, Raefe," rasped the man pinning Elyria's wrists. She suppressed a shudder, jerking against his hold. The grip on her limbs only tightened.

Raefe traced a finger around her ankle in slow, deliberate circles. "Ah, yes. Won't you bring your wings out to play? Perhaps if you put on a good show, we'll let you go."

Even if his lecherous gaze hadn't been raking over her body as he said the words, there wasn't a chance in the four hells Elyria believed him. He'd already told her they'd come here for her. They weren't leaving without her. But even if he was telling the truth, there was still no stars-damned way she was unveiling her wings. Not a fucking chance she would reveal the most vulnerable part of herself to these scoundrels.

"Show me yours, and I'll show you mine," she spat.

"That can be arranged," Raefe said, and Elyria had to swallow to keep the evening's libations from making a violent return up her throat.

Her pulse quickened, that feeling of discomfort—of *warning*—stirring in her gut once more.

"Fine," she said quickly. "I'll sing for you—and I'll do it happily, too." Raefe arched his brow. She smiled sweetly. "When your body is cold in the ground, and I'm dancing atop your grave. In fact, I'll put on a whole celestial-blessed concert, motherfucker."

Raefe made a tutting sound before widening his grin. The blood froze in Elyria's veins. "Oh, I think we'll be making sweet music together long before then."

## CHAPTER 2

## BRUTES, BEASTS, AND VERMIN

*Elyria*

Raefe dragged the finger that had been circling Elyria's ankle up the outside of her leg, following the seam of her pants. She drew a sharp breath when he reached her thigh, her heart pounding in her chest. His hand snaked slowly over her leather breeches in a checkerboard pattern—back and forth, up and down—like he was trying to memorize the shape of her.

Revulsion coursed through her veins, hot and fierce. She refused to let it show on her face, though she couldn't help writhing as he neared her inner thigh. She was bracing herself for his touch to go further—to go too far—when he stopped. With a wicked grin, he moved to the other side of the table and repeated the same thing on her other leg.

It took a moment for Elyria to calm her thundering heart enough to

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realize that something wasn't right. To realize that the path Raefe traced up her body prickled—that it *burned*. Her skin was on fire, the leather of her breeches scorching.

Her first thought was that his touch was just *that* repulsive, but it soon became all too clear that the sensation was not in her head.

Her skin *was* burning.

Raefe was a flamecaller, and he was branding her through her clothing.

The guffaws of the men pinning her down were a horrific chorus in Elyria's ears as pain finally dawned on her face. Sweat beaded on her brow, and she thought she might crack a tooth from how tightly she clenched her jaw. But she would not scream, even as she thrashed against the table.

The slightest breeze wafted over her legs as she did, a cruel respite for her scalded flesh that didn't last nearly long enough. It was quickly overshadowed by a dark understanding of exactly what Raefe was doing as his white-hot touch seared through her breeches, leaving them in tatters.

He was stripping her bare, inch by excruciating inch.

If nearly suffocating before hadn't sobered her up, the scorched path Raefe was carving into her skin certainly did the trick.

The stench of charred leather and burnt flesh wafted into her nose. Elyria nearly vomited. She cursed her traitorous body when tears slipped from her eyes, dripping into her ears. Still Elyria refused to give Raefe or his lackeys the satisfaction of hearing a single whimper.

She could take it.

She'd survived worse.

But it hurt. The pain was overwhelming. And while Elyria had no doubt she could survive the torment, she could also feel . . . *it*. Stirring, awakening, deep inside her. That inner darkness that she spent so much of her energy, so much effort to keep contained.

Admittedly, at this moment Elyria didn't mind the thought of Raefe getting a taste of that darkness. He had, after all, sought her out for it. "*This is the might of the Revenant?*" he'd complained. If he only knew what he was asking for.

What Elyria knew was that however satisfying it might feel to let

the darkness out to take care of Raefe and his men . . . it would still not be worth the cost.

This needed to stop. Now.

Elyria wrenched her neck, looking around her in a desperate bid to see if there was anyone—anything—left in the tavern that might help her. Any potential ally. Any possible distraction.

The tavern was empty.

Empty, save for . . .

From the corner of her eye, Elyria saw Artie rise from behind the counter. She shook her head, just a degree in each direction. A tiny warning.

The tavern master gave Elyria a purposeful look, placed a small plant on the bar—no bigger than the palm of his hand—and ducked back down behind the counter before any of the men noticed.

A sense of calm washed over Elyria. Her consciousness reached toward the plantling, feeling for its energy, the magic thrumming in its cells. Full of potential, full of possibility.

Full of *growth*.

She did her best to still her body, to cease her writhing, despite the blisters she could feel forming on her legs.

Raefe's finger stilled. He met her eye, his expression shifting. Puzzlement. Wariness.

"What's this, then?" he said, whispering as if speaking only to himself.

Elyria closed her eyes. She exhaled. "It's just that I truly do hate that I've disappointed you. Allow me to rectify that."

Her eyes snapped open. They burned silver with cold fury. Power thrummed along her skin, wisps of energy seeping off her like smoke. The men holding her wrists and ankles inhaled sharply, and their grasp loosened by a fraction.

Raefe's head whipped from side to side as he tried to make sense of the shift in the air, as he searched for the cause of this sudden change in Elyria's countenance. Shadows blurred the edges of her vision as he locked eyes with her once more.

And then she saw it.

Fear.

Elyria smiled.

She flexed her hands, splaying her palms even as her wrists were still pinned by Raefe's increasingly confused henchman. Vines sprouted from the planter on the counter, shattering the tiny terra-cotta pot as they erupted. They split, lengthened, multiplied, and in an instant, all four men were suspended by their feet, wrapped from neck to ankle in thick vines.

"She's a wildshaper!" cried one of the men.

"You bit—" yelled another, but a vine snaked around his mouth, cutting him off before he could get the word out.

Elyria bit back a laugh. That was putting it mildly.

Raefe's gray eyes were wide as the vines curled up the length of his body, but he said nothing. He made no sound at all, save for the labored inhale and exhale of breath as Elyria's vines tightened around his chest. Then a sort of choking, gagging sound as one crawled into his mouth. Elyria shook with the effort it took to be just as slow and deliberate with Raefe as he had been with her.

Elyria sat up with a groan. Ignoring the muffled screams coming from around her, she peeled back the scraps of leather that had once been her pants. She frowned, wincing as she prodded one particularly heinous section of her right thigh.

Artie poked his head up from behind the bar and assessed the scene—a half-dozen men hanging upside down, engulfed in vines—with stony disinterest. "All right then, lass?" he asked Elyria, and maybe she just imagined it, but she thought she saw relief flicker over his face. Thought his voice sounded thicker than usual.

"I'll live," she grunted, pain overtaking her senses as she shifted one of her legs. Her magic was nearly spent keeping her attackers bound, but Elyria called forth what little remaining energy she had. She wrapped her blistered, burning legs in tendrils of healing magic. The relief was immediate. Her thighs still stung, throbbing as if each leg had its own heartbeat, but it was manageable. And it would do until she got to a healer.

"Ye're sure—"

The door burst open. A gaggle of city guards poured into the tavern, interrupting whatever Artie planned to say. They hauled the two female

members of Raefe's merry gang in with them, their wrists bound and gags over their mouths.

"Ah, Officers, excellent timing, as always," Elyria said drily. The muffled screams of agreement coming from both the shackled women and Elyria's own vine-bound attackers indicated they either did not understand or did not agree with her sarcastic words.

"What now, Lightbreaker?" said the guard at the front of the pack, sounding tired. He wore a captain's emblem over his left breast. She thought his name might be Zaric, though admittedly, she had not been in a particularly reliable state of sobriety during their past encounters.

Elyria got to her feet, her hands raised in mock surrender. "Wasn't me this time, sir. I swear it."

Zaric snorted. "Regardless, I must insist you release those men."

"They are hardly men, Captain. Cowards? Yes. Brutes? Absolutely. Beasts? Without a doubt. Vermin? In—"

"I do believe we understand your meaning," Zaric interrupted.

"Regardless," Elyria said pointedly, "I am of the opinion that they require a bit more time to consider the consequences of their actions. They attacked me, unprovoked. Destroyed the tavern. Ruined my favorite pair of breeches." She motioned to her barely covered legs, and several of the guards' eyes shot to the ceiling, their faces red. One of the female guards standing next to the captain looked personally offended. "I remain unconvinced they've learned their lesson."

Artie huffed in agreement.

"A likely story." The female guard stepped forward, blowing a lock of short copper hair out of her eyes with a huff. Elyria wondered if she knew her. "Just how much have you had to drink tonight?"

"Taryn," Captain Zaric cautioned.

"For this would hardly be the first time we were called to break up a tavern brawl—called to this very tavern—only to find you attempting to hide all manner of sins," Taryn sneered, undeterred by the captain's warning.

Elyria's gaze turned cold as she assessed the guard. "Do I know you?"

Taryn's jaw flexed, but she barreled on, ignoring the question. "And even were you being truthful, preposterous as the concept may be, the