

# THE RAVEN THIEF

## CHAPTER I

THE VILLAGE WAS small, barely more than a few houses and a pub.

That's the way the people who called the town home liked it. Nondescript. Furtive. Hidden to all those who didn't know to look for it.

Each person was known and knew everyone else.

They were more so a family than a village, or was it that it took a village to raise a family, and this was what resulted when bonds over blood took precedence?

Men and women came and went over the years, but those who kept their homes here never changed, and those who left usually returned if it was meant to be.

He'd returned some time ago and hadn't left since.

The last time he'd left had nearly been his last. He wouldn't risk it again.

Never again.

He might be a slow learner, but he did learn.

And mistakes once made were not to be repeated.

Dio stared at the beer on the table.

The glass was sweating. The drink was neither cold enough, nor the room warm enough, to cause such a feat, and yet he watched a fat drop of water condense on the clear surface of the cup and slide down to the wood upon which it sat. As far as tables went, it had served its purpose over many years, lifetimes even. Names and dates and deeds were carved into the top. Some of his deeds were dug deep into the varnish, worn away by the hands that came and sat in the seat that he now occupied one after the other.

It was how they made their deals in a place like this.

Names carved and etched into the wood, signed as pacts as such.

The drop of water trailed into the divot of an "O" crossed with a crude arrow and a slashing sword.

Once, it was connected to a “D,” but he’d picked at the initial until the letter was no more than another chip in the wood.

It didn’t negate the deal that once bound the two partners, but it made Dio feel better to pretend that the bargain had never been struck since his letter was no longer tethered to the pact.

*Damn her.*

His fingers tightened into a fist. He closed his eyes to block out the sight before him.

Dio didn’t notice when the bar went silent.

A chair pulled back from a table was a normal sound.

Even the thud of mailed hands settling on the wood across from him was nothing more than the usual at *The Devil’s Door*.

“Hear me out.”

Those words...

*“Hear me out.”*

*Dio looked up from his beer and stared into a pair of piercing green eyes. She smiled at him without a care in the world, even as he knew her reputation of being anything but careless. In her hand, propped on the table between them, she held a ring with a ruby the size of a strawberry on it, the same color too. She twirled the too large jewel on her finger like it was a trinket worth no more than a tavern glass, meant for the ilk of the world and not royalty.*

*Then, he’d listened.*

Now...

He stared at the woman sitting across from him.

His breath caught in his chest, not out of shock or any softer emotion.

The emotion that stole his air was pure and unadulterated hate.

A snarl stole across his lips. “Not a chance in the seven hells, Ora.”

The only reason he didn’t draw the knife from his hip and slit her pretty throat where she sat was because Ludus was a personal friend and had gotten Dio back on his feet when he returned broken the last time around. Dio didn’t want to cause the barkeep any new trouble by killing the witch in front of everyone else here.

Though, truthfully, the others were all locals, and all people that Dio would call friend.

They’d likely pin her down while he carved his vengeance out of her skin.

“Dio, look, it’s not like—”

When he called her a witch, it wasn’t just an insult. It was a true titling. There was magic and power wound so deep into her blood it oozed from her skin. The green of her eyes wasn’t just green but swirled with a myriad of different shades. Her skin shown with a light, tempting a touch, and if you gave into the urge, pray she desired the same, or the burn would scald you from within.

He knew.

Once she’d invited him to her side, and fool that he’d been, Dio listened and went with her.

“Maybe I wasn’t clear, Orali. No.”

Simple. Concise. No room for misinterpretation.

He said the words with his hands flat on the table, nails scratching the wood to hold on tight, so he didn’t rise up and across the counter to fly at the woman.

She leaned back in her chair, but her grin never dimmed. “It won’t be like last time.”

*Last time...*

For a moment, the sheer absurdity of her words held him in stasis.

The memory of searing agony and wet blood and her face fading into the night where he laid on the ground holding his guts together...

“Last time!” his voice rose to a thundering yell. “Last time you left me to die!”

It was funny, but he didn't remember rising. Hands, lying so sweetly against the wood slapped down, the table jumping beneath his touch, palms burning from the impact. His untouched beer sloshed over the rim of his glass.

The silence of the room deepened at his fury.

A single eyebrow rose on her face, her only response, unphased by his anger. “I gave you your share of the bounty, Dio.”

He wanted to strike her.

*Gods in their heavens high above*, he wanted to reach across the damn table and throttle the trollup. Never in his life had he harmed a woman. It was the one creed he'd never broken, but *Gods be damned* if his control wasn't about to break. He could almost feel her neck beneath his hands, her breath catching in her throat, eyes dilated as she writhed beneath him...

Dio shook his head, clenched his fingers into fists. *No*. He wouldn't think of the past. Not *that* bit of their past. The other part... “I was bleeding out, Ora. You looked at me, tossed a bag of coins in my lap, and sauntered off without a care in the world, without a blasted backwards glance!”

Her eyes widened in mock innocence. “I could have kept it all for myself.”

*Nope*.

The Gods would understand.

If he killed her right now, They'd understand, probably come down from on high to pat him on the back for a job well done. Just a quick jab of his knife, a slice across her lying, treacherous, elegant throat...

He could almost hear the praise now...

Darkness invaded her gaze. The bright green grew dim, shadowed like a forest's midnight paths.

“Sit down, Dio.” Her words carried a weight that sank into his bones and folded his body to her will.

The spell wasn't even a spell, not with chanting or sigils or whatever else mages were said to use in the casting of their magic. She spoke, and he obeyed, and he hated her for it, and himself for not being able to resist. Her words wrapped around his will and bent him to hers.

Knees trembled, back spasmed.

He sat.

The last time they'd met, she hadn't been this strong, that dark light hadn't been in her gaze.

She smiled, but the expression didn't reach her eyes. “Now, as you remember, I don't like to repeat myself, so, just hear me out, and we'll be done.”

His hand shook on the table between them. With his fingers clenched, the only movement he was allowed was the rhythmic squeezing of his fist, timing out the moments until he could reclaim control over his own body. At least he could still speak. For all she might control his flesh, apparently, she had left him his mind, his ability to pretend that his decisions were his own.

“I already said no. I don't care what else you have to say.”

Shadows tracked across her face.

Dio thought he heard the rustling of wings in the barroom.

She leaned forward in her seat, and for just a moment, her eyes turned from green to pitch black, her pupils flaring wide and overwhelming all the color in her stare.

There were good reasons not to have dealings with mages.

He'd ignored them the first time she came with a proposition for him. She might have let him go then. He had the gnawing feeling that he wasn't going to be given that choice no matter what he said now.

"You will listen to me, Diorlin."

"You almost got me killed. I don't owe you anything."

"I never said you owed me anything."

"Then I have no reason to listen to you."

This time it was her hands that slapped forward onto the table between them. "If I'd have stayed, you would have died."

Someone unsheathed a sword. Tankards were rapped down on tables. Clothing shurred as men rose, the vacuous silence that had engulfed them broken now by the townsfolk coming to Dio's defense. They were the ones who tended him when he returned, his guts barely held within his body, come home to the thieves' town because he was damned if he was going to die alone among enemies.

Around him were men who had stolen treasures from kings and gentry. Men who had travelled to far distant lands and met the creatures who lived there only to take what those mythical peoples guarded as their own and bring it home. These were men with more steel in their spines than Dio. Those who were better at the craft of deception and theft than he would ever be.

They stood in his defense.

She slapped her hands down again and they sat.