

DEATHMASK

A Novel

By

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Chapter Three

Polianna wiped the trickling sweat from her neck and brow with a sodden handkerchief, trying to ignore the burning in her legs and the ringing in her ears. Her ankle threatened to twist on a loose stone that she should have avoided, and she stumbled to recover. Her clumsiness earned her a dirty look from Kir. She plodded on more carefully, but the lack of sleep and the previous day's rigors were taking their toll on her, and the others were noticing. She wasn't really lagging behind, but the pace was not as brisk as the day before, and she had no doubt it had been slowed for her benefit alone. She blinked the spots from her vision and met a few of the derisive glances that the others invariably shot at her in times like this. Her eyes dropped away from those accusing looks, color flushing to her sweat-dampened cheeks, but there was anger there too, although she would never show it. These muscle-bound boneheads had spent their entire youths running and racing and climbing and wrestling, while Polianna sat indoors with her nose in books. Now they expected her to keep up with them after they'd slept all night and she'd only managed a few uneasy glasses of nightmare-ridden naps. It just wasn't fair!

"...Polianna..."

Her head snapped around, her eyes flashing at Ferdy and Kelson, the two nearest rangers. Now they were whispering about her behind her back! She glared at their patently false questioning looks, then whirled back to the trail, lurching forward, her anger flaring.

"Next they'll be laughing out loud!" she grumbled beneath her breath, shaking her head to clear the damnable ringing in her ears. Sweat dribbled from her brow into her eyes, and she wiped them angrily.

Kir called a brief halt to talk with Lyso, today's point lookout, and Polianna took the opportunity to sag against a huge boulder near their track. She pressed her fists into her aching back and wiped her face again, blinking and trying to breathe deeply. It seemed to help, and the ringing subsided a little. She glared around at their surroundings. Forest loomed less than a quarter league to the south, but Kir had insisted on traversing this field of twisted granite to save time. Dead trees lay among the rocks, broken and bleached white from the sun like skeletons lying in the rubble of a fallen wall.

"Stupid to walk out in the sun when there's shade right over there!" she spat, wringing out her sodden handkerchief with a vengeance.

"...Polianna..." "...Polianna..."

She stiffened at the whispers, refusing to dignify their covert gossiping with a reaction. She wiped her brow again and glared at the rangers from under the damp cloth, squinting at the muscular, bronzed skin, hating their strength and grace with a burning jealousy.

"Go ahead and make your little jokes, muscle-heads!" she hissed to herself. "We'll see how you sleep tonight with a plague of fire beetles in your bedrolls."

She watched Lyso nod to Kir and turn back to the trail, advancing low and carefully. A fist pressed into a flat palm from Kir told them to move forward, but cautiously. Lyso had found something.

“Great!” she muttered, pushing herself up and joining the stooped, skulking procession. “Now we’re going to run across a patrol of westerners, and here we are right out in the open!” Her fingers fumbled at the pouches at her waist while she moved along, her eyes flicking between her feet and the surrounding rocks while she tried to stay low and be silent.

They had advanced only a hundred steps when the rocks at her feet wavered and blurred in her vision. She stopped and steadied herself, thinking she was experiencing a bout of heat stress, but there was something else. It began like a tickle in the back of her mind, as if someone were tapping on her shoulder, but inside her head.

“...Polianna...”

She ignored the whisper, knowing whatever was in her head was important. She put her hand out to a nearby stone to steady herself and closed her eyes, slipping into a careful seeing of the surrounding rocks. Heat wavered up from the sun blasted stone, and the tickling in her mind became more insistent.

“...Polianna...”

“Shhh!” she hissed irritably, waving the offending whisperer away without opening her eyes and spoiling the seeing. There was something else there besides the heat of the sun on the rocks. Flickers of motion around the twisted dead trees caught her attention, flashes of warmth as if something were peeking out then receding back into hiding. The tickling became even stronger, almost like there were words attached to it, and she knew immediately what it was. She shifted her seeing from heat to a subtle scan for magical energy, and a figure among the dead wood and rocks flared like a beacon. ‘Flame spell’, something said in her mind, and her hand was reaching for the pouch full of glass dust at her waist even before she could shout a warning.

“Kir!”

He turned to her as if his motions were slowed, his feet stuck in taffy. He glared irritably, but as her eyes flung wide and her lips began to utter words of magic, he realized what she meant. She watched his mouth open, his hand reaching for an arrow, then a feathered shaft materialized in his thigh, and his warning turned to a howl of surprise and pain!

“AMBUSH!” someone shouted in her ear, and she turned to see Kelson pitch forward to fall at her feet, an arrow’s bent and bloodied head protruding from his ruined eye.

The words flowed from her even before the enemy wizard’s spell was complete. Her hands came up and a shimmering oval of mirrored nothingness formed in her grasp. An arrow passed through her sleeve and clattered to the stones without touching her, but she stood firm, waiting for the arcing spear of flame that she knew would come.

Then it did come, a bolt of searing yellow-white death as thick as her torso aimed right at her. She steeled her nerves and centered the reflective oval where the spell would hit. The destructive energy entered the mirror and she staggered back with the force of it, screaming out the word that would send it back along its path to its origin. The flame leapt from her grasp, taking the energy of the mirror with it and lancing into the tangle of dead trees and rocks where the enemy wizard hid. She smiled grimly as it struck, the wizard’s flailing dark robes consumed in flames, as she would have been if not for her

timely precognition. Something jerked her down and she found herself enveloped in the strong, willowy arms of a half-woodling ranger.

“Your spell has evened the odds greatly, Polianna, but I wish you would take heed of the arrows!” Judd let her go and nocked an arrow into his bow. “You could have been killed!”

“Would have been killed, if I hadn’t taken the time to cast that spell right!” she snapped back as he sent an arrow whistling into the rocks behind them. “And your whispers didn’t help!”

He looked at her quizzically, but then his eyes widened and he sent another shaft whizzing past her ear. A scream told her that the arrow found its mark. The main enemy group was to the south, among the dead trees, but a few were scattered to the north and east as well, a perfectly laid trap. Kir lay among the rocks ahead, crouched low with the broken shaft of an arrow still sticking from his leg, but grimly sending his own deadly fire into the enemy. Her warning had saved his life, although she doubted she’d ever hear a thank you from him.

Arrows clattered among the rocks from all sides. Her breath came in gasps and her heart pounded so hard she thought it would burst. This was undoubtedly the same patrol they had evaded at the black outcropping, which meant they were outnumbered more than two to one. Even with the opposing wizard roasted to ashes, they were still pinned down and flanked, and the westerners wore chainmail, affording them some protection from arrows. Poli retrieved her flame stick, but didn’t know whether to use it now or wait for the inevitable rush that would surely overwhelm them. She felt her fatigue mounting, whether from the spell she’d deflected or the long hot march, it didn’t matter. She hadn’t the energy to cast anything more than a few simple tricks that would do them little good. Thuri, a tall redheaded ranger, screamed as his shoulder was pierced, and she prepared herself for the final moment.

“*Allow me, Polianna,*” someone said, but when she whirled toward the speaker, no one was there. But there was something else, something not beside her, but *inside* her, and she could feel its strength infusing her limbs.

“Yes! Of course! The trees!” She lurched to her feet and away from Judd’s grasping fingers. The notion struck her like a thunderbolt, the answer to their plight, the spell that would save them... And it was so *easy*!

She leapt to a high stone, arrows hissing past her, ruffling her dark cloaks but not touching her. Yes, the enemy was mostly among the dead tangle of trees; this would work perfectly! Her arms rose in a commanding gesture and words of power issued from her lips, darkening the air around her with their force. The spell hit the air like a shivering chill and raced from her toward the white, bleached wood, infecting their long-dead remains and commanding them to do her bidding.

“KILL!” she hissed, clenching her fists.

The dead skeletons of trees wrenched themselves from their slumber, rocks tumbling away from their roots and half-buried limbs. A hush of shocked silence fell over the enemy, and the arrows stopped as all eyes went to the towering giants of bleached wood that had suddenly come to life.

Dead white limbs groped among the rocks, raking up struggling warriors like cockles from a stony shore. Swords hacked at the grasping wooden hands, but only nicked and scratched; the horrible strength of the towering trees could not be resisted. Chainmail

ripped with the sound of a parting sheet as the first enemy soldier was torn apart like an overcooked rabbit. Two more died before the enemy commander saw the folly of opposing such strength and leapt up to order the retreat. His command died with him as a tree limb grasped his throat and twisted his head from his body like a cork from a bottle. Many more of the westerners died before they were clear of Polianna's animated allies and into the forest. More than a score lay dead among the rocks before Polianna released her clenched hands. The creaking, shambling trees stilled with her gesture, then toppled back to the stones as inanimate and lifeless as they had been for years.

"Polianna!" Judd called, scrabbling up the rock to her. "Are you all right?"

"What?" She turned to him, and for a moment did not recognize his concerned features. Her bewilderment passed quickly, however, and color flushed to her pale cheeks. She stumbled, suddenly exhausted and not knowing why, but Judd's strong hands were there to steady her. "I'm fine," she assured him, straightening and taking a deep, cleansing breath.

"Are you sure?" he asked incredulously, his fingers exploring her robes and finding more than a few holes and tears where arrows had pierced them. "You've been shot!"

"No, I..." she gaped at the holes in surprise, but there was no pain and no blood. None of the arrows had touched her. "They all missed, I guess."

"Missed? They could not have all pierced your robes and missed your flesh, Polianna. Please, let me check. You may be wounded and not know it."

"I'm all right, Judd," she insisted, brushing away his hands. "You'll just have to trust me." She turned and climbed shakily down the rock, leaving him staring after her in wonder.

Judd stooped briefly to study the rock where she had stood, looking for blood or some other evidence that she might not be as hale as she claimed; all that he found was a thin dusting of wood pulp and a few flecks of rust. He looked after Polianna again, his eyes narrowing speculatively. Wizards were notoriously secretive regarding their spells, and Polianna was evidently no exception. He stepped down after her to join the thickening crowd of grateful rangers.

"That was amazing!" Kir spouted, limping up to grasp her shoulder firmly, his chiseled features beaming with astonishment and gratitude. "First you roast their wizard with his own spell, then those trees! How did you do that?"

"I would guess it was magic, wouldn't you Kir?" Tolya stepped up and clapped Polianna on the back with enough force to stagger her. She cleaned and sheathed her bloodied dagger and beamed down with new respect at the sorceress. "You saved each and every one of us with that spell, Poli. When we get back to someplace civilized enough to have a tavern, I think we all owe you a drink!"

A ragged cheer and much laughter rumbled through the group of rangers, not the least among them from Kir. Polianna blushed and grinned at the praise, shrugging and claiming that she hadn't done all that much, but they would not let her shirk the credit. Each one in turn thanked her and shook her hand or gripped her arm, and she had to admit that the adulation felt good. Her worth to them had been proven today, making her one of them. Despite her lack of woodcraft and skill at arms, not a single one would begrudge her presence among them again.

She let her quivering knees buckle as the gratitude of the rangers dwindled, sinking to a nearby stone to gather her wits. Her ears sang with fatigue and adrenalin, and the

unaccustomed twisting in her stomach that was the embarrassment of being the center of so much praise for the first time in her life. A few came by to thank her again, and she smiled and nodded to them, but the ringing in her ears had begun to pulse and pound strangely until she could have sworn she could hear faint, ringing laughter echoing among the stones.

The sun had traversed a significant portion of the sky by the time the rangers were ready to move again. Kelson had been killed by an arrow, and Lyso was found with his throat cut, but those two had been the only deaths. Several sported arrow wounds in arm, leg and shoulder, but none were life threatening, and some careful surgery, healing salve and bandaging had readied them for travel. Tolya and Ferdy scoured the enemy casualties and painlessly dispatched the two who weren't dead, since taking prisoners was out of the question and leaving them wounded in the wilderness was unthinkable. Not much was left of the ones that had fallen prey to the ravaging trees, but some equipment was salvaged and quivers were filled. A map case was recovered from the dead commander's corpse, and Kir poured over the detailed scrolls with a frown that marred his chiseled features.

"Damn it to the pits of Hades! Poli!" Her head snapped up from her book of spells like thunder had clapped overhead. "Have a look at this for me, would you?"

Polianna nodded with a bit of trepidation, put her book away and joined Kir at the wide, flat rock he was using for a table. "What is it?" She wasn't used to being consulted on matters of strategy or planning, and standing right next to Kir made her nervous. His rippling chest was only inches from her eyes, and the hearty musk of his sweat infected her like a draught of hot liquor. She kept her eyes on the curled parchment, trying to make heads or tails from the squiggles of rivers and inverted 'V's of mountains, and ignore his overpowering presence.

"You can read these scrawlings, can't you?" he asked, tracing a thick finger over the corner legend. "I know their language well enough, but this is something new."

"No," she answered flatly, shaking her head at the strange marks. "This isn't a language, Kir, it's some kind of code or script to keep it secret. The characters look dwarvish but the language isn't dwarvish or Sofro. It could be some foreign tongue written in dwarvish I guess, but if it is, it's not one I know."

"Damn, this worries me!" His finger stabbed a point well east of their current position. "This is where we're supposed to meet Gilthain in two days, and we're a half-day behind, but these marks look like troop designations or my mother was an ogre!"

"But they're all around Lord Gilthain!" she ventured, managing to keep the panic out of her voice. "If the Third Army is surrounded --"

"Just keep that to yourself, Poli," he said sternly, his ice blue eyes stabbing at her from under his blond brows. "I don't want the others worried about this. These could be future troop movements, anyway, but it sure as Hades means we should get back as soon as possible." He rolled the parchments tightly and put them back in their case, glaring up at the sun's position, then looking back down at her. "I'd like to make up the time we've lost, Poli, but I don't want to run you into the ground either. How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine now," she lied, hoping her fatigue wasn't that obvious. "I'll be better once we get into the trees, but you shouldn't hold up for me. If you went ahead, I could catch up after the sun --"

“I’m not leaving you behind, Poli, but don’t think that if you were one of my rangers that I wouldn’t.”

“What?” she gaped, honestly caught off-guard. “Don’t you think I can take care of myself?”

“Just the opposite, Poli,” he said with a smile that made her break out in gooseflesh. “I’ll not leave you behind because we might just run into another patrol before we reach Gilthain, and I need *you* to take care of *us*!” His huge hand enveloped her shoulder, and she thought her knees would buckle. “You proved your worth today Poli, and don’t think that Lord Gilthain won’t hear about it when we get back.”

“I --”

“Kir!” Tolya stepped up with a curt nod to Polianna and a glint that might have actually been jealousy in her eye. “We’re ready to move. What do you want done with Kel and Lyso?”

“Split their gear and bury them with stones,” he said with a frown. “We’re going to be traveling light and fast, Tol, so spread the word. Oh, and tell Ulnek and Judd that I want them both on point. We don’t want any more surprises.”

“Both scouts on point, light and fast,” she confirmed, nodding sharply again and whirling to bark orders at the others.

“That’s all Poli, and don’t forget, if we’re pushing too fast, let us know.”

“I will,” she agreed, having no intention of doing so. His words had put a fire in her belly. They *needed* her! She had herbs in her pouches that would keep her going, although she would pay the price later with the shakes and sweats. She clenched her jaw and met that icy hot gaze for just a moment, and she saw just a hint of something there that hadn’t been there before. Confidence? Respect perhaps? Maybe even a flicker of attraction?

He turned with a nod and left her standing there trembling and feeling like an idiot. Her cheeks were aflame, and she just knew that everyone was looking at her. She ducked her head and turned away, her feet carrying her away from the embarrassing situation while her mind whirled to recover. Surely she’d been mistaken about what she’d seen in his eyes. Kir was... well... Kir, and he could and often did have any woman he wanted, but she had never been one of them, and had never dared hope to be. Tolya was his favorite right now, which wasn’t surprising. She was everything men wanted: tall, lithe and tan, with burnished copper for hair and smooth, satin skin. She had everything Polianna did not, except for one thing: magic. Tolya was a stealthy assassin in the guise of a beautiful woman, deadly as any viper the Gods had ever made, but Polianna had just proven herself to be quite a formidable sorceress. So maybe it was strength that Kir was attracted to, in which case Tolya might just have some competition.

“Yea, right!” she scoffed to herself, shaking herself out of the fantasy with a start, and finding her feet a step from the two mounds of stones that covered Lyso and Kelson. She stared at the graves for a moment, wondering why she wasn’t feeling more for the two men whom she had known for years.

“What a terrible waste...”

She turned, expecting to see Judd or Ulnek standing at her shoulder, but there was no one within five steps. She shook her head again and looked around, knowing she’d heard that whispered voice. A curious memory of the recent fight tickled her mind, a whisper at her elbow just before that rush of power. She wondered about the trees that had leapt

to her command and wondered where in Mortas' name she'd gotten the spell to animate them. The power to do things like that was beyond her capacity, and no such spell was in her repertoire anyway. Both the spell and the power had come from somewhere, but where? She closed her eyes and slipped into the seeing, but the only thing amiss was that curious darkness around Kir's packs.

"The power can be yours, Polianna..."

Her jaw clenched against the cold tendril of fear trickling up her spine. She *knew* she'd heard that voice again, but now she knew where it was coming from, and where she'd gotten the spell to animate the dead trees. Her eyes opened slowly, and she glared at the black leather bag slung over Kir's broad back.

"The mask..." The words froze on her lips. She should tell someone! But what would she tell them, that some ancient piece of black pottery had given her the power to save them? That it hadn't been her? That she was just a weak, clumsy, fat...

"You will be the one, Polianna..."

Polianna clenched her jaw and turned away from the whisper, shuddering at the chill it evoked. As the procession moved out she joined up near the rear, planning to stay as far away from Kir as possible and trying not to remember the glorious rush of power she'd felt during the fight.