

DEATHMASK

A Novel

By

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## Chapter Two

“*Polianna...*” the dark voice whispered, barely audible, yet deafening.

“*Polianna...*” breathed the dark lips, sensuous, yet cold, chilling, but hinting of the fires within.

“*Polianna!*”

Suddenly the dark eyes flung wide, and behind were orbs of ebony, unseeing, yet piercing her soul to the core, and in them her own features were reflected. There she saw herself pale and cold as death, yet beautiful, as she had never been in life.

“*You will be the one, Polianna,*” the dark face said, black lips curving upward and parting to reveal even, white teeth.

“NO!” she tried to scream, but her voice was muffled, inaudible, and something was holding her, restricting her arms and legs. She burned like the fires of Hades were upon her. And the dark face was growing before her, and smiling down on her.

Polianna lurched up and out of her nightmare, her scream catching at her throat, her arms and legs tangled in her sweaty cloaks and blankets. She slumped back onto her sleeping furs, panting and gasping at the horror that had only been a dream, cursing her subconscious for creating such a childishly stupid nightmare from the previous day’s events.

She threw off her covers and stood up, shaking out her damp cloaks and drawing a deep cleansing breath of the cool night air. Stars glittered like jewels above the dark spears of fir trees that surrounded the sleeping rangers. They’d entered the wood only a few glasses after midnight and had fallen on the ground and slept like the dead. But dawn was still far off and here she stood, awake and alert and knowing she would be unable to go back to sleep.

“All because I’ve got an overactive imagination!”

Her shoulders shuddered with a sudden chill from her damp cloaks, so she picked up a blanket and draped it over her shoulders. Despite the heat of the midsummers day, the nights were always cool in the high forest. Winter would bring high snows, and would probably push the war between the Tira and Sofro southward, if it was not won outright before then. Tira’s Emperor Jillian would surely sue for peace before the western armies were at his door. With the First and Second armies defeated and scattered, all that now stood between the enemy and the gates of Tiravore were the Third army, commanded by Lord Gilthain, of which Kir and his rangers were a part. There was also a slim hope of buying aid from the northern highland tribes. The Highlanders were fierce and their horsemanship unmatched, and if seduced by Jillian’s gold they might just sway the tide of conflict. But without them the forest Empire of Tira would fall, and the Empire of Sofro would gain all the lands east of The Barrens and south of the Ironwall Peaks.

Polianna began a slow, deliberate stroll around the camp, almost laughing at the thought of just how little all this would mean to her one way or the other; that is, if she wasn’t killed. Oh, she was loyal to Jillian, to be sure, and would use her arts to the best

defense of her Emperor and Lord, but if Jillian fell, all his armies would likely be conscribed by Emperor Tandros, and she would still be a soldier.

“Soldier! Ha!” she snorted under her breath. “Three years of tramping around in this Gods forsaken wilderness, trying not to get killed, and I’m still no more soldier than I was eight years ago!”

Soldier seemed such a catchall title, ranging from wizards and healers and even priests to common foot soldiers and men that did little but dig latrines. Joining the Imperial Army had just been a shortcut for Polianna. In five years of intensive training she had attained powers that would have taken her ten or even fifteen years to gain as an apprentice. After her training, she owed the Emperor an additional five years in which she could practice and progress in her craft under the guise of soldier. Who had known that a war would erupt and make her plan so perilous.

“Just don’t get killed,” she muttered to herself. The phrase had become her litany, and had kept her alive and sane for three years. “Just don’t get killed, and you get what you’ve worked for.”

“Has sleep eluded you, Polianna?” Judd’s melodious voice said at her shoulder, startling her badly. “Or are you troubled by something?”

“Haven’t I told you a million times not to sneak up on me, Judd?” she growled, shaking her flame stick under his nose before stuffing it back into a pocket. “You’re lucky I didn’t roast you and ask your name and rank after you were ashes.” The slim wand of firebrush was her panic weapon. Unlike a true wand, it only had power for one discharge, but it only took a single word to activate, and others like it had saved her life in the past.

“I trust your reflexes, Polianna,” he said with a smile, taking another silent step closer. She noticed his feet were bare and his pants were wet to the knee.

“Been wading?”

“The long march has wearied my feet,” he confessed, wiggling his long, graceful toes with a smile, “and I can watch just as well from the pool.” He nodded to the still water beside their camp.

“Aren’t you tired?” she asked, knowing he would simply shrug and claim that his half-woodling blood needed less rest than most humans. That was his usual dodge, although she’d seen him sleep just as long and hard after a march as any of the others. This time, however, he surprised her.

“Actually, yes.” He retrieved his boots from a flat stone beside the pool and looked to the eastern sky. There was still no hint of dawn, but it could not be far away. “If you are fully awake, I would gratefully take rest. The morning watch is Ulnek and Seri.”

“Go sleep,” she said with a nod. “I’ll take over for you.”

“Thank you.” He placed his slim hand on her shoulder before melting into the dark camp.

Polianna shook her head once slowly, trying to puzzle out Judd’s curious manner. He’d always been nice to her, more so than the other rangers anyway, which wouldn’t have taken much. He never joined in their joking about her lack of woodcraft, and often brought her herbs and mosses to soothe sore feet or itchy rashes from the few toxic woodland plants. Lately, however, whenever he wasn’t scouting ahead, flitting though the forest as only a woodling can, he always seemed to be less than a few steps away. And there was that curious gesture, laying his hand on her shoulder. More than a

handshake but less than a hug, the gesture often caught her off guard. She didn't know how to respond.

She took a seat on one of the flat stones near the water and dipped her hands into the shimmering blackness. A quick splash of the icy liquid on her face and arms and she was painfully awake. Her cupped hands brought a refreshing draught to her lips, then she took a moment to look down into the pool's inky depths at her reflection cast by the moonlight.

She pushed an errant strand of her straight, sandy hair out of her eyes and frowned at herself. She tried pointing her chin, but the faint bulge underneath that made her face so round would not go away. She poked her full cheeks in, but the bones underneath remained hidden. She widened her eyes, but the faint squint lines in the corners could still be seen, even in the dim light. The lack of sharp lines and her pale, thin lips made her not exactly homely, but just plain. Add the extra two-stone of weight she never seemed able to lose, despite their endless marching and the slim trail rations, and she thought herself a wholly unappealing package.

"Good old Rolly Poli," she grumbled, swatting the water and dashing her reflection into indistinguishable ripples. She didn't even remember where she'd picked up that particularly embarrassing nickname. Whenever she heard it, unpleasant memories of her childhood rose unbidden.

She brought the flame stick from her pocket and ran her hands along the careful symbols she had carved into it, and her frown gradually evolved into a thin, tight smile. She could feel the magic in the wood, magic she had put there, magic she could wield at her command. The discovery of her talent had put an end to most of the teasing and ridicule of her peers. Those who had not relented had been plagued with mysterious insect bites, rashes and unpleasant gastrointestinal disorders. The tricks had not endeared her to her few 'friends' but she had learned that power brought something better than popularity; it brought respect. So she had thought 'To Hades with trying to be pretty and slim and dainty', things that she could never achieve and which only brought pain with each new failure. She read and she studied and found that she was bright enough to be good at magic, if not brilliant enough to be great at it. And when the opportunity came, she joined the Imperial Army and learned more than she ever thought possible, and she discovered that there was even more to achieve as her powers grew.

"And someday," she told the slowly stilling reflection in the pool, "you'll be powerful, and rich... and even beautiful." For Polianna knew that magic could do many things.

But as the water became placid again and her reflection cleared, Polianna found that there was something strange about that so-familiar face staring back at her. It was still undeniably hers. The small scar across the bridge of her nose was still there and the scattering of freckles was the same, but it was as if her whole face had been stretched, or thinned.

"Hmmm, maybe all this blasted marching *has* finally melted off some weight," she thought aloud, running a finger down her seemingly sharper jaw line. She shrugged, unable to put her finger on exactly what was different. Something just looked sharper, better defined, like the difference between a girl's face and the woman she grows into. "Then again, maybe all this wishful thinking has finally gotten to my brain!"

She turned her back to the pool and looked at the tiny camp, counting the fourteen sleeping forms and marking the spot where Kir slept. Identifying which lump of furs was his was simple: it was the biggest, and the only one with two people crowding under the same blanket. A brief twinge of jealousy toward Tolya threatened to sour her mood, but it was far too beautiful a night to let it be ruined. The moonlight outlined the slumbering shapes in silver, which made keeping watch a simple chore. There was little undergrowth in this part of the forest, and anyone trying to approach could be seen easily from more than a bowshot away.

Polianna scanned carefully from the shore on her left all the way around to the shore on her right, and could not see any movement nor hear any sound that was not from the wind. Then she closed her eyes and stretched her senses outward into a cautious seeing. She restricted her vision to heat, which would be most useful and least likely to attract attention if another wizard were out there. The sleeping forms stood out like beacons in the night, but nothing stirred as far as her senses reached except for a few sleepy squirrels and an owl perched in a tree over their heads. There were spells that could hide the heat of a body or even a small group, but they would require magical energy that could be easily detected.

She shifted her sight toward the spectrum of the ethereal and immediately noted the difference. Most of the sleeping rangers glowed steadily with a light green-white radiance, but there was a patch of darkness where Kir slept that she could not penetrate. Something was clouding her vision there, something like a sphere of shadow.

“Must be that damnable mask,” she reasoned, letting her sight fade to normal.

*“You will be the one, Polianna.”*

She whirled into a crouch toward the voice, a light stone thrust high over her head and her flame stick waving around for something to blast. The whisper had been right over her shoulder, she could have sworn it, but there was nothing there even under the blinding white radiance of her light stone. She whirled again, thinking it might be a ruse, but her light showed only trees, bark and the soft bed of pine needles that carpeted the forest floor. She knew that a heat-masked assassin might be able to sneak close enough in the dark to put a dagger in her back, but she should have sensed the magical energy used for the spell. She thought about raising an alarm, but waking the rangers for nothing would only bring her more ridicule. Her lack of woodcraft had always been a sore point with the warriors, and she didn't need any more sore feelings from them.

“Damn!” she hissed, pocketing the stone. The flame stick she kept in her hand for comfort. “Now I'm falling asleep at my post and falling into that same stupid dream! I must be more tired than I thought!”

She sat there a long time, fingering the flame stick and shifting her vision from mundane to magically-enhanced. Her ears strained for the faintest whisper or rustle of brush, but the night remained dark and quiet. Finally, when the eastern sky was brightening into dawn, she woke Ulnek and Seri and tried to catch a few more minutes of sleep before Kir called them all up to begin the day's march. But tired as she was, whenever she closed her eyes and waited for sleep to come, all she could see was the curious shadow looming over Kir's lumpy packs.