

DECEPTION'S ROSE

WAR OF GODS & MEN: BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER ONE



For so long, I thought I had a choice in the god I served. As the years passed into the precipice of the Dark Era, I no longer knew. The God of Deception had come to me when I was at my weakest, when I was so young, when the dark sky witnessed my father's blade call for me. Call for my death. The god remained with me, be it a blessing or a curse, he often chained himself to my mind. *In my mind.*

And now, as dark magic suffocated the Realm of Andrael, I clung to Deceit with all I was—

Be it a blessing or a curse.

Drink and dance swirled together, festivities glorious in merriment and laughter.

I sat alone beside a tower of glassware, drinks reaching tall and overflowing with crimson wine like blood of a severed vein. I plucked a stem from the top. Nestling back into my seat, I watched those around without cares or woes, feeling a likeness—thankful to be in my own skin. It was draining to pose as someone else with no end in sight.

At the end of a sip, a drop of wine fell upon my lap, marring sapphire and gold and staining the finest gown I owned. I did not care. Not as I sat at the threshold of delight. Music bloomed from every corner, sirs and maidens intoxicated in dance and wine. I smiled at several children as they twirled past me, ribbons flourishing from the floral crowns upon their heads, wooden swords in hand.

Percy emerged from the crowd with that handsome smile, sweat slick upon his brow. “Beautiful Rhoswen, come dance with me.” Breathing heavily, he lifted his hand to me, palm raised towards the Everlaides, ever gallant in his form.

I did not want to dance. Nothing stirred within me to abandon my seat, but I could never deny him. Those chestnut eyes always pried a smile from my lips.

I relinquished the wine, lifted my hand, and Percy grinned all the more grand for it.

His hand swallowed mine, and with a playful tug, he threw me into the throng. My guide in the ruckus, Percy took the lead and whirled me in circles and skips.

I laughed with my whole heart.

Twirling beneath Percy’s arm, the stone walls spun around me. I caught a glimpse of his house’s sigil, the tapestries blanketing walls in olive and gold shields. The promise of fortitude and honor. Wilted moonlight slipped through the windows, casting soft rays against the stone walls. Torches burned away the night and left us with feral shadows of our own making, wine causing this estate to misplace graceful steps.

Leaves painted in gilded glitter fell from on high, pouring over us in celebration to a new season. Summer was long behind us, my months in this

house near an end, and autumn was in full reign. My heart was swayed towards tears, surrounded by this glistening, mottled gold.

The voice crawled from the dark corners of my mind. *Do not lose your focus, child.*

I swallowed the tears and conspired. *Give me a moment, Deceit.*

The god hissed, his ancient breath rippling beneath my skin.

Percy strengthened his hand at the small of my back, lifting my legs from the ground.

My feet hit the tiles. *Leave me be, just for a moment. Everything is under control.*

The wine has left you addled, my dear. The god's talons drummed along my mind in disharmony to the ballad. *I do not trust these men.*

Trust me.

But Deceit did not. Not entirely. Though after all these years together, I doubted Deceit truly trusted anyone.

"Are you well, Miss Fallen?" Percy swept loose hairs from my face and lifted my jaw. My tongue tied behind tight lips, and he said in a quiet voice, "Rhoswen, are you all right?" His eyes peered into mine as his thumb stroked my cheek.

I memorized the sensation, feeling a pain—a sorrow—needle through my splitting joy.

My legs leaped in the air at Percy's command. When my feet met the ground, I dragged out a smile.

"Wonderful," I lied.

Lutes and strings ignited the night, leaving no moment of silence. The riches of this party, the prosperity of this estate, were decadent. Depraved. Wealth built upon the backs of elvish slaves.

The only son of his name, Percival Calhoun was sworn to uphold his family legacy and claim the riches as his own. His father lay ill, and his mother rested in the grave beneath the estate's sycamore tree. Within a week's time, Percy may become the lord of his home and continue the dynasty of his family. The dynasty that sold souls for coin.

Percy swiped away more of my fallen hair, clearing a way for his lips. His breath was hot against my neck as he whispered, "I should like to spend some time with you tonight." His hand tensed on my back. "*Alone.*"

I craned my neck to see his eyes. Even as his family stood upon the blood of elves, there was something of him I could never make out. "It would be an honor, Lord Percival."

His lips drew thin. "I am no lord, Rhoswen."

Our heels spun over the marble floor. I laced my fingers behind his neck and drew his ear to my lips, spilling words into his mind as we continued in dance. "Percival Calhoun, I have no doubt you will be the greatest lord this land has ever seen."

Percy's feet ceased with something severe clenching his jaw. His eyes bored into me as though I knew his darkest secrets and was prepared to pronounce them before all of man. But, as he strengthened his hand around mine, as his finger traced my jaw, I knew he was merely entranced. Enthralled. Desperate for what I might offer apart from the stroking of his ego.

His lips lowered to mine as they had many times, though I pulled back.

“Not here, please,” I said with a deceptive swoon, feigning a blush. “I must present myself as a lady, my lord.”

Percy did not deny the title as his lips grazed my neck.

I predicted they would.

This part. This part was always the hardest.

What breaking delight I held shattered. A stone formed where my heart once was, and my throat tightened. The god sulked in my mind, his eyes gazing behind mine as he watched. Stalked. Deceit’s grin stabbed my skull.

Percy appeared to notice my unease. He removed his toying hands, straightened his spine, and clenched the hem of his jacket. In an honorable bow, he said, “Forgive me for my forwardness, Miss Fallen. Shall I call upon you later tonight?”

I stepped towards him, leaving my internal qualms behind and closing the distance he had made.

“No.” I slipped my finger beneath his collar. “You will find me tonight, yourself, and you will do to me whatever you’d like.”

The knit of his brow, the slack of his lips—I had done it, faltered his composure. Made him tremble. He did not see my smile as I buried my face beside his neck. It was not a curl of the lips that would evoke comfort. It was a cutting smile to keep those damn tears at bay.

His breath shuddered upon my cheek before he withdrew. “Then I will find you tonight, Miss Fallen.”

His words were a lie. He only did not know it yet.

You are learning well, Rhoswen. The god’s voice grated within me like chalk on bone.

Coming from you, I do not know if I should take that as a compliment.

Deceit's nails were ten spikes in my mind, tightening, burrowing. *Is it not good?* He rasped. *Good to become more godlike?*

What is considered good, Deceit?

Mankind has long stood divided on the matter.

Percy stepped from me, falling into the dancing crowd, never to come back. I twisted towards my seat and wove past dancers.

And what do you believe? I asked the god.

He cackled in the void. *That men are fools, my darling.*

Yet you stand with us.

Oh, darling, if you all die, who would there be for me to deceive?

The god's hiss echoed in my mind, drowning out the string instruments and rattling me within.

This was my god. My God of Deception.

And my deception, this art of subtlety, came with bold purpose—to kill the corrupt rulers of Andrael and overthrow the king and his sons, all so the gods might bring peace to the lands. I was no killer, the only blood on my hands being my own, but I was a puppet to a greater scheme I could not fully comprehend.

A scream rang.

My heart buckled.

Glasses turned to shards upon the marble ground, wine spilling at our feet.

Distress roared from the foyer, men yelling, women crying. Dresses and jackets tore past me, the estate of dance and laughter turned to a disoriented muddle of turmoil.

I threw myself around. “Vera?” My yell could not outmatch the clamor.

A man rammed against my back, and my breath belted out.

I whipped upright with a racing heart. “Vera!” I cried, trying to find those red hairs.

Another brigade wailed into me, knocking me down, and my head smacked against a chair. Feet stampeded all around.

“Gods, Rhoswen, we need to leave!” A hand met my back, an arm wrapped around mine. Vera heaved me from the ground, and the god anchored in me, stabilizing my spinning head.

“What happened?” I followed Vera’s stride, weaving through the havoc.

“Someone has been killed.”

I halted, searching the corridor. My heart filled with the same fear reflected in the eyes of those around me. Cries and screams wailed in discord. Stained glass shattered in the bedlam, whilst chaos strung from one soul to the next. Ribbons waved from floral crowns, children running with tears drenching their cheeks.

My eyes snagged on the sight of red. My breath caught in my throat.

Percy lay upon the stairs. Stairs stained red. His face had fallen as ashen as the marble beneath, torchlight drawing out every shade of scarlet and flesh. Sweat glistened upon his brow—sweat from our dance. Even as my blood turned cold, I could feel the warmth of his touch upon my waist, holding me gently, and his hand upon my jaw, lifting my eyes to his.

People ran past, frantic and screaming, but I barely noticed them.

My sight dragged to the man towering over Percy. A cloak stirred like rolling smoke, and his hood concealed his features. Though no shadow could hide his vivid, red eyes. A dagger was in the assassin’s hand—a dagger drenched in blood.

Glowering, he measured me as he often did. I grit my teeth. Tears were barbs behind my eyes.

Percy was dead. The destined lord of the house had fallen.

The reign of the Calhourns was finished.

I ran. I ran with all my might, my legs stretching far before me, conceding to the current of people. Vera and I charged through the foyer towards the outlet with the rest of the estate, shoulder to shoulder, feet tripping over feet, fighting to the door. An olive tapestry fell from above, swaying in surrender, and the golden sigil trampled beneath our feet.

We passed the doorway, escaping into the courtyard.

The air was cold. My nose and cheeks burned in frost and dread.

Vera's fire curls caught the moonlight. Clasp ing my arm, she dragged me through the madness. Parties scrambled left and right, fleeing Percy's undug grave.

Our feet knocked against the stone path alongside many others, and we curled around the entrance fountain. Mist wafted in the outskirts, swallowing us as we charged in. Branches raked my scalp, wrenching my hair. Yells echoed. I reached out my hands and charted the misty garden of thorns and thistles.

Vera held my gown from behind and only let go once the air cleared.

At the cusp of the wood, beneath the sycamore tree, Vera dug her feet into the dirt and halted.

"Good riddance," slithered from her tongue and seeped into the soil beside Percy's mother.

Tears almost left my eyes, but they did not fall. I would not allow them to adorn this night.

...

The realm of Andrael had hushed as Vera and I tread through nature's alleys. The wood was dense, stalks like spires reaching towards the Everlaides. My feet had begun to throb past an hour ago while thistles scratched my skin raw. Vera huffed with nearly every step, her gown covered in the wood we walked.

Summoning Deceit's magic, I softened my face to clay—a simple way to pass time or keep my attention elsewhere. Pinching the lobe of my ear, I stretched it out like the waves of my hair and curled the loose skin between my fingertips. The tender burning only lasted for a moment as my skin bent to my will. Spiraling, it grazed the edge of my collarbone.

Vera paced beside me. "Sands, I hate it when you do that."

I offered a hollow laugh and studied her features, determining her temper. I burned as my skin and bones stretched and folded, brown hairs traded for red.

In Deception's sway, I became a walking reflection of Vera.

I mimicked her voice. "*I hate it when you do that.*" Then my own laugh bounded off the trees, the wood laughing beside me.

Vera did not.

A shrilling scowl marked her delicate brows, her timeless beauty contorting to the authority of anger. And still, despite glare lines carving her forehead with thin lips, she was the most beautiful person I knew.

Leaving my body as it was, I strung my arm around hers, and we continued our trek through the legion of trees.

Any other mask would demand my concentration, but not hers. We had known each other too long, walking the same fate for ten years, hand-in-hand. Her appearance was as leisurely to hold as flexing a muscle.

The years made us inseparable, our unique abilities braiding our paths into one. She had become like a sister—a woman I would risk anything for, even my life.

Days left us laughing in merriment, and others with our fingers laced around the other's throats. Apologies were traded and abandoned, depending on her temper, which fluctuated like the waves of the sea. She had a heart of fire that burned and consumed with a soul of the same, wild and untamable.

Vera fixed her sights before her, denying me the satisfaction of seeing her face upon mine. "Are you gladdened to be leaving their company?" She asked.

"I am. I was growing tired of their endless talk of *pointy-eared fiends* and gossip of the castle. Perhaps now, the elvish slavery will be weakened, and more might walk free."

Vera's cheeks swirled to crimson. "Gods damn their dynasty. It was sickening, listening to their poisonous talk of the elves." She leaped over a boulder with a long sigh.

"I remember when elves were able to walk freely," I said. "There was peace. The days were simpler before the king's decrees."

"That's for damn sure," Vera huffed. "And all those lords jumped in delight to uphold King Paden's laws without a second thought. Suppressing what was left of the Goddess of Light. And anyone beneath the lords is too damn scared to do anything about it."

"I can barely remember the magic elves wield."

Elves—the people crafted from the Goddess of Light and the God of Sentient. Second to mankind in creation and favored by the gods. A sure threat to the king for simply existing.

I continued, “I’d only seen elvish light once before, when the sun still shone.”

“Oh yeah?” Vera asked. “What’d it look like?”

I tried to dig up lost memories—ones that’d burn my eyes if I saw them now, placed against the ever-grey backdrop of Andrael. “I cannot remember. The elf was tall and lean, and I remember a brilliant flash of light. That’s it.”

“Hm, he sounds sexy.”

I snickered.

Vera’s feet planted at the end of another leap. “The elves had never made it to the eastern villages before the slavery laws. I’ve never seen their magic myself. *Oh fuck,*” she muttered to herself, yanking out a barbed vine from her leg. “And what of Percy? You two seemed to be getting well acquainted.”

A chuckle left me without my consent. “Is that not what I do? Get well acquainted for them to only fall?”

“Do you ever grow weary of it?”

“I do not ask myself that anymore. I suppose I was once tired of it, but the war presses on regardless.” I refused the tears that filled the brim of my eyes, forcing them back into hiding.

“Always such a devoted servant, you are, and we all know the gods favor you for it.”

“Ah, yes, the seducing, the masks, the deceiving. My practices must be so well perceived by those above.”

Deceit hissed.

“Better you than I, love.” Vera chuckled with a smile. “I’d slice their throats before I’d get any answers, and—” She cut herself short and looked at me, quick to scowl. “Can you take off my face for two damn seconds?”

I shook my head with a smirk.

“Stubborn as ever,” she said. “If spilling the lords’ blood wasn’t an act of the gods, I’d have a lot to answer for at the end of my days.”

“My deception would not be sinless either.”

Vera clicked her tongue. “Yes, I suppose we both would have a lot to answer for.”

A silence drew, filled by the cracking of dead leaves underfoot.

“Rhoswen, I have noticed you’ve been rather quiet these days.”

“Quiet? How so?”

“No more talk of what life might be after the war. No more talk of venturing to the elvish lands. No more dreaming, it seems.”

I contemplated the unlit sky. “After the war—is such a day to ever come? At the beginning of the Dark Era, I used to count the days as the sun rose and lowered, but I suppose I stopped when the nights and dark days all bled together. Besides, what purpose do dreams have when you’re in an era of nightmares?”

She slapped my arm with a grin. “Careful what you say, love. My god wouldn’t take too kindly to you speaking ill of dreams.”

I extended my arms to the wood and shouted for the gods to hear, “Let Slumber’s curse come upon me! Pull me into ceaseless dreams!” I angled myself towards Vera. “Then perhaps I might sleep through these cursed times.”

She nestled her head in the cradle of my shoulder. “So, you *are* weary of it all.”

“I cannot be weary, Vera. Too much is at stake.”

She looked at the clouds overhead, her voice a breath. “The entire fate of the realm.”

“The fate of Andrael.”

Rustling tickled a clearing in the wood. A flattened path, shadowed in the night, waited before me where a horse belted a neigh. Eight hooves appeared. Our escape was only steps away from the drudging wood and this dreadful night.

I emerged from the cusp of the wood. Then, I saw him.

A dark figure. A hooded man with a sheathed dagger. His cloak tossed in the winds like rolling smoke, and those lit, red eyes were on me.

A murderer. A killer.

Percy’s assassin.

I sighed. “Hello, Taison.”

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