

Chapter Two

It had never occurred to Tommy that complete and total honesty would play such a big part in his life moving forward, but in the days since he'd captured Kaya, their inability to lie to one another had built the most impressive foundation between the two of them.

There was no need to worry about sparing feelings or trying to play coy. All their cards were on the table for the asking, and neither found it a problem to ask bold and daring questions.

They both found each other insanely attractive, and she had admitted to admiring his gumption coming into her decision to try and flip him. As the youngest Captain ever, his debut had made something of a sizable clatter. She had been watching him before that, tracking his rise within the Green House, and even the Vastian School before that. There he had been something of a prodigy, albeit a somewhat troubled one with a checkered past. Even at an early age, Tommy Clarke had been earmarked by several different houses and factions as someone to keep an eye on.

When he was just eight years old, incredibly early in his magical training, he'd stopped two thirteen-year-olds who had been trying to set up a side hustle. The older boys had been trying to extort the younger kids for lunch money. The older kids might have had a chance, but the third person they'd tried to shake down was Weird Orphan Clarke, and Tommy was not the kind of person anyone could intimidate, no matter how much they had on him in terms of weight, height, age or experience.

The two older boys had spent a month in the infirmary, and Tommy had spent a week in solitary confinement as punishment. But from that moment on, his reputation, both inside the school and out, had been made, cast in iron. There was no fight that Tommy Clarke would back down from, and Tommy would. Not. Lose.

From that day on, Weird Orphan Clarke had gotten the new nickname of Powderkeg Clarke to some, or Overkill Clarke to others.

He'd been an exceptional student who'd mostly kept to himself. Oh, he'd had a few acquaintances here and there, but no real school friends to speak of. The same could be said of his relationships, some girls in and out of his life. They'd all described him the same way – affectionate but somehow distant, like he was keeping some part of his life hidden away. Many of them thought it sprung from the fact that Tommy was obviously the child of two powerful magical bloodlines, but that neither had wanted to keep him, and had left him at the Vastian School as an orphan, one of the very few wards of the school itself. Of course, Tommy had used his own magic growing up, trying to determine his point of origin, but even now, thirty years later, it all remained obscured from him. He'd even broken into the school records, only to find they had no clues about his lineage either, other than to classify him as 'potential omega-class natural aptitude,' something which he found out later meant that most of his teachers had just assumed Tommy would join The Deck someday and assume his position as one of the 54 most powerful mages on the planet. That sort of expectation had certainly put a bit of weight on him growing up.

Kaya had asked him about that early on, and, because he couldn't lie to her, he'd given her a straight answer – of course he'd been distant as a younger man. He'd been focused on his classes, focused on his schoolwork, focused on his training and focused on finding out where he'd come from, and that had left little room for personal relationships. Besides, he'd told her, he'd been able to tell that almost all the women were looking at him as a project, someone to be 'fixed.'

In return, since she couldn't lie to him, Kaya admitted that was one of the things she'd found so utterly enchanting about him – his determination to walk his own path, despite expectations. He'd been willing to challenge other students and teachers, and in doing so, he'd made a few enemies among some of the elder mages, although most of them approved of his moxie.

He'd been fourteen when he met his first member of The Deck, the Four of Spades, a Captain from the Indigo Wizards' House (Indigo was the color for the continent of Australia), hysterically named Bruce. Bruce Hutchison had been giving a lecture at the Vastian School to any student who had wanted to attend. It had drawn an attendance of nearly two hundred students, with not enough room for them all to sit in the largest hall the school had, many crammed into standing room only spaces. Tommy had been there, seated near the front, having arrived before most of the other students had even started to make their way across the campus.

The lecture had been about the differences between workshop magic and field magic, and how field magic was always going to be done faster, less precisely and under more pressure, but that made it the purest expression of a caster's capabilities, and perhaps the only true measure of a mage. It was something Tommy found himself in total agreement with, which, apparently, put him at odds with many of the other students, and a good number of the faculty.

At the end of the lecture, Bruce had asked Tommy to stay after, to talk with him for a few minutes. During their conversation, Bruce told Tommy that a mage was only as strong as they *thought* they were, and asked Tommy how strong a mage he planned to eventually become.

“Strong enough to change the world,” Tommy had replied, “but not *so* strong that anyone notices before I do.”

“That's a *very* good answer,” Bruce had told him. Every year since then, Bruce had come to check up on Tommy and spent a few days imparting some new skill or concept to Tommy, who'd taken all the lessons to heart, and had started adapting them into his own fashion. He'd wanted to have a lot more time to get up to speed on the various political factions and their current states before he'd gotten dragged into politics, but when his name was put up for consideration, Tommy knew he'd be confirmed as a Captain, much earlier than he'd intended to.

Someone noticed faster than he wanted.

While he hadn't found out who'd put his name forward for a Captain's consideration, Tommy had always suspected that Bruce might have recommended it to Grand Captain Feng, although there were a number of people in the Green Wizards' House who might have made mention of him.

By contrast, Kaya had wanted to make a name for herself as quickly as possible, coming from royal lineage where either you started big, or you were a non-starter. Kaya was far enough removed from the throne that if she wanted to, she could've simply laid back and spread her legs for a very comfortable life with little in the way of day-to-day concerns, but that was precisely what she *didn't* want.

She was eighty years old, which put her just a smidgen below twenty in terms of human maturity levels. (The common rough estimate was that four years to an elf was the emotional equivalent to one year as a human.) Therefore, she was still considered young, impetuous and mercurial. The Orange House of Elves was headquartered in Moscow, and they lived in the life of extreme luxury, but Kaya had felt they had been living their lives of luxury behind their gilded walls too long and had lost touch with the world as it was today. As such, she had enrolled herself in Fyodor's Academy, a Russian school where those with natural magical talents could refine them, regardless of their Faction. There she studied with

humans, elves, vampires, faeries, werewolves, shades and dragons all the same. She had been a gifted student in private study and felt like her skills would progress much faster if they were constantly being challenged by hungry and eager students. So out with the personal tutors and in with the public-school education system.

Kaya had hidden her personal lineage from all her fellow students and teachers alike, happy to pass herself off as a little orphan girl with a wealthy patron. Much like Tommy, she'd wanted her skills to speak for themselves, and didn't like the idea of trading on her family name, although a few members of the executive staff at the school knew her real identity, as her parents had insisted that she have a guard enrolled in classes with her, and that she be protected at all times.

(In line to the throne of Avalon, even if it was dozens and dozens of deaths away, was *still* in line to the throne of Avalon.)

When she got out of school, she resumed her name and position with the family, but had also decided to try and get involved in the family business, which was the gathering and manipulation of information. The Russian elves were secret brokers, the kind of fixers who always had the dirt on someone and could use it to the best of their advantage.

The problem was that the North American houses – the Green Houses – they were such anarchy that it was hard to get a read on who was important within them and who was simply a background player. So various members of the Russian elves had begun trying to study all the Green Houses for weaknesses or places they could exert pressure. Kaya was one of the three elves who'd been assigned to the Green Wizards' House, and when Tommy asked her, she provided the names of the other two without any pushing. But the Orange Elves' House didn't trust the Green Elves' House as far as they could throw the Empire State Building.

For the last few days, Tommy and Kaya been mostly like a couple of college kids in a new relationship, fucking each other senseless and occasionally remembering to go and get meals, but after day five, Tommy knew that they had to go and make it official. He did have a full week to claim a Plunder, but there was no reason to delay it up to the wire. And after a week, his claim to Kaya as Plunder would be... much more complicated.

"You like having an elvish princess as a fucktoy, don't you?" Kaya asked him as she ran her tongue along the length of his cock. "Don't feel bad. I love the idea myself. The fact that we can't lie to each other in any way?" She shuddered in delight. "I didn't realize what a fucking turn on that would be for me, but I have to admit... I get off on how dirty I can be with you, when I don't have to act like a noble princess with a stick my ass."

"Maybe I should take that stick out and replace it with something else," he teased.

She groaned excitedly. "Yes, *please*. But not now. We have to go and make your capture of me official, and we both know that," she said, pulling up his boxers, tucking his still stiff cock away. "If we wait too much longer, this becomes an unprotected alliance, and that's the *last* thing either of us wants."

"Yeah, very true," Tommy said, sitting up in his bed. He leaned over and pressed his lips against hers, giving her a long, affectionate kiss. "That means *both* of us have to put on clothes."

She whined playfully, stretching out in the bed like an annoyed cat. "But I *like* the idea of you marching me into the old woman's office wearing nothing but a collar and a leash, watching her eyes widen like dinner plates."

Tommy looked over his shoulder, his hand resting on top of hers for a moment. “When have *you* met the Antiquarian? That’s an occurrence generally reserved for Captains,” he asked her, looking down into her chilly blue eyes.

“My mother was one of the Captains of the Orange Elvish House,” Kaya said to him. “Back during the Cold War. Before she died. She captured a human mage, an officary of the Red House. Not a Captain, but some mid-level functionary stationed at the headquarters in London. Mother took me in to witness his official transfer, so that I would understand the fundamental rule of The Great Game – ‘Do. Not. Get. Caught.’” She sighed a little bit before looking up at him with a tender smile. “Although I suppose we caught each other, so that doesn’t make it so bad. I know you can’t lie to me, Thomas, but tell me again why you seem *unafraid* that you are unable to lie to me?”

“Because I don’t intend to play the Game the way they taught us to when we were growing up, Kaya,” he said, as she flipped her hand over and moved to interlace her fingers with his. “As children, we were taught that in The Great Game, the only specific group of people you could trust was your House, your own Faction and your own Color. I realized it was just another sort of nationalism, a sort of blind loyalty that didn’t make any sense. There were good and bad actors in all Houses, all Factions, all Colors. Trusting every one of the Green Wizards with my life would be a fool’s errand, and I’d be dead by year’s end if I did that. So, when a Captainship was basically foisted upon me, I set out to play The Great Game *my* way. I would play to lift the tide for *all* boats, not just the ones that allied themselves with me. I would improve the world for *all* our peoples, and for all portions of the world. Yes, sometimes there would still be short term gains and losses, but the plan, *my* plan, would be to try and improve things for everyone, at the expense of as few as possible. That’s why I told you, it was always part of my plan to get partners who would work *with* me, not just *for* me.”

“And what if I had been someone intent on exploiting you for her own personal gain?”

“Are you?”

“I am not, and you know that I cannot lie to you,” she said with a smirk.

“Well, I cannot lie to you either, so if I had found out that you could not be trusted to work *with* me and were, instead, set on working *against* me because of this handicap, I would’ve killed you and disposed of the body, or claimed it as self-defense, which I suppose technically it was, since you cast upon me first.”

“You transported us from the club to your apartment,” she giggled.

“Except that’s a bring-along spell, meaning if you hadn’t wanted to come here, it wouldn’t have *brought* you here,” he said. “And you cast the lust spell upon me before *that*.”

“Damn, I suppose that’s all true,” she said. “I truly did engage in an unprovoked attack upon a Captain. You would’ve been entirely within your rights to end my life.”

“Good thing you’re both as hot and smart as you are,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. “Now get your ass out of bed before I paddle it red and then get you dressed.”

“How dare you threaten me with a good time?” she giggled as she slowly pushed herself out of bed. “We need to discuss residential accommodations, Thomas. I think I need to be here on a more permanent basis.”

Tommy started to pull on his usual sort of attire – worn jeans, a white undershirt, a flannel overshirt and his denim jacket. He also slid his heavy black frame glasses back over his eyes. He could see well enough in the short range without them, but anything more than ten feet away was a horrible blur unless he had them on. Rumor had it there was a spell to restore a person's eyesight back to optimal, but it carried with it a five-to-ten percent chance of permanent, incurable blindness. Tommy had long ago learned what odds were worth playing and which ones weren't. "Why? You asking me for a key to my house already? You don't even know exactly where we *are* right now," he said with a laugh. "We can talk about that after we see The Antiquarian."

"Are you nervous?"

"I am," he said. "And you should be too."

"She's a very old woman, Tommy. She can't be *that* powerful."

"She's alive through the magics of the Pact," Tommy told her. "You must not have noticed, but when we declare a capture, we tithe a tiny portion of our magic to the Pact, which ensures your safety should you ever be confronted as a Registered Agent. All that protection has to come from somewhere."

"I suppose it had never occurred to me." She slipped out of bed and started pulling on the clothes she'd been wearing the night they'd first met, something that couldn't help but make Tommy smirk. The skirt was shorter than he remembered, and the white Oxford top was sheer enough that it was clear she hadn't put on the bra beneath, and when she went to pull on her shoes, he could see she hadn't bothered with the panties either.

"You're going to give her a heart attack, dressed like that," he told her.

"If we're lucky," Kaya giggled.

One of the interesting things about The Antiquarian was that no two Captains could reach her the same way. Each Captain, prior to Ascension, was given their own private contact point by the Antiquarian herself. The Ascension notice came as part of a package, along with several gifts from important parties in it. One of those gifts was a used book of some kind, often intended as both a gift and a warning. Each Captain got a book unique to them, according to legend, and no two Captains would ever receive the same book. The used book would have a reseller stamp inside of the front of it. That was where that Captain and *only* that Captain could meet up with them. Tommy's book was a copy of William Gibson's "Neuromancer," and it was stamped with the location of Recycle Bookstore West, down in Campbell, a bit of a drive, although Tommy had no intention of the two of them driving there.

Once both he and Kaya were in a presentable state, he shifted his fingers and bent the world around them like a rubber band, all the details of Tommy's apartment disappearing one at a time in a spiral of color and light, until a swirling technicolor vortex surrounded them, and new details began to drop into place, one, a brick wall, then another, then another, until finally they were standing in a back alleyway in Campbell, some sixty miles south.

"You've certainly gotten the knack for travel magic down pat," she told him with a slight smile, as they walked around the corner. With the high heels on, she was at least a foot taller than him, and they certainly drew some looks as they walked into the bookstore.

"Hey," Tommy said to the clerk. "My name's Tommy Clarke. I'm here to talk to someone about a first edition 'Neuromancer' that I have..." And then he watched the fireworks show. When he'd started to talk, the clerk had looked at him with that same sort of dead-eyed stare a clerk would often have after a

seven-hour shift, but the minute his name left his lips, Tommy could see copper sparks popping inside the man's irises, as the spell started to take hold in him.

"Of course, Captain Clarke," the man said to him, stepping out from behind the counter. They walked over towards the back of the building, and he opened a doorway for Tommy which he imagined normally led to a stockroom or closet, but was instead filled with a deep blue mist, which Tommy and Kaya stepped foot into, and were transported into the Antiquarian's Domicile.

No one knew where the Domicile actually existed, but the best theory was that it was deep underground somewhere beneath an eastern European mountain of some kind. All the walls, floors and ceiling looked like they were carved directly into stone. The cables were strapped to the walls, not behind them. There was artwork hanging on the walls by some of the most famous artists in the world, but none of the pieces the public had ever seen. Lost works by Picasso, DaVinci, Monet, Manet, Van Gough, Dali, Warhol... and while artwork took up lots of space on the walls, all the rest of the available room was covered by books and bookshelves, lights from the ceiling casting interesting shadows in every direction. The furniture was all leather bound, and the rumor was that it was human leather, although Tommy chalked that up to ghost stories, designed to spook younger mages.

"Ah, young Captain Clarke," the Antiquarian said. She was a woman who looked to be somewhere between ninety and a hundred and lots, but she was far older than that, having lived powered by magic for longer than the Accords had been in place, and they were thousands of years old. "I was starting to wonder if you were going to come and file a capture for your first Captain's Day. Grand Captain Feng and I had a wager, and I'm glad to see I was correct, and you *are* here with a trophy. You didn't need to force her to dress so skimpily, though."

"I like dressing like this," Kaya said. "It makes people underestimate me."

"You were still caught, my dear," the Antiquarian said with a whisper of a chuckle. "Now let me explain to you the rules, so you know what you are on the hook for and what you aren't, while I get your memento ready."

She led them down the hallway into a room nearly completely empty except for a pedestal in the very center with a massive leatherbound book atop it, and a small wooden box on a lower pedestal next to it.

"I think I know the rules, but I suppose it doesn't hurt to be reminded," Kaya told her.

"Good girl," the Antiquarian said, opening the wooden box, taking out a small silver coin the size of an American quarter. She took it and handed it to Kaya. "Hold that, would you, dear? Now, as registered Plunder, you are indebted to serve Captain Clarke and provide him any and all information he requests about your House, your Color or your family as his Registered Agent. He is, for all intents and purposes, the highest priority in your life, and your life is dependent upon his. If he makes a demand of you, unless it puts your own life in immediate danger, you are honor bound to follow that command. You are a Registered Agent for Captain Clarke of the Green Wizards' House. That means he is, for all intents and purposes, your only real concern in life.

"As a Registered Agent, you are free from the consequences of your actions, barring being Unmasked. If you are Unmasked, you will confirm your Registration, and you will renounce all affiliations with your House, your Color and your family, and you will become an open part of whatever organizations Captain Clarke is at that time. At that point, you would be completely under his care, and his responsibility. Until that time, the only people who will know of your allegiance are those Captain

Clarke chooses to tell. He is not required to tell anyone, but he may, as most Captains do, allow you to identify yourself in moments of danger to other Captains of his House.

“A formal accusation of Unmasking can only be made upon an individual once every ten years, and even then, they must correctly identify *whose* Plunder you *are*. Should they have even a single detail incorrect – your captor’s house, name, color, faction – then the Unmasking is declared completely as false, no other details will be provided to your accusers, and your allegiance cannot be challenged for another ten years. Your status as his Registered Agent is also unaffected should Captain Clarke become Plunder at some point, however unlikely that may be. If he becomes someone else’s Plunder, you are under no obligations to provide information to the holder of Captain Clarke’s Badge in the Ledger. No Captain has ever been taken as Plunder, but the chance is still there, so I am obliged to read those rules to you. Do you have any questions about what’s happened to you, Princess Oksana Sidorov?”

The entire time she’d been talking, the Antiquarian had been making constant gestures over the coin in Kaya’s hands, and it had turned from a simple disc of silver into a glowing swirl of insignia, incantations and spells, layer upon layer upon layer of well-honed magics baking into the tiny piece of metal, conveying her all the protections afforded to a Plunder.

“Only one,” she said, her porcelain hands trembling a little. Despite her familiarity with strong and powerful magic, this was easily the most powerful object she’d ever seen by several orders of magnitude. The Badges were the kind of thing that was undetectable by their very nature but contained enough raw magical force to intimidate even the most experienced spellcaster. “Are there any conditions under which I am allowed to reveal my status as a Registered Agent?”

“If you genuinely feel your life is being threatened, and that revealing your status as a Registered Agent will allow you to keep your life, you will feel the gaes waning to allow you to speak and announce that you are the Plunder of Captain Clarke,” the Antiquarian said. “That is the only condition under which you are allowed to reveal yourself.” She took the coin, now less an object and more of a tiny supernova of magic, from Kaya’s hands and clasped it between her own, closing off the light, sealing it away inside of the coin, pressing all that magic into permanence inside of the object. When she opened her hands, it appeared as merely a silver coin again, although the grooves still glowed faintly with a wicked magical flame. “Brace yourself, child. This is going to sting.”

“I can handle p—YEEARGH!”

The Antiquarian drew her fingertip across Kaya’s collarbone on her left side and the flesh parted, making an incision, which the Antiquarian pushed the coin inside of, sliding it beneath Kaya’s flesh and into her body, then dragged her fingers back over the incision, sealing the flesh back up again, leaving not so much as a scar. The elven princess brought her fingertips up to rub the area where the Badge now resided beneath her skin, but she could not feel it to the touch, its presence entirely concealed within her body. “They all say that, dear, but this sort of pain goes down to your very soul.” She smiled a little bit, watching Kaya still poking and rubbing at her chest and shoulder, as if trying to find the Badge. “Undetectable means what it says, Kaya.”

“I’m just astonished that I can carry something in my body, feel its presence in a figurative sense but not in a literal one,” Kaya grumbled.

“It’s one of the oldest and most powerful magics there is, established as part of the Great Game when the Houses were established, along with the Accords,” the Antiquarian said with a mysterious smile. “Those truly were the unbroken horizon days.” She paused, as if caught in a moon dance’s memory for a

fraction of a second, and then the moment passed, like a balloon being popped on a sharp needle, as she unlocked the spin dial combination lock on the Ledger, removed the chain and then opened the great book quite a ways in.

“So, all the Plunder, all the Registered Agents, they are listed in that book there?” Kaya asked, curiously.

“Oh no, my dear,” the Antiquarian said with a little laugh. “This is only the *current* Ledger. It contains all *active and living* Registered Agents only. There are many volumes before it containing those long since lost to time and history.” She flipped through the pages too quick for Tommy or Kaya to even get more than a glance at the pages, and even then, some kind of spell prevented any of the characters from making sense on the page, all looking like some forgotten and lost secret language, until the old woman stopped flipping and settled on a page with his name on the top and nothing else on the page. “Ah. Here we are. Captain Tommy Clarke, Captain of the Green Wizards’ House. Princess, if you wouldn’t mind signing here, please,” she said, handing a pen to Kaya. “Both your full name and your nickname, if you would be so kind, so as to ensure there’s no confusion.”

While Kaya was writing her name in elegant Elvish script, Tommy tilted his head a little. “Shouldn’t it say ‘*Seventh* Captain’ at the top, ma’am?”

“Oh, I never bother with listing which *rank* of Captain someone is, unless they’ve achieved the rank of Grand Captain, in which case I make a note of that, simply for historical accuracy’s sake,” she said. “I’m thinking of writing a book about the politics of the Forty-Nine from a thousand years ago, since perhaps putting all of that into writing might explain some of the chaos between the Houses and the Factions that persists even to this day. What do you think, Captain Clarke?”

“I think that would make for *fascinating* reading, Antiquarian, and as long as all those named are dead, it would only enlighten us as to our own history lost to us,” he said, placing a hand on her shoulder, watching her turn those almost black eyes, filled with the eons of stars, up to look at him. “Might I ask you one question of my own since I have you here?”

“Of course, Captain,” she said with a smile. “It puts you in rarified air, for few Captains think to take advantage of my knowledge when they are here. I cannot tell you of anyone else’s Plunder, naturally, but I suspect your question isn’t of that nature.”

“It isn’t,” Tommy said with a little chuckle. “In all my research into Captains’ Days, I have been unable to find an answer to this question. If I, as a Captain, were to be acting on a Captains’ Day hunt, were able to capture multiple Plunders, and keep them close and secure for the full twenty-four hours as is required by the Grand Tradition, would I be able to claim *all* of them as Plunder?”

The Antiquarian laughed in a sound of genuine surprise. “You know, Captain Clarke, in the thousands of years since the Great Game has been going, none has ever thought to ask that question,” she said, almost in a sound of admiration. “To answer it, however, yes, yes you would. There is no written by-law stating that a Captain can only capture a single Plunder on any given Captains’ Day. The problem, I would imagine, would be both acquiring and keeping multiple Plunders for the full day’s length required. But if you could overcome that?” She offered a slight bow. “Then I wish you good fortune on your hunt, Captain, and remind you that fortune favors the bold. And it seems like boldness is something you are in no short supply of.”

“That, my dear Antiquarian, I have in spades.”