

CHAPTER ONE

CARVING OUT ORGANS

It had been a year and Klaus Whitlock was still dead.

As far as Nyssa knew, no one had been found responsible for it and that was utterly maddening because how in the hell did—

“Klaus?” Nyssa called cautiously, seeing the ajar door to his cabin. She stepped closer to see the door frame had splintered, as though someone had kicked the door open. “Klaus!”

She pushed back the door, the wood panel hanging on by barely a hinge and looked around the room, panic rising in her chest. Furniture overturned, claw marks digging through the walls and—

Nyssa cleared her throat, trying once again to pack away the memory that stuck with her. It was what she saw every night when she closed her eyes.

That...same sequence of events.

She'd gone over the day of his death a million times, trying to pick out micro decisions she could have made that might have changed the outcome. Maybe if she was stronger, smarter, or braver, she would have sensed something.

Maybe if she was better than she was, Nyssa wouldn't have let herself get dragged back Under to further her education of the Seven Seas, instead of trying to find her best friend's murderer.

She was spiralling (or maybe she'd been doing that since the night of his death), and the only person that could really bring her back, really coax her into something rational had stopped being a part of this plane a long time ago.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Nyssa took in the streets, at the stone that had been laid carefully and repaired on more than one occasion. The lamps at the street's edges, powered by a warm orange light of Arcane invention, illuminating those who walked at night. Nyssa strayed further from those lights than most, constantly fidgeting with her clothes, making sure her hood stayed in place and that her tattooed arm stayed mostly covered.

Finally, she got to her destination and her eyes scaled up the building, searching for any single trait that would make it different from the building in her memory. The wooden sign so meticulously carved to read The Lost Wren and the one just beneath it that read Tavern & Inn. She stared at it.

And stared.

And stared.

“You one of those Psionics?” Someone drawled behind her, snapping her out of her trance. She glanced at them briefly, taking quiet note of her red hair and long, dark brown coat.

“What?”

“Staring so damn hard at the door, like you're willing it to just spring open.”

“No, I—” Nyssa's voice hitched, and she stopped, masking the emotion with an indelicate cough. “Just

got distracted.”

The redhead pushed open the door and nodded for Nyssa to enter along with her.

She pushed open the door to Klaus’s bedroom, half-holding her breath. With how torn up the rest of the home was, Nyssa didn’t know what to expect.

Not a single thought that ran through her head had prepared her, and she reacted by screaming until her throat was raw.

Nyssa breathed in the Lost Wren, took in the tables and chairs whose layout hadn’t been changed since she’d gotten to this town 3 years ago. A stage that she’d belonged now home to a band that played music that had people spinning and dancing in the room’s clear out centre.

Finally, Nyssa raised her eyes to the bar—

“Songbird!” Klaus yelled, jumping over the bar to greet her like an overeager puppy. Nyssa rolled her eyes, but let him sweep her into a tight hug. The kind of hug no one had bothered to give her in a long time.

There was no Klaus this time. Two bartenders, but neither of them were people she recognized. Everything was the same and somehow, she felt out of place. Like her world had been paused, but somehow, everything else kept moving without her.

Fire burned bright at the large hearth that she’d sit in front of in the colder months, alongside Klaus as he taught her whatever obscure hobby he’d picked up most recently. Where she’d fallen asleep against Klaus on more than one occasion, only to wake up back in her own bed.

Nyssa let out a shaky breath as her gaze fell back on the bar, still half-expecting Klaus to pop out somewhere. Not expecting. Hoping.

It wasn’t until she gripped the edge of the bar and sat down did Nyssa realize the way her muscles had been barely holding her up.

“What can I get for ya, honey?”

The bartender is a towering figure with broad shoulders and a rough-hewn face, but with the kind of smile that would soften the harshest of lines. His callous hands cleaned tankard after tankard in between pouring drinks. Adorning his rugged leather vest are various trinkets and charms. The trinkets reminded Nyssa of the first time she’d come to the surface world.

She’d been a collector back then, but she hadn’t been that girl in a long time.

Even at her pause, the bartender continued to focus on her, with that warm, patient expression, and for a second, Nyssa thought she’d be able to say it.

To be quick.

Her lips parted to speak and that’s when Nyssa felt the lump in her throat. She cleared her throat and then swallowed and then—

There was a glass of water in front of her. The bartender’s eyes shone with empathy and nodded towards the glass.

“Drink something. When you’re ready, just wave me over.”

Nyssa almost wanted to laugh at the premise of being ready because fuck no. Nothing in the entire fucking world could prepare her for the fact that she was about to talk to the father of her best friend. A father who had been more of a nurturing figure in a mere two years than Nyssa’s grandparents had been in over twenty. Nyssa had failed him when she’d failed Klaus.

Still, she lifted her hand to flag down the bartender.

“Now, what did you need?”

“Beck. Is Beck here tonight?” Each word was painful, pushing past that lump in her throat to be vocalized.

“Umm...”

“Tell him...tell him Nyssa Rose is here and wants to see him. Please.”

The bartender disappeared through a door. Nyssa couldn’t help but remember the feeling of Klaus’s hand on hers as he pulled her through that same door, over and over again.

When the bartender came back, it was like seeing the ghost of Klaus, but aged. Beck Whitlock looked at her, new wrinkles creasing his face. Wrinkles that seemed to fade when she lowered her hood for the first

time. She slid off her seat and moved around the bar towards him.

He didn't run or perform stunts to get to her, like Klaus would've, just waited, and when Beck's arms were around her, the sting of tears made a resurgence. She didn't know what else to do other than bury her face in Beck's shoulder and cry.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." They were the only words that she could get out as a million reasons rang through her mind.

I'm sorry I left. I'm sorry I didn't save him. I'm sorry he met me because it was all my fault.

All those words died before they could get from her mind to her tongue because really, not a single one of those words added up to much. Maybe, as Beck held her so tightly, maybe those words didn't matter to him.

Still holding her tightly, Beck pulled Nyssa through that back door and down the hallway to his office. She breathed out at the sight of it. The large oak desk in its centre was still stacked with ledgers and invoices, quills, and inkwells ("*I don't like those Arcane pen contraptions, you two,*" Beck had moaned once when they teased him for it). Though Arcane lamps lit his tavern, his office preferred old-fashioned candles in iron holders that flickered sporadically. The shelves of old books that Nyssa had read the entirety of at least twice were just the same, save for a few new ones.

Beck guided Nyssa to the sofa that sat against his shelves and held out a handkerchief to her. Nyssa dabbed at her tears, averting her eyes now that she'd moved past such a sudden state of emotion. Nothing was said for a few moments until Beck reached for her face, his face becoming saddened disbelief.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm supposed to ask you that. I...I'm so sorry. I left. I—"

"None of that," Beck dismissed with a nonchalant wave. "I'm just happy to see you, birdie."

Birdie.

The nickname landed a one-two punch. First the overwhelming sense of love and relief, and then the pain. The complete and utter pain that came with the memory.

"If my boy gets to give you a nickname, so do I, Nya," Beck said playfully as they turned down the sheets of the bed in preparation for the next guess. "How about my birdie?"

"Nya?" Beck's voice interrupted her daze. Nyssa looked back to him, perpetually confused. "Are you okay?"

Okay is a luxury I've never been granted, Nyssa thought wryly, though she conceded to herself that perhaps it was a bit dramatic. Even if she took away the hyperbole of it all, she didn't know how to answer that question.

1. Her best friend died.

2. She'd been sent to stay with cousins on the Isle of Nox in order to better become a Nereiad. Embrace her water spirit-ness in all its glory, as it were.

3. She was so painfully, fucking alone.

But she couldn't, wouldn't, say any of that because Beck was better off not knowing. Beck had more important things to worry about than her.

"Did they find who did it?"

"That's not important, birdie," Beck murmured gently, not needing clarification regarding the question. His use of not important stabbed her in the gut.

"He was murdered, Beck!"

"He...according to the medmage, he wasn't. Heart failure."

"He..." Her chest started to hurt. "That's not possible. I—I saw him. He was—"

Nyssa knelt down next to Klaus with shaking hands and she reached for him and then stopped. His throat was shredded, the source of a pool of blood and the cuts stained with a black fluid. A blackness that seemed to reach the veins in his face. His neck. His arms.

His eyes were wide. Terrified.

She leaned down, a little closer, seeing that his chest didn't rise or fall. No breath escaped. Her throat loosed a loud, aching sob, rivers of grief pouring down her face as she collapsed against him.

"I...I have to go," Nyssa said, getting up. Beck reached for her, but Nyssa flinched back, making a break for the door.

"I...I have to go," Nyssa said, getting up. Beck reached for her, but Nyssa flinched back, making a break for the door.



She didn't know where the hell she was going.

Nyssa's head was swimming, overloaded with memories, information, questions and, most of all, utter devastation.

For the record, Nyssa was considerably older than Klaus, but somehow, she'd fallen into a little sister-type role with him. A constant state of him pulling her to safety, from other beings, from her tendency to danger, etcetera. The only difference between her and an actual little sister is that Nyssa Rose was not naive; she was arrogant, and hell, that's a touch more dangerous, isn't it?

Tiernan Westbrook was that of a predator if Nyssa had ever seen it, sleek and deadly, always moving with a disarming, delicate grace. His lean frame is cloaked in attire tailored for stealth and mobility, dark garments blending seamlessly into the shadows he calls home. Still, she let him sit next to her.

Let him pretend he knew more until, well, Klaus.

"Get the hell out of my tavern, Tiernan."

"Whoa, Klaus, didn't know this was your girl here."

"Don't talk to her. Don't fucking look at her," Klaus warned coldly, voice dripping in venom. Nyssa could say with full confidence that was the first and only time she'd ever felt attraction for Klaus Whitlock. "Crawl back to your cave of killers or I swear to the Gods, I'll summon the Ward officers myself."

Tiernan got up from the stool where he sat, hands raised in surrender. He cast one more look over Nyssa and this time, she sat up a little straighter and felt the living water within her churn, ready to be used.

"The Innovator's offer still stands, you know."

"And my offer still stands to personally escort him to the Nightmare Domain."

"You won't always be so untouchable, Whitlock," Tiernan sneered before leaving. Nyssa looked at Klaus who intently watched Tiernan slam the tavern's doors behind him.

"What the actual fuck was that?"

"That, my friend, was a psychotic mercenary."

"No, a mercenary with all those weapons?! I never would've guessed!" Nyssa answered dryly. Klaus made a face at her mocking, raising a glass to his lips. "Still lost on the whole untouchable part though."

"My dear Songbird, must I reveal all my secrets so early in our friendship?"

Nyssa pushed open the doors to the Red Hound, a much seedier local tavern than the one she'd just come from. Unlike the Lost Wren, which catered to travelling musicians and dancers, the Red Hound catered to anyone with a less-than-stellar history looking to get fucked, either by alcohol or a courtesan.

Interest in either was non-existent for Nyssa. She was, however, looking to fuck someone up.

"Tiernan Westbrook!" His name ripped from her throat before she could take a moment to consider what she was doing. The man in question stood up, finishing his drink as he laid eyes on her.

He smirked.

He fucking smirked.

"Well, if it isn't Whitlock's little songbird finally home!" Tiernan announced, raising his drink to her as he stumbled. "You go a little mad while you were away, doll?"

It was mocking. He was mocking her. Nyssa let out a laugh, smiled in a way that made Tiernan's buddies grow somewhat uneasy, and stepped forward.

Water hummed throughout her body calling out to be used.

"What did you do to Klaus, Tiernan?"

"Whatever happened to your boy was his own fault. He liked to put his nose where it didn't belong." Any joyous teasing previously exhibited was gone.

“Where was he putting his nose in the days leading up to his death?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yeah, that’s why I asked the fucking question,” Nyssa snapped as her instincts took over. Water shot out her hand like a miniature wave, coaxing Tiernan back until he hit a wall. The mercenary sputtered, trying to catch his breath as his friends tried to come to his aid.

Grabbing a bottle, Nyssa whacked it against the side of a table and then pressed it against Tiernan’s stomach.

“Call off your dogs, Tiernan,” Nyssa hissed venomously. “Or I start carving out organs.”

Tiernan waved to his friends to stand down, looking at the woman before him. Her free hand turned to living water and he paled as that water entered his nose and throat. Nyssa watched as he coughed and sputtered against her, the glass bottle cutting pieces of his clothes and skin.

After recalling her water, Tiernan gasped for breath.

“Did you kill him?”

“No.”

Nyssa’s water reached for Tiernan and he flinched.

“Listen, I heard about that death. Whatever did...that wasn’t...had to have been some kind of creature.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“Gods, yes!”

Nyssa pushed the broken glass into Tiernan, trying not to flinch at the squelch of piercing flesh or how deceptively difficult it felt, before stepping back and letting him drop. Her eyes fell on the silent tavern of crooks, thieves and mercenaries, who all stared at her with some kind of conflicted horror.

Like perhaps they should attack. Do something, but Nyssa knew they didn’t know what the fuck to make of her. From the display, they knew she was Nereiad and they also knew that for Nyssa to do what she just did, she needed an external water source.

Well, a normal Nereiad would.

Nyssa left the Red Hound to hear a whistle and two uniformed Ward officers ran towards her, blood still splattered on her clothes and hands. She didn’t stop, but broke into a run. There were stones and pain and Nyssa couldn’t really tell what was going on anymore.

Her lungs burned and her shoulder stung, but she knew her next damn goal.

Get the medmage who wrote the death report to admit why it was a goddamn cover-up.