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JENNIFER A. NIELSEN



# WRATH OF THE STORM

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— · MARK OF THE THIEF · —

BOOK THREE



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A note to readers: Latin words will be italicized  
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# ONE

If I was lucky, I still had another hour to live. Of course, if luck had ever played a role in my life, I wouldn't have been here in the first place.

Only the gods knew how long I'd been trapped beneath a pile of rubble from what had once been a temple — and a tomb. Atroxia's tomb.

Was it hours? Days? I really didn't know.

I had destroyed this temple, hoping to destroy Atroxia as well. But she was so much more powerful than I had expected. My plan had failed. I had failed against her and, in doing so, had lost everything.

My magic was gone. Every time I'd awoken, I'd hoped to find a spark within me. Yet I was still waiting, still hoping. It was gone.

I'd also lost my mother and my sister. I had no idea if they were safe, or where they were now.

My friend Aurelia was probably safe, but she was lost, at least to me. In order to save her own life, Aurelia had agreed to

marry another of our friends, Crispus. That agreement had etched a wound within me that no kind of magic could heal.

I'd even lost Radulf, who had traded himself to Atroxia to save me. No matter how often I had tried to understand why he'd done that, I couldn't. Something in the complicated relationship with my grandfather had changed. I just wasn't sure what it was.

I'd lost all of this because of Atroxia, which was her name while in her human form. The Praetors knew her differently, as a cursed dragon named the Mistress who was bound to serve the goddess Diana. At times, they spoke as one voice, but not always, I'd learned. The dragon controlled the girl.

It was obvious why Diana had chosen to curse Atroxia this way. Atroxia had once been a *vestalis*, a holy woman. But she was nothing of the sort now. Instead of honoring her high position, she had betrayed it centuries ago, an act that resulted in the murder of Emperor Julius Caesar by one of Diana's descendents. The punishment for her crime was to be buried alive. While she still breathed, Diana changed her into a dragon, powerful enough to withstand centuries of punishment. It saved her life and, at the same time, destroyed her life.

Thanks to my foolishness, she was loose now and would carry out Diana's plans to bring down the empire. The Praetors of Rome would help in that fight. It was a war that had started with Caesar's assassination.

And I suspected that one way or the other, it would end with me.

Time was not on my side.

For once, it wasn't because of the gods, or my failed attempts to reclaim any feeling of magic.

No, my problem now was far more simple.

I was running out of air.

I needed to escape.

But first, I would sleep again.

I couldn't help it.

## ·TWO·

Nicolas Calva, where are you?”

The sharp voice snapped me from my sleep and was accompanied by a pained scream that seemed to echo in the rubble around me. I felt the scream inside my bones, as if whatever had caused it was also happening to me.

It was completely dark down here, but I didn’t need light to confirm that I was still alone. The voice had been in my head and had belonged to Radulf. He was calling out for me. And then had been punished for it.

Viciously punished. I knew that because I had felt it too. My heart was still pounding. The tips of my fingers felt like they were on fire, but I couldn’t move enough to do anything about them.

The Mistress had taken Radulf away, believing he had the Malice of Mars. Just to look at it, the Malice appeared innocent enough, only a silver armband for the forearm, similar to what a gladiator might wear. But anyone with magic would sense its great power, enough to topple an empire. More than anything in the world, the Mistress wanted that Malice.



Except Radulf didn't have it. I did, somewhere nearby in this darkness.

My eyes wanted to close again, wanted to return me to the deep sleep that had claimed me so many times already since I had become trapped down here. This was Diana's curse on the temple, no doubt, to cause anyone trapped here to sleep, preserving their life and, at the same time, refusing to allow them to live.

I had to get out of here.

My right arm was trapped beneath a large rock and had long ago lost any feeling. I tried making a fist and thought I had been successful, but I wasn't sure. It was completely numb. My left arm was nearer to my body. My wrist wouldn't bend, and then I remembered the Mistress had broken it. So as far as I could tell, I still had both limbs, but they were useless. My legs were below me, twisted and contorted around crumbled temple stones that at one time had each been as large as a grown man. Equally useless.

The Malice was in here too. I vaguely remembered collapsing the temple with the Malice in my hands. Bringing several tons of marble and brick down over my head had been a dangerous move, but it seemed better than allowing the Mistress to get it. Now I wasn't so sure. The best choice would've been not to seek the Malice in the first place, though that might never have been an option for me. Eventually, I'd have been forced into coming here. Diana's curse must still rest upon this temple, or I'd probably be dead already.

Collapsing the temple had been only half of my stupid



plan. The other half was to use the Malice to escape again. Unfortunately, it had fallen out of my reach. I hoped it wasn't far away.

I closed my eyes, searching for any feeling of magic within me. I had lost my magic once before, when Radulf took it from me in the amphitheater, and on multiple occasions I had spent so much of my magic that I was unable to use it. But it had always come back. It would come back to me one more time. I hoped.

The Divine Star marked my shoulder. It was still there and could heal me. Where was the *bulla*?

I vaguely felt its weight on my chest, but the metal had gone cold. I inched my left wrist upward, then clenched my teeth as the broken bones protested the movement. During the battle with the Mistress, how many times had I healed that wrist, only to break it again moments later? Why couldn't I heal it one more time?

I could. I just needed to touch the *bulla*, and since my right hand was probably flattened like a squashed bug, my broken left hand would have to do the work.

I took a few deep breaths to summon enough courage to raise the arm, then lifted it suddenly, pushing through crumbled stones and pockets of loose dirt. I didn't get far before I had to stop to catch my breath and mumble a few curse words. But no matter how it was screaming at me, my wrist was above my waist now. One more move and it would reach the *bulla*.

My whole arm throbbed, and waves of nausea washed over me. I didn't want to move again. If I only relaxed, I knew I could

fall asleep as I had every time before. This place wanted me to sleep, to disappear forever here.

But when Radulf had sacrificed himself to the Mistress, I had vowed to go and find him, to save him from whatever the Mistress might do. However long I'd already allowed him to remain within her clutches, it was too long. I had to get out of here.

So before I could think better of it, I jerked my arm upward again. The wrist snapped against a sharp rock that had been in its way, but my arm pushed past it. I cried out, only to fill my lungs with dust that the wrist had swept up with it. Choking, I pressed my arm against my chest, then felt something change.

My left hand had landed on the bulla. It couldn't grip anything, but the same sharp rock that had given me so much pain now propped my arm perfectly in place against the gold amulet.

A familiar heat lit within my chest and quickly spread through me. I had been shivering before. Interesting that I hadn't known how cold I was until now.

The instant the bulla's power reached the Divine Star, its healing powers began to flow through my chest down to my legs and arms. The warm magic seeped into the bones of my wrist, strengthening them and bonding them back together. Making me whole again. A quick, painless wiggle of my wrist confirmed that.

I was still trapped, and I doubted the bulla could get thousands of pounds of rock and brick off me. But I knew something that could do it.

Magic can always sense other magic in the area, and I used that power to search for the Malice nearby.

The bulla had originally been given to Julius Caesar, filled with Venus's powers. Upon Caesar's death, Venus's power left the bulla, and Diana replaced the magic with her own, hoping it would be used in her war against the gods. The fact that I had the bulla and was using it to stop that war probably infuriated her.

As a rule, having a god furious with you is not a good thing. How well I understood that.

Nor did it help that I had the Malice . . . more or less. The Malice came from the god Mars with the power to end that war. To end any war, really. Use of the Malice guaranteed its bearer victory in battle.

If Diana resented my having the bulla, I could only imagine how she felt about the Malice. But she had no claim upon that amulet. I did. The key to finding it had been given to me. She'd have to destroy me to get it back.

What a pleasant way to begin a day — with the reminder that one of the gods had specifically targeted me for destruction. I grimaced, deciding that at least Diana would not kill me here.

I felt the Malice's magic slightly below my right hand. I pressed that hand downward and heard a shift in the rocks around me. They were more delicately balanced than I had imagined. Perhaps my right hand was keeping them in place.

So, more carefully, I lowered my hand farther and felt a small quake of rocks tilting overhead. It was difficult to imagine myself in a worse position than my current one. If she could see me now, Aurelia would rightly accuse me of great stupidity.

“Picture where you want to go,” I whispered. That was what Radulf would say. Indeed, that was how I had gotten myself here in the first place, for better or worse. Where did I want to go?

Home.

I didn’t have a home of my own, but I could go to Radulf’s home. I pictured my room there, with the frescoes of Minerva in battle with a draco, the statues that lined his hallways, and even the *triclinium*, where he and I had eaten as we faced off in numerous battles of will.

But most clearly of all, I saw Radulf’s atrium. Painted in the rich colors of Rome and surrounded with tall marble columns made to look like serpents climbing the walls. Considering the cruel serpent that had trapped me down here, it wasn’t the most welcoming thought, but anything was better than this.

My left hand had finally healed enough to clasp the bulla. I held to it tightly as I pictured the atrium, every detail of the room so sharp in my mind that I could hear the steady drops of water falling into the pool. It must be raining outside. How I missed water. Now that I was awake, I was terribly thirsty. When was the last time I’d had a drink? It felt like months.

I reached for the Malice again, and this time the rocks above me shifted. My predicament was becoming clear. Any more movement, and those rocks would fall, crushing me.

It had nearly cost my life to get the Malice the first time. For all I knew, it would still cost Radulf his life, and maybe others whom I loved. I would not let that be in vain. I refused to leave the Malice behind.

I closed my eyes again and let Radulf's atrium come into focus. That's where I would go, disappearing completely from this rubble before it collapsed.

Had I ever been this tired? I didn't think so, not even when I was a slave in the mines of Rome. But I could not allow myself to sleep now. If I did, I might never wake up.

I pushed all my weight downward while the fingers of my right hand searched for the metal edge of the Malice. Rocks continued crumbling above me. I felt their weight and used the bulla's strength to push against them. I couldn't give much magic to the effort — what little I had was needed to get me to the atrium.

Then my fingers touched the Malice, and with one more stretch downward, my hand closed around it.

"Go," I whispered, clenching my eyes shut.

Rocks tumbled above me. Smaller pebbles moved out of the way for the larger boulders, but I wasn't there to see what happened next.

I heard running water and briefly opened my eyes, long enough to see the painting of the serpent inside Radulf's atrium. Someone called my name.

And I fell asleep again.