

Oracle of Life  
The Lords’ Gambit Series Volume One

*Deborah and Nariah Excerpt*

*~A Newsletter Subscriber Exclusive Sneak Peak~*

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\*\*\*PLEASE NOTE: This is an unedited advance reader preview of this excerpt. This book is currently with the editor, so typos/grammatical errors will be corrected prior to its January 17<sup>th</sup> 2023 publication.\*\*

The mahogany double-doors slid closed in silence behind Nariah, leaving her in a darkness that was somehow even darker than the cloudy, moonless night outside. Silence hung thicker than the incense infused air. Sliding off her slippers, Nariah felt around on the cold tiles blindly with her feet for the carpeted aisle runner that led to the dais. At last, soft fur tickled the sole of her foot.

“Deborah?” Nariah called in a whisper, gritting her teeth and holding her head up high as she made her way down the aisle.

Darkness and quiet were both normal parts of a royal’s death rights, but not quite to this extreme. While thick drapes covered the stained-glass windows at every mourning ceremony, low black candles typically lit an altar placed behind the deceased’s body, to allow mourners one last opportunity to see their loved one before the pyre.

Why were there no candles?

“Deborah?” Nariah whispered again.

Her stomach clenched into knots. What if Deborah wasn’t there? What if someone had set a trap for the Oracle they wanted dead? Her thoughts flashed back to Truett’s warning. Her nails bit into her palms.

Nariah’s toes struck the first marble stair of the dais, and she sucked in her breath at the pain. Skirts rustled somewhere ahead of her, followed by the clicking of heels on marble.

“Did you think you would find comfort in the face of a dead man, Doomsayer?” Deborah’s silky, deep voice purred, dripping disdain. “That a heretic like you would be permitted any semblance of home, even in death?”

Knees buckling, Nariah stumbled to the floor. No trap awaited her, but a recommitted sentence from her baby sister’s lips sealed her fate. Tears stung Nariah’s eyes, and she squeezed them shut against the loss of all she had hoped for.

Why had she ever come back? What had she hoped would change?

Deborah stopped walking so close to Nariah that the new Queen’s velvet cloak brushed her exiled sister’s face. Cold fingers brushed across Nariah’s cheek so briefly that she wondered for a moment if it was only her imagination.

“No,” Deborah whispered. “You have no family here. I pronounce you dead, Nariah Alcon of Ellonai. The darkness of the tomb I curse upon your all-seeing eyes. The flames of the pyre I curse upon your body. No one will even gather to hear you scream.”

There was not even a hint of emotion in the Queen’s voice; it was as though a numb, heartless soul had taken up residence of her once lively and passionate spirit.

Rustling, tinkling armor and heavy footsteps echoed through the hall as soldiers moved in from either side. They were slow in the darkness, but there were many of them. Despite knowing that Truett was probably right this entire time, that this was probably a trap from the start, the actuality of it drove a knife through her heart. She was alone in the dark...

The dark.

Magic tingled between her fingers. What was it Estes had told her? Darkness was just one more element of this world? Twisting her hand and holding it up by her face, she reached out to the darkness just as she had the sands on the night she first met the lords.

Slowly, she watched the blackness give way around her, shimmering and bending. The candles, she thought, a low chuckle escaping at the thought of the parlor trick that had frightened the gate guard so many weeks ago. Taking a guess as to where the candles should be, and hoping they were actually there, Nariah flicked her fingers in what she hoped was their direction.

Sparks flew, and impossible heat for candles so small blew over the hall in a wave. The blood thrummed in Nariah’s veins at the terror in her sister’s now-visible eyes. Terror... Deborah’s wide magenta eyes and scarred face spoke of unknown horrors that drove an invisible knife through Nariah’s gut.

Once smooth, pale cheeks were now a raw pink, riddled with deep, purple veins and raised lumps of molten red. Her sister’s frame was so thin, so frail, that her wrist was barely more than a skeleton’s in a stretched covering of skin. Half of her flowing black hair was white, and the other half was missing, carrying more of the scars and bulging veins that protruded from her face.

Flames of anger roiled in Nariah’s chest. Who had scarred her once beautiful sister so?

Dropping her hand, Nariah only then realized that she was holding an orb of swirling darkness within it. The soldiers had frozen in place only steps from her, but she couldn’t say whether it was out of fear of her magic, or simply because they awaited Deborah’s command.

“Who did this to you?” Nariah whispered, reaching her empty hand out to her sister.

Deborah jumped back a step with a hiss. A literal hiss, with a forked tongue slithering between her teeth.

“Take her!” the young queen shouted, and before Nariah could react, all of the soldiers leapt at her at once. They pinned her to the floor in seconds, hands like vices allowing no room for even the slightest movement.

*“Your sister is no longer human, Oracle,” Irony’s voice giggled in Nariah’s head. “And she wanted you dead. I see her mind, you know.”*

“Hold her!”

“Get me the bag!”

“Where are the chains?!”

“Don’t let go!”

*“Get out of my head!”* Nariah screamed in her mind, but the goddess only laughed harder.

*“They won’t come for you, you know—your little lords. They’re glad you’re gone. All they needed was the prophecy; they have no need for you. This kingdom is doomed, anyway. You’ve seen it. Isn’t it time, Nariah, for someone to save you?”*

Glancing up at the dais, Nariah finally noticed her father’s body. Everything around her froze. She struggled to breathe, to think. Her father’s skin, once as rich a mahogany as her own, was as black as an obsidian statue, and even from her position on the floor, glowing purple in his veins stood out like a vivid nightmare.

Deborah caught Nariah’s gaze from beside their father’s body. The queen’s lips curled back in a snarl, revealing two rows of jagged, yellowed fangs. How was it that none of the guards saw the monster on the dais? How could they not care?

“What *are* you?!” Nariah screamed. “What have you done with my sister?”

One of the guards shoved a small ball of rolled-up leather into her mouth, cutting her off. A black bag engulfed her head, and chains looped around her limbs. No amount of showy magic could get her out of this... her sister—or whatever the *thing* was that was changing her sister—wanted her dead.

A month ago, Nariah would have happily burned if it meant the rest of her people would live. There was no way she could leave them under the rule of a monster. Her sister needed her. Her people needed her.

Somehow she was going to get herself out of these chains.

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