

The Fog and Glass

In the liminal space at the edge of Calrithen, where city gives way to twilight woods, a tavern stands beneath the boughs of silver-leafed trees.

Travelers from all walks of life pass through—Sidhe, Changelings, Huldra, Duskwalkers, Sablekind—drawn to sit at the long, polished tables of The Fog and Glass. Maybe it is the tavern that pulls them in. Or maybe it's the bartender.

They say Lorien Vask has always been here, keeping the doors open, pouring drinks, listening. That isn't true. But it feels true.

He looks to be a young man, handsome, his dark curls swept back with careless ease, his eyes sharp as fresh-cut glass. He crafts bespoke drinks for each traveler, something that tastes just right—herbs that warm the bones, spirits that soothe the mind, liquors that loosen the tongue. And when the drink settles, so do their stories.

Not that he needs them to speak. Even remembering is enough, if the memory burns bright in their mind.

They notice his languid, easy confidence, the smoothness of his voice, the way his gaze lingers when a story takes shape.

They don't notice the way his fingers *rap-tap-tap* on the counter, the flicker of magic coiling through the air. They don't feel the thin, oh-so-thin mist slipping past their lips.

They don't catch his lithe fingers corking tiny bottles beneath the counter.

And later, they don't even realize something is missing.

It started as a hobby. A way to slide into lives he'd never lived, to scratch the old itch to steal—one that had gone unsatisfied since he left behind bigger crimes and sharper debts.

But after she disappeared, it became an obsession.

Every night after he closes, he takes them upstairs—the bottles, the stolen moments—and drinks them, one by one, searching for a trace of her in strangers' memories.

He has caught fragments before. A glimpse of her on the street, her mother's scarf wrapped around her neck. There—her long hair vanishing into a crowd. Here—slipping through a

doorway, lost to the past before he can reach her. Enough to know she is out there. Not nearly enough to track her down.

On a rainy night two years into his search, he finds nothing. So he reaches up to his highest shelf for his last memory of her.

It had tormented him once, surging into his mind in a constant, looping ritual until the night he bottled it up. But even now he can't resist watching it anew, in case he missed something, a reason for her leaving.

He pulls the cork free and swallows. It tastes of starlight and tears.

The memory paints itself into his mind.

Amaryllis lights the candles on his bedside table. The flicker of fire glows against the tumble of long curls over her bare shoulders.

He touches her cheek, the soft, barely-there freckles.

She lifts her head, meets his mouth—

A clatter. A bang outside the tavern. Amaryllis pulls away with a rueful smile. "Jade must have gotten out again."

She leaves to fetch the fox, and he turns toward the bed, waiting for her to return.

He must have fallen asleep, because the memory blurs.

Then—her whisper, low in the dark. "I love you."

A brush of her fingers over his temple.

The door closes.

The room is silent.

The memory blurs again. Then it's morning, and she is gone.

Lorien siphons the memory back into the vial with an exhale, a *rap-tap-tap* of his fingers on his thigh.

She was the reason he stepped out of a world where debts were collected in blood. Because of her, he had wanted something different. So he'd traded knives in the dark for a quieter life at The Fog and Glass.

She was his dream. He thought he'd been hers. There was no good reason for her to have left without a trace, without a goodbye.

An unwelcome guest enters The Fog and Glass—a trollborn with the same putrid breath and necklaces of teeth he had when they both ran in Severien's circle.

Lorien has gone to great lengths to look different now, has discarded his old name for this new one. He simply masks his loathing behind a welcoming smile and thinks what a pity it is the whole league didn't end up behind bars when he sold out Severien.

He mixes a drink of black spiced whiskey and moonveil. Leans across the bar to talk to him. He is crass and loud. Lorien has little hope he's seen her, but he *rap-tap-taps*—

The trollborn barks a laugh, slamming his palm down on the bar.

“Bold of you, trying that on me. I keep my own trophies.” He sweeps open his cloak, revealing rows of tiny vials shimmering with stolen memories.

And there—a small, silver vial he recognizes.

Labeled with his name in her sloped handwriting.

Lorien lunges.

His hand clamps around the trollborn's thick neck, dragging him over the bar. He keeps few weapons on hand these days, and his magic had always been for coaxing, but he smashes a bottle and holds the jagged edge under the trollborn's chin.

“Where did you get that silver vial?”

The trollborn growls, spits. Lorien doesn't move.

Panting, he relents. “Gambling den at the Undercrown.”

At the mention of Severien's old stronghold, whoever hadn't fallen silent did so now.

“Give it to me.”

The trollborn's fat fingers grope for the vial, then slide it across the bar. Only then does Lorien shove him back. He snatches it and points the jagged bottle at the tavern at large.

“Get out.” His voice is fire and command.

When the last traveller sweeps through the door, Lorien bars it behind them.

He drops into the closest chair, the silver vial cold in his grip. He comes to only one conclusion.

Amaryllis took one of his memories before she left.

His hands shake as he uncorks it. Throws it back.

Amaryllis lights the candles on his bedside table.

He touches her cheek, the soft, barely-there freckles.

She lifts her head, meets his mouth—

A bang outside the tavern. Amaryllis pulls away with a rueful smile. “Jade must have gotten out again.”

She leaves to fetch the fox. He moves toward the bed.

Footsteps pound on the staircase, and as he turns, rough hands seize him.

He hurls off his attackers, reaching for the knife on his wall, but magic strikes.

Crippling, crushing—his lungs seize, his body wrenches as he is forced to his knees. A sword lifts his chin.

Severien.

Severien, out of prison somehow. Released or escaped what should have been a life sentence.

His sablekind eyes are black as death itself, staring down at him with a promise of retribution.

Amaryllis stumbles back into the room, bleeding, gasping. “It’s revenge you want, isn’t it? You want to hurt him?”

“Amaryllis, run.”

She doesn’t. She steps between them, into Severien’s line of sight.

“Then take me.”

A new terror grips Lorien, deep and icy and all-consuming.

And Severien sees it there, written on his face. His lip curls. His eyes slide to Amaryllis, clutching her robe to her chest, looking at her for the first time.

“Sev, no,” Lorien croaks. “I’ll do anything.”

And those damning words seal the deal.

“You,” Severien rasps. “In exchange for his life.”

“Yes,” she whispers. “Just leave him be.” He fights, thrashes, screams, but they force him onto the bed. Amaryllis kneels and cups his face, thumb brushing his jaw.

“I’m sorry.” There’s a vial in her hands. Her fingers rap-tap-tap.

He doesn’t know what she is doing until it’s too late. Her practice is crude—the memory

doesn't slip free so much as wrench from his mind, past his lips.

His breath rushes out of him.

Had he been shouting? Why?

His body sags into the bed. Amaryllis blows out the candle.

Then—her whisper, low in the dark. "I love you."

A brush of her fingers over his temple.

The door closes.

The room is silent.

He slips into sleep.

Lorien dons the cloak of shadows Severien had once woven for him, and heads into the city with the wind at his heels. His heart eats him, pounding with devastation and devotion.

By the stars, he loved this brave, reckless woman. But fear gripped his soul, too. He didn't know what Severien had forced her to become—slave, servant, spy, concubine...

It didn't matter.

He would get her out. Tonight.

The Undercrown sprawls beneath the city, built into the bones of an ancient temple—Severien's kingdom of crime, where deals are struck in candlelit halls and debtors disappear into the catacombs. Lorien thought he'd put an end to this. He should have known no prison could hold Severien.

He slips in through an old sewer tunnel, moving like shadows through its winding halls. He is swift and thorough, checking the servant's quarters, the jail cells. She's not there.

Dread coils in his stomach.

His steps guide him toward Severien's quarters. There's a room near his, reserved for his favorites.

Lorien waits in the dark until the hall is clear, then coaxes the lock open and steps inside.

There's a figure by the bed—a turn of her head, the sweep of her hair, and their eyes lock.

His name is a gasp on her lips, and she runs. He's crushing her to him. She fits against him like no time has passed, and she is crying, whispering you remembered, you remembered, and he

can't tell if it's a curse or a prayer, but he would keep her in his arms for a thousand years if she would let him.

They pull back enough to wipe tears from each other's cheeks. Her hands tremble, and he turns his head, presses his lips to her palm. "Let's go, Amaryllis. We can leave right now, with the cloak of shadows. No one will catch us."

"Lorien." She drops her hands. "If I leave the Undercrown, he won't stop hunting us. We'd be on the run forever."

"I will gladly do that."

"No." She takes the smallest of steps back. There's a shadow beneath her eyes, a weight in the way she stands. "This is my choice. I'm treated fine—"

"Fine?" His voice sharpens. "You are a prisoner here."

"But I'm alive. And staying here is the only thing keeping him from killing you."

"Amaryllis—"

"Stay with me tonight." Fresh tears gleam in her eyes as she catches his cloak again. "I just... please."

The fight isn't over, but how could he refuse her?

They fall together into whispers and skin and gentle rocking, into surrender and release.

Lorien lays awake, watching each of Amaryllis's deep, slow breaths.

He knows she's right.

If he frees her, they'll be hunted. A life of running, of looking over their shoulders—he won't do that to her.

He could take Severien's memories, but Severien knows his tricks. Has endless safeguards.

And Amaryllis won't let him turn himself in.

Unless...

His plans shift, certainty settling into place.

He leans over and kisses her awake.

She opens heavy-lidded eyes. Memories burn bright in her gaze—all their love. All their time together. He strokes her hair. Cups her jaw.

Drums his fingers lightly on her cheek. *Rap-tap-tap.*

He is so, so much more skilled at this than she. She doesn't notice. She's already falling back asleep.

He uncorks the vial in his pocket. Coaxes every single memory of them past her lips, into the vial.

When she wakes, she'll be free. No guilt. No love or longing. No reason to stay, or to stop him.

He'll remember for both of them, till the end.

He leaves his cloak of shadows on the bed for her to escape with—he won't be needing it. Then he slips out.

He turns for Severien's rooms, where the reckoning he once fled awaits, the bottle of stolen memories deep in his pocket.