

A glowing golden key floats in the center of a misty, blue-toned forest. The key has a bright yellow-orange sunburst effect at its head. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees and a ground covered in fallen logs and moss. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ethereal.

The Key Thief

Christina Van Starckenburg

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— PROLOGUE —

The Lost Key

Prince Damien paused in the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. The strands of his long black hair that weren't knotted into his ponytail fluttered in the early morning breeze. The two guards who had been leaning over to pull back the flaps and announce his presence snapped back to their upright positions.

Damien's expression was severe as he turned and looked toward the mountains that obscured the gateway between the elven and human realms. In his mind, he saw beyond the silhouetted peaks of the Greisgebied Mountains to his palace, and to all of the fields and forests his brother left unworked. His fists clenched and his lips curled down in a snarl at the thought of the king.

He forced his expression back to its characteristic look. Soon, the elves would be prosperous enough not to need to subject themselves to the pity and scorn of the pathetic people who walked on this side of the mountain. Soon, the Elven Kingdom of Grahmadon would be his and safely out of the control of his useless brother. His mouth twisted into a smile as he indicated to the guards that he was ready for them to announce his arrival.

"His Royal Highness, Prince Damien of Grahmadon," proclaimed the guard on the right.

The flaps were swept out of his way, and he entered. Servants silently moved chairs back as the six nobles around the table stood. The table was created from a cross-section of an ancient chestnut balanced on top of the stump of a much smaller tree. When he was a child, his father told him it was commissioned by their grandfather to remind his descendants about all of the different items that balance on the king's ability to lead. Damien's mother had overheard and scoffed that all it did now was warn the men in their family to keep their temper in front of those they wished to impress lest they knock it over. Oftentimes, there was a map covering up the table's rings, but they had no need of maps today.

Damien briefly let his smile fall onto each of the six elves standing around the table. Except for Mikhail, these lords had secretly supported his claim to the throne for a long time. But now, with the newcomer's help, their support need not be secret much longer. Not for the first time, Prince Damien wondered what his brother, King Orrin, had done to get Mikhail to turn from him. At first, he thought it was a trap when Mikhail showed up with the key the night before last. But the elf had been watched closely since his arrival; no messages had been sent out, and he did bring the key to the gates between the realms. Taking the key from the keeper was enough to have the older elf executed for treason, and so, for now, Damien was intent on believing his sincerity.

He placed his fingers lightly onto the table and leaned forward, ignoring the chair behind him. "All right, gentlemen, how do we get Queen Alethea through the gate without the key?"

Lord Diogenes tapped his lips thoughtfully. His dark brown hair was pulled up in the same style the prince had been favoring lately, and Damien knew Diogenes would change his hairstyle should Damien's diverge from the knotted tie for too long. "We could always allow her to pass through the gate with the key and then have someone steal it from her possession."

Prince Damien's lips pursed as the idiotic idea came out of Diogenes' mouth. How he longed to put Lord Diogenes in his place and be done with his foolishness forever. But no, that pathetic elf would likely turn tail and tell Orrin everything if he felt even the slightest bit insulted.

"That could work," mused the portly Lord Hieremias. "Although," he paused dramatically as he puffed out his chest and nodded to the prince, "I'm not sure we should leave our success up to the likelihood of the queen being lax in her guarding of the key."

Prince Damien's eyes darkened as he swallowed his response—of course, those two were the first to open their mouths. Fools always were. Before he told them as much, Lord Mikhail spoke up.

"Perhaps, Your Majesty, it might be best to imprison the queen."

Lords Agapios, Gregorios, and Venedictos narrowed their eyes at the newcomer. While Diogenes and Hieremias had flocked to his side at the first slight from his brother the other three were more level-headed, and Damien had worked long and hard to subtly sway them to his side and his belief that he would be the better ruler. As such, their concern with the statement rekindled Damien's ill-ease with Mikhail's presence.

Naturally, Diogenes and Hieremias did not remain silent. "He's trying to betray you, my lord," said Diogenes as Hieremias snapped, "Perhaps we should lock him up." The two were always worried when another lord joined their ranks. They seemed to know their prince merely tolerated them, yet they lacked the intelligence to figure out why.

Prince Damien held up his hand to silence the lords and nodded towards Mikhail, "Continue."

Mikhail bowed graciously. "I have no intention of betraying you, my lord; I only meant we should imprison her so she and your brother are unable to sire any brats that might pose problems down the road should your brother or his offspring ever learn how to open the gateways again."

The prince nodded pensively. He considered Mikhail's point. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gregorios stroking his beard and nodding as well. Agapios and Venedictos were watching the prince to see what his reaction would be, but Damien noted that their postures had relaxed minutely with the added explanation. Only Diogenes and Hieremias still sneered at Mikhail.

"Yes," Prince Damien said after a few moments and sat down, finally signalling to the other lords that it was all right for them to follow suit. "That is a good plan. Once I am king, we will lock her in one of the towers to rot."

Agapios coughed and looked down into his teacup. "Unfortunately, my prince, while this method may succeed in getting you sworn in as regent, it will not make you king." He pushed the cup aside, and a servant swooped in and replaced it with one that was steaming. The other servants moved in unison to replace the remaining cups.

Venedictos nodded. "He's right, Your Majesty, especially since the queen is currently acting as regent."

"Illegally," snapped the prince. He slapped his hands down on the table, causing Diogenes to jump and the tea to slosh out of several of the cups. Servants scurried in to wipe up the mess and refill them. "Our laws dictate that only a man may rule, and before dragging us out into this wasteland run amok with peasants, my brother decided to put his wife on the throne."

"So, no one will see anything amiss with you removing her and stepping in," said Mikhail.

Hieremias nodded so rapidly Damien wondered if his head would fall off. "That's right and being regent isn't so bad." He looked around at the other elves for support before continuing, "First of all, we'll be spared from your brother's rule, and, perhaps more importantly, since they'll never make it back, you'll be king in all but name, and none of the other nobles will be able to question it."

Diogenes nodded emphatically. "That's true, and" he lowered his voice before continuing, "unless your brother and his wife were to die unexpectedly, and without anyone assuming foul play, this is the quietest and least divisive way for you to gain the throne and save us." He rubbed his hands together a few times before setting them down on the table, where his fingers began to tap nervously.

The four lords of sense and reason remained impassive at Diogenes' suggestion. Although, Damien thought he detected a hint of alarm in Mikhail's expression before he composed himself. Damien wondered if the newcomer would have it in him to kill a kinsmen should the transition not go smoothly.

"You'd probably have more supporters than you'd think if you opted to try and overthrow your brother through more violent methods," continued Hieremias picking up where Diogenes left off, without any of the other lord's inhibitions. "While not as loyal as those of us in this room," his eyes darted towards Mikhail as an exception, "there are other lords who would stand with you should you make your desire to rule be known more widely. They haven't acted since they don't think it's what you'd want."

"But that would mar some individuals' opinions of you," stammered Diogenes. His eyes flicked from Damien, to the other lords in the room, to the tent's flaps, never resting on anything for more than a moment. He licked his lips and swallowed. "Not that, well... that's not necessarily a bad thing. I mean, if you wanted to do that—show you who's truly loyal and on your side and all."

Prince Damien shook as he took a slow breath in. He looked at Mikhail; this was not the time to ruin everything by losing his temper. "Yes," he said at length, "that could work. Once Orrin is gone for several years, I will petition the lords to have me crowned king in light of my brother's abandonment. It will take longer, but I can wait."

He stood up and slapped Lord Agapios on the shoulder. "Come, it is time to be off. If we leave within the hour, we'll be able to arrive right when the gates can open." As Damien approached the entrance, the guards pulled back the flaps once more, and he strode into the still early morning sun. The other lords followed him out and dispersed, moving towards their temporary abodes.

Prince Damien sauntered back to his tent to get the key. Mikhail trailed a few steps behind Damien as he headed to his own tent. A flurry of activity was happening around them. Half of the tents were already dismantled. The late autumn breeze danced in his hair, but despite the chill wind, warmth radiated throughout his body. He smirked.

Once this was all over, he would find Lord Mikhail an appropriate role to thank him for the key. One that would keep him close so he could watch him and see if his opinions about his

betrayal of the king would change. The elf had stolen the key once, and he had been very vague about how. Damien was not going to let it happen a second time.

He nodded to Lord Mikhail, who paused and bowed before turning and entering into his tent to hurry his servants up. Prince Damien smiled and continued down the path. Soon, he would be king in all but name. Damien just needed to get back through the gate with his followers and his brother would never be able to return to Grahmadon. Then, once he claimed regency back from his brother's wife, he would be free to lock the queen up somewhere secure and out of the way.

The prince's smile melted from his face. Her prison would have to be comfortable unless he wanted to risk upsetting too many of the lords still loyal to the king. The more dangerous ones could be disposed of quickly and quietly, but, if too many were to disappear at once, it could create problems he didn't want to deal with right now. If one or two loyalists a year passed away from seemingly natural circumstances, it would ensure the majority would support his coronation when the time came without spooking the nobles into wondering if they were next.

He stopped walking and pointed to the solitary guard outside of his tent, "You there, how are the preparations coming for us to leave?"

The elf's eyes bulged and his whole body tensed as he took a step back and looked around frantically for someone else that his prince, no, his king, might be speaking to. Seeing no one, he bowed low and opened his mouth wordlessly a few times before he was able to stammer, "W-w-w-well, milord."

"Good." Prince Damien turned away from the elf and saw him flee out of the corner of his eye. He considered calling him to account for his poor behaviour. The guard should have, at the very least, opened the tent. Once the kingdom was safe, he would have someone figure out who that elf was and teach him the proper way to address royalty.

Prince Damien entered his tent. Papers rustled in the breeze let in by the open flap. Sheets slipped off his desk and danced across the floor. Clothes had been pulled from their chest. His sleeping mat had been yanked from its spot and flipped over. One of his spare shoes had been knocked over and was now leaning against the first. Ink dripped from the desk onto the toppled chair and ran down the seat to the ground forming a fresh pool on his ceremonial cloak.

He opened his mouth in horror as the terror of the guard in front of his tent took on a whole new meaning. "Guards!" he bellowed, as he edged inside.

He stepped over the chair, heedless of the ink that brushed against his garments. Did that imposter find it? Prince Damien placed his hands on the lip of the desk to find the latch for the secret drawer.

A guard dashed into the room. It was not the one Prince Damien had spoken with moments before, but then, he didn't expect it to be. Prince Damien picked up a few pages and knocked them together into a neater pile to disguise the fact he had been looking for the drawer. Had the first thief not found it, he certainly wouldn't advertise its location to a second.

"Is this how you respond when your prince calls you?" He slapped the papers down on the desk, careless of where the ink still pooled. "My tent has been ransacked! How did this happen under your supervision? Had there been an ambush, I would be dead by the time you moseyed into this mess."

The guard threw his hand up into a stiff salute as a red tinge gave color to his cheeks. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. There was—"

"Well, find out who did this and bring them back!" Damien flexed his fingers as they rested on the paper that was slowly sucking up the ink. He was tempted to pick the guard up and throw him from the tent. "Move!" He waved the man out of the tent.

"Of course, sir." The guard ducked out the front of the tent.

No wonder this had happened; all of the guards were incompetent. That would change when he was the rightful king. His fingers tapped on the table before him. One hit the bottom of the ink bottle. Prince Damien stared at it a moment. He picked up the bottle and threw it across the tent. It shattered on the armour of the Captain of the Guards, who chose that moment to enter.

The remaining black liquid ran down Captain Akimos' tabard, but the elf ignored it as he scanned the room. "I alerted the guards about the intruder in our midst. We will hunt down this apostate and bring him to justice." He moved to step back outside the tent but paused on the threshold. "Did he find it?"

Prince Damien's eyes tightened as he tried to bore holes into Akimos. "Out," he whispered. The irritatingly calm Captain Akimos bowed low and left.

Alone once more, Prince Damien returned his attention to his desk. He found the latch and opened the drawer. The key was no longer there. He regretted throwing the ink jar already, for he sorely wanted to be able to throw it again. Instead, he threw the papers he had gathered to the ground once more. His lips paled and thinned as he stormed out of his tent after the guards.

"Find him, or we will all be trapped in this accursed land," he yelled at the guards who were running past him. They paused their rushing long enough to salute him and then turned back to the task at hand.

The prince followed them to the edge of the camp.

Captain Akimos appeared at his side with the reins to his horse and the prince's. "My soldiers have tracked the thief that way." He gestured through the forest towards the river. "Do you wish to follow along as we capture him?"

The prince grabbed the reins and mounted his steed. As he spurred the creature forward through the trees, he cursed the decision to leave most of their evlayar home. He would much rather be in the sky on the back of a winged horse right now.

As Damien and Akimos poked through the leaves and branches on the hill above the riverbank, Damien glanced at the horizon. There, he glimpsed the retreating back of the thief galloping away on a stolen horse. Three elves rode swiftly to catch him and a shadow whooshed over him to confirm that some of the evlayar they brought with them had managed to get out of their stables and into the air. Damien called for more guards and galloped to the top of the hill to watch.

The soldiers raced hard and fast, but from where the prince and Akimos waited, it seemed like the thief was spurred on by magic, for he continued to outpace even the flying horses. "Get me a glass!" he demanded.

Captain Akimos calmly handed his prince the spyglass he was holding.

Blood pounded in his ears as he watched the elf race towards the river and away with his key. "Shoot him," he yelled, though his guards could not hear him.

One of the evlayar hovered in the air. From Damien's spot on the ground, he saw the rider nocking an arrow. He turned the spyglass on the thief and imagined the rider purposely slowing his breathing as he aimed his shot.

The would-be thief turned to face them. That action alone saved his life but didn't save him from being shot through the arm and side. The elf doubled over in his saddle but kept riding.

Damien swore.

The guard loosed a second arrow. That too found its mark in the center of the thief's back. But the elf, drawing on some vestiges of strength, held onto his horse long enough to reach the bridge.

"He must have magic," said Prince Damien, with a tinge of fear. Halfway across the bridge, he saw the thief slip from his saddle and stumble over the edge and into the river.

The riders and guards caught up to the thief's horse. Prince Damien looked on as the aerial and land teams swept the water for a sign of the thief. But the edges of the river were frozen, and the current was swift. Even as he watched, Damien knew it was no use. The way home was lost to them all.