

The
DARKNESS
Within
Us

Also by Tricia Levenseller

DAUGHTER *of the* PIRATE KING
DAUGHTER *of the* SIREN QUEEN

VENGEANCE *of the* PIRATE QUEEN

WARRIOR *of the* WILD

The SHADOWS *Between* Us

BLADE *of* SECRETS
MASTER *of* IRON



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Within
Us

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*For Rachel and Holly,
Thank you for making my dreams come true.*



THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A BAD IDEA,
JUST POORLY EXECUTED AWESOME ONES.

—Damon Salvatore, *The Vampire Diaries*,
Season 2, Episode 15



CHAPTER

I

My husband is taking too long to die.

I sit at his bedside, ever the dutiful wife, watching his breath squeeze out of his chest, praying that each one will be his last.

For gods' sake, the man is pushing sixty-four years of age. He's plagued with all manner of diseases from a life of debauchery and indulgence and devils know what else. Yet Hadrian Demos, the Duke of Pholios, clings to life as though there's still something it has to offer him—a bedridden, lecherous old man with nothing going for him except for the sight of my face day after day.

Pholios shifts, as if my thoughts have roused him, and I check over my shoulder, ensuring that Kyros is still stationed in the room, before scooting my chair back an inch. I cast my gaze down to the ground and wait.

"Chrysantha," the old man groans.

"I'm here, husband." I reach out and take one of his spotted, hairy hands, wrapping it in both of mine.

"You look beautiful today," he says.

"Thank you."

I manage not to roll my eyes, for it's how he greets me every morning, as though paying me compliments will get him what he really wants from me, his nineteen-year-old wife.

Pholios smacks his lips together. "Water."

I turn to the pitcher on the bedside table, only to discover it has nothing left.

"You must have been quite thirsty in the night, Your Grace," I say. "I'll refill your cup."

"Kyros can do it."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I force my face to remain a mask of indifference. Living with the duke often feels like I've got an iron band around my lungs. It tightens the moment I realize I'm about to be alone with him.

Kyros, the handsome young footman, locks eyes with me. Sympathy and regret radiate from him, but I subtly nod my encouragement. The last thing I want is my friend getting fired for disobeying orders.

"At once, Your Grace," he says. "I will return shortly." The last bit is meant for me.

The moment he leaves the opulent master suite of the Pholios Manor, my husband jerks free of my hold and reaches for my breasts.

Long used to the duke's antics, I stand and turn to make my escape, but not quickly enough. He manages to swat my rump before I'm out of arm's reach. I keep my gaze on the ground.

It's the best tactic for hiding my true thoughts.

"Shall I read to you today?" I ask.

Pholios grunts. "No. No more books. Come back over here."

"More books, you said? Let me go select one." I glide to the opposite side of the room, where a line of shelves decorates the wall.

"Damnable nitwit," Pholios says. "I paid your father seven thousand necos for you. Such a waste."

"I'm sorry, husband." The band squeezes tighter.

“I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to hike up those skirts and climb onto this bed to do your wifely duty.”

A so-called duty that he has been unable to force me to perform thanks to his illness.

“What duty could be more important than caring for my husband?” I ask.

He doesn’t think me cheeky. No one does. I’ve worked long and hard to secure the reputation of a simpleton. It’s saved me more times than I can count. It’s how I manipulated my father into marrying me to a dying wealthy duke. If only I’d known then what I’d signed up for. Pholios didn’t reveal his true nature to me until after we were married. I thought he merely wanted a bedside companion until he joined the devils in one of their hells.

“Your *nightly* duty,” the duke clarifies.

“It’s daytime, husband.”

“I know that!” His coughs fill the room, and I ignore them while I take my time staring at the rows of books. I already know which one I will select, but I’m in no hurry to step within reaching distance once again. Not until Kyros is back in the room.

Pholios may be a foul creature, but he likes to keep up appearances in front of his staff. Either he knows what he’s doing is wrong and wants to maintain some sort of reputation or he thinks matters of the bedroom should be kept private. Either way, when others are around, he keeps his hands to himself, though Kyros has walked in on plenty of untoward occurrences. I’ve been grabbed, pinched, slapped, and pawed at more times than I can count in the last two months of my life, which also happens to be the length of my marriage.

But it will all be worth it as soon as Pholios is dead. The duke has no children of his own, no relatives to inherit his title, which means that upon his death, all of this will be mine. The manor, the dukedom, the servants, the *money*. All mine to do with as I please, and no man

will ever be able to decide my fate again. I will be a dowager duchess forevermore.

Forever free.

That future is so close I can taste it. Just a few more weeks. A month at most. Pholios can't have much longer left.

And then I won't have to hide who I really am anymore.

When I hear the soft steps of Kyros returning, I select the book of poetry from the shelf. The footman looks relieved to find me on the other side of the room. His sympathy is unnecessary—I can handle the old man—but it is kind, nonetheless. I return to my chair as Kyros finishes assisting the duke in taking a drink. Pholios nearly chokes when he reads the title on the tome I hold.

"No," he says. "I hate poetry."

Which is precisely why I chose it. "It will clear your head, Your Grace. Poetry livens the soul."

He grumbles some more but quiets as I start reading. I think he likes the sound of my voice, though he mostly stares at my chest while I read, so I raise the book a little higher. After about ten minutes of this, Pholios's snores fill the room once more.

"Are you all right, Your Grace?" Kyros asks me, his tone a gentle murmur so as not to wake the duke.

"Well enough, Kyros, and you?" I close the book and turn in my chair to properly observe the man. Even in his livery, he is quite handsome. He wears the traditional white shirt and stockings with gloves and boots. He's always clean and pristine, with the best posture. His strong chin bears the most adorable dimple in the center, and his green eyes always seem bright. Combed-back, sun-kissed hair hangs past his ears, and his strong form puts many footmen to shame.

Day after day, it's just me and Kyros stuck in this suite, seeing to the duke and his every need. On occasion, Kyros's young son makes an appearance, desperate to show us frogs he's caught in the property's

pond or the rocks he's found in the woods. The boy knows to be quiet in case the duke is sleeping, careful to catch our attention and drag us from the room for brief moments to see his prizes.

I always relish the opportunity.

"Very well, Your Grace." Kyros politely does not speak of my marriage with the duke and what I'm subjected to. He has the common sense to know that I have no wish to talk of such humiliation. "Nico learned a new word this morning," he says instead, to bring the conversation to brighter topics.

I smile at that. "And what is the word?"

"Indignant."

"Such a big word for a four-year-old."

"Don't let him hear you say that. He's four and a half, and not a day less."

In the time we've spent together in this room, I've learned quite a bit about Kyros and his past. He had a son at seventeen. He and the child's mother weren't married, and when she became pregnant, she made it very clear that she had no interest in raising a child. Though the law makes no such demands of single men, Kyros took up the role of father alone.

"Where is Nico now?" I ask.

"In the kitchens, helping Cook. You know how he has a sweet tooth."

"I shall have to track him down later. I look forward to hearing him try to work *indignant* into a sentence."

Doran, another footman, enters the room, brandishing a salver with a single letter upon it.

"A letter for you, Duchess," he says in a loud voice, waking Pholios once more. I wish to chide the man, but I keep a wan smile in place.

"Thank you, Doran," I say as I stand and retrieve the folded parchment.

"I'll have breakfast now, Kyros. Go fetch it," the duke says, alert once more.

Though I'm sure both servants leave the room, I don't notice. I'm too busy staring at the handwriting on the letter.

It's my sister's.

Alessandra never writes me. I barely write her—only when I wish to amuse myself by chastising her. She thinks me a puffed-up imbecile, which I find all the more entertaining. Alessandra has always been too obvious about what she wants and how she'll go about getting it. Right now, she's attempting to woo the Shadow King.

I chuckle quietly to myself. If he didn't want me, then he's certainly not going to want her. It's not a matter of vanity. I may have gotten Mother's looks, but that's no matter. A pretty face will only get you so far. What's most important is that I'm the better actress. I can pretend to be what men want. And what men want most, I've discovered, is someone they think they can control. So I pretend to be docile. I pretend to be obedient. When men think they can control you, they don't watch you as closely. When they think you're stupid, they're not so careful about the things they'll say in front of you.

But Alessandra? I could always tell what she was thinking. Although, I will admit that I hadn't thought her capable of murder. When the truth about what happened to her first lover came out, I was caught by surprise. And even more shocking was the king's immediate pardoning of her.

It's my fault the two of us aren't close. We've always been in competition for our father's attention. His whole world was Mother, but when she died when I was twelve and Alessandra eleven, I knew his love would either transfer to Alessandra or to me. He only ever had enough room in his heart for one woman at a time, so I snatched it up before Alessandra even knew what was happening. She would have done the same if she could.

We live in a world where men decide everything. Where we live. When we receive money. Who we will marry. I knew my best chance

of achieving happiness was to wrap my father around my finger. It was her or me.

I chose me.

I feel a little guilty at times, but that won't matter when I finally have what I want. When I'm rich and beholden to no man, I can do whatever I wish, including cultivating a relationship with my sister if I choose.

I unfold the letter and read its contents:

Dear Chrysantha,

I wanted to extend a personal invitation to my wedding. Kallias and I are marrying in six months' time. My coronation is to be held the same day, right after the marriage ceremony.

You will attend, yes? Or are you too busy playing nursemaid to your wrinkled husband? Surely you can spare some time for the biggest day in your only sister's life? Send your reply along speedily, and I shall save you a front-row seat to this trollop's wedding to the Shadow King.

*All my best,
Alessandra*

There's a thundering in my ears, and I don't notice until it's too late that I've crushed the letter within my grasp.

The king.

My little sister is wedding the damned king.

He didn't want me, but he wants her. *Her!* The murderess.

All this time I've spent plotting, planning, trying to achieve something for myself. I've been molested, degraded, verbally assaulted day after day, and for what? Thus far, I have nothing to show for it.

Meanwhile, Alessandra has slept with so many men that I've lost count. I've called her much worse than a trollop in the past. It was my way of telling her to be cautious. She had to be careful with her reputation if

she was to secure a good future for herself. And it made me feel better, when the jealousy over her finding companionship while I was fighting for survival on my own would nearly overcome me. Because I thought carrying on as she did would prevent me from marrying into wealth.

But somehow she won a *king*. She will become an actual *queen*. She'll have untold resources and money and *everything*. No one will ever touch her, not when she's wedded to the most powerful man in the world.

My temperature spikes, and red tinges the world.

She won.

How could she have won? She didn't do anything! She didn't earn it. She didn't even know we were playing the same game and how, how, how, damn it?

During my frantic musings, I hadn't realized I'd drawn closer to the bed. Pholios strikes like a snake, gripping my hip through my dress, and trying to pull me closer.

In my fury, I smack his hand away without thinking.

The duke and I both freeze.

"Did you just strike me?" he asks.

"I had an itch, Your Grace."

He grunts and has the audacity to look offended, but I can tell a foul thought has taken root in his mind when he suddenly smiles.

"Come closer, wife, and I shall forgive it."

"Closer?" I ask.

"Yes, lean over the bed. My comforter has come untucked on the other side. You must fix it."

My face is a mask of emptiness, and my soul burns. I've been trapped in this house too long, stuck in this room with the duke staring at me while he licks his lips and tries to coax me closer. Meanwhile, my sister is living a life of luxury and perfection and freedom. On the

damned Shadow King's arm. I had failed to woo him during my stay at the palace, so I thought I'd settled for the next best thing.

I will settle no longer.

The iron band around my lungs snaps. My brain detaches from the rest of my body, and my limbs move without my consciously saying so.

I do as the duke bid earlier. I hike up my skirts and sit astride him. His eyes bulge from their sockets before he has the good sense to reach out with both hands, wrapping them around my waist. He tries to force me into just the position he wants; then he makes his best attempts at thrusting his hips up into me, layers and layers of clothing and bedding thankfully still separating us.

But my focus is on the extra pillow beside his head. I lean down for it, and Pholios's fingers go to cup my breasts. The pressure is bruising, but I don't sit up until I've got the pillow. Even then, it's only to adjust my position.

I smother him with the down-filled cushion.

That which had started to go hard beneath me suddenly goes limp. Pholios's cries of distress are eaten by the pillow, and his feeble body barely moves beneath mine. His hands finally leave my chest to reach for my arms, trying to force them away from himself.

I don't let up the pressure.

"Isn't this what you wanted, husband? Am I finally good for something now?"

If Alessandra can get everything she wants despite murdering a man, then why can't I? Her face rises in my vision, and I close my eyes against it, against every foul thing this man has ever done to me.

Never again.

Even when his pathetic resistance ceases, I don't get up right away. I sit there atop my dead husband, lost in some kind of dark limbo between before and after.

Before, I wasn't a violent person. Before, I'd been patience personified.

Now, I'm free. Now, I can be whatever I want.

Starting with a murderess, just like my sister. I have stooped to her level. The thought finally drives me to action. I right myself, place the pillow back in its position, and smooth out the duke's hair. He looks so peaceful in death.

I hope he finds no peace wherever I've just sent him.

As I return to my chair, I notice a figure in the doorway. Kyros's son, Nico, stands there, crumbs on his chin.

He looks between me and the duke.

I catch my breath.