

This is an excerpt from my current work-in-progress,
the first book in my Deceiver series, which remains untitled for now.

Prologue

The Tower of Tamlon

A slow rumble shook the walls, and the tower groaned occasionally. The winds, which had been building all day, were beginning to crescendo into a steady howl. High up the southeast Tower of Tamlon, overlooking the North Sea, Illena Maren paced restlessly, the edge of her long, red gown trailing as she crossed the marble floor and peered out the arched window. From far below, the sound of waves echoed as they crashed against the jagged reef.

On a nearby table, a single candle flickered, more charred and blackened than yellow. Illena held her hand over the flame, almost touching it before pulling away. "Where are you, my love?" she whispered, feeling the heat from the flame against her skin.

For a moment, her eyes caught a glimpse of her own reflection in a mirror hanging from a large stone column. Just shy of her middle years, threads of silver were now woven throughout her long, dark hair, which had been carefully swept into a simple but elegant crown. Her once radiant beauty now bore the marks of time, with a face lined by worry and bright sea-green eyes that had seen too much.

An icy breeze swept through the chamber, and Illena wrapped her arms around herself to keep from shivering. Torches mounted in ornate sconces, cast shadows onto the high ceiling above, while a giant hearth snapped and sputtered as if in protest of the encroaching cold. The walls were adorned with numerous murals and paintings, priceless works of art whose luster had been dulled by the passage of time and the fading memories of the stories they once told.

Only one tapestry seemed to remain untouched by the elements, nestled between the arms of a single, high-backed chair. Woven in intricate detail, the vibrant threads seemed to come alive, depicting a lone figure standing atop a giant, windswept peak, with outstretched arms. His face, half-shrouded in shadow, bore an expression of both triumph and torment. Below him, shapes writhed and twisted, some forming recognizable human features while others faded into mist.

For a moment, Illena gazed at the tapestry, her fingers tracing the gilded inscription beneath it, but even that couldn't hold her attention for long. Memories stirred, and her thoughts drifted once more to her beloved, a sudden ache welling deep within her. "Where are you?" she murmured, as tears began to spill. Without realizing it, she tensed as a sudden sound intruded on her thoughts —the cry of a baby.

Surprise flashed across her face as she hurried through the large archway into the adjoining room, scrubbing the tears from her eyes. The sound of the rain beating relentlessly against the windows and walls meant the storm had finally broke and she felt a sudden keen awareness of her surroundings. The cries that had torn her from her reverie, now pierced her entire being. Leaning down, she carefully retrieved the small bundle from the cradle beside the bed, pulling it to her chest. Tiny, powerful movements probed the edges of the swaddling blanket, as she began to gently sway back and forth.

A loud thunderclap echoed through the chamber, causing the crystals on the chandelier to clatter. Illena adjusted the blanket so that she could gaze at the small child in her arms. Her child. The only secret she had ever kept from her beloved before he had left. A sudden pang of guilt struck her, and her face flushed hot. She had rationalized her decision thousands of times,

rehearsing all the reasons why she hadn't told him. But the truth was, she wasn't entirely certain. She had wanted to, but when the time came, the words wouldn't come out.

A flood of emotion washed over her, and she quietly sat down, smiling at her daughter, tears streaming down her cheeks. A small smile glowed up at her and a laugh escaped the darkness. Softly, she began to sing a lullaby she remembered learning from her mother. By the time she finished, the child had drifted to sleep again, seemingly untroubled by the storm outside or any worry within.

When Illena emerged from the room, she did not immediately see the man who had appeared near the entryway. The doors to the chamber remained shut behind him, and there had been no sound other than the storm. It was as though he simply materialized. He stood motionless, and then, tossing back his cloak, he called out, his voice hoarse, "Illena, it is I... I... have... returned."

At the sound of his voice, Illena felt her knees buckle, barely catching herself with one hand against the wall. "Thoren?" she breathed, her heart pounding with disbelief. Her eyes widened as they took in the sight of a man dressed in familiar clothes that now hung loose on his gaunt frame. His once vibrant hair was now more gray than dark, and an unkempt beard framed a face etched by exhaustion. The distant look in his eyes made him almost unrecognizable.

He tottered forward, almost falling. "Illena," he repeated, collapsing into her arms as she rushed to him. A fleeting thought crossed her mind: his clothes and hair were untouched by the storm. But all thoughts were pushed aside as it took all her strength to guide him to the ornate couch by the fireplace, her body curved protectively around his. Her hands shook as she

smoothed the hair away from his face, fighting back tears. "Illena, my love," he rasped, "I'm finally home."

"What have they done to you?" A million thoughts raced through her mind as she hurried to place pillows behind his back and draped a warm blanket over his legs. It took a moment before she could bring herself to meet his gaze, fearing what it might reveal about his suffering. He tried to sit up, but she gently pushed him down, urging him to rest.

She peered into his eyes, and for a moment, the distant gaze vanished, replaced by a sharp lucidity. Then, sudden panic overtook his expression. "No!" he exclaimed, trying to sit up once more.

"What is it?" Illena asked, her eyes darting around to take in her surroundings.

After a moment, his expression softened, and the distant look returned. His gaze drifted to the fire, where the light reflected in his tired eyes. His voice, barely above a whisper, said, "Sorry... It's just been so long."

Illena felt a nagging sensation in the back of her mind, a thought she couldn't quite grasp. Her thoughts were adrift. "Thoren, listen," she began. "There's something I have to tell you..." She wanted to say, "We have a child," but he had already drifted off to sleep. A wave of gratitude washed over her as she watched the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. Whatever questions were lingering in her mind, she pushed them away and forced herself to relax.

But then, slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, Thoren's body began to change. His eyes shot open first, widening in surprise and filling with desperation, as though he wanted to stop

whatever it was from happening but couldn't. His face grimaced; his muscles tightened. His body contorted, and he began to writhe. Illena stepped back, as he toppled backwards, crashing to the marble floor, his body rebounding from the hard stone.

He convulsed and thrashed as if in wild agony, letting out a throated scream that dwarfed anything she had ever heard before, "Illena!" It was the anguished voice of her beloved, crying out in desperate torment. For the first time since those two winters ago, Illena felt as though she were truly hearing it again.

"No..." she sobbed, her voice drowning in sorrow. "It can't be." And then everything turned silent.

Illena watched in despair as the man, who had finally stopped convulsing, slowly got to his feet. He was younger than Thoren, shorter, with a lean build and blond hair that fell in disarray around his sharp features. But it was the cut of his clear blue eyes—cold, calculating—and the sudden cruel smile that made her shiver. His mouth twisted with distaste as he surveyed his surroundings. Clad entirely in black, he meticulously straightened his cloak, a gesture that seemed in odd counterpoint to what had occurred. Illena took a step backward when his piercing gaze turned to her.

"So, now you know," he said, his voice cold and mocking. "Not what I had envisioned, but Thoren was many things, if not resourceful."

"What have you done?" Illena breathed, her heart pounding as though it might explode from her chest. Though she knew the answer, she desperately wanted to turn away from it.

“It’s not what I’ve done,” he frowned contemptuously. “It’s what Thoren’s done. Though how he managed to do it...” His voice trailed off, and he looked away as though lost in thought before turning once more to face Illena. “No doubt, trying to warn you.” He smiled again, another cruel smile, filled with hate.

The truth of his words resounded like an iron fist, striking Illena to her core. The life-bond severed; he’d been unable to maintain the form of her beloved. Thoren had sacrificed himself, giving his life in warning. The sudden realization pierced Illena, and she stumbled backward, dropping to her knees, a deep, throaty sob escaping her mouth, “No! No!”

“Oh, how I wish he were alive to see you now,” the man sneered. He took a step towards Illena, gesturing casually, “You know, many things are shared in the life-bond: thoughts, memories... desires.”

Illena winced involuntarily and the man dressed in black laughed out loud.

“Oh, yes, I feel I know you... intimately, Illena Maren, First of the Protectors, Queen of the Everlands. I know all your secrets... Well, maybe not all. Thoren, as I mentioned, was indeed resourceful...”

Illena steeled her voice as she slowly got to her feet. “Who are you, Deceiver?” A memory stirred from deep within, a cloudy memory, a dream of a dream, faded but not gone. She tried to bring it to her mind, but it eluded her.

“I’ve gone by many names. In another life, I was known as Ka’el Asmoresh Lanforth, but you-”

“Deceiver of Dreams.” Illena’s voice was a whisper of disbelief. Tears blurred her vision, and again the memory stirred, this time more pronounced. She briefly closed her eyes, trying to remember, her mind drifting to the cold of winter and the last time she saw her beloved.

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“Do you trust me?” Thoren asked, his bright blue-green eyes wide with sincerity.

“Of course, I trust you. What sort of question is that?”

“We must face the possibility that I could fail, or worse, be captured.”

“I don’t want to think about that,” Illena said, shying away from the thought.

“Darkness is spreading throughout the Everlands. Mordethar and his Dominion of Deceivers are growing in strength and number. Even the most powerful Source Wielders are falling victim. Nothing escapes the life-bond. Remember that. Nothing. Should you come face to face with a Deceiver, they will try to use your own mind against you, pulling out your memories, everything you ever learned, everything you trained for, all your weaknesses, vulnerabilities... secrets. In the end, you’ll be staring at a version of yourself when they try to destroy you.”

“Or worse,” Illena shuddered, “someone you know and trust.”

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“So, you have heard of me,” the Deceiver said scornfully. “It won’t make any difference. Not even the mighty Thoren Aeldor, King of the Evers, could withstand the Breaking.”

“You’re not worthy to speak his name!” Illena spat, her voice rising with fury. “For all your empty triumphs, I will destroy you!”

The Deceiver’s expression darkened, a flicker of contempt flashing across his face. “You pitiful fool! You’re just like all the others. They all thought as you do. And one by one, they all failed.”

Not a moment later, his body began to contort once more, but this time without the violent and agonizing protest from before. The change was almost instantaneous, and then, another man stood before her, tall with dark skin. “A pity Thoren had to ruin the surprise,” he said in a deep baritone voice.

He began to change again, his shape shifting rapidly into different people, some of whom Illena recognized from her past. Lanfer Sunstrike, tall and imposing with sun-kissed skin and piercing blue eyes. Grissom Wrangel, stout and muscular, with dark skin and a stern countenance. Next, Porter Ashfall, lean and roguish, with tanned skin and a cunning look in his eyes. Finally, her old mentor from the Council of Source Wielders, Elara Moonshadow, a woman of striking elegance with silver hair and a calm, wise demeanor.

Illena gazed, dumbfounded, her heart sinking in disbelief. How was this possible? Were they all prisoners somewhere, enslaved in some dungeon while he masquerades around in their bodies? At least this means they’re still alive, she thought, taking some small comfort, but then quickly reminding herself that being alive and living are completely different things. She suddenly felt a deep sorrow for her lost companions.

The Deceiver seemed to take immense satisfaction in Illena's discomfort. It was odd hearing the voice of her former mentor, in the exact tone and tenor, every detail the same. In the voice of Elara Moonshadow, the Deceiver spoke, "It wasn't me that killed Thoren Aeldor. Not really. Sure, it took quite some time to piece together his memories," the Deceiver continued. "The tedious monotony and endless waiting for his mind to weaken. No one can hold out forever. The will is strong, but the body falters. And you, my Queen, were his downfall. How else do you think I entered his mind? I came to him as you in a dream. The look in his eyes when he saw you, it was... breathtaking. He didn't see the trap until I'd already slipped past. Oh, he tried to shut me out after that, door after door he tried to close, but he couldn't close them fast enough. You know, it actually was a challenge for me?"

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"How can I possibly defeat an enemy who is the mirror of myself?" Illena asked with a large sigh.

"Not just the mirror of you," Thoren said, "but a hundred versions of you... and other Source Wielders – anyone they share the life-bond with, provided they're still alive and under their control. No one can withstand that kind of power. Which is why the practice is forbidden. In a confrontation, the best you can hope for is to try to escape."

"I thought you said we needed to prepare for the possibility of failure. What you're describing sounds more like the inevitability of defeat. What if escape isn't possible?"

Thoren paused, his eyes filling with sorrow as though he were grappling with an unpleasant thought he wished he could change.

“There is one possibility,” he said. “It’s never been done before,” Thoren said, hesitating again.

“Why do I get the feeling that I am not going to like whatever it is you’re about to say?”

“You know me too well, my love,” his voice trailed off, and he held his words.

Illena paused, weighing his expression, and then tilted her head and gave him a look. After a long pause, she said, “You better just tell me. Why all this hesitation?”

“Because it relies on the overconfidence of the Deceiver... and... the use of a Compulsion.”

“A Compulsion?” Illena asked, her voice sounding incredulous. Compulsions were another forbidden use of the Source and the flows used to create them complex weaves that only a master Source Wielder with a deep learning could achieve. Forbidden because once implemented, the recipient must do whatever is put into their mind at the time the Compulsion was created. “A Compulsion to do what?” Though she asked, fearful of the answer.

“To use the True Source to destroy yourself.”

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“Elara Moonshadow was my mentor and friend,” Illena said to the Deceiver. “You are an abomination to her memory.”

“Her memory? She’s still alive. Do you want to know what she’s thinking right now? Shall we ask her?”

For a moment, the Deceiver closed his eyes and seemed to go somewhere with his mind. When Elara Moonshadow opened her eyes, they were wide with panic and terror. “Illiyana!” she cried, taking one step forward and then stopping herself as she looked around with wild eyes, taking in the surroundings and trying to make sense of them.

Tears streamed down Illena’s face at the recognition of her old mentor and friend. “Elara,” she said, “I’m sorry this happened to you.”

Tears streamed down Elara’s face, but she held herself with grace and dignity. “You were always my best student, Illiyana,” she said with a note of nostalgia. “And now, look at you! Queen of the Evers!”

Illena smiled and nodded, scrubbing the tears from her face.

“Why are you crying, child? There will be a time for tears later. Right now, you must prepare yourself, for all our sakes, you must defeat—” Her voice cut off abruptly and her eyes closed again. A moment later, they opened. “She just goes on and on, doesn’t she?” The Deceiver said in Elara’s voice.

Illena’s voice was iced iron. “Your days of self-adulation will soon be at an end, Deceiver!”

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Illena’s eyes widened in alarm and horror, and then slowly recognition spread across her face as she began to understand the merits of Thoren’s plan.

Thoren nodded and continued. "In a confrontation, when a Deceiver first assumes the form of their victim, they are quick to connect through the life-bond, mirroring everything they can. It's possible that a Compulsion, hidden within you and activated at the time of the mirroring, could pass through the life-bond before they realize what's happened. At that precise moment, the Compulsion, which in this case would be for you to use the True Source to destroy yourself..." his voice trailed off.

"Would become their Compulsion as well," Illena finished, her voice barely a whisper. "Mutual destruction."

Thoren looked away, unable to meet her gaze. "Yes."

They sat together in silence, Thoren holding Illena in his arms, weighing the gravity of their words.

Thoren finally broke the silence. "Mind you, this is only a contingency plan. I'm sure everything will turn out fine."

"You have such a way with words, my love."

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The sudden, piercing cries of an infant girl cut through the chaos, jolting Illena as if struck by lightning. A surge of urgency washed over her, and she wondered how long she had been distracted. Her eyes locked onto the Deceiver and didn't move. The Deceiver's face registered a flicker of shock as he morphed back into his true form.

“What—,” he stopped short, a puzzled frown spreading across his face as he tried to piece everything together. “How did I not know? Unless... I see... I will have to consider how Thoren managed to keep that hidden from me.”

“He didn’t know,” Illena said, feeling an intense sudden guilt.

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They sat together in silence, neither wanting the moment to end, both dreading what was yet to come. Finally, Illena began to nod slowly. “Well, it’s not going to get any easier the longer we wait. Let’s get this over with, my love,” she said abruptly, her voice steady despite the turmoil within.

Thoren took a deep breath, his eyes meeting hers with a mix of sorrow and resolve. “The Compulsion can be triggered any number of ways,” he began, his voice low and measured. “But so that you don’t inadvertently trigger it yourself on a whim or just by thinking something, it will be connected to a series of words spoken out loud.”

Illena paused, considering his words, and recalled the vow she had taken when she was named First among the Protectors. The Protector’s Vow, also known as The Final Oath, was a promise of unwavering courage in the face of insurmountable odds. Spoken first by Arathor Valen during the Battle of Elderglade, it symbolized the ultimate sacrifice. Illena felt a deep kinship with the ancient Source Wielder, understanding the weight of his sacrifice and the courage it took.

“The Protector’s Vow,” Illena said finally, her voice filled with sudden determination.

“Use the Protector’s Vow.”

Thoren studied her for a moment, then nodded solemnly. “Very well,” he said, his voice heavy with the gravity of the task. He stepped closer, his hands beginning to move in intricate patterns as he drew upon the True Source. She could see the strain on his face as he wove complex flows, blending different elements with a deftness that only a master could achieve.

“Now, close your eyes,” Thoren instructed softly.

Illena obeyed, her eyelids fluttering shut. She felt the world around her fade as she focused inward, feeling the warmth of the Source coursing through her. Thoren’s presence was a beacon of strength beside her, his power a steady current she could almost touch.

As Thoren worked, Illena felt the delicate threads of the Compulsion weave into her mind, a lattice of intricate flows settling deep within her consciousness. She sensed the power of the Source intertwining with her thoughts, creating a bond that felt both alien and familiar. The words of the Protector’s Vow echoed faintly in her mind, their rhythm and cadence a soothing counterpoint to the tension that gripped her.

Thoren’s voice broke through the silence, a steady murmur that guided the weave as he recited the vow from memory, “When the night is darkest, and hope fades dim, I shall not despair, I shall not give in. Though enemies surround, and friends disappear, I shall not lose hope, I shall not fear.”

Illena felt the Compulsion take hold, a subtle shift in her awareness. It was as if a seed had been planted deep within her, a dormant command waiting to be awakened. She felt a strange sense of calm settle over her.

Thoren's voice grew firmer, the final words of the Vow resonating with a power that seemed to vibrate in the air around them. "For I am one with the Source, the Light my guide, and if death should come, I shall meet it with pride."

The weave settled into place, a final thread tightening with a faint hum. Illena opened her eyes, meeting Thoren's gaze. She saw the exhaustion in his eyes, but also the unwavering resolve.

"It is done," he said softly. "The Compulsion is set. Speak the Protector's Vow, and... When that moment comes, there will be no return."

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The Deceiver morphed back into the form of Elara Moonshadow, shaking her head in mock disappointment. "Illena, Illena, Illena, so many secrets! What else have you kept hidden from your precious husband? No matter, I shall discover them soon enough!"

"I'm growing tired of these games," Illena said, seizing the True Source, feeling the familiar rush of power fill her. She wove intricate flows of fire and air, her hands moving in graceful, practiced patterns. The room seemed to hum with energy as she held onto the weaves, feeling their potential coiled and ready. "You heard my former mentor; I was always her best student. Even she could not best me in a battle."

With a flick of her wrist, Illena released the flows. Streams of fire shot out, twisting and curling like serpents through the air, their heat palpable even from a distance. The Deceiver's eyes widened, momentarily stunned by the ferocity of her attack. But then his expression hardened, and with a swift motion, he countered, weaving flows of air and spirit to deflect the fiery assault. The air shimmered as their powers collided, the opposing forces crackling and sparking.

"Very well," he said simply, his voice a low growl. He lifted his hands, and the air around him seemed to thicken with power. He began hurling everything he had at Illena – bolts of lightning, torrents of wind, and blades of pure energy. Each attack was a masterpiece of deadly precision, but Illena was ready. She spun her own weaves, creating shields of earth and water, deflecting his onslaught with a skill honed through years of training.

She moved with the fluid grace of a dancer, her mind focused despite the chaos around her. Yet, in the back of her mind, thoughts of her daughter persisted. Would she survive? Would someone come for her? Her thoughts raced and whirled, but she forced herself to remain calm, to stay in the moment.

She thought of Thoren, his face clear in her mind, a source of strength. She remembered her coronation day, the joy and pride she had felt. She thought of her friends, their camaraderie, and the battles they had fought together. The sum of her life's choices played out before her, and she felt a deep sense of satisfaction. It was a life well-lived.

The Deceiver's attacks grew more desperate, more frantic. He could feel her resolve, her unwavering determination. He lashed out with a massive weave of destruction, a combination of

all the elements, but Illena met it with a counterweave of equal power. The air around them erupted in a brilliant explosion of light and energy, the shockwave shaking the very foundations of the tower.

“You’re weak,” Illena scoffed, trying to control her breathing. “Just wait until Mordethar sees how you’ve failed him. I am sure your Master will – ”

“Enough!” The Deceiver sneered viciously, raising a fist. Then slowly, he began to morph and change yet again, and Illena felt a surge of hope mingled with dread as she began to see herself reflected in the form in front of her. She could feel the life-bond forming and concentrated on opening her mind fully. As soon as she felt the probing tendrils of the Deceiver, she began reciting the vow:

“When the night is darkest, and hope fades dim,
I shall not despair...”

As Illena began to speak, her mind shifted as if suddenly being driven by an outside force. Her actions were no longer her own. Even her thoughts were fading as though she were falling asleep and seeing everything through the eyes of a stranger. She felt herself seizing the True Source, the power building up in her, taking in more than she could contain, and then taking in even more. Her thoughts drifted again, fading, she felt tired and had to fight to stay awake. She could sense more than see that the same thing was happening within the Deceiver, and she smiled inwardly. It worked, Thoren, my love, it worked. I’m coming to join you now. Her skin felt on fire, as though she might explode at any moment, the strain more intense than anything she’d ever encountered before. And then, suddenly, everything was quiet.

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The storm outside began to wane, the first light of dawn breaking through the clouds and casting a soft glow through the windows. The Tower of Tamlon stood in disarray, scorch marks marring the walls and floors. Toppled furniture and broken glass lay scattered everywhere.

Elara Moonshadow cradled the young infant in her arms, her eyes sweeping over the wreckage with a mix of sorrow and resolve. She gently rocked the child, whose cries had subsided to soft whimpers. "Your mother," Elara murmured, her voice tinged with both pride and sadness, "was always my best student."

She paused, gazing at the dawn light filtering through the broken windows. Her voice was just a whisper, "Now, it's time to begin again."