

# Chapter One



Aviere Mye gritted her teeth and cursed Edith Eisen, regretting being her *capodecina* instead of *donna* of her own territory... *My former territory*, she reminded herself.

The lithe, longhaired brunette released a short breath when her lanky, sloppy brother babbled an answer to her simplistic question. She poured sulfate into a plastic shell before sealing the completed amphetamine pill.

*I swear, if Limere keeps blubbing, I'll shoot him with a tranquilizer.*

Aviere leaned back in her leather chair and raised her chin, snorting at her brother's ripped-up blue jeans and disheveled, long-sleeved shirt. She pressed a finger to her temple and created a circular gesture with her free hand, indicating to try again.

Halfway through Limere's next incoherent sentence, Aviere held up a leather-gloved hand and resisted the urge to stab him.

"Limere, start from the beginning... and without stuttering, this time."

Sullen ice-blue eyes trailed to her dark brown suede boots.

"Look at me, Limere. A *donna* deserves respect."

"You're a *capodecina*, Sis," he said, voice harsh. "You're working your way up the ranks again after your husband lost Central Baltimore."

Aviere parted her bangs and narrowed her cerulean eyes. "You have thirty seconds before I use you as my next test subject for my latest concoction."

Limere gulped, then paled at her statement.

"Now, answer the question. Did you meet with Eisen or not?"

He lowered his head and scratched the back of his neck. "No. There were cops at her place. Someone almost followed me back here."

Aviere rubbed her throat, tightened her lips, and lowered her silver-rimmed spectacles. "What do you mean 'almost followed' you here? How could anyone track you when you cloak your presence with magic, Limere?"

Limere skittered back. "Sis, I didn't mean to! I swear! Don't claw me, all right?!"

*"Then answer the damn question, Limere."*

"Feds. There were feds there." He wiped beading sweat off his brow. "I booked it before they arrested me, though."

Aviere glanced at the test tubes and various liquids, reminding her of orders she needed to fill. One side of her desk contained herbs and gelatin pill capsules, while vials and typed papers rested on the other. She splayed her hands and snarled, pointy canines resting on her bottom lip.

The mention of federal agents made Aviere again reconsider being Eisen's *capodecina*, considering she almost resigned from the mafia two days earlier.

*I wanted to leave and search for Gunther on my own terms. I could have said no, but Eisen coerced me by being my racing sponsor.*

Goosebumps made her shiver the longer she reflected on the federal agents. Then butterflies fluttered in her stomach, hoping her suspicions weren't correct.

*I finally convinced Eisen to let me street race as a way bring in money, but I can't shake the feeling someone's messed it up.*

Aviere met Limere's light blue eyes and rested a finger on the bridge of her glasses. "Why were federal agents at Eisen's place?"

Silence lingered between them. Limere fidgeted with his fingers before staring in her eyes.

“Edith’s dead, Aviere. Her entire family got iced this evening.”

The color drained from Aviere’s face. “No!”

“The feds were investigating the gruesome scene when I got there. One was taking pictures while the other chased me out of the house.”

She took off her glasses and held them delicately in her leather-gloved hand.

*Shit. I didn’t think they’d get Eisen with Martinez guarding her.*

“I grabbed something from the house.”

Aviere held out her hand. “Let me see.”

Limere reached into his pocket and offered two thin tubes in a plastic baggie. “They were next to her dead teenage kids. You use these for liquid forms of black bryony, don’t you?”

Aviere snatched the plastic bag, tempted to crush it like her shattered dreams.

*Without Eisen, the dons will assume I’m extracting revenge for our family losing Central Baltimore. So much for my sponsorship. No one’ll help me once they find out Eisen’s dead.*

She rose from her leather chair. “Find out what killed them. Our lives depend on it.”

Limere edged closer until she smelled musk and earthy tones. “You know they’ll have a hit on you by morning, Sis.”

“I know.”

“The feds mentioned you as a prime suspect. They’re on their way here to take you in for questioning.”

*Christ. I guess it’s expected. I’m Charm City’s best poisoner, after all.*

Aviere shoved the chair against the desk, disregarding the contents inside her test tubes. The contents on the desk seemed insignificant, compared to her latest crisis.

Once news spread about Edith Eisen, she’d be the target of a citywide manhunt. If they didn’t catch her first, her family would pay the price. She glimpsed at the digital clock on the computer and scowled.

Judging from her calculations, Aviere only had four hours to find Maurice and Limere a sanctuary until morning.

“Limere, take Maurice somewhere safe. I don’t want you guys involved in this manhunt.”

“Yeah, but I need to tell you something, Sis.”

Aviere reached for her purse. “This better be good.”

“One of the feds... he’s a mage, like me.”

She stiffened before whirling back to her brother. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Not sure how developed he is, though. I booked it before I could test him.”

Aviere opened a drawer and retrieved a black and green-cased iPhone, studied her notifications, and growled at an incoming text message. “Can we buy the feds off, Lim?”

“Mages rarely take money, unless they’re necromancers or bounty hunters.”

“You’re telling me this one hides behind the law.” Aviere went through scattered papers on her desk, jotting down notes on a pink sticky pad. “Once we have a name, I can find out if we can buy his silence. If not, I’ll handle him myself.”

Limere shuffled his feet again before removing his filthy blood red baseball cap. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Aviere.”

Cerulean eyes changed shape, morphing into feline eyes. “Explain, Limere.”

“Mages are tricky bastards.”

“Yet you’re still here.” She did her best to revert to normal. “But you have your uses.”

Icy blue eyes sneered at the *capodecina*. “That’s cold to say to your older brother.”

“You had your chance to take over,” Aviere snapped, patting her chest. “It’s not my fault you sold drugs to undercover law enforcement officers for more cocaine.”

“Look, the mage—”

“Hell, Gunther didn’t trust you when our family ran Central Baltimore. He caught hell from every *don* in the city when he appointed me as his Underboss. But I did better as *donna* when Gunther disappeared until your drug bust cost us our position. My husband’s gambling didn’t help, though.”

Limere’s face turned scarlet. “I don’t need a trip down memory lane when we’re on limited time, Sis. But you can’t kill me because you’re upset something’s not going your way.”

“Stop questioning my orders,” Aviere commanded, powering down her tiny laptop. “I’m losing patience and there isn’t much time.”

“The other guy’s a skilled fed, but he’s more of an information specialist. I’m guessing he may have worked forensics before becoming a field agent for the feds.”

*Thank god, something useful, Limere.*

“Martinez should be able to get him reassigned after contacting our mole.”

Aviere busied herself by taking out the laptop battery and crammed it inside her handbag. Then she knelt on the ground and kicked up a wooden floorboard. “So the mage is our problem.”

“Yeah. Maurice and I should have something between us by tomorrow.”

She hid the laptop underneath the flooring before knocking the floorboard back in place with her boot. “Why is Maurice digging on mages when those are your *specialty*, Limere?”

She watched Limere reach in his back pocket for a slim, silver case. “Well, you know—”

Aviere snarled when she tried snatching his case. She missed, but ripped part of his long, cotton sleeve. Claws poked through her gloves and Aviere flushed, scolding herself for her careless mistake.

*I had these made two weeks ago. One day, I’ll slip my claws out in front of the wrong people.*

“Goddammit, Sis... I loved this shirt!”

Aviere curled her upper lip, scurrying to put her supplies away. “Weed’s pungent, Limere. Creatures *smell* shit and I don’t need *shifter* politics along with a bloody mage.” Once her desk was clear, the *capodecina* cleaned her glasses and scrunched her nose, trying to block out her brother’s skunky scent.

The iPhone vibrated and chimed three times. Aviere pocketed the device after reading another text message. “Darren’s waiting upstairs. Get rid of him. If the feds are on their way, he’ll get arrested, too.”

Limere ran his hands through his scraggly brunette hair, dandruff flaking on his shoulders. “What’s *he* doing here? I spoke with him and got our supplies for the week an hour ago.”

Aviere closed her eyes to hide her surprise. *When we get home, I’ll remind Limere about maintaining good hygiene.*

“Probably what everyone else wants,” she said brutally, pointing to the door after opening her eyes. “Get going. You and Reese have work to do.”

“All right.” Limere put his baseball cap on backwards. “Sis, be careful. Stay safe. I’ll call you when I find a safe spot to meet us.”

“I will. You too, Lim.”

As Limere left the room, Aviere dropped the faux purse next to her seat, trying to forget the unpleasant bile and her trembling, icy fingers.

*Trust Limere. He’ll take care of Reese. Focus on the assassins. It’s my job to fix these problems, so I’m not afraid of them or the feds coming after me.*

She pulled out a vial gun and smiled at the single vial of ammunition. The Poisoner shouldered her purse before drawing a set of keys seconds afterward.

*Just find out who’s responsible for murdering the crime lords before the dons take you out, Vi. Whoever killed Eisen might be responsible for Gunther’s disappearance, too.*

A sour expression crossed the Poisoner’s face as she pocketed her Post-it notes, determined to find out who killed her boss and turned her life upside down two days before her first race.