



MORGAN RICE

A DIRGE
FOR PRINCES

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (BOOK FOUR)

A Throne for Sisters

Морган Райс

A Dirge for Princes

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“Morgan Rice's imagination is limitless. In another series that promises to be as entertaining as the previous ones, A THRONE OF SISTERS presents us with the tale of two sisters (Sophia and Kate), orphans, fighting to survive in a cruel and demanding world of an orphanage. An instant success. I can hardly wait to put my hands on the second and third books!” --Books and Movie Reviews (Roberto Mattos) From #1 Bestseller Morgan Rice comes an unforgettable new fantasy series. In A DIRGE FOR PRINCES (A Throne for Sisters—Book Four), Sophia, 17, battles for her life, trying to recover from the wound left by Lady D’Angelica. Will her sister Kate’s new powers be enough to bring her back? The ship sails with the sisters to the distant and exotic lands of their uncle, their last hope and only know connection to their parents. Yet the journey is treacherous, and even if they find it, the sisters don’t know if their reception will be warm or hostile. Kate, indentured to the witch, finds herself in an increasingly desperate situation—until she meets a sorceress who may hold the secret to her freedom. Sebastian returns to court, heartbroken, desperate to know if Sophie is alive. As his mother forces him to marry Lady D’Angelica, he knows the time has come to risk it all. A DIRGE FOR PRINCES (A Throne for Sisters—Book Four) is the fourth book in a dazzling new fantasy series rife with love, heartbreak, tragedy, action, adventure, magic, swords, sorcery, dragons, fate and heart-pounding suspense. A page turner, it is filled with characters that will make you fall in love, and a world you will never forget. Book #5 in the series will be released soon. “ powerful opener to a series will produce a combination of feisty protagonists and challenging circumstances to thoroughly involve not just young adults, but adult fantasy fans who seek epic stories fueled by powerful friendships and adversaries.” --Midwest Book Review (Diane Donovan)

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Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	10
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	16
CHAPTER FOUR	19
CHAPTER FIVE	22
CHAPTER SIX	26
CHAPTER SEVEN	29
CHAPTER EIGHT	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

Morgan Rice

A DIRGE FOR PRINCES

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising 8 books; and of the new epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

"If you thought that there was no reason left for living after the end of THE SORCERER'S RING series, you were wrong. In RISE OF THE DRAGONS Morgan Rice has come up with what promises to be another brilliant series, immersing us in a fantasy of trolls and dragons, of valor, honor, courage, magic and faith in your destiny. Morgan has managed again to produce a strong set of characters that make us cheer for them on every page...Recommended for the permanent library of all readers that love a well-written fantasy."

-Books and Movie Reviews

Roberto Mattos

"An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice's previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more."

-The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the Dragons)

"A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. A *Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence...For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival...Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series."

-Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

"THE SORCERER'S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours,

and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

-Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

-Publishers Weekly

Books by Morgan Rice

THE WAY OF STEEL

ONLY THE WORTHY (Book #1)

A THRONE FOR SISTERS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (Book #1)

A COURT FOR THIEVES (Book #2)

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CHAPTER ONE

Kate sprinted for the docks Finnael had told her about, moving faster than anyone else could have, praying that she would be in time. The vision of her sister lying gray and dead haunted her, pushing her forward with all the speed her powers could give her. Sophia couldn't be dead.

She couldn't.

Kate could see the royal soldiers down in the village, pulling together now around their leader. Another time, Kate might have stopped to fight them, simply for the harm that the Dowager had done in her life. Now, though, there was no time. She ran for the boats, trying to pick out the one Sophia had been on in her vision.

She saw it ahead, a dual-masted vessel with a seahorse for a prow. She ran for it, leaping as she got close to clear the railing and land lightly on the deck of the ship. She could see sailors staring at her, some of them reaching for weapons. If they had done anything to harm her sister, she would kill every last one of them.

"Where is my sister?" she demanded, the words ringing out.

Perhaps they recognized the resemblance, even though Kate was shorter and more muscled than Sophia, and her hair was hacked boyishly short. They pointed mutely toward the cabin at the rear of the ship.

As she stormed toward it, Kate saw a large, balding, bearded man struggling back to his feet.

"What happened here?" she demanded. "Quickly, I think my sister is in danger."

"Your sister is Sophia?" the man said. He still looked confused by whatever had knocked him down. "There was a man... he hit me. Your sister is in the cabin."

Kate didn't hesitate. She walked to the cabin and kicked the door hard enough to splinter it open. Inside...

She saw a forest cat in one corner, large and gray-furred, growling softly. She saw Sebastian there, kneeling there with a dagger in his hands, wet with blood almost to the wrists. He was howling with tears, but that meant nothing. A man could cry with remorse, or with guilt, just as easily as anything else.

On the floor beside him, Kate could see Sophia, lying corpse still, her flesh as gray as anything Kate had seen in her vision. There was blood pooling on the floor beside her, and a wound in her chest that could only have come from one weapon.

"She's dead, Kate," Sebastian said, looking over at her. "She's dead."

"*You're* dead," Kate bellowed. She'd told Sebastian once that she couldn't forgive the way he'd hurt Sophia. This, though, was beyond anything he'd done before. He'd tried to murder her sister. Anger flooded through Kate then, and she surged forward.

She hit Sebastian, knocking him away from her sister. He rolled up, the knife still in his hand.

"Kate, I don't want to hurt you."

"Like you hurt my sister?"

Kate kicked him in the stomach and then grabbed his arm, wrenching it until the knife clattered to the floor. He managed to pull clear before she could break the limb, but Kate wasn't done with him yet.

"Kate, I didn't do this, I –"

"*Liar!*" She ran forward, grabbing him and bundling him back through the doorway as much through speed as through the enhanced strength the fountain had given her. She burst out into the sunlight with him, then managed to get a grip on Sebastian's legs, lifting him. She flung him over the side of the ship to plunge down toward the docks. He landed on them headfirst, sprawling bonelessly in unconsciousness.

Kate wanted to jump down after him. Wanted to kill him. There was no time though. She had to get back to Sophia.

“If he wakes up,” Kate said to the captain, “kill him.”

“I’d do it now,” the big man said, “but I have to get this ship moving.”

Kate saw him point to where the royal soldiers were descending on the ship, moving toward it with grim determination.

“Do what you can,” Kate said. “I have to help my sister.”

She ran back into the cabin. Sophia was still too still, too bloodied. Kate couldn’t see her chest rising or falling. Only the faintest flicker of thoughts within her told Kate that there was any life there at all. Kate knelt by her, trying to gather herself, trying to remember what Finnael the sorcerer had taught her. He’d brought a plant back to lush green life, but Sophia wasn’t a plant, she was Kate’s sister.

Kate reached for the space within her where she could see the energy around things, where she could see the soft golden glow that had faded almost to nothing around Sophia. She could feel that energy now, and Kate could remember what it had felt like to pull energy out of the plant, but pulling energy away wasn’t what she needed to do.

She reached out, seeking other sources of energy, seeking the power that she needed to do this. She sank into it, trying to find any energy that she could. Kate could feel it then; feel it beyond the confines of this room, beyond the narrow bounds that defined her own flesh.

She felt it then, the instant of connection so huge, so overwhelming, that Kate didn’t think she could hold onto it. It was too much, but if it meant saving Sophia, Kate had to find a way to do it. She grabbed for the power around her...

...and found herself feeling the whole of the kingdom, every life, every hint of power. Kate could feel the plants and the animals, the people and the things that represented older, stranger powers. Kate could feel it, and she knew what the energy was: it was life, it was magic.

She took power as delicately as she could, in fragments from a hundred places. Kate felt a patch of grass brown in the Ridings, a few leaves fall from trees on the slopes of Monthys. She only took the barest amount from each place, not wanting to do more harm than that.

Even so, it felt like trying to contain a flood. Kate screamed with the effort of trying to contain it all, but she held. She had to.

Kate poured it into Sophia, trying to regulate it all, trying to force it to do what she wanted. With the plant it had simply been a case of adding energy, but would that work here? Kate hoped so, because she wasn’t sure that she knew enough about healing wounds to do anything else. She gave Sophia the energy that she’d borrowed from the world, bolstering the thin gold line of her life, trying to build it into something more.

Slowly, so slowly that it was almost imperceptible, Kate saw the wound start to close. She kept going, until the flesh there was perfect, but there was still more to do. It wasn’t enough to have a perfect-looking corpse. She kept pushing energy into her sister, hoping against hope that it would be enough.

Finally she saw Sophia’s chest start to rise and fall once more. Her sister was breathing on her own, and for the first time, Kate had the sense that she wasn’t going to die. Relief flooded through her at that thought. Sophia didn’t wake, though, her eyes staying closed no matter how much energy Kate used. Kate wasn’t sure that she could hold onto the power any longer. She let it go, falling back to the deck in exhaustion as if she’d just run a dozen leagues.

That was when she heard the shouts of fighting from beyond the cabin. Kate forced herself to her feet, and it wasn’t easy. Even if the energy to restore Sophia hadn’t come from her, channeling it had still taken an effort. Kate managed to stand, drawing her blade and making it to the door.

Beyond, soldiers in royal uniforms were forcing their way onto the ship, while sailors struggled to push them back. She saw the captain charge forward, cutting a man down using a long knife, while

another sailor pushed a man back from the railing with a billhook. She also saw a sailor killed by the thrust of a soldier's sword, another fall backward as a pistol sounded.

Kate all but staggered forward, managing to lunge with a thrust that took a soldier through the armpit, but barely managing to parry a blow from the butt of a musket. She stumbled and the man stood over her, reversing the weapon to bring a bayonet to bear.

Then Kate heard a roar, and the forest cat leapt past her, slamming into the man, its teeth ripping into his throat. The beast snarled and leapt at another, and now the soldiers hesitated, pulling back.

Kate had to kneel there and watch it, because she was too exhausted to do more than that. When she saw one of the soldiers aiming a pistol at the cat, she drew a dagger and threw it overhand. The weapon went off and he fell back from the boat.

Kate saw the cat leap over the side, onto the docks, and a second later she heard a scream as it struck again.

"Get this boat out to sea!" she yelled. "We're dead if we stay here!"

The sailors leapt to do it, and Kate forced herself up again, trying to plug the gap. Some fought, and they were like defenders at a parapet, pushing back the clambering foes. The forest cat snapped and snarled, leaping at those who forced their way aboard, swiping with claws and clamping down with needle-sharp teeth. Kate didn't know when her sister had acquired a companion like that, but it was certainly loyal – and deadly.

If she had been at full strength, she might have taken on the soldiers by herself, moving among them, running and killing. As it was, she could barely muster the energy to thrust down at them alongside the sailors. Those pushed past Kate, as if trying to shield her from the fighting. Kate just wanted them to focus on getting the ship away from the docks.

Slowly, the ship did start to move. The sailors used oars and long poles to push it clear, and Kate felt the shift of the deck under their efforts. A soldier leapt at the ship and fell short, falling between the boat and the docks.

Below, Kate saw the forest cat still snarling and killing, hemmed in by soldiers. Kate suspected that her sister wouldn't want her companion abandoned, and in any case, the forest cat had saved them. She couldn't just leave it.

"You need to get aboard," she yelled, then realized the stupidity of expecting it to understand that. Instead, she summoned up the little power she had left, wrapping the need to get aboard with an image of the boat leaving, and threw it at the creature.

It turned its head, sniffed the air once, and bounded for the boat. Kate saw its muscles bunch, and then it leapt. Its claws dug into the wood of the ship as it pulled itself up the side, and then it settled on the railing pushing its head against Kate's hand and purring.

Kate stumbled back, feeling the solidity of a mast at her back. She all but slid down it to the deck, sitting there because she no longer had the strength to stand. But that didn't matter anymore. They were already well away from the docks, only a few scattered shots marking the presence of their attackers there.

They'd done it. They were safe, and Sophia was alive.

At least for now.

CHAPTER TWO

Sebastian woke to pain. Total, complete pain. It seemed to surround him, throbbing through him, absorbing every fraction of his being. He could feel the pulsing agony in his skull where he'd struck it as he fell, but there was another repetitive pain, bruising his ribs as someone tried to kick him awake.

He looked up and saw Rupert looking down at him from possibly the only angle where his brother didn't look like some golden ideal of a prince. His expression certainly didn't match that ideal, looking as though, had it been anyone else, he would have cheerfully cut their throat. Sebastian groaned in pain, feeling like his ribs might have broken under the impact.

"Wake up, you useless idiot!" Rupert snapped. Sebastian could hear the anger there, and the frustration.

"I'm awake," Sebastian said. Even he could hear that the words were anything but clear. More pain flooded through him, along with a kind of foggy confusion that felt as though he'd been hit over the head with a hammer. No, not with a hammer; with the whole world. "What happened?"

"You got thrown from a boat by a girl, that's what happened," Rupert said.

Sebastian felt the roughness of his brother's grip as he hauled him back to his feet. When Rupert let go, Sebastian staggered and almost fell again, but managed to catch himself in time. None of the soldiers around him moved to help, but then, they were Rupert's men, and probably had little love for Sebastian after his escape from them.

"Now it's your turn to tell *me* what happened," Rupert said. "I went through this village from end to end, and they finally told me that was the boat your *beloved* was taking." He made it sound like a curse word. "Since you were thrown off it by a girl with the same look to her –"

"Her sister, Kate," Sebastian said, remembering the speed with which Kate had propelled him from the cabin, the anger there as she had thrown him. She'd wanted to kill him. She'd thought that he'd...

He remembered then, and the image of it was enough to make him stop, standing there in blank unresponsiveness, even as Rupert decided it would be a good idea to slap him. The pain of that felt like just one more iota added to a mountain of it. Even the bruises from where Kate had thrown him felt like nothing compared to the raw pit of grief that threatened to open up and claim him at any moment.

"I said, what happened to the girl who fooled you into being her fiancé?" Rupert demanded. "Was she there? Did she escape with the rest of them?"

"She's dead!" Sebastian snapped without thinking. "Is that what you want to hear, Rupert? Sophia is dead!"

It was as if he were looking down at her again, seeing her pale and lifeless on the cabin floor, blood pooled around her, the wound in her chest filled by a dagger so slender and sharp that it might as well have been a needle. He could remember how still Sophia had been, no hint of movement to mark her breathing, no brush of air against his ear when he'd checked.

He'd even pulled the dagger out, in the stupid, instinctual hope that it would make things better, even though he knew that wounds were not so easily undone. All it had done was widen the pool of blood, cover his hands in it, and convince Kate that he'd murdered her sister. It was a miracle, put like that, that she'd only thrown him from the boat, not cut him to pieces.

"At least you did one thing right in killing her," Rupert said. "It might even help Mother to forgive you for running off like this. You have to remember that you're just the spare brother, Sebastian. The dutiful one. You can't afford to upset Mother like that."

Sebastian felt disgust in that moment. Disgust that his brother would think he could ever hurt Sophia. Disgust that he saw the world like that at all. Disgust, frankly, that he was even related to

someone who could see the world as just his plaything, where everyone else was on some lower level, there to fit into whatever roles he assigned.

"I didn't kill Sophia," Sebastian said. "How could you think I could *ever* do something like that?"

Rupert looked at him in obvious surprise, before his expression shifted to one of disappointment.

"And there I was thinking that you'd finally grown a backbone," he said. "That you'd decided to actually be the dutiful prince you pretend to be and get rid of the whore. I should have known that you would still be completely useless."

Sebastian lunged at his brother then. He smashed into Rupert, sending the pair of them tumbling to the wooden slats of the docks. Sebastian came up on top, grabbing at his brother, swinging a punch down.

"Don't you talk about Sophia like that! Isn't it enough for you that she's gone?"

Rupert bucked and twisted underneath him, coming up on top for a moment and throwing a punch of his own. The tumbling momentum of the fight kept going, and Sebastian felt the edge of the dock against his back a moment before he and Rupert plunged into the water.

It closed over them as they fought, their hands locked on one another's throats almost through instinct. Sebastian didn't care. He had nothing left to live for, not when Sophia was gone. Maybe if he ended up as cold and dead as her, there was a chance that they might be reunited in whatever lay beyond death's mask. He could feel Rupert kicking at him, but Sebastian barely even acknowledged the tiny extra hint of pain.

He felt hands grabbing at him then, hauling him out of the water. He should have known that Rupert's men would intervene to save their prince. They pulled Sebastian and Rupert from the water by their arms and their clothes, hauling them up onto dry land and all but holding them up as the cold water seeped through them.

"Let go of me," Rupert demanded. "No, hold him."

Sebastian felt the hands tighten on his arms, holding him in place. His brother hit him then, hard in the stomach, so that Sebastian would have doubled up if the soldiers hadn't been holding him. He saw the moment when his brother drew a knife, this one curved and razor edged: a hunter's knife; a skinning knife.

He felt the sharpness of that edge as Rupert pressed it to his face.

"You think you get to attack me? I've ridden halfway across the kingdom because of you. I'm cold, I'm wet, and my clothes are ruined. Maybe your face should be too."

Sebastian felt a bead of blood form under the pressure of that edge. To his surprise, one of the soldiers stepped forward.

"Your highness," he said, the deference in his tone obvious. "I suspect that the Dowager would not wish us to allow *either* of her sons to be harmed."

Sebastian felt Rupert go dangerously still, and for a moment, he thought that he would do it anyway. Instead, he pulled the knife away, his anger sliding back behind the mask of civility that usually disguised it.

"Yes, you're right, soldier. I wouldn't want Mother angry that I had... miss-stepped."

It was such a benign term to use when he'd been talking about cutting Sebastian's face to pieces only moments before. The fact that he could switch like that confirmed almost everything Sebastian had heard about him. He'd always tried to ignore the stories, but it was as though he'd seen the real Rupert both here, and earlier, when he'd tortured the gardener at the abandoned house.

"I want all of Mother's anger reserved for you, little brother," Rupert said. He didn't hit Sebastian this time, just clapped a hand to his shoulder in a brotherly fashion that was undoubtedly an act. "Running off like this, fighting her soldiers. *Killing* one of them."

Almost too fast to follow, Rupert spun, stabbing the one who had raised an objection through the throat. The man fell, clutching the wound, his expression of shock almost matched by those around him.

“Let us be clear,” Rupert said, in a dangerous voice. “I am the crown prince, and we are a long way from the Assembly of Nobles, with its rules and its attempts to contain its betters. Out here, I will *not* be questioned! Is that understood?”

If it had been anyone else, he would have quickly found himself cut down by the other soldiers. Instead, the men murmured a chorus of assent, each one seeming to know that anyone cutting down a prince of the blood would be the one responsible for reigniting the civil wars.

“Don’t worry,” Rupert said, wiping the knife. “I was kidding about cutting your face. I won’t even say that you killed this man. He died in the fighting around the ship. Now, thank me.”

“Thank you,” Sebastian said in flat tones, but only because he suspected that it was the best way to avoid further violence.

“Besides, I think Mother will believe a tale of your uselessness more than one of your murderousness,” Rupert said. “The son who ran away, couldn’t get there in time, lost his lady love, and got himself beaten up by a girl.”

Sebastian might have thrown himself forward again, but the soldiers were still holding him tight, as if expecting exactly that. Perhaps, in a way, they were even doing it for his own protection.

“Yes,” Rupert said, “you make a far better tragic figure than one of hate. You look the very picture of grief right now.”

Sebastian knew that his brother would never understand the truth of it. He would never understand the sheer pain eating through his heart, far worse than any of the aches from his bruises. He would never understand the grief of losing someone he loved, because Sebastian was sure now that Rupert didn’t love anyone except himself.

Sebastian had loved Sophia, and it was only now that she was gone that he could begin to understand how much, simply by seeing how much of his world had been ripped away in the moments since he’d seen her so still and lifeless, beautiful even in death. He felt like some shambling thing from one of the old tales, empty except for the shell of flesh surrounding his grief.

The only reason he wasn’t crying was because he felt too hollow to do even that. Well, that and because he didn’t want to give his brother the satisfaction of seeing him in pain. Right then, he would even have welcomed it if Rupert had killed him, because at least that would have brought an end to the infinite expanse of pain seeming to stretch out around him.

“It’s time for you to come home,” Rupert said. “You can be there while I report everything that has happened to our mother. She sent me to bring you back, so that’s what I’m going to do. I’ll tie you over a horse if I have to.”

“You don’t have to,” Sebastian said. “I’ll go.”

He said it quietly, but even so, it was enough to get a smile of triumph out of his brother. Rupert thought that he’d won. The truth was that Sebastian simply didn’t care. It didn’t matter anymore. He waited for one of the soldiers to bring him a horse, mounted up, and heeled it forward with leaden limbs.

He would go home to Ashton, and he would be whatever kind of prince his family wanted him to be. None of it would make a difference.

Nothing did, now that Sophia was dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Cora was more than grateful when the ground started to level out again. It seemed as though she and Emeline had been walking forever, although her friend didn't show any of the strain of it.

"How can you just keep walking like you aren't tired?" Cora asked, as Emeline continued to press forward. "Is it some kind of magic?"

Emeline looked back. "It's not magic, it's just... I spent most of my life on Ashton's streets. If you showed that you were weak, people found ways to prey on you."

Cora tried to imagine that, living somewhere where there was the chance of violence any time anyone showed weakness. She realized that she didn't have to imagine it, though.

"In the palace, it was Rupert and his cronies," she said, "or the noble girls who thought they could abuse you just because they were feeling angry at something else."

She saw Emeline cock her head to the side. "I would have thought that it would be better in the palace," she said. "At least you didn't have to dodge the gangs or the slave takers. You didn't have to spend your nights hunkered down in coal cellars so that no one would find you."

"Because I was already indentured," Cora pointed out. "I didn't even have a bed in the palace. They just assumed that I would find a corner to sleep in. That, or some noble would want me in their bed."

To Cora's surprise, Emeline put her arms around her in a hug. If there was one thing Cora had learned on the road, it was that Emeline wasn't usually a demonstrative person.

"I saw some nobles once, out in the city," Emeline said. "I thought that they would be something brighter and better than one of the gangs, until I got closer. Then I saw one of them beating a man senseless just because he could. They were exactly the same."

It seemed strange, bonding like this over how harsh their lives had been, but Cora did feel closer to Emeline than she had at the start of this. It wasn't just that they'd been through a lot of the same things in their lives. They'd traveled a long way together now too, and there was still the prospect of more miles to come.

"Stonehome will be there," Cora said, trying to convince herself as much as Emeline.

"It will," Emeline said. "Sophia saw it."

It felt strange, putting so much trust in Sophia's powers, but the truth was that Cora *did* trust her, absolutely. She would gladly trust her life to the things that Sophia had seen, and there was no one she would rather share the journey with than Emeline.

They kept going, and as they headed west, they started to see more rivers, in networks that connected like capillaries leading to bigger arteries. Soon, there seemed to be almost as much water as land, so that even the fields in between were semi-flooded things, people farming in mud that threatened to turn into marsh at any moment. Rain seemed to be a constant, and while occasionally Cora and Emeline huddled down out of the worse of it, for the most part they pressed on.

"Look," Emeline said, pointing to one of the riverbanks. All Cora could see at first were reeds rising beside it, disturbed here and there by the movement of small animals. Then she saw the coracle upturned on the bank like the shell of some armored creature.

"Oh no," Cora said, guessing what Emeline intended.

Emeline reached out to put a hand on her arm. "It's all right. I'm good with boats. Come on, you'll enjoy it."

She led the way to the coracle, and all Cora could do was follow, silently hoping that there would be no oars. There was a paddle, though, and it seemed to be all Emeline needed. Soon, she was in the coracle, and Cora had to jump in beside her or be left walking along the bank.

It was faster than walking, Cora had to admit. They skimmed down the river like a pebble thrown from some giant hand. It was as relaxing as it had been sitting on the cart. More relaxing, since

they'd spent half the time on the cart jumping off to help push it up hills and out of mud. Emeline seemed to be enjoying piloting it too, navigating the changes in the river as it went from rough to smooth water and back again.

Cora saw the moment when the water shifted, and she saw Emeline's expression shift in the same instant.

"There's... something there," Emeline said. "Something powerful."

What have we here? a voice asked, sounding in Cora's mind. *Two fresh young things. Come closer, my darlings. Come closer.*

Ahead, Cora saw... well, she wasn't quite sure what she saw. At first, it seemed like a woman made from water, but a flicker of light later, it seemed like a horse. The urge to go toward it was overwhelming. It felt as though there was safety ahead.

No, it was more than that; it felt as if it was *home* waiting for her there. The home that she'd always wanted, with warmth, a family, safety...

That's it. Come to me. I can give you everything you want. You will never be alone again.

Cora wanted to urge the coracle forward. She wanted to dive from it, to be with the creature that promised so much. She half stood, ready to do just that.

"Wait!" Emeline called out. "It's a trick, Cora!"

Cora felt something settle around her mind, a wall rising up between her and the promises of safety. She could see Emeline straining, and knew that the other girl had to be the one doing it, blocking the power pushing at them with her own talents.

No, come to me, the thing urged, but it was a distant echo of what it had been.

Cora looked at it, really looked at it, now. She saw the swirling water there; saw the currents around it that would drown anyone foolish enough to pass through them. She remembered old stories of river spirits, kelpies, the kind of dangerous magic that had turned the world against all of it.

She saw the water start to shift beneath the coracle, and only realized what was happening as the current started to drag it forward.

"Emeline!" she yelled. "It's pulling us in!"

Emeline remained still, shaking with obvious effort as she fought to keep the creature from overwhelming them both. That meant that it was up to Cora. She grabbed for the coracle's paddle, aiming for the shore and paddling with all the strength she had.

At first, it seemed that nothing was happening. The current was too strong, the kelpie's pull too total. Cora recognized those thoughts for what they were and pushed them aside. She didn't have to paddle against the current, just to its side. She pulled at the water with it, forcing the coracle to move through sheer strength of will.

Slowly, it began to shift off course, moving closer to the bank as Cora paddled.

"Hurry," Emeline said beside her. "I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

Cora kept going, and the coracle moved by what felt like inches, but it did move. It grew closer, and closer, until finally Cora thought that the reeds might be in reach. She grabbed for them, managing to get hold of a handful of them and using them to pull their tiny vessel close to the shore. She dragged the coracle to the riverbank, then leapt out, grabbing for Emeline's arm.

She pulled her friend up onto the riverbank, seeing the coracle pulled in by the current. Cora saw the kelpie rear up in apparent anger, smashing down on the small vessel and reducing it to splinters.

As soon as they were on dry land, Cora felt the pressure on her mind easing, while Emeline gave a gasp and rose to her feet under her own power. It seemed that, off the water, the kelpie couldn't touch them. It reared up again, then plunged down, disappearing out of sight.

"I think we're safe," Cora said.

She saw Emeline nod. "I think... maybe we'll stay off the water for a while, though."

She sounded exhausted, so Cora helped her away from the riverbank. It took a while to find a path, but once they did so, it seemed natural to follow it.

They kept going along the road, and now there were more people than there had been in the north. Cora saw fisher-folk coming in from the riverbanks, farmers with carts full of goods. She saw more people coming in from all around now, with loads of cloth or herds of animals. One man was even herding a flock of ducks that ran ahead of him as sheep might have for someone else.

“There must be a traveling market,” Emeline said.

“We should go,” Cora said. “They might put us back on the road for Stonehome.”

“Or they might kill us as witches the moment that we ask,” Emeline pointed out.

Even so, they went, making their way along the paths with the others until they saw the market ahead. It was on a small island amidst the rivers, the route fordable at any one of a dozen points. On that island, Cora saw stalls and auction spaces for everything from goods to livestock. She was just grateful that no one was trying to sell any of the indentured today.

She and Emeline made their way down to the island, wading across one of the fords to reach it. They kept their heads low, blending into the crowds as much as possible, especially when Cora saw the masked figure of a priestess wandering through the crowd, dispensing her goddess’s blessings.

Cora found herself drawn to a space where players were performing *The Dance of St. Cuthbert*, although it wasn’t the serious version that had sometimes been put on in the palace. This version featured a lot more bawdy humor and excuses for sword fights, the company obviously knowing its audience. When they were done, they took a bow, and people started to call out the names of plays and skits, hoping to see their favorite performed.

“I still don’t see how we can find someone who knows the way to Stonehome,” Emeline said. “At least, not without as good as declaring ourselves to the priests.”

Cora had been thinking about that too. She had an idea.

“You will see if people start thinking about it, won’t you?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Emeline said.

“So we get them thinking about it,” Cora said. She turned to the players. “What about *The Stone Keeper’s Daughters*?” she called out, hoping that the crowd would block any sight of her.

To her surprise, it worked. Perhaps it was because it was a daring, even dangerous, play to call for: the story of how a stonemason’s daughters proved to be witches and found a home far from those who would hunt them. It was the kind of play that could get someone arrested for performing it in the wrong place.

They performed it here, though, in all its glory, masked figures representing priests chasing after the young men playing the women’s parts for fear of bad luck. All the while, Cora looked at Emeline expectantly.

“Well, is it getting them thinking about Stonehome?” she asked.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean... wait,” Emeline said, turning her head. “See that man there, selling wool? He’s thinking about a time he went there to trade. That woman... her sister went there.”

“So you have a direction for it again?” Cora asked.

She saw Emeline nod. “I think we can find it.”

It wasn’t much of a hope, but it was something. Stonehome still lay ahead, and with it, the prospect of safety.

CHAPTER FOUR

From above, the invasion looked like the sweep of a wing enfolding the land it touched. The Master of Crows enjoyed that, and he was probably the only one in a position to appreciate it, his crows giving him a perfect view as his ships swept in to shore.

“Perhaps there are other watchers,” he said to himself. “Perhaps the creatures of this island will see what is coming for them.”

“What is that, sir?” a young officer asked. He was bright and blond-haired, his uniform shining with the effort of polishing.

“Nothing you need to be concerned with. Prepare to land.”

The young man hurried off, with the kind of spring in his movements that seemed to long for action. Perhaps he thought himself invulnerable because he fought for the New Army.

“They’re all food for the crows eventually,” the Master of Crows said.

Not today, though, because he had picked his landing sites with care. There were parts of the continent beyond the Knifewater where people shot at crows almost as a matter of course, but here they had yet to learn the habit. His creatures had spread out, showing him the spots where defenders had set cannon and barricades in preparation for an invasion, where they had hidden men and fortified villages. They had created a network of defenses that should have swallowed an invading force whole, but the Master of Crows could see the holes in them.

“Begin,” he commanded, and bugles blared, the sounds carrying across the waves. Landing boats lowered, and a tide of men swept into shore in them. Mostly, they did it in silence, because a player did not announce the placing of his pieces on a gaming board. They spread out, bringing in cannon and supplies, moving swiftly.

Now the violence began, in exactly the ways that he had planned, men creeping around the ambush sites of his enemies to descend on them from the rear, weapons pounding the hidden knots of foes who wanted to stop him. From this distance, it should have been impossible to hear the screams of the dying, or even the musket fire, but his crows relayed everything.

He saw a dozen fronts at once, the violence blooming into multifaceted chaos as it always did in the moments after a conflict had begun. He saw his men charging up a beach into a knot of peasants, swords swinging. He saw horses disembarking while around them, a company fought to maintain its beachhead against a militia armed with agricultural tools. He saw both points of slaughter and hard-fought bravery, although it was hard to tell the two apart.

Through his crows’ eyes, he saw a group of cavalry gathering a little way inland, their breastplates shining in the sun. There were enough that they could potentially punch a hole in his carefully coordinated web of landing sites, and although the Master of Crows doubted they knew the correct spot to strike, he could not take that risk.

He extended his concentration, using his crows to find a suitable officer nearby. To his amusement, he found the young man who had been so eager before. He focused, the effort of making one of the beasts carry his words far greater than simply looking through their eyes.

“There are cavalry north of you,” he said, hearing the croak of the crow’s voice as it repeated the words. “Circle to the ridge to your west and take them as they come for you.”

He didn’t wait for a response, but instead sent the crow into flight, watching from above as the men obeyed his orders. This was what his talent gave him: the ability to see more, to spread his reach further than any normal man could have. Most commanders found themselves mired in the fog of war, or hamstrung by messengers who couldn’t move fast enough. He could coordinate an army with the ease a child might have shown moving tin soldiers around a table.

Below his circling bird, he saw the cavalry come thundering in, looking every inch some elegant army out of legend. He heard the blare of the muskets that started to cut them down, then saw the

waiting soldiers charge into them, quickly turning their storybook charge into a thing of blood and death, pain and sudden anguish. The Master of Crows saw man after man fall, including the young officer, caught through the throat by a stray blade.

“All food for the crows,” he said. It didn’t matter; that small battle was won.

He could see a more difficult battle around the dunes that led up toward a small village. One of his commanders hadn’t been fast enough to follow his orders, which meant that the defenders had dug in, holding the route to their village even against the larger force. The Master of Crows stretched, then clambered down into a landing boat.

“To shore,” he said, pointing.

The men with him set to their work with the speed that came from long practice. The Master of Crows watched the progress of the battle as he got closer, hearing the screams of the dying, seeing his forces overwhelm group after group of would-be defenders. It was obvious that the Dowager had ordered the defense of her kingdom, but clearly not well enough.

They reached the shore, and the Master of Crows strode through the battle as if he were taking a stroll. The men around him kept low, muskets raised as they looked for threats, but he walked tall. He knew where his enemies were.

All his enemies. He could already feel the power of this land, and sense the movement in it as some of the more dangerous things there reacted to his arrival. Let them feel him coming. Let them know fear at what was to come.

A small knot of enemy soldiers leapt up from a hiding place behind an upturned boat, and there was no more time to think, only act. He drew a long dueling blade and a pistol in one smooth motion, firing into the face of one of the defenders, then running another through. He swayed aside from an attack, struck back with lethal force, and kept moving.

The dunes were ahead, and the village lay beyond them. Now the Master of Crows could hear the violence without having to resort to his creatures. He could pick out the clash of blade on blade with his own ears, the boom of muskets and pistols echoing as he approached. He could see men struggling with one another, his crows letting him pick out the points where defenders knelt or lay, their weapons trained on anything that approached.

He stood there in the middle of it all, daring them to fire at him.

“You have one chance to live,” he said. “I need this beach, and I am prepared to pay you for it with your lives and those of your families. Lay down your arms and leave. Better yet, join my army. Do these things, and you will survive. Continue to fight, and I will see your homes razed.”

He stood there, waiting for an answer. He got it when a shot rang out, the pain and impact of it slamming through him so hard that he staggered, falling to one knee. Right then, though, there was too much death around to stop him so easily. The crows were being well fed today, and their power would heal anything that did not kill him outright. He pushed power into the wound, closing it as he stood.

“So be it,” he said, and then charged forward.

Ordinarily, he did not do this. It was a foolish way of fighting; an old way that had nothing to do with well-organized armies or efficient tactics. He moved with all the speed that his power gave him, dodging and running as he closed the distance.

He killed the first man without stopping, plunging his sword deep and then wrenching it clear. He kicked the next to the ground, then finished him with a sweeping stroke of his blade. He snatched up the man’s musket with one hand and fired it, using the sight of his crows to tell him where to aim.

He plunged forward into a cluster of men hiding behind a barricade of sand. Against the slow advance of his forces, it might have been enough to delay them, creating time for more men to come to bear. Against his wild charge, it made no difference. The Master of Crows leapt the sand walls, jumping into the midst of his enemies and cutting in every direction.

His men would be following behind, even if he had no concentration to spare to look through the eyes of his crows for them. He was too busy parrying sword strokes and axe blows, striking back with vicious efficiency.

Now his men were there, pouring over the sand barricades like the incoming tide. They died as they did it, but now it didn't matter to them, so long as they were there with their leader. It was what the Master of Crows had been counting on. They showed surprising loyalty for men who were little more than crow food to him.

With their numbers behind him, it wasn't long before the defenders were dead, and the Master of Crows let his men push forward toward the village.

"Go," he said. "Slaughter them for their defiance."

He watched the rest of the landings for a few minutes more, but there didn't seem to be any other major choke points. He had chosen his spot well.

By the time the Master of Crows reached the village, parts of it were already aflame. His men were moving through the streets, cutting down any of the villagers they found. Most were, anyway. The Master of Crows saw one dragging a young woman from the village, her fear matched only by the soldier's obvious enjoyment of it.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he got closer.

The man stared at him in shock. "I... I saw this one, my lord, and I thought – "

"You thought you'd keep her," the Master of Crows finished for him.

"Well, she'd fetch a fine price in the right place." The soldier dared a smile that seemed designed to make the two of them part of some grand conspiracy.

"I see," he said. "I did not order that though. Did I?"

"My lord – " the soldier began, but the Master of Crows was already raising a pistol. He fired it so close that the other man's features all but disappeared in the blast of it. The young woman beside him seemed too shocked even to scream as her attacker fell.

"It is important that my men learn to act in accordance with my orders," the Master of Crows said to the woman. "There are places where I allow captives, and others where it is agreed that none but the gifted are to be harmed. It is important that discipline is maintained."

The woman looked hopeful then, as if thinking that this was all some mistake, in spite of the depredations of the others in the village. She looked that way right up to the point when the Master of Crows thrust his sword through her heart, the thrust sure and clean, probably even painless.

"In this case, I gave your men a choice, and they made it," he said as she clutched at the weapon. He pulled it out, and she fell. "It is a choice I intend to give much of the rest of this kingdom. Perhaps they will choose more wisely."

He looked around as the slaughter continued, feeling neither pleasure nor displeasure, just a kind of even satisfaction at a task accomplished. A step, at least, because after all, this was no more than the taking of a village.

There would be much more to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dowager Queen Mary of the House of Flamberg sat in the great chambers of the Assembly of Nobles, trying not to look too bored on her throne at the heart of things while the supposed representatives of her people talked, and talked.

Ordinarily, it wouldn't have mattered. The Dowager had long ago mastered the art of looking impassive and regal while the great factions there argued. Typically, she let the populists and the traditionalists wear themselves out before she spoke. Today, though, that was taking longer than usual, which meant that the ever-present tightness in her lungs was growing. If she did not finish with this soon, these fools might see the secret that she worked so hard to disguise.

But there was no hurrying it. War had come, which meant that everyone wanted their chance to speak. Worse, more than a few of them wanted answers that she didn't have.

"I merely wish to ask my honorable friends whether the fact that enemies have landed on our shore is indicative of a wider government policy of neglecting our nation's military capabilities," Lord Hawes of Briarmarsh asked.

"The honorable lord is well aware of the reasons that this Assembly has been wary of the notion of a centralized army," Lord Branston of Upper Vereford replied.

They continued to babble on, refighting old political battles while more literal ones were growing closer.

"If I might state the situation, so that this Assembly does not accuse me of neglecting my duty," General Sir Guise Burborough said. "The forces of the New Army have landed on our southeastern shores, bypassing many of the defenses that we put in place to prevent the possibility. They have advanced at a rapid rate, overwhelming those defenders who have tried to stop them and burning villages in their wake. Already, there are *numerous* refugees who seem to think that *we* should provide them with lodging."

It was amusing, the Dowager thought, that the man could make people running for their lives sound like unwanted relatives determined to stay too long.

"What of preparations around Ashton?" Graham, Marquis of the Shale, demanded. "I take it that they are heading this way? Can we seal the walls?"

That was the response of a man who knew nothing about cannon, the Dowager thought. She might have laughed out loud if she'd had the breath for it. As it was, it was all she could do to maintain her impassive expression.

"They are," the general replied. "Before the month is out, we might have to prepare for a siege, and earthworks are already being constructed against the possibility."

"Are we considering evacuating the people in the army's path?" Lord Neresford asked. "Should we advise the people of Ashton to flee north to avoid the fighting? Should our queen, at least, consider retreating to her estates?"

It was funny; the Dowager had never taken him for one interested in her well-being. He had always been quick to vote against any proposal she put forward.

She decided that it was time to speak, while she still could. She stood, and the room fell silent. Even though the nobles had fought for their Assembly, they still listened to her within it.

"To order an evacuation would start a panic," she said. "There would be looting in the streets, and strong men who might defend their homes otherwise will flee. I will stand here too. This is my home, and I will not be seen to run from it in the face of a rabble of foes."

"Far from a rabble, Your Majesty," Lord Neresford pointed out, as if the Dowager's advisors hadn't told her the precise extent of the invading force. Perhaps he just assumed that, as a woman, she wouldn't have enough knowledge of war to understand it. "Although I am sure that all the Assembly is eager to hear your plans to defeat it."

The Dowager stared him down, although that was hard to do when her lungs felt as though she might burst into a coughing fit at any moment.

“As the honorable lords know,” she said, “I have deliberately eschewed too close a role in the kingdom’s armies. I wouldn’t want to make you all uncomfortable by claiming to command you now.”

“I’m sure we can forgive it this once,” the lord said, as if he had the power to forgive or condemn her. “What is your solution, Your Majesty?”

The Dowager shrugged. “I thought that we would start with a wedding.”

She stood there, waiting for the furor to die down, the various factions within the Assembly shouting at one another. The royalists were cheering their support, the anti-monarchists griping about the waste of money. The military members were assuming that she was ignoring them, while those from the further reaches of the kingdom wanted to know what any of it meant for their people. The Dowager didn’t say anything until she was sure that she had their attention.

“Listen to yourselves, babbling like frightened children,” she said. “Did your tutors and your governesses not teach you the history of our nation? How many times have foreign foes sought to claim our lands, jealous of their beauty and their wealth? Shall I list them for you? Shall I tell you about the failures of the Havvers Warfleet, the Invasion of the Seven Princes? Even in our civil wars, the foes that came from without were always pushed back. It has been a thousand years since anyone has conquered this land, and yet you panic now because a few foes have evaded our first line of defenses.”

She looked around the room, shaming them like children.

“I cannot give our people much. I cannot command without your support, and rightly so.” She didn’t want them arguing about her power here and now. “I can give them hope, though, which is why today, in this Assembly, I wish to announce an event that offers hope for the future. I wish to announce the impending marriage of my son Sebastian to Lady d’Angelica, Marchioness of Sowerd. Will any of you seek to force a vote on the matter?”

They didn’t, although she suspected that it was as much because they were stunned by the announcement as anything. The Dowager didn’t care. She set off from the chamber, deciding that her own preparations were more important than whatever business it would conclude in her absence.

There was still so much to do. She needed to make sure that the Danses’ daughters had been contained, she needed to make wedding preparations —

The coughing fit took her suddenly, even though she had been expecting it through most of her speech. When her handkerchief came away stained with blood, the Dowager knew that she’d pushed too hard today. That, and things were progressing faster than she would have liked.

She *would* finish things here. She would secure the kingdom for her sons, against all the threats, inside and out. She would see her line continue. She would see the dangers eliminated.

Before all of that, though, there was someone she needed to see.

“Sebastian, I’m so sorry,” Angelica said, and then stopped herself with a frown. That wasn’t right. Too eager, too bright. She needed to try again. “Sebastian, I’m so sorry.”

Better, but still not quite right. She kept practicing as she made her way along the corridors of the palace, knowing that when the time came to actually say it in earnest, it would have to be perfect. She needed to make Sebastian understand that she felt his pain, because that kind of sympathy was the first step when it came to owning his heart.

It would have been easier if she’d felt anything but joy at the thought of Sophia being gone. Just the memory of the knife sliding into her brought a smile that she wouldn’t be able to show in front of Sebastian when he got back.

That wouldn't be long. Angelica had beaten him home by riding hard, but she had no doubt that Rupert, Sebastian, and all the rest would return soon. She needed to be ready once they did, because there was no point in removing Sophia if she couldn't take advantage of the gap that left.

For now, though, Sebastian wasn't the member of their family she needed to worry about. She stood outside the Dowager's quarters, taking a breath while the guards watched her. When they swung the doors back in silence, Angelica set her brightest smile on her features and ventured forward.

"Remember that you've done what she wants," Angelica told herself.

The Dowager was waiting for her, seated on a comfortable chair and drinking some kind of herbal tea. Angelica remembered her deep curtsy this time, and it seemed that Sebastian's mother wasn't in a mood to play games.

"Please rise, Angelica," she said in a tone that was surprisingly mild.

Still, it made sense that she would be pleased. Angelica had done everything that was required.

"Sit there," the older woman said, gesturing to a spot beside her. It was better than having to kneel before her, although being commanded like that was still a small piece of grit rubbing against Angelica's soul. "Now, tell me about your journey to Monthys."

"It's done," Angelica said. "Sophia is dead."

"Are you sure of that?" the Dowager asked. "You checked her body?"

Angelica frowned at the questioning note there. Was nothing good enough for this old woman?

"I had to escape before that, but I stabbed her with a stiletto laced with the most vicious poison I had," she said. "No one could have survived."

"Well," the Dowager said, "I hope you're correct. My spies say that her sister showed up?"

Angelica felt her eyes widening slightly at that. She knew that Rupert wasn't back yet, so how could the Dowager have heard so much, so quickly? Maybe he'd sent a bird ahead.

"She did," she said. "She sailed off with her sister's corpse, on a boat heading for Ishjemme."

"Heading for Lars Skyddar, no doubt," the Dowager muttered. It was another small shock for Angelica. How could peasants like Sophia and her sister possibly know someone like Ishjemme's ruler?

"I've done what you wanted," Angelica said. Even to her, it sounded defensive.

"Are you expecting praise?" the Dowager asked. "Maybe a reward? Some petty title to add to your collection, maybe?"

Angelica didn't like being talked down to like that. She'd done everything the Dowager had required. Sophia was dead, and Sebastian would be home soon, ready to accept her.

"I have just announced your nuptials to the Assembly of Nobles," the Dowager said. "I would think that marrying my son would be reward enough."

"More than enough," Angelica said. "Will Sebastian accept this time, though?"

The Dowager reached out, and Angelica had to force herself not to flinch as the old woman patted her cheek.

"I'm sure I said that was part of *your* job. Distract him. Seduce him. Get down on your knees in front of him and beg, if you have to. My reports say that he's cloaked in grief as he comes home. Your job will be to make him forget all of that. Not mine, yours. Do a good job, Angelica." The Dowager shrugged. "Now get out. I have things to do. I have to make sure that you actually finished Sophia, for one thing."

The dismissal was abrupt enough to be rude. With anyone else, it would have been enough to warrant retribution. With the Dowager, there was nothing that Angelica could do, and that only made it worse.

Still, she would do what the old woman required. She would make Sebastian hers once he got home. She would be royalty by marriage soon, and that elevation would be more than reward enough.

In the meantime, the Dowager's uncertainty about Sophia gnawed at her. Angelica had killed her; she was sure of it, but...

But it wouldn't hurt to see what she could learn about events in Ishjemme, just to be certain. She had at least one friend there, after all.

CHAPTER SIX

Sophia could feel the rhythmic flow of the ship somewhere beneath her, but it was a distant thing, on the edge of her awareness. Unless she concentrated, it was hard to remember that she had ever been on a ship. She certainly couldn't find it, even though it was the last place that she could remember being.

Instead, she seemed to be in a shadowy place, filled with mist that shifted and billowed, fractured light filtering through it so that it seemed more like the ghost of a sun than its reality. In the mist, Sophia had no idea which way was forward, or which way she was supposed to go.

Then she heard the cry of a child, cutting through the fog more clearly than the sunlight. Somehow, some instinct told her that the child was hers, and that she needed to go to it. Without hesitating, Sophia set off through the mist, running toward it.

"I'm coming," she assured her child. "I'll find you."

It continued to cry, but now the mist twisted the sound, making it seem to come from every direction at once. Sophia picked a direction, plunging forward again, but it seemed that every direction she picked was the wrong one, and she got no closer.

The mist shimmered, and scenes seemed to form around her, set out as perfectly as performances on a stage. Sophia saw herself screaming in childbirth, her sister holding her hand as she brought a life into the world. She saw herself holding that child in her arms. She saw herself dead, with a physiker standing beside her.

"She wasn't strong enough, after the attack," he said to Kate.

That couldn't be right though. It couldn't be true if the other scenes were true. It could happen.

"Maybe none of it is true. Maybe it's just imagination. Or maybe they're possibilities, and nothing is decided."

Sophia recognized Angelica's voice instantly. She spun, seeing the other woman standing there, a bloody knife in her hand.

"You're not here," she said. "You can't be."

"But your child can?" she countered.

She stepped forward and stabbed Sophia then, the agony of it lancing through her like fire. Sophia screamed... and she was alone, standing in the mist.

She heard a child crying somewhere in the distance, setting off toward it because she knew instinctively that it was her child, her daughter. She ran, trying to catch up, even as she had the sense that she'd done this before...

She found scenes from a girl's life around her. A toddler playing, happy and safe, Kate laughing along with her because they'd both found a good hiding place under the stairs and Sophia couldn't find them. A toddler pulled from a castle just in time, Kate fighting against a dozen men, ignoring the spear in her side so that Sophia could run with her. The same child alone in an empty room, no parent there.

"What is this?" Sophia demanded.

"Only you would demand meaning from something like this," Angelica said, stepping from the mist again. "You can't just have a dream, it has to be filled with portents and signs."

She stepped forward, and Sophia raised a hand to try to stop her, but that just meant that the knife thrust into her under the armpit, rather than cleanly up through the chest.

She was standing in the mist, a child's cries sounding around her...

"No," Sophia said, shaking her head. "I won't keep going around and around this. It's not real."

"It's real enough for you to be here," Angelica said, her voice echoing from the mist. "What does it feel like, being a dead thing?"

"I'm not dead," Sophia insisted. "I can't be."

Angelica's laugh echoed the way her child's cries had before. "You can't be dead? Because you're that special, Sophia? Because the world needs you so much? Let me remind you."

She stepped from the mist, and now they weren't standing in mist, but in the cabin of the boat. Angelica stepped forward, the hatred on her face obvious as she thrust the blade into Sophia once more. Sophia gasped with it, then fell, collapsing into darkness as she heard Sienne attack Angelica.

She was back in the mist then, standing there while it shimmered around her.

"Is this death then?" she demanded, knowing that Angelica would be listening. "If so, what are you doing here?"

"Maybe I died too," Angelica said. She stepped back into view. "Maybe I hate you so much that I followed you. Or maybe I'm just everything you hate in the world."

"I don't hate you," Sophia insisted.

She heard Angelica laugh then. "Don't you? You don't hate that I got to grow up in safety while you were in the House of the Unclaimed? That everyone accepts me at court while you had to run? That *I* could have married Sebastian without any problems, while you had to run away?"

She stepped forward again, but this time she didn't stab Sophia. She stepped past her, walking off into the mist. The mist seemed to reshape itself as Angelica passed, and Sophia knew that this couldn't be the real her now, because the real Angelica wouldn't have tired of murdering her quite so quickly.

Sophia followed in her wake, trying to make sense of it all.

"Let's show you a few more possibilities," Angelica said. "I think you'll like these."

Just the way Angelica said it told Sophia how little she would like it. Even so, she followed her into the mist, not knowing what else to do. Angelica quickly disappeared out of sight, but Sophia kept walking.

Now she was standing in the middle of a room where Sebastian sat, obviously trying to hold back the tears that fell from his eyes. Angelica was there with him, reaching out for him.

"You don't have to hold your emotions back," Angelica said in a tone of perfect sympathy. She put her arms around Sebastian, holding him. "It's all right to grieve for the dead, but just remember that the living are here for you."

She looked straight at Sophia while she held Sebastian, and Sophia could see the look of triumph there. Sophia started forward in anger, wanting to pull Angelica away from him, but her hand couldn't even touch them. It passed through without making contact, leaving her staring at them, no more than a ghost.

"No," Sophia said. "No, this isn't real."

They didn't react. She might as well not have been there. The image shifted, and now Sophia was standing in the middle of the kind of wedding that she could never have dared to imagine for herself. It was in a hall whose roof seemed to reach to the sky, nobles gathered in such numbers that they made even that seem small.

Sebastian was waiting by an altar along with a priestess of the Masked Goddess whose robes proclaimed her rank above the others of her order. The Dowager was there, seated on a throne of gold as she watched her son. The bride came forward, veiled and dressed in pure white. When the priestess threw back the veil to reveal Angelica's face, Sophia screamed...

She found herself in chambers she knew from memory, the layout of Sebastian's things unchanged from the nights she'd spent there with him, the fall of moonlight on the sheets straight from her memories of their time together. There were bodies tangled in those sheets, and in one another. Sophia could hear their laughter and their joy.

She saw moonlight fall on Sebastian's face, caught in an expression of pure need, and Angelica's, which held nothing but triumph.

Sophia turned and ran. She ran through the mist blindly, not wanting to see any more. She didn't want to stay in this place. She had to escape it, but she couldn't find a way out. Worse, it

seemed that every direction she turned led back in the direction of more images, and even the images of her daughter hurt, because Sophia had no way of knowing which ones might be real and which were just there to hurt her.

She had to find a way out, but couldn't see well enough to find one. Sophia stood there, feeling the panic building in her. Somehow, she knew that Angelica would be following her again, stalking her through the mist, ready to thrust her blade home in her once more.

Then Sophia saw the light, glowing through the fog.

It built slowly, starting as a thing that barely pushed its way through the murk, then slowly becoming something bigger, something that burned the fog away the same way the morning sun might burn off morning dew. The light brought warmth with it, feeding life into limbs that had felt leaden before.

It flowed over Sophia, and she let the power of it pour into her, carrying with it images of fields and rivers, mountains and forests, a whole kingdom contained in that touch of light. Even the remembered pain of the wound in her side seemed to fade before that power. On instinct, Sophia put her hand to her side, feeling it come away wet with blood. She could see the wound there now, but it was closing, the flesh knitting together under the touch of the energy.

As the mist lifted, Sophia could see something in the distance. It took a few more seconds before enough burned away to reveal a spiral staircase leading up toward a patch of light, so far above that it seemed impossible to reach. Somehow, Sophia knew that the only way to leave this seemingly never-ending nightmare was to reach that light. She set off in the direction of the staircase.

"You think you get to leave?" Angelica demanded from behind Sophia. She spun, and barely managed to get her hands down in time as Angelica struck at her with the knife. Sophia pushed her back on instinct, then turned and ran for the stairs.

"You'll never leave here!" Angelica called out, and Sophia heard her footsteps following behind.

Sophia sped up. She didn't want to be stabbed again, and not just to avoid the pain of it. She didn't know what would happen if this place shifted again, or how long the opening above would last. She couldn't afford to take the risk either way, so she ran for the stairs, spinning as she reached them to kick out at Angelica and knock her back mid-thrust.

Sophia didn't stay to fight her, but instead sprinted up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She could hear Angelica following, but that didn't matter then. All that mattered was escaping. She continued up the stairs as they climbed, and climbed.

The stairs kept going, seeming to climb forever. Sophia continued to clamber up them, but she could feel herself starting to tire. She was no longer taking the steps two at a time now, and a glance over her shoulder showed her that the version of Angelica in whatever nightmare this was still followed her, stalking forward with a grim sense of inevitability.

Sophia's instinct was to keep climbing, but a deeper part of her was starting to think that was stupid. This wasn't the normal world; it didn't have the same rules, or the same logic. This was a place where thought and magic counted for more than the purely physical ability to keep going.

That thought was enough to make Sophia stop and delve deeper into herself, reaching for the thread of power that had seemed to connect her to an entire country. She turned to face the image of Angelica, understanding now.

"You aren't real," she said. "You aren't here."

She sent a whisper of power out, and the image of her would-be killer dissolved. She concentrated, and the spiral staircase disappeared, leaving Sophia standing on flat ground. The light wasn't high above now, but was instead just a step or two away, forming a doorway that seemed to open onto a ship's cabin. The same ship's cabin where Sophia had been stabbed.

Taking a deep breath, Sophia stepped through, and woke.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kate sat on the deck of the ship as it scythed through the water, exhaustion preventing her from doing much more. Even with the time that had passed since she'd healed Sophia's wound, it felt as though she hadn't fully recovered from the effort.

From time to time, the sailors checked on her as they passed. The captain, Borkar, was especially attentive, running by with a frequency and deference that would have seemed amusing if he hadn't been so completely sincere about it.

"Are you all right, my lady?" he asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time. "Do you require anything?"

"I'm fine," Kate assured him. "And I'm not anyone's lady. I'm just Kate. Why do you keep calling me that?"

"It's not my place to say, my... Kate," the captain insisted.

It wasn't just him. All the sailors seemed to be walking around Kate with a level of deference that verged on the obsequious. She wasn't used to it. Her life had consisted of the brutality of the House of the Unclaimed, followed by the camaraderie of Lord Cranston's men. And there had been Will, of course...

She hoped that Will was safe. When she'd left, she hadn't been able to say goodbye, because Lord Cranston would never have let her go if she had. She would have given anything to be able to say it properly, or better yet, to bring Will with her. He would probably have laughed at the men who bowed to her, knowing how much that unwarranted politeness would annoy her.

Maybe it was something Sophia had done. After all, she'd played the part of a noble girl before. Maybe she would explain it all once she woke up. If she woke up. No, Kate couldn't think like that. She had to hope, even if it had been more than two days now since she'd closed the wound in Sophia's side.

Kate went through to the cabin. Sophia's forest cat raised its head as Kate entered, looking up protectively from where it lay across Sophia's feet like some furry blanket. To Kate's surprise, the cat had barely moved from Sophia's side in all the time the ship had been traveling. It let Kate ruffle its ears as she moved to her sister's bedside.

"We're both just hoping that she'll wake up, aren't we?" she said.

She sat beside her sister, watching her sleep. Sophia looked so peaceful now, no longer marred by the stiletto wound in her side, no longer gray with the pallor of death. She could have been asleep, except that she'd been asleep like this for so long that Kate was starting to worry she might die of thirst or hunger before she woke.

Then Kate saw the faint flicker of Sophia's eyelids, the barest movement of her hands against the bedclothes. She stared at her sister, daring to hope.

Sophia's eyes opened, staring straight at her, and Kate couldn't help herself. She threw herself forward, hugging her sister, holding her close.

"You're alive. Sophia, you're alive."

"I'm alive," Sophia reassured her, holding on as Kate helped her to sit up. Even the forest cat seemed happy about it, moving forward to lick both of their faces with a tongue like a blacksmith's rasp.

"Easy, Sienne," Sophia said. "I'm all right."

"Sienne?" Kate asked. "That's her name?"

She saw Sophia nod. "I found her on the road to Monthys. It's a long story."

Kate suspected that there were a lot of stories to be told. She moved back from Sophia, wanting to hear all of it, and Sophia all but fell back to the bed.

"Sophia!"

"It's all right," Sophia said. "*I'm* all right. At least, I think I am. I'm just tired. I could do with a drink too."

Kate passed her a water skin, watching Sophia drink deeply. She called out for the sailors, and to her surprise, Captain Borkar himself came running.

"What do you need, my lady?" he asked, then stared at Sophia. To Kate's shock, he fell to one knee. "Your highness, you're awake. We were all so worried about you. You must be starving. I'll fetch food at once!"

He hurried off, and Kate could feel the joy coming off him like smoke. She had at least one other concern, though.

"Your highness?" she said, staring over at Sophia. "The sailors have been treating me oddly ever since they realized I was your sister, but this? You're telling them that you're royalty?"

It sounded like a dangerous game to play, pretending to be royal. Was Sophia playing on her engagement to Sebastian, or pretending to be some foreign royal, or was it something else?

"It's nothing like that," Sophia said. "I'm not pretending anything." She took hold of Kate's arm. "Kate, I found out who our parents are!"

That was one thing that Sophia wouldn't joke about. Kate stared at her, barely able to believe the implications of it. She sat down on the edge of the bed, wanting to understand it all.

"Tell me," she said, unable to contain her shock. "You really think... you think that our parents were some kind of royalty?"

Sophia started to sit up. When she struggled with it, Kate helped her.

"Our parents were named Alfred and Christina Danse," Sophia said. "They lived, *we* lived, in an estate in Monthys. Our family used to be the kings and queens before the Dowager's family pushed them aside. The person who explained this said that they had a kind of... connection to the land. They didn't just rule it; they were part of it."

Kate froze as she heard that. She'd felt that connection. She'd felt the country spread out before her. She'd reached for the power in it. It had been how she'd been able to heal Sophia.

"And this is real?" she said. "This isn't some kind of story? I'm not going mad?"

"I wouldn't make this up," Sophia reassured her. "I wouldn't do that to you, Kate."

"You said that our parents *were* these people," Kate said. "Are they... did they die?"

She did her best to hide the pain that went through her with that thought. She could remember the fire. She could remember running. She couldn't remember what had happened to her parents.

"I don't know," Sophia said. "No one seems to know what happened to them after that. All of this... the plan was to head to our uncle, Lars Skyddar, and hope that he knows something."

"Lars Skyddar?" Kate had heard that name. Lord Cranston had talked about the lands of Ishjemme, and how they'd managed to keep out invaders using a combination of cunning tactics and the natural defenses of their icy fjords. "He's our uncle?"

It was too much to take in. Just like that, Kate had gone from having no family beyond her sister to having a family who had been kings and queens, who *did* rule in at least one far-off land. It was too much, too quickly.

On instinct, Kate found herself reaching for the locket that she wore around her neck. She took it out, looking down at the image of the woman within. She had a name for that woman now: Christina Danse. Her mother. That made her Kate Danse.

Kate smiled. She liked the sound of that. She liked the idea of having a family name that she knew, rather than just being Unclaimed, marked by the tattoo on her calf.

"What's that?" Sophia asked, and Kate realized that she wasn't looking at the locket, but at the ring she'd placed on the same chain for safekeeping. There was no doubt that Sophia recognized it. Of course she would, when it had been her engagement ring. "Where did you get that?"

There was no point in trying to hide it now.

"Sebastian gave it to me to give to you," she said. "But Sophia, you need to stay away from him."

"I love him," Sophia said, "and if he loves me – "

"He *stabbed* you," Kate insisted, feeling an echo of the anger that had been there when she'd first seen Sophia lying there near death. "He tried to murder you!"

Even given that, Sophia still shook her head. "That wasn't him."

"Because that's not how he really is?" Kate guessed. It sounded like the kind of excuse some farmer's wife might make when her husband got drunk and beat her. "Because he loves you really?"

"No," Sophia said. "I mean that it *wasn't him*. A noblewoman called Milady d'Angelica stabbed me, not Sebastian."

Kate hadn't met this noblewoman, but she hadn't been the one kneeling over Sophia's body.

"He was here," Kate insisted. "He had the knife in his hand. He was covered in your blood!"

"Maybe he was trying to save me," Sophia insisted.

"And maybe you're just reaching for anything you can find to defend him," Kate shot back. "Maybe you even really believe that this woman was here, rather than Sebastian, but I know what I saw."

"It was Angelica," Sophia insisted. "She stabbed me, and Sienne tore a piece out of her back as she ran. Please, Kate, I just want you to believe me. Sebastian wasn't the one who did this."

"He's done plenty of other things," Kate pointed out. "He was the one who sent you away so that you ended up in this mess in the first place. He said he wanted to find you, but as far as I can see all he did was lead half the royal army to hunt you. Even if he didn't stab you, he did nothing to try to save you."

"You can't blame him for not having the magic to heal me," Sophia said. She reached up for Kate, pulling her close. "I don't want to fight, Kate. You saved my life, and we're traveling together now to find our family. I love Sebastian. Can't you just accept that?"

Kate wished she could, but as far as she could see, loving Sebastian had brought her sister nothing but pain. She took the ring from the chain around her neck, pressing it into Sophia's hand with bad grace.

"You should have this," she said. "If it were me, I'd take it and throw it into the ocean, or sell it for extra coin, but you'll probably take it as a promise."

Kate saw Sophia nod, and knew that her sister was thinking in those terms. She really thought that the prince whose hands had been covered in her blood would come to her and be the perfect husband. Kate saw her slip it onto her little finger, holding it there almost reverently.

"Why do you want him so much?" Kate demanded. "Why is it so important that things work out with him? You have a whole life ahead of you. You've just told me that we have a chance to find our family. You've told me that... goddess, I'm a princess, aren't I?"

"You're a princess," Sophia said with a faint smile, "and you will have to wear pretty ball gowns from now on."

"Not in a million years," Kate said. "And you're avoiding the point. You're not some Indentured girl anymore. You could have any man you wanted. So why him? And don't just tell me that you love him."

"Is love so stupid?" Sophia asked.

Kate found herself thinking about Will, but didn't say anything. If this was the way love made people think, then it *was* stupid.

"Kate, I need him," Sophia said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm pregnant with his child," Sophia said.

Kate stared at her. "You're pregnant?"

She hugged her sister again then.

"Of course, you realize what this means?" Sophia asked. "You're not just going to be a princess, Kate. You're going to be an *aunt*."

Kate hadn't thought of it like that, and just the thought of it was mildly terrifying. There were other, bigger, fears though. The two of them were heading off to a place Kate had never been to find a man they didn't know, all while her home was in the middle of an invasion.

She didn't know what their trip to Ishjemme would involve, but she suspected that it wouldn't be easy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sebastian shambled into the palace like a dead thing when he arrived, and not just because Rupert had made them ride hard on the way back south, apparently enjoying his discomfort.

The fact was that the world seemed too empty for anything else now that Sophia was gone.

“You should go get cleaned up,” Rupert said with obvious amusement. “I’m sure Mother will want to speak to you as soon as she hears you’re back.”

He was clearly looking forward to the thought of what their mother would have to say, but he was still quick to leave Sebastian to it. Maybe he was that eager to get back to his carousing and his cronies. Maybe he was just certain that Sebastian didn’t have any reason to go anywhere else now.

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