



MORGAN RICE

A KISS
FOR QUEENS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (BOOK SIX)

Морган Райс A Kiss for Queens

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Аннотация

“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)

The new #1 Bestselling epic fantasy series by Morgan Rice!

In A KISS FOR QUEENS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Six), it is time for Sophia to come into her own. It is time for her to lead an army, to lead a nation, to step up and be the commander of the most epic battle the realm may ever see. Her love, Sebastian, remains imprisoned and set to be executed. Will they reunite in time?

Kate has finally freed herself from the witch's power, and is free to become the warrior she was meant to be. Her skills will be tested in

the battle of her life, as she fights at her sister's side. Will the sisters save each other?

The Queen, furious at Rupert and Lady D'Angelica, exiles him and sentences her to execution. But they just may have their own agenda.

And all of this converges in an epic battle that will decide the future of the crown—and the fate of the realm—forever.

A KISS FOR QUEENS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Six) is book #6 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 #7 in the series will be released soon.

“[A Throne for Sisters is a] powerful opener to a series [that] 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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Morgan Rice

A Kiss for Queens (A Throne for Sisters—Book Six)

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; of the new epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS, comprising seven books (and counting); and of the new science fiction series THE INVASION CHRONICLES. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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in touch!

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

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ONLY THE WORTHY (Book #1)

A THRONE FOR SISTERS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (Book #1)

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CHAPTER ONE

Sebastian crept through Ashton, cautious as a hunted deer, trying to work out his next move. He was free, but the truth was that he didn't trust it. Even now, it felt like some trick. The circumstances of his escape saw to that.

Sebastian still couldn't understand those. Someone had unlocked his cell door and killed all the guards in Rupert's townhouse, but they hadn't bothered to claim the credit for it; hadn't even announced themselves. Sebastian would have expected a rescuer to be there for this part of the escape as well. Instead, he progressed along Ashton's streets alone.

He skulked through Knotty Hill and the Screws, making his way slowly toward the docks. He was cautious, and not just for all the usual reasons that someone making their way through Ashton needed to be cautious. At some point, Rupert would find out that he was missing, and send men to hunt for him.

"I need to be away before then," Sebastian said to himself. That part seemed obvious.

If he still had his mother's favor, it would be a different matter, but after he'd run out on his wedding, he doubted she would be in a mood to help him. Besides, the truth was that he wanted to leave Ashton quickly for another reason: the sooner he left, the sooner he would reach Ishjemme and Sophia.

"I will get to her," he promised himself. He would reach her,

and he would be together with her. That was what mattered right now.

He made his way down to the docks, finding an inn and settling into a corner, the cowl of his cloak up as he watched for men who might be working for Rupert. They'd caught him on the way out of the city once, after all.

"What can I get you?" a serving woman asked him.

Sebastian put a small coin on the table from the pouch that someone had left him along with the cloak and a double-edged dagger. "Food," he said, "and information. Are there any ships leaving for Ishjemme?"

The serving woman took the coin. "Food, I can manage. For the other, you're welcome to sit here and listen. Captains come through often enough with the docks."

Sebastian had thought it might come to that. He'd been hoping to be out of Ashton quickly, but he couldn't risk going along the docks simply asking for a ship again. That had been how Rupert had caught him last time. He needed to take his time. He needed to listen.

He did both, sitting there and trying to pick up what he could of the conversations there in the inn while he ate a plate of bread, cheese, and cured ham. The men in the corner were talking about the wars across the Knifewater, which no longer seemed so distant now that the New Army had tried to invade. A man and a woman were talking in whispers, but Sebastian could see enough of them together to guess that they were making promises to one

another and working out a life together. It made him think of Sophia. Others were talking about the latest players' works, or the arguments they'd seen out on the docks. In amongst it all, though, one whisper caught at Sebastian's ears.

"The Dowager..."

Sebastian stood, making his way over to the dock hand who'd said it.

"What was that?" he demanded. "What were you saying about the Dowager?"

He kept his head down, hoping no one would realize who he was.

"What's it to you?" the dock hand demanded.

Sebastian thought quickly, letting his voice take on the same rough edge. "Been hearing her name all day. Finally thought I'd see what was happening."

The dock hand shrugged. "Well, you'll not get much from me. All I've heard is what anyone's heard: something's happening up at the palace. There are whispers about the Dowager, and now the whole place is locked down. My brother had a delivery up that way, and was stuck more than an hour just at Higharch."

"Thanks," Sebastian said, moving away from the other man and heading for the door.

By rights, the hints of trouble at the palace should have meant nothing to him. He should have just kept going with his original plan to find a boat and get to Sophia as quickly as he could. Whatever was happening with his mother, it wasn't any of his

business.

Sebastian tried to tell himself all of that. Even so, his feet found themselves turning inexorably in the direction of the palace, carrying him across the cobbles and up through the city.

“Sophia will be waiting,” he told himself, but the truth was that he didn’t even know if Sophia had played a role in his escape. If she had, wouldn’t his rescuers have announced themselves? She might not know that he was on his way, and in any case, could Sebastian really leave without at least knowing what was happening?

He made up his mind. He would go to the palace, grab supplies, and learn what was happening. If he did it quietly, Sebastian guessed he might be out of there before anyone even noticed, and in a far better position to get the ship he needed to Ishjemme and Sophia. He nodded to himself, walking in the direction of the palace, then stopping to hail a passing palanquin for hire. The bearers looked at him skeptically, but didn’t voice any doubts once he’d thrown them a couple of coins.

“This is close enough,” Sebastian said, once they reached a street not far from the palace grounds. He couldn’t risk trying to get in through the front doors, in case Rupert’s cronies were there. Instead, Sebastian slipped around to one of the garden gates. There was a guard there, looking surprisingly alert considering it was such a minor gate that he was guarding. Sebastian watched him for a while, then beckoned to a nearby street urchin and held out a coin.

“What’s that for?” the child asked, suspicion ringing through his tone. Sebastian wasn’t sure he wanted to know what had happened to make the child that suspicious of strangers.

“I want you to go and cause trouble with that guard. Get him to chase you, but don’t get caught. Do you think you can do that?”

The child nodded.

“Do a good job, and there’s another coin in it for you,” Sebastian promised, then stood back in a doorway to wait.

He didn’t have to wait long. In less than a minute, the child was there, throwing mud in the direction of the guard. One spattered off his helmet, bursting over his uniform in a great spray of earth.

“Oi!” the guard yelled, and ran for the urchin.

Sebastian hurried into the gap that was left, making his way through the gate and into the palace grounds. He hoped the child would be all right. He suspected he would, because no urchin lived on Ashton’s streets for long without being able to run.

Sebastian made his way through the gardens, finding himself thinking about the walks he’d taken with Sophia through them. He would be reunited with her soon. Maybe Ishjemme would have gardens to rival the beauty of the climbing roses here. He intended to find out either way.

The grounds were quieter than they normally were. On any normal day, there should have been servants bustling about, gardening or collecting herbs and vegetables for the kitchens. There should have been nobles taking formal turns around the grounds, for the exercise, for the opportunity to talk politics

with one another without being overheard, or as part of the elaborate hints and subtle gestures that constituted courtship in the kingdom.

Instead, the gardens were all but empty, and Sebastian found himself slipping through the kitchen gardens, into the palace through a side door. Servants there stared at him, and Sebastian kept moving, not wanting the entanglements that might come if someone called out his presence. He didn't want to be caught up talking to the full court; he just wanted to find out what was happening and leave again, as unobtrusively as possible.

Sebastian made his way through the palace, ducking back every time he thought a guard might be coming, heading in the direction of his rooms. He went in, collecting a spare sword and changing his clothes, grabbing a bag and filling it with what supplies he could. He went out into the palace again...

...and almost immediately found himself face to face with a servant, who started to back away, terror etched on her face, as if she thought he might cut her down.

"Don't worry," Sebastian said. "I won't hurt you. I'm just here to—"

"He's here!" the servant called out. "Prince Sebastian is here!"

Almost immediately, the sound of booted feet followed. Sebastian turned to run down the hallway, sprinting along the corridors he'd spent most of his life walking. He went left, then right, trying to lose the men who ran along behind him now, yelling for him to stop.

There were more men ahead. Sebastian glanced around, then burst into a nearby room, hoping that there might at least be an adjoining door or a place to hide. There was neither.

Guards crowded into the room. Sebastian considered his options, thought about the beating he'd received at the hands of Rupert's men, and drew his sword almost on instinct.

"Put the sword down, your highness," the leader of the guards commanded. There were men on either side of Sebastian now, and, to his surprise, at least some had muskets leveled. What kind of men would risk his mother's anger by threatening one of her sons with death like that? Normally, they didn't dare so much as a rebuke. It was part of the reason Rupert had gotten away with so much over the years.

Sebastian wasn't Rupert, though, and he wasn't foolish enough to consider fighting against a group of armed men like that. He lowered his sword, but didn't drop it.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. There was one card he could play here that didn't sit well with him, but might be his best option to stay safe. "I am the heir to my mother's throne, and you are threatening me. Lower your weapons at once!"

"Is that why you did it?" the guards' leader demanded, in a tone that held more hatred than Sebastian had heard in his life. "Did you want to be the heir?"

"Is that why I did what?" Sebastian shot back. "What is happening here? When my mother hears of this—"

"There's no point in playing innocent," the guard captain said.

“We know you’re the one who murdered the Dowager.”

“Murdered...” It was as though the world stopped in that moment. Sebastian stood there open-mouthed, his sword clattering from nerveless fingers as the shock of it hit him. Someone had murdered the Dowager? His mother was *dead*?

Grief poured into him, the sheer horror of what had happened filling him. His mother was dead? She couldn’t be. She’d always been there, as immovable as rock, and now... she was gone, torn away in an instant.

Instantly, men rushed in to grab him, arms fastening onto his from either side. Sebastian was too numb to even struggle. He couldn’t believe it. He’d thought that his mother would outlast everyone else in the kingdom. He’d thought her so strong, so cunning, that nothing would be able to bring her to an end. Now someone had murdered her.

No, not someone. There was only one person it was likely to be.

“Rupert did this,” Sebastian said. “Rupert is the one who—”

“Stop your lies,” the guard captain said. “I’m to believe that it’s a coincidence that we’ve found you running armed through the palace so soon after your mother’s death? Prince Sebastian of the House of Flamberg, I am arresting you for the murder of your mother. Take him to one of the towers, lads. I expect they’ll want to try him for this before they execute him as the traitor he is.”

CHAPTER TWO

Angelica sat primly in the drawing room of Rupert's townhouse, as perfectly arranged as the flowers sitting on the mantelpiece, listening to the realm's elder prince panic while trying not to show any of her disdain.

"I killed her!" he shouted, spreading his arms wide as he paced back and forth. "I actually killed her."

"Shout it a little louder, my prince," Angelica said, unable to keep at least a little of the disdain she felt from seeping through. "I think there are some people in the next building who might not have heard you."

"Don't make fun of me!" Rupert said, pointing at her. "You... you put me up to this."

A faint trickle of fear rose in Angelica at that. She had no wish to be the target of Rupert's anger.

"And yet you are the one covered in the Dowager's blood," Angelica said, with a faint hint of disgust. Not at the killing; the old bat had deserved that. It was simply disgust at the inelegance of it all, and the stupidity of her husband-to-be.

Rupert's expression flashed with anger, but then he looked down at himself as if seeing the blood on his shirt for the first time, staining it crimson to match his coat. His expression returned to something distraught as he did it. Strange, Angelica thought, was it possible that they'd found one person Rupert

actually regretted hurting?

“They’ll kill me for it,” Rupert said. “I killed my mother. I walked through the palace with her blood on me. People saw me.”

Possibly half of Ashton saw him, given the way he’d probably gone through the streets with it. The best that could be said was that at least he’d had a cloak wrapped around him for that part of the journey. As for the rest... well, Angelica would deal with it.

“Take your shirt off,” she ordered.

“You do *not* command me!” Rupert said, rounding on her.

Angelica stood firm, but made her tone gentler, trying to soothe Rupert the way he so obviously wanted. “Take your shirt off, Rupert. We need to get you cleaned up.”

He did it, throwing off his coat as well. Angelica dabbed at the blood spots that remained with a kerchief and a bowl of water, erasing what she could of the traces of violence. She rang a small bell and a waiting servant came in with fresh clothes, taking the old ones away.

“There,” Angelica said as Rupert dressed, “doesn’t that feel better?”

To her surprise, Rupert shook his head. “It doesn’t take away what happened. It doesn’t take away what I see in here, in *here!*” He struck at the side of his head with a flat palm.

Angelica caught his hand, kissing his brow as gently as a mother with a child. “You mustn’t hurt yourself. You’re too precious to me for that.”

Precious was one word for it. Necessary might be another. Angelica needed Rupert alive and well, at least for now. He was the key to unlock the doors of power, and he needed to be intact to do it. Controlling him had proved so easy before, but all of this was... unexpected.

"You'll lose me soon," Rupert said. "When they find out what I did..."

"Rupert, I've never seen a death affect you like this before," Angelica said. "You've fought in battles. You've commanded armies that have killed thousands."

He'd fought and killed in less obviously necessary causes, too. He'd hurt more than his share of people in his life. From what Angelica had heard, he'd done things that would turn most people's stomachs, hidden away from the world. Why should one more death be a problem?

"This was my mother," Rupert said, as if that made it obvious. "She wasn't some peasant. She was my mother, and the queen."

"The mother who was going to steal your birthright," Angelica pointed out. "The queen who was going to exile you."

"Even so—" Rupert began.

Angelica took hold of his shoulders, wishing she could get away with shaking some sense into him. "There is no even so," she said. "She was going to take everything from you. She was going to destroy you to give everything to her son—"

"I am her son!" Rupert shouted, pushing Angelica back. Angelica knew she should have been afraid of him in that

moment, but the truth was that she wasn't. For the moment, at least, she was the one in control.

"Yes, you are," Angelica said. "Her son, and her heir, and she tried to take all of that from you. She tried to give it to someone who would have hurt you. It was practically self-defense."

Rupert shook his head. "People won't... they won't see it like that. When they learn what I have done..."

"Why should they learn that?" Angelica asked, in a perfectly reasonable tone that pretended not to understand. She moved over to one of the couches there, sitting and taking a cup of chilled wine. She gestured for Rupert to do the same, and he drank his at a speed that suggested he barely tasted it.

"People will have seen me," Rupert said. "They will guess where the blood came from."

Angelica hadn't thought Rupert was that stupid. She'd thought he was a fool, obviously, even a dangerous fool, but not *that* much of one.

"People can be bought, or threatened, or killed," she said. "They can be distracted by rumors, or even persuaded that they were wrong. I have people listening for hints that people are speaking up against you, and any who are will be either silenced or made to look like fools, so that they are ignored."

"Even so—" Rupert began.

"There you go again, my love," Angelica said. "You are a strong man, a confident man. Why are you second-guessing yourself with this?"

“Because there are so many ways it can go wrong,” Rupert said. “I am not a fool. I know what people think of me. If rumors start, they will believe them.”

“Then I shall see that they do not start,” Angelica said, “or that a more suitable target for them is found.” She reached out to take one of his hands in hers. “When you have bedded some noble’s daughter in the past and been too rough with her, did you worry about their wrath?”

Rupert shook his head. “I have *never*—”

“Lying is your first tool in this,” Angelica said, calmly. She knew exactly what Rupert had done in the past, and to whom. She’d made it her business to know every small detail, so that she would be able to use it if she had to. Originally, the plan had been to destroy the prince when she married Sebastian, but it could be just as useful now.

“I don’t know why you’re bringing this up,” Rupert said. “It isn’t relevant. It’s—”

“Distraction is your second,” Angelica said. “We will find better things for the people to focus on.”

She saw Rupert flush with anger.

“I will be your king,” he snapped.

“And that is your third tool,” Angelica whispered, moving in to kiss him. “You are safe. Do you understand, my love? Or you will be. The trick now is to shore up your position.”

She watched Rupert relax visibly as the idea started to sink in. However deeply killing his mother had touched him, he knew

how to get away with whatever he did. He'd been doing it for long enough, after all. Or maybe it was the prospect of power that calmed him, the thought of what would follow.

"I have already spoken to my allies," Rupert said.

"And now it is time to get them to act," Angelica replied. "Make them a part of this from the start. The Dowager's death is already rumor for the city, and it will be announced formally soon enough. Things must move quickly now." She drew him to his feet. "All kinds of things."

"Which things?" Rupert asked. Angelica put it down to the shock.

"Our wedding, Rupert," she said. "It must happen before people have a chance to argue. We must present them with a stable front, a settled royal dynasty to follow."

Rupert moved surprisingly quickly when he grabbed her by the throat, the anger there rising up again with dangerous rapidity.

"Don't tell me what I *must* do," he said. "My mother tried to do that."

"I am not your mother," Angelica replied, trying not to wince at the strength of the grip. "But I *would* like to be your wife before the day is done. I thought we'd discussed that, Rupert. I thought it was what you wanted."

Rupert let go of her. "I don't know. I don't... none of this is what I planned."

"Isn't it?" Angelica asked. "You planned to take the throne."

Surely you knew what sacrifices that would involve? Although I'd like to think that marrying me is hardly *that* much of a hardship."

She moved back from him. "If you like, it is not too late to call things off. Tell me to leave, and I will vacate Ashton for my family's estates. Choose to wait, and we will wait. Of course, then you would not have my family's strength, or their allies. And there would be no one to help you to contain all those... difficult rumors."

"You're threatening me?" Rupert demanded. Angelica knew how dangerous a game that was. Even so, she was going to play it, because the real game she was playing was far more dangerous.

"I'm simply pointing out the advantages you gain by going through with it, my love," Angelica said. "Marry me, and I can make all of this so much easier for you. It is better to do it today than a month from now. If I can act as your wife, I have a *reason* to protect you from the world."

Rupert stood there for several seconds, and for a moment Angelica thought she might have misjudged all of this. That he might walk away after all. Then he gave a single, terse nod.

"Very well," he said. "If it matters to you, we will do it today. Now, I'm going to get some air and start contacting our allies."

He turned and walked out. Angelica suspected that he was more likely to seek out wine than their allies, but that didn't matter. It was probably even to their benefit. She would soon have them doing all that they should, sending messages on behalf of her husband.

She rang the bell for a servant.

“See that the clothes Prince Rupert was wearing when he came in are burned,” she said to the girl who came in. “Then fetch a priestess of the Masked Goddess, and invite the members of the Dowager’s inner council to meet at the palace. Oh, and send someone along to my dressmaker. There should be a wedding dress waiting for me by now.”

“My lady?” the girl said.

“Am I not speaking clearly enough?” Angelica asked. “My dressmaker. Go.”

The girl went. It was strange how stupid people could be sometimes. The servant had obviously assumed that Angelica would have made no preparations for her own wedding. Instead, she’d begun sending messages out for the preparations almost as soon as she got the idea to have Rupert marry her. It was important that this wedding looked as much like one as possible given the short notice.

It was a shame that there would be no opportunity to have a bigger ceremony later, but there was one obvious impediment to that: Rupert would be dead by then.

Today had shown the necessity of that more clearly than Angelica could have believed. She’d thought Rupert a man as much in control of himself as she was of herself, yet he remained as changeable as the wind. No, the plan she’d put in place was the way to go. She would marry Rupert tonight, kill him by morning, and be crowned queen before his body was even in the ground.

Ashton would have the queen it needed then. Angelica would rule, and the kingdom would be better for it. Everything was going to turn out right. She could feel it.

CHAPTER THREE

Sophia could only wait as the fleet advanced on Ashton. As *her* fleet advanced. Even here and now, after everything that had happened, it was hard to remember that all of this was hers. Every life on the ships around her, every lord who sent men, every piece of land from which they came, was her responsibility.

“There’s a lot to take responsibility for,” Sophia whispered to Sienne, the forest cat purring as she brushed against Sophia’s legs, winding around her with her own impatience.

There had been a fleet’s worth of ships anyway as they left Ishjemme, but since then more and more vessels had joined them, coming in down Ishjemme’s coasts or from the small islands along the way, even coming out from the Dowager’s kingdom as those loyal to her came to join in the assault.

There were so many soldiers there with her now. Enough soldiers to maybe win this war. Enough soldiers to wipe Ashton from the map, if she chose it.

It will be all right, Lucas sent across to her, obviously sensing her disquiet.

People will die, Sophia sent back.

But they are here because they choose to be, Lucas replied. He walked up to put a hand on her shoulder. *Honor them by not throwing those lives away, but do not lessen what they offer by holding back.*

"I think it's one of those things that's easier to say than to do," Sophia said aloud. She reached down to ruffle Sienne's ears automatically.

"Possibly," Lucas admitted. He looked ready for war in a way that Sophia did not, a blade by his side and pistols set at his belt. Sophia guessed that she just looked impossibly round with the weight of her unborn child, unarmed and unarmored as she stood there.

But not unready, Lucas sent. He gestured to the rear of the ship. "Our commanders await."

Mostly, that meant her cousins and her uncle. They held this together as surely as Sophia did, but there were other men there too: clan chiefs and minor lords, hard men who still offered bows as Sophia approached, her brother and her forest cat by her side.

"Are we ready?" she asked, looking over to her uncle and trying to look like the queen that they all needed her to be.

"There are still decisions to make," Lars Skyddar said. "We know what we are trying to achieve, but now we need to decide on the specifics."

"What's to decide?" her cousin Ulf demanded, in his usual bluff tone. "We get the men together, pound the walls with cannon, then charge in."

"This explains a lot about the way you hunt," Ulf's sister Frig said, with a wolf-like smile. "We should encircle the city like a noose, closing in."

"We need to be ready for a siege," Hans said, cautious as ever.

It seemed that everyone had their own idea of how it should go, and a part of Sophia wished that she could stand back, leaving all of this to those with wiser heads, more knowledge of war. She knew she couldn't, though, and that the cousins would argue forever if she let them do it. That meant the only way to do this was to choose.

"When will we reach the city?" she asked, trying to think.

"Probably dusk," her uncle said.

"It's too late for a simple assault then," she said, thinking of the time she'd spent in the city at night. "I know Ashton's streets. Trust me, if we try to charge through them in the dark, it won't end well."

"A siege then," Hans said, seeming pleased by the prospect, or maybe just that his plan was the one being chosen.

Sophia shook her head. "A siege hurts the wrong people, and doesn't help the right ones. The city's old walls only protect the inner part of the city, and you can bet that the Dowager would starve the poorest to feed herself. Meanwhile, every moment we wait, Sebastian is in danger."

"What then?" her uncle asked. "Do you have a plan, Sophia?"

"We will anchor in front of Ashton when we get there," she said. "We will send out messages for them to surrender."

"They won't do it," Hans said. "Even if we offer them quarter."

Sophia shook her head. She knew that much. "The Dowager won't believe that anyone else would have more mercy than her. But the illusion that we are giving them time to surrender will

buy us time for half our men to move around to the landward side of the city. They will take the outskirts quietly. The people there have no love for the Dowager.”

“Do they have any more for an invader?” Lucas asked.

It was a good question, but then, her brother had a knack for asking good questions.

“I hope so,” Sophia said. “I hope they’ll remember who we are, and what things were like before the Dowager.” She looked over to Hans. “You’ll lead the forces there. I need someone who can keep the men disciplined, and not slaughter ordinary people.”

“I will see to it,” Hans assured her, and Sophia knew that he would.

Sophia turned to Ulf and Frig. “You two will take a small force close to the river gates. If the men I sent made it inside, those will open. Your job will be to help them hold it until the rest of us can attack. The main fleet will land, and we’ll move in under cover of the ships’ cannons.”

It sounded like a good plan. She hoped it was, at least. The alternative was that she’d just condemned men she commanded to death.

It is a good plan, Lucas sent to her.

I just hope it works, Sophia replied.

A third voice joined them then, coming in across the water.
It will. I’ll make sure it does.

Sophia turned and saw a smaller cluster of ships approaching. They had a disreputable look to them, seeming like the kind

of things mercenaries or bandits might have chosen. It was her sister's voice that rang out from them, though.

Kate? You're here?

I'm here, she sent back. And I brought the most disreputable free company there is with me. Lord Cranston says that he will be honored to serve.

That thought cheered Sophia almost as much as the presence of her sister there. It wasn't just the extra fighting men, although Sophia would take all she could get right then. It was the fact that her sister was back with the fighting company she'd enjoyed being part of so much, and...

Is Will there? Sophia asked.

He is, Kate replied. Sophia could feel the happiness there. I will see you soon, my sister. Save some enemies for me.

I'm sure there will be plenty to go around.

"Kate is coming," Sophia said to Lucas.

"I know," her brother said. "I felt her thoughts. I'd thought I'd have to wait until we returned to finally meet her."

"And find our parents after that," Sophia said. She knew she shouldn't be thinking so far ahead yet. She should be concentrating on the battle to come, but it was almost impossible to keep her thoughts there. She was too busy thinking about everything that might flow from it. She would get Sebastian back. She would free the Dowager's people from the crushing weight of her rule. They would find their parents.

"Kate will be as excited as we are to find our parents," Sophia

said. “More. I’m not sure she even has memories of them to keep her going.”

“Soon, we’ll all have more than that,” Lucas said.

“I hope so,” Sophia replied. She couldn’t help worrying though. “Do you have it?”

Lucas nodded, obviously understanding what she meant. He brought out the flat disc made from interlocking bands of metal, glowing with bright, jumbled lines as he touched it. When Sophia brought her hand to rest on the metal too, the segments of the device spun into place, revealing the outlines of landmasses, from the Dowager’s kingdom to distant shapes that must have been the Far Colonies and the Silk Lands. It was tantalizingly close to telling them what they needed to know; there just wasn’t anything to tell them where their parents might be now. Sophia guessed that would come when Kate joined them. She hoped it would.

“Keep the device safe,” Sophia said. “If we lose it...”

Lucas nodded. “I have protected it this far. I’m more concerned about keeping you and Kate safe.”

Sophia hadn’t thought about that. The three of them were about to head into the middle of a battle. If one of them were to fall in that battle, they might never find their parents. It would be a double blow, losing the promise of their mother and father even as they mourned a brother or sister.

“You have to stay safe too,” Sophia said. “And I’m *not* just saying that because I want to find our parents.”

“I know,” Lucas said. “And I will do all I can. Official Ko had

me trained well.”

“And Kate learned plenty from the witch who tried to claim her,” Sophia said.

“If she’s half as deadly alone as she was when she was throwing me around the castle, she’ll be fine,” Lucas said. “The question is you, Sophia. I know you have Sienne, but will you be safe in the middle of a battle?”

“I won’t be in the middle,” Sophia promised. She put a protective hand over her belly. “But I’ll do whatever I have to do to make sure my child has a father.”

“She will,” Lucas said, and there was something about the certainty of it that made Sophia look at him. She knew that she’d seen glimpses of things in her dreams. She wondered if Lucas had too.

“Did you see something?” Sophia asked.

Lucas shook his head. “I have some talent for it, but I think you got more of it. What I mostly see for tomorrow is blood.”

That was easy enough to see even without the magic that brought dreams to both of them. Sophia looked out again, and now there was a coastline on the horizon, a speck of a city sitting in it.

“Ashton,” Sophia said. She hadn’t seen it in what seemed like forever.

The city spread out like a stain on the landscape, its buildings old, its expanse sprawling beyond its walls. Part of their fleet was already breaking off, Hans moving to land further along the coast

and take the outskirts.

The rest of them moved closer, signal flags flying to coordinate their movements. They anchored well out of cannon range, and small boats lowered, complete with messengers and the demand to surrender. Sophia knew that Ulf and Frig would be preparing their own small boats to sneak close to the city before the battle started, ready for the river gates to open to them.

Sophia could see the ships waiting there, ready for war in response to whatever messages had reached them. Not enough to stop a fleet their size, not pinned against the shore like that. As they approached closer, Sophia could hear trumpets sounding, see signal fires being lit.

She looked past it all to the palace and the noble quarter. Sebastian was somewhere in there, held in a cell, waiting for her rescue.

“We could still charge in, the way Cousin Ulf wants,” Lucas said.

Sophia looked at the sky. The sun was already falling, sending red fingers across the horizon. She had to force herself to shake her head. It was one of the hardest things she’d ever done.

“We can’t risk a night attack,” she said. “We need to stick to the plan.”

“Then we attack at dawn,” Lucas said.

Sophia nodded. At dawn, everything would be determined. They would see if she got her family’s kingdom back, along with the man she loved, or if they were all condemned to death.

“We attack at dawn,” she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kate stood with the sea breeze running across her face, feeling truly free for the first time that she could remember. Seeing Ashton approaching in the distance brought back memories of the life she'd had there for so long as one of the Unclaimed, but those memories didn't own her anymore, and the anger that came with them felt more like a dull ache than anything fresh.

She felt Lord Cranston approaching before he reached her. That much of her powers had come back. That was *hers*, not something that Siobhan or her fountain had given her.

"We're attacking at dawn, my lord," she said, turning.

Lord Cranston smiled at that. "A traditional time for it, although there's no need to call me that now, Kate. We're the ones sworn to serve you, your highness."

Your highness. Kate suspected that she would never get used to being called that. Especially not by the man who had been one of the first to give her a place in the world where she fit in.

"And there's really no need to call me *that*," Kate countered.

Lord Cranston pulled off a surprisingly elegant courtier's bow. "It's who you are now, but all right, Kate. Shall we pretend that we're back in the camp, and you're learning tactics from me?"

"I suspect I still have plenty to learn," Kate said. She doubted that she'd learned half of what Lord Cranston had to teach in the time she'd been a part of his company.

“Oh, undoubtedly,” Lord Cranston said, “so, a lesson. Tell me, in the history of Ashton, how has it been taken?”

Kate thought. It wasn’t something that their lessons had covered so far.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“It has been done by treachery,” Lord Cranston said, counting the options on his fingers. “It has been done by winning the rest of the kingdom, so that there is no point in holding out. It has been done in the distant past through magic.”

“And by force?” Kate asked.

Lord Cranston shook his head. “Although cannon may change that, of course.”

“My sister has a plan,” Kate said.

“And it seems well done,” Lord Cranston said, “but what happens to plans in battles?”

That, at least, Kate knew. “They fall apart.” She shrugged. “Then it’s a good job that we have the finest of the free companies working for us to fill the gaps.”

“And it’s a good job that I have the girl who can summon mists and move faster than a man can follow,” Lord Cranston replied.

Kate must have hesitated just a second or two too long before replying.

“What is it?” Lord Cranston asked.

“I broke away from the witch who gave me that power,” she said. “I... don’t know how much is left. I still have some skill for reading minds, but the speed, the strength, is gone. I guess that

kind of magic is too.”

She still knew the theory of it, still had the feeling of it in her, but the paths to it felt burned raw by the loss of connection to Siobhan’s fountain. It seemed that all things had their price, and this was one she was willing to pay.

At least, if it didn’t cost all of them their lives.

Lord Cranston nodded. “I see. Can you still use a sword?”

“I’m... not sure,” Kate admitted. That had been something she’d learned under Siobhan, after all, yet the memories of her training were still there, still fresh. She’d won what she knew through days of “dying” at the hands of spirits, over and over.

“Then I think that we should find out before a battle in earnest, don’t you?” Lord Cranston suggested. He stepped back, giving a formal duelist’s bow, his eyes carefully on Kate, and drew his sword with a hiss of metal.

“With live blades?” Kate said. “What if I don’t have the control? What if—”

“Life is full of what-ifs,” Lord Cranston said. “Battle, even more so. I’ll not test you with a training blade only to find that your skill falls apart when there’s real risk.”

It still seemed like a dangerous way to test her skills. She didn’t want to hurt Lord Cranston by accident.

“Draw your blade, Kate,” he said.

Reluctantly, she did so, the saber fitting neatly into her hand. There were the remnants of runes etched into the blade where Siobhan had worked on it, but those were dull things now, barely

there unless the light caught them. Kate took her guard.

Lord Cranston thrust at once, with all the skill and violence of a younger man. Kate barely parried it in time.

"I told you," she said. "I don't have the strength or speed I used to have."

"Then you must try to find a way to make up for it," Lord Cranston said, and immediately sent another thrust at her head. "War is not fair. War does not care if you are weak. All it cares about is if you win."

Kate gave ground, cutting an angle to avoid being pressed back against the railings of the ship. She parried and parried again, trying to protect herself from the onslaught.

"Why are you holding back?" Lord Cranston demanded. "You can still see every thought of attack, can't you? You still know every move that can be made with a blade, don't you? If I make the Rensburg feint, you know that the response is..."

He made a complex double feint. Automatically, Kate moved to bind his sword halfway through.

"You see, you know this!" Lord Cranston snapped. "Now fight, damn you!"

He attacked with such ferocity that Kate's only option was to fight back with all her skill. She watched his thoughts as best she could, seeing the flickers of coming movements, the patterns of attack. Her body didn't have the speed it once had, but it still knew what to do, putting the blade where it was needed, beating and parrying, disengaging and pressuring.

Kate took Lord Cranston's blade and felt the slightest of weaknesses in the pressure as he presented it. She circled with the bind, applying more pressure, and his sword clattered to the ship's deck. Her own sword swept up for his throat... and she managed to stop just a hair's breadth short of his skin.

He smiled at her. "Good, Kate. Excellent. You see, you don't need some witch's tricks. *You* are the one who has learned this, and *you* are the one who will cut the enemy to pieces."

He clasped Kate's hand then, wrist to wrist, and Kate was surprised to hear clapping from below on the ship. She turned, seeing other members of the company there, looking on as if she and Lord Cranston were players there to entertain them. Will was there with them, looking relieved as well as happy. Kate ran down the steps from the command deck to him, kissing him as she got to him.

Of course, that got a different sort of cheer from the others there, and Kate pulled away, red-faced.

"That's enough, you lazy dogs," Lord Cranston yelled down. "If you have time to ogle, you have time to work!"

The men around them groaned and got on with their preparations for the battle. Still, the moment had passed, and Kate didn't want to risk kissing Will again in case any of them were still watching.

"I was so worried about you," Will said, with a nod up toward where Lord Cranston stood. "When the two of you were fighting, it looked as though he was really trying to kill you."

“It was what I needed,” Kate said with a shrug. She wasn’t sure that she could explain it to Will. He’d joined Lord Cranston’s company, but there always seemed to be a part of him that wanted to be back, working in his father’s forge. He’d joined up for the chance to see the world, the chance to go somewhere else.

For Kate, it was different. She needed to push into the spaces where things didn’t feel safe, or she wasn’t sure that she felt alive. She didn’t feel like she could deal with the extremes of the world unless she went out and did it. Lord Cranston had understood that, and he’d pushed her into the place where she’d truly been able to test herself.

“Even so,” Will said, “I thought that there would be blood on the deck before it was done.”

“There wasn’t though,” Kate said. She hugged him, simply because she wanted to. She wished that there were enough privacy on the boat for more than that. “That’s the important thing.”

“And you were amazing up there,” Will admitted. “Maybe we shouldn’t bother attacking tomorrow, just send you to fight them all one by one.”

Kate smiled at that thought. “I think it might get a little tiring after the first few. Besides, would you want to miss out on the action?”

She saw Will look away.

“What is it?” she asked, resisting the urge to read his thoughts and find out.

“Honestly? I’m scared,” he said. “No matter how many battles we fight in, it never seems to get easier. I’m scared for myself, for my friends, about whether my parents will be caught up in it all... and I’m scared for you.”

“I think we just found out that you don’t need to be worried about me,” Kate said.

“You’re better with a sword than anyone I know,” Will agreed, “but I still worry. What if there’s a sword you don’t see? What if there’s some random musket shot? War is chaos.”

It was, but that was part of what Kate liked about it. There was something about being at the heart of a battle that just made sense in a way the rest of the world sometimes didn’t. She didn’t say that, though.

“It will be all right,” she said, instead. “I’ll be fine. You’ll be working with the artillery, not at the heart of any charges. Sophia would never allow her people to loot, or to attack ordinary people, so your parents will be safe. It will be all right.”

“Just... stay safe,” Will said. “There are so many things I want to have time to say to you, and do with you, and—”

“We’ll have time for all of them,” Kate promised. “Now, you should go. You know Lord Cranston gets annoyed if I keep you from your duties too long.”

Will nodded, looking as though he might kiss her again, but didn’t. Another thing that would have to wait until after the battle. Kate watched him go, stretching out what there was of her talent to take in the thoughts and feelings of the soldiers there.

She could feel their fears and their worries. Every man there knew that the world would erupt in violence come the dawn, and most were wondering if they would come through that chaos in one piece. Some were thinking of friends, others of families. A few were going through possibility after possibility, as if thinking of the danger ahead would stop it from happening.

Kate was looking forward to it. In battle, the world made a kind of sense.

“Tomorrow, I will kill the people who hurt my family,” she promised. “I’ll cut through them, and I’ll take the throne for Sophia.”

Tomorrow, they would go into Ashton, and they would take back everything that was supposed to be theirs.

CHAPTER FIVE

From the steps of the Masked Goddess's temple, standing poised at their summit as he waited for the start of his mother's funeral, Rupert watched the sunset. It spread in shades of red, hues that reminded him too much of the blood he'd shed. It shouldn't bother him. He was stronger than that, *better* than that. Even so, every look down at his hands brought with it memories of the way his mother's blood had stained them, every moment of silence brought back the memory of her gasps as he'd stabbed her.

"You!" Rupert said, pointing to one of the augers and minor priests who crowded around the entrance. "What does this sunset portend?"

"Blood, your highness. A sunset like this means blood."

Rupert took a half step forward, planning to strike the man for his insolence, but Angelica was there to catch him, her hand brushing across his skin in a promise he wished there was more time to make good on.

"Ignore him," she said. "He knows nothing. *No one* knows anything, unless you tell them."

"He said blood," Rupert complained. His mother's blood. The pain of that flickered through him. He'd lost his mother, the grief of it almost a surprise to him. He'd expected to feel nothing but relief at her death, or perhaps joy that the throne was finally his.

Instead... Rupert felt broken inside, empty and guilty in a way he'd never felt before.

"Of course he said blood," Angelica replied. "There's to be a battle tomorrow. Any fool could see blood in a sunset with enemy ships moored offshore."

"Plenty have," Rupert said. He pointed at another man, an auger who seemed to be using some complex clockwork device to scrawl calculations on a scrap of parchment. "You, tell me how the battle will go tomorrow!"

The man looked up, a wild look in his eyes. "The signs are not good for the kingdom, your majesty. The gears—"

This time, Rupert did strike out, sending the man sprawling with a booted foot. If Angelica hadn't been there to pull him back, he might have kept kicking until there was nothing left but a pile of broken bones.

"Consider how it would look, doing that at the funeral," Angelica said.

It was enough to get Rupert to hold back, at least. "I don't see why the priests even let the likes of those onto the steps of their temple. I thought they *killed* witches."

"Maybe it's a sign that these have no talent," Angelica suggested, "and that you shouldn't listen to them."

"Maybe," Rupert said, but there had been others. It seemed that everyone had an opinion on the battle to come. There had been augers enough back at the palace, both real and merely nobles who liked to guess at sunsets or the flight of birds.

Right then, though, this funeral, his *mother's* funeral, was the only thing that mattered.

Apparently, there were those who didn't understand that. "Your highness, your highness!"

Rupert spun toward the man who came running. He wore a soldier's uniform, bowing low.

"The correct form of address for a king is 'your majesty,'" Rupert said.

"Your majesty, forgive me," the man said. He rose from his bow. "But I have an urgent message!"

"What is it?" Rupert demanded. "Can't you see that I am attending my mother's funeral?"

"Forgive me, your... majesty," the man said, obviously only just catching himself in time. "But our generals request your presence."

Of course they did. Fools who had not seen the route to defeating the New Army now wanted to gain his favor by showing how many ideas they had for dealing with the threat that had come to them.

"I will come, or not, after the funeral," Rupert said.

"They said to stress the importance of the threat," the man said, as if those words would somehow move Rupert to action. To some kind of *obedience*.

"I will decide its importance," Rupert said. At the moment, nothing felt important compared to the funeral that was about to happen. Let Ashton burn for all he cared; he would bury his

mother.

“Yes, your majesty, but—”

Rupert stopped the man with a look. “The generals want to pretend that everything must happen now,” he said. “That there is no plan without me. That I’m needed if we are to defend the city. I have a reply for them: do your jobs.”

“Your majesty?” the messenger said, in a tone that made Rupert want to punch him.

“Do your jobs, soldier,” he said. “These men claim to be our finest generals, but they can’t organize the defense of one city? Tell them that I will come to them when I am ready to. In the meantime, they will see to it. Now go, before I lose my temper.”

The man hesitated a moment, then bowed again. “Yes, your majesty.”

He hurried off. Rupert watched him go, then turned back to Angelica.

“You’re being quiet,” he said. Her expression was perfectly neutral. “You don’t agree with me burying my mother either?”

Angelica put a hand on his arm. “I think that if you need to do this, you should, but we can’t neglect the dangers, either.”

“What dangers?” Rupert demanded. “We have generals, don’t we?”

“Generals from a dozen different forces stitched together to form an army,” Angelica pointed out. “No two of whom will agree on who is in charge without someone there to set an overall strategy. Our fleet sits too close to the city, our walls are relics

rather than defenses, and our enemy is a dangerous one.”

“Be careful,” Rupert warned her. His grief was closing around him like a fist, and the only way Rupert knew to respond to it was with anger.

Angelica moved forward to kiss him. “I am being careful, my love, my *king*. We’ll take the time to do this, but soon, you’ll need to give them direction, so that you have a kingdom to rule.”

“Let it burn,” Rupert said on reflex. “Let it all burn.”

“You might mean that now,” Angelica said, “but soon, you’ll want it. And then, well, there’s a danger that they won’t let you have it.”

“*Let me have my crown?*” Rupert said. “I am king!”

“You are the heir,” Angelica said, “and we have built you support in the Assembly of Nobles, but that support could fade if you are not careful. The generals you are ignoring will wonder if one of them should rule. The nobles will ask questions about a king who puts his grief before their safety.”

“And you, Angelica?” Rupert asked. “What do you think? Are you loyal?”

His fingers went to the hilt of a knife almost automatically, feeling its comforting presence. Angelica’s covered them.

“I think that I have chosen my place in this,” she said, “and it is alongside you. I’ve sent someone to deal with some of the threat of the fleet. If a death can slow us, it can slow them just as easily. Afterwards, we can do everything that needs to be done, together.”

“Together,” Rupert said, taking Angelica’s hand.

“Are you ready?” Angelica asked him.

Rupert nodded, even though right then the ache inside him was too great to ever be subdued. He would never be ready for the moment to let his mother go.

They stepped into the temple together. It had been dressed for a state funeral with a haste that was almost unseemly, rich drapes in dark hues filling the space within, cut through here and there by the royal crest. The pews of the temple were full of mourners, every noble in Ashton and for miles around turning out, along with merchants and soldiers, clergy and more. Rupert had made sure of that.

“They’re all here,” he said, looking around.

“All who could come,” Angelica replied.

“The ones who didn’t are traitors,” Rupert snapped back. “I’ll have them killed.”

“Of course,” Angelica said. “After the invasion, though.”

It was strange that he’d found someone so ready to agree to all the things that needed doing. She was as ruthless as he was in her way, beautiful and intelligent. She was there for this, too, standing beside him and managing to make even funeral black look exquisite, there to support Rupert as he made his way through the temple, toward the spot where his mother’s coffin sat waiting for interment, her crown set atop it.

A choir started to sing a requiem as they proceeded, the high priestess droning her prayers to the goddess. None of it would

be original. There had been no time for that. Still Rupert would have a composer employed once all this was done. He would raise statues to his mother. He would—

“We’re here, Rupert,” Angelica said, guiding him to his seat on the front row. There was more than enough space there, in spite of the crowded building. Perhaps the guardsmen standing there to enforce it had something to do with that.

“We are gathered to bear witness to the passing of a great figure among us,” the high priestess droned as Rupert took his place. “Dowager Queen Mary of the House of Flamberg is gone behind the mask of death, into the arms of the goddess there. We mourn her passing.”

Rupert mourned it, the grief rising up through him as the priestess spoke about what a great ruler his mother had been, how important her role had been in unifying the kingdom. The old priestess gave a long sermon about the virtues found in the holy texts that his mother had embodied, and then men and women started to come up to speak about her greatness, her kindness, her humility.

“It’s like they’re talking about someone else,” Rupert whispered across to Angelica.

“It’s the sort of thing that they’re expected to say at a funeral,” she replied.

Rupert shook his head. “No, it isn’t right. It isn’t *right*.”

He stood, moving to the front of the temple, not caring that some lord was still busy spinning out the one time he’d met

the Dowager into a eulogy. The man backed away as Rupert approached, falling silent.

“You’re all talking nonsense,” Rupert said, his voice carrying easily. “You’re talking about my mother and ignoring the real her! You say that she was good, and kind, and generous? She was none of those things! She was hard. She was ruthless. She could be cruel.” His hand swept around. “Is there anyone here she didn’t hurt? She hurt me often enough. She treated me like I was barely worthy to be her son.”

He could hear the whispers among those there. Let them whisper. He was their king now. What they thought didn’t matter.

“But she was strong, though,” Rupert said. “It’s thanks to her that you have a country at all. Thanks to her that traitors to this land have been driven out, their magic suppressed.”

A thought came to him.

“I will be as strong. I will do what is needed.”

He strode over to the coffin, lifting the crown. He thought about what Angelica had said about the Assembly of Nobles, as if Rupert needed their *permission*. He took it, and he set it on his own brow, ignoring the gasps from those there.

“We will bury my mother as the person she was,” Rupert said, “not as your lies! I command it as your king!”

Angelica stood then, hurrying over to him and taking his hand. “Rupert, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he shot back. Another impulse came to him, and he looked out over the crowd. “You all know Milady d’Angelica,”

Rupert said. "Well, I have an announcement for you. Tonight, I will take her as my wife. You are all required to attend. Anyone who does not will be hanged for it."

There was no gasp this time. Perhaps they could no longer be shocked. Perhaps they'd gone past it all. Rupert walked over to the coffin.

"There, Mother," he said. "I have your crown. I'm going to marry, and tomorrow, I'm going to save your kingdom. Is that enough for you? Is it?"

A part of Rupert expected some answer, some sign. There was nothing. Nothing but the silence of the watching crowd, and the deep guilt that somehow still wormed its way through him.

CHAPTER SIX

From the balcony of a house in Carrick, the Master of Crows watched the gathering armies, looking out through the eyes of his creatures. He smiled to himself as he did so, a sense of satisfaction creeping over him.

“The pieces are in place,” he said, as his crows showed him the gathering ships, the defenders rushing to build barricades. “Now to watch them fall.”

The bloody sunset matched his mood today, as did the screams coming from the courtyard below his balcony. The day’s executions were proceeding apace: two men caught trying to desert, a would-be thief, a woman who had stabbed her husband. They stood tied to posts while the executioners worked with swords and garroting rope.

The crows descended on them. There were probably those who thought that he enjoyed the violence of such moments. The truth was that it didn’t matter either way to him; only the power that such deaths brought through his pets.

The Master of Crows looked around at the commanders waiting for his instructions, seeing if any flinched or looked away from the scenes below. Most did not, because they’d learned what was expected of them. One younger officer swallowed as he watched though. He would probably need to be watched.

For a moment or two, the Master of Crows slipped his

attention back to the creatures wheeling above Ashton. As they gyred and looped, they showed him the spread of the advancing fleet, the branching force that sought to land further up the coast. A rook on a city wall showed him a group of Ishjemme men in merchant clothes opening a hidden chest of weapons by the river. A raven near the city's graveyard heard men talking of retreating when the attack came, leaving the nobles to fend for themselves.

It seemed like a combination that might leave his pets hungry. He could not have that.

"We have a task to perform," he said to the waiting men as he brought his attention back to himself. "Follow me."

He led the way down through the house, taking it for granted that the others would be in his wake. Servants scurried aside, eager not to be in the path of so many powerful men as they descended. The Master of Crows could feel their resentment and their fear, but it didn't matter. It was only the inevitable consequence of ruling.

In the courtyard, the screams had faded to the silence that only death could bring. Even the quietest of living creatures had the soft sound of breath, the fluttering beating of a heart. Now, only the cawing of the crows cut through the silence as the bodies hung limp against their posts.

"Order must be maintained," the Master of Crows said, looking over at the officer who had shown a flicker of distaste. "We are a machine of many parts, and each must play its role. Now that they have stepped beyond their bounds, the role of

these three is to feed the carrion birds.”

Those were flying down in greater numbers now, settling on the still recent corpses as they started to feast. Already, the Master of Crows could feel the power starting to flow into his flock from the deaths, along with the hundreds more that spread around the New Army’s empire at any one time. There were even a few of his birds feeding in the Dowager’s kingdom.

“It is time to place a thumb upon the scales,” he said, drawing on that power and tracing silver lines of consequence within his mind. Each represented a possibility, a choice. The Master of Crows had no way of knowing which would come to pass; he was not the woman of the fountain, or another of the true seers. He could see enough, though, to know where to exert influence. Where to push for the effects he wanted.

He reached out to the fluttering birds around Ashton. His mind sought the spots where a few well-placed words might do the most, and corvids of all kinds came from the sky to croak them.

A raven landed near the commander of Ashton’s city watch at his command, black eyes staring up at him.

“Northerners on the river,” it croaked as the Master of Crows uttered the words. “Northerners on the river, disguised as merchants.”

He didn’t wait to watch the man’s shock as he tried to make sense of what was happening. Instead, the Master of Crows shifted his attention to a rook in the graveyard, having it land on

a headstone near the would-be conspirators who planned to flee.

“Be brave,” his bird croaked. “You are watched.”

To balance it, he sent another bird to a man by one of the main walls, having it caw a premonition of death. He sowed courage and cowardice, gave truths and told lies, weaving them into a spell of known and half-known things.

Not all of the birds were successful. He sent a blackbird winging its way to Prince Rupert’s window, only to find it barred. He sent a crow winging out toward the ships that waited in the harbor, circling lower over Ishjemme’s flagship, only to find his attention caught by the sight of a young man looking up. The Master of Crows knew that young man. He was the one who had thrust a blade into him back in Ishjemme. He stared up at the bird now, and his hand went to his belt, coming up with a pistol almost inhumanly fast...

“Damn it all!” the Master of Crows snarled as he jerked his attention back from the bird just in time.

He left the invaders’ fleet alone. Instead, he focused his attention on the city, finding small things that might give men courage or take it, that might fuel their rage or make them careless. He had a magpie steal a wife’s wedding ring as she washed glasses, then drop it at the feet of the soldier she was married to. No doubt the man would spend the battle wondering why it was not on her finger, and if he should be home. He had a raven lift a lit candle, dropping it in a set of abandoned buildings where the flames would lick.

“Let them choose if they want to save their homes from invaders or from fire,” he said.

There were a hundred other birds about a hundred other errands, each one taking a flicker of power, but each one an investment in the chaos that would flow from it. Some spoke to soldiers, others to men and women he’d sent for this moment, who stood to tell stories of the horrors of Ishjemme to those who would listen, or suggested bloody rebellion against the Dowager’s line, or both.

The Master of Crows took a battle that should have been an easy victory for the invaders and wove it into something more complex, more dangerous, and more deadly.

By the time he came back to himself, he was smiling with what he had achieved. Men thought of the great workings of magic and they thought of symbols or ancient tomes, yet he had just worked something far greater, with far less. He looked around at his officers, still watching the crows pecking at the dead with dutiful expressions.

“The enemy will have their battle for Ashton tomorrow,” he said. “It will be a bloody one, with many dead on all sides.”

He couldn’t help a note of satisfaction at that. After all, he was the main reason that so many would die.

“When do we strike, my lord?” one of his fleet’s commanders asked. “Do you have orders for us?”

“You are eager to attack?” the Master of Crows asked.

“I am, my lord,” the man said. He pounded a fist into his palm.

“I want to crush them for the humiliation they inflicted last time around.”

“Me too,” a general said. “I want them to know that the New Army is stronger.”

A chorus of assent followed, each man seeming to strive harder than the last to show how committed he was to making up for the failures of the assault on the Dowager’s kingdom. Maybe that was the point. Maybe each wanted to show that they could do better. Maybe they thought that their hides were at stake if they failed again.

They weren’t entirely wrong in that guess. Even so, the Master of Crows held up a hand for calm. “Be patient. Return to your men and your ships. Ensure that all is ready for an attack. I will tell you the moment for it.”

They left as a group, each hurrying to prepare. The Master of Crows let them go. For now, his attention was on the blood red of the sunset and what it portended. There would be blood aplenty in the morning, he had no doubt. Thanks to his creatures’ efforts, there would be carnage on a scale that would make Ashton’s river run red. His creatures would feast.

“And when they are done,” he said, “we will add what’s left to our empire.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The assassin who went by Rose waited for full dark before she rowed out toward the ships waiting in the harbor, her oars muffled by cloth in the rowlocks. It helped that the moon was bright, and that she'd always seen well in the dark when she needed to. It meant that she didn't have to risk even a thief's lantern. Even so, fear ran through her with every stroke, pushed down only with an effort.

"This will be fine," she said. "You've done this a hundred times before."

Perhaps not a hundred. Even the finest of her profession who ever lived had never killed so many. She was not some butcher's cleaver, sent to cut down as many in a war as she could. She was a gardener's knife, sheering only what was necessary from the stem.

"Half the soldiers there will have killed more than me," she whispered, as if that justified it.

There was always fear as she did it. Fear of discovery. Fear that something would go wrong. Fear that she might acquire the kind of conscience that stopped her from doing what she was best at.

"Not so far," Rose whispered.

Gently, she guided her boat through the waiting boats. She wasn't surprised to hear a voice call out into the night.

“Oi, who goes down there? What are you up to?”

Rose saw a soldier leaning over the prow of a nearby ship, a bow in his hands. Perhaps someone stupid would have tried to row to safety, and gotten an arrow in their back for their trouble. Instead, she took a moment to think. Accents were a skill she'd taken the time to work on, so now Rose selected a suitable one, not Ishjemme itself, but the rougher burr of one of the islands between there and the kingdom's coast. That was better. The soldiers from Ishjemme might know one another. They couldn't expect to know all their allies.

“Getting ready for a battle, you idiot. What are *you* doing? Trying to wake up all of Ashton?”

“Aye, well, you could be anyone!” the soldier called out. “It could have been a boat full of the enemy, for all I knew.”

“Do I *look* like a boat full of the enemy?” Rose shot back. “Now, can I get on with delivering the reports I'm supposed to? I've been scouting that excuse for a city for hours now. Can't even find the flagship.”

She saw the man point.

“Over there,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Rose was good at pretending to be people she wasn't. Some thought that assassins should be people who could fight their way through an army, or fire an arrow from further than a man could see. She liked stories like that. It meant that they weren't looking at the innocuous figure next to them who had just put something

in their wine.

“No chance of doing that this time though,” she said to herself.

She wasn’t sure that Milady d’Angelica had understood what she was asking when she’d sent her to do this. Frankly, she doubted the noblewoman cared. Yet there was a big difference between poisoning some rival in Ashton and sneaking onto a ship in the middle of a battle fleet.

Especially one where those who led it were rumored to have magic.

That was the part that terrified her in all of this. How was someone supposed to slip aboard a ship when people could read the murderous thoughts in her heart? When they could sense her coming and probably send phantasms shrieking after her soul? It meant that her usual strategy of disguise and lying was out, for one thing.

“I should just row all the way to the continent,” Rose muttered. What kind of idiot put herself in the middle of a battle like this by choice? She kept going in the direction of the flagship, though, for three reasons.

One was that she was being paid well for this. Too well to ignore it. Another was that, whatever her skills with a knife and a poisoned dart, she suspected that Milady d’Angelica would be a dangerous enemy to have. The third... well, the third was simple:

She was good at this.

Rose stopped the small boat well short of the flagship, in the space where it was just one more shadow against the dark.

Taking off her Ishjemme colors to reveal black clothes beneath, she slipped into the waters of the bay.

The cold leached heat from her body, while she tried not to think of all the filth that spilled from Ashton's gutters into its river and then the sea. She ignored the idea of the other things that might be in the waters too, the sharks and other predators that would be gathering to scavenge in the wake of a battle. Maybe their presence would even be a good thing, disguising her murderous intent with their own to any prying minds.

Rose crept forward with silent strokes through the water, ducking her head whenever she thought someone might be glancing in her direction, ignoring the foul taste of the seawater. It seemed to take forever to get close to the flagship, the roll of it pushing out a faint wash that buffeted her as she closed on it.

Finally, her fingers found the wood of the hull, searching for handholds the way someone else might have clambered their way up a rock face. Rose moved slowly, determined not to make any sound, even trying to still her thoughts so that they would not give her away to any of those there with magic.

She raised her head up enough to see a watchman moving along the deck. She ducked down, listening to the rhythm of his steps, letting him pass. Still, she didn't move. Instead, she waited until he passed twice more, learning the pattern of it. Someone more foolish might have rushed out onto the deck the first time, and been caught for it. Rose had learned when to be patient.

The third time the watcher went past, she slipped into his

wake, a length of garroting wire dropping from her sleeve. The man was taller than her, but Rose was used to that. She had the wire around his throat in an instant, jerking it tight and driving her knee into his back to bring him down. There was no time for him to scream as the wire cut deep, only for a brief gasp to escape.

Rose dumped the guard's body in the water, trying to do it as quietly as possible. It was a shame to have to kill someone who was not her target, but the man's watch had too few spaces in it, too few gaps into which she might slip when the time came to make her escape. She put her garrote away. She would not be using it for what came next.

"Quietly now," she whispered to herself as she scurried below decks.

She might not have the magic that those here were said to have, to ferret out the thoughts of others, but she had eyes to pick out the shadows of coiled ropes and stacked weapons in the near dark, ears to seek out the breathing of sleeping men, differentiating carefully between those who were deeply asleep and those who might wake if she got too close. She moved on the balls of her feet, keeping to the shadows as she moved past the spaces where the ordinary soldiers lay, heading for the space where her target would be.

Rose opened doors in silence in the dark, looking at the sleeping figures there, watching for the one she'd been sent for. She found her target in a room marked with Ishjemme's colors:

the room of a leader, the room of a ruler. She pushed open the door in silence.

Ahead of her, a candle flickered into being, revealing Lars Skyddar, sitting on a sea chair, a sword across his lap.

“You’ve come for me,” he said.

Rose considered her options. Could she run? Could she get clear of this ship before this man brought a whole crew to face her?

“How did you know I was coming?” she demanded. “I know I made no sound.”

“A long time ago, I was told that I would face death on the night before our greatest battle, and that I must face it alone. I’ve known this moment was coming since my nieces arrived.”

“Are you going to call for them?” Rose asked, her hands moving down almost imperceptibly to her belt, considering which of the poisoned darts there might do the job best. Their deaths weren’t the plan for tonight, but Milady d’Angelica would probably reward her well if she managed it.

“I will not risk their lives,” Lars Skyddar said. “Yours, on the other hand...”

He leapt forward, almost fast enough that Rose couldn’t do anything. If he’d been twenty years younger, perhaps she *wouldn’t* have been able to do anything, and the sword would have hacked deep into her. As it was, it still caught her flesh as she dove aside, still left a smear of blood as she rolled back to her feet.

Ishjemme's duke was already turning to attack her again, but Rose's hand came up from her belt, flinging a handful of darts without caring which poison was on them, only caring that some, enough, would strike home.

Her foe gasped as they hit him. The darts held everything from sleeping poisons to the quickest of killers, and even the assassin had no clue what so many would do at once. It was enough that they were doing *something*. Even as she watched, the sword went clattering to the ground.

She slipped in close, drawing a dagger, not wanting to leave it to an uncertain combination of alchemy to finish the job. She pulled back her arm to deliver the fatal thrust...

And Lars Skyddar pulled her close, dragging one of the darts from his flesh and into hers.

Rose stabbed him on reflex, thrusting up into the man's heart before abandoning her grip on the blade. She stared down at him, then at the dart sticking from her flesh, unable to contain her shock. He'd poisoned her with her own weapon!

Rose all but staggered from the cabin, trying to stay quiet but having no time for it. She didn't know which poison had been on the weapon, but already she thought she could feel a sluggishness invading her limbs, numbness reaching into her fingertips.

She grabbed an antidote vial from her belt, not knowing if it was the right one, or if it would make things worse. She slipped up onto the deck, moving with graceless steps now, not even sure which way her small boat lay for her escape. She staggered to the

railing, turning back briefly, glimpsing sailors looking in other directions, none seeing her.

She toppled from the ship, no art to it, no skill. She imagined that the splash of it would be enough to draw attention from all around if it weren't for the press of so many ships in such a small space.

As the water closed over her, she had one thought: she'd done what was required of her. She'd killed the leader of the invasion, leaving only the untested and the young to do the job. She'd cleared the way for other plots too, the ones that Milady d'Angelica thought she didn't know about.

She'd done all of that, and not one piece of it helped as the water swallowed her up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The wedding was not what Angelica would have hoped for from her nuptials. She stood at the entrance to the church of the Masked Goddess, only recently scrubbed clean of the evidence of the funeral, and trying to ignore all the imperfections. When she had dreamed of this day as a girl, imagining the triumph of it, it had not looked like this.

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