



MORGAN RICE

A CROWN
FOR ASSASSINS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (BOOK SEVEN)

A Throne for Sisters

Морган Райс

A Crown for Assassins

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2018

Райс М.

A Crown for Assassins / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2018 — (A Throne for Sisters)

ISBN 978-1-64-029454-7

“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 CROWN FOR ASSASSINS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Seven), Sophia, Kate and Lucas finally get the chance to journey in search of their long-lost parents. Will they find them? Are they alive? And what message do they hold for them? Their journey demands a price, though. Ashton is left without a ruler, and the Master of Crows still lies in wait, ready to strike. As the fate of the realm lies in the balance, help may come from the most unlikely place of all: Stonehome. A CROWN FOR ASSASSINS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Seven) is book #7 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 #8 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)

ISBN 978-1-64-029454-7

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Morgan Rice

A CROWN FOR ASSASSINS

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 eight 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.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay 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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CHAPTER ONE

Sophia stood before the Assembly and tried not to feel overwhelmed by the splendor of it all, or by everything that was due to happen today. Around her, nobles stood in the kind of finery that had kept Ashton's tailors and dressmakers busy for weeks, while soldiers stood in their finest dress uniforms.

It wasn't just the nobility, of course. The Assembly of Nobles was an assembly of everybody now, with common folk on its benches, dressed in whatever they'd been able to find for the occasion.

"I feel underdressed," Sophia said to Kate, who gave Sophia her arm to lean on. Her dress of simple white seemed almost plain beside the gold and the jewels, the silks and the brocade, and even after adjustments by the city's dressmakers, it still strained to cover the swell of her pregnancy. Beside her, Sienne, her forest cat, pushed against her with a gentle purr.

"It's your wedding day," Kate said. "You are by definition the most beautiful woman in the room."

"*Our* wedding day," Sophia pointed out, although someone watching wouldn't have known it from looking at her sister. Kate was in military uniform, and Sophia doubted that anyone had dared to suggest a wedding dress.

"There's just the small matter of your coronation to take care of first," Kate said with a smile.

Sophia took a careful breath, feeling the child within her move as she did. That made her smile. All these weeks, and it was still hard to believe that she would be a mother soon.

"Ready?" Kate asked.

Sophia nodded. "I'm ready."

Kate led her outside, and the cheers of the waiting crowds hit Sophia in a wall of sound. There were so many people there. Sophia could hear them, and feel the presence of their thoughts around her. She could feel a mental message of joy from those with gifts like hers seeping through the rest of it, though there were few enough of those.

"I wish Cora and Emeline could be here," Sophia said.

"They'll be back once they persuade Stonehome's leaders to come out of hiding again," Kate assured her.

Sophia had half expected them to stay after the battle with one of their own on the throne.

I'd thought they would stay, Sophia sent to her sister.

Kate shrugged. *They're used to hiding, and most of them have lives in Stonehome. Cora and Emeline will get them back. Now come on, your carriage is waiting.*

It was, and the idea that she would be processing to her wedding in a gilded carriage was almost enough to make Sophia laugh. If anyone had told her that this would be her wedding when she was growing up, she wouldn't have believed them. Still, the carriage was necessary. Sophia wasn't sure that she would be able to make the journey down to the city's main square on foot at the moment without arriving exhausted, so she and Kate mounted their carriage, four white horses drawing it at a stately trot, while all the members of the Assembly followed behind, cheering their support.

If only they could be that united when they're debating, Sophia sent to Kate.

You've managed to get plenty done, Kate sent back. *You must be doing something right.*

Sophia wasn't sure how much she'd achieved so far though. Oh, she'd made her declarations at the end of the battle for Ashton, and she hoped that she'd made life better for people, but life in the kingdom was complex. It seemed that for every proposal she made, there were a dozen objections, suggestions, recommendations.

Take the rebuilding of Ashton after the battle. If she looked out from her carriage, Sophia could see buildings in the midst of reconstruction, soldiers turned to laborers as they worked on the city, yet

every day seemed to bring a fresh debate on whether this or that building was more appropriate, on who owned the land, or who should do the work now that indentured labor was no longer an option.

That's one thing I have achieved, Sophia sent as they passed a group of men who wore their marks of ownership on bare calves, no one bothering them or trying to command them now that they were free. *If I don't do anything else, that will be enough.*

I think you'll do plenty more, Kate assured her.

Around them, the crowds continued to cheer. Music played here and there as street performers joined in the celebrations. Lord Cranston and his men marched in, joining the procession in perfect step as they headed toward the square. Someone threw something and Kate caught it, looking wary, but it was only a flower. Sophia laughed and tucked it in the short locks of her sister's hair as best she could.

"I'm going to do *something* to make you look like a bride," Sophia said.

"For that, shouldn't we both be wearing masks?"

"No," Sophia said firmly. That was one thing she had been clear on, for the same reason that none of this would be taking place inside the Church of the Masked Goddess, but in the square beyond instead.

That square was so tightly packed with people that it took soldiers to keep a clear space at its heart. There was a platform set there, festooned with silks, with a throne set upon it alongside an altar. The current high priestess of the Masked Goddess stood there, along with Sophia and Kate's cousins Hans and Jan; Frig and Ulf were in the mountain lands, seeing to the rebuilding of Monthys, while Rika, Oli, and Endi were back in Ishjemme.

Lucas stood there too, resplendent in his silk robes, managing to look both delighted for his sisters and surprisingly restless all at once.

Do you get the feeling that he just wants to get all of this out of the way so that he can go look for our parents? Sophia sent to Kate.

So that we can look, Kate corrected her. *It must be hard, waiting like this when he knows where to look now, and not even having the prospect of a wedding to pass the time.*

If either of you thinks I am anything less than happy for you, Lucas sent to them both, *then you are mistaken. I would not miss this day for anything. Are you ready to be queen, Sophia?*

In answer to that, Sophia stepped down from the carriage and strode up to the stage while the crowd cheered. She turned to look around the people assembled there, feeling the joy from them, and the hope. She knew that they would expect her to speak.

"A few weeks ago, I took Ashton by force," she said. "I made decisions as a queen because I had an army to back me. Then I went to the Assembly of Nobles and I put my case to them. They agreed to me being the queen because my blood gave me the right to it. Today, I am to be crowned, but neither of these things seems like enough. So I ask you this: will *you* have me for your queen?"

When the answering roar came, Sophia moved to the throne and seated herself upon it. Hans came forward with a crown, a delicate thing whose platinum and gold wires twined to seem like vines, jeweled flowers set along its circumference. He passed it to the high priestess of the Masked Goddess. This was one part of the ceremony Sophia could have done without, but if she was going to reunite all of Ashton, she had to show that she was willing to accept all of its people, including the Masked Church's many followers.

"By the power vested in me by the Masked Goddess," the high priestess said, then paused as though remembering that she should say more, "by the right of your blood, the authority of the Assembly, and... apparently, the will of the people, I name you Sophia, queen of this kingdom."

The cheers as she set the crown on Sophia's head were almost deafening. Sophia looked around at the smiling faces of the people she cared about, and she knew that there were very few things that could make her happier.

Except, of course, the wedding that was about to follow.

Sebastian stood in the entranceway of the Masked Goddess's temple, wishing that he could have been out there with Sophia for the moment when she was crowned. That would have been one broken tradition too far, though, given what they were about to do.

"Nervous?" he asked Will, who was standing beside him in his soldier's uniform. His family would be out there in the crowd somewhere. A part of Sebastian wished that *his* family were still around to see this moment, in spite of everything they'd done to the kingdom, to him, and to Sophia.

"Terrified," Will assured him. "You?"

Sebastian smiled. "I'm happy that this is happening at all, after everything that went before."

Trumpets sounded, signaling his cue to move forward and finally wed the woman he loved. He moved through the crowd, his outfit as simple as Sophia's, a second half to make a whole. The people stepped aside for him, and Sebastian still found himself a little surprised by the goodwill they seemed to have for him in spite of all the rumors that had been started about him and in spite of everything his family had done over the years.

He stepped up onto the platform and dropped to one knee, his head bowed in acknowledgment of his newly crowned queen. Sophia laughed and stood, pulling him to his feet.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "You don't ever have to bow to me."

"I do though," Sebastian said. "I want people to see that this is your kingdom. That *you* are the queen."

"And soon you will be my king beside me," Sophia said. She looked as though she wanted to kiss him, and Sebastian *definitely* wanted to kiss her, but that would have to wait.

The high priestess made a small sound of annoyance, as if to remind them that there was a wedding waiting.

"We are gathered today to witness the wedding of Queen Sophia of the House of Danse to Prince Sebastian of the House of Flamberg. They stand unmasked in the sight of the goddess, and before one another."

It conveniently left out the part where neither of them had followed the traditional ceremony in the first place. Sebastian let it go. The fact that he was marrying the woman he loved was the only thing that mattered.

"Now," the high priestess said. "Queen Sophia tells me that she wishes to say her own words at this point. Your Majesty?"

Sophia reached out to touch Sebastian's face, and in that moment the crowd was quiet enough that the words carried over it on the breeze.

"When I first met you," she said, "I didn't know who I was. I didn't know where I fit into the world, or even if I could. I knew that I loved you, though. That part was a constant. That part hasn't changed. I love you, Sebastian, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

It was Sebastian's turn then, but he hadn't prepared what he would say. He had thought that he would know when the time came, and, it turned out, he did.

"We've been through so much," Sebastian said. "I have had moments when I thought that I had lost you, and moments when I knew that I did not deserve you. I tried to follow you beyond the kingdom, and in the end, you are the one who found me here. I love you, Sophia." He paused for a moment and smiled. "I never thought that *I* would be the one marrying into royalty."

The high priestess took their hands, placing them in one another. Sebastian's heart pulsed with anticipation. Ordinarily, this would have been the moment when she pronounced them married, but that wasn't the way Sophia wanted things.

Instead, the horns sounded again.

Kate looked out toward the entrance to the Church of the Masked Goddess, unable to contain her excitement much longer. Her sister getting both crowned and married would already have made this one of the best days of her life at any other time, but now, it felt as though she'd waited long enough. She watched with eager anticipation as Will stepped out.

Neither of them looked as regal as Sophia and Sebastian did, but that was fine by Kate. They were soldiers, not rulers. It was enough that Will was the same gorgeous boy she'd first seen when he'd come to visit his parents' forge.

He marched down toward the platform, and halfway along his route, Lord Cranston and his men drew their swords, forming an arch of steel for Will to walk beneath. It made Kate glad to see it, and glad that they were all still alive after all the battles they'd fought.

Will came up onto the platform and Kate grabbed his hand for herself, not waiting for some withered old priestess to decide that it was time.

"When I first met you," Will said, "I thought you were headstrong, stubborn, and probably likely to get both of us killed. I wondered what kind of wild girl had come into my parents' forge. Now I know that you are all of those things, Kate, and it is just a part of what makes you so amazing. I want to be your husband until the stars grow so dull I can't see you, or until *I* grow so dull I start to slow you down."

"You don't slow me down," Kate replied. "My heart's beating faster just looking at you, for one thing. I wish I could promise to settle down with you and to make things peaceful, but we both know that's not the way that the world works. War can come even in the happiest times, and it's not in my nature to stand by for it. Still, until blade or bow or just old age claims us, I want you to be mine."

It wasn't the traditional kind of promise, but it was what was in Kate's heart, and she suspected that was the part that counted. The high priestess didn't look particularly impressed, but from where Kate was standing, that was just an added bonus.

"Now that we have heard your own promises to one another, I ask you, Sophia of House Danse, do you take Sebastian of House Flamberg to be your husband?"

"I do," Sophia said beside Kate.

"And do you, Kate of House Danse, take Will... son of Thomas the smith, to be your husband?"

"Didn't I just say that?" Kate pointed out, trying not to laugh at the old woman's inability to comprehend that someone born to a smith might not have a house name. "All right, all right, I do."

"Do you, Sebastian of House Flamberg take Sophia of House Danse to be your wife?"

"I do," Sebastian said.

"And do you Will take Kate of House Danse to be your wife?"

"I do," he said, sounding happier than Kate suspected anyone had a right to be at the prospect of being joined to her for life.

"Then it is my pleasure to declare that you are one flesh, joined in the eyes of the goddess," the priestess intoned.

But Kate didn't hear her. By that point, she was far too busy kissing Will.

CHAPTER TWO

The Master of Crows watched his fleet with satisfaction as it sailed in to land on the northern coast of what had once been the Dowager's kingdom. The invasion fleet was like a bloodstain on the water, the crows flying above in great flocks that seemed more like storm clouds.

Ahead lay a small fishing port, hardly a fitting start for his campaign, but after the time they'd spent at sea, it would be a welcome taste of things to come. The ships hung back, waiting for his signal, and the Master of Crows paused for a moment to appreciate the beauty of it all, the peace of the sunlit shore.

He waved a hand idly, and whispered, knowing that a hundred corvids would croak the words to his captains. "Let it begin."

The ships started to move forward like the individual components of some beautiful machine of death, each one slotting into its allotted place as it moved toward the shore. The Master of Crows guessed that the captains would be vying to see who could perform their duties the most precisely, trying to please him with the obedience of their crews. They never seemed to learn that he cared about little except the death to follow.

"There will be death," he murmured as one of his pets landed on his shoulder. "There will be enough death to drown the world."

The crow cawed its agreement, as well it should. His creatures had been well fed in the last weeks, the deaths from the battle for Ashton still filling his coffers of power, even as fresh deaths flowed in from around the New Army's empire every day.

"There will be more today," he said with a grim smile as both soldiers and would-be soldiers lined up to defend their home on the shore.

Cannon sounded, the first shots echoing across the water, the crashes of their impact reverberating. Soon the air would be thick with smoke, so that he would be the only one able to see what was happening, thanks to his birds. Soon, his men would have to trust his orders absolutely.

"Tell the third company to swing wider," he said to one of his aides. "It will prevent anyone from escaping up the coast."

"Yes, my lord," the young man replied.

"Have a landing boat prepared for me as well."

"Yes, my lord."

"And remind the men of my orders: those who resist are to be killed without mercy."

"Yes, my lord," the aide said again.

As if the Master of Crows' captains needed to be reminded. They knew his rules by now, his wishes. He sat on the deck of his flagship, watching cannonballs strike flesh, and men falling beneath the barrage of musket fire. Finally, he decided that the moment was ripe, and he made his way to the landing boat that was being lowered, checking his weapons as he went.

"Row," he commanded the men there, and they strained against the oars, striving to get him to the shore along with his troops.

He held up a hand as his crows warned him, and the men stopped rowing in time for a ball shot from an aging cannon to strike the water in front of them.

"Continue."

The landing boat slid through the waves, and, in spite of the overwhelming force of the New Army's numbers, some of the waiting men leapt to attack it. The Master of Crows hopped onto the quay to meet them, his blades rising.

He thrust through the chest of one, then stepped aside as another swung at him. He parried a blow and cut another man down with the casual efficiency of long practice. It was so foolish of men

like this to think that they could hope to defeat him, even hurt him. Only two people had managed that in a long while, and both Kate Danse and her detestable brother would die for that in time.

For now, this was not so much a fight as a slaughter, and the Master of Crows reveled in it. He hacked and he thrust, bringing down foes with every movement. When he saw a young woman trying to run, he paused to draw a pistol and shoot her in the back, then continued about his more pressing work.

"Please," a man begged, throwing down his sword in surrender. The Master of Crows gutted him, then moved onto the next.

The slaughter was as inevitable as it was absolute. A scattering of badly armed militia couldn't begin to hope to defend against this many foes. It was done so quickly that it was hard to imagine what they had been trying to achieve by standing at all. Presumably something to do with honor, or some other nonsense.

"Ah," the Master of Crows said to himself as he looked through the eyes of one of his creatures and saw a knot of people fleeing into the nearby hills, heading south. He came back to himself and looked over to the nearest of his captains. "A group of villagers is fleeing along a trail not far from here. Take men and slaughter them all, please."

"Yes, my lord," the man said. If the work of killing the innocent bothered him, he did not show it. But then, if he had been a man to balk at such things, the Master of Crows would have killed him for it long ago.

The Master of Crows stood in the wake of the battle, listening to the kind of quiet that only came with death. He listened to the crows as they landed to begin their work, and felt the power start to flow in as they consumed their share. It was a pitiful trickle compared to some of the battles that had gone before, but there would be more to follow.

He sent his awareness out into his creatures, letting them speak with his voice.

"This town is mine," he said. "Submit or you will die. Deliver up all those who have magic, or you will die. Do as you are commanded, or you will die. You are nothing now, slaves and less than slaves. Obey, and you will stave off being food for the crows for a while. Disobey, and you will die."

He sent his creatures up into the air, surveying the land that he had taken in this first advance. He could see the horizon stretched out far from him, with all the promise of more land to conquer, more deaths to feed his pets.

The Master of Crows did not normally receive visions. At best, his crows gave him enough to guess at what would happen. He was not the witch of the fountain, to pluck at the strands of the future, and even she had not been able to foresee her death. Now, though, the vision came rushing in to him, borne on the wings of his pets.

He saw a child, cradled in its mother's arms, and he recognized the kingdom's newly crowned queen instantly. He saw danger behind the child, and more than danger. The death he had staved off so long with the lives of others stalked in this babe's shadow. It reached out for him, with the innocence of a child, and the Master of Crows recoiled from it, fleeing back to himself.

He stood there in the middle of the town he had taken, shaking his head.

"Is everything all right, my lord?" his aide asked.

"Yes," the Master of Crows said, because if he admitted to weakness he would only have to kill the man. If any hint of the fear that rose within him got out, then all who saw would die. Yes, that was a thought...

"I have changed my mind," he said. "We will save conquest for the next town. Raze this one. Kill every inhabitant, man, woman or... babe in arms. Leave no two stones together."

The aide did not question that any more than his captain had questioned hunting down those fleeing.

"It will be as you command, my lord," he promised.

The Master of Crows had no doubt that it would be. He commanded, and people died in response. If there was meant to be a child who was a threat to him... well, that child could die as well—along with its mother.

CHAPTER THREE

Emeline stood at the heart of Stonehome and tried to contain some of her frustration as she looked around the stone circle at all the inhabitants. Cora and Aidan stood beside her, which was some support, but when everyone else there was so set against them, it didn't seem like enough.

"Sophia sent us to persuade you to come back to Ashton," Emeline said, focusing on the spot where Asha and Vincente sat. How many times had she had this argument there now? It had taken all this time just to get to the point where they would discuss this together at the circle. "There was no need for you to return to Stonehome after the battle. She is building a kingdom where our kind are free, and have nothing to fear."

"There is always *something* to fear while those who hate us exist," Asha retorted. "She could have ordered the Masked Goddess's churches shut down. She could have seen their butchers hanged for their crimes."

"And that would have restarted the civil war," Cora said from beside Emeline.

"Better to have a war than to live beside those who hate us," Asha said. "Who have done such things to us as can *never* be forgiven."

Vincente put it in more measured terms, but wasn't much more helpful. "This is a place where we have built a community, Emeline. This is a place where we can be sure we are safe. I have no doubt that Sophia has good intentions, but that is not the same thing as being able to change things."

Emeline had to fight back the urge to shout at them for their stupidity. Cora must have seen that, because she put a hand on Emeline's arm.

"It will be fine," she whispered. "They'll see sense eventually."

"What you call 'sense,'" Asha snapped from the other side of the stone circle, "I call a betrayal of our people. We are safe *here*, not out in the world."

Emeline shot her an angry glance. Asha couldn't have heard Cora's whisper from there, which meant that she'd read Cora's mind. That was more than rude; it was dangerous, especially when Asha had been the one to teach Emeline how to pull memories out of someone.

"People are free to come and go if they wish," Vincente said. "If Sophia really does deliver a kingdom where our kind are free, people will come of their own accord, without the need for emissaries."

"And what will it look like until then?" Emeline replied. "What will it look like when all those with gifts are hidden away, as if they are ashamed of them? Will it look like we are no threat, or will it give people space to claim that we are plotting in secret? For the old rumors to reappear?"

The hardest part about the crowd around them was that it was impossible for Emeline to gauge what effect her words were having. With another crowd she could have reached out for the feel of their thoughts, or at least listened to them talking to one another. Here, the conversations were silent things of thoughts flickering back and forth, well directed enough that she wasn't a part of it.

"Perhaps you have a point," Vincente said.

"They do *not*," Asha replied. "They are the ones who have made us less safe, by making it so that people know where we are."

"We haven't told anyone," Cora said.

Asha snorted. "As if they couldn't have taken it from your head. If you weren't sent by the queen, I'd take every thought you have for that."

"No," Aidan said, putting a protective hand on Cora's shoulder. "You wouldn't."

Vincente stood, his full height more than impressive enough to calm things. "That's enough bickering. Asha, the new defenses will be more than enough to protect us, even if people find us. As for the rest of it... I suggest a seeing."

"A seeing?" Emeline asked.

Vincente made a gesture that encompassed the crowd around them. “We join our minds together, and we see what will result from each action. It is not perfect, but it will help us to decide what we must do.”

The idea of joining her mind to so many others was a worrying one, but if it would give her a chance to persuade them, Emeline wasn’t going to hold back.

“All right,” she said. “How do we do it?”

Simply connect your mind to the others’, Vincente sent. *They are waiting.*

Emeline reached out with her gift, and now she could feel the minds of those around the circle waiting for her. They were open now in a way they had not been before. She took a breath and plunged in amongst them.

She was herself, and not herself, both an individual mote of thoughts and the larger cloud of them that drifted together. With so many of them in one place, there was power here that was more than one person could ever have possessed. That power drifted into focus, and Emeline felt Vincente’s hand guiding it with what she suspected was skill borne of long practice.

Concentrate on the future, he sent. *On seeing what will happen if—*

He didn’t get further than that, because in that moment, a vision overtook them with the force of a forest fire.

There *was* fire in the vision. It flickered over the rooftops of Ashton, consuming, destroying. Soldiers in ochre uniforms marched through the streets, killing as they went. Emeline heard women screaming from inside houses, saw men cut down as they fled in the streets. The vision seemed to float through the streets, barely giving them all enough time to take in the carnage as they headed for the palace.

Around them, the destruction of Ashton made Emeline ache to watch it. The slaughter was horrific, but strangely, the loss of the places that she’d grown up around was almost as bad. Seeing barges burn on the river made her think of the one she’d tried to escape the city on. Seeing the marketplace filled with corpses instead of stalls made her heart break.

They reached the palace, and the Master of Crows was waiting. There was no mistaking who he was, in his old-fashioned long coat and with his birds circling. Even in this image, the sight of him made Emeline shudder, but she couldn’t look away. She watched him marching through the palace, killing with such ease that it almost seemed inconsequential to him.

The image shifted, and he was standing on a balcony, a baby in his arms. Instinctively, Emeline knew that it was Sophia’s child. There was a shine to her that reminded her of Sophia’s thoughts, and Emeline wanted to reach out to protect the child.

There was nothing she could do here, though, except watch as the Master of Crows lifted the baby, as he held her above his head. As the crows came down to feed...

Emeline gasped as she snapped back into her body, her heart racing. Around the circle, she could see other people looking up, stunned or shaken. She knew they’d seen all the same things that she’d seen. That had been the point of it.

“We have to help them,” Emeline said, as soon as she had enough breath to do it.

“What?” Cora asked. “What’s happening?”

“The Master of Crows is going to burn Ashton,” Emeline said. “He’s going to kill Sophia’s baby. We saw it in a vision.”

Instantly, Cora’s expression was set. “Then we have to stop him.” Emeline saw her look around the circle of people. “We have to stop him.”

“You want more of our people to die for you?” Asha demanded, from the far side of the circle. “Didn’t enough fall just to give your friend the throne?”

“I have heard of this man,” Vincente said. “To go against him would be dangerous. It is too much to ask.”

“Too much to ask that you help save a child?” Emeline demanded, hearing her voice rise.

“Not our child,” Asha said.

Around them, the circle buzzed with thoughts. That only annoyed Emeline more, because it reminded her of just how much power there was in Stonehome.

“Not yours?” Emeline countered. “She will be the heir to the throne. If you ever want this to be your kingdom rather than a place you hide from, she’s your responsibility as much as anyone else’s.”

Vincente shook his head. “What would you have us do? We cannot fight the whole of the New Army in Ashton.”

“Then bring the child *here*,” Emeline replied. “Bring *everyone* here. Ashton might fall, but this is a safe place. It was *designed* to be safe. You said yourself that there were new defenses.”

“Defenses for us,” Asha replied. “Walls of power that take great effort to maintain. Should we protect a city’s worth of people who cannot contribute to that? Who have always hated us?”

Cora spoke up then. “When I came here, I was told that Stonehome was a place of safety for anyone who needed it, not just those with magic. Was that a lie?”

Silence greeted her words, and Emeline could guess what the answer would be even before Vincente gave it.

“You forced us into one fight,” he said. “We will not willingly choose another. We will let this pass, and we will rise from the ashes. We cannot help you.”

“Will not,” Emeline corrected him. “And if you won’t, then I’ll do it myself.”

“We will,” Cora said.

Emeline nodded. “If you won’t help, then we’ll go to Ashton. We’ll see Sophia’s baby safe.”

“You’ll die,” Asha said. “You think you can go up against an army?”

Emeline shrugged. “Do *you* think I care?”

“This is madness,” Asha said. “We should stop you leaving for your own safety.”

Emeline narrowed her eyes. “Do you think you could?”

Without waiting for an answer, she stood and left the circle. There was no point in debating any longer, and every moment they waited was another in which Sophia’s baby was in danger.

They had to get to Ashton.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sophia hadn't been able to talk anyone out of a lavish wedding party, even though it sounded like the kind of thing that the nobles before her might have thrown. Looking around the lawn of the palace, though, she was grateful that she hadn't been able to call it off. Seeing so many people there, feeling their enjoyment, only made her buzz with happiness.

"There are a lot of people who want to congratulate us," Sebastian said, his arm around her.

"They do know that I'll know if they mean it, right?" Sophia replied. She rubbed her lower back. There was a deep ache there that made her want to sit down, but she also wanted to be able to dance with Sebastian, just a little.

"They mean it," Sebastian said. He gestured to where some of the noblewomen of the court were standing, or dancing along to the music of strings and pipes. "Even they're happy for you. I think they like living in a court where they don't have to pretend all the time."

"They're happy for *us*," Sophia corrected him. She took his hand, leading him out onto the patch of lawn that was serving as a dance floor. She let Sebastian take her in his arms, the musicians at the side taking their cue from the two of them and slowing the pace of the dance a little.

Around them, people whirled together, far more energetically than Sophia could manage right now. The ache from her back had spread to her belly now, and she took that as her moment to step back from the dance. Two chairs, two *thrones*, had been set up by the side of the lawn for her and Sebastian. Sophia took hers gladly, and Sienne ran up to curl at her feet.

"It reminds me a little of the dance where we first met," she said.

"There are differences," Sebastian said. "Fewer masks, for one thing."

"I prefer it like that," Sophia said. "People shouldn't feel that they have to hide who they are just to have fun."

There were other differences too. There were ordinary people here as well as nobles, a clutch of merchants talking off to one side, a weaver's daughter dancing with a soldier. There were people there who had been indentured once, now free to join in the festivities rather than having to serve there. Several girls Sophia recognized from the House of the Unclaimed were off to one side, looking happier than they ever had there.

"Your majesties," a man said, approaching them and bowing low. His red and gold robe seemed to shine against the darkness of his skin, while his eyes were so pale they were almost lavender. "I am High Merchant N'ka of the Kingdom of Morgassa. His glorious majesty sends greetings on the occasion of your wedding, and has bid me to travel here to discuss trade with your kingdom."

"We'd be happy to talk about it," Sophia said. The merchant started to say something, and a look at his thoughts suggested that he was planning to negotiate an entire treaty right then and there. "After my wedding day, though?"

"Of course, your majesty. I will be in Ashton for some time."

"For now, enjoy the celebrations," Sophia suggested.

The merchant offered a deep bow and slipped back into the crowd. As if his approach had given permission to everyone else, a dozen more people came forward, from nobles seeking advancement to merchants with goods to sell and common folk who had grievances. Each time, Sophia said the same thing she'd said to the merchant, hoping that it would be enough, and that they would enjoy the rest of the evening.

One person who didn't seem to be enjoying the festivities quite so much was Lucas. He was standing in a corner with a goblet of wine, surrounded by an assortment of pretty young noblewomen, and still there was no smile on his face.

Is everything all right? Sophia sent over to him.

Lucas smiled in her direction, then spread his hands. *I am happy for you and Kate, but it seems that every woman here has taken that as an indication that I should be married next, and to them.*

Well, you never know, Sophia sent back, *perhaps one of them will turn out to be perfect for you.*

Perhaps, Lucas sent, although he didn't feel remotely convinced.

Don't worry, we'll be trekking after our parents across dangerous terrain soon enough, Sophia promised, *and you won't have to deal with the scary business of royal celebrations.*

In answer to that, Lucas said something to one of the women near him, extending a hand and leading her out onto the dance floor. Of course, he did it perfectly, dancing with the kind of elegance and grace that probably came from years of instruction. Official Ko, the man who had raised him, would have seen him trained in that as carefully as in everything else.

Kate and Will were already there, although they seemed to be so wrapped up in one another that they were mostly ignoring the music. It probably didn't help that her sister was better with a sword than she was at dancing, while Sophia doubted that Will knew many formal court dances. The two of them seemed happy enough just in one another's arms, whispering to one another and occasionally kissing. Sophia wasn't entirely surprised when they slipped off together in the direction of the palace while no one else was looking, doing it so smoothly that Sophia doubted anyone else even noticed.

A part of her wished that she and Sebastian could do the same; this was their wedding night, after all. Unfortunately, while the new head of the army might be able to avoid people's attention for a while, Sophia suspected that they might notice if their queen and king left the party early. The best thing was to enjoy the moment while it was there, accepting that all these people had come here because they wanted to wish her and Sebastian the best.

Sophia stood again, heading over to one of the tables where food was laid out on great platters that could have fed hundreds more. She started to pick through the partridge and the roast boar, the sugared dates and the other delights that she could never have imagined when she was a child in the House of the Unclaimed.

"You know that you could have a servant bring you food?" Sebastian said, although he did it with a smile that told Sophia he already knew what her answer would be.

"It still feels strange commanding people to do things for me that I could do for myself," she said.

"As the queen, I'd say you should get used to it," Sebastian said, "except I think that it's probably good that you aren't. Maybe the whole kingdom would be better if people remembered what it's like not to be the one giving orders."

"Maybe," Sophia agreed. She could see people watching them now, and a quick look at the thoughts of those around them told her they were expecting her to speak. She hadn't planned for that, but even so, she knew she couldn't disappoint them.

"My friends," she said, picking up a glass of cool apple juice. "Thank you all for coming to this celebration. It's good to see so many people whom Sebastian and I know and love, and so many more of you I hope we will have the chance to know in the days to come. This day couldn't have happened without all of you. Without friends, without help, Sebastian and I would probably have been killed many weeks ago. We wouldn't have each other, or this kingdom. We wouldn't have the chance to make things better. To all of you."

She lifted her glass in a toast that the others there quickly took up. On impulse, she turned and kissed Sebastian. That got cheers that roared around the gardens, and Sophia decided that they wouldn't have to sneak off like Kate and Will; if they announced that they were going, people would probably carry them back to their rooms. Perhaps they should try it. Perhaps—

She felt the first spasms deep inside her, her muscles contracting with such force that it almost bent Sophia double. She let out a deep groan of pain that left her struggling to breathe.

"Sophia?" Sebastian said. "What is it? Are you all right?"

Sophia couldn't answer. She could barely stand as a fresh contraction of her muscles hit her so hard that she cried out with it. Around her, the crowd murmured, some obviously looking concerned as the music ground to a halt.

"Is it poison?"

"Is she ill?"

"Don't be stupid, it's obvious..."

Sophia felt wetness run down her legs as her water broke. After so much time waiting, now it seemed as though everything was determined to happen far too fast.

"I think... I think the baby's coming," she said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Endi, Duke of Ishjemme, listened to the grind of the great statues as his men dragged them up the shore, hating the sound but enjoying what it represented. Freedom for Ishjemme. Freedom for his people. Today would be a symbol and a sign that people would not forget.

“We should have destroyed the statues of the Danses years ago,” he said to his brother.

Oli nodded. “If you say so, Endi.”

Endi caught the note of uncertainty. He clapped his brother on the shoulder and felt Oli flinch. “You don’t agree, brother? Come on, you can tell me the truth. I’m not some monster who only wants to hear people say yes.”

“Well...” Oli began.

“Seriously, Oli,” Endi said. “You shouldn’t be afraid of me. You’re my family.”

“It’s just that these statues are part of our history,” Oli said.

Now Endi understood. He should have guessed that his bookish brother would hate destroying anything connected to the past, but it *was* past, and Endi meant to see that it stayed that way.

“They controlled our home for too long,” Endi said. “As long as we have reminders of them sitting along the fjords alongside our true heroes, it will be a claim that they can step back in whenever they want to rule us. Do you understand, Oli?”

Oli nodded. “I understand.”

“Good,” Endi said, and signaled to his men to begin their work with axes and hammers, shattering the statues, reducing them to rubble that would be good for no more than building with. He enjoyed the sight of Lord Alfred’s and Lady Christina’s images breaking apart. It was a reminder that Ishjemme was not beholden to them or their children any longer.

“Things will change, Oli,” Endi said, “and change for the better. There will be houses for all who need them, safety for the kingdom, better trade... How are things with my canal scheme?”

It was a bold plan, to try to connect Ishjemme’s fjords given the number of mountains that stood on the peninsula’s interior, yet if they succeeded, Ishjemme could become as wealthy as any of the mercantile states. It also meant that his brother had something useful to do, keeping track of the progress, making sure that there were good maps to use.

“It is hard going,” Oli said. “Cutting through mountains and building locks for the boats takes a lot of men.”

“And a lot of time,” Endi said, “but we’ll get there. We must.”

It would show the world what Ishjemme could be. It would show his family just how much tradition had held them back. With a project like this to his name, probably all of his brothers and sisters would acknowledge that he always should have been his father’s heir.

“We’ve had to reroute several sections already,” Oli said. “There are farmsteads in the way, and people are reluctant to leave their homes.”

“You have offered them money?” Endi asked.

Oli nodded. “As you said to, and some left, but there are people who have lived there for generations.”

“Progress is necessary,” Endi said, as the crack of the hammers continued. “But don’t worry, the problem will be solved soon.”

They walked around to where more men were working on ships. Endi made a point of knowing about every ship that came into the port now. He’d spent long enough dealing with spies and killers to know how easily those could slip in. He watched the progress of the men as they worked to replace some of the vessels that were still stuck across the water. Ishjemme had to be defended.

“Endi, can I ask you a question?” Oli said.

“Of course you can, brother,” Endi said. “Although you’re the clever one. I suspect there’s not many things you could ask me you haven’t already read in one of your books.”

In truth, Endi suspected that there were plenty of things he knew that his brother didn’t, mostly about the secrets people kept, or the things people did to plot against one another. That was his world.

“It’s about Rika,” Oli said.

“Ah,” Endi replied, cocking his head to the side.

“When will you let her out of her rooms, Endi?” Oli asked. “She’s been cooped up there for weeks now.”

Endi nodded sadly. His youngest sibling was proving surprisingly intransigent. “What would you have me do? I can’t let her out when she’s in this rebellious mood of hers. The best I can do is keep her comfortable with the best food, and her harp. If people see her disagreeing at every step, it makes us look weak, Oli.”

“Even so,” Oli said, “hasn’t it been long enough?”

“It’s not like sending her to bed with no supper because she stole one of Frig’s dolls,” Endi said, with a grin at the thought of Frig ever playing with dolls rather than blades. “I can’t let her out until she’s shown that she can be trusted. Until she swears fealty to me, she stays there.”

“That could be a long time,” Oli said.

“I know,” Endi replied, with a sad sigh. He didn’t like locking his sister up like that, but what else could he do?

A soldier came up, offering a bow. “The prisoners you ordered have been brought, my lord.”

“Good,” Endi said. He looked over to his brother. “It looks as though we’re going to have a solution to the canal problem. Come on, Oli.”

He led the way back to where the statues had been broken up, the rubble lying in fragments on the ground. Perhaps a dozen men and women stood there, their hands bound.

“I’m told you are the ones who own farmsteads on the route of our new canal,” Endi said. “That you refused to sell your properties, even though I tried to be generous.”

“They’re our farms!” a man piped up.

“And this is about the prosperity of the whole of Ishjemme,” Endi shot back. “Every family will benefit, including yours. I want to offer you the money again. Can’t you see that you have no choice?”

“A man is always free to choose his path in Ishjemme,” another of the farmers shot back.

“Yes, but that path has consequences,” Endi said. “I’ll give you one last chance. As your duke, I command you to yield your claims.”

“It’s our land!” the first man shouted.

Endi sighed. “Just remember that I gave you the choice. Refusing to heed your duke’s command is treason. Men, execute the traitors.”

His men moved forward, the same axes and hammers in their hands that they’d used to smash the statues. They smashed flesh just as easily. Statues might not shriek, or beg, or make wet, gurgling sounds, but the crack of bone was near enough to the crack of stone. Endi looked around at his brother, not surprised to see Oli ashen-faced. His brother wasn’t as strong as he was.

“I know it’s hard, Oli,” he said, as more cries came in the background, “but we must do what is necessary if we are to make Ishjemme strong. If I do not do the cruel things that must be done, then others will come in and do worse.”

“As... as you say, brother.”

Endi took his brother by the shoulders. “At least this means that the way will be clear for the building projects now. I’m right in thinking that a traitor’s lands are forfeit, aren’t I?”

“I... I think that there are precedents,” Oli said. Endi could hear the quaver in his voice.

“Find them for me,” Endi said.

“What about these people’s families?” Oli said. “Some will have children, or old folk.”

“Do whatever you think is best to care for them,” Endi said. “Just so long as you get them out of the way before the work must be done.”

“I will,” Oli said. He looked thoughtful for a moment. “I... I’ll send out messages to the work crews at once.”

“See that you do,” Endi said.

He watched his brother hurrying off, knowing that Oli didn’t really understand the need for all of this. That was the luxury that came with knowing he would never have power. Rika had the same luxury. The two had probably been the only ones of his siblings who had never been warriors, never had to deal with the harsh realities of the world. Part of the reason that Endi had done all this in front of Oli was to make sure his brother learned what was sometimes needed.

It was for his own good. It was for everyone’s good. They would see it in time, and when they did, they would thank him for it. Even soft-hearted Rika would curtsy and admit that everything Endi had done was for the best. As for everyone else, they could go along with what needed to be done or...

Endi stood and listened to the sound of the hammers falling some more. They would thank him for it in the end.

CHAPTER SIX

Jan Skyddar must have been the only person in the whole of Ashton who found himself unhappy on Sophia's wedding day, having to force a smile just so he wouldn't ruin things for her and Sebastian, having to pretend that he was happy for her even though the ache in his heart threatened to tear him into pieces.

Now that they'd rushed her away to give birth to her child, to her and Sebastian's child, it was even worse.

"Would you like to dance with me?" a noblewoman asked. Around Jan, the party seemed to be continuing, the music back in full swing as it turned from celebrating Sophia's wedding to celebrating the impending heir to the throne.

The woman was beautiful, elegantly dressed, graceful. If he'd met her a year ago, Jan might have said yes to the dancing, and to almost anything else she suggested. Now, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't feel anything looking at her, because doing it was like staring at a candle compared to the sun. Sophia was the only one who mattered.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to be kind, to be good, to be all the things that he should be. "But there is... someone I am deeply in love with."

"Someone waiting for you back in Ishjemme?" the noblewoman said, with a mischievous smile. "That means that she is not here."

She reached for one of the laces of Jan's doublet, and Jan caught her wrist gently but firmly.

"As I said," he said with a rueful smile, "I love her very much. I don't mean it as an insult, but I'm not interested."

"A faithful man," the noblewoman said, as she turned to walk off. "Whoever she is, I hope she knows how lucky she is."

"If only things were that simple," Jan said with a shake of his head.

He moved through the party trying not to be the ghost at the feast. The last thing he wanted to do was to spoil anyone else's joy today, least of all Sophia's. That was the hardest part about loving her so much, he found: it was impossible to be as selfish as he should have been about it. He should have felt jealousy toward Sebastian, should have hated him with a passion. Should have been angry with Sophia for choosing a man who had put her aside once over him.

He couldn't do it. He loved Sophia too much for that. He wanted her to be happy more than anything else in the world.

"Are you well, Jan?" Lucas asked him, moving in with the kind of smoothness that made Jan grateful that the two of them would never cross blades. Jan had always thought that he could fight, but Sophia's siblings were like something else entirely.

Maybe it was just as well that Jan's mind was closed to being read by others, or they *might* have fought. Jan doubted Lucas would take well to knowing just how hopelessly in love Jan was with his sister.

"I'm fine," Jan said. "Maybe a few too many nobles trying to catch me the way a fisherman would go after swordfish."

"I've had the same problem," Lucas said. "And it is hard celebrating when at the same time you are thinking about something else."

For a moment, Jan thought that Lucas must have somehow seen past even the protections he had in place and seen things he shouldn't have. Perhaps it was just so clearly written on his face that it didn't take a mind reader to work it out.

"I am happy for my sisters," Lucas said, with a smile. "There's just a part of me that wants our parents here to witness all of this, and knows I *could* have been out finding them. Maybe I could have brought them back to see Sophia's wedding, and the birth of their grandchild."

“Or maybe sometimes we just have to be strong and accept that things don’t happen the way we want,” Jan suggested. “And it means that you get to be here. *You* get to see your niece or nephew.”

“Niece,” Lucas said. “Visions take the fun out of guessing. You’re right, though, Jan. I’ll wait. You’re a good man, cousin.”

He clasped Jan’s arm.

“Thank you,” Jan said, even if he wasn’t sure that he believed it sometimes. A truly good man wouldn’t hope that eventually Sophia would put all of this aside, loving him the same way he loved her.

“Now,” Lucas said, “I was looking for you because a message came for you by bird. The boy who brought it from the aviary is over there.”

Jan looked over to where a young man stood by one of the banquet tables, snatching food as though uncertain whether it was really meant for the likes of him.

“Thank you,” Jan said.

“You’re welcome. I should get back to Sophia. I want to be there when my niece comes into the world.”

Lucas walked away, leaving Jan to head over to the messenger. The boy looked a little guilty as Jan approached, stuffing a cake into his mouth and chewing hurriedly.

“You don’t need to worry,” Jan said. “The party is for everyone, you included. There are some things everyone should get to celebrate.”

“Yes, my lord,” the boy said. He held out a note. “This came for you.”

He held out a tightly rolled message for Jan to take. Jan lifted it, reading.

Jan, Endi has taken Ishjemme. He’s killing people. Rika is his prisoner. I have to do what he says. We need help. Oli.

The note made Jan freeze in place. He didn’t want to believe it. Endi would never do something like this. He would never betray Ishjemme like this. Oli wouldn’t lie, though, and Endi... well, he’d always liked sneaking about in the shadows, and it had been suspicious, the way so many of their ships had turned back midway through the battle for Ashton.

Even so, the idea that his brother had mounted some kind of coup was hard to comprehend. If anyone else had sent this message, Jan would have called them a liar. As it was... he didn’t know what to do.

“I can’t tell the others,” he said to himself. If he told his siblings, they would want to rush back to make sure that Ishjemme was safe, and that would deprive Sophia of support that she desperately needed. He couldn’t ignore a message like this though.

That meant that he had to go home.

Jan didn’t want to go home. He wanted to be here, as close to Sophia as possible. He wanted to be here in case there was more violence, in case she, or his siblings, needed him. Ashton was just recovering from the conflicts that had ruined it, and leaving it now felt like abandoning it. It felt like abandoning Sophia.

“Sophia doesn’t need me,” Jan said.

“What’s that, my lord?” the messenger asked.

“Nothing,” Jan said. “Can you take a message for me to... take it to Sophia when she’s able to hear it. Take her the message that you gave me, and tell her that I have gone to deal with things. Tell her that...” He couldn’t say any of the things he wanted to then. “Tell her that I will return soon.”

“Yes, my lord,” the messenger said.

Jan set off in the direction of the docks. The ships from the invasion were still there, and some of them would listen if he asked for their help. He wouldn’t take many of them, couldn’t stand the thought of leaving Sophia unprotected, but he would need some show of force if he was to convince his brother to back down.

Sophia didn’t need him right then, but it seemed that his younger brother and sister did. As much as Jan hated to leave Ashton, he couldn’t ignore that. He couldn’t stand by while Endi took

Ishjemme by force. He would go there, find out what was truly happening, and deal with it. Maybe when he was done with it, he would have worked out what to do when it came to the woman he loved.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sophia lay upon the bed that the midwife had all but ordered her to, servants crowded around her, and a few nobles, and frankly enough people to make her wonder if a queen got *any* privacy. She would have ordered them out if she'd had the breath to do it. She couldn't even ask Sebastian to do it, because the midwife had been quite clear that there would be no men in the room, not even kings.

"You're doing well," the midwife assured her, although Sophia could see the concerns in her mind; the preparations for a hundred different things that might go wrong. It was impossible to hold back her powers right then, thoughts washing over her in waves that seemed to match the pain of her contractions.

"I'm here," Kate said, rushing into the room. She looked around the people there.

Who are all these people? she sent to Sophia.

I don't want them here, Sophia managed through the pain. *Please, Kate.*

"Okay," Kate shouted, in a voice that was probably better suited to her new role with the army. "Everyone who isn't actively me or the midwife get out! No, no arguing. This is a birth, not a public performance. Out!"

The fact that her hand was on her sword hilt probably helped to get people moving, and in under a minute, the room was empty except for the three of them.

"Better?" Kate asked, taking her hand.

"Thank you," Sophia said, then cried out as a fresh wave of pain hit her.

"There are some valerian leaves in a bowl there," the midwife said. "They will help with the pain. Since you just got rid of all the servants, I think you just volunteered to help me, your highness."

"Sophia won't need them," Kate said.

Sophia definitely *felt* as though she needed them, but then she understood what her sister meant. Kate touched her mind, and she felt Lucas too, the two of them working together to draw her mind away from the pain, out of the confines of her body.

We are here for you, Lucas sent, *and so is your kingdom.*

Sophia felt the kingdom around her, the way she had only a few times before. The connection was undeniable. She wasn't just its queen, she was a part of it, in tune with the living power of everything that breathed within its borders, with the energy of the wind and the rivers, with the cool strength of the hills.

The midwife's voice drifted in from a distance. "You need to push with the next contraction, your majesty. Be ready. Push."

Push, Sophia, Kate sent.

Sophia felt her body respond, even though it seemed to be somewhere distant now, so far off that the pain that seemed to be waiting seemed like something that was happening to someone else.

You need to push harder, Kate sent.

Sophia did her best, and she could hear cries of pain that she guessed must be her own, even though it felt as though that didn't touch her. It touched the kingdom, though. She saw storm clouds gathering above her, felt the earth rumble below. With as little control of that connection as she had, she couldn't stop the roiling buildup.

The storm clouds burst into a torrent of rain that made rivers swell and drenched the people below. The storm was brief and powerful, the sun coming back into the sky so quickly it was as if it had never happened, a rainbow spreading in its wake.

You can come back to yourself now, Sophia, Lucas sent. *See your daughter.*

He and Kate drew Sophia back in, pulling her back to herself so that she was looking at the room again, breathing hard while the midwife stood a little way away, already wrapping a small form in swaddling. Lucas was there now, having obviously ignored the midwife's injunction.

Sophia felt a wave of joy break over her as she heard her daughter cry out for her, gurgling in the way babies did when they wanted their mothers.

“She sounds strong,” Kate said, taking the baby with surprising gentleness and waiting for the midwife to leave before holding her out for Sophia to take. Sophia reached out for her daughter, looking down into eyes that seemed to take in the entire world. Right then, her daughter *was* the entire world.

The vision hit Sophia so quickly that she gasped with it.

A red-haired young woman stood in a throne room, representatives of a hundred lands kneeling before her. She strode out into the streets, distributing bread to the poor, picking up flowers strewn at her feet so that she could laughingly make a crown of them for a group of children. She reached out for a wilted flower and brought it back to health...

...She strode through the middle of a battlefield, a blade in her hand, thrusting down into the bodies of the dying, ending their attempts to cling to life. She reached down for a young man and drew the life out of him with a touch, feeding it into the great well of power that would let her heal her own troops...

...She danced in the middle of a ball, laughing as she spun, obviously loved by those around her. Artists worked at the side of the room with everything from paint to stone to magic, creating works so beautiful they almost hurt the eye to look at them. She welcomed the poor into the feast, not as charity, but because she didn't see any difference between feeding her friends and feeding everyone who was hungry...

...She stood at the lip of a fighting pit, before a group of nobles who shook as they knelt, looking up at her with a mixture of fear and hatred that made Sophia wince to see it.

“You betrayed me,” she said, in a voice of almost perfect beauty. “You could have had everything, and all you had to do was follow my commands.”

“And be no better than slaves!” one of the men said.

She stepped toward them, a sword in her hand. “There must be a price for that.”

She moved close, and the killing began while around her the crowd chanted one word, a name, over and over “Christina, Christina...”

Sophia snapped back to herself, staring down at her daughter, not understanding what had just happened. Sophia understood the feel of a real vision by now, but she didn't understand what all of this meant. It felt like two sets of visions at once, each contradicting the other. They couldn't both be true, could they?

“Sophia, what is it?” Kate asked.

“I... I had a vision,” Sophia said. “A vision about my daughter.”

“What kind of vision?” Lucas asked.

“I don't understand it,” Sophia said. “I saw her, and half the time she was doing these beautiful, wonderful things, and the rest... it was so cruel, so evil.”

Show us, Kate suggested.

Sophia did her best, sending across the images of the vision to both of them. Even like this, she didn't feel as though she got the full sense of it across to them. She couldn't convey how wonderful and how terrifying it felt, how powerfully *real* it all was, even compared to the other visions she'd had.

“May I touch her mind?” Lucas asked, when Sophia had done it.

Sophia nodded, guessing that he was checking for any sign that her daughter wasn't what she appeared to be. After what Siobhan had tried to do, trying to take over her unborn form, the prospect of it was terrifying.

“She's still herself,” Lucas said, “but I can feel the power there. She's going to be stronger than any of us, I think.”

“What do the visions mean, though?” Sophia asked them. Her daughter looked so perfect in her arms. Sophia couldn’t imagine her ever stalking through a battlefield, sucking the life out of people the way the Master of Crows might have with his birds.

“Maybe they’re possibilities,” Kate suggested. “Siobhan used to talk about looking at the strands of the future, picking out the things that would make other things happen. Maybe these are two ways that her life *could* turn out.”

“But we don’t know what makes the difference,” Sophia said. “We don’t know how to make sure that the good things happen.”

“You raise her with love,” Lucas said. “You teach her well. You help her to move toward the light, not the dark. Little Christina will have power, whatever you do, but you can help her to use it well.”

Sophia recoiled at the name. It might have been her mother’s, but after the vision, she couldn’t give it to her daughter, she wouldn’t.

“Anything but Christina,” she said. She thought about the flowers that she’d seen her daughter weaving together in the street. “Violet. We’ll call her Violet.”

“Violet,” Kate said with a smile, holding out a finger for the tiny baby to grab. “She’s already strong, like her mother.”

“Like her aunt, maybe,” Sophia replied. Her smile faded a little. “Don’t tell Sebastian about all of this, please, either of you. He shouldn’t be burdened with the knowledge of this. With what she might become.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to,” Lucas assured her.

“Me either,” Kate said. “If anyone can raise her to be a good person, it’s you, Sophia. And we’ll be there to help.”

“We will,” Lucas said. He smiled to himself. “Perhaps I’ll have a chance to play Official Ko’s role and pass on some of the things he taught me.”

They seemed so certain that things would turn out all right, and Sophia wanted to believe it. Even so, a part of her couldn’t forget the things she’d seen. Her daughter smiled up at her in perfect innocence. Sophia had to make sure it stayed that way.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Henry d'Angelica, eldest son of Sir Hubert and Lady Neeme d'Angelica, had what he suspected was the hardest job in the kingdom right then: trying to mollify his parents regarding everything that had happened in the kingdom in the last few weeks.

"Ianthé is distraught, of course," his mother said, through her tears, as if it was news that his aunt would be upset about the death of her daughter.

His father was better at anger than at sadness, bringing a wrinkled fist down on the wood of the fireplace. "The things those barbarians did to her... do you know they put the poor girl's head on a spike?"

Henry had heard that rumor, along with a hundred others, mostly repeated by his parents. The house had been consumed by little else since the invasion. Angelica had been falsely accused of treason. Angelica had been torn apart by a mob, or hanged, or beheaded. The invaders had run through the streets, slaughtering anyone in royal colors. They had sided with the son who had murdered the old queen...

"Henry, are you even listening to us?" his father demanded.

In theory, Henry shouldn't have flinched. He was nineteen, a man grown. He was tall and strong, a fine swordsman and a better shot. Yet there was always something in his father's voice that made him just a small boy again.

"I'm sorry, Father, what did you say?" Henry asked.

"I said that something must be *done*," his father repeated, with obvious bad grace.

"As you say, Father," Henry said.

His father gave Henry an angry look. "Honestly, I have raised a vapid shell of a man in you. Not like your cousin."

"Now, my love..." his mother began, but in the halfhearted way she usually did.

"Well, it's true," his father snapped, pacing before the fireplace like a guard before a castle gate. Not that a man as important as Sir Hubert would have appreciated the comparison. "The boy can't stick with anything. How many tutors did he go through as a child? Then there was the commission with that military company I had to buy him out of, and the business with joining the Church of the Masked Goddess..."

Henry didn't bother pointing out that all of that had been down to his parents. There had been so many tutors because his father had a habit of firing them whenever they taught anything he didn't agree with, so that Henry had mostly educated himself in the house's library. Equally, his father had been the one to decide that a commission in a free company was no place for his son, while the business with the church had even been the old man's idea, until he learned that it would mean that Henry would never be able to give the family the heirs it required.

"You're daydreaming again," his father snapped. "Your cousin wouldn't be. She made something of her life. She married a *king*!"

"And almost married a prince twice over," Henry said, not able to stop himself.

He saw his father go white with anger. Henry knew that expression, and knew what it portended. So many times when he was growing up, he'd seen that expression and had to stand there, not flinching at the slaps or the switching that had come next. He steeled himself to do the same today.

Instead, as his father lashed out, Henry found his hand moving up almost automatically to catch the arm, squeezing hard enough to bruise as he held his father's wrist in place, looking at him evenly. He stepped back, letting his father's arm drop.

Sir Hubert rubbed his wrist. "I want you to leave my house! You are not welcome here anymore!"

"I think you're right," Henry said. "I should go. Please excuse me."

He felt oddly calm as he left the room, heading upstairs to the room he'd had since he was a child. There, he started to collect things together, working out what he would need, and what he would have to do next.

Henry only had only known his cousin a little when she was alive. There were those who said that with his golden hair, deep blue eyes, and handsome features he actually looked a little like her, but Henry had never been able to see it. Perhaps it was just that Angelica had always been the standard against which he had been found wanting. She was more intelligent, or able to get on with people better, or more successful at court.

Henry wasn't sure that any of those things were true. Typically, before his father had been rid of them, his tutors had been surprised by how quickly Henry learned, and he'd always had a knack for getting people to do what he needed. His lack of success at court had mostly come from a lack of interest.

"That will have to change," Henry said to himself.

He had heard the rumors about his cousin, but he had also been clever enough to seek out his own information, paying men for what they knew and drinking with travelers at the local inn. From what he could understand, his cousin had been put aside not once, but twice, by Sebastian, the son who was rumored to have murdered his mother. Angelica had then sided with Rupert, probably to make sure that she got to the throne, only to find that Sophia Danse's invasion turned anyone connected with the ruling family into a target.

"And it got her killed," Henry muttered as he fetched clothes and money, pistols and his old dueling rapier.

He had no doubt that Angelica had engaged in plenty of nefarious practices to get where she'd ended up. A part of Henry wished that he didn't understand how these things worked, but he did, and even someone like her didn't rise to be queen by accident. She'd always been quick to cheat or lie in games as a child, whenever it seemed it would gain her an advantage.

Yet the things the rumors accused her of... those sounded more like someone's revision of history to make themselves sound innocent. They were an excuse to have her killed, clearing the way for power.

If he were like his father, Henry would rage in impotent anger at that. If he were like his mother, he would break down at the horror of it while simultaneously spreading gossip. He wasn't like either of them, though. He was a man who did what was needed, and he needed to do this.

"The family honor will allow no less," Henry said, standing and hefting his bag.

He walked downstairs, pausing at the door to the drawing room.

"Mother, Father, I will be leaving now. I will not be returning. You should know that I will avenge my cousin's death, whatever it takes. I am not doing that so that you will be proud of me, because frankly I don't care what you think. I am doing it because it needs to be done. Farewell."

As goodbyes went, it was singularly unemotional, but Henry found that he had nothing better for them as he stalked from the house, ignoring his mother's wailing and his father's angry stares.

He went around to the stable, selecting the fine chestnut mare he always rode, along with a brindled horse to carry his pack. He started to saddle them, knowing every step of it by heart. Already, his mind was past thoughts of his parents, concentrating on the things that he would need to do in the days to come, the alliances he would have to make, the fights that he would have to win with words and gold and steel.

Was their new queen truly one of the Danses? It was possible, given the rumors, but even if she were, that would not give her the right to take the throne. That had fallen to Rupert, and Angelica through him. Since the only remaining member of the Flambergs was almost certainly guilty of treason, that meant...

"Yes," Henry said, with a rueful smile at how easily it had come to him, "that might work."

It wasn't that he wanted to do this. He didn't need a throne any more than he'd wanted the priestly occupation his parents had tried to foist on him. It was simply a necessary component of what was to come. Charge into Ashton and attempt to kill the queen, and he would be no more than a traitor.

Yet he couldn't allow the invaders from Ishjemme to go unpunished. At a stroke, they had undone all the careful work constructed following the civil wars. They had undone the old order and instituted a new one where the Assembly of Nobles was rearranged at the ruler's whim, and where his cousin could be executed on no more than the word of the queen.

Henry would not stand for that. He could make things as they were again. He could make them right.

With that in mind, he set off riding. He would need support for this, and thankfully, Henry knew *exactly* where to find it.

CHAPTER NINE

A week didn't seem like enough time to Sophia. Not enough time to spend with her husband. Not enough time to dote over Violet, who cooed up at her whenever Sophia held her, and who reached out for Sienne's fur whenever the forest cat came close.

"We don't have to go so soon if you don't want," Lucas said, as they stood at the docks, people crowding around them to see them off as they waited before the ship that was to carry them. High Merchant N'Ka waited aboard, smiling down, probably because of the chests of goods and promises of trade Sophia had given him.

"Or we could go," Kate said. "We could bring our parents back to you."

Sophia shook her head. "I know it seems mad doing it so soon, and it hurts more than I can say leaving Violet behind, but I feel as though, if we're going to find our parents, it needs to be the three of us. They made sure that the map only came together for all three of us for a reason."

"It doesn't have to be now, though," Lucas said.

"If not now, when?" Sophia asked. "We have peace for a while. Sebastian can hold the kingdom together, and I'm not caught up in all the details of ruling yet. If I leave it too long, I might never do it."

Plus, I've seen how much waiting has disappointed you, she sent. I want you to be happy, and I want Violet to have her grandparents.

I'm sure they will dote on her, Lucas sent back. And we will find them.

Sophia clung to that certainty as she went over to the spot where Sebastian stood with their daughter. She could sense that he was trying to be strong for her, that he wished she wasn't going, or that he was. She kissed him tenderly.

"I won't be gone so long," she said.

"Every moment will feel like too long," Sebastian replied. "And it is a long way to go that far south."

"The high merchant is sure that the journey to the coast won't take more than a week or two," Sophia said, hoping that he was right. "After that, the journey into the interior might take another week, two at most. I will be back to you before you know it, along with Violet's grandparents, if they're there to find."

"Two months will feel like an eternity," Sebastian said. He ran her hand through her hair. "But I know how happy it will make you to finally find your parents. I'd go with you if I could."

Sophia knew he would, and the idea of their whole family trekking to find her parents was one that made her ache with longing, even though she knew that it couldn't happen.

"One of us has to stay here to run things," she said.

"I just wish I could make sure you're safe," Sebastian said.

Sophia looked around at the ship, where a mixture of servants and Ishjemme's soldiers were finding space on the deck. "I have half a regiment with me, along with Sienne, Lucas, and Kate. I think *I* should be the one worried about *you* without us to look after you."

"I'll do my best not to get imprisoned by anyone again," Sebastian promised with a smile that Sophia returned.

"I love you so much," she said, kissing him once more. She leaned down to kiss her daughter's forehead. "And I love you too. When you're older, we'll tell you the story of how we went to find your grandparents so that they could see you."

There were so many things that she was leaving behind in the kingdom. Her daughter and her husband were the most obvious among them, but there were so many others as well. Her cousins were here, Hans working on the treasury, Ulf and Frig on the Monthys estate, Jan... well, she hadn't seen him since her wedding day, but she hoped that he was all right.

The various factions in the kingdom seemed to be settled for the moment. The Church of the Masked Goddess and the Assembly seemed to be quiet for the moment, while the progress for the people who had been downtrodden under the Dowager had already begun. More than that, Sophia trusted Sebastian. If anyone could run things here while she was gone, he could. The nobles and the people all respected him, while he probably knew the business of government a lot better than she did.

Even so, letting go of him and Violet was the hardest thing she had done.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she promised. "I'll learn how to call up the wind to push the boat faster if I have to. I won't let anything separate us any longer than it has to."

"And when you get back, you'll have stories to tell," Sebastian said with a smile that Sophia could see he didn't feel. He was being brave for her, but sometimes brave was enough.

"Come on, Sienne," she said.

She forced herself to make her way up the gangplank, standing on the deck while the crowd on the dock cheered and waved. It was the kind of moment that should have felt like an epic beginning. Instead, she found herself hoping that they would be able to find her parents and get back here as quickly as possible.

Kate was having a hard time letting go of Will.

"I wish you could come with me," she said.

"I could if you wanted," he suggested.

Kate shook her head. "I want to have something good to come back to, and you *definitely* count as something good."

Just the thought of that had her thinking of all the nights since the wedding, all the joyous times they'd spent in the few days they'd had since their wedding. It had her thinking of all the close moments that they'd spent together, the small touches, the laughter...

"You have to stay," Kate said, trying to convince herself as much as Will. "Sebastian is going to need all the help that he can get, and Lord Cranston will need you for an aide."

"I don't know if there will be much for a free company to do," Will said.

Kate shook her head, took his hand, and led him over to where Lord Cranston was waiting. Kate snapped off a salute.

"Since you're the head of the army now, I suspect that I should be saluting you," Lord Cranston said.

"Why do you think I'm saluting *you*, my lord?" Kate replied with a grin.

Lord Cranston looked at her in something like shock. "What exactly are you saying, Kate?"

"That someone must make sure that the kingdom is safe," Kate said. "And I don't trust anyone to make sure that the army stays on Sebastian's side more than you."

"Even though I am variously old, mercenary, drunken, capricious, and inclined to switch sides?" Lord Cranston said. Kate guessed that he wasn't entirely joking.

"You have never gone back on your word that I know of," she said. "As for the rest of it... well, I wouldn't want you any other way. The army is in your charge, my lord."

"And when I decide that our neighbors pay better?" Lord Cranston said.

"Then you'll back Sebastian anyway," Kate replied. She held out her hand. "Pretend all you want, but we both know you'd rather die than go back on your honor."

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