

MERMAID
MOON



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For Leslie Hayes



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*Fire leaves no history;
Air ever forgets;
Water washes away;
Land holds on too long;
Time is the measure of all.*
—*The Mermaids*



The moon lowers herself to draw the tide.

When she knew her time had come, she slipped from the quiet of her father's house to make her way down to the docks.

It wasn't easy. The pains came fast and hard, even at the start. In the light of a half-made moon, she stumbled in the familiar ruts and puddles of the path she'd raced down many times before. Each pain was an ember blazing from her belly to the tips of her fingers and toes; pain blinded her and stole her breath. Only force of will kept her on her feet and stealing toward the waterfront, the one place she knew—or hoped—she'd be safe.

Her body was ripping apart. She was being drawn and quartered like the worst kind of criminal, a thief or a murderer whose limbs were tied to four different horses and the horses then spurred in different directions. Blood sport. Something to think about as she both gasped for breath and

tried to keep silent, because the worst thing she could do now would be to make a sound loud enough to wake her neighbors. If things were as bad as she thought they might be, the villagers would come after her with torches and sharp-tipped hoes. Her parents, grudgingly kind as they had been to this point, would lead the charge.

Stars swaddled the sky while she sweated through her linen chemise and into her coarse wool dress. She fixed her eyes on that half pie of moon as her knees buckled under an especially terrible pang. She clutched her belly and pushed herself against the streaky wall of a butcher shop. It held her up as she smothered a groan. The butcher and his family slept above the shop; she shouldn't wake them.

The smell of her blood mixed with ripe meat was nauseous.

Pain is thirsty work, even in a cool month when green things are just beginning to take on summer hues. She wished for a barrel full of rainwater but instead found a pebble to pop into her mouth, and she sucked to draw the water from inside her own body.

In all her eighteen years she had never felt so alone as tonight, under the thick white stars. But soon she wouldn't be alone anymore. Soon she would have a baby.

A large — another rending pain — an enormous baby.

And that was about all she knew. She knew it was coming, yes, and she knew what she'd done to make it, and she knew she had to get down to the water fast

because—because—because that was the only place she could birth this baby safely.

This would be a special baby. No one in memory had given life to a baby such as this. No one had dared.

By the time she reached the narrow strip of sand that was the only beach in this country of cliffs and caves, she was exhausted, crawling on hands and knees. Not easy to do with her belly heaving and her skirts, soaked with birthing waters, tied up beneath her arms. But she had no choice. This was where she had to be.

The tide was slowly swelling to meet the half-moon. The sharp blade of it was cutting her open and drawing her tides, too, as it sank gracefully toward the horizon.

Would her lover meet her here? Would he bring sisters and aunts and cousins to help, as he'd promised he'd try? His people had unusually keen hearing, but she had done her best to make no sound at all. They might find her by smell, though; she smelled like an animal, sweaty and afraid. And of course he'd warned that the women of his clan might not come. They disapproved of what he and she had done as much as her own people would, *if* they knew—and she was determined they wouldn't.

The sand was cool against her palms and knees and shins. It felt like comfort. She let herself sink onto one side and press her temple against that yielding damp, breathe deep of the clean wet air. The *lap-lap* of the bay's rising little

waves was soothing, too; even the stars seemed gentle and kind, floating behind wispy drifts of cloud, now that she'd reached the place that was her entire plan.

She lay there, let the pain and the elements take her while she prayed. *Holy Virgin, Empress of the Seas, have pity on a sinner . . . And: Bjarl, my love, please find me.*

He did find her. First a wet head bobbed out among the waves—it could have been a seal. She didn't even notice it at first, but then came the steady splash of water as he propelled his powerful body along. He was flicking and steering in a way that both fascinated and revolted—revolted because it might mark this baby, too, and what would she do then?

She moaned. It did not give as much release as she wanted, but it was all she could allow herself.

Soon Bjarl's arms were around her, and the chilly skin of his chest was propping up her head. He had humped his way onto the sand where they used to make love. His hands somehow raised her knees and shifted them apart, though in a way very different from their old giddy nights. It was a position at once awkward and reassuring; in arranging her this way, Bjarl seemed expert, as if someone had trained him for precisely this moment. Maybe he was taught by a woman of his people—which might mean the women would not come to help at all.

She realized that Bjarl was pulling her from the sand into the shallows. The little kidney-shaped bay's salt water bathed her most fevered parts, stinging where they

were already starting to tear but otherwise soothing with coolness.

“It won’t be long,” he promised, pressing his lips to her brow. “Our babies come quickly.”

She wished he’d tell her that he loved her.

“I love you,” he said, as if he could hear her thoughts. She believed him. His people, the *marreminder*, claimed not to set much store by love, he had explained, because it was not something they could eat or hoard, and in their long, long lives they usually outgrew all emotion. But if Bjarl said he loved her, then surely he did.

She gasped out a few sounds to let him know she loved him too, and then she growled, because for a moment the pain became stronger than love.

In a lull she heard others surfacing, nearly silent splashes followed by snorts to clear waterlogged breathing passages in nose and neck. She heard palms digging into sand, bodies scraping over it. The women of his *flok* were here after all.

An old creature of vaguely female outline propped herself between her legs and studied them with the keen eye of one who sees in the dark. She slid her fingers inside (*pain*), feeling for the baby’s head.

“All as it should be,” she assured the parents-in-waiting.

A cloud drifted away from the half-moon, and a shaft of light revealed that old woman’s face—horrible, cracked, snaggle-toothed, and moldy—leering over her.

She recoiled and closed her eyes.

“*Shh*, beloved, the old one has powers,” Bjarl said.

The hideous crone cackled as if deliberately to frighten the poor girl, who had known nothing but her own village until the day she looked into the water and saw Bjarl looking back at her.

“Call me a witch,” said the crone, “if it comforts ye.”

The word was not a comfort, but she trusted in Bjarl’s choice of helpers. At this moment in her short, violent life, she had no one else—certainly no one who had shown her kindness.

The younger women set to work on her belly, rubbing it gently and singing to it in their trilling voices. One pair of hands circled her temples in a way that lifted much of her pain; another rubbed her scalp in a way that would have been pleasurable if not for the pain elsewhere; and of course Bjarl’s arms remained around her.

Oddly enough, at this moment, she felt more loved than at any other in her life.

“Tell me how we fell,” she whispered, delirious with suffering but still hoping he would understand her. “How we fell in love.”

She knew he was smiling; she felt his beard against her cheek, shedding water that sprinkled her neck with droplets.

“You were crouching on a rock,” he said, “and scrubbing linens against it. You were crying because your mother had been cruel to you that day. And I’d been fishing nearby when I felt your tears dropping into the waves, and I thought I’d never tasted anything so sweet. I swam up

and looked at you through the waterskin, and you looked down and saw me. You were so astonished, you fell off the rock and into my arms.”

In spite of the pain, she smiled. It was her favorite story, and Bjarl told it a little differently each time she asked. The one part that remained constant was this: *They fell in love.*

“That afternoon I gave you a sea star and asked you to be mine,” Bjarl finished, so quiet she was almost certain his women could not hear him.

More cold water splashed against her split legs and mounded belly, even her face, from the old one’s hands. She was glad for the cold. She looked up again, blinking, and admired the iciness of stars and moon, forever fixed in the blue bowl of sky. Sometimes, in the months when the sun never set, the moon was visible along with it, waxing and waning according to its own wishes. Sometimes it shimmered in yellow-green streaks of light that (though familiar) seemed to promise some life beyond the one lived on this hardscrabble island.

“It’s time to push,” said the old woman, spreading the girl’s legs wide, as if to pull her apart like a chicken.

The wavelets *hiss-hissed* as they receded down the sand. It was a pleasant sound.

Bracing herself against Bjarl’s strong chest, surrounded by his people, she pushed.

Now, at last, she let herself scream as loudly as she wanted. She screamed both pain and love.

♦ Chapter I ♦



To the list of events I never intended, it is time to add this: the first of the so-called miracles that have made these Dark Islands famous on land and sea.

The miracle, as these people have named it, begins with my first step on a pebbly shore; it ends in a wall of flowers stained red. In one form or another, it becomes the stuff of song and legend and even, I'm told, an entry in the books written by monks and illustrated in paints made of ground stone and gold and beetle shells, to be kept among other such objects in a place called Rome.

My own people sing of it, naturally. Their songs focus on my bravery and cunning, but the truth is that I wasn't brave or cunning at all—just lucky or unlucky, depending on how you view the events that followed.

This is how the songs go. I don't need to point out that I never sing them myself.

*Sanna the Lonely, Sanna the Meek—
She who was first to set foot on the land—
In the midst of their feast,
In savory and sweet,
Her body sang out the elements:
Air and earth and fire and time
Dyed themselves red in her blood.
Sanna the Clever, Sanna the Wise;
Sanna both Never and Always.*

I don't like what they call me, but who is ever entirely happy with a name given by others? And in any event, my names are not the worst exaggeration. The story grows and blooms as it passes each pair of lips, and soon the singers will have me slaying an empire and taking its wealth for my own.

I intend to narrate everything here exactly as it happened.

• Chapter 2 •



When I first come to the Thirty-Seven Dark Islands near the northernmost reach of our known world, what I imagine, what I intend, is finding my mother. She was just a girl when she made me, and she must be a woman now; but blood calls to blood, and though I was taken from her at birth—in a place my people don't remember because the witch of our *flok* worked a magic of forgetting—still there must be something, *must* be, in me to spark recognition from her.

I think my mother and I will recognize each other, all at once and completely, on first sight. I have my father's yellow hair and pale green eyes, with something of him in the point of my nose, but the rest of me (I believe) must be hers. She and her people will know me by my high cheekbones, sharp chin, and wide mouth, and they'll rejoice to

find the baby was not lost; then some missing, broken part of myself will be found and fixed.

That doesn't happen.

As I approach the castle where my quest truly begins, the ground rolls and twists. My legs tangle in the soft blue skirts of the dress I'm wearing, the overgown I chose from a chest that obviously once belonged to a fine woman. I also took a white veil and a silver diadem for my head.

I anticipated this awkwardness—*getting my land legs*, Sjøldent calls it, and it happened each time I practiced on solid ground. In a way I'm still practicing now, as I have a few islets to cross after the pebbly beach where I landed myself. Sometimes there's no bridge from one islet to the other, but I don't need to jump and don't trust my legs to do it. I find it's easy to wade, skirts hiked to my knees. But all of this is tiring, and I'm soon winded from effort.

I ache in unaccustomed places. With each step, I wonder if I should turn back or perhaps wait for another day, as my destination seems all but impossible to reach.

"Go to the castle," said Sjøldent, the oldest of the *flok* but still not considered an elder, one with the duty to govern, because she is so strange. She is the witch who taught me my magic and also, on the day of my birth, made everyone forget.

"What castle?" I asked, because I'd never seen one from where we liked to float just beyond the bay's waters; also, I'd learned from our travels that the word *castle*, or

something like it, is used to describe all manner of landish buildings.

Sjældent (squinting, as she always does to make things a little clearer through the white fog over her eyes) explained what a castle is here: “A many-chambered place where people live with weapons and treasures. This one grows out of a big rock farthest to these islands’ west, and it’s the only one in the whole miserable place. Ye won’t be able *not* to find it, if ye follow the wind.”

“And my mother will be there?”

Sjældent cackled, one of those coughing laughs that she thinks are so unsettling to the rest of us—because they are. For her they’re as natural as a burp to a child just learning to hold her breath underwater. My father says that when one is finally as old and ugly as Sjældent, a laugh commands a kind of respect.

And fear. Most of our people fear the old witch, and for better reason than her laugh.

“Ye’ll find something,” she said to me that day. She rarely answers questions directly. “Ye’ll find the whole landish *flok* gathered in one place. A woman who can help ye. And something to bring back here. To me.”

It would be easy to become irritated with Sjældent, if I didn’t need her so much. I’ve grown used to her during the suns and moons of my apprenticeship. So I asked her then, “Will the something be my mother?” I also thought, who better to help me than the woman herself?

She cackled again, ending with words children use for

taunting one another: “That, my girl, is for me to know and ye to find out.”

“I suppose I *will* find out,” I said, calm as could be, “and then we’ll both know, won’t we?”

She liked that. “Not so meek as when I found ye,” she said smugly.

I said, “I’m the one who came to you,” and then dived off the rock and deep under the seaskin, to show her that I might leave just as easily.

Arriving in the Dark Islands, as this place is called, took far more effort than a dive; it required nearly a year of training and chanting, trying and failing, breaking my pride over and over. And now that I’m here, my whole body stings and soars and throbs at once.

Excitement. Hope. Fear. Magic. So many questions perhaps to be answered . . . One big question, rather. And a single, secret name that Sjøldent conjured for me to tuck in my heart, far (for now) from my lips.

I can tell the castle is close when I emerge from a place covered in so many trees that I know to call it *forest*. I smell fire, and sweetness, and meat cooking, and people massed together. When I leave the trees, there it is—a great pile of rocks rising from the sea at a place where the currents are strong and the waves beat a spray as high as I stand. A castle, in fact, so much a part of the rock that it seems to *be* the rock and is not easily seen from the sea.

So close, now, but how my feet ache! First there’s a bridge

to cross over a freshwater channel, then a wide island shaped like a bowl with a well-trodden ridge down the center.

To keep steady, I count each step I manage without a stumble or a stubbed toe. One, two, five, and then I start counting again. It will take a while longer to learn, this walking over rocky earth.

The ridge is bounded on either side with a garden where plants grow in arithmetic patches and straight lines, which landish people find a useful way to organize nature and thus control their element, because they are anxious folk who cannot accept that there's no such condition as control. I sniff at the various rows and recognize some things I've tasted before, berries and small fruits for which we've traded with friendly peoples, but I've never seen them actually growing from the earth before. The wind blows their leaves the way the tide pushes and pulls at the weeds undersea, but both more gently and more fast.

On that wind, I catch the unmistakable odor of bodies together: landish bodies, moist with landish sweat. And the sounds of landish voices, speaking and exclaiming, and at least a hundred pairs of jaws at work.

I also smell pleasure, which adds a sweetness to the cloud of their scent. It carries easily on the wind and has a tangible substance, like a kind of web that might tangle me up.

I won't let my step falter. I push myself, willfully, a last dozen paces over the green-bowl island and across a wood-beamed bridge caked with mud, then finally—a *big* push—into the castle itself.

Cool. Stone. Crusty with salt from the sea. I can draw strength from that.

“Surely you can manage ten more steps,” I say out loud and sternly, for the benefit of my feet. They feel as if someone has smashed them with hammers and set them on fire, which is not too far from what they’ve endured today.

I limp under a series of archways, and then I see them: the landish folk. There are many more here than belong to my own clan and *flok*, and they are sitting on broken trees arranged within a big five-sided hollow of stone, with so many shining objects around them that my eyes are dazzled. I smell them fully, and hear them—all at once, overwhelming with sensation, as if smell and sound are always tangible things (to us, they are) and batter my body like waves.

“How are you going to bear them?” my age-mates asked when they heard of my plan. Especially Addra, who is flame-haired and dark-eyed and the most beautiful of all, forever admiring the reflection of her face and breasts in a rock pool—though she has the tongue of a dead clam, as Sjøldent likes to say, and must rely on her beauty, not her singing, to win her way in the world.

Whenever the subject of my quest arose, Addra shuddered exquisitely, completely disdaining the people from whom, after all, we take much of what makes our lives feel so joyous.

“Their smell,” she said, and she counted landish flaws on her fingers, where the webbing is as delicate and pink as

her nails: “Their awful, raspy voices and their breath that reeks of corpses; the taste—”

“She’s not going to *taste* them,” my loyal cousin La put in. “Are you, Sanna?”

Of course not.

“To be fair,” Pippa the Strong said once, to shut Addra up (Pippa is practically an elder by virtue of strength, and she finds Addra as irritating and unimportant as a sand flea), “you think that the landish reek of corpses because by the time you keep your promise to kiss them, they’ve died.”

And that is true, too. Addra’s face, if not her voice, has lured many a sailor to his death.

But in many other respects, Addra was speaking the truth. Landish breath, especially when so many are gathered together, *does* reek of the dead, and it’s enough to make my knees weak now, even as my mouth waters with a mix of hunger and revulsion. The landish *flok* has been feasting on landish animals, their earthy meat choked in smoke from a fire and stuffed with plants from the dirt, then drowned in sauces made from other things that grow in the ground. If only they ate a raw fish once in a while, they wouldn’t smell so bad.

As I step toward them, I get another sensation, that which we call the *Down-Below-Deep*. I feel as if I’m moving below the sea’s striae of buoyancy, so far down it takes days first to swim and then to sink to the bottom. Anyone who reaches that place risks being held by the weight of water until it crushes her to death.

I am almost afraid enough to turn back, but I don't. I am sworn to the quest. And anyway, my poor new feet can't walk to the water again, and my grip on my magic is weak; I might not be able to change.

So I take a deep breath, and then the last few steps into sun and the edge of the crowd.

In the sunshine, on the walls, grow dazzling white landish flowers. They are one source (but not the only source) of that sweet aroma of pleasure. Above the people's heads on the westernmost wall, in a nook where no flowers grow, stands a lady in a yellow gown and a veil to match, lips bumpy and pink, face also bumpy but bluish white. Not a real lady, I see very soon, but one of those figures that imitate the real. The landish like them for reasons we don't quite understand; perhaps the false figures make them feel less alone. This one has arms outstretched at her sides and is missing some fingers. Her flaking lips smile as if to welcome me home.

She makes me happy deep down, for reasons I can't explain.

But happiness here is a danger.

Seeing her, I fall. In front of all those staring landish people, I tumble. Into the flowers that cling to the walls, into branches that tear at me. They rip my fine blue dress apart, right down to my tender new skin.

I feel blood leaking from me—tiny drops, little red pearls—and I hear it hiss and sizzle in the air.

• Chapter 3 •



A feast of virtues and sins.



It falls on a warm, windy day in late summer, this Feast of the Virgin's Assumption. When they wake at dawn to the toll of the church bell, the farmers who haven't yet finished their harvest are of one mind, and that mind is on crops.

Wheat. Rye. Oats. Hay. The people stretch and shove each other out of bed, thinking of the ordinary things that they and their animals will eat in the lean, dark months that are coming, when most of their work will be done by touch as the moon passes in and out of her phases and the sun appears rarely if at all.

Turnips. Beets. Parsnips. Apples. A very few pears. Preserves of summer berries stored in clay jars. And ropes of onion and garlic, the poor man's (and woman's, and child's) staple flavoring. Salted fish kept in stinking, briny barrels.

This will be their fare, if they are lucky.

Except today: Today is for a feast. They can eat whatever they want, as much as they want, on a holy day that

coincides with harvest—the single day of the year that Baroness Thyrla opens her gate and unlocks her larders, ordering her cooks to do their best for the town. It's the day she welcomes the islanders to carry Our Lady of the Sea into the courtyard and set her in a niche, the day when she shares her own stores. And there will be plenty of the exotic goods brought in by ships that dock at her private harbor and never venture into the much larger Dark Moon Bay, on the shores of which these good people raise their crops and their children but almost never their hopes, because the land is rocky and very far north.

Father Abel says that August 15 should be devoted to all things Holy Mother. The day marks the Virgin's earthly dormition or death, and her body's rise up into heaven on a crescent moon lifted by angels' wings. But who can really be blamed if, as the lone church bell rings tinnily over the islands, thoughts of delicacies to be eaten mingle with the Blessed Mother?

Like all good things, the bounty from the Baroness's kitchen must be earned. So the townspeople assemble (stomachs growling) in the church nave to pray with Father Abel. The elderly priest leads the ceremony in a language they don't understand; they know only that it is holy. "*Sbh*," a dozen mothers hiss to their fidgety children, perhaps with a knock on the head. "Look at the Virgin. Think of your virtues and sins." They guess that's what Abel is running on about in his inscrutable Latin.

And who wouldn't want to gaze at Our Lady? She is the

town's pride—except that pride is a sin, too, so it's best to say they simply love it. Her. The statue.

No one knows how old Our Lady of the Sea is or who made her, but they do agree that at one time she was carved out of wood, a great piece as big as a living woman. She is somehow larger than a real woman, though, and more beautiful, with her lips parted and her arms spread to welcome good men and sinners alike into eternal forgiveness.

It is an honor to perform her annual cleaning and freshening of paint, preparing for the trip to the castle. The most skilled men in town (a town of very limited skill, it is true) vie for the honor of passing a cloth over her white face, stroking a new layer of yellow paint onto her robe and veil.

The years have not been kind to Our Lady of the Sea. Salt air and freezing temperatures corrode and shrink her paint, so her surface has become bubbly and uneven; her face and dress flake away at the touch. Also, in all the well-meant repainting, her eyes have migrated, such that the left one sits a thumb's width above the right.

Sheep's urine, that's what makes the yellow paint. Other towns might pay through the teeth for blue stone mined far to the south and east, to grind into the color the Church Fathers have unofficially associated with Mary. But in this town of fishers and farmers who struggle to pull a living out of the rock, a little urine is no dishonor. They use it to strengthen the wool of their clothes, to paint their houses, to fertilize certain plants in their gardens; there's no corner of the islands in which a body can take a breath and not

smell waste. The church, just now, as the day warms up, reeks like a baby's napkin, and nobody minds a bit.

At last, Father Abel begins a drawn-out, singsongy *A-a-a-a-a-m-e-en*.

As the final note dies into the church walls, six sturdy men approach Our Lady of the Sea. They lift her from her pedestal and onto a bier already decorated with late-summer flowers. Girls of the town (all virgins themselves, skinny and mouse-haired under their caps) heap more asters and daisies and stalks of grain at the statue's ankles.

Father Abel opens the church's big door, and the sturdy men carry the bier into the light, to loop around the church and westward through its garden of graves, on to the series of Islets that skip like stones to the sunset.

Now, walking, the girls and boys sing songs about the Virgin. She may look even shabbier in the bright outdoors, but she is theirs, and today she will gain them access to the castle. Their songs give her glory.

Steadily, singing, the villagers follow their Virgin up slope and down gully, over bridges, past fields fed by fresh-water springs, through woods and over an island shaped like a bowl, where greens and vegetables and other sallets are grown for the castle. Then to the castle itself, squatting dark and gray and jagged on the last bit of rock that could be called an island. This rock is so big that it is said the builders needed no mortar to fashion the four towers and countless rooms; the castle was almost entirely carved out of bedrock, with additional rubble from the ballast in the ships

that traveled far to bring riches back to Baroness Thyrla and her family (she must have had family at some time, though no one remembers them now). The castle has five sides and is widest to the north, where a towerless corner juts like a ship's prow into the sea—or, as mothers tell naughty children, like a blade-thin door for the dragon who lives in the rock below to burst through at the Baroness's command.

Preceded by Father Abel and the Virgin, the villagers pass the guards stationed at the castle gate with halberds erect. Then (still singing) they enter the five-sided courtyard and circle its rose-clad walls to set the precious statue in a niche at the far western end. She nestles into a gap among the roses that spring white as salt from the vine that runs all around the yard and that is also older than memory, perhaps as old as the rock. Feeding the castle's bees, who dance over the white blossoms before sinking inside to drink.

With the statue in place, the people find benches to sit on, at tables laden with their particular favorite treats. They see young pig and venison, honey cakes and spiced ale, fried squash blossoms and pies of unknown but no doubt delightful contents. Thyrla has had three of her cows butchered, and an exaltation of larks has come to ground in the center of each table, dressed in a fragrant sauce.

The people exchange covert smiles. When children squeal with excitement, they are hushed quickly, as is Old Olla, who greets friends too loudly (she's gone peculiar, living with the bees) with an "Oh, it's you!"

They remain standing while the Baroness and her

seventeen-year-old son, Peder—both lavishly dressed, even regally so, in cloth of gold and ropes of jewels that set off their bright hair and silver-gray eyes—enter the yard and assume their places on the dais, where only the Virgin statue and Father Abel are allowed to join them. Even young Peder's paid companion, a boy of the village named Tomas, sits among the commoners on this day, with his widowed mother, known as Inger Elder, and his sisters and brothers.

As one body, the villagers bow so low they could lick their own shoes. So low they smell little of the food and much of the roses, which are lightly and pleasantly sweet.

"Please, good people, do stand," says the Baroness in her imperious manner. She keeps herself so beautifully adorned that her mix of gold and silver hair (tending more toward silver now) has become the feminine ideal. She is so forceful, so sure of herself, that she would be magnificent even if she were covered in warts. As it is, she wears a patch over her right eye that would have disfigured a lesser woman but on her is another ornament, a triangle of white silk delicately embroidered with the outline of an eye closed in a wink.

No one has ever seen beneath that patch.

"Stand," this marvelous woman invites them again. "And then sit."

"*Eat!*" her son interjects. "Drink! Eat and drink until your bellies burst!"

"We give thanks for the Lord's bounty," Father Abel

says humbly, facing Thyrla and her son. “We give thanks for the Blessed Virgin and for the fruit of her womb, Jesus.”

He holds a Bible in trembling, knotty hands. Tradition dictates that he must stand as others begin the meal; he will read to the crowd what little the Bible says about the Virgin Mary, followed by pages of old writing about how her Son’s life reflects well upon hers. Only when Mary’s tale is thoroughly explored, and a good bit of Jesus’s, can he share in the feast.

“Begin!” Thyrla commands them, her people, as she waves her white hands.

Father Abel opens the cover of his precious book.

The townspeople have been invited three times now, so they are ready to eat. And to make each bite a prayer. They reach for their favorite morsels, shaking with the hunger that will finally be satisfied.

Everything seems ready and right.

But they are not prepared—because never once has it happened before—to see a stranger crashing into the yard. Tall, blue, a blur. She *really* crashes, perhaps tripped by one of the dogs that twine around legs looking for scraps. Stumbles and falls into the vine that holds the wall together.

What happens next puts a stop to the prayers and the pleasure. Food drops from mouths to the ground, where animals eat it.

The white roses are turning red.

• Chapter 4 •



It sounds like a sigh.



In the silence, they hear the change. It sounds like a sigh—as if flowers are relieved to become what they’ve wished to be all along, or as if the dragon inside the rock has turned over in his sleep.

Maybe it’s just the wind from the sea. But for one moment, there’s not so much as the call of a gull to distract anyone from what’s happening on the walls.

The tide of red washes through the flowers of the ancient vine that has suckled on the courtyard stone as long as anyone can remember. The flowers, too, have never changed in memory, but everyone who sees them now somehow knows that they will always be red hereafter.

While the people watch, they’re tickled with an unfamiliar feeling. It wells up within them like their own blood, but it’s even stronger than that and much more foreign.

It’s bliss.

The roses are pouring forth a deeper scent, one that plunges to the bottom of the belly. It is the best scent, and the red is the most beautiful color, any of these poor people have known in their lives.

And the cause of it all—that stranger, the pale-haired, blue-robed girl—now lies in the rose vine’s embrace, with thorns in her skin, her own blood glittering richer than Baroness Thyrla’s jewels. Richer even than the red of the roses.

The people break out both laughing and weeping. When at last they can speak, they cry, “Miracle!”

They rush toward the stranger, knocking benches and tables on end. They want to, *need* to lay their hands on the miracle, get her blood on their fingertips, taste the salty wine of it. They lick the drops away while the lavish feast from the Baroness’s kitchens grows cold and flavorless on the tables and the roses bloom and bloom and bloom.

Even Father Abel joins the rush; even Peder, the boy who has grown up with so much pleasure that he thinks any fresh brush with it is his due. Only Baroness Thyrla hangs back, watching her people descend like brown beetles on the once-bright, highly irregular, lavishly dressed intruder.

Only the Baroness, that is, and Our Lady of the Sea, the wooden statue presiding over the feast. The edges of her niche mark the last place where the flowers change, the last place where white yields to red with a billow of that perfect scent. They bring a flush of reflected pink to her chalky white cheeks.

Thyrla’s single gray eye glitters, hard and steely.

• Chapter 5 •



I know what a miracle is, because Sjældent explained it to me as part of the faith these landish people have in a powerful man, a father, who lives above them in the sky. A miracle is a bit of the absent father made visible, to keep the people behaving as they should. It is magic used to their benefit, the same thing witches do when people call them angels.

I may have laughed when Sjældent outlined this landish belief, but now I am quivering. In fear.

As the thorns bite into my flesh and the plant takes hold, I hear the people using that word. It bounces off the rocks and melts into the sea spray, and then it rushes toward me—because *I am the miracle*.

But what's just happened is *not* a miracle. I know this. It has nothing to do with some unseen person but is merely an accident, a misstep from legs not used to land—not used

to being legs, for that matter—and the magic I called to my body so I could come here. It is magic of alteration, and it didn't stop working when my own body changed. Or rather, I didn't remember to stop it, to limit it to my body, and so it spilled over into the prickling plant.

At first I can't make this much sense out of what's happening; understanding comes later. When I stumble, it seems the first thorn barely touches my skin before I'm falling deep into branches that have been waiting for me, and then there's the landish smell of earth and urine and meats cooked with fire. I am pinned under the branches but under people as well, all the people who were here before me and who now want to be exactly where I am.

It takes a moment to realize they want to be just here *because* of me. They are touching me, licking me. The branches wind tighter around my body, and my dress and veil tear. I hear a snapping of twig after twig as the landish people rush to pluck the flowers, to chew and swallow as they collect my blood.

They eat magic, I think hazily. I have to tell Sjældent and Father.

I hear Sjældent's voice in my head: *To them, eating is magic itself.* And that seems true, too.

There isn't much room for thinking beneath the squirming mass of landish people reaching through and shoving each other away. Not much room for breath, either. And the nauseous smell of them, with the sweet scent of these flowers, makes my final thoughts spin till I could hardly say my name if anyone asked.

Just as I am about to drown in this churning tide of landish bodies—hungry as sharks, grasping as octopuses—I feel a jolt. In my arm. A jolt as from one of those eels whose bite carries the same power as a lightning bolt, only this sensation is much sweeter. This feeling mixes pleasure with its pain.

It's a single hand, circling my upper arm, pulling. Somehow this hand has power to make the others fall away, at least after a few heartbeats in which I feel both jolts and smothers. The hand pulls me by the arm, and the thorns rip at my clothes and skin some more as I scabble to get my feet under myself again.

In no time at all, I am standing, blinking, in the sun and wind. Caressed by sea spray and the scent of a thousand flowers now turned bright red and spicy.

The people have fallen away. They sit on the overturned slabs of wood and shards of dishes, or they hover, hoping to dart back for another touch. My veil is entirely gone, and the silver diadem lies crushed somewhere beneath other feet.

The wind lifts my hair and blows it upward and across my face in a green-yellow swirl, so I have to take all this in during short bursts of clarity. But it's not my hair or the wind that is slowing down the most important observation of all, the one I can barely bring myself to recount. Because the hand that pulled me from the fray is still on my arm, and the face of the person who belongs to the hand is very close to mine, staring through the swirl of my hair with a single silver eye.

I feel a new sort of jolt, a cold shiver. I am Down-Below-Deeply afraid. For a moment I think it would have been better to lie beneath all those landish miracle-criers and hope to sink through the rock than to face this face.

That is because I have now recognized the cause of that first shock and tingle: It came from magic.

The person who grabbed me, the person who still holds my arm, is a person who has magic. And something tells me that she—it is a *she*—is not going to be a friend and teacher to me, at least not at first.

“Who are you,” she says in a voice that would freeze a white bear’s liver, “and what is your business in my castle?”

• Chapter 6 •



She has always been the Baroness.



Growing into herself in a time when the title of Baroness didn't mean much in these isolated islands, Thyrla learned to be cautious, especially when she felt an itch beneath her eye patch. The eye there is hidden for a particular reason. People may assume this is because the eye is blind or maimed in some way, but they're wrong. It is in fact rather *too* sensitive, and Thyrla keeps its messages to herself. An extra tear or two predict sorrow to come; a dry scrape means hardship. An itch is worst of all. It means the unknown.

She feels that itch today. Just before the stranger comes staggering into the yard and flings herself into the roses, just when Thyrla should be her best and strongest, presiding with her son over the annual feast that keeps the village in thrall to her wishes and needs—at this one moment of equilibrium, when light and dark are in balance and Thyrla can feed on her subjects' greed in the name of the Church—her secret eye begins to twitch.

She tries to ignore the itch and tickle, tries to will it away. She hates to be surprised. The itch is thoroughly maddening, though, and she thinks she probably sounds sharp when she invites her guests to begin eating. She accompanies her invitation with extravagant hand gestures, all so she can let one little finger slip under the patch, just for a heartbeat, to rub the itch.

With that, she only makes the itching worse. And then the eye's omen comes true. The stranger staggers into Thyrla's carefully arranged courtyard and well-planned life—a life in which for decades nothing has changed, not even the lines on her face—and suddenly she loses her people. Loses her white roses, too, though even she can't say what that means as yet.

Roses. Nothing more than a garden flower, growing from a vine so old and gnarled that its roots reach through the castle rock and tickle the dragon sleeping inside. According to the island people.

Superstitious village folk and farmers—Thyrla has counted on their stupidity during the many decades of her reign. She has always been the Baroness, as long as any of them can remember, and her power has grown with each annual feast. Soon, she reckons, she will have enough of both power and treasure to leave these Thirty-Seven Dark Islands and set sail for the world, where she will live on her ship like a queen.

While Thyrla looks into her future, the dragon turns over on its bed of gold and jewels; it heaves a sigh of dream-

inducing breath. The sap that springs through the roses is red now, red as blood. The people gathered for Their Lady's feast day have seen it, and seen who started it, and are completely enchanted with her.

Thyrla has no choice but to part the crowd and haul the stranger—a girl, a mere young female—to her feet. Her hand feels a spark where it holds the girl's arm.

“Who are you and what is your business in my castle?” It's easiest to be direct; she might catch the intruder off guard.

The girl makes a sort of purring, hissing sound in her throat, then drops her gaze to the scratches and stabs on her hands. She's a pale, muddy slip of a long-legged creature in a blue dress crackling with salt; green-blond hair tangles far down her back. Beautiful, as young girls always are (but not as beautiful as Thyrla—no one has ever been that). A beauty that might fade—yes, like a flower's—unless something else augments it. Talent. Power. Luck.

Always back to flowers. Thyrla can't imagine how this girl managed the trick. Her skin is as white as the petals used to be; her lips are as shockingly red as the roses are now. And her cheeks are flushed with . . . pride? Yes, she's proud of herself—here in the castle where no one should be prideful but Thyrla.

She dares to ask the Baroness, “Who are *you*?”

• Chapter 7 •

 *The waterskin singing.* 

“Have you heard?”

“Is she there?”

“What *can* you hear?”

All Sanna’s cousins and all of her aunts, all the boys and men, too, gather on the green-slimed rocks around Sjældent as if the old fright has a special way of knowing. Which, of course, she does—but Sanna is *her* project, and these girls are the ones who usually shun the two of them, make up silly rhymes about what Sanna and Sjældent “really” do while Sjældent teaches her magic.

Especially Addra, that haughty beauty with hair like the sunset and scales to match. Not a good voice, but she’s fond of telling others that looks are a talent, too, and it’s true—the others fawn on her for no reason other than the flash of her coloring and the chiseling of her cheekbones, and she has no mother to keep her in check. The others let her sling

herself languidly in the bottom of the O of Ringstone, that formation that rises midway between the bay town and the castle rock and has made a favorite spot for basking while the *flok* is here.

“Don’t be a tease, old hagfish!” Addra calls down from her perch now, and the girls (*and* the boys) giggle at her daring. “Tell us everything you know!”

Addra is combing her hair now with an ivory comb dug out of a shipwreck. For a young girl, there is no pleasure greater than the feel of those tiny teeth scraping her scalp while her hair dries in the sun.

Or almost none greater. Addra feels the joy of admiring attention. Maybe tonight she and another girl will twine their tails together and sleep floating as one on the seaskin.

Now, Sjøldent scratches at her own head with nails thick and cracked with time. Sanna used to dig out the barnacles and crabs there, and Sjøldent feels the girl’s absence very keenly.

“Tell us! Tell us! Tell us!” Addra starts the chant, and the others join in.

Sjøldent has had enough of them. “Yer lot are the ones with good hearing,” she says, bouncing her words off the water as if she doesn’t care. But if she weren’t so eager for news of the land, which she hasn’t detected yet, she’d let herself sink down to a cozy crag on the seafloor.

She adds, “Ye should tell *me* what’s what, for ye can ask me three times and the answer’ll still be none of yer knowing.”

(“Old biddy,” Addra whispers to the girls who adore her — that silly young Frill and lush, sighing La; even Pippa the Strong, who usually puts up with no nonsense. “What an old, shrieking gull.”)

“*That* I can hear,” Sjældent calls out.

“I meant you to!” Addra preens herself, getting excited giggles from the others.

“If ye be so daring, why not swim to the land yerself and find out?” Sjældent taunts her.

Which of course is impossible.

Addra ignores Sjældent elaborately and lets cloud-haired Frill climb up and start combing the hair down her back, over the small hole in her neck that expels old air while she inhales new. All the girls behave as if Addra’s hair is of utmost importance.

But few are actually thinking of Addra. Everyone from elders to infants is waiting to hear how Sanna is managing her quest. Sjældent, for one, has laid all her hopes on the girl’s fragile shoulders. She’d scoff at anyone who said that she, one of the greatest witches of her time or any other, loves Sanna — anyone like Bjarl, the girl’s father, who swims up with a gift of the pale pink jellies that she does love — but the girl is more important than the old witch would ever admit.

“Any ideas?” Bjarl asks, as if in exchange for the gift. “Any visions?”

“I’m not a land-witch,” Sjældent snaps. “I can’t see

everything there.” She stuffs an entire jelly into her mouth for a quivering, stinging bite.

Bjarl watches her enjoy her treat. He sighs. “Well, when you do know something . . .”

Sjældent twirls another jelly around a knobby forefinger and eyes him, squinting against the sun. “Wish in one hand,” she says, “and piss in the other, and guess where ye’ll go swimming first.”

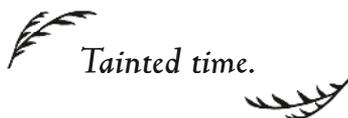
After that insult, everyone pretends to be very taken with the sight of a half-dozen dolphins circling the rocks and feeding on fish the girls throw them. The dolphins’ happy squeaks and clicks shiver through the *flok*’s seavish bones and spread pleasure. There’s some speculation as to whether the dolphins will jump through the O, as La swears she saw them do once, and if so whether they’ll knock Addra out of it.

But everyone knows what they’re really thinking about.

Sanna. And how she is faring in that strange, rocky land from which the smoky smells of roasted meat are wafting even to the lips of the O.

The clan’s elders — aunts and warriors and providers — curl into themselves with worry.

• Chapter 8 •



Tainted time.

Who are you? Who is she? Someone who asks questions rather than answering them, that's for certain.

Thyrla's fingers clutch the arm hard, and the spark turns to a jolting sensation. *Magic.* "Tell me your name," she orders.

"My—my name is Sanna," the stranger whispers. She's made that hissing, trilling noise again, but this time it is more distinct, as if it might actually be a name or part of one.

Her voice is all but inaudible, yet the people take up the sound, and it echoes around the courtyard: *Sanna Sanna Sanna Sanna . . .* It seems to make the roses contract, then pulse outward with new petals, like so many beating hearts.

Thyrla cuts in: "I am Baroness Thyrla of the Thirty-Seven Dark Islands," she says, as curt as she is grand. "You are intruding on our holy feast. Come with me."

The first thing to do is to get this Sanna person away from the town's eyes.

Thyrla gestures with her free hand, and the castle guards clear a path, though the townspeople cry out in dismay as they see the Baroness and the girl—and Peder, who follows like a brightly clad shadow of his mother, clutching a barely tasted cupful of mead—heading toward an archway that leads from the yard to the castle keep.

The guardsmen may feel every bit as dismayed as the rest to see Sanna go, but they hold the crowd inside the courtyard. And after all there is still food, somewhat crumbled and mixed together, nibbled by animals and stepped on by feet, but still in all likelihood delicious.

The people settle down to enjoy their feast. They bask in the deep red smell of roses, under the pink-cheeked, cockeyed gaze of their beloved Lady of the Sea.

Thyrla propels Sanna to her most private chamber, which she rarely opens to anyone. She needs it now because for her it is a place of strength. They go up several stairs (on which Sanna stumbles as if she's never encountered their like—*Holy oxtails, the girl is clumsy*), through a series of storerooms and sleeping rooms to a place where the walls narrow and one window looks over the courtyard and out to the sea, the other toward the town. Here is a heavy door that's as much strap iron as it is wood, and there are no fewer than seven locks running from floor to ceiling.

“Open it,” Thyrla orders Peder. Her hand is still a vise

on the stranger's arm, pain pulsing through from the touch of her. *Magic.*

He sets his cup (now empty) on the floor and unhooks the big iron ring from Thyrla's belt, then tries one key after another till he finds the right fit. He does this with a great show of importance, as if he's already lord of the castle (which he won't be until and unless Thyrla has lived a long, long time beyond this day). And he acts dramatically casual, as if he wants Sanna to think that he's simply opening a door he uses all the time, though in fact his mother rarely lets him visit her here.

As he works the locks, Peder is conscious of the mysterious girl's eyes upon him. She is bound to be impressed (he thinks) by meeting such a boy as he is, around her age and very good-looking, with his bright gold hair and silver eyes and a suit of clothes and jewels to match. Even if she's of high rank wherever she's from, even given her trick with the roses, she must be in awe of what she's found here.

"I'm her son," he introduces himself, feeling very important as he turns the fourth key. "Call me Baron Peder."

"Just Peder," Thyrla says sharply, and although he's not surprised she's putting him in his place, he does think it would be nice if she'd let him keep up appearances around a girl.

As he inserts the fifth key, Peder thinks over the name *Sanna* and starts fitting it into one of the songs he sings to the village girls. He might add new verses especially for her: *Sanna, wanna, sbanna* (Will it be clear he means "shall

not”? Is “shall not” appropriate for a wooing song?), *canna* (Again, “cannot”), *manna* (from heaven) . . . Imagine, a girl who performs miracles! He will have to be his most creative to compose the right song for her. But in the end, he is almost entirely sure, she will topple into love like any other girl . . .

“Oh, hurry it up, boy,” Thyrla says impatiently, as if Peder is one of her servants instead of her son. He applies himself to key the sixth and tries not to think, because when his mother is in such a mood, she can actually hear his thoughts.

With seven, he has the door open, and Thyrla pulls Sanna inside.

“Lock us in,” she orders.

She doesn’t say whether Peder should enter the room or stay outside, so he steps boldly in and does up the mechanisms, then sits on his mother’s green-draped bed, feet dangling. He wants to see what happens.

It’s as if he’s on a raft at sea, he thinks, as the mattresses cup his bum and the coverlets and bed curtains billow out, then in with his settling. The walls and even the ceiling are draped in green damask, too, so in a way it’s more like being *in* the sea, the green part that you see on top when you’re in a boat.

And that thought ignites his fear of drowning. Thyrla has warned him many times about the dangers of boats, so he can count on the fingers of one hand how many times he’s been in one, though he would dearly love to see more of the

world than these thirty-seven islands. Thyrla occasionally speaks of taking a journey . . .

Somewhere Peder hears a kind of knocking, as of small objects afloat; the draperies all around the room billow, though Thyrla has closed the shutters. He shivers. To be honest (as he rarely bothers to be), Mother's room has always made him feel unsettled and small.

By contrast, now that she's here, Thyrla seems to grow larger. She fills the room, in fact; there's hardly space for him or the strange girl or the bed or table or chair and chest where Thyrla does the sums and subtractions that govern her business.

Ignoring Peder, Thyrla grasps the girl by the shoulders and turns her this way and that. The scent of roses intensifies, as if Sanna carried it in with her, as if it's oozing from her pores with her blood.

Thyrla asks of a sudden, so as to catch her prey off guard, "Why are you here?"

The girl says, "I came . . . for you? Or I think I did."

Why does Thyrla get the sense that this is not a complete answer? She detects an accent she's never heard before, not in decades of trade with ships from every country in the known world. The eye she keeps hidden under the patch, the eye that itches when it meets something unknown, plagues her fiercely now.

"For me?" she asks, inviting elaboration, but Sanna doesn't speak.

Thyrla's mind tumbles over itself. It's obvious by now

that the girl has magic. The change in the roses wasn't a fluke; nothing makes a tingle and burn in another witch's flesh like the flow of magic. But does Sanna know how to *use* this power, or is it simply moving through her? And how can Thyrla turn all this magic to her own advantage?

She lets Sanna's arm go. There's nowhere for the girl to scurry to anyway, unless she can sprout wings and fly from three flights up. Thyrla gnaws her lip, thinking, plotting, and tries to shake feeling back into her hand. If she felt Sanna's magic, how much of Thyrla's did Sanna detect?

It's the boy, Peder, who breaks the silence.

"What sort of name is *Sanna*?" he asks. "Do you come from *very* far away?"

Thyrla darts him a look that says to hold his tongue. He's a stupid boy whose name means *rock*, as out of rock he was born and as foolish as a rock he's remained. Which is her doing, but still.

Sanna doesn't answer. Thyrla thinks she's feeling around the room for magic, too, but Peder seems to think she didn't understand him.

"I mean, what *land* are you from?" he clarifies, oblivious to his mother's unspoken command. "Denmark? Sweden? Lithuania? Probably fell off a ship, didn't you?"

The timid idiot is afraid of boats—well, Thyrla made him fear them on purpose, so he never would leave her.

"I was in the sea a long time," Sanna says, almost as if she's confessing a secret.

Caution, Thyrla reminds herself. She'd be a fool to think

Sanna doesn't feel magic coming from her as well. She says nothing for now; silence can be powerful, too.

She touches Sanna's arm again, as if assessing a leg of veal. It is hard and muscled—the arm of a laborer rather than a lady. And yet the girl acts more like a lady than a maid, but not enough like either one to be sure.

Thyrla speaks: “Let's see how worse for wear you are.” Both hands numb now from magical sparks, she turns Sanna right, left, forward, back, all under the pretext of examining her wounds. She finds nothing special, other than the drops of blood that glitter as they harden.

And yet the itch in Thyrla's eye is all but unbearable. She wants to scratch and pluck the eye out—but won't, of course. The eye is warning her.

The girl may be special, may be not; it remains to be seen. She might not even know her own strength. She could be under an enchantment. There's no telling what the tides might wash ashore on these islands, or how it can be used.

Around the room, a gentle clatter, as of branches knocking together in winter. Thyrla ignores it.

She says on a note of finality, “My maid will bring some salve for your wounds. And you should have a bath.”

Thyrla takes a step back. The girl stands like a pillar of salt. In her once-beautiful blue dress, with her yellow hair almost long enough to sit on and streaked with light green that might even be algae; with her green eyes blinking more than other eyes blink, though the light in the cabinet

is dim and the draft almost nothing, thanks to well-fit shutters.

“But before we send you to the bath” — Thyrla changes her mind — “we must have a test. A proving.”

“To prove what?” Sanna asks.

Can the girl really be so innocent — so stupid?

Thyrla can't stand the itch any longer. She grabs the ring of keys from her son's limp fingers. She unlocks the chest by the courtyard window, lifts the heavy lid, and takes out a nacreous vial. Breaks the wax seal, then tips the contents over her index finger so a bubble of thick white liquid forms. At last she pulls off the silk patch with the embroidered wink, and with her back to both her son and the stranger, she rubs the unguent on her special eye. It stings, but she'll feel better soon.

She turns around, keeping that eye shut, though it leaks some of the unguent. If she opened the eye, it would pierce Sanna like a pin and hold her bleeding out answers, but there's more to gain by keeping its powers a secret. She slides the patch back down.

“Where do you get your magic?” Thyrla asks abruptly. “Are you a woman of the Church or a witch?”

“The . . . Church?” The girl acts coy, brushing at her hands, shedding those bright bubbles of dried blood. Coy and anxious, or so she seems to want Thyrla to see her. A heartbeat too late, she asks, “Magic?”

Thyrla recognizes a certain knowing behind the

innocence. She begins—almost—to read the stranger’s thoughts, and already her eye itches less.

“The roses didn’t change on their own,” she says, as if it’s an established fact. “Not in over a hundred years—not since far, far back in my family’s history, that is—have the flowers been any color but white. As far as I know, no other color is possible. *Roses are white.*”

Sanna flushes as red as one of the new blooms, and the air crackles as more magic streams off her. It’s as good as a confession.

From the ceiling comes the subtle clatter again, as if the castle itself applauds Thyrla’s reasoning.

The Baroness decides to attack. “Do you presume to be both godly and witchly?” she asks. She blinks both eyes fast, trying to reach through the girl’s skull and see everything there, though the special eye sees nothing but the darkness of the patch. “Do you make both miracles and dark spells—or rather, do you try? It’s never been done. Just ask Father Abel at the village church. He’ll dunk you as soon as look at you, if there’s even a hint of witchcraft about. Not that dunking would work in your case; you look to have been thoroughly soaked and none the worse for it.”

The ceiling knocks once more, louder this time. *Shh, Uncle*, Thyrla thinks with the full force of her personality.

The ceiling quiets down.

Peder sits tense on the edge of the bed, hanging on the girl’s next words. He looks to Thyrla like a mooncalf, besotted by something new.

“I already told you I was in the sea a long time,” Sanna says.

Thyrla tries another line, hoping to pull this fish in. “Very well. That’s answered. But what else can you do? Are you a flower-witch only, or do you know other tricks?”

“Wh-what do you want me to say?” the girl stammers. “What do you need?” Her hands are bleeding again, staining her dress with kisses of blood. She looks like someone who has not planned ahead. She seems *out of her element*, so to speak.

When it comes to witches, as Thyrla knows well, looks are almost always deceiving. It will take a well-devised test to show just what kind of witch she’s dealing with.

She decides to be blunt.

“I want you to do a spell,” she says lightly, then laughs. Lesser people are always more frightened when threats come with laughter. “*Your* magic, your best magic.”

The stranger hesitates. She looks from Thyrla to Peder, the wastrel boy lounging on his mother’s bed. Thyrla expects her to lie and say she has no magic, can’t do a single trick; the red-rose miracle was an accident. But that is not what she says.

She says, “I’ll do magic, on purpose, if you do some first.” A half breath, and then she adds, “Please.”

• Chapter 9 •



It has all gone so wrong, so fast!

Maybe I can forgive myself for being careless with the magic that lingered in my blood (I had no way of knowing about that, and I'll guard against it in future), but how did I let myself be caught—*caught*, as we say in the sea, meaning the worst possible fate—by this woman? I, who have eluded sharks and squid and fishermen's nets since the day I was born, who have sung sailors to their death lest they violate me or a girl of my people: I failed to plan for a danger. A beautiful danger, for the woman and her son are very beautiful; and in the ocean, we learn early that the prettiest and most tempting creatures carry the most lethal poison.

This Baroness Thyrla, as she calls herself, is clearly—

“What kind of witch are you?” I ask her. I'm blunt.
“What kind of magic do *you* have?”

As soon as I say the word—*magic*—there comes a hissing sound, a howl, and a series of knocks, though Thyrla doesn't move so much as an eyelash. Then a silence as heavy as stone.

Silver and gold, shining in the half dark, Thyrla glares at me. From all the noises, including the not-noise of her silence, I conclude that she is a witch of the air, as I'm one of water. Which is why she's taken me somewhere so high and windy that the traces of my own element have evaporated.

The boy, Peder, is also staring, though the weight of his gaze feels quite different. Could he be a witch, too, perhaps of a different sort?

Sjældent and Father and all of the aunties told me that in this place, men are superior to women, and women must do as men say, even boys. I wonder if they are mistaken, or if the Baroness is simply an exception. She with her castle and her feast and her rose vine, ordering this boy about—she's no more docile than Sjældent or Addra.

But then, too, there's the strange way Peder looks at me: as if he owns me, the way someone might own a necklace or ring. I think I feel him already deep in my bones, owning me . . . and smiling.

"Careful, Mother," he says in a slow, drawling voice. "Our visitor could be planning a trick."

Thyrla doesn't look away from me. She doesn't even blink.

I don't think Peder means what he says, or else he's decided never to appear sincere for some reason. When I

look at him, he winks at me as if we're sharing a joke—or as if he's imitating the silken eye his mother is wearing over her real one.

“Like that trick with the roses,” he adds. “It could be no more than any sailor would pick up in a port to the east.”

I wouldn't have known a rose to nod at, if I hadn't fallen into them. Now I can't get their scent out of my nose; it's a bright-dark smell of air and sap, as far from salt depths as can be. Completely unexpected.

A test of magic wasn't in my plans, either—and now I've turned it into a *contest*, in which Thyrla and I will battle each other. This is surely not what Sjældent intended when she said I'd find a woman on these shores to help me. No one could possibly know of this Baroness and still expect help, let alone help finding a mother. It's hard enough to believe she's a mother herself, the way she orders Peder around so harshly.

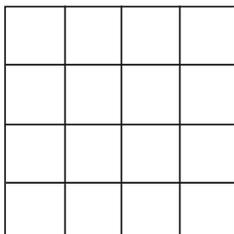
Except now. Now she's guarding her silence and letting him speak.

“Mother,” he says, “I think you should go first. Sanna wants to find your weakness.”

“Then I'll have to show her my strength.” The Baroness, finally speaking, is a little less frightening. Just a little. Her tongue is very sharp, and when she talks I feel that tingle of magic, even without a touch.

She says, “I have just the thing.” She goes to the table, picks up a silver jar, and spills sand over the surface. She does this till the table is covered, and then she smooths

the sand out; and when *that* is done, she begins to make marks in it. Her finger draws a series of lines that form sixteen squares:



Peder laughs—that sound of landish bells borne through the air—and says, “Oh, Mother.”

He says *Mother*, but I get the impression he’s speaking to me. Showing off: He knows something that I do not; he knows this magic, too.

“Name a number,” Thyrla says to me. “Any number. I will find it for you among others I write in this sand, beginning with one through twelve and conjuring the rest.”

My *flok* hasn’t much use for written numbers—there is no point in writing on water. But we know about them, as they are often found on things we keep because they’re pretty. And of course, we know how to count; we count fish, waves, ships, each other.

“Thirty-seven,” I say.

She seems pleased; her eye is bright. “Ah. For the Thirty-Seven Dark Isles. A very nice gesture from a guest. Well, remember your number, and my son will be our witness.”

Thyrla bends to the tablet and, pushing her right sleeve

up at the elbow, begins moving the sand around with her smallest finger, making numbers within the squares.

	1		
			2
5		3	
4		6	

It doesn't look like magic to me so far, but I watch. I know the looks of numbers up to a dozen or so; anything beyond that might be pure puzzle.

Thyrla pushes the sand around some more, dotting the squares with more numbers.

	1	12	7
11	8		2
5	10	3	
4		6	9

I think I hear laughter, or something more like teeth rattling against each other. I realize I'm frowning, and I tell my brow to unwrinkle. I wish my landish clothes didn't scratch so much. And that I could guess what Thyrla is doing before she finishes.

"It's very simple," says the Baroness. "These are all the numbers to a dozen, yes? And now we'll find your thirty-seven in every direction."

She fills the other squares with numbers bigger than I'm

used to seeing. I think, *Sjældent never told me about number-witches*. I know only of elemental witches: sea, land, air, fire, time.

My early self-assurance, whatever there was of it, has entirely vanished. But that's no magic feat.

"And there we are!" Thyrla steps aside to let me see even better.

The figure is now complete, with a number for each square in a seemingly haphazard pattern:

17	1	12	7
11	8	16	2
5	10	3	19
4	18	6	9

No number 37, though. I gaze down and let my face scowl if it wants to.

The Baroness knows I'm nonplussed. "Now try this," she says, with an air of command more than invitation: "Add them in any direction, up, down, or sideways, and you'll have thirty-seven each way."

"Diagonally, too," says Peder. He sounds excited. "Start in any corner and work toward its opposite, and you'll have . . ."

"Thirty-seven," they say together.

They are very pleased with themselves, mother and son. I check their sums and see that they are right; the number adds up in each place they say it will.

As I work the arithmetic, the rattling behind the

tapestries builds, along with the scent of roses still blooming in the courtyard. The smells of the guests, too, and the sound of their jaws grinding away at the food we left behind. I even think I hear my clan, bobbing around the rocks just beyond the bay and talking about me. My senses are overwhelmed.

But . . .

“I don’t think that’s magic,” I say, after careful consideration and a little more addition of my own. “If the first twelve numbers stay in their places, I can use the four spots that are left to create many different numbers. Forty or sixty or eighty-nine. And so can you, and so can anyone who knows arithmetic. And I believe I can make more if I move the digits around.”

If I have disappointed them by not being as green a girl as they expected, they don’t show it. Their smiles grow wider, and the ceiling sounds like a volcano about to bubble over.

“So you’ve guessed it’s a common dodge,” Thyrla says to me. “Aren’t you a clever one?”

She doesn’t seem to mean it, but she does seem to expect an answer. I think a silence will be more provocative.

And I’m right. “Well,” she says, “we’ve proven we both know some tricks—but as to *magic* . . . What are you really able to do, my dear? Would you like to walk on water, or shall I order some loaves and fishes brought up for you to multiply?”

I'm confused. My mind is tired of clevering, and my body is sore with spells. What could these two expect of me now?

"I'm still waiting for *your* magic," I say.

"And perhaps this as well?" Between her thumb and forefinger, she holds a golden ring with a green stone. My father once gave that to me, saying the stone was the color of my eyes, and I wore it ashore for good luck. I didn't feel her taking it from me.

I make a little lurch to grab it back.

"Now you have it—and now you don't," she says smugly. She slips the ring onto her own little finger and gazes at it with a show of admiration, though when compared to the other stones on her hands, my little emerald is nothing.

"Sleight of hand," I say. "You probably took it when we were climbing those"—I hesitate; for a moment I can't remember the word, and I want to say *snail*—"stairs to get here."

"Hmm." She sniffs at me. She looks very beautiful and very vexed. Then her sniff leads to a cough, and a puff of smoke from each nostril.

Her cough deepens, her body hunches over, and I worry she's having a fit. Maybe I should leap over there and thump her on the back; maybe she needs some healing magic, and if I heal her she'll be kind . . .

Her white skin is going blue; her gray eye is turning

black. I wonder why her own son continues to sit on her bed and doesn't get up to help. He could be just another part of the draperies for all he's doing.

Then Thyrla's lips stretch wide, and out of her mouth pops a lizard.

It lands with a dry skid on the table, blurring the numbers in the sand. Smooth and brown, with slotted yellow eyes rolling this way and that. Its legs are stiff, but its heart beats visibly in its throat.

Thyrla picks it up in a curl of her fingers and holds it toward me, coated with sand, to admire.

"See what a sweet little thing this is," she says raspily, through what must be a very sore throat. "My baby"—with a flick of the gaze to Peder, who laughs uncomfortably while the whole room seems to rattle. "There's magic for you, Sanna! I didn't have *him* inside me a moment ago."

I watch while a tiny tongue of flame blows from each of the lizard's nostrils and then is gone. The lizard's gone, too, as his legs find their strength and he leaps toward a wall.

Peder slaps his hands together. The sound echoes through the room with more of that dizzying clatter. I look around, more confused than ever, wondering where the lizard could have gone. And where he came from, really. I don't have the magic to make a creature out of nothing; I don't think even Sjældent can do that.

"Don't worry a bit," Thyrla says, with one of her easy smiles. "There are a thousand of his kind around the

place; he'll find them. Now, Sister Sanna, it's time for you to show me —"

She's cut off when the green cloth behind her catches fire. The little lizard is at the edge of it, coughing flames to make it burn more quickly.

"Oh, bother." Obviously irritated, Thyrla removes her shoe and uses it to smash the lizard to pulp. She moves so fast, it would be easy to miss, except for the mess on the floor.

"Never mind him," she says again, beating the green drape against the wall to extinguish the flame. "Really, this time. A miscalculation on my part. Now, Sanna, you must demonstrate your kind of magic. It's only polite."

Having seen what she does to lizards, I am rightfully afraid of displeasing. And I have learned one important fact: Thyrla can conjure, but she can't always control her conjurings. And the element of fire can hide within her breathy tricks.

She must be a powerful witch, indeed, to command two of the elements (though one rather poorly).

Then my ears fill with that odd knocking sound, and I am overwhelmed enough to swoon.

• Chapter 10 •



The land shakes; the sea remains.



Addra's head swivels, flashing red fire that confuses the dolphins. She beats her coppery tail against Ringstone's bottom.

"Did you hear that?" she calls down to the *flok*.

"You have the best vantage point," says Pippa the Strong, accusingly, for she thinks Addra's selfish.

But Pippa has heard, too, or at least felt the tremble in her bones that is even better than hearing and helps make her a great huntress.

"The islands are shaking," La guesses, round-eyed as a baby seal. "Something has happened."

"I smell smoke," says Ruut, a light-bearded young man; but since he is only a man, they ignore him.

The elders exchange looks that express more than words. Some of them are Sanna's relations by blood or bond—Gurria One Arm, Shusha the Logical, Mar of the

Long Reach—and all of them predict that this venture onto land will have profound consequences for the *flok*, though they are not sure what those consequences will be.

“A *something that happens* can be good,” says cloudy-haired Frill. No one pays much attention to her, either.

“Is Sanna safe?” asks her father, Bjarl. “Can anyone tell?”

The entire gathering listens hard. The dolphins chitter to each other and swoop off to sea, without jumping through Ringstone’s O. Frill, suddenly hopeless, bursts into tears, though as yet no one knows whether tears are warranted.

At the sound of weeping, Sjøldent shudders as if someone has poked her. She comes out of her doze and coughs to clear her throat; then an assortment of wee crabs and worms, which had been settling in comfortably among the gaps in her teeth, goes flying into the waves.

“No telling, no seeing,” she says, running her tongue around to feel for more. “Just ye hope our girl keeps some sense about her, and a grip on her magic.”

“She’ll sing us the story tonight,” says Gurria.

“If she’s alive,” Sjøldent agrees.

Bjarl ducks beneath the waves, lest he slap the old witch for leading Sanna into these islands. And for casting the spell that made all of them forget Sanna’s mother, his love, in the first place.

• Chapter 11 •



I do not swoon, because I must not; I know in my bones that I have to stay wary around Thyrla, even if she is the person Sjældent said would help me. I see now that if I'm going to get anything from her—if I'm even going to ask—I have to know when to hold my tongue. I certainly won't bring up my mother; I won't even think her name (my most treasured secret, or one of them) in the presence of this Baroness.

“Your turn, Sanna,” she says again, not minding the lizard's pink and gently smoking carcass behind her. “Show me your own kind of magic. Shall I order up those loaves and fishes? Or perhaps an old man you can raise from the dead?”

I think hard. I can't do anything she's mentioned so far, and I suspect she knows it; she's aiming to embarrass me. Perhaps she guesses my true nature and that's why she keeps offering fishes.

What am I sure I can accomplish to protect myself and keep my place here? I must appear strong but not too strong; I am certain that anyone either too weak or too strong will be crushed, like the lizard, with the wrath of the Baroness.

My eyes fall upon the table, where the sand still bears traces of numbers and of the poor lizard's feet.

Sand.

I know what to do.

I breathe in very gently, very slowly. My eyes flutter; my blood tingles. The sand begins to move.

For as long as I am able to inhale with my shrunken landish lungs, the sand lifts itself upward. The last scratches of numbers and lines are finally erased as the sand becomes first a mist, then a cloud, then a column.

I hold my breath, and the sand continues to move in place. Swirling around the edges and falling into itself, renewing at the bottom and spiraling up again.

A sand-twist is one of the simplest spells; it can be performed on land or in the sea, probably in the midst of a fire. Almost any seavish person, witch or not, can learn to make one, but I believe it's still a marvel to the landish. The twist shimmers in the space between the three of us, in the midst of a pure, surprised silence.

After the initial shock, Thyrla's eye turns from the sand to me to the sand again. Peder's mouth gapes open quite foolishly. I suppose he has none of his mother's gifts.

After a time, my lungs begin to ache, and so does my blood. I can't hold the magic much longer. So I make my

lips into a ring and puff out my cheeks, and I blow the sand toward the window, where it knocks open the boards that have kept the light out. It sparkles a moment just beyond the wall and then falls like a whisper over the thick-scented roses and the insects humming among them.

“Holy hops and barley,” Peder says, and looks at me with the round eyes of admiration. “You really can do something!”

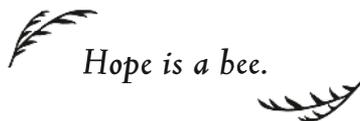
Thyrla says, brisk and brittle, as if she has to hide some feeling, “Very good, then. Very well.”

“Very well what?” I seem to have missed something.

What she says next is the biggest shock of the day:

“You and my son can marry.”

• Chapter 12 •



Hope is a bee.

In the courtyard, the broken feast (as it will come to be called) has been the finest in memory. It is less rushed, less *desperate*, than these meals usually are. Broken food actually tastes better than the elaborate concoctions first served, and with the Baroness busy, the people have all the time in the world to enjoy themselves.

“Flavors taste better blended,” pronounces Harald the butcher, who knows more than anyone else about food.

“Hunger’s the best sauce,” adds his wife, Maria, who is never wrong.

“Nothing tastes as good as hope,” says one of many Eriks who go to sea to fish. He is the closest to truth of them all.

The farmers, the fishers, the craftsmen of Dark Moon Harbor—everyone who saw the roses change—is now aware that magic wells up through the unlikeliest of channels. This feast is not just from the Baroness. It is a sign of

the promise that the Lord and His representatives on earth offer to even the humblest soul who is capable of trust.

For once, Father Abel leaves the Bible and the dais to sit down among the common people, on benches they've righted and at tables remade. He sits beside Old Olla, Thyrla's beekeeper, and shares her plates of pewter and wood, a trencher of bread, a cup of wine.

Of the tables' abundance, the people eat quietly. Simply, like the butterflies and bees that pleasure themselves in the heady red bowls of the blooms.

All this, too, the people know without discussing. They are sure of it in their souls. Only the tiniest children feel a need to speak, and they just make sounds such as "*Fa*" and "*Foo*," whatever those syllables mean.

The mothers of the children smile and give them tasty morsels usually reserved for the fathers. The fathers smile, too, and think of the happy futures their offspring will have. The boys will harvest unheard-of numbers of fish; they'll pull astonishing crops from the ground. The girls will marry these prosperous young men and will not die from child-birth or overwork but will raise good families and share in what makes the Dark Islands famous in other lands.

Whatever that is . . .

These children will see those other lands, too. Other castles, some with golden roofs. Barns as big as islands. Churches so grand that they glow with colored glass as with jewels, with figures carved and painted both inside and out to tell happy stories from the Bible and the lives of the

saints, rather than cautionary tales. Everything the people have heard about from sailors who stop in the bay for provisions: All this, the children will see for themselves.

The people plan these wonders without pride. Hope is not prideful; hope is trust that all of creation will sort itself out as it should. Hope is (Father Abel thinks it, helping Olla's spotted fingers pull a fish pie apart) a bee—a bee that creates even more goodness than it finds. The future is dripping with liquid-gold sweetness.

Above the feasters' heads, and as if approving of the grand plans and the people themselves, Our Lady of the Sea smiles with her rough pink lips and off-kilter eyes. Is it only in the imagination that her white skin and yellow robe shine brighter now than before? Is it just a fancy that has her cheeks even pinker than when the stranger fell softly into the blossoms?

No, none of this is imagined. It cannot be.

Our Lady's eyes see everything at once. They follow each man, woman, and child in the courtyard, and she beams at seeing how they offer one another bits of pie, slices of beef, morsels of honey-cured fruit.

The scent of red roses soaks the air like a sponge, and Our Lady's wooden arms seem to spread wider, and wider still, welcoming every glad soul into her embrace.

Then, all at once, the bees rise up from the flowers and swarm.

• Chapter 13 •



At that word, *marry*, the sand comes flying back in. Or rather, the sand that flew out returns in the form of an insect swarm, thin wings beating furiously and a deafening buzz sucking the air from the room.

They attack the Baroness and her son, stinging, but for the moment they leave me alone. I don't know why this is; I didn't conjure them, and I doubt Sjældent is close enough to have done it.

I'm alarmed to see these two, at first so superior and sneering at me, now running back and forth and beating themselves with their own arms and hands, trying to kill the creatures that still smell of the flowers. Such tiny, loud things—I think their hum is a sort of song like the whales', full of stories and information, only none of us can understand.

The Baroness shrieks, and it's a horrible sound, like a dolphin being devoured by a shark. Small things cause much pain.

Honestly, what did Sjældent have in mind when she sent me here? Had she any idea at all what I'd find? Will Thyrla really help in my quest, or has this been a mistake?

"Marry?" I say, but they're too busy to answer me. "You want me to marry *whom?*"

• Chapter 14 •



*All of you men who ride wooden boats
And cut paths in the sea with cruel purpose:
You're danger, says Mother; you're danger, says Auntie —
You'll tear us apart if you catch us.
So . . . let us sing you away into sleep.
Let us sing you away into Down-Below-Deep.*

—The Mermaids