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IN THE
VEINS
OF THE
DROWNING

BOOK ONE OF THE SIREN MAGE

KALIE CASSIDY





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PART I

THE MOUNTAIN



The air had grown heavy with the scent of the sea. I could nearly taste it, curling through the warm throne room like a tentacle.

It filled me with an upending sort of dread.

Guests poured in from the entry hall, their tittering and chatter pinging off the marble, but I clung to the outer edges, closer to the bone-white walls. I'd done so well keeping away. I'd spent my life ignoring the lure of the sea, only for it to slink past Fort Linum's defenses on the silks and fine wools of the long-traveled guests like an insidious stowaway.

"Imogen?" Agatha came to my side, studying me with sharp, worried eyes. She looked much the same as she had when she had been my teenage governess and I had been a girl of six. Impossibly youthful, warm brown skin, curls as shiny and dark as the ink in a pot. Soft lines did not even crease the high edges of her cheekbones, but I supposed one must smile often to earn them. "What's wrong? You're pale."

"It's the dress." I set a hand to my sternum, where a deep fluttering had started. "It's too damn tight. Will you loosen the laces?"

Her look turned raw with frustration. "They're not long enough. I don't understand why you agreed to wear this awful thing." She

adjusted the ruffe at my shoulder, shaking her head. “How you agreed to marry a man whose job it is to hunt and kill —”

“Agatha, please.” I kept my attention on the room — the food-laden tables, the flickering candles, the cups filled with wine. “Not now.”

“Then when? The wedding is in two days.”

“I’m aware.” When I met her gaze, there was a desperation in it that twisted my insides. “You know that I wasn’t given a choice.”

Tense, she scanned the throne room, then leaned in close. “We could leave,” she whispered. “We should have left years ago. There might be a way —”

I grabbed her by the hand and dragged her around the head table, into a tight, shadowed alcove. “Agatha, enough.” Her brown eyes were wide and searching, as faceted as polished wood. “Please. I beg you to stop condemning me for trying to make the best of this situation. I’ve done well keeping myself safe here, haven’t I? I will continue to. I must.”

Disappointment stooped her shoulders, but her voice filled with a cutting edge. “If this marriage, and the misery it will bring you, doesn’t make you see that you do not belong here . . . I have little hope that anything will.”

I wanted to tip back my chin so I might appear sure. So that she might think me as brave and hardy as she was. But I was no such thing. “That’s unfair of you.” I sounded ground down and soft. “Where would I go?”

She threw up her hands, exasperated. “Well, I suppose we’ll never know now, will we?”

An awful pit grew in my stomach. It was still early in the afternoon. The engagement feast wouldn’t be fully underway for a while yet. I searched the room for my fiancé, but he was nowhere to be seen. Nor was King Nemea. More gossiping revelers slowly crept through the towering throne room doors. More and more

salt air slithered in with them. My breaths turned rapid and shallow. "I'll be right back."

Agatha reached for my hand and held it tight. "I'm sorry. I just want you —"

I shook my head. "I know. I'm all right. I just need some air."

"I'm coming with you."

Even in the dim, I could see how Agatha's petite body had gone taut with vexation and the pit in my middle only widened. There were so many ways in which I was powerless, but it hurt me most to know that what I lacked caused Agatha so much pain.

"No." I gave her hand a squeeze. "Come up with an excuse if someone notices I'm gone. I won't be long."

I whisked away from her before she could protest further, through the tall oaken doors and the clog of visitors. I couldn't remember the last time Fort Linum had been so full, but I shouldered my way to the courtyard and up the winding narrow path that led to the fort's parapets. The air outside was cool and clear. Blessedly empty of brine.

The fluttering in my chest instantly ceased.

My too-wide skirt scraped the walls, snagging some of the beads, but I trudged ahead. My favorite spot in all of Fort Linum, the one with the grandest view of the sea, was at the end of the battlements, and up a steep run of stairs. I was gasping by the time I reached the secluded spot.

Tugging at my bodice, I traced the thin gray edge of the northern beach in the distance. On a map, the Isle of Seraf looked like a beastly jaw protruding from the waters of Leucosia. It was all jagged peaks and ravenous valleys, and upon its highest summit, King Nemea had built his fort. He'd forced it into existence, carving it from the rock, cramming it into the crooked teeth of the island like a stuck piece of gristle.

I tried to purge my anxieties with an exhale, only to have my eyes sting. It was inexplicable, how both terror and anticipation over my wedding filled me in equal measure. How I both feared what might come of it and hoped for the best. I struck the wall with my palm. “Bloody fucking Gods.”

“Has the party already started, then?”

The deep, smoky voice made me jump. I whirled toward the far end of the curved lookout to see a brooding figure — dark and tall — leaning against the fort wall. He wore a white shirt, tucked neatly into his trousers. His black boots were polished to an absurd shine. No doubt he was one of the many newly arrived guests who now swarmed the fort, thrilled by a rare invitation to gawk. To see what the Isle of Seraf and its hateful, reclusive king had become over the last many decades.

I adjusted my skirt and glowered. “The gentlemanly thing to do would have been to announce yourself when I arrived.”

He gave a conceding nod. Brow pinched, his gaze fell over the abundance of red silk ruffles at my low neckline, the heavy glass beading in the precise color of blood — the king’s color — stitched onto my bodice. The dress was gaudy and unfashionable, and as he stared at it a sardonic half smile curled his mouth. “Unbelievably, I didn’t notice you right away.”

My mood was tenuous, and I wanted to see the smug tilt of his lips fall. I gave a scoff. “How dare you laugh at me, sir.”

His eyes rounded with indignation. “I was not —”

“Oh please,” I said. “I had wished to be alone, but every inch of this place is crawling with ill-mannered people — this parapet included.”

His mouth opened, then shut. For a long moment, he simply stared at me, stupefied. “Well...” He crossed closer, narrowed his eyes to a scowl. “Seeing as how we had both hoped to be alone,



perhaps we could be alone together. Though I see that you might not be in the mood to share.”

I held his stare. He reminded me of summer. Skin a golden brown, eyes the color of dark leaves. The wind tousled his inky hair so that it hung over his creased brow. He was regal, towering and straight, well-built and graceful, but it was the way he looked at me down the length of his ever-so-slightly crooked nose that made me certain he was of noble birth. I yearned to tell him *no* simply because he seemed unaccustomed to hearing it, but something in me clamped down on the impulse. “We can share,” I finally said, “but only if you promise not to laugh at this ludicrous dress again.”

A breath. Another. Then his scowl melted into a full smile that dimpled his left cheek. “A tall ask.”

My jaw unhinged in amused outrage.

“Forgive me.” He raised his hands in surrender, face serious once more. “I’m simply relieved to know you’re aware that it’s...noticeable.”

“Of course.” I gave my skirt a deprecating flounce. “I’m impossible to miss.”

He gave another dimpled smile as he rested his elbows on the crenellated wall and stared at the vista.

A long silence sat between us. “And why,” I asked, “are you seeking refuge from the party? Strange to travel all this way, only to hide.”

He flexed his jaw. “This fort... It’s not a pleasant place.” His low voice had turned somber, ill at ease. He forced a flat smile. “And the wine is terrible. And you?”

I eyed the strong lines of his profile. There was something inviting about him, something that made me want to tell him the truth. “I’m most certainly avoiding the wine,” I said, instead. “Expect to wake with a headache and a burning stomach if you drink too much.”

"You couldn't pay me."

We stood side by side, staring over the mountain peaks and old twisted cypresses, out to the glittering band of sea.

"Quite a view," he said, quietly.

"It is." It was endless and sweeping and made me feel immeasurably small. "I don't think that's why Nemea built this fort so high up, though."

He gave a disgruntled sound deep in his chest at my mention of King Nemea. Mood suddenly sullen, he turned and rested his back against the parapet wall.

"You don't like him, do you?" I asked. There were not many who did.

His sidelong glance was fleeting. "I've heard rumors this fort was built this high so that he could pitch people from the windows and be certain they would die."

I gave a dark laugh, then gasped in a shallow breath. Nemea was far more inventive in his cruelty than to simply throw subjects from fort windows. "That's quite the rumor. And do you believe it?"

The way his attention bore down on me made me still. He studied me, as if he were cataloging my every feature, as if he searched for something in them. Finally, in a voice that rolled through his chest like the storms over the valley, he said, "I think the only reason anyone would reside this high up — this far from the rest of the world — is because they either have something to fear or something to hide."

My breath snagged. I looked toward the sea again, blinking against the returned sting in my eyes, feeling stripped bare. "Oh."

"Have I upset you?"

"Not at all." I fisted my skirt and started toward the stairs. "Excuse me."



“Wait.” He took a tight step closer, a gentle hand raised up in offering. “May I be of assistance?”

The earnest crease in his brow made me want to spit. “Do I look like I need it?”

“You do,” he said, commandingly, wholly unfazed by my turn of emotion. “There are tears in your eyes.”

He looked at me again with that incisive stare, like I was made of water he could see straight through. I opened my mouth — to say what, I wasn’t sure — when he cut me off.

“The entryway and halls are full of guests eager for gossip. As we’ve established, you’re quite...” His gaze darted down the front of my body. “...conspicuous in that gown. It would be wise to take a moment before you descend.”

His fastidious caution stunned me. There was something about him that made me want to relent. Perhaps it was that I could sense no malice in him, no lack of patience. I could feel his steadiness, a rooted, immovable quality that made me want to linger. We stood, gazes locked, at the top of the stairs.

A strong gust boomed up the wall below us. It howled around the fort’s corners and ran through our hair. I took a step back. “Thank you for the conversation,” I said, curtly. “Enjoy gaping at Seraf’s horrors, my lord.” I started down the stairs. “They’re as endless as the cheap wine.”



When I returned to the throne room it was close to bursting. It brimmed with beating music, bodies, and more of that unfamiliar salt air.

Agatha stood at my side, arm looped with mine. She took a deep breath and gave a shiver. “I suppose it’s best you can’t breathe.”

I grunted at that, unamused. The conversation from the parapet played over in my mind, and that odd plucking feeling in my chest had returned. "I need some wine."

"It's worse than usual." She took a sip of her own half-empty glass and grimaced.

"Then I'll drink it quickly." I wound us through groups of whispering guests, toward where the drink table sat. I downed a quick glass, then tried to pull in a breath, which earned me her scowl.

"Nemea ordered the dress to be made that tight on purpose, you know." Her mood hadn't improved in the least.

I took another gulp. "Yes, I know." I'd already surmised that Nemea had wanted my gown to be as heavy and pinching as a fetter. Expensive and garish, so that visitors would see his ward, would look closely, and I would be tasked with hiding my pain. He wanted me to remember that even in marriage, I would still be his to control. "I hope you find someone to dance with," I said in a gentle voice, trying to change the subject. "I know how you love it. The music shouldn't be ruined by my circumstances."

"They're hard to ignore," she said. I watched the first of the dancers twist and spin, letting the vibrations of the drum and lute stifle that feeling in my chest. "And how was dinner with your adoring captain last night?" Agatha asked, the question dripping with sarcasm. "Was your husband-to-be what we'd expected?"

We'd expected him to be dull and harsh, but to my surprise, he'd been anything but. I'd been surprised by his wit. He'd shown manners and offered thoughtful conversation. He'd kissed me softly when he left, his fingers firm on my jaw. "It was nice. He was kind."

The look she gave me felt like a strike to the knees. "*Kind.*"

My throat clamped. "I... I meant that he — I simply meant that I didn't fear him."

A woman beside me gasped and pointed toward the throne

room's tall oaken doors. She had not been the first to do so. Plenty of young ladies had swooned, leaning into their friends or escorts, at the sight of the Siren wing hanging above them, stark against the pale wall. The large feathers were stretched wide; bolts through the bone held it to its wooden plaque. The dim, golden candlelight didn't pull out the riot of colors on the wing's black plumage — the slash of iridescent blue and green near its base, the purple near its fringed edge — but I could paint it from memory. My gaze dipped to the inscription in the marble below it.

THE MONSTER IS ALWAYS SLAIN.

That motto was the black-tipped root of King Nemea's cruelty and the reason all the other rulers of the archipelago loathed him. It was why all these people had sailed for days across treacherous seas to visit a poor, near-barren rock of an island. For decades, King Nemea had obliterated all goodwill that might have once been his with the heinous practice of hunting divine Sirens.

I moved us away from the group of young women, whose eyes had found me and drank me in with condescension. Nemea had done well at making me a spectacle. We tucked in near the dais, where King Nemea stood speaking with the queen of the united kingdoms of Della and Gos. He was tall and barrel-chested. Wild black hair streaked with gray contrasted his fairer skin. That narrow, usually dour face of his looked so strange with a smile upon it. He gestured proudly and patted his chest, and the deep red coat he wore, boasting ruby buttons down its front, looked too fine against his rough countenance.

"He's positively glowing," Agatha drawled, a hateful frown on her face as she stared at him.

"I can't understand how you can look at him with such open