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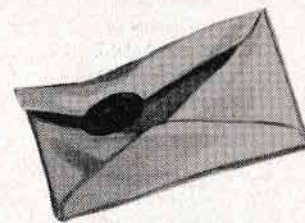
Sisters of Sword & Song

Dreams Lie Beneath

THE QUEEN'S RISING DUOLOGY

The Queen's Rising

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**DIVINE
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REBECCA ROSS



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Write me of hope and love, and hearts that endured.

—EMILY DICKINSON



Prologue



Cold fog had settled over the depot like a burial shroud, and Iris Winnow thought the weather couldn't have been better. She could hardly see the train through the gloam, but she could taste it in the evening air: metal and smoke and burning coal, all woven together with a trace of petrichor. The wooden platform was slick beneath her shoes, gleaming with rain puddles and piles of decaying leaves.

When Forest came to a stop at her side, she stopped as well, as if she were his mirror. The two of them were often mistaken for twins with their wide-set hazel eyes, wavy chestnut hair, and the freckles that spilled across their noses. But Forest was tall, Iris petite. He was five years her senior, and for the first time in her life, Iris wished that she were older than him.

"I won't be gone long," he said. "Only a few months, I think."

Her brother glanced at her in the fading light, waiting for her to respond. It was eventide, the moment between darkness and light, when the constellations began to dust the sky and the city lamps flickered to life in reply. Iris could feel the draw of it—Forest's concerned stare and the golden light that illuminated the low-hanging clouds—and yet her eyes wandered,

desperate for a distraction. A moment to blink away her tears before Forest could see them.

There was a soldier to her right. A young woman dressed in a perfectly starched uniform. Iris was struck by a wild thought. One that must have traveled across her face, because Forest cleared his throat.

"I should come with you," Iris said, meeting his gaze. "It's not too late. I can enlist—"

"No, Iris," Forest replied sharply. "You made me two promises, remember?"

Two promises, hardly a day old. Iris frowned. "How could I forget."

"Then speak them back to me."

She crossed her arms to ward off the autumn chill and the strange cadence in Forest's voice. There was a hint of desperation she hadn't heard in him until now, and gooseflesh rippled across her arms beneath her thin sweater.

"*Take care of Mum,*" she said, mimicking his baritone. It brought a smile to his face. "*Stay in school.*"

"I believe it was a bit more than a gruff '*Stay in school,*'" Forest said, nudging her foot with his boot. "You brilliant academic who has yet to miss a day of class in all her years. They give awards for that, you know."

"Fine." Iris relented, a blush nipping her cheeks. "You said, 'Promise me you'll enjoy your final year of school, and I'll be back in time to see you graduate.'"

"Yes," Forest said, but his smile began to wane.

He didn't know when he'd return. It was a promise he couldn't keep to her, although he continued to make it sound as if the war would end in a matter of months. A war that had only just begun.

What if I had been the one to hear the song? Iris thought, her heart so heavy it felt bruised against her ribs. *If I had encountered the goddess and not him . . . would he let me go like this?*

Her gaze dropped to Forest's chest. The place where his own heart was beating beneath his olive-green uniform. A bullet could pierce him in a split second. A bullet could keep him from ever returning home.

"Forest, I—"

She was interrupted by a shrill whistle that made her jump. It was the last call to board, and there was a sudden shuffle toward the train cars. Iris shivered again.

"Here," Forest said, setting down his leather satchel. "I want you to have this."

Iris watched as her brother opened the clasp and withdrew his tan-colored trench coat. He held it out to her, arching his brow when she merely stared at it.

"But you'll need it," she argued.

"They'll give me one," he replied. "Something war approved, I imagine. Go on, take it, Little Flower."

Iris swallowed, accepting his trench coat. She slipped her arms into it, belting the worn fabric tight across her waist. It was too big for her, but it was comforting. It felt like armor. She sighed.

"You know, this smells like the horologist's shop," she drawled.

Forest laughed. "And what, exactly, does a horologist's shop smell like?"

"Like dusty, half-wound clocks and expensive oil and those tiny metal instruments you use to fix all the broken pieces." But that was only partly true. The coat also held a remnant of the Revel Diner, where she and Forest would eat dinner at least twice a week while their mother waited tables. It smelled of the riverside park, of moss and damp stones and long walks, and Forest's sandalwood aftershave because, no matter how much he wanted one, he couldn't grow a beard.

"Then it should keep you good company," he said, slinging his satchel over his shoulder. "And you can have the wardrobe all to yourself now."

Iris knew he was trying to lighten the mood, but it only made her stomach ache to think about the small closet they shared in their flat. As if she would truly store his clothes somewhere else while he was gone.

"I'm sure I'll need the spare hangers, since—as you well know—I keep up with all the current fashion trends," Iris countered wryly, hoping Forest couldn't hear the sadness in her voice.

He only smiled.

This was it, then. The platform was nearly empty of soldiers, and the train

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was hissing through the gloom. A knot welled in Iris's throat; she bit the inside of her cheek as Forest embraced her. She closed her eyes, feeling the scratch of his linen uniform against her cheek, and she held the words she wanted to say in her mouth like water: *How can you love this goddess more than me? How can you leave me like this?*

Their mother had already spoken such sentiments, angry and upset with Forest for enlisting. Aster Winnow had refused to come to the depot to see him off, and Iris imagined she was at home, weeping as the denial wore away.

The train began to move, creeping along the tracks.

Forest slipped from Iris's arms.

"Write to me," she whispered.

"I promise."

He took a few steps backward, holding her gaze. There was no fear in his eyes. Only a dark, feverish determination. And then Forest turned, rushing to board the train.

Iris followed until he disappeared into the closest car. She lifted her hand and waved, even as tears blurred her vision, and she stood on the platform long after the train had vanished into the fog. Rainwater was seeping into her shoes. The lamps flickered overhead, buzzing like wasps. The crowd had dispersed, and Iris felt hollow—*alone*—as she began to walk home.

Her hands were cold, and she slipped them into the coat pockets. That was when she felt it—a crinkle of paper. Frowning, she assumed it was a candy wrapper that Forest had forgotten about until she pulled it out to study in the dim light.

It was a small piece of paper, folded crookedly, with a vein of typed words. Iris couldn't resist smiling, even as her heart ached. She read:

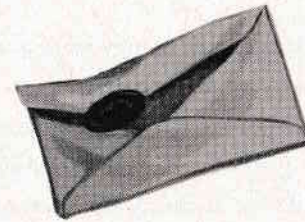
Just in case you didn't know...you are by far the best sister I've ever had. I'm so proud of you.

And I'll be home before you know it, Little Flower.



PART ONE

Letters Through *the* Wardrobe





1

Sworn Enemies



FIVE MONTHS LATER

Iris dashed through the rain with a broken high heel and a tattered trench coat. Hope was beating wildly in her chest, granting her speed and luck as she crossed the tram tracks downtown. She had been anticipating this day for weeks, and she knew she was ready. Even soaked, limping, and hungry.

Her first pang of unease came when she stepped into the lobby. This was an old building, constructed before the gods were vanquished. A few of those dead divines were painted on the ceiling, and despite the cracks and the faint light of the low-hanging chandeliers, Iris always glanced up at them. Gods and goddesses dancing among the clouds, dressed in long gilded robes with stars gleaming in their hair, their gazes sweeping the ground. It sometimes felt like those painted eyes were watching her, and Iris stifled a shiver. She removed her mangled right shoe and hurried to the lift with a stilted gait, thoughts of the gods swiftly fading when she thought about *him*. Perhaps the rain had slowed down Roman too, and she still had a chance.

She waited a full minute. The confounded lift must be stuck, of all days,

and she decided to take the stairs, hustling up to the fifth floor. She was shaking and sweating when she finally pushed through the heavy doors to the *Oath Gazette*, greeted by a wash of yellow lamplight, the scent of strong tea, and the morning hustle of preparing the newspaper.

She was four minutes late.

Iris stood amidst the hum, her gaze flickering to Roman's desk.

It was empty, and she was pleased until she glanced at the assignment board and saw him standing there, waiting for her to appear. As soon as their eyes met, he gave her a lazy smile and reached up to the board, yanking a piece of paper from a pin. The last assignment.

Iris didn't move, not even when Roman Kitt wound around the cubicles to greet her. He was tall and lithe with cheekbones that could cut stone, and he waved the piece of paper in the air, just out of her reach. The piece of paper she so badly wanted.

"Late again, Winnow," he greeted her. "The second time this week."

"I didn't know you were keeping tally, Kitt."

His smirk eased as his gaze dropped to her hands, cradling her broken shoe. "Looks like you ran into a bit of trouble this time."

"Not at all," she replied, her chin tilted upward. "I planned for this, of course."

"For your heel to break?"

"For you to get this final assignment."

"Going easy on me, then?" He arched a brow. "That's surprising. We're supposed to duel to the death."

She snorted. "A hyperbolic turn of phrase, Kitt. Which you do often in your articles, by the way. You should be careful of that tendency if you get columnist."

A lie. Iris rarely read what he wrote. But he didn't know that.

Roman's eyes narrowed. "What's so *hyperbolic* about soldiers going missing at the front?"

Iris's stomach clenched, but she hid her reaction with a thin smile. "Is that the topic of the last assignment? Thanks for letting me know." She turned away from him and began to weave around cubicles to her desk.

"It doesn't matter if you know it," he insisted as he followed her. "I have the assignment."

She reached her desk and flicked on her lamp. "Of course, Kitt."

He wasn't leaving. He continued to stand by her cubicle, watching her set down her tapestry bag and her mangled high heel like it was a badge of honor. She shed her trench coat. He rarely watched her this attentively, and Iris knocked over her tin of pencils.

"Did you need something?" she asked, hurrying to gather the pencils before they rolled off the desk. Of course, one did, landing right before Roman's leather brogues. He didn't bother to pick the pencil up for her, and she swallowed a curse as she bent down to retrieve it, noticing the spit polish of his shoes.

"You're going to write your own article about missing soldiers," he stated. "Even though you don't have the full information on the assignment."

"And that worries you, Kitt?"

"No. Course not."

She glanced at him, studying his face. She put her tin of pencils on the back side of her desk, far from any chance of spilling again. "Has anyone ever told you that you squint when you lie?"

His scowl only deepened. "No, but only because no one has spent as much time looking at me as you do, Winnow."

Someone snickered from a nearby desk. Iris flushed, sitting down in her chair. She grappled for a witty reply but came up short, because he was unfortunately handsome and he often drew her eyes.

She did the only thing she could; she leaned back in her chair and granted Roman a brilliant smile. One that reached her eyes, crinkling the corners. His expression darkened instantly, just as she expected. He hated it when she smiled like this at him. It always made him retreat.

"Good luck on your assignment," she said brightly.

"And you can have fun with the obituaries," he countered in a clipped tone, at last departing to his cubicle, which was—regrettably—only two desks away.

Iris's smile melted as soon as his back was turned. She was still absently staring in that direction when Sarah Prindle stepped into her field of vision.