

CHRISTIAN KLAYER

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READY TO GIVE UP—NOT ON HERSELF, AND NOT ON HER FAMILY.

JUSTICE
AT SEA



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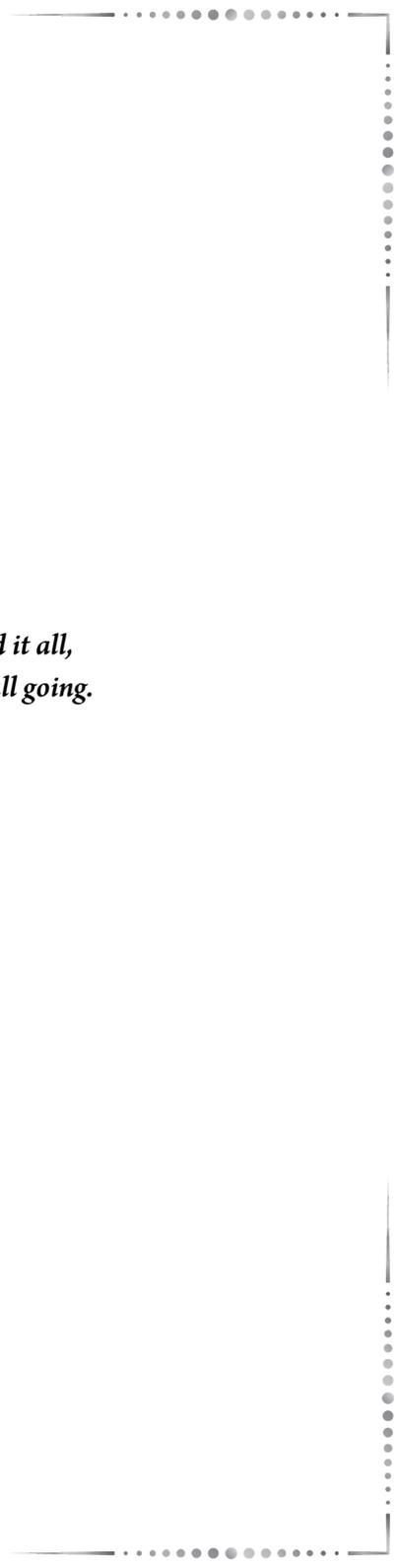
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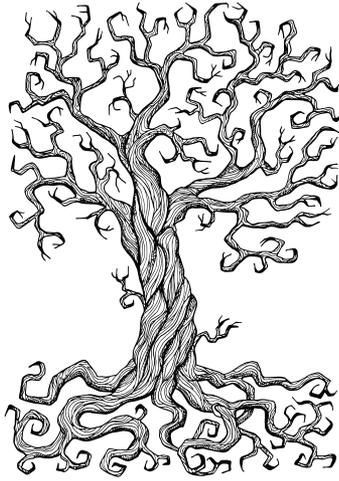
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*To Katie, who started it all,
and Kim, who kept it all going.*





CHAPTER 1

Estuary Raid

The mist.

It pooled ankle-deep on the deck, moving in little eddies around our feet every time we moved. A slow, dank current of it flowed silently down the forecastle stairs in wispy trails, then down to the main deck where it pooled again before draining out the scuppers and down the hull to the ocean. But no matter how much fog drained out, there was always more. Made me itch to grab a broom or mop and get it all off the deck, only I knew it wouldn't do any good. There was plenty more where that came from. All around us, in fact.

I was at the front rail near the bowsprit, the very forefront of the ship. A lantern threw yellow light that clung to the deck

behind me but didn't penetrate more than a dozen feet or so. All I could make out was more fog pooled on quiet, black, still water. The ship's prow barely made a ripple as we cut through the water without a sound. We'd been forced out into the Channel; coming back towards the English shore had a forbidden feel. We weren't welcome here in England anymore. You could feel it.

The mist had a way of dampening sounds, so that I kept looking back to make sure that everyone else was still there. I could see the rest of the quarterdeck that Faith, Sands, and Avonstoke shared with me, but the rest of the ship was lost in the haze.

Quiet should have been good. We were prowling in enemy territory. I'd given the orders for silence myself, but now the heavy feel of it was making my skin crawl. I thought the darkness was starting to show a little gray in it, at least, as if dawn might not be that far off.

"Justice," Faith hissed from behind me. "We're too far in!"

"Shh," I said, craning my neck to listen for signs of other ships, or possibly the English shore. England used to be home, before the Faerie took it and shrouded it in this bloody fog. Now it was enemy territory and there was no telling what changes the Faerie had wrought to it.

"Too far in!" she said again. I was supposed to be captain, but one of the problems with having my older sister on board was that she'd never taken orders from me and wasn't about to start now. Didn't matter if I was a captain, admiral, or a bag of rutabagas.

Faith looked unnatural in the eerie yellow light, with her white London dress and her long ash-white hair. No pants for her, despite being at sea. The Faerie might have conquered London, but they hadn't made much of a dent in Faith's sense of propriety or fashion. At least she'd forgone any hoops or a bustle.

She stepped closer, her dark eyes wild with panic. “You *know* the strain it takes for Sands to keep the shield up. He’s going to collapse if we keep him at it.”

I pushed my weather-beaten wide-brimmed black hat back on my head to peer up at her. She had to be prettier and older *and* taller. Life’s not fair.

“What about *you*?” I snapped. “Do you feel anything? Anything at all?”

Faith’s lips went tight. “No, same as the last time you asked. If I felt anything, don’t you think I’d tell you? Everyone keeps calling me a magician, but that’s all they can tell me. You don’t learn magic as much as feel it, but I don’t feel anything! I’m about as close to singing fish into a hat as raising a shield! You have to take us back!”

I shook my head. “You know we can’t do that. They get one ship across the channel and it’s all over.” I turned my back on her. She made a smothered noise behind me and I could sense her frustration.

The worst part about Faith’s warning was that she was probably right.

Sands looked an absolute and unmitigated shamble. The man’s face, when I glanced back again, despite myself, was covered in sweat though he shivered in the cold damp. His black coat and tails were spattered with salt, and he’d lost his hat. His cheeks showed two day’s growth around his blonde mustache and goatee and his blonde hair stuck out in all directions. His eyes, a startling emerald green under normal conditions, now shone like cat’s eyes or undersea lanterns, washing the forecastle deck and our boots with lime, eldritch light. He stared out over the water, looking for dangers most of the us couldn’t even see.

The Faerie invasion force had put up the mist to keep us out, of course. The Outcast Fleet stayed on the edge of the mist, where the rest of humanity couldn't reach us, but venturing further in, like we were doing now, was like taking out a rowboat into a monsoon.

My ghost eye, which helped me see through Faerie magic, allowed me to penetrate the first line of defense: the illusions, or glamours, as the Faerie called them. Dark flocks of predatory birds, specters gliding on top of the ocean's surface, that sort of thing. It was enough to scare the crew into a wailing froth and I was just barely holding that fear in check, constantly reminding them that the glamours weren't really there. The only person not showing any fear was Avonstoke and I had him to thank for bolstering the crew. Without him, I'd have a mutiny on my hands for sure. I looked back to where he stood, supporting Sands.

Avonstoke was tall, a Court Faerie like the stern and uncompromising Faerie marines. But Avonstoke wasn't stern, not by a long shot. The average Court Faerie was slender, with high cheekbones and angular features in a way that was disconcertingly inhuman. But Avonstoke wore it better somehow, more mysterious than inhuman, and with that kind of height and broad shoulders, he took the breath of every woman around him. I found him endearing, distracting, and exasperating in equal measures, but he'd become a sturdy support, my rock when things got dangerous, like now. His eyes, like the others of his kind, were pale gold, without any pupils. They were an echo of my ghost eye, a solid black marble in my left eye.

That ghost eye also allowed me to see the visions that really *were* out in the mist. Dark shapes cresting the water, ghost ships, an enormous bat-winged shape far overhead. But only Sands and I could see those, and neither of us mentioned it to the others.

“Ghosts,” he muttered when another of the ships went by.

“Intangible?” I said, keeping my voice equally low. “So, they can’t hurt us?” Avonstoke and Faith were close enough to hear, but I trusted them to keep their mouths shut.

Sands turned his glowing cat’s eyes to me and shook his head. “*Probably* not.” There was the hint, like always, of France and other unfamiliar places in the lilt of his voice. “Ships, or other things, caught by a vortex and wrenched free of their place in time. If they are ghosts to us, or we are ghosts to them, I cannot say. Now they move through *when*, as well as through *where*. Let’s hope they are not close enough in the fabric of time to reach us. Years spent in the mist would leave you quite mad. I should know.”

I wanted to ask more, but now wasn’t the time. He turned away, peering out into the fog with those luminous eyes.

What we were *really* worried about were the vortexes.

Dark twisters, like supernatural tornados, that threatened either to tear us to pieces or pull us entirely out of the world we knew. One false step and we could be ghosts ourselves. Or we could just be dead.

Even as I watched, another black tornado lurched out of the mist, moving far too quickly for us to avoid it, and battered itself against Sands’ shield. The shield, which, through my ghost eye, I could see as a soft green shimmer around the ship, rippled under the impact. But it held. It was all eerily silent and unreal. I felt no sign of the impact under my feet, which was even more unnerving.

But Sands shook under the impact, as if he had been hit directly. Avonstoke’s grip on him was the only thing that kept Sands from falling.

Faith wasn’t wrong. The little blonde man couldn’t take too much more of this.

I could see back to the rest of the ship, which was a far cry from a comfort. Every face that peered back was tight with sullen fear, watching me, or Faith, but mostly watching Sands, our only magician.

Except Sands wasn't a full-fledged magician anymore. Since passing his mantle to Faith, his powers had been slowly fading. To make matters worse, Faith, his replacement according to Father's plan, didn't seem close to taking his place.

I gnawed my lip.

The air was still, the rigging quiet, the splash of water soft, while we all struggled not to breathe too loudly. Everyone was listening hard enough to make their ears bleed. The ship itself made barely a creak under my feet. No scent of land came with the bare excuse for a breeze, even though I knew we had to be close. The chill off the water was like something off a grave.

A Prowler crew member ran up to report, knuckling his forehead. "Foretop lookout is seeing branches, Ma'am."

"Branches?" I said, raising an eyebrow. The man blanched, his greenish skin going visibly paler, but nodded. "Yes, Ma'am." Sometimes I forgot the reverence that the Faerie from Father's domain, most of our crew, felt for our family. If they only knew.

I opened my mouth to get a better explanation, but by then there was no need.

"There!" Faith said, pointing. "What's that?"

The mist parted to reveal a tree growing up out of the water, craggy and black and dripping with lichen and slim. The trunk was easily as wide around as the *Specter* was long, with branches angling up in all directions, long, jagged shapes that disappeared into the fog.

The tree was festooned with bodies.

There were dozens of them, all very dead, hanging from the branches on nooses. They'd been tall when alive, and not at all human, with great horns on their heads, white or black hair, gray skin, and talons on their hands and feet that immediately reminded me of the Soho Shark. The talons swayed, very gently, though there wasn't any breeze. Drops of moisture dripped down into the water with a morose and solitary dripping sound.

"Formori," Mr. Sands intoned, his green eyes still blazing. "Leaders of the Faerie once, but all wiped out by the Seelie Court."

"Much to everyone's relief, according to the stories," Avonstoke said softly behind him. "The atrocities they tell are enough to make even a hag's skin crawl." His handsome face looked thoughtful and a little curious.

"Formori," I repeated grimly. "Like the Soho Shark."

Sands looked confused and alarmed and I told him and the others, in as few words as possible, about our encounter with the Soho Shark and Victoria Rose. Just thinking about the two of them gave me shudders.

Mr. Sands whistled low. "The leader of the Formori was said to be missing one eye. A very dangerous individual, if this Soho Shark is the same person . . ." He frowned, lost in thought, while his hands plucked nervously at the brass buttons on his vest. He jerked with surprise when his fingers plucked one off completely.

"Damn," the little ex-magician said.

I had Mr. Starling ready a few crew members with long poles so they could push us off from the tree, if necessary, but we glided slowly and silently underneath the long line of hanged Formori.

Immediately after clearing that grisly obstacle, however, someone shouted up in the topmast. I heard a grinding sound, then the sound of breaking wood and the snapping of lines as a piece of

the topgallant mast went splashing into the sea on the starboard side.

“What happened?” I shouted, breaking my own rule of silence.

“We hits a low branch, we did!” a gravely, squeaky voice shouted back.

“Was anyone up in the gallants?” I shouted back.

“Don’t know, Captain!”

I leaned over the rail, calling to Avonstoke and Nellie down in the chains. “Have Wil check that wreckage and make sure no one is in it.”

“Yes Captain,” Nellie said. She called out in the soft and lilting Prowler language and Wil’s head broke the surface of the water.

“What did you do that for?” Wil said after Nellie relayed my orders, but then he dove without waiting for an answer. Two minutes later he surfaced. I couldn’t hear his words, but Nellie turned and shook her head up at me.

“Thank Heaven for that,” Faith said.

I nodded in agreement, too overwhelmed with relief to speak. At least that much luck was with us.

There was a shadowy line of the riverbank on the port side now, with the gleam of white through the fog as the gentlest of surfs broke on the rocks.

“Shoaling on the far side!” Nellie called out softly.

I leaned over the rail, pointing so that there should be no confusion. “Port?”

Nellie nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Port.”

“Pass along two points to starboard,” I ordered. The waiting sailor nodded and turned to pass the message.

A flurry of breezes came, luffing the main foresail immediately above us with a snap like the crack of a whip.

“Hear that?” Faith said.

I stared at her. The entire ship had heard it.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Not the sail. The *singing*.”

“I don’t hear anything,” I said carefully.

She frowned. “It’s gone now.”

Then I spied what looked like not only a land mass, but a familiar one. The Girdler, a sandbank, which would put us in the Queen’s Channel. I let out a long sigh. It was incredibly gratifying to know that this much, at least, of English geography remained.

Suddenly, the mist cleared. Well, not cleared exactly, but became more penetrable. More normal, like regular old English fog and not some supernatural abomination. There was even enough breeze to catch the sails and I felt the *Rachaela* make decent headway for the first time in hours.

“Well done, Sands,” I said.

“Thank you, Captain,” he said. His voice sounded normal, more human than when he’d spoken under the strain of his spell, but utterly exhausted, too. He looked more normal now, too. Still disheveled, but more like a man than a magical beacon. The eldritch light had faded from his eyes. He smoothed down his hair, then took a rueful look at his vest and trousers. He took a shaky step and Avonstoke steadied him.

“Through!” Faith breathed.

We’d thought it possible, but hadn’t been sure. The Faerie could have had this stuff over the entire country for all we knew. But apparently not. That was worth knowing and information I had to get back to the rest of the fleet. Or what was left of it. Father had commissioned a dozen ships like the *H.M.S. Rachaela*, but they had been lost in the mist before I’d taken command. Now, all that was left was the enormous *Seahome* and a few schooners.

This was why it was folly to brave the mist, but also why it had been so necessary. It was worth all the risk I'd taken just to know we could navigate it. Now we could attack the invasion forces, rather than just wait for them to make a move. One bold move here could outweigh months of ineffectual engagements.

"Land on the port side!" came the hoarse whisper from the main deck. "Crow's nest reports land on the port side!" They were still relaying messages to avoid shouting. Good. We *were* in the Estuary proper, in the Queen's Channel just as I thought. I tilted my head, listening hard, suddenly sure I heard something.

"Take him below," I said to Faith, nodding at Sands. "Let him rest while he can." As soon as we'd done our business here, he was going to be needed for the trip back.

She opened her mouth to say something, then stopped, her eyes wide as saucers. She heard it now, too. Sands looked around as well.

Voices. Another ship? Then I could see them. Three dark silhouettes of sails and rigging slowly sliding across the still water. Yes. More than one ship, it seemed. The largest looked big enough to be second or third rate, maybe, comparable to our ship. Only they probably didn't know we were here because of the fog and our effort to remain silent. We might be out of the magical part of the Faerie mist, but fog was still fog. Also, the enemy ships, from what I could see, didn't look to have anything like a full complement of crew on board.

I passed the word for the spyglass and it came in short order. The nearest ship showed me silhouettes that were unmistakably men. Normal men, not Faerie. English men pressed into service by the Black Shuck. Probably not even sailors, since the Shuck had run out of those.

That didn't change what I had to do, because the ships' holds would be filled with all manner of Faerie infantry. Enough infantry to get and hold a landfall in France. Even just a few could be too much for mundane forces and the Faerie would spread over the continent. The only thing stopping the Faerie from crossing and taking over the rest of the globe was the remaining Outcast Fleet. For three months, we hadn't been able to penetrate the mist, but we'd easily thwarted an attempt at crossing the channel because the invading Faeries knew nothing of sailing. But we'd lost so many ships trying to raid the coast that our defense of the channel was stretched hopelessly thin. If the invaders realized that, we'd be in trouble.

Other figures, tall and angular, moved on the enemy deck. Court Faerie like many of my own crew, but in uniforms of dark leather and bone. The Unseelie Court. The Black Shuck's people.

The *Rachaela* might have been outnumbered, but that wouldn't matter as much if they were only partially manned and rigged. They barely had any sail up and all listed and wallowed uncertainly. They weren't using the wind like we were; they were being towed by rowboats. Foolish. In addition, something had gone wrong with the towing ropes of the lead ship and a knot of the enemy, Faerie and human, were huddled around the prow, arguing.

Good. The Faerie still hadn't learned any real seamanship. They'd never had the need before now, since all sailing in Faerie was done with magic. That was our only advantage and I was going to exploit it to the hilt.

"Oh God," Faith's voice came softly next to me. She and Sands were still here. She sounded like she was going to pass out. Or throw up. Maybe both. I had the same feelings when I'd been poring over maps and planning the engagements. I'd have them

again, when I was looking over the lists of the wounded or seeing the damage wrought on my ship.

But now, all I felt was a sudden, thrilling rush. I could even feel a madcap grin crawl over my face.

“Oh God,” Faith said again. “Whenever you get that look in your eye, I know we’re going to be knee-deep in flying cannonballs right away. I *hate* cannonballs.”

“That’s why you’re taking Sands below,” I said cheerfully. “Go on.”

Of course, cannonballs could penetrate below decks, but mentioning that to my sister wasn’t going to make her feel any better. I could have had Avonstoke take Sands below, but I needed Avonstoke up here as much as I needed Sands and Faith out of the way.

Faith finally moved to go, and then stopped, glaring at me. “It’s unnatural, you know.”

“Of course it’s unnatural.” I turned and stepped past her to bring the spyglass to bear on the enemy ship again. “We’re at war with the bloody Faerie. Where have you been?”

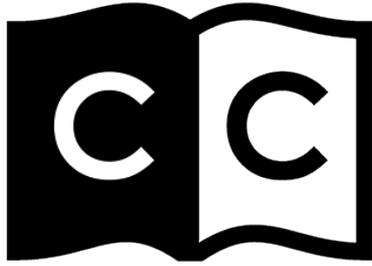
“Not them,” she said stiffly. “You. You’re not supposed to be happy on the brink of battle. It’s unseemly.”

I waved her away, keeping my eye to the glass, too busy to bandy words with her now. But I could feel a delicious thrill rising in me at the prospect of action, unmistakable now that she’d pointed it out.

“Unseemly,” Faith said. “Especially for a *girl*.” She finally took Sands below.

I turned and leaned down over the railing aft of us and called down softly to the main deck.

“Pass word to Starling. Bring us about on the port tack. Ready a turn to starboard and ready the starboard guns.”



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