

ISLES OF  
STORM &  
SORROW

# VESNOM

BEX HOGAN

Orion



It's a beautiful night for a wedding. The moon is radiant, offering its shimmering light as a blessing on the union, and the stars shine bright in celebration. The gentle breeze scatters delicate pink petals from the trees like confetti.

The room I'm in looks down over the gardens of the summer palace, and I rest my head against the cool glass of the window. Not moments ago I was surrounded by people, fussing over me, preparing me, filling the air with laughter and excitement. Now I'm alone. Waiting.

I am dressed for midnight. The only colour on my person is the scarlet thread woven through my corset. Otherwise I'm entirely in black as befits the Viper, though for one day only I'm in an elaborate gown, rather than my fighting garb. I slide the dagger gifted to me by my crew into my boot and immediately feel more myself. A bride I may be, but I have plenty of enemies who would love to use this day to their advantage.

There's a soft knock on the door. It's time. A flock of nerves takes flight inside me, fluttering in my chest. With a deep breath, my chin up, I meet my future head on. Two chambermaids greet me with a smile, before placing a heavy velvet cloak on to my shoulders and

fastening it with a bejewelled brooch at my throat. The hood is lifted carefully over my hair and I'm escorted from my chamber.

The ceremony is taking place outside, in a courtyard lit by a thousand candles and filled with islanders who have congregated to watch this historic event unfold. A hush descends over the crowd at my arrival, every head turning to watch me make the long walk to where the priestess waits to mark our vows. My heart is beating fast – too fast – though I'm comforted to see members of my crew standing either side of the aisle.

And then there he is. My eyes lock on him like a needle on a compass. Bronn. My eternal north.

His face remains as impassive as ever – he's had years to practise concealing his feelings – and though I'm still not always able to read him, today I have no doubt what's going through his mind. Reluctantly I pull my gaze away from him, moving my focus to the man waiting for me just feet ahead.

Torin. He is dressed in the finest cloth, trimmed with velvet and sparkling with fragments of crystal. He has never looked more handsome. He smiles at my approach – a wonderful, genuine smile because Torin can't give anything less – but even so I glimpse his conflict. I'm not the only one forsaking love in the name of duty today.

In a few steps I'm beside him, trying to block out the rest of the world as I listen to the priestess's words,

making my vows with as much honesty as I can. I promise to honour Torin, swear to defend him with my life, and pledge to remain true to him above all others – until death parts us. This last oath is by far the most difficult to make, but I force the words out. At least both of us know the truth. And as I'm not deceiving Torin in any way, there's no guilt.

Behind Torin, standing just close enough to be in my peripheral vision, is his new bodyguard, Braydon. I'm not used to him yet; he seems to trust me as little as Sharpe did to begin with. But while I eventually won Sharpe round, I suspect Braydon's dislike for me might be harder to overcome. I can sense him scowling even as I become his princess.

My eyes dart over to Sharpe, standing off to one side. The loss of his sight meant he had to be reassigned, and though he remains Torin's aide, his misery these past months has been obvious. He looks as though he wants to be here as much as Bronn does.

Our vows made, Torin and I are instructed to place our wrists together, as we did during our binding ceremony so long ago. But this time, rather than red-hot metal, silk is wrapped round our scarred skin, and we turn to face all those who have assembled to witness such a momentous occasion.

The crowd cheers, and my crew salutes us, before Torin leans over to kiss me gently on my lips. It's all part

of the act, I know, but I can feel the blood rush to my cheeks. His skin is soft where Bronn's is rough; his touch is ice where Bronn's is fire.

He is my husband. I am his wife.

When we walk back down the aisle, still bound together with the silk, I manage to avoid looking at Bronn. It takes me a few moments to realise I'm holding my breath, and I exhale. The worst, after all, is over. I force myself to relax, even going as far as to acknowledge the crowds of people who are cheering our departure.

It's then I see him. The stranger. There's nothing extraordinary about him but that's exactly what makes him stand out. He's dressed a little too normally. He's blending in a little too much. He stands exactly like a man who doesn't want to be noticed.

I look away, to avoid rousing his suspicions, but keep him in the corner of my eye – I don't want to lose sight of a potential threat. Torin must feel me tense, because he looks over, concerned.

'What's wrong?'

I give him the brightest smile possible, so that to the crowd I will seem merely like a happy bride talking with her new husband. 'Behind me, towards the wall. Black hair, tied back. Tall. Do you see him?'

Torin returns my false smile with one of his own and leans towards me, giving the impression of whispering

sweet nothings into my ear, while really looking past me to see who I mean.

‘Yes. Who is he?’

‘I was hoping you might know.’

‘Want me to have him removed?’

I shake my head. ‘The last thing we want to do is cause a spectacle.’ But I make a mental note to ask one of my crew to keep an eye on him the first chance I get.

When we reach the end of the aisle, Torin searches my face. ‘We did the right thing, didn’t we?’

I squeeze his arm with my free hand. ‘Of course we did.’ Though I do already wish the night was over. I would rather not have to endure the coming celebrations.

I’ve had no say in this wedding. I didn’t want it here, in the summer palace, deep in the heart of the First Isle. Set atop a mountain peak, the palace is bleak and isolated and a long way from my ship, which makes me feel vulnerable and uneasy. I didn’t want an extravagant feast and dancing when the islanders are still struggling to fill their bellies. But it’s all been arranged by someone else.

The King.

The very thought of the man makes my anger rise. I hate that he still has the crown, but by the time I returned from the West, Torin had already struck a deal with his father. Torin had given him two choices: abdicate or be overthrown. Ever the coward, the King did not relish a fight with his son and the new Viper, and so in order to

protect his reputation and legacy, the King agreed to abdicate quietly. But he had one condition: that he remain on the throne until this marriage had taken place, so he could use the excuse of royalty and Viper allying as his reason for stepping down. For the sake of the islands and to avoid further bloodshed Torin agreed, but when I found out the King's request a worm of suspicion burrowed into my stomach. Trusting the King isn't something that comes naturally to me, and I feared he'd only agreed to whatever would delay his abdication, giving him time to squirm his way out of his promise. So I'd paid him a visit, not long after I arrived back in the East, to add a little incentive. It was just like old times, climbing through his window in the dead of night, to make him wake to a living nightmare. I told him he would announce his abdication during the wedding feast, and presented him with a document to sign. His word was not enough for me; I wanted it in writing. And if he refused? Well, I had no qualms about threatening the royal neck.

*I killed my father. I will not hesitate to kill someone else's.*

They were words he understood, threats and violence being the only language the King will listen to, and he had done as I'd asked. But even now I feel a sense of unease. The King has betrayed me before and I have no doubt he'll try to again.

And while we sit beneath the stars, in the open air, that feeling only grows stronger, as I watch my new father-in-law tearing strips of roast suckling boar from the bone.

The King has invited everyone of importance throughout the Six Isles to celebrate the wedding. Distant family, governors, chief merchants, captains of the Fleet – they're all here, and I was happy for them to come, to witness his abdication, but I can't help suspecting the King's motives were quite different. For him, they're here to be impressed by his lavish display of wealth. The King does love to be admired.

Still, at least the atmosphere is warm – the courtiers are full of smiles for me, and no one seems displeased with the Prince wedding the Viper.

Finally it's time for speeches – another ritual that requires only my silence – and my breathing turns shallow with nervous anticipation. Either the King is about to relinquish his hold over the Isles or he's going to prove he's as untrustworthy as ever. I fear I know precisely which it will be. And if he forces my hand, then tomorrow all memories of a happy wedding will be forgotten. The silent war for power that's been raging between us will come to an end one way or another – and whether it's peacefully or with violence is now in the hands of the King.

The King is the first to speak, and he begins by waffling insincere words about how glad he is to see

everyone, how grateful he is to them for making the journey here. He draws everyone's attention to the feast, boasting of the quantity, noting the quality of the wine brought up from his cellars. But when he moves on to state how happy he is that, at last, the royal family and the Viper will be united by marriage, his tone changes. He goes to great lengths to insist no one should be in any doubt that the covenant between land and sea has never been stronger. It sounds more like a threat than a wedding speech and – judging by the looks on the watching faces – I'm not the only one who thinks so.

He talks about the days to come, the great power of his kingdom. He does not address his people's suffering, the hardships they bear. He says nothing about Adler, the monster who raised me; nothing about the fall of one Viper, the rise of the next. There's no praising his son for the part he played in defending the East.

And there is not one word about him abdicating the throne.

When he raises his glass of wine, toasting a long and happy partnership, he looks directly at me and smiles. A smile filled with a thousand challenges. A smile that tells me he intends to go nowhere.

Just as I feared.

I hold his gaze unflinchingly. Because if he thinks for one second that I'm going to let him go unpunished for all he's done, then he is very much mistaken. He's had

his chance and squandered it. The hard truth is this: I have to use the signed document to insist he abdicate, and if that fails, then I'm going to have to do what I should have done all along. I'm going to have to kill the King.

He looks away first, much to my satisfaction. Deciding it's time to remind the King who he's dealing with, I stand up.

I can feel disapproval from every side. It's not tradition for a princess to speak at her wedding. But I am the Viper, and I will not be silenced.

'Today is an historic moment, it's true,' I say, my voice firm and clear. 'But it's more than that. This alliance is a new beginning. For too long the islands have suffered, have been left to fend for themselves through terrible adversity.' I pause. 'Well, not any more. This is my vow: I will never stop fighting for you. From this day forward, the power of land and sea belongs to the islanders, to serve you above all else. And, I swear to you, peace will be restored.'

I've run out of words, and when an awkward silence falls I glance down at Torin.

My break with tradition wasn't exactly planned, and his jaw is clenched with tension. But in a show of solidarity Torin gets to his feet and raises his glass. 'To a new era!'

It breaks the spell and everyone joins in the toast.

And now I look at the King and give him my own smile. One that promises I will gladly destroy him if he continues to pursue this path.

I take my seat, allowing Torin his chance to speak. He has only kind words for his people, and he reaffirms my pledge that we will work tirelessly to end the dark days plaguing our lands.

But while he talks I can't help thinking how hard it will be to keep my vow to the islanders. Because the truth is – I have been fighting relentlessly since I came home, and yet I've hardly begun to make a difference. The carnage created by Adler is not easily undone, and several notorious and violent groups of bandits continue to elude me and my crew.

I take a deep breath. In such a public setting I must remain calm. Looking around the crowd, I try to gauge their reaction to our speeches.

My eyes fall on the stranger from the ceremony. I'd forgotten about him in my fury at the King's betrayal but now my unease comes rushing back. He is leaning against a stone wall, not sharing in the feast and he is certainly not clapping. He simply stares at me. Intently.

I look away and shuffle my foot, reassured by the sharp scratch of the knife blade still resting in my boot. Every instinct tells me I'll need it before the night's end.

*Finally* the feast is over and the music begins. Torin escorts me to the open floor where we dance together for

the first time. He must sense all my misery, because he holds me firmly but with great tenderness and I rest my head on his shoulder, endlessly glad that he is nothing like his father.

I'm obliged to dance with several more members of the court, but eventually I'm able to make my excuses and leave the floor. Desperate for a moment's peace, I move to the edge of the courtyard, choosing a vast stone pillar to hide behind, and leaning my forehead against it. I close my eyes and wonder if this will ever end. If I'll ever be able to undo the suffering, because if not—

‘You look beautiful.’

I hadn't heard him approach and, with the first true smile I've given all day, I turn to face Bronn.

‘Thank you. So do you.’

And he does, in his full Snake blacks, his raised hood casting a shadow across his brooding features. Dark, fathomless eyes peer through long lashes, eyes that I have lost myself in many nights.

Bronn steps closer, the pillar shielding us from view, and he leans to brush the hair from my forehead. The merest graze of his touch is the sweetest fire and I close my eyes, remembering the last time we were alone together. How we'd held each other, never wanting to let go, yet knowing we must, wondering if every kiss would be the last. I would have stolen all the time in the world to stay there in his arms a bit longer: two bodies, two

souls bound as one. Instead I'd wept once he fell asleep, mourning the life we could never have.

'Are you OK?'

I make a noise like a strangled laugh. 'No. Are you?'

'No. But I will be.'

He's so close now; I can feel the warmth of his breath on my skin and my heart beats faster, crying out from inside my chest, begging him to stay here with me. But I can feel him slipping away already. A distance that has nothing to do with proximity is growing between us.

In the few months since we left the West we've both thrown our energy into hunting down bandits. Carrying the guilt of surviving when we've lost those we love and knowing the price paid by so many for the sake of the Isles, we've attempted to dull our grief by fighting fiercely, not allowing their deaths to be in vain. After raids or battles, when blood had been shed, we always found our way to each other, stealing precious moments to feel alive when surrounded by death. We have sought comfort in each other's arms, and though we knew it couldn't last, it was easy to pretend.

I was selfish. I didn't want to lose him so soon after finding him again. But now, as I stand in my wedding dress longing for a man who isn't my husband, I see all too clearly that *everything's* changed. This marriage will tear us to shreds, will open wounds that will fester – not heal. It's already started. Today has cut into Bronn

as surely as any blade, and I am the one holding the dagger.

I move slightly away from him, steeling myself to do what's necessary. 'I have a job for you.'

Bronn frowns. 'A job?' He doesn't sound impressed.

I peer round the pillar and point to the long-haired man still lurking in the shadows.

'Find out who that is.'

Bronn follows my gaze, before looking back at me. 'Doesn't Torin know?'

I shake my head. 'If he's not a guest, I don't know how he got past the guards. I don't trust him. He watches too closely. I would feel better if you could follow him. Question him.'

My concern is real, but the truth is that I'm also trying to put some distance between us, and assigning Bronn a mission is the best way to do that. The look he's giving me suggests he knows my motives. Knows I'm saying goodbye.

It's a while before he speaks and when he does his voice is colder. 'Consider it done, Captain.'

And, giving the curtest of nods, Bronn walks away. It's as if he's extinguished all the candles and stolen the stars. My world has never felt so dark.

The celebrations last too long, but eventually Torin and I are escorted to our wedding chamber, high up in the

east tower, with bawdy laughter and coarse jokes being thrown at us the whole way.

Once the door is mercifully shut, Torin leans against it and exhales, while I kick the empty chamber pot across the room.

‘That lying, cheating, conniving piece of scum!’ I can no longer contain my rage towards the King, and it spews out of me in an uncontrollable stream. ‘Rotten, scheming hagbreather!’

‘Yes, my father never fails to disappoint,’ Torin growls.

‘Backstabbing, treacherous wartwhale! We should never have trusted him for a minute.’

Torin sighs, rubbing his jaw. ‘You mean *I* shouldn’t have trusted him.’

His frustration with himself tempers my fury. ‘You wanted to try the peaceful approach first,’ I say, collapsing backwards on to the bed, flinging my arms out wide. ‘It was the right thing to do.’

Torin comes to perch beside me, removing his boots. ‘I should have known better. My father will do anything to cling to his power.’

‘No, it’s my fault. I was too lenient on my return.’ Worn down from fighting, I allowed the King to feel safe. I should have poured fire on his agreement with Torin, forced him to abdicate immediately. And now, because of my weakness, things are going to get ugly.

Torin lies back next to me and for a moment we just

stare at each other, too weary for anything else. ‘Let’s not dwell on it any longer,’ he says eventually. ‘Let’s have just a few moments of the day untarnished by his presence. Tomorrow, the fight can resume. We’ll insist he keep his word and give up the throne as agreed. You have the document he signed, don’t you?’

I nod. ‘In my room. But he could argue it was signed under duress.’

A knowing smile spreads across Torin’s face. ‘Was it?’ ‘There may have been some coercion,’ I say with a shrug. ‘All right, well, if he decides to argue its validity, then we overthrow him. We hold all the cards.’

More conflict. Just what the Isles don’t need. But in my heart I know this is where we’re heading. And though it won’t pain me one bit to rid us all of the King, I wonder how far Torin’s willing to go to be free of his father. Overthrowing him is one thing. But would Torin let me kill him if it came to it?

‘It’s funny,’ Torin says, nudging me with his elbow. ‘Of all the ways I imagined my wedding night, I didn’t think I’d spend it talking about my father.’

I smile. ‘Me neither. We have far more important things to do.’

‘Sleep,’ we say at the same time, and it feels good to laugh together, after the strain of the day.

Torin helps me undo the laces of my corset, but then averts his gaze while I slip out of my gown and exchange

it for my shift. Once he's in bed, I lie beside him and hold his hand.

'It's sad,' he says, 'that no one but us knows how momentous today actually was. East binding to West. The start of a new reign. Our reign.'

Something unpleasant stirs in my stomach. The reminder of my duty to the West is unwelcome. I can barely help the East.

'We're not the only ones,' I say quietly. 'Bronn and Sharpe know.' Immediately I feel bad as pain flashes in Torin's eyes.

'They understand why we had to go through with today,' he says.

I smile by way of apology, not wanting to infect him with my misery. Torin's hopes for the future match my fears for the present, and it is why we need each other. Together we are balanced.

'We can do this,' he continues, squeezing my fingers. 'We will do this.'

I lean forward and kiss his forehead. 'I know.'

'Good night, wife,' he says, his eyes sparkling with affection.

'Sweet dreams, husband.'

I watch with envy how quickly sleep claims him. Though exhaustion prickles through my bones, for a long time I just lie there, my head too crowded with thoughts. The air is thick in here, suffocating, and I feel

the walls closing in on me. Leaving Torin alone in our marriage bed, I move to the window and push it open, desperate for air. It's as if the night is crushing my chest and I cannot breathe. I have to get out of here. Without even bothering to dress, I wrap my cloak round my shift and slip my dagger back into my boot.

When I appear at the door, three surprised guards look up at me. I raise my hand for them to be quiet.

'The Prince is asleep,' I say, ignoring their suggestive glances. 'I left some things in my old room and wish to retrieve them.'

'Allow me to escort you.' Braydon stands up, and then adds as an afterthought, 'Your Highness.'

'There's no need; I can find my way.'

'I insist.'

'Very well, if you must.'

There is no concern in his offer, only mistrust.

We walk through the castle, the only light coming from the candle I hold. It's quite a way to go to my room in the west tower, and all the while Braydon is several paces behind me, his eyes boring into my back.

When at last I reach my door, I turn to him. 'I think I might stay here for the rest of the night. I don't wish to disturb my husband. Thank you, Braydon.'

The bodyguard is clearly not happy to leave me, but what can he do? He bids me a frosty good night and at last I'm alone. The quiet is a balm to my troubled spirit.

So much of my life has been spent in isolation that now I find hours surrounded by others leaves me itching for solitude.

I move to the other side of my room, pausing as I pass the desk to check the drawer remains locked. Satisfied the scroll signed by the King is safe, I push the doors open on to the balcony, drinking in the cold air of the early hours of morning. The moon beams down on the castle, illuminating the delicate nightglow flowers that weave through the stone wall beside me like stars, and for a moment I allow myself to believe that things will fall into place as we hope.

I haven't felt much peace since I left the West. And it's not just the fighting. A quiet dissatisfaction is growing inside me like a weed. I don't know what it is, but it climbs and snakes, spreads and suffocates. Maybe it's just part of adapting to my new life. Or perhaps it is simply frustration clawing at me from within. But it's always there, an ever-present reminder that something is not right.

A sharp wind whips my cloak about me, stinging my skin, and as I brush the hair from my face an unexpected movement catches my attention. Leaning forward slightly, I try to identify what it is.

Scaling the ivy-covered walls of the east tower is a figure dressed entirely in black. The moonlight glints off the blade he holds between his teeth as he climbs swiftly

upwards. Whatever his intentions, they're definitely not friendly.

Only one person sleeps in that tower – Torin – and so I don't hesitate. Moving as soundlessly as the intruder, I remove my cloak and take my dagger from my boot before climbing on to the balustrade and reaching for a foothold on the castle wall. Running through the palace would take too long – this is the only way I'm going to reach him in time.

My hands glide easily over ancient stones, urgency causing the blood to pulse through my body so that even my fingertips tingle. My blade grazes my tongue and sweat runs down my back. I don't even let myself think of the drop beneath me. A single thought screams through my mind.

*Hurry.*

I'm closing the distance between us, but then I lose the intruder as he disappears through the bedroom window I opened not long ago. I climb faster. If I don't get there quickly, it'll be too late. When I'm close enough, I push off the wall and leap towards the window ledge, only just making the distance and hanging precariously for a moment before I scramble up into the room.

Before my eyes can adapt to the gloom, my hair is grabbed and my head slammed against the wall. Pain streaks through my skull and I drop the blade from my mouth as I gasp for air. He knew he was being followed.

He's swinging his knife round now, aiming for my guts, but I recover quickly and bring my fist down hard on to his arm, so that now he's the one who drops his weapon.

I don't wait for him to collect himself, bringing my hand up into his chin, and causing him to stagger backwards. But he avoids my next blow and lands one of his own, sending an explosion of pain through my shoulder.

I wish it weren't so dark, because all I can see of the intruder is that he's wearing a mask over his nose and mouth, his hood concealing his hair. I need to know who would be brave enough to steal into the Prince's room so brazenly, and I reach forward, hoping to remove the mask. But again he evades me. He's fast, and it's like he knows what I'm planning before I do it, because he's able to dodge every move I make.

He's good.

But I'm better.

Changing tactics, I kick him in the stomach, knocking him off balance. It's all the edge I need, and now I'm able to make my strikes count: a punch to the face, a jab to the ribs. And as our silent dance continues, the moonlight catches on his striking amber eyes, which blaze with fear.

'Who are you?' I have to know.

His response is to lunge for my neck, his hands seeking to crush my bones. I manage to grab his wrists

before they can do their damage, and for a moment we're frozen in a deadlock.

There's only one thing to do – I snap my head forward into his. He falters in pain and, with his balance compromised, I kick him again. He lurches away from me and falls on to the bed where Torin has been sleeping, oblivious to the danger.

But the weight of an assassin landing by him is enough to wake him, and Torin groggily sits up. 'Marianne?'

He's still half asleep.

The attacker hasn't fully recovered from the headbutt, but it won't take him long. I have to be quick. Racing to where my dagger still lies on the floor, I pick it up, and aiming directly for the man's heart I fling it with all the strength I possess.

Only for him to catch the blade between the palms of his hands.

Such skill, such a reflex, momentarily stuns me and before I can gather my wits the assassin turns and plunges my dagger firmly into Torin's chest.

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