

THE STAFF & THE SWORD



A DRAW OF
KINGS

PATRICK W. CARR



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To my editors at Bethany House,
Dave Long and Karen Schurrer:
To say that I couldn't have done this without you
is a ridiculous oversimplification.
You made me a better writer
and, Lord willing, will continue to do so.

And to Steve Laube:
Your unswerving commitment to tell me the truth
instead of what I wanted to hear
is why I love having you as my agent.

I hope we all get to work together again.

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A HOUSE DIVIDED

DEEP WITHIN, ADORA CONTINUED to harbor the possibility that her uncle, King Rodran, might still live, but the pallid faces of those on the ship, especially Errol's, refuted all hope.

As always, Errol's presence drew her gaze as a lodestone drew iron, and the thought of him made her acutely aware of herself: the feel of her hair against her face, the way the fabric of her clothes caressed her skin as she moved, the warmth of her blood pulsing through her veins.

She resisted the urge to scan the deck for him. He would be at the stern, close to the rail. Seasickness, dosed at intervals by Tek's store of zingiber root, kept him at the rear of the ship, away from her bout with Rokha.

Knees flexed, Adora attempted to distribute her weight as evenly between front foot and back as skill and practice could contrive. Tucking a contrary strand of her golden blond hair behind one ear, she sighted along the wooden staves that served as her practice sword and circled her opponent, searching for an opening that didn't exist.

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The wind, bitter with cold and grief, carried the tang of salt to where she stood. When she wet her lips, the taste of decay beneath the flavor of the waters of the Beron Strait filled her mouth. Errol's majority was still less than a year in his past, yet she, the only princess of Illustra, wavered between desiring his protection and wanting to safeguard him in turn. She started to laugh but held it back.

"Is something funny, Princess?" Rokha asked. Naaman Ru's raven-haired daughter stood two paces from her, a practice sword tracing lazy circles, like a snake waiting to strike. Her dark eyes, which usually blazed with hawklike intensity, were limned with smudges of grief and fatigue over the death of her father. Only the presence of Merodach, the watchman Rokha loved, managed to kindle her customary fire.

Adora moved to her right, testing her footing on the deck through her soft-soled boots. "Yes. I don't know whether to protect him or kiss him. He may be the strangest man I've ever met."

Rokha's soft chuckle misted the air. "You've led a sheltered life on your isle, Princess. The women of Basquon will tell you all men are strange—and they speak the truth—but mostly they are all strange in the same way. Errol is odd in his strangeness. He's seen more in the past year than most men could boast in a lifetime and has saved the kingdom twice under a burden that would crush most men, yet he still seems a boy in many ways."

The princess basked in the knowledge that Errol was hers before allowing a sigh to whisper from her lips. "The kingdom hardly treats him like a hero."

Rokha's dark eyes flared, making her resemble a bird of prey even more than usual. "They made him bait for Illustra's enemies." She spat across the deck. "There is steel in that man of yours that surprises even me." Rokha's full lips parted in a grin, and she chuckled deep in her throat. "And he has other skills, Princess. His lips are soft and his kisses stirring for one so young."

Adora knew this trick—it was Rokha's favorite—but even so, a spasm of jealous anger broke her concentration for an instant

before she could suppress it, and in that moment Rokha struck. The clack of swords sounded in a desperate staccato before Rokha landed a blow on Adora's shoulder. Again.

Adora held up a hand, flexed the arm. "That is a cheap trick."

Mirth melted away from Ru's daughter. "In battle there is alive and there is dead. That is all, Princess."

She shook her head in denial. "And how many will know to use Errol against me that way?"

"More than you think. You haven't made your love of him a secret. That was foolish."

For a moment she bristled, but the truth of Rokha's words couldn't be denied. She'd been rash—first to follow him, then to proclaim her love in Basquon. "He needs me, Rokha. How much can one person suffer?"

Rokha nodded. "True. I thought the priest's confession had broken him."

A fist closed around Adora's heart at the memory of Martin's revelations, how they had drained the life from Errol's eyes. She had never seen anyone still breathing appear so dead, yet some inspiration or circumstance in Merakh had restored him.

He smiled readily now, but Adora did not find herself reassured by his new, easy familiarity. Raised at court, she'd learned early to read the gestures and expressions nobles, churchmen, and courtiers used to hide the secrets locked within their hearts. Errol's dimpled smile held everything she'd once desired from him—warmth, affection, and love—but behind the deep cerulean of his eyes lurked a secret. She did not trust secrets, not with Errol, not after Martin stabbed her through the heart by announcing either Errol or Liam must die. She fumed, angry at her inability to pry Errol's plan from his lips.

The ship entered King's Port to the sound of Amos Tek calling for less sail. The captain maneuvered his charge past a pair of high-decked cogs manned by guards with crossbows.

Adora stumbled, her concern over Errol forgotten. Gusts of wind lifted oiled cloaks, revealing the livery of the men on those

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ships, men who should have been wearing the red of kingdom guards. Instead, each wore royal blue with a slash of white across the chest. Duke Weir's colors. And the ships were closing in. She searched the royal compound on the cliffs above, darted a glance over the port rail, and hurried to starboard. The harbor swarmed with ships, all manned by sailors in those same colors. King's Port was blockaded.

What had happened?

She spun, making for the broad steps that led below, intent on warning Martin and the rest. They met her halfway, Karele and Rale in the lead. Their pinched expressions told Adora they too had seen Weir's men. They stampeded past her, heading back toward Amos Tek, drawing her in their wake.

On the aft deck, Martin peppered Tek with questions. "What's the meaning of this, Captain? Those are Weir's men."

Tek rolled his shoulders, but the planes of his face, grown hard at the sight of the blockade, belied the casual gesture. "They've bottled up the harbor, right enough."

Martin rubbed a beefy hand across his jowls. "A precaution?"

Tek shook his head. "I doubt it, by the sea, I do. There are other ships entering the harbor without attracting this attention."

Errol came forward from his spot on the rail. He brushed his fingers across Adora's cheek in passing, and the sensation brought warmth and chills to her skin.

"They know who we are," he said. "By now the conclave and the Judica realize we've survived the trip to Merakh."

Luis nodded his agreement. Martin turned to face Karele, head of the solis, one of those who claimed to hear Auras, the spirit of Deas. "How were they able see us?"

If the presence of Weir's ships bothered Karele, the little man gave no sign. His large brown eyes remained calm, and no hint of alarm showed on his sharp features. "For some reason, Auras has allowed us to be discovered."

"Why?" The question crackled in the air before Adora fully realized she'd asked it. A thread of panic wormed its way into her

heart. The Weir family wanted her. As the only surviving member of the royal family, Adora's hand would bestow legitimacy on the next king, and Weir meant to claim the throne.

Karele gave a brief shake of his head, the breeze ruffling his dark hair. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. I don't know."

"Then I suggest we get everyone below," Cruk said. His voice sounded like gravel being broken to dust. "If Weir is searching for us, let's make sure he doesn't find what he's looking for."

Luis demurred. "There's no need. As Errol has said, the duke knows we're here. If we are visible to those readers loyal to Weir, they've seen us coming for the last two weeks."

Cruk's hand moved to his sword. "I was afraid you'd say that." He squeezed his eyes shut. "You'd think with war on our doorstep we'd be wise enough not to fight each other." His heavy face wore a deep scowl, and his right hand clenched the pommel of the sword at his waist.

Martin waved a hand, and a measure of the tension in Cruk's stance eased.

"Let us see what the good duke's intentions may be," Martin said. His gesture took in the ships that surrounded them, and his face became somber. "Conflict will only serve his ends. We must reach the Judica."

Hemmed in, Tek ordered more sail furled to keep the wind from driving them into their escort. The ship on their starboard side, bristling with blue-coated soldiers armed with crossbows, glided closer. A tall man, his hair and beard dark with oil, hailed them. "You do not fly the colors of Illustra. Drop anchor, in the name of the regent." A cloaked and hooded figure stood behind him, leaning forward as if whispering directions.

Martin stepped to the rail, his face clouded. "Regent? What man styles himself regent at Erinon?"

The man in blue flushed, but his eyes narrowed at the tone of authority in Martin's voice. "Duke Weir rules until a king is chosen."

"And by what right does the duke assume regency?" Martin

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asked. As he spoke, he opened his cloak to reveal his seal of office, proclaiming himself a benefice of the church.

The man bowed. “I crave your pardon, Excellency. The Judica installed Duke Weir as regent upon King Rodran’s death.”

Martin’s lips formed what would have been a smile had his eyes not remained so very cold. “Ah, I have been away from the Judica on church business. I pray you, Captain, please give the order to allow us to proceed. I have news that must be delivered to the Judica as soon as possible.”

The hooded figure behind the captain stepped around to address Martin. “Of that, I have no doubt, but I think it best if the captain and his men escort you personally to the isle.”

The muted afternoon light did not penetrate the hood, but the voice held a self-satisfied tone. Adora suppressed a chill. Her status and authority had been altered by Rodran’s death. In hundreds of years no princess had ever outlived the succession of Magis’s line. Until now.

She drew herself up and approached the rail, in hopes the habit of obedience to the royal family would allow her to countermand the stranger’s order. “Do you know who I am, Captain?” She paused for the captain’s nod and reply—“Yes, Princess”—before continuing. “I thank you for your offer of passage, but I assure you we are capable of delivering ourselves to the isle and the Judica.”

Amused laughter erupted from the hood of the captain’s advisor, and freckled hands rose to doff the covering. “But you won’t be going to the Judica, Princess—at least not yet.” A shock of red hair above a cold blue-eyed stare stabbed shards of ice into her heart. “Your business is with the regent. The captain has been commanded to deliver you to the duke, and to him you will go.”

Benefice Dane gave Martin a mocking bow. “I don’t think you’ll be surprised to learn you’ve been stripped of your orders and authority, *Pater*.” He stressed the last word with laughter.

His gaze lingered a moment on Martin before moving to search the rest of the party. “Ah, there you are, Earl Stone, hiding behind the legitimacy of others as usual. I must say I was surprised to

find you'd survived your trip to Merakh." Rabid hunger showed in Dane's face, and he leaned toward Errol with an expression of longing. "I think the Judica will give you to me now. Once we've proven my charge against you, you will die."

Burly men with grappling hooks and rope hauled the boats together, straining until the hollow thump of their hulls struck a funeral sound, as though Rodran had died all over again. Adora crossed into the custody of Weir's men along with Errol, Martin, and Luis.

Benefice Dane laughed at the sight of Rale, Merodach, and the rest of their party lining the rail on Tek's ship, their eyes filled with violence. He turned to the captain, who tugged his beard with short, nervous jerks. "Pass the order to the other ships: keep these men on their ship and in the harbor until you hear from us."

As guards escorted the men to quarters below, Errol threw Adora a smile that was surely meant to be encouraging but only succeeded in emphasizing her vulnerability. She tried to go with them, but Dane's arm blocked her way, his smile lazy and indulgent. "Not you, Princess. You'll dine with me."

Adora straightened. She'd never been tall, but Rodran had taught her how to dominate a room despite her average stature.

The benefice fluttered a hand at her indignation. "Please spare me your royal displeasure. Duke Weir rules now, and soon the Judica and conclave will confirm him as king."

Adora laughed, filling her expression with scorn and derision. "You think the cast will fall to Duke Weir? Any number of men could be chosen."

Dane gave her a smile one might bestow on a dim-witted child. "I'm surprised to find you so naïve, Princess. Duke Weir is the most powerful man in the kingdom. There is no alternative."

Adora bit the inside of her cheek. "The cast will have to be confirmed. The Judica knows Earl Stone is alive."

Benefice Dane stepped forward, his eyes ravenous. She flinched as he brushed her cheek in a gesture that was a caricature of Errol's caress. "Earl Stone will be executed for usurping the Judica's

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authority. His trial is a mere formality. He will have the chance to make himself useful to the duke beforehand, however, as a way to offer penance.”

She backed away until the rail stopped her.

Dane followed. His warm breath moved across her face, heavy with the scent of wine and cloves. “Don’t fret, Princess. Unlike the omne, you will find your station is secure.”

Blood dropped so quickly to her stomach the ship reeled and black spots danced in her vision. “What do you mean?”

Dane favored her with a tight-lipped smile, basking in her discomfort. “You will be queen, Princess.” The benefice’s smile grew, baring his teeth. “Oh yes, Duke Weir knows his only son lies dead in Merakh. You have much to thank me for. Originally, he blamed you almost as much as that puffed-up little peasant boy you’ve favored. He was going to have you both killed, but I persuaded him that your position and”—he leered—“other attributes were too valuable to waste. Duke Weir will make you the mother of the next dynasty.”

She backed away. His threats couldn’t be true. The archbenefice and primus would never allow it. “The duke already has a wife.”

A look of profound regret twisted the benefice’s features into a facade of sorrow. “I’m afraid the duchess has suffered an unfortunate accident. She fell down a flight of stairs. Oddly enough, it happened shortly after the duke learned his son had died and you were returning.”

Horror threatened to overwhelm her. She clenched her hands into fists. They trembled anyway. “You’re insane.”

“Possibly.” Dane shrugged, his smile remaining intact. “I don’t think you’ll find Duke Weir to be a particularly gentle lover. It seems that despite my best efforts, he still considers you at least partially responsible for his son’s death. But be of good cheer, Princess. At least your fate will be better than your paramour’s. Once the Judica has convicted Errol Stone of tampering with the succession, the duke plans something truly imaginative and lingering for him.”

When the ship glided into dock, Adora spied more of Duke Weir's men lining the piers. The sight of the blue-clad men affronted her as if the change in attire had been designed to expunge the memory of her uncle.

When the guards brought Errol and the others from below-decks, she edged close to Martin as they crossed over from the ship to dry land. "How many men does Weir have?"

The ex-benefice shrugged, but lines of worry creased his bluff face. "By all accounts, the duke has nearly fifty thousand under arms."

Adora tried to school her features, but shock pounded through her chest like a second heartbeat. The garrisons of the kingdom totaled one hundred thousand, but few of those men could be pulled back to the Green Isle. The troops were needed to safeguard the provinces bordering Merakh and the steppes. Weir could exert total authority over the island with half the men under his command.

She looked up to see Martin watching her. "I see you've grasped the problem, Your Highness. The duke may not be Deas's choice for king, but he may end up being the Judica's. The idea of martyrdom is stirring in the tales and histories, but few men have the constitution for it in the present."

"We are undone, Martin," she whispered. Desperation constricted her throat.

"Not yet, Highness," the priest said. "Deas has surprised me too much of late for me to surrender to hopelessness. And do not forget Errol."

At the mention of him, her heart skipped. She turned to spy him some ten paces back under heavy guard.

Martin nodded. "The hand of Deas is on him. Would that I had known it sooner."

They ascended the long winding incline toward the imperial compound. Absence and circumstance made the familiar lines of the palace strange, as if the next turn might place her in a location she wouldn't recognize.

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Once in the palace, the guards escorted them toward the king's—she corrected herself, the regent's—private audience chamber, where they separated them—most leading Errol, Martin, and Luis away while the rest hemmed her in.

Massive doors swung open. The echo of her footsteps warned Adora before she lifted her head to survey the nearly empty hall. Long stone benches to each side were devoid of the usual crowd of courtiers and functionaries, but at the far end, Weir filled the chair on the dais, flanked by eight blue-garbed soldiers. A jolt shot through her chest. Where were the watchmen? Granted, Weir was not king, but as regent he should have been guarded by the king's elite.

Adora noted the closed ranks of the soldiers and shook her head in disgust. Her uncle had never used more than four watchmen at a time. Perhaps it was a sign of Weir's vanity or insecurity. Either way, she chose to view it as weakness. She would not let him see her tremble.

Duke Weir, regent of all Illustra, beckoned her forward.