

ISLES OF  
STORM &  
SORROW

# VULTURE

BEX HOGAN

Orion

*I'm struggling to stay upright . . .*

*It's time to end this . . .*

*Bronn glides his blade across my neck . . .*

*Heat blazes through my whole body . . .*

*I slide down . . .*

*I gasp for air but choke on blood . . .*

*I'm dying alone . . .*

*I'm afraid.*

*I'm so very sad.*

*I'm . . .*

PART ONE  
**AWAKE**





There's no peace. Just pain. Cold and lonely despair that shatters every nerve, every bone, every fading heartbeat. It should be no surprise that dying hurts, and yet here I am, cursing the agony that consumes me. The crushing weight of finality rushes to meet me, my body empty of essence, nature declaring I've reached the end. All I have to do is let go.

It's so tempting. I'm not afraid of death, but I'm so very tired of living. I could surrender myself to the sands, soak into the island, become one with the earth, until not even a stain remains to betray my presence here. My life would be a forgotten whisper carried on the wind. I would be free.

But I cannot abandon the Isles. I will not.

And so I resist. In the space after my final heartbeat fades, when my body has stopped but my soul remains, I watch as the threads of my spirit drift upwards away from me, separating from my flesh, ready to sever permanently. This is the final test to pass. I must be quick, or it'll be too late and this last remnant of who I am will leave my body. I have never succeeded in doing this before, but while I've hesitated with others, now there is no fear. If it goes wrong, then I simply stay

dead. I alone will suffer, and that knowledge gives me comfort, resolve.

The strands are familiar as I weave them with my mind, and I have an advantage because I can feel them fit into place as I reconnect them to the body lying cold on the sand.

My confidence grows and warmth buzzes through me. It's urgent but peaceful, and so very *right*.

But the heat escalates beyond my control, and a blinding light surrounds me, scorching the peace away, eviscerating my confidence, pain consuming me until all my previous failures seem like merciful escapes.

There's no relief as the light thickens into an impenetrable blackness that forces itself down my throat and nose, choking me, destroying me, ripping me to pieces with ferocious intensity. Still the heat burns, flowing with the darkness. I can't survive this, won't survive this. I am being obliterated.

And then I understand.

Not obliteration.

Not even simply revival.

I am being *remade*.

Great power is forged in fire. Its flames engulf me now. The sacrifice has been given, the test passed. All that remains is to endure.

My bones shatter and mend, flesh melts then cools, all of me destroyed and reformed from the inside out.

The essence of who I was knits around this new form, a physically familiar shell with something new at its core. Pure magic.

And then, after a minute, after an eternity, I take a breath. Deep and long. It fills my lungs, and restarts my heart.

I'm alive.

For a moment I don't move. I just lie staring up at the sky, wondering if it is looking back in disbelief, an astonished witness to my resurrection. But the clouds roll over with indifference. As if nothing happened. As if I didn't just bleed to death.

I lift my hand to my throat, hardly daring to touch the wound, fearing what I might find, but feel only soft, warm skin. Healed.

I look down to where before fingers were missing. Then at my feet, where toes had been severed. They have been restored as completely as my life.

Cautiously I sit up, and in place of the pain that not long ago coursed through every fibre of my being, there is nothing but magic woven into the fabric of my soul. Its physical presence contradicts itself. It's hot yet cold, heavy yet light, sharp yet soft. It's familiar but strange, a perfect fit, yet too much to contain.

I am a Mage.

But there's something else. Something beyond the magic. Something altered. I can't identify it, the thought

intangible and moving fleetingly from my grasp, but I sense it nonetheless.

Is it possible that maybe, just maybe, I haven't quite restored myself to who I once was?

But that uncomfortable thought is pushed aside by more urgent ones – can I still sense Esther's protections? Do I remain hidden here? Am I safe from the man who imprisoned and tortured me? Despite the fact that my body is fortified with magic, it recoils in fear at the mere memory of him. Of Gaius. But Esther's enchantments hold strong, her familiar magic resonating with my own.

I need to focus. I fought past death for one reason and one reason only. To protect the Isles and the people I love. The blood moon is coming, I can sense it on the air, which means there isn't time to waste.

I have to get back to the East. To Torin.

I flex my fingers, both old and new, the power moving through them, through me, as though it has replaced the blood in my veins.

Who am I now? I stand, unsteady as a newborn fawn, faltering to find myself. There is the woman I was, I recognise her within me, but this pounding force that is also now a part of me demands attention.

Yes, I must return east to save Torin. But something else whispers inside me, persistent and strong, like the promise of a storm on the wind. For all those I love,

there are those I hate. And now vengeance might just be within my grasp. I cannot face Gaius, not yet, not until I'm certain of my capabilities – but he's not my only enemy.

I try to quiet the thought, but it worms its way in, burrowing deep.

*You can kill the King.*

Once Torin is safe, I can finally take revenge on the man who tried everything he could to kill me. I thought I needed an army to defeat him, but maybe I just needed magic.

And when the King's gone, there will be one confrontation remaining for me in the East.

Bronn.

I position the stones carefully along the edge of the beach. This will be the first test of my new power and I'm nervous. Once I'd allowed myself a moment to bask in the fact that I could walk properly again, I'd set straight to work. While I'm certain that Esther's protective magic continues to shield this place from Gaius's view, I can't be too careful. I've imbued each smooth stone with magic, whispering the incantation *felra* – hide – over every one, so they may create an invisible barrier around this corner of the island. I don't want anyone to see what I'm about to do.

I walk to the water's edge and take a breath,



wondering if my plan will work. There's only one way to find out. When I summon forth the magic it answers differently to before, now coming as easily as words to the tongue. A rush of heat rises inside me. My blood is boiling in my veins, until it runs dry to pure magic, a world of untamed power harnessed in skeleton and flesh. I have never been so alive. Or so unpredictable. The wild nature of the magic grips me tightly, and it's wonderfully freeing. I'm no longer restricted by anything, not my past, not my future. I am no longer Marianne, but so much more.

My fingers graze the water and call out for the one I seek.

*Rysa vatfa fugda. Veitja mi flutni.*

The last time I did this, I was foolish, commanding what wasn't mine to command, trying to wield a weapon that could not be harnessed. But not now. Now I whisper to an ally, one who understands the tongue I speak in, the language of the islands, the royalty, the Mages.

I do not fear her any more, do not wish to control her. I simply ask for her help.

And almost immediately she answers.

Ripping the fabric of the ocean wide open, the water raptor emerges, soaring straight upwards and stretching her four colossal wings wide to hold her in the air. She screams out with delight, a sound that

reaches inside me, connecting with my magic, shivering through my bones.

I hold my arms up, focusing all my energy on shielding the sight from Gaius's eyes.

The water raptor circles in the sky several times, drinking in the air, the sun on her feathered back, before she descends and lands on the beach before me. She holds her head high and proud, and I walk slowly towards her, the exertion of using my magic to keep us hidden taking an unexpected toll.

After a moment, she lowers her neck, her massive head stretching to meet mine, until we're so close that our breath and thoughts mingle as one.

When she hears what I desire, she grunts in understanding, unfurling a wing so that I can climb up on to her back. Her feathers are slick like oil and thick as rope, and I coil my hands around them to keep a grip, positioning myself just behind the first of the massive fins that run down her spine.

As soon as I'm secure, she senses it, and pushes away from the ground. We're rising towards the clouds and I can feel the world falling away beneath me. The sense of freedom is so acute I could almost forget the islands beneath us, and fly away with the raptor to explore the wider world. But, alas, I cannot. Nor can I even fly to the Eastern Isles, not without attracting a lot of unwanted attention. I cannot keep us hidden

as we travel at such a speed.

Though I'm braced for it, the raptor's descent is sharp and swift, throwing me forward so that I'm forced to grab handfuls of feathers to stop from falling. She plunges back into the water with such speed and grace, I barely have time to fill my lungs before we're deep enough for all the light to disappear.

Slowly I release the air I swallowed. Once this would have terrified me. For so many years the ocean kept me captive on a ship because I feared it more than Adler. But now, in these still depths, I find a peace I hadn't expected. The world of water does not belong to me or any other human; it has no mistress but the moon and its elemental enchantments call to the magic now fused to my bones.

As my lungs begin to dangerously empty, the raptor resurfaces, allowing me time to breathe, and the moment I'm ready we once again submerge.

I revel in her speed and embrace the thick nothingness of the deep. In this moment I am not at war, not running for my life, fighting for my islands. There is no heartbreak, no pain. Nothing beyond the raw power of the raptor, and the crushing strength of the ocean. If I can harness even a fraction of their might, the Isles stand a chance.

*And your enemies will fall at your feet.*

Just like that, the need for vengeance rushes into the

space created by the stillness. So many have sought to do me wrong, to steal my life, to silence my voice. How I long for my very name to drive fear into their hearts. For them to regret ever betraying me. To have my revenge. This time I don't try to silence the thought.

I relish it.