

NIGHTWEAVER

R. M. GRAY



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the USA by Gatekeeper Press, 2023
First Little, Brown Edition published in the USA by Little, Brown and Company,
a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2025
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Books, 2025

001

Text copyright © Rebekah Gray, 2023, 2025
Map by Srdjan Vidakovic

Family tree copyright © Colin Verdi, 2025
Rose ornaments © paprika/Shutterstock.com
Dagger art © Deiby Vargas/Shutterstock.com

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity,
encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture.

Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting
intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House
to continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in
any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Interior design by Michelle Gengaro
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-73506-0

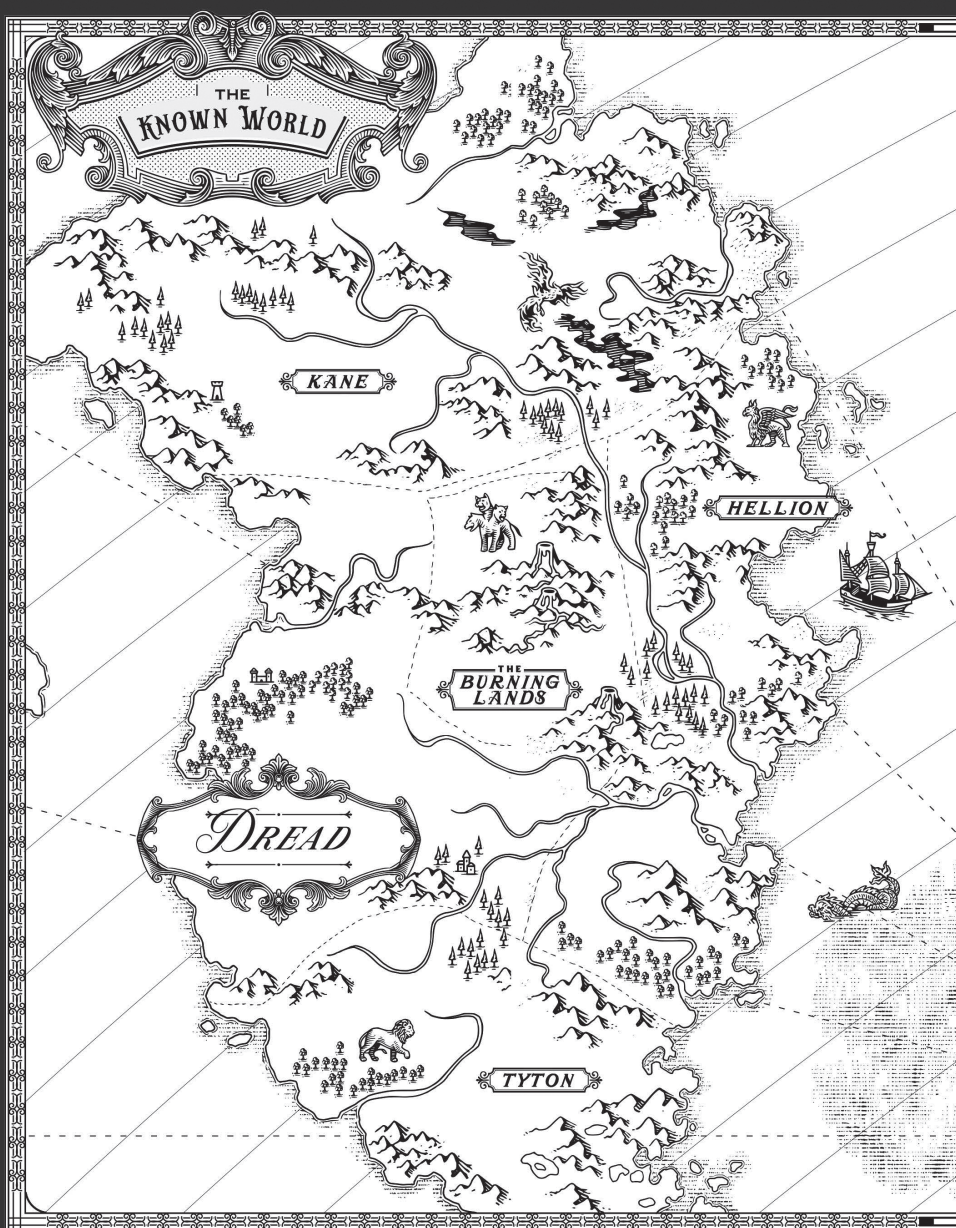
All correspondence to:
Penguin Books

Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



Penguin Random House is committed to a
sustainable future for our business, our readers
and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Mom and Dad, for always believing.
And for my husband, Harry, for dreaming
with me.







Philip Oberon
(Father)



Owen, 21



Margaret, 19



Lewis, 18



Elsie, 8



*Grace Oberon
(Mother)*

Charlie, 20

Aster, 17

Albert, 11

NIGHTWEAVER

PART ONE



MERCY



CHAPTER ONE

I'm not fast enough.

When the alarm rings out, warning of the attack, Owen is already armed and racing up the companionway of our family's ship.

"Don't worry, little mouse." My brother casts a wry smile over his shoulder as he tucks the knave of clubs playing card—his *lucky* card, as he calls it—up his sleeve, dirty-blond hair tumbling into his tawny eyes. "I'm sure there'll still be something for you to do."

I groan, stuffing daggers and pistols into every holster and sheath strapped to my body.

"Greedy pirate!" I call after him, a smirk tugging at my lips. Owen, the eldest of my six siblings and me, always claims the glory of first victory in battle and the best loot. But I never complain, and neither do my brothers and sisters, because there is no one I trust more to protect what our parents have fought so hard to secure—a

home aboard the finest vessel a pirate could hope for, crewed by the nine of us, free to sail the Western Sea, and safe from the monsters that live on land.

I take a quick inventory of my weapons, checking each one off as I touch their hilts and handles. A knife in each boot, a dagger at either hip, four pistols at my back...satisfied with my walking armory, I take my cutlass in hand and chase after Owen.

Before I reach the top step, thick black smoke chokes the morning air. I emerge onto the main deck of the *Lightbringer* expecting a bloodbath, but this is worse.

Much worse.

My foot slips, and my back slams against the deck, knocking the breath from my lungs. The thunder of cannons trembles in my chest, a deafening crash of splintering wood. I try to gather my bearings, but something hot and sticky soaks my clothes; it drips from my tangled hair, filling my senses with the bitter, metallic bite of copper. To my left, the pool of crimson originates from a headless body.

I don't need to see the face to know whose blood saturates me from head to toe.

Mary Cross, a refugee we took aboard only last week, after an enemy clan of pirates attacked her family's ship. They slaughtered the Cross clan, leaving Mary adrift in the Dire, a dark stretch of ocean plagued by sea monsters and cutthroat pirates. It seems she escaped one battle only to meet her family's same fate not a week later.

"On your feet!" Owen hoists me upright. He shouts something else, but I don't hear him over the din of clashing metal.

I know of only one ship capable of creating such mayhem. In the

two months I was held captive aboard the *Deathwail*, chained in the dank, dark hull of the cannibals' ship, I listened as they attacked countless vessels, stealing pirate children from their parents in the dead of night. A year has passed since I was rescued, but I still feel the burn of the rope those bloodthirsty brutes tied around my neck. I still remember the word they used to justify their fear of an emaciated, unarmed sixteen-year-old.

Cursed.

"Who—"

As the word leaves my mouth, a blaze of fire illuminates the towering black sails of the ship at our starboard side, and I have my answer. This is not the work of the *Deathwail*. Not the work of a rival clan. A black flag, embroidered with the scarlet sun of the Eerie, billows in the wind.

Nightweavers.

I look back toward Owen, hoping to find some inkling of reassurance in his face—in his kind, tawny eyes, so much like our father's, or his cheeky, carefree grin, a mirror image of our mother's—but I'm met with an expression of fear I've never seen before. Not in him.

He grabs my shoulders, clutching me with urgency. "Whatever you do, don't let them take you." And with that, he's gone, another faceless figure in the darkness.

My fist tightens around the hilt of my cutlass. *I will not let them take me.*

But I do not fear for myself. This is not my first battle. I have tasted blood and ash. I have plunged my dagger into the heart of my enemy. I have ended a life with the weight of a bullet. Elsie—sweet, innocent Elsie—has never had to endure the sting of a knife.

For eight years, Mother and Father have been careful to shield my little sister from the horrors of the life my siblings and I lead. She has never witnessed a massacre such as this.

Today will be no different.

My feet pivot, and instead of diving headfirst into the fray, I start belowdecks. But as I turn, two figures block my only path to the companionway.

“Not so fast, *pirate*,” comes a rough voice as one of the men takes a step toward me, his iron blade held between us. *Humans*, I realize when I see their hard faces. But why would these humans choose to crew alongside Nightweavers?

No matter. No one stands between my sister and me.

I flourish my cutlass. “You say *pirate* like it’s an insult.”

The first man lunges, and I dodge his strike with ease. I twirl, bringing my blade down in a smooth arc, slicing his chest wide open. He falls to his knees, blood spraying onto his face. The sight of it spurs something in me—something I’ve felt before in the heat of battle: a sort of thrumming in my chest, like the rhythm of waves as they lap at the hull of a ship. Before the second man can find his footing, I use the momentum I gained to pierce his throat. I withdraw my blade with a wet *shlink*, and he falls to the deck beside his companion.

Too easy.

I step over their bodies, my boot sticking to the first bloodied tread of the passage that leads belowdecks. That’s when I hear her.

“*Aster!*” Elsie shrieks, calling for me. I spin on my heel, trying to make sense of my surroundings in the haze of smoke. Fire razes the mainmast of the *Lightbringer*—my first and only home for seventeen years. Our enemy’s reckless attack is a declaration—the

Nightweavers don't plan on looting our meager stores; *we* are the only cargo they're interested in.

I sense movement to my right and lash out, my sword clashing with that of my sister Margaret. It's like looking in a mirror. She's two years older than me, but with the same wild, untamed hair that falls to her waist in dark brown waves, crisp with blood. Tears limn her sapphire eyes as she grits her teeth, lowering her sword.

"They took Elsie," she cries over the roar of fire, her voice breaking. "Charlie tried to get her back, but—"

"Margaret!" Our most elusive brother, Lewis, appears at her side, half of his face bloodied from a gash in his head. As the ship's resident spymaster, he always manages to keep his cool in battle. But he's still just an eighteen-year-old boy, and though it hardly ever shows, he looks every bit his age as he pants for breath, his light brown eyes wide. "Albert's wounded. His leg—"

Another blast sends shards of wood flying past us, slicing my face and arms. Margaret appears torn between tending to Albert and addressing my fresh wounds. But Albert is only eleven. He shouldn't even be in this fight.

"Go!" I shout through the pain.

Margaret hesitates only a second longer before she and Lewis charge into a plume of smoke. Alone again, I sip at the air, attempting to slow my heartbeat and focus on the task at hand.

"*Aster!*" Elsie cries—closer now as I near the starboard railing.

Before I can determine a course of action, Owen emerges from the smoke. Once again he's faster, grabbing hold of a line and leaping across the gap between our ship and the Nightweavers'. Without thinking, I follow him, careful not to glance at the dark waters

below. My knees collide with the deck of the Nightweavers' ship, but I'm on my feet in seconds, my spine flush against Owen's.

"Damn it," he snarls, and I'm surprised I hear him over the roar of the cannon as it rips another hole in the *Lightbringer*.

He must have heard her, too—little Elsie, in the arms of a Nightweaver, crying out for help. But she's nowhere to be seen. And we're surrounded.

Six Nightweavers encircle us, wielding rapiers that appear darker than any metal I've ever seen, the black iron glimmering with iridescent shades of purple, green, and blue. Their black cloaks are not suited for a life at sea, and their disfigured faces are hidden beneath the shadows of their hoods, but I've heard enough stories to know what I'm missing. Sallow skin, sharp teeth, eyes that shift between oily black pits and glowing red beacons. The stuff of old wives' tales, meant to scare children into behaving. Only, myths and legends won't tear your flesh from your bones in one bite. Nightweavers will.

There is a reason humans fled to the water six hundred years ago. After the Fall, Nightweavers claimed the land for themselves, hunting our kind to near extinction. The ocean was supposed to keep us safe. They weren't supposed to follow us here. But as trade flourishes between Hellion, a kingdom along the coast of Dread in the west, and the Tamed Lands to the east, more Nightweaver ships are being spotted near the borders of the Dire. They're hunting us again. And this time, we have nowhere left to run.

I swallow hard, stealing a glance toward our ship. Are Mother and Father still alive? Did they hear Elsie's cry?

My pulse hammers in my throat. Behind me, Owen's shoulders tense. How many times have we stood back-to-back, facing down our enemy, and laughed? *Why isn't he laughing?*

"I'm sorry," he breathes, his elbow brushing mine. I know what he really means. When we lose—and we will—he will not let the Nightweavers take me.

He'll kill me before they get the chance.

If we were facing an enemy clan, his promise would give me peace. A quick death at the hand of my brother is a kindness. But my stomach sours at the thought of Elsie. If the rest of us die in battle, what will become of her?

With my empty hand, I clutch the medallion hanging from my neck, my thumb grazing the embossed skull and crossed daggers on the surface of the bronze coin. I stole it off the pirate who saved me from the *Deathwail*, if only to prove I didn't imagine him in my feverish state. Some nights, when I wake in a fit of terror, I clutch the medallion to remind myself the nightmare is over. Now, as my fingers trace the symbol of death, the words he spoke to me as I slipped in and out of consciousness brush up against my mind. *Now's not the time for dying, love*, he said. *Remember, you have to live.*

Dying is easy. To save Elsie—to save my family—I'll have to live. Because if I'm not there to protect her from whatever gruesome fate the Nightweavers have planned for her, who will?

"What about the Red Island?" I say, nudging Owen, my eyes narrowed on the Nightweavers as they tighten their ranks to close the distance between us. "You said we'd find it together."

Owen rolls his head on his neck, sighing. "I thought you gave up on it."

I shift my weight and assume an offensive stance. "You know me better than that."

Many pirates have told tales of the mysterious Red Island, a haven for seafaring humans hidden deep within the Dire, where

few ever dare to venture. For years, Owen has implored Mother and Father to search for the Red Island. Still, they refuse. *It's only a legend*, they tell him. But he doesn't believe that. And neither do I.

I hear a smile in his voice when he says, "We go together, then."

Owen lurches forward, and I lose myself in the dance. I keep light on my feet, locked in battle with two Nightweavers, dodging their blows with ease. Their heavy cloaks offer me an advantage; the Nightweavers are slow, their steps unsure as the waves toss us to and fro.

I grit my teeth as the clang of metal on metal vibrates my jaw. They might not be accustomed to fighting aboard a ship, but I'm no match for a Nightweaver—much less two. They don't tire like us, and I summon every ounce of my strength to match them strike for strike.

"Aster!" Elsie wails.

I lose focus for only a second, but that's all it takes. In the instant I turn my head, searching for Elsie in the haze, the Nightweaver nearest to me lunges, his rapier aimed at my heart.

I'm not fast enough.

But Owen is.

He parries, throwing himself in front of me with enough force to knock me backward. I stumble, landing on a heap of bodies. He bested four Nightweavers, and I couldn't handle even two. If we live, he'll never let me forget it.

I barely find my footing when I'm yanked into the air. Two large hands wrap around my throat. Black spots edge my vision, and my cutlass clatters to the deck. A strangled yelp escapes me, though I wish it didn't.

This time, it's Owen who turns.

His eyes—his kind eyes—find me in an instant. They widen as a deep red stain blooms on his chest.

A Nightweaver withdraws his blade, slick with blood, and Owen's body crumples forward.

I want to scream, but the hands around my throat tighten. Owen's body blurs through my tears, but I can't look away from him. My oldest brother—my best friend—is dead. And it's all my fault.

Kill me, I plead silently, praying for death. But even as I think the words, shame claws viciously at my chest. *No*. Elsie needs me. My family needs me. I have to keep fighting. I have to live.

I struggle and kick, but the pressure builds in my head, bulging behind my eyes. Just as the world goes dark, I'm sent sprawling onto the deck. I reach for Owen's sleeve, clawing at the rough linen like I can rouse him from no more than a deep sleep.

"Get up!" I shout. "We go together! We have to go together!"

"Leave him!" barks a hoarse voice.

When I look up, I find Mother has followed us onto the Nightweavers' ship. She stands over my attacker's body, her face red with blood, her dark, untamed waves cascading down her yellow brocade coat. A crimson fountain gushes from the Nightweaver's throat, spilling onto her feet, but she doesn't seem to notice. She fixes her intense gaze on the two Nightweavers now backing away from where Owen and I lie.

"Get back to the *Lightbringer*!" she croaks, her face streaked where tears have cut through the smattering of scarlet. "Find Father—get to the jolly boat. Now!"

I know better than to disobey her, but that doesn't stop me. Elsie is still on this ship, and I will not let another sibling's blood

stain my hands. Not while I have breath in my lungs and enough bullets to take down anyone who stands in my way. I press a kiss to Owen's head and lift his arm, slipping the leather bracelet from his wrist onto mine.

I draw a pistol from my back, and while Mother is distracted with the two Nightweavers, I start for the companionway. When I reach the first step, I pivot slightly, my finger resting on the trigger. He's in my line of sight—Owen's murderer—but I freeze. The Nightweaver has his back to me, engaged in a duel with Mother—but there's something else, too.

A dark, shadowy figure seeps from the Nightweaver's body, taking on a form of its own. It looms over him, facing me, with scarlet eyes and teeth like daggers. It lets out a bloodcurdling shriek as it darts past me and disappears through the double doors of the captain's quarters.

The Nightweaver drops, convulsing at Mother's feet. His companion stumbles back in horror, and in that moment, I think he might actually seem human. *They feel fear, too.* Good to know.

Mother uses the opportunity to cut down his companion, and when he falls, she drives her blade through the other's chest, putting him out of his misery. I catch her eye, and she dips her chin at me, as if she forgot she ordered me to retreat, or doesn't care.

"I'll find Elsie," she says, closing the space between us in a few strides. She places a hand on my shoulder, and the surrounding chaos seems to slow, if just for a moment, as her eyes linger on Owen's body. "All is well."

All is well—the customary response to death in battle. The words are meant to be both a comfort and a call to arms, but they've never felt so hollow.

Mother heads belowdecks, trusting that this time I'll obey and return to the ship, but I don't move. I stare at the double doors, my pistol heavy in my hand. Mother and Father always taught us to ration our bullets, but somehow I think this may be the last chance I'll ever get to use them. And whatever's waiting for me inside the captain's quarters won't go down without a fight.

I reach the double doors, hesitate. The *Lightbringer* has gone up in flames. It will sink before dawn breaks, and my home will rest forever beneath the waves.

I have nothing left to lose.

I draw a second pistol from the strap across my back and kick the doors wide open. The neat, elegant chambers offer a reprieve from the wreckage outside. But the quiet puts me on edge. That shadow creature is somewhere, hiding, waiting to catch me unaware.

I won't let it.

Wood creaks underfoot as I take measured steps toward the door to the captain's private head. Something stirs behind it, and I think I hear breathing.

Owen's actual killer is on the other side of this door. That shadow creature possessed the Nightweaver that ran my brother through—I can feel it. It wanted me to know; it wanted me to follow. And if I die avenging Owen, then so be it. I never thought I'd live this long, anyway.

I kick open the door, my pistols drawn, but it isn't a looming shadow I find huddled on the floor. A little girl looks up at me, her long black hair spiraling in ringlets, her green eyes glassy with tears. She can't be much older than Elsie. What is she doing on a Nightweaver ship?

I lower my pistols. "I'm not going to hurt you," I whisper. But

before I can hold out my hand to help her to her feet, I'm struck from behind, and my knees buckle. I fight for consciousness, but it's no use.

The last thing I see is the black cloak of a Nightweaver as he hovers over me, pushing back his hood. But it isn't the face of a monster hidden beneath.

It's the face of a boy.