

DRAGON  
ASSASSIN  
ROYAL BLOOD

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ARTHUR SLADE

Cover art by  
Sally Gottschalk

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# BOOK ONE: BITTERWATERS



## Chapter 1

### ABOVE BITTERWATERS

We would die before I fulfilled my promise.

When we were halfway across the Bitterwaters, Brax's wings began to freeze. Chunks of ice formed along the bony edges, getting thicker each moment. Most of the ice would break off if he folded his wings in or flapped them harder, but it was obvious he was tiring.

There wasn't anything I could do from my perch on his back, other than huddle in my cloak and hold tight with my slowly freezing hands. Every once in a while I'd reach out and brush off the snow nearest me.

I'd long since lost the feeling in my toes. I had bought thick mittens, a scarf, a woollen hat, and three sweaters at a northern Akkadian village, all of which I was wearing. They had

been the last clothing from a merchant who'd sold the rest of his stock to Akkadian soldiers marching east. Since it was the end of his wares, he'd charged me double.

It was a good thing I had that extra layer of warmth, or my fingers and the rest of me would have long turned into icicles. I could only wait helplessly, expecting us to plunge into the waters at any moment.

The Bitterwaters, a sea legendary for causing the deaths of thousands of sailors, was a wasteland of water and ice that stretched forever in all directions. The ice hadn't formed in large enough chunks to land on. I'd lost count of how many hours we'd been in the air. The sun was shining somewhere far behind us, but not directly here. If the rumours were true, the sun never shone on Bitterwaters.

Brax made no complaint, but he was not one of those rare dragons with fur — he had scales and nothing else to keep his blood and organs warm. Flying made that blood move, but the wind and cold took its toll. Ice had frozen over his empty eye socket and he didn't bother to brush it away.

The joy of being in the air had long since been frosted out of me.

So had the fear of where we were going. Few humans had travelled across the Bitterwaters to the Land of Beasts and lived to tell the tale. There weren't even maps. Only stories of boats returning with burnt sails and oars broken and most of their crews dead.

The Land of Beasts, or "that horrible place beyond Bitterwaters," was mostly believed to be part of the shared

imaginings of crazed sailors. A dreamt-up place. Except it became quite real when the occasional dragon made its way across the water and burned down a village or two.

It became even more real when one of those dragons decided to go back. And this mystical, dangerous land that Brax called Drachia was where he was carrying me.

To kill someone he wouldn't name.

It was the second part of my deal with him. When I found Brax chained in a cave, I asked for his eye and his help killing my brother, in return for his freedom. Corwin had betrayed the Red Assassin School, resulting in the deaths of many students and almost all the mastrus. With the help of my classmates Megan and Thord, we tracked down Corwin and nearly died fighting the emperor, his employer. In the end, though, we did not kill my brother — we captured him and sent him on the back of a giant swan, unconscious and blind in one eye, toward the west. And now it was time for me to carry out the rest of the bargain.

It felt like it had all happened a hundred years ago, in a land that no longer seemed real, but it had only been two days since I'd said goodbye to my friends.

Only the cold was real now.

A *crack* indicated that another section of ice was falling off Brax's wings.

"Can you fly with that much ice stuck to you?" I asked.

"I have no choice."

"Was it this bad when you crossed the first time?" The scarf over my face muffled my voice.

“It’s colder now. And I didn’t have a passenger weighing me down, so it’s taking twice as long. Have you ever considered losing weight? You could start with your head.”

I bit back my reply, not that it was all that clever. He was not in the mood for talking and I wanted him to direct every bit of energy toward staying aloft.

I did the only thing I could — reached out and brushed away snow and ice as far as my arms would reach on either side. At least I was helping in some small amount, and it kept me warmer. Though I nearly slipped off more than once with the effort.

Again, there would be no hope of rescue from the Bitterwaters. I’d fall into that bone-chilling cold and freeze into a block of human ice, then sink to the bottom.

After at least another hour — or five minutes, because time had perhaps been frozen itself — I spoke again.

“Does the sun ever shine here?” I asked.

“No, child, it does not. They say this is where the tears of the moon fall. Thus the ice.”

“Who are *they*?”

“People from Woden — simpletons like your friend Thord. But that isn’t the moon’s tears below us. It’s death.”

“That Woden tale is a way of explaining things with a story.”

“I know that, Carmen!” he snapped. “I’m angry with everyone and everything right now. It’s the only emotion that keeps me going. Now be quiet for a long time because I need to concentrate.”

There was another large crack as a ragged chunk of ice broke

from the tip of his right wing. But there were ever-growing sections of ice in the centre that forced his wings to droop. If I had a pole, I could have reached them.

Slowly, my eyes closed. I could not slip into slumber. My hands would unclasp and I would fall.

But my eyes didn’t care about that. They were getting tired. And sore. I kept them closed for several moments.

Or longer. I wasn’t sure because I felt like I was in a dream, and in that dream I was getting warmer and warmer. Someone had lit a fire in a hearth and I was under several layers of blankets.

No. My mind was tricking me. But when I tried to open my eyes, I failed. The frost had iced my eyelashes together. I wiped at them with a rime-covered mitten but still couldn’t see. There was another cracking sound. And another.

Then silence.

I stopped rubbing at my eyes and listened. There were no more sounds of the ice cracking, though the wind had picked up enough to make the hood of my cloak flap.

Wait! That wasn’t wind. We were going faster and my position had shifted so I was leaning forward.

Which meant we were falling.

And I was blind.