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# The Seer And The Sword

Victoria Hanley

The  
Seer  
and the  
Sword

VICTORIA HANLEY

**CORGI BOOKS**

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To my children, Emrys and Rose



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Also available by Victoria Hanley:

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Torina gripped the crystal, gazing into it. She had wanted to put the seer's gift behind her, and it had found her again, given back by Landen. How had he come to have it? It still held the warmth of his body.

In the crystal, small dark rainbows floated across a panelled room. Torina recognized it as a favourite refuge of her father's, one he used when he wanted privacy, a place to sort out the issues that came to him for decision.

Her father appeared. He stood alone, bare-headed, looking into the fire burning in the hearth. His head swivelled as the door opened and Vesputo came in. Torina heard the door close behind Vesputo with a soft echoing thud. The king motioned him forward, then turned back to the fire.

*No, Papa!* She screamed inwardly, filled with horror. Vesputo's face showed single-minded, emotionless determination. She stretched out a hand, as if she could stop him.

He advanced to stand behind the king. He pulled a small stiletto from his belt.

*No!*

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# PART ONE

## Chapter One

In the castle of Archeld, Queen Dreea sat at her loom. Her vibrant weavings were prized throughout the kingdoms. They revealed a quiet passion the queen never showed in face or voice.

Beside Dreea, curled on a rug, her daughter Torina stitched embroidery. Long, slender fingers pulled the needle back and forth, forming the pattern of a rising sun: the sign of the house of Kareed. Mirandae, the queen's close servant, spun wool, her wheel humming.

Torina stuck the needle crosswise in her spool and flexed her hands. 'Enough sewing, Mamma! Let me go out and ride.'

Dreea smiled patiently. 'The sun is ready to set. You rode this morning.'

'The boys are still out.'

'And you are not a boy.' Dreea paused to feed a thread of scarlet into the pattern of blue she worked.

'They have the chance to watch for King Kareed! He's my father - I should be the first to see him!' Wispy tendrils of Torina's red curls straggled free of their ribbons.

Dreea shifted, laying hands on her full belly, thinking with regret of how Kareed's nature goaded him to pit his strength against the might of other kingdoms. Once again, he was at war to extend his borders. Ever since he could swing a sword, the pride of warriorship had driven him to battle. Each time he prevailed, he drew his circle wider.

Now his rule stretched north to Glavenrell, east to Desante, west to the sea, and south to Bellandra.

Bellandra, kingdom of peace, with a rich heritage of art and culture. Bellandra, whose citizens had enjoyed generations of harmony and prosperity. Dreea wondered, wistfully, what it would be like to live in such a land. It was said their magic Sword could stand against any foe. If that were so, what fate awaited Kareed?

Fear and hope struggled inside Dreea. She'd seen Bellandra herself, and loved the hospitable country. She didn't want its ancient beauty to be destroyed by war. Yet war was exactly what Kareed was determined to carry there. If he were the victor, he would force Bellandra into servitude to Archeld. And if the famous Sword defeated him, what would Dreea do? She loved Kareed with all the enduring tenacity of a gentle heart. He filled all the landscape of her tender soul.

Now, she feared Kareed had overreached destiny, and only sorrow could be the result. She had prayed and prayed that something good would come of this.

'Your father will be away a while longer,' the queen told her restless daughter.

'I still want to ride!'

Dreea shook her head. Many had told her that a more unruly spirit than Torina's could not be found, even in the wild forests of Archeld.

When fiery King Kareed married Dreea, he passed over many ladies of more obvious beauty and greater riches. She knew people wondered why he kept such a queen, who had no taste for war and never bore him an heir for Archeld. It had been nine years since the birth of their daughter; nine years and seven miscarriages. Sad that such a powerful king could not command something so simple as having a son. But with Dreea, and only with her, Kareed the mighty

king could become Kareed the loving man. When they were together, he relaxed into warmth, telling her all the secrets of his life. She doubted anyone guessed how much she knew. She never passed on his confidences, guarding them as closely as if they were her own.

And now, at last, her pregnancy was advanced; when the moon returned once more to fullness, she would deliver again. Perhaps this time it would be a boy.

A small commotion at the door to the hall drew Torina's gaze. Her eyes, coloured like the sea, lit with surprise as her comrade Zeon rushed in, face flushed.

'Torina!' his boyish voice announced. 'We saw the king riding, beyond the first ridge!'

A guard pressed through the door, grabbing Zeon roughly. 'That will be quite enough!' With Zeon wriggling in his grasp, the guard turned to Dreea. 'Sorry, my lady, for the intrusion. If the boys can be believed, your husband will be here by sunset.'

Dreea felt a strange leaping in her heart. Unthinking, she stood and took a step towards the door. She heard a crash and turned in surprise to see Mirandae rushing at her with outstretched arms. The room tilted oddly and the light went out, snuffed by a dark roar rising in her ears.

Torina was hardly aware of her mother swaying and Mirandae upsetting the spinning wheel in her haste to aid her mistress. All the young princess wanted was to beat Zeon through the door. Now, hair streaming behind her, she lay along her horse's neck, nudging Stina into a faster gallop. The westering sun caught the dust of a cloud of riders and glinted on the gold helmet of the king.

His amber-coloured stallion charged ahead of his men. One large arm swept the princess off her horse, red beard mingling with red curls as they embraced.



'How's my princess! Out here, near dark, unattended? Did you escape again?'

'I wanted to meet you.'

'And here I am.'

'Did you win the war?'

He snorted. 'Would I come home if I did not?'

She smiled, happy in her father's victory. They rode slowly, her horse trotting near. Kareed asked about her mother's health and Torina answered that the queen was well. Beaming, the king leaned into his saddlebag and brought out a fist.

'This is for you, all the way from Bellandra. Hold out your hand.'

He put a crystal sphere in her palm. Her fingers barely fitted round it. Torina held it up to the embers of the sun. Inside the crystal, light swam and brightened; a world of gold.

'How lovely.' She nestled in the curve of her father's arm. Moments alone with the king, without soldiers or petitioners or servants, were few.

Hooves pounded towards them from the direction of the castle. It was the guard who had hustled Zeon out. He galloped up.

'My lord,' he breathed. 'I'm sorry, my lord, about the princess. She slipped away.'

'She's a true daughter of a king.'

The guard bit his lip. 'Sir . . . it seems the queen was taken early.'

The king's indulgent smile changed to a frown.

'Vesputo!' he barked. From the horsemen following, a rider detached and sped forward. Dark moustache and heavy eyebrows marked a handsome face.

'Sir?'

'Take the child.' Torina was handed into Vesputo's saddle, as if she wasn't grown up enough to get up and down herself. 'When you've delivered her safely, ride back and see to it the troops are all accounted for.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'I can ride Stina, Papa!'

Not even looking at her, the king galloped away with the guard, their horses veiled in dust on the darkening plain.

Torina sat very still, sidesaddle on Vesputo's horse, clasping her new crystal and blinking.

'What did the guard mean about my mother?'

The soldier shrugged.

Torina stared at the crystal, rotating it in her hand. She brought it close to her face, then gasped as the dimming light congealed in its middle and began to form a face. It was her mother's. White, exhausted, laying on a pillow. Another face bent over her, a woman. Torina was somehow sure the woman was a midwife.

The midwife took the queen's hand and rubbed it. A voice came from her, echoing inside Torina's head as though mixed with surf sounds.

'A son, my lady. Stillborn.'

Dreea's face twisted into sobs.

'No!' Torina screamed, sliding down from Vesputo's saddle. She ran to Stina.

'What is it?' Vesputo called. Torina leaped on her horse and drove her heels into the flanks, heading for home.

Outside the queen's rooms, a group of women stood, waiting for news. Into this small crowd, Torina burst like a quick flame trying to take hold on green wood. She almost made it through the door.

Though she flailed and kicked, the women surrounded her, their soft arms firm as trees. She cried and called for her mother. They would not let her pass. When her cries gave way to shrieks of indignant anguish, some of them carried her to her room and stayed immovably by her side.

Dawn was beginning when Ancilla, Kareed's old mother, crept in to be with her granddaughter. The girl lay huddled in her carved bed, covered with blankets carefully worked by Dreea's patient hands.

Ancilla had borne only boys, and all had been killed in the Sliviite wars except Kareed, the son who arrived when she believed she was past the age for conceiving. Now she was older than anyone else, so old that wrinkles almost swallowed the delicate features that had once rallied kings. Yet her steps were still light, her eyes filled with the famous fire of the warrior line of Archeld.

She sat beside Torina, her bones barely dimpling the mattress. She smoothed the girl's wild hair. Torina's eyes fluttered open. She kissed Ancilla's withered fingers.

'Where's Mamma?'

'Resting.'

'The baby?'

'A stillborn son.' The old eyes misted.

Torina hugged her middle, staring as though impaled on some inner vision. The old queen followed her granddaughter's gaze and saw a pure crystal globe sitting on the bureau across from the bed.

'Stillborn!' the child cried pointing. 'Gramere, the crystal my father gave me told me that yesterday!'

Ancilla stared. Yesterday. The queen delivered this morning. How could the girl know? Was Torina a seer? Ah heaven, what a great and terrible gift, if she was.

Ancilla reached out to hold the shivering girl. Her thin voice quavered the ritual song of mourning. 'One I love is taken from me . . .'

Torina joined her in broken, childish tones.

'We will never walk together over the fields of earth,

Never hear the birds in the morning.

Oh, I have lived with you and loved you

And now you are gone away.

Gone where I cannot follow

Until I have finished all my days.'

King Kareed leaned against the stone wall of the courtyard, looking out over the road where all travel from the plains must pass. The army was returning, and the king stood in silent review of his troops. The men rode in disciplined ranks, saluting as they went by. Later, when they reached their quarters or reunited with their families, there would be rejoicing. A great victory. Bellandra, the invincible, conquered. Bellandra's Sword taken. Yes, they would celebrate. But now, in the presence of the king, whose suit of mourning white proclaimed his latest loss, they were subdued.

At last, the rear contingent came into view. Vesputo, grim-faced and dusty, turned his horse into the courtyard of the castle, followed by a small band of soldiers. The king went to meet them. He gripped Vesputo's hand as his protégé swung down.

'All accounted for?'

Vesputo nodded.

'Well done, Commander. Go refresh yourself. I know how well you deserve it.'

Vesputo took a deep breath and formed the formal words heard so many times during his five years serving

King Kareed. 'My spirit is saddened by the flight of your loved one.'

Kareed put a hand to his chest, then let it drop. 'May it be granted that at the end of my days we reunite.' Kareed thought of the many battles fought side by side with Vesputo. 'A son.'

'Ah. Sir, I—'

'Next time, Commander, you'll stay here and guard my family.'

The king stopped. Torina stood a few feet away, a mourning gown draped round her. How long had she been there? Her face was almost as white as her dress. He remembered he had not seen his daughter since she rode to meet him on the plains.

*This stillbirth has changed us all.*

He extended an arm. Her tentative fingers clasped his. Where was the eager child who had leaped into his arms only the day before?

Her small hand curled round the present he had given her. She held it out. 'This came from Bellandra?'

He nodded.

'Who gave it to you?'

'I saw it and thought of you. I forget who gave it to me.'

'Did you see my face in it?'

'Your face?' Kareed frowned in puzzlement.

'You've forgotten whose it was?' she persisted. Her voice sounded strained.

'Too many battles to remember all the places I've been.'

But Kareed did remember. The disturbing woman, older than Ancilla, bent and wizened. He had burst into her room during the search for the Sword, when they were sacking Bellandra. She had looked up at him with ageless eyes,

then down at the sparkling sphere in her lap. She smiled a twisted smile.

'Ah,' she moaned, and kissed the crystal. She held it up to him. 'For your red-haired daughter.'

Then she folded in front of him. When he prodded her with a sword, she never moved. Kareed had stopped to pry the shining thing from her dead hand, and slipped it into his pouch for Torina.

How had this old woman known he had a red-haired daughter? But then, he was a red-haired man.

*My son!* The pain possessed his soul again. He had seen the tiny, waxy-blue, perfectly formed infant who would never draw breath. *If I rode slowly, would you have lived?*

He was sure Dreea would have no more children. Yet he could not bear to put aside his beloved wife for a younger, fertile woman. The king looked fondly down on Torina's shining head, bent over the crystal.

*The last child in a long and formidable line.*

Thinking of her that way made him remember the end of a different lineage.

'I brought you another present, Torina,' he said, suddenly grim. 'Vesputo! Fetch the boy.'

The commander quickly returned. Before him walked the former prince of Bellandra. Dark, curling hair matted round his face; his features, under bruises and scrapes, looked still as driftwood. Dust and dirt had obliterated the elegant lines of his clothes. His legs, just beginning to lengthen towards manhood, were unsteady; his arms tied behind his back.

Vesputo thrust the young prisoner forward. The boy stumbled and fell. Torina sprang to help him. Kareed saw the boy's eyes flicker wide for an instant, his gaze like a hot

sun frozen in ice, as the king's daughter pulled him to his feet.

'Who is he?' Torina asked.

'The son of a king.'

'Why are his hands tied?'

'He's a prisoner. And the son of a king no more. I brought him here for you, Torina. He will make a fine slave.' Silently he added, *Yes, a slave. No matter that none of your other servants are slaves. This is different. This will crown the defeat of Bellandra.*

Torina looked at the boy, at his heavy curling hair and wild, remote eyes.

'If he is my slave,' she asked, 'does that make him my own?'

'All your own.'

'I can do whatever I want with him?'

The king nodded.

The princess shivered. 'What is your name, son of a king?' she asked.

'Landen.' The boy's manner, still that of a prince, contrasted oddly with his dusty rags and bruises.

'Vesputo,' Torina said.

'Princess?'

'Cut his ropes, please.'

The commander looked to his king, who inclined his head. A blade was drawn. Vesputo severed the ropes carelessly, trailing fresh blood. Landen rubbed his wrists as Torina stepped closer to him.

'My father fought your father.' She said it very softly, speaking as if no king or soldiers looked on. For her, they must have been forgotten.

Landen looked at the ground. A pulse in his neck beat, like the heart of a new-hatched bird.

'Landen,' she whispered. 'I never had a slave.'

The boy stood quietly.

'And I never will,' she continued, lifting her chin. 'Papa,' her voice rose. 'You gave him to me. I set him free.'

Kareed's eyebrows billowed, a ferocious storm gathering. When Vesputo suggested making Landen a slave, it was to demean the spirit of Bellandra. King Veldon had strutted for too long behind his magic Sword, looking down his nose at warrior kings. Prince Landen of Bellandra, King Veldon's only son, a slave to Kareed's daughter! That would give everyone pause.

Now, she threw in his teeth this gift so dearly won. For a century, no one had dared attack Bellandra, but he, Kareed, had done it. The king felt the familiar battle rage rising. He wanted to strike Torina flat. There she was, standing small and white beside him. But there was something in the way she clasped her hands together; it was what her mother did when he told her he was going to war. Kareed remembered how Dreea had pleaded with him to spare Bellandra, to let them keep their ways. Women knew nothing of war. They knew nothing of battles, princes and kings. He sighed, swallowing his anger. *Perhaps I've allowed this war to sully my judgement. Torina knows I don't keep slaves. And Bellandra's defeat is complete without this boy. After all, he's only thirteen - hardly more than a child.*

The king forced his face into a smile and pushed a laugh from his chest. 'By my helmet!' he cried in his battle voice. 'She's the true daughter of a king!'

A light wind picked up the collective sigh in the courtyard and carried it away. Men went about their business; taking horses to the stables, oiling weapons and stacking leather armour.



Landen stood, islated, in the stream of activity. He rubbed his wrists with shaking hands, chest heaving as if his lungs were a bellows demanding more air. The girl near him pretended not to notice, looking past him to the distant mountains. Vesputo had gone. The young princess spoke affectionately to King Kareed, calling him to her side.

Landen's knees trembled as his father's killer approached. He remembered that cruel fist batting him down, in the chamber of the Sword.

'Landen.' The king's rough voice held no animosity.

'Sir.' The word felt like a betrayal.

'You are now a member of my household. You'll receive warrior training with the other boys.'

The exiled prince felt faint. His father's dying words rang in his ears. *Find someone who can teach you to fight.*

Kareed shifted his feet. 'I bear you no ill will. The past is buried.'

*Not for me. My father is buried.*

'Torina,' the king said. 'Attend to this boy. See he's fed, and get him washed.' Kareed turned and left them.

Landen felt a small, confiding hand touch his arm.

'This way,' the red-haired girl guided. She led him into the castle. She moved with assurance through the halls, to a private room. There she gave him a soft chair, then went out into the hallway.

Landen scanned the room. It was the first time he'd been out of bonds or cages since Bellandra fell. If he ran out of the door, would anyone stop him? He was a fast runner. He could get away, steal a horse, make his way back to Bellandra.

But what about the Sword? His father had told him to get the Sword. And what about learning to fight? Did anyone in Bellandra even know how?

He heard the red-haired girl speaking imperiously to someone, ordering a bath, steaming hot. Landen's filthy, blood-scabbed skin cried out for the relief of a soaking. His hands shook, much as he tried to control them. The girl came back.

'Your bath will be ready in moments,' she told him, and there was kindness in her haughty voice.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, ashamed of the weakness that made him shiver.

'My name's Torina,' she volunteered.

He mumbled her name, feeling exhaustion in body and spirit. He knew he should thank her: for setting him free from slavery; for having the good nature to tend him. He couldn't bring himself to do it.

He looked at the furniture. It was rich, well placed, well polished. This was the castle of the most powerful king on the continent, if the soldiers were to be believed, and he was inside it. How had Kareed gained so much wealth and influence? Not by justice or compassion. Not by kindness.

How had Landen's father, wise King Veldon, renowned poet, generous, honest man, been overcome by a harsh aggressor like Kareed? How had justice been routed, and peace bled to death? Where had Bellandra gone wrong?

Landen bit quivering lips as he pondered the answer. *Veldon was good, but not a good warrior. He didn't know how to fight, didn't think he'd ever have to. Kareed won because he was the stronger warrior.*

Landen didn't like it. He didn't like it, but knew it was true. In the Sword's chamber, it had been Kareed who knew how to pick up a weapon, and he had done it without hesitation, with power and with glee, while Landen faltered, wasting precious seconds.

Running now would lose him his chance to find out what made this king the victor in every conquest he undertook. If

Landen left, it would be like handing Kareed the Sword all over again. No, he must not go. He had to stay, learn everything he could. Kareed had promised he would be trained; and though Kareed was a ruthless invader, Landen had heard that his word was good.

*I'll hold you to your promise, King Kareed. And one day, I'll take the Sword from you. When I do, I'll know how to use it.*

A tap on the open door, and a large woman appeared. Torina took Landen's hand again, as if he was a small child, and he allowed her to lead him. They followed the woman down a hallway to a luxurious private bath.

The boy bathed without thought of modesty, nearly weeping with gratitude for the water's heat and the glorious abrasions of fine soap. He was so tired it was a valiant effort to towel himself dry and step into the clothes Torina thoughtfully brought him. Sturdy, working clothes, they fitted, more or less. His ragged, stained Bellandran garments were gone.

She took him back to the other room, and had food and water fetched. As he ate and drank, she watched quietly. The bath, and coming to a decision to stay in Archeld, had washed away his tremors. He was glad.

Torina went to get more food, and he felt himself slipping into sleep; only dreamily aware when she returned. He was never sure if he imagined it but, as sleep claimed him, he thought he felt her light finger tracing the features of his face.

## Chapter Two

In the bowels of the castle of Archeld stood an ancient door, cut in stone. Kareed, carrying a torch, fitted a key into the lock. Beside him, Vesputo held a long wooden box. The door opened with a creak of disuse.

The dank smell of close air greeted them as they entered the vault. A bare dirt floor and stone walls housed boxes covered with dusty cloths. In the centre of the room was a large, pyramid-shaped steel box. Kareed bent to open it. Taking the long box from Vesputo, Kareed set it down. He lifted its lid, revealing the Sword of Bellandra. The blade shimmered pale and sharp in the torchlight. It was so resplendent that a stab of reproach hit the king as he closed the Sword into the pyramid. He shot bolts and fastened locks on the pyramid's sides.

'Old Talsed counselled me that this pyramid of steel will disguise the Sword of Bellandra and mute its power,' Kareed said. 'And he knows more than he ought to about enchantments.'

'Forgive me, my lord, but why not carry it yourself, as a token of your victory?'

'Ah, my friend, I dare not. There's said to be a mighty curse on anyone who lifts this Sword for conquest. Who knows if it's true; it may not be. Certainly, the weapon turned out to be useless to Bellandra, for all its reputation of invincible magic. But there's no call to invite a curse. I don't have any need of this Sword, I'm strong enough without it.'

‘True indeed. If you don’t intend to wear it, why not get rid of it?’

‘My advisors tell me it cannot be destroyed. There *is* an enchantment on it, though of what sort I can’t tell. Perhaps it’s losing power. It hasn’t been raised in battle since King Landen the First fought off hundreds of invaders, all of them warriors of note, and that was many generations ago.’

‘Strange that Veldon never tried to use it.’

Kareed shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘Stupid. Stupid to remain complacent after the message I sent him. Stupid not to post scouts or send spies. And stupid to try to parley his way out of war when we arrived to do battle. After the warnings I gave, did he think I wouldn’t keep my word? He was a fool to ignore me.’

Vesputo nodded wryly. ‘Who can account for it?’

‘At any rate, this weapon holds the spirit of his people, and must not be set free.’

‘Ah. Then you want to keep the Sword in this vault so it doesn’t fall into anyone else’s hands?’

The king assented, making sure all the locks were secure. ‘You and I will keep this secret. If anyone asks what became of it, say the Sword was destroyed.’

\* \* \*

Before she went to bed, Torina slipped into the small room where she had left the strange boy. He was still fast asleep. Should she wake him? Take him somewhere? Her father said he was now a member of the household. All the boys in training lived in a barracks on the far side of the king’s house, near the practice field. Zeon had told her about it; they slept in bunks, took their meals and practised the arts of war. All under the fierce eye of Emid, the trainer.

Should this boy be with them? If he woke up, would he wonder what to do? She would not like to be alone at night in a strange house in a far land. Her father had called him

the son of a king. King Veldon ruled Bellandra, so King Veldon must be Landen's father. What happened to kings who lost the war? His mother was Queen Anise. She had died before this. But what about his father? Where was his father now?

Torina went to Gramere with her problem. The sharp old eyes watched closely.

'Veldon's son, Landen,' she murmured. 'Sad those two men fought - your father and King Veldon. I always hoped they would keep the peace. Torina, my dear, my son takes no prisoners among rulers. Landen's father is dead.'

Torina felt a cold shudder. How dreadful, that when kings fought, one of them must die.

'What'll I do, Gramere? No one else is helping him. I think they forgot him.'

'Go to bed, child. I'll send Maude to be with the boy. If he wakes up, she'll let him know to stay in the room. In the morning, come to me and we'll take him to the barracks.'

Torina walked through the familiar halls of the castle, her mind sad. What would it mean to her, to sleep alone in a foreign country, with her parents dead? All those bruises and cuts she'd seen; why had the soldiers been so unkind?

As soon as dawn filtered in, Torina was awake. She bounced into her clothes. She found Gramere snoozing in the great carved bed of her ancestors. The old queen was instantly awake at Torina's touch. Together they went to the small room where Landen lay. Ancilla dismissed her servant as the boy stirred. He stretched guardedly, looking at them with large, doubtful eyes.

'I knew your father,' Ancilla said. 'Long ago. He was a fine man. None better.'

Landen sat up. He looked at the floor.