

ALLISON SAFT

New York Times bestselling author




A Dark
and
Drowning
Tide

A NOVEL

BY ALLISON SAFT

A FAR WILDER MAGIC
DOWN COMES THE NIGHT
A FRAGILE ENCHANTMENT
A DARK AND DROWNING TIDE

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and
Drowning
Tide
A NOVEL

A decorative floral wreath composed of thin, curving branches with small, five-petaled flowers and leaves, framing the text.

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NEW YORK

A Dark and Drowning Tide is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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FOR MOSES, GILBERT, AND ALEXANDER

PART I



The Deba
in
Thorns

ONE

SYLVIA WAS IN THE RIVER AGAIN. Lorelei didn't need to see her to be certain of it. Crowds, after all, were the smoke to Sylvia's fire.

Lorelei stood with her shoulders hunched against the wind, trying and failing to contain her mounting disgust. In the span of an hour, the entire student population of Ruhigburg University had spilled onto the banks of the Vereist. They clamored and shoved and jostled one another as they fought for a better view of the water—or, perhaps more accurately, the spectacle they'd been promised. Most of them, predictably, were nursing a bottle of wine.

As she approached the edge of the crowds, she saw silver glittering on throats and iron chains jangling on wrists. They wore their jackets inside out and strung horseshoes around their necks. A few—Sylvia's most avid devotees, no doubt—had crowned themselves with rowan branches and braided clover into their hair. They clearly expected blood. Lorelei had never seen so many protective wards in her life.

Utterly ridiculous. If they truly wanted to guard themselves against fairy magic, they should have stayed well away from the river instead of gawping at it like nitwits. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. Good sense tended to flee wherever Sylvia von Wolff went.

Apparently, some poor fool had nearly drowned an hour ago—lured into the abyssal depths of the river by an errant nixie's song. It was almost impressive, considering a nixie hadn't been spotted this close to the city in ten years. She'd overheard a girl regaling her friends with the gruesome

details—and then, nauseatingly starry-eyed: “Did you hear Sylvia von Wolff has promised to tame the nixie?”

Lorelei had nearly combusted then and there.

Professor Ziegler had asked Lorelei and Sylvia to meet her fifteen minutes ago. Tonight, the king of Brunnestaad himself was hosting a send-off ball in honor of the expedition, and the three of them were meant to make a grand entrance: the esteemed professor and her two star students. If they made Ziegler late...

No, she could not even think of it.

Lorelei shoved into the crowd. “Move.”

The effect was instantaneous. One man dropped his opera glasses as he leapt out of her path. Another yelped when the hem of her black greatcoat brushed his leg. Another less fortunate soul stumbled forward as Lorelei’s shoulder clipped hers.

As she passed, someone behind her muttered, “*Viper.*”

If she had any time to spare, she might have risen to the bait. Every now and again, people needed to be reminded of exactly how she’d earned that name.

She elbowed her way to the front of the crowd and scanned the riverbank. Even beneath the pale light of dusk, the waters of the Vereist remained an eerie, lightless black. It cut straight through campus like an ink stain that wouldn’t lift. And there, shrouded in the branches of a weeping willow, was Sylvia.

From this angle, Lorelei couldn’t see her face, but she could see her hair. Even after five years of knowing her, it always shocked her—the stark, deathlike white of it. She’d knotted the unruly waves at the nape of her neck with a ribbon of blood-red silk, but a few stubborn strands had managed to escape. In Lorelei’s weaker moments, she imagined that grabbing hold of it would feel like plunging her hands into cold water.

She stalked toward Sylvia, and with as much acid as she could muster in two syllables, she said, “Von Wolff.”

Sylvia gasped, whirling around to face her. As soon as their gazes met, Sylvia's face paled to the enchanting color of soured milk. Lorelei allowed herself one moment to delight in that glimpse of startled dread before Sylvia's perfectly pleasant mask slotted back into place. Somehow, after all this time, Sylvia had never grown accustomed to being hated.

And oh, how Lorelei despised her.

"Lorelei!" Her pained smile dimpled the dueling scar slashed across her cheek. "What a pleasant surprise."

Sylvia sat on the riverbank, her feet dangling in the water and the skirts of her damask gown puddled around her. Her mud-caked slippers lay abandoned beside her, and she cradled—of all things—a guitar in her lap.

The beginnings of a tension headache pounded in Lorelei's temples. She felt as though she'd suddenly lost her grasp of the Brunnisch language—or perhaps been transported to some stranger realm where one could reasonably face down one of Brunnestaad's deadliest creatures in full dress. Then again, Sylvia looked as though she'd gotten ready in a great hurry and then gone traipsing through the woods. She very well might have, if the stray petals tangled in her hair were anything to go by. Cherry blossoms, Lorelei noted absently. Spring had come early this year, but a damp cold lingered like a fever that wouldn't break.

"You're late."

Sylvia had the good sense to wince, but she continued tuning her guitar. "I am sure Ziegler will understand. You've heard about the nixie attack, haven't you? Someone had to do something about it."

Lorelei felt her entire body seize with murderous intent. "That doesn't mean it had to be *you*, you arrogant fool."

Sylvia reeled back, affronted. "Excuse me? Arrogant?"

Lorelei glanced pointedly at the crowds behind them—at the hundreds of eyes trained on Sylvia. Lorelei could nearly taste their hunger in the air. Whether they truly wanted to see Sylvia work her strange magic or to watch her blood run into the water, Lorelei did not know. She supposed it didn't matter. Either way, they'd have gotten what they came for.

“Insatiable, then.” She sneered. “You’ll have a legion of well-wishers to fend off in a matter of hours, and yet you’re starved for attention.”

Bitterness crept unbidden into her voice. Six months ago, Ziegler promised to name one of her students the co-leader of the Ruhigburg Expedition, and tonight, she would finally announce her selection at the send-off ball. Lorelei had never harbored any expectation that she’d be chosen. At twenty-five years old, Sylvia was one of the most famous and beloved naturalists in the country. And Lorelei was no one, a cobbler’s daughter plucked from the Yevanverte.

Even so, she dreamed.

With that kind of renown, any publisher would leap at the opportunity to print her research. Even better, it would force the king to acknowledge her. Past rulers had only kept Yevani in their court as bankers and financiers, but King Wilhelm surrounded himself with artists and scholars. Lorelei was not beautiful enough to whisper her heart’s desires into the king’s ear and believe he would listen. There was no charm she had, no power she possessed to make her persecutors throw themselves at her feet. All she had was her mind. If she co-led the expedition he’d commissioned, she’d have the sway to ask him to appoint her a shutzyeva: a Yeva under the direct protection of the king.

She’d learned to survive the viper pit of Ruhigburg University by becoming the worst of them. But outside the university, her reputation meant nothing. As a shutzyeva, she would be granted the full rights of a citizen. She could exist, unbothered and untouchable, outside the walls of the Yevanverte. With a direct line to the king, she could advocate for her people. But her most secret, selfish desire was simple. As a citizen, she could purchase a passport, her ticket to a world she’d only ever read about. It was all she’d ever wanted, the only thing she’d ever allowed herself to want: the freedom to be a real naturalist.

Wilhelm had not appointed any shutzyevan during his brief reign. But it was an exceedingly rare honor—one she was certain she could earn.

“I am not doing this for *attention*.” Sylvia looked flustered. “I’m doing this for—”

“What you’re doing is wasting everyone’s time,” Lorelei said brusquely. She had endured far too many speeches about *noblesse oblige* over the years to let Sylvia continue uninterrupted. “Mine, Ziegler’s—and His Majesty’s, for that matter. You’ve spent far too long playing knight-errant with your own research. It’s high time you took your responsibility to the expedition seriously.”

Sylvia’s face flushed, and her pale eyes filled with fire. It made Lorelei’s blood quicken with anticipation and her mouth go dry. “Accuse me of neglecting my duties to Wilhelm again, and I will pitch you into the Vereist.”

Lorelei knew she’d touched a nerve. Most provinces had resisted the unification of their patchwork Kingdom of Brunnestaad—and none fought more valiantly than Sylvia’s homeland of Albe. Even twenty years after their annexation, they agitated for their independence. Lorelei supposed she could sympathize. They practiced their own religion, spoke their own dialect, and by land mass rivaled the rest of Brunnestaad combined. The rest of the kingdom believed them heretical, mountain-dwelling yokels, ready to turn and bite at a moment’s notice. Sylvia, naturally, was the heir apparent to its ducal seat.

“Besides,” Sylvia continued huffily, “this will be fast. I know exactly how to deal with nixies by now.”

Lorelei had never seen a nixie before, but as the expedition’s folklorist, she had recorded countless tales of the *wildeleute* over the years. Most commoners she’d interviewed thought them monsters, sometimes even gods. In truth, most species of *wildeleute* were nothing but a nuisance. The more bearable sort sequestered themselves in far-flung places and amused themselves by leading travelers astray. Others ran amok in the countryside, stirring up mischief in villages and trading petty enchantments for bread crusts or jars of cream.

And then, there were creatures like nixies. Facing one armed with only a guitar and three kilos of silk seemed to Lorelei a regrettable idea. “And how,

exactly, do you plan to deal with it? Bludgeon it? Perhaps invite it to tea?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Sylvia replied crossly. "I am going to sing to her. I've been practicing my technique for months now."

"*Sing* to it?" Lorelei spluttered. "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

Sylvia canted her chin. "And how many books have you published on the subject of nixies?"

A frigid silence descended. Both of them knew very well that Lorelei had not published a word.

"Mock me all you'd like," said Sylvia, "but my research suggests that nixies congregate around sources of magic. Learning to communicate with them could prove invaluable on the expedition."

Lorelei very much doubted that. Debates still raged in the halls of the university about the exact origin and nature of magic, but the most widely accepted theory posited that it was aether, a natural substance found only in water. Thaumalogists, specialists in the study of magic, had already developed instruments to measure it, and those were far less deadly and far more precise than *nixies*, of all things.

Feeling spiteful, she gestured at the empty expanse of the river. "Well, then, let us see your groundbreaking research in action. Or have nixies learned to cloak themselves as well as alps?"

The crowd was growing restless. Farther upriver, she spied a group of boys shouting and jeering as they hefted one of their friends into the air. Clearly, they meant to throw him into the river. Lorelei rolled her eyes. There was a reason no one swam in the Vereist. Once you sank beneath the surface, there was no way to orient yourself in the total darkness. Nixie or not, someone was going to die today.

Sylvia flushed with indignation. "She will come."

"Go on, then. Far be it from me to distract you."

Sylvia smiled beatifically. "Wonderful! Then please be quiet."

Lorelei had half a mind to shove her into the river, but she complied.

Sylvia plucked an off-key little arpeggio, and then began to sing. Lorelei watched her from the corner of her eye. The evening light filtered through the branches overhead, casting lacelike shadows across Sylvia's face. She grinned as her fingers clumsily shaped the chords. Never in Lorelei's life had she encountered anyone so *demonstrative*. She'd spent most of her life around northerners and had grown accustomed to their cold, clipped efficiency. But in Albe, people did strange things like sing in public and—worse—hug one another in greeting. Most of the time, Sylvia's easy warmth and excitability infuriated Lorelei. Other times, it reminded her too much of all the things she'd left behind.

She tore her gaze away and tightened the stranglehold on her own homesickness. Out in front of her, the Vereist shone like a sheet of black glass. It had always unsettled her, but it was far from the strangest river in Brunnestaad. To the north, there was the Salz, where you could step onto its churning surface and walk straight across from bank to bank. To the west, you could wade into the Heilen and your every wound would close. And somewhere in this treacherous, sprawling kingdom lay the aim of the Ruhigburg Expedition: the Ursprung, the fabled source of all magic and King Wilhelm's current obsession.

Sylvia grabbed her arm. "Look!"

Before Lorelei could twist out of her grasp, the water rippled. Slowly, something emerged from the darkness of the river. The mist parted, and a gaunt face stared out at them, as gray and lustrous as a full moon against the clouds.

Gasps and shouts rang out from the crowds behind them. Lorelei couldn't find it in herself to be annoyed. There was, admittedly, a certain provincial novelty in seeing one of the wildeleute here in the city, as if some folktale or quaint landscape painting had come to life. All of the engravings in the travel narratives she'd read paled in comparison to the sight of her, real and solid and terrible. The nixie's skin glistened, and her dark hair fanned out atop the river like a spill of ink. But her eyes struck Lorelei with a cold, instinctual

dread. They were a solid black as depthless as the Vereist—and uncannily reptilian; a thin, translucent film slid over them as she blinked.

“Look at her,” Sylvia said with true wonder in her voice. “Isn’t she magnificent?”

No, Lorelei wanted to say. She’s dreadful.

A glittery sound caught Lorelei’s attention. A tangle of pendants rested against Sylvia’s collarbone, each one engraved with the icon of a saint. Lorelei could not recall the last time she’d seen her without them; they’d always struck her as unusual. Here in the province of Neide, non-Yevani tended to be more restrained in their faith. But Sylvia, Albisch through and through, prayed as ostentatiously as she did anything else. She unclasped them one by one until they lay in a heap beside her. Just like that, she carried no wards that might whittle the edges of the nixie’s magic.

Despite herself, Lorelei understood the morbid fascination of the crowd. She’d never watched Sylvia work before. Admittedly, there was a sick sort of thrill that came from watching someone hurl themselves headlong into danger. In recent years, Sylvia had made a name for herself due to her... unusual methodology. She published trivial little stories of her adventures with the wildeleute, ones in which she purposefully ensnared herself in fairy magic in order to record the experience. Her travelogues enraptured her readers—bamboozled them into calling her a visionary. But there was no scientific merit to them whatsoever. They were an affront to empiricism, based on threadbare anecdotal data and—worse—*whimsy*. Lorelei knew by now that Sylvia was only exceptionally lucky—and incredibly stupid. A nixie’s song held a powerful hypnotic magic; countless had drowned under their spell.

The nixie eased herself onto a smooth rock jutting from the river’s surface, and Lorelei did her best not to recoil. The nixie’s hair was tangled with lotus flowers and as slick as a knot of cattails. It cascaded over her bony shoulders and pooled in her lap. Where a human’s legs would begin, her hips were covered in iridescent scales and tapered into a long, serpentine tail. Her

blue lips parted just enough to reveal the barest glimpse of her serrated teeth. It was a smile that sent a bolt of fear straight through Lorelei.

“Von Wolff,” Lorelei warned.

“Peace, Lorelei.” The fact Sylvia *sang* it only added insult to injury. “She’s just curious.”

She hardly saw how that was reassuring. A clamor went up behind them. Lorelei glanced over her shoulder to see that their audience had grown in number—and grown bolder. They pressed in closer, chattering excitedly and pointing.

Idiots, all of them.

“Get back,” Lorelei snapped, “unless you want to drown today.”

A *hiss* pulled her attention back to the water. As the nixie drew in a breath, the membranous gills on her rib cage rippled and flared. Then she began to sing, and all the world went perfectly still.

It was a song like the sea—the sweetest song Lorelei had ever heard. It swelled and crested, inexorable and irresistible as it wove around Sylvia’s in perfect harmony. One moment, Lorelei had her feet planted solidly on the earth. The next, she felt weightless, soaring. Never before had she felt so... complete, as though she breathed in tandem with every being on earth. For one glorious, incandescent moment, she saw it: the vibrant, wild beauty of the world. Aether was within all of them—within *everything*. It glimmered in the mist, and the Vereist sparkled with a thousand different colors, so bright it nearly brought tears to her eyes. How had she ever thought it so dark?

She took one step toward the water, then another. Just as she toed the edge of the riverbank, the iron chain around her neck singed her, as though she’d touched a white-hot brand. With a gasp, Lorelei snapped back to her senses. The river—once again black and dull as iron—churned winkingly below her. She nearly swore aloud. If she didn’t get herself together, she was going to drown in shallow water like a doddering fool.

Focus, damn you.

She bit down on the inside of her lip. As the tang of copper coated her tongue, the nixie’s magic dissipated completely. A horrid keening cut

through the haze of her thoughts and set her blood to ice.

So *that* was the true sound of its song.

Sylvia, however, remained under its enchantment. She stood perfectly still, with a strange and shining look of rapture in her eyes. It was a rare thing to examine her up close, when she was always in motion. Her eyes were a shade of gray so pale they were almost violet. Like most of the nobility, she had a fine latticework of dueling scars across her temples: each one a dubious badge of honor for enduring a blow to the face. The thickest one, gashed across her cheek, shone like a sheet of sunlit ice. Sylvia set down her guitar, still humming her eerie, tuneless song. The noise of the crowd swelled once again.

Somewhere in the din, Lorelei could make out someone shouting, “*She’s doing it!*”

A bolt of alarm shot through Lorelei. “What are you doing?”

Sylvia ignored her as she walked toward the river. The loose ends of her hair danced in the wind, the last red glare of the day illuminating it like white fire. The nixie extended a webbed hand to her. As Sylvia waded toward her, it was all too easy to imagine her slipping under. Her fine plum gown would bloom around her like a rose. Her silver hair would be stark as bone against the deep black of the river. Alas, Ziegler would never forgive Lorelei if she sat idly by while their naturalist waded to her death. She would have to intervene.

As a rule, Lorelei didn’t use her magic where anyone might see. But over the years, she’d grown adept at concealing it. Inhaling deeply, she called on her magic. Power unfurled through her chest and flowed down to the tips of her fingers. She imagined closing her fist around the aether rushing through the water, and—there. There was a brief moment of overwhelm, when her will pulled uselessly against the river. But then the connection snapped into place, and she felt the Vereist like an extension of herself, a phantom limb. Its current roared in her ears like the flow of her own blood. Sweat beaded on her brow. She didn’t have long before she lost her hold on it entirely, but she didn’t need much.

With an exhale, she sent the water skipping off its course—just enough to sweep the nixie from her perch. Sylvia jerked like her strings had been cut. At last, Lorelei let go of her magic. Relief and exhaustion settled heavily over her.

The nixie shot out of the water a moment later, fixing Lorelei with a look almost like indignation. With a toss of her hair, the nixie slipped back beneath the surface and disappeared. It was so startlingly human, it left Lorelei dumbfounded.

“Wait!” Sylvia called helplessly.

So help her, if Sylvia tried to pursue that beast...

Before she could think better of it, Lorelei closed the gap between them and took hold of her elbow. “Have you lost your mind? Get back here *now*.”

Sylvia rounded on her with her mouth hinged open, no doubt to say something petulant and irritating, but Lorelei didn’t get a chance to hear it. Sylvia wrenched her arm away so vehemently, she lost her footing—and took Lorelei with her. For one horrible moment, time seemed to grind to a halt. The sounds of shrieks reached her from a thousand kilometers away.

Then, they toppled into the water.

Blackness enveloped her, so complete she couldn’t see her own hand in front of her face. The cold greedily snatched her breath away. Lorelei kicked her way to the surface and gasped in a lungful of air.

Sylvia had already crawled onto the shore, looking very much like a wet cat. She bristled, her dress clinging to her skin, her hair limp around her shoulders. The gathered masses had already begun to scatter, disappointment plain on their faces.

“Look what you’ve done now,” Sylvia said accusingly. “She was speaking to me.”

“What *I’ve* done?” It was hard to feel especially righteous with her hair plastered to her face. Her mouth tasted like river water and silt. She somehow managed to overcome the weight of her sodden greatcoat and hauled herself onto the riverbank. “That was entirely your fault.”