

MORTAL HERITANCE • BOOK ONE

SISTERS
OF THE
PERILOUS
HEART

SANDRA L. VASHER

SISTERS
OF THE
PERILOUS
HEART

MAP OF KEPLER

THE ATLANTIS OCEAN

NEW
PARIS

WEST COAST
SHORES

FORMER
WESTERN
REPUBLIC

MORKUM

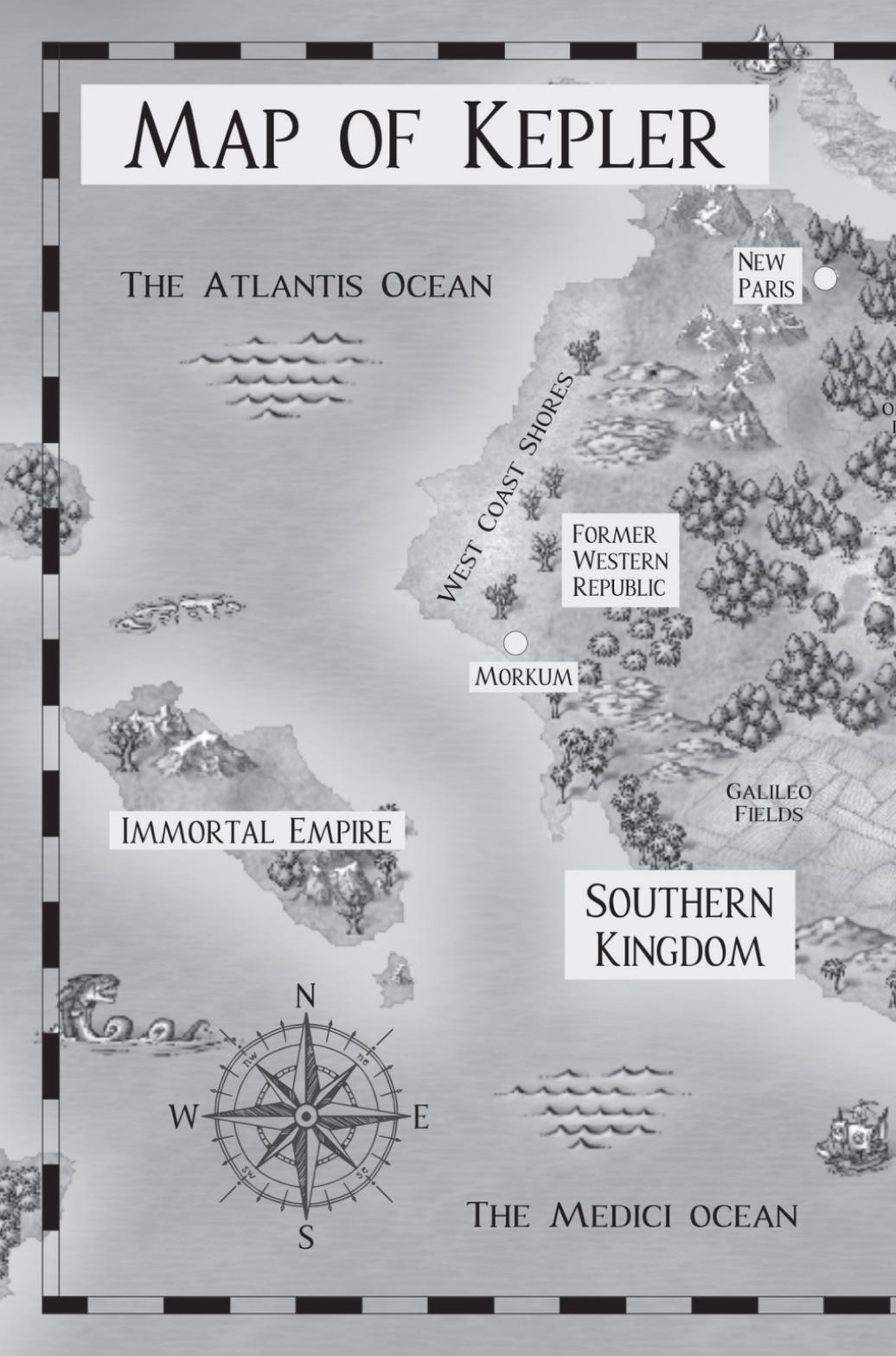
GALILEO
FIELDS

IMMORTAL EMPIRE

SOUTHERN
KINGDOM



THE MEDICI OCEAN





THE ASIMOV STRAITS

NORTHERN KINGDOM

CERULEAN

ORCHID LAKE

SILVER ORCHID

MOUNTAIN OF PERIL

SEA OF DAO

NEW AMERICA

SLED LODGE

WATERTON

GREAT CRATER LAKE

SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAINS

BUS STOP

EASTERN RIDGE TRAIL

EASTERN DESERT

GANDHI

FIRST MEETING

CLEMSON

GUARNERI

NATIVE VALLEY

FORMER EASTERN CONFEDERATION

SECOND ATTACK

NOVI DUPREE

ALIGHIERI

JOURNEYS TAKEN BY CARINA AND QUEEN VIVIAN

CAPE GREGORY

THE AURELIAN GULF



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INK PRESS



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*To my parents, who read this cover-to-cover at least twice, and
to my husband, who probably won't ever read it cover-to-cover
because he had to listen to every scene at least four times.*



M. KAYES FINAL MISSION LOG

The worst part of the trip was the last five minutes before Earth disappeared. I watched it become smaller than the pinprick on my finger, where a needle had tacked through my skin that morning before launch for a blood sample. I was scheduled to give another in ten days. The ship would have 109,378 samples in its database before I arrived at my destination: the planet Kepler.

As home faded, I indulged one more time—and I told myself it would be the last—in imagining *her* on that pinprick of a planet. It was her birthday. Perhaps she was wearing my last gift right then—a delicate, rose gold, self-winding perpetual watch with a leather band she might have to replace once or twice in her lifetime.

She was twenty-six that day. I was twenty-seven. But I didn't wear a watch. I was Immortal. Unless I managed to die of an unnatural cause, I would maintain something close to my current physical state forever.

If she had gone through with her promise, forever would

have been with her. Now, she would be dead before I was even a tenth of the way into my journey.

The betrayal *still* stings.

“Myles Alexander, stop! You can’t dwell on the past. It’s already gone.”

I looked away from the speck of Earth to see Lizzy Dupree behind my shoulder, smiling at me with bright, optimistic eyes that I’d never seen turn red. Immortality was possible thanks to the Immortality Virus, an engineered strain of influenza. No one could be cured, but the upside of survival was attractive and the fatality rate low. A stress reaction that increased blood flow to the retina, rapidly blew out your pupils, and made your eyes change color was a minor downside.

“Please, Myles. Your eyes are red.”

I was alone on this mission. Lizzy was not. She was here with her sister, Anna, who had already told me—bluntly and without solicitation—that the two timelessly beautiful women had sworn off love for good. “Because it ruined our parents,” is what Anna said, a day into our training program. Lizzy found me later, though, told me she thought it was too soon in our Immortal lives to swear off any vice, and kissed me to prove the point.

I told her I was in love with someone else. I never wanted to hurt anyone the way *she* had hurt me. Lizzy only said, “But this isn’t love, Myles. This is distraction.”

Then she kissed me again.

I suspected that day—and I still believe—that if I ever fell for Lizzy, it would be in an excruciatingly damaging way. Thankfully, she had good intuition for when I might not be up for distraction. She did not kiss me as I stared back at Earth.

“I came to tell you the meeting’s going to start

soon.” She leaned casually against the wall of the ship.

“They want to start planning.”

“Seems early for that,” I said.

“Right?!” she exclaimed. “We have three-thousand years to figure out how to take over the planet. I voted to start the meeting with a hundred-year ice breaker.”

I wondered what Lizzy Dupree’s idea of an ice breaker might be.

“Oh good, your eyes are blue again.” She looped her arm around mine and pulled me away from the window. “You’re much cuter this way.

“How’s your sister?” I asked.

“Do you have siblings?”

I shook my head.

She laughed heartily and patted my arm. “Let’s just say she’s hard to explain.”



This is the story of what happened 4,194 Earth Years later, on the planet Kepler. It is not my story, though I was more tangled up in it than I wanted to be before I returned to Earth, in a ship packed with several crates of sassafras beer and a note from a very old queen that said, “Thank you for your service. Farewell until we meet again.”

Mortals.

~Myles Alexander Kayes



A POEM FROM *THE COLLECTED*
WORKS OF ANNA DUPREE

We do not speak
—anymore—
of the dreams and schemes we planned
before we knew
trouble.

(And our troubles are not the same.)

We digressed idly in guileless youth;
now we diverge on separate paths,
believing in struggle, waving our flags
—alone! I am alone! do not come to help!—
as proof of our bravery.

(You are not she who needs a friend.
I am not her, the indebted one.)

But I knew you when you were
a spark of magic,
a wisp of light,
an endless possibility,
when you wanted everything for me
and I asked you to be wise,
when I wanted everything for you
and you asked me to be free.

(We trusted each other.)

Now we sail our ships
in the currents of a stranger's whim.
I see your banner,
you see mine.
We are in the same treacherous depths,
the same boiling sea.

(We cannot speak across the waters, dear,
nor scream against the wind.)

Yet you are there,
I am here, and
—somehow—
that is enough, together.

When distance keeps us apart,
we remain sisters of the perilous heart.

THE FRONT PAGE OF
THE ALIGHIERI POST

THE ALIGHIERI POST

Wednesday, August 6, 881 AAH

CORONATION ANNOUNCEMENT

Hear all you Mortal citizens of Kepler: let it be known that on this, the sixth morning in the eighth month of the eight-hundred-and-eighty-first year

After Arrival of Humans,

PRINCESS VIVIAN
ELIZA ANDREA
WELLINGTON

Heir to the Throne of the Southern Kingdom of Kepler shall be crowned the fifteenth
QUEEN OF THE SOUTHERN
KINGDOM OF KEPLER,
which Kingdom extends from the

West Coast to the Eastern Ridge Trail, North to the icecaps, and South from the Galileo Fields to Cape Gregory at the furthest reaches of the Aurelian Gulf.

The coronation ceremony, scheduled to take place, as per custom, immediately after the Dawn Prayers, shall precede the Parade of the Red Leopard. All citizens are invited to greet the newly ascended monarch as she takes her first steps as Queen through Alighieri, Capital City of South Kepler.

God save the Crown.



CHAPTER ONE THE ASSASSINATION

The queen of South Kepler was dying, and not in a metaphorical way. Queen Vivian could feel blood seeping through her silk corset. A long arrow stuck out from her chest. She watched it wobble from the place where it'd pierced her heart.

Queen for two minutes. That's how long she'd lasted. Two minutes ago, she'd been dripping sweat in the stifling summer heat of the Royal Cathedral of Alighieri, wondering if she could ask someone to open a window before she recited the Coronation Oath. She'd sipped water from the Cup of Truth, and the officiant had given her the words she needed to dizzily promise her life for her kingdom as she focused on Not Passing Out. Then came the arrow.

It didn't matter now what she'd promised.

Vivian pitched sideways. The trumpeters, celebrating the end of an early morning ceremony, didn't notice. Her mother, standing next to her, failed to reach out. Vivian could only hear a single yell above the jubilant march.

Bastian.

She'd never heard him yell like that.

From where she landed on the elevated dais of the cathedral's apse, she could see Bast leap forward, leaving Nate behind in the front row of the nave, standing uncharacteristically still. The guests in the second row had caught on, and their screams were contagious, spreading terror while the royal guards sprang into action.

"Viv."

She opened her eyes. She hadn't known they were shut. The voice had sounded distant, but Bast and Nate were both crouched right beside her. She feebly grasped the air above her, found the wood arrow and followed it down to wet fabric. Her lungs felt like they were being torn from the inside walls of her chest. Needles stabbed through her hands and feet. Her brothers were saying things she couldn't hear. She coughed, splattering bright blood across their faces and into their dark blond hair.

More arrows whizzed above them, and Vivian wondered why time had decided to slow now, as the agony of death seized her. Someone tumbled down, landing with a hard thud, but Vivian couldn't see who it was. The officiant maybe? A guard sweeping in belatedly to protect the new queen? Her mother, the queen consort?

"Immortal assassins! Guards, capture them!"

Not her mother, then.

Queen Constance's powerful voice echoed through the cathedral. She was untouchable. While Bast and Nate tried to help Vivian, Mom stood with deadly poise commanding the royal guards to eliminate the Immortals responsible for Vivian's near-complete assassination. Too bad Dad hadn't had the same talent for self-preservation, but King Herschel

had been dead for three years and sick for much longer.

Queen Constance turned her head briefly toward her children and caught her daughter's eye. A fresh chill crawled through Vivian. Mom had worn her thin-lipped smile, stained with red contempt, to the coronation ceremony. Vivian couldn't tell if she had taken it off yet; that smile wasn't all that different from a frown.

Mom shifted her gaze to the boys. She loved Bast as much as a woman like Constance could love anyone, but Mom had always regarded Vivian with suffering indifference at best and jealousy at worst. She barely acknowledged Nate as her son at all.

Poor Nate. He'd have it rough now that his turn was up. It was a curse that sixteen-year-old Nate was a year older than Bast. Nate was hot-headed, clumsy, impulsive, dull. A general disappointment. Bast took after Mom. He was brilliant, calculating, confident, cruel at times—the family prodigy without any doubt.

The boys looked a lot alike, though.

Before her father died, King Herschel had confessed to Vivian that he was glad she was born first. He thought it was a blessing for the kingdom that she would be queen. “The pressure wouldn't have gotten to Bastian either. But Nate ...” He didn't have to finish for Vivian to know what he meant.

Vivian favored Bast to Nate for company herself—she couldn't have an in-depth conversation about anything important with Nate—but she, at least, cared about them both. There was only a year and a half to go before Nate would be old enough for a coronation ceremony, and from the look on his face now, she thought he might already know he was in trouble. She wondered if Bast would try to help him.

If Vivian had been capable of more than a tormented,

shallow breath, she would have sighed. She had a complicated family.

“I told you to put pressure on it!” Bast yelled, pushing Nate aside completely and pressing his hands down on Vivian’s chest. Bast’s voice shook her from her haze. “Put your hands there ... no, Nate, *there*, and do what you would do if you were warming something up.”

Nate followed instructions, and Vivian had the strange sensation of warm, magical energy flowing over her skin from Nate at the same time she felt Bast’s cool energy circulating through her blood. Bast cursed and began a soft chant. Nate’s eyes shifted nervously, but he joined in. Though their voices were low and muted by the chaos, she recognized the prayer. Maybe she was already gone. Praying was not on Vivian’s list of things she thought her brothers would try together to save her life.

“It’s ‘Holy Spirit peaceful *be*’ not ‘Holy Spirit peace to *me*,’ you moron!” Bast yelled. “You’re not asking for peace for *yourself*!”

Or maybe she was still alive. Though she did feel nauseous and sort of light. Bitter saliva was pooling in her throat. It seemed unlikely that either magic or prayer could save her. Mom would be pleased to have her title back, but what a lousy eighteenth birthday. Vivian had preferred being seventeen and a princess. She’d also preferred having a father who was living. You didn’t always get what you wanted. Her mother gave her a single, last, nearly emotionless glance as Vivian shut her eyes and slipped into the darkness again.

Something her dad told her before he died came back to her. She’d complained that it wasn’t fair he was dying. He’d said: “*Life is a death sentence for all of us, Vivian. The only question is how long your sentence is.*”

So. Her sentence had been precisely eighteen years.

“NO!” Bast roared.

Vivian’s world blackened ...

... and then brightened. She opened her eyes.

Something was wrong.

Her head felt fuller and heavier than she thought it should for a dead person. The arrow was gone, but her chest still throbbed with pain. She was breathing. Her brothers were lifting her up between them, her arms draped over their shoulders.

“We have to get out of here,” Nate was saying.

“You think I don’t *know* that?” Bast answered. “Viv, can you walk?”

She nodded weakly and started moving forward, trying to ignore their painful grips. They passed the officiant lying by the altar. Dead, probably.

“Where are we going?” Nate asked. Clueless as always. How did he know so little? Vivian knew where they were going as they moved swiftly from the dais to the prayer chapel at the side of the apse. Bast opened the door to the chapel and shut it hard once they were inside. Filtered light from a stained-glass window illuminated an ancient tapestry hanging behind a prayer rug on the back wall.

“Don’t you know *anything*?” Bast pointed at the tapestry. “There’s a door there.”

“A door?”

“Yes, stupid, a door.”

“Why?”

Bast flicked his hand, and the tapestry rolled neatly up, revealing the hidden door. “This is the *Royal* Cathedral, Nate. It’s there in case the royal family—that’s us if you didn’t know—needs to get out fast.”

“I *know* we’re the royal family!”

They squeezed through the door together. Vivian was having trouble finding her feet, and she thought she was about to collapse or vomit. She wondered if the boys would be strong enough to keep her upright.

“I cannot believe you are in line before I am,” Bast muttered, closing the hidden door behind them. As it shut, they were consumed by a light-less void.

“Whoa,” Nate said. “It’s really dark.”

“Yeah, *fire*, Nate,” Bast ordered. “This would be a good time for you to be useful.”

“Oh.” A splash of flames rose in the dark from Nate’s hand. The fire seemed like it could dance off his fingertips and out of control any second. Vivian wanted to tell him to stop and say she could do it instead, but she didn’t think she could.

“Light switch,” Bast said, nodding to the wall and flipping the switch telekinetically. Dim overhead lights crackled to life and Vivian was relieved when Nate doused the flames.

“There will be royal guards on the other side,” Bast told them.

“How do you know that?” Nate asked.

“I just do.”

“Why do *you* know everything? No one tells *me* anything.”

“Viv doesn’t need to be told anything.”

That was true. She’d had a foreboding sense of doom about the coronation for weeks now, and given what had happened, she wouldn’t have been surprised if Mom had somehow had a hand in allowing Immortals to infiltrate the crowd at the coronation ceremony. Mom might even have had a conversation with Bast about the possibility beforehand. She’d have done it casually. Something like: “Oh, Bast, dear,

don't forget about the escape tunnels. This is a high-profile event. You never know what might happen. I'll put guards at all the exits."

Bast wouldn't have thought twice about why she was reminding him. He'd have taken for granted that those were standard precautions. It would never have occurred to him that Mom had come up with a way to get her favorite child out of a bloodbath she was orchestrating.

A muffled crash alerted them to someone entering the chapel behind them. Several someones, from what they could hear. Probably the assassins. It sounded like they were tearing up the chapel trying to figure out where she, Bast, and Nate had gone. It would only be a matter of seconds before the hidden door was found.

Bast frowned. "We need to seal that thing up."

Vivian tried to step away from her brothers. Bast was right. They needed to close off that part of the tunnel. She would have to do it. Nate couldn't be trusted with magic like that. He'd accidentally kill them all trying to do it.

Her brothers held her back. "Not *you*, Viv," Bast said.

"I can do it," Nate offered.

Vivian tensed up. "I can," she tried to say, but there was phlegm in her throat that still tasted like blood, and her voice would only come out as a choked rasp.

Bast waved his hand impatiently. "No, you *can't*." He looked sternly at Nate. "And we need to seal it anyway, not blow it up, or we could risk damage to the Royal Cathedral. I'll handle this."

He let go of Vivian and went back a few steps. They heard someone say: "found it," but Bast had already gone to work jamming the door with ice. Vivian could feel the cold on her skin even with Nate right next to her. When whoever

was behind the door tried to open it, it wouldn't budge.

Bast jogged back to her and Nate while the assassins began pounding the door. "There." He picked up Vivian's arm again, now with cold hands.

"Doesn't sound very sealed," Nate said as they all flinched at a loud yell on the other side.

Vivian agreed. "Bast, you should let me—"

Bast growled in frustration and yanked her and Nate forward. "What part of 'no' don't you understand?"

Vivian struggled against him. "The part where *I'm* the queen!"

He dropped her arm again, turned to face her, and jabbed his finger toward her heart.

"What do you think happened there?" Bast demanded.

Vivian stood still. "I was shot," she said slowly.

"Correct. And why did you almost die?"

She was confused. "I was *shot*. But you healed it, and—"

"*Incorrect*." He rubbed the vein that stuck out by his left temple when he was upset.

The word made her feel unsteady. "Meaning I *wasn't* shot? But I thought ..."

"No, you were shot for sure," Nate said. "But that's not why you almost died. Bast thinks the water in the Cup of Truth was poisoned."

Bast rubbed the vein harder. "Not poisoned. *Infected*. With some strain of the Immortality Virus. And I *don't* think it was in the water. The Immortality Virus usually spreads through blood. It was probably on the arrow."

Vivian put her hand on her chest. Her heart was beating, wasn't it? But Immortals had beating hearts, too. "Am I ...?"

"Your body isn't compatible with the virus, Viv. It's not going to make you Immortal." Bast stuck his hands in his

pockets and shook his head at the ground. “It’s faster than any strain of the Immortality Virus I’m familiar with. It infected your entire system in a few minutes. That’s why you were coughing up so much blood. You should be dead. You *would* be dead except for magic. It’s the only thing keeping whatever’s in you now from destroying you. And even with magic from all three of us, I can only slow the virus down.”

She stared at him, trying to understand.

He ran the back of his hand over his forehead and closed his eyes for a second before he opened them and looked fiercely at her. “Look, we’ll figure out what to do. We’ll get help. We’ll find more magic. But we’re barely keeping you alive. If you try to use magic—*any* magic, Viv—it might kill you. Understand?”

Someone was still trying to break down the door. Bast went back to add another layer of ice. Vivian hoped he was creating a secure enough seal. She couldn’t really think any more about that, though. To tell the truth, she had other things to worry about.

The queen of South Kepler was dying after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sandra L. Vasher is an indie writer, recovering lawyer, dreamer, consultant, blogger, serial entrepreneur, and mommy of very spoiled dog. She enjoys long drives in fall weather, do-it-yourself projects, animated movies and cartoons, fanfiction, red wine, traveling everywhere, and baking sweet and savory treats. She can often be found trying not to hunch over her computer at her favorite coffee shops in Raleigh, North Carolina. Follow her online at sandyvasher.com.