



MORGAN RICE

A QUEST OF HEROES

(BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Quest of Heroes

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Rice M.

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From #1 Bestselling author Morgan Rice comes the debut of a dazzling new fantasy series. A QUEST OF HEROES (BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING) revolves around the epic coming of age story of one special boy, a 14 year old from a small village on the outskirts of the Kingdom of the Ring. The youngest of four, the least favorite of his father, hated by his brothers, Thorgrin senses he is different from the others. He dreams of becoming a great warrior, of joining the King's men and protecting the Ring from the hordes of creatures on the other side of the Canyon. When he comes of age and is forbidden by his father to try out for the King's Legion, he refuses to take no for an answer: he journeys out on his own, determined to force his way into King's Court and be taken seriously. But King's Court is rife with its own family dramas, power struggles, ambitions, jealousy, violence and betrayal. King MacGil must choose an heir from amongst his children, and the ancient Dynasty Sword, the source of all their power, still sits untouched, waiting for the chosen one to arrive. Thorgrin arrives as an outsider and battles to be accepted, and to join the King's Legion. Thorgrin comes to learn he has mysterious powers he does not understand, that he has a special gift, and a special destiny. Against all odds he falls in love with the king's daughter, and as their forbidden relationship blossoms, he discovers he has powerful rivals. As he struggles to make sense of his powers, the king's sorcerer takes him under his wing and tells him of a mother he never knew, in a land far away, beyond the Canyon, beyond even the land of the Dragons. Before Thorgrin can venture out and become the warrior he yearns to be, he must complete his training. But this may be cut short, as he finds himself propelled into the center of royal plots and counterplots, ones that may threaten his love and bring him down—and the entire kingdom with him. With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A QUEST OF HEROES is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken

hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders. It is 82,000 words.

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"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."

*– William Shakespeare
Henry IV, Part II*

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

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"THE SORCERER'S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers."

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“An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist...Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl...one extraordinary girl!...Easy to read but extremely fast-paced... Rated PG.”

– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Turned*)

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– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Loved*)

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Chapter One

The boy stood on the highest knoll of the low country in the Western Kingdom of the Ring, looking north, watching the first of the rising suns. As far as he could see stretched rolling green hills, dipping and rising like camel humps in a series of valleys and peaks. The burnt-orange rays of the first sun lingered in the morning mist, making them sparkle, lending the light a magic that matched the boy's mood. He rarely woke this early or ventured this far from home – and never ascended this high – knowing it would incur his father's wrath. But on this day, he didn't care. On this day, he disregarded the million rules and chores that had oppressed him for his fourteen years. For this day was different. It was the day his destiny had arrived.

The boy, Thorgrin of the Western Kingdom of the Southern Province of the clan McLeod – known to all he liked simply as Thor – the youngest of four boys, the least favorite of his father, had stayed awake all night in anticipation of this day. He had tossed and turned, bleary-eyed, waiting, *willing* the first sun to rise. For a day like this arrived only once every several years, and if he missed it, he would be stuck in this village, doomed to tend his father's flock the rest of his days. That was a thought he could not bear.

Conscription Day. It was the one day the King's Army canvassed the provinces and hand-picked volunteers for the King's Legion. As long as he had lived, Thor had dreamt of nothing else. For him, life meant one thing: joining the Silver, the King's elite force of knights, bedecked in the finest armor and the choicest arms anywhere in the two kingdoms. And one could not enter the Silver without first joining the Legion, the company of squires ranging from fourteen to nineteen years of age. And if one was not the son of a noble, or of a famed warrior, there was no other way to join the Legion.

Conscription Day was the only exception, that rare event every few years when the Legion ran low and the King's men scoured the land in search of new recruits. Everyone knew that few commoners were chosen – and that even fewer would actually make the Legion.

Thor studied the horizon intently, looking for any sign of motion. The Silver, he knew, would have to take this, the only road into his village, and he wanted to be the first to spot them. His flock of sheep protested all around him, rising up in a chorus of annoying grunts and urging him to bring them back down the mountain, where the grazing was choicer. He tried to block out the noise, and the stench. He had to concentrate.

What had made all of this bearable, all these years of tending flocks, of being his father's lackey, his older brothers' lackey, the one cared for least and burdened most, was the idea that one day he would leave this place. One day, when the Silver came, he would surprise all those who had underestimated him and be selected. In one swift motion, he would ascend their carriage and say goodbye to all of this.

Thor's father, of course, had never considered him seriously as a candidate for the Legion – in fact, he had never considered him as a candidate for anything. Instead, his father devoted his love and attention to Thor's three older brothers. The oldest was nineteen and the others but a year behind each other, leaving Thor a good three years younger than any of them. Perhaps because they were closer in age, or perhaps because they looked alike and looked nothing like Thor, the three of them stuck together, barely acknowledging Thor's existence.

Worse, they were taller and broader and stronger than he, and Thor, who knew he was not short, nonetheless felt small beside them, felt his muscular legs frail compared to their barrels of oak. His father made no move to rectify any of this – and in fact seemed to relish it – leaving Thor to attend the sheep and sharpen weapons while his brothers were left to train. It was never spoken, but always understood, that Thor would spend his life in the wings, be forced to watch his brothers achieve great things. His destiny, if his father and brothers had their way, would be to stay here, swallowed by this village, and give his family the support they demanded.

Worse still was that Thor sensed his brothers, paradoxically, were threatened by him, maybe even hated him. Thor could see it in their every glance, their every gesture. He didn't understand how, but he aroused something, like fear, or jealousy, in them. Perhaps it was because he was different from them, didn't look like them or speak with their mannerisms; he didn't even dress like them, his father reserving the best – the purple and scarlet robes, the gilded weapons – for his brothers, while Thor was left wearing the coarsest of rags.

Nonetheless, Thor made the best of what he had, finding a way to make his clothes fit, tying the frock with a sash around his waist, and, now that summer was here, cutting off the sleeves to allow his toned arms to be caressed by the breezes. His shirt was matched by coarse linen pants – his only pair – and boots made of the poorest leather, laced up his shins. They were hardly the leather of his brothers' shoes, but he made them work. His was the typical uniform of a herder.

But he hardly had the typical demeanor. Thor stood tall and lean, with a proud jaw, noble chin, high cheekbones, and gray eyes, looking like a displaced warrior. His straight, brown hair fell back in waves on his head, just past his ears, and behind the locks, his eyes glistened like minnows in the light.

Thor's brothers would be allowed to sleep in this morning, given a hearty meal, and sent off for the Selection with the finest weapons and his father's blessing – while he would not even be allowed to attend. He had tried to raise the issue with his father once. It had not gone well. His father had summarily ended the conversation, and he had not tried again. It just wasn't fair.

Thor was determined to reject the fate his father had planned for him. At the first sign of the royal caravan, he would race back to the house, confront his father, and, like it or not, make himself known to the King's men. He would stand for selection with the others. His father could not stop him. He felt a knot in his stomach at the thought of it.

The first sun rose higher, and when the second sun, mint green, began to rise, adding a layer of light to the purple sky, Thor spotted them.

He stood upright, hairs on end, electrified. There, on the horizon, came the faintest outline of a horse-drawn carriage, its wheels kicking dust into the sky. His heart beat faster as another came into view; then another. Even from here the golden carriages gleamed in the suns, like silver-backed fish leaping from the water.

By the time he counted twelve of them, he could wait no longer. Heart pounding in his chest, forgetting his flock for the first time in his life, Thor turned and stumbled down the hill, determined to stop at nothing until he made himself known.

* * *

Thor barely paused to catch his breath as he sped down the hills, through the trees, scratched by branches and not caring. He reached a clearing and saw his village spread out below: a sleepy country town packed with one-story, white clay homes with thatched roofs. There were but several dozen families amongst them. Smoke rose from chimneys as most were up early preparing their morning meal. It was an idyllic place, just far enough – a full day's ride – from King's Court to deter passersby. Just another farming village on the edge of the Ring, another cog in the wheel of the Western Kingdom.

Thor burst down the final stretch, into the village square, kicking up dirt as he went. Chickens and dogs ran out of his way, and an old woman, squatting outside her home before a cauldron of bubbling water, hissed at him.

"Slow down, boy!" she screeched as he raced past, stirring dust into her fire.

But Thor would not slow – not for her, not for anybody. He turned down one side street, then another, twisting and turning the way he knew by heart, until he reached home.

It was a small, nondescript dwelling like all the others, with its white clay walls and angular, thatched roof. Like most, its single room was divided, his father sleeping on one side and his three

brothers on the other; unlike most, it had a small chicken coop in the back, and it was here that Thor was exiled to sleep. At first he'd bunked with his brothers; but over time they had grown bigger and meaner and more exclusive, and made a show of not leaving him room. Thor had been hurt, but now he relished his own space, preferring to be away from their presence. It just confirmed for him that he was the exile in his family that he already knew he was.

Thor ran to his front door and burst through it without stopping.

"Father!" he yelled, gasping for breath. "The Silver! They're coming!"

His father and three brothers sat hunched over the breakfast table, already dressed in their finest. At his words they jumped up and darted past him, bumping his shoulders as they ran out of the house and into the road.

Thor followed them out, and they all stood watching the horizon.

"I see no one," Drake, the oldest, answered in his deep voice. With the broadest shoulders, hair cropped short like his brothers', brown eyes, and thin, disapproving lips, he scowled down at Thor, as usual.

"Nor do I," echoed Dross, just a year below Drake, always taking his side.

"They're coming!" Thor shot back. "I swear!"

His father turned to him and grabbed his shoulders sternly.

"And how would you know?" he demanded.

"I saw them."

"How? From where?"

Thor hesitated; his father had him. He of course knew the only place Thor could have spotted them was from the top of that knoll. Now Thor was unsure how to respond.

"I... climbed the knoll –"

"With the flock? You know they are not to go that far."

"But today was different. I had to see."

His father glowered down.

"Go inside at once and fetch your brothers' swords and polish their scabbards, so they look their best before the King's men arrive."

His father, done with him, turned back to his brothers, who all stood in the road looking out.

"Do you think they'll choose us?" asked Durs, the youngest of the three, a full three years ahead of Thor.

"They'd be foolish not to," his father said. "They are short on men this year. It has been a slim cropping – or else they wouldn't bother coming. Just stand straight, the three of you, keep your chins up and chests out. Do not look them directly in the eye, but do not look away, either. Be strong and confident. Show no weakness. If you want to be in the King's Legion, you must act as if you're already in it."

"Yes, Father," his three boys answered at once, getting into position.

He turned and glared back at Thor.

"What are you still doing there?" he asked. "Get inside!"

Thor stood there, torn. He didn't want to disobey his father, but he had to speak with him. His heart pounded as he debated. He decided it would be best to obey, to bring the swords, and then confront his father. Disobeying outright wouldn't help.

Thor raced into the house, out through the back and to the weapons shed. He found his brothers' three swords, objects of beauty all of them, crowned with the finest silver hilts, precious gifts for which his father had toiled years. He grabbed all three, surprised as always at their weight, and ran back through the house with them.

He sprinted to his brothers, handed each a sword, then turned to his father.

"What, no polish?" Drake said.

His father turned to him disapprovingly, but before he could say anything, Thor spoke up.

“Father, please. I need to speak with you!”

“I told you to polish – ”

“*Please*, Father!”

His father glared back, debating. He must have seen the seriousness on Thor’s face, because finally, he said, “Well?”

“I want to be considered. With the others. For the Legion.”

His brothers’ laughter rose up behind him, making his face burn red.

But his father did not laugh; on the contrary, his scowl deepened.

“Do you?” he asked.

Thor nodded back vigorously.

“I’m fourteen. I’m eligible.”

“The cutoff is fourteen,” Drake said disparagingly, over his shoulder. “If they took you, you’d be the youngest. Do you think they’d choose you over someone like me, five years your elder?”

“You are insolent,” Durs said. “You always have been.”

Thor turned to them. “I’m not asking you,” he said.

He turned back to his father, who still frowned.

“Father, please,” he said. “Allow me a chance. That’s all I ask. I know I’m young, but I will prove myself, over time.”

His father shook his head.

“You’re not a soldier, boy. You’re not like your brothers. You’re a herder. Your life is here. With me. You will do your duties and do them well. One should not dream too high. Embrace your life, and learn to love it.”

Thor felt his heart breaking as he saw his life collapsing before his eyes.

No, he thought. *This can’t be.*

“But Father – ”

“Silence!” he shrieked, so shrill it cut the air. “Enough with you. Here they come. Get out of the way, and best mind your manners while they’re here.”

His father stepped up and with one hand pushed Thor to the side, as if he were an object he’d rather not see. His beefy palm stung Thor’s chest.

A great rumbling arose, and townsfolk poured out from their homes, lining the streets. A growing cloud of dust heralded the caravan, and moments later they arrived, a dozen horse-drawn carriages, with a noise like great thunder.

They came into town like a sudden army, halting close to Thor’s home. Their horses, pranced in place, snorting. It took a long time for the cloud of dust to settle, and Thor anxiously tried to steal a peek at their armor, their weaponry. He had never been this close to the Silver before, and his heart thumped.

The soldier on the lead stallion dismounted. Here he was, a real, actual member of the Silver, covered in shiny ring mail, a long sword on his belt. He looked to be in his thirties, a real man, stubble on his face, scars on his cheek, and a nose crooked from battle. He was the most substantial man Thor had ever seen, twice as wide as the others, with a countenance that said he was in charge.

The soldier jumped down onto the dirt road, his spurs jingling as he approached the lineup of boys.

Up and down the village dozens of boys stood at attention, hoping. Joining the Silver meant a life of honor, of battle, of renown, of glory – along with land, title, and riches. It meant the best bride, the choicest land, a life of glory. It meant honor for your family, and entering the Legion was the first step.

Thor studied the large, golden carriages, and knew they could only hold so many recruits. It was a large kingdom, and they had many towns to visit. He gulped, realizing his chances were even more

remote than he thought. He would have to beat out all these other boys – many of them substantial fighters – along with his own three brothers. He had a sinking feeling.

Thor could hardly breathe as the soldier paced in silence, surveying the rows of hopefuls. He began on the far side of the street, then slowly circled. Thor knew all the other boys, of course. He also knew some of them secretly did not want to be picked, even though their families wanted to send them off. They were afraid; they would make poor soldiers.

Thor burned with indignity. He felt he deserved to be picked as much as any of them. Just because his brothers were older and bigger and stronger didn't mean he shouldn't have a right to stand and be chosen. He burned with hatred for his father, and nearly burst out of his skin as the soldier approached.

The soldier stopped, for the first time, before his brothers. He looked them up and down, and seemed impressed. He reached out, grabbed one of their scabbards, and yanked it, as if to test how firm it was.

He broke into a smile.

"You haven't yet used your sword in battle, have you?" he asked Drake.

Thor saw Drake nervous for the first time in his life. Drake swallowed.

"No, my liege. But I've used it many times in practice, and I hope to – "

"In *practice*!"

The soldier roared with laughter and turned to the other soldiers, who joined in, laughing in Drake's face.

Drake turned bright red. It was the first time Thor had ever seen Drake embarrassed – usually, it was Drake embarrassing others.

"Well then I shall certainly tell our enemies to fear you – you who wields your sword *in practice*!"

The crowd of soldiers laughed again.

The soldier then turned to Thor's other brothers.

"Three boys from the same stock," he said, rubbing the stubble on his chin. "That can be useful. You're all a good size. Untested, though. You'll need much training if you are to make the cut."

He paused.

"I suppose we can find room."

He nodded toward the rear wagon.

"Get in, and be quick of it. Before I change my mind."

Thor's three brothers sprinted for the carriage, beaming. Thor noticed his father beaming, too. But he was crestfallen as he watched them go.

The soldier turned and moved on to the next home. Thor could stand it no longer.

"Sire!" Thor yelled out.

His father turned and glared at him, but Thor no longer cared.

The soldier stopped, his back to him, and slowly turned.

Thor took two steps forward, his heart beating, and stuck out his chest as far as he could.

"You haven't considered me, sire," he said.

The soldier, startled, looked Thor up and down as if he were a joke.

"Haven't I?" he asked, and burst into laughter.

His men burst into laughter, too. But Thor didn't care. This was his moment. It was now or never.

"I want to join the Legion!" Thor said.

The soldier stepped toward Thor.

"Do you now?"

He looked amused.

"And have you even reached your fourteenth year?"

"I did, sire. Two weeks ago."

“Two weeks ago!”

The soldier shrieked with laughter, as did the men behind them.

“In that case, our enemies shall surely quiver at the sight of you.”

Thor felt himself burning with indignity. He had to do something. He couldn't let it end like this. The soldier turned to walk away – but Thor could not allow it.

Thor stepped forward and yelled: “Sire! You are making a mistake!”

A horrified gasp spread through the crowd, as the soldier stopped and once again slowly turned. Now he was scowling.

“Stupid boy,” his father said, grabbing Thor by his shoulder, “go back inside!”

“I shall not!” Thor yelled, shaking off his father's grip.

The soldier stepped toward Thor, and his father backed away.

“Do you know the punishment for insulting the Silver?” the soldier snapped.

Thor's heart pounded, but he knew he could not back down.

“Please forgive him, sire,” his father said. “He's a young child and – ”

“I'm not speaking to you,” the soldier said. With a withering look, he forced Thor's father to turn away.

The soldier turned back to Thor.

“Answer me!” he said.

Thor swallowed, unable to speak. This was not how he saw it going in his head.

“To insult the Silver is to insult the King himself,” Thor said meekly, reciting what he'd learned from memory.

“Yes,” the soldier said. “Which means I can give you forty lashes if I choose.”

“I mean no insult, sire,” Thor said. “I just want to be picked. Please. I've dreamt of this my entire life. Please. Let me join you.”

The soldier looked at him, and slowly, his expression softened. After a long while, he shook his head.

“You're young, boy. You have a proud heart. But you're not ready. Come back to us when you are weaned.”

With that, he turned and stormed off, barely glancing at the other boys. He quickly mounted his horse.

Thor, crestfallen, watched as the caravan broke into action; as quickly as they'd arrived, they were gone.

The last thing Thor saw was his brothers, sitting in the back of the last carriage, looking out at him, disapproving, mocking. They were being carted away before his eyes, away from here, into a better life.

Inside, Thor felt like dying.

As the excitement around him faded, villagers slinked back into their homes.

“Do you realize how stupid you were, foolish boy?” Thor's father snapped, grabbing his shoulders. “Do you realize you could have ruined your brothers' chances?”

Thor brushed his father's hands off of him roughly, and his father reached back and backhanded him across the face.

Thor felt the sting of it and glared back at his father. A part of him, for the first time, wanted to hit his father back. But he held himself.

“Go get my sheep and bring them back. Now! And when you return, don't expect a meal from me. You will miss your meal tonight, and think about what you've done.”

“Maybe I shall not come back at all!” Thor yelled as he turned and stormed off, away from his home, toward the hills.

“Thor!” his father yelled. A few of the villagers who remained on the road stopped and watched.

Thor broke into a trot, then a run, wanting to get as far away from this place as possible. He barely noticed he was crying, tears flooding his face, as every dream he'd ever had was crushed.

Chapter Two

Thor wandered for hours in the hills, seething, until finally he chose a hill and sat, arms crossed over his legs, and watched the horizon. He watched the carriages disappear, watched the cloud of dust that lingered for hours after.

There would be no more visits. Now he was destined to remain here in this village for years, awaiting another chance – if they ever returned. If his father ever allowed it. Now it would be just him and his father, alone in the house, and his father would surely let out the full breadth of his wrath on him. He would continue to be his father's lackey, years would pass, and he would end up just like him, stuck here living a small, menial life – while his brothers gained glory and renown. His veins burned with the indignity of it all. This was not the life he was meant to live. He knew it.

Thor wracked his brain for anything he could do, any way he could change it. But there was nothing. These were the cards life had dealt him.

After hours of sitting, he rose dejectedly and began traversing his way back up the familiar hills, higher and higher. Inevitably, he drifted back toward the flock, to the high knoll. As he climbed, the first sun fell in the sky and the second reached its peak, casting a greenish tint. Thor took his time as he ambled, mindlessly removing his sling from his waist, its leather grip well worn from years of use. He reached into the sack tied to his hip and fingered his collection of stones, each smoother than the next, hand-picked from the choicest creeks. Sometimes he fired on birds; other times, rodents. It was a habit he'd ingrained over years. At first, he'd missed everything; then, once, he hit a moving target. Since then, his aim was true. Now, hurling stones had become part of him – and it helped to release some of his anger. His brothers might be able to swing a sword through a log – but they could never hit a flying bird with a stone.

Thor mindlessly placed a stone in the sling, leaned back, and hurled it with all he had, pretending he was hurling it at his father. He hit a branch on a far-off tree, taking it down cleanly. Once he'd discovered he could actually kill moving animals, he'd stopped aiming at them, afraid of his own power and not wanting to hurt anything; now his targets were branches. Unless, of course, a fox came after his flock. Over time, they had learned to stay clear, and Thor's sheep, as a result, were the safest in the village.

Thor thought of his brothers, of where they were right now, and he steamed. After a day's ride they would arrive in King's Court. He could just picture it. He saw them arriving to great fanfare, people dressed in their finest, greeting them. Warriors greeting them. Members of the Silver. They would be taken in, given a place to live in the Legion's barracks, a place to train in the King's fields using the finest weapons. Each would be named squire to a famous knight. One day, they would become knights themselves, get their own horse, their own coat of arms, and have their own squire. They would partake in all the festivals and dine at the King's table. It was a charmed life. And it had slipped from his grasp.

Thor felt physically sick, and tried to force it all from his mind. But he could not. There was a part of him, some deep part, that screamed at him. It told him not to give up, that he had a greater destiny than this. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it wasn't here. He felt he was different. Maybe even special. That no one understood him. And that they all underestimated him.

Thor reached the highest knoll and spotted his flock. Well trained, they were all still gathered, gnawing away contentedly at whatever grass they could find. He counted them, looking for the red marks he had stained on their backs. He froze as he finished. One sheep was missing.

He counted again, and again. He couldn't believe it: one was gone.

Thor had never lost a sheep before, and his father would never let him live this down. Worse, he hated the idea of one of his sheep lost, alone, vulnerable in the wilderness. He hated to see anything innocent suffer.

Thor scurried to the top of the knoll and scanned the horizon until he spotted it, far off, several hills away: the lone sheep, the red mark on its back. It was the wild one of the bunch. His heart dropped as he realized the sheep had not only fled, but had chosen, of all places, to head west, to Darkwood.

Thor gulped. Darkwood was forbidden – not just for sheep, but for humans. It was beyond the village limit, and from the time he could walk, Thor knew not to venture there. He never had. Going there, legend told, was a sure death, its woods unmarked and filled with vicious animals.

Thor looked up at the darkening sky, debating. He couldn't let his sheep go. He figured if he could move fast, he could get it back in time.

After one final look back, he turned and broke into a sprint, heading west, for Darkwood, thick clouds gathering above. He had a sinking feeling, yet his legs seemed to carry him on his own. He felt there was no turning back, even if he wanted to.

It was like running into a nightmare.

* * *

Thor sped down the series of hills without pausing, into the thick canopy of Darkwood. The trails ended where the wood began, and he ran into unmarked territory, summer leaves crunching beneath his feet.

The instant he entered the wood he was engulfed in darkness, the light blocked by the towering pines above. It was colder in here, too, and as he crossed the threshold, he felt a chill. It wasn't just from the dark, or the cold – it was from something else. Something he could not name. It was a sense of...being watched.

Thor looked up at the ancient branches, gnarled, thicker than he, swaying and creaking in the breeze. He had barely gone fifty paces into the wood when he began to hear odd animal noises. He turned and could hardly see the opening from which he'd entered; he felt already as if there were no way out. He hesitated.

Darkwood had always sat on the periphery of the town and on the periphery of Thor's consciousness, something deep and mysterious. Any herder who ever lost a sheep to the wood had never dared venture after it. Even his father. The tales about this place were too dark, too persistent.

But there was something different about today that made Thor no longer care, that made him throw caution to the wind. A part of him wanted to push the boundaries, to get as far away from home as possible, and to allow life to take him where it may.

He ventured farther, then paused, unsure which way to go. He noticed markings, bent branches where his sheep must have gone, and turned in that direction. After some time, he turned again.

Before another hour had passed, he was hopelessly lost. He tried to remember the direction from which he came – but was no longer sure. An uneasy feeling settled in his stomach, but he figured the only way out was forward, so he continued on.

In the distance, Thor spotted a shaft of sunlight, and made for it. Finding himself before a small clearing, he stopped at its edge, rooted – he could not believe what he saw before him.

Standing there, his back to Thor, dressed in a long, blue satin robe, was a man. No, not a man – Thor could sense it from here. He was something else. A Druid, maybe. He stood tall and straight, head covered by a hood, perfectly still, as if he did not have a care in the world.

Thor didn't know what to do. He had heard of Druids, but had never encountered one. From the markings on his robe, the elaborate gold trim, this was no mere Druid: those were royal markings. Of King's Court. Thor could not understand it. What was a royal Druid doing here?

After what felt like an eternity, the Druid slowly turned and faced him, and as he did, Thor recognized the face. It took his breath away. It was one of the most famous faces in the kingdom: the King's personal Druid. Argon, counselor to kings of the Western Kingdom for centuries. What he

was doing here, far from the royal court, in the center of Darkwood, was a mystery. Thor wondered if he were imagining it.

“Your eyes do not deceive you,” Argon said, staring directly at Thor.

His voice was deep, ancient, as if spoken by the trees themselves. His large, translucent eyes seemed to bore right through Thor, summing him up. Thor felt an intense energy radiating from the Druid – as if he were standing opposite the sun.

Thor immediately took a knee and bowed his head.

“My liege,” he said. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

Disrespect toward a King’s counselor would result in imprisonment or death. That fact had been ingrained in Thor since the time he was born.

“Stand up, child,” Argon said. “If I wanted you to kneel, I would have told you.”

Slowly, Thor stood and looked at him. Argon took several steps closer. He stopped and stared at Thor, until Thor began to feel uncomfortable.

“You have your mother’s eyes,” Argon said.

Thor was taken aback. He had never met his mother, and had never met anyone, aside from his father, who knew her. He had been told she died in childbirth, something for which Thor always felt a sense of guilt. He had always suspected that that was why his family hated him.

“I think you’re mistaking me for someone else,” Thor said. “I don’t have a mother.”

“Don’t you?” Argon asked with a smile. “Were you born by man alone?”

“I meant to say, sire, that my mother died in birth. I think you mistake me.”

“You are Thorgrin, of the clan McLeod. The youngest of four brothers. The one not picked.”

Thor’s eyes opened wide. He hardly knew what to make of this. That someone of Argon’s stature should know who he was – it was more than he could comprehend. He’d never even imagined that he was known to anyone outside his village.

“How...do you know this?”

Argon smiled back, but did not respond.

Thor was suddenly filled with curiosity.

“How...” Thor added, fumbling for words, “...how do you know my mother? Have you met her? Who was she?”

Argon turned and walked away.

“Questions for another time,” he said.

Thor watched him go, puzzled. It was such a dizzying and mysterious encounter, and it was all happening so fast. He decided he could not let Argon leave; he hurried after him.

“What are you doing here?” Thor asked, hurrying to catch up. Argon, using his staff, an ancient ivory thing, walked deceptively fast. “You were not waiting for *me*, were you?”

“Who else?” Argon asked.

Thor hurried to catch up, following him into the wood, leaving the clearing behind.

“But why me? How did you know I would be here? What is it that you want?”

“So many questions,” Argon said. “You fill the air. You should listen instead.”

Thor followed as they continued through the thick wood, doing his best to remain silent.

“You come in search of your lost sheep,” Argon stated. “A noble effort. But you waste your time. She will not survive.”

Thor’s eyes opened wide.

“How do you know this?”

“I know worlds you will never know, boy. At least, not yet.”

Thor wondered as he hiked to catch up.

“You won’t listen, though. That is your nature. Stubborn. Like your mother. You will continue after your sheep, determined to rescue her.”

Thor reddened as Argon read his thoughts.

“You are a feisty boy,” he added. “Strong-willed. Too proud. Positive traits. But one day it may be your downfall.”

Argon began to hike up a mossy ridge, and Thor followed.

“You want to join the King’s Legion,” Argon said.

“Yes!” Thor answered, excitedly. “Is there any chance for me? Can you make that happen?”

Argon laughed, a deep, hollow sound that sent a chill up Thor’s spine.

“I can make everything and nothing happen. Your destiny was already written. But it is up to you to choose it.”

Thor did not understand.

They reached the top of the ridge, where Argon stopped and faced him. Thor stood only feet away, and Argon’s energy burned through him.

“Your destiny is an important one,” he said. “Do not abandon it.”

Thor’s eyes widened. His destiny? Important? He felt himself swell with pride.

“I do not understand. You speak in riddles. Please, tell me more.”

Argon vanished.

Thor’s mouth fell open. He looked every which way, listening, wondering. Had he imagined it all? Was it some delusion?

Thor turned and examined the wood; from this vantage point, high up on the ridge, he could see farther than before. As he looked, he spotted motion in the distance. He heard a noise and felt sure it was his sheep.

He stumbled down the mossy ridge and hurried in the direction of the sound, back through the wood. As he went, he could not shake his encounter with Argon. He could hardly conceive it had happened. What was the King’s Druid doing here, of all places? He had been waiting for him. But why? And what had he meant about his destiny?

The more Thor tried to unravel it, the less he understood. Argon had warned him not to continue while tempting him to do so. Now, as he went, Thor felt an increasing sense of foreboding, as if something momentous were about to happen.

He turned a bend and stopped cold in his tracks at the view before him. All his worst nightmares were confirmed in a single moment. His hair stood on end, and he realized he had made a grave mistake in coming this deep into Darkwood.

Opposite him, hardly thirty paces away, was a Sybold. Hulking, muscular, standing on all fours, nearly the size of a horse, it was the most feared animal of Darkwood, maybe even of the kingdom. Thor had never seen one, but had heard the legends. It resembled a lion, but was bigger, broader, its hide a deep scarlet and its eyes a glowing yellow. Legend had it that its crimson color came from the blood of innocent children.

Thor had heard of few sightings of this beast his entire life, and even these were thought to be dubious. Maybe that was because no one had ever actually survived an encounter. Some considered the Sybold to be the God of the Woods, and an omen. What that omen was, Thor had no idea.

He took a careful step back.

The Sybold, its huge jaws half-open, its fangs dripping saliva, stared back with its yellow eyes. In its mouth was Thor’s missing sheep: screaming, hanging upside down, half its body pierced by fangs. It was mostly dead. The Sybold appeared to revel in the kill, taking its time; it seemed to delight in torturing it.

Thor could not stand the cries. The sheep wiggled, helpless, and he felt responsible.

Thor’s first impulse was to turn and run, but he already knew that would be futile. This beast could outrun anything. Running would only embolden it. And he could not leave his sheep to die like that.

He stood frozen in fear, and knew he had to take action of some sort.

His reflexes took over. He slowly reached down to his pouch, extracted a stone, and placed it in his sling. With a trembling hand, he wound up, took a step forward, and hurled.

The stone sailed through the air and hit its mark. A perfect shot. It hit the sheep in its eyeball, driving through to its brain.

The sheep went limp. Dead. Thor had spared the animal its suffering.

The Sybold glared, enraged that Thor had killed its plaything. It slowly opened its immense jaws and dropped the sheep, which landed with a thump on the forest floor. Then it set its eyes on Thor.

It snarled, a deep, evil sound that rose from its belly.

As it skulked toward him, Thor, heart pounding, placed another stone in his sling, reached back, and prepared to fire once again.

The Sybold broke into a sprint, moving faster than anything Thor had ever seen in his life. Thor took a step forward and hurled the stone, praying it hit, knowing he wouldn't have time to sling another before it arrived.

The stone hit the beast in its right eye, knocking it out. It was a tremendous throw, one that would've brought a lesser animal to its knees.

But this was no lesser animal. The beast was unstoppable. It shrieked at the damage, but never even slowed. Even without one eye, even with the stone lodged in its brain, it continued to charge mindlessly at Thor. There was nothing Thor could do.

A moment later, the beast was on him. It wound up with its huge claw and swiped his shoulder.

Thor shrieked. It felt like three knives cutting across his flesh, hot blood gushing instantly from it.

The beast pinned him to the ground, on all fours. The weight was immense, like an elephant standing on his chest. Thor felt his ribcage being crushed.

The beast threw back its head, opened wide its jaws to reveal its fangs, and began to lower them for Thor's throat.

As it did, Thor reached up and grabbed its neck; it was like gripping solid muscle. Thor could barely hang on. His arms started to shake as the fangs descended lower. He felt its hot breath all over his face, felt the saliva drip down onto his neck. A rumble came from deep within the animal's chest, burning Thor's ears. He knew he would die.

Thor closed his eyes.

Please, God. Give me strength. Allow me to fight this creature. Please. I beg you. I will do anything you ask. I will owe you a great debt.

And then something happened. Thor felt a tremendous heat rise up within his body, coursing through his veins, like an energy field racing through him. He opened his eyes and saw something that surprised him: from his palms emanated a yellow light, and as he pushed back into the beast's throat, amazingly, he was able to match its strength and hold it at bay.

Thor continued to push until he was actually pushing the beast back. His strength grew and he felt a cannonball of energy – an instant later, the beast went flying backwards, Thor sending it a good ten feet. It landed on its back.

Thor sat up, not understanding what had happened.

The beast regained its feet. Then, in a rage, it charged again – but this time Thor felt different. The energy coursed through him; he felt more powerful than he had ever been.

As the beast leapt into the air, Thor crouched down, grabbed it by its stomach, and hurled it, letting its momentum carry it.

The beast flew through the wood, smashed into a tree, and collapsed to the floor.

Thor stared, amazed. Had he just thrown a Sybold?

The beast blinked twice, then looked at Thor. It stood up and charged again.

This time, as the beast pounced, Thor grabbed it by its throat. They both went to the ground, the beast on top of Thor. But Thor rolled over on top of it. Thor held onto it, choking it with both

hands, as the beast kept trying to raise its head and snap its fangs at him. It just missed. Thor, feeling a new strength, dug his hands in and did not let go. He let the energy course through him. And soon, amazingly, he felt himself stronger than the beast.

He was choking the Sybold to death. Finally, the beast went limp.

Thor did not let go for another full minute.

He stood slowly, out of breath, staring down, wide-eyed, as he held his wounded arm. What had just happened? Had he, Thor, just killed a Sybold?

He felt it was a sign, on this day of all days. He felt as if something momentous had happened. He had just killed the most famed and feared beast of his kingdom. Single-handedly. Without a weapon. It did not seem real. No one would believe him.

He felt the world spin as he wondered what power had overcome him, what it meant, who he really was. The only people known to have power like that were Druids. But his father and mother were not Druids, so he couldn't be one.

Or could he be?

Sensing someone behind him, Thor spun to see Argon standing there, staring down at the animal.

"How did you get here?" Thor asked, amazed.

Argon ignored him.

"Did you witness what happened?" Thor asked, still unbelieving. "I don't know how I did it."

"But you do know," Argon answered. "Deep inside, you know. You are different than the others."

"It was like...a surge of power," Thor said. "Like a strength I didn't know I had."

"The energy field," Argon said. "One day you will come to know it quite well. You may even learn to control it."

Thor clutched his shoulder; the pain was excruciating. He looked down and saw his hand covered in blood. He felt lightheaded, worried what would happen if he didn't get help.

Argon took three steps forward, reached out, grabbed Thor's free hand, and placed it firmly on the wound. He held it there, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

Thor felt a warm sensation course through his arm. Within seconds, the sticky blood on his hand dried up, and he felt his pain begin to fade.

He looked down and could not comprehend it: he was healed. All that remained were three scars where the claws had cut – but they were sealed and looked to be several days old. There was no more blood.

Thor looked at Argon in astonishment.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

Argon smiled.

"I didn't. *You* did. I just directed your power."

"But I don't have the power to heal," Thor answered, baffled.

"Don't you?" Argon replied.

"I don't understand. None of this is making any sense," Thor said, increasingly impatient. "Please, tell me."

Argon looked away.

"Some things you must learn over time."

Thor thought of something.

"Does this mean I can join the King's Legion?" he asked, excitedly. "Surely, if I can kill a Sybold, then I can hold my own with other boys."

"Surely you can," he answered.

"But they chose my brothers – they didn't choose me."

"Your brothers couldn't have killed this beast."

Thor stared back, thinking.

“But they have already rejected me. How can I join them?”

“Since when does a warrior need an invitation?” Argon asked.

His words sunk in deep. Thor felt his body warming over.

“Are you saying I should just show up? Uninvited?”

Argon smiled.

“*You* create your destiny. Others do not.”

Thor blinked – and a moment later, Argon was gone. Again.

Thor spun around, looking in every direction, but there was no trace of him.

“Over here!” came a voice.

Thor turned and saw a huge boulder before him. He sensed the voice came from up top, and he immediately climbed the big rock.

He reached the top, and was puzzled to see no sign of Argon.

From this vantage point, though, he was able to see above the treetops of Darkwood. He saw where Darkwood ended, saw the second sun setting in a dark green, and beyond that, the road leading to King’s Court.

“The road is yours to take,” came the voice. “If you dare.”

Thor spun but saw nothing. It was just a voice, echoing. But he knew Argon was there, somewhere, egging him on. And he felt, deep down, that he was right.

Without another moment’s hesitation, Thor scrambled down the rock and set off through the wood for the distant road.

Sprinting for his destiny.

Chapter Three

King MacGil – stout, barrel-chested, with a beard too thick with gray, long hair to match, and a broad forehead lined with too many battles – stood on the upper ramparts of his castle, his Queen beside him, and overlooked the day’s burgeoning festivities. His royal grounds sprawled beneath him in all their glory, stretching as far as the eye could see, a thriving city walled in by ancient stone fortifications. King’s Court. Interconnected by a maze of winding streets sat stone buildings of every shape and size – for the warriors, the caretakers, the horses, the Silver, the Legion, the guards, the barracks, the weapons house, the armory – and among these, hundreds of dwellings for the multitude of his people who chose to live within the city walls. Between these streets spanned acres of grass, royal gardens, stone-lined plazas, overflowing fountains. King’s Court had been improved upon for centuries, by his father, and his father before him – and it sat now at the peak of its glory. Without doubt, it was now the safest stronghold within the Western Kingdom of the Ring.

MacGil was blessed with the finest and most loyal warriors any king had ever known, and in his lifetime, no one had dared attack. The seventh MacGil to hold the throne, he had held it well for his thirty-two years of rule, had been a good and wise king. The land had prospered greatly in his reign. He had doubled his army’s size, expanded his cities, brought his people bounty, and not a single complaint could be found among his people. He was known as the generous king, and there had never been such a period of bounty and peace since he took the throne.

Which, paradoxically, was precisely what kept MacGil up at night. For MacGil knew his history: in all the ages, there had never been such a long a stretch without a war. He no longer wondered *if* there would be an attack – but when. And from whom.

The greatest threat, of course, was from beyond the Ring, from the empire of savages that ruled the outlying Wilds, which had subjugated all the peoples outside the Ring, beyond the Canyon. For MacGil, and the seven generations before him, the Wilds had never posed a direct threat. Because of his kingdom’s unique geography, shaped in a perfect circle – a ring – separated from the rest of the world by a deep canyon a mile wide, and protected by an energy shield that had been active since a MacGil first ruled, they had little to fear of the Wilds. The savages had tried many times to attack, to penetrate the shield, to cross the canyon; not once had they been successful. As long as he and his people stayed within the Ring, there was no outside threat.

That did not mean, though, that there was no threat from inside. And that was what had kept MacGil up at night lately. That, indeed, was the purpose of the day’s festivities: the marriage of his eldest daughter. A marriage arranged specifically to appease his enemies, to maintain the fragile peace between the Eastern and Western Kingdoms of the Ring.

While the Ring spanned a good five hundred miles in each direction, it was divided down the middle by a mountain range. The Highlands. On the other side of the Highlands sat the Eastern Kingdom, ruling the other half of the Ring. And this kingdom, ruled for centuries by their rivals, the McClouds, had always tried to shatter its fragile truce with the MacGils. The McClouds were malcontents, unhappy with their lot, convinced their side of the kingdom sat on ground less fertile. They contested the Highlands, too, insisting the entire mountain range was theirs, when at least half of it belonged to the MacGils. There were perpetual border skirmishes, and constant threats of invasion.

As MacGil pondered it all, he was annoyed. The McClouds should be happy; they were safe inside the Ring, protected by the Canyon, they sat on choice land, and had nothing to fear. Why couldn’t they be content with their own half of the Ring? It was only because MacGil had grown his army so strong that, for the first time in history, the McClouds had dared not attack. But MacGil, the wise king he was, sensed something on the horizon; he knew this peace could not last. Thus, he had arranged this marriage of his eldest daughter to the eldest prince of the McClouds. And now the day had arrived.

As he looked down, he saw stretched below him thousands of minions dressed in brightly colored tunics, filtering in from every corner of the kingdom, from both sides of the Highlands. Nearly the entire Ring, all pouring into his fortifications. His people had prepared for months, commanded to make everything look prosperous, strong. This was not just a day for marriage; it was a day to send a message to the McClouds.

MacGil surveyed his hundreds of soldiers lined up strategically along the ramparts, in the streets, along the walls, more soldiers than he could ever need – and felt satisfied. It was the show of strength he wanted. But he also felt on edge; the environment was charged, ripe for a skirmish. He hoped no hotheads, inflamed with drink, rose up on either side.

He scanned the jousting fields, the playing fields, and thought of the day to come, filled with games and jousts and all sorts of festivities. They would be intense. The McClouds would surely show up with their own small army, and every joust, every wrestle, every competition, would take on meaning. If even one went awry, it could evolve into a battle.

“My King?”

He felt a soft hand on his and turned to see his Queen, Krea, still the most beautiful woman he’d ever known. Happily married to him his entire reign, she had borne him five children, three of them boys, and had not complained once. Moreover, she had become his most trusted counselor. As the years passed, he had come to learn she was wiser than all of his men. Indeed, wiser than he.

“It is a political day,” she said. “But also our daughter’s wedding. Try to enjoy. It won’t happen twice.”

“I worried less when I had nothing,” he answered. “Now that we have it all, everything worries me. We are safe. But I don’t feel safe.”

She looked back at him with compassionate eyes, large and hazel; they looked as if they held the wisdom of the world. Her eyelids drooped, as they always had, looking just a bit sleepy, and were framed by her beautiful, straight brown hair tinged with gray, which fell on both sides of her face. She had a few more lines, but she hadn’t changed a bit.

“That’s because you’re not safe,” she said. “No king is safe. There are more spies in our court than you’ll ever care to know. And that is the way of things.”

She leaned in and kissed him, and smiled.

“Try to enjoy it,” she said. “It is a wedding after all.”

With that, she turned and walked off the ramparts.

He watched her go, then turned and looked out over his court. She was right; she was always right. He did want to enjoy it. He loved his eldest daughter, and it was a wedding after all. It was the most beautiful day of the most beautiful time of year, spring at its height, with summer dawning, the two suns perfect in the sky, and the slightest of breezes astir. Everything was in full bloom, trees everywhere awash in a broad palette of pinks and purples and oranges and whites. There was nothing he’d like more than to go down and sit with his men, watch his daughter get married, and drink pints of ale until he could drink no more.

But he could not. He had a long course of duties before he could even step out of his castle. After all, the day of a daughter’s wedding meant obligation for a king: he had to meet with his council; with his children; and with a long a line of supplicants who had a right to see the King on this day. He would be lucky if he left his castle in time for the sunset ceremony.

* * *

MacGil, dressed in his finest royal garb, velvet black pants, a golden belt, a royal robe made of the finest purple and gold silk, a white mantle, shiny leather boots up to his calves, and wearing his crown – an ornate gold band with a large ruby set in its center – strutted down the castle halls, flanked by attendants. He strode through room after room, descending the steps from the parapet,

cutting through his royal chambers, through the great arched hall, with its soaring ceiling and rows of stained glass. Finally, he reached an ancient oak door, thick as a tree trunk, which his attendants opened before stepping aside. The Throne Room.

His advisors stood at attention as MacGil entered, the door slamming shut behind him.

“Be seated,” he said, more abrupt than usual. He was tired, on this day especially, of the endless formalities of ruling the kingdom, and wanted to get them over with.

He strode across the Throne Room, which never ceased to impress him. Its ceilings soared fifty feet high, one entire wall a panel of stained glass, floors and walls made of stone a foot thick. The room could easily hold a hundred dignitaries. But on days like today, when his council convened, it was just him and his handful of advisors in the cavernous setting. The room was dominated by a vast table shaped in a semicircle, behind which his advisors stood.

He strutted through the opening, right down the middle, to his throne. He ascended the stone steps, passed the carved golden lions, and sank into the red velvet cushion lining his throne, wrought entirely of gold. His father had sat on this throne, as had *his* father, and all the MacGils before him. When he sat, MacGil felt the weight of his ancestors – of all the generations – upon him.

He surveyed the advisors in attendance. There was Brom, his greatest general and his advisor on military affairs; Kolk, the general of the boys’ Legion; Aberthol, the oldest of the bunch, a scholar and historian, mentor of kings for three generations; Firth, his advisor on internal affairs of the court, a skinny man with short, gray hair and hollowed-out eyes that never stayed still. Firth was not a man that MacGil had ever trusted, and he never even understood his title. But his father, and his before him, kept an advisor for court affairs, and so he kept it out of respect for them. There was Owen, his treasurer; Bradaigh, his advisor on external affairs; Earnan, his tax collector; Duwayne, his advisor on the masses; and Kelvin, the representative of the nobles.

Of course, the King had absolute authority. But his kingdom was a liberal one, and his fathers had always taken pride in allowing the nobles a voice in all matters, channeled through their representative. It was historically an uneasy power balance between the kingship and the nobles. Now there was harmony, but during other times there had been uprisings and power struggles between the nobles and royalty. It was a fine balance.

As MacGil surveyed the room he noticed one person missing: the very man he wanted to speak with most – Argon. As usual, when and where he showed up was unpredictable. It infuriated MacGil to no end, but he had no choice but to accept it. The way of Druids was inscrutable to him. Without him present, MacGil felt even more haste. He wanted to get through this, get to the thousand other things that awaited him before the wedding.

The group of advisors sat facing him around the semicircular table, spread out every ten feet, each sitting in a chair of ancient oak with elaborately carved wooden arms.

“My liege, if I may begin,” Owen called out.

“You may. And keep it short. My time is tight today.”

“Your daughter will receive a great many gifts today, which we all hope will fill her coffers. The thousands of people paying tribute, presenting gifts to you personally, and filling our brothels and taverns, will help fill our coffers, too. And yet the preparation for today’s festivities will also deplete a good portion of the royal treasury. I recommend an increase of tax on the people, and on the nobles. A one-time tax, to alleviate the pressures of this great event.”

MacGil saw the concern on his treasurer’s face, and his stomach sank at the thought of the treasury’s depletion. Yet he would not raise taxes again.

“Better to have a poor treasury and loyal subjects,” MacGil answered. “Our riches come in the happiness of our subjects. We shall not impose more.”

“But my liege, if we do not – ”

“I have decided. What else?”

Owen sank back, crestfallen.

“My king,” Brom said in his deep voice. “At your command, we have stationed the bulk of our forces in court for today’s event. The show of power will be impressive. But we are stretched thin. If there should be an attack elsewhere in the kingdom, we will be vulnerable.”

MacGil nodded, thinking it through.

“Our enemies will not attack us while we are feeding them.”

The men laughed.

“And what news from the Highlands?”

“There has been no reported activity for weeks. It seems their troops have drawn down in preparation for the wedding. Maybe they are ready to make peace.”

MacGil was not so sure.

“That either means the arranged wedding has worked, or they wait to attack us at another time. And which do you think it is, old man?” MacGil asked, turning to Aberthol.

Aberthol cleared his throat, his voice raspy as it came out: “My liege, your father and his father before him never trusted the McClouds. Just because they lie sleeping, does not mean they will not wake.”

MacGil nodded, appreciating the sentiment.

“And what of the Legion?” he asked, turning to Kolk.

“Today we welcomed the new recruits,” Kolk answered, with a quick nod.

“My son among them?” MacGil asked.

“He stands proudly with them all, and a fine boy he is.”

MacGil nodded, then turned to Bradaigh.

“And what word from beyond the Canyon?”

“My liege, our patrols have seen more attempts to bridge the Canyon in recent weeks. There may be signs that the Wilds are mobilizing for an attack.”

A hushed whisper spread amongst the men. MacGil felt his stomach tighten at the thought. The energy shield was invincible; still, it did not bode well.

“And what if there should be a full-scale attack?” he asked.

“As long as the shield is active, we have nothing to fear. The Wilds have not succeeded in breaching the Canyon for centuries. There is no reason to think otherwise.”

MacGil was not so certain. An attack from outside was long overdue, and he could not help but wonder when it might be.

“My liege,” Firth said in his nasally voice, “I feel obliged to add that today our court is filled with many dignitaries from the McCloud kingdom. It would be considered an insult for you not to entertain them, rivals or not. I would advise that you use your afternoon hours to greet each one. They have brought a large entourage, many gifts – and, word is, many spies.”

“Who is to say the spies are not already here?” MacGil asked back, looking carefully at Firth as he did – and wondering, as always, if he might be one himself.

Firth opened his mouth to answer, but MacGil sighed and held up a palm, having had enough. “If that is all, I will leave now, to join my daughter’s wedding.”

“My liege,” Kelvin said, clearing his throat, “of course, there is one more thing. The tradition, on the day of your eldest’s wedding. Every MacGil has named a successor. The people shall expect you to do the same. They have been buzzing. It would not be advisable to let them down. Especially with the Destiny Sword still immobile.”

“Would you have me name an heir while I am still in my prime?” MacGil asked.

“My liege, I mean no offense,” Kelvin stumbled, looking concerned.

MacGil held up a hand. “I know the tradition. And indeed, I shall name one today.”

“Might you inform us as to who?” Firth asked.

MacGil stared him down, annoyed. Firth was a gossip, and he did not trust this man.

“You will learn of the news when the time is right.”

MacGil stood, and the others rose, too. They bowed, turned, and hurried from the room.

MacGil stood there thinking for he did not know how long. On days like this he wished he was not king.

* * *

MacGil stepped down from his throne, boots echoing in the silence, and crossed the room. He opened the ancient oak door himself, yanking the iron handle, and entered a side chamber.

He enjoyed the peace and solitude of this cozy room, as he always had, its walls hardly twenty paces in either direction yet with a soaring, arched ceiling. The room was made entirely of stone, with a small, round stained-glass window on one wall. Light poured in through its yellows and reds, lighting up a single object in the otherwise bare room.

The Destiny Sword.

There it sat, in the center of the chamber, lying horizontal on iron prongs, like a temptress. As he had since he was a boy, MacGil walked close to it, circled it, examined it. The Destiny Sword. The sword of legend, the source of the might and power of his entire kingdom, from one generation to the next. Whoever had the strength to hoist it would be the Chosen One, the one destined to rule the kingdom for life, to free the kingdom from all threats, in and outside the Ring. It had been a beautiful legend to grow up with, and as soon as he was anointed King, MacGil had tried to hoist it himself, as only MacGil kings were even allowed to try. The kings before him, all of them, had failed. He was sure he would be different. He was sure he would be The One.

But he was wrong. As were all the other MacGil kings before him. And his failure had tainted his kingship ever since.

As he stared at it now, he examined its long blade, made of a mysterious metal no one had ever deciphered. The sword's origin was even more obscure, rumored to have risen from the earth in the midst of a quake.

Examining it, he once again felt the sting of failure. He might be a good king, but he was not The One. His people knew it. His enemies knew it. He might be a good king, but no matter what he did, he would never be The One.

If he had been, he suspected there would be less unrest amongst his court, less plotting. His own people would trust him more and his enemies would not even consider attack. A part of him wished the sword would just disappear, and the legend with it. But he knew it would not. That was the curse – and the power – of a legend. Stronger, even, than an army.

As he stared at it for the thousandth time, MacGil couldn't help but wonder once again who it would be. Who of his bloodline would be destined to wield it? As he thought of what lay before him, his task of naming an heir, he wondered who, if any, would be destined to hoist it.

"The weight of the blade is heavy," came a voice.

MacGil spun, surprised to have company in the small room.

There, standing in the doorway, was Argon. MacGil recognized the voice before he saw him and was both irritated with him for not showing up sooner and pleased to have him here now.

"You're late," MacGil said.

"Your sense of time does not apply to me," Argon answered.

MacGil turned back to the sword.

"Did you ever think I would be able to hoist it?" he asked reflectively. "That day I became King?"

"No," Argon answered flatly.

MacGil turned and stared at him.

"You knew I would not be able to. You saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

MacGil pondered this.

“It scares me when you answer directly. That is unlike you.”

Argon stayed silent, and finally MacGil realized he wouldn’t say any more.

“I name my successor today,” MacGil said. “It feels futile, to name an heir on this day. It strips a king’s joy from his child’s wedding.”

“Maybe such joy is meant to be tempered.”

“But I have so many years left to reign,” MacGil pleaded.

“Perhaps not as many as you think,” Argon answered.

MacGil narrowed his eyes, wondering. Was it a message?

But Argon added nothing more.

“Six children. Whom should I pick?” MacGil asked.

“Why ask me? You have already chosen.”

MacGil looked at him. “You see much. Yes, I have. But I still want to know what you think.”

“I think you made a wise choice,” Argon said. “But remember: a king cannot rule from beyond the grave. Regardless of whom you think you choose, fate has a way of choosing for itself.”

“Will I live, Argon?” MacGil asked earnestly, asking the question he had wanted to know since he had awakened the night before from a horrific nightmare.

“I dreamt last night of a crow,” he added. “It came and stole my crown. Then another carried me away. As it did, I saw my kingdom spread beneath me. It turned black as I went. Barren. A wasteland.”

He looked up at Argon, his eyes watery.

“Was it a dream? Or something more?”

“Dreams are always something more, aren’t they?” Argon asked.

MacGil was struck by a sinking feeling.

“Where is the danger? Just tell me this much.”

Argon stepped close and stared into his eyes with such intensity, MacGil felt as if he were staring into another realm itself.

Argon leaned forward, whispered:

“Always closer than you think.”

Chapter Four

Thor hid in the straw in the back of a wagon as it jostled him along the country road. He'd made his way to the road the night before and had waited patiently until a wagon came along large enough for him to board without being noticed. It was dark by then, and the wagon trotted along just slowly enough for him to gain a good running pace and leap in from behind. He'd landed in the hay and buried himself inside. Luckily, the driver had not spotted him. Thor didn't know for certain if the wagon was going to King's Court, but it was heading in that direction, and a wagon this size, and with these markings, could be going few other places.

As Thor rode throughout the night, he stayed awake for hours, thinking of his encounter with the Sybold. With Argon. Of his destiny. His former home. His mother. He felt that the universe had answered him, had told him he had another destiny. He lay there, hands clasped behind his head, and stared up at the night sky, visible through the tattered canvas. He watched the universe, so bright, its red stars so far away. He was exhilarated. For once in his life, he was on a journey. He did not know where, but he was going. One way or the other, he would make his way to King's Court.

When Thor opened his eyes it was morning, light flooding in, and he realized he'd drifted off. He sat up quickly, looking all around, chiding himself for sleeping. He should have been more vigilant – he was lucky he had not been discovered.

The cart still moved, but did not jostle as much. That could only mean one thing: a better road. They must be close to a city. Thor looked down and saw how smooth the road was, free of rocks, of ditches, and lined with fine white shells. His heart beat faster; they were approaching King's Court.

Thor looked out the back of the cart and was overwhelmed. The immaculate streets were flooded with activity. Dozens of carts, of all shapes and sizes and carrying all manner of things, filled the roads. One was laden with furs; another with rugs; still another with chickens. Amongst them walked hundreds of merchants, some leading cattle, others carrying baskets of goods on their heads. Four men carried a bundle of silks, balancing them on poles. It was an army of people, all heading in one direction.

Thor felt alive. He'd never seen so many people at once, so many goods, so much happening. He'd been in a small village his entire life, and now he was in a hub, engulfed in humanity.

He heard a loud noise, the groaning of chains, the slamming of a huge piece of wood, so strong the ground shook. Moments later came a different sound, of horses' hooves clacking on wood. He looked down and realized they were crossing a bridge; beneath them passed a moat. A drawbridge.

Thor stuck his head out and saw immense stone pillars, the spiked iron gate above. They were passing through King's Gate.

It was the largest gate he had ever seen. He looked up at the spikes, marveling that if they came down, they would slice him in half. He spotted four of the King's Silver guarding the entry, and his heart beat faster.

They passed through a long stone tunnel, then moments later the sky opened again. They were inside King's Court.

Thor could hardly believe it. There was even more activity here, if possible – what seemed to be thousands of people, milling in every direction. There were vast stretches of grass, perfectly cut, and flowers blooming everywhere. The road widened, and alongside it were booths, vendors, and stone buildings. And amidst all of these, the King's men. Soldiers, bedecked in armor. Thor had made it.

In his excitement, he unwittingly stood; as he did, the cart stopped short, sending him tumbling backward, landing on his back in the straw. Before he could rise, there was the sound of wood lowered, and he looked up to see an angry old man, bald, dressed in rags and scowling. The cart driver reached in, grabbed Thor by the ankles with his bony hands, and dragged him out.

Thor went flying, landing hard on his back on the dirt road, raising up a cloud of dust. Laughter rose up around him.

“Next time you ride my cart, boy, it will be the shackles for you! You’re lucky I don’t summon the Silver now!”

The old man turned and spat, then hurried back on his cart and whipped his horses on.

Embarrassed, Thor slowly gained his wits and got to his feet. He looked around. One or two passersby chuckled, and Thor sneered back until they looked away. He brushed the dirt off and rubbed his arms; his pride was hurt, but not his body.

His spirits returned as he looked around, dazzled, and realized he should be happy that at least he’d made it this far. Now that he was out of the cart he could look around freely, and an extraordinary sight it was: the court sprawled as far as the eye could see. At its center sat a magnificent stone palace, surrounded by towering, fortified stone walls crowned by parapets, atop which, everywhere, patrolled the King’s army. All around him were fields of green, perfectly maintained, stone plazas, fountains, groves of trees. It was a city. And it was flooded with people.

Everywhere streamed all manner of people – merchants, soldiers, dignitaries – everyone in such a rush. It took Thor several minutes to understand that something special was happening. As he ambled along, he saw preparations being made – chairs placed, an altar erected. It looked like they were preparing for a wedding.

His heart skipped a beat as he saw, in the distance, a jousting lane, with its long dirt path and dividing rope. On another field, he saw soldiers hurling spears at far-off targets; on another, archers aiming at straw. It seemed as if everywhere were games, contests. There was also music: lutes and flutes and cymbals, packs of musicians wandering; and wine, huge casks being rolled out; and food, tables being prepared, banquets stretching as far as the eye could see. It was as if he’d arrived in the midst of a vast celebration.

As dazzling as all this was, Thor felt an urgency to find the Legion. He was already late, and he needed to make himself known.

He hurried to the first person he saw, an older man who seemed, by his blood-stained frock, to be a butcher, hurrying down the road. Everyone here was in such a hurry.

“Excuse me, sir,” Thor said, grabbing his arm.

The man looked down at Thor’s hand disparagingly.

“What is it, boy?”

“I’m looking for the King’s Legion. Do you know where they train?”

“Do I look like a map?” the man hissed, and stormed off.

Thor was taken aback by his rudeness.

He hurried to the next person he saw, a woman kneading flour on a long table. There were several women at this table, all working hard, and Thor figured one of them had to know.

“Excuse me, miss,” he said. “Might you know where the King’s Legion train?”

They looked at each other and giggled, some of them but a few years older than he.

The eldest turned and looked at him.

“You’re looking in the wrong place,” she said. “Here we are preparing for the festivities.”

“But I was told they trained in King’s Court,” Thor said, confused.

The women broke into another chuckle. The eldest put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

“You act as if this is your first time in King’s Court. Have you no idea how big it is?”

Thor reddened as the other women laughed, then finally stormed off. He did not like being made fun of.

He saw before him a dozen roads, twisting and turning every which way through King’s Court. Spaced out in the stone walls were at least a dozen entrances. The size and scope of this place was overwhelming. He had a sinking feeling he could search for days and still not find it.

An idea struck him: surely a soldier would know where the others trained. He was nervous to approach an actual King's soldier, but realized he had to.

He turned and hurried to the wall, to the soldier standing guard at the closest entrance, hoping he would not throw him out. The soldier stood erect, looking straight ahead.

"I'm looking for the King's Legion," Thor said, summoning his bravest voice.

The soldier continued to stare straight ahead, ignoring him.

"I said I'm looking for the King's Legion!" Thor insisted, louder, determined to be recognized.

After several seconds, the soldier glanced down, sneering.

"Can you tell me where it is?" Thor pressed.

"And what business have you with them?"

"Very important business," Thor urged, hoping the soldier would not press him.

The soldier turned back to looking straight ahead, ignoring him again. Thor felt his heart sinking, afraid he would never receive an answer.

But after what felt like an eternity, the soldier replied: "Take the eastern gate, then head north as far as you can. Take the third gate to the left, then fork right, and fork right again. Pass through the second stone arch, and their ground is beyond the gate. But I tell you, you waste your time. They do not entertain visitors."

It was all Thor needed to hear. Without missing another beat, he turned and ran across the field, following the directions, repeating them in his head, trying to memorize them. He noticed the sun higher in the sky, and only prayed that when he arrived, it would not already be too late.

* * *

Thor sprinted down the immaculate, shell-lined paths, twisting and turning his way through King's Court. He tried his best to follow the directions, hoping he was not being led astray. At the far end of the courtyard, he saw all the gates, and chose the third one on the left. He ran through it and then followed the forks, turning down path after path. He ran against traffic, thousands of people pouring into the city, the crowd growing thicker by the minute. He brushed shoulders with lute players, jugglers, jesters, and all sorts of entertainers, everyone dressed in finery.

Thor could not stand the idea of the selection beginning without him, and tried his best to concentrate as he turned down path after path, looking for any sign of the training ground. He passed through an arch, turned down another road, and then, far off, spotted what could only be his destination: a mini coliseum, built of stone in a perfect circle. Soldiers guarded the huge gate in its center. Thor heard a muted cheering from behind its walls and his heart quickened. This was the place.

He sprinted, lungs bursting. As he reached the gate, two guards stepped forward and lowered their lances, barring the way. A third guard stepped forward and held up a palm.

"Stop there," he commanded.

Thor stopped short, gasping for breath, barely able to contain his excitement.

"You...don't...understand," he heaved, words tumbling out between breaths, "I have to be inside. I'm late."

"Late for what?"

"The selection."

The guard, a short, heavy man with pockmarked skin, turned and looked at the others, who looked back cynically. He turned and surveyed Thor with a disparaging look.

"The recruits were taken in hours ago, in the royal transport. If you were not invited, you cannot enter."

"But you don't understand. I must – "

The guard reached out and grabbed Thor by the shirt.

“*You* don’t understand, you insolent little boy. How dare you come here and try to force your way in? Now go – before I shackle you.”

He shoved Thor, who stumbled back several feet.

Thor felt a sting in his chest where the guard’s hand had touched him – but more than that, he felt the sting of rejection. He was indignant. He had not come all this way to be turned away by a guard without even being seen. He was determined to make it inside.

The guard turned back to his men, and Thor slowly walked away, heading clockwise around the circular building. He had a plan. He walked until he was out of sight, then broke into a jog, creeping his way along the walls. He checked to make sure the guards weren’t watching, then picked up speed until he was sprinting. When he was halfway around the building he spotted another opening into the arena – high up were arched openings in the stone, blocked by iron bars. One of these openings was missing its bars. He heard another roar, lifted himself up onto the ledge, and looked.

His heart quickened. Spread out inside the huge, circular training ground were dozens of recruits – including his brothers. Lined up, they all faced a dozen of the Silver. The King’s men walked amidst them, summing them up.

Another group of recruits stood off to the side, under the watchful eyes of a soldier, throwing spears at a distant target. One of them missed.

Thor’s veins burned with indignation. He could have hit those marks; he was just as good as any of them. Just because he was younger, a bit smaller, it wasn’t fair that he was being left out.

Suddenly, Thor felt a hand on his back as he was yanked backwards and sent flying through the air. He landed hard on the ground below, winded.

He looked up and saw the guard from the gate, sneering down at him.

“What did I tell you, boy?”

Before he could react, the guard leaned back and kicked Thor hard. Thor felt a sharp thump in his ribs, as the guard wound up to kick him again.

This time, Thor caught the guard’s foot in midair; he yanked it, knocking him off balance and making him fall.

Thor quickly gained his feet. At the same time, the guard gained his. Thor stared at him, shocked by what he had just done. Across from him, the guard glowered.

“Not only will I shackle you,” the guard hissed, “but I will make you pay. No one touches a King’s guard! Forget about joining the Legion – now you will wallow away in the dungeon! You’ll be lucky if you’re ever seen again!”

The guard pulled out a chain with a shackle at its end. He approached Thor, vengeance on his face.

Thor’s mind raced. He could not allow himself to be shackled – yet he did not want to hurt a member of the King’s Guard. He had to think of something – and fast.

He remembered his sling. His reflexes took over as he grabbed it, placed a stone, took aim, and let it fly.

The stone soared through the air and knocked the shackles from the stunned guard’s grip; it also hit the guard’s fingers. The guard pulled back and shook his hand, yelling in pain, as the shackles clattered to the ground.

The guard, giving Thor a look of death, drew his sword. It came out with a distinctive, metallic ring.

“That was your last mistake,” he threatened darkly, and charged.

Thor had no choice; this man would just not leave him be. He placed another stone in his sling and hurled it. He aimed deliberately – he did not want to kill the guard, but he had to stop him. So instead of aiming for his heart, nose, eye, or head, Thor aimed for the one place he knew would stop him, but not kill him.

Between the guard’s legs.

He let the stone fly – not at full strength, but enough to put the man down.

It was a perfect strike.

The guard keeled over, dropping his sword, grabbing his groin as he collapsed to the ground and curled up in a ball.

“You’ll hang for this!” he groaned amidst grunts of pain. “Guards! Guards!”

Thor looked up and in the distance saw several of the King’s guards racing for him.

It was now or never.

Without wasting another moment, he sprinted for the window ledge. He would have to jump through, into the arena, and make himself known. And he would fight anyone who got in his way.

Chapter Five

MacGil sat in the upper hall of his castle, in his intimate meeting hall, the one he used for personal affairs. He sat on his intimate throne, this one carved of wood, and looked out at four of his children standing before him. There was his eldest son, Kendrick, at twenty-five years a fine warrior and true gentleman. He, of all his children, resembled MacGil the most – which was ironic, since he was a bastard, MacGil's only issue by another woman, a woman he had long since forgotten. MacGil had raised Kendrick with his true children, despite his Queen's initial protests, on the condition he would never ascend the throne. This pained MacGil now, since Kendrick was the finest man he'd ever known, a son he was proud to sire. There would have been no finer heir to the kingdom.

Beside him, in stark contrast, stood his second-born son – yet his firstborn legitimate son – Gareth, twenty-three, thin, with hollow cheeks and large brown eyes which never stopped darting. His character could not be more different than his elder brother's. Gareth's nature was everything Kendrick's was not: where his brother was forthright, Gareth hid his true thoughts; where his brother was proud and noble, Gareth was dishonest and deceitful. It pained MacGil to dislike his own son, and he had tried many times to correct his nature; but after some point in the boy's teenage years, he decided his nature was predestined: scheming, power-hungry, and ambitious in every wrong sense of the word. Gareth also, MacGil knew, had no love for women, and had many male lovers. Other kings would have ousted such a son, but MacGil was more open-minded, and for him, this was not a reason not to love him. He did not judge him for this. What he did judge him for was his evil, scheming nature, which was something he could not overlook.

Lined up beside Gareth stood MacGil's second-born daughter, Gwendolyn. Having just reached her sixteenth year, she was as beautiful a girl as he had ever laid eyes upon – and her nature outshone even her looks. She was kind, generous, honest – the finest young woman he had ever known. In this regard, she was similar to Kendrick. She looked at MacGil with a daughter's love for a father, and he'd always felt her loyalty in every glance. He was even more proud of her than of his sons.

Standing beside Gwendolyn was MacGil's youngest boy, Reece, a proud and spirited young lad who, at fourteen, was just becoming a man. MacGil had watched with great pleasure his initiation into the Legion, and could already see the man he was going to be. One day, MacGil had no doubt, Reece would be his finest son, and a great ruler. But that day was not now. He was too young yet, and still had much to learn.

MacGil had mixed feelings as he surveyed these four children, his three sons and daughter, standing before him. He felt pride mingled with disappointment. He also felt anger and annoyance, for two of his children were missing. The eldest, his daughter Luanda, of course was preparing for her own wedding, and since she was being married off to another kingdom, she had no business partaking in this discussion of heirs. But his other son, Godfrey, at eighteen the middle one, was absent. MacGil reddened from the snub.

Ever since he was a boy, Godfrey had shown such disrespect for the kingship; it was always clear that he cared not for it and would never rule. And, MacGil's greatest disappointment, Godfrey instead chose to waste away his days in alehouses with miscreant friends, causing the royal family ever-increasing shame and dishonor. He was a slacker, sleeping most of his days and filling the rest of them with drink. On the one hand, MacGil was relieved he wasn't here; on the other, it was an insult he could not suffer. He had, in fact, expected this, and had sent out his men early to comb the alehouses and bring him back. MacGil sat silently, waiting, until they did.

The heavy oak door finally slammed open and in marched the royal guards, dragging Godfrey between them. They gave him a shove, and Godfrey stumbled into the room as they slammed the door behind him.

His brothers and sister turned and stared. Godfrey was slovenly, reeking of ale, unshaven, and half-dressed. He smiled back. Insolent. As always.

“Hello, Father,” Godfrey said. “Did I miss all the fun?”

“You will stand with your siblings and wait for me to speak. If you don’t, God help me, I’ll chain you in the dungeons with the rest of the common prisoners, and you won’t see food – much less ale – for three days entire.”

Defiant, Godfrey glared back at his father. In that stare, MacGil detected some deep reservoir of strength, something of himself, a spark of something that might one day serve Godfrey well. That is, if he could ever overcome his own personality.

Rebellious to the end, Godfrey waited a good ten seconds before finally complying and ambling over to the others.

MacGil surveyed these five children standing before him: the bastard, the deviant, the drunkard, his daughter, and his youngest. It was a strange mix, and he could hardly believe they had all sprung from him. And now, on his eldest daughter’s wedding day, the task had fallen on him to choose an heir from this bunch. How was it possible?

It was an exercise in futility; after all, he was in his prime and could rule for thirty more years. Whatever heir he chose today might not even ascend the throne for decades. The entire tradition irked him. It may have been relevant in the times of his fathers, but it had no place now.

He cleared his throat.

“We are gathered here today at the bequest of tradition. As you know, on this day, the day of my eldest’s wedding, the task has fallen upon me to name a successor. An heir to rule this kingdom. Should I die, there is no one better fit to rule than your mother. But our kingdom’s laws dictate that only the issue of a king may succeed. Thus, I must choose.”

MacGil caught his breath, thinking. A heavy silence hung in the air, and he could feel the weight of anticipation. He looked in their eyes, and saw different expressions in each. The bastard looked resigned, knowing he would not be picked. The deviant’s eyes were aglow with ambition, as if expecting the choice naturally to fall on him. The drunkard looked out the window; he did not care. His daughter looked back with love, knowing she was not part of this discussion, but loving her father nonetheless. The same with his youngest.

“Kendrick, I have always considered you a true son. But the laws of our kingdom prevent me from passing the kingship to anyone of less than true legitimacy.”

Kendrick bowed. “Father, I had not expected you would do so. I’m content with my lot. Please do not let this confound you.”

MacGil was pained at his response, as he felt how genuine he was and wanted to name him heir all the more.

“That leaves four of you. Reece, you’re a fine young man, the finest I’ve ever seen. But you are too young to be part of this discussion.”

“I expected as much, Father,” Reece responded, with a slight bow.

“Godfrey, you are one of my three legitimate sons – yet you choose to waste your days in the alehouse, with the filth. You were handed every privilege in life, and have spurned every one. If I have any great disappointment in this life, it is you.”

Godfrey grimaced back, shifting uncomfortably.

“Well, then, I suppose I’m done here, and shall head back to the alehouse, shan’t I, Father?”

With a quick, mocking bow, Godfrey turned and strutted across the room.

“Get back here!” MacGil snapped. “NOW!”

Godfrey continued to strut, ignoring him. He crossed the room and pulled open the door. Two guards stood there.

MacGil seethed with rage as the guards looked to him questioningly.

But Godfrey did not wait; he shoved his way past them, into the open hall.

“Detain him!” MacGil yelled. “And keep him from the Queen’s sight. I don’t want his mother burdened by the sight of him on her daughter’s wedding day.”

“Yes, my liege,” they said, closing the door as they hurried off after him.

MacGil sat there, breathing, red-faced, trying to calm down. For the thousandth time, he wondered what he had done to warrant such a child.

He looked back at his remaining children. The four of them looked back at him, waiting in the thick silence. MacGil took a deep breath, trying to focus.

“That leaves but two of you,” he continued. “And from these two, I have chosen a successor.”

MacGil turned to his daughter.

“Gwendolyn, that will be you.”

There was a gasp in the room; his children all seemed shocked, most of all Gwendolyn.

“Did you speak accurately, Father?” Gareth asked. “Did you say Gwendolyn?”

“Father, I am honored,” Gwendolyn said. “But I cannot accept. I am a woman.”

“True, a woman has never sat on the throne of the MacGils. But I have decided it is time to change tradition. Gwendolyn, you are of the finest mind and spirit of any young woman I’ve met. You are young, but God be willing, I shall not die anytime soon, and when the time comes, you will be wise enough to rule. The kingdom will be yours.”

“But Father!” Gareth screamed, his face ashen. “I am the eldest born legitimate son! Always, in all the history of the MacGils, kingship has gone to the eldest son!”

“I am King,” MacGil answered darkly, “and I dictate tradition.”

“But it’s not *fair*!” Gareth pleaded, his voice whining. “I am supposed to be King. Not my sister. Not a woman!”

“Silence your tongue, boy!” MacGil shouted, shaking with rage. “Dare you question my judgment?”

“Am I being passed over then for a woman? Is that what you think of me?”

“I have made my decision,” MacGil said. “You will respect it, and follow it obediently, as every other subject of my kingdom. Now, you may all leave me.”

His children bowed their heads quickly and hurried from the room.

But Gareth stopped at the door, unable to bring himself to leave.

He turned back, and, alone, faced his father.

MacGil could see the disappointment in his face. Clearly, he had expected to be named heir today. Even more: he had wanted it. Desperately. Which did not surprise MacGil in the least – and which was the very reason he did not give it to him.

“Why do you hate me, Father?” he asked.

“I don’t hate you. I just don’t find you fit to rule my kingdom.”

“And why is that?” Gareth pressed.

“Because that is precisely the thing you seek.”

Gareth’s face turned a dark shade of crimson. Clearly, MacGil had given him an insight into his truest nature. MacGil watched his eyes, saw them burn with a hatred for him that he had never imagined possible.

Without another word, Gareth stormed from the room and slammed the door behind him.

In the reverberating echo, MacGil shuddered. He recalled his son’s stare and sensed a hatred so deep, deeper than even than those of his enemies. In that moment, he thought of Argon, of his pronouncement, of danger being close.

Could it be as close as this?

Chapter Six

Thor sprinted across the vast field of the arena, running with all he had. Behind him he could hear the footsteps of the King's guards, close on his tail. They chased him across the hot and dusty landscape, cursing as they went. Before him were spread out the members – and new recruits – of the Legion, dozens of boys, just like him, but older and stronger. They were training and being tested in various formations, some throwing spears, others hurling javelins, a few practicing their grips on lances. They aimed for distant targets, and rarely missed. These were his competition, and they seemed formidable.

Among them were dozens of real knights, members of the Silver, standing in a broad semicircle watching the action. Judging. Deciding who would stay and who would be sent home.

Thor knew he had to prove himself, had to impress these men. Within moments the guards would be upon him, and if he had any chance of making an impression, now was the time. But how? His mind raced as he dashed across the courtyard, determined not to be turned away.

OAs Thor raced across the field, others began to take notice. Some of the recruits stopped what they were doing and turned, as did some of the knights. Within moments, Thor felt all the attention focused on him. They looked bewildered, and he realized they must be wondering who he was, sprinting across their field, three of the King's guard chasing him. This was not how he had wanted to make an impression. His whole life, when he had dreamed of joining the Legion, this was not how he had envisioned it happening.

As Thor ran, debating what to do, his course of action was made plain for him. One large boy, a recruit, decided to take it upon himself to impress the others by stopping Thor. Tall, muscle-bound, and nearly twice Thor's size, he raised his wooden sword to block Thor's way. Thor could see he was determined to strike him down, to make a fool of him in front of everyone, and thereby gain himself advantage over the other recruits.

This made Thor furious. Thor had no bone to pick with this boy, and it was not his fight. But he was making it his fight, just to gain advantage with the others.

As he got closer, Thor could hardly believe this boy's size: he towered over him, scowled down with locks of thick black hair covering his forehead, and the largest, squarest jaw Thor had ever seen. He did not see how he could make a dent against this boy.

The boy charged him with his wooden sword, and Thor knew that if he didn't act quickly, he would be knocked out.

Thor's reflexes kicked in. He instinctively took out his sling, reached back, and hurled a rock at the boy's hand. It found its target and knocked the sword from his hand, just as the boy was bringing it down. It went flying and the boy, screaming, clutched his hand.

Thor wasted no time. He charged, taking advantage of the moment, leapt into the air, and kicked the boy, planting his two front feet squarely on the boy's chest. But the boy was so thick, it was like kicking an oak tree. The boy merely stumbled back a few inches, while Thor stopped cold in his tracks and fell at the boy's feet.

This does not bode well, Thor thought, as he hit the ground with a thud, his ears ringing.

Thor tried to gain his feet, but the boy was a step ahead of him. He reached down, grabbed Thor by his back, and threw him, sending him flying, face first, into the dirt.

A crowd of boys quickly gathered in a circle around them and cheered. Thor reddened, humiliated.

Thor turned to get up, but the boy was too fast. He was already on top of him, pinning him down. Before Thor knew it, it had turned into a wrestling match, and the boy's weight was immense.

Thor could hear the muted shouts of the other recruits as they formed a circle, screaming, anxious for blood. The face of the boy scowled down; the boy reached out his thumbs and brought

them down for Thor's eyes. Thor could not believe it – it seemed this boy really wanted to hurt him. Did he really want to gain advantage that badly?

At the last second, Thor rolled his head out of the way, and the boy's hands went flying by, plunging into the dirt. Thor took the chance to roll out from under him.

Thor gained his feet and faced the boy, who rose as well. The boy charged and swung for Thor's face, and Thor ducked at the last second; the air rushed by his face, and he realized if the boy's fist had hit him, it would have broken Thor's jaw. Thor reached up and punched the boy in the gut, but it hardly did a thing; it was like striking a tree.

Before Thor could react, the boy elbowed him in the face.

Thor stumbled back, reeling from the blow. It was like getting hit by a hammer, and his ears rang.

While Thor stumbled, still trying to catch his breath, the boy charged and kicked him hard in the chest. Thor went flying backwards and crashed to the ground, landing on his back. The other boys cheered.

Thor, dizzy, began to sit up, but the boy charged once more, swung, and punched him again, hard in the face, knocking him flat on his back again – and down for good.

Thor lay there, hearing the muted cheers of the others, feeling the salty taste of blood running from his nose, the welt on his face. He groaned in pain. He looked up and could see the large boy turn away and walk back toward his friends, already celebrating his victory.

Thor wanted to give up. This boy was huge, fighting him was futile, and he could take no more punishment. But something inside him pushed him. He could not lose. Not in front of all these people.

Don't give up. Get up. Get up!

Thor somehow summoned the strength. Groaning, he rolled over and got to his hands and knees, then, slowly, to his feet. He faced the boy, bleeding, his eyes swollen, hard to see, breathing hard, and raised his fists.

The huge boy turned around and stared down at Thor. He shook his head in disbelief.

"You should have stayed down, boy," he threatened, as he began to walk back to Thor.

"ENOUGH!" yelled a voice. "Elden, stand back!"

A knight suddenly stepped up, getting between them, holding out his palm and stopping Elden from getting closer to Thor. The crowd quieted, as they all looked to the knight; clearly this was a man who demanded respect.

Thor looked up, in awe at the knight's presence. He was in his twenties, tall, with broad shoulders, a square jaw, and brown, well-kept hair. Thor liked him immediately. His first-rate armor, chainmail made of polished silver, was covered with royal markings: the falcon emblem of the MacGil family. Thor's throat went dry: he was standing before a member of the royal family. He could hardly believe it.

"Explain yourself, boy," he said to Thor. "Why have you charged into our arena uninvited?"

Before Thor could respond, suddenly, the three members of the King's guard broke through the circle. The lead guard stood there, breathing hard, pointing a finger at Thor.

"He defied our command!" the guard yelled. "I am going to shackle him and take him to the King's dungeon!"

"I did nothing wrong!" Thor protested.

"Did you now?" the guard yelled. "Barging into the King's property uninvited?"

"All I wanted was a chance!" Thor yelled, turning, pleading to the knight before him, the member of the royal family. "All I wanted was a chance to join the Legion!"

"This training ground is only for the invited, boy," came a gruff voice.

Into the circle stepped a warrior, fifties, broad and stocky, with a bald head, short beard, and a scar running across his nose. He looked like he had been a professional soldier all his life – and

from the markings on his armor, the gold pin on his chest, he looked to be their commander. Thor's heart quickened at the site of him: a general.

"I was not invited, sire," Thor said. "That is true. But it has been my life's dream to be here. All I want is a chance to show you what I can do. I am as good as any of these recruits. Just give me one chance to prove it. Please. Joining the Legion is all I've ever dreamt of."

"This battleground is not for dreamers, boy," came his gruff response. "It is for fighters. There are no exceptions to our rules: recruits are chosen."

The general nodded, and the King's guard approached Thor, shackles out.

But suddenly the knight, the royal family member, stepped forward and put out his palm, blocking the guard.

"Maybe, on occasion, an exception may be made," he said.

The guard looked up at him in consternation, clearly wanting to speak out, but having to hold his tongue in deference to a royal family member.

"I admire your spirit, boy," the knight continued. "Before we cast you away, I would like to see what you can do."

"But Kendrick, we have our rules –" the general said, clearly displeased.

"The royal family makes the rules," Kendrick answered sternly, "and the Legion answers to the royal family."

"We answer to your father, the King – not to you," the general retorted, equally defiant.

There was a standoff, the air thick with tension. Thor could hardly believe what he had ignited.

"I know my father, and I know what he would want. He would want to give this boy a try. And that is what we will do."

The general, after several tense moments, finally backed down.

Kendrick turned to Thor, eyes locking on his, brown and intense, the face of a prince, but also of a warrior.

"I will give you one chance," he said to Thor. "Let's see if you can hit that mark."

He gestured at a stack of hay far across the field, with a small, red stain in its center. Several spears were lodged in the hay, but none inside the red.

"If you can do what none of these others boys could do – if you can hit that mark from here – then you may join us."

The knight stepped aside, and Thor could feel all eyes on him.

He spotted a rack of spears and looked them over carefully. They were of a finer quality than he'd ever seen, made of solid oak, wrapped in the finest leather. His heart pounded as he stepped forward, wiping the blood from his nose with the back of his hand, feeling more nervous than ever before in his life. Clearly, he was being given a nearly impossible task. But he had to try.

Thor reached over and picked a spear, not too long, not too short. He weighed it in his hand – it was heavy, substantial. Not like the ones he used back home. But it also felt right. He felt that maybe, just maybe, he could find his mark. After all, spear-throwing was his finest skill, next to hurling stones, and many long days of roaming the wilderness had given him ample targets. He had always been able to hit targets even his brothers could not.

Thor closed his eyes and breathed deeply. If he missed, he would be pounced upon by the guards and dragged off to jail – and his chances of joining the Legion would be ruined forever. This one moment held everything he had ever dreamt of.

He prayed to God with all he had.

Without hesitating, Thor opened his eyes, took two steps forward, reached back, and hurled the spear.

He held his breath as he watched it sail.

Please, God. Please.

The spear cut through the thick, dead silence, and Thor could feel the hundreds of eyes on it.

Then, after an eternity, there came the sound, the undeniable sound of a spear point piercing hay. Thor didn't even have to look. He knew, he just knew, it was a perfect strike. It was the way the spear felt when it left his hand, the angle of his wrist, that told him it would hit.

Thor dared to look – and saw, with huge relief, that he was right. The spear had found its place in the center of the red mark – the only spear in it. He'd done what the other recruits could not.

Stunned silence enveloped him, as he felt the other recruits – and knights – all gaping at him.

Finally, Kendrick stepped forward and clapped Thor hard on the back with his palm, with the sound of satisfaction. He grinned widely.

"I was right," he said. "You will stay!"

"What, my lord!" screamed the King's guard. "It is not fair! This boy arrived uninvited!"

"He hit that mark. That's invitation enough for me."

"He is far younger and smaller than the others. This is no peewee squad," said the general.

"I would rather a smaller soldier who can hit his mark than an oaf who cannot," the knight replied.

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