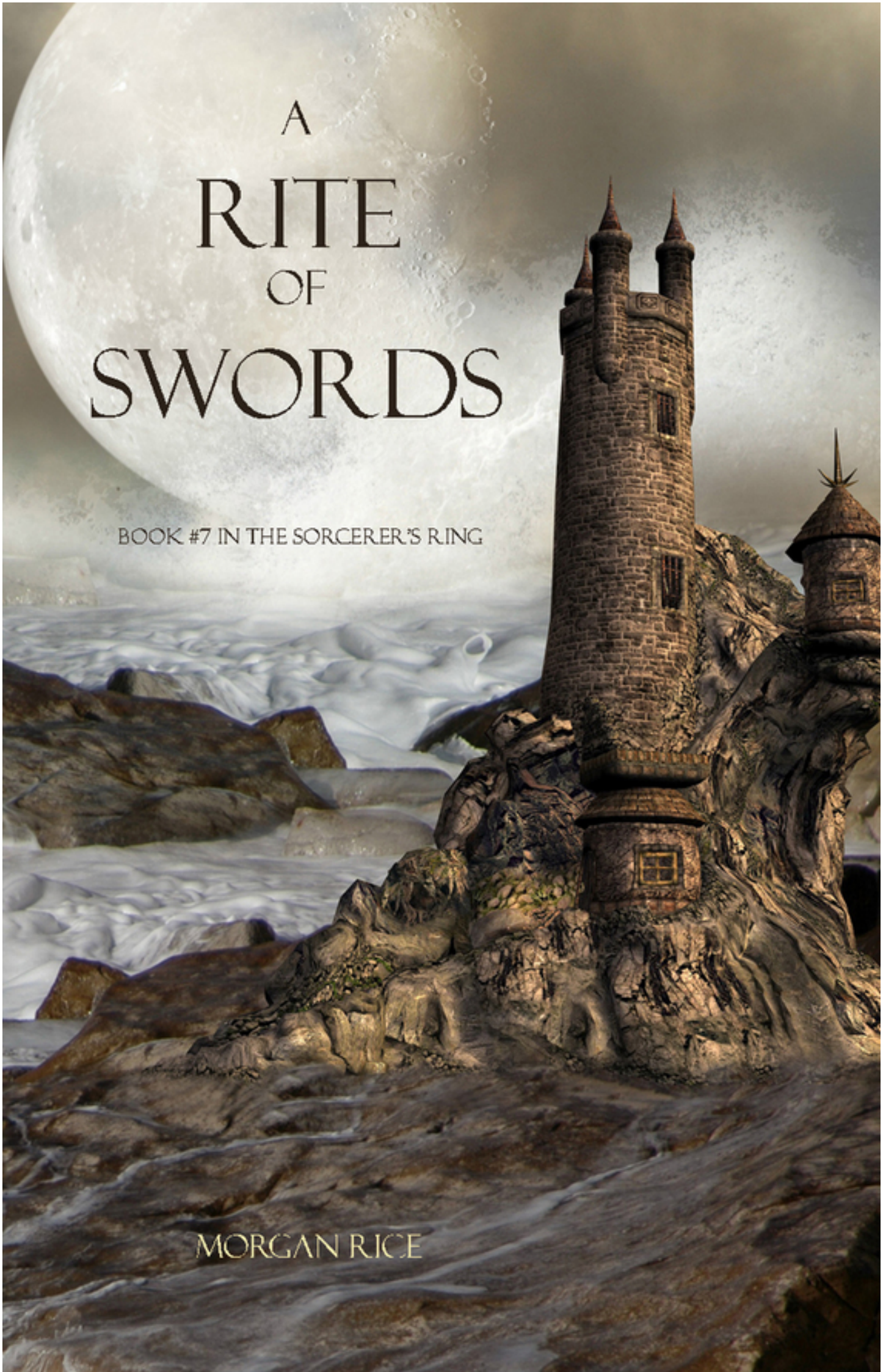
A
RITE
OF
SWORDS
BOOK #7 IN THE SORCERER'S RING
MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Rite of Swords

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2013

Rice M.

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In A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7 in the Sorcerer's Ring), Thor grapples with his legacy, battling to come to terms with who his father is, whether to reveal his secret, and what action he must take. Back home in the Ring, with Mycoples by his side and the Destiny Sword in hand, Thor is determined to wreak vengeance on Andronicus' army and liberate his homeland – and to finally propose to Gwendolyn. But he comes to learn that there are forces even greater than he that might just stand in his way.Gwendolyn returns and strives to become the ruler she is destined to be, using her wisdom to unite the disparate forces and drive out Andronicus for good. Reunited with Thor and her brothers, she is grateful for a lull in the violence, and for the chance to celebrate their freedom. But things change quickly – too quickly – and before she knows it, her life is thrown upside down again. Her elder sister, Luanda, caught in a fierce rivalry with her, is determined to wrest power, while King MacGil's brother arrives with his own army to gain control of the throne. With spies and assassins on all sides, Gwendolyn, embattled, learns that being queen is not as safe as she thought.Reece's love with Selese finally has a chance to flourish, yet at the same time, his old love appears, and he finds himself torn. But idle times are soon overcome by battle, and Reece, Elden, O'Connor, Conven, Kendrick, Erec and even Godfrey must face and overcome adversity together if they are to survive. Their battles take them to all corners of the Ring, as it becomes a race against time to oust Andronicus and save themselves from complete destruction. As powerful, unexpected forces battle for control of the Ring, Gwen realizes she must do whatever it takes to find Argon and bring him back.In a final, shocking twist, Thor learns that while his powers are supreme, he also has a hidden weakness – one that may just bring his final downfall.Will Thor and the others liberate the Ring and defeat Andronicus? Will Gwendolyn become the queen they all need her to be? What will become of the Destiny Sword, of Erec, Kendrick, Reece and Godfrey? And what is the secret that Alistair is hiding?With

its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A CHARGE OF VALOR 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.

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Morgan Rice
A Rite of Swords
(Book #7 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

"What is it that you would impart to me?
If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honor in one eye and death in the other,
And I will look on both indifferently,
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honor more than I fear death."
– William Shakespeare
Julius Caesar

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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,

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– Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

"Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting….Nicely written and an extremely fast read."
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"Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller….This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked."
– The Romance Reviews (regarding Loved)

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A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)
A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)
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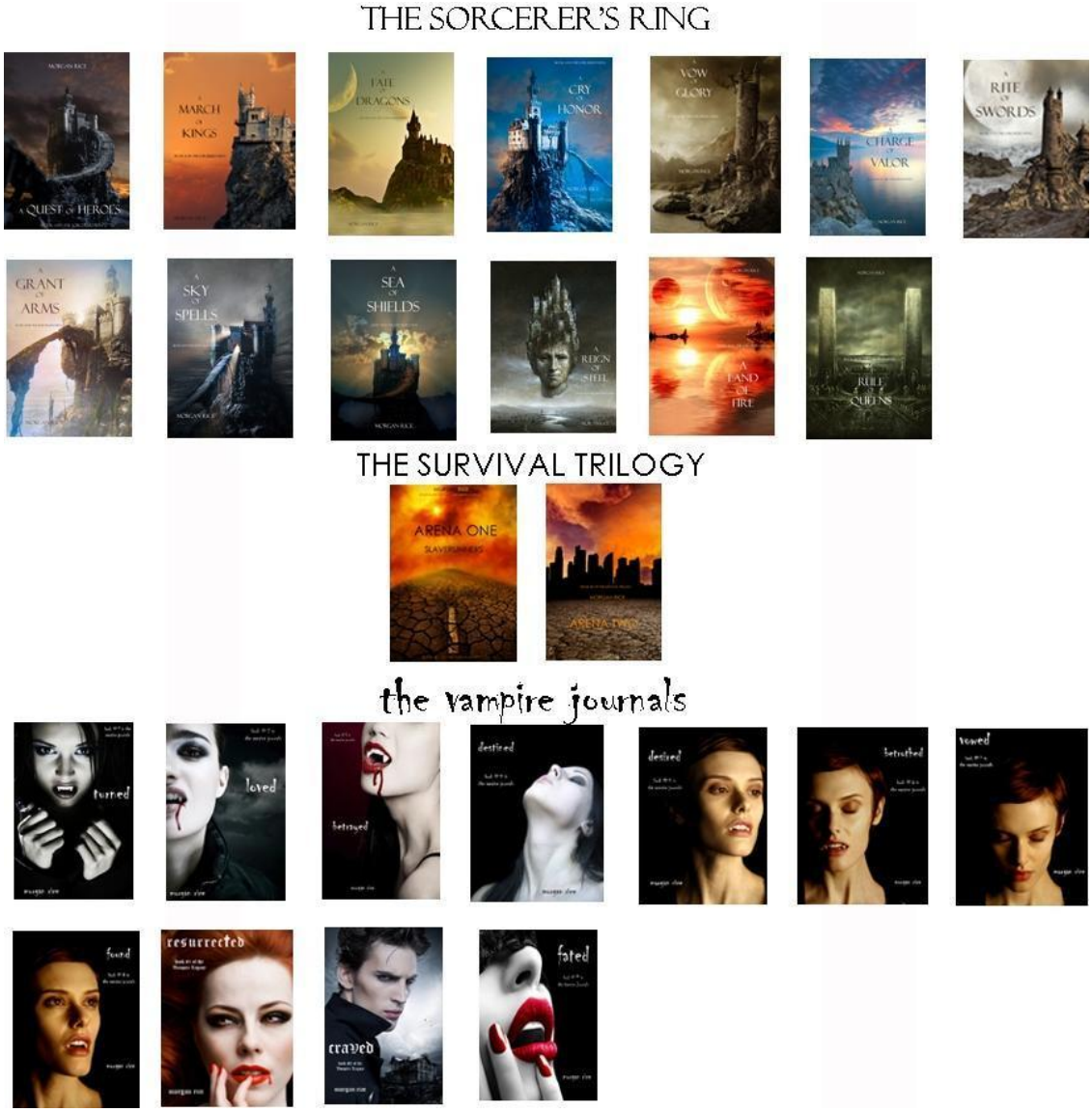
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Chapter One

Thorgrin rode on the back of Mycoples as she flew across the sprawling countryside of the Ring, heading south, somewhere towards Gwendolyn. Thor clutched the Destiny Sword as he looked down and saw below, sprawled out, the endless expanse of Andronicus' million-man army, covering the Ring like a plague of locusts. He felt the Sword throb in his palm and knew what it was urging him to do. Protect the Ring. Drive out the invaders. It was almost as if the Sword were commanding him – and Thor was only too happy to oblige.

Very soon, Thor would circle back and make each and every one of the invaders pay. Now that the Shield was restored, Andronicus and his men were trapped; no more Empire reinforcements could filter in, and Thor would not rest until he had killed each and every one.

But now was not yet the time for killing. Thor's first order of business was his one true love, the woman he had pined for ever since had had left these borders: Gwendolyn. Thor ached to lay his eyes upon her once again, to hold her, to know she was alive. Inside his shirt his mother's ring burned, and he could hardly wait to offer it to Gwen, to profess his love, to propose. He wanted her to know that nothing had changed between them, regardless of whatever had happened to her. He still loved her just as much – even more – and he needed her to know that.

Mycoples rumbled gently, and Thor could feel the vibration through her scales. Mycoples, he sensed, was eager to reach Gwendolyn, too, before anything happened to her. Mycoples ducked and weaved in and out of clouds, flapping her great wings, and she seemed content being here, inside the Ring, carrying Thor. Their bond was only growing stronger, and Thor felt that Mycoples shared his every thought and wish. It was like riding an extension of himself.

Thor's thoughts shifted from Gwendolyn as he flew in and out of the clouds. The former Queen's words dominated his thoughts, kept returning to him, as much as Thor preferred to shut them out. Her revelation had pained him beyond what he could imagine. Andronicus? His father?

It couldn't be. A part of Thor hoped it was just another cruel mind game of the former Queen, who, after all, had hated him from the start. Perhaps she had wanted to implant false thoughts in his mind to disturb him, to keep him away from her daughter, for whatever reason. Thor wanted desperately to believe that.

But deep down, as she had spoken the words, they had resonated within Thor's body and soul. He knew them to be true. As much as he would like to think otherwise, the second she had uttered it, he knew that Andronicus was, indeed, his father.

The thought hung over Thor like a nightmare. He had always hoped and prayed, somewhere in the back of his mind, that King MacGil was his father and that somehow Gwen was not truly his daughter, so that they could be together. Thor had always hoped that the day he learned who his father truly was, all would make sense in the world, that his destiny would become clear.

To learn that his father was not a hero was one thing. He could accept that. But to learn that his father was a monster – the worst of all monsters – the man, more than anything, who Thor wanted dead – it was too much to process. Thor carried Andronicus' bloodline. What did that mean for Thor? Did that mean that he, Thor, was destined to become a monster, too? Did that mean he had some evil streak lurking in his veins? Was he destined to become like him? Or was it possible that he could be different from him, despite their shared blood? Did destiny travel through the blood? Or did each generation make its own destiny?

Thor also struggled to understand what this all meant for the Destiny Sword. If the legend was true – that only a MacGil could wield it – did that mean Thor was a MacGil? If so, how could Andronicus possibly be his father? Unless Andronicus, somehow, was a MacGil?

Worst of all, how could Thor ever share this news with Gwendolyn? How could he tell her that he was the son of her most-hated enemy? Of the man who had her attacked? Surely, she would hate

Thor. She would see Andronicus' face every time she saw Thor's. And yet Thor had to tell her – he couldn't keep this secret from her. Would it ruin their relationship?

Thor's blood boiled with rage. He wanted to flail out at Andronicus for being his father, for doing this to him. As they flew, Thor looked down and scanned the land. He knew Andronicus was down there somewhere. Soon enough, he would meet him face to face. He would find him. Confront him. And he would kill him.

But first, he had to find Gwendolyn. As they crossed over the Southern Forest, Thor sensed she was close. He had a sinking feeling in his chest that something awful was about to happen to her. He urged Mycoples faster and faster, feeling that any moment could be her last.

Chapter Two

Gwendolyn stood alone on the upper parapets of the Tower of Refuge, dressed in the black robes the nuns had given her, already feeling as if she had been here forever. She had been greeted in silence, only one nun, her guide, speaking, just once, to instruct her about the rules of this place: there was to be no speaking, no interacting with any of the others. Each woman lived here in her own, separate universe. Each woman wanted to be left alone. This was a tower of refuge, a place for those seeking healing. Gwendolyn would be safe here from all the harms of the world. But also alone. Utterly alone.

Gwendolyn understood all too well. She wanted to be left alone, too.

She stood there now, atop the tower, looking out at the sweeping view of the treetops of the Southern Forest of the Ring, and felt more alone than ever before. She knew she should be strong, that she was a fighter. A King's daughter, and wife – or nearly wife – to a great warrior.

But Gwendolyn had to admit that, as much as she yearned to be strong, her heart and her spirit were still wounded. She missed Thor dearly and feared he would never return for her. And even if he did, once he found out what had happened to her, she feared he would never want to be with her again.

Gwen also felt hollowed-out knowing that Silesia had been destroyed, that Andronicus had won, and that everyone she cared about had already been captured or killed. Andronicus was everywhere now. He completely occupied the Ring and there was nowhere left to turn. Gwen felt hopeless, exhausted; far too exhausted for someone her age. Worse of all, she felt as if she had let everyone down; she felt as if she had lived too many lifetimes already, and she did not want to see any more.

Gwendolyn took a step forward, up onto the ledge, on the very edge of the parapet, beyond where one was supposed to stand. She lifted her arms slowly and held her palms out to her side. She felt a cold gust of wind, the freezing winds of winter. They knocked her off balance and she swayed on the edge of the precipice. She looked down and saw the steep plummet below.

Gwendolyn looked up to the sky, and thought of Argon. She wondered where he was, trapped in his own universe, serving his punishment, for her sake. She would give anything to see him now, to hear his wisdom one last time. Maybe that would save her, make her turn around.

But he was gone. He, too, had paid a price, and could not come back.

Gwen closed her eyes and thought one last time of Thor. If only he were here, that could change everything. If only she had *one* person left alive in the world who truly loved her, maybe that would give her a reason to go on living. She peered into the horizon, hoping beyond reason to see Thor. As she looked into the fast-moving clouds, she thought she heard dimly, somewhere on the horizon, the roar of a dragon. It was so distant, so soft, she must have imagined it. It was just her mind playing tricks on her. She knew no dragon could be here, inside the Ring. Just as she knew Thor was far away, lost forever in the Empire, in some place from which he would never return.

Tears rolled down Gwen's cheeks as she thought of him, of the life they could have had. Of how close they had once been. She pictured the look on his face, the sound of his voice, his laughter. She had been so sure they would be inseparable, that they would never be torn apart by anything.

"THOR!" Gwendolyn threw back her head and cried, swaying on the ledge. She willed for him to come back to her.

But her voice echoed on the wind and faded. Thor was a world away.

Gwendolyn reached down and held the amulet Thor had given her, the one that had saved her life once. She knew that her one chance had been used. Now, there were no more chances.

Gwendolyn looked down over the ledge and saw her father's face. He was surrounded by white light, smiling at her.

She leaned forward and hung one foot over the edge, closing her eyes to the breeze. She hovered there, caught between two worlds, between the living and the dead. She was balanced perfectly, and she knew the next gust of wind would decide for her which direction she would go.

Thor, she thought. *Forgive me.*

Chapter Three

Kendrick rode before the vast and growing army of MacGils, Silesians, and liberated countrymen of the Ring as they all burst out of the main gates of Silesia and onto the wide road, heading east, for Andronicus' army. Beside him rode Srog, Brom, Atme and Godfrey, and behind them, Reece, O'Connor, Conven, Elden, and Indra, amongst thousands of warriors. As they rode, they passed the charred bodies of thousands of Empire soldiers, black and stiff from the breath of the dragon; others lay dead from the mark of the Destiny Sword. Thor had unleashed waves of destruction, as if a single-man army. Kendrick took it all in, and was in awe at the scope of Thor' destruction, the power of Mycoples and the Destiny Sword.

Kendrick marveled at the turn of events. But days ago, they had all been imprisoned, under Andronicus' yoke, forced to admit defeat; Thor had been still in the Empire, the Destiny Sword but a lost dream, and there had been little hope of their returning. Kendrick and the others had been crucified, left to die, and it had seemed as if all were lost.

But now they rode as free men, as soldiers and knights once again, invigorated by Thor's arrival, the momentum now turned to their side. Mycoples had been a godsend, a force of destruction raining down from the sky; Silesia now stood as a free city, and the countryside of the Ring, instead of being filled with Empire soldiers, was littered with Empire corpses. The road leading east was lined with Empire bodies as far as the eye could see.

Yet as encouraging as all of this was, Kendrick knew that a half-million of Andronicus' men lay in waiting on the other side of the Highlands. They had beaten them back temporarily, but they had hardly wiped them out. And Kendrick and the others were not content to sit on their heels and wait in Silesia for Andronicus to regroup and attack once again – nor did they want to allow them a chance to escape and retreat back to the Empire. The Shield was up, and as badly outnumbered as Kendrick and the others were, at least now they had a fighting chance. Now, Andronicus' army was on the run, and Kendrick and the others were determined to continue the string of victories that Thor had begun.

Kendrick glanced back over his shoulder at the thousands of soldiers and free men riding with him and saw the determination on their faces. They had all tasted slavery, tasted defeat, and now he could see how much they all appreciated what it felt like to be free men once again. Not just for themselves, but for their wives and families. Each and every one of them was embittered, emboldened to make Andronicus pay and make sure he did not attack again. These were an army of men ready to fight to the death, and they rode as one. Everywhere they rode, they liberated more and more men, releasing them from their bonds and absorbing a sprawling and ever-growing army.

Kendrick himself was still recovering from his time upon the cross. His body was still not as strong as it was, and there still lingered the ever-present pain in his wrists and ankles from where those coarse ropes had dug into him. He looked over at Srog and Brom and Atme, his neighbors on the cross, and saw that they, too, were not as strong as they had once been. The crucifixion had taken its toll on all of them. Yet still they all rode proudly, emboldened. There was nothing like a chance to fight for your life, a chance for vengeance, to make you forget your injuries.

Kendrick was overjoyed to have his younger brother Reece and the other Legion brothers back from their quest, riding by his side once again. It had torn him apart to watch the slaughter of the Legion back in Silesia, and having these men back home restored some of his grief. He had always been close to Reece growing up, protective of him, taking the role of a second father to him during all those times when King MacGil had been too busy. In some ways, being only his half-brother had allowed Kendrick to become even closer to Reece; there was no burden on them to be close, and they became close out of choice. Kendrick had never been able to be close to his other younger brothers – Godfrey had spent his time with misfits in the tavern, and Gareth – well, Gareth had been Gareth.

Reece had been the only other one of the siblings who had embraced the battlefield, who had wanted to take up the life that Kendrick had chosen, too. Kendrick could not be more proud of him.

In the past, when Kendrick had ridden with Reece he had always been protective, keeping one eye on him; but since his return, Kendrick could see that Reece had become a true, hardened warrior himself, so he no longer felt the need to be so watchful of him. He wondered what sort of travails Reece must have undergone in the Empire to have transformed him to as hardened and skillful a warrior as he had become. He was looking forward to sitting down with him and hearing his stories.

Kendrick was overjoyed that Thor was back, too, and not just because Thor had liberated them, but also because he liked and respected Thor immensely and cared about him as he would a brother. Kendrick still replayed in his mind the image of Thor returning and wielding the Sword. He could not get over it. It was a vision he had never expected to see in his lifetime; indeed, he had never expected to see *anyone* wield the Destiny Sword, much less Thor, his own squire, a small, humble boy from a farming village on the periphery of the ring. An outsider. And not even a MacGil.

Or was he?

Kendrick wondered. He kept turning over in his mind the legend: only a MacGil could wield the Sword. Deep in his own heart, Kendrick had to admit that he'd always hoped that he himself would be the one to wield it. He'd hoped it would be the ultimate stamp on his legitimacy as a true MacGil, as the firstborn son. He had always dreamed that somehow, one day, circumstances would allow him to try.

But he had never been afforded that chance, and he did not begrudge Thor his achievement. Kendrick was not covetous; on the contrary, he marveled at Thor's destiny. He could not understand it, though. Was the legend false? Or was Thor a MacGil? How could he be? Unless Thor, too, was King MacGil's son. Kendrick wondered. His father had been known to sleep with many women outside of his marriage – which was indeed how he himself had been sired.

Was that why Thor had rushed out in Silesia, after speaking to his mother? What had they discussed, exactly? His mother wouldn't say. It was the first time she had kept a secret from him, from all of them. Why now? What secret was she withholding? What could she have said that had made Thor run off like that, leaving them all without a word?

It made Kendrick think of his own father, his own lineage. As much as he wished otherwise, he burned at the idea that he was illegitimate, and for the millionth time he wondered who his true mother was. He had heard various rumors throughout his life of different women that his father, King MaGil, had slept with, but he had never known for certain. When everything settled down – if it ever did – and the Ring returned to normal, Kendrick resolved to find out who his mother was for sure. He would confront her. He would ask her why she had let him go, why she had never been a part of his life. How she had met his father. He really just wanted to meet her, to see her face; to see if she looked like him; and to have her tell him that he was indeed legitimate, as legitimate as anyone else.

Kendrick was pleased that Thor had flown off to retrieve Gwendolyn, yet a part of him also wished Thor had stayed. Charging into battle, vastly outnumbered against tens of thousands of Andronicus' men, Kendrick knew they could use Thor and Mycoples now more than ever.

But Kendrick was born and bred a warrior, and he was not one to sit back and wait for others to fight his battles for him. Instead, he did what his instinct commanded him to do: ride out and conquer as much of the Empire army as he could, with his own men. He did not have special weapons like Mycoples or the Destiny Sword, but he had his own two hands, the same he had used since he was a boy. And that had always been enough.

They ascended a hill and as they reached its crest, Kendrick looked out over the horizon and saw in the distance a small MacGil city, Lucia, the first city east of Silesia. Empire corpses lined the road, and clearly Thor's wave of destruction had ended here. On the distant horizon, Kendrick could see a battalion of Andronicus' army retreating, riding east. He presumed they were heading back to Andronicus' main camp, to the safety of the other side of the Highlands. The main body of

the army was retreating – but they had left behind a smaller division to hold Lucia. Several thousand of Andronicus' men were stationed in the city, standing guard before it. Also visible were its citizens, enslaved by the soldiers.

Kendrick remembered what had happened to them back in Silesia, how they had been treated, and his face reddened with a desire for vengeance.

"ATTACK!" Kendrick screamed.

He raised his sword high and behind him came the invigorated shouts of thousands of soldiers.

Kendrick kicked his horse, and all of them raced as one down the hill, heading for Lucia. The two armies were preparing to face off, and though they were equally matched in terms of numbers, they were not, Kendrick knew, matched in terms of heart. This remnant division of Andronicus' army were invaders on the run, while Kendrick and his men were ready to fight for their very lives to protect their homeland.

His battle cry rose to the heavens as they charged for the gates of Lucia. They came so fast and quick that several dozen Empire soldiers standing guard turned and looked at each other in confusion, clearly not expecting this attack. The Empire soldiers turned, ran inside the gates, and furiously turned the cranks to lower the portcullis.

But not fast enough. Several of Kendrick's archers, leading the way, fired and killed them, their arrows landing expertly through their chests and backs, finding the joints in their armor. Kendrick himself hurled a spear, as did Reece beside him. Kendrick found his target – a large warrior taking aim with a bow – and was impressed to see Reece found his effortlessly, piercing a soldier through his heart. The gate remained open and Kendrick's men did not hesitate. With a great battle cry, they charged through, aiming for the heart of the city, not pausing to shy from confrontation.

There arose a great clang of metal as Kendrick and the others raised swords and axes and spears and halberds, and met the thousands of Empire soldiers who raced out to greet them on horseback. The first to make impact, Kendrick raised his shield and blocked a blow, at the same time swinging his sword and killing two soldiers. Without hesitating, he wheeled around and blocked another sword slash, then thrust his sword into an Empire soldier's gut. As the man died, Kendrick thought of vengeance; he thought of Gwendolyn, of his people, of all the people of the Ring who had suffered.

Reece, beside him, swung his mace and impacted a soldier on the side of his head, knocking him off his horse, then raised his shield and blocked a blow coming at him from his side. He swung his mace around and took out his attacker. Elden, beside him, rushed forward with his great axe and brought it down on a soldier aiming for Reece, cutting straight through his shield and into his chest.

O'Connor fired several arrows with deadly precision, even at such close distance, while Conven threw himself into the battle and fought recklessly, lunging forward beyond all the other men, not even bothering to raise his shield. He instead swung with two swords, heading into the thick of the Empire soldiers, as if he wanted to die. But amazingly, he did not. Instead, he took out men to the left and right.

Indra followed not far behind. She was fearless, more so than most of the men. She used her dagger with skill and cunning, cutting like a fish through the ranks and stabbing Empire soldiers in the throat. As she did, she thought of her homeland, of how much her own people had suffered under the boot of the Empire.

An Empire soldier brought his axe down for Kendrick's head before he could dodge it, and he braced himself for the blow; but he heard a great clang, and saw his friend Atme beside him, stopping the blow with his shield. Atme then jabbed his short spear and stabbed the attacker in the gut. Kendrick knew he owed him his life, once again.

As another soldier charged forward with a bow and arrow aimed right for Atme, Kendrick charged in front and slashed his sword upwards, knocked the bow up high into the sky, the arrow sailing aimlessly over Atme's head. Kendrick then butted the soldier on the bridge of the nose with his sword hilt, knocking him off his horse, where he was trampled to death. Now they were even.

And so the battle went, on and on, each army going blow for blow, men falling on both sides, but more on the Empire side, as Kendrick's men, fueled with rage, pressed farther and farther into the city. Eventually, their momentum swept them through like a tide. The Empire men were strong warriors, but they were the ones who were used to attacking and were caught off guard; soon, they were unable to organize and hold back the swell of Kendrick's army. They were pushed back and fell in greater numbers.

After nearly an hour of intense fighting, the Empire losses became a full scale retreat. Someone on their side sounded a horn, and one by one, they began to turn and gallop away, trying to make it out of the city.

With an even greater shout, Kendrick and his men charged after them, chasing them all the way through Lucia and pursuing them out the rear gates.

Whoever remained of the Empire battalion, still hundreds strong, rode for their lives in organized chaos, racing for the horizon. There arose a great shout within Lucia from the freed MacGil captives. Kendrick's men slashed their ropes and liberated them as they went, and the captives wasted no time in rushing to the horses of the fallen Empire soldiers, mounting them, stripping the corpses' weapons, and joining Kendrick's men.

Kendrick's army swelled to nearly double its size, and the thousands of them chased after the Empire soldiers, riding up and down the hills as they closed in on them. O'Connor and the other archers managed to pick some of them off, bodies falling here and there.

The chase went on, Kendrick wondering where they were heading, when he and his men crested a particularly high hill and he looked down to see one of the largest MacGil cities east of Silesia – Vinesia – nestled between two mountains, sitting in the valley. It was a substantial city, far greater than Lucia, with thick stone walls, and enforced iron gates. It was here, Kendrick realized, that the remnants of the Empire battalion fled, as the city stood protected by tens of thousands of Andronicus' men.

Kendrick paused with his men atop the hill and took in the situation. Vinesia was a major city, and they were vastly outnumbered. He knew it would be foolhardy to try, that the safest course would be to return to Silesia and be grateful for their victory here today.

But Kendrick was not in the mood for safe choices – and neither were his men. They wanted blood. They wanted vengeance. And on a day like today, odds no longer mattered. It was time to let the Empire men know what the MacGils were made of.

"CHARGE!" Kendrick yelled.

A shout arose, and thousands of men rushed forward, charging recklessly down the hill, toward the great city and the greater opponent, prepared to give up their lives, to risk it all for honor and for valor.

Chapter Four

Gareth coughed and wheezed as he stumbled his way across the desolate landscape, his lips chapped from lack of water, his eyes hollow with dark circles beneath them. It had been a harrowing few days, and he had expected to die more than once.

Gareth had escaped by the skin of his teeth from Andronicus' men in Silesia, hiding in a secret passageway deep within the wall and biding his time. He had waited, curled up like a rat inside the blackness, waiting for an opportune moment. He felt he had been there for days. He had witnessed everything, had watched with disbelief as Thor had arrived on the back of that dragon, had killed all those Empire men. In the confusion and chaos that ensued, Gareth had found his chance.

Gareth had slunk out through the back gate of Silesia while no one was looking, and had taken the road south, making his way along the edge of the Canyon, sticking mostly to the woods so as not to be detected. It did not matter – the roads were deserted anyway. Everyone was off east, fighting the great battle for the Ring. As he went, Gareth noted the charred bodies of Andronicus' men lining this road, and knew the battles here, down south, had already been fought.

Gareth made his way ever farther south, his instinct driving him back towards King's Court – or what remained of it. He knew it had been ravaged by Andronicus' men, that it likely lay in ruins, but still, he wanted to go there. He wanted to get far away from Silesia and go to the one place he knew he could take safe harbor. The one place everyone else had abandoned. The one place where he, Gareth, had once reigned supreme.

After days of hiking, weak and delirious from hunger, Gareth had finally emerged from the woods and spotted King's Court in the distance. There it was, its walls still intact, at least partially, though charred and crumbling. All around were the corpses of Andronicus' men, evidence that Thor had been here. Otherwise it sat empty, with nothing left but the whistling of the wind.

That suited Gareth just fine. He did not plan on entering the city anyway. He had come here for a small, hidden structure just outside the city walls. It was a place he had frequented as a child, a circular, marble structure, rising just a few feet above ground and adorned with elaborately carved statues about its roof. It had always looked ancient, sitting low like that, as if it had sprung up from the earth. And it was. It was the crypt of the MacGils. The place where his father had been buried – and his father before him.

The crypt was the one structure Gareth knew would be left intact. After all, who would bother to attack a tomb? It was the one place left where he knew no one would ever bother to look for him, where he could seek shelter. It was a place where he could hide, be left utterly alone. And a place where he could be with his ancestors. As much as Gareth hated his father, oddly enough, he found himself wanting to be closer to him these days.

Gareth hurried across the open field, a cold gust of wind making him shiver as he wrapped his ragged cloak tight around his shoulders. He heard the shrill cry of a winter bird, and looked up to see the huge, awful black creature circling high overhead, surely, with each cry, anticipating his collapse, its next meal. Gareth could hardly blame it. He felt on his last legs, and he was sure he appeared to be a prime meal for the bird.

Gareth finally reached the building, grabbed the massive iron door handle with two hands, and yanked with all his might, the world spinning, nearly delirious from exhaustion. It creaked and took all his strength to pry it wide.

Gareth hurried into the blackness, slamming the iron door. It echoed behind him.

He grabbed the unlit torch on the wall, where he knew it was mounted, struck its flint and lit it, affording himself just enough light to see by as he descended the steps, deeper and deeper into the blackness. It became colder and draftier the deeper he went, the wind finding its way down, whistling through small cracks. He could not help but feel as if his ancestors were howling at him, rebuking him.

"LEAVE ME!" he screamed back.

His voice echoed again and again off the crypt's walls.

"YOU WILL HAVE YOUR PRIZE SOON ENOUGH!"

Yet still the wind persisted.

Gareth, enraged, descended deeper, until finally he reached the great marble chamber, excavated with its ten-foot ceilings, where all his ancestors lay entombed in marble sarcophagi. Gareth marched solemnly down the hall, his footsteps echoing on the marble, toward the very end, where his father lay.

The old Gareth would have smashed his father's sarcophagus. But now, for some reason, he was beginning to feel an affinity for him. He could hardly understand it. Perhaps it was the opium wearing off; or perhaps it was because he knew that he himself would be dead soon, too.

Gareth reached the tall sarcophagus and hunched over it, leaning his head down. He surprised himself as he began to cry.

"I miss you father," Gareth wailed, his voice echoing in the emptiness.

He cried and cried, tears pouring down his face, until finally his knees grew weak and he slumped down in his exhaustion alongside the marble, sitting on the floor, leaning against the tomb. The wind howled as if in response, and Gareth lay down the torch, which burned lower and lower, a tiny flame decreasing in the blackness. Gareth knew that soon all would be blackness and that soon, he would join all those he loved the most.

Chapter Five

Steffen trekked somberly on the lonely forest road, slowly making his way from the Tower of Refuge. It broke his heart to leave Gwendolyn there like that, the woman whom he had been sworn to protect. Without her, he was nothing. Since meeting her, he had felt that he had finally found a purpose in life: to watch over her, to devote his life to paying her back for allowing him, a mere servant, to rise in the ranks; and most of all, for being the first person in his life not to detest and underestimate him based on his appearance.

Steffen had felt a sense of pride in helping her reach the Tower safely. But leaving her there had left him feeling hollow inside. Where would he go now? What would he do?

Without her to protect, his life felt aimless once again. He couldn't go back to King's court or to Silesia: Andronicus had defeated them both, and he recalled the destruction he saw as he'd fled from Silesia. The last he remembered, all his people were captives or slaves. There would be no virtue in returning. Besides, Steffen didn't want to cross the Ring again and be that far from Gwendolyn.

Steffen walked aimlessly for hours, winding through the forest trails, gathering his wits, until it had occurred to him where to go. He followed the country road north, up to a hill, the highest point, and from this lookout spotted a small town perched on another hill in the distance. He headed for it, and as he reached it, he turned back and saw this town had what he needed: a perfect view of the Tower of Refuge. If Gwendolyn ever tried to leave it, he wanted to be close by to make sure he was there to accompany her, to protect her. After all, his allegiance was to her now. Not to an army or a city, but to her. She was his nation.

As Steffen arrived in the small, humble village, he decided he would stay here, in this place, where he could always watch the Tower, and keep an eye out for her. As he passed through its gates, he saw it was a nondescript, poor town, another tiny village on the farthest outskirts of the Ring, so hidden in the southern forest that Andronicus' men had surely not even bothered to come this way.

Steffen arrived to the gaping stares of dozens of villagers, faces etched with ignorance and a lack of compassion, looking at him with mouths agape and the familiar scorn and derision he had received ever since he had been born. As they all scrutinized his appearance, he could feel their mocking eyes.

Steffen wanted to turn and run, but he forced himself not to. He needed to be close to the Tower, and for Gwendolyn's sake, he would put up with anything.

One villager, a burly man in his forties, dressed in rags as the others, turned and headed meanly toward him.

"What have we here, some sort of deformed man?"

The others laughed, turning and approaching.

Steffen kept calm, expecting this sort of greeting, which he had received his entire life. He'd found that the more provincial people were, the more joy they took in ridiculing him.

Steffen leaned back and assured himself that his bow was at the ready over his shoulder, in case these villagers were not just cruel, but violent. He knew, if he had to, he could take out several of them in the blink of an eye. But he wasn't here for violence. He was here to find shelter.

"He might be more than just a regular freak, is he?" asked another, as a large and growing group of menacing villagers began to surround him.

"From his markings I'd say he is," said another. "That looks like royal armor."

"And that bow – it's a fine leather."

"Not to mention the arrows. Gold-tipped, are they?"

They stopped but a few feet away, scowling down threateningly. They reminded him of the bullies who tormented him as a child.

"So, who are you, freak?" one of them said down to him.

Steffen breathed deeply, determined to stay calm.

"I mean you no harm," he began.

The group broke out laughing.

"Harm? You? What harm could you do us?"

"You couldn't harm our chickens!" laughed another.

Steffen flushed red as the laughter grew; but he would not allow himself to be provoked.

"I need a place to stay and food to eat. I have calloused hands and a strong back for working. Set met to a task, and I will mind myself. I don't need much. As much as the next man."

Steffen wanted to lose himself in menial work again, as he had all those years in the basement serving King MacGil. It would take his mind off things. He could perform hard labor and live a life of anonymity, as he had been prepared to do before he had ever met Gwendolyn.

"You call yourself a man?" one of them called out, laughing.

"Maybe we can find some use for him," another called out.

Steffen looked at him hopefully.

"That is, fighting against our dogs or chickens!"

They all laughed.

"I'd pay a grand amount to see that!"

"There's a war out there, in case you haven't noticed," Steffen said back coolly. "I'm sure, even in a provincial and rudimentary town like this, you can use a hand to maintain provisions."

The villagers looked at each other, baffled.

"Of course we know of the war," one said, "but our village is too small. Armies won't bother coming here."

"I don't like the way you talk," another said. "All fancy-like? Sounds like you had some schooling. You think you're better than us?"

"I'm no better than the next man," Steffen said.

"That much is obvious," laughed another.

"Enough of the banter!" cried one of the villagers in a serious tone.

He stepped forward and pushed the others aside with a strong palm. He was older than the others and looked to be a serious man. The crowd quieted in his presence.

"If you mean what you say," the man said in his deep, brusque voice, "I can use an extra set of hands on my mill. Pay is a sack of grain a day and a jug of water. You sleep in the barn, with the rest of the village boys. If that's agreeable to you, I will have you on."

Steffen nodded back, satisfied to finally see a serious man.

"I ask for nothing more," he said.

"This way," the man said, parting his way through the crowd.

Steffen followed him, and was led to a huge, wooden gristmill, all around which were teenagers and men. Each of them, sweating and covered in dirt, stood in the muddy tracks and pushed a massive wooden wheel, each grabbing a spoke and walking forward with it. Steffen stood there, surveyed the work, and realized it would be back-breaking labor. It would do.

Steffen turned to tell the man he would accept, but the man had already gone, assuming he would. The villagers, with a few final heckles, turned back to their affairs while Steffen looked ahead at the wheel, at the new life that lay ahead of him.

For a glimmer in time, he had been weak, had allowed himself to dream. He had imagined a life of castles and royalty and rank. Had seen himself being an important person, the hand of the Queen. He should have known better than to think so high. He, of course, was not meant for that. He never had been. What had happened to him, meeting Gwendolyn, had been a fluke. Now, his life would be relegated to this. But this, at least, was a life he knew. A life he understood. A life of hardship. And without Gwendolyn in it, this life would be just as well for him.

Chapter Six

Thor urged Mycoples faster as they raced through the clouds, getting ever closer to the Tower of Refuge. Thor felt with every ounce of his being that Gwen was in danger. He felt the vibration running through his fingertips, throughout his entire body, telling him, *warning* him. Go faster, it whispered to him.

Faster.

"Faster!" Thor urged Mycoples.

Mycoples roared softly in return, flapping her great wings harder. Thor had not even needed to utter the words – Mycoples understood everything, before he even said it – but he spoke the words anyway. They made him feel better. He was feeling helpless. He sensed that something was very wrong with Gwen, and that every second counted.

They finally broke through a patch of clouds and as they did, Thor was flooded with relief as he saw it come into view, in the distance: the Tower of Refuge. It was an ancient and eerie piece of architecture, a perfectly round, skinny tower shooting straight up into the sky, reaching nearly as high as the clouds. Built of an ancient, shining black stone, Thor could sense the power coming off it, even from here.

As they flew closer, suddenly he spotted something up high, atop the tower. It was a person. She was standing on the ledge, hands out, palms by her sides. Her eyes were closed, and she was swaying in the wind.

Thor knew immediately who it was.

Gwendolyn.

His heart pounded as he saw her standing there. He knew what she was thinking. And he knew why. She thought he had given up on her, and he could not help feeling as if it were his fault.

"FASTER!" Thor screamed.

Mycoples flapped her wings even harder, and they flew so fast it took Thor's breath away.

As they neared, Thor watched Gwen step backwards, off the ledge, back onto the safety of the roof, and his heart flooded with relief. Without even seeing him, on her own, she had changed her mind and decided not to jump.

Mycoples roared and Gwen looked up and spotted Thor for the first time. Their eyes locked, even from this great distance, and he watched the shock flood her face.

Mycoples landed on the roof and the moment she did, Thor jumped off, barely waiting for her to set down, and ran to Gwendolyn.

Gwen turned and stared at him, eyes open in complete surprise. She looked as if she were staring at a ghost.

Thor ran for her, his heart pounding, flooded with excitement, and reached out his arms. They embraced and held each other tightly as Thor picked her up and squeezed her. He spun her around again and again.

Thor heard her crying in his ear, felt her hot tears pouring down his neck, and he could hardly believe he was really here, holding her, here in the flesh. This was real. This was the dream he had seen in his mind's eye, day after day, night after night, when he had been deep in the Empire, when he had been sure he would never return, would never set eyes on Gwendolyn again. And here he was now, holding her in his arms.

Having been away from her for so long, everything about her felt new. It felt perfect. And he vowed he would never take another moment with her for granted again.

"Gwendolyn," he whispered in her ear.

"Thorgrin," she whispered back.

They held each other for he did not know how long, then slowly they pulled back and kissed. It was a passionate kiss, and neither of them backed away.

"You're alive," she said. "You're here. I can't believe you're here."

Mycoples snorted and Gwendolyn looked up over Thor's shoulder, as Mycoples flapped her wings once. Gwen's face flushed with fear.

"Do not be afraid," Thor said. "Her name is Mycoples. She is my friend. And she will be your friend, too. Let me show you."

Thor took Gwen's hand and led her slowly across the parapet. He could feel Gwen's fear as they approached. He understood. After all, this was a real, live dragon, and this was closer than Gwen had ever been to one in her life.

Mycoples stared back at Gwen with her huge, red glowing eyes, snorting gently, flapping her wings and arching back her neck. Thor sensed something like jealousy. And perhaps, curiosity.

"Mycoples, meet Gwendolyn."

Mycoples turned her head away, proudly.

Then suddenly she turned back and as she did, she stared right into Gwendolyn's eyes, as if seeing right through her. She leaned in, so close that her face was nearly touching Gwendolyn's.

Gwen gasped in surprise and awe – and perhaps fear. She reached up, her hand trembling, and lay it gently on Mycoples' long nose, touching her purple scales.

After several tense seconds, Mycoples finally blinked and lowered her nose and rubbed it against Gwen's stomach in a sign of affection. Mycoples kept rubbing her nose against Gwen's stomach, as if she were fixated on it, and Thor could not understand why.

Then, just as quickly, Mycoples turned her head away and looked off into the horizon.

"She's beautiful," Gwen whispered.

She turned and looked at Thor.

"I gave up hope that you would return," she said. "I did not think you would."

"Nor did I," Thor said. "Thinking of you is what sustained me. It gave me reason to survive. To return."

They embraced again, holding each other tightly as the breeze caressed them, then finally, they pulled back.

Gwendolyn looked down and noticed the Destiny Sword on Thor's hip and her eyes widened. She gasped.

"You brought back the Sword," she said. She looked up at him in disbelief. "*You* are the one to wield it."

Thor nodded back.

"But how…" she began, then trailed off. Clearly, she was overwhelmed.

"I do not know," Thor said. "I was just able to."

Her eyes opened with hope as she realized something else.

"Then the Shield is up again," she said hopefully.

Thor nodded back solemnly.

"Andronicus is trapped," he said. "We have already liberated King's Court and Silesia."

Gwendolyn's face rose in relief and joy.

"It was you," she said, realizing. "You freed our cities."

Thor shrugged modestly.

"It was Mycoples, mostly. And the Sword. I just went along for the ride."

Gwen beamed.

"And our people? Are they safe? Did any survive?"

Thor nodded.

"They are mostly alive and well."

She beamed, looking younger again.

"Kendrick awaits you in Silesia," Thor said, "as do Godfrey, Reece, Srog, and many, many others. They are all alive and well, and the city is free."

Gwendolyn rushed forward and hugged Thor, holding him tight. He could feel the relief flooding through her.

"I thought it was all gone," she said, crying softly, "lost forever."

Thor shook his head.

"The Ring has survived," he said. "Andronicus is on the run. We will return, and we will wipe him out for good. And then we will rebuild."

Gwendolyn suddenly turned her back to him and looked away, staring out at the sky, wiping away a tear. She wrapped her cloak tight around her shoulders, and her face filled with apprehension.

"I don't know if I can return," she said, hesitantly. "Something happened to me. While you were away."

Thor turned and faced her, holding her shoulders.

"I know what happened to you," he said. "Your mother told me. There is nothing to be ashamed of," he said.

Gwendolyn looking at him, her eyes filling with surprise and wonder.

"You *know*?" she asked, shocked.

Thor nodded.

"It means nothing," he said. "I love you as much as ever. Even more. Our love – that is what matters. That is what is unbreakable. I shall avenge you. I shall kill Andronicus myself. And our love, it will never die."

Gwen rushed forward and hugged Thor tight, her tears pouring down his neck. He could feel how relieved she was.

"I love you," Gwen said in his ear.

"I love you, too," he answered.

As Thor stood there, holding her, his heart pounded with trepidation. He wanted now, at this moment, more than ever, to ask her. To propose. But he felt he could not until he had first told her his secret, until he told her who his father was.

The thought of it filled him with shame and humiliation. Here he was, having just vowed to kill the very man they both hated most. And with his very next words, how could he announce that Andronicus was his father?

Thor felt sure that if he did, Gwendolyn would hate him forever. And he could not risk losing her. Not after all that happened. He loved her too much.

So instead, his hands trembling, Thor reached into his shirt and pulled out the necklace, the one he'd found among the dragon's treasures, with a rope made of gold and a shining golden heart, laden with diamonds and rubies. He held it up to the light, and Gwen gasped at the sight.

Thor came up behind her, and clasped it around her neck.

"A small token of my love and affection," he said.

It hung beautifully on her, the gold shining in the light, reflecting everything.

The ring burned in his pocket, and Thor vowed to give it to her when the time was right. When he could muster the courage to tell her the truth. But now was not that time, as much as he hoped that it could be.

"So you see, you can return," Thor said, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. "You *must* return. Your people need you. They need a leader. The Ring, without a leader, is nothing. They look to you for guidance. Andronicus still inhabits half the Ring. Our cities still need to be rebuilt."

He looked into her eyes and could see her thinking.

"Say yes," Thor urged. "Return with me. This Tower is no place for a young woman to live out the rest of her days. The Ring needs you. *I* need you."

Thor held out a hand and waited.

Gwendolyn looked down, wavering.

Then finally, she reached out and placed a hand in his. Her eyes turned lighter and lighter, glowing with love and warmth. He could see her slowly coming back to the old Gwendolyn he once knew, filled with life and love and joy. It was as if she were a flower, being restored before his eyes.

“Yes,” she said softly, smiling.

They embraced and he held her tight and vowed never to let her go again.

Chapter Seven

Erec opened his eyes to find himself lying in Alistair's arms, looking up at her crystal-blue eyes, which shone down with love and warmth. She wore a small smile at the corner of her lips, and he felt the warmth radiating off her hands, and through his body. As he checked himself, he felt entirely healed, reborn, as if he had never been injured. She had brought him back from the dead.

Erec sat up and looked into Alistair's eyes with surprise, finding himself wondering once again who she really was, how she could have such powers.

As Erec sat up and rubbed his head, he immediately remembered: Andronicus' men. The attack. The defense of the gulch. The boulder.

Erec jumped to his feet and saw his men all looking back towards him, as if awaiting his resurrection – and his command. Their faces were filled with relief.

"How long have I been unconscious?" he turned and asked Alistair, frantic. He felt guilty he had abandoned his men for so long.

But she smiled back at him sweetly.

"But for one second," she said.

Erec could not comprehend how that could be. He felt so restored, as if he had slept for years. He felt a new bounce in his step as he jumped to his feet and turned and ran for the entrance to the gulch and saw his handiwork: the huge boulder which he had smashed now stopped it up, and Andronicus' men could no longer get through. They had achieved the impossible and had fended off the much larger army. At least for now.

Before he could celebrate, Erec heard a sudden scream come from up above and looked up: there, atop the cliff, one of his men screamed, then tumbled backwards, end over end, and landed on the ground, dead.

Erec looked down and saw a spear impaled in the man's body, then looked back up to see a host of activity, shouts and screams erupting everywhere. Before his eyes, dozens of Andronicus' men appeared at the top, fighting hand-to-hand with the Duke's men, going blow for blow, and Erec realized what had happened: the Empire commander had split his forces, sending some through the gulch, and sending others straight up the mountain face.

"TO THE TOP!" Erec commanded. "CLIMB!"

The Duke's men followed him as he ran straight up the mountain face, sword in hand, scrambling up the steep ascent of rock and dust. Every several feet he slipped and reached out with his palm, scraping it against the stone, grabbing hold, doing his best not to fall backwards. He ran, but the face was so steep it was more climb than run; each step was hard fought, armor clanging all around him as his men huffed and puffed their way, like mountain goats, straight up the cliff.

"ARCHERS!" Erec screamed.

Down below, several dozen of the Duke's archers, scaling the mountain, stopped and took aim straight up the cliff. They unleashed a volley of arrows and several Empire soldiers screamed and hurled backwards, tumbling down along the side of the cliff. One body came hurling down at Erec; he dodged and barely avoided it. One of the Duke's men was not so lucky, though – a corpse hit him and sent him flying backwards to the ground, screaming, dead beneath its weight.

The Duke's archers dug in and stationed themselves up and down the mountain, firing every time an Empire soldier popped his head over the edge of the cliff to keep them at bay.

But the fighting up there was tight, hand-to-hand, and not all of the arrows hit their mark: one arrow missed, accidentally lodging into the back of one of the Duke's own men. The soldier screamed and arched his back, and an Empire soldier took advantage and stabbed him, knocking him backwards, screaming down the cliff. But as the Empire soldier was exposed, another archer landed an arrow in his gut, taking him out, too, his corpse falling face-first over the edge.

Erec redoubled his efforts, as did those around him, sprinting with all he had straight up the cliff. As he neared the top, just feet away, he slipped and began to fall; he flailed, reached out, and grabbed hold of a thick root emerging from the stone. He held on for his life, dangling from it, then pulled himself up, regained his footing, and continued to the top.

Erec reached the top before the others and raced forward with a battle cry, sword raised high, eager to help defend his men, who were holding their positions at the top but getting pushed back. There were but a few dozen of his men up here, and each was embroiled in hand-to-hand combat with Empire soldiers, outnumbered two to one. With each passing second, more and more Empire soldiers kept appearing at the top.

Erec fought like a madman, charging and stabbing two soldiers at once, freeing up his men. There was no one faster in battle than he, not in the whole Ring, and with two swords in hand, slashing every which way, Erec drew on his unique skills as champion of the Silver to fight back the Empire. He was a one-man wave of destruction as he spun and ducked and slashed, heading ever deeper right into the thick of Empire soldiers. He dodged and head-butted and parried, and went so fast that he opted not to use his shield.

Erec tore through them like a wind, downing a dozen soldiers before they barely had a chance to defend themselves. And the Duke's men, all around him, rallied.

Behind him, the rest of the Duke's men also reached the top, Brandt and the Duke leading the way, fighting by Erec's side. Soon, the momentum turned, and they found themselves pushing back the Empire men, corpses piling up all around them.

Erec squared off with the final Empire soldier left at the top, and he drove him backward then leaned back and kicked him, sending him off the Empire side, screaming as he tumbled backwards.

Erec and his men all stood there, catching their breath; Erec walked forward, across the broad landing, to the very edge of the Empire side of the cliff. He wanted to see what lay below. The Empire had stopped sending men up here, wisely, but Erec had a sinking feeling that they might still have some in reserve. His men came up beside him and looked down, too.

Nothing in Erec's wildest imagination prepared him for what he saw below. His heart sank. Despite the hundreds of men they had managed to kill, despite the fact that they had successfully sealed off the gulch and taken the high ground, there still remained below tens of thousands of Empire soldiers.

Erec could scarcely believe it. It had taken everything they had to get this far, and all the damage they had done had not even put a dent in the endless armor of the Empire. The Empire would just send more and more men up here. Erec and his men could kill dozens more, perhaps even hundreds. But eventually, the thousands would get through.

Erec stood there, feeling hopeless. For the first time in his life, he knew he was about to die, here, on this ground, on this day. There was no way around it. He did not regret it. He had put up a heroic defense, and if he were to die, there was no better way, or place. He gripped his sword and steeled himself, and his only hesitation was that Alistair should be safe.

Maybe he thought, in the next lifetime he would have more time with her.

"Well, we had a good run," came a voice.

Erec turned to see Brandt standing beside him, his hand on the hilt of his sword, also resigned. The two of them had fought countless battles together, had been outnumbered many times – and yet Erec had need never seen the expression on his friend's face that he saw now. It must have mirrored his own: it signaled that death was here.

"At least we shall go down with swords in our hands," said the Duke.

He echoed Erec's thoughts exactly.

Down below, the Empire's men, as if realizing, looked up. Thousands of them began to rally, to march in unison, heading for the cliff, weapons drawn. Hundreds of Empire archers began to

kneel, and Erec knew it would only be moments until the bloodshed began. He braced himself and breathed deep.

Suddenly there came a screeching noise from somewhere in the sky, off on the horizon. Erec looked up and searched the skies, wondering if he was hearing things. Once, he had heard the cry of a dragon, and he thought perhaps it sounded like that. It had been a sound he had never forgotten, one he had heard during his training, during The Hundred. It was a cry he had never thought to hear again. It couldn't be possible. A dragon? Here in the Ring?

Erec craned his neck and, in the distance, through the parting clouds, he saw a vision that would be burned into his mind for the rest of his life: flying toward them, its great wings flapping, was a huge purple dragon with large, glowing red eyes. The sight filled Erec with dread, more so than any army could.

But as he looked closer, his expression turned to one of confusion. He thought he could see two people riding on the back of the dragon. As Erec narrowed his eyes, he recognized them. Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

There, on the back of the dragon, sat Thorgrin and behind him, gripping his waist, was King MacGil's daughter. Gwendolyn.

Before Erec could begin to process what he was seeing, the dragon dove down, plunging toward the ground like an eagle. It opened its mouth and screeched an awful sound, a sound so sharp that a boulder beside Erec began to split. The entire ground shook as the dragon plunged, opened its mouth, and breathed a fire unlike anything Erec had ever seen.

The valley filled with the shouts and cries of thousands of Empire soldiers, as wave after wave of fire engulfed them, the whole valley becoming lit with flames. Thor directed the dragon up and down the ranks of Andronicus' men, wiping out scores of them in the blink of an eye.

The remaining soldiers turned and fled, racing for the horizon. Thor hunted these down, too, directing his dragon to breathe more and more fire.

Within moments, all the men below Erec – the men he had been so sure would lead to his death, were themselves dead. There remained nothing of them but charred corpses, fire and flames, souls that once were. The entire Empire battalion was gone.

Erec looked up, mouth open in shock, and watched as the dragon rose high into the air, flapped its great wings, and flew past them. It headed north. His men erupted into a great cheer as it passed them.

Erec was speechless in admiration of Thor's heroics, his fearlessness, his control of this beast – and of the beast's power. Erec had been given a second chance at life – he and all of his men – and for the first time in a while, he was feeling optimistic. Now they could win. Even against Andronicus' million men, with a beast like that, they could actually *win*.

"Men, march!" Erec commanded.

He was determined to follow the trail of the dragon, the smell of sulfur, the blaze in the sky, wherever it led them. Thorgrin had returned, and it was time to join him.

Chapter Eight

Kendrick charged on his horse, surrounded by his men, the thousands of them massed outside Vinesia, the major city that Andronicus' battalion had retreated to. A tall, iron portcullis barred the city gates, its stone walls were thick, and thousands of Andronicus' men teemed inside and out, vastly outnumbering Kendrick's army. The element of surprise was no longer on his side.

Worse, coming into view from behind the city were thousands more of Andronicus' men, reinforcements, flooding the plains. Just when Kendrick thought they had them on the run, the situation had been quickly reversed. In fact, now the army marched towards Kendrick, orderly, disciplined, one massive wave of destruction.

The only alternative now was to retreat to Silesia, to hold it temporarily until the Empire took it once again, until they were all slaves once again. And that could never be.

Kendrick had never been one to retreat from a confrontation, even when outnumbered, and neither were any of the other brave warriors here of MacGil's army, of Silesia, of the Silver. They would all, Kendrick knew, fight with him to the death. And as he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, he knew that was precisely what he would have to do on this day.

The Empire men let out a battle cry, and Kendrick's men met it with a louder one of their own.

As Kendrick and his men raced down the slope to meet the oncoming army, knowing it was a battle they could not win but determined to wage it anyway, Andronicus' men picked up speed and raced towards them too. Kendrick felt the air rushing through his hair, felt the vibration of the sword hilt in his hand, and knew it was a matter of time until he found himself lost in that great clang of metal, in that great, familiar rite of swords.

Kendrick was surprised to hear something like a screech high above; he craned his neck to look up into the sky and saw something bursting through the clouds that made him look twice. He had seen it once before – Thor appearing on the back of Mycoples – yet still the sight took his breath away. Especially because this time, Gwendolyn rode on the back, too.

Kendrick's heart swelled as he watched them dive and realized what was about to happen. He grinned wide, raised his sword higher, and charged faster, realizing for the first time that victory on this day would, after all, be theirs.

* * *

Thor and Gwen flew on the back of Mycoples, weaving in and out of the clouds, her great wings flapping faster and faster as he urged her on. He sensed danger below for Kendrick and the others, dove down low, and broke through the clouds. Before him there opened up a bird's eye view of the landscape: amidst the rolling hills of the Ring he saw the vast expanse of Andronicus' division, racing for Kendrick's men on the open plains.

Thor urged Mycoples down.

"Dive!" he whispered.

She dove low, so close to the ground that Thor could nearly jump off, then opened her mouth and breathed fire, the heat of it nearly singing Thor. Waves and waves of fire rolled through the plains, and there came the terrified shouts of Empire men. Mycoples wreaked destruction unlike anything the men had ever seen, setting miles of the countryside alight, and thousands of Andronicus' men fell.

Whoever survived turned and fled. Thor would leave the rest of them for Kendrick to take care of.

Thor turned towards the city and saw thousands more Empire soldiers within. He knew Mycoples could not maneuver in such a confined area, with its steep, narrow walls, and that it would

be too risky to set her down there. Thor saw hundreds of soldiers aiming at the sky with arrows and spears, and he feared the damage they might do to Mycoples at such short range. He didn't like it at all. He felt the Destiny Sword throbbing in his hand and knew this was a battle he would have to wage himself.

Thor directed Mycoples down to the front of the city, outside the huge iron portcullis.

As she set down, he leaned over and whispered into Mycoples' ear: "The gate. Burn it down and I will take it from there."

Mycoples sat there and squawked back at him, flapping her wings in defiance. Clearly, she wanted to stay with Thor, to fight by his side inside the city. But Thor would not give her the chance.

"This is my battle," he insisted. "And I need you to take Gwen to safety."

Mycoples seemed to concede. Suddenly, she leaned back and breathed fire on the iron gate, until finally it melted away to nothing.

Thor leaned over to Mycoples.

"Go!" he whispered to her. "Take Gwendolyn to safety."

Thor jumped off her back and as he did he felt the Destiny Sword throbbing in his hand.

"Thor!" Gwen called out.

But Thor was already racing to the melted gates. He heard Mycoples take off and knew she was taking Gwen to safety.

Thor sprinted through the open gates and into the courtyard, right into the heart of the city, into the mass of thousands of men. The Destiny Sword vibrated in Thor's hand like a living thing, bearing him as if he were lighter than air. All he had to do was hold on.

Thor felt his arm and wrist and body moving, slashing and attacking in every direction, the sword ringing through the air as it cut through men like butter, killing dozens in a single stroke. Thor spun and unleashed damage in every direction. At first, the Empire tried to attack him back; but after Thor cut through shields, through armor, through other weapons as if they were not even there, after he killed row after row of men, they realized what they were up against: a magical, unstoppable whirlwind of destruction.

The city broke into chaos. The thousands of Empire soldiers turned and tried to flee the city, to get away from Thor. But there was nowhere to go. Led by the sword, Thor was too fast, like lightning spreading through the city. The soldiers, panic-stricken, ran into the city walls, into each other, stampeding to get out.

Thor did not let them escape. He sprinted through every corner of the city, the sword bearing him with a speed unlike any he had ever known, and, as he thought of Gwendolyn, and what Andronicus had done to her, he killed soldier after soldier, exacting vengeance. It was time to rectify the wrongs that Andronicus had beset upon the Ring.

Andronicus. His father. The thought burned through him like a fire. With each sword slash, Thor imagined killing him, wiping out his ancestry. Thor wanted to be someone else, *from* someone else. He wanted a father he could be proud of. Anyone but Andronicus. And if he killed enough of these men, maybe, just maybe, he could be free of him.

Thor fought in a daze, wheeling in every direction, until finally he realized he was slashing at nothing. He looked around, and saw that every soldier, every single one of Andronicus' thousands, lay on the ground, dead. The city was filled with bodies. There was no one left to kill.

Thor stood alone in the city square, breathing hard, the Sword glowing in his hand, and not a soul stirred.

Thor heard a distant cheer; he snapped out of it, ran out the city gate and saw, in the distance, Kendrick's men, charging, pursuing the remnants of the army, pushing them back.

As Thor sprinted out the city gate, Mycoples saw him and descended, waiting for his return, Gwen still on her back. Thor mounted the dragon, and they rose once again up into the air.

They flew over Kendrick's army and Thor saw them from above, like ants below him. They cheered in victory as he flew over them. Finally they were in front of Kendrick's army, in front of the great mass of men and horses and dust. Up ahead were the scattered remnants of Andronicus' legions.

"Down," Thor whispered.

They dove and came upon the rear of Andronicus' men, and as they did Mycoples breathed fire, wiping out one row after the next, the great wall of fire going ever faster. Screams arose, and soon Thor wiped out the entire rear guard.

Finally, there was no one left to kill.

They continued flying, crossing the expansive plains, Thor wanting to be sure there was no one left. In the distance Thor saw the great mountain range, the Highlands, dividing east the East from the West. Between here and the Highlands there was not a single Empire soldier alive. Thor was satisfied.

The entire Western Kingdom of the Ring had been liberated. It had been enough killing for one day. The sun began to set, and whatever lay ahead, on the Eastern side of the Highlands, could lay there for now.

Thor circled and flew back towards Kendrick. The countryside raced below him and soon he heard the shouts and cheers of the men, looking up at the sky, cheering his name.

He set down before the army, dismounting and helping Gwendolyn down.

They were embraced by the huge group, all of them rushing forward, a great cheer of victory rising up as the soldiers pressed in from all sides. Kendrick, Godfrey, Reece and his other legion brothers, the Silver – everyone Thor had ever known and cared about rushed forward to embrace him and Gwendolyn.

They were all, finally, united. Finally, they were free.

Chapter Nine

Andronicus stormed through his camp and in an impulsive fit of rage, reached out with his long claws and severed the head of the young soldier who happened, to his great misfortune, to be standing nearby. As he marched, Andronicus decapitated one soldier after the next, until finally his men got the idea, and ran to stay clear of him. They should have known better than to be near him when he was in a mood like this.

Soldiers parted ways as Andronicus stormed through his camp of tens of thousands, all keeping a healthy distance. Even his generals stayed safely away, trailing behind him, knowing better than to get anywhere near him when he was this upset.

Defeat was one thing. But a defeat like this – it was unprecedented in the history of the Empire. Andronicus had never experienced defeat before. His life had been one long string of victories, each more brutal and satisfying than the next. He did not know what defeat felt like. Now he did. And he did not like it.

Andronicus ran over and over in his mind what had happened, how things had gone so wrong. Only yesterday it had seemed as if his victory was complete, as if the Ring were his. He had destroyed King's Court and had conquered Silesia; he had subjugated all the MacGils and humiliated their leader, Gwendolyn; he had tortured their greatest soldiers high up on the crosses, had already murdered Kolk, and had been about to execute Kendrick and the others. Argon had meddled in his affairs, had snatched Gwendolyn away before he could kill her, and Andronicus had been about to rectify that, to get her back and execute her, along with all the others. He had been a day away from complete victory and greatness.

And then everything had changed, so quickly, for the worse. Thor and that dragon had appeared on the horizon like a bad apparition, had descended like a cloud, and with their great flames and Destiny Sword had managed to wipe out entire divisions of men. Andronicus had witnessed it all at a safe distance; he'd had the good battle sense to retreat here, to this side of the Highlands, while his scouts continued to bring him back reports throughout the day of the damage Thor and the dragon had done. Down south, near Savaria, an entire battalion was wiped out; in King's Court and Silesia it was just as bad. Now the entire Western Kingdom of the Ring, once under his control, was liberated. It was inconceivable.

He stewed as he thought of the Destiny Sword. He had gone to such lengths to get it away from the Ring, and now it had returned here and with it, the Shield was back up. That meant he was trapped in here with the men he had; he could leave, of course, but he could not get any more reinforcements inside. He estimated he still had a half-million soldiers here, on this side of the Highlands, more than enough to outnumber the MacGils; but against Thor, the Destiny Sword and that dragon, numbers no longer mattered. Now the odds, ironically, were against *him*. It was a position he had never been in before.

As if things could not get even worse, his spies had also brought him reports of unrest back at home, in the Empire's capitol, of Romulus conniving to take his throne away from him.

Andronicus growled with rage as he stormed through his camp, debating his options, looking for someone, anyone to blame. He knew as a commander that the wisest thing to do, tactically, would be retreat and leave the Ring now, before Thor and his dragon found them, to salvage whatever forces he had left, board his ships, and sail back to the Empire in disgrace to retain his throne. After all, the Ring was but a speck in the huge expanse of the Empire, and every great commander was entitled to at least one defeat. He would still rule ninety-nine percent of the world, and he knew he should be more than satisfied with that.

But that was not the way of the Great Andronicus. Andronicus was not one to be prudent or content. He had always followed his passions, and though he knew it was risky, he was not ready to

leave this place, to admit defeat, to allow the Ring to slip from his grasp. Even if he had to sacrifice his entire Empire, he would find a way to crush and dominate this place. No matter what it took.

Andronicus could not control the dragon or the Destiny Sword. But Thorgrin… that was a different matter. His son.

Andronicus stopped and sighed at the thought. How ironic: his very own son, the last remaining obstacle to his domination of the world. Somehow, it seemed fitting. Inevitable. It was always, he knew, the people closest to you that hurt you the most.

He recalled the prophecy. It had been a mistake, of course, to let his son live. His great mistake in life. But he'd had a weak spot for him, even though he knew the prophecy declared it might lead to his very own demise. He had let Thor live, and now the time had come to suffer the price.

Andronicus continued storming through the camp, trailed by his generals, until finally he reached the periphery and came across a tent smaller than the others, the one scarlet tent in a sea of black and gold. There was only one person who had the audacity to have a different color tent, the only one his men feared.

Rafi.

Andronicus' personal sorcerer, the most sinister creature he had ever encountered, Rafi had counseled Andronicus every step of the way, had protected him with his malevolent energy, had been more responsible for his rise than any other. Andronicus hated to turn to him now, to admit how much he needed him. But when he encountered an obstacle not of this world, a thing of magic, it was always Rafi who he turned to.

As Andronicus approached the tent, two evil beings, tall and thin, hidden in scarlet cloaks, glowing yellow eyes protruding from behind their hoods, stared back. They were the only creatures in this entire camp who would dare not to bow their heads in his presence.

"I summon Rafi," Andronicus declared.

The two creatures, without turning, each reached over with a single hand and pulled back the flaps of the tent.

As they did, a horrible odor came out at Andronicus, making him recoil.

There was a long wait. All the generals stopped behind Andronicus and watched in anticipation, as did the entire camp, who all turned to see. The camp grew thick with silence.

Finally, out of the scarlet tent emerged a tall and skinny creature, twice as tall as Andronicus, as skinny as a branch from an olive tree, dressed in the darkest of scarlet robes, with a face that was invisible, hidden somewhere in the blackness behind its hood.

Rafi stood there and stared back, and Andronicus was able to see only his unblinking yellow eyes looking back, embedded in his too-pale flesh.

A tense silence ensued.

Finally, Andronicus stepped forward.

"I want Thorgrin dead," Andronicus said.

After a long silence, Rafi chuckled. It was a deep, disturbing sound.

"Fathers and sons," he said. "Always the same."

Andronicus burned inside, impatient.

"Can you help?" he pressed.

Rafi stood there silently, for too long, long enough that Andronicus considered killing him. But he knew that would be frivolous. Once, in a rage, Andronicus had tried to impetuously stab him, and in mid-air, the sword had melted in his hand. The hilt had burned his hand, too; it had taken months to recover from the pain.

So Andronicus just stood there, gritting his teeth and bearing the silence.

Finally, beneath his hood, Rafi purred.

"The energies that surround the boy are very strong," Rafi said slowly. "But everyone has a weakness. He has been elevated by magic. He can be brought down by magic, too."

Andronicus, intrigued, took a step forward.

“Of what magic do you speak?”

Rafi paused.

“A kind you have never encountered,” he answered. “A kind reserved only for a being like Thor. He is your issue, but he is more than that. He is more powerful even than you. If he lives to see the day.”

Andronicus fumed.

“Tell me how to capture him,” he demanded.

Rafi shook his head.

“That was always your weakness,” he said. “You choose to capture, not to kill him.”

“I will capture him first,” Andronicus countered. “Then kill him. Is there a way or not?”

There came another long silence.

“There is a way to strip him of his power, yes,” Rafi said. “With his precious Sword gone, and his dragon gone, he will be just like any other boy.”

“Show me how,” Andronicus demanded.

There was a long silence.

“For a price,” Rafi finally replied.

“Anything,” Andronicus said. “I’ll give you anything”

There came a long, dark chuckle.

“I think one day you will come to regret that,” Rafi answered. “Very, very much.”

Chapter Ten

As Romulus marched down the meticulously paved road, made of golden bricks, leading to Volusia, the Empire capital, soldiers dressed in their finest snapped to attention. Romulus walked in front of the remainder of his army, reduced to but a few hundred soldiers, dejected and defeated from their bout with the dragons.

Romulus seethed. It was a walk of shame. His entire life he had always returned victorious, paraded as a hero; now he returned to silence, to a state of embarrassment, bringing back, instead of trophies and captives, soldiers who had been defeated.

It burned him up inside. It had been so stupid of him to go so far in pursuit of the Sword, to dare do battle with the dragons. His ego had led him on; he should have known better. He had been lucky to escape at all, much less with any of his men intact. He could still hear his men's screams, still smell their charred flesh.

His men had been disciplined and had fought bravely, marching to their deaths on his command. But after his thousands dwindled before his eyes to a few hundred, he knew when to flee. He had ordered a hasty retreat, and the remnant of his forces had slipped into the tunnels, safe from the breath of the dragons. They had stayed underground and had made it all the way back to the capital on foot.

Now here they were, marching through city gates that rose a hundred feet into the sky. As they entered this legendary city, crafted entirely of gold, thousands of Empire soldiers crisscrossed in every direction, marching in formations, lining the streets, snapping to attention as he passed. After all, with Andronicus gone, Romulus was the *de facto* leader of the Empire, and the most respected of all warriors. That is, until his loss today. Now, after their defeat, he did not know how the people would view him.

The defeat could not have come at a worse time. It was the moment when Romulus was preparing his coup, preparing to seize power and oust Andronicus. As he wound his way through the meticulous city, passing fountains, meticulously paved garden trails, servants and slaves everywhere, he marveled that instead of returning, as he had envisioned, with the Destiny Sword in hand, with more power than he'd ever had, he was instead returning in a position of weakness. Now, instead of being able to claim the power that was rightly his, he would have to apologize before the Council and hope not to lose his position.

The Grand Council. The thought of it twisted him inside. Romulus was not one to answer to anyone, much less to a council made up of citizens who had never wielded a sword. Each of the twelve provinces of the Empire sent two representatives, two dozen leaders from every corner of the Empire. Technically, they ruled the Empire; in reality, though, Andronicus ruled as he wished, and the Council did as he said.

But when Andronicus had left for the Ring, he had given the Council more authority than they'd ever had; Romulus assumed Andronicus had done this to protect himself and keep Romulus in check, to make sure he had a throne left to come back to. His move had emboldened the Council; they now acted as if they had real authority over Romulus. And Romulus had to, for the time being, suffer the indignity of having to answer to these people. They were all hand-picked cronies of Andronicus, people Andronicus had entrenched to assure his throne would never die. The Council searched for any excuse to strengthen Andronicus and weaken any threat to him – especially Romulus. And Romulus' defeat left them a perfect opening.

Romulus marched all the way to the shining capitol building, a huge, black, round building that rose high into the sky, surrounded by golden columns, with a shining golden dome. It flew the banner of the Empire, and embedded over its door was the image of a golden lion with an eagle in its mouth.

As Romulus climbed its hundred golden steps, his men waited at the base of the plaza. He walked alone, taking the steps to the capitol doors three at a time, his weapons clanking against his armor as he went.

It took a dozen servants to open the massive doors at the top of the steps, each fifty feet high, made of shining gold with black studs throughout, each embossed with the seal of the Empire. They opened them all the way, and Romulus felt the cold draft rip through, bristling the hairs on his skin as he marched into the dim interior. The huge doors slammed shut behind him, and he felt, as he always did when entering this building, as if he were being entombed.

Romulus strutted across the marble floors, his boots echoing, clenching his jaw, wanting to be done with this meeting and on to more important things. He had heard a rumor of a fantastical weapon, right before coming here, and needed to know if it was true. If so, it would change everything, shift the balance entirely in his power. If it really existed, then all of this – Andronicus, the Council – would no longer mean anything to him. In fact, the entire Empire would finally be his. Thinking of this weapon was the only thing keeping Romulus confident and assured as he marched up yet another set of steps, through another set of huge doors, and finally into the round room that held the Grand Council.

Inside this vast chamber was a black, circular table, empty in its center, with a narrow passageway for one to enter. All around it sat the Council, in twenty-four black robes, sitting sternly around the table, all old men with graying horns and scarlet eyes, dripping red from too many years of age. It was humiliating for Romulus to have to face them, to have to walk through the narrow entry into the center of the table, to be surrounded by the people whom he had to address. It was humiliating to be forced to turn every which way to address them. The entire design of this room, this table, was just another one of Andronicus' intimidation tactics.

Romulus stood there in the center of the room, in the silence, for he did not know how long, burning up. He was tempted to walk out, but he had to check himself.

"Romulus of the Octakin Legion," one of the councilmen formally announced.

Romulus turned and saw a skinny, older councilmen, with hollow cheeks and graying hair, staring back at him with scarlet eyes. This man was a crony of Andronicus, and Romulus knew he would say anything to curry Andronicus' favor.

The old man cleared his throat.

"You have returned to Volusia in defeat. In disgrace. You are bold to come here."

"You have become a reckless and hasty commander," another councilmen said.

Romulus turned to see scornful eyes staring back at him from the other side of the circle.

"You have lost thousands of our men in your fruitless search for the Sword, in your reckless confrontation with the dragons. You have failed Andronicus and the Empire. What have you to say for yourself?"

Romulus stared back, defiant.

"I apologize for nothing," he said. "Retrieving the Sword was of importance to the Empire."

Another old man leaned forward.

"But you did *not* retrieve it, did you?"

Romulus reddened. He would kill this man if he could.

"I nearly did," he finally answered.

"*Nearly* doesn't mean a thing."

"We encountered unexpected obstacles."

"Dragons?" remarked another councilman.

Romulus turned to face him.

"How foolhardy could you be?" the councilman said. "Did you really think you could win?"

Romulus cleared his throat, his anger rising.

"I did not. My goal was not to kill the dragons. It was to retrieve the Sword."

"But again, you did not."

"Even worse," another said, "you have now unleashed the dragons against us. Reports are coming in of their attacks, all throughout the Empire. You have started a war we cannot win. It is a great loss for the Empire."

Romulus stopped trying to respond; he knew it would only lead to more accusations and recriminations. After all, these were Andronicus' men, and they all had an agenda.

"It is a pity that the Great Andronicus himself is not here to chastise you," said another councilmember. "I feel sure that he would not let you live the day."

He cleared his throat and leaned back.

"But in his absence, we must await his return. For now, you will command the army to send legions of ships to reinforce the Great Andronicus in the Ring. As for you, you will be demoted, stripped of your arms and your rank. Stay in the barracks and await further orders from us."

Romulus stared, disbelieving.

"Be glad that we don't execute you on the spot. Now leave us," said another councilman.

Romulus bunched his fists, his face turning purple, and stared down each of the councilmen. He vowed to kill each and every one of them. But he forced himself to refrain, telling himself that now was not the time. He might get some satisfaction out of killing them now, but it would not yield his ultimate goal.

Romulus turned and stormed from the room, his boots echoing, walking through the door as the servants opened it then slammed it shut behind him.

Romulus marched out of the capitol building, down the hundred golden steps and to his group of waiting men. He addressed his second-in-command.

"Sir," the general said, bowing down low, "what is your command?"

Romulus stared back, thinking. Of course he could not obey the Council's orders; on the contrary, now was the time to defy them.

"It is the command of the Council that all Empire ships at sea return home to our shores at once."

The general's eyes opened wide.

"But sir, that would leave the Great Andronicus abandoned inside the Ring, with no way of returning home."

Romulus turned stared at him, his eyes going cold.

"Never question me," he replied, steel in his voice.

The general bowed his head.

"Of course, sir. Forgive me."

His commander turned and rushed off, and Romulus knew he would execute his orders. He was a faithful soldier.

Romulus smiled inwardly to himself. How foolish the Council had been to think that he would defer to them, would carry out their orders. They had vastly underestimated him. After all, they had no one to enforce his demotion, and until they got around to figuring that out, Romulus, while he had power, would execute enough commands to prevent them from gaining power over him. Andronicus was great, but Romulus was greater.

A man stood on the periphery of the plaza, wearing a glowing green robe, his hood pulled down, revealing a wide, flat yellow face with four eyes. The man had long skinny hands, fingers as long as Romulus' arm, and stood patiently. He was a Wokable. Romulus did not like to deal with this race, but in certain circumstances he was compelled – and this was one of those times.

Romulus walked over to the Wokable, feeling its creepiness from several feet away as the creature stared back with its four eyes. It reached out with one of its long fingers and touched his chest. Romulus stopped cold at the contact from the slimy finger.

“We have found what you have sent us for,” the creature said. The Wokable made an odd gurgling noise in the back of its throat. “But it will cost you dearly.”

“I will pay anything,” Romulus said.

The creature paused, as if deciding.

“You must come alone.”

Romulus thought.

“How do I know you are not lying?” Romulus asked.

The creature leaned in and came the closest it could to a smile. Romulus wished it hadn’t. It revealed hundreds of sharp, small teeth in its rectangular jaw.

“You don’t,” it said.

Romulus looked into all of its eyes. He knew he should not trust this creature. But he had to try. The prize it dangled was too great to ignore. It was the prize Romulus had been searching for all his life: the mythical weapon that, legend had it, could lower the Shield and allow him to cross the Canyon.

The creature turned its back and began to walk away, and Romulus stood there, watching it.

Finally, he followed.

Chapter Eleven

Gwendolyn rode on the back of Mycoples, behind Thor, holding him tight, the wind rushing through her hair. It was cold, but it felt so refreshing. She was beginning to feel alive again.

In fact, Gwendolyn had never felt so happy as she did now. All felt right in the world again. She could feel her baby, kicking in her stomach, and could sense its joy at being near Thor. Gwen burned with excitement to tell Thor the news, but she was waiting for the perfect moment. And ever since they had left the Tower of Refuge, they had not had a moment to talk.

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