A SEA OF SHIELDS

BOOK #10 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Sea of Shields

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In A SEA OF SHIELDS (BOOK #10 IN THE SORCERER'S RING), Gwendolyn gives birth to her and Thorgrin's child, amidst powerful omens. With a son born to them, Gwendolyn and Thorgrin's lives are changed forever, as is the destiny of the Ring.Thor has no choice to but to embark to find his mother, to leave his wife and child and venture away from his homeland on a perilous quest that will have the very future of the Ring at stake. Before Thor embarks, he unites with Gwendolyn in the greatest wedding in the history of the MacGils, he must first help rebuild the Legion, he deepens his training with Argon, and he is given the honor he has always dreamed of when he is inducted into the Silver and becomes a Knight.Gwendolyn is reeling from the birth of her son, the departure of her husband, and the death of her mother. All of the Ring gathers for the royal funeral, which brings together the estranged sisters, Luanda and Gwendolyn, in one final confrontation that will have dire implications. Argon's prophecies ring in her head, and Gwendolyn feels a looming danger to the Ring, and furthers her plans to rescue all of her people in the case of a catastrophe.Erec receives news of his father's illness, and is summoned back home, to the Southern Isles; Alistair joins him on the journey, as their wedding plans are put in motion. Kendrick seeks out his long-lost mother, and is shocked at who he finds. Elden and O'Connor return to their home towns to find things are not what they expect, while Conven falls deeper into mourning and towards the dark side. Steffen unexpectedly finds love, while Sandara surprises Kendrick by leaving the Ring, back for her homeland in the Empire.Reece, despite himself, falls in love with his cousin, and when Tirus' sons find out, they set in motion a great treachery. Matus and Srog try to keep order in the Upper Isles, but a tragedy of misunderstanding ensues when Selese discovers the affair, right before her wedding, and a war threatens to erupt in the Upper Isles due to Reece's inflamed passions. The McCloud side of the Highlands are equally unstable, with a civil war on the verge of breaking out due to Bronson's

shaky rule and Luanda's ruthless actions.With the Ring on the verge of civil war, Romulus, in the Empire, discovers a new form of magic which may just destroy the Shield for good. He forges a deal with the dark side and, emboldened with a power that not even Argon can stop, Romulus embarks with a sure way to destroy the Ring.With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A SEA OF SHIELDS 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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Содержание

Chapter One 10
Chapter Two 12
Chapter Three 15
Chapter Four 18
Chapter Five 21
Chapter Six 24
Chapter Seven 27
Chapter Eight 31
Chapter Nine 34
Chapter Ten 37
Chapter Eleven 39
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 40

Morgan Rice
A Sea of Shields
(Book #10 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

Earl: "O that we now had here
But one ten thousand of those men in England…"
Henry V: "No, my fair cousin…
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more."
– William Shakespeare
Henry V

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About Morgan Rice

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

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

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

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

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

Gwendolyn screamed and screamed as the pain tore her apart.

She lay on her back in the field of wildflowers, her stomach hurting her more than she imagined possible, thrashing, pushing, trying to get the baby out. A part of her wished it would all stop, that she could just reach safety before the baby came. But a bigger part of her knew the baby was coming now, whether she liked it or not.

Please, God, not now, she prayed. *Just another few hours. Just let us reach safety first.*

But it was not meant to be. Gwendolyn felt another tremendous pain rip through her body, and she leaned back and shrieked as she felt the baby turning inside her, closer to emerging. She knew there was no way she could stop it.

Instead, Gwen resorted to pushing, forcing herself to breathe as the nurses had taught her, trying to help it come out. It didn't seem to be working, though, and she moaned in agony.

Gwen sat up once again and looked around for any sign of humanity.

"HELP!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

No answer came. Gwen was in the midst of summer fields, far away from a soul, and her scream was absorbed by the trees and the wind.

Gwen always tried to be strong, but she had to admit she was terrified. Less for herself, and more so for the baby. What if no one found them? Even if she could deliver on her own, how would she ever be able to walk out of this place with the baby? She had a sinking feeling that she and the baby would both die here.

Gwen thought back to the Netherworld, to that fateful moment with Argon when she had freed him, the choice she'd had to make. The sacrifice. The unbearable choice that had been forced upon her, having to choose between her baby and her husband. She wept now, recalling the decision she'd made. Why did life always demanded sacrifices?

Gwendolyn held her breath as the baby suddenly shifted inside her, a pain so severe it reverberated from the top of her skull down to her toes. She felt as if she were an oak tree being split in two from the inside out.

Gwendolyn arched back and groaned as she looked up to the skies, trying to imagine herself anywhere but here. She tried to hold onto something in her mind, something that would give her a sense of peace.

She thought of Thor. She saw the two of them together, when they had first met, walking through these same fields, holding hands, Krohn jumping at their feet. She tried to bring the picture to life in her mind, tried to focus on the details.

But it wasn't working. She opened her eyes with a start, the pain jolting her back to reality. She wondered how she had ever ended up here, in this place, all alone – then remembered Aberthol, telling her about her dying mother, her rushing out to see her. Was her mother dying too at this moment?

Suddenly, Gwen cried out, feeling as if she were dying, and she looked down and saw the crown of the baby's head emerging. She leaned back and shrieked as she pushed and pushed, sweating, her face bright red.

There came one final push, and suddenly, a cry pierced the air.

A baby's cry.

Suddenly, the sky blackened. Gwen looked up and watched in fear as the perfect summer day, without warning, turned to night. She watched as the two suns were suddenly eclipsed by the two moons.

A total eclipse of both suns. Gwen could hardly believe it: it only happened, she knew, once every ten thousand years.

Gwen watched in terror as she was immersed in the darkness. Suddenly, the sky filled with lightning, streaks flashing down, and Gwen felt herself pelted by small pellets of ice. She could not understand what was happening, until she finally realized it was hailing.

All of this, she knew, was a profound omen, all occurring at the precise moment of her baby's birth. She looked down at the child and knew immediately that he was more powerful than she could fathom. That he was of another realm.

As he emerged, crying, Gwen instinctively reached down and grabbed him, pulling him to her chest before he could slip into the grass and the mud, sheltering him from the hail as she wrapped her arms around him.

He wailed, and as he did, the earth began to quake. She felt the ground tremble, and in the distance, she saw boulders rolling down hillsides. She could feel the power of this child coursing through her, affecting the entire universe.

As Gwen clutched him tight, she felt weaker by the moment; she felt herself losing too much blood. She grew light-headed, too weak to move, barely strong enough to hold her baby, who would not stop wailing on her chest. She could barely feel her own legs.

Gwen had a sinking premonition that she would die here, on these fields, with this baby. She no longer cared about herself – but she could not imagine the idea of her baby dying.

"NO!" Gwen shrieked, summoning every last bit of strength she had to shout her protest up to the heavens.

As Gwen dropped her head back, lying flat on the ground, a shriek came in response. It was not a human shriek. It was that of an ancient creature.

Gwen began to lose consciousness. She looked up, her eyes closing on her, and saw what appeared to be an apparition from the skies. It was a massive beast, swooping down for her, and she realized dimly that it was a creature she loved.

Ralibar.

The last thing Gwen saw, before her eyes shut for good, was Ralibar swooping down, with his huge, glowing green eyes and his ancient red scales, his claws extended, and aiming right for her.

Chapter Two

Luanda stood frozen in shock, staring down at Koovia's corpse, still holding the bloody dagger in her hand, hardly believing what she had just done.

The entire feasting hall fell silent and stared at her, amazed, no one moving an inch. They all stared at Koovia's corpse at her feet, the untouchable Koovia, the great warrior of the McCloud kingdom, second only in prowess to King McCloud, and the tension was so thick in the room it could be cut with a knife.

Luanda was the most shocked of all. She felt her palm burning, the dagger still in it, felt a heat rush over her, exhilarated and terrified at having just killed a man. She was most of all proud that she had done it, proud that she had stopped this monster before he could lay hands on her husband or on the bride. He got what he deserved. All of these McClouds were savages.

There came a sudden shout, and Luanda looked up to see Koovia's lead warrior, just a few feet away, suddenly burst into action, vengeance in his eyes, and rush for her. He raised his sword high and aimed for her chest.

Luanda was still too numb to react, and this warrior moved quickly. She braced herself, knowing that in just a moment, she would feel the cold steel pierce through her heart. But Luanda did not care. Whatever happened to her now no longer mattered, now that she had killed that man.

Luanda shut her eyes as the steel came down, ready for death – and was surprised instead to hear a sudden clang of metal.

She opened her eyes and saw Bronson stepping forward, raising his sword and blocking the warrior's blow. It surprised her; she did not think he had it in him, or that he, with his one good hand, could stop such a mighty blow. Most of all, she was touched to realize that he cared for her that much, enough to risk his own life.

Bronson deftly swung his sword around, and even with just one, he had such skill and might that he managed to stab the warrior through the heart, killing him on the spot.

Luanda could hardly believe it. Bronson had, once again, saved her life. She felt deeply indebted to him, and a fresh rush of love for him. Perhaps he was stronger than she had imagined.

Shouts erupted on both sides of the feasting hall as the McClouds and MacGils rushed for each other, anxious to see who could kill the other first. All pretenses of civility that had occurred throughout the day's wedding and the night's feast were gone. Now it was war: warrior against warrior, all heated by drink, fueled by rage, by the indignity that the McClouds had tried to perpetrate in trying to violate their bride.

Men leapt over the thick wooden table, anxious to kill each other, stabbing each other, grabbing at each other's faces, wrestling each other down to the table, knocking over food and wine. The room was so tight, packed with so many people, that it was shoulder to shoulder, with barely any room to maneuver, men grunting and stabbing and screaming and crying as the scene fell into complete, bloody chaos.

Luanda tried to collect herself. The fighting was so quick and so intense, the men filled with such bloodlust, so focused on killing each other, that no one but she took a moment to look around and observe the periphery of the room. Luanda observed it all, and she took it all in with a greater perspective. She was the only one who observed the McClouds slithering around the edges of the room, slowly barring the doors, one at a time, and then slinking out as they did.

The hairs rose on the back of her neck as Luanda suddenly realized what was happening. The McClouds were locking everyone in the room – and fleeing for a reason. She watched them grab torches off the wall, and her eyes opened wide in panic. She realized with horror that the McClouds were going to burn down the hall with everyone trapped inside – even their own clansmen.

Luanda should have known better. The McClouds were ruthless, and they would do anything in order to win.

Luanda looked about, watching it all as it was unfolding before her, and she saw one door still left unbarred.

Luanda turned, broke away from the melee, and sprinted for the remaining door, elbowing and shoving men out of her way. She saw a McCloud, too, sprinting for that door on the far side of the room, and she ran faster, lungs bursting, determined to beat him to it.

The McCloud did not see Luanda coming as he reached the door, grabbed a thick, wooden beam, and prepared to bar it. Luanda charged him from the side, raising her dagger and stabbing him in the back.

The McCloud cried out, arched his back, and dropped to the ground.

Luanda grabbed the beam, yanked it off the door, threw it open, and ran outside.

Outside, eyes adjusting to the dark, Luanda looked left and right and saw McClouds, all lining up outside the hall, all bearing torches, preparing to set it on fire. Luanda flooded with panic. She could not let it happen.

Luanda turned, sprinted back into the hall, grabbed Bronson, and yanked him away from the skirmish.

“The McClouds!” she yelled urgently. “They are preparing to burn down the hall! Help me! Get everyone out! NOW!”

Bronson, understanding, opened his eyes wide in fear, and to his credit, without hesitating, he turned, rushed to the MacGil leaders, yanked them from the fight, and yelling at them, gesticulated toward the open door. They all turned and realized, then yelled orders to their men.

To Luanda’s satisfaction, she watched as the MacGil men suddenly broke away from the fight, turned, and ran for the one open door which she had saved.

While they were organizing, Luanda and Bronson wasted no time. They sprinted for the door, and she was horrified to watch another McCloud race for it, pick up the beam, and try to bar it. She did not think they could beat him to it this time.

This time, Bronson reacted; he raised his sword high overhead, leaned forward, and threw it.

It flew through the air, end over end, until finally it impaled itself in the McCloud’s back.

The warrior screamed and collapsed to the ground, and Bronson rushed to the door and threw it wide open just in time.

Dozens of MacGils stormed through the open door, and Luanda and Bronson joined them. Slowly, the hall emptied of all the MacGils, the McClouds left to watch in wonder as to why their enemies were retreating.

Once all of them were outside, Luanda slammed the door, picked up the beam with several others, and barred the door from the outside, so that no McClouds could follow.

The McClouds outside began to notice, and they started to drop their torches and draw their swords instead to charge.

But Bronson and the others gave them no time. They charged the McCloud soldiers all around the structure, stabbing and killing them as they lowered their torches and fumbled with their arms. Most of the McClouds were still inside, and the few dozen outside could not stand up to the rush of the enraged MacGils, who, blood in their eyes, killed them all quickly.

Luanda stood there, Bronson by her side, beside the MacGil clansmen, all of them breathing hard, thrilled to be alive. They all looked to Luanda with respect, knowing they owed her their lives.

As they stood there, they began to hear the banging of the McClouds inside, trying to get out. The MacGils slowly turned and, unsure what to do, looked to Bronson for leadership.

“You must put down the rebellion,” Luanda said forcefully. “You must treat them with the same brutality with which they intended to treat you.”

Bronson looked at her, wavering, and she could see the hesitation in his eyes.

"Their plan did not work," he said. "They are trapped in there. Prisoners. We will put them under arrest."

Luanda shook her head fiercely.

"NO!" she screamed. "These men look to you for leadership. This is a brutal part of the world. We are not in King's Court. Brutality reigns here. Brutality demands respect. Those men inside cannot be left to live. An example must be set!"

Bronson bristled, horrified.

"What are you saying?" he asked. "That we shall burn them alive? That we treat them with the same butchery with which they treated us?"

Luanda locked her jaw.

"If you do not, mark my words: surely one day they will murder you."

The MacGil clansmen all gathered around, witnessing their argument, and Luanda stood there, fuming in frustration. She loved Bronson – after all, he had saved her life. And yet she hated how weak, how naïve, he could be.

Luanda had enough of men ruling, of men making bad decisions. She ached to rule herself; she knew she would be better than any of them. Sometimes, she knew, it took a woman to rule in a man's world.

Luanda, banished and marginalized her entire life, felt she could no longer sit on the sidelines. After all, it was thanks to her that all these men were alive right now. And she was a King's daughter – and firstborn, no less.

Bronson stood there, staring back, wavering, and Luanda could see he would take no action.

She could stand it no further. Luanda screamed out in frustration, rushed forward, snatched a torch from an attendant's hand, and as all the men watched her in stunned silence, she rushed before them, held the torch high, and threw it.

The torch lit up the night, flying high through the air, end over end, and landing on the peak of the thatched roof of the feasting hall.

Luanda watched with satisfaction as the flames began to spread.

The MacGils all around her let out a shout, and all of them followed her example. They each picked up a torch and threw it, and soon the flames rose up and the heat grew stronger, singeing her face, lighting up the night. Soon, the hall was alight in a great conflagration.

The screams of the McClouds trapped inside ripped through the night, and while Bronson flinched, Luanda stood there, cold, hard, merciless, hands on her hips, and took satisfaction from each one.

She turned to Bronson, who stood there, mouth open in shock.

"That," she said, defiant, "is what it means to rule."

Chapter Three

Reece walked with Stara, shoulder to shoulder, their hands swaying and brushing each other, yet not holding hands. They walked through endless fields of flowers high up on the mountain range, bursting with color, with a commanding view of the Upper Isles. They walked in silence, Reece overwhelmed with conflicting emotions; he hardly knew what to say.

Reece thought back to that fateful moment when he had locked eyes with Stara at the mountain lake. He had sent his entourage away, needing time alone with her. They had been reluctant to leave the two of them alone – especially Matus, who knew too well their history – but Reece had insisted. Stara was like a magnet, pulling Reece in, and he wanted no one else around them. He needed time to catch up with her, to talk to her, to understand why she looked at him with the same look of love that he was feeling for her. To understand if all of this was real, and what was happening to them.

Reece's heart pounded as he walked, unsure where to begin, what to do next. His rational mind screamed at him to turn around and run, to get as far away from Stara as possible, to take the next ship back to the mainland and never think of her again. To go back home to the wife-to-be who was loyally waiting for him. After all, Selese loved him, and he loved Selese. And their marriage was but days away.

Reece knew it was the wise thing to do. The *right* thing to do.

But the logical part of himself was being overwhelmed by his emotions, by passions he could not control, that refused to be subservient to his rational mind. They were passions that forced him to stay here by Stara's side, to walk and walk with her through these fields. It was the uncontrollable part of himself that he had never understood, that had driven him, his entire life, to do impulsive things, to follow his heart. It had not always led him to the best decisions. But a strong, passionate streak ran through Reece, and he was not always able to control it.

As Reece walked beside Stara, he wondered if she was feeling the same way he was. The back of her hand brushed against his as she walked, and he thought he could detect a slight smile at the corner of her lips. But she was hard to read – she always had been. The very first time he'd met her, as young children, he remembered being struck, unable to move, unable to think of anything else but her for days on end. There was something about her translucent eyes, something about the way she held herself, so proud and noble, like a wolf staring back at him, that was mesmerizing.

As children, they knew that a relationship between cousins was forbidden. But it never seemed to faze them. Something existed between them, something so strong, too strong, pulling them toward each other despite whatever the world thought. They played together as children, instant best friends, choosing each other's company immediately over any of their other cousins or friends. When they visited the Upper Isles, Reece found himself spending every waking moment with her; she had reciprocated, rushing to his side, waiting by the shore for days on end until his boat arrived.

At first, they had just been best friends. But then they grew older, and one fateful night beneath the stars, it had all changed. Despite being forbidden, their friendship turned to something stronger, bigger than both of them, and neither was able to resist.

Reece would leave the Isles dreaming of her, distracted to the point of depression, facing sleepless nights for months. He would see her face every night in bed, and would wish an ocean, and a family law, did not lie between them.

Reece knew she felt the same; he had received countless letters from her, borne on the wings of an army of falcons, expressing her love for him. He had written back, though not as eloquently as she.

The day the two MacGil families had a falling out was one of the worst days of Reece's life. It was the day that Tirus's eldest son died, poisoned by the very same poison Tirus had planned for Reece's father. Nonetheless, Tirus blamed King MacGil. The rift began, and it was the day that Reece's heart – and Stara's – had died inside. His father was all-powerful, as was Stara's, and they

had both been forbidden to communicate with any of the other MacGils. They never traveled back there again, and Reece had stayed up nights in anguish, wondering, dreaming, how he could see Stara again. He knew from her letters that she had felt the same.

One day her letters stopped. Reece suspected they were intercepted somehow, but he never knew for certain. He suspected his no longer reached her, either. Over time, Reece, unable to go on, had to make the painful decision to force thoughts of her from his heart, had had to learn to push them from his mind. At the oddest times Stara's face would come back to him, and he never stopped wondering what had become of her. Did she still think of him, too? Had she married someone else?

Now, this day, seeing her again brought it all back. Reece realized how fresh it all still burned in his heart, as if he'd never left her side. She was now an older, fuller, even more beautiful version of herself, if possible. She was a woman. And her gaze was even more transfixing than it had ever been. In that gaze Reece detected love, and he felt restored to see that she still held the same love for him that he had for her.

Reece wanted to think of Selese. He owed that to her. But try as he did, it was impossible.

Reece walked with Stara along the ridge of the mountain, both silent, neither quite knowing what to say. Where could one begin to fill in the space of all those lost years?

"I hear you shall marry soon," Stara said finally, breaking the silence.

Reece felt a pit in his stomach. Thinking of marrying Selese had always brought him a rush of love and excitement; but now, coming from Stara, it made him feel devastated, as if he had betrayed her.

"I'm sorry," Reece replied.

He did not know what else to say. He wanted to say: *I don't love her. I see now that it was a mistake. I want to change everything. I want to marry you instead.*

But he *did* love Selese. He had to admit that to himself. It was a different kind of love, perhaps not as intense as his love for Stara. Reece was confused. He did not know what he was thinking or feeling. Which love was stronger? Was there even such a thing as degree when it came to love? When you loved someone, didn't that mean you loved them, no matter what? How could one love be stronger?

"Do you love her?" Stara asked.

Reece breathed deep, feeling caught in an emotional storm, hardly knowing how to reply. They walked for a while, he gathering his thoughts, until he was finally able to respond.

"I do," he replied, anguished. "I cannot lie."

Reece stopped and took Stara's hand for the first time.

She stopped and turned to face him.

"But I love you, too," he added.

He saw her eyes fill with hope.

"Do you love me more?" she asked softly, hopeful.

Reece thought hard.

"I've loved you my entire life," he said, finally. "You're the only face of love I'd ever known. You are what love means to me. I love Selese. But with you… it is like you are a part of me. Like my very own self. Like something I cannot be without."

Stara smiled. She took his hand and they continued walking side by side, she swinging their slightly, a smile on her face.

"You do not know how many nights I spent missing you," she admitted, looking away. "My words were born on so many falcons' wings – only to have them removed from my father. After the rift, I could not reach you. I even tried once or twice to sneak on a ship for the mainland – and I was caught."

Reece felt overwhelmed to hear all this. He'd had no idea. He'd always wondered how Stara had felt about him after the rift. Hearing this, he felt a stronger attachment to her than ever. He knew now that it was not just he that had felt that way. He did not feel as crazy. What they had was, indeed, real.

"And I never stopped dreaming of you," Reece replied.

They finally reached the very peak of the mountain ridge, and they stopped and stood there side by side, looking out together over the Upper Isles. From this vantage point they could see forever, across the island chain to the ocean, the mist above it, the waves crashing below, Gwendolyn's hundreds of ships lined up along the rocky shores.

They stood there in silence for a very long time, holding hands, savoring the moment. Savoring being together, finally, after all these years and all these people and life events striving to keep them apart.

"Finally, we are here, together – and yet ironically, it is now that you are most bound, with your wedding days away. It seems as if there is always something destined to come between us."

"And yet I am here today," Reece replied. "Perhaps destiny is telling us something else?"

She squeezed his hand tight, and Reece squeezed hers back. As they looked out, Reece's heart pounded, and he felt more confused than he ever had in his life. Was all this meant to be? Was he meant to run into Stara here, to see her before his wedding, to prevent him from making a mistake and marrying someone else? Was destiny, after all these years, trying to bring them together after all?

Reece could not help but feel that it was so. He felt that he had run into her by some stroke of fate, perhaps to give him one last chance before his wedding.

"What the fates bring together, no man can tear apart," Stara said.

Her words sank into Reece as she looked into his eyes, mesmerizing him.

"So many events in our lifetime have tried to keep us apart from each other," Stara said. "Our clans. Our homelands. An ocean. Time…. Yet nothing has been able to keep us from each other. So many years have passed, and our love remains as strong. Is it a coincidence that you should see me before you are to marry? Fate is telling us something. It is not too late."

Reece looked at her, his heart pounding. She looked at him, her translucent eyes reflecting the sky above and the ocean below, holding so much love for him. He felt more confused than ever, and unable to think clearly.

"Perhaps I should call the wedding off," he said.

"It is not for me to tell you," she replied. "You must search your own heart."

"Right now," he said, "my heart tells me *you* are the one I love. You are the one I've always loved."

She looked back at him earnestly.

"I have never loved another," she said.

Reece could not help himself. He leaned in, and his lips met hers. He felt the world melting all around him, felt immersed in love as she kissed him back.

They held the kiss until they could no longer breathe, until Reece realized, despite everything within him protesting otherwise, that he could never wed any other but Stara.

Chapter Four

Gwendolyn stood on a golden bridge. Clutching its rail, she looked down over the edge and saw a raging river beneath her. The rapids roared with fury, rising ever higher as she watched. She could feel their spray even from here.

"Gwendolyn, my love."

Gwen turned to see Thorgrin standing on the far shore, perhaps twenty feet away, smiling, holding out a hand.

"Come to me," he pleaded. "Cross the river."

Relieved to see him, Gwen began to walk toward him – until another voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Mother," came a soft-spoken voice.

Gwen spun to see a boy standing on the opposite shore. Perhaps ten, he was tall, proud, broad-shouldered, with a noble chin, a strong jaw, and glistening gray eyes. Like his father. He wore a beautiful, shining armor, of a material she did not recognize, and had warrior's weapons around his belt. She could sense his power even from here. An unstoppable power.

"Mother, I need you," he said.

The boy reached out a hand, and Gwen started toward him.

Gwen stopped and looked back and forth between Thor and her son, each extending a hand, and she felt torn, conflicted. She did not know which way to go.

Suddenly, as she stood there, the bridge collapsed beneath her.

Gwendolyn screamed as she felt herself plunging into the rapids below.

Gwen fell into the icy water with a shock and tumbled and turned through the raging waters. She bobbed up, gasping for air, and looked back to see her son and her husband, standing on opposite shores, each holding out their hands, each needing her.

"Thorgrin!" she yelled out. Then: "My son!"

Gwen reached for them both, screaming – but she soon felt herself plummeting over the edge of a waterfall.

Gwen shrieked as she lost sight of them and dropped hundreds of feet toward sharp rocks below.

Gwendolyn woke screaming.

She looked all around, covered in a cold sweat, confused, wondering where she was.

She slowly realized she lay in a bed, in a dim castle chamber, torches flickering along the walls. She blinked several times, trying to understand what had happened, still breathing hard. Slowly, she realized it was all just a dream. A horrible dream.

Gwen's eyes adjusted, and she spotted several attendants standing about the room. She noticed Illepra and Selese standing on either side of her, running cold compresses along her arms and legs. Selese wiped her forehead gently.

"Shhh," Selese comforted. "It was just a dream, my lady."

Gwendolyn felt a hand squeeze hers, and she looked over and her heart lifted to see Thorgrin. He knelt by her bedside, holding her hand, his eyes alight with joy to see her awake.

"My love," he said. "You are okay."

Gwendolyn blinked, trying to figure out where she was, why she was in bed, what all these people were doing here. Then suddenly, as she tried to move, she felt an awful pain in her stomach – and she remembered.

"My baby!" she called out, suddenly frantic. "Where is he? Does the boy live?"

Gwen, desperate, studied the faces around her. Thor clasped her hand firmly and smiled wide, and she knew all was okay. She felt her entire life reassured by that smile.

"He lives, indeed," Thor replied. "Thanks to god. And to Ralibar. Ralibar flew you both here, just in time."

"He is perfectly healthy," Selese added.

Suddenly, a cry tore through the air, and Gwendolyn looked over to see Illepra step forward, holding the crying baby bundled in a blanket in her arms.

Gwendolyn's heart flooded with relief, and she burst into tears. She started crying hysterically, weeping at the sight of him. She was so relieved, tears of joy washed over her. The baby was alive. She was alive. They had survived. Somehow, they had made it through this terrible nightmare.

She had never felt more grateful in her life.

Illepra leaned forward and placed the baby on Gwen's chest.

Gwendolyn sat up and looked down, examining him. She felt reborn at the touch of him, the weight of him in her arms, his smell, the way he looked. She rocked him and held him tight, all swaddled up in blankets. Gwendolyn felt herself filled with waves of love for him, with gratitude. She could hardly believe it; she had a baby.

As he was placed her arms, the baby suddenly stopped crying. He became very still, and he turned, opened his eyes, and looked right at her.

Gwen felt a jolt of shock race through her body as their eyes locked. The baby had Thor's eyes – gray, sparkling eyes that seemed to come from another dimension. They stared right through her. As she stared back, Gwendolyn felt as if she had known him from another time. For all time.

In that instant, Gwen felt a stronger bond to him than she had to anyone or anything in her life. She clasped him tight, and vowed to never let him go. She would walk through fire for him.

"He has your features, my lady," Thor said to her, smiling as he leaned over and looked with her.

Gwen smiled back, crying, overwhelmed with emotion. She had never been so happy in her life. This was all she ever wanted, to be here with Thorgrin and their child.

"He has your eyes," Gwen replied.

"All that he doesn't yet have is a name," Thor said.

"Perhaps we should name him after you," Gwendolyn said to Thor.

Thor shook his head, adamant.

"No. He is his mother's child. He bears your features. A true warrior should carry the spirit of his mother, and the skills of his father. He needs both to serve him well. He will have my skills. And he should be named after you."

"Then what do you propose?" she asked.

Thor thought.

"His name should sound like yours. The son of Gwendolyn should be named… Guwayne."

Gwen smiled. She instantly loved the ring of it.

"Guwayne," she said. "I like that."

Gwen smiled wide as she held the baby tight.

"Guwayne," she said down to the child.

Guwayne turned and opened his eyes again, and as he looked right through her, she could have sworn she saw him smile. She knew he was too young for that, but she did see a flicker of something, and she felt certain that he approved of the name.

Selese leaned forward and applied a salve to Gwen's lips, and gave her something to drink, a thick, dark liquid. Gwen immediately perked up. She felt she was slowly coming back to herself.

"How long have I been here?" Gwen asked.

"You have been asleep for nearly two days, my lady," Illepra said. "Ever since the great eclipse."

Gwen closed her eyes, and she remembered. It all came rushing back to her. She remembered the eclipse, the hail, the earthquake. . She had never seen anything like it.

"Our baby portends great omens," Thor said. "The entire kingdom witnessed the events. His birth is already spoken of, far and wide."

As Gwen clutched the boy tight, she felt a warmth spread through her, and she sensed herself how special he was. Her entire body tingled as she held him, and she knew this was no ordinary child. She wondered what sort of powers ran in his blood.

She looked over at Thor, wondering. Was this boy a druid, too?

"Have you been here all this time?" she asked Thor, realizing he had been by her side all this time and overwhelmed with gratitude toward him.

"I have, my lady. I came as soon as I heard. Aside from last night. I spent the night at the Lake of Sorrows. Praying for your recovery."

Gwen burst into tears again, unable to control her emotions. She had never felt more content in her life; holding this child made her feel complete in a way she had not thought possible.

Despite herself, Gwen flashed back to that fateful moment in the Netherworld, to the choice she had been forced to make. She squeezed Thor's hand and held the baby tight, wanting both of them close to her, wanting both of them to be with her forever.

Yet she knew that one of them would have to die. She cried and cried.

"What is wrong, my love?" Thor finally asked.

Gwen shook her head, unable to tell him.

"Do not worry," he said. "Your mother still lives. If that's why you are crying."

Gwen suddenly remembered.

"She is gravely ill," Thor added. "But there is still time yet to see her."

Gwen knew that she had to.

"I must see her," she said. "Take me to her now."

"Are you sure, my lady?" Selese asked.

"In your condition, you should not be moved," Illepra added. "Your delivery was most abnormal, and you must recover. You are lucky to be alive."

Gwen shook her head, adamant.

"I will see my mother before she dies. Take me to her. Now."

Chapter Five

Godfrey sat in the center of the long wooden table in the drinking hall, a mug of ale in each fist, singing with the large group of MacGils and McClouds, slamming his mugs on the table with the rest of them. They were all swaying back and forth, slamming their mugs to punctuate each phrase, ale spilling over the back of their hands and onto the table. But Godfrey did not care. He was deep into drink, as he had been every night this week, and he was feeling good.

On either side of him sat Akorth and Fulton, and as he looked side to side, he took satisfaction in seeing dozens of MacGils and McClouds around the table, former enemies all assembling for this drinking event he had put together. It had taken Godfrey several days of combing the Highlands to reach this point. At first, the men had been wary; but when Godfrey had rolled out the casks of ale, then the women, they started coming.

It had begun with just a few men, wary of each other, keeping to their own sides of the hall. But as Godfrey managed to pack the drinking hall, perched here on this peak of the Highlands, men began to loosen up, to interact. There was nothing, Godfrey knew, like the lure of free ale to bring men together.

What had pushed them over the edge, had made them like brothers, was when Godfrey had introduced the women. Godfrey had called upon all of his connections on both sides of the Highlands to clear out the brothels, and had paid all the women liberally. They now packed the hall with the soldiers, most sitting on a soldier's lap, and all the men were content. The well-paid women were happy, the men were happy, and the entire hall rang with joy and cheer as the men stopped focusing on each other and instead focused on the drink and the women.

As the night went on, Godfrey began to overhear talk between certain MacGils and McClouds of their becoming friends, making plans to go on patrol together. It was exactly the sort of bonding that his sister had sent him here to achieve, and Godfrey felt proud of himself that he had done it. He had also enjoyed himself along the way, his cheeks rosy with too much ale. There was something, he realized, to this McCloud ale; it was stronger on this side of the Highlands, and went straight to one's head.

Godfrey knew there were many ways to strengthen an army, to bring people together, and to govern. Politics were one; government was another; enforcement of law was another. But none of these reached men's hearts. Godfrey, for all his faults, knew how to reach the common man. He *was* the common man. While he might have the nobility of the royal family, his heart had always been with the masses. He had a certain wisdom, born of the streets, that all of those knights in shining silver would never have. They were above it all. And Godfrey admired them for that. But, Godfrey realized, there was a certain advantage to being below it all, too. It gave him a different perspective on humanity – and sometimes one needed both perspectives to fully understand the people. After all, the greatest mistakes the Kings had made had always come from their being out of touch with the people.

"These McClouds know how to drink," Akorth said.

"They do not disappoint," Fulton added, as two more mugs were slid down the table before them.

"This drink is too strong," Akorth said, letting out a large belch.

"I don't miss our hometown at all," Fulton added.

Godfrey got shoved in the ribs, and he looked over and saw some McCloud men, swaying too hard, laughing too loud, drunk as they coddled women. These McClouds, Godfrey realized, were rougher around the edges than the MacGils. The MacGils were tough, but the McClouds – there was something to them, something a bit uncivilized. As he surveyed the room with his expert eye, Godfrey saw the McClouds holding their women a bit too tight, slamming their mugs a bit too hard, elbowing each other roughly. There was something about these men that kept Godfrey on edge, despite all

the days he had spent with them. Somehow, he did not fully trust these people. And the more time he spent with them, the more he was beginning to understand why the two clans were apart. He wondered if they could ever truly be one.

The drinking reached its peak, and more mugs were being passed around, twice as many as before, and the McClouds were not slowing, as soldiers usually did at this point. Instead, they were drinking even more, way too much. Godfrey, despite himself, began to feel a bit nervous.

"Do you think men can ever drink too much?" Godfrey asked Akorth.

Akorth scoffed.

"A sacrilegious question!" he blurted.

"What's gotten into you?" Fulton asked.

But Godfrey watched closely as a McCloud, so drunk he could barely see, stumbled into a group of fellow soldiers, knocking them down with a crash.

For a second there was a pause, as the room turned to look at the group of soldiers on the floor.

But then the soldiers bounced back up, screaming and laughing and cheering, and to Godfrey's relief, the festivities continued.

"Would you say they've had enough?" Godfrey asked, beginning to wonder if this was all a bad idea.

Akorth looked at him blankly.

"Enough?" he asked. "Is there such a thing?"

Godfrey noticed that he himself was slurring his words, and his mind was not as sharp as he would have liked. Still, he was beginning to sense something turn in the room, as if something was not quite as it should be. It was all a bit too much, as if the room had lost all sense of self-restraint.

"Don't touch her!" someone suddenly screamed out. "She's mine!"

The tone of the voice was dark, dangerous, cutting through the air and making Godfrey turn.

On the far side of the hall a MacGil soldier stood, chest out, arguing with a McCloud; the McCloud reached out and snatched a woman off of the MacGil's lap, wrapping one arm around her waist and yanking her backwards.

"She *was* yours. She's mine now! Go find another!"

The MacGil's expression darkened, and he drew his sword. The distinctive sound cut through the room, making every head turn.

"I said she's *mine*!" he screamed.

His face was bright red, hair matted with sweat, and the entire room watched, riveted by the deadly tone.

Everything stopped abruptly and the room grew quiet, as both sides of the room watched, frozen. The McCloud, a large, beefy man, grimaced, took the woman, and threw her roughly to the side. She went flying into the crowd, stumbling and falling.

The McCloud clearly didn't care about the woman; it was now obvious to all that bloodshed was what he really wanted, not the woman.

The McCloud drew his own sword, and faced off.

"It will be your life for hers!" the McCloud said.

Soldiers backed away on all sides, allowing a small clearing for them to fight, and Godfrey saw everyone tensing up. He knew he had to stop this before it turned into a full-fledged war.

Godfrey jumped over the table, slipping on mugs of beer, scurried across the hall, and ran into the midst of the clearing, between the two men, holding out his palms to keep them at bay.

"Men!" he cried, slurring his words. He tried to stay focused, to make his mind think clearly, and he sincerely regretted having drunk as much as he had now.

"We're all men here!" he shouted. "We are all one people! One army! There's no need for a fight! There are plenty of women to go around! Neither of you meant it!"

Godfrey turned to MacGil, and MacGil stood there, frowning, holding his sword.

"If he apologizes, I will accept it," MacGil said.

The McCloud stood there, confused, then suddenly his expression softened, and he broke into a smile.

"Then I apologize!" the McCloud called out, holding out his left hand.

Godfrey stepped aside, and the MacGil took it warily, the two of them shaking hands.

As they did, though, suddenly the McCloud clasped the MacGil's hand, yanked him in close, raised his sword, and stabbed him right in the chest.

"I apologize," he added, "for not killing you sooner! MacGil scum!"

The MacGil fell to the ground, limp, blood pouring onto the floor.

Dead.

Godfrey stood there in shock. He was just a foot away from the soldiers, and he could not help but feel as if somehow this were all his fault. He had encouraged the MacGil to drop his guard; he was the one who had tried to broker the truce. He had been betrayed by this McCloud, made a fool of in front of all his men.

Godfrey was not thinking clearly, and fueled by drink, something inside him snapped.

In one quick motion, Godfrey bent down, snatched the dead MacGil's sword, stepped up, and stabbed the McCloud through the heart.

The McCloud stared back, eyes wide in shock, then slumped down to the ground, dead, the sword still embedded in his chest.

Godfrey looked down at his own bloody hand, and he could not believe what he had just done. It was the first time he had ever killed a man hand to hand. He never knew he had it in him.

Godfrey had not been planning to kill him; he had not even thought it through carefully. It was some deep part of himself that overcame him, some part that demanded vengeance for the injustice.

The room suddenly broke into chaos. From all sides, men screamed and attacked each other, enraged. Sounds of swords being drawn filled the room, and Godfrey felt himself shoved hard out of the way by Akorth, right before a sword just missed his head.

Another soldier – Godfrey could not remember who or why – grabbed him and threw him across the beer-lined table, and the last thing Godfrey remembered was sliding down the wooden table, his head smashing into every mug of ale, until finally he landed on the floor, banging his head, and wishing he were anywhere but here.

Chapter Six

Gwendolyn, in the wheelchair, Guwayne in her arms, braced herself as the attendants opened the doors and Thor rolled her in to her mother's sick chamber. The Queen's guard bowed their heads and stepped aside, Gwen clutching the baby tighter as they entered the darkened chamber. The room was silent, stifling, airless. Torches flickered dimly on either wall. She could sense death in the air.

Guwayne, she thought. *Guwayne. Guwayne.*

She said the name silently in her head, over and over to herself, trying to focus on anything but her dying mother. As she thought it, the name brought her comfort, filled her with warmth. *Guwayne*. The miracle child. She loved this baby more than she could say.

Gwen wanted her mother to see him before she died. She wanted her mother to be proud of her, and she wanted her mother's blessing. She had to admit it. Despite their troubled past, Gwen wanted peace and resolution in their relationship before she died. She was in a fragile state right now, and the fact that she had become closer to her mother these past moons only made Gwen feel even more distraught.

Gwen felt her heart clench as the doors closed behind her. She looked about the room and saw a dozen attendants standing near her mother, people from the old guard whom she recognized, who used to watch over her father. The room was filled with people. It was a deathwatch. At her mother's side, of course, was Hafold, her dutiful servant to the end, standing guard over her, not letting anyone close, as she had all throughout her life.

As Thor wheeled Gwendolyn close to her mother's bedside, Gwen wanted to get up, to lean over her mother, to give her a hug. But her body still ached with pain, and in her condition, she was unable.

Instead, she reached out with one hand and held her mother's wrist. It was cold to the touch.

As she did, her mother, lying there unconscious, slowly opened one eye. Her mother looked surprised and pleased at the sight of Gwen, and she slowly opened both eyes, and opened her mouth to speak.

She mouthed words, but they came out as a gasp. Gwen could not understand her.

Her mother cleared her throat and waved her hand for Hafold.

Hafold immediately bent over, leaning her ear close to the Queen's mouth.

"Yes, my lady?" Hafold asked.

"Send everyone out. I want to be alone with my daughter and Thorgrin."

Hafold looked briefly at Gwen, resentfully, then replied, "As you wish, my lady."

Hafold immediately rounded everyone up and ushered them out the door; then she came back and took her position again at the Queen's side.

"Alone," the Queen repeated to Hafold, with a knowing look.

Hafold looked down, surprised, then gave Gwen a jealous look and stormed out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Gwen sat there with Thor, relieved they were all gone. A heavy blanket of death hung in the air. Gwendolyn felt it – her mother would not be with her much longer.

Her mother clasped Gwen's hand, and Gwen squeezed hers. Her mother smiled, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"I am pleased to see you," her mother said. It came out as a whisper, just audible.

Gwen felt like crying again, and she tried her hardest to be strong, to hold back her tears for her mother's sake. Yet she could not help herself; tears suddenly came pouring out, and she cried and cried.

"Mother," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. For everything."

Gwen felt overcome with sorrow that they had not been closer in life. The two of them had never fully understood each other. Their personalities had always clashed, and they could never see

things the same way. Gwen was sorry for their relationship, even if she was not to blame. She wished, looking back, that there was something she could have said or done to make it different. But they had just been on two sides of the spectrum with everything in their lives. And it seemed that no effort on either of their part could ever change that. They were just two very different human beings, stuck in the same family, stuck in a mother-daughter relationship. Gwen was never the daughter she'd wanted, and the Queen was never the mother Gwen had wanted. Gwen wondered why they had been meant to be together.

The Queen nodded, and Gwen could see that she understood.

"It is I who am sorry," she replied. "You are an exceptional daughter. And an exceptional Queen. A far greater Queen than I ever was. And a far greater ruler than even your father was. He would be proud. You deserved a better mother than I."

Gwen brushed back tears.

"You were a fine mother."

Her mother shook her head.

"I was a good Queen. And a devoted wife. But I was not a good mother. Not to you, at least. I think I saw too much of myself in you. And that scared me."

Gwen squeezed her hand, crying, wishing they could have more time together, wishing they could have talked like this earlier in their lives. Now that she was Queen, now that they were both older, and now that she had a child, Gwen wanted her mother here. She wanted to be able to turn to her as her advisor. Yet ironically, the time she wanted her around the most was the one time she could not have her.

"Mother, I want you to meet my child. My son. Guwayne."

The Queen's eyes opened wide in surprise, and she lifted her head on her pillows and looked down and saw, for the first time, Gwen holding Guwayne in her arms.

The Queen gasped, and she sat up more, then burst out sobbing.

"Oh, Gwendolyn," her mother said. "He is the most beautiful baby I have ever seen."

She reached out and touched Guwayne, laying her fingertips on his forehead, and as she did, she cried harder.

Her mother slowly turned and looked over at Thor.

"You will be a fine father," she said. "My former husband loved you. I have come to understand why. I was wrong about you. Forgive me. I am glad you're with Gwendolyn."

Thor nodded solemnly, reached over, and clasped the Queen's shoulder as she reached out for him.

"There is nothing to forgive," he said.

The Queen turned and looked at Gwendolyn, and her eyes hardened; Gwen saw something inside them shifting, saw the former hard Queen coming back to life.

"You face many trials now," her mother said. "I've been keeping track of all of them. I still have my people everywhere too. I fear for you."

Gwendolyn patted her hand.

"Mother, do not trouble yourself with this now. This is no time for affairs of state."

Her mother shook her head.

"It is *always* time for affairs of state. And now most of all. Funerals, do not forget, are affairs of state. They are not family events; they are political ones."

Her mother coughed for a long time, then breathed deep.

"I haven't much time, so listen to my words," she said, her voice weaker. "Take them to heart. Even if you do not wish to hear them."

Gwen leaned in closer and nodded solemnly.

"Anything, Mother."

"Do not trust Tirus. He will betray you. Do not trust his people. Those MacGils, they are not us. They are us in name only. Do not forget this."

Her mother wheezed, trying to catch her breath.

"Do not trust the McClouds, either. Do not imagine you can make peace."

Her mother wheezed, and Gwen thought about that, trying to grasp its deeper meaning.

"Keep your army strong and your defenses stronger. The more you realize that peace is an illusion, the more peace you will secure."

Her mother wheezed again, for a long time, closing her eyes, and it broke Gwen's heart to see what an effort this was for her.

On the one hand, Gwen thought that perhaps these were just the words of a dying Queen who had been jaded too long; yet on the other hand, she could not help but admit that there was some wisdom in them, perhaps wisdom that she herself did not want to acknowledge.

Her mother opened her eyes again.

"Your sister, Luanda," she whispered. "I want her at my funeral. She is my daughter. My firstborn."

Gwendolyn breathed, surprised.

"She has done terrible things, deserving of exile. But allow her this grace, just once. When they put me in the earth, I want her there. Do not refuse the request of a dying mother."

Gwendolyn sighed, torn. She wanted to please her mother. Yet she did not want to allow Luanda back, not after what she had done.

"Promise me," her mother said, clutching Gwen's hand firmly. "*Promise me*."

Finally, Gwendolyn nodded, realizing she could not say no.

"I promise you, Mother."

Her mother sighed and nodded, satisfied, then leaned back in her pillow.

"Mother," Gwen said, clearing her throat. "I want you to give my child a blessing."

Her mother opened her eyes weakly and looked at her, then closed them and slowly shook her head.

"That baby already has every blessing a child could want. He has my blessing – but he does not need it. You will come to see, my daughter, that your child is far more powerful than you or Thorgrin or anyone who has come before, or will come since. It was all prophesied, years ago."

Her mother wheezed for a long time, and just when Gwen thought she was done, just when she was preparing to leave, her mother opened her eyes one last time.

"Do not forget what your father taught you," she said, her voice so weak she could barely talk. "Sometimes a kingdom is most at peace when it is at war."

Chapter Seven

Steffen galloped down the dusty road, heading east from King's Court, as he had been for days, trailed by a dozen members of the Queen's guard. Honored that the Queen had endowed him with this mission and determined to fulfill it, Steffen had been riding from town to town, accompanied by a caravan of royal carriages, each laden with gold and silver, royal coin, building supplies, corn, grain, wheat, and various provisions and building materials of every sort. The Queen was determined to bring aid to all the small villages of the Ring, to help them rebuild, too, and in Steffen, she had found a determined missionary.

Steffen had already visited many villages, had dispersed wagons full of supplies on the Queen's behalf, carefully and precisely allocating them to the villages and families most in need. He had taken pride in seeing the joy in their faces as he'd doled out supplies and allocated manpower to help rebuild the villages outlying King's Court. One village at a time, on Gwendolyn's behalf, Steffen was helping to restore faith in the power of the Queen, the power of the rebuilding of the Ring. For the first time in his life, people looked past his appearance, people treated him with respect, like a regular person. He loved the feeling. The people were starting to realize that they, too, were not forgotten under this Queen, and Steffen was thrilled to be a part of helping to spread their love and devotion to her. There was nothing he wanted more.

As fate would have it, the route the Queen had set him on was leading Steffen, after many villages, to his very own village, to the place he was raised. Steffen felt a sense of dread, a pit in his stomach, as he realized his own village was next on the list. He wanted to turn away, to do anything to avoid it.

But he knew he could not. He had vowed to Gwendolyn to fulfill his duty, and his honor was at stake – even if it entailed his going back to the very same place that occupied his nightmares. It was the place holding all the people he had known while he was raised, the people who had taken great pleasure in tormenting him, in mocking the way he was shaped. The people who had made him feel deeply ashamed of himself. Once he'd left, he'd vowed to never return, to never set eyes on his family again. Now, ironically, his mission led him here, requiring him to allocate for them whatever resources they might need on behalf of the Queen. The fates had been too cruel.

Steffen crested a hill and caught his first glimpse of his town. His stomach dropped. Just seeing it, he already thought less of himself. He was beginning to diminish, to crawl up inside, and it was a feeling he hated. He had been feeling so good, better than he ever had in his life, especially given his new position, his entourage, his answering to the Queen herself. But now, seeing this place, there came rushing back the way people used to perceive him. He hated the feeling.

Were these people still here? he wondered. Were they as cruel as they had always been? He hoped not.

If Steffen ran into his family here, what would he say to them? What would they say to him? When they saw the station he had achieved, would they be proud? He had achieved a station and rank higher than anyone in his family, or village, had ever achieved. He was one of the Queen's highest advisors, a member of the inner royal council. They would be flabbergasted to hear what he had achieved. Finally, they would have to admit they had been wrong all along about him. That he was not worthless after all.

Steffen hoped that maybe, that was how this would go. Maybe, finally, his family would admire him, and he would achieve some vindication amongst his people.

Steffen and his royal caravan pulled up to the gates to the small town, and Steffen directed them all to come to a stop.

Steffen turned and faced his men, a dozen of the Queen's royals guards, who all looked to him for direction.

"You will await me here," Steffen called out. "Outside the town gates. I don't want my people to see you yet. I want to face them alone."

"Yes, our Commander," they replied.

Steffen dismounted, wanting to walk the rest of the way, to enter the town on foot. He did not want his family to see his royal horse, or any of his royal entourage. He wanted to see how they'd react to him as he was, without seeing his station or rank. He even took off the royal markings on his new clothing, stripping them and leaving them in the saddle.

Steffen walked past the gates and into the small, ugly village he remembered, smelling of wild dogs, chickens running loose in the streets, old ladies and children chasing them. He walked past rows and rows of cottages, a few made of stone but most made of straw. The streets here were in poor shape, littered with holes and animal waste.

Nothing had changed. After all these years, nothing had changed at all.

Steffen finally reached the end of the street, turned left, and his stomach clenched as he saw his father's house. It looked the same as it always had, a small wood cottage with a sloped roof and a crooked door. The shed in the back was where Steffen had been made to sleep. The sight of it made him want to raze it.

Steffen walked up to the front door, which was open, stood at the entrance, and looked inside.

His breath was taken away as he saw his whole family there: his father and mother, all of his brothers and sisters, all of them crammed into that small cottage, as they had always been. All of them gathered around the table, as always, fighting over scraps, laughing with each other. They had never laughed with Steffen, though. Only *at* him.

They all looked older, but otherwise, just the same. He watched them all in wonder. Had he really hailed from these people?

Steffen's mother was the first to spot him. She turned, and at the sight of him she gasped, dropped her plate, smashing it on the floor.

His father turned next, then all the others, all staring back, in shock to see him again. They each wore an unpleasant expression, as if an unwelcome guest had arrived.

"So," his father said slowly, scowling, coming around the table toward him, wiping grease from his hands with a napkin in a threatening way, "you have returned after all."

Steffen remembered his father used to tie that napkin of his into a knot, wet it, and whip him with it.

"What's the matter?" his father added, a sinister smile on his face. "You couldn't make it in the big city?"

"He thought he was too good for us. And now he has to come running back to his home like a dog!" one of his brothers yelled out.

"Like a dog!" echoed one of his sisters.

Steffen was seething, breathing hard – but he forced himself to hold his tongue, to not stoop to their level. After all, these people were provincial, riddled with prejudice, the result of a life spent locked in a small town; he, though, had seen the world, and had come to know better.

His siblings – indeed, everyone in the room – laughed at him in the small cottage.

The only one not laughing, staring at him, wide-eyed, was his mother. He wondered if maybe she was the only redeemable one. He wondered if perhaps she would be happy to see him.

But she just slowly shook her head.

"Oh, Steffen," she said, "you should not have come back here. You are not a part of this family."

Her words, delivered so calmly, without malice, hurt Steffen most of all.

"He never was," his father said. "He's a beast. What are you doing here, boy? Come back for more scraps?"

Steffen did not answer. He did not have the gift of speech, of witty, quick-thinking retorts, and certainly not in an emotional situation like this. He was so flustered, he could hardly form words. There were so many things he wished to say to them all. But no words came to him.

So instead he just stood there, seething, silent.

"Cat got your tongue?" his father mocked. "Then out of my way. You're wasting my time. This is our big day, and you're not going to ruin it for us."

His father shoved Steffen out of the way as he rushed past him, stepping outside the doorway, looking both ways. The whole family waited and watched, until his father came back in, grunting, disappointed.

"Did they come yet?" his mother asked hopefully.

He shook his head.

"Don't know where they could be," his father said.

Then he turned to Steffen, angry, turning bright red.

"You get out of the door," he barked. "We're waiting for a very important man, and you're blocking the way. You're going to ruin it, aren't you, as you always ruined everything? What timing you have, to show up at a moment like this. The Queen's own commander will be arriving here any moment, to distribute food and supplies to our village. This is our moment to petition him. And look at you," his father sneered, "standing there, blocking our door. One sight of you, and he will pass our house over. He'd think we're a house of freaks."

His brothers and sisters broke into laughter.

"A house of freaks!" one of them echoed.

Steffen stood there, turning bright red himself, staring back at his father, who faced him, scowling.

Steffen, too flustered to reply, slowly turned his back, shook his head, and walked out the door.

Steffen walked out into the street, and as he did, he signaled for his men.

Suddenly, dozens of gleaming royal carriages appeared, racing through the village.

"They're coming!" screamed Steffen's father.

Steffen's entire family rushed out, running past Steffen, standing there, lining up, gaping at the wagons, at the royal guard.

The royal guard all turned and looked to Steffen.

"My lord," one of them said, "shall we distribute here or shall we carry on?"

Steffen stood there, hands on his hips, and stared back at his family.

As one, his entire family turned and, shocked beyond words, stared at Steffen. They kept looking back and forth between Steffen and the royal guard, completely flabbergasted, as if unable to comprehend what they were seeing.

Steffen walked slowly, mounted his royal horse, and sat before all the others, sitting in his gold and silver saddle, looking down on his family.

"*My lord*?" his father echoed. "Is this some sort of sick joke? *You?* The royal commander?"

Steffen merely sat there, looking down his father, and shook his head.

"That is right, Father," Steffen replied. "I am the royal commander."

"It can't be," his father said. "It can't be. How could a beast be chosen to the Queen's guard?"

Suddenly, two royal guardsmen dismounted, drew their swords, and rushed for his father. They held the tips of their swords at his throat firmly, pressing hard enough that his father opened his eyes wide in fear.

"To insult the Queen's man is to insult the Queen herself," one of the men snarled at Steffen's father.

His father gulped, terrified.

"My lord, shall we have this man imprisoned?" the other asked Steffen.

Steffen surveyed his family, saw the shock in all their faces, and debated.

"Steffen!" His mom came rushing forward, clasping his legs, pleading. "Please! Do not imprison your father! And please – give us provisions. We need them!"

"You owe us!" his father snapped. "For all that I gave you, your whole life. You owe us."

"Please!" his mom pleaded. "We had no idea. We had no idea who you had become! Please don't harm your father!"

She dropped to her knees and started to weep.

Steffen merely shook his head down at these lying, deceitful, honorless people, people who had been nothing but cruel to him his entire life. Now that they realized he was somebody, they wanted something from him.

Steffen decided they did not even deserve a response from him.

He realized something else, too: his whole life he had held his family up on a pedestal. As if they were the great ones, they were the perfect ones, the successful ones, the ones he wanted to become. But now he realized the opposite was true. It had all, his entire upbringing, been a grand delusion. These were just pathetic people. Despite his shape, he was above them all. For the first time, he realized that.

He looked down at his father, at sword-point, and a part of him wanted to hurt him. But another part of him realized one final thing: they did not deserve his vengeance, either. They would have to be somebody to deserve that. And they were nobody.

He turned to his men.

"I think this village will do just fine on their own," he said.

He kicked his horse, and in a great cloud of dust they all rode out of town, Steffen determined to never return to this place again.

Chapter Eight

The attendants threw open the ancient oak doors, and Reece hurried out of the nasty weather, wet from the driving wind and rain of the Upper Isles, and into the dry refuge of Srog's fort. He was immediately relieved to be dry as the doors slammed behind him, wiping water from his hair and face, and he looked up to see Srog hurrying over to give him a hug.

Reece embraced him back. He had always had a warm spot for this great warrior and leader, this man who had led Silesia so well, who had been loyal to Reece's father, and even more loyal to his sister. Seeing Srog, with his stiff beard, broad shoulders, and friendly smile, brought back memories of his father, of the old guard.

Srog leaned back and clasped a beefy hand on Reece's shoulder.

"You resemble your father too much as you grow older," he said warmly.

Reece smiled.

"I hope that's a good thing."

"It is indeed," Srog replied. "There was no finer man. I would have walked through fire for him."

Srog turned and led Reece through the hall, all of his men falling in behind them as they wound their way through the fort.

"You are a most welcome face to see here in this miserable place," Srog said. "I am grateful to your sister for sending you."

"It seems I have chosen a bad day to visit," Reece said as they passed an open-air window, rain lashing a few feet away.

Srog smirked.

"Every day is a bad day here," he answered. "Yet it can also change on a dime. They say the Upper Islands experience all four seasons in a single day – and I have come to see that it is true."

Reece looked outside at a small, empty castle courtyard, populated with a handful of ancient stone buildings, gray, ancient, which looked like they blended into the rain. Few people were outside, and those that were lowered their heads against the wind and hurried from one place to the next. This island seemed to be a lonely and desolate place.

"Where are all the people?" Reece asked.

Srog sighed.

"The Upper Islanders stay indoors. They keep to themselves. They are spread out. This place is not like Silesia, or King's Court. Here, they live all over the island. They do not congregate in cities. They are an odd, reclusive people. Stubborn and hardened – like the weather."

Srog led Reece down a corridor and they turned a corner and entered the Great Hall.

In the room sat a dozen of Srog's men, soldiers with their boots and armor on, glumly sitting around a table near a fire. Dogs slept around the fire, and the men ate hunks of meat and threw the scraps to the dogs. They looked up at Reece and grunted.

Srog led Reece to the fire. Reece rubbed his hands before the flames, grateful for its warmth.

"I know you haven't much time before your ship departs," Srog said. "But I at least wanted to send you off with some warmth and dry clothes."

An attendant approached and handed Reece a set of dry clothes and mail, exactly his size. Reece looked at Srog with surprise and gratitude as he peeled off his wet clothes and replaced them with these.

Srog smiled. "We treat our own well here," he said. "I figured you'd need it, given this place."

"Thank you," Reece said, already feeling much warmer. "I've never needed it more." He had been dreading sailing back in wet clothes, and this was exactly what he'd needed.

Srog began talking politics, a long monologue, and Reece nodded politely, pretending to listen. But deep down, Reece was distracted. He was still overwhelmed with thoughts of Stara, and he could

not shake her from his mind. He could not stop thinking of their encounter, and every time he thought of her, his heart fluttered with excitement.

He also could not stop thinking, with dread, of the task that lay ahead of him on the mainland, of telling Selese – and everyone else – that the wedding was off. He did not want to hurt her. But he did not see what choice he had.

"Reece?" Srog repeated.

Reece blinked and looked over at him.

"Did you hear me?" Srog asked.

"I'm sorry," Reece said. "What was that?"

"I said, I take it your sister has received my dispatches?" Srog asked.

Reece nodded, trying to focus.

"Indeed," Reece replied. "Which is why she sent me here. She asked me to check in with you, to hear firsthand what was happening."

Srog sighed, staring into the flames.

"I've been here six moons now," he said, "and I can tell you, the Upper Islanders are not like us. They are MacGils in name only. They lack the qualities of your father. They are not just stubborn – they are not to be trusted. They sabotage the Queen's ships daily; in fact, they sabotage everything we do here. They don't want us here. They don't want any part of the mainland – unless they are invading it, of course. To live in harmony, I have concluded, is just not their way."

Srog sighed.

"We waste our time here. Your sister should withdraw. Leave them to their own fate."

Reece nodded, listening, rubbing his hands before the fire, when suddenly, the sun broke free from the clouds, and the dark, wet weather morphed to a clear, shining summer day. A distant horn sounded.

"Your ship!" Srog cried out. "We must go. You must set sail before the weather returns. I will see you off."

Srog led Reece out a side door in the fort, and Reece was amazed as he squinted in the bright sunlight. It was as if the perfect summer day had returned again.

Reece and Srog walked quickly, side by side, followed by several of Srog's men, rocks crunching beneath their boots as they navigated the hills and made their way down winding trails toward the distant shore below. They passed gray boulders and rock-lined hills and cliffs peppered with goats that clung to the hillsides and chewed at weeds. As they neared the shore, all around them bells tolled from the water, warning ships of lifting fog.

"I can see firsthand the conditions you are dealing with," Reece finally said as they walked. "They are not easy. You have held things together here for far longer than others would have, I'm sure. You have done well here. I will be sure to tell the Queen."

Srog nodded back in appreciation.

"I appreciate your saying that," he said.

"What is the source of this people's discontent?" Reece asked. "They are free, after all. We mean them no harm – in fact, we bring them supplies and protection."

Srog shook his head.

"They will not rest until Tirus is free. They consider it a personal shame on them that their leader is imprisoned."

"Yet they are lucky he only sits in prison, and has not been executed for his betrayals."

Srog nodded.

"True. But these people do not understand that."

"And if we freed him?" Reece asked. "Would that set them at peace?"

Srog shook his head.

"I doubt it. I believe that would only embolden them for some other discontent."

"Then what is to be done?" Reece asked.

Srog sighed.

"Abandon this place," he said. "And as quickly as possible. I don't like what I see. I sense a revolt stirring."

"Yet we vastly outnumber them in men and ships."

Srog shook his head.

"That is all but an illusion," he said. "They are well organized. We are on their ground. They have a million subtle ways of sabotage we cannot anticipate. We are sitting here in a den of snakes."

"Not Matus, though," Reece said.

"True," Srog replied. "But he is the only one."

There is one other, Reece thought. Stara. But he kept his thoughts close to himself. Hearing all of this made him want to rescue Stara, to take her out of this place as quickly as possible. He vowed that he would. But first he needed to sail back and settle his affairs. Then he could return for her.

As they stepped onto the sand, Reece looked up and saw the ship before him, his men waiting.

He stopped before it, and Srog turned to him and clasped his shoulder warmly.

"I will share all of this with Gwendolyn," Reece said. "I will tell her your concerns. Yet I know she is determined with these isles. She views them as part of a greater strategy for the Ring. For now, at least, you must keep harmony here. Whatever it takes. What do you need? More ships? More men?"

Srog shook his head.

"All the men and ships in the world will not change these Upper Islanders. The only thing that will is the edge of the sword."

Reece looked back, horrified.

"Gwendolyn would never slaughter innocents," Reece said.

"I know that," Srog replied. "Which is why, I suspect, many of our men will die."

Chapter Nine

Stara stood on the parapets of her mother's fort, a square stone fortress as ancient as the island, the place in which Stara had lived ever since her mother had died. Stara walked to the edge, grateful that the sun had finally broken free on this dramatic day, and looked out to the horizon, with unusually nice visibility, and watched Reece's ship set sail in the distance. She watched his ship parting from the fleet, watched for as long as she possibly could as his boat drifted for the horizon, each lapping wave taking him farther and farther from her.

She could watch Reece's ship all day, knowing he was on it. She couldn't stand to see it go. She felt as if a part of her heart, a part of herself, were leaving the island.

Finally, after all these years in this lonely, awful, barren island, Stara felt overwhelmed with joy. Her meeting with Reece had made her feel alive again. It had restored an emptiness within her that she hadn't even realized had been gnawing away at her all these years. Now that she knew that Reece would call off the wedding, that he would return for her, that the two of them would be wed, finally together forever, Stara felt that everything was going to be okay in the world. All the misery that she had put up with in her life would be worth it.

Of course, she had to admit, there was a small part of her that felt bad for Selese. Stara never wanted to hurt anyone else's feelings. Yet at the same time, Stara also felt that her life was at stake, her future, her husband – and she also felt that it was only fair. After all, she, Stara, had known Reece her entire life, since they were kids. It was she who had been Reece's first and only love. This new girl, Selese, barely knew Reece, and only for a short while. She certainly could not know him like Stara did.

Selese, Stara figured, would eventually get over it and find someone else. But Stara, if she lost him, would never get over it. Reece was her life. Her destiny. They were meant to be, they had been their whole lives. Reece was her man first, and if anything, the way she saw it, Selese was taking him away from her, and not the other way around. Stara was only taking back what was rightfully hers.

Regardless, Stara could not have made a different decision if she'd tried. Whatever her rational mind would have told her was right or wrong, she could not listen. Her whole life, everyone around her – and her own rational mind – had also told her it was wrong for cousins to be together. And even then, she could not listen. She absolutely loved and adored Reece. She always had. And nothing anyone would say or do could change that. She *had* to be with him. There was no other option in life.

As Stara stood there looking out, watching his ship become smaller on the horizon, she heard sudden footsteps, someone else on the fort's roof, and she turned to see her brother, Matus, walking quickly toward her. She was pleased to see him, as always. Stara and Matus had practically been best friends their entire life. They had been outcasts from the rest of their family, from the rest of the Upper Islanders, Stara and Matus both despising their siblings, and their father. Stara thought of Matus and herself as being more refined, more noble, than the others; she saw her other family members as being treacherous, untrustworthy. It was as if she and Matus had their own little family within the family.

Stara and Matus lived here on separate floors in their mother's fort, apart from the others, who lived in Tirus's castle. Now that their father was in prison, their family was divided. Her other two brothers, Karus and Falus, blamed them. She could always trust Matus to have her back, though, and she was always there for him, too.

The two of them talked long and often of leaving the Upper Isles for the mainland, joining the other MacGils. And now, finally, all of that talk was beginning to feel like it might become a reality, especially with all the sabotage the Upper Islanders had been inflicting on Gwendolyn's fleet. Stara could not stand the thought of living here any longer.

"My brother," Stara greeted him, in a happy mood.

But Matus's expression was unusually darkened, and she could see immediately that he was troubled by something.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head disapprovingly at her.

"I think you know what's wrong, my sister," he said. "Our cousin. Reece. What has happened between you two?"

Stara reddened and turned her back on Matus, looking back out at the ocean. She strained to see Reece's ship in the distance, but it was already gone. A wave of anger rushed over her; she had missed the last glimpse of him.

"It is not your business," she snapped.

Matus had always been disapproving of her relationship with her cousin, and she'd had enough. It was the one point of contention between them, and it threatened to drive them apart. She did not care what Matus – or anyone else – thought. It was none of their business, as far as she was concerned.

"You know he is set to marry, don't you?" Matus asked her, accusing, coming up beside her.

Stara shook her head, as if to push the awful thought from her mind.

"He will not marry her," she answered.

Matus looked surprised.

"And how do you know that?" he pressed.

She turned to him, determined.

"He told me. And Reece does not lie."

Matus stared back, shocked. Then his expression darkened.

"Did you get him to change his mind then?"

She stared back, defiant, now angry herself.

"I did not need to convince him of anything," she said. "It was what he wanted. What he chose. He loves me. He always has. And I love him."

Matus frowned.

"And are you okay then to destroy this girl's heart? Whoever she is?"

She scowled, not wanting to hear this.

"Reece loved me far longer than he loved this new girl."

Matus would not relent.

"And what of all the carefully laid plans of the kingdom? You do realize that this is not just a wedding. It is political theater. A spectacle for the masses. Gwendolyn is Queen, and it is her wedding, too. The entire kingdom, and distant lands, will be there to watch. What will happen when Reece cancels? Do you think it will be taken lightly by the Queen? By all the MacGils? You will throw the entire Ring in disarray. You will set them all against us. Are your passions worth that much?"

Stara stared back at Matus, cold, hardening.

"Our love is stronger than any spectacle. Than any kingdom. You would not understand. You have never had love like ours."

Now Matus reddened. He shook his head, clearly furious.

"You are making the gravest mistake of your life," he said. "And of Reece's. You are going to bring down everyone with you. Yours is a foolish, childish, selfish decision. Your childish love should stay in the past."

Matus sighed, exasperated.

"You will pen a missive and send it on the next falcon to Reece. You will tell him you've changed your mind. You will instruct him to marry this girl. Whoever she is."

Stara felt herself swell with anger toward her brother, an anger stronger than she'd ever felt.

"You speak out of line," she said. "Do not pretend to give me counsel. You are not my father. You are my brother. Speak to me of this once more, and you shall never speak to me again."

Matus stared back, clearly stunned. Stara had never spoken to him that way before. And she meant it. Her feelings for Reece ran much deeper than her bond with her brother. Much deeper than anything in her life.

Matus, shocked and hurt, finally turned and stormed off the roof.

Stara turned and looked back out at the sea, hoping for any sign of Reece's ship. But she knew it was long gone.

Reece, she thought. *I love you. Stay the course. Whatever obstacles you face, stay the course. Be strong. Call off the wedding. Do it for me. For us.*

Stara closed her eyes and clenched her hands, and begged and prayed to every god she knew that Reece would have the strength to follow through. To come back for her. That the two of them would finally be together forever.

No matter what it took.

Chapter Ten

Karus and Falus, Tirus's two sons, walked quickly down the spiral stone staircase, descending deeper and deeper, heading toward the dungeon that held their father. They hated the indignity of having to descend to this place to see their father, a great warrior who had been rightful King of the Upper Isles. And they silently vowed revenge.

Yet this time, they brought news, news which could change everything. News which finally gave them cause for hope.

Karus and Falus marched right up to the soldiers standing guard at the entrance to the prison, men loyal, they knew, to the Queen. They stopped in their tracks, reddening, hating having to suffer the humiliation of needing to ask permission to see their father.

Gwendolyn's men surveyed them, as if debating, then nodded to each other and stepped forward.

"Hold your arms out," they commanded Karus and Falus.

Karus and Falus did so, bristling as the soldiers stripped them of their arms.

They then unlocked the iron gates, opened them slowly, and let them in, closing and slamming and locking the gates behind them.

Karus and Falus knew their time was short; they would only be allowed to visit their father for a few minutes, as they had, once a week, ever since he had been imprisoned. After that, Gwendolyn's men would command them to leave.

They walked to the end of the long dungeon corridor, all the cells empty, their father the only one down here in this ancient prison. Finally, they reached the last cell on the left, lit dimly by a flickering torch against the wall, and they turned to the bars and peered inside, searching for their father.

Slowly, Tirus emerged from the dark corners of the cell and came to the bars. He stared back, his face gaunt, his beard untended, grim. He stared back with the hopeless expression of a man who knew he would never see daylight again.

Karus's and Falus's hearts broke to witness it. It made them resolve even more to find a way to free him, and to get vengeance on Gwendolyn.

"Father," Falus said, hopefully.

"We bring urgent news," Karus said.

Tirus stared back at them, a flicker of hope at their tone.

"Out with it, then," he growled.

Falus cleared his throat.

"Our sister, it seems, has fallen in love again with our cousin, Reece. Our spies tell us the two plan to marry. Reece intends to call off his wedding on the mainland, and to marry Stara instead."

"We must find a way to stop it," Karus said, indignant.

Tirus stared back, expressionless, but they could see his eyes darting, taking it all in.

"Must we?" Tirus said slowly. "And why is that?"

They looked back at their father, confused.

"Why?" Karus asked. "We cannot have our family merge with Reece's. It would play right into the Queen's hand. Our families would merge, and she would gain complete control."

"It would remove any ounce of independence our people still have," Falus chimed in.

"The plans are already in motion," Karus added. "And we must find a way to stop them."

They waited for a response, but Tirus slowly shook his head.

"Stupid, stupid boys," he said slowly, his voice dark, shaking his head again and again. "Why did I raise such stupid boys? Have I taught you nothing all these years? You still look at what's in front of you, and not what's beyond."

"We do not understand, Father."

Tirus grimaced.

"And that is why I am in this position. That is why you are not ruling now. Stopping this union would be the stupidest thing you've ever done, and the worst thing that could happen to our island. If our Stara marries Reece, that would be the greatest thing that could ever happen for all of us."

They looked back, confused, not understanding.

"Greatest? How so?"

Tirus sighed, impatient.

"If our two families merge, Gwendolyn cannot keep me imprisoned here. She would have no choice but to set me free. It would change everything. It would not strip us of power – it would give us power. We would be legitimate MacGils, on the same footing as those on the mainland. Gwendolyn would be beholden to us. Don't you see?" he asked. "A child of Reece and Stara would be as much our child as theirs."

"But Father, it is not natural. They are cousins."

Tirus shook his head.

"Politics are not natural, my son. But this union will happen," he insisted, determination in his voice. "And you two will do everything in your power to make it happen."

Karus cleared his throat, nervous, uncertain now.

"But Reece has already sailed for the mainland," he said. "It is too late. Reece, we hear, has already made up his mind."

Tirus reached up and smacked the iron bars, as if wishing to smack Karus's face, and Karus jumped back, startled.

"You are even stupider than I thought," Tirus said. "You will make certain it happens. Men have changed their minds over lesser things than this. And you will make certain that Reece changes his mind."

"How?" Falus asked.

Tirus stood there thinking, stroking his beard for a long while. For the first time in many moons, his eyes were working, darting, thinking, formulating a plan. For the first time, there was hope and optimism in his eyes.

"This girl, Selese, the one he is about to marry," Tirus said finally. "She must be gotten to. You will find her. You will bring evidence… evidence of Reece and Stara's love. You will tell her firsthand, before he reaches her. You will be sure that she knows that Reece is in love with someone else. That way, in case Reece changes his mind before he reaches her, it will be too late. We will be assured of their breakup."

"But what evidence do we have of their love?" Karus asked.

Tirus rubbed his beard, thinking. Finally, he perked up.

"Do you remember those scrolls? The ones we intercepted when Stara was young? The love letters she penned to Reece? The letters he penned back to her?"

Karus and Falus nodded.

"Yes," Falus said. "We intercepted the falcons."

Tirus nodded.

"They remain in my castle. Bring them to her. Tell her they are recent, and make it convincing. She will never guess their age – and all will be finished."

Karus and Falus finally nodded, smiling, realizing the depth of their father's cunning and wisdom.

Tirus smiled back, for the first time in as long as they could remember.

"Our island will rise again."

Chapter Eleven

Thor sat atop his horse, leading it up and down the lines of Legion recruits, all of the eager boys lined up, standing at attention before him in the Legion's new arena.

Thor looked out at the dozens and dozens of new faces, examined each one carefully, and felt the weight of responsibility. New recruits had poured in from all over the Ring, all eager to join the newly rebuilt Legion. It was a daunting task to choose the next crop of warriors, the men upon whom the Ring would rely in the coming years.

A part of Thorgrin felt that he did not deserve to be here; after all, it was not so many moons ago that he himself was hoping to be picked by the Legion. As he thought back on it, it felt like a lifetime ago, before he'd met Gwen, before he'd had a child, before he'd become a warrior. Now here he was, tasked to rebuild it, to find replacements for all the brave souls that had been killed defending the Ring.

As Thor looked out past the boys, he saw the graveyard he'd had erected, all the markers rising from the earth shining in the late afternoon suns, reminding them always of the Legion they had known. It had been Thor's idea to bury them here, on the periphery of the new arena, so that they could always be with them, always be remembered, and watch over the new recruits. Thor could feel their spirits hovering over him, helping him, urging him on.

Knowing that his Legion brothers, Reece and Conven and Elden and O'Connor, were all spread throughout the Ring on various tasks, Thor felt comfortable, at least, that he was the one who remained here, close to home, to focus on this task. He'd also been Captain of the Legion, so it felt almost natural he should be the one tasked with rebuilding it.

Thor looked at the dozens of boys before him, and he had high hopes for some, but not for others. They did their best to stand at attention as he came close, and he could tell that some of them were just not warriors; others could be, yet they would need much training. There was an untested look in all their eyes, a look of anxiety, of fear of what was to come.

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