



A REIGN OF STEEL

BOOK #11 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Reign of Steel

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Rice M.

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In A REIGN OF STEEL (BOOK #11 IN THE SORCERER'S RING), Gwendolyn must protect her people as she finds King's Court under siege. She strives to evacuate them from the Ring – but there is one problem: her people refuse to leave. As a power struggle ensues, Gwen finds her queenship under challenge for the first time – while the greatest threat to the Ring looms. Behind the McClouds lie the threat of Romulus and his dragons, who, with the Shield destroyed, embark on a catastrophic invasion, nothing left to stand between them and the complete annihilation of the Ring. Romulus, with Luanda at his side, is unstoppable while the moon lasts, and Gwen must fight for survival – for herself, for her baby, and for her people – amidst an epic battle of dragons, and of men. Kendrick leads the Silver in a valiant battle, and he is joined by Elden and the new Legion recruits, along with his brother Godfrey, who surprises everyone, including himself, with his acts of valor. But even so, it may not all be enough. Thor, meanwhile, embarks on the quest of his life in the Land of the Druids, trekking across a fearsome and magical land, a land unlike any other, with magical rules out of its own. Crossing this land will require every ounce of strength and training he has, will force him to dig deeper within, to become the great warrior – and Druid – he was meant to be. As he encounters monsters and challenges unlike ever before, he will have to lay down his life to try to reach his mother. Erec and Alistair journey to the Southern Isles, where they are greeted by all of his people, including his competitive brother and envious sister. Erec has a dramatic final meeting with his father, as the island prepares for him to ascend the throne as King. But in the Southern Isles, one must fight for the right to be King, and in an epic battle, Erec will be tested as never before. In a dramatic twist, we learn that treachery hides even here, in this place of noble and great warriors. Reece, embattled and surrounded on the Upper Isles, must fight for his life after his vengeance on Tirus. Desperate, he finds himself united with Stara, each wary of the other, yet untied in a quest to survive – one that

will culminate in an epic battle at sea and will threaten the entire island. Will Gwen cross the sea to safety? Will Romulus destroy the Ring? Will Reece and Stara be together? Will Erec rise as King? Will Thor find his mother? What will become of Guwayne? Will anyone be left alive? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A REIGN OF STEEL is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders.

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Morgan Rice

A Reign of Steel

(Book #11 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

"There is a land where food once grew – but its place was transformed, resembling fire. It was a place where stones were sapphires, and it had dust of gold."

"The horse laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy from the sword. He cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. At the blast of the trumpet, he snorts: 'Hurrah!'"

– The Book of Job

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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!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

"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.”

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

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

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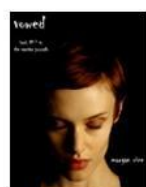
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Chapter One

Reece stood, the dagger in his hand impaled in Tirus's chest, frozen in a moment of shock. His entire world spun in slow motion, all of life a blur. He had just killed his worst enemy, the man responsible for Selese's death. For that, Reece felt a tremendous feeling of satisfaction, of vengeance. Finally, a great wrong had been set right.

Yet at the same time, Reece felt numb to the world, felt the odd feeling of preparing to greet death, bracing himself for the demise that would surely follow. The room was filled with Tirus's men, all of whom stood there, also frozen in shock, all witnessing the event. Reece braced himself for death. Yet he had no regrets. He felt grateful that he had even been given a chance to kill this man, who dared to think that Reece would ever actually apologize to him.

Reece knew that death was inevitable; he was too outnumbered in this room, and the only people in this great hall that were on his side were Matus and Srog. Srog, wounded, was bound with ropes, captive, and Matus stood beside him, under the watchful eye of the soldiers. They would be of little help against this army of Upper Islanders loyal to Tirus.

But before Reece died, he wanted to complete his revenge, and to take out as many of these Upper Islanders as he could.

Tirus slumped down to Reece's feet, dead, and Reece did not hesitate: he extracted his dagger and immediately spun and sliced the throat of Tirus's general, standing beside him; in the same motion, Reece whipped around and stabbed another general in the heart.

As the shocked room began to react, Reece moved quickly. He drew both swords from the scabbards of the two dying men, and charged the group of soldiers facing him. He killed four of them before they had a chance to react.

Hundreds of warriors finally broke into action, descending on Reece from all sides. Reece summoned all his training in the Legion, all the times he been forced to fight against groups of men, and as they encircled him, he raised his sword with both hands. He wasn't weighed down by armor, like these other men, or by a belt full of weapons, or a shield; he was lighter and faster than them all, and he was enraged, cornered in, and fighting for his life.

Reece fought valiantly, faster than all of them, remembering all those times he had sparred against Thor, the greatest warrior he'd ever fought, remembering how much his skills had been sharpened. He took down man after man, his sword clanging against countless others, sparks flying as he fought in every direction. He swung and swung until his arms grew heavy, cutting down a dozen men before they could blink.

But more and more men poured in. There were just too many of them. For every six that fell, a dozen more appeared, and the crowd grew thick as they rallied and pressed on him from all sides. Reece was breathing hard as he felt a sword slash his arm, and he screamed out, blood coming from his bicep. He swung around and stabbed the man in the ribs, but the damage had already been done. He was wounded now, and still more men appeared from every side. He knew his time had come.

At least, he realized, grateful, he was able to go down in an act of valor.

"REECE!"

A shriek suddenly pierced the air, a voice that Reece recognized immediately.

A woman's voice.

Reece's body went numb as he realized whose voice it was. It was the voice of the one woman left in the world who could catch his attention, even in the midst of this great battle, even in the midst of his dying moments:

Stara.

Reece looked up and saw her standing high atop the wooden bleachers that lined the sides of the room. She stood high above the crowd, her expression fierce, veins bulging in her throat as she

screamed for him. He saw she held a bow and arrow, and he watched as she took aim up high, at an object across the room.

Reece followed her gaze, and he realized what she aimed for: a thick rope, fifty feet long, anchoring an immense metal chandelier thirty feet in diameter, dropping to an iron hook in the stone floor. The fixture was as thick as a tree trunk, and held several hundred flaming candles.

Reece realized: Stara aimed to shoot out the cord. If she hit, it would send the chandelier crashing down – and it would crush half the men in this room. And as Reece looked up, he realized that he was standing right underneath it.

She was warning him to move.

Reece's heart pounded in panic as he turned and lowered his sword and charged wildly into his group of attackers, rushing to get out before it fell. He kicked and elbowed and head-butted soldiers out of his way as he burst through the group. Reece remembered from childhood what a great shot Stara was – always outdoing the boys – and he knew her aim would be true. Even though he ran with his back exposed to the men chasing him, he trusted her, knowing she would hit.

A moment later Reece heard the sound of an arrow slicing through the air, of a great rope snapping, then of a massive piece of iron releasing, plummeting straight down, rushing through the air at full speed. There came a tremendous crash, the entire room shaking, the vibration knocking Reece off his feet. Reece felt the wind on his back, the chandelier missing him by just a few feet as he fell to the stone on his hands and knees.

Reece heard the screams of men, and he looked over his shoulder and saw the damage Stara had done: dozens of men lay crushed beneath the chandelier, blood everywhere, crying out, pinned to their deaths. She had saved his life.

Reece scrambled to his feet, looking for Stara, and saw that she was in danger now. Several men were closing in on her, and while she took aim with her bow and arrow, he knew there were only so many shots she could get off.

She turned and looked nervously to the door, clearly thinking they could escape that way. But as Reece followed her glance, his heart dropped to see dozens of Tirus's men rush forward and block it, barring the two huge double doors with a thick wooden beam.

They were trapped, all exits blocked. Reece knew they would die here.

Reece saw Stara looking about the room, frantic, until her eyes settled on the uppermost row of the wooden bleachers along the back wall.

She gestured to Reece as she ran for it, and he had no idea what she had in mind. He saw no exit there. But she knew this castle better than he, and perhaps had an escape route in mind that he could not see.

Reece turned and ran, fighting his way through the men as they began to regroup and attack him. As he sprinted through the crowd, he fought minimally, trying not to engage them too much, but rather trying to cut a singular path through the men and make his way to the far corner of the room.

As he ran, Reece looked over at Srog and Matus, determined to help them, too, and he was happily surprised to see that Matus had grabbed the swords of his captors and had stabbed them both; he watched as Matus quickly cut Srog's cords, freeing Srog, who grabbed a sword and killed several soldiers who approached.

"Matus!" Reece screamed.

Matus turned and looked to him, and he saw Stara along the far wall and saw where Reece was running. Matus yanked Srog, and they turned and ran for it, too, all of them now heading in the same direction.

As Reece fought his way through the room, it began to open up. There were not as many soldiers here in this far corner of the room, far away from the opposite corner, from the barred exit where all the soldiers were converging. Reece hoped that Stara knew what she was doing.

Stara ran along the wooden bleachers, jumping higher and higher up the rows, kicking men in the face as they reached up to grab her. As Reece watched her, trying to catch up, he still did not know exactly where she was going, or what her plan could be.

Reece reached the far corner and jumped up onto the bleachers, jumping onto the first wooden row, then the next, then the next, climbing higher and higher, till he was a good ten feet above the crowd, on the farthest, highest wooden bench against the wall. He met up with Stara, and they converged against the far wall with Matus and Srog. They had a good lead on the other soldiers, except for one: he rushed Stara from behind, and Reece lunged forward and stabbed him through the heart, right before he brought a dagger down on Stara's back.

Stara raised her bow and turned to two soldiers lunging for Reece's exposed back, swords drawn, and took out them both.

The four of them stood, backs to the wall in the far corner of the room, on the highest bleacher, and Reece looked out and saw a hundred men race across the room, closing in on them. They were trapped now in this corner, with nowhere to go.

Reece did not understand why Stara had led them all here. Seeing no possible means of escape, he was certain that they would soon all be dead.

"What is your plan?" he yelled to her, as they stood side by side, fighting off men. "There is no way out!"

"Look up," she replied.

Reece craned his neck and saw above them another iron chandelier, with a long rope leading from it all the way down to the floor, right beside him.

Reece's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I don't understand," he said.

"The rope," she said. "Grab it. All of you. And hold on for dear life."

They did as she instructed, each grabbing the rope with both hands and holding tight. Suddenly, Reece realized what Stara was about to do.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he called out.

But it was too late.

As a dozen soldiers approached them, Stara grabbed Reece's sword, jumped into Reece's arms, and slashed the rope beside them, the one holding the chandelier.

Reece felt his stomach drop as suddenly the four of them, clutching onto the rope and each other, shot up high into the air at a dizzying speed, grabbing on for dear life as the iron chandelier plummeted down. It crushed the men below them and propelled the four of them high into the air, swinging from the rope.

The rope finally stopped, and the four of them hung there, swinging in the air, a good fifty feet above the hall.

Reece looked down, sweating, almost losing his grip.

"There!" Stara called out.

Reece turned and saw the huge stained-glass window before them, and realized her plan. The coarse rope cut Reece's palms, and he started to slip with the sweat. He didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

"I'm losing my grip!" Srog called out, trying his best to hold on despite his injuries.

"We need to swing!" Stara yelled. "We need momentum! Kick off the wall!"

Reece followed her lead: he leaned forward with his boot against the wall and together, they shoved off the wall, the rope swinging more and more wildly. They shoved again and again, until with one final kick, they swung all the way back, like a pendulum, and then they all, shouting, braced themselves as they swung right for the enormous stained-glass window.

The glass exploded, raining down all around them, and the four of them let go, dropping onto the wide stone platform at the base of the window.

Standing there, perched fifty feet above the room, the cold air rushing in, Reece looked down below, and on one side he saw the inside of the hall, hundreds of soldiers looking up at them, wondering how to pursue; on the other side he saw outside the fort. It was pouring outside, driving wind and blinding rain, and the drop below was a good thirty feet, certainly enough to break a leg. But Reece, at least, saw several tall bushes below, and he also saw that the ground was wet and soft with mud. It would be a long, hard fall; but maybe they would be cushioned enough.

Suddenly, Reece screamed out as he felt metal piercing his flesh. He looked down and grabbed his arm and realized an arrow had just grazed it, drawing blood. It was a minor wound, but it stung.

Reece turned and checked back down over his shoulder, and saw that dozens of Tirus's men were aiming bows and firing, arrows whizzing by them now from every direction.

Reece knew there was no time. He looked over and saw Stara standing on one side of him, Matus and Srog on the other, all of them wide-eyed with fear at the drop before them. He grabbed Stara's hand, knowing it was now or never.

Without a word, all of them knowing what needed to be done, they jumped together. They shrieked as they dropped through the air in the blinding rain and wind, flailing and falling, and Reece could not help but wonder if he'd just leapt from one certain death to another.

Chapter Two

Godfrey raised his bow with trembling hands, leaned over the edge of the parapet, and took aim. He meant to pick a target and fire right away – but as he saw the sight below, he knelt there, frozen in shock. Below him charged thousands of McCloud soldiers, a well-trained army flooding the landscape, all heading right for the gates of King's Court. Dozens of them rushed forward with an iron battering ram, and slammed it into the iron portcullis again and again, shaking the walls, the ground beneath Godfrey's feet.

Godfrey lost his balance and fired, and the arrow sailed harmlessly through the air. He grabbed another arrow and pulled it back on the bow, his heart pounding, knowing for sure that he would die here today. He leaned over the edge, but before he could fire, a rock cast from a sling flew up and smacked into his iron helmet.

There was a loud clang, and Godfrey fell back, his arrow shooting straight up into the air. He yanked off his helmet and rubbed his aching head. He never knew a rock could hurt so much; the iron seemed to reverberate in his very skull.

Godfrey wondered what he had gotten himself into. True, he had been heroic, he had helped by alerting the entire city of the McClouds' arrival, buying them precious time. He had maybe even saved some lives. He had certainly saved his sister.

Yet now here he was, along with but a few dozen soldiers left here, none of them Silver, none of them knights, defending this shell of an evacuated city against an entire McCloud army. This soldier stuff was not for him.

There came a tremendous crash, and Godfrey stumbled again as the portcullis was smashed open.

In through the open city gates rushed thousands of men, cheering, out for blood. As he sat up on the parapet, Godfrey knew it was only a matter of time until they came up here, until he'd fight his way to the death. Was this what it meant to be a soldier? Was this what it meant to be brave and fearless? To die, so others could live? Now that he was greeting death in the face, he wasn't so sure this was a great idea. Being a soldier, being a hero, was great; but being alive was better.

As Godfrey thought of quitting, of running off and trying to hide somewhere, suddenly, several McClouds stormed the parapets, racing up single file. Godfrey watched as one of his fellow soldiers was stabbed and dropped to his knees, groaning.

And then, once again, it happened. Despite all his rational thinking, all his common wisdom against being a soldier, something clicked inside Godfrey that he could not control. Something inside Godfrey could not stand to let other people suffer. For himself, he could not muster the courage; but when he saw his fellow man in trouble, something overcame him – a certain recklessness. One might even call it chivalry.

Godfrey reacted without thinking. He found himself grabbing a long pike and charging for the row of McClouds who raced up the stairs, single file along the parapets. He let out a great scream and, holding the pike firm, he rammed the first man. The huge metal blade went into the man's chest, and Godfrey ran, using his weight, even his beer belly, to push them all back.

To his own amazement, Godfrey succeeded, driving the row of men back down the spiral stone staircase, back down away from the parapets, single-handedly holding off the McClouds storming the place.

When he finished, Godfrey dropped the pike, amazed at himself, not knowing what had come over him. His fellow soldiers looked amazed too, as if not realizing he had it in him.

As Godfrey wondered what to do next, his decision was made for him, as he detected motion from the corner of his eye. He turned and saw a dozen more McClouds charging him from the side, pouring into the other side of the parapets.

Before Godfrey could manage to put up a defense, the first soldier reached him, wielding a huge war hammer, swinging for his head. Godfrey realized that the blow would crush his skull.

Godfrey ducked out of harm's way – one of the few things he knew how to do well – and the hammer swung over his head. Godfrey then lowered his shoulder and charged the soldier, driving him backwards, tackling him.

Godfrey drove him back, further and further, to where they grappled along the edge of the parapet, fighting hand-to-hand, grabbing for each other's throats. This man was strong, but Godfrey was strong, too, one of the few gifts he had been graced with in his life.

The two clambered, spinning each other back and forth, until suddenly, they both rolled over the edge.

The two of them went plummeting through the air, clutching each other, falling a good fifteen feet down to the ground below. Godfrey spun in the air, hoping that he would land on top of this soldier, instead of the other way around. He knew that the weight of this man, and all his armor, would crush him.

Godfrey spun at the last second, landing on the man, and the soldier groaned as Godfrey's weight crushed him, knocking him out.

But the fall took its toll on Godfrey, too, winding him; he hit his head, and as he rolled off the man, every bone in his body aching, Godfrey lay there for one second before the world spun, and he, lying beside his foe, blacked out beside him. The last thing he saw as he looked up was an army of McClouds, streaming into King's Court and taking it for their own.

* * *

Elden stood in the Legion training grounds, hands on his hips, Conven and O'Connor beside him, the three of them watching over the new recruits Thorgrin had left them with. Elden watched with an expert eye as the boys galloped back and forth across the field, trying to leap over ditches and launch spears through hanging targets. Some boys did not make the jump, collapsing with their horses into the pits; others did, but missed the targets.

Elden shook his head, trying to remember how he was when he first started his Legion training, and trying to take encouragement in the fact that in the last few days these boys had already shown signs of improvement. Yet these boys were still nowhere near the hardened warriors he needed them to be before he could accept them as recruits. He set the bar very high, especially as he had a great responsibility to make Thorgrin and all the others proud; Conven and O'Connor, too, would allow nothing less.

"Sire, there is news."

Elden looked over to see one of the recruits, Merek, the former thief, come running up to him, wide-eyed. Interrupted from his thoughts, Elden was agitated.

"Boy, I told you to never interrupt – "

"But sire, you don't understand! You must – "

"No, YOU don't understand," Elden countered. "When the recruits are training, you don't – "

"LOOK!" Merek shouted, grabbing him and pointing.

Elden, in a rage, was about to grab Merek and throw him, until he looked out at the horizon, and he froze. He could not fathom the sight before him. There, on the horizon, great clouds of black smoke rose into the air. All from the direction of King's Court.

Elden blinked, not understanding. Could King's Court be on fire? How?

Great shouts arose on the horizon, the shouts of an army – along with the sound of a crashing portcullis. Elden's heart sank; the gates to King's Court had been stormed. He knew that could only mean one thing – a professional army had invaded. Today, of all days, on Pilgrimage Day, King's Court was being overrun.

Conven and O'Connor burst into action, shouting out to the recruits to stop what they were doing, and rounding them up.

The recruits hurried over, and Elden stepped forward beside Conven and O'Connor, as they all quieted and stood at attention, awaiting orders.

"Men," Elden boomed. "King's Court has been attacked!"

There came a surprised and agitated murmur from the crowd of boys.

"You are not yet Legion, and you are certainly not Silver or hardened warriors that would be expected to go up against a professional army. Those men invading there are invading to kill, and if you go up against them, you may very well lose your lives. Conven, O'Connor, and I are duty bound to protect our city, and we must leave now for war. I do not expect any of you to join us; in fact, I would discourage it. Yet if any of you wish to, step forward now, knowing you may very well die on the field of battle today."

There came a few moments of silence, then suddenly, every single boy standing before them stepped forward, all brave, noble. Elden's heart swelled with pride at the sight.

"You have all become men today."

Elden mounted his horse and the others followed, all of them letting out a great cheer as they charged forward as one, as men, to risk their lives for their people.

* * *

Elden, Conven, and O'Connor led the way, a hundred recruits behind them, all galloping, weapons drawn, as they raced toward King's Court. As they neared, Elden looked out and was shocked to see several thousand McCloud soldiers storming the gates, a well-coordinated army clearly taking advantage of Pilgrimage Day to ambush King's Court. They were outnumbered ten to one.

Conven smiled, riding out in front.

"Just the kind of odds I like!" he shouted, taking off with a great cry, charging out in front of everyone, wanting to be the first to advance. Conven raised his battle-ax high, and Elden watched with admiration and concern as Conven recklessly attacked the rear of the McCloud army by himself.

The McClouds had little time to react as Conven swung his ax down like a madman and took out two of them at a time. Charging into the thick of the soldiers, he then dove from his horse and went flying through the air, tackling three soldiers and bringing them tumbling off their horse to the ground.

Elden and the others were right behind him. They clashed with the rest of the McClouds, who were too slow to react, not expecting an attack on their flank. Elden wielded his sword with wrath and dexterity, showing the Legion recruits how it was done, using his great might to take down one after the other.

The battle became thick and hand-to-hand, as their small fighting force forced the McClouds to change direction and defend. All the Legion recruits joined the fray, riding fearlessly into battle and clashing with the McClouds. Elden noticed the boys fighting out of the corner of his eyes and he was proud to see none of them hesitating. They were all in battle, fighting like real men, outnumbered hundreds to one, and none of them caring. McClouds fell left and right, caught off guard.

But the momentum soon turned, as the bulk of the McCloud men reinforced, and the Legion encountered professional soldiers. Some of the Legion began to fall. Merek and Ario took blows from a sword, but remained on their horses, fighting back and knocking their opponents down. But then they were hit by swinging flails, and knocked off their horses. O'Connor, riding beside Merek, got off several shots with his bow, taking out soldiers all around them – before being struck in the side with a shield and knocked off his horse. Elden, completely surrounded, finally lost the element of surprise, and he took a mighty blow to his ribs from a hammer, and a sword slash on his forearm. He turned and knocked the men off their horses – yet as he did, four more men appeared. Conven,

on the ground, fought desperately, swinging his ax wildly at horses and men who charged by – until finally he was hit from behind by a hammer and collapsed face-first in the mud.

Scores more McCloud reinforcements arrived, abandoning the gate to face them. Elden saw fewer of his own men, and he knew that soon they would all be wiped out. But he didn't care. King's Court was under attack, and he would give up his life to defend it, to defend these Legion boys whom he was so proud to fight with. Whether they were boys or men no longer mattered – they were shedding their blood beside him, and on this day, alive or dead, they were all brothers.

* * *

Kendrick galloped down the mountain of pilgrimage, leading a thousand Silver, all of them riding harder than they ever had, racing for the black smoke on the horizon. Kendrick chided himself as he rode, wishing he had left the gates more protected, never expecting such an attack on a day like this, and most of all, from the McClouds, whom he thought were pacified under Gwen's rule. He would make them all pay for invading his city, for taking advantage of this holy day.

All around him his brothers charged, one thousand strong, the entire wrath of the Silver, forgoing their sacred pilgrimage, determined to show the McClouds what the Silver could do, to make the McClouds pay once and for all. Kendrick vowed that by the time he was done, not one McCloud would be left alive. Their side of the Highlands would never rise again.

As Kendrick neared, he looked ahead and spotted Legion recruits fighting valiantly, saw Elden and O'Connor and Conven, all terribly outnumbered, and none backing down to the McClouds. His heart soared with pride. But they were all, he could see, about to be vanquished.

Kendrick cried out and kicked his horse even harder as he led his men and they all burst forward in one last charge. He picked up a long spear and as he got close enough, he hurled it; one of the McCloud generals turned just in time to see the spear sail through the air and pierce his chest, the throw strong enough to penetrate his armor.

The thousand knights behind Kendrick let out a great shout: the Silver had arrived.

The McClouds turned and saw them, and for the first time, they had real fear in their eyes. A thousand shining Silver knights, all of them riding in perfect unison, like a storm coming down the mountain, all with weapons drawn, all hardened killers, none with an ounce of hesitation in their eyes. The McClouds turned to face them, but with trepidation.

The Silver descended upon them, upon their home city, Kendrick leading the charge. He drew his ax and swung expertly, chopping several soldiers from their horses; he then drew a sword with his other hand, and riding into the thick of the crowd, stabbed several soldiers in all the vulnerable points of their armor.

The Silver bore right through the mass of soldiers like a wave of destruction, as they were so expert at doing, none of them at home until they were completely surrounded in the thick of battle. For a member of the Silver, that's what it meant to be at home. They slashed and stabbed all the McCloud soldiers around them, who were like amateurs compared to them, cries rising greater and greater as they felled McClouds in every direction.

No one could stop the Silver, who were too fast and sleek and strong and expert in their technique, fighting as one unit, as they had been trained to do since they could walk. Their momentum and skill terrified the McClouds, who were like common soldiers next to these finely trained knights. Elden, Conven, O'Connor and the remaining Legion, rescued by the reinforcements, rose back to their feet, however wounded, and joined the fight, helping the Silver's momentum even further.

Within moments, hundreds of McClouds lay dead, and those that remained were overtaken by a great panic. One by one, they began to turn and flee, McClouds pouring out of the city gates, trying to get away from King's Court.

Kendrick was determined not to let them. He rode to the city gates, his men following, and made sure to block the path of all those retreating. It was a funnel effect, and McClouds were slaughtered as they reached the bottleneck of the city gates – the very same gates they had stormed but hours before.

As Kendrick wielded two swords, killing men left and right, he knew that soon, every McCloud would be dead, and King's Court would be theirs once again. As he risked his life for the sake of his soil, he knew that this was what it meant to be alive.

Chapter Three

Luanda's hands trembled as she walked, one step at a time, across the vast Canyon crossing. With each step, she felt her life coming to an end, felt herself leaving one world and about to enter another. But steps away from reaching the other side, she felt as if these were her last steps on earth.

Standing just feet away was Romulus, and behind him, his million Empire soldiers. Circling high overhead, with an unearthly screeching, flew dozens of dragons, the fiercest creatures Luanda had ever laid eyes upon, slamming their wings against the invisible wall that was the Shield. Luanda knew that, with just a few more steps, with her leaving the Ring, the Shield would come down for good.

Luanda looked out at the destiny that stood waiting before her, at the sure death that she faced at the hands of Romulus and his brutal men. But this time, she no longer cared. Everything that she loved had already been taken from her. Her husband, Bronson, the man she loved most in the world, had been killed – and it was all Gwendolyn's fault. She blamed Gwendolyn for everything. Now, finally, it was time for vengeance.

Luanda stopped a foot away from Romulus, the two of them locking eyes, staring at each other over the invisible line. He was a grotesque man, twice as wide as any man should ever be, pure muscle, so much muscle in his shoulders that his neck disappeared. His face was all jaw, with roving, large black eyes, like marbles, and his head was too big for his body. He stared at her like a dragon looking down at its prey, and she had no doubt that he would tear her to pieces.

They stared each other in the thick silence, and a cruel smile spread across his face, along with a look of surprise.

"I never thought to see you again," he said. His voice was deep and guttural, echoing in this awful place.

Luanda closed her eyes and tried to make Romulus disappear. Tried to make her life disappear. But when she opened her eyes, he was still there.

"My sister has betrayed me," she answered softly. "And now it is time for me to betray her."

Luanda closed her eyes and took one final step, off the bridge, onto the far side of the Canyon.

As she did, there came a thunderous whooshing noise behind her; swirling mist shot up into the air from the bottom of the Canyon, like a great wave rising, and just as suddenly dropped back down again. There was a sound, as of the earth cracking, and Luanda knew with certainty that the Shield was down. That now, nothing remained between Romulus's army and the Ring. And that the Shield had been broken forever.

Romulus looked down at her, as Luanda bravely stood a foot away, facing him, unflinching, staring back defiantly. She felt fear but did not show it. She did not want to give Romulus the satisfaction. She wanted him to kill her when she was staring him in the face. At least that would give her something. She just wanted him to get it over with.

Instead, Romulus's smile broadened, and he continued to stare directly at her, rather than at the bridge, as she expected he would.

"You have what you want," she said, puzzled. "The Shield is down. The Ring is yours. Aren't you going to kill me now?"

He shook his head.

"You are not what I expected," he finally said, summing her up. "I might let you live. I might even take you as my wife."

Luanda gagged inside at the thought; this was not the reaction she'd wanted.

She leaned back and spit in his face, hoping that would get him to kill her.

Romulus reached up and wiped his face with the back of his hand, and Luanda braced herself for the blow to come, expecting him to punch her as before, to shatter her jaw – to do anything but

be nice to her. Instead, he stepped forward, grabbed her by the back of her hair, pulled her to him, and kissed her hard.

She felt his lips, grotesque, chapped, all muscle, like a snake, as he pressed her to him, harder and harder, so hard she could barely breathe.

Finally, he pulled away – and as he did, he backhanded her, smacking her so hard her skin stung. She looked up at him, horrified, filled with disgust, not understanding him.

“Chain her and keep her close to me,” he commanded. He had barely finished uttering the words before his men stepped forward and bound her arms behind her back.

Romulus’s eyes widened with delight as he stepped forward in front of his men, and, bracing himself, took the first step onto the bridge.

There was no Shield to stop him. He stood there safe and sound.

Romulus broke into a wide grin, then burst out laughing, holding his muscular arms out wide as he flung back his head. He roared with laughter, with triumph, the sound echoing throughout the Canyon.

“It is mine,” he boomed. “All mine!”

His voice echoed, again and again.

“Men,” he added. “Invade!”

His troops suddenly rushed past him, letting out a great cheer that was met, high above, by the host of dragons, who flapped their wings and flew, soaring above the Canyon. They entered the swirling mist, screeching, a great noise that rose to the very heavens, that let the world know that the Ring would never be the same again.

Chapter Four

Alistair lay in Erec's arms on the bow of the huge ship, which rocked gently up and down as the huge ocean waves rolled past again and again. She looked up, mesmerized, at the million red stars blanketing the night sky, sparkling in the distance; warm ocean breezes rolled in, caressing her, lulling her to sleep. She felt content. Just being here, together with Erec, her whole world felt at peace; here, in this part of the world, on this vast ocean, it felt as if all the troubles in the world had disappeared. Endless obstacles had kept the two of them apart and now, finally, her dreams were coming true. They were together, and there was no one and nothing left to stand between them. They had already set sail, were already on their way to his islands, his homeland, and when they arrived, she would marry him. There was nothing she wanted more in the world.

Erec squeezed her tight, and she leaned in closer to him as the two of them leaned back, looking up at the universe, the gentle ocean mist washing over them. Her eyes grew heavy in the quiet ocean night.

As she looked out at the open sky, she thought of how huge the world was; she thought of her brother, Thorgrin, out there somewhere, and she wondered where he was right now. She knew he was on his way to see their mother. Would he find her? What would she be like? Did she even really exist?

A part of Alistair wanted to join him on the journey, to meet their mother, too; and another part of her missed the Ring already, and wanted to be back home on familiar ground. But the biggest part of her was excited; she was excited to start life again, together with Erec, in a new place, a new part of the world. She was excited to meet his people, to see what his homeland was like. Who lived in the Southern Isles? she wondered. What were his people like? Would his family take him in? Would they be happy to have her, or would they be threatened by her? Would they welcome the idea of their wedding? Or had they envisioned someone else, one of their own, for Erec?

Worst of all, what she dreaded most – what would they think of her once they found out about her powers? Once they found out that she was a Druid? Would they consider her a freak, an outsider, like everyone else?

“Tell me again of your people,” Alistair said to Erec.

He looked at her, then looked backed out at the sky.

“What would you like to know?”

“Tell me about your family,” she said.

Erec reflected in the silence for a long time. Finally, he spoke:

“My father, he is a great man. He's been king of our people ever since he was my age. His looming death will change our island forever.”

“And have you any other family?”

Erec hesitated a long time, then finally nodded.

“Yes. I have a sister... and a brother.” He hesitated. “My sister and I, we were very close growing up. But I must warn you, she's very territorial and too easily jealous. She's wary of outsiders, and does not like new people in our family. And my brother...” Erec trailed off.

Alistair prodded him.

“What is it?”

“A finer fighter you will never meet. But he is my younger brother, and he has always set himself in competition with me. I have always viewed him as a brother, and he has always viewed me as competition, as someone who stands in his way. I do not know why. It just is how it is. I wish we could be closer.”

Alistair looked at him, surprised. She could not understand how anyone could look at Erec with anything but love.

“And is it still that way?” she asked.

Erec shrugged.

"I have not seen any of them since I was a child. It is my first return to my homeland; nearly thirty sun cycles have passed. I do not know what to expect. I am more a product of the Ring now. And yet if my father dies... I am the eldest. My people will look to me to rule."

Alistair paused, wondering, not wanting to pry.

"And will you?"

Erec shrugged.

"It is not something I seek. But if my father wishes... I cannot say no."

Alistair studied him.

"You love him very much."

Erec nodded, and she could see his eyes glistening in the starlight.

"I only pray our ship arrives in time before he dies."

Alistair considered his words.

"And what of your mother?" she asked. "Would she like me?"

Erec smiled wide.

"Like a daughter," he said. "For she will see how much I love you."

They kissed, and Alistair leaned back and looked at the sky, reaching over and grasping Erec's hand.

"Just remember this, my lady. I love you. You above all else. That is all that matters. My people shall give us the greatest wedding that the Southern Isles have ever seen; they will shower us with every festivity. And you will be loved and embraced by all of them."

Alistair studied the stars, holding Erec's hand tight, and she wondered. She had no doubt of his love for her, but she wondered about his people, people he himself barely knew. Would they embrace her as he thought they would? She was not so sure.

Suddenly, Alistair heard heavy footsteps. She looked over to see one of the ship's crew walk over to the edge of the railing, hoist a large dead fish over his head, and throw it overboard. There was a gentle splash below, and soon a bigger splash, as another fish leapt up and ate it.

There then followed an awful sound in the waters below, like a moaning or crying, followed by another splash.

Alistair looked over at the sailor, an unsavory character, unshaven, dressed in rags, with missing teeth, as he leaned over the edge, grinning like an oaf. He turned and looked right at her, his face evil, grotesque in the starlight. Alistair got a terrible feeling as he did.

"What did you throw overboard?" Erec asked.

"The guts of a simka fish," he replied.

"But why?"

"It's poison," he replied, grinning. "Any fish that eats it dies on the spot."

Alistair looked at him, horrified.

"But why would you want to kill the fish?"

The man smiled more broadly.

"I like to watch them die. I like to hear them scream, and I like to see them float, belly up. It's fun."

The man turned and walked slowly back to the rest of his crew, and as Alistair watched him go, she felt her skin crawl.

"What is it?" Erec asked her.

Alistair looked away and shook her head, trying to make her feeling go away. But it would not; it was an awful premonition, she was not sure of what.

"Nothing, my lord," she said.

She settled back into his arms, trying to tell herself that everything was all right. But she knew, deep down, that it was very far from all right.

* * *

Erec woke in the night, feeling the ship moving slowly up and down, and he knew immediately that something was wrong. It was the warrior within him, the part of him that had always warned him an instant before something bad happened. He'd always had the sense, ever since he was a boy.

He sat up quickly, alert, and looked all around. He turned and saw Alistair soundly asleep beside him. It was still dark, the boat still rocking on the waves, yet something was wrong. He looked all around, but saw no sign of anything amiss.

What danger could there be, he wondered, out here in the middle of nowhere? Was it just a dream?

Erec, trusting his instincts, reached down to grab his sword. But before his hand could grab the hilt, he suddenly felt a heavy net covering his body, draping down all around him. It was made of the heaviest rope he'd ever felt, nearly heavy enough to crush a man, and it landed all over him at once, tight all around him.

Before he could react, he felt himself being hoisted high into the air, the net catching him like an animal, its ropes so tight around him that he could not even move, his shoulders and arms and wrists and feet all constrained, crushed together. He was hoisted higher and higher, until he found himself a good twenty feet above the deck, dangling, like an animal caught in a trap.

Erec's heart slammed in his chest as he tried to understand what was going on. He looked down and saw Alistair below him, waking up.

"Alistair!" Erec called out.

Down below, she looked everywhere for him, and when she finally looked up and saw him, her face fell.

"EREC!" she yelled, confused.

Erec watched as several dozen crew members, bearing torches, approached her. They all wore grotesque smiles, evil in their eyes, as they closed in on her.

"It's about time he shared her," one of them said.

"I'm going to teach this princess what it means to live with a sailor!" another said.

The group broke into laughter.

"After me," another one said.

"Not before I've had my fill first," another said.

Erec struggled to break free with all that he had as they continued to close in on her. But it was to no avail. His shoulders and arms were clamped so tightly, he could not even wiggle them.

"ALISTAIR!" he screamed, desperate.

He was helpless to do anything but watch as he dangled above.

Three sailors suddenly pounced on Alistair from behind; Alistair screamed out as they pulled her to her feet, tore her shirt, yanked her arms behind her back. They held her tight as several more sailors approached.

Erec scanned the ship for any sign of the captain; he saw him on the upper deck, looking down, watching all of it.

"Captain!" Erec yelled. "This is your ship. Do something!"

The captain looked at him, then slowly turned his back on the whole scene, as if not wanting to watch it.

Erec watched, desperate, as a sailor pulled a knife and held it to Alistair's throat, and Alistair cried out.

"NO!" Erec yelled.

It was like watching a nightmare unfold beneath him – and worst of all, there was nothing he could do.

Chapter Five

Thorgrin faced Andronicus, the two of them alone in the field of battle, soldiers dead all around them. He raised his sword high and brought it down on Andronicus's chest; as he did, Andronicus dropped his weapons, smiled wide, and reached out to embrace him.

My son.

Thor tried to stop his sword slash, but it was too late. The sword cut right through his father, and as Andronicus split in two, Thor felt wracked with grief.

Thor blinked and found himself walking down an endlessly long altar, holding Gwen's hand. He realized it was their wedding procession. They walked toward a blood-red sun, and as Thor looked to both sides, he saw all the seats were empty. He turned to look at Gwen, and as she looked at him, he was terrified as her skin dried out and she became a skeleton, collapsing to dust in his hand. She fell in a pile of ashes at his feet.

Thor found himself standing before his mother's castle. He had somehow crossed the skywalk, and he stood before immense double doors, gold, shining, three times as tall as he. There was no handle, and he reached up and slammed his palms on them until they started to bleed. The sound echoed throughout the world. But no one came to answer.

Thor threw back his head.

"Mother!" he yelled.

Thor sank to his knees, and as he did, the ground turned into mud, and Thor slid down a cliff, falling and falling, flailing through the air, down, hundreds of feet, to a raging ocean below. He held his hands out to the sky, watched his mother's castle disappear from view, and shrieked.

Thor opened his eyes, breathless, the wind brushing his face, and he looked all around, trying to figure out where he was. He looked down and saw an ocean passing by beneath him, at dizzying speed. He looked up and saw he that clutched something rough, and as he heard the great flapping of wings, he realized he was holding on to Mycoples's scales, his hands cold from the nighttime air, his face numb from the gusts of sea wind. Mycoples flew with great speed, her wings ever flapping, and as Thor looked straight ahead, he realized he had fallen asleep on her. They were still flying, as they had been for days now, racing beneath the night sky, underneath a million twinkling red stars.

Thor sighed and wiped the back of his head, which was covered in sweat. He had vowed to stay alert, but it had been so many days, their trek together, flying, searching for the Land of the Druids. Luckily Mycoples, knowing him as well as she did, knew he was asleep and flew steadily, making sure he did not fall off. The two of them had been traveling so long together, they had become like one. As much as Thor missed the Ring, he was thrilled, at least, to be back with his old friend again, just the two of them, traveling the world; he could tell that she, too, was happy to be with him, purring contentedly. He knew that Mycoples would never let anything bad happen to him – and he felt the same way about her.

Thor looked below and examined the foaming, luminescent green waters of the sea; this was a strange and exotic sea, one he had never seen before, one of the many they had passed on their search. They continued to fly north, ever north, following the pointing arrow on the relic he had found in his hometown. Thor felt they were getting closer to his mother, to her land, to the Land of the Druids. He could feel it.

Thor hoped that the arrow was accurate. Deep down, he felt it was. He could sense in every fiber of his being that it was taking them closer to his mother, to his destiny.

Thor rubbed his eyes, determined to stay awake. He had thought they would have already found the Land of the Druids by now; it felt as if they had already covered half the world. For moment he worried: what if it was all a fantasy? What if his mother didn't exist? What if the Land of the Druids didn't exist? What if he was doomed to never find her?

He tried to shake these thoughts from his mind as he urged Mycoples on.

Faster, Thor thought.

Mycoples purred and flapped her wings harder, and as she put her head down, the two of them dove into the mist, heading for some point on the horizon that, Thor knew, might not even exist.

* * *

The day broke as Thor had never seen it, the sky awash with not two suns, but three, all three rising together in different points of the horizon, one red, one green, one purple. They flew just above the clouds, which were spread out beneath him, so close that Thor could touch them, a blanket of color. Thor basked in the most beautiful sunrise he'd ever seen, different colors of the suns breaking through the clouds, the rays streaking over him, beneath him, above him. He felt as if he were flying into the birth of the world.

Thor directed Mycoples down, and he felt moist as they went into the cloud cover; momentarily, his world was awash in different colors, then he was blinded. As they exited the clouds, Thor expected to see yet another ocean, yet another endless expanse of nothingness.

But this time, there was something else.

Thor's heart raced as he spotted beneath them a sight he'd always hoped to see, a sight which occupied his dreams. There, far below, a land came into view. It was an island, swirling in mist, in the midst of this incredible ocean, wide and deep. His relic vibrated, and he looked down and saw the arrow flashing, pointing straight down. But he did not even need to see it to know. He felt it, in every fiber of his being. She was here. His mother. The magical Land of the Druids existed, and he had arrived.

Down, my friend, Thor thought.

Mycoples aimed downward, and as they got closer, the island came increasingly into view. Thor saw endless fields of flowers, remarkably similar to the fields he'd seen in King's Court. He could not understand it. The island felt so familiar, almost as if he had arrived back at home. He had expected the land to be more exotic. It was strange how uncannily familiar it was. How could it be?

The island was encased by a vast beach of sparkling red sand, waves crashing against it. As they neared, Thor saw something that surprised him: there appeared to be an entrance to the island, two massive pillars soaring up to the heavens, the tallest pillars he had ever seen, disappearing into the clouds. A wall, perhaps twenty feet high, enclosed the entire island, and passing through these pillars appeared to be the only way to enter on foot.

Since he was on Mycoples, Thor decided he didn't need to go through the pillars. He would just fly over the wall and land on the island, anywhere he wanted. After all, he was not on foot.

Thor directed Mycoples to fly over the wall, but as she got closer, suddenly, she surprised him. She screeched and pulled back sharply, raising her talons in the air until she was nearly vertical. She stopped short, as if slamming into an invisible shield, and Thor held on for dear life. Thor directed her to keep flying, but she would not go any farther.

That's when Thor realized: the island was surrounded by some sort of energy shield, one so powerful that even Mycoples could not pass through. One could not fly over the wall; one had to pass through the pillars, on foot.

Thor directed Mycoples, and they dove down to the red shore. They landed before the pillars, and Thor tried to direct Mycoples to fly between them, through the vast gates, to enter with him into the Land of the Druids.

But again, Mycoples pulled back, raising her talons.

I cannot enter.

Thor felt Mycoples's thoughts race through him. He looked at her, saw her closing her huge glowing eyes, blinking, and he understood.

She was telling him that he would have to enter the Land of the Druids alone.

Thor dismounted on the red sand and stood before the pillars, examining them.

“I can’t leave you here, my friend,” Thor said. “It is too dangerous for you. If I must go alone, then I must go. Return to the safety of home. Wait for me there.”

Mycoples shook her head and lowered her head to the ground, lying there, resigned.

I will wait for you to the ends of the earth.

Thor could see that she was determined to stay. He knew she was stubborn, that she would not budge.

Thor leaned forward, stroked Mycoples’s scales on her long nose, leaned over, and kissed her. She purred, lifted her head, and rested it on his chest.

“I will return for you, my friend,” Thor said.

Thor turned and faced the pillars, solid gold, shining in the sun and nearly blinding him, and he took the first step. He felt alive in a way he never thought he would as he passed through the gates, and, finally, into the Land of the Druids.

Chapter Six

Gwendolyn rode in the back of the carriage, jostling along the country road, leading the expedition of people that wound its way slowly west, away from King's Court. Gwendolyn was pleased with the evacuation, which had been orderly thus far, and pleased with the progress her people had made. She hated leaving her city behind, but she was confident at least that they'd gained enough distance for her people to be safe, to be well on their way to her ultimate mission: to cross the Western Crossing of the Canyon, to board her fleet of ships on the shores of the Tartuvian, and to cross the great ocean for the Upper Isles. It was the only way, she knew, to keep her people safe.

As they marched, thousands of her people on foot all around her, thousands of others jostling in their carts, the sound of horses' hooves filled Gwen's ears, the sound of the steady motion of carts, of humanity. Gwen found herself getting lost in the monotony of the trek, holding Guwayne to her chest, rocking him. Beside her sat Steffen and Illepra, accompanying her the entire way.

Gwendolyn looked out to the road before her and tried to imagine herself anywhere but here. She had worked so hard to rebuild this kingdom, and now here she was, fleeing from it. She was executing her mass evacuation plan because of the McCloud invasion – but more importantly, because of all of the ancient prophecies, of Argon's hints, because of her own dreams and feelings of pending doom. But what if, she wondered, she was wrong? What if it was all just a dream, just worries in the night? What if everything in the Ring would be fine? What if this was an overreaction, an unnecessary evacuation? After all, she could evacuate her people to another city within the Ring, like Silesia. She did not have to take them across an ocean.

Not unless she foresaw a complete and entire destruction of the Ring. Yet from everything she'd read and heard and felt, that destruction was imminent. Evacuation was the only way, she assured herself.

As Gwen looked to the horizon, she wished Thor could be here, at her side. She looked up and scanned the skies, wondering where he was now. Had he found the Land of the Druids? Had he found his mother? Would he return for her?

And would they ever marry?

Gwen looked down into Guwayne's eyes, and she saw Thor looking back at her, saw Thor's grey eyes, and she held her son tighter. She tried not to think of the sacrifice she'd had to make in the Netherworld. Would it all come true? Would the fates be so cruel?

"My lady?"

Gwen started at the voice; she turned and looked to see Steffen, turning in the cart, pointing up to the sky. She noticed that all around her, her people were stopping, and she suddenly felt her own carriage jostled to a halt. She was puzzled as to why the driver would stop without her command.

Gwen followed Steffen's finger, and there, on the horizon, she was shocked to see three arrows shot up high into the air, all aflame, rising, then arching downward, falling to the ground like shooting stars. She was shocked: three arrows aflame could mean only one thing: it was the sign of the MacGils. The claws of the falcon, used to signal victory. It was a sign used by her father and his father before him, a sign meant only for the MacGils. There was no mistaking it: it meant the MacGils had won. They had taken back King's Court.

But how was it possible? she wondered. When they'd left, there was no hope of victory, much less survival, her precious city overrun by McClouds, with no one left to stand guard.

Gwen spotted, on the distant horizon, a banner being raised, higher and higher. She squinted, and again there was no mistake: it was the banner of the MacGils. It could only mean that King's Court was now back in the hands of the MacGils.

On the one hand, Gwen felt elated, and wanted to return at once. On the other hand, as she looked at the road they had traveled, she thought of all Argon's predictions, of the scrolls she had read,

of her own premonitions. She felt, deep down, that her people still needed to be evacuated. Perhaps the MacGils had recaptured King's Court; but that did not mean that the Ring was safe. Gwendolyn still felt certain that something much worse was coming, and that she had to get her people out of here, to safety.

"It seems we have won," Steffen said.

"A cause for celebration!" Aberthol called out, approaching her cart.

"King's Court is ours again!" called out a commoner.

A great cheer arose amongst her people.

"We must turn back immediately!" called out another.

Another cheer rose up. But Gwen shook her head adamantly. She stood and faced her people, and all eyes turned to her.

"We shall not turn back!" she boomed to her people. "We have begun the evacuation, and we must stick to it. I know that a great danger lies ahead for the Ring. I must get you to safety while we still have time, while there is still a chance."

Her people groaned, dissatisfied, and several commoners stepped forward, pointing to the horizon.

"I don't know about the rest of you," one bellowed, "but King's Court is my home! It is everything I know and love! I'm not about to cross the sea to some strange island while our city is intact and in the hands of the MacGils! I'm turning back for King's Court!"

A great cheer rose up, and as he left, walking back, hundreds of people fell in and followed him, turning their carts, heading back down the road toward King's Court.

"My lady, should I stop them?" Steffen asked, panicked, loyal to her to a fault.

"You are hearing the voice of the people, my lady," Aberthol said, coming up beside her. "You would be foolish to deny them. Moreover, you cannot. It is their home. It is all that they know. Do not fight your own people. Do not lead them without good reason."

"But I have good reason," Gwen said. "I know destruction is coming."

Aberthol shook his head.

"And yet they do not," he replied. "I do not doubt you. But queens plan ahead, while the masses act on instinct. And a queen is only as powerful as the masses allow her to be."

Gwen stood there, burning with frustration as she watched her people defy her command, migrating back to King's Court. It was the first time they had ever openly rebelled, had openly defied her. She did not like the feeling. Was it portending things to come? Were her days as queen numbered?

"My lady, shall I command the soldiers to stop them?" Steffen asked.

She felt as if he was the only one left still loyal to her. A part of her wanted to say yes.

But as she watched them go, she knew it would be futile.

"No," she said softly, her voice broken, feeling as if her child had just turned her back on her. What pained her the most was that she knew their actions would only lead to their harm, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. "I cannot prevent what destiny holds for them."

* * *

Gwendolyn, despondent as she trailed her people in the return to King's Court, rode through the rear gates of King's Court and already heard the distant cheers of celebration coming from the other side. Her people were elated, dancing and cheering, throwing their hats into the air as they all poured through the gates, returning to the courtyards of the city they knew and loved, the city they called home. Everyone rushed to congratulate the Legion, Kendrick, and the victorious Silver.

But Gwendolyn proceeded with a pit in her stomach, torn by mixed feelings. On the one hand, she was of course elated to be back here, too, elated that they had conquered the McClouds, elated to see that Kendrick and the others were safe. She took pride in seeing the McCloud corpses littered all

over the place, and she was thrilled to see that her brother Godfrey had managed to survive, sitting off to the side nursing a wound, head in hand.

Yet at the same time, Gwendolyn could not quell her deep sense of foreboding, her certainty that some other terrible calamity was coming for them all, and that the best thing for her people to do was to evacuate before it was too late.

But her people were swept up in victory. They would hear no reason as she was ushered, with thousands of others, into the sprawling city she knew so well. As they entered, Gwen was relieved to see that, at least, the McClouds had been killed quickly, before they'd had a chance to do any real damage to all of her careful rebuilding.

"Gwendolyn!"

Gwendolyn turned to see Kendrick dismount, rush forward, and embrace her. She hugged him back, his armor hard and cold, as she handed Guwayne to Illepra beside her.

"My brother," she said, looking up at him, his eyes shining with victory. "I am proud of you. You've done more than hold our city – you have vanquished our attackers. You and your Silver. You embody our code of honor. Father would be proud."

Kendrick grinned as he bowed his head.

"I am grateful for your words, sister. I was not about to allow your city, our city, father's city, be destroyed by those heathens. I was not alone; you should know that our brother Godfrey put up the first resistance. He and a small handful of others, and even the Legion – they all helped hold back the attackers."

Gwen turned to see Godfrey walking over at them, a beleaguered smile on his face, holding one hand to the side of his head, caked with dried blood.

"You became a man today, my brother," she said to him in earnest, draping a hand on his shoulder. "Father would be proud."

Godfrey smiled back sheepishly.

"I just wanted to warn you," he said.

She smiled.

"You did far more than that."

Alongside him came Elden, O'Connor, Conven, and dozens of Legion members.

"My lady," Elden said. "Our men fought valiantly here today. Yet I'm sad to say, we have lost many."

Gwen looked past him and saw the dead bodies all over King's Court. Thousands of McClouds – yet also dozens of Legion recruits. Even a handful of Silver were dead. It brought back painful memories of the last time her city was invaded. It was hard for Gwen to look.

She turned and saw a dozen McClouds, captives, still alive, heads down, hands behind their backs.

"And who are these?" she asked.

"The McCloud generals," Kendrick replied. "We've kept them alive. They are all that remains of their army. What do you command we do with them?"

Gwendolyn looked them over slowly, staring them in the eye as she did. Each one stared back at her, proud, defiant. Their faces were crude, typical McClouds, never showing remorse.

Gwen sighed. There had been a time when she had thought that peace was the answer to everything, that if only she could be kind enough and gracious enough to her neighbors, could show enough goodwill, then they'd be kind to her and her people.

But the longer she ruled, the more she saw that others only interpreted overtures of peace as a sign of weakness, as something to be taken advantage of. All her efforts at peace had culminated in this: a surprise attack. And on Pilgrimage Day no less, the holiest day of the year.

Gwendolyn felt herself hardening inside. She did not have the same naïveté, the same faith in man, that she once did. More and more, she had faith in only one thing: a reign of steel.

As Kendrick and the others all looked to her, Gwendolyn raised her voice:

“Kill them all,” she said.

Their eyes widened in surprise, and respect. They clearly had not expected this from their queen who had always strived for peace.

“Did I hear correctly, my lady?” Kendrick asked, shock in his voice.

Gwendolyn nodded.

“You did,” she replied. “When you’re done, collect their corpses, and expel them from our gates.”

Gwendolyn turned and walked away, through the courtyard of King’s Court, and as she did, she heard behind her the screams of the McClouds. Despite herself, she flinched.

Gwen walked through a city filled with corpses and yet filled with cheering and music and dancing, thousands of people swarming back to their homes, refilling the city as if nothing bad had ever happened. As she watched them, her heart filled with dread.

“The city is ours again,” Kendrick said, coming up beside her.

Gwendolyn shook her head.

“Just for a short while.”

He looked at her in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

She stopped and faced him.

“I’ve seen the prophecies,” she said. “The ancient scripts. I’ve spoken with Argon. I’ve dreamt a dream. An attack is coming our way. It was a mistake to return here. We must all evacuate at once.”

Kendrick looked at her, his face ashen, and Gwen sighed as she surveyed her people.

“But my people will not listen.”

Kendrick shook his head.

“What if you’re mistaken?” he said. “What if you are looking too deeply into prophecies? We have the finest fighting army in the world. Nothing can reach our gates. The McClouds are dead, and we have no other enemies left in the Ring. The Shield is up and holds strong. And we also have Ralibar, wherever he is. You have nothing to fear. *We* have nothing to fear.”

Gwendolyn shook her head.

“That is precisely the moment when you have the most to fear,” she replied.

Kendrick sighed.

“My lady, this was just a freak attack,” he said. “They surprised us on Pilgrimage Day. We shall never leave King’s Court unguarded again. This city is a fortress. It has held for thousands of years. There is no one left to topple us.”

“You are wrong,” she said.

“Well, even if I am, you see that the people won’t leave. My sister,” Kendrick said, his voice softening, imploring, “I love you. But I speak as your commander. As the commander of the Silver. If you try to force your people to evacuate, to do what they do not want to do, you will have a revolt on your hands. They do not see whatever danger that you do. And to be honest, I do not even see it myself.”

Gwendolyn looked at her people, and she knew that Kendrick was right. They would not listen to her. Even her own brother did not believe her.

And it broke her heart.

* * *

Gwendolyn stood alone on the upper parapets of her castle, holding Guwayne tight and looking out at the sunset, the two suns hanging low in the sky. Down below, she heard the muted shouts and celebrations of her people, all preparing for a huge night of celebration. Out there, she saw the rolling

vistas of the lands surrounding King's Court, a kingdom at its peak. Everywhere was the bounty of summer, endless fields of green, orchards, a lush land rich with bounty. The land was content, rebuilt after so much tragedy, and she saw a world at peace with itself.

Gwendolyn furrowed her brow, wondering how any sort of darkness could ever reach here. Maybe the darkness she had imagined had already come in the form of the McClouds. Maybe it had already been averted, thanks to Kendrick and the others. Maybe Kendrick had been right. Maybe she had grown too cautious since she had become Queen, had seen too much tragedy. Maybe she was, like Kendrick said, looking too deeply into things.

After all, to evacuate her people from their homes, to lead them across the Canyon, onto ships, to the volatile Upper Isles, was a drastic move, a move reserved for a time of the greatest calamity. What if she did so, and no tragedy ever befell the Ring? She'd be known as the Queen who panicked with no danger in sight.

Gwendolyn sighed, clutching Guwayne as he squirmed in her arms, and wondered if she were losing her mind. She looked up and searched the skies for any sign of Thorgrin, hoping, praying. At least, she hoped for any sign of Ralibar, wherever he was. But he, too, had not returned.

Gwen watched an empty sky, once again disappointed. Once again, she would have to rely on herself. Even her people, who had always supported her, who had looked to her as a god, now seemed to distrust her. Her father had never prepared her for this. Without the support of her people, what sort of Queen would she be? Powerless.

Gwen desperately wanted to turn to someone for comfort, for answers. But Thorgrin was gone; her mother was gone; seemingly everyone she knew and loved was gone. She felt at a crossroads, and had never felt more confused.

Gwen closed her eyes and called upon God to help her. She tried with all her will to summon him. She had never been one to pray much, but her faith was strong, and she felt certain that he existed.

Please, God. I am so confused. Show me how to best protect my people. Show me how to best protect Guwayne. Show me how to be a great ruler.

"Prayers are a powerful thing," came a voice.

Gwen spun at once, instantly relieved to hear that voice. Standing there, several feet away, was Argon. He was clothed in his white cloak and hood, holding his staff, looking out at the horizon instead of her.

"Argon, I need answers. Please. Help me."

"We are always in need of answers," he replied. "And yet they do not always come. Our lives are meant to be lived out. The future cannot always be told for us."

"But it can be hinted at," Gwendolyn said. "All the prophecies I've read, all the scrolls, the history of the Ring – still point to a great darkness that is coming. You must tell me. Will it occur?"

Argon turned and stared at her, his eyes filled with fire, darker and scarier than she'd ever seen them.

"Yes," he replied.

The definiteness of his answer scared her more than anything. He, Argon, who always spoke in riddles.

Gwen shivered inside.

"Will it come here, to King's Court?"

"Yes," he replied.

Gwen felt her sense of dread deepening. She also felt secure in her conviction that she had been right all along.

"Will the Ring will be destroyed?" she asked.

Argon looked to her, and nodded slowly.

"There are but a few things left that I can tell you," he said. "If you choose, this can be one of them."

Gwen thought long and hard. She knew Argon's wisdom was precious. Yet this was something she really needed to know.

"Tell me," she said.

Argon took a deep breath as he turned and surveyed the horizon for what felt like forever.

"The Ring will be destroyed. Everything you know and love will be wiped away. The place you now stand will be nothing but flaming embers and ashes. All of the Ring will be ashes. Your nation will be gone. A darkness is coming. A darkness greater than any darkness in our history."

Gwendolyn felt the truth of his words reverberate inside her, felt the deep timbre of his voice resonate to her very core. She knew that every word he spoke was true.

"My people do not see this," she said, her voice shaking.

Argon shrugged.

"You are Queen. Sometimes force must be used. Not only against one's enemies. But even against one's people. Do what you know. Do not always seek your people's approval. Approval is an elusive thing. Sometimes, when your people hate you the most, that is a sign that you are doing the best thing for them. Your father was blessed with a reign of peace. But you, Gwendolyn, you will have a far greater test: you will have a reign of steel."

As Argon turned to walk away, Gwendolyn stepped forward and reached out for him.

"Argon," she called.

He stopped, but did not turn around.

"Just tell me one more thing. I beg you. Will I ever see Thorgrin again?"

He paused, a long, heavy silence. In that grim silence, she felt her heart breaking in two, hoping and praying that he would give her just one more answer.

"Yes," he replied.

She stood there, her heart pounding, craving more.

"Can you tell me nothing more?"

He turned and looked at her, sadness in his eyes.

"Remember the choice you made. Not every love is meant to last forever."

High above, Gwen heard a falcon screech, and she looked to the sky, wondering.

She turned to look back at Argon, but he was already gone.

She clutched Guwayne tight and looked out at her kingdom, taking one long last look, wanting to remember it like this, when it was still vibrant, alive. Before it all turned to ash. She wondered with dread what danger so great could be lurking beyond that veneer of beauty. She shuddered, as she knew, without a doubt, that it would find them all very soon.

Chapter Seven

Stara yelled as she plummeted through the air, flailing, Reece beside her, Matus and Srog beside him, the four of them falling from the castle wall in the blinding wind and rain, plunging toward the ground. She braced herself as she saw the large bushes come up at her quickly, and she realized the only reason she might survive this fall was because of them.

A moment later, Stara felt as if every bone in her body was breaking as she smashed into the bush – which barely broke her fall – and continued on until she hit the ground. She felt the wind knocked out of her, and was sure she bruised a rib. Yet at the same time, she sank several inches and realized the ground was softer, muddier than she thought, and cushioned her fall.

The others hit, too, beside her, and all of them began to tumble as the mud gave way. Stara hadn't anticipated they would land on a steep slope, and before she could stop herself, she was sliding with the others, rushing downhill, all of them caught up in a mudslide.

They rolled and slid, and soon the gushing waters carried them, sliding down the mountain at full speed. As she slid, Stara looked back over her shoulder and saw her father's castle quickly fading from view, and realized that at least it was taking them away, far from their attackers.

Stara looked back down and dodged as she narrowly avoided rocks in her path, going so fast she could hardly catch her breath. The mud was unbelievably slick, and the rain came down harder, her world spinning at lightning speed. She tried to slow, grasping at the mud, but it was impossible.

Just as Stara wondered if this would ever end, she was flooded with panic as she remembered where this slope led: right off the side of a cliff. If they didn't stop themselves soon, she realized, they would all be dead.

Stara saw that none of the others could stop the slide either, all of them flailing, groaning, trying their hardest but helpless. Stara looked out and saw, with dread, the drop-off fast approaching. With no way to stop themselves, they were about to go right over the edge.

Suddenly Stara saw Srog and Matus veer to the left, to a small cave perched at the edge of the precipice. They somehow managed to smash into the rocks feet first, coming to a standstill just before they went over the edge.

Stara tried to dig her heels into the mud, but nothing was working; she merely spun and tumbled, and seeing the precipice coming up on her, she yelled, knowing she'd be over the edge in a second.

Suddenly, Stara felt a rough hand grabbing the back of her shirt, slowing her speed, then stopping her. She looked up to see Reece. He clung to a flimsy tree, one arm wrapped around it, at the edge of the precipice, his other hand reaching out and holding her as water and mud gushed, pulling her away. She was losing ground, nearly dangling over the edge. He had stopped her fall, but she was losing ground.

Reece could not continue to hold her, and she knew that if he didn't let go, soon they would both go over together. They would both die.

"Let me go!" she yelled up at him.

But he shook his head adamantly.

"Never!" he yelled back, his face dripping with water, over the rain.

Reece suddenly let go of the tree so he could reach out and grab her wrists with both hands; at the same time, he wrapped his legs around the tree, holding himself from behind. He yanked her to him with all his might, his legs the only thing keeping them both from going over.

With one final move, he groaned and cried and managed to yank her out of the current, to the side, and sent her rolling over to the cave with the others. Reece tumbled with her as she went, rolling out of the current himself, and helping her as she crawled.

When they reached the safety of the cave Stara collapsed, exhausted, lying face-first in the mud, and so grateful to be alive.

As she lay there, breathing hard, dripping wet, she wondered not about how close she'd come to death, but rather about one thing: did Reece still love her? She realized she cared more about that than even whether or not she lived.

* * *

Stara sat huddled around the small fire inside the cave, the others close by, finally starting to dry off. She looked around and realized the four of them looked like survivors of a war, cheeks sunken, all staring into the flames, holding up their hands and rubbing them, trying to shelter themselves from the ceaseless wet and cold. They listened to the wind and rain, the ever-present elements of the Upper Isles, thrashing outside. It felt like it would never end.

It was night now, and they had waited all day to light this fire, for fear of being seen. Finally, they had all been so cold and tired and miserable, they had risked it. Stara felt enough time had passed from their escape – and besides, there was no way those men would dare to venture all the way down to these cliffs. It was too steep and wet, and if they did, they would die trying.

Still, the four of them were trapped in here, like prisoners. If they stepped foot outside the cave, eventually an army of Upper Islanders would find them, and kill them all. Her brother would have no mercy on her, either. It was hopeless.

She sat near a distant, brooding Reece, and pondered the events. She had saved Reece's life back in the fort, but he had saved hers on the cliff. Did he still care for her the way he once did? The way that she still cared for him? Or was he still bitter over what had happened to Selese? Did he blame her? Would he ever forgive her?

Stara could not imagine the pain he was going through as he sat there, head in his hands, staring into the fire like a man who was lost. She wondered what was racing through his mind. He looked like a man with nothing left to lose, like a man who had been to the edge of suffering and had not quite returned. A man wracked by guilt. He did not look like the man she had once known, the man so full of love and joy, so quick to smile, who'd showered her with love and affection. Now, instead, he looked as if something had died inside of him.

Stara looked up, afraid to meet Reece's eyes, yet needing to see his face. She hoped secretly that he would be staring at her, thinking of her. Yet when she saw him, her heart broke to see that he was not looking at her at all. Instead, he just stared into the flames, the loneliest look on his face that she had ever seen.

Stara could not help wondering for the millionth time if whatever had existed between them was over, ruined by Selese's death. For the millionth time, she cursed her brothers – and her father – for putting into action such a devious plot. She had always wanted Reece to herself, of course; but she would never have condoned the subterfuge that had led to her demise. She had never wanted Selese to die, or even to be hurt. She had hoped that Reece would break the news to her in a gentle way, and that while upset, she would understand – and certainly not take her own life. Or destroy Reece's.

Now all of Stara's plans, her entire future, had crumbled before her eyes, thanks to her awful family. Matus was the only rational one left of her bloodline. Yet Stara wondered what would become of him, of the four of them. Would they just rot and die here in this cave? Eventually they would have to leave it. And her brother's men, she knew, were relentless. He would not stop until he'd killed them all – especially after Reece had killed her father.

Stara knew she should feel some remorse at her father being dead – and yet she felt none at all. She hated the man, and always had. If anything, she felt relieved, even grateful to Reece for killing him. He had been a lying, honorless warrior and king his entire life, and no father to her at all.

Stara glanced at these three warriors, all sitting there looking distraught. They'd been silent for hours, and she wondered if any them had a plan. Srog was badly wounded, and Matus and Reece had

been wounded as well, though their injuries were minor. They all looked frozen to the bone, beaten down by the weather of this place, by the odds against them.

“So are we all going to sit in this cave forever, and die here?” Stara asked, breaking the thick silence, no longer able to stand the monotony or the gloom.

Slowly, Srog and Matus looked over at her. But Reece still would not look up and meet her eyes.

“And where would you have us go?” Srog asked, defensive. “The entire island is crawling with your brother’s men. What chance do we hold against them? Especially with them enraged at our escape and your father’s death.”

“You got us into a pickle, my cousin,” Matus said, smiling, putting a hand on Reece’s shoulder. “That was a bold act of yours. Possibly the boldest act I’ve seen in my life.”

Reece shrugged.

“He stole my bride. He deserved to die.”

Stara bristled at the word *bride*. It broke her heart. His choice of that word told her everything – clearly, Reece was still in love with Selese. He would not even meet Stara’s eyes. She felt like crying.

“Do not worry, cousin,” Matus said. “I rejoice my father is dead, and I am glad that you are the one who killed him. I do not blame you. I admire you. Even if you nearly got us all killed in the process.”

Reece nodded, clearly appreciating Matus’s words.

“But no one answered me,” Stara said. “What is the plan? For us all to die here?”

“What is *your* plan?” Reece shot back at her.

“I have none,” she said. “I did my part. I rescued us all from that place.”

“Yes, you did,” Reece admitted, still looking into the flames rather than at her. “I owe you my life.”

Stara felt a glimmer of hope at Reece’s words, even if he would still not meet her eyes. She wondered if maybe he did not hate her after all.

“And you saved mine,” she replied. “From the edge of the cliff. We are even.”

Reece still stared into to the flames.

She waited for him to say something back, to say that he loved her, to say anything. But he said nothing. Stara found herself reddening.

“Is that it then?” she said. “Have we nothing else to say to each other? Is our business done?”

Reece raised his head, meeting her eyes for the first time with a puzzled expression.

Stara could stand it no more. She jumped to her feet and stormed away from the others, standing at the edge of the cave, her back to all of them. She looked out at the night, the rain, the wind, and she wondered: was everything over between her and Reece? If it was, she felt no reason to go on living.

“We can escape to the ships,” Reece finally said, after an interminable silence, his terse words cutting through the night.

Stara turned and looked at him.

“Escape to the ships?” she asked.

Reece nodded.

“Our men are down there, in the harbor below. We must go to them. It is the last MacGil territory left in this place.”

Stara shook her head.

“A reckless plan,” she said. “The ships will be surrounded, if they have not already been destroyed. We’d have to get through all of my brother’s men to get there. Better to hide out somewhere else on the island.”

Reece shook his head, determined.

“No,” he said. “Those are *our* men. We must go to them, whatever the cost. If they are attacked, then we will go down fighting with them.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” she said, equally determined. “At morning light, thousands of my brother’s men will litter the shores. There is no way past them.”

Reece stood, brushing off the dampness, a fire in his eyes.

“Then we shall not wait for morning light,” he said. “We will go now. Before the sun rises.”

Matus slowly stood, too, and Reece looked down at Srog.

“Srog?” Matus asked. “Can you make it?”

Srog grimaced as he stumbled to his feet, Matus lending a hand.

“I will not hold you back,” Srog said. “Go without me. I will stay here in this cave.”

“You will die here in this cave,” Matus said.

“Well then you will not die with me,” he replied.

Reece shook his head.

“*No man left behind*,” he said. “You will join us, no matter what it takes.”

Reece, Matus, and Srog walked up beside Stara at the edge of the cave, gazing out into the howling wind and rain. Stara looked the three men over, wondering if they were crazy.

“You wanted a plan,” Reece said, turning to her. “Well, now we have one.”

She shook her head slowly.

“Reckless,” she said. “That is the way of men. We will likely die on the way to the ships.”

Reece shrugged.

“We will all die one day anyway.”

As they all stood there, watching the elements, waiting for that perfect moment, Stara waited for Reece to do something, anything, to take her hand, to show her, even in the smallest way, that he still cared for her.

But he did not. He kept his hand to himself and Stara felt herself hardening, crushed inside. She prepared to embark, no longer caring what fate had in store for her. As they all stepped out into the darkness together, she realized that, without Reece’s love, she had nothing left to lose.

Chapter Eight

Alistair stood on the ship, terrified, arms bound behind her, her heart pounding as dozens of sailors closed in on her from all sides, a look of lust and death in their eyes. She realized that these men all aimed to rape and torture and kill her, and that they would take delight in doing so. She marveled that such evil existed in the world, and for a moment she struggled to understand humankind.

Her entire life, she'd always been known, everywhere she went, as the most beautiful girl – and more than once it had gotten her into trouble. She just wanted to be left alone. She had always just wanted to look normal, like everybody else. She never wanted to attract attention – and she certainly did not want to attract trouble.

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