



MORGAN RICE

A
DREAM
OF
MORTALS

BOOK #15 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Dream of Mortals

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In A DREAM OF MORTALS, Thorgrin and his brothers struggle to break free from the grips of the pirates, and to continue their search for Guwayne at sea. As they encounter unexpected friends and foes, magic and weaponry, dragons and men, it will change the very course of their destiny. Will they finally find Guwayne? Darius and his few friends survive the massacre of their people – but only to find that they are captives, thrown into the Empire Arena. Shackled together, facing unimaginable opponents, their only hope for survival is to stand and fight together, as brothers. Gwendolyn wakes from her slumber to discover that she and the others have survived their trek across the Great Waste – and even more shocking, that they have come to a land beyond their wildest imagination. As they are brought into a new royal court, the secrets Gwendolyn learns about her ancestors and her own people will change her destiny forever. Erec and Alistair, still captive at sea, struggle to break free from the grips of the Empire fleet in a bold and daring nighttime escape. When odds seem at their worst, they receive an unexpected surprise that might just give them a second chance for victory – and another chance to continue their attack on the heart of the Empire. Godfrey and his crew, imprisoned once again, set to be executed, have one last chance to try to escape. After being betrayed, they want more than escape this time – they want vengeance. Volusia is surrounded on all sides as she strives to take and hold the Empire capital – and she will have to summon a more powerful magic than she's ever known if she is to prove herself a Goddess, and become Supreme Ruler of the Empire. Once again, the fate of the Empire hangs in the balance. With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A DREAM OF MORTALS 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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A Dream of Mortals

(Book #15 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

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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 fifteen 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, Portuguese, 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

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence... For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival... Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

“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’s entertaining epic fantasy [THE SORCERER’S RING] includes classic traits of the genre – a strong setting, highly inspired by ancient Scotland and its history, and a good sense of court intrigue.”

– *Kirkus Reviews*

“I loved how Morgan Rice built Thor’s character and the world in which he lived. The landscape and the creatures that roamed it were very well described... I enjoyed [the plot]. It was short and sweet... There were just the right amount of minor characters, so I didn’t get confused. There were adventures and harrowing moments, but the action depicted wasn’t overly grotesque. The book would be perfect for a teen reader... The beginnings of something remarkable are there...”

– *San Francisco Book Review*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin «Thor» McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

– *Publishers Weekly*

“[A QUEST OF HEROES] is a quick and easy read. The ends of chapters make it so that you have to read what happens next and you don’t want to put it down. There are some typos in the book and some names are messed up, but this does not distract from the overall story. The end of the book made me want to get the next book immediately and that is what I did. All nine of the Sorcerer’s Ring series can currently be purchased on the Kindle store and A Quest of Heroes is currently free to get you started! If you are looking for a something quick and fun to read while on vacation this book will do nicely.”

– *FantasyOnline.net*

Books by Morgan Rice

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A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)

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THE SORCERER'S RING



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Chapter One

Gwendolyn slowly opened her eyes, caked with sand, the effort taking all of her strength. She could only open them a sliver, and she squinted out at a world that was blurry, filled with sunlight. Somewhere up above, the glaring desert suns shone down, creating a world that blinded her with white. Gwen did not know if she were dead or alive – she suspected the latter.

Blinded by the light, Gwen was too weak to turn her head left or right. *Was this what it was like, she wondered, to be dead?*

Suddenly, a shadow was cast over her face, and she blinked to see a black hood above her, obscuring the face of a small creature, its face hidden in darkness. All Gwen could see were its beady yellow eyes, staring down at her, examining her as if she were some object lost on the desert floor. It made a strange squeaking noise, and Gwen realized it was speaking in a language she did not understand.

There came a shuffling of feet, a small cloud of dust, and two more of these creatures appeared over her, faces covered with black hoods, all their eyes aglow, brighter than the sun. They squeaked, seeming to communicate with one another. Gwen could not tell what sort of creatures they were, and she wondered once again if she were alive, or if this were all a dream. Was it another one of the hallucinations she'd suffered during these past days in the desert heat?

Gwen felt a poke on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes again to see one of the creatures reaching down with its staff and jabbing her, presumably testing to see if she were still alive. Gwen wanted to reach up and swat it away, annoyed – but was too weak for even that. She welcomed the sensation, though; it made her feel that maybe, just maybe, she was alive after all.

Gwen suddenly felt long, thin claws wrap around her wrists, her arms, and felt herself being picked up, hoisted onto some sort of cloth, perhaps a canvas. She felt herself being dragged across the desert floor, sliding backwards beneath the sun. She had no idea if she were being dragged off to her death, but she was too weak to care. She looked up and saw the world go by, the sky bouncing as she did, the suns as blazing hot and brilliant as ever. She had never felt so weak or dehydrated in her life; each breath felt as if she were breathing fire.

Gwen suddenly felt a cold liquid run down her lips, and she saw one of the creatures leaning over her, pouring water from a sack. It took all of her energy just to manage to stick out her tongue. The cool water trickled down her throat, and it felt as if she were swallowing fire. She hadn't realized her throat could become this dry.

Gwendolyn drank greedily, relieved that at least these creatures were friendly. The creature, though, stopped pouring after a few seconds, pulling back the sack.

“More,” Gwen tried to whisper – but the words wouldn't come out, her voice still too raspy.

Gwen continued to be dragged and she tried to muster the energy to break free, to reach out and grab that sack, to drink all the water that was in there. But she did not have the energy to even lift an arm.

Gwen was dragged and dragged, her legs and feet hitting bumps and rocks beneath, and it seemed to go on forever. After a while she could no longer tell how much time had passed. It felt like days. The only sound she heard was that of the desert wind ripping through, carrying more dust and heat.

Gwen felt more cold water on her lips, and drank more this time, until it was pulled away. She opened her eyes a bit further, and as she saw the creature pull it away, she realized that he was feeding her slowly so as not to give her too much at once. The water trickling down her throat did not feel quite as harsh this time, and she felt the hydration rushing to her veins. She realized how desperately she needed it.

“Please,” Gwen said, “more.”

The creature, instead, poured some water over her face, her eyes, and the cool water felt so refreshing as it trickled down her hot skin. It took some of the dust off of her eyelids, and she was able to open them a bit more – enough to at least see what was happening.

All around her Gwen saw more of these creatures, dozens of them, shuffling along the desert floor in their black cloaks and hoods, speaking amongst themselves with strange squeaking noises. She looked over just enough to see them carrying several more bodies, and she felt an immense sense of relief to recognize the bodies of Kendrick, Sandara, Aberthol, Brandt, Atme, Illepra, the baby, Steffen, Arliss, several Silver, and Krohn – perhaps a dozen or so in all. They were all being dragged alongside her, and Gwen couldn't tell if they were alive or dead. From the way they all lay, all so limp, she could only assume they were dead.

Her heart sank, and Gwen prayed to God that wasn't the case. Yet she was pessimistic. After all, who could have survived out here? She was still not entirely sure that *she* had survived.

As she continued to be dragged, Gwen closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she realized that she had fallen asleep. She did not know how much more time had passed, but it was now late in the day, the two suns low in the sky. She was still being dragged. She wondered who these creatures were; she assumed them to be desert nomads of some sort, perhaps some tribe who had somehow managed to survive out here. She wondered how they'd found her, where they were taking her. On the one hand, she was so grateful that they had saved her life; on the other, who knew if they were taking her to be killed? To be a meal for the tribe?

Either way, she was too weak and exhausted to do anything about it.

Gwen opened her eyes, she did not know how much later, startled by a rustling sound. At first it sounded like a distant thorn bush whirling across the desert floor. But as the sound grew louder, more incessant, she knew it was something else. It sounded like a sandstorm. A raging, incessant sandstorm.

As they neared it and the people carrying her turned, Gwen looked over and was afforded a view unlike any she had ever seen. It was a view that made her stomach churn, especially as she realized they were approaching it: there, perhaps fifty feet away, was a wall of raging sand, rising right up into the sky, so high she could not see if it had an end. The wind blew violently through it, like a contained tornado, and the sand churned violently in the air, so thick she could not see through it.

They headed right for this wall of raging sand, the noise so loud it was deafening, and she wondered why. It seemed like they were approaching instant death.

“Turn back!” Gwen tried to say.

But her voice was hoarse, too weak for anyone to hear, especially over the wind. She doubted they'd listen to her, even if they had heard her.

Gwen began to feel the sand scraping her skin as they neared the churning sand wall, and suddenly two creatures approached her and draped a long, heavy sheet over her, draping it over her body, covering her face. She realized they were shielding her.

A moment later, Gwen found herself in a violent wall of churning sand.

As they entered it, the noise was so loud, Gwen felt as if she would go deaf, and she wondered how she could possibly survive this. Gwen realized right away that this canvas over her was saving her; it protected her face and skin from being torn apart by the raging wall of sand. The nomads marched on, their heads down low against the sand wall, as if they had done this many times before. They continued to yank her through it, and as the sand raged all around her, and Gwen wondered if it would ever have an end.

Then, finally, there came silence. Sweet, sweet silence, like she had never savored before. Two nomads removed the canvas from her, and Gwen saw they had cleared the sand wall, had emerged out the other side. But the other side of what? she wondered.

Finally, the dragging came to a stop and as it did, all Gwen's questions were answered. They set her down gently, and she lay there, unmoving, looking up at the sky. She blinked several times, trying to comprehend the sight before her.

Slowly, the view before her came into focus. She saw an impossibly high wall made of rock, climbing hundreds of feet into the clouds. The wall stretched in all directions, disappearing into the horizon. At the top of these towering cliffs, Gwen saw ramparts, fortifications, and atop them, thousands of knights wearing armor that shone in the sun.

She could not understand. How could they be here? she wondered. Knights, in the middle of the desert? Where had they taken her?

Then suddenly, with a jolt, she knew. Her heart beat faster as she suddenly realized they had found it, had made it here, all the way across the Great Waste.

It existed, after all.

The Second Ring.

Chapter Two

Angel felt herself plummeting through the air as she dove down, headfirst, for the raging waters of the churning sea below. She could still see Thorgrin's body submerged beneath the water, unconscious, limp, sinking down deeper with every passing moment. She knew that he could be dead within moments, and that if she hadn't dove off the ship when she had, he would certainly have no chance to live.

She was determined to save him – even if it meant her life, even if she died down there with him. She could not really understand it, but she felt an intense connection to Thor, ever since the moment they had first met back on her island. He had been the only one she had ever met who was unafraid of her leprosy, who had given her a hug despite it, who had looked at her as a normal person, and who had never shied away from her for a minute. She felt she owed him a great debt, felt an intense loyalty to him, and she would sacrifice her life for him, whatever the cost.

Angel felt her skin pierced by the icy cold waters as she was submerged. It felt like a million daggers piercing her skin. It was so cold it startled her, and she held her breath as she plunged down, deeper and deeper, opening her eyes in the murky waters and searching for Thorgrin. She barely spotted him in the darkness, sinking lower and lower, and she gave a great kick, again and again, reached out and, using her downward momentum, just grabbed his sleeve.

He was heavier than she thought. She wrapped both arms around him, turned around, and kicked furiously, using all her might to get them to stop descending and instead ascend. Angel wasn't big and she wasn't strong, but she had learned quickly growing up that her legs held a strength that her upper body did not. Her arms were weak from the leprosy but her legs were her gift, stronger than a man's, and she used them now, kicking for her life, swimming upwards toward the surface. If there was one thing she had learned growing up on an island, it was how to swim.

Angel kicked their way out of the murky deep, up higher and higher toward the surface, looking up and seeing sunlight reflected down through the waves above.

Come on! she thought. *Just a few more feet!*

Exhausted, unable to hold her breath much longer, she willed herself to kick harder – and with one last kick, she exploded up to the surface.

Angel came up gasping for air and she brought Thor up with her, her arms wrapped around him, using her legs to keep them afloat, kicking and kicking, holding his head above the surface. He still appeared unconscious to her, and now she worried if he had drowned.

“Thorgrin!” she cried. “Wake up!”

Angel grabbed him from behind, wrapped her arms tight around his stomach, and pulled sharply toward her, again and again, as she had seen one of her leper friends do once when another friend was drowning. She did it now, pulling up into his diaphragm, her little arms shaking as she did.

“Please, Thorgrin,” she cried. “Please live! Live for me!”

Angel suddenly heard a gratifying cough, followed by throwing up of water, and she was elated to realize that Thor had come back. He threw up all the sea water as he racked his lungs, coughing up again and again. Angel was flooded with relief.

Even better, Thor seemed to have regained consciousness. The whole ordeal seemed to have finally shaken him from his deep slumber. Maybe, she hoped, he would even be strong enough to fight off these men and help them escape somewhere.

Angel had hardly finished the thought when she suddenly felt a heavy rope land on her head, dropping down from the sky and completely engulfing her and Thorgrin.

She looked up and saw the cutthroats standing over them at the edge of the ship, staring down, grabbing hold of the other end of the rope and yanking it up, hoisting them in as if they were fish.

Angel struggled, thrashing at the rope, and she hoped Thor would, too. But while he coughed, Thor still lay there limply, and she could tell he clearly didn't have the strength yet to defend.

Angel felt them slowly hoisted up in the air, higher and higher, water dripping down from the net, as the pirates pulled them closer, back to the ship.

“NO!” she yelled, thrashing, trying to break free.

A cutthroat held out a long iron hook, hooked the net, and yanked them with one jerky motion for the deck.

They swung through the air, the cords were cut, and Angel felt herself falling as they landed hard on the deck, dropping a good ten feet and tumbling as they did. Angel's ribs hurt from the impact and she thrashed at the rope, trying to break free.

But it was no use. Within moments several pirates jumped on top of them, pinning her and Thorgrin down and yanking them out. Angel felt several rough hands grab her, and felt her wrists bound behind her back with coarse rope as she was dragged to her feet, dripping wet. She could not even move.

Angel looked over, worried for Thorgrin, and she saw him being bound, too, still out of it, more asleep than awake. They were each dragged together across the deck, too fast, Angel stumbling as they went.

“This will teach you to try to get away from us,” a pirate snapped.

Angel looked up and saw before her a wooden door to the lower deck being opened, and she stared into the blackness of the lower holds of the deck. The next thing she knew she and Thor were thrown by the pirates.

Angel felt herself go tumbling as she went flying headfirst into the blackness. She hit her head hard on the wood floor, landing face first, and then felt the weight of Thor's body landing on top of her, the two of them rolling into the blackness.

The wooden door to the deck was slammed from above, blocking out all the light, then locked with a heavy chain, and she lay there, breathing hard in the blackness, wondering where the pirates had thrown her.

At the far end of the hold sunlight suddenly came flooding in and she saw the pirates had opened up a wooden hatch, covered by iron bars. Several faces appeared above, sneering down, some of them spitting, before they walked away. Before they slammed this hatch down, too, Angel heard a reassuring voice in the darkness.

“It's okay. You're not alone.”

Angel started, surprised and relieved to hear a voice, and she was shocked and elated as she turned to see all of her friends sitting down there in the blackness, all with their hands bound behind their back. There sat Reece and Selese, Elden and Indra, O'Connor and Matus, all of them captive but alive. She had been so sure they had all been killed at sea, and was flooded with relief.

Yet she was also filled with foreboding: if all these great warriors had been taken prisoner, she thought, what chance did any of them ever have of making it out of here alive?

Chapter Three

Erec sat on the wooden deck of his own ship, his back against a pole, his hands bound behind him, and looked out with dismay at the sight before him. The remaining ships of his fleet were spread out before him in the calm ocean waters, all held captive in the night, blockaded by the fleet of a thousand Empire ships. They were all anchored in place, lit up beneath the two full moons, his ships flying the banners of his homeland and Empire ships flying the black-and-gold banners of the Empire. It was a disheartening sight. He had surrendered to spare his men from a certain death – and yet now they were at the mercy of the Empire, common prisoners with no way out.

Erec could see the Empire soldiers occupying each of his ships, as they occupied his, a dozen Empire soldiers standing guard per ship, staring lackadaisically at the ocean. On the decks of his ships Erec could see a hundred men on each, all lined up, bound with their wrists behind their back. On each ship they outnumbered the Empire guards, but clearly the Empire guards were not concerned. With all the men bound, they did not really need *any* men to watch over them, much less a dozen. Erec's men had surrendered, and clearly, with their fleet blockaded, there was nowhere for them to go.

As Erec looked out at the sight before him, he was racked with guilt. He had never surrendered before in his life, and to have to do so now pained him to no end. He had to remind himself he was a commander now, not a mere foot soldier, and he had a responsibility to all of his men. As outnumbered as they'd been, he could not have allowed them to all be killed. Clearly, they'd walked into a trap, thanks to Krov, and fighting at that moment would have been futile. His father had taught him that the first law of being a commander was to know when to fight and when to lay down your arms and choose to fight another day, another way. It was bravado and pride, he'd said, that led to most men's deaths. It was sound advice, but hard advice to follow.

"I myself would have fought," came a voice beside him, sounding like the voice of his conscience.

Erec looked over to see his brother, Strom, bound to a post beside him, looking as unflappable and confident as ever, despite the circumstances.

Erec frowned.

"You would have fought, and all of our men would be dead," Erec replied.

Strom shrugged.

"We will go down either way, my brother," he replied. "The Empire has nothing but cruelty. At least, my way, we would have gone down with glory. Now we will be killed by these men, but it won't be on our feet – it will be on our backs, their swords at our throats."

"Or worse," said one of Erec's commanders, bound to a post beside Strom, "we will be taken as slaves and never live as free men again. Is this what we followed you for?"

"You don't know any of that," Erec said. "No one knows what the Empire will do. At least we are alive. At least we have a chance. The other way would have guaranteed death."

Strom looked at Erec with disappointment.

"It is not a decision our father would have made."

Erec reddened.

"You don't know what our father would have done."

"Don't I?" Strom countered. "I lived with him, grew up with him on the Isles all my life, while you cavorted about the Ring. You barely knew him. And I say our father would have fought."

Erec shook his head.

"These are easy words for a soldier," he countered. "If you were a commander, your words might be quite different. I knew enough about our father to know that he would have saved his men, at any cost. He was not rash, and not impetuous. He was proud, but not overflowing with pride. Our father *the foot soldier*, in his youth, as you, might have fought; but our father *the King* would have

been prudent and lived to fight another day. There are things you will understand, Strom, as you grow up to become a man.”

Strom reddened.

“I am more man than you.”

Erec sighed.

“You don’t really understand what battle means,” he said. “Not until you lose. Not until you watch your men die before you. You have never lost. You have been sheltered on that Isle all your life. And that has formed your hubris. I love you as a brother – but not as a commander.”

They fell into a tense silence, a truce of sorts, as Erec looked up into the night, looking at the endless stars, and took stock of the situation. He truly loved his brother, but so often in life they argued about everything; they just didn’t see two things the same way. Erec gave himself time to cool off, took a deep breath, then finally turned back to Strom.

“I don’t mean for us to surrender,” he added, more calmly. “Not as prisoners, and not as slaves. You must take a broader view: surrendering is sometimes just the first step in battle. You don’t always encounter an enemy with your sword drawn: sometimes the best way to fight him is with open arms. You can always swing the sword later.”

Strom looked at him, puzzled.

“And then how do you plan to get us out of this?” he asked. “We have forfeited our arms. We are captives, bound, unable to move. We are surrounded by a fleet of a thousand ships. We stand no chance.”

Erec shook his head.

“You don’t see the whole picture,” he said. “None of our men are dead. We still have our ships. We may be prisoners, but I see few Empire guards on each of our ships – which means we outnumber them greatly. All that’s needed is a spark to light the fire. We can take them by surprise – and we can escape.”

Strom shook his head.

“We cannot overcome them,” he said. “We are bound, helpless, so the numbers mean nothing. And even if we did, we’d be crushed by the fleet which surrounds us.”

Erec turned, ignoring his brother, not interested in his pessimism. He instead looked over at Alistair, sitting several feet away, bound to a post on his other side. His heart broke as he examined her; she sat there, captive, all thanks to him. For himself, he did not mind being prisoner – that was the price of war. But for her, it broke his heart. He would give anything not to see her like this.

Erec felt so indebted to her; after all, she had saved their lives yet again, back in the Dragon’s Spine, against that sea monster. He knew she was still spent from the effort, knew she was unable to muster any energy. Yet Erec knew that she was their only hope.

“Alistair,” he called out again, as he had all night long, every few minutes. He leaned over and with his foot, he brushed her foot, gently nudging her. He would give anything to undo his binds, to be able to go over to her, to hug her, to free her. It was the most helpless feeling to lay beside her, and to be unable to do anything about it.

“Alistair,” he called out. “Please. It’s Erec. Wake up. I beg you. I need you – *we* need you.”

Erec waited, as he had all night long, losing hope. He did not know if she would ever return to him after her last exertion.

“*Alistair*,” he pleaded, again and again. “Please. Wake up for me.”

Erec waited, watching her, but she did not move. She lay so still, unconscious, as beautiful as ever in the moonlight. Erec willed for her to come to life.

Erec looked away, lowered his head, and closed his eyes. Perhaps all was lost, after all. There was simply nothing else he could do at this point.

“I’m here,” came a soft voice, ringing through the night.

Erec looked up with hope and turned to see Alistair staring back at him, and his heart beat faster, overwhelmed with love and joy. She looked exhausted, her eyes barely open, as she sleepily stared back at him.

“Alistair, my love,” he said urgently. “I need you. Just this one last time. I can’t do this without you.”

She closed her eyes for a long time, and then opened them, just a bit.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“Our bonds,” he said. “We need you to free us. All of us.”

Alistair closed her eyes again, and a long time elapsed, during which Erec could hear nothing save the wind caressing the ship, the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull. A heavy silence filled the air, and as more time passed, Erec felt sure she would not open them again.

Finally, slowly, Erec watched her open her eyes again.

With what appeared to be a monumental effort, Alistair opened her eyes, lifted her chin, and looked all about the ships, taking stock of everything. He could see her eyes changing colors, glowing a light blue, lighting up the night like two torches.

Suddenly, Alistair’s binds broke. Erec heard them snap in the night, then saw her raise her two palms before her. An intense light shone from them.

A moment later, Erec felt a heat behind his back, along his wrists. They felt impossibly hot, then suddenly, his binds began to loosen. One strip at a time, Erec felt each of his ropes breaking free, until finally he was able to snap them himself.

Erec raised his wrists and examined them in disbelief. He was free. He was truly free.

Erec heard the snapping of cords and looked over to see Strom break free of his binds. The snapping continued, all throughout the ship, and throughout his other ships, and he saw his other men’s bonds breaking, saw his men being freed, one at a time.

They all looked to Erec, and he held a finger to his lips, motioning for them to be quiet. Erec saw the guards had not noticed, all with their backs to them, standing at the rail, jesting with each other and looking at the night. Of course, none of them were on guard.

Erec motioned for Strom and the others to follow, and quietly, Erec leading the way, they all crept forward, heading for the guards.

“Now!” Erec commanded.

He burst into a sprint and they all did the same, rushing forward as one, until they reached the guards. As they got close, some of the guards, alerted by the wood creaking on the deck, spun around and began to draw their swords.

But Erec and the others, all hardened warriors, all desperate for their one chance to survive, beat them to it, moving too quickly through the night. Strom pounced on one and grabbed his wrist before he could swing; Erec reached into the man’s belt, drew his dagger, and cut his throat while Strom snatched the sword. Despite all their differences, the two brothers worked seamlessly together, as they always did, fighting as one.

Erec’s men all snatched weapons from the guards, killing them with their own swords and daggers. Other men simply tackled the guards who moved too slowly, shoving them over the rail, screaming, and sending them into the sea.

Erec looked out at his other ships, and saw his men killing guards left and right.

“Cut the anchors!” Erec commanded.

Up and down his ships his men severed the ropes, keeping them in place, and soon Erec felt the familiar feeling of his ship rocking beneath him. Finally, they were free.

Horns sounded, shouts rang out, and torches were lit up and down ships as the greater Empire fleet finally realized what was happening. Erec turned and looked out at the blockade of ships blocking their way to the open sea, and he knew that he had the fight of his life ahead of him.

But he no longer cared. His men were alive. They were free. Now they had a chance.

And now, this time, they would go down fighting.

Chapter Four

Darius felt his face sprayed with blood, and he turned to see a dozen of his men cut down by an Empire soldier riding an immense black horse. The soldier swung a sword larger than any Darius had ever seen, and in one clean sweep he chopped off twelve of their heads.

Darius heard shouts rise up all around him, and he turned in every direction to see his men being cut down everywhere. It was surreal. They swung with great blows, and his men fell by the dozens, then the hundreds – then the thousands.

Darius suddenly found himself standing on a pedestal, and as far as the eye could see lay thousands of corpses. All his people, piled up dead inside the walls of Volusia. There was no one left. Not a single man.

Darius let out a great shout of agony, of helplessness, as he felt himself grabbed from behind by Empire soldiers and dragged off, screaming, into the blackness.

Darius woke with a start, gasping for air, flailing. He looked all around, trying to understand what was happening, what was real and what was a dream. He heard the rustling of chains and as his eyes adjusted in the darkness, he began to realize where the noise was coming from. He looked down to see his ankles shackled with heavy chains. He felt the aches and pains all over his body, the sting of fresh wounds, and he saw his body covered in wounds, dried blood caked all over him. Every movement ached, and he felt as if he had been pummeled by a million men. One of his eyes was swollen nearly shut.

Slowly, Darius turned and surveyed his surroundings. On the one hand he was relieved that it had all been a dream – yet as he took it all in he slowly remembered, and the pain came back. It had been a dream, and yet there had also been much truth in it. There returned to him flashbacks of his battle against the Empire within the gates of Volusia. He recalled the ambush, the gates closing, the troops surrounding them – all of his men being slaughtered. The betrayal.

He struggled hard to bring it all back, and the final thing he remembered, after killing several Empire soldiers, was taking a blow the side of his head from the blunt end of an ax.

Darius reached up, chains rattling, and felt a huge welt on the side of his head, coming all the way down to the swelling in his eye. That had been no dream. That was real.

As it all came back, Darius was flooded with anguish, with regret. His men, all the people he had loved, had been killed. All because of him.

He looked around frantically in the dim light, looking for any sign of any of his men, any sign of survivors. Perhaps many had lived, and had, like him, been taken prisoner.

“Move on!” came a harsh command in the blackness.

Darius felt rough hands pick up him up from beneath his arms, drag him to his feet, then felt a boot kick him in the back of his spine.

He groaned in pain as he stumbled forward, chains rattling, feeling himself go flying into the back of a boy before him. The boy reached back and elbowed Darius in the face, sending him stumbling backwards.

“Don’t touch me again,” the boy snarled.

There stared back a desperate-looking boy, in shackles like he, and Darius realized he was shackled to a long line of boys, in both directions, long links of heavy iron connecting their wrists and ankles, all of them being herded down a dim stone tunnel. Empire taskmasters kicked and elbowed them along.

Darius scanned the faces as best he could, but recognized no one.

“Darius!” whispered an urgent voice. “Don’t collapse again! They’ll kill you!”

Darius’s heart leapt at the sound of a familiar voice, and he turned to see a few men behind him on the line, Desmond, Raj, Kaz, and Luzi, his old friends, the four of them all chained, all looking

as badly beaten as he must have looked. They all looked at him with relief, clearly happy to see that he was alive.

“Talk again,” a taskmaster seethed to Raj, “and I’ll take your tongue.”

Darius, as relieved as he was to see his friends, wondered about the countless others who had fought and served with him, who had followed him into the streets of Volusia.

The taskmaster moved further down the line, and when he was out of sight, Darius turned and whispered back.

“What of the others? Did anyone else survive?”

He prayed secretly that hundreds of his men had made it, that they were somewhere waiting, prisoners maybe.

“No,” came the decisive answer from behind them. “We’re the only ones. All the others are dead.”

Darius felt as if he had been punched in the gut. He felt he had let everyone down, and despite himself, he felt a tear roll down his cheek.

He felt like sobbing. A part of him wanted to die. He could hardly conceive it: all those warriors from all those slave villages.... It had been the beginning of what was going to be the greatest revolution of all time, one that would change the face of the Empire forever.

And it had ended abruptly in a mass slaughter.

Now any chance of freedom they’d had was destroyed.

As Darius marched, in agony from the wounds and the bruises, from the iron shackles digging into his skin, he looked around and began to wonder where he was. He wondered who these other prisoners were, and where they were all being led. As he looked them over, he realized that they were all about his age, and they all seemed extraordinarily fit. As if they were all fighters.

They rounded a bend in the dark stone tunnel, and sunlight suddenly met them, streaming through iron cell bars up ahead, at the end of the tunnel. Darius was shoved roughly, jabbed in the ribs with a club, and he surged forward with the others until the bars were opened and he was given one final kick, out into daylight.

Darius stumbled with the others and they all fell down as a group onto the dirt. Darius spit dirt from his mouth and raised his hands to protect himself from the harsh sunlight. Others rolled on top of him, all of them tangled up in the shackles.

“On your feet!” shouted a taskmaster.

They walked from boy to boy, jabbing them with clubs, until finally Darius scrambled with the others to his feet. He stumbled as the other boys, chained to him, tried to gain their balance.

They stood and faced the center of a circular dirt courtyard, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, framed by high stone walls, cell bars around its openings. Facing them, standing in the center, scowling back, stood one Empire taskmaster, clearly their commander. He loomed large, taller than the others, with his yellow horns and skin, and his glistening red eyes, wearing no shirt, his muscles bulging. He wore black armor on his legs, boots, and studded leather on his wrists. He wore the rankings of an Empire officer, and he paced up and down, examining them all with disapproval.

“I am Morg,” he said, his voice dark, booming with authority. “You will address me as sir. I am your new warden. I am your whole life now.”

He breathed as he paced, sounding more like a snarl.

“Welcome to your new home,” he continued. “Your temporary home, that is. Because before the moon is up, you will all be dead. I will take great pleasure in watching you all die, in fact.”

He smiled.

“But for as long as you are here,” he added, “you will live. You will live to please me. You will live to please the others. You will live to please the Empire. You are our objects of entertainment now. Our show things. Our entertainment means your death. And you will execute it well.”

He smiled a cruel smile as he continued pacing, surveying them. There came a great shout somewhere off in the distance, and the entire ground trembled beneath Darius's feet. It sounded like the shout of a hundred thousand citizens filled with bloodlust.

"Do you hear that cry?" he asked. "That is the cry of death. A thirst for death. Out there, behind those walls, lies the great arena. In that arena, you will fight others, you will fight yourselves, until none of you are left."

He sighed.

"There will be three rounds of battle," he added. "In the final around, if any of you survive, you will be granted your freedom, granted a chance to fight in the greatest arena of all. But don't get your hopes up: no one has ever survived that long.

"You will not die quickly," he added. "I am here to make sure of it. I want you dying slowly. I want you to be great objects of entertainment. You will learn to fight, and learn it well, to prolong our pleasure. Because you are not men anymore. You are not slaves. You are lower than slaves: you are gladiators now. Welcome to your new, and final, role. It won't last long."

Chapter Five

Volusia marched through the desert, her hundreds of thousands of men behind her, the sound of their marching boots filling the sky. It was a sweet sound to her ears, a sound of progress, of victory. She looked out as she went, and she was satisfied to see corpses lining the horizon, everywhere on the dried hard sands outlying the Empire capital. Thousands of them, sprawled out, all perfectly still, lying on their backs and looking up to the sky in agony, as if they had been flattened by a giant tidal wave.

Volusia knew it was no tidal wave. It was her sorcerers, the Voks. They had cast a very powerful spell, and had killed all those who thought they could ambush and kill her.

Volusia smirked as she marched, seeing her handiwork, relishing in this day of victory, in once again outsmarting those who meant to kill her. These were all Empire leaders, all great men, men who had never been defeated before, and the only thing standing between her and the capital. Now here they were, all these Empire leaders, all the men who had dared to defy Volusia, all the men who had thought they were smarter than her – all of them dead.

Volusia marched between them, sometimes avoiding the bodies, sometimes stepping over them, and sometimes, when she felt like it, stepping right on them. She took great satisfaction in feeling the enemy's flesh beneath her boots. It made her feel like a kid again.

Volusia looked up and saw the capital up ahead, its huge golden dome shining unmistakably in the distance, saw the massive walls surrounding it, a hundred feet high, noted its entrance, framed by soaring, arched golden doors, and felt the thrill of her destiny unfolding before her. Now, nothing lay between her and her final seat of power. No more politicians or leaders or commanders could stand in her way with any claim to rule the Empire but she. The long march, her taking one city after the next all these moons, her amassing her army one city at a time – finally, it all came to this. Just beyond those walls, just beyond those shining golden doors, stood her final conquest. Soon, she would be inside, she would assume the throne of power, and when she did, there would be no one and nothing left to stop her. She would take command of all the Empire's armies, of all its provinces and regions, the four horns and two spikes, and finally, every last creature of the Empire would have to declare her – a human – their supreme commander.

Even more so, they would have to call her *Goddess*.

The thought of it made her smile. She would erect statues of herself in every city, before every hall of power; she would name holidays after herself, make people salute each other by her name, and the Empire would soon know no name but hers.

Volusia marched before her army beneath the early morning suns, examining those golden doors and realizing this would be one of the greatest moments of her life. Leading the way before her men, she felt invincible – especially now that all the traitors within her ranks were dead. How foolish they had been, she thought, to assume she was naïve, to assume she would fall into their trap, just because she was young. So much for their old age – so far that had gotten them. It had gained them only an early death, an early death for underestimating her wisdom – a wisdom even greater than theirs.

And yet, as Volusia marched, as she studied the Empire bodies in the desert, she began to feel a growing sense of concern. There weren't as many bodies, she realized, as there should have been. There were perhaps a few thousand bodies, yet not the hundreds of thousands she had expected, not the main body of the Empire army. Had those leaders not brought all their men? And if not, where could they be?

She started to wonder: with its leaders dead, would the Empire capital still defend itself?

As Volusia neared the capital gates, she motioned for Vokin to step forward and for her army to stop.

As one, they all came to a stop behind her and finally there came a stillness in the morning desert, nothing but the sound of the wind passing through, the dust rising in the air, a thorn bush

tumbling. Volusia studied the massive sealed doors, the gold carved in ornate patterns and signs and symbols, telling stories of the ancient battles of the Empire lands. These doors were famous throughout the Empire, were said to have taken a hundred years to carve, and to be twelve feet thick. It was a sign of strength representing all the Empire lands.

Volusia, standing hardly fifty feet away, had never been so close to the capital entrance before, and was in awe of them – and of what they represented. Not only was it a symbol of strength and stability, it was also a masterpiece, an ancient work of art. She ached to reach out and touch those golden doors, to run her hands along the carved images.

But she knew now was not the time. She studied them, and a sense of foreboding began to arise within her. Something was wrong. They were unguarded. And it was all too quiet.

Volusia looked straight up, and atop the walls, manning the parapets, she saw thousands of Empire soldiers slowly come into view, lined up, looking down, bows and spears at the ready.

An Empire general stood in their midst, looking down at them.

“You are foolish to come so close,” he boomed out, his voice echoing. “You stand in range of our bows and spears. With the twitch of my finger, I can have you all killed in an instant.

“But I will grant you mercy,” added. “Tell your armies to lay down their arms, and I will allow you to live.”

Volusia looked up at the general, his face obscured against the sun, this lone commander left behind to defend the capital, and she looked across the ramparts at his men, all their eyes trained on her, bows in their hands. She knew he meant what he’d said.

“I will give you one chance to lay down *your* arms,” she called back, “before I kill all of your men, and burn this capital down to rubble.”

He snickered, and she watched as he and all his men lowered their face plates, preparing for battle.

As quick as lightning, Volusia suddenly heard the sound of a thousand arrows releasing, of a thousand spears being thrown, and as she looked up, she watched the sky blacken, thick with weaponry, all firing down right for her.

Volusia stood there, rooted to her spot, fearless, not even flinching. She knew that none of these weapons could harm her. After all, she was a goddess.

Beside her, the Vok raised a single long, green palm, and as he did, a green orb left his hand and floated up in the air before her, casting a shield of green light a few feet above Volusia’s head. A moment later, the arrows and spears bounced off it harmlessly and landed down on the ground beside her in a huge heap.

Volusia looked over in satisfaction at the growing pile of spears and arrows, and looked back up to see the stunned faces of all the empire soldiers.

“I will give you one more chance to lay down your arms!” she called back.

The empire commander stood there sternly, clearly frustrated and debating his options, but he did not budge. Instead he motioned to his men, and she could see them preparing another volley.

Volusia nodded to Vokin, and he gestured to his men. Dozens of Voks stepped forward and they all lined up and raised their hands high above their heads, aiming their palms. A moment later, dozens of green orbs filled the sky, heading for the capital walls.

Volusia watched in great expectation, expecting the walls to crumble, expecting to see all the men come crashing down at her feet, expecting the capital to be hers. She was anxious to sit on the throne already.

But Volusia watched in surprise and dismay as the green orbs of light bounced off the capital walls harmlessly, then disappeared in bright flashes of light. She could not understand: they were ineffectual.

Volusia looked over at Vokin, and he looked baffled, too.

The Empire commander, high above, snickered down.

“You are not the only one with sorcery,” he said. “These capital walls can be toppled by no magic – they have stood the test of time for thousands of years, have warded off barbarians, entire armies greater than yours. There is no magic than can topple them – only human hands.”

He grinned wide.

“So you see,” he added, “you’ve walked into the same mistake as so many other would-be conquerors before you. You’ve relied on sorcery in approaching this capital – and now you will pay the price.”

Up and down the parapets horns sounded, and Volusia looked over and was shocked to see an army of soldiers lining the horizon. They filled the skyline with black, hundreds of thousands of them, a vast army, greater even than the men she had behind her. They clearly had all been waiting beyond the wall, on the far side of the capital city, in the desert, for the command of the Empire commander. She had not just walked into another battle – this would be an outright war.

Another horn sounded, and suddenly, the massive golden doors before her began to open. They open wider and wider, and as they did there came a great battle cry, as thousands more Empire soldiers emerged, charging right for them.

At the same time, the hundreds of thousands of soldiers on the horizon charged, too, splitting their forces around the Empire city and charging them from both sides.

Volusia stood her ground, raised a single fist high, then brought it down.

Behind her, her army let out a great battle cry as they rushed forward to meet the Empire men.

Volusia knew this would be the battle that decided the fate of the capital – the very fate of the Empire. Her sorcerers had let her down – but her soldiers would not. After all, she could be more brutal than any other man, and she did not need sorcery for that.

She saw the men coming at her, and she stood her ground, relishing the chance to kill or be killed.

Chapter Six

Gwendolyn opened her eyes as she felt a jolt and a bump on her head, and she looked all about, disoriented. She saw she was lying on her side, on a hard wooden platform, and the world was moving about her. There came a whining, and she felt something wet on her cheek. She looked over to see Krohn, curling up beside her, licking her – and her heart leapt with joy. Krohn looked sickly, famished, exhausted – yet he was alive. That was all that mattered. He, too, had survived.

Gwen licked her lips and realized they were not as dry as before; she was relieved she could even lick them, as before her tongue had been too swollen to even move. She felt a trickle of cold water enter her mouth, and she looked up out of the corner of her eye to see one of those desert nomads standing over her, holding a sack over her. She licked at it greedily, again and again, until he pulled it away.

As he pulled his hand away, Gwen reached up and grabbed his wrist, and she pulled it toward Krohn. At first the nomad seemed baffled, but then he realized, and he reached over and poured some of the water into Krohn's mouth. Gwen felt relieved as she watched Krohn lap up the water, drinking as he lay there, panting, beside her.

Gwen felt another jolt on her head, another bump as the platform shook, and she looked out at the world, turned sideways, and saw nothing but sky before her, clouds passing by. She felt her body rising up, higher and higher into the air with each and every jolt, and she could not understand what was happening, where she was. She did not have the strength to sit up, but she was able to crane her neck enough to see that she was lying on a broad wooden platform, being hoisted by ropes at either end of it. Someone high above was yanking on the ropes, squeaking with age, and with each yank, the platform rose a bit higher. She was being raised up alongside steep, endless cliffs, the same cliffs she recognized from before she'd passed out. The cliffs which had been crowned by parapets and gleaming knights.

Remembering, Gwen turned and craned her neck, and she looked down and immediately felt dizzy. They were hundreds of feet above the desert floor, and rising.

She turned and looked up, and a hundred feet above them, she saw the parapets, her vision obscured by the sun, and the knights looking down, getting closer with each yank of the cords.

Gwen immediately turned and scanned the platform, and was flooded with relief to see all of her people were still with her: Kendrick, Sandara, Steffen, Arliss, Aberthol, Illepra, the baby Krea, Stara, Brant, Atme, and several of the Silver. They all lay on the platform, all being tended to by nomads who poured water into their mouths and on their faces. Gwen felt a rush of gratitude toward these strange nomadic creatures who had saved their lives.

Gwen closed her eyes again, lay her head back on the hard wood, as Krohn curled up beside her, and her head felt as if it weighed a million pounds. All was comfortably silent, no sound up here but that of the wind, and of the ropes creaking. She had traveled so far, for so long, and wondered when it all would end. Soon they would be at the top, and she only prayed that the knights, whoever they were, were as hospitable as these nomads from the desert.

With each yank, the suns grew stronger, hotter, no shade under which to hide. She felt as if she were burning to a crisp, as if she were being hoisted to the center of the sun itself.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes as she felt a final jolt, and realized she'd fallen back asleep. She felt movement and she realized she was being carried gingerly by the nomads, all placing her and her people back on the canvas tarps and carrying them off the platform and onto the parapets. Gwendolyn felt herself finally placed down, gently, onto a stone floor, and she looked up and blinked several times into the sun. She was too exhausted to lift her neck, not sure whether she was still awake or dreaming.

Coming into view were dozens of knights, approaching her, dressed in immaculate shiny plate and chain mail, crowding around her and looking down at her in curiosity. Gwen could not understand

how knights could be out here in this great desert, in this vast waste in the middle of nowhere, how they could be standing guard at the top of this immense ridge, beneath these suns. How did they survive out here? What were they guarding? Where did they get such regal armor? Was this all a dream?

Even the Ring, with its ancient tradition of grandeur, had little armor to match what these men wore. It was the most intricate armor she'd ever laid eye upon, forged of silver and platinum and some other metal she could not recognize, etched with intricate markings, and with weaponry to match. These men were clearly professional soldiers. It reminded her of the days when she was a young girl and accompanied her father onto the field; he would show her the soldiers, and she would look up and see them lined up with such splendor. Gwen had wondered how such beauty could exist, how it could even be possible. Perhaps she had died and this was her version of heaven.

But then she heard one of them step forward, out in front of the others, remove his helmet and look down at, his bright blue eyes filled with wisdom and compassion. Perhaps in his thirties, he had a startling appearance, his head stark bald, and wearing a light blond beard. Clearly, he was the officer in charge.

The knight turned his attention to the nomads.

"Are they alive?" he asked.

One of the nomads, in response, reached out with his long staff and gently prodded Gwendolyn, who shifted as he did. She wanted more than anything to sit up, to talk to them, to find out who they were – but she was too exhausted, her throat too dry, to respond.

"Incredible," said another knight, stepping forward, his spurs jingling, as more and more knights stepped forward and crowded all around them. Clearly, they were all objects of curiosity.

"It's not possible," said one. "How could they have survived the Great Waste?"

"They couldn't," said another. "They must be deserters. They must have somehow breached the Ridge, got lost in the desert, and decided to come back."

Gwendolyn tried to answer, to tell them everything that happened, but she was too exhausted to get the words out.

After a short silence, the leader stepped forward.

"No," said, confidently. "Look at the markings on his armor," he said, prodding Kendrick with his foot. "This is not our armor. It's not Empire armor, either."

All the knights crowded around, stunned.

"Then where are they from?" one asked, clearly baffled.

"And how did they know where to find us?" asked another.

The leader turned to the nomads.

"Where did you find them?" he asked.

The nomads squeaked back in return, and Gwen saw the leader's eyes widen.

"On the other side of the sand wall?" he asked them. "Are you certain?"

The nomads squeaked back.

The commander turned to his people.

"I don't think they knew we were here. I think they got lucky – the nomads found them and wanted their price and brought them here, mistaking them for one of us."

The knights looked at each other, and it was clear they'd never encountered a situation like this before.

"We can't take them in," said one of the knights. "You know the rules. You let them in and we leave a trail. No trails. Ever. We have to send them back, into the Great Waste."

A long silence ensued, interrupted by nothing but the howling of the wind, and Gwen could sense that they were debating what to do with them. She did not like how long the pause was.

Gwen tried to sit up in protest, to tell them that they couldn't send them back out there, they just couldn't. Not after all they'd been through.

“If we did,” the leader said, “it would mean their deaths. And our code of honor demands we help the helpless.”

“And yet if we take them in,” a knight countered, “then we could all die. The Empire will follow their trail. They will discover our hiding place. We would be endangering all of our people. Would you rather a few strangers die, or all of our people?”

Gwen could see their leader thinking, torn with anguish, facing a hard decision. She understood what it felt like to face hard decisions. She was too weak to resign herself to anything but to allow herself to be at the mercy of other people’s kindness.

“It may be so,” their leader finally said, resignation in his voice, “but I shall not turn away innocent people to die. They are coming in.”

He turned to his men.

“Bring them down on the other side,” he commanded, his voice firm with authority. “We shall bring them to our King, and he shall decide for himself.”

The men listened and began to break into action, preparing the platform on the other side for the descent, and one of his men stared back at their leader, uncertain.

“You are violating the King’s laws,” the knight said. “No outsiders are allowed into the Ridge. Ever.”

The leader stared back firmly.

“No outsiders have ever reached our gates,” he replied.

“The King may imprison you for this,” the knight said.

The leader did not waver.

“That is a chance I’m prepared to take.”

“For strangers? Worthless desert nomads?” the knight said, surprised. “Who knows who these people even are.”

“Every life is precious,” the leader countered, “and my honor is worth a thousand lifetimes in prison.”

The leader nodded to his men, who all stood there waiting, and Gwen suddenly felt herself lifted into the arms of a knight, his metal armor against her back. He picked her up effortlessly, as if she were a feather, and carried her, as the knights carried all the others. Gwen saw they were walking across a wide, flat stone landing atop the mountain ridge, spanning perhaps a hundred yards wide. They walked and walked, and she felt at ease in the arms of this knight, more at ease than she had in a long time. She wanted more than anything to say thank you, but she was too exhausted to even open her mouth.

They reached the other side of the parapets and as the knights prepared to place them on a new platform and lower them down the other side of the ridge, Gwen looked out and caught a glimpse of where they were going. It was a sight she would never, ever forget, a sight that took her breath away. The mountain ridge, rising out of the desert like a sphinx, was, she saw, shaped in a huge circle, so wide it disappeared from view in the midst of the clouds. It was a protective wall, she realized, and on its other side, down below, Gwen saw a glistening blue lake as wide as an ocean, sparkly in the desert suns. The richness of the blue, the sight of all that water, took her breath away.

And beyond that, on the horizon, she saw a vast land, a land so vast she could not see where it ended, and to her shock, it was a fertile, fertile green, a green glowing with life. As far as she could see there stretched farms and fruit trees and forests and vineyards and orchards in abundance, a land overflowing with life. It was the most idyllic and beautiful sight she had ever seen.

“Welcome, my lady,” their leader said, “to the land beyond the ridge.”

Chapter Seven

Godfrey, curled up in a ball, was awakened by a steady, persistent moaning interfering with his dreams. He woke slowly, unsure if he was really awake or still stuck in his endless nightmare. He blinked in the dim light, trying to shake off his dream. He had dreamt of himself as a puppet on a string, dangling over the walls of Volusia, being held by the Finians, who'd yanked the strings up and down, moving Godfrey's arms and legs as he dangled over the entrance to the city. Godfrey had been made to watch as below him thousands of his countrymen were butchered before his eyes, the streets of Volusia running red with blood. Each time he thought it was over, the Finian yanked on his strings again, pulling him up and down, over and over and over....

Finally, mercifully, Godfrey was awakened by this moaning, and he rolled over, his head splitting, to see it was coming from a few feet away, from Akorth and Fulton, the two of them curled up on the floor beside him, each moaning, covered in black and blue marks. Nearby were Merek and Ario, sprawled out unmoving on the stone floor, too – which Godfrey immediately recognized as the floor of a prison cell. All looked badly beaten – yet at least they were all here, and from what Godfrey could tell, they were all breathing.

Godfrey was once at once relieved and distraught. He was amazed to be alive, after the ambush he'd witnessed, amazed he had not been slaughtered by the Finians back there. Yet at the same time, he felt hollow, oppressed by guilt, knowing it was all his fault that Darius and the others had fallen into the trap inside the gates of Volusia. It was all because of his naïveté. How could he have been so stupid as to trust the Finians?

Godfrey closed his eyes and shook his head, willing for the memory to go away, for the night to have gone differently. He had led Darius and the others into the city unwittingly, like lambs to slaughter. Again and again in his mind he heard the screams of those men, trying to fight for their lives, trying to escape, echoing in his brain and leaving him no peace.

Godfrey clutched his ears and tried to make it go away, and trying to drown out Akorth and Fulton's moaning, both of them clearly in pain from all their bruises and from a night sleeping on a hard stone floor.

Godfrey sat up, his head feeling like a million pounds, and took in all his surroundings, a small prison cell containing just him and his friends and a few others he did not know, and he took some solace in the fact that, given how grim this cell looked, death might be coming for them sooner rather than later. This jail was clearly different from the last one, feeling more like a holding cell for those about to die.

Godfrey heard, somewhere far away, the screams of a prisoner being dragged away down a hall, and he realized: this place really was a holding pen – for executions. He had heard of other executions in Volusia, and he knew that he and the others would be dragged outside at first light and become sport for the arena, so that its good citizens could watch them get torn to death by the Razifs, before the real gladiator games began. That was why they'd kept them alive this long. At least now it all made sense.

Godfrey scrambled to his hands and knees, reaching out and prodding each of his friends, trying to rouse them. His head was spinning, he ached from every corner of his body, covered in lumps and bruises, and it hurt to move. His last memory was of a soldier knocking him out, and he realized he must have been pummeled by them after he was down. The Finians, those treacherous cowards, clearly didn't have it in them to kill him themselves.

Godfrey clutched his forehead, amazed that it could hurt so much without even having a drink. He gained his feet unsteadily, knees wobbling, and looked about the dark cell. A single guard stood outside the bars, his back to him, barely watching. And yet these cells were made with substantial

locks and thick iron bars, and Godfrey knew there would be no easy escape this time. This time, they were in until the death.

Slowly, beside him, Akorth, Fulton, Ario, and Merek gained their feet and they all studied their surroundings, too. He could see the puzzlement and fear in their eyes – and then the regret, as they began to remember.

“Did they all die?” Ario asked, looking at Godfrey.

Godfrey felt a pain in his stomach as he slowly nodded back.

“It’s our fault,” Merek said. “We let them down.”

“Yes, it is,” Godfrey replied, his voice breaking.

“I told you not to trust the Finians,” Akorth said.

“The question is not whose fault it is,” Ario said, “but what we are going to do about it. Are we going to let all of our brothers and sisters die in vain? Or are we going to gain vengeance?”

Godfrey could see the seriousness in young Ario’s face and he was impressed by his steely determination, even while imprisoned and about to be killed.

“Vengeance?” Akorth asked. “Are you mad? We are locked beneath the earth, guarded by iron bars and Empire guards. All of our men are dead. We’re in the midst of a hostile city and a hostile army. All of our gold is gone. Our plans are ruined. What possible vengeance can we take?”

“There’s always a way,” Ario said, determined. He turned to Merek.

All eyes turned to Merek, and he furrowed his brow.

“I am no expert on vengeance,” Merek said. “I kill men as they bother me. I do not wait.”

“But you are a master thief,” Ario said. “You’ve spent your whole life in a prison cell, as you admit. Surely you can get us out of this?”

Merek turned and surveyed the cell, the bars, the windows, keys, the guards – all of it – with an expert’s keen eye. He took it all in, then looked back at them grimly.

“This is no common prison cell,” he said. “It must be a Finian cell. Very expensive craftsmanship. I see no weak points, no way out, as much as I would wish to tell you otherwise.”

Godfrey, feeling overwhelmed, trying to shut out the screams of the other prisoners down the hall, walked to the prison cell door, pressed his forehead against the cool and heavy iron, and closed his eyes.

“Bring him here!” boomed a voice from down the stone hall.

Godfrey opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked down the hall to see several Empire guards dragging a prisoner. This prisoner wore a red sash over his shoulder, across his chest, and he hung limply in their arms, not even trying to resist. In fact, as he got closer, Godfrey saw that they had to drag him, as he was unconscious. Something was clearly wrong with him.

“Bringing me another plague victim?” the guard yelled back derisively. “What do you expect me to do with him?”

“Not our problem!” called back the others.

The guard on duty had a fearful look as he held up his hands.

“I’m not touching him!” he said. “Put him over there – in the pit, with the other plague victims.”

The guards looked at him questioningly.

“But he’s not dead yet,” they replied.

The guard on duty scowled.

“You think I care?”

The guards exchanged a look then did as they were told, dragging him across the prison corridor and throwing him into a large pit. Godfrey could see now that the pit was filled with bodies, all of them covered with the same red sash.

“And what if he tries to run?” the guards asked before turning away.

The commanding guard smiled a cruel smile.

“Do you not know what the plague does to a man?” he asked. “He’ll be dead by morning.”

The two guards turned and walked away, and Godfrey looked at the plague victim, lying there all alone in that unguarded pit, and he suddenly had an idea. It was crazy enough that it might just work.

Godfrey turned to Akorth and Fulton.

“Punch me,” he said.

They exchanged a puzzled look.

“I said punch me!” Godfrey said.

They shook their heads.

“Are you mad?” Akorth asked.

“I’m not going to punch you,” Fulton chimed in, “as much as you may deserve it.”

“I’m telling you to punch me!” Godfrey demanded. “Hard. In the face. Break my nose! NOW!”

But Akorth and Fulton turned away.

“You’ve lost it,” they said.

Godfrey turned to Merek and Ario, but they, too, backed away.

“Whatever this is about,” Merek said, “I want no part of it.”

Suddenly, one of the other prisoners in the cell waltzed up to Godfrey.

“Couldn’t help overhearing,” he said, grinning a gap-toothed grin, breathing stale breath all over him. “I’m more than happy to punch you, just to shut you the hell up! You don’t have to ask me twice.”

The prisoner swung, connected right on Godfrey’s nose with his bony knuckles, and Godfrey felt a sharp pain shooting through his skull as he cried out and grabbed his nose. Blood squirted out all over his face and down his shirt. The pain stung his eyes, clouding his vision.

“Now I need that sash,” Godfrey said, turning to Merek. “Can you get it for me?”

Merek, puzzled, followed his line of vision across the hall, to the prisoner lying unconscious in the pit.

“Why?” he asked.

“Just do it,” Godfrey said.

Merek furrowed his brow.

“If I tied something together, maybe I could reach it,” he said. “Something long and skinny.”

Merek reached up, felt his own collar, and extracted a wire from it; as he unfolded it, it was long enough to suit his purpose.

Merek leaned forward against the prison bars, careful so as not to alert the guard, and reached out with the wire, trying to hook the sash. It dragged in the dirt, but fell a few inches short.

He tried again and again, but Merek kept getting stuck at the elbow in the bars. They were not skinny enough.

The guard turned his way, and Merek quickly retracted it before he could see it.

“Let me try,” Ario said, stepping forward as the guard turned away.

Ario grabbed the long wire and stuck his arms through the cell, and his arms, much skinnier, passed through all the way up to the shoulder.

That extra six inches was what they needed. The hook just barely connected with the end of the red sash, and Ario began to pull it toward him. He stopped as the guard, facing the other direction, nodding off, lifted his head and looked around. They all waited, sweating, praying the guard did not look their way. They waited for what felt like an eternity, until finally the guard began nodding off again.

Ario pulled the sash closer and closer, sliding it across the prison floor, until finally it came through the bars and into the cell.

Godfrey reached out and put the sash on, and they all backed away from him, fearful.

“What on earth are you doing?” Merek asked. “The sash is covered with plague. You can infect us all.”

The other prisoners in the cell backed up, too.

Godfrey turned to Merek.

“I’m going to start coughing, and I’m not going to stop,” he said, wearing the sash, an idea hardening in his mind. “When the guard comes, he’ll see my blood and this sash, and you’ll tell him I have the plague, that they made a mistake in not separating me.”

Godfrey wasted no time. He began coughing violently, taking the blood on his face and rubbing it all up and down himself to make it look worse. He coughed louder than he’d ever had, until finally, he heard the cell door open and heard the guard walking in.

“Get your friend to shut up,” the guard said. “Do you understand?”

“He is not a friend,” Merek replied. “Just a man we met. A man who has the plague.”

The guard, baffled, looked down and noticed the red sash and his eyes widened.

“How did he get in here?” the guard asked. “He should’ve been separated.”

Godfrey coughed more and more, his entire body racked in a coughing fit.

He soon felt rough hands grab him and drag him out, shoving him. He stumbled across the hall, and with one last shove, he was thrown into the pit with the plague victims.

Godfrey lay on top of the infected body, trying not to breathe too loudly, trying to turn his head away, and not breathe in the man’s disease. He prayed to God he didn’t get it. It would be a long night, lying here.

But he was unguarded now. And when it was light, he would rise.

And he would strike.

Chapter Eight

Thorgrin felt himself plunging to the bottom of the ocean, the pressure building in his ears as he sank in the icy water, feeling as if he were being stabbed by a million daggers. Yet as he plunged deeper, the strangest thing happened: the light did not get darker, but brighter. As he flailed, sinking, dragged down by the weight of the sea, he looked down and was shocked to see, in a cloud of light, the last person he'd expected to see here: his mother. She smiled up at him, the light so intense he could barely see her face, and she reached out to him with loving arms as he sank, heading right for her.

"My son," she said, her voice crystal clear despite the waters. "I am here with you. I love you. It is not your time yet. Be strong. You have passed the test, yet there are many more to come. Face the world and never forget who you are. Never forget: your power comes not from your weaponry, but from inside you."

Thorgrin opened his mouth to answer back, but as he did, he found himself engulfed by water, swallowing, drowning.

Thor woke with a start, looking all around, wondering where he was. He felt a rough material on his wrists and realized he was bound, his hands behind his back, against a wooden pole. He looked around the dim hold, felt the rocking motion, and he knew at once he was on a ship. He could tell by the way his body moved, by the slats of light coming in, by the moldy smell of men trapped below deck.

Thorgrin looked about, immediately on guard, feeling weak, and trying to remember. The last thing he remembered was that awful storm, the shipwreck, he and his men tumbling from the boat. He remembered Angel, remembered clutching onto her for dear life, and he remembered the sword in his belt, the Sword of the Dead. How had he survived?

Thor looked all around, wondering how he was sailing at sea, confused, looking desperately for his brothers, and for Angel. He felt relieved as he made out shapes in the darkness, and saw them all nearby, bound with ropes to the posts: Reece and Selese, Elden and Indra, Matus, O'Connor, and a few feet away from them, Angel. Thor was elated to see they were all alive, though they all looked exhausted, beaten down from the storm and from the pirates.

Thor heard raucous laughter, arguing, cheering from somewhere up above, and then what sounded like explosions in his ears as men tumbled over each other on the hollow deck, and he remembered: the pirates. Those mercenaries who tried to sink him into the sea.

He would recognize that sound anywhere, the sound of crude individuals, bored at sea, out for cruelty – he had encountered too many of them before. He realized, shaking off his dream, that he was their prisoner now, and he struggled at his cords, trying to break free.

But he could not. His arms had been bound well, as were his ankles. He was not going anywhere.

Thorgrin closed his eyes, trying to summon his power from deep within, the power he knew could move mountains if he chose.

But nothing came. He was too spent from the ordeal of the shipwreck, his strength still too low. He knew from past experience that he needed time to recover. Time, he knew, that he did not have.

"Thorgrin!" came a relieved voice, cutting through the darkness. It was a voice he recognized well, and he looked over to see Reece, bound a few feet away, looking back at him with joy. "You live!" Reece added.

"We did not know if you would come through!"

Thor turned to see O'Connor bound on his other side, equally joyful.

"I prayed for you every minute," came a sweet, soft voice in the darkness.

Thor looked over to see Angel, tears of joy in her eyes, and he could feel how much she cared for him.

“You owe her your life, you know,” Indra said. “When they cut you loose, it was she who dove in and brought you back. Without her courage you would not be sitting here right now.”

Thor looked at Angel with a new respect, and a new feeling of gratitude and devotion.

“Little one, I shall find a way to repay you,” he said to her.

“You already have,” she said, and he could see how much she meant it.

“Repay her by getting us all out of here,” Indra said, struggling against her binds, irritated. “Those bloodsucking pirates are the lowest of the low. They found us floating at sea and bound us all while we were still unconscious from that storm. If they’d faced us man to man, it would be a very different story.”

“They are cowards,” Matus said. “Like all pirates.”

“They also stripped us of our weapons,” O’Connor added.

Thor’s heart skipped a beat as he suddenly recalled his weapons, his armor, the Sword of the Dead.

“Don’t worry,” Reece said, seeing his face. “Our weaponry made it through the storm – including yours. It is not at the bottom of the sea, at least. But the pirates have it. See there, through the slats?”

Thor peered through the slats and saw, on the deck, all of their weapons, laid out beneath the sun, the pirates crowding around them. He saw Elden’s battle-ax and O’Connor’s golden bow and Reece’s halberd and Matus’s flail and Indra’s spear and Selese’s sack of sand – and his very own Sword of the Dead. He saw the pirates, hands on their hips, looking down and examining them with glee.

“I never seen a sword like that,” one of them said to the other.

Thor reddened with rage as he saw the pirate prodding his sword with his foot.

“Looks like it was a King’s,” said another, stepping forward.

“I found it first, it’s mine,” the first one said.

“If you kill me for it,” said the other.

Thor watched the men tackle each other, then heard a loud thump as they both crashed down to the deck, wrestling, the other pirates jeering as they circled around. They rolled back and forth, punching and elbowing, the others egging them on, then finally Thor saw blood sprayed through the slats, saw one pirate stomp the other one’s head several times.

The others cheered, relishing in it.

The pirate who won, a man with no shirt, a wiry torso, and a long scar down his chest, got up and, breathing hard, walked over to the Sword of the Dead. As Thor watched, he reached down and grabbed it and held it up victoriously. The others cheered.

Thor burned at the sight. This scum, holding his sword, a sword meant for a King. A sword he had risked his life to earn. A sword given to he, and no other.

There came a sudden shout, and Thor saw the pirate’s face suddenly wince in agony. He cried out and threw the sword, as if holding a snake, and Thor saw it go flying through the air and land on the deck with a clang and a thud.

“It bit me!” the pirate yelled to the others. “The freaking sword bit my hand! Look!”

He held out his hand and displayed a missing finger. Thor looked over at the sword, its hilt visible through the slats, and saw small, sharp teeth protruding from one of the faces carved in it, blood running down it.

The other pirates turned and glanced at it.

“It’s of the devil!” one yelled.

“I’m not touching it!” yelled another.

“Never mind it,” said one, turning his back. “There are plenty of other weapons to choose from.”

“What about my finger?” cried the pirate, in agony.

The other pirates laughed, ignoring him, and instead focused on going through the other weapons, fighting over the cache for themselves.

Thor returned his attention to his sword, seeing it now sitting there, so close to him, tantalizingly right on the other side of the slats. He tried once again with all his might to break free, but his cords would not give. They had been tied well.

“If we could just get our weapons,” Indra seethed. “I can’t stand the sight of their greasy palms on my spear.”

“Maybe I can help,” Angel said.

Thor and the others turned to her skeptically.

“They didn’t bind as they did you,” she explained. “They were afraid of my leprosy. They tied my hands, but then they gave up. See?”

Angel stood, showing her wrists bound behind her back, but her feet free to walk.

“Little good it will do us,” Indra said. “You’re still locked down here with all of us.”

Angel shook her head.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I’m smaller than all of you. I can squeeze my body through those slats.” She turned to Thor. “I can reach your sword.”

He looked back at her, impressed by her fearlessness.

“You’re very bold,” he said. “I admire that about you. Yet you would endanger yourself. If they catch you out there, they may kill you.”

“Or worse,” Selese added.

Angel looked back, proud, insistent.

“I will die either way, Thorgrin,” Angel replied. “I learned that a long time ago. My life taught me that. My disease taught me that. Dying does not matter to me; it is only living that matters. And living free, unrestrained from the bonds of men.”

Thor looked back at her, inspired, amazed at her wisdom for such a young age. She already knew more about life than most of the great teachers he had met.

Thor nodded back at her solemnly. He could see the warrior spirit within her, and he would not restrain it.

“Go then,” he said. “Be quick and quiet. If you see any sign of danger, return to us. I care more for you than that sword.”

Angel brightened, encouraged. She turned quickly and hurried through the hold, walking awkwardly with her hands behind her back, until she reached the slats. She knelt there, looking out, sweating, eyes wide with fear.

Finally, seeing her chance, Angel stuck her head through a gap in the slats, just wide enough to hold her. She wiggled her way through it, pushing off with her feet.

A moment later, she disappeared from the hold, and Thor could see her, standing on the deck. His heart pounded as he prayed for her safety, prayed that she could get his sword and get back before it was too late.

Angel stood, crouched down and hurried quickly to the sword; she reached out with her bare foot, placed it on the hilt, and slid it over.

The sword made a loud noise as it slid across the deck, toward the hold. It was but a few inches away from the slats, when suddenly a voice cut through the air.

“The little creep!” a pirate yelled.

Thor saw all the pirates turn her way, then run to her.

Angel ran, trying to make it back – but they caught her before she could make it. They grabbed her and scooped her up, and Thor could see them marching her toward the rail, as if prepared to hurl her into the seas.

Angel managed to lift up the back of her heel hard and a groan rang out as she connected right between the pirate’s legs. The pirate holding her moaned and dropped her, and without hesitating, Angel raced back across the deck, reached the sword, and kicked it.

Thor watched, exhilarated, as the sword slipped through the cracks and landed in the hold, right at his feet, with a bang.

There came a scream as one of the pirates backhanded Angel. The others scooped her up and carried her back for the rail, preparing to throw her into the sea.

Thor, sweating, having more fear for Angel than for himself, looked down at his sword and felt an intense connection to it. Their connection was so strong, Thor did not need to use his magical powers. He spoke to it, as he would to a friend, and he felt it listen.

“Come to me, my friend. Release my binds. Let us be together again.”

The sword heeded his call. It suddenly lifted into the air, floated behind his back, and severed his ropes.

Thor immediately spun around, grabbed the hilt in midair, and brought the sword down, slashing the cords at his ankles.

He then jumped to his feet and slashed the cords binding all the others.

Thor turned and charged for the slats, raised his boot, and kicked off the wooden door. Shattered, it went flying into pieces as he burst out into sunlight, free, sword in hand – and determined to rescue Angel.

Thor sprinted onto the deck and charged for the men holding Angel, who squirmed in their arms, fear in her eyes as they reached the rail.

“Let her go!” Thor yelled.

Thor raced for her, cutting down the pirates who approached him from all sides, slashing them across the chest before they could even get a blow in – none of them a match for him and the Sword of the Dead.

He cut through the group, kicked the final two men out of the way, then reached out and grabbed the back of the final pirate’s shirt just before he dropped her over. He yanked him toward him, pulling Angel back over the edge, then twisted his arm so he dropped her. She landed safely on deck.

Thor then grabbed the man and hurled him over the edge. He plummeted into the icy seas, screaming.

Thor heard footsteps and turned to see dozens of pirates bearing down on him. This was not a small boat but a huge, professional ship, as large as any warship, and it contained at least a hundred pirates, all of them hardened, accustomed to a life of killing at sea. They all charged, clearly welcoming the fight.

Thor’s Legion brothers poured out of the hold, each racing forward to reclaim their weapons before the pirates could reach them. Elden jumped out of the way as a pirate brought a machete down for his neck, then he grabbed him and headbutted him, breaking the pirate’s nose. He snatched the machete from his hand and cut him in half. Then he leapt for his battle-ax.

Reese snatched his halberd, O’Connor his bow, Indra her spear, Matus his flail, and Selese her sack of sand, while Angel darted past them, kicking a pirate in the shin before he could throw a dagger at Thor. The pirate screamed and grabbed his leg, and the dagger went flying overboard.

Thor charged forward and leapt into the group, kicking one pirate in the chest and slashing another, then spinning around and slashing another’s arm before he could bring his machete down on Reece. Another charged and swung a club for his head, and Thor ducked, the club whizzing by. He prepared to stab him, but Reece stepped forward and used his halberd to kill him.

O’Connor let loose two arrows which went whizzing by Thor, and Thor spun and watched two pirates, charging for his back, fall dead. He spotted a pirate charging for Angel and Thor was about to chase after him when O’Connor stepped up and put an arrow in his back.

Thor heard footsteps and spun to see a pirate charging for O’Connor’s back with a club. Thor lunged and, feeling the Sword of the Dead vibrating, slashed his thick club in two then stabbed the pirate in the heart before he could reach him. Thor then spun around, kicked another man in the ribs,

and, the Sword of the Dead leading the way, chopped off the man's head. Thor was amazed. It was as if the sword had a beating heart of its own, willing Thor on to what it wanted him to do.

As Thor slashed furiously in every direction, a dozen men piled up before him, he covered in blood up to his elbows – when suddenly, a pirate jumped him from behind, landing on his back. The mercenary raised a dagger, bringing it down on the back of Thor's shoulder, and he was too close, and it was too late, for Thor to react.

Thor spotted an object in the air, hurling at him out of the corner of his eye, and he suddenly felt the man release his grip and drop down to the deck. Thor turned to see Angel standing there, having just thrown a stone, and realized she'd connected perfectly with the man's temple. The man squirmed at Thor's feet, and Thor watched, amazed, as Angel stepped forward, grabbed a hook off the deck, and raising it high, impaled it in the man's chest. It was the same hook the pirates had used to ensnare them in their net at sea. Justice, Thor realized, had come full circle.

He'd had no idea Angel had it in her; he saw the fierceness in her eyes as she stood over him and he realized she had a true warrior's spirit and was much more complex than he knew.

Thor turned and threw himself into the fray and he and his men attacked relentlessly, all of them banding together, as they had in so many places, a fine-tuned killing machine, all watching each other's backs. They fought beautifully together, knowing each other's rhythms. As Elden swung his battle-ax, Indra hurled her spear, killing those he could not reach. Matus swung his flail, killing two pirates at once, while Reece used his long halberd to kill three pirates before they could reach Selese. And Selese, in turn, sprinkled the dust from her sack on their wounds, healing all their wounds as they went and keeping them strong.

Slowly the tide turned, as they cut down one man after the next. The bodies piled high, and soon there remained but a dozen of them.

Eyes wide with fear, the dozen remaining pirates, realizing they could not win, dropped their daggers and machetes and axes and raised their hands, terrified.

"Don't kill us!" one yelled out, shaking. "We didn't mean it! We just went along with the others!"

"I'm sure you didn't," Elden said.

"Don't worry," Thor said, "we're not going to kill you."

Thor sheathed his sword, stepped forward, grabbed the pirate, lifted him over his head, and hurled him overboard, into the sea.

"The fish will do that for us."

The others joined him, driving the remaining few overboard with their weapons, into the sea, and Thor watched as the seas soon turned red, sharks circling and drowning out the cries of the pirates.

Thor turned to the others, who looked back at him. He could see in their eyes that they were thinking the same thing as he: victory, sweet victory, was theirs.

Chapter Nine

Erec bent over the rail and looked down in the torchlight into a sea filled with Empire corpses. A dozen Empire soldiers lay floating, all killed by Erec and his men, all pushed over the rail, and as he watched, slowly, one at a time, they sank.

Erec looked up and down his fleet of ships and saw his men on all of them, all now free, thanks to Alistair's breaking their bonds. The Empire had been foolish to leave but a dozen soldiers to guard each ship, thinking themselves invincible. They had been vastly outnumbered, and once Erec's men's bonds were broken, it had been easy to kill them and retake their ships. They had underestimated Alistair.

They also had no reason to fear an uprising because they had completely surrounded Erec's ships. Indeed, as Erec looked up he saw that the Empire blockade, with their thousand ships, was still intact. There was nowhere for them to go.

More horns sounded, more Empire soldiers cried out in the night, and Erec could see the lanterns being lit all up and down the fleet. The Empire, that sleeping dragon, was slowly rallying. Soon they would enclose Erec's men like a python and strangle them to death. This time, Erec was sure, they would show no mercy.

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