A JOUST OF KNIGHTS

BOOK #16 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Joust of Knights

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2014

Rice M.

A Joust of Knights / M. Rice — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2014 — (The Sorcerer's Ring)

ISBN 978-1-63-291130-8

In A JOUST OF KNIGHTS, Thorgrin and his brothers follow Guwayne's trail at sea, pursuing him to the Isle of Light. But as they reach the ravaged isle and the dying Ragon, all may be just too late.Darius finds himself brought to the Empire capital, and to the greatest arena of them all. He is trained by a mysterious man who is determined to forge him into a warrior, and to help him survive the impossible. But the capital arena is unlike anything Darius has seen, and its formidable foes may be too intense for even he to conquer.Gwendolyn is pulled into the heart of the family dynamics of the royal court of the Ridge, as the King and Queen beg her for a favor. On a quest to unearth secrets that can change the very future of the Ridge and save Thorgrin and Guwayne, Gwen is shocked by what she discovers as she digs too deep.Erec and Alistair's bonds deepen as they sail further upriver, into the heart of the Empire, determined to find Volusia and save Gwendolyn – while Godfrey and his crew wreak havoc within Volusia, determined to avenge their friends. And Volusia herself learns what it means to rule the Empire, as she finds her precarious capital embattled from all sides.With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A JOUST OF KNIGHTS 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.

ISBN 978-1-63-291130-8

© Rice M., 2014
© Lukeman Literary Management Ltd, 2014

Содержание

Chapter One 11
Chapter Two 13
Chapter Three 17
Chapter Four 20
Chapter Five 24
Chapter Six 26
Chapter Seven 28
Chapter Eight 30
Chapter Nine 33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 36

Morgan Rice
A Joust of Knights
(Book #16 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

Copyright © 2014 by Morgan Rice

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Jacket image Copyright Razumovskaya Marina Nikolaevna, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising sixteen books (and counting); of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising eleven books (and counting); and of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 20 languages.

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

THE SORCERER'S RING
A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)
A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)
A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)
A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)
A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)
A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)
A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)
A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)
A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)
A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)
A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)
AN OATH OF BROTHERS (Book #14)

A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)
A JOUST OF KNIGHTS (Book #16)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY
ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)
ARENA TWO (Book #2)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS
TURNED (Book #1)
LOVED (Book #2)
BETRAYED (Book #3)
DESTINED (Book #4)
DESIRED (Book #5)
BETROTHED (Book #6)
VOWED (Book #7)
FOUND (Book #8)
RESURRECTED (Book #9)
CRAVED (Book #10)
FATED (Book #11)

THE SORCERER'S RING

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

the vampire journals

Listen to THE SORCERER'S RING series in audio book format!
Now available on:
Amazon
Audible
iTunes

Chapter One

Thorgrin stood at the bow of the sleek ship, gripping the rail, his hair pushed back by the wind, and he stared into the horizon with a deepening sense of foreboding. Their ship, taken from the pirates, was sailing as fast as the winds could carry it, Elden, O'Connor, Matus, Reece, Indra, and Selese working the sails, Angel standing by his side, and Thor, as eager as he was, knew they could not go any faster. Yet still, he willed it to be so. After all this time, he finally felt with certainty that Guwayne lay just ahead, just past the horizon, on the Isle of Light. And with equal certainty, he sensed that Guwayne was in danger.

Thor did not understand how it could be so. After all, the last time he had left them, Guwayne had been safely on the Isle of Light, under Ragon's protection, a sorcerer as powerful as his brother. Argon was the most powerful sorcerer Thorgrin had ever known – had even protected the entire Ring – and Thor did not know how any harm could ever come to Guwayne while under Ragon's protection.

Unless there was some power out there that Thorgrin had never heard of, a power of a dark sorcerer's which could match even Ragon's. Could it be that some realm existed, some dark force, some evil sorcerer, of which he knew nothing?

But why would they target his son?

Thor thought back to the day he had fled the Isle of Light in such a hurry, under the spell of his dream, so driven to leave the place at the crack of dawn. Looking back, Thor realized he had been deceived by some dark force trying to lure him away from his son. It was only thanks to Lycoples, who still circled his ship, screeching, disappearing on the horizon and coming back again, that he had turned back for the Isle, was finally heading in the right direction. The signs, Thor realized, had been in front of his face the whole time. How had he ignored them? What dark force was leading him astray to begin with?

Thor recalled the price he'd had to pay: the demons released from hell, the dark lord's curse that each would mean a curse on his head. He knew that more curses, more trials lay before him, and he felt certain this had been one of them. What other tests, he wondered, lay before him? Would he ever get his son back?

"Don't worry," came a sweet voice.

Thor turned and looked down to see Angel tugging on his shirt.

"Everything will be okay," she added with a smile.

Thor smiled down at her and laid a hand on her head, reassured by her presence as always. He had come to love Angel as he would a daughter, the daughter he never had. He took reassurance in her presence.

"And if it's not," she added with a smile, "I'll take care of them!"

She proudly raised the small bow that O'Connor had carved for her, and showed Thor how she could pull back the arrow. Thor smiled, amused, as she raised the bow to her chest, shakily placed a small wooden arrow on it, and began to pull back the string. She released the bow, and her small wooden arrow went flying, shakily, overboard and out into the ocean.

"Did I kill a fish!?" she asked excitedly as she ran to the rail and looked over with glee.

Thor stood there, looking down into the foaming waters of the sea, and was not so sure. But he smiled all the same.

"I am sure you did," he said, reassuringly. "Perhaps even a shark."

Thor heard a distant screech, and he was suddenly on alert again. His entire body froze as he grabbed the hilt of his sword and looked out over the water, studying the horizon.

The thick gray clouds slowly cleared, and as they did, they revealed a horizon which made Thor's heart drop: in the distance, black plumes of smoke rose into the sky. As more clouds cleared,

Thor could see that they arose from a distant isle – not just any isle, but an island with steep cliffs, rising right up to the sky, a broad plateau at its top. An isle he could mistake for no other.

The Isle of Light.

Thor felt a pain in his chest as he saw a sky black with evil creatures, resembling gargoyles, circling what remained of the isle, like vultures, their screeches filling the air. There was an army of them, and below them, the entire isle was up in flames. Not a corner of it was left unscathed.

"FASTER!" Thor shouted, yelling at the wind, knowing it was futile. It was the most helpless feeling of his life.

But there was nothing more he could do. He watched the flames, the smoke, the monsters departing, heard Lycoples screeching above, and he knew it was too late. Nothing could have survived. Anything left on the isle – Ragon, Guwayne, anything at all – would surely, without a doubt, be dead.

"NO!" Thorgrin screamed, cursing the heavens, the ocean spray hitting his face as it carried him, too late, to the isle of death.

Chapter Two

Gwendolyn stood alone, back in the Ring, in her mother's castle, and she looked about at her surroundings and realized something was not quite right. The castle was abandoned, unfurnished, all its belongings stripped away; its windows were gone, the beautiful stained glass that had once adorned them lost, leaving nothing but cutouts in the stone, the sunset light streaming in. Dust swirled in the air, and this place felt as if it hadn't been inhabited in a thousand years.

Gwen looked out and saw the landscape of the Ring, a place she had once known and loved with all her heart, now barren, twisted, grotesque. As if nothing good were left alive in the world.

"My daughter," came a voice.

Gwendolyn turned and was shocked to find her mother standing there, looking back, her face drawn and sickly, hardly the mother she once knew and remembered. It was the mother she remembered from her deathbed, the mother who looked as if she had been aged too much for one lifetime.

Gwen felt a lump in her throat and she realized, despite all that had gone about between them, how much she missed her. She did not know if it was her she missed, or just seeing her family, something familiar, the Ring. What she would give to be home again, to be back in the familiar.

"Mother," Gwen replied, hardly believing the sight before her.

Gwen reached out for her, and as she did, she suddenly found herself somewhere else, standing on an island, at the edge of a cliff, the island charred, having just been burned to ashes. The heavy smell of smoke and sulfur hung in the air, burned her nostrils. She faced the isle, and as the waves of ashes dissipated in the wind, she looked out and saw a bassinet made of gold, charred, the only object in this landscape of embers and ash.

Gwen's heart pounded as she stepped forward, so nervous to see if her son was in there, if he was okay. A part of her was elated to reach in and hold him, to clutch him at her chest and never let him go again. But another part dreaded he might not be there – or worse, that he could be dead.

Gwen rushed forward and leaned down and looked in the bassinet, and her heart dropped to see it was empty.

"GUWAYNE!" she cried out, in anguish.

Gwen heard a screech, high up in the air, matching hers, and she looked up and saw an army of black creatures, resembling gargoyles, flying away. Her heart stopped as she saw, in the talons of the last one, a baby, dangling, crying. He was being carried away into skies of gloom, hoisted by an army of darkness.

"NO!" Gwen shrieked.

Gwen woke screaming. She sat up in bed, looking everywhere for Guwayne, reaching out to save him, to clutch him to her chest.

But he was nowhere to be found.

Gwendolyn sat in bed, breathing hard, trying to figure out where she was. The dim light of dawn spread through the windows, and it took her several moments to realize where she was: the Ridge. The King's castle.

Gwen felt something on her palm and she looked down to see Krohn licking her hand, then resting his head on her lap. She stroked his head as she sat on the edge of the bed, breathing hard, slowly orienting herself, the weight of her dream upon her.

Guwayne, she thought. The dream had felt so real. It was more, she knew, than a dream – it had been a vision. Guwayne, wherever he was, was in trouble. He was being abducted by some dark force. She could feel it.

Gwendolyn stood, agitated. More than ever, she felt an urgency to find her son, to find her husband. She wanted more than anything to see and to hold him. But she knew it was not meant to be.

Wiping away tears, Gwen wrapped her silk gown about herself, quickly crossed the room, the cobblestone smooth and cold on her bare feet, and lingered by the tall arched window. She pushed back the stained glass pane, and as she did, it let in the muted light of dawn, the first sun rising, flooding the countryside in scarlet. It was breathtaking. Gwen looked out, taking in the Ridge, the immaculate capital city and the endless countryside all around it, rolling hills and lush vineyards, the most abundance she had ever seen in one place. Beyond that, the sparkling blue of the lake lit up the morning – and beyond that, the peaks of the Ridge, shaped in a perfect circle, encircled the place, shrouded in mist. It seemed like a place to which there could come no harm.

Gwen thought of Thorgrin, of Guwayne, somewhere beyond those peaks. Where were they? Would she ever see them again?

Gwen went to the cistern, splashed water on her face, and dressed herself quickly. She knew she would not find Thorgrin and Guwayne by sitting here in this room, and she felt more than ever that she needed to. If anyone could help her, perhaps it was the King. He must have some way.

Gwen recalled her conversation with him, as they had walked the peaks of the Ridge and watched Kendrick depart, recalled the secrets he had revealed to her. His dying. The Ridge dying. There was more, too, more secrets he was going to reveal – but they had gotten interrupted. His advisors had whisked him away on urgent business, and as he'd left he'd promised to reveal more – and to ask her a favor. What was the favor? she wondered. What could he possibly want of her?

The King had asked for her to meet him in his throne room when the sun broke, and Gwen now hurried to get dressed, knowing she was already late. Her dreams had left her groggy.

As she rushed across the room, Gwendolyn felt a hunger pain, the starvation from the Great Waste still taking its toll, and she glanced over at the table of delicacies laid out for her – breads, fruits, cheeses, puddings – and she quickly grabbed some, eating as she went. She grabbed more than she needed, and as she went, she reached down and fed half of what she had to Krohn, who whined by her side, snatching it from her palm, eager to catch up. She was so grateful for this food, this shelter, these lavish quarters – feeling in some ways as if she were back in King's Court, in the castle of her upbringing.

Guards snapped to attention as Gwen exited the chamber, pushing open the heavy oak door. She strode past them, down the dimly lit stone corridors of the castle, torches still burning from the night.

Gwen reached the end of the corridor and ascended a set of spiral stone stairs, Krohn on her heels, until she reached the upper floors, where she knew the King's throne room to be, already becoming familiar with this castle. She hurried down another hall, and was about to pass through an arched opening in the stone when she sensed motion out of the corner of her eye. She flinched, surprised to see a person standing in the shadows.

"Gwendolyn?" he said, his voice smooth, too polished, emerging from the shadows with a smug, small smile on his face.

Gwendolyn blinked, taken aback, and it took her moment to remember who he was. She had been introduced to so many people these last few days, it had all become quite a blur.

But this was one face she could not forget. It was, she realized, the King's son, the other twin, the one with the hair, who had spoken out against her.

"You're the King's son," she said, remembering aloud. "The third eldest."

He grinned, a sly grin which she did not like, as he took another step forward.

"The second eldest, actually," he corrected. "We are twins, but I came first."

Gwen looked him over as he took a step closer, and noticed he was immaculately dressed and shaven, his hair coiffed, smelling like perfume and oil, dressed in the finest clothes she'd seen. He wore a smug look, and he reeked of arrogance and self-importance.

"I prefer not to be thought of as the twin," he continued. "I am my own man. Mardig is my name. It is just my lot in life to be born a twin, one I could not control. The lot, one could say, of crowns," he concluded, philosophically.

Gwen did not like being in his presence, still smarting from his treatment the night before, and she felt Krohn tense up at her side, the hairs on his neck rising as he rubbed up against her leg. She felt impatient to know what he wanted.

"Do you always linger in the shadows of these corridors?" she asked.

Mardig smirked as he stepped closer, a bit too close for her.

"It is my castle, after all," he replied, territorially. "I've been known to wander about it."

"*Your* castle?" she asked. "And not your father's?"

His expression darkened.

"Everything in time," he replied cryptically, and took another step forward.

Gwendolyn found herself involuntarily taking a step back, not liking the feel of his presence, as Krohn began to snarl.

Mardig looked down at Krohn disparagingly.

"You know that animals do not sleep in our castle?" he replied.

Gwen frowned, annoyed.

"Your father had no qualms."

"My father does not enforce the rules," he replied. "I do. And the King's guard is under my command."

She frowned, frustrated.

"Is that why you've stopped me here?" she asked, annoyed. "To enforce animal control?"

He frowned back, realizing, perhaps, that he'd met his match. He stared at her, his eyes locking on hers, as if summing her up.

"There is not a woman in the Ridge who does not long for me," he said. "And yet I see no passion in your eyes."

Gwen gaped at him, horrified, as she finally realized what this was all about.

"*Passion*?" she repeated, mortified. "And why would I? I am married, and the love of my life will soon return to my side."

Mardig laughed aloud.

"Is that so?" he asked. "From what I hear, he is long dead. Or so far lost to you, he will never return."

Gwendolyn scowled, her anger mounting.

"And even if he should never return," she said, "I would never be with another. And certainly not you."

His expression darkened.

She turned to go, but he reached out and grabbed her arm. Krohn snarled.

"I don't ask for what I want here," he said. "I take it. You are in a foreign kingdom, at the mercy of a foreign host. It would best be wise for you to oblige your captors. After all, without our hospitality, you will be cast into the waste. And there are a great many unfortunate circumstances which can accidentally befall a guest – even with the most well-intentioned of hosts."

She scowled, having seen too many real threats in her life to be afraid of his petty warnings.

"Captors?" she said. "Is that what you call us? I am a free woman, in case you haven't noticed. I can leave here right now if I choose."

He laughed, an ugly sound.

"And where would you go? Back into the Waste?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"You might be technically free to go," he added. "But let me ask you: when the world is a hostile place, where does that leave you?"

Krohn snarled viciously, and Gwen could feel him ready to pounce. She shook Mardgi's hand off of her arm indignantly, and reached down and laid a hand on Krohn's head, holding him back. And then, as she glared back at Mardig, she had a sudden insight.

"Tell me something, Mardig," she said, her voice hard and cold. "Why is it you are not out there, fighting with your brothers in the desert? Why is it that you are the only one who remains behind? Is it fear that drives you?"

He smiled, but beneath his smile she could sense cowardice.

"Chivalry is for fools," he replied. "Convenient fools, that pave the way for the rest of us to have whatever we want. Dangle the term 'chivalry,' and they can be used like puppets. I myself cannot be used so easily."

She looked at him, disgusted.

"My husband and our Silver would laugh at a man like you," she said. "You wouldn't last two minutes in the Ring."

Gwen looked from him to the entrance he was blocking.

"You have two choices," she said. "You can move out of my way, or Krohn here can have the breakfast he so heartily desires. I think you are about the perfect size."

He glanced down at Krohn, and she saw his lip quiver. He stepped aside.

But she did not go just yet. Instead, she stepped up, close to him, sneering, wanting to have her point made.

"You might be in command of your little castle," she snarled darkly, "but do not forget that you speak to a Queen. A *free* Queen. I will never answer to you, never answer to anyone else as long as I live. I am through with that. And that makes me very dangerous – far more dangerous than you."

The Prince stared back, and to her surprise, he smiled.

"I like you, Queen Gwendolyn," he replied. "Much more than I thought."

Gwendolyn, heart pounding, watched him turn and walk away, slithering back into the blackness, disappearing down the corridor. As his footsteps echoed and faded away, she wondered: what dangers lurked in this court?

Chapter Three

Kendrick charged across the arid desert landscape, Brandt and Atme by his side, his half-dozen Silver beside them, all that remained of the brotherhood of the Ring, riding together like old times. As they rode, venturing out deeper and deeper into the Great Waste, Kendrick felt weighed down by nostalgia and sadness; it made him remember his heyday in the Ring, surrounded by Silver, by brothers in arms, riding out into battle, alongside thousands of men. He had ridden with the finest knights the kingdom had to offer, each a greater warrior than the next, and everywhere he had ridden, trumpets had sounded and villagers had rushed out to greet him. He and his men had been welcome everywhere, and they had always stayed up late into the night, recounting stories of battle, of valor, of skirmishes with monsters that emerged from the canyon – or worse, from beyond the wild.

Kendrick blinked, dust in his eyes, snapping out of it. He was in a different time now, a different place. He looked over and saw the eight men of the Silver, and expected to see thousands more alongside them. But reality slowly sank in, as he realized the eight of them were all of what was left, and he realized how much had changed. Would those days of glory ever be restored?

Kendrick's idea of what made a warrior had shifted over the years, and these days, he found himself feeling that what made a warrior was not only skill and honor – but perseverance. The ability to go on. Life had a way of showering you with so many obstacles, calamities, tragedies, losses – and most of all, so much change; he had lost more friends than he could count, and the King he had lived his life for no longer even lived. His very homeland had disappeared. And yet still, he went on, even when he didn't know what for. He was searching for it, he knew. And it was that ability to go on, perhaps most of all, that made a warrior, that made a man stand the test of time when so many others fell away. It was what separated true warriors from fleeting ones.

"SAND WALL AHEAD!" shouted a voice.

It was a foreign voice, one that Kendrick was still getting used to, and he looked over to see Koldo, the King's eldest son, his black skin standing out amongst the group, leading the pack of soldiers from the Ridge. In the brief time Kendrick had known him, he had already come to respect Koldo, watching the way he led his men, and the way they looked up to him. He was a knight whom Kendrick was proud to ride beside.

Koldo pointed to the horizon and Kendrick looked out and saw what he was pointing to – in fact, he heard it before he saw it. It was a shrill whistling, like a windstorm, and Kendrick recalled his time in the Waste, being dragged through it semi-conscious. He recalled the raging sands, churning like a tornado that never went away, forming a solid wall and rising to the sky. It had looked impermeable, like a real wall, and it helped obscure the Ridge from the rest of the Empire.

As the whistling grew louder, Kendrick dreaded re-entering.

"SCARVES!" commanded a voice.

Kendrick saw Ludvig, the elder of the King's twins, stretching out a long, mesh white cloth and wrapping it over his face. One by one the other soldiers followed his lead and did the same.

There came riding up beside Kendrick the soldier who had introduced himself as Naten, a man Kendrick recalled taking an instant dislike to. He was rebellious of Kendrick's assigned command, and disrespectful.

Naten smirked over at Kendrick and his men as he rode closer.

"You think you lead this mission," he said, "just because the King assigned you. Yet you don't even know enough to cover your men from the Sand Wall."

Kendrick glared back at the man, seeing in his eyes that he held an unprovoked hatred for him. At first Kendrick had thought that perhaps he had just been threatened by him, an outsider – but now he could see that this was just a man who loved to hate.

"Give him the scarves!" Koldo yelled out to Naten, impatient.

After some more time passed and the wall came even closer, the sands raging, Naten finally reached down and threw the sack of scarves at Kendrick, hitting him roughly in the chest as he rode.

"Distribute these to your men," he said, "or end up cut up by the wall. It's your choice – I don't really care."

Naten rode off, veering back to his men, and Kendrick quickly distributed the scarves to his men, riding up beside each one and handing them off. Kendrick then wrapped his own scarf about his head and face, as the others from the Ridge did, wrapping it around again and again, until he felt secure yet could still breathe. He could barely see through it, the world obscured, blurry in the light.

Kendrick braced himself as they charged closer and the sounds of the swirling sands became deafening. Already fifty yard away, the air was filled with the sound of sand bouncing off armor. A moment later, he felt it.

Kendrick plunged into the Sand Wall, and it was like immersing himself in a churning ocean of sand. The noise was so loud he could barely hear the pounding of his own heart in his ears, as the sand embraced every inch of his body, fighting to get in, to tear him apart. The swirling sands were so intense, he could not even see Brandt or Atme, just a few feet beside him.

"KEEP RIDING!" Kendrick called out to his men, wondering if any of them could even hear him, reassuring himself as much as them. The horses were neighing like crazy, slowing down, acting oddly, and Kendrick looked down and saw the sand getting in their eyes. He kicked harder, praying his horse didn't stop where it was.

Kendrick kept charging and charging, thinking it would never end – and then, finally, gratefully, he emerged. He charged out the other side, his men beside him, back out into the Great Waste, open sky and emptiness waiting to greet him on the other side. The Sand Wall gradually calmed as they rode further, and as calm was restored, Kendrick noticed the men of the Ridge looking at him and his men with surprise.

"Didn't think we'd survive?" Kendrick asked Naten as he gaped back.

Naten shrugged.

"I wouldn't care either way," he said, and rode off with his men.

Kendrick exchanged a look with Brandt and Atme, as they all wondered again about these men from the Ridge. Kendrick sensed it would be a long and hard road to earn their trust. After all, he and his men were outsiders, and they had been the ones who had created this trail and caused them trouble.

"Up ahead!" Koldo yelled.

Kendrick looked up and saw there, in the desert, the trail left by him and the others of the Ring. He saw all their footsteps, now hardened in the sand, leading off to the horizon.

Koldo came to a stop where they ended, pausing, and all the others did, too, their horses breathing hard. They all looked down, studying them.

"I would have expected the desert to wash them away," Kendrick said, surprised.

Naten sneered back at him.

"This desert doesn't wash anything away. It never rains – and it remembers everything. These prints of yours would have led them right to us – and would have led to the downfall of the Ridge."

"Stop riding him," Koldo said to Naten darkly, his voice stern with authority.

They all turned to see him close by, and Kendrick felt a rush of gratitude toward him.

"Why should I?" Naten replied. "These people created this problem. I could be back, safe and sound, in the Ridge right now."

"Keep it up," Koldo said, "and I will send you home right now. You will be kicked off our mission and will explain to the King why you treated his appointed commander with disrespect."

Naten, finally humbled, looked down and rode off to the other side of the group.

Koldo looked over to Kendrick, nodding at him with respect, one commander to another.

"I apologize for my men's insubordination," he said. "As I am sure you know, a commander cannot always speak for all of his men."

Kendrick nodded back in respect, admiring Koldo more than ever.

“Is this then the trail of your people?” Koldo asked, looking down.

Kendrick nodded.

“Apparently so.”

Koldo sighed, turning and following it.

“We shall follow it until it ends,” he said. “Once we reach its end, we will backtrack and erase it.”

Kendrick was puzzled.

“But won’t we leave a trail of our own upon coming back?”

Koldo gestured, and Kendrick followed his glance to see, affixed to the back of his men’s horses, several devices that looked like rakes.

“Sweepers,” Ludvig explained, coming up beside Koldo. “They will erase our trail as we ride.”

Koldo smiled.

“This is what has kept the Ridge invisible from our enemies for centuries.”

Kendrick admired the ingenious devices, and there came a shout as the men all kicked their horses, turned and followed the trail, galloping through the desert, back into the Waste, toward a horizon of emptiness. Despite himself, Kendrick glanced back as they went, took one last look at the Sand Wall, and for some reason, was overcome by a feeling that they would never, ever, return.

Chapter Four

Erec stood at the bow of the ship, Alistair and Strom beside him, and looked out at the narrowing river with worry. Following close behind was his small fleet, all that remained of what had set out from the Southern Isles, all snaking their way up this endless river, deeper and deeper into the heart of the Empire. At some points this river had been as wide as an ocean, its banks no longer in sight, and its waters clear; but now Erec saw, on the horizon, it narrowed, closing into a chokepoint of perhaps only twenty yards wide, and its waters becoming murky.

The professional soldier within Erec was on high alert. He did not like confined spaces when leading men, and the narrowing river, he knew, would leave his fleet more susceptible to ambush. Erec glanced back over his shoulder and saw no sign of the massive Empire fleet they had escaped at sea; but that didn't mean they weren't out there, somewhere. He knew they would never give up the pursuit until they had found him.

Hands on his hips, Erec turned back and narrowed his eyes, studying the forlorn Empire lands on either side, stretching endlessly, a ground of dried sand and hard rock, lacking trees, lacking any sign of any civilization. Erec scanned the river banks and was grateful, at least, to spot no forts or Empire battalions positioned alongside the river. He wanted to sail his fleet upriver to Volusia as quickly as possible, find Gwendolyn and the others, and liberate them – and get out of here. He would sail them back across the sea to the safety of the Southern Isles, where he could protect them. He didn't want any distractions along the way.

Yet on the other hand, the ominous silence, the desolate landscape, also left him to worry: was the Empire hiding out there, waiting in ambush?

There was an even greater danger out there, Erec knew, than a pending attack by the enemy, and that was starving to death. It was a much more pressing concern. They were crossing what was essentially a desert wasteland, and all their provisions below had nearly run out. As Erec stood there, he could feel the grumbling in his belly, having rationed himself and the others to one meal a day for far too many days. He knew that if some bounty didn't appear on the landscape soon, they would have a much bigger problem on their hands. Would this river ever end? he wondered. What if they never found Volusia?

And worse: what if Gwendolyn and the others were no longer there? Or already dead?

"Another one!" Strom called out.

Erec turned to see one of his men yanking up a fishing line, a bright yellow fish at the end, flopping all over the deck. The sailor stepped on it, and Erec crowded around with the others and looked down. He shook his head in disappointment: two heads. It was another one of the poisonous fish that seemed to live in abundance in this river.

"This river is damned," his man said, hurling down the fishing rod.

Erec walked back to the rail and studied the waters with disappointment. He sensed a presence and turned to see Strom come up beside him.

"And if this river does not lead us to Volusia?" Strom asked.

Erec spotted concern in his brother's face, and he shared it.

"It will lead us somewhere," Erec replied. "And it brings us north. If not to Volusia, then we will cross land on foot and fight our way."

"Should we abandon our ships then? How shall we ever flee this place? Return to the Southern Isles?"

Erec slowly shook his head and sighed.

"We might not," he answered honestly. "No quest of honor is safe. And has that ever stopped you or I?"

Strom turned to him and smiled.

"That is what we live for," he replied.

Erec smiled back and turned to see Alistair come up on his other side, holding the rail and looking out at the river, which was narrowing as they sailed. Her eyes were glazed and had a distant look, and Erec could sense she was lost in another world. He had noticed something else had changed about her, too – he was not sure what, as if there was some secret she were holding back. He was dying to ask her, but he did not wish to pry.

A chorus of horns sounded, and Erec, startled, turned and looked back. His heart fell as he saw what loomed.

"CLOSING IN FAST!" shouted a sailor from up high on the mast, pointing frantically. "EMPIRE FLEET!"

Erec ran across the deck, back to the stern, accompanied by Strom, racing past all of his men, all of them in battle mode, grabbing their swords, preparing their bows, mentally preparing themselves.

Erec reached the stern and gripped the rail and looked out, and he saw it was true: there, at a bend in the river, just a few hundred yards away, was a row of Empire ships, sailing their black and gold sails.

"They must have found our trail," Strom said beside him.

Erec shook his head.

"They were following us the whole time," he said, realizing. "They were just waiting to show themselves."

"Waiting for what?" Strom asked.

Erec turned and looked back over his shoulder, upriver.

"That," he said.

Strom turned and studied the narrowing river.

"They waited until the river's most narrow point," Erec said. "Waited until we had to sail single file and were too deep to turn back. They've got us exactly where they want us."

Erec looked back at the fleet, and as he stood there, he felt an incredible sense of focus, as he often did when leading his men and finding himself in times of crisis. He felt another sense kick in, and as often happened in times like these, an idea occurred to him.

Erec turned to his brother.

"Man that ship beside us," he commanded. "Take up the rear of our fleet. Get every man off of it – have them board the ship beside it. Do you hear me? Empty that ship. When the ship is empty, you'll be the last to leave it."

Strom looked back, confused.

"When the ship is empty?" he echoed. "I don't understand."

"I plan to wreck it."

"To wreck it?" Strom asked, dumbfounded.

Erec nodded.

"At the most narrow point, where the river banks meet, you will turn that ship sideways and abandon it. It will create a wedge – the dam that we need. No one will be able to follow us. Now go!" Erec yelled.

Strom jumped into action, following his brother's orders, to his credit, whether he agreed with them or not. Erec sailed his ship alongside his others and Strom leapt from one rail to the other. As he landed on the other ship, he began barking orders, and the men broke into action, all of them jumping, one at a time, off their ship and onto Erec's.

Erec was concerned as he watched their ships begin to drift apart.

"Man the ropes!" Erec called out to his men. "Use the hooks – hold the ships together!"

His men followed his command, running to the side of the ship, hoisting the grappling hooks and throwing them through the air, hooking them onto the ship beside them and yanking with all

their might so that the ships stopped drifting apart. It sped up the process, and dozens of men leapt from one rail to the other, all grabbing their weapons hastily as they abandoned the ship.

Strom supervised, yelling orders, making sure each man left the ship, corralling them all until there was no left on board.

Strom caught Erec's eye, as Erec watched with approval.

"And what of the ship's provisions?" Strom yelled out above the din. "And its surplus weaponry?"

Erec shook his head.

"Let it go," he called back. "Just take up our rear and destroy the ship."

Erec turned and ran to the bow, leading his fleet as they all followed him and sailed into the bottleneck.

"SINGLE FILE!"

All his ships fell in behind him as the river tapered to its narrowest point. Erec sailed through with his fleet, and as he did, he glanced back and saw the Empire fleet closing in fast, now hardly a hundred yards away. He watched hundreds of Empire troops man their bows and prepare their arrows, setting them on fire. He knew they were nearly in range; there was little time to waste.

"NOW!" Erec yelled to Strom, just as Strom's ship, the last of the fleet, entered the narrowest point.

Strom, watching and waiting, raised his sword and slashed half the ropes attaching his ship to Erec's, at the same time jumping ship over to Erec's side. He cut them just as the abandoned ship sailed into the bottleneck, and it immediately floundered, rudderless.

"TURN IT SIDEWAYS!" Erec commanded his men.

His men all reached out and grabbed the ropes that remained on one side of the ship and yanked as hard as they could, until the ship, groaning in protest, slowly turned its way sideways against the current. Finally, the current carrying it, it lodged itself firmly in the rocks, crammed between the two river banks, its wood groaning and beginning to crack.

"PULL HARDER!" Erec yelled.

They pulled and pulled and Erec hurried over and joined them, all of them groaning as they yanked with all their might. Slowly, they managed to turn the ship, holding it tight as it lodged more and more deeply into the rocks.

As the ship stopped moving, firmly lodged, finally Erec was satisfied.

"CUT THE ROPES!" he yelled, knowing it was now or never, feeling his own ship begin to falter.

Erec's men slashed the remaining ropes, disentangling his ship – and not a moment too soon.

The abandoned ship began cracking collapsing, its wreckage firmly blocking the river – and a moment later, the sky turned black as a host of flaming Empire arrows descended for Erec's fleet.

Erec had maneuvered his men out of harm's way just in time: the arrows all landed on the abandoned ship, falling twenty feet short of Erec's fleet, and they served only to set the ship aflame, creating yet another obstacle between them and the Empire. Now, the river would be impassable.

"Full sail ahead!" Erec yelled.

His fleet sailed with all they had, catching the wind, distancing themselves from their blockade, and sailing farther and farther north, harmlessly out of the way of the Empire's arrows. Another volley of arrows came, and these landed in the water, splashing and hissing all around the ship as they hit the water.

As they continued sailing, Erec stood at the bow and watched, and he looked out with satisfaction as he watched the Empire fleet come to a halt before the flaming ship. One of the Empire ships fearlessly tried to ram it – but all it got for its efforts was to catch fire; hundreds of Empire soldiers cried out, engulfed in flames, and jumped overboard – and their flaming ship created an

even deeper sea of wreckage. Looking at it, Erec figured the Empire would not be able to get through for several days.

Erec felt a strong hand clasp his shoulder, and he looked over to see Strom standing beside him, smiling.

“One of your more inspired strategies,” he said.

Erec smiled back.

“Well done,” he replied.

Erec turned and looked back upriver, the waters snaking every which way, and he did not take comfort yet. They had won this battle – but who knew what obstacles lay ahead?

Chapter Five

Volusia, wearing her golden robes, stood high up on the dais, looking down at the hundred golden steps she had erected as an ode to herself, stretched out her arms, and reveled in the moment. As far as she could see, the capital's streets were lined with people, Empire citizens, her soldiers, all of her new worshipers, all bowing down to her, touching their heads to the ground in the breaking dawn light. They all chanted as one, a soft, persistent sound, participating in the morning service which she had created, as her ministers and commanders had instructed them to do: worship her, or face death. She knew that now they worshipped her because they had to – but soon enough, they would do so because it was all they knew.

"Volusia, Volusia, Volusia," they chanted. "Goddess of the sun and goddess of the stars. Mother of oceans and harbinger of the sun."

Volusia looked out and admired her new city. Erected everywhere were the golden statues of her, just as she'd instructed her men to build. Every corner of the capital had a statue of her, shining gold; everywhere one looked, there was no choice but to see her, to worship her.

Finally, she was satisfied. Finally, she was the Goddess she knew she was meant to be.

The chanting filled the air, as did the incense, burned at every altar to her. Men and women and children filled the streets, shoulder to shoulder, all bowing down, and she felt she deserved it. It had been a long, hard march to get here, but she had marched all the way to the capital, had managed to take it, to destroy the Empire armies that had opposed her. Now, finally, the capital was hers.

The Empire was hers.

Of course, her advisors thought otherwise, but Volusia did not care much what they thought. She was, she knew, invincible, somewhere between heaven and earth, and no power of this world could destroy her. Not only did she cower in fear – but rather, she knew this was just the beginning. She wanted more power, still. She planned to visit every horn and spike of the Empire and crush all those who opposed her, who would not accept her unilateral power. She would amass a greater and greater army, until every corner of the Empire subjugated itself to her.

Ready to start the day, Volusia slowly descended her dais, taking one golden step after the next. She reached out with her hands, and as they all rushed forward, her palms touched their palms, a throng of worshipers embracing her as their own, a living goddess amongst them. Some worshippers, weeping, fell to their faces as she went, and scores more formed a human bridge at the bottom, eager for her to walk over them. She did, stepping on the soft flesh of their backs.

Finally, she had her flock. And now it was time to go to war.

* * *

Volusia stood high on the ramparts surrounding the Empire capital, peering out into the desert sky with a heightened sense of destiny. She saw nothing but headless corpses, all of the men she had killed – and a sky of vultures, screeching, swooping, picking away at their flesh. Outside these walls there was a light breeze, and she could already smell the stench of rotting flesh, heavy in the wind. She smiled wide at the carnage. These men had dared oppose her – and they had paid the price.

"Should we not bury the dead, Goddess?" came a voice.

Volusia looked over to see the commander of her armed forces, Rory, a human, tall, broad-chested, with a chiseled chin and stunning good looks. She had chosen him, had elevated him above the other generals, because he was pleasing to the eyes – and even more so, because he was a brilliant commander and would win at any cost – just like her.

"No," she replied, not looking at him. "I want them to rot beneath the sun, and the animals to gorge on their flesh. I want all to know what happens to those who oppose the Goddess Volusia."

He looked out at the sight, recoiling.

"As you wish, Goddess," he replied.

Volusia scanned the horizon, and as she did, her sorcerer, Koolian, wearing a black hood and cloak, with glowing green eyes and a wart-lined face, the creature who had helped guide her own mother's assassination – and one of the few members of her inner circle whom she still trusted – stepped up beside her, scanning it too.

"You know that they are out there," he reminded. "That they come for you. I feel them coming even now."

She ignored him, looking straight ahead.

"As do I," she finally said.

"The Knights of the Seven are very powerful, Goddess," Koolian said. "They travel with an army of sorcerers – an army even you cannot fight."

"And do not forget Romulus's men," Rory added. "Reports have him close to our shores even now, returned from the Ring with his million men."

Volusia stared, and a long silence hung in the air, broken by nothing but the howling of the wind.

Finally, Rory said:

"You know we cannot hold this place. Remaining here will mean death for us all. What do you command, Goddess? Shall we flee the capital? Surrender?"

Volusia finally turned to him and smiled.

"We shall celebrate," she said.

"Celebrate?" he asked, shocked.

"Yes, we shall celebrate," she said. "Right until the very end. Reinforce our city gates, and open the grand arena. I declare a hundred days of feasts and games. We may die," she concluded with a smile, "but we shall do so with a smile."

Chapter Six

Godfrey raced through the streets of Volusia, joined by Ario, Merek, Akorth, and Fulton, hurrying to make the city gate before it was too late. He was still elated by his success at sabotaging the arena, managing to poison that elephant, to find Dray and release him into the stadium just when Darius needed him most. Thanks to his help, and the Finian woman, Silis, Darius had won; he had saved his friend's life, which relieved his guilt at least a little bit for setting him up for ambush in the streets of Volusia. Of course, Godfrey's role was in the shadows, where he was best, and Darius could not have emerged the victor without his own bravery and masterful fighting. Still, Godfrey had played some small part.

But now, everything was going awry; Godfrey had expected, after the match, to be able to meet Darius at the stadium gate as he was being led out, and to free him. He had not expected that Darius would be escorted out the rear gate and ushered through the city. After he had won, the entire Empire crowd had been chanting his name, and the Empire taskmasters had become threatened by his unexpected popularity. They had created a hero, and had decided to usher him out of the city and for the capital arena as soon as possible, before they had a revolution on their hands.

Now Godfrey ran with the others, desperate to catch up, to reach Darius before he left the city gates and it was too late. The road to the capital was long, desolate, led through the Waste and was heavily guarded; once he left the city, there would be no way they could help him. He had to save him, or else all of his efforts would be for naught.

Godfrey dashed through the streets, breathing hard, and Merek and Ario helped Akorth and Fulton along, gasping for air, their large bellies leading the way.

"Don't stop!" Merek encouraged Fulton as he dragged his arm. Ario merely elbowed Akorth in the back, making him groan, prodding him on as he slowed.

Godfrey felt the sweat pouring down his neck as he ran, and he cursed himself, once again, for drinking so many pints of ale. But he thought of Darius and forced his aching legs to keep moving, turning down one street after the next, until finally, they all emerged from a long, stone archway, into the city square. As they did, there in the distance, perhaps a hundred yards away, lay the city gate, imposing, rising fifty feet high. As Godfrey looked out, his heart dropped to see its bars being opened wide.

"NO!" he called out, involuntarily.

Godfrey panicked as he watched Darius's carriage, drawn by horses, guarded by Empire soldiers, encased in iron bars – like a cage on wheels – heading through the open gates.

Godfrey ran faster, faster than he knew he could go, stumbling over himself.

"We're not going to make it," Merek said, the voice of reason, laying a hand on his arm.

But Godfrey shook it off and ran. He knew it was a hopeless cause – the carriage was too far away, too heavily guarded, too fortified – and yet he ran anyway, until he could run no longer.

He stood there, in the midst of the courtyard, Merek's firm hand holding him back, and he leaned over and heaved, hands on his knees.

"We can't let him go!" Godfrey cried out.

Ario shook his head, coming up beside him.

"He is already gone," he said. "Save yourself. We must fight another day."

"We will get him back some other way," Merek added.

"How!?" Godfrey pleaded desperately.

None of them had an answer as they all stood there and watched the iron doors slam behind Darius, like gates closing on Darius's soul.

He could see Darius's carriage through the gates, already far away, riding into the desert, putting distance between themselves and Volusia. The cloud of dust in their wake rose higher and higher,

soon obscuring them from view, and Darius felt his heart break as he felt he had let down the last person he knew, and his one hope for redemption.

The silence was shattered by a wild dog's manic barking, and Godfrey looked down to see Dray emerging from a city alley, barking and snarling like mad, charging across the courtyard after his master. He, too, was desperate to save Darius, and as he reached the great iron gates, he leapt up and threw himself on them, tearing at them, fruitlessly, with his teeth.

Godfrey watched with horror as the Empire soldiers standing guard caught sight of Dray and signaled to each other. One drew his sword and approached the dog, clearly preparing to slaughter him.

Godfrey did not know what overcame him, but something inside him snapped. It was just too much for him, too much injustice for him to bear. If he could not save Darius, at least he must save his beloved dog.

Godfrey heard himself shout, felt himself running, as if he were outside of himself. With a surreal feeling, he felt himself draw his short sword and rush forward for the unsuspecting guard, and as the guard turned, he watched himself plunge it into the guard's heart.

The huge Empire soldier looked down at Godfrey with disbelief, his eyes open wide, as he stood there, frozen. Then he dropped down to the ground, dead.

Godfrey heard a cry and saw the two other Empire guards bear down on him. They raised their menacing weapons, and he knew he was no match for them. He would die here, at this gate, but at least he would die with a noble effort.

A snarl ripped through the air, and Godfrey saw, out of the corner of his eye, Dray turn and bound forward, and leap onto the guard looming over Godfrey. He sank his fangs into his throat, and pinned him down to the ground, tearing at him until the man stopped moving.

At the same time, Merek and Ario rushed forward and each used their short swords to stab the other guard at Godfrey's back, killing him together before he could finish Godfrey off.

They all stood there, in the silence, Godfrey looking at all the carnage, shocked at what he had just done, shocked that he had that sort of bravery, as Dray rushed over and licked the back of his hand.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Merek said, admiringly.

Godfrey stood there, stunned.

"I'm not even sure what I just did," he said, meaning it, the events all a blur. He had not meant to act – he just had. Did that still make him brave? he wondered.

Akorth and Fulton looked every which way, in terror, for any sign of Empire soldiers.

"We must get out of here!" Akorth yelled. "Now!"

Godfrey felt hands on him and felt himself ushered away. He turned and ran with the others, Dray at their side, all of them leaving the gate, running back to Volusia, and to God knew what the fates had in store for them.

Chapter Seven

Darius sat back against the iron bars, his wrists shackled to his ankles, a long, heavy chain between them, his body covered in wounds and bruises, and he felt like he weighed a million pounds. As he went, the carriage bouncing on the rough road, he looked out and watched the desert sky between the bars, feeling forlorn. His carriage passed through an endless, barren landscape, nothing but desolation as far as the eye could see. It looked as if the world had ended.

His carriage was shaded, but streaks of sunlight streamed through the bars, and he felt the oppressive desert heat rising up in waves, making him sweat even in the shade, adding to his discomfort.

But Darius did not care. His entire body burned and ached from his head to his toes, covered in lumps, his limbs hard to move, worn out from the endless days of fighting in the arena. Unable to sleep, he closed his eyes and tried to make the memories go away, but each time he did, he saw all of his friends dying alongside him, Desmond, Raj, Luzi and Kaz, each in terrible ways. All of them dead so that he could survive.

He was the victor, had achieved the impossible – and yet that meant little to him now. He knew death was coming; his reward, after all, was to be shipped off for the Empire capital, to become a spectacle in a greater arena, with even worse foes. The reward for it all, for all his acts of valor, was death.

Darius would rather die right now than go through it all again. But he could not even control that; he was shackled here, helpless. How much longer would this torture have to go on? Would he have to witness every last thing he loved in the world die before he could die himself?

Darius closed his eyes again, desperately trying to blot out the memories, and as he did there came to him an early childhood memory. He was playing before his grandfather's hut, in the dirt, wielding a staff. He hit a tree again and again, until finally his grandfather snatched it from him.

"Do not play with sticks," his grandfather scolded. "Do you wish to catch the Empire's attention? Do you wish for them to think of you as a warrior?"

His grandfather broke the stick over his knee, and Darius had bristled with outrage. That was more than a stick: that was his all-powerful staff, the only weapon he'd had. That staff had meant everything to him.

Yes, I want them to know me as a warrior. I want to be known as nothing else in life, Darius had thought.

But as his grandfather turned his back and stormed away, he had been too scared to say it aloud.

Darius had picked up the broken stick and held the pieces in his hands, tears rolling down his cheek. One day, he vowed, he would take revenge on all of them – his life, his village, their situation, the Empire, anything and everything he could not control.

He would crush them all. And he would be known as nothing other than a warrior.

* * *

Darius did not know how much time had passed when he awoke, but he noticed immediately that the bright morning sun of the desert had shifted to the dim orange sun of afternoon, heading to sunset. The air was much cooler, too, and his wounds had stiffened, making it harder for him to move, to even shift himself in the uncomfortable carriage. The horses jostled endlessly on the hard rock of the desert, the endless feeling of metal banging against his head making him feel as if it were shattering his skull. He rubbed his eyes, pulling the caked dirt from his lashes, and wondered how far this capital was. He felt as if he he'd traveled already to the ends of the earth.

He blinked several times and looked out, expecting, as always to see an empty horizon, a desert of waste. Yet this time as he looked out, he was startled to see something else. He sat up straighter for the first time.

The carriage began to slow, the thundering of the horses quieted a bit, the roads became smoother, and as he studied the new landscape, Darius saw a sight he would never forget: there, rising out of the desert like some lost civilization, was a massive city wall, seeming to rise to the heavens and stretching as far as the eye could see. It was marked by huge, shining golden doors, its walls and parapets lined with Empire soldiers, and Darius knew at once that they had made it: the capital.

The sound of the road changed, a hollow, wooden sound, and Darius looked down and saw the carriage being driven over an arched drawbridge. They passed hundreds more soldiers lining the bridge, all of whom snapped to attention as they went.

A great groaning filled the sky, and Darius looked ahead and watched the golden doors, impossibly tall, open wide, as if to embrace him. He saw a glimmer beyond them, of the most magnificent city he'd ever seen, and he knew, without a doubt, that this was a place from which there would be no escape. As if to confirm his thoughts, Darius heard a distant thunder, one he recognized immediately: it was the roar of an arena, a new arena, of men out for blood, and of what would surely be his final resting place. He did not fear it; he just prayed to god that he die on his feet, a sword in his hand, in one final act of valor.

Chapter Eight

Thorgrin pulled one last time on the golden rope, hands shaking, Angel on his back, sweat pouring down his face, and he finally cleared the cliff, his knees touching down on soil, catching his breath. He turned and looked back and saw, hundreds of feet below, straight down the steep cliffs, the crashing ocean waves, their ship on the beach, looking so small, and he was amazed at how far he'd climbed. He heard groans all around him, and turned to see Reece and Selese, Elden and Indra, O'Connor and Matus all finishing the climb, all hoisting themselves up and onto the Isle of Light.

Thor knelt there, muscles exhausted, and looked up at the Isle of Light spread out before him – and his heart sank with a fresh sense of foreboding. Before he even saw the awful sight, he could smell the burning ash, the smell of smoke heavy in the air. He could also feel the heat, the smoldering fires, the damage that remained from whatever creatures had destroyed this place. The island was black, burned, destroyed, everything that had once been so idyllic about it, that had seemed so invincible, now turned to ash.

Thorgrin gained his feet and wasted no time. He began to venture out into the isle, his heart pounding as he looked everywhere for Guwayne. As he took in the state of this place, he hated to think of what he might find.

"GUWAYNE!" Thorgrin shouted as he jogged across the smoldering hills, raising both hands to his mouth.

His voice was echoed back to him against the rolling hills, as if to mock him. And then nothing but silence.

There came a lonely screech from somewhere high above, and Thor looked up to see Lycoples, still circling. Lycoples screeched again, dove low, and flew off toward the center of the isle. Thor sensed at once that she was leading him to his son.

Thor broke off into a jog, the others beside him, running through the charred wasteland, searching everywhere.

"GUWAYNE!" he shouted again. "RAGON!"

As Thor took in the devastation of the blackened landscape, he felt increasingly certain that nothing could have survived here. These rolling hills, once so lush with grass and trees, were now but a scarred landscape. Thor wondered what sort of creatures, aside from dragons, could wreak this sort of havoc – and more importantly, who controlled them, who had sent them here, and why. Why was his son so important that someone would send an army for him?

Thor looked to the horizon, hoping for a sign of them, but his heart sank as he saw nothing. Instead he saw only smoldering flames littering the hills.

He wanted to believe Guwayne had somehow survived all this. But he did not see how. If a sorcerer as powerful as Ragon could not stop whatever forces had been here, how could he possibly save his son?

For the first time since he had set out on this quest, Thor was beginning to lose all hope.

They ran and ran, ascending and descending hills, and as they crested a particularly large hill, suddenly O'Connor, leading the way, pointed excitedly.

"There!" he called out.

O'Connor pointed to the side, to the remains of an ancient tree, now charred, its branches gnarled. And as Thor looked closely, he spotted, lying beneath it, motionless, a body.

Thor felt at once that it was Ragon. And he saw no sign of Guwayne.

Thor, filled with dread, raced forward, and as he reached him, collapsed on his knees at his side, scanning everywhere for Guwayne. He hoped that perhaps he'd find Guwayne hidden in Ragon's robes, or somewhere beside him, or nearby, perhaps in the cleft of a rock.

But his heart sank as he saw he was nowhere to be found.

Thor reached down and slowly turned over Ragon, his robe charred black, praying he had not been killed – and as he turned him over, he felt a glimmer of hope to see Ragon's eyes flutter. Thor reached down and grabbed his shoulders, still hot to the touch, and he pulled back Ragon's hood and was horrified to see his face charred, disfigured from the flames.

Ragon began to gasp and cough, and Thor could see he was struggling for life. He felt devastated at the sight of him, this beautiful man who had been so kind to them, reduced to such a state for defending this isle, for defending Guwayne. Thor could not help but feel responsible.

"Ragon," Thorgrin said, his voice catching in his throat. "Forgive me."

"It is I who beg your forgiveness," Ragon said, his voice raspy, barely able to get out the words. He coughed a long time, then finally continued. "Guwayne…" he began, then trailed off.

Thor's heart was slamming his chest, not wanting to hear his next words, fearing the worst. How could he ever face Gwendolyn again?

"Tell me," Thor demanded, clutching his shoulders. "Does the boy live?"

Ragon gasped a long time, trying to catch his breath, and Thor gestured to O'Connor, who reached over and handed him a sack of water. Thor poured the water over Ragon's lips, and Ragon drank, coughing as he did.

Finally, Ragon shook his head.

"Worse," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Death would have been a mercy for him."

Ragon fell silent, and Thor nearly shook with anticipation, willing him to speak.

"They have taken him away," Ragon finally continued. "They snatched him from my arms. All of them, all here, just for him."

Thor's heart dropped at the thought of his precious child being snatched away by these evil creatures.

"But who?" Thor asked. "Who is behind this? Who is more powerful than you who could do this? I thought your power, like Argon's, was impenetrable by all creatures of this world."

Ragon nodded.

"All creatures of this world, yes," he said. "But these were not of this world. They were creatures not from hell, but from a place even darker: the Land of Blood."

"The Land of Blood?" Thorgrin asked, baffled. "I have been to the hells and back," Thor added. "What place can be darker?"

Ragon shook his head.

"The Land of Blood is more than a place. It is a state. An evil darker and more powerful than you ever imagine. It is the domain of the Blood Lord, and it has grown darker and more powerful over generations. There is a war between the Realms. An ancient struggle between evil and light. Each vies for control. And Guwayne, I'm afraid, is the key: whoever has him, can win, can have dominion over the world. For all time. It was what Argon never told you. What he could not tell you yet. You were not ready. It was what he was training you for: a greater war than you would ever know."

Thor gaped, trying to comprehend.

"I don't understand," he said. "They have not taken Guwayne to kill him?"

He shook his head.

"Far worse. They have taken him as their own, to raise as the demon child they need to fulfill the prophecy and destroy all that is good in the universe."

Thor reeled, his heart pounding, trying to understand it all.

"Then I shall get him back," Thor said, a cold feeling of resolve rushing through his veins, especially as he heard Lycoples high above, screeching, craving, as he, vengeance.

Ragon reached out and grabbed Thor's wrist, with a surprising amount of strength for a man about to die. He looked into Thor's eyes with an intensity that scared him.

"You cannot," he said firmly. "The Land of Blood is too powerful for any human to survive. The price to enter there is too high. Even with all your powers, mark my words: you would surely

die if you go there. *All* of you would. You are not powerful yet enough yet. You need more training. You need to foster your powers first. To go now would be folly. You would not retrieve your son, and you would all be destroyed."

But Thor's heart hardened with resolve.

"I have faced the greatest darkness, the greatest powers in the world," Thorgrin said. "Including my own father. And never have I backed down from fear. I will face this dark lord, whatever his powers; I will enter this Land of Blood, whatever the cost. It is my son. I will retrieve him – or die trying."

Ragon shook his head, coughing.

"You are not ready," he said, his voice trailing off. "Not ready…. You need… power…. You need… the… ring," he said, and then erupted into a fit of coughing blood.

Thor stared back, desperate to know what he meant before he passed away.

"What ring?" Thor asked. "Our homeland?"

There came a long silence, Ragon's wheezing the only sound in the air, until finally he opened his eyes, just a sliver.

"The… sacred ring."

Thor grabbed Ragon's shoulders, willing him to respond, but suddenly, he felt Ragon's body stiffening in his hands. His eyes froze, there came an awful death gasp, and a moment later, he stopped breathing, perfectly still.

Dead.

Thor felt a wave of agony rush through him.

"NO!" Thor threw his head back and cried to the heavens. Thor was wracked with sobs as he reached out and embraced Ragon, this generous man who had given up his life to guard his son. He was overwhelmed with grief and guilt – and he slowly and steadily felt a new resolve rising up within him.

Thor looked to the heavens, and he knew what he had to do.

"LYCOPLES!" Thor shrieked, the anguished cry of a father filled with desperation, filled with fury, with nothing left to lose.

Lycoples heard his cry: she screeched, high up in the heavens, her fury matching Thor's, and she circled down lower and lower, until she landed but a few feet away.

Without hesitating, Thor ran to her, jumped on her back, and grabbed hold of her neck tight. He felt energized to be on the back of a dragon again.

"Wait!" O'Connor yelled, rushing forward with the others. "Where are you going?"

Thor looked them dead in the eye.

"To the Land of Blood," he replied, feeling more certain than he'd ever had in his life. "I will rescue my son. Whatever it takes."

"You will be destroyed," Reece said, stepping forward with concern, his voice grave.

"Then I will be destroyed with honor," Thor replied.

Thor peered upward, looked to the horizon, and he saw the trail of the gargoyles, disappearing into the sky – and he knew where he must go.

"Then you shall not go alone," Reece called out, "We shall follow your trail in our ship, and we shall meet you there."

Thorgrin nodded and squeezed Lycoples, and suddenly, Thor felt that familiar sensation as the two of them lifted up into the air.

"No, Thorgrin!" cried out an anguished voice behind him.

He knew the voice to be Angel's, and he felt a pang of guilt as he flew away from her.

But he could not look back. His son lay ahead – and death or not, he would find him – and kill them all.

Chapter Nine

Gwendolyn walked through the tall arched doors to the King's throne room, held open for her by several attendants, Krohn at her side, and was impressed by the sight before her. There, at the far end of the empty chamber, sat the King on his throne, alone in this vast place, the doors echoing behind her as they closed. She approached, walking down the cobblestone floors, passing shafts of sunlight as they streamed in through the rows of stained glass, lighting up the place with images of ancient knights in scenes of battle. This place was both intimidating and serene, inspiring and haunted by the ghosts of kings past. She could feel their presence hanging in the thick air, and it reminded her, in too many ways, of King's Court. She felt a sudden pang of sadness hanging in her chest, as the room made her miss her father dearly.

King MacGil sat there, ponderous, chin on his fist, clearly burdened by thought, and, Gwendolyn sensed, by the weight of rulership. He looked lonely to her, trapped in this place, as if the weight of the kingdom sat on his shoulders. She understood the feeling all too well.

"Ah, Gwendolyn," he said, lighting up at the sight of her.

She expected him to remain on his throne, but he immediately rose to his feet and hurried down the ivory steps, a warm smile on his face, humble, without the pretension of other kings, eager to come out and greet her. His humility was a welcome relief to Gwendolyn, especially after that encounter with his son, which still left her shaken, as ominous as it was. She wondered whether to tell the King; for now, at least, she thought she would hold her tongue and see what happened. She did not want to seem ungrateful, or to begin their meeting on a bad note.

"I thought of little else since our discussion yesterday," he said, as he approached and embraced her warmly. Krohn, at her side, whined and nudged the King's hand, and he looked down and smiled. "And who is this?" he asked warmly.

"Krohn," she replied, relieved he had taken a liking to him. "My leopard – or, to be more accurate, my husband's leopard. Although I suppose he's as much mine now as his."

To her relief, the King knelt down, took Krohn's head in his hands, rubbed his ears and kissed him, unafraid. Krohn responded by licking his face.

"A fine animal," he said. "A welcome change from our common stock of dog here."

Gwen looked at him, surprised at his kindness as she recalled Mardig's words.

"Then animals such as Krohn are allowed here?" she asked.

The King threw back his head back and laughed.

"Of course," he replied. "And why not. Did someone tell you otherwise?"

Gwen debated whether to tell her of her encounter, and decided to hold her tongue; she did not want to be viewed as a tattletale, and she needed to know more about these people, this family, before drawing any conclusions or hastily rushing into the middle of a family drama. It was best, she thought, to keep silent for now.

"You wished to see me, my King?" she said, instead.

Immediately, his face grew serious.

"I do," he said. "Our speech was interrupted yesterday, and there remains much we need to discuss."

He turned and gestured with his hand, beckoning for her to follow him, and they walked together, their footsteps echoing, as they crossed the vast chamber in silence. Gwen looked up and examined saw the high, tapered ceilings as they went, the coat of arms displayed along the walls, trophies, weapons, armor…. Gwen admired the order of this place, how much pride these knights took in battle. This hall reminded her of a place she might have found back in the Ring.

They crossed the chamber and when they reached the far end passed through another set of double doors, their ancient oak a foot thick and smooth from use, and they exited onto a massive

balcony, adjacent to the throne room, a good fifty feet wide and just as deep, a marble baluster framing it.

She followed the King out, to the edge, and leaning her hands against the smooth marble, she looked out. Below her stretched the sprawling and immaculate city of the Ridge, all its angular slate roofs marking the skyline, all its ancient houses of different shapes, built so close to one another. This was clearly a patchwork city that had evolved over hundreds of years, cozy, intimate, well-worn from use. With its peaks and spires, it looked like a fairytale city, especially set against the backdrop of the blue waters beyond, sparkling under the sun – and beyond even that, the towering peaks of the Ridge, rising up all around it in a huge circle, like a great barrier to the world.

So tucked in, so sheltered from the outside world, Gwen could not imagine that anything bad could ever befall this place.

The King sighed.

"Hard to imagine this place is dying," he said – and she realized he had been sharing the same thoughts.

"Hard to imagine," he added, "that *I* am dying."

Gwen turned to him and saw his light-blue eyes were pained, filled with sadness. She felt a flush of concern.

"Of what malady, my lord?" she asked. "Surely, whatever it is, it is something the healers can heal?"

Slowly, he shook his head.

"I have been to every healer," he replied. "The finest in the kingdom, of course. They have no cure. It is a cancer spreading throughout me."

He sighed and looked off to the horizon, and Gwen felt overwhelmed with sadness for him. Why was it, she wondered, that the good people were often beset with tragedy – while the evil ones somehow managed to flourish?

"I hold no pity for myself," the King added. "I accept my fate. What concerns me now is not myself – but my legacy. My children. My kingdom. That is all that matters to me now. I cannot plan my own future, but at least I can plan theirs."

He turned to her.

"And that is why I have summoned you."

Gwen's heart broke for him, and she knew she would do anything she could to help him.

"As much as I am willing," she replied, "I see not how I can be of help to you. You have an entire kingdom at your disposal. What can I possibly offer that others cannot?"

He sighed.

"We share the same goals," he said. "You wish to see the Empire defeated – so do I. You wish for a future for your family, your people, a place of safety and security, far from the grips of the Empire – as do I. Of course, we have that peace here, now, in the shelter of the Ridge. But this is not a true peace. Free people can go anywhere – we cannot. We are not living free as much as we are hiding. There is an important difference."

He sighed.

"Of course, we live in an imperfect world, and this may be the best our world has to offer. But I think not."

He fell silent for a long while, and Gwen wondered where he was going with this.

"We live our lives in fear, as my father did before me," he finally continued, "fear that we will be discovered, that the Empire will find us here in the Ridge, that they will arrive here, bring war to our doorstep. And warriors should never live in fear. There is a fine line between guarding your castle and being afraid to walk out openly from it. A great warrior can fortify his gates and defend his castle – but an even greater warrior can open them wide and fearlessly face whoever knocks."

He turned to her, and she could see a kingly determination in his eyes, could feel him emanating strength – and in that moment, she understood why he was King.

"Better to die facing the enemy, boldly, than to wait safely for him to come to our gates."

Gwen was baffled.

"You wish, then," she said, "to attack the Empire?"

He stared back, and she still could not understand his expression, what was racing through his mind.

"I do," he replied. "But it is an unpopular position. It was, too, an unpopular position for my ancestors before me, which is why they never did. You see, safety and bounty has a way of softening a people, making them reluctant to give up what they have. If I launched a war, I would have many fine knights behind me – but also, many reluctant citizens. And perhaps, even, a revolution."

Gwen looked out and squinted at the peaks of the Ridge, looming on the distant horizon, with the eye of a Queen, of the professional strategist she had become.

"It seems it would be next to impossible for the Empire to attack you," she replied, "even if they did somehow find you. How could they even scale those walls? Cross that lake?"

He placed his hands on his hips and looked out and studied the horizon with her.

"We would certainly have the advantage," he replied. "We could kill a hundred of theirs for every one of ours. But the problem is, they have millions to spare – we have thousands. Eventually, they will win."

"Would they sacrifice millions for a small corner of the Empire?" she asked, knowing the answer before she even asked it. After all, she had witnessed firsthand what they had given up to attack the Ring.

"They are ruthless for conquest," he said. "They would sacrifice anything. That is their way. They would never give up. That is what I know."

"Then how can I help, my liege?" she asked.

He sighed, quiet for a long time, looking out at the skyline.

"I need you to help me save the Ridge," he said finally, looking her, an intense gravity in his eyes.

"But how?" she asked, confused.

"Our prophecies speak of the arrival of an outsider," he said. "A woman. From another kingdom, across the sea. They speak of her saving the Ridge, of her leading our people across the desert. I never knew of what they meant, until this day. I believe that woman is you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.