

THE
GIFT
OF
BATTLE

BOOK #17 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

The Gift of Battle

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In THE GIFT OF BATTLE, Thor meets his greatest and final challenge, as he quests deeper into the Land of Blood to attempt to rescue Guwayne. Encountering foes more powerful than he ever imagined, Thor soon realizes he is up against an army of darkness, one for which his powers are no match. When he learns a sacred object may give him the powers he needs – an object which has been kept secret for ages – he must embark on a final quest to retrieve it before it is too late, with the fate of the Ring hanging in the balance. Gwendolyn keeps her vow to the King of the Ridge, entering the tower and confronting the cult leader to learn what secret he is hiding. The revelation sends her to Argon, and ultimately to Argon's master – where she learns the greatest secret of all, one which may alter the destiny of her people. When the Ridge is discovered by the Empire, the invasion begins and, under attack by the greatest army known to man, it falls on Gwendolyn to defend, and to lead her people on one final, mass exodus. Thor's Legion brothers, on their own, face unimaginable risks, as Angel is dying from her leprosy. Darius fights for his life beside his father in the Empire capital, until a surprise twist prods him, with nothing left to lose, to finally tap his own powers. Erec and Alistair reach Volusia, battling their way upriver, and they continue on their quest for Gwendolyn and the exiles, as they face unexpected battles. And Godfrey realizes that he must ultimately make a decision to be the man he wants to be. Volusia, surrounded by all the power of the Knights of the Seven, must put herself to the test as goddess and discover if she alone has the power to crush men and rule the Empire. While Argon, faced with his end of days, realizes the time has come to sacrifice himself. As good and evil hang in the balance, one final, epic battle – the greatest battle of all – will determine the outcome of the Ring for all time. With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, THE GIFT OF BATTLE 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. THE GIFT OF BATTLE is the longest of all the books in the series, at 93,000 words!

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Morgan Rice

The Gift of Battle

(Book #17 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

*For Jake Maynard.
A true warrior.*

*“You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin – but I come to you
with the Name of the Lord, Master of Legions, God of the battalions.”
– David to Goliath
I Samuel, 17:45*

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and of the new epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 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*

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KINGS AND SORCERERS



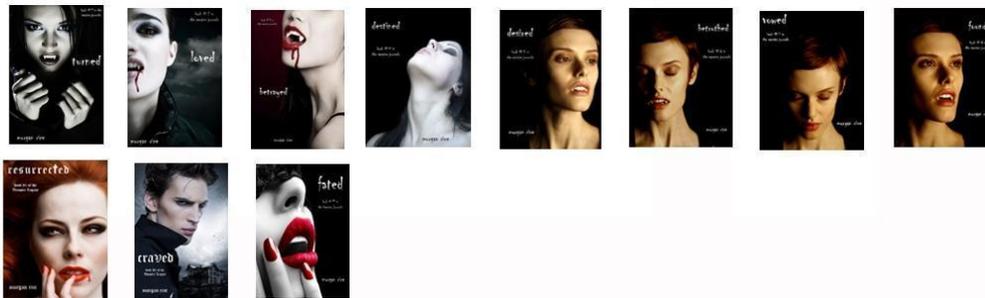
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Chapter One

Thorgrin, standing on the violently rocking ship, looked out before him and slowly, in horror, began to realize what he had just done. He looked down in shock at his own hand, still gripping the Sword of the Dead, then looked up to see, but inches away, the face of his best friend, Reece, staring back at him, eyes wide open in pain and betrayal. Thor's hands shook violently as he realized he had just stabbed his best friend in the chest and was watching him die before his eyes.

Thor could not understand what had happened. As the ship tossed and turned, the currents continued to pull them through the Straits of Madness, until finally, they emerged out the other side. The currents calmed, the ship leveled out, and the thick clouds began to lift as with one final burst, they exited into calm, still waters.

As they did, the fog that had enveloped Thor's mind lifted, and he began to feel his old self, to see the world with clarity once again. He looked at Reece in front of him, and his heart broke as he realized it was not the face of an enemy, but of his best friend. He slowly realized what he had done, realized that he had been in the grips of something greater than himself, a spirit of madness he could not control, which had forced him to perform this horrible act.

"NO!" Thorgrin shouted, his voice broken with anguish.

Thor extracted the Sword of the Dead from his best friend's chest, and as he did, Reece gasped and began to collapse. Thor chucked the sword away, not wanting to lay eyes upon it, and it landed with a hollow thud on the deck, as Thor sank to his knees and caught Reece, holding him in his arms, determined to save him.

"Reece!" he called out, crushed by guilt.

Thor reached out and pressed his palm against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. But he could feel the hot blood running through his fingers, could feel Reece's life force ebbing out of him as he held him in his arms.

Elden, Matus, Indra, and Angel rushed forward, they, too, finally free from the grips of their madness, and they crowded around. Thor closed his eyes and prayed with all he had that his friend come back to him, that he, Thor, be given one chance to rectify his error.

Thor heard footsteps, and he looked up to see Selese rush forward, her skin more pale than he'd ever seen, her eyes aglow with a light that was other-worldly. She dropped to her knees before Reece, took him in her arms, and as she did, Thor let him go, seeing the glow surrounding her and remembering her powers as a healer.

Selese looked up at Thor, her eyes burning with intensity.

"Only you can save him," she said urgently. "Place your hand on his wound now!" she commanded.

Thor reached out and placed a palm on Reece's chest, and as he did, Selese laid her hand over his. He could feel the heat and power coursing through her palm, over his hand, and into Reece's wound.

She closed her eyes and began to hum, and Thor felt a wave of heat rise up in his friend's body. Thor prayed with all he had that his friend come back to him, that he be forgiven for whatever madness had driven him to do this.

To Thor's great relief, Reece slowly opened his eyes. He blinked and looked up at the sky, and then slowly sat up.

Thor watched, amazed, as Reece blinked several times and looked down at his wound: it was entirely healed. Thor was speechless, overcome, in awe of Selese's powers.

"My brother!" Thorgrin cried out.

He reached out and hugged him, and Reece, disoriented, slowly hugged him back as Thor helped him to his feet.

“You are alive!” Thor exclaimed, hardly daring to believe it, clasping his shoulder. Thor thought of all the battles they had been in together, all the adventures, and he could not have tolerated the idea of losing him.

“And why would I not be?” Reece blinked, confused. He looked all around at the wondering faces of the Legion, and he seemed puzzled. The others each stepped forward and embraced him, one by one.

As the others stepped forward, Thor looked around and took stock, and he suddenly realized, with horror, that someone was missing: O’Connor.

Thor rushed to the side rail and frantically searched the waters, remembering O’Connor, at the height of his madness, had leapt off the ship into the raging currents.

“O’Connor!” he yelled.

The others rushed up beside him and searched the waters, too. Thor stared down and craned his neck to look back at the Straits, at the raging red waters, thick with blood – and as he did, he saw O’Connor, flailing, being sucked in right at the border of the Straits.

Thor wasted no time; he reacted instinctively and leapt up onto the rail and then dove headfirst over the edge, into sea.

Submerged, startled by the heat of it, Thor felt how thick this water was, as if he were swimming through blood. The water, so hot, was like swimming in mud.

It took all of Thor’s strength to swim through the viscous waters, back up to the surface. He set his sights on O’Connor, who was beginning to sink, and he could see the panic in his eyes. He could also see, as O’Connor crossed the border into the open sea, the madness beginning to leave him.

Still, as he flailed, he was beginning to sink, and Thor knew that if he didn’t reach him soon, he would soon sink to the bottom of the Straits and never be found again.

Thor redoubled his efforts, swimming with all he had, swimming through the intense pain and exhaustion he felt in his shoulders. And yet, just as he neared, O’Connor began to sink down into the water.

Thor felt an injection of adrenaline as he watched his friend sink beneath the surface, knowing it was now or never. He burst forward, dove down underwater, and gave a great kick. He swam underwater, straining to open his eyes and see through the thick liquid; he could not. They stung too much.

Thor closed his eyes and drew upon his instincts. He summoned some deep part of himself that could see without seeing.

With another desperate kick, Thor reached out, groping the waters before him, and felt something: a sleeve.

Elated, he grabbed O’Connor and held on tight, amazed at the weight of him as he sank.

Thor yanked, as he turned and with all his might aimed back up for the surface. He was in agony, every muscle in his body protesting, as he kicked and swam for freedom. The waters were so thick, held so much pressure, his lungs felt as if they might burst. With each stroke of his hand, he felt as if he were pulling the world.

Just when he thought he would never make it, would sink back down to the depths with O’Connor and die here in this awful place, Thor suddenly broke the surface of the water. Gasping for air, he turned and looked all around and saw, with relief, that they had emerged on the other side of the Straits of Madness, in the open waters. He watched O’Connor’s head pop up beside him, saw him, too, gasping for air, and his sense of relief was complete.

Thor watched as the madness left his friend and the lucidity slowly returned to his eyes.

O’Connor blinked several times, coughing and gasping out the water, then looked to Thor, questioningly.

“What are we doing here?” he asked, confused. “Where are we?”

“Thorgrin!” called a voice.

Thor heard a splash in the water and he turned and saw a heavy rope land in the water beside him. He looked up and saw Angel standing up there, joined by the others at the rail of the ship, which had sailed back to meet them.

Thor grabbed it, grabbing O'Connor with his other hand, and as he did the rope moved, Elden reaching down with his great strength and yanking them both up the side of the hull. The other Legion joined in and pulled, one yank at a time, until Thor felt himself rising through the air and, finally, over the rail. They both landed on the deck of the ship with a thud.

Thor, exhausted, out of breath, still coughing up sea water, sprawled on the deck beside O'Connor; O'Connor turned and looked at him, equally exhausted, and Thor could see the gratitude in his eyes. He could see O'Connor thanking him. No words need be said – Thor understood. They had a silent code. They were Legion brothers. Sacrificing for each other was what they did. It was what they lived for.

Suddenly, O'Connor started laughing.

At first Thor was worried, wondering if the madness was still upon him, but then he realized that O'Connor was fine. He was just back to his old self. He was laughing from relief, laughing from joy at being alive.

Thor began to laugh, too, the stress behind him, and the others all joined in. They were alive; despite all odds, they were alive.

The other Legion stepped forward and grabbed O'Connor and Thor and yanked them back to their feet. They all clasped hands, embraced joyfully, their ship, finally, entering waters with smooth sailing ahead.

Thor looked out and saw with relief that they were sailing further and further from the Straits, and lucidity was descending over all of them. They had made it; they had passed through the Straits, albeit with a heavy price. Thor did not think they could survive a trip through it again.

“There!” called out Matus.

Thor turned with the others and followed his finger as he pointed – and he was stunned by the sight before them. He saw a whole new vista spread before them on the horizon, a new landscape in this Land of Blood. It was a landscape thick with gloom, dark clouds lingering low on the horizon, the water still thick with blood – and yet now, the outline of the shore was closer, more visible. It was black, devoid of trees or life, looking like ash and mud.

Thor's heartbeat quickened as beyond it, in the distance, he spotted a black castle, made of what appeared to be earth and ash and mud, rising up from the ground as if it were one with it. Thor could feel the evil emanating off of it.

Leading to the castle was a narrow canal, its waterways lined with torches, blocked by a drawbridge. Thor saw torches burning in the windows of the castle, and he felt a sudden sense of certainty: with all his heart, he knew that Guwayne was inside that castle, waiting for him.

“Full sails!” Thor cried out, feeling back in control again, feeling a renewed sense of purpose.

His brothers jumped into action, hoisting the sails as they caught the strong breeze that picked up from behind and propelled them forward. For the first time since entering this Land of Blood, Thor felt a sense of optimism, a sense that they could really find his son and rescue him from here.

“I'm glad you're alive,” came a voice.

Thor turned and looked down to see Angel smiling up at him, tugging on his shirt. He smiled, knelt down beside her, and hugged her.

“As I am you,” he replied.

“I don't understand what happened,” she said. “One minute I was myself, and the next... it was like I did not know myself.”

Thor slowly shook his head, trying to forget.

“Madness is the worst foe of all,” he replied. “We, ourselves, are the one enemy we cannot overcome.”

She frowned, concerned.

“Will it ever happen again?” she asked. “Is there anything else in this place like that?” she asked, fear in her voice as she studied the horizon.

Thor studied it too, wondering the very same thing himself – when all too soon, to his dread, the answer came rushing out at them.

There came a tremendous splash, like the sound of a whale surfacing, and Thor was amazed to see the most hideous creature he’d ever seen emerging before him. It looked like a monster squid, fifty feet high, bright red, the color of blood, and it loomed over the ship as it shot up out of the waters, its endless tentacles thirty feet long, dozens of them spreading out in every direction. Its beady yellow eyes scowled down at them, filled with fury, as its huge mouth, lined with sharp yellow fangs, opened up with a sickening sound. The creature blotted out whatever light the gloomy skies had allowed, and it shrieked an unearthly sound as it began to descend right for them, its tentacles spread out, ready to consume the entire ship.

Thor watched it with dread, caught up in its shadow with all the others, and he knew they had gone from one certain death to the next.

Chapter Two

The Empire commander lashed his zerta again and again as he galloped through the Great Waste, following the trail, as he had been for days, across the desert floor. Behind him, his men rode on, gasping, on the verge of collapsing, as he had not given them a moment to rest the entire time they had been riding – even throughout the night. He knew how to drive zertas into the ground – and he knew how to drive men, too.

He had no mercy on himself, and he certainly had none for his men. He wanted them to be impervious to exhaustion and heat and cold – especially when they were on a mission as sacred as this. After all, if this trail actually led to where he hoped it might – to the legendary Ridge itself – it could change the entire fate of the Empire.

The commander dug his heels into the zerta's back until it shrieked, forcing it ever faster, until it was nearly tripping over itself. He squinted into the sun, scrutinizing the trail as they went. He had followed many trails in his life, and had killed many people at the end of them – yet he had never followed a trail as enthralling as this one. He could feel how close he was to the greatest discovery in the history of the Empire. His name would be memorialized, sung of for generations.

They ascended a ridge in the desert, and he began to hear a faint noise growing, like a storm brewing in the desert; he looked out as they crested it, expecting to see a sandstorm coming their way, and he was shocked, instead, to spot a stationary wall of sand a hundred yards away, rising straight up from the ground into the sky, swirling and churning, like a tornado in place.

He stopped, his men beside him, and watched, curious, as it did not seem to move. He could not understand it. It was a wall of raging sand, but it did not come any closer. He wondered what lay on the other side. Somehow, he sensed, it was the Ridge.

“Your trail ends,” one of his soldiers said derisively.

“We cannot pass through that wall,” said another.

“You have led us to nothing but more sand,” said another.

The commander slowly shook his head, scowling back with conviction.

“And what if there lies a land on the other side of that sand?” he retorted.

“The other side?” a soldier asked. “You are mad. It is nothing but a cloud of sand, an endless waste, like the rest of this desert.”

“Admit your failure,” said another soldier. “Turn back now – or if not, we shall turn back without you.”

The commander turned and faced his soldiers, shocked at their insolence – and saw contempt and rebellion in their eyes. He knew he had to act quickly if he were to quash it.

In a fit of sudden rage, the commander reached down, grabbed a dagger from his belt, and swung it backwards in one quick motion, lodging it in the soldier's throat. The soldier gasped, then fell backwards off his zerta and hit the ground, a fresh pool of blood collecting on the desert floor. Within moments, a swarm of insects appeared out of nowhere, covering his body and eating it.

The other soldiers now looked to their commander in fear.

“Is there anyone else who wishes to defy my command?” he asked.

The men stared back nervously, but this time said nothing.

“Either the desert will kill you,” he said, “or I will. It's your choice.”

The commander charged forward, lowering his head, and cried a great battle cry as he galloped right for the sand wall, knowing it might mean his death. He knew his men would follow, and a moment later he heard the sound of their zertas, and smiled in satisfaction. Sometimes they just had to be kept in line.

He shrieked as he entered the tornado of sand. It felt like a million pounds of sand weighing down on him, chafing his skin from every direction as he charged deeper and deeper into it. It was so

loud, sounding like a thousand hornets in his ears, and yet still he charged, kicking his zerta, forcing it, even as it protested, deeper and deeper inside. He could feel the sand scraping his head and eyes and face, and he felt as if he might be torn to bits.

Yet still he rode on.

Just as he was wondering if his men were right, if this wall led to nothing, if they would all die here in this place, suddenly, to the commander's great relief, he burst out of the sand and back into daylight, no more sand chafing him, no more noise in his ears, nothing but open sky and air – which he had never been so happy to see.

All around him, his men burst out, too, all of them chafed and bleeding like he, along with their zertas, all looking more dead than alive – yet all of them alive.

And as he looked up and out before him, the commander's heart suddenly beat faster as he came to a sudden stop at the startling sight. He could not breathe as he took in the vista, and slowly but surely, he felt his heart swell with a sudden sense of victory, of triumph. Majestic peaks rose straight up into the sky, forming a circle. A place that could only be one thing:

The Ridge.

There it sat on the horizon, shooting up into the air, magnificent, vast, stretching out of sight on either side. And there, at the top, gleaming in the sunlight, he was amazed to see thousands of soldiers in shining armor, patrolling.

He had found it. He, and he alone, had found it.

His men came to an abrupt stop beside him, and he could see them, too, looking up at it in awe and wonder, their mouths agape, all of them thinking the same thing he did: this moment was history. They would all be heroes, known for generations in Empire lore.

With a broad smile, the commander turned and faced his men, who now looked at him with deference; he then yanked on his zerta and turned it back around, preparing to ride back through the sand wall – and all the way, without stopping, until he reached the Empire base and reported to the Knights of the Seven what he personally had discovered. Within days, he knew, the entire force of the Empire would descend upon this place, the weight of a million men bent on destruction. They would pass through this sand wall, scale the Ridge, and crush those knights, taking over the final remaining free territory of the Empire.

“Men,” he said, “our time has come. Prepare to have your names etched in eternity.”

Chapter Three

Kendrick, Brandt, Atme, Koldo, and Ludvig trekked through the Great Waste, into the rising suns of the desert dawn, marching on foot, as they had been all night, determined to rescue young Kaden. They marched somberly, falling into a silent rhythm, each with hands on their weapons, all peering down and following the trail of the Sand Walkers. The hundreds of footprints led them deeper and deeper into this landscape of desolation.

Kendrick began to wonder if it would ever end. He marveled that he had found himself back in this position, back in this Waste he had sworn he would never step foot in again – especially on foot, with no horses, no provisions, and no way of getting back. They had put their faith in the other knights of the Ridge that they would return for them with the horses – but if not, they had bought themselves a one-way ticket into a quest of no return.

But that was what valor meant, Kendrick knew. Kaden, a fine young warrior with a big heart, had nobly stood watch, had ventured bravely into the desert to prove himself while standing guard, and he had been kidnapped by these savage beasts. Koldo and Ludvig could not turn their back on their younger brother, however grim the chance – and Kendrick, Brandt, and Atme could not turn their backs on all of them; their sense of duty and honor compelled them otherwise. These fine knights of the Ridge had taken them in with hospitality and grace when they had needed them most – and now it was time to repay the favor – whatever the cost. Death meant little to him – but honor meant everything.

“Tell me about Kaden,” Kendrick said, turning to Koldo, wanting to break the monotony of silence.

Koldo looked up, startled from the deep silence, and sighed.

“He is one of the finest young warriors you will ever meet,” he said. “His heart is always bigger than his age. He wanted to be a man before he was even a boy, wanted to wield a sword before he could even hold one.”

He shook his head.

“It surprises me not that he venture too deep, would be the first one on a patrol to be taken. He backed down from nothing – especially if it meant watching over others.”

Ludvig chimed in.

“If any of us had been taken,” he said, “our little brother would be the first to volunteer. He is the youngest of us, and he represents what is best in us.”

Kendrick had assumed as much from what he’d seen when talking to Kaden. He had recognized the warrior spirit within him, even at his young age. Kendrick knew, as he always had, that age had nothing to do with being a warrior: the warrior spirit resided in someone, or it did not. The spirit could not lie.

They continued marching for a long time, falling back into their steady silence as the suns rose higher, until finally Brandt cleared his throat.

“And what of these Sand Walkers?” Brandt asked Koldo.

Koldo turned to him as they marched.

“A vicious group of nomads,” he replied. “More beast than man. They are known to patrol the periphery of the Sand Wall.”

“Scavengers,” Ludvig chimed in. “They have been known to drag their victims deep into the desert.”

“To where?” Atme asked.

Koldo and Ludvig exchanged an ominous look.

“To wherever it is they are gathering – where they perform a ritual and tear them to pieces.”

Kendrick flinched as he thought of Kaden, and the fate that awaited him.

“Then there is little time to waste,” Kendrick said. “Let us run, shall we?”

They all looked at each other, knowing the vastness of this place and what a long run they’d have before them – especially in the rising heat and with their armor. They all knew how risky it would be not to pace themselves in this unforgiving landscape.

Yet they did not hesitate; they broke into a jog together. They ran into nothingness, sweat soon pouring down their faces, knowing if they did not find Kaden soon, this desert would kill them all.

* * *

Kendrick gasped as he ran, the second sun now high overhead, its light blinding, its heat stifling, and yet he and the others continued to jog, all gasping, their armor clanking as they ran. Sweat poured down Kendrick’s face and stung his eyes so badly, he could barely see. As his lungs nearly burst, he had never known how badly he could crave oxygen. Kendrick had never experienced anything like the heat of these suns, so intense, feeling like it would burn the skin right off his body.

They would not make it much further in this heat, at this pace, Kendrick knew; soon enough, they would all die out here, collapse, become nothing but food for insects. Indeed, as they ran, Kendrick heard a distant screech, and he looked up to see the vultures circling, as they had been for hours, getting lower. They were always the smart ones: they knew when a fresh death was imminent.

As Kendrick peered out at the footprints of the Sand Walkers, still trailing off into the horizon, he could not comprehend how they had covered so much ground so quickly. He only prayed that Kaden was still alive, that all of this was not for nothing. Yet he could not, despite himself, help but wonder if they would ever reach him at all. It was like following footprints out into a receding ocean.

Kendrick glanced around him and saw the others slumped over, too, all stumbling more than running, all barely on their feet – yet all determined, like he, not to stop. Kendrick knew – they all knew – that as soon as they stopped moving, they would all be dead.

Kendrick wanted to break the monotony of the silence, yet he was too tired to talk to the others now, and he forced his legs onward, feeling as if they weighed a million pounds. He dared not even use the energy to look up into the horizon, knowing he would see nothing, knowing that he was doomed to die here after all. Instead, he looked down to ground, watching the trail, preserving whatever precious energy he had left.

Kendrick heard a noise, and at first he was sure it was his imagination; yet it came again, a distant sound, like the humming of bees, and this time he forced himself to look up, knowing it was stupid, that nothing could be there, and afraid to be hopeful.

Yet this time, the sight before him made his heart pound with excitement. There, before them, perhaps a hundred yards away, was a gathering of Sand Walkers.

Kendrick jabbed the others, and they each looked up, too, snapped out of their reverie, and they each saw it with a shock. Battle had arrived.

Kendrick reached down and grabbed his weapon, as the others did, too, and felt the familiar rush of adrenaline.

The Sand Walkers, dozens of them, turned and spotted them, and they, too, prepared, facing them. They shrieked and burst into a run.

Kendrick raised his sword high and let out a great battle cry, ready, at last, to kill his foes – or die trying.

Chapter Four

Gwendolyn walked solemnly through the capital of the Ridge, Krohn at her side, Steffen trailing behind her, her mind reeling as she pondered Argon's words. On the one hand, she was elated that he had recovered, was back to himself – yet his fateful prophecy rang inside her head like a curse, like a bell tolling her death. From his dire, cryptic statements, it sounded as if she were not meant to be together with Thor forever.

Gwen fought back tears as she walked quickly, with purpose, heading for the tower. She tried to block out his words, refusing to allow prophecies to run her life. That was the way she had always been, and that was what she needed to remain strong. The future might be written, and yet she felt it could also be changed. Destiny, she felt, was malleable. One only had to want it badly enough, be willing to give up enough – whatever the cost.

This was one of those times. Gwen absolutely refused to allow Thorgrin and Guwayne to slip away from her, and she felt a rising sense of determination. She would defy her destiny, no matter what it took, sacrifice whatever the universe demanded of her. Under no circumstance would she go through life without seeing Thor or Guwayne again.

As if hearing her thoughts, Krohn whined at her leg, rubbing up against it as she marched through the streets. Snapped out of her thoughts, Gwen looked up and saw the looming tower before her, red, circular, rising up right in the center of the capital, and she remembered: the cult. She had vowed to the King that she would enter the tower and try to rescue his son and daughter from the grips of this cult, to confront its leader about the ancient books, the secret they were hiding that could save the Ridge from destruction.

Gwen's heart pounded as she approached the tower, anticipating the confrontation before her. She wanted to help the King, and the Ridge, but most of all, she wanted to be out there, searching for Thor, for Guwayne, before it was too late for them. If only, she wished, she had a dragon at her side, as she used to; if only Ralibar could come back to her and take her far across the world, away from here, far from the problems of the Empire and back to the other side of the world, to Thorgrin and Guwayne once again. If only they could all return to the Ring and live life as they once did.

Yet she knew those were childish dreams. The Ring was destroyed, and the Ridge was all she had left. She had to face her current reality and do what she could to help save this place.

“My lady, may I accompany you inside the tower?”

Gwen turned at the voice, snapping out of her reverie, and she was relieved to see her old friend Steffen by her side, one hand on his sword, walking protectively beside her, eager, as always, to watch over her. He was the most loyal advisor she had, she knew, as she reflected back on how long he had been with her, and felt a rush of gratitude.

As Gwen stopped before the drawbridge before them, leading to the tower, he peered out at it suspiciously.

“I don't trust this place,” he said.

She laid a comforting hand on his wrist.

“You are a true and loyal friend, Steffen,” she replied. “I value your friendship, and your loyalty, but this is a step I must take alone. I must find out what I can, and having you there will put them on guard. Besides,” she added, as Krohn whined, “I will have Krohn.”

Gwen looked down, saw Krohn looking up at her expectantly, and she nodded back.

Steffen nodded.

“I shall wait for you here,” he said, “and if there's any trouble within, I shall come for you.”

“If I don't find what I need within that tower,” she replied, “I am afraid there will be much greater trouble coming for all of us.”

* * *

Gwen walked slowly over the drawbridge, Krohn at her side, her footsteps echoing on the wood, crossing over the gently rippling waters beneath her. All along the bridge were lined up dozens of monks, standing at perfect attention, silent, wearing scarlet robes, hands hidden inside them, with their eyes closed. They were a strange lot of guards, unarmed, incredibly obedient, standing guard here for Gwen didn't know how long. Gwen marveled at their intense loyalty and devotion to their leader, and she realized it was as the King said: they all revered him as a god. She wondered what she was getting into.

As she neared, Gwen looked up at the huge, arched doorways looming before her, made of ancient oak, carved with symbols she did not understand, and she watched in wonder as several monks stepped forward and pulled them open. They creaked, disclosing a gloomy interior lit only by torches, and a cool draft met her, smelling faintly of incense. Krohn stiffened beside her, growling, and Gwen walked inside and heard it slam behind her.

The sound echoed inside, and it took a moment for Gwen to get her bearings. It was dark in here, the walls lit only by torches and by the filtered sunlight which poured in through stained glass high above. The air in here felt sacred, silent, and she felt as if she had entered a church.

Gwen looked up and saw the tower spiraled ever higher, with gradual, circular ramps leading up the floors. There were no windows, and the walls echoed with the faint sound of chanting. The incense hung heavy in the air here, and monks appeared and disappeared throughout, walking as in a trance in and out of the chambers. Some waved incense and some chanted, while others were silent, lost in reflection, and Gwen wondered more about the nature of this cult.

“Did my father send you?” echoed a voice.

Gwen, startled, wheeled to see a man standing a few feet away, wearing a long, scarlet robe, smiling back at her good-naturedly. She could hardly believe how much he resembled his father, the King.

“I knew he would send someone sooner or later,” Kristof said. “His efforts to bring me back into his fold are endless. Please, come,” he beckoned, turning aside and gesturing with his hand.

Gwen fell in beside him as they walked down a stone, arched corridor, heading gradually up the ramp in circles to the higher levels of the tower. Gwen found herself caught off guard; she had expected a crazed monk, a religious fanatic, and was surprised to find someone affable and good-natured, and clearly in his right mind. Kristof did not seem like the lost, crazy person his father had made him out to be.

“Your father asks for you,” she finally said, breaking the silence after they passed a monk walking down the ramp the opposite way, never lifting his eyes from the floor. “He wants me to bring you back home.”

Kristof shook his head.

“That's the thing about my father,” he said. “He thinks he has found the only true home in the world. But I have learned something,” he added, facing her. “There are many true homes in this world.”

He sighed as they continued walking, Gwen wanting to give him his space, not wanting to press too hard.

“My father would never accept who I am,” he finally added. “He will never learn. He remains stuck in his old, limited beliefs – and he wants to impose them on me. But I am not him – and he will never accept that.”

“Do you not miss your family?” Gwen asked, surprised that he would commit his life to this tower.

“I do,” he replied frankly, surprising her. “Very much. My family means everything to me – but my spiritual calling means more. My home is here now,” he said, turning down a corridor as Gwen followed. “I serve Eldof now. He is my sun. If you knew him,” he said, turning and staring at Gwen with an intensity that frightened her, “he would be yours, too.”

Gwen looked away, not liking the look of fanaticism in his eyes.

“I serve no one but myself,” she replied.

He smiled at her.

“Perhaps that is the source of all your earthly worries,” he replied. “No one can live in a world where they do not serve someone else. Right now, you are serving someone else.”

Gwen stared back suspiciously.

“How so?” she asked.

“Even if you think you serve yourself,” he replied, “you are deceived. The person you are serving is not *you*, but rather the person your parents molded. It is your *parents* you serve – and all of their old beliefs, passed down by their parents. When will you be bold enough to cast off their beliefs and serve you?”

Gwen frowned, not buying his philosophy.

“And take on whose beliefs instead?” she asked. “Eldof’s?”

He shook his head.

“Eldof is merely a conduit,” he replied. “He helps cast off who you were. He helps you find your true self, all you were meant to be. That is whom you must serve. That is who you will never discover until your false self is set free. That is what Eldof does: he sets us all free.”

Gwendolyn looked back at his shining eyes, and she could see how devoted he was – and that devotion scared her. She could tell right away that he was beyond reason, that he would never leave this place.

It was scary, the web that this Eldof had spun to lure all these people in and trap them here – some cheap philosophy, with a logic all to itself. Gwen did not want to hear any more; it was a web she was determined to avoid.

Gwen turned and continued walking, shaking it off with a shudder, and continued up the ramp, circling the tower, gradually going up higher and higher, wherever it was leading them. Kristof fell in beside her.

“I have not come to argue the merits of your cult,” Gwen said. “I cannot convince you to return to your father. I promised to ask, and I have done so. If you do not value your family, I cannot teach you to value it.”

Kristof looked back at her gravely.

“And do you think my father values family?” he asked.

“Very much,” she replied. “At least from what I can see.”

Kristof shook his head.

“Let me show you something.”

Kristof took her elbow and led her down another corridor to the left, then up a long flight of steps, stopping before a thick oak door. He looked at her meaningfully, then pulled it open, revealing a set of iron bars.

Gwen stood there, curious, nervous to see whatever he wanted to show her – then she stepped up and stared through the bars. She was horrified to see a young, beautiful girl sitting alone in a cell, staring out the window, her long hair hanging on her face. Though her eyes were wide open, she did not seem to take notice of their presence.

“This is how my father cares for family,” Kristof said.

Gwen looked back at him, curious.

“His family?” Gwen asked, stunned.

Kristof nodded.

“Kathryn. His other daughter. The one he hides from the world. She has been relegated here, to this cell. Why? Because she is touched. Because she’s not perfect, like him. Because he’s ashamed of her.”

Gwen fell silent, feeling a pit in her stomach as she looked at the girl sadly, wanting to help her. She started to wonder about the King, and started to wonder if Kristof had any truth to his words.

“Eldof values family,” Kristof continued. “He would never abandon one of his own. He values our *true* selves. No one here is turned away out of shame. That is the blight of pride. And those who are touched are closest to their true selves.”

Kristof sighed.

“When you meet Eldof,” he said, “you will understand. There is no one like him, nor will there ever be.”

Gwen could see the fanaticism in his eyes, could see how lost he was in this place, this cult, and she knew he was too far lost to ever return to the King. She looked over and saw the King’s daughter sitting there, and she felt overwhelmed with sadness for her, for this entire place, for their shattered family. Her picture-perfect view of the Ridge, of the perfect royal family, was crumbling. This place, like every other, had its own dark underbelly. There was a silent battle raging here, and it was a battle of beliefs.

It was a battle Gwen knew she could not win. Nor did she have time to. Gwen thought of her own abandoned family, and she felt the pressing urgency to rescue her husband and her son. Her head was spinning in this place, with the incense thick in the air and lack of windows disorienting her, and she wanted to get what she needed and leave. She tried to remember why she’d even come here, then it came back to her: to save the Ridge, as she had vowed to the King.

“Your father believes that this tower holds a secret,” Gwen said, getting to the point, “a secret that could save the Ridge, could save your people.”

Kristof smiled and crossed his fingers.

“My father and his beliefs,” he replied.

Gwen furrowed her brow.

“Are you saying it is not true?” she asked. “That there is no ancient book?”

He paused, looked away, then sighed deeply and fell silent for a long time. Finally, he continued.

“What should be revealed to you, and when,” he said, “is beyond me. Only Eldof can answer your questions.”

Gwen felt a sense of urgency rising within her.

“Can you bring me to him?”

Kristof smiled, turned, and began to walk down the corridor.

“As surely,” he said, walking quickly, already distant, “as a moth to a flame.”

Chapter Five

Stara stood on the precarious platform, trying not to look down as she was pulled higher and higher in the sky, seeing the vista expand with each yank of the rope. The platform rose higher and higher along the edge of the Ridge, and Stara stood there, her heart pounding, in disguise, the hood pulled low over her face, and sweat trickling down her back as she felt the desert heat rising. It was stifling this high up, and the day had barely broken. All about her were the ever-present sounds of ropes and pulleys, wheels squeaking, as the soldiers yanked and yanked, none realizing who she was.

Soon, it stopped, and all was still as she was standing at the peak of the Ridge – the only sound that of the howl of the wind. The view was staggering, making her feel as if she were standing at the very top of the world.

It brought back memories. Stara recalled the time she'd first arrived at the Ridge, fresh from the Great Waste, with Gwendolyn and Kendrick and all the other stragglers, most of them more dead than alive. She knew she was lucky to have survived, and at first, the sight of the Ridge had been a great gift, had been a sight of salvation.

And yet now here she was, prepared to leave, to descend the Ridge once again on its far side, to head back out into the Great Waste, back out into what could be a sure death. Beside her, her horse pranced, its shoes clicking the hollow platform. She reached out and stroked its mane reassuringly. This horse would be her salvation, her ticket out of this place; it would make her passage back across the Great Waste a very different scenario than it had been.

"I don't recall orders from our commander about this visit," came the commanding voice of a soldier.

Stara stood very still, knowing they were talking about her.

"Then I shall take that up with your commander himself – and with my cousin, the King," Fithe replied confidently, standing next to her, sounding as convincing as ever.

Stara knew he was lying, and she knew what he was risking for her – and she was forever grateful to him for it. Fithe had surprised her by being good to his word, by doing everything in his power, as he had promised, to help her leave the Ridge, to help her have a chance to go out there and find Reece, the man she loved.

Reece. Stara's heart ached at the thought of him. She would leave this place, however safe it was, would cross the Great Waste, cross oceans, cross the world, just for one chance to tell him how much she loved him.

As much as Stara hated to put Fithe in jeopardy, she needed this. She needed to risk it all to find the one she loved. She could not sit safely in the Ridge, no matter how glorious and rich and safe, until she was reunited with Reece.

The iron gates to the platform creaked open, and Fithe took her arm, accompanying her, as she wore her hood low, her disguise working. They stepped off the wooden platform and onto the hard stone plateau atop the Ridge. A howling wind passed through, strong enough to nearly knock her off balance, and she clutched the horse's mane, her heart pounding as she looked up and saw the vast expanse, the craziness of what she was about to do.

"Keep your head down and your hood lowered," Fithe whispered urgently. "If they see you, that you are a girl, they will know you're not meant to be up here. They will send you back. Wait until we reach the far end of the ridge. There's another platform waiting to bring you down the other side. It will take you – and you alone."

Stara's breath quickened as the two of them crossed the wide stone plateau, passing knights, walking quickly, Stara keeping her head down, away from the prying eyes of soldiers.

Finally, they stopped, and he whispered:

"Okay. Look up."

Stara pulled back her hood, her hair covered in sweat, and as she did, she was dazed by the sight: two huge, beautiful suns, still red, rose up in the glorious desert morning, the sky covered in a million shades of pinks and purples. It seemed as if it were the dawn of the world.

As she looked out, she saw the entire Great Waste spread out before her, seeming to stretch to the end of the world. In the distance there was the raging Sand Wall, and despite herself, she looked straight down. She reeled from her fear of heights, and she immediately wished she hadn't.

Down below, she saw the steep drop, all the way down to the base of the Ridge. And before her, she saw a lone platform, empty, waiting for her.

Stara turned and looked up at Fithe, staring back at her meaningfully.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly. She could see the fear for her in his eyes.

Stara felt a streak of apprehension rush through her, but she then thought of Reece, and she nodded without hesitation.

He nodded back at her kindly.

"Thank you," she said. "I don't know how I can ever repay you."

He smiled back.

"Find the man you love," he replied. "If it cannot be me, at least it can be someone else."

He took her hand, kissed it, bowed, and turned and walked away. Stara watched him go, her heart filled with appreciation for him. If she hadn't loved Reece the way she had, perhaps he would be a man she would love.

Stara turned, steeling herself, held the horse's mane, and took the first fateful step onto the platform. She tried not to look out at the Great Waste, at the journey before her that would almost certainly mean her death. But she did.

The ropes creaked, the platform swayed, and as the soldiers lowered the ropes, one foot at a time, she began her descent, all alone, into nothingness.

Reece, she thought, I might die. But I will cross the world for you.

Chapter Six

Erec stood at the bow of the ship, Alistair and Strom beside him, and peered down at the teeming waters of the Empire river below. He watched as the raging current forked the ship left, away from the channel that would have led them to Volusia, to Gwendolyn and the others – and he felt torn. He wanted to rescue Gwendolyn, of course; and yet also had to fulfill his sacred vow to those freed villagers, to free their neighboring village and wipe out the Empire garrison nearby. After all, if he did not, then the Empire soldiers would soon kill the freed men, and all of Erec's efforts to free them would have been for naught, leaving their village back in the hands of the Empire once again.

Erec looked up and studied the horizon, very conscious of the fact that every passing moment, every gale of wind, each stroke of the oar, was taking them farther away from Gwendolyn, from his original mission; and yet sometimes, he knew, one had to divert from the mission in order to do what was most honorable and right. Sometimes the mission, he realized, was not always what you thought it was. Sometimes it was ever-changing; sometimes it was a side journey along the way that ended up becoming the *real* mission.

Still, Erec resolved inwardly to vanquish the Empire garrison as quickly as possible and fork back upriver toward Volusia, to save Gwendolyn before it was too late.

“Sir!” yelled a voice.

Erec looked up to see one of his soldiers, high on the mast, pointing to the horizon. He turned to see, and as their ship passed a bend in the river and the currents picked up, Erec's blood quickened to see an Empire fort, teeming with soldiers, perched at the edge of the river. It was a drab, square building, built of stone, low to the ground, Empire taskmasters lined up all around it – yet none watching the river. Instead, they were all watching the slave village below, packed with villagers, all under the whip and rod of Empire taskmasters. The soldiers mercilessly lashed the villagers, torturing them on the streets under hard labor, while the soldiers above looked down and laughed at the scene.

Erec reddened with indignation, seething at the injustice of it all. He felt justified in forking his men this way up the river, and determined to set wrongs right and make them pay. It might just be a drop in the bucket of the travesty of the Empire, and yet one could never underestimate, Erec knew, what freedom meant to even a few people.

Erec saw the shores lined with Empire ships, guarded casually, none of them suspecting an attack. Of course, they would not: there were no hostile forces in the Empire, none that the vast Empire army could fear.

None, that is, but Erec's.

Erec knew that while he and his men were outnumbered, still, they had the advantage of surprise. If they could strike quickly enough, perhaps they could take them all out.

Erec turned to his men and saw Strom standing there beside him, eagerly awaiting his command.

“Take command of the ship beside me,” Erec commanded his younger brother – and no sooner had he uttered the words than his brother burst into action. He ran across the deck, leapt off the rail and onto the ship sailing beside them, where he quickly headed to the bow and took command.

Erec turned to his soldiers crowding around him on his ship, waiting his direction.

“I don't want them alerted to our presence,” he said. “We must get as close as we can. Archers – at the ready!” he cried. “And all of you, grab your spears and kneel down!”

The soldiers all took positions, squatting low all along the rail, rows and rows of Erec's soldiers lined up, all holding spears and bows, all well-disciplined, patiently awaiting his command. The currents picked up, Erec saw the Empire forces looming close, and he felt the familiar rush in his veins: battle was in the air.

They got closer and closer, now but a hundred yards away, and Erec's heart was pounding, hoping they were not detected, feeling the impatience of all his men around him, waiting to attack.

They just had to get in range, and every lap of the water, every foot they gained, he knew, was invaluable. They only had one chance with their spears and arrows, and they could not miss.

Come on, Erec thought. Just a little bit closer.

Erec's heart sank as an Empire soldier suddenly turned casually and examined the waters – and then squinted in confusion. He was about to spot them – and it was too soon. They were not in range yet.

Alistair, beside him, saw it, too. Before Erec could give the command to start the battle early, she suddenly stood, and with a serene, confident expression, raised her right palm. A yellow ball appeared in it, and she pulled her arm back and then hurled it forward.

Erec watched in wonder as the orb of light floated up in the air above them and came down, like a rainbow, and descended over them. Soon a mist appeared, obscuring their view, protecting them from Empire eyes.

The Empire soldier now peered into the mist, confused, seeing nothing. Erec turned and smiled at Alistair knowing that, once again, they would be lost without her.

Erec's fleet continued to sail, now all perfectly hidden, and Erec looked over at Alistair in gratitude.

“Your palm is stronger than my sword, my lady,” he said with a bow.

She smiled back.

“It is still your battle to win,” she replied.

The winds carried them closer, the mist staying with them, and Erec could see all of his men itching to fire their arrows, to hurl their spears. He understood; his spear itched in his palm, too.

“Not yet,” he whispered to his men.

As they parted the mist, Erec began to catch glimpses of the Empire soldiers. They stood on the ramparts, their muscled backs glistening, raising whips high and lashing villagers, the crack of their whips audible even from here. Other soldiers stood peering into the river, clearly summoned by the man on watch, and they all peered suspiciously into the mist, as if suspecting something.

Erec was so close now, his ships hardly thirty yards away, his heart pounding in his ears. Alistair's mist began to clear, and he knew the time had come.

“Archers!” Erec commanded. “Fire!”

Dozens of his archers, all up and down his fleet, stood, took aim, and fired.

The sky filled with the sound of arrows leaving string, sailing through the air – and the sky darkened with the cloud of deadly arrowtips, flying high in an arc, then turning down for the Empire shore.

A moment later cries rang through the air, as the cloud of deadly arrows descended upon the Empire soldiers teeming in the fort. The battle had begun.

Horns sounded everywhere, as the Empire garrison was alerted and rallied to defend.

“SPEARS!” Erec cried.

Strom was first to stand and hurl his spear, a beautiful silver spear, whistling through the air as it flew with tremendous speed then found a place in the stunned Empire commander's heart.

Erec hurled his on his heels, joining in as he threw his golden spear and took out an Empire commander on the far side of the fort. All up and down his fleet his ranks of men joined in, hurling their spears and taking out startled Empire soldiers who barely had time to rally.

Dozens of them fell, and Erec knew his first volley had been a success; yet still hundreds of soldiers remained, and as Erec's ship came to a stop, roughly touching down on shore, he knew the time had come for hand-to-hand battle.

“CHARGE!” he yelled.

Erec drew his sword, leapt up onto the rail, and jumped through the air, falling a good fifteen feet before landing on the sandy shores of the Empire. All around him his men followed, hundreds strong, all charging across the beach, dodging Empire arrows and spears as they burst out of the

mist and across the open sand for the Empire fort. The Empire soldiers rallied, too, rushing out to meet them.

Erec braced himself as a hulking Empire soldier came charging right for him, shrieking, lifting his ax and swinging it sideways for Erec's head. Erec ducked, stabbed him in the gut, and hurried on. Erec, his battle reflexes kicking in, stabbed another soldier in the heart, sidestepped an ax blow from another, then spun around and slashed him across the chest. Another charged him from behind, and without turning, he elbowed him in the kidney, dropping him to his knees.

Erec ran through the ranks of soldiers, quicker and faster and stronger than anyone on the field, leading his men as one at a time, they cut down the Empire soldiers, making their way toward the fort. The fighting grew thick, hand-to-hand, and these Empire soldiers, nearly twice their size, were fierce opponents. Erec was heartbroken to see many of his men fall around him.

But Erec, determined, moved like lightning, Strom beside him, and he outmaneuvered them left and right. He tore through the beach like a demon released from hell.

Soon enough, the business was done. All was still on the sand, as the beach, turned to red, was filled with corpses, most of them the bodies of Empire soldiers. Too many of them, though, were the bodies of his own men.

Erec, filled with fury, charged the fort, still teeming with soldiers. He took the stone steps along its edge, all his men following, and met a soldier who came running down for him. He stabbed him in the heart, right before he could lower a double-handed hammer on his head. Erec stepped aside and the soldier, dead, came tumbling down the steps beside him. Another soldier appeared, slashing at Erec before he could react – and Strom stepped forward, and with a great clang and a shower of sparks, blocked the blow before it could reach his brother and elbowed the soldier with the hilt of his sword, knocking him off the edge and sending him shrieking to his death.

Erec continued charging, taking four steps at a time until he reached the upper level of the stone fort. The dozens of Empire soldiers who remained on the upper level were now terrified, seeing all their brothers dead – and at the sight of Erec and his men reaching the upper levels, they turned and began to flee. They raced down the far side of the fort, into the village streets – and as they did, they were met by a surprise: the villagers were now emboldened. Their fearful expressions morphed to one of rage, and as one, they rose up. They turned on their Empire captors, snatching whips from their hands, and began to lash the fleeing soldiers as they ran the other way.

The Empire soldiers were not expecting it, and one by one, they fell under the whips of the slaves. The slaves continued to whip them as they lay on the ground, again and again and again, until finally, they stopped moving. Justice had been served.

Erec stood there, atop the fort, breathing hard, his men beside him, and took stock in the silence. The battle was over. Down below, it took a minute for the dazed villagers to process what had happened, but soon enough they did.

One at a time, they began to cheer, and a great cheer rose up in the sky, louder and louder, as their faces filled with pure joy. It was a cheer of freedom. This, Erec knew, made it all worth it. This, he knew, was what valor meant.

Chapter Seven

Godfrey sat on the stone floor in the underground chamber of Silis' palace, Akorth, Fulton, Ario, and Merek beside him, Dray at his feet, and Silis and her men across from them. They all sat gloomily, heads lowered, hands across their knees, all knowing they were on a death watch. The chamber trembled with the thumping of war up above, of the invasion of Volusia, the sound of their city being sacked reverberating in their ears. They all sat there, waiting, as the Knights of the Seven tore Volusia to pieces above their heads.

Godfrey took another long drink from his sack of wine, the last sack left in the city, trying to numb the pain, the certainty of his looming death at the hands of the Empire. He stared at his feet, wondering how it all could have come to this. Moons ago, he was safe and secure inside the Ring, drinking his life away, with no other worries but what tavern and what brothel to visit on any given night. Now here he was, across the sea, in the Empire, trapped underground in a city under ruin, having walled himself into his own coffin.

His head buzzed, and he tried to clear his mind, to focus. He sensed what his friends were thinking, could feel it in the contempt of their glares: they never should have listened to him; they should have all escaped when they'd had the chance. If they had not come back for Silis, they could have reached the harbor, boarded a ship, and now been far from Volusia.

Godfrey tried to take solace in the fact that he had, at least, repaid a favor and had saved this woman's life. If he had not reached her in time to warn her to descend, she would certainly be up above and dead by now. That had to be worth something, even if it was unlike him.

"And now?" Akorth asked.

Godfrey turned and saw him looking back at him with an accusatory look, voicing the question that was clearly burning in all of their minds.

Godfrey looked around and scanned the small, dim chamber, torches flickering, nearly out. Their measly provisions and a sack of ale were all they had, sitting in one corner. It was a death vigil. He could still hear the sound of the war up above, even through these thick walls, and he wondered how long they could ride out this invasion. Hours? Days? How long would it be until the Knights of the Seven conquered Volusia? Would they go away?

"It's not us they're after," Godfrey observed. "It's Empire fighting Empire. They have a vendetta against Volusia. They have no issue with us."

Silis shook her head.

"They will occupy this place," she said somberly, her strong voice cutting through the silence. "The Knights of the Seven never retreat."

They all fell silent.

"Then how long can we live down here?" Merek asked.

Silis shook her head as she glanced at their provisions.

"A week, perhaps," she replied.

There suddenly came a tremendous rumble up above, and Godfrey flinched as he felt the ground shaking beneath him.

Silis jumped to her feet, agitated, pacing, studying the ceiling as dust began to filter down, showering over all of them. It sounded like an avalanche of stone above them, and she examined it as a concerned homeowner.

"They have breached my castle," she said, more to herself than to them.

Godfrey saw a pained look in her face, and he recognized it as the look of someone losing everything she had.

She turned and looked at Godfrey gratefully.

"I would be up there now if it weren't for you. You saved our lives."

Godfrey sighed.

“And for what?” he asked, upset. “What good did it do? So that we can all die down here?”

Silis looked glum.

“If we remain here,” Merek asked, “will we all die?”

Silis turned to him and nodded sadly.

“Yes,” she answered flatly. “Not today or tomorrow, but within a few days, yes. They cannot get down here – but we cannot go up there. Soon enough our provisions will run out.”

“So what then?” Ario asked, facing her. “Do you plan to die down here? Because I, for one, do not.”

Silis paced, her brow furrowed, and Godfrey could see her thinking long and hard.

Then, finally, she stopped.

“There is a chance,” she said. “It is risky. But it just might work.”

She turned and faced them, and Godfrey held his breath in hope and anticipation.

“In my father’s time, there was an underground passage beneath the castle,” she said. “It leads through the castle walls. We could find it, if it still exists, and leave at night, under the cover of darkness. We can try to make our way through the city, to the harbor. We can take one of my ships, if there are any left, and sail from this place.”

A long, uncertain silence fell over the room.

“Risky,” Merek finally said, his voice grave. “The city will be teeming with Empire. How are we to cross it without getting killed?”

Silis shrugged.

“True,” she replied. “If they catch us, we will be killed. But if we emerge when it is dark enough, and we kill anyone who stands in our way, perhaps we will reach the harbor.”

“And what if we find this passageway and reach the harbor, and your ships aren’t there?” Ario asked.

She faced him.

“No plan is certain,” she said. “We may very well die out there – and we may very well die down here.”

“Death comes for us all,” Godfrey chimed in, feeling a new sense of purpose as he stood and faced the others, feeling a sense of resolve as he overcame his fears. “It is a question of how we wish to die: down here, cowering as rats? Or up there, aiming for our freedom?”

Slowly, one at a time, the others all stood. They faced him and all nodded solemnly back.

He knew, at that moment, a plan had been formed. Tonight, they would escape.

Chapter Eight

Loti and Loc walked side by side beneath the burning desert sun, the two of them shackled to each other, as they were whipped by the Empire taskmasters behind them. They trekked through the wasteland and as they did, Loti wondered once again why her brother had volunteered them for this dangerous, backbreaking job. Had he gone mad?

“What were you thinking?” she whispered to him. They were prodded from behind and as Loc lost his balance and stumbled forward, Loti caught him by his good arm before he fell.

“Why would you volunteer us?” she added.

“Look ahead,” he said, regaining his balance. “What do you see?”

Loti looked ahead and saw nothing but the monotonous desert stretched out before them, filled with slaves, the ground hard with rocks; beyond that, she saw a slope to a ridge, atop which labored a dozen more slaves. Everywhere were taskmasters, the sound of whips heavy in the air.

“I see nothing,” she replied, impatient, “but more of the same: slaves being worked to their deaths by taskmasters.”

Loti suddenly felt a searing pain across her back, as if her skin were being torn off, and she cried out as she was lashed across her back, the whip slicing her skin.

She turned to see the scowling face of a taskmaster behind her.

“Keep silent!” he commanded.

Loti felt like crying from the intense pain, but she held her tongue and continued to walk beside Loc, her shackles rattling under the sun. She vowed to kill all of these Empire as soon as she could.

They continued marching in silence, the only sound that of their boots crunching beneath the rock. Finally, Loc inched closer beside her.

“It’s not what you see,” he whispered, “but what you *don’t* see. Look closely. Up there, on the ridge.”

She studied the landscape, but saw nothing.

“There is but one taskmaster up there. One. For two dozen slaves. Look back, over the valley, and see how many there are.”

Loti glanced furtively back over her shoulder, and in the valley spread out below, she saw dozens of taskmasters overseeing slaves, who broke rock and tilled the land. She turned and looked back up at the ridge, and she understood for the first time what her brother had in mind. Not only was there only one taskmaster, but even better, there was a zerta beside him. A means of escape.

She was impressed.

He nodded in understanding.

“The ridgetop is the most dangerous job post,” he whispered. “The hottest, the least desired, by slave and taskmaster alike. But that, my sister, is an opportunity.”

Loti was suddenly kicked in the back, and she stumbled forward along with Loc. The two of them righted themselves and continued up the ridge, Loti gasping for air, trying to catch her breath beneath the rising heat as they ascended. But this time, when she looked back up, her heart swelled with optimism, beating faster in her throat: finally, they had a plan.

Loti had never considered her brother to be bold, so willing to take such risk, to confront the Empire. But now as she looked at him, she could see the desperation in his eyes, could see that he was finally thinking as she was. She saw him in a new light, and she admired him greatly for it. It was exactly the type of plan she would have come up with herself.

“And what of our shackles?” she whispered back, as she made sure the taskmasters were not looking.

Loc gestured with his head.

“His saddle,” Loc replied. “Look closely.”

Loti looked and saw the long sword dangling in it; she realized they could use it to cut the shackles. They could make a break from there.

Feeling a sense of optimism for the first time since being captured, Loti perused the other slaves atop the peak. They were all broken men and women, hunched mindlessly over their tasks, none with any defiance left in their eyes; she knew at once that none of them would be of any help to their cause. That was fine by her – they did not need their help. They needed but one chance, and for all these other slaves to serve as a distraction.

Loti felt one final hard kick in the small of her back, and she stumbled forward and landed face-first in the dirt as they reached the peak of the ridge. She felt rough hands drag her back up to her feet, and she turned to see the taskmaster shove her roughly before turning and heading back down the ridge, leaving them there.

“Get in line!” yelled a new taskmaster, the sole one atop the ridge.

Loti felt his calloused hands grab the back of her neck and shove her; her chains rattled as she hurried forward, stumbling into the work field of slaves. She was handed a long hoe with an iron end, then given one last shove as the Empire taskmaster expected her to start tilling with all the others.

Loti turned, saw Loc give her a meaningful nod, and she felt the fire burning in her veins; she knew it was now or never.

Loti let out a cry, raised the hoe, swung it around, and with all her might brought it down. She was shocked to feel the thud, to see it lodged into the back of the taskmaster’s head.

Loti had swung around so quickly, so decisively, clearly he had never expected it. He had not even time to react. Clearly no slave here, surrounded by all these taskmasters and with nowhere to run, would ever dare such a move.

Loti felt the buzz of the hoe throughout her hands and arms, and she watched in shock, then satisfaction, as the guard stumbled forward and fell. With her back still burning from the lashes, it felt like vindication.

Her brother stepped forward, raised his own hoe high, and as the taskmaster began to writhe, he brought it straight down on the back of his head.

Finally, the taskmaster lay still.

Breathing hard, covered in sweat, her heart still pounding, Loti dropped the hoe in disbelief, sprayed with the man’s blood, and exchanged a glance with her brother. They had done it.

Loti could feel the curious stares of all the other slaves around her, and she turned and saw that they were all watching, mouths agape. They all leaned on their hoes, stopping work, and gave them a horrified look of disbelief.

Loti knew she had no time to waste. She ran, Loc beside her, shackled together, to the zerta, lifted the longsword from its saddle with both hands, raising it high, and turned.

“Watch out!” she yelled to Loc.

He braced himself as she lowered it with all her might and slashed their chains. It sparked, and she felt the satisfying freedom of their chains being severed.

She turned to go when she heard a shout.

“And what of us!?” shouted a voice.

Loti turned to see the other slaves come running over, holding out their shackles. She turned and saw the waiting zerta, and she knew time was precious. She wanted to head east as soon as she could, to head to Volusia, the last place she had knew Darius was heading. Perhaps she would find him there. Yet at the same time, she could not stand to see her brothers and sisters shackled.

Loti raced forward, through the crowd of slaves, slashing shackles left and right, until all of them were free. She did not know where they would go now that they were – but at least freedom was theirs to do with as they wished.

Loti turned, mounted the zerta, and held out a hand for Loc. He gave her his one good hand and she pulled him up – then gave the zerta a fierce kick in its ribs.

As they took off, Loti exhilarated at her freedom, in the distance, she could already hear the shouts of the Empire taskmasters, all spotting her. But she did not wait. She turned and directed the zerta down the ridge, down the opposite slope, she and her brother bursting out into the desert, away from the taskmasters – and on the other side of freedom.

Chapter Nine

Darius looked up in shock, staring back at the eyes of the mysterious man kneeling over him. His father.

As Darius stared into the man's eyes, all sense of time and space fell away, his entire life freezing in that moment. It all suddenly fell into place: that feeling Darius had had from the moment he had laid eyes upon him. That familiar look, that certain something that had been tugging away at his consciousness, that had been bothering him ever since they'd met.

His *father*.

The word did not even seem real.

There he was, kneeling over him, having just saved Darius's life, having blocked a deadly blow from the Empire soldier, one which surely would have killed Darius. He had risked his life to venture out here, alone, into the arena, at the moment Darius had been about to die.

He had risked it all for him. His son. But why?

"Father," Darius said back, more of a whisper, in awe.

Darius felt a rush of pride to realize he was related to this man, this fine warrior, the finest warrior he had ever met. It made him feel that perhaps he could be a great warrior, too.

His father reached down and grabbed Darius's hand, and it was a firm, muscular grip. He yanked Darius to his feet, and as he did, Darius felt renewed. He felt as if he had a reason to fight, a reason to go on.

Darius immediately reached down, grabbed his dropped sword off the floor, then turned, together with his father, and they faced the oncoming horde of Empire soldiers together. With those hideous creatures now dead, his father having killed them all, horns had sounded, and the Empire had sent out a fresh wave of soldiers.

The crowd roared, and Darius looked out at the hideous faces of the Empire soldiers bearing down on them, wielding long spears. Darius focused, and he felt the world slowing as he prepared to fight for his life.

A soldier charged and threw a spear at his face, and Darius dodged right before it hit his eye; he then swung around and as the soldier neared to tackle him, Darius smashed him on his temple with the hilt of his sword, knocking him to the ground. Darius ducked as another soldier swung a sword at his head, then lunged forward and stabbed him in the gut.

Another soldier charged from the side, his spear aiming for Darius's ribs, moving too fast for Darius to react; yet he heard the sound of wood smashing metal, and he turned gratefully to see his father appear and use his staff to block the spear before it hit Darius. He then stepped forward and jabbed the staff between the soldier's eyes, knocking him to the ground.

His father spun with his staff and faced the group of attackers, the click-clack of his staff filling the air as he swatted away one spear thrust after the next. His father danced between the soldiers, like a gazelle weaving through men, and he wielded his staff like a thing of beauty, spinning and striking soldiers expertly, with well-placed jabs in the throat, between the eyes, in the diaphragm, felling men in every direction. He was like lightning.

Darius, inspired, fought like a man possessed beside his father, drawing energy off of him; he slashed and ducked and jabbed, his sword clanging against other soldiers' swords, sparks flying as he advanced fearlessly into the group of soldiers. They were larger than he, but Darius had more spirit, and he, unlike they, was fighting for his life – and for his father. He deflected more than one blow meant for his father, saving him from an unforeseen death. Darius dropped soldiers left and right.

The last Empire soldier rushed for Darius, raising a sword high overhead with both hands – and as he did, Darius lunged forward and stabbed him in the heart. The man's eyes opened wide, as he slowly froze and fell to the ground, dead.

Darius stood beside his father, the two of them back to back, breathing hard, surveying their handiwork. All around them, Empire soldiers lay dead. They had been victorious.

Darius felt that here, beside his father, he could face whatever the world threw at him; he felt that together, they were an unstoppable force. And it felt surreal to actually be fighting at his father's side. His father, whom he had always dreamt was a great warrior. His father was not, after all, just any ordinary person.

There came a chorus of horns, and the crowd cheered. At first Darius hoped they were cheering for his victory, but then huge iron doors opened at the far side of the arena, and he knew that the worst of it was just beginning.

There came the sound of a trumpet, louder than any Darius had ever heard, and it took him a moment to realize it was not the trumpet of a man – but rather, of an elephant. As he watched the gate, his heart pounding with anticipation, there suddenly appeared, to his shock, two elephants, all black, with long gleaming white tusks, faces contorted with rage as they leaned back and trumpeted.

The noise shook the very air. They lifted their front legs then brought them down with a crash, stamping the ground so hard that it shook, throwing Darius and his father off balance. Atop them rode Empire soldiers, wielding spears and swords, dressed head to toe in armor.

As Darius surveyed them, looking up at these beasts, larger than anything he had encountered in his life, he knew there was no way he and his father could win. He turned and saw his father standing there, fearlessly, not backing down as he stoically stared death in the face. It gave Darius strength.

“We cannot win, Father,” Darius said, stating the obvious as the elephants began their charge.

“We already have, my son,” his father said. “By standing here and facing them, by not turning and running, we have defeated them. Our bodies might die here today, but our memory lives on – and it shall be one of valor!”

Without another word, his father let out a cry and began to charge, and Darius, inspired, cried out and charged beside him. The two of them raced out to meet the elephants, running as fast as they could, not even hesitating to meet death in the face.

The moment of impact was not what Darius expected. He dodged a spear as the soldier, atop the elephant, threw it straight down at him, then he raised his sword and slashed at the elephant's foot as it charged right for him. Darius did not know how to strike an elephant, or if the blow would even have any impact.

It did not. Darius's blow barely scratched its skin. The massive beast, enraged, lowered its trunk and swung it sideways, smashing Darius in the ribs.

Darius went flying thirty feet through the air, feeling the wind knocked out of him, and landed on his back, rolling in the dust. He rolled and rolled, trying to catch his breath as he heard the muted shout of the crowd.

He turned and tried to catch a glimpse of his father, concerned for him, and out of the corner he saw him hurling his spear straight up, aiming for one of the elephant's huge eyes, then rolling out of the way as the elephant charged for him.

It was a perfect strike. It lodged firmly in its eye and as it did the elephant shrieked and trumpeted, its knees buckling as it tumbled to the ground and rolled, taking out the other elephant with it in a huge cloud of dust.

Darius scrambled to his feet, inspired and determined, and he set his sights on one of the Empire soldiers, who had fallen and was rolling on the ground. The soldier gained his knees, then turned and, still clutching his spear, took aim for Darius's father's back. His father stood there, unsuspecting, and Darius knew in a moment he would be dead.

Darius burst into action. He charged the soldier, raised his sword, and slashed the spear from his hand – then swung around and decapitated him.

The crowd cheered.

But Darius had little time to revel in his triumph: he heard a great rumbling, and he turned to see the other elephant had regained its feet – and its rider – and was bearing down on him. With no time to run out of the way, Darius lay on his back, took the spear, and held it straight up, as the elephant's foot came down. He waited until the last moment, then rolled out of the way as the elephant went to stomp him into the earth.

Darius felt a great wind as the elephant's foot rushed past him, missing him by inches, then heard a shriek and the sound of spear impacting flesh as he turned to see the elephant stepping on the spear. The spear rose straight up, all the way through its flesh and out the other side.

The elephant bucked and shrieked, running in circles, and as it did, the Empire soldier riding it lost his balance and fell, a good fifty feet, shrieking as he landed to his death, crushed by the fall.

The elephant, still mad with rage, swung the other way and smacked Darius with his trunk and sent him flying once again, tumbling in the other direction, Darius feeling as if all his ribs were breaking.

As Darius crawled on his hands and knees, trying to catch his breath, he looked up to see his father fighting valiantly with several Empire soldiers, who had been released from the gates to assist the others. He spun and slashed and jabbed with his staff, felling several of them in every direction.

The first elephant that had fallen, the spear still in its eye, regained its feet, whipped back up by another Empire soldier who jumped on its back. Under his direction, the elephant bucked, then charged right for Darius's father who, unsuspecting, continued to fight the soldiers.

Darius watched it happening and he stood there, helpless, his father too far away from him and he unable to get there in time. Time slowed as he saw the elephant turn right for him.

“NO!” Darius shrieked.

Darius watched in horror as the elephant rushed forward, right for his unsuspecting father. Darius raced across the battlefield, rushing to save him in time. Yet, he knew, even as he ran, that it was futile. It was like watching his world fall apart in slow motion.

The elephant lowered its tusks, charged forward, and impaled his father through the back.

His father cried out, blood pouring from his mouth, as the elephant raised him high in the air.

Darius felt his own heart close up as he saw his father, the bravest warrior he had ever seen, high in the air, impaled by the tusk, struggling to break free even as he was dying.

“FATHER!” Darius shrieked.

Chapter Ten

Thorgrin stood at the bow of the ship, tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, and looked up in shock and horror at the massive sea monster emerging from the depths of the water. It was the same color as the blood sea below, and as it rose higher and higher, it cast a shadow over what little light there was in this Land of Blood. It opened its massive jaws, revealing dozens of rows of fangs, and it released its tentacles in every direction, some of them longer than the ship, as if a creature from the very depths of hell were reaching out to give them a hug.

Then it plunged down for the ship, ready to engulf them all.

Beside Thorgrin, Reece, Selese, O'Connor, Indra, Matus, Elden, and Angel all stood holding their weapons, standing their ground fearlessly in the face of this beast. Thor strengthened his resolve as he felt the Sword of the Dead vibrating in his hand, and he knew he had to take action. He had to protect Angel and the others, and he knew he could not wait for the beast to come to them.

Thorgrin leapt forward to meet it, up high onto the rail, raised his sword high overhead, and as one of the tentacles came swinging sideways for him, he swung around and chopped it off. The huge tentacle, severed, fell to the ship with a hollow sound, shaking the boat, then slid alongside the deck until it smashed into the rail.

The others did not hesitate either. O'Connor let loose a volley of arrows for the beast's eyes, while Reece chopped off another tentacle descending for Selese's waist. Indra threw her spear, piercing its chest, Matus swung his flail, severing another tentacle, and Elden used his ax, chopping off two in one stroke. As one, the Legion descended on this beast, attacking it like a finely tuned machine.

The beast shrieked in rage, having lost several of its tentacles, pierced by arrows and spears, clearly caught off guard by the coordinated attack. Its first attack halted, it shrieked even louder in frustration, shot up high into the air, and then just as quickly plunged beneath the surface, creating great waves and leaving the ship rocking in its wake.

Thor stared out at the sudden silence, puzzled, and for a second he thought that maybe it had retreated, that they had defeated it, especially as he saw the beast's blood pooling at the surface. But then he had a sinking feeling that all went too quiet, too quickly.

And then, too late, he realized what the beast was about to do.

"HANG ON!" Thor yelled to the others.

Thor had barely uttered the words when he felt their ship rise up unsteadily from the waters, higher and higher, until it was in the air, in the tentacles of the beast. Thor looked down and saw the beast beneath it, its tentacles wrapped all over the ship from bow to stern. He braced himself for the crash to come.

The beast hurled the ship and it went flying like a toy through the air, all of them trying to hold on for dear life, until it finally landed back in the ocean, rocking violently.

Thor and the others lost their grip and went sliding across the deck every which way, smashing into the wood as the ship tossed and turned. Thor spotted Angel sliding across the deck, heading for the rail, soon to go over the edge, and he reached out and grabbed her small hand, holding her tight as she looked back at him with panic.

Finally, the ship righted itself. Thor scrambled to his feet, as did the others, bracing for the next attack, and as soon as he did, he saw the beast swimming toward them at full speed, its tentacles flailing. It gripped the ship from all sides, its tentacles creeping over the edge, over the deck, and coming right at them.

Thor heard a cry and he looked out and saw Selese, a tentacle wrapped around her ankle, sliding across the deck, being yanked overboard. Reece swung around and chopped off the tentacle, but just as quickly another tentacle grabbed Reece's arm. More and more tentacles crept over the ship, and as

Thor felt one on his own thigh, he looked around and saw all of his Legion brothers swinging wildly, chopping off tentacles. For each one they chopped off, two more appeared.

The entire ship was covered, and Thor knew that if he did not do something soon, they would all be sucked under for good. He heard a screech, high in the sky, and as he looked up, he saw one of the demon creatures released from hell, flying high overhead, looking down with a mocking gaze as it flew away.

Thor closed his eyes, knowing this was one of his tests, one of the monumental moments in his life. He tried to blot out the world, to focus inwardly. On his training. On Argon. On his mother. On his powers. He was stronger than the universe, he knew that. There were powers deep within him, powers above the physical world. This creature was of this earth – yet Thor's powers were greater. He could summon the powers of nature, the very powers that had created this beast, and send it back to the hell it had come from.

Thor felt the world slow all around him. He felt a heat rising within his palms, spreading through his arms, his shoulders, and back again, prickling, right down to his fingertips. Feeling invincible, Thor opened his eyes. He felt an incredible power shining through them, the power of the universe.

Thor reached out and placed his palm on the tentacle of the beast, and as he did, he seared it. The beast withdrew it immediately from his thigh, as if being burnt.

Thor stood, a new man. He turned and saw the beast's head rearing itself up along the edge of the ship, opening its jaws, preparing to swallow them all. He saw his Legion brothers and sisters sliding, about to be dragged over the edge.

Thor let out a great battle cry and charged the beast. He dove for it before it could reach the others, forgoing his sword and instead reaching out with his burning palms. He grabbed hold of the beast's face and laid his palms on it, and as he did, he felt them sear the beast's face.

Thor held on tight as the beast shrieked and writhed, trying to break free from his grasp. Slowly, one tentacle at a time, the beast began to release its grip on the boat, and as it did, Thor felt his power rising within him. He grabbed hold of the beast firmly and raised both of his palms, and as he did, he felt the weight of the beast, rising higher and higher into the air. Soon it hovered above Thor's palms, the power within Thor keeping it afloat.

Then, when the beast was a good thirty feet overhead, Thor turned and cast his hands forward.

The beast went flying forward, above the ship, shrieking, tumbling end over end. It sailed through the air a good hundred feet, until finally it went limp. It dropped down into the sea with a great splash, then sank beneath the surface.

Dead.

Thor stood there in the silence, his entire body still warm, and slowly, one at a time, the others regrouped, gaining their feet and coming up beside him. Thor stood there, breathing hard, dazed, looking out at the sea of blood. Beyond it, on the horizon, his eyes fixed on the black castle, looming over this land, the place that, he knew, held his son.

The time had come. There was nothing stopping him now, and it was time, finally, to retrieve his son.

Chapter Eleven

Volusia stood before her many advisors in the streets of the Empire capital, staring at the looking glass in her hand with shock. She examined her new face from every angle – half of it still beautiful, and the other half disfigured, melted away – and she felt a wave of disgust. The fact that half of her beauty still remained somehow made it all worse. It would have been easier, she realized, if her entire face had been disfigured – then she could remember nothing of her former looks.

Volusia recalled her stunning good looks, the root of her power, which had carried her through every event in life, which had allowed her to manipulate men and women alike, to bring men to their knees with a single glance. Now, all that was gone. Now, she was just another seventeen-year-old girl – and worse, half-monster. She could not stand the sight of her own face.

In a burst of rage and desperation, Volusia flung the looking glass down and watched as it smashed to pieces on the pristine streets of the capital. All of her advisors stood there, silent, looking away, all knowing better than to talk to her at this moment. It was also clear to her, as she surveyed their faces, that none of them wanted to look at her, to see the horror that was now her face.

Volusia looked around for the Volks, eager to tear them apart – but they were already gone, having disappeared as soon as they had cast that awful spell on her. She'd been warned not to join forces with them, and now she realized all the warnings had been right. She had paid the price dearly for it. A price that could never be turned back.

Volusia wanted to let her rage out on someone, and her eyes fell on Brin, her new commander, a statuesque warrior just a few years older than her, who had been courting her for moons. Young, tall, muscular, he had stunning good looks and had lusted after her the entire time she had known him. Yet now, to her fury, he would not even meet her gaze.

“You,” Volusia hissed at him, barely able to contain herself. “Will you now not even look at me?”

Volusia flushed as he looked up but would not meet her eyes. This was her destiny now, for the rest of her life, she knew, to be viewed as a freak.

“Am I disgusting to you now?” she asked, her voice breaking in desperation.

He hung his head low, but did not respond.

“Very well,” she said finally, after a long silence, determined to exact vengeance on someone, “then I *command* you: you will gaze at the face which you hate the most. You will prove to me that I am beautiful. You will sleep with me.”

The commander looked up and met her eyes for the first time, fear and horror in his expression.

“Goddess?” he asked, his voice cracking, terrified, knowing he would face death if he defied her command.

Volusia smiled wide, happy for the first time, realizing that would be the perfect revenge: to sleep with the man who found her most loathsome.

“After you,” she said, stepping aside and gesturing toward her chamber.

* * *

Volusia stood before the tall arched, open-air window on the top floor of the palace of the Empire capital, and as the early morning sun rose, the drapes billowing in her face, she cried quietly. She could feel her teardrops trickling down the good side of her face but not the other, the side melted away. It was numb.

A light snoring punctuated the air, and Volusia glanced over her shoulder to see Brin lying there, still asleep, his face bunched up in an expression of disgust, even in sleep. He had hated every

moment he had lain with her, she knew, and that had brought her some small revenge. Yet still she did not feel satisfied. She could not let it out on the Volks, and she still felt a need for vengeance.

It was a weak bit of vengeance, hardly the one she craved. The Volks, after all, had disappeared, while here she was, the next morning, still alive, still stuck with herself, as she would have to be for the rest of her life. Stuck with these looks, this disfigured face, which even she could not bear.

Volusia wiped back the tears and looked out, beyond the city line, beyond the capital walls, deep on the horizon. As the sun rose, she began to see the faintest trace of the armies of the Knights of the Seven, their black banners lining the horizon. They were camped out there, and their armies were mounting. They were encircling her slowly, gathering millions from all corners of the Empire, all preparing to invade. To crush her.

She welcomed the confrontation. She did not need the Volks, she knew. She did not need any of her men. She could kill them on her own. She was, after all, a goddess. She had left the realm of mortals long ago, and now she was a legend, a legend that no one, and no army, in the world could stop. She would greet them on her own, and she would kill them all, for all time.

Then, finally, there would be no one left to confront her. Then, her powers would be supreme.

Volusia heard a rustling behind her and out of the corner of her eye, she detected motion. She saw Brin rise from bed, casting off his sheets and beginning to dress. She saw him slinking around, careful to be quiet, and she realized he meant to slip out from the room before she saw him – so that he would never have to look upon her face again. It added insult to injury.

“Oh, Commander,” she called out casually.

She saw him freeze in his tracks in fear; he turned and looked over at her reluctantly, and as he did, she smiled back, torturing him with the grotesqueness of her melted lips.

“Come here, Commander,” she said. “Before you leave, there is something I want to show you.”

He slowly turned and walked, crossing the room until he reached her side, and he stood there, looking out, looking anywhere but at her face.

“Have you not one sweet parting kiss for your Goddess?” she asked.

She could see him flinch ever so slightly, and she felt fresh anger burning within her.

“Never mind,” she added, her expression darkening. “But there is, at least, something I want to show you. Have a look. Do you see out there, on the horizon? Look closely. Tell me what you see down there.”

He stepped forward and she laid a hand on his shoulder. He leaned forward and examined the skyline, and as he did, she watched his brow furrow in confusion.

“I see nothing, Goddess. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Volusia smiled wide, feeling the old sense of vindictiveness rise up within her, feeling the old need for violence, for cruelty.

“Look more closely, Commander,” she said.

He leaned forward, just a bit more, and in one quick motion, Volusia grabbed his shirt from behind, and with all her might, threw him face first out the window.

Brin shrieked as he flailed and flew through the air, dropping down all the way, a hundred feet, until finally he landed face first, instantly dead, on the streets below. The thud reverberated in the otherwise quiet streets.

Volusia smiled wide, examining his body, finally feeling a sense of vengeance.

“It is yourself you see,” she replied. “Who is the less grotesque of us now?”

Chapter Twelve

Gwendolyn walked through the dim corridors of the tower of the Light Seekers, Krohn at her side, walking slowly up the circular ramp along the sides of the building. The path was lined with torches and cult worshipers, standing silently at attention, hands hidden in their robes, and Gwen's curiosity deepened as she continued to ascend one level after another. The King's son, Kristof, had led her halfway up after their meeting, then had turned and descended, instructing her that she would have to complete the journey alone to see Eldof, that she alone could face him. The way they all spoke about him, it was as if he were a god.

Soft chanting filled the air heavy with incense, as Gwen walked up the very gradual ramp, and wondered: What secret was Eldof guarding? Would he give her the knowledge she needed to save the King and save the Ridge? Would she ever be able to retrieve the King's family from this place?

As Gwen turned a corner, the tower suddenly opened up, and she gasped at the sight. She entered a soaring chamber with a hundred-foot ceiling, its walls lined with floor to ceiling stained glass windows. A muted light flooded through, filled with scarlets, purples, and pinks, lending the chamber an ethereal quality. And what made it all most surreal of all was to see one man sitting alone in this vast place, in the center of the room, the shafts of light coming down on him as if to illuminate him and him alone.

Eldof.

Gwen's heart pounded as she saw him sitting there at the far end of the chamber, like a god who had dropped down from the sky. He sat there, hands folded in his shining golden cloak, his head stark bald, on a huge and magnificent throne carved of ivory, torches on either side of it and on the ramp leading to it, obliquely lighting the room. This chamber, that throne, the ramp leading to it – it was more awe-inspiring than approaching a King. She realized at once why the King felt threatened by his presence, his cult, this tower. It was all designed to inspire awe and subservience.

He did not beckon her, or even acknowledge her presence, and Gwen, not knowing what else to do, began to ascend the long, golden walkway leading to his throne. As she went she saw he wasn't alone in here after all, for obscured in the shadows were rows of worshipers all lined up, eyes closed, hands tucked in their cloaks, lining the ramp. She wondered how many thousands of followers he had.

She finally stopped a few feet before his throne and looked up.

He looked back down with eyes that seemed ancient, ice-blue, glowing, and while he smiled down at her, his eyes held no warmth. They were hypnotizing. It reminded her of being in Argon's presence.

She did not know what to say as he stared down; it felt as if he were staring into her soul. She stood there in the silence, waiting until he was ready, and beside her, she could feel Krohn stiffening, equally on edge.

"Gwendolyn of the Western Kingdom of the Ring, daughter of King MacGil, last hope for the savior of her people – and ours," he pronounced slowly, as if reading from some ancient script, his voice deeper than any she'd ever heard, sounding as if it had resonated from the stone itself. His eyes bore into hers, and his voice was hypnotic. As she stared into them, it made her lose all sense of space and time and place, and already, Gwen could feel herself getting sucked in by his cult of personality. She felt entranced, as if she could look nowhere else, even if she tried. She immediately felt as if he were the center of her world, and she understood at once how all of these people had come to worship and follow him.

Gwen stared back, momentarily at a loss for words, something that had rarely happened to her. She had never felt so star-struck – she, who had been before many Kings and Queens; she, who was Queen herself; she, the daughter of a King. This man had a quality to him, something she could not quite describe; for a moment, she even forgot why she had come here.

Finally, she cleared her mind long enough to be able to speak.

“I have come,” she began, “because – ”

He laughed, interrupting her, a short, deep sound.

“I know why you have come,” he said. “I knew before *you* even did. I knew of your arrival in this place – indeed, I knew even before you crossed the Great Waste. I knew of your departure from the Ring, your travel to the Upper Isles, and of your travels across the sea. I know of your husband, Thorgrin, and of your son, Guwayne. I have watched you with great interest, Gwendolyn. For centuries, I have watched you.”

Gwen felt a chill at his words, at the familiarity of this person she didn’t know. She felt a tingling in her arms, up her spine, wondering how he knew all this. She felt that once she was in his orbit, she could not escape if she tried.

“How do you know all this?” she asked.

He smiled.

“I am Eldof. I am both the beginning and the end of knowledge.”

He stood, and she was shocked to see he was twice as tall as any man she’d met. He took a step closer, down the ramp, and with his eyes so mesmerizing, Gwen felt as if she could not move in his presence. It was so hard to concentrate before him, to think an independent thought for herself.

Gwen forced herself to clear her mind, to focus on the business at hand.

“Your King needs you,” she said. “The Ridge needs you.”

He laughed.

“*My* King?” he echoed with disdain.

Gwen forced herself to press on.

“He believes you know how to save the Ridge. He believes you are holding a secret from him, one that could save this place and all of these people.”

“I am,” he replied flatly.

Gwen was taken aback at his immediate, frank reply, and hardly knew what to say. She had expected him to deny it.

“*You are?*” she asked, flabbergasted.

He smiled but said nothing.

“But why?” she asked. “Why won’t you share this secret?”

“And why should I do that?” he asked.

“*Why?*” she asked, stumped. “Of course, to save this kingdom, to save his people.”

“And why would I want to do that?” he pressed.

Gwen narrowed her eyes, confused; she had no idea how to respond. Finally, he sighed.

“Your problem,” he said, “is that you believe everyone is meant to be saved. But that is where you are wrong. You look at time in the lens of mere decades; I view it in terms of centuries. You look at people as indispensable; I view them as mere cogs in the great wheel of destiny and time.”

He took a step closer, his eyes searing.

“Some people, Gwendolyn, are *meant* to die. Some people *need* to die.”

“*Need* to die?” she asked, horrified.

“Some must die to set others free,” he said. “Some must fall so that others may rise. What makes one person more important than another? One place more important than another?”

She pondered his words, increasingly confused.

“Without destruction, without waste, growth could not follow. Without the empty sands of the desert, there can be no foundation on which to build the great cities. What matters more: the destruction, or the growth to follow? Don’t you understand? What is destruction but a foundation?”

Gwen, confused, tried to understand, but his words only deepened her confusion.

“Then are you going to stand by and let the Ridge and its people die?” she asked. “Why? How would that benefit you?”

He laughed.

“Why should everything always be for a benefit?” he asked. “I won’t save them because they are not *meant* to be saved,” he said emphatically. “This place, this Ridge, it is not meant to survive. It is meant to be destroyed. This King is meant to be destroyed. All these people are meant to be destroyed. And it is not for me to stand in the way of destiny. I have been granted the gift to see the future – but that is a gift I shall not abuse. I shall not change what I see. Who am I to stand in the way of destiny?”

Gwendolyn could not help but think of Thorgrin, of Guwayne.

Eldof smiled wide.

“Ah yes,” he said, looking right at her. “Your husband. Your son.”

Gwen looked back, shocked, wondering how he’d read her mind.

“You want to help them so badly,” he added, then shook his head. “But sometimes you cannot change destiny.”

She reddened and shook off his words, determined.

“I *will* change destiny,” she said emphatically. “Whatever it takes. Even if I have to give up my very own soul.”

Eldof looked at her long and hard, studying her.

“Yes,” he said. “You will, won’t you? I can see that strength in you. A warrior’s spirit.”

He examined her, and for the first time she saw a bit of certainty in his expression.

“I did not expect to find this within you,” he continued, his voice humbled. “There are a select few, like yourself, who do have the power to change destiny. But the price you will pay is very great.”

He sighed, as if shaking off a vision.

“In any case,” he continued, “you will not change destiny here – not in the Ridge. Death is coming here. What they need is not a rescue – but an exodus. They need a new leader, to lead them across the Great Waste. I think you already know that you are that leader.”

Gwen felt a chill at his words. She could not imagine herself having the strength to go through it all again.

“How can I lead them?” she asked, exhausted at the thought. “And where is there left to go? We are in the midst of nowhere.”

He turned away, falling silent, and as he began to walk away, Gwen felt a sudden burning desire to know more.

“Tell me,” she said, rushing out and grabbing his arm.

He turned and looked at her hand, as if a snake were touching him, until finally she removed it. Several of his monks rushed forth out of the shadows and hovered close by, looking at her angrily – until finally Eldof nodded at them, and they retreated.

“Tell me,” he said to her, “I will answer you once. Just once. What is it that you wish to know?”

Gwen took a deep breath, desperate.

“Guwayne,” she said, breathless. “My son. How do I get him back? How do I change destiny?”

He looked at her long and hard.

“The answer has been before you all along, and yet you don’t see.”

Gwen racked her brain, desperate to know, and yet she could not understand what it was.

“Argon,” he added. “There remains one secret he has feared to tell you. That is where your answer lies.”

Gwen was shocked.

“Argon?” she asked. “Does Argon know?”

Eldof shook his head.

“He does not. But his master does.”

Gwen’s mind reeled.

“His *master*?” she asked.

Gwen had never considered Argon having a master.

Eldof nodded.

“Demand that he bring you to him,” he said, a finality in his voice. “The answers you receive will startle even you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Mardig strutted down the castle corridors with determination, his heart pounding as he contemplated in his mind's eye what he was about to do. He reached down and with a sweaty palm clutched the dagger deep hidden in his waist. He walked the same path he had a million times before – on his way to see his father.

The King's chamber was not far now, and Mardig twisted and turned down the familiar corridors, past all the guards who bowed reverentially at the sight of the King's son. Mardig knew he had little to fear from them. No one had any idea what he was about to do, and no one would know what had happened until long after the deed was done – and the kingdom was his.

Mardig felt a whirlwind of conflicting emotions as he forced himself to put one foot in front of the other, his knees trembling, forced himself to stay resolved as he prepared to do the deed he had contemplated his entire life. His father had always been an oppressor to him, had always disapproved of him, while he had approved of his other, warrior, sons. He even approved of his daughter more than he. All because he, Mardig, had chosen not to participate in this culture of chivalry; all because he preferred to drink wine and chase women – instead of killing other men.

In his father's eyes, that made him a failure. His father had frowned upon everything Mardig did, his disapproving eyes following him at every corner, and Mardig had always dreamt of a day of reckoning. And at the same time, Mardig could seize power for himself. Everyone had expected the kingship to fall to one of his brothers, to the eldest, Koldo, or if not he, then to Mardig's twin, Ludvig. But Mardig had other plans.

As Mardig turned the corner, the soldiers guarding it reverentially bowed, and they turned to open it for him without even asking him why.

But suddenly, one of them stopped, unexpectedly, and turned to look at him.

"My lord," he said, "the King did not make us aware of any visitors this morning."

Mardig's heart started pounding, but he forced himself to appear bold and confident; he turned and stared back at the soldier, a stare of entitlement, until finally he could see the soldier looking unsure of himself.

"And am I a mere visitor?" Mardig answered coldly, doing his best to seem unafraid.

The guard slowly backed away quickly and Mardig marched through the open door, the guards closing it behind him.

Mardig strutted into the room, and as he did, he saw the surprised eyes of his father, who had been standing at the window and looking out looking pensively at his kingdom. He faced him, confused.

"Mardig," his father said, "to what do I owe the privilege? I did not summon you. Nor have you bothered to visit me any of these past moons – unless there was something you want."

Mardig's heart slammed in his chest.

"I've not come to ask anything of you, Father," he replied. "I have come to take."

His father looked confused.

"To take?" he asked.

"To take what is mine," Mardig replied.

Mardig took a few long strides across the chamber, steeling himself, as his father looked back at him, baffled.

"What is it that is yours?" he asked.

Mardig felt his palms sweating, the dagger in his hand, and did not know if he could go through with it.

"Why, the kingdom," he said.

Mardig slowly released the dagger in his palm, wanting his father to see it before he stabbed him, wanting his father to see firsthand how much he hated him. He wanted to see his father's expression of fear, of shock, of rage.

But as his father looked down, it was not the moment Mardig had expected. He had expected his father to resist, to fight back; but instead he looked up at him with sadness and compassion.

"My boy," he said. "You are still my son, despite all, and I love you. I know, deep in your heart, you don't mean this."

Mardig narrowed his eyes, confused.

"I am sick, my son," the King continued. "Soon enough, I will be dead. When I am, the Kingdom will pass to your brothers, not you. Even if you were to kill me now, you would gain nothing from it. You would still be third in line. So put down your weapon and embrace me. I still love you, as any father would."

Mardig, in a sudden rush of rage, hands shaking, leapt forward and plunged the dagger deep into his father's heart.

His father stood there, eyes bulging in disbelief, as Mardig held him tight and looked into his eyes.

"Your sickness has made you weak, Father," he said. "Five years ago I could never have done this. And a kingdom does not deserve a weak king. I know you will die soon – but that is not soon enough for me."

His father finally collapsed to the floor, motionless.

Dead.

Mardig looked down, breathing hard, still in shock at what he had just done. He wiped his hand on his robe, threw down the knife, and it landed with a clang on the floor.

Mardig scowled down at his father.

"Don't you worry about my brothers, Father," he added. "I have a plan for them, too."

Mardig stepped over his father's corpse, approached the window, and looked down at the capital city below. His city.

Now it was all *his*.

Chapter Fourteen

Kendrick raised his sword and blocked the blow as a Sand Walker brought its razor-sharp claw down for his face. It stopped it with a clang, sparks flying out, and Kendrick dodged out of the way, as the creature slid its claws down off the blade and swiped for his head.

Kendrick spun around and slashed, but the creature was surprisingly quick. It backed away, Kendrick's sword just missing. It then lunged forward, leaping high into the air and coming straight down for Kendrick – and this time, he was prepared. He had underestimated its speed, but would not do so a second time. Kendrick squatted down low and raised his sword high – and he let the beast impale itself, falling right through the blade.

Kendrick rose to his knees and swung his sword low, slashing off the legs of two Sand Walkers as they came for him. He then turned and thrust his sword backwards, stabbing one in the gut right before it landed on his back.

The beasts descended on him from all directions, and Kendrick found himself in the midst of a heated battle, Brandt and Atme by his side and Koldo and Ludvig by his other. The five of them instinctually backed up to each other, forming a tight circle, back to back, slashing and jabbing and kicking, keeping the creatures at bay as they watched each other's backs.

They fought and fought and fought beneath the blazing suns, with nowhere to retreat to in the vast, open space. Kendrick's shoulders ached, and he was up to his elbows in blood, exhausted from his long trek, from the endless battle. They had no reserves, and nowhere to go, and they all fought for their lives. The enraged screeches of these beasts filled the air, as they dropped left and right. Kendrick knew that they had to be careful; it was a long trek back, and if any of them were wounded, it would be a dire situation.

As he fought, in the distance, Kendrick caught a glimpse of the boy, Kaden, and he was relieved to see he was still alive. He struggled, his hands and arms bound behind his back and held back by several creatures. The sight of him motivated Kendrick, reminded him why he had come out here to begin with. He fought furiously, doubling his efforts, trying to cut through all these beasts and make his way to the boy. He did not like the way they were handling him, and he knew he had to reach him before these creatures did anything rash.

Kendrick groaned in pain as he suddenly felt a slash across his arm. He turned to see a creature swinging again, coming down with his razor-sharp claws, right for his face. He could not react in time, and he braced himself for the blow, expecting it to tear his face in two – when suddenly Brandt lunged forward and pierced the creature through its chest with his sword, saving Kendrick at the last moment.

At the same time, Atme stepped forward and slashed a creature right before it could sink its fangs into Brandt's throat.

Kendrick then spun, slashing two creatures before they descended on Atme.

Around and around he went, spinning and slashing, fighting each and every creature to the last. The creatures fell at their feet, piling on the sand, and the sand turned red with blood.

Kendrick spotted, out of the corner of his eye, several creatures grabbing Kaden and beginning to run off with him. Kendrick's heart pounded; he knew it was a dire situation. If he lost sight of them, they would disappear in the desert and they'd never find Kaden again.

Kendrick knew he had to make a run for it. He broke free from the fight, elbowing several creatures out of his way, and chased after the boy, leaving the others to fight the creatures. Several creatures pursued him, and Kendrick turned, kicking and slashing to deter them as he went. Kendrick felt himself scratched on all sides, but no matter what, he didn't stop. He had to reach Kaden in time.

Kendrick, spotting Kaden, knew he had to stop him; he knew he only had one shot at this.

Kendrick reached into his waist, grabbed a knife, and threw it. It landed on a creature's neck, killing it right before it could sink its claws into Kaden's throat. Kendrick burst through the crowd, closing the gap, running all the way to Kaden and stabbing another right before it could finish him off.

Kendrick took a defensive position over Kaden, who lay on the ground, bound, as Kendrick killed off his captors. As more creatures closed in on him, Kendrick blocked their claws in each direction. He found himself surrounded, slashing in every direction, but determined to save Kaden. The others, he could see, were too immersed in battle to rush to Kaden's side.

Kendrick raised his sword high and slashed the boy's ropes, freeing him.

"Take my sword!" Kendrick implored.

Kaden grabbed the extra short sword from Kendrick's scabbard, and spun and faced the rest of the creatures, at Kendrick's side. Although he was young, Kendrick could see the boy was quick and brave and bold, and Kendrick was pleased to have him by his side, fighting the creatures.

They fought well together, felling creatures left and right. But, fight as they did, there were just too many of them, and Kendrick and Kaden were soon completely surrounded.

Kendrick was losing strength, his shoulders tiring, when suddenly, he saw the creatures begin to fall and heard a great battle cry from behind them. Kendrick was elated to see Koldo, Ludvig, Brandt, and Atme break through the lines, killing creatures in every direction. Encouraged, Kendrick fought back, making one last push, Kaden by his side. The six of them, fighting together, were unstoppable, felling all of the creatures.

Kendrick stood there in the silence, breathing hard on the desert sand, taking stock; he could hardly believe what they had just done. All around them were the piled up carcasses of the beasts, sprawled out in various directions, the sand red with blood. He and the others were covered in wounds, scratched up – but they all stood there, alive. And Kaden, grinning from ear to ear, was free.

Kaden reached out and embraced each one of them, one by one, starting with Kendrick, looking at him meaningfully. He saved his final embrace for Koldo, his eldest brother, and Koldo hugged him back, his black skin rippling in the sky.

"I can't believe you came for me," Kaden said.

"You're my brother," Koldo said. "Where else would I be?"

Kendrick heard a sound and looked over and saw the six horses these creatures had kidnapped, all tied to a rope together – and he and the others exchanged knowing glances.

As one, they all rushed over and mounted the beasts, each barely seated before they dug in their heels and prodded the beasts onward, back into the Waste, all heading back to the Ridge, back, finally, to home.

Chapter Fifteen

Erec stood at the stern of his ship, taking up the rear of his fleet, and checked back over his shoulder once again with anxiety. On the one hand, he was relieved that they had managed to wipe out that Empire village, to fork back up the river toward Volusia, toward Gwendolyn; on the other hand, he had paid a dear price, not just in lost men, but in lost time – he had wiped out whatever lead they'd had on the remainder of the Empire fleet. As he glanced back, he saw them following, way too close, snaking their way upriver, but a few hundred yards away, sailing the black and gold banners of the Empire. He had lost his day's lead on them, and they now followed him furiously, like a hornet chasing its prey, their superior ships, better manned, getting ever closer with each gust of wind.

Erec turned back and checked the horizon. He knew from his scouts that Volusia lay just beyond the bend somewhere – yet, at the rate at which the Empire was closing the gap, he wondered if his small fleet would reach it in time. He was starting to realize that if they did not make it in time, they would have to turn around and make a stand – and that was a stand, so vastly outnumbered, they could not win.

Erec heard a sound that raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and he turned and looked up to see a sight which left him with a cold dread: a wave of Empire arrows had been unleashed, and they now sailed through the air, blackening the sky, heading, in a high arc, for his fleet. Erec braced himself and watched with relief as the first volley landed in the water all around him, perhaps twenty yards from his ship, the sound of arrows hitting water sounding like heavy raindrops.

“ARROWS!” Erec yelled, warning his men to take cover.

Most of them did, and not a moment too soon. Another volley soon followed, these shot by crossbows with a further range, and Erec watched, horrified, as one reached the deck of his ship and one of his soldiers yelled out. Erec turned to see it sticking through his leg, pierced by a random arrow, the only one with a range just far enough to hit.

Erec felt a flush of indignation – and of urgency. The Empire was within range; too soon they would be overtaken, and with the Empire's fleet of thousands of ships, there was simply no way Erec's men could outfight them. Erec knew he had to think quickly.

“Shall we turn and fight, my brother?” asked Strom, coming up beside him.

Alistair looked back, too, standing calmly beside him.

“You will prevail, my love,” she said. “I have seen it.”

Erec felt encouraged by her words, as always, and as he stared and studied the landscape, an idea came to him.

“Sometimes,” he said, “we must sacrifice to achieve something greater.”

Erec turned to his brother, confident.

“Board the ship beside us. Evacuate it, then take up the rear,” he commanded. He then took Strom's arm and looked him in the eye.

“When you're done,” he added, “set that ship aflame, and sail it right for their fleet. You will jump on my ship before the flames overtake it.”

Strom's eyes widened in appreciation for the plan. He jumped into action, running and leaping from the deck to the ship beside him, executing his brother's orders. He began barking orders, and the men fell in all around him, jumping into action and beginning to abandon ship, jumping onto the deck of Erec's ship. Erec could feel the weight of his ship growing heavier.

“More oars!” Erec cried, feeling them slowing.

He doubled the number of oarsmen on board, and they all pulled, heaving, as Erec's ship began to pick up speed.

“Spread out!” Erec commanded, realizing his ship was going too slow. “Jump to the other ships!”

His men did as commanded, jumping from his ship to several others in his fleet, distributing their weight evenly amongst the ships. Finally, Erec's ship righted and gained speed.

Erec turned to watch the last of the men jump from Strom's ship. Strom raised a torch and ran up and down the ship, setting flame to everything, then threw it with all his might. The torch landed on the mast, lighting it, setting the whole ship in a huge conflagration, and Strom turned, leapt back onto his brother's ship, and stood there, watching, as the ghost ship, aflame, drifted down current – right for the Empire fleet.

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