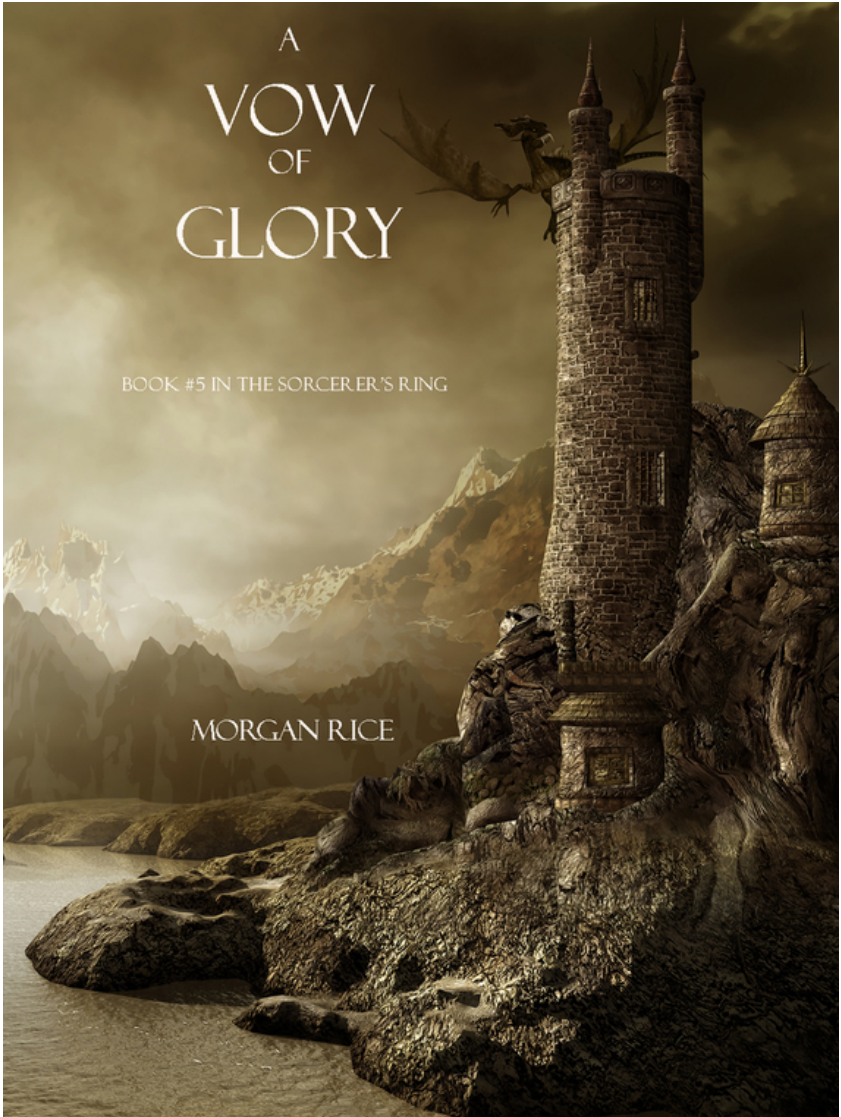
A
VOW
OF
GLORY
BOOK #5 IN THE SORCERER'S RING
MORGAN RICE

Morgan Rice

A Vow of Glory

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Аннотация

In A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5 in the Sorcerer's Ring), Thor embarks with his Legion friends on an epic quest into the vast wilds of the Empire to try to find the ancient Destiny Sword and save the Ring. Thor's friendships deepen, as they journey to new places, face unexpected monsters and fight side by side in unimaginable battle. They encounter exotic lands, creatures and peoples beyond which they could have ever imagined, each step of their journey fraught with increasing danger. They will have to summon all their skills if they are to survive as they follow the trail of the thieves, deeper and deeper into the Empire. Their quest will bring them all the way into the heart of the Underworld, one of the seven realms of hell, where the undead rule and fields are lined with bones. As Thor must summon his powers, more than ever, he struggles to understand the nature of who he is. Back in the Ring, Gwendolyn must lead half of King's Court to the Western stronghold of Silesia, an ancient city perched on the edge of the Canyon that has stood for one thousand years. Silesia's fortifications have allowed it to survive every attack throughout every

century – but it has never been faced with an assault by a leader like Andronicus, by an army like his million men. Gwendolyn learns what it means to be queen as she takes on a leadership role, Srog, Kolk, Brom, Steffen, Kendrick and Godfrey by her side, preparing to defend the city for the massive war to come. Meanwhile, Gareth is descending deeper into madness, trying to fend off a coup that would have him assassinated in King's Court, while Erec fights for his life to save his love, Alistair and the Duke's city of Savaria as the downed shield enables the wild creatures to invade. And Godfrey, wallowing in drink, will have to decide if he is ready to cast off his past and become the man his family expects him to be. As they all fight for their lives and as things seem as if they can't get any worse, the story ends with two shocking twists. Will Gwendolyn survive the assault? Will Thor survive the Empire? Will the Destiny Sword be found? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A VOW OF GLORY 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. It is 75,000 words.

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Morgan Rice
A Vow of Glory
(Book #5 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

"Life every man holds dear; but the dear man holds honor far more precious dear than life."
– William Shakespeare
Troilus and Cressida

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About Morgan Rice

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

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

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– Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding Turned)

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– The Romance Reviews (regarding Loved)

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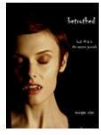

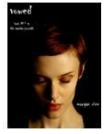

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Chapter One

Andronicus rode proudly down the center of McCloud's royal city, flanked by hundreds of his generals and dragging behind him his most prized possession: King McCloud. Stripped of his armor, half-naked, his hairy body rolling with fat, King McCloud was bound by ropes and tied to the back of Andronicus' saddle by a long rope circling his wrists.

As Andronicus rode slowly, reveling in his triumph, he dragged McCloud through the streets, over dirt and pebbles, stirring up a cloud of dust. McCloud's people gathered and gaped. He could hear McCloud calling out, writhing in pain as he paraded him through the streets of his own city. Andronicus beamed. The faces of McCloud's people crumpled in fear. Here was their former king, now the lowliest of slaves. It was one of the finest days Andronicus could remember.

Andronicus was surprised at how easy it had been to take McCloud's city. It seemed as if McCloud's men had been demoralized before the attack had even begun. Andronicus's men had conquered them in a blaze of lightning, his thousands of soldiers swooping in, overriding the few soldiers who dared to defend, and swarming the city in the blink of an eye. They must have realized there was no point in resisting. They had all laid down their arms assuming, if they surrendered, Andronicus would take them captive.

But they did not know the great Andronicus. He despised surrender. He took no captives, and lowering their weapons just made it all the easier for him.

The streets of McCloud's city ran with blood as Andronicus' men swept every alley, every side street, butchering every man they could find. The women and children he had taken as slaves, as he always did. The houses they looted, one at a time.

As Andronicus rode now, slowly through the streets, surveying his triumph, he saw the corpses everywhere, the heaping spoils, the destroyed homes. He turned and nodded to one of his generals, and immediately the general raised a torch high, motioned to his men, and hundreds of them fanned throughout the city, setting fire to the thatched roofs. Flames rose up all around them, reaching for the sky, and Andronicus could already begin to feel the heat from here.

"NO!" McCloud screamed, flailing on the ground behind him.

Andronicus grinned wider and picked up his pace, aiming for a particularly large rock; there came a satisfying thump, and he knew McCloud's body had ridden over it.

Andronicus took great satisfaction in watching this city burn. As he had in every conquered city in his Empire, he would first raze the city to the ground, then build it up again, with his own men, his own generals, his own Empire. That was his way. He wanted no trace of the old. He was building a new world. The world of Andronicus.

The Ring, the sacred Ring which had eluded all of his

ancestors, was now his territory. He could hardly conceive it. He breathed deeply, wondering just how great he was. Soon enough, he would cross the Highlands and conquer the other half of the Ring, too. Then there would be no place left on the planet upon which his foot had not tread.

Andronicus rode up to the towering statue of McCloud, in the city square, and stopped before it. It stood there like a shrine, rising fifty feet, made of marble. It showed a version of McCloud that Andronicus did not recognize – a young, fit, muscular McCloud, wielding a sword proudly. It was egomaniacal. For that, Andronicus admired him. A part of him wanted to take the statue back home, install it in his palace as a trophy.

But another part of him was too disgusted by it. Without thinking, he reached down, took out his sling – three times larger than that of any human, large enough to hold a rock the size of a small boulder – reached back and hurled it with all he had.

The small boulder flew through the air and connected with the head of the statue. McCloud's marble head shattered into pieces, exploding off the body. Andronicus then let out a shout, raised his two-handed flail, charged, and swung with all he had.

Andronicus smashed the statue's torso and the marble toppled, then crashed to the ground, shattering with a great noise. Andronicus turned his horse and made sure, as he rode, that McCloud's body was scraped up over the shards.

"You will pay for that!" an agonized McCloud cried weakly.

Andronicus laughed. He had encountered many humans in his

lifetime, but this one might just be the most pathetic of them all.

"Will I?" Andronicus yelled.

This McCloud was too thick-headed; he still did not appreciate the might of the great Andronicus. He would have to be taught, once and for all.

Andronicus scanned the city, and his eyes fell on what was surely McCloud's castle. He kicked his horse and took off at a gallop, his men falling in behind him as he dragged McCloud across the dusty courtyard.

Andronicus rode up the dozens of marble steps, McCloud's body thumping behind him, calling out and groaning with each step, then he continued to ride, right up through the marble entrance. Andronicus' men were already standing guard at the doors, at their feet the bloody corpses of McCloud's former guards. Andronicus grinned with satisfaction to see that already, every corner of the city was his.

Andronicus continued riding, right through the vast castle doors, inside a corridor of soaring arched ceilings, all made of marble. He marveled at the excess of this McCloud king. He clearly had spared no expense in indulging himself.

Now his day had come. Andronicus continue to ride with his men down the wide corridors, the horses' hooves echoing off the walls, to what was clearly McCloud's throne room. He burst through the oak doors and rode right to the center of the room, to an obscene throne, crafted of gold, sitting in the center of the chamber.

Andronicus dismounted, climbed the golden steps slowly, and sat in it.

He breathed deeply as he turned and surveyed his men, his dozens of generals seated on horseback awaiting his command. He looked over at the bloody McCloud, still tied to his horse, groaning. He surveyed this room, examined the walls, the banners, the armor, the weaponry. He looked down at the workmanship of this throne and admired it. He considered melting it down, or perhaps bringing it back for himself. Maybe he would give it to one of his lesser generals.

Of course, this throne was still nothing next to Andronicus' own throne, the most massive throne of all the kingdoms, one which had taken twenty laborers forty years to build. The building of it had begun in his father's lifetime and had been completed on the day Andronicus had murdered his own father. It had been perfect timing.

Andronicus looked down at McCloud, this pathetic little human, and wondered how best to make him suffer. He examined the shape and size of his skull, and decided that he would like to shrink it and wear it on his necklace, with the other shrunken heads around his neck. Yet Andronicus realized that before he killed him, he would need some time to thin out his face, his cheekbones, so that it looked better around his neck. He did not want a fat, plump face ruining the aesthetic of his necklace. He would let him live a while, and torture him in the meantime. He smiled to himself. Yes, it was a very good plan.

"Bring him to me," Andronicus commanded one of his generals, in his ancient, deep snarl.

The general jumped down without a moment's hesitation, hurried over to McCloud, cut the rope, and dragged the bloody body across the floor, staining it red as he went. He dropped it at the base of Andronicus' feet.

"You can't get away with this!" McCloud mumbled weakly.

Andronicus shook his head; this human would never learn.

"Here I am, seated on your throne," Andronicus said. "And there you are, lying at my feet. I should think it is safe to say that I can get away with anything I want. And that I already have."

McCloud lay there, moaning and writhing.

"My first order of business," Andronicus said, "will be to have you pay the proper respect to your new king and master. Come to me now, and have the honor of being the first to kneel before me in my new kingdom, the first to kiss my hand and call me King of what was once the McCloud side of the Ring."

McCloud looked up, got to his hands and knees, and sneered at Andronicus.

"Never!" he said, and turned and spat on the floor.

Andronicus leaned back and laughed. He was heartily enjoying this. He had not met a human this willful for quite some time.

Andronicus turned and nodded, and one of his men grabbed McCloud from behind, while another came forward and held his head still. A third came forward with a long razor. As he

approached, McCloud buckled in fear.

"What are you doing?" McCloud asked in panic, his voice several octaves higher.

The man reached down and quickly shaved off half of McCloud's beard. McCloud looked up in bewilderment, clearly baffled that the man had not hurt him.

Andronicus nodded, and another man stepped forward with a long poker, at the end of which was carved in iron the emblem of Andronicus' kingdom – a lion with a bird in its mouth. It glowed orange, steaming hot, and as the others held McCloud down, the man lowered the poker for his now-bare cheek.

"NO!" McCloud screeched, realizing.

But it was too late.

A horrific shriek cut through the air, accompanied by a hissing noise and the smell of burnt flesh. Andronicus watched with glee as the poker burned deeper and deeper into McCloud's cheek. The hissing grew louder, the screams almost intolerable.

Finally, after a good ten seconds, they dropped McCloud.

McCloud slumped to the ground, unconscious, drooling, as smoke rose up from half of his face. It now bore the emblem of Andronicus, burned into his flesh.

Andronicus leaned forward, looked down at the unconscious McCloud, and admired the handiwork.

"Welcome to the Empire."

Chapter Two

Erec stood atop the hill at the forest's edge and watched the small army approach, and his heart filled with fire. He was born for a day like this. In some battles, the line blurred between just and unjust – but not on this day. The Lord from Baluster had stolen his bride unashamedly, and had been boastful and unapologetic. He had been made aware of his crime, had been given a chance to make wrongs right, and had refused to rectify his errors. He had brought his woes upon himself. His men should have let it alone – especially now that he was dead.

But there they rode, hundreds of them, paid mercenaries to this lesser lord – all bent on killing Erec solely because they had been paid by this man. They charged toward him in their shiny green armor, and as they neared they let out a battle cry. As if that might scare him.

Erec was unafraid. He had seen too many battles like this. If he had learned anything in all his years of training, it was to never fear when he fought on the side of the just. Justice, he was taught, may not always prevail – but it gave its bearer the strength of ten men.

It was not fear Erec felt as he saw the hundreds of men approach, knowing he would likely die on this day. It was expectation. He had been given a chance to meet his death in the most honorable way, and that was a gift. He had taken a vow of

glory, and today, his vow was demanding its due.

Erec drew his sword and charged down the slope on foot, sprinting for the army as it charged him. At this moment he wished more than ever that he had his trusted horse, Warkfin, to ride with into battle – but he felt a sense of peace knowing Warfkin was bringing Alistair back to Savaria, to the safety of the Duke's court.

As he neared the soldiers, hardly fifty yards away, Erec picked up speed, sprinting for the lead knight in the center. They did not slow, and neither did he, and he braced himself for the clash to come.

Erec knew he had one advantage: three hundred men could not physically fit close enough to all attack one man at the same time; he knew from his training that at most six men on horseback could get close enough to attack a man at once. The way Erec saw it, that meant his odds were not three hundred to one – but only six to one. As long as he could kill the six men in front of him at all times, he had a chance to win. It was just a matter of whether he had the stamina to make it through.

As Erec charged down the hill, he drew from his waist the one weapon he knew would be best: a flail with a chain ten yards long, at the end of which was a spiked, metal ball. It was a weapon meant for laying a trap on the road – or for a situation just like this.

Erec waited until the last moment, until the army did not have time to react, then spun the flail high overhead and hurled

it across the battlefield. He aimed for a small tree, and the spiked chain spread out across the battlefield; as the ball wrapped around it, Erec tucked into a roll and hit the ground, avoiding the spears about to be hurled at him, and held on to the shaft with all his might.

He timed it perfectly: there was no time for the army to react. They saw it at the last second and tried to pull up on their horses – but they were going too fast, and there wasn't time.

The entire front line ran into it, the spiked chain cutting through all the horses' legs, sending the riders falling face-first down to the ground, the horses landing on top of them. Dozens of them were crushed in the chaos.

Erec had no time to be proud of the damage he had done: another flank of the army turned and bore down on him, charging with a battle cry, and Erec rolled to his feet to meet them.

As the lead knight raised a javelin, Erec took advantage of what he had: he did not have a horse, and could not meet these men at their height, but since he was low, he could use the ground beneath him. Erec suddenly dove down to the ground, tucked into a roll, raised his sword, and sliced off the legs of the man's horse. The horse buckled and the soldier did a face plant before he had a chance to let go of his weapon.

Erec continued to roll, and managed to miss the stampeding feet of the horses around him, who had to part ways to avoid running into the downed horse. Many did not succeed, tripping over the dead animal, and dozens more horses crashed down to

the ground, raising a cloud of dust and causing a logjam amongst the army.

It was exactly what Erec had hoped for: dust and confusion, dozens more falling to the ground.

Erec jumped to his feet, raised his sword and blocked a sword coming down for his head. He spun and blocked a javelin, then a lance, then an ax. He defended the blows that rained down on him from all sides, but knew he could not keep this up forever. He had to be on the attack if he were to stand any chance.

Erec tucked into a roll, came out of it, took a knee, and hurled his sword as if it were a spear. It flew through the air and into the chest of his closest attacker; his eyes opened wide and he fell sideways, dead, off his horse.

Erec took the opportunity to jump onto the man's horse, snatching his flail from his hands before he died. It was a fine flail, and Erec had singled him out for this reason; it had a long, studded silver shaft and a four-foot chain, with three spiked balls at the end of it. Erec pulled back and swung it high overhead, smashing the weapons from the hands of several opponents at once; then he swung again and knocked them from their horses.

Erec surveyed the battlefield and saw that he had done considerable damage, with nearly a hundred knights downed. But the others, at least two hundred of them, were regrouping and charging him now – and they were all determined.

Erec rode out to meet them, one man charging two hundred, and raised a great battle cry of his own, raising his flail ever

higher, and praying to God that his strength would only hold.

* * *

Alistair cried as she held onto Warkfin with all her might, the horse galloping, taking her down the too-familiar road to Savaria. She had been screaming and kicking at the beast the whole way, trying with everything she had to get it to turn around, to ride back to Erec. But it would not listen. She had never encountered any horse like this one before – it listened unwaveringly to its master's command and would not waver. Clearly, it was set on bringing her exactly where Erec had commanded it to – and she finally resigned herself to the fact that there was nothing she could do about it.

Alistair had mixed feelings as she rode back through the city gates, a city in which she had lived so long as an indentured servant. On the one hand, it felt familiar – but on the other, it brought back memories of the innkeeper who had oppressed her, of everything that was wrong about this place. She had so looked forward to moving on, to moving out of here with Erec and beginning a new life over with him. While she felt safe within its gates, she also felt an increasing foreboding for Erec, out there alone, facing that army. The thought of it made her sick.

Realizing that Warkfin would not turn around, she knew her next best bet was to get help for Erec. Erec had asked her to stay here, within the safety of these gates – but that was the last thing

she would ever do. She was a king's daughter, after all, and she was not one to run from fear or from confrontation. Erec had found his match in her: she was as noble and as determined as he. And there was no way she would ever live with herself if anything happened to him back there.

Knowing this royal city well, Alistair directed Warkfin to the Duke's castle – and now that they were within the gates, the animal listened. She rode to the castle entrance, dismounted, and ran past the attendants who tried to stop her. She brushed off their grasp and raced down the marble corridors she had learned so well as a servant.

Alistair put her shoulders into the large royal doors to the chamber hall, crashed them open, and barged into the Duke's private chamber.

Several council members turned to look at her, all wearing royal robes, the Duke seated in the center with several knights around him. They all wore astonished expressions; she had clearly interrupted some important business.

"Who are you, woman?" one called out.

"Who dares interrupt the Duke's official business?" another yelled.

"I recognize the woman," the Duke said, standing.

"As do I," said Brandt, the one she recognized as Erec's friend. "It is Alistair, is it not?" he asked. "Erec's new wife?"

She ran towards him, in tears, and clasped his hands.

"Please, my lord, help me. It is Erec!"

"What has happened?" the Duke asked, alarmed.

"He lies in grave danger. Even now he faces a hostile army alone! He would not let me stay behind. Please! He needs help!"

Without a word, all the knights jumped to their feet and began to run from the hall, not one of them hesitating; she turned and ran with them.

"Stay here!" Brandt exhorted.

"Never!" she said, running behind him. "I will lead you to him!"

They all ran as one down the corridors, out the castle doors and to a large group of waiting horses, each mounting theirs without a moment's hesitation. Alistair jumped on Warkfin, kicked, and led the group, as anxious to go as the rest of them.

As they charged through the Duke's court, soldiers all around them began to mount horses and join them – and by the time they left the gates of Savaria, they were accompanied by a large and growing contingent of at least a hundred men, Alistair riding in front, beside Brandt and the Duke.

"If Erec finds out that you ride with us, it will be my head," Brandt said, riding beside her. "Please, just tell us where he is, my lady."

But Alistair shook her head doggedly, pushing back tears as she rode harder, the great rumble of all these men around her.

"I would rather go down to my grave than abandon Erec!"

Chapter Three

Thor rode warily on the forest trail, Reece, O'Connor, Elden and the twins on horseback beside him, Krohn at his heels, as they all emerged from the forest on the far side of the Canyon. Thor's heart beat faster in anticipation as they finally reached the perimeter of the thick wood. He raised a hand, motioning for the others to be silent, and they all froze beside him.

Thor looked out and surveyed the great expanse of beach, of open sky, and beyond it, the vast yellow sea that would take them to the distant lands of the Empire. The Tartuvian. Thor hadn't seen its waters since their journey to The Hundred. It felt odd to be back again – and this time, with a mission that held the fate of the Ring.

After crossing the Canyon bridge, their short ride through the forest in the Wilds had been uneventful. Thor had been instructed by Kolk and Brom to look for a small ship moored on the shores of the Tartuvian, carefully hidden beneath the branches of an immense tree which hung over the sea. Thor followed their directions exactly, and as they reached the wood's perimeter, he spotted the ship, well-hidden, ready to take them where they needed to go. He was relieved.

But he then saw six Empire troops, standing on the sand before the vessel, inspecting it. Another soldier had climbed on board the ship, docked partly on the beach, rocking in the gently

lapping waves. There was supposed to be no one here.

It was a stroke of bad luck. As Thor looked farther out at the horizon, he saw the distant outline of what appeared to be the entire Empire fleet, thousands of black ships flying the black flags of the Empire. Luckily they did not sail toward Thor, but in a different direction, taking the long, circular course to bring them around the Ring, to the McCloud side, where they had breached the Canyon. Luckily, their fleet was preoccupied with a different route.

Except for this one patrol. These six Empire soldiers, probably scouts on a routine mission, somehow must have stumbled upon this Legion ship. It was bad timing. If Thor and the others had just reached the shore a few minutes earlier, they probably would have already boarded it and shoved off. Now, they had a confrontation on their hands. There was no way around it.

Thor looked up and down the beach and saw no other contingents of Empire troops. At least that was in their favor. It was probably a lone patrol group.

"I thought the boat was supposed to be well-hidden," O'Connor said.

"Apparently not enough," Elden remarked.

The six of them sat on their horses, staring at the ship and the group of soldiers.

"It won't be long until they alert other Empire troops," Conven observed.

"And then we'll have an all-out war on our hands," added

Conval.

Thor knew they were right. And that it was not a chance they could take.

"O'Connor," Thor said, "your aim is the best of the bunch. I've seen you hit from fifty yards out. See that one on the bow? We've got one shot at this. Can you do it?"

O'Connor nodded gravely, his eyes fixed on the Empire soldiers. He reached deliberately over his shoulder, lifted his bow, placed an arrow, and held it at the ready.

They all were looking to Thor, and he felt ready to lead.

"O'Connor, on my signal, fire. Then we'll charge for the ones below. Everyone else, use your throwing weapons as we get close. Try to get as close as you can first."

Thor motioned with his hand, and suddenly, O'Connor released the string.

The arrow sailed through the air with a whooshing noise, and it was a perfect shot, its metal tip piercing the heart of the Empire soldier on the bow. The soldier stood there, his eyes opening wide for a moment, as if he did not understand what was happening, then he suddenly stretched his arms out wide and fell forward, face-first, in a swan dive, landing with a splat on the beach at the feet of his fellow soldiers, staining the sand red.

Thor and the others charged, a well-oiled machine in sync with each other. The sound of their horses' galloping gave them away, and the six other soldiers turned and faced them. The soldiers mounted their horses and charged back, preparing to meet them

in the middle.

Thor and his men still had the advantage of surprise. Thor reached back and hurled a stone with his sling and hit one of them in the temple from twenty yards away as he was in the midst of mounting his horse. He fell back off of it, dead, the reins still in his hands.

As they neared, Reece threw his ax, Elden his spear, and the twins each their daggers. The sands were uneven and the horses slipped, making throwing the weapons harder than usual. Reece's ax found its mark, killing one of them, but the others missed.

That left four of them. The lead one broke out from the group, charging right for Reece, who was weaponless; he had cast his ax but not had time to draw his sword yet. Reece braced himself, and at the last second Krohn leapt forward, bit the soldier's horse in the leg, and the horse collapsed, its rider falling down to the ground and sparing Reece at the last moment.

Reece drew his sword and stabbed the soldier, killing him before he could regain his feet.

That left three. One of them came for Elden with an ax, swinging for his head; Elden blocked it with his shield and in the same motion swung his sword and chopped the ax handle in half. Elden then swung around with his shield and smashed the attacker in the side of the head, knocking him from his horse.

Another soldier pulled a flail from his waist and swung its long chain, the spiked end suddenly coming down for O'Connor. It happened too fast, and there was no time for O'Connor to react.

Thor saw it coming and charged forward to his friend's side, raising his sword and slashing the chain of the flail, before it hit O'Connor. There came the sound of sword cutting through iron, Thor marveling at how sharp his new sword was. The spiked ball went flying down harmlessly to the ground and lodged in the sand, saving O'Connor's life. Conval then rode up and stabbed the soldier with a spear, killing him.

The final Empire soldier saw he was badly outnumbered; fear in his eyes, he suddenly turned and took off, racing down shore, his horse's prints leaving deep impressions in the sand.

They all set their sights on the retreating soldier: Thor hurled a stone with his sling, O'Connor raised his bow and fired, and Reece hurled a spear. But the soldier rode too erratically, the horse dipping in the sand, and they all missed.

Elden drew his sword and Thor could see that he was about to charge after him. Thor held out a hand and motioned for him to stay put.

"Don't!" Thor screamed.

Elden turned and looked at him.

"If he lives, he will send others after us!" Elden protested.

Thor turned and looked back at the boat, and knew it would take precious time to hunt him down – time they could not afford.

"The Empire will come after us no matter what," Thor said. "We haven't time to lose. What is most important now is that we get far from here. To the ship!"

They dismounted as they reached the ship and Thor reached

into his saddle and began to empty it of all its provisions as the others did the same, loading up on weapons and on sacks of food and water. Who knew how long the voyage would take, how long it would be until they saw land again – *if* they saw land again. Thor also loaded up on food for Krohn.

They threw the sacks up high over the railing of the boat; they landed on the deck above with a thump.

Thor grabbed the thick, knotted rope hanging over the side, the coarse rope cutting into his hands, and tested it. He draped Krohn over his shoulder, the weight of them both testing his muscles, and pulled up towards the deck. Krohn whined in his ear, hugging his chest with his sharp claws, clinging to him.

Soon Thor was over the railing, Krohn leaping off of him onto the deck – and the others followed close behind. Thor leaned over and looked down at the horses on the beach, looking up as if awaiting a command.

"And what of them?" Reece asked, coming up beside him.

Thor turned and surveyed the ship: it was maybe twenty feet long and half as wide. It was big enough for the seven of them – but not for their horses. If they tried to take them, the horses might trample the wood, damage the boat. They had to leave them behind.

"We have no choice," Thor said, looking down longingly at them. “We'll have to find new ones.”

O'Connor leaned over the rail.

"They're smart horses," O'Connor said. "I trained them well.

They will return home upon my command."

O'Connor whistled sharply.

As one, the horses turned and bolted, racing across the sand and disappearing into the forest, heading back towards the Ring.

Thor turned and looked at his brothers, at the ship, at the sea before them. Now they were stranded, with no horses, with no choice but to move forward. Reality was sinking in. They were truly alone, with nothing but this boat, and about to part from the shores of the Ring for good. Now there was no turning back.

"And how are we supposed to get this boat into the water?" Conval asked, as they all looked down, fifteen feet below, at the hull. A small portion of it was in the lapping waves of the Tartuvian, but most of it was lodged firmly in the sand.

"Over here!" Conven said.

They hurried to the other side where a thick iron chain dangled over the edge, at the bottom of which was an immense iron ball, sitting on the sand.

Conven reached down and yanked on the chain. He groaned and struggled, but could not lift it.

"It's too heavy," he grunted.

Conval and Thor hurried over and helped, and as the three of them grabbed the chain and pulled, Thor was shocked by its weight: even with the three of them pulling, they could only lift it a few feet. Finally, they all dropped it, and it fell back down to the sand.

"Let me help," Elden said, stepping forward.

With his huge bulk, Elden towered over them, and he reached down by himself and yanked on the chain, and managed to lift the ball into the air alone. Thor was amazed. The others jumped in and they all pulled, as one, yanking the anchor up one foot at a time, and finally over the railing and onto the deck.

The boat started to move, rocking a little bit in the waves, but it remained lodged in the sand.

"The poles!" Reece said.

Thor turned and saw two wooden poles, nearly twenty feet long, mounted along the sides of the boat, and realized what they were for. He ran over with Reece and grabbed one while Conval and Conven grabbed the other.

“When we shove off,” Thor screamed out, “you all raise the sails!”

They leaned over, jabbed the poles into the sand, and pushed with all their might; Thor groaned from the effort. Slowly, the boat began to move, just the tiniest bit. At the same time, Elden and O'Connor ran to the middle of the boat and pulled the ropes to raise the canvas sails, raising them with effort, one foot at a time. Luckily there was a strong breeze, and as Thor and the others shoved and shoved against the shore, struggling with all they had to get this surprisingly heavy boat out of the sand, the sails raised higher, and began to catch the wind.

Finally, the boat rocked beneath them as it glided out onto the water, bobbing, weightless, Thor's shoulders shaking from the effort. Elden and O'Connor raised the sails to full mast, and soon

they were drifting out to sea.

They all let out a cheer of triumph, as they put the poles back in place and ran over and helped Elden and O'Connor secure the lines. Krohn yelped beside them, excited by it all.

The boat was drifting aimlessly and Thor hurried to the wheel, O'Connor beside him.

"Want to take the wheel?" Thor asked O'Connor.

O'Connor grinned wide.

"Would love to."

They began to gain real speed, cruising out on the yellow waters of the Tartuvian, the wind at their backs. Finally, they were moving, and Thor took a deep breath. They were off.

Thor headed out to the bow, Reece beside him, while Krohn came up between them and leaned into Thor's leg, while Thor reached down and stroked his soft white fur. Krohn leaned over and licked Thor; Thor reached into a small sack and pulled out a piece of meat for Krohn, who snatched it up.

Thor looked out at the vast sea before them. The distant horizon was dotted with black Empire ships, surely on their way to the McCloud side of the Ring. Luckily, they were distracted, and could not possibly be on the lookout for a lone boat heading into their territory. The skies were clear, there was a strong wind at their backs, and they continued to gain speed.

Thor looked out and wondered what lay before them. He wondered how long it would be until they reached Empire land, what might be waiting to greet them. He wondered how they

would find the sword, how all this would end. He knew the odds were against them, yet still he felt exhilarated to finally be on the journey, thrilled that they'd made it this far, and eager to do retrieve the Sword.

"What if it's not there?" Reece asked.

Thor turned and looked at him.

"The sword," Reece added. "What if it's not there? Or if it's lost? Or destroyed? Or if we just never find it? The Empire is vast, after all."

"Or what if the Empire's figured out how to wield it?" Elden asked in his deep voice, coming up beside them.

"What if we find it but can't bring it back?" Conven asked.

The group of them stood there, oppressed by what lay before them, by the sea of unanswered questions. This journey was madness, Thor knew.

Madness.

Chapter Four

Gareth paced the stone floors of his father's study – a small chamber on the top floor of the castle that his father had cherished – and, bit by bit, tore it apart.

Gareth went from bookcase to bookcase, yanking down precious volumes, ancient leather books that had been in the family for centuries, tearing the bindings and shredding the pages into small bits. As he threw them in the air, they fell down over his head like snowflakes, clinging to his body and to the drool running down his cheeks. He was determined to tear apart every last thing in this place that his father had loved, one book at a time.

Gareth hurried over to a corner table, grabbed what was left of his opium pipe, and with shaking hands sucked hard, needing his hit now more than ever. He was addicted, smoking it every minute he could, determined to block out the images of his father that haunted him in his dreams, and now even when he was awake.

As Gareth put down the pipe, he saw his father standing there, before him, a decaying corpse. Each time the corpse was more decayed, more skeleton than flesh; Gareth turned from the awful sight.

Gareth used to try to attack the image – but he'd learned that did no good. So now he just turned his head, constantly, always

looking away. Always it was the same: his father wearing a rusted crown, his mouth open, his eyes gazing at him with contempt, reaching out a single finger, pointing accusingly at him. In that awful stare, Gareth felt his own days numbered, felt it was only a matter of time until he joined him. He hated seeing him more than anything. If there had been one saving grace in murdering his father, it was that he would not need to see his face again. But now, ironically, he saw it more than ever.

Gareth turned and hurled the opium pipe at the apparition, hoping that if he threw it quickly enough it might actually hit.

But the pipe merely flew through the air and smashed against the wall, shattering. His father still stood there, and glared down at him.

"Those drugs won't help you now," his father scolded.

Gareth could stand it no longer. He charged for the apparition, hands out, lunging to scratch his father's face; but as always, he sailed through nothing but air, and this time went stumbling across the room and landing hard on his father's wooden desk, sending it crashing down to the floor with him.

Gareth rolled on the ground, winded, and looked up and saw he had gashed his arm. Blood was dripping down his shirt, and he looked down and noticed he still wore the undershirt he had slept in for days; in fact, he had not changed for weeks now. He glanced over at a reflection of himself and saw his hair was wild; he looked like a common ruffian. A part of him could hardly believe he had sunk so low. But another part of him no longer

cared. The only thing left inside of him was a burning desire to destroy – to destroy any remnant of his father that once was. He would like to have this castle razed, and King's Court with it. It would be vengeance for the treatment he bore as a child. The memories were stuck inside him, like a thorn he could not pull out.

The door to his father's study opened wide, and in rushed one of Gareth's attendants, looking down in fear.

"My liege," the attendant said. "I heard a crash. Are you okay? My liege, you are bleeding!"

Gareth looked up at the boy with hatred. Gareth tried to get to his feet, to lash out at him, but he slipped on something, and fell back down to the ground, disoriented from the last hit of opium.

"My liege, I will help you!"

The boy rushed forward and grabbed Gareth's arm, which was too thin, barely flesh and bone.

But Gareth still had a reserve of strength and as the boy touched his arm, he shoved him off, sending him across the room.

"Touch me again and I will cut off your hands," Gareth seethed.

The boy backed up in fear, and as he did, another attendant entered the room, accompanied by an older man whom Gareth vaguely recognized. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew him – but he could not place him.

"My liege," came an old, gravelly voice, "we have been waiting

for you in the council chamber for half the day. The council members cannot wait much longer. They have urgent news, and must share it with you before the day is up. Will you come?"

Gareth narrowed his eyes at the man, trying to make him out. He dimly remembered he had served his father. The council chamber… The meeting… It all swirled in his mind.

"Who are you?" Gareth asked.

"My liege, I am Aberthol. Your father's trusted advisor," he said, stepping closer.

It was slowly coming back. Aberthol. The council. The meeting. Gareth's mind spun, his head crushing him. He just wanted to be left alone.

"Leave me," he snapped. "I will come."

Aberthol nodded and hurried from the room with the attendant, closing the door behind them.

Gareth knelt there, head in his hands, trying to think, to remember. It was all so much. It started to come back to him in bits. The shield was down; the Empire was attacking; half his court had left; his sister had led them away; to Silesia… Gwendolyn… That was it. That was what he had been trying to remember.

Gwendolyn. He hated her with a passion he could not describe. Now, more than ever, he wanted to kill her. He *needed* to kill her. All his troubles in this world – they were all a result of her. He would find a way to get back at her, even if he had to die trying. And he would kill his other siblings next.

Gareth started to feel better at the thought.

With a supreme effort, he struggled to his feet and stumbled through the room, knocking over an end table as he went. As he neared the door, he spotted an alabaster bust of his father, a sculpture his father had loved, and he reached down, grabbed it by its head and threw it at the wall.

It smashed into a thousand pieces, and for the first time that day, Gareth smiled. Maybe this day would not be so bad after all.

* * *

Gareth strutted into the council room flanked by several attendants, slamming open the huge oak doors with his palm, making everyone in the crowded room jump at his presence. They all quickly stood at attention.

While normally this would give Gareth some satisfaction, on this day, he was beyond caring. He was plagued by the ghost of his father, and infused with rage that his sister had left. His emotions swirled within him, and he had to take it out on the world.

Gareth stumbled through the vast chamber in his opium-induced haze, walking down the center of the aisle toward his throne, dozens of councilmen standing aside as he went. His court had grown, and today the energy was frantic, as more and more people seemed to filter in with the news of the departure of half of King's Court, and of the shield being down. It was as if

whomever remained of King's Court was pouring in for answers.

And of course, Gareth had none.

As Gareth strutted up the ivory steps to his father's throne, he saw, standing patiently behind it, Lord Kultin, the mercenary leader of his private fighting force, the one man left in the court who he could trust. Alongside him stood dozens of his fighters, standing there silently, hands on their swords, ready to fight to the death for Gareth. It was the one thing left that gave Gareth comfort.

Gareth sat in his throne and surveyed the room. There were so many faces, a few he recognized and many he didn't. He trusted none of them. Every day he purged more from his court; he had already sent so many to the dungeons, and even more to the executioner. Not a day passed when he didn't kill at least a handful of men. He thought it good policy: it kept the men on their toes, and prevented a coup from forming.

The room sat silent, staring at him in a daze. They all looked terrified to speak. Which was exactly what he wanted. Nothing thrilled him more than infusing fear in his subjects.

Finally, Aberthol stepped forward, his cane echoing off the stone, and cleared his throat.

"My liege," he began, his voice ancient, "we stand at a moment of great disarray in King's Court. I do not know what news has yet reached you: the Shield is down; Gwendolyn has left King's Court and has taken Kolk, Brom, Kendrick, Atme, the Silver, the Legion, and half of your army – along with half of King's Court.

Those that remain here look to you for guidance, and to know what our next move will be. The people want answers, my liege."

"What's more," said another council member whom Gareth dimly recognized, "word has spread that the Canyon has already been breached. Rumor has it that Andronicus has invaded the McCloud side of the Ring with his million-man army."

An outraged gasp spread throughout the room; dozens of brave warriors whispered to each other, flooded with fear, and a state of panic spread like wildfire.

"It can't be true!" exclaimed one of the soldiers.

"It is!" insisted the councilmember.

"Then all hope is lost!" yelled out another soldier. "If the McClouds are overrun, the Empire will come for King's Court next. There's no way we can keep them back."

"We must discuss terms of surrender, my liege," Aberthol said to Gareth.

"Surrender!?" another man yelled. "We shall never surrender!"

"If we don't," yelled another soldier, "we will be crushed. How can we stand up to one million men?"

The room broke out into an outraged murmur, the soldiers and counselors arguing with each other, all in complete disarray.

The Council leader slammed his iron rod on the stone floor and screamed:

"ORDER!"

Gradually, the room quieted. All the men turned and looked

at him.

"These are all decisions for a king, not for us," one of the council men said. "Gareth is lawful King, and it is not for us to discuss terms of surrender – or whether to surrender at all."

They all turned to Gareth.

"My liege," Aberthol said, exhaustion in his voice, "how do you propose we deal with the Empire's army?"

The room grew deathly silent.

Gareth sat there, staring down at the men, wanting to respond. But it was getting harder and harder for him to keep his thoughts clear. He kept hearing his father's voice in his head, yelling at him, as when he was a child. It was driving him crazy, and the voice would not go away.

Gareth reached out and scratched the wooden arm of the throne, again and again. The sound of his fingernails clawing was the only sound in the room.

The council members exchanged a worried glance.

"My liege," another councilman prompted, "if you choose not to surrender, then we must fortify King's Court at once. We must secure all the entrances, all the roads, all the gates. We must call up all the soldiers, prepare defenses. We must prepare for a siege, ration food, protect our citizens. There is much to be done. Please, my liege. Give us a command. Tell us what to do."

Once again the room fell silent, as all eyes fixed on Gareth.

Finally, Gareth lifted his chin and stared out.

"We will not fight the Empire," he declared. "Nor will we

surrender."

Everyone in the room looked at each other, confused.

"Then what shall we do, my liege?" Aberthol asked.

Gareth cleared his throat.

"We shall kill Gwendolyn!" he declared. "That is all that matters now."

There followed a shocked silence.

"Gwendolyn?" a councilman called out in surprise as the room broke out into another surprised murmur.

"We will send all of our forces after her, to slaughter her and those with her before they reach Silesia," Gareth announced.

"But, my liege, how shall this help us?" a councilman called out. "If we venture out to attack her, that will only leave our forces exposed. They would all be surrounded and slaughtered by the Empire."

"It would also leave King's Court open for attack!" called out another. "If we are not going to surrender, we must fortify King's Court at once!"

A group of men shouted in agreement.

Gareth turned and looked at the councilman, his eyes cold.

"We will use every man we have to kill my sister!" he said darkly. "We will not spare even one!"

The room fell silent as a councilman pushed back his chair, scraping against the stone, and stood.

"I will not see King's Court ruined for your personal obsession. I, for one, am not with you!"

"Nor I!" echoed half the men in the room.

Gareth felt himself fuming with rage, and was about to stand when suddenly the doors to the chamber burst open and in rushed the commander of what remained of the army. All eyes were on him. He dragged a man in his arms, a ruffian with greasy hair, unshaven, bound by his wrists. He dragged the man all the way to the center of the room and stopped before the king.

"My liege," the commander said coldly. "Of the six thieves executed for the theft of the Destiny Sword, this man was the seventh, the one who escaped. He tells the most fantastical tale of what happened.

“Speak!" the commander prodded, shaking the ruffian.

The ruffian looked nervously in every direction, his greasy hair clinging to his cheeks, looking unsure. Finally, he yelled out:

"We were ordered to steal the sword!”

The room broke out into an outraged murmur.

"There were nineteen of us!” the ruffian continued. “A dozen were to take it away, in the cover of darkness, across the Canyon bridge, and into the wilds. They hid it in a wagon and escorted it across the bridge so the soldiers standing guard would have no idea what was inside. The others, the seven of us, were ordered to stay behind after the theft. We were told we would be imprisoned, as a show, and then let free. But instead, my friends were all executed. I would have been too, had I not escaped.”

The room broke out into a long, agitated murmur.

"And where were they taking the sword?" the commander

pressed.

"I do not know. Somewhere deep inside the Empire."

"And who ordered such a thing?"

"He!" the ruffian said, suddenly turning and pointing a bony finger at Gareth. "Our King! He commanded us to do it!"

The room broke out into a horrified murmur, shouts arising, until finally a councilman slammed his iron staff several times and screamed for silence.

The room quieted, but barely.

Gareth, already shaking with fear and rage, stood slowly from his throne, and the room quieted, as all eyes fell on him.

One step at a time, Gareth descended the ivory steps, his footsteps echoing, the silence so thick one could cut it with a knife.

He crossed the chamber, until finally he reached the ruffian. He stared back at him coldly, a foot away, the man squirming in the commander's arm, looking every which way but at him.

"Thieves and liars are dealt with only one way in my kingdom," Gareth said softly.

Gareth suddenly pulled a dagger from his waist and plunged it in the ruffian's heart.

The man screamed out in pain, his eyes bulging, then suddenly slumped down to the ground, dead.

The commander looked over at Gareth, scowling down at him.

"You have just murdered a witness against you," the commander said. "Don't you realize that only serves to further

insinuate your guilt?”

"What witness?" Gareth asked, smiling. “Dead men don't speak.”

The commander reddened.

"Lest you forget, I am commander of the half of the King’s army. I will not be played for a fool. From your actions, I can only surmise that you are guilty of the crime he accused you of. As such, I and my army shall serve you no longer. In fact, I will take you into custody, on the grounds of treason to the Ring!”

The commander nodded to his men, and as one, several dozen soldiers drew their swords and stepped forward to arrest Gareth.

Lord Kultin came forward with twice as many of his own men, all drawing their swords and walking up behind Gareth.

They stood there, facing off with the commander’s soldiers, Gareth in the middle.

Gareth smiled triumphantly back at the commander. His men were outnumbered by Gareth’s fighting force, and he knew it.

"I will go into no one’s custody,” Gareth sneered. “And certainly not by your hand. Take your men and leave my court – or meet the wrath of my personal fighting force."

After several tense seconds, the commander finally turned and gestured to his men, and as one, they all retreated, walking warily backwards, swords drawn, from the room.

"From this day forward,” the commander boomed, “let it be known that we no longer serve you! You will face the Empire's army on your own. I hope they treat you well. Better than you

treated your father!"

The soldiers all stormed from the room, in a great clang of armor.

The dozens of councilmen and attendants and noblemen who remained all stood in the silence, whispering.

"Leave me!" Gareth screamed. "ALL OF YOU!"

All the people left in the chamber quickly filed out, including Gareth's own fighting force left.

Only one person remained, lingering behind the others.

Lord Kultin.

Just he and Gareth were alone in the room. He walked up to Gareth, stopping a few feet away, and examined him, as if summing him up. As usual, his face was expressionless. It was the true face of a mercenary.

"I don't care what you did or why," he began, his voice gravelly and dark. "I don't care about politics. I'm a fighter. I care only for the money you pay me and my men."

He paused.

"Yet I would like to know, for my own personal satisfaction: did you truly order those men to take the sword away?"

Gareth stared back at the man. There was something in his eyes that he recognized in himself: they were cold, remorseless, opportunistic.

"And if I did?" Gareth asked back.

Lord Kultin stared back for a long time.

"But why?" he asked.

Gareth stared back, silent.

Kultin's eyes widened in recognition.

"You couldn't wield it, so no one could?" asked Kultin. "Is that it?" He considered the ramifications. "Yet even so," Kultin added, "surely you knew that sending it away would lower the shield, make us vulnerable to attack."

Kultin's eyes opened wider.

"You *wanted* us to be attacked, didn't you? Something in you wants King's Court destroyed," he said, suddenly realizing.

Gareth smiled back.

"Not all places," Gareth said slowly, "are meant to last forever."

Chapter Five

Gwendolyn marched with the huge entourage of soldiers, advisors, attendants, councilors, Silver, Legion, and half of King's Court, as they all made their way – one huge, walking city – away from King's Court. Gwen was overwhelmed with emotion. On the one hand, she was thrilled to finally be free from her brother Gareth, to be far from his reach, surrounded by trusted warriors who could protect her, with no fear of his treachery or of being married off to anyone. Finally, she would not have to watch her back every waking moment from fear of one of his assassins.

Gwen also felt inspired and humbled to be chosen to rule, to lead this huge contingent of people. The huge entourage followed her as if she were some sort of prophet, all marching on the endless road to Silesia. They saw her as their ruler – she could see it in their every glance – and looked to her with expectation. She felt guilty, wanting one of her brothers to have the honor – anyone but her. Yet she saw how much hope it gave the people to have a fair and just leader, and that made her happy. If she could fulfill that role for them, especially in these dark times, she would.

Gwen thought of Thor, of their teary goodbye at the Canyon, and it broke her heart; she saw him disappearing, walking across the Canyon bridge, into the mist, on a journey that would almost

surely lead to his death. It was a valiant and noble quest – one she could not deny him – one she knew had to be taken for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the Ring. Yet she also kept asking herself why it had to be *him*. She wished it could be anyone else. Now, more than ever, she wanted him by her side. In this time of turmoil, of huge transition, as she was left all alone to rule, to carry his child, she wanted him here. More than anything, she worried for him. She could not imagine life without him; the thought of it made her want to cry.

But Gwen breathed deep and stayed strong, knowing all eyes were on her as they marched, an endless caravan on this dusty road, heading ever farther North, towards the distant Silesia.

Gwen was also still in shock, torn apart for her homeland. She could hardly fathom that the ancient Shield was down, that the Canyon had been breached. Rumors had been circulating from distant spies that Andronicus had already landed on McCloud's shores. She could not be certain what to believe. She had a hard time grasping that it could have happened so quickly – after all, Andronicus would still have to send his entire fleet across the ocean. Unless somehow McCloud had been behind the theft of the sword, and had orchestrated the downing of the Shield. But how? How had he managed to steal it? Where was he taking it?

Gwen could feel how dejected everyone was around her, and she could hardly blame them. There was an air of despondency among this crowd, and for good reason; without the shield, they were all defenseless. It was only a matter of time – if not today,

then tomorrow or the day after – that Andronicus would invade. And when he did, there was no way they could hold back his men. Soon this place, everything she had grown to love and cherish, would be conquered and everyone she loved would be killed.

As they marched, it was as if they were marching to their deaths. Andronicus was not here yet, but it felt as if they had already been captured. She recalled something her father once said: conquer an army's heart and the battle is already won.

Gwen knew it was up to her to inspire them all, to make them feel a sense of safety, of security – somehow, even, of optimism. She was determined to do so. She could not let her personal fears or a sense of pessimism overcome her at a time like this. And she refused to allow herself to wallow in self-pity. This was no longer just about her. It was about these people, their lives, their families. They needed her. They were all looking to her for help.

Gwen thought of her father and wondered what he would do. It made her smile to think of him. He would have put on a brave face, no matter what. He had always told her to hide fear with bluster, and as she thought back on his life, he had never seemed afraid. Not once. Perhaps it was just show; but it was a *good* show. As leader, he had known he was on display at all times, had known it was the *show* that people needed, perhaps even more than the leadership. He was too selfless to indulge in his fears. She would learn from his example. She would not either.

Gwen looked around and saw Godfrey marching beside her, and beside him Illepra, the healer; these two were engaged in

conversation, and the two of them, she had noticed, seemed to take an ever-increasing liking to each other, ever since Illepra had saved his life. Gwen longed for her other siblings to be here, too. But Reece was gone with Thor, Gareth of course was gone from her forever, and Kendrick was still in his outpost, somewhere in the east, still helping to rebuild that remote town. She had sent a messenger for him – it had been the first thing she had done – and she prayed he would reach him in time to retrieve him, bring him to Silesia to be with her and help defend it. At least, then, two of her siblings – Kendrick and Godfrey – could take refuge in Silesia with her; that accounted for all of them. Except, of course, for her oldest sister, Luanda.

For the first time in a long time, Gwen's thoughts turned to Luanda. She had always had a bitter rivalry with her older sister; it had not surprised Gwen in the least that Luanda had taken the first chance she could to flee King's Court and marry that McCloud. Luanda had always been ambitious and had always wanted to be first. Gwendolyn had loved her, and had looked up to her when she was younger; but Luanda, ever competitive, had not returned the love. And after a while, Gwen had stopped trying.

Yet now Gwen felt bad for her; she wondered what had become of her, with the McClouds invaded by Andronicus. Would she be killed? Gwen shuddered at the thought. They were rivals, but at the end of the day, they were still sisters, and she did not want to see her dead before her time.

Gwen thought of her mother, the only other one in her family left out there, stranded at King's Court, with Gareth, still in her state. The thought made her cold. Despite all the anger she still had for her mother, Gwen did not want her to end up like she did. What would happen if King's Court were overrun? Would her mother be slaughtered?

Gwen could not help but feel as if her carefully built-up life was collapsing around her. It seemed like only yesterday it was the height of summer, Luanda's wedding, a glorious feast, King's Court overflowing with abundance, she and her family all together, celebrating – and the Ring impregnable. It had seemed as if it would last forever.

Now everything had splintered apart. Nothing was as it once had been.

A cold autumn breeze picked up, and Gwen pulled her blue wool sweater tight over her shoulders. Fall had been too short this year; winter was already coming. She could feel the icy breezes, getting heavier with moisture as they headed farther North along the Canyon. The sky was growing darker sooner and the air was filled with a new sound – the cry of the Winter Birds, the red and black vultures that circled low when the temperature dropped. They cawed incessantly, and the sound sometimes grated on Gwen. It was like the sound of death coming.

Since saying goodbye to Thor they had all headed alongside the Canyon, following it North, knowing it would take them to westernmost city in the western part of the Ring – Silesia. As

they went, the Canyon's eerie mist rolled off it in waves, clinging to Gwen's ankles.

"We are not far now, my lady," came a voice.

Gwen looked over to see Srog standing on her other side, dressed in the distinctive red armor of Silesia and flanked by several of his warriors, all dressed in their red chain mail and boots. Gwen had been touched by Srog's kindness to her, by his loyalty to the memory of her father, by his offer of Silesia as a refuge. She did not know what she and all these people would have done otherwise. They would still, even now, be stuck in King's Court at the mercy of Gareth's treachery.

Srog was one of the most honorable lords she had ever met. With thousands of soldiers at his disposal, with his control of the famed stronghold of the West, Srog had not needed to pay homage to anyone. But he paid homage to her father. It had always been a delicate power balance. In the times of her father's father, Silesia had needed King's Court; in her father's time, less so; and in her time, not at all. In fact, with the lowering of the Shield and the chaos at King's Court, they were the ones who needed Silesia.

Of course, the Silver and Legion were the finest warriors there were – as were the thousands of troops accompanying Gwen, that comprised half of the King's army. Yet Srog, like most other lords, could have simply lowered his gates and looked after his own.

Instead, he had sought Gwen out, had paid allegiance to her,

and had insisted on hosting all of them. It had been a kindness which Gwen was determined to somehow, one day, repay. That is, if they all survived.

"You need not worry," she replied softly, laying a gentle hand on his wrist. "We would march to the ends of the earth to enter your city. We are most fortunate for your kindness in this difficult time."

Srog smiled. A middle-aged warrior with too many lines etched into his face from battle, red-brownish hair, a strong jaw line and no beard, Srog was a man's man, not only a Lord, but a true warrior.

"For your father, I would walk through fire," he responded. "Thanks are not in order. It is a great honor to be able to repay my debt to him in service of his daughter. After all, it was his wish that you should rule. So when I answer to you, I answer to him."

Near Gwen also marched Kolk and Brom, and behind them all was the ever-present clatter of thousands of spurs, of swords jingling in their scabbards, of shields brushing up against armor. It was a huge cacophony of noise, heading farther and farther north along the Canyon's edge.

"My lady," Kolk said, "I am burdened by guilt. We shouldn't have let Thor, Reece, and the others head out alone into the Empire. More of us should have volunteered to go with them. It will be on my head if anything should happen to them."

"It was the quest they chose," Gwen responded. "It was a quest of honor. Whoever was meant to go has gone. Guilt does no one

any good."

"And what should happen if they don't return in time with the Sword?" Srog asked. "It won't be long until Andronicus' army appears at our gates."

"Then we shall make a stand," Gwen said confidently, raising as much courage in her voice as she could, hoping to put others at ease. She noticed the other generals turn and look at her.

"We will defend until the last blow," she added. "There will be no retreat, no surrender."

She sensed the generals were impressed. She was impressed by her own voice, the strength rising up within her, surprising even her. It was the strength of her father, of seven generations of MacGil kings.

As they continued to march, the road curved sharply to the left, and as Gwen turned the corner she stopped in her tracks, breathless at the sight.

Silesia.

Gwen remembered her father taking her on trips here, when she was a young girl. It was a place that lingered in her dreams ever since, a place that had felt magical to her then. Now, laying her eyes on it as a grown woman, it still took her breath away.

Silesia was the most unusual city Gwen had ever seen. All the buildings, all the fortifications, all the stone – everything was built of an ancient, shining red. The upper half Silesia, tall, vertical, replete with parapets and spires, was built on the mainland, while the lower half was built down into the side of

the Canyon. The swirling mists of the Canyon blew in and out, enveloping it, making the red shine and sparkle in the light – and making it seem as if it were built in the clouds.

Its fortifications rose a hundred feet, crowned in parapets and backed by an endless row of walls. The place was a fortress. Even if an army somehow breached its walls, it still would have to descend to the lower half of the city, straight down the cliffs, and fight on the edge of the Canyon. It was clearly a war no invading army would want to wage. Which was why this city had stood for a thousand years.

Her men stopped and gaped, and Gwen could feel that they were all in awe, too.

For the first time in a while, Gwen felt a sense of optimism. This was a place they could stay, away from Gareth's reach, a place they could defend. A place where she could rule. And maybe – just maybe – the MacGil kingdom could rise again.

Srog stood there, hands on his hips, taking it all in as if seeing his own city for the first time, his eyes shining with pride.

"Welcome to Silesia."

Chapter Six

Thor opened his eyes at the crack of dawn to see the gently rolling waves of the ocean, rising and falling in huge crests, blanketed by the soft light of the first sun. The light yellow water of the Tartuvian sparkled in the morning mist. The shipped bobbed silently in the water, the only sound that of the lapping waves against its hull.

Thor sat up and looked around. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion – in fact, he had never felt this tired in his life. They had been sailing for days, and everything here, on this side of the world, felt different. The air was so thick with humidity, the temperature so much warmer, it was like breathing in a constant stream of water. It made him feel sluggish, made his limbs feel heavy. He felt as if he had arrived at Summer.

Thor looked around and saw that all of his friends, normally up before dawn, were all slumped on the deck, sleeping. Even Krohn, always awake, was asleep beside him. The thick tropical weather had affected them all. None of them even bothered to man the wheel anymore – they had given that up days ago. There was no point: their sails were always at full mast with a driving westerly wind, and the magical tides of this ocean constantly pulled their ship in one direction. It was as if they were being pulled to one location, and they had tried several times to steer or change course – but it was useless. They had all become resigned

to let the Tartuvian take them where it would.

It's not like they knew where in the Empire to go anyway, Thor mused. As long as the tides took them to dry land, he figured, that would be good enough.

Krohn roused, whining, then leaned forward and licked Thor's face. Thor reached into his sack, nearly empty, and gave Krohn the last of his dried meat sticks. To Thor's surprise, Krohn did not snatch it from his hand, as he usually did; instead, Krohn looked at it, looked at the empty sack, then looked back at Thor meaningfully. He hesitated to take the food, and Thor realized Krohn didn't want to take the last piece from him.

Thor was touched by the gesture, but he insisted, pushing the meat into his friend's mouth. Thor knew they would be out of food soon, and prayed they reached land. He had no idea how much longer the journey could take; what if it took months? How would they eat?

The sun rose quickly here, growing bright and strong too early, and Thor stood as the mist began to burn off of the water and he went to the bow.

Thor stood there and looked out, the deck rocking gently beneath him, and watched as the mist dissipated. He blinked, wondering if he were seeing things, as the outline of a distant land appeared on the horizon. His pulse quickened. It was land. Real land!

The land appeared in a most unusual shape: two long, narrow peninsulas stuck out into the sea, like two ends of a pitchfork,

and as the mist lifted, Thor looked to his left and right and was amazed to see two strips of land on either side of them, each about fifty yards off. They were being sucked right down the middle of a long inlet.

Thor whistled, and his Legion brothers arose. They scrambled to their feet and hurried beside him, standing at the bow, looking out.

They all stood there, breathless at the sight: the shores were the most exotic he had ever seen, densely packed with jungle, soaring trees clinging to the shoreline, so thick it was impossible to see beyond them. Thor spotted huge ferns, thirty feet tall, leaning over the water; yellow and purple trees that seemed to reach into the sky; and everywhere, there were the foreign and persistent noises of beasts, birds, insects, and he did not know what else, snarling and crying and singing.

Thor swallowed hard. He felt as if they were entering an impenetrable animal kingdom. Everything felt different here; the air smelled different, foreign. Nothing here remotely reminded him of the Ring. The other Legion members all turned and looked at each other, and Thor could see the hesitation in their eyes. They all wondered what creatures lay in wait for them inside that jungle.

It was not as if they had a choice. The current brought them one way, and clearly this was where they needed to disembark to enter the Empire's lands.

"Over here!" O'Connor yelled.

They rushed to O'Connor's side of the railing, as he leaned over and pointed down at the water. There, swimming alongside the ship, was a huge insect, a luminescent purple, ten feet long, with hundreds of legs. It glowed beneath the waves, then scurried along the water's surface; as it did, its thousands of small wings started buzzing, and it lifted just above the water. Then it went back to gliding along the surface, then it plunged below. Then it repeated the process all over again.

As they watched, it suddenly rose up, higher in the air, to eye level with the boys, hovering, staring at them with its four large green eyes. It hissed, and they all jumped back involuntarily, reaching for their swords.

Elden stepped forward and swung at it. But by the time his sword reached the air, it was already back in the water.

Thor and the others went flying, crashing on the deck, as their boat came to a sudden stop, lodging itself on shore with a jolt.

Thor's heart beat faster as he looked over the edge: beneath them was a narrow beach made up of thousands of small jagged rocks, bright purple in color.

Land. They had made it.

Elden led the way to the anchor, and they all hoisted it and dropped it over the edge. They each climbed down the chain, jumping off it and landing on shore, Thor handing Krohn to Elden as he went.

Thor sighed as his feet touched the ground. It felt so good to have land – dry, steady land – beneath his feet. He would be fine

if he never set sail on a ship again.

They all grabbed the ropes and dragged the boat as far onto shore as they could.

"Do you think the tides will take it away?" Reece asked, looking up at the boat.

Thor looked at it; it seemed secure in the sand.

“Not with that anchor,” Elden said.

"The tide won’t take it," O’Connor said. "The question is whether someone else will.”

Thor took one long last look at the ship, and realized his friend was right. Even if they found the sword, they might very well return to an empty shore.

"And then how will we get back?" Conval asked.

Thor could not help but feel as if, every step of the way, they were burning their bridges.

"We shall find a way," Thor said. “After all, there must be other ships in the Empire, right?"

Thor tried to sound authoritative, to reassure his friends. But deep down, he was not so sure himself. This entire journey was feeling increasingly ominous to him.

As one, they turned and faced the jungle, staring at it. It was a wall of foliage, blackness behind it. The animal noises rose up in a cacophony all around them, so loud that Thor could hardly hear himself think. It felt as if every beast of the Empire was screaming out to greet them.

Or to warn them.

* * *

Thor and the others hiked side-by-side, warily, each of them on guard, through the thick, tropical jungle. It was hard for Thor to hear himself think, so persistent were the screams and cries of the orchestra of insects and animals around him. Yet when he looked into the blackness of the foliage, he could not spot them.

Krohn walked at his heels, snarling, the hair standing on his back. Thor had never seen him so alert. He looked over at his brothers-in-arms, and saw each, like he, with a hand resting on the hilt of his sword, all of them on-edge, too.

They had been hiking for hours now, deeper and deeper into the jungle, the air becoming hotter and thicker, more humid, heavier to breathe. They had followed the traces of what appeared to once be a trail, a few broken branches hinting at the path the group of men who had arrived here may have taken. Thor only hoped it was the trail of the group who had stolen the sword.

Thor looked up, in awe of the nature: everything was overgrown to epic proportion, every leaf as big as himself. He felt like an insect in a land of giants. He saw something rustling behind some of the leaves, but couldn't actually make out anything. He had the ominous feeling they were being watched.

The trail before them suddenly ended in a solid wall of foliage. They all stopped and looked at each other, puzzled.

"But the trail can't just disappear!" O'Connor said, hopeless.

"It didn't," Reece said, examining the leaves. "The jungle just grew back on itself."

"So which way now?" Conval asked.

Thor turned and looked all around, wondering the same thing. In every direction was just more of the dense foliage, and there seemed to be no way out. Thor was beginning to have a sinking feeling, and felt increasingly lost.

Then he had an idea.

"Krohn," he said, kneeling down and whispering in Krohn's ear. "Climb that tree. Look for us. Tell us which way to go."

Krohn looked up at him with his soulful eyes, and Thor felt he understood.

Krohn sprinted for an enormous tree, the trunk as wide as ten men, and without hesitating pounced on it and clawed his way up. Krohn sprinted straight up then leapt out onto one of the highest branches. He walked out to its tip and looked out, his ears standing straight. Thor had always sensed that Krohn understood him, and now he knew for certain that he did.

Krohn leaned back and made a strange purring noise in the back of his throat, then scurried back down the trunk and took off in one direction. The boys exchanged a curious look, then all turned and followed Krohn, heading off into that part of the jungle, pushing back the thick leaves so they could walk.

After a few minutes, Thor was relieved to see the trail pick up again, the telltale signs of broken branches and foliage showing

which way the group had went. Thor leaned down and patted Krohn, kissing him on the head.

"I don't know what we would have done without him," Reece said.

"Nor do I," Thor responded.

Krohn purred, satisfied, proud.

As they continued deeper into the jungle, twisting and turning, they came to a stretch of new foliage, with flowers all around them, enormous, the size of Thor, bursting with every color. Other trees had fruits the size of boulders hanging from the branches.

They all stopped in wonder as Conval walked over to one of the fruits, glowing red, and reached up to touch it.

Suddenly, there came a deep, growling noise.

Conval backed away and grabbed his sword, and the others all looked at each other anxiously.

"What was that?" Conval asked.

"It came from over there," Reece said, gesturing to another part of the jungle.

They all turned and looked. But Thor could see nothing but leaves. Krohn snarled back at it.

The noise grew louder, more persistent, and finally, the branches began to rustle. Thor and the others took a step back, drawing their swords, and waited, expecting the worst.

What stepped forward from the jungle exceeded even Thor's worst expectations. Standing there before them was an enormous

insect, five times Thor's size, resembling a praying mantis, with two rear legs, two smaller front legs that dangled in the air, and long claws at the ends of them. Its body was a fluorescent green, covered in scales, and it had small wings which buzzed and vibrated. It had two eyes at the top of its head, and a third eye on the tip of its nose. It reached around and revealed more claws – hidden under its throat – which vibrated and snapped.

It stood there, towering over them, and another claw came out from its stomach, a long skinny arm, protruding; suddenly, faster than any of them could react, it reached out and snatched O'Connor, its three claws expanding and wrapping around his waist. It lifted him high in the air, as if he were a leaf.

O'Connor swung his sword but was nowhere near quick enough. The beast shook him several times, then suddenly opened its mouth, revealing row after row of sharp teeth, turned O'Connor sideways, and began to lower him towards it.

O'Connor shrieked as an instant and painful death loomed.

Thor reacted. Without thinking, he placed a stone in his sling, took aim and hurled it at the beast's third eye, at the tip of its nose.

It was a direct strike. The beast shrieked, an awful noise, loud enough to split a tree, then dropped O'Connor, who fell end over end and landed on the soft jungle floor with a thump.

The beast, enraged, then turned its sights on Thor.

Thor knew that making a stand and fighting this creature would be futile. At least one of his brothers would get killed, and

likely Krohn, too, and it would drain whatever precious energy they had. He felt that maybe they had intruded on its territory, and that if they could get out of there quick enough, it might just leave them be.

"RUN!" Thor screamed.

They turned and ran – and the beast began to chase after them.

Thor could hear the sound of the beast's nails cutting through the dense foliage right behind them, slicing through the air and missing his head by a few feet. Shredded leaves flew up into the air and rained down around him. They all ran as one, and Thor felt that if they could just gain enough distance, they could find a way to take shelter. If not, then they would have to make a stand.

But Reece suddenly slipped beside him, falling over a branch, face-first into the foliage, and Thor knew he wouldn't get up in time. Thor stopped beside them, drew his sword, and stood between him and the beast.

"KEEP RUNNING!" Thor yelled over his shoulder to the others, as he stood there, ready to defend Reece.

The beast lunged for him, shrieking, and swung its claw for Thor's face. Thor ducked and swung his sword at the same time, and the beast let out a horrific shriek as Thor chopped off one of its claws. A green fluid sprayed all over Thor, and he looked up and watched in horror as the beast re-grew its claw just as quickly as it had lost it. It was as if Thor had never injured it.

Thor swallowed. This would be an impossible beast to kill. And now he had angered it.

The beast swiped down with yet another arm, coming out from somewhere else on its body, and swiped Thor hard in the ribs, sending him flying and landing in a clump of trees. The beast then lowered another claw for Thor, and Thor knew he was in trouble.

Elden, O'Connor, and the twins rushed forward, and as the beast came down with another claw for Thor, O'Connor fired an arrow into its mouth, lodging in the back of its throat, making it shriek. Elden took his two-handed ax and brought it down on the beast's back, while Conven and Conval each threw a spear, lodging on either side of its throat. Reece regained his feet and plunged his sword into the beast's belly. Thor leapt up and swung his sword at another of the beast's arms, chopping it off. And Krohn joined them, leaping into the air and sinking his fangs into its throat.

The beast let out shriek after shriek, as they all did more damage than Thor thought possible. It was incredible to Thor that it was still standing, its wings still vibrating. This beast just would not die.

They all watched in horror as, one at a time, the beast reached over and pulled out the spears and swords and the ax lodged in it – and as it did, its injuries all healed before their eyes.

This beast was undefeatable.

The beast leaned back and roared, and all of Thor's Legion brothers looked up in shock. They had all given it everything they had, and couldn't even dent it.

The beast prepared to lunge at them again, with its razor sharp jaws and claws, and Thor realized there was nothing else they could do. They were all going to die.

“OUT OF THE WAY!" came a sudden scream.

The voice came from behind Thor, and it sounded young. Thor turned to see a small boy, perhaps eleven, run up behind them, carrying what appeared to be a jug of water. Thor ducked and the boy threw up the water, splashing it all over the beast's face.

The beast leaned back and screeched, steam rising from its face, reaching up with its claws and tearing at its cheek, its eyes, its head. It shrieked again and again, the noise so loud that Thor had to hold his hands over his ears.

Finally, the beast turned and darted away, back into the jungle, getting lost in the foliage.

They all turned and looked at the boy with a new sense of wonder and appreciation. Dressed in rags, with longish brown hair and bright-green, intelligent eyes, the boy was covered in dirt, and looked, judging by his bare feet and dirty hands, as if he lived out here.

Thor had never been more grateful to anyone.

"Weapons won’t hurt a Gathorbeast," the boy said, rolling his eyes. "Lucky for you I heard the shrieks and was close. If not, you’d be dead by now. Don’t you know that you never confront a Gathorbeast?”

Thor looked at his friends, all at a loss for words.

“We didn’t confront it,” Elden said. “It confronted us.”

“They don’t confront you,” the boy said, “unless you intrude on its territory.”

"What were we supposed to do?" Reece asked.

"Well, never look it in the eye for one," the boy said. "And if it attacks, lie face down until it leaves you be. And most of all, don’t ever try to run.”

Thor stepped forward and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You saved our lives," he said. “We owe you a great debt.”

The boy shrugged.

"You don't look like Empire troops,” he said. “You look like you came from somewhere else in the world. So why wouldn’t I help you? You seem to have the markings of that group that came from the ship some days ago."

Thor and the others exchanged a knowing glance, and turned to the boy.

"Do you know where this group went?" Thor asked.

The boy shrugged.

"It was a large group, and they were carrying a weapon. It seemed heavy: it took all of them to carry it. I tracked them for days. They were easy to track. They were slow-moving. They were also sloppy and careless. I know where they went, though I didn't track them much beyond the village. I can bring you there and point you in the right direction, if you like. But not today.”

The others exchanged a puzzled look.

"Why not?" Thor asked.

"Night falls in but a few hours. You can't be outside after dark."

"But why?" Reece asked.

The boy looked at him as if he were crazy.

"The Ethabugs," he said.

Thor stepped forward and looked at the boy. He liked this boy immediately. He was intelligent, earnest, fearless, and had a lot of heart.

"Do you know a place where we can take shelter for the night?"

The boy looked back at Thor, then shrugged, looking uncertain. He stood there, wavering.

"I don't think I should," he said. "Grandpa will get mad."

Krohn suddenly emerged from behind Thor, and walked towards the boy – and the boy's eyes lit up in delight.

"Wow!" the boy exclaimed.

Krohn licked the boy's face, again and again, and the boy giggled in delight and reached up and stroked Krohn's head. Then the boy knelt down, lowered his spear, and hugged Krohn. Krohn seemed to hug him back, and the boy laughed hysterically.

"What's his name?" the boy asked. "What is he?"

"His name is Krohn," Thor said, smiling. "He is a rare white leopard. He comes from the other side of the ocean. From the Ring. Where we are from. He likes you."

The boy kissed Krohn several times, and finally stood and looked back at Thor.

"Well," the boy said, wavering, "I guess I can bring you to our village. Hopefully grandpa won't get too mad. If he does, you're out of luck. Follow me. We have to hurry. It will be night soon."

The boy turned and quickly weaved his way through the jungle, and Thor and the others followed. Thor was amazed at the boy's dexterity, at how well he knew the jungle. It was hard to keep up.

"People come through here from time to time," the boy said. "The ocean, the tides, it leads them right into the harbor. Some people come from the sea and cut through here, on their way somewhere else. Most of them don't make it. They get eaten by something or other in the jungle. You guys were lucky. There a lot worse things here than that Gathorbeast."

Thor swallowed.

"Worse than that? Like what?"

The boy shook his head, continuing to hike.

"You don't want to know. I've seen some pretty awful things here."

"How long have you been here?" Thor asked, curious.

"My whole life," the boy said. "My grandpa moved us when I was little."

"But why here, in this place? Surely there must be more hospitable places."

"You don't know the Empire, do you?" the boy asked. "The troops are everywhere. It's not so easy to stay out of their sight. If they ever catch us, they capture us as slaves. They rarely come

out here, though – not this deep in the jungle."

As they cut through a thick patch of foliage, Thor reached up to brush a leaf out of his way, but the boy turned and shoved Thor's hand, screaming:

"DON'T TOUCH THAT!"

They all stopped, and Thor looked over at the leaf he'd almost touched. It was large and yellow, and seemed innocent enough.

The boy reached out with his stick and gently touched the tip of it; as he did, the leaf suddenly wrapped itself around the stick, incredibly fast, and a hissing noise followed, as the tip of the stick evaporated.

Thor was shocked.

"A Rankle leaf," the boy said. "Poison. If you touched it, you'd be missing a hand right now."

Thor looked around at all the foliage with a new respect. He marveled at how lucky they had been to encounter this boy.

They continued on their hike, Thor keeping his hands close to his body, as did the others. They tried to be more careful about everywhere they stepped.

"Stay close to each other and follow my footsteps exactly," the boy said. "Don't touch anything. Don't try to eat those fruits. And don't smell those flowers either – unless you want to pass out."

"Hey, what's that?" O'Connor asked, turning and looking at a huge fruit dangling from a branch, long and narrow, a glistening yellow. O'Connor took a step towards it, reaching out.

"NO!" the boy screamed.

But it was too late. As he touched it, the ground give way beneath all of them, and Thor felt himself sliding, racing down a hill running with mud and water. They were stuck on a mudslide and they could not stop.

They all screamed as they slid in the mud, hundreds of feet, straight down to the black depths of the jungle.

Chapter Seven

Erec sat on his horse, breathing hard, preparing himself to attack the two hundred soldiers facing him. He had fought valiantly and had managed to take down the first hundred – but now his shoulders were weak, his hands trembling. His mind was ready to fight forever – yet he did not know how long his body would follow. Still, he would fight with all he had, as he had done his whole life, and let the fates make the decision for him.

Erec screamed and kicked the unfamiliar horse which he had stolen from one of his opponents, and charged for the soldiers.

They charged back, matching his lone battle cry with theirs, fierce. Much blood had already been spilled on this field, and clearly no one was leaving without the other side dead.

As he charged, Erec removed a throwing knife from his belt, took aim, and threw it at the lead soldier before him. It was a perfect throw, lodging in his throat, and the soldier clutched his throat, dropping the reins, and fell from his horse. As Erec had hoped, he fell before the feet of the other horses, causing several to trip over him and sending them crashing to the ground.

Erec raised a javelin with one hand, a shield in the other, lowered his faceplate, and charged with all he had. He would charge this army as fast and hard as he could, take whatever blows he would, and cut a line right through it.

Erec screamed as he charged into the group. All his years

of jousting had served him well, and he used the long javelin expertly to take out one soldier after the next, knocking them down in succession. He crouched low and with his other hand covered himself with the shield; he felt a rain of blows descend on him, on his shield, on his armor, from all directions. He was slammed by swords and axes and maces, a storm of metal, and Erec prayed his armor would hold. He clung to his javelin, taking out as many soldiers as he could as he charged, cutting a path through the huge group.

Erec didn't slow, and after about a minute of riding, finally broke out the other side, into the open, having cut a straight path of devastation right down the middle of the group of soldiers. He had taken out at least a dozen soldiers – but he had suffered for it. He breathed hard, his body aching, the clang of metal still ringing in his ears. He felt as if he had been put through a grinder. He looked down and saw he was covered in blood; luckily, he did not feel any major wounds. They seemed to be minor scratches and cuts.

Erec rode in a wide circle, looping back, preparing to face the army again. They, too, had turned around, preparing to charge him once more. Erec was proud of his victories thus far, but it was getting harder for him to catch his breath, and he knew that one more pass through this group might finish him off. Nonetheless, he readied himself to charge again, never willing to back away from a fight.

An unusual cry suddenly arose from behind the army, and

Erec was at first confused to see a contingent of soldiers attacking the rear. But then he recognized the armor, and his heart soared: it was his close friend from the Silver, Brandt, along with the Duke and dozens of his men. Erec's heart fell when he spied Alistair among them. He had asked her to stay in the safety of the castle, and she had not listened. For that, he loved her more than he could say.

The Duke's men attacked the army from behind with a fierce battle cry, causing chaos. Half the army turned to face them, and they met in a great clang of metal, Brandt leading the way with his two-handed ax. He swung at the lead soldier, chopping off his head, then swung his ax around in the same motion and lodged it another man's chest.

Erec, inspired, got a second wind: he took advantage of the chaos and charged the other half of the army. As he galloped, he leaned over and snatched a spear protruding from the earth, leaned back, and threw it with the force of ten men. The spear went through one soldier's throat and continued going, lodging in the chest of another.

Erec then raised his sword high and brought it down on the first soldier he reached, chopping the shaft of his mace in half, then swinging around and chopping off the man's head.

Erec continued fighting, throwing himself into the group of men with all his remaining energy, thrusting, blocking, parrying, attacking all the soldiers who swarmed him from all sides. He alternately raised his shield, blocking blow after blow, and

attacked; within moments, the soldiers were all converging around him, dozens of them, attacking him from every direction.

He killed more than he could count, but there were just too many of them, even with the Duke's men preoccupying the rear flank. One of them slipped a blow of his mace past Erec, into his back, between his shoulder blades; Erec cried out in pain as the spiked metal ball landed on his spine. He fell from his horse, down to the ground, the impact winding him.

But he did not give up. His instincts kicked in and he had the presence of mind to roll immediately, raise his shield and block a blow descending for his head. Then he parried with his sword, severing the man's arm.

A soldier aimed to trample Erec's head, but Erec spun out of the way, swung around and chopped off the horse's legs, sending its rider to the ground; Erec then rolled over and stabbed the man in the chest.

More and more men converged on Erec, and he rolled to his knees and blocked blow after blow, countering when he could as he was swarmed. His shoulders were weakening. A particularly large knight with a straight, long beard stepped forward and raised an ax high. Erec raised his shield to block it, but another soldier kicked it from his hand, and before he could react, a third soldier stepped on his chest, pinning him down. There were just too many of them, and Erec was too weary. There was nothing left he could do but watch as the huge knight began to swing down his ax.

Suddenly there came a great commotion, and Erec looked up to see Brandt arrive, raising his sword high with a fierce cry, swinging with all he had, and in a single blow chopping the shaft of the ax in half, and also lopping off the huge knight's head.

There followed the Duke and several others, attacking all the soldiers around Erec, clearing a path to him. Erec spun, grabbed the soldier's leg who was stepping on his chest, and yanked him down to the ground; he then rolled over and snapped the man's neck with his bare hands.

Erec grabbed a dagger from the dead man's waist, spun around, and stabbed another attacker in the side of the throat who had been swinging for him. He gained his feet, grabbed his sword from the bloody battlefield, and got his third wind.

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