MORGAN RICE
BOOK #12 IN THE SORCERER'S RING
A
LAND
OF
FIRE

Morgan Rice
A Land of Fire
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Аннотация

In A LAND OF FIRE (BOOK #12 IN THE SORCERER'S RING), Gwendolyn and her people find themselves surrounded on the Upper Isles, besieged by Romulus' dragons and his million man army. All seems lost – when salvation comes from an unlikely source. Gwendolyn is determined to find her baby, lost at sea, and to lead her nation-in-exile to a new home. She travels across foreign and exotic seas, encountering unthinkable dangers, rebellion and starvation, as they sail for dream of a safe harbor. Thorgrin's finally meets his mother in the Land of the Druids, and their meeting will change his life forever, make him stronger than he has ever been. With a new quest, he embarks, determined to rescue Gwendolyn, to find his baby, and to fulfill his destiny. In an epic battle of dragons and of men, Thor will be tested in every way; as he battles monsters and lays down his life for his brothers, he will dig deeper to become the great warrior he was meant to be. In the Southern Isles, Erec lies dying, and Alistair, accused of his murder, must do what she can to both save Erec and absolve herself of guilt. A civil war erupts in a power struggle for

the throne, and Alistair finds herself caught in the middle, with her fate, and Erec's, hanging in the balance. Romulus remains intent on destroying Gwendolyn, Thorgrin, and what remains of the Ring; but his moon cycle is coming to an end, and his power will be severely tested. Meanwhile, in the Northern province of the Empire, a new hero is rising: Darius, a 15 year old warrior, who is determined to break off the chains of slavery and rise up amongst his people. But the Northern Capitol is run by Volusia, a 18 year old girl, famed for her beauty – and famed also her barbaric cruelty. Will Gwen and her people survive? Will Guwayne be found? Will Romulus crush the Ring? Will Erec live? Will Thorgrin return in time? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A LAND OF FIRE 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.

Содержание

Chapter One 11
Chapter Two 19
Chapter Three 24
Chapter Four 39
Chapter Five 41
Chapter Six 48
Chapter Seven 62
Chapter Eight 70
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 72

Morgan Rice
A Land of Fire (Book #12 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

"Thus I turn my back:
There is a world elsewhere."
– William Shakespeare
Coriolanus

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses,

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

About Morgan Rice

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

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

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

"THE SORCERER'S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers."
– Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

"Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting….Nicely written and an extremely fast read."
– Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding Turned)

"An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist… Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl… one extraordinary girl!… Easy to read but extremely fast-paced… Rated PG."
– The Romance Reviews (regarding Turned)

"Grabbed my attention from the beginning and did not let go….This story is an amazing adventure that is fast paced and action packed from the very beginning. There is not a dull moment to be found."
– Paranormal Romance Guild (regarding Turned)

"Jam packed with action, romance, adventure, and suspense. Get your hands on this one and fall in love all over again."
– vampirebooksite.com (regarding Turned)

"A great plot, and this especially was the kind of book you will have trouble putting down at night. The ending was a cliffhanger that was so spectacular that you will immediately want to buy the next book, just to see what happens."
– The Dallas Examiner (regarding Loved)

"A book to rival TWILIGHT and VAMPIRE DIARIES, and one that will have you wanting to keep reading until the very last page! If you are into adventure, love and vampires this book is the one for you!"
– Vampirebooksite.com (regarding Turned)

"Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller….This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked."
– The Romance Reviews (regarding Loved)

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THE SORCERER'S RING

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

the vampire journals

Chapter One

Gwendolyn stood on the shore of the Upper Isles, gazing out into the ocean, watching with horror as the fog rolled in and began to consume her baby. She felt as if her heart were breaking in two as she saw Guwayne floating farther and farther away, into the horizon, disappearing in the mist. The tide was carrying him God knows where, every second taking him more beyond her reach.

Tears rolled down Gwendolyn's cheeks as she watched, unable to tear herself away, numb to the world. She lost all sense of time and place, could no longer feel her body. A part of her died as she watched the person she loved most in the world be consumed by an ocean tide. It was as if a part of her were sucked out to sea with him.

Gwen hated herself for what she had done; yet at the same time, she knew it was the only thing in the world that might just save her child. Gwen heard the roaring and thundering on the horizon behind her, and she knew that soon, this entire island would be consumed with flame – and that nothing in the world could save them. Not Argon, who lay still in a helpless state; not Thorgrin, who was a world away, in the Land of the Druids; not Alistair or Erec, who were another world away, in the Southern Isles; and not Kendrick or the Silver or any of the other brave men who were here in this place, none of them with the means

to combat a dragon. Magic was what they needed – and it was the one thing they had run out of.

They had been lucky to escape the Ring at all, and now, she knew, fate had caught up with them. There was no more running, no more hiding. It was time to face the death that had been chasing them.

Gwendolyn turned and faced the opposite horizon, and she could see even from here the black mass of dragons heading her way. She had little time; she did not want to die all alone here on these shores, but with her people, protecting them as best she could.

Gwen turned back for one last look out at the ocean, hoping for a last glimpse of Guwayne.

But there was nothing. Guwayne was far from her now, somewhere on the horizon, already traveling to a world she would never know.

Please, God, Gwen prayed. *Be with him. Take my life for his. I will do anything. Keep Guwayne safe. Let me hold him again. I beg you. Please.*

Gwendolyn opened her eyes, hoping to see a sign, perhaps a rainbow in the sky – anything.

But the horizon was empty. There was nothing but black, glowering clouds, as if the universe were furious with her for what she had done.

Sobbing, Gwen turned her back on the ocean, on what remained of her life, and broke into a jog, each step taking her

closer to make her final stand with her people.

* * *

Gwen stood on the upper parapets of Tirus's fort, surrounded by dozens of her people, among them her brothers Kendrick and Reece and Godfrey, her cousins Matus and Stara, Steffen, Aberthol, Srog, Brandt, Atme, and all the Legion. They all faced the sky, silent and somber, knowing what was coming for them.

As they listened to the distant roars that shook the earth, they stood there, helpless, watching Ralibar wage their war for them, a single brave dragon fighting his best, holding off the host of enemy dragons. Gwen's heart soared as she watched Ralibar fight, so brave, so bold, one dragon against dozens and yet unafraid. Ralibar breathed fire on the dragons, raised his great talons and scratched them, clutched them, and sank his teeth into their throats. He was not only stronger than the others, but faster, too. He was a thing to watch.

As Gwen watched, her heart soared with its last ounce of hope; a part of her dared to believe that maybe Ralibar could defeat them. She saw Ralibar duck and dive down as three dragons breathed fire at his face, narrowly missing him. Ralibar then lunged forward and plunged his talons into one of the dragons' chest, and used his momentum to force it down toward the ocean.

Several dragons breathed fire onto Ralibar's back as he dove,

and Gwen watched in horror as Ralibar and the other dragon became a flaming ball, dropping down to the sea. The dragon resisted, but Ralibar used all his weight to drive it down into the waves – and soon they both plunged into the ocean.

A great hissing noise arose, along with clouds of steam, as the water doused the fire. Gwen watched with anticipation, hoping he was okay – and moments later, Ralibar surfaced, alone. The other dragon surfaced too, but it was bobbing, floating on the waves, dead.

Without hesitating, Ralibar shot up toward the dozens of other dragons diving down at him. As they came down, their great jaws open, aiming for him, Ralibar was on the attack: he reached out his great talons, leaned back, spread his wings, and grabbed two of them, then spun around and drove them down into the sea.

Ralibar held them under, yet as he did, a dozen dragons pounced on Ralibar's exposed back. The whole group of them plummeted into the ocean, driving Ralibar down with them. Ralibar, as valiantly as he fought, was just way too outnumbered, and he plunged into the water, flailing, held down by dozens of dragons, screeching in fury.

Gwen swallowed, her heart breaking at the sight of Ralibar fighting for all of them, all alone out there; she wished more than anything that she could help him. She combed the surface of the ocean, waiting, hoping, for any sign of Ralibar, willing him to surface.

But to her horror, he never did.

The other dragons surfaced, and they all flew up, regrouped, and set their sights on the Upper Isles. They seemed to look right at Gwendolyn as they let out a great roar and spread their wings.

Gwen felt her heart splitting. Her dear friend Ralibar, their last hope, their last line of defense, was dead.

Gwen turned to her men, who stood staring in shock. They knew what was coming next: an unstoppable wave of destruction.

Gwen felt heavy; she opened her mouth, and the words stuck in her throat.

"Sound the bells," she finally said, her voice hoarse. "Command our people to shelter. Anyone above ground needs to go below, now. Into the caves, the cellars – anywhere but here. Command them – now!"

"Sound the bells!" Steffen yelled, running to the edge of the fort, screaming out over the courtyard. Soon, bells tolled throughout the square. Hundreds of her people, survivors from the Ring, now fled, racing to take shelter, heading for the caves on the outskirts of town or hurrying into cellars and shelters below ground, preparing themselves against the inevitable wave of fire that would come.

"My Queen," Srog said, turning to her, "perhaps we can all take shelter in this fort. After all, it is made of stone."

Gwen shook her head knowingly.

"You do not understand the dragons' wrath," she said. "Nothing above ground will be safe. Nothing."

"But my lady, perhaps we will be safer in this fort," he urged.

“It has stood the test of time. These stone walls are a foot thick. Wouldn’t you rather be here than underneath the earth?”

Gwen shook her head. There came a roar, and she looked to the horizon and could see the dragons approaching. Her heart broke as she saw, in the distance, the dragons breathing a wall of flame down onto her fleet that lay in the southern harbor. She watched as her precious ships, her lifeline off this island, beautiful ships that had taken decades to build, were reduced to nothing but kindling. She felt fortunate that she had anticipated this, and had hidden a few ships on the other side of the island. If they ever even survived to use them.

“There is no time for debate. All of us will leave this place at once. Follow me.”

They followed Gwen as she hurried off the roof and down the spiral steps, taking them as fast as she could; as she went, Gwen instinctively reached out to clutch Guwayne – then her heart broke once again as she realized he was gone. She felt a part of her missing as she ran down the steps, hearing all the footsteps behind her, taking them two at a time, all of them rushing to get to safety. Gwen could hear the distant roars of the dragons getting closer, shaking the place already, and she only prayed that Guwayne was safe.

Gwen burst out of the castle and raced across the courtyard with the others, all of them running for the entrance to the dungeons, long emptied of prisoners. Several of her soldiers waited before the steel doors, opening up to steps leading down

to the ground, and before they entered, Gwen stopped and turned to her people.

She saw several people still rushing about the courtyard, shrieking in fear, in a daze, unsure where to go.

"Come here!" she called out. "Come underground! All of you!"

Gwen stepped aside, making sure they all made it to safety first, and one by one, her people rushed past her, down the stone steps into the darkness.

The last people to stop and stand with her were her brothers, Kendrick and Reece and Godfrey, along with Steffen. The five of them turned and examined the sky together, as another earth-shattering roar came.

The host of dragons was now so close that Gwen could see them, hardly several hundred yards away, their great wings larger than life, all of them emboldened, faces filled with fury. Their great jaws were wide open, as if anticipating tearing them apart, and their teeth were each as large as Gwendolyn.

So, Gwendolyn thought, *this is what death looks like.*

Gwen took one last look around, and she saw hundreds of her people taking shelter in their new homes above ground, refusing to go below.

"I told them to get below ground!" Gwen yelled.

"Some of our people listened," Kendrick observed sadly, shaking his head, "but many would not."

Gwen felt herself breaking up inside. She knew what would

happen to the people who stayed above ground. Why did her people always have to be so obstinate?

And then it happened – the first of the dragon fire came rolling toward them, far enough away so as not to burn them, yet close enough that Gwen could feel the heat scorching her face. She watched in horror as screams arose, coming from her people on the far side of the courtyard who had decided to wait above ground, inside their dwellings or inside Tirus's fort. The stone fort, so indomitable just moments before, was now ablaze, flames shooting out the sides and front and back, as if it were nothing but a house of flame, its stone charred and seared in but a moment. Gwen swallowed hard, knowing that if they had tried to wait it out in the fort, they would all be dead.

Others had not been so lucky: they shrieked, ablaze, and ran through the streets before collapsing to the earth. The horrible smell of burning flesh cut through the air.

"My lady," Steffen said, "we must go below. Now!"

Gwen could not bear to tear herself away, and yet she knew he was right. She allowed herself to be led by the others, to be dragged down through the gates, down the steps, into the blackness, as a wave of flame came rolling toward her. The steel doors slammed closed a second before they reached her, and as she heard them reverberate behind her, they felt like a door slamming closed in her heart.

Chapter Two

Alistair, sobbing, knelt beside Erec's body, clutching him tight, her wedding dress covered in his blood. As she held him, her entire world spinning, she felt the life flow beginning to ebb out of him. Erec, riddled with stab wounds, was moaning, and she could sense by the rhythms of his pulse that he was dying.

"NO!" Alistair moaned, cradling him in her arms, rocking him. She felt her heart rend in two as she held him, felt as if she were dying herself. This man whom she had been about to marry, who had looked at her with such love just moments before, now lay nearly lifeless in her arms; she could hardly process it. He had received the blow so unsuspecting, so filled with love and joy; he had been caught off guard because of her. Because of her stupid game, asking him to close his eyes while she approached with her dress. Alistair felt overwhelmed with guilt, as if it were all her fault.

"Alistair," he moaned.

She looked down and saw his eyes half open, saw them becoming dull, the life force beginning to leave them.

"Know that this is not your fault," he whispered. "And know how much I love you."

Alistair wept, holding him to her chest, feeling him growing cold. As she did, something inside her snapped, something that felt the injustice of it all, something that absolutely refused to

allow him to die.

Alistair suddenly felt a familiar, tingly feeling, like a thousand pinpricks in the tips of her fingers, and she felt her entire body flush with heat from head to toe. A strange force overtook her, something strong and primal, something she did not understand; it came on stronger than any surge of force she had ever felt in her life, like an outside spirit taking over her body. She felt her hands and arms burning hot, and she reflexively reached out and placed her palms on Erec's chest and forehead.

Alistair held them there, her hands burning ever hotter, and she closed her eyes. Images flashed through her mind. She saw Erec as a youth, leaving the Southern Isles, so proud and noble, standing on a tall ship; she saw him entering the Legion; joining the Silver; jousting, becoming a champion, defeating enemies, defending the Ring. She saw him sitting erect, posture perfect on his horse, in shining silver, a model of nobility and courage. She knew she could not let him die; the world could not afford to let him die.

Alistair's hands grew hotter still, and she opened her eyes and saw his eyes closing. She also saw a white light emanating from her palms, spreading all over Erec; she saw him infused with it, surrounded by a globe. And as she watched, she saw his wounds, seeping blood, slowly begin to seal up.

Erec's eyes flashed open, filled with light, and she felt something shift within him. His body, so cold just moments before, began to warm. She felt his life force returning.

Erec looked up at her in surprise and wonder, and as he did, Alistair felt her own energy depleted, her own life force lessening, as she transferred her energy to him.

His eyes closed and he fell into a deep sleep. Her hands suddenly grew cool, and she checked his pulse, felt it return to normal.

She sighed with great relief, knowing she had brought him back. Her palms shook, so drained from the experience, and she felt depleted, yet elated.

Thank you, God, she thought, as she leaned down, laid her face on his chest, and hugged him with tears of joy. *Thank you for not taking my husband from me.*

Alistair stopped crying, and she looked over and took in the scene: she saw Bowyer's sword lying there on the stone, its hilt and blade covered in blood. She hated Bowyer with a passion more than she could conceive; she was determined to avenge Erec.

Alistair reached down and picked up the bloody sword; her palms were covered in blood as she held it up, examining it. She prepared to cast it away, to watch it go clattering to the far end of the room – when suddenly, the door to the room burst open.

Alistair turned, the bloody sword in hand, to see Erec's family rush into the room, flanked by a dozen soldiers. As they came closer, their expressions of alarm turned to one of horror, as they all looked from her to the unconscious Erec.

"What have you done?" Dauphine cried out.

Alistair looked back at her, uncomprehending.

"I?" she asked. "I have done nothing."

Dauphine glowered as she stormed closer.

"Have you?" she said. "You've only killed our best and greatest knight!"

Alistair stared back at her in horror as she suddenly realized they were all looking at her as if she were a murderer.

She looked down and saw the bloody sword in her hand, saw the bloodstains on her palm and all over her dress, and she realized they all thought she had done it.

"But I did not stab him!" Alistair protested.

"No?" Dauphine accused. "Then did the sword appear magically in your hand?"

Alistair looked about the room, as they all gathered around her.

"It was a man who did this. The man who challenged him on the field in battle: Bowyer."

The others looked to each other, skeptical.

"Oh was it, then?" Dauphine countered. "And where is this man?" she asked, looking all about the room.

Alistair saw no sign of him, and she realized they all thought she was lying.

"He fled," she said. "After he stabbed him."

"And then how did his bloody sword get into your hand?" Dauphine countered.

Alistair looked down at the sword in her hand in horror, and

she flung it, clanging across the stone.

"But why would I kill my own husband-to-be?" she asked.

"You are a sorcerer," Dauphine said, standing over her now. "Your kind are not to be trusted. Oh, my brother!" Dauphine said, rushing forward, dropping down to her knees beside Erec, getting between him and Alistair. Dauphine hugged Erec, clutching him.

"What have you done?" Dauphine moaned, between tears.

"But I am innocent!" Alistair exclaimed.

Dauphine turned to her with an expression of hatred, and then turned to all the soldiers.

"Arrest her!" she commanded.

Alistair felt hands grabbing her from behind, as she was yanked to her feet. Her energy was depleted, and she was unable to resist as the guards bound her wrists behind her back and began to drag her away. She cared little for what happened to her – yet, as they dragged her away, she could not bear the thought of being apart from Erec. Not now, not when he needed her most. The healing she had given him was only temporary; she knew that he needed another session, and that if he did not get it, he would die.

"NO!" she yelled. "Let me go!"

But her shouts fell on deaf ears as they dragged her away, shackled, as if she were just another common prisoner.

Chapter Three

Thor raised his hands to his eyes, blinded by the light, as the shining, golden doors to his mother's castle opened wide, so intense he could barely see. A figure walked out toward him, a silhouette, a woman he sensed, in every fiber of his being, to be his mother. Thor's heart pounded as he saw her standing there, arms at her side, facing him.

Slowly, the light began to fade, just enough for him to lower his hands and look at her. It was the moment he had been waiting for his entire life, the moment that had haunted him in his dreams. He could not believe it: it was really her. His mother. Inside this castle, perched atop this cliff. Thor opened his eyes fully and laid eyes upon her for the first time, standing but a few feet away, staring back. For the first time, he saw her face.

Thor's breath caught in his throat as he looked back at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She looked timeless, at once both old and young, her skin nearly translucent, her face shining. She smiled back at him sweetly, her long blonde hair falling down past her stomach, her big bright translucent gray eyes, her perfectly chiseled cheekbone and jawline matching his. What surprised Thor most as he stared at her was that he could recognize many of his own features in her face – the curve of her jaw, her lips, the shade of her gray eyes, even her proud forehead. In some ways, it was like staring back at himself. She also looked

strikingly like Alistair.

Thor's mother, dressed in a white silk robe and cloak, the hood pulled back, stood with her palms out to her sides, adorned with no jewelry, her palms smooth, her skin like that of a baby's. Thor could feel the intense energy exuding from her, more intense than he had ever felt, like the sun, enveloping him. As he stood basking in it, he felt waves of love directed toward him. He had never before felt such unconditional love and acceptance. He felt like he *belonged*.

Standing here now, before her, Thor finally felt as if a part of him were complete, as if all was okay in the world.

"Thorgrin, my son," she said.

It was the most beautiful voice he'd ever heard, soft, reverberating off the ancient stone walls of the castle, sounding as if it had come down from heaven itself. Thor stood there in shock, not knowing what to do or what to say. Was this all real? He wondered briefly if it was all just another creation in the Land of the Druids, just another dream, or his mind playing tricks on him. He had been wanting to embrace his mother for as long as he could remember, and he took a step forward, determined to know if she was an apparition.

Thor reached out to embrace her, and as he did, he was afraid that his hug would go through nothing but air, all of this just an illusion. But as Thor reached out, he felt his arms wrap around her, felt himself hug a real person – and he felt her hug him back. It was the most amazing feeling in the world.

She hugged him tight, and Thor was elated to know that she was real. That this was all real. That he had a mother, that she really existed, that she was here in the flesh, in this land of illusion and fantasy – and that she really cared about him.

After a long while, they leaned back, and Thor looked at her, tears in his eyes, and saw that there were tears in hers, too.

"I'm so proud of you, my son," she said.

He stared back, at a loss for words.

"You have completed your journey," she added. "You are worthy to be here. You have become the man I always knew you would."

Thor looked back at her, taking in her features, still amazed by the fact that she really existed, and wondering what to say. His entire life he'd had so many questions for her; yet now that he was here before her, he was drawing a blank. He wasn't sure even where to begin.

"Come with me," she said, turning, "and I will show you this place – this place where you were born."

She smiled and held out her hand, and Thor grasped it.

They walked side-by-side into the castle, his mother leading the way, light exuding off of her and bouncing off the walls. Thor took it all in in wonder: it was the most resplendent place he'd ever seen, its walls made of sparkling gold, everything shining, perfect, surreal. He felt as if he had come to a magical castle in heaven.

They passed down a long corridor with high arched ceilings,

light bouncing off of everything. Thor looked down and saw the floor was covered in diamonds, smooth, sparkling in a million points of light.

"Why did you leave me?" Thor suddenly asked.

They were the first words Thor had spoken, and they surprised even him. Of all the things he wanted to ask her, for some reason this popped out first, and he felt embarrassed and ashamed that he hadn't anything nicer to say. He hadn't meant to be so abrupt.

But his mother's compassionate smile never faltered. She walked beside him, looking at him with pure love, and he could feel such love and acceptance from her, could feel that she did not judge him, no matter what he said.

"You are right to be upset with me," she said. "I need to ask your forgiveness. You and your sister meant more to me than anything in the world. I wanted to raise you here – but I could not. Because you are both special. Both of you."

They turned down another corridor, and his mother stopped and turned to Thor.

"You are not just a Druid, Thorgrin, not just a warrior. You are the greatest warrior that has ever been, or ever will be – and the greatest Druid, too. Yours is a special destiny; your life is meant to be bigger, much bigger, than this place. It is life and a destiny meant to be shared with the world. That is why I set you free. I had to let you out in the world, in order for you to become the man you are, in order for you to have the experiences you had and to learn to become the warrior you are meant to be."

She took a deep breath.

"You see, Thorgrin, it is not seclusion and privilege that make a warrior – but toil and hardship, suffering and pain. Suffering above all. It killed me to watch you suffer – and yet paradoxically, that was what you needed most in order to become the man you have become. Do you understand, Thorgrin?"

Thor did indeed, for the first time in his life, understand. For the first time, it all made sense. He thought of all the suffering he had encountered in his life: his being raised without a mother, reared as a lackey to his brothers, by a father who hated him, in a small, suffocating village, viewed by everyone as a nobody. His upbringing had been one long string of indignities.

But now he was beginning to see that he needed that; that all of his toil and tribulation was meant to be.

"All of your hardship, your independence, your struggling to find your own way," his mother added, "it was my gift to you. It was my gift to make you stronger."

A gift, Thorgrin thought to himself. He had never thought of it that way before. At the time, it felt like the farthest thing from a gift – yet now, looking back, he knew that it was exactly that. As she spoke the words, he realized that she was right. All the adversity in his life that he had faced – it had all been a gift, to help mold him into what he had become.

His mother turned, and the two continued to walk side-by-side through the castle, and Thor's mind spun with a million questions for her.

“Are you real?” Thor asked.

Once again, he was ashamed for being so blunt, and once again he found himself asking a question he did not expect to ask. Yet he felt an intense desire to know.

“Is this place real?” Thor added. “Or is it all just illusion, just a figment of my own imagination, like the rest of this land?”

His mother smiled at him.

“I am as real as you,” she replied.

Thor nodded, assured at the response.

“You are correct that the Land of Druids is a land of illusion, a magic land within yourself,” she added. “I am very much real – yet at the same time, like you, I am a Druid. Druids are not so attached to physical place as are humans. Which means that a part of me lives here, while a part of me lives elsewhere. That is why I am always with you, even if you cannot see me. Druids are everywhere and nowhere at once. We straddle two worlds that others do not.”

“Like Argon,” Thor replied, recalling Argon’s distant gaze, his sometimes appearing and disappearing, his being everywhere and nowhere at once.

She nodded.

“Yes,” she replied. “Just like my brother.”

Thor gaped, in shock.

“Your brother?” he repeated.

She nodded.

“Argon is your uncle,” she said. “He loves you very much. He

always has. And Alistair, too."

Thor pondered it all, overwhelmed.

His brow furrowed as he thought of something.

"But for me, it's different," Thor said. "I don't quite feel as you. I feel more of an attachment to place than you. I can't travel to other worlds as freely as Argon."

"That is because you are half human," she replied.

Thor thought about that.

"I am here now, in this castle, in my home," he said. "This is my home, is it not?"

"Yes," she replied. "It is. Your true home. As much as any home you have in the world. Yet Druids are not as attached to the concept of home."

"So if I wanted to stay here, to live here, I could?" Thor asked.

His mother shook her head.

"No," she said. "Because your time here, in the Land of the Druids, is finite. Your arriving here was destined – yet you can only visit the Land of the Druids once. When you leave, you can never return again. This place, this castle, everything you see and know here, this place of your dreams that you have seen for so many years, it will all be gone. Like a river that cannot be stepped in twice."

"And you?" Thor asked, suddenly afraid.

His mother shook her head sweetly.

"You shall not see me again, either. Not like this. Yet I will always be with you."

Thor was crestfallen at the thought.

"But I don't understand," Thor said. "I finally found you. I finally found this place, my home. And now you are telling me it is just for this once?"

His mother sighed.

"A warrior's home is out in the world," she said. "It is your duty to be out there, to assist others, to defend others – and to be become, always, a better warrior. You can always become better. Warriors are not meant to sit in one place – especially not a warrior with a great destiny such as yours. You will encounter great things in your life: great castles, great cities, great peoples. Yet you must not cling to anything. Life is a great tide, and you must allow it to take you where it will."

Thor furrowed his brow, trying to understand. It was so much to take in at once.

"I always thought that, once I found you, my greatest quest would be finished."

She smiled back at him.

"That is the nature of life," she replied. "We are given great quests, or we choose them for ourselves, and we set out to achieve them. We never truly imagine we can achieve them – and yet, somehow, we do. Once we do, once one quest is complete, somehow we expect our lives to be over. But our lives are just beginning. Climbing one peak is a great accomplishment in itself – yet it also leads to another, greater, peak. Achieving one quest enables you to embark on another, greater, quest."

Thor looked at her, surprised.

"That's right," she said, reading his mind. "Your finding me will lead you now to another – greater – quest."

"What other quest can there be?" Thor asked. "What can be greater than finding you?"

She smiled back, her eyes filled with wisdom.

"You cannot even begin to imagine the quests that lay ahead of you," she said. "Some people in life are born with just one quest. Some people, none. But you – Thorgrin – have been born with a destiny of twelve quests."

"Twelve?" Thor repeated, flabbergasted.

She nodded.

"The Destiny Sword was one. You achieved that marvelously. Finding me was another. You have achieved two of them. You have ten more to go, ten quests even greater than those two."

"Ten more?" he asked. "Greater? How is it possible?"

"Let me show you," she said, as she came up beside him and draped an arm around him and led him gently down the corridor. She led him through a shining sapphire door, and into a room made entirely of sapphires, sparkling green.

Thor's mother led him across the room to a huge, arched window made of crystal. Thor stood beside her and reached up and placed a palm on the crystal, sensing he needed to, and as he did, the two windowpanes gently opened.

Thor looked out at the ocean, a sweeping panorama from here, covered in a blinding haze and fog, a white light bouncing off of

everything, making it seem as if they were perched atop heaven itself.

"Look out," she said. "Tell me what you see."

Thor looked out, and at first he saw nothing but ocean and white haze. Soon, though, the haze turned brighter, the ocean began to disappear, and images began to flash before him.

The first thing Thor saw was his son, Guwayne, out at sea, floating on a small boat.

Thor's heart raced in panic.

"Guwayne," he said. "Is it true?"

"Even now he is lost at sea," she said. "He needs you. Finding him will be one of the great quests of your life."

As Thor watched Guwayne floating away, he felt an urgency to leave this place at once, to race to the ocean.

"I must go to him – now!"

His mother laid a calming hand on his wrist.

"See what else you have to see," she said.

Thor looked out and saw Gwendolyn and her people; they sat huddled on a rocky island and braced themselves as a wall of dragons descended from the sky, blanketing them. He saw a wall of flame, bodies on fire, people screaming in agony.

Thor's heart pounded with urgency.

"Gwendolyn," Thor cried. "I must go to her."

His mother nodded.

"She needs you, Thorgrin. They all need you – and they also need a new home."

As Thor continued to watch, he saw the landscape transform, and he saw the entire Ring devastated, a blackened landscape, Romulus's million men covering every inch of it.

"The Ring," he said, horrified. "It is no more."

Thor felt a burning desire to race from here and rescue them all right now.

His mother reached out and closed the window panes, and he turned and faced her.

"Those are just some of the quests that lay before you," she said. "Your child needs you, Gwendolyn needs you, your people need you – and beyond that, you will need to prepare for the day when you shall become King."

Thor's eyes opened wide.

"I? King?"

His mother nodded.

"It is your destiny, Thorgrin. You are the last hope. It is you who must become King of the Druids."

"King of the Druids?" he asked, trying to comprehend. "But… I don't understand. I thought I was in the Land of the Druids."

"The Druids do not live here anymore," his mother explained. "We are a nation in exile. They live now in a distant kingdom, in the far reaches of the Empire, and they are in great danger. You are destined to become their King. They need you, and you need them. Collectively, your power will be needed to battle the greatest power ever known to us. A threat far greater than the dragons."

Thor stared back, wondering.

"I'm so confused, Mother," he admitted.

"That is because your training is incomplete. You have advanced greatly, but you haven't even begun to reach the levels you will need to become a great warrior. You will meet powerful new teachers who will guide you, who will bring you to levels higher than you can imagine. You haven't even begun to see the warrior you will become.

"And you will need it, all of their training," she continued. "You will face monstrous empires, kingdoms greater than anything you've ever seen. You will encounter savage tyrants that make Andronicus look like nothing."

His mother examined him, her eyes full of knowing and compassion.

"Life is always bigger than you imagine, Thorgrin," she continued. "Always bigger. The Ring, in your eyes, is a great kingdom, the center of the world. But it is a small kingdom compared to the rest of the world; it is but a speck in the Empire. There are worlds, Thorgrin, beyond what you can imagine, bigger than anything you've seen. You have not even begun to live." She paused. "You will need this."

Thor looked down as he felt something on his wrist, and he watched as his mother clasped a bracelet on it, several inches wide, covering half of his forearm. It was shining gold, with a single black diamond in its center. It was the most beautiful, and the most powerful, thing he'd ever seen, and as it sat on his wrist,

he felt its power throbbing, infusing him.

"As long as you wear this," she said, "no man born of woman can harm you."

Thor looked back at her, and in his mind flashed the images he'd seen beyond those crystal windows, and he felt anew the urgency to Guwayne, to save Gwendolyn, to save his people.

But a part of him did not want to leave here, this place of his dreams to which he could never return, did not want to leave his mother.

He examined his bracelet, feeling the power of it overwhelming him. He felt as if it carried a piece of his mother.

"Is that why we were meant to meet?" Thor asked. "So that I could receive this?"

She nodded.

"And more importantly," she said, "to receive my love. As a warrior, you must learn to hate. But equally important, you must learn to love. Love is the stronger of the two forces. Hatred can kill a man, but love can raise him up, and it takes more power to heal than it does to kill. You must know hate, but you must also know love – and you must know when to choose each. You must learn not only to love, but more importantly, to allow yourself to receive love. Just as we need meals, we need love. You must know how much I love you. How much I accept you. How proud of you I am. You must know that I am always with you. And you must know that we will meet again. In the meantime, allow my love to carry you through. And more importantly, allow yourself

to love and accept yourself."

Thor's mother stepped forward and hugged him, and he hugged her back. It felt so good to hold her, to know he had a mother, a real mother, who existed in the world. As he held her, he felt himself filling up with love, and it made him feel sustained, born anew, ready to face anything.

Thor leaned back and looked into her eyes. They were his eyes, gray eyes, gleaming.

She lay both palms on his head, leaned forward, and kissed his forehead. Thor closed his eyes, and he never wanted the moment to end.

Thor suddenly felt a cool breeze on his arms, heard the sound of crashing waves, felt moist ocean air. He opened his eyes and looked about in surprise.

To his shock, his mother was gone. Her castle was gone. The cliff was gone. He looked all around, and he saw that he stood on a beach, the scarlet beach that lay at the entrance to the Land of the Druids. He had somehow exited the Land of the Druids. And he was all alone.

His mother had vanished.

Thor looked down at his wrist, at his new golden bracelet with the black diamond in its center, and he felt transformed. He felt his mother with him, felt her love, felt able to conquer the world. He felt stronger than he ever had. He felt ready to head into battle against any foe, to save his wife, his child.

Hearing a purring sound, Thor looked over and was elated to

see Mycoples sitting not far away, slowly lifting her great wings. She purred and walked toward him, and Thor felt that Mycoples was ready, too.

As she approached, Thor looked down and was shocked to see something sitting on the beach, which had been hidden beneath her. It was white, large, and round. Thor looked closely and saw that it was an egg.

A dragon's egg.

Mycoples looked to Thor, and Thor looked at her, shocked. Mycoples looked back at the egg sadly, as if not wanting to leave it but knowing that she had to. Thor stared at the egg in wonder, and he wondered what sort of dragon would emerge from Mycoples and Ralibar. He felt it would be the greatest dragon known to man.

Thor mounted Mycoples, and the two of them turned and took one long last look at the Land of the Druids, this mysterious place that had welcomed Thor in, and thrown him out. It was a place Thor was in awe of, a place he would never quite understand.

Thor turned and looked at the great ocean before them.

"It is time for war, my friend," Thor commanded, his voice booming, confident, the voice of a man, of a warrior, of a King-to-be.

Mycoples screeched, raised her great wings, and lifted the two of them up into the sky, over the ocean, away from this world, heading back for Guwayne, for Gwendolyn, for Romulus, his dragons, and the battle of Thor's life.

Chapter Four

Romulus stood at the bow of his ship, first in the fleet, thousands of Empire ships behind him, and he looked out at the horizon with great satisfaction. High overhead flew his host of dragons, their screeches filling the air, battling Ralibar. Romulus clutched the railing as he watched, digging his long fingernails into it, gripping the wood as he watched his beasts attack Ralibar and drive him down into the ocean, again and again, pinning him beneath the waters.

Romulus cried out in joy and squeezed the rail so hard that it shattered as he watched his dragons shoot up from the ocean, victorious, with no sign of Ralibar. Romulus raised his hands high above his head and leaned forward, feeling a power burning in his palms.

"Go, my dragons," he whispered, eyes aglow. "Go."

No sooner had he uttered the words than his dragons turned and set their sights on the Upper Isles; they raced forward, screeching, raising their wings high. Romulus could feel himself controlling them, could feel himself invincible, able to control anything in the universe. After all, it was still his moon. His time of power would be up soon, but for now, nothing in the world could stop him.

Romulus's eyes lit up as he watched the dragons aim for the Upper Isles, saw in the distance men and women and children

running and screaming from their path. He watched with delight as the flames began to roll down, as people were burned alive, and as the entire island went up in one huge ball of flame and destruction. He savored watching it be destroyed, just the same way he had watched the Ring destroyed.

Gwendolyn had managed to run from him – but this time, there was nowhere left to go. Finally, the last of the MacGils would be crushed under his hand forever. Finally, there would be no corner left of the universe that was not subjugated to him.

Romulus turned and looked over his shoulder at his thousands of ships, his immense fleet filling the horizon, and he breathed deep and leaned back, raising his face to the heavens, raising his palms up to his sides, and he shrieked a shriek of victory.

Chapter Five

Gwendolyn stood in the cavernous stone cellar underground, huddled with dozens of her people, and listened to the earth quake and burn above her. Her body flinched with every noise. The earth shook hard enough at times to make them stumble and fall, as outside, huge chunks of rubble smashed to the ground, the playthings of the dragons. The sound of it rumbling and reverberating echoed endlessly in Gwen's ears, sounding as if the whole world were being destroyed.

The heat became more and more intense below ground as the dragons breathed down on the steel doors above, again and again, as if knowing they were hiding under here. The flames luckily were stopped by the steel, yet black smoke seeped through, making it ever harder to breathe, and sending them all into coughing fits.

There came the awful sound of stone smashing against steel, and Gwen watched as the steel doors above her bent and shook, and nearly caved in. Clearly, the dragons knew they were down here, and were trying their best to get in.

"How long will the gates hold?" Gwen asked Matus, standing close by.

"I do not know," Matus replied. "My father built this underground cellar to withstand attack from enemies – not from dragons. I do not think it can last very long."

Gwendolyn felt death closing in on her as the room became hotter and hotter, feeling as if she were standing on a scorched earth. It became harder to see from the smoke, and the floor trembled as rubble smashed again and again above them, small pieces of rock and dust crumbling down onto her head.

Gwen looked around at the terrified faces of all those in the room, and she could not help but wonder if, by retreating down here, they had all set themselves up for a slow and painful death. She was starting to wonder if perhaps the people who had died up above, right away, were the lucky ones.

Suddenly there came a reprieve, as the dragons flew off elsewhere. Gwen was surprised, and wondered what they were up to, when moments later, she heard a tremendous crash of rock and the earth shook so strongly that everyone in the room fell. The crash had been distant, and was followed by two trembles, like a landslide of rock.

"Tirus's fort," Kendrick said, coming up beside her. "They must have destroyed it."

Gwen looked up at the ceiling and realized he was probably right. What else could elicit such an avalanche of rock? Clearly, the dragons were in a rage, intent on destroying every last thing on this isle. She knew it would only be a matter of time until they burst through to this chamber, too.

In the sudden lull, Gwen was shocked to hear the shrill sound of a baby's cry cutting through the air. The sound pierced her like a knife in her chest. She could not help but immediately think of

Guwayne, and as the cry, somewhere above ground, grew louder, a part of her, still distraught, convinced herself that it was indeed Guwayne up there, crying out for her. She knew rationally that it was impossible; her son was out on the ocean, far from here. And yet, her heart begged for it to be so.

"My baby!" Gwen screamed. "He's up there. I must save him!"

Gwen ran for the steps, when suddenly she felt a strong hand on hers.

She turned to see her brother Reece holding her back.

"My lady," he said. "Guwayne is far from here. That is the cry of another baby."

Gwen did not wish it to be true.

"It is still a baby," she said. "It is all alone up there. I cannot let it die."

"If you go up there," Kendrick said, stepping forward, coughing in the soot, "we will have to close the doors after you, and you will be all alone up there. You will die up there."

Gwen was not thinking clearly. In her mind, there was a baby alive up there, all alone, and she knew, above all, that she had to save it – no matter what the price.

Gwen shook her hand free from Reece's grip and sprinted for the stairs. She took them three at a time, and before anyone could reach her, she pulled back the metal pole barring the doors, and leaned into them with her shoulder, pushing them up with all her might as she raised her palms.

Gwen screamed out in pain as she did, the metal so hot it

burned her palms, and quickly she retracted them; undeterred, she then covered her palms with her sleeves and pushed the doors up all the way.

Gwendolyn coughed madly as she burst out into daylight, clouds of black smoke pouring out of the underground with her. As she stumbled to the surface, she squinted against the light, then looked out, raising a hand to her eyes, and was shocked to see one huge wave of destruction. All that had been standing just moments before was now razed, reduced to piles of smoking and charred rubble.

The baby's cries came again, louder up here, and Gwen looked around, waiting for the black clouds of smoke to part; as she did, she saw, on the far side of the court, a baby on the ground, wrapped in a blanket. Nearby, she saw its parents lying, burnt alive, now dead. Somehow, the baby had survived. Perhaps, Gwen thought with a pang of misery, the mother had died sheltering it from the flames.

Suddenly, Kendrick, Reece, Godfrey, and Steffen appeared beside her.

"My lady, you must come back now!" Steffen implored. "You shall die up here!"

"The baby," Gwen said. "I must save it."

"You cannot," Godfrey insisted. "You will never make it back alive!"

Gwen no longer cared. Her mind was overcome with a laser-like focus, and all she saw, all she could think of, was the child.

She blocked out the rest of the world and knew that, as much as she needed to breathe, she needed to save it.

The others tried to grab her, but Gwen was undeterred; she shook off their grip and dashed for the baby.

Gwen sprinted with all she had, heart slamming in her chest as she ran through the rubble, through clouds of billowing black smoke, flames all around her. The black smoke acted as a shield, though, and luckily for her, the dragons could not see her yet. She ran across the courtyard, through the clouds, seeing only the baby, hearing only its cries.

She ran and ran, her lungs bursting, until she finally reached it. She reached down and scooped up the baby and immediately examined its face, some part of her expecting to see Guwayne.

She was crestfallen to see it was not him; it was a girl. She had large, beautiful blue eyes filled with tears as she shrieked and trembled, her hands in fists. Still, Gwen felt elated to hold another baby, feeling as if somehow she were making amends for sending Guwayne away. And she could already see, after a brief glance at the baby's sparkling eyes, that it was beautiful.

The clouds of smoke lifted and Gwendolyn suddenly found herself exposed at the far end of the courtyard, holding the wailing baby. She looked up and saw, hardly a hundred yards away, a dozen fierce dragons, with huge glowing eyes, all turning and looking at her. They fixed their eyes on her with delight and fury, and she could see that they were already preparing to kill her.

The dragons launched into the air, flapping their great wings, so enormous from this close, heading her way. Gwen braced herself, standing there, clutching the baby, knowing she would never make it back in time.

Suddenly, there came the sound of drawn swords, and Gwen turned to see her brothers Reece, Kendrick, and Godfrey, along with Steffen, Brandt, Atme, and all the Legion members, standing beside her, all drawing swords and shields, all rushing to protect her. They formed a circle around her, holding their shields up to the sky, and they all prepared to die with her. Gwen was so deeply moved and inspired by their courage.

The dragons bore down on them, opening their massive jaws, and they braced themselves for the inevitable flame that would kill them all. Gwen closed her eyes and she saw her father, saw everyone who was ever important in her life, and she prepared to meet them.

Suddenly, there came a horrific shriek, and Gwen flinched, assuming it was the first attack.

But then she realized it was a different screech, one she recognized: the screech of an old friend.

Gwen looked up to the skies behind her, and she was overcome as she spotted a lone dragon racing through the skies, hurrying to do battle with the ones approaching her. She was even more elated to see, on its back, the man she loved more than anyone in the world:

Thorgrin.

He had returned.

Chapter Six

Thor rode on the back of Mycoples, the clouds whipping his face, going so fast he could hardly breathe, as they raced for the host of dragons and prepared for battle. Thor's bracelet throbbed on his wrist, and he felt that his mother had infused him with a new power which he could hardly understand; it was as if there were little sense of space and time. Thor had barely thought of flying back, had barely lifted from the shores of the Land of the Druids, when he was suddenly here already, above the Upper Isles, racing into the nest of dragons. Thor felt as if he had been magically transported here, as though they had traveled through a gap in time or space – as if his mother had launched them here, had somehow allowed them to achieve the impossible, to fly faster and farther than he ever had before. He felt it was his mother sending him off with a gift of speed.

As Thor squinted through the cloud cover, the immense dragons came into view, circling the Upper Isles, diving down and preparing to breathe fire. Thor looked down and his heart dropped to see that the island was already engulfed in flame, razed to the ground. He wondered with dread if anyone had managed to survive; he did not see how they could have. Was he too late?

Yet as Mycoples dove down, came ever closer, Thor's eyes narrowed in on a single person, drawing him in like a magnet as

he singled her out in the chaos: Gwendolyn.

There she was, his wife-to-be, standing in the courtyard proudly, fearlessly, clutching a baby, surrounded by everyone Thor loved, all of them encircling her and raising shields to the sky as the dragons dove down to attack. Thor watched in horror as the dragons opened their great jaws and prepared to breathe flames that Thor knew, in but a moment, would consume Gwendolyn and everyone he loved.

"DIVE!" Thor screamed to Mycoples.

Mycoples needed no encouragement: she dove down faster than Thor could imagine, so fast he could hardly catch his breath, and he held on for dear life as she did, nearly upside down. Within moments she reached the three dragons about to attack Gwendolyn, and with a great roar, her jaw opened wide, her talons out before her, Mycoples attacked the unsuspecting beasts.

Mycoples smashed into the dragons, her downward momentum carrying her, landing on their backs, clawing one and biting another – and swiping the third with her wings. She stopped them right before they breathed fire, driving them face-first into the earth.

They all impacted the ground together, and there came a great rumble and clouds of dust as Mycoples drove their faces down beneath the earth, until they were lodged so deeply in it that they were stuck, only their rear talons sticking up out of the ground. As they touched down, Thor turned and saw Gwendolyn's shocked expression, and he thanked God that he'd

saved her just in time.

There came a great roar, and Thor turned and looked back up to the sky, and faced an onslaught of approaching dragons.

Mycoples was already turning and flying upwards, launching, heading up for the dragons fearlessly. Thor was weaponless, but he felt different than he ever had entering a battle: for the first time in his life, he felt he did not need weapons. He felt he could summon and rely on the power within him. His true power. The power his mother had instilled him with.

As they approached, Thor held up his wrist, aiming his golden bracelet, and a light shot forth from the black diamond in its center. The yellow light engulfed the dragon closest to them, in the center of the pack, and knocked him backwards, sending him racing through the air, upwards, colliding into the others.

Mycoples, in a rage, determined to wreak havoc, dove fearlessly into the nest of dragons, fighting and clawing her way through, sinking her teeth into one, throwing another, and cutting a path through them as she knocked several of them back. She clamped down on one until it went limp and then dropped it; it fell to earth like a huge boulder falling from the sky, and hit the ground, shaking it. Thor could hear the impact from here as it caused another earthquake down below.

Thor glanced down below and saw Gwen and the others running to take cover, and he knew that he needed to direct all these dragons away from the island, away from Gwendolyn, in order to give them a chance to escape. If he led the dragons out

to the ocean, he figured he could lure them away and take the fight out there.

"To the open sea!" Thor cried.

Mycoples followed his command, and they turned and flew through the nest of dragons and out the other side.

Thor turned as he heard a roar, and felt a distant heat as flames launched his way. He was satisfied to see his plan was working: all the dragons had abandoned the Upper Isles, and were now following him out to the open sea. In the distance, down below, Thor spotted Romulus's fleet blanketing the sea, and he knew that even if somehow he survived against the dragons – he would still have a million-man army to face on his own. He knew he likely would not survive this encounter. But at least it would buy the others some time.

At least Gwendolyn could make it.

* * *

Gwen stood in the razed and smoldering courtyard of what remained of Tirus's court, still clutching the baby, looking up at the sky in wonder and relief and sadness all at once. Her heart soared to see Thor again, the love of her life, alive, returned, and on Mycoples, no less. With him here, she felt a part of her had been restored, felt as if anything was possible. She felt something she had not felt in a long time: the will to live again.

Her men slowly lowered their shields as they watched the

dragons turn and fly off, finally leaving the Isles and heading out to open sea. Gwen looked around and saw the devastation they had left, the huge piles of rubble, the flames everywhere, and the dead dragons lying on their backs. It looked like an island ravaged by war.

Gwen also saw what must have been the baby's parents, two corpses lying nearby, right beside where Gwen had found her. Gwen looked into the baby's eyes and realized she was all she had left in the world. She clutched her tight.

"This is our chance, my lady!" Kendrick said. "We must evacuate now!"

"The dragons are distracted," Godfrey added. "For now, at least. Who knows when they shall return. We must all leave this place at once."

"But the Ring is no more," Aberthol said. "Where will we go?"

"Anywhere but here," Kendrick replied.

Gwen heard their words, yet they felt distant in her mind; she instead turned and searched the skies, watching Thor fly off in the distance, filled with longing.

"And what of Thorgrin?" she asked. "Shall we leave him, alone up there?"

Kendrick and the others grimaced, their faces falling in disappointment. Clearly, the thought disturbed them, too.

"We would fight with Thorgrin to the death if we could, my lady," Reece said. "But we cannot. He is in the sky, over the sea, far from here. None of us have a dragon. Nor do we have his

power. We cannot help him. Now we must help those we can help. That is what Thor sacrificed for. That is what Thor has given his life for. We must take the opportunity he has given us."

"What remains of our fleet still lies on the far side of the island," Srog added. "It was wise of you to hide those ships. Now we must use them. Whoever is left of our people, we must leave this place at once – before their return."

Gwendolyn's mind raced with mixed emotions. She wanted so badly to go and save Thor; yet at the same time, she knew that waiting here, with all these people, would do him no good. The others were right: Thor had just given his life for their safety. It would make his actions worth nothing if she did not try to save these people while she could.

Another thought loomed in Gwen's mind: Guwayne. If they left now, rushed out to the open sea, maybe, just maybe, they could find him. And the thought of seeing her son again filled with her a new will to live.

Finally, Gwen nodded, holding the baby, preparing to move.

"Okay," she said. "Let us go and find my son."

* * *

The roar of the dragons grew louder behind Thor, the group getting closer, chasing them, as he and Mycoples flew farther out to sea. Thor felt a wave of flame rolling toward his back, about to engulf them, and he knew that if he did not do something soon,

he would soon be dead.

Thor closed his eyes, no longer afraid to call on the power within him, no longer feeling the need to rely upon physical weapons. As he closed his eyes, he recalled his time in the Land of the Druids, recalled how powerful he had been, how much he had been able to influence everything around him with his mind. He recalled the power within him, how the physical universe was just an extension of his mind.

Thor willed his mind power to the surface, and he imagined a great wall of ice behind him, shielding him from fire, protecting him. He imagined himself completely covered in a protective bubble, he and Mycoples, safe from the dragons' wall of fire.

Thor opened his eyes and was amazed to feel himself encased in cold, and to see a tremendous wall of ice all around him, just as he'd envisioned, three feet thick and sparkling blue. He turned and watched the dragons' wall of flame approach – and get stopped by the wall of ice, the flames hissing, huge clouds of steam rising up. The dragons were irate.

Thor circled around as the wall of ice melted, and he decided to meet the nest of dragons head on. Mycoples fearlessly flew into the dragons – and clearly, they were not expecting this attack.

Mycoples lunged forward, extended her talons, grabbed one dragon by its jaw, and swung around and threw it; the dragon went hurtling, end over end, spinning out of control, and down into the ocean below.

Before she could regroup, Mycoples was attacked by another dragon, which clamped its jaws on her side. Mycoples shrieked, and Thor reacted immediately. He jumped off Mycoples's back onto the dragon's nose, and ran along its head and re-mounted himself on the dragon's back. The dragon kept its hold on Mycoples, bucking wildly to knock Thor off, and Thor held on for dear life as he rode the hostile dragon.

Mycoples lurched forward and with her jaws clamped down on the tail of another dragon, tearing it off. The dragon screamed and plummeted to the ocean – but no sooner had she done so than Mycoples was pounced on by several more dragons, who sank their teeth into her legs.

Thor, meanwhile, still held on for dear life, determined to take control of this dragon. He forced himself to remain calm and to remember that it was all a matter of his mind. He could feel the tremendous power of this ancient, primordial beast raging through his veins. And as he closed his eyes, he stopped resisting, and began to feel in tune with it. He felt its heart, its pulse, its mind. He felt himself become one with it.

Thor opened his eyes, and the dragon opened its eyes too, now glowing a different color. Thor saw the world through the dragon's eyes. This dragon, this hostile beast, became an extension of Thor. What it saw, Thor saw. Thor commanded it – and it listened.

The dragon, at Thor's command, released its grip on Mycoples; it then roared and lurched forward, sinking its teeth

into the three dragons attacking Mycoples, and tearing them to pieces.

The other dragons were caught off guard, clearly not expecting one of their own to attack them; before they could regroup, Thor had already attacked a half dozen of them, using this dragon to clamp down on the back of their necks, catching them unaware, maiming one dragon after the next. Thor dove into three more and had the dragon bite down on their wings, tearing them from their backs, the dragons tumbling into the sea.

Suddenly Thor was attacked from the side, and did not see it coming; the dragon opened its jaws and sank its teeth into Thor.

Thor shrieked as a long, jagged tooth punctured his rib cage and knocked him off his dragon, sending him tumbling through the air. He felt himself plunging down toward the ocean, wounded, and he realized he was about to die.

Out of the corner of his eye, Thor spotted Mycoples diving down beneath him – and the next thing Thor knew, he landed on Mycoples's back, saved by his old friend. The two of them were back together again, both wounded.

Thor, breathing hard, clutching his rib, surveyed the damage they had done: a dozen dragons now lay dead or maimed, bobbing in the ocean. They had done well, just the two of them, far better than he would have imagined.

Yet Thor heard a tremendous shriek, and he looked up to see several dozen dragons left. Gasping for breath, Thor realized it been a valiant fight, but their chance of winning looked grim.

Still, he did not hesitate; he flew fearlessly upward, racing to meet the dragons that challenged them.

Mycoples shrieked and breathed back fire as they sent fire at Thor. Thor again used his powers to put up a wall of ice before him, stopping the dragons' flames from reaching him. He held onto Mycoples as she impacted the group, as she thrashed and clawed and bit, fighting for her life. She took wounds, but she did not let it slow her down as she wounded dragons on all sides of her. Thor, joining in, raised his bracelet and took aim at dragon after dragon, and as a beam of white light shot forth, it knocked one dragon after the next off of Mycoples as she fought.

Thor and Mycoples fought and fought, each covered in wounds, bleeding, exhausted.

And yet, still, dozens more dragons remained.

As Thor held up his bracelet, he felt the power ebbing – indeed, he felt the power ebbing from himself. He was powerful, he knew, but not powerful enough yet; he knew he could not sustain the fight until the very end.

Thor looked up to see huge wings in his face, followed by long sharp talons, and he watched helplessly as they punctured Mycoples's throat. Thor held on for dear life as the dragon grabbed hold of Mycoples, clamped its jaws down on her tail, and swung her around and threw her.

Thor hung on as he and Mycoples went spinning through the air; Mycoples tumbled end over end, and they plummeted down for the ocean, out of control.

They landed in the water, Thor still holding on, and the two of them plunged beneath the surface. Thor flailed underwater, until finally their momentum stopped. Mycoples turned and swam up, heading for sunlight.

As they surfaced, Thor breathed deep, gasping for air, treading the frigid waters as he still clung to Mycoples. The two bobbed in the water, and as they did, Thor looked to the side and saw a sight he would never forget: floating in the water, not far from him, eyes open, dead, was a dragon he had come to love: Ralibar.

Mycoples spotted him at the same time, and as she did, something overcame her, something Thor had never seen: she shrieked a great wail of grief and raised her wings high, extending them all the way. Her entire body shuddered as she let out a horrific howl, shaking the universe. Thor saw her eyes change, glowing all different colors, until finally they were shining yellow and white.

Mycoples turned, a different dragon, and looked up at the host of dragons coming down for them. Something within her, Thor realized, had snapped. Her mourning had morphed into rage, and had given her a power unlike any Thor had ever seen. She was a dragon possessed.

Mycoples raced up to the sky, wounds bleeding and not caring. Thor felt a new burst of energy as well, and a desire for vengeance. Ralibar had been a close friend, had sacrificed his life for all of them, and Thor felt determined to set wrongs right.

As they raced toward them, Thor leapt off of Mycoples and

landed on the nose of the closest dragon, hugging it as he leaned around and grabbed at its jaws, clamping them shut. Thor summoned whatever power he had left within him, and he spun the dragon around in the air, then threw it with all his might. The dragon went flying, taking out two more dragons in the air, and all three went soaring down to the ocean below.

Mycoples whirled around and caught Thor as he fell, and he landed on her back as she raced for the dragons that remained. She met their roars with hers, biting stronger, flying faster, cutting deeper than they. The more they wounded her, the less she seemed to notice. She was a whirlwind of destruction, as was Thor, and by the time she and Thor were done, Thor realized there were no more dragons left in the sky to greet them: all of them had dropped down from the sky to the ocean, maimed or killed.

Thor found himself flying alone with Mycoples high in the air, circling the fallen dragons below, taking stock. The two of them breathed hard, dripping blood. Thor knew that Mycoples was breathing her dying breaths – he could see it as blood dripped from her mouth, each breath a gasp, a death pain.

"No, my friend," Thor said, holding back tears. "You cannot die."

My time has come, Thor heard her say. *At least I have died with dignity.*

"No," Thor insisted. "You must not die!"

Mycoples breathed blood, and the flapping of her wings

weakened as she began to dip down toward the ocean.

There is one last fight left in me, Mycoples said. *And I want my final moment to be one of valor.*

Mycoples looked up, and Thor followed her gaze to see Romulus's fleet of ships stretching across the horizon.

Thor nodded gravely. He knew what Mycoples wanted. She wanted to greet her death in one last great battle.

Thor, badly wounded, breathing hard, feeling as if he would not make it either, wanted to go down that way, too. He wondered now if his mother's prophecies were true. She told him that he could alter his own destiny. Had he altered it? he wondered. Would he die now?

"Then let us go, my friend," Thorgrin said.

Mycoples let out a great shriek, and together, the two of them dove down, taking aim for Romulus's fleet.

Thor felt the wind and the clouds racing through his hair and face as he let out a great battle cry. Mycoples shrieked to match his rage, and they dove down low, and Mycoples opened her great jaws and breathed down fire on one ship after another.

Soon, a wall of flame spread across the seas, set one ship after another aflame. Tens of thousands of ships lay before them, but Mycoples would not stop, opening her jaws, unrolling cloud after cloud of flame. The flames stretched as if they were one continuous wall, as the screams of men rose up below.

Mycoples's flames began to weaken, and soon she breathed, and little fire emerged. Thor knew that she was dying beneath

him. She flew lower and lower, too weak to breathe fire. But she was not too weak to use her body as a weapon, and in place of breathing fire, she dropped down toward the ships, aiming her hardened scales into them, like a meteor racing down from the sky.

Thor braced himself and held on with all his might as she dove right into the ships, the sound of cracking wood filling the air. She flew into one ship after another, back and forth, destroying the fleet. Thor held on as pieces of wood smashed into him from every direction.

Finally, Mycoples could go no further. She stopped in the center of the fleet, bobbing in the water, having destroyed many of the ships, yet still surrounded by thousands more. Thor bobbed on her back as she lay floating, breathing weakly.

The remaining ships turned on them. Soon the skies grew black, and Thor heard a whizzing sound. He looked up and saw a rainbow of arrows arching his way. Suddenly, he was overcome with horrific pain, pierced with the arrows, with nowhere to hide. Mycoples, too, was pierced by them, and they began to sink beneath the waves, two great heroes having fought the battle of their lives. They had destroyed the dragons and much of the Empire fleet. They had done more than an entire army could have done.

But now there was nothing left, they could die. As Thor was pierced by arrow after arrow, sinking lower and lower, he knew there was nothing left to do but prepare to die.

Chapter Seven

Alistair looked down to find herself standing on a skywalk, and as she looked past it, down far below, she saw the ocean crashing into rocks, the sound filling her ears. A strong gale of wind knocked her off balance, and Alistair looked up and, as she had in so many dreams in her life, she saw a castle perched on a cliff, heralded by a shining gold door. Standing before it was a single figure, a silhouette, hands held out to her as if to embrace her – yet Alistair could not see her face.

"My daughter," the woman said.

She tried to take a step toward her, but her legs were stuck, and she looked down to see she was shackled to the ground. Try as she did, Alistair was unable to move.

She reached her hands out to her mother and cried desperately: "Mother, save me!"

Suddenly Alistair felt her world slipping past her, felt herself plummeting, and she looked down to see the skywalk collapsing beneath her. She fell, shackles dangling behind her, and went hurtling down toward the ocean, taking an entire section of the skywalk with her.

Alistair went numb as her body sank into the ice-cold ocean, still shackled. She felt herself sinking, and she looked up to see the daylight above become more and more faint.

Alistair opened her eyes to find herself sitting in a small, stone

cell, in a place she did not recognize. Before her sat a single figure, and she dimly recognized him: Erec's father. He grimaced down at her.

"You have murdered my son," he said. "Why?"

"I did not!" she protested weakly.

He frowned.

"You shall be sentenced to death," he added.

"I did not murder Erec!" Alistair protested. She stood and tried to rush to him, but once again she found herself shackled to the wall.

There appeared behind Erec's father a dozen guards, dressed in all black armor, wearing formidable faceplates, the sound of their jingling spurs filling the room. They approached and reached out and grabbed Alistair, yanking her, pulling her from the wall. Yet her ankles were still shackled, and they stretched her body more and more.

"No!" Alistair shrieked, being torn apart.

Alistair woke, covered in a cold sweat, and looked all around, trying to figure out where she was. She was disoriented; she did not recognize the small, dim cell she sat in, the ancient stone walls, the metal bars on the windows. She spun around, trying to walk, and she heard a rattling and looked down to see her ankles were shackled to the wall. She tried to shake them loose but she could not, the cold iron cutting into her ankles.

Alistair took stock and realized that she was in a small holding cell partly beneath ground, the only light source coming from

the small window cut into the stone, blocked by iron bars. There came a distant cheer, and Alistair, curious, made her way to the window, as much as the shackles allowed, and leaned forward and looked through, trying to get a glimpse of daylight, and to see where she was.

Alistair saw a huge crowd gathered – and at its head stood Bowyer, smug, triumphant.

"That sorcerer Queen tried to murder her husband-to-be!" Bowyer boomed to the crowd. "She approached me with a plot to kill Erec and to marry me instead. But her plans were foiled!"

An indignant cheer arose from the crowd, and Bowyer waited for them to calm. He raised his palms and spoke again.

"You can all rest easy now knowing that the Southern Isles shall not be under Alistair's rule, or under any other rule but my own. Now that Erec lies dying, it is I, Bowyer, who will protect you, I, the next-best champion of the games."

There came a huge shout of approval, and the crowd started to chant:

"King Bowyer, King Bowyer!"

Alistair watched the scene in horror. Everything was happening so quickly around her, she could hardly process it all. This monster, Bowyer, just the sight of him filled her with rage. This very same man who had tried to murder her beloved was right there, before her eyes, claiming to be innocent, and trying to blame her. Worst of all, he would be named King. Would there be no justice?

Yet what happened to her didn't bother her nearly as much as the thought of Erec wallowing in his sickbed, still needing her healing. She knew that if she did not complete the healing on him soon, he would die here. She didn't care if she wallowed away in this dungeon forever for a crime she did not commit – she just wanted to make sure that Erec was healed.

The door to her cell suddenly slammed open, and Alistair wheeled to see a large group of people march in. At their center was Dauphine, flanked by Erec's brother, Strom, and his mother. Behind them were several royal guards.

Alistair stood up to greet them, but her shackles dug into her ankles, rattling, sending a piercing pain through her shins.

"Is Erec okay?" Alistair asked, desperate. "Please tell me. Does he live?"

"How dare you ask if he is alive," Dauphine snapped.

Alistair turned to Erec's mother, hoping for her mercy.

"Please, just let me know that he lives," she pleaded, her heart breaking inside.

His mother nodded back gravely, looking at her with disappointment.

"He does," she said weakly. "Though he lies gravely ill."

"Bring me to him!" Alistair insisted. "Please. I must heal him!"

"*Bring you to him?*" Dauphine echoed. "The temerity. You are not going anywhere near my brother – in fact, you are not going anywhere at all. We just came to take one last look at you before

your execution."

Alistair's heart fell.

"Execution?" she asked. "Is there no judge or jury on this island? Is there no system of justice?"

"*Justice?*" Dauphine said, stepping forward, red-faced. "*You* dare ask for justice? We found the bloody sword in your hand, our dying brother in your arms, and you dare to speak of justice? Justice has been served."

"But I tell you, I did not kill him!" Alistair pleaded.

"That's right," Dauphine said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "a magical mystery man entered the room and killed him, then disappeared and placed a weapon in your hands."

"It was not a mystery man," Alistair insisted. "It was Bowyer. I saw with my own eyes. He killed Erec."

Dauphine grimaced.

"Bowyer showed us the scroll that you penned to him. You pleaded for his hand in marriage and planned to kill Erec and marry him instead. You are a sick woman. Was not having my brother and having the Queenship enough for you?"

Dauphine handed Alistair the scroll, and Alistair's heart sank as she read:

Once Erec is dead, we shall spend our lives together.

"But that is not my hand!" Alistair protested. "The scroll is forged!"

"Yes, I'm sure it is," Dauphine said. "I'm sure you have a convenient explanation for everything."

“I penned no such scroll!” Alistair insisted. “Don’t you hear yourselves? This makes no sense. Why would I murder Erec? I love him with all my soul. We were nearly wed.”

“And thank the heavens you were not,” Dauphine said.

“You must believe me!” Alistair insisted, turning to Erec’s mother. “Bowyer tried to kill Erec. He wants the kingship. I want nothing of being Queen. I never have.”

“Don’t you worry,” Dauphine said. “You shall never be. In fact, you shall not even live. We here on the Southern Isles serve justice quickly. Tomorrow, you shall be executed.”

Alistair shook her head, realizing they could not be reasoned with. She sighed, her heart heavy.

“Is that why you’ve come?” she asked weakly. “To tell me that?”

Dauphine sneered back in the silence, and Alistair could feel the hatred in her gaze.

“No,” Dauphine finally replied, after a long, heavy silence. “It was to pronounce your sentence to you, and to take one long last look at your face before you are sent to hell. You will be made to suffer, the same way our brother was made to suffer.”

Suddenly, Dauphine reddened, lunged forward, reached out her fingernails, and grabbed Alistair’s hair. It happened so quickly, Alistair had no time to react. Dauphine let out a guttural scream as she scratched Alistair’s face. Alistair raised her hands to block herself, as others stepped forward to pull Dauphine off.

“Let go of me!” Dauphine yelled. “I want to kill her now!”

“Justice will be served tomorrow,” Strom said.

“Lead her out of here,” Erec’s mother commanded.

Guards stepped forward and yanked Dauphine from the room as she kicked and screamed in protest. Strom joined them, and soon the room was completely empty except for Alistair and Erec’s mother. She stopped at the door, slowly turned, and faced Alistair. Alistair searched her face for any trace left of kindness and compassion.

“Please, you must believe me,” Alistair said earnestly. “I don’t care what the others think of me. But I do care about you. You were kind to me from the moment you met me. You know how much I love your son. You know I could never have done this.”

Erec’s mother examined her, and as her eyes watered, she seemed to vacillate.

“That is why you stayed behind, isn’t it?” Alistair pressed. “That is why you’ve lingered. Because you want to believe me. Because you know I am right.”

After a long silence, his mother finally nodded. As if coming to a decision, she took several steps toward her. Alistair could see that Erec’s mother really did believe her, and she was elated.

His mother rushed forward and embraced her, and Alistair hugged her back and cried over her shoulder. Erec’s mother cried, too, and finally, she stepped back.

“You must listen to me,” Alistair said urgently. “I care not for what happens to me, or what others think of me. But Erec – I must get to him. *Now*. He is dying. I’ve only partially healed him,

and I need to finish. If I do not, he will die."

His mother looked her up and down, as if finally realizing she was speaking the truth.

"After all that's happened," she said, "all you care about is my son. I can see now that you really do care for him – and that you could never have done this."

"Of course not," Alistair said. "I've been set up by that barbarian, Bowyer."

"I will get you to Erec," she said. "It may cost us our lives, but if so, we will die trying. Follow me."

His mother unlocked her shackles, and Alistair quickly followed her out the cell, into the dungeons, and on their way to risk it all for Erec.

Chapter Eight

Gwendolyn stood on the bow of the ship, the ocean caressing her face, surrounded by all of her people, holding the rescued baby. All were in a state of shock as they sailed on the seas, already far from the Upper Isles. They were joined by just two ships, all that was left of the great fleet that had set sail from the Ring. Gwen's people, her nation, all the proud citizens of the Ring, had been reduced to but several hundred survivors, a nation in exile, floating, homeless, looking for some place to start again. And they were all looking to her for leadership.

Gwen stared out at the sea, examining it as she had been for hours, immune to the cold spray of the ocean mist as she peered into the fog, as she tried to keep her heart from breaking. The baby in her arms had finally fallen asleep, and all Gwen could think of was Guwayne. She hated herself; she had been so stupid to let him sail away. At the time it had seemed like the best idea, had seemed like the only way to save him from the certain imminent death. Who could have foreseen the change of events, that the dragons would have been averted? If Thor had not appeared when he had, surely they would all be dead right now – and Gwen could never have expected that.

Gwen had managed, at least, to save some of her people, some of her fleet, to save this baby, and they had managed, at least, to escape from the isle of death. Yet Gwen still shuddered each

time a roar of the dragons pierced the air, growing ever distant the farther they sailed. She closed her eyes and winced; she knew there was an epic battle being waged, and that Thor was in the middle of it. More than anything, she wanted to be there, by his side. Yet at the same time, she knew that would be futile. She would be useless as Thor fought those dragons, and she would just expose her people to getting killed.

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