A SKY OF SPELLS

BOOK #9 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Sky of Spells

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In A SKY OF SPELLS (BOOK #9 IN THE SORCERER'S RING), Thorgrin finally returns to himself and must confront his father once and for all. An epic battle occurs, as two titans face each other, and as Rafi uses his power to summon an army of undead. With the Destiny Sword destroyed, and the fate of the Ring in the balance, Argon and Alistair will need to summon their magical powers to help Gwendolyn's brave warriors. Yet even with their help, all could be lost if it were not for the return of Mycoples, and her new companion, Ralibar.Luanda struggles to prevail against her captor, Romulus, as the fate of the Shield hangs in the balance. Reece, meanwhile, struggles to lead his men back up the Canyon walls, with Selese's help. Their love deepens; but with the arrival of Reece's old love, his cousin, a tragic love triangle and misunderstandings develop.When the Empire is finally ousted from the Ring, and Gwendolyn has her chance for personal vengeance against McCloud, there is great cause to celebrate. As the new Queen of the Ring, Gwen uses her powers to unite both MacGils and McClouds for the first time in history, and to begin the epic rebuilding of the land, of her army, and of the Legion. King's Court slowly comes back to life once again, as they all begin to pick up the pieces. It is destined to become a more glorious city than even her father ever dreamed of, and in the process, justice finally finds Gareth.Tirus must be brought to justice, too, and Gwen will have to decide what sort of leader she will be. There is a great conflict amongst Tirus' sons, not all of whom see things the same way, and a struggle for power erupts once again, as Gwen decides if she will accept an invitation to the Upper Isles, thus making the MacGil clan whole once again. Erec is summoned to return to his people in the Southern Isles and see his dying father, and Alistair joins him, as they prepare for their wedding. Thorgrin and Gwendolyn may have wedding preparations in their future, too.Thor becomes closer to his sister, and as all settles down inside the Ring, he finds himself summoned to embark on his greatest quest of all: to seek out his

mysterious mother in a faraway land and to find out who he really is. With multiple wedding preparations in the air, with Spring returning, King's Court rebuilding, festivals afoot, peace seems to settle back onto the Ring. But danger lurks in the most unforeseen corners, and all of these characters greatest tribulations might be yet to come.With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A SKY OF SPELLS is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders.

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Morgan Rice
A Sky of Spells
(Book #9 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
for he today that sheds his blood with me
shall be my brother."
– William Shakespeare
Henry V

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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).

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!

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– 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."
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"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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Chapter One

Thor faced Gwendolyn, holding his sword at his side, his entire body trembling. He looked out and saw all the faces staring back at him in the stunned silence – Alistair, Erec, Kendrick, Steffen, and a host of his countrymen – people he had known and loved. *His* people. Yet here he was, facing them, sword at his side. He was on the wrong side of battle.

Finally, he realized.

Thor's veil had lifted as Alistair's words rang through him, filled him with clarity. He was Thorgrin. A member of the Legion. A member of the Western Kingdom of the Ring. He was not a solider for the Empire. He did not love his father. He loved all these people.

Most of all, he loved Gwendolyn.

Thor looked down and saw her face, staring up at him with such love, her eyes tearing. He was filled with shame and horror to realize he was facing her, holding this sword. His palms burned with humiliation and regret.

Thor dropped the sword, letting it fall from his hands. He took a step forward and embraced her.

Gwendolyn hugged him back tightly, and he heard her crying, felt her hot tears pouring down his neck. Thor was overwhelmed with remorse, and he could not conceive how it had all happened. It was a blur. All he knew was that he was happy to be back to himself, to have clarity, and to be back with his people.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear. "And I always will."

"I love you with everything that I am," Thor replied.

Krohn whined at his feet, limping over and licking Thor's palm; Thor leaned down and kissed his face.

"I'm sorry," Thor said to him, remembering hitting him as Krohn had defended Gwendolyn. "Please forgive me."

The earth, quaking violently but moments before, finally became still again.

"THORGRIN!" a shriek cut through the air.

Thor turned to see Andronicus. He stepped forward, into the clearing, scowling, his face red with rage. Both armies watched in stunned silence, as father and son faced each other.

"I *command* you!" Andronicus said. "Kill them! Kill them all! I am your father. You listen to me, and to me alone!"

But this time, as Thor stared back at Andronicus, something felt different. Something shifted inside. No longer did Thor view Andronicus as his father, as a family member, as someone he must answer to and give his life for; instead, he saw him as a foe. A monster. Thor no longer felt any obligation to give up his life for this man. On the contrary: he felt a burning rage against him. Here was the man who had ordered the attack on Gwendolyn; here was the man who had killed his fellow countrymen, who had invaded and ransacked his homeland; here was the man who had taken over his own mind, who had held him hostage with his dark sorcery.

This was not a man he loved. Rather, this was a man he wanted to kill more than anything on earth. Father or not.

Thor suddenly felt himself flood with rage. He reached down, picked up his sword, and charged full speed across the clearing, ready to kill his father.

Andronicus looked shocked as Thor charged, raised his sword high, and as Thor brought it down with both hands, with all his might, for his head.

Andronicus raised his huge battle axe at the last second, turning it sideways and blocking the blow with its metal shaft.

Thor did not relent: he swung his sword again and again, going for the kill, and each time Andronicus raised his axe and blocking it. The great clang of the two weapons meeting rang through the air as both armies watched in silence. Sparks flew with each blow.

Thor screamed and grunted, using every skill he had, hoping to kill his father on the spot. He had to do it, for himself, for Gwendolyn, for all those who had suffered by this monster's hand. With each blow, Thor wanted, more than anything, to wipe out his lineage, his own background, to start fresh again. To choose a different father.

Andronicus, on the defense, only blocked Thor's blows, and did not fight back. Clearly, he was refraining from attacking his son.

"Thorgrin!" Andronicus said, between blows. "You are my son. I do not wish to harm you. I am your father. You have saved my life. I want you alive."

"And I want you dead!" Thor screamed back.

Thor swung down again and again, driving him back, across the clearing, despite Andronicus' great size and strength. Yet still, Andronicus would not swing back at Thor. It was as if he was hoping that Thor would come back to him again.

But this time, Thor would not. Now, finally, Thor knew who he was. Finally, Andronicus' words were free from his head. Thor would rather be dead than at Andronicus's mercy again.

"Thorgrin, you must stop this!" Andronicus cried out. Sparks flew by his face as he blocked a particularly vicious slash with his axe head. "You will force me to kill you, and I do not wish to. You are my son. To kill you would be to kill myself."

"Then kill yourself!" Thor said. "Or if you do not wish to, then I shall do it for you!"

With a great cry Thor leapt up and kicked Andronicus with both feet in the chest, sending him stumbling and landing on his back.

Andronicus looked up, as if stunned that could have happened.

Thor stood over him and raised his sword high to finish him off.

"NO!" shrieked a voice. It was an awful voice, sounding like it erupted from the very depths of hell, and Thor glanced over to see a single man enter the clearing. He wore a long scarlet robe, his face hidden behind a hood, and an unearthly growl erupted from his throat.

Rafi.

Somehow, Rafi had made it back from his battle with Argon. He stood there now, holding both arms out wide at his sides. His sleeves fell as he rose his arms, revealing pale, blistery skin that looked as if it had never seen the sun. He emitted an awful sound from the back of his throat, like a snarl, and as he opened his mouth wide, it grew louder and louder until it filled the air, the low timber vibrating and making Thor's ears hurt.

The earth began to quake. Thor was knocked off-balance as the entire ground shook. He followed Rafi's hands and saw before him a sight he would never forget.

The earth began to split in two, a great chasm opening, spreading wider and wider. As it did, soldiers from both sides fell, slipping down, screaming as they hurled down into the ever-growing crevice.

An orange glow emitted from beneath the earth, and there came an awful hissing noise as steam and fog arose.

There appeared a single hand, emerging from the crevice, gripping the earth. The hand was black, lumpy, disfigured, and as it pulled itself up, Thor, to his horror, saw emerging from the earth an awful creature. It was in the shape of a human, but it was entirely black, with large glowing red eyes and long red fangs. A long, black tail dragged behind it. Its body was lumpy, and it looked like a corpse.

It leaned back its head and there came an awful roar, like Rafi's. It appeared to be some sort of undead creature, summoned from the depths of the hell.

Behind this creature there suddenly emerged another. Then another.

Thousands more of these creatures surfaced, pulling themselves up from the bowels of hell, an army of undead. Rafi's army.

Slowly, they came to Rafi's side, facing Thorgrin and the others.

Thor stared back in shock at this army facing him; as he stood there, his sword still held high, Andronicus suddenly rolled out from under him and retreated back to his army, clearly not wanting to have to confront Thorgrin.

Suddenly, the thousands of creatures rushed towards Thor, flooding the clearing, coming to kill Thor and all of his people.

Thor snapped out of it and raised his sword high as the first creature leapt for him, snarling, claws extended. Thor sidestepped, swung his sword, and chopped off its head. It stumbled to the ground, unmoving, and Thor braced himself for the next one.

These creatures were strong and fast, but one on one, they were no match for Thor and the skilled warriors of the Ring. Thor fought them deftly, killing them left and right. Yet the question was, how many could he could fight at once? He was flooded by thousands of them, from all directions, as was everyone around him.

Thor fell in beside Erec, Kendrick, Srog and the others, each fighting beside each other, watching each other's backs as they swung left and right, taking out two and three creatures at a time. One of them slipped by, grabbed Thor's arm and scratched it, drawing blood, and Thor cried out in pain, swung around and stabbed in the heart, killing it. Thor was a superior fighter, but his arm already throbbed, and he didn't know how long it would be until these creatures took their toll.

First and foremost in his mind, though, was getting Gwendolyn to safety.

"Get her to the back!" Thor shrieked, grabbing Steffen, who was fighting with a monster, and shoving him to Gwen. "NOW!"

Steffen grabbed Gwen and dragged her away, back through the army of soldiers, distancing her from the beasts.

"NO!" Gwen screamed, protesting. "I want to be here with you!"

But Steffen listened dutifully, dragging her back to the rear flank of the battle, protecting her behind the thousands of MacGils and Silver who valiantly stood there and fought back the creatures. Thor, seeing her safe, was relieved, and he turned back and threw himself into the fight with the undead.

Thor tried to summon his Druid power, to fight with his spirit along with his sword; but for some reason, he could not. He was too exhausted from his experience with Andronicus, from Rafi's mind control, and his power needed more time to heal. He had to fight with conventional weapons.

Alistair stepped forward, by Thor's side, raised a palm, and directed it at the crowd of undead. A ball of light emanated from it, and she killed several creatures at once.

She raised both palms repeatedly, killing creatures all around her, and as she did, Thor felt inspired, his sister's energy infusing him. He tried once again to summon some other part of himself, to fight not only with his sword, but with his mind, his spirit. As the next creature approached he raised a palm and tried to summon the wind.

Thor felt the wind rush through his palm, and suddenly, a dozen creatures went flying through the air, the wind driving them, howling as they tumbled back into the crevice in the earth.

Kendrick, Erec and the others, beside Thor, fought valiantly, each killing dozens of creatures, as did all their men around them, letting out a battle cry, as they fought with all they had. The Empire army sat back and let Rafi's army of undead fight for them, let them weary Thor's men. It was working.

Soon, Thor's men, exhausted, were swinging more slowly. And yet the undead never stopped pouring out from the earth, a never-ending stream.

Thor found himself breathing hard, as were the others. The undead were starting to break through their ranks, and his men were beginning to fall. There were just too many. All around Thor there arose his men's screams as the undead pinned them down, sinking their fangs into the soldiers'

throats and sucking out their blood. With each soldier a creature killed, the undead seemed to grow stronger.

Thor knew they had to do something fast. They needed to summon a tremendous power to counteract this, a power stronger than he or Alistair had.

“Argon!” Thor suddenly said to Alistair. “Where is he? We must find him!”

Thor looked over and saw Alistair getting tired, her strength waning; a beast slipped past her, backhanded her, and she fell, screaming. As the beast leapt on top of her, Thor stepped forward and thrust his sword through the creature’s back, saving her at the last second.

Thor reached out a hand and yanked her quickly to her feet.

“Argon!” Thor screamed. “He’s our only hope. You must find him. Now!”

Alistair gave him a knowing look, and raced into the crowd.

A creature slipped by, his claws plunging for Thor’s throat, and Krohn rushed forward and leapt up on it, snarling, pinning it down to the earth. Another creature then plunged onto Krohn’s back, and Thor slashed it, killing it.

Another creature jumped onto Erec’s back, and Thor rushed forward, pried it off, grabbed it with both hands lifted it high overhead and hurled it into several other creatures, knocking them down. Another beast charged for Kendrick, who did not see it coming, and Thor took his dagger and stabbed it in the throat, right before it sank its fangs into Kendrick’s shoulder. Thor felt that this was the least he could do to begin to make up for facing off against Erec and Kendrick and all the others. It felt good to be fighting on their side again, on the right side; it felt good to know who he was again, and to know who he was fighting for.

As Rafi stood there, arms out wide, chanting, thousands more of these beasts were spilling out from the bowels of the earth, and Thor knew that they would not be able to hold them back much longer. A swarm of black enveloped them, as more undead, elbow to elbow, rushed forward. Thor knew that soon, he and all of his people would be consumed.

At least, he thought, he would die on the right side of battle.

Chapter Two

Luanda fought and thrashed as Romulus carried her in his arms, each step taking her farther from her homeland as they crossed the bridge. She screamed and flailed, dug her nails into his skin, did everything possible to free herself. But his arms were too muscular, like rocks, his shoulders too broad, and he wrapped her so tight, holding held her in his grips like a python, squeezing her to death. She could barely breathe, her ribs hurt so badly.

Despite all of that, it was not herself she worried for most. She looked up ahead and saw at the far end of the bridge a vast sea of Empire soldiers, standing there, weapons at the ready, waiting. They were all anxious for the Shield to lower so that they could race onto the bridge. Luanda looked over and saw the strange cloak that Romulus was wearing, vibrating and glowing as he carried her, and she sensed that somehow she was the key to his bringing down the Shield. It must have something to do with her. Why else would he kidnap her?

Luanda felt a fresh determination: she had to free herself – not just for herself, but for her kingdom, her people. When Romulus brought down the Shield, those thousands of men awaiting him would charge across, a vast horde of Empire soldiers, and like locusts, descend on the Ring. They would destroy what was left of her homeland for good, and she could not allow that to happen.

Luanda hated Romulus with everything she had; she hated all of these Empire, and Andronicus most of all. A gale swept through and she felt the cold wind grazing against her bald head, and she groaned as she remembered her shaved head, her humiliation at the hands of these beasts. She would kill each and every one of them if she could.

When Romulus had freed her from being tied up in Andronicus' camp, Luanda had at first thought that she was being spared from a horrible fate, spared from being paraded around like an animal in Andronicus' Empire. But Romulus had turned out to be even worse than Andronicus. She felt certain that as soon as they crossed the bridge, he would kill her – if not torture her first. She had to find some way to escape.

Romulus leaned over and spoke in her ear, a deep, throaty sound which set her hairs on edge.

"It won't be long now, my dear," he said.

She had to think quickly. Luanda was no slave; she was the firstborn daughter of a king. Royal blood ran in her, the blood of warriors, and she feared no one. She would do anything she had to to fight any adversary; even someone as grotesque and powerful as Romulus.

Luanda summoned all of her remaining strength and in one quick motion, she craned back her neck, leaned forward and sank her teeth into Romulus' throat. She bit down with all her might, squeezing harder and harder, until his blood squirted out all over her face and he shrieked, dropping her.

Luanda scurried to her knees, turned and took off, sprinting back across the bridge for her homeland.

She heard his footsteps bearing down on her. He was much faster than she'd imagined and as she glanced back, she saw him bearing down on her with a look of pure rage.

She looked ahead and saw the mainland of the Ring before her, only twenty feet away, and she ran even harder.

Just steps away, Luanda suddenly felt an awful pain in her spine, as Romulus dove forward and dug his elbow down on her back. She felt as if he'd crushed her as she collapsed, face-first, onto the dirt.

A moment later, Romulus was on top of her. He spun her around and punched her in the face. He hit her so hard, her entire body flipped, and she landed back in the dirt. The pain resonated throughout her jaw, her entire face, as she lay there, barely conscious.

Luanda felt herself being hoisted high over Romulus' head, and she watched with terror as he charged for the edge of the bridge, preparing to cast her over. He screamed as he stood there, holding her high overhead, preparing to throw her.

Luanda looked over, down at the steep drop, and knew her life was about to end.

But Romulus held her there, frozen, at the precipice, arms shaking, and apparently, thought better of it. As her life hung in the balance, it seemed Romulus debated. Clearly, he wanted to throw her over the edge in his fit of rage – yet he could not. He needed her for to fulfill his purpose.

Finally, he lowered her, and wrapped his arms around her even tighter, nearly squeezing the life out of her. He then hurried back across the Canyon, heading back towards his people.

This time, Luanda just hung there limply, reeling from the pain, nothing more she could do. She had tried – and she had failed. Now all she could do was watch her fate approach her, step-by-step, as she was carried across the Canyon, swirling mists rising up and enveloping her, then disappearing just as quickly. Luanda felt as if she were being taken to some other planet, to some place from which she would never return.

Finally, they reached the far side of the Canyon, and as Romulus took his final step, the cloak around his shoulders vibrated with a great noise, glowing a luminescent red. Romulus dropped Luanda on the ground, like an old potato, and she hit the ground hard, banging her head, and lay there.

Romulus's soldiers stood there, at the edge of the bridge, staring out, all of them clearly afraid to step forward and test whether the Shield was truly down.

Romulus, fed up, grabbed a soldier, hoisted him high overhead and threw him onto the bridge, right into the invisible wall that was once the Shield. The soldier raised his hands and screamed, bracing himself for a certain death as he expected to disintegrate.

But this time, something different happened. The soldier went flying through the air, landed on the bridge, and rolled and rolled. The crowd watched in silence as he rolled to a stop – alive.

The soldier turned and sat up and looked back at all of them, the most shocked of all. He had made it. Which could only mean one thing: the Shield was down.

Romulus' army let out a great roar, and as one they all charged. They swarmed onto it, racing for the Ring. Luanda cowered, trying to stay out of the way as they all stampeded past her, like a herd of elephants, heading for her homeland. She watched with dread.

Her country as she knew it was finished.

Chapter Three

Reece stood at the edge of the lava pit, looking down in utter disbelief as the ground shook violently beneath him. He could hardly process what he had just done, his muscles still aching from releasing the boulder, from casting the Destiny Sword into the pit.

He had just destroyed the most powerful weapon in the Ring, the weapon of legend, the sword of his ancestors for generations, the weapon of the Chosen One, the only weapon holding up the Shield. He had hurled it down into a pit of molten fire and with his own eyes had watched it melt, flare up in a great ball of red, then disappear into nothingness.

Gone forever.

The ground had begun shaking since, and it had not stopped. Reece struggled to balance, as did the others, as he backed away from the edge. He felt as if the world were crumbling around him. What had he done? Had he destroyed the Shield? The Ring? Had he made the biggest mistake of his life?

Reece reassured himself by telling himself he had no choice. The boulder and the Sword were simply too heavy for them all to carry out of here – much less to climb the walls with – or to outrun these violent savages. He had been in a desperate situation, and it had called for desperate measures.

Their desperate situation had not changed yet. Reece heard a great screaming all around him, and a sound arose of a thousand of these creatures, chattering their teeth in an unnerving way and laughing and snarling at the same time. It sounded like an army of jackals. Clearly, Reece had angered them; he had taken away their precious object, and now they all seemed resigned to make him pay.

As bad as the situation had been moments before, now it was even worse. Reece spotted the others – Elden, Indra, O'Connor, Conven, Krog and Serna – all looking down in horror at the lava pit, then turning and looking around in desperation. Thousands of Faws were closing in from every direction. Reece had managed to spare the Sword, but he had not thought past that, had not thought through how to get himself and the others out of danger. They were still completely surrounded, with no way of getting out.

Reece was determined to find a way out, and with the burden of the Sword off their heads, at least now they could move quickly.

Reece drew his sword, and it cut through the air with a distinctive ring. Why sit back and wait for these creatures to attack? At least he would go down fighting.

"CHARGE!" Reece screamed to the others.

They all drew their weapons and rallied behind him, following as he sprinted away from the edge of the lava pit and right into the thick crowd of Faws, swinging his sword every which way, killing them left and right. Beside him, Elden raised his axe and chopped off two heads at a time, while O'Connor drew his bow and fired on the run, taking out all those in his path. Indra rushed forward and with her short sword, stabbed two in the heart, while Conven drew both of his swords and, screaming like a madman, charged forward, swinging wildly and killing Faws in every direction. Serna wielded his mace, and Krog his spear, protecting their rear flank.

They were a unified fighting machine, fighting as one, fighting for their lives, cutting their way through the thick crowd as they desperately tried to escape. Reece led them up a small hill, aiming for the high ground.

They slipped as they went, the ground still shaking, the slope steep, muddy. They lost some momentum, and several Faws jumped onto Reece, clawing and biting him. He spun and punched them; they were persistent and clung to him, but he managed to throw them off, kicking them back, then stabbing them before they could attack again. Cut and bruised, Reece kept fighting, as they all did, all fighting for their lives to climb the hill and escape from this place.

As they finally reached the high ground, Reece had a moment of reprieve. He stood there, gasping for air, and in the distance, caught a glimpse of the Canyon wall before it was covered by the thick mist. He knew it was out there, their lifeline back to the surface, and he knew they had to reach it.

Reece looked back over his shoulder and saw thousands of Faws racing uphill for them, buzzing, teeth chattering, making an awful noise, louder than ever, and he knew that they would not let them go.

"What about me?" a voice screamed out, cutting through the air.

Reece turned and saw Centra back there. He was still being held captive, beside the leader, and a Faw still held a knife to his throat.

"Don't leave me!" he screamed. "They'll kill me!"

Reece stood there, burning with frustration. Of course, Centra was right: they would kill him. Reece could not leave him there; it would go against Reece's code of honor. After all, Centra had helped them when they'd needed help.

Reece stood there, hesitating. He turned and saw, in the distance, the Canyon wall, the way out, tempting him.

"We can't go back for him!" Indra said, frantic. "They will kill us all."

She kicked a Faw that approached her and it fell backwards, sliding on its back down the slope.

"We'd be lucky to escape with our own lives as it is!" Serna called out.

"He's not one of us!" Krog said. "We can't endanger our group for him!"

Reece stood there, debating. The Faws were getting closer, and he knew he had to make his decision.

"You're right," Reece admitted. "He's not one of us. But he helped us. And he's a good man. I cannot leave him at the mercy of those things. *No man left behind!*" Reece said firmly.

Reece began to head down the slope, to go back for Centra – but before he could, Conven suddenly broke from the group and charged, racing down, leaping and sliding on the muddy slope, feet first, his sword out, sliding downward and slashing as he went, killing Faws left and right. He was hurling back to where they'd come from single-handedly, recklessly, throwing himself into the group of Faws and somehow cutting his way through them with sheer determination.

Reece jumped into action close behind.

"The rest of you stay here!" Reece shouted out. "Wait for our return!"

Reece followed in Conven's tracks, slashing the Faws left and right; he caught up with Conven and provided backup, the two of them fighting their way back down the mountain for Centra.

Conven charged forward, breaking through the crowd of Faws as Reece fought his way all the way to Centra, who stared back, wide-eyed in fear. A Faw raised his dagger to cut Centra's throat, but Reece did not give him the chance: he stepped forward, raised his sword, took aim and threw it with all his might.

The sword went flying through the air, tumbling end over end, and lodged itself through the throat of the Faw, a moment before it killed Centra. Centra screamed as he looked over and saw the dead Faw, just inches away, their faces almost touching.

To Reece's surprise, Conven did not go for Centra; instead he kept running up the small hill, and Reece looked up, horrified to see what he was doing. Conven seemed suicidal. He cut his way through the group of Faws surrounding their leader, who sat high up on his platform, looking over the battle. Conven killed them left and right. They hadn't been expecting it, and it all happened too fast for any them to react. Reece realized that Conven was aiming for their leader.

Conven got closer, leapt into the air, raised his sword, and as the leader realized and tried to flee, Conven stabbed it through the heart. The leader shrieked – and suddenly, there came a chorus of ten thousand shrieks, all the Faws, as if they themselves had been stabbed. It was as if they all shared the same nervous system – and Conven had severed it.

"You shouldn't have done that," Reece said to Conven as he returned to his side. "Now you've started a war."

As Reece watched in horror, a small hill exploded, and out of it there streamed thousands and thousands of Faws, pouring out of it like a mound of ants. Reece realized that Conven had killed their queen bee, had incited the wrath of a nation of these things. The ground shook with their footsteps, as they all gnashed their teeth and charged right for Reece and Conven and Centra.

"MOVE!" Reece screamed.

Reece shoved Centra, who stood in shock, and they all turned and ran back for the others, fighting their way back up the muddy slope.

Reece felt a Faw jump on his back and knock him down. It dragged him by his ankles, back down the slope, and lowered its fangs for his neck.

An arrow sailed by Reece's head, and there came the noise of an arrow impacting flesh and Reece looked up to see O'Connor, atop the hill, holding a bow.

Reece regained his feet, Centra helping him up as Conven protected their rear, fighting back the Faws. Finally, they all raced up the remainder of the hill and reached the others.

"Good to have you back!" Elden called out, as he rushed forward and took out several Faws with his axe.

Reece paused at the top, peering out into the mist and wondering which way to go. The path forked two ways and he was about to go right.

But Centra suddenly raced past him, heading left.

"Follow me!" Centra called out as he ran. "It's the only way!"

As thousands of Faws began to ascend the slope, Reece and the others turned and ran, following Centra, slipping and sliding down the other side of the hill, as the ground continue to shake. They followed Centra's lead, and Reece was more grateful than ever that he'd saved his life.

"We need to make the Canyon!" Reece called out, not sure which way Centra was going.

They sprinted, weaving their way through the thick, gnarled trees, struggling to follow Centra as he deftly navigated through the mist on a rough dirt trail, covered in roots.

"There's only one way to lose those things!" Centra called back. "Stay on my trail!"

They followed Centra closely as he ran, tripping over roots, scratched by branches, Reece struggling to see through the thickening mist. He stumbled more than once on the uneven footing.

They ran until their lungs hurt, the awful screech of those things behind them, thousands of them, closing in. Elden and O'Connor's helping Krog was slowing them down. He hoped and prayed that Centra knew where he was going; he could not see the Canyon wall at all from here.

Suddenly, Centra stopped short, and reached out with his palm and slapped Reece's chest, stopping him in his tracks.

Reece looked down and saw at his feet a steep drop off, into a raging river below.

Reece turned to Centra, puzzled.

"Water," Centra explained, gasping for air. "They're afraid to cross water."

The others all stopped short beside them, staring down at the roaring rapids, as they all tried to catch their breath.

"It's your only chance," Centra added. "Cross this river and you can lose their trail for now, and gain time."

"But how?" Reece asked, staring down at the foaming green waters.

"That current would kill us!" Elden said.

Centra smirked.

"That's the least of your worries," he answered. "That water is filled with Fourens – the deadliest animal on the planet. Fall in, and they'll tear you to pieces."

Reece looked down at the water, wondering.

"Then we can't swim," O'Connor said. "And I don't see a boat."

Reece looked over his shoulder, the sound of the Faws getting closer.

"Your only chance is this," Centra said, reaching back and pulling a long vine attached to a tree, its branches hanging over the river. "We must swing our way across," he said. "Don't slip. And don't fall short of the shore. Send it back for us when you're done."

Reece looked down at the gurgling water, and as he did, he saw awful little glowing yellow creatures jumping out, like sunfish, all jaws, snapping and making strange noises. There were schools of them and they all looked as if they were awaiting their next meal.

Reece glanced back over his shoulder, and saw the army of Faws on the horizon, closing in. They had no choice.

"You can go first," Centra said to Reece.

Reece shook his head.

"I will go last," he answered. "In case we don't all make it in time. You go first. You brought us here."

Centra nodded.

"You don't have to ask me twice," he said with a smile, nervously watching the Faws closing in.

Centra grabbed hold of the vine and with a scream he leapt off, swinging quickly over the waters as he hung low on the vine, lifting his feet from the water and from the snapping creatures. Finally, he landed on the far shore, tumbling on the ground.

He made it.

Centra stood, smiling; he grabbed the vine as it swung, and sent it back over the river.

Elden reached out and grabbed it, and held it out to Indra.

"Ladies first," he said.

She grimaced.

"I don't need pampering," she said. "You're big. You might break the vine. You go, and get it over with. Don't fall in – or else this woman will have to save you."

Elden grimaced, unamused, as he grabbed the vine.

"I was just trying to help," he said.

Elden jumped off with a shout, sailed through the air, and tumbled on the far shore beside Centra.

He sent the rope back, and O'Connor went, followed by Serna, then Indra, then Conven.

The last ones left were Reece and Krog.

"Well, I guess it's just the two of us," Krog said to Reece. "Go. Save yourself," Krog said, glancing back over his shoulder nervously. "The Faws are too close There isn't time for both of us to make it."

Reece shook his head.

"No man left behind," he said. "If you won't go then I won't."

They both stood there, stubbornly, Krog looking increasingly nervous. Krog shook his head.

"You are a fool. Why do you care so much about me? I wouldn't care half as much for you."

"I am leader now, which makes you my responsibility," Reece replied. "I don't care for you. I care for honor. And my honor commands me to leave no one behind."

They both turned nervously as the first of the Faws reached them. Reece stepped forward, beside Krog, and they slashed with their swords, killing several.

"We go together!" Reece called out.

Without wasting another moment, Reece grabbed Krog, draped him over his shoulder, grabbed the rope, and the two of them screamed as they set off through the air, a moment before the Faws stormed the shore.

The two of them sailed through the air, swaying across for the other side.

"Help!" Krog screamed.

Krog was slipping off of Reece's shoulder, and he grabbed the vine; but it was now wet with the spray of the rapids, and Krog's hands slipped right through the vine as he plummeted down. Reece

reached down to grab him, but it all happened too fast: Reece's heart plummeted as he was forced to watch Krog fall, just out of his grasp, down into the gushing waters.

Reece landed on the far shore and tumbled to the ground. He rolled to his feet, prepared to rush back to the water – but before he could react, Conven broke from the group, rushed forward and dove headfirst into the raging waters.

Reece and the others watched, breathless. Was Conven that brave, Reece wondered? Or that suicidal?

Conven swam fearlessly through the gushing current. He reached Krog, somehow not getting bit by the creatures, and grabbed him as he flailed, draping an arm around his shoulder and treading water with him. Conven swam against the current, heading back to shore.

Suddenly, Krog shrieked.

"MY LEG!"

Krog writhed in pain as a Fouren lodged in his leg, biting him, its shiny yellow scales visible over the current. Conven swam and swam until finally he neared shore and Reece and the others reached down and dragged them out. As they did, a school of Fourens jumped into the air after them, and Reece and the others swatted them away.

Krog flailed and Reece looked down and saw the Fouren still in his leg; Indra pulled her dagger, bent over and dug it into Krog's thigh as he shrieked, prying the animal out. It flopped on shore, then back into the water.

"I hate you!" Krog seethed to her.

"Good," Indra replied, unfazed.

Reece looked at Conven, who stood there, dripping wet, in awe of his fearlessness. Conven stared back, expressionless, and Reece noticed with shock that a Fouren was lodged in his arm, flopping in the air. Reece couldn't believe how calm Conven was, as he reached over slowly, yanked it out and threw it back into the water.

"Didn't that hurt?" Reece asked, confused.

Conven shrugged.

Reece worried for Conven more than ever; while he admired his courage, he could not believe his recklessness. He had dived headfirst into a school of vicious creatures, and didn't even think twice about it.

On the far side of the river, hundreds of Faws stood there, staring out, infuriated, chattering their teeth.

"Finally," O'Connor said, "we're safe."

Centra shook his head.

"Only for now. Those Faws are smart. They know the river bends. They'll take the long way, run around it, find the crossing. Soon, they'll be on our side. Our time is limited. We must move."

They all followed Centra as he sprinted through mud fields, past exploding geysers, navigating his way through this exotic landscape.

They ran and ran, until finally the mist broke and Reece's heart was elated to see, before them, the Canyon wall, its ancient stone shining. He looked up, and its walls seemed impossibly high. He did not know how they would climb it.

Reece stood there with the others and stared up with dread. The wall seemed even more imposing now than it had on the way down. He looked over and saw their ragged state and wondered how they could possibly scale it. They were all exhausted, beaten and bruised, weary from battle. Their hands and feet were raw. How could they possibly climb straight up, when it had taken all they had just to descend?

"I can't go on," Krog said, wheezing, his voice cracking.

Reece was feeling the same way, though he did not say it.

They were backed into a corner. They had outrun the Faws, but not for long. Soon they would find them, and they would all be outnumbered and killed. All of this hard work, all of their efforts, all for nothing.

Reece did not want to die here. Not in this place. If he had to die, he wanted to die up there, on his own soil, on the mainland, and with Selese by his side. If only he could have one more chance to escape.

Reece heard a horrific noise, and he turned to see the Faws, perhaps a hundred yards away. There were thousands of them, and they had already skirted the river, and were closing in.

They all drew their weapons.

"There's nowhere left to run," Centra said.

"Then we'll fight to the death!" Reece called out.

"Reece!" came a voice.

Reece looked straight up the Canyon wall, and as the mist cleared, there appeared a face he at first thought was an apparition. He could not believe it. There, before him, was the woman he had just been thinking of.

Selese.

What was she doing here? How had she arrived here? And who was that other woman with her? It looked like the royal healer, Illepra.

The two of them hung there, on the side of the cliff, a long and thick rope coiled around their waists and hands. They were coming down quickly, on a long, thick rope, one easy to grasp. Selese reached back and threw the rest of it down, dropping a good fifty feet through the air, like manna from heaven, and landing at Reece's feet.

It was the way out.

They did not hesitate. They all ran for it, and within moments were climbing up, as fast as they could. Reece let everyone else go first, and as he jumped up, the last man up, he climbed and pulled the rope with him as he went, so that the Faws could not get it.

As he cleared the ground, the Faws appeared, reaching up and jumping for his feet – and just missing as Reece climbed out of reach.

Reece stopped as he reached Selese, who waited for him on a ledge; he leaned over and they kissed.

"I love you," Reece said, his entire being filled with love for her.

"And I you," she replied.

The two of them turned and headed up the Canyon wall with the others. They climbed, higher and higher. Soon, they would be home. Reece could hardly believe it.

Home.

Chapter Four

Alistair sprinted her way through the chaotic battlefield, weaving her way in and out of the soldiers as they fought for their lives against the army of undead rising up all around them. Moans and shrieks filled the air as the soldiers killed the ghouls – and as the ghouls, in turn, killed the soldiers. The Silver and MacGils and Silesians fought boldly – but they were vastly outnumbered. For each undead they killed, three more appeared. It was only a matter of time, Alistair could see, until all of her people were wiped out.

Alistair doubled her speed, running with all she had, her lungs bursting, ducking as an undead swiped for her face and crying out as another scratched her arm, drawing blood. She did not stop to fight them. There was no time. She had to find Argon.

She ran in the direction she had seen him last, when he was fighting Rafi and had collapsed from the effort. She prayed it had not killed him, that she could rouse him, and that she could make it before she and all her people were killed.

An undead appeared before her, blocking her way, and she held out her palm; a white ball of light struck it in the chest, knocking it backwards.

Five more appeared, and she held out her palm – but this time, only one more ball of light emerged, and the other four closed in on her. Her powers, she was surprised to realize, were limited.

Alistair braced herself for attack as they closed in – when she heard a snarling noise and looked over to see Krohn, leaping beside her and sinking his fangs into their throats. The undead turned on him, and Alistair found her chance. She elbowed one in the throat, knocking it over, and ran.

Alistair pushed her way through the chaos, desperate, the ghouls increasing in number by the moment, her people beginning to be pushed back. As she ducked and weaved, she finally emerged into a small clearing, the place where she remembered seeing Argon.

Alistair scanned the ground, desperate, and finally, between all the corpses, she found him. He was lying there, slumped on the ground, curled up in a ball. He lay in a small clearing and clearly he had cast some sort of spell to keep others away from him. He was unconscious, and as Alistair rushed to his side, she hoped and prayed he was still alive.

As she came closer, Alistair felt enveloped, protected in his magic bubble. She took a knee beside him and took a deep breath, finally safe from the battle all around her, finding respite in the eye of the storm.

Yet Alistair was also struck with terror as she looked down at Argon: he lay there, eyes closed, not breathing. She was flooded with panic.

“Argon!” she cried out, shaking his shoulders with both hands, trembling. “Argon, it’s me! Alistair! Wake up! You *have* to wake up!”

Argon lay there, unresponsive, while all around her, the battle was intensifying.

“Argon, please! We need you. We cannot combat Rafi’s magic. We do not have the skills that you do. Please, come back to us. For the Ring. For Gwendolyn. For Thorgrin.”

Alistair shook him, you still he did not respond.

Desperate, an idea came to her. She lay both palms on his chest, closed her eyes and focused. She summoned all of her inner energy, whatever was left, and slowly, she felt her hands warm. As she opened her eyes, she saw a blue light emanating from her palms, spreading over his chest and shoulders. Soon it enveloped his entire body. Alistair was using an ancient spell she had once learned, to revive the sick. It was draining her, and she felt all the energy leaving her body. Getting weak, she willed for Argon to come back.

Alistair collapsed, exhausted from the effort, and lay at Argon’s side, too weak to move.

She sensed movement, and she looked over and to her amazement saw Argon begin to stir.

He sat up and turned to her, his eyes shining with an intensity that scared her. He stared at her, expressionless, then reached over, grabbed his staff, and gained his feet. He reached out one hand, grabbed hers, and effortlessly yanked her to her feet.

As he held her hand, she felt all of her own energy restored.

"Where is he?" Argon asked.

Argon did not wait for an answer; it was as if he knew exactly where he needed to go, as he turned, staff at his side, walked right into the thick of battle.

Alistair couldn't understand how Argon was not hesitant to stroll into the soldiers. Then she understood why: he was able to cast a magical bubble around him as he went, and as the undead charged him from all sides, none were able to penetrate it. Alistair stuck close to him as he marched fearlessly, harmlessly through the thick of the battle, as if strolling through a meadow on a sunny day.

The two of them made their way through the battlefield, and he kept silent, marching, dressed in his long white cloak and hood, walking so fast that Alistair could barely keep up.

He finally stopped at the center of the battle, in a clearing, opposite which stood Rafi. Rafi still stood there, holding both arms out at his sides, his eyes rolled back in his head as he summoned thousands of undead, pouring out of the crevice in the earth.

Argon raised a single palm high overhead, palm up, facing the sky, and opened his eyes wide.

"RAFI!" he screamed in challenge.

Despite all the noise, Argon's scream cut through the battle, resonating off the hills.

As Argon shrieked, suddenly the clouds parted high above. A white stream of light came flying down, from the sky, right to Argon's palm, as if connecting him to the very heavens. The stream of light grew wider and wider, like a tornado, enveloping the battlefield, enveloping everything around him.

There came a great wind and a great whooshing noise, and Alistair watched in disbelief as beneath her the ground began to shake even more violently, and the huge crevice in the earth began to move in the opposite direction, slowly sealing itself backup.

As it began to close on itself, dozens of undead shrieked, crushed as they tried to crawl out.

Within moments, hundreds of undead were slipping, sliding back down to the earth, as the crevice became more and more narrow.

The earth shook one last time, then grew quiet, as the crevice finally sealed itself, the ground whole again, as if no fissure had ever appeared. The awful shrieks of the undead filled the air, muted from beneath the earth.

There came a stunned silence, a momentary lull in battle, as everyone stood and watched.

Rafi shrieked and turned and set his sights on Argon.

"ARGON!" Rafi shrieked.

The time had come for the final clash of these two great titans.

Rafi ran into the open clearing, holding his red staff high, and Argon did not hesitate, racing out to greet Rafi.

The two met in the middle, each wielding their staffs high overhead. Rafi brought his staff down for Argon and Argon raised his and blocked it. A great white light arose, like sparks, as they met. Argon swung back, and Rafi blocked.

Back and forth they went, blow for blow, attacking, blocking, white light flying everywhere. The ground shook with each of their blows, and Alistair could feel a monumental energy in the air.

Finally, Argon found his opening, swinging his staff from underneath, upwards, and as he did, shattering Rafi's staff.

The ground shook violently.

Argon stepped forward, raised his staff high overhead with two hands, and plunged it straight down, right through Rafi's chest.

Rafi let out an awful shriek, thousands of small bats flying out of his mouth as his jaw remained wide open. The skies turned black for a moment, as thick black clouds gathered from the heavens, right over Rafi's head, and swirled down to earth. They swallowed him whole, and Rafi howled as he spun through the air, yanked upwards, into the skies, heading up to some awful fate that Alistair did not want to imagine.

Argon stood there, breathing hard, as all finally fell silent, Rafi dead.

The army of undead shrieked, as one at a time, they all disintegrated before Argon's eyes, each falling into a mound of ashes. Soon the battlefield was littered with thousands of mounds, all that remained of Rafi's evil spells.

Alistair surveyed the battlefield and saw there was only one battle left to wage: across the clearing, her brother, Thorgrin, was already facing off with their father, Andronicus. She knew that in the battle to come, one of these determined men would lose their lives: her brother or her father. She prayed that it was her brother who came out alive.

Chapter Five

Luanda lay on the ground at Romulus' feet, watching in horror as thousands of Empire soldiers flooded the bridge, screaming with triumph as they crossed into the Ring. They were invading her homeland, and there was nothing she could do but sit there, helpless, and watch, and wonder if it was somehow all her fault. She could not help but feel as if she was somehow responsible for the Shield's lowering.

Luanda turned and looked out at the horizon, saw the endless Empire ships, and she knew that soon it would be millions of Empire troops flooding in. Her people were finished; the Ring was finished. It was all over now.

Luanda closed her eyes and shook her head, again and again. There was a time when she had been so angry with Gwendolyn, with her father, and would have been glad to witness the destruction of the Ring. But her mind had changed, ever since Andronicus' betrayal and treatment of her, ever since his shaving her head, his beating her in front of his people. It made her realize how wrong, how naïve, she had been in her own quest for power. Now, she would give anything for her old life back. All she wanted now was a life of peace and contentment. She no longer craved ambition or power; now, she just wanted to survive, to make wrongs right.

But as she watched, Luanda realized it was too late. Now her beloved homeland was on its way to destruction, and there was nothing she could do.

Luanda heard an awful noise, laughter mixed with a snarl, and she looked up and saw Romulus standing there, hands on his hips, watching it all, a huge contended smile on his face, his long jagged teeth showing. He threw back his head and laughed and laughed, elated.

Luanda yearned to kill him; if she had a dagger in hand, she would run it through his heart. But knowing him, how thick he was built, how impervious he was to everything, the dagger probably wouldn't even pierce it.

Romulus looked down at her, and his smile turned to a grimace.

"Now," he said, "it's time to kill you slowly."

Luanda heard a distinctive clang and watched Romulus draw a weapon from his waist. It looked like a short sword, except tapered to a long narrow point. It was an evil weapon, one clearly designed for torture.

"You are going to suffer very, very much," he said.

As he lowered his weapon, Luanda raised her hands to her face, as if to block it all out. She closed her eyes and shrieked.

That was when the strangest thing happened: as Luanda shrieked, her shriek was echoed by an even greater shriek. It was the shriek of an animal. A monster. A primordial roar, one louder and more resonant than anything she'd ever heard in her life. It was like thunder, tearing the skies apart.

Luanda opened her eyes and looked up to the heavens, wondering if she had imagined it. It sounded as if it had been the shriek of God himself.

Romulus, also stunned, looked up to the skies, baffled. By his expression, Luanda could tell that it had really happened; she had not imagined it.

It came again, a second shriek, even worse than the first, with such ferocity, such power, Luanda realized it could only be one thing:

A dragon.

As the skies parted, Luanda was awe-struck to watch two immense dragons soar overhead, the largest and scariest creatures she had ever seen, blotting out the sun, turning day to night as they cast a shadow over all of them.

Romulus' weapon fell from his hands, his mouth open in shock. Clearly, he'd never witnessed anything quite like this, either, especially as the two dragons flew so low to the ground, barely twenty

feet above their heads, nearly grazing their heads. Their great talents hung below them, and as they shrieked again, they arched their backs and spread open their wings.

At first, Luanda braced herself, as she assumed they were coming to kill her. But as she watched them fly, so fast overhead, as she felt the wind they left knock her over, she realized they were going elsewhere: over the Canyon. Into the Ring.

The dragons must have seen the soldiers crossing into the Ring and realized the Shield was down. They must have realized that this was their chance to enter the Ring, too.

Luanda watched, riveted, as one dragon suddenly opened its mouth, swooped down, and breathed a stream of fire onto the men on the bridge.

Screams of thousands of Empire soldiers arose, shrieking to the heavens as a great wall of fire engulfed them.

The dragons continued flying, breathing fire as they crossed the bridge, burning all of Romulus' men. Then they continued to fly, into the Ring itself, continuing to breathe fire and to destroy every Empire man who'd entered, sending wave after wave of destruction.

Within moments, there were no Empire men left on the bridge, or on the mainland of the Ring.

The Empire men who were heading for the bridge, who were about to cross, stopped in their tracks. They dared not enter. Instead, they turned and fled, running back to the ships.

Romulus turned to watch his men leave, irate.

Luanda sat there, stunned, and realized this was her chance. Romulus was distracted, as he turned and chased after his men and tried to get them to head for the bridge. This was her moment.

Luanda jumped to her feet, her heart pounding, and turned and raced back for the bridge. She knew she had only a few precious moments; if she were lucky, maybe, just *maybe*, she could run long enough, before Romulus noticed, and make the other side. And if she could make the other side, maybe her reaching the mainland would help restore the Shield.

She had to try, and she knew it was now or never.

Luanda ran and ran, breathing so hard she could hardly think, her legs shaking. She stumbled on her feet, her legs heavy, her throat dry, flailing her arms as she went, the cold wind grazing her bald head.

She ran faster and faster, her heart pounding in her ears, the sound of her own breathing filling her world, as all became a narrow blur. She made it a good fifty yards across the bridge before she heard the first scream.

Romulus. Clearly, he had spotted her.

Behind her there suddenly came the sound of men charging on horseback, crossing the bridge, coming after her.

Luanda sprinted, increasing her pace, as she felt the men bearing down her. She ran past all the corpses of the Empire men, burnt by the dragons, some still flaming, doing her best to avoid them. Behind her, the horses grew even louder. She glanced back over her shoulder, saw their spears raised high and knew that this time Romulus aimed to have her killed. She knew that, in just moments, those spears would be thrust into her back.

Luanda looked forward and saw the Ring, the mainland, just feet in front of her. If only she could make it. Just ten more feet. If she could just cross the border, maybe, just maybe, the Shield would go back up and save her.

The men bore down on her as she took her final steps. The sound of horses was deafening in her ears, and she smelled the sweat of horses and of men. She braced herself, expecting a spear point to puncture her back at any moment. They were just feet away. But so was she.

In one final act of desperation, Luanda dove, just as she saw a soldier raise his hand with a spear behind her. She hit the ground with a tumble. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the spear sailing through the air, heading right for her.

Yet as soon as Luanda crossed the line, landed on the mainland of the Ring, suddenly, behind her, the Shield was activated again. The spear, inches behind her, disintegrated in mid-air. And behind it, all the soldiers on the bridge shrieked, raising their hands to their faces, as they all went up in flames, disintegrating.

In moments, they were all just piles of ashes.

On the far side of the bridge Romulus stood, watching it all. He shrieked and beat his chest. It was a cry of agony. A cry of someone who had been defeated. Outwitted.

Luanda lay there, breathing hard, in shock. She leaned down and kissed the soil she leaned on. Then she threw her head back and laughed in delight.

She had made it. She was safe.

Chapter Six

Thorgrin stood in the open clearing, facing Andronicus, surrounded by both armies. They stood at a standstill, watching as father and son faced off once again. Andronicus stood there in all his glory, towering over Thor, wielding a huge axe in one hand and a sword in the other. As Thor faced him, he forced himself to breathe slow and deep, to control his emotions. Thor had to remain clear-minded, to focus as he fought this man, the same way he would any other enemy. He had to tell himself that he was not facing his father, but his worst foe. The man who had hurt Gwendolyn; the man who had hurt all of his countrymen; the man who had brainwashed him. The man who deserved to die.

With Rafi dead, Argon back in control, all the undead creatures back beneath the earth, there was no more delaying this final confrontation, Andronicus' facing off with Thorgrin. It was the battle that must determine the fate of the war. Thor would not let him get away, not this time, and Andronicus, cornered in, finally seemed willing to face off with his son.

"Thornicus, you are my son," Andronicus said, his low voice reverberating. "I do not wish to harm you."

"But I wish to harm you," Thor replied, refusing to give in to Andronicus' mind games.

"Thornicus, my son," Andronicus repeated, as Thor took a wary step closer, "I do not wish to kill you. Lay down your weapons and join me. Join me as you had before. You are my son. You are not *their* son. You carry my bloodline; you do not carry theirs. My homeland is your homeland; the Ring is but an adopted place for you. You are *my* people. These people mean nothing to you. Come home. Come back to the Empire. Allow me to be the father you always wanted. And become the son I always wanted you to be.

"I will not fight you," Andronicus said finally, as he lowered his axe.

Thor had heard enough. He had to make a move now, before he allowed his mind to be swayed by this monster.

Thor let out a battle cry, raised sword high and charged forward, bringing it down with both hands for Andronicus' head.

Andronicus stared back in surprise, then at the last second, he reached down, grabbed his axe from the ground, raised it and blocked Thor's blow.

Sparks flew off of Thor's sword as the two of them locked weapons, inches away, each groaning, as Andronicus held back Thor's blow.

"Thornicus," Andronicus grunted, "your strength is great. But it is *my* strength. I gave you this. My blood runs in your veins. Stop this madness, and join me!"

Andronicus pushed Thor back, and Thor stumbled backwards.

"Never!" Thor screamed, defiant. "I will never return to you. You are no father to me. You are a stranger. You don't deserve to be my father!"

Thor charged again, screaming, and brought his sword down. Andronicus blocked it, and Thor, expecting it, quickly spun around with his sword and slashed Andronicus' arm.

Andronicus cried out as blood squirted from his wound. He stumbled back and looked Thor over with disbelief, reaching over and touching his wound, then examining the blood on his hand.

"You mean to kill me," Andronicus said, as if realizing for the first time. "After all I've done for you."

"I most certainly do," Thorgrin said.

Andronicus studied him, as if studying a new person, and soon his look changed from one of wonder and disappointment, to one of anger.

"Then you are no son of mine!" he screamed. "The Great Andronicus does not ask twice!"

Andronicus threw down his sword, raised his battle axe with both hands, let out a great cry and charged for Thor. Finally, the battle had begun.

Thor raised his sword to block the blow, but it came down with such force that, to Thor's shock, it shattered Thor's sword, breaking it in two.

Thor quickly improvised, dodging out of the way as the blow continued to come down; it just grazed him, missing by an inch, so close he could feel the wind brush his shoulder. His father had tremendous strength, greater than any warrior he'd ever faced, and Thor knew this would not be easy. His father was fast, too – a deadly combination. And now Thor had no weapon.

Andronicus swung around again without hesitating, swinging sideways, aiming to chop Thor in half.

Thor leapt into the air, high over Andronicus his head, doing a somersault, using his inner powers to propel him, to bring him high in the air and land behind Andronicus. He landed on his feet, reached down and grabbed his father's sword from the ground, spun around and charged, swinging for Andronicus' back.

But to Thor's surprise, Andronicus was so fast, he was prepared. He spun around and blocked the blow. Thor felt the impact of metal hitting metal reverberate throughout his body. Andronicus' sword, at least, held; it was stronger than his. It was strange, to hold his father's sword – especially when facing his father.

Thor swung around, and came down sideways for Andronicus' shoulder. Andronicus blocked, and came down for Thor's.

Back and forth they went, attacking and blocking, Thor driving Andronicus back, and Andronicus, in turn, pushing Thor back. Sparks flew, the weapons moving so fast, gleaming in the light, their great clangs riveting the battlefield, the two armies watching, transfixed. The two great warriors pushed each other back and forth across the open clearing, neither gaining an inch.

Thor raised his sword to strike again, but this time Andronicus surprised him by stepping forward and kicking him in the chest. Thor went flying backwards, landing on his back.

Andronicus rushed forward and brought down his axe. Thor rolled out of the way, but not quickly enough: it sliced Thor's bicep, just enough to draw blood. Thor cried out, but nonetheless, swung around, and swung his sword and sliced Andronicus' calf.

Andronicus stumbled and cried out, and Thor rolled back to his feet, as the two faced each other, each wounded.

"I'm stronger than you, son," Andronicus said. "And more experienced in battle. Give in now. Your Druid powers will not work against me. It is just me against you, man to man, sword to sword. And as a warrior, I am better. You know this. Yield to me, and I shall not kill you."

Thor scowled.

"I yield to no one! Least of all you!"

Thor forced himself to think of Gwendolyn, of what Andronicus had done to her, and his rage intensified. Now was the time. Thor was determined to finish Andronicus off, once and for all, to send this awful creature back to hell.

Thor charged with a final burst of strength, giving it all he had, letting out a great cry. He brought his sword down left and right, swinging so fast he could barely contain it, Andronicus blocking each one, even as he was pushed back, step by step. The fighting went on and on, and Andronicus seemed surprised that his son could exhibit such strength, and for so long.

Thor found his moment of opportunity when, for a moment, Andronicus' arms grew tired. Thor swung for his axe head and connected, and managed to knock the blade from Andronicus' hands. Andronicus watched it fly through the air, shocked, and Thor then kicked his father in the chest, knocking him down, flat on his back.

Before he could rise, Thor stepped forward and placed a foot on his throat. Thor had him pinned, and he stood there, looking down at him.

The entire battlefield was riveted as Thor stood over him, holding the tip of his sword to his father's throat.

Andronicus, blood seeping from his mouth, smiled between his fangs.

"You cannot do it, son," he said. "That is your great weakness. Your love for me. Just like my weakness for you. I could never bring myself to kill you. Not now, not your entire life. This entire battle is futility. You will let me go. Because you and I are one."

Thor stood over him, hands shaking as he held the sword tip at his father's throat. Slowly, he raised it. A part of him felt his father's words to be true. How could he bring himself to kill his father?

But as he stared down, he considered all the pain, all the damage, his father had inflicted on everyone around him. He considered the price of letting him live. The price of compassion. It was too great a price to pay, not just for Thorgrin, but for everyone he loved and cared about. Thor glanced behind him and saw the tens of thousands of Empire soldiers whom had invaded his homeland, standing there, ready to attack his people. And this man was their leader. Thor owed it to his homeland. To Gwendolyn. And most of all, to himself. This man might be his father by blood, but that was all. He was not his father in any other sense of the word. And blood alone did not make a father.

Thor raised his sword high, and with a great cry, he swung it down.

Thor closed his eyes, and opened them to see the sword, embedded in the soil, right beside Andronicus' head. Thor left it there and stepped back.

His father had been right: he had been unable to do it. Despite everything, he just could not bring himself to kill a defenseless man.

Thor turned his back on his father, facing his own people, facing Gwendolyn. Clearly he had won the battle; he had made his point. Now, Andronicus, if he had any honor, would have no choice but to return home.

"THORGRIN!" Gwendolyn screamed.

Thor turned to see, with shock, Andronicus's axe swinging at him, coming right for his head. Thor ducked at the last second, and the axe flew by.

Andronicus was fast, though, and in the same motion he swung back around with his gauntlet and backhanded Thor across the jaw, knocking him down to his hands and knees.

Thor felt an awful cracking in his ribs, as Andronicus' boot kicked him in the stomach, sending him rolling, gasping for air.

Thor lay on his hands and knees, breathing hard, blood dripping from his mouth, his ribs killing him, trying to muster the strength to get up. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Andronicus step forward, smile wide, and raise his axe high with both hands. He was aiming, Thor could see, to chop off Thor's head. Thor could see it in his bloodshot eyes that Andronicus would have no mercy, as Thor had had.

"This is what I should have done thirty years ago," Andronicus said.

Andronicus let out a great scream, as he brought his axe down for Thor's exposed neck.

Thor, though, was not done fighting; he managed one last burst of energy, and despite all his pain, he scrambled to his feet and charged his father, tackling him around the ribs, driving him backwards, onto the ground, on his back.

Thor lay on top of him, wrestling him down, preparing to fight him with his bare hands. It had become a wrestling match. Andronicus reached up and grabbed Thor's throat, and Thor was surprised by his strength; he felt himself losing air quickly as he was choked.

Thor grasped at his waist, desperate, searching for his dagger. The royal dagger, the one King MacGil had given him, before he died. Thor was losing air fast, and he knew if he didn't find it soon, he'd be dead.

Thor found it with his last breath. He raised it high, and plunged it down with both hands, into Andronicus' chest.

Andronicus shot up, gasping for air, eyes bulging in a death stare, as he sat up and continued to choke his son.

Thor, out of breath, was seeing stars, going limp.

Finally, slowly, Andronicus' grip released, as his arms fell to his side. His eyes rolled sideways, and he stopped moving.

He lay there frozen. Dead.

Thor gasped as he pried his father's limp hand from his throat, heaving and coughing, rolling off his father's dead body.

His entire body was shaking. He had just killed his father. He had not thought it was possible.

Thor glanced around and saw all the warriors, both armies, staring at him in shock. Thor felt a tremendous heat course through his body, as if some profound shift had just occurred within him, as if he had wiped some evil part of himself. He felt changed, lighter.

Thor heard a great noise in the sky, like thunder, and he looked up and saw a small black cloud appear over Andronicus' corpse, and a funnel of small black shadows, like demons, whirl down to the ground. They swirled around his father, encompassing him, howling, then lifted his body high into the air, higher and higher, until it disappeared into the cloud. Thor watched, in shock, and wondered to what hell his father's soul would be dragged.

Thor looked up, and saw the Empire army facing him, tens and tens of thousands of men, vengeance in their eyes. The Great Andronicus was dead. Yet still, his men remained. Thor and the men of the Ring were still outnumbered a hundred to one. They had won the battle, but they were about to lose the war.

Erec and Kendrick and Srog and Bronson walked to Thor's side, swords drawn, as they all faced the Empire together. Horns sounded up and down the Empire line, and Thor prepared to face battle one last time. He knew they could not win. But at least they would all go down together, in one great clash of glory.

Chapter Seven

Reece marched beside Selese, Illepra, Elden, Indra, O'Connor, Conven, Krog and Serna, the nine of them marching west, as they had been for hours, ever since emerging from the Canyon. Somewhere, Reece knew, his people were on the horizon, and, dead or alive, he was determined to find them.

Reece had been shocked as they had passed through a landscape of destruction, endless fields of corpses, littered by feasting birds, charred from the breath of dragons. Thousands of Empire corpses lined the horizon, some of them still smoking. The smoke from their bodies filled the air, the unbearable stench of burning flesh permeating a land destroyed. Whomever had not been killed by the dragon's breath had been marred in the conventional battle against the Empire, MacGils and McClouds lying dead, too, entire towns destroyed, piles of rubble everywhere. Reece shook his head: this land, that had once been so abundant, was now ravaged by war.

Ever since arising from the Canyon, Reece and the others had been determined to make it home, to get back to the MacGil side of the Ring. Unable to find horses, they had marched all the way through the McCloud side, up over the Highlands, down the other side, and now, finally, they marched through MacGil territory, passing nothing but ruin and devastation. From the looks of the land, the dragons had help destroyed the Empire troops, and for that, Reece was grateful. But Reece still did not know what state he might find his own people in. Was everyone dead in the Ring? Thus far, it seemed so. Reece was aching to find out if everyone was okay.

Each time they reached a battlefield of dead and injured, the ones not seared by the dragons' flames, Illepra and Selese went from corpse to corpse, turning them over, checking. Not only were they driven by their professions but Illepra also had another goal in mind: to find Reece's brother. Godfrey. It was a goal Reece shared.

"He's not here," Illepra announced yet again, as she finally stood, having turned over the last corpse of this field, disappointment etched across her face.

Reece could tell how much Illepra cared for his brother, and he was touched. Reece, too, hoped that he was okay and among the living – but from the looks of these thousands of corpses, he had a sinking feeling he was not.

They moved on, marched over yet another rolling field, another series of hills, and as they did, they spotted another battlefield on the horizon, thousands more corpses laid out. They headed for it.

As they walked, Illepra cried quietly. Selese laid a hand on her wrist.

"He's alive," Selese reassured. "Do not worry."

Reece stepped up and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, feeling compassion for her.

"If it's one thing I know about my brother," Reece said, "he's a survivor. He finds a way out of everything. Even death. I promise you. Godfrey is more likely already in a tavern somewhere, getting drunk."

Illepra laughed through her tears, and wiped them away.

"I hope so," she said. "For the first time, I really hope so."

They continued their somber march, silently through the wasteland, each lost in their own thoughts. Images of the Canyon flashed through Reece's mind; he could not suppress them. He thought back to how desperate their situation had been, and was filled with gratitude to Selese; if she hadn't appeared when he had, they would still be down there, surely all dead.

Reece reached over and took Selese's hand and smiled as the two held hands as they walked. Reece was touched by her love and devotion for him, by her willingness to cross the entire countryside just to save him. He felt an overwhelming rush of love for her, and he could not wait until they had a moment alone so he could express it to her. He had already decided he wanted to be with her forever. He felt a loyalty to her unlike he had ever felt to anyone else, and as soon as they had a moment, he

vowed to propose to her. He would give her his mother's Ring, the one his mother had given to him to give to the love of his life, when he found her.

"I can't believe you crossed the Ring just for me," Reece said to her.

She smiled.

"It wasn't that far," she said.

"Not far?" he asked. "You put your life in danger to cross a war-ravaged country. I owe you. Beyond what I could say."

"You owe me nothing. I am just glad you're alive."

"We *all* owe you," Elden chimed in. "You saved all of us. We would all be stuck down there in the bowels of the Canyon, forever."

"Speaking of debts, I have one to discuss with you," Krog said to Reece, coming up beside him with a limp. Since Illepra had splinted his leg at the top of the Canyon, Krog had at least been able to walk on his own, if stiffly.

"You saved me down there, and more than once," Krog continued. "It was pretty stupid of you, if you ask me. But you did it anyway. Don't think I owe you, though."

Reece shook his head, caught off guard by Krog's gruffness and his awkward attempt to thank him.

"I don't know if you are trying to insult me, or trying to thank me," Reece said.

"I have my own way," Krog said. "I am going to watch your back from now on. Not because I like you, but because that's what I feel called to do."

Reece shook his head, baffled as always by Krog.

"Don't worry," Reece said. "I don't like you either."

They all continued their march, all of them relaxed, happy to be alive, to be above ground, to be back on this side of the Ring – all except Conven, who walked quietly, apart from the others, withdrawn into himself as he had been ever since the death of his twin in the Empire. Nothing, not even an escape from death, seemed to shake him from it.

Reece thought back and recalled how, down there, Conven had thrown himself recklessly into danger, time and again, nearly killing himself to save the others. Reece could not help but wonder if it came more from a desire to kill himself than to help the others. He worried about him. Reece did not like to see him so alienated, so lost in depression.

Reece walked up beside him.

"You fought brilliantly back there," Reece said to him.

Conven just shrugged and looked down to the ground.

Reece wracked his brain for something to say, as they marched on in silence.

"Are you happy to be home?" Reece asked. "To be free?"

Conven turned and stared at him blankly.

"I'm not home. And I'm not free. My brother is dead. And I have no right to live without him."

Reece felt a chill run through him at his words. Clearly, Conven was still overwhelmed with grief; he wore it like a badge of honor. Conven was more like the walking dead, his eyes blank. Reece recalled them once filled with joy. Reece could see that his mourning was deep, and he had the sinking feeling that it might not ever lift from him. Reece wondered what would become of Conven. For the first time, he did not think anything good.

They marched and marched, and hours passed, and they reached yet another battlefield, shoulder to shoulder with corpses. Illepra and Selese and the others fanned out, going corpse to corpse, turning them over, looking for any sign of Godfrey.

"I see a lot more MacGils on this field," Illepra said hopefully, "and no dragon's breath. Maybe Godfrey is here."

Reece looked up and saw the thousands of corpses and wondered, even if he was here, if they could ever find him.

Reece spread out and went corpse to corpse, as did the others, turning each over. He saw all the faces of his people, face to face, some he recognized and some he didn't, people he had known and fought with, people who had fought for his father. Reece marveled at the devastation that had descended on his homeland, like a plague, and he earnestly hoped that it was all finally passed. He'd seen his fill of battles and wars and corpses to last a lifetime. He was ready to settle down into a life of peace, to heal, to rebuild again.

"HERE!" shouted Indra, her voice filled with excitement. She stood over a body and stared down.

Illepra turned and came running over, and all of them gathered around. She knelt beside the body, and tears flooded her face. Reece knelt down beside her and gasped to see his brother.

Godfrey.

His big belly sticking out, unshaven, his eyes closed, too pale, his hands blue with cold, he looked dead.

Illepra leaned over and shook him, again and again; he did not respond.

"Godfrey! Please! Wake up! It's me! Illepra! GODFREY!"

She shook him again and again, but he did not rouse. Finally, frantically, she turned to the others, scanning their belts.

"Your wine sack!" she demanded to O'Connor.

O'Connor fumbled at his waist and hastily removed it and handed it to Illepra.

She took it and held it over Godfrey's face and squirted it on his lips. She lifted his head, opened his mouth, and squirted some on his tongue.

There came a sudden response, as Godfrey licked his lips, and swallowed.

He coughed, then sat up, grabbed the sack, eyes still closed, and squirted it, drinking more and more, until he sat all the way up. He slowly opened his eyes and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked around, confused and disoriented, and belched.

Illepra cried out with joy, leaning over and giving him a big hug.

"You survived!" she exclaimed.

Reece sighed with relief as his brother looked around, confused, but very much alive.

Elden and Serna each grabbed Godfrey under the shoulder and hoisted him to his feet. Godfrey stood there, wobbly at first, and he took another long drink from the sack and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Godfrey looked around, bleary-eyed.

"Where am I?" he asked. He reached up and rubbed his head, which had a large welt, and his eyes squinted in pain.

Illepra studied the wound expertly, running her hand along it, and the dried blood in his hair.

"You've received a wound," she said. "But you can be proud: you're alive. You're safe."

Godfrey wobbled, and the others caught him.

"It is not serious," she said, examining it, "but you will need to rest."

She removed a bandage from her waist and began to wrap it around his head, again and again. Godfrey winced, and looked over at her. Then he looked about and surveyed all the corpses, eyes opening wide.

"I'm alive," he said. "I can't believe it."

"You made it," Reece said, clasping his older brother's shoulder happily. "I knew you would."

Illepra embraced him, hugging him, and slowly, he hugged her back.

"So this is what it feels like to be a hero," Godfrey observed, and the others laughed. "Give me more drink like this," he added, "and maybe I'll do it more often."

Godfrey took another long swig, and finally he began to walk with them, leaning on Illepra, one shoulder around her, as she helped him balance.

"Where are the others?" Godfrey asked as they went.

"We don't know," Reece said. "Somewhere west, I hope. That's where we're heading. We march for King's Court. To see who lives."

Reece gulped as he uttered the words. He looked off into the horizon, and prayed that his countrymen had met a similar fate to Godfrey. He thought of Thor, of his sister Gwendolyn, of his brother Kendrick, of so many others that he loved. But he knew that the bulk of the Empire army still lay ahead, and judging from the number of dead and wounded he'd already seen, he had a sinking feeling that the worst was still to come.

Chapter Eight

Thorgrin, Kendrick, Erec, Srog and Bronson stood as a unified wall against the Empire army, their people behind them, weapons drawn, preparing to face the onslaught of Empire troops. Thor knew this would be his death charge, his final battle in life, yet he had no regrets. He would die here, facing the enemy, on his feet, sword in hand, his brothers in arms at his side, defending his homeland. He would be given a chance to make up for what he had done, for facing his own people in battle. There was nothing more he could ask for in life.

Thor thought of Gwendolyn, and he only wished that he had more time for her sake. He prayed that Steffen had brought her safely out and that she was safe back there, behind the lines. He felt determined to fight with all he had, to kill as many Empire as he could, just to prevent them from harming her.

As Thor stood there he could feel his brothers' solidarity, all of them unafraid, standing there valiantly, holding their ground. These were the finest men of the kingdom, the finest knights of the Silver, MacGils, Silesians – all of them unified, none of them backing away in fear, despite the odds. All of them were prepared to give up their lives to defend their homeland. They all valued honor and freedom more than life.

Thor heard Empire horns, up and down the lines, watched their divisions of countless men line up in precise units. These were disciplined soldiers he was facing, soldiers with merciless commanders, who had fought their whole lives. It was a well-oiled machine, trained to carry on in the face of their leader's death. A new nameless Empire commander stepped up, and led the troops. There numbers were vast, endless, and Thor knew there was no way they could defeat them with so few men. But that mattered not anymore. It did not matter if they died. All that mattered was *how* they died. They would die on their feet, as men, in a final clash of valor.

"Shall we wait for them to come to us?" Erec asked aloud. "Or shall we offer them the greeting of the MacGils?"

Thor smiled, along with the others. There was nothing like a smaller army charging a larger one. It was reckless, yet it was also the height of courage.

As one, Thor and his men all suddenly let out a battle cry, and they all charged. They raced on foot, hurrying to bridge the gap between the two armies, their battle cries filling the air, their men following close on their heels. Thor held his sword high, running beside his brothers, his heart thumping, a cold gust of wind brushing his face. This was what battle felt like. It reminded him what it felt like to be alive.

The two armies charged, racing as fast as they could to kill each other. In moments they met in the middle, in a tremendous clang of weapons.

Thor slashed every which way, hurling himself into the front row of Empire soldiers, who wielded long spears, pikes, lances. Thor slashed the first pike he encountered in half, then stabbed the soldier through the gut.

Thor ducked and weaved as multiple lances came his way; he swung his sword, whirling in every direction, slicing all the weapons in half with a splintering noise and kicking and elbowing each soldier out of his way. He backhanded several more with his gauntlet, kicked another in the groin, elbowed one in the jaw, head-butted another, stabbed another, and spun and slashed another. The quarters were close, and it was hand to hand, and Thor was a one-man machine, cutting his way through the vastly superior force.

All around him, his brothers were doing the same, fighting with incredible speed and power and strength and spirit, even though they were outnumbered, throwing themselves into the much larger army and cutting through the rows of Empire men which seemed to have no end. None hesitated, and none retreated.

All around Thor, thousands of men met thousands of others, men screaming and grunting as they fought hand-to-hand in the huge vicious battle, the determining battle for the fate of the Ring. And despite the vastly superior forces, the men of the Ring were gaining momentum, holding the Empire at bay and even pushing them back.

Thor snatched a flail from an Empire soldier's hands, kicked him back, then swung it around and smashed him in the side of the helmet. Thor then swung it high overhead in a broad circle and knocked down several more. He threw it into the crowd and took down even more.

Thor then raised his sword and went back to hand-to-hand fighting, slashing every which way until his arms and shoulders grew tired. At one point he was a touch too slow, and a soldier came down at him with a raised sword; Thor turned to face him, too late, and braced himself for the blow and injury to come.

Thor heard a snarling noise, and Krohn whizzed by, leaping into the air and locking his jaws on the soldier's throat, driving him down, saving Thor.

Hours of close fighting passed. While Thor was at first encouraged by all their gains, it soon became apparent that this battle was an act of futility, prolonging the inevitable. No matter how many of them they killed, the horizon continued to be filled with an endless array of men. And while Thor and the others were growing weary, the Empire men were fresh, more and more pouring in.

Thor, losing momentum, not defending as quickly as he had been, suddenly received a sword slash on the shoulder; he cried out in pain, as blood gushed from his arm. Thor then received an elbow in the ribs, and a battle axe descended for him, which he just barely blocked with his shield. He had nearly raised the shield a second too late.

Thor was losing ground, and as he glanced around, he saw that the others around him were, too. The tide was beginning to turn yet again; Thor's ears were filled with the death cries of too many of his men, beginning to fall. After hours of fighting, they were losing. Soon, they would all be finished. He thought of Gwendolyn, and he refused to accept it.

Thor threw his head back to the heavens, desperately trying to summon whatever powers he had left. But his Druid power was not responding. Too much of it, he sensed, had been drained from his time with Andronicus, and he needed time to heal. He noticed Argon on the battlefield, not as powerful as he had been either, his powers, too, drained fighting Rafi. And Alistair was weakened, too, her powers drained reviving Argon. They had no other backup. Just their strength of arms.

Thor threw his head back to the heavens and let out a great battle cry of desperation, willing for something to be different, for something to change.

Please God, he prayed. *I beg of you. Save us all on this day. I turn to you. Not to man, not to my powers, but to you. Give me a sign of your power.*

Suddenly, to Thor's shock, the air was filled with the noise of a great roar, one so loud it seemed to split the very heavens.

Thor's heart quickened as he immediately recognized the sound. He looked at the horizon and saw bursting out of the clouds his old friend, Mycoples. Thor was shocked, elated to see that she was alive, that she was free, and that she was back here, in the Ring, flying towards him. It was like a part of himself had been restored.

Even more surprising, beside her saw Thor a second dragon. A male dragon, with ancient, faded red scales, and huge, glowing green eyes, fiercer-looking even than Mycoples. Thor watched the two of them soaring through the air, weaving in and out, and then plunging down, right for Thor. He realized then that his prayers had been answered.

Mycoples raised her wings, arched back her neck and shrieked, as did the dragon beside her, and the two of them breathed a wall of fire down onto the Empire army, lighting up the sky. The cold day was suddenly warm, then hot, as walls of flames rolled and rolled towards them. Thor raised his arms to his face.

The dragons attacked from the back, so the flames did not quite reach Thor. Still, the wall of fire was close enough that Thor felt its heat, the hairs on his forearm singed.

The shouts of thousands of men rose up into the air as the Empire army, division by division, was set on fire, tens of thousands of soldiers screaming for their lives. They ran every which way – but there was nowhere to flee. The dragons were merciless. They were on a rampage, and they were filled with fury, ready to wreak vengeance on the Empire.

One division of Empire after the next stumbled to the ground, dead.

The remaining soldiers facing Thor turned in a panic and fled, trying to get away from the dragons crisscrossing the sky, breathing flame everywhere. But they only ran to their own deaths, as the dragons zeroed in on them, and finished them off one at a time.

Soon, Thor found himself facing nothing but an empty field, black clouds of smoke, the smell of burning flesh filling the air, of dragon's breath, of sulfur. As the clouds lifted, they revealed a charred wasteland before him, not a single man left alive, all the grass and trees withered down to nothingness but black and ash. The Empire army, so indomitable just minutes ago, was now completely gone.

Thor stood there in shock, elated. He would live. They would all live. The Ring was free. Finally, they were free.

Mycoples dove down and sat before Thor, lowering her head and snorting.

Thor stepped forward, smiling as he went to his old friend, and Mycoples lowered her head all the way to the ground, purring. Thor stroked the scales on her face, and she leaned in and rubbed her nose up and down his chest, stroking her face against his body. She purred contentedly, and it was clear she was ecstatic to see Thor again, as ecstatic as he was to see her.

Thor mounted her, and turned, atop Mycoples, and faced his army, thousands of men staring back in wonder and joy, as he raised his sword.

The men raised their swords and cheered back to him. Finally, the skies were filled with the sound of victory.

Chapter Nine

Gwendolyn stood there, looking up at Thorgrin, atop Mycoples, and her heart soared with relief and pride. She had made her way through the thick crowd of soldiers, back to the front lines, throwing off the protection of Steffen and the others. She had pushed her way all the way into the clearing, and she stood before Thor. She burst into tears of joy, as she looked out and saw the Empire defeated, all threats finally gone, as she saw Thor, her love, alive, safe. She felt triumphant. She felt as if all the darkness and grief of the last several months had finally lifted, felt that the Ring was finally safe once again. She felt overwhelmed with joy and gratitude as Thor spotted her and looked down at her with such love, his eyes shining.

Gwen prepared to go forth and greet him, when suddenly a noise cut through the air that made her turn.

"BRONSON!" came the shriek.

Gwen and the others turned, and her heart sank with dread to see a man emerge from the ashes of the Empire side. The man had been lying face-down on the ground, covered with the bodies of Empire soldiers, and he stood and knocked them off as he rose to his full height.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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