AN
OATH
OF
BROTHERS
BOOK #14 IN THE SORCERER'S RING
MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

An Oath of Brothers

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In AN OATH OF BROTHERS, Thorgrin and his brothers emerge from the land of the dead, more driven than ever to find Guwayne, and set sail across a hostile sea, leading them to places beyond their wildest dreams. As they come ever-closer to finding Guwayne, they also encounter obstacles unlike ever before, obstacles which will test them to their very limits, which will call on all their training and force them to stand together as one, as brothers.Darius stands up to the Empire, boldly waging a guerilla war, amassing an army, as one freed slave village after the next rallies to his cause. Facing off against fortified cities, against an army a thousand times his size, he summons all of his instincts and courage, determined to survive, determined to win, to strive for freedom at any cost, even at the cost of his life.Gwendolyn, with no other choice, leads her people into the Great Waste, deeper into the Empire than anyone has ever journeyed, on a quest to find the legendary Second Ring—the last hope for the survival of her people, and the last hope for Darius. Yet along the way she will encounter horrific monsters, worse landscapes, and an insurrection from amidst her own people that even she may not be able to stop.Erec and Alistair sail for the Empire to save their people, and along the way stop at hidden islands, determined to raise an army—even if it means dealing with mercenaries of questionable repute.Godfrey finds himself deep inside the city of Volusia and deep in trouble as his plan goes from bad to worse. Imprisoned, set to be executed, finally, even he can see no way out.Volusia forges a pact with the darkest of sorcerers, and driven to even greater heights, she continues her ascent, conquering all who stand in her way. More powerful than ever, she will take her war all the way to the steps of the Empire Capital—until she is up against the entire Empire army, an army that dwarfs even her own, setting the stage for an epic battle.Will Thorgrin find Guwayne? Will Gwendolyn and her people survive? Will Godfrey escape? Will Erec and Alistair reach the Empire? Will Volusia become the next Empress? Will Darius lead his people to victory?With its sophisticated

world-building and characterization, AN OATH OF BROTHERS 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
An Oath of Brothers
(Book #14 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

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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 fourteen books (and counting).

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

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

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Chapter One

Darius looked down at the bloody dagger in his hand, at the Empire commander dead at his feet, and he wondered what he had just done. His world slowed as he looked up and saw the shocked faces of the Empire army spread out before him, hundreds of men on the horizon, *real* men, warriors with *real* armor and *real* weaponry, scores of them mounted on zertas. Men who had never known defeat.

Behind Darius, he knew, were his few hundred paltry villagers, men and women without steel, without armor, left alone to face this professional army. They had implored him to surrender, to accept the maiming; they didn't want a war they could not win. They didn't want death. And Darius had wanted to oblige them.

But deep down in his soul he could not. His hands had acted on their own, his spirit had risen up on its own, and he could not have controlled it if he tried. It was the deepest part of himself, the part that had been oppressed his entire life, the part that thirsted for freedom as a dying man thirsts for water.

Darius looked out at the sea of faces, never feeling so alone, yet never feeling so free, and his world spun. He felt outside of himself, looking down on himself. It all felt surreal. He knew this was one of those pivotal moments of his life. He knew it was a moment that would change everything.

Yet Darius had no regrets. He looked at the dead Empire commander, this man who would have taken Loti's life, who would have taken all of their lives, who would have maimed them, and he felt a sense of justice. He also felt emboldened. After all, an Empire officer had fallen. And that meant that any Empire soldier could fall. They might be bedecked in the greatest armor, the greatest weaponry, but they bled like any other man. They were not invincible.

Darius felt a rush of strength within him, and he burst into action before any of the others could react. A few feet away was the small entourage of Empire officers who had accompanied their commander, and they stood there in shock, clearly never expecting anything but surrender, never expecting their commander to be attacked.

Darius took advantage of their surprise. He lunged forward, drew a dagger from his waist, slashed one's throat, then spun around and in the same motion, slashed another.

The two of them stared back at him, eyes wide open, as if unbelieving this could happen to them, blood pouring from their throats, as they dropped to their knees, then collapsed, dead.

Darius braced himself; his bold move had left him vulnerable to attack, and one of the officers lunged forward and slashed his steel sword, aiming for his head. Darius wished at that moment that he had armor, a shield, a sword to block it – anything. But he did not. He'd left himself vulnerable to attack, and now, he knew he was going to pay the price. At least he would die a free man.

A sudden clang cut through the air, and Darius looked over to see Raj standing beside him, blocking the blow with a sword of his own. Darius glanced over and realized that Raj had taken the sword from the dead soldier and had rushed forward and blocked for him at the last moment.

Another clang tore through the air, and Darius looked to his other side to see Desmond blocking another blow meant for him. Raj and Desmond rushed forward, slashing back at their attackers, who had not expected the defense. They swung like men possessed, the clanging of their swords sparking as they met their attackers', driving them back, then each landing a deadly blow before the Empire soldiers could fully defend.

The two soldiers dropped down, dead.

Darius felt a rush of gratitude toward his brothers, elated to have them here, fighting at his side. He no longer faced the army alone.

Darius reached down, snatched the sword and the shield from the dead commander's body, then joined Desmond and Raj as they rushed forward and attacked the six remaining officers of his

entourage. Darius swung the sword high, and relished the weight; it felt so good to wield a real sword, a real shield. He felt invincible.

Darius lunged forward and blocked a mighty sword slash with his shield and at the same time slipped a sword thrust between the kinks of an empire soldier's armor, stabbing him in the shoulder blade; the soldier grunted and dropped to his knees.

He turned and swung his shield, blocking a blow from the side, then spun around and used the shield as a weapon, smashing another attacker in the face and felling him. He then spun around with his sword and slashed his other attacker across the stomach, killing him just before the soldier, hands raised above his head, could land a blow on Darius's neck.

Raj and Desmond charged forward, too, at his side, going blow for blow with the other soldiers, the clanging sharp in his ears. Darius thought back to all their sparring with wooden swords, and he could see now, in battle, what great fighters they were. As he swung himself, he realized how much all of their sparring had sharpened him. He wondered if he could have won without it. And he was determined to win on his own, with his own two hands, and to never, ever, draw upon the magic power that lurked somewhere deep inside him and that he did not fully understand – or *want* to understand.

As Darius, Desmond, and Raj felled the remainder of the entourage, as they stood there alone in the midst of the battlefield, the hundreds of other Empire soldiers in the distance finally rallied. Collecting themselves, they let out a great battle cry and charged down on them.

Darius looked out, standing there, breathing hard, the bloody sword in his hand, and he realized there was nowhere to run. As the perfect squadrons of soldiers burst into action, he realized that that was death coming his way. He stood his ground, as did Desmond and Raj, wiped the sweat off the back of his brow and faced them. He would not back down, not for anyone.

There came another great battle cry, this time from behind, and Darius glanced back and was happily surprised to see all of his villagers, charging, rallying. He spotted several of his brothers in arms rushing forward, scavenging swords and shields from the fallen Empire soldiers, racing to join their ranks. The villagers, Darius was proud to see, covered the battlefield like a wave, scavenging, arming themselves with steel and weaponry and soon, several dozen of them were armed with real weapons. Those that did not have steel wielded makeshift weapons carved of wood, dozens of the younger ones, Darius's friends, wielding short, wooden spears that they had sharpened to a point, and small wooden bows and arrows at their sides, clearly hoping for a fight such as this.

They all charged together, as one, each and every one fighting for their lives as they joined Darius to face the Empire army.

In the distance a huge banner waved, a trumpet sounded, and the Empire army mobilized. The clanging of armor filled the air as hundreds of the Empire soldiers marched forward as one, well-disciplined, a wall of men, shoulder to shoulder, holding ranks perfectly as they marched toward the crowd of villagers.

Darius led his men in the charge, all of them fearlessly beside him, and as they neared the empire ranks, Darius shouted:

"SPEARS!"

His people let their short spears fly, soaring over Darius's head, flying through the air and finding targets across the clearing. Many of the wooden spears, not sharp enough, hit armor and bounced off harmlessly. But more than a few found kinks in the armor and hit their mark, and a handful of Empire soldiers cried out, dropping in the distance.

"ARROWS!" Darius cried out, still charging, sword held high, closing the gap.

Several villagers stopped, took aim, and unleashed a volley of sharpened wooden arrows, dozens of them arcing high in the air, across the clearing, to the surprise of the Empire, who clearly had not expected a fight – much less for the villagers to have any weapons. Many bounced harmlessly off the armor, but enough found their marks, striking soldiers in the throats and in their joints, felling several more.

"STONES!" Darius yelled.

Several dozen villagers stepped forward and, using their slings, hurled stones.

A barrage of small stones hailed through the skies, and the sound of rocks hitting armor filled the air. A few soldiers, hit in the face by stones, dropped, while many others stopped and raised their shields or hands to stop the assault.

It slowed the Empire and added an element of uncertainty to their ranks – but it did not stop them. On and on they marched, never breaking ranks, even with arrows and spears and stones assailing them. They simply raised their shields, too arrogant to duck, marching with their shining steel halberds straight up in the air, their long, steel swords swinging at their belts, clanging in the morning light. Darius watched them advance, and he knew that was a professional army coming toward him. He knew it was a wave of death.

There came a sudden rumbling, and Darius looked up and saw three huge zertas break from the front lines and come charging toward them, one officer riding each, wielding long halberds. The zertas charged, fury on their faces, kicking up waves of dust.

Darius braced himself as one bore down on him, the soldier sneering as he raised his halberd and suddenly hurled it right for him. Darius was caught off guard by the speed, and at the last moment he dodged it, barely getting out of the way.

But the villager behind them, a boy he knew from growing up, was not so lucky. He cried out in pain as the halberd pierced his chest, blood gushing from his mouth as he dropped to his back, staring up at the sky.

Darius, in a rage, turned and faced the zerta. He waited and waited, knowing that if he did not time it perfectly, he would be trampled to death.

At the last second Darius rolled out of the way and swung his sword, chopping the zerta's legs out from under him.

The zerta shrieked and dropped face-first to the ground, its rider flying off it, landing in the group of villagers.

A villager broke from the crowd and rushed forward, hoisting a large rock high overhead. Darius turned and was surprised to see it was Loti – she held it high, then smashed it down on the soldier's helmet, killing him.

Darius heard galloping and turned to find, bearing down on him, another zerta, the soldier astride it raising his spear and aiming it down at him. There was no time to react.

A snarl ripped through the air, and Darius was surprised to see Dray suddenly appear, leaping forward, high into the air, and biting the soldier's foot just as he hurled the spear. The soldier lurched forward and his spear throw went straight down, into the dirt. He wobbled and fell sideways off the zerta, and as he hit the ground he was pounced on by several villagers.

Darius looked to Dray, who came running to his side, forever grateful to him.

Darius heard another battle cry and turned to find yet another Empire officer charging him, raising his sword and bringing it down on him. Darius turned and parried, knocking the other sword away with a clang before it could reach his chest. Darius then spun around and kicked the soldier's feet out from under him. He fell to the ground, and Darius kicked him across the jaw before he could rise, knocking him out for good.

Darius watched Loti race past him, throwing herself headlong right into the thick of the fight as she reached down and snatched a sword from a dead soldier's waist. Dray lunged forward before her to protect her, and it concerned Darius to see her in the thick of the fight, and he wanted to get her to safety.

Loc, her brother, beat him to it. He rushed forward and grabbed Loti from behind, making her drop the spear.

"We must go from here!" he said. "This is no place for you!"

"This is the *only* place for me!" she insisted.

Loc, though, even with his one good hand, was surprisingly strong, and he managed to drag her, protesting and kicking, away from the thick of battle. Darius was more grateful to him than he could say.

Darius heard a clang of steel beside him and he turned to see one of his brothers in arms, Kaz, struggling with an Empire soldier. While Kaz had once been a bully and a thorn in Darius' side, now, Darius had to admit, he was happy to have Kaz by his side. He saw Kaz go back and forth with the soldier, a formidable warrior, clang for clang, until finally the soldier, in a surprise move, bested Kaz and knocked the sword from his hand.

Kaz stood there, defenseless, fear in his face for the first time Darius could remember. The Empire soldier, blood in his eyes, stepped forward to finish him off.

Suddenly, there came a clang, and the soldier suddenly froze and fell, face-first, down to the ground. Dead.

They both looked over, and Darius was shocked to see Luzi standing there, half Kaz's size, holding a sling in his hand, empty from having just fired. Luzi smirked at Kaz.

"Regret bullying me now?" he said to Kaz.

Kaz stared back, speechless.

Darius was impressed that Luzi, after the way he'd been tormented by Kaz in all their days of training, had stepped up and saved his life. It inspired Darius to fight even harder.

Darius, seeing the abandoned zerta stomping wildly through his ranks, rushed forward, ran up alongside it, and mounted it.

The zerta jerked wildly, but Darius held on, clutching it tight, determined. Finally, he got control of it, and he managed to turn it and direct it toward the Empire ranks.

His zerta galloped so fast he could barely control it, taking him out beyond all his men, leading the charge single-handedly into the thick of the Empire ranks. Darius's heart slammed in his chest as he neared the wall of soldiers. It seemed impenetrable from here. And yet, there was no turning back.

Darius forced his courage to carry him through. He charged right into them and as he did, he slashed down wildly with his sword.

From his higher vantage point, Darius slashed side to side, taking out scores of surprised Empire soldiers, who had not expected to be charged by a zerta. He cut through the ranks with blinding speed, parting the sea of soldiers, carried by his momentum – when suddenly, he felt a horrific pain on his side. It felt as if his ribs were being torn in two.

Darius, losing his balance, went flying through the air. He hit the ground hard, feeling a searing pain in his side, and realized he'd been smashed with the metal ball of a flail. He lay there on the ground, in the sea of Empire soldiers, far from his people.

As he lay there, his head ringing, his world blurry, he looked out in the distance and noticed his people getting surrounded. They fought valiantly, but they were just too outnumbered, too outmatched. His men were getting slaughtered, their screams filling the air.

Darius's head, too heavy, dropped back down to the ground and as he lay there, he looked up and saw all the Empire men closing in on him. He lay there, spent, and knew his life would soon be over.

At least, he thought, he would die with honor.

At least, finally, he was free.

Chapter Two

Gwendolyn stood on the crest of the hill, looking out at the breaking dawn over the desert sky, and her heart pounded in anticipation as she prepared to strike. Watching the Empire confrontation with the villagers from afar, she had marched her men here, skirting the battlefield the long way, and positioned them behind Empire lines. The Empire, so focused on the villagers, on the battle below, had never seen them coming. And now, as villagers began to die below, it was time to make them pay.

Ever since Gwen had decided to turn her men around, to help the villagers, she had felt an overwhelming sense of destiny. Win or lose, she knew it was the right thing to do. She had watched the confrontation unfolding from high in the mountain ranges, had seen the Empire armies approaching with their zertas and professional soldiers, and it brought back fresh feelings, reminding her of the Ring's invasion by Andronicus, and then, Romulus. She had watched Darius step forward by himself, to face them, and her heart had soared as she had witnessed him kill that commander. It was something that Thor would have done. That she herself would have done.

Gwen stood there now, Krohn snarling quietly beside her, Kendrick, Steffen, Brandt, Atme, dozens of Silver and hundreds of her men all behind her, all wearing the steel armor they'd had since they'd left the Ring, all bearing their steel weaponry, all patiently awaiting her command. Hers was a professional army, and they had not had a fight since they'd been exiled from their homeland.

The time had come.

"NOW!" Gwen cried.

There arose a great battle cry as all of her men, led by Kendrick, raced down the hill, their voices carrying like a thousand lions in the early morning light.

Gwen watched as her men reached the Empire lines and as the Empire soldiers, preoccupied with fighting the villagers, slowly turned, baffled, clearly not understanding who could be attacking them or why. Clearly, these Empire soldiers had never been caught off guard before, and certainly not by a professional army.

Kendrick gave them no time to collect themselves, to process what was happening. He lunged forward, stabbing the first man he encountered, and Brandt and Atme and Steffen and the dozens of Silver at their side all joined in, shouting as they plunged their weapons into the soldiers. All of her men carried a great grudge, all had been itching for a fight, craving vengeance against the empire and cooped up from sitting idle too many days in that cave. They had been craving, Gwen knew, to let their wrath out on the Empire ever since they'd abandoned the Ring – and in this battle, they'd found the perfect outlet. In each of her people's eyes there burned a fire, a fire that held the souls of all the loved ones they'd lost in the Ring and the Upper Isles. It was a need for vengeance that they had carried across the sea. In many ways, Gwen realized, the villagers' cause, even halfway around the world, was their cause, too.

Men cried out as they fought hand-to-hand, Kendrick and the others using their momentum to slash their way thick into the fray, taking out rows of Empire soldiers before they could even rally. Gwen was so proud as she watched Kendrick block two blows with his shield, spin around and smash one soldier in the face with it, then slash another across the chest. She watched as Brandt kicked a soldier's legs out from under him, then stabbed him, on his back, through the heart, driving his sword down with both hands. She saw Steffen wield his short sword and chop off a soldier's leg, then step forward and kick another soldier in the groin and head-butt him, knocking him out. Atme swung his flail and took out two soldiers in one blow.

"Darius!" cried the voice.

Gwen looked over to see Sandara standing beside her, pointing to the battlefield.

"My brother!" she cried.

Gwen spotted Darius on the ground, on his back, and surrounded by Empire, closing in. Her heart leapt with concern, but she watched with great satisfaction as Kendrick rushed forward and held out his shield, saving Darius from an axe blow right before it hit his face.

Sandara cried out, and Gwen could see her relief, could see how much she loved her brother.

Gwendolyn reached over and took a bow from one of the soldiers standing guard beside her. She placed an arrow, pulling it back and taking aim.

"ARCHERS!" she yelled.

All around her a dozen of her archers took aim, pulling back their bows, awaiting her command.

"FIRE!"

Gwen shot her arrow high into the sky, over her men, and as she did, her dozen archers fired, too.

The volley landed on the thicket of remaining Empire soldiers, and cries rang out as a dozen soldiers dropped to their knees.

"FIRE!" she yelled again.

There came yet another volley; then another.

Kendrick and his men rushed in, killing all those men who had dropped to their knees from the arrows.

The Empire soldiers were forced to abandon attacking the villagers and instead turn their army around and confront Kendrick's men.

This gave the villagers an opportunity. They let out a loud cry as they charged forward, stabbing in the back the Empire soldiers, who were now getting slaughtered from both sides.

The Empire soldiers, squeezed between two hostile forces, their numbers dwindling quickly, finally began to realize they were outmaneuvered. Their ranks of hundreds soon dwindled to dozens, and those who remained turned and tried to flee on foot, their zertas either killed or taken hostage.

They did not make it very far before they were hunted down and killed.

There arose a great shout of triumph from both the villagers and Gwendolyn's men. They all gathered together, cheering, embracing each other as brothers, and Gwendolyn hurried down the slope and joined them, Krohn at her heels, bursting into the thick of it, men all around her, the smell of sweat and fear strong in the air, blood running fresh on the desert floor. Here, on this day, despite everything that had happened back in the Ring, Gwen felt a moment of triumph. It was a glorious victory here in the desert, the villagers and the exiles of the Ring joined together, united in defiance of the enemy.

The villagers had lost many good men, and Gwen had lost some of hers. But Darius, at least, Gwen was relieved to see, was alive, helped unsteadily to his feet.

Gwen knew the Empire had millions more men. She knew a day of reckoning would come.

But that day was not today. Today she had not made the wisest decision – but she had made the bravest one. The right one. She felt it was a decision her father would have made. She had chosen the hardest path. The path of what was right. The path of justice. The path of valor. And regardless of what might come, on this day she had lived.

She had really lived.

Chapter Three

Volusia stood on the stone balcony looking down, the cobblestone courtyard of Maltolis spread out below her, and far below she saw the sprawled out body of the Prince, lying there, unmoving, his limbs spread out in grotesque position. He seemed so far away from up here, so minuscule, so powerless, and Volusia marveled how, just moments before, he had been one of the most powerful rulers in the Empire. It struck home how frail life was, what an illusion power was – and most of all, how she, of infinite power, a true goddess now, wielded the power of life and death over anyone. Now, no one, not even a great prince, could stop her.

As she stood there, looking out, there arose all throughout the city the cries of his thousands of people, the touched citizens of Maltolis, moaning, their sound filling the courtyard and rising up like a plague of locusts. They wailed and screamed and slammed their heads against the stone walls; they leapt to the floor, like irate children, and tore the hair from their scalps. From the sight of them, Volusia mused, one would think that Maltolis had been a benevolent leader.

"OUR PRINCE!" one of them screamed, a scream echoed by many others as they all rushed forward, leaping onto the mad Prince's body, sobbing and convulsing as they clutched it.

"OUR DEAR FATHER!"

Bells suddenly tolled all throughout the city, a long succession of ringing, echoing each other. Volusia heard a commotion and she raised her eyes and watched as hundreds of Maltolis's troops marched hurriedly through the city gates, into the city courtyard, in rows of two, the portcullis rising to let them all in. They all aimed for Maltolis's castle.

Volusia knew she had set in motion an event that would forever alter this city.

There came a sudden, insistent booming at the thick oak door to her chamber, making her jump. It was an incessant slamming, the sound of dozens of soldiers, armor clanging, slamming a battering ram into the thick oak door of the Prince's chamber. Volusia, of course, had barred it, and the door, a foot thick, meant to withstand a siege, nonetheless buckled on its hinges, as the shouts of men came from the other side. With each slam it bent more.

Slam slam slam.

The stone chamber shook, and the ancient metal chandelier, hanging high above from a wooden beam, swayed wildly before it came crashing down to the floor.

Volusia stood there and watched it all calmly, expecting it all. She knew, of course, that they would come for her. They wanted vengeance – and they would never let her escape.

"Open the door!" shouted one of his generals.

She recognized his voice – the leader of Maltolis's forces, a humorless man she had met briefly, with a low, raspy voice – an inept man but a professional soldier, and with two hundred thousand men at his disposal.

And yet Volusia stood there and faced the door calmly, unfazed, watching it patiently, waiting for them to crash it down. She could of course have opened it for them, but she would not give them the satisfaction.

Finally there came a tremendous crash, and the wooden door gave way, bursting off its hinges, and dozens of soldiers, armor clanging, rushed the room. Maltolis' commander, donning his ornamental armor, and carrying the golden scepter that entitled him to command Maltolis' army, led the way.

They slowed to a quick walk as they saw her standing there, alone, not trying to run. The commander, a deep scowl set on his face, marched right up to her and stopped abruptly a few feet away.

He glared down at her with hatred, and behind him, all his men stopped, well-disciplined, and awaited his command.

Volusia stood there calmly, staring back with a slight smile, and she realized her poise must have thrown them off, as he seemed flustered.

"What have you done, woman?" he demanded, clutching his sword. "You have come into our city as a guest and you have killed our ruler. The chosen one. The one who could not be killed."

Volusia smiled back, and replied calmly:

"You are quite wrong, General," she said. "*I* am the one who cannot be killed. As I have just proved here today."

He shook his head in fury.

"How could you be so stupid?" he said. "Surely you must have known we would kill you and your men, that there is nowhere to run, no way to escape this place. Here, your few are surrounded by hundreds of thousands of ours. Surely you must have known that your act here today would amount to your death sentence – worse, your imprisonment and torture. We do not treat our enemies kindly, in case you haven't noticed."

"I have noticed indeed, General, and I admire it," she replied. "And yet you will not lay a hand on me. None of your men will."

He shook his head, annoyed.

"You are more foolish than I thought," he said. "I bear the golden scepter. All of our armies will do as I say. *Exactly* as I say."

"Will they?" she asked slowly, a smile on her face.

Slowly, Volusia turned and looked through the open-air window, down at the Prince's body, now being hoisted upon the shoulders of lunatics and bore throughout the city like a martyr.

Her back to him, she cleared her throat and continued.

"I do not doubt, General," she said, "that your forces are well-trained. Or that they will follow he who wields the scepter. Their fame precedes them. I know, too, that they are vastly greater than mine. And that there is no way to escape from here. But you see, I do not wish to escape. I do not need to."

He looked back at her, baffled, and Volusia turned and looked out the window, combing the courtyard. In the distance she spotted Koolian, her sorcerer, standing there in the crowd, ignoring all the others and staring only up at her with his glowing green eyes and wart-lined face. He wore his black cloak, unmistakable in the crowd, his arms folded calmly, his pale face looking up at her, partially hidden behind the hood, awaiting her command. He stood there, the only one still and patient and disciplined in this chaotic city.

Volusia gave him a barely discernible nod, and she saw him immediately nod back.

Slowly, Volusia turned, a smile on her face, and faced the general.

"You can hand me the scepter now," she said, "or I can kill you all and take it for myself."

He looked back at her, astounded, then shook his head and, for the first time, smiled.

"I know delusional people," he said. "I served one for years. But you… you are in a class of your own. Very well. If you wish to die that way, then so be it."

He stepped up and drew his sword.

"I am going to enjoy killing you," he added. "I wanted to from the moment I saw your face. All that arrogance – it is enough to make a man sick."

He approached her, and as he did, Volusia turned and suddenly saw Koolian standing in the room beside her.

Koolian turned and stared at him, startled at his sudden appearance out of thin air. He stood there, stumped, clearly not expecting this, and clearly not knowing what to make of him.

Koolian pulled back his black hood and sneered back at him with his grotesque face, too pale, his white eyes, rolling back in his head, and he slowly raised his palms.

As he did, suddenly, the commander and all his men dropped to their knees. They shrieked and raised their hands to their ears.

"Make it stop!" he yelled.

Slowly, blood poured from their ears, and one by one, they dropped to the stone floor, unmoving.

Dead.

Volusia stepped up slowly, calmly, reached down, and grabbed the golden scepter from the commander's dead hand.

She lifted it high and examined it in the light, admiring the weight of it, the way it glistened. It was a sinister thing.

She smiled wide.

It was even heavier than she had imagined.

* * *

Volusia stood just beyond the moat, outside the city walls of Maltolis, her sorcerer, Koolian, her assassin, Aksan, and the commander of her Volusian forces, Soku, behind her, and she looked out at the vast Maltolisian army assembled before her. As far as she could see, the desert plains were filled with Maltolis's men, two hundred thousand of them, a greater army than she'd ever laid eyes upon. Even for her, it was awe-inspiring.

They stood there patiently, leader-less, all looking to her, Volusia, who stood on a raised dais, facing them. The tension was thick in the air, and Volusia could sense that they were all waiting, pondering, deciding whether to kill her or to serve her.

Volusia looked out at them proudly, feeling her destiny before her, and slowly raised the golden scepter up overhead. She turned slowly, in every direction, so they could all see her, all see the scepter, glistening in the sun.

"MY PEOPLE!" she boomed out. "I am the Goddess Volusia. Your prince is dead. I am the one who bears the scepter now; I am the one you shall follow. Follow me, and you shall gain glory and riches and all your hearts' desires. Stay here, and you will waste away and die in this place, under the shadow of these walls, under the shadow of a corpse of a leader who never loved you. You served him in madness; you shall serve me in glory, in conquest, and finally have the leader you deserve."

Volusia raised the scepter higher, looking out at them, meeting their disciplined glances, feeling her destiny. She felt that she was invincible, that nothing could lie in her way, not even these hundreds of thousands of men. She knew that they, like all the world, would bow down to her. She saw it happening in her mind's eye; after all, she was a goddess. She lived in a realm above men. What choice could they have?

As sure as she envisioned it, there came a slow clanking of armor, and one by one, all of the men before her took a knee, one after the other, a great clang of armor spreading across the desert, as they all knelt down to her.

"VOLUSIA!" they chanted softly, again and again.

"VOLUSIA!"

"VOLUSIA!"

Chapter Four

Godfrey felt the sweat pouring down the back of his neck as he huddled inside the group of slaves, trying not to stick to the middle and not be seen as they wound their way through the streets of Volusia. Another crack cut through the air, and Godfrey screamed out in pain as the tip of a whip lashed his behind. The slave beside him screamed much louder, as the whip was mostly meant for her. It lashed her solidly across the back, and she cried and stumbled forward.

Godfrey reached out and caught her before she collapsed, acting on impulse, knowing he was risking his life in doing so. She steadied herself and turned to him, panic and fear across her face, and as she saw him, her eyes opened wide in surprise. Clearly, she had not expected to see him, a human, light of skin, walking freely beside her, unshackled. Godfrey shook his head quickly and raised a finger to his mouth, praying she'd remain silent. Luckily, she did.

There came another crack of a whip and Godfrey looked over and saw taskmasters working their way up the convoy, mindlessly lashing slaves, clearly just wanting to keep their presence known. As he glanced back, he noticed, right behind him, the panicked faces of Akorth and Fulton, eyes darting about, and beside them, the calm, determined faces of Merek and Ario. Godfrey marveled that these two boys showed more composure and bravery than Akorth and Fulton, two grown, albeit drunk, men.

They marched and marched, and Godfrey sensed they were nearing their destination, wherever that might be. Of course, he could not let them arrive there: he had to make a move soon. He had accomplished his goal, had managed to get inside Volusia – but now he had to break free from this group, before they were all discovered.

Godfrey looked about, and noticed something he took to heart: the taskmasters were now congregating mostly at the front of this convoy of slaves. It made sense, of course. Given that all the slaves were shackled together, there was clearly nowhere they could run, and the taskmasters clearly felt no need to guard the rear. Aside from the lone taskmaster walking up and down the lines lashing them, there was no one to stop them from slipping out through the back of the convoy. They could escape, slip out silently into the streets of Volusia.

Godfrey knew they should act quickly; and yet his heart pounded every time he considered making the bold move. His mind told him to go, and yet his body kept hesitating, never quite working up the courage.

Godfrey still could not believe they were here, that they had really made it inside these walls. It was like a dream – yet a dream that kept getting worse. The buzz from the wine was wearing off, and the more it did, the more he realized what a profoundly bad idea all of this was.

"We have to get out of here," Merek leaned forward and whispered urgently. "We have to make a move."

Godfrey shook his head and gulped, sweat stinging his eyes. A part of him knew he was right; yet another part of him kept waiting for exactly the right moment.

"No," he replied. "Not yet."

Godfrey looked around and saw all manner of slaves shackled and dragged throughout the streets of Volusia, not only those of darker skin. It looked as if the Empire had managed to enslave all manner of race from all corners of the Empire – everyone and anyone who was not of the Empire race, everyone who did not share their glowing yellow skin, extra height, broad shoulders, and the small horns behind their ears.

"What are we waiting for?" Ario asked.

"If we run out into the open streets," Godfrey said, "we might be too conspicuous. We might get caught, too. We must wait."

"Wait for what?" Merek pressed, frustration in his voice.

Godfrey shook his head, stumped. He felt as if his plan were falling apart.

"I don't know," he said.

They turned yet another corner, and as they did, the entire city of Volusia opened up before them. Godfrey took in the sight, in awe.

It was the most incredible city he'd ever seen. Godfrey, as the son of a king, had been to big cities, and grand cities, and wealthy cities, and fortified cities. He had been to some of the most beautiful cities in the world. Few cities were able to rival the majesty of a Savaria, a Silesia, or most of all, King's Court. He was not easily impressed.

But he had never seen anything like this. It was a combination of beauty, order, power, and wealth. Mostly wealth. The first thing that struck Godfrey were all the idols. Everywhere, placed throughout the city, were statues, idols to gods that Godfrey did not recognize. One appeared to be a god of the sea, another of the sky, another of the hills…. Everywhere were clusters of people, bowing down to them. In the distance, towering over the city, was a massive golden statue, rising up a hundred feet, of Volusia. Hordes of people bowed low before it.

The next thing that surprised Godfrey were the streets, paved with gold, shining, immaculate, everything fastidiously neat and clean. All the buildings were made of perfectly hewn stone, not a stone out of place. The city streets stretched forever, the city seeming to sprawl to the horizon. What took him aback even more were the canals and waterways, interlacing through the streets, sometimes in arches, sometimes in circles, carrying the azure tides of the ocean and acting as conduits, the oil which made this city flow. These waterways were packed with ornate golden vessels, making their way gently up and down them, crisscrossing through the streets.

The city was filled with light, reflecting off the harbor, dominated by the ever-present sound of crashing waves, as the city, shaped in a horseshoe, hugged the harbor shoreline, and waves crashed right up against its golden seawall. Between the sparkling light of the ocean, the rays of the two suns overhead, and the ever-present gold, Volusia positively dazzled the eyes. Framing it all, at the entrance to the harbor, were two towering pillars, nearly reaching to the sky, bastions of strength.

This city was built to intimidate, Godfrey realized, to exude wealth, and it did its job well. It was a city which exuded advances and civilization, and if Godfrey had not known of the cruelty of its inhabitants, it would have been a city he would have loved to live in himself. It was so different from anything the Ring had to offer. The cities of the Ring were built to fortify, protect, and defend. They were humble and understated, like their people. These cities of the Empire, on the other hand, were open, fearless, and build to project wealth. It made sense, Godfrey realized: after all, the Empire cities had no one from whom to fear an attack.

Godfrey heard a clamor up ahead, and as they twisted down an alleyway and turned a corner, suddenly, a great courtyard opened up before them, the harbor behind it. It was a wide, stone plaza, a major crossroads in the city, a dozen streets emerging from it in a dozen directions. All of this was visible in glimpses through a stone archway about twenty yards up ahead. Godfrey knew that once their entourage passed through it, they would all be out in the open, exposed, with everyone else. They wouldn't be able to slip out.

Even more disconcerting, Godfrey saw slaves pouring in from all directions, all being ushered in by taskmasters, slaves from all corners of the Empire and all manner of races, all shackled, being dragged towards a high platform at the base of the ocean. Slaves stood up high on it, while rich Empire folk studied them and placed bids. It looked like an auction block.

A cheer rose up, and Godfrey watched as an Empire noble examined a slave's jaw, a slave with white skin and long, stringy brown hair. The noble nodded in satisfaction, and a taskmaster came up and shackled the slave, as if concluding a business transaction. The taskmaster grabbed the slave by the back of the shirt and threw him, face-first, off the platform and down onto the ground. The man went flying, hitting the ground hard, and the crowd cheered in satisfaction, as several soldiers came forth and dragged him away.

Another entourage of slaves emerged from another corner of the city, and Godfrey watched as a slave was shoved forward, the largest slave, a foot taller than the others, strong and healthy. An Empire soldier raised his ax and the slave braced himself.

But the taskmaster chopped the shackles, the sound of metal hitting stone ringing through the courtyard.

The slave stared at the taskmaster, confused.

"Am I free?" he asked.

But several soldiers rushed forward, grabbed the slave's arms, and dragged him to the base of a large golden statue at the base of the harbor, another statue of Volusia, her finger pointed to the sea, waves crashing at her feet.

The crowd gathered close as the soldiers held the man down, his head pushed down, face-first, on the statue's foot.

"NO!" the man screamed.

The Empire soldier stepped forward and wielded his ax again, and this time, decapitated the man.

The crowd shouted in delight, and they all dropped to their knees and bowed down to the ground, worshipping the statue as the blood ran over its feet.

"A sacrifice to our great goddess!" called out the soldier. "We dedicate to you the first and choicest of our fruits!"

The crowd cheered again.

"I don't know about you," came Merek's voice in Godfrey's ear, urgent, "but I'm not going to be sacrificed to some idol. Not today."

There came another crack of a whip, and Godfrey could see the entranceway getting closer. His heart pounded as he considered his words, and knew Merek was right. He knew he had to do something – and fast.

Godfrey turned at a sudden movement. From the corner of his eye, he saw five men, wearing bright-red cloaks and hoods, walking quickly down the street in the other direction. He noticed they had white skin, pale hands and faces, saw that they were smaller than the hulking brutes of the Empire race, and immediately, he knew who they were: Finians. One of Godfrey's great skills was being able to commit tales to memory even while drunk, and he had listened thoroughly over the past moon as Sandara's people had recounted stories of Volusia many times over the fire. He had listened to their descriptions of the city, of its history, of all the races that were enslaved, and of the only free race: the Finians. The only exception to the rule. They had been allowed to live free, generation after generation, because they were too rich to kill, too connected, too able to make themselves indispensable, and to broker in the trading of power. They were easily noticeable, he had been told, by their too-pale skin, by their bright red cloaks and fiery red hair.

Godfrey had an idea. It was now or never.

"MOVE!" he called out to his friends.

Godfrey turned and leapt into motion, running out from the back of the entourage, to the baffled looks of the shackled slaves. The others, he was relieved to see, followed on his heels.

Godfrey ran, huffing, weighed down by the heavy sacks of gold at his waist, as were the others, jingling as they went. Up ahead he spotted the five Finians turning down a narrow alleyway; he ran right for them, and only prayed they could turn the corner undetected from Empire eyes.

Godfrey, his heart slamming in his ears, turned the corner and as he saw the Finians before him, without thinking he leapt into the air and pounced on the group from behind.

He managed to tackle three of them down to the ground, his ribs hurting as he hit the stone and went rolling with them. He looked up and saw Merek, following his lead, tackle another, Akorth jump down and pin down one of them, and watched Fulton leap for the last one, the smallest of

the bunch. Fulton, Godfrey was annoyed to see, missed, and instead he went groaning and tumbling down to the ground.

Godfrey knocked out one of them on the ground and held down another, yet he was panicked to see the smallest one still running, breaking free, about to turn the corner. He glanced up out of the corner of his eye and watched as Ario stepped forward calmly, reached down and picked up a stone, examined it, then reached back and threw it.

A perfect shot, it struck the Finian in the temple as he was turning a corner, knocking him down to the ground. Ario ran over to him and stripped him of his cloak and began to put it on, realizing Godfrey's intentions.

Godfrey, still struggling with the other Finian, finally reached up and elbowed him across the face, knocking him out. Akorth finally grabbed his Finian by the shirt and smashed his head into the stone floor twice, knocking him out too. Merek choked his long enough make him lose consciousness, and Godfrey looked over and watched Merek roll onto the final Finian and hold a dagger to his throat.

Godfrey was about to yell at Merek to stop, but a voice cut through the air, beating him to it:

"No!" commanded the harsh voice.

Godfrey looked up to see Ario standing over Merek, scowling down.

"Do not kill him!" Ario commanded.

Merek scowled back.

"Dead men don't talk," Merek said. "I let him go, all of us die."

"I don't care," Ario said, "he did nothing to you. He will not be killed."

Merek, defiant, slowly rose to his feet and faced Ario. He got in his face.

"You're half my size, boy," Merek seethed, "and I hold the dagger. Don't tempt me."

"I may be half your size," Ario replied calmly, "but I'm twice as quick. Come at me and I will snatch that dagger from you and slice your throat before you finish swinging."

Godfrey was amazed at the exchange, most of all because Ario was so calm. It was surreal. He didn't blink, or move a muscle, and he spoke as if he were having the calmest conversation in the world. It made his words all the more convincing.

Merek must have thought so, too, because he did not make a move. Godfrey knew he had to break it up, and quick.

"The enemy is not here," Godfrey said, rushing forward and lowering Merek's wrist. "He is out there. We fight each other, and we stand no chance."

Luckily, Merek allowed his wrist to be lowered, and he sheathed his dagger.

"Hurry now," Godfrey added. "All of you. Strip their clothes and don them. We are Finians now."

They all stripped the Finians and donned their bright-red cloaks and hoods.

"This is ridiculous," Akorth said.

Godfrey examined him and saw his belly was too big, and he was too tall; the cloak ran short, exposing his ankles.

Merek snickered.

"Should have had one less pint," he said.

"I'm not wearing this!" Akorth said.

"It's not a fashion show," Godfrey said. "Would you rather be discovered?"

Akorth grudgingly backed down.

Godfrey stood there and looked at the five of them standing there, wearing the red cloaks, in this hostile city, surrounded by the enemy. He knew their chances were slim, at best.

"Now what?" Akorth asked.

Godfrey turned and looked out at the end of the alleyway, leading out into the city. He knew the time had come.

"Let's go see what Volusia is all about."

Chapter Five

Thor stood at the bow of the small sailing vessel, Reece, Selese, Elden, Indra, Matus, and O'Connor seated behind him, none of them rowing, the mysterious wind and current making all effort futile. It would carry them, Thor realized, where it would, and no amount of rowing or sailing would make a difference. Thor glanced back over his shoulder, watched the massive black cliffs marking the entrance to the Land of the Dead fading farther and farther away, and he felt relieved. It was time to look forward, to find Guwayne, to start a new chapter in his life.

Thor glanced back and noted Selese sitting in the boat, beside Reece, holding his hand, and he had to admit, the sight was disconcerting. Thor was thrilled to see her back in the land of the living again, and thrilled to see his best friend so elated. Yet it also, he had to admit, gave him an eerie feeling. Here was Selese, once dead, now brought back to life. He felt as if they had somehow changed the natural order of things. As he examined her, he noticed she had a translucent, ethereal quality, and even though she was really there, in the flesh, he could not help but see her as dead. He could not help but wonder, despite himself, if she was really back for good, how long her time here would last before she returned.

Yet Reece, on the other hand, clearly did not see it that way. He was totally enamored of her, Thor's friend joyous for the first time in as long as he could remember. Thor could understand: after all, who wouldn't want the chance to make wrongs right, to make amends for past mistakes, to see someone one was sure he would never see again? Reece clutched her hand, staring into her eyes, and she caressed his face as he kissed her.

The others, Thor noticed, looked lost, as if they'd been to the depths of hell, to a place they could not easily shake from their minds. The cobwebs lingered heavily, and Thor felt them, too, shaking flashbacks from his mind. There was an aura of gloom, as they all mourned the loss of Conven. Thor, especially, turned over and over in his mind if there was anything he could have done to stop him. Thor looked out to sea, studying the gray horizon, the limitless ocean, and he wondered how Conven could have made the decision he had. He understood his deep grief for his brother; yet Thor would never make the same decision. Thor realized he felt a sense of grief for the loss of Conven, whose presence had always been felt, who had always seemed to be by his side, ever since his first days in the Legion. Thor recalled his visiting him in prison, his talking him into a second chance at life, all of his attempts to cheer him up, to snap him out of it, to bring him back.

Yet, Thor realized, no matter what he'd done, he could never quite bring Conven back. The better part of Conven was always with his brother. Thor recalled the look in Conven's face as he'd remained behind and the others left. It was not a look of regret; it was a look of pure joy. Thor felt that he was happy. And he knew he shouldn't hold too much regret. Conven had made his own decision, and that was more than most people got in this world. And after all, Thor knew they would meet again. In fact, maybe Conven would be the one waiting to greet him when he died. Death, Thor knew, was coming for them all. Maybe not today, or tomorrow. But one day.

Thor tried to shake the somber thoughts; he looked out and forced himself to focus on the ocean, scouring the waters every which way, looking for any sign of Guwayne. He knew it was likely futile to look for him here, on the open sea, yet still, Thor felt mobilized, filled with a newfound optimism. He knew now, at least, that Guwayne was alive, and that was all he needed to hear. He would stop at nothing to find him again.

"Where do you suppose this current is taking us?" O'Connor asked, reaching over the edge of the boat and skimming the water with his fingertips.

Thor reached down and touched the warm water, too; it rushed by so fast, as if the ocean could not bring them wherever it was taking them fast enough.

"As long as it is far from there, I don't care," Elden said, glancing back over his shoulder in fear at the cliffs.

Thor heard a screeching noise, high up, and he looked up and was thrilled to see his old friend, Estopheles, circling high above. She dove down in broad circles around them, then lifted back up into the air. Thor felt as if she were guiding them, encouraging them to follow her.

"Estopheles, my friend," Thor whispered up to the sky. "Be our eyes. Lead us to Guwayne."

Estopheles screeched again, as if answering, and spread her wings wide. She turned and flew off into the horizon, in the same direction the current was taking them, and Thor felt certain they were getting closer.

As Thor turned he heard a gentle clanging at his side, and he looked down and saw the Sword of Death hanging at his waist, and it was shocking to see it there. It made his trip to the land of the dead feel more real than ever. Thor reached down, felt its ivory hilt, crossed with skulls and bones, and tightened his grip on it, feeling its energy. Its blade was inlaid with small black diamonds, and as he held it up to examine it, he saw them sparkling in the light.

As he held it, it felt so right in his hand. He hadn't felt this way about a weapon since he'd wielded the Destiny Sword. This weapon meant more to him than he could say; after all, he had managed to escape that world, and so had this weapon, and he felt they were both survivors of an awful war. They had been through it together. Entering the land of the dead and returning had been like walking through a giant spider web and pulling it off. It was off, Thor knew, and yet somehow he still felt it sticking to him. At least he had this weapon to show for it.

Thor reflected on his exit, on the price he'd paid, on the demons he'd unleashed unwittingly on the world. He felt a pit in his stomach, sensing he'd unleashed a dark force on the world, one not so easily contained. He felt he'd sent something out, like a boomerang, that would one day, somehow, return to him. Perhaps even sooner than he thought.

Thor gripped the hilt, prepared. Whatever it was, he would meet it in battle fearlessly, would kill whatever came his way.

But what he truly feared were the things he could not see, the invisible havoc the demons might wreak. What he feared most were the spirits unknown, the spirits who fought by stealth.

Thor heard footsteps, felt their small boat rock, and he turned and saw Matus walk up beside him. Matus stood there sadly, looking out at the horizon with him. It was a dark, grim day, and as they looked out, it was hard to tell if it was morning or afternoon, the whole sky uniform, as if this entire part of the world were in mourning.

Thor thought of how Matus had quickly become a close friend to him. Especially now, with Reece fixated on Selese, Thor felt the partial loss of one friend, and the gaining of another. Thor recalled how Matus had saved him more than once down there, and he already felt a loyalty to him, as if he had always been one of his own brothers.

"This vessel," Matus said softly, "was not made for the open seas. One good storm, and we shall all be killed. It is just an outboat from Gwendolyn's ship, not meant to traverse the seas. We must find a bigger boat."

"And land," O'Connor chimed in, coming up on Thor's other side, "and provisions."

"And a map," Elden chimed in.

"Where is our destination, anyway?" Indra asked. "Where is it we are going? Have you any idea where your son might be?"

Thor examined the horizon, as he had a thousand times, and reflected on all their questions. He knew they were all right, and had been thinking the same things. A vast sea lay before them, and they were a small vessel, with no provisions. They were alive, and he was grateful for that, but their situation was precarious.

Thor shook his head slowly. As he stood there, immersed in thought, he began to spot something on the horizon. As they sailed closer, it began to more distinctly come into view, and he felt certain it was something and not just his eyes playing tricks on him. His heart raced with excitement.

The sun broke through the clouds, and a shaft of sunlight poured down on the horizon and lit up a small island. It was a small land mass, in the middle of a vast ocean, with nothing else anywhere near it.

Thor blinked, wondering if it were real.

"What is it?" Matus asked the question on all of their minds, as they all saw it, all of them standing and staring.

As they came close, Thor saw a mist surrounding the island, sparkling in the light, and he sensed a magical energy to this place. He looked up and saw it was a stark place, cliffs rising straight up into the air, hundreds of feet, a narrow, steep, unforgiving island, waves crashing into the boulders that surrounded it, emerging from the ocean like ancient beasts. Thor sensed, with every ounce of his being, that this was where they were meant to go.

"That's a steep climb," O'Connor said. "If we even made it."

"And we don't know what's at the top," Elden added. "Could be hostile. Our weapons are all gone, except for your sword. We can't afford a battle here."

But Thor considered the place, and he wondered, sensing something strong here. He looked up high and watched Estopheles circling it, and he felt even more certain that this was the place.

"No stone must be left unturned in our search for Guwayne," Thor said. "No place is too remote. This island will be our first stop," he said. He tightened his grip on his sword:

"Hostile or not."

Chapter Six

Alistair found herself standing in a strange landscape she did not recognize. It was a desert of sorts, and as she looked down the desert floor turned from black to red, drying up, cracking beneath her feet. She looked up, and in the distance she spotted Gwendolyn standing before a ragtag army, but a few dozen men, members of the Silver that Alistair once knew, all their faces bloody, their armor cracked. In Gwendolyn's arms was a small baby, and Alistair sensed that it was her nephew, Guwayne.

"Gwendolyn!" Alistair called out, relieved to see her. "My sister!"

But as Alistair watched there suddenly came an awful sound, the sound of a million flapping wings, growing louder, followed by a great squawking. The horizon turned black and there emerged a sky filled with ravens, flying her way.

Alistair watched in horror as the ravens arrived in one huge flock, a wall of black, swooped down and snatched Guwayne from Gwendolyn's arms. Screeching, they lifted him up into the sky.

"NO!" Gwendolyn shrieked, reaching for the sky as they tore at her hair.

Alistair watched, helpless, nothing she could do but watch them carry off the screaming baby. The desert floor cracked and dried further, and it began to split apart, until one by one, all of Gwen's men collapsed down into it.

Only Gwendolyn remained, standing there, staring back at her, her eyes haunted with a look that Alistair wished she had never seen.

Alistair blinked and found herself standing on a great ship in the midst of an ocean, waves crashing all around her. She looked about and saw she was the only one on the ship, and faced forward and saw another ship before her. Erec stood at its bow, facing her, and was joined by hundreds of soldiers from the Southern Isles. She was distressed to see him on another ship, and sailing away from her.

"Erec!" she called out.

He stared back, reaching out for her.

"Alistair!" he called back. "Come back to me!"

Alistair watched in horror as the ships drifted further apart, Erec's ship sucked away from her on the tides. His ship began to slowly spin in the water, and it spun faster and faster, Erec reaching out for her, Alistair helpless to do nothing but watch as his ship was sucked down by a whirlpool, deeper and deeper, until it disappeared from view.

"EREC!" Alistair cried.

There came another wail, to match hers, and Alistair looked down to see that she was holding a baby – Erec's child. It was a boy, and his wails rose to the heavens, drowning out the noise of the wind and the rain and the shrieking of men.

Alistair woke screaming. She sat up and looked around, wondering where she was, what had happened. Breathing hard, slowly collecting herself, it took her several moments to realize it was all just a dream.

She stood and looked down at the creaking floorboards of the deck, and realized she was still on the ship. It all came flooding back to her: their departure from the Southern Isles, their quest to free Gwendolyn.

"My lady?" came a gentle voice.

Alistair looked over and saw Erec standing beside her, looking back at her, concerned. She was relieved to see him.

"Another nightmare?" he asked.

She nodded, looking away, self-conscious.

"Dreams are more vivid at sea," said another voice.

Alistair turned to see Erec's brother, Strom, standing nearby. She turned further and saw hundreds of Southern Islanders all aboard the ship, and it all came back to her. She remembered their departure, their leaving a grieving Dauphine behind, whom they had left to be in charge of the Southern Isles with her mother. Ever since receiving that message, all of them felt they had no choice but to set sail for the Empire, to search for Gwendolyn and all the others of the Ring, duty-bound to save them. They knew it would be an impossible mission, yet none of them cared. It was their duty.

Alistair rubbed her eyes and tried to shake the nightmares from her mind. She did not know how many days had passed already on this endless sea, and as she looked out now, studying the horizon, she could not see much. It was all obscured by fog.

"The fog has been following us since the Southern Isles," Erec said, watching her gaze.

"Let's hope it's not an omen," Strom added.

Alistair gently rubbed her belly, reassured that she was OK, that her baby was OK. Her dream had felt too real. She did it quickly and discreetly, not wanting Erec to know. She hadn't told him yet. A part of her wanted to – but another part of her wanted to wait for the perfect moment, when it felt right.

She took Erec's hand, relieved to see him alive.

"I'm glad you're okay," she said.

He smiled back, as he pulled her close and kissed her.

"And why wouldn't I be?" he asked. "Your dreams are just fancies of the night. For every nightmare, there is also a man who is safe. I'm as safe here, with you and my loyal brother and my men, as I can ever hope to be."

"Until we reach the Empire at least," Strom added with a smile. "Then we shall be as safe as we can ever be with a small fleet against ten thousand ships."

Strom smiled as he spoke, seeming to relish the fight to come.

Erec shrugged, serious.

"With the Gods behind our cause," he said, "we cannot lose. Whatever the odds."

Alistair pulled back and frowned, trying to make sense of it all.

"I saw you and your ship being sucked down to the bottom of the sea. I saw you on it," she said. She wanted to add the bit about their child, but she restrained herself.

"Dreams are not always what they appear to be," he said. Yet deep in his eyes, she saw a flash of concern. He knew that she saw things, and he respected her visions.

Alistair took a deep breath, looked down to the water, and knew he was right. They were all here, alive after all. Yet it had seemed so true.

As she stood there, Alistair felt the temptation to again raise her hand to her belly, to feel her stomach, to reassure herself and the child she knew was growing within her. Yet, with Erec and Strom standing there, she did not want to give it away.

A low, soft horn cut through the air, sounding intermittently every few minutes, warning the other ships in his fleet of their presence in the fog.

"That horn might give us away," Strom said to Erec.

"To whom?" Erec asked.

"We know not what lurks behind the fog," Strom said.

Erec shook his head.

"Perhaps," he replied. "But the greater danger for now is not the enemy, but ourselves. We collide into our own, and we can bring our entire fleet down. We must sound the horns until the fog lifts. Our entire fleet can talk this way – and just as importantly, not drift too far from each other."

In the fog, a horn from another of the ships in Erec's fleet echoed, confirming its location.

Alistair looked out into the fog, and wondered. She knew they had so far to go, that they were on the other side of the world from the Empire, and she wondered how they would ever reach Gwendolyn and her brother in time. She wondered how long the falcons had took with that message, and wondered

if they were even still alive. She wondered what had become of her beloved Ring. What an awful way for them all to die, she thought, on a foreign shore, far from their homeland.

"The Empire is across the world, my lord," Alistair said to Erec. "It shall be a long journey. Why do you stay up here on the deck? Why not go down below, to the hold, and sleep? You haven't slept in days," she said, observing the dark rings beneath his eyes.

He shook his head.

"A commander never sleeps," he said. "And besides, we are almost at our destination."

"Our destination?" she asked, puzzled.

Erec nodded and looked out into the fog.

She followed his gaze but saw nothing.

"Boulder Isle," he said. "Our first stop."

"But why?" she asked. "Why stop before we reach the Empire?"

"We need a bigger fleet," Strom chimed in, answering for him. "We can't face the Empire with a few dozen ships."

"And you will find this fleet in Boulder Isle?" Alistair asked.

Erec nodded.

"We might," Erec said. "Bouldermen have ships, and men. More than we have. They despise the Empire. And they have served my father in the past."

"But why would they help you now?" she asked, puzzled. "Who are these men?"

"Mercenaries," Strom chimed in. "Rough men forged by a rough island on rough seas. They fight for the highest bidder."

"Pirates," Alistair said disapprovingly, realizing.

"Not quite," Strom replied. "Pirates strive for loot. Bouldermen live for killing."

Alistair examined Erec, and could see in his face that it was true.

"It is noble to fight for a true and just cause with pirates?" she asked. "Mercenaries?"

"It is noble to win a war," Erec replied, "and to fight for a just cause such as ours. The means of waging such a war is not always as noble as we might like."

"It is not noble to die," Strom added. "And the judgment on nobility is decided by the victors, not the losers."

Alistair frowned and Erec turned to her.

"Not everyone is as noble as you, my lady," he said. "Or as I. That is not the way the world works. That is not the way that wars are won."

"And can you trust such men?" she finally asked him.

Erec sighed and turned back to the horizon, hands on his hips, staring out as if wondering the same thing.

"Our father trusted them," he finally said. "And his father before him. They never failed them."

"And does that mean they shall not fail you now?" she asked.

Erec studied the horizon, and as he did, suddenly the fog lifted and the sun broke through. The vista changed dramatically, their suddenly gaining visibility, and in the distance, Alistair's heart leapt as she saw land. There, on the horizon, sat a soaring island made of solid cliffs, rising straight up into the sky. There seemed to be no place to land, no beach, no entrance. Until Alistair looked higher and saw an arch, a door cut into the mountain itself, the ocean splashing right up against it. It was a large and imposing entrance, guarded by an iron portcullis, a wall of solid rock with a door cut into the middle of it. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen.

Erec stared at the horizon, studying it, the sunlight striking the door as if illuminating the entrance to another world.

"Trust, my lady," he answered finally, "is born of need, not of want. And it is a very precarious thing."

Chapter Seven

Darius stood in the battlefield, holding a sword made of steel, and looked all around him, taking in the landscape. It had a surreal quality. Even seeing it with his own eyes, he could not believe what had just happened. They had defeated the Empire. He, alone, with a few hundred villagers, without any real weapons – and with the help of Gwendolyn's few hundred men – had defeated this professional army of hundreds of Empire soldiers. They had donned the finest armor, had wielded the finest weapons, had had zertas at their disposal. And he, Darius, barely armed, had led the battle that had defeated them all, the first victory against the Empire in history.

Here, in this place, where he had expected to die defending Loti's honor, he now stood victorious.

A conqueror.

As Darius surveyed the field, he saw intermingled with the Empire corpses the bodies of scores of his own villagers, dozens dead, and his joy was tampered with sorrow. He flexed his muscles and felt fresh wounds himself, sword slashes in his biceps and thighs, and felt the sting of the lashes still on his back. He thought of the retaliation to come and knew their victory had come at a price.

But then again, he mused, all freedom did.

Darius sensed motion and he turned to see approaching him his friends, Raj and Desmond, wounded but, he was relieved to see, alive. He could see in their eyes that they looked at him differently – that all of his people now looked at him differently. They looked at him with respect – more than respect, with awe. Like a living legend. They had all seen what he had done, standing up to the Empire alone. And defeating them all.

They no longer looked to him as a boy. They now looked to him as a leader. A warrior. It was a look he had never expected to see in these older boys' eyes, in the villagers' eyes. He had always been the one overlooked, the one that no one had expected anything from.

Coming up alongside him, joining Raj and Desmond, were dozens of his brothers in arms, boys whom he had trained and sparred with day after day, perhaps fifty of them, brushing off their wounds, rising to their feet, and congregating around him. They all looked to him, standing there, holding his steel sword, covered in wounds, with awe. And with hope.

Raj stepped forward and embraced him, and one at a time, his other brothers in arms embraced him as well.

"That was reckless," Raj said with a smile. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I thought for sure you would surrender," Desmond said.

"I can hardly believe we are all standing here," said Luzi.

They looked about in wonder, surveying the landscape, as if they all had been dropped down on a foreign planet. Darius looked at all the dead bodies, at all the fine armor and weaponry glistening in the sun; he heard birds cawing, and looked up to see the vultures already circling.

"Gather their weapons," Darius heard himself command, taking charge. It was a deep voice, a deeper one than he had ever used, and it carried an air of authority he had never recognized in himself. "And bury our dead."

His men listened, all of them fanning out, going soldier to soldier, scavenging them, each of them choosing the finest weapons: some took swords, others maces, flails, daggers, axes, and war hammers. Darius held up the sword in his hand, the one he had taken from the commander, and admired it in the sun. He admired its weight, its elaborate shaft and blade. Real steel. Something he thought he would never have a chance to hold in his lifetime. Darius intended to put it to good use, to use it to kill as many Empire men as he could.

"Darius!" came a voice he knew well.

He turned to see Loti burst through the crowd, tears in her eyes, rushing toward him past all the men. She rushed forward and embraced him, holding him tight, her hot tears pouring down his neck.

He embraced her back, as she clung to him.

"I shall never forget," she said, between tears, leaning in close and whispering in his ear. "I shall never forget what you have done this day."

She kissed him, and he kissed her back, as she cried and laughed at the same time. He was so relieved to see her alive, too, to hold her, to know this nightmare, at least for now, was behind them. To know that the Empire could not touch her. As he held her, he knew he would do it all again a million times over for her.

"Brother," came a voice.

Darius turned and was thrilled to see his sister, Sandara, step forward, joined by Gwendolyn and the man Sandara loved, Kendrick. Darius noticed the blood running down Kendrick's arm, the fresh nicks in his armor and on his sword, and he felt a rush of gratitude. He knew that if it hadn't been for Gwendolyn, Kendrick, and their people, he and his people surely would have died on the battlefield today.

Loti stood back as Sandara stepped forward and embraced him, and he hugged her back.

"I owe you all a great debt," Darius said, looking at them all. "I and all of my people. You came back for us when you did not need to. You are true warriors."

Kendrick stepped forward and placed a hand on Darius's shoulder.

"It is you who are a true warrior, my friend. You displayed great valor on the battlefield today. God has rewarded your valor with this victory."

Gwendolyn stepped forward, and Darius bowed his head as she did.

"Justice has triumphed today over evil and brutality," she said. "I take personal pleasure, for many reasons, in watching your victory and in your allowing us to take part in it. I know that my husband, Thorgrin, would, too."

"Thank you, my lady," he said, touched. "I have heard many great things about Thorgrin, and I hope to meet him some day."

Gwendolyn nodded.

"And what are your plans for your people now?" she asked.

Darius thought, realizing he had no idea; he hadn't been thinking that far ahead. He hadn't even thought he would survive.

Before Darius could respond there was a sudden commotion, and there burst forth from the crowd a face he knew well: there approached Zirk, one of Darius's trainers, bloodied by battle, wearing no shirt with his bulging muscles. He was followed by a half dozen village elders and a large number of villagers, and he did not look pleased.

He glared down on Darius condescendingly.

"And are you proud of yourself?" he asked disparagingly. "Look at what you've done. Look at how many of our people died here today. They all died senseless deaths, all good men, all dead because of you. All because of your pride, your hubris, your love for this girl."

Darius reddened, his anger flaring up. Zirk had always had it in for him, from the first day he'd met him. For some reason, he had always seemed to feel threatened by Darius.

"They are not dead because of me," Darius replied. "They had a chance to live because of me. To truly live. They died at the Empire's hands, not my own."

Zirk shook his head.

"Wrong," he retorted. "If you had surrendered, as we had told you to do, we all would be missing a thumb today. Instead, some of us are missing our lives. Their blood is on your head."

"You know nothing!" Loti cried out, defending him. "You were all just too scared to do what Darius did for you!"

"Do you think it's going to end here?" Zirk continued. "The Empire has millions of men behind this. You killed a few. So what? When they find out, they will return with fivefold these men. And next time, each and every one of us will be slaughtered – and tortured first. You have signed all of our death sentences."

"You are wrong!" Raj called out. "He has given you a chance at life. A chance at honor. A victory that you did not deserve."

Zirk turned to Raj, scowling.

"These were the actions of a foolish and reckless young boy," he replied. "A group of boys who should have listened to their elders. I never should have trained any of you!"

"Wrong," Loc yelled out, stepping forward beside Loti. "These were the bold actions of a *man*. A man that led boys to be men. A man that you pretend to be, but are not. Age does not make the man. Valor does."

Zirk reddened, scowling at him, and tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword.

"So says the cripple," Zirk replied, stepping threateningly toward him.

Bokbu emerged from the crowd and held out a palm, stopping Zirk.

"Don't you see what the Empire is doing to us?" Bokbu said. "They create division amongst us. But we are one people. United under one cause. They are the enemy, not us. Now more than ever we see that we must unite."

Zirk rested his hands on his hips and glared at Darius.

"You are just a foolish boy with fancy words," he said. "You can never defeat the Empire. Never. And we are not united. I disapprove of your actions today – we all do," he said, gesturing to half the elders and a large group of villagers. "Uniting with you is uniting with death. And we intend to survive."

"And how do you intend to do that?" Desmond asked back angrily, standing by Darius's side.

Zirk reddened and remained silent, and it was clear to Darius that he had no plan, just like all the others, that he was speaking out of fear, frustration, and helplessness.

Bokbu finally stepped forward, between them, breaking the tension. All eyes turned to him.

"You are both right and you are both wrong," he said. "What matters now is the future. Darius, what is your plan?"

Darius felt all eyes turn to him in the thick silence. He thought, and slowly a plan formed in his mind. He knew there was but one route to take. Too much had happened for anything else.

"We will take this war to the Empire's doorstep," he called out, invigorated. "Before they can regroup, we will make them pay. We will rally the other slave villages, we will form an army, and we will make them learn what it means to suffer. We might die, but we will all die as free men, fighting for our cause."

There came a great cheer out from behind Darius, from the majority of the villagers, and he could see most of them rallying behind him. A small group of them, rallying behind Zirk, looked back, unsure.

Zirk, clearly infuriated and outnumbered, reddened, released his grip on his sword hilt, and turned and stormed off, disappearing into the crowd. A small group of villagers stormed off with him.

Bokbu stepped forward and solemnly faced Darius, his face lined with worry, with age, with lines that had seen too much. He stared back at Darius, his eyes filled with wisdom. And with fear.

"Our people turn to you to lead them now," he said softly. "That is a very sacred thing. Do not lose their trust. You are young to lead an army. But the task has fallen upon you. You have started this war. Now, you must finish it."

* * *

Gwendolyn stepped forward as the villagers began to dissipate, Kendrick and Sandara by her side, Steffen, Brandt, Atme, Aberthol, Stara, and dozens of her men behind her. She looked upon Darius with respect, and she could see the gratitude in his eyes for her decision to come to his aid on the battlefield today. After their victory, she felt vindicated; she knew she had made the right decision, however hard it had been. She had lost dozens of her men here today, and she mourned their loss. Yet she also knew that, had she not turned around, Darius and all the others standing here would certainly be dead.

Seeing Darius standing there, so bravely facing off against the Empire, made her think of Thorgrin, and her heart broke as she thought of him. She felt determined to reward Darius's bravery, whatever the cost.

"We stand here ready to support your cause," Gwendolyn said. She commanded the attention of Darius, Bokbu, and all the others, as all the remaining villagers turned to her. "You took us in when we needed it – and we stand here ready to support you when you need it. We lend our arms to yours, our cause to yours. After all, it is one cause. We wish to return to our homeland in freedom – you wish to liberate your homeland in freedom. We each share the same oppressor."

Darius looked back at her, clearly touched, and Bokbu stepped forward in the midst of the group and stood there, facing her in the thick silence, all of their people watching.

"We see here today what a great decision we made to take you in," he said proudly. "You have rewarded us far beyond our dreams, and we have been greatly rewarded. Your reputation, you of the Ring, as honorable and true warriors, has held true. And we are forever in your debt."

He took a deep breath.

"We do need your help," he continued. "But more men on the battlefield is not what we need. More of your men will not be enough – not with the war that is coming. If you truly wish to help our cause, what we really need is for you to find us reinforcements. If we are to stand a chance, we will need tens of thousands of men to come to our aid."

Gwen stared back, wide-eyed.

"And where are we to find these tens of thousands of knights?"

Bokbu looked back grimly.

"If there exists anywhere a city of free men within the Empire, a city willing to come to our aid – and that is a big *if* – then it would lie within the second Ring."

Gwen stared back, puzzled.

"What are you asking of us?" she asked.

Bokbu stared back, solemn.

"If you truly wish to help us," he said, "I ask you to embark on an impossible mission. I ask you to do something even harder and more dangerous than joining us on the battlefield. I ask you to embark on your original plan, on the quest on which you were to embark today. I ask you to cross the Great Waste; to seek out the Second Ring; and if you make it there alive, if it even exists, to convince their armies to rally to our cause. That is the only chance we'd stand of winning this war."

He stared back, somber, the silence so thick that all Gwen could hear was the wind rustling through the desert.

"No one has ever crossed the Great Waste," he continued. "No one has ever confirmed the Second Ring even exists. It is an impossible task. A march to suicide. I hate to ask you. Yet it is what we need most."

Gwendolyn examined Bokbu, noted the seriousness on his face, and she pondered his words long and hard.

"We will do whatever is needed," she said, "whatever best serves your cause. If allies lie on the other side of the Great Waste, then so be it. We shall march at once. And we shall return with armies at our disposal."

Bokbu, tears in his eyes, stepped forward and embraced Gwendolyn.

"You are a true queen," he said. "Your people are fortunate to have you."

Gwen turned to her people, and she saw them all staring back solemnly, fearlessly. She knew they would follow her anywhere.

"Prepare to march," she said. "We shall cross the Great Waste. We shall find the Second Ring. Or we shall die trying."

* * *

Sandara stood there, feeling torn apart as she watched Kendrick and his people preparing to embark on their journey to the Great Waste. On her other side were Darius and her people, the people she had been raised with, the only people she'd ever known, preparing to turn away, to rally their villages to fight the Empire. She felt split down the middle, and did not know which way to turn. She couldn't bear to see Kendrick disappear forever; and yet she couldn't bear to abandon her people, either.

Kendrick, finishing preparing his armor and sheathing his sword, looked up and met her eyes. He seemed to know what she was thinking – he always did. She could also see hurt in his eyes, a wariness of her; she did not blame him – all this time in the Empire she had kept her distance from him, had lived in the village while he lived in the caves. She had been intent on honoring her elders, on not intermarrying with another race.

And yet, she realized, she had not honored love. What was more important? To honor one's family's laws or to honor one's heart? She had anguished over it every day.

Kendrick made his way over to her.

"I expect you will remain behind with your people?" he asked, a wariness in his voice.

She looked at him, torn, anguished, and did not know what to say. She did not know the answer herself. She felt frozen in space, in time, felt her feet rooted to the desert floor.

Suddenly, Darius came up beside her.

"My sister," he said.

She turned and nodded to him, grateful for the distraction, as he draped an arm around her shoulder and looked at Kendrick.

"Kendrick," he said.

Kendrick nodded back with respect.

"You know the love that I hold for you," Darius continued. "Selfishly, I want you to stay."

He took a deep breath.

"And yet, I implore you to go with Kendrick."

Sandara looked at him, shocked.

"But why?" she asked.

"I see the love you hold for him, and he for you. A love like this does not come twice. You must follow your heart, regardless of what our people think, regardless of our laws. That is what matters most."

Sandara looked at her younger brother, touched; she was impressed at his wisdom.

"You really have grown since I've left you," she said.

"Don't you dare abandon your people, and don't you dare go with him," came a stern voice.

Sandara turned to see Zirk, overhearing and stepping forward, joined by several of the elders.

"Your place is here with us. If you go with this man, you shall not be welcome back here."

"And what business is it of yours?" Darius asked angrily, defending her.

“Careful, Darius,” Zirk said. “You may lead this army for now, but you don’t lead us. Don’t pretend to speak for our people.”

“I speak for my sister,” Darius said, “and I will speak for anyone I wish.”

Sandara noticed Darius clench his fist on the hilt of his sword as he stared down Zirk, and she quickly reached out and placed a reassuring hand on his wrist.

“The decision is mine to make,” she said to Zirk. “And I have already made it,” she said, feeling a rush of indignation and suddenly deciding. She would not let these people make a decision for her. She had been allowing the elders to dictate her life as long as she knew, and now, the time had come.

“Kendrick is my beloved,” she said, turning to Kendrick, who looked back at her with surprise. As she said the words, she knew them to be true, and felt such a rush of love for him, felt a wave of guilt for not embracing him sooner before the others. “His people are my people. He is mine and I am his. And nothing, no one, not you, not anyone, can tear us apart.”

She turned to Darius.

“Goodbye, my brother,” she said. “I will join Kendrick.”

Darius grinned wide, while Zirk scowled back.

“Never look upon our faces again,” he spat, then turned and walked away, the elders joining him.

Sandara returned to Kendrick and did what she had wanted to do ever since the two of them had arrived here. She kissed him openly, without fear, in front of everyone, finally able to express her love for him. To her great joy, he kissed her back, taking her in his arms.

“Be safe, my brother,” Sandara said.

“And you, my sister. We shall meet again.”

“In this world or the next,” she said.

With that, Sandara turned, took Kendrick’s arm, and together, they joined his people, heading out toward the Great Waste, to a sure death, but she was ready to go anywhere in the world, as long she was by Kendrick’s side.

Chapter Eight

Godfrey, Akorth, Fulton, Merek, and Ario, dressed in the Finians' cloaks, walked down the shining streets of Volusia, all on guard, bunched together, and very tense. Godfrey's buzz had long ago worn off, and he navigated the unknown streets, the gold sacks at his waist, cursing himself for volunteering for this mission and racking his brain for what to do next. He would give anything for a drink right now.

What a terrible, awful idea he had had to come here. Why on earth had he had such a stupid moment of chivalry? What was chivalry anyway? he wondered. A moment of passion, of selflessness, of craziness. It just made his throat run dry, his heart pound, his hands shake. He hated the feeling, hated every second of it. He wished he'd kept his big mouth shut. Chivalry wasn't for him.

Or was it?

He was no longer sure of anything. All he knew right now was that he wanted to survive, to live, to drink, to be anywhere but here. What he wouldn't give for a beer right now. He would trade the most heroic act in the world for a pint of ale.

"And who is it exactly we are going to pay off?" Merek asked, coming up beside him as they walked together through the streets.

Godfrey racked his brain.

"We need someone in their army," he finally said. "A commander. Not too high up. Someone just high enough. Someone who cares more for gold than killing."

"And where will we find such a person?" Ario asked. "We can't exactly march into their barracks."

"In my experience, there's only one reliable place to find someone of imperfect morals," Akorth said. "The taverns."

"Now you're talking," Fulton said. "Now, finally, someone is talking sense."

"That sounds like an awful idea," Ario retorted. "It sounds like you just want a drink."

"Well, I do," Akorth said. "And what's the shame in that?"

"What do you think?" Ario countered. "That you're just going to march into a tavern, find a commander, and buy him off? That it's that easy?"

"Well, the kid is finally right about something," Merek chimed in. "It's a bad idea. They'd take one look at our gold, kill us, and take it for themselves."

"That's why we're not bringing our gold," Godfrey said, deciding.

"Huh?" Merek asked, turning to him. "What are we going to do with it then?"

"Hide it," Godfrey said.

"Hide all this gold?" Ario asked. "Are you mad? We brought too much as it is. It's enough to buy half the city."

"That's precisely why we are going to hide it," Godfrey said, warming to the idea. "We find the right person, for the right price, that we can trust, and we'll lead him to it."

Merek shrugged.

"This is a fool's errand. It's going from bad to worse. We followed you in, God knows why. You're walking us to our graves."

"You followed me in because you believe in honor, in courage," Godfrey said. "You followed me in because, from the moment you did, we became brothers. Brothers in valor. And brothers do not abandon one another."

The others fell silent as they walked, and Godfrey was surprised at himself. He did not fully understand this streak of himself that surfaced every now and again. Was it his father talking? Or he?

They turned a corner, and the city opened up, and Godfrey was overwhelmed once again by the beauty of it. Everything shining, streets lined with gold, interlaced with canals of sea water, light

everywhere, reflecting off the gold, blinding him. The streets were bustling here, too, and Godfrey took in the thick throngs, amazed. His shoulder got bumped more than once, and he took care to keep his head lowered so that the Empire soldiers would not detect him.

Soldiers, in all manner of armor, marched to and fro in every direction, interspersed with Empire nobles and citizens, huge men with the identifiable yellow skin and small horns, many with stands, selling wares up and down the streets of Volusia. Godfrey spotted Empire women, too, for the first time, as tall as the men and as broad-shouldered, looking nearly as big as some of the men back in the Ring. Their horns were longer, pointier, and they glistened an aqua blue. They looked more savage than the men. Godfrey wouldn't want to find himself in a fight with any of them.

"Maybe we can bed some of the women while we're here," Akorth said with a belch.

"I think they would just as happily cut your throat," Fulton said.

Akorth shrugged.

"Maybe they'd do both," he said. "At least I'd die a happy man."

As the throngs grew thicker, pushing their way through more city streets, Godfrey, sweating, trembling with anxiety, forced himself to be strong, to be brave, to think of all those back in the village, of his sister, who needed their help. He considered the numbers they were up against. If he could pull off this mission, perhaps he could make a difference, perhaps he could truly help them. It wasn't the bold, glorious way of his warrior brothers; but it was his way, and the only way he knew.

As they turned a corner, Godfrey looked up ahead and saw exactly what he was looking for: there, in the distance, a group of men came spilling out of a stone building, wrestling with each other, a crowd forming around them, cheering. They threw punches and stumbled in a way which Godfrey immediately recognized: drunk. Drunks, he mused, looked the same anywhere in the world. It was a fraternity of fools. He spotted a small black banner flying over the establishment, and he knew at once what it was.

"There," Godfrey said, as if looking at a holy mecca. "That's what we want."

"The cleanest-looking tavern I've ever seen," Akorth said.

Godfrey noticed the elegant façade, and he was inclined to agree with him.

Merek shrugged.

"All taverns are the same, once you're inside. They'll be as drunk and stupid here as they would be in any place."

"My kind of people," Fulton said, licking his lips as if already tasting the ale.

"And just how are we supposed to get there?" Ario asked.

Godfrey looked down and saw what he was referring to: the street ended in a canal. There was no way to walk there.

Godfrey watched as a small golden vessel pull up at their feet, two Empire men inside, and watched them jump out, tie the boat to a post with a rope, and leave it there as they walked into the city, never looking back. Godfrey spotted the armor on one of them and figured they were officers, and had no need to worry about their boat. They knew, clearly, that no one would ever be so foolish as to dare steal their boat from them.

Godfrey and Merek exchanged a knowing look at the same moment. Great minds, Godfrey realized, thought alike; or at least great minds who had both seen their share of dungeons and back alleys.

Merek stepped forward, removed his dagger, and sliced the thick rope, and one at a time, they all piled into the small golden vessel, which rocked wildly as they did. Godfrey leaned back and with his boot shoved them off from the dock.

They glided down the waterways, rocking, and Merek grabbed the long oar and steered, rowing.

"This is madness," Ario said, glancing back for the officers. "They might come back."

Godfrey looked straight ahead and nodded.

"Then we better row faster," he said.

Chapter Nine

Volusia stood in the midst of the endless desert, its green floor cracked and parched, hard as stone beneath her feet, and she stared straight ahead, facing off with the entourage from Dansk. She stood there proudly, a dozen of her closest advisors behind her, and faced off against two dozen of their men, typical Empire, tall, broad-shouldered, with the glowing yellow skin, the glistening red eyes and two small horns. The only noticeable difference of this people of Dansk was that, over time, they grew their horns out to the side instead of straight up.

Volusia looked out over their shoulders, and saw sitting on the horizon the desert city of Dansk, tall, supremely imposing, rising a hundred feet into the sky, its green walls the color of the desert, made of stone or brick – she could not tell which. The city was shaped in a perfect circle, parapets at the top of the wall, and between them, soldiers stationed every ten feet, facing every station, keeping watch, eyeing every corner of desert. It looked impenetrable.

Dansk lay directly south of Maltolis, halfway between the mad Prince's city and the southern capital, and it was a stronghold, a pivotal crossroads. Volusia had heard about it many times from her mother, but had never visited herself. She had always said that no one could take the Empire without taking Dansk.

Volusia looked back at their leader, standing before her with his envoy, smug, smirking down at her arrogantly. He looked different than the others, clearly their leader, with an air of confidence, more scars on his face, and with two long braids that descended from his head to his waist.

They had been standing this way in the silence, each waiting for the other to speak, no sound but that of the howling wind in the desert.

Finally, he must have tired of waiting, and he spoke:

"So you wish to enter our city?" he asked her. "You and your men?"

Volusia stared back, proud, confident, and expressionless.

"I do not wish to enter it," she said. "I wish to take it. I've come to offer you terms of surrender."

He stared back at her blankly for several seconds, as if trying to comprehend her words, then finally his eyes opened wide in surprise. He leaned back and laughed uproariously, and Volusia reddened.

"We?!" he said. "*Surrender!?*"

He screamed with laughter, as if he had heard the funniest joke in the world. Volusia stared back calmly, and she noted that all the soldiers joining him did not laugh – they did not even smile. They stared back at her seriously.

"You are but a girl," he finally said, looking amused. "You know nothing of the history of Dansk, of our desert, of our people. If you had, you would know that we have *never* surrendered. Not *once*. Not in ten thousand years. Not to *anyone*. Not even to the armies of Atlow the Great. Not once has Dansk been conquered."

His smile morphed to a scowl.

"And now you arrive," he said, "a stupid young girl, appearing from nowhere, with a dozen soldiers, and asking us to surrender? Why shouldn't I kill you right now, or take you to our dungeons? I think it is you who should be negotiating terms of surrender. If I turn you away, this desert will kill you. Then again, if I take you in, I might kill you."

Volusia stared back calmly, never flinching.

"I won't offer you my terms twice," she said calmly. "Surrender now and I will spare all of your lives."

He stared back at her, dumbfounded, as if finally realizing she was serious.

"You are deluded, young girl. You have suffered beneath the desert suns for too long."

She stared back, her eyes darkening.

"I am no young girl," she replied. "I am the great Volusia of the great city of Volusia. I am the Goddess Volusia. And you, and all beings on earth, are subservient to me."

He stared at her, his expression shifting, staring back at her as if she were mad.

"You are not Volusia," he said. "Volusia is older. I have met her myself. It was a very unpleasant experience. And yet I see the resemblance. You are… her daughter. Yes, I can see it now. Why is your mother not coming here to talk to us? Why is she sending you, her daughter?"

"*I* am Volusia," she replied. "My mother is dead. I made sure of that."

He stared back at her, his expression growing serious. For the first time, he seemed unsure.

"You may have been able to murder your mother," he said. "But you are foolish to threaten us. We are not a defenseless woman and your men of Volusia are far from here. You were foolish to venture so far from your stronghold. Do you think you can take our city with a dozen soldiers?" he asked, releasing and gripping the hilt of the sword as if thinking about killing her.

She smiled slowly.

"I can't take it with a dozen," she said. "But I can take it with two hundred thousand."

Volusia raised one fist high into the air, clutching the Golden Scepter, raising it ever higher, never taking her eyes off of him, and as she did, she watched the face of the Dansk envoy leader look out behind her, and morph to panic and shock. She did not need to turn around to know what he was looking at: her two hundred thousand Maltolisian soldiers, had rounded the hill upon her signal and stretched across the entire horizon. Now the Dansk leader knew the threat facing his city.

His entire envoy bristled, looking terrified and anxious to run back to the safety of their city.

"The Maltolisian army," their leader said, his voice fearful for the first time. "What are they doing here, with you?"

Volusia smiled back.

"I am a goddess," she said. "Why wouldn't they be serving me?"

He looked back at her now with a look of awe and surprise.

"Yet still, you wouldn't dare attack Dansk," he said, his voice quivering. "We are under the direct protection of the capital. The Empire army numbers in the millions. If you took our city, they would be obliged to retaliate. You would all be slaughtered in due course. You could not win. Are you that reckless? Or that stupid?"

She held her smile, enjoying his discomfort.

"Maybe a little bit of both," she said. "Or maybe I'm just itching to test my newfound army and sharpen their skills on you. It is your great misfortune that you lie in the way, between my men and the capital. And nothing, nothing, will lie in my way."

He glared her, his face turning into a sneer. Yet now, for the first time, she could see real panic in his eyes.

"We came to discuss terms, and we do not accept them. We will prepare for war, if that is what you wish. Just remember: you brought this upon yourself."

He suddenly kicked his zerta with a shout, and he turned, with the others, and galloped away, their convoy stirring up a cloud of dust.

Volusia casually dismounted from her zerta, reached over and grabbed a short, golden spear as her commander, Soku, reached over and handed it to her.

She held up one hand to the wind, felt the breeze, narrowed one eye, and took aim.

Then she leaned forward and threw it.

Volusia watched as the spear went flying in a high arc through the air, a good fifty yards, then finally she heard a great cry, and the satisfying thump of spear hitting flesh. She watched in delight as it lodged in the leader's back. He cried out, falling from his zerta, and landed on the desert floor, tumbling.

His entourage stopped and looked down, horrified. They sat there on their zertas, as if debating whether to stop and get him. They looked back and saw all of Volusia's men on the horizon, marching

now, and clearly they thought better of it. They turned and galloped away, heading to the city gates, abandoning their leader on the desert floor.

Volusia rode with her entourage until she reached the dying leader, and dismounted by his side. In the distance she heard iron slam, and she noticed his entourage entering Dansk, a huge iron portcullis slamming down behind them, and the enormous iron double doors of the city sealed shut after them, creating an iron fortress.

Volusia looked down at the dying leader, who turned on his back and looked up at her in anguish and shock.

"You cannot wound a man who comes to talk terms," he said, outraged. "It goes against every law of the Empire! Never has such a thing been done before!"

"I did not intend to wound you," she said, kneeling down beside him, reaching out and touching the shaft of the spear. She shoved the spear deep into his heart, not letting go until finally he stopped squirming and breathed his last breath.

She smiled wide.

"I intended to kill you."

Chapter Ten

Thor stood at the bow of the small sailing vessel, his brothers standing behind him, his heart pounding with anticipation as the current carried them straight toward the small island before them. Thor looked up, studied its cliffs in wonder; he'd never seen anything like it. The walls were perfectly smooth, a white, solid granite, sparkling beneath the two suns, and they rose straight up, hundreds of feet high. The island itself was shaped in a circle, its base surrounded by boulders, and it was hard to think amidst the incessant crashing of the waves. It looked impregnable, impossible for any army to scale.

Thor held a hand up to his eyes and squinted into the sun. The cliffs seemed to stop at some point, to cap off in a plateau hundreds of feet high. Whoever lived up there, at the top, would live safely forever, Thor realized. Assuming anyone lived up there at all.

At the very top, hovering over the island like a halo, was a ring of clouds, soft pink and purple, blanketing it from the harsh rays of the sun, as if this place were crowned by God himself. A gentle breeze stirred here, the air pleasant and mild. Thor could sense even from here that there was something special about this place. It felt magical. He had not felt this way since he had reached the land of his mother's castle.

All the others looked up, too, expressions of wonder across their faces.

"Who do you suppose lives here?" O'Connor asked aloud the question on all of their minds.

"Who – or what?" Reece asked.

"Maybe no one," Indra said.

"Maybe we should sail on," O'Connor said.

"And skip the invitation?" Matus asked. "I see seven ropes, and there are seven of us."

Thor examined the cliffs and as he looked closely, he saw seven golden ropes dangling from the top down to the shores, glistening in the sun. He wondered.

"Maybe someone's expecting us," Elden said.

"Or tempting us," Indra said.

"But who?" Reece asked.

Thor looked up at the very top, all of these same thoughts racing through his mind. He wondered who could know they were coming. Were they being watched somehow?

They all stood in the boat silently, bobbing in the water, as the current brought them ever closer.

"The real question," Thor asked aloud, finally breaking the silence, "is if they are friendly – or if this is a trap?"

"Does it make any difference?" Matus asked, coming up beside him.

Thor shook his head.

"No," he said, tightening his grip on the hilt of his sword. "We will visit it either way. If friend, we will embrace them; if foe, we will kill them."

The currents picked up, and long, rolling waves carried their boat all the way to the narrow shore of black sand that surrounded the place. Their boat washed gently up, lodging on it, and as it did, everyone all jumped out at once.

Thor gripped the hilt of his sword, on edge, and looked about in every direction. There was no movement on the beach, nothing but the crashing of the waves.

Thor walked up to the base of the cliffs, laid his palm on them, felt how smooth they were, felt the heat and energy radiating off of them. He examined the ropes which rose straight up the cliff, sheathing his sword and grabbing hold of one.

He tugged on it. It didn't give.

One by one the others joined him, each grabbing a rope and tugging on it.

"Will it hold?" O'Connor wondered aloud, looking straight up.

They all looked up, clearly wondering the same thing.

"There is only one way to find out," Thor said.

Thor grabbed the rope with both hands, jumped up, and began his ascent. All around him the others did the same, all of them scaling the cliffs like mountain goats.

Thor climbed and climbed, his muscles aching, burning under the sun. Sweat poured down his neck, stung his eyes, and all of his limbs shook.

And yet at the same time, there was something magical about these ropes, some energy that supported him – and the others – and made him climb faster than he'd ever had, as if the ropes were pulling him up.

Much sooner than he'd imagined possible, Thor found himself reaching the top; he reached up and was surprised to find himself grabbing onto grass and soil. He pulled himself up, rolling onto his side, onto soft grass, exhausted, breathing hard, limbs aching. All around him, he saw the others arriving, too. They had made it. Something had wanted them up there. Thor did not know if that was cause for reassurance or for worry.

Thor took a knee and drew his sword, immediately on edge, not knowing what to expect up here. All around him his brothers did the same, all of them rising to their feet and instinctually getting into a semicircular formation, guarding each other's backs.

Yet as Thor stood there, looking out, he was shocked by what he saw. He had expected to see an enemy facing him, had expected to see a rocky and barren and desolate place.

Instead, he saw no one there to welcome them. And instead of rock, he saw the most beautiful place he had ever laid eyes upon: there, spread out before him, were rolling green hills, lush with flowers, foliage, and fruits, sparkling in the morning sun. The temperature up here was perfect, caressed by gentle ocean breezes. There were fruit orchards, lush vineyards, places of such bounty and beauty that it immediately caused all of his tension to fall away. He sheathed his sword, as the others relaxed, too, all of them gazing out as this place of perfection. For the first time since he'd set sail from the land of the dead, Thor felt as if he could truly relax and let down his guard. This was a place he was in no rush to leave.

Thor was baffled. How could such a gorgeous and temperate place exist in the midst of an endless and unforgiving ocean? Thor looked about and saw a gentle mist hanging over everything, looked up and saw, high above, the ring of gentle purple clouds covering the place, sheltering it, yet also allowing the sun to streak through here and there – and he knew in every ounce of his body that this place was magical. It was a place of such physical beauty that it put even the bounty of the Ring to shame.

Thor was surprised as he heard what sounded like a distant screech; at first he thought it was just his mind playing tricks on him. But then he felt a chill as he heard it again.

He raised his hand to his eyes and looked up, studying the skies. He could have sworn it sounded like the cry of a dragon – and yet he knew that was not possible. The last of the dragons, he knew, had died with Ralibar and Mycoples. He had witnessed it himself, that fateful moment of their deaths still hanging over him like a dagger in his heart. There wasn't a day that went by when he did not think of his good friend Mycoples, when he did not wish she was back at his side.

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