

A knight in full plate armor is riding a horse against a dramatic sunset sky. The knight is wearing a helmet with a visor and is holding a sword. The horse is also wearing armor on its head and neck. The scene is lit with warm, golden light from the setting sun, creating a silhouette effect on the knight and horse.

MORGAN RICE

RISE
OF THE
VALIANT

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK #2)

Kings and Sorcerers

Морган Райс

Rise of the Valiant

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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In the wake of the dragon's attack, Kyra is sent on an urgent quest: to cross Escalon and seek out her uncle in the mysterious Tower of Ur. The time has come for her to learn about who she is, who her mother is, and to train and develop her special powers. It will be a quest fraught with peril for a girl alone, Escalon filled with dangers from savage beasts and men alike – one that will require all of her strength to survive. Her father, Duncan, must lead his men south, to the great water city of Esephus, to attempt to free his fellow countrymen from the iron grip of Pandesia. If he succeeds, he will have to journey to the treacherous Lake of Ire and then onto the icy peaks of Kos, where there live the toughest warriors of Escalon, men he will need to recruit if he has any chance of taking the capital. Alec escapes with Marco from The Flames to find himself on the run through the Wood of Thorns, chased by exotic beasts. It is a harrowing journey through the night as he quests for his hometown, hoping to be reunited with his family. When he arrives, he is shocked by what he discovers. Merk, despite his better judgment, turns back to help the girl, and finds himself, for the first time in his life, entangled in a stranger's affairs. He will not forego his pilgrimage to the Tower of Ur, though, and he finds himself anguished as he realizes the tower is not what he expects. Vesuvius spurs his giant as he leads the Trolls on their mission underground, attempting to bypass The Flames, while the dragon, Theos, has his own special mission on Escalon. With its strong atmosphere and complex characters, RISE OF THE VALIANT is a sweeping saga of knights and warriors, of kings and lords, of honor and valor, of magic, destiny, monsters and dragons. It is a story of love and broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is fantasy at its finest, inviting us into a world that will live with us forever, one that will appeal to all ages and genders.

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Morgan Rice

Rise of the Valiant

*“Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.”*

– *William Shakespeare*
Julius Caesar

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About Morgan Rice

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

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

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“If you thought that there was no reason left for living after the end of THE SORCERER’S RING series, you were wrong. In RISE OF THE DRAGONS Morgan Rice has come up with what promises to be another brilliant series, immersing us in a fantasy of trolls and dragons, of valor, honor, courage, magic and faith in your destiny. Morgan has managed again to produce a strong set of characters that make us cheer for them on every page....Recommended for the permanent library of all readers that love a well-written fantasy.”

– *Books and Movie Reviews*

Roberto Mattos

“RISE OF THE DRAGONS succeeds – right from the start.... A superior fantasy...It begins, as it should, with one protagonist's struggles and moves neatly into a wider circle of knights, dragons, magic and monsters, and destiny....All the trappings of high fantasy are here, from soldiers and battles to confrontations with self....A recommended winner for any who enjoy epic fantasy writing fueled by powerful, believable young adult protagonists.”

– *Midwest Book Review*

D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer

“[RISE OF THE DRAGONS] is a plot-driven novel that’s easy to read in a weekend...A good start to a promising series.”

– *San Francisco Book Review*

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

– *The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the Dragons)*

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

– *Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)*

“THE SORCERER’S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

– *Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

“Rice’s entertaining epic fantasy [THE SORCERER’S RING] includes classic traits of the genre – a strong setting, highly inspired by ancient Scotland and its history, and a good sense of court intrigue.”

– *Kirkus Reviews*

“I loved how Morgan Rice built Thor’s character and the world in which he lived. The landscape and the creatures that roamed it were very well described... I enjoyed [the plot]. It was short and sweet... There were just the right amount of minor characters, so I didn’t get confused. There were adventures and harrowing moments, but the action depicted wasn’t overly grotesque. The book would be perfect for a teen reader... The beginnings of something remarkable are there...”

– *San Francisco Book Review*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin «Thor» McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

– *Publishers Weekly*

“[A QUEST OF HEROES] is a quick and easy read. The ends of chapters make it so that you have to read what happens next and you don’t want to put it down. There are some typos in the book and some names are messed up, but this does not distract from the overall story. The end of the book made me want to get the next book immediately and that is what I did. All nine of the Sorcerer’s Ring series can currently be purchased on the Kindle store and A Quest of Heroes is currently free to get you started! If you are looking for a something quick and fun to read while on vacation this book will do nicely.”

– *FantasyOnline.net*

Books by Morgan Rice

KINGS AND SORCERERS

RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Book #1)

RISE OF THE VALIANT (Book #2)

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)

A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

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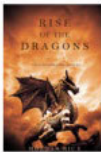
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KINGS AND SORCERERS



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Chapter One

Kyra walked slowly through the carnage, snow crunching beneath her boots, taking in the devastation the dragon had left behind. She was speechless. Thousands of the Lord's Men, the most feared men in Escalon, lay dead before her, wiped out in an instant. Charred bodies lay smoking all around her, the snow melted beneath them, their faces contorted in agony. Skeletons, twisted in unnatural positions, still clutched their weapons in bony fingers. A few corpses stood in place, their frames somehow staying vertical, still looking up at the sky as if wondering what had killed them.

Kyra stopped beside one, examining it with wonder. She reached out and touched it, her finger grazing its rib cage, and she watched in amazement as it crumbled and fell, clattering to the ground in a heap of bones, its sword falling harmlessly by its side.

Kyra heard a screech high overhead and she craned her neck to see Theos, circling high above, breathing flame as if still unsatisfied. She could feel what he was feeling, feel the rage burning in his veins, his desire to destroy all of Pandesia – indeed, the entire world – if he could. It was a primal rage, a rage which knew no bounds.

The sound of boots in the snow snapped her out of it, and Kyra looked back to see her father's men, dozens of them, walking through, taking in the destruction, eyes wide in shock. These battle-hardened men had clearly never seen a sight like this; even her father, standing nearby, joined by Anvin, Arthfael and Vidar, seemed frazzled. It was like walking through a dream.

Kyra noticed these brave warriors turn from searching the skies to looking at her, a sense of wonder in their eyes. It was as if *she* were the one who had done all of this, as if she were the dragon herself. After all, only she had been able to summon it. She looked away, feeling uncomfortable; she could not tell if they looked at her as if a warrior or a freak. Perhaps they did not know themselves.

Kyra thought back to her prayer on the Winter Moon, her wish to know if she were special, if her powers were real. After today, after this battle, she could have no doubts. She had *willed* that dragon to come. She had felt it herself. How, she did not know. But she knew now, definitively, that she was different. And she could not help but wonder if that also meant the other prophecies about her were true. Was she then truly destined to become a great warrior? A great ruler? Greater even than her father? Would she truly lead nations into battle? Would the fate of Escalon truly hang upon her shoulders?

Kyra did not see how it could be possible. Maybe Theos had come for his own reasons; maybe his damage here had nothing to do with her. After all, the Pandesians had injured him – hadn't they?

Kyra no longer felt sure of anything. All she knew was that, in this moment, feeling the strength of the dragon burning in her veins, walking this battlefield, seeing their greatest foe dead, she felt that all things were possible. She knew she was no longer a fifteen-year-old girl hoping for approval in other men's eyes; she was no longer a plaything for the Lord Governor – for any man – to do with as he wished; she was no longer the property of other men, to be married off, abused, tortured. She was her own person now. A warrior among men – and one to be feared.

Kyra walked through the sea of bodies until finally the corpses stopped and the landscape morphed to ice and snow again. She paused beside her father, taking in the vista as down below the valley spread out beneath them. There lay the wide open gates of Argos, a city emptied, all its men dead in these hills. It was eerie to see such a great fort sitting vacant, unguarded. Pandesia's most important stronghold was now wide open for anyone to enter. Its daunting high walls, carved of thick stone and spikes, its thousands of men and layers of defenses, had precluded any idea of revolt; its presence here had allowed Pandesia an iron grip on the whole of northeastern Escalon.

They all set off down the slope and onto the winding road that led to the city gates. It was a victorious but solemn walk, the road littered with more dead bodies, stragglers whom the dragon had sought out, markers on the trail to destruction. It was like walking through a graveyard.

As they passed through the awesome gates, Kyra paused at the threshold, her breath taken away: inside, she could see, lay thousands more corpses, charred, smoking. It was what had remained of the Lord's Men, those late to mobilize. Theos had forgotten no one; his fury was visible even on the fort's walls, large swaths of stone stained black with flame.

As they entered, Argos was notable for its silence. Its courtyard empty, it was uncanny for such a city to be so devoid of life. It was as if God had sucked it all up in a single breath.

As her father's men rushed forward, sounds of excitement began to fill the air, and Kyra soon understood why. The ground, she could see, was littered with a treasure trove of weapons unlike any she had ever seen. There, spread out on the courtyard ground, lay the spoils of war: the finest weaponry, the finest steel, the finest armor she had ever seen, all gleaming with Pandesian markings. There were even, scattered amongst them, sacks of gold.

Even better, at the far end of the courtyard there sat a vast stone armory, its doors wide open as the men had left in haste, revealing inside a bounty of treasures. Walls were lined with swords, halberds, pikes, hatchets, spears, bows – all made of the finest steel the world had to offer. There were enough weapons here to arm half of Escalon.

There came the sound of neighing, and Kyra looked to the other side of the courtyard to see a row of stone stables, and inside there stomped an army of the finest horses, all spared the dragon's breath. Enough horses to carry an army.

Kyra saw the look of hope rising in her father's eyes, a look she had not seen in years, and she knew what he was thinking: Escalon could rise again.

There came a screech, and Kyra looked up to see Theos circling lower, talons extended, flapping his great wings as he flew over the city, a victory lap. His glowing yellow eyes locked on hers, even from that great distance. She could not look anywhere else.

Theos dove down and landed outside the city gates. He sat there proudly, facing her, as if summoning her. She felt him calling her.

Kyra felt her skin prickling, the heat rising within her, as she felt an intense connection with this creature. She had no choice but to approach him.

As Kyra turned and crossed the courtyard, heading back toward the city gates, she could feel the eyes of all the men on her, looking from the dragon to her as they stopped to watch. She walked alone toward the gate, her boots crunching in the snow, her heart pounding as she went.

As she went, Kyra suddenly felt a gentle hand on her arm, stopping her. She turned to see her father's concerned face looking back.

"Be careful," he warned.

Kyra continued walking, feeling no fear, despite the fierce look in the dragon's eyes. She felt only an intense bond with him, as if a part of her had reappeared, a part she could not live without. Her mind spun with curiosity. Where had Theos come from? Why had he come to Escalon? Why had he not come back sooner?

As Kyra passed through Argo's gates and neared the dragon, his noises grew louder, somewhere between a purr and a snarl, as he waited for her, his huge wings flapping gently. He opened his mouth as if to release fire, baring his huge teeth, each one as long as she, and sharp as a sword. For a moment she was frightened, his eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made it hard to think.

Kyra finally came to a stop a few feet before him. She studied him in awe. Theos was magnificent. He rose thirty feet high, his scales thick, hard, primordial. The ground trembled as he breathed, his chest rattling, and she felt entirely at his mercy.

They stood there in the silence, the two of them facing off, examining each other, and Kyra's heart slammed in her chest, the tension in the air so thick she could hardly breathe.

Her throat dry, she finally summoned the courage to speak.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why have you come to me? What do you want from me?"

Theos lowered his head, snarling, and leaned forward, so close that his huge snout nearly touched her chest. His eyes, so huge, glowing yellow, seemed to look right through her. She stared into them, each nearly as big as her, and felt lost in another world, another time.

Kyra waited for the answer. She waited for her mind to be filled with his thoughts, as it once was.

But she waited and waited, and was shocked to find her mind was blank. Nothing was coming to her. Had Theos gone silent? Had she lost her connection to him?

Kyra stared back, wondering, this dragon more of a mystery than ever. Suddenly, he lowered his back, as if beckoning her to ride. Her heart quickened as she imagined herself flying through the skies on his back.

Kyra slowly walked to his side, reached up, and grabbed his scales, hard and rough, preparing to grab his neck and climb up.

But no sooner had she touched him when he suddenly writhed away, making her lose her grip. She stumbled and he flapped his wings and in one quick motion, lifted off, so abrupt that her palms scraped against his scales, like sandpaper.

Kyra stood there, stung, baffled – but most of all, heartbroken. She watched helplessly as this tremendous creature lifted into the air, screeching, and flew higher and higher. As quickly as he had arrived, Theos suddenly disappeared into the clouds, nothing but silence following in his wake.

Kyra stood there, hollowed out, more alone than ever. And as the last of his cries faded away, she knew, she just knew, that this time, Theos was gone for good.

Chapter Two

Alec ran through the woods in the black of night, Marco at his side, stumbling over roots submerged in the snow and wondering if he would make it out alive. His heart pounded in his chest as he ran for his life, gasping for breath, wanting to stop but needing to keep pace with Marco. He glanced back over his shoulder for the hundredth time and watched as the glow from The Flames grew fainter the deeper into the woods they went. He passed a patch of thick trees, and soon the glow was entirely gone, the two of them immersed in near blackness.

Alec turned and groped his way as he bumped off trees, trunks whacking his shoulders, branches scratching his arms. He peered into the blackness ahead of him, barely making out a path, trying not to listen to the exotic noises all around him. He had been duly warned about these woods, where no escapee survived, and he had a sinking feeling the deeper they went. He sensed the danger here, vicious creatures lurking everywhere, the wood so dense it was hard to navigate and growing more tangled with each step he took. He was starting to wonder if he might have been better off staying back at The Flames.

“This way!” hissed a voice.

Marco grabbed his shoulder and pulled him as he forked right, between two huge trees, ducking beneath their gnarled branches. Alec followed, slipping in the snow, and soon found himself in a clearing in the midst of the thick forest, the moonlight shining through, lighting their way.

They both stopped, bent over, hands on their hips, gasping for breath. They exchanged a glance, and Alec looked back over his shoulder at the wood. He breathed hard, his lungs aching from the cold, his ribs hurting, and wondered.

“Why aren’t they following us?” Alec asked.

Marco shrugged.

“Maybe they know this wood will do their job for them.”

Alec listened for the sound of Pandesian soldiers, expecting to be pursued – but there came none. Instead, though, Alec thought he heard a different sound – like a low, angry snarl.

“Do you hear that?” Alec asked, the hair rising on the back of his neck.

Marco shook his head.

Alec stood there, waiting, wondering if his mind were playing tricks on him. Then, slowly, he began to hear it again. It was a distant noise, a faint snarl, menacing, unlike anything Alec had ever heard. As he listened, it began to grow louder, as if coming closer.

Marco now looked at him with alarm.

“That’s why they didn’t follow,” Marco said, his voice dawning with recognition.

Alec was confused.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Wilvox,” he answered, eyes now filled with fear. “They’ve unleashed them after us.”

The word Wilvox struck terror in Alec; he had heard of them as a child, and he knew they were rumored to inhabit the Wood of Thorns, but he’d always assumed they were the stuff of legend. They were rumored to be the deadliest creatures of the night – the stuff of nightmares.

The snarling intensified, sounding as if there were several of them.

“RUN!” Marco implored.

Marco turned and Alec joined him as the two of them burst across the clearing and back into the wood. Adrenaline pumped in his veins as Alec ran, hearing his own heartbeat in his ears, drowning out the sound of ice and snow crunching beneath his boots. Soon, though, he heard the creatures behind him closing in, and he knew they were being hunted by beasts they could not outrun.

Alec stumbled over a root and slammed into a tree; he cried out in pain, winded, then bounced off it and continued to run. He scanned the woods for any escape, realizing their time was short – but there was nothing.

The snarling grew louder, and as he ran, Alec looked back over his shoulder – and immediately wished he hadn't. Bearing down on them were four of the most savage creatures he'd ever laid eyes upon. Resembling wolves, the Wilvox were twice the size, with small sharp horns sticking out the back of their heads, and one large, single red eye between the horns. Their paws were the size of a bear's, with long, pointed claws, and their coats were slick and as black as night.

Seeing them this close, Alec knew he was a dead man.

Alec burst forward with his last ounce of speed, his palms sweating even in the icy cold, his breath frozen in the air before him. The Wilvox were hardly twenty feet away and he knew from the desperate look in their eyes, from the drool hanging from their mouths, that they would tear him to pieces. He saw no means of escape. He looked to Marco, hoping for some sign of a plan – but Marco carried the same look of despair. He clearly had no idea what to do either.

Alec closed his eyes and did something he had never done before: he prayed. Seeing his life flashing before his eyes, it changed him somehow, made him realize how much he cherished life, and made him more desperate than he'd ever been to keep it.

Please, God, get me out of this. After what I did for my brother, don't let me die here. Not in this place, and not by these creatures. I'll do anything.

Alec opened his eyes, looked up ahead, and as he did, this time he noticed a tree slightly different than the others. Its branches were more gnarled and hung lower to the ground, just high enough where he could grab one with a running jump. He had no idea if Wilvox could climb, but he had no other choice.

"That branch!" Alec yelled to Marco, pointing.

They ran for the tree together, and as the Wilvox closed in, but feet away, without pausing, they each jumped up and grabbed the branch, pulling themselves up.

Alec's hands slipped on the snowy wood, but he managed to hang on, and he pulled himself up until he was grabbing the next branch several feet off the ground. He then immediately jumped up to the next branch, three feet higher, Marco beside him. He had never climbed so fast in his life.

The Wilvox reached them, the pack snarling viciously, jumping and clawing at their feet. Alec felt their hot breath on the back of his heel a moment before he raised his foot, the fangs coming down and missing him by an inch. The two of them kept climbing, propelled by adrenaline, until they were a good fifteen feet off the ground, and safer than they needed to be.

Alec finally stopped, clutching a branch with all his might, catching his breath, sweat stinging his eyes. He looked back down, watching, praying the Wilvox could not climb, too.

To his immense relief, they were still on the ground, snarling and snapping, jumping up for the tree, but clearly unable to climb. They scratched the trunk madly, but to no avail.

The two sat on the branch, and as the reality sank in that they were safe, they each breathed a sigh of relief. Marco burst into laughter, to Alec's surprise. It was a madman's laugh, a laugh of relief, the laugh of a man who had been spared from a sure death in the most unlikely way.

Alec, realizing how close they had come, could not help laughing, too. He knew they were still far from safety; he knew they could never leave this spot, and that they would even likely die in this place. But for now, at least, they were safe.

"Looks like I owe you," Marco said.

Alec shook his head.

"Don't thank me yet," Alec said.

The Wilvox were snarling viciously, raising the hair on the back of his neck, and Alec looked up at the tree, hands trembling, wanting to get even farther away and wondering how high they could climb, wondering if they had any way out of here.

Suddenly, Alec froze. As he looked up, he flinched, struck by a terror unlike he had ever known. There, in the branches above him, looking down, was the most hideous creature he had ever seen. Eight feet long, with the body of a snake but with six sets of feet, all with long claws, and a head shaped like an eel's, it had narrow slits for eyes, dull yellow, and they focused on Alec. Just feet away, it arched its back, hissed, and opened its mouth. Alec, in shock, could not believe how wide it opened – wide enough to swallow him whole. And he knew, from its rattling tail, that it was about to strike – and kill them both.

Its mouth came down right for Alec's throat, and he reacted involuntarily. He shrieked and jumped back as he lost his grip, Marco beside him, thinking only of getting away from those deadly fangs, that huge mouth, a sure death.

He did not even think about what lay below. As he felt himself flying backwards through the air, flailing, he realized, too late, that he was heading from one set of fangs to another. He glanced back and saw the Wilvox salivating, opening their jaws, nothing he could do but brace himself for the descent.

He had exchanged one death for another.

Chapter Three

Kyra walked slowly back through the gates of Argos, the eyes of all her father's men upon her, and she burned with shame. She had misread her relationship with Theos. She had thought, stupidly, that she could control him – and instead, he had spurned her before all these men. For the eyes of all to see, she was powerless, had no dominion over a dragon. She was just another warrior – not even a warrior, but just a teenage girl who had led her people into a war they, abandoned by a dragon, could no longer win.

Kyra walked back through the gates of Argos, feeling the eyes on her in the awkward silence. What did they think of her now? she wondered. She did not even know what to think of herself. Had Theos not come for her? Had he only fought this battle for his own ends? Did she have any special powers at all?

Kyra was relieved as the men finally looked away, returned to their looting, all busy gathering weaponry, preparing for war. They rushed to and fro, gathering all the bounty left behind by the Lord's Men, filling carts, leading away horses, the clang of steel ever present as shields and armor were tossed into piles by the handful. As more snow fell and the sky began to darken, they all had little time to lose.

"Kyra," came a familiar voice.

She turned and was relieved to see Anvin's smiling face as he approached her. He looked at her with respect, with the reassuring kindness and warmth of the father figure he had always been. He draped one arm affectionately around her shoulder, smiling wide beneath his beard, and he held out before her a gleaming new sword, its blade etched with Pandesian symbols.

"Finest steel I've held in years," he noted with a broad grin. "Thanks to you, we have enough weapons here to start a war. You have made us all more formidable."

Kyra took comfort in his words, as she always did; yet she still could not cast off her feeling of depression, of confusion, of being spurned by the dragon. She shrugged.

"I did not do all this," she replied. "Theos did."

"Yet Theos returned for *you*," he replied.

Kyra glanced up at the gray skies, now empty, and she wondered.

"I'm not so sure."

They both studied the skies in the long silence that followed, broken only by the wind sweeping through.

"Your father awaits you," Anvin finally said, his voice serious.

Kyra joined Anvin as they walked, snow and ice crunching beneath their boots, winding their way through the courtyard amidst all the activity. They passed dozens of her father's men as they trekked through the sprawling fort of Argos, men everywhere, finally relaxed for the first time in ages. She saw them laughing, drinking, jostling each other as they gathered weapons and provisions. They were like children on All Hallow's Day.

Dozens more of her father's men stood in a line and passed sacks of Pandesian grain, handing them to each other as they piled carts high; another cart clambered by, overflowing with shields that clanked as it went. It was stacked so high that a few fell over the side, soldiers scrambling to gather them back in. All around her carts were heading out of the fort, some on the road back to Volis, others forking off on different roads to places her father had directed, all filled to the brim. Kyra took some solace in the sight, feeling less bad for the war she had instigated.

They turned a corner and Kyra spotted her father, surrounded by his men, busy inspecting dozens of swords and spears as they held them out for his approval. He turned at her approach and as he gestured to his men, they dispersed, leaving them alone.

Her father turned and looked at Anvin, and Anvin stood there for a moment, unsure, seemingly surprised at her father's silent look, clearly asking him to leave, too. Finally, Anvin turned and joined the others, leaving Kyra alone with him. She was surprised, too – he never asked Anvin to leave before.

Kyra looked up at him, his expression inscrutable as always, wearing the distant, public face of a leader among men, not the intimate face of the father she knew and loved. He looked down at her, and she felt nervous as so many thoughts raced through her head at once: was he proud of her? Was he upset that she had led them into this war? Was he disappointed that Theos had spurned her and abandoned his army?

Kyra waited, accustomed to his long silence before speaking, and she could not tell anymore; too much had changed between them too fast. She felt as if she had grown up overnight, while he had been changed by recent events; it was as if they no longer knew how to relate to each other. Was he the father she had always known and loved, who would read her stories late into the night? Or was he her commander now?

He stood there, staring, and she realized that he did not know what to say as the silence hung heavy between them, the only sound that of the wind whipping through, the torches flickering behind them as men began to light them to ward off night. Finally, Kyra could stand the silence no longer.

“Will you bring all this back to Volis?” she asked, as a cart rattled by filled with swords.

He turned and examined the cart and seemed to snap out of his reverie. He didn't look back at Kyra, but rather watched the cart as he shook his head.

“Volis holds nothing for us now but death,” he said, his voice deep and definitive. “We head south now.”

Kyra was surprised.

“South?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Espehus,” he stated.

Kyra's heart flooded with excitement as she pictured their journey to Espehus, the ancient stronghold perched on the sea, their biggest neighbor to the south. She became even more excited as she realized – if he was going there it could only mean one thing: he was preparing for war.

He nodded, as if reading her mind.

“There is no turning back now,” he said.

Kyra looked back at her father with a sense of pride she had not felt in years. He was no longer the complacent warrior, living his middle years in the security of a small fort – but now the bold commander she once knew, willing to risk it all for freedom.

“When do we leave?” she asked, her heart pounding, anticipating her first battle.

She was surprised to see him shake his head.

“Not we,” he corrected. “I and my men. Not you.”

Kyra was crestfallen, his words like a dagger in her heart.

“Would you leave me behind?” she asked, stammering. “After all that has happened? What else must I do to prove myself to you?”

He shook his head firmly, and she was devastated to see the hardened look in his eyes, a look which she knew meant he would not bend.

“You shall go to your uncle,” he said. It was a command, not a request, and with those words she knew where she stood: she was his soldier now, not his daughter. It hurt her.

Kyra breathed deep – she would not give in so quickly.

“I want to fight alongside you,” she insisted. “I can help you.”

“You *will* be helping me,” he said, “by going where you're needed. I need you with him.”

She furrowed her brow, trying to understand.

“But why?” she asked.

He was silent for a long time, until he finally sighed.

“You possess...” he began, “...*skills* I do not understand. Skills that we will need to win this war. Skills that only your uncle will know how to foster.”

He reached out and held her shoulder meaningfully.

“If you want to help us,” he added, “if you want to help our people, that is where you are needed. I don’t need another soldier – I need the unique talents you have to offer. The skills that no one else has.”

She saw the earnestness in his eyes, and while she felt awful at the prospect of being unable to join him, she felt some reassurance in his words – along with a heightened sense of curiosity. She wondered what skills he was referring to, and wondered who her uncle might be.

“Go and learn what I cannot teach you,” he added. “Come back stronger. And help me win.”

Kyra looked into his eyes, and she felt the respect, the warmth returning, and she began to feel restored again.

“Ur is a long journey,” he added. “A good three-day ride west and north. You will have to cross Escalon alone. You will have to ride quickly, by stealth, and avoid the roads. Word will soon spread of what has happened here – and Pandesian lords will be wrathful. The roads will be dangerous – you will stick to the woods. Ride north, find the sea, and keep it in view. It shall be your compass. Follow its coastline, and you will find Ur. Stay away from villages, stay away from people. Do not stop. Tell no one where you are going. Speak to no one.”

He grabbed her shoulders firmly and his eyes darkened with urgency, scaring her.

“Do you understand me?” he implored. “It is a dangerous journey for any man – much less for a girl alone. I can spare no one to accompany you. I need you to be strong enough to do this alone. Are you?”

She could hear the fear in his voice, the love of a concerned father torn, and she nodded back, feeling pride that he would trust her with such a quest.

“I am, Father,” she said proudly.

He studied her, then finally nodded, as if satisfied. Slowly, his eyes welled with tears.

“Of all my men,” he said, “of all these warriors, you are the one I need the most. Not your brothers, and not even my trusted soldiers. *You* are the one, the only one, who can win this war.”

Kyra felt confused and overwhelmed; she did not fully understand what he meant. She opened her mouth to ask him – when suddenly she sensed motion approaching.

She turned to see Baylor, her father’s master of horse, approaching with his usual smile. A short, overweight man with thick eyebrows and stringy hair, he approached them with his customary swagger and smiled at her, then looked to her father, as if awaiting his approval.

Her father nodded to him, and Kyra wondered what was going on, as Baylor turned to her.

“I’m told you’ll be taking a journey,” Baylor said, his voice nasal. “For that, you’ll need a horse.”

Kyra frowned, confused.

“I have a horse,” she replied, looking over at the fine horse she’d ridden during the battle with the Lord’s Men, tied up across the courtyard.

Baylor smiled.

“That’s not a horse,” he said.

Baylor looked to her father and her father nodded, and Kyra tried to understand what was happening.

“Follow me,” he said, and without waiting, he suddenly turned and strode off for the stables.

Kyra watched him go, confused, then looked to her dad. He nodded back.

“Follow him,” he said. “You won’t regret it.”

* * *

Kyra crossed the snowy courtyard with Baylor, joined by Anvin, Arthfael and Vidar, heading eagerly toward the low, stone stables in the distance. As she went, Kyra wondered what Baylor had meant, wondered what horse he had in mind for her. In her mind, one horse was not much different from another.

As they approached the sprawling stone stable, at least a hundred yards long, Baylor turned to her, eyes widening in delight.

“Our Lord’s daughter will need a fine horse to take her wherever it is she is going.”

Kyra’s heart quickened; she had never been given a horse from Baylor before, an honor usually reserved only for distinguished warriors. She’d always dreamed of having one when she was old enough, and when she had earned it. It was an honor that even her older brothers did not enjoy.

Anvin nodded proudly.

“You have earned it,” he said.

“If you can handle a dragon,” Arthfael added with a smile, “you can most certainly handle a master horse.”

As the stables loomed, a small crowd began to gather, joining them as they walked, the men taking a break from their gathering of weapons, clearly curious to see where she was being led. Her two older brothers, Brandon and Braxton, joined them, too, glancing over at Kyra wordlessly, jealousy in their eyes. They looked away quickly, too proud, as usual, to acknowledge her, much less offer her any praise. She, sadly, expected nothing else of them.

Kyra heard footsteps and looked over, pleased to see her friend Dierdre joining her, too.

“I hear you’re leaving,” Dierdre said as she fell in beside her.

Kyra walked beside her new friend, comforted by her presence. She thought back to their time together in the governor’s cell, all the suffering they had endured, escaping, and she felt an instant bond with her. Dierdre had gone through an even worse hell than she had, and as she studied her, black rings beneath her eyes, an aura of suffering and sadness still lingering about her, she wondered what would become of her. She could not just leave her alone in this fort, she realized. With the army heading south, Dierdre would be left alone.

“I can use a traveling companion,” Kyra said, an idea forming as she uttered the words.

Dierdre looked at her, eyes widening with surprise, and broke into a wide smile, her heavy aura lifting.

“I was hoping you would ask,” she replied.

Anvin, overhearing, frowned.

“I don’t know if your father would approve,” he interjected. “You have serious business ahead of you.”

“I won’t interfere,” Dierdre said. “I must cross Escalon anyway. I am returning to my father. I’d rather not cross it alone.”

Anvin rubbed his beard.

“Your father would not like it,” he said to Kyra. “She may be a liability.”

Kyra laid a reassuring hand on Anvin’s wrist, resolved.

“Dierdre is my friend,” she said, settling the matter. “I would not abandon her, just as you would not abandon one of your men. What is it you have always told me? *No man left behind.*”

Kyra sighed.

“I may have helped save Dierdre from that cell,” Kyra added, “but she also helped save me. I owe her a debt. I am sorry, but what my father thinks matters little. It is *I* crossing Escalon alone, not he. She is coming with me.”

Dierdre smiled. She stepped up beside Kyra and linked arms with hers, a new pride in her step. Kyra felt good at the idea of having her on the journey, and she knew she'd made the right decision, whatever should happen.

Kyra noticed her brothers walking nearby and she could not help but feel a sense of disappointment that they were not more protective of her, that they would not think to offer to join her, too; they were too competitive with her. It saddened her that that was the nature of their relationship, yet she could not change other people. She was better off anyway, she realized. They were filled with bravado, and would only do something reckless to get her in trouble.

"I would like to accompany you, too," Anvin said, his voice heavy with guilt. "The idea of your crossing Escalon does not sit well with me." He sighed. "But your father needs me now more than ever. He's asked me to join him in the south."

"And I," Arthfael added. "I would like to join you, too – but I have been assigned to join the men south."

"And I to remain behind and guard Volis in his absence," Vidar added.

Kyra was touched by their support.

"Do not worry," she replied. "I have but a three-day ride before me. I shall be fine."

"You shall," Baylor chimed in, stepping closer. "And your new horse shall make sure of it."

With that, Baylor pushed open wide the door to the stables, and they all followed him into the low stone building, the smell of horses heavy in the air.

Kyra's eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light as she followed him in, the stables damp and cool, filled with the sound of excited horses. She looked up and down the stalls and saw before her rows of the most beautiful horses she'd ever seen – big, strong, beautiful horses, black and brown, each one a champion. It was a treasure chest.

"The Lord's Men reserved the best for themselves," Baylor explained as they walked, heading down the rows with a swagger, in his element. He touched one horse here and patted another and the animals seemed to come alive in his presence.

Kyra walked slowly, taking it all in. Each horse was like a work of art, larger than most horses she'd seen, filled with beauty and power.

"Thanks to you and your dragon, these horses are ours now," Baylor said. "It is only fitting that you take your pick. Your father has instructed me to give you first choice, even over his."

Kyra was overwhelmed. As she studied the stable, she felt a great burden of responsibility, knowing this was a once in a lifetime choice.

She walked slowly, running her hand along their manes, feeling how soft and smooth they were, how powerful, and was at a loss for which to choose.

"How do I pick?" she asked Baylor.

He smiled and shook his head.

"I've trained horses my entire life," he replied, "I've raised them, too. And if there is one thing I know, it is no two horses are the same. Some are bred for speed, others for stamina; some are built for strength, while others are made to carry a load. Some are too proud to carry a thing. And others, well, others are built for battle. Some thrive in solo jousts, others just want to fight, and others still are created for the marathon of war. Some will be your best friend, others will turn on you. Your relationship to a horse is a magical thing. They must call to you, and you to them. Choose well, and your horse shall be forever beside you, in times of battle and times of war. No good warrior is complete without one."

Kyra walked slowly, heart thumping with excitement, passing horse after horse, some looking at her, some looking away, some neighing and stamping impatiently, others standing still. She was waiting for a connection, and yet she felt none. She was frustrated.

Then, suddenly, Kyra felt a chill up her spine, like a lightning bolt shooting through her. It came as a sharp sound echoed through the stables, a sound that told her that *that* was her horse. It did not

sound like a typical horse – but emitted a much darker sound, more powerful. It cut through the noise and rose above the sounds of all the others, like a wild lion trying to break free of its cage. It both terrified her – and drew her in.

Kyra turned toward its source, at the end of the stable, and as she did there came a sudden crashing of wood. She saw the stalls shatter, wood flying everywhere, and there ensued a commotion as several men hurried over, trying to close the broken wooded gate. A horse kept smashing it with its hooves.

Kyra hurried toward the commotion.

“Where are you going?” Baylor asked. “The fine horses are here.”

But Kyra ignored him, gaining speed, her heart beating faster as she went. She knew it was calling her.

Baylor and the others hurried to catch up with her as she neared the end, and as she did, she turned and gasped at the sight before her. There stood what appeared to be a horse, yet twice the size of the others, legs as thick as tree trunks. It had two small, razor-sharp horns, barely visible behind its ears. Its hide was not brown or black like the others, but a deep scarlet – and its eyes, unlike the others, glowed green. They looked right at her, and the intensity struck her in the chest, taking her breath away. She could not move.

The creature, towering over her, made a noise like a snarl, and revealed fangs.

“What horse is this?” she asked Baylor, her voice barely above a whisper.

He shook his head disapprovingly.

“That is no horse,” he frowned, “but a savage beast. A freak. Very rare. It is a Solzor. Imported from the far corners of Pandesia. The Lord Governor must have kept it as a trophy to keep on display. He could not ride the creature – no one could. Solzors are savage creatures, not to be tamed. Come – you waste precious time. Back to the horses.”

But Kyra stood there, rooted in place, unable to look away. Her heart pounded as she knew this was meant for her.

“I choose this one,” she said to Baylor.

Baylor and the others gasped, all staring at her as if she were mad. A stunned silence ensued.

“Kyra,” Anvin began, “your father would never allow you – ”

“It is my choice, is it not?” she replied.

He frowned and raised his hands to his hips.

“That is no horse!” he insisted. “It is a wild creature.”

“It would as soon kill you,” Baylor added.

Kyra turned to him.

“Was it not you who told me to trust my instincts?” she asked. “Well, this is where they have led me. This animal and I belong together.”

The Solzor suddenly reared its huge legs, smashed another wooden gate, and sent splinters everywhere and men cowering. Kyra was in awe. It was wild and untamed and magnificent, an animal too big for this place, too big for captivity, and far superior to the others.

“Why should she get to have it?” Brandon asked, stepping forward and shoving others out of his way. “I am older, after all. *I* want it.”

Before she could reply, Brandon rushed forward as if to claim it. He went to jump on its back and as he did, the Solzor bucked wildly and threw him off. He went flying across the stables, and smashing into the wall.

Braxton then rushed forward, as if to claim it, too, and as he did it swung its head and sliced Brandon’s arm with his fangs.

Bleeding, Brandon shrieked and ran from the stables, clutching his arm. Braxton scrambled to his feet and followed on his heels, the Solzor just missing him as it tried to bite him.

Kyra stood, transfixed, yet somehow unafraid. She knew that for her, it would be different. She felt a connection to this beast, the same way she had to Theos.

Kyra suddenly stepped forward, boldly, standing right in front of it, in range of its deadly fangs. She wanted to show the Solzor that she trusted it.

“Kyra!” Anvin shouted, concern in his voice. “Get back!”

But Kyra ignored him. She stood there, staring the beast in the eye

The beast stared back, a low snarl emanating from its throat, as if debating what to do. Kyra trembled from fear, but she would not let the others see it.

She forced herself to show her courage. She raised a hand slowly, stepped forward, and touched its scarlet hide. It snarled more loudly, showing its fangs, and she could feel its anger and frustration.

“Unlock its chains,” she commanded the others.

“What!?” one of them called out.

“That is not wise,” Baylor called, fear in his voice.

“Do as I say!” she insisted, feeling a strength rise up within her, as if the will of this beast were pouring through her.

Behind her, soldiers rushed forward with keys, unlocking its chains. All the while the beast never took his angry eyes off her, snarling, as if summing her up, as if daring her.

As soon as it was unchained, the beast stomped his legs, as if threatening to attack.

But, strangely, it did not. Instead, it stared at Kyra, fixing its eyes on her, and slowly its look of anger seemed to morph to one of tolerance. Perhaps even gratitude.

Ever so slightly, it seemed to lower its head; it was a subtle gesture, almost unnoticeable, yet one she could decipher.

Kyra stepped forward, held its mane, and in one quick motion mounted it.

A gasp filled the room.

At first the beast shivered and began to buck. But Kyra sensed it was for show. It didn’t really want to throw her off – it just wanted to make a point of defiance, of who was in control, to keep her on edge. It wanted to let her know it was a creature of the wild, a creature to be tamed by no one.

I do not wish to tame you, she said to it in her mind’s eye. I wish only to be your partner in battle.

The Solzor calmed, still prancing, but not as wildly, as if hearing her. Soon, it stopped moving, perfectly still beneath her, snarling out at the others, as if to protect her.

Kyra, sitting atop the Solzor, now calm, looked down at the others. A sea of shocked faces stared back, mouths agape.

Kyra slowly smiled wide, feeling a great sense of triumph.

“This,” she said, “is my choice. And his name is Andor.”

* * *

Kyra rode Andor at a walk down the center of the courtyard of Argos, and all her father’s men, hardened soldiers, stopped and watched in awe as she went. Clearly, they had never seen anything like it.

Kyra held his mane gently, trying to pacify him as he snarled softly at all the men, glaring them down, as if he held a vendetta for being caged. Kyra adjusted her balance, Baylor having put a fresh leather saddle on him, and tried to get used to riding up so high. She felt more powerful with this beast beneath her than she’d ever had.

Beside her, Dierdre rode a beautiful mare, one Baylor had chosen for her, and the two of them continued through the snow until Kyra spotted her father in the distance, standing there by the gate, awaiting her. He stood with his men, all of them waiting to see her off, and they, too, looked up at her in fear and awe, stunned that she could ride this animal. She saw the admiration in their eyes,

and it emboldened her for the journey ahead. If Theos would not return to her, at least she had this magnificent creature beneath her.

Kyra dismounted as she reached her father, guiding Andor by his mane and seeing the concern flicker in her father's eyes. She did not know if it was because of this beast or for the journey ahead. His look of concern reassured her, made her realize she was not the only one who feared what lay ahead, and that he cared for her after all. For the briefest moment he let his guard down and shot her a look that only she could recognize: the love of a father. She could tell that he struggled in sending her on this quest.

She stopped a few feet away, facing him, and all grew silent as the men gathered around to watch the exchange.

She smiled up at him.

"Do not worry, Father," she said. "You raised me to be strong."

He nodded back, pretending to be reassured – yet she could see he was not. He was still, most of all, a father.

He looked up, searching the skies.

"If only your dragon would come for you now," he said. "You could cross Escalon in but a few minutes. Or better – he could join you on your journey and incinerate anyone who came in your path."

Kyra smiled sadly.

"Theos is gone now, Father."

He looked back at her, eyes filled with wonder

"Forever?" he asked, the question of a warlord leading his men into battle, needing to know but afraid to ask.

Kyra closed her eyes and tried to tune in, to get a response. She willed for Theos to answer her.

Yet there came a numbing silence. It made her wonder if her she had ever had a connection to Theos to begin with, or if she had only imagined it.

"I do not know, Father," she answered honestly.

He nodded back, accepting, the look of a man who had learned to accept things as they were and to rely on himself.

"Remember what I – " her father began.

"KYRA!" an excited shout cut through the air.

Kyra turned as the men parted ways, and her heart lifted with delight to see Aidan running through the city gates, Leo at his side, jumping down from a cart driven by her father's men. He ran right for her, stumbling through the snow, Leo even faster, way ahead of him, and already bounding ahead into Kyra's arms.

Kyra laughed as Leo knocked her down, standing on her chest on all fours and licking her face again and again. Behind her, Andor snarled, already protective of her, and Leo jumped up and faced off with it, snarling back. They were two fearless creatures, each equally protective of her, and Kyra felt honored.

She jumped up and stood between them, holding Leo back.

"It's okay, Leo," she said. "Andor is my friend. And Andor," she said, turning, "Leo is mine, too."

Leo backed down reluctantly, while Andor continued to snarl, albeit in a quieter fashion.

"Kyra!"

Kyra turned as Aidan ran into her arms. She reached down and hugged him tight as his little hands clutched her back. It felt so good to embrace her little brother, whom she was certain she would never see again. He was the one bit of normalcy left in the whirlwind her life had become, the one thing that had not changed.

"I heard you were here," he said in a rush, "and I caught a ride to see you. I'm so happy you're back."

She smiled sadly.

"I'm afraid not for long, my brother," she said.

A flash of concern crossed his face.

"You're leaving?" he asked, crestfallen.

Her father interjected.

"She is off to see her uncle," he explained. "Let her go now."

Kyra noted that her father said *her* uncle and not *your* uncle, and she wondered why.

"Then I shall join her!" Aidan insisted proudly.

Her father shook his head.

"You shall not," he replied.

Kyra smiled down at her little brother, so brave, as always.

"Father needs you elsewhere," she said.

"The battlefield?" Aidan asked, turning to their father hopefully. "You are setting out for Esephus," he added in a rush. "I have heard! I want to join you!"

But he shook his head.

"It is Volis for you," he replied. "You will stay there, protected by the men I leave behind. The battlefield is no place for you now. One day."

Aidan flushed red with disappointment.

"But I want to fight, Father!" he protested. "I don't need to stay boarded up in some empty fort with women and children!"

His men snickered, but her father looked serious.

"My decision is made," he answered curtly.

Aidan frowned.

"If I can't join Kyra and I can't join you," he said, refusing to let it go, "then what use is my learning about battles, learning how to use weapons? What has all my training been for?"

"Grow hair on your chest first, little brother," Braxton laughed, stepping forward, Brandon beside him.

Laughter arose amidst the men and Aidan reddened, clearly embarrassed in front of the others.

Kyra, feeling bad, knelt before him and looked at him, placing a hand on his cheek.

"You shall be a finer warrior than all of them," she reassured him softly, so that only he could hear. "Be patient. In the meantime, watch over Volis. It needs you, too. Make me proud. I shall return, I promise, and one day we shall fight great battles together."

Aidan seemed to soften a bit, as he leaned forward and hugged her again.

"I don't want you to go," he said softly. "I had a dream about you. I dreamt..." He looked up at her reluctantly, eyes filled with fear. "...that you would die out there."

Kyra felt a shock at his words, especially as she saw the look in his eyes. It haunted her. She did not know what to say.

Anvin stepped forward and draped over her shoulders thick, heavy furs, warming her; she stood and felt ten pounds heavier, but it shut out all the wind and took away the chill down her back. He smiled back.

"Your nights will be long, and fires shall be far away," he said, and gave her a quick embrace.

Her father stepped forward quickly and embraced her, the strong embrace of a warlord. She hugged him back, lost in his muscles, feeling safe and secure.

"You are my daughter," he said firmly, "don't forget that." He then lowered his voice so the others could not hear, and added: "I love you."

She was overwhelmed with emotions, but before she could reply he quickly turned and hurried away – and at the same moment Leo whined and jumped up on her, nudging his nose into her chest.

"He wants to go with you," Aidan observed. "Take him – you'll need him far more than I, shuttered up in Volis. He's yours anyway."

Kyra hugged Leo, unable to refuse as he would not leave her side. She felt comforted by the idea of his joining her, having missed him dearly. She could use another set of eyes and ears, too, and there was no one more loyal than Leo.

Ready, Kyra mounted Andor as her father's men parted ways. They held up torches of respect for her all along the bridge, warding off the night, lighting a path for her. She looked out beyond them and saw the darkening sky, the wilderness before her. She felt excitement, fear, and most of all, a sense of duty. Of purpose. Before her lay the most important quest of her life, a quest that had at stake not only her identity, but the fate of all of Escalon. The stakes could not be higher.

Her staff strapped over one shoulder, her bow over the other, Leo and Dierdre beside her, Andor beneath her, and all her father's men watching, Kyra began to ride Andor at a walk toward the city gates. She went slowly at first, through the torches, past the men, feeling as if she were walking into a dream, walking into her destiny. She did not look back, not wanting to lose resolve. A low horn was sounded by her father's men, a horn of departure, a sound of respect.

She prepared to give Andor a kick – but he already anticipated her. He began to run, first at a trot, then a gallop.

Within moments Kyra found herself racing through the snow, through the gates of Argos, over the bridge, into the open field, the cold wind in her hair and nothing before her but a long road, savage creatures, and the falling blackness of night.

Chapter Four

Merk ran through the wood, stumbling down the dirt slope, weaving between trees, the leaves of Whitewood crunching beneath him as he ran for all he had. He looked ahead and kept in his sights the distant plumes of smoke filling the horizon, blocking out the blood-red sunset, and he felt a rising sense of urgency. He knew the girl was down there somewhere, possibly being murdered even at this moment, and he could not make his legs run fast enough.

Killing seemed to find him; it encountered him at every turn, on seemingly every day, the way other men were summoned home for dinner. *He had a date with death*, his mother used to say. Those words rang in his head, had haunted him for most of his life. Were her words self-fulfilling? Or had he been born with a black star over his head?

Killing for Merk was a natural part of his life, like breathing or having lunch, no matter who he was doing it for, or how. The more he pondered it, the more he felt a great sense of disgust, as if he wanted to vomit his entire life. But while everything inside him screamed at him to turn around, to start life anew, to continue on his pilgrimage for the Tower of Ur, he just could not do it. Violence was, once again, summoning him, and now was not the time to ignore its call.

Merk ran, the billowing clouds of smoke getting closer, making it harder to breathe, the smell of smoke stinging his nostrils, and a familiar feeling began to overtake him. It was not fear or even, after all these years, excitement. It was a feeling of familiarity. Of the killing machine he was about to become. It was always what happened when he went into battle – his own, private battle. In his version of battle, he killed his opponent face to face; he didn't have to hide behind a visor or armor or a crowd's applause like those fancy knights. In his view, his was the most courageous battle of all, reserved for true warriors like himself.

And yet as he ran, something felt different to Merk. Usually, Merk did not care who lived or died; it was just a job. That kept him clear to reason, free from being clouded emotionally. Yet this time, it was different. For the first time in as long as he could remember, no one was paying him to do this. He proceeded of his own volition, for no other reason than because he pitied the girl and wanted to set wrongs right. It made him invested, and he did not like the feeling. He regretted now that he had not acted sooner and had turned her away.

Merk ran at a steady clip, not carrying any weapons – and not needing to. He had in his belt only his dagger, and that was enough. Indeed, he might not even use it. He preferred to enter battle weaponless: it threw his opponents off-guard. Besides, he could always strip his enemy's weapons and use them against them. That left him with an instant arsenal everywhere he went.

Merk burst out of Whitewood, the trees giving way to open plains and rolling hills, and was met by the huge, red sun, sitting low on the horizon. The valley spread out before him, the sky above it black, as if angry, filled with smoke, and there, aflame, sat what could only be the remnants of the girl's farm. Merk could hear it from here, the gleeful shouts of men, criminals, their voices filled with delight, bloodlust. With his professional eye he scanned the scene of the crime and immediately spotted them, a dozen men, faces lit by the torches they held as they ran to and fro, setting everything aflame. Some ran from the stables to the house, setting torches to straw roofs, while others slaughtered the innocent cattle, hacking them down with axes. One of them, he saw, dragged a body by the hair across the muddy ground.

A woman.

Merk's heart raced as he wondered if it was the girl – and if she were dead or alive. He was dragging her to what appeared to be the girl's family, all of them tied to the barn by ropes. There were her father and mother, and beside them, likely her siblings, smaller, younger, both girls. As a breeze moved a cloud of black smoke, Merk caught a glimpse of the body's long blonde hair, matted with dirt, and he knew that was her.

Merk felt a rush of adrenaline as he took off at a sprint down the hill. He rushed into the muddy compound, running amidst the flame and the smoke, and he could finally see what was happening: the girl's family, against the wall, were all already dead, their throats cut, their bodies hanging limply against the wall. He felt a wave of relief as he saw the girl being dragged was still alive, resisting as they dragged her to join her family. He saw a thug awaiting her arrival with a dagger, and he knew she would be next. He had arrived too late to save her family – but not too late to save her.

Merk knew he had to catch these men off-guard. He slowed his gait and marched calmly down the center of the compound, as if he had all the time in the world, waiting for them to take notice of him, wanting to confuse them.

Soon enough, one of them did. The thug turned immediately, shocked at the sight of a man walking calmly through all the carnage, and he yelled to his friends.

Merk felt all the confused eyes on him as he proceeded, walking casually toward the girl. The thug dragging her looked over his shoulder, and at the sight of Merk he stopped, too, loosening his grip and letting her fall in the mud. He turned and approached Merk with the others, all closing in on him, ready to fight.

“What do we have here?” called out the man who appeared to be their leader. It was the one who had dropped the girl, and as he set his sights on Merk he drew a sword from his belt and approached, as the others encircled him.

Merk looked only at the girl, checking to make sure she was alive and unharmed. He was relieved to see her squirm in the mud, slowly collecting herself, lifting her head and looking back out at him, dazed and confused. Merk felt relief that he had not, at least, been too late to save her. Perhaps this was the first step on what would be a very long road to redemption. Perhaps, he realized, it did not start in the tower, but right here.

As the girl turned over in the mud, propping herself up on her elbows, their eyes met, and he saw them flood with hope.

“Kill them!” she shrieked.

Merk stayed calm, still walking casually toward her, as if not even noticing the men around him.

“So you know the girl,” the leader called out to him.

“Her uncle?” one of them called out mockingly.

“A long-lost brother?” laughed another.

“You coming to protect her, old man?” another mocked.

The others burst into laughter as they closed in.

While he did not show it, Merk was silently taking stock of all his opponents, summing them up out of the corner of his eye, tallying how many they were, how big they were, how fast they moved, the weapons they carried. He analyzed how much muscle they had versus fat, what they were wearing, how flexible they were in those clothes, how fast they could pivot in their boots. He noted the weapons they held – the crude knives, daggers drawn, swords poorly sharpened – and he analyzed how they held them, at their sides or out in front, and in which hands.

Most were amateur, he realized, and none of them truly concerned him. Save one. The one with the crossbow. Merk made a mental note to kill him first.

Merk entered a different zone, a different mode of thinking, of being, the one that always naturally gripped him whenever he was in a confrontation. He became submerged in his own world, a world he had little control over, a world he gave his body up to. It was a world that dictated to him how many men he could kill how quickly, how efficiently. How to inflict the maximum damage with the least possible effort.

He felt bad for these men; they had no idea what they were walking into.

“Hey, I'm *talking* to you!” their leader called out, hardly ten feet away, holding out his sword with a sneer and closing in fast.

Merk stayed the course, though, and kept marching, calm and expressionless. He was staying focused, hardly listening to their leader's words, now muted in his mind. He would not run, or show any signs of aggression, until it suited him, and he could sense how puzzled these men were by his lack of actions.

"Hey, do you know you're about to die?" the leader insisted. "You listening to me?"

Merk continued walking calmly while their leader, infuriated, waited no longer. He shouted in rage, raised his sword, and charged, swinging down for Merk's shoulder.

Merk took his time, not reacting. He walked calmly toward his attacker, waiting until the very last second, making sure not to tense up, to show any signs of resistance.

He waited until his opponent's sword reached its highest point, high above the man's head, the pivotal moment of vulnerability for any man, he had learned long ago. And then, faster than his foe could possibly foresee, Merk lunged forward like a snake, using two fingers to strike at a pressure point beneath the man's armpit.

His attacker, eyes bulging in pain and surprise, immediately dropped the sword.

Merk stepped in close, looped one arm around the man's arm and tightened his grip in a lock. In the same motion he grabbed the man by the back of his head and spun him around, using him as a shield. For it wasn't this man that Merk had been worried about, but the attacker behind him with the crossbow. Merk had chosen to attack this oaf first merely to gain himself a shield.

Merk spun and faced the man with the crossbow, who, as he'd anticipated, already had his bow trained on him. A moment later Merk heard the telltale sound of an arrow being released from the crossbow, and he watched it flying through the air right for him. Merk held his writhing human shield tight.

There came a gasp, and Merk felt the oaf flinch in his arms. The leader cried out in pain, and Merk suddenly felt a jolt of pain himself, like a knife entering his own stomach. At first he was confused – and then he realized the arrow had gone through the shield's stomach, and the head of it had just barely entered Merk's stomach, too. It only penetrated perhaps a half inch – not enough to seriously wound him – but enough to hurt like hell.

Calculating the time it would take to reload the crossbow, Merk dropped the leader's limp body, grabbed the sword from his hand, and threw it. It sailed end over end toward the thug with the crossbow and the man shrieked, eyes widening in shock, as the sword pierced his chest. He dropped his bow and fell limply beside it.

Merk turned and looked over at the other thugs, all clearly in shock, two of their best men dead, all now seeming unsure. They faced each other in the awkward silence.

"Who are you?" one finally called out, nervousness in his voice.

Merk smiled wide and cracked his knuckles, relishing the bout to come.

"I," he replied, "am what keeps you up at night."

Chapter Five

Duncan rode with his army, the sound of hundreds of horses thundering in his ears as he led them south, throughout the night, away from Argos. His trusted commanders rode beside him, Anvin on one side and Arthfael on the other, only Vidar remaining home to guard Volis, while several hundred men lined up beside them, all riding together. Unlike other warlords, Duncan liked to ride side-by-side with his men; he did not consider these men to be his subjects, but rather his brothers-in-arms.

They rode through the night, the cool wind in their hair, the snow beneath their feet, and it felt good to be on the move, to be heading for battle, to no longer be cowering behind the walls of Volis as Duncan had for half his life. Duncan looked over and spotted his sons Brandon and Braxton riding alongside his men, and while he was proud to have them with him, he did not worry for them as he did for his daughter. Despite himself, as hour followed hour, even though he told himself he would not worry, Duncan found his nighttime thoughts turning to Kyra.

He wondered where she was now. He thought of her crossing Escalon alone, with only Dierdre, Andor, and Leo to join her, and his heart tugged at him. He knew the journey he had sent her on was one that could imperil even some hardened warriors. If she survived it, she would return a greater warrior than any of the men who rode with him here today. If she did not, he would never be able to live with himself. But desperate times called for desperate measures, and he needed her to complete her quest more than ever.

They crested a hill and descended another, and as the wind picked up, Duncan looked out at the rolling plains, spread out before him beneath the moonlight, and he thought of their destination: Esephus. The stronghold of the sea, the city built on the harbor, the crossroads of the northeast and the first major port for all shipping. It was a city bordered by the Sea of Tears on one side and a harbor on the other, and it was said whoever controlled Esephus controlled the better half of Escalon. The next closest fort to Argos and a vital stronghold, Esephus had to be his first stop, Duncan knew, if he were to have any chance of rallying a revolution. The once-great city would have to be liberated. Its harbor, once so proudly filled with ships waving the banners of Escalon, was now, Duncan knew, filled with Pandesian ships, a humbled reminder of what it once was.

Duncan and Seavig, the warlord of Esephus, had been close once. They had ridden into battle together as brothers-in-arms countless times, and Duncan had sailed out to sea with him more than once. But since the invasion, they had lost touch. Seavig, a once-proud warlord, was now a humbled soldier, unable to sail the seas, unable to rule his city or visit other strongholds, like all warlords. They might as well have detained him and labeled him what he truly was: a prisoner, like all other warlords of Escalon.

Duncan rode through the night, the hills lit only by the torches of his men, hundreds of sparks of light heading south. As they rode, more snow fell and the wind raged, and the torches struggled to stay alight as the moon fought to break through the clouds. Yet Duncan's army pushed on, gaining ground, these men who would ride anywhere on earth for him. It was unconventional, Duncan knew, to attack at night, much less in the snow – yet Duncan had always been an unconventional warrior. It was what had allowed him to rise through the ranks, to become the old king's commander, was what had led to his having a stronghold of his own. And it was what made him one of the most respected of all dispersed warlords. Duncan never did what other men did. There was a motto he tried to live by: *do what other men expected least*.

The Pandesians would never expect an attack, since word of Duncan's revolt could not have spread this far south so soon – not if Duncan reached them in time. And they would certainly never expect an attack at nighttime, much less in the snow. They would know the risks of riding at night,

of horses breaking legs, and of a myriad other problems. Wars, Duncan knew, were often won more by surprise and speed than by force.

Duncan planned to ride all night long until they reached Esephus, to try to conquer the vast Pandesian force and take back this great city with his few hundred men. And if they took Esephus, then maybe, just maybe, he could gain momentum and begin the war to take back all of Escalon.

“Down below!” Anvin called out, pointing into the snow.

Duncan looked down at the valley below and spotted, amidst the snow and fog, several small villages dotting the countryside. Those villages, Duncan knew, were inhabited by brave warriors, loyal to Escalon. Each would have but a handful of men, but it could add up. He could gain momentum and bolster his army’s ranks.

Duncan shouted above the wind and horses to be heard.

“Sound the horns!”

His men sounded a series of short horn blasts, the old rallying cry of Escalon, a sound which warmed his heart, a sound which had not been heard in Escalon in years. It was a sound that would be familiar to his fellow countrymen, a sound that would tell them all that they needed to know. If there were any good men in those villages, that sound would stir them.

The horns sounded again and again, and as they neared, slowly torches lit in the villages. Villagers, alerted to their presence, began to fill the streets, their torches flickering against the snow, men hastily getting dressed, grabbing weapons and donning whatever crude armor they had. They all gazed up the hill to see Duncan and his men approaching, gesturing as if filled with wonder. Duncan could only imagine what a sight his men made, galloping in the thick of night, in a snowstorm, down the hill, raising hundreds of torches like a legion of fire fighting the snow.

Duncan and his men rode into the first village and came to a stop, their hundreds of torches lighting the startled faces. Duncan looked down at the hopeful faces of his countrymen, and he put on his fiercest battle face, preparing himself to inspire his fellow men as never before.

“Men of Escalon!” he boomed, slowing his horse to a walk, turning and circling as he tried to address them all as they pressed close around him.

“We have suffered under the oppression of Pandesia for far too long! You can choose to stay here and live your lives in this village and remember the Escalon that once was. Or you can choose to rise up as free men, and help us begin the great war for freedom!”

There arose a cheer of joy from the villagers as they unanimously rushed forward.

“The Pandesians are taking our girls now!” called out one man. “If this is freedom, then I don’t know what liberty is!”

The villagers cheered.

“We are with you, Duncan!” shouted another. “We shall ride with you to our deaths!”

There arose another cheer, and the villagers rushed to mount their horses and join his men. Duncan, satisfied at his growing ranks, kicked his horse and continued to ride out from the village, starting to realize how long overdue Escalon was to revolt.

Soon they reached another village, its men already out and waiting, their torches lit, as they heard the horns, the shouts, saw the army growing and clearly knew what was happening. Local villagers called out to each other, recognizing each other’s faces, realized what was happening, and needed no more speeches. Duncan swept through this village as he did the last, and it took no convincing for the villagers, too eager for freedom, too eager to have their dignity restored, to mount their horses, grab their weapons, and join Duncan’s ranks, wherever he should take them.

Duncan charged through village after village, covering the countryside, all lighting up in the night, despite the wind, despite the snow, despite the black of night. Their desire for freedom was too strong, Duncan realized, to do anything but shine even in the darkest night – and to take up arms to win back their lives.

* * *

Duncan rode all through the night, leading his growing army south, his hands raw and numb from the cold as he gripped the reins. The further south they went, the more the terrain began to morph, the dry cold of Volis replaced with the wet cold of Esephus, its air heavy, as Duncan remembered it to be, with the damp of the sea and the smell of salt. The trees were shorter here, too, windswept, all seemingly bent from the easterly gale that never ceased.

They crested hill after hill. The clouds parted, despite the snow, and the moon opened up in the sky, shining down on them, lighting their way enough to see by. They rode, warriors against the night, and it was a night Duncan would remember, he knew, for the rest of his life. Assuming he survived. This would be the battle upon which hinged everything. He thought of Kyra, his family, his home, and he did not want to lose them. His life was on the line, and the lives of all he knew and loved, and he would risk it all tonight.

Duncan glanced back over his shoulder and was elated to see he had picked up several hundred more men, all riding together as one, with a single purpose. He knew that, even with their numbers, they would be vastly outnumbered and would be facing a professional army. Thousands of Pandesians were stationed in Esephus. Duncan knew that Seavig still had hundreds of his own disbanded men at his disposal, of course, but there was no knowing if he would risk it all to join Duncan. Duncan had to assume he would not.

They soon crested yet another hill and as they did, they all came to a stop, needing no prodding. For there, far below, sprawled the Sea of Tears, its waves crashing to shore, the great harbor, and the ancient city of Espehus rising up beside it. The city looked as if it had been built into the sea, the waves crashing against its stone walls. The city was built with its back to land, as if facing the sea, its gates and portcullises sinking into the water as if they cared more about accommodating ships than horses.

Duncan studied the harbor, the endless ships packed in it, all, he was chagrined to see, flying the banners of Pandesia, the yellow and blue that flew like an offense to his heart. Flapping in the wind was the emblem of Pandesia – a skull in the mouth of an eagle – making Duncan sick. Seeing such a great city held captive by Pandesia was a source of shame for Duncan, and even in the black night his cheeks blushed red. The ships sat there smugly, anchored safely, none expecting an attack. Of course. Who would dare attack them? Especially in the black of night, and in a snowstorm?

Duncan felt all his men's eyes on him, and he knew his moment of truth had come. They all awaited his fateful command, the one that would change the fate of Escalon, and he sat there on his horse, wind howling, and he felt his destiny welling up within him. He knew this was one of those moments that would define his life – and the lives of all these men.

“FORWARD!” he boomed.

His men cheered, and as one they all charged down the hillside, racing for the harbor, several hundred yards away. They raised their torches high, and Duncan felt his heart slamming in his chest as the wind brushed his face. He knew this mission was suicide – yet he also knew it was crazy enough that it just might work.

They tore down the countryside, their horses galloping so fast that the cold air nearly took his breath away, and as they neared the harbor, its stone walls hardly a hundred yards before them, Duncan prepared for battle.

“ARCHERS!” he called out.

His archers, riding in neat rows behind him, set their arrows aflame, torching their tips, awaiting his command. They rode and rode, their horses thundering, the Pandesians below still not aware of the attack to come.

Duncan waited until they got closer – forty yards out, then thirty, then twenty – and finally he knew the time was right.

“FIRE!”

The black night was suddenly lit up with thousands of flaming arrows, sailing in high arcs through the air, cutting through the snow, making their way for the dozens of Pandesian ships anchored in the harbor. One by one, like fireflies, they found their targets, landing on the long, flapping canvas of Pandesian sails.

It took but moments for the ships to be lit up, the sails and then the ships all aflame, as the fire spread rapidly in the windy harbor.

“AGAIN!” Duncan yelled.

Volley followed volley, as fire-tipped arrows fell like raindrops all over the Pandesian fleet.

The fleet was, at first, quiet in the dead of night, the soldiers all fast asleep, all so unsuspecting. The Pandesians had become, Duncan realized, too arrogant, too complacent, never possibly suspecting an attack like this.

Duncan did not give them time to rally; emboldened, he galloped forward, closing in on the harbor. He led the way right up to the stone wall bordering the harbor.

“TORCHES!” he cried.

His men charged right up to the shoreline, raised their torches high, and with a great shout, they followed Duncan’s example and hurled their torches onto the ships closest to them. Their heavy torches landed like clubs on the deck, the thumping of wood filling the air, as dozens more ships were set aflame.

The few Pandesian soldiers on duty noticed too late what was happening, finding themselves caught in a wave of flame, and shrieking and jumping overboard.

Duncan knew it was only a matter of time until the rest of the Pandesians woke.

“HORNS!” he shouted.

Horns were sounded up and down the ranks, the old rallying cry of Escalon, the short bursts that he knew Seavign would recognize. He hoped it would rouse him.

Duncan dismounted, drew his sword, and rushed for the harbor wall. Without hesitating, he jumped over the low stone wall and onto the flaming ship, leading the way as he charged forward. He had to finish the Pandesians off before they could rally.

Anvin and Arthfael charged at his side and his men joined in, all letting out a great battle cry as they threw their lives to the wind. After so many years of submission, their day of vengeance had come.

The Pandesians, finally, were roused. Soldiers began to emerge from the decks below, streaming forth like ants, coughing against the smoke, dazed and confused. They caught sight of Duncan and his men, and they drew swords and charged. Duncan found himself being confronted by streams of men – yet he did not flinch; on the contrary, he attacked.

Duncan charged forward and ducked as the first man slashed for his head, then came up and stabbed the man in the gut. A soldier slashed at his back, and Duncan spun and blocked it – then spun the soldier’s sword around and stabbed him in the chest.

Duncan fought back heroically as he was attacked from all sides, recalling days of old as he found himself immersed in battle, parrying on all sides. When men got too close to reach with his sword, he leaned back and kicked them, creating space for himself to swing; in other instances, he spun and elbowed, fighting hand to hand in the close quarters when he needed to. Men dropped all around him, and none could get close.

Duncan soon found himself joined by Anvin and Arthfael as dozens of his men rushed forward to help. As Anvin joined him, he blocked the blow of a soldier charging Duncan from behind, sparing him a wound – while Arthfael stepped forward, raised his sword, and blocked a hatchet coming down for Duncan’s face. As he did, Duncan simultaneously stepped forward and stabbed the soldier in the gut, he and Arthfael working together to fell him.

They all fought as one, a well-oiled machine from all their years together, all guarding each other's backs as the clang of swords and armor pierced the night.

All around him, Duncan saw his men boarding ships up and down the harbor, attacking the fleet as one. Pandesian soldiers streamed forth, all fully roused, some of them on fire, and the warriors of Escalon all fought bravely amidst the flames, none backing down even as fires raged all around them. Duncan himself fought until he could lift his arms no more, sweating, smoke stinging his eyes, swords clanging all around him, dropping one soldier after the next that tried to escape to shore.

Finally, the fires grew too hot; Pandesian soldiers, in full armor, trapped by the flames, leapt from their ships into the waters below – and Duncan led his men off the ship and over the stone wall, back to the harbor side. Duncan heard a shout and he turned and noticed hundreds of Pandesian soldiers trying to follow, to pursue them off the ship.

As he stepped down onto dry land, the last of his men to leave, he turned, raised his sword high, and hacked at the great ropes binding the ships to shore.

“THE ROPES!” Duncan yelled.

Up and down the harbor his men followed his lead and severed the ropes anchoring the fleet to shore. As the great rope before him finally snapped, Duncan placed his boot on the deck and with a great kick, shoved the ship away from shore. He groaned from the effort, and Anvin, Arthfael and dozens of others rushed forward, joining him. As one, they all shoved the burning hull away from shore.

The flaming ship, filled with shrieking soldiers, drifted inevitably toward the other ships in the harbor – and as it reached them, it set them aflame, too. Men leapt from ships by the hundreds, shrieking, sinking into the black waters.

Duncan stood there, breathing hard and watching, his eyes aglow, as the whole harbor soon lit in a great conflagration. Thousands of Pandesians, fully roused now, emerged from the lower decks of other ships – but it was too late. They surfaced to a wall of flame, and left with the choice of being burned alive or jumping into a death by drowning in the freezing waters, they all chose the latter. Duncan watched as the harbor soon filled with hundreds of bodies, bobbing in the waters, crying out as they tried to swim for shore.

“ARCHERS!” Duncan yelled.

His archers took aim and fired volley after volley, aiming for the flailing soldiers. One by one they found their marks, and the Pandesians sank.

The waters became slick with blood, and soon there came snapping noises and the sound of shrieking, as the waters were filled with glowing yellow sharks, feasting in the blood-filled harbor.

Duncan looked out and it slowly dawned on him what he had done: the entire Pandesian fleet, but hours ago sitting so defiantly in the harbor, a sign of Pandesian conquest, was no more. Its hundreds of ships were destroyed, all burning together in Duncan's victory. His speed and surprise had worked.

There came a great shout amongst his men, and Duncan turned to see all of his men cheering as they watched the ships burn, their faces black with soot, exhaustion from having ridden through the night – yet all of them drunk with victory. It was a cry of relief. A cry of freedom. A cry they had been waiting years to release.

Yet no sooner had it sounded when another shout filled the air – this one much more ominous – followed by a sound which made the hair rise on Duncan's neck. He turned and his heart dropped to see the great gates to the stone barracks slowly opening. As they did, there appeared a frightening sight: thousands of Pandesian soldiers, fully armed, in perfect ranks; a professional army, outnumbering his men ten to one, was preparing. And as the gates opened, they let out a cry and charged right for them.

The beast had been roused. Now, the real war would begin.

Chapter Six

Kyra, clutching Andor's mane, galloped through the night, Deidre beside her, Leo at her feet, all racing through the snow-filled plains west of Argos like thieves fleeing through the night. As she rode, hour passing hour, the sound of the horses thumping in her ears, Kyra became lost in her own world. She imagined what might lie ahead of her in the Tower of Ur, who her uncle might be, what he would say about her, about her mother, and she could barely contain her excitement. Yet she also had to admit, she felt fear. It would be a long trek to cross Escalon, one she had never done before. And looming ahead of them, she saw, was the Wood of Thorns. The open plains were coming to an end, and they would soon be immersed in a claustrophobic wood filled with savage beasts. She knew all rules were off once they crossed that tree line.

The snow whipped her face as the wind howled across the open plains, and Kyra, her hands numb, dropped the torch from her hand, realizing it had burned dead long ago. She rode through the dark, lost in her own thoughts, the only sound that of the horses, of the snow beneath them, and of Andor's occasional snarl. She could feel his rage, his untamed nature, unlike any beast she had ever ridden. It was as if Andor was not only unafraid of what lay ahead – but openly hoping for a confrontation.

Wrapped in her furs, Kyra felt another wave of hunger pains, and as she heard Leo whine yet again, she knew they could not all ignore their hunger much longer. They had been riding for hours and had already devoured their frozen strips of meat; she realized, too late, that they had not brought enough provisions. No small game surfaced on this snowy night, and it did not bode well. They would have to stop and find food soon.

They slowed as they neared the edge of the Wood, Leo snarling at the dark tree line. Kyra glanced back over her shoulder, at the rolling plains leading back to Argos, at the last open sky she would see for a while. She turned back and stared at the wood, and a part of her was loath to move ahead. She knew the reputation of the Wood of Thorns, and this, she knew, was a moment of no turning back.

"You ready?" she asked Dierdre.

Dierdre appeared to be a different girl now than the one who had left prison. She was stronger, more resolute, as if she had been to the depths of hell and back and was ready to face anything.

"The worst that can happen has already happened to me," Deidre said, her voice cold and hard as the wood before them, a voice too old for her age.

Kyra nodded, understanding – and together, they set off, entering the tree line.

The moment they did, Kyra immediately felt a chill, even in this cold night. It was darker here, more claustrophobic, filled with ancient black trees with gnarled branches resembling thorns, and thick, black leaves. The wood exuded not a sense of peace, but one of evil.

They proceeded at a quick walk, as fast as they could amidst these trees, snow and ice crunching beneath their beasts. There slowly arose the sounds of odd creatures, hidden in the branches. She turned and scanned them searching for the source, but could find none. She felt they were being watched.

They proceeded deeper and deeper into the wood, Kyra trying to head west and north, as her father had told her, until she found the sea. As they went, Leo and Andor snarled at hidden creatures Kyra could not see, while she dodged the branches scratching her. Kyra pondered the long road ahead of her. She was excited at the idea of her quest, yet she longed to be with her people, to be fighting at their side in the war she had started. She already felt an urgency to return.

As hour followed hour, Kyra peered into the wood, wondering how much further until they reached the sea. She knew it was risky to ride in such darkness – yet she knew it was also risky to camp out here alone – especially as she heard another startling noise.

“Where is the sea?” Kyra finally asked Dierdre, mainly to break the silence.

She could tell from Dierdre’s expression that she had stirred her from her thoughts; she could only imagine what nightmares she was lost in.

Dierdre shook her head.

“I wish I knew,” she replied, her voice parched.

Kyra was confused.

“Didn’t you come this way when they took you?” she asked.

Dierdre shrugged.

“I was locked in a cage in the back of the wagon,” she replied, “and unconscious most of the trip. They could have taken me any direction. I don’t know this wood.”

She sighed, peering out into the blackness.

“But as we near Whitewood, I should recognize more.”

They continued on, falling into a comfortable silence, and Kyra could not help but wonder about Deidre and her past. She could feel her strength, yet also her profound sadness. Kyra found herself getting consumed by dark thoughts of the journey ahead, of their lack of food, of the biting cold and the savage creatures awaiting them, and she turned to Dierdre, wanting to distract herself.

“Tell me of the Tower of Ur,” Kyra said. “What’s it like?”

Dierdre looked back, black circles beneath her eyes, and shrugged.

“I’ve never been to the tower,” Dierdre replied. “I am from the city of Ur – and that is a good day’s ride south.”

“Then tell me of your city,” Kyra said, wanting to think of anything but here.

Dierdre’s eyes lit up.

“Ur is a beautiful place,” she said, longing in her voice. “The city by the sea.”

“We have a city south of us that is near the sea,” Kyra said. “Esephus. It is a day’s ride from Volis. I used to go there, with my father, when I was young.”

Dierdre shook her head.

“That is not a sea,” she replied.

Kyra was confused.

“What do you mean?”

“That is the Sea of Tears,” Dierdre replied. “Ur is on the Sea of Sorrow. Our is a much more expansive sea. On your eastern shore, there are small tides; on our western coast, the Sorrow has waves twenty feet high that crash into our shores, and a tide that can pull out ships in a glance, much less men, when the moon is high. Ours is the only city in all of Escalon where the cliffs lower enough to allow ships to touch to shore. Our has the only beach in all of Escalon. It is why Andros was built but a day’s ride east of us.”

Kyra pondered her words, glad to be distracted. She recalled all of this from some lesson in her youth, but she had never pondered it all in detail.

“And your people?” Kyra asked. “What are they like?”

Dierdre sighed.

“A proud people,” she replied, “like any other in Escalon. But different, too. They say those of Ur have one eye on Escalon and one on the sea. We look to the horizon. We are less provincial than the others – perhaps because so many foreigners touch down on our shores. The men of Ur were once famed warriors, my father foremost amongst them. Now, we are subjects, like everyone else.”

She sighed, and fell silent for a long time. Kyra was surprised when she started to speak again.

“Our city is cut with canals,” Dierdre continued. “When I was growing up, I would sit atop the ridge and watch the ships come in and out for hours, sometimes days. They would come to us from all over the world, flying all different banners and sails and colors. They would bring in spices and silks and weapons and delicacies of every manner – sometimes even animals. I would look at the people coming and going, and I would wonder about their lives. I wanted desperately to be one of them.”

She smiled, an unusual sight, her eyes aglow, clearly remembering.

"I used to have a dream," Dierdre said. "When I came of age, I would board one of those ships and sail away to some foreign land. I would find my prince, and we would live on a great island, in a great castle somewhere. Anywhere but Escalon."

Kyra looked over to see Dierdre smiling.

"And now?" Kyra asked.

Dierdre's face fell as she looked down at the snow, her expression suddenly filled with sadness. She merely shook her head.

"It's too late for me," Dierdre said. "After what they've done to me."

"It's never too late," Kyra said, wanting to reassure her.

But Dierdre merely shook her head.

"Those were the dreams of an innocent girl," she said, her voice heavy with remorse. "That girl is long gone."

Kyra felt sadness for her friend as they continued in silence, deeper and deeper into the wood. She wanted to take away her pain, but did not how. She wondered at the pain that some people lived with. What was it her father had told her once? *Do not be fooled by men's faces. We all lead lives of quiet despair. Some hide it better than others. Feel compassion for all, even if you see no outward reason.*

"The worst day of my life," Dierdre continued, "was when my father conceded to Pandesian law, when he let those ships enter our canals and let his men lower our banners. It was a sadder day, even, than when he allowed them to take me."

Kyra understood all too well. She understood the pain Dierdre had gone through, the sense of betrayal.

"And when you return?" Kyra asked. "Will you see your father?"

Dierdre looked down, pained. Finally, she said: "He is still my father. He made a mistake. I am sure he did not realize what would become of me. I think he shall never be the same when he learns what happened. I want to tell him. Eye to eye. I want him to understand the pain I felt. His betrayal. He needs to understand what happens when men decide the fate of women." She wiped away a tear. "He was my hero once. I do not understand how he could have given me away."

"And now?" Kyra asked.

Dierdre shook her head.

"No more. I am done making men my heroes. I shall find other heroes."

"What about you?" Kyra asked.

Dierdre looked back, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"Why look any further than yourself?" Kyra asked. "Can you not be your own hero?"

Dierdre scoffed.

"And why would I?"

"You are a hero to me," Kyra said. "What you suffered in there – I could not suffer. You survived. More than that – you are back on your feet and thriving even now. That makes you a hero to me."

Dierdre seemed to contemplate her words as they continued on in the silence.

"And you, Kyra?" Dierdre finally asked. "Tell me something about you."

Kyra shrugged, wondering.

"What would you like to know?"

Dierdre cleared her throat.

"Tell me of the dragon. What happened back there? I've never seen anything like it. Why did he come for you?" She hesitated. "Who are you?"

Kyra was surprised to detect fear in her friend's voice. She pondered her words, wanting to answer truthfully, and wished she had the answer.

"I don't know," she finally answered, truthfully. "I suppose that is what I am going to find out."

"You don't know?" Dierdre pressed. "A dragon swoops down from the sky to fight for you, and you don't know why?"

Kyra thought about how crazy that sounded, yet she could only shake her head. She looked up reflexively at the skies, and between the gnarled branches, despite all hope, she hoped for a sign of Theos.

But saw nothing but gloom. She heard no dragon, and her sense of isolation deepened.

"You know that you are different, don't you?" Dierdre pressed.

Kyra shrugged, her cheeks burning, feeling self-conscious. She wondered if her friend looked at her as if she were some kind of freak.

"I used to be so sure of everything," Kyra replied. "But now...I honestly don't know anymore."

They continued riding for hours, falling back into a comfortable silence, sometimes trotting when the wood opened up, at other times the wood so dense they needed to dismount and lead their beasts. Kyra felt on edge the entire time, feeling as if they could be attacked at any moment, never able to relax in this forest. She did not know what hurt her more: the cold or the hunger pains ripping through her stomach. Her muscles ached, and she couldn't feel her lips. She was miserable. She could hardly conceive their quest had barely begun.

After hours more passed, Leo began to whine. It was a strange noise – not his usual whine, but the one he reserved for times when he smelled food. At the same moment Kyra, too, smelled something – and Dierdre turned in the same direction and stared.

Kyra peered through the wood, but saw nothing. As they stopped and listened, she began to hear the faintest sound of activity somewhere up ahead.

Kyra was both excited by the smell and nervous about what that could mean: others were sharing this wood with them. She recalled her father's warning, and the last thing she wanted was a confrontation. Not here and not now.

Dierdre looked at her.

"I'm famished," Dierdre said.

Kyra, too, felt the hunger pangs.

"Whoever it is, on a night like this," Kyra replied, "I have a feeling they won't be keen to share."

"We have plenty of gold," Dierdre said. "Perhaps they will sell us some."

But Kyra shook her head, having a sinking feeling, while Leo whined and licked his lips, clearly famished, too.

"I don't think it's wise," Kyra said, despite the pains in her stomach. "We should stick to our path."

"And if we find no food?" Dierdre persisted. "We could all die of hunger out here. Our horses, too. It could be days, and this might be our only chance. Besides, we have little to fear. You have your weapons, I have mine, and we have Leo and Andor. If you need to, you could put three arrows in someone before he blinked – and we could be far off by then."

But Kyra hesitated, unconvinced.

"Besides, I doubt a hunter with a spit of meat will cause us all any harm," Dierdre added.

Kyra, sensing everyone else's hunger, their desire to pursue it, could resist no longer.

"I don't like it," she said. "Let us go slowly and see who it is. If we sense trouble, you must agree to leave before we get close."

Dierdre nodded.

"I promise you," she replied.

They all headed off, riding at a fast walk through the woods. As the smell grew stronger, Kyra saw a dim glow up ahead, and as they rode for it, her heart beat faster as she wondered who it could be out here.

They slowed as they approached, riding more cautiously, weaving between the trees. The glow grew brighter, the noise louder, the commotion greater, as Kyra sensed they were on the periphery of a large group of people.

Dierdre, less cautious, letting her hunger get the best of her, rode faster, moving up ahead and gaining a bit of distance.

“Dierdre!” Kyra hissed, urging her back.

But Dierdre kept moving, seemingly overcome by her hunger.

Kyra hurried to keep up with her, and as she did, the glow became brighter as Dierdre stopped at the edge of a clearing. As Kyra stopped beside her, looked past her into a clearing in the wood, she was shocked by what she saw.

There, in the clearing, were dozens of pigs roasting on spits, huge bonfires lighting up the night. The smell was captivating. Also in the clearing were dozens of men, and as Kyra squinted, her heart dropped to see they were Pandesian soldiers. She was shocked to see them here, sitting around fires, laughing, jesting with each other, holding sacks of wine, hands full of chunks of meat.

On the far side of the clearing, Kyra’s heart dropped to see a cluster of iron carriages with bars. Dozens of gaunt faces stared out hungrily, the faces of boys and men, all desperate, all captives. Kyra realized at once what this was.

“The Flames,” she hissed to Dierdre. “They are bringing them to The Flames.”

Dierdre, still a good fifteen feet ahead, did not turn back, her eyes fixed on the roasting pigs.

“Dierdre!” Kyra hissed, feeling a sense of alarm. “We must leave this place at once!”

Dierdre, though, still did not listen, and Kyra, throwing caution to the wind, rushed forward to grab her.

No sooner had she reached her when suddenly, Kyra sensed motion out of the corner of her eyes. At the same moment Leo and Andor snarled – but it was too late. From out of the wood there suddenly emerged a group of Pandesian soldiers, casting a huge net before them.

Kyra turned and instinctively reached back to draw her staff, but there was no time. Before she could even register what was happening, Kyra felt the net falling down on her, binding her arms, and she realized, with a sinking heart, that they were all now slaves to Pandesia.

Chapter Seven

Alec flailed as he fell backwards, feeling the cold rush of air, his stomach dropping as he plummeted toward the ground and the pack of Wilvox below. He felt his life flash before his eyes. He had escaped the venomous bite of the creature above him only to fall to what would surely be an instant death below. Beside him, Marco flailed, too, the two of them falling together. It was little solace. Alec did not want to see his friend die, either.

Alec felt himself crashing into something, a dull pain on his back, and he expected to feel fangs sink into his flesh. But he was surprised to realize it was the muscular body of a Wilvox writhing beneath him. He had fallen so quickly that the Wilvox had had no time to react and he had landed flat on its back, it cushioning his fall as he knocked it to the ground.

There came a thump beside him, and Alec looked over to see Marco land atop one another Wilvox, flattening it, too, at least long enough to keep its snapping jaws away. That left only two other Wilvox to contend with. One of them leapt into action, lowering its jaws for Alec's exposed stomach.

Alec, still on his back, a Wilvox beneath him, allowed his instincts to take over, and as the beast leapt on top of him, he leaned back, raised his boots and put them up protectively over his head. The beast landed on top of them and as it did, Alec shoved with his feet and sent it flying backwards.

It landed several feet away in the snow, buying Alec precious time – and a second chance.

At the same time, Alec felt the beast beneath him wiggle out. It prepared to lunge and as it did, Alec reacted. He spun around quickly, wrapping one arm tightly around its throat in a chokehold, holding it close enough so that it could not bite, and squeezing as hard as he could. The creature struggled like mad in his grip, trying desperately to snap at him, and it took all of Alec's might to contain it. Somehow, he did. He squeezed tighter and tighter. The beast jerked away, turning and rolling in the snow, and Alec held on and rolled with it.

Out of the corner of his eye Alec spotted another beast charging for his now-exposed back, and he anticipated the feel of fangs sinking into his flesh. He had no time to react, so he did what was counterintuitive: still holding the Wilvox, he rolled onto his back, holding it out in front of him, its back atop his stomach, its legs kicking in the air. The other beast, airborne, landed with his fangs – and instead of finding a target in Alec, the fangs sunk into the exposed belly of the other beast. Alec held on tight, using it as a shield, as it shrieked and squirmed. Finally, he felt it go limp in his arms as its hot blood poured out all over him.

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