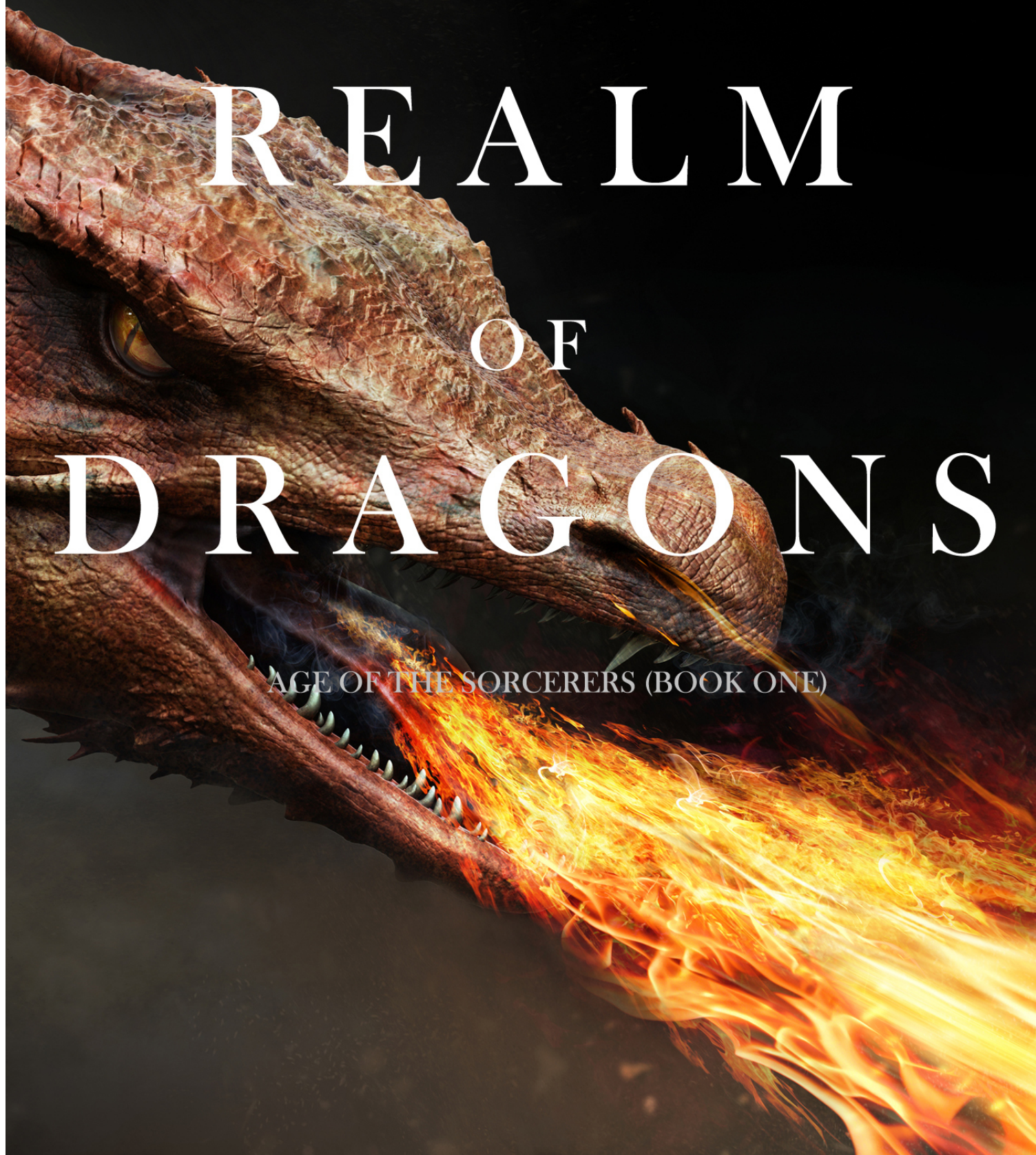


MORGAN RICE

REALM  
OF  
DRAGONS

AGE OF THE SORCERERS (BOOK ONE)



Age of the Sorcerers

Morgan Rice

**Realm of Dragons**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Rice M.**

Realm of Dragons / M. Rice — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (Age of the Sorcerers)

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“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 (re The Sorcerer’s Ring) “The beginnings of something remarkable are there.” --San Francisco Book Review (re A Quest of Heroes) From #1 bestseller Morgan Rice, author of A Quest of Heroes (over 1,300 five star reviews) comes the debut of a startlingly new fantasy series. REALM OF DRAGONS (Age of the Sorcerers—Book One) tells the story of the epic coming of age of one very special 16 year old boy, a blacksmith’s son from a poor family who is offered no chance of proving his fighting skills and breaking into the ranks of the nobles. Yet he holds a power he cannot deny, and a fate he must follow. It tells the story of a 17 year old princess on the eve of her wedding, destined for greatness—and of her younger sister, rejected by her family and dying of plague. It tells the tale of their three brothers, three princes who could not be more different from each other—all of them vying for power. It tells the story of a kingdom on the verge of change, of invasion, the story of the dying dragon race, falling daily from the sky. It tells the tale of two rival kingdoms, of the rapids dividing them, of a landscape dotted with dormant volcanoes, and of a capital accessible only with the tides. It is a story of love, passion, of hate and sibling rivalry; of rogues and hidden treasure; of monks and secret warriors; of honor and glory, and of betrayal and deception. It is the story of Dragonfell, a story of honor and valor, of sorcerers, magic, fate and destiny. It is a tale you will not put down until the early hours, one that will transport you to another world and have you fall in love with characters you will never forget. It appeals to all ages and genders. Books two and three (THRONE OF DRAGONS and BORN OF DRAGONS) are now available for pre-order. “A spirited fantasy ....Only the beginning of what promises to be an

epic young adult series.” --Midwest Book Review (re A Quest of Heroes) “Action-packed .... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.” --Publishers Weekly (re A Quest of Heroes)

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# Morgan Rice

## Realm of Dragons (Age of the Sorcerers—Book One)

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 twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS, comprising eight books; of the new science fiction series THE INVASION CHRONICLES, comprising four books; of the fantasy series OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS, comprising four books; of the fantasy series THE WAY OF STEEL, comprising four books; and of the new fantasy series AGE OF THE SORCERERS. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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*--Books and Movie Reviews  
Roberto Mattos*

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“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*

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--*Publishers Weekly*

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## CHAPTER ONE

King Godwin III of the Northern Kingdom had seen many things in his time. He'd seen the march of armies and the working of magic, but right now he could only stare at the body of the creature that lay before him, prostrate and unmoving on the grass, its bones and its scales lending a sense of impossibility to the moment in the evening light.

The king dismounted his horse, which was refusing to get any closer, whether because of what the creature was, or simply where they were. They'd ridden more than a day south of Royalsport, so that the roar of the Slate River was just a few dozen yards away, the land of his kingdom dropping away into those roaring, steely, violent waters. Beyond it, there might be watchers staring out from the south, even across its vast width. Godwin hoped not, and not just because he and the others were so far from home, open to any who could get over the bridges between the kingdoms. He didn't want them seeing this.

King Godwin stepped forward, while around him the small crowd that had come with him tried to work out whether they should do the same. There weren't many of them, because this... this wasn't something he was sure he wanted people to see. His eldest son, Rodry, was there, twenty-three and looking like the man Godwin had once been, tall and powerfully built, with light hair shaved at the temples so it wouldn't obscure his swordsmanship, in the one reminder of his mother. Rodry's brothers, Vars and Greave, were still at home, neither the kind of man to ride out on something like this. Vars would probably complain that Rodry had been chosen for this—not that Vars would ever volunteer for anything with the hint of danger. Greave would be stuck in the library with his books.

His daughters were frankly more likely to have come, or at least two of them were. The youngest, Erin, would have relished the adventure. Nerra would have wanted to see the strangeness of the creature, probably cried over its death in spite of what it was. Godwin smiled at the thought of her kindness, although as always, that smile faded slightly at the thought of her latest coughing fit, and of the sickness that they kept so carefully concealed. Lenore would probably have preferred to stay in the castle, but then, she had a wedding to prepare for.

Instead of any of the others, it was Godwin and Rodry. There were half a dozen Knights of the Spur with him, Lars and Borus, Halfin and Twell, Ursus and Jorin, all men Godwin trusted, who had served him well for decades in some cases, their armor embossed with the symbols they'd chosen, shining slightly in the spray from the river. There were the villagers who had found this thing, and there, on a sickly-looking horse, was the robed figure of his sorcerer.

"Grey," King Godwin said, waving the man forward.

Master Grey stepped forward slowly, leaning on his staff.

In other circumstances, King Godwin would have laughed at the contrast between them. Grey was slender and shaven headed, skin so pale it almost matched his name, with robes of white and gold. Godwin was larger, broad shouldered and frankly broad bellied these days, armored and full bearded, with dark hair down to his shoulders.

"Do you think they're lying about this?" King Godwin said, with a jerk of his head toward the villagers.

Godwin knew the ways men tried, with cow bones and leather plates, but his sorcerer didn't answer his question. Grey merely shook his head and looked him straight in the eye.

A shiver ran up Godwin's spine. There was no doubting the realness of this. This wasn't some joke, to try and gain favor or money or both.

This was a dragon.

Its scales were the red of blood poured over rusted iron. Its teeth were like ivory, as long as a man was tall, and its claws were razor edged. Great wings spread out, ragged and torn through, huge

and bat-like, seeming barely enough to hold such a great beast aloft. The creature's body curled on the ground, longer than a dozen horses, large enough that in life it could have lifted Godwin like a toy.

"I've never seen one before," King Godwin admitted, placing a hand against the scaled hide. He half expected it to be warm, but instead, it was only the cold stillness of death.

"Few have," Grey said. Where Godwin's voice was a deep, sonorous thing, Grey's was like the whisper of paper.

The king nodded. Of course the sorcerer wouldn't say all that he knew. It wasn't a thought that comforted him. To see a dragon now, and a dead one...

"What do we know about this one?" the king asked. He walked down the length of it, to the remains of the tail, which stretched out impossibly long behind it.

"A female," the sorcerer said, "and red—with all that implies."

Of course, he didn't explain what it implied. The sorcerer walked around it, looking thoughtful. Occasionally, he glanced back inland, as if calculating something.

"How did it die?" Godwin asked. He'd been in battles in his time, but he couldn't see the wound of axe or sword on the creature, couldn't imagine what weapon could harm such a beast.

"Perhaps...just age."

Godwin stared back.

"I thought they were supposed to live forever," Godwin said. In that moment, he wasn't a king, but the boy who had first gone to Grey all those years ago, seeking help and knowledge. The sorcerer had seemed old even then.

"Not forever. A thousand years, born only on the dragon moon," Grey said, sounding as though he were quoting something.

"A thousand years is still too many for us to find one dead here, now," King Godwin said. "I don't like it. It feels too much like an omen."

"Possibly," Grey admitted, and he was rarely a man to admit anything like that. "Death is sometimes a powerful omen. Sometimes it is just death. And sometimes, it is life, too."

He glanced back again toward the kingdom.

King Godwin sighed, despairing of ever truly understanding the man, then kept staring at the beast, trying to determine how something so powerful, so magnificent, could have died. There were no signs of battle upon it, no obvious wounds. He stared into the creature's eyes as if they might provide him with some kind of answers.

"Father?" Rodry called out.

King Godwin turned to his son. He looked much as Godwin had at that age, muscled and powerful, though with a trace of his mother's good looks and lighter hair to remind him of her now she was gone. He sat atop a charger, his armor inlaid with shining blue. He looked impatient at the prospect of being stuck there, doing nothing. Probably, when he'd heard that there was a dragon, he'd been hoping he might get to *fight* one. He was still young enough to think he could win against everything.

The knights around him waited patiently for their king's instructions.

King Godwin knew there was only so much time they should be out. So close to the river, there was a risk of the southerners slipping across one of the bridges, and it was getting dark.

"Take too long and the queen will think we're both trying to get out of the wedding preparations," Rodry pointed out. "It will take us long enough to get back, even riding hard."

There was that. With Lenore's wedding just a week away, Aethe wasn't likely to be forgiving about it, especially not if he was off with Rodry. Despite his efforts, she still thought that he favored his three sons by Illia over the three daughters she'd given him.

"We'll get back soon enough," King Godwin said. "First, though, we need to do something about this." King Godwin glanced over to Grey before he continued. "If people hear about a dragon,

let alone a dead dragon, they'll think it's an ill omen, and I'll not have ill omens the week of Lenore's wedding."

"No, of course not," Rodry said, looking ashamed that he hadn't thought of it himself. "So what do we do?"

The king had already thought of that. He walked over to the villagers first, taking out what coin he had.

"You have my thanks for telling me about this," he said, passing them the coins. "Now return to your homes and tell no one what you've seen. You were not here, this did not happen. If I hear otherwise..."

They took the unspoken threat, bowing hastily.

"Yes, my king," one said, before they both hurried off.

"Now," he said, turning to Rodry and the knights. "Ursus, you're the strongest; let's see how much strength you actually have. Fetch ropes, one of you, so we can all drag the beast."

The largest of his knights nodded in approval, and all of them set to work, rooting through saddlebags until one came out with some thick ropes. Trust Twell the planner to have everything needed.

They tied the remains of the dragon, taking longer than King Godwin would have liked. The sheer bulk of the beast seemed to resist attempts to contain it, so that Jorin, ever the nimblest, had to clamber over the creature with a rope over his shoulders to tie it. He leapt down lightly, even in his armor. Eventually though, they got it lashed together. The king went down to them and took hold of the rope.

"Well?" he said to the others. "Do you think I'm going to haul this into the Slate by myself?"

There was a time when he might have, when he'd been as strong as Ursus, aye, or Rodry. Now though, he knew himself well enough to know when he needed help. The men there got the message and took the rope. King Godwin felt the moment when his son started to lend his strength to the effort, pushing at the dragon's corpse from the far side, groaning with the effort.

Slowly, it started to move, leaving tracks in the dirt as they shifted its bulk. Only Grey didn't add his efforts to the rope, and frankly they would have barely counted for much anyway. Step by step, the group of them got the dragon closer to the river.

Finally, they made it to the edge, getting it poised at the point where the ground fell away toward the river that was both the kingdom's border and its defense. It sat there, so perfectly poised that a breath could have taken it over, briefly looking to King Godwin as if it were perched ready to fly out toward the southerners' lands.

He set a boot against its flank and, with a cry of effort, kicked it over the edge.

"It's done," he said as it hit the water with a splash.

It didn't disappear, though. Instead, it bobbed there, the sheer ferocity of the steel-gray waters enough to carry it away downstream, the dragon's body bumping off rocks and twisting in the current. It was a current against which no man could swim, and against which even the dragon's weight was a tiny thing. It was pulled down in the direction of the waiting sea, those dark waters rushing to join up with the greater body of them.

"Let us just hope that it hasn't laid its clutch," Grey murmured.

King Godwin stood there, too tired to question the man, watching the creature's corpse until it was out of sight. He told himself that it was because he wanted to be sure it didn't wash back into his kingdom, didn't come back to cause trouble again. He told himself that he was just catching his breath, because he was hardly a young man anymore.

It wasn't the truth, though. The truth was that he was worried. He'd ruled his kingdom a long time, and he'd never seen the likes of this before. For it to occur now, something was happening.

And King Godwin knew that, whatever it was, it was about to affect the whole kingdom.

## CHAPTER TWO

Devin dreamed, finding himself in a place far beyond the forge where he worked, beyond even the city of Royalsport where he and his family lived. He dreamed often, and in his dreams, he could go anywhere, be anything. In his dreams, he could be the knight that he'd always wanted to be.

This dream was a strange one, though. For one thing, he *knew* that he was in a dream, where normally he didn't. It meant that he could walk it, and it seemed to shift as he looked at it, letting him create landscapes around him.

It was as if he were floating over the kingdom. Down below he could see the land spread out beneath him, the north and the south, split by the Slate River, and Leveros, the monks' isle, off to the east. In the far north, on the very fringes of the kingdom, five or six days' ride away, he could see the volcanoes that had lain dormant for years. Far to the west, he could just spot the Third Continent, the one people talked of in whispers, in awe of the things that lived there.

It was a dream, yet it was, he knew, a remarkably accurate view of the kingdom.

Now he wasn't above the world. Now he was in a dark space, and there was something in there with him: a shape that filled that space, the scent of it musty, dry, and reptilian. A flicker of light glimmered off scales, and in the half-dark, he thought he could hear the rustle of movement, along with breathing like bellows. In his dream, Devin could feel his fear rising, his hand closing around the hilt of a sword reflexively, lifting a blade of blue-black metal.

Great golden eyes opened in the dark, and another flicker of light came. By it, he could see a great, dark-scaled body on a scale he had never seen before, wings curled and mouth wide open to reveal a light within. Devin had a moment to realize that it was a flicker of flame coming from the creature's mouth, and then there was nothing *but* flame, surrounding him, filling the world...

The flames gave way, and now he was sitting in a room whose walls formed a circle, like it was at the top of a tower. The place was filled from floor to ceiling with oddments that must have been collected from a dozen times and places; silk screens covered the walls, while there were brass objects on shelves that Devin couldn't begin to guess the purpose of.

There was a man there, sitting cross-legged in a rare patch of open space, in a chalk circle surrounded by candles. He was bald and serious looking, his eyes fixed on Devin. He wore rich robes embroidered with sigils, and jewelry that embodied mystical patterns.

"Do you know me?" Devin asked as he got closer.

A long silence followed, one so long that Devin began to wonder if he had even asked the question.

"The stars said that if I waited here, in dreams, you would come," the voice finally said. "The one who is to be."

Devin realized then who this man was.

"You're Master Grey, the king's sorcerer."

He swallowed at the thought of it. They said that this man had the power to see things that no sane man would want to; that he'd told the king the moment of his first wife's death and everyone had laughed until the fainting fit had struck her, cracking her head on the stone of one of the bridges. They said that he could look into a man's soul and draw out all he saw there.

*The one who is to be.*

What could that mean?

"You are Master Grey."

"And you are the boy born on the most impossible of days. I have looked and looked, and you should not exist. But you do."

Devin's heart raced at the thought that the king's sorcerer knew who he was. Why would a man like this take an interest in him?

And he knew, at that moment, that this was more than just a dream.

This was a meeting.

“What do you want from me?” Devin asked.

“Want?” The question seemed almost to catch the sorcerer by surprise, if anything could. “I merely wanted to see you for myself. To see you on the day that your life will change forever.”

Devin burned with questions, but in that moment, Master Grey reached down for one of the candles around him, snuffing it with two long fingers while he murmured something on the edge of hearing.

Devin wanted to step forward, wanted to comprehend what was happening, but instead, he felt a force he couldn't understand dragging him backwards, out of the tower, into the dark...

\*\*\*

“Devin!” his mother called. “Wake up, or you'll miss breakfast.”

Devin cursed as his eyes snapped open. Already, dawn light was coming in through the window of his family's small home. It meant that if he didn't hurry, he wouldn't be able to get to the House of Weapons early enough, wouldn't have time for anything except plunging straight into work.

He lay in bed, breathing hard, trying to shake off the heaviness, the realness, of the dreams.

But try as he did, he could not. It hung over him like a heavy cloak.

“DEVIN!”

Devin shook his head.

He jumped from bed and hurried to dress. His clothes were simple, plain things, patched in places. Some were hand-me-downs from his father, which didn't fit well since, at sixteen, Devin was still more slender than him, no bigger than average for a boy his age, even if he was a little taller. He brushed dark hair out of his eyes with hands that had their share of the small burn marks and cuts that came from the House of Weapons, knowing that it would be worse when he was older. Old Gund could barely move some of his fingers, the effort of the work had taken so much from him.

Devin dressed and hurried to the kitchen of his family's cottage home. He sat there, eating stew at the kitchen table with his mother and father. He mopped at it with a piece of hard bread, knowing that even though it was simple stuff, he would need it for the hard day of work to come in the House of Weapons. His mother was a small, birdlike woman, who looked so fragile next to him that it seemed as if she might break beneath the weight of the work she did every day, yet she never did.

His father was also shorter than him, but broad and muscled, and hard like teak. Each of his hands was like a hammer, and there were tattoos running along his forearms that hinted of other places, from the Southern Kingdom to the lands on the far side of the sea. There was even a small map there, showing both lands, but also the isle of Leveros and the continent of Sarras, so far across the sea.

“Why are you staring at my arms, boy?” his father asked, his voice rough. He wasn't a man who had ever been good at showing affection. Even when Devin had gotten his position in the House, even when he'd shown himself able to make weapons as fine as the best masters, his father had done little more than nod.

Devin desperately wanted to tell him of his dream. But he knew better not to. His father would belittle him, launch into a jealous rage.

“Just a tattoo I haven't seen,” Devin said. Ordinarily, his father wore longer sleeves, and Devin was rarely there long enough to look. “Why does this one have Sarras and Leveros on it? Did you go there when you were a—”

“That's none of your business!” his father snapped, his anger curiously at odds with the simple question. He hurriedly pulled down his sleeves, tying the stays at the wrists so that Devin couldn't see any more. “There are things you don't ask about!”

“I’m sorry,” Devin said. There were days when Devin barely knew what to say to his father; days when he barely even felt like his son. “I should get to work.”

“So early? You’re going to practice the sword again, aren’t you?” his father demanded. “You’re still trying to be a knight.”

He seemed genuinely angry, and Devin couldn’t begin to work out why.

“Would that be such a terrible thing?” Devin asked tentatively.

“Know your place, boy,” his father spat. “You’re no knight. Just a commoner—like the rest of us.”

Devin bit back an angry response. He didn’t have to go to work for at least an hour yet, but he knew that to stay was to risk an argument, like all the arguments that had come before it.

He stood, not even bothering to finish his meal, and walked out.

A muted sunlight hit him. Around him, most of the city was still asleep, quiet in the earliest part of the morning, even those who worked by night having returned home. It meant that Devin had most of the streets to himself as he made his way to the House of Weapons, running over the cobbles, working hard. The sooner he made it there, the more time he would have, and in any case, he’d heard the sword masters there tell their students that this sort of exercise was vital if they were to have stamina in combat. Devin wasn’t sure if any of them did it, but *he* did. He would need every skill he could gain if he was going to become a knight.

Devin continued making his way through the city, running faster, harder, still trying to shake off the remnants of the dream. Had it truly been a meeting?

*The one who is to be.*

What could that mean?

*The day your life will change forever.*

Devin looked about, as if looking for some sign, some indication of something that would change him on this day.

Yet he saw nothing other than the ordinary goings-on of the city.

Had it just been a foolish dream? A wish?

Royalsport was a place of bridges and of alleys, dark corners and strange smells. At low tide, when the river between the islands that formed it was low enough, people would walk across the riverbeds, although guards would try to manage it and make sure that none of them went to districts where they weren’t wanted.

The waterways between the islands formed a series of concentric circles, the wealthier parts toward its heart, protected by the layers of river beyond. There were entertainment districts and noble districts beyond that, then merchant ones, and poorer areas where anyone walking had to be careful to keep an eye on his money pouch.

The Houses stood out on the skyline, their buildings given over to ancient institutions as old as the kingdom; older, since they were relics of the days when the dragon kings were said to have ruled, back before the wars that had driven them out. The House of Weapons stood belching smoke despite the early hour, while the House of Knowledge stood as two entwined spires, the House of Merchants was gilded until it shone, and the House of Sighs stood at the heart of the entertainment district. Devin wove his way forward through the streets, avoiding the few other figures rising as early as him as he ran his way to the House of Weapons.

When he arrived, the House of Weapons was almost as still as the rest of the city. There was a watchman on the door, but he knew Devin by sight, and was used to him coming in at strange hours. Devin passed him with a nod and then headed inside. He took the sword he’d been working on most recently, solid and dependable, fit for a real soldier’s hand. He finished the wrapping on the hilt and then took it upstairs.

This space did not have the stink of the forge, or the dirt. It was a place of clean wood and sawdust to catch any stray blood, where arms and armor stood on stands and a twelve-sided practice

space stood in the middle, surrounded by a small number of benches where those waiting for lessons might sit. There were posts there and cutting bundles, all set so that noble students could practice.

Devin went to an armsman's quintain, a post taller than him on a base, set with metal poles that served as weapons and free to swing in response to the blows of a swordsman. The skill with it was to strike and then move or parry, to bind to it without getting a weapon caught, and to hit without being hit. Devin took up a high guard, and then struck out.

His first few blows were steady, moving into his work and testing the sword that he held. He caught the first few return swings of the posts, then swayed aside from the next few, slowly getting a feel for the sword he held. He started to increase the pace, adjusting his footwork, moving from one guard to another with his blows: ox, to wraith, to long, and back again.

Somewhere in the flurry of it, he stopped thinking about the individual moves, the strokes and the parries and the binds flowing together into one whole where steel rang on steel and his blade flickered out to cut and thrust. He worked until he was sweating, the post moving at speeds now that could bruise or injure if he misjudged things even once.

Finally, he stepped back, saluting the post as he had seen swordsmen salute an opponent, before checking the blade he held for damage. There were no nicks on it or cracks. That was good.

"Your technique is good," a voice said, and Devin spun, finding himself facing a man of perhaps thirty, dressed in breeches and a shirt that had been tied tighter to his body to avoid cloth tangling with a passing blade. He had long dark hair, tied back in braids that would not come undone in a fight, and aquiline features leading up to eyes of piecing gray. He walked with a slight limp, as if from an old injury. "But you should keep your weight off your heels as you turn; it makes it hard for you to adjust until you complete the movement."

"You... you're Swordmaster Wendros," Devin said. The House had many sword masters, but Wendros was the one nobles paid most to learn from, some waiting years to do it.

"Am I?" He took a moment to stare at his reflection in a suit of plate armor. "Why, so I am. Hmm, I'd listen to what I said then, if I were you. They tell me I know all there is to know about a sword, as if that's much.

"Now listen to another piece of advice," Swordmaster Wendros added. "Give it up."

"What?" Devin said, shocked.

"Give up your attempt to become a swordsman," he said. "Soldiers just need to know how to stand in a line. There is more to being a warrior." He leaned in close. "*Much* more."

Devin didn't know what to say. He knew he was alluding to something greater, something beyond his wisdom; yet he had no idea what it could be.

Devin wanted to say something, but he couldn't think of the words.

And just like that, Wendros turned and marched off into the sunrise.

Devin found himself thinking about the dream he'd had. He couldn't help feeling as if they were connected.

He couldn't help feeling as if today was the day that would change everything.

## CHAPTER THREE

Princess Lenore could barely believe the beauty of the castle as servants transformed it in preparation for her wedding. It went from a thing of gray stone to something sheathed in blue silk and elegant tapestries, chains of woven promises and dangling trinkets. Around her, a dozen maidservants busied themselves with elements of dresses and decorations, buzzing around her like a swarm of worker bees.

They did it for her, and Lenore was truly grateful for that, even if she knew that as a princess she should expect it. Lenore had always found it amazing that others were prepared to do so much for her, simply because of who she was. She appreciated beauty almost more than anything else, and here they were, doing so much with silk and lace to make the castle wondrous...

"You look perfect," her mother said. Queen Aethe was giving commands at the heart of all of it, looking resplendent as she did so in dark velvet and shining jewels.

"Do you think so?" Lenore asked.

Her mother led her to stand in front of the great mirror that her maids had arranged. In it, Lenore could see the similarities between them, from the near black hair to the tall, slender frame. Except for Greave, all her other siblings had taken after their father but Lenore was definitely her mother's daughter.

Thanks to her maids' efforts, she shone in silks and diamonds, her hair braided with blue thread, her dress embroidered with silver. Her mother made the smallest of adjustments, then kissed her cheek.

"You look perfect, exactly as a princess should."

From her mother, that was about the greatest compliment that she could have. She'd always told Lenore that as the eldest sister, her duty was to be the princess that the realm needed, to look it and to act it in every moment. Lenore did her best, hoping it would be enough. It never felt like it, but still Lenore tried to live up to everything she ought to be.

Of course, that also allowed her little sisters to be... other things. Lenore wished that Nerra and Erin were there too. Oh, Erin would complain about being fitted for a dress, and Nerra would probably have to stop partway through because she felt unwell, but Lenore couldn't think of anyone she wanted there more.

Well, there was one person.

"When will he be here?" Lenore asked her mother.

"They say that Duke Viris's retinue arrived in the city this morning," her mother said. "His son should be with it."

"It did?" Instantly, Lenore ran over to the window and the balcony there, leaning out over it as if being that fraction closer to the city would let her see her betrothed as he arrived. She looked out over the bridge-linked islands that made up Royalsport, but from this height it wasn't possible to make out individuals, only the concentric rings of the water between the islands, and the buildings that stood between. She could see the guard barracks that spilled out men when it was low tide to manage traffic across the rivers, the Houses—of Weapons and Sighs, Knowledge and Merchants—each standing at the heart of their district. There were the houses of the poorer folk on the islands toward the edges of the city, and the great homes of the wealthy closer to, some even on their own small islands. The castle towered over all of it, of course, but that didn't mean that Lenore could spot the man to whom she was going to be married.

"He'll be here," her mother promised. "Your father has arranged a hunt on the morrow, as part of the celebrations, and the duke will not risk missing it."

“His son will come for Father’s hunt, but not to see me?” Lenore asked. For a moment, she felt as nervous as a girl, not a woman of eighteen full summers. It was only too easy to imagine him not wanting her, not loving her, in a marriage arranged like this.

“He will see you, and he will love you,” her mother promised. “How could anyone not?”

“I don’t know, Mother... he hasn’t even met me,” Lenore said, feeling the nerves that threatened to overwhelm her.

“He will soon, and...” Her mother paused as a knock came at the door to the chamber. “Come in.”

Another maidservant entered, this one less richly dressed than the others; a servant for the castle, rather than directly for the princess.

“Your majesty, your highness,” she began, with a curtsy. “I’ve been sent to tell you that Duke Viris’s son Finnal has arrived, and is waiting in the greater antechamber, if you have time to meet him before the feasting.”

Ah, the feasting. Her father had declared a week of it and more, filled with entertainments, open to all.

“If I have time?” Lenore said, and then remembered how things were done at court. She was a princess, after all. “Of course. Please tell Finnal that I will be down directly.”

She turned to her mother. “Can Father afford to be so generous with the feasting?” she asked. “I’m not... I don’t *deserve* a whole week and more of it, and it must be eating into both our coin and our food stocks.”

“Your father *wants* to be generous,” Lenore’s mother said. “He says that the hunt tomorrow would bring enough quarry to make up for it.” She laughed. “My husband thinks himself the grand hunter still.”

“And it’s a good chance to organize things while people are busy feasting,” Lenore guessed.

“That too,” her mother said. “Well, if there’s to be a feast, we should make sure that you look fit for it, Lenore.”

She fussed around Lenore for a few moments longer, and Lenore hoped she looked good enough.

“Now, shall we go and see your husband-to-be?”

Lenore nodded, not able to quiet the excitement practically bursting from her chest. She walked with her mother and her coterie of maids down through the castle, heading to the antechamber that backed onto the great hall.

There were so many people in the castle, all working on the preparations for the wedding, many of them also heading down in the direction of the great hall. The castle was a place of winding corners and rooms that led into one another, the whole layout spiraling much like the arrangement of the city, so that any attacker would have to face layer upon layer of defenses. Her ancestors had made it more than a thing of gray stone defenses though, each room painted in colors so bright they seemed to bring the outside world in. Well, maybe not the world of the city; much of that was made far too drab by rain, mud, smoke, and choking vapors.

Lenore made her way down through a promenading gallery, which had paintings of her ancestors along one wall, each looking stronger and more refined than the last. From there, she took winding stairs that led through a series of receiving rooms, down to a space where an antechamber stood before the great hall. She stood with her mother outside the door, waiting until the servants opened it, announcing her.

“Princess Lenore of the Northern Kingdom, and her mother, Queen Aethe.”

They stepped inside, and there he was.

He was... perfect. There was no other word for it as he turned toward Lenore, sweeping the most graceful bow that she had seen in a long time. He had dark hair in gloriously short curls, features that were refined, almost beautiful, and a form that seemed both slender and athletic, encased in a

red slashed doublet and gray hose. He seemed perhaps a year or two older than Lenore, but that was exciting rather than frightening.

“Your majesty,” he said with a look to Lenore’s mother. “Princess Lenore. I am Finnal of House Viris. I can only tell you how long I have looked forward to this moment. You are even more lovely than I had thought.”

Lenore blushed, and she *didn’t* blush. Her mother had always told her that it was unbecoming. When Finnal held out his hand, she took it as gracefully as she could, feeling the strength in those hands, imagining what it would be like for them to pull her close so that they could kiss, or more than kiss...

“Next to you, I hardly feel like the lovely one,” she said.

“If I shine, it is only with your reflected light,” he replied. So handsome, and he could manage a compliment so poetic too?

“It’s hard to believe that in just a week we will be married,” Lenore said.

“I think that might be because we aren’t the ones who had to put in long months of work negotiating the marriage,” Finnal replied. He smiled a beautiful smile. “But I am glad that our parents did.” He looked around the room, at her mother and the maids there. “It is almost a pity that I cannot have you here to myself, Princess, but perhaps it is as well. I fear that I might get lost staring into your eyes, and then your father would be annoyed with me for missing so much of his feasting.”

“Do you always manage such pretty compliments?” Lenore asked.

“Only when they are warranted,” he replied.

Lenore felt herself almost swept away with her thoughts of him as she stood beside him at the door leading from the antechamber to the great hall. When servants opened it, she could see the feast in full flow; could hear the music of minstrels and see the tumblers providing entertainment further down the hall where the common folk sat.

“We should go in,” her mother said. “Your father will no doubt wish to show his approval of this marriage, and I am sure that he will want to see how happy you are. You are happy, Lenore?”

Lenore looked into the eyes of her fiancé, and could only nod.

“Yes,” she said.

“And I shall strive to see that you stay that way,” Finnal said. Taking her hand, he lifted it to his lips, and the heat of that contact shot through Lenore. She found herself imagining all the other places that he might kiss, and Finnal smiled again, as if knowing the effect he was having. “Soon, my love.”

His love? Did Lenore love him, so soon after meeting him? Could she love him, when there had been only this brief moment of contact? Lenore knew it was nonsense to think that she could, the stuff of a bard’s songs, but in that moment she did. Oh, how she did.

Smiling, she stepped forward in perfect step with Finnal, knowing that together they must look like something out of legend to those who watched, moving like one thing, joined together. Soon they would be, and that thought was more than enough for Lenore as they went to join the feast.

Nothing, she thought, could possibly ruin this moment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Prince Vars downed a flagon of ale, making sure he had a good view of Lyril as he did. She lay, still undressed in his bed, sitting up and watching him with just as much obvious interest, the bruises of the night before showing only a little.

As well she should, Vars thought. He was a prince of the blood after all, maybe not as muscled as his older brother, but at twenty-one he was still young, still handsome. She should watch him with interest, and deference, and maybe fear if she could tell all the things he thought about doing to her in that moment.

No, better to leave that for now. Being rough with her was one thing, but she was just noble enough for it to matter. Better to leave the fullness of it for those who wouldn't be missed.

Lyril was rather beautiful herself, of course, because Vars wouldn't be sleeping with her if she weren't: flame-haired and creamy-skinned, full-bodied and green-eyed. She was the eldest daughter of a nobleman who fancied himself a merchant, or a merchant who'd bought nobility, Vars couldn't remember which, and didn't particularly care. She was less than him, so she did as he commanded. What else was there?

"Seen enough, my prince?" she asked. She stood and moved across to him. Vars liked the way she did that. Liked the way she did a lot of things.

"My father wants me to join him on a hunt tomorrow," Vars said.

"I could ride out with you," Lyril said. "Watch you and offer you my favors as you ride."

Vars laughed, and if that caused a flash of hurt to her, who cared? Besides, Lyril would be used to it by now. Ordinarily, he didn't sleep with women for long before he grew bored with them, or they drifted off elsewhere, or he hurt them too much and they ran. Lyril had lasted longer than most. Years now, although obviously there had been others in that time.

"Embarrassed to be seen with me?" she asked.

Vars stepped close to her, stopping her with a look. In that moment of fear, she was as beautiful as anyone he had seen.

"I will do as I wish," Vars said.

"Yes, my prince," she replied, with another shiver that set its answer trembling along Vars's arms with desire.

"You are as lovely as any woman alive, and noble born, and perfect," he said.

"Then why is it that you're taking so long to marry me?" Lyril asked. It was an old argument. She'd been asking, and hinting, and commenting for as long as Vars could remember.

He stepped in, quick and sharp, grabbing her by the hair. "Marry you? Why should I marry you? Do you think you're special?"

"I must be," she countered. "Or a prince like you would never want me."

She had him there.

"Soon," Vars said, pushing down his flash of anger. "When things are right for it."

"And when will things be right?" Lyril demanded. She started to dress, and just the sight of her doing it was enough to make Vars want to undress her again. He moved over to her, kissing her deeply.

"Soon," Vars promised, because promising was easy. "For now though..."

"For now, we're meant to be at your father's feast, celebrating the arrival of your sister's fiancé," Lyril said. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I wonder if he's handsome."

Vars spun her to him, his arms grasping hard enough that she gasped. "Am I not enough for you?"

"Enough, and more than enough."

Vars groaned at the trap in that, then went and dressed, finding a flask of wine and sipping it as he went. He offered it to Lyril, who also took some. They headed out into the castle, making their way through its twists and turns, down toward the great hall.

“Your highness, my lady,” a servant said as they passed, “the feasting has already begun.”

Vars rounded on the man. “Do you think I need you to tell me that? Do you think I’m stupid, or that I have no idea of the time?”

“No, my prince, but your father—”

“My father will be busy with the politics of it all, or he will be listening to Rodry boast about whatever my brother has done now,” Vars said.

“As you say, your highness,” the man said. He made to go.

“Wait,” Lyril said. “Do you think that you just get to go? You should apologize to the prince, and to me, for interrupting us.”

“Yes, of course,” the servant said. “I am most—”

“A proper apology,” Lyril said. “On your knees.”

The man hesitated for a moment, and Vars leapt in. “Do it.”

The servant sank to his knees. “I apologize for interrupting you, your highness, my lady. I should not have done it.”

Vars saw Lyril smile at that.

“No,” she said. “Now go, get out of our sight.”

The servant all but ran off at her command, like a greyhound after a rabbit. Vars laughed as he went.

“You can be deliciously cruel sometimes,” he said. He liked that in her.

“Only when it is amusing,” Lyril replied.

They kept going, down to the feast. Of course, by the time they entered, it was in full swing, with everyone drinking and dancing, eating and enjoying themselves. Vars could see his half-sister up at the front, the center of attention along with her husband-to-be. Why the child of a king’s second wife should warrant such attention was beyond him.

It was bad enough that Rodry was there with a cluster of noble youths in one corner, receiving their admiration as he told and retold stories of his exploits. Why had fate seen fit to make him the oldest? It made no sense to Vars when it was obvious that Rodry was about as suited to the future role of king as he was to flying by flapping his over-muscled arms.

“Of course, a wedding like this provides possibilities,” Lyril said. “It brings together so many lords and ladies...”

“Who can then be made into our friends,” Vars said. He understood how the game worked. “Of course, it helps if one knows their weaknesses. Did you know that Earl Durrus over there has a weakness for smoking blood amber?”

“I did not,” Lyril said.

“Nor will anyone else, if he remembers that I am his friend,” Vars said. He and Lyril continued through the crowd, slowly drifting in their separate directions. He could see her eyeing up the women, trying to decide all the ways that they were less pretty than her, or weaker, or just not of her level. Probably trying to decide all of the advantages she could gain with them, too. There was a hardness to that assessment that Vars liked. Maybe that was a part of why he’d been with her so long.

“Of course, that’s another reason not to join the hunt tomorrow,” he said. “With all the idiots away, I can do what I want, maybe set things up to my advantage.”

“Did I hear some mention of the hunt?”

His brother’s voice was as booming and as bluff as ever. Vars turned to Rodry, forcing the smile he’d learned to force through so much of his childhood.

“Rodry, brother,” he said. “I hadn’t realized that you were back from... where was it you and Father went again?”

Rodry shrugged. “You could have gone and found out.”

“Ah, but you went running,” Vars said, “and you’re the one who matters to him.”

If Rodry caught the sharpness of it, he didn’t show it.

“Come on,” Rodry said, clapping him on the back. “Join me and my friends.”

He made joining the bunch of young fools who all but worshipped him as a hero sound like some great gift, rather than a horror Vars would have paid solid gold to avoid. They played at being like his father’s Knights of the Spur, but not one of them had made a name for himself yet. His smile became more strained as he walked into the heart of them, and he grabbed a goblet of wine as a welcome distraction. In just a brief space, it was gone, so he grabbed another.

“We’re talking about all the hunts we’ve been on,” Rodry said. “Berwick says that he once took down a boar with a dagger.”

One of the young men there gave a bow that made Vars want to kick him in the face. “I was gored twice.”

“Then perhaps you should have used a spear,” Vars said.

“I broke my spear on the training grounds of the House of Weapons,” Berwick said.

“When were you last on the training grounds, brother?” Rodry asked, obviously knowing the answer. “When will you be joining the knights, as I have?”

“I train with the sword,” Vars said, probably a little more defensively than he should have. “I just think that there are more useful things to do than spending every waking moment doing so.”

“Or maybe you just don’t like the thought of facing up to an enemy ready to cut you down, eh, brother?” Rodry said, clapping Vars on the shoulder. “The same way you don’t like going on the hunt, in case something happens to you.”

He laughed, and the cruelest thing was that his brother probably didn’t even see it as hurtful. Rodry wasn’t a man who went through the world with any care, after all.

“Are you calling me a coward, Rodry?” Vars said.

“Oh no,” Rodry said. “There are some men who are meant to be out in the world fighting, and others who are better off staying at home, right?”

“I could hunt if I wanted to,” Vars said.

“Ah, the brave knight!” Rodry said, and that got another of those laughs that no one there would see as cruel except Vars. “Well then, you should come with us! We’re going down into the city to make sure we have the weapons we need for the morrow.”

“And leave the feast?” Vars retorted.

“The feasting will last days yet,” Rodry shot back. “Come on, we can pick you out a fine spear so you can show us how to hunt boar.”

Vars wished he could simply walk away, or better yet, smash his brother’s face into the nearest table. Maybe keep smashing it until it was a pulp, and he was left as the heir he should always have been. Instead, he knew he was going to have to go down into the city, across the bridges, but at least down there, he might find someone on whom to take his anger out. Yes, Vars was looking forward to that, and to more beyond it. Maybe even to being king one day.

For now, though, the part of him that screamed to stay safe to avoid danger was telling him not to confront his brother. No, he would wait for that.

But whoever got in his way down in the city was going to pay.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Devin swung his hammer, bashing it down on the lump of metal that was due to become a blade. The muscles on his back ached as he did it, the heat of the forge making sweat run through his clothes. In the House of Weapons, it was always hot, and this close to one of the forges, it was almost unbearable.

“You’re doing well, boy,” Old Gund said.

“I’m sixteen, I’m not a boy,” Devin said.

“Aye, but you’re still the size of one. Besides, to an old man like me, you’re all boys.”

Devin shrugged at that. He knew that, to anyone looking, he must not have looked like a smith, but he thought; the metal *demand*ed thinking to truly understand it. The subtle gradations of heat and patterns of steel that could change a weapon from flawed to perfect were almost magical, and Devin was determined to know them all, to truly *understand*.

“Careful, or it will cool too much,” Gund said.

Quickly, Devin got the metal back into the heat, watching the shade of it until it was exactly right, then pulling it out to work on it. It was close, but it still wasn’t quite right, something about the edge not quite perfect. Devin knew it as surely as he knew his right from his left.

He was still young, but he knew weapons. He knew the best ways to craft them and to sharpen them... he even knew how to wield them, although both his father and Master Wendros seemed determined that he should not. The training the House of Weapons offered was for nobles, young men coming in to learn from the finest sword masters, including the impossibly skilled Wendros. Devin had to do it alone, practicing with everything from swords to axes, spears to knives, cutting at posts and hoping it was right.

A clamor from near the front of the House briefly caught Devin’s attention. The great metal doors at the front stood open, perfectly balanced to swing at the slightest touch. The young men who’d come in through it were clearly noble, and just as clearly slightly drunk. Drunk was dangerous in the House of Weapons. A man who showed up drunk to work here was sent home, and if he did it more than once, he was dismissed.

Even clients were generally shown the door if they were not sober enough. A man with a blade who was drunk was a dangerous man, even if he didn’t mean to be. These, though... they wore royal colors, and to be anything less than courteous was to risk more than a job.

“We are in need of weapons,” the one at the front said. Devin recognized Prince Rodry at once, from the stories about him if not in person. “There is a hunt tomorrow, and there will probably be a tournament following the wedding.”

Gund went to meet them, because he was one of the master blacksmiths there. Devin kept his attention on the blade he was forging, because the least slip or mistake could introduce air bubbles that would form cracks. He made it a point of pride that the weapons he forged didn’t break or shatter when struck.

Despite the metal’s need for his attention, Devin wasn’t able to take his eyes off the young nobles who had come there. They seemed around his age; boys trying to be the prince’s friend rather than the Knights of the Spur who served his father. Gund began by showing them spears and blades that might have suited the king’s armies, but they quickly waved them away.

“These are the sons of the king!” one of the men said, gesturing first to Prince Rodry and then to another man Devin guessed to be Prince Vars, if only because he didn’t look slender, gloomy, or girlish enough for Prince Greave. “They deserve finer stuff than this.”

Gund started to show them finer things, the ones with gilt handles or decoration worked into the heads of spears. He even showed them some of the ones that were master made, with layer upon

layer of the finest steel, wavy patterns built into them through clay heat treating, and edges that could serve as razors if need be.

“Too fine for them,” Devin murmured to himself. He took the blade he was forging and considered it. It was ready. He heated it up once more, ready to quench it in the long bath of dark oil that stood waiting for it.

He could see from the way they were picking up the weapons and waving them that most of those there had no real idea what they were doing. Perhaps Prince Rodry did, but he was away on the far side of the House’s main floor by now, trying a great spear with a leaf-bladed head, spinning it with the expertise that came from long practice. In contrast, those with him looked more like they were playing at being knights than actually knights. Devin could see the clumsiness in some of their movements, and the ways that their grips on the weapons were subtly wrong.

“A man should know the weapons he makes, and uses,” Devin said, as he plunged the blade he’d made into the quenching trough. It flared and flamed for a moment, then hissed as the weapon slowly cooled.

He practiced with blades so he could know when they were perfect for a trained warrior. He worked at his balance and his flexibility as well as his strength, because it seemed right that a man should forge himself as well as any weapon. He found both difficult; the knowing of things was easier for him, the making of perfect tools, understanding the moment when—

A crash from over where the nobles were toying with the weapons caught his attention, and Devin’s gaze snapped over in time to see Prince Vars standing in the midst of a pile of armor collapsed from its stand. He was glaring at Nem, another of the boys who worked at the House of Weapons. Nem had been Devin’s friend as long as he could remember, large and frankly too well fed, maybe not the fastest of wit, but with hands that could shape the finest of metalwork. Prince Vars quickly shoved him the way Devin might have pushed a stuck door.

“Stupid boy!” Prince Vars snapped. “Can’t you watch where you’re going?”

“Sorry, my lord,” Nem said, “but you were the one who walked into me.”

Devin’s breath caught at that, because he knew how dangerous it was to talk back to any noble, let alone a drunk one. Prince Vars drew himself up to his full height and then struck Nem across the ear, hard enough to send him tumbling down among the steel. He cried out and came up with blood on his arm from where something sharp had caught it.

“How dare you talk back to me?” the prince said. “I say that you walked into me, and you’re calling me a liar?”

Perhaps someone else there might have come up angry, come up ready to fight, but despite his size, Nem had always been gentle. He just looked hurt and perplexed.

For a moment, Devin hesitated, looking around to see if any of the others would intervene in this. None of the ones with Prince Rodry seemed as though they were going to intervene though, probably too worried about insulting someone who outranked them so greatly even as nobles, and maybe some of them thinking that maybe his friend *did* deserve a beating for whatever they thought he’d done.

As for Prince Rodry, he was still over on the other side of the House’s floor, working with the spear. If he’d heard the commotion above the din of working hammers and rushing forge bellows, he didn’t show it. Gund wouldn’t interfere, because the old man hadn’t survived as long as he had in the environment of the forge by causing trouble for his betters.

Devin knew he should stand by too, even when he saw the prince raise his hand again.

“Are you going to apologize?” Vars demanded.

“I didn’t do anything!” Nem insisted, probably too stunned to remember how the world worked yet, and truth be told, he wasn’t all that bright when it came to things like this. He still thought the world was fair, still thought that not doing anything wrong was enough of an excuse.

“No one talks to me like that,” Prince Vars said, and hit Nem again. “I’m going to beat some manners into you, and when I’m done you’ll thank me for the lesson. And if you get my title wrong while you do it, I’ll beat that into you too. Or, no, let’s give you a real lesson.”

Devin knew he should do nothing, because he wasn’t as young as Nem, and he *did* know the way the world worked. If a prince of the blood stood on your toes, you apologized to him, or thanked him for the privilege. If he wanted your best work, you sold him it, even though it looked as though he couldn’t swing it right. You didn’t interfere, didn’t intervene, because that meant consequences, for you and your family.

Devin had a family, out beyond the walls of the House of Weapons. He didn’t want to see them hurt just because he’d been hot-tempered and not minded his manners. He didn’t want to stand by and see a boy beaten senseless for a drunken prince’s whim either, though. His grip tightened on his hammer, and Devin set it down, trying to tell himself to stand back.

Then Prince Vars grabbed Nem’s hand. He forced it down onto one of the anvils.

“Let’s see how good a smith you are with a broken hand,” he said. He took a hammer and lifted it, and in that moment Devin knew what would happen if he did nothing. His heart raced.

Without thinking, Devin lunged forward and grabbed for the prince’s arm. He didn’t deflect the blow by much, but it was enough that it missed Nem’s hand and struck the iron of the anvil.

Devin held the grip, just in case the prince tried to smash him with it next.

“What?” Prince Vars said. “Take your hands off me.”

Devin struggled, pinning down his hand; this close to him, Devin could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“Not if you’re going to keep striking my friend,” Devin said.

He knew that just by grabbing the prince, he’d created trouble for himself, but it was too late now.

“Nem doesn’t understand, and he wasn’t the reason you knocked over half the armor in here. That would be the drink.”

“Take your hand off me, I said,” the prince repeated, and his other hand strayed toward the eating knife at his belt.

Devin pushed him backward as gently as he could manage. A part of him still hoped this could be peaceful, even as he knew exactly what was going to happen next.

“You don’t want to do that, your highness.”

Vars glared at him, breathing hard, with a look of pure hatred.

“I’m not the one who’s made the mistake here, traitor,” Prince Vars growled, death in his voice.

Vars set down his hammer and picked up an arming sword from one of the benches, although it was obvious to Devin that he was no expert with it.

“That’s right—you’re a traitor. Attacking a royal person is treason, and traitors die for it.”

He swung the sword at Devin, and instinctively, Devin grabbed for whatever he could find. It turned out to be a forge hammer of his own, and he brought it up to block the blow, hearing the ring of iron on iron as he stopped the sword from connecting with his head. The impact jarred at his hands, and there was no time to think now. Catching the blade against the hammer’s head, he wrenched it from the prince’s grip with all his strength, sending it clattering across the floor to join the pile of discarded armor.

He made himself stop then. He was angry that the prince could come in and strike at him like that, but Devin was all patience. Metal required it. A man who was impatient at the forge was a man who got hurt.

“You see?” Prince Vars called out, pointing a finger that was trembling in either anger or fear. “He strikes at me! Seize him. I want him dragged to the deepest cell the castle possesses, and his head on a pike by morning.”

The young men around him looked reluctant to react, but it was just as obvious that they weren't going to stand by while someone as low-born as Devin fought with a prince. Most were still holding swords or spears that they'd been trying out inexpertly, and now Devin found himself in the middle of a ring of such weapons, all pointed straight at his heart.

"I don't want any trouble," Devin said, not knowing what else to do. He let the hammer thud to the floor, because it was useless to him there. What could he do, try to fight his way out against so many? Even though he suspected he was better with a blade than the men there, there were too many to even try it, and if he did, what then? Where would he be able to run, and what would it mean for his family if he did?

"Maybe there's no need for a cell," Prince Vars said. "Maybe I'll take his head off here, where people can see. Put him on his knees. On his knees, I said!" he repeated when the others didn't do it quickly enough.

Four of them came forward and pushed Devin down, while the others kept their weapons trained on him. Prince Vars, meanwhile, had picked up the sword again. He lifted it, obviously testing the weight, and in that moment Devin knew that he was going to die. Fear filled him, because he couldn't see a way out. No matter how much he thought, no matter how strong he was, it wouldn't change things. The others there might not agree with what the prince was about to do, but they would stand by anyway. They would stand there and watch while the prince swung that sword and...

...and the world seemed to stretch out in that moment, one heartbeat fading into the next. In that instant, it was as if he could see every muscle in the prince's frame, see the sparks of thought that powered it. It was easy in that moment to reach out, and to change just one of them.

"Ow! My arm!" Prince Vars yelled, his sword clattering to the ground.

Devin stared back, stunned. He tried to make some sense of what he'd just done.

And he was terrified by himself.

The prince stood there, clutching at his arm and trying to rub some feeling back into the fingers.

Devin could only stare at him. Had he really done that somehow? How? How could anyone make someone's arm cramp just by thinking about it?

He thought back to the dream once more...

"That's enough," a voice called out, interrupting. "Let him go."

Prince Rodry stepped into the circle of weapons, and the young men there lowered them in response to his presence, almost breathing a sigh of relief that he was there.

Devin definitely did, yet he kept his eyes on Prince Vars, and the weapon he now held in his off hand.

"That's enough, Vars," Rodry said. He stepped between Devin and the prince, and Prince Vars hesitated for a moment. Devin thought he might even swing the sword anyway, regardless of his brother's presence.

Then he threw the blade aside.

"I didn't want to come here anyway," he said, and stalked out.

Prince Rodry turned to Devin, and it didn't even take another word for him to be released by the men who held him.

"You were brave to stand up for the boy," he said. He lifted the spear he held. "And you do good work. I'm told this is one of yours."

"Yes, your highness," Devin said. He didn't know what to think. In a matter of seconds, he'd gone from being sure he would die to being released, from being thought a traitor to being complimented on his work. It made no sense, but then, why should things have to make sense in a world where he'd somehow just done... magic?

Prince Rodry nodded and then turned to leave. "Be more careful in the future. I might not be here to save you next time."

It took several more seconds before Devin could bring himself to stand, breaths coming in short bursts. He looked over to Nem, who was trying to hold the wound on his arm closed. He looked scared and shaken by what had happened.

Old Gund was there then, taking Nem's arm and wrapping a strip of cloth around it. He looked over to Devin.

"You had to interfere?" he asked.

"I couldn't let him hurt Nem," Devin said. That was one thing he would do again, a hundred times if he had to.

"The worst he'd have gotten was a beating," Gund said. "We've all had worse. Now... you need to go."

"Go?" Devin said. "For today?"

"For today, and all the days that follow, you fool," Gund said. "Do you think we can let a man who fights a prince stay in the House of Weapons?"

Devin felt the breath leave his chest. Leave the House of Weapons? The only real home he'd ever known?

"But I didn't—" Devin began, and stopped himself.

He wasn't Nem, to believe that the world would turn out the way he wanted just because it was the right thing. Of course Gund would want him gone; Devin had known before he interfered what this might cost him.

Devin stared back and nodded, all he could do in response. He turned and began to walk.

"Wait," Nem called out. He ran to his workbench and then ran back with something wrapped in cloth. "I... I don't have much else. You saved me. You should have this."

"I did it because I'm your friend," Devin said. "You don't have to give me anything."

"I want to," Nem replied. "If he'd hit my hand, I couldn't make anything else, so I want you to have something I made."

He passed it to Devin, and Devin took it carefully. Unwrapping it, he could see that it was... well, not a sword, exactly. A long knife, a messer, sat there, too long to be a true knife, not quite long enough to be a sword. It was single edged, with a hilt that stuck out only on one side, and a wedge-shaped point. It was a peasant's weapon, far removed from the longswords and arming swords of the knights. But it was light. Deadly. And beautiful. Devin could see at a glance, as he turned it and as it gleamed in the light, that it could be far more nimble and deadly than any proper sword. It was a weapon of stealth, cunning, and speed. One perfect for Devin's light frame and young age.

"It's not finished," Nem said, "but I know you can finish it better than I could, and the steel's good, I promise."

Devin gave it an experimental swing, feeling the blade cut the air. He wanted to say that it was too much, that he couldn't take it, but he could see how much Nem wanted him to have this.

"Thank you, Nem," he said.

"You two done?" Gund said. He looked over to Devin. "I won't say I'm not sorry to see you go. You're a good worker, and a finer smith than most here. But you can't be here when this comes back on us. You need to go, boy. Now."

Devin wanted to argue even then. But he knew it was futile, and he realized that he no longer wanted to be there. He didn't want to be somewhere he wasn't wanted. This had never been his dream. This had been a way to survive. His dream had always been to be a knight, and now...

Now it seemed that his dreams held far stranger things. He needed to work out what they were.

*The day your life will change forever.*

Could this be what the sorcerer meant?

Devin had no choice. He couldn't turn around now, couldn't go back to his forge to set everything back where it should be.

Instead, he walked out into the city. Into his destiny.

And into the waiting day before him.

## CHAPTER SIX

Nerra walked the woods alone, slipping between the trees, enjoying the feeling of sunlight on her face. She imagined that everyone back in the castle would have noticed that she had slipped out by now, but she also suspected that they wouldn't care that much. She would only complicate the wedding preparations by being there.

Here in the wild, she fit. She wound flowers into her dark hair, letting them join the braids. She took off her boots, tying them together over her shoulder so she could feel the earth beneath her feet. Her slender form wove in and out of the trees, almost wisplike in a dress of fall colors. The sleeves were long, of course. Her mother had drummed the need for that into her long ago. Her family might know about her infirmity, but no one else was to.

She loved the outdoors. She loved seeing the plants and picking out their names, bluebell and hogweed, oak and elm, lavender and mushroom. She knew more than their names, too, because each had its own properties, things it could help with or harm it could do. A part of her wished she could spend all her life out here, free and at peace. Maybe she could; maybe she could persuade her father to let her build a home out in the forest, and put what she knew of it to good use, healing the sick and the injured.

Nerra smiled sadly at that, because even though she knew it was a good dream, her father would never go along with it, and in any case... Nerra held back from the thought for a moment, but couldn't forever. In any case, she probably wouldn't live long enough to build any kind of life. The sickness killed, or transformed, too quickly for that.

Nerra picked at a strand of willow bark that would be good for aches, putting strips into her belt pouch.

*I'll probably need it soon enough*, she guessed. There were no aches today, but if not her, then maybe Widow Merrill's boy, down in the town. She'd heard that he had a fever, and Nerra knew as much about dealing with the sick as anyone.

*I want one day without having to think about it*, Nerra thought to herself.

Almost as if thinking about it brought it to her, Nerra felt herself growing faint, and had to reach out for one of the trees for support. She clung to it, waiting for the dizziness to pass, feeling her breathing come harder as she did it. She could also feel the pulsing on her right arm, itching and throbbing, as if something were striving to get loose under the skin.

Nerra sat down, and here, in the privacy of the forest, she did what she would never do back at the castle: she rolled up her sleeve, hoping that the coolness of the forest air would do some good where nothing else ever had.

The tracery of marks on her arm was familiar by now, black and vein like, standing out against the almost translucent paleness of her skin. Had the marks grown anymore since she'd last looked at them? It was hard to tell, because Nerra avoided looking if she could, and didn't dare show them to anyone else. Even her brothers and sisters didn't know the full truth of it, only knew about the fainting fits, not about the rest of it. That was for her, her parents, Master Grey, and the lone physician her father had trusted with it.

Nerra knew why. Those with the scale-mark were banished, or worse, for fear of the condition spreading, and for fear of what it might mean. Those with the scale sickness, the stories said, eventually transformed into things that were anything but human, and deadly to those who remained.

"And so I must be alone," she said aloud, pulling her sleeve down again because she could no longer stand the sight of what was there.

The thought of being alone bothered her almost as much. As much as she liked the forest, the lack of people hurt. Even as a child, she hadn't been able to have close friends, hadn't had the collection of maidservants and young noblewomen Lenore had, because one of them might have seen.

She hadn't even had the promise of lovers, and suitors for a girl who was obviously sick were even less likely. A part of Nerra wished she could have had all that, imagining a life where she had been normal, been well, been safe. Her parents could have found some young nobleman to marry her, as they had with Lenore. They could have had a home and a family. Nerra could have had friends, and been able to help people. Instead... there was only this.

*Now I've made even the forest sad,* Nerra thought with another wan smile.

She stood and kept walking, determined to let herself enjoy the fineness of the day at least. There would be a hunt tomorrow, but that was too many people to ever really enjoy the outdoors. She would be expected to remember how to chatter to those who saw prowess in killing woodland creatures as a virtue, and the noise of the hunting horns would be deafening.

Nerra heard something else then; it wasn't a hunting horn, but it was still the sound of someone close by. She thought she caught a glimpse of someone in the trees, a young boy, perhaps, although it was hard to tell for sure. She found herself worrying then. How much had he seen?

Maybe it was nothing. Nerra knew there had to be people somewhere else in the woods. Maybe they were charcoal burners or foresters; maybe they were poachers. Whoever they were, if she kept going, Nerra would probably run into them again. She didn't like that idea, didn't like the risk of them seeing more than they should, so she threw herself off in a new direction, almost at random. She could find her way through the woods, so she wasn't worried about getting lost. She just kept going, spotting holly now and birch, celandine, and wild roses.

And something else.

Nerra paused as she caught sight of a clearing that looked as though something large had been in it, branches broken, ground trampled. Had it been a boar, or maybe a pack of them? Was there a bear about somewhere, large enough that maybe the hunt was needed after all? Nerra couldn't see any bear prints among the trees though, or indeed anything at all that suggested something had come through on foot.

She could see an egg though, sitting in the middle of the clearing, rolled onto one side on the grass.

She froze, wondering.

*It can't be.*

There were stories, of course, and the castle's galleries had some petrified versions, devoid of any life.

But this... it couldn't really be...

She made her way closer to it, and now she could start to take in the sheer size of the egg. It was huge, big enough that Nerra's arms would barely have fit around it if she had tried to embrace it. Big enough that no bird could have laid it.

It was a rich, deep blue that was almost black, with golden veins running through it like streaks of lightning across a night sky. When Nerra reached out, ever so tentatively, to touch it, she felt that the surface of it was strangely warm in a way that no egg should have been. That, as much as any of the rest of it, confirmed what she had found.

*A dragon's egg.*

That was impossible. How long had it been since someone had seen a dragon? Even those stories were of great winged beasts flying the skies, not of eggs. Dragons were never helpless, small things. They were huge and terrifying and impossible. But Nerra couldn't think what else this could be.

*And now the choice is mine.*

She knew she couldn't just walk away now that she'd seen the egg here, abandoned with no sign of a nest the way a bird would lay its clutch. If she did that, the odds were that something would simply come and eat the egg, destroying the creature within. That, or there would be people, and she had no doubt that they would sell it. Or crush it out of fear. People could be cruel sometimes.

She couldn't take it home with her either. Imagine that, walking through the gates of the castle with a dragon's egg in her hands. Her father would have it taken from her in a heartbeat, probably for Master Grey to study. At best, the creature within would find itself caged and poked at. At worst... Nerra shuddered at the thought of the egg being dissected by scholars of the House of Knowledge. Even Physicker Jarran would probably want to take it apart to study it.

*Where then?*

Nerra tried to think.

She knew the woods as well as she knew the path to her chambers. There had to be somewhere that would be better than simply leaving the egg in the open...

Yes, she knew just the place.

She wrapped her arms around the egg, the heat of it strange against her body as she lifted it. It was heavy, and for a moment Nerra was worried she might drop it, but she managed to clasp her hands together and start off through the woods.

It took a while to find the spot that she was looking for, looking out for the aspen trees that signaled the small space where the old cave was, marked out by stones that were long since mossed over. It opened in the side of a small hill in the midst of the wood, and Nerra could see from the ground around it that nothing had decided to use it as a resting place. That was good; she didn't want to take her prize somewhere it would be in fresh danger.

The clearing suggested that dragons didn't make nests, but Nerra made one for the egg anyway, collecting twigs and branches, brush and grass, then weaving all of it slowly into a rough oval on which she was able to rest the egg. She pushed the whole thing back into the dark half of the cave, confident that nothing would be able to see it from outside.

"There," she said to it. "You'll be safe now, at least until I work out what to do with you."

She found tree branches and foliage, deliberately covering the entrance. She took rocks and rolled them into place, each so big she could barely move it. She hoped it would be enough to keep away all the things that might try to get inside.

She was just finishing when she heard a sound and turned with a start. There among the trees was the boy she had glimpsed before. He stood there staring at her as if trying to work out what he'd seen.

"Wait," Nerra called out to him, but the very shout was enough to startle him. He turned and ran off, leaving Nerra wondering exactly what he had seen, and who he would tell.

She had a sinking feeling that it was too late.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Princess Erin knew she shouldn't be here, riding through the forest on the way north to the Spur. She should be back at the castle, being fitted for a dress for her older sister's wedding, but just the thought of it was enough to make her wince.

It brought too many thoughts of what might be waiting for her next, and why she'd left. At the very least, she would rather be riding here in tunic, doublet, and breeches than standing there playing dress-up while Rodry made fun of her with his friends, and Greave moped about, and Vars... Erin shuddered. No, better to be out here, doing something useful, something that would *prove* she was more than just some daughter to marry off.

She rode through the forest, taking in the plants along the side of the path as she passed, even though those were more Nerra's fascination than hers. She rode past broad oak and silver birch, seeing the shadows they cast and trying not to think about all the spaces those shadows gave for someone to hide.

Her father would probably be angry with her for coming out without an escort. Princesses needed to be protected, he would tell her. They didn't wander off alone into places like this, places where the trees seemed to close in and the path was little more than a suggestion. He would be angry at her for more than that, of course. He probably thought she hadn't heard the conversation with her mother, the one that had sent her off practically running for the stables.

*"We need to find a husband for Erin,"* her mother had said.

*"A husband? She's as likely to ask for more sword lessons,"* her father had replied.

*"And that's the point. A girl shouldn't be doing such things, putting herself in that kind of danger. We need to find a husband for her."*

*"After the wedding,"* her father had said. *"There will be plenty of nobles there for the feasting and the hunting. Maybe we can find a young man who will make a suitable husband for her."*

*"We might need to offer a dowry for her."*

*"Then we will. Gold, a dukedom, whatever is most suitable for my daughter."*

The betrayal had been instant, and absolute. Erin had strode to her room to gather her things: her staff and her clothes, a pack full of supplies. She had sworn to herself then that she wouldn't be coming back.

*"Besides,"* she said to her horse, *"I'm old enough to do what I want."*

She might be the youngest of all her siblings, but she was still sixteen. She might not be everything her mother wanted—too boyish with her dark hair cut at shoulder level where it wouldn't get in the way, never inclined to sew or curtsy or play the harp—but she was still more than capable of looking after herself.

At least, she thought she was.

She would have to be, if she wanted to join the Knights of the Spur. Just the name of their order made Erin's heart leap. They were the finest warriors of the realm, every name among them a hero. They served her father, but also rode out righting wrongs and fighting foes that no others could. Erin would give anything to join them.

That was why she was riding north, to the Spur. That was also why she was taking this route, through parts of the forest long thought dangerous.

She rode on, taking in the place. Any other time, it would have been beautiful, but then, any other time, she wouldn't have been here. Instead, she looked around, eyes darting, all too aware of the shadows on each side of the path, the way the branches brushed at her as she rode. It was a place where she could imagine someone disappearing, never to return.

Even so, it was the route she had to take if she was going to reach the Knights of the Spur. Especially if she wanted to be able to impress them when she got there. Set beside that, her fear didn't matter.

"Why don't you stop there?" a voice from further along the forest path called.

There. Erin felt a brief thrill of fear at the words, the flutter running up through her belly. She drew her horse to a halt, then swung down from the saddle smoothly. Almost as an afterthought, she took down her short staff, gloved hands carrying it lightly.

"Now, what do you think you're going to do with that stick?" the man from further down the forest path said. He stepped out, dressed in rough-spun clothes and holding a hatchet. Two more men stepped out from the trees behind Erin, one holding a long knife, the other an arming sword that suggested he might once have fought on behalf of a nobleman.

"Back in a village I passed through," Erin said, "they told me about bandits in the forest."

They didn't seem to think it was odd that she'd come here anyway. Erin could feel the fear inside her. Should she have come here? She'd had plenty of training bouts, but this... this was different.

"Looks as though we're famous, boys," the leader called out with a laugh.

Famous was one word for it. In the village, she'd spoken to a young woman who was traveling with her husband. She had said that even when they gave these men everything they had, they still wanted more, and they took it. She had detailed all of it to Erin, and Erin had wished she'd had Lenore's way with people, or Nerra's compassion. Erin didn't have either; all she had was this.

"They say you kill those who fight," Erin said.

"Well then," the leader said. "You'll know not to fight."

"Barely worth it," one of the others said. "Hardly a girl at all."

"You're complaining?" the leader shot back. "The things you've done with boys as well?"

Erin stood there, waiting. The fear was still there, and it had grown into a monstrous thing, a bear-sized thing that threatened to crush her into immobility. She shouldn't have come here. This wasn't a training bout, and she had never truly fought anyone before. She was just a young woman who was about to be killed, or worse...

No. Erin thought about that, thought about the woman from the village, and she forced the fear down, under the anger.

"If you want to make this easy on yourself, you'll hand over everything you have. The horse, your valuables, everything."

"And take off those clothes," the other who'd spoken said. "It will save us getting blood on them."

Erin swallowed, thinking about what that might mean. "No."

"Well then," the leader said. "Looks like we do this the hard way."

The one with the long knife came at Erin first, grabbing for her and slashing with it at her body. Erin broke the grip, but the blade slid through her clothing as easily as it might have through a milkmaid's butter. The man's leer of triumph quickly turned to shock as the blade stopped, caught with the sound of metal on metal.

"Taking off a coat of mail is hard work," Erin said.

She struck out with her staff, smashing the man in the face with the haft, causing him to stagger back. The leader came at her with his hatchet and, bringing her weapon across, she knocked it to one side. She struck out with the end, jabbing it into the man's throat so that he gurgled and stumbled away.

"Bitch!" the knifeman said.

Now Erin twisted the staff, drawing off the end to reveal the long blade beneath that ran almost half its length. The dappled light of the forest shone darkly from it. In the weird, calm space that followed, she spoke. No point in disguising anything now.

“When I was young, my mother made me take sewing lessons, but the woman who taught us was nearly blind, and Nerra, my sister, used to cover for me while I ran out and fought the boys with sticks. When my mother found out, she was angry, but my father said that I might as well learn properly, and he was the king, so...”

“Your father’s the king?” the leader said. Fear crossed his face, closely followed by greed. “If they catch us, they’ll kill us, but they would have done that anyway, and the ransom we’ll get for someone like you...”

Probably they would pay it. Although, given what Erin had overheard and the amount they’d been prepared to pay to get rid of her...

The bandit lunged forward for Erin again, interrupting her train of thought by swinging his hatchet and then kicking out at her. Erin swept the hatchet blow aside one-handed, pushed at the man’s elbow, and then kicked him in the knee as he tried to kick her, sending him stumbling to the ground. Her teacher would probably be angry that she hadn’t followed up.

*Keep moving, end it quickly, take no chances.* Erin could almost hear the words of her teacher, Swordmaster Wendros. He had been the one to tell her to use the short spear, a weapon that could make up for her lack of height and power with its speed and reach. Erin had been a little disappointed by the choice at the time, but she wasn’t now.

Taking a two-handed grip on her weapon, she spun, covering as the one with a sword came at her. She set blows aside one after another, then aimed a cut of her own at him. A spear can cut as well as thrust. He went to deflect the strike, his sword rising up to meet it, and Erin rolled her wrists to send her blade dancing under the block, the spear’s point lancing forward to thrust through his neck. Even as he died, the man flailed another blow at her, and Erin struck it aside, already moving on.

*Do not stop. Keep moving until the fight is done.*

“She’s killed him!” the knifeman shouted. “She’s killed Ferris!”

He lunged at her with the long knife, obviously trying to kill, not capture. He rushed in, trying to get in close where the greater length of Erin’s weapon wouldn’t count. Erin made to step back, then moved in even closer than he expected, wheeling him over her hip so he landed with a whoosh of escaping air...

Or he would have if he hadn’t dragged her down with him.

*Showy, girl. Just do what’s needed.*

It was too late for that now, because she was on the floor with the knifeman, caught there while he stabbed at her, only her coat of mail keeping her from death. She’d been overconfident, and now she was in a space where the man’s greater strength was starting to tell. He was on top of her now, pushing the knife down toward her throat...

Somehow, Erin managed to get close enough to bite him, and that gave her enough room to scramble free, no art or skill to it now, only desperation. The leader was back on his feet by now, swinging his weapon again. Erin parried the first blow, barely, on her knees, took a kick to the midsection, and spat blood as she came up.

“You picked the wrong people to mess with, bitch,” the leader said and went for an overhand stroke, aimed at her head.

There was no time to dodge, no time to parry. All Erin could do was duck down and thrust up with her spear. She felt the crunch as it went through flesh, expected to feel the impact of her foe’s weapon in her own body, but for a moment, things just froze. She dared to look up, and he was there, transfixed on the end of her spear, so busy staring down at the weapon that he hadn’t finished his own attack.

*It is a fine thing to be lucky, and a stupid thing to rely on it,* Swordmaster Wendros’s voice sounded in her mind.

The knifeman was still down, struggling to rise.

“Mercy, please,” the knifeman said.

“Mercy?” Erin said. “How much mercy did you show to the people you robbed, and killed, and raped? When they begged you, did you laugh at them? Did you run them down when they fled? How much mercy would you have shown *me*?”

“Please,” the man said, standing. He turned to run, probably hoping he could outpace Erin in the trees.

She almost let him go, but what would he do then? How many more people would die when he thought he could get away with it again? She reversed her blade, hefted it, and flung it.

Over a long distance, it wouldn’t have worked, because the spear was shorter than a true javelin, but over the short space between them it sailed through the air perfectly, plunging through the bandit point first and bringing him to the ground. Erin stepped over to him, set a foot on his back, and dragged it out. Lifting it, she brought it down sharply on his neck.

“That’s as much mercy as I have today,” she said.

She stood there, then moved to the side of the track, suddenly nauseous. It had felt so right and so easy when she’d been fighting, but now...

She threw up. She’d never killed anyone before, and now the horror and the stench of it were almost overwhelming. She knelt there for what felt like hours before her mind insisted that she should move. Swordmaster Wendros’s voice came to her again...

*When it is done, it is done. You focus on the practical, and you don’t regret any of it.*

That was easier said than done, but Erin forced herself to her feet. She cleaned her sword on their clothes, then dragged the bodies to the side of the track. That was the hardest part of all of it, because they were all bigger than she was, and a corpse felt heavier than a living thing too. By the time she was done, there was more blood on her clothes than there had been from the fight, not to mention the cut where the knifeman had struck. She had the strange, sudden thought that she was going to have to make sure they got to a servant to mend before her mother saw them. She laughed at that, and for several moments, she couldn’t stop laughing.

*Battle nerves. The greatest threat to a swordsman, and the greatest drug the world has ever known.*

Erin stood there a moment or two longer, letting the excitement of the fight run through her veins. She’d killed men, and she’d done more than that. She’d proved herself. The Knights of the Spur would have to take her now.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Renard kept coming to the Inn of the Broken Scale for three main reasons, and none of them had to do with the frankly terrible beer. The first was the barmaid Yselle, who seemed to have a thing for burly men with red hair like him, and who seemed to alternate between accusing him of cheating on her and demanding that he come by more often.

The second reason was that, on the days when he was inclined to try to make an honest living, they didn't mind him taking out his lute and playing a few of the old ballads. Mostly, Renard didn't feel like doing it, but sometimes his fingers itched for the performance.

The third reason was that his fingers more often itched for other things, and the inn was a good place to hear rumors.

"It sounds too much like a story," he said to the man opposite him, carefully using the distraction to switch a card for one of those he had hidden in his sleeve.

"Ye can call it a story if you like, but I saw it with my own eyes," the man insisted. He was dressed in rough sailor's clothes, and claimed that he worked on the ships that sailed the long route out, away from the crippling rapids of the river and across the sea. That alone made Renard suspicious. Sailors were madmen; had to be, when it was far easier to trade via the bridges between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms than to stray into the dangers of deep water.

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