


AGE OF THE SORCERERS (BOOK TWO)

THRONE
OF
DRAGONS

A silhouette of a dragon with its wings spread wide, positioned centrally against a bright, glowing sunset sky. The dragon's head is at the top, with horns and a crown-like structure. The wings are large and detailed, with visible scales and feathers. The background is a gradient of orange and yellow, with rays of light emanating from behind the dragon, creating a dramatic and powerful atmosphere.

MORGAN RICE

Morgan Rice
Throne of Dragons
Серия «Age of the Sorcerers», книга 2

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Аннотация

“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.”

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From #1 bestseller Morgan Rice, author of A Quest of Heroes (over 1,300 five star reviews) comes a startlingly new fantasy series.

In THRONE OF DRAGONS (Age of the Sorcerers—Book Two) King Godwin mobilizes his army to cross the great bridge and invade

the South to rescue his 17 year old daughter, Lenore. But Lenore is imprisoned deep in the South, under the watchful and hateful eye of King Ravin, and she may have to learn to escape herself first if she has any chance of escape.

Her brother Rodry, though, is way ahead of the King's men, deep in hostile territory, alone on a mission to save his sister—while her other brother, Vars, offers a lesson in cowardice and betrayal.

Devin follows Gray, eager to learn more about how to harness his powers and about who he is.

Greave travels to remote regions to find the house of scholars and to try to save his sister, Nerra.

But Nerra, sickened by the scale sickness, is dying on a remote isle once touched by dragons. And her only chance of survival may just compel her to risk it all.

And all of this will culminate in an epic battle that may just determine the fate of the two kingdoms.

AGE OF THE SORCERERS weaves an epic saga of love, of passion, of sibling rivalry; of rogues and hidden treasure; of monks and warriors; of honor and glory, and of betrayal, 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 in love with characters you will never forget. It appeals to all ages and genders.

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“A spirited fantasyOnly 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

Throne of Dragons (Age of the Sorcerers—Book Two)

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**, comprising two books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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

—*Books and Movie Reviews*

Roberto Mattos

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

—*The Wanderer, A Literary Journal* (regarding *Rise of the*

Dragons)

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

--*Books and Movie Reviews*, Roberto Mattos

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

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CHAPTER ONE

When Lenore woke, for one beautiful second, she thought that it had all been a nightmare. She could feel the softness beneath her, and she saw the simple comfort of the inn's room, and she assumed that the awful things she remembered must have been no more than the terrors of the dark. They couldn't be real, they...

They were. Lenore knew it a second later as consciousness came back to her, knew it in the bruises and the pain. She shook her head, trying to *make* herself not think about where she was, but she could no more hold back those thoughts than she could hold back an ocean.

The Quiet Men King Ravin had sent for her had kept her here, a prisoner. When she'd tried to break free, they'd beaten her. Eoris and Syrelle were the worst...

Lenore forced herself to look around, to think of anything else but this.

The room at the top of the inn was empty now except for her, and Lenore knew this might be the only chance she would get to survive this. Shaking, having to ignore the pain with every motion she made, Lenore started to stand.

She fell against the bed for a second, catching herself, but she didn't fall back. If she let herself fall back, she wouldn't get up again, and then she would just be waiting for them to carry her

away to King Ravin's lands.

I will be strong, she told herself.

She made her way to standing. She didn't look much like a princess now. Her dress had tears in it from the violence of her capture, but Lenore pulled it back on anyway, tying the torn elements together as best she could.

She padded toward the door on silent feet. Outside, she could hear Eoris and Syrelle talking, and Lenore's heart hammered in her chest, fearing that they might be about to come back inside.

"...sure we don't have time to tarry here with the princess?" Syrelle asked, in that wheedling, half mad voice of hers.

"We need to get her back to the south, my love," Eoris said. "And if you hurt her too much she won't transport easily."

"King Ravin is no fun," Syrelle said.

"And when I tell him you said that, what do you think he'll do to you?" Eoris shot back. "No, we leave in an hour. We'll head for the nearest bridge and be across soon enough. Remember to leave some of the maids alive. King Ravin wants them to talk."

He wanted them to talk? Lenore found herself caught between happiness that at least some of her servants were still alive and horror at all the things they must have suffered alongside her, fear of how many of them might have died, and confusion, because why would King Ravin want *any* of them alive to tell people that he had King Godwin's daughter?

That didn't matter right then. The only thing that mattered was trying to get away. She'd tried that before though, and hadn't

gotten even as far as the stables. How was she supposed to get away when she'd already been caught once, when they had shown that they could catch her whatever she tried?

No, she wouldn't give up, she couldn't. Once they got her beyond the river... how could anyone hope to escape from there? It *had* to be now, while they were occupied; while they still thought that she was helpless and caught here.

Knowing that there was no way out through the door, Lenore went over to the window. It was chipped and sticking, hard enough to open that Lenore was sure it would creak and protest as she pushed the shutters apart, giving away what she was doing to anyone listening. Lenore opened it and froze in place, waiting to see if there was any reaction. No one burst into the room though, no one shouted or raised an alarm.

Lenore looked over the ground below her. There was a low roof for the floor below, and beyond that the open space beyond the inn, with a courtyard leading over to the stables. There were bodies in that now, dragged into a pile as if they were mere refuse, something that didn't matter at all to the Quiet Men who had killed them. Lenore could see some of those Quiet Men now, no longer dressed in peasant garb, but in dark leathers and dulled scale armor that made them look ready to fight an army's worth of foes.

One, a woman, was standing over a group of four of Lenore's servants. She pointed to two and set them running, far enough away that Lenore couldn't see which ones they were. Then she

raised a small, hand-sized crossbow.

“No,” Lenore whispered to herself in horror, even as the first bolt flew out. It struck the first servant in the middle of the back and she fell, tumbling into the dirt. She rose up, screaming, looking back toward the one who had shot her...

That only meant that the second bolt took her through the chest.

Lenore wanted to scream too, her heart breaking at the sight of an innocent girl she'd thought of as almost a friend being butchered for no reason. She *didn't* scream though, because then it would have been over; there would have been no way to escape. She focused on the one who was still running, knowing that at least one of them was going to get free.

Lenore waited until she saw that the Quiet Men were all moving in different directions, looking to their preparations to leave rather than at her. When she saw her moment, Lenore screwed up her courage and stepped out of the window. She crunched down onto the roof of the overhanging section, hoping against hope that it would bear her weight.

She moved to the edge of the roof in a crouch, checked that there was no one beneath, and tried not to catch her breath at the sight of the drop below. She could do this; she had to. Swinging off the side of the roof, Lenore hung on by her hands for a moment, took a breath, and dropped.

She hit the ground hard, the breath coming out of her in a whoosh of air that was only good because it stopped Lenore from

crying out loud enough to be heard. She rolled to her knees, waited for her head to stop spinning, and forced herself to stand once again. She managed to get up and started into the shadows of the next building.

She didn't try for the stables this time. There were too many Quiet Men around it, and no hope of getting a horse clear of them without being spotted. Instead, Lenore knew her best hope was to make her way away from the inn on foot, staying in the trees and bushes near the road and hoping that one of her brothers would be coming with the forces that should have been there to protect her in the first place...

Why hadn't they come? Why hadn't they been there to save her? Vars had been sent to protect her, and Rodry had said that he would take over the duties partway around the wedding harvest, yet neither of them had been there when Lenore needed them. Now she was alone, having to sneak out of the village and hoping all the time that she could avoid the Quiet Men for long enough.

She kept going; it wasn't far now. Just a few dozen paces, and she would be out of the village. Once she was in the open ground beyond, surely even the Quiet Men couldn't find her?

That thought was enough to make her keep going. Lenore crept from the shadow of one building to the next. She was almost there, almost there.

There was a patch of open ground ahead of her, and Lenore froze on the edge of it, waiting, looking left and right. She couldn't see anybody, but she knew already how little that could

mean with people like this. But if she stood there and did nothing...

Lenore ran as much as she could, given how her body hurt with every step, bursting forward for the safety beyond the open ground. Behind her, she heard a shout from the inn, and she knew that Eoris or Syrelle had gone into the room where they'd left her, discovering her missing. The thought of them in pursuit was enough to make her move faster, running for the greenery beside the road, for hiding, for *safety*.

"There!" a voice called, and she knew then that they'd spotted her. She kept going, not knowing what else to do, knowing only that if she stopped, they would have her in their clutches again.

She couldn't run any faster, but she was at least among the trees and the bushes beside the road now, her breath coming in pants as she ran, moving left and right in an effort to foil her pursuers.

Lenore heard the sound of footsteps behind her and dodged around a tree, not daring to look back. Another tree lay ahead, and she knew that if she could only get around it, there was denser greenery beyond. She could lose them there, maybe, but first she had to choose. Left or right... left or right...

Lenore went left, and immediately knew that it was the wrong choice as strong hands grabbed her, weight bearing her down to the ground hard, knocking the breath out of her. She tried to fight, but she already knew how little she could do. Hands wrenched her hands in front of her, tying them there, then pulled

her up.

The man who stood there was Ethir, the one who had caught her in the stables; the first one who had... He lifted her easily, setting her on her feet.

“You’re going to regret running, Princess,” he said in that soft voice of his. “We’ll make sure you’re going to regret it.”

“Please,” Lenore begged, but it made no difference. Ethir dragged her back toward the waiting horses, and the trip south, and every moment of horror that awaited her beyond the bridges leading out of the kingdom.

CHAPTER TWO

King Godwin II of the Northern Realm sat on his throne in front of a sea of his courtiers and struggled to keep his temper. After all that had happened, after his daughter Nerra had been forced to leave, he hated that he still had to sit here, pretending that all was well. He wanted to rise up from this throne and go after her, yet he knew he couldn't.

Instead, he had to sit here, in a great hall that even now had the remnants of the feasting before not quite cleared away, holding court. The great hall was huge and stone built, with banners on the wall with the bridges that marked the North. Squares of carpet had been set out, each one restricted to a different rank of the nobility, or to particular noble families.

He had to stand there before them, and he had to do it alone, because Aethe wouldn't step out in front of courtiers who had helped send Nerra away. Right then, Godwin would have preferred to be almost anywhere else: Ravin's kingdom, the third continent of Sarrass, anywhere.

How could he pretend when Nerra was banished, and his youngest daughter, Erin, seemed to have run off to be a knight? Godwin knew he looked disheveled, his graying beard less than perfect, his robes of office stained, but that was because he had barely slept in days. He could see Duke Viris and his cronies looking over with obvious amusement at that. If the man's son

weren't due to marry his daughter...

Thoughts of Lenore calmed him. She was off about the wedding harvest, accompanied by Vars. She would be back soon, and all would be well. In the meantime, though, there were serious matters that needed to be attended to; rumors that had swirled through the court and promised danger for all of them.

"Bring forward my son!" Godwin said, the words ringing around the room. "Rodry, step out here and be seen!"

His eldest son stepped out through the crowd of those watching, looking like the knight that he was, and like the man Godwin had been when he was younger. He was tall and muscled with years of sword practice, his blond hair cut short so as not to get in the way. He was every inch the warrior, and it was clear that people watched him with love as he strode through them. Now, if only he could *think*, as well.

"Is all well, Father?" he asked, offering a bow.

"No, all is not well," Godwin shot back. "Did you think I wouldn't find out about the ambassador?"

Say this for his eldest son; at least he had a solid streak of honesty in him. He could no more hide behind a lie than behind a slender tree. Vars would probably have dissembled out of cowardice, and Greave would have wrapped everything up in pretty quotes from those books of his, but Rodry just stood there, solid as a stone. With about the brains of one, too, given what he said next.

"I couldn't just stand there after he'd insulted our entire family,

our whole *kingdom*,” Rodry said.

“That’s *exactly* what you should have done,” Godwin shot back. “Instead, you shaved his head, *killed* two of his guards... If you weren’t my son and heir, you’d hang for something like that. As it is, those friends of yours...”

“They took no part in the fight,” Rodry said, standing tall, taking all of this onto himself. If he weren’t so angry at the stupidity of it all, Godwin might almost be proud.

“Well, they’ll be stuck taking part in one soon enough,” he said. “Do you think a man like King Ravin won’t strike back? I sent his ambassador on his way because he couldn’t *do* anything to us. Now you’ve given him a reason to try harder.”

“And we’ll be there ready to stop him when he does,” Rodry said. Of course he was unrepentant. He might be a man grown, and a knight, but he had never known true war. Oh, he’d fought with bandits and creatures, as any Knight of the Spur would, but he hadn’t faced a full army on the battlefield the way Godwin had in his youth, hadn’t seen the chaos, and the death, and the...

“Enough,” Godwin said. “You were a fool to do this, Rodry. You must learn better if you’re ever to be worthy to be king.”

“I—” Rodry began, clearly ready to argue.

“Be quiet,” Godwin said. “You want to argue because your temper won’t let you do anything else. Well, I’m still king, and I don’t want to hear it.”

For a moment, he thought that his son might argue anyway, and then Godwin would have to find a punishment that would

actually stick when it came to the heir to his throne. Thankfully, Rodry held his tongue.

“If you ever do something as stupid as this again, I’ll have your status as a knight taken from you as a disgrace,” Godwin said. It was the worst thing he could think of when it came to Rodry, and the message of it certainly seemed to hit home. “For now, step back out of my sight, before I lose my temper the way *you* always seem to.”

He could see Rodry reddening, and he thought that his son might stay and argue, but he seemed to think better of it. Instead, he turned on his heel and stalked from the hall. Maybe he *was* capable of learning something after all. He sat back on a throne made of hard, dark, unyielding wood, waiting to see who would come forward next, if anyone would dare, given that he still had anger lingering after rebuking his son.

Finnal, his soon to be son-in-law, filled the void, stepping forward smoothly and giving a bow that was even smoother.

“Your majesty,” he said. “Forgive me, but given how disrupted things have been with the wedding preparations, my family feels that I should make one or two... requests.”

His family, which meant Duke Viris, who still stood there smiling in the background, calm as a heron standing above a river waiting to see what he could grab. He was a man who never seemed to be directly responsible for anything, but always seemed to just *be* there, slightly out of reach of any blame.

“What requests?” Godwin asked.

Finnal stepped forward to hand him a rolled length of parchment. Even that was well done, because it meant that he would never have to read out the demands within the parchment himself.

They *were* demands; very subtle ones, but demands nonetheless. Where before, the lands offered as a dowry had run to just short of several villages, now, the revised suggestion was that it should include them. There was more money, of course, because inevitably there would be more money, but the real gains of it were hidden away, spread across an extra fishing vessel here, a tithe from a mill there. None of it looked very much, and if Godwin were openly outraged by it, he would probably look like a miser, but when you added it together, it was a definite increase.

“This is not what our families have already agreed,” he pointed out.

Finnal offered another of those elegant bows. “My father is a big believer that an agreement can always be... renegotiated. Besides, that was before other circumstances came to light, my king.”

“What other circumstances?” Godwin demanded.

“The risk of scale sickness within a family always makes it harder to marry into,” Finnal said. He sounded apologetic about it, but Godwin didn’t believe that tone for a moment. Was *this* why his father had stood there and had another noble bring Nerra’s sickness into the light? For a *renegotiation*?

Godwin rose from his throne, his anger propelling him. He

wasn't sure what he would have said then, what he would have done, but he didn't get any chance to do it, because in that moment the doors to the great hall burst open, letting in a guard who seemed to be all but holding up a serving girl. Godwin normally didn't pay that much attention to the individual servants, but he felt sure that this was one of the ones who had gone off with Lenore, just days before.

The sight of her there was enough to make Godwin stop short, a hand of cold fear wrapping around his heart where before there had been only the heat of anger.

"Your majesty," the guard called out. "Your majesty, there has been an attack!"

It took a second before Godwin could even speak, his fear was so great.

"What kind of attack? What happened?" he demanded. He looked over to the young woman there, who looked as though she was barely standing.

"We... we were..." She shook her head as though she could barely even bring herself to say it. "There was an inn... there were people there. King Ravin's people..."

Now the fear inside Godwin gave way to horror.

"Lenore, where is she? Where *is* she?" he demanded.

"They took her," the servant said. "They killed the guards, and they took us, and they..." The pause told Godwin everything he needed to know. "They let some of us go, they *wanted* us to tell you."

“And Lenore?” Godwin asked. “What about my daughter?”

“They still have her,” the young woman said. “They said they were going to take her south, over the bridge. They’re going to give her to King Ravin.”

In that moment, nothing else mattered; not his son’s overreactions, not his son-to-be’s demands. All that mattered was the thought that another of his daughters was in danger, and this time, he wasn’t going to fail her, not like he had with Nerra.

“Summon my knights!” he called out. “Send messages to the Knights of the Spur. Summon my guards. I want every man we have gathered together! Why are you standing there? Move!”

Around him, guards and servants broke into motion, some running to send messages, some hurrying to go get weapons. For his part, Godwin stalked from the hall, heading through the castle, not caring how many followed him. He all but ran down a spiral stair, feet rattling off the well-worn stone. He passed along tapestry-lined corridors, along paths that had been worn deep into the tiled floors by generations of feet. He headed down to the armory, where a huge door of solid brass stood between the world and the weapons that the castle held, the finest work that the House of Weapons had. The guards there stepped aside to let him pass.

His armor sat on its stand, breastplate dulled with age, greaves worked with interlocking swirls. Ordinarily, Godwin would have waited for a page to help him, but now he threw it on, fastening buckles, tying stays. He knew he *should* be making his way to the

queen's chambers, going to tell her that another of her daughters was in danger. Right then, Godwin could have faced a thousand armies, but he couldn't face doing *that*.

What he was about to face was bad enough. Lenore was in danger, had probably faced horrors that were almost beyond imagining. Even with all his armies, Godwin didn't know if they would be in time to retrieve her, or what foes they would face in the attempt. All he knew was that he couldn't face losing another daughter, not now.

"I will get her back," he said aloud. "Whatever it takes, I will get my daughter *back*."

CHAPTER THREE

Rodry was furious, his anger bubbling up in him the way lava might have bubbled in one of the volcanoes of the far north, hinting at worse to come. Servants rushed past him, and Rodry had to move himself carefully out of their path; he wasn't like his brother Vars, wasn't the kind of man who would take his frustrations out on another.

Frustrations? That wasn't the right word when his father had just humiliated him for doing something that *he* should have done in the first place.

A group of his friends were approaching now, and Rodry waited for them. None of them were yet the knights they wanted to be, but at least he could depend on them to support him.

"Your father seems angry," one of his friends, Kay, said. He sounded nervous about the whole thing.

"You're just nervous because you're the one who escorted the ambassador down to the border," Mautlice said. He was the son of an earl, always good to have on a hunt, and strong with it.

"I won't let him do anything to hurt all of you," Rodry said. "I've already told him that it was down to me alone."

"There was no need," Seris said. He was plump and dressed in layers of velvet, always quick with a quip, but just as quick to back Rodry up.

"I appreciate that," Rodry said. "I have two brothers who will

happily dance around what they really want to say. I value people who say what they feel.”

“You seem pretty angry about all this,” Kay said.

That wasn't a big enough word for what Rodry was feeling now. Humiliated, maybe. Frustrated that he couldn't seem to do the right thing. Frustrated with his father, who had already sent Nerra away, who seemed to be angry with *him* even though he'd done the only honorable thing when it came to the ambassador, and who seemed to be determined to pander to Finnal and his family, in spite of the rumors about him.

There were days when Rodry was convinced that he would never understand politics. Why should he *have* to, though? A man should do the right thing, the honorable thing, and trust that those around him would do the same. He should be strong enough to protect his friends and strike down evil. Everything else was... was just playing games.

He headed in the direction of his rooms, through the maze of corridors that filled the castle, the others following in his wake. They headed up along a gallery of stained windows, each twisting the light in a different way, then through a broad receiving room filled with deep oak furniture. Rodry shoved a table aside and kept moving.

Around him, the castle was abuzz, but Rodry was angry enough to ignore that. It was probably just something to do with the wedding. Ever since his father had sent the wedding harvest off early, the castle had been scrambling to keep up.

Rodry made it to his rooms. They were more starkly functional than those of his brothers, with trunks and chests along one wall. His armor stood on a stand, spotlessly clean, cared for with all the precision he'd learned among the Knights of the Spur.

Thoughts of the order brought with it thoughts of Erin, since Commander Harr had sent messages to let the court know where she was. Rodry should have guessed that his little sister would head out to the Spur eventually, but he hadn't, simply because it wasn't the kind of thing that girls did.

Perhaps he should be the one to go out there and fetch her back. As a Knight of the Spur, he had the right to enter their fortress home. As Erin's half-brother, he might be able to talk her around, or at least drag her back. At the same time though, Rodry was glad that at least one member of his family could do as they wished.

"We'll go to the House of Weapons," he said to the others. "Spend some time in the training rings there."

"Again?" Kay said. "I'd rather be hunting."

"You all say that you want to be knights someday," Rodry said. "Well, for that, you need to be able to fight better. Maybe enough lessons with Swordmaster Wendros and you'll even beat me."

That would take a *lot* of lessons, but there was no reason not to give them some hope.

"Come on," he said. "It will impress that maid of my sister's you seem to be so sweet on."

"Do you think so?" Kay asked.

“Well, he needs *something* to impress her,” Seris said, and the others laughed.

The group of them felt as though it was about to fall into all the familiar joking and camaraderie, not quite that of the *real* knights Rodry spent time with, but close enough for now, and almost enough to keep his anger in check.

Then a servant came running in.

“Your highness,” the man said. “I’ve been sent to find you. It’s about Princess Lenore.”

Instantly, Rodry spun toward the man. “What about her? What’s wrong?”

Just the servant’s tone said that *something* was, and whatever it was, it was bad.

“She’s been attacked,” the servant said. “King Ravin’s people are supposed to be taking her south toward one the bridges. The king is gathering all the knights. He has sent messages to the Spur.”

“Gathering knights?” Rodry said, springing toward the stand where his armor lay. “And how long will that take?”

Too long, that was the obvious answer. His father was a king, which meant that he would move slowly, gathering assent, gathering troops. Always preparing, never *acting*. Like with the ambassador.

“My father will waste time,” Rodry said. “He will let them get away, and if they make it south, he’ll say that my sister is lost.” He looked over to the servant. “How was Lenore even attacked?”

Where were Vars and his men?”

“I... no one knows for sure, your highness,” the servant said.

Meaning that Vars hadn't been there when he should have been. Anger flashed through Rodry at that, but also guilt. He should have argued more when his father sent Vars to accompany Lenore, should have insisted on guarding her himself. He should have *been* there.

Well, he would be now. Rodry looked around at his friends. They were not the Knights of the Spur, but they had been on enough hunts, trained with weapons enough times. They were here, and they were all he had.

“Seris, find the others, as many as you can, and as quickly. Tell them what has happened, and tell them that I need them. Mautlice, get us horses waiting. Bribe the stable hands if you have to. Kay, get together the weapons.”

“We're joining your father's forces?” Kay asked.

Rodry couldn't contain his anger then. He struck the wall beside him, and the others flinched back.

“My father won't be *fast enough!*” he shouted. “A small group can move faster. No, I'm doing this myself. I'm going to go and get my sister back, and get her *safe*. Kay, if that girl you like is one of her servants, she'll be in danger too. Don't you want to help?”

“I...” Kay nodded.

“All of you,” Rodry said. “You say you want to be knights. You say you want to prove yourselves. This is how you do it. We

do the things that only knights can do. We protect those who need protecting.” He looked at them, imploring them. “Please. I’m asking this not as your prince, but as your friend. Help me save my sister.”

There was no reason for them to, of course. They *should* go to his father’s forces, should wait to take action along with the rest. Instead, Rodry felt relief as they nodded, one by one.

“I’ll find more people,” Seris promised. “I think I saw a few down in the long gallery earlier. Maybe a few guards, or knights...”

“Halfin and Twell might come,” Rodry said. “But the knights owe their first loyalty to my father.” He paused. “I’ll not pretend that this is safe. Even if we succeed, my father might still be angry with us for what we do. But I have to do this. I can’t stand by.”

The others nodded.

“Here, let me help you with your armor,” Kay said.

Rodry threw on the chain shirt himself, but he needed his friend’s help with the straps of the breastplate and the pauldrons. The gorget and the gauntlets came next. Ordinarily, Rodry wouldn’t have ridden like this, but he didn’t want to get close to his sister’s pursuers, only to have to stop and ready his protection.

“We need to hurry,” he said. “There’s no time to lose.”

The others rushed off about the tasks that he’d set them, and Rodry readied his weapons: sword and spear, dagger and mace. He started off through the castle, and servants moved out of his way. Perhaps they sensed the anger that still boiled inside him,

pushing him forward.

By the time he got down to the stables, Mautlice had already succeeded in gathering horses for them. More of his friends were already gathering round, along with half a dozen guards, so that there were perhaps twenty in their company in total. Some of them were as armored as Rodry, but others wore only light leathers or chain, as if they'd thrown on whatever they could find close at hand. Would it be enough?

It would have to be, because there was no time for more. They had to get to Lenore.

Rodry's own horse was at the head of the line. He put a foot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. The gates of the castle were open ahead, showing a view down into Royalsport.

Rodry looked back at his group of men. For a moment, there in the sun, they looked as though they might actually be knights. He didn't know how they would fare against the kind of soldiers King Ravin sent, but he had to hope that they could be fast enough, could *do* enough, to save his sister. He drew his sword, then gestured forward with it.

“Onward!”

As the wedge of their horses rumbled into galloping motion, Rodry just hoped that they would be in time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devin staggered back toward Royalsport, still not quite able to believe what he'd seen, what he'd *found*. How could he have spotted a *dragon*, when they had not been seen in so very long?

It was more than that, though; right then, he wasn't even sure who he was. The dreams that had come to him had hinted that he was someone else, someone from a strange place that wasn't the Northern Kingdom. Devin didn't know what to think of that, didn't know who he was meant to be. Where did what he'd done against the wolves fit into it all, too? He'd done magic, but what did that *mean*?

As he reached the city, his feet turned automatically on the route that would take him over the city's many bridges, toward home. He'd gone a dozen steps through the crowds of the city before he realized that he didn't have a home to go to, not anymore. He couldn't go back to the House of Weapons either, because he didn't work there anymore, so what did that leave?

He looked out over the city, caught in the mid-morning sun that made it seem as though the mists of the day before had never happened. Its thatched houses spread out between the streams that filled the city the way spider-web cracks might spread across a mirror. Devin could make out the districts, noble, then poor, then poorer, down to the spot where Devin's home sat... his *former* home, he corrected himself.

The people there bustled along cobbled streets, toward the businesses in which they worked, or toward the great forms of the Houses that stood over the city. The House of Weapons was already belching smoke from its forges into the sky, while the House of Scholars sat aloof from the cacophony of the city. The House of Merchants squatted at their heart of the city's markets, while the House of Sighs was quiet during the day, the last of the patrons from the night before already gone. The smell of the city was a mixture of smoke and sweat, the press of people impossible to ignore.

Devin looked past all of that, toward the solid, gray-walled block of the castle. Rodry would be there, and the prince might help him. Master Grey might be there, and *this* time Devin might be able to get answers from him. Were Princess Lenore not off on her wedding harvest, there might have been a chance to catch a glimpse of her, and the thought of that made Devin's heart ache even though he knew he should ignore that feeling.

He set off for the castle, his slender form weaving through the crowds on the streets. Being taller than most people, he could pick his route easily enough, steering clear of the stalls that lined the side of the thoroughfares, where the press was thickest, and looking on toward the network of streams that crisscrossed the city. Devin brushed dark hair out of his eyes, wondering if the streams would be low enough at this hour to wade. He thought better of it; even if the fine clothes he'd borrowed from Sir Halfin now had mud on them from the forest, it seemed better not to

encrust them with more. At least, not if he wanted to get into the castle.

Devin took the bridges instead, hurrying over one stone and wood span after another, rising up toward the castle. On another bridge, he saw a small troop of horsemen charging their way through the city, clearly in a hurry. Devin thought he caught a glimpse of Rodry at their head, but they were too far away for him to call to.

Instead, he kept going for the castle, making his way up through the wealthier districts of the city. He was used to guards giving him glances as he passed, but now it seemed that they were distracted by something. That was enough to make Devin move faster, since it seemed obvious that whatever had happened, the castle was the best chance for him to find answers.

He reached the gates of the castle and stopped in shock, because of the figure standing there. Master Grey stood in robes of white and gold, worked with mystic sigils and runes that caught the light as he moved to stare straight at Devin. He pushed back his hood, revealing his shaven head and piercing eyes.

“What’s happening?” Devin asked. “Why are people rushing around here?”

“That is not what you came here to ask about,” Master Grey said, in a tone that suggested he knew *exactly* what Devin had seen.

“No,” Devin admitted. “I... I was following you, and then I saw... there was a *dragon*...”

“You want answers,” Master Grey said. “You want to know about magic.”

Devin nodded.

“How badly?” the sorcerer asked. “Do you really want to know about something that might consume you utterly?”

Devin paused. A day or two ago, and he might have walked away at that thought. Now though... now he had nothing left to lose. No home, no family...

“I want to know,” he said.

“Come with me,” Master Grey said, turning and walking as if it were settled that Devin would follow. For once, he didn't seem to be disappearing out of view, and Devin was so grateful for the chance to actually keep up with him that he hurried to do so, falling into step with the sorcerer as Master Grey led the way into the castle. Crowds of servants parted, moving aside for the magus.

“I... I dreamed strange things,” Devin said as he walked. “I dreamed that I wasn't who I had always thought I was.”

Master Grey didn't answer, just kept walking to a set of stairs heading down into the bowels of the castle. There were torches flickering there, casting shadows on stones that seemed older than the rest of the castle, smooth edged, with a hint of the mortar that held them crumbling through time.

“We're heading down,” Devin said. “Where are we going?”

Again, he got no answer from the magus. Devin could feel frustration building within him. He stepped in front of Master

Grey, determined to get some kind of reaction from him. The sorcerer stopped, looking at him until the uncomfortable weight of his gaze made Devin step aside.

“I just want some answers!” Devin insisted.

“Answers are often valuable,” Master Grey said. “But they are rarely just given to us.”

“I just want to make sense of the things that I saw,” Devin said. “I know I was born on the dragon moon. I know my parents aren’t my parents.”

“Dangerous things to say,” Master Grey said. “Maybe even dangerous things to know.”

“And you’re not going to explain any of it,” Devin guessed. “Why did you even meet me at the gate if you’re not going to explain things?”

“Because you have a task to perform,” Master Grey said. “One that may prove important in the days to come.”

“What task?” Devin said.

They reached a door of dark oak, bound with iron, and Master Grey pushed it open, revealing a cavernous space with a vaulted roof, a window above letting in a shaft of light that spread into a bright circle on a floor of black and white tiles. The room had been equipped with a forge, a smelter, an anvil, and what seemed to Devin like every tool anyone could ever need to work with metal, arranged on racks of blackened iron.

That part was strange enough, but there were symbols worked into every surface, symbols that reminded Devin of those on

Master Grey's robes.

"You've put magic into all this?" he asked.

To his surprise, Master Grey shook his head. "This is not to bring magic into this, but to contain it when *you* use it."

"And how do I do that?" Devin said.

Even Master Grey's smile was enigmatic, impossible to decipher fully. "You already know what summoning magic feels like. You just need to guide it into the metal as you work."

"And how do I do *that*?" Devin repeated.

"You will learn," Master Grey assured him. He gestured to the forge. "You will need to, because star metal will not respond just to heat or the hammer."

Devin looked over to where the star metal ore sat waiting by the smelter. He walked over to it, touching it, feeling the sensation of something running from him to it; something he couldn't place, still didn't fully understand.

"It responds to you," Master Grey said. He moved to stand by the wall. "Now you need to *control* that response. Magic is dangerous. My spells will contain it, but were you to get this badly wrong... the metal might consume you."

"Consume me?" Devin repeated. Iron and steel felt a long way away, suddenly.

"The metal soaks in magic. It needs it to shape it, but pour too much in, and you might lose yourself," Master Grey said. "Find your magic, boy. Channel it; use it to shape the metal as you work it. Start the smelter."

Devin wanted to argue, but this was the task that had been set for him. He needed to do this if he was going to earn his place within the castle. He needed to hand the sword to the king... or to Rodry. Either way, he would need to craft it first.

He built up the fire for the smelter, wood first, then charcoal, pumping the bellows, building the heat. He watched the flames, waiting for them to be the correct color to tell him that they were hot enough.

“More than heat, boy,” Master Grey reminded him.

Devin reached inside himself, trying to find the power that had come out so readily in the valley. It had responded to the metal, so Devin touched a piece of the ore, concentrating on that feeling. He could feel it, he could *feel* it. He tried to push that feeling into the smelter, into the flames...

He barely threw himself flat in time as flames leapt from it, scorching past him in a way that brought back the vision he'd had of the dragon. Even as he struck the flagstones of the floor, Devin saw the protections Master Grey had woven flare into life to absorb the unleashed power.

“I...” Devin stood on unsteady legs. “I can't do this.”

“You can, and you will. Patience.”

Devin wasn't feeling patient right then, especially not when he could hear the sounds of people shouting in the castle beyond, almost as loud as if the place were under attack.

“What is going on out there?” Devin asked.

“That is not relevant to your part in this,” Master Grey said.

“I want to know,” Devin said. He stood back. “What are you keeping from me?”

“There are many things I know that you do not,” Master Grey pointed out.

Devin started toward the door. “I’ll find out myself.”

“Princess Lenore has been taken by King Ravin’s men,” Master Grey said, in tones that held sympathy, but of a detached kind, as if none of this truly touched him. “Prince Rodry has already ridden to rescue her, while her father is gathering men to march on the bridges to the south.”

Devin felt as though his heart had stopped in his chest in that instant. Lenore was in danger? Just the thought of it was enough to make him want to go rushing after her, ready to save her. He didn’t know where the feeling came from, but it *was* there, and he knew that he couldn’t stand by while she was in danger.

“I need to go join the king’s forces,” he said, starting for the door again.

Master Grey moved in front of him. “And do what?”

“I could... I could help fight to get her back.”

“And do you think there aren’t enough men rushing to do that?” Master Grey replied. “Prince Rodry has his... friends. The king has his knights and his guards. You can do nothing by going with them except bring death upon yourself.”

He made it sound as certain as a stone falling from a cliff.

“What do you care?” Devin demanded.

“I care because you are too *important* to throw away like this.

The boy born on the dragon moon? The one from the prophecy? No, *this* is your role: to learn, to grow into your magic, to forge the sword.”

Devin started toward the door again, but Master Grey raised a hand.

“Do you think that the king will not leave you behind if I ask it?” he said. He nodded to the smelter. “Now, you have a task to perform. *Gently* this time.”

Devin wanted to argue more, but he knew it would do no good. He wanted to help save Lenore, but Master Grey was frustratingly, impossibly right. He *couldn't* add anything to the men already riding to the rescue, couldn't be the noble warrior who saved her. This was all he could do.

He went back to the smelter, ready to try again. He could feel the frustration inside him, and not just at this. He had so many questions, and Master Grey would never answer any of them.

He would find a way to get answers though, to everything.

CHAPTER FIVE

Prince Greave was not used to ships in anything but the theoretical sense. Oh, he had read parts of Samir's *On Navigation* and Hussard's *Around the Coasts* in preparation for the voyage, but neither of them had prepared him for the reality of a violently bucking sea, a crew of sailors who more or less ignored him, and a sky that seemed just one step short of a storm.

The *Serpentine* was a large, three-masted ship, high sided and curved so that it was like a sword cutting through the waves. Small boats sat at the side, lashed up against railings. The sailors were tough-looking men in loose, rough clothes that let them move smoothly around the ship's rigging. They were tough and weathered, nothing like Greave, and they looked at his smooth skin and almost feminine looks with contempt.

Only the thought of Nerra, and what they were going to do to help her, made any of this worthwhile. This was the fastest way to Astare and the great library that lay there. It was the only way to get to a place where he might find a cure for the scale sickness quickly enough. Even then... even then, Greave was worried that he might be too late.

"Is this... normal?" Aurelle asked beside him.

"Starting to wish that you hadn't come?" Greave asked.

She shook her head. "You are here, and so I will be here."

She made it seem utterly natural, yet Greave couldn't imagine

another woman following him here, onto the rough seas that had claimed so many lives, on a boat that could be torn apart if it strayed too close to the tearing currents near the banks of the Slate. No other woman had wanted to, but Aurelle was more than just another woman.

“You look queasy,” Aurelle said.

Greave dreaded to think how he must look then. Ordinarily, he was slender, with almost feminine features, hair falling in soft waves, features locked in an expression that might have seemed like an artist’s perfect inspiration for sadness. Now, his hair was matted with sea salt, and he had the first beginnings of a dark beard dotting his chin. His wasn’t a face that could take a beard, even when he wasn’t half green with seasickness.

As for Aurelle... she was perfect.

It wasn’t just that she was beautiful, although she was, her skin alabaster, her cheekbones and lips merely the brightest stars among a constellation of perfect features. Her body... Greave could write poems about her, especially since she was no longer dressed in a courtly gown, but in traveling clothes of gray and silver tunic, corset and britches.

None of that was as important as the fact that she was here, with him, on the best route they could find to Astaré’s great library. She’d come with him on this hunt to find a cure for the scale sickness when no one else would have, searching to help Nerra, getting on the boat with him willingly, if not entirely happily.

“We couldn’t have ridden there?” she asked.

“It’s about as far north and east as you can go in the Northern Kingdom without hitting the volcanic lands,” Greave said. “To get there riding would be difficult, even dangerous, if it were just the two of us.”

“And this isn’t?” Aurelle asked, with a gesture toward the sea around them.

There was no sign of land from here; the ships had to travel wide to avoid the risk of dangerous currents near the coast. It was unnerving, when Greave had spent most of his life in the confines of libraries, but at the same time he could feel something in him expanding at the sight of all this. *This* was what the writers he admired had seen, the world in all its glory.

“Greave,” Aurelle said, pointing. “Look, a whale.”

Greave looked and saw a broad gray shape rising from the water, but the maw at the front was too long and too full of spiked teeth for any whale. Its body was as large as any whale’s, but it ran with fronds of flesh that might be mistaken at a distance for seaweed. Greave found his memory flickering back to Lolland’s *Creatures of the Deep*, and fear rose inside him.

“That’s no whale,” he said. “Hold onto something, Aurelle.” Louder, he called out so that the crew could hear. “Darkmaw!”

The crew looked round at that, and it took them a second longer to respond than they should have simply because it was him bellowing it rather than one of their own. Greave knew what they must be thinking in that moment: that this was a soft,

cosseted prince who wouldn't know a darkmaw from a shoal of herring. Even so, a second later, they saw it for themselves, and they ran for the ship's stock of harpoons.

By that point, the creature was already diving.

Greave watched its shadow through the water, his eyes picking it out as he clung to one of the ropes of the ship. Around him, sailors watched warily, several still scrambling for weapons.

Then the creature struck.

It slammed against the side of the boat, but the boson was already turning the ship away from it, so that it didn't bear the full brunt of the attack. Even so, it was enough to make the ship rock violently, listing to the side strongly enough that only Greave's grip on the rope kept him upright.

Aurette wasn't so lucky. She cried out as she fell, sliding down toward the edge of the ship. The darkmaw was already rising up, its great mouth open to take its prey while those great fronds clung to the ship, holding it at its tilted angle.

Greave leapt forward on instinct, grabbing for Aurette, even though it meant letting go of his own safe hold. He felt his fingers fasten onto her wrist, but even as he did so, he could feel his own footing giving way.

Ahead of him, Greave could see harpoons starting to sprout from the creature's flesh, but they didn't seem to make any difference to it. He was sliding closer now, and he could see great, unblinking eyes on him, looking at him with a malevolence that was terrifying.

“Your highness!” one of the sailors yelled, and Greave looked over his way just in time to see the man throw a harpoon to him. The weapon hung in the air for a second before slamming into Greave’s palm as he caught it.

“Greave!” Aurelle cried out. She was almost to the edge of the boat now, slowed by Greave’s grip on her wrist, but only just. Greave held the harpoon, regretting that he hadn’t spent more time training with weapons, knowing that he would have to be close to that great eye before...

He threw the harpoon, and it flew truer than Greave could have hoped. It slammed into the open orb of the darkmaw’s eye, plunging deep so that the creature let out a scream that seemed to shake the world. Its bulk reared away from the ship as the vessel started to right itself, the splash as it reentered the water sending a wave over the ship that threatened to swamp it.

Greave clung to Aurelle throughout, determined not to let her go. He pulled her up, holding her to him so that there would be no danger of her falling into the water, but also because he wanted to prove to himself that she was still real, still there, still safe.

“I thought I was going to lose you,” he said.

“You saved me,” she replied. “I... I don’t know what to say...”

“I do,” Greave said. He kissed her then, gently. “I love you.”

“I... I love you too.”

Aurette said the words automatically, because in the House of Sighs, they had taught her well that such things were a tool to be used, just one more way to control the feelings of those who heard them. For those whose only role was to give themselves to others, they were words that could take away an edge of harshness or win more coin. For those like her, they could be a weapon as sharp as any knife.

She *could* have stabbed Prince Greave in that moment. He was close enough, and maybe in the aftermath of the chaos, the sailors there would assume that the beast had done him some harm.

Maybe they wouldn't, though. Maybe they would see what she had done, and kill her for it. Maybe they would assume that the wound was from the creature, but that would still leave her as a woman alone on a boat full of sailors, with no way home beyond their grace.

No, a boat was not the best place to kill the prince, even if her patron would probably tell her to do it now, whatever the risk. Aurette found herself thinking of Duke Viris and the things he had her do. There was no reason to think that he had any concern for her. His time with her in the House of Sighs had proved that.

Aurette told herself that she was only being practical, yet there was more to it than that. Greave was a gentle, kind, thoughtful man, who was nothing like most of those Aurette had met. He

had leapt to save her without a moment's thought, throwing himself into danger when he could have just clung to his line and waited for the sailors to drive off the darkmaw. She couldn't imagine Duke Viris doing that.

His mission for her remained: Aurelle was meant to prevent Greave from finding any way to help his sister. She was to distract him, control him, and, if necessary, kill him. Now, Aurelle found herself dreading that necessity, because she didn't know what she would do. She couldn't imagine herself killing Greave, couldn't imagine herself hurting him.

It occurred to her then that not being able to help his sister would hurt him almost as much. Could she really do that? *Should* she do that? Common sense said that she must; that Duke Viris was not just her employer, but the one whose side was likely to be ascendant after all of this. Aurelle had felt what it meant to be at the mercy of powerful men; she had no wish to have one of the most powerful of all angry with her.

And yet... she still clung to Greave, still held this strange, beautiful man who would travel the length of a kingdom to help his sister, who valued books more than violence.

"I love you," she repeated, and reflected that sometimes a dagger could have two edges, and it was as easy to cut oneself with it as an enemy.

They would make land soon enough, and after that... after that she would have to choose.

CHAPTER SIX

Prince Vars rode at the head of his men, trying to stay upright in the saddle and look every inch the royalty he was. He'd always been good at that. He wasn't quite as muscled as Rodry, didn't have the almost feminine beauty of Greave, but he was still young, still handsome, still noble looking in his armor and finery as he rode.

He knew that the guards with him were watching, waiting for his orders. He considered the inn where they'd stayed the night, wrung dry of ale, and meat, and women. Vars had paid for his share of all three, and now the temptation was to just dive back in there.

"Your highness," the men's sergeant said. "Shouldn't we be making time if we're to catch up with the princess on her wedding harvest?"

"*I* give the commands, Sergeant," Vars reminded him, but the irritating thing was that the man had a point. Slacking off for a night had done no harm, and would serve to remind everyone that *he* was the important one. Even so, he knew how angry his father would be if he found out that Vars wasn't there, and Vars had no wish to truly risk his father's wrath.

"Very well," he said. "We march!"

They set off, the sun just getting higher, the warmth pleasant rather than oppressive. They spent the morning making their way

back to the crossroads where Vars had chosen for them to go the other way. They rode through open farmland, where fields of wheat and whatever other crops peasants were meant to grow stood on either side. The roads out here were dirt things, with dry stone walls to either side and occasional trees: apple and cedar, oak and pear. A few sheep flocked in one of the fields nearby, stupid as people often seemed to be.

His men, at least, were sensible: when they reached the spot where the fallen crossroads sign lay, they didn't say a word about having been there before. Vars led the way down the other fork; it shouldn't be more than about an hour's ride from there to reach the inn where Lenore was supposed to be spending the night.

After that time alone, just afraid enough of the dangers of the road, she would greet Vars the way she always greeted their hero brother, Rodry. Of course, Vars would still need to spend another few days with her on this journey, trudging around the backwaters of the kingdom to collect tribute, but maybe that didn't have to be so bad now. Maybe some of that tribute could find its way into his coffers along the way...

That pleasant thought kept Vars going while his troops marched in step, heading along the road to the inn. He could see it there in the distance, the buildings visible now through the trees. Vars heeled his horse forward. They would arrive as a single, shining cohort, with Vars at their head...

Something was wrong. There should have been smoke from cooking fires there, should have been a dozen other signs of life.

Instead, it was quiet. A part of Vars screamed at him to turn back, to stay away. He knew, though, that doing so would make him look weak, would get back to his father...

So instead he hung back just enough to let the others arrive in the inn before him. From behind the wall of his men, Vars saw the spot where Lenore's carriage had been left, and that made hope rise in him. Then he saw the bodies, and hope fell away again, replaced by a crushing fear.

They lay where they had fallen, or been dragged. Vars recognized the uniforms of the few guards Lenore had taken with her, covered in blood. There were maidservants, too, killed with at least as much savagery, although perhaps not so much speed. Vars's practiced eye knew marks made with careful violence all too well.

Fear filled him then. Some of it was fear for his half-sister, because in spite of what some people thought, Vars was not a monster. Admittedly, more of it was fear for himself, and how their father would react if he found out that Vars had lost Lenore, but that wasn't the *point*.

The point... the point was that this had happened and Vars hadn't been here.

His first thought was relief, because being here would have meant senseless danger, maybe even death, looking at the ease with which it seemed that they'd slaughtered the few guards that had gone with Lenore.

His next thought was that he was *meant* to be there, and that

everyone would know it. They would look at him like he was nothing, less than nothing, even though he was a prince of the realm.

“Find my sister!” Vars commanded. “Find out what happened here!”

He sat there atop his horse while his men spread out, watching as they moved from building to building. Vars sat with his hand on the hilt of his sword, not knowing what he would do if attackers were to leap from the buildings around. Would he strike out at them, or sit there frozen, or flee? Certainly, he wasn’t going to go into the buildings first, seeking *out* danger.

A part of Vars hated himself for that.

“There’s someone here!” the sergeant called out from over by the inn’s stables. “She’s alive, barely!”

That was enough to send Vars down from his horse, hoping against hope that it was Lenore. If she was dead among all of this...

He burst into the stables and found the sergeant helping a young woman to her feet. She wasn’t Lenore, didn’t even look like one of her maids. Instead, she wore simple clothes that marked her out as a peasant of some sort, perhaps a servant at the inn. Vars strode up to her.

“What happened here?” he demanded. “Where is my sister?”

The young woman cried out at the violence of his tone, and only the sergeant’s soothing grip on her stopped her from pulling away completely. Vars had no time for that. He needed to know

what had happened here, needed to know just how much trouble he was in.

“What *happened* here?” he demanded. “Where is Princess Lenore?”

“Gone,” the servant said. “The Quiet Men... they took her...”

“Quiet Men?” Vars said, unwilling to believe it. He’d heard the stories. King Ravin’s trained killers, taught to cross the bridges to do his bidding.

“They... they killed most of us,” the woman said. “They took over the inn, kept only a few of us for... for...”

Another man might have said something soothing in that moment. Vars just watched her.

“Where is my sister?” he repeated.

“They took her,” the servant said. “They waited until she came into the inn with her men, and they killed the men, and... they captured her; her and her maids. They kept her here, hurt her, and now they’re riding for the South.”

“And they left you alive to tell us this?” Vars asked, not entirely believing it. When one did evil things, it was better to do them in secret, away from prying eyes. He knew that as well as anyone.

“They *wanted* people to know,” the young woman said. “They killed some of the maids, but others... they sent them out with the news. They left *me* here. They want people to know what they did, that they could get to the princess even here. That they *have* her.”

Vars let out a shout that was pure frustration and anger. Those around must have taken it for anger that his sister had been captured like that, that she was in danger. It was more than that, though, so much more. It was the fact that others knew what had happened here, thanks to those the Quiet Men had let go. It was the frustration that others would, inevitably, know about his failure.

It was the understanding of what he would need to do next.

“How many of them are there?” he demanded.

“A... maybe a dozen,” the woman said.

A dozen had done all of this? Still, at least there was one advantage to that: they outnumbered them. Vars *liked* it when he outnumbered his opponents.

“Gather the men,” Vars snapped.

“What about this one?” the sergeant asked, with a nod to the woman who’d been left.

“My sister’s the one who matters!”

She was the one whose safety would count to their father. Come back with her, and Vars could make up any story he wanted about being delayed on the road, then still be counted as a hero. Come back without...

It wouldn’t come to that; Vars wouldn’t allow it.

He went to his horse, vaulting into the saddle like some hero out of a song. The irony of it wasn’t lost on him as his men gathered, forming up together as precisely as if they’d been commanded by a *real* leader.

Vars drew his sword, which was more than he usually did in a fight. He looked out over the men.

“You, see if there are any horses left in the stables. The rest of you, get ready to march, double time.” There were a few murmurs from within the ranks, but Vars silenced them with a glare. “My sister, your princess, is in danger! King Ravin’s men are taking her back to the Southern Kingdom, and that means crossing the bridges. If we reach them first, we can still stop them, still save her! Every man here can be a hero!”

They all could, but he would be the biggest hero of all. Save his sister, and men would tell stories of how brave Prince Vars had fought the best that King Ravin could offer. Fail... fail and his father would probably have his head.

Kill a dozen men to stop that? Vars would do that and more.

“Forward!” he yelled, and heeled his horse onward. “We need to get to the bridge in time!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first surprise for Nerra was that she woke at all. Her eyes flickered open, and she could breathe, her body not threatening to consume her. She sat, and the second surprise was the bed that she sat on. It was a thing of stone, covered in blankets, in what appeared to be a long dormitory of similar beds.

On each of those beds, a figure lay, most of them moaning, many of them so still that it looked as though they were only breaths away from death. Nerra could smell sweat, and a kind of heat that seemed to be bone deep. The figures wore a variety of clothes, as if they'd been brought here from all corners of the world, but here and there Nerra could see a patch of bare skin, marred by black, scale-like lines...

They were like her.

Nerra looked round sharply, trying to make sense of this. When she had passed out, there had been only the forest, and the dragon...

“You're awake.”

The man who stood near the door was the third surprise. He had a long, curling beard, into which he seemed to have woven shells, each painted with a different sign. His graying hair was also long, falling to his shoulders. He wore a tunic and britches, frayed here and there through overuse. He was tall and broad shouldered, with features that seemed weatherworn and lined by

care.

“Who... who are you?” Nerra asked, standing. “Where am I?”

“You are where you need to be, in the last refuge for those with the dragon sickness,” the man said. Nerra frowned at that; in the Northern Kingdom, they called it the scale sickness. Did that mean she wasn’t *in* the Northern Kingdom anymore?

“I... I feel...” Nerra began. “I was dying.”

“You were,” the man agreed, in a voice that seemed too calm for the words. “But we have ways of stabilizing the sickness, for a time.”

“But that’s incredible,” Nerra said. “If people knew... my father is—”

“I know who you are, Princess Nerra,” the man said. “I know that you were cast out for what you are, but you are safe here. This is a place where all of those with the sickness can live out the days of humanity they have left. Where we do what we can to extend those days a little.”

Nerra frowned at that. “You still haven’t told me who you are.”

“I am Kleos,” the man said. “I am the keeper of this place. I saw your arrival; it is rare for one to be brought directly by a dragon.”

Rare, but apparently not so rare as to bring out shock in the man there.

“You’re talking as if you’ve seen dragons before,” Nerra said. “Where *is* this?”

“Come,” he said. “It is better if you see for yourself.”

He led the way out of the dormitory, into a large open space that seemed to be almost like a village. People worked there, tilling small plots of vegetables or carrying water. Each and every one seemed to have the scale mark somewhere on their body.

The land around the village was rocky, rising on slopes that led up to the lip of what looked like a volcano. Other rock formations lay scattered around in basalt, dark and angular, as if grown from the volcano's fire. There were trees on some sections of the slope, growing out of the dark soil, while in the distance, the ground fell away toward the surrounding sea, making the whole place into an island. A jetty down below suggested how most people reached there.

It was what lay beyond that caught Nerra's eye most, though. So far off that it was barely visible on the horizon, she saw a shoreline far larger than that of the island, volcanoes rising up from the landscape to give it a jagged, toothed appearance. Above the volcanoes, here and there, she saw circling dots. It took a moment to realize just how huge they would be, and it was only then that she realized *what* they had to be: dragons.

"That's Sarras," Nerra said in shock. She had never seen the third continent, but there was only one place that it could be. If true though, it meant that her dragon had carried her halfway across an ocean. "I'm on Sarras."

"Not quite," Kleos said, gesturing to the small community around them. "This is Haven. Our island sits quite apart from the horrors of... that place."

“What horrors?” Nerra asked.

Kleos shook his head. “This is not a place for that. This is a place of peace, where those with the sickness can live out their days, and find a graceful death.”

“A...” Nerra shook her head at that thought. She was supposed to just sit here and wait for death? “What is this place? A prison? Am I supposed to be a captive here?”

“This is a place of refuge,” Kleos said. “Where those with the dragon sickness can be safe from the world around them, and the world can be safe from them.”

“That’s the second time that you’ve called it that,” Nerra pointed out. “Is it just because of the scales?”

“It is because of what people with the sickness become,” Kleos said. He paused for a moment. “I... I could show you, but it might be better not to. There might be more peace in not knowing what awaits.”

Nerra didn’t hesitate. “Show me.”

No one else had been able to truly show her where her disease was going to lead. The physicker had *told* her, but that wasn’t the same, not even close. Nerra needed to see it for herself. She followed as Kleos led the way to a different part of the community, to a stone building whose door seemed solidier than the rest. He took out a key, unlocking it.

“We must be careful within,” he warned. “The ones here... they have little humanity left.”

“But you said that there were ways to help,” Nerra said.

“There are,” Kleos agreed. “But do not let that lure you into false hope, Princess. There is no cure. Eventually, even with all I do, it leads to this.”

He stepped back to let Nerra inside, so that she could see. Inside the building it was shadowy, the darkness cut through by the whimpering and moaning of those within. There was nothing human about this sound, though.

There was certainly nothing human about the creature that rose up in front of her. It was larger than a man, with scaled, clawed hands, teeth that looked as though they could bite straight through flesh, and features that had been distorted into a kind of lizard-like snout. Its body was bulky and misshapen, muscles seeming to grow under the skin in ways that made no sense. Its eyes were human, but there was no humanity left in them, only rage, and pain, and hunger. It was a thing that was no longer human, but wasn't quite a dragon, either, caught somewhere between, unfinished, twisted out of one form but not quite into the next.

It lunged forward at Nerra, and she was too slow to dodge in that moment. The bulk of the creature was on her then, knocking her to the ground and looming over her. Its claws rose up, ready to strike, and Nerra was sure then that Kleos had only brought her there to die at its hands for reasons she couldn't begin to fathom.

Then Kleos was there. He had a wavy blade in his hands that seemed to have been made of some dark metal, the knife as long as Nerra's forearm. He thrust with it, catching the creature in the

chest so that it shrieked out in an animal cry. It fell back, claws up as if to ward off more cuts, but Kleos was already advancing.

“I’m sorry,” he said, as Nerra started to stand. “When I brought you here I did not know that this one would be quite so far along. It... it is time for him.”

“That used to be a person?” Nerra asked. She couldn’t believe it, wouldn’t believe it, because... that would mean that *she* would end up like that. “Isn’t there anything you can do to help?”

“Only one thing now,” Kleos said, and stepped forward after the creature. His expression was filled with pity, but even so, it didn’t stop him from stepping inside the circle of the dragon-thing’s claws. He thrust sharply with the blade he held, this time up under its jaw, up into its brain. Nerra heard the creature give a gasp that seemed part shock, part relief, then Kleos dragged his blade clear, letting the beast slump back to the floor.

He stood there over it for several seconds. From deeper in the building, Nerra could hear growling that suggested more of these things... these *people*, were there.

“Help me to carry him outside,” Kleos said. “He has found peace now, and we will treat his body with honor.”

Nerra didn’t know what to do, so she got a hold of the creature’s legs, helping while Kleos lifted.

“Will that...” she began. “Will I...”

“Will you end up like Matteus here?” Kleos asked. He bowed his head. “Some do not live so long. The dragon sickness tears them apart. But yes, you might.”

“And when I do, you’ll kill me?” Nerra said.

Kleos nodded. “I will give you peace, when there is nothing left in you that knows it.”

Nerra felt sick then. Her dragon had brought her here, had saved her, yet now... now it looked as though the only thing it had saved her for was death.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lenore hoped for death as she sat on the horse, her hands bound before her and Ethir's grasp around her waist holding her there firmly. Around them, the other Quiet Men rode, horses moving in a near silent line, those riding them doing so with their hands on the strange assortment of weapons they carried.

Before, she had hoped for escape, but the Quiet Men had shown her twice now that there was no way for her to escape them. They had caught her easily, back in the inn, and captured her again just as smoothly when she had tried to flee. She could not escape.

Then, she had hoped for rescue. Lenore had been certain that it would come, with the Knights of the Spur riding over the horizon, or Rodry, even Vars, coming with the men who should have been guarding her. Here, in the open, couldn't they sweep down on these dozen and defeat them? Couldn't they save her?

Yet with every passing league, those hopes were fading. They got closer to the bridges and further from any help with every stride of the horses. Already, Lenore could see the largest of the bridges in the distance, its span stretching out over the Slate in length after length of dark wood.

There were guards at the end of the bridge, perhaps half a dozen, but as Lenore and the Quiet Men rode forward, she knew they wouldn't stop a force such as this. They were a big enough

force to stop smugglers, or to collapse the bridge in the event of an invasion, protecting the kingdom with the fury of the river, not the strength of their numbers. They weren't there to fight a force coming from this side. Most weren't even facing the right way as the Quiet Men descended on them, looking out over the river instead, making sure that no threat was coming from the other side.

She saw some of them turn at the sound of the approaching horses, but they were too late. The first of the Quiet Men were already striking at them, cutting down with swords, striking out with knives. They fell on the guards, and it wasn't even a fight, not really. Most of the men there didn't even manage to draw their swords. Of those who did, more died without ever managing to use them. One managed a clumsy blow aimed at one of the Quiet Men, but the simple truth was that those who guarded the bridges were not the finest of the kingdom's warriors, just those who were prepared to sit there longest, managing the trade between the two sides of the bridge. That guard died as quickly as the others, a spray of blood coming from his throat as one of the Quiet Men opened it with a sword.

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