

MORGAN RICE

BORN
OF
DRAGONS

AGE OF THE SORCERERS (BOOK THREE)

Morgan Rice
Born of Dragons

Серия «Age of the Sorcerers», книга 3

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=55833230
Born of Dragons (Age of the Sorcerers—Book Three):
ISBN 9781094310862*

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)

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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 BORN OF DRAGONS (Age of the Sorcerers—Book Three) Lenore is safely returned to the North—but not without a price. Her

both Rodry is dead and her father, King Godwin, lies in a coma. With the rulership of the North in question, her treacherous brother Vars may just find an opening to rule.

But Vars is a coward, and King Ravin, smarting from defeat, mobilizes the entire South to invade. The northern capital, never defeated, lies protected by tides and canals—but Ravin can happily lose scores of men.

The most epic battle, it seems, is yet to come.

Devin must quest to learn his true identity and forge the Unfinished Sword—yet he is distracted, realizing he has fallen in love with Lenore. Lenore, though, is stuck in a hateful marriage, one which may endanger her very life.

Renard, with his brazen act of theft, is on the run from the Hooded Folk, all of them anxious to retrieve the amulet that can control dragons.

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Book #4 will be available soon.

“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

Born of Dragons (Age of the Sorcerers—Book Three)

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 three 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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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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

--Books and Movie Reviews

Roberto Mattos

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

--The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the

Dragons)

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

--Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

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

--Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

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

--Publishers Weekly

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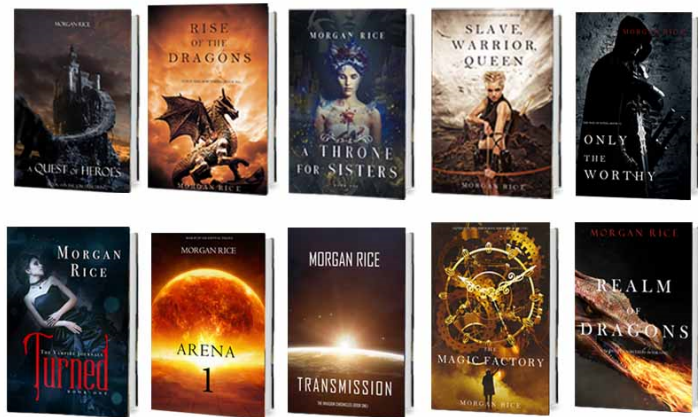
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CHAPTER ONE

Queen Aethe knelt beside her husband's bed as the world collapsed in on her, watching his all too still form through her tears. She had lost track of the time she had spent there, her grief making day and night blur into one another, food coming only when servants begged her to eat, tasting like ashes even then.

The room was rich in its opulence, with tapestries set around the walls and furniture constructed using the rich woods from every corner of the Northern Kingdom. None of that made any difference, not the gilded cups, not the silks, none of it. It all seemed gray and dead when Godwin lay unmoving upon the bed.

"When will he *wake*?" she demanded of Physicker Jarran, who did no more than shake his head and spread pudgy fingers.

"I have treated his wounds as best I can," the man said. "Beyond that, I am sorry, I have no answers."

"Then what use are you?" Queen Aethe demanded, the anger flashing up inside the grief feeling like the only thing that would help now. "You couldn't help my daughter. You can't help my husband. What *use* are you? Get out! Get back to lancing boils and stitching cuts!"

It was harsh, but everything felt harsh right then. The world had become a thing of sharp edges and shadows that leached the strength from her, making it hard for her to even stand. There was no one who could comfort Aethe right then. Even with her

husband surrounded by servants and guards, Aethe felt as lonely as if she had been stranded in the middle of an open plain.

“Why can’t anyone *help* him?” she demanded, kneeling by the bed again, but no one answered. No one dared to. A desperate thought came to her. “Where is Master Grey?”

That was possibly a question that none of them could answer. Who knew where the magus was, or what he would do? Aethe went to one of the room’s windows, even that taking an effort, staring out at the tower attached to the castle, trying to catch any glimpse of the man. Of course, there was nothing, no one was sitting there, waiting to save Godwin.

She looked out over Royalsport, spread out below her. The streams of the city were at full tide now, dividing it up into its constituent islands, each holding a district of the city’s homes. Walls enclosed most of the city, but some of it spilled beyond them, like a fat man’s stomach spreading beyond his belt. The slums stood up against the walls and spread out into the countryside beyond. The great Houses stood above the rest: the blocky form of the House of Merchants standing above the market, the bright colors of the House of Sighs above the entertainment district, the House of Scholars rising in twisting spires, and the House of Weapons belching smoke as its furnaces prepared more weapons for the violence.

From where she stood, Aethe could see the signs of that violence already, the knights and the soldiers making their camps outside the city, the crowds in the streets holding even more men

of violence than usual. There were noble forces as well as those of the king, because of course each duke or earl had his dozens with him, ready to do his will.

Aethe turned her back on it; she couldn't bear to look on it any longer. She couldn't bear *any* of it any longer.

"Wake up, husband," she said softly, returning to the bed and perching on it. "Your kingdom needs you." She leaned down and let her lips brush his forehead. "I need you."

Her husband was not the man he had once been, and not just in the usual senses that age had made his hair gray, run some of his muscles to fat. Aethe was well used to that, knew those changes in him as well as she knew every line and gray hair that had crept into her own body. No, this was about how pale he was, his skin almost as gray as his beard, his breathing so shallow it was barely there. It hurt just to see him like that.

So much hurt, right then. She couldn't take more of it.

"We can't lose you," Aethe said. "Rodry... your son is dead, Godwin." Aethe had never cared much for Godwin's sons, because they were a reminder of his first marriage, and of how much more he had loved his first wife. But of them, Rodry had been the best. Greave was strange and obsessed with his books, while Vars was... Aethe shuddered. "And of my daughters, Nerra is gone, and Erin throws herself into battle like a boy."

At least they'd gotten Lenore back. She was back, and safe, and married, although she should never have been in danger, never have been captured, in the first place. Aethe just had to

hope that her marriage to Finnal would be a happy one; she trusted that it would be, in spite of her daughter's nerves before her wedding.

For that, though, they would have to face up to the threat from the Southern Kingdom. Aethe had always thought that no army could cross the rushing waters of the Slate River, but now they were saying that a force was coming in from the east, via the Isle of Leveros.

"Please wake up," she said, holding Godwin's hand. "I fear for what will happen if you don't."

"There is nothing to fear," a voice said from the doorway. "I have everything in hand as regent."

Queen Aethe turned as Vars stepped into the room.

It was hard to express how little like a king her husband's son looked. He wore a circlet of gold, but he was smaller than her husband, weaker looking, his hair a dull, muddy brown and his features undistinguished. His clothes were fine, but Aethe could see the wine stains there. More than that, there was something about Vars that she had simply never liked. Godwin would surely never have wanted him to rule in his stead.

"How did we come to this?" Aethe asked, knowing that Vars must share her grief even if they shared so little else. "How was my daughter taken by the south, your brother killed? How is your father fallen just at the moment when the Southern Kingdom is attacking us?"

That was the part that made Aethe's grief all the worse. It

would have been bad enough if her husband had fallen in combat, but for all of it to happen together was just too much. It felt as though it had destroyed her, leaving nothing behind. The mention of it all seemed to hit Vars too, almost like a blow.

“It is impossible to judge these things,” Vars said. To Aethe’s surprise, he came to stand beside her, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I suspect it was all plotted by the Southern Kingdom. Yes, if there is anyone to blame, it must be them.”

“I *do* blame them,” Aethe said, feeling the anger burning brightly inside her, a flame that felt as if it would consume her utterly if she let it. “After all they’ve done, I’d see all of them wiped from the world if I could!”

“There is much to hate them for,” Vars said.

“Killing your brother, kidnapping your sister...”

“Yes,” Vars said. “At least she’s married to Finnal now.”

“She is,” Aethe said, and there was some relief in that. She knew Lenore had had her nerves before the wedding, but she was sure her daughter was going to be happy soon. “And Godwin...”

“We’ll do everything we can to help,” Vars said. “Everything that’s needed.”

“Can you... can you find Master Grey?” she asked. “The physicker isn’t doing anything, so maybe he...”

“I will see that he is sent for,” Vars said. “And in the meantime, I will keep everything running smoothly here.”

“I’ll help,” Aethe said. “Whatever you need. We’ll keep the kingdom safe together. For Godwin.”

She could feel the tears falling, feel herself almost falling with the weakness of her grief.

“That will not be necessary,” Vars said.

“But Vars—” Aethe began. She needed something to do that would make her feel useful, make her feel a part of things again.

“My father’s wife is clearly distraught,” Vars said, turning to a pair of the guards there. He didn’t call her the queen, Aethe noted. “She needs to go and rest. Take her to her rooms and see that she is not disturbed.”

“What?” Aethe said. “I don’t need to go anywhere.”

“You do,” Vars insisted. “You’re tired, you’re distraught. Go get some sleep. It’s for your own good.”

The problem was that the more she protested, the more she looked like nothing but the grief-stricken wife. The guards came to her, taking her by the arms. She fought clear of them, determined to walk on her own, but she couldn’t stop the tears that started to run down her face. She stared back at Vars, standing over her husband. How could this be happening?

More importantly, what disaster did it mean for the kingdom?

CHAPTER TWO

Almost since her arrival when he was a boy, Vars had longed to be able to send Aethe away. His father's wife, his *replacement* for Vars's mother, had long been a focus for so many of his disappointments in life. She had been whispering in his father's ear for as long as he could remember, telling him that Vars was weak or cowardly or unworthy; that her daughters should rule.

She'd even insinuated as much in their conversation before. She'd asked questions about how Lenore came to be alone that obviously suggested she suspected Vars of some failing in his duties as her guard. She'd suggested that her brood could help to share the load of government, and Vars knew as well as anyone that was just a veiled way of saying that they might be able to take power from him. Now, as guards took Aethe away to her rooms, Vars risked a smile of satisfaction.

"What are all of you doing here?" he asked, as he looked around the room at the servants and the guards. As far as he could see, they were just standing there. "Do you think my father is going to sit up and demand a glass of wine, or lead you all off into the fray?"

Most of them looked away at his words, as if they didn't want to listen to them. Well, Vars was the regent now, and they *had* to listen.

"We stay by the king out of loyalty, your highness," one of the

servants said. “And in case he requires our aid.”

“What aid?” Vars demanded. “I saw Physicker Jarran leaving on my way up. Was his aid enough? No. Even my father’s vaunted sorcerer has done nothing but mutter to himself in his tower. Yet all of *you* will offer him your aid? Get out.”

“But your highness—”

Vars rounded on the servant. “You spoke of loyalty before. I am the king regent. I speak with the king’s voice. If you have any loyalty, you will obey. My father does not need to be surrounded by guards, or by servants. You will leave, or I will have you removed from this room by force.”

Vars could tell that none of them liked the idea of leaving, but the truth was that he didn’t care. He’d long found that people only did what they were made to do. The ones who talked about honor, or loyalty, or patriotism were simply liars, pretending to be so much better than Vars was.

As they started to file out, one of the guards paused. “What if the king *does* wake, your highness? Shouldn’t one of us stay to tend to him, and to inform you if it happens?”

Vars didn’t shout at the man, but only because he had no wish to be seen as a son who hated his father, or as a fool who could not control his kingdom. What people saw was far more important than the truth, after all.

“That is not a job for any of you,” he said. “It is a task a child could do.” An idea came to him. “Who is the youngest of the pages here?”

“That would be Merin, your highness,” one of the servants said. “He’s eleven.”

“Eleven is old enough to watch and see if my father wakes up, and young enough that he’s no use for anything else,” Vars said. “Fetch him here, and then get off about your real duties. We’re in the middle of a war, after all!”

Those words were enough to get them all moving, forcing them into motion when Vars’s own aura of command could not. He hated them for that. He hated more than them, of course. He went over to his father’s sickbed, staring down at the comatose form of King Godwin.

He looked so frail and gray, the muscles of his body less slab-like now that he was on his back. He looked older than he had before to Vars, and less frightening.

“It’s about the only time I can’t remember you towering over me, telling me how useless you think I am,” Vars said. Even though his father couldn’t hear the words, it was good to say them. He would never have had the courage to say it were his father awake, would never have been able to get the words out.

Vars paced the room, thinking of all the things that he’d always wanted to say to his father, all the things that were there in his head, trapped behind the fear that had always kept them there. Even now, it was hard to say them, but knowing that his father couldn’t really hear them, couldn’t do anything about it, helped.

“They say that you might live or die,” Vars said. “I’m hoping you die. It’s what you deserve after the kind of father you’ve

been.” He stared down at his father with hatred. If he’d had the courage to do it, he might have lifted a pillow and held it down over his father’s face.

“Do you know what it was like, growing up with you as a father?” he asked. “Nothing I did was good enough for you. Rodry was always the golden one. Oh, you liked *him*, when he wasn’t attacking ambassadors. I’m glad you heard he was dead before they stabbed you. And Nerra... what must it have felt like when she had to leave?”

There was no answer, of course, no flicker of a response from his father’s slack features. In a way, that was even more aggravating.

“When my mother died, you were so quick to find yourself a new wife,” Vars said. “Your sons needed you, I needed you, but you just married Aethe and had your precious daughters.”

He found himself thinking of all the times his father had chided him while lavishing attention on Nerra, Lenore, and even Erin.

“You gave Lenore and her stupid wedding so much attention, didn’t you? You pinned so many hopes on her. Do you know why you’re lying here? Do you know why she was taken in the first place?” Vars paused, leaning in toward his father, close enough that he could whisper. “They took her because I took my men the wrong way. I didn’t want to waste my time guarding her, when *I* was the one closer to the throne. I didn’t want to sit there while the perfect princess wandered around the kingdom, receiving

adulation. I left her, and Ravin's men took her, and Rodry died saving her."

Vars straightened up, feeling the deep satisfaction of finally getting to tell his father all the things he'd had to hold back.

"You've always put me down," Vars said. "But look at me now. I'm the one who just did what I wanted, who spent my time in the House of Sighs and the inns rather than your precious House of Weapons. Yet *I'm* the one in command now, and I'm going to make the most of it."

A knock came on the door of the chamber. A servant came in leading a young boy, sandy-haired and chubby-faced, dressed in shirt, tunic, and hose of royal blue and gold. He looked nervous to be in Vars's presence, sweeping a halting bow. As he did so, Vars saw that one of his hands was small and twisted, perhaps in some long ago accident. Vars didn't care.

"You're Merin?" Vars demanded.

"Yes, your highness," the boy said in a small, frightened voice.

"Do you know what you're here to do?" Vars asked.

The boy shook his head, clearly too frightened now to talk.

"You're to watch over my father. You're to bring him his meals, wash him, and wait to see if he wakes." He didn't ask if the boy could do it all or not; he didn't care. "Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, your—"

"Good," Vars said, cutting him off. He had no interest in what a boy like that had to say, only in making sure that his father's humiliation was complete. Live or die, it didn't matter. Either

his father would live, and Vars would have the small revenge of having done this to him, or he would die, and Vars would know that he'd made the old fool's last days just that little bit worse.

He turned his attention to the other servant there, a man who shifted nervously in place. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "I thought I told all of you to be off about your normal duties."

"Yes, your highness," the man said. "I've come because... because your presence is required."

"Required?" Vars said. He reached out, grabbing the man by the shirt. It was easy enough to do when he knew the servant would not dare to strike him back. That would be treason, after all. "I am the king's regent. People do not *require* things of me."

"Forgive me, your highness," the man said. "That... that was the word that they used when they sent me to fetch you."

Fetch was almost as bad as required. Vars contemplated striking the man, holding back only because that might make him forget his place, and Vars had no wish to be struck in return, whatever his revenge might be.

"Who sent you, and why?" Vars said. "Who thinks that they can give commands in my castle?"

"The nobles, your highness," the servant said. "They have called..." He looked as though he was remembering words he had been told to pass on. "...called a conference to discuss the invasion by the Southern Kingdom, and to decide on a response to it collectively. The nobles are there, and the knights. It is

beginning in the great hall as we speak.”

Vars shoved the man away from him, sudden anger burning through him. How dare they? How *dare* they take this moment when he had all the power in the kingdom and try to make him feel small?

He could see what they were doing, even without being told all of it. His nobles were testing him, treating him as if he were not a true king, not a powerful ruler like his father. They were trying to make him into something they could command and control, a servant as much as a ruler. They thought they could tell him where to be and when, decide things among themselves, with Vars little more than a shape in a crown, sitting on a throne.

Well, they would see about that. Vars would show them *exactly* how wrong they all were.

CHAPTER THREE

For so much of her life, Lenore had been perfect, meek, obedient. She had been the epitome of a princess, while around her, her sisters had done more or less as they wished. Nerra had always been quick to run into the forest, while Erin had played at soldiers. Lenore had been left to be the one doing all the things a princess should.

Now, though, she was doing what she wanted.

“Are you sure we should head down into the city, my lady?” Orianne asked, as they walked toward the entrance to the castle. “It may not be safe to go alone.”

A shiver ran down Lenore’s spine at the memory of her kidnapping, but she shook her head.

“There might be threats outside the city,” she said, “but Royalsport is safe. Besides, we’ll take a guard.” She picked one out. “You, you’ll escort us down into the city, won’t you?”

“As you command, your highness,” the man said, falling into step with the two of them.

“But why the city?” Orianne asked. “You were never one to go into it before.”

That was true. Of all her family, Lenore had been the one to spend the least time outside the ordered world of the royal court. Now, though, now she couldn’t stand to be there. She couldn’t stand there with more people congratulating her on her marriage,

with her father lying near death and her mother little more than a grieving shadow. She couldn't stand to be there with Finnal, however much he might require her to stay by his side.

There was another reason too: she thought she'd seen Devin heading down into the city from time to time, and she hoped that he might be down there. The thought of speaking with him again made Lenore's heart lift when nothing else would. Just the thought of him, and his kindness, made her smile in ways that thoughts of her new husband couldn't.

"We'll go down there and let people see that even in a time of grief, we are there for them," Lenore said.

She set off with Orianne and the guard in her wake, stepping past the guards on the gate, then walking down toward the body of the city. Lenore took in the houses on either side, their height and their grandeur, took in the rich scent of the city air, the feel of the cobbles beneath her feet. She could have ridden in a carriage, but that would have isolated her from the city around her. Besides, the last time she had done that was on her wedding harvest, and Lenore was trying to escape those memories, not revisit them.

She headed down into a pleasant garden district close to the castle, the houses there clearly those of nobles, the streets clean and not too busy with people. It wasn't enough for Lenore right then. She knew that Devin was probably from a much poorer area than this, and she wanted to see for herself what that meant in Royalsport.

“Are you sure you want to go this way, Lenore?” Orianne asked her as they took a bridge over to an area that was clearly a little poorer, the houses more closely packed, the people more clearly at work rather than leisure. The smoke of the House of Weapons rose overhead.

“This is exactly where I need to be,” Lenore said. “I need to see the real city, all of it.”

And if they happened to find Devin along the way, then that would be even better. Lenore admitted to herself then that her heart skipped a beat every time she saw him. Of course, it had done the same with Finnal, but there was a difference. Devin wasn't there for some marriage that would lead to lands, didn't have ugly rumors running around him. All that Lenore had seen or heard of him showed him to be brave and kind... the type of man she *should* have married, were it not impossible.

“Much further, and we'll be close to the House of Sighs,” Orianne said. Lenore could see it in the distance over the rooftops, gaudy colors set there to catch the eye. An idea came to her.

“You should go there,” she said to her maid. “Talk to... our friend there. Assure her of our good will.”

“You're sure?” Orianne asked. “It would be a delicate place to be associated with.”

“I'm sure,” Lenore said. She'd seen what Finnal was now; she needed all the allies she could get, even if they came from places that had once made her blush just to think of them.

“As you wish, my lady,” Orianne said, sweeping a curtsy and hurrying off.

That left Lenore and the guard to wander through the streets. Lenore didn't really have a direction in mind; the wandering was enough, the freedom to go in whatever direction she wished.

She was still wandering when she heard footsteps behind them. Lenore frowned and looked to the guard.

“Do you hear that?” she said.

“Hear what, your highness?”

Maybe it was just her fears getting the better of her, being out here in a place that should have been familiar, yet was anything but that. Even so, she was sure she could hear footsteps again, thought that she caught a glimpse of a figure somewhere over her shoulder, there and then gone again in the city streets as more people wandered past. Lenore started to walk faster.

She took the next couple of turnings at random, then cursed as she and her guard reached a dead end in a quiet courtyard surrounded by houses. She looked back, and now a man approached, in dark clothes, a knife at his hip, wearing insignia that marked him as one of Duke Viris's men; Finnal's men.

Lenore should have breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of her husband's man there, since at least it wasn't some ruffian there to rob her. Instead, Lenore felt the tension balling up inside her.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “Who are you?”

“My name is Higgis, your highness,” the man said, sweeping a bow. “I am a servant, sent with instructions from your husband.”

“What instructions?” Lenore asked.

The man came up from his bow with his knife already in his hand, stepping close to the guard Lenore had brought with her and thrusting once, then again. Lenore gasped, pressing herself back against the nearest of the buildings, but with the man between her and the exit to the courtyard, there was no escape.

“I was sent to save you from ruffians who set upon you,” the man said. He wiped off his knife and put it away. “They killed your guard and beat you before stealing from you. All because you did not heed your husband’s instructions to stay where he set you. As a result, he will be forced to take you away from the city to convalesce.”

The servant stepped forward, cracking his knuckles.

“You’re really going to strike a princess?” Lenore demanded. “I’ll have your head.”

“No, your highness,” the man said. “You will not, while your husband will reward me, as he has before. Now, I would say that this will go easier on you if you hold still, but that would be a lie.”

He drew back a fist, and for a moment, Lenore was sure that there would be nothing but pain in her future. Then a second, smaller, figure rushed past the man into the courtyard, stepping in between Lenore and her would-be attacker.

“Erin?” Lenore said.

Her sister stood there, staff in her hands before her, spinning it casually as she waited. Finnal’s servant didn’t hesitate, but rushed toward her. Erin waited until the very last moment, then stepped

aside, staff lashing out into the man's midriff, his knee, his skull. The weapon seemed to be everywhere at once in that moment, moving in a blur that was punctuated only by the crack of wood against flesh.

The servant stepped back, drawing his knife again. Erin lashed out with her staff, striking at his wrist, the crack of bone audible to Lenore as the weapon connected. The man cried out, stumbled back, and then turned and ran. For a moment, Lenore thought her sister might set after him in chase, but then she stopped, turning back to Lenore.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Did he hurt you?"

Lenore shook her head. "Not me, but my guard..." She looked down at the dead eyes of the guardsman, staring out in shock. It was far too similar to those she'd seen before. "What are you doing here, Erin?"

"I thought I'd follow you down into town. I had a break from training with Odd. But then I saw this one following you, and I wanted to know what was going on." She fixed Lenore with a level look. "What *is* going on, sister?"

"It..." Lenore forced her voice to stay level. She would not be weak, would not be trembling and hysterical, would not be any of the things Finnal probably thought she was. "It's my new husband."

"Finnal?" Erin said.

"He's every bit as bad as they say, Erin," Lenore said. "He only cares about what he can get from our marriage, not about

me. And this... he's sent a man to beat me just because I've left the castle without his say."

Erin's face was hard. "I'll kill him. I'll gut him and stick his head on a pike."

"No," Lenore said. "You can't. Kill Duke Viris's son? It would be civil war."

"You think I care?" Erin demanded.

"I think *I* have to care," Lenore said. "No, we have to be smarter than that."

"We?" Erin said.

"My maid, Orianne, knows what Finnal is like. She will help. So will others, like Devin."

Lenore didn't know why it was his name that came to mind, but it was.

"That's it?" Erin asked. She shook her head. "Well, it's a start. We could go to Vars."

"He wouldn't care," Lenore pointed out. "I'd find a way to divorce Finnal if I thought Vars would listen."

"Then we'll find something even *he'll* listen to," Erin insisted.

Lenore shook her head. "That won't be easy."

Erin sighed. "I know. But I swear to you, Lenore, that Finnal won't hurt you more than he has. No one will. From now on, I go where you do, and if anyone attacks you... I'll stand by your side and cut their hearts out if they try."

CHAPTER FOUR

Nerra knelt by the waters of the temple fountain, among the bones of those dead who had tried it before. Above her, the slopes of the volcano seemed to look down angrily, forbidding her to try what she was about to try. Looking at her arms, she could see the patches of scale sickness there, the lines of it dark on her arms.

She would not die like Lina. Even if these waters meant death, it was better than waiting for the sickness to claim her out here on the island her dragon had brought her to. Seeing her friend die had been the fuel to propel her all this way to the temple, to the fountain she had promised the island's keeper, Kleos, she would not seek.

She drank its waters now. She took in the water in a single long swallow that drained her cupped hands. There seemed to be no point in just sipping when any touch of the water was supposed to mean death.

She did not dare to hope for what else it might mean.

"They wouldn't call it a healing fountain just as a lie," Nerra said aloud, as if doing so would make it true. "They wouldn't build all this."

Why build an open air temple if the only goal was to kill those who came? Why bother with a fountain at all, or the strange pressure that had seemed to push her back from the place as she had walked the volcano's slopes? Kleos, the keeper of the sick,

had told her that to drink was death, that it was all just a way to let those with the dragon sickness kill themselves, but Nerra had to hope that he was wrong, or lying, or both.

It would work. It had to.

Nerra stood and looked out over the island around her, so close to the continent of Sarras and yet not quite a part of it. She looked out over the fiery volcanic landscape she had crossed, and over the jungle of the rest. From here, she couldn't see the small village that sought to contain the sick and the dying, those slowly transforming from the sickness into monstrous things that knew only hunger and death. Wasn't it better to try this than to sit there, waiting for the bitter mercy of Kleos's knife when she became too twisted?

Nerra stood there, waiting, trying to imagine the water working inside her. Should she have felt something by now? She knew herbs well enough to know that the effects were rarely instant, but somehow, she'd expected healing waters to be—

Nerra screamed as the pain hit her, so sharp and so all-consuming that it drove her to her knees once more. She clutched at her stomach as her body writhed with agony, her cries coming so quickly that she didn't even have the breath for it.

Kleos hadn't lied; the fountain was poison to those who drank from it. Nerra could feel the water within her now, twisting through her like some kind of barbed serpent, burning through her as if she had swallowed the volcano's lava rather than mere water. She tried to throw it up, but it wouldn't come; she didn't

even have enough control over herself for that.

“Please...” Nerra cried out.

She felt as if her whole body were tearing itself apart, muscle by muscle, bone by bone. It felt as if every scrap of her was at war with the rest, waging a conflict where she was the battlefield, the warriors and the barren plain it would leave behind, all life ripped from her.

“No...” Nerra cried out. She found herself thinking in that moment of everything she had been forced to leave behind in the Northern Kingdom, everything that she would never see again as the agony of the deadly waters ripped into her. She thought of her brothers and sisters, elegant Lenore and anything but elegant Erin, Rodry who was always so quick to charge in to defend others and Greave, who was so quiet and thoughtful. She even found herself thinking of Vars.

Above all of it though, she found herself thinking of the dragon she had found. In her mind’s eye, it was grown, impossibly quickly, its scales shining with a rainbow sheen, its wings spread wide as it soared. The image was so clear that Nerra looked up, half expecting to see it in the sky, as it had been when the bandits had come for her in the woods. It had carried her here, so why would it *not* be here?

She was alone, though; more alone than she’d ever been. Even in the forest, there had been animals, and a sense of peace. Now... now there was only the pain that filled her, twisted her, broke her. Nerra felt her arm snap, and she screamed with it, felt

the muscles of her fingers contract so hard that they shattered the bones within.

Somewhere in it, she must have passed out from the pain, because she saw the dragon again, saw *more* dragons, rising again on Sarras, in flights and flocks that filled the sky. They spun above her, and then she was among them, taking in the multitude of their colors, black and red, gold and emerald and more.

She was on the ground now, moving through the remnants of buildings now far older than anything in the Northern Kingdom, things that looked as though they had been grown, not built. She thought she could see other figures moving among those buildings, flickering in the corners of her vision, yet every time she tried to turn her head to get a better view, it seemed that they scattered, fading away into the distance, impossible to catch up to.

Nerra tried to chase them, but they ran into tunnels where the walls seemed to shift and stretch even as Nerra plunged into them. It was this living stone that reached out for her, and grabbed her, and twisted her like clay until Nerra ran out of the breath even to scream anymore in her dreams.

Then she did the one thing she had never expected to do: she woke up.

It was impossible to tell how much time had passed. The sun was still in the sky, but a dozen days might have passed for all Nerra knew. Her body ached with the memory of all the agony the water had put it through, and she felt so weak that...

No, wait; she *didn't* feel weak. She felt thirsty, and hungry, and tired, but not weak. If anything, she felt strong. She stood, and for the first time in what seemed like a long time, there was no hint of dizziness as she did it. Even so, Nerra almost fell. The muscles of her legs felt... wrong, somehow. Different.

Even the world around her seemed different, changed somehow. The colors of it seemed subtly changed, as if she could see more of them than ever before, while it seemed that the smells of the jungle nearby were so strong that she could all but *taste* them.

Right now though, that didn't matter. What mattered was that she had survived. Did that mean... did it mean that she was cured? Had the fountain *healed* her?

Nerra barely dared to hope that it might be true, that she might have survived when so many others had died, but hope *did* start to rise in her. She was definitely alive, and all of the awful, bone-breaking sensations in her body were gone. If she was whole, was it too much to hope that she might also have been cured?

Then Nerra saw her arm. It was still a humanoid arm, not twisted into the hideous, misshapen things those with the dragon sickness became down in the village, but it was completely covered in iridescent scales of a deep blue. Muscles moved under the skin, far thicker than they had been before, and even as Nerra watched, she saw claws extend from her fingers, wickedly sharp-looking.

She cried out in shock at the sight of her arm like that, clawing

at the scales, and there *were* claws with which to do it, which only made it feel worse. What was happening to her, what had she become? She felt as if she couldn't breathe, and this had nothing to do with the illness and everything to do with the sheer strangeness of what was happening. She took a step back, but that only took her toward the pool of water. She couldn't stop herself; she had to look.

The being that stared back at her was utterly changed from who she had been, and yet not the broken, twisted thing that she had been so scared of becoming. Nerra could only stare at it for long seconds, unable to make sense of it, horror, shock, and sheer fascination battling for supremacy within her.

Her skin was scaled, her eyes yellow as a snake's, her features extended into something more draconic, yet there was an undeniable symmetry and beauty to those features. Nerra would have rejected it all, even so, but there was still something about them that reminded Nerra of herself. Even the memory of her hair was there, in frond-like strands that were more like the crest of a lizard. Her body was just as scaled, and more muscled with it, able to move in sinuous ways thanks to the rearrangement of her joints, yet she didn't look like a monster.

"Of course I'm a monster!" she said aloud, and her voice was the only part of her that didn't seem changed. That made it worse, somehow, not better. How could that part of her be the same, when so much of the rest of her was so twisted? A thought came to her, that none of her family would recognize her now, that she

had lost *everything*. Rage came up inside her, swift and sudden and total, and she picked up a lump of temple masonry and crushed it between her hands. It was only as she did it that she realized just how strong this new form had become.

The rage was still there, and Nerra could feel it fighting to bubble up, to take her over, the way all the transformed ones in the village turned into mindless things. Nerra fought back against that, against the shock, against the sheer grief of this transformation, forcing all of it down inside her, refusing to become anything like *that*. She clung to the side of the pool, staring down into the water, forcing herself to look at this changed version of who she was until she thought she could bear it.

The fountain hadn't killed her, hadn't healed her, it had *changed* her. It had been like a catalyst for the transformation the sickness brought, but it had taken her right past the twisted forms it usually created, into being something sleek and lithe, lizard-like and human all at once.

Nerra didn't know what to do with that thought, didn't know how to get past the shock of what she was, what she'd *become*. She didn't understand this, didn't know what to do next. She needed to know what was going on, and what had happened to her, but there was only one place she could think of that she might get answers, and that was one where they might kill her just for what she was.

Striding out over the surface of the volcano, Nerra set off back

in the direction of the village.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stalking Finnal and his people was easy enough for Erin; after all, as a princess, she could go everywhere in the castle, and as a knight, no one looked twice at her for doing it with her short spear by her side, the head of it still sheathed so that it looked like a staff.

What would anyone truly see if they glanced her way? A girl shorter than her sisters, in chain and plate armor, dark hair cropped short so that it would be out of the way for fighting, features fixed with determination. They wouldn't be able to guess what she was about, wouldn't be able to fathom the part where, sooner or later, she planned on thrusting her spear through Finnal's heart. People didn't want to look at princesses and think that they might do something like that.

People were stupid.

For now, Erin was just following, moving among the crowds of the castle, going from the gathered knights to the clusters of servants as Finnal made his way across the courtyard toward the great hall. There were tents out in the courtyard at the moment, in the shadow of the high walls, soldiers camped there as they waited for new commands. Some sat around cooking fires in the open air, and Finnal paused at some of them, making jokes and laughing. At a few, he handed out coins, probably trying to buy affection.

Erin couldn't work out what her sister had ever seen in him. Oh, he was pretty enough as these things went, all elegant grace, high cheekbones, and a ready smile. He dressed in dark clothes edged with silver, the better to draw attention to the shine of the rest of him. And certainly, everyone around him responded to him as if the sun itself had just come out from behind a cloud whenever he passed. Yet Lenore deserved more than that; deserved someone who actually loved her.

She certainly deserved someone who wouldn't try to hold her a virtual hostage in their marriage, sending thugs after her just because she'd dared to go outside. Finnal would pay for that, and dearly.

Erin smiled as she saw Finnal's path arc toward the stables on his way across to the great hall. With so many people in the castle at the moment, it was hard to find a good place for an ambush, but Erin was sure there would be a spot there. She knew just the place.

Abandoning her attempts to be a silent shadow behind him, Erin ran across the courtyard at an angle away from Finnal. She cut back around and, running up a flight of stone steps until she was on the lowest level of the walls, she slipped past one of the guards who looked out over the islands of the city, padding on silent feet before she dropped down onto the roof of the stables.

She'd hidden here plenty of times when she was younger, partly because it was a good place to crouch when she wanted to avoid the etiquette lessons her mother wanted her to learn, and

partly because there was a space where it was possible to look down into the stables. Erin had used it to spy on hunting parties or knights getting ready to go out into the kingdom, always feeling jealous that they got to do all that when she didn't. Now she waited and watched, gripping the haft of her spear.

Was she really going to do this? Nerves came as she waited, because while she'd killed before, she'd never done it in cold blood. Was she really going to cut down her sister's husband, leave him for dead in the stables?

The answer to that was simple: if not her, then who? Oh, Lenore had spoken about her maidservant doing something, finding some piece of information that would convince people to be rid of Finnal more cleanly, but what were the chances of truly doing that? Even if they got information that might persuade most people, would Vars agree to the annulment of the marriage? He'd been the one pushing for it to happen quickly in the first place.

Maybe once their father woke up, but this was quicker, and cleaner, and... well, Finnal deserved it. No one threatened Erin's sister.

She waited up there until she could hear voices below.

"...the largest bay," Finnal said, somewhere below.

"But sir, that horse is the property of Prince Rodry."

"And I wish to honor his memory by putting it into his sister's service," Finnal said. He came into view below, the top of his head visible in a wash of curls. "Remember that I am her

husband, and that the lands I now own include... hmm, where did you say your family was from?"

The threat was there below the surface, and all of it just added to Erin's anger. This man was cruel the moment he had power, a snake in a pretty covering. More than that, he was trying to steal from her dead brother now, as well as threatening her sister. Erin couldn't let any of this stand.

"Perhaps if I went to talk to the master of stables," the groom Finnal was talking to said.

"That seems like an excellent idea," Finnal said. "I will be right here."

The groom clearly hadn't meant to do it then, but with Finnal waiting, he had no choice. There was only one advantage to it: it meant that Finnal was alone in the stables save for the horses, right in Erin's line of sight. Erin took the sheath from her spear's head, feeling her heart hammering in her chest. She could do this, she had to do this, for her sister.

The angle wasn't quite right, so Erin shifted position on the roof, or tried to. She felt her foot give as it went through part of the roof's thatch, and she had to fight to keep from gasping as she nearly fell. Only by digging her spear into the thatch was she able to keep her balance and prevent herself from tumbling through.

Erin crouched there out of sight for several seconds. She could hear footsteps up above on the wall, but she knew the guards wouldn't be able to see her from there. She was more concerned about the possibility that she might have startled Finnal. Even so,

when she finally dared to look back through the gap in the roof into the stables, he was still there, still looking over the horses as if trying to work out which of them he would claim next.

Erin hefted her spear, adjusting her grip, ready to throw. The spear was short, but from here, she had no doubt that she would be able to propel it right through Finnal's heart. Erin took a breath, steadying her hand, feeling the tension there and—

And a hand closed over the haft of the spear, stopping her from flinging it.

“Killing him in broad daylight?” Odd whispered, with a disapproving shake of his head.

Erin spun to him. The former knight still wore the monk's habit he had gained on the Isle of Leveros, his sword strapped across his back. She hadn't expected him to move so quietly.

“He has to *die*,” Erin hissed back, but even as she glanced down through the gap, she saw that Finnal was moving out of her line of sight.

“And when you kill him, what then?” Odd asked. He still hadn't let go of her weapon. “First, your spear would be sticking out of his chest. Princess or not, you can't just kill the son of a duke with impunity. They'd hang you!”

“Even Vars wouldn't have me hanged,” Erin said. “And to protect Lenore—”

“To protect your sister, you have to *be* there!” Odd snapped back. He shoved Erin away from him. “Not find yourself rotting in a dungeon, and not start a civil war that will kill all of us.”

“Killing that... *that* will end things, not start them,” Erin insisted.

“Not when half the nobles support him and his father,” Odd said. “It would show the kingdom the monarchy is trying to rule without advice or restraint. Do the sensible thing, Erin.”

“Because *you* know so much about that?” Erin snapped back. She looked from Odd to where the knights stood. “Do you think I don’t know who you are, and who you were? They didn’t call you Sir Oderick the Sensible!”

“No, they called me mad,” he said. In an instant, his sword had cleared its sheath. It flashed out, and Erin barely parried it in time with her spear. “They said I was a crazed thing. They said I was a monster.”

He struck again and again, forcing Erin back, one step, then another.

“You think your anger is everything there is? Well, I know about anger,” he said. He struck again, and now Erin was annoyed enough to lash out in return. She set her feet, and...

...except there was no “and,” because it turned out that Erin had run out of roof. She tumbled down, her spear spinning from her hand. For a moment, she was sure she would break bones on the cobbles below. Except that it seemed that Odd had not just steered her toward the edge of the roof, he’d pushed her off the one spot with a water butt below. Erin struck it with a splash, briefly submerging and coming up spluttering.

Odd was already down there, holding her spear out to her.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“I feel like I should stab you as well as him,” Erin said. She felt the weight of his gaze on her. “But... not yet. You’re right. I can’t just kill him, can I?”

Odd shook his head and tossed her spear to her. “We will have to find another way. For now, your sister is in a dangerous marriage, and she has fewer friends than she thought.”

“She has me,” Erin said, hauling herself out of the water.

“Us,” Odd corrected her.

Erin didn’t question that; she was simply grateful that a warrior this skilled was willing to help. Finnal had resources on his side, and position, and even Vars’s friendship. Set against that, all Erin had to help her keep her sister safe was one possibly mad ex-knight. Still, she would keep Lenore safe, even if it cost Erin her life.

CHAPTER SIX

Devin stood in Master Grey's quarters, among the oddments that only a magus could collect, staring at a map of the kingdom while Master Grey pointed at spots on it.

"My research has identified places where fragments of the Unfinished Sword will sit," he said. "A family tomb in the foothills of the far north, a shrine outside a village in the kingdom's heartlands." He pointed to another half dozen spots, one by one.

Devin tried to take it all in. "Why would anyone spread the fragments of a sword like this?"

"Because it is a weapon of power," the sorcerer replied. "One too dangerous to be left in the hands of men in times of peace."

"Have there *been* any times of peace recently?" Sir Twell the Planner asked from across the room. Sir Halfin the Swift stood beside him, the two knights of the Spur wearing half plate and chain, covered by cloaks, their shields plain rather than showing the insignia that would mark them out. Sir Twell had a bandaged wound from the battle, but still seemed to be moving well. Sir Halfin kept shifting his weight, as if eager to just *move*.

"The wars of men are not what I'm worried about," Master Grey said.

"Then what *are* you worried about?" Devin asked. Not that he expected an answer. He didn't get one.

“It is vital that you collect the fragments of the sword,” Master Grey said. “Many are hidden in plain sight, some in more... dangerous places. You proved with the blade you made for the wedding that you can forge star metal.”

“Wonderful,” Sir Halfin said. “Traveling together to collect that stuff. It will be just like our trip to Clearwater Deep.”

“Except that this time, Rodry won’t be with us,” Sir Twell said, in a somber tone. “You say that all this is needed, wizard?”

Master Grey nodded. “If you had seen the things that I have seen, you would not have to ask.”

“But I *do* have to ask,” Sir Twell said. “Because you want to take two knights away in the middle of a war.”

“I would take more,” Master Grey said. “But there are those who would follow, if they knew what was happening. The two of you plus Devin is more discreet.”

The knight sighed at that, because it clearly hadn’t been what he meant. “And you’ve prepared for this properly?”

Master Grey gave him an odd look. “For longer than even you could understand, Planner. But if you mean in the more immediate sense... horses, supplies, weapons, and gold will be waiting for you below. All that even *you* could require.”

That seemed to make the knight, if not happy, then at least content.

Sir Halfin turned to Devin. “And what about you? Do you think that this is a good idea? Do you trust the king’s sorcerer?”

Devin wasn’t sure how to answer either of those questions.

Master Grey was not a man who inspired trust, or gave answers, or even acted in any way that wasn't down to his own unfathomable prophecies. He certainly didn't think that this would be safe, or easy. Yet he'd seen things himself that he shouldn't have been able to, he'd read part of Master Grey's thoughts about a child born on the dragon moon being vital. If he was, didn't he have a duty to act?

"I think that we have to do this," Devin said. He held out his hand toward the others. "If this can help the kingdom, then we have to at least try. *Will* you help?"

Sir Halfin was the first to reach out, placing his hand over Devin's. "I will. If we are not for this, what are Knights of the Spur for?"

Sir Twell took a moment longer, but then joined his hand with theirs. "Very well," he said. "I swear it. I still have one question though: how will we find these fragments?"

"Devin will feel the star metal when he is close," Master Grey said. "But further off..." He took out what looked like a map, laying it flat. It showed the kingdom, showed the fragments that he had pointed out, yet there was something else... at least one of them was moving.

"Magic," Devin said, in awe. Even having seen all that Master Grey could do, such a thing still seemed filled with wonder.

"The map will track the fragments," the magus said. "With it, you should be able to get close. I would guess that the one that is moving is one that is currently possessed by a merchant, who

thinks of it as a trinket to sell.”

“Then we’ll get it back,” Devin promised. “And all the others.”

“Leave quickly,” Master Grey said. He put a hand on Devin’s shoulder. “There might not be much time left, for any of us.”

“I will,” Devin said, but then thought for a moment. “There’s just one thing I need to do first.”

When Devin approached Lenore’s rooms, his heart was in his mouth. He wasn’t sure if he would even be allowed to see her, let alone to speak with her, or... or what? Express everything he felt? Say it all even though she was a married woman now?

Devin didn’t know. Didn’t know what to say, or how far to go. He only knew that he had to do *something*. So he’d come to her rooms, and that was strange in itself. Shouldn’t she be in Finnal’s chambers now that she was his wife?

He was even more surprised when a completely different princess opened the door, a spear in her hand as if she might stab him.

“Who are you?” Princess Erin demanded. “What do you want?”

“It’s all right, Erin,” Lenore’s voice called from behind her. “It’s Devin, Rodry’s friend. Let him in.”

Princess Erin gave him another look as though expecting Devin to suddenly draw out a knife and attack, but she stepped

back.

“I guess if you’re a friend of Rodry’s, it’s okay.”

Devin had never seen the interior of the rooms beyond, and for a moment the sight took him aback. Blue silk billowed at the windows of a sitting room area, while on one of the couches, Lenore sat reading, and a figure in a monk’s robes stood a little way away, apparently focusing on nothing. To Devin’s eyes Lenore was more beautiful than ever, the fine-boned fragility of her features filled with a new kind of determination after her kidnapping, her nearly black hair tied back now in a simple style that somehow suited her even more than all the efforts her maids had produced before, and her eyes... Devin felt as though he could stare at those eyes forever.

“Devin,” she said, holding out a hand to him. She drew him to sit beside her. “It’s good to see you. I didn’t think you’d come here.”

“Is it all right to come here?” Devin asked, with a frown. “I... wouldn’t want to cause trouble for you.”

He knew it wasn’t usual, a lowborn young man like him visiting a princess in her rooms. He didn’t want to do anything that would bring disapproval for Lenore.

“No, I’m *glad* you came,” Lenore said, and Devin’s heart leapt. “I... was hoping that you would, but I thought with everything you have to do for Master Grey, that you might not have time. That you’d forgotten about me.”

“I could never forget about you,” Devin said, and then realized

what he'd said. "That is... I've just been very busy."

"It must be strange, working for a sorcerer," Lenore said. "The sword you forged was beautiful, by the way. I'm sure Rodry would have..."

She choked back the last word, and Devin nodded, because even though Rodry hadn't been his brother, he still understood the pain of losing him. "Thank you," he said, because if there was one person he wanted to appreciate something he'd made, it was Lenore. "Actually, that's kind of why I've come. I... Master Grey is sending me off to do another job for him. I can't say what, but I'll have to be away at least for a while."

Was that disappointment Devin saw in her eyes, or was he just imagining that she felt all that he did at the thought of not being able to see one another?

"That's... a pity," Lenore said. "It's good having you around. I... I like having you here."

"I like being here," Devin said. "But I think I have to do this, and before I left, I wanted, well, to give you something." He realized how that would sound. "I mean, because the wedding present I made ended up being more of a wedding present for your husband."

"My husband, yes," Lenore said, as if for a moment, she'd almost forgotten about Finnal.

Devin took his chance and took out a small fragment of star metal that had been left over from the forging. He'd worked on it, trying to build his skills with it, shaping it into a series of

age-like spheres that fit around one another, each moving freely inside the next. At its heart, he'd set a piece of colored glass, so that every movement of the spheres of star metal around it changed the way the light hit it.

"It isn't much," Devin said. "Certainly not compared to a sword, but—"

"It's beautiful," Lenore said, holding it in the palm of her hand. "I love it."

And I love you, Devin wanted to say, but didn't, couldn't. Not to a princess; a *married* princess no less.

"I will keep it close as a reminder while you're gone," Lenore said. "I'll treasure it."

"That's... I'm glad," Devin said. Why was it so hard to find the words around her? "I should go. The others are waiting for me."

He took Lenore's hand briefly, trying to work out whether it would be appropriate to kiss it or not. Probably not. He stood and headed for the door.

"Devin," Lenore called out before he got there. He turned back, hopeful. "I... I'll miss you while you're gone."

"Thanks, I'll miss you too," he said, and then hurried from the room, cursing himself all the while for being unable to say the one thing that mattered.

Surely, whatever happened out there, trying to gain the fragments, it had to be easier than *this*?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trapped in a tomb with a dragon just outside and the Hidden just beyond that, Renard had been in worse spots. He couldn't actually think of what any of them were, but he was sure that he must have.

In theory, of course, he could make the whole thing simple: he could wait for the dragon to leave, then walk out to meet the Hidden. All he had to do then was hand over the amulet that even now siphoned his strength like a fine hole punched at the bottom of a reservoir.

He couldn't do that, though. Instead, Renard was going to have to do this the hard way.

He checked carefully around the walls of the inner tomb, hoping there would be some hidden way out, some crack or tunnel that had not been there when the makers of this place had built it into the side of the volcano. A nice, convenient way out didn't seem like too much to ask, did it?

Apparently, it was, which meant that either he walked out the way he'd come, or... or he went out through the opening above the main mausoleum space. Falling to his death versus being caught by the Hidden trying to cross them. Put like that, it was no choice at all.

Renard unlocked the golden doors to the tomb with his tools, hearing the click of it, feeling the sweat running down his brow

at the thought of what might be just beyond. More scraping sounded, the dragon clawing to get in, and Renard kept perfectly still until the sound stopped. He left it another minute, then two.

He could sit here forever listening, but sooner or later, he would have to move. He did so, cracking open the door and looking out. The sky above was dimming, the light in the mausoleum less strong now. Renard didn't dare shine his lantern, though, because that would certainly bring the attention of the beast. Instead, he crept out, seeing what he could by natural light.

There, across the cavernous enclosure, he could see the bulk of the creature. It was still, curled up almost catlike in sleep, its flank rising and falling slowly with its breaths. Renard kept his distance, suspecting that even the slightest sound might wake it.

In the dim light, he surveyed the internal walls of the tomb as best he could. The lower levels were rich with carvings and monuments; an easy climb for someone like him. Higher up though, the stonework seemed to give way to natural rock, and this looked like a far harder climb than the one outside had been.

It was either that or stay here until the dragon woke up, so Renard started to climb. He set off, using the statue of some forgotten warrior for a foothold, then launching himself up to catch an upper row of stonework. He swung his body up, twisting as he went, moving ever higher.

Renard gasped as the stone face of a grotesque form he was using for a handhold gave way, part of it starting to tumble down. His reflexes, at least, were still good, and his hand shot out to

catch it, rather than let it clatter to the ground below. For a moment, Renard hung by one hand, his other holding a twisted stone face that seemed to find the whole thing very funny. He was glad one of them did.

Carefully, he searched with his feet, finding footholds that would support him. Just as precisely, he set the stone face down on a shelf of rock, where it could not fall and risk disturbing the dragon below.

He moved quicker now, knowing that even his grip would only last so long like this. He moved from hold to hold, reaching out, setting his hand or his foot in place, shifting his weight. He tried to map out his path to the space where greenery showed above, and his breath caught as he saw a problem.

There was a space where rock had fallen away, leaving no obvious handholds. If he'd had time in a space like that, it wouldn't have been a problem, because Renard would have worked with hammers and spikes to make his own path. He'd done that once in the treasure vault of a merchant where to even touch the floor would have been to set off a truly elaborate array of traps. Now though, he didn't know how much time he had until the dragon woke, and he couldn't risk the sound of hammering into rock. That left only one thing: he would have to leap the gap to the next hold.

For a moment, Renard considered returning to ground level, exiting through the main tunnel, and just trying to sneak past the Hidden. Somehow, though, he doubted that would work. They

would catch him, and then...

Yes, there were definitely worse things than falling.

He glanced down in that moment, and below him, he saw one of the dragon's great, golden eyes open.

That spurred Renard to leap as nothing else could. He heard the dragon's roar as he propelled himself upward, his body seeming to hang in space forever before his hands found a shelf of rock above. It was sharp edged, digging into his hands, but he didn't care now, only cared about hauling himself up, out into the open air on the upper slopes of the volcano.

The dragon came soaring out of the hole behind him, powerful wings sending it up into the sky. It circled, and for a moment, Renard thought that it might turn and head straight for him. Instead though, something seemed to distract it, perhaps the sight of prey in the distance, perhaps something else. It wheeled and flew into the distance with rapid beats of its wings.

Renard lay on his back for long seconds, trying to get his breath back after the terror of the last few moments. He couldn't stay like that long though, because he had no way of knowing when the beast might decide to come back for him. Worse, with it gone, the Hidden might think it was worth the risk to follow him into the mausoleum, might see that he was gone.

He forced himself to stand, if only because he needed all the head start that he could get when it came to enemies like that; and they *were* his enemies now. They'd become that the moment he'd defied them, the moment he hadn't just walked out to them

with the amulet.

They would probably have killed him anyway, of course. People like that were just the type to double-cross a thief. Was there no honor left in the world? Of course, by doing this, he put more than himself in danger. What might they do to Yselle, or the others back in Lord Carrick's lands?

Renard just had to hope that they would be too busy hunting for him, and that seemed like a stupid thing for a man to hope. Still, he set off down the far slope of the volcano, heading for the farmland below, moving quickly now. He could feel the thin trickle of strength running out of him from the amulet, but it seemed that as long as he didn't try to use it, it was *only* a trickle.

He kept going, and he was on the very lowest slopes when he looked back and saw three robed figures far above. It seemed that Void, Wrath, and Verdant had worked out what he'd done, which meant he needed to *run*.

He ran, plunging toward the fields, and around him, the landscape seemed to explode with danger. A tree twisted its branches toward him, and Renard barely stepped out of the way in time. A rock became razor-sharp fragments, forcing him to throw himself flat. He got up and kept running.

He leapt over a low stone wall and ran through the fields, darting this way and that, keeping low and hoping that the dark secrets that infused the Hidden only had a limited range. Looking back, he thought that the crops had obscured their view of him, but Renard knew better than to stop. He had enough experience

of running away in his life to know that didn't mean anything.

He kept going, and now he found a stream that was wide, and muddy, and probably waist deep. Beyond it, there was open ground with only a scattering of cover, trees and bushes. A man like Renard might be able to hide there, but for how long? There had to be a better way. Looking at the river, Renard thought that he could see one, but what if—

“We'll find you!” Wrath roared somewhere behind him. “And then I'll melt the eyes from your skull!”

His mind made up, Renard took a breath, plunged into the murky waters, and crouched at the bottom.

Instantly, the silty waters hid the world above from view except as faint shadows. The water was cold, rushing around him at speed, but Renard stayed where he was, not daring to move as three figures appeared on the banks above. Echoes of their voices filtered down to him.

“...way he went?” Wrath demanded, his angry red mask visible for all to see.

“We will find him,” Verdant said in that melodic voice she had. She called out. “Come out, Renard, dear. Come and play!”

There was something about the tone of that voice that made Renard's limbs want to react on their own. He had to fight to keep them in place, and he had to fight more than that, too. His lungs were starting to tell him that it was time to come up for air, but if he did that, he would pop up right in front of the Hidden. The terror of what might happen then kept his head below the water.

How much longer he could do it without drowning, though... Renard's lungs were starting to burn, while above him, Void was looking around, more frightening with his blank mask than the others put together.

"Keep going," he said. "Find him. Find the artifact."

Above Renard, Verdant stepped up to the bank. Branches and vines stretched out over the water, forming a living bridge that creaked and twisted as the three of them stepped across, continuing their chase.

Even when they passed out of sight, Renard left it as long as he could before he came up for air. He left it until blackness pressed in on the edges of his sight, because every second he waited was another that his pursuers were moving away from him.

Finally, he could take it no more, and broke the surface, gasping.

"Damn it," he said to himself. "Damn them all!"

He held up the amulet, its octagonal form containing a dragon scale, surrounded by runes and gems of different colors. It was what they wanted, but Renard knew that he couldn't give something so powerful to people like that. Nor could he just hold onto it, not when he could feel it leeching at his life, bit by tiny bit.

What he really needed was a sorcerer of some kind to tell him what to do with it, but Renard didn't know any of those. He had no experience with magical amulets, no experience with dragons or words that could twist the world, or any of this strangeness. Thankfully though, he *did* have plenty of experience with stolen

goods.

He knew *exactly* where to get rid of those.

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time Vars stalked into the great hall, it was already full to its stone-lined walls with people. There were so many there that the large squares of carpet that normally divided them up by rank had given way to only a general approximation. The nobles were there, and the leaders of the Houses of Merchants, Weapons, Scholars, and even Sighs. The doors at the far end were open, letting even more listen in, and setting the banners around the walls to flapping.

Almost as much as their mouths. Vars had never liked the hubbub of the court, and now, with so many voices talking at once it was all the more irritating for it.

“We must maintain a watch on the Slate,” a minor noble said.

“Why?” a knight shot back. “In case Ravin manages to build more bridges while we aren’t looking?”

“Exactly,” the first man said, apparently oblivious to his own stupidity.

“What we need is coordination between ourselves and your personal forces,” Commander Harr said. The commander of the Knights of the Spur stood there in full armor, gray beard halfway down his breastplate so that Vars found himself wondering if the man even slept in it. “We must leave no gaps in our defenses.”

“Meaning that we must shoulder the cost of this?” the leader of the House of Merchants asked, standing there in so many gold

chains that just one of them could probably have funded the war.

“We must study what is happening,” the leader of the scholars said, severe in his dark robes and shaven head.

“We must up production,” the representative of the House of Weapons added.

At least the woman from the House of Sighs was quiet, seeming content to watch what was happening. Vars had no use for the opinion of a mere courtesan.

Vars stood in the shadow of the throne, listening to them go on, waiting for one of them to notice his presence. Seconds ticked by as they continued to bicker among one another, some saying that they should hold in place, others that they should advance. Beyond that, there seemed to be no agreement, with every faction having its own would-be strategists, its own ideas of what troops should go where, and how, and who should pay.

He could feel his anger building inside him, washing over even the fear of so many people standing in front of him. He stepped around to the throne, setting himself before it very deliberately.

“Silence!” he yelled. Even then, only some of them fell quiet. “If there is not *silence* here, I will see this hall cleared by the guards!”

Now there was quiet. In it, all of them stared at him. The anxiety that brought to Vars only made him feel worse. All those eyes staring at him only made him feel small, vulnerable, and Vars *hated* that.

“I am king now!” he bellowed, in defiance of those stares.

“You’re all talking as if you’re deciding what to do about the invasion, but *I* will decide!”

“Your highness,” a count said, stepping forward. “With respect, this is a decision that affects the entire kingdom, and your father still lives. It is important that all of those affected should have a say.”

Vars glared at the man. “Really? And would you ask the peasants who work your land what they think?”

That seemed to take the man aback. “Your highness, we nobles are not peasants. Our position compared to yours is not as theirs is to us.”

“A king is addressed as *your majesty*,” Vars snapped back at him.

“But you are the king’s *regent*, your highness,” said another noble, whom Vars recognized as the Marquis of the Underlands. “While we must respect any decision made in this regard, it is also true that you have the position only as next in line to the throne. No final decision has been made.”

“No final decision about *what*?” Vars demanded. He could feel control of this slipping away from him.

“About whether you will be king,” the marquis replied.

Vars wanted to have the man beheaded for that, wanted to walk down there and strangle the man with his bare hands. Except... the marquis was a big man, and Vars could feel the fear rising in him, holding him in place, refusing to let him do any of the things that he so desperately wanted to do.

“Such talk borders on treason, my lord,” a voice said from the back. Vars breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized Finnal, pushing his way through the crowd. “And is not something that my father would support.”

The man backed away a little. “I meant nothing by it. Merely that the traditional roles of the nobility must—”

“The traditional role of the nobility is to support the king,” Finnal said. He swept a bow in Vars’s direction. “Please continue, your majesty.”

Buoyed by Finnal’s support, Vars could feel some of his confidence returning.

“We have information that King Ravin’s people are attacking via the Isle of Leveros,” Vars said. “My own sister risked herself to bring that information to us.”

Erin could count as his sister now that she’d done something useful. She would go back to being just his half-sister soon enough.

“We are aware of that,” Commander Harr of the Spur said. “The question is what we do to counter that. The military implications are complex, and—”

“The military situation is simple,” Vars said. “We have information that our enemy did not think we would have. We know that they are attacking to the north. They think that we are distracted fully by the attack on the southern bridges. Therefore we will go to meet them.”

“And what does that mean?” Commander Harr asked.

Somehow, the old man had always had a way of asking Vars questions that made him feel as if he knew nothing. “What troops are we to send, and what to leave behind?”

“Why, Commander,” Vars said. “We send your knights.”

“All of them?” the representative from the House of Weapons echoed. “But wouldn’t that leave Royalsport undefended?”

“The guards will remain here, obviously,” Vars said. “And the private forces of my loyal nobles.” He looked around them to ensure that they *were* loyal. “But the Knights of the Spur will ride north to face the threat, along with as many soldiers as are able to travel quickly. We will attack them as they land, and take them by surprise.”

The brilliance of the plan lay in its simplicity, and its speed. It also meant that the fighting would take place a long way away from the capital. Vars could take the credit for the victory, without ever having to go near the fight. It was the best kind of plan all round.

“I really don’t think—” Commander Harr began, but Vars cut him off.

“We have the advantage,” he said. “Our foe believes that he has tricked us, and that he can ravage the north of our kingdom at will. That situation will not last long. He will anticipate that messengers will flow south after he lands. So we must act *now*. We throw everything at this in a decisive hammer blow to finish it. We put King Ravin’s head on a pike, and show him that the Southern Kingdom cannot strike at us, cannot kidnap my sister,

kill my brother, all but murder my father!”

Vars didn't care about any of those things, but if those below him did, he would use all of them to get his way.

Still, though, they argued. Where they should have cheered his plan, should have chanted his name, instead they fell into talking among themselves. There were so many people talking at once that Vars could only pick out fragments of it.

“The historical precedents are worrying...” the scholars' leader said.

“Such a move would mean we would have to shoulder the burden,” a count put in.

“...not to mention the implications for the landscape they move through,” one of the knights said, as if ordinary knights got a say in all of this.

Even the woman from the House of Sighs seemed to think she could speak up, whispering to those next to her in words Vars couldn't hear. To his surprise, some of them even nodded, as if someone from *that* House would ever know more about war than their king regent.

“...should wait for orders from King Godwin when he wakes,” a noble said, and Vars could feel his rage growing inside him.

Once more, Finnal stepped in, holding up his hands. “My lords and ladies,” he said. “We have had plenty of chance to discuss this, but the time has come to act. The king's regent has made a decision for the good of the country, and it is up to us to act upon it. I say now, as a part of his family, and as his friend, I know that

King Regent Vars has all of our safety at his heart. We must do this; we must strike at King Ravin's forces to the north at once!"

That got a cheer, and Vars was grateful for it, even more so when he saw that the knights in the crowd were starting to move, heading for the courtyard to gather supplies. There was a strong sense of satisfaction that came from knowing that people were doing as he commanded, even if it had taken Finnal's help to do it.

At the same time though, he was angry. Angry that people had talked over him, questioned him, looked down on him even though he was king now in all but name. It was a situation he couldn't allow to stand, one he *couldn't* allow.

He had to act.

CHAPTER NINE

King Ravin stood at the prow of his flagship, his armor shining like that of a hero, his crown set atop his dark curls and his hand resting on his sword, making sure he looked every inch the warrior king as his armada closed in on the coast near to the city of Astore.

He felt a surge of satisfaction. There was always a kind of joy in knowing that things had gone as he had planned them, whether it was the conquest of a hunted creature, a woman, or a kingdom.

He had felt the same satisfaction when he had taken the throne from his father so many years before, had felt a touch of it with each group of Quiet Men that infiltrated the Northern Kingdom at his command, each spy who brought back more details of the landscape, the villages, the supplies. He had planned every detail of the conquest to come, and now it was unfolding exactly as it should.

He knew his men would be watching him then, waiting for more commands. Already, a dozen of his ships were attacking the city, but the rest waited, held in place by his authority. Not a man would have dared to act without his command, and not just because they all knew that to do so was death for them and their families. Every man there knew that they only had a part of the whole, that only their king understood the whole of the plan.

That was as it should be. A king who gave away all the plans he

had did not remain king for long. Look at his fool of a father, who had trusted Ravin with every thought, every idea. It had made the kingdom easy to unify when he was gone.

“Well?” Ravin said, turning back toward the deck of the ship. Commanders waited there, one from the fleet, one from the soldiers, and a third dressed in the ordinary clothing of the Quiet Men. There was also a scholar carrying a note from a messenger bird. Because he looked the most terrified, Ravin kept him waiting, pointing at the fleet’s admiral instead.

“Your majesty,” the man said. “The voyage from Leveros has produced minimal losses. The advance party has landed troops as you commanded, and is now back in position with the fleet. The other ships await your command to move in on the coast.”

Ravin turned his attention to the commander of the troops he had sent to Astore. “And you?”

The man bowed. “Your majesty, the assault on the city is already proceeding. It has minimal defenses, and we anticipate being in full control of it within hours. The men have been instructed to kill all who resist.”

“And my Quiet Men?” Ravin asked the third figure there.

“Are in place in settlements within the kingdom, ready to receive your troops on the march from Astore to Royalsport,” the man said.

King Ravin nodded. Finally, he turned to the frightened messenger. “You are going to tell me that my forces in the south have been defeated.”

It wasn't a question, but even so, the man nodded. "King Godwin fell in the fighting, and Prince Rodry is dead, but they managed to recover Princess Lenore, and the bridge was destroyed with your forces upon it," the man choked out.

King Ravin shrugged, and he saw the messenger's eyes widen in surprise at that. "Did you think I didn't anticipate any of this?" he asked. "The attack on the south was always destined to fail, and if they have recovered one princess, what do I care?"

Not that the princess wouldn't be his in due course. Everything in the Northern Kingdom would be. He strode to the side of the ship, taking in the vastness of his fleet. So many men stood ready there, from all parts of his kingdom. There were tribesmen from the deserts and armored city dwellers, former pirates from the coast and slave legionnaires who had never known anything but violence. All wore the red of his colors now; all wore the same armor.

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