



THE WEIGHT OF HONOR

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK #3)

MORGAN RICE

Kings and Sorcerers

Морган Райс

The Weight of Honor

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THE WEIGHT OF HONOR is book #3 in Morgan Rice's bestselling epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS. In THE WEIGHT OF HONOR, Kyra finally meets her cryptic uncle, and is shocked to discover he is not the man she expected. She embarks on a period of training which will test her stamina and her frustration, as she soon encounters the limits of her power. Unable to summon her dragon, unable to search deep within, and feeling an urgency to help in her father's wars, Kyra doubts if she will ever become the warrior she thought she was. And when she meets a mysterious boy, more powerful than her, deep in the forest, she wonders what her future really has in store for her. Duncan must descend the peaks of Kos with his new army and, vastly outnumbered, launch a risky invasion on the capital. If he wins, waiting behind its ancient walls, he knows, will be the old king and his nest of nobles and aristocrats, all with their own agendas, all of them as quick to betray as they are to embrace. Unifying Escalon may, indeed, be harder than freeing it. Alec, in Ur, must tap his unique skills in the forge to aid the resistance if they have any chance of defending against the looming Pandesian invasion. He is awestruck when he encounters Dierdre, the strongest girl he has ever meet. The time she has a chance to make a stand against Pandesia, and as she bravely faces off, she who wonders if her father and his men will have her back this time. Merk finally enters the tower of Ur, and is stunned by what he discovers. Initiated into its strange codes and rules, he meets his fellow Watchers, the toughest warriors he has ever encountered, and he finds that earning their respect will not be easy. With an invasion looming, they must all prepare the tower; yet even all its secret passageways may not keep them safe from the betrayal lurking from within. Vesuvius leads his Troll nation across a vulnerable Escalon, devastating the land, while Theos, enraged at what becomes of his son, is on a rampage himself, and will not stop until all of Escalon is aflame. With its strong atmosphere and complex characters, THE WEIGHT OF HONOR is a sweeping saga of knights and warriors, of kings and lords, of honor and valor, of magic, destiny, monsters and dragons. It is a story of love and broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal.

It is fantasy at its finest, inviting us into a world that will live with us forever, one that will appeal to all ages and genders.

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Содержание

Chapter one	12
CHAPTER TWO	14
CHAPTER THREE	15
CHAPTER FOUR	18
CHAPTER FIVE	20
CHAPTER SIX	23
CHAPTER SEVEN	29
CHAPTER EIGHT	34
CHAPTER NINE	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

Morgan Rice

The Weight of Honor

*"If I lose mine honor,
I lose myself."*

*William Shakespeare
Antony and Cleopatra*

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Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and of the new epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising 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

"RISE OF THE DRAGONS succeeds – right from the start.... A superior fantasy...It begins, as it should, with one protagonist's struggles and moves neatly

into a wider circle of knights, dragons, magic and monsters, and destiny....All the trappings of high fantasy are here, from soldiers and battles to confrontations with self....A recommended winner for any who enjoy epic fantasy writing fueled by powerful, believable young adult protagonists.”

– *Midwest Book Review*

D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer

“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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THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)

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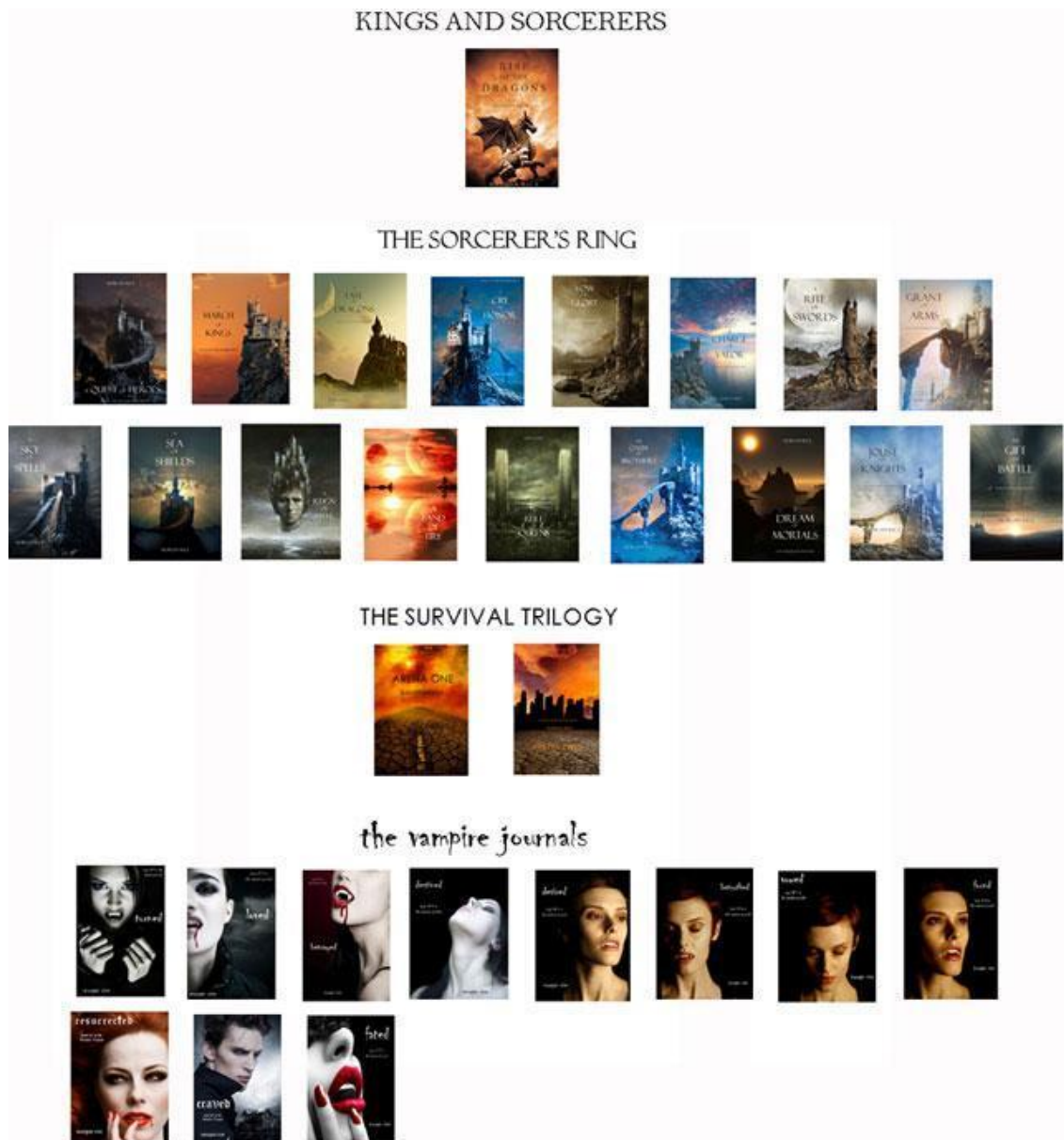
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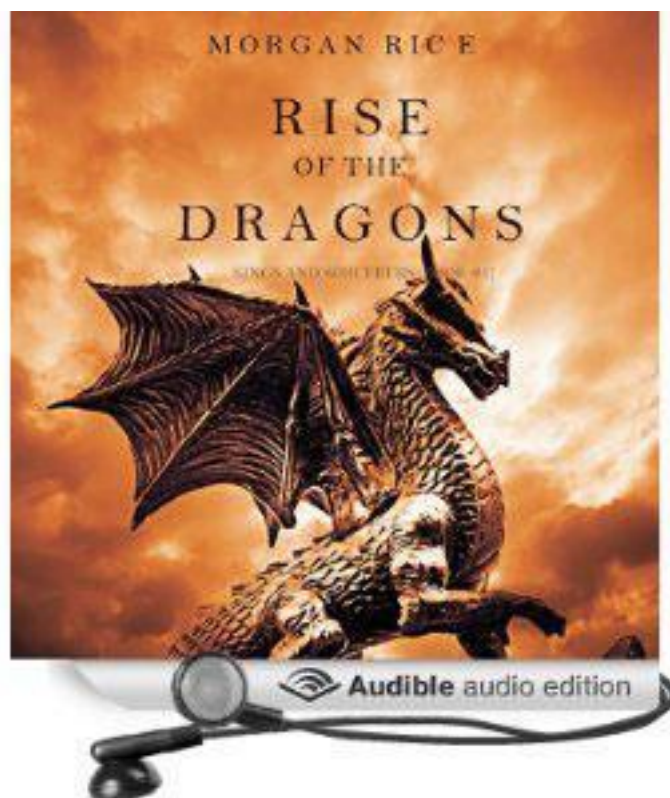
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Chapter one

Theos dove for the countryside, filled with a fury he could no longer contain. He no longer cared what his target was – he would make the entire human race, the entire land of Escalon, pay for the loss of his egg. He would destroy the entire world until he found what he was looking for.

Theos was torn by the irony of it all. He had fled his homeland to shelter his egg, to spare his child the wrath of all the other dragons, all threatened by his offspring, by the prophecy that his son would become Master of All Dragons. They had all wished to destroy him, and that, Theos could never allow. He had fought off his fellow dragons, had received a grievous wound in the battle, and flown, wounded, thousands of miles across many great seas, until he had come here, to this island of humans, this place where the other dragons would never look for him, all for safe harbor for his egg.

Yet when Theos had landed, had placed his egg on the remote forest floor, it had left him vulnerable. He had paid for it dearly, receiving fresh wounds from the Pandesian soldiers, and losing sight of his egg as he'd fled in haste, his life spared only by that human, Kyra. On that confusing night, amidst the snowstorm and raging winds, he had never been able to find his egg again, buried in the snow, despite circling, returning again and again. It was a mistake for which he hated himself, a mistake for which he blamed the human race, and for which he would never, ever forgive.

Theos dove ever faster, opened his jaws wide, roared in rage, a roar that shook the very trees, and breathed a stream of flame so hot that even he recoiled from it. It was a massive stream, powerful enough to wipe out an entire city, and it rained down on his haphazard target: a small country village unlucky enough to lie in his path. Down below, several hundred humans, spread across farms and vineyards, had no idea of the death about to greet them.

They looked up, faces frozen in horror as the flames descended – but it was too late. They shrieked and ran for their lives, but the cloud of flame caught them. The flames spared no one – men, women, children, farmers, warriors, all those who ran, and all those who stood frozen. Theos flapped his great wings and set them all aflame, set their houses aflame, their weapons, their livestock, their possessions. They would all, every single last one of them, pay.

When Theos finally swooped back up, nothing remained. Where the village once stood was now a great conflagration, fires which would soon reduce it to ash. Fitting, Theos thought: from ashes humans came, and to ashes they would return.

Theos did not slow. He continued to fly, staying low to the ground, roaring as he hacked away at trees, clawed off branches in a single swipe, tore leaves to shreds. He flew along the treetops, carving out a path, still breathing flame. He left a great trail of flame as he went, a scar upon the land, a roadway of fire for Escalon to always remember him. He set aflame great swaths of the Wood of Thorns, knowing it wouldn't grow back for thousands of years, knowing he would leave this scab upon the land and gaining some satisfaction at the thought. He realized, even as he breathed, that his flames might find and burn his own egg. Yet, overwhelmed with rage and frustration, he could not stop himself.

As he flew, gradually, the landscape changed beneath him. Woods and fields were replaced by stone buildings, and Theos peered down and saw he flew over a sprawling garrison, packed with thousands of soldiers in blue and yellow armor. Pandesians. The soldiers scanned the skies in panic and wonder, armor glistening. Some, the smart ones, fled; the brave ones stood their ground and as he neared, they threw spears and javelins his way.

Theos breathed and burned all the weapons in midair, sending them raining back to the earth as piles of ash. His flames continued down until they reached the now-fleeing soldiers, burning them alive, trapped in their shiny suits of metal. Soon, Theos knew, all those suits of metal would be rusting husks on the ground, a memento of his visit here. He did not stop until he burned every last soldier, leaving the garrison one giant cauldron of flame.

Theos flew on, flying north, unable to stop himself. The landscape changed, and changed again, and he did not slow even when he spotted a curious sight: there, far below, appeared a massive creature, a giant, emerging from a tunnel in the ground. It was a creature unlike any Theos had ever seen, a powerful creature. Yet Theos felt no fear; on the contrary, he felt anger. Anger for its being in his path.

The beast looked up and its grotesque face collapsed in fear as Theos dove down low. It, too, turned and fled, back for its hole – but Theos would not let it go so easily. If he could not find his child, then he would destroy them all, man and beast alike. And he would not stop until everyone and everything in Escalon was no more.

CHAPTER TWO

Vesuvius stood in the tunnel and looked up at the shafts of sunlight pouring down on him, sunlight from Escalon, and he basked in the sweetest feeling of his life. That hole high above, those rays shining down upon him, represented a victory greater than any he could dream, the completion of the tunnel that he had imagined his entire life. Others had said it could not be built, and Vesuvius knew he had achieved what his father and his father before him could not, had created a pathway for the entire nation of Marda to invade Escalon.

Dust still swirled in the light, debris still filling the air from where the giant had punched a hole through the ceiling, and as Vesuvius stared through it, he knew that hole high above represented his destiny. His entire nation would follow on his heels; soon all of Escalon would be his. He grinned wide, already imagining the rape and torture and destruction awaiting him. It would be a blood fest. He would create a nation of slaves, and the nation of Marta would double in size – and territory.

“NATION OF MARDA, ADVANCE!” he shouted.

There arose a great shout behind him as the hundreds of trolls crammed in the tunnel raised their halberds and charged with him. He led the way, charging up the tunnel, slipping and sliding on the dirt and rock, as he made his way toward the opening, toward conquest. With Escalon in sight, he trembled with excitement as the ground shook beneath him, tremors from the giant’s screeching up above, the beast, too, clearly thrilled to be free. Vesuvius imagined the damage the giant would do up there, let loose on a rampage, terrorizing the countryside – and he smiled wider. It would have its fun, and when Vesuvius tired of it, he would kill it. In the meantime, it was a valuable asset in his rampage of terror.

Vesuvius looked up and blinked in confusion as he saw the sky suddenly darken up above, and he felt a great wave of heat come his way. He was baffled to see a wall of flame descending, suddenly covering the countryside. He could not understand what was happening as a horrific wave of heat came at him, scalding his face, followed by the roar of the giant – and then, a tremendous shriek of agony. The giant stomped, clearly hurt by something, and Vesuvius looked up in terror as it inexplicably turned back around. Its face half-burned, it charged back into the tunnel, underground – and right for him.

Vesuvius stared, but could not comprehend the nightmare unfolding before him. Why would the giant turn back around? What was the source of heat? What had burned his face?

Vesuvius then heard a flapping of wings, a shriek even more horrific than that of the giant – and he knew. He felt a shudder as he realized that up there, flying by, was something even more terrifying than a giant. It was something Vesuvius had never thought he’d encounter in his lifetime: a dragon.

Vesuvius stood there, frozen in fear for the first time in his life, his entire army of trolls frozen behind him – all of them trapped. The unthinkable had happened: the giant was running scared from something even greater than itself. Burned, in agony, panicked, the giant swung its huge fists as it descended, swiped with its vicious claws, and Vesuvius watched in terror as all around him his trolls were swatted. Whatever lay in its wrathful path was crushed by its feet, cut in half by its claws, smashed by its fists.

And then, before he could get out of its way, Vesuvius felt his own ribs cracking as the giant scooped him up and threw him in the air.

He felt himself airborne, tumbling end over end, the world spinning – and the next thing he knew his head was smashing into rock, the awful pain ripping through his body, as he impacted a stone wall. As he began to plummet to the ground, to lose consciousness, the final thing he saw was the giant, destroying everything, undoing all his plans, all he had worked for, and he realized he would die here, far beneath the earth, but feet away from the dream he almost had.

CHAPTER THREE

Duncan felt the air rush past him as he slid down the rope at sunset, scaling down the majestic peaks of Kos, holding on for dear life as he slid faster than he'd imagined possible. All around him the men slid, too – Anvin and Arthfael, Seavig, Kavos, Bramthos, and thousands of others, Duncan's, Seavig's, and Kavos's men joining together as one army, all sliding down the ice in rows, a well-disciplined army leapfrogging over each other, all of them desperate to reach the bottom before they were detected. As Duncan's feet touched the ice, he immediately pushed off again, repelling downward, his hands spared from being torn to shreds only by the thick gloves Kavos had given him.

Duncan marveled at how fast his army moved, all in a near free fall down the cliff. When he had been atop Kos, he'd had no idea how Kavos had planned on getting an army this size down so quickly without losing men; he hadn't realized they'd had such an intricate array of ropes and picks that could get them down so smoothly. These were men made for the ice, and for them, this lightning-fast descent was like a casual hike. He finally understood what they'd meant when they'd said the men of Kos were not trapped up here – but rather, the Pandesians, down below, were the ones who were trapped.

Kavos suddenly came to an abrupt stop, landing with both feet on a wide and broad plateau protruding from the mountain, and Duncan stopped beside him, as did all the men, momentarily pausing halfway down the mountain face. Kavos walked over to the edge and Duncan joined him, leaning over, seeing the ropes dangling far beneath; through them, far below, through the mist and final rays of the sun, Duncan could see at the mountain's base a sprawling, stone Pandesian garrison, teeming with thousands of soldiers.

Duncan looked over at Kavos, and Kavos looked back, delight in his eyes. It was a delight Duncan recognized, one he had seen many times in his life: the ecstasy of a true warrior about to go to war. It was what men like Kavos lived for. Duncan felt it himself, he had to admit, that tingling in his veins, that tightness in his gut. The sight of those Pandesians made him as excited for the thrill of battle as the next man.

"You could have descended anywhere," Duncan said, examining the landscape below. "Most of it is empty. We could have avoided confrontation, and moved on to the capital. Yet you chose the spot where the Pandesians are strongest."

Kavos smiled broadly.

"I did," he replied. "The men of Kavos do not look to avoid confrontation – we seek it out." He grinned wider. "Besides," he added, "an early battle will warm us for our march on the capital. And I want to make these Pandesians think twice the next time they decide to surround the base of our mountain."

Kavos turned and nodded to his commander, Bramthos, and Bramthos rallied their men and joined Kavos as they all rushed for a massive ice boulder perched at the edge of the cliff. They all, as one, leaned their shoulders into it.

Duncan, realizing what they were doing, nodded to Anvin and Arthfael, who rallied their men, too. Seavig and his men joined them, and as one, they all pushed.

Duncan dug his feet into the ice and pushed, straining under the weight of it, slipping, pushing with all he had. They all groaned, and slowly, the massive boulder began to roll.

"A welcoming present?" Duncan asked, smiling, grunting beside Kavos.

Kavos grinned back.

"Just a little something to announce our arrival."

A moment later Duncan felt a great release, heard a cracking of ice, and he leaned over and watched in awe as the boulder rolled over the edge of the plateau. He stepped back quickly with the others and watched as the boulder hurled down at full speed, rolling, bouncing off the ice wall,

gaining speed. The massive boulder, with a diameter of at least thirty feet, fell straight down, rushing like an angel of death for the Pandesian fortress below. Duncan braced himself for the explosion to follow, all of those soldiers below unwitting, waiting targets.

The boulder struck the center of the stone garrison, and the crash was greater than anything Duncan had heard in his life. It was as if a comet had struck Escalon, a boom echoing so loudly he had to cover his ears, the ground shaking beneath him, making him stumble. An enormous cloud of stone and ice rose up, dozens of feet high, and the air, even from up here, became audible with the terrified shouts and cries of men. Half the stone garrison was destroyed on impact, and the boulder continued to roll, crushing men, flattening buildings, leaving a wake of destruction and chaos.

“MEN OF KOS!” shouted Kavos. “Who has dared approach our mountain?”

There came a great shout as his thousands of warriors suddenly charged forward and leapt off the edge of the cliff, following Kavos, all grabbing ropes and rappelling so fast, they were practically free-falling down the mountain. Duncan followed, his men behind him, all jumping, too, grabbing onto the ropes and descending so fast he could barely breathe; he felt certain he would break his neck upon impact.

Seconds later he found himself landing hard at the base, hundreds of feet below, descending into a huge cloud of ice and dust, the rumble still echoing from the rolling boulder. All the men turned and faced the garrison and they all let out a great battle cry as they drew their swords and charged, rushing headlong into the chaos of the Pandesian camp.

The Pandesian soldiers, still reeling from the explosion, turned with shocked faces to see the army charging; clearly, they had not expected this. Dazed, caught off guard, several of their commanders lying there dead, crushed by the boulder, they seemed too disoriented to even think straight. As Duncan and Kavos and their men bore down on them, some began to turn and run. Others reached for swords – but Duncan and his men descended upon them like locusts and stabbed them before they even had a chance to draw.

Duncan and the men rushed through the camp, never hesitating, knowing time was of the essence, and they felled the recovering soldiers on every side, following the trail of destruction left by the boulder. Duncan slashed every which way, stabbing one soldier in the chest, smashing another in the face with the hilt of his sword, kicking one who charged him, and ducking and laying his shoulder into another as the man swung an axe at his head. Duncan did not pause, felling everyone in his path, breathing hard, knowing they were still outnumbered and that he had to kill as many as he could as quickly as he could.

Beside him, Anvin, Arthfael, and his men joined him, all watching each other's backs, all rushing forward and slashing and defending in every direction as the clangs of warfare filled the garrison. Embroiled in a full-scale battle, Duncan knew it would have been wiser to have conserved his men's energy, to have avoided this confrontation and marched to Andros. But he also knew that honor compelled the men of Kos to fight this battle, and he understood how they felt; the wisest course of action was not always what moved men's hearts.

They moved through the camp with speed and discipline, the Pandesians in such disarray that they were barely able to put up an organized defense. Every time a commander surfaced, or a company formed, Duncan and his men hacked them down.

Duncan and his men rushed through the garrison like a storm, and hardly an hour had passed when Duncan finally stood there, at the end of the fort, turning every which way, and realized, blood-spattered, that there was no one left to kill. He stood there, breathing hard as twilight fell, a mist settling over the mountains, all uncannily silent.

The fort was theirs.

The men, realizing, let out a spontaneous cheer, and Duncan stood there, Anvin, Arthfael, Seavig, Kavos, and Bramthos coming up beside him, wiping blood from his sword, his armor, and taking it all in. He noticed a wound on Kavos's arm, seeping blood.

“You’re wounded,” he pointed out to Kavos, who didn’t seem to notice.

Kavos looked down at it and shrugged. He then smiled.

“A beauty scratch,” he replied.

Duncan surveyed the battlefield, so many men dead, mostly Pandesians and few his own men. He then looked up and saw the ice peaks of Kos towering over them, disappearing in the clouds, and he was in awe at how high they had climbed, and how fast they had descended. It had been a lightning attack – like death raining down from the sky – and it had worked. The Pandesian garrison, seeming so indomitable but hours ago, was now theirs, nothing but a flattened ruin, all its men lying in pools of blood, dead beneath the twilight sky. It was surreal. The warriors of Kos spared no one, took no mercy, and had been an unstoppable force. Duncan had a fresh respect for them. They would be crucial partners in liberating Escalon.

Kavos surveyed the corpses, breathing hard, too.

“That is what I call an exit plan,” he said.

Duncan saw him grinning as he surveyed the enemy bodies, watching their men stripping the dead of their weapons.

Duncan nodded.

“And a fine exit it was,” he replied.

Duncan turned and looked west, past the fort, into the setting sun, and motion caught his eye. He squinted and saw a sight which filled his heart with warmth, a sight which somehow he had expected to see. There, on the horizon, stood his warhorse, standing proudly before the herd, hundreds of warhorses behind him. He had, as always, sensed where Duncan would be, and was there, loyally awaiting him. Duncan’s heart lifted, knowing his old friend would bring his army the rest of the way to the capital.

Duncan whistled, and as he did, his horse turned and ran for him. The other horses followed, and there came a great rumble in the twilight, as the herd galloped through the snowy plain, heading right for them.

Kavos nodded in admiration beside him.

“Horses,” Kavos remarked, watching them approach. “I myself would have walked to Andros.”

Duncan grinned.

“I am sure you would have, my friend.”

Duncan stepped forward as his horse approached, and caressed his old friend’s mane. He mounted him, and as he did, all his men mounted with him, thousands of them, an army on horseback. They sat there, fully armed, staring into the twilight, nothing before them now but the snowy plains leading to the capital.

Duncan felt a rush of excitement as he felt, finally, that they were on the brink. He could feel it, could smell victory in the air. Kavos had gotten them down the mountain; now it was *his* show.

Duncan raised his sword, feeling the eyes of all the men, all the armies, upon him.

“MEN!” he called out. “To Andros!”

They all let out a great battle cry and charged with him, into the night, across the snowy plains, all prepared to stop at nothing until they had reached the capital and waged the greatest war of their lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kyra looked up into the breaking dawn and saw a figure standing over her, a silhouette against the rising sun, a man she knew could only be her uncle. She blinked in disbelief as he stepped into view. Here, finally, was the man she had traveled across Escalon to meet, the man that would reveal her destiny, the man who would train her. Here was her mother's brother, the only link she had to the mother she never knew.

Her heart slammed with anticipation as he stepped forward out of the light and she saw his face.

Kyra was amazed: he looked startlingly like her. She had never met anyone who bore her resemblance – not even her father, as much as she hoped. She had always felt like a stranger in this world, disconnected to any true lineage – but now, seeing this man's face, his high, chiseled cheekbones, his flashing gray eyes, a man who stood tall and proud, with broad shoulders, muscular, dressed in shining gold chain-mail armor, with light brown hair that went down to his chin, unshaven, in his forties, perhaps, she realized he was special. And by extension, that made her special. For the first time in her life, she really felt it. For the first time, she felt connected to someone, to a powerful bloodline, to something greater than herself. She felt a sense of belonging in the world.

This man was clearly different. He was obviously a warrior, proud and noble, yet he did not carry any swords, any shields, weapons of any sort. To her amazement and delight, he carried only a single item: a golden staff. A *staff*. He was just like her.

"Kyra," he said.

His voice resounded through her, a voice so familiar, so much like hers. Hearing him speak, she felt not only a connection to him, but even more exciting, to her mother. Here stood her mother's brother. Here was the man who knew who her mother was. Finally, she would get the truth – there would be no more secrets in her life. Soon enough she would know everything about the woman she had always longed to know.

He lowered a hand, and she reached up and took it, standing, her legs stiff from the long night of sitting before the tower. It was a strong hand, muscular, yet surprisingly smooth, and he helped her to her feet. Leo and Andor stepped toward him and Kyra was surprised they did not snarl as usual. Instead, they walked forward and licked the man's hand, as if they had known him forever.

Then, to Kyra's amazement, Leo and Andor stood at attention, as if the man had silently commanded them. Kyra had never seen anything like it. What powers did this man have?

Kyra didn't even need to ask if he was her uncle – she sensed it with every ounce of her body. He was powerful, proud, everything she had hoped he would be. There was something else in him, too, something she could not quite grasp. It was a mystical energy radiating off of him, an aura of calm, yet also of strength.

"Uncle," she said. She liked the sound of that word.

"You may call me Kolva," he replied.

Kolva. Somehow, it was a name that felt familiar.

"I crossed Escalon to see you," she said, nervous, not knowing what else to say. The morning silence swallowed her words, the barren plains filled only with the sound of the distant crashing of the ocean. "My father sent me."

He smiled back. It was a warm smile, the lines in his face bunching up as if he had lived a thousand years.

"It was not your father who sent you," he replied. "But something far greater."

He suddenly, without warning, turned his back and began to walk, using his staff, away from the tower.

Kyra watched him go, stunned, not understanding; had she offended him?

She hurried to catch up, Leo and Andor at her side.

“The tower,” she said, confused. “Are we not going inside?”

He smiled.

“Some other time, perhaps,” he replied.

“But I thought I had to reach the tower.”

“You did,” he replied. “But not enter it.”

She struggled to understand as he hiked quickly, entering the woodline, and she hurried to catch up. His staff clicked on the dirt and leaves, as hers did, too.

“Then where shall we train?” she asked.

“You shall train where all the great warriors train,” he replied. He looked ahead. “In the woods beyond the tower.”

He entered the woods, moving so quickly Kyra nearly had to run to keep up with him, even though he seemed to be walking at a slow pace. The mystery around him deepened, as a million questions raced through her mind.

“Is my mother alive?” she asked in a rush, unable to contain her curiosity. “Is she here? Have you met her?”

The man merely smiled and shook his head as he continued to walk.

“So many questions,” he replied. He hiked for a long time, the forest filled with the sound of odd creatures, then finally added, “Questions, you will come to find, have little meaning here. Answers have even less. You must learn to find your own answers. The *source* of your answers. And even greater – the source of your questions.”

Kyra was confused as they hiked through the forest, the trees a bright green, seeming to glow all around her in this mysterious place. She soon lost sight of the tower, and the crashing of the waves grew quieter now. She struggled to keep up as the trail wound every which way.

She was burning with questions, and finally, could no longer contain her silence.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked. “Is this where you will train me?”

The man continued hiking, over a running creek, twisting and turning between ancient trees, their bark glowing a luminescent green, as she followed on his heels.

“I shall not train you,” he said. “Your uncle shall.”

Kyra was baffled.

“My *uncle*?” she asked. “I thought you were my uncle.”

“I am,” he replied. “And you have another.”

“Another?” she asked.

Finally, he burst into a clearing in the woods, stopping at its edge, and she, out of breath, stopped beside him. She looked out before her and was stunned at what she saw.

On the opposite side of the clearing sat an immense tree, the largest she had ever seen, ancient, its branches stretching everywhere, shimmering with purple leaves, its trunk thirty feet wide. The branches twisted and intersected with one another, creating a small tree house, perhaps ten feet off the ground, looking as if it had sat there forever. A small light came from inside the branches, and Kyra looked up and saw a sole figure sitting on the edge of the branches, looking as if he were in a state of meditation, staring down at them.

“He is your uncle, too,” said Kolva.

Kyra’s heart slammed in her chest, not understanding any of this. She looked up at the man he said was her uncle and wondered if he were playing a trick on her. Her other uncle appeared to be a boy, perhaps ten years old. He sat perfectly straight, as if in meditation, staring straight ahead, not really looking at her, his eyes glowing blue. His boyish face was lined, as if he were a thousand years old, his skin a darkish brown, covered in age spots. He could have been hardly more than four feet tall. It was as if he were a boy with an aging disease.

She did not know what to make of it.

“Kyra,” he said, “meet Alva.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Merk entered the Tower of Ur, walking through the tall, golden doors he never thought to pass through, the light shining so brightly inside it nearly blinded him. He raised a hand, shielding his eyes, and as he did, he was in awe at what he saw before him.

There, standing opposite him, was a real Watcher, his yellow eyes piercing as he stared back at Merk, the same eyes that had haunted Merk from behind the slot in the door. He wore a yellow, flowing robe, his arms and legs concealed, and the little flesh he showed pale. He was surprisingly short, his jaw elongated, his cheeks sunken, and as he stared back, Merk felt uncomfortable. Light shone from the short golden staff he held before him.

The Watcher studied him silently, and Merk felt a draft behind him as the doors suddenly slammed shut, trapping him in the tower. The hollow sounded echoed off the walls, and he involuntarily flinched. He realized how on edge he was from not sleeping all these days, from nights of troubled dreams, from his obsession over entering here. Standing inside now, he felt a strange sense of belonging, as if he had finally entered his new home.

Merk expected the Watcher to welcome him, to explain where he was. But instead, he turned wordlessly and walked away, leaving Merk standing there alone, wondering. He had no idea whether to follow.

The Watcher crossed to a spiral, ivory staircase at the far end of the chamber and, to Merk's surprise, he headed not up but down. He quickly descended and disappeared from view.

Merk stood there in the silence, stumped, not knowing what was expected of him.

"Shall I follow you?" he finally called out.

Merk's voice rang and echoed back at him, off the walls, as if mocking him.

Merk looked around, examining the inside of the tower. He saw the walls, shining, were made of solid gold; saw a floor made of an ancient black marble, streaked with gold. The place was dim, lit only by the mysterious glow coming off its walls. He looked up and saw the ancient staircase, carved of ivory; he stepped forward and cranked his neck and, at its very top, he spied a golden dome, at least a hundred feet high, sunlight filtering down. He saw all the levels above, all the different landings and floors, and he wondered what lay up there.

He looked down and, even more curious, he saw the steps continuing down below, to subterranean floors, where the Watcher had gone, and he wondered. The beautiful ivory stairs, like a work of art, twisted and turned mysteriously in both directions, as if rising up to heaven and down to the lowest levels of hell. Merk wondered, most of all, if the legendary Sword of Flames, the sword guarding all of Escalon, lay within these walls. He felt a rush just thinking about it. Where could it be? Up or down? What other relics and treasures were stored here?

Suddenly, a hidden door opened out of the side wall and Merk turned to see a stern-faced warrior emerge, a man roughly Merk's size, wearing chain mail, his skin pale from too many years of not seeing sunlight. He walked toward Merk, a human, a sword on his waist with a prominent insignia, the same symbol Merk had seen etched outside the tower walls: an ivory staircase rising to the sky.

"Only Watchers descend," the man said, his voice dark, rough. "And you, my friend, are no Watcher. Not yet, at least."

The man stopped before him and stared him up and down, laying his hands on his hips.

"Well," he continued, "I suppose if they let you in, there must be a reason."

He sighed.

"Follow me."

With that, the abrupt warrior turned and ascended the staircase. Merk's heart pounded as he hurried to catch up, his head swimming with questions, the mystery of this place deepening with each step.

“Do your job and do it well,” the man spoke, his back to Merk, his voice dark and echoing off the walls, “and you shall be allowed to serve here. Guarding the tower is the highest calling Escalon has to offer. You must be more than a mere warrior.”

They stopped at the next level, and the man stopped and stared into Merk’s eyes, as if sensing some deep truth about him. It made Merk uncomfortable.

“We all have dark pasts,” the man said. “That is what drove us here. What virtue lies in your darkness? Are you ready to be born again?”

He paused, and Merk stood there, trying to comprehend his words, unsure how to reply.

“Respect is hard won here,” he continued. “We are, each of us, the best Escalon has to offer. Earn it, and one day, you may be accepted into our brotherhood. If not, you will be asked to leave. Remember: those doors which opened to let you in, can just as easily let you out.”

Merk’s heart sank at the thought.

“How can I serve?” Merk asked, feeling the sense of purpose he had always craved to feel.

The warrior stood there for a long time, then finally turned and began ascending the next flight. As Merk watched him go, it was dawning on him that there were many things forbidden here in this tower, many secrets he might not ever get to know.

Merk went to follow, but suddenly, a large beefy hand slapped him in the chest, stopping him. He looked over to see another warrior appear, exiting another hidden door, while the first warrior continued on, disappearing into the upper levels. The new warrior towered over Merk, wearing the same golden chain mail.

“You’ll serve on this level,” he said, gruff, “with the rest of them. I am your commander. Vicor.”

His new commander, a thin man with a face as hard as stone, looked as if he should not be crossed. Vicor turned and gestured to an open door in the wall, and Merk entered cautiously, wondering what this place was as he twisted and turned down narrow stone halls. They walked in silence, passing through open arches carved of stone door, and the hall opened into an expansive room with a high tapered ceiling, stone floors and walls, and lit by sunlight filtering in through narrow, tapered windows. Merk was startled to see dozens of faces staring back at him, faces of warriors, some thin, some muscular, all with hard, unflinching eyes, all alight with a sense of duty, of purpose. They were all spread throughout the room, each stationed before a window, and they all, wearing the golden chainmail, turned and looked out at the stranger entering their room.

Merk felt self-conscious and he stared back at the men in the awkward silence.

Beside him, Vicor cleared his throat.

“The brothers don’t trust you,” he said to Merk. “They might never trust you. And you might never trust them. Respect is not handed out here, and there are no second chances.”

“What is it that I am to do?” Merk asked, baffled.

“The same as these men,” Vicor replied gruffly. “You will watch.”

Merk scanned the curved stone room and at the far end, perhaps fifty feet away, he saw an open window at which sat no warrior. Vicor walked slowly toward it and Merk followed, passing the warriors, all watching as he went, then turning back to their windows. It was a strange feeling to be among these men, yet to not be a part of them. Not yet. Merk had always fought alone, and he did not know what it was like to belong to a group.

As he passed and surveyed them, he felt these were all, like he, broken men, men with nowhere else to go, with no other life purpose. Men who had made this stone tower home. Men like him.

As he neared his station, Merk noticed the final man he passed looked different than the others. He appeared to be a boy, perhaps eighteen, with the smoothest and fairest skin Merk had ever seen, and with long, fine blond hair down to his waist. He was thinner than the others, with little muscle, and he looked as if he had never been in battle. Yet, still, he had a proud look to him, and Merk was surprised to see him stare back with the same fierce, yellow eyes as the Watcher. The boy almost looked too frail to be here, too sensitive – yet at the same time, something in his look set Merk on edge.

“Do not underestimate Kyle,” Vicor said, looking over as Kyle turned back to his window. “He is the strongest among us, and the only true Watcher here. They sent him here to protect us.”

Merk found it hard to believe.

Merk reached his post and sat beside the tall window and looked out. There was a stone ledge to sit upon, and as he leaned forward and looked through the window, he was afforded a sweeping view of the landscape below. He saw the barren peninsula of Ur, the treetops of the distant forest, and beyond that, the ocean and sky. He felt as if he could see all of Escalon here.

“Is that all?” Merk asked, surprised. “I just sit here and watch?”

Vicor grinned.

“Your duties have not even begun.”

Merk frowned, disappointed.

“I have not come all this way to sit in a tower,” Merk said, to the looks of some others. “How am I to defend from up here? Can I not patrol on the ground?”

Vicor smirked.

“You see far more up here than you can below,” he replied.

“And if I see something?” Merk asked.

“Sound the bell,” he said.

He nodded and Merk saw a bell perched beside the window.

“There have been many attacks against our tower over the centuries,” Vicor continued. “All have failed – because of us. We are the Watchers, the last line of defense. All of Escalon needs us – and there are many ways to defend a tower.”

Merk watched him go, and as he settled into his station, in the silence, he wondered: just what had he signed himself up for?

CHAPTER SIX

Duncan led his men as they galloped through the moonlit night, across the snowy plains of Escalon, hour passing hour as they charged, somewhere on the horizon, for Andros. The night ride brought back memories, of past battles, of his time in Andros, of serving the old King; he found himself getting lost in thoughts, memories blending with the present blending with fantasies for the future, until he no longer knew what was real. As usual, his thoughts drifted to his daughter.

Kyra. Where are you? he wondered.

Duncan prayed she was safe, that she was advancing in her training, and that they would soon reunite for good. Would she be able to summon Theos again? he wondered. If not, he did not know if they could win this war that she had begun.

The incessant sound of horses, of armor, filled the night, Duncan barely feeling the cold, his heart warm from their victory, from their momentum, from the growing army behind him, and from anticipation. Finally, after all these years, he felt the tide turning his way again. He knew Andros would be heavily guarded with a sitting, professional army, that they would be vastly outnumbered, that the capital would be fortified, and that they did not have the manpower to stage a siege. He knew that the battle of his life awaited him, one that would determine the fate of Escalon. Yet that was the weight of honor.

Duncan also knew that he and his men had cause on his side, had desire, purpose – and most of all, speed and the power of surprise. The Pandesians would never expect an attack on the capital, not by a subjugated people, and certainly not at night.

Finally, as the first traces of dawn began to break, the sky still a bluish haze, Duncan saw in the distance, just beginning to appear, the familiar contours of the capital. It was a sight he had not expected to see again in his lifetime – and one that made his heart beat faster. Memories rushed back, of all the years he had lived there, had served the King and the land loyally. He recalled Escalon in the height of its glory, a proud, free nation, one that had seemed undefeatable.

Yet seeing it also brought back bitter memories: the weak King's betrayal of his people, his surrendering of the capital, of Escalon. He recalled he and all the great warlords dispersing, being forced to leave in shame, all exiled to their own strongholds, all across Escalon. Seeing the majestic contours of the city brought rushing back to him longing and nostalgia and fear and hope all at the same moment. Those were the contours that had shaped his life, the outline of the most magnificent city in Escalon, ruled by kings for centuries, stretching so far it was hard to see where they ended. Duncan breathed deep as he saw the familiar parapets and domes and spires, all of which were deeply ingrained in his soul. In some ways, it was like returning home – except Duncan was not the defeated, loyal commander he had once been. Now he was stronger, willing to answer to no one, and he had an army in tow.

In the breaking dawn the city was still lit by torches, the remnant of the night's watch, just beginning to shake off the long night in the morning mist, and as Duncan neared, another sight came into view which made his heart churn: the blue and yellow banners of Pandesia, flying proudly over the battlements of Andros. It made him sick – and gave him a fresh wave of determination.

Duncan immediately scanned the gates, and his heart soared to see it was guarded by only a skeleton crew. He breathed a sigh of relief. If the Pandesians knew they were coming, thousands of soldiers would be guarding it – and Duncan and his men would stand no chance. But that told him they did not know. The thousands of Pandesian soldiers stationed there must still be asleep. Duncan and his men, luckily, had advanced quickly enough to just have a chance.

This element of surprise, Duncan knew, would be their only advantage, the only thing giving them a chance to take the massive capital, with its layers of battlements, designed to withstand an army. That – and Duncan's insider knowledge of its fortifications and weak points. Battles, he knew,

had been won with less. Duncan studied the city's entrance, and he knew where he'd have to attack first if they stood any chance of victory.

"Whoever controls those gates controls the capital!" Duncan shouted to Kavos and his other commanders. "They must not close – we cannot let them close, whatever it costs. If they do, we shall be sealed out for good. I will take a small force with me and make with all speed for the gates. You," he said, gesturing to Kavos, Bramthos and Seavig, "lead the rest of our men to the garrisons and protect our flank against the soldiers as they emerge."

Kavos shook his head.

"Charging those gates with a small force is reckless," he shouted. "You'll be surrounded, and if I am fighting the garrisons, I cannot protect your back. It's suicide."

Duncan smiled.

"And that is why I chose this task for myself."

Duncan kicked his horse and rode out before the others, heading for the gates, while Anvin, Arthfael and a dozen of his closest commanders, men who knew Andros as well as he, men he had fought with his entire life, rode to follow him, as he knew they would. They all veered for the city gates at full speed, while behind them, Duncan saw, out of the corner of his eye, Kavos, Bramthos, Seavig, and the bulk of their army veer off for the Pandesian garrisons.

Duncan, heart slamming, knowing he had to reach the gate before it was too late, lowered his head and urged his horse faster. They galloped down the center of the road, over King's Bridge, the hooves clapping on the wood, and Duncan felt the thrill of battle drawing near. As dawn broke, Duncan saw the startled face of the first Pandesian to spot them, a young soldier standing guard sleepily on the bridge, blinking, looking out, his face spreading with terror. Duncan closed the gap, reached him, brought down his sword, and in one swift move slashed him before he could raise his shield.

The battle had begun.

Anvin, Arthfael, and the others hurled spears, felling a half-dozen Pandesian soldiers who turned their way. They all continued to gallop, none of them pausing, all of them knowing it meant their life. They raced over the bridge just like that, all charging for the wide-open gates to Andros.

Still a good hundred yards away, Duncan looked up at the legendary gates of Andros, a hundred feet high, carved of gold, ten feet thick, and he knew that, if sealed, the city would be impregnable. It would take professional siege equipment, none of which he had, and many months, and many men pounding at the gates – which he did not have, either. Those gates had never given, despite centuries of assaults. If he did not reach them in time, all was lost.

Duncan surveyed the mere dozen Pandesian soldiers guarding it, the guard duty light, the men sleepy at dawn and none expecting an attack, and he urged his horse faster, knowing his time was limited. He had to reach them before they spotted him; he needed but one more minute to assure his survival.

Suddenly, though, a great horn sounded, and Duncan's heart dropped as he looked up to see, high atop the parapets, a Pandesian watchman staring down, sounding a horn of warning again and again. The sound echoed throughout the city walls, and Duncan's heart sank as he knew that any advantage he may have had was lost. He had underestimated the enemy.

The Pandesian soldiers at the gate broke into action. They rushed forward and put their shoulders into the gates, six men on each side, pushing with all their might to close them. At the same time, four more soldiers turned massive cranks on either side, while four more pulled at chains, two on each side. With a great creaking, the bars began to shut. Duncan watched with desperation, feeling as if they were shutting a coffin on his heart.

"FASTER!" he urged his horse.

They all picked up speed, in one final, mad dash. As they neared, a few of his men hurled spears at the men at the gate in a desperate effort – but they were still too far, and the spears fell short.

Duncan urged his horse like never before, riding out recklessly before the others, and as he neared the closing gates, he suddenly felt something whiz by him. He realized it was a javelin and he looked up to see soldiers atop the parapets hurling them downward. Duncan heard a cry and looked over to see one of his men, a brave warrior he had fought beside for years, impaled and go flying backwards off his horse, dead.

Duncan pushed harder, throwing caution to the wind as he aimed for the closing doors. He was perhaps twenty yards away and the doors were just feet away from closing forever. No matter what, even if it meant his own death, he could not let that happen.

In a final suicide charge, Duncan threw himself off his horse, diving for the open crack just as the gates were closing. He reached out with his sword as he did and thrust it forward, and he managed to jam it in the crack just before it closed. His sword bent – but did not break. That slice of steel, Duncan knew, was the only thing keeping those gates from closing for good, the only thing keeping the capital open, the only thing keeping all of Escalon from being lost.

The shocked Pandesian soldiers, realizing their gate wasn't closing, looked down at Duncan's sword, amazed. They charged, all rushing for it, and Duncan knew that, even if it cost his life, he could not let that happen.

Still winded from his fall from his horse, his ribs aching, Duncan tried to roll out of the way of the first soldier pouncing for him, but he could not move quickly enough. He saw the raised sword behind him and braced himself for the deadly blow – when suddenly, the soldier cried out and Duncan turned, puzzled, as he heard a neighing and saw his warhorse leaning back and kicking his foe in the chest, right before he could stab Duncan. The soldier went flying back, ribs cracking, and landed on his back, unconscious. Duncan looked up at his horse with gratitude, realizing that he had, once again, saved his life.

Given the time he needed, Duncan rolled to his feet, drew his spare sword, and prepared as the group of soldiers descended upon him. The first soldier slashed down at him with his sword and Duncan blocked it overhead, spun around, and slashed him across the back of the shoulder, sending him to the ground. Duncan stepped forward and stabbed the next soldier in the gut before he could reach him, then jumped over his falling body and with both feet kicked the next one in the chest, knocking him to his back. He ducked as another soldier swung for him, then spun around and slashed him in the back.

Duncan, distracted by his attackers, spun as he sensed motion behind him and saw a Pandesian grabbing the sword wedged between the gates and yanking it out by its hilt. Realizing there was no time, Duncan turned, took aim, and threw his sword. It spun end over end and lodged itself in the man's throat, right before he could extract his long sword. He had saved the gate – but it had left him defenseless.

Duncan charged for the gate, hoping to widen the crack – but as he did, a soldier tackled him from behind and drove him down to the ground. His back exposed, Duncan knew he was in danger. There was little he could do as the Pandesian behind him raised a spear high to impale his back.

A shout filled the air as Duncan saw, out of the corner of his eye, Anvin rush forward, swing his mace and smash the soldier on his wrist, knocking the spear from his hand just before it impaled Duncan. Anvin then jumped off his horse and tackled the man down to the ground – and at the same time, Arthfael and the others arrived, attacking the other group of soldiers heading for Duncan.

Freed up, Duncan took stock and saw the soldiers guarding the gate were dead, the gate barely being kept open by his sword, and as he saw, out of the corner of his eye, hundreds of Pandesian soldiers beginning to emerge from the barracks in the dawn and rush out to fight Kavos, Bramthos, Seavig, and their men. He knew time was short. Even with Kavos and his men engaging them, enough would slip through and make their way for the gate, and if Duncan did not control these gates soon, all of his men would be finished.

Duncan dodged as yet another spear was hailed down upon him from the parapets. He rushed over and grabbed a bow and arrow from a felled soldier, leaned back, took aim, and fired at a Pandesian high at the top as he leaned over and looked down with a spear. The boy shrieked and fell, impaled by the arrow, clearly not expecting that. He plummeted down to earth and landed beside Duncan with a crash, Duncan stepping out of the way so as not to be killed by the body. Duncan took particular satisfaction to see this boy was the hornblower.

“THE GATES!” Duncan shouted to his men, as they finished felling the remaining soldiers.

His men rallied, dismounting, rushing up beside him and helping him yank open the massive gates. They yanked with all their might – yet they barely budged. More of his men joined in, and as they all yanked together, slowly, one began to move. One inch at a time, it opened, and soon there was enough space for Duncan to put his foot in the gap.

Duncan squeezed his shoulders in the gap, and he pushed with all his might, grunting, arms shaking. Sweat poured down his face, despite the morning cold, as he looked out and saw the flood of soldiers streaming out of the garrison. Most faced off with Kavos, Bramthos and their men, but enough skirted around them and headed his way. A sudden shriek rang through the dawn and Duncan saw one of his men beside him, a good commander, a loyal man, fall to the ground. He saw a spear in his back, and he looked up to see the Pandesians were in throwing range.

More Pandesians raised spears to hurl their way, and Duncan braced himself, realizing they were not going to make it through the gate in time – when suddenly, to his surprise, the soldiers stumbled and fell, face-first. He looked up to see arrows and swords in their backs, and he felt a rush of gratitude to see Bramthos and Seavig leading a hundred men, forking off from Kavos, who faced off with the garrison, and turning back to aid him.

Duncan redoubled his efforts, pushing with all his might as Anvin and Arthfael squeezed in beside him, knowing he had to get the gap wide enough for his men to charge through. Finally, as more of his men squeezed in, they dug their feet into the snowy ground and began to walk. Duncan took step after step, until finally, with a groaning, the gates opened halfway.

There came a victorious shout behind him and Duncan turned to see Bramthos and Seavig leading the hundred men forward on horseback, all of them rushing for the open gate. Duncan retrieved his sword, raised it high and charged, leading the men through the open gates, stepping foot inside the capital, throwing all caution to the wind.

With spears and arrows still raining down on them, Duncan knew at once that they had to gain control of the parapets, which were also equipped with catapults which could do unlimited damage to his men below. He looked up at the battlements, debating the best way to ascend, when suddenly he heard another shout and looked ahead to see a large force of Pandesian soldiers rallying from within the city and charging their way.

Duncan faced them boldly.

“MEN OF ESCALON, WHO HAS INHABITED OUR PRECIOUS CAPITAL!?” he shouted.

His men all shouted and charged behind him as Duncan remounted his horse and led them to greet the soldiers.

There followed a great clash of arms as soldier met soldier, horse met horse, and Duncan and his hundred men attacked the hundred Pandesian soldiers. Duncan sensed that the Pandesians were caught off guard in the dawn, had smelled blood in the water when they had spotted Duncan and his few men – but had not expected such a huge number of reinforcements behind Duncan. He could see their eyes widen at the sight of Bramthos, Seavig, and all their men pouring through the city gates.

Duncan raised his sword and blocked a sword slash, stabbed a soldier in the gut, spun, and bashed another in the head with his shield, then grabbed the spear from his harness and hurled it at another. He cut a path fearlessly through the crowd, felling men left and right, as all around him, Anvin, Arthfael, Bramthos, Seavig, and their men did the same. It felt good to be back inside the capital again, these streets he once knew so well – and it felt even better to be ridding it of Pandesians.

Soon dozens of Pandesians piled up at their feet, all unable to stop the tide of Duncan and his men, like a wave crashing through the capital at dawn. Duncan and his men had too much at stake, had come too far, and these men guarding these streets were far from home, demoralized, their cause weak, their leaders far away, and unprepared. After all, they had never met in battle the true warriors of Escalon. As the tide turned, the Pandesian soldiers who remained turned and fled, giving up – and Duncan and his men rode faster, hunting them down, felling them with arrows and spears until there were none left.

With the path into the capital cleared, and with arrows and spears still hailing down, Duncan turned and focused again on the parapets, as another one of his men fell from his horse, an arrow through his shoulder. They needed the parapets, the high ground, not only to stop the arrows, but to aid Kavos; after all, Kavos was still outnumbered out there, beyond the walls, and he would need Duncan's help at the parapets, with the catapults, if he were to stand any chance of surviving.

“TO THE HEIGHTS!” Duncan shouted.

Duncan's men cheered and followed as he signaled to them, forking off, half following him and half following Bramthos and Seavig to the far side of the courtyard, to ascend from the other side. Duncan headed for the stone steps that lined the side walls, leading to the upper parapets. Guarding them were a dozen soldiers, and they looked up, wide-eyed, at the coming assault. Duncan bore down on them and he and his men hurled spears, killing them all before they could even raise their shields. There was no time left to waste.

They reached the steps and Duncan dismounted and led the charge, single file, up the steps. He looked up with a start to see Pandesian soldiers running down to greet him, spears raised high, ready to throw; he knew they would have the advantage, racing downward, and, not wanting to waste time in hand-to-hand combat as spears were hailing down upon him, he thought quick.

“ARROWS!” Duncan commanded the men behind him.

Duncan ducked, hitting the ground, and a moment later he felt arrows whiz overhead as his men followed his command, stepping forward and firing. Duncan looked up and watched in satisfaction as the group of soldiers racing down the narrow stone staircase stumbled and fell off the side of the steps, crying out as they plummeted and landed on the stone courtyard far below.

Duncan continued running up the steps, tackling a soldier as more came charging and knocking him over the edge. He spun around and bashed another with his shield, sending him flying, too, then came straight up with his sword and stabbed another through the chin.

But that left Duncan vulnerable on the narrow staircase, and a Pandesian jumped him from behind and dragged him to the edge. Duncan held on for dear life, clawing at the stone, unable to grab hold and about to fall over – when suddenly the man atop him went limp and slumped over his shoulder, over the edge, dead. Duncan saw a sword in his back, and he turned to see Arthfael lifting him back to his feet.

Duncan continued charging, grateful to have his men at his back, and he ascended level after level, avoiding spears and arrows, blocking some with his shield, until finally he reached the parapets. At the top sat a broad, stone plateau, perhaps ten yards wide, spanning the top of the gates, and it was packed with Pandesian soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, all armed with arrows, spears, javelins, and all in the midst of raining down weapons on Kavos's men below. As Duncan arrived with his men, they stopped attacking Kavos, and instead turned to fight him. At the same time, Seavig and the other contingent of men finished scaling the steps on the far side of the courtyard, and attacked the soldiers from the far end. They were sandwiching them in, with nowhere to go.

The fighting was thick, hand-to-hand, as men on all sides fought for every precious inch. Duncan raised his shield and his sword, and as clanging filled the air, the fighting bloody, hand to hand, he hacked through one man at a time. Duncan dodged, avoiding slashes, and lowered his shoulder and shoved more than one man over the edge, shrieking to his death far below, knowing that sometimes, one's best weapons were one's hands.

He cried out in pain as he received a slash in the stomach, but luckily he twisted and it grazed him. As the soldier came in for a death blow, Duncan, with no room to maneuver, headbutted him, making him drop his sword. He then kneed him, reached over, grabbed hold of him, and threw him over the edge.

Duncan fought and fought, every foot hard won, as the sun rose higher and the sweat stung his eyes. His men grunted and cried out in pain on all sides, as Duncan's shoulders grew tired with killing.

As he gasped for breath, covered in his foe's blood, Duncan took one final step forward and raised his sword – and was shocked to see Bramthos and Seavig and their men facing him. He turned and surveyed all the dead bodies and realized, amazed, that they had done it – they had cleared the parapets.

There arose a shout of victory as all their men met in the middle.

Yet Duncan knew the situation was still urgent.

“ARROWS!” he shouted.

He immediately looked down at Kavos's men and saw a great battle being waged below, in the courtyard, as thousands more Pandesian soldiers rushed out of the garrisons to meet them. Kavos was slowly being surrounded on all sides.

Duncan's men raised bows from the fallen, took aim over the walls, and fired down at the Pandesians, Duncan joining in. The Pandesians never expected to be fired upon from the capital, and they fell by the dozens, dropping to the ground, Kavos's men spared from deathly blows. Pandesians began to drop all around Kavos, and soon a great panic ensued, as they realized Duncan controlled the heights. Sandwiched between Duncan and Kavos, they had nowhere left to flee.

Duncan would not give them time to regroup.

“SPEARS!” he commanded.

Duncan grabbed one himself and hurled it down, then another, and another, raiding the huge reserve of weapons left here atop the parapets, designed to fend off invaders of Andros.

As the Pandesians began to waver, Duncan knew he had to do something definitive to finish them off.

“CATAPULTS!” he yelled.

His men rushed to the catapults left atop these battlements and pulled on the great ropes, turning cranks as they got them into position. They placed the boulders inside and awaited his command. Duncan walked up and down the line and adjusted positions so that the boulders would miss Kavos's men and find the perfect target.

“FIRE!” he called out.

Dozens of boulders flew through the air, and Duncan watched with satisfaction as they plummeted down and battered the stone garrisons, killing dozens of Pandesians at a time as they poured out, like ants, to fight Kavos's men. The sounds echoed throughout the courtyard, stunning the Pandesians and increasing their panic. As clouds of dust and debris arose, they turned and turned, unsure which way to fight.

Kavos, veteran warrior that he was, took advantage of their hesitation. He rallied his men and charged forward with a new momentum, and while the Pandesians wavered, he hacked his way through their ranks.

Bodies fell left and right, the Pandesian camp in disarray, and soon they turned and fled in every direction. Kavos hunted each and every one down. It was a slaughter.

By the time the sun had fully risen, all the Pandesians lay on the ground, lifeless.

As silence fell, Duncan looked out, stunned, filled with a dawning sense of victory, as he began to realize that they had done it. They had taken the capital.

As his men shouted all around him, claspings his shoulders, cheering and embracing, Duncan wiped sweat from his eyes, still breathing hard, and began to let it sink in: Andros was free.

The capital was theirs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alec craned his neck and looked up, dazzled, as he passed through the soaring arched gates of Ur, jostled by mobs of people on all sides. He marched through, Marco beside him, their faces still covered in dirt from their endless trek through the Plain of Thorns, and he stared up at the soaring marble arch, appearing to be a hundred feet high. He looked at the ancient, granite temple walls on either side of him, and it amazed him that he was walking through a cutout in a temple, serving also as the city entrance. Alec saw many worshippers kneeling before its walls, a strange mix with all the hustle and bustle of commerce here, and it caused him to reflect. He had once prayed to the gods of Escalon – but now he prayed to none. What living god, he wondered, could have allowed his family to die? The only god he could serve now was the god of vengeance – and it was a god he was determined to serve with all his heart.

Alec, overwhelmed by the stimulation all around him, saw right away that this city was unlike any place he had ever been, so unlike the tiny village where he had been raised. For the first time since the death of his family, he felt himself being jolted back to life. This place was so startling, so alive, it was hard to enter and not be distracted. He felt a stirring of purpose as he realized, inside these gates, were others like him, like-minded friends of Marco, set on vengeance against Pandesia. He looked up at it all in wonder, all the people of different garb and manner and race, all rushing in every direction. It was a true cosmopolitan city.

“Keep your head down,” Marco hissed to him, as they passed through the eastern gate, merging into the mobs.

Marco nudged him.

“There.” Marco nodded to a group of Pandesian soldiers. “They’re checking faces. I am sure they search for ours.”

Alec reflexively tightened his grip on his dagger, and Marco reached over and grabbed his wrist firmly.

“Not here, my friend,” Marco cautioned. “This is no country village but a city of war. Kill two Pandesians at the gate, and an army will follow.”

Marco stared at him with intensity.

“Would you rather kill two?” he pressed. “Or two thousand?”

Alec, realizing the wisdom in his friend’s words, released his grip on his dagger, summoning all his will to quell his passion for vengeance.

“There will be many chances, my friend,” Marco said, as they pressed on through the crowd, heads lowered. “My friends are here, and the resistance is strong.”

They merged with the throng passing through the gate, and Alec lowered his eyes so the Pandesians would not see them.

“Hey you!” a Pandesian barked. Alec felt his heart pounding as he kept his head down.

They rushed his way, and he tightened his grip on his dagger, preparing. But they stopped a boy beside him, instead, roughly grabbing his shoulder and checking his face. Alec breathed deep, relieved it was not him, and he passed through the gate quickly, undetected.

They finally entered the city square, and as Alec pulled back his hood and looked inside the city, he was in awe at the sight before him. There, before him, stretched all the architectural magnificence and bustle of Ur. The city seemed to be alive, pulsing, shining in the sun, seeming to actually sparkle. At first Alec could not understand why, and then he realized: the water. Everywhere was water, the city laced with canals, blue water sparkling in the morning sun, making the city feel as if it were one with the sea. The canals were filled with every manner of vessel – rowboats, canoes, sailing boats – even sleek black warships sailing the yellow and blue banners of Pandesia. The canals were bordered by cobblestone streets, ancient stone, worn smooth, being tread on by thousands of

people in every manner of wardrobe. Alec saw knights, soldiers, civilians, traders, peasants, beggars, jugglers, merchants, farmers and many other folk, all mingling together. Many wore colors Marco had never seen, clearly visitors from across the sea, visitors from around the world who were visiting Ur, Escalon's international port. Indeed, bright, foreign colors and insignias were flown by all the different ships cramming the canal, as if the whole world had come together at one place.

"The cliffs surrounding Escalon are so high, they are what keep our land impregnable," Marco explained as they walked. "Ur has the only beach, the only harbor for large vessels wishing to beach. Escalon has other harbors, but none as easy to access. So when they wish to visit us, they all come here," he added with a wave of his hand, looking out at all the people, all the ships.

"It is both a good and a bad thing," he continued. "It brings us trade and commerce from all four corners of the kingdom."

"And the bad?" Alec asked, as they squeezed their way through the crowd and Marco stopped to purchase a stick of meat.

"It leaves Ur prone to attack by sea," he replied. "It is a natural spot for an invasion."

Alec studied the city's skyline in awe, taking in all the steeples, the endless array of tall buildings. He had never seen anything like it.

"And the towers?" he asked, looking up at a series of tall, square towers crowned with parapets, sticking up over the city and facing the sea.

"They were built to watch the sea," Marco answered. "Against invasion. Though, with the weak King's surrender, little good it did us."

Alec wondered.

"And if he hadn't surrendered?" Alec asked. "Could Ur fend off an attack by sea?"

Alec shrugged.

"I am no commander," he said. "But I know we have ways. We could certainly fend off pirates and raiders. A fleet is another story. But in its thousand-year history, Ur has never fallen – and that tells you something."

Distant bells tolled in the air as they continued walking, mingling with the sound of seagulls overhead, circling, squawking. As they pushed through the mobs, Alec found his stomach growling as he smelled all manner of food in the air. His eyes widened as they passed rows of merchant booths, all lined with goods. He saw exotic objects and delicacies he had never laid eyes upon before, and he marveled at this cosmopolitan city life. Everything was faster here, everyone in such a rush, the people bustling so quickly that he could barely take it all in before they passed him by. It made him realize what a small town he had come from.

Alec stared at a vendor selling the largest red fruits he had ever seen, and he reached into his pocket to buy one – when he felt his shoulder bumped hard from the side.

He spun to see a large man, older, towering over him, with a black scruffy beard, scowling down. He had a foreign face which Alec could not recognize, and he cursed in a language Alec did not understand. The man then shoved him, sending Alec, to his surprise, flying backwards into a stall, crashing down to the street.

"There's no need for that," Marco said, stepping forward and putting out a hand to stop the man.

But Alec, normally passive, felt a new sense of rage. It was an unfamiliar feeling, a rage smoldering inside him ever since the death of his family, a rage which needed an outlet. He could not control himself. He jumped to his feet and lunged forward, and, with a strength he didn't know he had, punched the man in the face, knocking him back, sending him crashing over another stall.

Alec stood there, amazed that he had knocked down the much bigger man, while Marco stood beside him, wide-eyed, too.

A commotion erupted in the marketplace as the man's oafish friends began to run over, while a group of Pandesian soldiers came running over from the other side of the square. Marco looked panicked, and Alec knew they were in a precarious position.

“This way!” Marco urged, grabbing Alec and yanking him roughly.

As the oaf gained his feet and the Pandesians closed in, Alec and Marco ran through the streets, Alec following his friend as he navigated this city he knew so well, taking shortcuts, weaving in and out between stalls and making sharp turns down alleyways. Alec could barely keep up with all the sharp zigzags. Yet when he turned and looked over his shoulder, he saw the large group closing in and knew they had a fight on their hands they could not win.

“Here!” Marco yelled.

Alec watched Marco jump off the edge of the canal, and without thinking he followed him, expecting to land in water.

He was surprised, though, not to hear a splash, and to instead find himself landing on a small stone ledge down at the bottom, one he had not detected from above. Marco, breathing hard, knocked four times on an anonymous wood door, built into the stone, beneath the street – and a second later the door opened and Alec and Marco were pulled into the blackness, the door slamming behind them. Before it did, Alec saw men running toward the edge of the canal, questioning, unable to see below as the door closed.

Alec found himself underground, in a dark, subterranean canal, and he ran, baffled, splashing in water up to his ankles. They twisted and turned, and soon there came sunlight again.

Alec saw they were in a large stone room, beneath the city streets, sunlight filtering in from grates high above, and he looked over in amazement to see himself surrounded by several boys their age, all with faces covered in dirt and smiling back good-naturedly. They all stopped, breathing hard, and Marco smiled and greeted his friends.

“Marco,” they said, embracing him.

“Jun, Saro, Bagi,” Marco replied.

They each stepped forward and he embraced each one, grinning, these men clearly like brothers to him. They were each about their age, as tall as Marco, broad-shouldered, with tough faces and the looks of boys who had managed to survive their whole lives on the streets. They were boys who, clearly, had had to make a way for themselves.

Marco pulled Alec forward.

“This,” he announced, “is Alec. He is one of us now.”

One of us. Alec liked the sound of that. It felt good to belong somewhere.

They each clasped forearms with him, and one of them, the tallest, Bagi, shook his head and grinned.

“So you are the one who started all that excitement?” he asked with a smile.

Alec smiled sheepishly back.

“The guy pushed me,” Alec said.

The others all laughed.

“Good enough a reason as any to risk our lives on this day,” Saro replied, sincere.

“You’re in a city now, country boy,” Jun said sternly, unsmiling, unlike the others. “You could have got us all killed. That was stupid. Here, people don’t care – they’ll shove you – and a whole lot worse. Keep your head down and watch where you’re going. If someone bumps you, turn away or you may find a dagger in your back. You got lucky this time. This is Ur. You never know who’s crossing the street, and people here will cut you for any reason – and some, for no reason at all.”

His newfound friends suddenly turned and headed off, deeper into the cavernous tunnels, and Alec hurried to catch up as Marco joined them. They all seemed to know this place by heart, even in the dim light, twisting and turning with ease through the underground chambers, water dripping and echoing all around them. They all had clearly grown up here. It made Alec feel inadequate, having grown up in Soli, seeing this place which was so worldly, these boys who were so street smart. They had all clearly suffered trials and hardships which Alec could never imagine. They were a rough lot, having clearly been in more than a few altercations, and above all, they appeared to be survivors.

After turning down a series of alleys, the boys ascended a steep metal ladder, and soon Alec found himself back above ground, on the streets, in a different part of Ur, emerging into another bustling crowd. Alec spun and looked around, seeing a big town square with a copper fountain in its center, not recognizing it, barely able to keep track of all the neighborhoods of this sprawling city.

The boys stopped before a low, squat, anonymous building made of stone, similar to all the others, with its low, slanted red-tiled roof. Bagi knocked twice and a moment later the anonymous rusted door opened. They all quickly filed inside, then it slammed closed behind them.

Alec found himself in a dim room, lit only by the sunlight streaming in through windows high above, and he turned as he recognized the sound of hammers striking anvils, and surveyed the room with interest. He heard the hiss of a forge, saw the familiar clouds of steam, and he immediately felt at home. He did not have to look around to know he was in a forge, and that it was filled with smiths working on weapons. His heart lifted with excitement.

A tall, thin man with a short beard, perhaps in his forties, face blackened from soot, wiped his hands on his apron and approached. He nodded at Marco's friends with a look of respect, and they nodded back.

"Fervil," Marco said.

Fervil turned and saw Marco, and his face lit up. He stepped forward and embraced him.

"I thought you'd gone to The Flames," he said.

Marco grinned back.

"Not anymore," he replied.

"You boys ready to work?" he added. Then he looked over at Alec. "And who do we have here?"

"My friend," Marco replied. "Alec. A fine smith, and eager to join our cause."

"Is he now?" Fervil asked skeptically.

He surveyed Alec with harsh eyes, looking him up and down as if he were useless.

"I doubt that," he replied, "from the looks of him. Looks awful young to me. But we can put him to work collecting our scraps. Take this," he said, reaching over and handing Alec a bucket full of metal scrap. "I'll let you know if I need more from you."

Alec reddened, indignant. He did not know why this man had taken such a dislike to him – perhaps he was threatened. He could sense the forge grow quiet, could sense the other boys watching. In many ways, this man reminded him of his father, and that only increased Alec's anger.

Still, he fumed inside, no longer willing, since the death of his family, to tolerate anything he had before.

As the others turned to walk away, Alec dropped the bucket of metal and it clanged loudly on the stone floor. The others all turned around, stunned, and the forge grew quiet, as the other boys stopped to watch the confrontation.

"Get the hell out of my shop!" Fervil snarled.

Alec ignored him; instead, he stepped past him, to the closest table, picked up a long sword, held it out straight, and examined it.

"This your handiwork?" Alec asked.

"And who are you to be asking questions of me?" Fervil demanded.

"Is it?" Marco pressed, sticking up for his friend.

"It is," Fervil answered defensively.

Alec nodded.

"It's junk," he concluded.

There came a gasp in the room.

Fervil stood to his full height and scowled back, livid.

"You boys can leave now," he snarled. "All of you. I have enough smiths in here."

Alec stood his ground.

"And none worth a damn," he countered.

Fervil turned red and stepped forward threateningly, and Marco put a hand between them.

“We’ll leave,” Marco said.

Alec suddenly lowered the sword’s tip to the ground, raised his foot high, and with one clean kick, shattered it in two.

Shards flew everywhere, stunning the room.

“Should a good sword do that?” Alec asked with a wry smile.

Fervil shouted and charged Alec – and as he neared, Alec held out the jagged end of the broken blade, and Fervil stopped in his tracks.

The other boys, seeing the confrontation, drew swords and rushed forward to defend Fervil, while Marco and his friends drew theirs around Alec. All the boys stood there, facing off with each other in a tense standoff.

“What are you doing?” Marco asked Alec. “We all share the same cause. This is madness.”

“And that is why I cannot let them fight with junk,” Alec replied.

Alec threw down the broken sword, reached over, and slowly drew a long sword from his belt.

“Here is my handiwork,” Alec said loudly. “I crafted it myself in my father’s forge. A finer work you will never find.”

Alec suddenly turned the sword, grabbed the blade, and held it out, hilt first, to Fervil.

In the tense silence, Fervil looked down, clearly not expecting this. He snatched the hilt, leaving Alec defenseless, and for a moment he seemed to contemplate stabbing Alec with it.

Yet Alec stood there proudly, unafraid.

Slowly, Fervil’s face softened, clearly realizing Alec had left himself defenseless, and looking at him with more respect. He looked down and examined the sword. He weighed it in his hand and held it up to the light, and finally, after a long time, he looked back at Alec, impressed.

“Your work?” he asked, disbelief in his voice.

Alec nodded.

“And I can forge many more,” he replied.

He stepped forward and looked at Fervil, intensity in his eyes.

“I want to kill Pandesians,” Alec replied. “And I want to do it with real weapons.”

A long, thick silence lingered over the room, until finally Fervil slowly shook his head and smiled.

He lowered the sword and held out an arm, and Alec clasped it. Slowly, all the boys lowered their weapons.

“I suppose,” Fervil said, his grin broadening, “we can find a spot for you.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aidan trekked down the lonely forest road, as far from anywhere as he'd ever been, feeling utterly alone in the world. If it were not for his Wood Dog beside him he would be forlorn, hopeless; but White gave him strength, even as grievously wounded as he was, as Aidan ran his hand along his short, white fur. They both limped, each wounded from their encounters with that savage cart driver, every step they took painful as the sky grew dark. With each limping step Aidan took, he vowed that if he ever laid eyes on that man again, he'd kill him with his own hands.

White whined beside him, and Aidan reached over and stroked his head, the dog nearly as tall as him, more wild beast than dog. Aidan was grateful not only for his companionship but for the fact that he had saved his life. He had rescued White because something inside him would not let him turn away – and yet he had received the reward of his life in return. He would do it all over again, even if he knew it would mean his being dumped out here, in the midst of nowhere, on a certain course with starvation and death. It was still worth it.

White whined again, and Aidan shared his hunger pains.

"I know, White," Aidan said. "I'm hungry, too."

Aidan looked down at White's wounds, still seeping blood, and shook his head, feeling awful and helpless.

"I would do anything to help you," Aidan said. "I wish I knew how."

Aidan leaned over and kissed him on the head, his fur soft, and White leaned his head back into Aidan's. It was the embrace of two people on a death walk together. The sounds of wild creatures rose up in a symphony in the darkening forest, and Aidan felt his little legs burning, felt they couldn't go on much further, that they would die out here. They were still days from anywhere, and with night falling, they were vulnerable. White, as powerful as he was, was in no shape to fight off anything, and Aidan, weaponless, wounded, was no better. No carts had come by for hours, and none would, he suspected, for days.

Aidan thought of his father, out there somewhere, and felt he had let him down. If he were to die, Aidan wished he could have at least died at his father's side somewhere, fighting some great cause, or at home, in the comfort of Volis. Not here, alone in middle of nowhere. Each step seemed to drag him closer to death.

Aidan reflected on his short life thus far, pondering all the people he had known and loved, his father and brothers, and most of all, his sister, Kyra. He wondered about her, wondered where she was right now, if she had crossed Escalon, if she had survived the journey to Ur. He wondered if she ever thought of him, if she would be proud of him now, trying as he was to follow in her footsteps, trying to cross Escalon, too, in his own way, to help their father and the cause. He wondered if he would ever have lived to become a great warrior, and felt deeply saddened that he would never see her again.

Aidan felt himself sinking with each step he took, and there wasn't anything much he could do now except give in to his wounds and exhaustion. Going slower and slower, he looked over at White and saw him dragging his legs, too. Soon they would have to lie down and rest right here on this road, come what may. It was a frightful proposition.

Aidan thought he heard something, faint at first. He stopped and listened intently as White stopped, too, looking questioningly up at him. Aidan hoped, prayed. Had he been hearing things?

Then it came again. He was sure this time. A squeak of wheels. Of wood. Of iron. It was a cart.

Aidan spun around, his heart skipping a beat as he squinted into the fading light. At first he saw nothing. But then slowly, surely, he saw something come into view. A cart. Several carts.

Aidan's heart pounded in his throat, barely able to contain his excitement as he felt the rumble, heard the horses, and watched the caravan head his way. But then his excitement tempered as he wondered if they could be hostile. After all, who else would be traveling this long stretch of barren

road, so far from anywhere? He could not fight and White, snarling half-heartedly, did not have much fight left in him, either. They were at the mercy of whoever was approaching. It was a scary thought.

The sound grew deafening as the carts neared, and Aidan stood boldly in the center of the road, realizing he could not hide. He had to take his chances. Aidan thought he heard music as they neared, and it deepened his curiosity. They gained speed, and for a moment he wondered if they would run him over.

Then, suddenly, the entire caravan slowed and stopped before him, as he blocked the road. They stared down at him, the dust settling all around them, a large group, perhaps fifty people, and Aidan blinked up in surprise to see they were not soldiers. They did not appear to be hostile, either, he realized with a sigh of relief. He noticed the wagons filled with all sorts of people, men and women of all different ages. One appeared to be filled with musicians, holding various musical instruments; another was filled with men who appeared to be jugglers or comedians, their faces painted in bright colors and wearing brightly colored tights and tunics; another cart seemed to be filled with actors, men holding scrolls, clearly rehearsing scripts, dressed in dramatic costumes; while another was filled with women – barely clothed, their faces painted with too much makeup.

Aidan blushed and looked away, knowing he was too young to gape at such things.

“You, boy!” a voice called out. It was a man with a very long beard, bright red, down to his waist, a peculiar-looking man, with a friendly smile.

“Is this your road?” he asked in jest.

Laughter erupted from all the carts, and Aidan blushed.

“Who are you?” Aidan asked, baffled.

“I think the better question,” he called back, “is who are you?” They looked down in fear at White as he snarled. “And what on earth are you doing with a Wood Dog? Don’t you know they’ll kill you?” they asked, fear in their voices.

“Not this one,” Aidan replied. “Are you all...entertainers?” he asked, still curious, wondering what they were all doing out here.

“A kind word for it!” someone called from a cart, to raucous laughter.

“We are actors and players and jugglers and gamblers and musicians and clowns!” another man yelled.

“And liars and scoundrels and whores!” called out a woman, and they all laughed again.

Someone strummed on a harp, as the laughter increased, and Aidan blushed. A memory came rushing back of when he had once met such people, when he was younger and living in Andros. He recalled watching all the entertainers stream into the capital, entertaining the King; he remembered their brightly colored faces; their juggling knives; a man eating fur; a woman singing songs; and a bard reciting poems from memory that seemed to last for hours. He remembered being puzzled as to why anyone would choose such a life path, and not that of a warrior.

His eyes lit up as he suddenly realized.

“Andros!” Aidan called out. “You’re going to Andros!”

A man jumped off one of the carts and came toward him. He was a large man, perhaps in his forties, with a big belly, an unkempt brown beard, shaggy hair to match, and a warm and friendly smile. He walked over to Aidan and put a fatherly arm around his shoulder.

“You’re too young to be out here,” the man said. “I’d say you’re lost – but from the wounds on you and that dog of yours, I’m guessing it’s something more. Looks like you got yourself into some trouble and found yourself in too deep – and I’d guess,” he concluded, examining White warily, “that it had something to do with your helping this beast.”

Aidan remained quiet, not knowing how much to say, while White came over and licked the man’s hand, to Aidan’s surprise.

“Motley’s what I call myself,” the man added, reaching out a hand.

Aidan looked back warily, not shaking his hand but nodding back.

“Aidan is my name,” he replied.

“You two can stay out here and starve to death,” Motley continued, “but that’s not a very fun way to die. Me personally, I’d want to at least have a good meal first, then die some other way.”

The group broke into laughter, while Motley continued holding out his hand, looking at Aidan with kindness and compassion.

“I expect you two, wounded as you are, need a hand,” he added.

Aidan stood there proudly, not wanting to show weakness, as his father had taught him.

“We were doing just fine as we were,” Aidan said.

Motley led the group in a fresh round of laughter.

“Of course you were,” he replied.

Aidan looked suspiciously at the man’s hand.

“I am going to Andros,” Aidan said.

Motley smiled.

“As are we,” he replied. “And as luck would have it, the city is big enough to hold more than just us.”

Aidan hesitated.

“You’d be doing us a favor,” Motley added. “We can use the extra weight.”

“And the extra mouth to feed!” called out a fool from another crowd, to laughter.

Aidan looked back warily, too proud to accept, but finding a way to save face.

“Well...” Aidan said. “If I’d be doing you a favor...”

Aidan took Motley’s hand, and found himself pulled into his cart. He was stronger than Aidan expected, given that, from the way he dressed, he seemed to be a court fool; his hand, beefy and warm, was twice the size of Aidan’s.

Motley then reached over, hoisted White, and placed him gently in the back of the cart, beside Aidan. White curled up beside Aidan in the hay, head in his lap, eyes half-closed in exhaustion and pain. Aidan understood the feeling too well.

Motley jumped in and the driver cracked the whip, and the caravan took off, all of them cheering as music played again. It was a jolly song, men and women plucking harps, playing flutes and cymbals, and several of the people, to Aidan’s surprise, danced in the moving carts.

Aidan had never seen such a happy group of people in his life. His whole life had been spent in the gloom and silence of a fort filled with warriors, and he wasn’t sure what to make of all this. How could anyone be so happy? His father had always taught him that life was a serious thing. Was this all not trivial?

As they proceeded down the bumpy road, White whined out in pain, while Aidan stroked his head. Motley came over and, to Aidan’s surprise, knelt by the dog’s side and applied a compress to his wounds, covered in a green salve. Slowly, White quieted, and Aidan felt grateful for his help.

“Who are you?” Aidan asked.

“Well, I’ve worn many names,” Motley replied. “The best was ‘actor.’ Then there was ‘rogue,’ ‘fool,’ ‘jester’...the list goes on. Call me as you will.”

“You are no warrior, then,” Aidan realized, disappointed.

Motley leaned back and roared with laughter, tears streaming down his cheeks; Aidan could not understand what was so funny.

“Warrior,” Motley repeated, shaking his head in wonder. “Now that is one thing I’ve never been called. Nor is it something I have ever wished to be called.”

Aidan furrowed his brow, not comprehending.

“I come from a line of warriors,” Aidan said proudly, sticking his chest out as he sat, despite his pain. “My father is a great warrior.”

“I’m very sorry for you then,” Motley said, still laughing.

Aidan was confused.

“Sorry? Why?”

“That is a sentence,” Motley replied.

“A sentence?” Aidan echoed. “There is nothing greater in life than to be a warrior. It is all I have ever dreamed of.”

“Is it?” Motley asked, amused. “Then I feel doubly sorry for you. I think feasting and laughing and sleeping with beautiful women is about as great a thing as there is – far better than parading around the countryside and hoping to stick a sword in another man’s belly.”

Aidan reddened, frustrated; he had never heard a man speak of battle in such a sense, and he took offense. He had never met anyone remotely like this man.

“Where is the honor in your life?” Aidan asked, puzzled.

“Honor?” Motley asked, seemingly genuinely surprised. “That is not a word I have heard for years – and it’s too a big word for such a young boy.” Motley sighed. “I do not think honor exists – at least, I have never seen it. I thought of being honorable once – it got me nowhere. Besides, I’ve seen too many honorable men fall prey to devious women,” he concluded, and others in their cart laughed.

Aidan looked around, saw all these people dancing and singing and drinking the day away, and he had mixed feelings about riding with this crowd. They were men who were kind but who did not strive to lead the warrior’s life, who were not devoted to valor. He knew he should be grateful for the ride, and he was, but he did not know how to feel about riding with them. They were certainly not the sort of men his father would associate with.

“I shall ride with you,” Aidan finally concluded. “We shall be traveling companions. But I cannot consider myself your brother-in-arms.”

Motley’s eyes opened wide, shocked, silent for a good ten seconds, as if he didn’t know how to respond.

Then, finally, he burst into laughter that lasted way too long, echoed by all those around him. Aidan did not understand this man, and he did not think he ever would.

“I think I shall enjoy your company, boy,” Motley finally said, wiping away a tear. “Yes, I think I shall enjoy it very much.”

CHAPTER NINE

Duncan, flanked by his men, marched through the capital of Andros, behind him the footsteps of thousands of his soldiers, victorious, triumphant, their armor clanging as they paraded through this liberated city. Everywhere they went, they were met by the triumphant cheers of citizens, men and women, old and young, all dressed in the fancy garments of the capital, all rushing forward on the cobblestone streets and throwing flowers and delicacies his way. Everyone proudly waved the banners of Escalon. Duncan felt triumphant to see the colors of his homeland waving again, to see all these people, just the day before so oppressed, now so jubilant, so free. It was an image he would never forget, an image that made all of it worth it.

As the early morning sun broke over the capital, Duncan felt as if he were marching into a dream. Here was a place he had been sure he would never step foot in again, not while he was alive, and certainly not under these conditions. Andros, the capital. The crown jewel of Escalon, seat of kings for thousands of years, now in his control. The Pandesian garrisons had fallen. His men controlled the gates; they controlled the roads; they controlled the streets. It was more than he could have ever hoped for.

But days ago, he marveled, he was still in Volis, all of Escalon still under the iron thumb of Pandesia. Now, all of northwestern Escalon stood free and its very capital, its heart and soul, was free from Pandesian rule. Of course, Duncan realized, they had achieved this victory solely through speed and surprise. It was a brilliant victory, but also a potentially transient one; once word reached the Pandesian Empire, they would come for him – and not with a few garrisons, but with the might of the world. The world would fill with the stampede of elephants, the sky would fill with arrows, the sea would be covered in ships. But that was no reason to turn his back on doing what was just, on doing what was demanded of a warrior. For now, at least, they had held their own; for now, at least, they were free.

Duncan heard a crash and he turned to see an immense marble statue of His Glorious Ra, supreme ruler of Pandesia, toppled, yanked down with ropes by scores of citizens. It smashed into a thousand pieces as it hit the ground, and men cheered, stomping on its shards. More citizens rushed forward and yanked at the huge blue and yellow banners of Pandesia, tearing them from walls, buildings, steeples.

Duncan could not help but smile, taking in the adulation, the sense of pride these people had at gaining their freedom back, a feeling he understood all too well. He looked over at Kavos and Bramthos, Anvin and Arthfael and Seavig and all their men, and he saw them beaming too, exultant, reveling on this day that would be written into the history books. It was a memory they would all take with them for the rest of their lives.

They all marched through the capital, passing squares and courtyards, turning down streets that Duncan knew so well from all the years he had spent here. They rounded a bend, and Duncan looked up and his heart quickened to see the capitol building of Andros, its golden dome shining in the sun, its huge arched golden doors as imposing as ever, its white marble façade shining, engraved, as he remembered it, with the ancient writings of Escalon philosophers. It was one of the few buildings Pandesia had not touched, and Duncan felt a sense of pride at seeing it.

Yet he also felt a pit in his stomach; he knew that waiting for him inside would be the nobles, the politicians, the serving council of Escalon, the men of politics, of schemes, men he did not understand. They were not soldiers, not warlords, but men of wealth and power and influence which had been inherited from their ancestors. They were men who did not deserve to wield power, and yet men who, somehow, still held an iron grip on Escalon.

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