

A detailed illustration of a castle with multiple towers and spires, perched on the edge of a dark, craggy cliff. The scene is set against a dramatic, orange-hued sky with soft clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The castle's architecture is intricate, with arched windows and decorative elements. The overall mood is one of grandeur and mystery.

A
MARCH
OF
KINGS

BOOK #2 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A March of Kings

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2013

Rice M.

A March of Kings / M. Rice — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2013 — (The Sorcerer's Ring)

ISBN 978-1-93-941605-6

A MARCH OF KINGS takes us one step further on Thor's epic journey into manhood, as he begins to realize more about who he is, what his powers are, as he embarks to become a warrior. After he escapes from the dungeon, Thor is horrified to learn of another assassination attempt on King MacGil. When MacGil dies, the kingdom is set into turmoil. As everyone vies for the throne, King's Court is more rife than ever with its family dramas, power struggles, ambitions, jealousy, violence, and betrayal. An heir must be chosen from among the children, and the ancient Destiny Sword, the source of all their power, will have a chance to be wielded by someone new. But all this might be upended: the murder weapon is recovered, and the noose tightens on finding the assassin. Simultaneously, the MacGils face a new threat by the McClouds, who are set to attack again from within the Ring. Thor fights to win back Gwendolyn's love, but there may not be time: he is told to pack up, to prepare with his brothers in arms for The Hundred, a hundred grueling days of hell that all Legion members must survive. The Legion will have to cross the Canyon, beyond the protection of the Ring, into the Wilds, and set sail across the Tartuvian Sea for the Isle of Mist, said to be patrolled by a dragon, for their initiation into manhood. Will they make it back? Will the Ring survive in their absence? And will Thor finally learn the secret of his destiny? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A MARCH OF KINGS is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigue and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition, and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders.

ISBN 978-1-93-941605-6

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Morgan Rice

A March of Kings

(Book #2 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

*"Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still."*

– *William Shakespeare*
Macbeth

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

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“Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller...This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked.”

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Chapter One

King MacGil stumbled into his chamber, having had way too much to drink, the room spinning, his head pounding from the night's festivities. A woman whose name he did not know clung to his side, one arm draped around his waist, her shirt half-removed, leading him with a giggle toward his bed. Two attendants closed the door behind them and disappeared discreetly.

MacGil did not know where his queen was, and on this night he did not care. They rarely shared a bed anymore – she often retired to her own chamber, especially on nights of feasts, when the meals went on too long. She knew of her husband's indulgences, and did not seem to care. After all, he was king, and MacGil kings had always ruled with entitlement.

But as MacGil aimed for bed the room spun too fiercely, and he suddenly shrugged this woman off. He was no longer in the mood for this.

“Leave me!” he commanded, and shoved her away.

The woman stood there, stunned and hurt, and the door opened and the attendants returned, each grabbing one arm and leading her out. She protested, but her cries were muffled as they closed the door behind her.

MacGil sat on the edge of his bed and rested his head in his hands, trying to get his headache to stop. It was unusual for him to have a headache this early, before the drink had time to wear off, but tonight was different. It had all changed so quickly. The feast had been going so well; he had been settling in with a fine choice of meat and a strong wine, when that boy, Thor, had to surface and ruin everything. First it was his intrusion, with his silly dream; then he had the audacity to knock the goblet from his hands.

Then that dog had to appear and lap it up, and drop dead in front of everyone. MacGil had been shaken ever since. The realization had struck him like a hammer: someone had tried to poison him. To assassinate him. He could hardly process it. Someone had snuck past his guards, past his wine and food tasters. He had been a breath away from being dead, and it still shook him.

He recalled Thor being taken away to the dungeon, and wondered again if it had been the right command. On the one hand, of course, there was no way the boy could have known that goblet was poisoned unless he himself had poisoned it, or was somehow complicit in the crime. On the other hand, he knew Thor had deep, mysterious powers – too mysterious – and perhaps he had been telling the truth: maybe he had indeed envisioned it in a dream. Maybe Thor had, in fact, saved his life, and maybe MacGil had sent to the dungeon the one person truly loyal.

MacGil's head pounded at the thought, as he sat there rubbing his too-lined forehead, trying to work it all out. But he had drunk too much on this night, his mind was too foggy, his thoughts swirled, and he could not get to the bottom of it all. It was too hot in here, a sultry summer night, his body overheated with hours of indulging in food and drink, and he felt himself sweating.

He reached over and threw off his mantle, then his outer shirt, undressing to nothing but his undershirt. He wiped the sweat off his brow, then his beard. He leaned back and pulled off his huge, heavy boots, one at a time, and curled his toes as they hit the air. He sat there and breathed hard, trying to regain his equilibrium. His belly had grown today, and it was burdensome. He kicked his legs up and lay back, resting his head on the pillow. He sighed and looked up, past the four posters, to the ceiling, and willed the room to stop spinning.

Who would want to kill me? he wondered, yet again. He had loved Thor like a son, and part of him sensed that it could not be him. He wondered who else it could be, what motive they might have – and most importantly, if they would try again. Was he safe? Had Argon's pronouncements been right?

MacGil felt his eyes grow heavy, as he sensed the answer just outside of his mind's grasp. If his mind was just a little clearer, maybe he could work it all out. But he would have to wait for the light of morning to summon his advisors, to launch an investigation. The question in his mind was not who

wanted him dead – but who did *not* want him dead. His court was filled with people who craved his throne. Ambitious generals; maneuvering councilmembers; power-hungry nobles and lords; spies; old rivals; assassins from the McClouds – and maybe even from the Wilds. Perhaps even closer than that.

MacGil's eyes fluttered as he began to fall into sleep; but something caught his attention which kept them open. He detected movement and looked over to see that his attendants were not there. He blinked, confused. His attendants never left him alone. In fact, he could not remember the last time he had been alone in this room, by himself. He did not remember ordering them to leave. Even stranger: his door was wide open.

At the same moment MacGil heard a noise from the far side of the room, and turned and looked. There, creeping along the wall, coming out of the shadows, into the torchlight, was a tall, thin man, wearing a black cloak and hood pulled over his face. MacGil blinked several times, wondering if he were seeing things. At first he was sure it was just shadows, flickering torchlight playing tricks on his eyes.

But a moment later the figure was several paces closer and approaching his bed quickly. MacGil tried to focus in the dim light, to see who it was; he began instinctively to sit up, and being the old warrior he was, he reached for his waist, for a sword, or at least a dagger. But he had undressed and there were no weapons to be had. He sat, unarmed, on his bed.

The figure moved quickly now, like a snake in the night, getting ever closer, and as MacGil sat up, he got a look at his face. The room still spun, and his drunkenness prevented him from comprehending clearly, but for a moment, he could have sworn it was the face of his son.

Gareth?

MacGil's heart flooded with sudden panic, as he wondered what he could possibly be doing here, unannounced, so late into the night.

"My son?" he called out.

MacGil saw the deadly intent in his eyes, and it was all he needed to see – he started to jump out of bed.

But the figure moved too quickly. He leapt into action, and before MacGil could raise his hand in defense, there was the gleaming of metal in the torchlight, and fast, too fast, there was a blade puncturing the air – and plunging into his heart.

MacGil shrieked, a deep dark cry of anguish, and was surprised by the sound of his own scream. It was a battle scream, one he had heard too many times. It was the scream of a warrior mortally wounded.

MacGil felt the cold metal breaking through his ribs, pushing through muscle, mixing with his blood, then pushing deeper, ever deeper, the pain more intense than he had ever imagined, as it seemed to never stop plunging. With a great gasp, he felt hot, salty blood fill his mouth, felt his breathing grow hard. He forced himself to look up, at the face behind the hood. He was surprised: he had been wrong. It was not the face of his son. It was someone else. Someone he recognized. He could not remember who, but it was someone close to him. Someone who looked like his son.

His brain wracked with confusion as he tried to put a name to the face.

As the figure stood over him, holding the knife, MacGil somehow managed to raise a hand and push it into the man's shoulder, trying to get him to stop. He felt a burst of the old warrior's strength rise up within him, felt the strength of his ancestors, felt some deep part of him that made him king, that would not give up. With one giant shove, he managed to push back the assassin with all his might.

The man was thinner, more frail than MacGil thought, and went stumbling back with a cry, tripping across the room. MacGil managed to stand and, with a supreme effort, reached down and pulled the knife from his chest. He threw it across the room and it hit the stone floor with a clang, skidding across it, and slammed into the far wall.

The man, whose hood had fallen back around his shoulders, scrambled to his feet and stared back, wide-eyed with terror, as MacGil began to bear down on him. The man turned and ran across the room, stopping only long enough to retrieve the dagger before he fled.

MacGil tried to chase him, but the man was too fast, and suddenly the pain rose up, piercing his chest. He felt himself grow weak.

MacGil stood there, alone in the room, and looked down at the blood pouring from his chest, into his open palms. He sank to his knees.

He felt his body grow cold, and leaned back and tried to call out.

“Guards,” came his faint cry.

He took a deep breath, and with supreme agony, managed to muster his deep voice. The voice of a once-king.

“GUARDS!” he shrieked.

He heard footsteps from some distant hallway, slowly getting closer. He heard a distant door open, sensed bodies getting closer to him. But the room spun again, and this time it was not from drink.

The last thing he saw was the cold stone floor, rising up to meet his face.

Chapter Two

Thor grabbed the iron knocker of the immense wooden door before him and pulled with all his might. It opened slowly, creaking, and revealed before him the king's chamber. He took a step in, feeling the hairs on his arms tingle as he crossed the threshold. He could feel a great darkness here, lingering in the air like a fog.

Thor took several steps into the chamber, hearing the crackle of the torchlight on the walls as he made his way toward the body, lying in a heap on the floor. He already sensed it was the king, that he had been murdered – that he, Thor, had been too late. Thor could not help but wonder where all the guards were, why no one was here to rescue him.

Thor's knees grew weak as he took the final steps to the body; he knelt on the stone, grabbed the shoulder, already cold, and rolled the king over.

There was MacGil, his former king, lying there, eyes wide open, dead..

Thor looked up and suddenly saw the king's attendant standing over them. He held a large, bejeweled goblet, one that Thor recognized from the feast, made of solid gold and covered in rows of rubies and sapphires. While staring at Thor, the attendant poured it slowly onto the king's chest. The wine splashed all over Thor's face.

Thor heard a screeching, and turned to see his falcon, Estopheles, perched on the king's shoulder; she licked the wine off his cheek.

Thor heard a noise and turned to see Argon, standing over him, looking down sternly. In one hand he held the crown, shining. In another, his staff.

Argon walked over and placed the crown firmly on Thor's head. Thor could feel it, its weight digging in, fitting snugly, its metal hugging his temples. He looked up at Argon in wonder.

"You are King now," Argon pronounced.

Thor blinked, and when he opened his eyes, before him stood all the members of the Legion, of the Silver, hundreds of men and boys crammed together into the chamber, all facing him. As one, they all knelt, then bowed down to him, their faces low to the ground.

"Our King," came a chorus of voices.

Thor woke with a start. He sat upright, breathing hard, looking all about him. It was dark in here, and humid, and he realized he was sitting on a stone floor, his back to the wall. He squinted in the darkness, saw iron bars in the distance and beyond them, a flickering torch. Then he remembered: the dungeon. He had been dragged down here, after the feast.

He remembered that guard, punching him in the face, and realized he must have been unconscious; he didn't know how long. He sat up, breathing harder, trying to wash away the horrific dream. It had seemed so real. He prayed it wasn't true, that the king wasn't dead. The image of the dead king was lodged in his mind. Had Thor really seen something? Or was it all just his imagination?

Thor felt someone kick him on the sole of his foot, and looked up to see a figure standing over him.

"It's about time you woke up," came the voice. "I'm waiting hours."

In the dim light Thor made out the face of a teenage boy, about his age. He was thin, short, with hollow cheeks and pockmarked skin – yet there seemed to be something kind and intelligent behind his green eyes.

"I'm Merek," he said. "Your cellmate. What you in for?"

Thor sat upright, trying to get his wits about him. He leaned back against the wall, ran his hands through his hair, and tried to remember, to piece it all together.

"They say you tried to kill the king," Merek continued.

"He did try to kill him, and we're going to tear him to pieces if he ever gets out from behind those bars," snarled a voice.

A chorus of clanking erupted, tin cups banging against metal bars, and Thor looked to see the entire corridor filled with cells, grotesque-looking prisoners sticking their heads to the bars and, in the flickering torchlight, sneering out at him. Most were unshaven, with missing teeth, and some looked as if they'd been down here for years. It was a horrifying sight, and Thor forced himself to look away. Was he really down here? Would he be stuck down here, with these people, forever?

"Don't worry about them," Merek said. "It's just you and me in this cell. They can't get in. And I could care less if you poisoned the king. I'd like to poison him myself."

"I didn't poison the King," Thor said, indignant. "I didn't poison anyone. I was trying to save him. All I did was knock over his goblet."

"And how did you know the goblet was poisoned?" screamed a voice from down the aisle, eavesdropping. "Magic, I suppose?"

Their came a chorus of cynical laughter from up and down the cell corridor.

"He's psychic!" one of them yelled out, mocking.

The others laughed.

"No, it was just a lucky guess!" another bellowed, to the delight of the others.

Thor glowered, resenting the accusations, wanting to set them all straight. But he knew it would be a waste of time. Besides, he didn't have to defend himself to these criminals.

Merek studied him, with a look that was not as skeptical as the others. He looked as if he were debating.

"I believe you," he said, quietly.

"You do?" Thor asked.

Merek shrugged.

"After all, if you're going to poison the King, would you really be so stupid to let him know?"

Merek turned and walked away, a few paces over to his side of the cell, and leaned back against the wall and sat down, facing Thor.

Now Thor was curious.

"What are *you* in for?" he asked.

"I'm a thief," Merek answered, somewhat proudly.

Thor was taken aback; he'd never been in the presence of a thief before, a *real* thief. He himself had never thought of stealing, and had always been amazed to realize that some people did.

"Why do you do it?" Thor asked.

Merek shrugged.

"My family has no food. They have to eat. I don't have any schooling, or any skills of any kind. Stealing is what I know. Nothing major. Just food mostly. Whatever gets them through. I got away with it for years. Then I got caught. This is my third time caught, actually. Third time's the worst."

"Why?" Thor asked.

Merek was quiet, then slowly shook his head. Thor could see his eyes well up with tears.

"The king's law is strict. No exceptions. Third offense, they take your hand."

Thor was horrified. He glanced down at Merek's hands; they were both there.

"They haven't come for me yet," Merek said. "But they will."

Thor felt terrible. Merek looked away, as if ashamed, and Thor did, too, not wanting to think about it.

Thor put his head in his hands, his head killing him, trying to piece together his thoughts. The last few days felt like a whirlwind; so much had happened so quickly. On the one hand, he felt a sense of success, of vindication: he'd seen the future, had foreseen MacGil's poisoning, and had saved him from it. Perhaps fate, after all, could be changed – perhaps destiny could be bent. Thor felt a sense of pride: he had saved his king.

On the other hand, here he was, in the dungeon, unable to clear his name. All his hopes and dreams were shattered, any chance of joining the Legion gone. Now he would be lucky if he didn't

spend the rest of his days down here. It pained him to think that MacGil, who had taken Thor in like a father, the only real father he had ever had, thought Thor actually tried to kill him. It pained him to think that Reece, his best friend, might believe that he'd tried to kill his father. Or even worse, Gwendolyn. He thought of their last encounter – how she thought he frequented the brothels – and felt as if everything good in his life had been pulled out from under him. He wondered why this was all happening to him. After all, he had only wanted to do good.

Thor didn't know what would become of him; he didn't care. All he wanted now was to clear his name, for people to know that he hadn't tried to hurt the king; that he had genuine powers, that he really saw the future. He didn't know what would become of him, but he knew one thing: he had to get out of here. Somehow.

Before Thor could finish the thought, he heard footsteps, heavy boots clomping their way down the stone corridors; there came a rattling of keys, and moments later, there came into view a burly jail keeper, the man who had dragged Thor here and punched him in the face. At the sight of him Thor felt the pain well up on his cheek, felt aware of it for the first time, and felt a physical revulsion.

"Well, if it isn't the little pip who tried to kill the King," the warder scowled, as he turned the iron key in the lock. After several reverberating clicks, he reached over and slid back the cell door. He carried shackles in one hand, and a small axe hung from his waist.

"You'll get yours," he sneered at Thor, then turned to Merek, "but now it's your turn, you little thief. Third time," he said with a malicious smile, "no exceptions."

He dove for Merek, grabbed him roughly, yanked one arm behind his back, clamped down the shackle, then clamped the other end into a hook on the wall. Merek screamed out, tugging wildly against the shackle, trying to break free; but it was useless. The warder got behind him and grabbed him, held him in a bear hug, took his free arm, and placed it on a stone ledge.

"This will teach you not to steal," he snarled.

He removed the axe from his belt and raised it high above his head, his mouth open wide, his ugly teeth sticking out as he snarled.

"NO!" Merek screamed.

Thor sat there, horrified, transfixed as their warder brought down his weapon, aiming for Merek's wrist. Thor realized that in seconds, this poor boy's hand would be chopped off, forever, for no reason other than his petty thievery for food, to help feed his family. The injustice of it burned inside him, and he knew he could not allow it. It just wasn't fair.

Thor felt his entire body growing hot, and then felt a burning inside, rising up from his feet and coursing through his palms. He felt time slow down, felt himself moving faster than the man, felt every instant of every second, as the man's axe hung there in mid-air. Thor felt a burning energy ball in his palm and hurled it at his warder.

He watched in amazement as the yellow sphere went flying from his palm, through the air, lighting up the dark cell as it left a trail – and went right for the warder's face. It hit him in his head, and as it did, he dropped his axe and went flying across the cell, smashing into a wall and collapsing. Thor saved Merek a split second before the blade reached his wrist.

Merek looked over at Thor, wide-eyed.

The warder shook his head and began to rise, to apprehend Thor. But Thor felt the power burning through him, and as the warder reached his feet and faced him, Thor ran forward, jumped into the air, and kicked him in the chest. Thor felt a power he had never known rush through his body and heard a cracking noise as his kick sent the large man flying back through the air, smashing against the wall, and down into a heap on the floor, truly unconscious this time.

Merek stood there, shocked, and Thor knew exactly what he had to do. He grabbed the axe, hurried over, held Merek's shackle up against the stone, and chopped it. A great spark flew through the air as the chain-link was severed. Merek flinched, then raised his head and looked at the chain dangling down to his feet, and realized he was free.

He stared back at Thor, open-mouthed.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Merek said. “I don’t know how you did that, whatever it is, or who you are – or *what* you are – but you saved my life. I owe you one. And that is something I do not take lightly.”

“You owe me nothing,” Thor said.

“Wrong,” Merek said, reaching out and clasping Thor’s forearm. “You’re my brother now. And I will repay you. Somehow. Someday.”

With that, Merek turned, hurried out the open cell door, and ran down the corridor, to the shouts of the other prisoners.

Thor looked over, saw the unconscious guard, the open cell door, and knew he had to act, too. The shouts of prisoners were growing louder.

Thor stepped out, looked both ways, and decided to run the opposite way of Merek. After all, they couldn’t catch them both at once.

Chapter Three

Thor ran through the night, through the chaotic streets of King's Court, amazed at the commotion around him. The streets were crowded, throngs of people hurrying about in an agitated stir. Many carried torches, lighting up the night, casting stark shadows on faces, while the castle bells tolled incessantly. It was a low ring, coming once a minute, and Thor knew what that meant: death. Death bells. And there was only one person in the kingdom for whom the bells would toll on this night: the king.

Thor's heart pounded as he wondered. The dagger from his dream flashed before his eyes. Had it been true?

He had to know for sure. He reached out and grabbed a passerby, a boy running the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" Thor demanded. "What is all this commotion?"

"Haven't you heard?" the boy shot back, frantic. "Our king is dying! Stabbed! Mobs are forming outside King's Gate, trying to get the news. If it's true, it's terrible for us all. Can you imagine? A land without a king?"

With that, the boy shoved Thor's hand off, turned and ran back into the night.

Thor stood there, his heart pounding, not wanting to acknowledge the reality all around him. His dreams, his premonitions – they were more than fancies. He had seen the future. Twice. And that scared him. His powers were deeper than he knew, and seemed to be getting stronger with each passing day. Where would this all lead?

Thor stood there, trying to figure out where to go next. He had escaped, but now he had no idea where to turn. Surely within moments the royal guards – and possibly all of King's Court – would be out looking out for him. The fact that Thor escaped would just make him seem more guilty. But then again, the fact that MacGil was stabbed while Thor was in prison – wouldn't that vindicate him? Or would it make him seem like part of a conspiracy?

Thor couldn't take any chances. Clearly, no one in the kingdom was in the mood to hear rational thought – it seemed everyone around him was out for blood. And he would probably be the scapegoat. He needed to find shelter, some place to go where he could ride out the storm and clear his name. The safest place to go would be far from here. He should flee, take refuge in his village – or even farther, as much distance from here as he could get.

But Thor did not want to take the safest route; it was not who he was. He wanted to stay here, to clear his name, and to keep his position in the Legion. He was not a coward, and he did not run. Most of all, he wanted to see MacGil before he died – assuming he was still alive. He *needed* to see him. He felt overwhelmed with guilt that he hadn't been able to stop the assassination. Why had he been doomed to see the king's death if there was nothing he could do about it? And why had he envisioned him being poisoned when he was, in fact, stabbed?

As Thor stood there, debating, it came to him: Reece. Reece was the one person he could trust not to turn him in to the authorities, maybe even to give him safe harbor. He sensed Reece would believe him. He knew Thor's love for his father was genuine, and if anyone had a chance of clearing Thor's name, it would be Reece. He had to find him.

Thor took off at a sprint through the back alleys, twisting and turning against the crowd, as he ran away from King's Gate, toward the castle. He knew where Reece's chamber was – on the eastern wing, close to the outer city wall – and he only hoped that Reece was inside. If he was, maybe he could catch his attention, help him find a way into the castle. Thor had a sinking feeling that if he lingered here, in the streets, he would soon be recognized. And when this mob recognized him, it would tear him to bits.

As Thor turned down street after street, his feet slipping in the mud of the summer night, he finally reached the stone wall of the outer ramparts. He stuck close, running alongside it, just beneath the eyes of the watchful soldiers who stood every few feet.

As he neared Reece's window, he reached down and picked up a smooth rock. Luckily, the one weapon they had forgotten to strip him of was his old, trusted sling. He extracted it from his waist, set the stone in place, and hurled it.

With his flawless aim, Thor sent the stone flying over the castle wall and perfectly into the open-air window of Reece's room. Thor heard it clack into the inner wall, then waited, ducking low along the wall to escape detection by the King's guards, who flinched at the noise.

Nothing happened for several moments, and Thor's heart dropped, as he wondered if Reece was not in his room after all. If not, Thor would have to flee this place; there was no other way for him to gain safe harbor. He held his breath, his heart pounding, as he waited, watching the opening by Reece's window.

After what felt like an eternity, Thor was about to turn away, when he saw a figure lean his head out the window, brace both palms on the windowsill, and look around with a puzzled expression.

Thor stood, darting out several steps away from the wall, and waved one arm high.

Reece looked down and noticed him. Reece's face lit up in recognition, visible in the torchlight even from here, and, Thor was relieved to see joy on his face. That told him all he needed to know: Reece would not turn him in.

Reece signaled for him to wait, and Thor hurried back to the wall, squatting low just as a guard turned his way.

Thor waited for he did not know how long, ready at any moment to flee from the guards, until finally Reece appeared, bursting through a door in the outer wall, breathing hard as he looked both ways and spotted Thor.

Reece hurried over and embraced him. Thor was overjoyed. He heard a squeaking, and looked down to see, to his delight, Krohn, bundled up in Reece's shirt. Krohn nearly jumped out of the shirt as Reece reached down and handed him to Thor.

Krohn – the ever-growing white leopard cub Thor had once rescued – leapt into Thor's arms as Thor hugged him back, whining and squealing and licking Thor's face.

Reece smiled.

"When they took you away, he tried to follow you, and I took him to make sure he was safe."

Thor clasped Reece's forearm in appreciation. Then he laughed, as Krohn kept licking him.

"I missed you too, boy," Thor laughed, kissing him back. "Quiet now, or the guards will hear us."

Krohn quieted, as if he understood.

"How did you escape?" Reece asked, surprised.

Thor shrugged. He did not quite know what to say. He still felt uncomfortable speaking about his powers, which he did not understand. He didn't want others to think of him as some kind of freak.

"I got lucky I guess," he responded. "I saw an opportunity and I took it."

"I'm amazed a mob did not tear you apart," Reece said.

"It's dark," Thor said. "I don't think anyone recognized me. Not yet, anyway."

"Do you know that every soldier in the kingdom is looking for you? Do you know that my father has been stabbed?"

Thor nodded, serious. "Is he okay?"

Reece's face fell.

"No," he answered, grim. "He is dying."

Thor felt devastated, as if it were his own father.

“You know I had nothing to do with it, don’t you?” Thor asked, hopeful. He didn’t care what anyone else thought, but he needed his best friend, MacGil’s youngest son, to know that he was innocent.

“Of course,” Reece said. “Or else I would not be standing here.”

Thor felt a wave of relief, and clasped Reece on the shoulder gratefully.

“But the rest of the kingdom will not be so trusting as I,” Reece added. “The safest place for you is far from here. I will give you my fastest horse, a pack of supplies, and send you far away. You must hide until this all dies down, until they find the true killer. No one is thinking clearly now.”

Thor shook his head.

“I cannot leave,” he said. “That would make me seem guilty. I need others to know I did not do this. I cannot run from my troubles. I must clear my name.”

Reece shook his head.

“If you stay here, they’ll find you. You’ll get imprisoned again – and then executed – if not killed by a mob first.”

“That is a chance I must take,” Thor said.

Reece stared at him long and hard, and his look changed from one of concern to one of admiration. Finally, slowly, he nodded.

“You are proud. And stupid. Very stupid. That is why I like you.”

Reece smiled. Thor smiled back.

“I need to see your father,” Thor said. “I need to have a chance to explain to him, face-to-face, that it wasn’t me, that I had nothing to do with it. If he decides to sentence me, then so be it. But I need one chance. I want him to know. That is all I ask of you.”

Reece stared back earnestly, summing up his friend. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he nodded.

“I can get you to him. I know a back way. It leads to his chamber. It’s risky – and once you’re in, you will be on your own. There is no way out. There will be nothing I can do for you then. It could mean your death. Are you sure you want to take that chance?”

Thor nodded back with deadly seriousness.

“Very well then,” Reece said, and suddenly reached down and threw a cloak at Thor.

Thor caught it and looked down in surprise; he realized Reece must have planned for this all along.

Reece smiled as Thor looked up.

“I knew you’d be dumb enough to want to stay. I’d expect nothing less from my best friend.”

Chapter Four

Gareth paced his chamber, reliving the events of the night, flooded with anxiety. He couldn't believe what had happened at the feast, how it had all gone so wrong. He could hardly comprehend that stupid boy, that outsider Thor, had somehow caught onto his poison plot – and even more, had managed to actually intercept the goblet. Gareth thought back to that moment when he saw Thor jump up, knock down the goblet, when he heard the goblet hit the stone, watched the wine spill out on the floor, and saw all his dreams and aspirations spill out with it.

In that moment, Gareth had been ruined. Everything he'd lived for had been crushed. And when that dog lapped up the wine and dropped dead – he knew he was finished. He saw his whole life flash before him, saw himself discovered, sentenced to life in the dungeon for trying to kill his father. Or worse, executed. It was stupid. He should have never gone through with the plan, never visited that witch.

Gareth had, at least, acted quickly, taking a chance and jumping to his feet and being the first to pin the blame on Thor. Looking back, he was proud of himself, at how quickly he had reacted. It had been a moment of inspiration, and to his amazement, it seemed to have worked. They had dragged Thor off, and afterwards, the feast had nearly settled down again. Of course, nothing was the same after that, but at the very least, the suspicion seemed to fall squarely on the boy.

Gareth only prayed it stayed that way. It had been decades since an assassination attempt on a MacGil, and Gareth feared there would be an inquiry, that they would end up looking more deeply into the deed. Looking back, it had been foolish to try to poison him. His father was invincible. Gareth should have known that. He had over-reached. And now he could not help but feel as if it were only a matter of time until the suspicion fell on him. He would have to do whatever he could to prove Thor's guilt and have him executed before it was too late.

At least Gareth had somewhat redeemed himself: after that failed attempt, he had called off the assassination. Now, Gareth felt relieved. After watching the plot fail, he had realized there was a part of him, deep down, that did not want to kill his father after all, did not want to have his blood on his hands. He would not be king. He might never be king. But after tonight's events, that settled well with him. At least he would be free. He could never handle the stress of going through all this again: the secrets, the covering up, the constant anxiety of being found out. It was too much for him.

As he paced and paced, the night growing late, finally, slowly, he began to calm down. Just as he was beginning to feel like himself, preparing to settle in for the night, there came a sudden crash, and he turned to see his door burst open. In burst Firth, wide-eyed, frantic, rushing into the room as if he were being chased.

“He's dead!” Firth screamed. “He's dead! I killed him. He's dead!”

Firth was hysterical, wailing, and Gareth had no idea what he was talking about. Was he drunk?

Firth ran throughout the room, shrieking, crying, holding up his hands – and it was then that Gareth noticed his palms, covered in blood, his yellow tunic, stained red.

Gareth's heart skipped a beat. Firth had just killed someone. But who?

“*Who* is dead?” Gareth demanded. “Who do you speak of?”

But Firth was hysterical, and could not focus. Gareth ran to him, grabbed his shoulders firmly and shook him.

“Answer me!”

Firth opened his eyes and stared, with the eyes of a wild horse.

“Your father! The King! He's dead! By my hand!”

At his words, Gareth felt as if a knife had been plunged into his own heart.

He stared back, wide-eyed, frozen, feeling his whole body go numb. He released his grip, took a step back, and tried to catch his breath. He could see from all the blood that Firth was telling the

truth. He could not even fathom it. Firth? The stable boy? The most weak-willed of all his friends? Killed his father?

“But...how is that possible?” Gareth gasped. “When?”

“It happened in his chamber,” Firth said. “Just now. I stabbed him.”

The reality of the news began to sink in, and Gareth regained his wits; he noticed his open door, ran to it, and slammed it shut, checking first to make sure no guards had seen. Luckily, the corridor was empty. He pulled the heavy iron bolt across it.

He hurried back across the room. Firth was still hysterical, and Gareth needed to calm him. He needed answers.

He grasped him by the shoulders, spun him, and back-handed him hard enough to make him stop. Finally, Firth focused on him.

“Tell me everything,” Gareth ordered coldly. “Tell me exactly what happened. Why did you do this?”

“What do you mean *why*?” Firth asked, confused. “You wanted to kill him. Your poison didn’t work. I thought I could help you. I thought that was what you wanted.”

Gareth shook his head. He grabbed Firth by the shirt and shook him, again and again.

“Why did you do this!?” Gareth screamed.

Gareth felt his whole world crumbling. He was shocked to realize he actually felt remorse for his father. He could not understand it. Just hours ago, he’d wanted more than anything to see him poisoned, dead at the table. Now the idea of his being killed struck him like the death of a best friend. He felt overwhelmed with remorse. A part of him had not wanted him to die after all – especially not this way. Not by Firth’s hand. And not by a blade.

“I don’t understand,” Firth whined. “Just hours ago you tried to kill him yourself. Your goblet plot. I thought you would be grateful!”

To his own surprise, Gareth reached back and smacked Firth across the face.

“I did not tell you to do this!” Gareth spat. “*I never* told you to do this. Why did you kill him? Look at you. You are covered in blood. Now we are both finished. It is only a matter of time until the guards catch us.”

“No one saw,” Firth pleaded. “I slipped between the shifts. No one spotted me.”

“And where is the weapon?”

“I did not leave it,” Firth said proudly. “I’m not stupid. I disposed of it.”

“And what blade did you use?” Gareth asked, his mind spinning with the implications. He went from remorse to worry; his mind raced with every detail of the trail that this bumbling fool might have left, every detail that might lead to him.

“I used one that could not be traced,” Firth said, proud of himself. “It was a dull, anonymous blade. I found it in the stables. There were four others just like it. It could not be traced,” he repeated.

Gareth felt his heart drop.

“Was it a short knife, with a red handle and a curved blade? Mounted on the wall beside my horse?”

Firth nodded back, looking doubtful.

Gareth glowered.

“You fool. Of course that blade is traceable!”

“But there were no markings on it!” Firth protested, sounding scared, his voice trembling.

“There are no markings on the blade – but there is a mark on the hilt!” Gareth yelled. “Underneath! You did not check carefully. You fool.” Gareth stepped forward, reddening. “The emblem of my horse is carved underneath it. Anyone who knows the royal family well can trace that blade back to me.”

He stared at Firth, who seemed stumped. He wanted to kill him.

“What did you do with it?” Gareth pressed. “Tell me you have it on you. Tell me that you brought it back with you. Please.”

Firth swallowed.

“I disposed of it carefully. No one will ever find it.”

Gareth grimaced.

“Where, exactly?”

“I threw it down the stone chute, into the castle’s chamber pot. They dump the pot every hour, into the river. Do not worry, my lord. It’s deep in the river by now.”

The castle bells suddenly tolled, and Gareth turned and ran to the open window, his heart flooded with panic. He looked out and saw all the chaos and commotion below, mobs surrounding the castle. Those bells tolling could only mean one thing: Firth was not lying. He had killed the king.

Gareth felt his body grow icy cold. He could not conceive that he had set in motion such a great evil. And that Firth, of all people, had executed it.

There came a sudden pounding at his door, and as it burst open, several royal guards rushed in. For a moment, Gareth was sure they would arrest him.

But to his surprise, they stopped and stood at attention.

“My Lord, your father has been stabbed. There may be an assassin on the loose. Be sure to stay safe in your room. He is gravely injured.”

The hair rose on the back of Gareth’s neck at that last word.

“Injured?” Gareth echoed, the word nearly sticking in his throat. “Is he still alive then?”

“He is, my lord. And God be with him, he will survive and tell us who performed this heinous act.”

With a short bow the guard hurried from the room, slamming closed the door.

A rage overwhelmed Gareth and he grabbed Firth by his shoulders, drove him across the room and slammed him into a stone wall.

Firth stared back, wide-eyed, looking horrified, speechless.

“What have you done?” Gareth screamed. “Now we are both finished!”

“But...but...” Firth stumbled, “...I was sure he was dead!”

“You are sure of many things,” Gareth said, “and they are all wrong!”

A thought occurred to Gareth.

“That dagger,” he said. “We have to retrieve it, before it’s too late.”

“But I threw it away, my lord,” Firth said. “It is washed away in the river!”

“You threw it into a chamber pot. That does not mean it is yet in the river.”

“But it most likely is!” Firth said.

Gareth could stand this idiot’s bumbling no longer. He burst past him, running out the door, Firth on his heels.

“I will go with you. I will show you exactly where I threw it,” Firth said.

Gareth stopped in the corridor, turned and stared at Firth. He was covered in blood, and Gareth was amazed the guards had not spotted it. It was lucky. Firth was more of a liability than ever.

“I’m only going to say this once,” Gareth growled. “Get back to my room at once, change your clothes, and burn them. Get rid of any traces of blood. Then disappear from this castle. Stay away from me on this night. Do you understand me?”

Gareth shoved him back, then turned and ran. He sprinted down the corridor, ran down the spiral stone staircase, going down level after level, towards the servants’ quarters.

Finally, he burst into the basement, to the turned heads of several servants. They had been in the midst of scrubbing enormous pots and boiling pails of water. Huge fires roared amidst brick kilns, and the servants, wearing stained aprons, were drenched in sweat.

On the far side of the room Gareth spotted an enormous chamber pot, filth hailing down from a chute and splashing in it every minute.

Gareth ran up to the closest servant and grabbed his arm desperately.

“When was the pot last emptied?” Gareth asked.

“It was taken to the river just minutes ago, my lord.”

Gareth turned and raced out the room, sprinting down the castle corridors, back up the spiral staircase, and bursting out into the cool night air.

He ran across the grass field, breathless as he sprinted for the river.

As he neared it, he found a place to hide, behind a large tree, close to the shore. He watched two servants raise the huge iron pot and tilt it into the rushing current of the river.

He watched until it was upside down, all of its contents emptied, until they turned back with the pot and trekked back towards the castle.

Finally, Gareth was satisfied. No one had spotted any blade. Wherever it was, it was now in the river’s tides, being washed away into anonymity. If his father should die on this night, there would be no evidence left to trace the murderer.

Or would there?

Chapter Five

Thor followed on Reece's heels, Krohn behind him as they weaved their way through the back passageway to the king's chamber. Reece had brought them through a secret door, hidden in one of the stone walls, and now held a torch, leading them as they walked single file in the cramped space, working their way through the inner guts of the castle in a dizzying array of twists and turns. They ascended a narrow, stone staircase, which led to another passageway. They turned, and before them was another staircase. Thor marveled at how intricate this passage was.

"This passageway was built into the castle hundreds of years ago," Reece explained in a whisper as they went, breathing hard as he climbed. "It was built by my father's great-grandfather, the third MacGil king. He had it built after a siege – it's an escape route. Ironically, we have never been under siege since, and these passageways haven't been used in centuries. They were boarded up and I discovered them as a child. I like to use them from time to time to get around the castle with no one knowing where I am. When we were younger, Gwen and Godfrey and I would play hide and seek in them. Kendrick was too old, and Gareth didn't like to play with us. No torches, that was the rule. Pitch black. It was terrifying at the time."

Thor tried to keep up as Reece navigated the passage with a stunning display of virtuosity, obvious that he knew every step by heart.

"How do you possibly remember all these turns?" Thor asked in awe.

"You get lonely growing up as a boy in this castle," Reece continued, "especially when everyone else is older, and you're too young to join the Legion, and there's nothing else to do. I made it my mission to discover every nook and cranny of this place."

They turned again, went down three stone steps, turned through a narrow opening in the wall, then went down a long stairwell. Finally, Reece brought them to a thick, oak door, covered in dust. He leaned one ear against it and listened. Thor came up beside him.

"What door is this?" Thor asked

"Shhh," Reece said.

Thor grew quiet and put his own ear against the door, listening. Krohn stood there behind him, looking up.

"It is the back door to my father's chamber," Reece whispered. "I want to hear who's in there with him."

Thor listened, his heart pounding, to the muffled voices behind the door.

"Sounds like the room is full," Reece said.

Reece turned and gave Thor a meaningful look.

"You will be walking into a firestorm. His generals will be there, his council, his advisors, his family – everyone. And I'm sure every one of them will be on the lookout for you, his supposed murderer. It will be like walking into a lynching mob. If my father still thinks you tried to murder him, you'll be finished. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Thor swallowed hard. It was now or never. His throat went dry, as he realized this was one of the turning moments of his life. It would be easy to turn back now, to flee. He could live a safe life somewhere, far from King's Court. Or he could pass through that door and potentially spend the rest of his life in the dungeon, with those cretins – or even executed.

He breathed deep, and decided. He had to face his demons head-on. He could not back away.

Thor nodded. He was afraid to open his mouth, afraid that if he did, he might change his mind.

Reece nodded back, with a look of approval, then pushed the iron handle and leaned his shoulder into the door.

Thor squinted in the bright torchlight as the door flew open. He found himself standing in the center of the king's private chamber, Krohn and Reece beside him.

There were at least two dozen people crammed in around the king, who lay on his bed; some stood over him, others knelt. Surrounding the king were his advisors and generals, along with Argon, the Queen, Kendrick, Godfrey – even Gwendolyn. It was a death vigil, and Thor was intruding on this family's private affair.

The atmosphere in the room was somber, the faces grave. MacGil lay propped up on pillows, and Thor was relieved to see that he was still alive – at least for now.

All the faces turned at once, startled at Thor's and Reece's sudden entrance. Thor realized what a shock it must have been, with their sudden appearance in the middle of the room, coming out of a secret door in the stone wall.

"That's the boy!" someone from the crowd yelled, standing and pointing at Thor with hatred. "He's the one who tried to poison the king!"

Guards bore down on him from all corners of the room. Thor hardly knew what to do. A part of him wanted to turn and flee, but he knew he had to face this angry mob, had to have his peace with the king. So he braced himself, as several guards ran forward, reaching out to grab him. Krohn, at his side, snarled, warning his attackers.

As Thor stood there, he felt a sudden heat rise up within him, a power surging through him; he raised one hand, involuntarily, and held out a palm and directed his energy towards them.

Thor was amazed as they all stopped in mid-stride, feet away, as if frozen. His power, whatever it was, welling within him, kept them at bay.

"How dare you march in here and use your sorcery, boy!" Brom – the king's greatest general – yelled, drawing his sword. "Was trying to kill our king once not enough?"

Brom approached Thor with his sword drawn; as he did, Thor felt something overcome him, a feeling stronger than he'd ever had. He simply closed his eyes and focused. He sensed the energy within Brom's sword, its shape, its metal, and somehow, he became one with it. He willed it to stop in his mind's eye.

Brom stood frozen in his tracks, wide-eyed.

"Argon!" Brom spun and yelled. "Stop this sorcery at once! Stop this boy!"

Argon stepped from the crowd, and slowly lowered his hood. He stared back at Thor with intense, burning eyes.

"I see no reason to stop him," Argon said. "He has not come here to harm."

"Are you mad? He's nearly killed our King!"

"That is what you suppose," Argon said. "That is not what I see."

"Leave him be," came a gravelly, deep voice.

Everyone turned as MacGil sat up. He looked over, very faint. It was clearly a struggle for him to speak.

"I want to see the boy. He is not the one who stabbed me. I saw the man's face, and it was not him. Thor is innocent."

Slowly, the others relaxed their guard, and Thor relaxed his mind, letting them go. The guards backed away, looking at Thor warily, as if he were from another realm, and slowly put their swords back in their scabbards.

"I want to see him," MacGil said. "Alone. All of you. Leave us."

"My King," Brom said. "Do you really think that is safe? Just you and this boy alone?"

"Thor is not to be touched," MacGil said. "Now leave us. All of you. Including my family."

A thick silence fell over the room as everyone stared at each other, clearly unsure what to do. Thor stood there, rooted in place, hardly able to process it all.

One by one the others, including the King's family, filed from the room, as Krohn left with Reece. The chamber, so filled with people but moments before, suddenly became empty.

The door closed. It was just Thor and the king, alone in the silence. He could hardly believe it. Seeing MacGil lying there, so pale, in such pain, hurt Thor more than he could say. He did not

know why, but it was almost as if a part of him were dying there, too, on that bed. He wanted more than anything for the king to be well.

“Come here, my boy,” MacGil said weakly, his voice hoarse, barely above a whisper.

Thor lowered his head and hurried to the king’s side, kneeling before him. The king held out a limp wrist; Thor took his hand and kissed it.

Thor looked up and saw MacGil smiling down weakly. Thor was surprised to feel hot tears flooding his own cheeks.

“My liege,” Thor began, all in a rush, unable to keep it in, “please believe me. I did not poison you. I knew of the plot only from my dream. From some power which I know not of. I only wanted to warn you. Please, believe me – ”

MacGil held up a palm, and Thor fell silent.

“I was wrong about you,” MacGil said. “It took being stabbed by another man’s hand to realize it wasn’t you. You were just trying to save me. Forgive me. You were loyal. Perhaps the only loyal member of my court.”

“How I wish I had been wrong,” Thor said. “How I wish that you were safe. That my dreams were just illusions; that you were never assassinated. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you’ll survive.”

MacGil shook his head.

“My time has come,” he said to Thor.

Thor swallowed, hoping it wasn’t true but sensing that it was.

“Do you know who did this terrible act, my lord?” Thor asked the question that had been burning through his mind since he’d had the dream. He could not imagine who would want to kill the king, or why.

MacGil looked up at the ceiling, blinking with effort.

“I saw his face. It is a face I know well. But for some reason, I cannot place it.”

He turned and looked at Thor.

“It doesn’t matter now. My time has come. Whether it was by his hand, or by some other, the end is still the same. What matters now,” he said, and reached out and grabbed Thor’s wrist with a strength that surprised him, “is what happens after I’m gone. Ours will be a kingdom without a king.”

MacGil looked at Thor with an intensity Thor did not understand. Thor did not know precisely what he was saying – what, if anything, he was demanding. Thor wanted to ask, but he could see how hard it was for MacGil to catch his breath, and did not want to risk interrupting him.

“Argon was right about you,” he said, slowly releasing his grip. “Your destiny is far greater than mine.”

Thor felt an electric shock through his body at the king’s words. His destiny? Greater than the King’s? The very idea that the King would even bother to discuss Thor with Argon was more than Thor could comprehend. And the fact that he would say that Thor’s destiny was greater than the King’s – what could he possibly mean? Was King MacGil just being delusional in his final moments?

“I chose you...I brought you into my family for a reason. Do you know what that reason is?”

Thor shook his head, wanting desperately to know.

“Don’t you know why I wanted you here, only you, in my final moments?”

“I’m sorry, my liege,” he said, shaking his head. “I do not know.”

MacGil smiled faintly, as his eyes began to close.

“There is a great land, far from here. Beyond the Wilds. Beyond even the land of the Dragons. It is the land of the Druids. Where your mother is from. You must go there to seek the answers.”

MacGil’s eyes opened wide and he stared at Thor with an intensity that Thor could not comprehend.

“Our kingdom depends on it,” he added. “You are not like the others. You are special. Until you understand who you are, our kingdom will never rest at ease.”

MacGil's eyes closed and his breathing grew shallow, each breath coming out with a gasp. His grip slowly weakened on Thor's wrist, and Thor felt his own tears welling up. His mind was spinning with everything the king had said, as he tried to make sense of it all. He could barely concentrate. Had he heard it all correctly?

MacGil began to whisper something, but it was so quiet, Thor could barely make it out. Thor leaned in close, bringing his ear to MacGil's lips.

The king lifted his head one last time, and with one final effort said:

"Avenge me."

Then, suddenly, MacGil stiffened. He lay there for a few moments, then his head rolled to the side as his eyes opened wide, frozen.

Dead.

"NO!" Thor wailed.

His wail must have been loud enough to alert the guards, because an instant later, he heard a door burst open behind him, heard the commotion of dozens of people rushing into the room. In the corner of his consciousness he understood there was motion all around him. He dimly heard the castle bells tolling out, again and again. The bells pounded, matching the pounding of the blood in his temples. But it all became a blur, as moments later the room was spinning.

Thor was fainting, heading for the stone floor in one great collapse.

Chapter Six

A gust of wind struck Gareth in the face and he looked up, blinking back tears, into the pale light of the first rising sun. The day was just breaking, and yet at this remote spot, here on the edge of the Kolvian Cliffs, there were already gathered hundreds of the king's family, friends, and close royal subjects, hovering close, hoping to participate in the funeral. Just beyond them, held back by an army of soldiers, Gareth could see the masses pouring in, thousands of people watching the services from a distance. The grief on their faces was genuine. His father was loved, that was certain.

Gareth stood with the rest of the immediate family, in a semi-circle around his father's body, which sat suspended on planks over a pit in the earth, ropes around it, waiting to be lowered. Argon stood before the crowd, wearing the deep-scarlet robes he reserved only for funerals, his expression inscrutable as he looked down at the King's body, the hood obscuring his face. Gareth tried desperately to analyze that face, to decipher how much Argon knew. Did Argon know he murdered his father? And if so, would he tell the others – or let destiny play out?

To Gareth's bad luck, that annoying boy, Thor, had been cleared of guilt; obviously, he could not have stabbed the king while he was in the dungeon. Not to mention that his father himself had told all the others that Thor was innocent. Which only made things worse for Gareth. A council had already been formed to look into the matter, to scrutinize every detail of his murder. Gareth's heart pounded as he stood there with the others, staring at the body about to be lowered into the earth; he wanted to go down with it.

It was only a matter of time until the trail led to Firth – and when it did, Gareth would be brought down with him. He would have to act quickly to divert the attention, to pin the blame on someone else. Gareth wondered if those around him suspected him. He was likely just being paranoid, and as he surveyed the faces, he saw none looking at him. There stood his brothers, Reece, Godfrey, and Kendrick; his sister Gwendolyn; and his mother, her face wrought with grief, looking catatonic; indeed, since his father's death, she had been a different person, barely able to speak. He'd heard that when she'd received the news something had happened within her, some sort of paralysis. Half her face was frozen; when she opened her mouth, the words came out too slow.

Gareth examined the faces of the King's council behind her – his lead general, Brom and the Legion head, Kolk, stood in front, behind whom stood his father's endless advisors. They all feigned grief, but Gareth knew better. He knew that all these people, all the council members and advisors and generals – and all the nobles and lords behind them – barely cared. He recognized on their faces ambition. Lust for power. As each stared down at the king's corpse, he felt that each wondered who might be next to grab the throne.

It was the very thought that Gareth was having. What would happen in the aftermath of such a chaotic assassination? If it had been clean and simple, and the blame pinned on someone else, then Gareth's plan would have been perfect – the throne would fall to him. After all, he was the first-born, legitimate son. His father had ceded power to Gwendolyn, but no one was present at that meeting except for his siblings, and his wishes were never ratified. Gareth knew the council, and knew how seriously they took the law. Without a ratification, his sister could not rule.

Which, again, led to him. If due process took its course – and Gareth was determined to make sure it did – then the throne would have to fall on him. That was the law.

His siblings would fight him, he had no doubt. They would recall their meeting with their father, and probably insist that Gwendolyn rule. Kendrick would not try to take power for himself – he was too pure-hearted. Godfrey was apathetic. Reece was too young. Gwendolyn was his only real threat. But Gareth was optimistic: he didn't think the council was ready for a woman – much less a teenage girl – to rule the Ring. And without a ratification from the king, they had the perfect excuse to pass her over.

The only real threat left in Gareth's mind was Kendrick. After all, he, Gareth, was universally hated while Kendrick was loved among the common men, among the soldiers. Given the circumstance, there was always the chance the council would hand the throne to Kendrick. The sooner Gareth could take power, the sooner he could use his powers to quash Kendrick.

Gareth felt a tug at his hand, and looked down to see the knotted rope burning his palm. He realized they had begun lowering his father's coffin; he looked over and saw his other siblings, each holding a rope like he, slowly lowering it. Gareth's end tilted, as he was late lowering, and he reached out and grabbed the rope with his other hand until finally it leveled out. It was ironic: even in death, he could not please his father.

Distant bells tolled, coming from the castle, and Argon stepped forward and raised a palm.

"Itso ominus domi ko resepia..."

The lost language of the Ring, the royal language, used by his ancestors for a thousand years. It was a language Gareth's private tutors had drilled into him as a boy – and one he would need as he assumed his royal powers.

Argon suddenly stopped, looked up, and stared right at Gareth. It sent a chill down Gareth's spine as Argon's translucent eyes seemed to burn right through him. Gareth's face flushed, and he wondered if the whole kingdom was watching, and if any knew what it meant. In that stare, he felt that Argon knew of his involvement. And yet Argon was mysterious, always refusing to get involved in the twists and turns of human fate. Would he stay quiet?

"King MacGil was a good king, a fair king," Argon said slowly, his voice deep and unearthly. "He brought pride and honor to his ancestors, and riches and peace to this kingdom unlike any we've ever known. His life was taken prematurely, as God would have it. But he left behind a legacy deep and rich. Now it is up to us to fulfill that legacy."

Argon paused.

"Our kingdom of the Ring is surrounded by threats deep and ominous on all sides. Beyond our Canyon, protected only by our energy shield, lies a nation of savages and creatures that would tear us apart. Within our Ring, opposite our Highlands, lies a clan that would do us harm. We live in unmatched prosperity and peace; yet our security is fleeting.

"Why do the gods take someone from us in his prime – a good and wise and fair king? Why was his destiny to be murdered this way? We are all merely pawns, puppets in fate's hand. Even at the height of our power, we can end up beneath the earth. The question we must grapple with is not what we strive for – but who we strive to be."

Argon lowered his head, and Gareth felt his palms burning as they lowered the coffin all the way; it finally hit the ground with a thud.

"NO!" came a shriek.

It was Gwendolyn. Hysterical, she ran for the edge of the pit, as if to throw herself in; Reece ran forward and grabbed her, held her back. Kendrick stepped up to help.

But Gareth felt no sympathy for her; rather, he felt threatened. If she wanted to be under the earth, he could arrange that.

Yes, indeed, he could.

* * *

Thor stood just feet away from King MacGil's body as he watched it lowered into the earth, and felt overwhelmed by the sight. Perched on the edge of the highest cliff of the kingdom, the king had chosen a spectacular place to be buried, a lofty place, which seemed to reach into the clouds themselves. The clouds were tinged with orange and greens and yellows and pinks, as the first of the rising suns crawled its way higher into the sky. But the day was covered with a mist that would not lift, as if the kingdom itself were mourning. Krohn, beside him, whimpered.

Thor heard a screech, and looked up to see Estopheles, circling high above, looking down on them. Thor was still numb; he could hardly believe the events of the last few days, that he was standing here now, in the midst of the king's family, watching this man he had grown so quickly to love be lowered into the earth. It seemed impossible. He had barely begun to know him, the first man who had ever been like a real father, and now he was being taken away. More than anything, Thor could not stop thinking of the king's final words:

You are not like the others. You are special. And until you understand who you are, our kingdom will never rest at ease.

What had the king meant by that? Who was he, exactly? How was he special? How did the king know? What did the fate of the kingdom have to do with Thor? Had the king just been delirious?

There is a great land, far from here. Beyond the Empire. Beyond even the land of the Dragons. It is the land of the Druids. Where your mother is from. You must go there to seek the answers.

How had MacGil known about his mother? How had he known where she lived? And what sort of answers did she have? Thor had always assumed she was dead – the idea that she could be alive electrified him. He felt determined, more than ever, to seek her out, to find her. To find the answers, to discover who he was and why he was special.

As a bell tolled and MacGil's corpse began to lower, Thor wondered about the cruel twists and turns of fate; why had he been allowed to see the future, to see this great man killed – yet made powerless to do anything about it? In some ways, he wished he had never seen any of this, had never known in advance what would happen; he wished he had just been an innocent bystander like the rest, just woken one day to learn that the king was dead. Now he felt as if he were a part of it. Somehow, he felt guilty, as if he should have done more.

Thor wondered what would become of the kingdom now. It was a kingdom without a king. Who would reign? Would it be, as everyone speculated, Gareth? Thor could not imagine anything worse.

Thor scanned the crowd and saw the stern faces of the nobles and lords, gathered here from all corners of the Ring; he knew them to be powerful men, from what Reece had told him, in a restless kingdom. He could not help wondering who the killer could be. In all those faces, it seemed as if everyone were suspect. All of these men would be vying for power. Would the kingdom splinter into parts? Would their forces be at odds with each other? What would be his own fate? And what of the Legion? Would it be disbanded? Would the army be disbanded? Would The Silver revolt if Gareth was named king?

And after all that had happened, would the others truly believe Thor was innocent? Would he be forced to return to his village? He hoped not. He loved everything he had; he wanted more than anything to stay here, in this place, in the Legion. He just wanted everything to be as it was, wanted nothing to change. The kingdom, just days ago, had seemed so substantial, so permanent; MacGil had seemed like he would hold the throne forever. If something so secure, so stable could suddenly collapse – what hope did that leave for the rest of them? Nothing felt permanent to Thor anymore.

Thor's heart broke as he watched Gwendolyn try to jump into the grave with her father. As Reece held her back, attendants came forward and began shoveling the mound of dirt into the pit, while Argon continued his ceremonial chanting. A cloud passed in the sky, blotting out the first sun for a moment, and Thor felt a cold wind whip through on this rapidly warming summer day. He heard a whining, and looked down and saw Krohn at his feet, looking up at him.

Thor hardly knew what would become of anything anymore, but he knew one thing: he had to talk to Gwen. He had to tell her how sorry he was, how distraught he was, too, over her father's death, tell her that she was not alone. Even if she decided never to see Thor again, he had to let her know he had been falsely accused, that he hadn't done anything in that brothel. He needed a chance, just one chance, to set the record straight, before she dismissed him for good.

As the final shovelful of dirt was thrown on the king and the bells tolled again and again, the crowd rearranged itself: rows of people stretched as far as Thor could see, winding their way along

the cliff, each holding a single black rose, lining up to pass the fresh mound of dirt that marked the king's grave. Thor stepped forward, knelt down, and placed his rose on the already growing pile. Krohn whined.

As the crowd began to disperse, people milling about in every direction, Thor noticed Gwendolyn break free from Reece's grip and run, hysterical, away from the grave.

"Gwen!" Reece called out after her.

But she was inconsolable. She cut through the thick mob and ran down a dirt trail along the cliff's edge. Thor could not stand to see her like that; he had to try to speak with her.

Thor burst through the crowd himself, Krohn at his heels, weaving this way and that through the thickening crowd, trying to follow her trail and catch up with her. Finally, he broke free from the outskirts and spotted her running, far away from the others.

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