A
FATE
OF
DRAGONS
BOOK #3 IN THE SORCERER'S RING
MORGAN RICE

Morgan Rice

A Fate of Dragons

Серия «The Sorcerer's Ring», книга 3

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=9094715
ISBN 9781939416094

Аннотация

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3 in the Sorcerer's Ring) takes us deeper into Thor's epic journey to becoming a warrior, as he journeys across the Sea of Fire to the dragon's Isle of Mist. An unforgiving place, home to the most elite warriors of the world, Thor's powers and abilities deepen as he trains. His friendships deepen, too, as they face adversities together, beyond what they could imagine. But as they find themselves up against unimaginable monsters, The Hundred quickly goes from training session to a matter of life or death. Not all will survive. Along the way, Thor's dreams, along with his mysterious encounters with Argon, will continue to plague him, to press him to try to learn more about who he is, who his mother is, and what the source of his powers are. What is his destiny? Back in the Ring, matters are getting much worse. As Kendrick is imprisoned, Gwendolyn finds it landing on her to try to save him, to save the Ring by bringing down her brother Gareth. She hunts for clues for her father's murderer along with her brother Godfrey, and along the way, the two of them will become much closer, united in their cause. But Gwendolyn finds herself in

mortal danger as she presses too deep, and she may be in over her head. Gareth attempts to wield the Dynasty Sword and learns what it means to be King, becoming drunk with the abuse of power. He rules ruthlessly, becoming paranoid. As the noose tightens on the king's assassin, the McClouds attack deeper into the Ring, and King's Court finds itself in an increasingly precarious position. Gwendolyn pines for Thor's return, for them to be together, for their love to blossom. But with powerful forces in their way, it is questionable if that chance will ever come. Will Thor survive The Hundred? Will King's Court collapse? Will MacGil's murderer be found? Will Gwendolyn end up with Thor? And will Thor finally learn the secret of his destiny? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A FATE OF DRAGONS is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues 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.

Содержание

Chapter One	13
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	19
Chapter Four	24
Chapter Five	33
Chapter Six	39
Chapter Seven	50
Chapter Eight	63
Chapter Nine	68
Chapter Ten	77
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	78

Morgan Rice
A Fate of Dragons
(Book #3 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

"Come not between the dragon and his wrath."
– William Shakespeare
King Lear

Copyright © 2013 by Morgan Rice

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the

product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Jacket image Copyright Bob Orsillo, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

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).

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

"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

"Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting….Nicely written and an extremely fast read."
– Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding Turned)

"An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist…Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl…one extraordinary girl!…Easy to read but extremely fast-paced… Rated PG."
– The Romance Reviews (regarding Turned)

"Grabbed my attention from the beginning and did not let go….This story is an amazing adventure that is fast paced and action packed from the very beginning. There is not a dull moment to be found."
– Paranormal Romance Guild (regarding Turned)

"Jam packed with action, romance, adventure, and suspense. Get your hands on this one and fall in love all over again."

– vampirebooksite.com (regarding Turned)

"A great plot, and this especially was the kind of book you will have trouble putting down at night. The ending was a cliffhanger that was so spectacular that you will immediately want to buy the next book, just to see what happens."

– The Dallas Examiner (regarding Loved)

"A book to rival TWILIGHT and VAMPIRE DIARIES, and one that will have you wanting to keep reading until the very last page! If you are into adventure, love and vampires this book is the one for you!"

– Vampirebooksite.com (regarding Turned)

"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."

– The Romance Reviews (regarding Loved)

Books by Morgan Rice

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)
A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)
A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)
A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)
A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)
A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)
A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)
A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)
A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)
A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)
A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY
ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)
ARENA TWO (Book #2)

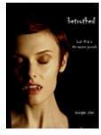
THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS
TURNED (Book #1)
LOVED (Book #2)
BETRAYED (Book #3)
DESTINED (Book #4)
DESIRED (Book #5)
BETROTHED (Book #6)
VOWED (Book #7)

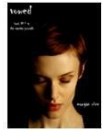
FOUND (Book #8)
RESURRECTED (Book #9)
CRAVED (Book #10)
FATED (Book #11)

THE SORCERER'S RING

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

the vampire journals





Listen to THE SORCERER'S RING series in audio book format!

Now available on:

Amazon

Audible

iTunes

Chapter One

King McCloud charged down the slope, racing across the Highlands, into the MacGils' side of the Ring, hundreds of his men behind him, hanging on for dear life as his horse galloped down the mountain. He reached back, raised his whip, and brought it down hard on the horse's hide: his horse didn't need prodding, but he liked to whip it anyway. He enjoyed inflicting pain on animals.

McCloud nearly salivated as he took in the sight before him: an idyllic MacGil village, its men out in the fields, unarmed, its women home, tending linens on strings, barely dressed in the summer clime. House doors were open; chickens roamed freely; cauldrons already boiling with dinner. He thought of the damage he would do, the loot he would garner, the women he would ruin – and his smile broadened. He could almost taste the blood he was about to shed.

They charged and charged, their horses rumbling like thunder, spilling over the countryside, and finally, someone took notice: the village guard, a pathetic excuse for a soldier, a teenage boy, holding a spear, who stood and turned at the sound of their approach. McCloud got a good look at the white of his eyes, saw the fear and panic in his face; in this sleepy outpost, this boy had probably never seen battle in his life. He was woefully unprepared.

McCloud wasted no time: he wanted the first kill, as he always had in battle. His men knew enough to give it to him.

He whipped his horse again until it shrieked, and gained speed, heading out farther in front of the others. He raised his ancestor's spear, a heavy thing of iron, leaned back, and hurled it.

As always, his aim was true: the boy had barely finished turning when the spear met his back, sailing right through it and pinning him to a tree with a whooshing noise. Blood gushed from his back, and it was enough to make McCloud's day.

McCloud let out a short cry of joy as they all continued charging, across the choice land of the MacGils, through yellow cornstalks swaying in the wind, up to his horse's thighs, and towards the village gate. It was almost too beautiful a day, too beautiful a picture, for the devastation they were about to enact.

They charged through the unprotected gate of the village, this place dumb enough to be situated on the outskirts of the Ring, so close to the Highlands. *They should have known better*, McCloud thought with scorn, as he swung an axe and chopped down the wooden sign announcing the place. He would rename it soon enough.

His men entered the place, and all around him erupted screams of women, of children, of old men, of whomever happened to be home in this godforsaken place. There were probably a hundred unlucky souls, and McCloud was determined to make each one of them pay. He raised his axe high overhead as he focused on one woman in particular, running with her back

to him, trying for dear life to make it back to the safety of her home. It was not meant to be.

McCloud's axe hit her in the back of her calf, as he had wanted, and she went down with a shriek. He hadn't wanted to kill her: only to maim her. After all, he wanted her alive for the pleasure he would have with her afterwards. He had chosen her well: a woman with long, untamed blond hair and narrow hips, hardly over eighteen. She would be his. And when he was done with her, perhaps he would kill her then. Or perhaps not; perhaps he would keep her as his slave.

He screamed in delight as he rode up next to her and jumped off his horse in mid-stride, landing on top of her and tackling her to the ground. He rolled with her on the dirt, feeling the impact of the road, and smiled as he relished what it felt like to be alive.

Finally, life had meaning again.

Chapter Two

Kendrick stood in the eye of the storm, in the Hall of Arms, flanked by dozens of his brothers, all hardened members of The Silver, and looked calmly back at Darloc, the commander of the royal guard sent on an unfortunate mission. What had Darloc been thinking? Did he really think he could march into the Hall of Arms and try to arrest Kendrick, the most loved of the royal family, in front of all his brothers-in-arms? Did he really think the others would stand by and allow it?

He had vastly underestimated The Silver's loyalty to Kendrick. Even if Darloc had arrived with legitimate charges for his arrest – and these certainly were not – Kendrick doubted very much that his brothers would allow him to be carted away. They were loyal for life, and loyal to the death. That was the creed of The Silver. He would have reacted the same way if any of his brethren were threatened. After all, they had all trained together, fought together, for all their lives.

Kendrick could feel the tension that hung in the thick silence, as The Silver held their weapons drawn at the mere dozen royal guards, who shifted where they stood, looking more uncomfortable by the moment. They must have known it would be a massacre if any of them tried for their swords – and wisely, none did. They all stood there and awaited the order of their commander, Darloc.

Darloc swallowed, looking very nervous. He realized his cause was hopeless.

"It seems you have not come with enough men," Kendrick responded calmly, smiling. "A dozen of the King's Guard against a hundred of The Silver. Yours is a lost cause."

Darloc flushed, looking very pale. He cleared his throat.

"My liege, we all serve the same kingdom. I do not wish to fight you. You are correct: this is a fight we could not win. If you command us, we will leave this place and return to the King.

"But you know that Gareth would just send more men for you. Different men. And you know where this will all lead. You might kill them all – but do you really want the blood of your fellow brothers on your hands? Do you really want to spark a civil war? For you, your men would risk their lives, kill anyone. But is that fair to them?"

Kendrick stared back, thinking it all through. Darloc had a point. He did not want any of his men hurt solely on his account. He felt an overwhelming desire to protect them from any bloodshed, no matter what that meant for him. And however awful his brother Gareth was, and however bad a ruler, Kendrick did not want a civil war – at least, not on his account. There were other ways; direct confrontation, he had learned, was not always the most effective.

Kendrick reached over and slowly lowered his friend Atme's sword. He turned and faced the other Silver. He was overwhelmed with gratitude to them for coming to his defense.

"My fellow Silver," he announced. "I am humbled by your defense, and I assure you it is not in vain. As you all know me, I had nothing to do with the death of my father, our former king. And when I find his true killer, whom I suspect I have already found from the nature of these orders, I shall be the first to have vengeance. I stand falsely accused. That said, I do not wish to be the impetus for a civil war. So please, lower your arms. I will allow them to take me peacefully, for one member of the Ring should never fight another. If justice lives, then the truth will come out – and I will be returned to you promptly."

The group of Silver slowly, reluctantly, lowered their arms as Kendrick turned back to Darloc. Kendrick stepped forward and walked with Darloc for the door, the King's Guard surrounding him. Kendrick walked proudly, in the center, erect. Darloc did not try to shackle him – perhaps out of respect, or out of fear, or because Darloc knew he was innocent. Kendrick would lead himself to his new prison. But he would not give in so easily. Somehow he would clear his name, get himself freed from the dungeon – and kill his father's murderer. Even if it was his own brother.

Chapter Three

Gwendolyn stood in the bowels of the castle, her brother Godfrey beside her, and stared back at Steffen as he stood there, shifting, twisting his hands. He was an odd character – not just because he was deformed, his back twisted and hunched, but also because he seemed to be filled with a nervous energy. His eyes never stopped shifting, and his hands clasped each other as if he were wracked with guilt. He rocked in place as he stood, shifting from foot to foot, and hummed to himself in a deep voice. All these years of being down here, Gwen figured, all these years of isolation had clearly forged him into an odd character.

Gwen waited in anticipation for him to finally open up, to reveal what had happened to her father. But as seconds turned into minutes, as the sweat increased on Steffen's brow, as he rocked ever more dramatically, nothing came. There continued to be just a thick, heavy silence, punctuated only by his humming noises.

Gwen was beginning to sweat herself down here, the roaring fires from the pits too close on this summer day. She wanted to be finished with this, to leave this place – and never return here again. She scrutinized Steffen, trying to decipher his expression, to figure out what ran through his mind. He had promised to tell them something, but now he had fallen silent. As she examined him, it appeared he was having second thoughts. Clearly, he was

afraid; he had something to hide.

Finally, Steffen cleared his throat.

"Something fell down the chute that night, I admit it," he began, not making eye contact, looking somewhere on the floor, "but I'm not sure what it was. It was metal. We took the chamber pot out that night, and I heard something land in the river. Something different. So," he said, clearing his throat several times as he wrung his hands, "you see, whatever it is, it washed away, in the tides."

"Are you certain?" Godfrey demanded.

Steffen nodded vigorously.

Gwen and Godfrey exchanged a look.

"Did you get a look at it, at least?" Godfrey pressed.

Steffen shook his head.

"But you made mention of a dagger. How did you know it was a dagger if you did not see it?" Gwen asked. She felt certain that he was lying; she just did not know why.

Steffen cleared his throat.

"I said so because I just assumed it was a dagger," he responded. "It was small and metal. What else could it be?"

"But did you check the bottom of the pot?" Godfrey asked. "After you dumped it? Maybe it is still in the pot, at the bottom."

Steffen shook his head.

"I checked the bottom," he said. "I always do. There was nothing. Empty. Whatever it was, it was washed away. I saw it float away."

"If it was metal, how did it float?" Gwen asked.

Steffen cleared his throat, then shrugged.

"The river is mysterious," he answered. "Tides are strong."

Gwen exchanged a skeptical look with Godfrey, and she could tell from his expression that he did not believe Steffen, either.

Gwen was growing increasingly impatient. Now, she was also baffled. Just moments before, Steffen was going to tell them everything, as he had promised. But it seemed as if he had suddenly changed his mind.

Gwen took a step closer to him and scowled, sensing that this man had something to hide. She put on her toughest face, and as she did, she felt the strength of her father pouring through her. She was determined to discover whatever it was he knew – especially if it would help her find her father's killer.

"You are lying," she said, her voice steely cold, the strength in it surprising even her. "Do you know what the punishment is for lying to a member of the royal family?"

Steffen wrung his hands and nearly bounced in place, glancing up at her for a moment, then quickly looking away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. Please, I have nothing more."

"You asked us before if you would be spared from jail if you told us what you knew," she said. "But you have told us nothing. Why would you ask that question if you had nothing to tell us?"

Steffen licked his lips, looking down at the floor.

"I… I…um," he started and stopped. He cleared his throat. "I was worried…that I would get in trouble for not reporting that

an object came down the chute. That is all. I am sorry. I do not know what it was. It's gone."

Gwen narrowed her eyes, staring at him, trying to get to the bottom of this strange character.

"What happened to your master, exactly?" she asked, not letting him off the hook. "We are told he went missing. And that you had something to do with it."

Steffen shook his head again and again.

"He left," Steffen answered. "That is all I know. I'm sorry. I know nothing that can help you."

Suddenly there came a loud swooshing noise from across the room, and they all turned to see waste come flying down the chute, and land with a splat in the huge chamber pot. Steffen turned and ran across the room, hurrying over to the pot. He stood beside it, watching as it filled with waste from the upper chambers.

Gwen turned and looked at Godfrey, who stared back at her. He wore an equally baffled expression.

"Whatever he's hiding," she said, "he won't give it up."

"We could have him imprisoned," Godfrey said. "That might get him to speak."

Gwen shook her head.

"I don't think so. Not with this one. He's obviously extremely afraid. I think it has to do with his master. He's clearly torn about something, and I don't think it has to do with father's death. I think he knows something that might help us – but I sense that

cornering him will only make him shut down."

"So what should we do?" Godfrey asked.

Gwen stood there, thinking. She remembered a friend of hers, when she was young, who had once been caught lying. She remembered her parents had pressured her every which way to tell the truth, but she would not. It was only weeks later, when everyone had finally left her alone, that she had stepped forward voluntarily and revealed everything. Gwen sensed the same energy coming off of Steffen, that backing him into a corner would make him shut down, that he needed space to come forward on his own.

"Let's give him time," she said. "Let's search elsewhere. Let's see what we can find out, and circle back to him when we have more. I think he'll open up. He's just not ready."

Gwen turned and watched him, across the room, examining the waste as it filled the cauldron. She felt certain that he would lead them to her father's murderer. She just did not know how. She wondered what secrets lurked in the depths of his mind.

He was a very strange character, Gwen thought. Very strange, indeed.

Chapter Four

Thor tried to breathe as he blinked back the water which covered his eyes, his nose, his mouth, pouring down all around him. After sliding across the boat, he had finally managed to grab hold of the wooden railing, and he clung to it for dear life as the relentless water worked away at his grip. Every muscle in his body was shaking, and he did not know how much longer he could hold on.

All around him his brothers did the same, clinging to dear life for whatever they could find as the water tried to drive them off the boat. Somehow, they held on.

The sound was deafening, and it was hard to see more than a few feet in front of him. Despite the summer day the rain was cold, and the water sent a chill through his body he could not shake. Kolk stood there, scowling, hands on his hips as if impervious to the rain wall, and barked out all around him.

"GET BACK TO YOUR SEATS!" he screamed. "ROW!"

Kolk himself took a seat and began rowing, and within moments the boys slipped and crawled across the deck, heading back for the benches. Thor's heart pounded as he let go himself, and struggled to cross the deck. Krohn, inside his shirt, whined, as Thor slipped then fell, landing hard on the deck.

He crawled the rest of the way, and soon found himself back in his seat.

"TIE YOURSELVES IN!" Kolk screamed.

Thor looked down and saw the knotty ropes beneath his bench, and finally realized what they were for: he reached down and tied one around his wrist, chaining himself to the bench and the oar.

It worked. He stopped slipping. And soon, he was able to row.

All around him the boys resumed their rowing, Reece taking a seat in front of him, and Thor could feel the boat moving. Within minutes, the rain wall lightened up ahead.

As he rowed and rowed, his skin burning from this strange rain, every muscle in his body aching, finally the sound of the rain began to subside, and Thor began to feel less water pouring down on his head. In a few more moments, they entered a sunny sky.

Thor looked about, shocked: it was completely dry, bright. It was the strangest thing he had ever experienced: half the boat was under a dry, shining sun, while the other half was being poured on as they finished passing through the rain wall.

Finally, the entire boat was under a clear blue and yellow sky, the warm sun beating down on them. It was silent now, the rain wall disappearing fast, and all of his brothers-in-arms looked at each other, stunned. It was as if they had passed through a curtain, to another realm.

"YIELD!" yelled Kolk.

All around Thor boys dropped their oars with a collective groan, gasping, catching their breath. Thor did the same, feeling

every muscle in his body trembling and grateful to have a break. He slumped over, gasped for air and tried to relax his aching muscles as their boat glided into these new waters.

Thor finally regained himself and stood and looked around. He looked down at the water, and saw that it had changed color: it was now a light, glowing red. They had entered a different sea.

"The Sea of Dragons," Reece said, beside him, also looking down in wonder. "They say it runs red with the blood of its victims."

Thor looked down at it. It bubbled in places, and in the distance, strange beasts surfaced from the water momentarily, then submerged. None lingered long enough for him to get a good look at them, but he did not want to try his luck and lean down any closer.

Thor turned and took it all in, disoriented. Everything here, on this side of the rain wall, seemed so foreign, so different. There was even a slight red mist in the air, hovering low over the water. He surveyed the horizon and spotted dozens of small islands, spread out, like stepping stones on the horizon.

A strong breeze picked up and Kolk stepped forward and barked:

"RAISE THE SAILS!"

Thor jumped into action with all the boys around him, grabbing the ropes, and hoisting them to catch the breeze. The sails caught and a gust of wind carried them. Thor felt the boat moving beneath them faster than it ever had, and they aimed for

the islands. The boat rocked on huge, rolling waves, which rose up out of nowhere, gently moving up and down.

Thor made his way toward the bow, leaned against the rail and looked out. Reece came up beside him, and O'Connor came up on his other side. They all stood side-by-side, and Thor watched as the chain of islands fast approached. They stood there in silence for a long time, Thor relishing the moist breezes as his body relaxed.

Finally, Thor realized they aimed for one island in particular. It grew larger, and Thor felt a chill as he realized it was their destination.

"The Isle of Mist," Reece said, in awe.

Thor studied it in wonder. Its shape began to come into focus – it was rocky and craggy, barren, and it stretched several miles in each direction, long and narrow, shaped like a horseshoe. Huge waves crashed against its shore, rumbling even from here, creating enormous sprays of foam as they met enormous boulders. There was the tiniest strip of land beyond the boulders, and then a wall of cliffs which soared straight up, high into the air. Thor did not see how their boat could safely land.

Adding to the strangeness of this place, a red mist lingered all over the island, like a dew, sparkling in the sun. It gave it an ominous feel. Thor could sense something inhuman, unearthly, about this place.

"They say it's survived millions of years," O'Connor added. "It's older than the Ring. Older, even, than the Empire."

"It belongs to the dragons," Elden added, coming up beside Reece.

As Thor watched, suddenly the second sun plummeted in the sky; in moments the day went from sunny and bright to nearly sunset, the sky tainted with reds and purples. He could not believe it: he had never seen the sun move that quickly before. He wondered what else was different in this part of the world.

"Does a dragon live on this isle?" Thor asked.

Elden shook his head.

"No. I hear it lives close by. They say that red mist is forged from a dragon's breath. He breathes at night on a neighboring island, and the wind carries it and covers the island by day."

Thor heard a sudden noise; at first it sounded like a low rumble, like thunder, long and loud enough to shake the boat. Krohn, still in his shirt, ducked his head and whined.

The others all spun and Thor turned too and looked out; somewhere on the horizon he thought he could see the faint outline of flames licking the sunset, then disappearing in black smoke, like a small volcano erupting.

"The Dragon," Reece said. "We are in its territory now."

Thor swallowed, wondering.

"But then how can we be safe here?" O'Connor asked.

"You're not safe anywhere," came a resounding voice.

Thor spun to see Kolk standing there, hands on his hips, watching the horizon over their shoulders.

"That is the point of The Hundred, to live with the risk of

death each day. This is not an exercise. The dragon lives close, and there's nothing to stop him from attacking. He likely will not, because he jealously guards his treasure on his own isle, and dragons don't like to leave treasure unprotected. But you will hear his roars, and see his flames at night. And if we anger him somehow, there's no telling what could happen."

Thor heard another low rumble, saw another burst of flame on the horizon, and watched as they got closer and closer to the isle, waves crashing against it. He looked up at the steep cliffs, a wall of rock, and wondered how they would ever get up to the top, to its flat and dry land.

"But I see nowhere for a ship to dock," Thor said.

"That would be too easy," Kolk shot back.

"Then how do we get onto the island?" O'Connor asked.

Kolk smiled down, an evil smile.

"You swim," he said.

For a moment, Thor wondered if he was kidding; but then he realized from the look on his face that he was not. Thor swallowed.

"Swim?" Reece echoed, unbelieving.

"Those waters are teeming with creatures!" Elden said.

"Oh, that's the least of it," Kolk continued. "Those tides are treacherous; those whirlpools will suck you down; those waves will smash you into those jagged rocks; the water is hot; and if you make it past the rocks, you'll have to find a way to climb those cliffs, to reach dry land. If the sea creatures don't get you

first. Welcome to your new home."

Thor stood there with the others, at the rail's edge, looking down at the foaming sea beneath him. The water swirled beneath him like a living thing, the tides growing stronger by the second, rocking the boat, making it harder to keep his balance. Down below, the waters raged, churning, a bright red which seemed to contain the blood of hell itself. Worst of all, as Thor watched closely, these waters were disturbed every few feet by the surfacing of another sea monster, rising up, snapping its long teeth, then submerging.

Their ship suddenly dropped anchor, far from shore, and Thor swallowed. He looked up at the boulders framing the island, and wondered how they would make it from here to there. The crashing of the waves grew louder by the second, making others have to shout to be heard.

As he watched, several small rowboats were lowered into the water, then guided by the commanders far from the ship, a good thirty yards. They would not make it that easy: they would have to swim to reach them.

The thought of it made Thor's stomach turn.

"JUMP!" Kolk screamed.

For the first time, Thor felt afraid. He wondered if that made him less of a Legion member, less of a warrior. He knew warriors should be fearless at all times, but he had to admit to himself that he felt fear now. He hated the fact that he did, and he wished it could be otherwise. But he did.

But as Thor looked around and saw the terrified faces of the other boys, he felt better. All around him boys stood close to the rail, frozen in fear, staring down at the waters. One boy in particular was so scared that he shook. It was the boy from the day of the shields, the one who had been afraid, who had been forced to run laps.

Kolk must have sensed it, because he crossed the boat towards him. Kolk seemed unaffected as the wind threw back his hair, grimacing as he went, looking ready to conquer nature itself. He came up beside him and his scowl deepened.

"JUMP!" Kolk screamed.

"No!" the boy answered. "I can't! I won't do it! I can't swim! Take me back home!"

Kolk walked right up to the boy, as he was beginning to back away from the rail, grabbed him by the back of his shirt, and hoisted him high off the ground.

"Then you shall learn to swim!" Kolk snarled, and then, to Thor's disbelief, he hurled the boy over the edge.

The boy went flying through the air, screaming, as he plummeted a good fifteen feet towards the foaming sea. He landed with a splash, then floated to the surface, flailing, gasping for air.

"HELP!" he screamed.

"What's the first law of the Legion?" Kolk screamed out, turning to the other boys on ship, ignoring the boy in the water.

Thor was dimly aware of the correct response, but was too

distracted by the sight of the boy, drowning below, to answer.

"To help a fellow Legion member in need!" Elden screamed out.

"And is he in need?" Kolk yelled, pointing down to the boy.

The boy raised his arms, bobbing in and out of the water, and the other boys stood on deck, staring, all too scared to dive in.

At that moment, something funny happened to Thor. As he focused on the drowning boy, everything else fell away. Thor no longer thought of himself. The fact that he might die never even entered his mind. The sea, the monsters, the tides…it all faded away. All he could think of was rescuing someone else.

Thor stepped up onto the wide, oak rail, bent his knees, and without thinking, leapt high into the air, heading face first for the bubbling red of the waters beneath him.

Chapter Five

Gareth sat on his father's throne in the Grand Hall, rubbing his hands along its smooth, wooden arms and looking out at the scene before him: thousands of his subjects were packed into the room, people flocking in from all corners of The Ring to watch this once-in-a-lifetime event, to see if he could wield the Dynasty Sword. To see if he was the Chosen One. Not since his father was young had the people had a chance to witness a hoisting – and no one seemed to want to miss it. Excitement hung in the air like a cloud.

Gareth himself was numb with anticipation. As he watched the room continue to swell, more and more people packed inside, he started to wonder whether his father's advisors has been right, whether indeed it had been a bad idea to hold the hoisting in the Grand Hall and to open it to the public. They had urged him to attempt it in the small, private Sword Chamber; they had reasoned that if he failed, few would witness it. But Gareth did not trust his father's people; he felt more confident in his destiny than his father's old guard, and he wanted the entire kingdom to witness his accomplishment, to witness that he was the Chosen One, as it happened. He had wanted the moment recorded in time. The moment his destiny had arrived.

Gareth had entered the room with a flair, had strutted through accompanied by his advisors, wearing his crown and mantle,

wielding his scepter – he wanted them all to know that he, not his father, was the true King, the true MacGil. As he had expected, it had not taken him as long to feel that this was his castle, these his subjects. He wanted his people to feel it now, this show of power to be widely seen. After today, they would know for certain he was their one and only true king.

But now that Gareth sat there, alone on the throne, looking out at the vacant iron prongs in the center of the room in which the sword would be placed, lit up by a shaft of sunlight pouring down through the ceiling, he was not so sure. The gravity of what he was about to do weighed down on him; it would be an irreversible step, and there was no turning back. What if, indeed, he failed? He tried to push it from his mind.

The huge door opened with a creak on the far side of the room, and with an excited hush, the room fell silent in anticipation. In marched a dozen of the court's strongest hands, holding the sword between them, all struggling under its weight. Six men stood on each side, marching slowly, one step at a time, carrying the sword toward its resting place.

Gareth's heart quickened as he watched it get closer. For a brief moment, his confidence wavered – if these twelve men, larger than any he had ever seen, could barely hold it, what chance was there for him? But he tried to push these thoughts from his mind – after all, the sword was about destiny, not strength. And he forced himself to remember it was his destiny to be here, to be the firstborn of the MacGils, to be King. He

searched the crowd for Argon; for some reason he had a sudden, intense desire to seek his counsel. This was the time he needed him most. For some reason, he could think of no one else. But of course, he was nowhere to be found.

Finally, the dozen men reached the center of the room, carrying the sword into the shaft of sunlight, and they placed it down on the iron prongs. It landed with a reverberating clang, the sound traveling in ripples throughout the room. The room fell entirely silent.

The crowd instinctively parted ways, making a path for Gareth to walk down and try to hoist it.

Gareth slowly rose from his throne, savoring the moment, savoring all this attention. He could feel all the eyes on him. He knew a moment like this would never come again, when the entire kingdom watched him so completely, so intensely, analyzing every move he made. He had lived this moment so many times in his mind since he had been a youth, and now it had come. He wanted it to go slowly.

He walked down the steps of the throne, taking them one at a time, savoring each step. He walked on the red carpet, feeling how soft it was beneath his feet, closer and closer towards the patch of sunlight, toward the sword. As he walked, it was like walking in a dream. He felt outside of himself. A part of him felt as if he had walked this carpet many times before, having hoisted the sword a million times in his dreams. It made him feel all the more he was fated to hoist it, that he was walking into destiny.

He saw how it would go in his mind: he would step forward boldly, reach out with a single hand, and as his subjects leaned in, he would suddenly and dramatically raise it high over his head. They would all gasp and fall to their faces and declare him the Chosen One, the most important of the MacGil kings who had ever ruled, the one meant to rule forever. They would weep with joy at the sight. They would cower in fear of him. They would thank God they had lived in this lifetime to witness it. They would worship him as a god.

Gareth approached the sword, just feet away now, and felt himself tremble inside. As he entered the sunlight, although he had seen the sword many times before, he was taken aback by its beauty. He had never been allowed this close to it before, and it surprised him. It was intense. With a long shining blade, made from a material which no one had deciphered, it had the most ornate hilt he had ever seen, wrapped with a fine, silk-like cloth, encrusted with jewels of every sort, and emblazoned with the falcon crest. As he took a step closer, hovering over it, he felt the powerful energy radiating from it. It seemed to throb. He could hardly breathe. In just a moment it would be in his palm. High above his head. Shining in the sunlight for all the world to see.

He, Gareth, the Great One.

Gareth reached out and placed his right hand on the hilt, slowly closing his fingers around it, feeling every jewel, every contour as he grasped it, electrified. An intense energy radiated through his palm, up his arm, through his body. It was unlike

anything he had ever felt. This was his moment. His moment for all time.

Gareth would take no chances: he reached down and clasped his other hand on the hilt, too. He closed his eyes, his breathing shallow.

If it please the gods, allow me to hoist this. Give me a sign. Show me that I am King. Show me that I am meant to rule.

Gareth prayed silently, waiting for a response, for a sign, for the perfect moment. But seconds went by, a full ten seconds, the entire kingdom watching, and he heard nothing.

Then, suddenly, he saw the face of his father, scowling back at him.

Gareth opened his eyes in terror, wanting to wipe the image from his mind. His heart pounded, and he felt it was a terrible omen.

It was now or never.

Gareth leaned over, and with all his might, he tried to hoist the sword. He struggled with all he had, until his entire body shook, convulsed.

The sword did not budge. It was like trying to move the very foundation of the earth.

Gareth tried harder still, harder, and harder. Finally, he was visibly groaning and screaming.

Moments later, he collapsed.

The blade had not moved an inch.

A shocked gasp spread throughout the room as he hit the

ground. Several advisors rushed to his aid, checking to see if he was okay, and he violently shoved them away. Embarrassed, he stood, bringing himself back to his own two feet.

Humiliated, Gareth looked around at his subjects, looking to see how they would view him now.

They had already turned away, were already filtering from the room. Gareth could see the disappointment in their faces, could see that he was just another failed spectacle in their eyes. Now they all knew, each and every one of them, that he was not their true king. He was not the destined and chosen MacGil. He was nothing. Just another prince who had usurped the throne.

Gareth felt himself burning with shame. He had never felt more lonely than in that moment. Everything he had imagined, from the time he was a child, had been a lie. A delusion. He had believed in his own fable.

And it had crushed him.

Chapter Six

Gareth paced in his chamber, his mind reeling, stunned by his failure to hoist the sword, trying to process the ramifications. He felt numb. He could hardly believe he had been so stupid to attempt to hoist the sword, the Dynasty Sword, which no MacGil had been able to hoist for seven generations. Why had he thought he would be better than his ancestors? Why had he assumed he would be different?

He should have known. He should have been cautious, never should have overestimated himself. He should have been content with simply having his father's throne. Why did he have to push it?

Now all his subjects knew he was not the Chosen One; now his rule would be marred by this; now, perhaps, they would have more grounds to suspect him for the death of his father. He saw that everyone looked at him differently already, as if he were a walking ghost, as if they were already preparing themselves for the next king to come.

Worse than that, for the first time in his life, Gareth felt unsure about himself. His entire life, he had seen his destiny clearly. He had been certain he was meant to take his father's place, to rule and to wield the sword. His confidence had been shaken to the core. Now, he was not sure about anything.

Worst of all, he could not stop seeing that image of his father's

face, right before he'd hoisted it. Had that been his revenge?

"Bravo," came a slow, sardonic voice.

Gareth spun, shocked that anyone was with him in this chamber. He recognized the voice instantly; it was a voice he had become too familiar with over the years, and one he had come to despise. It was the voice of his wife.

Helena.

There she stood, in a far corner of the room, observing him as she smoked her opium pipe. She inhaled deeply, held it, then slowly let it out. Her eyes were bloodshot, and he could see that she had been smoking too long.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"This is my bridal chamber after all," she responded. "I can do anything I want here. I'm your wife and your queen. Don't forget. I rule this kingdom as much as you do. And after your debacle today, I would use the term *rule* very loosely indeed."

Gareth's face burned red. Helena had always had a way of striking him with the lowest blow of all, and at the most inopportune time. He despised her more than any woman in his life. He could hardly conceive that he had agreed to marry her.

"Do you?" Gareth spat, turning and marching towards her, seething. "You forget that I am King, you wench, and I could have you imprisoned, just like anyone else in my kingdom, whether you are my wife or not."

She laughed at him, a derisive snort.

"And then what?" she snapped. "Have your new subjects

wonder of your sexuality? No, I doubt that very much. Not in the scheming world of Gareth. Not in the mind of the man who cares more than anyone else how people perceive him."

Gareth stopped before her, realizing she had a way of seeing through him which annoyed him to the core. He understood her threat and realized that arguing with her would do no good. So he just stood there, quietly, waiting, his fists bunched.

"What is it that you want?" he said slowly, trying to control himself from doing something rash. "You don't come to me unless you want something."

She laughed a dry, mocking laugh.

"I'll take whatever it is that I want. I haven't come to ask you for anything. But rather to tell you something: your entire kingdom has just witnessed your failure to hoist the sword. Where does that leave us?"

"What you mean *us*?" he asked, wondering where she was going with this.

"Your people know now what I have always known: that you are failure. That you are not the Chosen One. Congratulations. At least now it is official."

He scowled back.

"My father failed to wield the sword. That did not prevent him from ruling effectively as King."

"But it affected his kingship," she snapped. "Every moment of it."

"If you're so unhappy with my inabilities," Gareth fumed,

"why don't you just leave this place? Leave me! Leave our mockery of a marriage. I am King now. I don't need you anymore."

"I'm glad you raised that point," she said, "because that is precisely the reason I've come. I want you to end our marriage officially. I want a divorce. There is a man I love. A *real* man. One of your knights, in fact. He's a warrior. We are in love, a true love. Unlike any love I ever had. Divorce me, so I can stop carrying on this affair in secret. I want our love to be public. And I want to be married to him."

Gareth stared back at her, shocked, feeling hollowed out, as if a dagger had just been plunged into his chest. Why had Helena had to surface? Why now, of all times? It was too much for him. He felt as if the world were kicking him while he was down.

Despite himself, Gareth was surprised to realize that he had some deep feelings for Helena, because when he heard her actual words, asking for a divorce, it did something to him. It upset him. Despite himself, it made him realize he did not want a divorce from her. If it came from him, it was one thing; but if it came from her, it was another. He did not want her to have her way, and not so easily.

Most of all, he wondered how a divorce would influence his kingship. A divorced King would raise too many questions. And despite himself, he found himself jealous of this knight. And resentful of her rubbing his lack of manhood in his face. He wanted vengeance. On both of them.

"You can't have it," he snapped. "You are bound to me. Stuck as my wife forever. I will never let you free. And if I ever encounter this knight you are cheating with, I will have him tortured and executed."

Helena snarled back at him.

"I am *not* your wife! You are not my husband. You are not a man. Ours is an unholy union. It has been from the day it was forged. It was an arranged partnership for power. The whole thing disgusts me – it always has. And it has ruined my one chance to *truly* be married."

She breathed, her fury rising.

"You will give me my divorce, or I will reveal to the entire kingdom the man you are. You decide."

With that Helena turned her back on him, marched across the room and out the open door, not even bothering to close it behind her.

Gareth stood alone in the stone chamber, listening to the echo of her footsteps and feeling a chill pervade his body that he could not shake. Was there anything stable he could hold onto anymore?

As Gareth stood there, trembling, watching the open door, he was surprised to see somebody else walk through it. He had barely had time to register his conversation with Helena, to process all of her threats, when in walked a too-familiar face. Firth. The usual bounce to his step was gone as he entered the room tentatively, a guilty look on his face.

"Gareth?" he asked, sounding unsure.

Firth stared at him, wide-eyed, and Gareth could see how bad he felt. He *should* feel bad, Gareth thought. After all, it was Firth who put him up to wielding the sword, who had finally convinced him, who had made him think that he was more than he was. Without Firth's whispering, who knew? Maybe Gareth would have never even attempted to wield it.

Gareth turned to him, seething. In Firth he finally found an object in which to direct all his anger. After all, Firth had been the one who killed his father. It was Firth, this stupid stable boy, who got him into this whole mess to begin with. Now he was just another failed successor to the MacGil lineage.

"I hate you," Gareth seethed. "What of your promises now? What of your confidence that I would wield the sword?"

Firth swallowed, looking very nervous. He was speechless. Clearly, he had nothing to say.

"I am sorry, my Lord," he said. "I was wrong."

"You were wrong about a lot of things," Gareth snapped.

Indeed, the more Gareth thought about it, the more he realized how wrong Firth had been. In fact, if it were not for Firth, his father would still be alive today – and Gareth would not be in any of this mess. The weight of the kingship would not be on his head, all these things would not be going wrong. Gareth longed for simpler days, when he was not King, when his father was alive. He felt a sudden desire to bring them all back, the way things used to be. But he could not. And he had Firth to blame

for all of this.

"What are you doing here?" Gareth pressed.

Firth cleared his throat, obviously nervous.

"I've heard…rumors…whispers of servants talking. Word has reached me that your brother and sister are asking questions. They've been spotted in the servants' quarters. Examining the waste chute for the murder weapon. The dagger I used to kill your father."

Gareth's body went cold at his words. He was frozen in shock and fear. Could this day get any worse?

He cleared his throat.

"And what did they find?" he asked, his throat dry, the words barely escaping.

Firth shook his head.

"I do not know, my lord. All I know is that they suspect something."

Gareth felt a renewed hatred for Firth, one he did not know he was capable of. If it wasn't for his bumbling ways, if he had disposed of the weapon properly, he would not be in this position. Firth had left him vulnerable.

"I'm only going to say this once," Gareth said, stepping close to Firth, getting in his face, glowering back at him with the firmest look he could muster. "I do not want to see your face ever again. Do you understand me? Leave my presence, and never come back. I'm going to relegate you to a position far from here. And if you ever step foot in these castle walls again, rest assured

I will have you arrested.

"NOW LEAVE!" Gareth shrieked.

Firth, eyes welling with tears, turned and fled from the room, his footsteps echoing long after he ran down the corridor.

Gareth drifted back to thinking of the sword, of his failed attempt. He could not help but feel as if he had set in motion a great calamity for himself. He felt as if he had just pushed himself off a cliff, and from this time forward, he would only be facing his descent.

He stood there, rooted to the stone in the reverberating silence, in his father's chamber, trembling, wondering what on earth he had set in motion. He had never felt so alone, so unsure of himself.

Was this what it meant to be king?

* * *

Gareth hurried up the stone, spiral staircase, rushing up floor after floor, hurrying his way to the castle's uppermost parapets. He needed fresh air. He needed time and space to think. He needed a vantage point of his kingdom, a chance to see his court, his people, and to remember it was all *his*. That, despite all the nightmarish events of the day, he was, after all, still king.

Gareth had dismissed his attendants and ran alone, up flight after flight, breathing hard. He stopped on one of the floors, bent over and caught his breath. Tears were streaming down his

cheeks. He kept seeing the face of his father, scolding him at every turn.

"I hate you!" he screamed to the empty air.

He could have sworn he heard mocking laughter in return. His father's laughter.

Gareth needed to get away from here. He turned and continued running, sprinting, until finally he reached the top. He burst out through the door, and the fresh summer air hit him in the face.

He breathed deep, catching his breath, reveling in the sunshine, in the warm breezes. He took off his mantle, his father's mantle, and threw it down to the ground. It was too hot – and he didn't want to wear it anymore.

He hurried to the edge of the parapet and clutched the stone wall, breathing hard, looking down on his court. He could see the never-ending crowd, filtering out from the castle. They were leaving the ceremony. His ceremony. He could almost feel their disappointment from here. They looked so small. He marveled that they were all under his control.

But for how long?

"Kingships are funny things," came an ancient voice.

Gareth spun and saw, to his surprise, Argon standing there, feet away, wearing a white cloak and hood and holding his staff. He stared back at him, a smile at the corner of his lips – yet his eyes were not smiling. They were glowing, staring right through him, and they set Gareth on edge. They saw too much.

There were so many things Gareth had wanted to say to Argon, to ask him. But now that he had already failed to wield the sword, he could not recall a single one.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Gareth pleaded, desperation in his voice. "You could have told me I was not meant to hoist it. You could have saved me the shame."

"And why would I do that?" Argon asked.

Gareth scowled.

"You are not a true counsel to the King," he said. "You would have counseled my father truly. But not I."

"Perhaps he was deserving of true counsel," Argon replied.

Gareth's fury deepened. He hated this man. And he blamed him.

"I don't want you around me," Gareth said. "I don't know why my father hired you, but I don't want you in King's Court."

Argon laughed, a hollow, scary sound.

"Your father did not hire me, foolish boy," he said. "Nor his father before him. I was meant to be here. In fact, you might say I hired *them*."

Argon suddenly took a step forward, and looked as if he were staring into Gareth's soul.

"Can the same be said of you?" Argon asked. "Are you meant to be here?"

His words struck a nerve in Gareth, sent a chill through him. It was the very thing Gareth had been wondering himself. Gareth wondered if it was a threat.

“He who reigns by blood will rule by blood,” Argon proclaimed, and with those words, he swiftly turned his back and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Gareth screamed, no longer wanting him to go, needing answers. “What do you mean by that?”

Gareth could not help but feel Argon was giving him a message, that he would not rule long. He needed to know if that was what he had meant.

Gareth ran after him, but as he approached, right before his eyes, Argon disappeared.

Gareth turned, looked all around him, but saw nothing. He heard only a hollow laughter, somewhere in the air.

“Argon!” Gareth screamed.

He turned again, then looked up to the heavens, sinking to one knee and throwing back his head. He shrieked:

“ARGON!”

Chapter Seven

Erec marched alongside the Duke, Brandt and dozens of the Duke's entourage, through the winding streets of Savaria, a crowd growing as they went, towards the house of the servant girl. Erec had insisted he meet her without delay, and the Duke had wanted to lead the way personally. And where the Duke went, everyone followed. Erec looked around at the huge and growing entourage, and was embarrassed, realizing he would arrive at this girl's abode with dozens of people in tow.

Since he had first seen her, Erec had been able to think of little else. Who was this girl, he wondered, who seemed so noble, yet worked as a servant in the Duke's court? Why had she fled from him so hastily? Why was it that, in all his years, with all the royal women he had met, this was the only one who had captured his heart?

Being around royalty his entire life, the son of a king himself, Erec could detect other royalty in an instant – and he sensed from the moment he spotted her that she was of a much more regal position than the one she was occupying. He was burning with curiosity to know who she was, where she was from, what she was doing here. He needed another chance to set his eyes upon her, to see if he had been imagining it or if he would still feel the way he did.

"My servants tell me she lives on the city's outskirts," the

Duke explained, talking as they walked. As they went, people on all sides of the streets opened their shutters and looked down, amazed at the presence of the Duke and his entourage in the common streets.

"Apparently, she is servant to an innkeeper. Nobody knows her origin, where she came from. All they know is that she arrived in our city one day, and became an indentured servant to this innkeeper. Her past, it seems, is a mystery."

They all turned down another side street, the cobblestone beneath them becoming more crooked, the small dwellings closer to each other and more dilapidated, as they went. The Duke cleared his throat.

"I took her in as a servant in my court on special occasions. She is quiet, keeps to herself. No one knows much about her. Erec," the Duke said, finally turning to Erec, laying a hand on his wrist, "are you certain about this? This woman, whoever she is, is just another commoner. You can have your choice of any woman in the kingdom."

Erec looked back at him with equal intensity.

"I must see this girl again. I don't care who she is."

The Duke shook his head in disapproval, and they all continued walking, turning down street after street, passing through twisting, narrow alleyways. As they went, this neighborhood of Savaria became even seedier, the streets filled with drunken types, lined with filth, chickens and wild dogs roaming about. They passed tavern after tavern, the screams of

patrons carrying out into the streets. Several drunks stumbled before them, and as night began to fall, the streets began to be lit by torches.

"Make way for the Duke!" shouted his lead attendant, rushing forward and finally pushing drunks out of the way. All up and down the streets unsavory types parted ways and watched, amazed, as the Duke passed, Erec beside him.

Finally, they arrived at a small, humble inn, built of stucco, with a pitched, slate roof. It looked as if it could hold maybe fifty patrons in its tavern below, with a few rooms for guests above. The front door was crooked, one window was broken, and its entry lamp hung crookedly, its torch flickering, the wax too low. Shouts of drunks spilled out the windows, as they all they stopped before the door.

How could such a fine girl work in a place like this? Erec wondered, horrified, as he heard the shouts and jeers from inside. His heart broke as he thought of it, as he thought of the indignity she must suffer in such a place. *It's not fair*, he thought. He felt determined to rescue her from it.

"Why do you come to the worst possible place to choose a bride?" the Duke asked, turning to Erec.

Brandt turned to him too.

"Last chance, my friend," Brandt said. "There is a castle full of royal women waiting for you back there."

But Erec shook his head, determined.

"Open the door," he commanded.

One of the Duke's men rushed forward and yanked it open. The smell of stale ale came out in waves, making him recoil.

Inside, drunken men were hunched over the bar, seated along wooden tables, shouting too loudly, laughing, jeering and jostling each other. They were crude types, Erec could see that at once, with bellies too large, cheeks unshaven, clothes unwashed. None of them warriors.

Erec took several steps in, searching the place for her. He could not possibly imagine that a woman like her could work in such a place. He wondered if maybe they had come to the wrong dwelling.

"Excuse me, sir, I'm looking for a woman," Erec said to the man standing beside him, tall and wide, with a big belly, unshaven.

"Are you then?" the man yelled out, mocking. "Well, you've come to the wrong place! This is not a brothel. Although there is one across the street – and I hear the women there are fine and plump!"

The man started laughing, too loudly, in Erec's face, and several of his fellows joined in.

"It is not a brothel I seek," Erec answered, unamused, "but a single woman, one who works here."

"You must mean then the innkeeper's servant," called out someone else, another large, drunk man. "She's probably in the back somewhere, scrubbing the floors. Too bad – I wish she were up here, on my lap!"

The men all screamed out in laughter, overwhelmed with their own jokes, and Erec reddened at the thought of it. He felt ashamed for her. For her to have to serve all of these types – it was an indignity that was too much for him to contemplate.

"And you are?" came another voice.

A man stepped forward, wider than the others, with a dark beard and eyes, a deep scowl, a wide jaw, accompanied by several seedy men. He had more muscle on him than fat, and he approached Erec threateningly, clearly territorial.

"Are you trying to steal my servant girl?" he demanded. "Out with you then!"

He stepped forward and reached out to grab Erec.

But Erec, hardened by years of training, the kingdom's greatest knight, had reflexes beyond what this man could imagine. The moment his hands touched Erec, he sprang into action, grabbing his wrist in a lock, spinning the man around with lightning speed, grabbing him by the back of his shirt, and shoving him across the room.

The big man went flying like a cannonball, and he took several men out with him, all of them crashing to the floor of the small place like bowling pins.

The entire room grew silent, as every man stopped and watched.

"FIGHT! FIGHT!" the men chanted.

The innkeeper, dazed, stumbled to his feet and charged for Erec with a shout.

This time Erec did not wait. He stepped forward to meet his attacker, raised an arm, and brought his elbow straight down on the man's face, breaking his nose.

The innkeeper stumbled backwards, then collapsed, landing on the floor on his rear.

Erec stepped forward, picked him up, and despite his size, hoisted him high above his head. He took several steps forward and threw the man, and he went flying through the air, taking half the room down with him.

All the men in the room froze, stopping their chanting, growing quiet, starting to realize that someone special was among them. The bartender, though, suddenly came rushing forward, a glass bottle held high over his head, aiming right for Erec.

Erec saw it coming and already had his hand on his sword – but before Erec could draw it, his friend Brandt stepped forward, beside him, drew a dagger from his belt, and held the tip of it out at the bartender's throat.

The bartender ran right into it and stopped cold, the blade just about to puncture his skin. He stood there, eyes wide open in fear, sweating, frozen in mid-air with the bottle. The room grew so silent at the standoff one could hear a pin drop.

"Drop it," Brandt ordered.

The bartender did so, and the bottle smashed on the floor.

Erec drew his sword with a resounding ring of metal and walked over to the innkeeper, who lay moaning on the floor, and pointed it at his throat.

"I will only say this once," Erec announced. "Clear this room of all this riffraff. Now. I demand an audience with the lady. Alone."

"The Duke!" someone yelled.

The whole room turned and finally recognized the Duke standing there, by the entrance, flanked by his men. All of them rushed to take off their caps and bow their heads.

"If the room is not clear by the time I finish speaking," the Duke announced, "each one of you here will be imprisoned at once."

The room broke into a frenzy as all the men inside scurried to vacate, rushing past the Duke and out the front door, leaving their unfinished bottles of ale where they were.

"And out with you, too," Brandt said to the bartender, lowering his dagger, grabbing him by his hair and shoving him out the door.

The room, which had been so rowdy moments before, now sat empty, silent, save for Erec, Brandt, the Duke, and a dozen of his closest men. They shut the door behind them with a resounding slam.

Erec turned to the innkeeper, sitting on the floor, still dazed, wiping blood from his nose. Erec grabbed him by the shirt, hoisted him up with both hands, and sat him down on one of the empty benches.

"You've ruined my business for the night," the innkeeper whined. "You will pay for this."

The Duke stepped forward and backhanded him.

"I can have you killed for attempting to lay a hand on this man," the Duke scolded. "Do you not know who this is? This is Erec, the king's best knight, the champion of The Silver. If he chooses to, he can kill you himself, right now."

The innkeeper looked up at Erec, and for the first time, real fear crossed his face. He nearly trembled in his seat.

"I had no idea. You did not announce yourself."

"Where is she?" Erec demanded, impatient.

"She's in the back, scrubbing the kitchen. What is it that you want with her? Did she steal something of yours? She is just another indentured servant girl."

Erec drew his dagger and held it to the man's throat.

"Call her a 'servant' again," Erec warned, "and you can be sure I will cut your throat. Do you understand?" he asked firmly as he held the blade against the man's skin.

The man's eyes flooded with tears, as slowly he nodded.

"Bring her here, and hurry about it," Erec ordered, and yanked him to his feet and gave him a shove, sending him flying across the room, and toward the back door.

As the innkeeper left, there came a clanging of pots from behind the door, muted yelling, and then, moments later, the door opened, and out came several women, dressed in rags, smocks and bonnets, covered in kitchen grease. There were three older women, in their sixties, and Erec wondered for a moment if the innkeeper knew who he was speaking of.

And then, she came out – and Erec's heart stopped in his chest. He could hardly breathe. It was her.

She wore an apron, covered in grease stains, and kept her head down low, ashamed to look up. Her hair was tied, covered in a cloth, her cheeks were caked with dirt – and yet still, Erec was smitten by her. Her skin was so young, so perfect. She had high, chiseled cheeks and jawbones, a small nose covered in freckles, and full lips. She had a broad, regal forehead, and her beautiful blonde hair spilled out from beneath the bonnet.

She glanced up at him, just for a moment, and her large, wonderful almond-green eyes, which shifted in the light, changing to crystal blue then back again, held him rooted in place. He was surprised to realize that he was even more mesmerized by her now than he had been when he'd first met her.

Behind her, out came the innkeeper, scowling, still wiping blood from his nose. The girl walked forward tentatively, surrounded by these older women, towards Erec, and curtsied as she got close. Erec rose, standing before her, as did several of the Duke's entourage.

"My lord," she said, her voice soft, sweet, filling Erec's heart. "Please tell me what I've done to offend you. I don't know what it is, but I'm sorry for whatever it is I have done to warrant the presence of the Duke's court."

Erec smiled. Her words, her language, the sound of her voice – it all made him feel restored. He never wanted her to stop speaking.

Erec reached up and touched her chin with his hand, lifting it until her gentle eyes met his. His heart raced as he looked into her eyes. It was like getting lost in a sea of blue.

"My lady, you have done nothing to offend. I do not think you shall ever be able to offend. I come here not out of anger – but out of love. Since I saw you, I have been able to think of nothing else."

The girl looked flustered, and immediately dropped her eyes to the ground, blinking several times. She twisted her hands, looking nervous, overwhelmed. She was clearly unused to this.

"Please my lady, tell me. What is your name?"

"Alistair," she answered, humbly.

"Alistair," Erec repeated, overwhelmed. It was the most beautiful name he had ever heard.

"But I do not know why it should serve you to know it," she added, softly, still looking at the floor. "You are a Lord. And I am but a servant."

"She is *my* servant, to be exact," the innkeeper said, stepping forward, nasty. "She is indentured to me. She signed a contract, years ago. Seven years is what she promised. In return, I give her food and board. She is three years in. So you see, this is all a waste of time. She is mine. I own her. You are not taking this one away. She is mine. Do you understand?"

Erec felt a hatred for the innkeeper beyond what he had ever felt for a man. He was partly of a mind to draw his sword and stab him in the heart and be done with him. But however much

the man may have deserved it, Erec did not want to break the King's law. After all, his actions reflected on the king.

"The King's law is the King's law," Erec said to the man, firmly. "I don't intend on breaking it. That said, tomorrow begin the tournaments. And I am entitled, as any man, to choose my bride. And let it be known here and now that I choose Alistair."

A gasp spread the room, as everyone turned to each other, shocked.

"That is," Erec added, "if she consents."

Erec looked at Alistair, his heart pounding, as she kept her face lowered to the floor. He could see that she was blushing.

"Do you consent, my lady?" he asked.

The room fell silent.

"My Lord," she said softly, "you know nothing of who I am, of where I am from, of why I am here. And I am afraid these are things I cannot tell you."

Erec stared back, puzzled.

"Why can you not tell me?"

"I have never told anyone since my arrival. I have made a vow."

"But why?" he pressed, so curious.

But Alistair merely kept her face down, silent.

"It's true," inserted one of the servant women. "This one's never told us who she is. Or why she's here. She refuses to. We've tried for years."

Erec was deeply puzzled by her – but that only added to her mystery.

"If I cannot know who you are, then I shall not," Erec said. "I respect your vow. But that will not change my affection for you. My lady, whoever you are, if I should win these tournaments, then I will choose you as my prize. You, from any woman in this entire kingdom. I ask you again: do you consent?"

Alistair kept her eyes fixed to the ground, and as Erec watched, he saw tears rolling down her cheeks.

Suddenly, she turned and fled from the room, running out and closing the door behind her.

Erec stood there, with the others, in the stunned silence. He hardly knew how to interpret her response.

"You see then, you waste your time, and mine," the innkeeper said. "She said no. Be off with you then."

Erec frowned back.

"She did not say no," Brandt interjected. "She did not respond."

"She is entitled to take her time," Erec said, in her defense. "After all, it is a lot to consider. She does not know me, either."

Erec stood there, debating what to do.

"I will stay here tonight," Erec finally announced. "You shall give me a room here, down the hall from hers. In the morning, before the tournaments begin, I shall ask her again. If she consents, and if I win, she shall be my bride. If so, I will buy her out of her servitude with you, and she shall leave this place with me."

The innkeeper clearly did not want Erec under his roof, but

he dared not say anything; so he turned and stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Are you certain you wish to stay here?" the Duke asked. "Come back to the castle with us."

Erec nodded back, gravely.

"I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

Chapter Eight

Thor plummeted down through the air, diving, racing headfirst for the churning waters of the Sea of Fire. He entered it and sunk down, immersed, and was startled to feel the water was hot.

Beneath the surface, Thor opened his eyes briefly – and wished he hadn't. He caught a glimpse of all manner of strange and ugly sea creatures, small and big, with unusual and grotesque faces. This ocean was teeming. He prayed they did not attack him before he could reach the safety of the rowboat.

Thor surfaced with a gasp, and looked immediately for the drowning boy. He spotted him, and just in time: he was flailing, sinking, and in a few more seconds, surely he would have drowned.

Thor reached around, grabbed him from behind by his collarbone, and began to swim with him, keeping both their heads above water. Thor heard a whelp and a whine, and as he turned, he was shocked to see Krohn: he must have leapt in after him. The leopard swam beside him, paddling up to Thor, whining. Thor felt terrible that Krohn was endangered like this – but his hands were full and there was little he could do.

Thor tried not to look all around him, at the waters, churning red, at the strange creatures surfacing and disappearing all around him. An ugly-looking creature, purple, with four arms

and two heads, surfaced nearby, hissed at him, then submerged, making Thor flinch.

Thor turned and saw the rowboat, about twenty yards away, and swam for it frantically, using his one arm and his legs as he dragged the boy. The boy flailed and screamed, resisting, and Thor feared he might bring him down with him.

"Hold still!" Thor screamed harshly, hoping the boy would listen.

Finally, he did. Thor was momentarily relieved – until he heard a splash and turned his head the other way: right beside him, another creature surfaced, small, with a yellow head and four tentacles. It had a square head, and it swam right up to him, snarling and shaking. It looked like a rattlesnake that lived in the sea, except its head was too square. Thor braced himself as it got closer, preparing to be bitten – but then suddenly it opened its mouth wide and spat seawater at him. Thor blinked, trying to flush it from his eyes.

The creature swam around and around them, in circles, and Thor redoubled his efforts, swimming faster, trying to get away.

Thor was making progress, getting closer to the boat, when suddenly another creature surfaced on his other side. It was long, narrow, and orange, with two claws at its mouth and dozens of small legs. It also had a long tail, which it whipped about in every direction. It looked like a lobster, standing upright. It skirted along the water's edge, like a water bug, and buzzed its way close to Thor, turning to the side and whipping its tail. The tail lashed

Thor's arm and he cried out in pain at the sting.

The creature whizzed back and forth, lashing out again and again. Thor wished he could draw his sword and attack it – but he only had one free hand, and he needed it to swim.

Krohn, swimming beside him, turned and snarled at the creature, a hair-raising noise, and as Krohn fearlessly swam its way, it scared the beast, making it disappear beneath the waters. Thor sighed with relief – until the creature suddenly reappeared on his other side, and lashed him again. Krohn turned and chased it all around, trying to catch it, snapping his jaws at it, and always missing.

Thor swam for his life, realizing the only way out of this mess was to get out of this sea. After what felt like forever, swimming harder than he'd ever had, he made it close to the rowboat, rocking violently in the waves. As he did, two Legion members, older boys who never spoke to Thor and his classmates, were waiting there to help him. To their credit, they leaned over and extended him a hand.

Thor helped the boy first, reaching around and hoisting him up towards the boat. The older boys grabbed the boy by his arms and dragged him up.

Thor then reached around, grabbed Krohn by his stomach and threw him up out of the water, and onto the boat. Krohn clamored with all four paws as he scratched and slipped on the wooden boat, dripping wet, shaking. He slid across the wet bottom, across the boat. Then he immediately bounced back up,

turned, and ran back to the edge, looking for Thor. He stood there, looking down into the water, and yelped.

Thor reached up and grabbed the hand of one of the boys, and was just pulling himself into the boat when suddenly he felt something strong and muscular wrap itself around his ankle and thigh. He turned and looked down, and his heart froze as he saw a lime-green squid-like creature, wrapping a tentacle around his leg.

Thor cried out in pain as he felt its stingers pierce his flesh.

Thor realized that if he didn't do something quick, he would be finished. With his free hand, he reached down to his belt, extracted a short dagger, leaned over, and slashed at it. But the tentacle was so thick, the dagger could not even pierce it.

It made it angry. The creature's head suddenly surfaced – green, with no eyes and two jaws on its long neck, one atop the other – opened its rows of razor-sharp teeth and leaned in towards Thor. Thor felt the blood being cut off from his leg, and knew he had to act fast. Despite the elder boy's efforts to hang onto him, Thor's grip was slipping, and he was sinking back into the water.

Krohn yelped and yelped, hairs standing on his back, leaning over as if getting ready to pounce into the water. But even Krohn must have known it would be useless to attack this thing.

One of the older boys stepped forward and screamed:

"DUCK!"

Thor lowered his head, as the boy threw a spear. It whizzed

through the air but it missed, flew harmlessly by and sank into the water. The creature was too skinny, and too quick.

Suddenly, Krohn leapt off the boat and back into the water, landing with his jaws open and his sharp teeth extended on the back of the creature's neck. Krohn clamped down and swung the creature left and right, not letting go.

But it was a losing battle: the creature's skin was too tough, and it was too muscular. The creature threw Krohn side to side then finally sent him flying into the water. Meanwhile, the creature's grip tightened on Thor's leg; it was like a vice, and Thor felt himself losing oxygen. The tentacles burned so badly, Thor felt as if his leg was about to be torn off his body.

In one final, desperate attempt, Thor let go of the boy's hand and in the same motion swung around and reached for the short sword on his belt.

But he could not grab it in time; he slipped and spun and fell face first into the water.

Thor felt himself dragged away, farther from the boat, the creature pulling him out to sea. He was dragged backwards, faster and faster, and as he reached out helplessly, he watched the rowboat disappearing before him. The next thing he knew, he felt himself being pulled down, beneath the surface of the water, deep into the depths of the Sea of Fire.

Chapter Nine

Gwendolyn ran in the open meadow, her father, King MacGil, beside her. She was young, maybe ten, and her father was much younger, too. His beard was short, not showing any signs of the gray it would have later in life, and his skin was free of wrinkles, youthful, shining. He was happy, carefree, and laughed with abandon as he held her hand and ran with her through the fields. This was the father she remembered, the father she knew.

He picked her up and threw her over his shoulder, spinning her again and again, laughing louder and louder, and she giggled hysterically. She felt so safe in his arms, and she wanted this time together to never end.

But when her father set her down, something strange happened. Suddenly, the day went from a sunny afternoon to twilight. When Gwen's feet hit the ground, they were no longer in the flowers of the meadow, but stuck in mud, up to her ankles. Her father now lay in the mud, on his back, a few feet away from her – older, much older, too old – and he was stuck. Even farther away, lying in the mud, was his crown, sparkling.

"Gwendolyn," he gasped. "My daughter. Help me."

He lifted a hand out from the mud, reaching for her, desperate.

She was overcome with an urgency to help him, and she tried to go to him, to grab his hand. But her feet would not budge. She looked down and saw the mud hardening all around her, drying

up, cracking. She wiggled and wiggled, trying to break free.

Gwen blinked and found herself standing on the parapets of the castle, looking down on King's Court. Something was wrong: as she looked down, she did not see the usual splendor and festivities, but rather a sprawling cemetery. Where there once sat the shining splendor of King's Court there were now fresh graves as far the eye could see.

She heard a shuffling of feet, and her heart stopped as she turned to see an assassin, wearing a black cloak and hood, approaching her. He sprinted for her, pulling back his hood, revealing a grotesque face, one eye missing, a thick, jagged scar over the socket. He snarled, raised one hand, and raised a glistening dagger, its hilt glowing red.

He was moving too fast and she could not react in time. She braced herself, knowing she was about to be killed as he brought the dagger down with full force.

It stopped suddenly, just inches from her face, and she opened her eyes to see her father, standing there, a corpse, catching the man's wrist in mid-air. He squeezed the man's hand until he dropped it, then hoisted the man over his shoulders and threw him off the parapet. Gwen listened to his screams as he plunged down over the edge.

Her father turned and stared at her; he grabbed her shoulders firmly with his decomposing hands and wore a stern expression.

"It is not safe for you here," he warned. "It is not safe!" he screamed, his hands digging into her shoulders far too firmly,

making her cry out.

Gwen woke screaming. She sat upright in bed, looking all around her chamber, expecting an attacker.

But she was met with nothing but silence – the thick, still silence that precedes dawn.

Sweating, breathing hard, she jumped from bed, dressed in her nighttime lace, and paced her room. She hurried over to a small, stone basin and splashed water in her face, again and again. She leaned against the wall, felt the cool stone on her bare feet on this warm summer morning, and tried to compose herself.

The dream had felt too real. She sensed it was more than a dream – a genuine warning from her father, a message. She felt an urgency to leave King's Court, right now, and never come back.

She knew that was something she could not do. She had to compose herself, to gain her wits. But every time she blinked, she saw her father's face, felt his warning. She had to do something to shake the dream off.

Gwen looked out and saw the first sun just beginning to rise, and she thought of the only place that would help her regain her composure: King's River. Yes, she had to go.

* * *

Gwendolyn immersed herself again and again in the freezing cold springs of King's River, holding her nose and ducking her head under water. She sat in the small, natural swimming pool

carved from rock, hidden in the upper springs, that she had found and frequented ever since she was a child. She held her head beneath the water and lingered there, feeling the cold currents run through her hair, over her scalp, feeling it wash and cleanse her naked body.

She had found this secluded spot one day, hidden amidst a clump of trees, high up on the mountain, a small plateau where the river's current slowed and created a pool that was deep and still. Above her, the river trickled in and below her, it continued to trickle down – yet here, on this plateau, the waters held just the slightest current. The pool was deep, the rocks smooth, and the place so well-hidden, she could bathe naked with abandon. She came here almost every morning in the summer, as the sun was rising, to clear her mind. Especially on days like today, when dreams haunted her, as they often did, it was her one place of refuge.

It was so hard for Gwen to know if it was just a dream, or something more. How was she to know when a dream was a message, an omen? To know whether it was just her mind playing tricks on her or if she was being given a chance to take action?

Gwendolyn rose for air, breathing in the warm summer morning, hearing the birds chirp all around her in the trees. She leaned back against the rock, her body immersed up to her neck, sitting on a natural ledge in the water, thinking. She reached up with her hands and splashed her face, then ran her hands through her long, strawberry hair. She looked down at the crystal

surface of the water, reflecting the sky, the second sun, which was already beginning to rise, the trees which arched over the water, and her own face. Her almond eyes, glowing blue, looked back at her from the rippling reflection. She could see something of her father in them. She turned away, thinking again of her dream.

She knew it was dangerous for her to remain in King's Court with her father's assassination, with all the spies, all the plots – and especially, with Gareth as king. Her brother was unpredictable. Vindictive. Paranoid. And very, very jealous. He saw everyone as a threat – especially her. Anything could happen. She knew that she was not safe here. Nobody was.

But she was not one to run. She needed to know for sure who her father's murderer was, and if it was Gareth, she could not run away until she had brought him to justice. She knew her father's spirit would not rest until whoever killed him was caught. Justice had been his rallying cry all his life, and he, of all people, deserved to have it for himself in death.

Gwen thought again of her and Godfrey's encounter with Steffen. She felt certain Steffen was hiding something, and wondered what it was. A part of her felt he might open up on his own time. But what if he would not? She felt an urgency to find her father's killer – but did not know where else to look.

Gwendolyn finally rose from her seat beneath the water, climbed onto shore naked, shivering in the morning air, hid behind a thick tree, and reached up to take her towel from a

branch, as she always did.

But as she reached for it, she was shocked to discover her towel was not there. She stood there, naked, wet, and could not understand it. She was certain she had hung it there, as she always did.

As she stood there, baffled, shivering, trying to understand what had happened, suddenly, she sensed motion behind her. It happened so quickly – a blur – and an instant later, her heart stopped, as she realized a man stood behind her.

It happened too fast. In seconds the man, wearing a black cloak and hood, as in her dream, was behind her. He grabbed her from behind, reached up with a bony hand and clasped it over her mouth, muting her screams as he held her tight. He reached around with his other hand and grabbed her by the waist, pulling her close and hoisting her off the ground.

She kicked in the air, trying to scream, until he set her down, still clasping her tight. She tried to break free from his grasp, but he was too strong. He reached around and Gwen saw he held a dagger with a glowing red hilt – the same from her dream. It had been a warning after all.

She felt the blade pressed up against her throat, and he held it so tight that if she moved in any direction, her throat would be cut. Tears poured down her cheeks as she struggled to breathe. She was so mad at herself. She had been so stupid. She should have been more vigilant.

"Do you recognize my face?" he asked.

He leaned forward and she felt his hot, horrible breath on her cheek, and saw his profile. Her heart stopped – it was the same face from her dream, the man with the missing eye and scar.

"Yes," she answered, her voice shaking.

It was a face she knew too well. She did not know his name, but she knew that he was an enforcer. A low-class type, one of several who had hung around Gareth since he was a child. He was Gareth's messenger. Gareth sent him to anyone he wished to scare – or torture or kill.

"You are my brother's dog," she hissed back at him, defiant.

He smiled, revealing missing teeth.

"I am his messenger," he said. "And my message comes with a special weapon to help you remember it. His message to you today is to stop asking questions. It is one you will come to know well, because when I'm finished with you, the scar I will leave on that pretty face of yours will make you remember it for your entire life."

He snorted, then raised the knife high and began to bring it down for her face.

"NO!" Gwen shrieked.

She braced herself for the life-changing slash.

But as the blade came down, something happened. Suddenly, a bird screeched, swooped down from out of the sky, dove right for the man. She glanced up and recognized it at the last second:

Estopheles.

It swooped down, its talons out, and scratched the man's face

as he brought down the dagger.

The blade had just begun to slice Gwen's cheek, stinging her with its pain, when it suddenly changed directions; the man shrieked, dropping the blade and raising his hands. Gwen saw a white light flash in the sky, the sun shining behind the branches, and as Estopheles flew away, she knew, she just knew, that her father had sent the falcon.

She wasted no time. She spun around, leaned back and, as her trainers had taught her to do, kicked the man hard in the solar plexus, taking perfect aim with her bare foot. He keeled over, feeling the strength of her legs as she drove her kick right through him. She'd had it drilled into her, from the time she was young, that she did not need to be strong to fend off an attacker. She just needed to use her strongest muscles – her thighs. And to take aim precisely.

As the man stood there, keeled over, she stepped forward, grabbed the back of his hair and raised her knee – again, with pinpoint precision – and connected perfectly on the bridge of his nose.

She heard a satisfied crack and felt his hot blood gush out, pour onto her leg, staining it; as he slumped to the ground, she knew she had broken his nose.

She knew she should finish him off for good, take that dagger and plunge it into his heart.

But she stood there, naked, and her instinct was to clothe herself and get out of here. She didn't want his blood on her

hands, however much he may have deserved it.

So instead she reached down, grabbed his blade, chucked it into the river, and wrapped her clothes around herself. She prepared to flee, but before she did, she turned back, wound up, and kicked him as hard as she could in the groin.

He screamed out in pain, and curled up in a ball, like a wounded animal.

Inwardly she was shaking, feeling how close she had come to being killed, or at least maimed. She felt the cut stinging her cheek, and realized she would probably carry some scar, however light. She felt traumatized. But she did not let him show it. Because at the same time, she also felt a new strength welling up in her, the strength of her father, of seven generations of MacGil kings. And for the first time she realized that she, too, was strong. As strong as her brothers. As strong as any of them.

Before she turned away, she leaned down close so he could hear her amidst his groans.

"Come near me again," she growled to the man, "and I will kill you myself."

Chapter Ten

Thor felt himself getting sucked down beneath the water and knew that within moments he would be plunged to the depths and drowned – if he wasn't eaten alive first. He prayed with all that he had.

Please, don't let me die now. Not here. Not in this place. Not by this creature.

Thor tried to summon his powers, whatever they were. He tried with all that he had, willed that special energy to flow through him, to help him defeat this creature. He closed his eyes and willed for it to work.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.