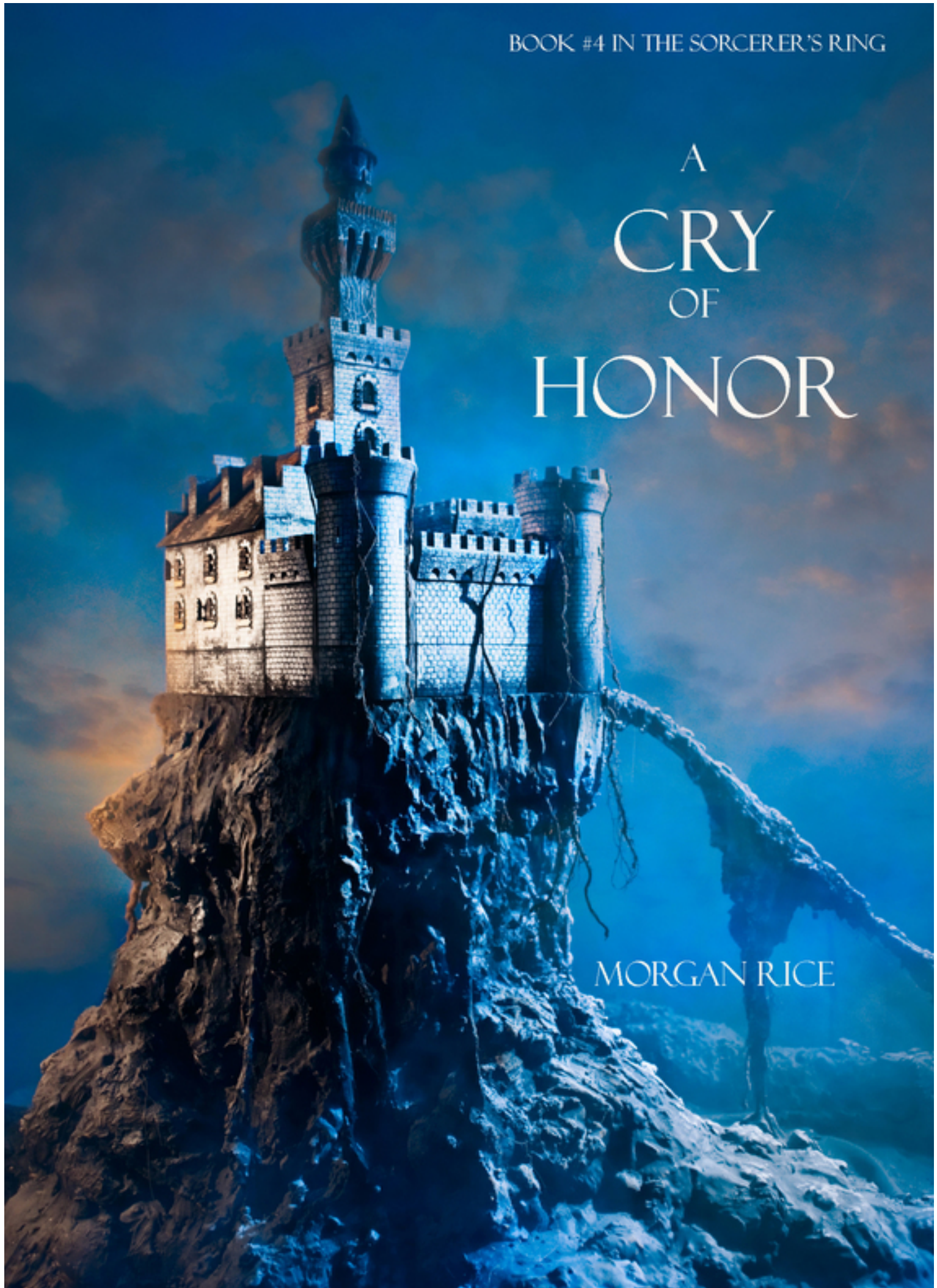


BOOK #4 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

A
CRY
OF
HONOR

MORGAN RICE



The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice
A Cry of Honor

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2013

Rice M.

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In A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4 in the Sorcerer's Ring), Thor has returned from The Hundred as a hardened warrior, and now he must learn what it means to battle for his homeland, to battle for life and death. The McClouds have raided deep into MacGil territory – deeper than ever before in the history of the Ring – and as Thor rides into an ambush, it will fall on his head to fend off the attack and save King's Court. Godfrey has been poisoned by his brother by a very rare and potent poison, and his fate lies in Gwendolyn's hands, as she does whatever she can to save her brother from death. Gareth has fallen deeper into a state of paranoia and discontent, hiring his own tribe of savages as a personal fighting force and giving them Silver Hall – ousting The Silver and causing a rift in King's Court that threatens to blow up into a civil war. He also schemes to have the fierce Nevaruns take Gwendolyn away, selling her off in marriage without her consent. Thor's friendships deepen, as they journey to new places, face unexpected monsters and fight side by side in unimaginable battle. Thor journeys to his hometown and, in an epic confrontation with his father, he learns a great secret of his past, of who he is, who his mother is – and of his destiny. With the most advanced training he's ever received from Argon, he begins to tap powers he didn't know he had, becoming more powerful each day. As his relationship with Gwen deepens, he returns to King's Court in the hopes of proposing to her – but it may already be too late. Andronicus, armed with an informer, leads his million-man Empire army to once again attempt to breach the Canyon and crush the Ring. And just as things seem like they can't get any worse at King's Court, the story ends with a shocking twist. Will Godfrey survive? Will Gareth be ousted? Will King's Court split in two? Will the Empire invade? Will Gwendolyn end up with Thor? And will Thor finally learn the secret of his destiny? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A CRY OF HONOR 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. It is 85,000 words.

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Morgan Rice

A Cry of Honor

(Book #4 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

*“Be not afraid of greatness:
some are born great,
some achieve greatness,
and some have greatness thrust upon them.”*

*– William Shakespeare
Twelfth Night*

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About Morgan Rice

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

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

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

– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Loved*)

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Chapter One

Luanda charged across the battlefield, narrowly avoiding a galloping horse as she weaved her way towards the small dwelling that held King McCloud. She clutched the cold, iron spike in her hand, trembling, as she crossed the dusty grounds of this city she once knew, this city of her people. She had been forced all these months to witness them being butchered – and she'd had enough. Something inside her snapped. She no longer cared if she went up against the entire McCloud army – she would do whatever she could to stop it.

Luanda knew what she was about to do was crazy, that she was taking her life into her hands, and that McCloud would likely kill her. But she pushed these thoughts from her mind as she ran. The time had come to do what was right – at any cost.

Across the crowded battlefield, amidst the soldiers, she spotted McCloud in the distance, carrying that poor, screaming girl into an abandoned dwelling – a small clay house. He slammed the door behind them, raising a cloud of dust.

“Luanda!” came a shout.

She turned and saw Bronson, perhaps a hundred yards behind, chasing after her. His progress was interrupted by the endless stream of horses and soldiers, forcing him to stop several times.

Now was her chance. If Bronson caught up to her, he would prevent her from going through with it.

Luanda doubled her speed, clutching the spike, and tried not to think how crazy this all was, how slim her chances were. If entire armies could not bring down McCloud, if his own generals, his own son, trembled before him, what chance did she alone possibly have?

Moreover, Luanda had never killed a man before, much less a man of McCloud's stature. Would she freeze up when the time came? Could she really sneak up on him? Was he impervious, as Bronson had warned?

Luanda felt implicit in this army's bloodshed, in the ruin of her own land. Looking back, she regretted she had ever agreed to marry a McCloud, despite her love for Bronson. The McClouds, she had learned, were a savage people, beyond correction. The MacGills had been lucky the Highlands divided them, she realized that now, and that they had stayed on their side of the Ring. She had been naïve, had been stupid to assume the McClouds were not as bad as she had been raised to think. She thought she could change them, that having a chance to be a McCloud princess – and one day queen – was somehow worth it, whatever the risk.

But now she knew she was wrong. She would give up everything – give up her title, her riches, her fame, all of it – to have never met the McClouds, to be back in safety, with her family, on her side of the Ring. She was mad at her father now for having arranged this marriage; she was young and naïve, but he should have known better. Was politics so important to him to sacrifice his own daughter? She was mad at him, too, for dying, for leaving her alone with all of this.

Luanda had learned the hard way, these last few months, to depend on herself, and now was her chance to make things right.

She trembled as she reached the small clay house, with its dark, oak door, slammed shut. She turned and looked both ways, expecting McCloud's men to bear down on her; but to her relief, they were all too preoccupied with the havoc they were wreaking to notice.

She reached up, the stake in one hand, and grabbed the knob, turning it as delicately as she could, praying she did not alert McCloud.

She stepped inside. It was dark in here, and her eyes adjusted slowly from the harsh sunlight of the white city; it was cooler in here, too, and as she stepped across the threshold of the small house, the first thing she heard were the moans and cries of the girl. As her eyes adjusted she looked over in the small house and saw McCloud, undressed from the waist down, on the floor, the girl undressed,

struggling beneath him. The girl cried and screamed, her eyes bunched up, as McCloud reached up and clamped her mouth shut with his beefy palm.

Luanda could hardly believe this was real, that she was really going through with this. She took a tentative step forward, her hands shaking, her knees weak, and prayed she would have the strength to carry through. She clutched the iron spike as if it were her lifeline.

Please, God, let me kill this man.

She heard McCloud grunting and groaning, like a wild animal, having his fill. He was relentless. The girl's screams seemed to amplify with his every move.

Luanda took another step, then another, and was just feet away. She looked down at McCloud, studied his body, trying to decide the best place to strike. Luckily he had removed his chainmail and wore only a thin, cloth shirt, now drenched in sweat. She could smell it from here, and she recoiled. Removing his armor was a careless move on his part, and it would be, Luanda decided, his last mistake. She would raise the spike high, with both hands, and plunge it into his exposed back.

As McCloud's groans reached their peak, Luanda raised the spike high. She thought of how her life would change after this moment, how, in just seconds, nothing would ever be the same. The McCloud kingdom would be free of their tyrant king; her people would be spared from further destruction. Her new husband would rise and take his place, and finally, all would be well.

Luanda stood there, frozen with fear. She trembled. If she did not act now, she never would.

She held her breath, took one final step forward, held the spike high overhead with both hands, and suddenly dropped to her knees, plunging the iron down with all she had, preparing to drive it through the man's back.

But something happened which she did not expect, and it all happened in a blur, too quickly for her to react: at the last second McCloud rolled out of the way. For a man with his bulk, he was much faster than she could imagine. He rolled to one side, leaving the girl beneath him exposed. It was too late for Luanda to stop.

The iron spike continued, to Luanda's horror, plunging all the way down – and into the girl's chest.

The girl sat straight up, shrieking, and Luanda was mortified to feel the spike piercing her flesh, inches deep, all the way to her heart. Blood gurgled from her mouth and she looked at Luanda, terrified, betrayed.

Finally, she lay back down, dead.

Luanda knelt there, numb, traumatized, hardly grasping what had just happened. Before she could process it all, before she could realize McCloud was safe, she felt a stinging blow on the side of her face, and felt herself go down to the ground.

As she soared through the air, she was dimly aware that McCloud had just punched her, a tremendous blow had sent her flying, had indeed anticipated her every move since she had walked into the room. He had feigned ignorance. He had waited for his moment, waited for the perfect chance to not only dodge her blow, but to trick her into killing this poor girl at the same time, to put the guilt of it on her head.

Before her world dimmed, Luanda caught a glimpse of McCloud's face. He was grinning down, mouth open, breathing hard, like a wild beast. The last thing she heard, before his giant boot rose up and came down for her face, was his guttural voice, spilling out like an animal:

“You did me a favor,” he said. “I was through with her anyway.”

Chapter Two

Gwendolyn ran down the twisting side streets of the worst part of King's Court, tears streaming down her cheeks as she ran from the castle, trying to get as far away from Gareth as she could. Her heart still raced since their confrontation, since seeing Firth hanging, since hearing Gareth's threats. She desperately tried to extricate the truth from his lies. But in Gareth's sick mind, the truth and lies were all twisted together, and it was so hard to know what was real. Had he been trying to scare her? Or was everything he'd said true?

Gwendolyn had seen Firth's dangling body with her own eyes, and that told her that perhaps, this time, all of it was true. Perhaps Godfrey had indeed been poisoned; perhaps she had indeed been sold off into marriage to the savage Nevaruns; and perhaps Thor was right now riding into an ambush. The thought of it made her shudder.

She felt helpless as she ran. She had to make it right. She could not run all the way to Thor, but she could run to Godfrey and could see if he had been poisoned – and if he still lived.

Gwendolyn sprinted deeper into the seedy part of town, amazed to find herself back here again, twice in as many days, in this disgusting part of King's Court to which she had vowed to never return. If Godfrey had truly been poisoned, she knew it would happen at the ale house. Where else? She was mad at him for returning, for lowering his guard, for being so careless. But most of all, she feared for him. She realized how much she had come to care for her brother these last few days, and the thought of losing him, too, especially after losing her father, left a hole in her heart. She also felt somehow responsible.

Gwen felt real fear as she ran through these streets, and not because of the drunks and scoundrels all around her; rather, she feared her brother, Gareth. He had seemed demonic in their last meeting, and she could not get the image of his face, of his eyes, from her mind – so black, so soulless. He looked possessed. That he had been sitting on their father's throne made the image even more surreal. She feared his retribution. Perhaps he was, indeed, plotting to marry her off, something she would never allow; or perhaps he just wanted to throw her off guard, and he was really planning to assassinate her. Gwen looked around, and as she ran, every face seemed hostile, foreign. Everyone seemed like a potential threat, sent by Gareth to finish her off. She was becoming paranoid.

Gwen turned the corner and bumped shoulders with a drunken old man – which knocked her off balance – and she jumped and screamed involuntarily. She was on edge. It took her a moment to realize it was just a careless passerby, not one of Gareth's henchmen; she turned and saw him stumble, not even turning back to apologize. The indignity of this part of town was more than she could stomach. If it were not for Godfrey she would never come near it, and she hated him for making her stoop to this. Why couldn't he just stay away from the alehouses?

Gwen turned another corner and there it was: Godfrey's tavern of choice, an excuse of an establishment, sitting there crooked, door ajar, drunks spilling out of it, as they perpetually did. She wasted no time, and hurried through its open door.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust in the dim bar, which reeked of stale ale and body odor; as she entered, the place fell silent. The two dozen or so men stuffed inside all turned and looked at her, surprised. Here she was, a member of the royal family, dressed in finery, charging into this room that probably hadn't been cleaned in years.

She marched up to a tall man with a large belly whom she recognized as Akorth, one of Godfrey's drinking companions.

"Where's my brother?" she demanded.

Akorth, usually in high spirits, usually ready to unleash a tawdry joke that he himself was too satisfied with, surprised her: he merely shook his head.

"It does not fare well, my lady," he said, grim.

“What do you mean?” she insisted, her heart thumping.

“He took some bad ale,” said a tall, lean man whom she recognized as Fulton, Godfrey’s other companion. “He went down late last night. Hasn’t gotten up.”

“Is he alive?” she asked, frantic, grabbing Akorth’s wrist.

“Barely,” he answered, looking down. “He’s had a rough go. He stopped speaking about an hour ago.”

“Where is he?” she insisted.

“In the back, missus,” said the barkeep, leaning across the bar as he wiped a tankard, looking grim himself. “And you best have a plan to deal with him. I’m not going to have a corpse lingering in my establishment.”

Gwen, overwhelmed, surprised herself and drew a small dagger, leaning forward and holding the tip to the barkeep’s throat.

He gulped, looking back in shock, as the place fell deadly silent.

“First of all,” she said, “this place is not an *establishment* – it is an excuse of a watering hole, and one that I will have razed to the ground by the royal guard if you speak to me that way again. You may begin by addressing me as *my lady*.”

Gwen felt outside of herself, and was surprised by the strength overcoming her; she had no idea where it was coming from.

The barkeep gulped.

“My lady,” he echoed.

Gwen held the dagger steady.

“Secondly, my brother shall not die – and certainly not in this place. His corpse would do your establishment far more honor than any living soul who has passed through here. And if he does die, you can be sure the blame will fall on you.”

“But I did nothing wrong, my lady!” he pleaded. “It was the same ale I served to everybody else!”

“Someone must have poisoned it,” Akorth added.

“It could have been anyone,” Fulton said.

Gwen slowly lowered her dagger.

“Take me to him. Now!” she ordered.

The barkeep lowered his head in humility this time, and turned and hurried through a side door behind the bar. Gwen followed on his heels, Akorth and Fulton joining her.

Gwen entered the small back room of the tavern and heard herself gasp as she saw her brother, Godfrey, laid out on the floor, supine. He was more pale than she had ever seen him. He looked a step away from death. It was all true.

Gwen rushed to his side, grasped his hand and felt how cold and clammy it was. He did not respond, his head lying on the floor, unshaven, greasy hair clinging to his forehead. But she felt his pulse, and while weak, it was still there; she also saw his chest rise with each breath. He was alive.

She felt a sudden rage well up within her.

“How you could leave him here like this?” she screamed, wheeling to the barkeep. “My brother, a member of the royal family, left alone to lie like a dog on the floor while he’s dying?”

The barkeep gulped, looking nervous.

“And what else was I supposed to do, my lady?” he asked, sounding unsure. “This is not a hospital. Everyone said he was basically dead and – ”

“He is *not* dead!” she screamed. “And you two,” she said, turning to Akorth and Fulton, “what kind of friends are you? Would he have left you like this?”

Akorth and Fulton exchanged a meekish glance.

“Forgive me,” Akorth said. “The doctor came last night and looked at him and said he was dying – and that all that was left was for time to take him. I didn’t think anything could be done.”

“We stayed with him most the night, my lady,” Fulton added, “at his side. We just took a quick break, had a drink to pass our sorrows, and then you came in and – ”

Gwen reached up and in a rage swatted both of their tankards from their hands, sending them flying to the floor, the liquid spilling everywhere. They looked up at her, shocked.

“Each of you, grab one end of him,” she ordered coldly, standing, feeling a new strength rise within her. “You will carry him from this place. You will follow me across all of King’s Court until we reach the Royal Healer. My brother will be given a chance for real recovery, and will not be left to die based on the proclamation of some dim-witted doctor.

“And you,” she added, turning to the barkeep. “If my brother should live, and if he should ever return to this place and you agree to serve him a drink, I shall see to it firsthand that you are thrown in the dungeon never to come out.”

The barkeep shifted in place and lowered his head.

“Now move!” she screamed.

Akorth and Fulton flinched, and jumped into action. Gwen hurried from the room, the two of them right behind her, carrying her brother, following her out the bar and into daylight.

They began to hurry down the crowded back streets of King’s Court, toward the healer, and Gwen only prayed that it was not too late.

Chapter Three

Thor galloped across the dusty terrain of the outer reaches of King's Court, Reece, O'Connor, Elden, and the twins by his side, Krohn racing beside him, Kendrick, Kolk, Brom, and scores of Legion and Silver riding with them, a great army going out to meet the McClouds. They rode as one, preparing to liberate the city, and the sound of hooves was deafening, rumbling like thunder. They had been riding all day, and already the second sun was long in the sky. Thor could hardly believe he was riding with these great warriors, on his first real military mission. He felt that they had accepted him as one of theirs. Indeed, the entire Legion had been called up as reserves, and his brothers-in-arms rode all around him. The Legion members were dwarfed by the thousands of members of the king's army, and Thor, for the first time in his life, felt a part of something greater than himself.

Thor also felt a driving sense of purpose. He felt needed. His fellow citizens were under siege by the McClouds, and it was left to this army to liberate them, to save his people from a horrible fate. The importance of what they were doing weighed on him like a living thing – it made him feel alive.

Thor felt security in the presence of all these men, but he also felt a sense of worry, too: this was an army of real men, but that also meant they were about to face an army of real men. Real, hardened warriors. It was life and death this time, and there was far more at stake here than he had ever encountered. As he rode, he reached down instinctively and felt reassured by the presence of his trusted sling and his new sword. He wondered if by the day's end it would be stained with blood. Or if he himself would be wounded.

Their army suddenly let out a great shout, louder even than the horses' hooves, as they rounded a bend and on the horizon spotted for the first time the besieged city. Black smoke rose up in great clouds from it, and the MacGil army kicked their horses, gaining speed. Thor, too, kicked his horse harder, trying to keep up with the others as they all drew their swords, raised their weapons, and headed for the city with deadly intent.

The massive army was broken down into smaller groups, and in Thor's group there rode ten soldiers, legion members, his friends, and a few others he did not know. At their head rode one of the senior commanders of the king's army, a soldier the others called Forg, a tall, thin man with a wiry build, pockmarked skin, cropped, gray hair, and dark, hollow eyes. The army was breaking down into smaller groups and forking in every direction.

"This group, follow me!" he commanded, gesturing with his staff for Thor and the others to fork off and follow his lead.

Thor's group followed orders and fell in behind Forg, forking farther away from the main army. Thor looked back and noticed that his group had separated farther than most, the army becoming more distant, and just as Thor was wondering where they were being lead, Forg shouted:

"We will take up a position on the McCloud flank!"

Thor and the others exchanged a nervous and excited look as they all charged, forking until the main army was out of sight.

Soon they were in a new terrain, and the city fell out of sight completely. Thor was on guard, but there was no sign of the McCloud army anywhere.

Finally, Forg pulled his horse to a stop before a small hill, in a grove of trees. The others came to a stop behind him.

Thor and the others looked at Forg, wondering why he had stopped.

"That keep there, that is our mission," Forg explained. "You are young warriors still, so we want to spare you from the heat of battle. You will hold this position as our main army sweeps through the city and confronts the McCloud army. It is unlikely any McCloud soldiers will come this way, and you will be mostly safe here. Take positions around it, and stay here until we say otherwise. Now move!"

Forg kicked his horse and charged up the hill; Thor and the others did the same, following him. The small group rode across the dusty plains, kicking up a cloud, with no one in sight as far as Thor could see. He felt disappointed to be removed from the main action; why were they all being so sheltered?

The more they rode, the more something felt off to Thor. He couldn't place it, but his sixth sense was telling him that something was wrong.

As they neared the hilltop, atop which sat a small, ancient keep – a tall, skinny tower that looked abandoned – something within Thor told him to look behind him. As he did, he saw Forg. Thor was surprised to see that Forg had gradually dropped behind the group, gaining more and more distance, and as Thor watched, Forg turned around, kicked his horse and without warning, galloped the other way.

Thor could not understand what was happening. Why had Forg left them so suddenly? Beside him, Krohn whined.

Just as Thor was beginning to process what was happening, they reached the hilltop, reached the ancient keep, expecting to see nothing but wasteland before them.

But the small group of legion members pulled their horses to an abrupt stop. They sat there, all of them, frozen at the sight before them.

There, facing them, waiting, was the entire McCloud army.

They had been led right into a trap.

Chapter Four

Gwendolyn hurried through the winding streets of King's Court, Akorth and Fulton carrying Godfrey behind her, pushing her way as she cut a path through the common folk. She was determined to reach the healer as soon as possible. Godfrey could not die, not after all they had been through, and certainly not like this. She could almost see Gareth's self-satisfied smile as he received news of Godfrey's death – and she was intent on changing the outcome. She only wished she had found him sooner.

As Gwen turned a corner and marched into the city square, the crowds became particularly thick, and she looked up and saw Firth, still swinging from a beam, the noose tight around his neck, dangling for all to gawk at. She instinctively turned away. It was an awful sight, a reminder of her brother's villainy. She felt she could not escape his reach wherever she turned. It was odd to think that just the day before she had been talking to Firth – and now he hung here. She couldn't help but feel that death was closing in all around her – and was coming for her, too.

As much as Gwen wanted to turn away, to choose another route, she knew that heading through the square was the most direct way, and she would not shrink from her fears; she forced herself to march right past the beam, right past the hanging body in her way. As she did, she was surprised to see the royal executioner, dressed in black robes, blocking her way.

At first she thought he was going to kill her, too – until he bowed.

"My lady," he said humbly, lowering his head in deference. "Royal orders have not yet been given as to what to do with the body. I have not been instructed whether to give him a proper burial or throw him in a mass paupers' grave."

Gwen stopped, annoyed that this should fall on her shoulders; Akorth and Fulton stopped right beside her. She looked up, squinted in the sun, looking at the body dangling just feet from her, and she was about to move on and ignore the man, when something occurred to her. She wanted justice for her father.

"Throw him in a mass grave," she said. "Unmarked. Give him no special rites of burial. I want his name forgotten from the annals of history."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment, and she felt a small sense of vindication. After all, this man had been the one who had actually killed her father. While she hated displays of violence, she shed no tears for Firth. She could feel her father's spirit with her now, stronger than ever, and felt a sense of peace from him.

"And one more thing," she added, stopping the executioner. "Take down the body now."

"Now, my lady?" the executioner asked. "But the king gave orders for it to hang indefinitely."

Gwen shook her head.

"Now," she repeated. "Those are his new orders," she lied.

The executioner bowed and hurried off to cut down the corpse.

Gwen felt another small sense of vindication. She had no doubt that Gareth was checking on Firth's body out his window throughout the day – its removal would vex him, would serve as a reminder that things would not always go as he planned.

Gwen was about to go when she heard a distinctive screech; she stopped and turned, and up high, perched on the beam, she saw the falcon Estopheles. She raised her hand to her eye to shield the sun, trying to make sure her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. Estopheles screeched again and opened her wings, then closed them.

Gwen could feel the bird bore the spirit of her father. His soul, so restless, was one step closer to peace.

Gwen suddenly had an idea; she whistled and held out one arm, and Estopheles swooped down off her perch and landed on Gwen's wrist. The weight of the bird was heavy, and her claws dug into Gwen's skin.

"Go to Thor," she whispered to the bird. "Find him on the battlefield. Protect him. GO!" she shouted, lifting her arm.

She watched as Estopheles flapped her wings and soared, higher and higher into the sky. She prayed it would work. There was something mysterious about that bird, especially its connection to Thor, and Gwen knew anything was possible.

Gwen continued on, hurrying through the winding streets towards the healer's cottage. They passed through one of several arched gates heading out of the city, and she moved as fast as she could, praying that Godfrey hung in there long enough for them to get help.

The second sun dipped lower in the sky by the time they climbed a small hill on the outskirts of King's Court and the healer's cottage came into view. It was a simple, one-room cottage, its white walls made of clay, with one small window on each side and a small, arched oak door in front. Hanging from its roof were plants of every color and variety, framing the cottage – which was also surrounded by a sprawling herb garden, flowers of every color and size making the cottage look as if it were dropped into the midst of a greenhouse.

Gwen ran to the door and slammed the knocker several times. The door opened, and before her appeared the startled face of the healer.

Illepra. She had been healer to the royal family her entire life, and had been a presence in Gwen's life ever since she could walk. Yet still, Illepra managed to look young – in fact, she barely looked older than Gwen. Her skin positively glowed, radiant, framing her kind, green eyes and making her seem to be hardly more than 18 years. Gwen knew she was a good deal older than that, knew that her appearance was deceiving, and she also knew that Illepra was one of the smartest and most talented people she had ever met.

Illepra's gaze shifted to Godfrey as she took in the scene at once. She did away with pleasantries as her eyes opened wide with concern, realizing the urgency. She brushed past Gwen and hurried to Godfrey's side, laying a palm of his forehead. She frowned.

"Bring him in," she ordered the two men, hastily, "and be quick about it."

Illepra went back inside, opening the door wider, and they followed on her heels as they rushed into the cottage. Gwen followed them in, ducking at the low entrance, and closed the door behind them.

It was dim in here, and it took her eyes a moment to adjust; when they did, she saw the cottage exactly as she had remembered it as a young girl: small, light, clean, and overflowing with plants, herbs and potions of every variety.

"Set him down there," Illepra ordered the men, as serious as Gwen had ever heard her. "On that bed, in the corner. Remove his shirt and shoes. Then leave us."

Akorth and Fulton did as they were told. As they were hurrying out the door, Gwen grabbed Akorth's arm.

"Stand guard outside the door," she ordered. "Whoever came after Godfrey might want a chance at him still. Or at me."

Akorth nodded and he and Fulton exited, closing the door behind them.

"How long has he been like this?" Illepra asked urgently, not looking at Gwen as she knelt at Godfrey's side and began to feel his wrist, his stomach, his throat.

"Since last night," Gwen answered.

"Last night!" Illepra echoed, shaking her head in concern. She examined him for a long time in silence, her expression darkening.

"It's not good," she said finally.

She placed a palm on his forehead again and this time closed her eyes, breathing for a very long time. A thick silence pervaded the room, and Gwen was beginning to lose her sense of time.

“Poison,” Illepra finally whispered, her eyes still closed, as if reading his condition through osmosis.

Gwen always marveled at her skill; she had never been wrong once, not in her lifetime. And she had saved more lives than the army had taken. She wondered if it was a learned skill or if it was inherited; Illepra’s mother had been a healer, and her mother before her. Yet at the same time, Illepra had spent every waking minute of her life studying potions and the healing arts.

“A very powerful poison,” Illepra added, more confident. “One I encounter rarely. A very expensive one. Whoever was trying to kill him knew what he was doing. It is incredible he did not die. This one must be stronger than we think.”

“He gets it from my father,” Gwen said. “He had the constitution of a bull. All the MacGil kings did.”

Illepra crossed the room and mixed several herbs on a wooden block, chopping and grinding them and adding a liquid as she did. The finished product was a thick, green salve, and she filled her palm, hurried back to Godfrey’s side, and applied it up and down his throat, under his arms, on his forehead. When she finished, she crossed the room again, took a glass and poured several liquids, one red, one brown and one purple. As they blended, the potion hissed and bubbled. She stirred it with a long, wooden spoon, then hurried back to Godfrey and applied it to his lips.

Godfrey did not budge; Illepra reached behind his head and lifted it with her palm, and forced the liquid into his mouth. Most of it spilled down the side of his cheeks, but some of it went down his throat.

Illepra dabbed the liquid from his mouth and jaw, then finally leaned back and sighed.

“Will he live?” Gwen asked, frantic.

“He might,” she said, somber. “I have given him everything I have, but it won’t be enough. His life is in the hand of the fates.”

“What can I do?” Gwen asked.

She turned and stared at Gwen.

“Pray for him. It will be a long night indeed.”

Chapter Five

Kendrick had never appreciated what freedom was like – true freedom – until this day. The time he had spent locked away in the dungeon had shifted his view on life. Now he appreciated every little thing – the feel of the sun, the wind in his hair, just being outside. Charging on a horse, feeling the earth speeding by beneath him, being back in armor, having his weaponry back, and riding alongside his brothers-in-arms made him feel as if he had been shot out of a cannon, made him feel a recklessness which he had never experienced before.

Kendrick galloped, leaning low into the wind, his close friend Atme at his side, so grateful for the chance to fight with his brothers, to not miss this battle, and eager to liberate his home city from the McClouds – and to make them pay for invading. He rode with an urge for bloodshed, though even as he rode he knew that the real target of his wrath was not the McClouds but his brother, Gareth. He would never forgive him for imprisoning him, for accusing him of his father's murder, for taking him away in front of his men – and for attempting to execute him. Kendrick wanted vengeance on Gareth – but since he could not have it, at least not today, he would take it out on the McClouds.

When Kendrick returned to King's Court, though, he would settle things. He would do whatever he could to oust his brother and instill his sister Gwendolyn as the new ruler.

They neared the sacked city and huge, billowing black clouds rolled towards them, filling Kendrick's nostrils with acrid smoke. It pained him to see a MacGil city like this. If his father had still been alive, this would have never happened; if Gareth had not succeeded him, this would have never have happened either. It was a disgrace, a stain on the honor of the MacGils and The Silver. Kendrick prayed they were not too late to rescue these people, that the McClouds had not been here too long, and that not too many people had been injured or killed.

He kicked his horse harder, riding out in front of the others, as they all charged, like a swarm of bees, towards the open-gate entrance to the city. They stormed through, Kendrick drawing his sword, preparing to encounter a host of the McCloud enemy as they charged into the city. He let out a great shout, as did all the men around him, steeling himself for impact.

But as he passed through the gate and into the dusty square of the city, he was stumped by what he saw: nothing. All around him were the telltale signs of an invasion – destruction, fires, looted homes, corpses piled, women crawling. There were animals killed, blood on the walls. It had been a massacre. The McClouds had ravaged these innocent folk. The thought of it made Kendrick sick. They were cowards.

But what stumped Kendrick as he rode was that the McClouds were nowhere in sight. He could not understand it. It was as if the entire army had evacuated deliberately, as if they had known they were coming. Fires were still alight, and it was clear that they had been lit with a purpose.

It was beginning to dawn on Kendrick that this was all a decoy. That the McClouds had wanted to lure the MacGil army to this place.

But why?

Kendrick suddenly spun, looked around, desperate to see if any of his men were missing, if any contingent had been lured away, to another spot. His mind was flooding with a new sense, a sense that this had all been arranged to cordon off a group of his men, to ambush them. He looked everywhere, wondering who was missing.

And then it hit him. One person was missing. His squire.

Thor.

Chapter Six

Thor sat on his horse, atop the hill, the group of Legion members and Krohn beside him, and looked out at the startling sight before him: as far as the eye could see were McCloud troops, sitting on horseback, a vast and sprawling army, awaiting them. They had been set up. Forg must have led them here on purpose, must have betrayed them. But why?

Thor swallowed, looking out at what appeared to be their sure death.

A great battle cry rose up as the McCloud army suddenly charged them. They were but a few hundred yards away, and closing in fast. Thor glanced back over his shoulder, but there were no reinforcements as far as he could see. They were completely alone.

Thor knew they had no other choice but to make a last stand here, on this small hill, beside this deserted keep. They were impossible odds, and there was no way they could win. But if he was going to go down, he would go down bravely and face them all like a man. The Legion had taught him that much. Running was not an option; Thor prepared himself to face his death.

Thor turned and looked at his friends' faces, and he could see they, too, were pale with fear; he saw death in their eyes. But to all of their credit, they remained brave. Not one of them flinched, even though their horses pranced, or made a move to turn and run. The Legion was one unit now. They were more than friends: the Hundred had forged them into one team of brothers. Not one of them would leave the other. They had all taken a vow, and their honor was at stake. And to the Legion, honor was more sacred than blood.

"Gentlemen, I do believe we have a fight before us," Reece announced slowly, as he reached over and drew his sword.

Thor reached down and drew his sling, wanting to take out as many as he could before they reached them. O'Connor drew his short spear, while Elden hoisted his javelin; Conval raised a throwing hammer, and Conven a throwing pick. The other boys with them from the Legion, the ones Thor did not know, drew their swords and raised their shields. Thor could feel the fear in the air, and he felt it too as the thunder of the horses grew, as the sound of the McClouds' cries reached the heavens, sounding like a rolling clap of thunder about to hit them. Thor knew they needed a strategy – but he did not know what.

Next to Thor, Krohn snarled. Thor drew inspiration from Krohn's fearlessness: he never whimpered or looked back once. In fact, the hairs rose on his back and he slowly walked forward, as if to meet the army alone. Thor knew that in Krohn he had found a true battle companion.

"Do you think the others will reinforce us?" O'Connor asked.

"Not in time," Elden answered. "We've been set up by Forg."

"But why?" Reece asked.

"I don't know," Thor answered, stepping forward on his horse, "but I have a sinking feeling it has something to do with me. I think someone wants me dead."

Thor felt the others turn and look at him.

"Why?" Reece asked.

Thor shrugged. He did not know, but he had some inkling it had to do with all the machinations at King's court, something to do with the assassination of MacGil. Most likely, it was Gareth. Perhaps he viewed Thor as a threat.

Thor felt terrible for having endangered his brothers-in-arms, but there was nothing he could do about it now. All he could do was try to defend them.

Thor had enough. He shouted and kicked his horse, and burst forward at a gallop, charging out before the others. He would not wait here to be met by this army, met by his death. He would take the first blows, maybe even divert some from his brothers-in-arms, and give them a chance to run if they decided to. If he was going to meet his ending, he would meet it fearlessly, with honor.

Shaking inside but refusing to show it, Thor galloped farther and farther from the others, charging down the hill towards the advancing army. Beside him, Krohn sprinted, not missing a beat.

Thor heard a shout as behind him, his fellow Legion members raced to catch up. They were hardly twenty yards away, and they galloped after him, raising a battle cry. Thor remained out in front, yet it still felt good to have their support behind him.

Before Thor a contingent of warriors broke out from the McCloud army, charging ahead to meet Thor, perhaps fifty men. They were a hundred yards ahead and closing in fast, and Thor pulled back his sling, set a stone, took aim, and hurled. He targeted the lead warrior, a large man with a silver breastplate, and his aim was perfect. He hit the man at the base of the throat, between the plates of armor, and the man fell from his horse, landing on the ground before the others.

As he fell, his horse fell with him, and the dozen horses behind him piled up, sending their soldiers hurling to the ground, face first.

Before they could react, Thor placed another stone, reached back and hurled it. Again, his aim was true, and he hit one of the lead warriors in the temple, at the spot exposed from his raised faceplate, and knocked him sideways off his horse, into several other warriors, taking them down like dominoes.

As Thor galloped, a javelin flew by his head, then a spear, then a throwing hammer and a throwing pick, and he knew his Legion brothers were supporting him. Their aim was true, too, and their weapons took down the McCloud soldiers with deadly precision, several of them falling from the horses and crashing into others who fell with them.

Thor was elated to see that they had already managed to take down dozens of McCloud soldiers, some of them with direct hits but most being tripped up by falling horses. The advance contingent of fifty men was now down on the ground, lying in great heaps of dust.

But the McCloud army was strong, and now it was their turn to fight back. As Thor came within thirty yards of them, several threw weapons his way. A throwing hammer came right at his face, and Thor ducked at the last moment, the iron whizzing by his ear, missing by an inch. A spear came flying at him just as quickly and he ducked the other way, as the tip grazed the outside of his armor, luckily just missing him. A throwing pick came right for his face, and Thor raised his shield and blocked it. It stuck to his shield, and Thor reached over, pulled it off, and threw it back at his attacker. Thor's aim was true, and it lodged in the man's chest, piercing his chainmail; with a scream the man cried out and slumped over his horse, dead.

Thor kept charging. He charged right into the thick of the army, into a sea of soldiers, prepared to meet his death. He shouted and raised his sword as he did, letting out a great battle cry; behind him, his brothers-in-arms did, too.

With a great clash of arms, there came impact. A huge, full-grown warrior charged for him, raised a two-handed ax, and brought it down for Thor's head. Thor ducked, the blade swinging by his head and slashed the soldier's stomach as he rode past; the man screamed out, and slumped over on his horse. As he fell he dropped his battle ax, and it went flying end over end into a McCloud horse, which shrieked and pranced, throwing off his rider into several others.

Thor kept charging, right into the thick of the McCloud warriors, hundreds of them, cutting a path right through them, as one after the other swung at him with their swords, axes, maces, and he blocked with his shield or dodged them, slashing back, ducking and weaving, galloping right through. He was too quick, too nimble, for them, and they had not expected it. As a huge army, they could not maneuver fast enough to stop him.

There rose up a great clash of metal all around him, as blows hailed down on him from every direction. He blocked one after the other with his shield and sword. But he could not stop them all. A sword slash grazed his shoulder, and he cried out in pain as it drew blood. Luckily the wound was shallow, and it did not prevent him from fighting. He continued to fight back.

Thor, fighting with both hands, was surrounded by McCloud warriors, and soon the blows began to lighten, as other Legion members joined the pack. The clang grew greater as the McCloud men fought against the Legion boys, swords striking shields, spears hitting horses, javelins being thrust into armor, men fighting in every way. Screams rang out from both sides.

The Legion had an advantage in that they were a small and nimble fighting force, the ten of them in the midst of a huge and slow-moving army. There was a bottleneck, and not all the McCloud warriors could reach them at once; Thor found himself fighting two or three men at a time, but no more. And his brothers at his back prevented him from being attacked from behind.

As a warrior caught Thor off guard and swung his flail right for Thor's head, Krohn snarled and pounced. Krohn leapt high into the air and clamped down on his wrist; he tore it off, blood flying everywhere, forcing the soldier to change direction right before the flail impacted Thor's skull.

It was like a blur as Thor fought and slashed and parried in all directions, using every ounce of his skill to defend, to attack, to watch out for his brothers, and to watch out for himself. He instinctively summoned his endless days of training, of being attacked from all sides, in all situations. In some ways, it felt natural to him. They had trained him well, and he felt able to handle this. His fear was always there, but he felt able to control it.

As Thor fought and fought, his arms growing heavy, his shoulders tired, Kolk's words rang in his ears:

Your enemy will never fight on your terms. He will fight on his. War for you means war for someone else.

Thor spotted a short, broad warrior raise a spiked chain with both hands and swing for the back of Reece's head. Reece did not see it coming; in a moment, he would be dead.

Thor leapt off his horse, jumping in mid-air and tackling the warrior right before he released the chain. The two of them went flying off the horses and landed hard on the ground in a cloud of dust, Thor rolling and rolling, the wind knocked out of him, as horses trampled all around him. He wrestled with the warrior on the ground, and as the man raised his thumbs to gouge out Thor's eyes, Thor suddenly heard a screech – and saw Estopheles swoop down and claw the man's eyes right before he could hurt Thor. The man screamed, clutching his eyes, and Thor elbowed him hard and knocked him off of him.

Before Thor had a chance to revel in his victory, he felt himself kicked hard in the gut, knocking him onto his back. He looked up to see a warrior raise a two-handed war hammer and bring it down for his chest.

Thor rolled, and the hammer whizzed by him, sinking into the earth all the way up to the hilt. He realized it would have crushed him to death.

Krohn pounced on the man, leaping forward and sinking his fangs into the man's elbow; the soldier reached over and punched Krohn, again and again. But Krohn would not let go, snarling, until finally he tore the man's arm off. The soldier shrieked and fell to the ground.

A soldier stepped forward and slashed his sword down at Krohn; but Thor rolled over with his shield and blocked the blow, his entire body shaking with the clang, saving Krohn's life. But as Thor knelt there he was exposed, and another warrior charged over him with his horse, trampling him, knocking him down face first, the horse hooves feeling like they were crushing every bone in his body.

Several McCloud soldiers jumped down and surrounded Thor, closing in on him.

Thor realized he was in a bad place; he would give anything to be back up on his horse now. As he lay there on the ground, his head ringing with pain, out of the corner of his eye he saw his other Legion members fighting, and losing ground. One of the Legion boys he did not recognize let out a high-pitched scream, and Thor watched as a sword punctured his chest, and he slumped over, dead.

Another one of the Legion Thor did not know came to his aid, killing his attacker with a thrust of his spear – but at the same time, a McCloud attacked him from behind, thrusting a dagger into his neck. The boy screamed and fell off his horse, dead.

Thor turned and looked up to see a half dozen soldiers bearing down on him. One raised a sword and brought it down for his face, and Thor reached up and blocked it with his shield, the clang resonating in his ears. But another raised his boot and kicked Thor's shield from his hand.

A third attacker stepped on Thor's wrist, pinning it to the ground.

A fourth attacker stepped forward and raised a spear, preparing to drive it through Thor's chest.

Thor heard a great snarl, and Krohn leapt on the soldier, driving him back and pinning him down. But a soldier stepped forward with a club and swiped Krohn, hitting him so hard that Krohn went tumbling over with a yelp, and landed on his back, limp.

Another soldier stepped forward, standing over Thor, and raised a trident. He scowled down, and this time there was no one to stop him. He prepared to bring it down, right for Thor's face, and as Thor lay there, pinned, helpless, he could not help but feel that, finally, his end had come.

Chapter Seven

Gwen knelt by Godfrey's side in the claustrophobic cottage, Illepra beside her, and could stand it no longer. She had been listening to her brother's moans for hours, watching Illepra's face grow increasingly grim, and it seemed certain he would die. She felt so helpless, just sitting here. She felt that she needed to do something. Anything.

Not only was she racked with guilt and worry for Godfrey – but even more so, for Thor. She could not shake from her mind the image of him charging into battle, sent into a trap by Gareth, about to die. She felt she had to help Thor in some way, too. She was going crazy sitting here.

Gwen suddenly rose to her feet, and hurried across the cottage.

"Where are you going?" Illepra asked, her voice hoarse from chanting prayers.

Gwen turned to her.

"I will be back," she said. "There is something I must try."

She opened the door and hurried outside, into the sunset air, and blinked at the sight before her: the sky was streaked with reds and purples, the second sun sitting as a green ball on the horizon. Akorth and Fulton, to their credit, still stood there, on guard – they jumped up and looked at her with concern on their faces.

"Will he live?" Akorth asked.

"I don't know," Gwen said. "Stay here. Stand guard."

"And where are you going?" Fulton asked.

An idea had occurred to her as she looked into the blood red sky, felt the mystical feeling in the air. There was one man who might be able to help her.

Argon.

If there was one person Gwen could trust, one person who loved Thor and who had remained loyal to her father, one person who had the power to help her in some way, it was he.

"I need to seek out someone special," she said.

She turned and hurried off, across the plains, breaking into a jog, running, retracing the steps to Argon's cottage.

She hadn't been here in years, ever since she was a child, but she remembered he lived high on the desolate, craggy plains. She ran and ran, barely catching her breath as the terrain became more desolate, more windy, grass giving way to pebbles, then to rocks. The wind howled, and as she went, the landscape became eerie; she felt as if she were walking on the surface of a star.

She finally reached Argon's cottage, out of breath, and pounded on the door. There was no knob anywhere she could use, but she knew this was his place.

"Argon!" she shrieked. "It is me! MacGil's daughter! Let me in! I command you!"

She pounded and pounded, but the only response was the howling of the wind.

Finally, she broke into tears, exhausted, feeling more helpless than she ever had. She felt hollowed out, as if she had nowhere left to turn.

As the sun sank deeper into the sky, its blood-red giving way to twilight, Gwen turned and began to walk back down the hill. She wiped tears from her face as she went, desperate to figure out where to go next.

"Please father," she said aloud, closing her eyes. "Give me a sign. Show me where to go. Show me what to do. Please don't let your son die on this day. And please don't let Thor die. If you love me, answer me."

Gwen walked in silence, listening to the wind, when suddenly, a flash of inspiration struck her. The lake. The Lake of Sorrows.

Of course. The lake was where everyone went to pray for someone who was deathly ill. It was a pristine, small lake, in the middle of the Red Wood, surrounded by towering trees that reached into the sky. It was considered a holy place.

Thank you father, for answering me, Gwen thought.

She felt him with her now, more than ever, and burst into a sprint, racing towards Red Wood, towards the lake that would hear her sorrows.

* * *

Gwen knelt on the shore of the Lake of Sorrows, her knees resting on the soft, red pine that encased the water like a ring, and looked out at the still water, the stillest water she had ever seen, which mirrored the rising moon. It was a brilliant, full moon, more full than she had ever seen, and while the second sun was still setting, the moon was rising, casting both sunset and moonlight over the Ring. The sun and the moon reflected together, opposite each other in the lake, and she felt the sacredness of this time of day. It was the window between the close of one day and the start of another, and at this sacred time, and in this sacred place, anything was possible.

Gwen knelt there, crying, praying for all she was worth. The events of the last few days had been too much for her, and she let it all out. She prayed for her brother, but even more so for Thor. She could not stand the thought of losing them both on this night, of having no one left around her but Gareth. She could not stand the thought of being shipped off to be wed to some barbarian. She felt her life collapsing around her, and she needed answers. Even more, she needed hope.

There were many people in her kingdom who prayed to the God of the Lakes, or the God of the Woods, or the God of the Mountains, or the God of the Wind – but Gwen never believed in any of these. She, like Thor, was one of the few who went against the grain of belief in her kingdom, and followed the radical path of believing in just one God, just one being who controlled the entire universe. It was to this God that she prayed.

Please God, she prayed. Return Thor to me. Let him be safe in battle. Let him escape his ambush. Please let Godfrey live. And please protect me – don't let me be taken away from here, wed to that savage. I will do anything. Just give me a sign. Show me what you want from me.

Gwen knelt there for a long time, hearing nothing but the howling of the wind racing through the endlessly tall pine trees of Red Wood; she listened to the gentle cracking of the branches as they swayed above her head, their needles dropping in the water.

“Be careful what you pray for,” came a voice.

She spun, flinching, and was shocked to see someone standing there, not far from her. She would have been scared, but she recognized the voice immediately – an ancient voice, older than the trees, older than the earth itself, and her heart swelled as she realized who it was.

She turned and saw him standing over her, wearing his white cloak and hood, eyes translucent, burning through her as if he were peering into her very soul. He held his staff, lit up in the sunset and the moonlight.

Argon.

She stood and faced him.

“I sought you out,” she said. “I went to your cottage. Did you hear me knock?”

“I hear everything,” he answered cryptically.

She paused, wondering. He was expressionless.

“Tell me what I have to do,” she said. “I will do anything. Please, don't let Thor die. You can't let him die!”

Gwen stepped forward and grasped his wrist, pleading. But as she touched him she was scorched by a burning heat, traveling through his wrist and onto her hands, and she pulled back, overwhelmed by the energy.

Argon sighed, turned from her, and took several steps towards the lake. He stood there, looking out at the water, his eyes reflected in the light.

She walked up beside him and stood there silently for she did not know how long, waiting until he was ready to speak.

“It is not impossible to change fate,” he said. “But it exacts a heavy price on the petitioner. You want to save a life. That is a noble endeavor. But you cannot save two lives. You will have to choose.”

He turned and faced her.

“Would you have Thor live on this night, or your brother? One of them must die. It is written.”

Gwen was horrified by the question.

“What kind of choice is that?” she asked. “By saving one, I condemn the other.”

“You do not,” he responded. “They are both meant to die. I am sorry. But that is their fate.”

Gwen felt as if a dagger had been plunged into her stomach. Both of them meant to die? It was too awful to imagine. Could fate really be that cruel?

“I cannot choose one over the other,” she said, finally, her voice weak. “My love for Thor is stronger, of course. But Godfrey is my flesh and blood. I cannot stomach the idea of one dying at the expense of the other. And I don’t think either of them would want that.”

“Then they both shall die,” Argon replied.

Gwen felt flooded with panic.

“Wait!” she called out, as he began to turn away.

He turned and looked at her.

“What about me?” she asked. “What if I should die in their stead? Is it possible? Can they both live, and I will die?”

Argon stared at her for a very long time, as if taking in her very essence.

“Your heart is pure,” he said. “You are the most pure-hearted of all the MacGils. Your father chose wisely. Yes, he did...”

Argon’s voice trailed off as he continued to look into her eyes. Gwen felt uncomfortable, but did not dare look away.

“Because of your choice, because of your sacrifice on this night,” Argon said, “the fates have heard you. Thor will be saved on this night. And so will your brother. You will live, too. But a small piece of your life must be taken. Remember, there is always a price. You will die a partial death in return for both of their lives.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, terror-stricken.

“Everything comes with a price,” he answered. “You have a choice. Would you rather not pay it?”

Gwen steeled herself.

“I will do anything for Thor,” she said. “And for my family.”

Argon stared right through her.

“Thor has a very great destiny,” Argon said. “But destiny can change. Our fate is in our stars. But it is also controlled by God. God can change fate. Thor was meant to die on this night. He will live only because of you. You will pay that price. And the cost will be high.”

Gwen wanted to know more, and she reached out to Argon, but as she did, suddenly, a bright light flashed before her, and Argon disappeared.

Gwen spun, looking for him in every direction, but he was nowhere to be found.

She finally turned and looked out at the lake, so serene, as if nothing had happened here on this night. She saw her reflection, and she looked so far away. She was filled with gratitude, and finally, with a sense of peace. But she couldn’t help but also feel a sense of dread for her own future. As much as she tried to put it out of her mind, she couldn’t help but wonder: what price would she pay for Thor’s life?

Chapter Eight

Thor lay on the ground in the midst of the battlefield, pinned down by McCloud soldiers, helpless, hearing the clash of battle, the screams of horses, of men dying all around him. The setting sun and the rising moon – a full moon, fuller than any he had ever seen – was suddenly blocked by a huge soldier, who stepped forward, raised his trident and prepared to bring it down. Thor knew that his time had come.

Thor closed his eyes, preparing for death. He did not feel fear. Only remorse. He wanted more time to be alive; he wanted to discover who he was, what his destiny was, and most of all, he wanted more time with Gwen.

Thor felt it wasn't fair to die like this. Not here. Not this way. Not on this day. It wasn't his time yet. He could feel it. He was not ready yet.

Thor suddenly felt something rising up within him: it was a fierceness, a strength unlike any he had ever known. His entire body tingled and grew hot as he felt a new sensation shoot through him, from the soles of his feet, through his legs, up his torso, and through his arms, until his fingertips were positively burning, sparking with an energy he could barely understand. Thor shocked himself by letting out a fierce roar, like a dragon rising from the depths of the earth.

Thor felt the strength of ten men course through him as he broke off the soldiers' grips and leapt to his feet. Before the soldier could bring the trident down, Thor stepped forward, grabbed him by his helmet and head-butted him, cracking his nose in two; he then kicked him so hard he careened backward like a cannonball, knocking down ten men.

Thor shrieked with a newfound rage as he grabbed a soldier, raised him high overhead and threw him into the crowd, taking down a dozen soldiers like bowling pins. Thor then reached out and snatched a flail with a ten-foot chain from a soldier's hands, and swung it overhead, again and again, until screams rose up all around him, taking down all the soldiers within a ten-foot radius, dozens of them.

Thor felt his power continue to surge, and he let it take over. As several more men charged him, he reached up and held out a palm and was surprised to feel a tingling and then watch a cool mist emanate from it. His attackers suddenly stopped, blanketed in a sheet of ice. They stood frozen in place, blocks of ice.

Thor turned his palms in each direction, and everywhere men became frozen; it looked like blocks of ice had dropped down all over the battlefield.

Thor turned to his brothers-in-arms, and saw several soldiers about to land fatal blows on Reece, O'Connor, Elden, and the twins. He raised a palm in each direction and froze the attackers, saving his brothers from instant death. They turned and looked at him, relief and gratitude welling in their eyes.

The McCloud army began to notice and became wary of approaching Thor. They started to create a safe perimeter around him, all of these warriors afraid to get too close as they saw dozens of their comrades frozen in place on the battlefield.

But then there came a roar, and a man stepped forward, five times the size of the others. He must have been fourteen feet tall, and he carried a sword bigger than Thor had ever seen. Thor raised a palm to freeze him – but it didn't work against this man. He merely swatted the energy away as if it were an annoying insect, and continued to charge for Thor. Thor was beginning to realize that his power was imperfect; he was surprised, and did not understand why he was not strong enough to stop this man.

The giant reached Thor in three long steps, surprising Thor with his speed, and then backhanded him, sending Thor flying.

Thor hit the ground hard, and before he could turn, the giant was on him, lifting him up over his head with two hands. He threw him, and the McCloud army screamed in triumph as Thor soared

through the air a good twenty feet before landing on the ground and tumbling hard, until he rolled to a stop. Thor felt as if all his ribs had been cracked.

Thor looked up to see the giant bearing down on him, and this time, there was nothing left he could do. Whatever power he had had been exhausted.

He closed his eyes.

Please God, help me.

As the giant bore down on him, Thor began to hear a muted buzzing in his mind; it grew and grew, and soon, it became a buzzing outside of his mind, in the universe. He felt a strange sensation he had never felt before; he began to feel in unison with the very material and fabric of the air, the swinging of the trees, the movement of the blades of grass. He felt a great buzzing amidst all of them, and as he reached up a hand, he felt as if he were gathering this buzzing, from all corners of universe, summoning it to his will.

Thor opened his eyes to hear a tremendous buzzing overhead, and watched in surprise as a massive swarm of bees materialized from the sky. They poured in from all corners, and as he raised his hands, he felt that he was directing them. He did not know how he was doing it, but he knew that he was.

Thor moved his hands in the direction of the giant, and as he did, he watched as a swarm of bees darkened the sky, dove down, and completely covered the giant. The giant raised his hands and flailed, then shrieked, as they swarmed him, stinging him a thousand times until he collapsed to his knees, then to his face, dead. The ground shook with the impact of his body.

Thor then directed his hand towards the McCloud army, who sat on their horses, staring back at him, watching the scene, in shock. They began to turn to flee – but there was no time to react. Thor swung his palm in their direction, and the swarm of bees left the giant and began to attack the soldiers.

The McCloud army let out a shout of fear, and as one they turned and rode, stung countless times by the swarm. Soon the battlefield emptied of them as they disappeared as fast as they could. Some of them could not manage to ride away in time, and soldier after soldier fell, filling the field with corpses.

As the survivors kept galloping, the swarm chased them all the way across the field, into the horizon, the great sound of buzzing blending with the thunder of horses' hooves and of men's shouts of fear.

Thor was astounded: within minutes, the battlefield was vacant and still. All that remained was the moaning of the McCloud wounded, lying in heaps. Thor looked around and saw his friends, exhausted and breathing hard; they seemed to be badly bruised and covered in light wounds, but okay. Aside, of course, from the three legion members he did not know, who lay there, dead.

There came a great rumbling on the horizon, and Thor turned in the other direction and saw the King's army charging over the hill, racing towards them, Kendrick leading the way. They galloped for them, and within moments they came to a stop before Thor and his friends, the lone survivors on this bloody field.

Thor stood there, in shock, staring back, as Kendrick, Kolk, Brom, and the others dismounted and walked slowly towards Thor. They were accompanied by dozens of Silver, all the great warriors of the King's Army. They saw that Thor and the others stood there alone, victorious, in the bloody battlefield, riddled with the corpses of hundreds of McClouds. He could see their looks of wonder, of respect, of awe. He could see it in their eyes. It was what he had wanted his entire life.

He was a hero.

Chapter Nine

Erec galloped on his horse, racing down the Southern Lane, charging faster than ever, doing his best to avoid the holes on the road in the black of night. He had not stopped riding since he had received news of Alistair's kidnapping, of being sold into slavery and taken to Baluster. He could not stop reprimanding himself. He'd been stupid and naïve to trust that innkeeper, to assume he would be good to his word, would keep up his end of the deal and release Alistair to him after he had won the tournament. Erec's word was his honor, and he assumed that others' word was sacred, too. It was a foolish mistake. And Alistair had paid the price for it.

Erec's heart broke at the thought of her, and he kicked his horse harder. Such a beautiful and refined lady, first having to suffer the indignity of working for that innkeeper – and now, being sold into slavery, and to the sex trade no less. The thought of it infuriated him, and he could not help but feel that he was somehow responsible: if he had never showed up in her life, had never offered to take her away, perhaps the innkeeper never would have considered this.

Erec charged through the night, the sound of his horse's hooves ever-present, filling his ears, along with the sounds of his horse's breathing. The horse was beyond exhausted, and Erec feared he might ride him to the ground. Erec had gone right to the innkeeper after the tournament, had not stopped to take a break, and was so weary with exhaustion, he felt as if he might just slump and fall off his horse. But he forced his eyes to stay open, forced himself to stay awake, as he rode beneath the last vestiges of the full moon, heading ever south for Baluster.

Erec had heard stories of Baluster throughout his life, though it was a place he had never been; from the rumors, it was known to be a place of gambling, of opium, of sex, of every imaginable vice in the kingdom. It was where the disgruntled poured in, from all four corners of the Ring, to exploit every sort of dark festivity known to man. The place was the opposite of who he was. He never gambled and rarely drank, preferring to spend his free time training, sharpening his skills. He could not understand the types of people who embraced sloth and revelry, the way the frequenters of Baluster did. Coming here did not bode well for him. Nothing good could come of it. The very thought of her in such a place made his heart sink. He knew he had to rescue her quickly, and get her far from here, before any damage was done.

As the moon fell in the sky, as the road grew wider and more well-traveled, Erec caught his first glimpse of the city: the endless number of torches lighting its walls made the city appear like a bonfire in the night. Erec was not surprised: its inhabitants were rumored to stay up all hours of the night.

Erec rode harder and the city neared, and finally he rode over a small wooden bridge, torches on either side, a sleepy sentry nodding off at its base, who jumped up as Erec stormed past. The guard called out after him: "HEY!"

But Erec didn't even slow. If the man mustered up the confidence to chase after Erec – which Erec doubted very much – then Erec would make sure it was the last thing he did.

Erec charged through the large, open entrance to this city which was laid out in a square, surrounded by low, ancient stone walls. As he entered, he charged down the narrow streets, so bright, all lined with torches. The buildings were built close together, giving the city a narrow, claustrophobic feeling. The streets were absolutely mobbed with people, and nearly all of them seemed drunk, stumbling to and fro, screaming loudly, jostling each other. It was like a huge party. And every other establishment was a tavern or gambling den.

Erec knew this was the right place. He could sense Alistair here, somewhere. He swallowed hard, hoping it was not too late.

He rode up to what appeared to be a particularly large tavern in the center of the city, throngs of people milling outside, and figured it would be a good place to start.

Erec dismounted and hurried inside, elbowing his way past the people rowdy with drink and making his way up to the innkeeper, who stood in the back, in the center of the room, writing down people's names as he took their coins and directed them to rooms. He was a slimy-looking fellow, wearing a fake smile, sweating, and rubbing his hands together as he counted their coins. He looked up at Erec, a plastic smile on his face.

"A room, sir?" he asked. "Or is it women you want?"

Erec shook his head and came in close to the man, wanting to be heard above the din.

"I'm looking for a trader," Erec said. "A slave trader. He rode this way from Savaria but a day or so ago. He brought precious cargo. Human cargo."

The man licked his lips.

"What you seek is valuable information," the man said. "I can provide that, just as easily as I can provide a room."

The man reached forward and rubbed his fingers together, and held out a palm. He looked up at Erec and smiled, sweat forming on his upper lip.

Erec was disgusted by this man, but he wanted information, and didn't want to waste time, so he reached into his pouch and put a large gold coin in the man's hand.

The man's eyes opened wide as he examined it.

"King's gold," he observed, impressed.

He looked Erec up and down with a look of respect and wonder.

"Have you ridden all the way from King's Court, then?" he asked.

"Enough," Erec said. "I'm the one asking questions. I have paid you. Now tell me: where is the trader?"

The man licked his lips several times, then leaned in close.

"The man you seek is Erbot. He comes through once a week with a new batch of whores. He auctions them off to the highest bidder. You'll likely find him in his den. Follow this street to the end, and his establishment lies there. But if the girl you seek is of any worth, she's probably gone already. His whores don't last long."

Erec turned to go, when he felt a warm, clammy hand grab his wrist. He turned, surprised to see the innkeeper grabbing him.

"If it is whores you seek, why not try one of mine? They are just as good as his, and half the price."

Erec sneered at the man, revolted. If he had more time, he would probably kill him, just to rid the world of such a man. But he summed him up, and decided he wasn't worth the effort.

Erec shook his hand off, then leaned in close.

"Lay your hands on me again," Erec warned, "and you will wish that you hadn't. Now take two steps back from me before I find a nice spot for this rapier in my hand."

The innkeeper looked down, eyes opened wide in fear, and took several steps back.

Erec turned and stormed from the room, elbowing and shoving patrons out of his way as he burst back outside and through the double doors. He had never been so disgusted by humanity.

Erec mounted his horse, which was prancing and snorting at some drunk passersby who were eyeing it – no doubt, Erec figured, to try to steal it. He wondered if they would have actually attempted it had he not returned, and he made a note to himself to tie his horse more securely at the next place. He marveled at the vice of this town. Still, his horse, Warkfin, was a hardened warhorse, and if anyone tried to steal him, he would trample them to death.

Erec kicked Warkfin, and they went charging down the narrow street, Erec doing the best he could to avoid the throngs of people. It was late in the night, yet the streets seemed to become more and more dense with humanity, people of all races mingling with each other. Several drunk patrons screamed out at him as he charged past them too quickly, but he didn't care. He could feel Alistair within reach and would stop at nothing until he had her back.

The street ended in a stone wall, and the last building on the right was a leaning tavern, with white clay walls and a thatched roof, which looked as if it had seen better days. From the looks of the people going in and out, Erec sensed this was the right place.

Erec dismounted, tied his horse securely to a post, and burst through the doors. As he did, he stopped in his tracks, surprised.

The place was dimly lit, one big room with a few flickering torches on the walls and a dying fire in the fireplace in the far corner. Rugs were strewn everywhere, on which lied scores of women, scantily dressed, bound by thick ropes to each other and to the walls. They all appeared to be on drugs – Erec could smell the opium in the air, and saw a pipe being passed around. A few well-dressed men walked through the room, kicking and nudging the feet of the women here and there, as if testing out the merchandise and deciding what to buy.

In the far corner of the room sat a single man on a small, red velvet chair, wearing a silk robe, women chained to either side of him. Standing behind him were huge, muscular men, their faces covered in scars, taller and broader even than Erec, looking as if they would be thrilled to kill somebody.

Erec took in the scene and realized exactly what was going on: this was a sex den, these women were for hire, and that man in the corner was the kingpin, the man who had snatched Alistair – and probably had snatched all of these women, too. Even now Alistair might be in this room, Erec realized.

He burst into action, frantically hurrying through the aisles of women and scanning all the faces for hers. There were several dozen women in this room, some passed out, and the room was so dim it was hard to tell right away. He looked from face to face, walking through the rows, when suddenly a large palm smacked him in the chest.

“You pay yet?” came a gruff voice.

Erec looked up and saw a huge man standing over him, scowling down.

“You want to look at the women, you gotta pay,” the man boomed in his low voice. “Those are the rules.”

Erec sneered back at the man, feeling a hatred rising up within him, and then faster than the man could blink, he reached up and struck him with the heel of his palm, right in his esophagus.

The man gasped, eyes opened wide, then dropped to his knees, clutching his throat. Erec reached up and elbowed him in the temple, and the man fell flat on his face.

Erec walked quickly through the rows, scanning the faces desperately for Alistair, but she was nowhere in sight. She was not here.

Erec’s heart was pounding as he hurried to the far corner of the room, to the older man sitting in the corner, watching over everything.

“Have you found something you like?” asked the man. “Something you want to bid on?”

“I’m looking for a woman,” Erec began, his voice steel, trying to keep calm, “and I’m only going to say this once. She’s tall, with long blond hair and green-blue eyes. Her name is Alistair. She was taken from Savaria but a day or two ago. I’m told she was taken here. Is that true?”

The man slowly shook his head, grinning.

“The property you seek has already been sold, I’m afraid,” the man said. “A fine specimen, though. You do have good taste. Choose another, and I will give you a discount.”

Erec glowered, feeling a rage within him unlike any he’d ever felt.

“Who took her?” Erec growled.

The man smiled.

“My, you do seem fixed on this one particular slave.”

“She is not a slave,” Erec growled. “She is my *wife*.”

The man looked back, shocked – then suddenly threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“Your *wife*! That’s a good one. Not anymore, my friend. Now she is someone else’s plaything.” Then the innkeeper’s face darkened, into an evil scowl, as he gestured to his henchmen, and added, “Now get rid of this piece of trash.”

The two muscle-bound men came forward, and with a speed that surprised Erec, both lunging at him at once, reaching out to grab his chest.

But they did not realize who they were attacking. Erec was faster than them both, sidestepping them, grabbing the wrist of one of them and bending it back until the man fell flat on his back, and then elbowing the other in the throat at the same time. Erec stepped forward and crushed the windpipe of the man on the floor, knocking him out, then leaned forward and head-butted the other one, who was grasping his throat, knocking him out, too.

The two men lay there, unconscious, and Erec stepped over their bodies and towards the innkeeper, who was now shaking his chair, eyes opened wide in fear.

Erec reached forward, grabbed the man by the hair, yanked back his head, and held a dagger to the man’s throat.

“Tell me where she is, and I might just let you live,” Erec growled.

The man stammered.

“I will tell you, but you are wasting your time,” he answered. “I sold her to a lord. He has his own force of knights and lives in his own castle. He is a very powerful man. His castle has never been breached. And beyond that, he has an entire army on reserve. He’s a very rich man – he has an army of mercenaries willing to do his bidding at any moment. Any girl he buys, he keeps. There is no way you will ever get her free. So go back to wherever it is you came from. She is gone.”

Erec held the blade tighter to the man’s throat until he began to draw blood, and the man cried out.

“Where is this lord?” Erec snarled, losing patience.

“His castle is west of town. Take the Western gate of the city, and go until the road goes no further. You will see his castle. But it is a waste of time. He paid some good money for her – more than she was worth.”

Erec had enough. Without pausing, he sliced this sex trader’s throat, killing him. Blood poured out everywhere as the man slumped down in his seat, dead.

Erec looked down at the dead body, at the unconscious henchmen, and felt revolted by this entire place. He couldn’t believe it existed.

Erec walked through the room and began to sever the ropes connecting all the women, cutting the thick twine, freeing them one at a time. Several jumped up and ran for the door. Soon the entire room was loose, and they all trampled for the door. Some were too drugged to move, and others helped them.

“Whoever you are,” one woman said to Erec, stopping at the door, “bless you. And wherever it is you are going, may God help you.”

Erec appreciated the gratitude and the blessing; and he had a sinking feeling that, where he was going, he was going to need it.

Chapter Ten

Dawn broke, spilling through the small windows of Illepra's cottage, falling over Gwendolyn's closed eyes, and slowly waking her. The first sun, a muted orange, caressed her, waking her in the near silence of dawn. She blinked several times, at first disoriented, wondering where she was. And then she realized:

Godfrey.

Gwen had fallen asleep on the floor of the cottage, lying on a bed of straw near his bedside. Illepra slept right beside Godfrey, and it had been a long night for the three of them. Godfrey had moaned throughout the night, tossing and turning, and Illepra had tended to him incessantly. Gwen had been there to help any way she could, bringing wet cloths, ringing them out, placing them on Godfrey's forehead, and handing Illepra the herbs and salves she'd continually asked for. The night had seemed endless; many times Godfrey had screamed out, and she'd been sure he was dying. More than once he had called out for their father, and it had given Gwen a chill. She felt her father's presence, hovering over them strongly. She did not know whether her father would want his son to live or to die – their relationship had always been so fraught with tension.

Gwen had also slept in the cottage because she did not know where else to go. She felt unsafe returning to the castle, to be under the same roof with her brother; she felt safe here, in Illepra's care, with Akorth and Fulton standing guard outside the door. She felt nobody knew where she was, and she wanted it that way. Besides, she had grown fond of Godfrey these last few days, had discovered the brother she had never known, and it pained her to think of him dying.

Gwen scrambled to her feet, hurrying over to Godfrey's side, her heart pounding, wondering if he was still alive. A part of her sensed that if he woke in the morning, he would make it, and if he did not, it would be over. Illepra roused and hurried over, too. She must have fallen asleep at some point in the night; Gwen could hardly blame her.

The two of them knelt there, by Godfrey's side, as the small cottage filled with light. Gwen placed a hand on his wrist and shook him, as Illepra reached up and placed a hand on his forehead. She closed her eyes and breathed – and suddenly Godfrey's eyes opened wide. Illepra pulled her hand back in surprise.

Gwen was surprised, too. She did not expect to see Godfrey open his eyes. He turned and looked right at her.

"Godfrey?" she asked.

He squinted, closed his eyes, and opened them again; then, to her amazement, he propped himself up on one elbow and looked at them.

"What time is it?" he asked. "Where am I?"

His voice sounded alert, healthy, and Gwen had never felt so relieved. She broke into a huge smile, along with Illepra.

Gwen lunged forward and embraced him, giving him a big hug, then pulled back.

"You're alive!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I am," he said. "Why wouldn't I be? Who is this?" he asked, turning towards Illepra.

"The woman who saved your life," Gwen answered.

"Saved my life?"

Illepra looked down to the floor.

"I only helped a small bit," she said, humbly.

"What happened to me?" he asked Gwen, frantic. "The last I remember, I was drinking in the tavern and then..."

“You were poisoned,” Illepra said. “A very rare and strong poison. I’ve not encountered it in years. You’re lucky to be alive. In fact, you’re the only one I’ve ever seen survive it. Someone must have been looking down on you.”

At her words, Gwen knew she was right, and immediately thought of her father. The sun streaked into the windows, stronger, and she felt her father’s presence with them. He had wanted Godfrey to live.

“It serves you right,” Gwen said with a smile. “You had promised to forsake ale. Now look at what happened.”

He turned and smiled at her; she saw the life back in his cheeks and felt flooded with relief. Godfrey was back.

“You saved my life,” he said to her, earnestly.

He turned to Illepra.

“Both of you did,” he added. “I don’t know how I shall ever repay you.”

As he looked at Illepra, Gwen noticed something – it was something in his look, something more than gratitude. She turned and looked at Illepra, and noticed her blushing, looking down to the floor – and Gwen realized they liked each other.

Illepra quickly turned and crossed the room, turning her back to them, busying herself with a potion.

Godfrey looked back to Gwen.

“Gareth?” he asked, suddenly solemn.

Gwen nodded back, understanding what he was asking.

“You’re lucky you’re not dead,” she said. “Firth is.”

“Firth?” Godfrey’s voice rose in surprise. “Dead? But how?”

“He hung him from the gallows,” she said. “You were supposed to be next.”

“And you?” Godfrey asked.

Gwen shrugged.

“He has plans to marry me off. He sold me to the Nevaruns. Apparently they’re on their way to take me.”

Godfrey sat up, outraged.

“I shall never allow it!” he exclaimed.

“Neither shall I,” she answered. “I will find a way.”

“But without Firth, we have no evidence,” he said. “We have no way to bring him down. Gareth will be free.”

“We will find a way,” she responded. “We will find – ”

Suddenly the cottage filled with light as the door opened and in marched Akorth and Fulton.

“My lady – ” Akorth began, then turned at the sight of Godfrey.

“You son of a bitch!” Akorth cried out in joy to Godfrey. “I knew it! You cheated just about everything in life – I knew you’d cheat death, too!”

“I knew no tankard of ale would take you to your grave!” Fulton added.

Akorth and Fulton ran over, and as Godfrey jumped up from bed, and they all embraced.

Then Akorth turned to Gwen, serious.

“My lady, I’m sorry to disturb you, but we spotted a contingent of soldiers on the horizon. They are rushing for us even now.”

Gwen looked at him with alarm, then ran outside, all of them on her heels, ducking her head, and squinting in the strong sunlight.

The group stood outside, and Gwen looked out at the horizon and watched a small group of Silver riding for the cottage. A half dozen men charged at full speed, and there was no doubt they were racing for them.

Godfrey reached down to draw his sword, but Gwen lay a reassuring hand on his wrist.

“These are not Gareth’s men – they are Kendrick’s. I am sure they come in peace.”

The soldiers reached them and, without pausing, dismounted from their horses and knelt before Gwendolyn.

“My lady,” the lead soldier said. “We bring you great news. We have pushed back the McClouds! Your brother Kendrick is safe, and he has asked me to send you a message: Thor is well.”

Gwen burst into tears at the news, overwhelmed with gratitude and relief, stepping forward and embracing Godfrey, who embraced her back. She felt as if her life had been restored within her.

“They shall all return today,” the messenger continued, “and there will be a great celebration in King’s Court!”

“Great news indeed!” Gwen exclaimed.

“My lady,” came another, deep voice, and Gwen looked over to see a lord, a renowned warrior, Srog, dressed in the distinctive red of the west, a man she had known since youth. He had been close to her father. He knelt before her, and she felt ashamed.

“Please, sir,” she said, “do not kneel before me.”

He was a famous man, a powerful lord who had thousands of soldiers answering to him, and who ruled his own city, Silesia, the stronghold of the West, an unusual city, built right into a cliff on the edge of the Canyon. It was nearly impenetrable. He was one of the few her father ever trusted.

“I have ridden here with these men because I hear that great changes are astir in King’s Court,” he said knowingly. “The throne is unsteady. A new ruler – a firm ruler, a true ruler – must be placed in his stead. Word has reached me of your father’s desire that you should reign. Your father was like a brother to me, and his word is my bond. If that is his wish, then it is mine. I have come to let you know that, if you should rule, then my men will swear allegiance to you. I would urge you to act soon. The events of today have proven that King’s Court needs a new ruler.”

Gwen stood there, taken aback, hardly knowing how to respond. She felt deeply humbled, and a sense of pride, but she also felt overwhelmed, in over her head.

“I thank you, sir,” she said. “I’m grateful for your words, and for your offer. I shall ponder it deeply. For now, I wish only to welcome home my brother – and Thor.”

Srog bowed his head, and a horn sounded on the horizon. Gwen looked up and could already see the dust cloud: a great army was appearing. She raised one hand to block out the sun, and her heart soared. Even from here, she could feel who it was. It was the Silver, the King’s men.

And riding at their head was Thor.

Chapter Eleven

Thor rode with the army, thousands of soldiers heading as one back towards King's Court, and he felt triumphant. He still could hardly process what had happened. He was proud of what he had done, proud that when things seemed at their lowest point in battle, he had not given into his fear, but stayed and faced those warriors. And he was in shock that he had somehow survived.

The entire battle had felt surreal, and he was so grateful he'd been able to summon his powers – yet he was also confused, since his powers did not always work. He did not understand them, and worse, he did not know where they came from or how to muster them. It made him realize more than ever that he had to learn to rely on his human skills, too – on being the best fighter, the best warrior, he could be. He was starting to realize that to be the best warrior he could be, he needed both sides of himself – the fighter, and the sorcerer – if that's even what he was.

They rode all night to get back to King's Court, and Thor was now beyond exhausted, but also exhilarated. The first sun was breaking over the horizon, the vast expanse of sky opened before him in shades of yellows and pinks, and he felt as if he were seeing the world for the first time. He had never felt so alive. He was surrounded by his friends, Reece, O'Connor, Elden, and the twins; by Kendrick, Kolk, and Brom; and by hundreds of members of the Legion, The Silver, and of the King's army. But instead of being on the outskirts of it, now he rode at the center, embraced by all of them. Indeed, they all looked at him differently since the battle. Now, he saw admiration in the eyes of not just his fellow Legion members, but also in the eyes of the real, full-grown warriors. He had faced the entire McCloud army by himself and turned back the tide of war.

Thor was just happy that he did not let any of his Legion brothers down. He was happy that his friends had escaped mostly unharmed, and he felt a sense of remorse about those who died in the battle. He did not know them, but he wished he could have saved them, too. It had been a bloody, ferocious battle, and even now, as Thor rode, whenever he blinked, images flashed in his head of the fighting, of the various weapons and warriors who had come at him. The McClouds were fierce people, and he had been lucky; who knew if he would be so lucky if they met again. Who knew if he would be able to summon those powers again. He did not know if they would ever come back. He needed answers. And he needed to find his mother. He needed to know who he truly was. He needed to seek out Argon.

Krohn whined behind him, and Thor leaned back and stroked his head, while Krohn licked his palm. Thor was relieved that Krohn was okay. Thor had carried him off the battlefield and had slung him over the back of his horse behind him; Krohn seemed able to walk, but Thor wanted him to rest and recover for the long journey back. The blow Krohn took was mighty, and it looked to Thor that he might have broken a rib. Thor could barely express his gratitude to Krohn, who felt more like a brother to him than an animal, and who had saved his life more than once.

As they crested a hill and the vista of the kingdom spread out before them, there came into view the sprawling, glorious city of King's Court, with dozens of towers and spires, with its ancient stone walls and its massive drawbridge, with its arched gates, its hundreds of soldiers standing guard on the parapets and on the road, rolling farmland encasing it, and of course King's Castle in its center. Thor thought immediately of Gwen. She had sustained him in battle; she had given him reason and purpose to live. Knowing that he was set up out there, that he was ambushed, Thor suddenly feared for her fate, too. He hoped she was okay back here, that whatever forces had put into play his treachery had left her untouched.

Thor heard a distant cheer, saw something glimmering in the light, and as he squinted his eyes at the hilltop, he realized that a great crowd was forming on the horizon, before King's Court, lining the road, waving flags. The people were coming out in force to greet them.

Someone sounded a horn, and Thor realized they were being welcomed home. For the first time in his life, he did not feel like an outsider.

“Those horns, they sound for you,” Reece said, riding beside him, patting him on the back, looking at him with a new respect. “You are the champion of this battle. You are the people’s hero now.”

“Imagine, one of us, a mere Legion member, turning back the entire McCloud Army,” O’Connor added with pride.

“You do great honor to the entire Legion,” Elden said. “Now they will have to take all of us a lot more seriously.”

“Not to mention, you saved all of our lives,” Conval added.

Thor shrugged, filled with pride, but also refusing to allow any of this to get to his head. He knew he was human, frail, vulnerable, like any of them. And that the tide of battle could have gone the other way.

“I just did what I was trained to do,” Thor responded. “What we were all trained to do. I’m no better than anyone else. I just got lucky on this day.”

“I should say that it was more than luck,” Reece responded.

They all continued at a slow trot, down the main road leading to King’s Court, and as they did the road began to fill with people, pouring out from the countryside, cheering, waving banners, the royal blue and yellow of the MacGils. Thor realized that this was becoming a full-fledged parade. The entire court had come out to celebrate them, and he could see the relief and joy in their faces. He could understand why: if the McCloud army had come any closer, they could have destroyed all this.

Thor rode with the others through the throngs of people, over the wooden drawbridge, their horses’ hooves clomping. They passed through the arched stone gate, through the underpass, the sky going dark, then out the other side, into King’s Court – where they were met by cheering masses. They waved flags and threw candies, and a band of musicians started up, sounding cymbals, banging drums, while people broke into dance in the streets.

Thor dismounted with the others as it became too thick to ride, and he reached over and helped Krohn down from the horse. He watched carefully as Krohn limped, then walked; he seemed okay to walk now, and Thor felt relieved. Krohn turned and licked his palm several times.

The group of them walked through King’s Plaza, as Thor was hugged and embraced from every side by people he did not know.

“You have saved us!” an older man called out. “You have liberated our kingdom!”

Thor wanted to respond, but he could not, his voice swallowed by the din of hundreds of people cheering and shouting all around them, the music rising up. Soon, casks of ale were rolled out onto the field, and people burst into drinking, song and laughter.

But Thor had only one thing on his mind: Gwendolyn. He had to see her. He scanned all the faces, desperate for a glimpse of her, sure that she would be here – but he felt crushed to see that he could not find her.

Then he felt a tap on the shoulder.

“I believe the woman you’re looking for is that way,” said Reece, turning him and pointing the other way.

Thor turned and his eyes lit up. There, walking quickly towards him, wearing a huge, relieved smile and looking as if she had been up all night, was Gwendolyn.

She looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and she hurried towards him and ran right into Thor’s arms. She jumped up and embraced him, and he hugged her back, tightly, spinning her in the crowd. She clung to him and would not let go, and he could feel her tears pouring down his neck. He could feel her love, and he felt it right back.

“Thank God you are alive,” she said, overjoyed.

“I thought of nothing but you,” Thor said back, holding her tight. As he held her in his arms, everything felt right in the world once again.

Slowly, he let her go, and she stared up at him and they leaned in and kissed. They held the kiss for a long time, the masses swirling all around them.

“Gwendolyn!” Reece called out in delight.

She turned and embraced him, and then Godfrey stepped up and embraced Thor, then his brother Reece. It was a big family reunion, and Thor somehow felt as if he were a part of it, as if these were all his family already. They were all united by their love for MacGil – and by their hatred for Gareth.

Krohn stepped forward and jumped up onto Gwendolyn, and she leaned back with a laugh and hugged him as he licked her face.

“You grow bigger with each passing day!” she exclaimed. “How can I thank you for keeping Thor safe?”

Krohn jumped up on her again and again, until finally, laughing, she had to pat him down.

“Let’s leave this place,” Gwen said to Thor, being pressed from every side by the thick masses. She reached out and took his hand.

Thor reached out and took hers back, and was about to follow – when suddenly, several warriors of The Silver came up behind Thor and picked him up into the air, high above their heads, placing him on their shoulders. As Thor rose into the air, a great shout came from the crowd.

“THORGRIN!” the crowd cheered.

Thor was spun around and around, as a tankard of ale was thrust into his hand. He leaned back and drank, and the crowd cheered like wild.

Thor was set down roughly, and he stumbled, laughing, as the crowd embraced him.

“We head now to the victor’s feast,” said a warrior Thor did not know, a member of The Silver, who clapped him on the back with a beefy hand. “It is a feast for warriors only. For men. You will join us. There will be a spot reserved for you at the table. And you and you,” he said, turning to Reece, O’Connor and Thor’s friends. “You are men now. And you will join us.”

A cheer rose up as they were all grabbed by members of The Silver and dragged away; Thor broke free at the last second and turned to Gwen, feeling guilty and not wanting to let her down.

“Go with them,” she said, selflessly. “It is important that you do. Feast with your brothers. Celebrate with them. It is a tradition among The Silver. You cannot miss it. Later tonight, meet me at the back door of the Hall of Arms. Then we will be together.”

Thor leaned in and kissed her one last time, holding it as long as he could, until he was tugged away by his fellow soldiers.

“I love you,” she said to him.

“I love you too,” he said back, meaning it more than she would ever know.

All he could think of, as he was dragged away, as he watched those beautiful eyes, so filled with love for him, was that he wanted, more than anything, to propose to her, to make her his forever. Now was not the right time, but soon, he told himself.

Perhaps even tonight.

Chapter Twelve

Gareth stood in his chamber, looking out the window at the breaking light of dawn as it rose over King's Court, watching the masses gather below – and felt sick to his stomach. On the horizon was his worst fear, the very picture of what he dreaded most: the king's army returning, victorious, triumphant from its clash with the McClouds. Kendrick and Thor rode at its head, free, alive – heroes. His spies had already informed him of everything that had happened, that Thor had survived the ambush, that he was alive and well. Now these men were all emboldened, returning to King's Court as a solidified force. All his plans had gone terribly awry and left a pit in his stomach. He felt the kingdom closing in on him.

Gareth heard a creaking noise in his room, and he spun and shut his eyes quickly at the sight before him, stricken with fear.

“Open your eyes, son!” came the booming voice.

Shaking, Gareth opened his eyes, and was aghast to see his father, standing there, a corpse, decomposing, a rusted crown on his head, a rusted scepter in his hand. He stared back with a reprimanding look, as he had in life.

“Blood will have blood,” his father proclaimed.

“I hate you!” Gareth screamed. “I HATE YOU!” he repeated, and pulled the dagger from his belt and charged forward for his father.

As he reached him, he sliced his dagger – hitting nothing but air – and stumbled through the room.

Gareth spun, but the apparition was gone. He was alone in the chamber. He had been alone the entire time. Was he losing his mind?

Gareth ran to the far corner of the chamber, rummaged through his dressing cabinet and extracted his opium pipe with trembling hands; he quickly lit it, and inhaled deeply, again and again. He felt the flush of drugs wash over his system, felt himself lost temporarily in the drug high. He had been turning to the opium more and more these past days – it seemed to be the only thing that helped chase away the image of his father. Gareth was tormented being here, and he was starting to wonder if his father's ghost was trapped in these walls and if he should move his court somewhere else. He would like to raze this building anyway – this place held every memory of his childhood that he hated.

Gareth turned back to the window, covered in a cold sweat, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He watched. The army neared, and Thor was visible even from here, the stupid masses flocking to him like a hero. It made Gareth livid, made him burn with envy. Every plan he had put into motion had fallen apart: Kendrick was freed; Thor was alive; even Godfrey had somehow managed to escape the poison – enough poison to kill a horse.

But then again, his other plans had worked: Firth, at least, was dead, and there was no witness left to prove he'd killed his father. Gareth took a deep breath, relieved, realizing things were not as bad as they seemed. After all, the convoy of Nevaruns was still en route to take away Gwendolyn, to drag her off to some horrible corner of the Ring and marry her off. He smiled at the thought, starting to feel better. Yes, at least she would be out of his hair soon enough.

Gareth had time. He would find other ways to deal with Kendrick and Thor and Godfrey – he had myriad schemes to kill them off. And he had all the time and all the power in the world to make it happen. Yes, they had won this round, but they would not win the next.

Gareth heard another groan, spun, and saw nothing in this chamber. He had to get out of here – he couldn't stand it anymore.

He turned and stormed from the room, the door opening before he reached it, his attendants careful to anticipate his every move.

Gareth threw on his father's mantle and crown, and picked up his scepter, as he marched down the hall. He turned down the corridors until he reached his private dining room, an elaborate stone chamber with high arched ceilings and stained-glass windows, lit up in the early morning light. Two attendants stood waiting at the open door, and another stood waiting behind the head of the table. It was a long banquet table, stretching fifty feet, with dozens of chairs lined up on either side of it; the attendant pulled Gareth's out for him as he approached, an ancient, oak chair that his father had sat on countless times.

Gareth sat and realized how much he hated this room. He remembered being forced to sit in here as a child, his entire family lined up around it, being rebuked by his father and mother. Now the room was profoundly lonely. There was no one in here but him – not his brothers or sisters or parents or friends. Not even his advisors. Over the past days, he had managed to isolate everybody, and now he dined alone. He preferred it that way anyway – there were too many times he had seen the ghost of his father in here with him, and he had become embarrassed to cry out in front of others.

Gareth reached down and took a sip of his morning soup, then suddenly slammed his silver spoon down on the plate.

“The soup is not hot enough!” he shrieked.

It was hot, but not piping hot as he liked it, and Gareth would not tolerate one more mistake around him. An attendant ran over.

“I am sorry, my liege,” the attendant said, bowing his head as he rushed to take it away. But Gareth picked up the plate and threw the hot liquid in the attendant's face.

The attendant grabbed his eyes, screaming as he was scalded by the liquid. Gareth then took the plate, lifted it high above his head, and smashed it on the attendant's head.

The attendant screamed, clutching his bloody scalp.

“Take him away!” Gareth screamed to the other attendants.

They looked at each other warily, then reluctantly obeyed.

“Send him to the dungeons!” Gareth said.

As Gareth sat back down, trembling, the room was empty save for one attendant, who walked over to Gareth meekly.

“My liege,” he said, nervous.

Gareth looked over at him in a seething rage. As he looked over, Gareth could see his father, sitting erect at the table, a few chairs away, looking back at him and smiling an evil smile. Gareth tried to look away.

“The Lord you summoned has arrived to see you,” the attendant said. “Lord Kultin, from the Essen province. He waits outside.”

Gareth blinked several times, as he began to process what his attendant was saying. Lord Kultin. Yes, now he remembered.

“Send him in at once,” Gareth ordered.

The attendant bowed and ran from the room, and as he opened the door, in strutted a huge, fierce warrior with long black hair, cold black eyes, a long black beard. He wore full armor and a mantle, wore two long swords, one on either side of his belt, and he kept his hands resting on both of them, as if ready to defend – or attack – at any moment. He looked as if he were in a rage himself, but Gareth knew he was not – Lord Kultin had always appeared this way, ever since the time of his father.

Kultin strutted up to Gareth, stood over him, and Gareth waved his hand at an empty seat.

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