

A stone castle with multiple towers and crenellations sits atop a dark, craggy cliff. A thick, gnarled vine bridge arches from the left side of the cliff towards the castle. The sun is positioned behind the castle, creating a bright glow and casting long shadows. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The foreground shows some sparse, green vegetation.

A
GRANT
OF
ARMS

BOOK #8 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

MORGAN RICE

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Grant of Arms

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2013

Rice M.

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In A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8 in the Sorcerer's Ring), Thor is caught between titanic forces of good and evil, as Andronicus and Rafi use all of their dark sorcery to attempt to crush Thor's identity and take control of his very soul. Under their spell, Thor will have to battle a greater fight than he has ever known, as he struggles to cast off his father and free himself from their chains. But it may already be too late. Gwendolyn, with Alistair, Steffen and Aberthol, ventures deep into the Netherworld, on her quest to find Argon and free him from his magical trap. She sees him as the only hope to save Thor and to save the Ring, but the Netherworld is vast and treacherous, and even finding Argon may be a lost cause. Reece leads the Legion members as they embark on a near-impossible quest to do what has never been done before: to descend into the depths of the Canyon and find and retrieve the lost Sword. As they descend, they enter another world, filled with monsters and exotic races – all of them bent on keeping the Sword for their own purposes. Romulus, armed with his magical cloak, proceeds with his sinister plan to cross into the Ring and destroy the Shield; Kendrick, Erec, Bronson and Godfrey fight to free themselves from their betrayal; Tirus and Luanda learn what it means to be traitors and to serve Andronicus; Mycoples struggles to break free; and in a final, shocking twist, Alistair's secret is finally revealed. Will Thor return to himself? Will Gwendolyn find Argon? Will Reece find the Sword? Will Romulus succeed in his plan? Will Kendrick, Erec, Bronson and Godfrey succeed in the face of overwhelming odds? And will Mycoples return? Or will the Ring fall into complete and final destruction? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A GRANT OF ARMS 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.

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Содержание

Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	14
Chapter Three	18
Chapter Four	20
Chapter Five	24
Chapter Six	26
Chapter Seven	28
Chapter Eight	30
Chapter Nine	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

Morgan Rice

A Grant of Arms

(Book #8 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

*"Mine honor is my life, both grow in one.
Take honor from me, and my life is done."*

– *William Shakespeare*
Richard II

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

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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

Gwendolyn braced herself against the cold, whipping wind as she stood at the edge of the Canyon and took her first step onto the arched footbridge that spanned the Northern Crossing. This rickety bridge, covered in ice, was comprised of a worn wooden rope and planks, and hardly seemed capable of holding them. Gwen cringed as she took her first step.

Gwen slipped, and reached out and grabbed the railing, which swung and hardly helped. Her heart dropped to consider that this flimsy bridge was their only way to cross the northern side of the Canyon, to enter the Netherworld, and to find Argon. She looked up and saw, in the distance, the Netherworld beckoning, a sheet of blinding snow. The crossing felt even more ominous.

A sudden gale came, and the rope swayed so violently, Gwendolyn felt herself grabbing the rail with both hands and dropping to her knees. For a moment she did not know if she could even hang on – much less cross it. She realized this was far more dangerous than she had thought, and that they would all be taking their lives into their hands to try.

“My lady?” came a voice.

Gwen turned to see Aberthol standing a few feet away, beside Steffen, Alistair and Krohn, all of them waiting to follow. The five of them made an unlikely group, perched here on the edge of the world, facing an uncertain future and a probable death.

“Must we really attempt to cross this?” he asked.

Gwendolyn turned and looked back out at the whipping snow and wind before her, and clutched her furs tighter around her shoulders as she shivered. Secretly, she did not want to cross the bridge; she did not want to take this journey at all. She would much rather retreat to the safety of her childhood home, King’s Court, to sit behind its snug walls, before a fire, and contemplate none of the dangers and worries of the world that had engulfed her since she had become queen.

But of course, she could not do that. King’s Court was no more; her childhood was gone; and she was Queen now. She had a baby-to-be to care for, a husband-to-be out there somewhere, and they needed her. For Thorgrin, she would walk through fire if that was needed. Gwen felt certain that it was indeed needed. They all needed Argon – not just her and Thor, but the entire Ring. They were up against not only Andronicus, but also a powerful magic, powerful enough to ensnare Thor, and without Argon, she did not know how they could possibly combat it.

“Yes,” she replied. “We must.”

Gwen prepared to take another step, and this time Steffen rushed forward, blocking her way.

“My lady, please allow me to go first,” he said. “We do not know what terrors await us on this bridge.”

Gwendolyn was touched by his offer, but reached up and gently pushed him aside.

“No,” she said. “I shall.”

She waited no longer, but stepped forward, taking firm hold of the rope rail.

As she took a step, she was struck by the freezing sensation in her hand, the ice digging into her, the cold sensation shooting up her palms and arms. She breathed sharply, unsure if she could even hang on.

Another gale of wind came, blowing the bridge side to side, forcing her to tighten her grip, to tolerate the pain of the ice. She struggled to balance with all she had, as her feet slipped on the ice-covered rope and planks beneath her. The bridge lurched sharply to the left, and for a moment she was sure she would fall over the side. The bridge corrected itself, and swayed back in the other direction.

Gwen knelt again. She had barely gone ten feet, and already her heart was pounding so hard she could barely breathe, and her hands were so numb she could hardly feel them.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and she thought of Thor. She pictured his face, every angle of it. She dwelled on her love for him. Her determination to free him. Whatever it took.

Whatever it took.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes and forced herself to take several steps forward, clutching the railing, not willing to stop this time for anything. The wind and snow could drive her down into the depths of the Canyon. She no longer cared. It was no longer about her; it was about the love of her life. For him, she could do anything.

Gwendolyn felt the weight shift on the bridge behind her and glanced back to see Steffen, Aberthol, Alistair, and Krohn following. Krohn slipped on his paws as he rushed past the others, weaving in and out until he was by Gwendolyn's side.

"I don't know if I can do this," Aberthol called out, his voice strained, after a few shaky steps.

He stood there, arms shaking as he clutched the rope, a feeble old man, barely able to hang on.

"You can do it," Alistair said, stepping up beside him and draping one arm around his waist. "I'm right here. Do not worry."

Alistair walked with him, helping him forward as the group resumed walking, heading farther and farther across the bridge, one step at a time.

Gwen once again marveled at Alistair's strength in the face of adversity, her calm nature, her fearlessness. She also exuded a power that Gwendolyn did not understand. Gwen could not explain why she felt as close to her as she did, but in the short time she had known her, she already felt like a sister. She drew strength from her presence. And from Steffen's.

There came a lull in the wind, and they made good time. Soon they crossed the midpoint of the bridge, moving faster now, Gwen growing accustomed to the slippery planks. The far side of the Canyon began to come into sight, only fifty yards away, and Gwendolyn's heart began to well with optimism. They might make it after all.

A fresh gale whipped through, this one stronger than all the others, so strong that Gwen was forced to drop to her knees and clutch the rope with both hands. She held on for dear life as the bridge swung up nearly ninety degrees, then swung back down just as violently. She felt a plank give way beneath her feet, and cried out as one of her legs sank down into the opening, through the bridge, her leg stuck up to her thigh. She wiggled, but could not get out.

Gwendolyn turned to watch Aberthol lose his grip, letting go of Alistair and beginning to slide over the edge of the bridge. Alistair reacted quickly, reaching out with one hand and clasping his wrist, holding him back just before Aberthol slipped over the edge.

Alistair leaned over the edge of the bridge, holding on, as Aberthol swung beneath her, nothing between him and the bottom of the Canyon. Alistair strained, and Gwen prayed the rope did not give. Gwen felt so helpless, stuck as she was, her leg lodged between the planks. Her heart pounded madly as she tried to get out.

The bridge swayed wildly, and Alistair and Aberthol swayed with it.

"Let go!" Aberthol screamed. "Save yourself!"

Aberthol's cane slipped from his hand and tumbled through the sky, end over end, down towards the depths of the Canyon. Now all he had left was the staff strapped to his back.

"You are going to be all right," Alistair said calmly.

Gwen was surprised to see Alistair so poised, confident.

"Look into my eyes," Alistair instructed, firmly.

"What?" Aberthol screamed out over the wind.

"Look into my eyes," Alistair commanded, even more strength in her voice.

There was something about her tone that commanded men, and Aberthol looked up at her. Their eyes locked, and as they did, Gwendolyn watched a light glow emanate from Alistair's eyes and shine down to Aberthol's. She watched in disbelief as the glow enveloped Aberthol, and as Alistair leaned back and with one yank, pulled Aberthol back up, onto the bridge.

Aberthol, stunned, lay there, breathing hard, and looked up at Alistair in wonder; then he immediately turned and grabbed hold of the rope railing with both hands, before another gust of wind came.

“My lady!” Steffen yelled.

He kneeled over her, then reached down, grabbed her shoulders, and yanked with all his might.

Gwen began to slowly dislodge from the planks, but as she came close to breaking free, she slipped from his icy grip and fell back down to where she had been, lodging even deeper. Suddenly, a second plank beneath Gwendolyn snapped, and she screamed as she felt herself begin to plummet.

Gwendolyn reached up and grabbed hold of the rope with one hand and Steffen’s wrist with the other. She felt as if her shoulders were being torn from her sockets as she dangled in the open air. Steffen dangled now, too, leaning so far over the edge, his legs tangled up behind him, risking his life to keep her from falling, the breaking ropes behind him the only thing keeping them afloat.

There came a snarling and Krohn leapt forward and sunk his fangs into the fur on Gwen’s coat and pulled back with all he had, snarling and whining.

Slowly, Gwen was hoisted, inch by inch, until finally she could grab hold of the planks on the bridge. She dragged herself up and lay there face-first, spent, breathing hard.

Krohn licked her face again and again, and she breathed, so grateful for him, and for Steffen, who now lay beside her. She was so happy to be alive, to be saved from a horrible death.

But Gwendolyn suddenly heard a snapping noise and felt the entire bridge quiver. Her blood ran cold as she turned and looked back: one of the ropes anchoring the bridge to the Canyon snapped.

The entire bridge jerked, and Gwen watched in horror as the other one, hanging by a thread, snapped, too.

They all screamed as suddenly half of the entire bridge detached from the Canyon wall; the bridge swung them all so fast that Gwen could hardly breathe as they flew through the air, heading at light speed for the far side of the Canyon wall.

Gwen looked up and saw the rock wall coming at them in a blur, and she knew that in moments, they would all be dead from the impact, their bodies crushed, and that whatever survived of them would plummet down to the depths of the earth.

“Rock, give way! I COMMAND YOU!” shouted a voice filled with ancient primordial authority, a voice unlike any Gwen had ever heard.

She glanced over to see Alistair, clutching the rope, holding out one palm, fixated fearlessly on the cliff they were about to hit. From Alistair’s palm there emanated a yellow light, and as they sped closer to the Canyon wall, as Gwendolyn braced herself for impact, she was shocked at what happened next.

Before her eyes, the solid rock face of the Canyon changed to snow – as they all impacted, Gwendolyn did not feel the crack of bones she had expected to. Instead, she felt her entire body immersed in a wall of light, fluffy snow. It was freezing, and it covered her completely, entering her eyes and nose and ears – but it did not hurt her.

She was alive.

They all dangled there, the rope hanging from the top of the Canyon, immersed in the wall of snow, and Gwendolyn felt a strong hand grab her wrist. Alistair. Her hand was strangely warm, despite the freezing cold. Alistair had already somehow grabbed the others, too, and soon they were all, including Krohn, yanked up by her, as she climbed the rope as if it were nothing.

Finally, they reached the top, and Gwen collapsed on solid ground, on the far side of the Canyon. The second they did, the remaining ropes snapped, and what was left of the bridge plummeted down, hurling into the mist, into the depths of the Canyon.

Gwendolyn lay there, breathing hard, so grateful to be on solid ground again, wondering what just happened. The ground was freezing, covered in ice and snow, but nonetheless it was solid ground. She was off the bridge, and she was alive. They had made it. Thanks to Alistair.

Gwendolyn turned and looked over at Alistair with a new sense of wonder and respect. She was beyond grateful to have her by her side. She truly felt like the sister she'd never had, and Gwen had a feeling that she had not even begun to see the depth of Alistair's power.

Gwen had no idea how they would make it back to the mainland of the Ring when they were done here – *if* they were ever done, if they ever even found Argon and made it back. And as she peered into the wall of blinding snow ahead of her, the entry to the Netherworld, she had a sinking feeling that the hardest obstacles still lay before them.

Chapter Two

Reece stood on the Eastern Crossing of the Canyon, clutching onto the stone railing of the bridge, and looking down over the precipice in horror. He could hardly breathe. He still could not believe what he had just witnessed: the Destiny Sword, lodged in a boulder, plummeting over the edge, tumbling end over end, and being swallowed by the mist.

He had waited and waited, expecting to hear the crash, to feel the tremor beneath his feet. But to his shock, the noise never came. Was the Canyon indeed bottomless? Were the rumors true?

Finally, Reece let go of the railing, his knuckles white, released his breath, and turned and looked at his fellow Legion. They all stood there – O'Connor, Elden, Conven, Indra, Serna, and Krog – also looking over, aghast. The seven of them stood frozen in place, none able to comprehend what had just happened. The Destiny Sword; the legend they had all grown up with; the most important weapon in the world; the property of kings. And the only thing left keeping the Shield up.

It had just slipped from their grasp, descended into oblivion.

Reece felt he had failed. He felt he had let down not just Thor, but the entire Ring. Why couldn't they have gotten there just a few minutes sooner? Just a few more feet, and he would have saved it.

Reece turned and looked at the far side of the Canyon, the Empire side, and braced himself. With the Sword gone, he expected the Shield to lower, expected all the Empire soldiers lined up on the other side to suddenly stampede and cross into the Ring. But a curious thing happened: as he watched, none of them entered the bridge. One of them tried, and was eviscerated.

Somehow, the Shield was still up. He did not understand.

"It makes no sense," Reece said to the others. "The Sword has left the Ring. How can the Shield still be up?"

"The Sword has not left the Ring," O'Connor suggested. "It has not crossed yet to the other side of the Ring. It has fallen straight down. It is stuck between two worlds."

"Then what becomes of the Shield if the Sword is neither here nor there?" Elden asked.

They all looked at each other in wonder. No one held the answer; this was unexplored territory.

"We can't just walk away," Reece said. "The Ring is safe with the Sword on our side – but we don't know what will happen if the Sword lingers below."

"As long as it is not in our grasp, we don't know if it can end up on the other side," Elden added, agreeing.

"It is not a chance we can take," Reece said. "The fate of the Ring rests on it. We cannot return empty-handed, as failures."

Reece turned and looked at the others, decided.

"We must retrieve it," he concluded. "Before someone else does."

"Retrieve it?" Krog asked, aghast. "Are you a fool? How exactly do you plan to do that?"

Reece turned and stared down Krog, who stared back, defiant as always. Krog had become a real thorn in Reece's side, defying his command at every turn, challenging him for power at every corner. Reece was losing patience with him.

"We will do it," Reece insisted, "by descending to the bottom of the Canyon."

The others gasped, and Krog raised his hands to his hips, grimacing.

"You are mad," he said. "No one has ever descended to the bottom of the Canyon."

"Nobody knows if there even *is* a bottom," Serna chimed in. "For all we know the Sword descended into a cloud, and is still descending as we speak."

"Nonsense," Reece countered. "Everything must have a floor. Even the sea."

"Well, even if the bottom does exist," Krog retorted, "what good does it do us if it so far down that we can neither see nor hear it? It could take us days to reach it – *weeks*."

"Not to mention, it's hardly a leisurely hike," Serna said. "Have you not seen the cliffs?"

Reece turned and surveyed the cliffs, the ancient rock walls of the canyon, partially concealed in the swirling mists. They were straight, vertical. He knew they were right; it would not be easy. Yet he also knew that they had no choice.

“It gets worse,” Reece retorted. “Those walls are also slick with mist. And even if we do reach the bottom, we might not ever get back up.”

They all stared at him, puzzled.

“Then you yourself agree that it is madness to try,” Krog said.

“I agree it is madness,” Reece said, his voice booming with authority and confidence. “But madness is what we were born for. We are not mere men; we are not mere citizens of the Ring. We are a special breed: we are soldiers. We are warriors. We are men of the Legion. We took a vow, an oath. We vowed never to shy from a quest because it is too difficult or dangerous, never to hesitate though an endeavor may cause personal harm. It is for the weak to hide and cower – not for us. That is what *makes* us warriors. That is the very essence of valor: you embark on a cause bigger than yourself because it is the right thing to do, the honorable thing to do, even if it may be impossible. After all, it is not the achievement that makes something valorous, but the attempt of it. It is bigger than us. It is *who we are*.”

There came a heavy silence, as the wind whipped through and the others contemplated his words.

Finally, Indra stepped forward.

“I am with Reece,” she said.

“As am I,” Elden added, stepping forward.

“And I,” O’Connor added, stepping to Reece’s side.

Conven walked silently beside Reece, gripping the hilt of his sword, and turned and faced the others. “For Thorgrin,” he said, “I would go to the ends of the earth.”

Reece felt emboldened having his tried-and-true Legion members at his side, these people who had become as close to him as family, who had ventured with him to the ends of the Empire. The five of them stood there and stared back at the two new Legion members, Krog and Serna, and Reece wondered if they were going to join them. They could use the extra hands; but if they wanted to turn back, then so be it. He would not ask twice.

Krog and Serna stood there, staring back, unsure.

“I am a woman,” Indra said to them, “as you have mocked me before. And yet here I stand, ready for a warrior’s challenge – while there you are, with all your muscles, mocking and afraid.”

Serna grunted, annoyed, brushing back his long brown hair from his wide, narrow eyes and stepping forward.

“I will go,” he said, “but only for Thorgrin’s sake.”

Krog was the only one who stood there, red-faced, defiant.

“You are damn fools,” he said. “All of you.”

But still, he stepped forward, joining them.

Reece, satisfied, turned and led them to the Canyon’s edge. There was no more time to waste.

* * *

Reece clung to the side of the cliff as he inched his way down, the others several feet above him, all of them making the painful descent, as they had been for hours. Reece’s heart pounded as he scrambled to keep his footing, his fingers raw and numb with cold, his feet slipping on the slick rock. He had not anticipated it to be this hard. He had looked down and had studied the terrain, the shape of the rock, and had noticed that in some places, the rock went straight down, perfectly smooth, impossible to climb; in other places it was covered in a dense moss; and in still others, it had

a serrated slope, indents, holes, nooks, and crannies in which one could place one's feet and hands. He had even spotted the occasional ledge to rest on.

Yet the actual climbing had proved much harder than it had seemed. The mist perpetually obscured his view, and as Reece swallowed and looked down, he was having a harder and harder time finding footholds. Not to mention, even after all this time climbing, the bottom, if it even existed, remained out of sight.

Inwardly, Reece was feeling a mounting fear, a dryness in his throat. A part of him wondered if he had made a grave mistake.

But he dared not show his fear to the others. With Thor gone, he was their leader now, and he needed to set an example. He also knew that indulging his fears would not do him any good. He needed to stay strong and to stay focused; he knew that fear would only obscure his abilities.

Reece's hands were trembling as he got a hold of himself. He told himself he had to forget what lay below and concentrate just on what lay before him.

Just one step at a time, he told himself. He felt better thinking of it that way.

Reece found another foothold, and took another step down, then another, and found himself starting to get back into a rhythm.

"WATCH OUT!" someone yelled.

Reece braced himself as small pebbles suddenly showered down all around him, bouncing off his head and shoulders. He looked up to see a large rock come hurling down; he dodged and just missed it.

"Sorry!" O'Connor called down. "Loose rock!"

Reece's heart was pounding as he looked back down and tried to stay calm. He was dying to know where the bottom was; he reached over, grabbed a small rock which had landed on his shoulder, and, looking down, hurled it.

He watched, waiting to see if it made a noise.

It never did.

His foreboding deepened. There was still no sense of where the canyon ended. And with his hands and feet already trembling, he did not know if they could make it. Reece swallowed, all sorts of thoughts racing through his brain as he continued. What if Krog had been right? What if there really was no bottom? What if this was a reckless suicide mission?

As Reece took another step, scampering down several feet, gaining momentum again, suddenly he heard the sound of body scraping rock, and then heard someone cry out. There came a commotion beside him, and he looked over to see Elden, beginning to fall, slipping down past him.

Reece instinctively reached out a hand, and managed to grab Elden's wrist as he slipped past. Luckily Reece had a firm grip on the cliff with his other hand, and was able to hold Elden tightly, preventing him from sliding all the way down. Elden dangled, though, unable to find footing. Elden was too big and heavy, and Reece felt his strength slipping away.

Indra appeared, scaling down quickly, and reached out and grabbed Elden's other wrist. Elden scrambled, but could not find footing.

"I can't find a hold!" Elden screamed back, panic in his voice. He kicked wildly, and Reece feared that he would lose his own grip and go falling down with him. He thought quickly.

Reece recalled the rope and grappling hook O'Connor had shown him before their descent, the tool of choice they used to scale walls during a siege. *In case it comes in handy*, O'Connor had said.

"O'Connor, your rope!" Reece screamed. "Throw it down!"

Reece looked up and watched O'Connor pull the rope from his waist, lean back and impale the hook into a nook in the wall. He sank it in with all his might, tested it several times, then threw it down. The rope dangled past Reece.

It couldn't have come a moment sooner. Elden's slippery palm was sliding out of Reece's hand, and as he began to fall back, Elden reached out and grabbed the rope. Reece held his breath, praying it held.

It did. Elden slowly pulled himself up, until finally he found a strong footing. He stood on a ledge, breathing hard, back to his old balance. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, and so did Reece. It had been too close.

* * *

They climbed and climbed, until Reece did not know how much time had passed. The sky turned darker, and Reece dripped with sweat despite the cold, feeling as if any moment could be his last. His hands and feet shook violently, and the sound of his own breathing filled his ears. He wondered how much more of this he could take. He knew that if they did not find the bottom soon, they would all have to stop and rest, especially as night fell. But the problem was, there was nowhere to stop and rest.

Reece could not help but wonder, if they all became too exhausted, if the others might just begin to fall, one at a time.

There came a great clamor of rock, and then a small avalanche, tons of pebbles raining down, landing on Reece's head and face and eyes. His heart stopped as he heard a scream – a different one this time, a scream of death. Out of the corner of his eye he saw plummeting past him, almost faster than he could process, a body.

Reece reached out a hand to grab him, but it happened too fast. All he could do was turn and watch as he spotted Krog, airborne, flailing, shrieking, falling backward, straight down into nothingness.

Chapter Three

Kendrick sat astride his horse, beside Erec, Bronson, and Srog, out in front of his thousands of men as he faced down Tirus and the Empire. They had walked right into a trap. They had been sold out by Tirus, and Kendrick realized now, too late, that it had been a great mistake to trust him.

Kendrick looked up and to his right, and saw ten thousand Empire soldiers high on the ridge of the valley, arrows at the ready; to his left he saw just as many. Before them stood even more. Kendrick's few thousand men could never possibly outfight this number of soldiers. They would be slaughtered to even try. And with all those bows drawn, the slightest move would result in the massacre of his men. Geographically, being at the base of a valley, didn't help them either. Tirus had chosen his ambush location well.

As Kendrick sat there, helpless, his face burning with rage and indignation, he stared back at Tirus, who sat up high on his horse with a self-satisfied smile. Beside him sat his four sons, and beside them, an Empire commander.

"Is money that important to you?" Kendrick asked Tirus, hardly ten feet away, his voice as cold as steel. "Would you sell your own people, your own blood?"

Tirus showed no remorse; he smiled still wider.

"Your people are not my blood, remember?" he said. "That is why I am not, according to your laws, entitled to my brother's throne."

Erec cleared his throat in anger.

"The MacGil laws pass the throne to the son – not to the brother."

Tirus shook his head.

"All inconsequential now. Your laws no longer matter. Might always triumphs over law. It is those with might who dictate the law. And now as you can see, I am stronger. Which means, from now on, I write the law. Succeeding generations will remember none of your laws. All that they will remember is that I, Tirus, was King. Not you, and not your sister."

"Thrones taken illegitimately never last," Kendrick countered. "You may kill us; you may even convince Andronicus to grant you a throne. But you and I both know you won't rule for long. You'll be betrayed by the same treachery you instilled on us."

Tirus sat there, unfazed.

"Then I shall savor those brief days on my throne while they last – and I shall applaud the man that can betray me with as much skill as I used to betray you."

"Enough talk!" the Empire commanders yelled out. "Surrender now or your men will die!"

Kendrick stared back, furious, knowing he needed to surrender but not wanting to.

"Lay down your arms," Tirus said calmly, his voice reassuring, "and I will treat you fairly, as one warrior to another. You shall be my prisoners of war. I may not share your laws, but I do honor the battle code of a warrior. I promise you, you shall not be harmed under my watch."

Kendrick looked over at Bronson, at Srog, and at Erec, who glanced back at him. All of them sat there, proud warriors each, horses prancing beneath them, silent.

"Why should we trust you?" Bronson called out to Tirus. "You who have already proven that your word means nothing. I am of a mind to die here on the battlefield, just to wipe that smug smile off your face."

Tirus turned and scowled at Bronson.

"You speak though you are not even a MacGil. You are a McCloud. You have no right interfering in MacGil business."

Kendrick came to the defense of his friend: "Bronson is as much a MacGil now as any of us. He speaks with the voice of our men."

Tirus gritted his teeth, clearly annoyed.

“The choice is yours. Look all about you and see our thousands of archers at the ready. You have been outwitted. If you even reach for your swords, your men will fall dead on the spot. Surely even you can see that. There are times to fight, and times to surrender. If you want to protect your men, you will do what any good commander would do. Lay down your arms.”

Kendrick clenched his jaw several times, burning up inside. As much as he hated to admit it, he knew Tirus was correct. He glanced about and knew in an instant that most if not all of his men would die here if they tried to fight. As much as he wanted to fight, it would be the selfish choice; and as much as he despised Tirus, he sensed he was telling the truth and that his men would not be harmed. As long as they lived, they could always fight another day, in some other place, on some other battlefield.

Kendrick looked over at Erec, a man he had fought with countless times, the champion of the Silver, and knew he was thinking the same thing. It was different to be a leader than to be a warrior: a warrior could fight with reckless abandon, but a leader had to think of others first.

“There is a time for arms, and a time for surrender,” Erec called out. “We will take you for your word as a warrior that our men shall be unharmed, and on that condition, we will lay down our arms. But if you violate your word, God rest your soul, I will come back from hell to avenge each and every one of my men.”

Tirus nodded, satisfied, and Erec reached out and dropped his sword and scabbard down to the ground. They landed with a clang.

Kendrick followed, as did Bronson and Srog, each of them reluctant but knowing it was the wise course.

Behind them came the clash of thousands of weapons, all falling through the air and landing on the winter ground, all the Silver and MacGils and Silesians surrendering.

Tirus smiled wide.

“Now dismount,” he commanded.

One at a time, they dismounted, standing before their horses.

Tirus grinned, reveling in his victory.

“For all those years I was exiled to the Upper Isles, I envied King’s Court, my elder brother, all of his power. But now which MacGil holds all the power?”

“The power of treachery is no power at all,” Bronson said back.

Tirus scowled and nodded to his men.

They rushed forward and bound each of their wrists with coarse ropes. They all began to get dragged away, thousands of them captive.

As Kendrick was being pulled, he suddenly recalled his brother, Godfrey. They had all set off together, yet he had not seen him or his men anywhere since. He wondered if somehow he had managed to escape? He prayed that he would find a better fate than they. Somehow, he was optimistic.

With Godfrey, one never knew.

Chapter Four

Godfrey rode out in front of his men, flanked by Akorth, Fulton, and his Silesian general, and riding beside the Empire commander whom he had paid off liberally. Godfrey rode with a wide smile on his face, more than satisfied as he looked over and saw the division of Empire men, several thousand strong, riding alongside them, joining his cause.

He reflected with satisfaction on the payoff he had given them, the endless bags of gold, recalled the looks on their faces, and was elated that his plan had worked. He hadn't been sure of it up until the last moment, and for the first time, he breathed easy. There were many ways to win a battle, after all, and he had just won one without shedding a drop of blood. Perhaps that didn't make him as chivalrous or bold as the other warriors. But, still, it made him successful. And at the end of the day, wasn't that the goal? He would rather keep all his men alive with a little bit of bribery than see half of them killed in some reckless act of chivalry. That was just him.

Godfrey had worked hard to achieve what he had. He'd used all of his black-market connections through the brothels, back alleys, and taverns in order to find out who had been sleeping with whom, which brothels the Empire commanders frequented in the Ring, and which Empire commander was open to being paid off. Godfrey had deeper illicit contacts than most – indeed, he had spent his entire life accumulating them – and now they had come in handy. It had also not hurt that he had paid each of his contacts off well. Finally, he had put his daddy's gold to good use.

Still, Godfrey had not been sure if they were reliable, not until the last moment. There was no one to sell you out like a thief, and he'd had to take the chance that he was being had. He knew it was a coin toss, that these people were only as reliable as the gold they were paid. But he'd paid them with very, very fine gold, and they had turned out to be more reliable than he thought.

Of course, he had no idea how long this division of Empire troops would remain loyal. But at least they had wormed their way out of one battle, and for now, had them at their side.

"I was wrong about you," came a voice.

Godfrey turned to see the Silesian general coming up beside him with a look of admiration.

"I doubted you, I must admit," he continued. "I apologize. I could not have imagined the plan you had up your sleeve. It was ingenious. I won't question you again."

Godfrey smiled back, feeling vindicated. All the generals, all the military types, had doubted him his whole life. In his father's court, a court of warriors, he had always been looked upon with disdain. Now, finally, they were seeing that he, in his own way, could be as competent as them.

"Don't worry," Godfrey said. "I question myself. I am learning as I go. I am not a commander, and I have no master plan other than to survive any way I can."

"And where to now?" the general asked.

"To join with Kendrick, Erec, and the others, and do what we can to abet their cause."

They rode, the thousands of them, an awkward and uneasy alliance between the Empire men and Godfrey's, charging up and down hills, across long, dry, dusty plains, heading to the valley where Kendrick had told them to rendezvous.

As they rode, a million thoughts raced through Godfrey's mind. He wondered how Kendrick and Erec had fared; he wondered how outnumbered they would be; and he wondered how he would fare in the next battle, a *real* battle. There was no more avoiding it; he had no more tricks up his sleeve, no more gold.

He gulped, nervous. He felt that he did not have the same level of courage that all the others seemed to have, that they all seemed to be born with. Everyone else seemed so fearless in battle, and even in life. But Godfrey had to admit he was afraid. When it came down to it, to the thick of battle, he knew he would not shirk. But he was clumsy and awkward; he did not have the skills of the others, and he just didn't know how many times he would be saved by the gods of luck.

The others didn't seem to care if they died – they all seemed too willing to give their lives for glory. Godfrey appreciated glory. But he loved life more. He loved his ale, and loved his food, and even now, he felt a growling in his stomach, an urge to be back in the safety of a tavern somewhere. A life of battle was just not for him.

But Godfrey thought of Thor, out there somewhere, captive; he thought of all his kin fighting for the cause, and he knew this was where his honor, as sullied as it might be, compelled him to be.

They rode and rode and, finally, all crested a peak and were afforded a sweeping view of the valley spread out below. They came to a halt, and Godfrey squinted into the blinding sun, trying to adjust, to make sense of the sight before him. He raised one hand to shield his eyes and looked out, confused.

Then, to his dread, all became clear. Godfrey's heart stopped: down below, thousands of Kendrick's and Erec's and Srog's men were being dragged away, bound as captives. This was the fighting force he was supposed to meet up with. They were completely surrounded, by ten times as many Empire soldiers. They were on foot, wrists bound, all taken prisoner, all being led away. Godfrey knew Kendrick and Erec would never surrender unless there had been good reason. It looked as if they had been set up.

Godfrey froze, struck with panic. He wondered how this could have happened. He had been expecting to find them all in the heat of a well-matched battle, had expected to charge in and join forces with them. But now, instead, they were disappearing into the horizon, already a good half-day's ride away.

The Empire general rode up beside Godfrey and scoffed.

"It seems your men have lost," the Empire general said. "That wasn't part of our deal."

Godfrey turned to him, and saw how anxious the general seemed to be.

"I paid you well," Godfrey said, nervous but mustering his most confident voice as he felt his deal falling apart. "And you promised to join me in my cause."

But the Empire general shook his head.

"I promised to join you in battle – not on a suicide mission. My few thousand men will not go up against an entire battalion of Andronicus'. Our deal has changed. You can fight them on your own – and I'm keeping your gold."

The Empire general turned and screamed as he kicked his horse and took off in the other direction, his men following on his heels. They soon disappeared down on the other side of the valley.

"He has our gold!" Akorth said. "Should we pursue him?"

Godfrey shook his head as he watched them ride off.

"And what good would that do? Gold is gold. I'm not going to risk our lives for it. Let him go. There is always more."

Godfrey turned and watched the horizon, the disappearing group of Kendrick's and Erec's men, which he cared more about. Now he was without backup, and was even more isolated than before. He felt his plans crumbling all around him.

"Now what?" Fulton asked.

Godfrey shrugged.

"I have no idea," he said.

"You're not supposed to say that," Fulton said. "You're a commander now."

But Godfrey merely shrugged again. "I speak the truth."

"This warrior stuff is hard," Akorth said, scratching his belly as he removed his helmet. "It doesn't seem to quite work out as you expect, does it?"

Godfrey sat there on his horse, shaking his head, pondering what to do. He'd been dealt a hand he had not expected, and he had no contingency plan.

"Should we turn back?" Fulton asked.

"No," Godfrey heard himself say, surprising even himself.

The others turned and looked at him, shocked. Others huddled closer to hear his command.

“I may not be a great warrior,” Godfrey said, “but those are my brothers out there. They are being taken away. We cannot turn back. Even if it means our deaths.”

“Are you mad?” the Silesian general asked. “All of those fine warriors of the Silver, of the MacGils, of the Silesians – *all* of them, and they could not fight back the Empire’s men. How do you think a few thousand of our men, under *your* command, will do it?”

Godfrey turned to him, annoyed. He was tired of being doubted.

“I never said we would win,” he countered. “I say only that it is the right thing to do. I will not abandon them. Now if you want to turn around and go home, feel free. I will attack them myself.”

“You are an inexperienced commander,” he said, scowling. “You know not of what you speak. You will lead all these men to certain death.”

“I am,” Godfrey said. “That is true. But you promised not to doubt me again. And I won’t be turning around.”

Godfrey rode several feet forward and up an elevation so that he could be seen by all his men.

“MEN!” he called out, his voice booming. “I know you don’t know me as a tried-and-true commander, as you do Kendrick or Erec or Srog. And it is true, I do not have their skills. But I have heart, at least on occasion. And so do you. What I know is that those are our brothers out there, captured. And I myself would rather not live than live to see them taken away before our eyes, than go back home like dogs to our cities and await the Empire to come and kill us, too. Be sure of it: they will kill us one day. We can all go down now, on our feet, fighting, chasing the enemy as free men. Or we can go down in shame and dishonor. The choice is yours. Ride with me, and live or not, you will ride to glory!”

There came a shout from his men, one so enthusiastic that it surprised Godfrey. They all raised their swords high into the air, and it gave him courage.

It also made Godfrey realize the reality of what he just said. He had not really thought through his words before saying them; he just got swept up in the moment. Now he realized he was committed to it, and he was a little shocked by his own words. His own bravery was daunting to even him.

As the men pranced on their horses, prepared their arms, and got ready for their final charge, Akorth and Fulton came up alongside him.

“Drink?” Akorth asked.

Godfrey looked down and saw him reaching out with a skin of wine, and he snatched it from Akorth’s hand; he threw his head back and drank and drank, until he had nearly drunk the whole thing, barely stopping to catch his breath. Finally, Godfrey wiped the back of his mouth and handed it back.

What have I done? he wondered. He had committed himself, and the others, to a battle he could not win. Had he been thinking clearly?

“I didn’t think you had it in you,” Akorth said, patting him roughly on the back as he belched. “Quite a speech. Better than theater!”

“We should have sold tickets!” Fulton chimed in.

“I guess you’re not half wrong,” Akorth said. “Better to die on our feet than on our backs.”

“Although on our backs might not be half bad, if it’s in a brothel bed,” Fulton added.

“Hear hear!” Fulton said. “Or how about dying with a mug of ale in our arms and our heads tilted back!”

“That would be fine indeed,” Akorth said, drinking.

“But after a while I suppose, it would all get boring,” Fulton said. “How many mugs can one man drink, how many women can one man bed?”

“Well, a lot, if you think about it rightly,” Akorth said.

“Even so, I suppose it might be fun to die a different way. Not as boring.”

Akorth sighed.

“Well, if we survive all this, at least it would give us cause to *really* have a drink. For once in our lives, we will have earned it!”

Godfrey turned away, trying to tune out Akorth and Fulton’s perpetual chatter. He needed to concentrate. The time had come for him to become a man, to leave behind witty banter and tavern jokes; to make *real* decisions that affected *real* men in the *real* world. He felt a heaviness about him; he could not help but wonder if this was as his father had felt. In some strange way, as much as he hated the man, he was beginning to sympathize with his father. And maybe even, to his own horror, to become like him.

Forgetting the danger before him, Godfrey was overcome with a surge of confidence. He suddenly kicked his horse and with a battle cry, raced headlong down the valley.

Behind him came the immediate battle cry of thousands, and their horses’ steps filled his ears as they charged behind him.

Godfrey already felt light-headed, the wind in his hair, the wine going to his head, as he raced towards a certain death, and wondered what in the world he had gotten himself into.

Chapter Five

Thor sat atop his horse, his father at his side, McCloud on his other, and Rafi close by. Behind them sat tens of thousands of Empire soldiers, the main division of Andronicus' army, well-disciplined and patiently awaiting Andronicus' command. They all sat atop a ridge, looking up at the Highlands, their peaks covered in snow. Atop the Highlands sat the McCloud city, Highlandia, and Thor tensed up as he watched thousands of troops exit the city and ride towards them, preparing for battle.

These were not MacGil men; nor were they Empire soldiers. They wore an armor Thor dimly recognized; but as he tightened his grip on his new sword's hilt, he was not sure exactly who they were, or why they were attacking.

"McClouds. My former men," McCloud explained to Andronicus. "All good McCloud soldiers. All men I once trained and fought with."

"But now they have turned against you," Andronicus observed. "They charge to meet you in battle."

McCloud scowled, missing an eye, half his face branded with the Empire seal, looking grotesque.

"I am sorry, my lord," he said. "It is not my fault. It is the work of my boy, Bronson. He turned my own people against me. If it weren't for him, they would all be joining me right now in your great cause."

"It is not because of your boy," Andronicus corrected, steel in his voice, turning towards him. "It is because you are a weak commander and a weaker father. The failure in your son is the failure in you. I should have known you'd be unable to control your own men. I should have killed you long ago."

McCloud gulped, nervous.

"My lord, you might also consider that they are not just fighting against me, but against you. They want to rid the Ring of the Empire."

Andronicus shook his head, fingering his necklace of shrunken heads.

"But you are on my side now," he said. "So to fight against me is to fight against you, too."

McCloud drew his sword, scowling down at the approaching army.

"I'll fight and kill each and every one of my own men," he declared.

"I know you will," Andronicus said. "If you don't, I will kill you myself. Not that I need your help. My men will do far more damage than you can ever dream – especially when led by my own son, Thornicus."

Thor sat on his horse, dimly hearing all of their conversations, yet at the same time not hearing any of it. He was in a daze. His mind swarmed with foreign thoughts he did not recognize, thoughts that pulsed through his brain and continually reminded him of the allegiance he owed his father, of his duty to fight for the Empire, of his destiny as the son of Andronicus. The thoughts swirled in his mind relentlessly, and as much as he tried, he was unable to clear his mind, to think thoughts of his own. It was as if had been taken hostage within his own body.

As Andronicus spoke, each of his words became a suggestion in Thor's mind, then a command. Then somehow, they became his own thoughts. Thor struggled, some small part of him trying to rid his mind of these invasive feelings, to reach a point of clarity. But the more he struggled, the harder it became.

As he sat there on his horse, watching the incoming army galloping across the plains, he felt the blood in his veins flowing, and all he could think of was his loyalty to his father, his need to crush anyone who stood in his father's way. Of his destiny to rule the Empire.

"Thornicus, did you hear me?" Andronicus prodded. "Are you prepared to prove yourself in battle for your father?"

“Yes, my father,” Thor answered, staring straight ahead. “I battle anyone who battles you.”

Andronicus smiled wide. He turned and faced his men.

“MEN!” he boomed. “The time has come to face the enemy, to rid the Ring of its surviving rebels once and for all. We shall begin with these mccloud men who dare defy us. Thornicus, my son, will lead us in battle. You will follow him as you would follow me. You will give your life for him as you would for me. Betrayal to him is betrayal to me!”

“THORNICUS!” Andronicus screamed.

“THORNICUS!” came the echo of the chorus of ten thousand Empire troops behind them.

Thor, emboldened, raised his new sword high, the sword of the Empire, the one his beloved father had given him. He felt a power welling through it, the power of his bloodline, of his people, of all that he was meant to be. Finally he was back home, back with his father, once again. For his father, Thor would do anything. Even throw himself to death.

Thor let out a great battle cry as he kicked his horse and went charging down the valley, the first in battle. Behind him came a great battle cry, as tens of thousands of men followed, all of them prepared to follow Thornicus to their deaths.

Chapter Six

Mycoples sat curled up, tangled inside the immense Akron net, unable to stretch, to flap her wings. She sat at the helm of the Empire ship, and struggle as she did, she could not lift her chin, move her arms, expand her claws. She had never felt worse in her life, never felt such a lack of freedom, of strength. She was curled up in a ball, blinking slowly, despondent, more so for Thor than for herself.

Mycoples could sense Thor's energy, even from this great distance, even as her ship sailed across the sea, rolling up and down in the monstrous waves, her body rising and falling as waves crashed onto the deck. Mycoples could feel Thor changing, becoming someone else, not the man she once knew. Her heart broke. She could not help but feel as if somehow she had let him down. She tried to struggle once again, wanting so much to go to him, to save him. But she just could not break free.

A huge wave crashed on deck, and the foaming waters of the Tartuvian slipped beneath her net, making her slide and bang her head on the wooden hull. She cowered and snarled, not having the spirit or strength that she used to. She was resigned to her new fate, knowing she was being taken away to be killed, or worse, to live a life in captivity. She didn't care what became of her. She just wanted Thor to be okay. And she wanted a chance, just one last chance, for vengeance on her attackers.

"There she is! Slipped halfway across the deck!" one of the Empire soldiers yelled out.

Mycoples felt a sudden jabbing pain on the sensitive scales of her face, and she saw two Empire soldiers, with spears thirty feet long, prodding her at a safe distance through the net. She tried to lunge forward for them, but her constraints held her down. She snarled as they poked her again and again, laughing, clearly having fun.

"She's not so scary now, is she?" one asked the other.

The other laughed, jabbing his spear close to her eye. Mycoples moved away at the last second, sparing herself blindness.

"She's harmless as a fly," said one.

"I hear they're going to put her on display in the new Empire capitol."

"That's not what I heard," said the other. "I heard they're going to pry off her wings and torture her for all the harm she did our men."

"I wish I'd be there to see that."

"Do we really need to deliver her intact?" one asked.

"Orders."

"But I don't see why we can't at least maim her a little. After all, she doesn't really need both eyes, does she?"

The other laughed.

"Well now that you put it that way, I guess not," he answered. "Go for it. Have fun."

One of the men came closer and raised a spear high.

"Hold still now, little girl," the soldier said.

Mycoples flinched, helpless as the soldier came charging forward, preparing to plunge his long spear into her eye.

Suddenly, another wave crashed over the bow; the water took out the legs of the soldier, and he went sliding right for her face, eyes open wide in terror. In a huge burst of effort, Mycoples managed to lift one claw just high enough to allow the soldier to slip beneath her; as he did, she brought it down on him and pinned it through his throat.

He shrieked and blood spilled everywhere, mixing with water, as he died beneath her. Mycoples felt some small satisfaction.

The remaining Empire soldier turned and ran, screaming for help. Within moments, a dozen Empire soldiers approached, all bearing long spears.

"Kill the beast!" one of them screamed.

They all approached to kill her, and Mycoples felt certain that they would.

Mycoples felt a sudden rage burn through her, unlike anything she'd ever felt. She closed her eyes and prayed to God to give her one final burst of strength.

Slowly, she felt a great heat rise within her belly and travel down her throat. She lifted her mouth and let out a roar. To her surprise, a slew of flames poured out.

The flames traveled through the net, and though not destroying the Akron, still a wall of fire engulfed the dozen men coming at her.

They all shrieked as their bodies went up in flames; most collapsed on deck, and those that didn't die instantly ran and jumped overboard into the sea. Mycoples smiled.

Dozens more soldiers appeared, these wielding clubs, and Mycoples tried to summon the fire again.

But this time it did not work. God had answered her prayers, and had given her a one-time grace. But now, there was no more she could do. She was grateful, at least, for what she'd had.

Dozens of soldiers descended on her, beating her with clubs, and slowly, Mycoples felt herself sinking down, lower and lower, eyes closing. She curled herself up tight, resigned, wondering if her time on this world had come to an end.

Soon, her world was filled with blackness.

Chapter Seven

Romulus stood at the helm of his massive ship, the hull painted black and gold and waving the flag of the Empire, a lion with an eagle in its mouth, flapping boldly in the wind. He stood there with hands on hips, his wide muscular frame even wider, as if rooted to the deck, and stared out at the rolling, luminescent waves of the Ambrek. In the distance, just coming into view, was the shore of the Ring.

Finally.

Romulus' heart soared with anticipation as he laid eyes on the Ring for the first time. On his ship sailed his finest hand-picked men, several dozen of them, and behind them sailed thousands of the finest Empire ships there were. A vast armada, filling the sea, all sailing the banner of the Empire. They had sailed a long way, circling the Ring, determined to land on the McCloud side. Romulus planned to enter the Ring by himself, sneak up on his old boss, Andronicus, and assassinate him when he was least expecting it.

He smiled at the thought. Andronicus had no idea of the might or cunning of his number two in command, and he was about to learn the hard way. He never should have underestimated him.

Huge waves rolled past, and Romulus reveled in the cold spray on his face. In his arm he clutched the magical cloak he had obtained in the forest, and he felt it was going to work, was going to get him across the Canyon. He knew that when he put it on, he would be invisible, able to penetrate the shield, to cross into the Ring alone. His mission would require stealth and cunning and surprise. His men couldn't follow, of course, but he didn't need any of them: once he was in, he would find Andronicus's men – Empire men – and rally them to his cause. He would divide them and create his own army, his own civil war. After all, the Empire soldiers loved Romulus as much as they did Andronicus. He would use Andronicus' own men against him.

Romulus would then find a MacGil, bring him back across the Canyon, as the cloak demanded, and if the legend was true, the Shield would be destroyed. With the Shield down, he would summon all of his men, and his entire fleet would pour inside and they would all crush the Ring for good. Then, finally, Romulus would be sole ruler of the universe.

He breathed deep. He could almost taste it now. He had been fighting his entire life for this moment.

Romulus gazed up at the blood-red sky, the second sun setting, a huge ball on the horizon, glowing a light blue this time of day. It was the time of day that Romulus prayed to his gods, the God of the Land, the God of the Sea, the God of the Sky, the God of the Wind – and most of all, the God of War. He knew he needed to appease them all. He was prepared: he had brought many slaves to sacrifice, knowing their spilled blood would lend him power.

The waves crashed all around him as they neared shore. Romulus did not wait for the others to lower the ropes but rather leapt off the hull as soon as the bow touched sand, falling a good twenty feet, and landing on his feet, up to his waist in the water. He didn't even flinch.

Romulus sauntered onto the shore as if he owned it, his footprints heavy in the sand. Behind him, his men lowered the ropes and all began to filter off the ship, as one boat after another landed.

Romulus surveyed all of his work, and he smiled. The sky was growing dark, and he had reached shore at the perfect moment to present a sacrifice. He knew he had the gods to thank for this.

He turned and faced his men.

“FIRE!” Romulus screamed out.

His men scurried to build a huge bonfire, fifteen feet high, a massive pile of wood ready, waiting to be lit, spread out and shaped in the form a three-pointed star.

Romulus nodded, and his men dragged forward a dozen slaves, bound to each other. They were tied up along the wood of the bonfire, their ropes secured to it. They stared back, wide-eyed with

panic. They screamed and thrashed, terrified, seeing the torches at the ready and realizing they were about to be burned alive.

“NO!” one of them screamed. “Please! I beg you! Not this. Anything but this!”

Romulus ignored them. Instead, he turned his back on everyone, took several steps forward, opened his arms wide, and craned his neck up to the skies.

“OMARUS!” he cried out. “Give us the light to see! Accept my sacrifice tonight. Be with me on my journey into the Ring. Give me a sign. Let me know if I will succeed!”

Romulus lowered his hands, and as he did, his men rushed forward and threw their torches onto the wood.

Horrific screams rose up, as all the slaves were burned alive. Sparks flew out everywhere, as Romulus stood there, face aglow, watching the spectacle.

Romulus nodded, and his men brought forward an old woman, her eyes missing, her face wrinkled, her body curled up. Several men carried her forward in a chariot, and she leaned forward towards the flames. Romulus watched her, patient, awaiting her prophecy.

“You will succeed,” she said. “Unless you see the suns converge.”

Romulus smiled wide. Sun converge? That hadn’t happened in a thousand years.

He was elated, a warm feeling flooding his chest. That was all he needed to hear. The gods were with him.

Romulus grabbed his cloak, mounted his horse, and kicked it hard, beginning to gallop alone, across the sand, for the road that would lead to the Eastern Crossing, across the Canyon, and soon, into the very heart of the Ring itself.

Chapter Eight

Selese walked through the remnants of the battlefield, Illepra by her side, each of them going body to body, checking for signs of life. It had been a long, hard trek from Silesia, as the two of them stuck together, following the main body of the army and tending to the wounded and the dead. They forked off from the other healers and had become close friends, bonding through adversity. They naturally gravitated towards each other, each close in age, each resembling the other, and perhaps most importantly, each in love with a MacGil boy. Selese loved Reece, and Illepra, while she was loath to admit it, loved Godfrey.

They had done their best to keep up with the main body of the army, weaving in and out of fields and forests and muddy roads, constantly combing for MacGil wounded. Unfortunately, finding them did not prove hard; they filled with landscape in abundance. In some cases, Selese was able to heal them; but in too many cases, the best she and Illepra could do was patch their wounds, put them out of pain with their elixirs, and allow them a peaceful passing.

It was heartbreaking for Selese. Having been a healer in a small town her whole life, she had never dealt with anything on this scale or severity. She was used to handling minor scrapes, cuts, and wounds, or maybe the occasional Forsyth bite. But she was not used to such massive bloodshed and death, such severity of wounds and wounded. It saddened her profoundly.

In her profession, Selese yearned to heal people, and to see them well; yet ever since she had embarked from Silesia, she had seen nothing but an endless trail of blood. How could men do this to each other? These wounded were all sons to someone; fathers, husbands. How could mankind be so cruel?

Selese was even more heartbroken by her lack of ability to help each person she encountered. Her supplies were limited to what they could carry, and given their long trek, that wasn't much. The other healers of the kingdom were spread out, all over the Ring; they were an army in and of themselves, but they were stretched too thin, and supplies were too low. Without adequate wagons, horses, and a team of helpers, there was only so much she could transport.

Selese closed her eyes and breathed deeply as she walked, seeing the faces of the wounded flash before her. Too many times she had tended a mortally wounded soldier crying out in pain, had watched his eyes glaze over, and given him Blatox. It was an effective painkiller, and an effective tranquilizer. But it would not heal a festering wound, nor stop infection. Without all of her supplies, it was the best she could do. It made her want to cry and scream at the same time.

Selese and Illepra each knelt over a wounded soldier, a few feet away from each other, each busy suturing a wound with a needle and thread. Selese had been forced to use this needle one too many times, and she wished she had a clean one. But she had no choice. The soldier cried out in pain as she stitched a long vertical wound in his bicep that did not seem to want to stay closed, continually seeping. Selese pressed one palm down, trying to staunch the blood flow.

But it was a losing battle. If only she had gotten to this soldier a day go, all would have been fine. But now his arm was green. She was staving off the inevitable.

"You're going to be just fine," Selese said down to him.

"No I'm not," he said, staring up at her with a look of death. Selese had seen that look one too many times already. "Tell me. Will I die?"

Selese took a deep breath and held it. She did not know how to reply. She hated to be dishonest. But she could not bear to tell him.

"Our fates are in our makers' hands," she said. "It is never too late for any of us. Drink," she said, taking a small vial of Blatox from the satchel of potions at her waist, putting it to his lips and stroking his forehead.

His eyes rolled back, and he sighed, peaceful for the first time.

“I feel good,” he said.

Moments later, his eyes closed.

Selese felt a tear roll down her cheek, and quickly wiped it away.

Illepra finished with her wounded, and they each got up, weary, and continued walking down the endless trail together, passing corpse after corpse. They headed, inevitably, east, following the main body of the army.

“Are we even doing anything here?” Selese finally asked, after a long silence.

“Of course,” Illepra answered.

“It doesn’t seem that way,” Selese said. “We have saved so few, and lost so many.”

“And what of those few?” Illepra countered. “Are they not worth anything?”

Selese thought.

“Of course they are,” she said. “But what about the others?”

Selese closed her eyes and tried to imagine them; but they were just a blur faces now.

Illepra shook her head.

“You think in the wrong way. You are a dreamer. Too naïve. You cannot save everyone. We did not start this war. We only pick up after it.”

They continued to walk in silence, trekking ever further east, past fields of bodies. Selese was happy, at least, for Illepra’s company. They had provided each other company and solace, and had shared expertise and remedies along the way. Selese was astounded by Illepra’s wide range of herbs, ones she had never encountered; Illepra, in turn, was continually surprised by the unique salves Selese had discovered in her small village. They complemented each other well.

As they marched, scanning the dead once again, Selese’s thoughts drifted to Reece. Despite everything all around her, she could not get him from her mind. She had traveled all the way to Silesia just to find him, to be with him. But the fates had split them apart too soon, this stupid war pulling them in two different directions. She wondered with every passing moment if Reece was safe. She wondered where, exactly, in the battlefield he was. And with each corpse she passed, she quickly glanced at the face with a sense of dread, hoping and praying it was not Reece. Her stomach clenched with each body she approached, until she turned it over and saw the face and saw it was not him. With each one, she sighed with relief.

Yet with every step she took she was on edge, always feared she would find him with the wounded – or worse, the dead. She did not know she could go on if she did.

She was determined to find him, dead or alive. She had journeyed this far, and she would not turn back until she knew his fate.

“I haven’t seen any signs of Godfrey,” Illepra said, kicking rocks as they went.

Illepra had spoken of Godfrey intermittently ever since they’d left, and it was obvious she was smitten by him, too.

“Nor have I,” Selese said.

It was a constant dialogue between the two of them, each smitten by the two brothers, Reece and Godfrey, two brothers who could not be more different from each other. Selese could not understand what Illepra saw in Godfrey, personally. He seemed to be just a drunkard to her, a silly man, not to be taken seriously. He was fun, and funny, and certainly witty. But he was not the vision of the man Selese wanted. Selese wanted a man who was sincere, earnest, intense. She yearned for a man who exhibited chivalry, honor. Reece was the one for her.

“I just don’t know how he could have survived all this,” Illepra said sadly.

“You love him, don’t you?” Selese asked.

Illepra reddened and turned away.

“I never said anything about love,” she said defensively. “I’m just concerned for him. He’s just a friend.”

Selese smiled.

“Is he? Then why do you not stop speaking of him?”

“Do I?” Illepra asked, surprised. “I hadn’t realized it.”

“Yes, constantly.”

Illepra shrugged and grew silent.

“I guess he got under my skin somehow. He makes me so mad sometimes. I’m constantly dragging him from the taverns. He promises me, every time, that he will never return. But he always does. It’s maddening, really. I’d thrash him if I could.”

“Is that why you’re so anxious to find him?” Selese asked. “To thrash him?”

Now it was Illepra’s turn to smile.

“Perhaps not,” she said. “Perhaps I want to give him a hug, too.”

They rounded a hill and came upon a soldier, a Silesian. He lay beneath a tree, moaning, his leg clearly broken. Selese could see it from here, with her expert eye. Nearby, tied to the tree, were two horses.

They rushed to his side.

As Selese set to tending his wounds, a deep gash in his thigh, she could not help but ask what she had asked every soldier she had encountered:

“Have you seen any of the royal family?” she asked. “Have you seen Reece?”

All the other soldiers had turned and shaken their heads and looked away, and Selese was so used to disappointment that she by now expected a negative answer.

But, to her surprise, this soldier nodded in the affirmative.

“I have not ridden with him, but I have seen him, yes, my lady.”

Selese’s eyes widened with excitement and hope.

“Is he alive? Is he hurt? Do you know where he is?” she asked, her heart quickening, clutching the man’s wrist.

He nodded.

“I do. He is on a special mission. To retrieve the Sword.”

“What sword?”

“Why, the Destiny Sword.”

She stared in awe. The Destiny Sword. The sword of legend.

“Where?” she asked, desperate. “Where is he?”

“He is gone to the Eastern Crossing.”

The Eastern Crossing, Selese thought. That was far, so far. There was no way they could make it on foot. Not at this pace. And if Reece was there, surely he was in danger. Surely, he needed her.

As she finished caring for the soldier, she looked over and noticed the two horses tied to the tree. Given this man’s broken leg, there was no way he could ride them. The two horses here would be useless to him. And soon enough, they would die if they were not taken care of.

The soldier saw her eyeing them.

“Take them, lady,” he offered. “I won’t be needing them.”

“But they are yours,” she said.

“I can’t ride them. Not like this. You’ll put them to use. Take them, and find Reece. It’s a long journey from here and you won’t make it on foot. You’ve helped me greatly. I won’t die here. I have food and water for three days. Men will come for me. Patrols come by here all the time. Take them and go.”

Selese clasped his wrist, overflowing with gratitude. She turned to Illepra, determined.

“I must go and find Reece. I’m sorry. There are two horses here. You can take the other anywhere you need to go. I need to cross the Ring, to go to the Eastern crossing. I’m sorry. But I must leave you.”

Selese mounted her horse, and was surprised as Illepra rushed forward and mounted the one beside her. Illepra reached out with her short sword and chopped the rope binding the horses to the tree.

She turned to Selese and smiled.

“Did you really think, after all we’ve been through, I would let you go alone?” she asked.

Selese smiled. “I guess not,” she answered.

The two of them kicked their horses, and they took off, racing down the road, heading ever further east, somewhere, Selese prayed, towards Reece.

Chapter Nine

Gwendolyn huddled low, lowering her chin against the wind and snow as she marched through an endless field of white, Alistair, Steffen and Aberthol beside her, Krohn at her feet. The five of them had been marching for hours, ever since they had crossed the Canyon and entered the Netherworld, and Gwen was exhausted. Her muscles ached and her stomach hurt, sharp pains shooting through her every now and again as the baby moved. It was a world of white, snow falling relentlessly, whipping into her eyes, the horizon offering no reprieve. There was nothing to break up the monotony of the landscape; Gwen felt as if she were walking to the very ends of the earth.

It had become even colder, too, and despite her furs, Gwendolyn felt the cold seeping into her bones. Her hands were already numb.

She looked over and saw the others shivering, too, all fighting against the cold, and she began to wonder if she had made a grave mistake coming here. Even if Argon were here, with no markers of any sort on the horizon, how could they ever find him? There was no trail, no path, and Gwen felt a sinking sense of desperation as she had no idea where they were all heading. All she knew was that they were heading away from the Canyon, ever farther north. Even if they found Argon, how could they ever free him? Could he even be freed?

Gwen felt as if she had journeyed to a place not meant for humans, a supernatural place meant for sorcerers and druids and mysterious forces of magic she did not understand. She felt as if she were trespassing.

Gwen felt another sharp pain in her stomach, and felt the baby turn within her again and again. This one was so intense she nearly lost her breath, and she stumbled for a moment.

She felt a reassuring hand grab her wrist and steady her.

“My lady, are you all right?” Steffen asked, quickly coming to her side.

Gwen closed her eyes, breathed deep, her eyes watery from the pain, and nodded back. She stopped a moment and placed a hand on her stomach and waited. Her baby clearly was not happy to be here. Neither was she.

Gwen stood there for a few moments, breathing deeply, until the pain finally passed. She wondered again if she had been wrong to venture here; but she thought of Thor, and her desire to save him trumped all else.

They began walking again, and as the pain subsided, Gwendolyn feared not only for her baby, but for the others, too. In these conditions, she did not know how long they could all last; she did not even know if they could turn back at this point. They were stuck. This was all uncharted territory, with no map, and no end in sight.

The sky was tinged with a purple light, everything tainted in amber and violet, making her feel even more disoriented. There was no sense of day or night here. Just an endless march into nothingness.

Aberthol had been right: this was truly another world, an abyss of snow and emptiness, the most desolate place she'd ever seen.

Gwendolyn paused for a moment to catch her breath and as she did, she felt a warm, reassuring hand on her stomach, and was surprised by the heat.

She turned to see Alistair standing beside her, laying a hand on her stomach, looking over at her with concern.

“You are with child,” she said. It was more a statement than a question.

Gwendolyn stared back at her, shocked that she knew, especially as her stomach still looked flat. She no longer had the strength to keep it a secret, though, and she nodded yes.

Alistair nodded back knowingly.

“How did you know?” Gwen asked.

But Alistair merely closed her eyes and breathed deep, keeping her palm on Gwen's stomach. Gwen was comforted by the feeling, and felt a healing warmth spread through her.

"A very powerful child," Alistair said, her eyes still closed. "He's scared. But not sick. He will be fine. I am taking away his fears now."

Gwendolyn felt waves of light and heat rushing through her. Soon, she felt entirely restored.

Gwen was overwhelmed with gratitude and love for Alistair; she felt inexplicably close to her.

"I don't know how to thank you," Gwendolyn said as she stood up, feeling almost normal again, as Alistair removed her hand.

Alistair lowered her head humbly.

"There is nothing to thank me for," she answered. "It is what I do."

"You did not tell me you were pregnant, my lady," Aberthol said sternly. "If I knew, I would have never advised this trip."

"My lady, I had no idea," Steffen said.

Gwendolyn shrugged, superstitious, not wanting all this attention on her baby.

"And who is the father?" Aberthol asked.

Gwen felt a deep sense of ambivalence as she said the word:

"Thorgrin."

Gwen felt torn. She felt waves of guilt for what she had done to Thor, for how they had said goodbye; she also felt mixed feelings about the child's lineage. She pictured Andronicus' face and shuddered.

Aberthol nodded.

"A most excellent lineage," he said. "You carry a warrior inside you."

"My lady, I would give my life to protect your child," Steffen said.

Krohn walked up, leaned his head into her stomach, and licked it several times, whining.

Gwen was overwhelmed by their kindness and felt supported.

Suddenly, Krohn turned and surprised them all by snarling viciously. He took several steps forward into the blinding snow, his hairs on-end. He peered into the snow, ignoring them.

Gwen and the others looked at each other, puzzled. Gwen peered into the snow but could see nothing. She had never heard Krohn snarl like that.

"What is it, Krohn?" she asked, nervous.

Krohn continued to snarl, inching forward, and Gwen, nervous, lowered her hand to the dagger at her waist as the others laid their hands on their weapons, too.

They waited and watched.

Finally, out of the blinding snow there emerged a dozen creatures. They were terrifying, entirely white, with huge yellow eyes and four long, yellow fangs, larger than wolves. They were bigger than Krohn, and each had two heads with long fangs, descending nearly a foot. They emitted a low, constant, vicious noise as they approached the group, spread out in a wide semi-circle.

"Lorks," Aberthol said with fear, stepping back.

Gwendolyn heard the distinctive ring of metal as Steffen drew his sword. Aberthol clutched his staff out before him with both hands, while Alistair just stood there, staring, intense. Gwendolyn clutched her dagger and held it tight, prepared to lay down her life to defend her baby.

Krohn wasted no time: with a snarl, he charged forward and initiated the attack. He leapt into the air and sank his fangs into the throat of a lork, and even though it was bigger, Krohn was determined and wrestled it down to the ground in a snarling match. The sounds were vicious as they rolled and rolled. Soon the snow stained red, and Gwen was relieved to see it was with the blood of the lork. Krohn pinned it down, victorious.

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