

RISE OF THE DRAGONS

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK #1)



MORGAN RICE

Kings and Sorcerers

Морган Райс

Rise of the Dragons

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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From #1 Bestselling author Morgan Rice comes a sweeping new epic fantasy series: "Rise of the Dragons" ("Kings and Sorcerers" – Book 1). Kyra, 15, dreams of becoming a famed warrior, like her father, even though she is the only girl in a fort of boys. As she struggles to understand her special skills, her mysterious inner power, she realizes she is different than the others. But a secret is being kept from her about her birth and the prophecy surrounding her, leaving her to wonder who she really is. When Kyra comes of age and the local lord comes to take her away, her father wants to wed her off to save her. Kyra, though, refuses, and she journeys out on her own, into a dangerous wood, where she encounters a wounded dragon – and ignites a series of events that will change the kingdom forever. 15 year old Alec, meanwhile, sacrifices for his brother, taking his place in the draft, and is carted off to The Flames, a wall of flames a hundred feet high that wards off the army of Trolls to the east. On the far side of the kingdom, Merk, a mercenary striving to leave behind his dark past, quests through the wood to become a Watcher of the Towers and help guard the Sword of Fire, the magical source of the kingdom's power. But the Trolls want the Sword, too – and they prepare for a massive invasion that could destroy the kingdoms forever. With its strong atmosphere and complex characters, "Rise of the Dragons" is a sweeping saga of knights and warriors, of kings and lords, of honor and valor, of magic, destiny, monsters and dragons. It is a story of love and broken hearts, of deception, of ambition and betrayal. It is fantasy at its finest, inviting us into a world that will live with us forever, one that will appeal to all ages and genders.

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Morgan Rice

Rise of the Dragons

*“Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”*

*– William Shakespeare
Julius Caesar*

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Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and of the new epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising two books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“If you thought that there was no reason left for living after the end of THE SORCERER'S RING series, you were wrong. In RISE OF THE DRAGONS Morgan Rice has come up with what promises to be another brilliant series, immersing us in a fantasy of trolls and dragons, of valor, honor, courage, magic and faith in your destiny. Morgan has managed again to produce a strong set of characters that make us cheer for them on every page....Recommended for the permanent library of all readers that love a well-written fantasy.”

*– Books and Movie Reviews
Roberto Mattos*

“RISE OF THE DRAGONS succeeds – right from the start.... A superior fantasy...It begins, as it should, with one protagonist's struggles and moves neatly into a wider circle of knights, dragons, magic and monsters, and destiny....All the trappings of high fantasy are here, from soldiers and battles to confrontations with self....A recommended winner for any who enjoy epic fantasy writing fueled by powerful, believable young adult protagonists.”

– *Midwest Book Review*

D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer

“[RISE OF THE DRAGONS] is a plot-driven novel that's easy to read in a weekend...A good start to a promising series.”

– *San Francisco Book Review*

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice's previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

– *The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the Dragons)*

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

– *Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)*

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

– *Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

“Rice's entertaining epic fantasy [THE SORCERER'S RING] includes classic traits of the genre – a strong setting, highly inspired by ancient Scotland and its history, and a good sense of court intrigue.”

– *Kirkus Reviews*

“I loved how Morgan Rice built Thor's character and the world in which he lived. The landscape and the creatures that roamed it were very well described... I enjoyed [the plot]. It was short and sweet....There were just the right amount of minor characters, so I didn't get confused. There were adventures and harrowing moments, but the action depicted wasn't overly grotesque. The book would be perfect for a teen reader... The beginnings of something remarkable are there...”

– *San Francisco Book Review*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old

Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king.... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

– *Publishers Weekly*

“[A QUEST OF HEROES] is a quick and easy read. The ends of chapters make it so that you have to read what happens next and you don’t want to put it down. There are some typos in the book and some names are messed up, but this does not distract from the overall story. The end of the book made me want to get the next book immediately and that is what I did. All nine of the Sorcerer’s Ring series can currently be purchased on the Kindle store and A Quest of Heroes is currently free to get you started! If you are looking for a something quick and fun to read while on vacation this book will do nicely.”

– *FantasyOnline.net*

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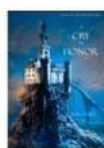
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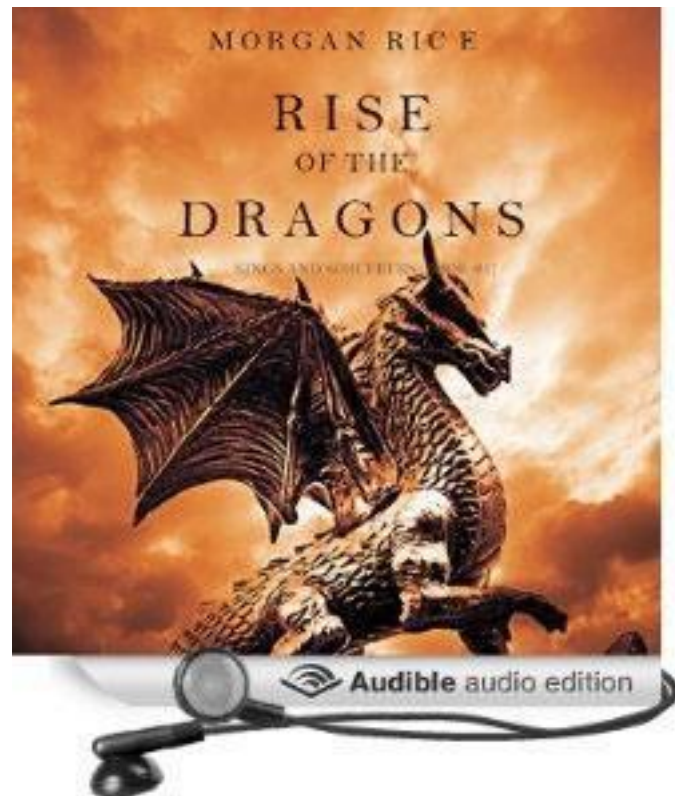


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Chapter One

Kyra stood atop the grassy knoll, the frozen ground hard beneath her boots, snow falling around her, and tried to ignore the biting cold as she raised her bow and focused on her target. She narrowed her eyes, shutting out the rest of the world – a gale of wind, the sound of a distant crow – and forced herself to see only the skinny birch tree, far-off, stark-white, standing out amidst the landscape of purple pine trees. At forty yards, this was just the sort of shot her brothers couldn't make, that even her father's men couldn't make – and that made her all the more determined – she being the youngest of the bunch, and the only girl amongst them.

Kyra had never fit in. A part of her wanted to, of course, wanted to do what was expected of her and spend time with the other girls, as was her place, attending to domestic affairs; but deep down, it was not who she was. She was her father's daughter, had a warrior's spirit, like he, and she would not be contained to the stone walls of their stronghold, would not succumb to a life beside a hearth. She was a better shot than these men – indeed, she could already outshoot her father's finest archers – and she would do whatever she had to to prove to them all – most of all, her father – that she deserved to be taken seriously. Her father loved her, she knew, but he refused to see her for who she was.

Kyra did her best training far from the fort, out here on the plains of Volis, alone – which suited her well, since she, the only girl in a fort of warriors, had learned to be alone. She had taken to retreating here every day, her favorite spot, high atop the plateau overlooking the fort's rambling stone walls, where she could find good trees, skinny trees hard to hit. The thwack of her arrows had become an ever-present sound echoing over the village; not a tree up here had been spared from her arrows, their trunks scarred, some trees already leaning.

Most of her father's archers, Kyra knew, took aim at the mice that covered the plains; when she had first started, she had tried that herself, and had found she could kill them quite easily. But that had sickened her. She was fearless, but sensitive, too, and killing a living thing with no purpose displeased her. She had vowed then that she would never take aim at a living thing again – unless it were dangerous, or attacking her, like the Wolfbats that emerged at night and flew too close to her father's fort. She had no qualms about dropping them, especially after her younger brother, Aidan, suffered a Wolfbat bite that left him ill for half a moon. Besides, they were the fastest moving creatures out there, and she knew that if she could hit one, especially at night, then she could hit anything. She had once spent an entire night by a full moon firing away from her father's tower, and had run out eagerly at sunrise, thrilled to see scores of Wolfbats littering the ground, her arrows still in them, villagers crowding around and looking with amazed faces.

Kyra forced herself to focus. She played through the shot in her mind's eye, seeing herself raising her bow, pulling it back quickly to her chin and releasing without hesitation. The real shooting, she knew, happened before the shot. She had witnessed too many archers her age, on their fourteenth year, draw their strings and waver – and she knew then that their shots were lost. She took a deep breath, raised her bow, and in one decisive motion, pulled back and released. She did not even need to look to know she had hit the tree.

A moment later she heard its thwack – but she had already turned away, already looking for another target, one further off.

Kyra heard a whining at her feet and she looked down at Leo, her wolf, walking beside her as he always did, rubbing against her leg. A full-grown wolf, nearly up to her waist, Leo was as protective of Kyra as Kyra was of him, the two of them an inseparable sight in her father's fort. Kyra could not go anywhere without Leo hurrying to catch up. And all that time he clung to her side – unless a squirrel or rabbit crossed his path, in which case he could disappear for hours.

"I didn't forget you, boy," Kyra said, reaching into her pocket and handing Leo the leftover bone from the day's feast. Leo snatched it, trotting happily beside her.

As Kyra walked, her breath emerging in mist before her, she draped her bow over her shoulder and breathed into her hands, raw and cold. She crossed the wide, flat plateau and looked out. From this vantage point she could see the entire countryside, the rolling hills of Volis, usually green but now blanketed in snow, the province of her father's stronghold, nestled in the northeastern corner of the kingdom of Escalon. From up here Kyra had a bird's-eye view of all the goings-on in her father's fort, the comings and goings of the village folk and warriors, another reason she liked it up here. She liked to study the ancient, stone contours of her father's fort, the shapes of its battlements and towers stretching impressively through the hills, seeming to sprawl forever. Volis was the tallest structure in the countryside, some of its buildings rising four stories and framed by impressive layers of battlements. It was completed by a circular tower on its far side, a chapel for the folk, but for her, a place to climb and look out at the countryside and be alone. The stone complex was ringed by a moat, spanned by a wide main road and an arched stone bridge; this, in turn, was ringed by layers of impressive outer embankments, hills, ditches, walls – a place befitting one of the King's most important warriors – her father.

Though Volis, the final stronghold before The Flames, was several days' ride from Andros, Escalon's capital, it was still home to many of the former King's famed warriors. It had also become a beacon, a place that had become home to the hundreds of villagers and farmers that lived in or near its walls, under its protection.

Kyra looked down at the dozens of small clay cottages nestled in the hills on the outskirts of the fort, smoke rising from chimneys, farmers hurrying to and fro as they prepared for winter, and for the night's festival. The fact that villagers felt safe enough to live outside the main walls, Kyra knew, was a sign of great respect for her father's might, and a sight unseen elsewhere in Escalon. After all, they were a mere horn sounding away from protection, from the instant rallying of all her father's men.

Kyra looked down at the drawbridge, always packed with throngs of people – farmers, cobblers, butchers, blacksmiths, along with, of course, warriors – all rushing from fort to countryside and back again. For within the fort's walls was not only a place to live and train, but also an endless array of cobblestone courtyards which had become a gathering place for merchants. Every day their stalls were lined up, people selling their wares, bartering, showing off the day's hunt or catch, or some exotic cloth or spice or candy traded from across the sea. The courtyards of the fort were always filled with some exotic smell, be it of a strange tea, or a cooking stew; she could get lost in them for hours. And just beyond the walls, in the distance, her heart quickened to see the circular training ground for her father's men, Fighter's Gate, and the low stone wall surrounding it, and she watched with excitement as his men charged in neat lines with their horses, trying to lance targets – shields hanging from trees. She ached to train with them.

Kyra suddenly heard a voice cry out, one as familiar to her as her own, coming from the direction of the gatehouse, and she turned, immediately on alert. There was a commotion in the crowd, and she watched as through the bustle, spilling out of the throng and out onto the main road, there emerged her younger brother, Aidan, led by her two older brothers, Brandon and Braxton. Kyra tensed, on guard. She could tell from the sound of distress in her baby brother's voice that their older brothers were up to no good.

Kyra's eyes narrowed as she watched her older brothers, feeling a familiar anger rise up within her and unconsciously tightening her grip on her bow. There came Aidan, marched between them, each taller by a foot, each grabbing his arm and dragging him unwillingly away from the fort and into the countryside. Aidan, a small, thin, sensitive boy, barely ten, looked extra vulnerable sandwiched between his two brothers, overgrown brutes of seventeen and eighteen. They all had similar features and coloring, with their strong jaws, proud chins, dark brown eyes, and wavy brown hair – though Brandon and Braxton wore theirs cropped short, while Aidan's still fell, unruly, past his eyes. They all looked alike – and none like her, with her light blonde hair and light gray eyes. Dressed in her woven tights, woolen tunic, and cloak, Kyra was tall and thin, too pale, she was told, with a broad

forehead and a small nose, blessed with striking features that had led more than one man to look twice. Especially now that she was turning fifteen, she noticed the looks increasing.

It made her uncomfortable. She did not like calling attention to herself, and she did not view herself as beautiful. She cared nothing for looks – only for training, for valor, for honor. She would rather have resembled her father, as her brothers did, the man she admired and loved more than anyone in the world, than have her dainty features. She always checked the mirror for something of himself in her eyes, yet no matter how hard she looked, she could not find it.

“I said, get *off* of me!” Aidan shouted, his voice carrying all the way up here.

At her baby brother’s call of distress, a boy who Kyra loved more than anyone in the world, she stood ramrod straight, like a lion watching its cub. Leo, too, stiffened, the hair rising on his back. With their mother long gone, Kyra felt obliged to watch over Aidan, to make up for the mother he never had.

Brandon and Braxton dragged him roughly down the road, away from the fort, on the lone country road toward the distant wood, and she saw them trying to get him to wield a spear, one too big for him. Aidan had become a too-easy target for them to pick on; Brandon and Braxton were bullies. They were strong and somewhat brave, but they had more bravado than real skills, and they always seemed to get into trouble they could not quite get out of themselves. It was maddening.

Kyra realized what was happening: Brandon and Braxton were dragging Aidan with them on one of their hunts. She spotted the sacks of wine in their hands and knew they’d been drinking, and she fumed. It was not enough that they were going to kill some senseless animal, but now they were dragging their younger brother along with them, despite his protests.

Kyra’s instincts kicked in and she leapt into action, running downhill to confront them, Leo running by her side.

“You’re old enough now,” Brandon said to Aidan.

“It’s past time you became a man,” Braxton said.

Bounding down the grass hills she knew by heart, it did not take Kyra long to catch up to them. She ran out onto the road and stopped before them, blocking their path, breathing hard, Leo beside her, and her brothers all stopped short, looking back, stunned.

Aidan’s face, she could see, fell in relief.

“Are you lost?” Braxton mocked.

“You’re blocking our way,” Brandon said. “Go back to your arrows and your sticks.”

The two of them laughed derisively, but she frowned, undeterred, as Leo, beside her, snarled.

“Get that beast away from us,” Braxton said, trying to sound brave but fear apparent in his voice as he tightened his grip on his spear.

“And where do you think you’re taking Aidan?” she asked, dead serious, looking back at them without flinching.

They paused, their faces slowly hardening.

“We’re taking him wherever we please,” Brandon said.

“He’s going on a hunt to learn to become a *man*,” Braxton said, emphasizing that last word as a dig to her.

But she would not give in.

“He’s too young,” she replied firmly.

Brandon scowled.

“Says who?” he asked.

“Says me.”

“And are you his mother?” Braxton asked.

Kyra flushed, filled with anger, wishing their mother was here now more than ever.

“As much as you are his father,” she replied.

They all stood there in the tense silence, and Kyra looked to Aidan, who looked back with scared eyes.

“Aidan,” she asked him, “is this something you wish to do?”

Aidan looked down at the ground, ashamed. He stood there, silent, avoiding her glance, and Kyra knew he was afraid to speak out, to provoke the disapproval of his older brothers.

“Well, there you have it,” Brandon said. “He doesn’t object.”

Kyra stood there, burning with frustration, wanting Aidan to speak up but unable to force him.

“It is unwise for you to bring him on your hunt,” she said. “A storm brews. It will be dark soon. The wood is filled with danger. If you want to teach him to hunt, take him when he’s older, on another day.”

They scowled back, annoyed.

“And what do you know of hunting?” Braxton asked. “What have you hunted beside those trees of yours?”

“Any of them bite you lately?” Brandon added.

They both laughed, and Kyra burned, debating what to do. Without Aidan speaking up, there wasn’t much she could do.

“You worry too much, sister,” Brandon finally said. “Nothing will happen to Aidan on our watch. We want to toughen him up a bit – not kill him. Do you really imagine you’re the only one who cares for him?”

“Besides, Father is watching,” Braxton said. “Do you want to disappoint him?”

Kyra immediately looked up over their shoulders, and high up, in the tower, she spotted her father standing at the arched, open-aired window, watching. She felt supreme disappointment in him for not stopping this.

They tried to brush past, but Kyra stood there, doggedly blocking their way. They looked as if they might shove her, but Leo stepped between them, snarling, and they thought better of it.

“Aidan, it’s not too late,” she said to him. “You don’t have to do this. Do you wish to return to the fort with me?”

She examined him and could see his eyes tearing, but she could also see his torment. A long silence passed, with nothing to break it up but the howling wind and the quickening snow.

Finally, he squirmed.

“I want to hunt,” he muttered half-heartedly.

Her brothers suddenly brushed past her, bumping her shoulder, dragging Aidan, and as they hurried down the road, Kyra turned and watched, a sickening feeling in her stomach.

She turned back to the fort and looked up at the tower, but her father was already gone.

Kyra watched as her three brothers faded from view, into the brewing storm, toward the Wood of Thorns, and she felt a pit in her stomach. She thought of snatching Aidan and bringing him back – but she did not want to shame him.

She knew she should let it go – but she could not. Something within her would not allow her to. She sensed danger, especially on the eve of the Winter Moon. She did not trust her elder brothers; they would not harm Aidan, she knew, but they were reckless, and too rough. Worst of all, they were overconfident in their skills. It was a bad combination.

Kyra could stand it no longer. If her father wouldn’t act, then she would. She was old enough now – she did not need to answer to anyone but herself.

Kyra burst into a jog, running down the lone country path, Leo by her side, and heading right for the Wood of Thorns.

Chapter Two

Kyra entered the gloomy Wood of Thorns, just west of the fort, a forest so thick one could barely see through it. As she walked through it slowly with Leo, snow and ice crunching beneath their feet, she looked up. She was dwarfed by the thorn trees that seemed to stretch forever. They were ancient black trees with gnarled branches resembling thorns, and thick, black leaves. This place, she felt, was cursed; nothing good ever came out of it. Her father's men returned from it injured from hunts, and more than once a troll, having broken through The Flames, had taken refuge here and used it as a staging ground to attack a villager.

As Kyra entered, immediately she felt a chill. It was darker in here, cooler, the air wetter, the smell of the thorn trees heavy in the air, smelling like decaying earth, and the massive trees blotting out what remained of daylight. Kyra, on guard, was furious at her older brothers. It was dangerous to venture here without the company of several warriors – especially at dusk. Every noise startled her. There came a distant cry of an animal, and she flinched, turning and looking for it. But the wood was dense, and she could not find it.

Leo, though, snarled beside her and suddenly bounded off after it.

“Leo!” she called out.

But he was already gone.

She sighed, annoyed; it was always his way when an animal crossed. He would return, though, she knew – eventually.

Kyra continued on, alone now, the wood growing darker, struggling to follow her brothers' trail – when she heard distant laughter. She snapped to attention, turning to the noise and weaving past thick trees until she spotted her brothers up ahead.

Kyra lingered back, keeping a good distance, not wanting to be spotted. She knew that if Aidan saw her, he would be embarrassed and would send her away. She would watch from the shadows, she decided, just making sure they did not get into trouble. It was better for Aidan not to be shamed, to feel like he was a man.

A twig snapped beneath her feet and Kyra ducked, worried the sound would give her away – but her drunk older brothers were oblivious, already a good thirty yards ahead of her, walking quickly, the noise drowned out by their own laughter. She could see from Aidan's body language that he was tense, almost as if he were about to cry. He clutched his spear tightly, as if trying to prove himself a man, but it was an awkward grip on a spear too big, and he struggled under the weight of it.

“Get up here!” Braxton called out, turning to Aidan, who trailed a few feet behind.

“What are you so afraid of?” Brandon said to him.

“I'm not afraid – ” Aidan insisted.

“Quiet!” Brandon suddenly said, stopping, holding out a palm against Aidan's chest, his expression serious for the first time. Braxton stopped, too, all of them tense.

Kyra took shelter behind a tree as she watched her brothers. They stood at the edge of a clearing, looking straight ahead as if they had spotted something.

She crept forward, on alert, trying to get a better look, and as she weaved between two large trees, she stopped, stunned, as she caught a glimpse of what they were seeing. There, standing alone in the clearing, rooting out acorns, was a boar. It was no ordinary boar; it was a monstrous, Black-Horned Boar, the largest boar she had ever seen, with long, curled white tusks and three long, sharpened, black horns, one protruding from its nose and two from its head. Nearly the size of a bear, it was a rare creature, famed for its viciousness and its lightning-quick speed. It was an animal widely feared, and one that no hunter wanted to meet.

It was trouble.

Kyra, hair rising on her arms, wished Leo were here – yet was also grateful he was not, knowing he would bound off after it and unsure if he would win the confrontation. Kyra stepped forward, slowly removing her bow from her shoulder while instinctively reaching down to grab an arrow. She tried to calculate how far the boar was from the boys, and how far away she was – and she knew this was not good. There were too many trees in the way for her to get a clean shot – and with an animal this size, there was no room for error. She doubted one arrow could even fell it.

Kyra noticed the flash of fear on her brothers' faces, then saw Brandon and Braxton quickly cover up their fright with a look of bravado – one she felt sure was fueled by drink. They both raised their spears and took several steps forward. Braxton saw Aidan rooted in place, and he turned, grabbed the small boy's shoulder, and made him step forward, too.

"There's a chance to make a man of you," Braxton said. "Kill this boar and they'll sing of you for generations."

"Bring back its head and you'll be famed for life," Brandon said.

"I'm...scared," Aidan said.

Brandon and Braxton scoffed, then laughed derisively.

"Scared?" Brandon said. "And what would Father say if he heard you say that?"

The boar, alerted, lifted its head, revealing glowing yellow eyes, and stared at them, its face bunching up in an angry snarl. It opened its mouth, revealing fangs, and drooled, while at the same time emitting a vicious growl that erupted from somewhere deep in its belly. Kyra, even from her distance, felt a pang of fear – and she could only imagine the fear Aidan was feeling.

Kyra rushed forward, throwing caution to the wind, determined to catch up before it was too late. When she was just a few feet behind her brothers, she called out:

"Leave it alone!"

Her harsh voice cut through the silence, and her brothers all wheeled, clearly startled.

"You've had your fun," she added. "Let it be."

While Aidan looked relieved, Brandon and Braxton each scowled back at her.

"And what do you know?" Brandon shot back. "Stop interfering with real men."

The boar's snarl deepened as it crept toward them, and Kyra, both afraid and furious, stepped forward.

"If you are foolish enough to antagonize this beast, then go ahead," she said. "But you will send Aidan back here to me."

Brandon frowned.

"Aidan will do just fine here," Brandon countered. "He's about to learn how to fight. Aren't you, Aidan?"

Aidan stood silent, stunned with fear.

Kyra was about to take another step forward and snatch Aidan's arm when there came a rustling in the clearing. She saw the boar edge its way closer, one foot at a time, threateningly.

"It won't attack if it's not provoked," Kyra urged her brothers. "Let it go."

But her brothers ignored her, both turning and facing it and raising spears. They walked forward, into the clearing, as if to prove how brave they were.

"I'll aim for its head," Brandon said.

"And I, its throat," Braxton agreed.

The boar snarled louder, opened its mouth wider, drooling, and took another threatening step.

"Get back here!" Kyra yelled out, desperate.

But Brandon and Braxton stepped forward, raised their spears, and suddenly threw them.

Kyra watched in suspense as the spears flew through the air, bracing herself for the worst. She saw, to her dismay, Brandon's spear graze its ear, enough to draw blood – and to provoke it – while Braxton's spear sailed past, missing its head by several feet.

For the first time, Brandon and Braxton looked afraid. They stood there, open-mouthed, a dumb look on their faces, the glow from their drink quickly replaced by fear.

The boar, infuriated, lowered its head, snarled a horrific sound, and suddenly charged.

Kyra watched in horror as it bore down on her brothers. It was the fastest thing she'd ever seen for its size, bounding through the grass as if it were a deer.

As it approached, Brandon and Braxton ran for their lives, darting away in opposite directions.

That left Aidan standing there, rooted in place, all alone, frozen in fear. His mouth agape, he loosened his grip and his spear fell from his hand, sideways to the ground. Kyra knew it wouldn't make much difference; Aidan could not have defended himself if he tried. A grown man could not have. And the boar, as if sensing it, set its sights on Aidan, aiming right for him.

Kyra, heart slamming, burst into action, knowing she would only have one chance at this. Without thinking, she bounded forward, dodging between the trees, already holding her bow before her, knowing she had one shot and that it had to be perfect. It would be a hard shot, even if the boar weren't moving, in her state of panic – yet it would have to be a perfect shot if they were to survive this.

"AIDAN, GET DOWN!" she shouted.

At first, he did not move. Aidan blocked her way, preventing a clean shot, and as Kyra raised her bow and ran forward, she realized that if Aidan did not move, her one shot would be lost. Stumbling through the wood, her feet slipping in the snow and damp earth, for a moment she felt all would be lost.

"AIDAN!" she shouted again, desperate.

By some miracle, he listened this time, diving down to the earth at the last second and leaving the shot open for Kyra.

As the boar charged for Aidan, time suddenly slowed for Kyra. She felt herself entering an altered zone, something rising up within her which she had never experienced and which she did not fully understand. The world narrowed and came into focus. She could hear the sound of her own heart beating, of her breathing, of the rustling of leaves, of a crow cawing high above. She felt more in tune with the universe than she ever had, as if she had entered some realm where she and the universe were one.

Kyra felt her palms begin to tingle with a warm, prickly energy she did not understand, as if something foreign were invading her body. It was as if, for a fleeting instant, she had become somebody bigger than herself, somebody much more powerful.

Kyra entered into a state of non-thinking, and she allowed herself to be driven by pure instinct, and by this new energy flowing through her. She planted her feet, raised the bow, placed an arrow, and let it fly.

She knew the second she released it that it was a special shot. She did not need to watch the arrow sail to know it was going exactly where she wanted it to: in the beast's right eye. She shot with such force that it lodged itself nearly a foot before stopping.

The beast suddenly grunted as its legs buckled out from under it, and it fell face-first in the snow. It slid across what remained of the clearing, writhing, still alive, until it reached Aidan. It finally came to a stop but a foot away from him, so close that, when it finally stopped, they were nearly touching.

It twitched on the ground, and Kyra, already with another arrow on her bow, stepped forward, stood over the boar, and put another arrow through the back of its skull. It finally stopped moving.

Kyra stood in the clearing, in the silence, her heart pounding, the tingling in her palms slowly receding, the energy fading, and she wondered what had just happened. Had she really taken that shot?

She immediately remembered Aidan, and as she spun and grabbed him he looked up to her as he might have to his mother, eyes filled with fear, but unharmed. She felt a flash of relief as she realized he was okay.

Kyra turned and saw her two older brothers, each still lying in the clearing, staring up at her with shock – and awe. But there was something else in their looks, something which unsettled her: suspicion. As if she were different from them. An outsider. It was a look Kyra had seen before, rarely,

but enough times to make her wonder at it herself. She turned and looked down at the dead beast, monstrous, huge, stiff at her feet, and she wondered how she, a fifteen-year-old girl, could have done this. It went beyond skills, she knew. Beyond a lucky shot.

There had always been something about her that was different from the others. She stood there, numb, wanting to move but unable. Because what had shaken her today was not this beast, she knew, but rather the way her brothers had looked at her. And she could not help wondering, for the millionth time, the question she had been afraid to confront her entire life:

Who was she?

Chapter Three

Kyra walked behind her brothers as they all hiked the road back to the fort, watching them struggle under the weight of the boar, Aidan beside her and Leo at her heels, having returned from chasing his game. Brandon and Braxton labored as they carried the dead beast between them, tied to their two spears and draped across their shoulders. Their grim mood had changed drastically since they had emerged from the wood and back into open sky, especially now with their father's fort in sight. With each passing step, Brandon and Braxton became more confident, nearly back to their arrogant selves, now at the point of laughing, heckling each other as they boasted of *their* kill.

"It was *my* spear that grazed it," Brandon said to Braxton.

"But," countered Braxton, "it was my spear that incited it to veer for Kyra's arrow."

Kyra listened, her face reddening at their lies; her pig-headed brothers were already convincing themselves of their own story, and now they seemed to actually believe it. She already anticipated their boasting back in their father's hall, telling everyone of *their* kill.

It was maddening. Yet she felt it was beneath her to correct them. She believed firmly in the wheels of justice, and she knew that, eventually, the truth always came out.

"You're liars," Aidan said, walking beside her, clearly still shaken from the event. "You know Kyra killed the boar."

Brandon glanced over his shoulder derisively, as if Aidan were an insect.

"What would *you* know?" he asked Aidan. "You were too busy pissing your pants."

They both laughed, as if hardening their story with each passing step.

"And you weren't running scared?" Kyra asked, sticking up for Aidan, unable to stand it a second longer.

With that, they both fell silent. Kyra could have really let them have it – but she did not need to raise her voice. She walked happily, feeling good about herself, knowing within herself that she had saved her brother's life; that was all the satisfaction she needed.

Kyra felt a small hand on her shoulder, and she looked over to see Aidan, smiling, consoling her, clearly grateful to be alive and in one piece. Kyra wondered if her older brothers also appreciated what she had done for them; after all, if she hadn't appeared when she had they would have been killed, too.

Kyra watched the boar bounce before her with each step, and she grimaced; she wished her brothers had let it remain in the clearing, where it belonged. It was a cursed animal, not of Volis, and it didn't belong here. It was a bad omen, especially coming from the Wood of Thorns, and especially on the eve of the Winter Moon. She recalled an old adage she had read: *do not boast after being spared from death*. Her brothers, she felt, were tempting the fates, bringing darkness back into their home. She could not help but feel it would herald bad things to come.

They crested a hill and as they did, the stronghold spread out before them, along with a sweeping view of the landscape. Despite the gust of wind and increasing snow, Kyra felt a great sense of relief at being home. Smoke rose from the chimneys that dotted the countryside and her father's fort emitted a soft, cozy glow, all lit with fires, fending off the coming twilight. The road widened, better maintained as they neared the bridge, and they all increased their pace and walked briskly down the final stretch. The road was bustling with people, eager for the festival despite the weather and falling night.

Kyra was hardly surprised. The festival of the Winter Moon was one of the most important holidays of the year, and all were busy preparing for the feast to come. A great throng of people pressed over the drawbridge, rushing to get their wares from vendors, to join the fort's feast – while an equal number of people rushed out of the gate, hurrying to get back to their homes to celebrate with their families. Oxen pulled carts and carried wares in both directions, while masons banged and chipped away at yet another new wall being built to ring the fort, the sound of their hammers steady

in the air, punctuating the din of livestock and dogs. Kyra wondered how they always worked in this weather, how they kept their hands from going numb.

As they entered the bridge, merging with the masses, Kyra looked up ahead and her stomach tightened as she saw, standing near the gate, several of the Lord's Men, soldiers for the local Lord Governor appointed by Pandesia, wearing their distinctive scarlet chain mail armor. She felt a flash of indignation at the sight, sharing the same resentment as all of her people. The presence of the Lord's Men was oppressive at any time – but on the Winter Moon it was especially so, when they could surely only be here to demand whatever gleanings they could from her people. They were scavengers, in her mind, bullies and scavengers for the despicable aristocrats that had lodged themselves in power ever since the Pandesian invasion.

The weakness of their former King was to blame, having surrendered them all – but that did them little good now. Now, to their disgrace, they had to defer to these men. It filled Kyra with fury. It made her father and his great warriors – and all of her people – nothing better than elevated serfs; she desperately wanted them all to rise up, to fight for their freedom, to fight the war their former King had been afraid to. Yet she also knew that, if they were to rise up now, they would face the wrath of the Pandesian army. Perhaps they could have held them back if they had never let them in; but now that they were entrenched, they had few options.

They reached the bridge, merging with the mob, and as they passed, people stopped, stared, and pointed at the boar. Kyra took a small satisfaction in seeing that her brothers were sweating under the burden of it, huffing and puffing. As they went, heads turned and people gaped, commoners and warriors alike, all impressed by the massive beast. She also spotted a few superstitious looks, some of the people wondering, as she, if this were a bad omen.

All eyes, though, looked to her brothers with pride.

“A fine catch for the festival!” a farmer called out, leading his ox as he merged onto the street with them.

Brandon and Braxton beamed proudly.

“It shall feed half your father's court!” called out a butcher.

“How did you manage it?” asked a saddler.

The two brothers exchanged a look, and Brandon finally grinned back at the man.

“A fine throw and a lack of fear,” he replied boldly.

“If you don't venture to the wood,” Braxton added, “you don't know what you'll find.”

A few men cheered and clapped them on the back. Kyra, despite herself, held her tongue. She did not need these people's approval; she knew what she had done.

“They did not kill the boar!” Aidan called out, indignant.

“You shut up,” Brandon turned and hissed. “Any more of that and I will tell them all that you pissed your pants when it charged.”

“But I did not!” Aidan protested.

“And they will believe you?” Braxton added.

Brandon and Braxton laughed, and Aidan looked to Kyra, as if wanting to know what to do. She shook her head.

“Don't waste your effort,” she said to him. “The truth always prevails.”

The throngs thickened as they crossed over the bridge, soon shoulder to shoulder with the masses as they passed over the moat. Kyra could feel the excitement in the air as twilight fell, torches lit up and down the bridge, the snowfall quickening. She looked up before her and her heart quickened, as always, to see the huge, arched stone gate to the fort, guarded by a dozen of her father's men. At its top were the spikes of an iron portcullis, now raised, its sharpened points and thick bars strong enough to keep out any foe, ready to be closed at the mere sound of a horn. The gate rose thirty feet high, and at its top was a broad platform, spreading across the entire fort, wide stone battlements manned with lookouts, always keeping a vigilant eye. Volis was a fine stronghold, Kyra had always

thought, taking pride in it. What gave her even more pride were the men inside it, her father's men, many of Escalon's finest warriors, slowly regrouping in Volis after being dispersed since the surrender of their King, drawn like a magnet to her father. More than once she had urged her father to declare himself the new King, as all his people wanted him to – but he would always merely shake his head and say that was not his way.

As they neared the gate, a dozen of her father's men charged out on their horses, the masses parting for them as they rode out for the training ground, a wide, circular embankment in the fields outside the fort ringed by a low, stone wall. Kyra turned and watched them go, her heart quickening. The training grounds were her favorite place. She would go there and watch them spar for hours, studying every move they made, the way they rode their horses, the way they drew their swords, hurled spears, swung flails. These men rode out to train despite the coming dark and falling snow, even on the eve of a holiday feast, because they *wanted* to train, to better themselves, because they would all rather be on a battlefield than feasting indoors – like her. These, she felt, were her true people.

Another group of her father's men came out, these on foot, and as Kyra approached the gate with her brothers, these men stepped aside, with the masses, making room for Brandon and Braxton as they approached with the boar. They whistled in admiration and gathered around, large, muscle-bound men, standing a foot taller than even her brothers who were not small, most of them wearing beards peppered with gray, all hardened men in their thirties and forties who had seen too many battles, who had served the old King and had suffered the indignity of his surrender. Men who would have never surrendered on their own. These were men who had seen it all and who were not impressed by much – but they did seem taken with the boar.

“Kill that on your own, did you?” one of them asked Brandon, coming close and examining it.

The crowd thickened and Brandon and Braxton finally stopped, taking in the praise and admiration of these great men, trying not to show how hard they were breathing.

“We did!” Braxton called out proudly.

“A Black-Horned,” exclaimed another warrior, coming up close, running his hand along the back of it. “Haven't seen one since I was a boy. Helped kill one myself, once – but I was with a party of men – and two of them lost fingers.”

“Well, we lost nothing,” Braxton called out boldly. “Just a spear head.”

Kyra burned as the men all laughed, clearly admiring the kill, while another warrior, their leader, Anvin, stepped forward and examined the kill closely. The men parted for him, giving him a wide berth of respect.

Her father's commander, Anvin was Kyra's favorite of all the men, answering only to her father, presiding over these fine warriors. Anvin had been like a second father to her, and she had known him as long as she could remember. He loved her dearly, she knew, and he looked out for her; more importantly to her, he always took time for her, showing her the techniques of sparring and weaponry when others would not. He had even let her train with the men on more than one occasion, and she had relished each and every one. He was the toughest of them all, yet he also had the kindest heart – for those he liked. But for those he didn't, Kyra feared for them.

Anvin had little tolerance for lies, though; he was the sort of man who always had to get to the absolute truth of everything, however gray it was. He had a meticulous eye, and as he stepped forward and examined the boar closely, Kyra watched him stop and examine its two arrow wounds. He had an eye for detail, and if anyone would recognize the truth, it would be him.

Anvin examined the two wounds, inspecting the small arrowheads still lodged inside, the fragments of wood where her brothers had broken off her arrows. They had snapped it close to the tip, so no one would see what had really felled it. But Anvin was not just anyone.

Kyra watched Anvin study the wounds, saw his eyes narrow, and she knew he had summed up the truth in a glance. He reached down, removed his glove, reached into the eye, and extracted one of the arrowheads. He held it up, bloody, then slowly turned to her brothers with a skeptical look.

“A spear point, was it?” he asked, disapproving.

A tense silence fell over the group as Brandon and Braxton looked nervous for the first time. They shifted in place.

Anvin turned to Kyra.

“Or an arrowhead?” he added, and Kyra could see the wheels turning in his head, see him coming to his own conclusions.

Anvin walked over to Kyra, drew an arrow from her quiver, and held it up beside the arrowhead. It was a perfect match, for all to see. He gave Kyra a proud, meaningful look, and Kyra felt all eyes turn to her.

“Your shot, was it?” he asked her. It was more a statement than a question.

She nodded back.

“It was,” she replied flatly, loving Anvin for giving her recognition, and finally feeling vindicated.

“And the shot that felled it,” he concluded. It was an observation, not a question, his voice hard, final, as he studied the boar.

“I see no other wounds besides these two,” he added, running his hand along it – then stopping at the ear. He examined it, then turned and looked at Brandon and Braxton disdainfully. “Unless you call this grazing of a spearhead here a wound.”

He held up the boar’s ear, and Brandon and Braxton reddened while the group of warriors laughed.

Another of her father’s famed warriors stepped forward – Vidar, close friend to Anvin, a thin, short man in his thirties with a gaunt face and a scar across his nose. With his small frame, he did not look the part, but Kyra knew better: Vidar was as hard as stone, famed for his hand-to-hand combat. He was one of the hardest men Kyra had ever met, known to wrestle down two men twice his size. Too many men, because of his diminutive size, had made the mistake of provoking him – only to learn their lesson the hard way. He, too, had taken Kyra under his wing, always protective of her.

“Looks like they missed,” Vidar concluded, “and the girl saved them. Who taught you two to throw?”

Brandon and Braxton looked increasingly nervous, clearly caught in a lie, and neither said a word.

“It’s a grievous thing to lie about a kill,” Anvin said darkly, turning to her brothers. “Out with it now. Your father would want you to tell the truth.”

Brandon and Braxton stood there, shifting, clearly uncomfortable, looking at each other as if debating what to say. For the first time she could remember, Kyra saw them tongue-tied.

Just as they were about to open their mouths, suddenly a foreign voice cut through the crowd.

“Doesn’t matter who killed it,” came the voice. “It’s ours now.”

Kyra turned with all the others, startled at the rough, unfamiliar voice – and her stomach dropped as she saw a group of the Lord’s Men, distinctive in their scarlet armor, step forward through the crowd, the villagers parting for them. They approached the boar, eyeing it greedily, and Kyra saw that they wanted this trophy kill – not because they needed it, but as a way to humiliate her people, to snatch away from them this point of pride. Beside her, Leo snarled, and she laid a reassuring hand on his neck, holding him back.

“In the name of your Lord Governor,” said the Lord’s Man, a portly soldier with a low brow, thick eyebrows, a large belly, and a face bunched up in stupidity, “we claim this boar. He thanks you in advance for your present on this holiday festival.”

He gestured to his men and they stepped toward the boar, as if to grab it.

As they did, Anvin suddenly stepped forward, Vidar by his side, and blocked their way.

An astonished silence fell over the crowd – no one ever confronted the Lord’s Men; it was an unwritten rule. No one wanted to incite the wrath of Pandesia.

“No one’s offered you a present, as far as I can tell,” he said, his voice steel, “or your Lord Governor.”

The crowd thickened, hundreds of villagers gathering to watch the tense standoff, sensing a confrontation. At the same time, others backed away, creating space around the two men, as the tension in the air grew more intense.

Kyra felt her heart pounding. She unconsciously tightened her grip on her bow, knowing this was escalating. As much as she wanted a fight, wanted her freedom, she also knew that her people could not afford to incite the wrath of the Lord Governor; even if by some miracle they defeated them, the Pandesian Empire stood behind them. They could summon divisions of men as vast as the sea.

Yet, at the same time, Kyra was so proud of Anvin for standing up to them. Finally, somebody had.

The soldier glowered, staring Anvin down.

“Do you dare defy your Lord Governor?” he asked.

Anvin held his ground.

“That boar is ours – no one’s giving it to you,” Anvin said.

“It *was* yours,” the soldier corrected, “and now it belongs to us.” He turned to his men. “Take the boar,” he commanded.

The Lord’s Men approached and as they did, a dozen of her father’s men stepped forward, backing up Anvin and Vidar, blocking the Lord’s Men’s way, hands on their weapons.

The tension grew so thick, Kyra squeezed her bow until her knuckles turned white, and as she stood there she felt awful, felt as if somehow she were responsible for all this, given that she had killed the boar. She sensed something very bad was about to happen, and she cursed her brothers for bringing this bad omen into their village, especially on Winter Moon. Strange things always happened on the holidays, mystical times when the dead were said to be able to cross from one world to the other. Why had her brothers had to provoke the spirits in this way?

As the men faced off, her father’s men preparing to draw their swords, all of them so close to bloodshed, a voice of authority suddenly cut through the air, booming through the silence.

“The kill is the girl’s!” came the voice.

It was a loud voice, filled with confidence, a voice that commanded attention, a voice that Kyra admired and respected more than any in the world: her father’s. Commander Duncan.

All eyes turned as her father approached, the crowd parting ways for him, giving him a wide berth of respect. There he stood, a mountain of a man, twice as tall as the others, with shoulders twice as wide, an untamed brown beard and longish brown hair both streaked with gray, wearing furs over his shoulders and bearing two long swords on his belt and a spear across his back. His armor, the black of Volis, had a dragon carved into its breastplate, the sign of their house. His weapons bore nicks and scrapes from one too many battle and he projected experience. He was a man to be feared, a man to be admired, a man who all new to be just and fair. A man loved and, above all, respected.

“It is Kyra’s kill,” he repeated, glancing disapprovingly at her brothers as he did, then turning and looking at Kyra, ignoring the Lord’s Men. “It is for her to decide its fate.”

Kyra was shocked at her father’s words. She had never expected this, never expected him to put such responsibility in her hands, to leave to her such a weighty decision. For it was not merely a decision about the boar, they both knew, but about the very fate of her people.

Tense soldiers lined up on either side, all with hands on swords, and as she looked out at all the faces, all turning to her, all awaiting her response, she knew that her next choice, her next words, would be the most important she had ever spoken.

Chapter Four

Merk hiked slowly down the forest path, weaving his way through Whitewood, and he reflected on his life. His forty years had been hard ones; he had never before taken the time to hike through a wood, to admire the beauty around him. He looked down at the white leaves crunching beneath his feet, punctuated by the sound of his staff as he tapped the soft forest floor; he looked up as he walked, taking in the beauty of the Aesop trees, with their shining white leaves and glowing red branches, glistening in the morning sun. Leaves fell, showering down on him like snow, and for the first time in his life, he felt a real sense of peace.

Of average height and build, with dark black hair, a perpetually unshaven face, a wide jaw, long, drawn-out cheekbones, and large black eyes with black circles under them, Merk always looked as if he hadn't slept in days. And that was always how he felt. But now. Now, finally, he felt rested. Here, in Ur, in the northwest corner of Escalon, there came no snow. The temperate breezes off the ocean, but a day's ride west, assured them of warmer weather and allowed leaves of every color to flourish. It also allowed Merk to sojourn wearing but a cloak, with no need to cower from the freezing winds, as they did in much of Escalon. He was still getting used to the idea of wearing a cloak instead of armor, of wielding a staff instead of a sword, of tapping the leaves with his staff instead of piercing his foes with a dagger. It was all new to him. He was trying to see what it felt like to become this new person he yearned to be. It was peaceful – but awkward. As if he were pretending to be someone he was not.

For Merk was no traveler, no monk – nor was he a peaceful man. He was still, in his blood, a warrior. And not just any warrior; he was a man who fought by his own rules, and who had never lost a battle. He was a man who was unafraid to take his battles from the jousting lanes to the back alleys of the taverns he loved to frequent. He was what some people liked to call a mercenary. An assassin. A hired sword. There were many names for him, some even less flattering, but Merk didn't care for labels, or about what other people thought. All he cared about was that he was one of the best.

Merk, as if to fit his role, had gone by many names himself, changing them at his whim. He didn't like the name his father had given him – in fact, he didn't like his father, either – and he wasn't about to go through life with a name someone else slapped on him. Merk was the most frequent name change, and he liked it, for now. He did not care what anyone called him. He cared only about two things in life: finding the perfect spot for the point of his dagger, and that his employers pay him in freshly minted gold – and a lot of it.

Merk had discovered at a young age that he had a natural gift, that he was superior to all others at what he did. His brothers, like his father and all his famed ancestors, were proud and noble knights, donning the best armor, wielding the best steel, prancing about on their horses, waving their banners with their flowery hair and winning competitions while ladies threw flowers at their feet. They could not have been more proud of themselves.

Merk, though, hated the pomp, the limelight. Those knights had all seemed clumsy at killing, vastly inefficient, and Merk had no respect for them. Nor did he need the recognition, the insignias or banners or coats of arms that knights craved. That was for people who lacked what mattered most: the skill to take a man's life, quickly, quietly, and efficiently. In his mind, there was nothing else to talk about.

When he was young and his friends, too small to defend themselves, had been picked on, they had come to him, already known to be exceptional with a sword, and he had taken their payment to defend them. Their bullies never tormented them again, as Merk went that extra step. Word had spread quickly of his prowess, and as Merk accepted more and more payments, his abilities in killing progressed.

Merk could have become a knight, a celebrated warrior like his brothers. But he chose instead to work in the shadows. Winning was what interested him, lethal efficiency, and he had discovered

quickly that knights, for all their beautiful weapons and bulky armor, could not kill half as fast or effectively as he, a lone man with a leather shirt and a sharp dagger.

As he hiked, poking the leaves with his staff, he recalled one night at a tavern with his brothers, when swords had been drawn with rival knights. His brothers had been surrounded, outnumbered, and while all the fancy knights stood on ceremony, Merk did not hesitate. He had darted across the alley with his dagger and sliced all their throats before the men could draw a sword.

His brothers should have thanked them for their lives – instead, they all distanced themselves from him. They feared him, and they looked down on him. That was the gratitude he received, and the betrayal hurt Merk more than he could say. It deepened his rift with them, with all nobility, with all chivalry. It was all hypocrisy in his eyes, self-serving; they could walk away with their shiny armor and look down on him, but if it hadn't been for him and his dagger they would all be lying dead in that back alley today.

Merk hiked and hiked, sighing, trying to release the past. As he reflected, he realized he did not really understand the source of his talent. Perhaps it was because he was so quick and nimble; perhaps it was because he was fast with his hands and wrists; perhaps it was because he had a special talent for finding men's vital points; perhaps it was because he never hesitated to go that extra step, to take that final thrust that other men feared; perhaps it was because he never had to strike twice; or perhaps it was because he could improvise, could kill with any tool at his disposal – a quill, a hammer, an old log. He was craftier than others, more adaptable and quicker on his feet – a deadly combination.

Growing up, all those proud knights had distanced themselves from him, had even mocked him beneath their breath (for no one would mock him to his face). But now, as they were all older, as their powers waned and as his fame spread, he was the one enlisted by kings, while they were all forgotten. Because what his brothers never understood was that *chivalry* did not make kings kings. It was the ugly, brutal violence, fear, the elimination of your enemies, one at a time, the gruesome killing that no one else wanted to do, that made kings. And it was he they turned to when they wanted the *real* work of being a king done.

With each poke of his staff, Merk remembered each of his victims. He had killed the King's worst foes – not by poison – for that, they brought in the petty assassins, the apothecaries, the seductresses. The worst ones they often wanted killed with a statement, and for that, they needed him. Something gruesome, something public: a dagger in the eye; a body left strewn in a public square, dangling from a window, for all to see the next sunrise, for all to be left in wonder as to who had dared oppose the King.

When the old King Tarnis had surrendered the kingdom, had opened the gates for Pandesia, Merk had felt deflated, purposeless for the first time in his life. Without a King to serve he had felt adrift. Something long brewing within him had surfaced, and for some reason he did not understand, he began to wonder about life. All his life he had been obsessed with death, with killing, with taking life away. It had become easy – too easy. But now, something within him was changing; it was as if he could hardly feel the stable ground beneath his feet. He had always known, firsthand, how fragile life was, how easily it could be taken away, but now he started to wonder about preserving it. Life was so fragile, was preserving it not a greater challenge than taking it?

And despite himself, he started to wonder: what was this thing he was stripping away from others?

Merk did not know what had started all this self-reflection, but it made him deeply uncomfortable. Something had surfaced within him, a great nausea, and he had become sick of killing – he had developed as great a distaste for it as he had once enjoyed it. He wished there was one thing he could point to that triggered all of this – the killing of a particular person, perhaps – but there was not. It had just crept up on him, without cause. And that was most disturbing of all.

Unlike other mercenaries, Merk had only taken on causes he believed in. It was only later in life, when he had become too good at what he did, when the payments had become too large, the people

who requested him too important, that he had begun to blur the lines, to accept payment for killing those who weren't necessarily at fault – not necessarily at all. And that was what was bothering him.

Merk developed an equally strong passion for undoing all that he had done, for proving to others that he could change. He wanted to wipe out his past, to take back all that he had done, to make penitence. He had taken a solemn vow within himself never to kill again; never to lift a finger against anyone; to spend the rest of his days asking God for forgiveness; to devote himself to helping others; to become a better person. And it was all of this that had led him to this forest path he walked right now with each click of his staff.

Merk saw the forest trail rise up ahead then dip, aglow with white leaves, and he checked the horizon again for the Tower of Ur. There was still no sign of it. He knew eventually this path must lead him there, this pilgrimage that had been calling to him for months now. He had been captivated, ever since he was a boy, by tales of the Watchers, the secretive order of monks/knights, part men and part something else, whose job was to reside in the two towers – the Tower of Ur in the northwest and the Tower of Kos in the southeast – and to watch over the Kingdom's most precious relic: the Sword of Fire. It was the Sword of Fire, legend had it, that kept The Flames alive. No one knew for sure which tower it was in, a closely kept secret known by none but the most ancient Watchers. If it were ever to be moved, or stolen, The Flames would be lost forever – and Escalon would be vulnerable to attack.

It was said that watching over the towers was a high calling, a sacred duty and honorable duty – if the Watchers accepted you. Merk had always dreamed of the Watchers as a boy, had gone to bed at night wondering what it would be like to join their ranks. He wanted to lose himself in solitude, in service, in self-reflection, and he knew there was no better way than to become a Watcher. Merk felt ready. He had discarded his chain mail for leather, his sword for a staff, and for the first time in his life, he had gone a solid moon without killing or hurting a soul. He was starting to feel good.

As Merk crested a small hill, he looked out, hopeful, as he had been for days, that this peak might reveal the Tower of Ur somewhere on the horizon. But there was nothing to be found – nothing but more woods, reaching as far as the eye could see. Yet he knew he was getting close – after so many days of hiking, the tower could not be that far off.

Merk continued down the slope of the path, the wood growing thicker, until, at the bottom, he came to a huge, felled tree blocking the path. He stopped and looked at it, admiring its size, debating how to get around it.

"I'd say that's about far enough," came a sinister voice.

Merk recognized the dark intention in the voice immediately, something he had become expert in, and he did not even need to turn to know what was coming next. He heard leaves crunching all around him, and out of the wood there emerged faces to match the voice: cutthroats, each more desperate looking than the next. They were the faces of men who killed for no reason. The faces of common thieves and killers who preyed on the weak with random, senseless violence. In Merk's eyes, they were the lowest of the low.

Merk saw he was surrounded and knew he had walked into a trap. He glanced around quickly without letting them know it, his old instincts kicking in, and he counted eight of them. They all held daggers, all dressed in rags, with dirty faces, hands, and fingernails, all unshaven, all with a desperate look that showed they hadn't eaten in too many days. And that they were bored.

Merk tensed as the lead thief got closer, but not because he feared him; Merk could kill him – could kill them all – without blinking an eye, if he chose. What made him tense was the possibility of being forced into violence. He was determined to keep his vow, whatever the cost.

"And what do we have here?" one of them asked, coming close, circling Merk.

"Looks like a monk," said another, his voice mocking. "But those boots don't match."

"Maybe he's a monk who thinks he's a soldier," one laughed.

They all broke into laughter, and one of them, an oaf of a man in his forties with a missing front tooth, leaned in with his bad breath and poked Merk in the shoulder. The old Merk would have killed any man who had come half as close.

But the new Merk was determined to be a better man, to rise above violence – even if it seemed to seek him out. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, forcing himself to remain calm.

Do not resort to violence, he told himself again and again.

“What’s this monk doing?” one of them asked. “Praying?”

They all burst into laughter again.

“Your god won’t save you now, boy!” another exclaimed.

Merk opened his eyes and stared back at the cretin.

“I do not wish to harm you,” he said calmly.

Laughter rose up, louder than before, and Merk realized that staying calm, not reacting with violence, was the hardest thing he had ever done.

“Lucky for us, then!” one replied.

They laughed again, then all fell silent as their leader stepped forward and got in Merk’s face.

“But perhaps,” he said, his voice serious, so close that Merk could smell his bad breath, “we wish to harm you.”

A man came up behind Merk, wrapped a thick arm around his throat, and began squeezing. Merk gasped as he felt himself being choked, the grip tight enough to put him in pain but not to cut off all air. His immediate reflex was to reach back and kill the man. It would be easy; he knew the perfect pressure point in the forearm to make him release his grip. But he forced himself not to.

Let them pass, he told himself. *The road to humility must begin somewhere.*

Merk faced their leader.

“Take of mine what you wish,” Merk said, gasping. “Take it and be on your way.”

“And what if we take it and stay right here?” the leader replied.

“No one’s asking you what we can and can’t take, boy,” another said.

One of them stepped up and ransacked Merk’s waist, rummaging greedy hands through his few personal belongings left in the world. Merk forced himself to stay calm as the hands rifled through everything he owned. Finally, they extracted his well-worn silver dagger, his favorite weapon, and still Merk, as painful as it was, did not react.

Let it go, he told himself.

“What’s this?” one asked. “A dagger?”

He glared at Merk.

“What’s a fancy monk like you carrying a dagger?” one asked.

“What are you doing, boy, carving trees?” another asked.

They all laughed, and Merk gritted his teeth, wondering how much more he could take.

The man who took the dagger stopped, looked down at Merk’s wrist, and yanked back his sleeve. Merk braced himself, realizing they’d found it.

“What’s this?” the thief asked, grabbing his wrist and holding it up, examining it.

“It looks like a fox,” one said.

“What’s a monk doing with a tattoo of a fox?” another asked.

Another stepped forward, a tall, thin man with red hair, and grabbed his wrist and examined it closely. He let it go and looked up at Merk with cautious eyes.

“That’s no fox, you idiot,” he said to his men. “It’s a wolf. It’s the mark of a King’s man – a mercenary.”

Merk felt his face flush as he realized they were staring at his tattoo. He did not want to be discovered.

The thieves all remained silent, staring at it, and for the first time, Merk sensed hesitation in their faces.

“That’s the order of the killers,” one said, then looked at him. “How did you get that mark, boy?”

“Probably gave it to himself,” one answered. “Makes the road safer.”

The leader nodded to his man, who released his grip on Merk’s throat, and Merk breathed deep, relieved. But the leader then reached up and held a knife to Merk’s throat and Merk wondered if he would die here, today, in this place. He wondered if it would be punishment for all the killing he had done. He wondered if he was ready to die.

“Answer him,” their leader growled. “You give that to yourself, boy? They say you need to kill a hundred men to get that mark.”

Merk breathed, and in the long silence that followed, debated what to say. Finally, he sighed.

“A *thousand*,” he said.

The leader blinked back, confused.

“What?” he asked.

“A thousand men,” Merk explained. “That’s what gets you that tattoo. And it was given to me by King Tarnis himself.”

They all stared back, shocked, and a long silence fell over the wood, so quiet that Merk could hear the insects chirping. He wondered what would happen next.

One of them broke into hysterical laughter – and all the others followed. They laughed and guffawed as Merk stood there, clearly thinking it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard.

“That’s a good one, boy,” one said. “You’re as good a liar as you are a monk.”

The leader pushed the dagger against his throat, hard enough to begin to draw blood.

“I said, answer me,” the leader repeated. “A *real* answer. You want to die right now, boy?”

Merk stood there, feeling the pain, and he thought about the question – he truly thought about it. Did he want to die? It was a good question, and an even deeper question than the thief supposed. As he thought about it, really thought about, he realized that a part of him did want to die. He was tired of life, bone tired.

But as he dwelled on it, Merk ultimately realized he was not ready to die. Not now. Not today. Not when he was ready to start anew. Not when he was just beginning to enjoy life. He wanted a chance to change. He wanted a chance to serve in the Tower. To become a Watcher.

“No, actually I don’t,” Merk replied.

He finally looked his captor right in the eye, a resolve growing within him.

“And because of that,” he continued, “I’m going to give you one chance to release me, before I kill you all.”

They all looked at him in silent shock, before the leader scowled and began to break into action.

Merk felt the blade begin to slice his throat, and something within him took over. It was the professional part of him, the one he had trained his entire life, the part of him that could take no more. It meant breaking his vow – but he no longer cared.

The old Merk came rushing back so fast, it was as if it had never left – and in the blink of an eye, he found himself back in killer mode.

Merk focused and saw all of his opponents’ movements, every twitch, every pressure point, every vulnerability. The desire to kill them overwhelmed him, like an old friend, and Merk allowed it to take over.

In one lightning-fast motion, Merk grabbed the leader’s wrist, dug his finger into a pressure point, snapped it back until it cracked, then snatched the dagger as it fell and in one quick move, sliced the man’s throat from ear to ear.

Their leader stared back at him with an astonished look before slumping down to the ground, dead.

Merk turned and faced the others, and they all stared back, stunned, mouths agape.

Now it was Merk’s turn to smile, as he looked back at all of them, relishing what was about to happen next.

“Sometimes, boys,” he said, “you just pick the wrong man to mess with.”

Chapter Five

Kyra stood in the center of the crowded bridge, feeling all eyes on her, all awaiting her decision for the fate of the boar. Her cheeks flushed; she did not like to be the center of attention. She loved her father for acknowledging her, though, and she felt a great sense of pride, especially for his putting the decision in her hands.

Yet at the same time, she also felt a great responsibility. She knew that whatever choice she made would decide the fate of her people. As much as she loathed the Pandesians, she did not want the responsibility of throwing her people into a war they could not win. Yet she also did not want to back down, to embolden the Lord's Men, to disgrace her people, make them seem weak, especially after Anvin and the others had so courageously made a stand.

Her father, she realized, was wise: by putting the decision in her hands, he made it seemed as if the decision was theirs, not the Lord's Men, and that act alone had saved his people face. She also realized he had put the decision in her hands for a reason: he must have known this situation required an outside voice to help all parties save face – and he chose her because she was convenient, and because he knew her not to be rash, to be a voice of moderation. The more she pondered it, the more she realized that was why he chose her: not to incite a war – he could have chosen Anvin for that – but to get his people out of one.

She came to a decision.

"The beast is cursed," she said dismissively. "It nearly killed my brothers. It came from the Wood of Thorns and was killed on the eve of Winter Moon, a day we are forbidden to hunt. It was a mistake to bring it through our gates – it should have been left to rot in the wild, where it belongs."

She turned derisively to the Lord's Men.

"Bring it to your Lord Governor," she said, smiling. "You do us a favor."

The Lord's Men looked from her to the beast, and their expressions morphed; they now looked as if they had bitten into something rotten, as if they didn't want it anymore.

Kyra saw Anvin and the others looking at her approvingly, gratefully – and her father most of all. She had done it – she had allowed her people to save face, had spared them from a war – and had managed a jibe at Pandesia at the same time.

Her brothers dropped the boar to the ground and it landed in the snow with a thud. They stepped back, humbled, their shoulders clearly aching.

All eyes now fell to the Lord's Men, who stood there, not knowing what to do. Clearly Kyra's words had cut deep; they now looked at the beast now as if it were something foul dragged up from the bowels of the earth. Clearly, they no longer wanted it. And now that it was theirs, they seemed to have also lost the desire for it.

Their commander, after a long, tense silence, finally gestured to his men to pick up the beast, then turned, scowling, and marched away, clearly annoyed, as if knowing he had been outsmarted.

The crowd dispersed, the tension gone, and there came a sense of relief. Many of her father's men approached her approvingly, laying hands on her shoulder.

"Well done," Anvin said, looking at her with approval. "You shall make a good ruler someday."

The village folk went back to their ways, the hustle and bustle returning, the tension dissipated, and Kyra turned and searched for her father's eyes. She found them looking back, he standing but a few feet away. In front of his men, he was always reserved when it came to her, and this time was no different – he wore an indifferent expression, but he nodded at her ever so slightly, a nod, she knew, of approval.

Kyra looked over and saw Anvin and Vidar clutching their spears, and her heart quickened.

"Can I join you?" she asked Anvin, knowing they were heading to the training grounds, as the rest of her father's men.

Anvin glanced nervously at her father, knowing he would disapprove.

“Snow’s thickening,” Anvin finally replied, hesitant. “Night’s falling, too.”

“That’s not stopping you,” Kyra countered.

He grinned back.

“No, it’s not,” he admitted.

Anvin glanced at her father again, and she turned and saw him shake his head before turning and heading back inside.

Anvin sighed.

“They’re preparing a mighty feast,” he said. “You’d best go in.”

Kyra could smell it herself, the air heavy with fine meats roasting, and she saw her brothers turn and head inside, along with dozens of villagers, all rushing to prepare for the festival.

But Kyra turned and looked longingly out at the fields, at the training grounds.

“A meal can wait,” she said. “Training cannot. Let me come.”

Vidar smiled and shook his head.

“You sure you’re a girl and not a warrior?” Vidar asked.

“Can I not be both?” she replied.

Anvin let out a long sigh, and finally shook his head.

“Your father would have my hide,” he said.

Then, finally, he nodded.

“You won’t take no for an answer,” he concluded, “and you’ve got more heart than half my men. I suppose we can use one more.”

* * *

Kyra ran across the snowy landscape, trailing Anvin, Vidar and several of her father’s men, Leo by her side as usual. The snowfall was thickening and she did not care. She felt a sense of freedom, of exhilaration, as she always did when passing through Fighter’s Gate, a low, arched opening cut into the stone walls of the training ground. She breathed deep as the sky opened up and she ran into this place she loved most in the world, its rolling green hills, now covered in snow, encased by a rambling stone wall, perhaps a quarter mile wide and deep. She felt everything was as it should be as she saw all the men training, crisscrossing on their horses, wielding lances, aiming for distant targets and bettering themselves. This, for her, was what life was about.

This training ground was reserved for her father’s men; women were not allowed here and neither were boys who had not yet reached their eighteenth year – and who had not been invited. Brandon and Braxton, every day, waited impatiently to be invited – yet Kyra suspected that they never would. Fighter’s Gate was for honorable, battle-hardened warriors, not for blowhards like her brothers.

Kyra ran through the fields, feeling happier and more alive here than anywhere else on earth. The energy was intense, it packed with dozens of her father’s finest warriors, all wearing slightly different armor, warriors from all regions of Escalon, all of whom had over time gravitated to her father’s fort. There were men from the south, from Thebus and Leptis; from the Midlands, mostly from the capital, Andros, but also from the mountains of Kos; there were westerners from Ur; river men from Thusis and their neighbors from Esephus. There were men who lived near the Lake of Ire, and men from as far away as the waterfalls at Everfall. All wore different colors, armor, wielded different weapons, all men of Escalon yet each representing his own stronghold. It was a dazzling array of power.

Her father, the former King’s champion, a man who commanded great respect, was the only man in these times, in this fractured kingdom, that men could rally around. Indeed, when the old King had surrendered their kingdom without a fight, it was her father that people urged to assume

the throne and lead the fight. Over time, the best of the former King's warriors had sought him out, and now, with the force growing larger each day, Volis was achieving a strength that nearly rivaled the capital. Perhaps that was why, Kyra realized, the Lord's Men felt the need to humble them.

Elsewhere throughout Escalon, the Lord Governors for Pandesia did not allow knights to gather, did not allow such freedoms, for fear of a revolt. But here, in Volis, it was different. Here, they had no choice: they needed to allow it because they needed the best possible men to keep The Flames.

Kyra turned and looked out, beyond the walls, beyond the rolling hills of white, and in the distance, on the far horizon, even through the snowfall, she could see, just barely, the dim glow of The Flames. The wall of fire that protected the eastern border of Escalon, The Flames, a wall of fire fifty feet deep and several hundred high, burned as brightly as ever, lighting up the night, their outline visible on the horizon and growing more pronounced as night fell. Stretching nearly fifty miles wide, The Flames were the only thing standing between Escalon and the nation of savage trolls to the east.

Even so, enough trolls broke through each year to wreak havoc, and if it weren't for The Keepers, her father's brave men who kept The Flames, Escalon would be a slave nation to the trolls. The trolls, who feared water, could only attack Escalon by land, and The Flames was the only thing keeping them at bay. The Keepers stood guard in shifts, patrolled in rotation, and Pandesia needed them. Others were stationed at The Flames, too – draftees, slaves and criminals – but her father's men, The Keepers, were the only true soldiers amongst the lot, and the only ones who knew how to keep The Flames.

In return, Pandesia allowed Volis and their men their many small freedoms, like Volis, these training grounds, real weapons – a small taste of freedom to make them still feel like free warriors, even if it was an illusion. They were not free men, and all of them knew it. They lived with an awkward balance between freedom and servitude that none could stomach.

But here, at least, in Fighter's Gate, these men were free, as they had once been, warriors who could compete and train and hone their skills. They represented the best of Escalon, better warriors than any Pandesia had to offer, all of them veterans of The Flames – and all serving shifts there, but a day's ride away. Kyra wanted nothing more than to join their ranks, than to prove herself, to be stationed at The Flames, to fight real trolls as they came through and to help guard her kingdom from invasion.

She knew, of course, that it would never be allowed. She was too young to be eligible – and she was a girl. There were no other girls in the ranks, and even if there were, her father would never allow it. His men, too, had looked upon her as a child when she had started visiting them years ago, had been amused by her presence, like a spectator watching. But after the men had left, she had remained behind, alone, training every day and night on the empty fields, using their weapons, targets. They had been surprised at first to arrive the following day to find arrow marks in their targets – and even more surprised when they were in the center. But over time, they had become used to it.

Kyra began to earn their respect, especially on the rare occasions she had been allowed to join them. By now, two years later, they all knew she could hit targets most of them could not – and their tolerating her had morphed to something else: respecting her. Of course, she had not fought in battles, as these other men had, had never killed a man, or stood guard at The Flames, or met a troll in battle. She could not swing a sword or a battle axe or halberd, or wrestle as these men could. She did not have nearly their physical strength, which she regretted dearly.

Yet Kyra had learned she had a natural skill with two weapons, each of which made her, despite her size and sex, a formidable opponent: her bow, and her staff. The former she had taken to naturally, while the latter she had stumbled upon accidentally, moons ago, when she could not lift a double-handed sword. Back then, the men had laughed at her inability to wield the sword, and as an insult, one of them had chucked her a staff derisively.

"See if you can lift this stick instead!" he'd yelled, and the others had laughed. Kyra had never forgotten her shame at that moment.

At first, her father's men had viewed her staff as a joke; after all, they used it merely for a training weapon, these brave men who carried double-handed swords and hatchets and halberds, who could cut through a tree with a single stroke. They looked to her stick of wood as a plaything, and it had given her even less respect than she already had.

But she had turned a joke into an unexpected weapon of vengeance, a weapon to be feared. A weapon that now even many of her father's men could not defend against. Kyra had been surprised at its light weight, and even more surprised to discover that she was quite good with it naturally – so fast that she could land blows while soldiers were still raising their swords. More than one of the men she had sparred with had been left black and blue by it and, one blow at a time, she had fought her way to respect.

Kyra, through endless nights of training on her own, of teaching herself, had mastered moves which dazzled the men, moves which none of them could quite understand. They had grown interested in her staff, and she had taught them. In Kyra's mind, her bow and her staff complemented each other, each of equal necessity: her bow she needed for long-distance combat, and her staff for close fighting.

Kyra also discovered she had an innate gift that these men lacked: she was nimble. She was like a minnow in a sea of slow-moving sharks, and while these aging men had great power, Kyra could dance around them, could leap into the air, could even flip over them and land in a perfect roll – or on her feet. And when her nimbleness combined with her staff technique, it made for a lethal combination.

“What is *she* doing here?” came a gruff voice.

Kyra, standing to the side of the training grounds beside Anvin and Vidar, heard the approach of horses, and turned to see Maltren riding up, flanked by a few of his soldier friends, still breathing hard as he held a sword, fresh from the grounds. He looked down at her disdainfully and her stomach tightened. Of all her father's men, Maltren was the only one who disliked her. He had hated her, for some reason, from the first time he'd laid eyes upon her.

Maltren sat on his horse, and seethed; with his flat nose and ugly face, he was a man who loved to hate, and he seemed to have found a target in Kyra. He had always been opposed to her presence here, probably because she was a girl.

“You should be back in your father's fort, girl,” he said, “preparing for the feast with all the other young, ignorant girls.”

Leo, beside Kyra, snarled up at Maltren, and Kyra laid a reassuring hand on his head, keeping him back.

“And why is that wolf allowed on our grounds?” Maltren added.

Anvin and Vidar gave Maltren a cold, hard look, taking Kyra's side, and Kyra stood her ground and smiled back, knowing she had their protection and that he could not force her to leave.

“Perhaps you should go back to the training ground,” she countered, her voice mocking, “and not concern yourself with the comings and goings of a young, ignorant girl.”

Maltren reddened, unable to respond. He turned, preparing to storm off, but not without taking one last jab at her.

“It's spears today,” he said. “You'd best stay out of the way of real men throwing real weapons.”

He turned and rode off with the others and as she watched him go, her joy at being here was tempered by his presence.

Anvin gave her a consoling look and lay a hand on her shoulder.

“The first lesson of a warrior,” he said, “is to learn to live with those who hate you. Like it or not, you will find yourself fighting side-by-side with them, dependent on them for your lives. Oftentimes, your worst enemies will not come from without, but from within.”

“And those who can't fight, run their mouths,” came a voice.

Kyra turned to see Arthfael approaching, grinning, quick to take her side, as he always was. Like Anvin and Vidar, Arthfael, a tall, fierce warrior with a stark bald head and a long, stiff black

beard, had a soft spot for her. He was one of the best swordsmen, rarely bested, and he always stood up for her. She took comfort in his presence.

“It’s just talk,” Arthfael added. “If Maltren were a better warrior, he’d be more concerned with himself than others.”

Anvin, Vidar and Arthfael mounted their horses and took off with the others, and Kyra stood there watching them, thinking. Why did some people hate? she wondered. She did not know if she would ever understand it.

As they charged across the grounds, racing in wide loops, Kyra studied the great warhorses in awe, eager for the day when she might have one of her own. She watched the men circle the grounds, riding alongside the stone walls, their horses sometimes slipping in the snow. The men grabbed spears handed to them by eager squires, and as they rounded the loop, they threw them at distant targets: shields hanging from branches. When they hit, the distinct clang of metal rang out.

It was harder than it looked, she could see, to throw while on horseback, and more than one of the men missed, especially as they aimed for the smaller shields. Of those who hit, few hit in the center – except for Anvin, Vidar, Arthfael and a few others. Maltren, she noticed, missed several times, cursing under his breath and glaring over at her, as if she were to blame.

Kyra, wanting to keep warm, pulled out her staff and began spinning and twirling it in her hands, over her head, around and around, twisting and turning it like a living thing. She thrust at imaginary enemies, blocked imaginary blows, switching hands, over her neck, around her waist, the staff like a third arm for her, its wood well-worn from years of molding it.

While the men circled the fields, Kyra ran off to her own little field, a small section of the training grounds neglected by the men but which she loved for herself. Small pieces of armor dangled from ropes in a grove of trees, spread out at all different heights, and Kyra ran through and, pretending each target was an opponent, struck each one with her staff. The air filled with her clanging as she ran through the grove, slashing, weaving and ducking as they swung back at her. In her mind she attacked and defended gloriously, conquering an army of imaginary foes.

“Kill anyone yet?” came a mocking voice.

Kyra turned to see Maltren ride up on his horse, laughing derisively at her, before he rode off. She fumed, wishing that someone would put him in his place.

Kyra took a break as she saw the men, done with their spears, dismount and form a circle in the center of the clearing. Their squires rushed forward and handed them wooden training swords, made of a thick oak, weighing nearly as much as steel. Kyra kept to the periphery, her heart quickening as she watched these men square off with each other, wanting more than anything to join them.

Before they began, Anvin stepped into the middle and faced them all.

“On this holiday, we spar for a special bounty,” he announced. “To the victor shall go the choice portion of the feast!”

A cry of excitement followed, as the men charged each other, the click-clack of their wooden swords filling the air, driving each other back and forth.

The sparring was punctuated by the blasts of a horn, sounding every time a fighter was struck by a blow, and sending him to the sidelines. The horn sounded frequently, and soon the ranks began to thin, most of the men now standing to the side and watching.

Kyra stood on the sidelines with them, burning to spar, though she was not allowed. Yet today was her birthday, she was fifteen now, and she felt ready. She felt it was time to press her case.

“Let me join them!” she pleaded to Anvin, who was standing nearby, watching.

Anvin shook his head, never taking his eyes off the action.

“Today marks my fifteenth year!” she insisted. “Allow me to fight!”

He glanced over at her skeptically.

“This is a training ground for men,” chimed in Maltren, standing on the sidelines after losing a point. “Not young girls. You can sit and watch with the other squires, and bring us water if we demand it.”

Kyra flushed.

“Are you so afraid that a girl might defeat you?” she countered, standing her ground, feeling a rush of anger within her. She was her father’s daughter, after all, and no one could speak to her like that.

Some of the men snickered, and this time, Maltren blushed.

“She has a point,” Vidar chimed in. “Maybe we should let her spar. What’s to lose?”

“Spar with what?” Maltren countered.

“My staff!” Kyra called out. “Against your wooden swords.”

Maltren laughed.

“That would be a sight,” he said.

All eyes turned to Anvin, as he stood there, debating.

“You get hurt, your father will kill me,” he said.

“I won’t get hurt,” she pleaded.

He stood there for what felt like forever, until finally he sighed.

“I see no harm in it then,” he said. “If nothing else, it will keep you silent. As long as these men have no objection,” he added, turning to the soldiers.

“AYE!” called out a dozen of her father’s men in unison, all enthusiastically rooting for her. Kyra loved them for it, more than she could say. She saw the admiration they held for her, the same love they reserved for her father. She did not have many friends, and these men meant the world to her.

Maltren scoffed.

“Let the girl make a fool of herself then,” he said. “Might teach her a lesson once and for all.”

A horn sounded, and as another man left the circle, Kyra rushed in.

Kyra felt all eyes on her as the men stared, clearly not expecting this. She found herself facing her opponent, a tall man of stocky build in his thirties, a powerful warrior she had known since her father’s days at court. From having observed him, she knew him to be a good fighter – but also overconfident, charging in the beginning of each fight, a bit reckless.

He turned to Anvin, frowning.

“What insult is this?” he asked. “I shall not fight a girl.”

“You insult yourself by fearing to fight me,” Kyra replied, indignant. “I have two hands, and two legs, just as you. If you will not fight me, then concede defeat!”

He blinked, shocked, then scowled back.

“Very well then,” he said. “Don’t go running to your father after you lose.”

He charged at full speed, as she knew he would, raised his wooden sword hard and high, and came straight down, aiming for her shoulder. It was a move she had anticipated, one she had seen him perform many times, one he clumsily foreshadowed by the motion of his arms. His wooden sword was powerful, but it was also heavy and clumsy next to her staff.

Kyra watched him closely, waited until the last moment, then sidestepped, allowing the powerful blow to come straight down beside her. In the same motion, she swung her staff around and whacked him in the side of his shoulder.

He groaned as he stumbled sideways. He stood there, stunned, annoyed, having to concede defeat.

“Anyone else?” Kyra asked, smiling wide, turning and facing the circle of men.

Most of them wore smiles, clearly proud of her, proud of watching her grow up and reach this point. Except, of course, Maltren, who frowned back. He looked as if he were about to challenge her when suddenly another soldier appeared, facing off with a serious expression. This man was shorter and wider, with an unkempt red beard and fierce eyes. She could tell by the way he held his sword

that he was more cautious than her previous opponent. She took that as a compliment: finally, they were beginning to take her seriously.

He charged, and Kyra did not understand why, but for some reason, knowing what to do came easily to her. It was as if her instincts kicked in and took over for her. She found herself to be much lighter and more nimble than these men, with their heavy armor and thick, wooden swords. They all were fighting for power, and they all expected their foes to challenge and block them. Kyra, though, was happy to dodge them, and refused to fight on their terms. They fought for power – but she fought for speed.

Kyra's staff moved in her hand like an extension of her; she spun it so quickly her opponents had no time to react, they still in mid-swing while she was already behind them. Her new opponent came at her with a lunge to the chest – but she merely sidestepped and swung her staff up, striking his wrist and dislodging his sword from his grip. She then brought the other end around and cracked him on the head.

The horn sounded, the point hers, and he looked at her in shock, holding his forehead, his sword on the ground. Kyra, examining her handiwork, realizing she was still standing, was a bit startled herself.

Kyra had become the person to beat, and now the men, no longer hesitant, lined up to test their skills against her.

The snowstorm raged on as torches were lit against the twilight and Kyra sparred with one man after the next. No longer did they wear smiles: their expressions were now deadly serious, perplexed, then outright annoyed, as no one could touch her – and each ended up defeated by her. Against one man, she leapt over his head as he thrust, spinning and landing behind him before whacking his shoulder; for another, she ducked and rolled, switched hands with her staff and landed the decisive blow, unexpectedly, with her left hand. For each, her moves were different, part gymnast, part swordsman, so none could anticipate her. These men did a walk of shame to the sidelines, each amazed at having to admit defeat.

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