

A dragon with large, dark wings is shown in flight, moving from the left side of the frame towards the center. The background is a misty, overcast sky with soft, diffused light. Below the dragon, a dense forest of green trees is visible. In the distance, on the right side, a stone castle or fortress is partially visible through the haze. The overall mood is mysterious and epic.

A REALM OF SHADOWS

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK #5)

MORGAN RICE

Kings and Sorcerers

Морган Райс

A Realm of Shadows

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2015

Райс М.

A Realm of Shadows / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2015 — (Kings and Sorcerers)

The #1 Bestselling series, with over 400 five star reviews on Amazon!"A Realm of Shadows" is book #5 in Morgan Rice's bestselling epic fantasy series "Kings and Sorcerers"!In "A Realm of Shadows", Kyra finds herself in the midst of a burning capital, attacked by a host of dragons, clinging for life. With her beloved homeland destroyed, The Flames down and the trolls pouring in, Kyra must urgently quest to Marda to retrieve the magic weapon before it is too late – even if it takes her into the very heart of darkness.Duncan finds himself trapped, with the others, in the burning capital, and he uses all his wits to find his men, attempt escape, and rally his forces to regroup and attack Pandesia. Across the kingdom, Merk sails with King Tarnis' daughter through the Bay of Death as they abandon the Tower of Kos and sail for the warrior isle of Knossos. Pursued by Vesuvius and his army of trolls, crossing the world's most treacherous waters, they know they have little chance to reach the isle, and even less chance of escape.Dierdre and Marco survive the tidal wave that destroyed Ur only to find their beloved city under water. With everyone they knew and loved lost and dead, they must pick up the pieces and journey to the one person they know who is left alive: Kyra. Alec, meanwhile sails back for Escalon with the people of The Lost Isles, holding the precious sword that might just change everything. But none expect to encounter a land destroyed, a land that is now teeming with dragons.With its strong atmosphere and complex characters, "A Realm of Shadows" 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, 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

A Realm of Shadows

*“Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.”*

William Shakespeare, Macbeth

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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 six books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

TURNED (Book #1 in the Vampire Journals), **ARENA ONE** (Book #1 of the Survival Trilogy) and **A QUEST OF HEROES** (Book #1 in the Sorcerer's Ring) and **RISE OF THE DRAGONS** (Kings and Sorcerers – Book #1) are each available as a free download!

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“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

“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

“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

Books by Morgan Rice

KINGS AND SORCERERS

RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Book #1)
RISE OF THE VALIANT (Book #2)
THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)
A FORGE OF VALOR (Book #4)
A REALM OF SHADOWS (Book #5)
NIGHT OF THE BOLD (Book #6)

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)
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A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
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A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)
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THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



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* * *



Chapter One

The captain of the Royal Guard stood atop his watchtower and looked down at the hundreds of Keepers below him, all the young soldiers patrolling the Flames under his watchful eye, and he sighed with resentment. A man worthy of leading battalions, the captain felt it was a daily insult for him to be stationed here, at the farthest ends of Escalon, watching over an unruly group of criminals they liked to call soldiers. These were not soldiers – they were slaves, criminals, boys, old men, the unwanted of society, all enlisted to watch a wall of flames that had not changed in a thousand years. It was really just a glorified jail, and he deserved better. He deserved to be anywhere but here, stationed guarding the royal gates of Andros.

The captain glanced down, barely interested, as another scuffle ensued, the third this day. This one appeared to be between two overgrown boys, fighting over a scrap of meat. A crowd of shouting boys quickly gathered around them, cheering them on. This was all they had to look forward to out here. They were all too bored, standing and watching the Flames day after day, all desperate for bloodlust – and he let them have their fun. If they killed each other, so much the better – that would be two fewer boys for him to watch over.

There came a shout as one of the boys bested the other, plunging a dagger into his heart. The boy went limp as the others cheered his death, then quickly raided his corpse for anything they could find. It was, at least, a mercifully fast death, far better than the slow ones the others would face out here. The victor stepped forward, shoved the others aside, and reached down and grabbed the morsel of bread from the dead man's pocket, stuffing it back into his own.

It was just another day here at the Flames, and the captain burned with indignity. He did not deserve this. He had made one mistake, once disobeying a direct order, and as punishment he had been sent here. It was unfair. What he wouldn't give to be able to go back and change that one moment in his past. Life, he thought, could be too exacting, too absolute, too cruel.

The captain, resigned to his fate, turned and stared back at the Flames. There was something about their ever-present crackle, even after all these years, that he found alluring, hypnotic. It was like staring into the face of God Himself. As he got lost in the glow, it made him wonder about the nature of life. It all felt so meaningless. His role here – all these boys' roles here – felt so meaningless. The Flames had stood for thousands of years and would never die, and as long as they burned, the troll nation could never break through. Marda might as well be across the sea. If it were up to him, he would pick the best of these boys and station them elsewhere in Escalon, along the coasts, where they really needed them, and he would put all the criminals amongst them to death.

The captain lost track of time, as he often did, getting lost in the glow of the Flames, and it wasn't until late in the day that he suddenly squinted, alert. He had seen something, something he could not quite process, and he rubbed his eyes, knowing he must be seeing things. Yet as he watched, slowly he realized he was not seeing things. The world was changing before his eyes.

Slowly, the ever-present crackle, the one he had lived by for every waking moment since he had arrived here, fell silent. The heat that had been pouring off the Flames suddenly vanished, leaving him feeling a chill, a real chill, for the first time since he had been here. And then, as he watched, the column of bright red and orange flames, the one that had burned his eyes, had lit up the day and night incessantly, for the first time, was gone.

It disappeared.

The captain rubbed his eyes again, wondering. Was he dreaming? Before him, as he watched, the Flames were lowering, down to the ground, like a curtain being dropped. And a second later, there was nothing there at all.

Nothing.

The captain's breath stopped, panic and disbelief slowly welling up inside him. He found himself looking out, for the first time, to what lay on the other side: Marda. He had a clear and unobstructed view. It was a land filled with black – black, barren mountains, black craggy rocks, black earth, dead, black trees. It was a land he was never meant to see. A land that no one in Escalon was ever meant to see.

There came a stunned silence as the boys below, for the first time, stopped fighting amongst themselves. All of them, frozen in shock, turned and gaped. The wall of flame was gone, and standing there, on the other side, facing them greedily, was an army of trolls, filling the land, filling the horizon.

A nation.

The captain's heart fell. There, just feet away, stood a nation of the most disgusting beasts he had ever seen, overgrown, grotesque, misshapen, all wielding huge halberds, and all patiently awaiting their moment. Millions of them stared back, seemingly equally stunned, as it clearly dawned on them that there was now nothing separating them from Escalon.

The two nations stood there, facing off, looking at each other, the trolls beaming with victory, the humans with panic. After all, there stood merely hundreds of humans here, against a million trolls.

Breaking the silence there arose a shout. It came from the troll side, a shout of triumph, and it was followed by a great thunder, as the trolls charged. They rumbled through like a herd of buffalo, raising their halberds and chopping off the heads of panic-stricken boys who could not even muster the courage to run. It was a wave of death, a wave of destruction.

The captain himself stood there on his tower, too terrified to do anything, to even draw his sword, as the trolls raced for him. A moment later he felt himself falling, as the angry mob knocked down his tower. He felt himself landing in the trolls' arms, and he shrieked as he felt himself grabbed by their claws, torn to pieces.

And as he lay there dying, knowing what was coming for Escalon, a final thought crossed his mind: the boy who was stabbed, who had died for the morsel of bread, was the luckiest of all.

Chapter Two

Dierdre felt her lungs being crushed as she tumbled end over end, deep underwater, desperate for air. She tried to get her bearings but was unable, thrown around by the massive waves of water, her world turning upside down again and again. She wanted more than anything to take a deep breath, her entire body screaming for oxygen, yet she knew that to do so would certainly mean her death.

She closed her eyes and cried, her tears merging with the water, wondering if this hell would ever end. Her only solace came in thinking of Marco. She had seen him, with her, tumbling in the waters, had felt him holding her hand, and she turned and searched for him. Yet as she looked, she saw nothing, nothing but blackness and waves of foaming, crushing water driving her down. Marco, she assumed, was long dead.

Dierdre wanted to cry, yet the pain knocked any thoughts of self-pity from her mind, made her think only of survival. For just when she thought the wave could not get any stronger, it smashed her down into the ground, again and again, pinning her down with such force that she felt as if the entire weight of the world were atop her. She knew she would not survive.

How ironic, she thought, to die here, in her home city, crushed beneath a tidal wave created by Pandesians' cannon fire. She would rather have died any other way. She could, she thought, handle almost any form of death – except for drowning. She couldn't take this awful pain, the flailing, being unable to open her mouth and take that one breath that every ounce of her body so desperately craved.

She felt herself getting weaker, giving in to the pain – and then, just as she felt her eyes about to close, just as she knew she could not stand it one second longer, she suddenly felt herself turning, spinning rapidly upward, the wave shooting her up with the same force that it had used to crush her. She rose upward with the momentum of a catapult, racing for the surface, the sunlight visible, the pressure killing her ears.

To her shock, a moment later she surfaced. She gasped, taking huge gulps of air, more grateful than she had ever been in her life. She gasped, sucking it in, and then a moment later, to her terror, she was sucked back down underwater. This time, though, she had enough oxygen to survive a little longer, and this time the water didn't push her down as far.

She soon rose back up again, surfacing, taking another gasp of air, before being driven down yet again. It was different each time, the wave weakening, and as she surfaced again, she sensed the wave was reaching the end of the city and petering out.

Dierdre soon found herself past the city limits, past all the great buildings, all of them now underwater. She was driven back underwater, yet slow enough to be able to finally open her eyes underwater and see all the grand buildings beneath that had once stood. She saw scores of corpses floating in the water past her, like fish, bodies whose death expressions she already tried to drive from her mind.

Finally, she did not know how much later, Dierdre surfaced, this time for good. She was strong enough to fight the final, weak wave as it tried to suck her back down, and with one last kick, she stayed afloat. The water from the harbor had traveled too far inland, and there was nowhere left for it to go, and Dierdre soon felt herself washed up onto a grassy field somewhere as the waters receded, rushing back out to sea, leaving her alone.

Dierdre lay there on her stomach, face planted in the soggy grass, moaning from the pain. She was still gasping, her lungs aching, breathing deep and savoring every breath. She managed to turn her head weakly, to look back over her shoulder, and she was horrified to see that what had once been a great city was now nothing but sea. She spotted only the highest part of the bell tower, sticking out a few feet, and marveled that it once stood hundreds of feet in the air.

Beyond exhausted, Dierdre finally let herself go. Her face fell to the ground as she lay there, letting the pain of what had happened overcome her. She couldn't move if she tried.

Moments later she was fast asleep, barely alive on a remote field in a corner of the world. Yet somehow, she was alive.

* * *

“Dierdre,” came a voice, and a gentle nudge.

Dierdre peeled open her eyes, dazed to see it was sunset. Icy cold, her clothes still wet, she tried to get her bearings, wondering how long she had been lying here, wondering if she were alive or dead. Then the hand came again, nudging her shoulder.

Dierdre looked up and there, to her immense relief, was Marco. He was alive, she was overjoyed to see. He looked beaten up, haggard, too pale, and he looked as if he had aged a hundred years. Yet he was alive. Somehow, he had managed to survive.

Marco knelt beside her, smiling yet looking down at her with sad eyes, eyes not shining with the life they once held.

“Marco,” she answered weakly, startled at how raspy her own voice was.

She noticed a gash on the side of his face and, concerned, reached out to touch it.

“You look as bad as I feel,” she said.

He helped her up and she rose to her feet, her body wracked with pain from all the aches and bruises, scratches and cuts all up and down her arms and legs. Yet as she tested each limb, at least nothing was broken.

Dierdre took a deep breath and steeled herself as she turned and looked behind her. As she feared, it was a nightmare: her beloved city was gone, now nothing but a part of the sea, the only thing sticking up a small part of the bell tower. On the horizon beyond it she saw a fleet of black Pandesian ships, making their way deeper and deeper inland.

“We can’t stay here,” Marco said with urgency. “They’re coming.”

“Where can we go?” she asked, feeling hopeless.

Marco stared back, blank, clearly not knowing either.

Dierdre stared out at the sunset, trying to think, blood pounding in her ears. Everyone she knew and loved was dead. She felt she had nothing left to live for, nowhere left to go. Where could you go when your home city was destroyed? When the weight of the world was bearing down on you?

Dierdre closed her eyes and shook her head in grief, wishing it all away. Her father, she knew, was back there, dead. His soldiers were all dead. People she had known and loved all her life, all of them dead, all thanks to these Pandesian monsters. Now there was no one left to stop them. What cause was there to go on?

Dierdre, despite herself, broke down weeping. Thinking of her father, she dropped to her knees, feeling devastated. She wept and wept, wanting to die here herself, wishing she *had* died, cursing the heavens for allowing her to live. Why couldn’t she have just drowned in that wave? Why couldn’t she just have been killed with the others? Why had she been cursed with life?

She felt a soothing hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Dierdre,” Marco said softly.

Dierdre flinched, embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said, weeping. “It’s just that... my father... Now I have nothing.”

“You’ve lost everything,” Marco said, his voice heavy, too. “I have, too. I don’t want to go on, either. But we *have* to. We can’t lie here and die. It would dishonor them. It would dishonor everything they lived and fought for.”

In the long silence that followed, Dierdre slowly pulled herself upright, realizing he was right. Besides, as she looked up at Marco’s brown eyes, staring back at her with compassion, she realized she *did* have someone. She had Marco. She also had the spirit of her father, looking down, watching over her, wishing her to be strong.

She forced herself to shake out of it. She had to be strong. Her father would want her to be strong. Self-pity, she realized, would help no one. And neither would her death.

She stared back at Marco, and she could see more than compassion – she could also see the love in his eyes for her.

Not even fully aware of what she was doing, Dierdre, her heart pounding, leaned in and met Marco's lips in an unexpected kiss. For a moment, she felt herself transported to another world, and all her worries disappeared.

She slowly pulled back, staring at him, shocked. Marco looked equally surprised. He took her hand.

As he did, encouraged, filled with hope, she was able to think clearly again – and a thought came to her. There was someone else, a place to go, a person to turn to.

Kyra.

Dierdre felt a sudden rush of hope.

"I know where we must go," she said excitedly, in a rush.

Marco looked at her, wondering.

"Kyra," she said. "We can find her. She will help us. Wherever she is, she is fighting. We can join her."

"But how do you know she is alive?" he asked.

Dierdre shook her head.

"I don't," she replied. "But Kyra always survives. She is the strongest person I have ever met."

"Where is she?" he asked.

Dierdre thought, and she recalled the last time she had seen Kyra, forking north, for the Tower.

"The Tower of Ur," she said.

Marco looked back, surprised; then a glimmer of optimism crossed his eyes.

"The Watchers are there," he said. "As are other warriors. Men who can fight with us." He nodded, excited. "A good choice," he added. "We can be safe in that tower. And if your friend is there, then all the better. It's a day's hike from here. Let us go. We must move quickly."

He took her hand, and without another word the two of them took off, Dierdre filled with a new sense of optimism as they headed into the forest, and somewhere, on the horizon, for the Tower of Ur.

Chapter Three

Kyra braced herself as she walked into a field of fire. The flames rose to the sky then lowered just as quickly, turning all different colors, caressing her as she walked with her arms out by her sides. She felt its intensity, felt it enveloping her, wrapping her in a thin embrace. She knew she was walking into death, and yet she could walk no other way.

And yet somehow, incredibly, she did not feel pain. She felt a sense of peace. A sense of her life ending.

She looked out and through the flames, she saw her mother, awaiting her somewhere at the far end, on the opposite side of the field. She felt a sense of peace, as she finally knew she would be in her mother's embrace.

I'm here, Kyra, she called. Come to me.

Kyra peered into the flames and could just make out her mother's face, nearly translucent, partially hidden as a wall of flame shot up. She walked deeper into the crackling flames, unable to stop until she was surrounded on all sides.

A roar cut through the air, even above the sound of the fire, and she looked up and was in awe to see a sky filled with dragons. They circled and shrieked, and as she watched, one huge dragon roared and dove down just for her.

Kyra sensed it was death coming for her.

As the dragon neared, its talons extended, suddenly the ground dropped out beneath her and Kyra found herself falling, hurtling down into the earth, an earth filled with flame, a place from which she knew she would never escape.

Kyra opened her eyes with a start, breathing hard. She looked all around, wondering where she was, feeling pain in every corner of her body. She felt the pain in her face, her cheek swollen, throbbing, and as she slowly lifted her head, finding it hard to breathe, she found that her face was encased in mud. She was, she realized, lying face first in the mud, and as she placed her palms in it and slowly pushed up, she wiped mud back from her face, wondering what was happening.

A sudden roar ripped through the air, and Kyra looked up and felt a wave of terror as she spotted something in the sky that was very real. The air was filled with dragons of all shapes and sizes and colors, all circling, screeching, breathing fire into the air, filled with fury. As she watched, one swooped down and breathed a column of flame all the way to the ground.

Kyra looked over and took in her surroundings, and her heart skipped a beat as she realized where she was: Andros.

It all came rushing back to her. She had been flying atop Theon, racing back to Andros to save her father, when they had been attacked in the sky by that flock of dragons. They had appeared from nowhere in the sky, had bitten Theon, had thrown them down to the ground. Kyra realized she must have blacked out.

Now she woke to a wave of heat, of awful shrieking, of a capital in chaos, and she looked about and saw the capital aflame. Everywhere, people were running for their lives, shrieking, as fire descended in waves, like a storm. It looked as if the end of the world had come.

Kyra heard labored breathing, and her heart fell to see Theon lying close by, on his side, wounded, blood pouring from his scales. His eyes were closed, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth, and he looked on the verge of death. The only reason they were still alive, she realized, was that she and Theon were covered in a mound of rubble. They must have been thrown into a building, which collapsed on top of them. At least that had kept them sheltered, out of view of the dragons high above.

Kyra knew she had to get herself and Theon out of there at once. They hadn't much time until they were spotted.

“Theon!” she urged.

She turned and heaved, crushed by the rubble, and finally managed to shove a huge piece of rubble off her back, freeing herself. She then hurried over to Theon and frantically shoved at the mound of rubble atop him. She was able to push off most of the rocks, yet as she shoved at the large boulder on his back, pinning him down, she got nowhere. She shoved again and again, yet no matter how hard she tried, it would not budge.

Kyra ran over and grabbed Theon’s face, desperate to rouse him. She stroked his scales, and slowly, to her relief, Theon opened his eyes. Yet he then closed his eyes again, as she shook him harder.

“Wake up!” Kyra demanded. “I need you!”

Theon’s eyes opened again, slightly, then turned and looked over at her. The pain and fury in his eyes softened as he recognized her. He tried to shift, to get up, but clearly he was too weak; the boulder pinned him down.

Kyra shoved the boulder furiously, yet she broke down crying as she realized they could not get it to move. Theon was stuck. He would die here. And so would she.

Kyra, hearing a roar, looked up and saw a massive dragon with spiked green scales had spotted them. It roared with fury, then began to dive right for them.

Leave me.

Kyra heard a voice reverberating deep inside her. Theon’s voice.

Hide. Go far from here. While there is still time.

“No!” she cried, shaking, refusing to leave him.

Go, he urged. Or else we will both die here.

“Then we shall both die!” she cried, a steely determination overtaking her. She would not abandon her friend. Not ever.

The sky darkened and Kyra looked up to see the huge dragon diving down, talons extended. It opened its mouth, rows of sharpened teeth showing, and she knew she would not survive. But she did not care. She would not abandon Theon. Death would take her. But not cowardice. She did not fear dying.

Only not living well.

Chapter Four

Duncan ran with the others through the streets of Andros, hobbling, trying his best to keep pace with Aidan, Motley, and the young girl with them, Cassandra, while Aidan's dog, White, nipped at his heels and urged him on. Dragging his arm was his old and trusted commander, Anvin, his new squire Septin by his side, trying his best to keep him moving, yet clearly in bad shape himself. Duncan could see how injured his friend was, and it moved him that he had come in this state, had risked his life and traveled all this way to free him.

The ragtag group sprinted down the war-torn streets of Andros, chaos erupting all around them, all the odds against them for survival. On the one hand, Duncan felt so relieved to be free, so happy to see his son again, so grateful to be with all of them. Yet as he searched the skies, he also sensed he had left a jail cell only to be thrown into a sure death. The sky was filled with circling dragons, swooping down, swiping buildings, destroying the city as they breathed their awful columns of flame. Entire streets were filled with fire, blocking off the group's every turn. As one street at a time was lost, escape from the capital seemed less and less likely.

Motley clearly knew these back alleys well, and he led them deftly, turning down one alley after another, finding shortcuts everywhere, managing to avoid the roving packs of Pandesian soldiers, which was the other threat to their escape. Yet Motley, for all his craftiness, could not avoid the dragons, and as he turned them down another alley, it, too, was suddenly aflame. They all stopped in their tracks, faces burning from the heat, and retreated.

Duncan, covered in sweat as he backed up, looked to Motley, and he took no solace as, this time, Motley turned every which way, his face etched in panic.

"This way!" Motley finally said.

He turned and led them down another side alley, and they ducked beneath a stone arch right before a dragon filled the spot they had just stood with a fresh wave of fire.

As they ran, it pained Duncan to see this great city torn apart, this place he had once loved and defended. He could not help but feel as if Escalon would never be returned to its former glory. That his homeland was ruined forever.

There came a shout, and Duncan glanced back over his shoulder to see dozens of Pandesian soldiers had spotted them. They were chasing them down the alley, closing in, and Duncan knew they could not fight them – and could not outrun them. The exit to the city was still far, and their time had run out.

There suddenly came a great crash – and Duncan looked up to see a dragon swipe the bell tower off the castle with its talons.

"Look out!" he yelled.

He lunged forward and knocked Aidan and the others out of the way right before the remnants of the tower crashed beside them. A huge chunk of stone landed behind him with a deafening crash, raising up a pile of dust.

Aidan looked up at his father, shock and gratitude in his eyes, and Duncan felt a sense of satisfaction that he had at least saved his son's life.

Duncan heard the muffled shouts, and he turned and realized, with gratitude, that the rubble had at least blocked the way of the pursuing soldiers.

They kept running, Duncan struggling to keep up, his weakness and injuries from his imprisonment gnawing away at him; he was still malnourished, bruised, and beaten, and each step was a painful effort. Yet he forced himself to go on, if for no other reason than to make sure his son and his friends survived. He could not let them down.

They turned a narrow corner and reached a fork in the alleyways. They paused, all looking to Motley.

“We have to get out of this city!” Cassandra yelled to Motley, clearly frustrated. “And you don’t even know where you’re going!”

Motley looked left, then right, clearly stumped.

“There used to be a brothel down this alley,” he said, looking to his right. “It leads out the back of the city.”

“A brothel?” Cassandra retorted. “Nice company that you keep.”

“I don’t care what company you keep,” Anvin added, “as long as it gets us out of here.”

“Let’s just hope it’s not blocked,” Aidan added.

“Let’s go!” Duncan called out.

Motley began to run again, turning right, out of shape and gasping for breath.

They turned and followed, all putting their hope in Motley as he ran through the deserted back alleys of the capital.

They turned again and again, and finally, they came upon a low stone archway. They all ducked, running through it, and as they emerged from the other side, Duncan was relieved to find it open up. He was thrilled to see, in the distance, the rear gate of Andros, and the open plains and desert beyond it. Just beyond the gate stood dozens of Pandesian horses, tied up, clearly abandoned by their dead riders.

Motley grinned.

“I told you,” he said.

Duncan ran with the others, gaining speed, feeling returned to his old self again, feeling a whole new rush of hope – when suddenly, there came a cry that pierced his soul.

He stopped short, listening.

“Wait!” he called out to the others.

They all stopped and looked back at him as if he were mad.

Duncan stood there, waiting. Could it be? He could have sworn he had heard the voice of his daughter. Kyra. Was he hearing things?

Of course, he must have imagined it. How could she possibly be *here*, in Andros? She was far from here, across Escalon, in the Tower of Ur, safe and sound.

Yet he could not bring himself to leave after hearing it.

He stood there, frozen, waiting – and then, he heard it again. His hair stood on end. He was sure this time. It was Kyra.

“Kyra!” he said aloud, his eyes widening.

Without thinking, he turned his back on the others, turned his back on the exit, and ran back into the flaming city.

“Where are you going!?” Motley called out behind him.

“Kyra is here!” he called, still running. “And she’s in danger!”

“Are you mad?” Motley said, rushing up and grabbing his shoulder. “You run back to a certain death!”

But Duncan, determined, shoved Motley’s hand away and continued to run.

“A certain death,” he replied, “would be turning my back on the daughter I love.”

Duncan did not pause as he turned down an alleyway alone, sprinting back into death, into a city aflame. He knew it would mean his death. And he did not care. As long as he could see Kyra again.

Kyra, he thought. Wait for me.

Chapter Five

The Most Holy and Supreme Ra sat on his golden throne in the capital, in the midst of Andros, looked down on the chamber filled with his generals, slaves, and supplicants, and rubbed his palms into the throne's arms, burning with dissatisfaction. He knew he should feel victorious, sated, after all he had achieved. After all, Escalon had been the last holdout of freedom in the world, the last place in his empire not completely under his subjugation, and in the last few days he had managed to lead his forces through one of his great routs of all time. He closed his eyes and smiled, relishing the image of running over the Southern Gate, unimpeded, of razing all the cities in southern Escalon, of blazing a trail north, all the way to the capital. He grinned as he reflected that this country, once so bountiful, was now a massive grave.

In the north, Escalon, he knew, fared no better. His fleets had managed to flood the great city of Ur, now but a memory. On the eastern coast, his fleets had taken the Sea of Tears and destroyed all the port cities along the coast, beginning with Esephus. Hardly an inch of Escalon lay out of his grasp.

Most of all, Escalon's defiant commander, the rabble-rouser who had started all of this, Duncan, lay in a dungeon as Ra's captive. Indeed, as Ra looked out and watched the sun rise through the window, he was giddy with excitement at the idea of personally walking Duncan to the gallows. He would personally pull the cord and watch him die. He smiled at the thought. Today would be a beautiful day.

Ra's victory was complete on all fronts – and yet, still, he did not feel sated. Ra sat there and looked deep within himself, trying to understand this feeling of dissatisfaction. He had everything he wanted. What was nagging at him?

Ra had never felt sated, not in any of his campaigns, not his entire life. There had always been something burning in him, a desire for more, and more. Even now, he could feel it. What else could he do to fulfill his desires? he wondered. To make his victory truly feel complete?

Slowly, a plan came to him. He could murder every man, woman, and child left in Escalon. He could rape the women and torture the men first. He smiled wide. Yes, that would help. In fact, he could start right now.

Ra looked down at his advisors, hundreds of his best men, all kneeling before him, heads lowered, none daring to make eye contact. They all stared at the ground soundlessly, as they should. After all, they were lucky to be in the presence of a god such as himself.

Ra cleared his throat.

"Bring me the ten most beautiful women left in the land of Escalon at once," he commanded, his deep voice booming across the chamber.

One of his servants bowed his head until it touched the marble floor.

"Yes, my lord!" he said, as he turned and ran off.

Yet as the servant reached the door it slammed open first, as another servant burst into the chamber, frantic, running right toward Ra's throne. All the others in the room gasped, horrified by the affront. No one dared to ever enter a room, much less approach Ra, without a formal invitation. Doing so meant a certain death.

The servant threw himself face-first on the floor, and Ra glared down in disgust.

"Kill him," he commanded.

Immediately, several of his soldiers rushed forward and grabbed the man. They dragged him away, flailing, and as they did, he cried: "Wait, my awesome Lord! I come bearing urgent news – news you must hear at once!"

Ra let the man be dragged away, not caring for the news. The man flailed the entire way, until finally as he reached the exit, the door about to close, he yelled:

"Duncan has escaped!"

Ra, feeling a jolt of shock, suddenly raised his right palm. His men stopped, holding the messenger at the door.

Scowling, Ra slowly processed the news. He stood and breathed deep. He descended the ivory steps, one at a time, his golden boots echoing, as he crossed the entire chamber. The room was silent, filled with tension, as he finally stopped right before the messenger. With every step he took, Ra could feel his fury rising within him.

“Tell me again,” Ra commanded, his voice dark and ominous.

The messenger shook.

“I am most sorry, my great and holy Supreme Lord,” he said with a shaking voice, “but Duncan has fled. Someone has broken him out of the dungeons. Our men are pursuing him through the capital even as we speak!”

Ra felt his face flush, felt the fire burning within him. He clenched his fists. He would not allow it. He would not allow himself to be robbed of his final piece of satisfaction.

“Thank you for bringing me this news,” Ra said.

Ra smiled, and for a moment the messenger looked relaxed, even began to smile back, puffing himself up with pride.

Ra *did* reward him. He stepped forward and slowly wrapped his hands around the man’s neck, then squeezed and squeezed. The man’s eyes bulged in his head and he reached up and grabbed Ra’s wrists – but was unable to pull them off. Ra knew he would not be able to. After all, he was just a man, and Ra was the great and holy Ra, the Man Who Was Once a God.

The man collapsed to the floor, dead. Yet it still gave Ra little satisfaction.

“Men!” Ra boomed.

His commanders snapped to attention and looked back with fear.

“Block every exit to the city! Dispatch every soldier we have to find this Duncan. And while you’re at it, kill every last man, woman, and child inside the city of Escalon. GO!”

“Yes, Supreme Lord!” the men replied, as one.

They all raced from the room, stumbling over each other, each rushing to do their master’s bidding faster than the others.

Ra turned, seething, and took a deep breath as he crossed the now empty chamber alone. He exited out to a broad balcony overlooking the city.

Ra stepped outside and felt the fresh air as he surveyed the chaotic city below. His soldiers, he was happy to see, occupied most of it. He wondered where Duncan could be. He admired him, he had to give him that; perhaps he even saw something of himself in him. Still, Duncan would learn what it meant to cross the great Ra. He would learn to accept death graciously. He would learn to submit, like the rest of the world.

Cries began to ring out, and Ra looked down and saw his men raising swords and spears and stabbing unsuspecting men and women and children in the back. Per his orders, the streets began to flow with blood. Ra sighed, contenting himself in this, and taking some satisfaction in it. All of these Escalonites would learn. It was the same everywhere he went, in every country he conquered. They would pay for their commander’s sins.

A sudden noise cut through the air, though, even above the cries below, startling Ra from his reverie. He could not understand what it was, or why it disturbed him so much. It was a low, deep rumble, something like thunder.

Just as he wondered if he had really heard it, it came again, louder, and he realized it was not coming from the ground – but from the sky.

Ra looked up, baffled, peering into the clouds, wondering. The sound came again, and again, and he knew it was not thunder. It was something much more ominous.

As he examined the rolling, gray clouds, Ra suddenly saw a sight that he would never forget. He blinked, certain he was imagining it. But no matter how many times he looked away, it was still there.

Dragons. An entire flock.

They descended for Escalon, talons extended, wings raised, breathing flames of fire. And flying right for him.

Before he could even process it, hundreds of his soldiers below were set aflame by the dragons' breath, shrieking, caught in the columns of fire. Hundreds more groaned as the dragons tore them to shreds.

As he stood there, numb with panic, with disbelief, an enormous dragon singled him out. It aimed for his balcony, raised its talons, and dove.

A moment later, it sliced the stone in half, just missing him as he ducked. Ra, in a panic, felt the stone give way beneath his feet.

Moments later he felt himself falling, flailing, shrieking, down for the ground below. He had thought he was untouchable, greater than them all.

Yet death, after all, had found him.

Chapter Six

Kyle swung his staff with all he had, reeling from exhaustion as he struck both the Pandesian soldiers and the trolls closing in on him from all sides. He felled men and trolls left and right as their swords and halberds clanged off his staff, sparks flying everywhere. Even while defeating them, he could feel the ache, deep in his shoulders. He had been battling them for hours, he was surrounded on all sides now, and his situation, he knew, was dire.

At first the Pandesians and trolls had fought each other, leaving him free to fight whom he wished, yet as they saw Kyle felling everyone around him, they clearly realized it was in their best interest to team up against him. For a moment the Pandesians and trolls had stopped trying to kill each other, and instead all focused on killing him.

As Kyle swung and knocked back three trolls, a Pandesian managed to sneak behind him and slash Kyle's stomach with his sword. Kyle shouted out and reeled from the pain, spinning to avoid the worst of it, yet still bleeding. Before he could parry, at the same time, a troll raised a club and smashed Kyle in the shoulder, knocking the staff from his hand and sending him to his hands and knees.

Kyle knelt there, the pain shooting up and down his shoulder, throbbing, as he tried to catch his breath. Before he could gather himself, yet another troll rushed forward and kicked him in the face, sending him flat on his back.

A Pandesian then stepped forward with a long spear, raised it high with both hands, and brought it down for Kyle's head.

Kyle, not ready to die, spun out of the way, and the spear planted itself in the ground just inches from his face. He continued to roll, gained his feet, and as two more trolls charged, he grabbed a sword from the ground, spun, and stabbed them both.

As several others crowded in, Kyle quickly grabbed his staff and knocked them all out, fighting like a cornered animal as he formed a circle around him. He stood there, breathing heavily, blood pouring from his lip, while his opponents formed a thick circle around him, all closing in, blood in their eyes.

The pain in his stomach and shoulder unbearable, Kyle tried to block it out, tried to focus as he stood there. He faced an imminent death, he knew, and he took solace only in the fact that he had rescued Kyra. That had made it all worth it, and he was willing to pay the price.

He glanced at the horizon, and took solace in the fact that she had gotten away from all this, had ridden away on the back of Andor. He wondered if she was safe, and prayed that she was.

Kyle had fought brilliantly, for hours, one man up against both these armies, and had killed thousands of them. Yet now, he knew, he was too weak to go on. There were just too many of them, and their numbers never seemed to end. He had found himself in the middle of a war, the trolls flooding the land from the north while the Pandesians streamed up from the South, and he could no longer fight them both.

Kyle felt a sudden pain in his ribs as a troll rushed him from behind and jabbed him in the back with the shaft of his ax. Kyle swung around with his staff, slashing the troll in the throat, dropping him – but at the same time two Pandesian soldiers rushed forward and smashed him with their shields. The pain in his head overwhelming, Kyle dropped down to the ground, this time, he knew, for good. He was too weak to rise again.

Kyle closed his eyes and there flashed through his mind images of his life. He saw all the Watchers, people he had served with for centuries, saw all the people he had known and loved. Most of all, he saw Kyra's face. The only thing he regretted was that he would not see her again before he died.

Kyle looked up as three hideous trolls stepped forward, raising their halberds. He knew this was it.

As they began to lower them, everything came into focus. He was able to hear the sound of the wind; to really smell the crisp, cool air. For the first time in centuries, he felt truly alive. He wondered why he had never been able to truly appreciate life until he was almost dead.

As Kyle closed eyes and braced himself for death's embrace, suddenly a roar pierced the sky. It snapped him from his reverie. He blinked and glanced up to see something emerge through the clouds. At first Kyle thought it was angels, coming to take away his dead body.

But then he saw that the trolls above him were frozen in confusion themselves, all searching the sky – and Kyle knew it was real. It was something else.

And then, as he caught a glimpse of what it was, his heart stopped.

Dragons.

A flock of dragons circled, diving down in fury, breathing fire. They descended rapidly, talons extended, letting loose their flame and, without warning, killing hundreds of soldiers and trolls at once. A wave of fire rolled down, spreading, and within seconds, the trolls standing over Kyle were all burnt to a crisp. Kyle, seeing the flames coming, grabbed a huge copper shield beside him and took shelter behind it, curling up in a ball. The heat was intense as the flames rolled off it, nearly burning his hands, yet he held on. The dead trolls and soldiers landed on top of him, their armor further shielding him as yet another wave of flame came, this one more powerful. Ironically, these trolls and Pandesians were now saving him from death.

He held on, sweating, barely able to stand the heat as the dragons dove again and again. Unable to stand it any longer, he passed out, praying with all he was that he was not burned alive.

Chapter Seven

Vesuvius stood at the edge of the cliff, beside the Tower of Kos, staring down at the crashing waves of the Sorrow, the steam still rising from where the Sword of Fire had sunk – and he grinned wide. He had done it. The Sword of Flames was no more. He had robbed the Tower of Kos, had robbed Escalon, of its most precious artifact. He had, once and for all time, lowered the Flames.

Vesuvius beamed, giddy with excitement. His palm still throbbed from where he had grabbed the burning Sword of Flames, and he looked down and saw the insignia branded in it. He ran his finger along his fresh scars, knowing they would stay there forever, a mark of his success. The pain was blinding, yet he forced it from his mind, forced it not to bother him. In fact, he taught himself to enjoy the pain.

After all these centuries, now, finally, his people would have their due. No longer would they be relegated to Marda, to the northernmost reaches of the empire, to infertile land. Now they would take their vengeance for being quarantined behind a wall of flames, would flood Escalon, tear it to shreds.

His heart skipped a beat, giddy at the thought. He could not wait to turn back around, to cross the Devil's Finger, to return to the mainland and to meet his people in the middle of Escalon. The entire troll nation would converge at Andros, and together, one square inch at a time, they would destroy Escalon forever. It would become the new troll homeland.

Yet as Vesuvius stood there, looking down at the waves, the spot where the sword had sunk, something gnawed at him. He looked out to the horizon, examining the black waters of the Bay of Death, and there was something lingering, something that made his satisfaction incomplete. As he examined the horizon, far out in the distance, he spotted a single, small ship with white sails, sailing along the Bay of Death. It sailed west, away from the Devil's Finger. And as he watched it go, he knew something was wrong.

Vesuvius turned back and looked up at the Tower beside him. It had been empty. Its doors left open. The Sword had been waiting for him. Those guarding had abandoned it. It had all been too easy. Why?

Vesuvius knew the assassin Merk had been pursuing the Sword; he had followed him all the way across the Devil's Finger. Why then would he abandon it? Why was he sailing away from here, across the Bay of Death? Who was that woman sailing with him? Had she been guarding this tower? What secrets was she hiding?

And where were they going?

Vesuvius looked down at the steam rising from the ocean, then back up to the horizon, and his veins burned. He could not help but feel that somehow he had been duped. That a complete victory had been snatched from him.

The more Vesuvius dwelled on it, the more he realized something was wrong. It was all too convenient. He studied the violent seas below, the waves crashing into the rocks, the rising steam, and he realized he would never know the truth. He would never know if the Sword of Flames had truly sunk to the bottom. If there was something here he was missing. If that had even been the right sword. If the Flames would stay down, too.

Vesuvius, burning with indignation, came to a decision: he had to pursue them. He would never know the truth until he did. Was there another, secret, tower somewhere? Another sword?

Even if there was not, even if he had accomplished all he needed, Vesuvius was famed for leaving no victims alive. Ever. He always pursued every last man to his death, and standing here, watching those two escape from his grasp, did not sit right with him. He knew he could not just let them go.

Vesuvius looked down at the dozens of ships still tied to the shores, abandoned, rocking wildly in the waves, as if waiting for him. And he came to an immediate decision.

“To the ships!” he commanded his army of trolls.

As one they scrambled to do his bidding, rushing down to the rocky shore, boarding the ships. Vesuvius followed, boarding the stern of the final ship.

He turned, raised his halberd high, and chopped the rope.

A moment later he was off, all the trolls with him, all of them crammed onto ships, and setting sail on the legendary Bay of Death. Somewhere on the horizon sailed Merk and that girl. And Vesuvius would not stop, no matter where he had to sail, until both of them were dead.

Chapter Eight

Merk gripped the rail as he stood at the bow of the small ship, the former King Tarnis's daughter beside him, each lost in their own world as they were thrown about by the rough waters of the Bay of Death. Merk stared out at the black waters, windswept, dotted with whitecaps, and he could not help but wonder about the woman beside him. The mystery surrounding her had only deepened since they'd left the Tower of Kos, had embarked on this ship to some mysterious place. His mind swam with questions for her.

Tarnis's daughter. It was hard for Merk to believe. What had she been doing out here, at the end of the Devil's Finger, holed up in the Tower of Kos? Was she in hiding? In exile? Being protected? From whom?

Merk sensed that she, with her translucent eyes, her too-pale complexion and unflappable poise, was of another race. But if so, then who was her mother? Why had she been left alone to guard the Sword of Flames, the Tower of Kos? Where had all her people gone?

And most pressing of all, where was she leading them now?

One hand on the rudder, she steered the ship deeper into the bay, to some destination on the horizon that Merk could only wonder at.

"You still haven't told me where we're going," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

There followed a long silence, so long, he was unsure if she would ever reply.

"At least, then, tell me your name," he added, realizing she had never offered it.

"Lorna," she replied.

Lorna. He liked the sound of it.

"The Three Daggers," she added, turning to him. "That's where we're going."

Merk frowned.

"The Three Daggers?" he asked, surprised.

She merely looked straight ahead.

Merk, though, was stunned by the news. The most remote islands in all of Escalon, The Three Daggers were so deep in the Bay of Death, he had not known of anyone who had ever actually traveled there. Knossos, of course, the legendary isle and fort, sat on the last of them, and legend had always had it that it held Escalon's fiercest warriors. They were men who lived on a desolate island off a desolate peninsula, in the most dangerous body of water there was. They were men rumored to be as rough as the sea that surrounded them. Merk had never met one in person. No one had. They were more legend than real.

"Did your Watchers retreat there?" he asked.

Lorna nodded.

"They await us now," she said.

Merk turned and looked back over his shoulder, wanting one last glimpse of the Tower of Kos, and as he did, his heart suddenly stopped at what he saw: there, on the horizon, pursuing them, were dozens of ships, sails full.

"We've got company," he said.

Lorna, to his surprise, did not even turn around, but merely nodded.

"They will chase us to the ends of the earth," she said calmly.

Merk was puzzled.

"Even though they have the Sword of Flames?"

"It was never the Sword that they were after," she corrected. "It was destruction. The destruction of us all."

“And when they catch us?” Merk asked. “We cannot fight off an army of trolls alone. Nor can a small isle of warriors, no matter how tough they may be.”

She nodded, still unfazed.

“We may indeed die,” she replied. “Yet we shall do it in the company of our fellow Watchers, fighting for what we know is true. There are many secrets left to guard.”

“Secrets?” he asked.

But she fell silent, watching the waters.

He was about to ask her more, when a sudden gale of wind nearly capsized the boat. Merk fell to his stomach, slamming into the side of the hull and sliding over the edge.

Dangling, he grasped onto the rail for dear life as his legs sank into the water, water so icy cold he felt he would freeze to death. He hung on with a single hand, mostly submerged, and as he looked back down over his shoulder, his heart leapt to see a school of red sharks suddenly closing in. He felt horrific pain as teeth began to dig into his calf, as he saw blood in the water that he knew was his own.

A moment later Lorna stepped forward and cracked the waters with her staff; as she did, brilliant white light spread on the surface, and the sharks dispersed. In the same motion she grabbed his hand and dragged him back onto the ship.

The ship righted itself as the wind subsided and Merk sat on deck, wet, freezing, breathing hard, and a terrible pain in his calf.

Lorna examined his wound, tore a piece of cloth from her shirt, and wrapped it around his leg, staunching the blood.

“You saved my life,” he said, filled with gratitude. “There were dozens of those things in there. They would have killed me.”

She looked him, her light blue eyes hypnotizing, so large.

“Those creatures are the least of your worries here,” she said.

They sailed on in silence, Merk slowly regaining his feet and watching the horizon, sure to grip the rail tightly, with both hands this time. He examined the horizon, but as much as he watched it, he saw no sign of the Three Daggers. He looked down and studied the waters of the Bay of Death with a new respect and fear. He looked carefully, and saw swarms of small red sharks under the surface, barely visible, hidden mostly by the waves. He knew now that entering that water meant death – and he could not help but wonder what other creatures inhabited this body of water.

The silence deepened, punctuated only by the howling of the wind, and after hours more passed, Merk, feeling desolate out here, needed to talk.

“What you did with that staff,” Merk said, turning to Lorna. “I have never seen anything like it.”

Lorna remained expressionless, still watching the horizon.

“Tell me about you,” he pressed.

She glanced at him, then looked back to the horizon.

“What would you like to know?” she asked.

“Anything,” he replied. “Everything.”

She fell silent a long time, then finally, she said:

“Start with you.”

Merk stared back, surprised.

“Me?” he asked. “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about your life,” she said. “Anything you want to tell me.”

Merk took a deep breath as he turned and stared into the horizon. His life was the one thing he did not want to talk about.

Finally, realizing they had a long journey ahead, he sighed. He knew he had to face himself at one time or another, even if he was not proud of it.

“I’ve been an assassin most my life,” he said slowly, regretfully, staring into the horizon, his voice grave and filled with self-loathing. “I’m not proud of it. But I was the best at what I did. I was in demand by kings and queens. No one could rival my skills.”

Merk fell into a long silence, trapped in memories of a life he regretted, memories he would rather not recall.

“And now?” she asked softly.

Merk was grateful to detect no judgment in her voice, as he usually did with others. He sighed.

“Now,” he said, “it is not what I do anymore. It is not who I am anymore. I have vowed to renounce violence. To put my services to a cause. Yet, try as I do, I cannot seem to get away from it. Violence seems to find me. There is always, it seems, another cause.”

“And what is your cause?” she asked.

He thought about that.

“My cause, initially, was to become a Watcher,” he replied. “To devote myself to service. To guard the Tower of Ur, to protect the Sword of Flames. When that fell, I felt my cause was to reach the Tower of Kos, to save the sword.”

He sighed.

“And yet now here we are, sailing through the Bay of Death, the Sword gone, the trolls following, and heading to a barren chain of islands,” Lorna replied with a smile.

Merk frowned, unamused.

“I have lost my cause,” he said. “I have lost my life’s purpose. I do not know myself anymore. I do not know my direction.”

Lorna nodded.

“That is a good place to be,” she said. “A place of uncertainty is also a place of possibility.”

Merk studied her, wondering. He was touched by her lack of condemnation. Anyone else who had heard his tale would vilify him.

“You do not judge me,” he observed, shocked, “for who I am.”

Lorna stared at him, her eyes so intense it was like staring into the moon.

“That was who you *were*,” she corrected. “Not who you are now. How can I judge you for who you once were? I only judge the man standing before me.”

Merk felt restored by her answer.

“And who am I now?” he asked, wanting to know the answer, unsure of it himself.

She stared at him.

“I see a fine warrior,” she replied. “A selfless man. A man who wants to help others. And a man full of longing. I see a man who is lost. A man who has never known himself.”

Merk pondered her words, and they resonated deep within him. He felt them all to be true. Too true.

A long silence fell between them, as their small ship bobbed up and down in the waters, slowly making its way west. Merk checked back and saw the troll fleet still on the horizon, still a good enough distance away.

“And you?” he finally asked. “You are Tarnis’s daughter, are you not?”

She searched the horizon, her eyes aglow, and finally, she nodded.

“I am,” she replied.

Merk was stunned to hear it.

“Then why were you here?” he asked.

She sighed.

“I have been hidden here since I was a young girl.”

“But why?” he pressed.

She shrugged.

“I suppose it was too dangerous to keep me in the capital. People could not know I was the King’s illegitimate daughter. It was safer here.”

“Safer here?” he asked. “At the ends of the earth?”

“I was left with a secret to guard,” she explained. “More important even than the kingdom of Escalon.”

His heart pounded as he wondered what it could be.

“Will you tell me?” he asked.

But Lorna slowly turned and pointed ahead. Merk followed her gaze and there, on the horizon, the sun shone down on three barren islands, rising up from the ocean, the last one a fort of solid stone. It was the most desolate and yet beautiful place Merk had ever seen. A place distant enough to hold all the secrets of magic and power.

“Welcome,” Lorna said, “to Knossos.”

Chapter Nine

Duncan, alone, hobbling from the pain in his ankles and wrists, ran through the streets of Andros, ignoring the pain, spurred on by adrenaline as he thought of only one thing: saving Kyra. Her cry for help echoed in his mind, his soul, made him forget his injuries as he sprinted through the streets, sweating, toward the sound.

Duncan twisted and turned down Andros' narrow alleyways, knowing Kyra lay just beyond those thick stone walls. All around him the dragons dove, setting fire to street after street, the tremendous heat radiating off the walls, so hot that Duncan could feel it even on the far side of the stone. He hoped and prayed they did not descend to his alley – or else, he would be finished.

Despite the pain, Duncan did not stop. Nor did he turn around. He could not. Driven by a father's instinct, he physically could not go anywhere but toward the sound of his daughter. It crossed his mind that he was running to his death, losing any chance he'd have of escape, yet it did not slow him. His daughter was trapped, and that was all that mattered to him now.

"NO!" came the cry.

Duncan's hair stood on end. There it was again, her shriek, and his heart received a jolt at the sound. He sprinted faster, giving it all he had, turning down yet another alleyway.

Finally, as he turned again, he burst through a low, stone arch, and the sky opened before him.

Duncan found himself in an open courtyard, and as he stood at its edge, he was stunned at the sight before him. Flames filled the far side of the courtyard as dragons criss-crossed the air, breathing down, and beneath a stone ledge, barely shielded from all the fire, sat his daughter.

Kyra.

There she was, in the flesh, alive.

Even more shocking than seeing her here, alive, was seeing the baby dragon lying beside her. Duncan stared, confused by the sight. At first he assumed Kyra was struggling to kill a dragon that had fallen from the sky. But then he saw that the dragon was pinned down by a boulder. He was puzzled as he saw Kyra shoving at it. What, he wondered, was she trying to do? Free a dragon? Why?

"Kyra!" he shrieked.

Duncan sprinted across the open courtyard, avoiding columns of flame, avoiding the swipe of a dragon's talon, still running until finally he reached his daughter's side.

As he did, Kyra looked up and her face fell in shock. And then joy.

"Father!" she called.

She ran into his arms, and Duncan embraced her, as she embraced him back. As he held her in his arms, he felt restored again, as if a part of himself had returned.

Tears of joy ran down his cheeks. He could hardly believe Kyra was really here, and alive.

She clutched him and he clutched her, and he was relieved most of all, as he felt her shaking in his arms, that she was uninjured.

Remembering, he pushed her back, turned to the dragon, drew his sword, and raised it, about to chop off the dragon's head to protect his daughter.

"No!" Kyra shrieked.

She stunned Duncan by rushing forward and grabbing his wrist, her grip surprisingly strong, and holding back his blow. This was not the meek daughter he had left behind in Volis; she was clearly a warrior now.

Duncan looked back at her, baffled.

"Do not harm him," she commanded, her voice confident, the voice of a warrior. "Theon is my friend."

Duncan looked at her, stunned.

"Your *friend*?" he asked. "A dragon?"

“Please, Father,” she said, “there is little time to explain. Help us. He is pinned down. I cannot remove this boulder alone.”

Duncan, as shocked as he was, trusted her. He sheathed his sword, came up beside her, and pushed at the boulder with all his might. Yet, try as he did, it barely budged.

“It’s too heavy,” he said. “I can’t. I am sorry.”

Suddenly, there came the rattling of armor behind him and Duncan turned and was overjoyed to see Aidan, Anvin, Cassandra, and White all rush forward. They had come back for him, had risked their lives, too, once again.

Without hesitating, they all ran right up to the boulder and pushed.

It rolled a bit, but still they could not get it off.

There came the sound of gasping, and Duncan turned to see Motley rushing to catch up with the others, out of breath. He joined them, throwing his weight into the boulder – and this time, it began to really roll. Motley, the actor, the overweight fool, the one they had expected the least of, made the difference in getting the boulder off the dragon.

With one last heave it landed with a crash, in a cloud of dust, and the dragon was free.

Theon jumped to his feet and screeched, arching his back, extending his talons. In fury, he looked up at the sky. A big purple dragon had spotted them, was diving down right for them, and Theon, without pausing, leapt into the air, opened his jaws, and flew straight up, locking on the soft jugular of the unsuspecting dragon.

Theon held on with all his might. The huge dragon shrieked in fury, thrown off guard, clearly not expecting as much from the baby dragon, and the two of them went smashing down into a stone wall on the far side of the courtyard.

Duncan and the others exchanged a look of shock as Theon wrestled the dragon, refusing to let go of the squirming big dragon, pinning it down on the far side of the courtyard. Theon, ferocious, writhed, snarling, and did not let go until the much larger dragon finally went limp.

For a moment, they all had a respite.

“Kyra!” Aidan called out.

Kyra looked down and noticed her little brother, and Duncan watched with joy as Aidan ran into Kyra’s arms. She embraced him, while White jumped up and licked Kyra’s palms, clearly thrilled.

“My brother,” Kyra gushed, her eyes filled with tears. “You are alive.”

Duncan could hear the relief in her voice.

Aidan’s eyes suddenly lowered in sadness.

“Brandon and Braxton are dead,” he announced to Kyra.

Kyra paled. She turned and looked to Duncan, and he nodded in solemn confirmation.

Suddenly Theon flew up and landed before them, flapping his wings and gesturing for Kyra to climb on his back. Duncan heard the roars high above, and he looked up to see them all circling, preparing to dive.

To Duncan’s awe, Kyra mounted Theon. There she sat, atop a dragon, strong, fierce, having all the poise of a great warrior. Gone was the little girl he had once known; she had been replaced by a proud warrior, a woman who could command legions. He had never felt more pride until this day.

“We have no time. Come with me,” she said to them. “All of you. Join me.”

They all looked at each other in surprise, and Duncan felt a pit in his stomach at the idea of riding a dragon, especially as it snarled down at them.

“Hurry!” she said.

Duncan, seeing the flock of dragons descending and knowing they had little choice, jumped into action. He hurried with Aidan, Anvin, Motley, Cassandra, Septin and White, as they all leapt onto the dragon’s back.

He clutched the heavy, ancient scales, marveling that he was really sitting on the back of a dragon. It was like a dream.

He held on with all he had as the dragon lifted into the air. His stomach lightened, and he could hardly believe the feeling. For the first time in his life, he was flying in the air, above the streets, faster than he had ever been.

Theon, faster than them all, flew just above the streets, twisting and turning, so fast the other dragons could not reach him amidst all the confusion and dust of the capital. Duncan looked down and was amazed to see the city from above, to see the tops of buildings, the winding streets laid out like a maze below.

Kyra directed Theon brilliantly, and Duncan was so proud of his daughter, so amazed that she was able to control a beast like this. Within moments, they were free, in the open sky, beyond the capital walls, and soaring over the countryside.

“We must head south!” Anvin yelled out. “There are rock formations there, beyond the perimeter of the capital. All our men await us! They have retreated there.”

Kyra directed Theon, and soon they were all flying south, toward a huge outcropping of rock on the horizon. Duncan saw up ahead the hundreds of massive boulders, dotted with small caves inside, on the horizon, south of the capital walls.

As they approached, Duncan saw the armor and weaponry inside the caves, glistening in the desert light, and his heart lifted to see hundreds of his men inside, awaiting him at this rallying point.

As Kyra directed Theon down, they landed at the entrance of a massive cave. Duncan could see the fear in the faces of the men below as the dragon approached, bracing themselves for an attack. But then they spotted Kyra and the others on his back, and their expressions changed to one of shock. They let down their guard.

Duncan dismounted with Kyra and the others, and he ran to embrace his men, overjoyed to see them alive again. There were Kavos and Bramthos, Seavig and Arthfael, men who’d risked their lives for him, men he thought he’d never see again.

Duncan turned and saw Kyra, and he was surprised to see she had not dismounted with the others.

“Why do you still sit there?” he asked. “Won’t you join us?”

But Kyra sat there, her back so straight and proud, and solemnly shook her head.

“I mustn’t, Father. I have some solemn business elsewhere. On behalf of Escalon.”

Duncan stared back, baffled, marveling at the strong warrior his daughter had become.

“But where?” Duncan asked. “Where is more important than at our side?”

She hesitated.

“Marda,” she replied.

Duncan felt a chill at the word.

“Marda?” he gasped. “You? Alone? You shall never return!”

She nodded, and he could see in her eyes that she already knew.

“I vowed to go,” she replied, “and I cannot abandon my mission. Now that you are safe, my duty calls. Haven’t you always taught me that duty comes first, Father?”

Duncan felt his heart swell with pride at her words. He stepped forward, reached up, and embraced her, clutching her to him as his men circled around.

“Kyra, my daughter. You are the better part of my soul.”

He saw her eyes well with tears, and she nodded back, stronger, more powerful, without the sentiments she used to have. She gave a little kick, and Theon was quickly up in the air. Kyra flew proudly on his back, higher and higher, up in the sky.

Duncan’s heart broke as he watched her go, heading north, wondering if he would ever see her again as she flew somewhere toward the blackness of Marda.

Chapter Ten

Kyra leaned forward and gripped Theon's scales as they flew, holding tight as the wind ripped through her hair. They flew in and out of clouds, her hands shaking from the moisture, the cold, yet Kyra ignored it all as they raced across Escalon on the way to Marda. Nothing would stop her now.

Kyra's mind swam with all she'd just been through, still trying to process it all. She recalled her father, and was happy to think of him safe with his men outside of Andros. She felt a great sense of satisfaction. Time and again she had almost died trying to reach him, had been warned to stay away at the cost of her life. Yet she had not given up, sensing deep in her heart that he needed her. She had learned a valuable lesson: she must always trust her instincts, no matter how many people warned her away.

Indeed, as she reflected on it, she realized now that that was precisely why Alva had warned her away: it was a test. He had made it clear that she would die if she went back for her father because he wanted to test her resolve, to test her courage. He had known all along that she would live. He wanted to see if she would head into battle, though, if she thought she would die.

Of course, at the same time her father had saved her; if he had not arrived when he had, Theon would still be pinned beneath that rubble and she would surely be dead. Thinking of her father sacrificing everything for her lifted her heart, too. It brought tears to her eyes as she thought of his braving the flames, and dragons, and death, all just for her.

Kyra smiled as she thought of her brother Aidan, so happy that he was alive and safe, too. She thought of her two dead brothers, and as much strife and rivalry as they'd had between them, it still pained her. She wished she could have been there to protect them.

Kyra thought of Andros, the once great capital, now a cauldron of flame, and her heart fell. Would Escalon ever return to its former glory?

So much had happened at once, Kyra could barely process it. It was as if the world were spinning out of control beneath her, as if the only constant these days was change.

Kyra tried to shake it all from her mind and focus on the journey before her: Marda. Kyra felt infused with a sense of purpose as she flew, her heart pounding, anxious to get there, to find the Staff of Truth. She dipped through clouds and looked down as she flew, looking for markers, trying to see how close she was to the border, the Flames. As she searched the landscape, her heart fell to see what had become of her homeland: she saw a land torn apart, scarred, burnt by flames. She saw entire strongholds destroyed, whether by Pandesian soldiers, or marauding trolls, or enraged dragons, she did not know. She saw a land so ravaged it was unrecognizable from the place she had once known and loved. It was hard to believe. The Escalon she knew was no more.

It all felt surreal to her, hard to imagine that such change could come so drastically and so quickly. It made her wonder. What if, on that one snowy night, she had never encountered the wounded Theos? Would the fate of Escalon have taken a different course?

Or had it all been predestined? Was she the one responsible for all this, for all that she saw below? Or was she just the vehicle? Would it all have happened some other way regardless?

Kyra wanted so desperately to dive down, to land below, to stay here in Escalon and help wage war against the Pandesians, the trolls, to help fix whatever she could. Yet, despite a sense of looming dread, she forced herself to look up, to stay focused on her mission, to keep flying north, somewhere toward the blackness of Marda.

Kyra shivered. It would be a journey, she knew, to the very essence of darkness. Marda had always, since she had been young, been a place of legend, a place of such evil, so off limits, that no one would ever entertain the idea of visiting it. It was, on the contrary, a place to be sealed off from the world, to be protected from, a place that her people thanked the universe every day was shielded by the Flames. Now, unbelievably, a place she was seeking out.

On the one hand, it was madness. Yet on the other, Kyra's mother had sent her here, and she sensed deep down that the mission was true. She sensed that Marda was where she was needed, where her ultimate test lay. Where the Staff of Truth lay, that only she could retrieve. It was crazy, but she could already feel the staff, deep in her gut, summoning her, luring her to it like an old friend.

Still, Kyra, for the first time in as long as she could remember, felt a wave of self-doubt overwhelm her. Was she really strong enough to do this? To go to Marda, a place even her father's men feared to venture? She felt a battle raging within her own soul. Everything inside her screamed that to go to Marda would be to go to her death. And she did not want to die.

Kyra tried to force herself to be strong, not to veer from the path. She knew this was a journey she had to take, and she knew she could not shy away from what was demanded of her. She tried to push from her mind the horrors that awaited her on the far side of the Flames. A nation of trolls. Volcanoes, lava, ash. A nation of evil, of sorcery. Unimaginable creatures and monsters. She tried not to recall the stories she had heard as a child. A place where people tore each other apart for fun, led by the demonic leader Vesuvius. A nation that lived for blood, for cruelty.

They dipped down beneath the clouds for a moment, and Kyra glanced down and saw, far below, that they were passing over the northeastern corner of Escalon. Her heart leapt as she began to recognize the countryside: Volis. There were the hills of her hometown, once so beautiful, now a scab of what it once was. Her heart fell at the sight. There in the distance lay her father's stronghold, the fort, all now in ruins. It was a great heap of rubble, scattered with untended corpses sprawled in unnatural positions, visible even from here, looking up at the sky as if to ask Kyra how she could have let this happen to them.

Kyra shut her eyes and tried to push the image from her mind – yet she could not. It was too hard to just fly over this place that had once meant so much to her. She looked up toward the horizon, toward Marda, and she knew she should continue on, but something inside her could not bring herself to just pass over her hometown. She had to stop and see it for herself before she left Escalon, on what might be her final journey.

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