A knight in full plate armor is riding a horse. The knight is wearing a helmet with a visor and a full suit of armor. The horse is also wearing armor on its head and neck. The background is a dramatic sunset with a bright sun low on the horizon, casting a golden glow over the scene. The sky is filled with clouds, some of which are illuminated by the sun. The overall mood is epic and heroic.

MORGAN RICE

NIGHT
OF THE
BOLD

KINGS AND SORCERERS (BOOK 6)

Kings and Sorcerers

Морган Райс

Night of the Bold

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2016

Райс М.

Night of the Bold / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2016 — (Kings and Sorcerers)

The #1 Bestselling series, with over 400 five star reviews on Amazon!"Night of the Bold" is book #6 – and the final installment – in Morgan Rice's bestselling epic fantasy series "Kings and Sorcerers"!In "Night of the Bold", Kyra must find a way to free herself from Marda and return to Escalon with the Staff of Truth. If she does, awaiting her will be the most epic battle of her life, as she will need to face off against Ra's armies, a nation of trolls, and a flock of dragons. If her powers, and the weapon, are strong enough, her mother awaits her, ready to reveal the secrets of her destiny, and of her birth.Duncan must make an epic stand against Ra's armies once and for all. Yet even as he fights the greatest battles of his life, leading to a final stand in The Devil's Gluch, he cannot expect the dark trickery that Ra has awaiting him.In the Bay of Death, Merk and King Tarnis' daughter must join forces with Alec and the warriors of the Lost Isles to fight off the dragons. They must find Duncan and unite to save Escalon, yet Vesuvius has resurfaced, and they cannot anticipate the treachery awaiting them.In the epic finale to Kings and Sorcerers, the most dramatic battles, weapons and sorcery all lead to a breathtaking, unexpected conclusion, filled with both heartbreaking tragedy and inspiring re-birth.With its strong atmosphere and complex characters, "Night of the Bold" 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

Night of the Bold

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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 twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY**, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); of the 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.

Morgan's new epic fantasy series, **OF CROWNS AND GLORY**, will publish in April, 2016, beginning with book #1, **SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN**.

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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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

“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

OF CROWNS AND GLORY

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN (Book #1)

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)

A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)

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- OBSESSED (Book #12)

KINGS AND SORCERERS



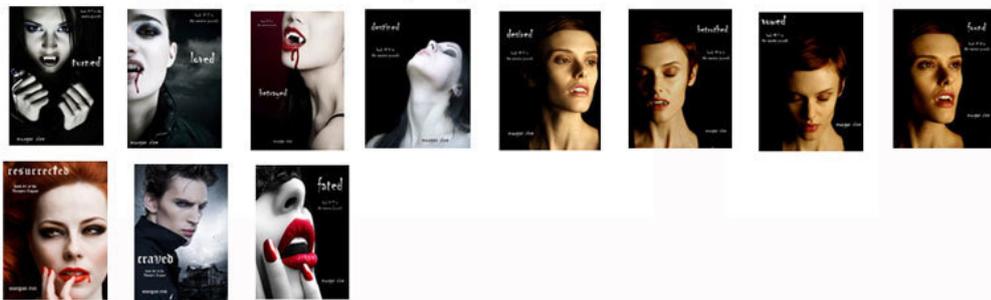
THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals



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Chapter One

Duncan walked through the ebbing flood, water splashing against his calves, flanked by dozens of his men as they trekked through the floating graveyard. Hundreds of Pandesian corpses floated by, bumping against his legs as he sloshed through what remained of the Everfall flood. As far as he could see stretched a sea of corpses, Pandesian soldiers washing up from the overflowing Canyon, being swept out to the desert in the receding waters. It was the solemn air of victory.

Duncan looked down at the Canyon, overflowing with water, still spewing out corpses by the minute as it bubbled over, and he turned and looked at the horizon, toward Everfall, where the gushing torrents had slowed to a trickle. Slowly, he felt the thrill of victory well up inside him. All around him, the air began to buzz with the victorious cheers of his stunned men, all trekking through the waters in disbelief, all slowly realizing that they had actually won. Against all odds, they had survived, had conquered the much greater legion. Leifall had come through, after all. Duncan felt a surge of gratitude to his loyal soldiers, to Leifall, Anvin, and most of all, his son. In the face of grim odds, none had backed down in fear.

There came a distant rumble, and Duncan checked the horizon and was overjoyed to see Leifall and his men of Leptus, Anvin and Aidan amongst them, White running at their feet, all returning from Everfall, riding back to reunite with them. They were joined by Leifall's small army, hundreds of men, their shouts of triumph audible even from here.

Duncan looked back to the north and spotted on the distant horizon a world filled with black. There, perhaps a day's ride away, sat the remainder of the Pandesian army, rallying, preparing to avenge their defeat. Next time they would not attack with ten thousand men, Duncan knew, but with a hundred thousand.

Duncan knew time was short. He had been lucky once, but there was no way he could withstand an attack from hundreds of thousands of soldiers, not even with every trick in the world. And he had exhausted all his tricks. He needed a new strategy, and he needed it fast.

As his men gathered around him, Duncan searched all the hard and earnest faces and knew these great warriors looked to him for leadership. He knew that whatever decision he made next would affect not just him but all of these great men – indeed, the entire fate of Escalon. He owed it to them all to choose wisely.

Duncan wracked his brain, willing the answer to come to him, pondering all the ramifications of any strategic move. All moves carried great risk, all carried dire repercussions, and all were even riskier than what he had done here in the canyon.

“Commander?” came a voice.

Duncan turned to see the serious face of Kavos, looking back at him with respect. Behind him, hundreds of men stared back, too. They were all awaiting direction. They had followed him to the brink and had come out alive, and they trusted him.

Duncan nodded, breathing deeply.

“We meet the Pandesians in the open field,” he began, “and we lose. They outnumber us still a hundred to one. They are also better rested, armed and equipped. We would all be dead by sunfall.”

Duncan sighed, his men hanging on his every word.

“Yet we cannot run,” he continued, “nor should we. With the trolls, too, attacking, and the dragons circling, we have no time to hide, to fight a guerrilla war. Nor is hiding our way. We need a bold and quick and decisive strategy to defeat the invaders and rid our country of them once and for all.”

Duncan fell silent for a long time, pondering the near impossible task ahead. All that could be heard was the sound of the wind rippling off the desert.

“What do you propose, Duncan?” Kavos finally prodded.

He looked back at Kavos, gripping and ungripping his halberd, staring back with intensity, as his words rang in his head. He owed these great warriors a strategy. A way not just to survive – but to victory.

Duncan pondered the terrain of Escalon. All battles, he knew, were won by terrain, and his knowing the terrain of his homeland was perhaps his one remaining advantage in this war. He reflected on all the places in Escalon where the terrain might offer a natural advantage. It would need to be a very special place indeed, a place where a few thousand men could fight off hundreds of thousands. There were few places in Escalon – few places anywhere – that could allow that.

Yet as Duncan recalled the legends and tales ingrained in him by his father and his father before him, as he recalled all the great battles he had studied from times of old, he found his mind turning to the battles that were most heroic, the most epic, the battles of few against many. Again and again, his mind returned to but one place: the Devil's Gulch.

The place of heroes. The place where few men had fought off an army, where all the great warriors of Escalon had been tested. The Gulch offered the most narrow pass in all of Escalon, and it was perhaps the one place in the land where the terrain defined the battle. A wall of steep cliffs and mountains met the sea, leaving but a narrow corridor to pass through, forming the Gulch that had taken more than a few lives. It forced men to pass through single file. It forced armies to pass through single file. It created a bottleneck where a few warriors, if well placed and heroic enough, could fight off an entire army. At least, according to the legends.

“The Gulch,” Duncan finally replied.

All eyes widened. Slowly, they nodded back in respect. The Gulch was a serious decision; it was a place of last resort. It was a place to go when there was no other place to go, a place for men to die or to live, for the land to be lost or to be saved. It was a place of legend. A place of heroes.

“The Gulch,” Kavos said, nodding for a long time as he rubbed his beard. “Strong. Yet there remains one problem.”

Duncan looked back.

“The Gulch is designed to keep invaders out – not in,” he replied. “The Pandesians are already in. We could perhaps block it off and keep them in. But we want them out.”

“Never once in our ancestors' time,” Bramthos added, “has an invading army, once it crossed the Gulch, been forced to leave through it again. It is too late. They have already passed through it.”

Duncan nodded back, thinking the same thoughts himself.

“I have considered this,” he replied. “Yet there is always a way. Perhaps we can lure them back through it, to the other side. And then, once they are south, we can seal it off and make our stand.”

The men stared back, clearly confused.

“And how do you propose we do that?” Kavos asked.

Duncan drew his sword, found a dry patch of sand, stepped forward, and began to draw. All the men huddled around close as his blade scratched the sand.

“A few of us will lure them through,” he said, drawing a line in the sand. “The rest will wait on the other side, prepared to seal it. We shall make the Pandesians think they are pursuing us, that we are fleeing. My force, once it passes through, can circle back, through the tunnels, come back on this side of the Gulch, and seal it off. We can then all make a stand together.”

Kavos shook his head.

“And what makes you think Ra will send his army through that gulch?”

Duncan felt determined.

“I understand Ra,” he replied. “He craves our destruction. He craves complete and total victory. This will appeal to his hubris, and for that, he will send his entire army after us.”

Kavos shook his head.

“The men that lure them through,” he said, “will be exposed. It will be near impossible to make it back in time through the tunnels. Those men may likely be trapped and die.”

Duncan nodded gravely.

“Which is why I shall lead those men myself,” he said.

The man all looked back at him with respect. They stroked their beards, faces beset with concern and doubt, all clearly realizing how risky this was.

“Perhaps it could work,” Kavos said. “Perhaps we can lure the Pandesian forces through and perhaps even seal them out. Yet even so, Ra won’t send all his men. Stationed here are just his southern forces. He has other men, spread throughout our land. He has a mighty northern army, guarding the north. Even if we won this epic battle, we would not win the war. His men would still hold Escalon.”

Duncan nodded back, thinking the same thoughts himself.

“This is why we shall split our forces,” he replied. “Half of us will ride for the Gulch, while the other half will head north and attack Ra’s northern army. Lead by you.”

Kavos stared back at him with surprise.

“If we are to free Escalon, we must do it all at once,” Duncan added. “You will lead the battle in the north. Lead them to your homeland, to Kos. Take the fight to the mountains. No one can fight there as well as you.”

Kavos nodded, clearly liking the idea.

“And you, Duncan?” he asked in return, concern in his voice. “As poor as my odds are in the north, your odds in the Gulch are much worse.”

Duncan nodded back and smiled. He clasped Kavos’s shoulder.

“Better odds for glory, then,” he replied.

Kavos smiled back with admiration.

“And what of the Pandesian fleet?” Seavig chimed in, stepping forward. “Even now they hold the port of Ur. Escalon cannot be free while they hold the seas.”

Duncan nodded to his friend, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Which is why you shall take your men and make for the coast,” Duncan replied. “Use our hidden fleet and sail north, at night, up the Sorrow. Sail to Ur, and with cunning enough, perhaps you can defeat them.”

Seavig stared back, rubbing his beard, his eyes alight with mischief and daring.

“You realize we will have a dozen ships against a thousand,” he replied.

Duncan nodded back, and Seavig smiled.

“I knew there was a reason I liked you,” Seavig replied.

Seavig mounted his horse, his men following, and he took off without another word, leading them all off into the desert, riding west for the sea.

Kavos stepped forward, clasped Duncan’s shoulder, and looked him in the eye.

“I always knew we would both die for Escalon,” he said. “I only did not know we would die in such a glorious way. It shall be a death worthy of our ancestors. I thank you for that, Duncan. You have given us a great gift.”

“And I you,” Duncan replied.

Kavos turned, nodded to his men, and without another word, they all mounted their horses and took off, riding north, for Kos. They all rode off with eager shouts, raising up a great cloud of dust as they went.

That left Duncan standing there alone with several hundred men, all looking to him for direction. He turned and faced them.

“Leifall approaches,” he said, watching them near on the horizon. “When they arrive, we shall all ride for the Gulch as one.”

Duncan went to mount his horse, when suddenly, a voice cut through the air:

“Commander!”

Duncan turned in the opposite direction, and he was shocked at what he saw. There, from the east, a lone figure was approaching, walking toward them through the desert. Duncan's heart pounded as he watched her. It could not be possible.

His men parted ways on all sides as she approached. Duncan's heart skipped a beat, and he slowly felt his eyes filling with tears of joy. He could hardly believe it. There, approaching him, like an apparition from the desert, was his daughter.

Kyra.

Kyra walked toward them, alone, a smile on her face, heading right for him. Duncan was baffled. How had she arrived here? What was she doing here? Why was she alone? Had she walked all this way? Where was Andor? Where was her dragon?

None of it made any sense.

And yet there she was, in the flesh and blood, his daughter returned to him. Seeing her made him feel as if his soul was being restored. All felt right in the world, even if just for a moment.

"Kyra," he said, stepping forward eagerly.

The soldiers parted ways as Duncan walked forward, smiling, holding out his arms, eager to embrace her. She smiled too, throwing her arms out as she walked toward him. It made his entire life worthwhile just to know that she was alive.

Duncan took the final steps, so excited to embrace her, and as she stepped forward and embraced him, he wrapped his arms around her.

"Kyra," he gushed, tearing. "You're alive. You've returned to me."

He could feel the tears streaming down his face, tears of joy and relief.

Yet strangely, as he held her, she was still, silent in return.

Slowly, Duncan began to realize that something was wrong. A split second before he realized, his world was suddenly filled with blinding pain.

Duncan gasped, unable to catch his breath. His tears of joy quickly morphed to tears of pain, as he found himself breathless. He couldn't process what was happening; instead of a loving embrace, he felt a cold shaft of steel puncturing his ribs, being driven all the way inside. He felt a hot sensation gushing down his stomach, felt himself numb, unable to breathe, to think. The pain was so blinding, so searing, so unexpected. He looked down and saw a dagger in his heart, and he stood there in shock.

He looked up at Kyra, looked into her eyes, and as horrific as the pain was, the pain of her betrayal was worse. Dying did not bother him. But dying by his daughter's hand tore him to pieces.

As he felt the world begin to spin beneath him, Duncan blinked, baffled, trying to understand why the person he loved most in the world would betray him.

Yet Kyra only smiled back, showing no remorse.

"Hello, Father," she said. "So nice to see you again."

Chapter Two

Alec stood in the dragon's mouth, gripping the Unfinished Sword with trembling hands, dazed, as the dragon's blood gushed down on him like a waterfall. He looked out from between the rows of razor-sharp teeth, each as large as he, and braced himself as the dragon plummeted straight down for the ocean below. He felt his stomach dropping through his throat as the icy waters of the Bay of Death rushed up to greet him. He knew that if he was not killed by the impact, he would be crushed by the dead dragon's weight.

Alec, still in shock that he'd managed to kill this great beast, knew that the dragon, with all its weight and speed, would sink to the bottom of the Bay of Death, and would take him with it. The Unfinished Sword could slay a dragon – but no sword could stop his descent. Worse, the dragon's jaws, now lax, were closing in on him as its jaw muscles relaxed, clamping down to become a cage from which Alec could never escape. He knew he had to move fast if he had any chance of survival.

As the blood gushed down onto his head from the roof of the dragon's mouth, Alec extracted the sword and, as the jaws nearly closed, braced himself and leapt. He shrieked as he fell through the icy air, the dragon's razor-sharp teeth scraping his back, slicing his flesh, and for a moment, his shirt snagged on the dragon's tooth, and he did not think he would make it. Behind him he heard the great jaws clamp shut, felt his shirt rip, a piece torn off – and finally, he was in free-fall.

Alec flailed as he dropped through the air, bracing himself for the black, swirling waters below.

Suddenly there came a splash, and Alec was in shock as he plunged into the frigid waters, the icy temperature taking his breath away. The last thing he saw as he looked up was the dragon's dead body, plunging down near him, about to impact the bay.

The dragon's body hit the surface with an awful crash, sending huge waves of water up in either direction. Luckily, it just missed Alec, and the wave instead crested out and away from its corpse. It carried Alec high up a good twenty feet away before it stopped – and then, to Alec's dread, it began to suck down everything around it in a giant whirlpool.

Alec swam with all his might to get away, yet he could not. Try as he did, the next thing he knew, he was being sucked down in the vast whirlpool, beneath the depths.

Alec swam as best he could while still clutching the sword, already a good twenty feet below the surface, kicking and plunging in the freezing waters. He kicked for the surface, desperate, sunlight sparkling high above, and as he did, he saw massive sharks begin to swim toward him. He just spotted the hull of the ship bobbing in the waters high above and he knew he had but moments to make it if he were to survive.

With one last kick Alec finally surfaced, gasping for air; a moment later, he felt strong hands grabbing at him. He looked up to see Sovos yanking him on board the ship, and a second later he was up in the air, still grasping the sword.

Yet he sensed motion out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a massive red shark leaping out of the water, aiming for his leg. There was no time.

Alec felt the sword humming in his hand, telling him what to do. It was like no other feeling he'd ever felt. He swung and shrieked as he brought it down with all his might, using both hands.

There followed the sound of steel cutting through flesh, and Alec watched with shock as the Unfinished Sword hacked the huge shark in half. The red waters quickly teemed with sharks, eating the pieces.

Another shark leapt up for his feet, yet this time Alec felt himself yanked high up and he landed on the deck with a thud.

He rolled and groaned, covered in aches and bruises, and breathed hard with relief, spent, dripping wet. Someone immediately covered him in a blanket.

“As if killing a dragon weren’t enough,” Sovos said with a smile, standing over him, handing him a flask of wine. Alec took a long swig, and it warmed his stomach.

The ship was teeming with soldiers, all in an excited, chaotic state. Alec was not surprised: it was not often, after all, that a dragon was felled by a sword. He looked over and saw on the deck, amidst the crowd, Merk and Lorna, clearly rescued from bobbing in the waters before. Merk looked to him like a rogue, possibly an assassin, while Lorna was stunning, with an ethereal quality. They were both dripping wet and looked dazed, and happy to be alive.

Alec noticed all the soldiers staring back at him, awestruck, and he slowly rose to his feet, in shock as he realized himself what he had just achieved. They looked from the sword, dripping wet in his hand, up to him, as if he were a god. He could not help but look down at the sword himself, feeling the weight of it in his hand, like a living thing. He stared down at the mysterious, gleaming metal as if it were a foreign object and he relived in his mind the moment he had stabbed the dragon, his shock at its puncturing its flesh. He marveled at the power of this weapon.

Perhaps even more than that, Alec could not help but wonder who *he* was. How was he, a simply boy from a simple village, able to slay a dragon? What did destiny have in store for him? He was beginning to feel it would be no ordinary destiny.

Alec heard the snapping of a thousand jaws, and he looked over the rail to see a school of red sharks now feasting on the dragon’s huge carcass, floating at the surface. The black waters of the Bay of Death were now blood-red. Alec watched the floating carcass, and it sank in that he had really done it. Somehow, he had killed a dragon. He, alone, in all of Escalon.

Great shrieks filled the sky, and Alec looked up to see dozens more dragons circling in the distance, breathing great columns of flame, eager for vengeance. While they all stared own at him, some seemed afraid to approach. Several flew off from the pack as they spotted their fellow dragon floating dead in the water.

Others, though, screeched in fury and dove right for him.

As he watched them plummet, Alec did not wait. He ran for the stern, jumped onto the rail, and faced them. He felt the power of the sword coursing through him, egging him on, and as he stood there, he felt a new steely determination. He felt as if the sword were driving him. He and the weapon were now one.

The pack of dragons descended right for him. A huge one with glowing green eyes led them, shrieking as it breathed down flame. Alec held the sword high, feeling the vibration in his hand, lending him courage. The very fate of Escalon, he knew, was at stake.

Alec felt a surge of courage he’d never known as he let out a battle cry himself; as he did, the sword became aglow. An intense burst of light shot forth, rising up, stopping the wall of flame halfway in the sky. It continued on until it made the flame reverse course, and as Alec slashed the sword again, the dragon shrieked as its own column of flame encapsulated it. In a great ball of fire, the dragon shrieked and flailed as it fell straight down and plunged into the waters.

Another dragon dove down, and again Alec raised the sword, stopping the wall of flame, killing it. Another dragon came in low, and as it did, it lowered its talons, as if to scoop Alec up. Alec turned and slashed and was shocked as the sword chopped off its legs. The dragon screeched, and in the same motion Alec swung again, slashing its side, opening a huge gash. The dragon crashed into the ocean, and as it flapped there, unable to fly, it was set upon by a mass of sharks.

Another dragon, a small red one, swooped down low from the other side, its jaws wide open – and as it did, this time Alec allowed his instincts to lead him and leapt up into the air. The sword lent him power, and he leapt higher than he could imagine, over the dragon’s head, and landed on its back.

The dragon shrieked and bucked, but Alec held on tight. It could not cast him off.

Alec felt himself stronger than the dragon, able to command it.

“Dragon!” he called out. “I command you! Attack!”

The dragon had no choice but to turn and fly up, right into the flock of descending dragons, a dozen of them still coming down. Alec faced them fearlessly, flying up to meet them, holding the sword before him. As they met in the sky, Alec slashed the sword again and again, with a power and speed he did not know he possessed. He sliced off one dragon's wing, then sliced another's throat, then stabbed another in the side of the neck, then spun and cut off another's tail. One at a time the dragons plummeted down through the sky, crashing into the waters, causing a whirlpool in the bay below.

Alec did not relent. He attacked the flock again and again, criss-crossing the skies, never retreating. Caught up in the whirlwind, he barely noticed when finally the few remaining dragons turned, screeched, and flew off, afraid.

Alec could hardly believe it. Dragons. *Afraid.*

Alec looked below. He saw how high he was, saw the Bay of Death laid out below, saw hundreds of ships, most aflame, and thousands of trolls floating, dead. The Isle of Knossos, too, was aflame, its great fort in ruins. It was a sprawling scene of chaos and destruction.

Alec spotted his fleet and directed the dragon lower. When they neared, Alec raised the sword and plunged it into the dragon's back. It screeched and began to plummet, and as they neared the water, Alec leapt and landed in the waters beside the ship.

Immediately, ropes were thrown, and Alec was hoisted back inside.

As he landed back on the deck, this time, he did not shiver. He no longer felt cold, or tired, or weak, or afraid. He felt, instead, a power he never knew. He felt filled with courage, with strength. He felt himself being reborn.

He had killed a flock of dragons.

And nothing in Escalon could stop him now.

Chapter Three

Vesuvius, awakened by the feeling of sharp claws crawling on the back of his hand, peeled open one eye, the other still sealed shut. He looked up, disoriented, to find himself lying face first in the sand, ocean waves crashing behind him, icy water rushing up the back of his legs. He remembered. After that epic battle he had washed up on the shores of the Bay of Death; he wondered how long he had lay here, unconscious. The tide was now slowly creeping in, preparing to carry him away if he had not awakened. Yet it was not the cold of the waters that woke him – it was the creature on his hand.

Vesuvius looked over at his hand, stretched out on the sand, and saw a large purple crab digging a claw into his hand, tearing out a small piece of his flesh. It took its time, as if Vesuvius were a corpse. With each dig, Vesuvius felt a shock wave of pain.

Vesuvius could not blame the creature; he looked out and saw thousands of corpses sprawled all over this beach, the remnants of his troll army. They all lay there, covered by the purple crabs, the click-clack of their claws filling the air. The stink of decaying trolls overwhelmed him, made him nearly gag. This crab on his hand was clearly the first that had dared venture all the way to Vesuvius. The others likely sensed he was still alive and bided their time. Yet this one brave crab had taken his chances. Dozens more were turning his way now, tentatively following his lead. In moments, Vesuvius knew, he would be covered, eaten alive by this small army – if he wasn't first sucked out to sea by the freezing tides of the Bay of Death.

Feeling a hot flash of rage, Vesuvius reached over with his free hand, grabbed the purple crab, and slowly squeezed. The crab tried to get away – but Vesuvius would not allow it to. It flailed wildly, trying to reach Vesuvius with its pinchers, but he held tight, preventing it from spinning around. He squeezed harder and harder, slowly, taking his time, taking great pleasure in inflicting pain. The creature screeched, hissing an awful high-pitched noise, as Vesuvius slowly squeezed his hand into a fist.

Finally, it exploded. Gobs of purple blood dripped onto his hand, as Vesuvius heard the satisfying crack of the shell. He dropped it, smashed to a pulp.

Vesuvius pulled himself up to one knee, still wobbly, and as he did, dozens of crabs scurried away, clearly shocked to see the dead rise. A chain reaction began, and as he stood, thousands of crabs scattered, leaving the beach empty as Vesuvius took his first steps on shore. He walked through the graveyard and slowly, it all came flooding back.

The battle of Knossos. He had been winning, about to destroy Lorna and Merk, when those dragons had arrived. He recalled falling from the island; losing his army; recalled his fleet aflame; and finally, nearly drowning himself. It had been a rout, and he burned with shame at the thought of it. He turned and looked back out at the bay, the place of his defeat, and saw, in the distance, the Isle of Knossos still aflame. He saw the remnants of his fleet, floating, smashed into pieces, some partial ships still aflame. And then he heard a shriek high above. He looked up and blinked.

Vesuvius could not conceive what he saw before him. It could not be. Dragons were falling from the sky, plummeting into the bay, unmoving.

Dead.

High above, he saw a lone man riding one, battling them all as he clung to the back of a dragon, wielding a sword. Finally, the rest of the flock turned and fled.

He looked back to the waters and saw, on the horizon, dozens of ships, flying the banners of the Lost Isles, and he watched as the man dropped from the last dragon and returned to the ships. He spotted the girl, Lorna, the assassin, Merk, and it burned him to know they had survived.

Vesuvius looked back to the shore and as he examined his troll nation dead, eaten by crabs or taken by the tide and eaten by sharks, he had never felt so alone. He was, he realized with shock, the sole survivor of the army he had brought.

Vesuvius turned and looked north, at the mainland of Escalon, and he knew that somewhere, far north, the Flames had been lowered. Right now, his people were leaving Marda, raiding Escalon, millions of trolls migrating south. After all, Vesuvius had succeeded in reaching the Tower of Kos, in destroying the Sword of Flames, and surely by now his nation had crossed over and was tearing Escalon to bits. They needed leadership. They needed him.

Vesuvius may have lost this battle – but, he had to remember, he had won the war. His greatest moment of glory, the moment he'd awaited his entire life, was still awaiting him. The time had come for him to claim the mantle, to lead his people to complete and total victory.

Yes, he thought, as he stood straighter, brushing off the pain, the wounds, the freezing cold. He had gotten what he had come for. Let the girl and her people flail about on the ocean. After all, he had the destruction of Escalon before him. He could always return and kill her later. He smiled at the thought. He would kill her indeed. He would tear her limb to limb.

Vesuvius took off at a jog, then, soon, a full-fledged run. He would head north. He would meet his nation. And he would lead them on the greatest battle of all time.

It was time to destroy Escalon for now and forever.

Soon, Escalon and Marda would be one.

Chapter Four

Kyle watched in awe as the fissure in the earth widened, thousands of trolls falling to their deaths, flailing, deep into the bowels of the earth. Alva stood close by, staff raised, and intense rays of light shone down from it, so bright that Kyle had to shield his eyes. He was obliterating the army of trolls, single-handedly protecting the north. Kyle had fought with all he had, as had Kolva beside him, and while they had taken out dozens of trolls in fierce hand-to-hand combat before falling wounded, their resources were limited. Alva was the only thing stopping the trolls from overrunning Escalon.

The trolls soon realized the fissure was killing them, and they stopped on the far side, fifty feet away, realizing they could no longer advance. They looked out at Alva and Kolva and Kyle and Dierdre and Marco, eyes filled with frustration. As the fissure continued to spread their way, they turned, and panic in their eyes, they fled.

Soon the great rumbling thundered away, and all fell silent. The tide of trolls had stopped. Were they fleeing back to Marda? Regrouping to invade elsewhere? Kyle could not be sure.

As everything quieted, Kyle lay there, in agony from his wounds. He watched as Alva slowly lowered his staff and the light dimmed around him. Alva then turned to him, held out a palm, and laid it on Kyle's forehead. Kyle felt a rush of light enter his body, felt himself warming, lightening, and within moments, he felt himself completely healed. He sat up, in shock, feeling himself again – and overflowing with gratitude.

Alva knelt at Kolva's side, laid his hand on his stomach, and healed him, too. Within moments Kolva stood, clearly surprised to be back on his feet, light glowing from his eyes. Dierdre and Marco were next, and as Alva laid his palms on them, they, too were healed. He reached out with his staff and touched Leo and Andor, too, and they rose to their feet, all of them healed by Alva's magical power before their wounds finished them off for good.

Kyle stood there, amazed, witnessing firsthand the power of this magical being he had only heard rumors of for most of his life. He knew he was in the presence of a true master. He also sensed that it was a presence that was fleeting; a master that could not stay.

"You have done it," Kyle said, filled with awe and gratitude. "You have stopped the entire nation of trolls."

Alva shook his head.

"I have not," he replied deliberately, his voice measured, ancient. "I have only slowed them. A great and terrible destruction still comes our way."

"Yet how?" Kyle pressed. "The fissure – they could never cross it. You've killed so many thousands of them. Are we not safe?"

Alva shook his head sadly.

"You have not even begun to see the tip of this nation. Millions more have yet to advance. The great battle has begun. The battle that will decide the fate of Escalon."

Alva walked through the rubble of the Tower of Ur, picking his way with his staff, and Kyle studied him, puzzled as always by this enigma. He finally turned to Dierdre and Marco.

"You crave to return to Ur, do you not?" he asked them.

Dierdre and Marco nodded back, hope in their eyes.

"Go," he commanded.

They stared back, clearly baffled.

"But there is nothing left there," she said. "The city was destroyed. Flooded. The Pandesians rule it now."

"To return there would be to return to our deaths," Marco chimed in.

"For now," Alva replied. "But you will be needed there soon, when the great battle comes."

Dierdre and Marco, needing no prodding, turned, mounted Andor together, and galloped away, south into the woods, back toward the city of Ur.

Leo remained back, by Kyle's side, and Kyle stroked his head.

"You think of me and you think of Kyra, don't you boy?" Kyle asked Leo.

Leo whined back affectionately, and Kyle could tell he would stay by his side and protect him as if he were Kyra. He sensed a great fighting partner in him.

Kyle looked back, questioning, as Alva turned and stared at the woods to the north.

"And us, my master?" Kyle asked. "Where are we needed?"

"Right here," Alva said.

Kyle stared at the horizon, joining him in looking north toward Marda.

"They are coming," Alva added. "And we three are the last and final hope."

Chapter Five

Kyra was flooded with panic as she struggled in the spider's web, writhing, desperate to get free as the massive creature crawled for her. She did not want to look, but could not help it. She turned and was filled with dread to see a hissing, massive spider, creeping down at her, one huge leg at a time. It stared back with its huge red eyes, raised its long, fuzzy black legs, and opened its mouth wide, revealing yellow fangs, saliva dripping from them. Kyra knew she had but moments to live – and that this would be an awful way to die.

As she writhed, Kyra heard the clatter all around her of bones in the web; she looked and saw the remains of all the victims who had died here before her, and she knew her chances of survival were slim. She was stuck to the web, and there was nothing she could do.

Kyra closed her eyes, knowing she had no other choice. She could not rely on the external world. She had to look within. She knew the answer did not lie in her external strength, in her external weaponry. If she relied on the external world, she would die.

Internally, though, her power, she sensed, was vast, infinite. She had to tap her inner strength, had to summon the powers she feared to face. She had to finally understand what drove her, understand the sum result of all her spiritual training.

Energy. That was what Alva taught her. When we rely on ourselves, we use but a fraction of our energy, a fraction of our potential. Tap into the world's energy. The entire collective universe is waiting to assist you.

It was coursing through her veins, she felt it. It was that special something she had been born with, that her mother had passed down to her. It was the power that coursed through everything, like a river flowing beneath the earth. It was the same power she had always had a hard time trusting in. It was the deepest part of herself, and the part she still did not completely trust. It was the part that she feared the most, more so than any enemy. She wanted to summon her mother, desperate for her help. Yet she knew she could not reach her here, in this land of Marda. She was entirely on her own. Perhaps this, being utterly alone, dependent on no one else, was the final leg of her training.

Kyra closed her eyes, knowing it was now or never. She sensed she had to become bigger than herself, bigger than this world she saw before her. She forced herself to focus on the energy within, and then, the energy all around her.

Slowly, Kyra tuned in. She sensed the energy of the web, of the spider; she could feel it coursing through her. She slowly allowed it to become a part of her. She no longer struggled against it. She allowed herself, instead, to become one with it.

Kyra felt herself slow down; she felt time slow down. She tuned in on the smallest detail, heard everything, felt everything around her.

Suddenly, Kyra felt a flash of energy, and she knew, for the first time, that all of the universe was one. She felt all the walls of separation come down, felt the barrier dissolve between the external and internal worlds. She felt that the distinction itself was false.

As she did, she felt a rush of energy, as if a dam had released inside her. Her palms burned as if they were on fire.

Kyra opened her eyes and saw the spider, so close now, looking down at her, preparing to pounce. She turned and saw her staff, feet away, stuck in the web. She reached out, no longer doubting herself. She summoned the staff, and as she did, it sailed through the air, right into her waiting palm. She clutched it tight.

Kyra used her power, knowing she was stronger than all she saw before her, and trusted herself. As she did, she raised her arm holding the staff, and it snapped free of the web.

She wheeled, and just as the spider closed its fangs for her, she reached over and jabbed her staff inside its mouth.

The spider let out a horrible screeching noise, and Kyra pried the staff deep into its mouth, turning it sideways. It tried to close its jaws, but it could not, the staff prying its mouth open.

But then, to Kyra's shock, it suddenly closed its jaws and snapped the ancient staff into pieces. It broke that which could not be broken, shattering it in its mouth like a toothpick. This beast was more powerful than she had imagined.

The spider pounced for her, and as it did, time slowed. Kyra felt everything snap into focus. She felt, deep down, that she could free herself, that she could be faster than it was.

Kyra snapped forward, freeing herself, and rolled in the web; when its fangs lowered, they tore open the web instead of her.

As Kyra focused, she felt, for the first time, a faint buzz in the air, felt something summoning her. She turned and stared at what, on the far side of the web, was what she had journeyed to Marda for: the Staff of Truth. There it sat, lodged in a block of black granite, ethereal, glowing under the midnight sky.

Kyra felt an intense connection with it, felt her palms tingling as she reached out with her right hand. She let out the greatest battle cry of her life, and she knew, she just knew, that the staff would obey her.

Suddenly, Kyra felt the earth shake beneath her. She knew she was drawing the weapon out from the very core of the earth, and for a glorious moment, she no longer doubted herself, her powers, or the universe.

A great noise followed, that of stone grating against stone, and Kyra watched with awe as the staff slowly rose, released from the granite. It lifted slowly, then flew through the air, its black, jeweled shaft landing in Kyra's right palm. She grasped it and she felt alive. It was like grasping a snake, like holding onto a living thing.

Without hesitating, Kyra spun and brought it down, just as the spider came for her. The staff suddenly morphed into a blade, and it sliced the massive web in half.

The spider, screeching, fell to the ground, clearly stunned.

Kyra spun around and sliced the web again, freeing herself completely and landing on her feet. She held the staff with both hands high above her head, just as the beast lunged for her. She faced it bravely, stepping forward and slashing at it with the Staff of Truth with all her might. She felt the staff cut through the spider's thick body. It let out an awful screech, as she sliced the spider in half.

Thick, black blood gushed from it, as the spider fell to her feet, dead.

Kyra stood there holding the staff, arms trembling, feeling a rush of energy unlike anything she had ever felt. She felt that she had changed in that moment. She felt she had become more powerful, that she would never be the same again. She felt all the doors had opened, and that anything was possible.

High above, the skies thundered, and lightning cracked. Scarlet lightning shot across the clouds, layering it with streaks, as if the clouds were running with lava. There followed a tremendous roar, and Kyra was overjoyed to see Theon bursting through the clouds. The barrier, she sensed, had been lowered as she drew the staff. For the first time, she knew that she was the one destined to change everything.

Theon landed at her feet, and without pausing, she mounted his back and they rose high into the air. Thunder rumbled all around them as they flew through the skies, heading south, away from Marda, toward Escalon. Kyra knew she had descended to the deepest levels and had prevailed, that she had passed her final test.

And now, the Staff of Truth in hand, she had a war to wage.

Chapter Six

As she sailed away, Lorna watched the still-burning isle of Knossos fade into the horizon, and her heart broke inside her. She stood at the bow of the ship, gripping the rail, Merk at her side and the fleet of the Lost Isles behind her, and could feel all the eyes upon her. This beloved isle, home to the Watchers, to the brave warriors of Knossos, was no more. Up in flames, its glorious fort destroyed, the beloved warriors who had stood guard for thousands of years were now all dead, killed by the wave of trolls, and finished off by the flock of dragons.

Lorna sensed motion and turned to see, stepping up beside her, Alec, the boy who had killed the dragons, who had finally made the Bay of Death fall silent. He stood there, looking as dazed as she, holding his sword, and she felt a wave of gratitude toward him, and toward that weapon he held his hands. She glanced down at it, the Unfinished Sword, a thing of beauty, and could feel the intense energy coming off of it. She recalled the dragons' death, and she knew that in his hands he held the fate of Escalon.

Lorna was grateful to be alive. She knew that she and Merk would have met a fateful end in the Bay of Death had these men of the Lost Isles not arrived. Yet she also felt a wave of guilt for those who had not survived. What pained her most was that she had not foreseen this. Her entire life, she had foreseen everything, all the twists and turns of fate in her lonely life standing guard in the Tower of Kos. She had foreseen the trolls' arrival, had foreseen Merk's arrival, and had even foreseen the Sword of Flames being destroyed. She had foreseen the great battle at the Isle of Knossos – yet she had not foreseen its outcome. She had not foreseen the isle in flames, had not foreseen these dragons. She was doubting her own powers, and that stung her more than anything.

How could this happen? she wondered. The only answer could be that the destiny of Escalon was changing moment to moment. What had been written for thousands of years was being unwritten. The fate of Escalon, she sensed, hung in the balance, and was now amorphous.

Lorna sensed all the eyes of the ship on her, all wanting to know where to go next, what fate held in store for them as they sailed from the burning isle. With the world burning in chaos, they all looked to her for the answer.

As Lorna stood there, she closed her eyes, and slowly, she could feel the answer welling up inside her, telling her where they were needed most. Something was obscuring her vision, though. With a start, she remembered. Thurn.

Lorna opened her eyes and searched the waters below, watching every floating body that passed by, the sea of corpses bumping against the hull. The other sailors, too, had been searching for hours, scanning the faces with her, and yet they had not been successful.

“My lady, the ship awaits your command,” Merk prodded gently.

“We have searched the waters for hours,” Sovos added. “Thurn is dead. We must let him go.”

Lorna shook her head.

“I sense he is not,” she countered.

“I, more than anyone, wish that were so,” Merk replied. “I owe him my life. He saved us from the dragons' breath. Yet we saw him catch fire and plummet to the sea.”

“Yet we did not see him die,” she replied.

Sovos sighed.

“Even if he somehow survived the fall, my lady,” Sovos added, “he could not have survived these waters. We must let him go. Our fleet needs direction.”

“No,” she said, decisive, her voice ringing with authority. She could feel it rising within her, a premonition, a tingling between her eyes. It was telling her that Thurn was alive down there, somewhere amidst the wreckage, amidst the thousands of floating bodies.

Lorna scanned the waters, waiting, hoping, listening. She owed him that much, and she never turned a back on a friend. The Bay of Death was eerily quiet, with all the trolls dead, the dragons gone; and yet still it carried a sound of its own, the non-stop howling of the wind, the splashing of a thousand whitecaps, the groaning of their ship as it was rocked nonstop. As she listened, the gales of wind grew more fierce.

“A storm brews, my lady,” Sovos finally said. “We must sail. We need direction.”

She knew they were right. And yet, she could not let go.

Just as Sovos opened his mouth to speak, suddenly Lorna felt a rush of excitement. She leaned over and spied something in the distance, bobbing in the waters, carried by the currents toward the ship. She felt a tingling in her gut, and she knew it was him.

“THERE!” she cried.

The men rushed to the railing and stared over the edge, and they all saw it, too: there was Thurn, floating in the water. Lorna wasted no time. She took two big steps, jumped off the rail, and dove, head first, falling twenty feet through the air down for the icy waters of the bay.

“Lorna!” Merk cried out behind her, concern in his voice.

Lorna saw the red sharks swarming below, and understood his concern. They were circling Thurn, but while they prodded him, she saw they hadn’t yet been able to pierce his armor. Thurn was lucky, she realized, to still be in his armor, the only thing saving his life – and luckier still that he was grasping a plank of wood, keeping him afloat. Yet the sharks were now swarming in greater force, becoming more bold, and she knew his time was limited.

She also knew the sharks would come for her, and yet she would not hesitate, not when his life was in danger. She owed him that much.

Lorna landed in the water, in shock at the icy cold, and without pausing, kicked and swam beneath the surface until she reached him, using her power to swim faster than the sharks. She put her arms around him, grabbing him, sensing he was alive, though unconscious. The sharks began to swim for her, and she braced herself, prepared to do whatever she had to do to keep them alive.

Lorna suddenly saw ropes landing around her, and she grabbed on tight and felt herself yanked backwards quickly, flying through the air. It was not a moment too soon: a red shark leapt from the water and snapped for her legs, just missing.

Lorna, holding Thurn, was yanked through the air, rising in the freezing wind, swaying wildly as they smashed against the hull of the ship. A moment later they were pulled up by the crew, and before she went back on board, she caught a last glimpse of the sharks swarming below, furious at having lost their meal.

Lorna landed on the deck with a thud, Thurn in her arms, and as they did, she immediately turned him over and examined him. Half of his face was disfigured, burnt by the flames, yet he had, at least, survived. His eyes were closed. At least they were not open to the sky; that was a good sign. She put her hands on his heart, and she felt something. However faint, there was a heartbeat.

Lorna rested her palms on his heart, and as she did, she felt a rush of energy, an intense heat pouring through her palms and into him. She summoned her powers and willed for Thurn to come back to life.

Thurn suddenly opened his eyes and sat upright with a gasp, breathing heavily, spitting out water. He coughed and the other men rushed forward and wrapped him in furs, warming him. Lorna was elated. She watched the color return to his face, and she knew he would live.

Lorna suddenly felt a warm fur being draped over her shoulder, and she turned to see Merk standing over her, smiling down, helping her to her feet.

The men soon crowded around her, looking at her with even more respect.

“And now?” he asked earnestly, coming up beside her. He nearly had to shout to be heard over the wind, the groaning of their rocking ship.

Lorna knew their time was scarce. She closed her eyes and reached her palms up to the sky, and slowly, she felt the fabric of the universe. With the Sword of Flames destroyed, Knossos gone, the dragons fled, she needed to know where Escalon needed them most in its time of crisis.

She suddenly felt the vibration of the Unfinished Sword beside her, and she knew. She turned and looked at Alec, and he stared back, clearly waiting.

She felt his special destiny rising up within her.

“You shall pursue the dragons no more,” she said. “Those that fled will not come to you – they fear you now. And if you seek them out, you will not find them. They have gone to battle elsewhere in Escalon. The mission to destroy them is now someone else’s.”

“Then what, my lady?” he asked, clearly surprised.

She closed her eyes and sensed the answer coming to her.

“The Flames,” Lorna replied, feeling the answer with certainty. “They must be restored. It is the only way to keep Marda from destroying Escalon. That is what matters most now.”

Alec seemed perplexed.

“And what has that to do with me?” he asked.

She stared back.

“The Unfinished Sword,” she replied. “It is the last hope. It, and it alone, can restore the Flame Wall. It must be returned to its original home. Until then, Escalon can never be safe.”

He stared back, surprise in his face.

“And where is its home?” he asked, as the men crowded close to listen.

“In the north,” she replied. “In the Tower of Ur.”

“Ur?” Alec asked, baffled. “Has the tower not already been destroyed?”

Lorna nodded.

“The tower, yes,” she replied. “But not what lies beneath.”

She took a deep breath as they all looked to her, riveted.

“The tower holds a hidden chamber, deep below the ground. It was never the tower that was important – that was a diversion. It was what lay below. There, the Unfinished Sword will find its home. When you return it, the land will be safe, the Flames restored for all time.”

Alec took a deep breath, clearly taking it all in.

“You want me to journey north?” he asked. “To the tower?”

She nodded.

“It will be a treacherous journey,” she replied. “You will find foes on all sides. Take the men of the Lost Isles with you. Sail up the Sorrow, and do not stop until you reach Ur.”

She stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Return the sword,” she commanded. “And save us.”

“And you, my lady?” Alec asked.

She closed her eyes and felt a terrible rush of pain, and she knew immediately where she had to go.

“Duncan dies as we speak,” she said. “And only I can save him.”

Chapter Seven

Aidan rode across the wasteland with Leifall's men, Cassandra on one side, Anvin on the other, White at his feet, and as they galloped, raising a cloud of dust, Aidan felt overjoyed at his sense of victory and pride. He had helped achieve the impossible, managing to redirect the falls, to change the massive rush of Everfall, to send its waters gushing across the plains and flood the canyon – and save his father just in time. As he approached, so eager to be reunited with his father, Aidan could see his father's men in the distance, could hear their shouts of jubilation even from here, and he felt filled with pride. They had done it.

Aidan was elated his father and men had survived, the canyon flooded, overflowing, thousands of Pandesians dead, washed up at their feet. For the first time, Aidan felt a great sense of purpose and belonging. He'd truly contributed to his father's cause, despite his young age, and he felt like a man amongst men. He felt this was one of the great moments of his life.

As they galloped, the sun shining down, Aidan could not wait for the moment when he saw his father, the pride in his eyes, the gratitude and most of all, the look of respect. His father would now, he was sure, look upon him as an equal, as one of his own, a true warrior. It was all that Aidan had ever wanted.

Aidan rode on, the thunderous sound of horses in his ears, caked in dirt, sunburned from the long ride, and as they finally crested the hill and came charging down, he saw the final stretch before them. He looked out at the group of his father's men, heart pounding with anticipation – when suddenly, he realized that something was wrong.

There, in the distance, his father's men were parting ways, and amidst them he saw a sole figure, walking alone in the desert. A girl.

It made no sense. What was a girl doing out there, alone, walking toward his father? Why had all the men stopped and let her through? Aidan did not know exactly what was wrong, but by the way his heart was pounding, something deep inside told him it was trouble.

Even stranger, as Aidan neared, he was floored as he recognized the girl's singular appearance. He saw her suede and leather cloak, her tall black boots, her staff at her side, her long light-blonde hair, her proud face and features, and he blinked, confused.

Kyra.

His confusion only deepened. As he watched her walk, saw the manner of her gait, the way she held her shoulders, he knew something was not quite right. That looked like her, but it was not. That was not the sister he had lived with his entire, with whom he had spent so many hours reading books in her lap.

Still a hundred yards away, Aidan's heart was pounding as he felt a deepening sense of apprehension. He lowered his head, kicked his horse and urged him on, galloping so fast he could hardly breathe. He had a sinking premonition, felt a sense of impending doom as he saw the girl near Duncan.

"FATHER!" he shrieked.

Yet from here, his cries were drowned out by the wind.

Aidan galloped faster, riding out ahead of the pack, racing down the mountain. He watched, helpless, as the girl reached out to embrace his father.

"NO, FATHER!" he shouted.

He was fifty yards away, then forty, then thirty – yet still too far to do anything but watch.

"WHITE, RUN!" he commanded.

White took off, running even faster than the horse. And yet still Aidan knew there would be no time.

Then he watched it happen. The girl, to Aidan's horror, reached out and plunged a dagger into his father's chest. His father's eyes widened as he dropped to his knees.

Aidan felt as if he, too, had been stabbed. He felt his entire body collapse within him, never feeling so helpless in his life. It had all happened so quickly, his father's men standing there, confused, dumbfounded. No one even knew what was happening. But Aidan knew. He knew right away.

Still twenty yards out, Aidan, desperate, reached into his waist, drew the dagger that Motley had given him, reached back, and threw it.

The dagger sailed through the air, spinning end over end, shimmering in the light, heading for the girl. She extracted her dagger, grimaced, and prepared to stab Duncan again – when suddenly, Aidan's dagger found its target. Aidan was relieved, at least, to watch it puncture the back of her hand, to see her shriek and drop her weapon. It was no earthly shriek, and certainly not Kyra's. Whoever she was, Aidan had outed her.

She turned and looked at him, and as she did, Aidan watched with horror as her face transformed. The girlish countenance was replaced by a grotesque, manly figure, growing bigger by the second, larger than any of them. Aidan's eyes opened wide in shock. It was not his sister. It was none other than the Great and Holy Ra.

Duncan's men, too, stared back in shock. Somehow, the dagger puncturing his hand had transformed the illusion, had shattered whatever magic sorcery he had used to deceive Duncan.

At the same moment White lunged forward, leaping through the air and landing on Ra's chest with his huge paws, driving him back. Snarling, the dog tore at his throat, scratching him. He clawed at his face, throwing Ra completely off guard and preventing him from rallying and attacking Duncan again.

Ra, struggling in the dirt, looked up to the heavens and shouted out words, something in a language Aidan did not understand, clearly invoking some ancient spell.

And then, suddenly, Ra disappeared into a ball of dust.

All that remained was his bloody dagger, fallen to the ground.

And there, in a pool of blood, Aidan's unmoving father.

Chapter Eight

Vesuvius rode north through the countryside, galloping on the back of the horse he had stolen after murdering a group of Pandesian soldiers – and on a rampage ever since, barely slowing as he tore through village after village, murdering innocent women and children. In some cases he passed through a village for its food and weapons; in others, just for the joy of killing. He smiled wide as he recalled torching village after village, single-handedly burning them down to the ground. He would leave his mark on Escalon everywhere he went.

As he rode out of the last village, Vesuvius groaned and threw a flaming torch, watching with satisfaction as it landed on yet another roof, setting another village aflame. He burst out of it with glee. It was the third village he had burned this hour. He would burn them all down if he could – but he had pressing business. He dug his heels into horse, determined to reunite with his trolls and lead them on the final stretch of their invasion. They needed him now, more than ever.

Vesuvius rode and rode, crossing the great plains and entering the northern part of Escalon. He sensed his horse tiring beneath him, but that only made him dig his heels in deeper. He cared not if he rode it to its death – in fact, he hoped he did.

As the sun grew long in the sky, Vesuvius could sense his troll nation getting closer, awaiting him; he could smell it in the air. It gave him great joy to think of his people here in Escalon, finally, on this side of the Flames. Yet as he rode, he wondered why his trolls were not further south by now, pillaging all of the countryside. What was stopping them? Were his generals so incompetent that they could accomplish nothing without him?

Vesuvius finally burst free of a long stretch of woods, and as he did, his heart leapt to see his forces spread out on the plains of Ur. Tens of thousands of trolls were gathering, he was thrilled to see. Yet he was confused: instead of looking victorious, these trolls looked defeated, forlorn. How could it be?

As Vesuvius watched his people just standing there, his faced flush with chagrin. Without him there, they all seemed demoralized, to have all the fight taken out of them. Finally, the Flames down, Escalon was theirs. What were they waiting for?

Vesuvius finally reached them, and as he burst into the crowd, galloping amongst them, he watched them all turn and look up at him with shock, fear, and then hope. They all froze and stared. He'd always had that effect upon them.

Vesuvius jumped down from his horse, and without hesitating, raised his halberd high, spun around, and chopped off his horse's head. The horse stood there for a moment, headless, then dropped to the ground, dead.

That, Vesuvius thought, was for not riding fast enough.

Besides, he always liked to kill something when he arrived somewhere.

Vesuvius saw the fear in his trolls' eyes as he marched toward them in a rage, demanding answers.

"Who is leading these men?" he demanded.

"I have, my lord."

Vesuvius turned to see a thick, large troll, Suves, his deputy commander in Marda, facing him, tens of thousands of trolls behind him. Vesuvius could tell that Suves was trying to look proud, yet fear lurked behind his gaze.

"We thought you were dead, my lord," he added, as if explaining.

Vesuvius scowled.

"I do not die," he snapped. "Dying is for cowards."

The trolls all stared back in fear and silence as Vesuvius clenched and unclenched his grip on his halberd.

“And why have you stopped here?” he demanded. “Why have you not destroyed all of Escalon?”

Suves looked back and forth from his men to Vesuvius in fear.

“We were stopped, my master,” he finally admitted.

Vesuvius felt a rush of rage.

“Stopped!?” he snapped. “By whom?”

Suves hesitated.

“The one known as Alva,” he finally said.

Alva. The name rang deep in Vesuvius’s soul. Escalon’s greatest sorcerer. The only one, perhaps, with more power than he.

“He created a fissure in the earth,” Suves explained. “A canyon we could not cross. He has separated the south from the north. Too many of us have already died trying. It is I who called off the attack, who saved all these trolls you see here today. It is I you have to thank for their precious lives being restored. It is I who saved our nation. For that, my master, I ask that you promote me, and give me a command of my own. After all, this nation looks to me now for leadership.”

Vesuvius felt his rage building to the point of explosion. Hands shaking, he took two quick steps, swung his halberd wide, and sliced off Suves’s head.

Suves collapsed to the ground, while the rest of the trolls stared back in shock and fear.

“There,” Vesuvius replied to the dead troll, “is your command.”

Vesuvius surveyed his troll nation with disgust. He patrolled his lines up and down, staring into all their faces, instilling fear and panic in all of them, as he enjoyed doing.

Finally, he spoke, his voice sounding more like a growl.

“The great south lies before you,” he boomed in his dark voice, filled with fury. “Those lands were ours once, pillaged from your forefathers. Those lands were once Marda. They stole what is ours.”

Vesuvius took a deep breath.

“For those of you who are afraid to advance, I will collect your names, and your family’s names, and I will have each one of you tortured slowly, one at a time, then sent to rot in the pits of Marda. Those of you who wish to fight, to save your lives, to reclaim what your forefathers once owned, will join me now. Who is with me?” he shouted.

There arose a great cheer, a loud rumbling through the ranks, row after row, as far as he could see, of trolls raising their halberds and chanting his name.

“VESUVIUS! VESUVIUS! VESUVIUS!”

Vesuvius let out a great battle cry, turned, and sprinted south. Behind him he heard a rumble like thunder, the rumble of thousands of trolls following him, of a great nation determined to put an end to Escalon once and for all.

Chapter Nine

Kyra flew on Theon's back, racing south through Marda, slowly returning to herself as she left this land of blackness. She felt more powerful than ever. In her right hand she wielded the Staff of Truth, light shining off it, engulfing them both. It was a weapon, she knew, that was bigger than her; it was an object of destiny, filling her with its power, commanding her as she commanded it. Holding it made the universe feel bigger, made her feel bigger.

Kyra felt as if she were holding the weapon she had been meant to wield since she was born. For the first time in her life, she understood what had been missing, and she felt complete. She and the staff, this mysterious weapon she had retrieved from deep in the lands of Marda, were one.

Kyra flew south, Theon, too, bigger and stronger beneath her, the fury and vengeance in his eyes matching her own. As they flew and flew, hours passing, finally the gloom began to subside, and the green of Escalon became visible. Kyra's heart leapt to see her homeland; she had never thought to see it again. She felt a sense of urgency; she knew her father, engulfed by Ra's armies, needed her in the south; she knew that Pandesian soldiers filled the land; she knew that Pandesia's fleets were pounding Escalon from the seas; she knew that somewhere high above the dragons circled, also bent on Escalon's destruction; and she knew the trolls were invading, millions of creatures tearing her land apart. Escalon was in dire straits in all directions.

Kyra blinked and tried to push from her mind the awful memory of her homeland torn to shreds, the long stretches of ruin and rubble and ash. And yet, as she clutched the staff tighter, she knew this weapon might be its hope for redemption. Could this staff, Theon, and her powers truly save Escalon? Could something so far gone be saved? Could Escalon ever even hope to return to what it had once been?

Kyra did not know. But there was always hope. That was what her father had taught her: even in one's bleakest hour, when things looked so grim, even if they appeared utterly destroyed, there was always hope. There was always some spark of life, of hope, of change. Nothing was never absolute. Not even destruction.

Kyra flew and flew, feeling her destiny well up within her, feeling a surge of optimism, feeling more powerful with each passing moment. She reflected, and felt she had conquered something deep within herself. She recalled slicing that spider's web, and she felt that, as she had sliced it, she had also severed something within her. She had been forced to survive on her own, and she had conquered the deepest demons within her. She was no longer the same girl who had grown up in Fort Volis; she was not even the same girl who had ventured into Marda. She returned now as a woman. As a warrior.

Kyra looked down through the clouds, sensing the landscape shift beneath her, and saw they had finally reached the border where the Flames had once stood. As she examined the big scar upon the land, motion below caught her eye.

"Lower, Theon."

They dove beneath the heavy clouds, and as the gloom dissolved, her heart lifted to see the land she had loved again. She was thrilled to see her own soil, the hills and trees which she recognized, to smell the air of Escalon.

Yet as she looked again, her heart fell. There, below, were millions of trolls, flooding the land, racing south from Marda. It resembled a mass migration of beasts, their rumble audible even from here. Seeing this, she did not know how her nation could ever withstand such an attack. She knew her people needed her – and fast.

Kyra felt the Staff of Truth buzz in her hands, then make a high-pitched whistling noise. She felt it calling her to action, demanding she strike. She did not know if she was commanding the staff, or if it was commanding her.

Kyra aimed the staff toward the ground, and as she did, a cracking noise emanated from it. It was as if she were wielding thunder and lightning in her palm. She watched in fascination as an intense orb of light shot forth from the staff and raced down for the ground.

Hundreds of trolls stopped and looked up, and she saw panic and terror in their faces as they looked at the ball of light coming down at them from the sky. They had no time to run.

An explosion followed, so powerful that its shock waves rocked Theon and Kyra even from the ground. The orb of light hit the ground with the force of a comet hitting earth. As it rippled, thousands of trolls fell, flattened by the ever-expanding waves of light.

Kyra examined the staff in awe. She prepared to slash it again, to wipe out the troll army – when suddenly, a horrific roar sounded above her. She looked up and was shocked to see the huge face of a scarlet dragon emerging from the clouds – and a dozen more behind it. She realized, too late, that these dragons had been looking for them.

Before Kyra could strike at them with her staff, a dragon reached out and swiped at Theon with its talons. Theon was caught off guard, and was sent spinning through the air by the tremendous blow.

Kyra hung on for dear life as they spun, nearly out of control. Theon's wings were upside down as he tried to right himself, and he turned again and again, Kyra barely hanging on, clutching his scales, until he finally straightened.

Theon roared in defiance and, despite being smaller than the bunch, he lunged upwards, fearless, at the dragon who had swiped him. The dragon was clearly surprised that the smaller Theon had rebounded, and before it could react, Theon sank his teeth into its tail.

The large dragon shrieked as Theon bit its tail clean off. It flew for a moment without a tail, then lost its bearings and plummeted, face-first, straight for the ground below. It landed with a crash, creating a crater and a cloud of dust.

Kyra raised her staff, feeling it burning in her palm, and swung it as three more dragons came for her. She watched as a ball of light shot forth and smashed the three dragons in the face. They screeched, stopped short in the air, then flailed. They became very still, then plummeted straight down, like rocks, until they, too, hit the ground with an explosion, dead.

Kyra was amazed at her power. Had the Staff of Truth really just killed three dragons with a single slash?

Kyra raised the staff again as a dozen more dragons appeared, and as she lowered it, expecting to fell them, she was suddenly surprised to feel a horrific pain in her hand. She turned and noticed out of the corner of her eye a dragon swooping down behind her, and its talons swiping the back of her hand. It slashed her hand, drawing blood, while in the same motion, it clutched the Staff of Truth and yanked it from her hands.

Kyra shrieked, more from the horror of losing the staff than from the pain. She watched, helpless, as the dragon flew off, taking the staff away from her. The dragon then dropped it, and she watched with horror as the staff tumbled through the air, falling end over end, down toward the ground. The staff, Escalon's last hope, would be destroyed.

And Kyra, defenseless now, faced a flock of dragons, all ready to tear her apart.

Chapter Ten

Lorna, feeling a sense of urgency, walked briskly through the camp, Duncan's men parting ways for her. Merk walked at her side, joined by Sovos and trailed by a dozen men of the Lost Isles, warriors who had forked off from the others and joined them on their journey out of the Bay of Death, back to land, and all the way out here, in the desert, past Leptus. Lorna had single-mindedly led them here, knowing that Duncan needed her.

As she approached, Lorna saw Duncan's men looking at her with wonder. They made room for her until she finally reached the small clearing where Duncan lay. Concerned warriors huddled around him, kneeling by his side, all gravely concerned for their dying commander. She saw Anvin and Aidan, weeping, White at their feet, emitting the only sound in the heavy silence.

A hand stopped her as she approached Duncan, and she stopped and looked back. Merk and Sovos tensed, hands on their swords, but she gently laid a hand on them, not wanting a confrontation.

"Who are you, and why do you come here?" Duncan's warrior asked sternly.

"I am King Tarnis's daughter," she replied with authority. "Duncan tried to save my father. I have come to return the favor."

The man looked surprised.

"His wound is fatal," the warrior said. "I have seen it many times in battle. He is past all healing."

It was Lorna's turn to frown.

"We waste time. Do you want Duncan to die here, bleeding? Or shall I attempt to heal him?"

The warriors were clearly all skeptical since their encounter with Ra and his sorcery, and they looked at each other. Finally, Anvin nodded.

"Let her through," he said.

They stepped aside, and as Merk and Sovos lowered their weapons, Lorna hurried forward and knelt at Duncan's side.

She examined him and knew immediately it was not good. She could sense the black aura of death around him, and knew, as she examined his closed, fluttering eyes, that the end was near. He was soon leaving this earth. Ra's blow had done grievous damage – not so much because of the dagger, but because, she sensed, of Duncan's feeling of betrayal behind it. Duncan still thought it was Kyra who had stabbed him, and she sensed in his aura that he no longer wished to live because of it. It was sapping his life force away.

"Can you save my father?"

Lorna looked over to see Aidan, red-eyed, cheeks wet with tears, staring up at her with hope and desperation. She took a deep breath.

"I do not know," she answered simply.

Lorna lay one palm on Duncan's forehead, and the other on his wound. She began to hum an ancient hymn, and slowly, the crowd fell silent. Aidan's weeping stopped. She felt a tremendous heat course through her palms, confronting his sickness. She closed her eyes and summoned all the power she had, trying to read his destiny, to understand what had happened, what his fate held in store.

Slowly, it all came to her. Duncan had been meant to die here today. That was his destiny. Here, in this place, on this battlefield, after his great victory in the canyon. She saw all the battles he had ever fought; saw his rise to warrior, to commander; saw his final and greatest battle here at the Canyon. He was not meant to survive the flooding. He was meant to die in its wake. He had taken the revolution as far as he was meant to take it.

She sensed his daughter, Kyra, flying through the air, on her way here, meant to take over his command. Duncan was meant to die at this moment.

Yet, as she knelt over him, Lorna summoned the power of the universe and begged it to change his fate, to change his destiny. After all, Duncan had been the one and only true friend to her father,

King Tarnis, even when all others had turned his back on him. Duncan was the one her father had urged to come save her. For the sake of her father, she owed it to him. And she also, deep down, sensed that there might be within Duncan, still one epic battle left to be fought.

Lorna wrestled with fate, feeling the struggle exhaust her. She felt an battle epic of spirits raging within her, as she wrestled with powers she was not supposed to wrestle with. Dangerous powers. Powers that could kill her. Fate, after all, was not a thing to be taken lightly.

As she struggled, Lorna felt Duncan's life hanging in the balance. Finally, she collapsed in exhaustion, breathing hard, and as she did, an answer came to her: it was both victory and failure. Duncan's life would be extended – but only for a short while. He would be allowed one last battle, allowed to see his daughter's face again, his *real* daughter, allowed to die in her arms. That, at least, was something.

Lorna shook, feeling sick, overwhelmed by the powers she had fought with. Her palms burned, and finally there came a flash, a feeling unlike any she'd ever felt, and she was thrown back by the power of it. She landed on her back a few feet away.

Merk quickly pulled her up, and she knelt there, weak, in a cold sweat.

A few yards away, Duncan lay unmoving, and Lorna felt overpowered by the magic of what she had summoned.

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