

# MORGAN RICE'S EPIC FANTASY BUNDLE

# A QUEST OF HEROES

(BOOKS #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)

RISE OF THE DRAGONS

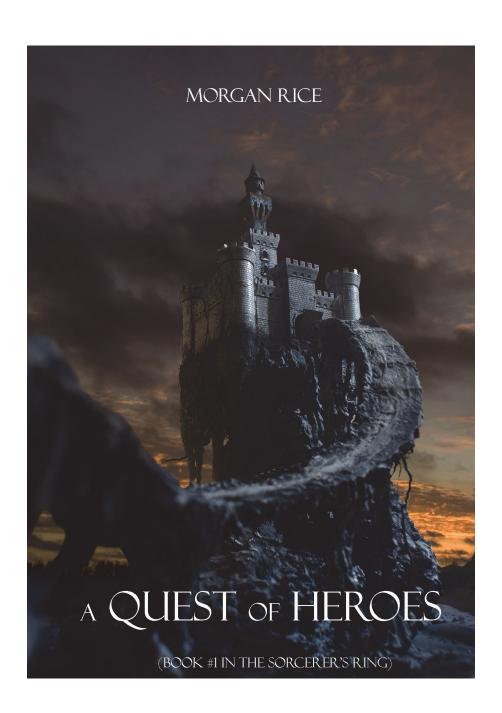
(KINGS AND SORCERERS—BOOK 1)

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN

(OF CROWNS AND GLORY-BOOK 1)

MORGAN RICE

A QUEST OF HEROES RISE OF THE DRAGONS SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN



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(BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)

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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 three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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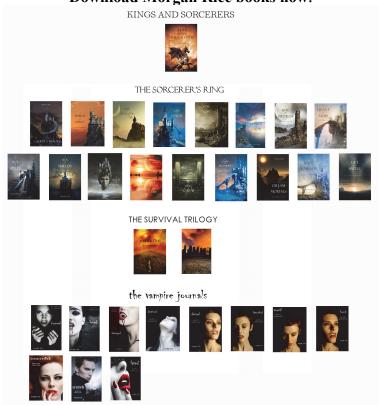
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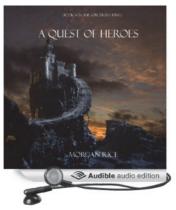
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"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."

—William Shakespeare Henry IV, Part II

## **CHAPTER ONE**

The boy stood on the highest knoll of the low country in the Western Kingdom of the Ring, looking north, watching the first of the rising suns. As far as he could see stretched rolling green hills, dipping and rising like camel humps in a series of valleys and peaks. The burnt-orange rays of the first sun lingered in the morning mist, making them sparkle, lending the light a magic that matched the boy's mood. He rarely woke this early or ventured this far from home—and never ascended this high—knowing it would incur his father's wrath. But on this day, he didn't care. On this day, he disregarded the million rules and chores that had oppressed him for his fourteen years. For this day was different. It was the day his destiny had arrived.

The boy, Thorgrin of the Western Kingdom of the Southern Province of the clan McLeod—known to all he liked simply as Thor—the youngest of four boys, the least favorite of his father, had stayed awake all night in anticipation of this day. He had tossed and turned, bleary-eyed, waiting, willing the first sun to rise. For a day like this arrived only once every several years, and if he missed it, he would be stuck in this village, doomed to tend his father's flock the rest of his days. That was a thought he could not bear.

Conscription Day. It was the one day the King's Army canvassed the provinces and hand-picked volunteers for the King's Legion. As long as he had lived, Thor had dreamt of nothing else. For him, life meant one thing: joining the Silver, the King's elite force of knights, bedecked in the finest armor and the choicest arms anywhere in the two kingdoms. And one could not enter the Silver without first joining the Legion, the company of squires ranging from fourteen to nineteen years of age. And if one was not the son of a noble, or of a famed warrior, there was no other way to join the Legion.

Conscription Day was the only exception, that rare event every few years when the Legion ran low and the King's men scoured the land in search of new recruits. Everyone knew that few commoners were chosen—and that even fewer would actually make the Legion.

Thor studied the horizon intently, looking for any sign of motion. The Silver, he knew, would have to take this, the only road into his village, and he wanted to be the first to spot them. His flock of sheep protested all around him, rising up in a chorus of annoying grunts and urging him to bring them back down the mountain, where the grazing was choicer. He tried to block out the noise, and the stench. He had to concentrate.

What had made all of this bearable, all these years of tending flocks, of being his father's lackey, his older brothers' lackey, the one cared for least and burdened most, was the idea that one day he would leave this place. One day, when the Silver came, he would surprise all those who had underestimated him and be selected. In one swift motion, he would ascend their carriage and say goodbye to all of this.

Thor's father, of course, had never considered him seriously as a candidate for the Legion—in fact, he had never considered him as a candidate for anything. Instead, his father devoted his love and attention to Thor's three older brothers. The oldest was nineteen and the others but a year behind each other, leaving Thor a good three years younger than any of them. Perhaps because they were closer in age, or perhaps because they looked alike and looked nothing like Thor, the three of them stuck together, barely acknowledging Thor's existence.

Worse, they were taller and broader and stronger than he, and Thor, who knew he was not short, nonetheless felt small beside them, felt his muscular legs frail compared to their barrels of oak. His father made no move to rectify any of this—and in fact seemed to relish it—leaving Thor to attend the sheep and sharpen weapons while his brothers were left to train. It was never spoken, but always understood, that Thor would spend his life in the wings, be forced to watch his brothers achieve great things. His destiny, if his father and brothers had their way, would be to stay here, swallowed by this village, and give his family the support they demanded.

Worse still was that Thor sensed his brothers, paradoxically, were threatened by him, maybe even hated him. Thor could see it in their every glance, their every gesture. He didn't understand how, but he aroused something, like fear, or jealousy, in them. Perhaps it was because he was different from them, didn't look like them or speak with their mannerisms; he didn't even dress like them, his father reserving the best—the purple and scarlet robes, the gilded weapons—for his brothers, while Thor was left wearing the coarsest of rags.

Nonetheless, Thor made the best of what he had, finding a way to make his clothes fit, tying the frock with a sash around his waist, and, now that summer was here, cutting off the sleeves to allow his toned arms to be caressed by the breezes. His shirt was matched by coarse linen pants—his only pair—and boots made of the poorest leather, laced up his shins. They were hardly the leather of his brothers' shoes, but he made them work. His was the typical uniform of a herder.

But he hardly had the typical demeanor. Thor stood tall and lean, with a proud jaw, noble chin, high cheekbones, and gray eyes, looking like a displaced warrior. His straight, brown hair fell back in waves on his head, just past his ears, and behind the locks, his eyes glistened like minnows in the light.

Thor's brothers would be allowed to sleep in this morning, given a hearty meal, and sent off for the Selection with the finest weapons and his father's blessing—while he would not even be allowed to attend. He had tried to raise the issue with his father once. It had not gone well. His father had summarily ended the conversation, and he had not tried again. It just wasn't fair.

Thor was determined to reject the fate his father had planned for him. At the first sign of the royal caravan, he would race back to the house, confront his father, and, like it or not, make himself known to the King's men. He would stand for selection with the others. His father could not stop him. He felt a knot in his stomach at the thought of it.

The first sun rose higher, and when the second sun, mint green, began to rise, adding a layer of light to the purple sky, Thor spotted them.

He stood upright, hairs on end, electrified. There, on the horizon, came the faintest outline of a horse-drawn carriage, its wheels kicking dust into the sky. His heart beat faster as another came into view; then another. Even from here the golden carriages gleamed in the suns, like silver-backed fish leaping from the water.

By the time he counted twelve of them, he could wait no longer. Heart pounding in his chest, forgetting his flock for the first time in his life, Thor turned and stumbled down the hill, determined to stop at nothing until he made himself known.

\*

Thor barely paused to catch his breath as he sped down the hills, through the trees, scratched by branches and not caring. He reached a clearing and saw his village spread out below: a sleepy country town packed with one-story, white clay homes with thatched roofs. There were but several dozen families amongst them. Smoke rose from chimneys as most were up early preparing their morning meal. It was an idyllic place, just far enough—a full day's ride—from

King's Court to deter passersby. Just another farming village on the edge of the Ring, another cog in the wheel of the Western Kingdom.

Thor burst down the final stretch, into the village square, kicking up dirt as he went. Chickens and dogs ran out of his way, and an old woman, squatting outside her home before a cauldron of bubbling water, hissed at him.

"Slow down, boy!" she screeched as he raced past, stirring dust into her fire.

But Thor would not slow—not for her, not for anybody. He turned down one side street, then another, twisting and turning the way he knew by heart, until he reached home.

It was a small, nondescript dwelling like all the others, with its white clay walls and angular, thatched roof. Like most, its single room was divided, his father sleeping on one side and his three brothers on the other; unlike most, it had a small chicken coop in the back, and it was here that Thor was exiled to sleep. At first he'd bunked with his brothers; but over time they had grown bigger and meaner and more exclusive, and made a show of not leaving him room. Thor had been hurt, but now he relished his own space, preferring to be away from their presence. It just confirmed for him that he was the exile in his family that he already knew he was.

Thor ran to his front door and burst through it without stopping.

"Father!" he yelled, gasping for breath. "The Silver! They're coming!"

His father and three brothers sat hunched over the breakfast table, already dressed in their finest. At his words they jumped up and darted past him, bumping his shoulders as they ran out of the house and into the road.

Thor followed them out, and they all stood watching the horizon.

"I see no one," Drake, the oldest, answered in his deep voice. With the broadest shoulders, hair cropped short like his brothers', brown eyes, and thin, disapproving lips, he scowled down at Thor, as usual.

"Nor do I," echoed Dross, just a year below Drake, always taking his side.

"They're coming!" Thor shot back. "I swear!"

His father turned to him and grabbed his shoulders sternly.

"And how would you know?" he demanded.

"I saw them."

"How? From where?"

Thor hesitated; his father had him. He of course knew the only place Thor could have spotted them was from the top of that knoll. Now Thor was unsure how to respond.

"I...climbed the knoll—"

"With the flock? You know they are not to go that far."

"But today was different. I had to see."

His father glowered down.

"Go inside at once and fetch your brothers' swords and polish their scabbards, so they look their best before the King's men arrive."

His father, done with him, turned back to his brothers, who all stood in the road looking out.

"Do you think they'll choose us?" asked Durs, the youngest of the three, a full three years ahead of Thor.

"They'd be foolish not to," his father said. "They are short on men this year. It has been a slim cropping—or else they wouldn't bother coming. Just stand straight, the three of you, keep your chins up and chests out. Do not look them directly in the eye, but do not look away, either. Be strong and confident. Show no weakness. If you want to be in the King's Legion, you must act as if you're already in it."

"Yes, Father," his three boys answered at once, getting into position.

He turned and glared back at Thor.

"What are you still doing there?" he asked. "Get inside!"

Thor stood there, torn. He didn't want to disobey his father, but he had to speak with him. His heart pounded as he debated. He decided it would be best to obey, to bring the swords, and then confront his father. Disobeying outright wouldn't help.

Thor raced into the house, out through the back and to the weapons shed. He found his brothers' three swords, objects of beauty all of them, crowned with the finest silver hilts, precious gifts for which his father had toiled years. He grabbed all three, surprised as always at their weight, and ran back through the house with them.

He sprinted to his brothers, handed each a sword, then turned to his father.

"What, no polish?" Drake said.

His father turned to him disapprovingly, but before he could say anything, Thor spoke up.

"Father, please. I need to speak with you!"

"I told you to polish—"

"Please, Father!"

His father glared back, debating. He must have seen the seriousness on Thor's face, because finally, he said, "Well?"

"I want to be considered. With the others. For the Legion."

His brothers' laughter rose up behind him, making his face burn red.

But his father did not laugh; on the contrary, his scowl deepened.

"Do you?" he asked.

Thor nodded back vigorously.

"I'm fourteen. I'm eligible."

"The cutoff is fourteen," Drake said disparagingly, over his shoulder. "If they took you, you'd be the youngest. Do you think they'd choose you over someone like me, five years your elder?"

"You are insolent," Durs said. "You always have been."

Thor turned to them. "I'm not asking you," he said.

He turned back to his father, who still frowned.

"Father, please," he said. "Allow me a chance. That's all I ask. I know I'm young, but I will prove myself, over time."

His father shook his head.

"You're not a soldier, boy. You're not like your brothers. You're a herder. Your life is here. With me. You will do your duties and do them well. One should not dream too high. Embrace your life, and learn to love it."

Thor felt his heart breaking as he saw his life collapsing before his eyes.

No, he thought. This can't be.

"But Father—"

"Silence!" he shrieked, so shrill it cut the air. "Enough with you. Here they come. Get out of the way, and best mind your manners while they're here."

His father stepped up and with one hand pushed Thor to the side, as if he were an object he'd rather not see. His beefy palm stung Thor's chest.

A great rumbling arose, and townsfolk poured out from their homes, lining the streets. A growing cloud of dust heralded the caravan, and moments later they arrived, a dozen horse-drawn carriages, with a noise like great thunder.

They came into town like a sudden army, halting close to Thor's home. Their horses, pranced in place, snorting. It took a long time for the cloud of dust to settle, and Thor anxiously tried to steal a peek at their armor, their weaponry. He had never been this close to the Silver before, and his heart thumped.

The soldier on the lead stallion dismounted. Here he was, a real, actual member of the Silver, covered in shiny ring mail, a long sword on his belt. He looked to be in his thirties, a real man, stubble on his face, scars on his cheek, and a nose crooked from battle. He was the most substantial man Thor had ever seen, twice as wide as the others, with a countenance that said he was in charge.

The soldier jumped down onto the dirt road, his spurs jingling as he approached the lineup of boys.

Up and down the village dozens of boys stood at attention, hoping. Joining the Silver meant a life of honor, of battle, of renown, of glory—along with land, title, and riches. It meant the best bride, the choicest land, a life of glory. It meant honor for your family, and entering the Legion was the first step.

Thor studied the large, golden carriages, and knew they could only hold so many recruits. It was a large kingdom, and they had many towns to visit. He gulped, realizing his chances were even more remote than he thought. He would have to beat out all these other boys—many of them substantial fighters—along with his own three brothers. He had a sinking feeling.

Thor could hardly breathe as the soldier paced in silence, surveying the rows of hopefuls. He began on the far side of the street, then slowly circled. Thor knew all the other boys, of course. He also knew some of them secretly did not want to be picked, even though their families wanted to send them off. They were afraid; they would make poor soldiers.

Thor burned with indignity. He felt he deserved to be picked as much as any of them. Just because his brothers were older and bigger and stronger didn't mean he shouldn't have a right to stand and be chosen. He burned with hatred for his father, and nearly burst out of his skin as the soldier approached.

The soldier stopped, for the first time, before his brothers. He looked them up and down, and seemed impressed. He reached out, grabbed one of their scabbards, and yanked it, as if to test how firm it was.

He broke into a smile.

"You haven't yet used your sword in battle, have you?" he asked Drake.

Thor saw Drake nervous for the first time in his life. Drake swallowed.

"No, my liege. But I've used it many times in practice, and I hope to—"

"In practice!"

The soldier roared with laughter and turned to the other soldiers, who joined in, laughing in Drake's face.

Drake turned bright red. It was the first time Thor had ever seen Drake embarrassed—usually, it was Drake embarrassing others.

"Well then I shall certainly tell our enemies to fear you—you who wields your sword *in practice*!"

The crowd of soldiers laughed again.

The soldier then turned to Thor's other brothers.

"Three boys from the same stock," he said, rubbing the stubble on his chin. "That can be useful. You're all a good size. Untested, though. You'll need much training if you are to make the cut."

He paused.

"I suppose we can find room."

He nodded toward the rear wagon.

"Get in, and be quick of it. Before I change my mind."

Thor's three brothers sprinted for the carriage, beaming. Thor noticed his father beaming, too.

But he was crestfallen as he watched them go.

The soldier turned and moved on to the next home. Thor could stand it no longer.

"Sire!" Thor yelled out.

His father turned and glared at him, but Thor no longer cared.

The soldier stopped, his back to him, and slowly turned.

Thor took two steps forward, his heart beating, and stuck out his chest as far as he could.

"You haven't considered me, sire," he said.

The soldier, startled, looked Thor up and down as if he were a joke.

"Haven't I?" he asked, and burst into laughter.

His men burst into laughter, too. But Thor didn't care. This was his moment. It was now or never.

"I want to join the Legion!" Thor said.

The soldier stepped toward Thor.

"Do you now?"

He looked amused.

"And have you even reached your fourteenth year?"

"I did, sire. Two weeks ago."

"Two weeks ago!"

The soldier shrieked with laughter, as did the men behind them.

"In that case, our enemies shall surely quiver at the sight of you."

Thor felt himself burning with indignity. He had to do something. He couldn't let it end like this. The soldier turned to walk away—but Thor could not allow it.

Thor stepped forward and yelled: "Sire! You are making a mistake!"

A horrified gasp spread through the crowd, as the soldier stopped and once again slowly turned.

Now he was scowling.

"Stupid boy," his father said, grabbing Thor by his shoulder, "go back inside!"

"I shall not!" Thor yelled, shaking off his father's grip.

The soldier stepped toward Thor, and his father backed away.

"Do you know the punishment for insulting the Silver?" the soldier snapped.

Thor's heart pounded, but he knew he could not back down.

"Please forgive him, sire," his father said. "He's a young child and—"

"I'm not speaking to you," the soldier said. With a withering look, he forced Thor's father to turn away.

The soldier turned back to Thor.

"Answer me!" he said.

Thor swallowed, unable to speak. This was not how he saw it going in his head.

"To insult the Silver is to insult the King himself," Thor said meekly, reciting what he'd learned from memory.

"Yes," the soldier said. "Which means I can give you forty lashes if I choose."

"I mean no insult, sire," Thor said. "I just want to be picked. Please. I've dreamt of this my entire life. Please. Let me join you."

The soldier looked at him, and slowly, his expression softened. After a long while, he shook his head.

"You're young, boy. You have a proud heart. But you're not ready. Come back to us when you are weaned."

With that, he turned and stormed off, barely glancing at the other boys. He quickly mounted his horse.

Thor, crestfallen, watched as the caravan broke into action; as quickly as they'd arrived, they were gone.

The last thing Thor saw was his brothers, sitting in the back of the last carriage, looking out at him, disapproving, mocking. They were being carted away before his eyes, away from here, into a better life.

Inside, Thor felt like dying.

As the excitement around him faded, villagers slinked back into their homes.

"Do you realize how stupid you were, foolish boy?" Thor's father snapped, grabbing his shoulders. "Do you realize you could have ruined your brothers' chances?"

Thor brushed his father's hands off of him roughly, and his father reached back and backhanded him across the face.

Thor felt the sting of it and glared back at his father. A part of him, for the first time, wanted to hit his father back. But he held himself.

"Go get my sheep and bring them back. Now! And when you return, don't expect a meal from me. You will miss your meal tonight, and think about what you've done."

"Maybe I shall not come back at all!" Thor yelled as he turned and stormed off, away from his home, toward the hills.

"Thor!" his father yelled. A few of the villagers who remained on the road stopped and watched.

Thor broke into a trot, then a run, wanting to get as far away from this place as possible. He barely noticed he was crying, tears flooding his face, as every dream he'd ever had was crushed.

## CHAPTER TWO

Thor wandered for hours in the hills, seething, until finally he chose a hill and sat, arms crossed over his legs, and watched the horizon. He watched the carriages disappear, watched the cloud of dust that lingered for hours after.

There would be no more visits. Now he was destined to remain here in this village for years, awaiting another chance—if they ever returned. If his father ever allowed it. Now it would be just him and his father, alone in the house, and his father would surely let out the full breadth of his wrath on him. He would continue to be his father's lackey, years would pass, and he would end up just like him, stuck here living a small, menial life—while his brothers gained glory and renown. His veins burned with the indignity of it all. This was not the life he was meant to live. He knew it.

Thor wracked his brain for anything he could do, any way he could change it. But there was nothing. These were the cards life had dealt him.

After hours of sitting, he rose dejectedly and began traversing his way back up the familiar hills, higher and higher. Inevitably, he drifted back toward the flock, to the high knoll. As he climbed, the first sun fell in the sky and the second reached its peak, casting a greenish tint. Thor took his time as he ambled, mindlessly removing his sling from his waist, its leather grip well worn from years of use. He reached into the sack tied to his hip and fingered his collection of stones, each smoother than the next, hand-picked from the choicest creeks. Sometimes he fired on birds; other times, rodents. It was a habit he'd ingrained over years. At first, he'd missed everything; then, once, he hit a moving target. Since then, his aim was true. Now, hurling stones had become part of him—and it helped to release some of his anger. His brothers might be able to swing a sword through a log—but they could never hit a flying bird with a stone.

Thor mindlessly placed a stone in the sling, leaned back, and hurled it with all he had, pretending he was hurling it at his father. He hit a branch on a far-off tree, taking it down cleanly. Once he'd discovered he could actually kill moving animals, he'd stopped aiming at them, afraid of his own power and not wanting to hurt anything; now his targets were branches. Unless, of course, a fox came after his flock. Over time, they had learned to stay clear, and Thor's sheep, as a result, were the safest in the village.

Thor thought of his brothers, of where they were right now, and he steamed. After a day's ride they would arrive in King's Court. He could just picture it. He saw them arriving to great fanfare, people dressed in their finest, greeting them. Warriors greeting them. Members of the Silver. They would be taken in, given a place to live in the Legion's barracks, a place to train in the King's fields using the finest weapons. Each would be named squire to a famous knight. One day, they would become knights themselves, get their own horse, their own coat of arms, and have their own squire. They would partake in all the festivals and dine at the King's table. It was a charmed life. And it had slipped from his grasp.

Thor felt physically sick, and tried to force it all from his mind. But he could not. There was a part of him, some deep part, that screamed at him. It told him not to give up, that he had a greater destiny than this. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it wasn't here. He felt he was different. Maybe even special. That no one understood him. And that they all underestimated him.

Thor reached the highest knoll and spotted his flock. Well trained, they were all still gathered, gnawing away contentedly at whatever grass they could find. He counted them, looking for the red marks he had stained on their backs. He froze as he finished. One sheep was missing.

He counted again, and again. He couldn't believe it: one was gone.

Thor had never lost a sheep before, and his father would never let him live this down. Worse, he hated the idea of one of his sheep lost, alone, vulnerable in the wilderness. He hated to see anything innocent suffer.

Thor scurried to the top of the knoll and scanned the horizon until he spotted it, far off, several hills away: the lone sheep, the red mark on its back. It was the wild one of the bunch. His heart dropped as he realized the sheep had not only fled, but had chosen, of all places, to head west, to Darkwood.

Thor gulped. Darkwood was forbidden—not just for sheep, but for humans. It was beyond the village limit, and from the time he could walk, Thor knew not to venture there. He never had. Going there, legend told, was a sure death, its woods unmarked and filled with vicious animals.

Thor looked up at the darkening sky, debating. He couldn't let his sheep go. He figured if he could move fast, he could get it back in time.

After one final look back, he turned and broke into a sprint, heading west, for Darkwood, thick clouds gathering above. He had a sinking feeling, yet his legs seemed to carry him on his own. He felt there was no turning back, even if he wanted to.

It was like running into a nightmare.

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Thor sped down the series of hills without pausing, into the thick canopy of Darkwood. The trails ended where the wood began, and he ran into unmarked territory, summer leaves crunching beneath his feet.

The instant he entered the wood he was engulfed in darkness, the light blocked by the towering pines above. It was colder in here, too, and as he crossed the threshold, he felt a chill. It wasn't just from the dark, or the cold—it was from something else. Something he could not name. It was a sense of...being watched.

Thor looked up at the ancient branches, gnarled, thicker than he, swaying and creaking in the breeze. He had barely gone fifty paces into the wood when he began to hear odd animal noises. He turned and could hardly see the opening from which he'd entered; he felt already as if there were no way out. He hesitated.

Darkwood had always sat on the periphery of the town and on the periphery of Thor's consciousness, something deep and mysterious. Any herder who ever lost a sheep to the wood had never dared venture after it. Even his father. The tales about this place were too dark, too persistent.

But there was something different about today that made Thor no longer care, that made him throw caution to the wind. A part of him wanted to push the boundaries, to get as far away from home as possible, and to allow life to take him where it may.

He ventured farther, then paused, unsure which way to go. He noticed markings, bent branches where his sheep must have gone, and turned in that direction. After some time, he turned again.

Before another hour had passed, he was hopelessly lost. He tried to remember the direction from which he came—but was no longer sure. An uneasy feeling settled in his stomach, but he figured the only way out was forward, so he continued on.

In the distance, Thor spotted a shaft of sunlight, and made for it. Finding himself before a small clearing, he stopped at its edge, rooted—he could not believe what he saw before him.

Standing there, his back to Thor, dressed in a long, blue satin robe, was a man. No, not a man—Thor could sense it from here. He was something else. A Druid, maybe. He stood tall and straight, head covered by a hood, perfectly still, as if he did not have a care in the world.

Thor didn't know what to do. He had heard of Druids, but had never encountered one. From the markings on his robe, the elaborate gold trim, this was no mere Druid: those were royal markings. Of King's Court. Thor could not understand it. What was a royal Druid doing here?

After what felt like an eternity, the Druid slowly turned and faced him, and as he did, Thor recognized the face. It took his breath away. It was one of the most famous faces in the kingdom: the King's personal Druid. Argon, counselor to kings of the Western Kingdom for centuries. What he was doing here, far from the royal court, in the center of Darkwood, was a mystery. Thor wondered if he were imagining it.

"Your eyes do not deceive you," Argon said, staring directly at Thor.

His voice was deep, ancient, as if spoken by the trees themselves. His large, translucent eyes seemed to bore right through Thor, summing him up. Thor felt an intense energy radiating from the Druid—as if he were standing opposite the sun.

Thor immediately took a knee and bowed his head.

"My liege," he said. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

Disrespect toward a King's counselor would result in imprisonment or death. That fact had been ingrained in Thor since the time he was born.

"Stand up, child," Argon said. "If I wanted you to kneel, I would have told you."

Slowly, Thor stood and looked at him. Argon took several steps closer. He stopped and stared at Thor, until Thor began to feel uncomfortable.

"You have your mother's eyes," Argon said.

Thor was taken aback. He had never met his mother, and had never met anyone, aside from his father, who knew her. He had been told she died in childbirth, something for which Thor always felt a sense of guilt. He had always suspected that that was why his family hated him.

"I think you're mistaking me for someone else," Thor said. "I don't have a mother."

"Don't you?" Argon asked with a smile. "Were you born by man alone?"

"I meant to say, sire, that my mother died in birth. I think you mistake me."

"You are Thorgrin, of the clan McLeod. The youngest of four brothers. The one not picked."

Thor's eyes opened wide. He hardly knew what to make of this. That someone of Argon's stature should know who he was—it was more than he could comprehend. He'd never even imagined that he was known to anyone outside his village.

"How...do you know this?"

Argon smiled back, but did not respond.

Thor was suddenly filled with curiosity.

"How..." Thor added, fumbling for words, "...how do you know my mother? Have you met her? Who was she?"

Argon turned and walked away.

"Questions for another time," he said.

Thor watched him go, puzzled. It was such a dizzying and mysterious encounter, and it was all happening so fast. He decided he could not let Argon leave; he hurried after him.

"What are you doing here?" Thor asked, hurrying to catch up. Argon, using his staff, an ancient ivory thing, walked deceptively fast. "You were not waiting for *me*, were you?"

"Who else?" Argon asked.

Thor hurried to catch up, following him into the wood, leaving the clearing behind.

"But why me? How did you know I would be here? What is it that you want?"

"So many questions," Argon said. "You fill the air. You should listen instead."

Thor followed as they continued through the thick wood, doing his best to remain silent.

"You come in search of your lost sheep," Argon stated. "A noble effort. But you waste your time. She will not survive."

Thor's eyes opened wide.

"How do you know this?"

"I know worlds you will never know, boy. At least, not yet."

Thor wondered as he hiked to catch up.

"You won't listen, though. That is your nature. Stubborn. Like your mother. You will continue after your sheep, determined to rescue her."

Thor reddened as Argon read his thoughts.

"You are a feisty boy," he added. "Strong-willed. Too proud. Positive traits. But one day it may be your downfall."

Argon began to hike up a mossy ridge, and Thor followed.

"You want to join the King's Legion," Argon said.

"Yes!" Thor answered, excitedly. "Is there any chance for me? Can you make that happen?" Argon laughed, a deep, hollow sound that sent a chill up Thor's spine.

"I can make everything and nothing happen. Your destiny was already written. But it is up to you to choose it."

Thor did not understand.

They reached the top of the ridge, where Argon stopped and faced him. Thor stood only feet away, and Argon's energy burned through him.

"Your destiny is an important one," he said. "Do not abandon it."

Thor's eyed widened. His destiny? Important? He felt himself swell with pride.

"I do not understand. You speak in riddles. Please, tell me more."

Argon vanished.

Thor's mouth fell open. He looked every which way, listening, wondering. Had he imagined it all? Was it some delusion?

Thor turned and examined the wood; from this vantage point, high up on the ridge, he could see farther than before. As he looked, he spotted motion in the distance. He heard a noise and felt sure it was his sheep.

He stumbled down the mossy ridge and hurried in the direction of the sound, back through the wood. As he went, he could not shake his encounter with Argon. He could hardly conceive it had happened. What was the King's Druid doing here, of all places? He had been waiting for him. But why? And what had he meant about his destiny?

The more Thor tried to unravel it, the less he understood. Argon had warned him not to continue while tempting him to do so. Now, as he went, Thor felt an increasing sense of foreboding, as if something momentous were about to happen.

He turned a bend and stopped cold in his tracks at the view before him. All his worst nightmares were confirmed in a single moment. His hair stood on end, and he realized he had made a grave mistake in coming this deep into Darkwood.

Opposite him, hardly thirty paces away, was a Sybold. Hulking, muscular, standing on all fours, nearly the size of a horse, it was the most feared animal of Darkwood, maybe even of the

kingdom. Thor had never seen one, but had heard the legends. It resembled a lion, but was bigger, broader, its hide a deep scarlet and its eyes a glowing yellow. Legend had it that its crimson color came from the blood of innocent children.

Thor had heard of few sightings of this beast his entire life, and even these were thought to be dubious. Maybe that was because no one had ever actually survived an encounter. Some considered the Sybold to be the God of the Woods, and an omen. What that omen was, Thor had no idea.

He took a careful step back.

The Sybold, its huge jaws half-open, its fangs dripping saliva, stared back with its yellow eyes. In its mouth was Thor's missing sheep: screaming, hanging upside down, half its body pierced by fangs. It was mostly dead. The Sybold appeared to revel in the kill, taking its time; it seemed to delight in torturing it.

Thor could not stand the cries. The sheep wiggled, helpless, and he felt responsible.

Thor's first impulse was to turn and run, but he already knew that would be futile. This beast could outrun anything. Running would only embolden it. And he could not leave his sheep to die like that.

He stood frozen in fear, and knew he had to take action of some sort.

His reflexes took over. He slowly reached down to his pouch, extracted a stone, and placed it in his sling. With a trembling hand, he wound up, took a step forward, and hurled.

The stone sailed through the air and hit its mark. A perfect shot. It hit the sheep in its eyeball, driving through to its brain.

The sheep went limp. Dead. Thor had spared the animal its suffering.

The Sybold glared, enraged that Thor had killed its plaything. It slowly opened its immense jaws and dropped the sheep, which landed with a thump on the forest floor. Then it set its eyes on Thor.

It snarled, a deep, evil sound that rose from its belly.

As it skulked toward him, Thor, heart pounding, placed another stone in his sling, reached back, and prepared to fire once again.

The Sybold broke into a sprint, moving faster than anything Thor had ever seen in his life. Thor took a step forward and hurled the stone, praying it hit, knowing he wouldn't have time to sling another before it arrived.

The stone hit the beast in its right eye, knocking it out. It was a tremendous throw, one that would've brought a lesser animal to its knees.

But this was no lesser animal. The beast was unstoppable. It shrieked at the damage, but never even slowed. Even without one eye, even with the stone lodged in its brain, it continued to charge mindlessly at Thor. There was nothing Thor could do.

A moment later, the beast was on him. It wound up with its huge claw and swiped his shoulder.

Thor shrieked. It felt like three knives cutting across his flesh, hot blood gushing instantly from it.

The beast pinned him to the ground, on all fours. The weight was immense, like an elephant standing on his chest. Thor felt his ribcage being crushed.

The beast threw back its head, opened wide its jaws to reveal its fangs, and began to lower them for Thor's throat.

As it did, Thor reached up and grabbed its neck; it was like gripping solid muscle. Thor could barely hang on. His arms started to shake as the fangs descended lower. He felt its hot breath all

over his face, felt the saliva drip down onto his neck. A rumble came from deep within the animal's chest, burning Thor's ears. He knew he would die.

Thor closed his eyes.

Please, God. Give me strength. Allow me to fight this creature. Please. I beg you. I will do anything you ask. I will owe you a great debt.

And then something happened. Thor felt a tremendous heat rise up within his body, coursing through his veins, like an energy field racing through him. He opened his eyes and saw something that surprised him: from his palms emanated a yellow light, and as he pushed back into the beast's throat, amazingly, he was able to match its strength and hold it at bay.

Thor continued to push until he was actually pushing the beast back. His strength grew and he felt a cannonball of energy—an instant later, the beast went flying backwards, Thor sending it a good ten feet. It landed on its back.

Thor sat up, not understanding what had happened.

The beast regained its feet. Then, in a rage, it charged again—but this time Thor felt different. The energy coursed through him; he felt more powerful than he had ever been.

As the beast leapt into the air, Thor crouched down, grabbed it by its stomach, and hurled it, letting its momentum carry it.

The beast flew through the wood, smashed into a tree, and collapsed to the floor.

Thor stared, amazed. Had he just thrown a Sybold?

The beast blinked twice, then looked at Thor. It stood up and charged again.

This time, as the beast pounced, Thor grabbed it by its throat. They both went to the ground, the beast on top of Thor. But Thor rolled over on top of it. Thor held onto it, choking it with both hands, as the beast kept trying to raise its head and snap its fangs at him. It just missed. Thor, feeling a new strength, dug his hands in and did not let go. He let the energy course through him. And soon, amazingly, he felt himself stronger than the beast.

He was choking the Sybold to death. Finally, the beast went limp.

Thor did not let go for another full minute.

He stood slowly, out of breath, staring down, wide-eyed, as he held his wounded arm. What had just happened? Had he, Thor, just killed a Sybold?

He felt it was a sign, on this day of all days. He felt as if something momentous had happened. He had just killed the most famed and feared beast of his kingdom. Single-handedly. Without a weapon. It did not seem real. No one would believe him.

He felt the world spin as he wondered what power had overcome him, what it meant, who he really was. The only people known to have power like that were Druids. But his father and mother were not Druids, so he couldn't be one.

Or could he be?

Sensing someone behind him, Thor spun to see Argon standing there, staring down at the animal.

"How did you get here?" Thor asked, amazed.

Argon ignored him.

"Did you witness what happened?" Thor asked, still unbelieving. "I don't know how I did it."

"But you do know," Argon answered. "Deep inside, you know. You are different than the others."

"It was like...a surge of power," Thor said. "Like a strength I didn't know I had."

"The energy field," Argon said. "One day you will come to know it quite well. You may even learn to control it."

Thor clutched his shoulder; the pain was excruciating. He looked down and saw his hand covered in blood. He felt lightheaded, worried what would happen if he didn't get help.

Argon took three steps forward, reached out, grabbed Thor's free hand, and placed it firmly on the wound. He held it there, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

Thor felt a warm sensation course through his arm. Within seconds, the sticky blood on his hand dried up, and he felt his pain begin to fade.

He looked down and could not comprehend it: he was healed. All that remained were three scars where the claws had cut—but they were sealed and looked to be several days old. There was no more blood.

Thor looked at Argon in astonishment.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

Argon smiled.

"I didn't. You did. I just directed your power."

"But I don't have the power to heal," Thor answered, baffled.

"Don't you?" Argon replied.

"I don't understand. None of this is making any sense," Thor said, increasingly impatient. "Please, tell me."

Argon looked away.

"Some things you must learn over time."

Thor thought of something.

"Does this mean I can join the King's Legion?" he asked, excitedly. "Surely, if I can kill a Sybold, then I can hold my own with other boys."

"Surely you can," he answered.

"But they chose my brothers—they didn't choose me."

"Your brothers couldn't have killed this beast."

Thor stared back, thinking.

"But they have already rejected me. How can I join them?"

"Since when does a warrior need an invitation?" Argon asked.

His words sunk in deep. Thor felt his body warming over.

"Are you saying I should just show up? Uninvited?"

Argon smiled.

"You create your destiny. Others do not."

Thor blinked—and a moment later, Argon was gone. Again.

Thor spun around, looking in every direction, but there was no trace of him.

"Over here!" came a voice.

Thor turned and saw a huge boulder before him. He sensed the voice came from up top, and he immediately climbed the big rock.

He reached the top, and was puzzled to see no sign of Argon.

From this vantage point, though, he was able to see above the treetops of Darkwood. He saw where Darkwood ended, saw the second sun setting in a dark green, and beyond that, the road leading to King's Court.

"The road is yours to take," came the voice. "If you dare."

Thor spun but saw nothing. It was just a voice, echoing. But he knew Argon was there, somewhere, egging him on. And he felt, deep down, that he was right.

Without another moment's hesitation, Thor scrambled down the rock and set off through the wood for the distant road.

Sprinting for his destiny.

# **CHAPTER THREE**

King MacGil—stout, barrel-chested, with a beard too thick with gray, long hair to match, and a broad forehead lined with too many battles—stood on the upper ramparts of his castle, his Queen beside him, and overlooked the day's burgeoning festivities. His royal grounds sprawled beneath him in all their glory, stretching as far as the eye could see, a thriving city walled in by ancient stone fortifications. King's Court. Interconnected by a maze of winding streets sat stone buildings of every shape and size—for the warriors, the caretakers, the horses, the Silver, the Legion, the guards, the barracks, the weapons house, the armory—and among these, hundreds of dwellings for the multitude of his people who chose to live within the city walls. Between these streets spanned acres of grass, royal gardens, stone-lined plazas, overflowing fountains. King's Court had been improved upon for centuries, by his father, and his father before him—and it sat now at the peak of its glory. Without doubt, it was now the safest stronghold within the Western Kingdom of the Ring.

MacGil was blessed with the finest and most loyal warriors any king had ever known, and in his lifetime, no one had dared attack. The seventh MacGil to hold the throne, he had held it well for his thirty-two years of rule, had been a good and wise king. The land had prospered greatly in his reign. He had doubled his army's size, expanded his cities, brought his people bounty, and not a single complaint could be found among his people. He was known as the generous king, and there had never been such a period of bounty and peace since he took the throne.

Which, paradoxically, was precisely what kept MacGil up at night. For MacGil knew his history: in all the ages, there had never been such a long a stretch without a war. He no longer wondered *if* there would be an attack—but when. And from whom.

The greatest threat, of course, was from beyond the Ring, from the empire of savages that ruled the outlying Wilds, which had subjugated all the peoples outside the Ring, beyond the Canyon. For MacGil, and the seven generations before him, the Wilds had never posed a direct threat. Because of his kingdom's unique geography, shaped in a perfect circle—a ring—separated from the rest of the world by a deep canyon a mile wide, and protected by an energy shield that had been active since a MacGil first ruled, they had little to fear of the Wilds. The savages had tried many times to attack, to penetrate the shield, to cross the canyon; not once had they been successful. As long as he and his people stayed within the Ring, there was no outside threat.

That did not mean, though, that there was no threat from inside. And that was what had kept MacGil up at night lately. That, indeed, was the purpose of the day's festivities: the marriage of his eldest daughter. A marriage arranged specifically to appease his enemies, to maintain the fragile peace between the Eastern and Western Kingdoms of the Ring.

While the Ring spanned a good five hundred miles in each direction, it was divided down the middle by a mountain range. The Highlands. On the other side of the Highlands sat the Eastern Kingdom, ruling the other half of the Ring. And this kingdom, ruled for centuries by their rivals, the McClouds, had always tried to shatter its fragile truce with the MacGils. The McClouds were malcontents, unhappy with their lot, convinced their side of the kingdom sat on ground less fertile. They contested the Highlands, too, insisting the entire mountain range was theirs, when at

least half of it belonged to the MacGils. There were perpetual border skirmishes, and constant threats of invasion.

As MacGil pondered it all, he was annoyed. The McClouds should be happy; they were safe inside the Ring, protected by the Canyon, they sat on choice land, and had nothing to fear. Why couldn't they be content with their own half of the Ring? It was only because MacGil had grown his army so strong that, for the first time in history, the McClouds had dared not attack. But MacGil, the wise king he was, sensed something on the horizon; he knew this peace could not last. Thus, he had arranged this marriage of his eldest daughter to the eldest prince of the McClouds. And now the day had arrived.

As he looked down, he saw stretched below him thousands of minions dressed in brightly colored tunics, filtering in from every corner of the kingdom, from both sides of the Highlands. Nearly the entire Ring, all pouring into his fortifications. His people had prepared for months, commanded to make everything look prosperous, strong. This was not just a day for marriage; it was a day to send a message to the McClouds.

MacGil surveyed his hundreds of soldiers lined up strategically along the ramparts, in the streets, along the walls, more soldiers than he could ever need—and felt satisfied. It was the show of strength he wanted. But he also felt on edge; the environment was charged, ripe for a skirmish. He hoped no hotheads, inflamed with drink, rose up on either side.

He scanned the jousting fields, the playing fields, and thought of the day to come, filled with games and jousts and all sorts of festivities. They would be intense. The McClouds would surely show up with their own small army, and every joust, every wrestle, every competition, would take on meaning. If even one went awry, it could evolve into a battle.

"My King?"

He felt a soft hand on his and turned to see his Queen, Krea, still the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. Happily married to him his entire reign, she had borne him five children, three of them boys, and had not complained once. Moreover, she had become his most trusted counselor. As the years passed, he had come to learn she was wiser than all of his men. Indeed, wiser than he.

"It is a political day," she said. "But also our daughter's wedding. Try to enjoy. It won't happen twice."

"I worried less when I had nothing," he answered. "Now that we have it all, everything worries me. We are safe. But I don't feel safe."

She looked back at him with compassionate eyes, large and hazel; they looked as if they held the wisdom of the world. Her eyelids drooped, as they always had, looking just a bit sleepy, and were framed by her beautiful, straight brown hair tinged with gray, which fell on both sides of her face. She had a few more lines, but she hadn't changed a bit.

"That's because you're not safe," she said. "No king is safe. There are more spies in our court than you'll ever care to know. And that is the way of things."

She leaned in and kissed him, and smiled.

"Try to enjoy it," she said. "It is a wedding after all."

With that, she turned and walked off the ramparts.

He watched her go, then turned and looked out over his court. She was right; she was always right. He did want to enjoy it. He loved his eldest daughter, and it was a wedding after all. It was the most beautiful day of the most beautiful time of year, spring at its height, with summer dawning, the two suns perfect in the sky, and the slightest of breezes astir. Everything was in full bloom, trees everywhere awash in a broad palette of pinks and purples and oranges and whites.

There was nothing he'd like more than to go down and sit with his men, watch his daughter get married, and drink pints of ale until he could drink no more.

But he could not. He had a long course of duties before he could even step out of his castle. After all, the day of a daughter's wedding meant obligation for a king: he had to meet with his council; with his children; and with a long a line of supplicants who had a right to see the King on this day. He would be lucky if he left his castle in time for the sunset ceremony.

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MacGil, dressed in his finest royal garb, velvet black pants, a golden belt, a royal robe made of the finest purple and gold silk, a white mantle, shiny leather boots up to his calves, and wearing his crown—an ornate gold band with a large ruby set in its center—strutted down the castle halls, flanked by attendants. He strode through room after room, descending the steps from the parapet, cutting through his royal chambers, through the great arched hall, with its soaring ceiling and rows of stained glass. Finally, he reached an ancient oak door, thick as a tree trunk, which his attendants opened before stepping aside. The Throne Room.

His advisors stood at attention as MacGil entered, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Be seated," he said, more abrupt than usual. He was tired, on this day especially, of the endless formalities of ruling the kingdom, and wanted to get them over with.

He strode across the Throne Room, which never ceased to impress him. Its ceilings soared fifty feet high, one entire wall a panel of stained glass, floors and walls made of stone a foot thick. The room could easily hold a hundred dignitaries. But on days like today, when his council convened, it was just him and his handful of advisors in the cavernous setting. The room was dominated by a vast table shaped in a semicircle, behind which his advisors stood.

He strutted through the opening, right down the middle, to his throne. He ascended the stone steps, passed the carved golden lions, and sank into the red velvet cushion lining his throne, wrought entirely of gold. His father had sat on this throne, as had *his* father, and all the MacGils before him. When he sat, MacGil felt the weight of his ancestors—of all the generations—upon him.

He surveyed the advisors in attendance. There was Brom, his greatest general and his advisor on military affairs; Kolk, the general of the boys' Legion; Aberthol, the oldest of the bunch, a scholar and historian, mentor of kings for three generations; Firth, his advisor on internal affairs of the court, a skinny man with short, gray hair and hollowed-out eyes that never stayed still. Firth was not a man that MacGil had ever trusted, and he never even understood his title. But his father, and his before him, kept an advisor for court affairs, and so he kept it out of respect for them. There was Owen, his treasurer; Bradaigh, his advisor on external affairs; Earnan, his tax collector; Duwayne, his advisor on the masses; and Kelvin, the representative of the nobles.

Of course, the King had absolute authority. But his kingdom was a liberal one, and his fathers had always taken pride in allowing the nobles a voice in all matters, channeled through their representative. It was historically an uneasy power balance between the kingship and the nobles. Now there was harmony, but during other times there had been uprisings and power struggles between the nobles and royalty. It was a fine balance.

As MacGil surveyed the room he noticed one person missing: the very man he wanted to speak with most—Argon. As usual, when and where he showed up was unpredictable. It infuriated MacGil to no end, but he had no choice but to accept it. The way of Druids was inscrutable to him. Without him present, MacGil felt even more haste. He wanted to get through this, get to the thousand other things that awaited him before the wedding.

The group of advisors sat facing him around the semicircular table, spread out every ten feet, each sitting in a chair of ancient oak with elaborately carved wooden arms.

"My liege, if I may begin," Owen called out.

"You may. And keep it short. My time is tight today."

"Your daughter will receive a great many gifts today, which we all hope will fill her coffers. The thousands of people paying tribute, presenting gifts to you personally, and filling our brothels and taverns, will help fill our coffers, too. And yet the preparation for today's festivities will also deplete a good portion of the royal treasury. I recommend an increase of tax on the people, and on the nobles. A one-time tax, to alleviate the pressures of this great event."

MacGil saw the concern on his treasurer's face, and his stomach sank at the thought of the treasury's depletion. Yet he would not raise taxes again.

"Better to have a poor treasury and loyal subjects," MacGil answered. "Our riches come in the happiness of our subjects. We shall not impose more."

"But my liege, if we do not—"

"I have decided. What else?"

Owen sank back, crestfallen.

"My king," Brom said in his deep voice. "At your command, we have stationed the bulk of our forces in court for today's event. The show of power will be impressive. But we are stretched thin. If there should be an attack elsewhere in the kingdom, we will be vulnerable."

MacGil nodded, thinking it through.

"Our enemies will not attack us while we are feeding them."

The men laughed.

"And what news from the Highlands?"

"There has been no reported activity for weeks. It seems their troops have drawn down in preparation for the wedding. Maybe they are ready to make peace."

MacGil was not so sure.

"That either means the arranged wedding has worked, or they wait to attack us at another time. And which do you think it is, old man?" MacGil asked, turning to Aberthol.

Aberthol cleared his throat, his voice raspy as it came out: "My liege, your father and his father before him never trusted the McClouds. Just because they lie sleeping, does not mean they will not wake."

MacGil nodded, appreciating the sentiment.

"And what of the Legion?" he asked, turning to Kolk.

"Today we welcomed the new recruits," Kolk answered, with a quick nod.

"My son among them?" MacGil asked.

"He stands proudly with them all, and a fine boy he is."

MacGil nodded, then turned to Bradaigh.

"And what word from beyond the Canyon?"

"My liege, our patrols have seen more attempts to bridge the Canyon in recent weeks. There may be signs that the Wilds are mobilizing for an attack."

A hushed whisper spread amongst the men. MacGil felt his stomach tighten at the thought. The energy shield was invincible; still, it did not bode well.

"And what if there should be a full-scale attack?" he asked.

"As long as the shield is active, we have nothing to fear. The Wilds have not succeeded in breaching the Canyon for centuries. There is no reason to think otherwise."

MacGil was not so certain. An attack from outside was long overdue, and he could not help but wonder when it might be.

"My liege," Firth said in his nasally voice, "I feel obliged to add that today our court is filled with many dignitaries from the McCloud kingdom. It would be considered an insult for you not to entertain them, rivals or not. I would advise that you use your afternoon hours to greet each one. They have brought a large entourage, many gifts—and, word is, many spies."

"Who is to say the spies are not already here?" MacGil asked back, looking carefully at Firth as he did—and wondering, as always, if he might be one himself.

Firth opened his mouth to answer, but MacGil sighed and held up a palm, having had enough. "If that is all, I will leave now, to join my daughter's wedding."

"My liege," Kelvin said, clearing his throat, "of course, there is one more thing. The tradition, on the day of your eldest's wedding. Every MacGil has named a successor. The people shall expect you to do the same. They have been buzzing. It would not be advisable to let them down. Especially with the Destiny Sword still immobile."

"Would you have me name an heir while I am still in my prime?" MacGil asked.

"My liege, I mean no offense," Kelvin stumbled, looking concerned.

MacGil held up a hand. "I know the tradition. And indeed, I shall name one today."

"Might you inform us as to who?" Firth asked.

MacGil stared him down, annoyed. Firth was a gossip, and he did not trust this man.

"You will learn of the news when the time is right."

MacGil stood, and the others rose, too. They bowed, turned, and hurried from the room.

MacGil stood there thinking for he did not know how long. On days like this he wished he was not king.

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MacGil stepped down from his throne, boots echoing in the silence, and crossed the room. He opened the ancient oak door himself, yanking the iron handle, and entered a side chamber.

He enjoyed the peace and solitude of this cozy room, as he always had, its walls hardly twenty paces in either direction yet with a soaring, arched ceiling. The room was made entirely of stone, with a small, round stained-glass window on one wall. Light poured in through its yellows and reds, lighting up a single object in the otherwise bare room.

The Destiny Sword.

There it sat, in the center of the chamber, lying horizontal on iron prongs, like a temptress. As he had since he was a boy, MacGil walked close to it, circled it, examined it. The Destiny Sword. The sword of legend, the source of the might and power of his entire kingdom, from one generation to the next. Whoever had the strength to hoist it would be the Chosen One, the one destined to rule the kingdom for life, to free the kingdom from all threats, in and outside the Ring. It had been a beautiful legend to grow up with, and as soon as he was anointed King, MacGil had tried to hoist it himself, as only MacGil kings were even allowed to try. The kings before him, all of them, had failed. He was sure he would be different. He was sure he would be The One.

But he was wrong. As were all the other MacGil kings before him. And his failure had tainted his kingship ever since.

As he stared at it now, he examined its long blade, made of a mysterious metal no one had ever deciphered. The sword's origin was even more obscure, rumored to have risen from the earth in the midst of a quake.

Examining it, he once again felt the sting of failure. He might be a good king, but he was not The One. His people knew it. His enemies knew it. He might be a good king, but no matter what he did, he would never be The One.

If he had been, he suspected there would be less unrest amongst his court, less plotting. His own people would trust him more and his enemies would not even consider attack. A part of him wished the sword would just disappear, and the legend with it. But he knew it would not. That was the curse—and the power—of a legend. Stronger, even, than an army.

As he stared at it for the thousandth time, MacGil couldn't help but wonder once again who it would be. Who of his bloodline would be destined to wield it? As he thought of what lay before him, his task of naming an heir, he wondered who, if any, would be destined to hoist it.

"The weight of the blade is heavy," came a voice.

MacGil spun, surprised to have company in the small room.

There, standing in the doorway, was Argon. MacGil recognized the voice before he saw him and was both irritated with him for not showing up sooner and pleased to have him here now.

"You're late," MacGil said.

"Your sense of time does not apply to me," Argon answered.

MacGil turned back to the sword.

"Did you ever think I would be able to hoist it?" he asked reflectively. "That day I became King?"

"No," Argon answered flatly.

MacGil turned and stared at him.

"You knew I would not be able to. You saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

MacGil pondered this.

"It scares me when you answer directly. That is unlike you."

Argon stayed silent, and finally MacGil realized he wouldn't say any more.

"I name my successor today," MacGil said. "It feels futile, to name an heir on this day. It strips a king's joy from his child's wedding."

"Maybe such joy is meant to be tempered."

"But I have so many years left to reign," MacGil pleaded.

"Perhaps not as many as you think," Argon answered.

MacGil narrowed his eyes, wondering. Was it a message?

But Argon added nothing more.

"Six children. Whom should I pick?" MacGil asked.

"Why ask me? You have already chosen."

MacGil looked at him. "You see much. Yes, I have. But I still want to know what you think."

"I think you made a wise choice," Argon said. "But remember: a king cannot rule from beyond the grave. Regardless of whom you think you choose, fate has a way of choosing for itself."

"Will I live, Argon?" MacGil asked earnestly, asking the question he had wanted to know since he had awakened the night before from a horrific nightmare.

"I dreamt last night of a crow," he added. "It came and stole my crown. Then another carried me away. As it did, I saw my kingdom spread beneath me. It turned black as I went. Barren. A wasteland."

He looked up at Argon, his eyes watery.

"Was it a dream? Or something more?"

"Dreams are always something more, aren't they?" Argon asked. MacGil was struck by a sinking feeling.

"Where is the danger? Just tell me this much."

Argon stepped close and stared into his eyes with such intensity, MacGil felt as if he were staring into another realm itself.

Argon leaned forward, whispered:

"Always closer than you think."

#### CHAPTER FOUR

Thor hid in the straw in the back of a wagon as it jostled him along the country road. He'd made his way to the road the night before and had waited patiently until a wagon came along large enough for him to board without being noticed. It was dark by then, and the wagon trotted along just slowly enough for him to gain a good running pace and leap in from behind. He'd landed in the hay and buried himself inside. Luckily, the driver had not spotted him. Thor didn't know for certain if the wagon was going to King's Court, but it was heading in that direction, and a wagon this size, and with these markings, could be going few other places.

As Thor rode throughout the night, he stayed awake for hours, thinking of his encounter with the Sybold. With Argon. Of his destiny. His former home. His mother. He felt that the universe had answered him, had told him he had another destiny. He lay there, hands clasped behind his head, and stared up at the night sky, visible through the tattered canvas. He watched the universe, so bright, its red stars so far away. He was exhilarated. For once in his life, he was on a journey. He did not know where, but he was going. One way or the other, he would make his way to King's Court.

When Thor opened his eyes it was morning, light flooding in, and he realized he'd drifted off. He sat up quickly, looking all around, chiding himself for sleeping. He should have been more vigilant—he was lucky he had not been discovered.

The cart still moved, but did not jostle as much. That could only mean one thing: a better road. They must be close to a city. Thor looked down and saw how smooth the road was, free of rocks, of ditches, and lined with fine white shells. His heart beat faster; they were approaching King's Court.

Thor looked out the back of the cart and was overwhelmed. The immaculate streets were flooded with activity. Dozens of carts, of all shapes and sizes and carrying all manner of things, filled the roads. One was laden with furs; another with rugs; still another with chickens. Amongst them walked hundreds of merchants, some leading cattle, others carrying baskets of goods on their heads. Four men carried a bundle of silks, balancing them on poles. It was an army of people, all heading in one direction.

Thor felt alive. He'd never seen so many people at once, so many goods, so much happening. He'd been in a small village his entire life, and now he was in a hub, engulfed in humanity.

He heard a loud noise, the groaning of chains, the slamming of a huge piece of wood, so strong the ground shook. Moments later came a different sound, of horses' hooves clacking on wood. He looked down and realized they were crossing a bridge; beneath them passed a moat. A drawbridge.

Thor stuck his head out and saw immense stone pillars, the spiked iron gate above. They were passing through King's Gate.

It was the largest gate he had ever seen. He looked up at the spikes, marveling that if they came down, they would slice him in half. He spotted four of the King's Silver guarding the entry, and his heart beat faster.

They passed through a long stone tunnel, then moments later the sky opened again. They were inside King's Court.

Thor could hardly believe it. There was even more activity here, if possible—what seemed to be thousands of people, milling in every direction. There were vast stretches of grass, perfectly cut, and flowers blooming everywhere. The road widened, and alongside it were booths, vendors, and stone buildings. And amidst all of these, the King's men. Soldiers, bedecked in armor. Thor had made it.

In his excitement, he unwittingly stood; as he did, the cart stopped short, sending him tumbling backward, landing on his back in the straw. Before he could rise, there was the sound of wood lowered, and he looked up to see an angry old man, bald, dressed in rags and scowling. The cart driver reached in, grabbed Thor by the ankles with his bony hands, and dragged him out.

Thor went flying, landing hard on his back on the dirt road, raising up a cloud of dust. Laughter rose up around him.

"Next time you ride my cart, boy, it will be the shackles for you! You're lucky I don't summon the Silver now!"

The old man turned and spat, then hurried back on his cart and whipped his horses on.

Embarrassed, Thor slowly gained his wits and got to his feet. He looked around. One or two passersby chuckled, and Thor sneered back until they looked away. He brushed the dirt off and rubbed his arms; his pride was hurt, but not his body.

His spirits returned as he looked around, dazzled, and realized he should be happy that at least he'd made it this far. Now that he was out of the cart he could look around freely, and an extraordinary sight it was: the court sprawled as far as the eye could see. At its center sat a magnificent stone palace, surrounded by towering, fortified stone walls crowned by parapets, atop which, everywhere, patrolled the King's army. All around him were fields of green, perfectly maintained, stone plazas, fountains, groves of trees. It was a city. And it was flooded with people.

Everywhere streamed all manner of people—merchants, soldiers, dignitaries—everyone in such a rush. It took Thor several minutes to understand that something special was happening. As he ambled along, he saw preparations being made—chairs placed, an altar erected. It looked like they were preparing for a wedding.

His heart skipped a beat as he saw, in the distance, a jousting lane, with its long dirt path and dividing rope. On another field, he saw soldiers hurling spears at far-off targets; on another, archers aiming at straw. It seemed as if everywhere were games, contests. There was also music: lutes and flutes and cymbals, packs of musicians wandering; and wine, huge casks being rolled out; and food, tables being prepared, banquets stretching as far as the eye could see. It was as if he'd arrived in the midst of a vast celebration.

As dazzling as all this was, Thor felt an urgency to find the Legion. He was already late, and he needed to make himself known.

He hurried to the first person he saw, an older man who seemed, by his blood-stained frock, to be a butcher, hurrying down the road. Everyone here was in such a hurry.

"Excuse me, sir," Thor said, grabbing his arm.

The man looked down at Thor's hand disparagingly.

"What is it, boy?"

"I'm looking for the King's Legion. Do you know where they train?"

"Do I look like a map?" the man hissed, and stormed off.

Thor was taken aback by his rudeness.

He hurried to the next person he saw, a woman kneading flour on a long table. There were several women at this table, all working hard, and Thor figured one of them had to know.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "Might you know where the King's Legion train?"

They looked at each other and giggled, some of them but a few years older than he.

The eldest turned and looked at him.

"You're looking in the wrong place," she said. "Here we are preparing for the festivities."

"But I was told they trained in King's Court," Thor said, confused.

The women broke into another chuckle. The eldest put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

"You act as if this is your first time in King's Court. Have you no idea how big it is?"

Thor reddened as the other women laughed, then finally stormed off. He did not like being made fun of.

He saw before him a dozen roads, twisting and turning every which way through King's Court. Spaced out in the stone walls were at least a dozen entrances. The size and scope of this place was overwhelming. He had a sinking feeling he could search for days and still not find it.

An idea struck him: surely a soldier would know where the others trained. He was nervous to approach an actual King's soldier, but realized he had to.

He turned and hurried to the wall, to the soldier standing guard at the closest entrance, hoping he would not throw him out. The soldier stood erect, looking straight ahead.

"I'm looking for the King's Legion," Thor said, summoning his bravest voice.

The soldier continued to stare straight ahead, ignoring him.

"I said I'm looking for the King's Legion!" Thor insisted, louder, determined to be recognized.

After several seconds, the soldier glanced down, sneering.

"Can you tell me where it is?" Thor pressed.

"And what business have you with them?"

"Very important business," Thor urged, hoping the soldier would not press him.

The soldier turned back to looking straight ahead, ignoring him again. Thor felt his heart sinking, afraid he would never receive an answer.

But after what felt like an eternity, the soldier replied: "Take the eastern gate, then head north as far as you can. Take the third gate to the left, then fork right, and fork right again. Pass through the second stone arch, and their ground is beyond the gate. But I tell you, you waste your time. They do not entertain visitors."

It was all Thor needed to hear. Without missing another beat, he turned and ran across the field, following the directions, repeating them in his head, trying to memorize them. He noticed the sun higher in the sky, and only prayed that when he arrived, it would not already be too late.

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Thor sprinted down the immaculate, shell-lined paths, twisting and turning his way through King's Court. He tried his best to follow the directions, hoping he was not being led astray. At the far end of the courtyard, he saw all the gates, and chose the third one on the left. He ran through it and then followed the forks, turning down path after path. He ran against traffic, thousands of people pouring into the city, the crowd growing thicker by the minute. He brushed shoulders with lute players, jugglers, jesters, and all sorts of entertainers, everyone dressed in finery.

Thor could not stand the idea of the selection beginning without him, and tried his best to concentrate as he turned down path after path, looking for any sign of the training ground. He

passed through an arch, turned down another road, and then, far off, spotted what could only be his destination: a mini coliseum, built of stone in a perfect circle. Soldiers guarded the huge gate in its center. Thor heard a muted cheering from behind its walls and his heart quickened. This was the place.

He sprinted, lungs bursting. As he reached the gate, two guards stepped forward and lowered their lances, barring the way. A third guard stepped forward and held up a palm.

"Stop there," he commanded.

Thor stopped short, gasping for breath, barely able to contain his excitement.

"You...don't...understand," he heaved, words tumbling out between breaths, "I have to be inside. I'm late."

"Late for what?"

"The selection."

The guard, a short, heavy man with pockmarked skin, turned and looked at the others, who looked back cynically. He turned and surveyed Thor with a disparaging look.

"The recruits were taken in hours ago, in the royal transport. If you were not invited, you cannot enter."

"But you don't understand. I must—"

The guard reached out and grabbed Thor by the shirt.

"You don't understand, you insolent little boy. How dare you come here and try to force your way in? Now go—before I shackle you."

He shoved Thor, who stumbled back several feet.

Thor felt a sting in his chest where the guard's hand had touched him—but more than that, he felt the sting of rejection. He was indignant. He had not come all this way to be turned away by a guard without even being seen. He was determined to make it inside.

The guard turned back to his men, and Thor slowly walked away, heading clockwise around the circular building. He had a plan. He walked until he was out of sight, then broke into a jog, creeping his way along the walls. He checked to make sure the guards weren't watching, then picked up speed until he was sprinting. When he was halfway around the building he spotted another opening into the arena—high up were arched openings in the stone, blocked by iron bars. One of these openings was missing its bars. He heard another roar, lifted himself up onto the ledge, and looked.

His heart quickened. Spread out inside the huge, circular training ground were dozens of recruits—including his brothers. Lined up, they all faced a dozen of the Silver. The King's men walked amidst them, summing them up.

Another group of recruits stood off to the side, under the watchful eyes of a soldier, throwing spears at a distant target. One of them missed.

Thor's veins burned with indignation. He could have hit those marks; he was just as good as any of them. Just because he was younger, a bit smaller, it wasn't fair that he was being left out.

Suddenly, Thor felt a hand on his back as he was yanked backwards and sent flying through the air. He landed hard on the ground below, winded.

He looked up and saw the guard from the gate, sneering down at him.

"What did I tell you, boy?"

Before he could react, the guard leaned back and kicked Thor hard. Thor felt a sharp thump in his ribs, as the guard wound up to kick him again.

This time, Thor caught the guard's foot in midair; he yanked it, knocking him off balance and making him fall.

Thor quickly gained his feet. At the same time, the guard gained his. Thor stared at him, shocked by what he had just done. Across from him, the guard glowered.

"Not only will I shackle you," the guard hissed, "but I will make you pay. No one touches a King's guard! Forget about joining the Legion—now you will wallow away in the dungeon! You'll be lucky if you're ever seen again!"

The guard pulled out a chain with a shackle at its end. He approached Thor, vengeance on his face.

Thor's mind raced. He could not allow himself to be shackled—yet he did not want to hurt a member of the King's Guard. He had to think of something—and fast.

He remembered his sling. His reflexes took over as he grabbed it, placed a stone, took aim, and let it fly.

The stone soared through the air and knocked the shackles from the stunned guard's grip; it also hit the guard's fingers. The guard pulled back and shook his hand, yelling in pain, as the shackles clattered to the ground.

The guard, giving Thor a look of death, drew his sword. It came out with a distinctive, metallic ring.

"That was your last mistake," he threatened darkly, and charged.

Thor had no choice; this man would just not leave him be. He placed another stone in his sling and hurled it. He aimed deliberately—he did not want to kill the guard, but he had to stop him. So instead of aiming for his heart, nose, eye, or head, Thor aimed for the one place he knew would stop him, but not kill him.

Between the guard's legs.

He let the stone fly—not at full strength, but enough to put the man down.

It was a perfect strike.

The guard keeled over, dropping his sword, grabbing his groin as he collapsed to the ground and curled up in a ball.

"You'll hang for this!" he groaned amidst grunts of pain. "Guards! Guards!"

Thor looked up and in the distance saw several of the King's guards racing for him.

It was now or never.

Without wasting another moment, he sprinted for the window ledge. He would have to jump through, into the arena, and make himself known. And he would fight anyone who got in his way.

# **CHAPTER FIVE**

MacGil sat in the upper hall of his castle, in his intimate meeting hall, the one he used for personal affairs. He sat on his intimate throne, this one carved of wood, and looked out at four of his children standing before him. There was his eldest son, Kendrick, at twenty-five years a fine warrior and true gentleman. He, of all his children, resembled MacGil the most—which was ironic, since he was a bastard, MacGil's only issue by another woman, a woman he had long since forgotten. MacGil had raised Kendrick with his true children, despite his Queen's initial protests, on the condition he would never ascend the throne. This pained MacGil now, since Kendrick was the finest man he'd ever known, a son he was proud to sire. There would have been no finer heir to the kingdom.

Beside him, in stark contrast, stood his second-born son—yet his firstborn legitimate son—Gareth, twenty-three, thin, with hollow cheeks and large brown eyes which never stopped darting. His character could not be more different than his elder brother's. Gareth's nature was everything Kendrick's was not: where his brother was forthright, Gareth hid his true thoughts; where his brother was proud and noble, Gareth was dishonest and deceitful. It pained MacGil to dislike his own son, and he had tried many times to correct his nature; but after some point in the boy's teenage years, he decided his nature was predestined: scheming, power-hungry, and ambitious in every wrong sense of the word. Gareth also, MacGil knew, had no love for women, and had many male lovers. Other kings would have ousted such a son, but MacGil was more open-minded, and for him, this was not a reason not to love him. He did not judge him for this. What he did judge him for was his evil, scheming nature, which was something he could not overlook.

Lined up beside Gareth stood MacGil's second-born daughter, Gwendolyn. Having just reached her sixteenth year, she was as beautiful a girl as he had ever laid eyes upon—and her nature outshone even her looks. She was kind, generous, honest—the finest young woman he had ever known. In this regard, she was similar to Kendrick. She looked at MacGil with a daughter's love for a father, and he'd always felt her loyalty in every glance. He was even more proud of her than of his sons.

Standing beside Gwendolyn was MacGil's youngest boy, Reece, a proud and spirited young lad who, at fourteen, was just becoming a man. MacGil had watched with great pleasure his initiation into the Legion, and could already see the man he was going to be. One day, MacGil had no doubt, Reece would be his finest son, and a great ruler. But that day was not now. He was too young yet, and still had much to learn.

MacGil had mixed feelings as he surveyed these four children, his three sons and daughter, standing before him. He felt pride mingled with disappointment. He also felt anger and annoyance, for two of his children were missing. The eldest, his daughter Luanda, of course was preparing for her own wedding, and since she was being married off to another kingdom, she had no business partaking in this discussion of heirs. But his other son, Godfrey, at eighteen the middle one, was absent. MacGil reddened from the snub.

Ever since he was a boy, Godfrey had shown such disrespect for the kingship; it was always clear that he cared not for it and would never rule. And, MacGil's greatest disappointment,

Godfrey instead chose to waste away his days in alehouses with miscreant friends, causing the royal family ever-increasing shame and dishonor. He was a slacker, sleeping most of his days and filling the rest of them with drink. On the one hand, MacGil was relieved he wasn't here; on the other, it was an insult he could not suffer. He had, in fact, expected this, and had sent out his men early to comb the alehouses and bring him back. MacGil sat silently, waiting, until they did.

The heavy oak door finally slammed open and in marched the royal guards, dragging Godfrey between them. They gave him a shove, and Godfrey stumbled into the room as they slammed the door behind him.

His brothers and sister turned and stared. Godfrey was slovenly, reeking of ale, unshaven, and half-dressed. He smiled back. Insolent. As always.

"Hello, Father," Godfrey said. "Did I miss all the fun?"

"You will stand with your siblings and wait for me to speak. If you don't, God help me, I'll chain you in the dungeons with the rest of the common prisoners, and you won't see food—much less ale—for three days entire."

Defiant, Godfrey glared back at his father. In that stare, MacGil detected some deep reservoir of strength, something of himself, a spark of something that might one day serve Godfrey well. That is, if he could ever overcome his own personality.

Rebellious to the end, Godfrey waited a good ten seconds before finally complying and ambling over to the others.

MacGil surveyed these five children standing before him: the bastard, the deviant, the drunkard, his daughter, and his youngest. It was a strange mix, and he could hardly believe they had all sprung from him. And now, on his eldest daughter's wedding day, the task had fallen on him to choose an heir from this bunch. How was it possible?

It was an exercise in futility; after all, he was in his prime and could rule for thirty more years. Whatever heir he chose today might not even ascend the throne for decades. The entire tradition irked him. It may have been relevant in the times of his fathers, but it had no place now.

He cleared his throat.

"We are gathered here today at the bequest of tradition. As you know, on this day, the day of my eldest's wedding, the task has fallen upon me to name a successor. An heir to rule this kingdom. Should I die, there is no one better fit to rule than your mother. But our kingdom's laws dictate that only the issue of a king may succeed. Thus, I must choose."

MacGil caught his breath, thinking. A heavy silence hung in the air, and he could feel the weight of anticipation. He looked in their eyes, and saw different expressions in each. The bastard looked resigned, knowing he would not be picked. The deviant's eyes were aglow with ambition, as if expecting the choice naturally to fall on him. The drunkard looked out the window; he did not care. His daughter looked back with love, knowing she was not part of this discussion, but loving her father nonetheless. The same with his youngest.

"Kendrick, I have always considered you a true son. But the laws of our kingdom prevent me from passing the kingship to anyone of less than true legitimacy."

Kendrick bowed. "Father, I had not expected you would do so. I'm content with my lot. Please do not let this confound you."

MacGil was pained at his response, as he felt how genuine he was and wanted to name him heir all the more.

"That leaves four of you. Reece, you're a fine young man, the finest I've ever seen. But you are too young to be part of this discussion."

"I expected as much, Father," Reece responded, with a slight bow.

"Godfrey, you are one of my three legitimate sons—yet you choose to waste your days in the alehouse, with the filth. You were handed every privilege in life, and have spurned every one. If I have any great disappointment in this life, it is you."

Godfrey grimaced back, shifting uncomfortably.

"Well, then, I suppose I'm done here, and shall head back to the alehouse, shan't I, Father?"

With a quick, mocking bow, Godfrey turned and strutted across the room.

"Get back here!" MacGil snapped. "NOW!"

Godfrey continued to strut, ignoring him. He crossed the room and pulled open the door. Two guards stood there.

MacGil seethed with rage as the guards looked to him questioningly.

But Godfrey did not wait; he shoved his way past them, into the open hall.

"Detain him!" MacGil yelled. "And keep him from the Queen's sight. I don't want his mother burdened by the sight of him on her daughter's wedding day."

"Yes, my liege," they said, closing the door as they hurried off after him.

MacGil sat there, breathing, red-faced, trying to calm down. For the thousandth time, he wondered what he had done to warrant such a child.

He looked back at his remaining children. The four of them looked back at him, waiting in the thick silence. MacGil took a deep breath, trying to focus.

"That leaves but two of you," he continued. "And from these two, I have chosen a successor."

MacGil turned to his daughter.

"Gwendolyn, that will be you."

There was a gasp in the room; his children all seemed shocked, most of all Gwendolyn.

"Did you speak accurately, Father?" Gareth asked. "Did you say Gwendolyn?"

"Father, I am honored," Gwendolyn said. "But I cannot accept. I am a woman."

"True, a woman has never sat on the throne of the MacGils. But I have decided it is time to change tradition. Gwendolyn, you are of the finest mind and spirit of any young woman I've met. You are young, but God be willing, I shall not die anytime soon, and when the time comes, you will be wise enough to rule. The kingdom will be yours."

"But Father!" Gareth screamed, his face ashen. "I am the eldest born legitimate son! Always, in all the history of the MacGils, kingship has gone to the eldest son!"

"I am King," MacGil answered darkly, "and I dictate tradition."

"But it's not *fair*!" Gareth pleaded, his voice whining. "I am supposed to be King. Not my sister. Not a woman!"

"Silence your tongue, boy!" MacGil shouted, shaking with rage. "Dare you question my judgment?"

"Am I being passed over then for a woman? Is that what you think of me?"

"I have made my decision," MacGil said. "You will respect it, and follow it obediently, as every other subject of my kingdom. Now, you may all leave me."

His children bowed their heads quickly and hurried from the room.

But Gareth stopped at the door, unable to bring himself to leave.

He turned back, and, alone, faced his father.

MacGil could see the disappointment in his face. Clearly, he had expected to be named heir today. Even more: he had wanted it. Desperately. Which did not surprise MacGil in the least—and which was the very reason he did not give it to him.

"Why do you hate me, Father?" he asked.

- "I don't hate you. I just don't find you fit to rule my kingdom."
- "And why is that?" Gareth pressed.
- "Because that is precisely the thing you seek."

Gareth's face turned a dark shade of crimson. Clearly, MacGil had given him an insight into his truest nature. MacGil watched his eyes, saw them burn with a hatred for him that he had never imagined possible.

Without another word, Gareth stormed from the room and slammed the door behind him.

In the reverberating echo, MacGil shuddered. He recalled his son's stare and sensed a hatred so deep, deeper than even than those of his enemies. In that moment, he thought of Argon, of his pronouncement, of danger being close.

Could it be as close as this?

### CHAPTER SIX

Thor sprinted across the vast field of the arena, running with all he had. Behind him he could hear the footsteps of the King's guards, close on his tail. They chased him across the hot and dusty landscape, cursing as they went. Before him were spread out the members—and new recruits—of the Legion, dozens of boys, just like him, but older and stronger. They were training and being tested in various formations, some throwing spears, others hurling javelins, a few practicing their grips on lances. They aimed for distant targets, and rarely missed. These were his competition, and they seemed formidable.

Among them were dozens of real knights, members of the Silver, standing in a broad semicircle watching the action. Judging. Deciding who would stay and who would be sent home.

Thor knew he had to prove himself, had to impress these men. Within moments the guards would be upon him, and if he had any chance of making an impression, now was the time. But how? His mind raced as he dashed across the courtyard, determined not to be turned away.

OAs Thor raced across the field, others began to take notice. Some of the recruits stopped what they were doing and turned, as did some of the knights. Within moments, Thor felt all the attention focused on him. They looked bewildered, and he realized they must be wondering who he was, sprinting across their field, three of the King's guard chasing him. This was not how he had wanted to make an impression. His whole life, when he had dreamed of joining the Legion, this was not how he had envisioned it happening.

As Thor ran, debating what to do, his course of action was made plain for him. One large boy, a recruit, decided to take it upon himself to impress the others by stopping Thor. Tall, muscle-bound, and nearly twice Thor's size, he raised his wooden sword to block Thor's way. Thor could see he was determined to strike him down, to make a fool of him in front of everyone, and thereby gain himself advantage over the other recruits.

This made Thor furious. Thor had no bone to pick with this boy, and it was not his fight. But he was making it his fight, just to gain advantage with the others.

As he got closer, Thor could hardly believe this boy's size: he towered over him, scowled down with locks of thick black hair covering his forehead, and the largest, squarest jaw Thor had ever seen. He did not see how he could make a dent against this boy.

The boy charged him with his wooden sword, and Thor knew that if he didn't act quickly, he would be knocked out.

Thor's reflexes kicked in. He instinctively took out his sling, reached back, and hurled a rock at the boy's hand. It found its target and knocked the sword from his hand, just as the boy was bringing it down. It went flying and the boy, screaming, clutched his hand.

Thor wasted no time. He charged, taking advantage of the moment, leapt into the air, and kicked the boy, planting his two front feet squarely on the boy's chest. But the boy was so thick, it was like kicking an oak tree. The boy merely stumbled back a few inches, while Thor stopped cold in his tracks and fell at the boy's feet.

This does not bode well, Thor thought, as he hit the ground with a thud, his ears ringing.

Thor tried to gain his feet, but the boy was a step ahead of him. He reached down, grabbed Thor by his back, and threw him, sending him flying, face first, into the dirt.

A crowd of boys quickly gathered in a circle around them and cheered. Thor reddened, humiliated.

Thor turned to get up, but the boy was too fast. He was already on top of him, pinning him down. Before Thor knew it, it had turned into a wrestling match, and the boy's weight was immense.

Thor could hear the muted shouts of the other recruits as they formed a circle, screaming, anxious for blood. The face of the boy scowled down; the boy reached out his thumbs and brought them down for Thor's eyes. Thor could not believe it—it seemed this boy really wanted to hurt him. Did he really want to gain advantage that badly?

At the last second, Thor rolled his head out of the way, and the boy's hands went flying by, plunging into the dirt. Thor took the chance to roll out from under him.

Thor gained his feet and faced the boy, who rose as well. The boy charged and swung for Thor's face, and Thor ducked at the last second; the air rushed by his face, and he realized if the boy's fist had hit him, it would have broken Thor's jaw. Thor reached up and punched the boy in the gut, but it hardly did a thing; it was like striking a tree.

Before Thor could react, the boy elbowed him in the face.

Thor stumbled back, reeling from the blow. It was like getting hit by a hammer, and his ears rang.

While Thor stumbled, still trying to catch his breath, the boy charged and kicked him hard in the chest. Thor went flying backwards and crashed to the ground, landing on his back. The other boys cheered.

Thor, dizzy, began to sit up, but the boy charged once more, swung, and punched him again, hard in the face, knocking him flat on his back again—and down for good.

Thor lay there, hearing the muted cheers of the others, feeling the salty taste of blood running from his nose, the welt on his face. He groaned in pain. He looked up and could see the large boy turn away and walk back toward his friends, already celebrating his victory.

Thor wanted to give up. This boy was huge, fighting him was futile, and he could take no more punishment. But something inside him pushed him. He could not lose. Not in front of all these people.

Don't give up. Get up. Get up!

Thor somehow summoned the strength. Groaning, he rolled over and got to his hands and knees, then, slowly, to his feet. He faced the boy, bleeding, his eyes swollen, hard to see, breathing hard, and raised his fists.

The huge boy turned around and stared down at Thor. He shook his head in disbelief.

"You should have stayed down, boy," he threatened, as he began to walk back to Thor.

"ENOUGH!" yelled a voice. "Elden, stand back!"

A knight suddenly stepped up, getting between them, holding out his palm and stopping Elden from getting closer to Thor. The crowd quieted, as they all looked to the knight; clearly this was a man who demanded respect.

Thor looked up, in awe at the knight's presence. He was in his twenties, tall, with broad shoulders, a square jaw, and brown, well-kept hair. Thor liked him immediately. His first-rate armor, chainmail made of polished silver, was covered with royal markings: the falcon emblem of the MacGil family. Thor's throat went dry: he was standing before a member of the royal family. He could hardly believe it.

"Explain yourself, boy," he said to Thor. "Why have you charged into our arena uninvited?" Before Thor could respond, suddenly, the three members of the King's guard broke through the circle. The lead guard stood there, breathing hard, pointing a finger at Thor.

"He defied our command!" the guard yelled. "I am going to shackle him and take him to the King's dungeon!"

"I did nothing wrong!" Thor protested.

"Did you now?" the guard yelled. "Barging into the King's property uninvited?"

"All I wanted was a chance!" Thor yelled, turning, pleading to the knight before him, the member of the royal family. "All I wanted was a chance to join the Legion!"

"This training ground is only for the invited, boy," came a gruff voice.

Into the circle stepped a warrior, fifties, broad and stocky, with a bald head, short beard, and a scar running across his nose. He looked like he had been a professional soldier all his life—and from the markings on his armor, the gold pin on his chest, he looked to be their commander. Thor's heart quickened at the site of him: a general.

"I was not invited, sire," Thor said. "That is true. But it has been my life's dream to be here. All I want is a chance to show you what I can do. I am as good as any of these recruits. Just give me one chance to prove it. Please. Joining the Legion is all I've ever dreamt of."

"This battleground is not for dreamers, boy," came his gruff response. "It is for fighters. There are no exceptions to our rules: recruits are chosen."

The general nodded, and the King's guard approached Thor, shackles out.

But suddenly the knight, the royal family member, stepped forward and put out his palm, blocking the guard.

"Maybe, on occasion, an exception may be made," he said.

The guard looked up at him in consternation, clearly wanting to speak out, but having to hold his tongue in deference to a royal family member.

"I admire your spirit, boy," the knight continued. "Before we cast you away, I would like to see what you can do."

"But Kendrick, we have our rules—" the general said, clearly displeased.

"The royal family makes the rules," Kendrick answered sternly, "and the Legion answers to the royal family."

"We answer to your father, the King—not to you," the general retorted, equally defiant.

There was a standoff, the air thick with tension. Thor could hardly believe what he had ignited.

"I know my father, and I know what he would want. He would want to give this boy a try. And that is what we will do."

The general, after several tense moments, finally backed down.

Kendrick turned to Thor, eyes locking on his, brown and intense, the face of a prince, but also of a warrior.

"I will give you one chance," he said to Thor. "Let's see if you can hit that mark."

He gestured at a stack of hay far across the field, with a small, red stain in its center. Several spears were lodged in the hay, but none inside the red.

"If you can do what none of these others boys could do—if you can hit that mark from here—then you may join us."

The knight stepped aside, and Thor could feel all eyes on him.

He spotted a rack of spears and looked them over carefully. They were of a finer quality than he'd ever seen, made of solid oak, wrapped in the finest leather. His heart pounded as he stepped forward, wiping the blood from his nose with the back of his hand, feeling more nervous than ever before in his life. Clearly, he was being given a nearly impossible task. But he had to try.

Thor reached over and picked a spear, not too long, not too short. He weighed it in his hand—it was heavy, substantial. Not like the ones he used back home. But it also felt right. He felt that maybe, just maybe, he could find his mark. After all, spear-throwing was his finest skill, next to hurling stones, and many long days of roaming the wilderness had given him ample targets. He had always been able to hit targets even his brothers could not.

Thor closed his eyes and breathed deeply. If he missed, he would be pounced upon by the guards and dragged off to jail—and his chances of joining the Legion would be ruined forever. This one moment held everything he had ever dreamt of.

He prayed to God with all he had.

Without hesitating, Thor opened his eyes, took two steps forward, reached back, and hurled the spear.

He held his breath as he watched it sail.

Please, God. Please.

The spear cut through the thick, dead silence, and Thor could feel the hundreds of eyes on it.

Then, after an eternity, there came the sound, the undeniable sound of a spear point piercing hay. Thor didn't even have to look. He knew, he just knew, it was a perfect strike. It was the way the spear felt when it left his hand, the angle of his wrist, that told him it would hit.

Thor dared to look—and saw, with huge relief, that he was right. The spear had found its place in the center of the red mark—the only spear in it. He'd done what the other recruits could not.

Stunned silence enveloped him, as he felt the other recruits—and knights—all gaping at him. Finally, Kendrick stepped forward and clapped Thor hard on the back with his palm, with the sound of satisfaction. He grinned widely.

"I was right," he said. "You will stay!"

"What, my lord!" screamed the King's guard. "It is not fair! This boy arrived uninvited!"

"He hit that mark. That's invitation enough for me."

"He is far younger and smaller than the others. This is no peewee squad," said the general.

"I would rather a smaller soldier who can hit his mark than an oaf who cannot," the knight replied.

"A lucky throw!" yelled the large boy whom Thor had just fought. "If we had more chances, we would hit, too!"

The knight turned and stared down the boy who yelled.

"Would you?" he asked. "Shall I see you do it now? Shall we wager your stay here on it?"

The boy, flustered, lowered his head in shame, clearly not willing to take up the offer.

"But this boy is a stranger," protested the general. "We don't even know where he hails from."

"He comes from the lowlands," came a voice.

The others turned to see who spoke, but Thor did not need to—he recognized the voice. It was the voice that had plagued him his entire childhood. The voice of his eldest brother: Drake.

Drake stepped forward with his other two brothers, and glared down at Thor with a look of disapproval.

"His name is Thorgrin, of the clan McCleod of the Southern Province of the Eastern Kingdom. He is the youngest of four. We all hail from the same household. He tends our father's sheep!"

The entire group of boys and knights burst into a chorus of laughter.

Thor felt his face redden; he wanted to die at that moment. He had never been more ashamed. That was just like his brother, to take away his moment of glory, to do whatever he could to keep him down.

"Tends sheep, does he?" echoed the general.

"Then our foes will surely have to watch out for him!" yelled another boy.

There was another chorus of laughter, and Thor's humiliation deepened.

"Enough!" yelled Kendrick, sternly.

Gradually, the laughter subsided.

"I'd rather have a sheepherder any day who can hit a mark than the lot of you—who seem good at laughing, but not much more," Kendrick added.

With that, a silence descended on the boys, who weren't laughing anymore.

Thor was infinitely grateful to Kendrick. He vowed to pay him back any way he could. Regardless of what happened to Thor, this man had, at least, restored his honor.

"Don't you know, boy, that it is not a warrior's way to tattle on his friends—much less his own family, his own blood?" the knight asked Drake.

Drake looked down, flustered, one of the rare times that Thor had seen him out of sorts.

But another of his other brothers, Dross, stepped forward and protested: "But Thor wasn't even chosen. We were. He is merely following us here."

"I'm not following you," Thor insisted, finally speaking up. "I'm here for the Legion. Not for you."

"It doesn't matter why he's here," the general said, annoyed, stepping forward. "He's wasting all of our time. Yes, it was a good hit of the spear, but he still cannot join us. He has no knight to sponsor him, and no squire willing to partner with him."

"I will partner with him," called out a voice.

Thor spun, along with the others. He was surprised to see, standing a few feet away, a boy his age, who actually looked like him, except with blond hair and bright green eyes, wearing the most beautiful royal armor: chainmail covered with scarlet and black markings—another member of the King's family.

"Impossible," the general said. "The royal family does not partner with commoners."

"I can do as I choose," the boy shot back. "And I say that Thorgrin will be my partner."

"Even if we sanctioned it," the general said, "it does not matter. He has no knight to sponsor him."

"I shall sponsor him," came a voice.

Everyone turned in the other direction, and there came a muffled gasp amongst the others.

Thor turned to see a knight mounted on a horse, bedecked in the beautiful, gleaming armor and wearing all manner of weaponry on his belt. He positively shined—it was like looking at the sun. Thor could tell by his demeanor, his bearing, and by the markings on his helmet, that he was different from the others. He was a champion.

Thor recognized this knight. He had seen paintings of him, and had heard of his legend. Erec. He couldn't believe it. He was the greatest knight in the Ring.

"But my lord, you already have a squire," the general protested.

"Then I shall have two," Erec answered, in a deep, confident voice.

A stunned silence pervaded the group.

"Then there is nothing left to say," Kendrick said. "Thorgrin has a sponsor and a partner. The matter is resolved. He is now a member of the Legion."

"But you have forgotten about me!" the King's guard screamed, stepping forward. "None of this excuses the fact that the boy has struck a member of the King's guard, and that he must be punished. Justice must be done!"

"Justice will be done." Kendrick's voice could have cut steel. "But it will be at my discretion. Not yours."

"But my liege, he must be put in the stocks! An example must be made of him!"

"If you keep up your talk, then *you* shall be the one going to the stocks," Kendrick said to the guard, glaring him down.

Finally, the guard backed down; reluctantly, he turned and walked away, red-faced, glaring at Thor.

"Then it is official," Kendrick called out in a loud voice. "Welcome, Thorgrin, to the King's Legion!"

The crowd of knights and boys let out a cheer and then turned away, back to their training.

Thor felt numb with shock. He could hardly believe it. He was now a member of the King's Legion. It was like a dream.

Thor turned to Kendrick, more grateful to him than he could ever say. He had never had anyone in his life before who cared about him, who went out of his way to look out for him, to protect him. It was a funny feeling. He already felt closer to this man than to his own father.

"I don't know how to thank you," Thor said. "I am deeply indebted to you."

Kendrick smiled down. "Kendrick is my name. You shall get to know it well. I am the King's eldest son. I admire your courage. You shall be a fine addition to this lot."

Kendrick turned and hurried off, and as he did, Elden, the huge boy Thor had fought, shuffled by.

"Watch your back," the boy said. "We sleep in the same barracks, you know. And don't think for a moment you're safe."

The boy turned and stormed off before Thor could respond; he had already made an enemy.

He was beginning to wonder what was in store for him here, when the King's youngest son hurried over to him.

"Don't mind him," he said to Thor. "He's always picking fights. I'm Reece."

"Thank you," Thor said, reaching out his hand, "for choosing me as your partner. I don't know what I would have done without it."

"I'm happy to choose anyone who stands up to that brute," Reece said happily. "That was a nice fight."

"Are you kidding?" Thor asked, wiping dried blood from his face and feeling his welt swell up. "He killed me."

"But you didn't give up," Reece said. "Impressive. Any of the others of us would have just stayed down. And that was one hell of a spear throw. How did you learn to throw like that? We shall be partners for life!" He looked at Thor meaningfully as he shook his hand. "And friends, too. I can sense it."

As Thor shook his hand, he couldn't help but feel that he was making a lifelong friend. Suddenly, he was poked from the side.

He spun and saw an older boy standing there, with pockmarked skin and a long and narrow face.

"I am Feithgold. Erec's squire. You are now his *second* squire. Which means you answer to me. And we have a tournament in minutes. Are you going to just stand there when you've been made squire to the most famous knight in the kingdom? Follow me! Quickly!"

Reece had already turned away. Thor turned and hurried after the squire as he ran across the field. He had no idea where they were going—but he didn't care. He was singing inside. He had made it.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

Gareth hurried across King's Court, dressed in his royal fineries, pushing his way amongst the masses who poured in from all directions for his sister's wedding, and he fumed. He was still reeling from his encounter with his father. How was it possible that he was skipped over? That his father would not choose him as king? It made no sense. He was the firstborn legitimate son. That was the way it had always worked. He had always, from the time he was born, assumed he would reign—he had no reason to think otherwise.

It was unconscionable. Passing him over for a younger sibling—and a girl, no less. When word spread, he would be the laughingstock of the kingdom. As he walked, he felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him and he did not know how to catch his breath.

He stumbled his way with the masses toward the wedding ceremony of his elder sister. He looked about, saw the multitude of colored robes, the endless streams of people, all the different folk from all the different provinces. He hated being this close to commoners. This was the one time when the poor could mingle with the rich, the one time those savages from the Eastern Kingdom, from the far side of the Highlands, had been allowed in, too. Gareth still could hardly conceive his sister was being married off to one of them. It was merely a political move by his father, a pathetic attempt to make peace between the kingdoms.

Even stranger, somehow, his sister actually seemed to like this creature. Gareth could hardly conceive why. Knowing her, it was not the *man* she liked, but the title, the chance to be Queen of her own province. She would get what she deserved; they were all savages, those on the other side of the Highlands. In Gareth's mind, they lacked his civility, his refinery, his sophistication. It was not his problem. If his sister was happy, let her be married off. It was just one less sibling to have around that might stand in his way to the throne. In fact, the farther away she was, the better.

Not that any of this was his concern anymore. After today, he would never be king. Now, he would be relegated to being just another anonymous prince in his father's kingdom. Now, he had no path to power; now, he was doomed to a life of mediocrity.

His father had underestimated him—he always had. His father considered himself politically shrewd—but Gareth was much shrewder and always had been. For instance: for marrying Luanda to a McCloud, his father thought himself a master politician. But Gareth was more farsighted than his father, was able to consider more of the ramifications, and was already looking one step farther. He knew where this would lead. Ultimately, this marriage would not appease the McClouds but embolden them. They were brutes, so they would see this peace offering not as a sign of strength, but of weakness. They would not care for a bond between the families, and as soon as his sister was taken away, Gareth felt certain they would plan an attack. It was all a ruse. He had tried to tell his father, but he would not listen.

Not that any of this was his concern anymore. After all, now he was just another prince, just another cog in the kingdom. Gareth positively burned at the thought of it, and hated his father at that moment with a hatred he never knew was possible. As he crammed in, shoulder to shoulder with the masses, he imagined ways he could take revenge, ways he could get the kingship after

all. He could not just sit idly by, that was for certain. He could not let the kingship go to his younger sister.

"There you are," came a voice.

It was Firth, walking up beside him, wearing a jolly smile and revealing his perfect teeth. Eighteen, tall, thin, with a high voice and smooth skin and ruddy cheeks, Firth was his lover of the moment. Gareth was usually happy to see him, but was in no mood for him now.

"I think you have been avoiding me all day," Firth added, linking one arm around his as they walked.

Gareth immediately shook off his arm, checking to make sure no one had seen.

"Are you stupid?" Gareth chastised. "Don't you ever link arms with me in public again. *Ever*."

Firth look down, red-faced. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think."

"That's right, you didn't. Do it again, and I shall never see you again," Gareth scolded.

Firth turned redder, and looked truly apologetic. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

Gareth checked again, felt confident no one had seen, and felt a little bit better.

"What gossip from the masses?" Gareth asked, wanting to change the subject, to shake his dark thoughts.

Firth immediately perked up and regained his smile.

"Everyone waits in expectation. They all wait for the announcement that you have been named successor."

Gareth's face dropped. Firth examined him.

"Haven't you?" Firth asked, skeptical.

Gareth reddened as he walked, not meeting Firth's eyes.

"No."

Firth gasped.

"He passed me over. Can you imagine? For my sister. My younger sister."

Now Firth's face fell. He looked astonished.

"That is impossible," he said. "You are firstborn. She is a woman. It's not possible," he repeated.

Gareth looked at him, stone cold. "I do not lie."

The two of them walked for some time in silence, and as it grew even more crowded, Gareth looked around, starting to realize where he was and really take it all in. King's Court was absolutely jammed—there must have been thousands of people swarming in from every possible entrance. They all shuffled their way toward the elaborate wedding stage, around which were set at least a thousand of the nicest chairs, with thick cushions covered in red velvet, and golden frames. An army of servants strode up and down the aisles, seating people, carrying drinks.

On either side of the endlessly long wedding aisle, strewn with flowers, sat the two families—the MacGils and McClouds—the line sharply demarcated. There were hundreds on either side, each dressed in their finest, the MacGils in the deep purple of their clan, and the McClouds in their burnt-orange. To Gareth's eye, the two clans could not look more different: though they were each richly adorned, he felt as if the McClouds were merely dressing up, pretending. They were brutes beneath their clothes—he could see it in their facial expressions, in the way they moved, jostled each other, the way they laughed too loudly. There was something beneath their surface that royal clothing could not hide. He resented having them within their gates. He resented this entire wedding. It was yet another foolish decision by his father.

If Gareth were king, he would have executed a different plan. He would have called this wedding, too. But then he would have waited until late in the night, when the McClouds were steeped in drink, barred the doors to the hall, and burned them all in a great fire, killing them all in one clean swoop.

"Brutes," Firth said, as he examined the other side of the wedding aisle. "I can hardly imagine why your father let them in."

"It should make for interesting games afterwards," Gareth said. "He invites our enemy into our gates, then arranges wedding-day competitions. Is that not a recipe for skirmish?"

"Do you think?" Firth asked. "A battle? Here? With all these soldiers? On her wedding day?" Gareth shrugged. He put nothing past the McClouds.

"The honor of a wedding day means nothing to them."

"But we have thousands of soldiers here."

"As do they."

Gareth turned and saw a long line of soldiers—MacGils and McClouds—lined up on either side of the battlements. They would not have brought so many soldiers, he knew, unless they were expecting a skirmish. Despite the occasion, despite the fine dress, despite the lavishness of the setting, the endless banquets of food, the summer solstice in full bloom, the flowers—despite everything, there still hung a heavy tension in the air. Everyone was on edge—Gareth could see it by the way they bunched up their shoulders, held out their elbows. They didn't trusted each other.

Maybe he would get lucky, Gareth thought, and one of them would stab his father in his heart. Then maybe he could become king after all.

"I suppose we can't sit together," Firth said, disappointment in his voice, as they approached the seating area.

Gareth shot him a look of contempt. "How stupid are you?" he spat, venom in his voice.

He was seriously beginning to wonder whether he had made a good idea to choose this stable boy as his lover. If he didn't get him over his sappy ways quick, he might just out them both.

Firth looked down in shame.

"I will see you afterwards, in the stables. Now be gone with you," he said, and gave him a small shove. Firth disappeared into the crowd.

Suddenly, Gareth felt an icy grip on his arm. For a moment his heart stopped, as he wondered if he was discovered; but then he felt the long nails, the thin fingers, plunge into his skin, and he knew it right away to be the grasp of his wife. Helena.

"Don't embarrass me on this day," she hissed, hatred in her voice.

He turned and studied her. She looked beautiful, all done up, wearing a long white satin gown, her hair piled high with pins, wearing her finest diamond necklace, and her face smoothed over with makeup. Gareth could see objectively that she was beautiful, as beautiful as she was on the day he married her. But still he felt no attraction to her. It had been another idea of his father's—to try to marry him out of his nature. But all it had done was give him a perpetually sour companion—and stir up even more court speculation about his true inclinations.

"It is your sister's wedding day," she rebuked. "You can act as if we are a couple—for once." She locked one arm through his and they walked to a reserved area roped off with velvet. Two royal guards let them through and they mingled with the rest of the royals at the base of the aisle.

A trumpet was blown, and slowly, the crowd quieted. There came the gentle music of a harpsichord, more flowers were strewn along the aisle, and the royal procession began to walk

down, couples arm-in-arm. Gareth was tugged by Helena, and he began marching down the aisle with her.

Gareth felt more conspicuous, more awkward than ever, hardly knowing how to make his love seem genuine. He felt hundreds of eyes on him, and couldn't help but feel as if they were all evaluating him, though he knew they were not. The aisle could not be short enough; he could not wait to reach the end, stand near his sister at the altar, and get this over with. He also could not stop thinking about his meeting with his father, and he wondered if all these onlookers already knew the news.

"I received ill news today," he whispered to Helena as they finally reached the end, and the eyes were off him.

"Do you think I don't know that already?" she snapped.

He turned and looked at her, surprised.

She looked back with contempt. "I have my spies," she said.

He narrowed his eyes, wanting to hurt her. How could she be so nonchalant?

"If I am not king, then you shall never be queen," he said.

"I never expected to be queen," she answered.

That surprised him even more.

"I never expected him to name you," she added. "Why would he? You are not a leader. You are a lover. But not *my* lover."

Gareth felt himself reddening.

"Nor are you mine," he said to her.

It was her turn to redden. She was not the only one who had a secret lover. Gareth had spies of his own who told him of her exploits. He had let her get away with it so far—as long as she kept it quiet, and left him alone.

"It's not like you give me a choice," she answered. "Do you expect me to remain celibate the rest of my life?"

"You knew who I was," he answered. "Yet you chose to marry me. You chose power, not love. Don't act surprised."

"Our marriage was arranged," she said. "I did not choose a thing."

"But you did not protest," he answered.

Gareth lacked the energy to argue with her today. She was a useful prop, a puppet wife. He could tolerate her, and she could be useful on occasion—as long as she did not annoy him too much.

Gareth watched with supreme cynicism as everyone turned to watch his eldest sister being walked down the aisle by his father, that creature. The gall of him—he even had the nerve to feign sadness, wiping a tear as he walked her. An actor to the last. But in Gareth's eyes, he was just a bumbling fool. He couldn't imagine his father felt any genuine sadness for marrying off his daughter, who, after all, he was throwing to the wolves of the McCloud kingdom. Gareth felt an equal disdain for Luanda, who seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. She seemed to hardly care that she was being married off to a lesser people. She, too, was after power. Cold-blooded. Calculated. In this way, she, of all his siblings, was most like him. In some ways he could relate to her, though they never had much warmth for each other.

Gareth shifted on his feet, impatient, waiting for it all to end.

He suffered through the ceremony, Argon presiding over the blessings, reciting the spells, performing the rituals. It was all a charade, and it made him sick. It was just the union of two families for political reasons. Why couldn't they just call it what it was?

Soon enough, thank heavens, it was over. The crowd rose up in a huge cheer as the two kissed. A great horn was blown, and the perfect order of the wedding dissolved into controlled chaos. The royal family all made their way back down the aisle and over to the reception area.

Even Gareth, as cynical as he was, was impressed by the sight; his father had spared no expense this time. Stretching out before them were all manner of tables, banquets, vats of wine, an endless array of roasting pigs and sheep and lamb.

Behind them, they were already preparing for the main event: the games. There were targets being prepared for stone-hurling, spear-throwing, archery—and, at the center of it all, the jousting lane. Already, the masses were crowding around it.

Crowds were already parting for the knights on both sides. For the MacGils, the first to enter, of course, was Kendrick, mounted on his horse and bedecked in armor, followed by dozens of the Silver. But it was not until Erec arrived, set back from the others on his white horse, that the crowd quieted in awe. He was like a magnet for attention; even Helena leaned forward, and Gareth noted her lust for him, like all the other women.

"He's nearly of selection age, yet he's not married. Any woman in the kingdom would marry him. Why does he choose none of us?"

"And what do you care?" Gareth asked, feeling jealous despite himself. He too, wanted to be up there in armor, on a horse, jousting for his father's name. But he was not a warrior. And everyone knew it.

Helena ignored him with a dismissive wave of her hand. "You are not a man," she said, derisively. "You do not understand these things."

Gareth blushed. He wanted to let her have it, but now was not the time. Instead, he accompanied her as she took a seat in the stands with the others to watch the day's festivities. This day was going from worse to worse, and Gareth already felt a pit in his stomach. It would be a very long day, a day of endless chivalry, of pomp, of pretense. Of men wounding or killing each other. A day he was completely excluded from. A day that represented everything he hated.

As he sat there, he brooded. He wished silently that the festivities would erupt into a full-fledged battle, that there would be full-scale bloodshed before him, that everything good about this place be destroyed, torn to bits.

One day he would have his way. One day he would be King. One day.

#### CHAPTER EIGHT

Thor did his best to keep up with Erec's squire, hurrying to catch up as he weaved his way through the masses. It had been such a whirlwind since the arena, he could hardly process what was happening all around him. He was still trembling inside, could still hardly believe he had been accepted into the Legion, and that he had been named second squire to Erec.

"I told you, boy—keep up!" Feithgold snapped.

Thor resented being called "boy," especially as the squire was hardly a few years older. Feithgold darted in out of the crowd, almost as if he were trying to lose Thor.

"Is it always this crowded here?" Thor called out, trying to catch up.

"Of course not!" Feithgold yelled back. "Today is not only the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, but also the day the King chose for his daughter's wedding—and the only day in history we've opened our gates to the McClouds. There has never been such a crowd here as now. It is unprecedented. I hadn't expected this! I fear we will be late!" he said, all in a rush, as he sped through the crowd.

"Where are we going?" Thor asked.

"We're going to do what every good squire does: to help our knight prepare!"

"Prepare for what?" Thor pressed, nearly out of breath. It was getting hotter by the minute, and he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"The royal joust!"

They finally reached the edge of the crowd and stopped before a King's guard, who recognized Feithgold and gestured to the others to let them pass.

They slipped under a rope and stepped into a clearing, free from the masses. Thor could hardly believe it; there, up close, were the jousting lanes. Behind the ropes stood mobs of spectators, and up and down the dirt lanes stood huge warhorses—the largest Thor had ever seen—mounted by knights in all manner of armor. Mixed among the Silver were knights from all over the two kingdoms, from every province, some in black armor, others in white, wearing helmets and donning weapons of every shape and size. It looked as if the entire world had descended on these jousting lanes.

There were already some competitions in progress, knights from places Thor did not recognize charging each other, clanging lances and shields, followed always by a short cheer from the crowd. Up close, Thor could not believe the strength and speed of the horses, the sound the weapons made. It was a deadly art.

"It hardly seems like a sport!" Thor said to Feithgold as he followed him along the perimeter of the lanes.

"That's because it is not," Feithgold yelled back, over the sound of a clang. "It is a serious business, masked as a game. People die here, every day. It is battle. Lucky are the ones who walk away unscathed. They are far and few between."

Thor looked up as two knights charged each other and collided at full speed. There was an awful crash of metal on metal, then one of them flew off his horse and landed on his back, just feet away from Thor.

The crowd gasped. The knight did not stir, and Thor saw a piece of a wooden shaft stuck in his ribs, piercing his armor. He cried out in pain and blood poured from his mouth. Several squires ran over to attend him, dragging him off the field. The winning knight paraded slowly, raising his lance to the cheer of the crowd.

Thor was amazed. He had not envisioned the sport to be so deadly.

"What those boys just did—that is your job now," Feithgold said. "You are squire now. More precisely, second squire."

He stopped and came in close—so close, Thor could smell his bad breath.

"And don't you forget it. I answer to Erec. And you answer to me. Your job is to assist me. Do you understand?"

Thor nodded back, still trying to take it all in. He had imagined it all going differently in his head, and still didn't know exactly what was in store for him. He could feel how threatened Feithgold was by his presence, and felt he had made an enemy.

"It is not my intention to interfere with your being Erec's squire," Thor said.

Feithgold let out a short, derisive laugh.

"You couldn't interfere with me, boy, if you tried. Just stay out of my way and do as I tell you."

With that, Feithgold turned and hurried down a series of twisting paths behind the ropes. Thor followed as best he could, and soon found himself in a labyrinth of stables. He walked down a narrow corridor, all around him warhorses strutting, squires nervously tending to them. Feithgold twisted and turned and finally stopped before a giant, magnificent horse. Thor had to catch his breath. He could hardly believe something so big and beautiful was real, let alone could be contained behind a fence. It looked ready for war.

"Warkfin," Feithgold said. "Erec's horse. Or one of them—the one he prefers for jousting. Not an easy beast to tame. But Erec has managed. Open the gate," Feithgold ordered.

Thor looked at him, puzzled, then looked back at the gate, trying to figure it out. He stepped forward, pulled at a peg between the slats, and nothing happened. He pulled harder until it budged, and he gently swung open the wooden gate.

The second he did, Warkfin neighed, leaned back, and kicked the wood, just grazing the tip of Thor's finger. Thor yanked back his hand in pain.

Feithgold laughed.

"That's why I had you open it. Do it quicker next time, boy. Warkfin waits for no one. Especially you."

Thor was fuming; Feithgold was already getting on his nerves, and he hardly saw how he would be able to put up with him.

He quickly open the wooden gates, this time stepping out of the way of the horse's flailing legs.

"Shall I bring him out?" Thor asked with trepidation, not really wanting to grab the reins as Warkfin stomped and swayed.

"Of course not," Feithgold said. "That is my role. Your role is to feed him—when I tell you to. And to shovel his waste."

Feithgold grabbed Warkfin's reins and began to lead him down the stables. Thor swallowed, watching. This was not the initiation he had in mind. He knew he had to start somewhere, but this was degrading. He had pictured war and glory and battle, training and competition among boys his own age. He never saw himself as a servant-in-waiting. He was starting to wonder if he had made the right decision.

They finally left the dark stables for the bright light of day, back in the jousting lanes. Thor squinted from the change, and was momentarily overcome by thousands of people cheering the noise of opposing knights as they smashed into one other. He'd never heard such a clang of metal, and the earth quaked from the horses' massive gait.

All around were dozens of knights and their squires, preparing. Squires polished their knights' armor, greased up weapons, checked saddles and straps, and double-checked weapons as knights mounted their steeds and waited for their names to be called.

"Elmalkin!" an announcer called out.

A knight from a province Thor did not recognize, a broad fellow in red armor, galloped out the gate. Thor turned and jumped out of the way just in time. The knight charged down the narrow lane, and his lance brushed off the shield of a competitor. They clanged, the other knight's lance struck, and Elmalkin went flying backwards, landing on his back. The crowd cheered.

Elmalkin immediately gathered himself, though, jumping to his feet, spinning around and reaching out a hand to his squire, who stood beside Thor.

"My mace!" the knight yelled out.

The squire next to Thor jumped into action, grabbing a mace off the weapons rack and sprinting out toward the center of the lane. He ran toward Elmalkin, but the other knight had circled back and was charging again. Just before the squire reached him to placing the mace into his master's hand, the other knight thundered down upon them. The squire did not reach Elmalkin in time. The other knight brought his lance down—and as he did, his lance sideswiped the squire's head. The squire, reeling from the blow, spun around quickly and went down to the dirt, face first.

He did not move. Thor could see blood oozing from his head, even from here, staining the dirt.

Thor swallowed.

"It's not a pretty sight, is it?"

Thor turned to see Feithgold standing beside him, staring back.

"Steel yourself, boy. This is battle. And we're right in the middle of it."

The crowd suddenly grew quiet as the main jousting lane was opened. Thor could sense anticipation in the air as all the other jousts stopped in anticipation of this one. On one side, out came Kendrick, walking out on his horse, lance in hand.

On the far side, facing him, out walked a knight in the distinctive armor of the McClouds.

"MacGils versus McClouds," Feithgold whispered to Thor. "We've been at war for a thousand years. And I very much doubt this match will settle it."

Each knight lowered his visor, a horn sounded, and with a shout, the two charged each other.

Thor was amazed at how much speed they picked up before they moments later collided with such a clang, Thor nearly raised his hands to his ears. The crowd gasped as both fighters fell from their horses.

They each jumped to their feet and threw off their helmets, as their squires ran out to them, handing them short swords. The two knights sparred with all they had. Watching Kendrick swing and slash mesmerized Thor: it was a thing of beauty. But the McCloud was a fine warrior, too. Back and forth they went, each exhausting the other, neither giving ground.

Finally their swords met in one momentous clash, and they each knocked each other's swords from their hands. Their squires ran out, maces in hand, but as Kendrick reached for his

mace, the McCloud's squire ran up behind him and struck him in the back with his own weapon, the blow sending him to the ground, to the horrified gasp of the crowd.

The McCloud knight retrieved his sword, stepped forward, and pointed it at Kendrick's throat, pinning him to the ground. Kendrick was left with no choice.

"I concede!" he yelled.

There was a victorious shout among the McClouds—but a shout of anger from the MacGils.

"He cheated!" yelled out the MacGils.

"He cheated! He cheated!" echoed a chorus of angry cries.

The mob was getting angrier and angrier, and soon there was such a chorus of protests that the mob began to disperse, and both sides—the MacGils and McClouds—began to approach each other on foot.

"This isn't good," Feithgold said to Thor, as they stood on the side, watching.

Moments later, the crowd erupted; blows were thrown, and it became an all-out brawl. It was chaos. Men were swinging wildly, grabbing each other in locks, driving each other to the ground. The crowd swelled and the brawl threatened to blow up into an all-out war.

A horn sounded and guards from both sides marched in, managing to split up the crowd. Another, louder, horn sounded, and silence fell as King MacGil stood from his throne.

"There will be no skirmishes today!" he boomed in his kingly voice. "Not on this day of celebration! And not in my court!"

Slowly, the crowd calmed.

"If it is a contest you wish for between our two great clans, it will be decided by one fighter, one champion, from each side."

MacGil looked to King McCloud, who sat on the far side, seated with his entourage.

"Agreed?" MacGil yelled out.

McCloud stood solemnly.

"Agreed!" he echoed.

The crowd cheered on both sides.

"Choose your best man!" MacGil velled.

"I already have," McCloud said.

There emerged from the McCloud side a formidable knight, the biggest man Thor had ever seen, mounted on his horse. He looked like a boulder, all bulk, with a long beard and a scowl that looked permanent.

Thor sensed movement beside him, and right next to him, Erec stepped up, mounted Warkfin, and walked forward. Thor swallowed. He could hardly believe this was happening all around him. He swelled with pride for Erec.

Then he was overcome with anxiety, as he realized he was on duty. After all, he was squire and his knight was about to fight.

"What do we do?" Thor asked Feithgold in a rush.

"Just stand back and do as I tell you," he answered.

Erec strode forward into the jousting lane, and the two knights stayed there, facing each other, their horses stomping in a tense standoff. Thor's heart pounded in his chest as he waited and watched.

A horn sounded, and the two charged each other.

Thor could not believe the beauty and grace of Warkfin—it was like watching a fish jump from the sea. The other knight was huge, but Erec was a graceful and sleek fighter. He cut

through the air, his head low, his silver armor rippling, more polished than any armor he had laid his eyes upon.

As the two men met, Erec held his lance with perfect aim and leaned to the side. He managed to knock the knight in the center of his shield while simultaneously dodging his blow.

The huge mountain of a man tumbled backwards, onto the ground. It was like a boulder landing.

The MacGil crowd cheered as Erec rode past, turned, and circled back. He raised his face plate and held the tip of his lance to the man's throat.

"Yield!" Erec yelled down.

The knight spit.

"Never!"

The knight then reached into a hidden satchel on his waist, pulled out a handful of dirt, and before Erec could react, threw it into Erec's face.

Erec, stunned, reached for his eyes, dropping his lance and falling from his horse.

The MacGil crowd booed and hissed and cried in outrage as Erec fell, clutching his eyes. The knight, wasting no time, hurried over and kneed him in the ribs.

Erec rolled over, and the knight grabbed a huge rock, picked it up high, and prepared to bring it down on Erec's skull.

"NO!" Thor screamed, stepping forward, unable to control himself.

Thor watched in horror as the knight brought down the rock. At the last second, Erec somehow rolled out of the way. The stone lodged deep into the ground, right where his skull had been.

Thor was amazed at Erec's dexterity. He was already back on his feet, facing this dirty fighter.

"Short swords!" the Kings cried out.

Feithgold suddenly wheeled and stared at Thor, wide-eved.

"Hand it to me!" he yelled.

Thor's heart pounded in panic. He spun around, searching Erec's weapons rack, looking desperately for the sword. There was a dizzying array of weapons before him. He reached out, grabbed it, and thrust it into Feithgold's palm.

"Stupid boy! That is a medium sword!" Feithgold yelled.

Thor's throat went dry; he felt the whole kingdom staring at him. His vision was blurry with anxiety as he spiraled into panic, not knowing which sword to choose. He could barely focus.

Feithgold stepped forward, shoved Thor out of the way, and grabbed the short sword himself. He then raced out into the jousting lane.

Thor watched him go, feeling useless, horrible. He also tried to imagine if it were himself running out there, in front of all those people, and his knees grew weak.

The other knight's squire reached him first, and Erec had to jump out of the way as the knight swung for him, barely missing. Finally, Feithgold reached Erec and placed the short sword into his hand. As he did, the knight charged Erec. But Erec was too clever. He waited until the last moment, then jumped out of the way.

The knight kept charging, though, and ran right into Feithgold, standing, to his bad luck, in the place where Erec had just been. The knight, filled with rage at missing Erec, kept charging and grabbed Feithgold with both hands by his hair, and head-butted him hard in the face.

There was a cracking of bone as blood squirted from Feithgold's nose and he collapsed to the ground, limp.

Thor stood there, mouth open in shock. He could not believe it. Neither could the crowd, which booed and hissed.

Erec swung around with his sword, just missing the knight, and the two faced each other again.

Thor suddenly realized: he was Erec's only squire now. He gulped. What was he supposed to be doing? He was not prepared for this. And the whole kingdom was watching.

The two knights attacked each other viciously, going blow for blow. Clearly the McCloud knight was much stronger than Erec—yet Erec was the better fighter, faster and more agile. They swung and slashed and parried, neither able to gain advantage.

Finally, King MacGil stood.

"Long spears!" he called out.

Thor's heart pounded. He knew this meant him: he was on duty.

He spun and looked at the rack, taking down the weapon that seemed most appropriate. As he grabbed its leather shaft, he prayed he chose correctly.

He burst onto the lane and could feel thousands of eyes on him. He ran and ran for all he was worth, wanting to reach Erec as quickly as possible, and finally placing the spear into his hand. He was proud to see he reached him first.

Erec took the spear and spun, prepared to face the other knight. Being the honorable warrior that he was, Erec waited until the other knight was armed before attacking. Thor hurried off to the side, out of the men's way, not wanting to repeat Feithgold's mistake. As he did, he dragged Feithgold's limp body out of harm's way.

As Thor watched, he sensed something was wrong. Erec's opponent took his spear, raised it straight up, then began bringing it down in a strange motion. As he did, suddenly, Thor felt his world go into focus in a way it never had. He intuited that something was wrong. His eyes locked on the McCloud knight's spearhead, and as he looked closely, he noticed it was loose. The knight was about to use the tip of his spear as a throwing knife.

As the knight brought down his spear, the head detached and sailed through the air, end over end, heading right for Erec's heart. In seconds, Erec would be dead—there was no way he could react in time. From the looks of its jagged blade, it appeared to be armor-piercing.

In that moment, Thor felt his whole body warming. He felt a tingling sensation—it was the same sensation he'd experienced back in Darkwood, when battling the Sybold. His whole world slowed. He was able to see the tip spinning in slow motion, was able to feel an energy, a heat, rising within him—one he didn't know he had.

He stepped forward and felt bigger than the spearhead. In his mind, he willed it to stop. He demanded it to stop. He did not want to see Erec hurt. Especially not this way.

"NO!" Thor shrieked.

He took another step and held out his palm, aimed at the spearhead.

It stopped and hung there, in midair, right before reaching Erec's heart.

It then dropped harmlessly to the ground.

The two knights both turned and looked at Thor—as did the two kings, as did the thousands of spectators. He felt the whole world staring down at him, and realized they had all just witnessed what he did. They all knew he was not normal, that he had some sort of power, that he had influenced the games, had saved Erec—and changed the fate of the kingdom.

Thor stood rooted in place, wondering what just happened.

He was now certain he wasn't the same as all these people. He was different.

But who was he?

## **CHAPTER NINE**

Thor found himself swept up, ushered through the crowd by Reece, the King's youngest son and his newfound sparring partner. Ever since the jousting match, it had been a blur. Whatever he had done back there, whatever power he had used to stop that spearhead from killing Erec, it had caught the attention of the entire kingdom. The match had been stopped after that, called off by both Kings, and a truce called. Each knight retired to his side, the masses broke up in an agitated stir, and Thor had been taken by the arm and ushered off by Reece.

He'd been swept away in a royal entourage, cutting the back way through the masses, Reece tugging at his arm the whole way. Thor was still shaking from the day's events. He hardly understood what he had just done back there, how it had influenced things. He had just wanted to be anonymous, just another one of the King's Legion. He had not wanted to be the center of attention.

Worse, he didn't know where he was being led, if he was going to be punished somehow for interfering. Of course, he had saved Erec's life—but he had also interfered with a knight's battle, which was forbidden for a squire. He wasn't sure if he would be rewarded or rebuked.

"How did you do that?" Reece asked, as he yanked him along. Thor followed blindly, trying to process it all himself. As he went, the masses gawked, staring at him as if he were some kind of freak.

"I don't know," Thor answered truthfully. "I just wanted to help him and...it happened." Reece shook his head.

"You saved Erec's life. Do you realize that? He is our most famed knight. And you saved him."

Thor felt good as he turned Reece's words over in his head, felt a wave of relief. He had liked Reece from the moment he'd met him; he had a calming effect, always knowing what to say. As he pondered it, he realized maybe he was not in for punishment after all. Maybe, in some ways, they would view him as a sort of hero.

"I didn't try to do anything," Thor said. "I just wanted him to live. It was just...natural. It was no big deal."

"No big deal?" Reece echoed. "I couldn't have done it. None of us could have."

They turned the corner and Thor saw before them the King's castle, sprawled out, reaching high into the sky. It looked monumental. The King's army stood at attention, lining the cobblestone road leading over the drawbridge, keeping the masses at bay. They stepped aside to allow Reece and Thor past.

The two of them followed the road, soldiers on either side, up to the huge arched doors, covered in iron bolts. Four soldiers pulled it open and stepped aside, at attention. Thor could not believe the treatment he was receiving; he felt as if he were a member of the royal family.

As they entered the castle, the doors closing behind them, Thor was amazed at the sight before him: the inside was immense, with soaring stone walls a foot thick and vast, open rooms. Before him milled hundreds of members of the royal court, rambling about in an excited stir. He could sense the buzz and excitement in the air, and all eyes turned and looked at him as he entered. He was overwhelmed by the attention.

They all huddled close, seemed to gawk as Thor went with Reece down the castle corridors. He had never seen so many people dressed in such finery. He saw dozens of girls of all ages, dressed in elaborate outfits, locking arms and whispering in each other's ears and giggling at him as he went. He felt self-conscious. He couldn't tell if they liked him, or if they were making fun of him. He was not used to being the center of attention—much less in a royal court—and hardly knew how to handle himself.

"Why are they laughing at me?" he asked Reece.

Reece turned and chuckled. "They're not laughing at you," he said. "They have taken a liking to you. You're famous."

"Famous?" he asked, stunned. "What do you mean? I just got here."

Reece laughed and clasped a hand on his shoulder. He was clearly amused by Thor.

"Word spreads faster in the royal court than you might imagine. And a newcomer like yourself—well, this does not happen every day."

"Where are we going?" he asked, realizing he was being led somewhere.

"My father wants to meet you," he said, as they turned down a new corridor.

Thor swallowed.

"Your father? You mean...the King?" Suddenly, he was nervous. "Why would he want to meet me? Are you sure?"

Reece laughed.

"I am quite sure. Stop being so nervous. It's just my dad."

"Just your dad?" Thor said with disbelief. "He's the King!"

"He's not that bad. I have a feeling it will be a happy audience. You saved Erec's life, after all."

Thor swallowed hard, his palms sweaty, as another large door opened and they entered a vast hall. He looked up in awe at the arched ceiling, covered in an elaborate design and soaring high. The walls were lined with arched stained-glass windows, and if possible, even more people were crammed into this room. There must have been a thousand of them, and the room positively swarmed. Banquet tables stretched across the room as far as the eye could see, people sitting on endlessly long benches, dining. Between these was a narrow aisle with a long, red carpet, leading to a platform on which sat the royal throne. The crowd parted ways as Reece and Thor walked down the carpet toward the King.

"And where do you think you're taking him?" came a hostile, nasally voice.

Thor looked up to see a man standing over him, not much older than he was, dressed in a royal garb, clearly a prince, blocking their way and scowling down.

"It's Father's orders," Reece snapped back. "Better get out of our way, unless you want to defy them."

The prince stood his ground, frowning, looking as if he'd bitten into something rotten as he examined Thor. Thor did not like him at all. There was something he did not trust about him, with his lean, unkind features and eyes which never stopped darting.

"This is not a hall for commoners," the prince replied. "You should leave the riffraff outside, where it came from."

Thor felt his chest tighten. Clearly this man hated him, and he had no idea why.

"Shall I tell Father you said that?" Reece defended, standing his ground.

Grudgingly, the prince turned and stormed away.

"Who was that?" Thor asked Reece, as they continued walking.

"Never mind him," Reece replied. "He's just my older brother—or one of them. Gareth. The oldest. Well, not really the oldest—he's just the oldest legitimate one. Kendrick, who you met on the battleground—he is really the oldest."

"Why does Gareth hate me? I don't even know him."

"Don't worry—he doesn't reserve his hate only for you. He hates everybody. And anyone who gets close to the family, he sees as a threat. Never mind him. He is but one of many."

As they continued walking, Thor felt increasingly grateful to Reece, who, he was realizing, was becoming a true friend.

"Why did you stand up for me?" Thor asked, curious.

Reece shrugged.

"I was ordered to bring you to Father. Besides, you're my sparring partner. And it's been a long time since someone came through my age here who I thought could be worthy."

"But what makes me worthy?" Thor asked.

"It's the fighter's spirit. It cannot be faked."

As they continued to walk down the aisle toward the King, Thor felt as if he'd always known him—it was strange, but in some ways he felt as if Reece were his own brother. He had never had a brother—not a real brother—and it felt good.

"My other brothers are not like him, don't worry," Reece said as people flocked around them, trying to catch a glimpse of Thor. "My brother Kendrick, the one you met—he's the best of all. He's my half-brother, but I consider him a true brother—even more than Gareth. Kendrick is like a second father to me. He will be to you, too, I am sure of it. There is nothing he would not do for me—or for anyone. He is the most loved of our royal family among the people. It is a great loss he is not allowed to become King."

"You said 'brothers.' You have another brother, too?" Thor asked.

Reece took a deep breath.

"I have one other, yes. We are not that close. Godfrey. Unfortunately, he wastes his days in the alehouse, with the commoners. He's not a fighter, like us. He's not interested in it—he's not interested in anything, really. Except ale—and the ladies."

Suddenly, they stopped short as a girl blocked their way. Thor stood there, transfixed. Perhaps a couple of years older than him, she stared back with blue, almond eyes, perfect skin, and long, strawberry hair. She was dressed in a white satin dress bordered with lace, and her eyes positively glowed, dancing with joy and mischief. She locked her eyes on his and held him completely captivated. He couldn't move if he wanted to. She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

She smiled, displaying perfect white teeth—and as if he weren't transfixed already, her smile held him there, lit up his heart in a single gesture. He never felt so alive.

Thor stood before her, unable to speak. Unable to breathe. It was the first time in his life he'd ever felt this way.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" the girl asked Reece. Her voice went right into Thor—it was even sweeter than her appearance.

Reece sighed.

"And then there's my sister," he said with a smile. "Gwen, this is Thor. Thor, Gwen."

Gwen curtsied.

"How do you do?" she asked with a smile.

Thor stood there, frozen. Finally, Gwen giggled.

"Not so many words at once, please," she said with a laugh.

Thor felt himself redden; he cleared his throat.

"I am...I... am...sorry," he said. "I'm Thor."

Gwen giggled.

"I know that already," she said. She turned to her brother. "My, Reece, your friend certainly has a way with words."

"Father wants to meet him," he said impatiently. "We are going to be late."

Thor wanted to speak to her, to tell her how beautiful she was, how happy he was to meet her, how grateful he was she had stopped. But his tongue was completely tied. He had never been this nervous in his life. So, instead, all that came out was:

"Thank you."

Gwen giggled, laughing harder.

"Thank you for what?" she asked. Her eyes lit up. She was enjoying this.

Thor felt himself redden again.

"Um...I don't know," he mumbled.

Gwen laughed harder, and Thor felt humiliated. Reece elbowed him, prodding him on, and the two continued to walk. After a few steps, Thor checked back over his shoulder. Gwen still stood there, staring back at him.

Thor felt his heart pounding. He wanted to talk to her, to find out everything about her. He was so embarrassed for his loss of words. But he had never been exposed to girls, really, in his small village—and certainly never to one so beautiful. He had never been taught exactly what to say, how to act.

"She talks a lot," Reece said, as they continued, approaching the King. "Never mind her." "What is her name?" Thor asked.

Reece gave him a funny look. "She just told you!" he said with a laugh.

"I'm sorry...I...uh...I forgot," Thor said, embarrassed.

"Gwendolyn. But everyone calls her Gwen."

Gwendolyn. Thor turned her name over and over in his mind. Gwendolyn. *Gwen*. He did not want to let it go. He wanted it to linger in his consciousness. He wondered if he would have a chance to see her again. He guessed probably not, being a commoner. The thought hurt him.

The crowd grew quiet as Thor looked up and realized they were now close to the King. King MacGil sat on his throne, dressed in his royal purple mantle, wearing his crown and looking imposing.

Reece kneeled before him, and the crowd quieted. Thor followed suit. A silence blanketed the room.

The King cleared his throat, a deep, hearty noise. As he spoke, his voice boomed throughout the room.

"Thorgrin of the Lowlands of the Southern Province of the Western Kingdom," he began. "Do you realize that today you interfered with the King's royal joust?"

Thor felt his throat go dry. He hardly knew how to respond; it was not a good way to begin. He wondered if he was going to be punished.

"I am sorry, my liege," he finally said. "I didn't mean to."

MacGil leaned forward and raised one eyebrow.

"You didn't mean to? Are you saying you didn't mean to save Erec's life?"

Thor was flustered. He realized he was just making it worse.

"No, my liege. I did mean to—"

"So then you admit you did mean to interfere?"

Thor felt his heart pounding. What could he say?

"I am sorry, my liege. I guess I just...wanted to help."

"Wanted to help?" MacGil boomed, then leaned back and roared with laughter.

"You wanted to help! Erec! Our greatest and most famed knight!"

The room erupted with laughter, and Thor felt his face flush, one too many times for one day. Could he do nothing right here?

"Stand and come closer, boy," MacGil ordered.

Thor looked up in surprise to see the King smiling down, studying him, as he stood and approached.

"I spot nobility in your face. You are not a common boy. No, not common at all...." MacGil cleared his throat.

"Erec is our most loved knight. What you have done today is a great thing. A great thing for us all. As a reward, from this day, I take you in as part of my family, with all the same respects and honors due any of my sons."

The King leaned back and boomed: "Let it be known!"

There came a huge cheer and stomping of feet throughout the room.

Thor looked around, flustered, unable to process all that was happening to him. Part of the King's family. It was beyond his wildest dreams. All he had wanted was to be accepted, to be given a spot in the Legion. Now, this. He was so overwhelmed with gratitude, with joy, he hardly knew what to do.

Before he could respond, suddenly the room broke into song and dance and feasting, people celebrating all around him. It was mayhem. He looked up at the King, saw the love in his eyes, the adoration and acceptance. He had never felt the love of a father figure in his life. And now here he was, loved not just by a man, but by the King, no less. In one day, his world had changed. He only prayed that all of this was real.

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Gwendolyn pushed her way through the crowd, wanting to catch sight of the boy before he was ushered out of the royal court. *Thor*. Her heart beat faster at the thought of him, and she could not stop turning his name over in her mind. She had been unable to stop thinking about him from the moment she had encountered him. He was younger than her, but not by more than a year or two—and besides, he had an air about him that made him seem older, more mature than the others, more profound. From the moment she had seen him, she felt she had known him. She smiled to herself as she remembered meeting him, how flustered he was. She could see in his eyes that he felt the same way about her.

Of course, she did not even know the boy. But she had witnessed what he had done on the jousting lane, had seen what a liking her younger brother had taken to him. She had watched him ever since, sensing there was something special about him, something different from the others. Meeting him had only confirmed it. He was different from all these royal types, from all the people born and bred here. There was something refreshingly genuine about him. He was an outsider. A commoner. But oddly, with a royal bearing. It was as if he were too proud for what he was.

Gwen made her way to the upper balcony's edge and looked down. Below was spread out the royal court, and she caught a last glimpse of Thor as he was ushered out, Reece by his side. They were surely heading to the barracks, to train with the other boys. She felt a pang of regret, already wondering, scheming, how she could arrange to see him again.

Gwen had to know more about him. She had to find out. For that, she would have to speak to the one woman who knew everything about anyone and everything going on in the kingdom: her mother.

Gwen turned and cut her way back through the crowd, twisting through the back corridors of the castle she knew by heart. Her head spun. It had been a dizzying day. First, the morning's meeting with her father, his shocking news that he wanted her to rule his kingdom. She was completely caught off guard, had never expected it in a million years. She still could hardly process it now. How could she ever possibly rule a kingdom? She pushed the thought from her mind, hoping that day would never come. After all, her father was healthy and strong, and more than anything, all she wanted was for him to live. To be here with her. To be happy.

But she could not push the meeting from her mind. Somewhere in there, lurking, was the seed planted that one day, whenever that day should come, *she* would be next. She would succeed him. Not any of her brothers. But her. It terrified her; it also gave her a sense of importance, of confidence, unlike any she'd ever had. He had found her fit to rule—*her*—to be the wisest of them all. She wondered why.

It also, in some ways, worried her. She assumed it would stir up a huge amount of resentment and envy—her, a girl, being chosen to rule. Already she could feel Gareth's envy. And that scared her. She knew her older brother to be terribly manipulative and completely unforgiving. He would stop at nothing to get what he wanted, and she hated the idea of being in his sights. She had tried to talk to him after the meeting, but he would not even look at her.

Gwen ran down the spiral staircase, her shoes echoing on the stone. She turned down another corridor, passed through the rear chapel, through another door, past several guards, and entered the private chambers of the castle. She had to speak with her mother, whom she knew would be resting here. Her mother had little tolerance for these long social affairs anymore—she liked to slip out to her private chambers and rest as often as possible.

Gwen passed another guard, went down another hall, then finally stopped before the door to her mother's dressing room. She was about to open it, but stopped. Behind the door, she heard muted voices, their pitch rising, and sensed something wrong. It was her mother, arguing. She listened closely, and heard her father's voice. They were fighting. But why?

Gwen knew she should not be listening—but she could not help herself. She reached out and gently pushed open the heavy oak door, grabbing it by its iron knocker. She opened it just a crack and listened.

"He won't stay in my house," her mother snapped.

"You rush to judgment when you don't even know the entire story."

"I know the story," she snapped back. "Enough of it."

Gwen heard venom in her mother's voice, and was taken aback. She rarely heard her parents fight—just a few times in her life—and had never heard her mother so worked up. She could not understand why.

"He will stay in the barracks with the other boys. I do not want him under my roof. Do you understand?" she pressed.

"It is a big castle," her father spat back. "His presence will not be noticed by you."

"I don't care if it is noticed or not. I don't want him here. He's your problem. It was you who chose to bring him in."

"You are not so innocent, either," her father retorted.

She heard footsteps, watched her father strut across the room and out the door on the other side, slamming it behind him so hard that the room shook. Her mother stood alone in the center of the room, and began to cry.

Gwen felt terrible. She didn't know what to do. On one hand, she thought it best to slip away, but on the other, she couldn't stand the sight of her mother crying, couldn't stand to leave her there like that. She also, for the life of her, could not understand what they were arguing about. She assumed they were arguing about Thor. But why? Why would her mother even care? Dozens of people lived in the castle.

Gwen couldn't bring herself to just walk away, not with her mother in that state. She had to comfort her. She reached up and gently pushed the door open.

It creaked, and her mother wheeled, caught off guard. She scowled at her daughter.

"Do you not knock?" she snapped. Gwen could see how upset she was, and felt terrible.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Gwen asked, walking toward her gently. "I don't mean to pry, but I heard you arguing with Father."

"You are right; you shouldn't pry," her mother retorted.

Gwen was surprised. Her mother was often a handful, but was rarely like this. The force of her anger made Gwen stop in her tracks a few feet away, unsure.

"Is it about the new boy? Thor?" she asked.

Her mother turned and looked away, wiping a tear.

"I don't understand," Gwen pressed. "Why would you care where he stayed?"

"My matters are of no concern to you," she said coldly, clearly wanting to end the matter. "What do you want? Why have you come here?"

Gwen was nervous now. She wanted her mother to tell her everything about Thor, but she couldn't have picked a worse moment. She cleared her throat, hesitant.

"I...actually wanted to ask you about him. What do you know of him?"

Her mother turned and narrowed her eyes at her, suspicious.

"Why?" she asked, with deadly seriousness. Gwen could feel her summing her up, looking right through her, and seeing with her uncanny perception that Gwen liked him. She tried to hide her feelings, but knew it was no use.

"I'm just curious," she said, unconvincingly.

Suddenly, the Queen took three steps toward her, grabbed her arms roughly, and stared into her face.

"Listen to me," she hissed. "I'm only going to say this once. Stay away from that boy. Do you hear me? I don't want you anywhere near him, under any circumstance."

Gwen was horrified.

"But why? He's a hero."

"He is not one of us," her mother answered. "Despite what your father might think. I want you to keep away from him. Do you hear me? Vow to me. Vow to me right now."

"I will not vow," Gwen said, yanking her arm away from her mother's too-strong grip.

"He is a commoner, and you are a Princess," her mother yelled. "You are a *Princess*. Do you understand? If you go anywhere near him, I will have him exiled from here. Do you understand?"

Gwen hardly knew how to respond. She had never seen her mother like this.

"Do not tell me what to do, Mother," she said, finally.

Gwen did her best to put on a brave voice, but deep inside she was trembling. She had come here wanting to know everything; now, she felt terrified. She did not understand what was happening.

"Do as you wish," her mother said. "But his fate lies in your hands. Don't forget it." With that, her mother turned, strutted from the room, and slammed the door behind her, leaving Gwen all alone in the reverberating silence, her good mood shattered. What could possibly elicit such a strong reaction from her mother and her father?

Who was this boy?

### CHAPTER TEN

MacGil sat in the banquet hall watching over his subjects, he at one end of the table and King McCloud at the other, hundreds of men from both clans between them. The wedding revelries had been going on for hours until, finally, the tension between the clans had settled down from the day's jousting. As MacGil suspected, all the men needed were wine and meat—and women—to make them forget their differences. Now they all mingled at the same table, like brothers in arms. In fact, looking them over, MacGil could no longer even tell they were of two separate clans.

MacGil felt vindicated; his master plan was working after all. Already, the two clans seemed closer. He had managed to do what a long line of MacGil kings before him could not: to unify both sides of the Ring, to make them, if not friends, then at least peaceful neighbors. His daughter Luanda was arm-in-arm with her new husband, the McCloud prince, and she seemed content. His guilt lessened. He might have given her away—but he did, at least, give her a queenship.

MacGil thought back to all the planning that preceded this event, recalled the long days of arguing with his advisors. He had gone against the advice of all his counselors in arranging this union. It was not an easy peace and, in time, the McClouds would settle in on their side of the Highlands, this wedding would be long forgotten, and one day they would stir with unrest. He was not naïve. But now, at least, there was a blood tie between the clans—and especially once a child was born, that could not be so easily ignored. If that child flourished, and one day even ruled, a child born of two sides of the Ring, then perhaps, one day, the entire Ring could be united, the Highlands would no longer be a border of contention, and the land could prosper under one rule. That was his dream. Not for himself, but for his descendants. After all, the Ring had to stay strong, needed to stay unified in order to protect the Canyon, to fight off the hordes of the world beyond. As long as the two clans remained divided, they presented a weakened front to the rest of the world.

"A toast," MacGil shouted, and stood.

The table grew quiet as hundreds of men stood too, raising their goblets.

"To the wedding of my eldest child! To the union of the MacGils and McClouds! To peace throughout the Ring!"

"HEAR HEAR!" came a chorus of shouts. Everyone drank and the room once again filled with the noise of laughter and feasting.

MacGil sat back and surveyed the room, looking for his other children. There, of course, was Godfrey, drinking with two fists, a girl on each shoulder, surrounded by his miscreant friends. This was probably the one royal event he had ever willingly attended. There was Gareth, sitting too closely to his lover, Firth, whispering in his ear; MacGil could see from his darting, restless eyes, that he was plotting something. The thought of it made his stomach turn, and he looked away. There, on the far side of the room, was his youngest son, Reece, feasting at the squires' table with the new boy, Thor. Thor already felt like a son to him, and he was pleased to see his youngest was fast friends with him.

He scanned the faces for his younger daughter, Gwendolyn, and finally found her sitting off to the side, surrounded by her handmaids, giggling. He followed her gaze, and noticed she was watching Thor. He examined her for a long time, and realized she was smitten. He had not foreseen this and was not quite sure what to make of it. He sensed trouble there. Especially from his wife.

"All things are not what they seem," came a voice.

MacGil turned to see Argon sitting by his side, watching the two clans dining together.

"What do you make of all this?" MacGil asked. "Will there be peace in the kingdoms?"

"Peace is never static," Argon said. "It ebbs and flows like the tides. What you see before you is the veneer of peace. You see one side of its face. You're trying to force peace on an ancient rivalry. But there are hundreds of years of spilled blood. The souls cry out for vengeance. And that cannot be appeared with a single marriage."

"What are you saying?" MacGil asked, taking another gulp of his wine, feeling nervous, as he often did around Argon.

Argon turned and stared at him with an intensity so strong, it struck panic into MacGil's heart.

"There will be war. The McClouds will attack. Prepare yourself. All the houseguests you see before you will soon be doing their best to murder your family."

MacGil gulped.

"Did I make the wrong decision to marry her off to them?"

Argon was silent for a while, until finally he said: "Not necessarily."

Argon looked away, and MacGil could see that he was finished with the topic. There were a million questions he wanted answered, but he knew his sorcerer would not answer them until he was ready. So instead, he watched Argon's eyes and followed their gaze to Gwendolyn, then to Thor.

"Do you see them together?" MacGil asked, suddenly curious to know.

"Perhaps," Argon answered. "There is still much yet to be decided."

"You speak in riddles."

Argon shrugged and looked away, and MacGil realized he wouldn't get any more from him.

"You saw what happened on the field today?" MacGil prodded. "With the boy?"

"I saw it before it happened," Argon replied.

"And what do you make of it? What is the source of the boy's powers? Is he like you?"

Argon turned and stared into MacGil's eyes, again with an intensity that almost made him look away.

"He is far more powerful than me."

MacGil stared back, shocked. He had never heard Argon speak like this.

"More powerful? Than you? How is that possible? You are the King's sorcerer—there is no one more powerful than you in all the land."

Argon shrugged.

"Power does not come in only one form," he said. "The boy has powers beyond what you can imagine. Powers beyond what he knows. He has no idea who he is. Or where he hails from."

Argon turned and stared at MacGil.

"But you do," he added.

MacGil stared back, wondering.

"Do I?" MacGil asked. "Tell me. I need to know."

Argon shook his head.

"Search your feelings. They are true."

"What will become of him?" MacGil asked.

"He will become a great leader. And a great warrior. He will rule kingdoms in his own right. Far greater kingdoms than yours. And he will be a far greater king than you. It is his destiny."

For a brief moment, MacGil burned with envy. He turned and examined the boy, laughing harmlessly with Reece, at a table for squires, the commoner, the weak outsider, the youngest of the bunch. He didn't imagine how it was possible. Looking at him now, he looked barely eligible to join the Legion. He wondered for a moment if Argon was wrong.

But Argon had never been wrong and never made pronouncements without a reason.

"Why are you telling me this?" MacGil asked.

Argon turned and stared at him.

"Because it is your time to prepare. The boy needs to be trained. He needs to be given the best of everything. It is your responsibility."

"Mine? And what of his father?"

"What of him?" Argon asked.

# **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

Thor peeled open his eyes, disoriented, wondering where he was. He lay on the floor, on a mound of straw, his face planted sideways, his arms dangling over his head. He lifted his face, wiping the drool from his mouth, and immediately felt a stab of pain in his head, behind his eyes. It was the worst headache of his life. He remembered the night before, the King's feast, the drinking, his first taste of ale. The room was spinning. His throat was dry, and at that moment he vowed he would never drink again.

Thor looked around, trying to get his bearings in the cavernous barracks. Everywhere were bodies, lying on heaps of straw, the room filled with snoring; he turned the other way and saw Reece, a few feet away, passed out, too. It was then he realized: he was in the barracks. The Legion's barracks. All around him were boys his age, about fifty of them.

Thor vaguely remembered Reece showing him the way, in the late hours of the morning, and crashing on the mound of straw. Early morning light flooded in through the open windows, and Thor soon realized he was the only one yet awake. He looked down and saw he had slept in his clothes, and reached up and ran a hand through his greasy hair. He would give anything for a chance to bathe—although he had no idea where. And he would do anything for a pint of water. His stomach rumbled—he wanted food, too.

It was all so new to him. He barely knew where he was, where life would take him next, what the routines were of the King's Legion. But he was happy. It had been a dazzling night, one of the finest of his life. He had found a close friend in Reece, and had caught Gwendolyn looking at him once or twice. He had tried to speak with her, but each time he approached, his courage failed. He felt a pang of regret as he thought about it. There had been too many people around. If it was ever just the two of them, he would gain the courage. But would there be a next time?

Before Thor could finish the thought, there was a sudden banging on the wooden doors of the barracks, and an instant later, they crashed open, light flooding in.

"To your feet, squires!" came a shout.

In marched a dozen members of the King's Silver, chainmail rattling, banging on the wooden walls with metal staffs. The noise was deafening, and all around Thor, the other boys jumped to their feet.

Leading the group was a particularly fierce-looking soldier Thor recognized from the arena the day before, the stocky, bald one with the scar on his nose, whom Reece had told him was named Kolk.

He seemed to be scowling right at Thor as he raised a finger and pointed it at him.

"You there, boy!" he screamed. "I said on your feet!"

Thor was confused. He was already standing.

"But I'm already on my feet, sire," Thor answered.

Kolk stepped forward and backhanded Thor across the face. Thor stung with the indignation of it, as all eyes were on him.

"Don't you talk back to your superior again!" Kolk reprimanded.

Before Thor could respond the men moved on, roaming through the room, yanking one boy after another to his feet, kicking some in the ribs who were too slow to get up.

"Don't worry," came a reassuring voice.

He turned and saw Reece standing there.

"It is not personal to you. It is just their way. Their way of breaking us down."

"But they didn't do it to you," Thor said.

"Of course, they won't touch me, because of my father. But they won't exactly be polite, either. They want us in shape, that's all. They think this will toughen us up. Don't pay much attention to them."

The boys were all marched out of their barracks and Thor and Reece fell in with them. As they stepped outside, the bright sunlight struck Thor and he squinted and held up his hands. Suddenly, he was overwhelmed with a wave of nausea, and he turned, bent over, and threw up.

He could hear the snicker of boys all around him. A guard pushed him, and Thor stumbled forward, back in line with the others, wiping his mouth. Thor had never felt more awful.

Beside him, Reece smiled.

"Rough night, was it?" he asked Thor, grinning widely, elbowing him in the ribs. "I told you to stop after the second goblet."

Thor felt queasy as the light pierced his eyes; it had never felt so strong as today. It was a hot day already, and he could feel drops of sweat forming beneath his leathermail.

Thor tried to remember back to Reece's warning of the night before—but for the life of him, he could not remember.

"I don't remember any such advice," Thor retorted.

Reece grinned wider. "Precisely. That is because you did not listen." Reece chuckled. "And those ham-handed attempts to speak to my sister," he added. "It was positively pathetic. I don't think I've ever seen a boy so fearful of a girl in my life."

Thor reddened as he tried to remember. But he could not. It was all hazy to him.

"I mean you no offense," Thor said. "With your sister."

"You cannot offend me. If she should choose you, I would be thrilled."

The two of them marched faster, as the group turned up a hill. The sun seemed to be getting stronger with each step.

"But I must warn you: every hand in the kingdom is after her. The chances of her choosing you... Well, let's just say they are remote."

As they marched faster across the rolling green hills of King's Court, Thor felt reassured. He felt accepted by Reece. It was amazing, but he continued to feel Reece was more of a brother to him than he'd ever had. As they walked, Thor noticed his three real brothers marching close by. One of them turned and scowled back to him, then nudged his other brother, who looked back with a mocking grin. They shook their heads and turned away. They had not so much as one kind word for Thor. But he hardly expected anything else.

"Get in line, Legion! Now!"

Thor looked up and saw several more of the Silver crowd around them, pushing the fifty of them into a tight line, double file. One man came up behind and struck the boy in front of Thor with a large bamboo rod, cracking him hard on the back; the boy cried out, and fell more tightly in line. Soon they were in two neat rows, marching steadily through the King's ground.

"When you march into battle, you march as one!" called out Kolk, walking up and down the sides. "This is not your mother's yard. You are marching to war!"

Thor marched and marched beside Reece, sweating in the sun, wondering where they were being led. His stomach still turned from the ale, and he wondered when he would have breakfast,

when he would get something to drink. Once again, he cursed himself for drinking the night before.

As they went up and down the hills, through an arched stone gate, they finally reached the surrounding fields. They passed through another arched stone gate and entered a coliseum of sorts. The training ground for the Legion.

Before them were all sorts of targets for throwing spears, firing arrows, and hurling rocks, as well as piles of straw to slash with swords. Thor's heart quickened at the sight of it. He wanted to get in there, to use the weapons, to train.

But as Thor made his way toward the training area, suddenly he was elbowed in the ribs from behind, and a small group of six boys, most of them younger like Thor, were herded off the main line. He found himself being split from Reece, being led to the other side of the field.

"Think you're going to train?" Kolk asked mockingly as they forked from the others, away from the targets. "It's horses for you today."

Thor looked up and saw where they were headed: on the far side of the field, several horses pranced about. Kolk looked down at him with an evil smile.

"While the others hurl spears and wield swords, today you will tend horses and clean their waste. We all have to start somewhere. Welcome to the Legion."

Thor's heart fell. This was not how he had seen it going at all.

"You think you're special, boy?" Kolk asked, walking beside him, getting close to his face. Thor sensed he was trying to break him. "Just because the King and his son have taken a liking to you, doesn't mean crap to me. You're in *my* command now. You understand me? I don't care about whatever fancy tricks you pulled on the jousting ground. You're just another little boy. Do you understand me?"

Thor swallowed. He was in for a long, hard training.

Making matters worse, as soon as Kolk drifted away to torture someone else, the boy in front of Thor, a short stocky kid with a flat nose, turned and sneered at him.

"You don't belong here," he said. "You cheated your way in. You weren't selected. You're not one of us. Not really. None of us like you."

The boy beside him also turned and sneered at Thor.

"We're going to do everything we can to make sure you drop out," he said. "Getting in is easy next to *staying* in."

Thor recoiled at their hatred. He couldn't believe he already had enemies, and didn't understand what he'd done to deserve it. All he'd ever wanted was to join the Legion.

"Why don't you mind yourself," came a voice.

Thor looked over and saw a tall, skinny redheaded boy, with freckles across his face and small green eyes, sticking up for him. "You two are stuck here shoveling with the rest of us," he added. "You're not so special, either. Go pick on someone else."

"You mind your business, lackey," one of the boys shot back, "or we'll be after you, too."

"Try it," the redhead snapped.

"You'll talk when I tell you to," Kolk yelled at one of the boys, smacking him hard upside the head. The two boys in front of Thor, thankfully, turned back around.

Thor hardly knew what to say; he fell in beside the redhead, grateful to him.

"Thank you," Thor said.

The redhead turned and smiled at him.

"Name is O'Connor. I'd shake your hand, but they'd smack me if I did. So take this as an invisible handshake."

He smiled wider, and Thor instantly liked him.

"Don't mind them," he added. "They're just scared. Like the rest of us. None of us quite knew what we were signing up for."

Soon their group reached the end of the field, and Thor counted six horses prancing about.

"Take up the reins!" Kolk commanded. "Hold them steady, and walk them around the arena until they break. Do it now!"

Thor stepped forward to take the reins of one of the horses, and as he did, the horse stepped back and pranced, nearly kicking him. Thor, startled, stumbled back, and the others in the group laughed at him. Kolk smacked him hard in the back of the head, and he felt like turning and hitting back.

"You are a member of the Legion now. You never retreat. From anybody. No man, no beast. Now take those reins!"

Thor steeled himself, stepped forward, and grabbed the reins from the prancing horse. He managed to hang on while the horse yanked and pulled, and began to lead him around the wide dirt field, getting in line with the others. His horse tugged at him, resisting, but Thor tugged back, not giving up so easily.

"It gets better, I hear."

Thor turned to see O'Connor coming up beside him, smiling. "They want to break us, you know?"

Suddenly, Thor's horse stopped. No matter how much he pulled on the reins, it would not budge. Then Thor smelled something awful; there was more waste coming from the horse than he ever imagined possible. It did not seem to end.

Thor felt a small shovel pressed into his palm, and looked over to see Kolk beside him, smiling down.

"Clean it up!" he snapped.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Gareth stood in the crowded marketplace, wearing a cloak despite the midday sun, sweating beneath it, and trying to remain anonymous. He always tried to avoid this part of King's Court, these crowded alleyways, which stank of humanity and common man. All around him were people haggling, trading, trying to get one up on each other. Gareth stood at a corner stall, feigning interest in a vendor's fruit, keeping his head low. Standing just a few feet away was Firth, at the end of the dark alleyway, doing what they had come here to do.

Gareth stood within earshot of the conversation, keeping his back to it so as not to be seen. Firth had told him of a man, a mercenary, who would sell him a poison vial. Gareth wanted something strong, something certain to do the trick. No chances could be taken. After all, his own life was on the line.

It was hardly the sort of thing he could ask the local apothecary for. He had set Firth to the task, who had reported back to him after testing out the black market. After much pointing of the way, Firth had led them to this slovenly character, with whom he now furtively spoke at the end of the alleyway. Gareth had insisted on coming along for their final transaction, to make sure everything went smoothly, to make sure he was not being swindled and given a false potion. Plus, he was still not completely assured of Firth's competence. Some matters, he just had to take care of himself.

They had waited for this man for half an hour, Gareth getting jostled in the busy market, praying he was not recognized. Even if he was, he figured, as long as he kept his back to the alley, if someone should know who he was, he could merely walk away, and no one would make the connection.

"Where is the vial?" Firth, just a few feet away, asked the cretin.

Gareth turned just a bit, careful to keep his face hidden, and peeked from the corner of his cloak. Standing opposite Firth was an evil-looking man, slovenly, too thin, with sunken cheeks and huge black eyes. He looked something like a rat. He stared down at Firth, unblinking.

"Where's the money?" he responded.

Gareth hoped Firth would handle this well; he usually managed to screw things up somehow.

"I shall give you the money when you give me the vial." Firth held his ground.

Good, Gareth thought, impressed.

There was a thick moment of silence, then:

"Give me half the money now, and I will tell you where the vial is."

"Where it is?" Firth echoed, his voice rising in surprise. "You said I would have it."

"I said you would have it, yes. I did not say I would bring it. Do you take me for a fool? Spies are everywhere. I know not what you intend—but I assume it is not trivial. After all, why else buy a vial of poison?"

Firth paused, and Gareth knew he was caught off guard.

Finally, Gareth heard the distinct noise of coins clacking, and peeked over and saw the royal gold pouring from Firth's pouch into the man's palm.

Gareth waited, the seconds stretching forever, increasingly worried they were being had.

"You'll take the Blackwood," the man finally responded. "At your third mile, fork on the path that leads up the hill. At the top, fork again, this time to the left. You will go through the darkest wood you have ever seen, then arrive at a small clearing. The witch's cottage. She will be waiting for you—with the vial you desire."

Gareth peeked from his hood, and saw Firth prepare to leave. As he did, the man reached out and suddenly grabbed him hard by his shirt.

"The money," the man growled. "It is not enough."

Gareth could see the fear spread across Firth's face, and regretted having sent him for this task. This slovenly character must have detected his fear—and now was taking advantage. Firth was just not cut out for the sort of thing.

"But I gave you precisely what you asked for," Firth protested, his voice rising too high. He sounded effeminate. And this seemed to embolden the man.

The man grinned back, evil.

"But now I ask for more."

Firth's eyes opened wide with fear, and uncertainty. Then, suddenly, Firth turned and looked right at him.

Gareth turned away, hoping it was not too late, hoping he was not spotted. How could Firth be so stupid? He prayed he had not given him away.

Gareth's heart pounded as he waited. He anxiously fingered the fruit, pretending to be interested. There was an interminable silence behind him, as Gareth imagined all the things that might go wrong.

Please, don't let him come this way, Gareth prayed to himself. Please. I'll do anything. I'll abandon the plot.

He felt a rough palm slap him on his back. He spun and looked.

The cretin's large black, soulless eyes stared into his.

"You didn't tell me you had a partner," the man growled. "Or are you a spy?"

The man reached out before Gareth could react, and yanked down Gareth's hood. He got a good look at Gareth's face, and his eyes opened wide in shock.

"The Royal Prince," the man stumbled. "What are you doing here?"

A second later, the man's eyes narrowed in recognition, and he answered himself, with a small, satisfied smile, piecing together the whole plot instantly. He was much smarter than Gareth had hoped.

"I see," the man said. "This vial—it was for you, wasn't it? You aim to poison someone, don't you? But who? Yes, that is the question..."

Gareth's face flushed with anxiety. This man—he was too quick. It was too late. His whole world was unraveling around him. Firth had screwed it up. If this man gave Gareth away, he would be sentenced to death.

"Your father, maybe?" the man asked, his eyes lighting in recognition. "Yes, that must be it, mustn't it? You were passed over. Your father. You aim to kill your father."

Gareth had had enough. Without hesitating, he stepped forward, pulled a small dagger from inside his cloak, and plunged it into the man's chest. The man gasped.

Gareth didn't want any passersby to witness this, so he grabbed the man by his tunic and pulled him close, ever closer, until their faces were almost touching, until he could smell his rotten breath. With his free hand, he reached up and clamped the man's mouth shut before he could cry out. Gareth felt the man's hot blood trickling on his palm, running through his fingers.

Firth came up beside him and let out a horrified cry.

Gareth held the man like that for a good sixty seconds, until finally, he felt him slumping in his arms. He let him collapse, limp, a heap on the ground.

Gareth spun all around, wondering if he had been seen; luckily, no heads turned in this busy marketplace, in this dark alley. He removed his cloak and threw it over the lifeless heap.

"I am so sorry, so sorry," Firth kept repeating, like a little girl, crying hysterically and shaking as he approached Gareth. "Are you okay? Are you okay?"

Gareth reached up and backhanded him.

"Shut your mouth and be gone from here," he hissed.

Firth turned and hurried off.

Gareth prepared to leave, but then stopped and turned back. He had one thing left to do: he reached down, grabbed his sack of coins from the dead man's hand, and stuffed it back into his waistband.

The man would not be needing these.

#### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gareth walked quickly through the forest trail, Firth beside him, his hood pulled over his head despite the heat. He could hardly conceive that he now found himself in exactly the situation he had wanted to avoid. Now there was a dead body, a trail. Who knew who that man may have talked to. Firth should have been more circumspect in his dealings with the man. Now, the trail could end up leading back to Gareth.

"I'm sorry," Firth said, hurrying to catch up beside him.

Gareth ignored him, doubling his pace, seething.

"What you did was foolish, and weak," Gareth said. "You never should have glanced my way."

"I didn't mean to. I didn't know what to do when he demanded more money."

Firth was right; it was a tricky situation. The man was a selfish, greedy pig who changed the rules of the game and deserved to die. Gareth shed no tears over him. He only prayed no one had witnessed the murder. The last thing he needed was a trail. There would be tremendous scrutiny in the wake of his father's assassination, and he could not afford even the smallest trail of clues left to follow.

At least they were now in Blackwood. Despite the summer sun, it was nearly dark in here, the towering eucalyptus trees blocking out every shaft of light. It matched his mood. Gareth hated this place. He continued hiking down the meandering trail, following the dead man's directions. He hoped the man had told the truth and was not leading them astray. The whole thing could be a lie. Or it could be he led them to a trap, to some friend of his waiting to rob them of more money.

Gareth chided himself. He had put too much trust in Firth. He should have handled this all himself. Like he always did.

"You better just hope that this trail leads us to the witch," Gareth quipped, "and that she has the poison."

They continued down trail after trail until they reached a fork, just as the man said they would. It boded well, and Gareth was slightly relieved. They followed it to the right, climbed a hill, and soon forked again. His instructions were true, and before them was, indeed, the darkest patch of wood Gareth had ever seen. The trees were impossibly thick and mangled.

Gareth entered the wood and felt an immediate chill up his spine, could feel the evil hanging in the air. He could hardly believe it was still daylight.

Just as he was getting scared, thinking of turning back, before him the trail ended in a small clearing. It was lit up by a single shaft of sunlight that broke through the trees. In its center was a small stone cottage. The witch's cottage.

Gareth's heart quickened. He entered the clearing looking around to make sure no one was watching, to make sure it was not a trap.

"You see, he was telling the truth," Firth said, excitement in his voice.

"That means nothing," Garrett chided. "Remain outside and stand guard. Knock if anyone approaches. And keep your mouth shut."

Gareth didn't bother to knock on the small, arched wooden door before him. Instead, he grabbed the iron handle, pushed open the two-inch-thick door, and ducked his head as he entered, closing it behind him.

It was dark inside, lit only by scattered candles in the room. It was a single-room cottage, devoid of windows, enveloped by a heavy energy. He stood there, stifled by the thick silence, preparing himself for anything. He could feel the evil in here. It made his skin crawl.

From the shadows he detected motion, then a noise.

Hobbling toward him there appeared an old woman, shriveled up, with a hunchback. She raised a candle, which lit up a face covered in warts and lines. She looked ancient, older than the gnarled trees that blanketed her cottage.

"You wear a hood, even in blackness," she said, wearing a sinister smile, her voice sounding like crackling wood. "Your mission is not innocent."

"I've come for a vial," Gareth said quickly, trying to sound brave and confident, but hearing the quivering in his voice. "Sheldrake Root. I'm told you have it."

There was a long silence, followed by a horrific cackle. It echoed in the small room.

"Whether or not I have it is not the question. The question is: why do you want it?"

Gareth's heart pounded as he tried to formulate an answer.

"Why should you care?" he finally asked.

"It amuses me to know who you are killing," she said.

"That's no business of yours. I've brought money for you."

Gareth reached into his waistband, took out a bag of gold, in addition to the bag of gold he had given the dead man, and banged them both down on her small wooden table. The sound of metallic coins rang in the room.

He prayed it would pacify her, that she would give him what he wanted and he could leave this place.

The witch reached out a single finger with a long, curved nail, picking up one of the bags and inspecting it. Gareth held his breath, hoping she would ask no more.

"This might be just enough to buy my silence," she said.

She turned and hobbled into the darkness. There was a hiss, and beside a candle Gareth could see her mixing liquid into a small, glass vial. It bubbled over, and she put a cork on it. Time seemed to slow as Gareth waited, increasingly impatient. A million worries raced through his mind: what if he was discovered? Right here, right now? What if she gave him the wrong vial? What if she told someone about him? Had she recognized him? He couldn't tell.

Gareth was having increasing reservations about this whole thing. He never knew how hard it could be to assassinate someone.

After what felt like an interminable silence, the witch returned. She handed him the vial, so small it nearly disappeared into his palm, and backed away from him.

"Such a small vial?" he asked. "Can this do the trick?"

She smiled.

"You'd be amazed at how little it takes to kill a man."

Gareth turned and headed for the door, when suddenly he felt a cold finger on his shoulder. He had no idea how she had managed to cross the room so quickly, and it terrified him. He stood there, frozen, afraid to turn and look at her.

She spun him around, leaned in close—an awful smell emanating from her—then suddenly reached up with both hands, grabbed his cheeks, and kissed him, pressing her shriveled lips hard against his.

Gareth was revolted. It was the most disgusting thing that had ever happened to him. Her lips were like the lips of a lizard, her tongue, which she pressed onto his, like that of a reptile. He tried to pull away, but she held his face tight, pulling him harder.

Finally, he managed to yank himself away. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, as she leaned back and chuckled.

"The first time you kill a man is the hardest," she said. "You will find it much easier the next time around."

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Gareth burst out of the cottage, back into the clearing, to find Firth standing there, waiting for him.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Firth asked, concerned. "You look as if you've been stabbed. Did she hurt you?"

Gareth paused, breathing hard, wiping his mouth again and again. He hardly knew how to respond.

"Let's get away from this place," he said. "Now!"

As they began to head out of the clearing into the black wood, the sun was suddenly obscured by clouds racing across the sky, making the beautiful day cold and dark. Gareth had never seen such thick, black clouds appear so quickly. He knew that whatever was happening, it was not normal. He worried how deep the powers of this witch were, as the cold wind rose in the summer day and crept up the back of his neck. He couldn't help but think she had somehow possessed him with that kiss, cast some sort of curse on him.

"What happened in there?" Firth pressed.

"I don't want to talk about it," Gareth said. "I don't want to think about this day—ever again."

The two of them hurried back down the trail, down the hill, and soon entered the main forest trail to head back toward King's Court. Just as Gareth was beginning to feel more relieved, preparing to shove the whole episode to the back of his mind, suddenly, he heard another set of boots. He turned and saw a group of men walking toward them. He couldn't believe it.

His brother. Godfrey. The drunk. He was walking toward them, laughing, surrounded by the villainous Harry and two other of his trouble-making friends. Of all the times and places for his brother to run into him. In the woods, in the middle of nowhere. Gareth felt as if his whole plot were cursed.

Gareth turned away, pulled the hood over his face, and hiked twice as fast, praying he had not been discovered.

"Gareth?" called out the voice.

Gareth had no choice. He froze in his tracks, pulled back his hood, and turned and looked at his brother, who came waltzing merrily toward him.

"What are you doing here?" Godfrey asked.

Gareth opened his mouth, but then closed it, stumbling, at a loss for words.

"We were going for a hike," Firth volunteered, rescuing him.

"A hike, were you?" one of Godfrey's friends mocked Firth, in a high, feminine voice. His friends laughed, too. Gareth knew that his brother and his friends all judged him for his predisposition—but he hardly cared about that now. He just needed to change the topic. He didn't want them to wonder what he was doing out here.

"What are you doing out here?" Gareth asked, turning the tables.

"A new tavern opened, by Southwood," Godfrey answered. "We had just been trying it out. The best ale in all the kingdom. Want some?" he asked, holding out a cask.

Gareth shook his head quickly. He knew he had to distract him, and he figured the best way was to change the topic, to rebuke him.

"Father would be furious if he caught you drinking during the day," Gareth said. "I suggest you set down that and return to court."

It worked. Godfrey glowered, and clearly he was no longer thinking about Gareth, but about his father and himself.

"And since when did *you* care about Father's needs?" he retorted.

Gareth had had enough. He hadn't time to waste with a drunkard. He succeeded in what he wanted, distracting him, and now, hopefully, he wouldn't think too deeply about why he had run into him here.

Gareth turned and hurried down the trail, hearing their mocking laughter behind him as he went. He no longer cared. Soon, it would be he who had the last laugh.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

Thor sat at the wooden table, working away at the bow and arrow laid out in pieces. Beside him sat Reece, along with several other members of the Legion. They were all hunched over their weapons, hard at work on carving the bows and tightening the strings.

"A warrior knows how to string his own bow," Kolk yelled out, as he walked up and down the rows of boys, leaning over, examining each one's work. "The tension must be just right. Too little, and your arrow will not reach its mark. Too much, and your aim will not be true. Weapons break in battle. Weapons break on journeys. You must know how to repair them as you go. The greatest warrior is also a blacksmith, a carpenter, a cobbler, a mender of all things broken. And you don't really know your own weapon until you've repaired it yourself."

Kolk stopped behind Thor and leaned over his shoulder. He yanked the wooden bow out of Thor's grasp, the string hurting his palm as he did.

"The string is not taut enough," he chided. "It is crooked. Use a weapon like this in battle, and you will surely die. And your partner will die beside you."

Kolk slammed the bow back down on the table and moved on; several other boys snickered. Thor reddened as he grabbed the string again, pulled it as taut as he possibly could, and wrapped it around the notch in the bow. He'd been at work on this for hours, the cap to an exhausting day of labor and menial tasks.

Most of the others were training, sparring, sword-fighting. He looked out and in the distance saw his brothers, the three of them, laughing as they clacked wooden swords; as usual, Thor felt they were gaining the upper hand while he was being left behind in their shadow. It was unfair. He felt increasingly that he was unwanted here, as if he were not a true member of the Legion.

"Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it," O'Connor said beside him.

Thor's palms were chafed from trying; he pulled back the string one last time, this time with all his might, and finally, to his surprise, it clicked. The string fit neatly in the notch, Thor pulling with all his might, sweating. He felt a great sense of satisfaction with his bow now as strong as it should be.

The shadows were growing longer as Thor wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and wondered how much longer this would go on. He contemplated what it meant to be a warrior. In his head, he had seen it differently. He had only imagined training, all the time. But he supposed this was also a form of training.

"This was not what I signed up for, either," O'Connor said, as if reading his mind.

Thor turned, and was reassured to find his friend's constant smile.

"I come from the Northern Province," he continued. "I, too, dreamed of joining the Legion my entire life. I guess I imagined constant sparring and battle. Not all of these menial tasks. But it will get better. It is just because we are new. It is a form of initiation. There seems to be a hierarchy here. We are also the youngest. I don't see the nineteen-year-olds doing this. This can't last forever. Besides, it's a useful skill to learn."

A horn sounded. Thor looked over and saw the rest of the Legion gathering beside a huge stone wall in the middle of the field. Ropes were draped across it, spaced every ten feet. The wall must have been thirty feet tall, and piled at its base were stacks of hay.

"What are you waiting for?" Kolk screamed. "MOVE!"

The Silver appeared all around them, screaming, and before Thor knew it he and the others jumped from their benches and ran across the field to the wall.

Soon they were all gathered there, standing before the ropes. There was an excited buzz in the air as all the Legion members stood together. Thor was ecstatic to finally be included with the others, and he found himself gravitating to Reece, who stood with another friend of his. O'Connor joined them.

"You will find in battle that most towns are fortified," Kolk boomed out, looking over the faces of the boys. "Breaching fortifications is the work of a soldier. In a typical siege, ropes and grappling hooks are used, much like the ones we have thrown over this wall, and climbing a wall is one of the most dangerous things you will encounter in battle. In few cases will you be more exposed, more vulnerable. The enemy will pour molten lead on you. They will shoot down arrows. Drop rocks. You don't climb a wall until the moment is perfect. And when you do, you must climb for your life—or else risk death."

Kolk took a deep breath, then yelled out: "BEGIN!"

All around him the boys broke into action, each charging for a rope. Thor sprinted for a free one and was about to take it when an older boy reached it first, bumping him out of the way. Thor scrambled and grabbed the closest one he could find, a thick, knotted twine. Thor's heart pounded as he began to scramble his way up the wall.

The day had turned misty, and Thor's feet slipped on the stone. Still, he made good time and couldn't help but notice he was faster than many of the others, nearly taking the lead as he scrambled his way up. He was, for the first time today, starting to feel good, starting to feel a sense of pride.

Suddenly, something hard slammed into his shoulder. He looked up and saw members of the Silver at the top of the wall, throwing down small rocks, sticks, all manner of debris. The boy on the rope beside Thor reached up with one hand to block his face and lost his grip and fell backwards, down to the ground. He dropped a good twenty feet, and landed in the pile of hay below.

Thor was losing his grip, too, but somehow managed to hang on. A club hailed down and struck Thor hard on the back, but he continued to climb. He was making good time and was starting to think he might even be the first one to the top, when suddenly, he felt a hard kick in the ribs. He couldn't understand where it came from, until he looked over and saw one of the boys beside him, swinging sideways. Before Thor could react, the boy kicked him again.

Thor lost his grip this time and found himself hurling backwards, through the air, flailing. He landed on his back in the hay, shocked but unhurt.

Thor scrambled to his hands and knees, catching his breath, and looked about. All around him, boys were dropping like flies from the ropes, landing in the hay, kicked or shoved by each other—or if not, then kicked off by members of the Silver up top. Those who weren't had their ropes cut, so they went came crashing down, too. Not a single member reached the top.

"On your feet!" yelled Kolk. Thor jumped up, as did the others.

"SWORDS!"

The boys ran as one to a huge rack of wooden swords. Thor joined them and grabbed one, shocked at how heavy it was. It weighed twice as much as any weapon he had lifted. He could barely hold it.

"Heavy swords, begin!" came a shout.

Thor looked up and saw that huge oaf, Elden, the one who had first attacked him when he met the Legion. Thor remembered him too well, as his face still hurt from the bruises Elden had given him. He was bearing down on him, sword held high, a look of fury on his face.

Thor raised his sword at the last moment and managed to block Elden's blow, but the sword was so heavy, he was barely able to hold it back. Elden, bigger and stronger, reached around and kicked Thor hard in the ribs.

Thor dropped to his knees in pain. Elden swung around again to crack him in the face, but Thor managed to reached up and block the blow with a moment to spare. But Elden was too quick and strong; he swung around and slashed Thor in the leg, knocking him down on his side.

A small crowd of boys gathered around them, cheering and hollering, as their fight became the center of attention. It seemed as if they were all rooting for Elden.

Elden came down with his sword again, slashing hard, and Thor rolled out of the way, the blow barely missing his back. Thor had a moment's advantage and took it—he swung around and hit the oaf hard behind the knee. It was a soft spot, and enough to knock him back, then down, stumbling onto his rear.

Thor used the chance to scramble to his feet. Elden rose, red-faced, more furious than ever, and now the two faced off.

Thor knew he couldn't just stand there; he charged and swung. But this practice sword was made of a strange wood and just too heavy; his move was telegraphed. Elden blocked it easily, then jabbed Thor hard in the ribs.

It hit a soft spot, and Thor keeled over and dropped his sword, the wind knocked out of him. The other boys screamed in delight. Thor kneeled there, unarmed, and felt the tip of Elden's sword jammed into the base of his throat.

"Yield!" Elden demanded.

Thor glared up at him, the salty taste of blood on his lip.

"Never," he said, defiant.

Elden grimaced, raised his sword, and prepared to bring it down. There was nothing Thor could do. He was in for a mighty blow.

As the sword came down, Thor closed his eyes and concentrated. He felt the world slowing down, felt himself transported to another realm. He was suddenly able to feel the swing of the sword in the air, its motion, and he willed the universe to stop it.

He felt his body warming, tingling, and as he focused, he felt something happening. He felt himself able to control it.

Suddenly the sword froze in midair. Thor had somehow managed to stop it using his power.

As Elden held the sword, confused, Thor then used his mind power to grasp and squeeze Elden's wrist. He squeezed harder and harder in his mind, and in moments, Elden cried out and dropped the sword.

All the boys quieted, as they stood, frozen, looking down at Thor, wide-eyed in surprise and fear.

"He's a demon!" one yelled out.

"A sorcerer!" another yelled.

Thor was overwhelmed. He had no grasp of what he had just done. But he knew it was not normal. He was both proud and embarrassed, emboldened and afraid.

Kolk stepped forward, into the circle, standing between Thor and Elden.

"This is no place for spells, boy, whoever you are," he chastised Thor. "It is a place for battle. You defied our rules of fighting. You will think about what you have done. I will send

you to a place of true danger, and we shall see how well your spells defend you there. Report to guard patrol at the Canyon."

There was a gasp among the Legion, and they all quieted. Thor did not understand exactly what that meant, but he knew that whatever it was, it could not be good.

"You can't send him to the Canyon!" Reece protested. "He is too new. He could get hurt."

"I shall do whatever I choose to, boy." Kolk grimaced at Reece. "Your father is not here to protect you now. Or him. And I run this Legion. And you better mind your tongue—just because you are royalty, don't think you can speak out of line again."

"Fine," Reece responded. "Then I shall join him!"

"As will I!" O'Connor chimed in, stepping forward.

Kolk looked them over, and slowly shook his head.

"Fools. That is your choice. Join him if you wish."

Kolk turned and looked at Elden. "Don't think you get off so easy, either," he said to him. "You started this fight. You must pay the price, too. You will join them on patrol tonight."

"But sire, you can't send me to the Canyon!" Elden protested, eyes wide in fear. It was the first time Thor had seen him afraid of anything.

Kolk took a step forward, close to Elden, and raised his hands to his hips. "Can't I?" he said. "Not only can I send you there— I can also send you away for good, out of this Legion, and to the farthest reaches of our kingdom if you continue to talk back to me."

Elden looked away, too flustered to respond.

"Anyone else want to join them?" Kolk called out.

The other boys, bigger and older and stronger, all looked away in fear. Thor gulped as he looked around at the nervous faces, and wondered just how bad the Canyon could be.

#### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Thor walked along the well-trodden dirt road, flanked by Reece, O'Connor, and Elden. The four of them had barely said a word to each other since they left, still in shock. Thor looked over at Reece and O'Connor with a feeling of gratitude he had never known before. He could hardly believe that they had put themselves on the line for him like that. He felt he had found true friends, more like brothers. He had no idea what lay in store for them at the Canyon, but whatever they should face, he was happy to have them at his side.

Elden he tried not to look at. He could see him kicking rocks, smoldering with rage, could see how annoyed and upset he was to be here, on patrol with them. But Thor felt no pity for him. As Kolk had said, he had started the whole thing. It served him right.

The four of them, a ragtag group, proceeded down the road, following directions. They had been walking for hours, it was late in the afternoon, and Thor's legs were growing weary. He was also hungry. He had been given only a small bowl of barley stew for lunch and hoped some food might be waiting for them wherever they were going.

But he had bigger worries than that. He looked down at his new armor, and knew it would not have been given to him if there were not an important reason. Before being sent off, the four of them had been given new squire's armor: leather, dressed in chainmail. They were also given short swords of a coarse metal—hardly the fine steel used to forge a knight's sword, but certainly better than nothing. It felt good to have a substantial weapon at his waist—in addition, of course, to his sling, which he still carried. Though he knew that if they were to encounter real trouble tonight, the weapons and armor they were given might not suffice. He longed for the superior armor and weapons of his cohorts in the Legion: medium and long swords of the finest metal, short spears, maces, daggers, halberds. But these belonged to the boys of fame and honor, from famous families, who could afford such things. This was not Thor, a simple shepherd's son.

As they marched down the interminable road into the second sunset, far from the welcoming gates of King's Court, toward the distant divide of the Canyon, Thor could not help but feel as if this were all his fault. For some reason, some of the other members of the Legion had seemed to not take a liking to him, as if they resented his presence. It didn't make any sense. And it gave him a sinking feeling. His whole life he had wanted nothing more than to join them. Now, he felt he had crashed into it by cheating; would he ever be truly accepted by his peers?

Now, on top of everything, he was singled out to be marched away for Canyon duty. It was unfair. He hadn't started the fight, and when he had used his powers, whatever they were, it had not been on purpose. He still didn't understand them, didn't know where they came from, how he summoned them, or how to turn them off. He shouldn't be punished for that.

Thor had no idea what Canyon duty meant, but from the expressions of the others, clearly, it was not desirable. He wondered if he were being marched off to be killed, if this was their way of forcing him out of the Legion. He was determined not to give up.

- "How much farther can the Canyon be?" O'Connor asked, breaking the silence.
- "Not far enough," answered Elden. "We wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for Thor."
- "You started the fight, remember?" Reece interrupted.
- "But I fought cleanly, and he did not," Elden protested. "Besides, he deserved it."

"Why?" Thor asked, wanting to know the answer that had been burning inside for a while. "Why did I deserve it?"

"Because you don't belong here, with us. You stole your position in the Legion. The rest of us were picked. You fought your way in."

"But isn't that what the Legion is about? Fighting?" Reece answered. "I would argue that Thor deserves his spot more than any of us. We were merely picked. He struggled and fought to gain what was not given him."

Elden shrugged, unimpressed.

"The rules are the rules. He was not picked. He shouldn't be with us. That's why I fought him."

"Well, you are not going to make me go away," Thor responded, shakiness in his voice, determined to be accepted.

"We'll see about that," Elden muttered darkly.

"And just what you mean by that?" O'Connor asked.

Elden did not volunteer any more, but continued walking silently. Thor's stomach tightened. He couldn't help but feel as if he had made too many enemies, though he did not understand why. He did not like the feeling.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Reece said to Thor, loudly enough for the others to hear. "You did nothing wrong. They sent you to Canyon duty because they see potential in you. They want to toughen you up or else they wouldn't bother. You're also in their sights because my father singled you out. That's all."

"But what is Canyon duty?" he asked.

Reece cleared his throat, looking anxious.

"I've never been on it myself. But I've heard stories. From some of the older kids, and from my brothers. It is patrol duty. But on the other side of the Canyon."

"The other side?" O'Connor asked, terror in his voice.

"What do you mean 'the other side'?" Thor asked, not understanding.

Reece studied him.

"Have you never been to the Canyon?"

Thor could feel the others looking at him, and he shook his head, self-conscious.

"You're kidding," Elden snapped.

"Really?" O'Connor pressed. "Not once in your life?"

Thor shook his head, reddening. "My father never took us anywhere. I've heard of it."

"You've probably never been outside your village, boy," Elden said. "Have you?"

Thor shrugged, silent. Was it that obvious?

"He hasn't," Elden added, incredulous. "Unbelievable."

"Shut up," Reece said. "Leave him alone. That doesn't make you any better than him."

Elden sneered at Reece and raised his hand briefly to his scabbard, but then relaxed it.

Apparently, even though he was bigger than Reece, he didn't want to provoke the king's son.

"The Canyon is the only thing keeping our kingdom of the Ring safe," Reece explained. "Nothing else stands between us and the hordes of the world. If the savages of the Wilds were to breach it, we would all be finished. The entire Ring looks to us, the King's men, to protect them. We have patrols guarding it all the time—mostly on this side, and occasionally, on the other. There is only one bridge across, only one way in or out, and the most elite of the Silver stand watch round-the-clock."

Thor had heard of the Canyon his entire life, had heard horrifying stories of the evils that lurked on the other side, the massive evil empire that surrounded the Ring, and how close they all lived to terror. It was one of the reasons he had wanted to join the King's Legion: to help protect his family and his kingdom. He hated the idea that other men were out there constantly protecting him while he lived comfortably in the arms of the kingdom. He wanted to do his service and help fight off the evil hordes. He could imagine nothing braver than those men who guarded the Canyon passageway.

"The Canyon is a mile wide, and surrounds the entire Ring," Reece explained. "It is not easy to breach. But of course our men are not the only thing keeping the hordes at bay. There are millions of those creatures out there, and if they wanted to overrun this Canyon, by sheer force of will, they could in a moment. Our manpower only helps supplement the energy shield of the Canyon. The real power that keeps them at bay is the power of the Sword."

Thor turned. "The Sword?"

Reece looked at him.

"The Destiny Sword. You know the legend?"

"This country rube probably never even heard of it," Elden chimed in.

"Of course I know it," Thor snapped back, defensive. Not only did he know it, but he had also spent many days pondering the legend throughout his life. He had always wanted to see it. The fabled Destiny Sword, the magical sword whose energy protected the Ring, filled the Canyon with a potent force that protected the Ring from invaders.

"The Sword lives in King's Court?" Thor asked.

Reece nodded.

"It has lived amongst the royal family for generations. Without it, the kingdom would be nothing. The Ring would be overrun."

"If we are protected, then why bother patrol the Canyon at all?" Thor asked.

"The Sword only blocks the major threats," Reece explained. "A small and isolated evil creature can slip in here and there. That is why our men are needed. A single being could cross the Canyon, or even a small group of them—they might be so bold as to try to cross the bridge, or they may act with stealth and climb down the Canyon walls on one end and up on the other. It is our job to keep them out. Even one creature can cause a lot of damage. Years ago, one slipped in and murdered half the children of a village before he was caught. The Sword does the bulk of the work, but we are an indispensable part."

Thor took it all in, wondering. The Canyon seemed so grand, their duty so important, he could hardly believe that he would be part of this great purpose.

"But even with all that, I haven't explained it very well," Reece said. "There's more to the Canyon than just that." He fell silent.

Thor looked at him and saw something like fear or wonder in his eyes.

"How can I explain it?" Reece said, struggling for the proper words. He cleared his throat. "The Canyon is far bigger than all of us. The Canyon is..."

"The Canyon is a place for men," came a resounding voice.

They all turned at the sound of the voice, the stamp of a horse.

Thor's eyes widened. Trotting up beside them, bedecked in full chainmail, with long gleaming weapons hanging over the side of his incredible horse, was Erec. He smiled down at them, keeping his eyes fixed on Thor.

Thor looked up in shock.

"It is a place that will make you a man," Erec added, "if you are not one already."

Thor had not seen Erec since his jousting match, and felt so relieved at his presence, to have a real knight here with them as they headed for the Canyon—no less, Erec himself. Thor felt invincible having him, and prayed he was coming with them.

"What are you doing here?" Thor asked. "Are you accompanying us?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound too eager.

Erec leaned back and laughed.

"Not to worry, young one," he said. "I'm going with you."

"Really?" Reece asked.

"It is tradition for a member of the Silver to accompany members of the Legion on their first patrol. I volunteered."

Erec turned and looked down at Thor.

"After all, you helped me yesterday."

Thor felt his heart warm, buoyed by Erec's presence. He also felt lifted up in the eyes of his friends. Here he was, being accompanied by the greatest knight of the kingdom, as they headed toward the Canyon. Much of his fear was falling away.

"Of course, I shall not go out on patrol with you," Erec added. "But I will lead you across the bridge, and to your camp. It will be your duty to venture out on patrol, alone, from there."

"It is a great honor, sire," Reece said.

"Thank you," O'Connor and Elden echoed.

Erec looked down at Thor and smiled.

"After all, if you're going to be my first squire, I can't let you die just yet."

"First?" Thor asked, his heart skipping a beat.

"Feithgold broke his leg in the jousting match. He will be out for at least eight weeks. You are my first squire now. And our training might as well begin, shan't it?"

"Of course, sire," Thor responded.

Thor's mind was swimming. For the first time in a while, he felt as if luck was finally turning his way. Now he was first squire to the greatest knight of all. He felt as if he had leapfrogged over all his friends.

The five of them continued on, heading west into the setting sun, Erec walking slowly on his horse beside them.

"I assume you have been to the Canyon, sire?" Thor asked.

"Many times," Erec responded. "My first patrol. I was your age, in fact."

"And how did you find it?" Reece asked.

All four boys turned and stared at Erec, rapt with attention. Erec rode on for some time in silence, looking straight ahead, his jaw set.

"Your first time is an experience you never forget. It is hard to explain. It is a strange and foreign and mystical and beautiful place. On the other side lie unimaginable dangers. The bridge to cross it is long and steep. There are many of us patrolling—but always, you feel alone. It is nature at its best. It crushes man to be in its shadow. Our men have patrolled it for hundreds of years. It is a rite of passage. You do not fully understand danger without it; you cannot become a knight without it."

He fell back into silence. The four boys looked at each other, queasy.

"Should we expect a skirmish on the other side then?" Thor asked.

Erec shrugged.

"Anything is possible, once you reach the Wilds. Unlikely. But possible."

Erec looked down at Thor.

"Do you want to be a great squire, and one day, a great knight?" he asked, looking right at Thor.

Thor's heart beat faster.

"Yes, sire, more than anything."

"Then there are things you must learn," Erec said. "Strength is not enough; agility is not enough; being a great fighter is not enough. There is something else, something more important than all of them."

Erec fell back into silence, and Thor could wait no longer.

"What?" Thor asked. "What is most important?"

"You must be of sound spirit," Erec replied. "Never afraid. You must enter the darkest wood, the most dangerous battle, with complete equanimity. You must carry this equanimity with you, always, whenever and wherever you go. Never fearful, always on guard. Never restful, always diligent. You don't have the luxury of expecting others to protect you anymore. You're no longer a citizen. You're now one of the King's men. The greatest qualities for a warrior are courage and equanimity. Be not afraid of danger. Expect it. But do not seek it.

"This Ring we live in," Erec added, "our kingdom. It seems as if we, with all our men, protect it against the hordes of the world. But we do not. We are protected only by the Canyon, and only by the sorcery within it. We live in a sorcerer's ring. Don't forget it. We live and die by magic. There is no security here, boy, on either side of the Canyon. Take away sorcery, take away magic, and we have nothing."

They walked on in silence for quite some time, as Thor turned Erec's words over in his mind again and again. He felt as if Erec were giving him a hidden message, as if he were telling him that, whatever power he had, whatever magic he might be summoning, it was nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, it was something to be proud of, and the source of all energy in the kingdom. Thor felt better. He had felt he was being sent to the Canyon as a punishment for his using his magic, and had felt guilty about it; but now he felt his powers, whatever they were, might become a source of pride.

As the other boys drifted ahead and Erec and Thor fell back, Erec looked down at him.

"You've already managed to make some powerful enemies at Court," he said, an amused smile on his face. "As many enemies as you have friends, it seems."

Thor reddened, shamed.

"I don't know how, sire. I didn't intend to."

"Enemies are not gained by intentions. They are often gained by envy. You have managed to create a great deal of it. That is not necessarily a bad thing. You are the center of much speculation."

Thor scratched his head, trying to understand.

"But I don't know why."

Erec still looked amused.

"The Queen herself is chief among your adversaries. You have somehow managed to get on her wrong side."

"My mother?" Reece asked, turning. "Why?"

"That is the very question I've been wondering myself," Erec said.

Thor felt terrible. The Queen? An enemy? What had he done to her? He couldn't conceive it. How could he even be important enough for her to take notice of him? He hardly knew what was happening around him.

Suddenly, something dawned on him.

"Is she the reason that I was sent out here? To the Canyon?" he asked.

Erec turned and looked straight ahead, his face growing serious.

"She might be," he said, contemplative. "She just might be."

Thor wondered at the extent and depth of the enemies he had made. He had stumbled into a court he knew nothing about. He had just wanted to belong. He had just followed his passion and his dream, and had done whatever he could to achieve it. He did not think that by doing so, he might raise envy or jealousy. He turned it over and over in his mind, like a riddle, but could not get to the bottom of it.

As Thor was mulling these thoughts, they reached the top of a knoll, and as the sight spread out before them, all thoughts of anything else fell away. Thor's breath was taken away—and not just by the strong, gusty wind.

Stretching out before them, as far as the eye could see, lay the Canyon. It was the first time Thor had ever seen it, and the sight shocked him so thoroughly he stood rooted in place, unable to move. It was the grandest and most majestic thing he had ever seen. The huge chasm in the earth seemed to stretch for eternity, spanned only by a single, narrow bridge lined with soldiers. The bridge seemed to stretch to the end of the earth itself.

The Canyon was alight with greens and blues from the second setting sun, and the sparkling rays bounced off its walls. As he felt his legs again, Thor began to walk with the others, closer and closer to the bridge, until he was able to look down, deep into the Canyon's cliffs; they seemed to plummet into the bowels of the earth. Thor could not even see the bottom, and didn't know if that was because it had no bottom, or if it was because it was covered in mist. The rock that lined the cliffs looked to be a million years old, formed with patterns that storms must have left centuries before. It was the most primordial place he had ever seen. He had no idea his planet was so vast, so vibrant, so alive.

It was as if he had come to the beginning of creation.

Thor heard the others gasp all around him, too.

The thought of the four of them patrolling this Canyon seemed laughable. They were dwarfed even by the sight of it.

As they walked toward the bridge, soldiers stiffened on either side, at attention, making way for the new patrol. Thor felt his pulse quicken.

"I don't see how the four of us can possibly patrol this," O'Connor said.

Elden snickered. "There are many patrols besides us. We are merely one cog in the machine."

As they walked across the bridge, the only sound to be heard was that of the whipping wind, and of their boots, and Erec's horse, walking along. The hoofs left a hollow and reassuring sound, the only real thing Thor could hang onto in this surreal place.

None of the soldiers, who all stiffened at attention in Erec's presence, said a word as they stood guard. They must have passed hundreds of them.

Thor could not help but notice on either side of them, impaled on spikes every few feet along the railing, were the heads of barbarian invaders. Some were still fresh, still dripping with blood.

Thor looked away. It made it all too real. He did not know if he was ready for this. He tried not to imagine the many skirmishes which must have produced those heads, the lives that had been lost, and what awaited him on the other side. He wondered if they would make it back. Was that the purpose of this whole expedition? To kill him off?

He looked over the edge, at the endlessly disappearing cliffs, and heard the screech of a distant bird; it was a sound he had never heard before. He wondered what kind of bird it was, and what other exotic animals lurked on the other side.

But it was not really the animals which bothered him, or even the heads on spikes. More than anything, it was the feeling of this place. He could not tell if it was the mist, or the howling wind, or the vastness of the open sky, or the light of the setting sun—but something about this place was so surreal, it transported him. Enveloped him. He felt a heavy magical energy hanging over them. He wondered whether it was the protection of the Sword, or some other ancient force. He felt as if he were not just crossing a mass of land, but crossing into another realm of existence.

Just a few short days ago he had been herding sheep in his small village. It seemed unbelievable that now, for the first time in his life, he would spend the night, unprotected, on the other side of the Canyon.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As the sun began to fade from the sky—dark scarlet mixed with blue that seemed to envelop the universe—Thor walked with Reece, O'Connor, and Elden down the trail that led into the forest of the Wilds. Thor had never been so on edge in his life. Now it was just the four of them, Erec having remained behind at camp, and despite their bickering, Thor sensed they now needed each other more than ever. They had to bond on their own, without Erec. Before they'd parted, Erec had told them not to worry, that he would stay at base and hear their calls, and would be there if they needed him.

That gave Thor little assurance now.

As the woods narrowed in on them, Thor looked around at this exotic place, the forest floor lined with thorns and strange fruits. The branches of the many trees were gnarled and ancient, nearly touching each other, so close Thor often needed to duck. They had thorns instead of leaves and they protruded everywhere. Yellow vines hung down in places, and Thor had made the mistake of reaching up to push a vine from his face only to realize it was a snake. He had yelled and jumped out of the way just in time.

He had expected the others to laugh at him, but they, too, were humbled with fear. All around them were the foreign noises of exotic animals. Some were low and guttural, some high-pitched and shrieking. Some echoed from far off; others seemed impossibly close. Twilight came on too fast as they all headed deeper into the forest. Thor felt certain that at any moment they could be ambushed. As the sky grew darker, it was getting harder to even see the faces of his compatriots. He gripped his sword hilt so tightly his knuckles whitened, while his other hand clutched his slingshot. The others gripped their weapons, too.

Thor willed himself to be strong, confident, and courageous as a good knight should. As Erec had instructed him. It was better for him to face death now than to always live in fear of it. He tried to lift his chin and walk boldly forward, even increasing his pace and going a few feet in front of the others. His heart was pounding, but he felt as if he were facing his fears.

"What are we patrolling for exactly?" Thor asked.

As soon as he said it, he realized it might be a dumb question, and he expected Elden to make fun of him.

But to his surprise, there was only silence in return. Thor looked over and saw the whites of Elden's eyes, and realized he was even more afraid. This, at least, gave Thor some confidence. Thor was younger and smaller than him, and he was not giving in to his fear.

"The enemy, I guess," Reece finally said.

"And who is that?" Thor asked. "What does he look like?"

"There are all sorts of enemies out here," Reece said. "We are in the Wilds now. There are nations of savages, and all manner and races of evil creatures."

"But what is the point of our patrol?" O'Connor asked. "What difference can we possibly make by doing this? Even if we kill one or two, is that going to stop the million behind it?"

"We are not here to make a dent," Reece answered. "We are here to make our presence known, on behalf of our King. To let them know not to come too close to the Canyon."

"I think it would make more sense to wait till they try to cross it and deal with them then," O'Connor said.

"No," Reece said. "It is better to deter them from even approaching. That is the reason for these patrols. At least, that is what my older brother says."

Thor's heart pounded as they continued deeper into the forest.

"How far are we supposed to go?" Elden asked, speaking up for the first time, his voice quivering.

"Don't you remember what Kolk said? We have to retrieve the red banner and bring it back," Reece said. "That is our proof that we've gone far enough for our patrol."

"I have not seen a banner anywhere," O'Connor said. "In fact, I can barely see a thing. How are we supposed to get back?"

No one answered. Thor was thinking the same thing. How could they possibly find a banner in the black of night? He started to wonder if this was all a trick, an exercise, another one of the psychological games the Legion played on the boys. He thought again of Erec's words, of his many enemies at court. He had a sinking feeling about this patrol. Were they being set up?

Suddenly there came a horrific screeching noise, followed by movement inside the branches—and something large ran across their path. Thor pulled his sword, and the others did, too. The sound of swords leaving scabbards, of metal on metal, filled the air as they all stood in place, holding their swords out in front of them, looking nervously in every direction.

"What was that?" Elden cried out, his voice cracking with fear.

The animal once again crossed their path, racing from one side of the forest to the other, and this time they got a good look at it.

Thor's shoulders relaxed as he recognized it.

"Just a deer," he said, greatly relieved. "The strangest-looking deer I've seen—but a deer nonetheless."

Reece laughed, a reassuring noise, a laugh too mature for his age. As Thor heard it, he realized it was the laugh of a future King. He felt better having his friend at his side. And then he laughed, too. All that fear, all for nothing.

"I never knew your voice cracked when you caved in to fear," Reece mocked Elden, laughing again.

"If I could see you, I would pummel you," Elden said.

"I can see you fine," Reece said. "Come try it."

Elden glared back at him, but didn't dare make a move. Instead, he put his sword back in his scabbard, as did the others. Thor admired Reece for giving Elden a hard time; Elden mocked everybody else—he deserved to get some back himself. He admired Reece's fearlessness in doing so because after all, Elden was still twice their size.

Thor finally felt some of the tension leaving his body. They'd had their first encounter, the ice was broken, and they were still alive. He leaned back and laughed, too, happy to be alive.

"Keep laughing, stranger boy," Elden said. "We'll see who has the last laugh."

I'm not laughing at you, as Reece is, Thor thought. I'm just relieved to be alive.

But he didn't bother saying it; he knew that nothing he could say would change Elden's hatred for him.

"Look!" O'Connor yelled. "There!"

Thor squinted but could barely see what he was pointing at in the thickening night. Then he saw it: the banner of the Legion, hanging from one of the branches.

They all began to run for it.

Elden ran past the others, brushing them aside roughly.

"That flag is mine!" he yelled.

"I saw it first!" O'Connor yelled.

"But I will get it first, and I will be the one to bring it back!" Elden yelled.

Thor fumed; he could barely believe Elden's actions. He recalled what Kolk had said—that whoever got the banner would be rewarded—and realized why Elden sprinted. But that did not excuse him. They were supposed to be a team, a group—not every man for himself. Elden's true colors were coming out—none of the others ran for it, tried to outdo the others. It made Thor hate Elden even more.

Elden sprinted past after elbowing O'Connor, and before the others could react, he gained several feet on them and snatched the banner.

As he did, a huge net appeared out of nowhere, rising from the ground, springing up into the air, entrapping Elden and hoisting him up high. He swung back and forth before their eyes, just feet away, like an animal caught in a trap.

"Help me! Help me!" he screamed, terrified.

They all slowed as they walked up close to him; Reece began to laugh.

"Well, who is the coward now?" Reece yelled out, amused.

"Why you little crap!" he yelled. "I will kill you when I get down from this!"

"Oh really?" Reece retorted. "And when will that be?"

"Set me down!" Elden yelled, turning and spinning in the net. "I command you!"

"Oh, you command us, do you?" Reece said, bursting into laughter again.

Reece turned and looked at Thor.

"What do you think?" Reece asked.

"I think that he owes all of us an apology," O'Connor said. "Especially Thor."

"I agree," Reece said. "I'll tell you what," he said to Elden. "Apologize—and make it sincere—and I will consider cutting you down."

"Apologize?" Elden echoed, horrified. "Not in one million suns."

Reece turned to Thor.

"Maybe we should just leave this lump here for the night. It would be great food for the animals. What do you think?"

Thor smiled wide.

"I think that's a fine idea," O'Connor said.

"Wait!" Elden shrieked.

O'Connor reached up and snatched the banner from Elden's dangling finger.

"Guess you didn't beat us to the banner after all," O'Connor said.

The three of them turned and began to walk away.

"No, wait!" Elden cried. "You can't leave me here! You wouldn't!"

The three of them continued to walk away.

"I'm sorry!" Elden began to sob. "Please! I'm sorry!"

Thor stopped, but Reece and O'Connor continued to walk. Finally, Reece turned.

"What are you doing?" Reece asked Thor.

"We can't leave him here," Thor said. As much as Thor disliked Elden, he didn't think it right to leave him there.

"Why not?" Reece asked. "He brought it on himself."

"If the tables were turned," O'Connor said, "you know he would gladly leave you there. Why should you care?"

"I understand," Thor said. "But that doesn't mean we should act like him."

Reece put his hands on his hips and sighed deeply as he leaned in and whispered to Thor.

"I wasn't going to leave him there all night. Maybe just half the night. But you do have a point. He's not cut out for this. He'd probably piss himself and have a heart attack. You're too kind. That's a problem," Reece said as he put a hand on Thor's shoulder. "But that's why I chose you for a friend."

"And I," O'Connor said, putting his hand on Thor's other shoulder.

Thor turned, marched toward the net, reached out, and cut it down.

Elden landed with a thud. He scrambled to his feet, threw the net off, and frantically searched the ground.

"My sword!" he yelled. "Where is it?"

Thor looked down at the ground, but it was too dark to see.

"It must have flown into the trees when you were hoisted up," Thor answered.

"Wherever it is, it's gone now," Reece said. "You'll never find it."

"But you don't understand," Elden pleaded. "The Legion. There is just one rule. Never leave your weapon behind. I can't return without it. I would be ousted!"

Thor turned and searched the ground again, searched the trees, looking everywhere. But he could see absolutely no sign of Elden's sword. Reece and O'Connor just stood there, not bothering to look.

"I'm sorry," Thor said, "I don't see it."

Elden scrambled everywhere, then finally gave up.

"It's your fault," he said, pointing at Thor. "You got us into this mess!"

"No I didn't," Thor replied. "You did! You ran for the flag. You pushed us all out of the way. You have no one to blame but yourself."

"I hate you!" Elden screamed.

He charged Thor, grabbing him by the shirt and knocking him down to the ground. The weight of him caught Thor off guard. Thor managed to spin around, but Elden spun again and pinned Thor down. Elden was just too big and strong, and it was too hard to hold him back.

Suddenly, though, Elden let go and rolled off. Thor heard the sound of a sword being extracted from his scabbard, and looked up and saw Reece standing over Elden, holding the tip of his sword at his throat.

O'Connor reached over and gave Thor a hand, and pulled him quickly to his feet. Thor stood with his two friends, looking down on Elden, who remained on the ground, Reece's sword at his throat.

"You touch my friend again," Reece, deadly serious, said slowly to Elden, "and I assure you, I will kill you."

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thor, Reece, O'Connor, Elden, and Erec all sat on the ground, forming a circle around a blazing fire. The five of them sat glum and silent, Thor surprised it could be this cold on a summer night. There was something about this canyon, the chilly, mystical winds that swirled around, down his back, and mingled with the fog that never seemed to go away, which left him damp to the bone. He leaned forward and rubbed his hands against the fire's heat, unable to get them warm.

Thor chewed on the piece of dried meat the others were passing around; it was tough and salty, but somehow nourished him. Erec reached over and handed him something and Thor felt a soft wineskin pressed into his hand, the liquid sloshing in it. It was surprisingly heavy as he raised it to his lips and squirted it into the back of his mouth, for too long a time. He felt warm for the first time that night.

Everyone was quiet, staring into the flames. Thor was still on edge. Being on this side of the Canyon, in enemy territory, he still felt as if he should be on guard at every moment, and marveled at how calm Erec seemed to be, as if he were casually sitting in his own backyard. Thor was relieved, at least, to be out of the Wilds, reunited with Erec, and sitting around the reassurance of a fire. Erec watched the forest line, attentive to every little noise, yet confident and relaxed. Thor knew that if any danger came, Erec would protect them all.

Thor felt content around the flames; he looked around and saw the others seemed content, too—except, of course, for Elden, glum ever since returning from the forest. He had lost his confident swagger from earlier in the day, and he sat there, sour and swordless. The commanders would never forgive such a mistake—Elden would be kicked out of the Legion upon their return. He wondered what Elden would do. He had a feeling he would not go down easily, that he had some trick, some backup plan, up his sleeve. Thor assumed that whatever it was, it would not be good.

Thor turned and followed Erec's gaze to the distant horizon, in the southern direction. A faint glow, an endless line as far as the eye could see, lit up the night. Thor wondered.

"What is it?" he finally asked Erec. "That glow? The one you keep staring at?"

Erec was silent for a long time, the only sound that of the whipping of the wind. Finally, without turning, he said: "The Gorals."

Thor exchanged a glance with the others, who looked back, fearful. Thor's stomach tightened at the thought of it. The Gorals. So close. There was nothing in between them and him except for a simple forest and a vast plain. There was no longer the great Canyon separating them, keeping them safe. All his life he had heard tales of these violent savages from the Wilds who had no ambition except to attack the Ring. And now there was nothing between them. He couldn't believe how many of them there were. It was a vast and waiting army.

"Aren't you afraid?" Thor asked Erec.

Erec shook his head.

"The Gorals move as one. Their army camps out there every night. They have for years. They would only attack the Canyon if they mobilized the entire army and attacked as one. And they wouldn't dare try. The power of the Sword acts as a shield. They know they cannot breach it."

"So then why do they camp out there?" Thor asked.

"It is their way of intimidating. And preparing. There have been many times throughout the course of history, in the time of our fathers, when they attacked, tried to breach the Canyon. But it hasn't happened in my time."

Thor looked up at the black sky, the yellow and blue and orange stars twinkling high overhead, and wondered. This side of the Canyon was a place of nightmares, and had been ever since he could walk. The thought of it made him fearful, but he forced that from his mind. He was a member of the Legion now, and had to act like it.

"Do not worry," Erec said, as if reading his thoughts. "They will not attack while we have the Destiny Sword."

"Have you ever held it?" Thor asked Erec, suddenly curious. "The Sword?"

"Of course not," Erec retorted sharply. "No one is allowed to grasp it, except for descendants of the King."

Thor looked at him, confused.

"I don't understand. Why?"

Reece cleared his throat.

"May I?" he interceded.

Erec nodded back.

"There is a legend around the Sword. It has never actually been hoisted by anyone. Legend has it that one man, the chosen one, will be able to wield it by himself. Only the King is allowed to try, or one of the King's descendants, if named King. So there it sits, untouched."

"And what of our current King? Your father?" Thor asked. "Can't he try?"

Reece looked down.

"He did once. When he was crowned. So he tells us. He could not lift it. So it sits there like an object of rebuke for him. He hates it. It weighs on him like a living thing.

"When the chosen one arrives," Reece added, "he will free the Ring from its enemies all around and lead us to a greater destiny than we've ever known. All wars will end."

"Fairytales and nonsense," Elden interceded. "That Sword will be lifted by no one. It is too heavy. It is not possible. And there is no 'chosen one.' It's all hogwash. That legend was invented just to keep the common man down, to keep us all waiting for the supposed 'chosen one.' To embolden the line of MacGils. It is a very convenient legend for them."

"Shut your tongue, boy," Erec snapped. "You will always speak respectfully of your King." Elden looked down, humbled.

Thor thought about everything, trying to take it all in. It was so much to process at once. All his life he had dreamt of seeing the Destiny Sword. He had heard stories of its perfect shape. It was rumored to be crafted from a material no one understood, was supposed to be a magical weapon. It made Thor wonder what would happen if they didn't have the sword to protect them. Would the King's army then be vanquished by the Empire? Thor looked out at the glowing fires on the horizon. They seemed to stretch to eternity.

"Have you ever been out there?" Thor asked Erec. "Far out there? Beyond the forest? Into the Wilds?"

The others all turned and look at Erec, as Thor anxiously awaited his reply. In the thick silence, Erec stared at the flames for a long time—so long that Thor began to doubt he would ever answer. Thor hoped he had not been too nosy; he felt so grateful and indebted to Erec, and

certainly didn't want to get on his bad side. Thor also wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer.

Just when Thor was wishing he could retract his question, Erec responded:

"Yes," he said, solemn.

That single word hung in the air for too long, and in it, Thor heard the gravity that told him all he needed to know.

"What is it like out there?" O'Connor asked.

Thor was relieved that he was not the only one asking the questions.

"It is controlled by one ruthless empire," Erec said. "But the land is vast and varied. There is the land of the savages. The land of the slaves. And the land of the monsters. Monsters unlike any you can imagine. And there are deserts and mountains and hills as far as you can see. There are the marshes and the swamps and the great ocean. There is the land of the Druids. And the land of the Dragons."

Thor's eyes opened wide.

"Dragons?" he asked, surprised. "I thought they didn't exist."

Erec looked at him, deadly serious.

"I assure you, they do. And it is a place you never want to go. A place even the Gorals fear."

Thor swallowed at the thought. He could hardly imagine venturing out that deep into the world. He wondered how Erec had ever made it back alive. He made a mental note to ask him another time.

There were so many questions Thor wanted to ask him—about the nature of the evil empire and who ruled it; why they wanted to attack; when Erec had ventured out; when he had returned. But as Thor stared into the flames it grew colder and darker, and as all his questions swirled in his head, he felt his eyes grow heavy. This was not the right time to ask.

Instead, he let sleep carry him away. He lay his head down on the ground. Before his eyes closed for good, he looked over at the foreign soil, and wondered when—or if—he would ever return home again.

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Thor opened his eyes, confused, wondering where he was and how he had gotten there. He looked down and saw a thick fog up to his waist, so thick he could not see his feet. He turned and saw dawn breaking over the canyon before him. Far away, on the other side, was his homeland. He was still on this side, the wrong side, of the divide. His heart quickened.

Thor looked at the bridge, but strangely, it was now empty of soldiers. The whole place, in fact, seemed desolate. He could not understand what was happening. As he watched the bridge, its wooden planks fell one after another, like dominoes. Within moments the bridge collapsed, dropped down into the precipice. The bottom was so far down, he never even heard the planks hit.

Thor swallowed and turned, looking for the others—but they were nowhere in sight. He had no idea what to do. Now he was stuck. Here, alone, on the other side of the Canyon, with no way to get back. He could not understand where everyone had gone.

Hearing something, he turned and looked into the forest. He detected movement. He rose to his feet and walked toward the sound, his feet sinking into the earth as he went. As he got closer, he spied a net hanging from a low branch. Inside it was Elden, spinning around and around in circles, the branches creaking as he moved.

A falcon sat perched on his head, a distinct-looking creature with a body that gleamed of silver and a single black stripe running down its forehead, between its eyes. It bent over, plucked out Elden's eye, and held it there. It turned to Thor, holding the eye in its beak.

Thor wanted to look away but could not. Just as he was realizing Elden was dead, suddenly, the entire wood came to life. Charging out of it, from every direction, was an army of Gorals. Huge, wearing only loincloths, with immense, well-muscled chests, three noses placed in a triangle on their face, and two long, curved sharp fangs, they hissed and snarled, sprinting right for him. It was a hair-raising sound, and there was nowhere for Thor to go. He reached down and grabbed for his sword—but looked down to discover it was gone.

Thor screamed.

He woke sitting straight up, breathing hard, looking frantically in every direction. All around him was silence—a real, alive silence, not the silence of his dream.

Beside him, in the first light of dawn, Reece, O'Connor, and Erec slept sprawled out on the ground, the dying embers of the fire near them. On the ground, hopping, was a falcon. It turned and cocked its head at Thor. It was large and silver and proud, with a single black stripe running down its forehead, and it stared at him, looking him right in the eye, and screeched. The sound made him shiver: it was the same falcon from his dream.

It was then he realized the bird was a message—that his dream had been more than a dream. That something was wrong. He could feel it, a slight vibration in his back, running up his arms.

He quickly got to his feet and looked all around, wondering what it could be. He heard nothing wrong, and nothing seemed out of place; the bridge was still there, the soldiers were all on it.

What was it? he wondered.

And then he realized what it was. Someone was missing. Elden.

At first Thor wondered if maybe he had left them, headed back across the bridge to the other side of the Canyon. Maybe he was ashamed over losing his sword and had left the region altogether.

But then Thor looked to the forest and saw fresh indentation in the moss, the footprints heading toward the trail in the morning dew. There was no doubt that those were Elden's. Elden had not left; he had gone back into the forest. Alone. Maybe to relieve himself. Or maybe, Thor realized with a shock, to try to retrieve his sword.

It was a stupid move, to go alone like that, and it proved how desperate Elden was. Thor sensed right away that there was great danger. Elden's life was at stake.

The falcon screeched at that moment, as if to confirm Thor's thoughts. Then it kicked up and flew, diving right for Thor's face. Thor ducked his head—its talons just missed and it rose in the air, flying away.

Thor leapt into action. Without thinking, without even contemplating what he was doing, he sprinted off into the woods, following the footprints.

Thor didn't stop to feel the fear as he sprinted alone, deep into the Wilds. If he had paused to think how crazy it was, he probably would have frozen, would have felt himself flooded with panic. But instead, he just reacted, feeling a pressing need to help Elden. He ran and ran—alone—deeper into the wood in the early light of dawn.

"Elden!" he screamed.

He couldn't explain it, but somehow he sensed Elden was about to die. Perhaps he shouldn't care, based on the way that Elden had treated him, but he couldn't help himself: he did. If he were in this situation, Elden would certainly not come to rescue him. It was crazy to put his life

on the line for someone who cared nothing for him—and, in fact, would gladly see him die. But he could not help it. He'd never felt a sensation like this one before, where his senses were screaming to him to react—especially over something he could not possibly have known. He was changing somehow, and he did not know how. He felt as if his body were being controlled by some new, mysterious power, and it made him feel uneasy, out of control. Was he losing his mind? Was he overreacting? Was it all just from his dream? Maybe he should turn around.

But he did not. He let his feet lead him and did not give in to fear or doubts. He ran and ran until his lungs were bursting.

Thor turned a bend, and what he saw made him stop short in his tracks. He stood there, trying to catch his breath, trying to reconcile the image before him, which did not make any sense. It was enough to strike terror into any hardened warrior.

There stood Elden, holding his short sword and looking up at a creature unlike any Thor had ever seen. It was horrific. It towered over them both, at least nine feet tall, and as wide as four men. It raised its muscular, red arms, with three long fingers, like nails, at the end of each hand, and a head like that of a demon, with four horns, a long jaw, and a broad forehead. It had two large yellow eyes and fangs curled like tusks. It leaned back and screeched.

Beside him, a thick tree, hundreds of years old, split in two at the sound.

Elden stood, frozen in fear. He dropped his sword, and the ground beneath him went wet.

The creature drooled and snarled, and took a step toward Elden.

Thor, too, was filled with fear, but unlike Elden, it did not immobilize him. For some reason, the fear heightened his senses, made him feel more alive. It gave him tunnel vision, allowed him to focus supremely on the creature before him, on its position to Elden, on its width and breadth and strength and speed. On its every movement. It also allowed him to focus on his own body position, his own weapons.

Thor burst into action. He charged forward, between Elden and the beast. The beast roared, its breath so hot, Thor could feel it even from a distance. The sound raised every hair on the back of Thor's neck and made him want to turn around. But he heard Erec's voice in his head, telling him to be strong. To be fearless. To retain equanimity. And he forced himself to stand his ground.

Thor raised his sword high and charged, plunging it into the beast's ribs, aiming for his heart. The creature shrieked in agony, its blood pouring down Thor's hand as Thor plunged the sword all the way in, to the hilt.

But to Thor's surprise, it did not die. The beast seemed invincible.

Without missing a beat, the beast swung around and swiped Thor so hard he felt his ribs crack. Thor went flying across the clearing, smashing into a tree before collapsing to the ground. He felt a terrible headache as he lay there.

Thor looked up, dazed and confused, the world spinning. The beast reached down and extracted Thor's sword from its stomach. The sword seemed tiny in its hands, like a toothpick, and the beast reached back and hurled it; it went flying through the trees, taking down branches, and disappeared into the wood.

It turned its full attention on Thor and began to bear down on him.

Elden stood where he was, still frozen in fear. But as the beast charged Thor, suddenly, Elden burst into action. He charged the beast from behind and jumped onto its back. It slowed the beast just enough for Thor to sit up; the beast, furious, flung back his arms and threw Elden. He went flying across the clearing, smashed into a tree, and slumped to the ground.

The beast, still bleeding, panting heavily, turned its attention back to Thor. It snarled and widened its fangs as it approached him.

Thor was out of options. His sword was gone, and there was nothing between him and the monster. The monster dove down for him, and at the last second, Thor rolled out of the way. The monster hit the tree where Thor had been with such force it uprooted it.

The beast raised its foot and brought it down for Thor's head. Thor once more rolled out of the way; the creature left a footprint where Thor's head had been.

Thor leapt to his feet, placed a stone in his sling, and hurled.

He hit the monster square between the eyes, a fiercer throw than he had ever made, and the creature staggered back. Thor was certain he had killed it.

But to his amazement, the beast did not stop.

Thor tried his best to summon his power, whatever power it was that he had. He charged the beast, leaping forward, crashing into it, aiming to tackle it and drive it down to the ground with a superhuman power.

But to Thor's shock, this time his power never kicked in. He was just another boy. A frail boy, next to this massive beast.

The beast merely reached down, grabbed Thor by his waist, and hoisted him high above its head. Thor, helpless, dangled high in the air—and then he was thrown. He went flying like a missile across the clearing, and smashed again into a tree.

Thor lay there, stunned, his head splitting, his ribs cracked in two. The beast raced for him, and he knew this time he was finished. It raised its red, muscular foot, preparing to bring it down right on Thor's head. He prepared for death.

Then, for some reason, the beast froze in midair. Thor blinked, trying to understand why.

The beast reached up and clutched its throat, and Thor noticed the head of an arrow protruding from it. A moment later, the beast keeled over, dead.

Erec came running into view, followed by Reece and O'Connor. Thor saw Erec looking down on him, asking if he was okay, and he wanted to answer, more than anything. But the words would not come out. A moment later, his eyes closed on him, and then his world went black.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thor opened his eyes slowly, dizzy at first, trying to figure out where he was. He was lying on straw, and for a moment wondered if he was back in the barracks. He propped himself up on one elbow, on alert, looking for the others.

He was somewhere else. From the looks of it, he was in a very elaborate stone room. It looked as if he were in a castle. A royal castle.

Before he could figure it all out, a large, oak door swung open and in strutted Reece. In the distance, Thor could hear the muted noise of a crowd.

"Finally, he lives," Reece announced with a smile, as he rushed forward, grabbed Thor's hand, and pulled him to his feet.

Thor raised a hand to his head, trying to slow his terrible headache from rising too fast.

"Come on, let's go, everyone's waiting for you," he urged, yanking Thor.

"Wait a minute, please," Thor said, trying to collect himself. "Where am I? What happened?"

"We're back in King's Court—and you are about to be celebrated as the hero of the day!" Reece said merrily, as they headed for the door.

"Hero? What do you mean? And...how did I get here?" he asked, trying to remember.

"That beast knocked you out. You've been out for quite a while. We had to carry you back across the Canyon bridge. Quite dramatic. Not exactly how I expected you to return to the other side!" he said with a laugh.

They walked out into the corridors of the castle, and as they went, Thor could see all sorts of people—women, men, squires, guards, knights—staring at him, as if they had been waiting for him to wake. He also saw something new in their eyes, something like respect. It was the first time he had seen it. Up until now, most everyone had looked at him with something like disdain—now they looked at him as if he were one of them.

"What exactly happened?" Thor racked his brain, trying to recall.

"Don't you remember any of it?" Reece asked.

Thor tried to think.

"I remember running into the wood. Fighting with that beast. And then..." He drew a blank.

"You saved Elden's life," Reece said. "You ran fearlessly into the wood, on your own. I don't know why you wasted energy on saving that prig's life. But you did. The King is very, very pleased with you. Not because he cares about Elden. But he cares very much about bravery. He loves to celebrate. It's important to him, to celebrate stories like this, to inspire the others. And it reflects well on the King, and on the Legion. He wants to celebrate. You're here because he's going to reward you."

"Reward me?" Thor asked, dumbfounded. "But I didn't do anything!"

"You saved Elden's life."

"I only reacted. I only did what came naturally."

"And that's exactly why the King wants to reward you."

Thor felt embarrassed. He didn't think his actions deserved rewarding. After all, if it hadn't been for Erec, Thor would be dead right now. Thor thought about it, and his heart filled with gratitude for Erec, once again. He hoped that one day he could repay him.

"But what about our patrol duty?" Thor asked. "We didn't finish it."

Reece put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Friend, you saved a boy's life. A member of the Legion. That's more important than our patrol." Reece laughed. "So much for an uneventful first patrol!" he added.

At the end of yet another corridor, two guards opened a door for them, and Thor blinked and found himself in the royal chamber. There must have been a hundred knights standing about the room, with its soaring cathedral ceilings, stained glass, and weapons and suits of armor hung everywhere on the walls like trophies. The Hall of Arms. It was the place where all the greatest warriors met, all the men of the Silver. Thor's heart raced as he surveyed the walls, all the famous weaponry, the armor of heroic and legendary knights. Thor had heard rumors of this place his entire life. It had been his dream to see it for himself one day. Normally no squires were allowed here—no one but the Silver.

Even more surprising, as he entered, real knights turned and looked at him—him—from all sides. And they wore looks of admiration. Thor had never seen so many knights in one room, and had never felt so accepted. It was like walking into a dream. Especially since just moments before, he had been fast asleep.

Reece must have noticed Thor's dumbfounded face.

"The finest of the Silver have gathered here to honor you."

Thor felt himself well with pride and disbelief. "Honor me? But I've done nothing."

"Wrong," came a voice.

Thor turned and felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. It was Erec, grinning down.

"You have displayed bravery and honor and courage, beyond what was expected of you. You nearly gave up your life to save one of your brethren. That is what we look for in the Legion, and this is what we look for in the Silver."

"You saved my life," Thor said to Erec. "If it weren't for you, that beast would have killed me. I don't know how to thank you."

Erec grinned down.

"You already have," he answered. "Don't you remember the joust? I believe we are even."

Thor marched down the walkway toward King MacGil's throne, at the far end of the hall, Reece on one side of him and Erec on the other. He felt hundreds of eyes on him, and it all felt like a dream.

Standing around the King were his dozens of counselors, along with his eldest son, Kendrick. As Thor approached, his heart swelled with pride. He could hardly believe the King was granting him an audience again—and that so many important men were here to witness it.

They reached the King's throne. MacGil stood, and a muted hush overcame the room. MacGil's ponderous expression broke into a wide smile, as he took three steps forward and to Thor's surprise, gave him a hug.

A great cheer rose up in the room.

He pulled back, held Thor firmly by the shoulders, and grinned down.

"You served the Legion well," he said.

A servant handed the King a goblet, which the King raised. In a loud voice, he called out: "TO COURAGE!"

"TO COURAGE!" shouted back the hundreds of men in the room. An excited murmur followed, then the room once again fell quiet.

"In honor of your exploits today," the King bellowed, "I grant you a great gift."

The King gestured, and an attendant stepped forward, wearing a long, black gauntlet, on which sat a magnificent falcon. It turned and stared right Thor—as if he knew him.

It took Thor's breath away. It was the exact falcon from his dream, with its silver body and the single black stripe running down its forehead.

"The falcon is the symbol of our kingdom, and of our Royal family," MacGil boomed. "It is a bird of prey, of pride and honor. Yet it is also a bird of skill, of cunning. It is loyal, and fierce, and it soars above all other animals. It is also a sacred creature. It is said that he who owns a falcon is also owned by one. It will guide you on all your ways. It will leave you, but it will always come back. And now, it is yours."

The falconer stepped forward, placed a heavy, chainmail gauntlet onto Thor's hand and wrist, then placed the bird on it. Thor felt electrified, having it on his arm. He could hardly move. He was shocked by its weight; it was a struggle just to hold still as the bird fidgeted on his wrist. He felt its talons digging in, though luckily he only felt pressure, as he was protected by the gauntlet. The bird turned, stared right at him, and screeched. Thor felt it looking into his eyes, and he felt a mystical connection to the animal. He just knew it would be with him all his days.

"And what shall you name her?" the King asked, in the thick silence of the room.

Thor racked his brain, which was too frozen to even work.

He tried to think quickly. He summoned in his mind all the names of all the famed warriors of the kingdom. He turned and scanned the walls, and saw a series of plaques with all the names of battles, all the places of the kingdom. His eyes rested on one particular place. It was a place in the Ring where he had never been, but which he had always heard was a mystical, powerful place. It sounded right to him.

"I shall call her Estopheles," Thor called out.

"Estopheles!" the crowd echoed, sounding pleased.

The falcon screeched as if in response.

Suddenly, Estopheles flapped her wings and flew up high, all the way to the apex of the cathedral ceiling, and out an open window. Thor watched her go.

"Don't worry," the falconer said, "she shall always return to you."

Thor turned and looked at the King. He had never been given a gift in his life, much less one of this stature. He hardly knew what to say, how to thank him. He was overwhelmed.

"My liege," he said, lowering his head. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You already have," MacGil said.

The crowd cheered, and the tension in the room was broken. A spirited conversation broke out among the men, and so many knights approached Thor, he hardly knew which way to turn.

"That is Algod, of the Eastern Province," Reece said, introducing him to one.

"And this is Kamera, of the Low Marshes.... And this, Basikold, of the Northern Forts...."

Soon, the names became a blur. Thor was overwhelmed. He could hardly believe that all these knights wanted to meet him. He had never felt so accepted or honored anytime in his life and he had a feeling that a day like this would never come again. It was the first time in his life he had a feeling of self-worth.

And he could not stop thinking of Estopheles.

As Thor turned every which way, greeting people whose names flowed by, names he could hardly grasp onto, a messenger hurried over, slipping between the knights. He carried a small scroll, which he pressed into Thor's palm.

Thor rolled it open and read the fine, delicate handwriting:

## Meet me in the back courtyard. Behind the gate.

Thor could smell a delicate fragrance emanating from the pink scroll, and was puzzled as he tried to figure out who it was from. It bore no signature.

Reece leaned over, read it over his shoulder, and laughed.

"It seems my sister has taken a fancy to you," he said, smiling. "I would go if I were you. She hates to be kept waiting."

Thor felt himself blush.

"The rear courtyard is through those gates. Hurry. She's known to change her mind quickly." Reece smiled as he looked at him. "And I'd love to have you in my family."

#### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thor tried to follow Reece's directions as he wound his way through the crowded castle, but it was not easy. This castle had too many twists and turns, too many hidden back doors, and too many long corridors that seemed to lead only to more corridors.

He ran through Reece's directions in his head as he descended yet another small set of steps, turned down another corridor, and finally stopped before a small arched door with a red handle—the one Reece had told him about—and pushed it open.

Thor hurried outside and was struck by the strong light of the summer day; it felt good to be outdoors, out of that stuffy castle, breathing fresh air, the sun on his face. He squinted, his eyes adjusting in the bright light, and took in the sight. Before him sprawled the royal gardens, stretching as far as the eye could see, hedges perfectly trimmed in different shapes, forming neat rows, trails winding amidst them. There were fountains, unusual trees, orchards ripe with early summer fruits, and fields of flowers of every size and shape and color. The sight took his breath away. It was like walking into a painting.

Thor looked everywhere for a sign of Gwendolyn, his heart pounding. This rear courtyard was empty, and Thor assumed it was probably reserved for the royal family, set off from the public with its high, stone garden walls. And yet, he looked everywhere and could not find her.

He wondered if her note was a hoax. That was probably it. She was probably just making fun of him, the country bumpkin, amusing herself at his expense. After all, how could someone of her rank really have any interest in him?

Thor looked down and read her note again, then rolled it back up in shame. He had been made fun of. What a fool he was to get his hopes up like that. It hurt him deeply.

Thor turned and prepared to head back into the castle, head lowered. Just as he reached for the door, a voice rang out.

"And where are you going?" came the joyful voice. It sounded like a bird's song.

Thor wondered if he was imagining it. He spun, searching, and there she was, sitting in the shade beneath a castle wall. She smiled back, dressed in her royal finest, layers of white satin dress with pink trim. She looked even more beautiful than he'd remembered.

It was her. Gwendolyn. The girl Thor had been dreaming about since they had met, with her almond, blue eyes and long strawberry hair, with her smile that lit his heart. She wore a large white-and-pink hat, shading her from the sun, beneath which her eyes sparkled. For a moment he felt like turning around to make sure that there was no one else standing behind him.

"Um..." Thor began. "I...um...don't know. I...um...was going inside."

Once again, he was finding himself flustered around her, finding it hard to collect his thoughts and articulate them.

She laughed, and it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

"And why would you be doing that?" she asked, playful. "You just arrived."

Thor was flustered. His tongue was tied.

"I...um...couldn't find you," he said, embarrassed.

She laughed again.

"Well, I'm right here. Aren't you going to come and get me?"

She held out a single hand; Thor rushed over to her, reached down, and took her hand. He was electrified by the touch of her skin, so smooth and soft, her frail hand fitting perfectly inside of his. She looked up at him and let her hand linger there a moment, before slowly rising. He loved the feel of her fingertips in his palm and hoped she would never take them away.

She withdrew her hand, then placed her arm in his, locking arms. She began to walk, leading the way down the series of winding trails. They walked along a small cobblestone path, and soon they were inside a labyrinth of hedges, protected from outside view.

Thor was nervous. Perhaps he, a commoner, would get in trouble, walking like this with the King's daughter. He felt a light sweat break out on his forehead, and did not know if it was from the heat or from her touch.

He wasn't sure what to say.

"You've caused quite a stir here, haven't you?" she said with a smile. He was grateful she broke the awkward silence.

Thor shrugged. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

She laughed. "And why wouldn't you mean to? Isn't it good to cause a stir?"

Thor was stymied. He hardly knew how to respond. It seemed as if he always said the wrong thing.

"This place is so stuffy and boring anyway," she said. "It's nice to have a newcomer. My father seems to have taken quite a liking to you. So has my brother."

"Um...thanks," Thor replied.

He was kicking himself, dying inside. He knew he should say more, and he wanted to. He just did not know what to say.

"Do you..." he began, racking his brain for the right thing to say, "...like it here?"

She leaned back and laughed.

"Do I like it here?" she asked. "But I should hope so. I live here!"

She laughed again and Thor felt himself redden. He felt that he was really messing things up. But he wasn't raised around girls, had never had a girlfriend in his village, and just didn't know what to say to her. What could he ask her? Where are you from? He already knew where she was from. He started to wonder why she bothered with him; was it just for her amusement?

"Why do you like me?" he asked.

She looked back at him, and made a funny sound.

"You are a presumptuous boy," she chuckled. "Who says I like you?" she asked with a huge smile. Clearly, everything he said amused her.

Thor now felt as if he'd gotten himself into deeper trouble.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I was just wondering. I mean...um...I know you don't like me."

She laughed harder.

"You are amusing, I have to give you that. I take it you've never had a girlfriend, have you?" Thor looked down and shook his head, humiliated.

"I assume no sisters, either?" she pressed.

Thor shook his head.

"I have three brothers," he blurted out. Finally, at least, he had managed to say something normal.

"Do you?" she asked. "And where are they? Back in your village?"

Thor shook his head. "No, they are here, in the Legion, with me."

"Well, that must be comforting."

Thor shook his head.

"No. They don't like me. They wish I wasn't here."

It was the first time her smile dropped.

"And why wouldn't they like you?" she asked, horrified. "Your own brothers?"

Thor shrugged. "I wish I knew."

They walked a while more in silence. He was suddenly afraid that he was killing their happy mood.

"But don't worry, it doesn't bother me. It's always been that way. In fact, actually, I've met good friends here. Better friends than I've ever had."

"My brother? Reece?" she asked.

Thor nodded.

"Reece is a good one," she said. "He's my favorite in some ways. I have four brothers, you know. Three are true, and one is not. The eldest is my dad's son from another woman. My half-brother. You know him, Kendrick?"

Thor nodded. "I owe him a great debt. It is thanks to him that I have a spot in the Legion. He's a fine man."

"It's true. He's one of the finest in the kingdom. I love him as much as a true brother. And then there's Reece, who I love just as much. The other two...well.... You know how families are. Not everyone gets along. Sometimes I wonder how all of us come from the same people."

Now Thor was curious. He wanted to know more about who they were, her relationship to them, why they were weren't close. He wanted to ask her, but didn't want to pry. And she didn't seem to want to dwell on it, either. She seemed to be a happy person, a person who only liked to focus on happy things.

As they finished the labyrinth trail, the courtyard opened up to a new garden, where the grass was perfectly trimmed and designed into shapes. It was a massive game board of some sort, sprawling at least fifty feet in each direction, with huge wooden pieces, taller than Thor, placed throughout.

Gwen cried out in delight.

"Will you play?" she asked.

"What is it?" he asked.

She turned, her eyes opened wide in amazement.

"You've never played Racks?" she asked.

Thor shook his head, embarrassed, feeling more like a country rube than ever.

"It is the finest game!" she exclaimed.

She reached out with her two hands and took his, dragging him onto the field. She bounded off with delight; he couldn't help but smile himself. More than anything, more than the field, more than this beautiful place, it was the feel of her hands on his that electrified him. The feeling of being wanted. She *wanted* him to go with her. She *wanted* to spend time with him. Why would anyone care about him? Especially someone like her? He still felt as if this were all a dream.

"Stand over there," she said. "Behind that piece. You have to move it, and you have only ten seconds to do so."

"What do you mean move it?" Thor asked.

"Choose a direction, quickly!" she cried out.

Thor picked up the enormous wooden block, surprised at its weight. He carried it several steps, and put it down on another square.

Without hesitating, Gwen pushed her own piece over. It landed on Thor's piece and knocked it to the ground.

She cried out in delight.

"That was a bad move!" she said. "You got right in my way! You lost!"

Thor looked at the two pieces on the ground, puzzled. He didn't understand this game at all.

She laughed, taking his arm as she continued to lead him down the trails.

"Don't worry, I'll teach you," she said.

His heart soared at her words. *She'd teach him*. She wanted to see him again. To spend time with him. Was he imagining all of this?

"So tell me, what do you think of this place?" she asked, as she led him into another series of labyrinths. This one was decorated with flowers eight feet high, bursting with color, strange insects hovering over their tips.

"It is the most beautiful place I've ever seen," Thor answered truthfully.

"And why do you want to be a member of the Legion?"

"It is all I ever dreamed of," he replied.

"But why?" she asked. "Because you want to serve my father?"

Thor thought about that. He'd never really wondered why—it was always just there.

"Yes," answered. "I do. And the Ring."

"But what about life?" she asked. "Don't you want to have a family? Land? A wife?"

She stopped and looked at him; it threw him. He was frazzled. He had never considered these things before, and hardly knew how to respond. Her eyes sparkled as she glanced back at him.

"Um...I...I don't know. I never really thought about it."

"And what would your mother say about that?" she asked, playfully.

Thor's smile lowered.

"I don't have a mother," he said.

Her smile dropped again.

"What happened to her?" she asked.

Thor was about to answer her, to tell her everything. It would be the first time in his life that he had ever spoken about her to anyone. And the crazy thing was, he wanted to. He wanted, desperately, to open up to her, this stranger, and let her know everything about his deepest feelings.

But as he opened his mouth to speak, suddenly a harsh voice came from out of nowhere.

"Gwendolyn!" shrieked the voice.

They both spun to see her mother, the Queen, dressed in her finest, accompanied by her handmaids, marching right for her daughter. Her face was livid.

The Queen walked right up to Gwen, grabbed her roughly by the arm, and yanked her away.

"You get back inside right now. What did I tell you? I don't want you speaking to him ever again. Do you understand me?"

Gwen's face reddened, then transformed with anger and pride.

"Get off me!" she yelled at her mother. But it was no use; her mother kept dragging her away, and her handmaids encircled her, too.

"I said get off me!" Gwen yelled. She glanced back at Thor with a desperate, sad look, one of pleading.

Thor understood the feeling. It was one that he felt himself. He wanted to call out to her, and felt his heart breaking as he watched her get dragged away. It was like watching a future life get taken away from him, right before his eyes.

He stood there for long after she disappeared from view, staring, rooted in place, breathless. He didn't want to leave, didn't want to forget all of this.

Most of all, he did not want to imagine that he might not ever see her again.

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As Thor ambled back to the castle, still reeling from his encounter with Gwen, he was barely even aware of his surroundings. His mind was consumed by thoughts of her; he could not stop seeing her face. She was magnificent. The most beautiful and kind and sweet and gentle and loving and funny person he had ever met. He needed to see her again. He actually felt pained at the absence of her presence. He didn't understand his feelings for her, and that scared him. He barely knew her, yet he knew already that he could not be without her.

Yet at the same time, he thought back to the Queen yanking her away, and his stomach sank to think of the powerful forces standing between them. Forces that did not want them to be together, for some reason.

As he tried to get to the bottom of it, suddenly he felt a stiff hand on his chest, stopping him hard in his tracks.

He looked up to see a boy, maybe a couple of years older than him, tall and thin, dressed in the most expensive clothes he had ever seen—in royal purple and green and scarlet silks, with an elaborate feathered hat—grimacing down. The boy looked dainty, spoiled, as if raised in the lap of luxury, with softened hands and high arched eyebrows that peered down disdainfully.

"They call me Alton," the boy began. "I am the son of Lord Alton, first cousin to the King. We have been lords of the realm for seven centuries. Which entitles me to be a Duke. You, by contrast, are a *commoner*," he said, nearly spitting the word. "The royal court is for royalty. And for men of rank. Not for your kind."

Thor stood there, having no idea who this boy was or what he had done to upset him.

"What do you want of me?" Thor asked.

Alton snickered.

"Of course, you would not know. You probably don't know anything, do you? How dare you barge in here and pretend to be one of us!" he spat.

"I'm not pretending anything," Thor said.

"Well, I don't care whatever wave you washed in on. I just want to warn you, before you get any more fantasies in your head, that Gwendolyn is mine."

Thor stared back, shocked. His? He hardly knew what to say.

"Our marriage has been arranged since birth," Alton continued. "We are of the same age, and of the same rank. Plans are already in motion. Don't you dare think, even for instant, that it will be any different."

Thor felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him; he didn't even have the strength to respond.

Alton took a step closer and stared down.

"You see," he said in a soft voice, "I allow Gwen her flirtations. She has many. Every once in a while she'll take pity on a commoner, or perhaps a servant. She will allow them to be her entertainment, her amusement. You might have come to the conclusion that it is something more. But that's all it is for Gwen. You are just another acquaintance, another amusement. She collects them, like dolls. They don't mean anything to her. She's excited by the newest commoner, and after a day or two, she gets bored. She shall drop you quickly. You're nothing to her, really. And by year's end she and I will be wed. Forever."

Alton's eyes opened wide, showing his fierce determination.

Thor felt his heart breaking at his words. Were they true? Was he really nothing to Gwen? Now he was confused; he hardly knew what to believe. She had seemed so genuine. But maybe Thor had just been jumping to the wrong conclusion?

"You're lying," Thor finally said back.

Alton sneered, and then raised a single, pampered finger, and jabbed it into Thor's chest.

"If I see you near her again, I'll use my authority to call the royal guard. They will have you imprisoned!"

"On what grounds?!" Thor asked.

"I need no grounds. I have rank here. I will make one up, and it is me they will believe. By the time I'm done slandering you, half the kingdom will believe you are a criminal."

Alton smiled, self-satisfied; Thor felt sick.

"You lack honor," Thor said, uncomprehending that anyone could act with such indecency. Alton laughed, a high-pitched sound.

"I never had it to begin with," he said. "Honor is for fools. I have what I want. You can keep your honor. And I will have Gwendolyn."

### CHAPTER TWENTY

Thor walked with Reece out the arched gate of King's Court and onto the country road that led to the Legion's barracks. The guards stood at attention for them as they passed and Thor felt a great sense of belonging, like he wasn't such an outsider. He thought back to just a few days before, when a guard had chased him out of here. How much had changed, so quickly.

Thor heard a screeching and looked up to see, high overhead, Estopheles circling, looking down. She dove, and Thor, excited, held out his wrist, still wearing the metal gauntlet. But she rose again and flew off, higher and higher, though never completely out of sight. Thor wondered. She was a mystical animal, and he felt an intense connection to her that was hard to explain.

Thor and Reece continued in silence, keeping a quick pace toward the barracks. Thor knew his brethren would be awaiting him and wondered what sort of reception he would receive. Would there be envy, jealousy? Would they be mad he got all this attention? Would they make fun of him for being carried back across the canyon? Or would they finally accept him?

Thor hoped it was the latter. He was tired of struggling with the rest of the Legion and just wanted, more than anything, to belong. To be accepted as one of them.

The barracks came into sight in the distance, and Thor's mind began to be preoccupied with something else.

Gwendolyn.

Thor didn't know how much he could talk to Reece about this, given that it was his sister. But he could not get her out of his mind. He couldn't stop thinking of his encounter with that menacing royal, Alton, and wondered how much of what he said was true. A part of him feared to discuss it with Reece, not wanting to risk upsetting him somehow and losing his new friend over his sister. But another part of him had to know what he thought.

"Who is Alton?" Thor finally asked, hesitant.

"Alton?" Reece repeated. "Why do you ask of him?"

Thor shrugged, unsure how much to say.

Luckily, Reece continued.

"He's but a menacing, lesser royal. Third cousin to the King. Why? Has he been after you about something?" Then Reece narrowed his eyes. "Gwen? Is that it? I should've warned you."

Thor turned and looked at Reece, eager to hear more.

"What do you mean?"

"He's a lout. He's been after my sister since he could walk. He's certain the two of them will be wed. My mother seems to think so, too."

"Will they?" Thor asked, surprised by the urgency in his own voice.

Reece looked at him and smiled.

"My, my, you have fallen for her, haven't you?" He chuckled. "That was fast."

Thor reddened, hoping it wasn't so obvious.

"Whether or not they do would depend on my sister's feelings for him," Reece finally answered. "Unless they forced her into marriage. But I doubt my father would do that."

"And how does she feel for him?" Thor pressed, afraid he was being too nosy, but needing to know.

Reece shrugged. "You'd have to ask her, I guess. I never talk to her about it."

"But would your father force her into marriage?" Thor pressed. "Could he really do such a thing?"

"My father can do anything he wants. But that's between him and Gwen."

Reece turned and looked at Thor.

"Why all these questions? What did you talk about?"

Thor blushed, unsure what to say.

"Nothing," he said finally.

"Nothing!" Reece laughed. "Sounds like a lot of nothing to me!"

Reece laughed harder, and Thor was embarrassed, wondering if he was just imagining that Gwen liked him. Reece reached over and put a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, old mate," Reece said, "the only thing you can know for sure about Gwen is that she knows what she wants. And she gets what she wants. That's always been the case. She's as strong-willed as my father. No one can force her to do anything—or like anyone—she doesn't want. So don't worry. If she chooses you, trust me, she'll let you know. Okay?"

Thor nodded, feeling better, as always, after he talked to Reece.

He looked up and saw the huge gates to the Legion's barracks before him. He was surprised to see several of the other boys standing at the gate, as if waiting for them, and even more surprised to see them grinning, and then letting out a cheer at the sight of him. They rushed forward, grabbed Thor by the shoulders, draped their arms around him, and pulled him inside. Thor was amazed as he was swept inside in an embrace of goodwill by the others.

"Tell us about the Canyon. What's it like on the other side?" one asked.

"What was the creature like? The one that you killed?" another asked.

"I didn't kill him," Thor protested. "Erec did."

"I heard you saved Elden's life," one said.

"I heard you attacked the creature head-on. Without any real weapons."

"You're one of us now!" one yelled out, and the other kids cheered, ushering him along, as if he were their long-lost brother.

Thor could hardly believe it. The more he heard their words, the more he realized maybe they did have a point. Maybe he had been brave after all. He never really thought about it. For the first time in a long while, he was starting to feel good about himself. Most of all because now, finally, he felt like he belonged with these boys. He felt tension releasing from his shoulders.

Thor was ushered out into the main training ground, and before him stood dozens more of the Legion, along with dozens of the Silver. They, too, let out a cheer at the sight of him. They all came forward and patted him on the back.

Kolk stepped forward, and the others quieted. Thor braced himself, since Kolk never had anything but contempt for Thor. But now, to Thor's surprise, he looked down at him with a different sort of expression. While he still couldn't quite bring himself to smile, he wasn't scowling, either. And Thor could have sworn he detected something like admiration in his eyes.

Kolk stepped forward, held up a small pin of a black falcon, and pinned it on Thor's chest.

The pin of the Legion. Thor had been accepted. Finally, he was one of them.

"Thorgrin of the Southern Province of the Western Kingdom," Kolk said, gravely. "We welcome you to the Legion."

The boys let out a shout, then all rushed in, draping their arms around Thor and swaying him this way and that.

Thor couldn't even take it all in. He tried not to. He just wanted to enjoy this moment. Now, finally, there was somewhere he belonged.

Kolk turned and faced the other boys.

"Okay, boys, calm yourselves," he commanded. "Today is a special day. No more pitchforks and polish and horse crap for you. Now it's time to really train. It's weapons day."

The boys returned an excited shout, and followed Kolk as he trotted across the training field toward a huge circular building made of oak, with shining bronze doors. Thor walked with the group as they approached, an excited buzz in the air. Reece was by his side, and O'Connor came and joined them.

"Never thought I'd see you alive again," O'Connor said, smiling and clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Next time, let me wake up first, will you?"

Thor smiled back.

"What is that building?" Thor asked Reece, as they got closer. There were immense iron rivets all over the door, and the place had an imposing presence.

"The weapons house," Reece answered. "It's where they store all our arms. Every once in a while they let us get a peek, even train with some of them. Depends what lesson they want to impart."

Thor's stomach tightened as he noticed Elden coming over to them. Thor braced himself, expecting a threat—but this time, to Thor's amazement, Elden wore a look of appreciation.

"I have to thank you," he said, looking down, humbled. "For saving my life."

Thor was stumped; he had never expected this from him.

"I was wrong about you," Elden added. "Friends?" he asked.

He held out a hand.

Thor, not one to hold a grudge, gladly reached over and met his hand.

"Friends," Thor said.

"I don't take that word lightly," Elden said. "I will always have your back. And I owe you one."

With that, he turned and hurried off back into the crowd.

Thor barely knew what to make of it. He was amazed at how quickly things had changed.

"I guess he's not a complete creep," O'Connor said. "Maybe he's okay after all."

They reached the weapons house. The immense doors swung open, and Thor entered in awe. He walked slowly, neck craned, surveying the place in a broad circle, taking it all in. There were hundreds of weapons, weapons he didn't even recognize, hanging on the walls. The other boys hurried forward in an excited rush, running up to weapons, picking them up, handling them, examining them. Thor followed their example, feeling like a kid in a candy store.

He hurried over to a large halberd, hoisted the wooden shaft with two hands, and felt its weight. It was massive, well oiled. The blade was worn and notched, and he wondered if it had killed any men in battle.

He set it down and picked up a spiked flail, a studded metal ball attached to a short staff by a long chain. He held the studded wooden shaft, and felt the metal spike dangle on the end of the chain. Beside him, Reece handled a battle axe and O'Connor tested the weight of a long pike, jabbing into the air at an imaginary enemy.

"Listen up!" Kolk yelled, and they all turned.

"Today we will learn about fighting your enemy from a distance. Can anyone here tell me what weapons can be used? What can kill a man from thirty paces away?"

"A bow and arrow," somebody yelled.

"Yes," Kolk answered. "What else?"

"A spear!" someone shouted.

"What else? There are more than just these. Let's hear them."

"A slingshot," Thor added.

"What else?"

Thor racked his brain, but was running out of options.

"Throwing knives," Reece yelled.

"What else?"

The other boys hesitated. No one had any ideas left.

"There are throwing hammers," Kolk yelled, "and throwing axes. There is the crossbow. Pikes can be thrown. So can swords."

Kolk paced the room, looking over the faces of the boys, who stood rapt with attention.

"That is not all. A simple rock from the ground can be your best friend. I've seen a man, big as a bull, a war hero, killed on the spot by a throw from a rock by a craftier soldier. Soldiers often don't realize that armor can be used as a weapon, too. The gauntlet can be taken off and thrown in an enemy's face. This can stun him, several feet away. In that moment, you can kill him. Your shield can be thrown, too."

Kolk took a breath.

"It is crucial that when you learn to fight, you don't just learn to fight in the distance between you and your opponent. You must expand your fight to a much greater distance. Most people fight with three paces. A good warrior fights with thirty. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" came the chorus of shouts.

"Good. Today, we will sharpen your throwing skills. Canvass the room and grab what throwing devices you see. Each grab one and be outside in thirty seconds. Now move!"

The room erupted into a scramble, and Thor ran for the wall, searching for something to grab. He was bumped and pushed every which way by other excited boys, until he finally saw what he wanted and grabbed it. It was a small throwing axe. O'Connor grabbed a dagger, Reece a sword, and the three of them raced out with the other boys into the field.

They followed Kolk to the far side of the field, where there were lined up a dozen shields on posts.

All the boys, holding their weapons, gathered around Kolk expectantly.

"You will stand here," he boomed out, gesturing to a line in the dirt, "and aim for those shields when throwing your weapons. You will then run to the shields, retrieve a different weapon, and practice throwing that. Never choose the same weapon. Always aim for the shield. For those of you who miss a shield, you will be required to run one lap around the field. Begin!"

The boys lined up, shoulder to shoulder, behind the dirt line, and began to throw their weapons at the shields, which must have been a good thirty yards away. Thor fell in line with them. The boy beside him reached back and threw his spear, missing by a hair.

The boy turned and began to jog around the arena. As he did, a member of the King's men ran up beside him, and laid a heavy mantle of chainmail over his shoulders, weighing him down.

"Run with that, boy!" he ordered.

The boy, weighed down, already sweating, continued to run in the heat.

Thor did not want to miss the target. He leaned back, concentrated, pulled his throwing axe back, and let it go. He closed his eyes and hoped it hit its mark, and was relieved to hear the sound of it embedding itself in the leather shield. He barely made it, hitting a lower corner, but at

least he did. All around him, several boys missed and broke off into laps. The few that hit raced for the shields to grab a new weapon.

Thor reached the shields and found a long, slim throwing dagger, which he extracted, then ran back to the throwing line.

They continued to throw for hours, until Thor's arm was killing him and he had run one too many laps himself. He was dripping in sweat, as were others around him. It was an interesting exercise, to throw all sorts of weapons, to get used to the feel and weight of all different shafts and blades. Thor felt himself getting better, more used to it, with each throw. But still, the heat was oppressive, and he was getting tired. There were only a dozen boys still standing before the shields, with most of them broken off into laps. It was just too hard to hit so many times, with so many different weapons, and the laps and the heat made accuracy more difficult. Thor was gasping, and didn't know how much longer he could go on. Just when he felt he was about to collapse, suddenly, Kolk stepped forward.

"Enough!" he yelled.

The boys returned from their laps and collapsed on the grass. They lay there, panting, breathing hard, removing the heavy coats of chain mail that had been draped on them. Thor, too, sat down in the grass, arm exhausted, dripping with sweat. Some of the King's men came around with buckets of water and dropped them on the grass. Reece reached out, grabbed one, drank from it, then handed it to O'Connor, who drank and handed it to Thor. Thor drank and drank, the water dripping down his chin and chest. The water felt amazing. He breathed hard as he handed it back to Reece.

"How long can this go on?" he asked.

Reece shook his head, gasping. "I don't know."

"I swear they're trying to kill us," came a voice. Thor turned and saw Elden, who had come up and sat beside him. Thor was surprised to see him there, and it sank in that Elden truly wanted to be friends. It was odd to see such a change in his behavior.

"Boys!" Kolk yelled, walking slowly between them. "More of you are missing your marks now, late in the day. As you can see, it is harder to be accurate when you're tired. That's the point. During battle, you will not be fresh. You will be exhausted. Some battles can go on for days. Especially if you are attacking a castle. And it is when you're at your most tired that you must make your most accurate throw. Often you will be forced to throw whatever weapon is at your disposal. You must be an expert in every weapon, and in every state of exhaustion. Is that understood?"

"YES SIR!" they shouted back.

"Some of you can throw a knife, or a spear. But that same person is missing with a hammer or axe. Do you think you can survive by throwing one weapon?"

"NO SIR!"

"Do you think this is just a game?"

"NO SIR!"

Kolk grimaced as he paced, kicking boys in the back who he felt were not sitting up straight enough.

"You've rested long enough," he said. "Back on your feet!"

Thor scrambled to his feet with the others, his legs weary, not sure how much more of this he could stand.

"There are two sides to distance fighting," Kolk continued. "You can throw—but so can your enemy. He may not be safe at thirty paces away—but you may not be, either. You must learn how to defend yourself at thirty paces. Is that understood?"

"YES SIR!"

"To defend yourself from a throwing object, you will need to not only be aware and quick on your feet, to duck, or roll, or dodge—but to also be adept at protecting yourself with a large shield."

Kolk gestured, and a soldier brought out a huge, heavy shield. Thor was amazed—it was nearly twice his size.

"Do I have a volunteer?" Kolk asked.

The group of boys was quiet, hesitant, and without thinking, Thor, swept up in the moment, raised his hand.

Kolk nodded, and Thor hurried forward.

"Good," Kolk said. "At least one of you is dumb enough to volunteer. I like your spirit, boy. A stupid decision. But good."

Thor was beginning to wonder if he really had made a stupid decision as Kolk handed him the huge metal shield. He fastened it to one arm, and could not believe how heavy it was. He was barely able to lift it.

"Thor, your mission is to run from this end of the field to the other. Unscathed. See those fifty boys facing you?" Kolk said to Thor. "They are all going to throw weapons at you. Real weapons. Do you understand? If you do not use your shield to protect you, you may die before you make it to the other side."

Thor stared back in disbelief. The crowd of boys grew very quiet.

"This is not a game," Kolk continued. "This is very serious. Battle is serious. It is life-and-death. Are you sure you still want to volunteer?"

Thor nodded, too frozen in terror to say anything else. He could hardly change his mind at this point, not in front of everyone.

"Good."

Kolk gestured to an attendant, who stepped forward and blew a horn.

"Run!" Kolk screamed.

Thor hoisted the heavy shield with two hands, grasping it with all that he had. As he did, he felt a resounding thud, so severe it shook his skull. It must have been a metal hammer. It didn't pierce the shield, but it sent an awful shock throughout his system. He nearly dropped the shield, but forced himself to grasp it and move on.

Thor began to run, hobbling as fast as he could with the shield. As weapons and missiles flew past him, he forced himself to huddle within the shield as best he could. The shield was his lifeline. And as he ran, he learned how to stay within it.

An arrow flew by him, missing him by a fraction of an inch, and he pulled his chin back tighter. Another heavy object slammed against the shield, hitting him so hard he stumbled back several feet and collapsed to the ground. But Thor got back on his feet and continued to run. With a supreme effort, gasping for air, finally he crossed the field.

"Yield!" Kolk yelled.

Thor dropped the shield, dripping in sweat. He was beyond grateful he had reached the other side; he didn't know if he could've held that shield for another moment.

Thor hurried back to the others, many of whom gave him looks of admiration. He wondered how he had survived.

"Nice work," Reece whispered to him.

"Any other volunteers?" Kolk called out.

There was dead silence among the boys. After watching Thor, no one else wanted to try.

Thor felt proud of himself. He wasn't sure if he would have volunteered knowing what it entailed, but now that it was over, he was glad that he did it.

"Fine. Then I will volunteer for you," Kolk yelled. "You! Saden!" he called out, pointing to someone.

An older, thin boy stepped forward, looking terrified.

"Me?" Saden said, his voice cracking.

The other boys laughed at him.

"Of course you. Who else?" Kolk said.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I would rather not."

A horrified gasp arose among the Legion.

Kolk approached him, grimacing.

"You don't do what you want," Kolk growled. "You do what I tell you to do."

Saden stood frozen, looking scared to death.

"He shouldn't be here," Reece whispered to Thor.

Thor turned and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"He comes from a noble family, and they placed them here. But he doesn't want to be here. He's not a fighter. Kolk knows that. I think they're trying to break him. I think they want him out."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot," Saden said, sounding terrified.

"You can," Kolk screamed, "and you will!"

There was a frozen, tense standoff.

Saden looked down to the ground, hanging his chin in shame.

"I am sorry, sir. Give me some other task, and I will gladly do it."

Kolk turned red in the face, storming toward him until he was inches from his face.

"I will give you another task, boy. I don't care who your family is. From now on, you will run. You will run around this field until you collapse. And you will not come back until you volunteer to take up this shield. Do you understand me?"

Saden looked as if he were about to burst into tears, as he nodded back.

A soldier came over, draped chainmail over Saden, and then another soldier draped a second set of chainmail on him. Thor could not understand how he could bear the weight of it. He could barely run with one of them.

Kolk leaned back and kicked Saden hard in the rear, and he went stumbling forward and began his long, slow jog around the field. Thor felt bad for him. As he watched him hobble around, he couldn't help but wonder if the boy would survive the Legion.

Suddenly a horn was sounded, and Thor turned to see a company of the King's men ride up on horseback, a dozen of the Silver with them, holding long spears and wearing feathered helmets. They stopped before the Legion.

"In honor of the King's daughter's wedding day, and in honor of the summer solstice, the King has declared the rest of today a hunting day!"

All the boys around Thor erupted into a huge cheer. As one, they broke off into a sprint, following the horses as they turned and charged across the field.

"What's happening?" Thor asked Reece, as he began to run with the others.

Reece wore a huge smile on his face.

"It's a godsend!" he said. "We're off for the day! We get to hunt!"

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

Thor jogged down the forest trail with the others, holding the spear that had been handed to him for the hunt. Beside him were Reece, O'Connor, and Elden, along with at least fifty other members of the Legion. In front of them rode a hundred Silver, on horseback and in light armor, some carrying short spears, but most with bows and arrows slung over their backs. Running on foot amongst them were dozens of squires and attendants.

Riding at the front was King MacGil, looking as huge and proud as ever, an excited grin on his face. He was flanked by his sons, Kendrick and Gareth, and, Thor was surprised to see, even Godfrey. Dozens of pages ran amongst them, a few of them leaning back and blowing horns made of long ivory tusks; others yanked at baying dogs, who anxiously ran forward to keep up with the horses. It was complete mayhem. As the huge group charged through the forest, they began to split off in every direction, and Thor hardly knew where they were going, or which group to follow.

Erec rode close by, and Thor and the others decided to follow his trail. Thor ran up beside Reece.

"Where are we going?" he asked Reece, out of breath as they ran.

"Deep into the wood," Reece called back. "The King's men aim to bring back days' worth of game."

"Why are some of the Silver on horses and others on foot?" O'Connor asked Reece.

"Those on horses are hunting the easier kill, such as deer and fowl," Reece responded. "They use their bows. Those on foot aim for the more dangerous animals. Like the yellowtail boar."

Thor was both excited and nervous at the mention of the animal. He had seen one growing up; it was a nasty and dangerous creature, known to tear a man in two with little provocation.

"The oldest warriors tend to stay on horseback and go after deer and birds," Erec added, looking down. "The younger tend to stay on foot, and go after the bigger game. You have to be in better shape for it, of course."

"Which is why we allow this hunt for you boys," Kolk, running with the others not far away, yelled out, "it is training for you, too. You will have to be on foot the entire hunt, keep up with the horses. As we go, you will break off into smaller groups, and each fork down your own path, and each hunt down your own animal. You will find the most vicious animal you can—and you will fight it to the death. These are the same qualities that make you a soldier: stamina, fearlessness, and not backing down from your adversary, no matter how big or how vicious. Now go!" he screamed.

Thor ran faster, as did all of his brethren, racing to catch up to the horses as they tore through the forest. He hardly knew which way to go, but he figured if he stuck close to Reece and O'Connor, he would be okay.

"An arrow, quick!" Erec yelled down.

Thor burst into action, running up beside Erec's horse, grabbing an arrow from the quiver on the saddle, and handing it up to him. Erec placed it on his bow as he rode, slowed, and took steady aim at something in the woods.

"The dogs!" Erec screamed.

One of the King's attendants released a barking dog, which dove into the bushes. To Thor's surprise, a large bird flew up, and as it did, Erec let loose the arrow.

It was a perfect shot, right to the neck, and the bird fell down, dead. Thor was amazed at how Erec had spotted it.

"The bird!" Erec yelled out.

Thor ran, grabbed the dead bird, warm, blood oozing from its neck, and ran back to Erec. He slung it on Erec's saddle to hang there as he rode.

All around Thor, many knights on horseback were doing the same, flushing birds and shooting them down for their squires to retrieve. Most used arrows; some used spears. Kendrick pulled back his spear, took aim, and hurled it at a deer. It was a perfect strike, right into its throat, and it fell, too.

Thor was amazed at the abundance of game in these woods, the amount of bounty they would be bringing home. It would be enough to feed King's Court for days.

"Have you been on a hunt before?" Thor called out to Reece, narrowly avoiding being trampled by one of the King's men as they ran. It was hard to hear, with the barking of the dogs, the horns sounding, and the screams of men, laughing, victorious, as they took down animal after animal.

Reece had a big smile on his face as he jumped over a log and continued running.

"Many times! But only because of my father. They don't let us join the hunt until a certain age. It's a thrilling thing—although no one tends to get out of it unscathed. More than one man has been hurt, or killed, chasing boar."

Reece gasped as he ran. "But I've always ridden on horseback," he added. "I've never been allowed to be on foot before, with the Legion, never allowed to hunt boar. It is a first for me!"

The forest suddenly changed, with dozens of trails stretching out before them, each splitting in a dozen ways. Another horn sounded, and the huge group began to break up into smaller groups.

Thor stuck close to Erec, and Reece and O'Connor joined them; they all turned onto a narrow path that curved sharply downward. They ran and ran, Thor clutching his spear tight as he jumped a small creek. Their small group comprised Erec and Kendrick on horseback, Thor, Reece, O'Connor, and Elden on foot, making six of them—and as Thor turned, he noticed two more members of the Legion running up behind them, joining them. They were large and broad, with wavy sandy hair that fell past their eyes, and big smiles. They looked to be a couple of years older than Thor—and they were identical twins.

"I am Conval," one of them called out to Thor.

"And I Conven."

"We are brothers," Conval said.

"Twins!" Conven added.

"Hope you don't mind if we join you," Conval said to Thor.

Thor had seen them around in the Legion, but had never met them before. He was happy to meet new members, especially members who were friendly to him.

"Happy to have you," Thor called out.

"The more hands the better," Reece echoed.

"I hear the boars in this wood are huge," Conval remarked.

"And deadly," Conven added.

Thor looked at the long spears the twins carried, three times longer than his, and wondered. He noticed them looking at his short spear.

"That spear won't be long enough," Conval said

"These boars have big tusks. You need something longer," Conven said.

"Take mine," Elden said, running to Thor and offering his spear.

"I can't take yours," Thor said. "What would you use?"

Elden shrugged. "I'll be okay."

Thor was touched at his generosity, and marveled at how different their friendship was now.

"Take one of mine," ordered a voice.

Thor looked up and saw Erec ride up beside him, gesturing to the saddle, which held two long spears.

Thor reached out and grabbed a long spear from the saddle, grateful to have it. It was heavier, and more awkward to run with—but he did feel more protected, and it sounded like he would need it.

They ran and ran, until the air burned in Thor's lungs and he did not know if he could go any farther. He was alert, looking about him for any sign of an animal. He felt protected with these other men around him, and invincible with a long spear. But he was still very much on edge. He had never hunted a boar before, and had no idea what to expect.

As his lungs burned, the forest broke open into a clearing and thankfully, Erec and Kendrick pulled their horses to a stop. Thor assumed that granted them all permission to stop, too. They all stood there, the eight of them in the forest clearing, the boys on foot gasping for air, and Erec and Kendrick dismounting from their horses. The horses panted, but otherwise it was quiet, the only sound the wind in the trees. The noise of the hundreds of other men racing through the forest was now gone, and Thor realized they must be very far from the others.

He looked around the clearing, panting.

"I haven't seen any markings of animals," Thor said to Reece. "Have you?"

Reece shook his head.

"The boar is a crafty animal," Erec said, stepping forward. "He won't always show himself. Sometimes he'll be the one watching you. He might wait until you're caught off guard, and then he'll charge. Always keep your guard up."

"Look out!" O'Connor yelled.

Thor spun and suddenly a large animal burst into the clearing with a huge commotion; Thor flinched, thinking they were being attacked by a boar. O'Connor screamed, and Reece turned and hurled a spear at it. It missed, and the animal flew up into the air. It was then that Thor realized it was just a turkey, disappearing back into the wood.

They all laughed, the tension broken. O'Connor reddened, and Reece laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, friend," he said.

O'Connor looked away, embarrassed.

"There are no boar here," Elden said. "We chose a bad path. The only thing down this path are fowl. We will come back empty-handed."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing," said Conval. "I hear a boar fight can be life-and-death."

Kendrick calmly surveyed the wood; Erec did the same. Thor could see on the faces of these two men that something was out there. He could tell from their experience and wisdom they were on guard.

"Well, the trail seems to end here," Reece said. "So if we go on, the wood will be unmarked. We won't find our way back."

"But if we go back, our hunt is over," O'Connor said.

"What would happen if we should return empty-handed?" Thor asked. "Without a boar?"

"We would be the laughingstock of the others," Elden said.

"No we wouldn't," Reece said. "Not everyone finds a boar. In fact, it's more rare to find one than not."

As the group of them stood there in silence, breathing hard, watching the woods, Thor suddenly realized he had drunk too much water. He had been holding it in the entire hunt and now he had such a pain in his bladder, he could barely contain it.

"Excuse me," he said, and began make to his way into the woods.

"Where are you going?" Erec asked, cautious.

"I just have to relieve myself. I'll be right back."

"Don't go far," Erec cautioned.

Thor, self-conscious, hurried into the woods and went about twenty paces from the others, until he found a spot just out of view.

Just as he finished relieving himself, suddenly, he heard a twig snap. It was loud and distinct, and he knew—he just knew—it was from no human.

He turned slowly, the hair rising on the back of his neck, and looked. Up ahead, maybe another ten paces, was another small clearing, a boulder in its center. And there, at the base of the boulder, was movement. A small animal, he could not tell what.

Thor debated whether to go back to his people or to see what it was. Without thinking, he crept forward. Whatever the animal was, he didn't want to lose it, and if he headed back, it might be gone when he returned.

Thor stepped closer, hairs on edge as the woods got thicker and there was less room to maneuver. He could see nothing but dense woods, the sun cutting at sharp angles. Finally, he reached the clearing. As he approached, he loosened his grip on his spear, and lowered it down to his hip. He was taken aback by what he saw before him in the clearing, in a patch of sunlight.

There, squirming in the grass beside the rock, was a small leopard cub. It sat there, squirming and whining, squinting into the sun. It looked as if it had just been born, barely a foot long, small enough to fit inside Thor's shirt.

Thor stood there, amazed. The cub was all white, and he knew it must be the cub of the white leopard, the rarest of all animals.

Hearing a sudden rustling of leaves behind him, he turned to see the entire group rushing toward him, Reece out front, looking worried. In moments, they were upon him.

"Where did you go?" he demanded. "We thought you were dead."

As they all came up beside him and looked down at the cub, he could hear them gasp in shock.

"A momentous omen," Erec said to Thor. "You have found the find of a lifetime. The rarest of all animals. It has been left alone. It has no one to care for it. That means it's yours. It is your obligation to raise it."

"Mine?" Thor asked, perplexed.

"It is your obligation," Kendrick added. "You found it. Or, I should say, it found you."

Thor was baffled. He had tended sheep, but he had never raised an animal in his life, and he had no idea what to do.

But at the same time, he already felt a strong kinship with the animal. Its small, light blue eyes opened and seemed to stare only at him.

He approached it, bent down, and picked it up in his arms. The animal reached up and licked his cheek.

"How does one care for a leopard cub?" Thor asked, overwhelmed.

"I suppose the same way one cares for anything else," Erec said. "Feed it when it's hungry."

"You must name it," Kendrick said.

Thor pondered, amazed that this was his second time to name an animal in as many days. He remembered a story from his childhood, about a lion that terrorized a village.

"Krohn," Thor said.

The others nodded back in approval.

"Like the legend," Reece said.

"I like it," O'Connor said.

"Krohn it is," Erec said.

As Krohn lowered its head into Thor's chest, Thor felt a stronger connection to it than to anything he'd ever had. He couldn't help but feel as if he'd already known Krohn for lifetimes as the animal squirmed and squealed at him.

Suddenly there came a distinct sound, one that raised the hair on the back of Thor's neck, and made him turn quickly and stare up at the sky.

High above, was Estopheles. It suddenly dove down low, right for Thor's head, screeching as it did, before lifting at the last second.

At first Thor wondered if it was jealous of Krohn. But then, with a split second to spare, Thor realized: his falcon was warning him.

A moment later there came a distinct noise from the other side of the wood. It was a rustling, followed by a charging—and it all happened too fast.

Because of the warning, Thor had an advantage—he saw it coming and leapt out of the way with a second to spare, as a massive boar charged right for him. It missed him by a hair.

The clearing broke into chaos. The boar charged the others, ferocious, swinging its tusks every which way. In one swipe, it managed to slice O'Connor's arm, and blood burst out as he clutched it, screaming.

It was like trying to fight a bull, but without the proper weapons. Elden tried to jab it with his long spear, but the boar merely turned its head, clamped down on it with its enormous mouth, and in one clean motion bit it in two. Then the boar turned and charged Elden, hitting him in the ribs; luckily for Elden, he narrowly missed being torn apart by its tusks.

This boar was unstoppable. It was out for blood, and it would clearly not leave them alone until it had it.

The others rallied and broke into action. Erec and Kendrick drew their swords, as did Thor, Reece, and the others.

They all encircled the beast, but it was hard to hit, especially with its three-foot-long tusks that kept them from getting anywhere close to it. It ran in circles, chasing them around the clearing. As they each took turns attacking, Erec scored a direct hit, slashing it on its side; but this boar must have been made of steel, because it just kept going.

That was when everything changed. For a brief moment, something caught Thor's eyes, and he turned and looked into the forest. In the distance, hidden behind the trees, he could have sworn he saw a man with a black, hooded cloak; he saw him raise a bow and arrow and aim it right for the clearing. He seemed to be aiming not at the boar, but at the men.

Thor wondered if he were seeing things. Could they be under attack? Here? In the middle of nowhere? By whom?

Thor allowed his instincts to take over. He sensed that the others were in danger, and he raced for them. He saw the man aiming his bow for Kendrick.

Thor dove for Kendrick. He tackled him hard, knocking him to the ground, and as he did so, a moment later the arrow flew by, just missing him.

Thor immediately looked back to the forest, looking for signs of the attacker. But he was gone.

But he had no time to think; the boar was still sprinting madly about the clearing, only feet away from them. Now it turned in their direction, and Thor had no time to react. He braced himself for the impact as the long, sharp tusks bore down directly for him.

A moment later there came a high-pitched squeal; Thor turned to see Erec leaping onto the beast's back, raising his sword high with both hands, and plunging it into the back of its neck. The beast roared, blood squirting from its mouth as it buckled to its knees, then crashed down to the ground, Erec on top of it. It came to a halt just feet away from Thor.

Everyone stood frozen in place, looking at each other—and wondering what on earth just happened.

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

Thor, carrying Krohn inside his shirt, was overwhelmed by the noise as Reece opened the door to the alehouse. A huge group of waiting Legion members and soldiers, crammed inside, met them with a shout. It was packed and hot inside, and Thor was immediately sandwiched in between his brethren, shoulder to shoulder. It had been a long day of hunting, and they had all gathered here, at this alehouse deep in the woods, to celebrate. The Silver had led the way, and Thor, Reece and the others followed.

Behind Thor, the twins, Conval and Conven, carried their prize possession, the boar, bigger than anyone else's, on a long pole over their shoulders. They had to set it down outside the tavern doors before coming in. Thor took a last glance back; it looked so fierce, it was hard to conceive they had killed it.

Thor felt a squirm inside his jacket and looked down to see his new companion, Krohn. He could hardly believe he was actually carrying a white leopard pup. It stared up at him with its crystal blue eyes and squeaked. Thor sensed he was hungry.

Thor was jostled inside the alehouse, dozens more men streaming in behind him, and he proceeded deeper into the small, crowded place, which must have been twenty degrees warmer in here—not to mention more humid. He followed Erec and Kendrick, and in turn was followed by Reece, Elden, the twins, and O'Connor, whose arm was bandaged from the boar's slice, but had finally stopped bleeding. O'Connor seemed more dazed than hurt. His good spirits had returned, and their whole group shuffled deep into the room.

It was packed shoulder to shoulder, so tight that there was barely room to even turn. There were long benches, and some men stood, while others sat, singing drinking songs and banging their tankards into their friends', or banging them on the table. It was a rowdy, festive environment, and Thor had never seen anything like it.

"First time in an alehouse?" Elden asked, practically shouting to be heard.

Thor nodded back, feeling like a rube once again.

"I bet you've never even had a tankard of ale, have you?" asked Conven, clapping him on the shoulder with a laugh.

"Of course I have," Thor shot back defensively.

He was blushing, though, and hoped no one could tell, because, in fact, he had never truly had ale, aside from the small sip at the wedding. His father had never allowed ale in the house. And even if he did, he was sure he couldn't afford it.

"Very good then!" cried out Conval. "Bartender, give us a round of your strongest. Thor here is an old pro!"

One of the twins put down a gold coin. Thor was amazed at the money these boys carried; he wondered what family they hailed from. That coin could have lasted his family a month back in his village.

A moment later a dozen tankards of foaming ale were slid across the bar, and the boys pushed their way through and grabbed them; a cask got shoved into Thor's hand. The foam dripped over the side of his hand, and his stomach twisted in anticipation. He was nervous.

"To our hunt!" Reece called out.

"TO OUR HUNT!" the others echoed.

Thor followed the others, trying to act natural as he raised the foaming liquid to his lips. He took a sip, and hated the taste, but saw the others gulping theirs down, not removing them from their lips until they finished. Thor felt obliged to do the same, or else look like a coward. He forced himself to drink it, gulping it down as fast he could, until finally, halfway through, he set it down, coughing.

The others looked at him, and roared with laughter. Elden clapped him on the back.

"It is your first time, isn't it?" he asked.

Thor reddened as he wiped foam from his lips. Luckily, before he could reply, there came a shout in the room, and they all turned to see several musicians shove their way in. They started playing on lutes and flutes, clanging cymbals, and the rowdy atmosphere heightened.

"My brother!" came a voice.

Thor turned to see a boy a few years older than him, with a small belly yet broad shoulders, unshaven, looking somewhat slovenly, step forward and embrace Reece in an awkward hug. He was joined by three companions, who seemed equally slovenly.

"I never thought I'd find you here!" he added.

"Well, once in a while I need to follow in my brother's footsteps, don't I?" Reece shouted back with a smile. "Thor, do you know my brother, Godfrey?"

Godfrey turned and shook Thor's hand, and Thor could not help but notice how smooth and plump it was. It was not a warrior's hand.

"Of course I know the newcomer," Godfrey said, leaning in too close and slurring his words. "The whole kingdom is alive with talk of him. A fine warrior I hear," he said to Thor. "Too bad. What a waste of a talent for the alehouse!"

Godfrey leaned back and roared with laughter, and his three companions joined him. One of them, a head taller than the others, with a huge belly, bright red cheeks, and flush with drink, leaned forward and clamped a hand on Thor's shoulder.

"Bravery is a fine trait. But it sends you to the battlefield, and keeps you cold. Being a drunk is a better trait: it keeps you safe and warm—and assures a warm lady by your side!"

He roared with laughter, as did the others, and the bartender set down fresh tankards of ale for all of them. Thor hoped he wouldn't be asked to drink; he could already feel the ale rushing to his head.

"It was his first hunt today!" Reece yelled out to his brother.

"Was it then?" Godfrey replied. "Well then that calls for a drink, doesn't it?"

"Or two!" his tall friend echoed.

Thor looked down as another cup was shoved into his palm.

"To firsts!" Godfrey called out.

"TO FIRSTS!" the others echoed.

"May your life be filled with firsts," the tall one echoed, "except for the first time being sober!"

They all roared with laughter as they drank.

Thor sipped his, then tried to get away with lowering it—but Godfrey caught him.

"That's not the way you drink it, boy!" Godfrey yelled. He stepped forward, grabbed the tankard, put it to Thor's lips, and the men all laughed as Thor gulped it down. He set it down, empty, and they cheered.

Thor felt lightheaded. He was beginning to feel out of control, and it was harder to focus. He didn't like the feeling.

Thor felt another squirm in his shirt, as Krohn reared his head.

"Well, what have we here!" Godfrey shouted in delight.

"It's a leopard cub," Thor said.

"We found it on the hunt," Reece added.

"He's hungry," Thor said. "I'm not sure what to feed him."

"Why, of course, ale!" the tall man yelled.

"Really?" Thor asked. "Is that healthy for him?"

"Of course!" Godfrey yelled. "It is just hops, boy!"

Godfrey reached out, dipped his finger into the foam, and held it out; Krohn leaned forward and licked it up. He licked again and again.

"See, he likes it!"

Godfrey suddenly retracted his finger with a scream. He held it up and showed blood.

"Sharp teeth on that one!" he yelled out—and the others all broke into laughter.

Thor reached down, stroked Krohn's head, and tilted the remnant of his drink into the leopard's mouth. Krohn lapped it up, and Thor resolved to find him real food. He hoped Kolk would let him stay in the barracks and that none of the Legion would object.

The musicians changed their song, and several more friends of Godfrey's appeared. They came over, joined them in a fresh round of drinks, and led Godfrey away, back into the crowd.

"I will see you later, young man," Godfrey said to Reece, before leaving. Then he turned to Thor: "Hopefully you'll spend more time in the alehouse!"

"Hopefully you'll spend more time on the battlefield," Kendrick called back.

"I very much doubt that!" Godfrey said and roared with laughter with the rest of his compatriots, as he disappeared into the crowd.

"Do they always celebrate like this?" Thor asked Reece.

"Godfrey? He's been in the alehouse since he could walk. A disappointment to my father. But he's happy with himself."

"No, I mean the King's men. The Legion. Is there always a trip to the alehouse?"

Reece shook his head.

"Today is a special day. The first hunt, and the summer solstice. This doesn't happen that often. Enjoy it while it does."

Thor was feeling increasingly disoriented as he looked around the room. This was not where he wanted to be. He wanted to be back in the barracks, training. And his thoughts drifted, once again, to Gwendolyn.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Kendrick asked, as he came up to Thor.

Thor looked at him, puzzled.

"The man in the woods, who shot the arrow?" Kendrick added.

The others crowded around close, trying to hear as the mood grew serious.

Thor tried again to remember, but he could not. Everything was fuzzy.

"I wish I did," he said. "It all happened so fast."

"Maybe it was just one of the King's other men, shooting in our direction by accident," O'Connor said.

Thor shook his head.

"He wasn't dressed like the others. He wore all black, and a cloak and hood. And he only shot one arrow, aimed right for Kendrick, then disappeared. I'm sorry. I wish I saw more."

Kendrick shook his head, trying to think.

"Who would want you dead?" Reece asked Kendrick.

"Was it an assassin?" O'Connor asked.

Kendrick shrugged. "I have no enemies that I know of."

"But Father has many," Reece said. "Maybe someone wants to kill you to get to him."

"Or maybe someone wants you out of the way for the throne," Elden postulated.

"But that's absurd! I'm illegitimate! I cannot inherit the throne!"

While they all shook their heads, sipping their ale and trying to figure it out, there came another shout in the room, and all the men's attention turned toward the staircase leading upstairs. Thor looked up and saw a string of women walk out of an upper hallway, stand by a banister, and look down at the room. They were all scantily dressed and wore too much makeup.

Thor blushed.

"Well, hello, men!" called the lady in front, with a large bosom and wearing a red lace outfit. The men cheered.

"Who's got money to spend tonight?" she asked.

The men cheered again.

Thor's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Is this also a brothel?" he asked.

The others turned and looked at him in stunned silence, then all broke into laughter.

"My God, you are naïve, aren't you!" Conval said.

"Tell me you've never been to a brothel?" Conven said.

"I bet he's never been with a woman!" Elden said.

Thor felt them all looking at him, and he felt his face turn red as a beet. He wanted to disappear. They were right: he had never been with a woman. But he would never tell them that. He wondered if it was obvious from his face.

Before he could respond, one of the twins reached up, clasped a firm hand on his back, and threw a gold coin up to the woman on the stairs.

"I believe you have your first customer!" he yelled.

The room cheered, and Thor, despite his pushing and pulling and resisting, felt himself shoved forward by dozens of men, through the crowd and up the staircase. As he went, his mind filled with thoughts of Gwen. Of how much he loved her. Of how he didn't want to be with anyone else.

He wanted to turn and run. But there was literally no escape. Dozens of the biggest men he had ever seen shoved him forward, and did not allow retreat. Before he knew it, he was up the steps, on the landing, staring at a woman taller than he, who wore too much perfume and smiled down at him. Making matters worse, Thor was drunk. The room was positively spinning out of control, and he felt that in another moment he would collapse.

The woman reached down, pulled Thor's shirt, led him firmly into a room, and slammed the door behind them. Thor was determined *not* to be with her. He held in his mind thoughts of Gwen, forcing them to the front. This was not how he wanted his first experience to be.

But his mind was not listening. He was so drunk, he could barely see now. And the last thing he remembered, before he blacked out, was being led across the room, toward a lady's bed, and hoping he made it before he hit the floor.

### **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

MacGil peeled open his eyes, awakened by the relentless pounding on his door, and immediately wished he hadn't. His head was splitting. Harsh sunlight shone in through the open castle window, and he realized his face was planted in his sheepskin blanket. Disoriented, he tried to remember. He was home, in his castle. He tried to summon the night before. He remembered the hunt. Then an alehouse in the woods. Drinking way too much. Somehow, he must have made it back here.

He looked over and saw his wife, the Queen, sleeping beside him under the covers and slowly rousing.

The pounding came again, the awful noise of an iron knocker slamming.

"Who could that be?" she asked, annoyed.

MacGil was wondering the same thing. He specifically remembered leaving instructions with his servants not to wake him—especially after the hunt. There'd be hell to pay for this.

It was probably his steward, with another petty financial matter.

"Stop that bloody banging!" MacGil finally bellowed, rolling out of bed, sitting with his elbows on his knees, hand in his head. He ran his hands through his unwashed hair and beard, then over his face, trying to wake himself up. The hunt—and the ale—had taken a lot out of him. He wasn't as limber as he used to be. The years had taken their toll; he was exhausted. At this moment, he felt like never drinking again.

With a supreme effort he pushed himself up off his knees and to his feet. Dressed only in his robe, he quickly crossed the room and finally reached the door, a foot thick, grabbing the iron handle and yanking it back.

Standing there was his greatest general, Brom, flanked by two lieutenants. The lieutenants lowered their heads in deference, but his general stared right at him, a grim look on his face. MacGil hated it when he wore that look. It always meant somber news. It was at moments like these that he hated being King. He had had such a good day yesterday, a great hunt, and it had reminded him of when he was young and carefree. Especially wasting the night away like that in the alehouse. Now, to be rudely awakened like this, it took away any illusion of peace he had had.

"My liege, I am sorry to wake you," Brom said.

"You should be sorry," MacGil growled. "This better be important."

"It is," he said.

King MacGil spotted the seriousness of his face, and turned and checked back over his shoulder for his Queen. She had gone back to sleep.

MacGil gestured for them to enter, then led them across his vast bedroom and through another arched door, to a side chamber, shutting the door behind them so as not to disturb her. He sometimes used this smaller room, no greater than twenty paces in each direction, with a few comfortable chairs and a big stained-glass window, when he didn't feel like going down to the Great Hall.

"My liege, our spies have told us of a McCloud contingent of men riding east, for the Fabian Sea. And our scouts in the south report a caravan of Empire ships heading north. Surely they must be heading there to meet the McClouds."

MacGil tried to process this information, his brain moving too slowly in his drunken state.

"And?" he prodded, impatient, tired. He was so exhausted by the endless machinations and speculations and subterfuges of his court.

"If the McClouds are truly meeting with the Empire, there can only be one purpose," Brom continued. "To conspire to breach the Canyon and overthrow the Ring."

MacGil looked up at his old commander, a man whom he had fought alongside for thirty years, and could see the deadly seriousness in his eyes. He could also see fear. That disturbed him; this was not a man he had ever seen fear anything.

MacGil slowly rose to his full height, which was still considerable, and turned and walked across the room until he reached the window. He looked out, surveying his court below, empty in the early morning, and pondered. He knew, all along, that one day a day like this would come. He just had not expected it to come so soon.

"That was quick," he said. "It's been but days since I married off my daughter to their prince. And now you think they already conspire to overthrow us?"

"I do, my liege," Brom responded sincerely. "I see no other reason. All indications are it is a peaceful meeting. Not a military one."

MacGil slowly shook his head.

"But it does not make sense. They could not let the Empire in. Why would they? Even if for some reason they managed to help lower the Shield on our side and open a breach, then what would happen? The Empire would overwhelm them as well. They would not be safe, either. Surely, they know this."

"Maybe they are going to strike a deal," Brom retorted. "Maybe they will let the Empire in, in return for their attacking us only, so that the McClouds can control the Ring."

MacGil shook his head.

"The McClouds are too smart for that. They are crafty. They know that the Empire cannot be trusted."

His general shrugged.

"Maybe they want control of the Ring so badly, they are willing to take that chance. Especially now that they have your daughter as their Queen."

MacGil thought about this. His head was pounding. He did not want to deal with this now. Not so early in the morning.

"So then what do you propose?" he asked, short with him, tired of all the speculation.

"We could preempt this, sire, and attack the McClouds. The time is now."

MacGil gaped at him.

"Right after I gave my daughter to them in a wedding? I don't think so."

"If we don't," Brom countered, "we allow them to dig our grave. Surely they will attack us. If not now, then later. And if they join with the empire, we would be finished."

"They cannot cross the Highlands so easily. We control all the choke points. It would be a slaughter. Even with the Empire in tow."

"The Empire have millions of men to spare," Brom responded. "They can afford to be slaughtered."

"Even with the Shield down," MacGil said, "it would not be so easy to just march millions of soldiers across the Canyon—or across the Highlands, or to approach by ship. We would spot such mobilization far in advance. We would have warning."

MacGil thought.

"No, we will not attack. But for now, we can take a prudent step: double our patrols at the Highlands. Strengthen our fortifications. And double our spies. That will be all."

"Yes, my liege," Brom said, turning and hurrying from the room with his lieutenants.

MacGil turned back to the window, his head pounding. He sensed war on the horizon, coming at him with the inevitability of a winter storm. He sensed, further, that there was nothing he could do about it. He looked all around him, at his castle, at the stone, at the pristine royal court spread out beneath him, and could not help but wonder how long all this would last.

What he would give for another drink.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Thor felt a foot nudging him in his ribs and slowly peeled opened his eyes. He lay face down on a mound of straw, and for a moment had no idea where he was. His head felt like it weighed a million pounds, his throat was drier than it had ever been, and his eyes and head were killing him. He felt as if he'd fallen off a horse.

He was nudged again, and as he sat up, the room spun violently. He leaned over and threw up, gagging again and again.

A chorus of laughter erupted all around him, and he looked up to see Reece, O'Connor, Elden, and the twins hovering close by, looking down.

"Finally, sleeping beauty wakes!" Reece called out, smiling.

"We didn't think you'd ever rise," O'Connor said.

"Are you okay?" Elden asked.

Thor sat up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, trying to process it all. As he did, Krohn, lying a few feet away, whimpered and ran over to him, jumping into his arms and burying his head in his shirt. Thor was relieved to see him, and happy to have him at his side. He tried to remember.

"Where am I?" Thor asked. "What happened last night?"

The three of them laughed.

"I'm afraid you had one drink too many, my friend. Someone can't hold his ale. Don't you remember? The alehouse?"

Thor closed his eyes, rubbed his temples, and tried to bring it all back. It came in flashes. He remembered the hunt...entering the alehouse...the drinks. He remembered being led upstairs...the brothel. After that, it was all black.

His heart quickened as he thought of Gwendolyn. Had he done anything stupid with that girl? Had he ruined his chances with Gwen?

"What happened?" he pressed Reece, serious, as he clasped his wrist. "Please, tell me. Tell me I didn't do anything with that woman."

The others laughed, but Reece stared back at his friend earnestly, realizing how upset he was.

"Don't worry, friend," he answered. "You did nothing at all. Except for throw up and collapse on her floor!"

The others laughed again.

"So much for your first time," Elden said.

But Thor felt deeply relieved. He had not alienated Gwen.

"Last time I buy you a woman!" said Conval.

"Perfectly good waste of money," said Conven. "She wouldn't even return it!"

The boys laughed again. Thor was humiliated, but relieved he had not ruined anything. He took Reece's arm and pulled him aside.

"Your sister," he whispered, urgently. "She doesn't know about any of this, does she?" Reece broke into a slow smile as he put an arm around Thor's shoulder.

"Your secret is safe with me, even though you didn't do anything. She doesn't know. And I can see how deeply you care for her, and I appreciate that," he said, his face morphing into a

serious expression. "I can see now that you really do care for her. If you had gone whoring, that would not be the kind of brother-in-law I would want. In fact, I have been asked to deliver you this message."

Reece shoved a small scroll into Thor's palm, and Thor looked down, confused. He saw the royal stamp on it, the pink paper, and he knew. His heart quickened.

"From my sister," Reece added.

"Whoa!" came a chorus of voices.

"Someone's got a love letter!" O'Connor said.

"Read it to us!" Elden yelled.

The others chimed in with laughter.

But Thor, wanting privacy, hurried off to the side of the barracks, away from the others. His head was splitting, and the room still spun—but he didn't care anymore. He unrolled the delicate parchment and read the note with trembling hands.

"Meet me at Forest Ridge at midday. Don't be late. And don't call attention to yourself."

Thor stuffed the note into his pocket.

"What does it say, lover boy?" Conven called out.

Thor hurried over to Reece, knowing he could trust him.

"The Legion has no exercises today, right?" Thor asked.

Reece shook his head. "Of course not. It's a holiday."

"Where is Forest Ridge?" Thor asked.

Reece smiled. "Ah, Gwen's favorite place," he said. "Take the eastern road out of the court and stay right. Climb the hill, and it begins after the second knoll."

Thor looked at Reece.

"Please, I don't want anyone to know."

Reece smiled.

"I'm sure she does not either. If my mother found out, she would kill you both. She would lock my sister in her room, and exile you to the southern end of the kingdom."

Thor gulped at the thought of it.

"Really?" he asked

Reece nodded back.

"She doesn't like you. I don't know why, but her mind is set. Go quickly, and don't tell a soul. And don't worry," he said, clasping his hand. "I won't either."

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Thor walked quickly in the early morning, Krohn scampering beside him, trying his best not to be seen. He followed Reece's directions as best he could, repeating them in his head as he hurried past the outskirts of the royal court, up a small hill, and along the edge of a thick forest. To his left, the ground fell off below him, leaving him walking on a narrow trail on the edge of a steep ridge, a cliff to his left, and the forest to his right. Forest Ridge. She had told him to meet her there. Was she serious? Or was she just playing with him?

Was that prissy royal, Alton, right? Was Thor just entertainment for her? Would she tire of him soon? He hoped, more than anything, that that was not the case. He wanted to believe her feelings for him were genuine; yet he still had a hard time conceiving how that could be the case. She barely knew him. And she was royalty. What interest could she possibly have in him? Not to mention that she was a year or two older, and he had never had an older girl take an interest in him; in fact, he had never had any girl take an interest in him. Not that there were many girls to choose from in his small village.

Thor had never thought about girls that much. He hadn't been raised with any sisters, and there were few girls his age in his village. At his age, none of the other boys seemed too concerned. Most of the boys seemed to wed around their eighteenth year, in arranged marriages—really, more like business arrangements. Men of high rank who weren't married off by their twenty-fifth year reached their Selection Day: they were obligated to either choose a bride or go out and find one. But that did not apply to Thor. He was of poor means, and people of his rank usually were just married off in ways that benefited the families. It was like trading cattle.

But when Thor had seen Gwendolyn, all that had changed. For the first time, he had been struck by something, a feeling so deep and strong and urgent it allowed him to think of nothing else. Each time he'd seen her, that feeling deepened. He hardly understood it, but it pained him to be away from her.

Thor doubled his pace along the ridge, looking for her everywhere, wondering exactly where she would meet him—or if she would meet him at all. The first sun grew higher and the first bead of sweat formed on his forehead. He still felt ill and queasy from the effects of the night before. As the sun grew even higher, and his search for her was proving futile, he began to wonder if she was really going to meet him at all. He also began to wonder just how much danger he was putting them in. If her mother, the Queen, really was so against this, would she truly have him deported from the kingdom? From the Legion? From everything he'd come to know and love? Then what would he do?

As he thought about it, he decided it was still all worth it, for the chance to be with her. He was willing to risk it all for that chance. He only hoped he wasn't being made a fool of, or rushing to any premature conclusions about how strong her feelings were for him.

"Were you just going to walk right by me?" came a voice, followed by a giggle.

Thor jumped, caught off guard, then stopped and turned. Standing in the shade of a huge pine tree, smiling back, was Gwendolyn. His heart lifted at that smile. He could see the love in her eyes, and all his worries and fears instantly melted away. He chided himself for how he could have been so stupid to ever second-guess her intentions.

Krohn squeaked at the sight of her.

"And what do have we here?!" she cried out in delight.

She knelt down and Krohn came running to her, leaping into her arms with a whimper; she picked him up and held him, caressing him.

"He's so cute!" she said, hugging him tightly. He licked her face. She giggled and kissed him back.

"And what's your name, little fellow?" she asked.

"Krohn," Thor said. Finally, this time, he was not as tongue-tied as before.

"Krohn," she echoed, looking into the cub's eyes. "And is it every day that you travel with a leopard friend?" she asked Thor with a laugh.

"I found him," Thor said, feeling self-conscious beside her, as he always did. "In the wood—on the hunt. Your brother said I should keep him, because I found him. That it was destined." She looked at him, and her expression became serious.

"Well, he is right. Animals are very sacred things. You don't find them. They find you."

"I hope you don't mind if he joins us," Thor said.

She giggled.

"I would be sad if he didn't," she answered.

She looked both ways, as if to make sure no one was watching, then reached out, grabbed Thor's hand, and pulled him into the wood.

"Let's go," she whispered. "Before someone spots us."

Thor was exhilarated at the feel of her touch, as she guided him onto the forest trail. They headed quickly into the woods, the path twisting and turning amidst the huge pines. She let go of his hand, but he did not forget the feel of it.

He was beginning to feel more confident that she actually liked him, and it was obvious she did not want to be spotted, either, probably by her mother. Clearly she took this seriously, because she had something to risk by seeing him, too.

Then again, Thor thought, maybe she just didn't want to be spotted by Alton—or by any other boys she might be with. Maybe Alton had been right. Maybe she was ashamed to be seen with Thor.

Thor felt all these mixed emotions swirl within him.

"Cat has your tongue, does it?" she asked, finally breaking the silence.

Thor felt torn; he didn't want to risk messing things up by telling her what was on his mind—but at the same time he felt like he needed to put all his worries to rest. He needed to know where she really stood. He could contain it no longer.

"When I left you last time, I ran into Alton. He confronted me."

Gwendolyn's expression darkened, her high spirits suddenly ruined—and Thor immediately felt guilty he had brought it up. He cherished her good nature, her joy, and wished he could take it back. He wanted to stop, but it was too late. There was no turning back now.

"And what did he say?" she said, her voice dropping.

"He told me to stay away from you. He told me you didn't really care about me. He told me I was just amusement for you. That you would tire of me in a day or two. He also said you and he were set to be wed, and that your marriage was already arranged."

Gwendolyn let out an angry, mocking laugh.

"Did he then?" she snorted. "That boy is the most arrogant, unbearable little pip," she added, angry. "He's been a thorn in my side since the time I could walk. Just because our parents are cousins, he thinks he's part of the royal family. I've never met anyone so entitled who deserved it less. Making things worse, he's got it into his head somehow that the two of us are destined to wed. As if I would just go along with whatever my parents forced me to do. Never. And certainly not with him. I can't stand the sight of him."

Thor felt so relieved at her words, he felt a million pounds lighter; he felt like singing from the treetops. It was exactly what he had needed to hear. Now he felt sorry he had darkened their mood all over nothing. But he wasn't completely satisfied yet; he noticed she still hadn't said anything about whether she truly liked him, Thor.

"As far as *you* are concerned," she said, stealing a glance him, then looking away. "I barely know you. I hardly need to be pressed to commit my feelings now. But I would say that I don't think I would be spending time with you if I hated you that much. Of course it is my right to change my mind as I wish, and I can be fickle—but not when it comes to love."

That was all Thor needed. He was impressed by her seriousness, and even more impressed by her choice of word: "love." He felt restored.

"And incidentally, I might also ask the same of you," she said, turning the tables. "In fact, I think I have a lot more to lose than you do. After all, I am royalty, and you are commoner. I am older and you are younger. Don't you think I should be the one who is more guarded? Whispers

come to me in the court of your agenda, your social climbing, of your just using me, being hungry for rank. Your wanting favor with the King. Should I believe all this?"

Thor was horrified.

"No, my lady! Never. These things never even entered my mind. I'm with you only because I cannot think of being anywhere else. Only because I want to be. Only because when I'm *not* with you, I think of nothing else."

A small smile played at the corner of her mouth, and he could see her expression starting to lighten.

"You are new here," she said. "You are new to King's Court, to royal life. You need time to see how things really work. Here, nobody means what they say. Everyone has an agenda. Everyone is angling for power—or rank or wealth or riches or titles. No one can ever be taken for face value. Everyone has their own spies, and factions, and agendas. When Alton told you that my marriage has already been arranged, for instance, what he was really doing was trying to find out how close you and I are. He is threatened. And he might be reporting to someone. For him, marriage doesn't mean love. It means a union. Purely for financial gain, for rank. For property. In our royal court, nothing is what it seems."

Suddenly, Krohn sprinted past them, down the forest trail and into a clearing. Gwen looked at Thor and giggled; she reached out, grabbed his hand, and ran with him. "Come on!" she yelled, excited.

The two of them ran down the trail and burst into the huge clearing, laughing. Thor was taken aback by the sight: it was a beautiful forest meadow filled with wildflowers of every possible color up to their knees. Birds and butterflies of every color and size danced and flew in the air, and the meadow was alive with the sound of chirping. The sun shone down brilliantly, and it felt like a secret place, hidden here in the midst of this tall dark wood.

"Have you ever played Hangman's Blind?" she asked with a laugh.

Thor shook his head, and before he could respond, she took a handkerchief from her neck, reached up, and wrapped it over Thor's eyes, tying it behind him. He couldn't see, and she giggled loudly in his ear.

"You're it!" she said.

Then he heard her run away in the grass.

He smiled.

"But what do I do?" he called out.

"Find me!" she called back.

Her voice was already far away.

Thor, blindfolded, began to run after her, tripping as he went. He listened carefully to the rustle of her dress, trying to follow her direction. It was hard, and he ran with his hands out before him, thinking always that he might run into a tree, even though he knew it was an open meadow. Within moments, he was disoriented, and felt as if he were running in circles.

But he continued to listen, hearing the sound of her giggle far away, and kept adjusting, running for it. Sometimes it seemed to get closer, then farther. He was beginning to feel dizzy.

He heard Krohn running beside him, yelping, and he listened instead to Krohn, following his footsteps. As he did, Gwyn's giggle got louder, and Thor realized that Krohn was leading him to her. He was amazed at how smart Krohn was, to join in their game.

Soon, he could hear her just feet away from him; he chased her, zigzagging every which way through the field. He reached out, and she screamed in delight as he caught the corner of her

dress. As he grabbed her, he tripped, and the two of them went crashing down into the soft field. He spun at the last second, so that he would fall first and she on top of him, cushioning her fall.

As Thor landed on the ground, Gwen on top of him, she screamed out in surprise. She was still giggling as she reached up and pulled back the kerchief.

Thor's heart was pounding as he saw her face just inches from his. He felt the weight of her body on his, in her thin summer dress, felt every contour of her body. The full weight of her pressed down on him, and she made no move to resist. She was staring into his eyes, their breathing shallow, and she did not look away. He did not either. Thor's heart pounded so fast, he was having a hard time focusing.

Suddenly, she leaned in and planted her lips on his. They were softer than he could possibly imagine, and as they met, for the first time in his life, he felt truly alive.

He closed his eyes, and she closed hers, and they did not move, their lips meeting for he did not know how long. He wanted to freeze this time.

Finally, slowly, she pulled away. She still smiled, as she slowly opened her eyes, and she still lay there, her body on his.

They lay like that for a long time, staring into each other's eyes.

"Where did you come from?" she asked, softly, smiling.

He smiled back. He did not know how to answer.

"I'm just a regular boy," he said.

She shook her head and smiled.

"No you are not. I can sense it. I suspect you are far, far more than that."

She leaned in and kissed him again, and his lips met hers, this time, for a much longer time. He reached up and ran his hand through her hair, and she ran hers through his. He could not stop his mind from racing.

He already wondered how this would end. Could they possibly be together, with all the forces between them? Was it possible for them to really be a couple?

Thor hoped, more than anything in his life, that they could. He wanted to be with her now, even more than he wanted to be in the Legion.

As he was thinking these thoughts, there came a sudden rustling in the grass, and the two of them, startled, turned. Krohn leapt through the grass, just feet away, and there came another rustling noise. Krohn yelped, then growled—then there came a hissing noise. Finally, it was quiet.

Gwen rolled off Thor as they both sat up and looked. Thor jumped to his feet, protective of Gwen, wondering what it could be. He didn't see anyone. But someone—or something—must be there, just feet away, in the tall grass.

Krohn appeared before them, and in his mouth, in his small, razor-sharp teeth, there dangled a huge, limp white snake. It must have been ten feet long, its skin a brilliant, shining white, as thick as a large tree branch.

Thor realized in an instant what had happened: Krohn had spared the two of them from an attack by this deadly reptile. His heart rushed with gratitude for the cub.

Gwen gasped.

"A Whiteback," she said. "The most lethal reptile in the entire kingdom."

Thor stared at it in awe.

"I thought this snake did not exist. I thought it was just a legend."

"It is very rare," Gwen said. "I've only see one in my lifetime. The day my father's father was killed. It is an omen."

She turned and looked at Thor.

"It means death is coming. The death of someone very close."

Thor felt a chill on his spine. A sudden cold breeze ran through the meadow on this summer day, and he knew, with absolute certainty, that she was right.

#### **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

Gwendolyn walked alone through the castle, taking the spiral staircase, twisting and turning her way to the top. Her mind raced with thoughts of Thor. Of their walk. Of their kiss. And then, of that snake.

She burned with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, she had been elated to be with him; on the other, she was terror-stricken by that snake, by the omen of death it brought. But she did not know for whom, and she could not get that out of her mind either. She feared it was for someone in her family. Could it be one of her brothers? Godfrey? Kendrick? Could it be her mother? Or, she shuddered to even think, her father?

The sight of that snake had cast a somber shadow on their joyous day, and once their mood had been shattered, they had been unable to get it back. They had made their way back together to the court, parting ways right before they came out of the woods, so they would not be seen. The last thing she wanted was for her mother to catch them together. But Gwen would not give up Thor so easily, and she would find a way to combat her mother; she needed time to figure out her strategy.

It had been painful to part with Thor; thinking back on it, she felt bad. She had meant to ask him if he would see her again, had meant to make a plan for another day. But she had been in a daze, so distraught by the sight of that snake that she had forgotten. Now she worried that he thought she didn't care for him.

The second she had arrived at King's Court, her father's servants had summoned her. She had been ascending the steps ever since, her heart beating, wondering why he wanted to see her. Had she had been spotted with Thor? There could be no other reason her father wanted to see her so urgently. Was he, too, going to forbid her to see him? She could hardly imagine that he would. He had always taken her side.

Gwen, nearly out of breath, finally reached the top. She hurried down the corridor, past the attendants who snapped to attention and opened the door for her to her father's chamber. Two more servants, waiting inside, bowed at her presence.

"Leave us," her father said to them.

They bowed and hurried from the room, closing the door behind them with a reverberating echo

Her father rose from his desk, a big smile on his face, and ventured toward her across the vast chamber. She felt at ease, as she always did, at the sight of him, and felt relieved to see no anger in his expression.

"My Gwendolyn," he said.

He held out his arms and embraced her in a big hug. She embraced him back, and he directed her to two huge chairs, placed on an angle beside the roaring fire. Several large dogs, wolfhounds, most of whom she had known since childhood, got out of their way as they walked toward the fire. Two of them followed her, and rested their heads in her lap. She was glad for the fire: it had become unusually cold for a summer day.

Her father leaned in toward the fire, staring at the flames as they crackled before them.

"You know why I have summoned you?" he asked.

She searched his face, but still was not sure.

"I do not, Father."

He looked back in surprise.

"Our discussion the other day. With your siblings. About the kingship. That is what I wanted to discuss with you."

Gwen's heart soared with relief. This was not about Thor. It was about politics. Stupid politics, which she could not care less about. She sighed in relief.

"You look relieved," he said. "What did you think we were going to discuss?"

Her father was too perceptive; he always had been. He was one of the few people who could read her like a book. She had to be careful around him.

"Nothing, Father," she said quickly.

He smiled again.

"So, then, tell me. What do you think of my choice?" he asked.

"Choice?" she asked.

"For my heir! To the kingdom!"

"You mean me?" she asked.

"Who else?" he laughed.

She blushed.

"Father, I was surprised, to say the least. I am not the firstborn. And I am a woman. I know nothing of politics. And care nothing for them—or for ruling a kingdom. I have no political ambition. I do not know why you chose me."

"It is precisely for those reasons," he said, his expression deadly serious. "It is because you don't aspire to the throne. You don't want the kingship. And you know nothing of politics."

He took a deep breath.

"But you know human nature. You are very perceptive. You got it from me. You have your mother's quick wit, but my skill with people. You know how to judge them; you can see right through them. And that is what a king needs. To know the nature of others. There is nothing more you need. All else is artifice. Know who your people are. Understand them. Trust your instincts. Be good to them. This is all."

"Surely, there must be more to ruling a kingdom than that," she said.

"Not really," he said. "It all stems from that. Decisions stem from that."

"But Father, you are forgetting that, first, I have no desire to rule, and second, you're not going to die. This is all just a silly tradition, linked to your eldest's wedding day. Why dwell on this? I'd rather not even speak of it, or think of it. I hope the day should never come when I see you pass—so this is all irrelevant."

He cleared his throat, looking grave.

"I have spoken to Argon, and he sees a dark future for me. I have felt it myself. I must prepare," he said.

Gwen felt her stomach tighten.

"Argon is a fool. A sorcerer. Half of what he says doesn't come to pass. Ignore him. Don't give in to his silly omens. You are fine. You will live forever."

But he slowly shook his head, and she could see the sadness in his face, and she felt her stomach tighten even more.

"Gwendolyn, my daughter, I love you. I need you to be prepared. I want you to be the next ruler of the Ring. I am serious in what I say. It is not a request. It is a command."

He looked at her with such seriousness, his eyes darkening, it scared her. She had never seen that look on her father's face before.

She felt her eyes well, and reached up and brushed away a tear.

"I am sorry to have upset you," he said.

"Then stop talking of this," she said, crying. "I don't want you to die."

"I am sorry, but I cannot. I need you to answer me."

"Father, I do not want to insult you."

"Then say yes."

"But how can I possibly rule?" she pleaded.

"It is not as hard as you think. You will be surrounded by advisors. The first rule is to trust none of them. Trust yourself. You can do this. Your lack of knowledge, your naïveté—that is what will make you great. You will make genuine decisions. Promise me," he insisted.

She looked into his eyes, and saw how much this meant to him. She wanted to get off this topic, if for no other reason than to appease his morbidity and cheer him up.

"Okay, I promise you," she said in a rush. "Does that make you feel better?"

He leaned back, and she could see him greatly relieved.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you."

"Good, now can we talk of other things? Things that might actually happen?" she asked.

Her father leaned back and roared with laughter; he seemed a million pounds lighter.

"That is why I love you," he said. "Always so happy. Always able to make me laugh."

He examined her, and she could sense he was searching for something.

"You seem unusually happy yourself," he said. "Is there a boy in the picture?"

Gwen blushed. She stood up and walked to the window, turning from him.

"I'm sorry, Father, but that is a private affair."

"It is not private if you will be ruling my kingdom," he said. "But I won't pry. However, your mother has requested an audience with you, and I assume she will not be so lenient. I will let it go. But prepare yourself."

Her stomach tightened, and she turned away, looking out the window. She hated this place. She wished she were anywhere but here. In a simple village, on a simple farm, living a simple life with Thor. Away from all of this, from all of these forces trying to control her.

She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, and turned to see her father standing there, smiling down.

"Your mother can be fierce. But whatever she decides, know that I will take your side. In matters of love, one must be allowed to choose freely."

Gwen reached up and hugged her dad. At that moment, she loved him more than anything. She tried to push the omen of that snake from her mind, praying, with all she had, that it was not meant for her father.

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Gwen twisted and turned down corridor after corridor, past rows of stained glass, heading toward her mother's chamber. She hated being summoned by her mother, hated her controlling ways. In many ways, her mother was really the one who ruled the kingdom. She was stronger than her father in many ways, stood her ground more, gave in less easily. Of course the kingdom had no idea; he put on a strong face, seemed to be the wise one.

But when he returned to the castle, behind closed doors, it was she whom he turned to for advice. She was the wiser one. The colder one. The more calculating one. The tougher one. The fearless one. She was the rock. And she ruled their large family with an iron fist. When she wanted something, especially if she got it into her head that it was for the good of the family, she made sure it happened.

And now her mother's iron will was about to be turned toward her; she was already bracing herself for the confrontation. She sensed it had something to do with her romantic life, and feared she had been spotted with Thor. But she was resolved not to back down—no matter what it took. If she had to leave this place, she would. Her mother could put her in the dungeon for all she cared.

As Gwen approached her mother's chamber, the large oak door was opened by her servants, who stepped out of the way as she entered, then closed it behind her.

Her mother's chamber was much smaller than her father's, more intimate, with large rugs and a small tea set and gaming board set up beside a roaring fire, several delicate, yellow velvet chairs beside them. Her mother sat in one of the chairs, her back to Gwen, even though she was expecting her. She faced the fire, sipped her tea, and moved one of the pieces on the game board. Behind her were two ladies-in-waiting, one tending her hair, the other tightening her strings on the back of her dress.

"Come in, child," came her mother's stern voice.

Gwen hated when her mother did this—held court in front of her servants. She wished she would dismiss them, like her father did when they spoke. It was the least she could do for privacy and decency. But her mother never did. Gwen concluded it was a power play, keeping her servants hovering around, listening, in order to keep Gwen on edge.

Gwen had no choice but to cross the room and take a seat in one of the velvet chairs opposite her mother, too close to the fire. Another of her mother's power plays: it kept her company too warm, caught off guard by the flames.

The Queen did not look up; rather, she stared down at her board game, pushing one of the ivory pieces in the complex maze.

"Your turn," her mother said.

Gwen looked down at the board; she was surprised her mother still had this game going. She recalled she had the brown pieces, but she hadn't played this game with her mother in weeks. Her mother was an expert at Pawns—but Gwen was even better. Her mother hated to lose, and she clearly had been analyzing this board for quite a while, hoping to make the perfect move. Now that Gwen was here, she made her play.

Unlike her mother, Gwen didn't need to study the board. She merely glanced at it and saw the perfect move in her head. She reached up and moved one of the brown pieces sideways, all the way across the board. It put her mother one move away from losing.

Her mother stared down, expressionless except for a flicker of her eyebrow, which Gwen knew indicated dismay. Gwen was smarter, and her mother would never accept that.

Her mother cleared her throat, studying the board, still not looking at her.

"I know all about your escapades with that common boy," she said derisively. "You defy me." Her mother looked up at her. "Why?"

Gwen took a deep breath, feeling her stomach tighten, trying to frame the best response. She would not give in. Not this time.

"My private affairs are not your business," Gwen responded.

"Aren't they? They are very much my business. Your private affairs will affect kingships. The fate of this family. Of the Ring. Your private affairs are political—as much as you would like to forget. You are not a commoner. *Nothing* is private in your world. And nothing is private from me."

Her mother's voice was steely and cold, and Gwen resented every moment of this visit. There was nothing Gwen could do but sit there and wait for her to finish. She felt trapped.

Finally, her mother cleared her throat.

"Since you refuse to listen to me, I will have to make decisions for you. You will not see that boy ever again. If you do, I will have him transferred out of the Legion, out of King's Court, and back to his village. Then I will have him put in stocks—along with his whole family. He will be cast out in disgrace. And you will never know him again."

Her mother looked up at her, her lower lip trembling in rage.

"Do you understand me?"

Gwen breathed in sharply, for the first time comprehending the evil her mother was capable of. She hated her more than she could say. Gwen also caught the nervous glances of the attendants. It was humiliating.

Before she could respond, her mother continued.

"Furthermore, in order to prevent more of your reckless behavior, I have taken steps to arrange a rational union for you. You will be wed to Alton, on the first day of next month. You may begin your wedding preparations now. Prepare for life as a married woman. That is all," her mother said dismissively, turning back to the board as if she had just mentioned the most common of matters.

Gwen seethed and burned inside, and wanted to scream.

"How dare you," Gwen said back, her rage building. "Do you think I am some puppet on a string, to be played by you? Do you really think I will marry whomever you tell me to?"

"I don't think," her mother replied. "I *know*. You are my daughter, and you answer to me. And you will marry exactly who I say you will."

"No I won't!" Gwen screamed back. "And you can't make me! Father said you can't make me!"

"Arranged unions are still the right of every parent in this kingdom—and they are certainly the right of the king and queen. Your father postures, but you know as well as I do that he will always concede to my will. I have my ways."

Her mother glared at her.

"So, you see, you will do as I say. Your marriage is happening. Nothing can stop it. Prepare yourself."

"I won't do it," Gwen responded. "Never. And if you talk to me any more of this, I will never speak to you again."

Her mother looked up and smiled at her, a cold, ugly smile.

"I don't care if you never speak to me. I'm your mother, not your friend. And I am your Queen. This may very well be our last encounter together. It does not matter. At the end of the day you will do as I say. And I will watch you from afar, as you live out the life I plan for you."

Her mother turned back to her game.

"You are dismissed," she said with a wave of her hand, as if Gwen were another servant.

Gwen so boiled over with rage, she could not take it anymore. She took three steps, marched to her mother's game board, and threw it over with both hands, sending the ivory pieces and the big ivory table crashing down and shattering to pieces.

Her mother jumped back in shock.

"I hate you," Gwen hissed.

With that, Gwen turned, red-faced, and stormed from the room, brushing off the attendants' hands, determined to walk out on her own volition—and to never see her mother's face again.

#### **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

Thor walked for hours through the winding trails of the forest, thinking about his encounter with Gwen. He could not shake her from his mind. Their time together had been magical, way beyond his expectations, and he no longer worried about the depth of her feelings for him. It was the perfect day—except, of course, for what happened at the end of their encounter.

That white snake, so rare, and such a bad omen. It was lucky they had not been bitten. Thor looked down at Krohn, walking loyally beside him, happy as ever, and wondered what would've happened if he had not been there, had not killed the snake and saved their lives. Would they both be dead right now? He was forever grateful to Krohn, and knew he had a lifelong, trusted companion in him.

Yet the omen still bothered him: that snake was exceedingly rare, and didn't even live in this portion of the kingdom. It lived farther south, in the marshes and swamps. How could it have traveled so far? Why did it have to come upon them at just that moment? It was too mystical, and he felt absolutely certain that it was a sign. Like Gwen, he felt it was a bad omen, a harbinger of death to come. But whose?

Thor wanted to push the image from his mind, to forget about it, to think of other things—but he could not. It plagued him, gave him no rest. He knew he should return to the barracks, but he had not been able to. Today was still their day off, and so instead he had walked for hours, circling the forest trails, trying to clear his mind. He felt certain the snake held some deep message just for him, that he was being urged to take some action.

Making things worse, his departure with Gwen had been abrupt. When they'd reach the forest's edge, they had parted ways quickly, with barely a word. She had seemed distraught. He assumed it was because of the snake, but he could not be sure. She had made no mention of their meeting again. Had she changed her mind about him? Had he done something wrong?

The thought tore Thor apart. He hardly knew what to do with himself, and he wandered in circles for hours. He needed to talk to someone who understood these things, who could interpret signs and omens.

Thor stopped in his tracks. Of course. Argon. He would be perfect. He could explain it all to him, and set his mind at ease.

Thor looked out. He was standing at the northern end of the farthest ridge and from here had a sweeping view of the royal city below him. He stood near a crossroads. He knew Argon lived alone, in a stone cottage on the northern outskirts of Boulder Plains. He knew that if he forked left, away from the city, one of these trails would lead him there. He began his journey.

It would be a long journey, and there was a good chance Argon would not even be there when Thor arrived. But he had to try. He could not rest until he had answers.

Thor walked with a new bounce in his step, walking double-time, heading toward the plains. Morning turned into afternoon, as he walked and walked. It was a beautiful summer day, and the light shone brilliantly on the fields all around him. Krohn bounced along at his side, stopping every now and again to pounce on a squirrel, which he carried triumphantly in his mouth.

The trail became steeper, windier, and the meadows faded, giving way to a desolate landscape of rocks and boulders. Soon, the trail, too, faded. It became colder and windier up

here, as the trees dropped away too, and the landscape turned rocky, craggy. It was eerie up here, nothing but small rocks, dirt, and boulders as far as the eye could see; Thor felt like he was journeying on a wasted earth. As the trail completely disappeared, Thor found himself walking on gravel and rock.

Beside him, Krohn began to whine. There was a creepy feeling in the air, and Thor felt it, too. It wasn't necessarily evil; it was just different. Like a heavy spiritual fog.

Just as Thor was beginning to wonder if he was heading in the right direction, he spotted on the horizon, high up on a hill, a small stone cottage. It was perfectly round, shaped as a ring, built of black, solid stone and low to the ground. It had no windows, and just a single door, shaped in an arch—yet with no knocker or handle. Could Argon really live here, in this desolate place? Would he be upset that Thor had come uninvited?

Thor was beginning to have second thoughts, but forced himself to stay on the path. As he approached the door, he felt the energy in the air, so thick he could hardly breathe. His heart beat faster with trepidation as he reached out to knock with his fist.

Before he could touch it, the door opened by itself, a crack. It looked black in there, and Thor could not tell if only the wind had pushed it open. It was so dark, he could not see how anyone could be inside.

Thor reached out, gently pushed open the door, and stuck his head in.

"Hello?" he called out.

He pushed it wider. It was completely dark in here, save for a soft glow on the far side of the dwelling.

"Hello?" he called out, louder. "Argon?"

Beside him, Krohn whined. It seemed obvious to Thor this was a bad idea, that Argon was not at home. But still he forced himself to look. He took two steps in, and as he did, the door slammed closed behind him.

Thor spun, and there, standing at the far wall, was Argon.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you," Thor said, his heart pounding.

"You come uninvited," Argon said.

"Forgive me," Thor said. "I did not mean to intrude."

Thor looked around as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and saw several small candles, laid out in a circle, around the periphery of the stone wall. The room was lit mostly by a single shaft of light, which came in through a small, circular opening in the ceiling. This place was overwhelming, stark and surreal.

"Few people have been here," Argon replied. "Of course, you would not be here now unless I allowed you to be. That door only opens for whom it is intended. For whom it is not, it would never open—not with all the strength of the world."

Thor felt better, and yet he also wondered how Argon had known he was coming. Everything about this man was mysterious to him.

"I had an encounter I did not understand," Thor said, needing to let it all out, and to hear Argon's opinion. "There was a snake. A Whiteback. It nearly attacked us. We were saved by my leopard, Krohn."

"We?" Argon asked.

Thor flushed, realizing he had said too much. He didn't know what to say.

"I was not alone," he said.

"And who were you with?"

Thor bit his tongue, not knowing how much to say. After all, this man was close to her father, the King, and perhaps he would tell.

"I don't see how that is relevant to the snake."

"It is entirely relevant. Have you not wondered if that is why the snake came to begin with?" Thor was caught completely off guard.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Not every omen you see is meant for you. Some are meant for others."

Thor examined Argon in the dim light, starting to understand. Was Gwen fated for something evil? And if so, could he stop it?

"Can you change fate?" Thor asked.

Argon turned, slowly crossing his room.

"Of course, that is the question we have been asking for centuries," Argon replied. "Can fate be changed? On the one hand, everything is destined, everything is written. On the other hand, we have free will. Our choices also determine our fate. It seems impossible for these two—destiny and free will—to live together, side by side, yet they do. It is where these two intercede—where destiny meets free will—that human behavior comes into play. Destiny can't always be broken, but sometimes it can be bent, or even changed, by a great sacrifice and a great force of free will. Yet most of the time, destiny is firm. Most of the time, we are just bystanders, put here to watch it play out. We think we play a part in it, but usually we don't. We are mostly observers, not participants."

"So then why does the universe bother showing us omens, if there's nothing we can do about them?" Thor asked.

Argon turned and smiled.

"You are quick, boy, I will give you that. Mostly, we are shown omens to prepare ourselves. We are shown our fate to give us time to prepare. Sometimes, rarely, we are given an omen to enable us to take action, to change what will be. But this is very rare."

"Is it true that the Whiteback foretells death?"

Argon examined him.

"It is," he said, finally. "Without fail."

Thor's heart pounded at the response, at the confirmation of his fears. He was also surprised by Argon's straightforward response.

"I encountered one today," Thor said, "but I don't know who will die. Or if there is some action I can take to prevent it. I want to put it out of my mind, but I cannot. Always, that image of the snake's head is with me. Why?"

Argon examined him a very long time, and sighed.

"Because whoever will die, it will affect you directly. It will affect your destiny."

Thor was increasingly agitated; he felt that every answer bred more questions.

"But that's not fair," Thor said. "I need to know who it is that will die. I need to warn them!" Slowly, Argon shook his head.

"It may not be for you to know," he answered. "And if you do know, there may still be nothing you can do about it. Death finds its subject—even if someone is warned."

"Then why was I shown this?" Thor asked, tormented. "And why can't I get it from my head?"

Argon stepped forward, so close, inches away; the intensity of his eyes burned bright in this dim place, and it frightened Thor. It was like looking into the sun, and it was all he could do not

to look away. Argon raised a hand and placed it on Thor's shoulder. It was ice to the touch and sent a chill through him.

"You are young," Argon said, slowly. "You are still learning. You feel things too deeply. Seeing the future is a great reward. But it can also be a great curse. Most humans who live out their destiny have no awareness of it. Sometimes the most painful thing is to be aware of your destiny, of what will be. You have not even begun to understand your powers. But you will. One day. Once you understand where you are from."

"Where I'm from?" Thor asked, confused.

"Your mother's home. Far from here. Beyond the Canyon, on the outer reaches of the Wilds. There is a castle, high up in the sky. It sits alone on a cliff, and to reach it, you walk along a winding stone road. It is a magical road—like ascending into the sky itself. It is a place of profound power. That is where you hail from. Until you reach that place, you will never fully understand. Once you do, all your questions will be answered."

Thor blinked, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself, to his amazement, standing outside Argon's dwelling. He had no idea how he got here.

The wind whipped through the rocky crag, and Thor squinted at the harsh sunlight. Beside him stood Krohn, whining.

Thor went back to Argon's door and pounded on it with all his might. There came nothing but silence in return.

"Argon!" Thor screamed.

He was answered only by the whistling of the wind.

He tried the door, even putting his shoulder to it—but it would not budge.

Thor waited a long time—he was not sure how long—until finally the day grew late. Finally, he realized that his time here was over.

He turned and began to walk back down the rocky slope, wondering. He felt more confused than ever, and also felt more certain that a death was coming—yet more helpless to stop it.

As he hiked in that desolate place, he began to feel something cold on his ankles and saw a thick fog forming. It rose, growing thicker and rising higher by the moment. Thor did not understand what was happening. Krohn whined.

Thor tried to speed up, to continue his way back down the mountain, but in moments the fog grew so thick, he could barely see before his eyes. At the same time, he felt his limbs grow heavy, and, as if by magic, the sky grew dark. He felt himself growing exhausted. He could not take another step. He curled up in a ball on the ground, right where he stood, enveloped in the thick fog. He tried to open his eyes, to move, but he could not. In moments, he was fast asleep.

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Thor saw himself standing at the top of a mountain, staring out over the entire kingdom of the Ring. Before him was King's Court, the castle, the fortifications, the gardens, the trees, and rolling hills as far as he could see—all in the full bloom of summer. The fields were filled with fruits and colored flowers, and there was the sound of music and festivities.

But as Thor turned slowly, surveying everything, the grass began to turn black. Fruits fell off the trees. Then the trees themselves shriveled up to nothing. All the flowers dried up to crisps, and, to his horror, one building after the next crumbled, until the entire kingdom was nothing but desolation, heaps of rubble and stone.

Thor looked down and suddenly saw a huge Whiteback slithering between his feet. He stood there, helpless, as it coiled around his legs, then his waist, then his arms. He felt himself being suffocated, the life squeezed out of him, as the snake coiled all the way around and stared at him

in the face, inches away, hissing, its long tongue nearly touching Thor's cheek. And then it opened its mouth wide, revealing huge fangs, leaned forward, and swallowed Thor's face.

Thor shrieked, then found himself standing alone inside the King's castle. It was completely empty, no throne left where one used to be. The Destiny Sword lay on the ground, untouched. The windows were all shattered, stained glass lying in heaps on the stone. He heard distant music, turned toward the sound, and walked through empty room after empty room. Finally he reached huge double doors, a hundred feet tall, and opened them with all his might.

Thor stood at the entrance to the royal feasting hall. Before him two long feasting tables stretched across the room, overflowing with food—yet empty of men. At the far end of the hall was one man. King MacGil. He sat on his throne, staring right at Thor. He seemed so far away.

Thor felt he had to reach him. He began to walk across the great room toward him, between the two feasting tables. As he went, all the food on either side of him went bad, becoming rotten with each step he took, turning black and immediately covered with flies. Flies buzzed and swarmed all around him, tearing apart the food.

Thor walked faster. The King was getting close now, hardly ten feet away, when a servant appeared out of a side chamber carrying a huge, golden goblet of wine. It was a distinctive goblet, made of solid gold and covered in rows of rubies and sapphires. While the King wasn't looking, Thor saw the servant slip a white powder into the goblet. Thor realized it was poison.

The servant brought it closer, and MacGil reached down and grabbed it with both hands. "No!" Thor screamed.

Thor lunged forward, trying to knock the wine away from the King.

But he was not fast enough. MacGil drank the wine in big gulps. It poured down his cheeks, down his chest, as he finished it.

MacGil turned and looked at Thor, and his eyes opened wide. He reached up and grabbed his throat until, gagging, he keeled over and fell off his throne; he fell sideways, landing on the hard stone floor. His crown rolled off it, hit the stone floor with a clang, and rolled several feet.

He lay there, motionless, eyes open, dead.

Estopheles swooped down, landed on MacGil's head. It sat there, looked right at Thor, and screeched. The sound was so shrill, it sent a shiver up Thor's spine.

"No!" Thor screamed.

\*

Thor woke screaming.

He sat up, looking all around, sweating, breathing hard, trying to figure out where he was. He was still lying on the ground, on Argon's mountain. He must have fallen asleep here. The fog was gone, and as he looked up he saw that it was daybreak. A blood-red sun was breaking over the horizon, lighting up the day. Beside him, Krohn whined, jumped into his lap, and licked his face.

Thor hugged Krohn with one hand as he breathed hard, trying to figure out if he was awake or asleep. It took him a long time to realize it had just been a dream. It had felt so real.

Thor heard a screech and turned to see Estopheles perched on a rock, just a foot away. The large bird looked right at him and screeched, again and again.

The sound sent a chill up Thor's spine. It was the same screech from his dream, and at that moment he knew, with every ounce of his body, that the dream had been a message.

The King was going to be poisoned.

Thor jumped to his feet and, in the breaking light of dawn, sprinted down the mountain, heading for King's Court. He had to get to the King. He had to warn him. The King might think he was crazy, but he had no choice—he would do whatever he could to save the King's life.

\*

Thor raced across the drawbridge, sprinting for the castle's outer gate, and luckily, the two guards recognized him from the Legion. They let him through without stopping, and he continued running, Krohn by his side.

Thor sprinted across the royal courtyard, past the fountains, and ran right to the inner gate of the King's castle. There stood four guards blocking his way.

Thor stopped, gasping for air.

"What is your purpose, boy?" one of them asked.

"You don't understand, you have to let me in," Thor gasped. "I need to see the King."

The guards looked at each other, skeptical.

"I am Thorgrin, of the King's Legion. You must let me through."

"I know who he is," one guard said to the other. "He's one of us."

But the lead guard stepped forward.

"What business have you with the King?" he pressed.

Thor still fought to catch his breath.

"Very urgent business. I must see him at once."

"Well, he must not be expecting you, because you are ill informed. Our King is not here. He left with his caravan hours ago, on court business. They won't be returning until tonight, until the royal feast."

"Feast?" Thor asked, his heart thumping. He remembered his dream, the feasting tables, and eerily felt it all coming to life.

"Yes, feast. If you are of the Legion, I am sure you will be there. But now he is gone, and there is no way you can see him. Come back tonight, with the others."

"But I must get him a message!" Thor insisted. "Before the feast!"

"You can leave the message with me if you like. But I can't deliver it any sooner than you."

Thor did not want to leave such a message with a guard; he realized it would seem crazy. He had to deliver it himself, tonight, before the feast. He only prayed it would not be too late.

#### **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

Thor hurried back to the Legion's barracks at the crack of dawn, luckily arriving before the day's training began. He was winded when he arrived, Krohn at his side, and he ran into the other boys just as they were waking, beginning to file out for the day's assignments. He stood there, gasping, more troubled than ever. He hardly knew how he would make it through the day's training; he would be counting down the minutes until the night's feast, until he could warn the King. He felt certain the omen came to him so that he could deliver the warning. The fate of the kingdom rested on his shoulders.

Thor ran up beside Reece and O'Connor as they made their way out to the field, looking exhausted, and began to line up.

"Where were you last night?" Reece asked.

Thor wished he knew how to respond—but he didn't really know where he had been himself. What was he supposed to say? That he had fallen asleep outside on the ground, on Argon's mountain? It made no sense, not even to him.

"I don't know," he answered, not knowing how much to tell them.

"What do you mean you don't know?" O'Connor asked.

"I got lost," Thor said.

"Lost?"

"Well, you're lucky you made it back when you did," Reece said.

"If you had come back late for the day's assignments, they wouldn't have let you back into the Legion," Elden added, coming up beside them, clapping a beefy hand on his shoulder. "Good to see you. You were missed yesterday."

Thor was still shocked at the difference in how Elden treated him since their time on the far side of the Canyon.

"How did things go with my sister?" Reece asked, in a hushed tone.

Thor blushed, unsure how to respond.

"Did you see her?" Reece prodded.

"Yes, I did," he began. "We had a great time. Although we had to leave abruptly."

"Well," Reece continued, as they all lined up side-by-side before Kolk and the King's men, "you will get to see more of her tonight. Put on your finest. It's the King's feast."

Thor's stomach dropped. He thought of his dream and felt as if destiny were dancing before his eyes—and that he was helpless, fated to do nothing but just watch it unfold.

"QUIET!" yelled Kolk, as he began to pace before the boys.

Thor stiffened with the others as they all fell silent.

Kolk walked slowly up and down the lines, surveying them all.

"You had your fun yesterday. Now it's back to training. And today, you will learn the ancient art of ditch-digging."

A collective groan rose up among the boys.

"SILENCE!" he yelled.

The boys fell quiet.

"Ditch-digging is hard work," Kolk continued. "But it is important work. You will one day find yourself out there in the wilderness, protecting our kingdom, with no one to help you. It will

be freezing, so cold you can't feel your toes, in the black of night, and you will do anything to keep warm. Or you may find yourself in a battle, in which you need to take cover to save yourself from the enemies' arrows. There may be a million reasons why you need a ditch. And a ditch may be your best friend.

"Today," he continued, clearing his throat, "you will spend all day digging, until your hands are red with calluses and your back is breaking, and you can't take it anymore. Then, on the day of battle, it will not seem as bad.

"FOLLOW ME!" Kolk yelled.

There came another groan of disappointment as the boys broke down into lines of two and began marching across the field, following Kolk.

"Great," Elden said. "Ditch-digging. Exactly how I wanted to spend the day."

"Could be worse," O'Connor said. "It could be raining."

They looked up at the sky, and Thor spotted threatening clouds overhead.

"It just might," Reece said. "Don't jinx it."

"THOR!" came a shout.

Thor turned to see Kolk glaring at him, off to the side. He ran over to him, wondering what he had done wrong.

"Yes, sire."

"Your knight has summoned you," he said curtly. "Report to Erec at the castle grounds. You're lucky: you're off duty for today. You will serve your knight instead, as all good squires should. But don't think you're getting out of ditch-digging. When you return tomorrow, you will be digging ditches by yourself. Now go!" he yelled.

Thor turned and saw the envious looks of the others, then ran from the field, heading for the castle. What could Erec want from him? Had it something to do with the King?

\*

Thor ran through King's Court, turning down a path he had never gone down before—toward the barracks of the Silver. Their barracks were much grander than those of the Legion's, their buildings twice the size, lined with copper, and their pathways paved with new stone. To get there, Thor had to pass through a large arched gate where a dozen of the King's men stood guard. The path then broadened, stretching out across a huge, open field and culminating in a complex of stone buildings encircled by a fence, and guarded by dozens more knights. It was an imposing sight, even from here.

Thor raced down the path, conspicuous in the open field. The knights already prepared for his approach, even though he was so far away, stepping forward and crossing their lances, looking straight ahead, ignoring him as they blocked his path.

"What business have you here?" one of them asked.

"I am reporting for duty," Thor responded. "I am Erec's squire."

The knights exchanged a wary look, but another knight stepped forward and nodded. They stepped back, uncrossed their weapons, and the gate slowly opened, its metal spikes rising, creaking. The gate was immense, at least two feet thick, and Thor thought that this place was even more fortified than even the King's castle.

"The second building on the right," the knight yelled. "You'll find him in the stables."

Thor turned and hurried down the path through the courtyard, passing a compound of stone buildings, taking it all in. Everything was gleaming here, spotless, perfectly maintained. The whole place exuded an aura of strength.

Thor found the building, and was dazzled by the sight before him: dozens of the biggest and most beautiful horses he'd ever seen were tied up in neat rows outside the building, most of them covered in armor. The horses gleamed. Everything here was bigger, grander.

Real knights trotted by in every direction, carrying various weapons, passing through the courtyard on their way in or out of various gates. It was a busy place, and Thor could feel the presence of battle here. This place was not about training; it was about war. Life and death.

Thor passed through a small, arched entranceway, down a darkened corridor of stone, and hurried past stable after stable, searching for Erec. Thor reached the end of it, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Looking for Erec, are you?" a guard asked.

Thor turned and nodded.

"Yes, sire. I am his squire."

"You are late. He is already outside, preparing his horse. Move quickly, then."

Thor ran down the corridor and burst out of the stables into an open field. There was Erec, standing before a giant, valiant stallion, a gleaming black horse with a white nose. The horse snorted as Thor arrived, and Erec turned.

"I am sorry, sire," Thor said, out of breath. "I came as fast as I could. I did not mean to be late."

"You are just in time," Erec said with a gracious smile. "Thor, meet Lannin," he added, gesturing to the horse.

Lannin snorted and pranced, as if in response. Thor stepped up and reached out a hand and stroked his nose; he whinnied softly in return.

"He is my journey horse. A knight of rank has many horses, as you will learn. There is one for jousting, one for battle, and one for the long, solitary journey. This is the one you forge the closest friendship with. He likes you. That is good."

Lannin leaned forward and stuck his nose in Thor's palm. Thor was overwhelmed by the magnificence of this creature. He could see intelligence shining in his eyes. It was eerie; he felt as if the horse understood everything.

But something Erec said threw Thor off.

"Did you say a journey, sire?" he asked, surprised.

Erec stopped tightening the harness, turned and looked at him.

"Today is the day of my birth. I have reached my twenty-fifth year. That is a special day. Do you know about Selection Day?"

Thor shook his head. "Very little, sire; only what others tell me."

"We knights of the Ring must always continue on, generation after generation," Erec began. "We have until our twenty-fifth year to choose a bride. If one is not chosen by then, law dictates for us to find one. We are given one year to find her, and to bring her back. If we return without one, then one is given to us by the King, and we forfeit our right to choose.

"So today, I must embark on my journey to find my bride."

Thor stared back, speechless.

"But sire, you are leaving? For one year?"

Thor's stomach dropped at the thought of it. He felt his world crumbling around him. It wasn't until this moment that he realized what a liking he had taken to Erec; in some ways, he had become like a father to him—certainly more of a father than the one he'd had.

"But then who shall I be squire to?" Thor asked. "And where will you go?"

Thor recalled how much Erec had stuck up for him, how he had saved his life. His heart sank at the idea of his leaving.

Erec laughed, a carefree laugh.

"Which question shall I answer first?" he said. "Do not worry. You have been assigned a new knight. You will be squire to him until my return. Kendrick, the King's eldest son."

Thor's heart soared to hear that; he felt an equally strong attachment to Kendrick who, after all, was the first one to look out for him and assure him a spot in the Legion.

"As far as my journey...." Erec continued, "...I do not yet know. I know I will head south, toward the kingdom that I hail from, and search for a bride in that direction. If I do not find one within the Ring, then I may even cross the sea to my own kingdom to search for one there."

"Your own kingdom, sire?" Thor asked.

Thor realized that he didn't really know that much about Erec, about where he came from. He had always just assumed he had come from within the Ring.

Erec smiled. "Yes, far from here, across the sea. But that is a tale for another time. It will be a far journey, and a long one, and I must prepare. So help me now. Time is short. Harness my horse, and stock it with all manner of weapons."

Thor's head was spinning as he sprang into action, running to the horse armory and retrieving the distinct black and silver armor that belonged to Lannin. He ran back with one piece at a time, first placing the mailcoat on the horse's back, reaching up to drape it around his huge body. Then Thor added the shaffron, the thin, plated metal for the horse's head.

Lannin whinnied as he did so, but seemed to like it. He was a noble horse, a warrior, Thor could tell, and he seemed just as comfortable in armor as a knight would.

Thor ran back and retrieved Erec's golden spurs, and helped attach one to each foot as Erec mounted the horse.

"Which weapons will you need, sire?" Thor asked.

Erec looked down, seeming huge from this perspective.

"It's hard to anticipate what battles I might encounter throughout a year. But I need to be able to hunt, and to defend myself. So of course, I need my longsword. I also should bring my shortsword, a bow, a quiver of arrows, a short spear, a mace, a dagger, and my shield. I suspect that will do."

"Yes, sire," Thor said, and broke into action. He ran to Erec's weapons rack, beside Lannin's stable, and looked over the dozens of weapons. There was an impressive arsenal to choose from.

He carefully removed all the weapons Erec specified, bringing them back one at a time and handing them to Erec or placing them securely in the harness.

As Erec sat there tightening his leather gauntlets, preparing to leave, Thor could not stand to watch him go.

"Sire, I feel it is my duty to accompany you on this journey," Thor said. "I am your squire after all."

Erec shook his head.

"It is a journey I must take alone."

"Then may I at least accompany you to the first crossing?" Thor pressed. "If you are heading south, those are roads that I know well. I am from the south."

Erec looked down, considering.

"If you want to accompany me to the first crossing, I see no harm in that. But it is a hard day's ride, so we must leave now. Take my squire's horse, in the rear of the stable. The brown one with the red mane."

Thor ran back to the stable and found the horse. As he mounted it, Krohn stuck his head out of his shirt and looked up and whined.

"It's okay, Krohn," Thor reassured.

Thor leaned forward, goaded the horse, and burst out of the stable. Erec had barely waited for him to catch up when he and Lannin raced off at a gallop. Thor followed Erec as best he could.

They rode together out of King's Court, through the gate, as several guardsmen pulled it back and stood to the side. Several members of the Silver were lined up, watching, waiting, and as Erec rode by, they raised their fists in salute.

Thor was proud to ride beside him, to be his squire, and excited to accompany him, even if it was only to the first crossing.

There was so much Thor had left to say to Erec, so many things he wanted to ask him—and so much he wanted to thank him for. But there wasn't time, as the two of them galloped south, bursting across the plains, the terrain constantly changing as their horses charged down the King's road in the late morning sun. As they passed a hill, in the distance Thor could see all the Legion members in a field, breaking their backs as they dug. Thor was glad he was not among them. As Thor watched, he saw one of them stop and raise a fist in the air toward him. It was hard to see in the sun, but he felt sure it was Reece saluting. Thor raised a fist back as they rode on.

The well-paved roads gave way to untended country roads: narrower, rougher, and eventually hardly more than well-trodden paths cutting through the countryside. Thor knew it was dangerous for common folk to ride these roads alone—especially at night, with all the thieves that lurked on them, but Thor had little worry of this himself, especially with Erec at his side—in fact, if a robber should confront them, Thor feared more for the robber's life. Of course, it would be crazy for any thief to attempt to stop a member of the Silver.

They rode all day, hardly taking a break, until Thor was exhausted, out of breath. He could hardly believe Erec's stamina—yet he dared not let Erec know he was tired, for fear of seeming weak.

They passed a major crossroads, and Thor recognized it. He knew that if they bore right, it would bring them to his village. For a moment, Thor felt overwhelmed with nostalgia, and part of him wanted to take the road, to see his father, his village. He wondered what his father was doing right now, who was tending the sheep, how irate his father must have been when Thor had not returned. Not that he cared for him much. He just momentarily missed what was familiar. He was, in fact, relieved he had escaped from that small village, and another part of him wanted to never return.

They continued galloping on, farther and farther south, to territory even Thor had never been to. He had heard of the southern crossing, though he had never had reason to be there himself. It was one of three major crossroads that led to the southern reaches of the Ring. He was a good half day's ride now from King's court, and already the sun was getting long in the sky. Thor, sweating, out of breath, was starting to wonder with trepidation if he would make it back in time for the King's feast tonight. Had he made a mistake to accompany Erec this far?

They rounded a hilltop, and finally Thor saw it, there on the horizon: the unmistakable sign of the first crossing. It was marked by a large, skinny tower, the King's flag draped from it in all four directions, and members of the Silver standing guard atop its parapets. At the sight of Erec, the knight atop the tower blew his trumpet. Slowly, the gatehouse rose.

They were but a few hundred yards away, and Erec slowed his horse to a walk. Thor had a knot in his stomach as he realized these were his last few minutes with Erec until who knew how

long. Who knew, indeed, if he would even return. One year was a long time, and anything could happen. Thor was glad, at least, that he had had this chance to accompany him. He felt as if he had fulfilled his duty.

The two of them walked side-by-side, their horses breathing hard, the men breathing hard, as they approached the tower.

"I may not see you for many moons," Erec said. "When I return, I will have a bride in tow. Things may change. Though no matter what happens, know that you will always be my squire." Erec took a deep breath.

"As I leave you, there are some things I want you to remember. A knight is not forged by strength—but by intelligence. Courage alone does not make a knight, but courage and honor and wisdom together. You must work always to perfect your spirit, your mind. Chivalry is not passive—it is active. You must work on it, better yourself, every moment of every day.

"Over these moons, you will learn all manner of weapons, all manner of skills. But remember: there is another dimension to our fighting. The sorcerer's dimension. Seek out Argon. Learn to develop your hidden powers. I have sensed them in you. You have great potential. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sire," Thor answered, welling with gratitude for his wisdom and understanding.

"I chose to take you under my wing for a reason. You are not like the others. You have a greater destiny. Greater, perhaps, even than mine. But it remains unfulfilled. You must not take it for granted. You must work at it. To be a great warrior, you must not only be fearless and skilled. You must also have a warrior's spirit, and carry that always in your heart and your mind. You must be willing to lay down your life for others. The greatest knight does not quest for riches or honor or fame or glory. The greatest knight takes the hardest quest of all: the quest to make yourself a better person. Every day, you must strive to be better. Not just better than others—but better than yourself. You must quest to take up the cause of those lesser than yourself. You must defend those who cannot defend themselves. It is not a quest for the light-hearted. It is a quest of heroes."

Thor's mind spun as he took it all in, pondering Erec's words carefully. He was overwhelmed with gratitude for him, and hardly knew how to respond. He sensed that it would take many moons for the full message of these words to sink in.

They reached the gate of the first crossing, and as they did, several members of the Silver came out to greet Erec. They rode up to him, big grins on their faces, and as he dismounted they clapped him hard on the back, as old friends.

Thor jumped down, took Lannin's reins, and led him to the keeper at the gate, to feed and rub him down. Thor stood there as Erec turned and looked at him, one last time.

In their final goodbye, there was too much Thor wanted to say. He wanted to thank him. But he also wanted to tell him everything. Of the omen. Of his dream. Of his fears for the King. He thought maybe Erec would understand.

But he could not bring himself to. Erec was already surrounded by knights, and Thor feared that Erec—and all of them—would think him crazy. So he stood there, tongue-tied, as Erec reached over and clasped his shoulder one last time.

"Protect our King," Erec said firmly.

The words sent a chill up Thor's spine, as if Erec had read his mind.

Erec turned, walked through the gate with the other knights, and as they passed through, their backs to him, the metal spikes slowly lowered behind him.

Erec was gone now. Thor felt a pit in his stomach. It could be an entire year until he saw him again.

Thor mounted his horse, grasped the reins, and kicked hard. Afternoon was here and he had a good half day's ride to make it back for the feast. He felt Erec's final words reverberating in his head, like a mantra.

Protect our King.

Protect our King.

#### **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

Thor rode hard in the darkness, racing through the final gate of King's Court, barely slowing his horse as he jumped off it, breathing hard, and handing the reins to an attendant. He had been riding all day, the sun had fallen hours before, and he could see immediately from all the torchlight inside, hear from all the reverie behind the gates, that the King's feast was in full swing. He kicked himself for being away for as long as he did, and only prayed he was not too late.

He ran to the nearest attendant.

"Is all in order inside?" he asked in a rush. He had to find out whether the King was okay—though of course he couldn't directly ask if he had been poisoned.

The attendant looked at him, baffled.

"And why shouldn't it be? All is in order, except that you are late. Members of the King's Legion should always be on time. And your clothes are filthy. You reflect poorly on your peers. Wash your hands, and hurry inside."

Thor rushed through the gate, sweating, put his hands in a small stone laver filled with water, splashed it on his face, and ran it through his longish hair. He had been in constant motion since early in the morning, he was covered in dust from the road, and it felt as if it had been ten days in one. He took a deep breath, tried to calm himself and seem orderly, and strode quickly down corridor after corridor, toward the vast doors of the feasting hall.

As he stepped inside, through the huge arched doors, it was just like his dream: before him were the two feasting tables, at least a hundred feet long, at the far end of which sat the King at the head of his own table, surrounded by men. The noise struck Thor like a living thing, the hall absolutely packed with people. There were not only the King's men, members of the Silver and of the Legion seated at the feasting tables, but also hundreds of others, bands of traveling musicians, groups of dancers, of jesters, dozens of women from the brothels.... There were also all manners of servants, of guards, dogs running about. It was a madhouse.

Men drank from huge goblets of wine and beer, and many of them stood, singing drinking songs, arms about each other, clinking casks. There were heaps of food laid out on the tables, with boar and deer and all sorts of other game roasting on spits before the fireplace. Half the room gorged themselves, while the other half mingled about the room. Looking at the chaos in the room, seeing how drunk the men were, Thor realized that if he'd arrived earlier, when it began, it would have been more orderly. Now, at this late hour, it seemed to have evolved into more of a drunken bash.

Thor's first reaction, aside from being overwhelmed, was deep relief to see that the King was alive. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was okay. He wondered again if that omen meant nothing, if his dream meant nothing, if he was just overreacting to fancies, making something bigger in his head than it should be. But still, he just could not shake the feeling. He still felt a pressing urgency to reach the King, to warn him.

Protect our King.

Thor pushed his way into the thick crowd, trying to make it the long way toward the King. It was slow going. The men were drunk and rowdy, packed shoulder to shoulder, and MacGil sat hundreds of feet away.

Thor managed to get about halfway through the crowd when he stopped, suddenly spotting Gwendolyn. She sat at one of the small tables, off to the side of the hall, surrounded by her handmaids. She looked glum, which seemed unlike her. Her food and drink were untouched, and she sat off to the side, separated from the other members of the royal family. Thor wondered what could be wrong.

Thor broke from the crowd and hurried over to her.

She looked up and saw him coming, but instead of smiling, as she always did, her face darkened. For the first time, Thor saw anger in her eyes.

Gwen slid her chair, got up, turned her back, and began to march away.

Thor felt as if a knife had been plunged into his heart. He could not understand her reaction. Had he done something wrong?

He raced around the table, hurrying over to her, and grabbed her wrist gently.

She surprised him by throwing it off roughly, turning and scowling at him.

"Don't you touch me!" she screamed.

Thor took a step back, shocked at her reaction. Was this the same Gwendolyn he knew?

"I'm sorry," he said. "I meant you no harm. And no disrespect. I just wanted to talk to you."

"I have no words left for you," she seethed, her eyes aglow with fury.

Thor could hardly breathe; he had no idea what he had done wrong.

"My lady, please tell me, what have I done to offend you? Whatever it is, I apologize."

"What you have done is beyond remedy. No apology will suffice. It is who you are."

She started to walk away again, and a part of Thor thought he should let her be; but another part of him couldn't stand to just walk away, not after what they'd had. He had to know—he had to know the reason why she hated him so much.

Thor ran in front of her, blocking her way. He could not let her go. Not like this.

"Gwendolyn, please. Just please give me one chance to at least know what it is that I have done. Please, just give me this."

She stared back, seething, hands on her hips.

"I think you know. I think you know very well."

"I do not," Thor stated earnestly.

She stared, as if summing him up, and finally, seemed to believe him.

"The night before you saw me, I am told that you visited the brothels. That you had your way with many women. And you delighted in them all night long. Then, as the sun broke, you came to me. Does that remind you? I'm disgusted by your behavior. Disgusted that I ever met you, that you ever touched me. I hope I shall never see your face again. You've made a fool of me—and *no one* makes a fool of me!"

"My lady!" Thor yelled out, trying to stop her, wanting to explain. "It isn't true!"

But a band of musicians got between them, and she darted off, slipping through the crowd so fast that he could not find her. Within moments, he completely lost trace of her.

Thor was burning inside. He could not believe that someone had gotten to her, had told her these lies about him, had turned her against him. He wondered who was behind it. It hardly mattered; his chances with her were now ruined. He was dying inside.

Thor turned and began to stagger through the room, remembering the King, feeling hollowed out, as if he had nothing left to live for.

Before he'd gone a few feet, Alton suddenly appeared, blocked his way, and sneered down with a satisfied smile. He wore silk leggings, a velvet blazer, and a feathered hat. He looked down at Thor, with his long nose and chin, and with the utmost arrogance and self-pride.

"Well, well," he said. "If it's not the commoner. Have you found your bride-to-be here yet? Of course you have not. I think rumors have spread already far and wide of your exploits in the brothel." He smiled and leaned in close, revealing small, yellow teeth. "In fact, I'm sure they have.

"You know what they say: if there's a glimmer of truth, it helps spark a rumor. I found that glimmer. And now your reputation is ruined, boy."

Thor, seething with rage, could take it no longer. He charged and punched Alton in the gut, making him keel over.

Moments later, bodies were on him, fellow Legion members, soldiers, getting in their way, pulling them apart.

"You have overstepped your bounds, boy!" Alton yelled out, pointing at him over the bodies. "No one touches a royal! You will hang in the stocks for the rest of your life! I will have you arrested! Be sure of it! At first light I will have them come for you!" Alton yelled, and turned and stormed away.

Thor couldn't care less about Alton, or his guards. He thought only of the King. He brushed the Legion members off and turned back for MacGil. He shoved people out of the way as he hurried for the King's table. His mind was swimming with emotions, and he could hardly believe this turn of events. Here he was, just as his reputation was rising, only to have it ruined by some malignant snake, to have his love cheated away from him. And now, tomorrow, the threat of being imprisoned. And with the Queen aligned against him, he feared that just maybe he would be.

But Thor didn't care about any of that now. All he cared about was protecting the King. He pushed harder as he weaved his way through the crowd, bumping into a jester, walking right through his act, and finally, after pushing through three more attendants, making it to the King's table.

MacGil sat in the center of the table, a huge skin of wine in one hand, his cheeks red, laughing at the entertainment. He was surrounded by all his top generals, and Thor stood before them, pushing his way right up to the bench, until finally, the King noticed him.

"My liege," Thor yelled out, hearing the desperation in his own voice. "I must speak with you! Please!"

A guard came to pull Thor away, but the King raised a palm.

"Thorgrin!" MacGil bellowed in his deep, kingly voice, drunk with wine. "My boy. Why have you approached our table? The Legion's table is there."

Thor bowed low.

"My King, I am sorry. But I must speak with you."

A musician clanged a cymbal in Thor's ear, and finally, MacGil gestured for him to stop. The music quieted, and all the generals turned and looked at Thor. Thor could feel all the attention on him.

"Well, young Thorgrin, now you have the floor. Speak. What is it that cannot wait till tomorrow?" MacGil said.

"My liege," Thor began, but then stopped. What could he say exactly? That he had a dream? That he saw an omen? That he felt the King would be poisoned? Would it sound absurd? But he had no choice. He had to press on.

"My liege, I had a dream," he began. "It was about you. In this feasting hall, in this place. The dream was...that you should not drink."

The King leaned forward, eyes opened wide.

"That I should not drink?" he repeated, slowly and loudly.

Then, after a moment of stunned silence, MacGil leaned back and roared with laughter, shaking the whole table.

"That I should not drink!" MacGil repeated. "What a dream is this! I should call it a nightmare!"

The King leaned back and bellowed, and all his men joined in. Thor reddened, but he could not back down.

MacGil gestured, and a guard stepped forward and grabbed Thor and began to take him away—but Thor roughly yanked the guard off of him. He was determined. He had to give the King this message.

Protect our King.

"My King, I demand that you listen!" Thor screamed, red-faced, pressing forward and banging the table with his fist.

It shook the table, and all the men's turned and stared at Thor.

There was a stunned silence, as the King's face dropped into a scowl.

"YOU demand?" MacGil yelled. "You demand nothing of me, boy!" he screamed, his anger rising.

The table quieted even more, and Thor felt his cheeks redden in humiliation.

"My King, forgive me. I mean no disrespect. But I am concerned for your safety. Please. Do not drink. I dreamt you were poisoned! Please. I care very much about you. That is the only reason for my saying so."

Slowly, MacGil's scowl lifted. He stared deeply into Thor's eyes and took a deep breath.

"Yes, I can see that you do care. Even if you are foolish boy. I forgive you your disrespect. Go on now. And don't let me see your face again until the morning."

He gestured to his guards, and they yanked Thor away, strongly this time. The table slowly resumed its merriment as they all went back to drinking.

Thor, dragged several feet away, burned with indignation. He feared for what he had done here tonight, and had a sinking feeling that tomorrow he would pay the price. Maybe even be asked to leave this place. Forever.

As the guards gave him one last shove, Thor found himself at the Legion's table, maybe twenty feet away from the King. He felt a hand on his shoulder and spun to see Reece standing there.

"I've been searching for you all day. What happened to you?" Reece asked. "You look as if you have seen a ghost!"

Thor was too overwhelmed to respond.

"Come sit with me—I saved you a seat," Reece said.

Reece pulled Thor down beside him, at a table set aside for the King's family. Godfrey had a drink in each hand, and beside him sat Gareth, watching with shifting eyes. Thor hoped beyond hope that Gwendolyn might be there, too, but she was not.

"What is it, Thor?" Reece prodded, as he sat down beside him. "You stare at this table as if it will bite you."

Thor shook his head.

"If I told you, you would not believe me. So best I just keep my mouth shut."

"Tell me. You can tell me anything," Reece urged with intensity.

Thor saw the look in his eyes, and realized that, finally, someone was taking him seriously. He took a deep breath and began. He had nothing to lose.

"The other day, in the forest, with your sister, we saw a Whiteback snake. She said it was an omen of death, and I believe it is. I went to Argon and he confirmed that a death is coming. Shortly after, I had a dream that your father would be poisoned. Here. Tonight. In this hall. I know it in my bones. He will be. Someone is trying to assassinate him," Thor said.

He said it all in a rush, and it felt good to get it off his chest. It felt good to have someone actually listen.

Reece was quiet as he stared back into his eyes for a long time. Finally, he spoke.

"You seem genuine. I have no doubt. And I appreciate your caring for my father. I believe you. I do. But dreams are tricky things. Not always what we think."

"I told the King," Thor said. "And they laughed at me. Of course, he will drink tonight."

"Thor, I believe you dreamt this. And I believe you feel this. But I've had terrible dreams, too, my entire life. The other night, I dreamt I was pushed out of the castle, and I woke feeling that I was. But I was not. Do you understand? Dreams are strange things. And Argon speaks in riddles. You must not take it all so seriously. My father is fine. I am fine. We're all fine. Try to just sit back and drink and relax. And enjoy."

With that, Reece leaned back in his chair, covered in furs, and drank. He gestured to a servant, who put a huge portion of venison before Thor, along with a drinking goblet.

But Thor just sat there, staring at his food. He felt his whole life dissolving around him. He didn't know what to do.

He could still think of nothing but his dream. It was like being in a waking nightmare, sitting there, watching everyone drink and feast around him. All he could do was watch all the drinks, all the goblets, heading for the King. He watched closely every server, every goblet of wine. Every time the King drank, Thor flinched.

Thor was obsessed. He could not look away. He watched and watched for what felt like hours.

Finally, Thor spotted one particular servant who approached the King with a goblet unlike the others. It was large, made of very distinct gold, covered in rows of rubies and sapphires.

It was the exact goblet from Thor's dream.

Thor, his heart pounding in his chest, watched with horror as the servant came closer to the King. When he was just feet away, Thor could stand it no longer. Every ounce of his body screamed this was the poisoned goblet.

Thor leapt from his table, shoved his way through the thick crowd, roughly elbowing everyone in his way.

Just as the King took the goblet into his hands, Thor leapt up onto his table, reached out, and slapped the goblet from the King's hands.

A horrified gasp filled the entire hall as the goblet flew threw the air and landed on the stone with a hard clink.

The entire hall went dead silent. Every musician, every juggler, stopped. Hundreds of men and women all turned and stared.

The King slowly stood and glowered down at Thor.

"How dare you!" shrieked the King. "You insolent little boy! I will put you in the stocks for this!"

Thor stood there, horrified. He felt the entire world crashing down on him. He just wanted to disappear.

Suddenly, a hound walked over to the puddle of wine now forming on the floor, and lapped it up. Before Thor could respond, before the room could move again, all eyes went to the hound, who started making awful, horrible noises.

A moment later, the hound froze up and fell on its side, dead. The entire room looked at the dog with a horrified gasp.

"You knew the drink was poison!" yelled a voice.

Thor turned and saw the Prince Gareth standing there, coming up beside the King, pointing accusingly at Thor.

"How could you have possibly have known it was poisoned? Unless you are the one who did it! Thor tried to poison the King!" Gareth yelled out.

The entire crowd cheered in outrage.

"Take him to the dungeon," the King commanded.

A moment later, Thor felt guards grabbing him hard from behind, dragging him through the hall. He squirmed, and tried to protest.

"No!" he screamed out. "You don't understand!"

But no one listened. He was dragged through the crowd, fast and quick, and as he went, he watched them all disappear from him, his whole life disappear from him. They crossed the hall and out a side door, the door slamming shut behind them.

It was quiet here. A moment later, Thor felt himself descending. He was being pulled by several hands down a winding stone staircase. It grew darker and darker, and soon he could hear the cries of prisoners.

An iron cell door opened, and he realized where he was being taken. The dungeon.

He squirmed, trying to protest, to break free.

"You don't understand!" he yelled.

Thor looked up and saw a guard step forward, a large, crude man with an unshaven face and yellow teeth.

He scowled down at Thor.

"Oh, I understand very well," came his raspy voice.

He pulled back his arm, and the last thing Thor saw was his fist, coming down right for his face.

Then his world was blackness.

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A MARCH OF KINGS takes us one step further on Thor's epic journey into manhood, as he begins to realize more about who he is, what his powers are, as he embarks to become a warrior. After he escapes from the dungeon, Thor is horrified to learn of another assassination attempt on King MacGil. When MacGil dies, the kingdom is set into turmoil. As everyone vies for the throne, King's Court is more rife than ever with its family dramas, power struggles, ambitions, jealousy, violence, and betrayal. An heir must be chosen from among the children, and the ancient Destiny Sword, the source of all their power, will have a chance to be wielded by someone new. But all this might be upended: the murder weapon is recovered, and the noose tightens on finding the assassin. Simultaneously, the MacGils face a new threat by the McClouds, who are set to attack again from within the Ring.

Thor fights to win back Gwendolyn's love, but there may not be time: he is told to pack up, to prepare with his brothers in arms for The Hundred, a hundred grueling days of hell that all Legion members must survive. The Legion will have to cross the Canyon, beyond the protection of the Ring, into the Wilds, and set sail across the Tartuvian Sea for the Isle of Mist, said to be patrolled by a dragon, for their initiation into manhood.

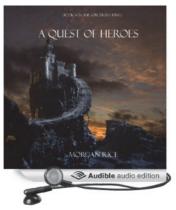
Will they make it back? Will the Ring survive in their absence? And will Thor finally learn the secret of his destiny?

With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A MARCH OF KINGS is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigue and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition, and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders.

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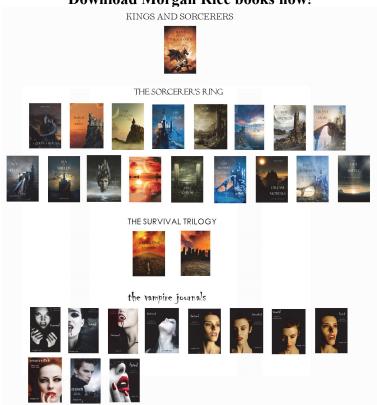
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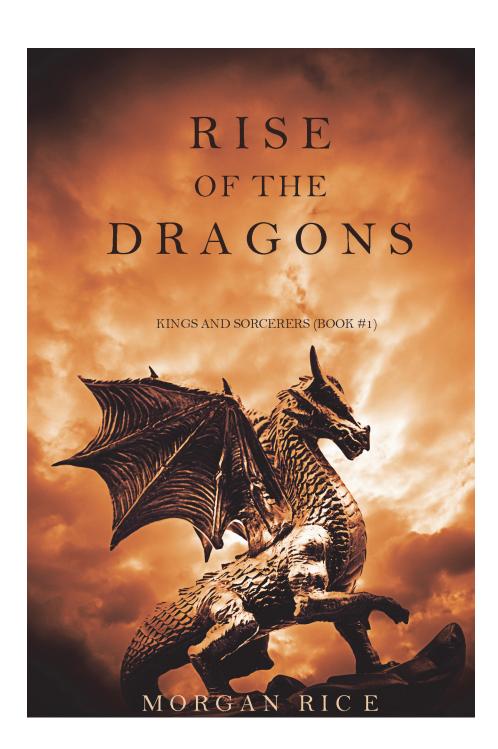
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## RISE OF THE DRAGONS

(KINGS AND SORCERERS—BOOK I)

MORGAN RICE

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--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."
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- "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

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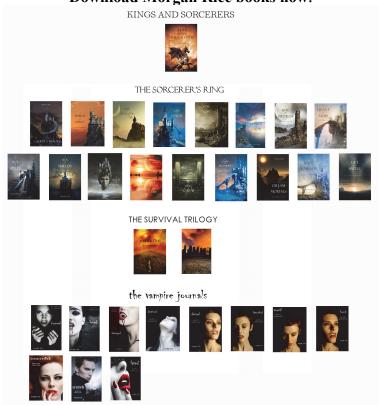
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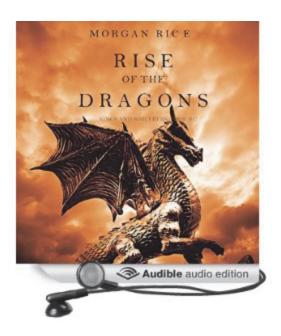
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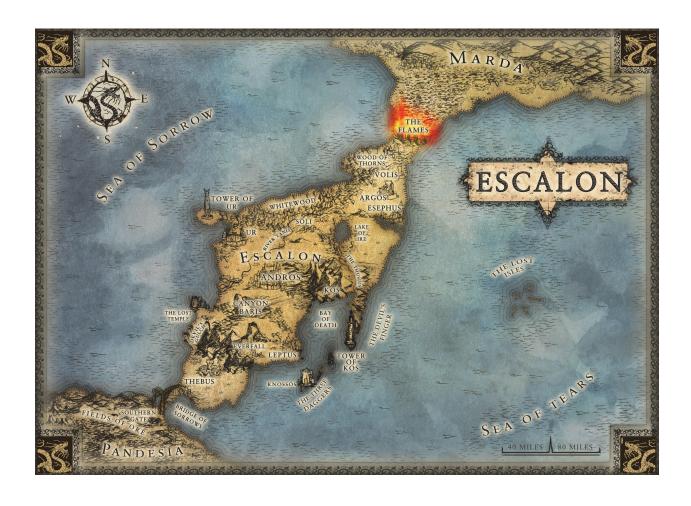
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"Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

--William Shakespeare *Julius Caesar* 

## **CHAPTER ONE**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kyra's eyes narrowed as she watched her older brothers, feeling a familiar anger rise up within her and unconsciously tightening her grip on her bow. There came Aidan, marched between them, each taller by a foot, each grabbing his arm and dragging him unwillingly away from the fort and into the countryside. Aidan, a small, thin, sensitive boy, barely ten, looked extra vulnerable sandwiched between his two brothers, overgrown brutes of seventeen and eighteen. They all had

similar features and coloring, with their strong jaws, proud chins, dark brown eyes, and wavy brown hair—though Brandon and Braxton wore theirs cropped short, while Aidan's still fell, unruly, past his eyes. They all looked alike—and none like her, with her light blonde hair and light gray eyes. Dressed in her woven tights, woolen tunic, and cloak, Kyra was tall and thin, too pale, she was told, with a broad forehead and a small nose, blessed with striking features that had led more than one man to look twice. Especially now that she was turning fifteen, she noticed the looks increasing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're old enough now," Brandon said to Aidan.

"It's past time you became a man," Braxton said.

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

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

"Are you lost?" Braxton mocked.

"You're blocking our way," Brandon said. "Go back to your arrows and your sticks."

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

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

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

They paused, their faces slowly hardening.

"We're taking him wherever we please," Brandon said.

"He's going on a hunt to learn to become a man," Braxton said, emphasizing that last word as a dig to her.

But she would not give in.

"He's too young," she replied firmly.

Brandon scowled.

"Says who?" he asked.

"Says me."

"And are you his mother?" Braxton asked.

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

"As much as you are his father," she replied.

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

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

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

"Well, there you have it," Brandon said. "He doesn't object."

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

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

They scowled back, annoyed.

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

"Any of them bite you lately?" Brandon added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, he squirmed.

"I want to hunt," he muttered half-heartedly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **CHAPTER TWO**

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

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

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

"Leo!" she called out.

But he was already gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not afraid—" Aidan insisted.

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

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

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

It was trouble.

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon and Braxton scoffed, then laughed derisively.

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

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

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

"Leave it alone!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon frowned.

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

Aidan stood silent, stunned with fear.

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

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

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

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

"And I, its throat," Braxton agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"AIDAN, GET DOWN!" she shouted.

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

"AIDAN!" she shouted again, desperate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kyra turned and saw her two older brothers, each still lying in the clearing, staring up at her with shock—and awe. But there was something else in their looks, something which unsettled her: suspicion. As if she were different from them. An outsider. It was a look Kyra had seen before, rarely, but enough times to make her wonder at it herself. She turned and looked down at the dead beast, monstrous, huge, stiff at her feet, and she wondered how she, a fifteen-year-old girl, could have done this. It went beyond skills, she knew. Beyond a lucky shot.

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

Who was she?

## **CHAPTER THREE**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kyra was hardly surprised. The festival of the Winter Moon was one of the most important holidays of the year, and all were busy preparing for the feast to come. A great throng of people pressed over the drawbridge, rushing to get their wares from vendors, to join the fort's feast—while an equal number of people rushed out of the gate, hurrying to get back to their homes to celebrate

with their families. Oxen pulled carts and carried wares in both directions, while masons banged and chipped away at yet another new wall being built to ring the fort, the sound of their hammers steady in the air, punctuating the din of livestock and dogs. Kyra wondered how they always worked in this weather, how they kept their hands from going numb.

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

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

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

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

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

Brandon and Braxton beamed proudly.

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

"How did you manage it?" asked a saddler.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But I did not!" Aidan protested.

"And they will believe you?" Braxton added.

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

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

The throngs thickened as they crossed over the bridge, soon shoulder to shoulder with the masses as they passed over the moat. Kyra could feel the excitement in the air as twilight fell, torches lit up and down the bridge, the snowfall quickening. She looked up before her and her heart quickened, as always, to see the huge, arched stone gate to the fort, guarded by a dozen of her father's men. At its top were the spikes of an iron portcullis, now raised, its sharpened points and

thick bars strong enough to keep out any foe, ready to be closed at the mere sound of a horn. The gate rose thirty feet high, and at its top was a broad platform, spreading across the entire fort, wide stone battlements manned with lookouts, always keeping a vigilant eye. Volis was a fine stronghold, Kyra had always thought, taking pride in it. What gave her even more pride were the men inside it, her father's men, many of Escalon's finest warriors, slowly regrouping in Volis after being dispersed since the surrender of their King, drawn like a magnet to her father. More than once she had urged her father to declare himself the new King, as all his people wanted him to—but he would always merely shake his head and say that was not his way.

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

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

"Kill that on your own, did you?" one of them asked Brandon, coming close and examining it. The crowd thickened and Brandon and Braxton finally stopped, taking in the praise and admiration of these great men, trying not to show how hard they were breathing.

"We did!" Braxton called out proudly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A spear point, was it?" he asked, disapproving.

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

Anvin turned to Kyra.

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

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

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

She nodded back.

"It was," she replied flatly, loving Anvin for giving her recognition, and finally feeling vindicated. "And the shot that felled it," he concluded. It was an observation, not a question, his voice hard, final, as he studied the boar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just as they were about to open their mouths, suddenly a foreign voice cut through the crowd. "Doesn't matter who killed it," came the voice. "It's ours now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The soldier glowered, staring Anvin down.

"Do you dare defy your Lord Governor?" he asked.

Anvin held his ground.

"That boar is ours—no one's giving it to you," Anvin said.

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

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

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

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

"The kill is the girl's!" came the voice.

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

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

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

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

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

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

spread quickly of his prowess, and as Merk accepted more and more payments, his abilities in killing progressed.

Merk could have become a knight, a celebrated warrior like his brothers. But he chose instead to work in the shadows. Winning was what interested him, lethal efficiency, and he had discovered quickly that knights, for all their beautiful weapons and bulky armor, could not kill half as fast or effectively as he, a lone man with a leather shirt and a sharp dagger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unlike other mercenaries, Merk had only taken on causes he believed in. It was only later in life, when he had become too good at what he did, when the payments had become too large, the people who requested him too important, that he had begun to blur the lines, to accept payment for killing those who weren't necessarily at fault—not necessarily at all. And that was what was bothering him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Merk saw he was surrounded and knew he had walked into a trap. He glanced around quickly without letting them know it, his old instincts kicking in, and he counted eight of them. They all held

daggers, all dressed in rags, with dirty faces, hands, and fingernails, all unshaven, all with a desperate look that showed they hadn't eaten in too many days. And that they were bored.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's this monk doing?" one of them asked. "Praying?"

They all burst into laughter again.

"Your god won't save you now, boy!" another exclaimed.

Merk opened his eyes and stared back at the cretin.

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

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

"Lucky for us, then!" one replied.

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

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

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

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

Merk faced their leader.

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

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

"No one's asking you what we can and can't take, boy," another said.

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

Let it go, he told himself.

"What's this?" one asked. "A dagger?"

He glared at Merk.

"What's a fancy monk like you carrying a dagger?" one asked.

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

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

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

"What's this?" the thief asked, grabbing his wrist and holding it up, examining it.

"It looks like a fox," one said.

"What's a monk doing with a tattoo of a fox?" another asked.

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

"That's no fox, you idiot," he said to his men. "It's a wolf. It's the mark of a King's man—a mercenary."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A thousand," he said.

The leader blinked back, confused.

"What?" he asked.

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

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

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

"That's a good one, boy," one said. "You're as good a liar as you are a monk."

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

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

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

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

"No, actually I don't," Merk replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

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

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

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

She came to a decision.

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

She turned derisively to the Lord's Men.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Snow's thickening," Anvin finally replied, hesitant. "Night's falling, too."

"That's not stopping you," Kyra countered.

He grinned back.

"No, it's not," he admitted.

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

Anvin sighed.

"They're preparing a mighty feast," he said. "You'd best go in."

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

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

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

Vidar smiled and shook his head.

"You sure you're a girl and not a warrior?" Vidar asked.

"Can I not be both?" she replied.

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

"Your father would have my hide," he said.

Then, finally, he nodded.

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

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

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

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

Her father, the former King's champion, a man who commanded great respect, was the only man in these times, in this fractured kingdom, that men could rally around. Indeed, when the old King had surrendered their kingdom without a fight, it was her father that people urged to assume the throne and lead the fight. Over time, the best of the former King's warriors had sought him out, and now, with the force growing larger each day, Volis was achieving a strength that nearly rivaled the capital. Perhaps that was why, Kyra realized, the Lord's Men felt the need to humble them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kyra turned to see Arthfael approaching, grinning, quick to take her side, as he always was. Like Anvin and Vidar, Arthfael, a tall, fierce warrior with a stark bald head and a long, stiff black beard, had a soft spot for her. He was one of the best swordsmen, rarely bested, and he always stood up for her. She took comfort in his presence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kill anyone yet?" came a mocking voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He glanced over at her skeptically.

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

Kyra flushed.

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

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

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

"Spar with what?" Maltren countered.

"My staff!" Kyra called out. "Against your wooden swords."

Maltren laughed.

"That would be a sight," he said.

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

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

"I won't get hurt," she pleaded.

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

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

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

Maltren scoffed.

"Let the girl make a fool of herself then," he said. "Might teach her a lesson once and for all." A horn sounded, and as another man left the circle, Kyra rushed in.

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

He turned to Anvin, frowning.

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

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

He blinked, shocked, then scowled back.

"Very well then," he said. "Don't go running to your father after you lose."

He charged at full speed, as she knew he would, raised his wooden sword hard and high, and came straight down, aiming for her shoulder. It was a move she had anticipated, one she had seen

him perform many times, one he clumsily foreshadowed by the motion of his arms. His wooden sword was powerful, but it was also heavy and clumsy next to her staff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soon there remained but a handful of men. Kyra stood in the center of the circle, breathing hard, turning in each direction to search for a new foe. Anvin, Vidar and Arthfael watched her from the sidelines, all with smiles across their faces, looks of admiration. If her father could not be there to witness this and be proud of her, at least these men could.

Kyra defeated yet another opponent, this one with a blow behind the knee, yet another horn sounded, and finally, with none left to face her, Maltren stepped out into the circle.

"A child's tricks," he spat, walking toward her. "You can spin a piece of wood. In battle, that will do you no good. Against a real sword, your staff would be cut in half."

"Would it, then?" she asked, bold, fearless, feeling the blood of her father flowing within her and knowing she had to confront this bully for all time, especially as all these men were watching her.

"Then why not try it?" she prodded.

Maltren blinked back at her in surprise, clearly not expecting that response. Then he narrowed his eyes.

"Why?" he shot back. "So you can run for your father's protection?"

"I need not my father's protection, nor anyone else's," she replied. "This is between you and me—whatever should happen."

Maltren looked over at Anvin, clearly uncomfortable, as if he had dug himself into a pit which he could not get out of.

Anvin stared back, equally disturbed.

"We spar with wooden swords here," he called out. "I won't have anyone get hurt under my watch—much less, our commander's daughter."

But Maltren suddenly darkened.

"The girl wants real weapons," he said, his voice firm, "then we shall give it to her. Perhaps she will learn a lesson for life."

Without waiting any further, Maltren crossed the field, drew his real sword from its scabbard, the sound ringing in the air, and stormed back. The tension became thick in the air, as all grew silent, none sure what to do.

Kyra faced Maltren, feeling her palms sweating despite the cold, despite a gust of wind that blew the torches sideways. She could feel the snow turning to ice, crunching beneath her boots, and she forced herself to focus, to concentrate, knowing this would be no ordinary bout.

Maltren let out a sharp cry, trying to intimidate her, and charged, raising his sword high, it gleaming in the torchlight. Maltren, she knew, was a different fighter than the others, more unpredictable, less honorable, a man who fought to survive rather than to win. She was surprised to find him swinging right for her chest.

Kyra ducked out of the way as the blade passed right by.

The crowd of men gasped, outraged, and Anvin, Vidar and Arthfael stepped forward.

"Maltren!" Anvin called out, furious, as if ready to stop it.

"No!" Kyra called back, staying focused on Maltren, breathing hard as he came at her again. "Let us fight!"

Maltren immediately spun around and swung again—and again and again. Each time, she dodged, or stepped back, or leapt over his swings. He was strong, but not as quick as she.

He then raised his sword high and brought it straight down, clearly expecting her to block and expecting to slash her staff in two.

But Kyra saw it coming and she instead sidestepped and swung her staff sideways, hitting his sword on the side of its blade, deflecting it while protecting her staff. In the same motion, she took advantage of the opening, and swung around and jabbed him in the solar plexus.

He gasped and dropped to one knee as a horn sounded.

There came a great cheer, all the men looking to her with pride as she stood over Maltren, the victor.

Maltren, enraged, looked up at her—and instead of conceding defeat as all the others had, he suddenly charged for her, raising his sword and swinging.

It was a move Kyra had not expected, assuming he would concede honorably. As he came for her, Kyra realized there were not many moves left at her disposal with such short notice. She could not get out of the way in time.

Kyra dove to the ground, rolled out of the way, and at the same time, spun around with her staff and struck Maltren behind the knees, sweeping his legs out from under him.

He landed on his back in the snow, his sword flying from his grip—and Kyra immediately gained her feet and stood over him, holding the tip of her staff down on his throat and pushing. At the same moment, Leo bounded over beside her and snarled over Maltren's face, inches away, his drool landing on Maltren's cheek, just waiting for the order to pounce.

Maltren looked up, blood on his lip, stunned and finally humbled.

"You dishonor my father's men," Kyra seethed, still enraged. "What do you think of my little stick now?"

A tense silence fell over them as she kept him pinned down, a part of her wanting to raise her staff and strike him, to let Leo loose on him. None of the men tried to stop it, or came to his aid.

Realizing he was isolated, Maltren looked up with real fear.

"KYRA!"

A harsh voice suddenly cut through the silence.

All eyes turned, and her father suddenly appeared, marching into the circle, wearing his furs, flanked by a dozen men and looking at her disapprovingly.

He stopped a few feet away from her, staring back, and she could already anticipate the lecture to come. As they faced each other, Maltren scrambled out from under her and scurried off, and she wondered why he did not rebuke Maltren instead of her. That angered her, leaving father and daughter looking at each other in a standoff of rage, she as stubborn as he, neither willing to budge.

Finally, her father wordlessly turned, followed by his men, and marched back towards the fort, knowing she would follow. The tension broke as all the men fell in behind him, and Kyra, reluctantly, joined. She began to trudge back through the snow, seeing the distant lights of the fort, knowing she'd be in for an earful—but no longer caring.

Whether he accepted her or not, on this day, she was accepted amongst his men—and for her, that was all that mattered. From this day forward, she knew, everything would change.

### **CHAPTER SIX**

Kyra marched beside her father down the stone corridors of Fort Volis, a rambling fort the size of a small castle, with smooth stone walls, tapered ceilings, thick, ornate wood doors, an ancient redoubt that had served to house the Keepers of The Flames and protect Escalon for centuries. It was a crucial fort for their Kingdom, she knew, and yet it was also home to her, the only home she'd ever known. She would often fall asleep to the sound of warriors, feasting down the halls, dogs snarling as they fought over scraps, fireplaces hissing with dying embers and drafts of wind finding their way through the cracks. With all its quirks, she loved every corner of it.

As Kyra struggled to keep pace, she wondered what was troubling her father. They walked quickly, silently, Leo beside them, late for the feast, turning down corridors, soldiers and attendants stiffening as they went. Her father walked more quickly than usual, and though they were late, this, she knew, was unlike him. Usually he walked side-by-side with her, had a big smile ready to flash behind his beard, clasped an arm around her shoulder, sometimes told her jokes, recounted his day's events.

But now he walked somberly, his face set, several steps ahead of her, and he wore what appeared to be a frown of disapproval, one she had rarely seen him wear. He looked troubled, too, and she assumed it could only be from the day's events, her brothers reckless hunting, the Lord's Men snatching their boar—and perhaps even because she, Kyra, had been sparring. At first she had assumed he was just preoccupied with the feast—holiday feasts were always burdensome for him, having to host so many warriors and visitors well past midnight, as was ancient tradition. When her mother had been alive and hosting these events, Kyra had been told, it had been much easier on him. He was not a social creature, and he struggled to keep up with social graces.

But as their silence thickened, Kyra started to wonder if it was something else entirely. Most likely, she figured, it had something to do with her training with his men. Her relationship with her father, which used to be so simple, had become increasingly complicated as she grew up. He seemed to have a great ambivalence over what to do with her, over what kind of daughter he expected her to be. On the one hand, he often taught her of the principles of a warrior, of how a knight should think, should conduct herself. They had endless conversations about valor, honor, courage, and he oft stayed up late into the night recounting tales of their ancestor's battles, tales that she lived for, and the only tales she wanted to hear.

Yet at the same time, Kyra noticed him catching himself now when he discussed such things, silencing himself abruptly, as if he'd realized he shouldn't be speaking of it, as if he realized that he had fostered something within her and wanted to take it back. Talking about battle and valor was second nature to him, but now that Kyra was no longer a girl, now that she was becoming a woman, and a budding warrior herself, there was a part of him that seemed surprised by it, as if he had never expected her to grow up. He seemed to not quite know how to relate to a growing daughter, especially one who craved to be a warrior, as if he did not know which path to encourage her on. He did not know what to do with her, she realized, and a part of him even felt uncomfortable around her. Yet he was secretly proud, she sensed, at the same time. He just couldn't allow himself to show it.

Kyra could not stand his silence anymore—she had to get to the bottom of it.

"Do you worry for the feast?" she asked.

"Why should I worry?" he countered, not looking at her, a sure sign he was upset. "All is prepared. In fact, we are late. If I had not come to Fighter's Gate to find you, I would be at the head of my own table by now," he concluded resentfully.

So that was it, she realized: her sparring. The fact that he was angry made her angry, too. After all, she had beaten his men and she deserved his approval. Instead, he was acting as if nothing had happened, and if anything, was disapproving.

She demanded the truth and, annoyed, she decided to provoke him.

"Did you not see me beat your men?" she said, wanting to shame him, demanding the approval that he refused to give.

She watched his face redden, ever so subtly, but he held his tongue as they walked—which only increased her anger.

They continued to march, past the Hall of Heroes, past the Chamber of Wisdom, and were nearly at the Great Hall when she could stand it no more.

"What is it, Father?" she demanded. "If you disapprove of me, just say it."

He finally stopped right before the arched doors to the feasting hall, turned and looked at her, stone-faced. His look pained her. Her father, the one person she loved more than anyone in the world, who always had nothing but a smile for her, now looked at her as if she were a stranger. She could not understand it.

"I don't want you on those grounds again," he said, a cold anger in his voice.

The tone of his voice hurt her even more than his words, and she felt a shiver of betrayal rush through her. Coming from anyone else it would hardly have bothered her—but from him, this man she loved and looked up to so much, who was always so kind to her, his tone made her blood run cold.

But Kyra was not one to back down from a fight—a trait she had learned from him.

"And why is that?" she demanded.

His expression darkened.

"I do not need to give you a reason," he said. "I am your father. I am commander of this fort, of my men. And I do not want you training with them."

"Are you afraid I shall defeat them?" Kyra said, wanting to get a rise out of him, refusing to allow him to close this door on her forever.

He reddened, and she could see her words hurt him, too.

"Hubris is for commoners," he chided, "not for warriors."

"But I am no warrior, is that right, Father?" she goaded.

He narrowed his eyes, unable to respond.

"It is my fifteenth year. Do you wish me to fight against trees and twigs my whole life?"

"I do not wish you to fight at all," he snapped. "You are a girl—a woman now. You should be doing whatever women do—cooking, sewing—whatever it is your mother would have raised you to do if she were alive."

Now Kyra's expression darkened.

"I'm sorry I am not the girl you wish me to be, Father," she replied. "I am sorry I am not like all the other girls."

His expression became pained now, too.

"But I am my father's daughter," she continued. "I am the girl you raised. And to disapprove of me is to disapprove of yourself."

She stood there, hands on her hips, her light-gray eyes, filled with a warrior's strength, flashing back at his. He stared back at her with his brown eyes, behind his brown hair and beard, and he shook his head.

"This is a holiday," he said, "a feast not just for warriors but for visitors and dignitaries. People will be coming from all over Escalon, and from foreign lands." He looked her up and down disapprovingly. "You wear a warrior's clothes. Go to your chamber and change into a woman's fineries, like every other woman at the table."

She flushed, infuriated—and he leaned in close and raised a finger.

"And don't let me see you on the field with my men again," he seethed.

He turned abruptly, as servants opened the huge doors for him, and a wave of noise came tumbling out to greet them, along with the smell of roasting meat, unwashed hounds and roaring fires. Music carried in the air, and the din of activity from inside the hall was all-consuming. Kyra watched her father turn and enter, attendants following.

Several servants stood there, holding open the doors, waiting as Kyra stood there, fuming, debating what to do. She had never been so angry in her life.

She finally turned and stormed off with Leo, away from the hall, back for her chamber. For the first time in her life, she hated her father at that moment. She had thought he was different, above all this; yet now she realized he was a smaller man than she had thought—and that, more than anything, hurt her. His taking away from her what she loved most—the training grounds—was a knife in her heart. The thought of living her life confined to silks and dresses left her feeling a greater sense of despair than she had ever known.

She wanted to leave Volis—and never come back.

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Commander Duncan sat at the head of the banquet table, in the massive feasting hall of fort Volis, and he looked out over his family, warriors, subjects, counselors, advisors and visitors—more than a hundred people, all stretched along the table for the holiday—with a heavy heart. Of all these people before him, the one most on his mind was the one he tried not to look at on principle: his daughter. Kyra. Duncan had always had a special relationship with her, had always felt the need to be both father and mother to her, to make up for the loss of her mother. But he was failing, he knew, at being her father—much less a mother, too.

Duncan had always made a point of watching over her, the only girl in a family of boys, and in a fort full of warriors—especially given that she was a girl unlike the other girls, a girl, he had to admit, who was too much like him. She was very much alone in a man's world, and he went out of his way for her, not only out of obligation, but also because he loved her dearly, more than he could say, perhaps even more, he hated to admit, than his boys. Because of all his children, he had to admit that he, oddly, even though she was a girl, saw himself most in her. Her willfulness; her fierce determination; her warrior's spirit; her refusal to back down; her fearlessness; and her compassion. She always stood up for the weak, especially her younger brother, and always stood up for what was just—whatever the cost.

Which was another reason why their conversation had irked him so badly, had left him in such a mood. As he had watched her on the training ground this evening, wielding her staff against those men with a remarkable, dazzling skill, his heart had leapt with pride and joy. He hated Maltren, a braggart and a thorn in his side, and he was elated that his daughter, of all people, had put him in his place. He was beyond proud that she, a girl of just fifteen, could hold her own with his men—and even beat them. He had wanted so badly to embrace her, to shower her with praise in front of all the others.

But as her father, he could not. Duncan wanted what was best for her and deep down, he felt she was going down a dangerous road, a road of violence in a man's world. She would be the only woman in a field of dangerous men, men with carnal desires, men who, when their blood was up, would fight to the death. She did not realize what true battle meant, what bloodshed, pain, death was like, up close. It was not the life he wanted for her—even if it were allowed. He wanted her safe and secure here in the fort, living a domestic life of peace and comfort. But he did not know how to make her want that for herself.

It had all left him feeling confused. By refusing to praise her, he figured, he could dissuade her. Yet deep down, he had a sinking feeling he could not—and that his withdrawal of praise would only alienate her further. He hated how he had to act tonight, and he hated how he felt right now. But he had no idea what else to do.

What upset him even more than all this, was what echoed in the back of his head: the prophecy proclaimed about her the day she was born. He had always disregarded it as nonsense, a witch's words; but today, watching her, seeing her prowess, made him realize how special she was, made him wonder if it could really be true. And that thought terrified him more than anything. Her destiny was fast approaching, and he had no way to stop it. How long would it be until everyone knew the truth about her?

Duncan closed his eyes and shook his head, taking a long swig from his sack of wine and trying to push it all from his mind. This was supposed to be a night of celebration, after all. The Winter solstice had arrived, and as he opened his eyes he saw the snow raging through the window, now a full-fledged blizzard, snow piled high against the stone, as if arriving on cue for the holiday. While the wind howled outside, they were all secure here in this fort, warm from the fires raging in the fireplaces, from the body heat, from the roasting food and from the wine.

Indeed, as he looked around, everyone looked happy—jugglers, bards and musicians made their rounds as men laughed and rejoiced, sharing battle stories. Duncan looked with appreciation at the awesome bounty before him, the banquet table covered with every sort of food and delicacy. He felt pride as he saw all the shields hanging high along the wall, each one hand-hammered with a different crest, each insignia representing a different house of his people, a different warrior who had come to fight with him. He saw all the trophies of war hanging, too, memories of a lifetime fighting for Escalon. He was a lucky man, he knew.

And yet as much as he liked to pretend otherwise, he had to face that his was a Kingdom under occupation. The old king, King Tarnis, had surrendered his people to all of their shame, had laid down arms without even a fight, allowing Pandesia to invade. It had spared casualties and cities—but it had also robbed their spirit. Tarnis had always argued that Escalon was indefensible anyway, that even if they held the Southern Gate, the Bridge of Sorrows, Pandesia could surround them and attack by sea. But they all knew that was a weak argument. Escalon was blessed with shores made of cliffs a hundred feet high, crashing waves and jagged rocks at their base. No ship could get close, and no army could breach them without a heavy price. Pandesia could attack by sea, but the price would be far too great, even for such a great empire. Land was the only way—and that left only the bottleneck of the Southern Gate, which all of Escalon knew was defensible. Surrendering had been a choice of pure weakness and nothing else.

Now he and all the other great warriors were king-less, each left to his own devices, his own province, his own stronghold, and each forced to bend the knee and answer to the Lord Governor installed by the Pandesian Empire. Duncan could still recall the day he had been forced to swear a new oath of fealty, the feeling he'd had when he was made to bend the knee—it made him sick to think of it.

Duncan tried to think back to the early days, when he had been stationed in Andros, when all the knights of all the houses had been together, rallied under one cause, one king, one capital, one banner, with a force ten times as great as the men he had here. Now they were scattered to the far corners of the Kingdom, these men here all that remained of a unified force.

King Tarnis had always been a weak king; Duncan had known that from the start. As his chief commander, he'd had the task of defending him, even if it was unmerited. A part of Duncan was not surprised the King had surrendered—but he was surprised at how quickly it had all fallen apart. All the great knights scattered to the wind, all returning to their own houses, with no king left to rule and all the power ceded to Pandesia. It had stripped lawfulness and had turned their Kingdom, once

so peaceful, into a breeding ground for crime and discontent. It was no longer safe to even travel the roads, once so safe, outside of strongholds.

Hours passed, and as the meal wound down, food was taken away and mugs of ale refreshed. Duncan grabbed several chocolates and ate them, relishing them, as trays of Winter Moon delicacies were brought to the table. Mugs of royal chocolate were passed around, covered in the fresh cream of goats, and Duncan, head spinning from drink and needing to focus, took one in his hands and savored its warmth. He drank it all at once, the warmth spreading through his belly. The snow raged outside, stronger with each moment, and jesters played games, bards told stories, musicians offered interludes, and the night went on and on, all oblivious to the weather. It was a tradition on Winter Moon to feast past midnight, to welcome the winter as one would a friend. Keeping the tradition properly, as legend went, meant the winter would not last as long.

Duncan, despite himself, finally looked over and saw Kyra; she sat there, disconsolate, looking down, as if alone. She had not changed from her warrior's clothes, as he had commanded; for a moment, his anger flared up, but then he decided to let it go. He could see she was upset, too; she, like he, felt things too deeply.

Duncan decided it was time to make peace with her, to at least console her if he could not agree with her, and he was about to rise in his chair and go to her—when suddenly, the great doors of the banquet hall burst open.

A visitor hurried into the room, a small man in luxurious furs heralding another land, his hair and cloak covered in snow, and he was escorted by attendants to the banquet table. Duncan was surprised to receive a visitor this late in the night, especially in this storm, and as the man removed his cloak, Duncan noted he wore the purple and yellow of Andros. He had come, Duncan realized, all the way from the capital, a good three-day ride.

Visitors had been arriving throughout the night, but none this late, and none from Andros. Seeing those colors made Duncan think of the old king, of better days.

The room quieted as the visitor stood before his seat and bowed his head graciously to Duncan, waiting to be invited to sit.

"Forgive me, my lord," he said. "I meant to arrive sooner. The snow prevented that, I'm afraid. I mean you no disrespect."

Duncan nodded.

"I am no lord," Duncan corrected, "but a mere commander. And we are all equals here, high and low-born, men and women. All visitors are welcome, whatever hour they arrive."

The visitor nodded graciously and was about to sit, when Duncan raised a palm.

"Our tradition holds for visitors from far away be given an honored seat. Come, sit near me."

The visitor, surprised, nodded graciously and the attendants led him, a thin, short man with gaunt cheeks and eyes, perhaps in his forties but appearing much older, to a seat near Duncan. Duncan examined him and detected anxiety in his eyes; the man appeared to be too on-edge for a visitor in holiday cheer. Something, he knew, was wrong.

The visitor sat, head down, eyes averted, and as the room slowly fell back into cheer, the man gulped down the bowl of soup and chocolate put before him, slurping it down with a big piece of bread, clearly famished.

"Tell me," Duncan said as soon as the man finished, anxious to know more, "what news do you bring from the capital?"

The visitor slowly pushed away his bowl and looked down, unwilling to meet Duncan's eyes. The table quieted, seeing the grim look on his face. They all waited for him to respond.

Finally, he turned and looked at Duncan, his eyes bloodshot, watering.

"No news that any man should have to bear," he said.

Duncan braced himself, sensing as much.

"Out with it, then," Duncan said. "Bad news grows only more stale with time."

The man looked back down at the table, rubbing his fingers against it nervously.

"As of the Winter Moon, a new Pandesian law is being enacted upon our land: puellae nuptias."

Duncan felt his blood curdle at the words, as a gasp of outrage emitted from up and down the table, an outrage he shared himself. *Puellae Nuptias*. It was incomprehensible.

"Are you certain?" Duncan demanded.

The visitor nodded.

"As of today, the first unwed daughter of every man, lord, and warrior in our Kingdom who has reached her fifteenth year can be claimed for marriage by the local Lord Governor—for himself, or for whomever he chooses."

Duncan immediately looked at Kyra, and he saw the look of surprise and indignation in her eyes. All the other men in the room, all the warriors, also turned and looked to Kyra, all understanding the gravity of the news. Any other girl's face would have been filled with terror, but she appeared to wear a look of vengeance.

"They shall not take her!" Anvin called out, indignant, his voice rising in the silence. "They shall not take any of our girls!"

Arthfael drew his dagger and stabbed the table with it.

"They can take our boar, but we shall fight to the death before they take our girls!"

The warriors let out a shout of approval, their anger fueled, too, by their drink. Immediately, the mood in the room had turned rotten.

Slowly Duncan stood, his meal spoiled, and the room quieted as he rose from the table. All the other warriors stood as he did, a sign of respect.

"This feast is over," he announced, his voice heavy. Even as he said the words, he noted it was not yet midnight—a terrible omen for the Winter Moon.

Duncan walked over to Kyra in the thick silence, passing rows of soldiers and dignitaries. He stood over her chair, and looked her in the eye, and she stared back, strength and defiance in her eyes, a look which filled him with pride. Leo, beside her, looked up at him, too.

"Come, my daughter," he said. "You and I have much to discuss."

### **CHAPTER SEVEN**

Kyra sat in her father's chamber, a small stone room on the upper floors of their fort with high, tapered ceilings and a massive marble fireplace, blackened from years of use, and they each stared in the gloomy silence. They sat on opposite sides of the fire, each on a pile of furs, staring at the crumbling logs as they crackled and hissed.

Kyra's mind spun from the news as she stroked Leo's fur, curled up at her feet, and it was still hard to believe it was true. Change had finally come to Escalon, and it felt as if this were the day her life had ended. She stared into the flames, wondering what was left to live for if Pandesia would snatch her away from her family, her fort, from all she knew and loved and wed her to some grotesque Lord Governor. She would rather die.

Kyra usually took comfort in being here, this room, where she had spent countless hours reading, getting lost in tales of valor and sometimes of legends, tales which she never quite knew were fact or fantasy. Her father liked to comb his ancient books and read them aloud, sometimes into the early hours of the morning, chronicles of a different time, a different place. Most of all, Kyra loved the stories of the warriors, of the great battles. Leo was always at her feet and Aidan often joined them; on more than one sunrise, Kyra would return bleary-eyed to her chamber, drunk on the stories. She loved to read even more than she loved weapons, and as she looked at the walls of her father's chamber, lined with bookcases, filled with scrolls and leather-bound volumes passed down for generations, she wished she could get lost in them now.

But as she glanced at her father, his grim face, it brought back their awful reality. This was no night for reading. She had never seen her father look so disturbed, so conflicted, as if for the first time he was unsure what action to take. Her father, she knew, was a proud man—all of his men were proud—and in the days when Escalon had a king, a capital, a court to rally around, all would have given up their lives for their freedom. It was not her father's way to surrender, to barter. But the old King had sold them out, had surrendered on their behalf, had left them all in this terrible position. As a fragmented, dispersed army, they could not fight an enemy already lodged in their midst.

"It would have been better to have been defeated that day in battle," her father said, his voice heavy, "to have faced Pandesia nobly and lost. The old King's surrender was a defeat anyway—just a long, slow, cruel one. Day after day, year after year, one freedom after the next is taken from us, each one making us slightly less of a man."

Kyra knew he was right; yet she could also understand King Tarnis's decision: Pandesia covered half the world. With their vast army of slaves they could have laid waste to Escalon until there was nothing left. They never would have backed down, however many millions of men it took. At least now Escalon was intact, its people alive—if one could call this life.

"For them, this is not about taking our girls," her father continued, his speech punctuated by the crackling fire. "This is about power. About subjugation. About crushing what is left of our souls."

Her father stared into the flames and she could see he was staring into his past and his future all at once. Kyra prayed that he would turn and tell her that the time had come to fight, to stand up for what they all believed in, to make a stand. That he would never let her be taken away.

But instead, to her increasing disappointment and anger, he sat there silently, staring, brooding, not offering her the assurances she needed. She had no idea what he was thinking, especially after their earlier argument.

"I remember a time when I served the King," he said slowly, his deep, strong voice setting her at ease, as it always had, "when all the land was one. Escalon was invincible. We had only to man The

Flames to hold back the trolls and the Southern Gate to hold back Pandesia. We were a free people for centuries, and that was always how it was supposed to be."

He fell silent for a long time, the fire crackling, and Kyra waited impatiently for him to finish, stroking Leo's head.

"If Tarnis had commanded us to defend the gate," he continued, "we would have defended it to the last man. All of us would have gladly died for our freedom. But one morning we all woke to find out lands already filled with men," he said, his eyes widening with agony as if reliving it again before his eyes.

"I know all of this," Kyra reminded, impatient, tiring of hearing the same story.

He turned to her, his eyes filled with defeat.

"When your own king has given up," he asked, "when the enemy is already amongst you, what is there left to fight for?"

Kyra fumed.

"Maybe kings do not always merit the title," she said, no longer having patience. "Kings are just men, after all. And men make mistakes. Perhaps, sometimes, the most honorable route is to defy your king."

Her father sighed, staring into the fire, not really hearing her.

"We here, of Volis, have lived well compared to the rest of Escalon. They allow us to keep weapons—real weapons—unlike the others, who are stripped of all steel under penalty of death. They let us train, they give us the illusion of freedom—just enough to keep us complacent. Do you know why they have?" he asked, turning to her.

"Because you were the King's greatest knight," she replied. "Because they want to afford you honors befitting your rank."

He shook his head.

"No," he replied. "It is only because they need us. They need Volis to man The Flames. We are all that stands between Marda and them. Pandesia fears Marda more than we. It is only because we are the Keepers. They patrol The Flames with their own men, their own draftees, but none are as vigilant as we."

Kyra thought about that.

"I always thought we were above it all, above the reach of Pandesia. But tonight," he said gravely, turning to her, "I realize that is not true. This news...I have been waiting for something of the sort for years. I did not realize how long. And despite all those years of preparation, now that it has arrived...there is nothing I can do."

He hung his head and she stared back at him, appalled, feeling indignation welling within her.

"Are you saying you will let them take me?" she asked. "Are you saying you would not fight for me?"

His face darkened.

"You are young," he said, angry, "naïve. You don't understand the way of the world. You look at this one fight—not the greater kingdom. If I fight for you, if my men fight for you, we might win one battle. But they will come back, not with a hundred men, or a thousand, or ten thousand—but a sea of men. If I fight for you, I commit all of my people to death."

His words cut into her like a knife, left her shaking inside, not only his words, but the despair behind them. A part of her wanted to storm out of here, sickened, so disappointed in this man she had once idolized. She felt like crying inside at such betrayal.

She stood, trembling, and scowled down at him.

"You," she seethed, "you, the greatest fighter of our land—yet afraid to protect the honor of his own daughter?"

She watched his face redden, humiliated.

"Watch yourself," he warned darkly.

But Kyra would not back down.

"I hate you!" she shouted.

Now it was his turn to stand.

"Do you want all of our people killed?" he yelled back. "All for your honor?"

Kyra could not help herself. For the first time in as long as she could member, she burst into tears, so deeply wounded by her father's lack of caring for her.

He stepped forward to console her, but she lowered her head and turned away as she cried. Then she caught hold of herself and quickly turned and wiped her tears away, looking to the fire with watery eyes.

"Kyra," he said softly.

She looked up at him and saw that his eyes were watering, too.

"Of course I would fight for you," he said. "I would fight for you until my heart stopped beating. I, and all of my men, would die for you. In the war that followed, you would die, too. Is that what you want?"

"And my slavery?" she shot back. "Is that what you want?"

Kyra knew she was being selfish, that she was putting herself first, and that was not her nature. Of course she would not allow all of her people to die on her behalf. But she just wanted to hear her father say the words: *I will fight for you. Whatever the consequences. You come first. You matter most.* 

But he remained silent, and his silence hurt her more than anything.

"I shall fight for you!" came a voice.

Kyra turned, surprised, to see Aidan entering the room, holding a small spear, trying to put on his bravest look.

"What are you doing here?" her father snapped. "I am speaking with your sister."

"And I overheard it!" Aidan said, marching inside, as Leo ran over to him, licking him.

Kyra could not help but smile. Aidan shared the same streak of defiance as she, even if he was too young and too small for his prowess to match his will.

"I will fight for my sister!" he added. "Even against all the trolls of Marda!"

She reached over and hugged him and kissed his forehead.

She then wiped her tears and turned back to her father, her glare darkening. She needed an answer; she needed to hear him say it.

"Do I not matter to you more than your men?" she asked him.

He stared back, his eyes filled with pain.

"You matter more to me than the world," he said. "But I am not merely a father—I am a Commander. My men are my responsibility, too. Can't you understand that?"

She frowned.

"And where is that line drawn, Father? When exactly do your people matter more than your family? If the abduction of your only daughter is not that line, then what is? I am sure if it were one of your *sons* taken, you would go to war."

He scowled.

"This is not about that," he snapped.

"But isn't it?" she shot back, determined. "Why is a boy's life worth more than a girl's?"

Her father fumed, breathing hard, and loosed his vest, more agitated than she'd ever seen him.

"There is another way," he finally said.

She stared back, puzzled.

"Tomorrow," he said slowly, his voice taking on a tone of authority, as if he were talking to his councilmen, "you shall choose a boy. Any boy you like from amongst our people. You shall wed by

sundown. When the Lord's Men come, you will be wed. Untouchable. You will be safe, here with us."

Kyra stared back, aghast.

"Do you really expect me to marry some strange boy?" she asked. "To just pick someone, just like that? Someone I don't love?"

"You will!" her father yelled, his face red, equally determined. "If your mother were alive, she would handle this business—she would have handled it long ago, before it came to this. But she is not. You are not a warrior—you are a girl. And girls wed. And that is the end of the matter. If you have not chosen a husband by day's end, I will choose one for you—and there is nothing more to say on the matter!"

Kyra stared back, disgusted, enraged—but most of all, disappointed.

"So is that how the great Commander Duncan wins battles?" she asked, wanting to hurt him. "Finding loopholes in the law to hide from his occupier?"

Kyra did not wait for a response, but turned and stormed from the room, Leo at her heels, and slammed the thick oak door behind her.

"KYRA!" her father yelled—but the slam muffled his voice.

Kyra marched down the corridor, feeling her whole world shifting beneath her, as if she were no longer walking on steady ground. She realized, with each passing step, that she could no longer stay here. That her presence would endanger them all. And that was something she could not allow.

Kyra could not fathom her father's words. She would never, *ever*, marry someone she did not love. She would never just give in and live a domestic life like all the other women. She would rather die first. Didn't he know that? Did he not know his own daughter at all?

Kyra stopped by her chamber, put on her winter boots, draped herself with her warmest furs, grabbed her bow and staff, and kept walking.

"KYRA!" her father's angry voice echoed from somewhere down the corridor.

She would not give him a chance to catch up. She kept marching, turning down corridor after corridor, determined to never see Volis again. Whatever lay out there, out in the real world, she would face it head on. She might die, she knew—but at least it would be *her* choice. At least she wouldn't live according to someone else's designs.

Kyra reached the main doors to the fort, Leo beside her, and the servants, standing there beneath the dying torches, stared back at her, puzzled.

"My lady," one said. "It is late. The storm rages."

But Kyra stood there, determined, until finally they realized she would not back down. They exchanged an unsure look, then each reached out and slowly pulled back the thick door.

The moment they did, a freezing gale of wind howled and struck her in the face, the wind carrying whipping snow. She pulled her furs tighter as she looked down and saw snow up to her shins.

Kyra stepped out into the snow, knowing it was unsafe out here at night, the woods filled with creatures, seasoned criminals, and sometimes trolls. Especially on this night of all nights, the Winter Moon, the one night of the year one was supposed to stay indoors, to bar the gates, the night when the dead crossed worlds and anything could happen. Kyra looked up and saw the huge, blood-red moon hanging on the horizon, as if tempting her.

Kyra breathed deep, took the first step and did not turn back, ready to face whatever the night had in store.

### **CHAPTER EIGHT**

Alec sat in his father's forge, the great iron anvil before him, well-nicked from years of use, lifted his hammer and pounded on the glowing-hot steel of a sword, freshly removed from the flames. He sweated, frustrated, as he tried to hammer out his fury. Having just reached his sixteenth year, shorter than most boys his age yet stronger than them, too, with broad shoulders, already emerging muscles, and a big mat of wavy black hair that fell past his eyes, Alec was not one to give up easily. His life had been hard-forged, like this iron, and as he sat beside the flames, wiping hair from his eyes continually with the back of his hand, he brooded, contemplating the news he had just received. He had never felt such a sense of despair. He smashed the hammer again and again, and as sweat poured down his forehead and hissed on the sword, he wanted to hammer away all his troubles.

His entire life, Alec had been able to control things, to work however hard he needed to to make things right. But now, for the first time in his life, he would have to sit back and watch as injustice came to his town, to his family—and there was nothing he could do about it.

Alec hammered again and again, the metal ringing in his ears, sweat stinging his eyes and not caring. He wanted to pound this iron until there was nothing left, and as he pounded he thought not of the sword but of Pandesia. He would kill them all if he could, these invaders who were coming to take away his brother. Alec slammed the sword, imagining it was their heads, wishing he could grab fate by the hands and shape it to his will, wishing he were powerful enough to stand up to Pandesia himself.

Today, Winter Moon, was his most hated day, the day when Pandesia scoured all the villages across Escalon and rounded up all eligible boys who had reached their eighteenth year for service at The Flames. Alec, two years shy, was still safe. But his brother, Ashton, having turned eighteen last harvest season, was not. Why Ashton, of all people? He wondered. Ashton was his hero. Despite being born with a club foot, Ashton always had a smile on his face, always had a cheerful disposition—more cheerful than Alec—and had always made the best of life. He was the opposite of Alec, who felt everything very deeply, who was always caught up in a storm of emotions. No matter how hard he tried to be happy, like his brother, Alec could not control his passions, and often caught himself brooding. He had been told that he took life too seriously, that he should lighten up; but for him, life was a hard, serious affair, and he simply did not know how.

Ashton, on the other hand, was calm, levelheaded and happy despite his position in life. He was also a fine blacksmith, like their father, and he was now single-handedly providing for their family, especially since their father's malady. If Ashton were taken away, their family would fall into poverty. Worse, Alec would be crushed, for he had heard the stories, and he knew that life as a draftee would mean death for his brother. With Ashton's club foot, it would be cruel and unjust for Pandesia to take him. But Pandesia was not famed for its compassion, and Alec had a sinking feeling that today could be the last day his brother lived at home.

They were not a rich family and did not live in a rich village. Their home was simple enough, a small, single-story cottage with a forge attached, in the fringes of Soli, a day's ride north of the capital and a day's ride south of Whitewood. It was a landlocked, peaceful village, in a rolling countryside, far from most things—a place most people looked over on the way to Andros. Their family had just enough bread to get through each day, no more, no less—and that was all they wished for. They used their skills to bring iron to market, and it was just enough to provide them what they needed.

Alec did not wish for much in life—but he did crave justice. He shuddered at the thought of his brother being snatched away to serve Pandesia. He had heard too many tales of what it was like to be drafted, to serve guard duty at The Flames that burned all day and all night, to become a Keeper.

The Pandesian slaves who manned The Flames, Alec had heard, were hard men, slaves from across the world, draftees, criminals, and the worst of the Pandesian soldiers. Most of them were not noble Escalon warriors, not the noble Keepers of Volis. The greatest danger at The Flames, Alec had heard, was not the trolls, but your fellow Keepers. Ashton, he knew, would be unable to protect himself; he was a fine blacksmith, but not a fighter.

"ALEC!"

His mother's shrill tone cut through the air, rising even over the sound of his hammering. Alec put down his hammer, breathing hard, not realizing how much he had worked himself up, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He looked over to see his mother sticking her

head disapprovingly through the door frame.

"I have been calling for ten minutes now!" she said harshly. "Dinner's past ready! We haven't much time before they arrive. We are all waiting for you. Come in at once!"

Alec snapped out of his reverie, laid down his hammer, rose reluctantly, and weaved his way through the cramped workshop. He could no longer prolong the inevitable.

He stepped back into their cottage through the open doorway, past his disapproving mother, and he stopped and looked at their dinner table, set with their finest, which wasn't much. It was a simple slab of wood and four wooden chairs, and one silver goblet had been placed in its center, the only nice thing the family owned.

Seated around the table, looking up at him, waiting, sat his brother and father, bowls of stew before them.

Ashton was tall and thin with dark features, while their father, beside him, was a large man, twice as wide as Alec, with a growing belly, a low brow, thick eyebrows, and the callused hands of a blacksmith. They resembled each other—and neither resembled Alec, who had always been told, with his unruly, wavy hair and flashing green eyes, that he looked like his mother.

Ashton looked at them and noted immediately the fear in his brother's face, the anxiety in their father's, both of them looking as if they were on a deathwatch. He felt a pit in his own stomach upon entering the room. Each had a bowl of stew set before them, and as Alec sat down across from his brother, his mother set a bowl before him, then sat down with one for herself.

Even though it was past dinner and by this time he was usually starving, Alec could barely even smell it, his stomach churning.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered, breaking the silence.

His mother gave him a sharp look.

"I care not," she snapped. "You will eat what is given you. This may well be our last meal together as a family—do not disrespect your brother."

Alec turned to his mother, a plain-looking woman in her fifties, her face lined from a life of hardship, and he saw the determination in her green eyes flashing back at him, the same determined look he wore himself.

"Shall we just pretend then that nothing is happening?" he asked.

"He is our son, too," she snapped. "You are not the only one here."

Alec turned to his father, feeling a sense of desperation.

"Will you let it happen, Father?" he asked.

His father frowned but remained silent.

"You're ruining a lovely meal," his mother said.

His father raised his hand, and she fell silent. He turned to Alec and gave him a look.

"What would you have me do?" he asked, his voice serious.

"We have weapons!" Alec insisted, hoping for a question such as this. "We have steel! We are one of the few that do! We can kill any soldier that comes near him! They'll never expect it!"

His father shook his head disapprovingly.

"Those are the dreams of a young man," he said. "You, who have never killed a man in your life. Let's pretend you kill the soldier that grabs Ashton—and what of the two hundred behind him?"

"Let us hide Ashton, then!" Alec insisted.

His father shook his head.

"They have a list of every boy in this village. They know he's here. If we don't turn him over, they will kill each and every one of us." He sighed, annoyed. "Do you not think I haven't thought through these things, boy? Do you think you're the only one who cares? Do you think I want my only son to be shipped off?"

Alec paused, puzzled by his words.

"What do you mean, only son?" he asked.

His father flushed.

"I did not say only—I said eldest."

"No, you said only," Alec insisted, wondering.

His father reddened and raised his voice.

"Stop harping on points!" he shouted. "Not at a time like this. I said *eldest* and that's what I meant and that's the end of it! I do not want my boy taken, just as much as you don't want your brother taken!"

"Alec, relax," came a compassionate voice, the only calm one in the room.

Alec looked across the table to see Ashton smiling back at him, even-keeled, well composed as always.

"It will be fine, my brother," Ashton said. "I shall serve my duty and I shall return."

"Return?" Alec repeated. "They take Keepers for seven years."

Ashton smiled.

"Then I shall see you in seven years," he replied, and smiled wide. "I suspect you shall be taller than me by then."

That was Ashton, always trying to make Alec feel better, always thinking of others, even in a time like this.

Alec felt his heart breaking inside.

"Ashton, you can't go," he insisted. "You won't survive The Flames."

"I—" Ashton began.

But his words were interrupted by a great commotion outside. There came the sound of horses charging into the village, of men clamoring. The whole family looked at each other, in fear. They sat there, frozen, as people began rushing to and fro outside the window. Alec could already see all the boys and families lining up outside.

"No sense prolonging it now," his father said, standing, placing his palms on the table, his voice breaking the silence. "We should not suffer the indignity of their coming into our house and dragging him off. We shall line up outside with the others and stand proudly, and let us pray that when they see Ashton's foot, they shall do the humane thing and skip him over."

Alec rose reluctantly from the table as the others all shuffled outside the house.

As he stepped outside into the cold night, Alec was struck at the sight: there was a commotion in his village like never before. The streets were aglow with torches, and all boys over eighteen were lined up, all their families standing by nervously, watching. Clouds of dust filled the streets as a caravan of Pandesians charged into town, dozens of soldiers in the scarlet armor of Pandesia, riding chariots driven by large stallions. Behind them they towed carriages made of iron bars, jolting roughly on the road.

Alec examined the carriages and saw they were filled with boys from across the land, staring out with scared and hardened faces. He gulped at the sight, imagining what lay in store for his brother.

They all came to a stop in the village, and a tense silence fell, as everyone waited, breathless.

The commander of the Pandesian soldiers jumped down from his carriage, a tall soldier with no kindness in his black eyes and a long scar across one eyebrow. He walked slowly, surveying the ranks of boys, the town so quiet that one could hear his spurs jingling as he went.

The soldier looked over each boy, lifting their chins and looking them in the eyes, poking their shoulders, giving each a small shove to test their balance. He nodded as he went, and as he did, his soldiers in waiting quickly grabbed the boys and dragged them to the cart. Some boys went silently; some protested, though, and these were quickly beat down by clubs and thrown into the carriage with the others. Sometimes a mother cried or a father yelled out—but nothing could stop the Pandesians.

The commander continued, emptying the village of its most prized assets, until finally he came to a stop before Ashton, at the end of the line.

"My son is lame," their mother quickly called out, pleading desperately. "He'd be useless to you."

The soldier looked Ashton up and down, and stopped at his foot.

"Roll up your pants," he said, "and take off your boot."

Ashton did so, leaning on Alec for balance, and as Alec watched him, he knew his brother well enough to know he was humiliated; his foot had always been a source of shame for him, smaller than the other, twisted and mangled, forcing him to hobble as he walked.

"He also works for me in the forge," Alec's father chimed in. "He is our only source of income. If you take him, our family will have nothing. We won't be able to survive."

The commander, finished looking at his foot, gestured for Ashton to put his boot back on. He then turned and looked at their father, his black eyes cold and firm.

"You live in our land now," he said, his voice like gravel, "and your son is our property to do with as we wish. Take him away!" the commander called out, and as he did, soldiers rushed forward.

"NO!" Alec's mother cried out in grief. "NOT MY SON!"

She rushed forward and grabbed Ashton, clinging to him, and as she did, a Pandesian soldier stepped forward and backhanded her across the face.

Alec's father grabbed the soldier's arm and as he did several soldiers pounced and pummeled him to the ground.

As Alec stood there, watching the soldiers drag Ashton away, he could stand it no more. The injustice of it all killed him—he knew he would be unable to live with it for the rest of his days. The image of his brother being dragged away would be imprinted in his mind forever.

Something within him snapped.

"Take me instead!" Alec found himself crying out, involuntarily rushing forward and standing between Alec and the soldiers.

They all stopped and looked at him, clearly caught off guard.

"We are brothers of the same family!" Alec continued. "The law says to take one boy from each family. Let me be that boy!"

The commander came and looked him over warily.

"And how old are you, boy?" he demanded.

"I've passed my sixteenth year!" he exclaimed proudly.

The soldiers laughed, while their commander sneered.

"You're too young for drafting," he concluded, dismissing him.

But as he turned to go, Alec rushed forward, refusing to be dismissed.

"I am a greater soldier than he!" Alec insisted. "I can throw a spear further and cut deeper with a sword. My aim is truer, and I am stronger than boys twice my age. *Please*," he pleaded. "Give me a chance."

As the commander stared back, Alec, despite his feigned confidence, was terrified inside. He knew he took a great risk: he could easily be imprisoned or killed for this.

The commander stared him down for what felt like an eternity, the entire village silent, until finally, he nodded back at his men.

"Leave the cripple," he commanded. "Take the boy."

The soldiers shoved Ashton, reached forward and grabbed Alec, and within moments, Alec felt himself being dragged away. It all happened so quickly, it was surreal.

"NO!" cried Alec's mother.

He saw her weeping as he felt himself being dragged and then tossed roughly into the iron carriage full of boys.

"No!" Ashton cried out. "Leave my brother alone! Take me!"

But there was no more listening. Alec was shoved deep inside the carriage, which stank of body odor and fear, stumbling over other boys who shoved him back rudely, and the iron door was slammed behind him, echoing. Alec felt a great sense of relief at having saved his brother's life, greater even than his fear. He had given his life up for his brother's—and whatever should come next would matter little next to that.

As he sat on the floor and settled back against the iron bars, the carriage already moving beneath him, he knew that he probably would not survive this. He met the angry eyes of the other boys, summing him up in the blackness, and as they jolted along the road, he knew that on the journey to come, there would be a million ways to die. He wondered which would be his. Singed by The Flames? Stabbed by a boy? Eaten by a troll?

Or would the least likely thing of all happen: would he somehow, against all odds, survive?

### CHAPTER NINE

Kyra hiked through the blinding snow, Leo leaning against her leg, the feel of his body the only thing grounding her in a sea of white. Snow whipping in her face, she could see hardly more than a few feet, the only light that from the blood-red moon, glowing eerily against the clouds when they did not consume the moon completely. The cold bit her to the bone, and only hours from home, she already missed the warmth of her father's fort. She imagined sitting by the fireplace now, in a pile of furs, drinking melted chocolate and lost in a book.

Kyra forced those thoughts from her mind and instead doubled her efforts, determined. She would get away from the life her father had carved out from her, whatever the cost. She would not be forced to marry a man she did not know or love, especially to appease Pandesia. She would not be ordered to a life by a hearth, would not be forced to give up on her dreams. She would rather die out here in the cold and the snow than live a life that other people had planned for her.

Kyra trekked on, wading through snow up to her knees, heading deeper into the black night, in the worst weather she had ever been in. It felt surreal. She could feel a special energy in the air on this night, when the dead were said to share the earth with the living, when others feared to leave their homes, when villagers boarded windows and doors, even in the best of weather. The air felt thick, and not only with snow: she could feel the spirits all around her. It felt as if they were watching her, as if she were walking into her destiny—or to her death.

Kyra crested a hill and caught a glimpse of the horizon, and for the first time in this trek, she was filled with hope. There, in the distance, lighting the sky despite the storm, sat The Flames, the only beacon in a world of white. In this black night they summoned her like a magnet, this place which she had wondered about her entire life and which her father had strictly forbidden her to go. She was surprised she had hiked this far, and she wondered if she had been unconsciously marching towards it since she'd set out.

Kyra stopped, gasping for breath, and took it in. The Flames. The great wall of fire that stretched fifty miles across the eastern border of Escalon, the only thing blocking her country from the vast lands of Marda, the kingdom of the trolls. The place where her father and his father before him had served dutifully, protecting their homeland, where all of her father's men, all of the Keepers, went to serve their duty in rotation.

They were higher, brighter, than she had imagined—all the men had boasted of and more—and she wondered what magical force kept them lit, how they could burn all day and night, if they would ever burn out. Seeing them in person only raised more questions than it answered.

Kyra knew thousands of men were stationed along The Flames, all sorts of men, the professionals from Volis, but also Pandesians, slaves, draftees, and criminals. All of them, technically, were Keepers, though none of the others had the skill her father's people had, having manned The Flames for generations. On the other side lurked thousands of trolls, desperate to break through. It was a dangerous place. A mystical place. A place for the desperate, the bold, and the fearless.

Kyra had to see it, up close. If nothing else, she needed to get her bearings in this storm, to warm her hands, and to decide where to go next.

Kyra hiked downhill through the snow, using her staff to steady herself, Leo beside her, marching for The Flames. Though it could hardly have been a mile away, it felt like ten, and what should have been a ten-minute hike took her over an hour as the snow worsened, the cold biting her to the bone. She turned and looked back for Volis, but it was long gone, lost in a world of white. She was too cold to make it back anyway.

Legs trembling from the cold, her toes growing numb, her hand stuck to the staff, Kyra finally stumbled down the hill and felt a sudden burst of heat as The Flames spread out before her. The sight took her breath away. Hardly a hundred yards away, the light was so bright that it lit up the entire night, making it feel like day, and The Flames rose so high, when she looked up, she could not see the end. The heat was so strong that even from here it warmed her, her body slowing coming back to life as she felt her hands and toes again. The crackling and hissing noise of the fire was so intense, it drowned out even the howl of the wind.

Mesmerized, Kyra came closer, feeling more and more warmth, as if walking towards the surface of the sun. She felt herself thaw as she approached, began to feel her toes and fingers again, tingling as the feeling came back. It was like standing before a huge fireplace, and she felt it bring her back to life. She stood before it, hypnotized, like a moth to a flame, staring at this wonder of the world, the greatest wonder in their land, the one thing keeping them safe—and the one thing no one understood. Not the historians, not the kings, and not even the sorcerers. When had it begun? What kept it going? When would it end?

It was said the Watchers knew the answers. But they, of course, would never reveal them. Legend had it the Sword of Fire, closely guarded in one of the two towers—no one knew which—kept The Flames alive. The Towers, guarded by a cult-like group of men, the Watchers, an ancient order, part man, part something else, were each well-hidden and guarded on two opposite ends of Escalon, one on the far western shore, in Ur, and the other in the southeastern corner of Kos. The Watchers were joined, too, by the finest knights the kingdom had to offer, all intent on keeping the Sword of Fire hidden and The Flames alive.

More than one troll, her father had told her, who breached The Flames had tried to find the towers, to steal the Sword—but none had ever been successful. The Watchers were too good at what they did. After all, even Pandesia, with all its might, dared not try to occupy the Towers, dared not risk angering the Watchers and lowering The Flames.

Kyra detected motion, and in the distance spotted soldiers on patrol, carrying torches in the night, pacing along The Flames, swords at their hips. They were spread out every fifty yards or so, with such vast territory to cover. Her heart beat faster as she watched them. She had really made it.

Kyra stood there, feeling alive, knowing anything could happen at any time. At any moment, a troll could burst through those flames, she knew. Of course, the fire killed most of them, but some, using shields, managed to burst through and live, at least long enough to kill as many soldiers as they could. Sometimes a troll even survived the passage and roamed the woods and terrorized villages. She remembered once when one of her father's men brought back a troll's head; it was a sight she would never forget.

As Kyra stared into The Flames, so mysterious, she wondered at her own fate, so far from home. What would become of her now?

"Hey, what are you doing here?" shouted a voice.

A soldier, one of her father's men, had spotted her, and was walking towards her.

Kyra did not want a confrontation. She was warm again, her spirits restored, and it was time to move on.

She whistled to Leo, and the two of them turned and headed back into the storm, towards the distant wood. She did not know where she would go next, but, inspired by The Flames, she knew that her destiny lay out there somewhere, even if she could not see it yet.

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Kyra stumbled through the night, chilled to the bone, glad Leo was with her and wondering how much longer she could go on. She had searched everywhere for shelter, for an escape from the biting wind and snow, and despite the risks, she had found herself gravitating toward the Wood of Thorns, the only place in sight. The Flames were far behind her by now, their glow no longer visible on the horizon, and the blood-moon had long ago been swallowed by the clouds, leaving her no light to see by. Fingers and toes numb again, her situation seemed to grow more dire by the moment. She began to wonder if it had been foolish to leave the fort at all. She wondered if her father, willing to give her away, would even care.

Kyra felt a fresh burst of anger as she continued through the snow, marching she was not sure where, but determined to get away from the life waiting for her. As another gale of wind passed and Leo whined, Kyra looked up and was surprised to see she had made it: before her lay the towering Wood of Thorns.

Kyra paused, feeling apprehensive, knowing how dangerous it was—even in the day, even in a group. To come here alone, and at night—and on Winter Moon, when spirits roamed—would be reckless. Anything, she knew, could happen.

But another gale whipped through, sending snow down the back of her neck and chilling her to the bone, and it drove Kyra forward, past the first tree, its branches heavy with snow, and into the wood.

As she entered, Kyra immediately felt relief. The thick branches sheltered her from the wind, and it was quieter in here. The raging snow was but a flurry in here, its fall broken by the thick branches, and for the first time since being outside, Kyra could see again. Even Already, she felt warmer.

Kyra used the opportunity to shake the snow off her arms and shoulders and hair, while Leo shook himself, too, snow flying everywhere. She reached into her sack and pulled out a piece of dried meat for him, and he snatched it eagerly as she stroked his head.

"Don't worry, I'll find us shelter, my friend," she said.

Kyra continued deeper into the wood, looking for any shelter she could find, realizing she'd need to stay the night here to wait out the storm, wake to a new day, and continue her trek in the morning. She searched for a boulder to take shelter against, or the nook of a tree, or ideally a cave—anything—but found none.

Kyra trekked deeper, snow up to her knees, brushing against snowy branches in the thick wood; as she went, strange animal noises cried out all around her. She heard a deep purring noise beside her and she spun and peered into the thick branches—but it was too dark to see anything. Kyra hurried on, not wanting to contemplate what beasts might be lurking here, and in no mood for a confrontation. She clutched her bow tightly, unsure if she could even use it, given how numb her hands were.

Kyra ascended a gentle slope and as she crested it, she stopped and looked out, afforded a view down below as moonlight momentarily shone through an opening in the trees. Down below, before her, sat a glistening lake, its waters ice-blue, translucent, and she recognized it immediately: the Lake of Dreams. Her father had brought her here once, when she was a child, and they had lit a candle and placed it on a lily pad, in honor of her mother. This lake was rumored to be a sacred place, a vast mirror that allowed one to look into both life above and life below. It was a mystical place, a place you did not come without good reason, a place where heartfelt wishes could not be ignored.

Kyra hiked for the lake, feeling drawn to it. She stumbled down the steep hill, using her staff to steady herself, weaving between trees, slipping and steadying herself, until she reached its shore. Oddly enough, its shore, made of a fine white sand, was free of snow. It was magical.

Kyra knelt by the water's edge, shivering from the cold, and looked down. In the moonlight, she saw her reflection, her blonde hair falling by her cheeks, her light gray eyes, her high cheekbones, her delicate features, looking nothing like her father or brothers, staring back at her. In her eyes, she was surprised to see a look of defiance, the eyes of a warrior.

As she looked at her reflection, she recalled her father's words from so many years ago: a heartfelt prayer at the Lake of Dreams cannot be refused.

Kyra, at a crossroads in her life as never before, needed guidance now more than ever. She had never felt more confused as to what to do, where to go, next. She closed her eyes and prayed with all her might.

God, I don't know who you are. But I ask your help. Give me something, and I shall give you whatever you ask in return. Show me which path to take. Give me a life of honor and courage. Of valor. Allow me to become a great warrior, to be at the mercy of no man. Allow me to have the freedom to do as I choose—not as someone else would choose for me.

Kyra knelt there, numb to the cold, at her wits' end, with nowhere left to turn in the world, praying with all her heart and all her soul. She lost all sense of time and place.

Kyra had no idea how much time had passed when she opened her eyes, snowflakes on her eyelids. She felt changed somehow, she did not know how, as if an inner peace had settled over her. She looked down into the lake, and this time, what she saw took her breath away.

Staring back up at her she did not see her own reflection—but the reflection of a dragon. It had fierce, glowing yellow eyes, and ancient red scales, and she felt her blood run cold as it opened its mouth and roared at her.

Kyra, startled, wheeled, expecting to see a dragon standing over her. She looked everywhere, but saw nothing.

It was only her, and Leo, who whined softly.

Kyra turned and looked down at the lake again, and this time, saw only her face staring back.

Her heart slammed in her chest. Had it been some trick of the light? Of her own imagination? Of course, it could not have been possible—dragons had not visited Escalon in a thousand years. Was she losing her mind? What could this all mean?

Kyra flinched as she suddenly heard a terrifying noise from far off in the woods, something like a howl, or possibly a cackle. Leo heard it, as he turned and snarled, his hair rising. Kyra searched the woods and in the distance saw a faint glow from behind the tree line. It was as if there were a fire—but there was no fire. Only an eerie, white glow.

Kyra felt the hair rise on the back of her neck as she felt as if another world were beckoning her. She felt as if she had opened a portal to the other world. As much as every part of her screamed to turn and run, she found herself mesmerized, found her body acting for her as she got up and began to make her way inextricably toward the light.

Kyra hiked up the hill with Leo, the glow getting brighter as she weaved between the trees. Finally she reached the ridge, and as she did, she stopped short, aghast. Before her, in a small clearing, was a sight she could have never expected—and one she would never forget.

An old woman, face whiter than the snow, grotesque, covered in warts and scars, stared down at what appeared to be a fire below her, holding her wrinkled hands to it. But the fire burned a bright white, and there were no logs beneath it. She looked up at Kyra with ice-blue eyes, eyes with no whites, all color, and no pupils. It was the scariest thing Kyra had ever seen, and her heart froze within her. Everything within her told her to turn and run, but she could not help herself as she stepped closer.

"The Winter Moon," the old lady said, her voice unnaturally deep, as if a bullfrog had spoken. "When the dead are not quite alive and the alive not quite dead."

"And which are you?" Kyra asked, stepping forward.

The woman cackled, a horrific sound that sent a chill up her spine. Beside her, Leo snarled.

"The question is," the woman said, "which are you?"

Kyra frowned.

"I am alive," she insisted.

"Are you? In my eyes, you are more dead than me."

Kyra wondered what she meant, and she sensed it was a rebuke, a rebuke for not going forth boldly and following her own heart.

"What is it you seek, brave warrior?" the woman asked

Kyra's heart quickened at the term, and she felt emboldened.

"I want a bigger life," she said. "I want to be a warrior. Like my father."

The old woman looked back down into the light, and Kyra was relieved to have her eyes off of her. A long silence fell over them as Kyra waited, wondering.

Finally, as the silence stretched forever, Kyra's heart fell in disappointment. Perhaps the woman would not respond. Or perhaps her wish was not possible.

"Can you help me?" Kyra asked, finally. "Can you change my destiny?"

The women looked back up, her eyes aglow, intense, scary.

"You've picked a night when all things are possible," she replied slowly. "If you want something badly enough, you can have it. The question is: what are you willing to sacrifice for it?"

Kyra thought, her heart pounding with the possibilities.

"I will give anything," she said. "Anything."

There came another long silence as the wind howled. Leo began to whine.

"We are each born with a destiny," the old woman finally said. "Yet we must also choose it for ourselves. Fate and free-will, they perform a dance, your whole life long. There is a constant tug of war between the two. Which side wins...well, that depends."

"Depends on what?" Kyra asked.

"Your force of will. How desperately you want something—and how graced you are by God. And perhaps most of all, what you are willing to give up."

"I will sacrifice," Kyra said, feeling the strength rising up within her. "I will sacrifice *everything* not to live the life that others have chosen for me."

In the long silence that followed, the woman stared into her eyes with such an intensity, Kyra nearly had to turn away.

"Vow to me," the old woman said. "On this night, vow to me that you will pay the price."

Kyra stepped forward solemnly, her heart pounding, feeling her life was about to change.

"I vow," she proclaimed, meaning it more than any words she had uttered in her life.

The certainty of her tone cut through the air, her voice carrying an authority which surprised even her.

The old woman looked at her, and for the first time, she nodded, as her face morphed into what appeared to be a look of respect.

"You will be a warrior—and more," the woman proclaimed loudly, raising her palms out to her side, her voice booming, louder and louder as she continued. "You will be the greatest of all warriors. Greater than your father. More than this, you will be a great ruler. You will achieve power beyond what you could dream. Entire nations will look to you."

Kyra's heart was slamming in her chest as she listened to the woman's proclamation, spoken with such authority, as if it had already happened.

"Yet you will also be tempted by darkness," the woman continued. "There will be a great struggle within you, darkness battling light. If you can defeat yourself, then the world will be yours."

Kyra stood there, reeling, hardly believing it all. How was it possible? Surely, she must have the wrong person. No one had ever told her she would be important, that she would be anything special. It all seemed so foreign to her, so unattainable.

"How?" Kyra asked. "How is this possible? I am but a girl."

The woman smiled, an awful, evil smile that Kyra would remember for the rest of her life. She stepped in close, so close that Kyra shook with fear.

"Sometimes," the old woman grinned, "your fate is waiting for you just around the corner, with your very next breath."

There came a sudden flash of light, and Kyra shielded her eyes as Leo snarled and pounced for the old woman.

When Kyra opened her eyes, the light was gone. The woman was gone, Leo leaping at thin air. The forest clearing held nothing but blackness.

Kyra looked everywhere, baffled. Had she imagined the whole thing?

Suddenly, as if to answer her thoughts, there came a horrific, primordial shriek, as if the heavens themselves had cried out. Kyra stood there, frozen in place, and she thought of the lake. Of her reflection

Because, although she had never set eyes upon one, she knew, she just *knew* that was the shriek of a dragon. That it was waiting for her, just beyond the clearing.

Standing there alone, the woman gone, Kyra felt herself reeling as she tried to process what just happened, what it all could mean. Most of all, she tried to understand that noise. It was a roar, a sound unlike any she had ever heard, so primal, as if the earth were being born. It at once terrified her and drew her in, leaving her no place else to go. It resonated through her in a way she could not understand, and she realized it was a sound she had been hearing somewhere in the back of her head her entire life.

Kyra tore through the woods, Leo beside her, stumbling knee-deep in the snow, branches snapping her in the face and she not caring, feeling an urgency to reach it. For as it screeched again, Kyra knew it was a sound of distress.

The dragon, she knew, was dying—and it desperately needed her help.

## CHAPTER TEN

Merk stood in the forest clearing, one man dead at his feet, and stared back at the seven other thieves, who gaped back. They now had a look of respect—and fear—in their eyes, clearly realizing they had made a mistake in taking him for just another vulnerable traveler.

"I'm tired of killing," Merk said to them calmly, a smile on his face, "so today is your lucky day. You have one chance to turn and run."

A long, tense silence fell over them as they all looked to each other, clearly debating what to do. "That's our friend you killed," one seethed.

"Your ex-friend," Merk corrected. "And if you keep talking, it will be you, too."

The thief scowled and raised his club.

"There are still seven of us and one of you. Lay that knife down real slow and raise your hands, and maybe we won't cut you to pieces."

Merk smiled wider. He was tired, he realized, of resisting the urge to kill, of resisting who he was. It was so much easier just to stop fighting it, to become the old killer he was.

"You had your warning," he said, shaking his head.

The thief charged, raising his club high and swinging wildly.

Merk was surprised. For a big man, he swung quicker than he would have imagined. Yet he was clumsy, and Merk merely ducked, stabbed him in the gut, and stepped aside, letting him fall face-first into the dirt.

Another thief charged, raising his dagger, aiming for Merk's shoulder, and Merk grabbed his wrist, re-directed it, and plunged the man's own dagger into his heart.

Merk saw a thief raise a bow and take aim, and he quickly grabbed another thief charging him, spun him around, and used him as a human shield. His hostage cried out as the arrow pierced his chest instead.

Merk then shoved the dying man forward, right into the one with the bow, blocking his shot, then raised his dagger and threw it. It spun end over end, crossing the clearing until it impaled in the man's neck, killing him.

That left three of them, and they now looked back at Merk with uncertain faces, as if debating whether to charge or run.

"There are three us and one of him!" one called out. "Let's charge together!"

They all charged him at once, and Merk stood there, waiting patiently, relaxed. He was unarmed, and that was how he wanted it; often, he found, the best way to defeat foes, especially when outnumbered, was to use their weapons against them.

Merk waited for the first one to slash at him, an oaf of a boy who charged clumsily with a sword, all power and no technique. Merk stepped aside, grabbed the boy's wrist, snapped it, then disarmed him and sliced his throat. As the second attacker came, Merk spun backwards and slashed him across the chest. He then turned and faced the third thief and threw the sword—a move the man did not expect. It spun end over end and entered the man's chest, sending him flat on his back.

Merk stood there, looking around at the eight dead men, taking stock of his work with a professional assassin's eye. As he did he noticed one of them—the one with the club—was still alive, squirming on his stomach. The old Merk took over, and he could not help himself as he walked over to the man, still unsatisfied. Leave no enemies alive. Ever. Never let them see your face.

Merk walked casually over to the thief, reached out with his boot, and kicked him over, until he lay on his back. The thief looked up, bleeding from his mouth, eyes filled with fear.

"Please...don't do it," he begged. "I would have let you go."

Merk smiled.

"Would you?" he asked. "Was that before you tortured me, or after?"

"Please!" the man called out, starting to cry. "You said you had renounced violence!"

Merk leaned back and thought about that.

"You're right," he said.

The man blinked up at him, hope in his eyes.

"I have," Merk added. "But the thing is, you stirred something up in me today, something I would have quite rather suppressed."

"Please!" the man shrieked, sobbing.

"I wonder," Merk said, reflective, "how many innocent women, children, you have killed on this road?"

The man continued to sob.

"ANSWER ME!" Merk yelled.

"What does it matter?" the man called back, between sobs.

Merk lowered the tip of his sword to the man's throat.

"It matters to me," Merk said, "a great deal."

"Okay, okay!" he called out. "I don't know. Dozens? Hundreds? It is what I have been doing my whole life."

Merk thought about that; at least it was an honest response.

"I myself have killed many men in my lifetime," Merk said. "Not all I am proud of—but all for a cause, a purpose. Sometimes I was duped into killing an innocent—but in that case, I always killed the person who hired me. I never killed women, and I never killed children. I never preyed on the innocent, or the defenseless. I never robbed and I never cheated. I guess that makes me something of a saint," Merk said, smiling at his own humor.

He sighed.

"But you," he continued, "you are scum."

"Please!" the man shouted. "You can't kill an unarmed man!"

Merk thought about that.

"You're right," he said, and looked about. "See that sword lying next to you? Grab it."

The man looked over, fear in his eyes.

"No," he cried, trembling.

"Grab it," Merk said, pushing the tip of his sword to the man's throat, "or I will kill you."

The thief finally reached over, grabbed the hilt of the sword, and held it with trembling hands.

"You can't kill me!" the man shouted again. "You vowed to never kill again!"

Merk smiled wide, and in one quick motion, he plunged his sword into the man's chest.

"The nice thing about starting over," Merk said, "is that there's always tomorrow."

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kyra raced through the snow, brushing back the thick branches in her way, the dragon's cry still echoing in her ears, and burst into a clearing, when she suddenly stopped short. All of her anticipation could not prepare her for what she saw before her.

Her breath was taken away—not by the blizzard or the cold or the wind—but this time by the sight, unlike anything she'd seen in her life. She had heard the tales, night after night in her father's chamber, the ancient legends of dragons, and had wondered if they were true. She had tried to imagine them in her mind's eye, had stayed up many a sleepless night trying visualize, and yet still she could not believe it was true.

Not until now.

For before her, hardly twenty feet away, Kyra was stunned to find herself standing face to face with a real, breathing dragon. It was terrifying—yet magnificent. It screeched as it lay on its side, trying to get up but unable, one wing flapping and the other appearing to be broken. It was huge, massive, each of its scarlet-red scales the size of her. Krya noticed the dozens of flattened trees, and realized it must have fallen from the sky, creating this clearing. It lay on a steep snow bank, close to a gushing river.

As she stared, agape, Kyra tried to process the sight before her. A dragon. Here, in Escalon. In Volis, in the Wood of Thorns. It wasn't possible. Dragons, she knew, lived on the other side of the world, and never in her life, or her father's time, or her father's father's time, had one been spotted in Escalon—much less near Volis. It made no sense.

She blinked several times and rubbed her eyes, thinking it must be an illusion.

And yet there it was, shrieking again, digging its claws in the snow, stained red with its blood. It was definitely wounded. And it was definitely a dragon.

Kyra knew she should turn and flee, and a part of her wanted to; after all, this dragon could surely kill her with a single breath, much less a stroke of its claws. She had heard tales of the damage a dragon could do, of their hatred for mankind, of their ability to tear a person to shreds in the blink of an eye, or wipe out an entire village with a single breath.

But something within Kyra made her hold her ground. She did not know if it was courage or foolishness or her own desperation—or something deeper. For deep down, as crazy as it was, she felt a primal connection to this creature she could not understand.

It blinked, slowly, staring back at her with equal surprise and as it did, what terrified Kyra most were not its fangs or its claws or its size—but its eyes. They were huge, glowing yellow orbs, so fierce, so ancient, so soulful and they looked right into hers. The hair raised on her arms as she realized they were the exact eyes she had seen in her own reflection in the Lake of Dreams.

Kyra braced herself, expecting to be killed—but the dragon did not breathe fire. Instead, it just stared at her. It was bleeding, its blood running down the snow bank into the river, and it pained Kyra to see it. She wanted to help it, and even more so, she was obliged to. Every clan in the kingdom had an oath they lived by, a sacred family law they had to uphold, at the risk of bringing a curse on their family. Her family's law, passed down for generations, was to never kill a wounded animal—indeed, it was the very insignia of her father's house: a knight holding a wolf. Her family had taken it further over the generations, taking it upon themselves as a law to help any wounded animal they encountered.

As Kyra watched its labored breathing, gasping, her heart went out to it and she thought of her family's obligation. She knew that to turn her back on it would bring a terrible curse upon her family, and she was determined to make it well again, whatever the risk.

As Kyra stood there, transfixed, unable to move, she realized she could not walk away for another reason: she felt a stronger connection to this beast than she had to any animal she had ever encountered, more so even than to Leo, who was like a brother to her. She felt as if she had just been reunited with a long-lost friend. She could sense the dragon's tremendous power and pride and fierceness, and just being around it inspired her. It made her feel as if the world were so much bigger.

As Kyra stood at the edge of the clearing, debating what action to take, she was startled by the snap of a branch, followed by laughter—a cruel man's laughter. As she watched, she was shocked to see a soldier, dressed in the scarlet armor and important furs of the Lord's Men, saunter into the clearing, wielding a spear and standing over the dragon.

Kyra flinched as the soldier suddenly jabbed the dragon in its ribcage, making it shriek and curl up; she felt as if she had been stabbed herself. Clearly the soldier was taking advantage of this wounded beast, preparing to kill it but torturing it first. The thought pained Kyra to no end.

"My ax, boy!" the soldier yelled.

A boy, perhaps thirteen, warily entered the clearing, leading a horse. He looked like a squire, and he seemed terrified as he approached, eyeing the dragon warily. He did as commanded and drew a long ax from the saddle and placed it in his master's hand.

Kyra watched with a sense of dread as the soldier came closer, the blade glistening in the moonlight.

"I'd say this will make a fine trophy," he said, clearly proud of himself. "They will sing songs of me for generations, this kill of all kills."

"But you did not kill it!" the squire protested. "You discovered it wounded!"

The soldier turned and raised the blade to the boy's throat threateningly.

"I killed it, boy, do you understand?"

The boy gulped, and slowly nodded.

The soldier turned back to the beast, raised his ax, and studied the dragon's exposed neck. The dragon struggled to get away, to lift itself up, but it was helpless.

The dragon suddenly turned and looked directly at Kyra, as if remembering her, its yellow eyes aglow, and she could feel it pleading to her.

Kyra could hold herself back no longer.

"NO!" she cried.

Without thinking, Kyra ran into the clearing, rushing down the slope, slipping in the snow, Leo at her side. She did not stop to consider that confronting a Lord's Man was a crime punishable by death, or that she was alone out here, exposed, that her actions could likely get her killed. She thought only of saving the dragon's life, of protecting what was innocent.

As she rushed forward, she instinctively pulled the bow from her shoulder, placed an arrow, and aimed for the Lord's Man.

The soldier looked truly stunned to see another person out here, in the middle of nowhere—much less a girl, and holding a bow at him. He stood holding his ax, frozen in midair, then slowly lowered it as he turned and faced her.

Kyra's arms shook as she held the bowstring and aimed at the man's chest, not wanting to fire if she didn't have to. She had never killed a man before, and was not sure if she could.

"Lower your ax," she commanded, trying to use her fiercest voice. She wished, at a time like this, that she possessed the deep, commanding voice of her father.

"And who commands me?" the man called back in a mocking voice, appearing amused.

"I am Kyra," she called out, "daughter of Duncan, *Commander* of Volis." She added the last bit with emphasis, hoping to scare him into backing down.

But he only grinned wider.

"An empty title," he countered. "You are serfs to Pandesia, as the rest of Escalon. You answer to the Lord Governor—like everybody else."

He looked her up and down and licked his lips, then took a threatening step toward her, clearly unafraid.

"Do you know the penalty for aiming a weapon at a Lord's Man, girl? I could imprison you and your father and all of your people just for this."

The dragon suddenly breathed hard, labored, gasping, and the soldier turned back and glanced at it, remembering. It was clearly trying to breathe fire, but unable to.

The soldier glanced back at Kyra.

"I have work to do!" he snapped at her, impatient. "This is your lucky day. Run off now, back to your father, and count your blessings I let you live. Now piss off!"

He turned his back on her derisively, ignoring her completely, as if she were harmless. He raised his ax again, took a step forward, and held it over the dragon's throat.

Kyra felt herself flush with rage.

"I will not warn you again!" she called out, her voice lower this time, filled with meaning, surprising even her.

She drew her bow further back, and the soldier turned and looked at her, and this time he did not smile, as if realizing she were serious. Kyra was puzzled as she saw him look over her shoulder, as if watching something behind her. Just then she suddenly detected motion out of the corner of her eye—but it was too late.

Kyra felt herself slammed from the side. She went flying sideways and dropped her bow, its arrow shooting harmlessly up in the air, as a heavy body landed on top of her and tackled her down to the ground. She landed in snow so deep she could hardly breathe.

Disoriented, Kyra struggled her way back to the surface to find a soldier on top of her, pinning her down. She saw four of the Lord's Men standing over her, and she realized: there had been more of them, hiding in the wood. How stupid of her, she realized, for assuming that solider was alone. These other men must have been lurking out there all that time. That's why, she realized now, the first soldier had been so brazen, even with a bow trained on him.

Two of the men roughly dragged her to her feet, while the other two stepped in close. They were cruel-looking men, with boorish faces, unshaven, eager for bloodlust—or worse. One began to unbuckle his belt.

"A girl with a little bow, are you?" asked one, mocking.

"You should have stayed home in your daddy's fort," said another.

Barely had he finished speaking when there came a snarling noise—and Leo leapt through the snow, pouncing on one and pinning him down.

Another one of the men turned and kicked Leo, but Leo turned and bit his ankle, felling him. Leo went back and forth between the two soldiers, snarling and biting as they kicked him back.

The two other soldiers, though, stayed focused on Kyra, and with Leo tied up, she felt a wave of panic. Strangely enough, though, despite her circumstances, she realized she did not feel panic for herself but for the dragon. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the first soldier once again raise his ax high and turn and approach the beast, and she knew that in a moment, it would be dead.

Kyra reacted instinctively. As one of the soldiers momentarily loosened his grip on her arm, caught off guard by Leo, she reached behind her, drew the staff sheathed to her back, and brought it down on an angle with lightning speed. She struck one of them perfectly in the pressure point in his temple, felling him before he could react.

She then pulled back the staff, slid her grip all the way up so she could use it at close range and jabbed the other soldier on the bridge of the nose. He shrieked, gushing blood, and dropped to his knees.

Kyra knew this was her chance to finish these two men. They were now prone, and Leo had the other two pinned down and struggling.

But her heart was still with the dragon—it was all she could think of—and she knew there wasn't time. So she instead ran for her bow, picked it up, placed an arrow, and with barely time to think, much less to aim, she prepared to fire. She had one shot, she knew, and it had to be true. It would be the first shot she had ever taken in action, in real battle, in the dark, in the blinding snow and wind, between trees and branches and with a target twenty yards off. It would be the first shot she had taken with her life at stake.

Kyra summoned all of her training, all of her long days and nights of shooting, everything she had within her, and forced herself to focus. She forced herself to become one with her weapon.

Kyra drew and released, and time slowed as she watched the arrow fly, hearing its whistle, unsure if it would hit. There were too many variables at play, from a gust of wind to the swaying branches to her frozen hands, to the movement of the soldier.

Kyra heard the satisfying thump of the arrow finding its mark, and she heard the soldier cry out. She watched his face in the moonlight, contorted in pain, and watched as he dropped the ax harmlessly at his side and collapsed, dead.

The dragon looked over at Kyra and their eyes met. Its huge yellow eyes, glowing even in the night, seemed to acknowledge what she had done, and in that moment she felt as if it knew she had saved it, and that they had just made a connection for life.

Kyra stood there in shock, hardly believing what she had done. Had she really just killed a man? And not just any man—but a Lord's Man. She had broken Escalon's sacred law. It was an act from which there was no return—an act which would spark a war and embroil all of her people. What had she done?

Yet somehow, she had no regrets, no doubts about what she had done. She felt as if she had stepped into destiny.

A searing pain on her jaw line snapped her out of it, as Kyra felt thick, calloused knuckles smash into her skin. Her world was filled with pain as she stumbled, punched in the face, and fell in the snow to her hands and knees, seeing stars, her world spinning. Before she could collect herself she felt a kick in the ribs, then felt a second soldier tackling her and pinning her face in the snow.

Kyra gasped for breath as a soldier jerked her to her feet. She stood there, facing the two men she had let live. Leo snarled, but he still struggled with the other two. One soldier bled from his nose and the other from his temple, and Kyra realized she should have killed them when she'd had the chance. She struggled with all her might to break free from their grip, but to no avail. She could see the look of death in their eyes.

One of them glanced back at his dead commander, then stepped in close and sneered.

"Congratulations," he hissed. "By morning, your fort, your people, will be razed to the ground." He backhanded her, and her face filled with pain as she went stumbling back.

The other soldier grabbed her firmly and pushed his dagger to her throat, while the other reached for his belt buckle.

"Before you die, you're going to remember us," he said. "It will be the last memory of your short life."

Kyra heard a whining and looked over her shoulder to see one of the soldiers stab Leo. She winced as if she herself had been stabbed, though Leo, fearless, turned and sunk his teeth into the soldier's wrist.

Kyra felt the blade at her throat, and she knew she was on her own. Yet instead of fear, she felt liberated. She felt her anger, her desire for vengeance against the Lord's Men, well up inside her. In this man, she had the perfect target. She might go down, but she would not do down without a fight.

She waited until the last moment as the soldier stepped closer, grabbing at her clothes—then she planted one foot, leaned back, and used her great flexibility to kick straight up, with all her might.

Kyra felt her foot connect between the man's legs with a great force and as she watched him cry out and drop to his knees, knowing it was a perfect blow. At the same moment, Leo shook off his attackers and turned and lunged for the man she felled, pouncing and sinking his fangs into his throat.

She turned to face the other soldier, the last one standing, and he drew a sword and faced her. Kyra picked up her staff from the snow and faced off with him—and he laughed.

"A staff against a sword," he mocked. "Better to give up now—your death won't be so painful."

He charged and swung at her, and as he did, Kyra's instincts took over; she imagined herself back in the training ground. As he swung, she dodged left and right, using her speed to her advantage. The soldier was big and strong and he wielded a heavy sword—yet she was light and unencumbered, and as he came down with a particularly fierce blow meant to chop her in half, she sidestepped and left him off balance; she swung around with her staff and cracked him on the back of his wrist and he dropped his sword, losing it in the snow.

He looked back at her, shocked, then sneered and charged her with his bare hands, as if to tackle her. Kyra waited, then at the last moment crouched low and brought the tip of her staff straight up, connecting with his chin. The blow snapped his neck back and sent him landing flat on his back, unmoving. Leo pounced on him and sank his fangs into his throat, making sure he was dead.

Kyra, assuming all her attackers were dead, was confused to hear movement behind her. She turned to see one of the two soldiers Leo had attacked somehow back on his feet, limping to his horse, drawing a sword from its saddle. The soldier rushed Leo, who still had his fangs in the other soldier's throat, his back to him.

Kyra's heart slammed in her chest; she was too far away to reach him in time.

"LEO!" she cried out.

But Leo, too busy snarling, did not realize.

Kyra knew she had to take drastic action or else watch Leo be killed before her eyes. Her bow was still in the snow, too far away from her.

She thought quick. She raised her staff and broke it over her knee and it broke in two. She took one of the halves, its tip jagged, took aim, leaned back and hurled it like a spear.

It whistled through the air and she prayed it find its target.

Kyra breathed with relief as she watched it pierce the soldier's throat right before he reached Leo. The man stumbled and fell at Leo's feet, dead.

Kyra stood there in the silence, breathing hard, seeing the carnage all around her, the five Lord's Men sprawled out in the snow, staining it red, and she could hardly believe what she had done. But before she could finish processing it, she suddenly detected motion out of the corner of her eye. She turned to see the squire, running for his horse.

"Wait!" Kyra called out.

She knew she had to stop him. If he made it back to the Lord Governor he would tell them what had happened. They would know it was she who had done this, and her father and her people would be killed.

Kyra picked up her bow, took aim, and waited until she had a good shot. Finally, the boy broke into the clearing, and as the clouds opened and the moon shone down, she had her chance.

But she could not take the shot. The boy had not done anything, after all, and something within her just could not kill an innocent boy.

Kyra lowered her bow with shaking hands and watched him ride off, feeling sick, knowing it would be her death sentence. Surely, a war would come for this.

With the squire on the run, Kyra knew her time was short. She should run back through the wood, for her father's fort, and alert them all as to what had happened. They would need time to prepare for war, to seal the fort—or to flee for their lives. She felt a terrible sense of guilt, yet also, of duty.

Yet Kyra could go nowhere. Instead, she stood there and watched, mesmerized, as the dragon flapped its good wing and stared back at her. She felt she had to be by its side.

Kyra hiked quickly through the snow, down the bank, toward the gushing river, until she stood before the dragon. It lifted its neck just a bit and stared at her, their eyes meeting, and the dragon stared back at her with an inscrutable expression. In its look Kyra thought she spotted gratitude—yet also, fury. She did not understand.

Kyra stepped closer, Leo snarling beside her, until she stood but a few feet away. Her breath caught in her throat. She could hardly believe she was standing so close to such a magnificent creature. She knew how dangerous this was, knew this dragon could kill her at any moment if it chose.

Kyra slowly lifted her hand, even as the dragon appeared to be frowning and, heart pounding with fear, reached out and touched its scales. Its skin was so rough, so thick, so primordial—it was like touching the beginning of time. Her hand trembled as her fingertips stroked it, and not from the cold

Its presence here was such a mystery, and her mind raced with a million questions.

"What hurt you?" Kyra asked, stroking its scales. "What are you doing on this side of the world?"

There came a sound like a growling from deep within its throat, and Kyra withdrew her hand, afraid. She could not read this beast, and even though she had just saved its life, Kyra suddenly felt it was a very bad idea to be so close to it.

The dragon looked at Kyra and slowly raised a sharpened claw until it touched Kyra's throat. Kyra stood there, frozen, terrified, wondering whether it would slice her throat.

Something flashed in its eyes and it seemed to change its mind. It withdrew its claw and then, to her surprise, in one quick motion slashed down.

Kyra felt a searing pain on her face and she cried out as the claw grazed her cheek, drawing blood. It was just a scratch, but it was enough, Kyra knew, to leave her with a scar.

Kyra reached up and touched the wound, saw the fresh blood in her hands, and felt a deep sense of betrayal and confusion. She looked back into the dragon's glowing yellow eyes, filled with defiance, and she was at a loss to understand this creature. Did it hate her? Had she made a mistake to save its life? Why had it only scratched her when it could have killed her?

"Who are you?" she asked softly, afraid.

She heard a voice, an ancient voice, rumbling in her mind's eye:

Theos.

She was shocked. She was sure it was the dragon's voice.

Kyra waited, hoping it would tell her more—but then suddenly, without warning, Theos shattered the silence by shrieking, rearing its head, and struggling to get away from her. It flopped and spun wildly, trying desperately to lift off.

Kyra could not understand why.

"Wait!" Kyra cried out. "You are wounded! Let me help you!"

It pained her to see him flopping so much, blood dripping from its wound, unable to get one wing to work. He was so massive that each flop raised a great cloud of snow, shaking the ground, making the earth rumble and shattering the stillness of this snowy night. He tried so hard to lift off into the air, but could not.

"Where is it you want to go?" Kyra called out.

Theos flopped again and this time he rolled down the steep, snowy bank, rolling, again and again, out of control, unable to stop itself. He rolled right for the gushing rapids.

Kyra watched with horror, helpless, as the dragon splashed into the raging waters of the river below.

"NO!" she cried out, rushing forward.

But there was nothing she could do. The great rapids carried Theos, flailing, screeching, downriver, winding through the forest, around a bend and out of sight.

Kyra watched him disappear and as she did, her heart broke inside her. She had sacrificed everything, her life, the destiny of her people, to save this creature—and now he was gone. What had it all been for? Had any of it even been real?

Kyra turned and looked out and saw the five dead men, still lying in the snow, saw Leo, wounded, beside her; she reached up and felt the sting on her cheek, saw the blood—and knew it had all been very real. She had survived an encounter with a dragon. She had killed five of the Lord's Men.

After tonight, she knew, her life would never be the same again.

Kyra noticed the horse's trail, winding into the wood, and she remembered the boy, riding to alert his people. She knew the Lord's Men would be coming for her people.

Kyra turned and sprinted into the wood, Leo at her side, determined to make it back to Volis, to alert her father and all her people—if it were not already too late.

# **CHAPTER TWELVE**

Vesuvius, King of the Trolls and Supreme Ruler of Marda, stood in the enormous cave beneath the earth, on a stone balcony a hundred feet high, and he looked down, surveying the work of his army of trolls beneath him. Thousands of trolls labored in this huge cavernous underground, hammering away at rock with pickaxes and hammers, chopping away at earth and stone, the sound of mining heavy in the air. Endless torches lined the walls while streams of lava crisscrossed the floor, sparking, emitting a glow, brightening the cave and keeping it hot while trolls sweated and gasped in the heat below.

Vesuvius smiled wide, his troll face grotesque, misshapen, twice the size of a human's, with two long fangs, like tusks, that emerged from his mouth, and beady red eyes which enjoyed watching people suffer. He wanted them his people to toil, to work harder than they'd ever had, for he knew it was only through extreme toil that he would achieve what his fathers could not. Twice the size of a typical troll, and three times the size of a human, Vesuvius was all muscle and rage, and he knew he was different, knew he could achieve what none before him had. He had hatched a plan that even his ancestors could not conceive, a plan that would bring glory to his nation forever. It would be the greatest tunnel ever created, a tunnel to bring them beneath The Flames, all the way into Escalon—and with each fall of the hammer, the tunnel became just a little bit deeper.

Not once, in centuries, had his people figured out how to cross The Flames en masse; individual trolls were able to pass through here and there, but most died on these suicide missions. What Vesuvius needed was an entire army of trolls to cross together, at once, to destroy Escalon once and for all. His fathers could not understand how to do it, and they had become complacent, resigned to a life here in the wilds of Marda. But not he. He, Vesuvius, was wiser than all his fathers, tougher, more determined—and more ruthless. One day, while brooding, he had thought, if he could not go through The Flames, or over them, then perhaps he could go under them. Captivated by the idea, he had set his plan into motion at once and had not stopped since, rallying thousands of his soldiers and slaves to build what would be the greatest creation of the troll kingdom: a tunnel beneath The Flames.

Vesuvius watched with satisfaction as one of his taskmasters whipped a human slave, one they had captured from the West, chained to the hundreds of other slaves. The human cried out and fell, and he was lashed until he died. Vesuvius grinned, pleased to see the other humans work harder. His trolls were nearly twice the size of the humans, much more grotesque-looking, too, with bulging muscles and misshaped faces, filled with a bloodlust that was insatiable. The humans, he'd found, were a good way for his people to vent their violence.

Yet as he watched, Vesuvius was still frustrated: no matter how many people he enslaved, how many of his soldiers he put to work, no matter how hard he lashed them, how much he tortured or killed his own people to motivate them, the progress remained too slow. The rock was too hard, the job too massive. At this rate, he knew, they would never complete this tunnel in his lifetime, and his dream of invading Escalon would remain but a dream.

Of course, they had more than enough room here in Marda—but it was not room that Vesuvius wanted. He wanted to kill, to subjugate all humans, to take all that was theirs, just for the fun of it. He wanted it all. And he knew that if he was to get there, the time had come for more drastic measures.

"My Lord and King?" came a voice.

Vesuvius turned to see several of his soldiers standing there, wearing the distinctive green armor of the troll nation, their insignia—a roaring boar's head with a dog in its mouth—emblazoned across

the front. His men lowered their heads out of deference, looking to the ground, as they had been trained to do when in his presence.

Vesuvius saw they were holding a troll soldier between them, wearing tattered armor, his face covered in dirt and ash and spotted with burn marks.

"You may address me," he commanded.

Slowly, they raised their chins and looked him in the eye.

"This one was captured inside Marda, in Southwood," one reported. "He was caught returning from beyond The Flames."

Vesuvius looked over the captive soldier, shackled, and was filled with disgust. Every day he sent men west, across Marda, on a mission to charge through The Flames and emerge on the other side, in Escalon. If they survived the journey, they were ordered to wreak terror amongst as many humans as they could. If they survived that, their orders were to seek out the two Towers and steal the Sword of Fire, the mythical weapon that supposedly held up The Flames. Most of his trolls never returned from the journey—they were either killed by the passage through the Flames or eventually, by the humans in Escalon. It was a one-way mission: they were commanded *never* to return—unless they came back with the Sword of Fire in hand.

But once in a while some of his trolls sneaked back, mostly disfigured from their journey through The Flames, unsuccessful in their mission but seeking to return anyway, for safe harbor back in Marda. Vesuvius had no stomach for these trolls, whom he considered to be deserters.

"And what news do you bring from the West?" he asked. "Did you find the Sword?" he added, already knowing the answer.

The soldier gulped, looking terrified.

He slowly shook his head.

"No, my Lord and King," he said, his voice broken.

Vesuvius raged in the silence.

"Then why did you return to Marda?" he demanded.

The troll kept his head lowered.

"I was ambushed by a party of humans," he said. "I was lucky to escape and make it back here."

"But why did you come back?" Vesuvius pressed.

The soldier looked at him, puzzled and nervous.

"Because my mission was over, my Lord and King."

Vesuvius fumed.

"Your mission was to find the Sword—or die trying."

"But I made it through The Flames!" he pleaded. "I killed many humans! And I made it back!"

"And tell me," Vesuvius said kindly, stepping forward and laying a hand on the troll's shoulder as he slowly walked with him toward the edge of the balcony. "Did you really think, upon coming back, that I would let you live?"

Vesuvius suddenly grabbed the troll by the back of his shirt, stepped forward, and hurled him over the edge.

The soldier flailed, shrieking through the air as much as his shackles would allow. All the workers down below stopped and looked up, watching as he fell. He tumbled a hundred feet then finally landed with a splat on the hard rock below.

The workers all looked up at Vesuvius, and he glared back down at them, knowing this would be a good reminder to all who failed him.

They quickly went back to work.

Vesuvius, still in a rage and needing to let it out on someone, turned from the balcony and strutted down the winding stone steps carved into the canyon wall, followed by his men. He wanted

to see their progress himself, up close—and while he was down there, he figured he could find a pathetic slave to beat to a pulp.

Vesuvius wound his way down the stairs, carved into the black rock, descending flight after flight, all the way down to the base of this vast cave, which became hotter the lower he went. Dozens of his soldiers fell in behind him as he strutted across the cave floor, weaving his way between the streams of lava, between hordes of workers. As he went, thousands of soldiers and slaves stopped working and parted ways for him, bowing their heads differentially.

It was hot down here, the base heated not only from the sweat of men, but from the streaks of lava that crisscrossed the room and oozed from the walls, from the sparks flying off the rocks as men struck them everywhere with axes and picks. Vesuvius marched across the vast cave floor, until finally he reached the entrance of the tunnel. He stood before it and stared: a hundred feet wide and fifty feet tall, the tunnel was being dug so that it sloped down gradually, deeper and deeper beneath the earth, deep enough to be able to support an army when the time came to burrow under The Flames. One day they would penetrate Escalon, rise above the surface, and take thousands of human slaves. It would, he knew, be the greatest day of his life.

Vesuvius marched forward, snatched a whip from a soldier's hands, reached high, and began lashing soldiers left and right. They all went back to work, striking the rock twice as fast, smashing the hard black rock until clouds of dust filled the air. He then made his way to the human slaves, men and women they had abducted from Escalon and had managed to bring back. Those were the missions he relished most of all, missions solely for the sake of terrorizing the West. Most humans died on the passage back, but enough survived, even if badly burnt and maimed—and these he worked to the bone in his tunnels.

Vesuvius zeroed in on them. He thrust the whip into a human's hand and pointed at a woman. "Kill her!" he commanded.

The human stood there, shaking, and merely shook his head.

Vesuvius snatched the whip back from his hand and instead lashed the man, again and again, until he finally stopped resisting, dead.

The others went back to work, averting his gaze, while Vesuvius threw down the whip, breathing hard, and stared back into the mouth of the cave. It was like staring at his nemesis. It was a half-formed creation, going nowhere. It was all happening too slowly.

"My Lord and King," came a voice behind him.

Vesuvius turned slowly to see several soldiers from the Mantra, his elite division of trolls, dressed in the black and green armor reserved for his best troops. They stood their proudly, holding halberds at their sides. These were the few trolls Vesuvius respected, and seeing them made his heart quicken. It could only mean one thing: they had brought news.

Vesuvius had dispatched the Mantra on a mission many moons ago: to find the giant that lurked in Great Wood, rumored to have killed thousands of trolls. His dream was to capture this giant, bring it back, and use its brawn to complete his tunnel. Vesuvius had sent mission after mission, and none had come back. All had been discovered dead, killed by the giant.

As Vesuvius stared at these men, his heart beat faster with hope.

"Speak," he commanded.

"My Lord and King, we have found the giant," one reported. "We have cornered him. Our men await your command."

Vesuvius grinned slowly, pleased for the first time in as along as he could recall. His smile grew wider as a plan hardened in his mind. Finally, he realized, it would all be possible; finally, he would have a chance to breach The Flames.

He stared back at his commander, filled with resolve, ready to do what he had to.

"Lead me to him."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kyra stumbled through the snow, now past her knees, trekking her way through the Wood of Thorns as she leaned on her staff, trying to fight her way through what had become a full-fledged blizzard. The storm raged so strongly now, it had even penetrated the thick branches of the wood, blowing back these huge trees, gusts of wind so strong that they nearly bent them in half. Gusts of wind and snow whipped her face, making it hard to see again—hard to even keep her footing. As the wind continually picked up, it took all her might just to walk a few steps.

The blood-red moon was long gone, as if it had been swallowed up by the storm, and now she had no light left to navigate by. Even if she had, she could barely see a thing. All she had left to ground her was Leo, walking slowly, wounded, leaning against her, his presence her only solace. With each step her feet seemed to sink deeper and she wondered if she were even making any progress. She felt an urgency to get back to her people, to warn them, making each step all the more frustrating.

Kyra tried to look up, squinting into the wind, hoping to find some distant landmark—anything—trying to see if she was even going the right way. But she was lost in a world of white. Her cheek burned from the dragon's scratch, feeling as if it were on fire. She reached up and touched it, and her hand was dotted with blood, the only warm thing left in the universe. Her cheek throbbed, nonetheless, as if the dragon had infected her.

As a particularly strong gust of wind knocked her backwards, Kyra finally realized she could not go on; they had to find shelter. She was desperate to reach Volis before the Lord's Men, but she knew that if she continued hiking like this, she knew she would die out here. Her only comfort was the fact that the Lord's Men would not be able to attack in this weather—if the squire even made it home.

Kyra looked around, this time for shelter—but even finding that proved elusive. Seeing nothing but white, the wind howling so loudly she could barely think, Kyra began to panic, to have visions of herself and Leo being found frozen out here in the snow, never discovered at all. She knew if she did not find something soon, they would certainly be dead by morning. This situation had crept up on her, and now it had become desperate. Of all nights to leave Volis, she realized now, she had picked the worst one.

As if sensing her new intention, Leo began to whine and he suddenly turned and ran away from her. He crossed a clearing and as he reached the other side, began to dig fiercely at a mound of snow.

Kyra watched curiously as Leo howled, scratching wildly, digging deeper and deeper in the snow, wondering what he had found. Finally, it gave way, and she was surprised to see he had unearthed a small cave, carved into the side of a huge boulder. Heart pounding with hope, she hurried over and crouched down and saw it was just wide enough to shelter them. It was also, she was thrilled to see, dry—and protected from the wind.

She leaned down and kissed his head.

"You did it, boy."

He licked her back.

She knelt down and crawled into the cave, Leo beside her, and as she entered, she had an immediate sensation of relief. Finally, it was quiet; the wind's noise was muted and for the first time it was not stinging her face, her ears; for the first time, she was dry. She felt like she could breathe again.

Kyra crawled on pine needles, deeper and deeper into the cave, wondering how deep it went, until finally she reached the back wall. She sat and leaned against it and looked out. Occasional

bursts of snow came in here, but the cave remained mostly dry, none reaching as deep as she. For the first time, she could truly relax.

Leo crawled up beside her, snuggling his head in her lap, and she hugged him to her chest as she leaned back against the stone, shivering, trying to keep warm. She brushed the snowflakes off of her furs and off his coat, trying to get them dry, and she examined his wound. Luckily, it wasn't deep.

Kyra used the snow to clean it out and he whined as she touched it.

"Shhh," she said.

She reached into her pocket and gave him her last piece of dried meat; he ate it greedily.

As she leaned back and sat there in the dark, listening to the raging wind, watching the snow begin to pile up again, blocking her view, Kyra felt as if it were the end of the world. She tried to close her eyes, feeling bone weary, frozen, desperately needing to rest, but the scratch on her cheek kept her awake, throbbing.

Eventually, her eyes grew heavy and began to shut on her. The pine beneath her felt oddly comfortable, and as her body morphed into the rock, she soon found herself, despite her best efforts, succumbing to the embrace of sweet sleep.

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Kyra flew on the back of a dragon, hanging on for dear life, moving faster than she knew was possible, as it screeched and flapped its wings. They were so wide and magnificent, and they grew wider as she watched them, seeming as if they would stretch over the world.

She looked down and her stomach dropped as she saw, far below, the rolling hills of Volis. She had never seen it from this angle, so high up. They flew over a lush countryside, with rolling green hills, stretches of woods, gushing rivers, and fertile vineyards. It was familiar terrain, and soon Kyra recognized her father's fort, rambling, its ancient stone walls blanketing the countryside, sheep roaming outside of it.

But as the dragon dove down, Kyra sensed immediately that something was wrong. She saw smoke rising—not the smoke of chimneys, but black, thick smoke. As she looked closer, she was horrified to see it was her father's fort aflame, waves of flame engulfing everything. She saw an army of the Lord's Men, stretching to the horizon, surrounding the fort, torching it, and as she heard the screams, she knew that everyone she knew and loved in the world was being slaughtered.

"NO!" she tried to shout.

But the words, stuck in her throat, would not come out.

The dragon craned its neck, turned it all the way back and looked her in the eye—and Kyra was surprised to see it was the same dragon she had saved, its piercing yellow eyes staring right back at her. Theos.

You saved me, she heard it say in her mind's eye. Now I shall save you. We are one now, Kyra. We are one.

Suddenly, Theos turned sharply, and Kyra lost her balance and fell.

She shrieked as she plummeted through the air, the ground coming for her fast.

"NO!" Kyra shrieked.

Kyra sat up shrieking in the blackness, unsure of where she was. Breathing hard, she looked all around, until she finally realized: she was in the cave.

Leo whined beside her, his head in her lap, licking her hand. She breathed deep, trying to remember where she was. It was still dark out, and outside the storm still raged, the winds howled, and the snow piled up. The throbbing in her cheek was worse, and she reached up and looked at her fingers and saw fresh blood. She wondered if it would ever stop bleeding.

"Kyra!" called out a mystical voice, sounding almost like a whisper.

Kyra, startled, wondering who could be in this cave with her, peered into the blackness, on alert. She looked up to see an unfamiliar figure standing over her in the cave. He wore a long, black robe and cloak and he held a staff; he appeared to be an older man, with white hair peeking out of his hood. His staff glowed, emitting a soft light in the blackness.

"Who are you?" she asked, sitting up straight, on guard. "How did you get in here?"

He took a step forward, and she wanted to see his face, but he was still obscured in shadow.

"What is it that you seek?" he asked, his ancient voice somehow putting her at ease.

She thought about that, trying to understand.

"I seek to be free," she said. "I seek to be a warrior."

Slowly, he shook his head.

"You forget something," he said. "The most important thing of all. What is it that you seek?" Kyra stared back, confused.

Finally, he took another step forward.

"You seek your destiny."

Kyra wondered at his words.

"And more," he said, "you seek to know who you are."

He stepped forward again, standing so close, yet still obscured in shadow.

"Who are you, Kyra?" he asked.

She stared back blankly, wanting to answer, but in that moment she had no idea. She was no longer sure of anything.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his voice so loud, echoing off the walls, hurting her eardrums.

Kyra raised her hands to her face, bracing herself as he came closer.

Kyra opened her eyes again and she was shocked to see that no one was there. She couldn't understand what was happening. She slowly lowered her hands, and as she did, she realized that this time, she was fully awake.

Bright sunlight shone into the cave, light reflecting off the snow, off the cave walls, blinding. She squinted, disoriented, trying to collect herself. The raging wind was gone; the blinding snow was gone. Instead, there was snow partially blocking the entrance and beyond it a world with a crystal blue sky, birds singing. It was as if the world had been reborn.

Kyra could hardly fathom it: she had survived the long night.

Leo gently bit at her pants leg and prodded her, impatient.

Disoriented, Kyra slowly stood and as she did, she immediately reeled from the pain. Not only was her entire body sore from the fighting, the blows she had received, but most of all, her cheek burned as if it were on fire. She recalled the dragon's claw, and she reached up and felt it; although just a scratch, it was still mysteriously moist, caked with blood.

As she stood she felt lightheaded, and she did not know if it was from her exhaustion, her hunger, or the dragon's scratch. She walked on unsteady legs, feeling unlike herself, as she followed Leo, who led the way impatiently out of the cave and back into day, clawing at the snow to widen their exit.

Kyra crouched down and stepped outside and as she stood, found herself immersed in a world of blinding white. She raised her hands to her eyes, her head splitting at the sight. It had warmed considerably, the wind was gone, birds chirped, and the sun filtered through trees in the forest clearing. She heard a whoosh and turned to see a huge clump of snow slide off a heavy pine and make its way to the forest floor. She looked down and saw she stood in snow up to her thighs.

Leo led the way, bounding through the snow, back in the direction of Volis, she was sure. She followed him, struggling to keep up.

Kyra, though, found herself struggling with each step she took. She licked her lips and felt more and more lightheaded. The blood pulsed in her cheek, and she began to wonder if the wound had

infected her. She felt herself changing. She could not explain it, but she felt as if the dragon's blood were pulsing through her.

"Kyra!"

There came a distant shout, sounding as if it were a world away. It was followed by several other voices, shouting her name, their cries absorbed by the snow and the pines. It took her a moment to realize, to recognize the voices: her father's men. They were out here, searching for her.

Kyra felt a surge of relief.

"Here!" she called out, thinking she was shouting, but surprised to hear her own voice was barely above a whisper. At that moment, she realized just how weak she was. Her wound was doing something to her, something she did not understand.

Suddenly, her knees buckled out from under her, and Kyra found herself falling into the snow, helpless to resist.

Leo yelped, then turned and ran for the distant voices.

She wanted to call to him, to call to all of them, but she was too weak now. She lay there, deep in the snow, and looked up at a world of white, at the blinding winter sun, and closed her eyes as a slumber she could no longer resist carried her away.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alec held his head in his hands, trying to stop his headache, as the carriage, packed with boys, jolted roughly along the country road, as it had been doing all night long. The bumps and ditches never seemed to end, and this primitive wooden cart, with its iron bars and wooden wheels, seemed to have been constructed to inflict the maximum possible discomfort. With each bump, Alec's head slammed into the wood behind him. After the first bump, he had been sure it could not go on like this for long, that the road must end sometime soon.

But hour after hour had passed, and if anything, the road only seemed to worsen. He had been awake all night long, with no hope of sleep, if not from the bumps then from the stink of the other boys, from their elbowing and jostling him awake. All night long the cart made stops in villages, picking up more and more boys, cramming them all in here in the blackness. Alec could feel them looking him over, summing him up, a sea of dejected faces staring back at him, their eyes filled with wrath. They were all older, miserable, and looking for a victim.

Alec had at first assumed that, since they were all in this together, all drafted against their will to serve at The Flames, there would be a solidarity amongst them. But he'd learned quickly that was not the case. Each boy was his own island, and if Alec received any sort of communication, it was only hostility. They were rough faces, unshaven, scars across them, noses that looked like they had been broken in too many fights, and it was beginning to dawn on Alec that not every boy in this carriage had just reached his eighteenth year—some were older, more broken down by life, looking like criminals, thieves, rapists, murderers, thrown in with the others, all of them being sent to keep The Flames.

Alec, sitting on the hard wood, jammed in, feeling as if he were on a journey to hell, was certain it could not get any worse; but the carriage stops never ended, and to his amazement, they crammed more and more boys in here. When he had first entered, a dozen boys had seemed tight, with no room to maneuver; but now, with over two dozen and counting, Alec could barely breathe. The boys who piled in after him were all forced to stand, trying to grab onto the ceiling, to anything, but mostly slipping and falling onto each other with each bump of the cart. More than one angry boy shoved back, and endless scuffles broke out, all night long, boys constantly elbowing and shoving each other. Alec watched in disbelief as one boy bit another's ear off. The only saving grace was that they had no room to maneuver, to even bring their shoulders back to throw a punch, so the fights had no choice but to defuse quickly, with vows to continue at a later time.

Alec heard birds chirping, and he looked out, bleary-eyed, to spot the first light of dawn creeping through the iron bars. He marveled that day had broke, that he had survived this, the longest night of his life.

As the sun lit the carriage, Alec began to get a better look at all the new boys that had come in. He was by far the youngest of the lot—and, it appeared, the least dangerous. It was a savage group of muscle-bound, irascible boys, all scarred, some tattooed, looking like the forgotten boys of society. They were all on edge, bitter from the long night, and Alec felt the carriage was ripe for an explosion.

"You look too young to be here," came a deep voice.

Alec looked over to see a boy, perhaps a year or two older, sitting beside him, shoulder to shoulder. He was the presence, Alec realized, that he had felt squished up against him all night long, a boy with broad shoulders, strong muscles and the innocent, plain face of a farmer. His face was unlike the others, open and friendly, perhaps even a bit naïve, and Alec sensed in him a kindred soul.

"I took my brother's slot," Alec replied flatly, wondering how much to tell him.

"He was afraid?" the boy asked, puzzled.

Alec shook his head.

"Lame," Alec corrected.

The boy nodded, as if understanding, and looked at Alec with a new respect.

They fell into silence, and Alec looked the boy over.

"And you?" Alec asked. "You don't appear to be eighteen, either."

"Seventeen," the boy said.

Alec wondered.

"Then why are you here?" he asked.

"I volunteered."

Alec was stunned.

"Volunteered? But why?"

The boy looked at the floor and shrugged.

"I wanted to get away."

"To get away from what?" Alec asked, baffled.

The boy fell silent and Alec could see a gloom pass over his face. He fell silent and he did not think he would respond—but finally, the boy mumbled: "Home."

Alec saw the sadness in his face, and he understood. Clearly, something had gone terribly wrong at this boy's home, and from the bruises on the boy's arms, and the look of sadness mixed with anger, Alec could only guess.

"I am sorry," Alec replied.

The boy looked at him with a surprised expression, as if not expecting any compassion in this cart. Suddenly, he extended a hand.

"Marco," he said.

"Alec."

They shook hands, the boy's twice as large as Alec's, with a strong grip that left his hand hurting. Alec sensed he had met a friend in Marco, and it was a relief, given the sea of faces before him.

"I suspect you are the only one who volunteered," Alec said.

Marco looked around and shrugged.

"I suspect you're right. Most of these were drafted or imprisoned."

"Imprisoned?" Alec asked, surprised.

Marco nodded.

"The Keepers are comprised not only of draftees, but a good amount of criminals, too."

"Who you calling a criminal, boy?" came a savage voice.

They both turned to see one of the boys, prematurely aged from his hard life, looking forty years old though not older than twenty, with a pockmarked face and beady eyes. He squatted down low, and stared into Marco's face.

"I wasn't talking to you," Marco replied, defiant.

"Well, now you are," the boy seethed, clearly looking for a fight. "Say it again. You want to call me a criminal to my face?"

Marco reddened and clenched his jaw, getting angry himself.

"If the shoe fits," Marco said.

The other boy flushed with rage, and Alec admired Marco's defiance, his fearlessness. The boy lunged at Marco, wrapping his hands around his throat and squeezing with all his might.

It all happened so fast, Marco was clearly caught off guard—and in these close quarters, he had little room to maneuver. His eyes bulged wide as he was losing air, trying unsuccessfully to pry the boy's hands off. Marco was bigger, but the boy had wiry hands, calloused, probably from years of murdering, and Marco could not loosen his grip.

"FIGHT! FIGHT!" the other boys called out.

The others looked over, half-heartedly watching the violence, one of a dozen fights that had erupted throughout the night.

Marco, struggling, leaned forward quickly and head-butted the other boy, smashing him in the nose. There came a cracking noise and blood gushed from the boy's nose.

Marco tried to stand to get better leverage—but as he did, a big boot pressed down on his shoulder from a different boy, pinning him down. At the same moment, the first boy, blood still gushing from his nose, reached into his waist and pulled out something shiny. It flashed in the premorning light, and Alec realized, shocked, it was a dagger. It was all happening so quickly, there was no time for Marco to react.

The boy thrust it forward, aiming for Marco's heart.

Alec reacted. He lunged forward, grabbed the boy's wrist with two hands, and pinned them down to the floor, sparing Marco from the deadly blow a moment before the blade touched his chest. The blade still grazed Marco, tearing open his shirt, but not touching his skin.

Alec and the boy went down to the wood, struggling for the blade, while Marco managed to reach up and twist the ankle of his other attacker, snapping it with a crack.

Alec felt greasy hands on his face, felt the first boy's long fingernails scratching him, reaching for his eyes. Alec knew he had to act quick, and he let go of the hand with the dagger, spun around and threw his elbow, feeling a satisfying crunch as his elbow connected with the boy's jaw.

The boy spun off of him, face-first to the ground.

Alec, breathing hard, his face stinging from the scratches, managed somehow to jump to his feet, as Marco stood beside him, sandwiched between all the other boys. The two stood side by side, looking down at their attackers lying on the floor, motionless. Alec's heart slammed in his chest, and as he stood there, he decided he no longer wanted to sit; it left him too vulnerable to attack from above. He would rather stand the rest of the way, however long the journey was.

Alec looked out and saw all the hostile eyes glaring at him, and this time, instead of looking away he met them back, realizing he needed to project confidence if he were to survive amongst this lot. Finally, they all seemed to give him a look, something like respect, and then they looked away.

Marco looked down, examining the tear in his shirt where the dagger had almost punctured his heart. He looked at Alec, his face filled with gratitude.

"You have a friend for life," Marco said sincerely.

He reached out for Alec's arm and Alec clasped it, and it felt good. A friend: that was exactly what he needed.

# **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

Kyra opened her eyes slowly, disoriented, wondering where she was. She saw a stone ceiling high above her, torchlight bouncing off its walls, and she felt herself lying in a bed of luxurious furs. She couldn't understand; last she remembered, she had been falling in the snow, sure she was going to die.

Kyra lifted her head and looked all around, expecting to see the snowy forest all around her. But instead, she was shocked to see a group of familiar faces crowding around her—her father, her brothers Brandon and Braxton and Aidan, Anvin, Arthfael, Vidar, and a dozen of her father's best warriors. She was back in the fort, in her chamber, in her bed, and they all looked down at her with concern. Kyra felt pressure on her arm, and she looked over to see Lyra, the court healer, with her large hazel eyes and long, silver hair, standing over her, examining her pulse.

Kyra opened her eyes fully, realizing she was not in the wood anymore. Somehow, she had made it back. She heard a whining beside her, felt Leo's nose on her hand, and she realized: he must have led them to her.

"What has happened?" she asked, still confused, trying to piece it all together.

The crowd seemed vastly relieved to see her awake, speaking, and her father stepped closer, his face filled with remorse and relief as he held her hand firmly. Aidan rushed forward and grabbed her other hand, and she smiled to see her younger brother at her side.

"Kyra," her father said, his voice filled with compassion. "You are home now. Safe."

Kyra saw the guilt in her father's face, and it all came back to her: their argument the night before. She realized he must have felt responsible. It was his words, after all, that had driven her away.

Kyra felt a sting and she cried out in pain as Lyra reached up and touched a cool cloth to her cheek; it had some sort of ointment in it, and her wound burned and then cooled.

"Water of the Lily," Lyra explained soothingly. "It took me six ointments to figure out what would cure this wound. You are lucky we can treat it—the infection was bad already."

Her father looked down at her cheek with an expression of concern.

"Tell us what happened," he said. "Who did this to you?"

Kyra propped herself up on one elbow, her head spinning as she did, feeling all the eyes on her, all the men riveted, waiting in silence. She tried to remember, to piece it all together.

"I remember..." she began, her voice hoarse. "The storm....The Flames...the Wood of Thorns."

Her father's brow furrowed in concern.

"Why did you venture there?" he asked. "Why did you hike so far on such a night?" She tried to remember.

"I wanted to see The Flames for myself," she said. "And then...I needed shelter. I remember...the Lake of Dreams...and then...a woman."

"A woman?" he asked. "In the Wood of Thorns?"

"She was...ancient...the snow did not reach her."

"A witch," gasped Vidar.

"Such things venture out on Winter Moon," added Arthfael.

"And what did she say?" her father demanded, on edge.

Kyra could see the confusion and concern in all the faces, and she decided to refrain, not to tell them of the prophecy, of her future. She was still trying to process it all herself, and she feared that if they heard it, they might she think was crazy.

"I....can't remember," she said.

"Did she do this to you?" her father asked, looking at her cheek.

Kyra shook her head and swallowed, her throat dry, and Lyra rushed forward and gave her water from a sack. She drank it, realizing how parched she was.

"There was a cry," Kyra continued. "Unlike any I had heard."

She sat up, feeling more lucid as it all rushed back to her. She looked her father directly in the eye, wondering how he would react.

"A dragon's cry," she said flatly, bracing herself for their reaction, wondering if they would even believe her.

The room broke into an audible gasp of disbelief, all the men gaping at her. An intense silence fell over the men, all of them looking more stunned than she had ever seen.

No one spoke for what felt like an eternity.

Finally, her father shook his head.

"Dragons have not visited Escalon for a thousand years," he said. "You must have heard something else. Perhaps your ears played tricks on you."

Thonos, the old king's historian and philosopher and now a resident of Volis, stepped forward, with his long gray beard, leaning on his cane. He spoke rarely, and when he did, he always commanded great respect, a vault of forgotten knowledge and wisdom.

"On the Winter Moon," he said, his voice frail, "such things are possible."

"I saw it," Kyra insisted. "I saved it."

"Saved it?" her father asked, looking at her as if she were mad. "You, saved a dragon?"

All the men looked back at her as if she had lost her mind.

"It was the injury," Vidar said. "It has touched her mind."

Kyra blushed, desperately wanting them to believe her.

"It has not touched my mind," she insisted. "I do not lie!"

She searched all their faces, desperate.

"When have any of you known me to lie?" she demanded.

They all stared back, unsure.

"Give the girl a chance," Vidar called out. "Let's hear her tale."

Her father nodded back at her.

"Go on," he prodded.

Kyra licked her lips, sitting upright.

"The dragon was wounded," she recalled. "The Lord's Men had it cornered. They were going to kill it. I could not let it die—not like that."

"What did you do?" Anvin asked, sounding less skeptical than the others.

"I killed them," she said, staring into space, seeing it again, her voice heavy, realizing how crazy her story sounded. She barely believed herself. "I killed them all."

Another long silence fell over the room, even graver than the first.

"I know you won't believe me," she finally added.

Her father cleared his throat and squeezed her hand.

"Kyra," he said, somber. "We found five dead men near you—Lord's Men. If what you say is true, do you realize how serious this is? Do you realize what you have done?"

"I had no choice, Father," she said. "The sigil of our house—we are forbidden to leave a wounded animal to die."

"A dragon is not an animal!" he countered angrily. "A dragon is a...."

But his voice trailed off, he clearly unsure what to say as he stared off into space.

"If the Lord's Men are all dead," chimed in Arthfael, breaking the silence, rubbing his beard, "what does it matter? Who's to know the girl killed them? How shall the trail lead back to us?" Kyra felt a pit in her stomach, but knew she had to tell them the complete truth.

"There was one more," she added, reluctant. "A squire. A boy. He witnessed it. He escaped, on horseback."

They stared at her, their faces somber.

Maltren stepped forward, frowning.

"And why did you let this one live, then?" he demanded.

"He was just a boy," she said. "Unarmed. Riding off, his back to me. Should I have put an arrow in it?"

"I doubt you put an arrow in any of them," Maltren snapped. "But if so, is it better to let a boy live and leave us all to die?"

"No one has left us to die," her father scolded Maltren, defending her.

"Hasn't she?" he asked. "If she is not lying, then the Lord's Men are dead, Volis is to blame, they have a witness, and we are all finished."

Her father turned to her, his face heavier than she had ever seen.

"This is grave news indeed," he said, sounding a million years old.

"I am sorry, Father," she said. "I did not mean to cause you trouble."

"Did not mean to?" Maltren countered. "No, you just accidentally killed five of the Lord's Men? And all for what?"

"I told you," she said. "To save the dragon."

"To save an imaginary dragon," Maltren snickered. "That makes it all worth it. One that, if it existed, would have gladly torn you apart."

"It did not tear me apart," she countered.

"No more talk of this dragon nonsense," her father said, his voice rising, agitated. "Tell us now the truth. We are all men here. Whatever happened, tell us. We shall not judge you."

She felt like crying inside.

"I have already told you," she said.

"I believe her," Aidan said, standing by her side. She so appreciated him for that.

But as she looked back out at the sea of faces, it was clear that no one else did. A long silence fell over the room.

"It is not possible, Kyra," her father finally said softly.

"It is," suddenly came a dark voice.

They all turned as the door to the chamber slammed open and in marched several of her father's men, brushing the snow off their furs and hair. The man who spoke, face still red from cold, looked at Kyra as if awestruck.

"We found prints," he said. "By the river. Near where the bodies were found. Prints too large for anything that walks this earth. Prints of a dragon."

The men all looked back at Kyra, now unsure.

"And where is this dragon then?" Maltren said.

"The trail leads to the river," the man reported.

"It couldn't fly," Kyra said. "It was wounded, like I said. It rolled into the rapids and I saw it no more."

The room fell into a long silence, and now, it was clear, they all believed her. They looked at her in awe.

"You say you saw this dragon?" her father asked.

She nodded.

"I came as close to it as you and I are now," she replied.

"And how did you survive?" he asked.

She gulped, unsure herself.

"It was how I received this wound," she said, touching her cheek.

They all looked at her cheek in a new light, all seeming stunned.

As Kyra ran her fingers along it, she sensed that it would scar, that it would change her appearance forever; yet somehow, strangely, she did not care.

"But I don't think it meant to hurt me," she added.

They stared at her as if she were mad. She wanted to explain to them the connection she had with the creature, but she did not think they would understand.

They all stared at her, all these grown men stumped, and finally her father asked:

"Why would you risk your life to save a dragon? Why would you endanger us all?"

It was a good question, one which Kyra did not have the answer to. She wished she did. She could not put into words the feelings, the emotions, the sense of destiny she had when near the beast—and she did not think these men would ever understand. Yet she knew she had endangered them all, and she felt terribly for it.

All she could do was hang her head and say: "Forgive me, Father."

"It is not possible," Maltren said, agitated. "It is impossible to confront a dragon and live."

"Unless," Anvin said, looking at Kyra strangely, then turned to her father. "Unless your daughter is the—"

Her father suddenly shot Anvin a look, and Anvin immediately stopped himself.

Kyra looked back and forth between the two, puzzled, wondering what Anvin was about to say. "Unless I am *what*?" Kyra demanded.

But Anvin looked away and would say no more. Indeed, the entire room fell silent, and as she searched all the faces she realized that all the men averted their gaze from her, as though they were all in on some secret about her.

Her father suddenly rose from her bedside and released his grip on her hand. He stood erect, in a way that signaled that the meeting was over.

"You must rest now," he said. Then he turned gravely to his men. "An army comes," he said gravely, his voice filled with authority. "We must prepare."

# **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Kyra stood alone in the warm, summer field, in awe at the world around her. Everything was in bloom, in dazzling color, the hills so green, so vibrant, dotted with glowing yellow and red flowers. Trees were in bloom everywhere, their foliage so thick, swaying in the wind, heavy with fruit. The hills rolled with vineyards, ripe, and the smell of flowers and grapes hung heavy in the summer air. Kyra wondered where she was, where her people had gone—where winter had gone.

There came a screech, high in the sky, and Kyra looked up to see Theos circling overhead. He swooped down, landing in the grass but a few feet away, and stared back at her with his intense, glowing yellow eyes. Something unspoken passed between them, their connection so intense, as if no words need be said.

Theos suddenly reared his head, shrieked, and breathed fire, right for her.

For some reason, Kyra was unafraid. She did not flinch as the flames approached her, somehow knowing he would never harm her. The fire forked, spreading out to the left and right of her, igniting the landscape all around her yet leaving her unscathed.

Kyra turned and was horrified to see the flames spread across the countryside, to see all the lush green, all the summer bounty, turn to black. The landscape changed before her eyes, the trees burned to a crisp, the grass replaced with soil.

The flames rose higher and higher, spread farther, faster, and in the distance, she watched with horror as they consumed Volis—until there was nothing left but rubble and ash.

Theos finally stopped, and Kyra turned and stared back at him. Kyra stood there, in the dragon's shadow, humbled by its massive size and she did not know what to expect. He wanted something from her, but she could not sense what it was.

Kyra reached out to touch its scales, and suddenly it raised a claw, screeched, and sliced open her cheek.

Kyra sat up in bed, shrieking, clutching her cheek, the awful pain spreading through her. She flailed, trying to get away from the dragon—but was surprised to feel human hands on her instead, calming her, trying to restrain her.

Kyra blinked and looked up to see a familiar face standing over her, holding a compress to her cheek.

"Shh," said Lyra, consoling her.

Kyra looked around, disoriented, and finally realized she had been dreaming. She was home, in her father's fort, still in her chamber.

"Just a nightmare," Lyra said.

Kyra realized she must have fallen back asleep, how long ago, she did not know. She checked the window and saw the sunlight had been replaced by blackness. She sat bolt upright, alarmed.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Late in the night, my lady," Lyra replied. "The moon has already risen and set."

"And what of the coming army?" she asked, her heart pounding.

"No army has come, my lady," she replied. "The snow is still high, and it was nearly dark when you woke. No army can march in this. Don't worry—you have only slept for hours. Rest now."

Kyra leaned back and exhaled; she felt a wet nose on her hand and she looked over to see Leo, licking her hand.

"He hasn't left your bedside, my lady," Lyra smiled. "And neither has he."

She gestured and Kyra looked over and was touched to see Aidan lying there, slumped in a pile of furs beside the fire, a leather-bound book in his hand, fast asleep.

"He read to you while you slept," she added.

Kyra was overwhelmed with love for her younger brother—and it made her all the more alarmed at the trouble to come.

"I can feel your tension," Lyra added as she pressed a compress on her cheek. "You dreamt troubled dreams. It is the mark of a dragon."

Kyra saw her looking back meaningfully, in awe, and she wondered.

"I don't understand what is happening to me," Kyra said. "I have never dreamt before. Not like this. They feel like more than dreams—it is as if I am really there. As if I am seeing through the dragon's eye."

The nurse looked at her with her soulful eyes, and laid her hands in her lap.

"Is a very sacred thing to be marked by an animal," Lyra said. "And this is no ordinary animal. If a creature touches you, then you share a synergy—forever. You might see what it sees, or feel what it feels, or hear what it hears. It may happen tonight—or it may be next year. But one day, it shall happen."

Lyra looked at her, searching.

"Do you understand, Kyra? You are not the same girl you were yesterday, when you set out from here. That is no mere mark on your cheek—it is a sign. You now carry within you the mark of a dragon."

Kyra furrowed her brow, trying to understand.

"But what does that mean?" Kyra asked, trying to make sense of it all.

Lyra sighed, exhaling a long time.

"Time will show you."

Kyra thought of the Lord's Men, of the coming war, and she felt a wave of urgency. She threw off her furs and rose to her feet and as she did, she felt wobbly, unlike herself. Lyra rushed over and held her shoulder, steadying her.

"You must lie down," Lyra urged. "The fever is not yet past."

But Kyra felt a pressing urgency to help and she could stay in bed no longer.

"I shall be fine," she replied, grabbing her cloak and draping it over her shoulders to ward off the draft. As she moved to go, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Drink this, at least," Lyra urged, handing her a mug.

Kyra looked down and saw a red liquid inside.

"What is it?"

"My own concoction," she replied with a smile "It will calm the fever, and relieve the pain."

Kyra took a long sip, holding it with both hands, and it felt thick as it went down, hard to swallow. She made a face and Lyra smiled.

"It tastes like earth," Kyra observed.

Lyra smiled wider. "It's not known for its taste."

But already Kyra felt better from it, her whole body immediately warmer.

"Thank you," she said. She went over to Aidan, leaned over and kissed his forehead, careful not to wake him. She then turned and hurried from the room, Leo beside her.

Kyra twisted and turned down Volis's endless corridors, all dim, lit only by the flickering torches along the walls. Only a few men stood guard at this late hour, the rest of the fort quiet, fast asleep. Kyra ascended the spiral, stone staircase and stopped before her father's chamber, blocked by a guard. He looked at her, something like reverence in his eyes, and she wondered how far the story had already spread. He nodded to her.

"My lady," he said.

She nodded back.

"Is my father in his chamber?"

"He could not sleep. Last I saw he was pacing toward his study."

Kyra hurried down the stone corridors, ducking her head beneath a low, tapered archway and down a spiral staircase until finally she made her way to the far end of the fort. The hall ended in the thick, arched wooden door to his library, and she reached out to open them, but found the doors already ajar. She stopped herself as she heard urgent, strained voices coming from inside.

"I tell you that is *not* what she saw," came the angry voice of her father.

He was heated, and she stopped herself from entering, figuring it would be best to wait. She stood there, waiting for the voices to stop, curious who he was speaking to and what they were talking about. Were they talking about her? she wondered.

"If she did indeed see a dragon," came a crackly voice, which Kyra immediately recognized as Thonos, her father's oldest advisor, "there remains little hope for Volis."

Her father muttered something she could not understand, and there followed a long silence, as Thonos sighed.

"The ancient scrolls," Thonos replied, his voice labored, "tell of the rise of the dragons. A time we shall all be crushed under their flames. We have no wall to keep them out. We have nothing but hills and sky. And if they have come, they are here for a reason."

"But what reason?" her father asked. "What would compel a dragon to cross the world?"

"Perhaps a better question, Commander," Thonos replied, "is what could wound it?"

A long silence followed, punctuated only by the crackling of the fire, until finally Thonos spoke again.

"I suspect it is not the dragon that troubles you most, is it?" Thonos asked.

There followed another long silence, and Kyra, though she knew she should not listen in, leaned forward, unable to help herself, and peered through the crack. Her heart felt heavy to see her father sitting there, head in his hands, brooding.

"No," he said, his voice thick with exhaustion. "It is not," he admitted.

Kyra wondered what they could be talking about.

"You dwell on the prophecies, do you not?" he asked. "The time of her birth?"

Kyra leaned in, her heart pounding in her ears, sensing they were speaking about her, but not understanding what they meant.

There came no response.

"I was there, Commander," Thonos finally said. "As were you."

Her father sighed, but would not raise his head.

"She is your daughter. Do you not think it fair to tell her? About her birth? Her mother? Does she not have a right to know who she is?"

Kyra's heart slammed in her chest; she hated secrets, especially about her. She was dying to know what they meant.

"The time is not right," her father finally said.

"But the time is never right, is it?" the old man said.

Kyra breathed sharply, feeling stung.

She suddenly turned and ran off, a heaviness in her chest as her father's words rang in her ears. They hurt her more than a million knives, more than anything the Lord's Men could throw at her. She felt betrayed. He was withholding a secret from her, some secret he'd been hiding her entire life. He had been lying to her.

Does she not have a right to know who she is?

Her entire life Kyra had felt that people had looked at her differently, as if they knew something about her which she did not, as if she were an outside, and she had never understood why. Now, she understood. She didn't just feel different than everyone else—she *was* different. But how?

Who was she?

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Vesuvius marched, a hundred trolls on his heels, through Great Wood, up the sharply rising terrain, too steep for the horses to follow. He marched with a sense of determination, and for the first time, optimism. He hacked through the thick brush with his blade and knew he could have passed through without cutting them, but he wanted to: he enjoyed killing things.

With each passing step Vesuvius heard the roar of the captured giant, growing louder, making the ground beneath them tremble. He noted the fear in the faces of his fellow trolls—and it made him smile. That fear was what he had been hoping to see for years—it meant that finally, after all the rumors, the giant had been found.

He chopped through the last of the brush and crested the ridge, and as he did, the forest opened up into a vast clearing before him. Vesuvius stopped in his tracks, caught off guard by the sight. At the far side of the clearing lay a huge cave, its arched opening a hundred feet high, and chained to its rock, by chains fifty feet long and three feet thick, one to each ankle and wrist, was the most immense, hideous creature he had ever laid eyes upon. It was a true giant, a nasty piece of creation, standing at least a hundred feet high and thirty feet wide, with a body built like a man but with four eyes, no nose, and a mouth that was all jaw and teeth. It opened its mouth in a roar, an awful sound, and Vesuvius, who feared nothing, who had faced the most gruesome creatures alive, had to admit that even *he* was afraid. It opened its mouth wider and wider, its teeth sharpened to a point five feet long, and looked as if it were ready to swallow the world.

It also looked enraged. It roared again and again, stomping its feet, fighting at the chains that bound it, and the ground shook, the cave shook, the entire mountainside shook. It was as if this beast, with all its power, was moving the entire mountain by itself, as if it had so much energy that it could not be contained. Vesuvius grinned; this was exactly what he needed. A creature like this could blast through the tunnel, could do what an army of trolls could not.

Vesuvius stepped forward and entered the clearing, noticing the dozens of dead soldiers, their corpses littering the ground, and as he did, his hundreds of waiting soldiers lined up at attention. He could see the fear in all their faces, as if they had no idea what to do with the giant now that they had captured him.

Vesuvius stopped at the edge of the clearing, just out of range of the giant's chains, not wanting to end up like the corpses, and as he did, it turned and charged for him, swiping at him with its long claws and missing by only a few feet.

Vesuvius stood there, staring back at it, while his commander came running up beside him, keeping his distance along the perimeter so as to be out of the giant's range.

"My Lord and King," the commander said, bowing deferentially. "The giant has been captured. It is yours to bring back. But we cannot bind it. We have lost many soldiers trying. We are at a loss for what to do."

Vesuvius stood there, hands on his hips, feeling the eyes of all his trolls on him as he surveyed the beast. It was an awesome specimen of creation, and as it glared down and snarled at him, anxious to tear him apart, Vesuvius could see what the problem was. He realized at once, as he usually did, how to fix it.

Vesuvius lay a hand on his commander's shoulder and leaned in close.

"You are trying to approach it," he said softly. "You must let it come to you. You must catch it off guard, and only then can you bind it. You must give it what it wants."

His commander looked back, confused.

"And what is it that it wants, my Lord and King?"

Vesuvius began to walk, leading his commander forward as they stepped deeper into the clearing, toward the giant.

"Why, you," Vesuvius finally replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world—and then shoved his commander with all his might, sending the unsuspecting soldier stumbling forward into the clearing.

Vesuvius backed up, safely out of range, and watched as the giant blinked down, surprised. The soldier leapt to his feet, trying to run, but the giant reacted immediately, swooping down with its claws, scooping him up and squeezing his hands around his waist as he raised him to eye level. He pulled him close and bit off the troll's head, swallowing his screams.

Vesuvius smiled, pleased to be rid of an inept commander.

"If I need to teach you what to do," he said to the corpse that was once his commander, "then why bother having a commander?"

Vesuvius turned and looked over the rest of his soldiers, and they all stood there, petrified, staring back in shock. He pointed to a soldier standing nearby.

"You," he said.

The troll stared back nervously.

"Yes, my Lord and King?"

"You are next."

The troll's eyes widened, and he dropped to his knees and clasped his hands out before him.

"I cannot, my Lord and King!" he wept. "I beg you! Not me! Choose someone else!"

Vesuvius stepped forward and nodded amicably.

"Okay," he replied. He stepped forward and sliced the troll's throat with his dagger, and the troll fell face-first, dead, at his feet. "I will."

Vesuvius turned to his other soldiers.

"Pick him up," he commanded, "and throw him in the giant's range. When it approaches, have your ropes ready. You will bind him as he goes for the bait."

A half dozen soldiers grabbed the corpse, rushed forward, and threw him into the clearing. The other soldiers followed Vesuvius's command, rushing forward on either side of the clearing with their massive ropes at the ready.

The giant studied the fresh troll at its feet, as if debating. But finally, as Vesuvius had gambled, it exhibited its limited intelligence and lunged forward, grabbing the corpse—exactly as Vesuvius knew it would.

"NOW!" he shrieked.

The soldiers threw the ropes, casting them over the back of the giant, grabbing hold on either side and pulling, pinning it down. More soldiers rushed forward and threw more ropes, dozens of them, again and again, binding its neck, its arms, its legs. They pulled with all their might as they encircled it, and the beast strained and struggled and roared in fury—but there was soon nothing it could do. Bound by dozens of thick ropes, held down by hundreds of men, it lay face down in the dirt, roaring helplessly.

Vesuvius walked close and stood over it, unimaginable just moments ago, and looked down, satisfied at his conquest.

Finally, after all these years, he grinned wide.

"Now," he said slowly, savoring each word, "Escalon is mine."

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kyra stood at the window of her chamber watching dawn break over the countryside with a sense of anticipation and dread. She had spent a long night plagued by nightmares, tossing and turning after overhearing her father's conversation. She could still hear the words ringing in her head:

Does she not have a right to know who she is?

All night long she had dreamt of a woman with an obscured face, wearing a veil, a woman she felt certain was her mother. She reached for her, again and again, only to wake grasping at the bed, at nothing.

Kyra no longer knew what was real and what was a dream, what was a truth and what was a lie. How many secrets had they been keeping from her? What couldn't they tell her?

Kyra finally woke at dawn, clutching her cheek, still stinging from the wound, and she wondered about her mother. All of her life she had been told that her mother had died in childbirth, and she had no reason to believe otherwise. Kyra felt she did not really resemble anyone in her family or in this fort, and the more she thought about it, the more she realized that everyone had always looked at her a bit differently, as if she didn't quite belong here. But she had never imagined that there was anything to it, that her father had been lying to her, keeping some secret from her. Was her mother still alive? Why did they have to hide it from her?

Kyra stood at the window, trembling inside, marveling at how her life had changed so drastically in the last day. She also felt a fire burning in her veins, running from her cheek to her shoulder and down to her wrist, and she knew she was not the same person she was. She could sense the warmth of the dragon coursing through her, pulsating inside her. She wondered what it all meant. Would she ever be the same person again?

Kyra looked down at the people below, hundreds hurrying to and fro so early, and she marveled at all the activity. Usually this time of day was quiet. But not now. The Lord's Men were coming for them, like a brewing storm, and her people knew there would be retribution. The spirit in the air was different this time, too. Her people had always been quick to back down. But their spirit seemed to have hardened this time, and she was thrilled to see them preparing to fight. Scores of her father's men were securing the earthen banks, doubling the guard at the gates, lowering the portcullis, taking positions on the ramparts, barring windows and digging ditches. Men selected and sharpened weapons, filled quivers with arrows, prepared horses, and assembled in the courtyard nervously. They were all preparing.

Kyra could hardly believe she was the catalyst for all this; she felt a sense of guilt and of pride all at once. Most of all, she felt dread. Her people, she knew, could not survive a direct attack by the Lord's Men, whom, after all, had the Pandesian Empire behind them. They could put up a stand, but when Pandesia arrived with all its might, they would all surely die here.

"Glad to see you're up," came a cheerful voice.

Kyra spun, startled, as did Leo beside her, not realizing anyone else was awake in the fort this early, and she was relieved to see Anvin standing in the doorway, a grin on his face, joined by Vidar, Arthfael, and several more of her father's men. As the group stood looking back at her, she could see they looked at her differently this time. There was something different in their eyes: respect. They no longer looked at her as if she were a young girl, an observer, but rather, as if she were one of them. An equal.

That look restored her heart, made her feel as if it had all been worth it. There was nothing she had ever wanted more than to gain the respect of these men.

"You're better, then?" asked Vidar.

Kyra thought about that, and as she opened and closed her fists and stretched her arms, she realized she was, indeed, better—in fact, stronger than ever before. As she nodded back to them, she could see they also looked at her with something else: a touch of fear. As if she held some sort of power they did not know or trust.

"I feel reborn," she replied.

Anvin grinned wide.

"Good," he said. "You're going to need it. We'll need every hand we can get."

She looked back, surprised and thrilled.

"Are you offering me a chance to fight with you?" she asked, her heart thumping. No news could be more thrilling to her.

Arthfael smiled and stepped forward, clasping her shoulder.

"Just don't tell your father," he said.

Leo stepped forward and licked these men's hands and they all stroked his head.

"We have a little present for you," Vidar said.

Kyra was surprised.

"A present?" she asked.

"Consider it a homecoming," Arthfael said, "just a little something to help you forget that scratch on your cheek."

He stepped aside, as did the others, and Kyra realized they were inviting her to follow. There was nothing she wanted more. She smiled back, joyful for the first time in as long as she could remember.

"Is that what it takes to be invited to join your lot?" she asked with a smile. "I had to kill five of the Lord's Men?"

"Three," Arthfael corrected. "As I recall, Leo here killed two of them."

"Yes," Anvin said. "And surviving an encounter with a dragon counts for something, too."

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Kyra marched with the men across the grounds of her father's fort, Leo at her side, their boots crunching on the snow, energized by the industry all around her, the fort so busy, filled with a sense of purpose, stunningly alive in the dawn. She passed carpenters, cobblers, saddlers, masons, all hard at work on their craft, while endless men sharpened swords and other blades along stones. As they walked, Kyra sensed people stopped and staring at her; her ears burned. They all must have known why the Lord's Men were coming, what she had done. She felt so conspicuous, and feared her people would hate her.

But she was surprised to see that they looked at her with admiration—and something else, perhaps fear. They must have discovered she'd survived an encounter with a dragon, and it seemed they did not know what to make of her.

Kyra looked up and searched the skies, hoping beyond hope that she might see Theos, recovered, flying high, circling her. But as she searched the skies, she saw nothing. Where was he? she wondered. Had he survived? Would he ever fly again? Was he already halfway across the world?

As they walked, crossing the fort, Kyra became curious as to where they were leading her and what gift they could possibly have in store for her.

"Where are we going?" she asked Anvin, as they turned down a narrow cobblestone street. They passed villagers digging out from the snow, while huge slabs of ice and snow slid off clay roofs. Smoke rose from chimneys all throughout the village, the smell of it crisp on the winter day.

They turned down another street and Kyra spotted a wide, low stone dwelling, covered in snow, with a red oak door, one set apart from the others, which she recognized immediately.

"Is that not the blacksmith's forge?" she asked.

"It is," Anvin replied, still walking.

"But why do you lead me here?" she asked.

They reached the door, and Vidar smiled as he opened the door and stepped aside.

"You shall see."

Kyra ducked through the low doorway then stood up straight in the forge, Leo following, the others filing in behind her, and as she entered, she was struck by the heat, the fires from the forge making it warm in here. She immediately noticed all the weapons laid out on the blacksmith's anvils, and she studied them with admiration: swords and axes still in progress, some still red-hot, still being molded.

The blacksmith sat there with his three apprentices, faces covered in soot, and looked up, expressionless, through his thick black beard. His place was packed with weapons—laid out on every surface, on the floor, hanging from hooks, and it appeared he was working on dozens at once. Kyra knew Brot, the blacksmith, a short man, stocky, with a low brow perpetually furrowed in concentration, to be a serious man who spoke few words, and who lived for his weapons. He was known to be gruff, not to care much for men—only for a piece of steel.

The few times Kyra had spoken with him, though, Brot had proved, beneath his gruff exterior, to be a kindhearted man, and passionate when talking about weaponry. He must have recognized a kindred soul in Kyra, as they had a mutual love for weaponry.

"Kyra," he said, seeming pleased to see her. "Sit."

She sat across form him at the empty bench, her back to the forge, feeling its heat. Anvin and the others crowded around them, and they all watched as Brot tinkered with his weaponry: a lance, a sickle, a mace in progress, its chain still waiting to be hammered out. Kyra saw a sword, its edges still rough, waiting to be sharpened. Behind him his apprentices worked, the noise of their tools filling the air. One hammered away at an ax, sparks flying everywhere, while another reached out with his long tongs and pulled a strip of white-hot steel from the forge, laying it on the anvil and preparing to hammer. The third used his tongs to take a halberd off his anvil and place it in the large, iron slack tub, its waters hissing the second it was submerged and emitting a cloud of steam.

For Kyra, this forge had always been the most exciting place in Volis.

As she watched him, her heart beat faster, wondering what present these men had in store.

"I heard of your exploits," Brot said, not meeting her eye, looking down at a long sword as he examined it, testing its weight. It was one of the longest swords she had ever seen, and he frowned and narrowed his eyes as he held its blade, seeming unsatisfied.

She knew better than to interrupt him, and she waited patiently in the silence for him to continue.

"A shame," he finally said.

Kyra stared back, confused.

"What?" she asked.

"That you did not kill the boy," he said. "We wouldn't all be in this mess if you had, would we?" He still did not meet her eyes, weighing the sword, and she flushed, knowing he was right but not regretting her actions.

"A lesson for you," he added. "Kill them all, always. Do you understand me?" he asked, his tone hard as he looked up and met her eyes, dead serious. "Kill them all."

Despite his harsh tone and blunt quality, Kyra admired Brot for always saying what he believed, and what others were afraid to say. She also admired him for his fearlessness: owning weapons of steel was outlawed by Pandesia, on punishment of death. Her father's men's weapons were sanctioned only because they kept The Flames—but Brot also illegally forged weapons for dozens of

others, helping to supply a secret army. He could be caught and killed at any moment, and yet he never flinched in the face of duty.

"Is that why you've summoned me?" she asked, puzzled. "To give me advice on killing men?"

He hammered away at a sword on the anvil before him, working for a while, ignoring her until he was ready. Still looking down, he said:

"No. To help you kill them."

She blinked, confused, and Brot reached back and gestured to one of his apprentices, who rushed over and handed him an object.

Brot looked at her.

"I heard you lost two weapons last night," he said. "A bow and a staff, was it?"

She nodded, wondering where he was going with this.

Brot shook his head disapprovingly.

"That is because you play with sticks. A child's weapons. You've killed five of the Lord's Men and have faced off with a dragon and lived, and that is more than anyone in this room. You are a warrior now, and you deserve a warrior's weapons."

He reached back as one of his apprentices handed him something, then turned back and laid a long object down on the table, covered in a red, velvet cloth.

She looked up at him questioningly, her heart beating with anticipation, and he nodded back.

Kyra reached out, slowly removed the red cloth, and gasped at what she saw: before her lay a beautiful longbow, its handle carved, ornate, and covered in a paper-thin sheet of shiny metal. It was unlike any bow she had ever seen.

"Alkan steel," he explained, as she hoisted it and admired how light it was. "The strongest in the world—and also the lightest. Very scarce, used by kings. These men here have paid for it—and my men have been pounding it all night."

Kyra turned and saw Anvin and the others looking back, smiling, and her heart filled with gratitude.

"Feel it," Brot urged. "Go ahead."

Kyra held up the bow and weighed it in her hand, in awe at how it fit in her hand.

"It is even lighter than my wood one," she said, confused.

"That's Beechum wood beneath," he said. "Stronger than what you had—and lighter, too. This bow will never break—and your arrows shall go much further."

She admired it, speechless, realizing this was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her. Brot reached out and handed her a quiver filled with arrows, all with shiny new heads, and as she fingered one she was amazed at how sharp they were. She inspected their intricate design.

"Barbed broadhead," Brot said proudly. "You land one of these, and the head will not come out. They are designed to kill."

Kyra looked up at Brot and the others, overwhelmed, not knowing what to say. What meant most to her were not the weapons but that these great men thought enough of her to go out of their way.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said. "I shall do my best to honor your work, and to be worthy of this weapon."

"I'm not done yet," he said, gruffly. "Hold out your arms."

She did, puzzled, and he stepped forward and examined them, rolling up her sleeves and checking her forearms. He finally nodded, satisfied.

"That's about right," he said.

Brot nodded to an apprentice, who stepped forward holding two shiny objects and clasped them to her forearms. As the cold metal touched her skin, Kyra was shocked to see that they were bracers,

long, thin forearm guards. They ran from her wrist to her elbow, and as they were clasped into place with a click, they fit perfectly.

Kyra bent her elbows in wonder, examining the bracers, and as she did, she felt invincible, as if they were a part of her new skin. They were so light, yet so strong, protecting her from wrist to elbow.

"Bracers," Brot said. "Thin enough to allow you to move, yet strong enough to withstand the blow of any sword." He looked right at her. "These are not only for protection from the string when firing that bow—these are extra-long, also made of Alkan steel. They are meant to replace a shield. This shall be your armor. If an enemy comes at you with a sword, you now have the means to defend yourself."

He suddenly grabbed a sword off the table, raised it high, and brought it down right for her head.

Kyra, shocked, reacted, raising her forearms with her new bracers—and she was amazed as she stopped the blow, sparks flying.

Brot smiled, lowering his sword, pleased.

Kyra examined her bracers and felt an overwhelming joy.

"You have given me all I could ever want," Kyra said, getting ready to embrace them.

But Brot held up a hand and stopped her.

"Not all," he corrected.

Brot gestured to his third apprentice, who brought forth a long object wrapped in a black velvet cloth.

Kyra looked at it curiously, then draped the bow over her shoulder and reached out and took it. She unwrapped it slowly, and when she finally saw what was beneath it, she was breathless.

It was a staff, a work of beauty, even longer than her old one, and, most amazing of all, shiny. Like the bow, it was covered in a plate of Alkan steel, pounded paper-thin, light reflecting off of it. Yet even with all this metal, as she weighed it in her hands, it was lighter than her old staff.

"Next time," Brot said, "when they strike your staff, it won't break. And when you hit a foe, the blow will be more severe. It is a weapon and a shield in one. And that's not all," he said, pointing at it.

Kyra looked down, confused, not understand what he was pointing at.

"Twist it," he said.

She did as he told her and as she did, to her shock, the staff unscrewed and split in two equal halves. In each end was embedded a pointy blade, several inches long.

Kyra looked up, agape, and Brot smiled.

"Now you have more ways to kill a man," he said.

She looked up at the glistening blades, the finest work she had ever seen, and she was in awe. He had custom-forged this weapon for her, giving her a staff that doubled as two short spears, a weapon uniquely suited for her strengths. She twisted it closed again, smoothly locking it into place, so seamless she could not even tell there was a concealed weapon within.

She looked up at Brot, at all of the men, tears in her eyes.

"I shall never be able to thank you," she said.

"You already have," Anvin said, stepping forward. "You have brought a war upon us—a war that we ourselves were afraid to start. You have done us a great favor."

Before she could process his words, suddenly, a series of horns sounded in the distance, one after the next, echoing off the fort.

All of them exchanged a glance, all knowing what this meant: battle had come.

The Lord's Men were here.

# **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

Merk hiked and hiked on the forest trail, the shadows getting long as he wound his way through Whitewood, the dead thieves now a good day's hike behind him. He hadn't stopped hiking since, trying to clear his mind of the incident, to get back to the peaceful place he had once inhabited. It wasn't easy. His legs growing weary, Merk was more anxious than ever to find the Tower of Ur, to walk into his new life as a Watcher, and he scanned the horizon, trying to catch a glimpse of it through the trees.

But there was no sign of it. This trek was beginning to feel more like a pilgrimage, one that would never end. The Tower of Ur was more remote, more well-hidden, than he had imagined.

Encountering those thieves had awakened something deep within him, had made Merk realize how hard it might be to shake off his old self. He did not know if he had the discipline. He only hoped that the Watchers would accept him in their order; if not, with nowhere else to turn, he would surely go back to being the man he once was.

Up ahead, Merk saw the wood change, saw a grove of ancient white trees, trunks as wide as ten men, reaching high into the sky, their branches spreading out like a canopy with shimmering red leaves. One of the trees, with a broad, curved trunk, looked particularly inviting, and Merk, feet aching, sat down beside it. He leaned back and felt an immediate sense of relief, felt the pain leaving his back and legs from hours of hiking. He kicked off his boots and felt the pain throbbing in his feet, and he sighed as a cool breeze soothed him, leaves rustling above.

Merk reached into his sack and extracted what remained of the dried strips of meat from the rabbit he had caught the other night. He took a bite and chewed slowly, closing his eyes, resting, wondering what the future had in store for him. Sitting here, against this tree, beneath these rustling leaves, felt good enough for him.

Merk's eyes felt heavy and he let them close, just for a moment, needing the rest.

When he opened them, Merk was surprised to see the sky had grown darker, to realize that he had fallen asleep. It was already twilight, and he realized with a start that he would have slept all night—if he had not been awakened by a noise.

Merk sat up and took stock, immediately on guard as his instincts kicked in. He clutched the hilt of his dagger, hidden in his waist, and waited. He did not want to resort to violence—but until he reached the Tower, he was starting to feel that anything was possible.

The rustling became louder, and it sounded like someone running, bursting through the forest. Merk was puzzled: what was someone else doing out here, in the middle of nowhere, in twilight? From the sound of the leaves, Merk could tell it was one person, and that it was light. Maybe a child, or a girl.

Sure enough, a moment later there burst into his sight a girl, emerging from the forest, running, crying. He watched her, surprised, as she ran, alone, stumbled, and fell, but feet away from him. She landed face-first in the dirt. She was pretty, perhaps eighteen, but disheveled, her hair a mess, dirt and leaves in it, her clothes ragged and torn.

Merk stood, and as she scrambled to get back to her feet she saw him and her eyes widened in panic.

"Please don't hurt me!" she cried, standing, backing away.

Merk raised his hands.

"I mean you no harm," he said slowly, standing to his full height. "In fact, I was just about to be on my way."

She backed up several feet in terror, still crying, and he could not help but wonder what had happened. Whatever it was, he did not want to get involved—he had enough problems of his own.

Merk turned back on the trail and began to walk away, when her voice cried out behind him: "No, wait!"

He turned and saw her standing there, desperate.

"Please. I need your help," she pleaded.

Merk looked at her and saw how beautiful she was beneath her disheveled appearance, with unwashed blonde hair, light blue eyes, and a face with perfect features, covered in tears and in dirt. She wore simple farmer's clothes, and he could tell she was not rich. She looked as if she had been on the run for a long time.

He shook his head.

"You don't have the money to pay me," Merk said. "I cannot help you, whatever it is you need. Besides, I'm on my way for my own mission."

"You don't understand," she begged, stepping closer. "My family—our home was raided this morning. Mercenaries. My father's been hurt. He chased them away, but they'll be back soon—and with a lot more men—to kill him, to kill my whole family. They said they will burn our farm to the ground. Please!" she begged, stepping closer. "I'll give you anything. *Anything!*"

Merk stood there, feeling sorry for her, but determined not to get involved.

"There are many problems in the world, miss," he said. "And I can't fix them all."

He turned once again to walk away, when her voice rang out again:

"Please!" she cried. "It is a *sign*, don't you see? That I would run into you here, in the middle of nowhere? I expected to find no one—and I found you. You were meant to be here, meant to help me. God is giving you a chance for redemption. Don't you believe in signs?"

He stood there and watched her sobbing, and he felt guilty, but mostly detached. A part of him thought of how many people he'd killed in his lifetime, and wondered: what's a few more? But there were always just a few more. It never seemed to end. He had to draw the line somewhere.

"I'm sorry, miss," he said. "But I am not your savior."

Merk turned again and began to walk off, determined this time not to stop, to drown out her sobs and grief by rustling the leaves loudly with his feet, blocking out the noise.

But no matter how hard he rustled the leaves, her cries continued, ringing somewhere in the back of his head, summoning him. He turned and watched her run off, disappearing back into the wood, and he wanted to feel a sense of relief. But more than anything, he felt haunted—haunted by a cry he did not want to hear.

He cursed as he hiked, enraged, wishing he'd never met her. Why? he wondered. Why him? It kept gnawing away at him, would not let him be, and he hated the feeling. Was this what it was like, he wondered, to have a conscience?

# **CHAPTER TWENTY**

Kyra's heart pounded as she walked with her father and brothers, Anvin and all the warriors, all marching solemnly through the streets of Volis, all preparing for war. There was a solemn silence in the air, the skies heavy with gray, a light snow falling once again as their boots crunched through the snow, approaching the main gate of the fort. Horns sounded again and again, and her father led his men stoically, Kyra surprised at how calm he was, as if he had done this a thousand times before.

Kyra looked straight ahead, and through the iron bars of the lowered portcullis she caught a glimpse of the Lord Governor, leading his men, a hundred of them, dressed in their scarlet armor, the yellow and blue Pandesian banners flapping in the wind. They galloped through the snow on their massive black horses, wearing the finest armor and donning the finest weaponry, all heading directly for the gates of Volis. The rumble of their horses was audible from here, and Kyra felt the ground tremble beneath her.

As Kyra marched, her heart pounding, she held her new staff, had her new bow strapped over her shoulder, and she wore hew new bracers—and she felt reborn. Finally, she felt like a *real* warrior, with real weapons. She was elated to have them.

As they marched, Kyra was pleased her to see her people rallying, unafraid, all joining them on their march to meet the enemy. She saw all the village folk looking to her father and his men with hope, and she was honored to be marching with them. They all seemed to have an infinite trust in her father, and she suspected that if they were under any other leadership, the village folk would not be as calm.

The Lord's Men came closer, a horn sounded yet again, and Kyra's heart slammed.

"No matter what happens," Anvin said, coming up beside her, talking quietly, "no matter how close they get, do not take any action without your father's command. He is your commander now. I speak to you not as his daughter, but as one of his men. One of us."

She nodded back, honored.

"I do not wish to be the cause of death for our people," she said.

"Don't worry," Arthfael said, coming up on her other side. "This day has been a long time coming. You didn't start this war—they did. The second they crossed the Southern Gate and invaded Escalon."

Kyra, reassured, tightened her grip on her staff, ready for whatever might come. Perhaps the Lord Governor would be reasonable. Perhaps he would negotiate a truce?

Kyra and the others reached the portcullis, and they all stopped and looked to her father.

He stood there, looking out, expressionless, his face hard, ready. He turned to his men.

"We shall not cower behind iron gates in fear of our enemies," he boomed, "but meet them, as men, beyond the gate. Raise it!" he commanded.

A groaning noise followed as soldiers slowly raised the thick iron portcullis. Finally, it stopped with a bang, and Kyra joined the others as they all marched through.

They marched across the hollow wood bridge, their boots echoing, crossed over the moat, and all came to a stop at the opposite side, waiting.

A rumble filled the air as the Lord's Men came to a stop a few feet before them. Kyra stood several feet behind her father, grouped in with the others, and she pushed her way to the front lines, wanting to stand by his side—and to stare down the Lord's Men, face to face.

Kyra saw the Lord Governor, a middle-aged, balding man with wisps of gray hair and a large belly, sitting smugly on his horse a dozen feet away, staring down at all of them as if he were too good for them. A hundred of his men sat on horseback behind him, all wearing serious expressions and bearing serious weaponry. These men, she could see, were all prepared for war and death. Kyra was so proud to see her father standing there, before all his men, unflinching, unafraid. He wore the face of a commander at war, one she had never seen before. It was not the face of the father she knew, but the face he reserved for his men.

A long, tense silence filled the air, punctuated only by the howling of the wind. The Lord Governor took his time, examining them for a full minute, clearly trying to intimidate them, to force her people to look up and take in the awesomeness of their horses and weapons and armor. The silence stretched so long that Kyra started to wonder if anyone would break it, and she began to realize that her father's silence, his greeting them silently, coldly, standing with all his men at arms, was in itself an act of defiance. She loved him for it. He was not a man to back down to anyone, whatever the odds.

Leo was the only one to make a sound, snarling quietly up at them.

Finally, the Lord Governor cleared his throat, as he stared at her father.

"Five of my men are dead," he announced, his voice nasally. He remained on his horse, not coming down to meet them at their level. "Your daughter has broken the sacred Pandesian law. You know the consequence: touching a Lord's Man means pain of death."

He fell silent, and her father did not respond. As the snow and wind picked up, the only sound that could be heard was the flapping of the banners in the wind. The men, equally numbered on both sides, stared at each other in a tense silence.

Finally, the Lord Governor continued.

"Because I am a merciful Lord," he said, "I will not execute your daughter. Nor will I kill you and your men and your people, which is my right. I am, in fact, willing to put all this nasty business behind us."

The silence continued as the Governor, taking his time, slowly surveyed all their faces, until he stopped on Kyra. She felt a chill as his greedy, ugly eyes settled on her.

"In return, I will take your daughter, as is my right. She is unwed, and of age, and as you know, Pandesian law permits me. Your daughter—all of your daughters—are our property now."

He sneered at her father.

"Consider yourself lucky I do not exact a harsher punishment," he concluded.

The Lord Governor turned and nodded to his men, and two of his soldiers, fierce-looking men, dismounted and began to cross the bridge, their boots and spurs echoing over the hollow wood as they went.

Kyra's heart slammed in her chest as she saw them coming for her; she wanted to take action, to draw her bow and fire, to wield her staff. But she recalled Anvin's words about awaiting her father's command, about how disciplined soldiers should act, and as hard as it was, she forced herself to wait.

As they came closer, Kyra wondered what her father would do. Would he give her away to these men? Would he fight for her? Whether they won or lost, whether they took her or not, did not matter to her—what mattered more to her was that her father cared enough to make a stand.

As they neared, though, her father did not react. Kyra's heart pounded in her throat. She felt a rush of disappointment, realizing he was going to let her go. It made her want to cry.

Leo snarled furiously, standing out in front of her, hair raised; yet still they didn't stop. She knew that if she commanded him to pounce, he would; yet she did not want him to be harmed by those weapons, and she did not want to defy her father's command and spark a war.

The men were but a few feet away from her when, suddenly, at the last second, her father nodded to his men, and six of them stepped forward, Kyra was elated to see, and lowered their halberds, blocking the soldiers' approach.

The soldiers stopped short, their armor clanging against the metal halberds, and they looked to her father with surprise, clearly not expecting this.

"You'll be going no further," he said. His voice was strong, dark, a voice no one would dare defy. It carried the tone of authority—not of a serf.

In that moment, Kyra loved him more than she'd ever had.

He turned and looked out at the Lord Governor.

"We are all free men here," he said, "men and women, old and young alike. The choice is hers. Kyra," he said, turning to her, "do you wish to leave with these men?"

She stared back at him, suppressing a smile.

"No," she answered firmly.

He turned back to the Lord Governor.

"There you have it," he said. "The choice is hers to make. Not yours, and not mine. If you wish to have some property or gold of mine as recompense for your loss," he said to the Governor, "then you may have it. But you shall not have my daughter—or any of our daughters—regardless of what a scribe has set down as Pandesian law."

The Lord Governor glowered down at him, shock in his face, clearly not used to being spoken to that way—or defied. He looked like he did not know what to do. Clearly, this was not the reception he had been expecting.

"You dare to block my men?" he asked. "To turn down my offer?"

"It is no offer at all," Duncan replied.

"Think carefully, serf," he chided. "I shall not offer it twice. If you refuse me, you will face death—you and all of your people. Surely you know that I am not alone—I speak for the vast Pandesian army. Do you imagine you can face Pandesia alone—when your own King has surrendered your kingdom? When the odds are so stacked against you?"

Her father shrugged.

"I don't fight for odds," he replied. "I fight for causes. Your number of men does not matter to me. What matters is our freedom. You may win—but you will never take our spirit."

The governor's face hardened.

"When all your women and children are taken from you screaming," he said, "remember the choice you made today."

The Lord Governor turned, kicked his horse, and rode off, followed by several attendants, heading back on the road on which he'd came, into the snowy countryside.

His soldiers, though, remained behind, and their commander raised his banner high and ordered: "ADVANCE!"

The Lord's Men all dismounted, lined up in a row, and marched in perfect discipline, over the bridge and right for them.

Kyra, heart pounding, turned and looked at her father, as did all the others, awaiting his command—and suddenly he raised one fist high, and with a fierce battle cry, lowered it.

Suddenly, the sky filled with arrows. Kyra looked over her shoulder to see several of her father's archers take aim from the battlements and fire. Arrows whizzed by her ear and she watched as they hit the Lord's Men left and right.

Cries filled the air as men died all around her. It was the first time she had seen so many men die up close, and the sight stunned her.

Her father, at the same time, drew a short sword from each side of his waist, stepped forward, and stabbed the two soldiers who had come for his daughter, each dropping, dead, at his feet.

At the same moment, Anvin, Vidar, and Arthfael raised spears and hurled them, each felling a soldier who charged across the bridge. Brandon and Braxton stepped forward and hurled spears, too, one grazing a soldier's arm and the other grazing a soldier's leg, wounding them, at least.

More men charged and Kyra, inspired, set aside her staff, raised her new bow for the first time, placed an arrow, and fired. She aimed for the commander, leading his men in a charge on horseback,

and she watched with great satisfaction as her arrow sailed through the air and impaled his chest. It was her first shot with the new bow, and her first time killing a man in formal combat—and as their commander fell to the ground, she looked down in shock at what she had just done.

At the same time, a dozen of the Lord's Men raised their bows and fired back, and Kyra watched in horror as arrows whizzed by her from the opposite direction—and as some of her father's men cried out, wounded, dropping all around her.

"FOR ESCALON!" her father yelled.

He drew his sword and led a charge across the bridge, into the thick of the Lord's Men. His soldiers followed close behind, and Kyra drew her staff and joined in, too, exhilarated at rushing into battle and wanting to be by her father's side.

As they charged, the Lord's Men prepared another round of arrows and fired once again—and soon a wall of arrows came at them.

But then, to Kyra's surprise, her father's men raised their large shields, creating a wall as they all squatted down together, perfectly disciplined. She squatted behind one of them, and heard the thwack as deadly arrows were stopped.

They all jumped to their feet and charged again, and she realized her father's strategy—to get close enough to the Lord's Men to render their arrows useless. They soon reached the wall of soldiers and there came a great clang of metal as men clashed in battle, swords meeting swords, halberds meeting shields, spears meeting armor. It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same moment

Squeezed into the bridge with nowhere to go, the men fought hand-to-hand, groaning, slashing and blocking, the clang of metal deafening. Leo lunged forward and sunk his teeth into a man's foot, while one of her father's men cried out beside her and she looked over to see him stabbed by a sword, blood dripping from his mouth.

Kyra watched Anvin head-butt a man, then plunge a sword into his gut. She watched her father use his shield as a weapon, smashing two men so hard he knocked them over the bridge and into the moat. She'd never before seen her father in action, and he was a fierce thing to watch. Even more impressive was how his men formed around him, and it was clear they had fought by each other's sides for years. They had a camaraderie she envied.

Her father's men fought so well, they caught the Lord's Men off guard, who clearly had not expected an organized resistance. The Lord's Men fought for their Governor, who had already left them—while her father's men fought for their home, their families and their very lives, all right here. Their passion, their stakes, gave them momentum.

In close quarters with little room to maneuver, Kyra saw a soldier come at her, sword raised high, and she immediately grabbed her staff with both hands, turned it sideways and raised it overhead as a shield. The man came at her with a long sword, and she prayed Brot's Alkan steel would hold.

The sword clanged off the staff as it would against a shield, and to her relief, the staff did not break.

Kyra spun the staff around and smashed the soldier in the side of the head. He stumbled back, and she then kicked him, sending him tumbling backwards, shrieking, into the moat.

Another soldier charged her from the side, swinging a flail, and she realized she wouldn't be able to react in time. But Leo rushed forward and pounced on his chest, pinning him down on all fours.

Another soldier came at her with an ax, swinging sideways at her; she barely had time to react, as she spun and used her staff to block it. She held her staff vertically, barely able to keep back the soldier's strength, as the ax came closer to her. She gained a valuable lesson, realizing she should not try to meet these men head on. She could not overpower them; she had to fight to her strength, not to theirs.

Losing strength as the ax blade came closer, Kyra remembered Brot's contraption. She twisted the staff, it split into two pieces, and she stepped back as the ax came whizzing past, missing her. The soldier was stunned, clearly not expecting this, and in the same motion, Kyra raised the two halves of the staff and plunged the blades into the soldier's chest, killing him.

There came a shout, a rallying cry from behind her—and Kyra turned to see a mob of village folk—farmers, masons, blacksmiths, armorers, butchers—all wielding weapons—sickles, hatchets, anything and everything—racing for the bridge. Within moments they joined her father's men, all of them ready to take a stand.

Kyra watched as Thomak the butcher used a cleaver to sever a man's arm, while Brine the mason smashed a soldier in the chest with a hammer, felling him. The village folk brought a fresh burst of energy to the battle, and as clumsy as they were, they caught the Lord's Men off guard. They fought with passion, releasing years of pent-up anger at their servitude. Now, finally, they had a chance to stand up for themselves—a chance for vengeance.

They pushed back the Lord's Men as they hacked their way through with brute force, felling men—and their horses—left and right. But after a few minutes of intense fighting these amateur warriors began to fall, the air filled with their cries as the better armed and better trained soldiers cut them down. The Lord's Men pushed back, and the momentum swung back the other way.

The bridge became more crowded as more of the Lord's Men reinforcements charged onto it. Her father's men, slipping in the snow, were tiring, more than one crying out and falling, killed by the Lord's Men. The tide of battle was turning against them, and Kyra knew she had to do something quickly.

Kyra eyed her surroundings and had an idea: she jumped up on the stone rail at the edge of the bridge, gaining the vantage point she needed, several feet above the others, exposing herself but no longer caring. She was the only one of them nimble enough to leap all the way up here, and she drew her bow, took aim, and fired.

With her superior angle, Kyra was able to take out one soldier after the next. She took aim at one of the Lord's Men, bringing a hatchet down for her unsuspecting father's back, and hit him in the neck, felling him right before he put a blade in her father's back. She then fired at a soldier swinging a flail, hitting him in the ribs right before he could impact Anvin's head.

Firing arrow after arrow, Kyra felled a dozen men—until she was finally spotted. She felt an arrowed whizz by her face, and she looked out to see archers firing back at her. Before she could react, she gasped in horrific pain as an arrow grazed her arm, drawing blood.

Kyra jumped down from the rail and back into the fray. She rolled to her hands and knees, and she knelt there, breathing hard, her arm killing her, and looked up and saw more reinforcements arriving onto the bridge. She watched her people get driven back, and watched as one of them, right beside her, a man she had known and loved, was stabbed in the gut and tumbled over the railing, into the moat, dead.

As she knelt there, a fierce soldier raised his ax high overhead and brought it down for her. She knew she could not react it in time and she braced herself—when suddenly Leo lunged forward and sunk his fangs into the man's stomach.

Kyra sensed motion out of the corner of her eye and she turned to see another soldier raise his halberd and bring it down for the back of her neck. Unable to react in time, she braced herself for the blow, expecting to die.

There came a clang, and she looked up to see the blade hovering right before her head—stopped by a sword. Her father stood over her, wielding the sword, saving her from the deadly blow. He spun his sword around, twisting the halberd out of the way, then stabbed the soldier in the heart.

The move, though, left her father defenseless, and Kyra watched, horrified, as another soldier stepped forward and stabbed her father in the arm; he cried out and went stumbling back as the soldier bore down on him.

As Kyra knelt there, an unfamiliar feeling began to overcome her; it was a warmth, beginning in her solar plexus and radiating from there. It was a foreign sensation, yet one she embraced immediately as she felt it giving her infinite strength, spreading through her body, one limb at a time, coursing through her veins. More than strength, it gave her focus; as she looked around, it was as if time slowed. In a single glance, she took in all the enemy soldiers, saw all their vulnerabilities, saw how to kill each and every one.

Kyra did not understand what was happening to her—and she did not care. She embraced the new power that took over her and allowed herself to succumb to its sweet rage and do with her as it would.

Kyra stood, feeling invincible, feeling as if everyone else moved in slow motion around her. She raised her staff and pounced into the crowd.

What happened next was a flash, a blinding blur that she could barely process and barely remember. She felt the power overtake her arms, felt it instruct her who to strike, where to move, and she found herself attacking enemy soldiers in a blur as she cut through the crowd. She smashed one soldier in the side of the head, then reached back and jabbed one in the throat; then leapt high and with two hands brought her staff straight down on two soldiers' heads. She twisted and spun her staff end over end as she cut through the mob like a whirlwind, felling soldiers left and right, leaving a trail in her wake. No one could catch her—and no one could stop her.

The clang of her metal staff hitting armor echoed in the air, all happening impossibly fast. For the first time in her life, she felt at one with the universe; she felt as if she were no longer trying to control—but allowing herself to be controlled. She felt as if she were outside of herself. She did not understand this new power, and it terrified and exhilarated her at the same time.

Within moments she had cleared all the Lord's Men off the bridge. She found herself standing on the far side and jabbing one last soldier between the eyes.

Kyra stood there, breathing hard, and suddenly time became fast again. She looked around and saw the damage she had done, and she was more shocked than anyone else.

The dozen or so soldiers who remained of the Lord's Men, on the far side of the bridge, looked back at her, panic in their eyes, and turned and ran, slipping in the snow.

There came a shout, and Kyra's father led the charge as his men pursued them. They hacked them down, left and right, until there were no survivors left.

A horn sounded. The battle was over.

All her father's men, all the villagers, stood there, stunned, realizing they had achieved the impossible. Yet, oddly, there wasn't the jubilant outcry that normally would follow such a victory; there came no cheering and embracing of men, no shouts of joy. Instead, the air was strangely silent, the mood somber; they had lost many good brothers on this day, their bodies scattered before them, and perhaps that caused the men to pause.

But it was more than that, Kyra knew. That wasn't what caused the silence. What caused it, she knew, was her.

Every eye on the battlefield turned and looked at her. Even Leo looked up at her, fear in his eyes, as if he no longer knew her.

Kyra stood there, still breathing hard, her cheeks still flush, and felt them all staring. They looked at her with awe—but also with suspicion. They looked at her as if she were a stranger in their midst. All of them, she knew, were asking themselves the same question. It was a question which she herself wanted answered, and one that terrified her more than anything:

Who was she?

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

Alec drifted in and out of sleep as he stood in the cart, sandwiched between the mass of boys, dreaming fast, troubled dreams. He saw himself being squeezed to death in a coffin filled with boys, the lid being slammed on him.

He woke with a start, breathing hard, realizing he was standing in the cart. More stops had been made and more boys were crammed in as the cart jolted along its way, all day long for a second day, up and down hills, weaving in and out of the wood. Alec had been on his feet ever since the confrontation, feeling safer to stand, and his back was killing him. But he longer cared. He found it easier to doze off while standing, especially with Marco beside him. The boys who had attacked him had retreated to the far side of the carriage, but at this point, he did not trust anybody.

The jolting of the cart had sunk into Alec's consciousness, and he forgot what it was like to stand on steady ground. He thought of Ashton and took solace in the fact that at least his brother wasn't standing here right now. It gave him a sense of purpose, and gave him the courage to go on.

As the shadows grew longer, no end in sight to their journey, Alec began to lose hope, to feel as if they would never reach The Flames.

More time passed, and after he dozed off several times, he felt a nudge in his ribs. He opened his eyes to see it was Marco, gesturing with his head.

Alec felt a wave of excitement rippling through the crowd of boys, and this time he sensed something was different. All the boys perked up as they began to turn and look through the iron bars. Alec turned and tried to look out, disoriented, but he could not see through the thick crowd of bodies.

"You've got to see this," Marco said, looking out.

Marco shifted out of the way so Alec could peek through. As he did, Alec saw a sight which he would never forget:

The Flames.

Alec had heard about The Flames his entire life, but he had never imagined they could exist. It was one of those things so hard to imagine that, try as he did, he just could not picture how it could be possible. How could flames really reach the sky? How could they burn forever?

But now, as he laid eyes upon them for the first time, he realized it was all true. It took his breath away. There, on the horizon, sat The Flames, rising, as legend had it, to the clouds, so thick he could not see where they ended. He could hear the crackling of it, feel the heat of it, even from here. It was awe-inspiring and terrifying at once.

Up and down The Flames, Alec saw stationed hundreds of soldiers, boys and men, standing guard, spread out every hundred feet or so. On the horizon, at the end of the road, he saw a black, stone tower, around which sat several outbuildings. It was a hub of activity.

"Looks like our new home," Marco observed.

Alec saw the rows of squalid barracks, packed with boys covered in soot. He felt a pit in his stomach, realizing this was a sorry glimpse of his future, of the hell his life would become.

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Alec braced himself as he was yanked off the cart by Pandesian handlers and went tumbling down, with a mass of boys, into the hard ground below. Boys landed on top of him, and as he struggled to breathe, it shocked him how hard the ground was—and that it was covered in snow. He wasn't used to this northeastern weather, and he realized immediately that his Midland clothes, too thin, would be useless here. Back in Soli, though it was but a few days' ride south, the ground was

soft, covered in green moss, lush; it never snowed there and the air smelled of flowers. Here it was cold and hard, lifeless—and the air smelled only of fire.

As Alec disentangled himself from the mass of bodies, he had barely gained his feet when he was shoved in the back. He stumbled forward and turned to see a handler behind him, herding all the boys like cattle toward the barracks.

Behind him Alec watched as several dozen boys emerged from his cart; more than one, he was surprised to see, fell out limply, dead. He marveled that he'd survived the journey, crammed in as he'd been. He ached in every bone in his body, his joints stiff, and as he marched, he had never felt more weary. He felt as though he hadn't slept in months, and as he felt as if he'd arrived at the end of the world.

Crackling filled the air and Alec looked up and saw, perhaps a hundred yards away, The Flames. They walked toward them, and they loomed larger and larger. They were awe-inspiring in person, up close, and he appreciated their heat, growing warmer with each step he took. He feared, though, how hot it would become when he got up close, as the others on patrol who stood hardly twenty yards away. He noticed they wore unusual protective armor. Even so, some lay there, limp, having clearly collapsed.

"See those flames, boy?" came a sinister voice.

Alec turned to see the boy he'd confronted in the carriage coming up beside him, his friend beside him, sneering.

"When I take your face to them no one's gonna recognize you—not even your mama. I'll burn your hands off until they're nothing but stumps. Appreciate what you got before you lose it."

He laughed, a dark, mean noise, sounding like a cough.

Alec stared back with defiance, Marco now beside him.

"You couldn't beat me in the carriage," Alec replied, "and you won't beat me now."

The boy snickered.

"This ain't no carriage, boy," he said. "You'll be sleeping with me tonight. Those barracks are all of ours. One night, one roof. It's you and me. And I've got all the time in the world. It might be tonight or it might be tomorrow—but one of these nights, when you least expect it, you'll be sleeping and we'll get you. You'll wake up to find your face in those flames. Sleep tight," he concluded with a laugh.

"If you're so tough," Marco said, beside him, "what are you waiting for? Here we are. Try it."

Alec saw the boy hesitate as he glanced back at the Pandesian handlers.

"When the time is right," he replied.

With that, they slinked away into the crowd.

"Don't worry," Marco said. "You'll sleep when I wake, and I'll do the same for you. If that scum come near us, they'll wish they hadn't."

Alec nodded in agreement, grateful, as he looked out at the barracks and wondered. A few feet from the packed entrance, Alec could already smell the body odor emanating from the building. He recoiled as he was shoved inside.

Alec tried to adjust to the dark barracks, lit only by the weak light coming through a few windows, high up. He looked down at the dirt floor and realized immediately that the carriage, as bad as it was, was better than this. He saw rows of suspicious, hostile faces, only the whites of their eyes visible, judging him up. They started to hoot and holler, clearly trying to intimidate them, the newbies, and to stake out their territory, and the barracks became filled with loud voices.

"Fresh meat!" called one.

"Fodder for The Flames!" cried another.

Alec felt a deepening sense of apprehension as they were all shoved deeper and deeper into the one big room. He finally stopped, Marco beside him, before an open patch of straw on the ground—only to be immediately shoved from behind.

"That's my spot, boy."

Alec turned to see an older recruit glaring at him, holding a dagger.

"Unless you want me to cut your throat," he warned.

Marco stepped forward.

"Keep your hay," he said. "It stinks anyway."

The two of them turned and continued deeper into the barracks, until, in a far corner, Alec found a small patch of hay deep in the shadows. He saw no one nearby, and he and Marco sat, a few feet away from each other, their backs against the wall.

Alec immediately breathed a sigh of relief; it felt so good to rest his aching legs, to not be in motion. He felt secure with his back to the wall, in a corner, where he could not get easily ambushed, and having a view of the room. He saw hundreds of recruits milling about, all in some state of argument, and dozens more pouring in by the second. He also saw several being dragged out by their ankles, dead. This place was a vision of hell.

"Don't worry, it gets worse," said a voice beside him.

Alec turned to see a recruit lying in the shadows a few feet away, a boy he hadn't noticed before, on his back, hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. He chewed on a piece of straw, and he had a deep, jaded voice.

"Hunger will probably kill you," the boy added darkly. "It kills about half the boys that come through here. Disease kills most others. If that doesn't get you, another boy will. Maybe you'll fight over a piece of bread—or maybe for no reason at all. Maybe he won't like the way you walk, or the way you look. Maybe you'll remind him of someone. Or maybe it'll just be pure hate for no reason. There's a lot of that going around here."

He sighed.

"And if all that doesn't get you," he added, "those flames will. Maybe not on your first patrol, or your second. But trolls break through when you least expect it, usually on fire, always looking to kill something. They've got nothing to lose and they come out of nowhere. I saw one the other night, sank its teeth in a boy's throat before the others could do anything."

Alec exchanged a look with Marco, each wondering what kind of life they'd signed up for.

"Nope," the boy added, "I haven't seen any boy survive more than one moon of duty."

"You're still here," Marco observed.

The boy grinned, chewing on his straw, still looking up.

"That's because I learned how to survive," he replied.

"How long have you been here?" Alec asked.

"Two moons," he replied. "The longest of all of them."

Alec gasped, shocked. Two moons, and the oldest survivor. This really was a factory of death. He started to wonder if he had made a mistake in coming here; maybe he should have just fought the Pandesians when they'd arrived in Solis and died a quick, clean death back at home. He found his thoughts turning to escape; after all, his brother had been spared—what did he have to gain by staying here now?

Alec found himself searching the walls, checking the windows and doors, counting the guards, wondering if there was a way.

"That's good," the boy said, still staring at the ceiling, yet somehow observing him. "Think of escape. Think of anything but this place. That's how you survive."

Alec flushed, embarrassed the boy read his mind, and amazed he could do it without even looking directly at him.

"But don't really try it," the boy said. "I can't tell you how many of us die each night trying. Better to be killed than to die that way."

"Die what way?" Marco asked. "Do they torture you?"

The boy shook his head.

"Worse," he replied. "They let you go."

Alec stared back, confused.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"They chose this spot well," he explained. "Those woods are filled with death. Boars, beasts, trolls—everything you can imagine. No boy ever survives."

The boy grinned, and looked at them for the first time.

"Welcome, my friends," he said, smiling wide, "to The Flames."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Kyra walked through the winding streets of Volis, snow crunching beneath her boots, in a daze after her first battle. It had all happened so quickly, had been more vicious, more intense than she could have imagined. Men died—good men—men she had known all her life, in horrible and painful ways. Fathers and brothers and husbands now lay dead in the snow, their corpses piled outside of the fort's gates, the ground too hard to bury them.

She closed her eyes and tried to shake out the images.

It had been a great victory, and yet it had also humbled her, made her see how real battle was, how fragile life could be. It had shown her how easily men could die—and how easily she could take a man's life—both of which she found equally disturbing.

Being a great warrior was what she had always wanted; yet she could see now that it came with a heavy price. Valor was what she strived for, yet there was nothing easy, she was realizing, about valor. Unlike the spoils of war, it was not something she could hold in her grasp, not something she could hang on her wall. And yet it was what men strived for. Where was this thing called valor? Now that the battle was over, where had it gone?

More than anything, the day's events forced Kyra to wonder about herself, her mysterious power, which came from nowhere and seemed to disappear just as quickly. She tried to summon it again, but could not. What was it? Where did it come from? Kyra did not like what she could not understand, what she could not control. She would rather be less powerful and understand where her talents came from.

As Kyra walked the streets, she was puzzled by her townsfolk's reaction. After the battle, she had expected them to be panicked, to board up their homes or prepare to evacuate the fort. After all, many of the Lord's Men had died, and surely they would also soon see the wrath of Pandesia. A great and terrible army would be coming for them all; it might be the next day, or the day after that, or the week after that—but surely it was coming. They were all the walking dead here. How could they be unafraid?

Yet as she mingled with her people, Kyra detected no fear. On the contrary, she saw a jubilant people, energized, rejuvenated; she saw a people that had been set free. They bustled in every direction, clapping each other on the back, celebrating—and preparing. They sharpened weapons, strengthened gates, piled rocks high, stored food, and hurried about with a great sense of purpose. The Volisians, following her father's example, had an iron will. They were a people not easily deterred, and in fact, it seemed as if they looked forward to the next confrontation, whatever the cost and however grim the odds.

Kyra also noticed something else as she walked amongst her people, something which made her uncomfortable: the new way they looked at her. Clearly word had spread of what she had done, and she could feel the whispers behind her back. They looked at her as if she were not of them, these people she had known and loved her entire life. It made her feel as if she were a stranger here, and made her wonder where her true home was. Most of all, it made her wonder about her father's secret.

Kyra walked over to the thick wall of the ramparts and climbed the stone steps, Leo right behind her, ascending to the upper levels. She passed all her father's men, standing guard every twenty feet or so, and she could see they, too, all viewed her differently now, a new respect in their eyes. That look made it all worth it for her.

Kyra turned a corner and in the distance, standing above the arched gates, looking out over the countryside, she saw the man she had come for: her father. He stood there, hands on his hips,

several of his men around him, gazing out into the rising snow. He blinked into the wind, unfazed by it—or by his fresh wounds from battle.

He turned at her approach and gestured to his men. They all walked off, leaving them alone.

Leo rushed forward and licked his hand, and her father stroked his head.

Kyra stood there, facing her father alone, and she did not know what to say. He looked back at her, expressionless, and she could not tell if he was angry with her, proud of her, or both. He was a complicated man in even the most simple of times—and these were not simple times. His face was hard, like the mountains beyond them, and as white as the snow that fell, and he looked like the ancient stone from which Volis had been quarried. She did not know if he was of this place, or if this place was of him.

He turned and looked back out at the countryside, and she stood beside him, looking out, too. They shared the silence, punctuated only by the wind, as she waited for him to speak.

"I used to think that our safety, our secure life here, was more important than freedom," he finally began, his voice a low rumble. "Today, I realized I was wrong. You have taught me what I have forgotten: that freedom, that honor, is worth more than all."

He smiled as he looked over at her, and she was relieved to see warmth in his eyes.

"You have given me a great gift," he said. "You have reminded me what honor means."

She smiled, touched by his words, relieved he was not upset with her, feeling the rift in their relationship repaired.

"It is hard to see men die," he continued, reflective, turning back to the countryside. "Even for me."

A long silence followed, and Kyra wondered if he would bring up what had happened; she sensed that he wanted to. She wanted to bring it up herself but was unsure how.

"I am different, Father, aren't I?" she finally asked, her voice soft, afraid to ask the question.

He continued to stare out at the horizon, inscrutable, until finally he nodded slightly.

"It has something to do with my mother, doesn't it?" she pressed. "Who was she? Am I even your daughter?"

He turned and looked at her, sadness in his eyes, mixed with a nostalgic look she did not fully understand.

"These are all questions for another time," he said. "When you are ready."

"I am ready now," she insisted.

He shook his head.

"There are many things you must learn first, Kyra. Many secrets I have had to withhold from you," he said, his voice heavy with remorse. "It pained me to do so, but it was to protect you. The time is near for you to know everything, to know who you truly are."

She stood there, her heart pounding, desperate to know, yet afraid at the same time.

"I thought I could raise you," he sighed. "They warned me this day would come, but I did not believe it. Not until today, not until I saw your skill. Your talents...they are beyond me."

She furrowed her brow, confused.

"I don't understand, Father," she said. "What are you saying?"

His face hardened with resolve.

"It is time for you to leave us," he said, his voice filled with determination, taking on the tone he used when his mind was set. "You must leave Volis at once and seek out your uncle, your mother's brother. Akis. In the Tower of Ur."

"The Tower of Ur?" she repeated, shocked. "Is my uncle a Watcher, then?"

Her father shook his head.

"He is much more. It is he who must train you—and is he, and only he, who can reveal the secret of who you are."

While learning the secret thrilled her, she was overwhelmed by the idea of leaving Volis.

"I don't want to go," she said. "I want to be here, with you. Especially now, of all times." He sighed.

"Unfortunately, what you and I want no longer matters," he said. "This is no longer about you and me. This is about Escalon—all of Escalon. The destiny of our lands lies in your hand. Don't you see, Kyra?" he said, turning to her. "It is you. You are the one who will lead our people out of the darkness."

She blinked, shocked, hardly believing his words.

"How?" she asked. "How is that possible?"

But he merely fell silent, refusing to say anymore.

"I can't leave your side, Father," she pleaded. "I won't. Not now."

He studied the countryside, sadness in his eyes.

"Within a fortnight, all you see here will be destroyed. There is no hope for us. You must escape when you can. You are our only hope—your dying here, with us, will help no one."

Kyra felt pained by his words. She could not bring herself to leave while her people died.

"They will come back, won't they?" she asked.

It was more of a statement than a question.

"They will," he replied. "They will cover Volis like a plague of locusts. All you have known and loved will soon be no more."

She felt a pit in her stomach at his response, and yet she knew it was the truth, and was grateful at least for that.

"And what of the capital?" Kyra asked. "What of the old King? Could you not go to Andros and resurrect the old army and make a stand?"

He shook his head.

"The King surrendered once," he said, wistfully. "The time to fight has passed. Andros is run by politicians now, not soldiers, and none are to be trusted."

"But surely they would stand up for Escalon, if not for Volis," she insisted.

"Volis is but one stronghold," he said, "one they can afford to turn their backs on. Our victory today, as great as it was, was too small for them to risk rallying all of Escalon."

They both fell into silence as they studied the horizon, Kyra pondering his words.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

"A good leader must always know fear," he replied. "Fear sharpens our senses, and helps us to prepare. It is not death I fear, though—it is only not dying well."

They stood there, studying the skies, as she realized the truth in his words. A long, comfortable silence fell over them.

Finally, he turned to her.

"Where is your dragon now?" he asked, then suddenly turned and walked off, as he sometimes

Kyra, alone, stood there and studied the horizon; strangely enough, she had been wondering the same thing. The skies were empty, thick with rolling clouds, and she kept hoping, in the back of her mind, to hear a screech, to see its wings dip down from the clouds.

But there was nothing. Nothing but emptiness and silence, and her father's lingering question: Where is your dragon now?

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

Alec felt himself rudely awakened by a kick in the ribs and he opened his eyes, exhausted, disoriented, trying to get his bearings. He pulled hay from his mouth, saw he was lying face-first on the ground, and he remembered: the barracks. He had been up most of the night, watching his and Marco's back as the night was filled the sounds of boys fighting, creeping in and out of the shadows, calling out to each other threateningly. He had watched more than one boy get dragged out, feet first, dead—but not before boys pounced on his corpse and raided it for anything they could salvage.

Alec was kicked again, and this time, alert, he rolled over, ready for anything. He looked up, blinking in the blackness, and was surprised to see not another boy but rather two Pandesian soldiers. They were kicking boys all up and down the line, grabbing them, yanking them to their feet. Alec felt rough hands beneath his arms, felt himself yanked up, too, then pushed and prodded out of the barracks.

"What's happening? What's going on?" he mumbled, still unsure if he was awake.

"Time for duty," the soldier snapped back. "You're not here for pleasure, boy."

Alec had wondered when he would be sent to patrol The Flames, but it had never occurred to him it would be in the middle of the night, and so soon after such a long ride. He stumbled forward, drunk with exhaustion, wondering how he could survive this. They had given them nothing to eat since he had arrived, and he still felt weak from the long journey.

Before him a boy collapsed, perhaps from hunger, or from exhaustion, it didn't matter—the soldiers pounced on him, kicking him viciously until he stopped moving altogether. They left him on the frozen ground, dead, and continued marching.

Realizing he did not want to end up like that boy, Alec strengthened his resolve and forced himself wide awake. Marco came up beside him.

"Sleep much?" Marco asked with a wry smile.

Alec shook his head gloomily.

"Don't worry," Marco said. "We'll sleep when we're dead—and we'll be dead soon enough."

They turned a bend and Alec was momentarily blinded by The Flames, hardly fifty yards away, their heat tremendous even from here.

"If trolls come through, kill them," an Empire soldier called out. "Otherwise, don't kill yourselves. At least not until morning. We want this place well-guarded."

Alec was given a final shove, and he and the group of boys were left near The Flames, while the soldiers turned and marched off. He wondered why they trusted them to stand guard, not to run—but then he turned and saw the watchtowers everywhere, manned with soldiers with crossbows, fingers on the trigger, all waiting eagerly for a boy to make a run for it.

Alec stood there, with no armor and no weapons, and wondered how they could expect him to be an effective guard. He looked over and saw some of the other boys had swords.

"Where did you get that?" Alec called out to a boy nearby.

"When a boy dies, get it from him," he called back. "If someone else doesn't beat you to it." Marco frowned.

"How do they expect us to stand guard with no weapons?" he asked.

One of the other boys, face black with soot, snickered.

"Newbies don't get weapons," he said. "They expect you to die anyway. If you're still here after a few nights, you'll find a way to get one."

Alec stared at The Flames, crackling so intensely, the heat warming his face, and he tried not to think about what lay on the other side, waiting to burst through.

"What do we do in the meantime?" he asked. "If a troll breaks through?" One boy laughed.

"Kill them with your bare hands!" he called out. "You might survive—but then again, you might not. He'll be on fire, and will probably burn you with him."

The other boys turned their backs and dispersed, each spreading out for their own stations, and Alec, weaponless, turned and looked at The Flames with a despairing feeling.

"We have been set up to die," he said to Marco.

Marco, about twenty feet away from him, staring at The Flames, looked disillusioned.

"Keeping the Flames was once a noble calling," he said, his voice glum. "Before Pandesia invaded. The Keepers were once honored, well-armed and well-equipped. It was why I volunteered. But now...it seems to be something else entirely. The Pandesians don't want the trolls coming through—but they don't use their own men. They want us to guard it—and they leave us to die here."

"Perhaps we should let them through then," Alec said, "and let them kill them all."

"We could," Marco said. "But they'd raid Escalon and kill our families, too."

They fell silent, the two of them standing there, staring into The Flames. Alec did not know how much time had passed while he stared, wondering. He could not help but feel as if he were staring into his own death. What was his family doing right now? he wondered. Were they thinking of him? Did they even care?

Alec found himself getting lost in depressing thoughts and knew he had to change his mood. He forced himself to look away, to glance back over his shoulder and to study the dark woodline. The woods were pitch black, foreboding, the soldiers in the watchtowers not even bothering to watch them. Instead, they kept their eyes fixed on the recruits, on The Flames.

"They are afraid to stand guard themselves," Alec observed, looking up at the soldiers. "Yet they don't want us to leave. Cowardly."

Barely had Alec uttered the words when he suddenly felt a tremendous pain in his back, sending him stumbling forward. Before he knew what was happening, he felt a club being jammed into his ribs and found himself landing face-first on the ground.

He heard a sinister voice in his ear, one he recognized:

"I told you I'd find you, boy."

Before he could react Alec felt rough hands grab him from behind and drag him forward, toward The Flames. There were two of them—the boy from the carriage and his friend—and Alec tried to resist, but it was useless. Their grip was too tight and they carried him closer and closer, until his face felt the intense heat of The Flames.

Alec heard struggling and he looked over and was surprised to see Marco wrapped up in chains, two other boys grabbing him from behind, holding him in place. They had planned this well. They really wanted them dead.

Alec struggled, but he could not gain leverage. They dragged him closer and closer to The Flames, hardly ten feet away, the heat of it so intense he could already feel the pain, feel as if his face were going to melt. He knew that with but a few more feet, he would be disfigured for life—if not dead.

Alec bucked, but they had him in such a tight grip, he could not break free.

"NO!" he shrieked.

"Time for payback," hissed the voice in his ear.

There suddenly came a horrific shriek, and Alec was shocked to realize it was not his own. The grip loosened on his arms and as it did he immediately pulled back from The Flames. At the same moment, he saw a burst of light and he watched, transfixed, as a creature burst forth from The Flames, on fire, and suddenly landed on the boy beside him, pinning him to the ground.

The troll, still on fire, rolled with the boy on the ground, sinking its fangs into his throat. The boy shrieked as he died instantly.

The troll turned and looked about, in a frenzy, and its eyes, large and red, met Alec's. Alec was terrified. Still aflame, it breathed through its mouth, its long fangs covered in blood, and looked ravenous for a kill, like a wild beast.

Alec stood there, frozen with fear, unable to move even if he wanted to.

The other boy ran, and the troll, detecting motion, turned and, to Alec's relief, lunged for him instead. In one bound it tackled him to the ground, still on fire, and sank its fangs into the back of his neck. The boy cried out as it killed him.

Marco shook off the stunned boys, grabbed their chain and swung it around, smashing one in the face and the other between the legs, dropping them both.

Bells started to toll in the watchtowers and chaos ensued. Boys came running from up and down The Flames to fight the troll. They jabbed at it with spears, but most, inexperienced, were afraid to get too close. The troll reached out, grabbed a spear and pulled a boy close, hugging him tight and, as the boy shrieked, setting him aflame.

"Now's our time," hissed an urgent voice.

Alec turned to see Marco running up beside him.

"They're all distracted. This may be our only chance."

Marco looked out and Alec followed his glance: he looked to the woods. He meant to escape.

Black and ominous, the woodline was foreboding. Alec knew that even greater dangers likely lurked in there, but he knew Marco was right: this was their chance. And nothing but death awaited them here.

Alec nodded and without another word they broke into a sprint together, running farther and farther from The Flames, toward the woods.

Alec's heart slammed in his chest as he expected at any moment to be shot in the back by a crossbow, and he ran for his very life. But as he glanced back over his shoulder, he saw everyone surrounding the troll, distracted.

A moment later, they entered the woods, engulfed in blackness, entering, he knew, a world of dangers greater than he could ever imagine. He would probably die here, he knew. But at least, finally, he was free.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kyra stood outside the gates of Volis, studying the wintry landscape as the snow fell, the sky streaked with scarlet as if the sun were struggling to break through, and she leaned forward on the emerging wall, breathing hard as she plopped down yet another stone. Kyra had joined the others in gathering these huge stones from the river to erect yet another wall around the perimeter of Volis. As the mason beside her smeared the plaster, she plopped down one stone after the next. Now, arms trembling, she needed a break.

Kyra was joined by hundreds of her people, lined up all along the wall, all building it higher, deeper, adding rings to the embankments. Others, beyond the wall, worked with shovels, digging fresh ditches, while others still dug graves for the dead. Kyra knew that all of this was futile, that it would not hold back the great Pandesian army when it came, that no matter what they did, they would all die in this place. They all knew it. But they built it anyway. It gave them something to do, some sense of having control while staring death in the face.

As Kyra took a break, she leaned against the wall, looked out at the landscape, and wondered. All was so still now, the snow muffling all sound, as if the world contained nothing but peace. But she knew differently; she knew the Pandesians were out there somewhere, preparing. She knew they would return, in a deafening rumble, and destroy all that she held precious. What she saw before her was an illusion: it was the calm before the storm. It was hard to understand how the world could be so still, so perfect, one moment—and so filled with destruction and chaos the next.

Kyra glanced back over her shoulder and saw her people winding down their work for the day, laying down trowels and shovels as night began to fall and filtering back toward their homes. Smoke rose from chimneys, candles were lit in windows, and Volis looked so cozy, so protected, as if it could not be touched by the world. She marveled at the illusion.

As she stood there, she could not help but hear her father's words, ringing in her ears, his request that she leave at once. She thought of her uncle, whom she had never met, of the journey it would require, across Escalon, through Whitewood, all the way to the Tower of Ur. She thought of her mother, of the secret being withheld from her. She thought of her uncle training her to become more powerful—and it all thrilled her.

And yet as she turned and looked at her people, she knew she just could not abandon them in their time of strife, even if it meant saving her life. It was just not who she was.

Suddenly, a low, soft horn sounded, one signaling the end of the work day.

"Night falls," said the mason, standing beside her, laying down his trowel. "There is little we can do in the dark. Our people return for the meal. Come now," he said, as rows of people turned and headed back across the bridge, through the gates.

"I will come in a moment," she said, not yet ready, wanting more time to enjoy the peace, the silence. She was always happiest alone, outdoors.

Leo whined and licked his lips.

"Take Leo with you—he's hungry."

Leo must have understood because he already leapt off after the mason while she was still speaking, and the mason laughed and returned with him for the fort.

Kyra stood outside the fort, closing her eyes against the noise and becoming lost in her thoughts. Finally, the sound of the hammers had stopped. Finally, she had true peace.

She looked out and studied the horizon, the darkening woodline, the rolling gray clouds covering up the scarlet, and she wondered. When were they coming? What size force would they bring? What would their army look like?

As she looked out, she was surprised to detect motion in the distance. Something caught her eye and as she watched, she saw a lone rider materialize, emerging from the wood and taking the main road for their fort. Kyra reached back and gripped her bow unconsciously, bracing herself, wondering if he were a scout, if he were heralding an army.

But as he neared, she loosened her grip and relaxed as she recognized him: it was one of her father's men. Maltren. He galloped, and as he did, led a riderless horse beside him by the reins. It was a most curious sight.

Maltren came to an abrupt stop before her and looked down at her with urgency, appearing scared; she could not understand what was happening.

"What is it?" she asked, alarmed. "Is Pandesia coming?"

He sat there, breathing hard, and shook his head.

"It is your brother," he said. "Aidan."

Kyra's heart plummeted at the mention of her brother's name, the person she loved most in the world. She was immediately on edge.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What's happened to him?"

Maltren caught his breath.

"He's been badly injured," he said. "He needs help."

Kyra's heart started pounding. Aidan? Injured? Her mind spun with awful scenarios—but mostly, confusion.

"How?" she demanded. "What was he doing in the wood? I thought he was in the fort, preparing for the feast?"

Maltren shook his head.

"He went out with your brothers," he said. "Hunting. He took a bad fall from his horse—his legs are broken."

Kyra felt a flash of determination rush through her. Filled with adrenaline, not even stopping to think it all through carefully, she rushed forward and mounted the spare horse.

If she had taken just a moment to turn around, to check the fort, she would have found Aidan, safely inside. But fueled by urgency, she did not stop to question Maltren.

"Lead me to him," she said.

The two of them, an unlikely duo, charged off together, away from Volis and, as night fell, toward the blackening wood.

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Kyra and Maltren galloped down the road, over the rolling hills, toward the wood, she breathing hard as she dug her heels into her horse, anxious to save Aidan. A million nightmares swarmed through her head. How could Aidan have broken his legs? What were her brothers doing hunting out here, close to nightfall, when all of her father's people had been forbidden to leave the fort? None of it made any sense.

They reached the edge of the wood, and as Kyra prepared to enter it, she was puzzled to see Maltren suddenly bring his horse to a stop before it. She stopped abruptly beside him and watched as he dismounted. She dismounted, too, both horses breathing hard, and followed him, baffled, as he stopped at the forest's edge.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked, breathing hard. "I thought Aidan was in the wood?" Kyra looked all around, and as she did, she suddenly had a feeling that something was terribly wrong—when suddenly, out of the woods, she was horrified to see, there stepped the Lord Governor himself, flanked by two dozen men. She heard snow crunching behind her, and she

wheeled to see a dozen more men encircle her, all aiming bows at her, one grabbing the reins to her horse. Her blood ran cold as she realized she had walked into a trap.

She looked at Maltren in fury, realizing he had betrayed her.

"Why?" she asked, disgusted at the sight of him. "You are my father's man. Why would you do this?"

The Lord Governor walked over to Maltren and placed a large sack of gold in his hand, while Maltren looked away guiltily.

"For enough gold," the Lord Governor turned and said to her, a haughty smile on his face, "you will find that men will do anything you wish. Maltren here will be rich forever, richer than your father ever was, and he will be spared from your fort's looming death."

Kyra scowled at Maltren, hardly fathoming this.

"You are a traitor," she said.

He scowled back at her.

"I am our savior," he replied. "They would have killed all of our people, thanks to you. Thanks to me, Volis will be spared. I made a deal. You can thank me for their lives." He smiled, satisfied. "And, to think, all I had to do was hand over you."

Kyra suddenly felt rough hands grab her from behind, felt herself hoisted in the air. She bucked and writhed, but she could not shake them as she felt her wrist and ankles bound, felt herself thrown into the back of a carriage.

A moment later, iron bars slammed on her and her cart jostled away, bumping over the countryside. She knew that, wherever they were taking her, no one would ever see or hear from her again. And as they entered the wood, blocking out all view of the falling night, she knew that her life, as she knew it, was over.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The giant lay at Vesuvius's feet, bound by a thousand ropes, held down by a hundred trolls, and as Vesuvius stood over it, so close to its fangs, he studied it in awe. The beast craned its neck, snarling, trying to reach out and kill him—but it could not budge.

Vesuvius grinned, delighted. He took pride in having power over helpless things, and more than anything, he loved watching trapped things suffer.

Seeing this giant here, back in his cave, in his own territory, gave him a thrill. Being able to stand so close to it made him feel all powerful, made him feel as if there were nothing in the world he could not conquer. Finally, after all these years, his dream had been realized. Finally, he would be able to achieve his lifelong goal, to create the tunnel that would lead his people under The Flames and into the West.

Vesuvius sneered down at the creature.

"You see, you are not as strong as I," he said, standing over it. "No one is as strong as I."

The beast roared, an awful sound, and struggled in vain. As it did, all the trolls holding it swayed left and right, the ropes shifting, but not giving. Vesuvius knew their time was short. If they were going to do this, the time was now.

Vesuvius turned and surveyed the cave: thousands of workers stopped their labor to watch the giant. At the far end sat the unfinished tunnel, and Vesuvius knew this would be the tricky part. He would have to put the giant to work. Somehow, he would have to goad it to enter the tunnel and smash through the rock. But how?

Vesuvius stood there, racking his brain, until an idea came to him.

He turned to the giant and drew his sword, aglow against the flames of the cave.

"I will cut your ropes," Vesuvius said to the beast, "because I do not fear you. You will be free, and you shall follow my command. You will smash through the rock of that tunnel, and you shall not stop until you have burrowed beneath The Flames of Escalon."

The giant let out a roar of defiance.

Vesuvius turned and surveyed his army of trolls, awaiting his command.

"When my sword lowers," he called out, his voice booming, "you shall cut all of its ropes at once. You shall then prod it with your weapons until it reaches the tunnel."

His trolls looked back nervously, all clearly terrified at the idea of freeing it. Vesuvius feared it, too, though he would never show it. And yet he knew there was no other way—this moment would have to come.

Vesuvius wasted no time. He stepped forward decisively, raised his sword, and slashed the first of the thick ropes binding the giant's neck.

Immediately, hundreds of his soldiers stepped forward, raised their swords high and slashed the ropes, and the sound of ropes snapping filled the air.

Vesuvius quickly retreated, backing off, but not too conspicuously, not wanting his men to see his fear. He slithered back behind his ranks of men, into the shadows of the rock, out of reach of the beast after it gained its feet. He would wait to see what happened first.

A horrific roar filled the canyon as the giant rose to its feet, enraged, and without wasting a second, swiped down with its claws in each direction. It scooped up four trolls in each hand, raised them high overhead and threw them. The trolls went flying end over end through the air, across the cave, until they smashed into the far wall and collapsed, sliding limply down, dead.

The giant bunched its hands into fists, raised them high and suddenly smashed the ground, using them like hammers, aiming for the trolls who scurried about. Trolls fled for their lives, but not in time. He crushed them like ants, the cave shaking with each smash.

As trolls tried to run between its legs, the giant raised its feet and stomped, flattening others. Enraged, it killed trolls in every direction. No one seemed able to escape its wrath.

Vesuvius watched with a mounting dread. He signaled to his commander, and immediately, a horn sounded.

On cue, hundreds of his soldiers marched forward from the shadows, long pikes and whips in hand, all preparing to poke and prod the beast. They encircled it, rushing forward from all directions, doing their best to prod it towards the tunnel.

But Vesuvius was horrified to watch his plan collapse before his eyes. The beast leaned back and kicked a dozen soldiers away at once; it then swung its forearm around and swatted fifty more soldiers, smashing them into a wall along with their pikes. It stomped others, holding whips, killing so many so quickly that none could get near it. They were useless against this creature, even with their numbers and with all their weapons. Vesuvius' army was dissolving before his eyes.

Vesuvius thought quickly. He could not kill the beast—he needed it alive, needed to harness its strength. Yet he needed it to obey him. But how? How could he goad it into the tunnel?

Suddenly, he had an idea: if he could not prod it in, then perhaps he could entice it.

He turned and grabbed the troll beside him.

"You," he commanded. "Run for the tunnel. Make sure the giant sees you."

The solder stared back, wide-eyed with fear.

"But, my Lord and King, what if it follows me?"

Vesuvius grinned.

"That is exactly the point."

The soldier stood there, panic-stricken, too scared to obey—and Vesuvius stabbed him in the heart. He then stepped up to the next soldier and held the dagger to his throat.

"You can die here now," he said, "by the edge of my blade—or you can run for that tunnel and have a chance to live. You choose."

Vesuvius pushed the blade tighter against his throat, and the troll, realizing he meant it, turned and darted off.

Vesuvius watched as he ran across the cave, zigzagging his way amidst all the chaos, between all the dying soldiers, through the beast's legs, and ran for the entrance to the tunnel.

The giant spotted him, and he swatted down and missed him. In a rage, and attracted to the one soldier running away from him, the giant, as Vesuvius had hoped, immediately followed. It ran through the cave, each step shaking the earth, the walls.

The troll ran for his life and finally entered the massive tunnel. Though wide and tall, the tunnel was shallow, ending after a mere fifty yards despite years of work, and as the troll ran inside, he soon reached the dead end, a wall of rock.

The giant, enraged, charged in after it, never even slowing. As it reached the troll it swiped for him with its massive fists and claws. The troll ducked and the giant instead smashed into rock. The ground shook, a great rumble followed, and Vesuvius watched in awe as the wall crumbled, as an avalanche of rocks came pouring out in a massive cloud of dust.

Vesuvius' heart quickened. That was it. It was exactly what he had always dreamt, exactly what he needed, what he had envisioned from the day he set out to find this beast. It swiped again, and smashed out another chunk of rock, taking out a good fifty feet in a single swipe—more than Vesuvius's slaves had been able to do in an entire year of digging.

Vesuvius was overjoyed, realizing it could work.

But then the giant found the troll, grabbed it, lifted it into the air, and bit off its head.

"CLOSE THE TUNNEL!" Vesuvius commanded, rushing forward and directing his soldiers.

Hundreds of trolls, waiting on standby, rushed forward and began pushing the slab of Altusian rock that Vesuvius had positioned before the entrance to the tunnel, a rock so thick that no beast,

not even this creature, could break it. The sound of stone scraping stone filled the air as Vesuvius watched the tunnel slowly seal up.

The giant, seeing the entrance being closed, turned and charged for it.

But the entrance sealed a moment before the giant reached it. The entire cave as it slammed into it—but luckily the stone held.

Vesuvius smiled; the giant was trapped. He was right where he wanted him.

"Send the next one in!" Vesuvius ordered.

A human slave was kicked forward, lashed by his captors, again and again, toward a tiny opening in the stone slab. The human, realizing what was about to happen, refused to go, kicking and struggling; but they beat him savagely, until finally they were able to run him through the opening, giving him one last shove through.

From inside there came the muffled shouts of the slave, clearly running for his life, trying to get away from the giant. Vesuvius stood there and listened with glee as he heard the sound of the enraged giant, trapped, swatting and smashing at rock, digging his tunnel for him.

One swipe at a time, his tunnel was being dug—each swipe, he knew, bringing him closer to The Flames, to Escalon. He would turn the humans into a nation of slaves.

Finally, victory would be his.

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

Kyra opened her eyes to blackness, lying on a cold stone floor, her head splitting, her body aching, and wondered where she was. Shivering from the cold, her throat parched, feeling as if she hadn't eaten in days, she reached out and felt the cobblestone floor beneath her fingers, and she tried to remember.

Images flooded her mind, and she was unsure at first if they were memories or nightmares. She recalled being captured by the Lord's Men, thrown into a cart, a metal gate slamming on her. She remembered a long, bumpy ride, remembered resisting as the gate opened, struggling to break free and being clubbed on the head. After that, all had, mercifully, been blackness.

Kyra reached up and felt the lump on the back of her head and she knew it had not been a dream. It had all been real. The reality sunk in like a stone: she had been captured by the Lord's Men, carted off, and imprisoned.

Kyra was furious at Maltren for his betrayal, furious at herself for being so stupid as to have believed him. She was also scared, pondering what would come next. Here she lay, alone, in the Governor's custody, and only terrible things could be coming for her. She felt sure that her father and her people had no idea where she was. Perhaps her father would assume she had heeded him and ventured to the Tower of Ur. Maltren would surely lie and report back that he had seen her fleeing Volis for good.

As Kyra scrambled in the dark, she instinctively reached for her bow, her staff—but they had all been stripped. She looked up and saw a dim glow coming through the cell bars, and she sat up and saw torches lining the stone walls of a dungeon, beneath which stood several soldiers, at attention. There sat a large iron door in the center of it, and it was silent down here, the only sound that of a dripping coming from somewhere in the ceiling, and of rats scurrying in some dark corner.

Kyra sat up against the wall, hugging her knees to her chest, trying to get warm. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, forcing herself to imagine herself someplace else, anywhere. As she did, she saw Theos' intense yellow eyes staring back at her. She could hear the dragon's voice in her mind's eye.

Strength is not defined in times of peace. It is defined in hardship. Embrace your hardship, do not shy from it. Only then can you overcome it.

Kyra opened her eyes, shocked at the vision, looking around and expecting to see Theos in front of her.

"Did you see him?" a girl's voice suddenly cut through the darkness, making Kyra jump.

Kyra wheeled, stunned to hear the voice of another person here in this cell with her, coming from somewhere in the shadows—and even more stunned to hear it was a girl's voice. She sounded about her age, and as a figure emerged from the shadows, Kyra saw she was right: there sat a pretty girl, perhaps fifteen, with brown hair and eyes, long tangled hair, face covered in dirt, clothes in tatters. She looked terrified as she stared back at Kyra.

"Who are you?" Kyra asked.

"Have you seen him?" the girl repeated, urgently.

"Seen who?"

"His son," she replied.

"His son?" Kyra asked, confused.

The girl turned and looked outside the cell, terror-stricken, and Kyra wondered what horrors she had seen.

"I haven't seen anyone," Kyra said.

"Oh God, please don't let them kill me," the girl pleaded. "Please. I hate this place!"

The girl began to weep uncontrollably, curled up on the stone floor, and Kyra, her heart breaking for her, got up, went over and draped an arm around her shoulder, trying to soothe her.

"Shhh," Kyra said, trying to calm her. Kyra had never seen anyone in such a broken state; this girl looked positively terrified about whoever it was she was talking about. It gave Kyra a sinking feeling for what was to come.

"Tell me," Kyra said. "Who are you talking about? Who hurt you? The Governor? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

She saw the bruises on the girl's face, the scars on her shoulders, and she tried not to think of what they had done to this poor girl. She waited patiently for her to stop weeping.

"My name is Dierdre," she said. "I've been here...I don't know. I thought it was a moon cycle, but I have lost track of time. They took me from my family, ever since the new law. I tried to resist, and they took me here."

Dierdre stared into space as if reliving it all again.

"Every day there await new tortures for me," she continued. "First it was the son, then the father. They pass me off like a doll and now...I am... nothing."

She stared back at Kyra with an intensity that scared her.

"I just want to die now," Dierdre pleaded. "Please, just help me die."

Kyra looked back, horrified.

"Don't say that," Kyra said.

"I tried to take a knife the other day to kill myself—but it slipped from my hands and they captured me again. Please. I'll give you anything. Kill me."

Kyra shook her head, aghast.

"Listen to me," Kyra said, feeling a new inner strength rise up within her, a new determination as she saw Dierdre's plight. It was the strength of her father, the strength of generations of warriors, coursing through her. And more than that: it was the strength of the dragon. A strength she did not know she had until this day.

She grabbed Dierdre's shoulders and looked her in the eye, wanting to get through to her.

"You are *not* going to die," Kyra said firmly. "And they are *not* going to hurt you. Do you understand me? You are going to live. I will make sure of it."

Dierdre seemed to calm, drawing strength from Kyra's strength.

"Whatever they have done to you," Kyra continued, "that is in the past now. Soon you are going to be free—we are going to be free. You are going to start life over again. We will be friends and I will protect you. Do you trust me?"

Dierdre stared back, clearly shocked. Finally, she nodded, calm.

"But how?" Dierdre asked. "You don't understand. There is no escape from here. You don't understand what they're like—"

They both flinched as the iron door slammed open. Kyra watched as the Lord Governor strutted in, trailed by a half dozen men, and joined by a man who was his spitting image, with that same bulbous nose and smug look, perhaps in his thirties. He must have been his son. He had his father's same sneering, stupid face, his same look of arrogance.

They all crossed the dungeon and neared the cell bars, and his men approached with torches, lighting up the cell. Kyra looked around in the bright light and was horrified to see her accommodations for the first time, to see the bloodstains all over the floor. She did not want to think of who else had been here—or of what had happened to them.

"Bring her here," the Governor ordered his men.

The cell door opened, his men marched in and Kyra found herself hoisted to her feet, arms yanked behind her back, unable to break free as much as she tried. They brought her close to the Lord Governor and he looked her up and down like an insect.

"Did I not warn you?" he said softly, his voice low and dark.

Kyra frowned.

"Pandesian law allows you to take unwed girls as wives, not prisoners," Kyra said, defiant. "You violate your own law to imprison me."

The Lord Governor exchanged a look with the others, and they all broke into laughter.

"Do not worry," he said, glowering at her, "I will make you my wife. Many times over. And my son's, too—and anyone else's whom I wish. And when we're done with you, if we haven't killed you yet, then I'll let you live out your days down here."

He grinned an evil grin, clearly enjoying this.

"As for your father and your people," he continued, "I've had a change of heart: we are going to kill every last one of them. They will be a memory soon enough. Not even that, I'm afraid: I will see to it that Volis is erased from the history books. As we speak, an entire division of the Pandesian army approaches to avenge my men and destroy your fort."

Kyra felt a great indignation bubbling up within her. She tried desperately to summon her power, whatever it was that had helped her on the bridge, but to her dismay, it would not come. She writhed and bucked, but could not break free.

"You have a strong spirit," he said. "That is good. I shall enjoy breaking that spirit. I shall enjoy it very much."

He turned his back on her, as if to leave, when suddenly, without warning, he wheeled and backhanded her with all his might.

It was a move she did not expect, and Kyra felt the mighty blow smash her jaw and send her reeling down to the floor, beside Dierdre.

Kyra, stung, jaw aching, lay there and looked up, watching them all go. As they all left her cell, locking it behind them, the Lord Governor stopped, face against the bars, and looked down at her.

"I will wait for tomorrow to torture you," he said, grinning. "I find that my victims suffer the most when they are given a full night to think about the hardship to come."

He let out an awful laugh, delighted with himself, then turned with his men and left the dungeon, the massive iron door slamming behind them like a coffin on her heart.

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

Merk hiked through Whitewood at sunset, his legs aching, his stomach growling, trying to keep the faith that the Tower of Ur was out there on the horizon, that eventually he would reach it. He tried to focus on what his new life would be like once he arrived, how he would become a Watcher and start again.

But he couldn't focus. Ever since he had met that girl, heard her story, it had been gnawing away at him. He wanted to push her from his mind, but try as he did, he could not. He was so sure he had been turning away from a life of violence. If he went back for her and helped kill those men, when would the killing ever end? Would there not be another job, another cause, right behind that one?

Merk hiked and hiked, poking the ground with his staff, leaves crunching beneath his feet, furious. Why had he had to run into her? It was a huge wood—why couldn't they have missed each other? Why did life always have to throw things in his way? Things beyond his understanding?

Merk hated hard decisions, and he hated hesitation; his entire life he had always been so sure of everything, and he had regarded that as one of his strong points. He had always known what he was. But now, he was not so sure. Now, he found himself wavering.

He cursed the gods for having him run into that girl. Why couldn't people take care of themselves, anyway? Why did they always need him? If she and her family were unable to defend themselves, then why did they deserve to live anyhow? If he saved them, wouldn't some other predator, sooner or later, kill them?

No. He could not save them. That would be enabling them. People had to learn to defend themselves.

And yet perhaps, he pondered, there was a reason she had been put before his eyes. Maybe he was being tested.

Merk looked up at the skies, the sunset a thin strip on the horizon, barely visible through Whitewood, and he wondered at his new faith.

Tested.

It was a powerful word, a powerful idea, and one he did not like. He did not like what he did not understand, what he could not control, and being tested was precisely that. As he hiked and hiked, stabbing the leaves with his staff, Merk felt his carefully constructed world collapsing all around him. Before, his life had been easy; now, it life felt like an uncomfortable state of questioning. Being sure of things in life, he realized, was easy; questioning things was what was hard. He had stepped out of a world of black and white and into a world filled with shades of gray, and the uncertainty unsettled him. He did not understand who he was becoming, and that bothered him most of all.

Merk crested a hill, leaves crunching, breathing hard but not from exertion. As he reached the top, he stopped and looked out, and for the first time since embarking on this journey, he felt a ray of hope. He almost could not believe what he was seeing.

There it sat, on the horizon, glowing against the sunset. Not a legend, not a myth, but a real place: the Tower of Ur.

Nestled in a small clearing in the midst of a vast and dark wood, it rose up, an ancient stone tower, circular, perhaps fifty yards in diameter, and rising to the treeline. It was the oldest thing he had ever seen, older, even, than the castles in which he had served. It had a mysterious, impenetrable aura to it. He could sense it was a mystical place. A place of power.

Merk breathed a deep sigh of exhaustion and relief. He had made it. Seeing it here was like a dream. Finally, he would have a place to be in the world, a place to call home. He would have a chance to start life over, a chance to repent. He would become a Watcher.

He knew he should be ecstatic, should double his pace and set off on the final leg of the journey before nightfall. And yet, try as he did, for some reason he could not take the first step. He stood there, frozen, something gnawing away at him.

Merk turned around, able to see the horizon in every direction, and in the far distance, against the setting sun, he saw black smoke rising. It was like a punch in the gut. He knew where it was coming from: that girl. Her family. The murderers were setting fire to everything.

As he followed the trail of smoke he they had not reached her farm yet. They were still on the outskirts of her fields. Soon enough, they would reach it. But for now, for these last precious minutes, she was safe.

Merk cracked his neck, as he was prone to do when torn by an inner conflict. He stood there, shifting in place, filled with a great sense of unease, unable to go forward. He turned and looked back at the Tower of Ur, the destination of his dreams, and he knew he should forge ahead. He had arrived, and he wanted to relax, to celebrate.

But for the first time in his life, a desire welled up within him. It was a desire to act selflessly, a desire to act purely for justice's sake. For no fee and no reward. Merk hated the feeling.

Merk leaned back and shouted, at war with himself, with the world. Why? Why now, of all times?

And then, despite every ounce of common sense he had, he found himself turning away from the Tower, towards the farm. First it was a walk, then a jog—then a sprint.

As he ran, something deep within him was being set free. The Tower could wait. It was time for Merk to do right in the world. It was time for these murderers to meet their match.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Kyra sat against the cold stone wall, her eyes bloodshot as she watched the first rays of dawn seep through the iron bars, cover the room in a pale light. She had been awake all night, as the Lord Governor had predicted, turning over in her mind the horrific punishment to come. She pondered what they had done to Dierdre, and tried not to think of the ways these cruel men would try to break her.

Kyra turned over in her mind a thousand schemes to resist, to escape. The warrior spirit in her refused to break—she would rather die first. Yet, as she mulled all possible ways of defiance, of escape, she kept returning to a feeling of hopelessness and despair. This place was more well-guarded than any place she had ever been. She was in the midst of the Lord Governor's fort, a Pandesian stronghold, a massive military complex holding thousands of soldiers. She was far from Volis, and even if somehow she managed to escape, she knew she would never make it back before they hunted her down and killed her. Assuming Volis still stood for her to return to. Worse, her father had no idea where she was, and he never would. She was utterly alone in the universe.

"No sleep?" came a soft voice, shattering her reverie.

Kyra looked over to see Dierdre sitting against the far wall, her face illuminated with the first light of dawn, she looking too pale, dark circles under her eyes. She appeared utterly dejected, and she stared back at Kyra with haunted eyes.

"I didn't sleep either," Dierdre continued. "I was thinking all night of what they will do to you—the same they've done to me. But for some reason it hurts me worse to think of them doing it to you than me. I'm already broken; there's nothing left of my life. But you're still perfect."

Kyra felt a deepening sense of dread as she contemplated her words. She could not imagine the horrors her newfound friend had gone through, and seeing her this way just made her more determined to fight back.

"There must be another way," Kyra said.

Dierdre shook her head.

"There is nothing here but a miserable existence of life. And then death."

There came the sudden sound of a door slamming across the dungeon hall, and Kyra stood, prepared to face whatever came at her, prepared to fight to the death if need be. Dierdre suddenly jumped to her feet and ran over to her, grabbing her elbow.

"Promise me one thing," Dierdre insisted.

Kyra saw the desperation in her eyes, and she nodded back.

"Before they take you," she said, "kill me. Strangle me if you have to. Do not let me live like this anymore. Please. I beg you."

As Kyra stared back, she felt a sense of resolve bubbling up within her. She shook off her selfpity, all of her doubts. She knew, in that moment, that she had to live. If not for herself, then for Dierdre. No matter how bleak life seemed, she knew she could not give up.

The soldiers approached, their boots echoing, their keys clanging, and Kyra, knowing there remained little time, turned and grabbed Dierdre's shoulders with a firm grip as she looked her in the eye.

"Listen to me," Kyra implored. "You are going to live. Do you understand me? Not only are you going to live, but you are going to escape with me. You are going to start your life over—and it is going to be a beautiful life. We will wreak vengeance on all the scum that did this to you—together. Do you hear me?"

Dierdre stared back, wavering.

"I need you to be strong," Kyra insisted, speaking also to herself, she realized. "Living is not for the weak. Dying, giving up, is for the weak—living is for the strong. Do you want to be weak and die? Or do you wish to be strong and live?"

Kyra kept staring at her intensely as light flooded the cell from the torches and soldiers came marching in—and finally, she thought she could see something shift in Dierdre's eyes. It was like a tiny glimmer of hope, and it was followed by a tiny nod of affirmation.

There came a clanging of keys, the cell door opening and she turned to see the soldiers approach. Rough, callused hands grab her wrists, and Kyra was yanked out of the cell, as the cell door slammed behind her. She let herself go slack. She had to conserve her energy. Now was not the time to fight back. She had to catch them off guard, to find the perfect moment. Even a powerful enemy, she knew, always had one moment of vulnerability.

Two soldiers held her in place, and through the iron door there appeared a man whom Kyra dimly recognized: the governor's son.

Kyra blinked, confused.

"My father sent me to get you," he said as he approached, "but I am going to have you first. He won't be pleased when he finds out, of course—but then again, what's he to do when it is too late?" The son's face contorted in a cool, evil smile.

Kyra felt a cold dread as she stared back at this sick man, who licked his lips and examined her as if she were an object.

"You see," he said, taking a step forward, beginning to take off his fur coat, his breath visible in the cold cell, "my father need not know all the goings-on of this fort. Sometimes I like to have first dibs on whatever passes through—and you, my dear, are a fine specimen. I'm going to have fun with you. Then I will torture you. I will keep you alive, though, so that I have something left to bring to him."

He grinned, getting so close she could smell his foul breath.

"You and I, my dear, are going to become very familiar."

The son nodded to his two guards, and she was surprised as they released their grip and backed off, each retreating to a side of the room to give him space.

She stood there, hands free, and furtively glanced across the room, summing up her odds. There were the two guards, each armed with a long sword, and the son himself, far taller and broader than she. She would be unable to overpower them all, even if armed, which she was not.

She noticed in the far corner, leaning against the wall, her weapons—her bow and staff, her quiver of arrows—and her heart beat faster. What she wouldn't give to have them now.

"Ahh," the son said, smiling. "You look for your weapons. You still think you can survive this. I see the defiance in you. Don't worry, I will break that soon enough."

Unexpectedly, the son reached back and backhanded her so hard it took her breath away, her entire face stinging with pain. Kyra stumbled back, landing on her knees, blood dripping from her mouth, the pain rudely awaking her, ringing in her ear, her skull. She knelt there, on her hands and knees, trying to catch her breath, realizing this was a preview of what was to come.

"Do you know how we tame our horses, my dear?" asked the son, as he stood over her and smiled down cruelly. A guard threw him Kyra's staff and the son caught it and without missing a beat raised it high and brought it down on Kyra's exposed back.

Kyra shrieked, the pain unbearable, and collapsed face-first on the stone, feeling as if he had broken every bone in her body. She could barely breathe and she knew that if she did not do something soon, she would be crippled for life.

"Don't!" cried Dierdre, pleading from behind the bars. "Don't harm her! Take me instead!" But the son ignored her.

"It begins with the staff," he said to Kyra. "Wild horses resist, but if you break them, again and again, beat them mercilessly, day after day, one day they will submit. They will be yours. There is nothing better than inflicting pain on another creature, is there?"

Kyra sensed motion, and out of the corner of her eye she watched him raise the staff again with a sadistic look, preparing for an even mightier blow.

Kyra's senses became heightened, and her world slowed. That feeling she'd had back on the bridge came rushing back, a familiar warmth, one that began in her solar plexus and radiated through her body. She felt it filling her with energy, with more strength and speed than she could ever dream.

Images flashed before her eyes. She saw herself training with her father's men, recalled her endless sparring, her learning how to feel pain and not be stunned, how to fight several attackers at once. Anvin had drilled her relentlessly for hours, day after day, until she had perfected her technique, until it had finally became a part of her. She had insisted on the men teaching her everything, however hard the lesson, and now it all came rushing back to her. She had trained for a time exactly like this.

As she lay there, the shock of the pain behind her, the warmth taking over her body, Kyra looked up at the son and felt her instincts taking over. She would die—but not here, not today—and not by this man's hand.

An early lesson came rushing back: The low ground can give you an advantage. The taller a man is, the more vulnerable he is. The knees are an easy target if you find yourself on the ground. Sweep them. They will fall.

As the staff came down for her, Kyra suddenly laid her palms flat on the stone, propped herself up enough to gain leverage, and swung her leg around quickly and decisively, aiming for the back of the son's knees. With all of her might, she felt the satisfying feeling of kicking the soft spot behind them.

His knees buckled and he was airborne, landing flat on his back on the stone with a thump, the staff falling from his hands and rolling across the floor. She could hardly believe it had worked. As he fell, he landed on his skull and it was such a loud crack, she was sure she had killed him.

But he must have been invincible, for he immediately began to sit up, glaring at her with the venom of a demon, preparing to pounce.

Kyra did not wait. She gained her feet and lunged for the staff, lying on the floor several feet away, knowing that if she could just grab her weapon, she could have a fair chance against all these men. As she ran for it, though, the son jumped up and reached out to grab her leg, to try to hold her back.

Kyra reacted, her nimbleness taking over, and leapt like a cat over him, missing his grip, and landed on the stone in a roll behind him, grabbing her staff as she did.

She stood there, holding her staff cautiously before her, so grateful to have her weapon back, the staff fitting perfectly in her hands. The two guards approached with swords drawn and, encircled, she looked quickly about in every direction, like a wounded animal backed into a corner. She was lucky, she realized, that it had all happened so quickly, buying her time before the guards could join.

The son stood, wiped blood off his lip with the back of his hand, and scowled back at her. "That was the biggest mistake of your life," he said. "Now not only will I torture you—"

Kyra had had enough of him, and she was not going to wait for him to strike first. Before he could finish speaking, she lunged forward, raised her staff and jabbed quickly, like a snake striking, right between his eyes. It was a perfect strike, and he cried out as she broke his nose, the crack echoing.

He dropped to his knees, whimpering, cradling his nose.

The two guards came at her, swords swinging for her head. Kyra turned her staff and blocked one blade, sparks flying as it clanged in the room, then immediately spun and blocked the other,

right before it hit her. Back and forth she went, blocking one blow after the next, the two coming at her so fast she barely had time to react.

One of the guards swung too hard and Kyra found an opening: she raised her staff and brought it straight down on his exposed wrist, smashing it and loosening his grip on his sword. As it landed on the floor with a clang, Kyra jabbed sideways, into the other guard's throat, stunning him, then she swung around and smashed the first guard in the temple, felling him.

Kyra took no chances: as one guard, on his back, tried to rise, she leapt high into the air and brought her staff down on his solar plexus—then as he sat straight up, she kicked him in the face, knocking him out for good. And as the other guard rolled, clutching his throat, beginning to get up again, Kyra jabbed down and struck him on the back of his head, knocking him out.

Kyra suddenly felt rough arms squeezing her in a hug from behind and realized the son was back; he was trying to squeeze the life out of her, to make her drop her staff.

"Nice try," he whispered in her ear, his mouth so close she could feel his hot breath on her neck.

Kyra, a flash of energy coursing through her, found a new strength within her, just enough to reach forward with her arms, lock her elbows, and burst free from the man's hug. She then grabbed her staff and swung behind her, upwards, with two hands, driving it between the son's legs.

He moaned, releasing his grip as he fell to his knees, and she turned and stood over him, he finally helpless as he looked up at her with shocked eyes filled with pain.

"Say hello to your father for me," she said, raising back her staff and with all her might striking him in the head.

This time, he collapsed, unconscious, on the stone.

Kyra, still breathing hard, still enraged, surveyed her handiwork: three men, formidable men, lay unmoving on the floor. She, a defenseless girl, had done it.

"Kyra!" cried a voice.

She turned and remembered Dierdre, and without wasting another second ran across the room. Grabbing the keys from the guard's waist, she unlocked the cell, and as she did, Dierdre ran into her arms, hugging her.

Kyra pulled her back and looked her in the eyes, wanting to know if she was mentally prepared to escape.

"It's time," Kyra said firmly. "Are you ready?"

Dierdre stood there, shell-shocked, staring at the carnage in the room.

"You beat him," Dierdre said, staring at the bodies in disbelief. "I can't believe it. You beat him."

Kyra watched something shift in Dierdre's eyes. All the fear drifted away, and Kyra saw a strong woman emerging from deep inside, a woman she had not recognized before. Seeing her attackers unconscious did something to her, infused her with a new strength.

Dierdre walked to one of the swords lying on the floor, picked it up, and walked back over to the son, still lying prone, unconscious. She stared down, and her face molded into a sneer.

"This is for everything you did to me," she said.

She raised the sword with trembling hands, and Kyra could see a great battle going on within herself as she hesitated.

"Dierdre," Kyra said softly.

Dierdre looked at her, a wild grief in her stare.

"If you do it," Kyra said softly, "you will be just like him."

Dierdre stood there, arms trembling, going through an emotional storm, and finally, she lowered the sword, dropping it on the stone. It clanged at her feet.

She spit in the son's face, then leaned back and with her boot kicked him a mighty blow across the face. Dierdre, Kyra was beginning to see, was a much stronger person than she'd thought.

She looked back at Kyra with shining eyes, life restored in them, as if her old self were coming back.

"Let's go," Dierdre said, her voice filled with strength.

\*

Kyra and Dierdre burst out of the dungeon into the early light of dawn, finding themselves smack in the middle of Argos, the Pandesian stronghold and the Lord Governor's military complex. Kyra blinked in the light, feeling so good to see daylight again, despite its being cold out here, and as she got her bearings she saw they were in the center of a rambling complex of stone keeps, all of it encased by a high stone wall and a massive gate. The Lord's Men were still slowly waking up, beginning to take positions all around the barracks; there must have been thousands of them. It was a professional army, and this place was more a city than a town.

The soldiers took positions along the walls, looking out toward the horizon; none looked inward. Clearly none were expecting two girls to escape from within their midst, and that gave them an advantage. It was still dark enough, too, to help obscure them, and as Kyra looked ahead, to the well-guarded entrance at the far end of the courtyard, she knew that if they had any chance of escape, it was now.

But it was a long courtyard to cross on foot, and she knew they might not make it—and even if they did, once they ran through it, they would be caught.

"There!" Dierdre said, pointing.

Kyra looked and saw, on the other side of the courtyard, a horse, tied up, a soldier standing beside it, holding its reins, his back to them.

Dierdre turned to her.

"We'll need a horse," she said. "It's the only way."

Kyra nodded, surprised they were thinking the same way, and that Dierdre was so perceptive. Dierdre, whom Kyra had at first thought would be a liability, she was coming to see was actually smart, quick, and decisive.

"Can you do it?" Dierdre asked, looking at the soldier.

Kyra tightened her grip on her staff and nodded.

As one, they ran out from the shadows and silently across the courtyard, Kyra's heart slamming in her chest as she focused on the soldier, his back to her, getting closer with each step—and praying they weren't discovered in the meantime.

Kyra ran so fast she could barely breathe, willing herself not to slip in the snow, no longer feeling the cold as adrenaline pumped through her veins.

Finally she reached the soldier, and at the last second, he heard them and spun.

But Kyra was already in motion, raising her staff and jabbing him in the solar plexus. As he grunted and dropped to his knees, she swung it around and brought it down on the back of his head—knocking him face-first into the snow, unconscious.

Kyra mounted the horse while Dierdre untied it and jumped up behind her—and they both kicked and took off.

Kyra felt the cold wind through her hair as the horse charged across the snowy courtyard, heading for the gate at the far end, perhaps a hundred yards away. As they went, sleepy soldiers began to take notice, and to turn their way.

"Come on!" Kyra yelled to the horse, urging it faster, seeing the exit looming closer and closer.

A massive stone arch lay straight ahead, its portcullis raised, leading to a bridge, and beyond that, Kyra's heart quickened to see, open land. Freedom.

She kicked the horse with all her might as she saw the soldiers at the exit taking notice.

"STOP THEM!" yelled a soldier from behind.

Several soldiers scurried to large iron cranks and, to Kyra's dread, began to turn the cranks that lowered the portcullis. Kyra knew that if it closed before they reached it, their lives would be over. They were but twenty yards away and riding faster than she'd ever had—and yet the portcullis, thirty feet high, was lowering slowly, one foot at a time.

"Get as low as you can!" she shrieked to Dierdre, Kyra bending all the way over until her face was on the horse's mane.

Kyra raced, heart pounding in her ears, as they charge through the arch, the portcullis lowering, so low that she had to duck. It was so close, she did not know if they would make it.

Then, just as she was sure they would die, their horse burst through, the portcullis slamming down right behind them with a great boom. A moment later they were across the bridge and, to Kyra's immense relief, out under open sky.

Horns sounded behind them, and a moment later, Kyra flinched as she heard an arrow whiz by her head.

She glanced back and saw the Lord's Men taking positions up and down the ramparts, firing at them. She zigzagged on the horse, realizing they were still within range, urging it faster.

They were making progress, perhaps a fifty yards out, far enough so most arrows fell short—when suddenly, to her horror, she watched an arrow land in their horse's side. It immediately reared—throwing them both off.

Kyra's world turned to chaos. She hit the ground hard, winded, as the horse rolled right next to her, luckily missing them by an inch.

Kyra knelt on her hands and knees, dazed, her head ringing, and looked over and saw Dierdre beside her. She glanced back and saw, in the distance, the portcullis being raised. Hundreds of soldiers were lined up, waiting, and as the portcullis opened, they tore out the gates. It was a full-scale army, on its way to kill them. She was confused as to how they could have assembled so quickly, but then she realized: they were already assembling, at dawn, to attack Volis.

Kyra, on foot, looked over at their dead horse, at the vast open plains before them, and she knew, finally, their time had come.

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**

Aidan marched for his father's chamber impatiently, Leo at his side, with a deepening premonition that something was wrong. He had been searching for his sister Kyra all over the fort, Leo at his side, checking all her usual haunts—the armory, the blacksmith's, Fighter's Gate—and yet she was nowhere to be found. He and Kyra had always had a close connection, ever since he was born, and he always knew when something was off with her—now, he felt warning signs inside. She had been absent from the feast, and he knew she would have not missed it.

Most concerning of all, Leo was not with her—which never, *ever* happened. Aidan had grilled Leo, but the wolf, clearly trying to tell him something, could not communicate. He only stuck to Aidan's side, and would not leave it.

Aidan had spent the feast with a knot in his stomach, checking the door constantly for any sign of Kyra. He had tried to mention it to his father during the meal, but Duncan had been surrounded by too many men, all of them too focused on discussing the battle to come, and none taking him seriously.

At first light Aidan, awake all night, jumped up and ran to his window, checking the breaking dawn for any sign of her. There was none. He burst out of his chamber, down the corridor, past all his father's men and into Kyra's room and he did not even knock as he put a shoulder to it, running inside, looking for her.

But his heart had fallen to find her bed empty, still made from the day before. He knew then, for certain, something was wrong.

Aidan ran all the way down the corridors to his father's chambers, and now he stood before the giant door and looked back at the two guards before it.

"Open the door!" Aidan ordered urgently.

The guards exchanged an unsure look.

"It was a long night, boy," one guard said. "Your father won't take kindly to being awakened."

"Today could bring battle," said the other. "He needs to be rested."

"I will not say it again," Aidan insisted.

They looked at him, skeptical, and Aidan, unable to wait, rushed forward and slammed the knocker.

"Whoa, boy!" one of them said.

Then realizing his determination, the other guard said, "All right—but it's your head if anything happens. And the wolf stays here."

Leo snarled, but the guard reluctantly pushed open the door just enough for Aidan to step inside, closing it behind him.

Aidan rushed to his father's bed to find him sleeping in his furs, snoring, a half-dressed serving girl lying beside him. He grabbed his father's shoulder and shoved him, again and again.

Finally, his father opened his eyes with a fierce look, staring back as if he were going to whack him. But Aidan would not be deterred.

"Father, you must wake up now!" Aidan urged. "Kyra is missing!"

His father's look morphed into one of confusion, and he stared back, eyes bloodshot, as if in a drunken haze.

"Missing?" he said, his voice deep, gravelly, rumbling in his chest. "What do you mean?"

"She did not return to her chamber last night. Something has happened to her—I'm certain of it. Alert your men at once!"

His father sat up, this time looking more alert, rubbing his face and trying to shake off the sleep.

"I am sure your sister is fine," he said. "She's always fine. She survived an encounter with a dragon—do you think a small snowstorm blew her away? She's just somewhere you cannot find her—she likes to go off by herself. Now go on. Be on your way before you end up with a good spanking."

But Aidan stood there, determined, red-faced.

"If you won't find her, I'll find her myself," he yelled and turned and ran from the chamber, hoping that somehow he had gotten through to him.

\*

Aidan stood outside the gates of Volis, Leo beside him, standing proudly on the bridge and watching dawn spread across the countryside. He checked the horizon for any signs of Kyra, hoping perhaps she'd return from firing arrows, but he found none. His foreboding worsened. He had spent the last hour waking everyone from his brothers to the butcher, asking who had seen her last. Finally, one of his father's men had reported that he had seen her riding off toward the Wood of Thorns with Maltren.

Aidan had combed the fort for Maltren and had been told he was out for his morning hunt. And now he stood here, watching for Maltren to return, eager to confront him and find out what happened to his sister.

Aidan stood there, shin deep in snow, shivering but ignoring it, hands on his hips, waiting, watching, until finally, he squinted as he saw a figure appearing on the horizon, charging forward in the snow, galloping, wearing the armor of his father's men, the dragon's crest shining on his breastplate. His heart lifted to see it was Maltren.

Maltren galloped toward the fort, a deer draped over the back of his horse, and as he neared, Aidan saw his disapproval. He looked down at Aidan and came to a reluctant stop before him.

"Out of the way, boy!" Maltren called out. "You're blocking the bridge."

But Aidan stood his ground, confronting him.

"Where is my sister?" Aidan demanded.

Maltren stared back, and Aidan saw a moment of hesitation cross his face.

"How should I know?" he barked back. "I am a warrior—I don't keep track of the frolicking of girls."

But Aidan held his ground.

"I was told she was with you last. Where is she?" he repeated more firmly.

Aidan was impressed by the authority in his own voice, reminding him of his own father, though he was still too young and lacked the deepness of tone he so badly craved.

He must have gotten through to Maltren, because he slowly dismounted, anger and impatience flashing in his eyes, and walked toward Aidan in a threatening matter, armor rattling as he went. As he neared, Leo snarled, so viciously that Maltren stopped, a few feet away, looking from the wolf to Aidan.

He sneered down at Aidan, stinking of sweat, and even though he tried not to show it, Aidan had to admit he was afraid. He thanked God he had Leo at his side.

"Do you know what the punishment is for defying one of your father's men?" Maltren asked, his voice sinister.

"He is my father," Aidan insisted. "And Kyra is his daughter, too. Now where is she?"

Inside, Aidan was trembling—but he was not about to back down—not with Kyra in danger.

Maltren looked about, over his shoulder, apparently checking to see if anyone were watching. Satisfied that no one was, he leaned in close, smiled, and said:

"I sold her to the Lord's Men—and for a handsome price. She was a traitor and a troublemaker—just like you."

Aidan's eyes widened in shock, furious at his betrayal.

"As for you," Maltren said, reaching in and grabbing Aidan's shirt, pulling him close. Aidan's heart jumped as he saw him slip his hand on a dagger in his belt. "Do you know how many boys die in this moat each year? It's a very unfortunate thing. This bridge is too slippery, and those banks too steep. No one will ever suspect this was anything but another accident."

Aidan tried to wiggle his way free, but Maltren's grip was too tight. He felt flushed with panic, as he knew he was about to die.

Suddenly, Leo snarled and leapt for Maltren, sinking his fangs into his ankle. Maltren let go of Aidan and raised his dagger to stab the wolf.

"NO!" Aidan shouted.

There came the sound of a horn, followed by horses bursting through the gate, galloping across the bridge, and Maltren stopped, dagger in mid-air. Aidan turned and his heart lifted with relief to see his father and two brothers approaching, joined by a dozen men, their bows already drawn and pointed for Maltren chest.

Aidan broke free and Maltren stood there, looking afraid for the first time, holding his dagger in his hand, caught red-handed. Aidan snapped his fingers, and Leo reluctantly backed off.

Duncan dismounted and stepped forward with his men, and as they did, Aidan turned to them.

"You see, Father! I told you! Kyra is missing. And Maltren has betrayed her—he has sold her to the Lord Governor!"

Duncan stepped forward and a tense silence overcame them as his men surrounded Maltren. He looked nervously over his shoulder to his horse, as if contemplating escape, but the men came forward and grabbed its reins.

Maltren looked back at Duncan, clearly nervous.

"You were going to lay your hands on my boy, were you?" his father asked, looking Maltren in the eye, his tone hard and cold.

Maltren gulped and said nothing.

Duncan slowly raised his sword and held the point to Maltren's throat, death in his eyes.

"You will lead us to my daughter," he said, "and it will be the last thing you do before I kill you."

# **CHAPTER THIRTY**

Kyra and Dierdre ran for their lives across the snowy plains, gasping for breath, as they slipped and slid on the ice. They sprinted through the icy morning, steam rising from their mouths, the cold burning Kyra's lungs, her hands numb as she gripped her staff. The rumble of a thousand horses filled the air, and she looked back and wished she hadn't: on the horizon charged the Lord's Men, thousands of them bearing down. She knew there was no point in running. With no shelter on the horizon, nothing but open plains before them, they were finished.

Yet still they ran, driven on by some instinct to survive.

Kyra slipped, falling face first in the snow, winded, and she immediately felt a hand under her arm, pulling her up; she looked over to see Dierdre yanking her back to her feet.

"You can't stop now!" Dierdre said. "You didn't leave me—and I won't leave you. Let's go!" Kyra was surprised by the authority and confidence in Dierdre's voice, as if she had been reborn since she had left prison, her voice filled with hope, despite their circumstances.

Kyra broke back into a run, both of them heaving, as they finally began to crest a hill. She tried not to think of what would happen when this army caught up with them, when they reached Volis and slaughtered her people. And yet, Kyra had been trained not to give up—however bleak.

They crested the hill and as they did, Kyra stopped in her tracks, stunned at the sight before her. From up here she had a view of the countryside, a huge plateau stretching before her, and her heart leapt with ecstasy as she saw, riding toward them, her father, leading a hundred men. She could not believe it: he had come for her. All of these men had come all this way, had risked their lives in a suicide mission, just for her.

Kyra burst into tears, overwhelmed with love and gratitude for her people. They had not forgotten her.

Kyra ran for them, and as she neared, she saw Maltren's severed head tied to his horse, and realized at once what had happened: they had discovered his treachery and had come for her. Her father seemed equally surprised to see her, running out here in the open; he had probably expected to free her from the fort, she realized.

They all stopped as they met in the middle, her father dismounting, rushing to her and meeting her in a strong embrace. As she felt his strong arms around her she was overwhelmed with relief, felt that everything would be well in the world, despite their overwhelming odds. She had never felt so proud of her father as she did in that moment.

Her father's expression suddenly changed, his face growing serious as he looked over her shoulder, and she knew he had seen it: the vast army of the Lord's Men, cresting the hill.

He gestured to a waiting horse, and another vacant one for Dierdre.

"Your horse is waiting for you," he said, pointing to a beautiful white stallion. "You will fight with us now."

With no time left for words, Kyra immediately mounted her horse as her father did his, and she fell in line with all his men, all of them facing the horizon. Before her, on the horizon, she saw the Lord's Men, spread out before them, thousands of men against their mere hundred. Yet her father's men sat proudly, and not one backed away.

"MEN!" her father yelled, his voice strong, booming. "WE FIGHT FOR ETERNITY!"

They let out a huge battle cry, sounded their horns, and as one, they all charged forward, rushing to meet the enemy.

Kyra knew this was suicide. Behind the thousand Lord's Men lay another thousand, and another thousand behind them. Her father knew that; all his men knew that. But no one hesitated. For they were not fighting for their land, but for something even more precious: their very existence. Their

right to live as free men. Freedom meant more to these men than life, and while they could all be killed, they would all, at least, die by choice, die as free men.

As Kyra rode beside her father, beside Anvin, Vidar and Arthfael, she was exhilarated, overcome with a rush of adrenaline. In her haze, she felt her life pass before her eyes. She saw all the people she had known and loved, the places she had been, the life she had led, knowing it was all about to end. As the two armies neared, she saw the Lord Governor's ugly face, leading the way, and she felt a fresh sense of anger at Pandesia. Her veins burned for vengeance.

Kyra closed her eyes and made one last wish.

If I am truly prophesied to become a great warrior, let the time be now. If I truly have a special power, show me. Let it come out now. Allow me to crush my enemies. Just this one time, on this one day. Allow justice to be done.

Kyra opened her eyes, and she suddenly heard a horrific screech cut through the air. It raised the hair on the back of her neck, and she searched the skies and saw something that took her breath away.

Theos.

The immense dragon flew, swooping down right for her, staring at her with his large, glowing yellow eyes, the eyes she had seen in her dreams, and in her waking moments. They were the eyes she could not shake from her mind, the eyes that she had always known she would one day see again.

His wing healed, Theos lowered his claws and dove down, right for her head, as if to kill her.

Kyra watched as all of her father's men looked up, mouths agape with fear, crouching, preparing to die. But she herself felt unafraid. She felt the strength within the dragon, and she knew this time that she and the dragon were one.

Kyra watched in awe as Theos came right for her, his wings so wide they blocked the sun, and screeched a mighty screech, enough to terrify the men. He came so close, then rose back up at the last second, his claws nearly grazing their heads.

Kyra turned and watched Theos fly straight up, then turn around and circle back. This time he flew behind her men, rushing forward as if to fight with them, right for the Lord's Men.

It opened its great jaws and flew over them until finally it led the way, out in front of her father's men, racing single-handedly to meet the Lord's Men in battle first.

Kyra watched, awestruck, as the dragon approach and the Lord Governor's face morphed from arrogance to fear; indeed, she saw the terror in all their faces, all of them, finally, afraid, all realizing what was to come. Vengeance.

Theos opened its mouth overhead and with a great hissing and crackling noise breathed fire, a stream of flame lighting up the snowy morning. The shrieks of men filled the air, as a great conflagration spread through the army's ranks, killing row after row of men.

The dragon continued, flying again, circling, breathing fire, killing every enemy in sight until finally, there was no one left. Nothing but endless piles of ash where men and horses once stood.

Kyra watched it unfold with a surreal feeling. It was like watching her destiny unfold before her. At that moment she knew that she was different, she was special. The dragon had come just for her.

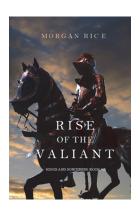
There was no turning back now: the Lord's Men were dead. Pandesia had been attacked, and Escalon had struck the first blow.

The dragon landed before them, in the fields of ash, as she and all of the men stopped, staring back, in awe. But Theos looked only at Kyra, with his glowing yellow eyes, transfixed on hers. He raised his wings, stretching forever, and shrieked, and awful shriek of rage that seemed to fill the entire universe.

The dragon knew.

It was time for the Great War to begin.

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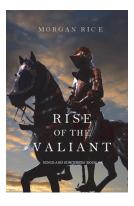
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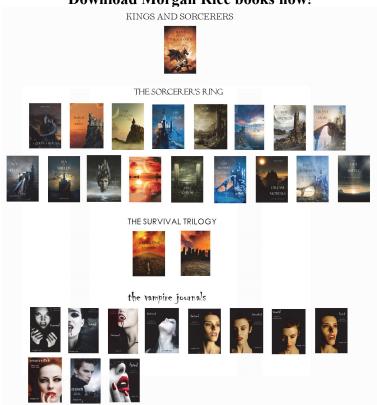
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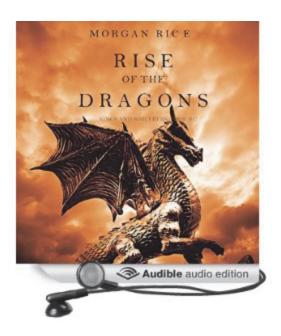
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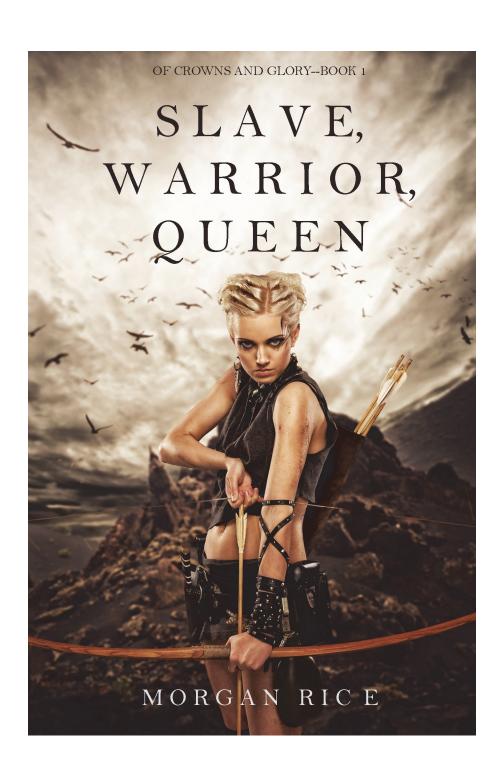
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Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series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

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# SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN

(OF CROWNS AND GLORY-BOOK 1)

MORGAN RICE

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- --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos
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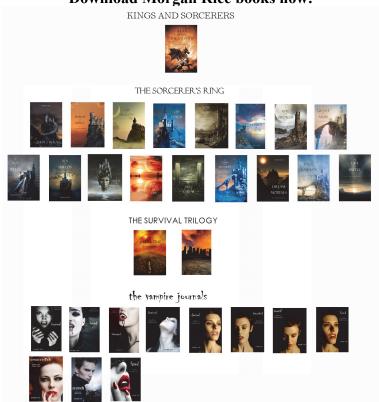
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To Storm Jensen, a remarkable wife, mother, and hero. Every word is a step—and you, Storm, are brave enough to start. "Come close, dear warrior, and I shall tell you a tale.

A tale of battles distant.

A tale of men and valor.

A tale of crowns and glory."

--The Forgotten Chronicles of Lysa

## CHAPTER ONE

Ceres ran through the back alleys of Delos, excitement coursing through her veins, knowing she could not be late. The sun was barely rising, and yet the muggy, dust-filled air was already suffocating in the ancient stone city. Legs burning, lungs aching, she nonetheless pushed herself to run faster, and faster still, hopping over one of the countless rats that crept out of the gutters and refuse in the streets. She could already hear the distant rumble, and her heart pounded with anticipation. Somewhere ahead, she knew, the Festival of the Killings was about to begin.

Letting her hands drag along the stone walls as she twisted and turned down a narrow alley, Ceres glanced back to make certain her brothers were keeping up. There, she was relieved to see, were Nesos, at her heels, and Sartes, only a few feet behind. At nineteen, Nesos was just two sun cycles older than she, while Sartes, her baby brother, four sun cycles younger, was on the verge of manhood. The two of them, with their longish sandy hair and brown eyes, looked exactly like each other—and their parents—and yet nothing like her. Still, though Ceres might be a girl, they had never been able to keep pace with her.

"Hurry!" Ceres yelled over her shoulder.

Another rumble came, and although she had never been to the festival, she imagined it in vivid detail: the entire city, all three million citizens of Delos, crowding into the Stade on this summer solstice holiday. It would be unlike anything she had seen before, and if her brothers and she didn't hurry, not a single seat would remain.

Picking up speed, Ceres wiped a drop of sweat off her brow and smeared it onto her frayed, ivory tunic, a hand-me-down from her mother. She had never been given new clothes. According to her mother, who doted on her brothers but seemed to reserve a special hatred and envy for her, she didn't deserve it.

"Wait!" Sartes yelled, an edge of irritation in his cracking voice.

Ceres smiled.

"Shall I carry you, then?" she yelled back.

She knew that he hated it when she teased him, yet her snide remark would motivate him to keep up. Ceres didn't mind his tagging along; she thought it was endearing how he, at thirteen, would do anything to be considered their peer. And even though she would never admit it openly, a huge part of her needed him to need her.

Sartes gave a loud grunt.

"Mother will kill you when she finds out you disobeyed her again!" he yelled back.

He was right. Indeed, she would—or give her a good flogging, at least.

The first time her mother had beaten her, at the age of five, it was the very moment Ceres lost her innocence. Before then, the world had been fun, kind, and good. After that, nothing had ever been safe again, and all that she had to hold onto was her hope of a future where she could get away from her. She was older now, close, and yet even that dream was slowly eroding in her heart.

Fortunately, Ceres knew her brothers would never tell on her. They were as loyal to her as she was to them.

"Then it's a good thing Mother will never know!" she cried back.

"Father will find out, though!" Sartes snapped.

She chuckled. Father already knew. They had made a deal: if she stayed up late to finish sharpening the swords due for delivery at the palace, she could go see the Killings. And so she did.

Ceres reached the wall at the end of the lane and, without pausing, wedged her fingers in two cracks and began to climb. Her hands and feet moved swiftly, and up she went, a good twenty feet, until she scrambled to the top.

She stood, breathing hard, and the sun greeted her with its bright rays. She shaded her eyes with a hand.

She gasped. Normally, the Old City was dotted with a few citizens, a stray cat or dog here and there—yet today it was positively alive. It swarmed with people. Ceres could not even see the cobblestones beneath the sea of people pressing into Fountain Square.

In the distance the ocean shimmered a vivid blue, while the towering white Stade stood as a mountain amongst twisting roads and sardine-packed two- and three-story houses. Around the outer edge of the plaza merchants had lined up booths, each eager to sell food, jewelry, or clothes.

A gust of wind brushed against her face, and the smell of freshly baked goods seeped into her nostrils. What she wouldn't give for food that would satisfy that gnawing sensation. She wrapped her arms around her belly as she felt a hunger pang. Breakfast this morning had been a few spoonfuls of soggy porridge, which had somehow managed to leave her stomach feeling hungrier than before she ate it. Given that today was her eighteenth birthday, she had hoped for at least a little extra food in her bowl—or a hug or *something*.

But no one had mentioned a word. She doubted they even remembered.

Light caught her eyes, and Ceres looked down to spot a golden carriage weaving through the crowd like a bubble through honey, slow and shiny. She frowned. In her excitement, she had failed to consider that the royalty would be at the event, too. She despised them, their haughtiness, that their animals were better fed than most of the people of Delos. Her brothers were hopeful that one day, they would triumph over the class system. But Ceres did not share their optimism: if there were to be any sort of equality in the Empire, it would have to come by way of revolution.

"Do you see him?" Nesos panted as he climbed up beside her.

Ceres's heart quickened as she thought of him. Rexus. She, too, had been wondering if he was here yet, and had been scanning the crowds to no avail.

She shook her head.

"There." Nesos pointed.

She followed his finger toward the fountain, squinting.

Suddenly she saw him, and could not suppress her burst of excitement. It was the same way she always felt when she saw him. There he was, sitting on the edge of the fountain, tightening his bow. Even from this distance, she could see his shoulder and chest muscles move beneath his tunic. Hardly a few years older than she, he had blond hair that stood out amongst heads of black and brown, and his tan skin glistened in the sun.

"Wait!" cried a voice.

Ceres glanced back down the wall to see Sartes, struggling with the climb.

"Hurry up or we'll leave you behind!" Nesos goaded.

Of course, they wouldn't dream of leaving their younger brother, although he did need to learn to keep up. In Delos, a moment of weakness could mean death.

Nesos ran a hand through his hair, catching his breath, too, as he surveyed the crowd.

"So who is your money on to win?" he asked.

Ceres turned to him and laughed.

"What money?" she asked.

He smiled.

"If you had any," he answered.

"Brennius," she replied without pausing.

His brow lifted in surprise.

"Really?" he asked. "Why?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Just a hunch."

But she did know. She knew very well, better than her brothers, better than all the boys of her city. Ceres had a secret: she hadn't told anyone she had, on occasion, dressed as a boy and trained at the palace. It was forbidden by royal decree for girls—punishable by death—to learn the ways of the combatlords, yet male commoners were welcome to learn in exchange for equal amounts of work in the palace's stables, work which she did happily.

She'd watched Brennius and had been impressed by the way he fought. He wasn't the largest of the combatlords, yet his moves were calculated with precision.

"No chance," Nesos replied. "It'll be Stefanus."

She shook her head.

"Stefanus will be dead within the first ten minutes," she said flatly.

Stefanus was the obvious choice, the largest of the combatlords, and probably the strongest; yet he wasn't as calculating as Brennius or some of the other warriors she had watched.

Nesos barked a laugh.

"I'll give you my good sword if that's the case."

She glanced at the sword attached to his waist. He had no idea how jealous she had been when he received that masterpiece of a weapon as a birthday gift from Mother three years ago. Her sword was an old leftover one her father had tossed into the recycling pile. Oh, the things she'd be able to do if she had a weapon like Nesos's.

"I'm going to hold you to it, you know," Ceres said, smiling—although in reality, she would never take his sword from him.

"I'd expect nothing less," he smirked.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest as a dark thought crossed her mind.

"Mother wouldn't allow it," she said.

"But Father would," he said. "He's very proud of you, you know."

Nesos's kind comment took her off guard, and not knowing exactly how to accept it, she lowered her eyes. She loved her father dearly, and he loved her, she knew. Yet for some reason, her mother's face appeared before her. All she ever wanted was for her mother to accept her and love her as much as her brothers. But as hard as she tried, Ceres felt she could never be enough in her eyes.

Sartes grunted as he climbed the last step behind them. He was still about a head shorter than Ceres and as scrawny as a cricket, but she was convinced he'd sprout like a bamboo shoot any day now. That's what had happened to Nesos. Now he was a muscle-bound hunk, hovering at six foot three.

"And you?" Ceres turned to Sartes. "Who do you think will win?"

"I'm with you. Brennius."

She smiled and ruffled his hair. He always said whatever she said.

Another rumble came, the crowd thickened, and she felt the urgency.

"Let's go," she said, "no time to waste."

Without waiting, Ceres climbed down the wall and hit the ground running. Keeping the fountain in sight, she made her way across the plaza, eager to reach Rexus.

He turned and his eyes widened in delight as she neared. She rushed into him and felt his arms wrap around her waist, as he pressed a scruffy cheek against hers.

"Ciri," he said in his low, raspy voice.

A shiver ran through her spine as she spun around to meet Rexus's cobalt blue eyes. At six foot one, he was nearly a head taller than her, and blond, coarse hair framed his heart-shaped face. He smelled like soap and the outdoors. Heavens, it was good to see him again. Even though she could fend for herself in nearly any situation, his presence brought her a sense of calm.

Ceres raised herself up onto the balls of her feet and curled willing arms around his thick neck. She had never seen him as more than a friend until she heard him speak of the revolution, and of the underground army he was a member of. "We will fight to free ourselves from the yoke of oppression," he had said to her years ago. He had spoken with such passion about the rebellion that for a moment, she had really believed overthrowing the royals was possible.

"How was the hunt?" she asked with a smile, knowing he had been gone for days.

"I missed your smile." He stroked her long, rose-gold hair back. "And your emerald eyes."

Ceres had missed him, too, but she didn't dare say. She was too afraid to lose the friendship they had if anything were to happen between them.

"Rexus," Nesos said, catching up, Sartes at his heels, and clasping his arm.

"Nesos," he said, in his deep, authoritative voice. "We have little time if we are to get in," he added, nodding to the others.

They all hurried off, merging with the throng heading toward the Stade. Empire soldiers were everywhere, urging the crowds forward, sometimes with clubs and whips. The closer they came to the road that led to the Stade, the more the crowd thickened.

All of a sudden, Ceres heard a clamor by one of the booths and she instinctively turned toward the sound. She saw that a generous space had opened up around a small boy, flanked by two Empire soldiers and a merchant. A few onlookers fled, while others gawked in a circle.

Ceres rushed forward to see one of the soldiers slap an apple out of the boy's hand as he grabbed the little one's arm, shaking him violently.

"Thief!" the soldier growled.

"Mercy, please!" the boy screamed, tears streaming down his dirty, hollow cheeks. "I was...so hungry!"

Ceres felt her heart burst from compassion, as she had felt the same hunger—and she knew the soldiers would be nothing short of cruel.

"Let the boy go," the heavyset merchant said calmly with the gesture of a hand, his gold ring catching the sunlight. "I can afford to give him an apple. I have hundreds of apples." He chuckled a little, as if to make light of the situation.

But the crowd gathered around and quieted as the soldiers turned to confront the merchant, their shiny armor rattling. Ceres's heart dropped for the merchant—she knew that one never risked confronting the Empire.

The soldier stepped forward menacingly toward the merchant.

"You defend a criminal?"

The merchant looked back and forth between the two of them, now seeming unsure. The soldier then turned and hit the boy across the face with a sickening crack that made Ceres shiver.

The boy fell to the ground with a thump as the crowd gasped.

Pointing at the merchant, the soldier said, "To prove your loyalty to the Empire, you will hold the boy while we flog him."

The merchant's eyes turned hard, his brow sweaty. To Ceres's surprise, he held his ground.

"No," he replied.

The second soldier took two threatening steps toward the merchant and his hand moved to the hilt of his sword.

"Do it, or you lose your head and we burn your shop down," the soldier said.

The merchant's round face went limp, and Ceres could tell he was defeated.

He slowly walked over to the boy and grabbed the boy's arms, kneeling in front of him.

"Please forgive me," he said, tears brimming in his eyes.

The boy whimpered and then started to scream as he tried to wring himself free from his grip.

Ceres could see the child was shaking. She wanted to keep moving toward the Stade, to avoid witnessing this, but instead, her feet stood frozen in the middle of the square, eyes glued to the brutality.

The first soldier tore the boy's tunic open while the second soldier whirled a flogger above his head. Most onlookers cheered the soldiers on, although a few murmured and walked away with heads hung low.

None defended the thief.

With a greedy, almost maddening expression, the soldier thrashed the whip against the boy's back, causing him to shriek in pain as they flogged him. Blood oozed out of the fresh lacerations. Again and again, the soldier flogged until the boy's head was sagging backward and he no longer screamed.

Ceres felt the strong urge to rush forward and save the boy. Yet to do so, she knew, would mean her death, and the death of all those she loved. She slumped her shoulders, feeling hopeless and defeated. Inwardly, she resolved to take revenge one day.

She yanked Sartes toward her and covered his eyes, desperately wanting to protect him, to give him a few more years of innocence, even though there was no innocence to be had in this land. She forced herself not to act on her impulse. As a man, he needed to see these instances of cruelty, not only to adapt, but also to one day be a strong contender in the rebellion.

The soldiers grabbed the boy out of the merchant's hands and then tossed his lifeless body into the back of a wooden cart. The merchant pressed his hands to his face and sobbed.

Within seconds, the cart was on its way, and the previously open space was again filled with people meandering about the square as if nothing had happened.

Ceres felt an overwhelming sense of nausea well up inside. It was unjust. In this moment, she could pick out a half a dozen pickpockets—men and women who had perfected their art so well that not even the Empire soldiers could catch them. This poor boy's life was now ruined because of his lack of skill. If caught, thieves, young or old, would lose their limbs or more, depending on how the judges felt that day. If he were lucky, his life would be spared and he would be sentenced to work in the gold mines for life. Ceres would rather die than have to endure being imprisoned like that.

They continued along the street, their mood ruined, shoulder to shoulder with the others as the heat grew almost unbearable.

A golden carriage pulled up next to them, forcing everyone out of the way, shoving people up to the houses on the sides. Jostled roughly, Ceres looked up to see three teenage girls in colorful silk dresses, pins of gold and precious jewels adorning their intricate up-dos. One of the

teenagers, laughing, tossed a coin out onto the street, and a handful of commoners stooped onto hands and knees, scrambling for a piece of metal that would feed a family for an entire month.

Ceres never stooped to pick up any handouts. She'd rather starve than take donations from the likes of those.

She watched a young man get hold of the coin and an older man drive him to the ground and clamp a stiff hand around his neck. With the other hand, the older man forced the coin out of the young man's hand.

The teenage girls laughed and pointed fingers before their carriage continued to weave through the masses.

Ceres's insides clenched with disgust.

"In the near future, inequality will vanish forever," Rexus said. "I will see to it."

Listening to him speak, Ceres's chest swelled. One day she would fight side by side with him and her brothers in the rebellion.

As they neared the Stade the streets widened, and Ceres felt like she could take a breath. The air buzzed. She felt she would rupture from excitement.

She walked through one of the dozens of arched entrances and looked up.

Thousands upon thousands of commoners teemed inside the magnificent Stade. The oval structure had collapsed on the top northern side, and the majority of the red awnings were torn and provided little protection from the sweltering sun. Wild beasts growled from behind iron gates and trap doors, and she could see the combatlords standing ready behind the gates.

Ceres gaped, taking it all in in wonder.

Before she knew it, Ceres looked up and realized she had fallen behind Rexus and her brothers. She rushed forward to catch up, yet as soon as she did, four burly men had surrounded her. She smelled alcohol, rotting fish, and body odor as they pressed in too close, turning and gaping at her with rotted teeth and ugly smiles.

"You're coming with us, pretty girl," one of them said as they all strategically moved in on her.

Ceres heart raced. She looked ahead for the others, but they were already lost in the thickening crowd.

She confronted the men, trying to put on her bravest face.

"Leave me be or I will..."

They burst into laughter.

"What?" one mocked. "A wee girl like you take us four?"

"We could carry you out of here kickin' and screamin' and not a soul would say nuttin'," another added.

And it was true. From the corner of her eye, Ceres watched people rush by, pretending not to notice how these men were threatening her.

Suddenly, the leader's face turned serious, and with one swift move, he grabbed her arms and pulled her close. She knew they could haul her away, never to be seen again, and that thought terrified her more than anything.

Trying to ignore her pounding heart, Ceres spun around, snatching her arm out of his stronghold. The other men hooted in amusement, but when she thrust the base of her palm into the leader's nose, snapping his head back, they went silent.

The leader placed filthy hands over his nose and grunted.

She didn't relent. Knowing she had one chance, she kicked him once in the stomach, remembering her days of sparring, and he keeled over as she connected.

Immediately, though, the other three were upon her, their strong hands grabbing her, yanking her away.

Suddenly, they relented. Ceres looked over with relief to see Rexus appear and punch one in the face, knocking him out.

Nesos then appeared and grabbed another and kneed him in the stomach before kicking him to the ground, leaving him in the red dirt.

The fourth man charged toward Ceres, but just as he was about to attack, she ducked, spun, and kicked him in the rear so he went flying into a pillar headfirst.

She stood there, breathing hard, taking it all in.

Rexus placed a hand on Ceres's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Ceres's heart was still running wild, but a feeling of pride slowly replaced her fear. She had done well.

She nodded and Rexus wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they continued on, his full lips gliding into a smile.

"What?" Ceres asked.

"When I saw what was happening, I wanted to run my sword through each and every one of them. But then I saw how you defended yourself." He shook his head and chuckled. "They didn't expect that."

She felt her cheeks flush. She wanted to say she had been fearless, but the truth was, she had not been.

"I was nervous," she admitted.

"Ciri, nervous? Never." He kissed Ceres on top of the head, and they continued into the Stade.

They found a few spots left at ground level and they took their seats, Ceres thrilled it was not too late as she put all the events of the day behind her and allowed herself to become caught up in the excitement of the cheering crowd.

"Do you see them?"

Ceres followed Rexus's finger and looked up to see a dozen or so teenagers sitting in a booth, sipping wine from silver goblets. She had never seen such fine clothing, so much food on one table, so much sparkling jewelry in her entire life. Not one of them had sunken cheeks or concave bellies.

"What are they doing?" she asked when she saw one of them collecting coins into a gold bowl.

"Each owns a combatlord," Rexus said, "and they place bets on who will win."

Ceres scoffed. This was just a game for them, she realized. Obviously, the spoiled teenagers didn't care about the warriors or about the art of combat. They just wanted to see if their combatlord would win. To Ceres, though, this event was about honor and courage and skill.

The royal banners were raised, trumpets blared, and as iron gates sprung open, one on each end of the Stade, combatlord after combatlord marched out of the black holes, their leather and iron armor catching the sunlight, emitting sparks of light.

The crowd roared as the brutes marched into the arena, and Ceres rose to her feet with them, applauding. The warriors ended in an outward-facing circle, their axes, swords, spears, shields, tridents, whips, and other weapons held to the sky.

"Hail, King Claudius," they yelled.

Trumpets blared again, and the golden chariot of King Claudius and Queen Athena whirled onto the arena from one of the entrances. Next, a chariot with Crown Prince Avilius, and Princess Floriana followed, and after them, an entire entourage of chariots carrying royals

flooded the arena. Each chariot was towed by two snow white horses adorned with precious jewels and gold.

When Ceres spotted Prince Thanos amongst them, she became appalled at the nineteen-year-old boy's scowl. From time to time when she delivered swords for her father, she had seen him speak with the combatlords at the palace, and he always carried that sour expression of superiority. His physique lacked nothing when it came to the likes of a warrior—he could almost be mistaken for one—his arms bulging with muscle, his waist tight and muscular, and his legs hard as tree trunks. However, it infuriated her how he appeared to hold no respect or passion for his position.

As the royals paraded up to their places at the podium, trumpets blared again, signaling the Killings were about to begin.

The crowd roared as all but two combatlords vanished back into the iron gates.

Ceres recognized one of them as Stefanus, but she couldn't make out the other brute wearing nothing but a visored helmet and a loincloth secured by a leather belt. Perhaps he had traveled from afar to contend. His well-oiled skin was the color of fertile soil, and his hair as black as the darkest night. Through the slits in the helmet, Ceres could see the look of resolve in his eyes, and she knew in an instant that Stefanus wouldn't live to see another hour.

"Don't worry," Ceres said, glancing over at Nesos. "I'll let you keep your sword."

"He's not defeated yet," Nesos replied with a smirk. "Stefanus would not be everyone's favorite if he weren't superior."

When Stefanus lifted his trident and shield, the crowd went silent.

"Stefanus!" one of the wealthy male youths from the booth shouted with a raised clenched fist. "Power and bravery!"

Stefanus nodded toward the youth as the audience roared with approval, and then he came at the foreigner with full force. The foreigner swerved out of the way in a flash, spun around, and slashed at Stefanus with his sword, missing by a mere inch.

Ceres cringed. With reflexes like that, Stefanus wouldn't last long.

Hacking away at Stefanus's shield again and again, the foreigner roared while Stefanus retreated. Stefanus, desperate, finally flung the edge of his shield into his opponent's face, sending a spray of blood across the air as his foe fell.

Ceres thought that was a rather nice move. Maybe Stefanus had improved in his technique since she saw him in training last.

"Stefanus! Stefanus!" the spectators chanted.

Stefanus stood at the feet of the injured warrior, but just as he was about to stab him with the trident, the foreigner lifted his legs and kicked Stefanus so he tumbled backwards, landing on his behind. Both hopped to their feet as quick as cats and faced each other again.

Their eyes locked and they began circling one another, the danger in the air palpable, Ceres thought.

The foreigner snarled and lifted his sword high into the air as he ran toward Stefanus. Stefanus quickly veered to the side and jabbed him in the thigh. In return, the foreigner swung his sword around and sliced Stefanus's arm.

Both warriors grunted in pain, but it was as if the wounds drove their fury instead of slowing them. The foreigner peeled off his helmet and flung it to the ground. His black bearded chin was bloodied, his right eye swollen, but his expression made Ceres think he was done playing games with Stefanus and was going in for the kill. How quickly would he be able to slay him?

Stefanus charged toward the foreigner, and Ceres gasped as Stefanus's trident collided with his opponent's sword. Eyeball to eyeball the warriors strained against each other, grunting, panting, shoving, the blood vessels in their foreheads protruding and the muscles bulging beneath their sweaty skin.

The foreigner ducked and wringed out of the deadlock, and unexpected to Ceres, he spun around like a tornado, sliced through the air with his sword, and decapitated Stefanus.

After a few breaths, the foreigner triumphantly lifted his arm into the air.

For a second, the crowd went completely silent. Even Ceres. She glanced up at the teenage boy who was Stefanus's owner. His mouth was wide open, his eyebrows knit together in fury.

The teenage boy hurled his silver goblet into the arena and stormed out of the booth. Death is the great equalizer, Ceres thought as she suppressed a smile.

"August!" a man in the crowd yelled. "August! August!"

One after another the spectators joined in, until the entire stadium chanted the victor's name. The foreigner bowed to King Claudius, and then three other warriors came running from the iron gates, replacing him.

One fight after another ensued as the day grew long, and Ceres watched with eyes peeled. She couldn't quite make up her mind whether she hated the Killings or loved it. On one hand, she enjoyed watching the strategy, the skill, and the bravery of the contenders; yet on the other, she despised how the warriors were nothing but pawns to the wealthy.

As the last fight of the first round arrived, Brennius and another warrior fought right next to where Ceres, Rexus, and her brothers were sitting. Closer and closer they came, their swords clanking, sparks flying. It was thrilling.

Ceres watched as Sartes leaned over the railing, his eyes glued to the combatants.

"Lean back!" she yelled at him.

But before he could respond, all of a sudden, an omnicat jumped out from a hatch in the ground on the other side of the stadium. The huge beast licked its fangs and its claws dug into the red dirt as it made its way toward the warriors. The combatlords hadn't yet seen the animal, and the stadium held its breath.

"Brennius is dead," Nesos mumbled.

"Sartes!" Ceres yelled again. "I said get back—"

She didn't have a chance to finish her words. Just then, the rock beneath Sartes's hands loosened, and before anyone could react, he tumbled down, over the rail, and fell all the way into the pit, landing with a thud.

"Sartes!" Ceres yelled in horror as she shot to her feet.

Ceres looked down to see Sartes, ten feet below, sit up and lean his back against the wall. His lower lip quivered, but there were no tears. No words. Holding his arm, he looked upward, his face twisted in agony.

Seeing him down there was more than Ceres could bear. Without thinking, she drew Nesos's sword and leapt over the rail, hopping into the pit, landing right in front of her younger brother.

"Ceres!" Rexus yelled.

She glanced back up and saw guards hauling Rexus and Nesos away before they could follow. Ceres stood in the pit, overcome with a surreal feeling to be down here with the fighters in the arena. She wanted to get Sartes out of there, but there was no time. So she stepped in front of him, determined to protect him as the omnicat roared at her. It hunched low, its wicked yellow eyes fixed on Ceres, and she could sense the danger.

She whipped Nesos's sword up with both hands and clenched it tight.

"Run, girl!" Brennius yelled.

But it was too late. Charging toward her, the omnicat was now only a few feet away. She stepped closer to Sartes and just before the animal attacked, Brennius came in from the side and sliced the beast's ear off.

The omnicat rose onto its hind legs and roared, clawing a chunk out of the wall behind Ceres as purple blood stained its fur.

The crowd roared.

The second combatlord approached, but before he could cause the beast any harm, the omnical lifted its paw and slit the man's throat with its claws. Clamping his hands around his neck, the warrior collapsed to the ground, blood seeping through his fingers.

Hungry for blood, the crowd cheered.

Snarling, the omnicat hit Ceres so hard she went flying into the air, crashing to the ground. On impact, the sword went tumbling from her hand and landed several feet away.

Ceres lay there, her lungs refusing to open up. Dying for air, her head spinning, she tried to crawl up onto hands and knees, but quickly tumbled back down.

Lying breathless with her face pressed against the coarse sand, she saw the omnicat heading toward Sartes. Seeing her brother in such a defenseless state, she felt her insides ignite with fire. She forced herself to take a breath and she discerned with complete clarity what she needed to do to save her brother.

Energy rushed through her like a flood, giving her instant power, and she rose to her feet, picked up the sword, and dashed toward the beast so fast she was convinced she was flying.

The beast was ten feet away from her now. Eight. Six. Four.

Ceres gritted her teeth and flung herself onto the beast's back, digging insistent fingers into its bristly fur, desperate to distract it from her brother.

The omnicat stood up on hind legs and shook its upper body, jostling Ceres back and forth. But her iron grip and her resolve were stronger than the animal's attempts to throw her off.

As the creature lowered back onto all fours again, Ceres seized the opportunity. She raised her sword high into the air and stabbed the beast in the neck.

The animal screeched and rose onto hind legs, as the crowd roared.

Reaching a paw around to Ceres, the creature pierced her back with its claws, and Ceres screamed from the pain, the claws feeling like daggers through her flesh. The omnicat grabbed her and hurled her into the wall, and she landed several feet away from Sartes.

"Ceres!" Sartes yelled.

Ears ringing, Ceres struggled to sit up, the back of her head throbbing, warm liquid running down her neck. There was no time to assess how serious the wound was. The omnicat was charging her again.

As the beast bore down, Ceres was out of options. Not even thinking, she instinctively raised a palm and held it out before her. It was the last thing she thought she'd ever see.

Just as the omnicat pounced, Ceres felt as if a ball of fire ignited in her chest, and suddenly she felt a ball of energy shoot out of her hand.

Mid-air, the beast suddenly went limp.

It crashed to the ground, skidding to a halt on top of her legs. Half-expecting the animal to come to life again and finish her off, Ceres held her breath as she watched it lie there.

But the creature didn't move.

Baffled, Ceres glanced at her palm. Not having seen what transpired, the crowd probably thought the beast died because she had stabbed him with her sword earlier. But she knew better.

Some mysterious force had left her hand and had killed the beast in an instant. What force was it? Never had anything like this occurred before, and she didn't quite know what to make of it.

Who was she to have this power?

Afraid, she let her hand fall to the earth.

She lifted hesitant eyes, and saw the stadium had gone silent.

And she could not help but wonder. Had they seen it, too?

## **CHAPTER TWO**

For a second that seemed to stretch on and on, Ceres felt every eye upon her as she sat there, numb with pain and disbelief. More so than the repercussions to come, she feared the supernatural power that lurked within her, that had killed the omnicat. More than all the people surrounding her, she feared to face herself—a self she no longer knew.

Suddenly, the crowd, stunned into silence, roared. It took her a moment to realize that they were cheering for her.

A voice cut through the roars.

"Ceres!" Sartes yelled, beside her. "Are you hurt?"

She turned toward her brother, still lying there on the Stade floor, too, and opened her mouth. But not a single word came out. Her breath was spent and she felt dazed. Had he seen what had really happened? She didn't know about the others, but at this distance, it would be a near miracle if he hadn't.

Ceres heard footsteps, and suddenly two strong hands pulled her to a standing position.

"Get out now!" Brennius growled, shoving her toward the open gate to her left.

The puncture wounds in her back ached, but she forced herself back to reality and grabbed Sartes and pulled him to a standing position. Together, they darted toward the exit, trying to escape the cheers of the crowd.

They soon arrived in the dark, stuffy, tunnel, and as they did, Ceres saw dozens of combatlords inside, awaiting their turn for a few moments of glory in the arena. Some sat on benches in deep meditation, others were tensing their muscles, pumping their arms as they paced back and forth, and yet others were preparing their weapons for the imminent bloodbath. All of them, having just witnessed the fight, looked up and stared at her, curiosity in their eyes.

Ceres hurried down underground corridors lined with torches giving the gray bricks a warm glow, passing all manner of weapons leaning against the walls. She tried to ignore the pain in her back, but it was difficult to do so when with every step, the rough material in her dress chafed against the open wounds. The omnicat's claws had felt like daggers going in, but it almost seemed worse now as each gash throbbed.

"Your back is bleeding," Sartes said, a tremor in his voice.

"I'll be fine. We need to find Nesos and Rexus. How is your arm?"

"It hurts."

When they reached the exit, the door swung open, and two Empire soldiers stood there.

"Sartes!"

Before she could react a soldier seized her brother, and another grabbed her. It was no use resisting. The other soldier swung her over his shoulder as if she were a sack of grain, and carried her away. Fearing she had been arrested, she beat him on the back, to no avail.

Once they were just outside the Stade, he threw her onto the ground, and Sartes landed beside her. A few onlookers formed a half-circle around her, gawking, as if hungry for her blood to be spilt.

"Enter the Stade again," the soldier snarled, "and you will be hanged."

The soldiers, to her surprise, turned without another word and vanished back into the crowd.

"Ceres!" a deep voice yelled over the hum of the crowd.

Ceres looked up with relief to see Nesos and Rexus heading toward them. When Rexus threw his arms around her, she gasped. He pulled back, his eyes filled with concern.

"I'll be okay," she said.

As the throngs poured out of the Stade, Ceres and the others blended in and hurried off back into the streets, not wanting any more encounters. Walking toward Fountain Square, Ceres replayed in her mind all that had happened, still reeling. She noticed her brothers' sideways glances, and wondered what they were thinking. Had they witnessed her powers? Likely not. The omnicat had been too close. Yet at the same time they glanced at her with a new sense of respect. She wanted more than anything to tell them what had happened. Yet she knew she could not. She was not even sure herself.

There was so much unsaid between them, yet now, amidst this thick crowd, was not the time to say it. They needed to get home, and safe, first.

The streets became far less crowded the further away they traveled from the Stade. Walking next to her, Rexus took one of her hands and interlaced fingers with her.

"I'm proud of you," he said. "You saved your brother's life. I'm not sure how many sisters would do that."

He smiled, his eyes filled with compassion.

"Those wounds look deep," he remarked, glancing at her back.

"I'll be fine," she muttered.

It was a lie. She wasn't at all certain she would be fine, or that she could even make it back home. She felt quite dizzy from the blood loss, and it didn't help that her stomach rumbled, or that the sun was harassing her back, causing her to sweat bullets.

Finally, they reached Fountain Square. As soon as they walked by the booths, a merchant trailed after them, offering a large basket of food for half price.

Sartes grinned from ear to ear—which she thought was rather strange—and then he held up a copper coin with his healthy arm.

"I think I owe you some food," he said.

Ceres gasped in shock. "Where did you get that?"

"That rich girl in the golden carriage tossed out two coins, not one, but everyone was so focused on the fight between the men that they didn't even notice," Sartes replied, his smile still very much intact.

Ceres grew angry and prepared to confiscate the coin from Sartes and throw it. That was blood money, after all. They didn't need anything from rich people.

As she reached to grab it, suddenly, an old woman appeared and blocked her path.

"You!" she said, pointing at Ceres, her voice so loud Ceres felt as if it vibrated straight through her.

The woman's complexion was smooth, yet seemingly transparent, and her perfectly arched lips were tinted green. Acorns and mosses adorned her long, thick, black hair, and her brown eyes matched her long brown dress. She was beautiful to behold, Ceres thought, so much so that she became mesmerized for a moment.

Ceres blinked back, stunned, certain she had never met this woman before.

"How do you know my name?"

Her eyes locked with the woman's as she took a few steps toward her, and Ceres noticed the woman smelled heavily of myrrh.

"Vein of the stars," she said, her voice eerie.

When the woman lifted her arm in a graceful gesture, Ceres saw that a triquetra was branded on the inside of her wrist. A witch. Based on the scent of the gods, perhaps a fortune-telling one.

The woman took Ceres's rose gold hair in her hand and smelled it.

"You are no stranger to the sword," she said. "You are no stranger to the throne. Your destiny is very great, indeed. Mighty will the change be."

The woman suddenly turned and hurried away, disappearing behind her booth, and Ceres stood there, numb. She felt the woman's words penetrate her very soul. She felt that they had been more than an observation; they were a prophecy. *Mighty. Change. Throne. Destiny.* These were words she had never associated with herself before.

Could they be true? Or were they just the words of a madwoman?

Ceres looked over and saw Sartes holding a basket of food, his mouth already stuffed with more than enough bread. He held it out for her. She saw the baked good, fruits, and vegetables, and it was almost enough to break her resolve. Normally, she would have devoured it.

Yet now, for some reason, she had lost her appetite.

There was a future before her.

A destiny.

\*

The walk home had taken almost an hour longer than usual, and they had all remained silent the entire way, each lost in their own thoughts. Ceres could only wonder what the people she loved most in the world thought of her. She hardly knew what to think of herself.

She looked up and saw her humble home, and she was surprised she had made it all the way, given how her head and back ached.

The others had parted with her some time ago, to run an errand for her father, and Ceres stepped alone across the creaky threshold, bracing herself, hoping she did not run into her mother.

She entered a bath of heat. She made her way over to the small vial of cleaning alcohol her mother had stored under her bed and uncorked it, careful not to use so much that it went noticed. Bracing herself for the sting, she pried her shirt and poured it down her back.

Ceres cried out from the pain, clenching her fist and leaning her head against the wall, feeling a thousand stings from the omnicat's claws. It felt as if this wound would never heal.

The door slammed open and Ceres flinched. She was relieved to see it was only Sartes.

"Father needs to see you, Ceres," he said.

Ceres noticed his eyes were slightly red.

"How's your arm?" she asked, assuming he was crying from the pain of his injured arm.

"It's not broken. Just sprained." He stepped closer and his face turned serious. "Thank you for saving me today."

She offered him a smile. "How could I be anywhere else?" she said.

He smiled.

"Go see Father now," he said. "I'll burn your dress and the cloth."

She didn't know how she'd be able to explain to her mother how her dress had suddenly vanished, but the hand-me-down definitely needed to be burned. If her mother found it in its current condition—bloodied and riddled with holes—there'd be no saying how severe her punishment would be.

Ceres left and walked down the downtrodden grass path toward the shed behind the house. There was one tree left on their humble lot—the others had been chopped into firewood and burned in the hearth to heat the house during cold winter nights—and its branches hovered over the house like a protecting energy. Every time Ceres saw it, it reminded her of her grandmother, who passed away the year before last. Her grandmother had been the one who had planted the tree when she was a child. It was her temple, in a way. And her father's too. When life was too much to handle, they would lie underneath the stars and open their hearts to Nana as if she were still alive.

Ceres entered the shed and greeted her father with a smile. To her surprise, she noticed that most of his tools had been cleared from the worktable, and that no swords waited by the hearth to be forged. She couldn't ever remember seeing the floor swept this clean, or the walls and ceiling so lacking in tools.

Her father's blue eyes lit up, the way they always did when he saw her.

"Ceres," he said, rising.

This past year, his dark hair had turned much grayer, his short beard, too, and the bags under his loving eyes had doubled in size. In the past, he had been large in stature and almost as muscular as Nesos; yet recently, Ceres noticed, he had lost weight and his formerly perfect posture was sagging.

He joined her at the door and placed a calloused hand to the small of her back.

"Walk with me."

Her chest tightened a little. When he wanted to talk *and* walk, that meant he was about to share something significant.

Side by side, they meandered to the back of the shed and into the small field. Dark clouds loomed in the near distance, sending in gusts of warm, temperamental wind. She hoped they would produce the rain needed to recover from this seemingly never-ending drought, yet as before, they probably held just empty promises of showers.

The earth crunched beneath her feet as she walked, the soil dry, the plants yellow, brown, and dead. This patch of land behind their subdivision was King Claudius's, yet it hadn't been sowed for years.

They crested a hill and stopped, looking across the field. Her father remained silent, his hands clasped behind his back as he looked up into the sky. It was unlike him, and her dread deepened.

Then he spoke, seeming to select his words with care.

"Sometimes we don't have the luxury of choosing our paths," he said. "We must sacrifice all that we want for our loved ones. Even ourselves, if needed."

He sighed, and in the long silence, interrupted only by the wind, Ceres's heart pounded, wondering where he was going with this.

"What I wouldn't give to hold onto your childhood forever," he added, peering into the heavens, his face twisted in pain before it relaxed again.

"What's wrong?" Ceres asked, placing a hand on his arm.

"I must leave for a while," he said.

She felt as if she couldn't take a breath.

"Leave?"

He turned and looked her in the eyes.

"As you know, the winter and spring were particularly hard this year. The past few years of drought have been difficult. We haven't made enough money to get through the next winter, and

if I don't go, our family will starve to death. I have been commissioned by another king to be his head bladesmith. It will be good money."

"You will take me with you, right?" Ceres said, a frantic tone in her voice.

He shook his head grimly.

"You must stay here and help your mother and brothers."

The thought sent a wave of horror through her.

"You can't leave me here with Mother," she said. "You wouldn't."

"I have spoken to her, and she will take care of you. She will be kind."

Ceres stomped her foot in the earth, the dust rising.

"No!"

Tears burst from her eyes and tumbled down her cheeks.

He took a small step toward her.

"Listen to me very carefully, Ceres. The palace still needs swords delivered from time to time. I have put in a good word for you, and if you make swords the way I have taught you, you could make a little money of your own."

Making her own money might possibly allow her more freedom. She had found her small, dainty hands had come in handy when carving intricate designs and inscriptions on the blades and hilts. Her father's hands were broad, his fingers thick and stubby, and few others had the skill she had.

Even so, she shook her head.

"I don't want to be a smith," she said.

"It runs in your blood, Ceres. And you have a gift for it."

She shook her head, adamant.

"I want to wield weapons," she said, "not make them."

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she regretted speaking them.

Her father furrowed his brow.

"You wish to be a warrior? A combatlord?"

He shook his head.

"One day it may be allowed for women to fight," she said. "You know I have practiced." His eyebrows crinkled in worry.

"No," he commanded, firmly. "That is not your path."

Her heart sank. She felt as if her hopes and dreams of becoming a warrior were dissipating with his words. She knew he wasn't trying to be cruel—he was never cruel. It was just reality. And for them to stay alive, she would have to sacrifice her part, too.

She looked into the distance as the sky lit with a jolt of lightning. Three seconds later, thunder rumbled through the heavens.

Had she not realized how dire their circumstances were? She always assumed they would pull through together as a family, but this changed everything. Now she wouldn't have Father to hold onto, and there would be no person to stand as a shield between her and Mother.

One tear after another dropped onto the desolate earth as she remained immovable where she stood. Should she give up her dreams and follow her father's advice?

He pulled something out from behind his back, and her eyes widened to see a sword in his hand. He stepped closer, and she could see the details of the weapon.

It was awe-inspiring. The hilt was of pure gold, engraved with a serpent. The blade was two-edged and looked to be of the finest steel. Though the workmanship was foreign to Ceres, she could immediately tell it was of the finest quality. On the blade itself there was an inscription.

## When heart and sword meet, there shall be the victory.

She gasped, staring at it in awe.

"Did you forge that?" she asked, her eyes glued to the sword.

He nodded.

"After the manner of the northerners," he replied. "I have labored on it for three years. Indeed, this blade alone could feed our family for an entire year."

She looked at him.

"Then why not sell it?"

He shook his head firmly.

"It wasn't made for that purpose."

He stepped closer, and to her surprise, he held it out before him.

"It was made for you."

Ceres raised a hand to her mouth and let out a moan.

"Me?" she asked, stunned.

He smiled wide.

"Did you really think I forgot your eighteenth birthday?" he replied.

She felt tears flood her eyes. She had never been more touched.

But then she thought about what he had said earlier, about not wanting her to fight, and she felt confused.

"And yet," she replied, "you said I must not train."

"I don't want you to die," he explained. "But I see where your heart is. And that, I cannot control."

He reached a hand underneath her chin and lifted her head until their eyes met.

"I am proud of you for it."

He handed her the sword, and when she felt the cool metal against her palm, she became one with it. The weight was perfect for her, and the hilt felt like it had been molded to her hand.

All the hope that had died earlier now reawakened in her chest.

"Don't tell your mother," he warned. "Hide it where she cannot find it, or she will sell it." Ceres nodded.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I will try to be back for a visit before the first snowfall."

"That's months away!" she said, taking a step back.

"It is what I must do to—"

"No. Sell the sword. Stay!"

He placed a hand on her cheek.

"Selling this sword might help us for this season. And perhaps next. But then what?" He shook his head. "No. We need a long-term solution."

Long term? Suddenly, she realized his new job wasn't just going to be for a few months. It might be years.

Her despondency deepened.

He stepped forward, as if sensing it, and hugged her.

She felt herself begin to cry in his arms.

"I will miss you, Ceres," he said, over her shoulder. "You are different than all the others. Every day I will look up into the heavens and know you are beneath the same stars. Will you do the same?"

At first she wanted to yell at him, to say: how dare you leave me here alone.

But she felt it in her heart that he couldn't stay, and she didn't want to make it harder on him than it already was.

A tear rolled down her face. She sniffled and nodded her head.

"I will stand beneath our tree every night," she said.

He kissed her on the forehead and wrapped tender arms around her. The wounds on her back felt like knives, but she gritted her teeth and remained silent.

"I love you, Ceres."

She wanted to respond, and yet she couldn't get herself to say anything—her words were stuck in her throat.

He fetched his horse from the stable, and Ceres helped him load it with food, tools, and supplies. He embraced her one last time, and she thought her chest might burst from sadness. Yet still, she couldn't utter a single word.

He mounted the horse, and nodded before signaling to the animal to move.

Ceres waved as he rode away, and she watched with unwavering attention until he vanished behind the distant hill. The only true love she had ever known came from that man. And now he was gone.

Rain started to descend from the heavens, and it prickled against her face.

"Father!" she screamed as loudly as she could. "Father, I love you!"

She fell to her knees and buried her hands in her face, sobbing.

Life, she knew, would never be the same again.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

With aching feet and burning lungs, Ceres climbed the steep hill as swiftly as she could without spilling a drop of water from either bucket by her sides. Normally she would pause for a break, but her mother had threatened no breakfast unless she was back by sunrise—and no breakfast meant she wouldn't eat until dinner. She didn't mind the pain, anyway—it, at least, allowed her to take her mind off her father, and the miserable new state of things since he had left.

The sun was just now cresting the Alva Mountains in the distance, painting the scattered clouds above golden-pink, and soft wind sighed through the tall, yellow grass on either side of the road. Ceres drew the fresh morning air in through her nose and willed herself faster. Her mother wouldn't find it an acceptable excuse that their regular well had dried up, or that there was a long line at the other one a half a mile away. Indeed, she did not stop until she reached the top of the hill—and once she did, she stopped in her tracks, stunned at the sight before her.

There, in the distance, was her house—and before it sat a bronze wagon. Her mother stood before it, conversing with a man who was so overweight, Ceres thought she had never seen anyone even half his size. He wore a burgundy linen tunic and a red silk hat, and his long beard was bushy and gray. She squinted, trying to understand. Was he a merchant?

Her mother was wearing her best dress, a green linen floor-length gown she had purchased years ago with money that was supposed to be used to buy Ceres new shoes. None of this made any sense.

Hesitantly, Ceres started down the hill. She kept her eyes trained on them, and when she saw the old man hand her mother a heavy leather pouch, saw her mother's emaciated face light up, she grew even more curious. Had their misfortune turned? Would Father be able to return home? The thoughts made her chest lighten a little, although she wouldn't allow herself to feel any excitement until she learned the details.

When Ceres neared their house, her mother turned and smiled at her warmly—and immediately Ceres felt a knot of worry in her stomach. The last time her mother had smiled at her like that—teeth gleaming, eyes bright—Ceres had received a flogging.

"Darling daughter," her mother said in an overly sweet tone, opening her arms toward her with a grin that made Ceres's blood curdle.

"This is the girl?" the old man said with an eager smile, his dark, beady eyes widening when he looked at Ceres.

Now up close, Ceres could see every wrinkle on the obese man's skin. His broad flat nose seemed to overtake his entire face, and when he took off his hat, his sweaty bald head glowed in the sunlight.

Her mother waltzed over to Ceres, took the buckets from her, and set them on the singed grass. That gesture alone confirmed to Ceres that something was severely wrong. She began to feel a panicky sensation rise in her chest.

"Meet my pride and joy, my only daughter, Ceres," her mother said, pretending to wipe a tear away from her eye when there was none. "Ceres, this is Lord Blaku. Please show your respects to your new master."

A jolt of fear stabbed Ceres through the chest. She sucked in a sudden breath. Ceres looked at her mother, and with her back to Lord Blaku, her mother gave her a smile that was as evil as she had ever seen.

"Master?" Ceres asked.

"To save our family from financial ruin and public embarrassment, the benevolent Lord Blaku offered your father and me a generous deal: a sack of gold in exchange for you."

"What?" Ceres gasped, feeling herself sinking into the earth.

"Now, be the good girl I know you are and show your respects," her mother said, shooting Ceres a warning glance.

"I will not," Ceres said, taking a step back as she puffed her chest up, feeling silly for not having immediately realized the man was a slaver, and that the transaction was for her life.

"Father would never sell me," she added through clenched teeth, her horror and indignation rising.

Her mother scowled and grabbed her by the arm, her fingernails digging into Ceres's skin.

"If you behave, this man might take you as his wife, and for you, that is a very lucky thing," she muttered.

Lord Blaku licked his thin crusty lips as his puffy eyes greedily wandered up and down Ceres's body. How could her mother do this to her? She knew her mother didn't love her as much as her brothers—but this?

"Marita," he said in a nasally voice. "You told me your daughter was fair, but you neglected to tell me what an utterly magnificent creature she is. Dare I say, I have yet to see a woman with lips as succulent as hers, and with eyes as passionate, and with a body as firm and exquisite."

Ceres's mother placed a hand over her heart with a sigh, and Ceres felt like she might just vomit right here. She clenched her hands into fists as she snapped her arm away from her mother's grasp.

"Perhaps I should have asked for more, if she pleases you so much," Ceres's mother said, her eyes lowering in despondency. "She is, after all, our only beloved girl."

"I am willing to pay good money for such a beauty. Will another five gold pieces suffice?" he asked.

"How generous of you," her mother replied.

Lord Blaku ambled over to his wagon to fetch more gold.

"Father will never agree to this," Ceres sneered.

Ceres's mother took a threatening step toward her.

"Oh, but it was your father's idea," her mother snapped, with her eyebrows raised halfway up her forehead. Ceres knew she was lying now—whenever she did that, she was lying.

"Do you actually think your father loves you more than he loves me?" her mother asked.

Ceres blinked, wondering what that would have to do with anything.

"I could never love someone who thinks she is better than me," she added.

"You never loved me?" Ceres asked, her anger morphing into hopelessness.

With the gold in hand, Lord Blaku waddled over to Ceres's mother and handed it to her.

"Your daughter is worth every piece," he said. "She will be a good wife and bear me many sons."

Ceres bit the inside of her lips and shook her head over and over again.

"Lord Blaku will come for you in the morning, so go inside and pack your belongings," Ceres's mother said.

"I won't!" Ceres screamed.

"That was always your problem, girl. You only ever think of yourself. This gold," her mother said, jingling the purse in front of Ceres's face, "will keep your brothers alive. It will keep our family intact, allowing us to remain in our home and make repairs. Did you fail to think about that?"

For a split second, Ceres thought maybe she was being selfish, but then she realized her mother was playing mind games again, using Ceres's love for her brothers against her.

"Do not worry," Ceres's mother said, turning toward Lord Blaku. "Ceres will comply. All you need to do is be firm with her, and she becomes as meek as a lamb."

Never. Never would she be that man's wife or anyone's property. And never would she let her mother or anyone exchange her life for fifty-five pieces of gold.

"I will never go with this slaver," Ceres snapped, shooting him a look of disgust.

"Ungrateful child!" Ceres's mother yelled. "If you do not do as I say, I will beat you so severely you will never walk again. Now get inside!"

The thought of being beaten by her mother brought back awful, visceral memories; she was taken back to that dreadful moment at five years old when her mother had beaten her until everything had gone black. The wounds from that beating and many others healed—yet the wounds in Ceres's heart had never stopped bleeding. And now that she knew for sure that her mother didn't love her, and never had, her heart split wide open for good.

Before she could respond, Ceres's mother stepped forward and slapped her across the face so hard her ear began ringing.

At first, Ceres was stunned by the sudden assault, and she almost backed down. But then something snapped inside her. She would not allow herself to cower as she always did.

Ceres smacked her mother back, across the cheek, so hard that she tumbled to the ground, gasping in horror.

Red-faced, her mother climbed to her feet, grabbed Ceres by the shoulder and hair, and kneed Ceres in the stomach. When Ceres stooped forward in agony, her mother jabbed her knee into Ceres's face, causing her to fall to the ground.

The slaver stood and watched, his eyes wide, chuckling, clearly taking delight in the fight. Still coughing and gasping for air from the assault, Ceres staggered to her feet. Screaming, she flung herself toward her mother, driving her to the ground.

This ends today, was all Ceres could think. All the years of never being loved, of being treated with disdain, fueled her rage. Ceres smashed closed fists into her mother's face again and again as tears of fury rolled down her cheeks, sobs uncontrollably spilling out of her lips.

Finally, her mother went limp.

Ceres's shoulders shook with each cry, her insides wrung inside out. Blurred by tears, she looked up at the slaver with an even more intense hatred.

"You will make a good one," Lord Blaku said with a guileful grin, as he picked up the bag of gold from the ground and attached it to his leather belt.

Before she could react, suddenly his hands were upon her. He grabbed Ceres and climbed into the carriage, tossing her into the back in one quick motion, as if she were a bag of potatoes. His massive bulk and strength was too much for her to resist. Holding her wrist with one arm and taking hold of a chain with the other, he said, "I'm not stupid enough to think you would still be here in morning."

She glanced at the house that had been her home for eighteen years, and her eyes filled with tears as she thought of her brothers and her father. But she had to make a choice if she was to save herself, before the chain was around her ankle.

So in one quick motion, she mustered all of her strength and snatched her arm out of the slaver's grip, lifted her leg, and kicked him in the face as hard as she could. He fell backwards, out of the carriage, and tumbled onto the ground.

She jumped from the wagon and ran as fast as she could down the dirt road, away from the woman she vowed to never call mother again, away from everything she had ever known and loved.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Surrounded by the royal family, Thanos tried hard to keep a pleasant expression on his face as he gripped the gold wine goblet—yet he could not. He hated being here. He hated these people, his family. And he hated attending royal gatherings—especially the ones following the Killings. He knew how the people lived, how poor they were, and he felt how senseless and unjust all this pomp and haughtiness really was. He would give anything to be far away from here.

Standing with his cousins Lucious, Aria, and Varius, Thanos didn't make the least bit of effort to engage in their petty conversation. Instead, he watched the imperial guests meander about in the palace gardens, wearing their togas and stolas, presenting fake grins and spewing false niceties. A few of his cousins were throwing food at each other as they ran across the manicured lawn and between tables stocked with food and wine. Others were reenacting their favorite scenes from the Killings, laughing at and mocking those who had lost their lives today.

Hundreds of people, Thanos thought, and not one was honorable.

"Next month, I will purchase three combatlords," Lucious, the eldest, said in a boisterous tone as he patted drops of sweat from his brow with a silk handkerchief. "Stefanus wasn't worth half of what I paid for him, and if he weren't dead already, I would have run a sword through him myself for having fought like a girl in the first round."

Aria and Varius laughed, but Thanos didn't find his comment amusing. Whether they considered the Killings a game or not, they should respect the brave and the dead.

"Well, did you see Brennius?" Aria asked, her large blue eyes widening. "I actually considered buying him, but he gave me this conceited look when I watched him rehearse. Can you believe it?" she added, as she rolled her eyes and huffed.

"And he stinks like a skunk," Lucious added.

Everyone except for Thanos laughed again.

"None of us would have picked him," Varius said. "Though he lasted longer than expected, his form was horrible."

Thanos couldn't keep quiet another second.

"Brennius had the best form in the entire arena," he interjected. "Don't talk about the art of combat as if you know anything about it."

The cousins grew quiet, and Aria's eyes became large as saucers as she looked toward the ground. Varius puffed out his chest and crossed his arms, scowling. He stepped closer to Thanos as if to challenge him, and the air thickened with tension.

"Well, never mind those self-important combatlords," Aria said, stepping between them, defusing the situation. She waved for the boys to gather around closer, and then she whispered, "I have heard an outlandish rumor. A little bee told me the king wants to have someone of royal birth compete in the Killings."

They all exchanged an uncomfortable look as they fell silent.

"Perhaps," Lucious said. "It won't be me, though. I'm not willing to risk my life for a stupid game."

Thanos knew he could beat out most combatlords, but killing another human wasn't something he wanted to do.

"You're just scared of dying," Aria said.

"I am not," Lucious retorted. "You take that back!"

Thanos's patience was spent. He walked away.

Thanos watched his distant cousin Stephania wander about as if she were looking for someone—probably him. A few weeks back, the Queen had said he was fated to be with Stephania, but Thanos felt otherwise. Stephania was as spoiled as the rest of the cousins and he'd rather give up his name, his inheritance, and even his sword to not have to marry her. She was beautiful to behold, true—her hair golden, her skin milky white, her lips blood-red—but if he had to listen to her talk about how life was so unfair one more time, he thought he might cut his ears off.

He scurried to the outskirts of the garden toward the rose bushes, avoiding eye contact with any of the attendees. But just as he rounded the corner, Stephania stepped in front of him, her brown eyes lighting up.

"Good evening, Thanos," she said with a scintillating smile that would have most of the boys here drooling after her. Everyone but Thanos.

"Good evening to you, too," Thanos said and skirted around her, continuing to walk.

She lifted up her stola and trailed after him like a pesky mosquito.

"Don't you find it so unfair how—" she began.

"I'm busy," Thanos snapped in a tone harsher than he intended, causing her to gasp. He then turned toward her. "I'm sorry...I'm just tired of all these parties."

"Perhaps you would like to stroll the gardens with me?" Stephania said, her right eyebrow peaking as she stepped closer.

That was the absolute last thing he wanted.

"Listen," he said, "I know the queen and your mother have it in their minds that we somehow belong together, but—"

"Thanos!" he heard behind him.

Thanos turned to see the king's messenger.

"The king would like you to join him in the gazebo straightaway," he said. "And you too, my lady."

"Might I inquire why?" Thanos asked.

"There is much to discuss," the messenger said.

Not having had regular conversations with the king in the past, Thanos wondered what that might entail.

"Of course," Thanos said.

To his great dismay, a beaming Stephania hooked her arm around his, and together they followed the messenger over to the gazebo.

When Thanos noticed several of the king's advisors and even the crown prince already sitting on benches and chairs, he found it odd that he had been invited, too. He would hardly have anything of value to offer in their conversation, as his opinions about how the Empire was ruled differed greatly from those of everyone here. The best thing he could do, he thought to himself, was to keep his mouth shut.

"What a lovely couple you make," the queen said with a warm smile as they entered.

Thanos pinched his lips shut and offered Stephania to sit down next to him.

Once everyone had settled, the king rose to his feet and the gathering quieted down. His uncle wore a knee-length toga, but where the others were white, red, and blue, his was purple, a color reserved only for the king. Around his balding temple was a golden wreath, and his cheeks and eyes still drooped even though he was smiling.

"The masses grow unruly," he said, his voice grave, slow. He slowly scanned all the faces with the authority of a king. "The time is past due to remind them who is king and enact harsher rules. From this day forward, I shall double tithes on all property and food."

There came a surprised murmur, followed by nods of approval.

"An excellent choice, your grace," said one of his advisors.

Thanos couldn't believe his ears. Double the people's taxes? Having mingled with commoners, he knew that the taxes required were already beyond what most commoners could afford. He had seen mothers mourn the loss of their children who died of starvation. As recently as yesterday, he had offered food to a homeless four-year-old girl whose every bone was visible beneath her skin.

Thanos had to look away or he would surely have to speak up against this insanity.

"And finally," the king said, "from now on, to counterbalance the underground revolution that is fomenting, the firstborn son in every family will become a servant in the king's army."

One after another, the small crowd commended the king for his wise decision.

Finally, though, Thanos felt the king turn to him.

"Thanos," the king finally said. "You have remained silent. Speak!"

Silence fell on the gazebo, as all eyes were on Thanos. He stood. He knew he had to speak up, for the emaciated girl, for the grieving mothers, for the voiceless whose lives seemed not to matter. He needed to represent them, because if he did not, no one would.

"Harsher rules will not crush the rebellion," he said, his heart thumping in his chest. "It will only embolden it. Instilling fear into the citizens and denying them freedom will do nothing but compel them to rise against us and join the revolution."

A few people laughed, while others talked amongst themselves. Stephania took his hand and tried to hush him, but he snatched it away.

"A great king uses love, as well as fear, to rule his subordinates," Thanos said.

The king gave the queen an uneasy glance. He stood up, and then walked over to Thanos.

"Thanos, you are a brave young man for speaking up," he said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "However, was your younger brother not murdered in cold blood by these same people, those who governed themselves, as you say?"

Thanos saw red. How dare his uncle bring up his brother's death so flippantly? For years, Thanos had fallen asleep to his grief as he mourned the loss of his brother.

"Those who murdered my brother didn't have enough food for themselves," Thanos said. "A desperate man will seek desperate measures."

"Do you question the king's wisdom?" the queen asked.

Thanos couldn't believe no one else was speaking up against this. Did they see not see how unjust it was? Did they not realize these new laws would breathe fire into the rebellion?

"Not for a moment will you be able to fool the people into believing you want anything other than their suffering and your profiting for yourselves," Thanos said.

There came a gasp of disapproval amidst the group.

"You speak harsh words, nephew," the king said, looking him in the eyes. "I would almost believe you mean to join the rebellion."

"Or perhaps he is already a part of it?" the queen said, her eyebrows rising.

"I am not," Thanos barked.

The air in the gazebo grew hotter, and Thanos realized if he wasn't careful, he might be accused of treason—a crime punishable by death without trial.

Stephania stood up and took Thanos's hand in hers—yet, agitated by her timing, he snapped his hand away.

Stephania's expression fell, and she looked down.

"Perhaps in time you will see the weaknesses of your beliefs," the king said to Thanos. "For now, our ruling will stand and shall be implemented immediately."

"Good," the queen said with a sudden smile. "Now, let us move onto the second item on our agenda. Thanos, as a young man of nineteen, we, your imperial sovereigns, have chosen a wife for you. We have decided you and Stephania are to be wed."

Thanos glanced over at Stephania, whose eyes were glazed with tears, an expression of worry painting her face. He felt aghast. How could they demand this of him?

"I cannot marry her," Thanos whispered, a knot forming in his belly.

Murmurs went through the crowd, and the queen shot to her feet so quickly that her chair fell backward with a crack.

"Thanos!" she yelled, hands clenched by her sides. "How dare you defy the king? You will marry Stephania whether or not you want to."

Thanos looked at Stephania with saddened eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Do you imagine you are too good for me?" she asked, her bottom lip trembling.

He took a step toward Stephania to comfort her what little he could, but before he reached her, she ran out of the gazebo, hands covering her face as she cried.

The king stood, clearly angered.

"Deny her, son", he said, his voice suddenly cold and hard, thundering through the gazebo, "and it will be the dungeon for you."

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Ceres sprinted, weaving through city streets, until she felt her legs would no longer hold her, until her lungs burned so much they might burst, and until she knew with absolute certainty the slaver would never find her.

Finally, she collapsed on the ground in a back alley amongst garbage and rats, arms wrapped around her legs, tears streaming down her hot cheeks. With her father away and her mother wanting to sell her, she had no one. If she remained on the streets and slept in the alleys, she would eventually die of starvation or freeze to death when winter came. Perhaps that would be best.

For hours she sat and cried, her eyes puffy, her mind muddled with despair. Where would she go now? How would she make money to survive?

The day had grown long when finally, she resolved to return home, sneak into the shed, take the few swords that were left, and sell them to the palace. They were expecting her today anyway. That way, she would have money for a few days at least until she could come up with a better plan.

She would also pick up the sword her father had given her and that she had hidden beneath the floorboards in the shed. But she wouldn't sell that, no. Not until she was staring death in the face would she give up her father's gift.

She jogged home, carefully watching for any familiar faces or for the slaver's wagon as she went. When she reached the last hill, she slunk behind the row of houses and into the field, tiptoeing across the parched earth, her eyes scanning for her mother.

A pang of guilt arose when she remembered how she had beaten her mother. She never wanted to hurt her, not even after how cruel her mother had been. Not even with her heart broken and unmendable.

Arriving at the back of their shed, she peeked in through a crack in the wall. Seeing it was empty, she stepped inside the dim shack and gathered the swords. But just as she was about to lift the floorboard where she had hidden the sword, she heard voices coming from outside.

When she stood up and glanced through a small hole in the wall, to her horror, she saw her mother and Sartes walking toward the shed. Her mother had a black eye and a bruise on her cheek, and now seeing her mother alive and well, it almost made Ceres smile knowing she had put it there. All the anger welled up again as she thought about how her mother wanted to sell her.

"If I catch you sneaking any food out to Ceres, I will flog you, do you understand?" her mother snapped as she and Sartes strode by her grandmother's tree.

When Sartes didn't answer, her mother slapped him across the face.

"Do you understand, boy?" she said.

"Yes," Sartes said, looking down, a tear in his eye.

"And if you ever see her, bring her home so I can give her a licking she will never forget."

They began walking toward the shed again, and Ceres's heart was suddenly thumping wildly. She gripped the swords and darted toward the back door as quickly and as quietly as she could. Just as she exited, the front door swung open, and she leaned against the outer wall and listened, the wounds from the omnicat's claws stinging her back.

"Who goes there?" her mother said.

Ceres held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I know you're there," her mother said and waited. "Sartes, go check the back door. It's ajar."

Ceres clenched the swords to her chest. She heard Sartes's footsteps as he walked toward her, and then the door opened with a creak.

Sartes's eyes widened when he saw her, and he gasped.

"Is there anyone there?" her mother asked.

"Um... no," Sartes said, his eyes filling with tears as they connected with Ceres's.

Ceres mouthed a "thank you," and Sartes gestured with his hand for her to leave.

She nodded, and with a heavy heart, she stole toward the field as the back door to the shed slammed shut. She would come back for her sword later.

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Ceres stopped at the palace gates sweating, famished, and exhausted, swords in hand. The Empire soldiers standing guard, clearly recognizing her as the girl who delivered her father's swords, let her pass without questioning her.

She hurried through the cobblestone courtyard and then turned for the blacksmith's stone cottage behind one of the four towers. She entered.

Standing by the anvil in front of the crackling furnace, the blacksmith hammered away at a glowing blade, the leather apron protecting his clothing from the flying sparks. The concerned expression on his face made Ceres wonder what was wrong. A jovial middle-aged man full of energy, he was rarely worried.

His bald, sweaty head greeted her before he noticed she had entered.

"Good morrow," he said when he saw her, nodding for her to place the swords on the worktable.

She strode across the hot smoky room and set them down, the metal rattling against a surface of burnt, tattered wood.

He shook his head, clearly troubled.

"What is it?" she asked.

He looked up, concern in his eyes.

"Of all the days to fall ill," he murmured.

"Bartholomew?" she asked, seeing that the young weapon-keeper of the combatlords wasn't here as he usually was, frantically preparing the last few weapons before sparring practice.

The blacksmith stopped hammering and looked up with a vexed expression, his bushy eyebrows crinkling.

He shook his head.

"And on sparring day, of all days," he said. "And not just any sparring day." He stuffed the blade into the glowing coals in the furnace and wiped his dripping brow with the sleeve of his tunic. "Today, the royals will spar with the combatlords. The king has hand-picked twelve royals to train for the Killings. Three will go on to participate."

She understood his worry. It was his responsibility to provide the weapon-keepers, and if he didn't, his job was on the line. Hundreds of blacksmiths would be eager to take his position.

"The king won't be happy if we are one weapon-keeper short," she said.

He leaned his hands on his thick thighs and shook his head. Just then, two Empire soldiers entered

"We are here to retrieve the weapons," one said, scowling toward Ceres.

Even though it wasn't forbidden, she knew it was frowned upon for girls to work in weaponry—a man's field. Yet she had grown accustomed to snide remarks and hateful glares most every time she made deliveries to the palace.

The blacksmith stood up and walked over to three wooden buckets filled with weapons, all ready for the sparring match.

"You will find here the remainder of the weapons the king requested for today," the blacksmith said to the Empire soldiers.

"And the weapon-keeper?" the Empire soldier demanded.

Just as the blacksmith opened his mouth to speak, Ceres had an idea.

"It is me," she said, excitement rising in her chest. "I am the stand-in today and until Bartholomew returns."

The Empire soldiers looked at her for a moment, startled.

Ceres pinched her lips together and took a step forward.

"I have been working with my father and with the palace my entire life, crafting swords, shields, and all manner of weapons," she said.

She didn't know where her courage came from, but she stood tall and stared the soldiers in the eye.

"Ceres..." the blacksmith said, giving her a look of pity.

"Try me," she said, strengthening her resolve, wanting them to test her abilities. "There isn't anyone who can take Bartholomew's place but me. And if you lack a weapon-keeper today, wouldn't that make the king rather upset?"

She wasn't certain, but she figured the Empire soldiers and the blacksmith would do almost anything to keep the king happy. Especially today.

The Empire soldiers looked at the blacksmith, and the blacksmith back at them. The blacksmith thought for a moment. And then another. Finally, he nodded. He laid a plethora of weapons onto the table, after which he gestured to her to proceed.

"Show us, then, Ceres," the blacksmith said, a twinkle in his eye. "Knowing your father, he probably taught you everything you are not supposed to know."

"And more," Ceres said, smiling inside.

She went over each weapon, explaining in great detail their uses and advantages, how one might be better in certain types of battles than others.

When she was finished, the Empire soldiers looked to the blacksmith.

"I suppose it is better to have a girl weapon-keeper than no weapon-keeper," the blacksmith said. "Let us go and speak to the king. Perhaps he will allow it, seeing there is no other."

Ceres was so excited she almost threw her arms around the blacksmith as he winked at her. The soldiers still seemed reluctant, but with no other apparent option, they agreed to take her along.

She followed the Empire soldiers out the back door and entered the palace training ground. Ceres was used to the sound of swords colliding, of the combatlords grunting as they sparred, and of the smell of sweat mixed with leather and metal filling the air. But what was quite unique was seeing the royals practicing in the center of the yard, wearing their fancy polished armor, looking as if they needed a lesson—or a hundred—in swordsmanship. Ceres didn't feel they belonged here. No, it disgusted her to see them on the training ground, all the underlords, counts, and dignitaries watching as they ate from mounds of food and drank from golden goblets. They should go back to their lavish parties, she thought. Not feign courage and honor.

One of the royals, though, stood out from the rest: Thanos. Watching him spar, she noticed how he moved with speed, grace, and agility. To her surprise, he appeared almost as skilled as Brennius; and he wore no armor like the other royals. His hair was different from his royal peers', too; not neat and pulled back into a low ponytail, but curly, unruly dark hair flying about his face with each move.

Ceres frowned. Perhaps he knew a thing or two about combat, but he was the haughtiest of the royals, always glowering at something or someone, never seeming to want to be a part of anything.

The guards led her to the throne, and when the blacksmith presented Ceres to the king as a stand-in weapon-keeper, the king paused, and then chuckled a bit as he glanced at his advisors on either side. Ceres didn't like how he looked at her as if she were an annoyance to be rid of. But in an instant, the king's expression changed, and his face lit up as if he just had the most brilliant idea.

"Not having anyone else, I see that this must be as you say," the king said to the blacksmith. "Ceres, you shall assist Prince Thanos."

The king said it in a way that made Ceres think it was a punishment or a means to shame Prince Thanos, but she didn't care. Even though she wasn't particularly happy to be Thanos's weapon-keeper, she had been assigned, and now she could show her skills in the royal court. It was more than any girl could ever expect.

She bowed toward the king and glanced at the blacksmith as she passed him. The blacksmith nodded, an almost prideful expression on his face, and then he walked back to the chalet.

The Empire soldier escorted Ceres over to Thanos, who stood by a table, and when Thanos glanced at Ceres, his scowl intensified.

"Very well," he muttered, staring at his uncle across the yard as if daggers were shooting from his eyes. The king gave Thanos a devious smirk, affirming to Ceres that her assignment to Thanos was indeed some form of a punishment.

Thanos stepped in front of Ceres, and she noticed how the neck of his shirt was open, revealing small amounts of curly, dark hair on his muscular chest. Her breath hitched. He looked at her, and when their eyes met, she found his gaze intense—irises darker than the blackest soot. Yet, he didn't intimidate her. In fact, his bottomless eyes drew her to him, making it impossible to look away.

Once he broke eye contact, Ceres was able to take a breath and think clearly; she again resolved to show him she knew what she was doing.

"I suppose I should trust you if the blacksmith speaks so highly of you," Thanos said as she laid out the weapons one by one onto the wooden table.

Even though she was a girl, and even though Thanos was undoubtedly smart enough to figure out that what his uncle had done was more of a cruel joke than anything, it surprised her that he gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"I will do my best, sire," she said, placing a sword onto the wood.

He glanced at her, his smoldering eyes studying her too intimately for her to feel comfortable.

"There is no need for such formalities here. Thanos will do," he said.

Again, she was surprised by his casual approach. Had she read him wrong? Was he not the arrogant, self-righteous, ungrateful young man she assumed he was?

Once she had laid out all the weapons, an Empire soldier reviewed the rules of combat. First, they watched a few of the combatlords spar, and then it was the royals' turn. The Empire soldier

called upon Lucious, a blond, muscular, but somewhat lanky young man, who stepped up to a combatlord. Thanos leaned over.

"I doubt Lucious will last very long," he whispered.

"Why do you say that?" Ceres asked, wondering why he would say something like that to her—a stranger—about a fellow royal.

"You'll see."

The right side of Thanos's lips rose, and Ceres liked how he spoke to her as if she were an equal.

Even before the fighting began, Ceres knew Thanos was right. Lucious's feet were too close together, his grip weak around the hilt, and his eyes too unfocused. It would be an embarrassment, to say the least, to watch him lose rather quickly to such a warrior he was facing.

With the first collision of swords, Ceres looked up and kept her gaze on the cloudy sky instead, keeping them there as she heard grunts and blades clashing. The fighting continued on for a while, and Ceres wondered if perhaps she had judged Lucious too harshly. At least Lucious was holding on, if nothing else.

But when Lucious started to scream a few minutes into the fight, and the onlookers murmured and gasped, she couldn't help but bring her eyes back onto the fighters again. Lucious was lying on the ground, holding the blade of his sword with one hand, the hilt with the other, struggling to keep the combatlord's sword away from his face. Blood ran down his arm, and he squealed, begging for the round to end.

"Enough!" the king said, and the combatlord retreated.

Lucious's weapon-keeper ran over to him and offered him a hand, but Lucious smacked it away.

"I can get up myself!" he yelled between gritted teeth, panting and spewing obscenities.

Lucious held his injured hand with the other and rolled onto his stomach before rising to his feet.

"I said I didn't want to do this!" he yelled toward the king. "And now look what happened! You have made me a fool!"

He stormed across the yard and vanished through the arching doorway into the palace. Most of the dignitaries had quieted, but some of them laughed

"Always such drama with Lucious," Thanos said, rolling his eyes.

"Next up is Thanos and Oedifus," an Empire soldier announced.

"Are you ready?" Thanos asked Ceres.

"Yes. Are you?" she replied.

He paused and gave her a sideways glance before saying, "Always. Let me start with the trident and shield."

She handed him the shield, and after he had secured it onto his arm, she gave him the trident. Her pulse rose as she watched him walk into the center of the practice arena, hoping he would win, but bracing herself in the very likely event he would lose. One did not just simply triumph over a combatlord, and especially not with as little training as Ceres assumed these royals had.

The combatlord was around Thanos's height, but his muscles were fuller, almost monstrously so, Ceres observed. His arms were covered in scars, his face disfigured from past wounds unevenly healed, and he grunted at Thanos even before the match had begun.

With Thanos's very first strike, Ceres could tell he was a marvelous warrior, and as the battle continued, as hard as he tried, the combatlord couldn't get to him. Thanos was so quick to swerve, and quick like a rattlesnake to attack, but he also possessed the strength of an omnicat.

Not only did he seem to read his opponent's mind, his feet moved with the ease of a trained dancer.

The entire match, Thanos was one step ahead of the combatlord, causing the onlookers to cheer with excitement. Ceres judged the trident a great choice for him, but from the way he moved, she believed a longsword would be the weapon granting him victory.

With the next move, the combatlord crouched and whipped one leg across the sand in a circular motion, wiping Thanos's feet from under him, causing him to fall onto his back. He hopped up to his feet again, but his trident had fallen several feet away.

Faster than she could even think, Ceres picked up the longsword and yelled, "Thanos!"

He glanced at her and she threw the sword to him. Catching it mid-air, Thanos didn't miss a beat and went after the combatlord with full force. Sparks flew as metal collided with metal, and watching Thanos's face and neck muscles strain, Ceres clenched her fists as she held her breath.

Retreating, the combatlord snarled and panted, saliva gushing from his mouth, but Thanos did not withdraw. Instead, he hit the combatlord's sword out of his hand and shoved him to the ground so Thanos ended up standing above him with his blade pointed at his challenger's neck.

With eyes wide open and her heart galloping in her chest, Ceres cheered with the rest of the crowd.

Thanos looked up at the king, his face a stone, and the king squinted his eyes as he leaned over and whispered something to the advisor on his right. With the nod of his uncle, Thanos lowered his sword and stepped out of the training area.

He walked toward her, a new look of admiration and wonder in his eyes. He studied her in silence for several seconds, breathing hard. Finally, he spoke.

"How did you know which weapon to give me?" he asked, wiping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

"The way you moved," she said. "It seemed a longsword would suit you."

Still panting, he watched her closely as he nodded.

Then he strode across the training ground and headed into the palace. For a moment, Ceres wasn't certain what to make of his strange behavior and his lack of further instructions. Should she stay? Should she leave? She decided to wait until she was released.

A few minutes later, and into the next round, a handler approached her.

"For you, my lady," he said, holding out a pouch. "An advance from Prince Thanos. If you accept, you have been hired as the prince's new weapon-keeper. He requests you return tomorrow an hour after dawn at this very spot."

Ceres held out her hand and after she had received the pouch, she opened it, seeing five pieces of gold. At first, overwrought with joy, she couldn't speak, but when the handler asked her again if she would accept, she said yes.

"You are at liberty to leave, my lady," he said, and then he swiveled around and walked back into the palace.

"Thank you," she said, realizing she was speaking to no one. She glanced up toward the east tower and saw Thanos standing on the balcony watching her. He nodded to her and smiled before heading inside.

With a light heart, she ran from the palace and headed home to pick up her sword. She also planned to secretly give the money to her brothers without their mother finding out, and to bid them a final farewell.

Finally, she was wanted.

Finally, she had a home.

# **CHAPTER SIX**

Ceres carefully peered in through the half-opened shutters, her mouth dry, eyes peeled for her mother. She had run home as nightfall descended on Delos, the clear skies above turning pink and lavender. Her eagerness to present the gold to her brothers had fueled each step. Aching with hunger, she had considered using one of the gold coins to purchase food, but was afraid to bump into her mother at the market.

With ears pinned for sounds or voices, she glanced further into the dim house. Not a soul was in sight. Where could Nesos and Sartes be? Usually, they were home at this time while Mother was away. Perhaps if she retrieved her sword first, her brothers would return by then.

Careful not to make a sound, she slunk around to the rear of the house, past her grandmother's tree and toward the shed. The door creaked when she opened it, and once inside the stuffy shack, she headed straight toward the corner. Kneeling down beside the floorboard, she lifted it up and fished out her sword. She breathed with relief to see it was still there.

For a moment Ceres sat and admired its beauty, the mixed metals, the shiny, thin, unblemished blade, the golden hilt adorned with serpents. The craftsmanship was after the manner of the northerners, her father had said. She would carry this sword with honor, always remembering the great love her father had for her.

She slid it into its sheath, secured it around her waist with a scabbard, and headed outside.

Seeing no one was there, she made her way to the front of the house again, and this time went in through the front door. The house was shadowy, the hearth unlit, and mounds of fruits, vegetables, meats, and baked goods decked the table, all no doubt bought with the gold gained by selling her life. Their savory aroma filled the room. She strode over to the food, picked up a loaf of bread, and devoured a few bites. Her stomach had churned for days.

Knowing she hadn't much time, Ceres hurried over to Nesos's bench-bed and placed the sack of gold beneath his pillow. He'd find it when he turned in for the night, and she didn't doubt he'd keep it a secret from Mother. She blinked, trying to fight back the tears while wondering if she'd ever see her dear brothers again. Her heart squeezed as she thought about Rexus. Would he forget about her?

Suddenly she jumped as the front door flung open, startling her. To her horror, in stepped Lord Blaku.

He grinned an awful, victorious grin.

"If it isn't the runaway," he said, his upper lip curled back, revealing yellowing teeth, the stench of sweat saturating the room.

Taking a few steps back, Ceres realized she needed to get away—quick. Thinking she'd be able to escape through the window in her parents' bedroom, she dropped the loaf of bread and darted toward the back door.

But just as she reached the doorway, her mother stepped into it, Ceres colliding with her. Briefly, Ceres noted that her mother wore a new dress made of the finest silk, and that she smelled like floral perfume.

"Did you really think you could beat me bloody and blue, steal my money, and get away with it?" her mother asked in a hateful tone as she grabbed Ceres's hair, pulling it so hard Ceres let out a cry.

Steal her money? But then it all made sense. Of course her mother wouldn't be collaborating with the slaver if she knew he had taken back the gold he'd paid for Ceres. However, he probably told her mother Ceres took the gold and ran off with it. Her mother was, after all, unconscious when he snatched the pouch of fifty-five pieces.

Before Ceres could explain, her mother slapped her across the face and shoved her so she fell to the floor. She then kicked Ceres in the stomach with her new pointy shoes.

Ceres couldn't breathe. Yet she forced herself to her feet, preparing to lunge for her mother—when the slaver grabbed her from behind in a deadlock. He squeezed her so hard she was certain the wounds on her back reopened.

She kicked and screamed, wriggled and scratched, trying to wrestle her way out of the fat old man's iron grip. But it was to no avail. He carried her through the room, and toward the front door.

"Wait!" her mother yelled.

She walked over to them and wrapped covetous fingers around Ceres's sword.

"What is this?" she asked, her eyes angered.

Still not giving up the fight, Ceres kicked her mother in the shin as hard as she could muster with the slaver squeezing the life out of her.

Her mother's face turned red, and she socked Ceres in the abdomen with such force Ceres thought she might vomit up the little food she had managed to swallow.

"That is my sword," her mother said.

Ceres knew her mother would recognize how valuable the sword was, and that there was no way she would let the slaver take it with him.

"I paid for the girl, and whatever is on her person, I own that now," Lord Blaku sneered.

"The sword was not on her person when I sold her to you," her mother retorted, her fingers fumbling to undo the scabbard around Ceres's waist.

Lord Blaku growled and threw Ceres against the kitchen table so her head hit the corner, a sharp pain spreading across her temple. Lying on the floor, dizzy from the blow, Ceres heard her mother scream and furniture being thrown across the room. She opened her eyes and sat up and saw the slaver standing over her mother, slamming a chair against her mother's head.

"Ceres, help!" her mother yelled, but Ceres no longer had it in her.

Barely able to move, Ceres crawled on hands and knees toward the door. Once she had crossed the threshold, Ceres climbed onto her feet. But she had no time. She could feel Lord Blaku's arms reaching for her, his eyes burning at her back. She needed to hurry if she was to escape, but her body wouldn't move as swiftly as she told it to.

Her heart leapt in her chest when she stumbled across the front yard, and just as she reached the dirt road, she thought she was free.

Just then, Lord Blaku roared behind her. She heard the crack of a whip and then felt a thick leather cord wrap around her neck. Being tugged backward by the whip, throat strangled, blood pooling in her head, she crashed to the ground. Her hands reached for the cord, trying to loosen it, but it was secured too tightly. She knew she needed air or she would pass out, but a breath could not be drawn.

Lord Blaku picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and threw her into the back of the carriage. Slowly, her surroundings started to turn dark. Then darker.

In a rush, he chained her ankles and wrists, and then he loosened the whip from around her neck.

Wheezing and couching, she gasped for air, her surroundings becoming clear again, the slaver's stench oozing into her nose as she panted.

He tore the sword from around her waist and studied it for a moment.

"This is a very fine weapon indeed," he said. "Now it is mine, and I shall melt it down."

Ceres reached a hand out toward her father's sword, the chains rattling as she moved, but he slapped her hand away and hopped out of the carriage.

He headed back into the house and when he came back out, he was holding the sack of gold Ceres had left for her brothers.

The carriage bounced as he climbed onto it, and after he whipped the horses, the wheels creaked to a start. As the carriage drove off, she kept her eyes on the near black sky, watching as silhouettes of birds flew above. A tear rolled down her cheek, but she made no sound. She had no strength to cry. Now everything had been taken from her. Her money. Her sword. Her family. Her freedom.

And when she didn't show up tomorrow morning at the palace ready to work for Prince Thanos, she would have lost everything.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Miles and miles ago, Lord Blaku had unchained Ceres and had thrown her into an enclosed slave cart, and now she sat in the light of the moon, numb, beside dozens of girls in a cage wagon, bumping forward on the main road out of Delos.

The night had been freezing—it was freezing still—and with little protection from the rain, Ceres hadn't been able to sleep, shivering all the time. Cold hands gripping the bars, she huddled at the end of the moving prison on soggy straw that reeked of urine and rotting flesh. It had stopped raining about an hour ago, and now the moon and stars were out.

She had listened in on the guards' conversations, seated up above, and a few of them had mentioned something about Holheim, the capital of Northland, which, she knew, was several months' journey away. Ceres knew if she were taken there, she would have no chance of ever seeing her family or Rexus again. But she stuffed those thoughts deep down into the dead part of her heart. Glancing back, she noticed that the girl who had been coughing the entire trip had become silent and was now slouching in the rear corner, lifeless, lips blue, skin white.

A mother and two young daughters sat next to the corpse, oblivious to the girl's passing. All the daughters were focused on was competing for their mother's lap. Better they do that than be aware that death was their neighbor, Ceres thought.

A few girls seated against the wall opposite Ceres carried a look of fear in their defeated eyes, and a few others cried in silent sobs as they longingly gazed out through the cage. Ceres didn't feel fear or sadness. She couldn't allow herself to be afraid here. Someone might sense it and judge her weak, and then use her weakness against her. Instead, she numbed herself so completely, she almost didn't care what happened to her.

"Get out of my seat," a blonde girl shouted to another.

"I have been sitting here all along," the second girl replied, her skin smooth and olive in the glow of the moonlight.

The blonde pulled the olive-skinned girl up by her ears and threw her onto the sodden, straw-covered floor. A few of the girls gasped, but most looked away, pretending not to notice the ruckus.

"This is my cart," the blonde exclaimed. "All these seats are mine."

"No they aren't," a dark-skinned girl said, shooting to her feet, her hands on her hips.

They stared at each other for a moment, and everyone in the cart grew quiet, eyes slipping toward the rivals as they waited to see what would happen.

Hissing, the blonde shoved the dark-skinned girl, and within seconds, they were on the floor in a wrestling match, screaming at the top of their lungs as arms and legs flailed, a few eager slaves egging them on.

It was a draw. The olive-skinned girl slowly stood up and walked toward the back as her hands dappled the cage walls, blood running from her nose. The wagon hit a bump, and she wobbled as she sat down on the floor across from Ceres. Wiping the blood with her brown, threadbare, filthy sleeve, she looked Ceres in the eyes.

"I'm Anka," she said.

The moonlight shone in through the cage onto the girl's face, and Ceres thought the girl had the most peculiar eyes she had ever seen: dark brown irises with streaks of turquoise. Her hair was long, thick, and black, and Ceres guessed the girl was around her age.

"I'm Ceres."

Feeling sorry for the girl, but without any strength to become involved, Ceres looked out through the iron bars at the back of the cart, wondering if it would be possible to escape. Life as a slave was not worth living, and she'd do anything to get out, even risk her life, if it came to that.

Unexpectedly, the wagon slowed to a stop on the side of the road, as Lord Blaku yelled for his guards to break up the fight. The cart rocked as the men jumped down from the roof and into puddles of water and wet grass. His face appeared right outside the cage and Ceres heard keys rattling, his heavy breath turning into puffs of smoke.

When the door swung open, a shadow of confusion flickered across Anka's face, and when two of the five guards entered the wagon, the slaves cowered and winced. The men grabbed the wrestling girls and hauled them outside kicking and screaming.

"You're a sweet one," Lord Blaku said, grabbing Anka's arm. "Come here, girl."

Anka feverishly shook her head and scuttled backward, her eyes wide with terror, and Ceres felt a wave of nausea wash over her when she thought about what that fat, old, ugly slaver would do to the innocent girl.

Anka shrieked as Lord Blaku pulled her out.

At that moment, Ceres caught a glimpse of her sword attached around the slaver's waist, and in a split second, she saw her opportunity for escape.

Lord Blaku reached for the deadbolt, but before he could lock it, Ceres kicked the door outward and leapt out of the wagon. A few other slaves escaped and started down the street, but two guards quickly rounded up the runaways as another slammed the door to the wagon shut.

The slaver flung Anka to the ground and reached for the hilt of Ceres's sword. Ceres kneed him in the groin so he buckled forward, and before he stood up, she drew her sword and sliced his thigh, causing him to fall to the muddy road, wailing. The sword felt so light in her hand, she noticed, and the blade had cut through the slaver's thigh like butter.

Three guards threw the other slaves back into the wagon and locked it, the girls crying in disapproval.

Just as Ceres was about to pull Anka to her feet, Anka gasped and yelled, "Behind you!" Ceres spun around to find three guards upon her. The first had his sword raised, and had Anka not warned her, Ceres would have had his blade in her back.

To her astonishment, the same power she had felt in the arena when she had saved Sartes rushed through her veins. Suddenly, she could see clearly what she needed to do in order to defeat the three guards.

She met the first guard's sword with her own several times before running her blade through him. He dropped to the side of the road in a puddle of water.

The short guard was holding a dagger, and he tossed it between his hands as he scuffled toward her. She kept her eye on the dagger for a few switches, and timing it just right, she flicked her sword between his hands so the dagger went flying into the air, landing on top of the slaver wagon.

"Let me go and I will let you live," Ceres said, so much authority in her voice, not even she recognized it.

"Anyone who captures her will receive fifty-five pieces of gold!" Lord Blaku yelled, throwing his whip toward the short guard who lost his dagger.

Ha! My mother's gold, Ceres thought, adding to her anger.

The two remaining guards inched toward her, the tall one with a patch over his eye drawing his sword, the short one cracking the whip. At the palace, Ceres had only ever fought one on one with others, and she felt uneasy having to conquer two at the same time. But then again, there, she hadn't been fighting for her life, and she hadn't felt that overwhelming surge of force she was feeling now.

The short man snapped the whip so it latched around Ceres's sword hand, and with a tug, Ceres fell to the ground, face first. She had gripped her sword so hard that it still remained in her hand, and with one hack, she severed the leather cords from around her wrist, freeing herself.

Quick as a cat, she sprung to her feet, and just as tall guard attacked, she lunged toward him, their swords colliding.

The short guard threw himself toward Ceres and wrapped arms around her legs so she couldn't move, causing her to topple over, crashing onto her back. He crawled on top of her and wrapped one hand around her sword arm, confining it, the other around her neck, choking her.

"Kill her if you must!" Lord Blaku shouted, still holding his hands around his bleeding thigh.

Ceres kicked her feet up and knocked the short guard in the head, shoving him off her as she rolled backward and up to a standing position. Seeing he was about to stagger to his feet, Ceres kicked him in the face several times until he slumped to the ground unconscious.

Just as the tall guard came at her, she swerved around him, struck his feet from under him, and once he had fallen onto his back, she sliced off his hand. He screamed as blood oozed from his stub.

She hadn't meant to be so brutal. She only wanted to harm him enough so he couldn't fight anymore and wouldn't follow her when she ran away, but the blade was exceptionally sharp and it took almost no effort to slash through his bones. Or perhaps it was this strange force that made it so effortless?

Some of girls in the wagon had climbed up the sides of the wall, rattling the cage, screaming for Ceres to let them out. Others cheered Ceres on, chanting for her to kill their captors.

"Give up your sword, or the girl dies," Lord Blaku yelled behind her.

Ceres whirled around to see Anka held at knifepoint by the slaver. Anka's bottom lip trembled, her eyes wide open, and the slaver pressed the blade into her throat, cutting her a little.

Should she try and save Anka? Ceres could just make a run for it and she would be free. But Anka's eyes pleaded with such desperation that Ceres couldn't find it in her heart to leave her to such a horrid fate. She glanced over at the girls in the wagon, who had turned quiet, realizing she could free them, too.

Ceres leaned back and threw her sword, praying her aim was true.

She watched as it spun end over end, then finally landed in Lord Blaku's face, the blade stabbing him in the eye. He fell backwards, landing flat in the mud.

Dead.

With a whimper, Anka crawled away from him, sobbing.

Ceres, breathing hard, walked forward in the quiet, pulled her sword out from the slaver's skull, and then walked over and slashed the lock off the wagon, opening the door. Shouting and sighing in delight, the women and girls streamed out of the cart one after another. A few thanked Ceres as they passed her, and the mother with her daughters embraced Ceres before turning back toward Delos.

With arms and legs feeling like they weighed a hundred pounds each, and her eyes heavy from sleeplessness, Ceres walked to the front of the wagon and cut the reins to the horses. She took a blanket, a bag of food, and a leather flask filled with wine from atop the wagon and attached it to one of the horses.

After she had removed the scabbard from Lord Blaku's carcass and secured her sword around her waist, she mounted the stout brown mare and steered it southward toward Delos. Just as she passed Anka, she stopped.

"You saved my life," Anka said. "I am indebted to you."

"You saved me first," Ceres replied. "You owe me nothing."

"Let me join you. Please. I have nowhere to go."

Ceres considered Anka's suggestion and thought it might be nice to have company on the cold, dark road back.

"Very well, Anka. We shall travel together," Ceres said with a soft smile.

She reached out her hand and pulled Anka up behind her, Anka clinging to Ceres's back as if for dear life. As lightning struck in the distance, the clouds rolling in again, Ceres prodded the horse to gallop. She would have time to spare before she needed to be at the palace, and she knew where she needed to go: to Rexus and her brothers.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The night remained brutally cold, the wind a roaring tempest, but that didn't prevent Ceres from compelling the horse forward at a furious pace, determined to reach Rexus if there was enough time. For hours, rain whipped against her like shards of ice, leaving her clothes sopping wet and her fingers frozen stiff, anger toward her mother and Lord Blaku driving her.

Finally, she sighted the capital's outer wall, and, as the rain ended, she slowed the horse to a trot. The sun crested the Alva Mountains, sparkling through dissipating clouds, and kissed the white buildings of the capital golden, and with about an hour to spare until she needed to be at the palace, Ceres hopped down from the horse and led the mare down the gently sloping gorge to the river. After she had escorted the horse to water, she unwrapped the bread and meat she had taken from Lord Blaku and portioned equal parts for Anka and herself.

She sat down on a rock and glanced at Anka, who was scarfing down the food like a ravenous animal.

"Would you like for me to take you home?" she asked Anka.

Anka paused and looked up, her eyes suddenly weary, but she said nothing.

"Perhaps now that the slaver is dead, your family—"

"My parents sold me to save their farm. Twenty pieces of gold," Anka said bitterly. "They are no longer my family."

Ceres understood. Oh, how she understood. She looked toward the Alva Mountains and thought for a moment.

"I know where you might find a new home," she said.

"Where?" Anka asked, taking a sip of the wine.

"My brothers and friends are part of the revolution."

Anka squinted her eyes, and then she nodded.

"You are my sister now and they shall be my family and friends. I shall fight by your side and belong to the revolution, too," she said.

Once they finished their meal, Ceres led the mare back onto the road and rode with Anka down the sloping hillside toward the capital's main entrance—a heavily guarded drawbridge made of thick oak. Getting in line behind other travelers and merchants, Ceres and Anka rode slowly past a soldier and onto the bridge.

They rode through the cobblestone streets, past houses and wooden shacks, and down cramped alleyways. The city began to rise, the inhabitants lining up at the living wells with buckets and vessels. Children played in the streets, their laughter filling the air, reminding Ceres of much happier, much simpler times.

Beyond acres and acres of wilted, brown plants, they arrived at the bottom of the Alva Mountains. Humble houses rested on the gently sloping hill, sheltered by jutting peaks, and a waterfall cascaded down the mountainside. From the outside, the small settlement looked like any ordinary one on the outskirts of Delos, with houses, wagons, animals, and peasants working the fields. But it was nothing but a façade to keep Empire soldiers from growing suspicious. Inside every abode, a rebellion was brewing.

Ceres had been here once before: two years ago when Rexus had shown her the growing collection of weapons stored in the cave behind the waterfall.

Outside the settlement, bordering on the sea, stood the old abandoned castle: the revolution's headquarters. Two of three towers had collapsed, and a few of the walls had been patched up with driftwood and rocks. Ceres's destination.

They dismounted and walked down the sandy pathway, the breeze from the sea tugging on Ceres's clothes. Once they arrived at the arching entryway, five heavily armored men wearing civilian clothes stopped them.

"My name is Ceres. I am here for Rexus, my friend, and Nesos and Sartes, my brothers," she said, staying the horse. "This is Anka, my friend. We want to join the rebellion."

One of the men's eyes flared a tad, as if her name held some significance. He nodded and headed into the courtyard while the other men studied the girls with distrustful glances.

Inside the courtyard, Ceres could see men and women working in a rushed, almost frantic manner. Some were training others in sword fighting; some were fashioning armor; some were making bows and whittling sticks into arrows; and yet others were sewing clothes.

A few minutes passed, and then a few more. Were Rexus and her brothers not here? Ceres wondered. Would she have to leave without seeing them? She had to see them before she left for the palace.

All of a sudden, Rexus burst around the corner.

"Ciri!" he yelled, running toward her.

Seeing his face again, Ceres felt her strength leave her, and when he wrapped eager arms around her, she broke down and sobbed. She had been strong for so long, and now standing wrapped in his safe embrace, she finally let her weakness surface.

"I thought you were dead," he said, stroking her back, squeezing her tight.

He rained kisses on her face, drying up her tears, and then he pressed his soft warm mouth to hers. But his lips were gone even before she had a chance to enjoy their first kiss.

"I was worried sick about you," he said, clutching her tightly. "Sartes said he saw you outside your father's shed, but that you vanished after that."

"Are my brothers here?" she asked.

"Not at the moment," Rexus replied. 'They are on an assignment."

Ceres felt her heart sink, but she nodded and took a step back.

"This is my friend Anka," she said, placing a hand on her new friend's shoulder. "She was also in the slaver wagon. She needs a place to stay."

"In a slaver wagon? That's why you look the way you do," Rexus said, playful eyes running up and down her body.

Ceres socked him in the shoulder.

"You certainly don't look any better than me," she said with a smirk, causing Rexus to laugh.

"Please get Fausta for me," Rexus said to a guard. He turned to Ceres, a conflicted look on his face. "Are you not staying?"

Ceres was torn. Part of her wanted to stay here with Rexus and her brothers, but a huge part of her wanted to work as a weapon-keeper.

"I have been hired by Prince Thanos as his weapon-keeper."

Rexus's eyes flared, and then he nodded.

An elderly woman waddled toward them with the guard, her crinkly skin white as snow, her eyes filled with years of suffering and wisdom.

"Fausta," Rexus said. "Please see to it that Anka is given a place to stay. And make sure she has food and dry clothes."

The old woman opened her frail arms and embraced the newcomer.

"You have a new home now, and we will see each other often," Ceres said to Anka. "I owe you my life and I shall never forget you."

Anka smiled softly and nodded. She gave Ceres a hug, and then she followed Fausta into the courtyard.

Taking Ceres's hand in his, Rexus grabbed the horse's reins and escorted them toward the stable. Once there, he let go of Ceres and led the horse to the water trough.

"You have a new sword," he said, not looking back, stroking the horse's mane.

The mare whinnied in approval.

"Yes. A gift from my father," she said, her hand automatically feeling for it, a pang of sadness overwhelming her.

But she didn't want to talk about sad things.

"The rebellion seems to have grown," she said.

"Since I last brought you here, our supporters have tripled in number," he said.

It made Ceres happy to see wonderment in his eyes.

They walked outside and sat down on a wooden bench, Rexus facing her. He gently stroked her hair, and then caressed her face.

A void opened within her chest when she thought of saying good-bye, and again she entertained the idea of remaining here.

"Perhaps I will stay with you," she said.

Rexus pressed his lips together.

"I would love that, but I think the best thing is if you keep your appointment at the palace," he said.

Ceres knew he was right, but still, it hurt to hear him say she should go.

"Here, we have many supporters," Rexus continued. "But we have no one working within the palace walls."

"I don't know how much access I would have to the inside or the other royals," she said.

"If you gain Prince Thanos's trust, I'm certain he would give you access to all the rebellion needs. When the moment is right, you could lead us inside the palace, securing our victory," he said.

Ceres's stomach churned at the thought of gaining Prince Thanos's trust only to betray him. But why? Perhaps it was because he did trust her and had given her a chance where others would not. Or perhaps it was because he despised his family and what they stood for just as much as any commoner.

Either way, Rexus was right: by doing this, she could help the rebellion like no one else. In fact, her presence inside the castle walls was just what the rebellion needed, and could very well play a significant part in the downfall of the Empire.

She nodded, and for a brief moment, they held each other's eyes.

Not wanting to drag out the farewell, the sadness already overwhelming her, Ceres rose to her feet and walked into the barn. Just as she was about to mount the horse, she heard Rexus enter behind her. While securing the saddle, she glanced back.

"I must go so I am not late for the palace. Please take care of my brothers, and Anka," she said.

Rexus placed a hand on her shoulder and tingles spread through Ceres's body. Ceres thought about the kiss they had shared earlier. Had he meant to kiss her as a friend, or something more? She wanted it to be more. She knew if she turned around, she would find his eyes and his lips would meet hers. And then she wouldn't be able to tear herself away.

So without another word she mounted her horse and kicked, galloping away, far from this place, and toward the palace—determined not to look back for anything.

## CHAPTER NINE

As the sun broke over the horizon and with hardly a second to spare, Ceres galloped through the palace gates, dropped off the horse at the royal stables, and darted toward the palace training ground. When she was almost halfway, she noticed her sword brushing against her leg, and she stopped. Would someone see her sword and perhaps even steal it from her if she brought it? She knew there was no time, and she could be fired for being late, but under no circumstances could she afford to lose this sword.

As fast as her feet could carry her, she sprinted back to the blacksmith's chalet, and finding the place empty, she climbed up the ladder to the loft. There, behind a pile of old planks and crooked twigs, she hid her sword before tearing toward the palace training ground.

When she arrived—breathless, heart thumping wildly— to her surprise, she saw that the entire court had gathered around the practice arena. The king and queen sat on their thrones, princes and princesses on chairs beneath the willow trees, fanning themselves, and the advisors and dignitaries sat on benches, whispering to each other.

In the practice arena, combatlords sparred against royals, and weapon-keepers were watching their masters, handing off swords, daggers, tridents, shields, and floggers. Since she could remember, Ceres had yearned for an opportunity like this, but now that the moment was here, she felt empty inside.

"Ceres!" Thanos yelled, waving to her.

She didn't know why, but when she saw him again, her heart stirred. Then she reprimanded herself. She had to remember why she was here, which was to be friend her enemies and gain their trust, not be amused by a handsome prince who somehow seemed to put her under his spell.

Ceres ran over to Thanos.

"Right on time," he said with a nod.

"Of course," she said as if getting here hadn't been a miracle and a half.

An Empire soldier marched to the center of the arena.

"All royal warriors, hastily line up before King Claudius, your weapon-keepers behind you," he said.

The royals stopped what they were doing and Ceres followed Thanos, taking her place behind him. She noticed that Lucious was back. Had he reconsidered? Been forced to return?

"You're wondering about Lucious?" Thanos asked, glancing back at her.

"Yes."

Ceres wasn't sure whether she hated it or liked it that he was so in tune with her thoughts.

"One doesn't say no to the king," Thanos whispered.

She wanted to ask why, but the king rose, holding a golden bowl up, and the gathering hushed.

"This dish is filled with the names of each of our royal warriors," the king said. "Today I will select three names who will fight in the Killings at noon."

The crowd gasped, each royal warrior and their weapon-keepers included.

But the Killings weren't supposed to be until next month, Ceres thought. Had the king just on a whim scheduled the Killings for today?

She glanced at Thanos, but he stood rigid as a board, his face forward so she couldn't see his expression. They weren't ready to fight in the Killings, Ceres knew. None of them were. They hadn't been given enough time to train together, to get to know each other's fighting styles.

Winding her hands tightly into fists, she focused on keeping her breathing steady. Only three of twelve would be selected, so there was still a chance they didn't have to fight today.

The king reached his chubby hand into the bowl and pulled out a slip.

"Lucious!" he yelled, an evil grin emerging on his lips.

Ceres exhaled and glanced over at Lucious, seeing that his face had turned as red as a beet. The onlookers clapped, although their applause was far from enthusiastic. Did they think this was unfair, too? Ceres wondered.

The king reached into the bowl again and drew a name.

"Georgio!" he hollered, his eyes slithering to the end of the line where Georgio waited.

A woman who looked old enough to be Georgio's mother stood up began to sob, yelling obscenities toward the king, but when she stepped onto the practice arena, she was escorted away by Empire soldiers.

Ceres huffed and kept her eyes trained on Thanos's broad back. Only one name left, she told herself. The chances of Thanos being selected were slim.

Reaching his hand into the bowl a third time, the king glanced at Thanos and the right side of his lip rose.

Ceres saw Thanos's shoulders tense, and immediately she knew something wasn't quite right. Had the king planned this? Rigged this?

Her heart nearly stopped.

"And last but not least, Thanos!" the king exclaimed with a smug smile.

The crowd went silent for a moment, but when the queen started to applaud with fervent enthusiasm, the others followed.

"The risk of death is great, my chosen ones. May you each represent your sovereign and Empire with honor and strength," the king continued.

The king sat down and an Empire soldier explained the rules of the Killings, but Ceres could hardly listen to a word he said, she was so shocked.

"Weapon-keepers who assist in the battle will be put to death...no more than three weapons on any one warrior at one time...no helping other combatlords...thumbs-up means the defeated lives, thumbs-down means the defeated must be slayed..." the Empire soldier said.

When he finished, Ceres stood frozen, staring out into thin air.

She vaguely registered that Thanos had turned around and was facing her. He grabbed her arm and shook it.

"Ceres!" he said.

Disoriented, she looked up into his face.

"Bartholomew is back. If you would like, I can have him be my weapon-keeper today," Thanos said.

At first, her heart leapt in her chest and she wanted to shout yes. Yes! But then she thought of the conversation she had had with Rexus. How would she earn Thanos's trust if she backed out now? She wouldn't.

"Is that what you want?" she asked.

"I prefer to work with you, but seeing the rules have changed, I will not hold it against you if you decide to sit this round out," he said.

She couldn't believe it. Here he was giving her freedom, and she was scheming how to best earn his trust so she could destroy him and his family. A feeling of guilt began to take root.

But then she remembered her people's suffering: the young boy who had been whipped in Fountain Square and hauled off to an unknown destination, the girl who had died in the slaver wagon alone and afraid, her brothers who never went to bed with full bellies, and her father who had to leave his family to make money elsewhere.

If she didn't stand up for them, who would?

"Then I will be your weapon-keeper today and for as long as you would have me," Ceres said. Thanos nodded, and a hint of a smile graced his lips.

"We shall conquer together," he said.

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With sweaty hands and an unsettled stomach, Ceres peered down the tunnel underneath the Stade. The passageway was crawling with Empire soldiers, combatlords, and weapon-keepers, weapons of every kind lining the walls, strewn across the gravel floors.

She sat down on a bench mere feet away from the iron gates, waiting for her and Thanos's turn, the crowd chanting like a dragon outside.

"Kill him! Kill him!" they shouted.

The onlookers roared, and not a minute later, the iron gates opened, chains clattering, and in strode two Empire soldiers, each hauling mutilated, dead combatlords. They threw one corpse on top of the other onto the dirt floor right across from where Ceres sat, and then they darted back out into the arena.

Ceres startled when the iron gate slammed shut behind them, and she couldn't help but slide her eyes toward the lifeless bodies. Just minutes ago, those men had stood in front of her full of vigor, certain they would be triumphant in today's competition. Now they rested in a heap on the floor, never to rise again.

When she glanced up at Thanos, his eyes were already on her, those impossibly dark irises carrying solemnity that Ceres had only ever seen in the dying. Was he afraid like she was? she wondered.

She watched as he tightened the thick leather belt around his canvas loincloth, his rigid abdomen exposed. She could hardly believe what little protection he wore: a single leather shoulder guard covering his right arm. Most of the other warriors hid behind heavy armor and shining helmets.

Ceres had been given a uniform: a blue short-sleeved tunic that reached to her knees, a silk rope around her waist, and soft leather knee-high boots that resembled Thanos's. Although she didn't particularly like it, she was glad to be out of her old clothes that did nothing but remind her of her old life.

"Did the king set you up?" Ceres asked, remembering King Claudius's sly expression when he hand-picked the royal warriors' names from the golden bowl.

"Yes," Thanos said.

She clenched her teeth and a fire of hate burned within.

"This isn't right," she said.

"No, it isn't," Thanos said, sitting down beside her, tightening the straps on his boots. "But if there is one thing I have learned, it is that you don't refuse the king."

"Have you refused him before?" she asked.

He nodded.

"For what?"

"I wouldn't marry the princess he had chosen for me."

She stared at him for a moment, stunned. She was amazed at the courage that must have taken. Perhaps the girl was hideous, although Ceres hadn't seen any hideous princesses her entire life, all of them dressed in fine clothing, bathed in sweet-smelling perfumes, and adorned with exquisite jewelry.

She looked away, wondering who this young man really was. A rebel? Ceres had not once considered that there might be a nonconformist within the palace walls.

She had a whole new respect for Thanos. Perhaps he was not the boy she thought he was. Which made her feel even sicker to betray him.

"And what of Lucious and Georgio?" she asked.

"The king despises them for other reasons."

"But how can the king can just randomly—"

He interrupted her, his voice impatient.

"Just because I am royalty doesn't mean I have a say in my life."

Ceres hadn't thought about that. She had always assumed the royals were free to do as they pleased and that they ruled as one big enemy.

"All the pomp and haughtiness, the rules, decorum, frivolous spending...it drives me to the brink of insanity," he said, almost growling.

Ceres was taken aback that he would say such things about the royals and didn't know exactly what to say to him. Instead, she looked out the iron gates, and just as she did, she saw a combatlord stab Georgio's weapon-keeper through the abdomen.

Her hand hit her mouth and she gasped.

In her naiveté, she had assumed she was safe from other combatlords since she wasn't the one fighting. A sense of dread gripped her shoulders and she noticed how her hands shook even more than before.

An Empire soldier approached, telling Thanos it was his turn to fight next, and that he would be fighting together with Lucious against two other combatlords.

With a parched throat, Ceres said, "We have to stick together if we are to make it out alive." Thanos nodded, a quiet understanding between them.

They stood up and walked over to the iron gates, each in their own thoughts for some time.

"I won't kill unless I have to," Thanos suddenly said.

Ceres nodded, wondering if this was one more way he planned to defy the king.

"I need to know I can trust you with my life," he said without looking away from the arena.

"You can trust me with your life," Ceres said, wondering if he heard the slight hesitation in her voice.

He closed his eyes and nodded.

"You can trust me with your life, too, Ceres," he said.

She didn't know why, but his words sank into her bones, and she felt they were true. Despite herself, she was feeling an intense bond with him.

Lucious and his weapon-keeper stepped up behind Thanos and Ceres, and Ceres noticed Lucious's shiny full body armor and visored helmet. No amount of armor will save a sloppy warrior's life, she thought.

The iron gates swung open, and in came Georgio alive, his body drenched in sweat, blood dripping from a few lacerations to his arms and abdomen. An Empire soldier dragged his weapon-keeper in behind him and flung him on top of the other cadavers on the floor.

Ceres's entire body started to shake.

"Stay close to me," Thanos said, his eyes straight forward as if in a trance, his jaw clenching. Just as the Empire soldier nodded for them to exit, Lucious shoved Ceres out of the way and entered the arena first, his arms held high in the air as if in victory. The masses went wild, and he paraded around for a few moments, reveling in their approval.

At any other time than this very moment, his behavior would have irritated Ceres to no end, but standing here, inhaling what could quite possibly be her last breath, she paid no attention to the approval-seeking fool.

Thanos and Ceres entered the arena next, and Ceres squinted, the sun blinding her. Once her eyes had adjusted to the light, she glanced up into the audience, seeing only roughly half the seats filled.

She gazed up at the podium and saw the king sitting up on his throne, smiling glumly. How she despised him. If what Thanos said was true, he was eviler than Ceres had imagined.

"Remember, stay close," Thanos said, touching her elbow.

She nodded and then spotted the two combatlords on the other side of the arena, wearing heavy armor, each holding a sword.

When the trumpets blared, at once, a beast sprung out from one of the trap doors in the ground. It charged toward Ceres and Thanos, its grizzled black fur glistening in the sunlight, its roar echoing against the stadium walls. The dog-like creature was unfamiliar to Ceres—large body, stalky legs—and moved at a slower pace compared to an omnicat, although she didn't doubt it was just as strong.

"A wolver!" someone from the crowd yelled, and then a wave of clamors moved through the audience.

Adrenaline coursed through her, and for a moment, she didn't know where to go. But when she saw the weapons lined up against the wall, she headed toward them and waited for Thanos's command.

First, Thanos called for the trident, and she flung it to him. Good choice, she thought as she watched him catch it mid-air. She wanted to jump in and help him, but she remembered the rule forbidding a weapon-keeper to intervene.

Thanos screamed at the wolver as he jabbed the trident toward the beast, his feet moving with swiftness, his reflexes lightning quick.

From the corner of her eye, Ceres noticed one of the combatlords making his way toward Thanos. If he were smart, the combatlord would wait to strike until after Thanos had slain the wolver or the beast might attack him, too.

All of a sudden, the wolver charged toward Thanos, and Thanos jabbed it in the shoulder. The onlookers cheered in approval at the fight's first attack.

However, the wolver didn't seem to be injured in the least, only growling louder from what Thanos had done, licking its teeth, red eyes glaring at Thanos.

"Longsword!" Thanos yelled.

Right as she threw it to him, he dropped the trident to the ground and caught the longsword mid-air. But then suddenly, Ceres sensed he needed protection from fire—quick—and she yelled at him and also threw him a shield. Just as he caught the shield, the wolver inhaled, and

then it spewed fire from its mouth. The onlookers gasped, and Thanos ducked behind the shield, the flames blasting against the metal surface.

Once the wolver had run out of breath, Thanos dropped his shield, picked up the trident, and hurled it at the beast's head, piercing its eye.

The animal violently shook its head as it snarled and growled, sending the trident flying halfway across the arena, Ceres saw.

Without hesitating, Thanos tore toward the wolver, leapt into the air, and lifted his sword. On his way down, he stabbed the beast in the head, and it fell lifeless onto the red sand.

But even though the audience cheered, there was no rest. The combatlord that had been lying in wait charged, his spear and sword pointed straight at Thanos.

Thanos pulled and pulled, trying to dislodge the blade from the wolver's skull, Ceres saw. But it wouldn't budge. And he already had three weapons on the field; the trident on the other side of the arena, his shield too far to reach, and the blade wedged into the wolver's skull. Ceres knew it was against the rules to throw him another one.

She held her breath. The combatlord was close. Too close. She stepped forward.

Still pulling on the blade, Thanos looked at Ceres, his eyes wide with fear, his face twisted in desperation.

He was going to die.

And there was nothing Ceres could do to prevent it.

# **CHAPTER TEN**

Screaming, Thanos desperately tugged at the blade lodged in the wolver's skull, but even as fiercely as he tried, the sword would not budge in the least. Hearing the combatlord's footsteps approaching, he glanced back to see his enemy a mere ten feet away. His life depended on retrieving his sword, for he knew a weaponless warrior was a dead warrior.

Fraught, he looked to Ceres, but he knew three weapons were on the field and if she threw him another one, she would be punished.

She raised a palm toward him, and just as he heard the swooshing sound of his opponent's blade descending, Thanos's sword jutted into his hand as if by some mystical force.

Shocked at what happened but with no time to linger on it, Thanos spun and rolled on the ground, the combatlord's sword just missing him by a fraction of an inch, the crowd's roar peaking into a frenzy before retreating into a static hum.

Thanos was quick to hop to his feet, and just then, he heard Lucious calling for help. Seeing his opponent several feet away, Thanos afforded a quick glance and discovered Lucious stripped of a weapon, his weapon-keeper lying facedown in the red sand.

"Throw me something! Anything!" Lucious yelled to Ceres, his voice filled with rage. "Do it now or I'll have you skinned alive!"

As Thanos snapped his attention back towards his foe, he vaguely registered that Ceres tossed Lucious two daggers. But his irritation was replaced with alarm when he saw the combatlord hurling a spear at him.

Just as the spear approached, Thanos clenched a fist around it, stopping it from penetrating his heart, and then he whirled the spear around and flung it back at the combatlord, piercing his thigh exactly where he had meant to.

"Thanos! Thanos!" the audience shouted, fists pumping into the air.

The combatlord fell to his feet, moaning in pain, holding his leg, the spear protruding from it.

Recognizing his opportunity, Thanos ran behind the combatlord and hit him on the head with the hilt of his sword, knocking him unconscious.

However, even before he could look to the king for acceptance of his victory, Lucious encircled him—and suddenly Lucious's combatlord attacked Thanos, forcing Thanos to continue fighting.

The scoundrel pawned his combatlord onto me, Thanos thought.

It was as he had always suspected: Lucious had absolutely no honor.

While he was battling a new opponent, Thanos could see Lucious sauntering over to the iron gate.

"Let me in or I will kill you and find your family and torture them all to death!" Lucious yelled.

Thanos heard the gate rattling as it opened, the crowed booing Lucious.

"Thanos!" Ceres yelled, holding up two daggers.

Of course. He was growing weary and needed lighter weapons. He nodded toward her, and she threw them to him.

Right away, Thanos kicked the combatlord in the chest so he flew backward. But with impeccable balance, the combatlord landed on his feet and charged toward Thanos, sword in

hand. The combatlord lunged forward, thrusting his sword toward Thanos, but Thanos jumped out of the way.

As they moved around the arena, Thanos noticed that little by little, his nemesis grew exhausted, his chest heaving greatly with each breath, his movements slackening a hair. His plan was working. He didn't want to kill the man, no, only exhaust him so he could render him unconscious like he had the first one.

Right as Thanos approached his shield, he picked it up from the ground and flung it into the combatlord's face. The combatlord fell to the ground lifeless, and for the first time since he could remember since entering the arena, the spectators went silent.

Thanos panted and gazed up at the podium, awaiting the king's decision, hoping he would not be commanded to murder his unconscious adversary.

However, from what he knew about the blood-thirsty monarch, Thanos feared King Claudius would force him to do something he had worked hard to avoid—kill.

The king glowered at Thanos as if he didn't accept that the battle had ended in Thanos's favor, the tension between the two palpable, the entire Stade void of the faintest of sounds. After arising from his seat, the king walked to the edge of the platform, his hand outstretched, his thumb outstretched to the side.

Finally, the king lifted a thumb up with a frown, and the onlookers broke into applause.

Thanos couldn't believe it. Ceres and he had survived. They had survived!

He looked over at Ceres, feeling drops of sweat dripping from his hair and down his face. He nodded, and when she smiled, it was as if in that instance, the victory was complete.

He stared at her, stunned. She had saved his life more than once, and had done it in a way he did not understand.

And for the first time since he'd met her, he was beginning to wonder.

Who was she?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A tear rolled down Ceres's cheek as her fingers carefully skimmed the weapons laid out on tables in the practice arena. Amidst the twilight she heard laughter and music spilling out from the open palace windows, every royal inside those haughty walls celebrating today's great victories. It made her feel more alone than ever. It made her miss her brothers, her father, her home, Rexus, dearly. It made her mourn for the mother she'd never had.

Ceres paused and listened to the wind sighing through the trees, as she looked up and saw a few stars twinkling down on her. She inhaled the fresh air, the scent of roses and lilies filling her nostrils. The quiet was a welcome friend after the roaring crowd at the Stade. Even if she had been invited to the feast, she wouldn't have wanted to accept, having no desire to mingle with those pompous royals who were congratulating each other for a battle Thanos and she had won.

Thanos. Her insides coiled tightly when she thought of how he hadn't even bothered to see her after the Killings. There was no "thank you." No "job well done." But she didn't need his approval or his praise, she reminded herself. She didn't need anyone.

Upset with herself for allowing such ludicrous melancholy, she wiped the tears from her cheeks, picked up a spear, and walked to the center of the practice arena.

Swinging the spear overhead, she whirled it around until a swooshing sound could be heard. She then hurled it at a training dummy, hitting it right on the center of the smallest circle. She smiled

Feeling much lighter, she meandered over to the table again and picked out a sword—one that reminded her of her own, its blade thin and long, its hilt bronze and gold.

Lunging forward, she pretended to attack Lucious—the coward—her sword moving with deftness, her attention and anger on her imaginary enemy.

Keep light afoot. She jumped. Attack and defend. She lunged. Be fluid like water, strong like a mountain. It was what her trainers at the palace had pounded into her. And it was what she had practiced for hours and months and years.

"After today, I would have thought you'd be tucked in bed, falling fast asleep."

She turned with a start to find Thanos stepping out from behind a willow tree, smiling.

Ceres lowered her sword and turned toward him, her cheeks hot with embarrassment. She saw he wore a loose linen shirt, the neck open, and dark curls framed his face. She tried to hate him in this moment.

But somehow her heart had warmed with his presence.

"I could say the same to you," she said, raising an eyebrow, hoping he wouldn't notice her racing heart.

"I was about to—but then I heard someone practicing in the arena below my room."

She looked up the tower to the balcony, his door open, red curtains dancing in the wind.

"I'm sorry I kept you up, my lord," she said, looking back at him.

"Thanos, please," he said, bowing toward her, keeping eye contact.

He smiled and took a step toward her.

"You weren't really keeping me up. I left the party as soon as I could to look for you, and that's when I saw you from my balcony," he said.

"Why were you looking for me?" she asked, trying to ignore the nervous energy that pulsed through her.

"I wanted to thank you for today," he said.

She stared at him blankly for a moment, trying to hold onto the anger for him that was quickly vanishing.

"What brilliant skill you have," he said. "You have been taught well."

She wouldn't reveal she had been dressing up as a boy, training with the combatlords at the palace. He could report her. And he would, wouldn't he? They might be allies in the arena, but in the real world, they were enemies.

"My father was a bladesmith," she said, hoping he wouldn't pry anymore into her training. He nodded.

"And where is he now?" Thanos asked.

Ceres looked down, thoughts of her father hundreds of miles away weighing heavily on her mind.

"He had to take work elsewhere," she whispered.

"I'm sad to hear, Ceres," Thanos said, stepping even closer.

She wished he would stay away, for when he was this close, it was hard to consider him her nemesis and to despise him so.

"And what of your mother?" he asked, watching her closely.

"She tried to sell me into slavery," Ceres admitted, thinking there was no harm in telling him the truth about her mother.

He nodded once, and squeezed his lips together.

"I'm sorry," he said.

It irritated her that he apologized for that. A prince. It was partly his fault her father hadn't been paid enough at the palace and needed to look for work elsewhere.

"How are your wounds?" she asked, walking over to the table and placing the sword on it, hoping to steer the conversation onto safer subjects.

"They'll heal," he said as he followed after her.

Standing next to her, his arms folded, he studied her face for a moment.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"What?" Ceres said.

"Out in the arena today. First, you threw me a shield. I have never heard of a wolver, let alone that any animal could spew flames."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I had heard of wolvers from my father," she fibbed.

"Then, my sword...it was lodged in the wolver's skull," he said, his eyes squinting. "You raised your hand and the blade jutted into my hand with this force—"

"I did no such thing!" Ceres interrupted him, backing away, afraid he was onto her.

He glanced at her with kind eyes and cocked his head to the side.

"Are you saying I imagined it?" he asked.

She balked. Was he trying to trap her? She needed to choose her words carefully or she could be thrown into prison for implying he was a liar.

"I am certain I don't know what you are talking about," she said.

His eyebrows knitted together and he opened his mouth as if to speak, but instead, he stepped toward her, placed a hand on her shoulder, and let it slide down her arm.

A delightful shiver went through Ceres, and she loathed how her body betrayed her so.

"No matter," he said. "Thank you, though. Your selections of weapons made all the difference."

"Yes, perhaps your lovely hair would have been singed off had I not offered the shield," she said with a smirk, trying to make light of the situation.

"You think I have lovely hair?" he asked.

Her breathing staggered, and she couldn't understand how she could have let such a flippant comment escape her lips.

"No," she said rather sharply, folding her arms in front of her chest.

His lips twitched.

"Well, then, I don't think you have beautiful eyes, either," he said.

"Then it's settled."

He nodded and Ceres walked over to a willow tree.

"It's getting late," she said.

"Perhaps I may escort you home?" he said, following her again.

Ceres lowered her gaze and shook her head.

"Or perhaps you need a place to stay?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Should she tell him the truth? If she didn't, she knew she would have to sleep outdoors every night.

"Yes," she said.

"There is no room for you inside the castle walls, but just down that path next to the well is a vacant summer home, and you are welcome to stay there."

He pointed to a small cottage secluded by trees, covered in vines.

"I would be very grateful," she said.

He took her arm and was about to walk her there, but then a girl emerged from the bushes. She was lovely, Ceres thought, with blonde hair and brown eyes, her skin as smooth as silk, her lips blood red. She wore a white silk dress, and when a breeze gusted against Ceres's face, she noticed the girl smelled of roses.

Feeling a bit awkward, Ceres pulled her arm away from Thanos's.

"Hello, Stephania," Thanos said, and Ceres could detect a slight irritation in his voice.

Stephania smiled at Thanos, but when her eyes reached Ceres, the girl frowned.

"Whom have we here?" Stephania asked.

"This is Ceres, my weapon-keeper," Thanos said.

"Where are you going with your weapon-keeper?" Stephania asked.

"That is none of your concern," Thanos replied.

"I am certain King Claudius would be thrilled to know you are meeting with your female weapon-keeper late at night, escorting her to unknown destinations," Stephania said.

"I'm certain the king would be equally thrilled to learn you are wandering around the palace grounds late at night in your sleepwear, unescorted by your handmaidens," Thanos snapped.

Stephania lifted her nose up, turned on her heels, and vanished down the paved walkway and back into the palace.

"Never mind her," Thanos said. "She's just upset I refused to marry her."

"It was her?" Ceres asked.

He didn't respond to her question, just jutted out his elbow, offering it to her again.

"Perhaps she was right. Maybe this is inappropriate," Ceres said.

"Nonsense," he said, and then he paused before smirking and saying, "Unless you were considering making it so?"

"Of course not," Ceres said, bothered, her cheeks flushing hot.

When she looped an arm through his to prove her point, she became irritated with herself for liking it, and immediately, she strengthened her resolve to not let the charming prince anywhere near her heart.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Standing atop a hill overlooking Cumorla, the capital of Haylon, a remote isle in the Mazeronian Sea, Commander Akila's heart soared with joy as he watched the statue of King Claudius come tumbling down. He inhaled the air, and the sweet sensation of justice filled him, as smoke from the king's castle rose into the azure heaven above the city.

*Justice*, Akila thought. Justice was finally being served today. Every last royal relative of the king had been locked inside that abominable seven-spired structure, and now it had burned down.

Wind pushed at his armor as he beheld the thousands of men on the hillside, their red banners flapping for the revolution's cause. Before twilight, he would lead them into a battle that would free them, finally, from centuries of oppression. His chest swelled with pride.

The people of Haylon had suffered long enough under the rule of tyrannical kings. They had paid unreasonable taxes, sent their best warriors to Delos, and bowed their heads to the ten thousand Empire soldiers that plagued the streets day and night. His entire life, Akila had watched women and daughters raped, children flogged and arrested. The young were forced to work long days in the king's fields, returning with welts and dejected eyes. He knew it was long past since they needed to take back their freedom, to take back their lives.

A messenger approached.

"Western Cumorla has been secured, sir," he said.

"The Empire soldiers?" Akila asked.

"Fleeing to the east."

"How many civilian lives lost?"

"Three hundred, thus far."

Akila clenched his fists. It was less than expected, but each life lost was a weight on his conscience, another son or daughter dead, a mother, brother, sister, father butchered while defending this land's freedom.

He dismissed the messenger and signaled to his lieutenant to alert the final wave of militias. They would trap the invaders on the western entrance and treat them with the same courtesy with which they had treated his people. Not much would be left of them after that, and that brought great joy to Akila's heart.

Akila kicked his horse forward, leading the lieutenant and his men into battle. He rode down the hill and in through the northern city gates, past balconied passageways, closed inns, and padlocked work shacks. He passed families huddled in corners, children lying facedown on the stone streets, and horses on the run without riders. The militias followed Akila without the city walls, hiding behind trenches to await the thousands of Empire soldiers that would soon flee through the gates and try to escape toward the harbor.

Not a one must escape, Akila had told his men this morning as he had ordered hundreds of men to stand guard at the docks. For even one escapee meant word would get back to Delos—and then the king would send tens of thousands of Empire soldiers to Haylon.

Minutes passed, and minutes more, until they had been lying in wait for nearly an hour, as twilight descended.

Then, suddenly, the first Empire soldier rode out on a horse, holding the Empire ensign, Akila saw.

"Long live King Claudius!" the soldier yelled.

Three flaming arrows hit him in the chest.

He fell off his horse, into the canal below the bridge.

Three more Empire soldiers followed, all felled, too, as they rode through the gates.

Soldier after soldier then trickled out of the city gates, and a brutal battle ensued.

Akila led the way with a fierce battle cry as night fell. All around him men were losing their lives to the cause of freedom, a freedom they would never see, but that perhaps their children would.

Akila gathered his most ruthless warriors to ride with him into the city, and he looked side to side to see them now, their horses thundering in his ears. He led the group of three hundred through the southern entrance, and then as they rode split them into four groups of fifty, each to search for Empire soldiers in different directions.

With torches and swords, Akila led his men down winding streets, stopping at every house, searching—hunting high and low, not a single enemy to be found. Almost at the end of their search, they happened upon a stable behind the high priest's mansion, and Akila thought it looked like an excellent hiding place for Empire soldiers.

As he was about to command his men to search the stable, the high priest stepped out from his house.

"Have you seen any Empire soldiers this way?" Akila asked, descending his horse.

"No," the priest said, his hands clasped as if in reverence in front of his body.

But there was something unsettling in the priest's eyes that made Akila think he was lying.

"Search the stable," Akila told his soldiers, and they immediately headed toward and entered the building.

There was a sudden uproar, and when Akila turned toward the commotion, the priest took off running down the street. Akila ran after him, but when he arrived at the street, he saw the priest galloping on a horse in the direction of the southern entrance.

Akila whistled, and once his horse was by his side, he hopped onto it and rode after the escapee. Through the city gates the priest went, with Akila on his heels, but Akila couldn't quite catch up to him.

Riding eastward, Akila whipped his horse onward relentlessly, his eyes on the escapee. He passed palm trees and hopped fences, rode through grassy fields and sand dunes. Following the priest down a steep sloping hill, it was then he saw a makeshift dock, hidden below a dome of trees. None of his men had been ordered to watch this dock because no one knew it was there.

To his dread, he saw the priest push away in a small sailboat, the wind catching the red sail immediately.

Almost there, Akila wondered if his horse would make the leap from the landing pier and into the boat, the distance increasing by the second. The horse's muscles tensed beneath him, but Akila drove it forward.

The horse leapt from the dock and into the vessel, skidding as it landed on the slippery wooden deck, throwing Akila off in the fall.

Slightly dazed from the rough landing, Akila rose to his feet and drew his sword.

The priest charged immediately, his sword held high, and he lunged and stabbed with the ferocity of a man who knew his life was at stake.

Akila dashed forward and slashed his blade toward the traitor, slicing him in the face. The man growled, dropped his sword, and whipped out a dagger, flinging it at Akila. But Akila saw it coming and blocked the dagger with his blade.

The priest spun and hurled a basket at Akila, then a wooden crate. Akila hit them away. Next, the priest grabbed a net and tossed it so Akila's sword hand became wrapped in it, and then he pulled on the net, causing Akila to stumble forward.

Coming at him, the priest picked up his sword and aimed it at Akila's chest, but Akila wore heavy armor and the man's sword slid off the metal like butter, causing the priest to stumble forward.

Taking advantage, Akila shook the net from off his arm and stabbed the priest.

He collapsed to the deck, dead.

Akila pulled his blade out of the priest's limp body and cleaned it on the net before sliding it back in its sheath.

Not wasting a second, he looked to the city walls, and seeing the black sky was turning navy blue, he realized he needed to return to his men, and quick. He sailed the boat back to the dock, set the boat on fire, and rode with all he had toward the eastern entrance.

Just as he arrived, pink graced the sky. Victory was called, and a new banner was placed atop the outer walls of Cumorla.

As bells of freedom tolled through the capital, Akila rode through the city's streets with his militia, men, women, and children cheering them on.

He looked toward the north and thought of his family members in Delos, still in bondage, and he knew in his heart that freedom was coming for them, too.

For here, for the first time in history, he stood on the first free land in the Empire.

The revolution had begun.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ceres felt a pang of fear as she realized someone was following her. She quickened her pace on the rocky white pathway, lit by the morning sun, winding her way amidst green lawns and endless rows of flowers, her mind still reeling from her encounter the night before with Thanos. She paused and looked over her shoulder, listening for the footsteps she knew she had just heard.

Yet there was no one in sight.

Ceres froze and listened. She didn't have time for annoying games. She needed to get to the palace training ground with the weapons in the barrow before practice started, or Thanos would be weaponless.

Who could it be?

Overheated, she glanced up into the sky as a drop of sweat rolled down her forehead. The sun was a hot glowing disk already, and just like the gardens, she was withering. The muscles in her arms and shoulders started to burn, but she couldn't afford to rest. She was late as it was.

Pushing the heavy handcart, she picked up her pace, and when the footsteps came again, and she spun and saw no one, her irritation increased.

Finally, as she neared the gazebo, the footsteps grew louder, and when she glanced over her shoulder again, this time she spotted Stephania, wearing a red silk dress, a golden wreath in her golden hair.

Of course. The snooping princess.

"Hello, weapon girl," Stephania said, a slight frown on her face.

Ceres bowed her head and turned back around, eager to get away. But before Ceres could escape, Stephania stepped in front of her, blocking the narrow path.

"How does a girl become something as lowly as a weapon-keeper, I wonder?" Stephania asked, her hand hitting her hips.

"Thanos hired me," Ceres replied. "Now if you would so kindly—"

"You will address me as your highness!" Stephania snapped.

Ceres startled and she wanted to give the spoiled girl a piece of her mind, but instead, she kept her head down, reminding herself she wasn't here to protect her honor, only to fight for the revolution.

"Yes, your highness," she said.

"It is important you know your place, would you not agree?" Stephania said.

She walked a slow circle around Ceres, eyes probing, hands clasped behind her back, and fancy shoes clicking against the bricks as she strode.

"Since the day you arrived, I have been watching you. I will *always* be watching you. Do you hear?" Stephania said.

Ceres pinched her lips together so she wouldn't be tempted to say something disrespectful in return, although it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain silent.

"I see the way you look at Prince Thanos, but you would be foolish to think he would consider you anything but—"

"I can assure you—" Ceres started.

Stephania stepped so close to Ceres's face that their noses were an inch away, and then she whispered through gritted teeth, "Don't interrupt your superior when she is speaking!"

Ceres squeezed fingers around the cart's handles, her forearms now burning.

"Prince Thanos may have hired you, but as his future wife, it is my responsibility to ensure his associations are trustworthy," Stephania said.

Now Ceres couldn't hold back anymore.

"Thanos told me he wasn't going to marry you," she said.

Stephania flinched.

"Thanos is a smart man, but he is no good judge of character. He probably failed to learn what transgressions there might be in your past before he hired you."

Did Stephania know about how she killed the slaver and his guards? Ceres wondered, now considering she could lose her position at the palace and be punished for it if it came out.

"There are no transgressions in my past," Ceres said sternly.

Stephania laughed.

"Oh, come now. Everyone has done something in the past they are ashamed of," she said.

Stephania picked up a sword from the handcart and poked Ceres's leg with it. Oh, how Ceres wanted to give the rotten princess a lesson in swordsmanship, revealing how inept her clean, dainty, little monarch hands were. But she remained immovable.

"And believe me," Stephania said as she raised the blade to Ceres's face, a hair away. "If there is so much as a sliver of a transgression in your past, I will find out, and then I will have you thrown out of the palace, headfirst."

Stephania tossed the sword onto the ground next to Ceres's feet, the blade clattering as it landed.

"Thanos is mine, do you hear?" Stephania said. "He has been promised to me by the king and queen and if you get in the way of our marriage, I will personally slit your throat while you are sleeping in my future summer home."

Stephania shoved Ceres with her shoulder as she walked by, heading toward the palace training grounds.

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The second Ceres arrived at the practice arena, she could sense that something was wrong. It wasn't that Stephania was glowering at her from beneath the willow trees, although their conversation was still swimming through Ceres's mind, irritating her to no end. It wasn't that it seemed the day would turn into the hottest one of the year, or that Thanos wasn't here yet, practicing.

As she rolled the handcart toward their weapon table, her eyes followed Lucious in the middle of the practice arena. He was clutching a bottle of wine in one hand, a sword in the other, and his new weapon-keeper knelt before him with a worried expression, while balancing an apple on his head. The weapon-keeper had several small cuts on his face, and one on his neck, Ceres saw.

"Stay...very...still," Lucious said, closing his eyes while pointing the tip of his sword toward the weapon-keeper's head.

The other royal warriors and their weapon-keepers stood watching, rolling their eyes, arms folded across chests.

Stepping closer, Ceres could see that Lucious's face and arms were bruised, one eye swollen and red. She couldn't remember him becoming injured yesterday at the Killings. Had something happened after the event?

She walked over to the table and started laying weapons out in preparation for when Thanos would arrive. Swords, daggers, a trident, a flogger.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Lucious stagger, causing the other royal warriors and a few weapon-keepers to laugh.

Lucious touched the tip of his sword to the weapon-keeper's nose, and the weapon-keeper winced with closed eyes as a drop of blood made its way into his mouth.

"Don't move a muscle or you could lose your head," Lucious said. "And you would have no one to blame but yourself."

This was insane, Ceres thought. Couldn't someone do something? She glanced at the others, but no one said a word or seemed to have any intent on helping Lucious's victim.

Next, Lucious raised his sword, but before he swung, the weapon-keeper whimpered and the apple fell from his head and onto the ground, bouncing on impact, rolling a few feet away.

"I told you to remain still!" Lucious snapped.

"I...I'm sorry," the weapon-keeper said, cowering backward, fright in his eyes.

"Get out of my sight, you useless piece of dung!" Lucious yelled.

The young man rose from his knees and scurried over to Lucious's weapon table. Just then, Thanos arrived.

"Good morrow," he said to Ceres, not having witnessed what just happened. "I trust you slept well?"

"Yes, thank you," Ceres said, now all of a sudden feeling much lighter from his presence.

She continued to place weapons on the table, but when he remained quiet, she looked over at him. To her surprise, she found that he was studying her face with eyes that seemed to want possess her, and when she raised an eyebrow at him, his lips tilted upward into a hint of a smile.

She felt her cheeks warm.

Without a word between them, he began helping her organize the weapons.

That's odd that he would help me, Ceres thought. He's a prince. Perhaps he was trying to show appreciation in return for how she had helped him at the Killings? He didn't have to do that, Ceres knew, though she did know one thing. When he showed kindness like this, it was becoming more and more difficult to reconcile the caring man before her with the arrogant man she had always thought he was.

Ceres glanced over to Stephania, and the princess's eyes were spewing hatred toward her. Surely, it couldn't be that Stephania was jealous of her? Thanos wouldn't take interest in a commoner, would he?

Ceres shook her head and laughed a bit, throwing the ridiculous thought out of her mind.

"What is it?" Thanos asked, smiling.

"Nothing," Ceres said. "So, what happened to Lucious anyway?"

"You mean the bruises?"

"Yes."

"The king had him beaten for how spinelessly he acted yesterday," Thanos said.

Even though she, too, thought Lucious a spineless imbecile, Ceres couldn't help but feel sorry for him. She had herself been bruised and battered countless times, and it wasn't something she wished upon anyone.

All of a sudden, Lucious yelled at his weapon-keeper, and just as she glanced up, she saw Lucious punching the young man in the stomach.

"Why isn't anyone doing anything?" Ceres asked.

Immediately, Thanos strode over to Lucious, stopping a few feet away.

"What are you trying to prove?" Thanos asked.

Lucious scoffed.

"Nothing."

Thanos took a threatening step toward Lucious.

"Why would I have anything to prove to anyone? I mean, look at you, anything is better than having a ratty, thin girl as a weapon-keeper," Lucious said with a scornful laugh.

"I suggest you treat your weapon-keeper with respect, and if you don't, I'm sure the king would see nothing wrong in leaving you to fend for yourself out in the arena," Thanos said.

"Is that a threat?" Lucious asked, eyes seething.

Just then a messenger arrived and handed Thanos a scroll. Thanos read it, and looking back toward Ceres, he gave her a nod before heading toward the palace.

Had he been summoned? Ceres wondered, not too thrilled about being left without any instruction.

An Empire soldier stepped into the center of the arena and listed in which order the royals would spar, with Lucious against Argus first.

"Finally!" Lucious said.

He flung the bottle of wine onto the ground, shattering it, and his weapon-keeper offered him a sword. He snatched it, and then with contrived enthusiasm, Ceres thought, he strode onto the practice arena where Argus waited.

The Empire soldier signaled the start of the match, and the royals began to spar. Lucious's first attack ended with his sword smashing into the ground, some onlookers snickering, others rolling their eyes. Lucious used his energy unwisely, Ceres saw, his jabs and lunges careless, with far too much effort.

The contenders took their places again, blade against blade, but within seconds of starting over, only a few hits in, Argus had hit Lucious's sword out of his hands and pointed his tip against Lucious's chest.

As soon as the Empire soldier named Argus the winner, Argus lowered his sword and jogged off the practice arena.

"Come on, cousin. Give me one more chance!" Lucious yelled after him. "I wasn't even trying!"

When Lucious saw Argus wouldn't entertain him, he turned to his own weapon-keeper.

"Xavier, spar with me," Lucious said.

"S...sire?" Xavier said with a nervous stutter. "I would, my lord, but I have no skill."

Angered, Lucious darted over to his weapon table, picked up a dagger, and stabbed Xavier in the abdomen.

Ceres's hand hit her mouth, and she gasped with the others as the weapon-keeper cried and fell to the ground, arms wrapped around his waist.

"Get the runt out of my sight!" Lucious yelled.

Within a few seconds, Empire soldiers hoisted the moaning weapon-keeper onto a stretcher and carried him away.

"What I don't understand," Lucious said, making his way over to Georgio's table, "is how I always get stuck with incompetence. Georgio, friend, lend me your boy."

Georgio stepped between his weapon-keeper and Lucious.

"Lucious, you know I hold you in high regard. But this is insanity. Go home," Georgio said with a chuckle, resting a hand on Lucious's shoulder.

"Get your pretty-boy hands off me!" Lucious yelled, whacking Georgio's arm away.

Yelling obscenities, Lucious walked over to another weapon-keeper, demanding he spar with him, but his master refused, too.

"Will no one fight me?" Lucious yelled, turning in a slow circle as his eyes scanned the bystanders. "Are you nothing but pitiful chicken droppings?"

With animosity in cold eyes, he continued to scrutinize the spectators, but most turned their eyes away.

Then he saw Ceres.

A pit formed in her stomach as he stomped toward her, pointing.

"You!" he yelled. "You will fight me!"

Ceres felt she would win a match against him, yet she was reluctant to accept, fearing she might hurt him, or make him look like the incompetent warrior he was in front of his peers. And if she made him look incompetent, she suspected Lucious would make certain she lost her position at the palace.

"I mean no disrespect, but I cannot fight you," she said.

"You will!" Lucious said. "In fact, I command you to spar with me."

She glanced at the others, some of them shaking their heads, others looking away, Stephania grinned wickedly. Could she refuse him? And what would happen if she did? Would Lucious fire her? Reason told her he probably would.

"Then I must accept the command," she said, thinking it might be better to accept than refuse him.

Lucious's face lit up.

"But first, may I fetch my sword from the blacksmith's chalet?" Ceres asked, thinking of her father's sword.

"Hurry along, little rat," Lucious said.

His comment exasperated her, but she would not let insulting words from a drunken coward affect her.

Excited as a spring day to finally be able to use her sword in real one-on-one combat, Ceres ran to the blacksmith's chalet and located her sword in the loft where she had left it. She sprinted back to the practice arena and took her spot across Lucious, who was standing ready with his own sword.

Lucious took one look at Ceres's sword, and his jaw dropped open.

"Where would a rodent like you get a weapon like that?" he asked with covetous eyes.

"My father gave it to me."

"Well, what a fool he must have been," Lucious said.

"And why is that?" Ceres asked.

"Today I will triumph over you, and when I do, your weapon will be mine."

Lucious lunged at Ceres, their blades colliding. Although Lucious was rather lacking in muscularity, gangly even, he was strong. After blocking a few blows, she began to doubt whether or not she would be able to win.

He slashed again but she resisted, and sword pressing against sword, they encircled as they stared into each other's eyes. She could see his hatred for her in those hazel irises, and she wondered what she possibly could have done to deserve it.

He shoved her hard so she had to move back several steps so as not to fall, and then he hacked at her from above, as she blocked from below.

A low rumble of excitement made its way through the bystanders.

Lunging, she slashed, but he retreated and wobbled a bit, his brow misted with sweat, his shoulders tense.

But then Lucious's eyes darkened, and he swung at her, rashly. She jumped over his blade, and just as she landed, she kicked him in the abdomen so he fell onto his back.

He didn't move for a moment, and Ceres wondered if he was unconscious. But a sudden shriek spilled out of his lips and he sat up. Leaning on his sword, he climbed to his feet while mumbling something underneath his breath.

"You're better than I thought, I'll give you that," Lucious said. "But I was going easy on you. Now I'm finished playing games, and you, little rat, must die."

Sweat stung Ceres's eyes, and she raised her sword as she exhaled several forceful breaths. She could feel Stephania's glare at the back of her head, and it made her want to triumph all the more.

Coming at her, Lucious attacked with all his might. She pretended she would meet him head on, but then swerved last minute and kicked her legs between his, and he tumbled to the ground onto his belly.

His sword skidded across the ground, stopping a few feet away, and then there was utter silence.

Lucious rolled onto his back. Ceres stood above him, holding the tip of her sword at his throat, waiting for the Empire soldier to call the winner.

But the soldier remained silent.

She looked up, and the Empire soldier still said nothing, an impassive expression on his face.

Glowering, Lucious climbed to a standing position and spit on the ground next to Ceres's feet.

"I refuse to acknowledge a girl's victory," he said.

Ceres took a step forward.

"I won fair and square," she said.

Lucious raised his hand and backhanded her across the cheek, the demoralizing assault causing several observers to gasp. Without even a second thought, acting only on rage and impulse, Ceres slapped him in return.

Right as her hand hit his face, she knew it was a huge mistake; yet there was not a thing she could do to take it back. Everyone had seen it, and although she wasn't quite certain what the punishment was for striking a royal, she knew it would be severe.

Holding his cheek, Lucious looked at her with wide, surprised eyes and for a few moments, it was as if time had frozen.

"Arrest her!" he yelled, pointing at her.

Ceres faltered a few steps back, time passing as if in a nightmare. But her mind seemed to not want to function, and before she could even think what to do or what to say, two Empire soldiers had grabbed her arms.

A moment later they were dragging her away, far from here, and far from the life she had almost had.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Rexus!"

Rexus turned to see a frantic Nesos sprinting toward him, and his heart flooded with dread. Nesos had been dispatched on an important mission, so his being here couldn't be good, Rexus knew.

Nesos skidded to a halt right in front of Rexus, dust stirring the air, and rested hands on knees while he panted.

"I just came... from northern Delos and... the Empire soldiers are everywhere... saying new laws are being enacted, they are hauling off... firstborn men, slaughtering... anyone who refuses," Nesos said, still breathless, sweat running down his face.

Rexus's blood curdled. He shot to his feet and took off at a run toward the main entrance of the castle. He had to warn the others.

"Next they will attack Delos east, then west...and finally south," Nesos said, trailing after

Rexus had an idea.

"Take with you a few men and send every dove we have to warn our supporters," he said. "Ask them to meet below North Square as soon as possible and with as many weapons as they can carry. We will free these firstborns so they can join the rebellion. I will gather the supporters here and ride out immediately."

"Right away," Nesos said.

It begins here, Rexus thought as he ran toward the others. Today they would make a stand and kill in the name of freedom.

Within moments Rexus had over a hundred men and fifty women assembled in front of the cascading waterfall, ready on horses, weapons in hand. As he explained the plan to the revolutionaries, he saw fear in their eyes. A fearful warrior would not win any battles, he knew. And so he stood before them to speak.

"I see in each of your eyes the terror of death," Rexus said.

"Fear you not death?" a man yelled from the crowd.

"Yes, I do. I have no wish to die. But more than fearing death, my deepest fear is living the rest of my life on my knees," Rexus said. "More than fearing death, I fear I will never know freedom. And these firstborn men can help us attain that."

"But we have children!" a woman yelled. "They will be punished for our rebellion!"

"I have no children of my own, but I know the fear of losing someone dear. If we win, your children and your children's children will never know oppression the way we have. And would you not rather your children follow in your example of courage than your example of fear?" he said.

The militia grew ghostly silent, and nothing but the roar of the waterfall and the occasional neighing of a horse could be heard.

"Do not fool yourselves into believing the Empire will give you liberty," Rexus said.

"I, like many here, are with you, friend," a man shouted. "But do you think we have a real chance at winning this war?"

"The war will not be won today," Rexus continued. "Not tomorrow, even. But eventually, we will win. A people who demands freedom will in the end claim it."

Heads nodded and a few lifted weapons into the air.

"We are few. They are many," another man said.

"We, the oppressed, outnumber the oppressors a hundred to one, and as soon as we have enough supporters, we will triumph!" Rexus said.

"They will never permit us to usurp the throne," a woman said.

"Permit?" Rexus said. "You do not need permission from any king, queen, or royal to free yourselves from the bonds of oppression. Today, and every day from now on, give yourselves permission and fight to take back your liberty!"

One by one, the rebels raised weapons into the air, soon the sound of their cheers overpowering the waterfall.

The time, Rexus knew, had come.

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As he rode toward Delos, followed by his men, the sound of the horses galloping in his ears, Rexus's thoughts turned toward Ceres. She had looked so thin and vulnerable when he saw her last, and his heart had nearly burst with emotion. Like every time before, he had been such a fool—had only kissed her briefly when he wanted to take her into his arms and keep her there forever.

From atop his horse, he saw the palace in the distance, and it haunted him to think of her alone amidst a sea of corruption, amidst the very wolves they fought against, her life endangered at every turn. He wanted to ride like the wind and save Ceres from such a place.

Ever since he could remember, he had wanted to marry Ceres; indeed, a large part of his motivation to join the rebellion was so that their future children could live in freedom. Yet, every time he saw her, his tongue twisted into a thousand knots, and he had never been able to say those words to her. He was a fool.

Riding to an uncertain fate, he suddenly realized that it wasn't true what he had said to the rebels just minutes ago. His deepest fear wasn't living the rest of his life on his knees. His deepest fear was that Ceres would have to do that, and that they might never have the chance to be together.

\*

Rexus arrived at the North Square with his troops, heavy fog a dense curtain around him, the city of Delos breathing like a ghost town. The trip had been more gruesome than he could ever have imagined—bodies lying facedown, contorted in unnatural position, mothers holding their dead children, sobbing, houses pillaged and plundered, blood flowing down the cobblestone streets.

And this, he knew, was just the beginning.

The scout he had sent out reported that there were over a thousand Empire soldiers in the piazza—though it was difficult to see clearly in such weather. At the moment, the soldiers were preparing to eat, so it would be the perfect time to attack.

Rexus glanced back at noble faces and dear friends. Not a one had proper armor like the Empire soldiers had, although most had been trained sufficiently in battle. There was no way this small army of roughly two hundred could triumph over a thousand Empire soldiers. Had he led these brave men and women into a suicide mission? he wondered.

If the doves had arrived to their destinations, a few more men and women would be on their way, he knew, perhaps adding another hundred to the militia, but that was still not nearly enough to defeat a thousand.

"But hundreds upon hundreds of young men—firstborns—are locked up in wagons in the center of the piazza," the scout told Rexus.

"Hundreds, you say?" Rexus asked, his heart growing hopeful.

The scout nodded.

Rexus named thirty men, himself included, whose main goal would be to break open the locks of the wagons and invite the firstborns to fight with them, increasing the rebellion's numbers. The other men and women would fight off the Empire soldiers, distracting them from noticing their new recruits were being stolen.

By the time Rexus had solidified the plan, more than a hundred additional revolutionaries had arrived, ready to fight with them.

Rexus ordered Nesos, the scout, and half the militia to attack from the north, and then he waited with nervous patience until the scout returned, saying the rebels had arrived safely at the other side of North Square.

This was a significant moment, he thought. For centuries, the oppression had been a curse over the land, a chain around hundreds of thousands of people's necks.

Trembling, yet resolute, Rexus raised his sword.

"For freedom!" he yelled as he led the revolutionaries into battle.

As they rode toward the square, horse hooves pounding against the rocks below, every rebel held breaths of dread, but also breaths of hope, Rexus could feel.

I must be strong for them, he thought, despite the weakness that pollutes my heart.

And so he willed his horse forward even though he feared death would take him if he didn't stop.

Rexus rode his horse as far as he could onto the battlefield, toward the wagons filled with firstborns, until the congestion of fighters prevented him from riding any further. He let out a great battle cry as he threw himself into the fray.

Rexus raised his sword and stabbed one soldier through the heart, sliced another's throat, and drove his sword through a third's abdomen, the cries of wounded men all around him.

An Empire soldier pulled Rexus from his horse and came at him with his sword, but Rexus ducked and then kicked the soldier in the knee, a sickening crack of bone.

The next Empire soldier—a monster of a man—hit Rexus's sword out of his hand. Weaponless, Rexus flung himself at the soldier, digging thumbs into the man's eyes.

The giant shrieked and socked Rexus in the stomach so he fell to the ground. Another soldier came at Rexus, and yet another.

Soon he was surrounded, three against one.

He saw his sword only a few feet away and scurried on hands and knees for it, but a soldier stood in his way. Rexus snatched the dagger from his boot and flung it into the soldier's neck before grabbing his sword and hopping to his feet.

The giant, now with a spear in his hands, sprang toward Rexus. Rexus hopped back and hacked the spear to the ground and then stepped on it, breaking it. With all his force, he kicked the brute in the abdomen. Nothing happened. Instead, Rexus stabbed his opponent in the foot, but he was punished with a fist to the side of his head, and he went crashing to the ground, his ear throbbing.

He staggered to his feet, his surroundings spinning, and suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his arm, warm blood spilling out from the fresh wound. He cried out.

After a moment he was able to see clearly, and he plunged his sword into the giant's lower abdomen. The Empire soldier fell to his knees and Rexus stepped aside as the soldier fell forward onto his face.

Shouts caught his attention, and he looked up to see the wagons crammed with the firstborn men a mere twenty feet away. He ran over to them, slashing more Empire soldiers on the way, and slashed the lock off the first door.

"Fight with us!" he yelled as the young men streamed out. "Win your freedom!"

Rexus ran to the next wagon, and the next, smashing the locks open, releasing as many firstborns as were imprisoned, asking them to fight. Most picked up swords of fallen soldiers and joined in the battle.

As the fog lightened, Rexus was saddened to see several of his men lay fallen on the cobblestones, his allies in eternity, his friends no more. But to his great joy, many more of the Empire soldiers lay lifeless, too.

"Retreat!" Rexus cried, seeing that he had accomplished his mission.

A horn blared through the fog, echoing in the streets, and his people fled from the battle, scattering into side alleyways, vanishing down main roads, raising hands into the air, their victory cries echoing through the streets.

He looked into the faces of the living—now friends for life—and he could see a fire kindled within each of their eyes. It was the spirit of the revolution. And soon that flicker would turn into a fiery inferno that would destroy the entire Empire.

Everything was about to change.

#### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ceres sat on the cold stone dungeon floor and watched the small boy beside her, squirming in pain, and wondered if he would live. He lay there, belly down, his pale skin white in the dimness, eyes halfway open, still recovering from a flogging in the market. He was awaiting his sentence, just like everyone else in this dungeon.

Just like her.

She looked around to see the cell filled with men, women, and children, some chained to the wall, others free to roam around. It was dark in here, and the smell of urine was even more prominent here than in the slaver cart, with no breeze to carry away the stench. The stone walls were slick with grime and dried blood, the ceiling looming over them like the weight of the world, barely high enough for her to stand fully erect in, and the floor was covered in smeared feces and mouse-droppings.

Worriedly, Ceres glanced down at the boy again. He hadn't moved from his position since she had been thrown in here yesterday, but his chest was still rising and sinking with silent breaths.

With the sun beaming in through the small barred window, she saw that the wounds on his back were healing with the fabric of his tunic stuck to it. Ceres wanted to do something—anything—to relieve his pain, but she had already asked to help him several times and there had been no response, not even a flicker in his pale blue eyes.

Ceres stood and tucked herself into the corner, eyes swollen from crying, mouth and throat parched from thirst. She shouldn't have hit a royal across the face, she knew that, but when she had done it, she had only reacted.

Would Thanos come for her? she wondered. Or were his promises just as rotten as all the other royals'?

The pregnant woman sitting opposite her rubbed her swollen belly, moaning softly, and Ceres wondered if she had gone into labor. Perhaps the woman would have to give birth in this wretched hole. She looked down at the little boy again and her heart ached when she considered it wasn't many years since Sartes was that size, and remembered how she used to sing lullabies to him until he fell asleep.

She tensed up when she noticed the silhouettes of two prisoners approaching before her.

"Who is that boy to you?" a gruff voice asked.

Ceres looked up. One of the men had a dirty, bearded face with angry blue eyes, the other was a bald man, muscular as a combatlord, the skin below his eyes covered in swirling black tattoos. The robust one smashed his knuckles together and they cracked, and the chain around his ankle clattered as he moved.

"No one," she said, looking away.

The bearded man leaned hands against the wall behind her on either side, confining her, his raunchy breath wafting into her face.

"You're lying," he said. "I saw the way you looked at him."

"I'm not lying," Ceres said. "But if I were, it wouldn't make one bit of difference to you or anyone else in here. We'd still be stuck in this prison, awaiting our punishments."

"When we ask you a question, we expect an honest answer," the tattooed man said, stepping forward, his chain rattling again. "Or are you too good for us?"

Ceres knew that playing nice or trying to avoid the bullies wasn't going to make them leave her alone.

As quickly as she could, she ducked, and darted past the thugs so she could go to the other side of the room where their chains wouldn't reach. But she didn't get far.

The tattooed man lifted his leg and the chain with it, catching Ceres's legs, causing her to trip and fall on her face. The bearded man stepped on the boy's back, and the little one shrieked in pain.

Ceres tried to rise to her feet, but the tattooed man wound his chain around her neck and pulled.

"Let the boy...go," she croaked, barely able to speak.

The boy's cries pierced straight to her heart, and she tugged on the chain, trying to free herself.

The tattooed man tugged even harder, until she couldn't breathe.

"You do care, don't you? Now, because you lied, the boy will bleed to death," the bearded man hissed.

He gave the boy a swift kick in the back, the child's cry filling the crammed cell, the other prisoners turning their heads away, some weeping quietly.

Ceres felt her body come alive, a surge of power overcoming her like a storm. Without even knowing what she was doing, she found herself strengthening her grip around the chain and snapping it in two.

The bearded man stared back at her, stunned, as if he had seen a ghost rise from the dead.

Free from the chain, Ceres stood, took hold of the chain, and whipped the bearded man, again and again, until he cowered in the corner, begging for mercy.

With her insides alight, she spun around and faced the tattooed man, the force within still feeding her body the strength she needed to stop the aggressors.

"If you touch him, or me, or any of the people in here one more time, I will kill you with my bare hands, you hear?" she said, pointing at him.

But this one growled and threw himself at her. She raised her palms, feeling the heat burning within, and without her touching him he went flying into the wall across the room with a thud and collapsed onto the ground, unconscious.

A tense silence fell, as Ceres felt all the eyes in the room on her.

"What force is that?" the pregnant woman asked.

Ceres glanced over at her, then looked at the others; everyone in the cell was dumbfounded.

The little boy sat up and winced, and Ceres kneeled by his side.

"You need rest," she said.

Now that the fabric had torn from the boy's back, she could also see puss between the blood. If his wounds weren't cleaned, he would die of the infection, she knew.

"How did you do that?" the boy asked.

Everyone's eyes were still on Ceres, wanting to know the answer to that question.

It was an answer she wanted to know herself.

"I...don't know," she said. "It just...overcame me when I saw what he was doing to you."

The boy paused and as he lay back down, with weary eyes, he said, "Thank you."

"Ceres," came a sudden whisper in the darkness. "Ceres!"

Ceres turned and looked through the bars of the cell and saw the form of a person wearing a hooded cape, the torches in the hallway illuminating the black material. Was it a servant boy sent by Thanos? she wondered.

Careful not to step on fingers and toes, Ceres made her way over to the stranger. He removed the hood, and to her astonishment and joy, she saw that it was Sartes.

"How did you find me? What are you doing here?" she asked, her hands gripping the bars, her chest brimming with joy—and trepidation.

"The blacksmith told me you were here, and I had to see you," he whispered, tears in his eyes. "I've been so worried for you."

She reached a hand through the bars and pressed a palm to his cheek.

"Sweet Sartes, I am doing well."

"This is not well," he said, his face etched with graveness.

"It is well enough. At least they haven't said anything about..."

She stopped herself from speaking the unspeakable, not wanting to worry Sartes.

"If they kill you, Ceres, I will...I will..."

"Shush, now. They will do no such thing." She lowered her voice several notches before whispering, "How is the rebellion?"

"There was a battle in northern Delos yesterday, a huge one. We won."

She smiled.

"So it has begun," she said.

"Nesos is fighting as we speak. He was injured yesterday, but not enough to keep him in bed." Ceres smiled a little.

"Always the tough one. And Rexus?" she asked.

"He is well, too. He misses you."

Hearing Sartes say that nearly brought Ceres to tears. Oh, how she missed Rexus, too.

Sartes leaned closer, his cape covering his arm, and then she peered down when she felt a sharp, cold object against her hand—a dagger. Without a word, only the silent understanding between them, she took the dagger and stuffed it down the front of her pants and then covered it with her shirt.

"I have to go before someone sees me," Sartes said.

She nodded, and reached tender arms through the bars.

"I love you, Sartes. Remember that."

"I love you, too. Be well."

Just as he vanished down the hallway, passing him, she saw the warden approach. She huddled back in the corner next to the boy, her hand stroking his hair, and the warden unlocked the door and stepped into the prison.

"Listen up, criminals. Here are the names of those who will be executed on the day after the morrow at sunrise: Apollo."

The boy let out a gasp, and Ceres felt him start to tremble beneath her hands.

"...Trinity..." the warden continued.

The pregnant woman cringed and swooped her arms around her swollen belly.

"...Ceres..."

Ceres felt a sudden sense of panic overtake her.

"...and Ichabod."

A man chained to the far end of the cell buried his face in his hands and sobbed quietly.

The warden turned on his feet and exited the cell, locking it behind him, nothing but the sound of his heavy footsteps marching away.

And with those few words, her death loomed.

#### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Thanos stormed into the throne room, clutching the scroll signed by the king—the abominable document which contained Ceres's execution orders. His heart was thundering against his ribs as his feet pounded the white marble floor beneath them, rage churning through him from head to toe.

Thanos had always thought this room was spacious beyond reason, the arched ceilings ridiculously high, the distance from the massive bronze door to the two thrones at the end nothing but wasted space. Or tainted space. The throne room was the place where all rules were forged, and to Thanos, this was where all the inequality originated.

Advisors and dignitaries sat between red marble pillars on intricately carved wooden seats on either side of the room, twirling their golden rings, wearing their fine apparel, proudly displaying colored sashes, which ranked them according to their importance.

The sun shone in through stained-glass windows, blinding him every few steps, but that didn't prevent him from glaring at the king who sat on his golden seat at the end of the room. Soon, Thanos stood at the bottom of the staircase below the thrones. He hurled the execution order at the feet of the king and queen, who were at the moment speaking with the minister of trade.

"I demand you recant this execution order at once!" Thanos said.

The king looked up with exhausted eyes.

"You shall wait your turn, nephew."

"There is no time. Ceres is to be executed on the morrow!" Thanos said.

The king huffed and shooed the minister away. Once the minister had left, the king looked at Thanos.

"Ceres, my weapon-keeper, might I remind you, was thrown in prison by Lucious, and now she is being sentenced to death?" Thanos said.

"Yes, she smote a royal, and that is, by law, punishable by public execution," the king said.

"Did you know Lucious backhanded her first? And all because she triumphed in a sword fight he demanded?"

"How does this commoner know how to wield a sword?" the queen asked. "It is against the laws of the land to do so."

The king nodded, and the advisors mumbled in agreement.

"Her father worked as a swordsmith here at the palace," Thanos said.

"If he taught her how to wield the sword, they should both be executed on the spot," the queen said.

"How can you be a good swordsmith unless you know how to wield a sword?" Thanos pressed. "Being a swordsmith is not forbidden for a woman."

"This is not about being a swordsmith, or a swordsman, Thanos. This is about a commoner assaulting a royal on royal grounds," the king said.

The queen laid a hand over the king's.

"If I didn't know Thanos was promised to Stephania, I would think he was taking an interest in this girl," she said.

"I take no interest in her other than that she is the best weapon-keeper I have had," Thanos lied.

"Stephania said she had seen you on the palace training ground with...what was the servant girl's name?" the queen asked.

"Ceres," Thanos said.

"Yes, Ceres. And Stephania said you held her arm."

"The girl doesn't have a home, and so I offered her to stay in the southern summer cottage for the time being," Thanos said.

"And who gave you that authority?" the queen asked.

"You know as well as I do that it used to be my parents' cottage, and it hasn't been used since they passed away," Thanos said.

"Stephania is a bright young lady with dignity and integrity, and she says she doesn't trust this strange girl. Has Ceres any credentials? Any official papers? She could be an assassin working for the rebellion for all we know," the queen said, working herself into a tizzy.

"Now, dear, let's not get all carried away. Do you really think the rebellion would send a female assassin?" the king said.

"Perhaps not," the queen replied. "Or perhaps they would, thinking a gullible young prince like Thanos would fall for a feisty warrior woman who sides with him against his family."

"No matter. The girl has her sentence, and to protect Lucious's honor, it will be carried through," the king said.

"You didn't think of protecting him when you sent him to compete in the Killings!" Thanos said.

The king scooted forward to the edge of his seat and pointed at Thanos, his eyes darkened with ire.

"Boy, you live in our palace and at the mercy and generosity of the queen and me. Do you really mean to defy us yet again?" he asked.

Thanos pointed to the Empire's banner to the right of the king.

"Freedom and justice to every citizen!" he bellowed, his voice echoing through the room. "The responsibility of the country's leaders is to protect the freedom of the people and to rule in justice. This is not justice."

"Stop with this nonsense," the king said. "The decision is final, and no amount of begging or senseless reasoning from you will change that."

"Then you must also imprison and sentence Lucious to death for what he did," Thanos said.

"Although I would not mourn the loss of Lucious for one solitary second, I will follow the laws of this land," the king said. "And if you interfere with my decision in any way, you will be expelled from court. Now leave so I can use my time on matters of importance."

Fuming, Thanos turned on his heels and tore out of the throne room, his pulse in his ears.

After he had marched back outside to the practice arena, he picked up a longsword. He went at a dummy long and hard, until there was nothing left but the wooden beam holding it, and then he hacked away at that, too.

Standing with the sword in his hands, he stood frozen as he panted for a long while, and then he flung the weapon as far as he could into the palace gardens.

How could the king possibly say he was serving justice? he wondered. Justice would mean every person had the same rights, privileges, and punishments, and Thanos knew that wasn't the case in the least.

He walked to the gazebo and slumped on a bench, his temple resting against his hands.

Ceres—what was it with her? Why did he need her the way he needed air? She had come into his life a breath of fresh air, her green eyes sparkling with wonder, her pale pink lips speaking

words he knew he would never tire of, a quiet strength in her lithe body laced with vulnerability. She wasn't like the girls at court who would babble on about mindless subjects and gossip about others only to make themselves look better. Ceres had a depth to her, and every part of her was genuine, not a speck of pretentiousness to be found. And it was as if she saw what he needed even before he knew it himself—a sixth sense perhaps?

He stood up and paced back and forth in the gazebo for several minutes, wondering what to do.

When they had stood below the Stade, awaiting the Killings, he had asked her if he could trust her with his life. She had said yes. And although her voice had faltered with the answer, he knew she would sacrifice herself to save him if it ever came to that.

If he saved her, he would be kicked out of the palace. If he left her to her fate, he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

He pulled his shoulders back and took a deep breath.

He knew what he needed to do.

#### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Although her eyes and limbs were heavy, Ceres, despite her exhaustion, hadn't slept a wink all night. The heavens were slowly lightening, she could see from the small barred window, and how she wished they wouldn't. With morning came her last few moments, and in less than an hour, she knew, she would be dead.

"Are you afraid?" Apollo asked, his head resting in her lap as she stroked his blond hair. She looked at him and thought of lying. But she couldn't.

"Yes. Are you?" Ceres said.

He nodded, a tear in his eye.

She could feel him quivering beneath her touch, or was it her hand that was trembling so?

The pregnant woman looked at Ceres with alarm in her eyes when the faint sound of footsteps came from the hallway. The distant noise came closer and closer until Ceres could hear nothing but the drum of marching men, and before she knew it, the warden stood before the cell, unlocking it.

"Apollo, Trinity, Ceres, and Ichabod, come with me," he said, several other Empire soldiers waiting behind him.

With hands that barely would move like she commanded them to, Ceres helped Apollo stand up. Fully erect, the boy reached only to just above her waist, Ceres noticed, and she thought it an awful shame that he would never get to grow up to be the man he might have become.

When she let go of him, his legs gave out from under him and he collapsed to the floor.

"Sorry," Apollo said with doleful eyes.

Crouching beside the boy, tears burning at the back of her eyes, Ceres shot the warden an ugly glare and helped Apollo to his feet again. Careful not to touch the wounds on his back, she supported him as they went into the dim, torch-lit hallway, the other two prisoners following behind them.

The warden jerked Apollo to the front, a soldier on each side holding the boy's arms so he wouldn't collapse. Ceres, trying to calm her shuddering legs, was next, and behind her, Trinity, and the old man Ichabod. The chains rattled when the Empire soldiers shackled Ceres's and the others' ankles and wrists, and once the prisoners had been chained, two Empire soldiers guarded each of them, one on either side. Trinity rocked back and forth, holding her belly, and then Ceres heard that she started to sing an old lullaby—the exact one Ceres used to sing to Sartes to make him fall asleep.

Ceres could no longer hold back the tears, and at the thought of her brothers, of Rexus, it was as if her heart broke in two. Never would she see them again, never would she joke with them, break bread with them, spar with them. Those had been such happy times, she remembered, even though they had been tainted by her mother's cruelty. But she loved them, and she wondered if they truly knew that.

Down the hallway Ceres walked, her feet feeling like blocks of stone as chains dragged on the floor, the beautiful tune of the pregnant woman guiding her steps. Climbing the stairs out of the dungeon, Ceres saw that it was slightly dark out, a few stars still twinkling above, refusing to give up their light in the pre-dawn heavens. An open horse-pulled wagon stood in the courtyard, and Ceres was shoved into the cart with the other prisoners, the Empire soldiers' whips causing her to cower, causing her to hate the Empire even more.

When Apollo was unable to climb into the wagon by himself, an Empire soldier picked the boy up and flung him into the cart so he hit his head against the side of the wagon, a yelp escaping his lips as his head was thrust backwards with a cracking sound.

"How could you be so cruel?" Ceres yelled at the Empire soldier, before turning her attention to Apollo.

She scooted closer to the boy, staring helplessly at the unnatural bend in his neck, and ever so carefully, she lifted his bleeding head into her lap.

"Apollo?" she croaked, dread filling her chest when she felt how lifeless his body had suddenly become.

"I can't see..." Apollo whispered with a hoarse voice, his eyes glazed with tears. "I...can't...I can't feel my legs."

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead, and seeing he was struggling to breathe, she wanted to help him. But all she could do was to take his small, cold hand in hers.

"I'm here," Ceres said, the words almost getting caught in her throat, tears dripping down onto his filthy, torn tunic.

"Promise to hold my hand...until I am...dead," Apollo stammered.

Ceres, unable to speak a word, just nodded and squeezed his hand in her own, gently stroking the blond hairs off his sweaty forehead.

His eyes fluttered before they shut, and then she noticed that his chest stopped rising and falling as his face yielded to the mask of death.

She sobbed once and brought his hand to her lips before placing it carefully on his chest. Now, at least, he wouldn't have to face decapitation, she thought. He was free.

As they rode through the crowd, she couldn't stop looking at the poor boy, his small lips, his eyelashes, the freckles on his nose. She wanted him to know she was still thinking of him and that she wouldn't leave him alone in the cart, at the mercy of the Empire soldiers that stole his freedom and his life. Perhaps she needed him in some small way, too, to remind her that there weren't only cruel people in this world, and that innocence and kindness were still more beautiful than any power on earth.

The wagon bumped past a blur of hateful words and angry faces, but she kept her eyes on Apollo's peaceful expression. Not even when a rotten tomato hit Ceres in the cheek did she tear her gaze from him.

The cart slowed to a stop in front of the wooden scaffold, and the prisoners were commanded to leave the wagon. However, Ceres refused to leave Apollo, clinging to him.

An Empire soldier, the one who had thrown him, grabbed Apollo by his legs and jerked him out of the wagon from Ceres's arms.

"Murderer!" she cried at the top of her lungs, tears spilling out of her eyes.

The soldier tossed Apollo onto a stack of hay, and then started toward Ceres, but she scuttled into the wagon's corner, refusing to get out.

Following after her, the Empire soldier that had just had his appalling hands on Apollo stepped into the wagon. She would not allow him to get away with murdering such an innocent boy. Seeing the other Empire soldiers were busy forcing the other prisoners up the stairs to the scaffold, she saw a chance to avenge him. She might die trying—but she was about to die anyway.

When the soldier leaned forward to haul her out of the cart, Ceres looped the shackles bound to her wrists around his neck and pulled with all her might.

On his back, the soldier croaked and kicked arms and legs, his filthy fingers tugging at the chain, his face turning red.

But Ceres refused to let the killer go, pulling harder until his face turned purple.

In what seemed like a last-ditch effort to save his life, the soldier's hands strained toward Ceres's neck. She blocked with her elbows, and just as she heard other Empire soldiers clamoring, scurrying toward the wagon, the man in her arms went limp.

Even after she knew he was dead, she kept the chain taut for as long as she could, until two Empire soldiers tore her out of the wagon and forced her to the bottom of the stairwell leading up to the scaffold.

One of the soldiers pulled out a dagger and pressed the tip to her back, the blade piercing her skin a little. She took a step. And then one more.

Her feet in a disoriented march, Ceres climbed the stairs after the others, the clamors of the crowd a distant tempest, and just as she arrived at the top, she was released from her chains.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, she vaguely noticed, and her throat was dry, her eyes wet. Had the crowd grown silent? she wondered, unable to tell above the roar of her trepidation.

An Empire soldier pulled her hands behind her back, tying them. She didn't resist. There was nothing more to resist now, she knew. She might as well let death take her.

The soldier shoved her in the direction of a man wearing a white hooded cloak, holding an axe—her executioner.

She was ordered to kneel before a wooden block, but when she didn't respond right away, the soldier pushed her to her knees, her head falling forward. With blurred vision, she looked up and out into the crowd, her entire body trembling, her stomach churning with nausea.

"Do you have any last words?" the executioner asked.

She remained frozen, trying to grasp this really was it. Her life, was it over? No. It couldn't be. It had gone so fast, too fast, and suddenly, there was no more time.

"Well, have you something to say, girl?" the executioner pressed.

She did have something to say, but the words would not formulate in her mind.

The crowd grew silent, all eyes on her, and then the executioner blindfolded her.

On her knees, she reached forward, feeling for the block, sensing its smoothness beneath her fingertips, and resigned to her death, she leaned forward and rested her chin on the wooden edge.

Father, she thought. Sartes. Nesos.

Rexus.

Then, to her disbelief, an image of Thanos formed in her mind, and she finally realized that even though she loved Rexus, she had fallen for Thanos, too.

And just as she grasped that, she hated herself for it. She was happy he would never find out. She swallowed the tears back, exhaled a breath, and the crowd went silent as she waited for it all to be over.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rexus was filled with rage as he lay on a rooftop and watched thousands of citizens being held captive in Blackrock Square, surrounded by Empire soldiers who encircled the outer edge of the piazza, preventing escape. Standing before them atop a platform, General Draco was reading the king's proclamation, and each word deepened the rage in Rexus's heart. They were preparing to take away more firstborns, the best men the people had to offer. He tightened his grip on his sword, preparing for battle.

Yet seeing so many Empire soldiers, Rexus began to second-guess his decision to lead the revolutionaries into yet another battle they weren't entirely prepared for. The rebellion had grown, yes, but it was still barely over a thousand men. The only way to victory today was if the citizens below joined in and helped attack the enemy.

But would they?

When General Draco finished reading, he looked up and his narrow eyes raked the crowd.

"Before we collect the firstborns—a warning. Rebellion does not come without punishment!" he yelled.

He nodded toward his lieutenant, and the lieutenant opened one of the slaver carts that stood behind the platform. Rexus squinted his eyes, wondering who could be inside.

He was stunned to see captured revolutionaries hauled out of the wagon, Empire soldiers beating them with clubs toward the podium. Rexus felt as if he were stabbed in the heart. One of the twelve groups he had dispatched had been captured.

The soldiers chained the prisoners atop the platform and gagged them, and Rexus's ire deepened as he watched them dragging a kicking and screaming Anka up to the podium, chaining her to a pole, too, her clothes bloody, her face bruised.

Rexus narrowed his eyes, the sight of Anka up there—Ceres's friend—causing his blood to boil with fury.

"Lead us to the hiding place of the rebellion, and I will let these people live!" General Draco shouted to the crowd, his voice booming through the square. "Say nothing, and after these traitors have been tortured and killed, I will seize twenty of you, and then twenty more, and yet another twenty, until someone speaks!"

Clamors of panic went through the crowd as frightened mothers embraced their children. Yet the piazza remained silent, no one willing to offer up information.

General Draco nodded, and twenty Empire soldiers marched up onto the platform, holding lit torches, taking their places beside the prisoners. When the general nodded again, the soldiers pressed the torches to the revolutionaries' faces. Each man and woman screamed, the shrieks of pain burning Rexus's ears.

The onlookers raged in disapproval, but the Empire soldiers standing amidst the crowd forced protesters into silence with clubs, spears, and whips.

Incensed, Rexus knew he could wait no longer. Ready or not, the time had come.

Rexus jumped down from the roof and mounted his horse, galloping back to where he had left his group of men.

"We attack now!" he shouted.

His men grabbed their weapons and quickly assembled, their faces hardening with fury.

Rexus dismounted and felt for the small mirror in his pocket, the same one each of the leaders of the other groups carried. He turned his mirror in the sun, catching the light, reflecting it, the sign they had made that they were ready to attack.

One after another, bright lights twinkled at him from behind houses, until he counted ten. Eleven, including his group, had made it, meaning only one hadn't.

Rexus looked back at his group and nodded, his heart racing wild.

"For freedom!" he yelled as pulled his sword from its sheath and ran into the square, the revolutionaries following at his heels. Although his hands trembled and his throat was dry, he didn't falter in the least. All around him the other groups of revolutionaries dashed out from behind shadows and buildings, their roars filling the square.

Rexus hacked his way through the wall of Empire soldiers, and then past three more inside the square, his eyes glancing at the platform when he wasn't fighting. He needed to get there before it was too late, he knew, before they lost their lives.

"Fight with us and win your freedom!" he yelled to the civilians as he worked his way through the crowd.

Slowly, he noticed that the men around him started to fight the enemy with their bare hands. Chaos erupted.

Empire soldiers took to attacking the citizens, butchering any and all who were in close proximity. Rexus redoubled his efforts, slashing down soldiers as he went. As his men swarmed the square from all sides, he looked up to see General Draco being ushered away beneath a mountain of shields. Rexus grabbed an arrow from his quiver, aimed it through a narrow gap in the shields, and released.

A moment later, General Draco cried out and fell, and was lying on the platform with an arrow in his shoulder.

The soldiers who had protected him turned toward Rexus.

"Arrest him!" a soldier yelled.

But Rexus was quick as lightning with his bow and he shot them down so swiftly, not one reached him. He dashed toward the poles, and with the help of other revolutionaries, released the prisoners from their shackles, freeing them before it was too late.

But where was Anka? he wondered, glancing around.

There was no time to search. Rexus stood at the edge of the platform and wound his bow, killing as many Empire soldiers as he had arrows.

Finally, the wall of Empire soldiers encircling the plaza broke open on the northern side, and women and children were rushed to the side streets, leaving only men left battling against their persecutors amidst the clanging of swords and groaning of men. Men fell on both sides, piling up in the streets which ran with blood.

Rexus hopped down from the podium, slaying soldier after soldier, fully engrossed in a battle he knew would either make or break the rebellion.

His heart broke a little more each time he saw one of his men or a civilian fall. He worked himself up into such a frenzy that he imagined he might never die at the hands of an Empire sword.

But just then, two soldiers came at him at once, one stabbing him from the side, the other pounding a hammer at him from above.

The blow to the head was sudden—dizzying—the sword in the shoulder a sharp pain that made a shriek tumble from his lips as he fell to the ground.

Momentarily, he could not see. Flailing his sword out in front of him, trying to defend himself, he felt another sharp stab in the leg.

He tried to focus his eyes, everything a blur.

An outcry made him recoil into a fetal position. The echoes of the battle surrounded him.

Now, he thought, now I die.

And with that thought, he knew Ceres would never know how much he cared.

But no sword punctured his chest. No spear was thrust into his abdomen. Instead, he heard grunts as swords collided.

When Rexus was finally able to focus his eyes again, he saw Nesos going at the two Empire soldiers, carrying a sword in one hand, a spear in the other.

Slowly, Rexus rose to his feet, the wound in his shoulder stinging, the blow to his head still making him feel dizzy, and the wound in his leg screaming. He fell over once, but stood straight back up.

Nesos buried his spear in one of the Empire soldier's necks, and feeling his strength return, Rexus sunk his spear deeply into the enemy's armpit.

A horn blared through the plaza, and the Empire soldiers looked up and began to evacuate toward the side streets. Mobs of citizens followed after and killed them.

The revolutionaries cheered, Nesos included. But Rexus couldn't lift his arm and his knees felt suddenly very weak.

Nesos ran toward him, catching him in the fall, helping him onto the ground ever so gently. As stillness settled at the piazza, Rexus lay there and looked toward the Alva Mountains, toward the cave, the castle, where he knew the bulk of his men were.

His eyes widened. His soul cried.

The castle was engulfed in a fiery inferno.

The revolution was over.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

Ceres's hair stood on the back of her neck as she waited for the axe to descend on her. The crowd had gone silent, and she heard her executioner raise his weapon into the air.

In that moment, her entire life flashed before her.

Yet, to her surprise, the blade never dropped.

Instead, she felt arms around her waist.

And a moment later, someone was hoisting her into the air.

She landed on her stomach, hunching forward, and realized she was draped across a horse's back, her legs on one side, her head on the other. Someone hopped onto the same horse right behind her, whipping it to a sudden start, and Ceres felt a strong arm holding her around her waist, preventing her from falling. She heard arrows swooshing by, hitting against armor or a shield.

The Empire soldiers yelled, the spectators clamored, but their voices slowly vanished as the horse galloped away.

The horse stopped after riding for a while, and she felt her new captor descend the horse. Then sturdy hands grabbed her waist, lifted her off, and set her onto the ground.

She removed the blindfold from her eyes and her breath stopped when she saw Thanos's face.

"Come," he said, taking her hand, pulling her with him toward the palace.

"Wait," she said. "Why...how...?"

She noticed her hands were still shaking, and she couldn't believe she wasn't yet dead.

He dragged her into the main entrance, her knees so wobbly she could barely keep up, confusion and anger and surprise reeling through her at once.

"We must speak to the king and queen this instant before the Empire soldiers hunt us down," Thanos said.

Ceres stiffened and snatched her hand from his, the thought of seeing the king and queen petrifying.

"No! Why?" she asked. "They ordered my execution."

Thanos pulled her behind a pillar in the vestibule, gently shoving her against the cold marble, looking into her eyes.

"I meant what I said at the Stade," he said.

She narrowed her eyes.

"You can trust me with your life."

When he leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers, she became breathless.

"And...I need you," he said.

Thanos lifted his hand and looked at Ceres's mouth while tracing her lips with his fingertips, his touch as light as a feather.

She shivered in delight, his scent all around her, his face an inch away, but the war between her head and her heart caused her to stiffen. She should not, no, she would not delight in his touch, she forbade her body. He was still the enemy, and for as long as she lived, he needed to remain that.

Reaching behind her head, he pressed his cheek to hers, the tenderness causing Ceres to let out a faint sigh. She felt his hand wrap around his waist, their bodies pressed against each other, warm, tender.

"But you must tell no one," he said, pulling away. "Come. We need to see the king and queen. I have a plan."

Against her will, she let him lead her into the colossal vestibule, and they ran past massive marble pillars that reached all the way to the high ceiling. Ceres had never seen the likes of such architecture; it seemed the palace was a building made by the gods. Silk curtains, shiny chandeliers, marble statues, and golden vases adorned the interior. Having just been in the dungeon, having lived in extreme poverty her entire life, it was as if she had been transported into another world.

Arriving at the second floor, he led her to an enormous bronze door and opened it. They stepped into a huge rectangular room, and at the end of red marble pillars, and rows of seats filled with finely dressed men and women, were two thrones. There sat the king and queen.

Holding Ceres's hand, Thanos walked toward the thrones.

The king rose, his face red, blood vessels protruding from his forehead.

"What have you done?" he bellowed.

The queen placed a hand on the king's, but the king only returned her gesture with a threatening glare.

"If you promise to spare Ceres's life, I will agree to marry Stephania," he announced.

Ceres glanced at Thanos sideways, wondering what he was doing, confused about his earlier advance.

"Do you think you run this kingdom, boy?" the king said, and then turned to the Empire soldiers. "Arrest them!"

"You will not arrest me!" Thanos yelled, taking a bold step forward as he pointed at the king. But the Empire soldiers did not heed Thanos.

The king waved his hand and with that, Ceres and Thanos were grabbed again, and this time, both were hauled off to the dungeon.

\*

Ceres stood by the bars, peering out into the dungeon hallway, her disbelief slowly being replaced with hopelessness. It hadn't even been an hour, and here she was again in this rotting hole, awaiting her fate. At least now they had the cell to themselves, no thugs to fear, but other than that, she knew her circumstances were bleak. Extremely bleak.

She thought of the others she had been brought to the scaffolding with, wondering if their sentence had been completed, if they were now one of thousands of casualties at the hands of the cruel Empire.

And then there was Apollo... Tears filled her eyes and she whisked one away as it fell.

She glanced over at Thanos sitting on the filthy floor, his dignity stripped with one word from the nasty king.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning his head backward onto the dungeon wall. "I didn't think my uncle would throw us in prison."

"You couldn't have known," Ceres said.

"I should have."

There was a long pause, for what was there to say? Ceres wondered. Examining the events that had led them here wouldn't change their circumstances.

Thanos stood up and paced back and forth a few times.

"I misjudged the queen's desire to have me marry Stephania," he said.

He kicked the wall several times and rattled the cage so hard Ceres thought he might break the bars.

"Don't blame yourself for others' cruelty," she said once he had calmed down, their eyes connecting in the dimness.

"I should have never stopped that horse."

She held his eyes, his stare intense, the memory of his fingertips on her mouth and of his body pressed against hers still resonating through her.

She heard footsteps coming down the passageway, and when she turned, she saw numerous Empire soldiers throw a young lady and several men into the cell next to them.

She gasped.

"Anka?" she said as she peered through the iron bars, recognizing her.

Anka clamped bloodied hands around the bars, her body covered in burn marks, her lovely black locks gone, shorn in uneven lengths.

"Ceres?" she said, her eyes popping.

The Empire soldiers opened the door to Ceres's cell and pulled Thanos and Ceres out, dragging them down the hallway.

"What happened? Are my brothers well? Is Rexus?" Ceres yelled back at Anka, desperate to know the answers.

"There was a battle..." Anka started.

But they turned the corner, and Ceres could no longer hear Anka's voice over the thrashing of the Empire soldiers' heavy boots. It crushed her.

"I demand you tell me where you are taking us," Thanos said.

The soldiers remained silent and pushed them forward, and Ceres's heart was racing the way it did when she was on her way to her execution.

Down the hallway they were shoved, and once they arrived at the staircase, the Empire soldiers stopped.

"Go," one said.

Perplexed, Ceres looked to Thanos. He took her hand, and together they started to climb the stairs.

What would await them at the top? Ceres wondered, finding it impossible to believe or hope she truly was free to go. Was there a wagon standing there to take them to the scaffolding? Were a dozen Empire soldiers standing in wait, ready to shoot them down with flaming arrows?

Thanos squeezed her hand, his face appearing much calmer than the raging anxiety she felt inside, and she wondered how he could be calm at such a moment as this.

Arriving at the top of the steps, Ceres saw the queen standing in front of them, her hands clasped in front of her body.

The queen glanced down at Ceres's and Thanos's joined hands and frowned.

"I spoke some sense into the king and he agreed to set you free so long as you solemnly swear to wed Stephania," she said.

"I swear it," Thanos said, tightening his grip around Ceres's hand.

"And with that, I expect you two to cease any and all contact other than when you are training for the Killings," the queen said, her eyes narrowing into slivers.

"Understood," Thanos said with a nod.

The gueen stepped forward and locked cold eyes on Ceres.

"As for you, little girl," she said, "I have plans for you, and you might think you are glad to keep your life, but soon you will regret that you weren't beheaded on that scaffolding today."

The queen turned on her heels and marched away, Ceres now realizing it was quite possibly even deadlier inside the castle walls than out.

#### CHAPTER TWENTY

Ceres arrived extra early the next morning at the palace training grounds, her mind still reeling from the events of the night before, from how close she had come to death. And most of all, from thoughts of Thanos. She owed him her life. And yet she did not know if she loved or hated him. And knowing Rexus was out there, waiting for her, she hated feeling this way about anyone else.

Anxious to take her mind off of all this and resume training with Thanos, Ceres focused on her work. With great care, she laid out the weapons she thought he might use in today's practice, and then she filled the drinking bucket with fresh water.

She was focusing when suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lucious walking straight toward her, his eyes filled with loathing, his muscles rigid with aggression. She tensed. Not a single other person was in sight, and now she wished she had not been so early.

And then, when she saw her sword in Lucious's hand, her heart started to race.

She knew she couldn't fight him—he might have her arrested and thrown in prison again. But she couldn't not defend herself either, knowing he would have no qualms about killing her.

Then a thought popped into her mind. Had the queen set this up?

Alarmed, she glanced around to see if anyone else might be on their way, but she heard no voices and saw no one in the distance.

Approaching, Lucious scowled and took a threatening step in her direction, his hand squeezing the hilt, the blood vessels in his forehead protruding.

"Place the sword on the table!" Ceres heard a deep voice growl behind her.

She swiveled around and saw a stranger. He was dressed in the manner of the southern isles, his longer than usual tunic similar to those she had seen from those parts. His skin was golden, his shoulder-length black hair kept in a ponytail, and his posture was an erect board.

With dark, slanted eyes, he glared at Lucious with such intensity, Ceres was convinced the stranger could kill with his eyes alone.

Lucious pinched his lips together and laid her sword onto the weapon table.

"Now leave," the man said.

Lucious gave him a disapproving look, but did as the stranger said and stomped off with a huff.

"I take it you are Ceres?" the man asked.

She hesitated to answer, wondering if this man could be trusted. Perhaps he was an assassin sent to kill her by the queen, the queen's words bouncing around inside of her skull.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You may call me Master Isel," the man said. "I am your new fighting master."

At first, she thought she had misheard him, especially when she considered the queen's last comment to her. But the way Isel looked at her, with respect and dignity in his eyes, she almost dared to believe what he had said was true.

"From now on, for three hours a day, I will train you to become a combatlord," he said. "I will instruct you like a man, so no man can ever touch you or triumph over you. Do you accept?"

Now she believed it was true, but why? And it surprised her that he even asked that question. Was *not* accepting an option? She knew even if it were, she would be a fool to decline.

"What is the purpose of this training?" she asked.

"Thanos sent me to you. A gift to make you strong. To give you what you so craved: a chance to learn to fight. To truly fight."

A shrill of joy erupted in her chest, and for a moment she couldn't breathe.

"Do you accept, or do I need to tell him that you so respectfully declined?" he asked, a twinkle in his eye.

"I accept. I accept," she said.

"Well then. If you are ready, let us begin."

She nodded and turned toward her sword to pick it up.

"No!" Isel said.

Startled, Ceres swiveled around.

"First, you must learn how to die."

Puzzled, Ceres squinted her eyes.

"Stand in the center of the practice arena," he said, pointing his sword toward it.

Ceres followed his instructions, and once she had taken her place, he walked a slow circle around her.

"Royal combatlords are expected to behave a certain way," he said. "When you represent the king, the Empire, a standard of excellence is required of you."

She nodded.

"There are specific death rituals, and you are expected to die bravely, with no trace of fear, offering yourself to cold-blooded murder."

"I understand," she said.

He faced her, his hands clasped behind his back.

"I see a lot of fear in your eyes," he said. "Your first lesson is to eradicate any traces of vulnerability, of gentleness, and most importantly, of fear from your countenance."

He stepped closer.

"Your mind is on other things, in other places. When you are with me, no *one* and no *thing* else exists anywhere!" he yelled with passion in his voice.

"Yes, Master Isel."

"To be a contender, as a girl, you must work twice as hard, three times as hard as the men, and if they sense any weakness in you, they will use it against you."

She nodded, knowing he spoke the truth.

"Your second lesson starts right away, and it is a lesson in strength. You are skinny. You need more muscle," he said. "Come."

She followed Isel down to the ocean side and he stopped at the jutting cliffs.

For the first two hours, he had her lift heavy boulders, throw heavy rocks, and climb the steep cliff.

Just when her body begged for her to be done, for the last hour, he compelled her to performed sequences of sprints and push-ups across the sand.

By the end of Ceres's lesson, her clothes were completely drenched with sweat and her muscles trembled from fatigue, and she could scarcely manage to walk back up to the palace where the other warriors were sparring.

At the top, Master Isel handed her a wooden cup.

"You will drink this every day," he said. "It is a tonic of ashes—good for strong bones."

She gulped the foul-tasting drink down, her arms so exhausted she could barely bring the cup to her lips.

"Tomorrow, I will meet you here at dawn to continue your strength training and more," he said.

Master Isel nodded toward a hefty blonde handmaiden, and the happy girl approached.

"Until tomorrow, Ceres," he said, walking away into the gardens.

"Please follow me, my lady," the handmaiden said and started toward the palace.

Ceres didn't think she could walk another step, but somehow, when she told her legs to move, she managed to follow.

The handmaiden led her into the palace, up four sets of stairs, and toward the western tower. Up at the very top of a spiraling staircase, they walked into a room. The bed sheets were made of silk, the drapes of fine linen, and a bed as wide as it was long stood against the northern wall.

Four dresses were laid out on the bed, two made of the finest silk, and two of soft linen. In front of the fireplace, on top of a white fur rug, stood a tub filed with steaming water, iris petals floating on the surface.

"Master Isel had this food ordered especially for you, my lady," the handmaiden said.

Her stomach growled when she saw a table covered in meats, fruits, vegetables, barley, beans, and breads. She walked over to it and devoured several mouthfuls of food, washing it down with wine from a golden goblet.

"May I help you undress for the bath, my lady?" the handmaiden asked after Ceres had finished eating.

Ceres felt a sudden rush of shyness come over her. Have someone undress her?

"I..." she balked.

But before she could decline, the handmaiden was tugging the shirt out of Ceres's pants, and once she was fully undressed, the handmaiden helped Ceres into the tub, the hot water enveloping her, soothing every sore muscle.

The girl proceeded to wash Ceres's skin with a sponge, and next, she worked on Ceres's hair, detangling it with a sweet-smelling honeysuckle conditioner, turning Ceres's hair as smooth as silk.

She climbed out of the tub, and the handmaiden dried her off, after which she rubbed oil into Ceres's skin. Then the girl applied makeup to Ceres's face.

"Your dress, my lady," the handmaiden said, holding up the coral-colored one.

First, she helped Ceres into a white tunic that reached her ankles and covered her shoulders, and then she dressed her in the coral dress, securing it with a golden brooch above each shoulder.

Studying the material, Ceres saw that the fabric was embroidered with golden thread, the pattern reminding her of lilies of the valley.

Finally, the handmaiden braided Ceres's hair into a partial up-do, and on her head, she placed a thin golden headband in the shape of a wreath.

"You are lovely, if I might say so, my lady," the handmaiden said with a smile as she stood back, admiring Ceres.

There was a subtle knock at the door, and the handmaiden answered it.

Ceres looked at herself in the mirror, hardly recognizing herself, her lips stained red, her face dusted with chalk, her eyes darkened with eye makeup. Although she was grateful for the food and the warm bath, she loathed how she looked like the princesses, the very ones she had her entire life hated.

Then she had an idea and turned toward the messenger at the door.

"Will you please tell Thanos I wish to have Anka, the girl who is in prison, for my handmaiden?" Ceres asked.

The messenger bowed.

"I will relay the message," he said.

The handmaiden closed the door and walked over to where Ceres stood.

"An invitation for you, my lady," she said with a bow.

Ceres picked the note off the silver platter and unrolled it.

Ceres.

If it pleases you, I would love the honor of your company this afternoon. It would be my greatest joy if you would meet me at the library.

Sincerely,

**Thanos** 

Ceres sat down on the bed and tried to ignore the excitement that hummed through her at the thought of seeing Thanos again—just the two of them—at the library, of all places. She loved to study, and had frequently snuck away from home to read scrolls at the library just twenty minutes from her parents' house.

I mustn't feel excited at the thought of seeing Thanos, she commanded herself, the note dropping to her side. If she allowed her affection for him to grow, deceiving him, and then betraying him, would be so very hard to do. And she loved Rexus. How could she even consider such an invitation from the enemy they a few days ago jointly despised?

Accepting Thanos's invitation was dangerous, too, Ceres knew. Just yesterday the queen had ordered they not see each other outside of practice, and here Thanos was openly defying her command. Had he no fear?

It didn't seem so.

Had he really agreed to marry Stephania to save her life? Ceres marveled. It was the kindest thing anyone had done for her. Too kind, in fact.

She should tell him it was too much of a sacrifice.

Yes, that was what she would do: accept his invitation and tell him, after which she would remind him that he had agreed not to see her.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY ONE**

This will not end well, Ceres thought as she walked down the winding staircase from her room, her handmaiden leading the way. With sweaty hands, and a heart that refused to beat at a reasonable pace, every few seconds, she'd stop and almost turn back to her chamber. There, it was safe. There, Thanos wouldn't visit her, and she wouldn't hate herself for accepting his invitation and for being untrue to Rexus.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairwell and peered down the hallway at the dozens of marble columns that lined the passage, the handmaiden continuing on. The ceilings seemed as high as mountaintops, the floor smooth as a lake on a quiet day, and the mural paintings covering the walls depicted former kings, queens, beasts, and nature.

The handmaiden, now several feet in front of Ceres, turned around and waved.

"Well, come on then," she said. "Or perhaps you are too sore?"

She was sore, yes, but that wasn't the reason she wasn't moving. However, she knew she needed to do this so she pulled her shoulders back, took a deep breath, and strode forward.

Once downstairs, the handmaiden led Ceres outside and walked her through the courtyard and to the side of the palace.

They arrived at a separate building, the face of the library having six marble columns. In front was a small fountain with a statue of the queen at the top, the queen's steely gaze looking down at Ceres.

Even here she is watching, Ceres thought.

"Is there anything else I can do for you before I leave?" the handmaiden said with a smile.

Ceres shook her head and watched as the girl sauntered off.

"Ceres?" she heard behind her.

She turned to see Thanos standing there, a white toga draped around his body, his dark curls combed back neatly. Although more formal-looking than usual, it was a good look for him, Ceres observed. She tried not to like it too much.

"I almost didn't recognize you," he said.

"I look...not like me," she said, twisting her hands into knots.

"You look exactly like you, just a little cleaner," he said, the slightest look of amusement in his face.

He leaned in and inhaled.

"And you smell good," he said.

Of all things to notice, she thought, irritated, though she couldn't stop her heart from beating a little faster.

"Did I not before?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not as much as a girl," he said.

"Well, don't get used to it. In the arena, I'll still not smell like a girl."

He laughed heartily, and that made Ceres even more irritated at him.

"Shall we?" he asked, holding his arm out for her to take it.

Without taking his arm, she walked right past him and up the stairs toward the library. She heard him exhaling sharply behind her.

Stepping inside, Ceres gasped when she saw thousands upon thousands of scrolls stacked into wooden shelves on every wall. She had never seen so many writings in one place—the other

library she had studied at was much smaller. Oh, how she would love to sit in this room for days and weeks and months and soak up all the knowledge that was in here.

The room was hot, the scent of wood and parchment inundating the musty air, and on the sides, by wooden tables, in between marble pillars, sat scholars dressed in togas, writing. There was a hushed reverence, and Ceres felt giddy to be here.

In the center of the library an elderly man stood at a marble slab, hunched over a scroll as he read. His head was bald, making his large ears more pronounced, and he had penetrating blue eyes that sat over a long, beaky nose.

He looked up and smiled, and immediately, Ceres knew she would like him.

Thanos walked in behind her and placed his hand on the small of her back, heat collecting there as he gently pushed her forward toward the old man.

"Ceres, meet Cosmas," Thanos said. "He is the royal scholar, among other things."

"I am honored to meet you," Ceres said with a nod and a slight curtsy.

"The honor is mine, my dear," the old man replied, his smile widening as he took her hand.

"What other sorts of things?" Ceres asked.

Thanos rested a hand on Cosmas's shoulder, his eyes filled with tenderness.

"Counselor, teacher, friend, father," he said.

The old man gasped a laugh and nodded.

"Father, yes."

Cosmas rolled up the scroll in front of him, but even though Ceres itched to know what was written on it, she didn't quite dare to ask to read it, thinking it might not be acceptable.

"You would never have known it, but you should have seen Thanos when he arrived at the castle," he said in a voice that sounded like it might crack any second. "He was such a scrawny little thing, one would never have thought he would grow up to look like a god."

Ceres laughed. Thanos stepped behind the old man and tapped his ear. Ceres nodded, realizing the man was hard of hearing.

"Thanos may have told you, but he lost his parents when he was but a babe. Such nice folks they were," Cosmas said, shaking his head, his lips tilting downward.

"I'm sorry to hear," Ceres said, glancing at Thanos, but Thanos said nothing.

The old man picked up the scroll, but before he could put it away, curiosity overcame Ceres, and she pushed her hesitation aside.

"May I read it?" she asked, forcing her voice to be louder than usual so Cosmas would hear her.

Thanos's eyes widened, and he had a look of disbelief on his face.

"What?" Ceres asked, feeling a little embarrassed from his stare.

"I guess...I just assumed you couldn't read," he said.

"Well, you assumed wrong," she retorted. "I love studying everything I can get my hands on."

Cosmas laughed and winked at her.

"Although this isn't the largest library in Delos, it is the oldest and carries the writings of the greatest philosophers and some of the best scholars in the world," Cosmas said. "You are more than welcome to study anything in here."

"Thank you," Ceres said, letting her eyes scan the scrolls. "I could live in this place."

"Hold on," Thanos said, his eyes narrowing, his expression filled with skepticism. "What is it you have you studied, exactly?"

"Mathematics, astronomy, physics, geometry, geography, physiology, and medicine, among other things," Ceres said.

Thanos nodded, a look of wonder, and perhaps even a look of pride in his eyes, Ceres saw.

"Thanos, why don't you give the dear a tour of the rest of the library, and we can study when you return?" Cosmas said.

"Would you like to see it?" Thanos asked.

"Of course," Ceres replied, bubbles of excitement rising within at the thought.

Thanos offered his arm again, but just like before, she sauntered right past him, not taking it. He rolled his eyes.

First Thanos took her to the study room, then a lecture hall and a meeting room, before finally showing her out to the library gardens.

They walked in silence on the stone path, past statues of gods and goddesses, manicured bushes, vine-covered pillars, and endless beds of brightly colored flowers. A gentle breeze delighted her face, the scent of roses stirring into the air.

At the back of her mind, she remembered there was something she had planned to say to Thanos, but with him here, she couldn't seem to recall what it was.

"I must admit, I was quite shocked when you started to list off all the philosophies you had studied," Thanos said. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you at first."

"Well, in your defense, most commoners aren't schooled, and most royals think they know everything about everyone, so how could you have known?" she said.

He chuckled at the jibe.

"I'll be the first to admit I am ignorant in many things," he said.

She glanced at him sideways. Was he pretending to be humble? She couldn't tell.

"How did you become learned?" he asked, clasping his hands behind his back as he walked.

"My father's best friend was a scholar, and the scholar would let me sneak into the library and read. And more often than not he would even sit down with me and teach me," she said.

"I'm glad there are some reasonable men out there, encouraging women to study," he said.

Ceres glanced at him again, trying to assess if he were being genuine in his remark or not, thinking he couldn't possibly be.

"Cosmas is one of those men. If you would like, I could have him continue to tutor you."

Ceres was unable to repress an ear-to-ear smile.

"I would like that. I would love that," she said.

They walked on a while longer until they came to a half-circle of marble pillars. Thanos bid her to sit on the stone bench, and after she sat down, he sat next to her. When she saw the city and the sea beyond, she sighed, for it was so beautiful.

"I didn't realize your parents died when you were young," Ceres said.

He looked out across the city, his nose wrinkling slightly.

"I don't remember them, although I have heard quite a few stories about them from Cosmas."

He paused and pressed a hand next to hers, resting on the bench, their pinky fingers touching. She couldn't help but notice how her stomach fluttered.

"I do often wonder what they were like, and especially what it would be like to have the love of a mother," he said.

"How did they die?" she asked, her voice soft.

"It's uncertain, but Cosmas thinks someone murdered them."

"How horrible!" Ceres exclaimed, placing her hand atop his without thinking.

Realizing what she had done, she was about to pull her hand away, but Thanos grabbed it before she could and held it tight.

They sat like that for a moment that seemed to span eternity, hearts beating strong, breaths ceased.

She would not look into his eyes, she told herself, for she knew if she did, something would happen. Something terrible. Something wonderful.

He placed a hand underneath her chin and lifted it so she had no other place to look but into his eyes.

And all of a sudden it was as if all the air had vanished from around her and she felt warm, warmer than she had ever felt.

His dark eyes flicked to her lips, and some unseen force drew her to him, pulling her away from her resolve to stay away, pulling her away from Rexus and all she had ever held dear.

With a soft smile, he lifted a hand and stroked her cheek, and Ceres could not for the life of her look away. He leaned forward, his lips finding her throat, so soft.

She took in a staggered breath while her hands knitted through his thick dark curls. She found his lips, warm, soft, and she moved hers across his, slowly, tingles spreading through her, and all that had ever been and all that was, was no more.

"Thanos!" Ceres heard, a female voice, bringing her back to reality.

She turned her head to see Stephania standing there, her lips pinched together tightly, tears in her eyes.

Thanos gave Stephania a hard glare.

"The king needs to see you," Stephania snapped.

"Can't it wait?" Thanos asked.

"No, it is of an urgent matter," Stephania said.

Thanos exhaled a slow breath, an expression of disappointment in his eyes. He stood up and bowed toward Ceres.

"Until next time," he said, and marched back toward the library.

Feeling quite embarrassed, Ceres rose to her feet and was about to leave, but Stephania stepped in her way, eyes seething.

"You will stay away from Thanos, you hear? Just because you are dressed as royalty doesn't mean you are one. You have nothing but commoner blood running through your veins."

"I..." Ceres started, but she was interrupted.

"I know Thanos likes you, but soon he will grow tired of you the way he does every commoner. And once you have given him what he wants, he will throw you out of the palace just like he did the other girls."

Ceres didn't believe Stephania for one second.

"If he has so many other girls, why do you want to marry him?" she asked.

"I don't have to explain myself to a lowlife like you. Stay away from my future husband, or I will find a way to make you disappear, do you understand?"

Stephania started back toward the library, but then she turned to face Ceres again.

"And just so you know," she said, "I will be telling the queen about all that I saw."

## **CHAPTER TWENTY TWO**

Thanos paced nervously back and forth outside of Ceres's door, his hands sweaty, his throat dry, his armor too restrictive and hot. Nothing felt right. Nothing was right. Although he realized he had no choice other than to accept his uncle's orders, he knew Ceres would not understand and that she would be hurt and quite possibly hate him for it. And the worst part was, she would be in the right to do so. Even he despised himself for agreeing to do as his uncle had commanded, and he wished there was some way out of this nightmare of a predicament.

Thanos wiped the sweat beading on his brow, and cursed silently.

It was idiotic to pace about here like a drunken fool, he knew, for the king had commanded him to leave immediately, so there was no time. But Ceres deserved the truth from him even if it would cause a mountain of a rift between them. Even if his greatest fear came true—that she would never want to see him again.

Never.

He squeezed his eyes shut as the horror of that thought settled in. And then he realized there was another reason he was here. A huge part of him needed to see her again, in the event he was killed.

He shouldn't think of matters he had no control over, he reprimanded himself.

He gritted his teeth and knocked on the door, and once the new handmaiden opened, he stepped inside.

Right when Ceres saw him, her face went pale.

"Thank you for freeing Anka and for allowing me to have her as my handmaiden," Ceres said. He glanced at the girl and nodded toward Ceres.

"Of course. Ceres, may I have a word?" he asked.

Thanos noted that Ceres's shoulders went tense, and an unsettled look in her eyes verified she knew something was terribly wrong.

"Of course," Ceres said.

"Perhaps we can take a walk," he said.

They went into the hallway and climbed the stairs to the rooftop, a warm breeze tugging at his hair. From here, Thanos could see the entire capital, houses built as if on top of each other, and he could even hear the riots on the streets.

He stopped at the veranda and faced Ceres. She was so beautiful, he thought, her white dress blowing in the wind, her strawberry blonde hair moving with the breeze. But it wasn't her beauty that made him adore her so. It was her thirst for life and learning, and the passion she carried for the people and things she loved.

He took a deep breath and looked her in the eyes before he spoke.

"King Claudius has ordered the royal army to annihilate the rebellion," he said.

Her lips squeezed together ever so slightly, and she turned away from him, looking across the city.

"Was that what the note was about?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And since you are in your armor, I assume you will be one of the ones enacting the king's orders," she said.

He didn't want to say, the words feeling like molasses in his throat.

"I wish I didn't have to, but I have no choice, Ceres," he said.

"One always has a choice."

Her voice was flat, but it was greatly constrained, he could hear, and he knew with certainty all she wanted to do was scream at him.

"How can you say I have a choice? You have no idea what it's like to live beneath the king, his eyes always scrutinizing you, the threat of death always looming around the corner."

"My brothers are out there!" she yelled, tears welling up in her eyes. "My friend Rexus. Will you kill them if you see them? Will you slay the very ones I love?"

His chest filled with a dull ache, seeing her upset, when all he wanted to do was to make her smile and make her feel safe.

"I realize you are angry—" he said.

"Because they are my people!" she shouted. "They are your people, too, Thanos. Can't you see you are fighting for a corrupt king, for oppression? Is that what you really want?"

Clenching his fist, he remained silent.

"You will be fighting against exactly what it is you yourself are trying to escape. Don't you see?" she said.

He knew she was right, but he had to do this or the king would have no qualms about throwing them both back into the dungeon, like he had threatened when Thanos tried to object.

He gripped the railing, clutching until his knuckles turned white.

"I have to do what I don't want to get the things I desire more."

She stood rigid as a board, her beautiful emerald eyes widening, her mouth open in shock.

"What more could you possibly want than for your freedom and for the freedom of your people?" she asked.

"You!" he said.

Ceres's eyes turned conflicted and tears welled up in her eyes. She exhaled a breath and gazed downward, wrapping her arms around her waist as if doing so would protect her heart somehow.

"I need to leave now. I just wanted to inform you where I went before I disappeared," he said.

"Don't go. Please," she whispered, her hands falling limp at her sides, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Ceres. I have to."

Her face morphed into a dozen shades of sadness and she let out a cry.

"If you do this, I won't ever talk to you again," she said, her voice shaky and not quite certain. "That's...that's a promise!"

He watched her run away, and although Thanos wanted nothing more than to go after her and take her in his arms, kiss her tenderly, he found his feet immovable. He stood quiet for a moment, anger and shame washing through him.

In order to save himself, he was about to give up all that he loved.

# **CHAPTER TWENTY THREE**

Thanos rode toward General Draco, passing tent after tent, passing tens of thousands of Empire soldiers peppering the Alva Mountains, and he did nothing to hide the animosity in his eyes. The despicable general stood for everything that was wrong with the Empire. In fact, he hated the corrupt man just as much as he hated his uncle; perhaps even more. It was rumored, after all, that General Draco was the one who had killed Thanos's parents.

Thanos finally arrived and dismounted his horse and strode across the scorched grass toward the silver-haired general. The middle-aged man stood in front of his tent, his red cape waving in the wind, a bandage wrapped around his muscular shoulder above his armor. He had been wounded yesterday when Blackrock Square had been stormed by the rebellion, Thanos had heard. If only that arrow had pierced his black heart.

"Come, my new lieutenant," General Draco said.

Thanos did not want that title; the king had forced it upon him. And now that the Empire stood between Ceres and him, driving a deep wedge that could destroy any chance he had at being with her, he detested it even more. However, he valued his and Ceres's life, so he would honor the title until the rebellion had been squashed.

Thanos followed the general inside the tent, where they ended standing around the massive oak strategy table in the middle of the room, a map of Delos and figurines strategically placed upon it.

"Your uncle speaks very highly of your combat and strategy skills, Thanos. I hope you will live up to your reputation." The general spoke in a rushed manner.

Thanos said nothing.

"The rebellion has grown out of hand, and we must squelch it today," General Draco said. "The rebels attacked Fountain Square today, as we suspected they would, and at this very moment, Empire soldiers are forcing them out of the piazza, northward. The instant you leave this tent, you will lead a company of one hundred and twenty men to the north side of Fountain Square, to here."

The general pointed to the map.

"You will capture or kill the leaders of the rebellion, and bring them back to camp dead or alive."

Thanos's heart groaned because he knew anyone brought back alive would be tortured to death. It would be more merciful to kill them all, he thought, although he didn't want to do that either.

"This mission must not fail, and due to the king's high recommendation, I requested you for this task," the general said.

"I understand," Thanos said.

"And just in case you need motivation, your uncle told me to inform you, if you do not succeed on this mission, he will have Ceres thrown into the dungeon, and she will be used as bait in the next Killings."

With one hundred and twenty Empire soldiers and four wagons of weapons in tow, Thanos arrived about a mile north of Fountain Square, at the very street where the Empire soldiers would steer the rebels. He ordered his men to stack weapons in abandoned houses, set up traps on the streets, and carry the firepots onto the rooftops.

Thanos climbed to the roof with two dozen Empire soldiers, while the others hid inside houses behind closed shutters to wait for the revolutionaries to pass by. He stood there, pacing, waiting, hating himself more with every minute that passed.

Hardly five minutes passed when Thanos heard the first set of horse hooves pounding against the cobblestones. Still fraught with conflict about his mission, detesting how he was being used as a pawn in the king's game, he lit the tip of his arrow and waited for the revolutionaries to come galloping around the corner. He could not rebel outwardly against the king, he knew; and yet he could find a way to do minimal damage to the rebels, and especially to those closest to Ceres.

Within seconds, four men on horses dashed by, their blue ensigns waving in the wind. Before they could pass, they were shot down with arrows from other Empire soldiers, and fell wounded in the street.

Thanos's arrow was still in his bow. Sweat trickled down his cheek.

Quickly, the rebels were snatched up by eight Empire soldiers and thrown into a slaver cart to be taken back to the camp for questioning.

This isn't right, Thanos thought. He knew he had no choice but to slaughter them.

Or did he? Could he save these men and women they were ordered to attack?

A group of nineteen came next, and just as they rode past Thanos, the Empire soldiers on the rooftops tilted the firepots, the hot oil drenching the revolutionaries. Their shrieks pierced Thanos's heart, and he had to look away from the writhing bodies on the streets. Once the hot oil had cooled, all nineteen were thrown into a slaver cart to be taken back to camp.

Just as the Empire soldiers had finished clearing the streets, hiding the evidence of the attack, another small group of riders came galloping toward them.

"Rexus!" Thanos heard one of the men yell.

Immediately, Thanos remembered Ceres had mentioned that name when they had spoken on the rooftop of the palace, and his gaze scanned the revolutionaries.

A muscular blond man turned his horse around and steered it to the side of the street, waving. Behind the small group rode a slew of revolutionaries, but before they arrived at the attack site, Thanos killed the flame on his arrow, hopped down from the roof and into an alleyway, lying in wait for Rexus to pass by.

Before Rexus came close enough, a mob of Empire soldiers stormed out from the houses and started slaving the revolutionaries.

Rexus, Thanos could see, startled at the surprise attack, but quicker than eyes could follow, Rexus pulled one arrow after another from his quiver, shooting his enemies down, killing every single one he shot.

Once his arrows had been depleted, Rexus hopped down from his horse and pulled his sword, slicing Empire soldiers down left and right with the speed and precision of a combatlord, Thanos saw.

Thanos dashed out from the alleyway and tore after Rexus, his sword held high, pretending he was going to attack. He wanted to get to the young man before anyone else had a chance to slay him dead.

He snuck up behind Rexus and wrapped an iron arm around his neck, and with a hand clasped around the young man's mouth, Thanos dragged him into the dimness of the alleyway.

But Rexus was strong, and he wrestled out of Thanos's grasp, drawing his sword.

Thanos held his hands out in front of him and dropped his sword to the ground.

"I mean you no harm!" he yelled, retreating deeper into the shadows, hoping Rexus would follow.

Rexus slashed at him with a force that had Thanos hopping backwards, frightened he had made a mistake and that this could be his last hour. Rexus lunged and spun around, whirling like a tornado after Thanos, the sword slicing through the air, making a swooshing sound.

"Ceres told me you were her friend!" Thanos said. "I want to help you!"

Rexus paused for a moment, staying his sword.

"This is a trap," he said.

"No. She was worried about you. She knew I would fight, and she mentioned her brothers. She mentioned you."

Rexus hesitated.

"Stay here and you will not be killed," Thanos said.

"I won't leave my men out there to die!" Rexus growled.

Of course he wouldn't, and Thanos should have known that. But he was doing this on the fly, with no time to plan.

As quick as a flash, Thanos snatched an arrow from his quiver and shot Rexus's sleeve, the arrow wedging into the wall behind Rexus, confining him.

The distraction gave Thanos just enough time to dash behind Rexus and knock him on the head with the hilt of his sword.

Rexus fell to the ground unconscious and Thanos exhaled a breath of relief. He might not be able to save everyone, Thanos knew, but at least he had saved one of Ceres's friends' lives.

Thanos climbed back onto the rooftop and looked down toward the street. Many Empire soldiers had fallen—many more than he thought would. He saw the opportunity to save the revolutionaries, yet to make it look like he had made the best decision for his own men. No one would blame him for retreating if he judged that his men were being butchered, losing sorely.

"Empire soldiers retreat!" he shouted. "Retreat immediately!"

A few of the Empire soldiers looked up with questions in their eyes, but Thanos knew they would follow his orders. Empire soldiers were trained to obey no matter the command.

The soldiers on the rooftops trickled down one after another, heading toward the wagons, and the soldiers battling the revolutionaries in the streets and inside houses retreated toward the wagons while fighting the enemy off.

Seeing his men were safe, Thanos was just about to join them, but then a faint sound behind him caught his attention. He glanced back to see a young revolutionary, a sword in one hand, a spear in the other.

Thanos drew his sword and took a step toward the man.

"I have no desire to harm you," he said.

Screaming, the young man came at Thanos, the tip of the spear pointing straight toward Thanos's heart.

Thanos spun around and hacked the spear out of his opponent's hand. The young man slashed, but missed, and before the young man could withdraw his arm, Thanos had sliced it open.

"I do not wish to kill you!" Thanos said again, taking a cautious step back. "Walk away and you will live."

"Anything from an Empire soldier's mouth is a lie!" the young man said.

The young man cried out and his jaw clenched, and in no time he was back at Thanos, jabbing.

"I know you are Prince Thanos!" the young man said, stabbing toward him.

"Correct. And who are you?" Thanos asked, blocking.

"That I will tell you once I have run my sword through you," the young man said.

"I must warn you, I have yet to lose a duel."

The young man's eyebrows rose, no fear present in his face.

"There must always be a first!" he yelled.

The young man sped toward Thanos, their swords crashing then, a power struggle, blade against blade. Shoving with a roar, Thanos pushed him away, but the young man was at him again. He was powerful, Thanos noticed, rage, anger, and passion for his cause probably fueling his strength.

The young man stabbed toward Thanos, but missed as Thanos swerved out of the way.

Thanos didn't want to kill him, but it would seem the young man would not stop until one of them was dead. In a split second, Thanos decided he would try to outrun him.

However, before Thanos could remove himself from the duel, the young man drove for Thanos's heart, but Thanos shifted so the young man tumbled forward.

And as he did, he fell, the blade ending up buried in his own abdomen instead.

The young man fell to the roof with a grunt, and as he drew the sword out of his stomach, he screamed.

Thanos took a few steps toward his enemy.

"Kill me," the young man said, a tinge of fear in his eyes.

Thanos gazed at the young man for a few moments, a feeling of sadness overwhelming him. He slid his sword back into its sheath and turned to walk away.

"I am dying," the young man grunted.

Thanos felt overwhelmed with sadness for him. He shook his head.

"You are," he said, seeing how grievous the wound was, realizing nothing could be done for him.

"I didn't tell you my name," the boy gasped.

Thanos nodded, waiting.

"Then tell me," he said, "and I shall make sure it is known that you died an honorable death."

"My name," he gasped, "is Nesos."

Thanos stared back in horror. Nesos. Ceres's brother.

And as Nesos fell down, dead, Thanos knew his life would never be the same again.

### CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

When Thanos entered the throne room, he noticed the tension right away, the king screaming at General Draco, the dignitaries arguing in their seats, gnashing teeth, and the queen spewing obscenities to an advisor. Everyone was here, he saw, even the princes and princesses who weren't usually at meetings such as this. And for good reason.

On his way back, Thanos had seen the slaughter. Houses had been burned to the ground, and citizens—men, women, and children—were left butchered in the streets, stray dogs eating at their flesh, crows pecking at bodies. A few poor souls had been nailed to the trees, while others hung from nooses. But so many Empire soldiers had died, too, and the revolutionaries weren't any kinder, torturing, desecrating bodies in vile ways and even dismembering them.

He knew this was not a war he wanted to be a part of. Not now. Not ever.

"The rebellion has grown beyond what anyone imagined it could, and now the few revolutionaries have become a monster, that if not slain soon, will vanquish the Empire," General Draco said, standing in front of the king and queen.

Once Thanos reached the bottom of the stairwell below the thrones, the room slowly grew silent.

The king did not reply to the general, but turned his attention to Thanos.

"I send my nephew out on one assignment," he said. "One measly assignment, and what happens? He fails miserably, embarrassing himself and the entire royal family in less than an hour. What have you to say for yourself, Thanos?"

Thanos pinched his lips together, in an attempt to prevent himself from telling his uncle he had failed on purpose.

"It was not just him," General Draco said. "Many failed. As I told you before, we must call in more soldiers from the north. If not, you will lose more battles and we will have a war on our hands."

Thanos was surprised that General Draco stood by him.

"If we don't keep losing, we won't have to bring in more troops," the king said.

"Perhaps, but it doesn't change the reality that we are bleeding more men than what the rebellion is birthing," General Draco said.

The king thought for a moment, running his fingers through his beard, and Thanos was glad the attention was no longer on him.

"I hesitate to call in the troops from the north. It will be days before they arrive," the king said.

"With all due respect, sire, what else can we do?" General Draco asked.

"Are there any other proposals?" the king asked, an open question to the dignitaries in the room.

"We should poison the wells in the city," one said. "And only supply water to the peaceable citizens."

"That might work, but the revolutionaries would only become angrier," the king said.

"Perhaps we can offer a deal, a sign of good will, and that will calm their rage."

"Open the king's food storage vaults. Feed them," another said.

The king paused for a moment before nodding.

"Perhaps," he said. "Any other suggestions?"

"Might I speak a word?" the queen asked, eyes cunningly watching Thanos.

All gazes in the room slid toward her.

The king gestured with a hand, allowing her to speak.

"I propose a union between a commoner and a royal, a nuptial between the people and the Empire," she said.

"What did you have in mind, exactly?" the king asked.

"A marriage between Thanos and Ceres," she said.

Gasps went through the throne room, expressions of horror and disbelief painting the advisors' faces.

Thanos was stunned by the queen's suggestion as well. Of course he would have no qualms about marrying Ceres, but for political purposes and to be a puppet in the king and queen's play? He didn't like that one bit. He didn't want them to defile the one thing that was the most precious in his life.

"I think that is an excellent idea," the king said. "A union between a lowly commoner and a royal. The people will love it."

"Thanos was promised to me!" a girl's voice boomed through the room.

Thanos swiveled around, and way in the back of the room stood Stephania, her body rigid, yet her eyes wounded.

Stephania walked down the hallway toward the thrones.

"You may not approach!" the queen yelled. "Go back to your seat and close your lips for the remainder of this meeting."

Stephania stopped in her tracks and looked at Thanos, her cheeks glistening with tears, he could see.

Not until now did he feel sorry for the princess. He had never wanted to marry her, but even she was just a pawn in a game they could never escape.

Thanos nodded at Stephania and gave her as empathetic a look as he could. Perhaps now she would back away, knowing it was not Thanos's decision to wed someone else. Perhaps it would finally set her free.

Stephania turned around, her feet hesitantly taking steps away from Thanos. Then she sped up and continued out the bronze doors at the end, running, her sobs vanishing as the doors closed behind her.

"I think it will put an end to the feud. At least for now," the king said. "Are you in agreement, Thanos?"

The king stared at Thanos, his eyes intense with power, as if with a warning: if Thanos didn't accept, it would be the dungeon for Ceres and him. The king knew his weakness was Ceres, and Thanos was furious with himself for having been so open about it. He should have hidden his affection for Ceres, should have known the king would sooner or later take what was most precious to him and use it against him.

Here he was again without a choice, and Thanos's heart twisted in defiance when he nodded.

"Then let it immediately be broadcast from every watchtower across the city!" the king bellowed. "And by the gods, let us hope it works."

Thanos stood in shock. He didn't think it would be announced so soon.

"Should we not ask her first?" Thanos said.

A few of the dignitaries chuckled.

"It is not a question, but a command, but if you want to let her know before she finds out some other way, you had better run," the king said.

At once, the bells tolled through the city, signaling a royal announcement, the sound igniting Thanos to take action.

He turned on his heels and ran toward the bronze door at the end, and toward Ceres's chamber, hoping he could tell her before it was too late.

But how could he ask her for marriage when he had just slaughtered her brother? Would he be able to keep it secret?

## **CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE**

Horrorstruck, Ceres stood by the window in her room overlooking Delos, the skyline filled with putrid black smoke rising from burning homes. Clamors filled with unspeakable pain reached all the way to her tower, and families with little ones rushed by in the street below, their faces obscured by panic.

For the past hour or so, she had done nothing but cry—cry for her people, cry for her friends, cry for her brothers, for they could be dead. And Rexus? It was more than she could bear to think about.

Unable to watch the dreadfulness unfold any longer, she walked over to the bed and sat, but just a moment later, she had to return to the window, thinking if she didn't remain there, she was somehow betraying her people.

This? This was what Thanos was fighting for? She was still as furious with him as she had been when he left. He had somehow gotten to her, weaseled his way into her heart, made her care. She had hoped he was different from all the other greedy, power-hungry royals, but when it came down to it, he was the same, and chose to fight for the inequality and injustice that cursed this land.

There was a knock at the door, and Anka opened it.

To Ceres's surprise, and great irritation, in walked Thanos.

"May I have a word in private?" he asked.

"No you may not," Ceres said, glancing back out the window again.

"Please. It is of utmost importance," he said.

After a few moments of hesitation, Ceres nodded to Anka, and the girl left, closing the door behind her.

Ceres stood immovable beside the window, her gaze still on the street below.

"Ceres," Thanos said.

Unwilling to face him, she kept looking out the window.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I realize you are upset with me for leaving, and I remember you said you never wanted to talk to me again. But can we for just a few minutes set our differences aside?" he said.

She glanced at him, considering his comment.

"I have something important to discuss with you," he said. "What I have to say may save many lives."

"All right," she said.

She walked over to the chair in front of the fireplace and sat down, and he followed after, taking a seat straight across from her.

She could see he was anxious, his eyes shifting nervously about as if he were carefully considering what to say, but it did nothing to make her less angry with him; she simply couldn't forget that when he had left to fight, it had crushed her and destroyed all trust they had built.

"Well?" she said after he hadn't said anything for a while.

"I need you to listen with an open mind," he said. "And heart."

She stared back.

"I just came from a meeting with the king and queen, and they believe there is a way to end all the fighting."

Now her interest was piqued, although her guard was still very much up.

"They suggested a marriage between a commoner and a royal," he said.

Ceres nodded.

"I can see where that might work," she said.

Thanos's shoulders relaxed a little and his face lit up.

"You do?"

"If there is a union between the common people and a royal, perhaps the people will think there will be a change."

Ceres looked him in the eyes, and even though she was as livid with him as she had ever been with anyone, and wanted to wring his neck in a fist fight, she also wanted to be closer to him, for him to close the distance between them and kiss her on the neck the way he had before.

She looked away. Those thoughts, those feelings—she would quash them with every fiber of her being until she could no longer remember them ever being there.

"Did they have anyone in mind?" she asked, thinking perhaps Anka since she had just come from the rebellion.

"Yes," he said.

He stood up and strode two steps, vanquishing the distance between them. He knelt down before her, and it puzzled her why he would do such a silly thing.

"I have something for you," he said.

From a small leather pouch hanging around his waist he pulled out a golden bracelet with a charm in the shape of a swan. Handing it to her, he smiled softly.

"It was my mother's," he said.

Even with how mad she was, she didn't want to offend him and refuse the gift he had just offered her—it was probably the most valuable thing he owned. But did he expect her to forgive him because he gave her a present? How shallow did he think she was? How easily did he think she would forsake her principles? She would not be bought, not ever.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he spoke first.

"Ceres, it is you and I they suggested."

She stared back, floored.

"I would be honored to have your hand in marriage," he added.

She couldn't speak, for suddenly there was a lump in her throat. She would not cry, no, she would not. He might think her tears happy, when all they were, were tears of sadness and resentment, of lost trust and lost friendship. There was no way she could say yes, she knew.

She thought of Rexus, fighting for freedom, risking his life day in and day out in hopes of offering liberty to all. Thanos, he fought against all that, and she could not love someone or marry someone like him. And here Thanos was proposing to her because the king thought it would lull the citizens into believing it might lead to equality. She knew it would not.

"It is not under ideal circumstances, but you have to know, before they suggested it, I had already fallen for you," he said. "I meant what I said on the roof. More than anything, I want you."

She looked away, still hurt and unable to open her heart to forgive.

"I went out to fight, Ceres, but when I did, I couldn't get myself to kill the revolutionaries." She glanced at him, the news melting some of her anger away.

"I saw Rexus. I pulled him into the alleyway with me and knocked him on the head so he wouldn't be killed by the Empire soldiers," Thanos said.

"Truly?" she asked.

He nodded.

"But there's more."

Ceres nodded, now willing to listen, now feeling ashamed she had been so hard on him.

"I saw your brother Nesos."

She reached for his hand and he took it.

"You did?" she asked, hope filling her chest.

"We fought on the roof top. I didn't know it was him. I didn't..."

"What happened?" she asked.

Thanos paused, and looked up at her with tears in his eyes, and she knew. She knew that look, the look of holding dreadful information from a loved one. The look of pain before it had been shared.

"He fell onto his sword and it stabbed him in the abdomen. I told him I didn't want to hurt him, but he—"

She shot to her feet so fast, the chair behind her screeched across the floor. There was simply nowhere to put the pain that was overpowering her, nowhere to contain something so mighty, nowhere to hide it or store it. It was everywhere all at once.

"MURDERER!" she shrieked, unable to stop herself from crying. "MY BROTHER!"

He stood there, looking dazed.

"I hate you, and abhor everything you stand for!" she yelled.

His eyes flinched, and he exhaled a defeated breath, the hand holding the bracelet falling into his lap.

"Now get out!" she said.

"Ceres, please don't do this," he pleaded.

"Get out!" she yelled. "I said I never wanted to see you again, and I meant it!"

Her chest tightened, her throat clenched shut. She had fallen for him, too, but her heart was foolish, she knew, and this more than anything proved it.

He rose to his feet and stood still for a moment, sorrow canvassing his face.

"I'm sorry, Ceres."

He walked away, leaving the door open behind him.

She turned to the window and wept. Nesos. Her brother. Gone forever. She could hardly breathe with grief.

Hardly had she caught her breath when she heard a sound behind her. She spun, assuming Thanos had returned, preparing to shout at him to leave—but was shocked at who she saw.

The queen.

She stared back haughtily, an evil grin upon her face.

"Hello, Ceres," the queen said, walking into the doorway, eyes rumbling with menace. "How did the proposal go?"

She grinned, stepping closer.

"As Thanos's future bride, your life belongs to the monarchy. It is my responsibility as your queen to see that you are protected. For starters, you will not leave this room unless you are permitted, and for now, I forbid it."

The queen suddenly turned, walked out, and slammed the door shut. Ceres heard a key being thrust into the keyhole.

Enraged, she ran to it and wrapped frantic hands around the door handle, pulling on it with all her might.

But it was too late. The door had been locked, and there was nothing to do but give up, she realized.

She fell to her knees with uncontrollable sobs, slamming her fists on the heavy oak, Nesos's name spilling from her lips.

And yet, amidst her cries, unbeknownst to her, she sometimes confused his name with Thanos's.

### **CHAPTER TWENTY SIX**

Ceres didn't know exactly how long she had been sitting on the stone floor in her chamber—it could have been minutes, or hours—tear after tear trailing down her face. It was eerily quiet outside, the riots having ceased. Likely, the news of her and Thanos's marriage announcement was pacifying the leaders of the rebellion. She doubted it would last long.

Oh, how she wished she hated Thanos; and yet her heart was a villain, betraying everything she ever held dear. Sadness overwhelmed her, and she tucked her knees into her chest and sobbed quietly for a moment.

This is what I deserve, she thought as she sat up straight and wiped the wetness from her cheeks, staining the silk sleeves. She hadn't played her cards well, she realized, in this royal game of power and intrigue. And it was becoming clear that if she were to remain at the palace and marry Thanos, she would have to learn how to beat the royals at their own game.

Had she made the right choice in rejecting Thanos? She thought she had, but why then, whenever she thought about his forlorn face when she had rejected him, did it feel as if everything was wrong?

On the other side of the door, keys rattled, and then someone inserted a key into the keyhole. Expecting the queen or an Empire soldier, she scuttled away from the door on hands and knees and dried her tears.

When the door opened, Anka stood in the doorway. She strode into the room and shut the door behind her.

Ceres hopped to her feet, a feeling of elation rushing through her. She ran to Anka and threw arms around her, squeezing tightly.

"You need to get out of here before we are discovered," Anka said. "Go seek out Rexus. The rebellion's new headquarters are down by fisherman's bay, inside Harbor Cave."

Ceres knew the cave well, having played there many times with her brothers growing up. She looked at Anka, so small and lovely, and she could not bear to leave her friend here alone amidst the wolves.

"Come with me," Ceres said, grabbing her hand.

"I cannot. I must stay here until my mission is complete," Anka said. "But here, take this." Anka slipped her gray hooded cape off and draped it around Ceres's shoulders.

"How will I ever repay you?" Ceres said, embracing Anka again.

"You owe me nothing," Anka said with a smile.

Ceres nodded, remembering speaking those exact words when she rescued Anka from the slaver cart.

"On second thought," Anka said with a smirk, "join the rebellion and make them pay for every person that was ever forced into slavery."

"I will," Ceres said.

Just before Ceres left, she snatched her sword from beneath the bed and fastened the scabbard around her waist. She drew the hood over her head and darted down the stairwell, thrilled to finally be joining the rebellion from within, to stand beside Rexus in the fight for liberty.

She ran down the corridor, eyes peeled, ears alert, her heart galloping. She knew exactly where the guards stood watch, and as she maneuvered through the palace, she made sure to avoid those areas. Moving swiftly, quietly, and above all, in the shadows, she made herself invisible.

She reached the kitchen and weaved through boxes of food and past cooks and servants busily working on the royals' next meal.

Stepping into the courtyard, she slunk behind crates of wine and carts of food, passing slaves and Empire soldiers who had their attention elsewhere.

Just as she exited the side gates, she saw an Empire soldier holding up a scroll, speaking from the platform right in front of the palace, dozens of citizens huddling around.

"It has been declared that Prince Thanos will marry the commoner, Ceres. Due to this union, King Claudius and the rebellion have agreed upon a truce. All citizens are hereby commanded to cease and desist any and all opposition to the Empire, which includes..."

His voice faded as she skirted around the corner of a building.

For a few moments, Ceres became breathless, paralyzed, her heart pounding in her throat. The marriage was being publicly announced even though she hadn't agreed to it.

Ceres ran as fast as she could, sprinting down the street. Panting, lungs on fire, she flew by carnage and wreckage southward toward the ocean, the breeze streaming against her body. She cautiously followed the back roads leading to the bay.

The rocky shore was difficult to maneuver, but Ceres dashed as fast as she could towards Rexus's cave. On she ran, hopping over large boulders, stepping on small stones, the sun a globe of fire on her head, causing her to sweat. Even when her legs demanded she stop, and her mouth became parched, she continued on past fishermen and boats, the seagulls above soaring against the blue sky.

I will rest once I am at the cave, she told herself, and with every stride, the excitement in her bosom grew. So much had changed since she had last seen Rexus, and even though it had only been days, it felt as if it had been months. Would things be the same? She needed to share her mourning of her brother with someone, someone who would understand.

By the time she reached the cave the sun had started to set, and the cavern in the mountainside was a gaping black hole behind warped vines and slimy mosses. Other than a handful of scouts hiding on the cliffs and behind bushes, watching her, the outside looked abandoned.

Ceres found herself stopped by flaming arrows shot to the ground right before her feet. She looked up, irritated that they didn't recognize her.

"I am here for Rexus. Nesos and Sartes are my brothers! I am with the rebellion!" she yelled.

Two watchers climbed down from the mountainside, bows strung with arrows, approaching Ceres.

"I must search you for weapons," one said.

"I have a sword, but you will not take it from me," she insisted, opening up the cape, revealing her father's sword.

"Then you will not be allowed inside," he said.

Had they not heard her?

"My name is Ceres and my brothers, Nesos and Sartes, are with the rebellion," she said with an irritated voice. "I am with the rebellion. Rexus sent me on a mission to the palace and I am here to report. Go ask him. He will vouch for me."

"You're the girl who is supposed to marry Prince Thanos," the other watcher said, mockingly. She didn't want to waste time explaining to them that, no, she wasn't going to marry Thanos and that she had refused him. Rexus would vouch for her once she was inside.

"Go tell Rexus I am here to report," she said, her voice stern.

One of the watchers headed inside, while the other held her at arrow-point. After a few minutes, the watcher returned.

"Rexus will not see you. He told me to tell you to go marry your prince charming, and to stay away from the rebellion," he said.

She gasped, bursts of pain, but also wrath clenching inside. He would not see her? He thought she had agreed to marry Prince Thanos?

"I demand to see him at once!" she shouted, her body rigid.

"Get lost," one of the watchers said, nudging her with the tip of his arrow.

Ceres realized standing here and arguing would not make one difference.

She spun around, clipping one of the watcher's feet from underneath him so he fell to the rocks with a thud, and before the other watcher could react, she had already drawn her sword and knocked him unconscious with her hilt.

With not a second to waste, arrows raining down at her, she sprinted into the cave. She zoomed by dark, glistening walls, her eyes on the lit torches in the distance, her hands fumbling to get her sword back into its sheath.

"Stop!"

Yells came from behind her, but she would not stop. She would see Rexus, and as soon as she would be given a chance to explain, he would understand that she loved him, and she would know she loved him too. More than Thanos. More than anyone.

"Rexus!" she yelled, slipping on the slimy rocks.

She reached the end of the narrowing, and when she stepped into the larger space, hundreds of eyes were on her, menacing expressions causing her to want to shrink.

"Seize her!" someone yelled.

"I need to speak with Rexus!" she yelled.

A mob of men gathered around her, grabbing her arms. One took her sword and it vanished into the crowd of men and women.

"Rexus!" she yelled.

The mob opened up, and Rexus was standing there before her, his blond hair gleaming in the light of the torches. He looked so forlorn, Ceres thought.

"Rexus," she said, tears in her eyes.

She wrestled free from her captors and threw herself against his firm chest, embracing him so tightly, he grunted.

After a few moments, she noticed his arms were still by his side, limp, not embracing her in return. She pulled back a little and looked up into his gorgeous face. It was as hard and cold as ice.

"I didn't send you on a mission to marry Prince Thanos. I sent you to gain the royals' trust," he said, his eyes burning with hatred.

"I refused to marry Prince Thanos, but the queen pushed it through anyway!" Ceres said.

"What made the prince think he could marry you in the first place? Were you encouraging him?"

The crowd went silent, waiting for her answer.

"Can we please go somewhere quiet to talk," Ceres asked.

"No. I want everyone to witness this."

"Rexus, you know me. You have known me for years! Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"There must have been some reason he thought he should ask you."

"What? Rexus, I denied him!" Ceres yelled.

"Of all the people to betray me, I never thought you would."

"But I—" Ceres started.

"One of the princesses at the palace sought me out and told me she had seen you and Thanos in the library gardens, kissing," Rexus said.

"Stephania?" Ceres asked.

Rexus's eyes flared just a tad, then softened, and she hoped maybe he would finally listen.

"So it is not true?" he asked, a look of slight relief on his face.

"Stephania was supposed to marry Thanos, but when the king and queen saw their opportunity to create peace in the Empire, they broke off their engagement and—"

"First, answer my question. Did you kiss him?" he pressed.

She couldn't lie to him, but she could explain. Or at least try to.

"Yes. But—"

"And was it of your own free will and choice?" he continued.

She couldn't respond to that. She just couldn't, for so many reasons.

Rexus nodded, knowingly, his nostrils flaring, his expression hard again.

"So how can I then believe that you declined his proposal of marriage? Maybe you have even been sent as a spy here?" he said.

"No!"

"Get her out of here. And let it be known to every revolutionary that Ceres is banned from joining the rebellion forever!" Rexus said.

He swiveled around, but then stopped and glanced back at Ceres one more time, his expression disturbed.

"And I thought you should know. Nesos endured to the end. He gave his life for the rebellion while his sister was off flirting with the enemy."

She collapsed to the ground, her grief crushing her heart so thoroughly, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't see, her eyes overflowing with tears.

As the revolutionaries dragged her out of the cave, she called her brother's name again and again. Everything she had was now lost to her.

### **CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN**

"May I have a word?" Thanos asked Cosmas in the library, his hands shaking like leaves caught in a storm.

Cosmas looked up from reading a scroll, his expression worried, but loving.

"Of course."

They walked together out into the palace gardens and sat on a bench in front of the marble fountain, beneath a cloudy sky.

"What can I help you with, son?" Cosmas asked.

Thanos huffed.

"The king and queen commanded Ceres and I to be wed to restore the peace in the land," he said.

"So I heard."

"She rejected me."

"Ah, that, too, I heard."

Thanos took a deep cleansing breath.

"I have fallen in love with Ceres, but she believes I only proposed because I was commanded to."

Cosmas nodded, paused, and brought a hand to his chin.

"Have you spoken to her, opened your heart and let her know how you feel?" Cosmas asked."

"I told her some things, but I didn't tell her I loved her," Thanos relied.

"Heavens, why not?"

She had been so angry with him, he remembered, but that hadn't been why he had held back.

"When I was on my mission, I fought with her brother and he fell onto his sword and died. I told Ceres what happened, but she was so furious with me, it was as if she believed I had killed him."

Cosmas nodded, pondering.

"You told her the truth, and she will be devastated and angry and hurt for a time. If you had remained silent, and she found out, she would never have forgiven you. You did the right thing."

"But she hates me now, even though I tried to save her brother," Thanos said.

"I have known you your entire life, Thanos. You are a good man."

Thanos moaned.

"How am I a good man when I am ready to run away and leave everything behind?"

"Running away might offer you a new start, but soon the ghosts of the past will come to haunt you," Cosmas said. "You must talk to her, and then she can decide."

"She will not speak to me." Then Thanos had a thought. "Will you try and talk some sense into her?" he pleaded.

Cosmas bushy eyebrows grew heavy and he huffed.

"Very well, but only if you promise me you will tell her you love her."

Thanos nodded. "I promise."

Ceres ran back through the palace, dashing up the stairs three at a time. She tore past Empire soldiers who tried to arrest her, and darted toward Thanos's chamber, her feet moving so fast they barely touched the marble floors. Thanos was the only one who could help her at this point, she knew, and if he refused, she would drag him back to Harbor Cave bound and gagged if needed. Thanos needed to tell Rexus that she indeed had declined his proposal, and to allow her a chance to join the revolutionaries.

When she stormed into Thanos's room, she was sorely disappointed to find it empty.

She sprinted toward the palace gardens, looked in the royal practice arena, and even checked the blacksmith's chalet. But he was nowhere. It was as if Thanos had vanished into thin air.

The library, of course! she thought.

As she shot back through the gardens, she saw the queen standing on the veranda, eyes like a hawk, a hint of a conniving smile on her lips. And then four Empire soldiers rushed out from behind bushes and trees, arresting Ceres, their grips around her arms so tight it was painful.

"Thanos!" she screamed, thrashing legs. "Thanos!"

But he did not come.

The Empire soldiers dragged her upstairs to the queen's chamber, and threw her onto the shiny marble floor at the queen's feet. Two stood in front of the door, blocking it, while the other two marched past the stone statue of a couple embracing, and out onto the balcony, through the open doors.

"Come with me," the queen said to Ceres.

The queen walked out through the flowing purple curtains onto the veranda, overlooking the ocean. Shaken, but still angered, Ceres climbed to her feet and followed after.

"I still don't know how you managed to get out of your room," the queen said, her steely eyes gazing into the distance, a golden wine goblet in her hand. "At first, I thought you found a way to climb out the window and down the side of the tower, but there would be no way to do that and not fall to your death."

Ceres pinched her lips, not willing to offer up that Anka had freed her.

"So someone in the palace must have opened the door for you, and when I find out who that person is, I will personally skin them alive," the queen said, her voice flat but strict.

"It's not that difficult to unlock the door from the inside," Ceres said, hoping the queen would believe she did it on her own.

The queen glanced at Ceres, squinting.

"I doubt that is what you did," she said.

The queen turned away and peered across the ocean.

"When I was your age, I thought I could do whatever I wanted, too. Youth has a way of making one naïve and irrational," she said.

"I am neither of those things," Ceres said.

The queen took a sip of wine.

"Of course, you are, my dear. Your returning to the palace proves it. You should have stayed far away, Ceres. Here, we have your entire life planned out, and it will not be to your liking."

"I won't marry Thanos, if that's what you mean," Ceres said.

"You will, and as the new princess, it will be your responsibility to produce babies. Lots and lots of babies. You will never be seen. You will never be heard. Your children will not know you, for the instant they are out of your womb, they will be ripped from your arms to be raised by a nanny, far, far away."

"I won't marry Thanos."

"You have no choice, Ceres. You *will* wed him and once you have produced enough children, you will be killed off and replaced by another girl, a woman of royal blood, someone deserving of the title *princess*."

"Thanos would never let that happen. He's not like the rest of you barbarians."

The queen chuckled.

"Do you really think he cares for you?" she said, tsking. "Oh my. You are even more naïve than I thought."

Ceres's shoulders grew tighter with the queen's words. Had he only pretended to hate his family and the royals to gain her sympathy? Had he shown affection to try and make her fall for him when in truth, he didn't care for her at all? No, she didn't believe it. His touch and his kiss had been too real.

"Thanos told me a secret, and I must say, he is even more of a barbarian than the rest of us," the queen said.

"I doubt that," Ceres said, her guard up.

"I suppose he didn't tell you he was the one who sought out and killed your brother, Nesos?" the queen said, a glib smile on her lips.

With all her might, Ceres tried to keep her face free from expressing the pang of grief she felt on the inside, tried to force her eyes not to fill with tears. But she could not hold it all inside and fell onto hands and knees as racking sobs tumbled from her lips.

"Why...why are you doing this to me?" Ceres asked, her voice cracking. "How can you hate me so much when you don't even know me?"

The queen walked toward Ceres, stepping on Ceres's filthy dress.

"I don't need to know you to realize that you are a very useful pawn to the Empire," she said.

"I will never be your or anyone else's pawn," Ceres seethed.

The queen ignored her comment.

"Because of this marriage, peace will prevail through the land, allowing the Empire to maintain power. And when you have fulfilled your purpose, make no mistake, you will be discarded."

The queen nodded toward the Empire soldiers behind her, and they grabbed Ceres's arms and pulled her to her feet.

"Take her back to her room," the queen said. "And make sure both her wrists and ankles are shackled this time."

# **CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT**

Thanos always felt better after talking to Cosmas, and as he eagerly walked toward Ceres's chamber, he knew with every fiber of his being that the right thing was to open up to her, even if it meant she would not have him.

He marched through the palace gardens, and just as he came around the gazebo, he saw the king approaching with his advisors. His uncle must surely be the most evil man to roam the earth, Thanos thought, a cruel murderer who would go to any length to maintain his power over his subjects.

Thanos veered from the path, taking a different route, hoping the king hadn't seen him.

"Good day, Thanos," the king yelled, waving for him to come.

Thanos's skin crawled, but he approached his uncle as the advisors continued on down the path.

"Walk with me," the king said.

He strolled down the pathway beside his uncle and toward the royal practice ground, the scent of the flowers so sweet, it was nauseating. Or was it his uncle's presence that made him feel that way?

"I heard the proposal did not go as expected," the king said, hands clasped behind his back.

Of all the people in the world, the king was the absolute last person Thanos wanted to have this conversation with. But here he was, trapped, and with no choice other than to answer his uncle's prying questions.

"Not exactly," Thanos said.

The king was silent for a moment, perhaps waiting for Thanos to say something.

"I can see you care for this girl," the king finally said. "And it might surprise you to know that our stories are rather similar."

That did surprise Thanos, and his curiosity was piqued.

"When I first met Athena, she could hardly stand to be in the same room as me," the king said with a chuckle. "It was a blind marriage, one my parents had arranged in order to expand the Empire's borders. I had heard rumors of Athena's beauty and I could hardly wait to meet her, but when we met, Athena refused to acknowledge my existence in the least."

"Why?" Thanos asked, having never heard this story before.

"You see, she had fallen in love with someone else."

It was an interesting story, Thanos thought, but he failed to see how their situations were similar.

"We married, and after the first year, we became best friends, and passionate lovers," the king continued with a proud expression on his face.

"Why are you telling me this?"

The king paused, placing a fat hand on Thanos's shoulder.

"I realize our situations are not exactly the same, but I know you, Thanos. You will probably refuse to marry Ceres if she is not in agreement. And because she loves someone else, you will do everything in your power to not force her to marry you."

Thanos squinted.

"Why would you think she loves someone else?" he asked.

"We had Ceres followed when she snuck out of the palace to go visit Rexus, one of the leaders of the rebellion, and Ceres's lover," the king said.

If his uncle's words were true, it would indeed be another blow to Thanos's pride, but could he trust what his uncle was saying? Never.

"Rexus is her childhood friend, nothing more," Thanos said.

"I do not tell you this to be cruel. I tell you this so you will know the truth and not be deceived. I might be harsh on you, but I am always truthful," the king said.

Thanos slapped the king's hand away from his shoulder and took a step back.

"You lie," he snarled.

"When Ceres returned to the palace, she admitted everything to the queen. Ask Ceres yourself if you don't trust my word or the queen's," the king said.

Thanos shook his head in disbelief, but if the king were lying, why would he suggest Thanos ask Ceres in person?

He glanced up at the tower. Had he been blind? Did Ceres not return his affection? All the signs pointed to it: her snide comments, the way she maintained her distance from him, her refusal to marry him. Perhaps he had been mistaken, and now he paid the consequences: humiliation and rejection.

A surge of anger filled his chest, and he felt heat spread through his cheeks.

"In truth, Stephania is a much better match for you, Thanos. Ah, she might be a bit spoiled and full of herself, but motherhood will remedy all that."

"I don't love her," Thanos said through clenched teeth.

"I will allow you to make this decision yourself, Thanos. But know this: if you marry Ceres, it will ensure peace in the Empire and thousands of lives will be spared. If you do not, many will die on either side."

"If I agree to wed Ceres, the rebellion might die down for some time, but I can assure you they will rise again. I don't doubt you know that," Thanos said.

"Temporary or not, it would give us time to bring in additional forces from the north."

Thanos thought for a moment, but he knew he couldn't—wouldn't—marry someone who didn't love him in return.

"Think on it for a while," the king said. "In the meantime, General Draco has requested you lead a legion of men to quell the rebellion in Haylon."

At any other time, Thanos would have rejected the command without a second thought. His uncle was indeed shrewd as a serpent, he knew, offering him this opportunity now that Thanos was heartbroken. And he hated that he had been played yet again.

"When would I leave?" Thanos asked.

"Now. The ships stand ready in the harbor and the Empire soldiers are awaiting their new leader."

Thanos felt a wave of rage.

"I do not accept the position," he said.

The king smiled.

"You have no choice."

Thanos scowled.

"Then give me a chance, at least, to see Ceres before I go," he said, desperate to see her one last time, to explain to her that he might never return.

But the king merely shook his head.

"I am afraid that is impossible," he said.

And with those words, he walked away.

Thanos wanted to run to Ceres, but before he could move, a dozen soldiers surrounded him. He knew it would be no use. They would, upon the King's command, escort him to the ship, away from all of this, and to a battle that may mean his death.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY NINE**

Sitting on a chair by the window in her chamber, her wrists and ankles chained, Ceres finally gave up trying to escape. For hours, she had strained to get out of these shackles, to summon the supernatural strength that sometimes granted her extreme power, but she was left with nothing but bruised flesh and bloodied skin.

Unsettled, trying to hold onto the dwindling sliver of sanity she had left, she gazed out the window at the serene capital. However, seeing how peace had descended over the war-torn city was of little help for nothing but deceit had brought this peace, she knew. How many more lies were out there floating around, keeping the infrastructure of the Empire from crashing down?

Ceres heard keys clatter outside the door, and when the door opened, to her surprise, in walked Cosmas.

He froze in the doorway, gasping when he saw her, a look of horror on his wrinkled face.

"Ceres, what happened to you?" he asked, immediately making his way over to her.

"The queen felt the need to confine me to my chamber," she said.

Cosmas examined the shackles, and when he saw her blood, he walked over to the water vessel, dipped a washcloth in it, and returned to her side.

"What a despicable thing to do to a sweet dear," he said, dabbing the washcloth on her sores. "Did she say why?"

Ceres bit down, the washcloth stinging as he cleaned her wounds.

"I refused to marry Thanos and then I left the castle," she said.

Cosmas paused, his expression saddened.

"Yes, he came to me, distraught, heartbroken," he said.

She blinked, trying to keep her tears at bay.

"I never wanted to hurt Thanos," she said. "But I refuse to have the Empire use us for their own gain."

Cosmas nodded, his brows knitting together.

"The queen said that I will only be used to breed babies and then I will be killed once I am no longer of use," Ceres said.

"I hope you know Thanos would never allow that," Cosmas said, continuing to clean her wounds.

"I didn't think he would. But now I don't know anymore."

Cosmas looked at her, his crinkly eyes a question.

"The queen said Thanos sought my brother out to kill him," Ceres said, a lump forming in her throat.

Cosmas gently placed a hand on her head, stroking her hair.

"My deepest condolences for your loss," he said. "Thanos told me what happened, and he was extremely distraught. He didn't know until after he had slain the young man that he was your brother. And he did all in his power not to slay him, even though Nesos tried to kill Thanos. Your brother fell on his own sword. A tragic misunderstanding, I am afraid. I am sure that if Nesos had known then he would not have tried to kill Thanos. But for Thanos's part, there was nothing more he could have possibly done. Nesos tried with all his heart to kill him. It was only his love for you that allowed Thanos to not fight back against a man who wanted his life."

So it wasn't as the queen said, Ceres noted with relief. The news made the loss slightly less horrific, although she still felt as if her heart might burst from sadness at any moment. But now she wondered, how many more of the queen's words were spiked with lies?

Cosmas looked Ceres in the eyes with such sincerity that she found herself holding her breath.

"Thanos loves you, Ceres. He needs a good, upright woman in his life to fight for him, with him, and to be on his side. Don't let the king and queen meddle in your relationship. Don't let them destroy what beauty is between you."

"Beauty? What beauty? He hasn't even had the decency to visit me," she said, a bitter taste in her mouth.

"He was sent on a mission to Haylon. The isle overthrew the Empire, and he was sent to get it back."

"What?" she asked in horror.

"Don't believe Thanos did it because he supports anything the Empire stands for," Cosmas said. "He most certainly does not."

He stepped closer and lowered his voice, and Ceres could sense he was going to say something dangerous, the air around them becoming tense.

"I overheard something," Cosmas said. "Thanos was told lies about you, and that is why he left for Haylon, despairing. It seems someone is trying to dispatch him and wants him dead. But I am not certain who or why."

"Who could possibly want Thanos dead?" she asked, worried.

"I know not. But whisper a word of this to anyone, and all of our lives will be in danger."

He took a step back, the atmosphere in the room returning to normal.

"There must be some way to get you out of the shackles. If only I had a key," he said, glancing around. "I'd sneak you out of here and bring you to my wife. You could stay with us in our home."

"You would do that for me?" she asked, realizing he'd be risking his life.

Cosmas smiled softly, his eyes brimming with tenderness.

"Thanos is like a son to me, and he loves you. I would do anything for him, and now you, too."

That brought tears to her eyes, Ceres having felt so alone and abandoned.

"Thank you," she said.

"I will be your faithful friend forever," Cosmas said. "You don't belong here, Ceres. Thanos cares for you, but the rest of the lot are rotten and vile, and you are too innocent and good to play their games."

Then she had a thought.

"If I write a letter to Thanos, is there any way you could deliver it for me?" she asked.

"Of course. I have a few friends, and I believe they could get it to Thanos rather quickly."

She pulled out parchment and started to write. She told him about everything, from what the queen had said, to why she had rejected his marriage proposal. She even told him that she did care for Rexus, but that she was confused because she loved them both. She told him about how she knew that the king and queen were pitting them against each other, but she had no way to prove it. She told him she had learned that he had killed her brother, but knew he hadn't intended it, and that she was trying to forgive him.

And finally, she asked him to return so she could hold him, keep him close, and she asked for his forgiveness for having been so cold.

She rolled the letter up and handed it to Cosmas.

"I will make sure this gets to Thanos, and I will protect it with my life if I have to," he said. He embraced her, and then he left, locking the door behind him.

As Ceres listened to his footsteps vanish down the stairs, she couldn't help but wonder if she had been wrong about everything. If Thanos would get her letter. If he would be killed.

And if she would ever see Thanos again.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

Ceres felt like her heart might leap out of her chest when she saw her father standing in the doorway of her chamber. He was dressed in fine clothing and his face was no longer pallid like it used to be, his cheeks rosy, his lips tilting upward. And those eyes... How wonderful it was to see his kind, loving eyes again, the eyes she trusted and immediately soothed her frazzled nerves.

She rose to her feet to run over to him, but the shackles restrained her.

His gaze fell upon the chains, and his expression turned worried. He strode across the chamber and reached arms around her.

She squeezed him tightly, nestling her face in his chest, the warmth of his body, the tenderness of his embrace, bringing tears of joy to her eyes.

"I missed you so," she whispered.

"I love you," he said.

For one blissful moment, they held each other, and all was beautiful and Ceres felt safe and loved.

But then she felt her father shrinking in her arms, vanishing little by little, his body imploding into nothingness, and it was as if she was herself dying with his departure.

"No," she whimpered as she grasped at him, trying to make it so he wouldn't disappear.

"Father!" she cried, closing her eyes, but then he was gone.

Sunlight warmed her face and she opened her eyes to find herself standing in the arena at the Stade, seven combatlords moving in on her, the crowd chanting for her blood to be spilt. Her hands and wrists were no longer shackled, but she had no weapons to defend herself with. Petrified, she searched her surroundings for a way to escape, but seeing the combatlords encircling her, there was no way out. Weaponless, she was incapable of fighting back, and when the combatlords charged toward her, she fell to her knees, shrieking, pressing the palms of her hands to her eyes.

Ceres woke up with a scream beneath the window, her body sweating, tears in her eyes, the stone floor cold and hard beneath her. The chains clattered when she buried her face in her hands, and she let out a piercing cry into the night.

What a horrid nightmare, she thought. But what did it mean? Was it an omen of what was to come? She hugged her chest, feeling so empty, so defenseless, so raw.

She startled when the door creaked open, and for a second, when she saw a male figure standing in the darkened doorway, in her half-awakened state she thought Thanos had returned.

"Thanos?" she whispered, excitement growing in her bosom.

"Is that what he does at night, visits you?" the man said.

The hairs on the back of Ceres's neck rose when she recognized the voice as Lucious's, and immediately she knew she was in danger, unable to escape, her wrists and ankles shackled.

"I hadn't seen you in a while and was worried about you," Lucious said.

"I doubt that."

He stepped closer, and his face appeared in the moonlight.

"Leave or I will scream," Ceres said, her breathing shallow.

"And who will come and save you? Not Thanos. Not the king of queen. Not Empire soldiers." She rose to her feet and picked up a golden goblet from the table, throwing it at him, but he veered quickly, and the cup flew out the open door and tumbled down the steps.

Lucious slammed the door shut and lunged toward Ceres, pushing her wrists into the wall behind her, rubbing his body against hers, his breath reeking of alcohol.

She screamed and kicked him in the shin, but he clasped a hand over her mouth and pressed his knees between her legs so she couldn't move them. With hasty fingers, he pulled her skirt up, and for a moment, he released her mouth and crushed her lips with his.

Bile rose in her throat, and Ceres opened her mouth, biting him as hard as she could. He pulled back and hit her across the face, fist closed, his golden ring cutting Ceres across the cheek.

She forced herself to ignore the pain and screamed as loudly as she could, but he stuffed fabric down her throat, gagging her. His hands fumbled at her skirt again, and he pressed against her with forceful hips, a wild look in his eyes, the feral gleam of a savage.

"You have given me so much trouble that you owe me a little pleasure," he hissed.

Muffled sounds escaped her lips as she fought against him with all her might, but he was too strong and she was shackled.

Suddenly, he fell to the floor behind her, lifeless. She glanced over her shoulder and was flooded with relief to see Anka standing there with a silver candleholder.

"Anka," Ceres croaked, her knees trembling so she could barely stand.

Anka ran over to Ceres and hurriedly inserted a key into the cuffs around Ceres's ankles and wrists, freeing her.

Hands shaking uncontrollably, Ceres pulled the fabric out of her parched mouth. Anka grabbed Ceres's shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

"Soldiers are coming. Run!" Anka said.

"You have to come with me this time," Ceres said.

"No, I need to stay."

Anka spun around in a flash, dashed out the door, and disappeared down the dark stairwell, her rushed footsteps gradually vanishing.

Quickly, Ceres gathered her senses, forcing herself to move even though all she felt like doing was curling up into a ball in the corner and crying. On her way out the door, she gave Lucious a swift kick in the abdomen. She had despised him before, but now her hatred would burn every time she would see him. She would remember this moment, oh, how she would remember.

With sweaty hands, she stole down the stairwell, but just as reached the bottom, a slew of Empire soldiers approached her from the right, their swords drawn.

She looked to the left, but just as many Empire soldiers were storming toward her from that direction.

Then she heard footsteps behind her, but before she could turn around, she felt a hard object hit the back of her head, and everything went black.

### **CHAPTER THIRTY ONE**

Stephania sat way in the back in the throne room and brought the fan to her lips, hiding a yawn, this dreary council of old birdbrained men and women so uninspiring she thought she might pass out from boredom. For hours, they had discussed—in that same mind-numbing monotonous tone—how the council was losing money, how the court was poorly managed, and how the rebellion, if it were to continue, would cost the Empire greatly. And as if these dignitaries couldn't grasp it, it had already been brought up *three* times that the rebellion had already drained half the king's gold.

Still, after hours of futile rambling, dozens of preposterous ideas being tossed around, they came up with no solutions. None. Stephania had sat through too many of these, and more and more, listening to these simpleminded mumbling nitwits, it just proved to her again that they were all brainless monkeys, pretending to know what they were talking about and what they were doing.

"Are there any more matters to discuss?" the king said from his throne at the front of the room.

Not a soul breathed a word, thank heavens, Stephania thought, dying to get out of this stuffy room, her bottom sore from having sat so long on this unpadded chair. Ever since the announcement that Thanos would wed Ceres, she had been demoted to sit in the back row by the exit door, next to the least important dignitary in the entire Empire, her seat the farthest from the king than anyone's.

I will climb my way back up into the king's graces, she resolved. Soon.

Just when she judged the meeting over, Cosmas, sitting at the front, rose and asked to stand before the king.

Stephania rolled her eyes. Would this day never end? She knew he was the old, senile, hard-of-hearing geriatric who cared about Thanos—a little too much, Stephania thought—but what on earth would he have to say that would warrant a single second in a council meeting such as this? All the old man did day in and day out was read scrolls in the library, stare at the stars, and talk of things that didn't really matter—not to the Empire at least.

Stephania noticed that the other dignitaries also seemed as disinterested in the old fart as her, their eyes glazing over with boredom.

Eying the floral pattern on her green silk dress, she listened with one ear, fanning herself as the ancient scholar held up a scroll toward the king.

"I was asked to deliver this letter to Thanos," Cosmas said. "It is from Ceres."

Stephania's ears perked right up. Perhaps the old scholar wasn't as much of a fool as she had thought. He had certainly misled me, Stephania thought, because she presumed the elder was more loyal to Thanos than even the king or the Empire. But perhaps she had been wrong in her assumption.

With a giddy heart, she repressed a smile. Now that commoner, Ceres, would be put to death and Stephania would marry Thanos, making everything right again. What fortune. What luck! Perhaps the gods were smiling down on her after all.

Stephania watched as the king read the letter in silence, his eyebrows sinking deeper and deeper over his fat face. When he had finished, he looked up.

"Did you read this?" the king asked Cosmas.

Cosmas stepped forward.

"Yes, and that was when I knew it needed to be brought to your attention," he said. "The girl is a lying conniving thief, a revolutionary in our very midst."

Gasps went through the chamber, and disorder erupted.

"Silence! Silence!" the king said.

"She must not marry Prince Thanos!" one advisor shouted.

"Hang the girl for treason!" another said.

The room exploded into commotion, some yelling for the king to imprison the imposter, others demanding she be put to death immediately.

"Silence!" the king yelled again, and the room settled down into a low hum of whispers. "We cannot just kill her. The revolutionaries will start rioting in the streets again and we are not ready to take upon all of them."

"But we must do something," an advisor said. "You do not mean to let a conspirator remain in our midst, leaking information to the revolutionary headquarters?"

A brilliant idea popped into Stephania's mind, and she gasped. A few heads turned toward her, and she smiled, knowing this idea would be her big chance to gain favor again. She just had to speak up.

"May I make a suggestion, Your Excellences?" she said loud and clear, rising to her feet.

The king's and queen's eyes darted to her.

"Please, it will also help to generate money for the Empire," she said, sensing their hesitation.

"Very well, speak," the king said. "But make it quick."

Stephania stepped onto the floor and walked toward the front of the room, her heels clicking against the marble floor, hundreds of eyes following her every step. She repressed a grin, bathing in the attention, elated that she had such a wonderful idea to present, when the supposed most powerful and intelligent men and women of the Empire had thought of no such thing. She knew that once she had shared with the king her idea, he would love it. And perhaps the king and queen would even give her more authority from now on—authority over Ceres.

Arriving at the bottom of the steps below the thrones, Stephania curtsied deeply before the king and queen.

"So far your excellences have done a wonderful job in using Ceres to promote and strengthen the Empire. And I see an opportunity to do it again," Stephania said.

"Well then, why don't you enlighten us," the queen said in a stiff tone.

"Don't throw Ceres out of our midst," Stephania said. "And don't execute her. Instead...use her to make the Empire wealthier than it has ever been."

The room grew silent, a few whispers throughout, and Stephania could just feel favor descending upon her again.

"And how do you propose we do that?" the king asked.

"Make her a permanent contender in the Killings," Stephania said.

Now the room had become so silent, Stephania could hear air moving in and out of her nostrils.

"She's a girl," someone yelled.

"No one would come see a commoner being butchered," another said.

Stephania was becoming impatient with these narrow-minded, short-sighted old-timers.

"Ceres is a soon-to-be royal female, a novelty, a fierce fighter in her own right," she said. "I have watched her fight, and she beat Lucious. I dare say people would travel from afar just to see her."

The king squinted, bringing a hand to his bearded chin.

"Make the spectators pay a premium to see the princess combatlord," Stephania added.

The king glanced at the queen, and the queen lifted an eyebrow.

"The princess combatlord," the king said. "I will think on it, but I do believe the idea to be excellent. Well done, Stephania. Well done."

Stephania curtsied again and walked back to her seat, extremely proud of herself for having thought of such a genius plan. Not only would her idea bring in money for the Empire, it would serve a very personal purpose, too.

Vengeance.

Finally, Thanos would be hers.

### CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

What a waste of my time, Sartes thought as he sat below the willow tree in their yard, peeling potatoes for his mother, the wind pulling at his burgundy tunic in a steady stream. Sartes was too young to fight in the rebellion, Rexus had told him, and had sent him back home to sit and wait to mature, to feel useless, to ponder on Nesos's death, to sit and think of how Ceres was trapped within the walls of the palace, being abused, used, and tortured.

He tossed the potato into the pot and started to peel another one.

How was it Rexus expected him to sit here and do nothing, to suffer the consequences of the war, but to not help in any way? He wasn't too young, he knew, but the revolutionaries didn't see that. Just because he was small of build didn't mean he didn't have skills and abilities that were useful in the war against the Empire.

But no matter how much he insisted to Rexus on staying, Sartes was sent home to be with his mother to peel vegetables and wait on her hand and foot.

When he heard wheels crunching against the gravel road, Sartes looked up. The Empire's blue and gold banner waved above an enclosed wagon, dozens of Empire soldiers marching behind it in two perfectly straight rows.

The front door to the house creaked open, and Sartes's mother stepped out onto the front porch, squinting toward the cart, a hand shading her eyes, a generous frown on her face.

"Get inside the house, Sartes," she said.

"Mother—"

"Get inside the house now!" she screamed.

Sartes huffed and threw the knife into the bucket of water and potatoes. Heading toward the house, he fumed about how unfair it was that everyone treated him like a helpless child.

"And don't come out until I tell you to, do you hear?" his mother snapped.

Sartes slammed the door shut behind him and sat by the kitchen table, peering out through the partially opened shutter, seeing the Empire wagon slow to a halt right in front of their yard.

An Empire soldier hopped down from the driver's seat and approached, a scroll carrying the Empire seal in his hand.

"We are here to recruit your firstborn son for the royal army," the Empire soldier said, holding the scroll toward Sartes's mother.

Sartes saw that his mother glanced down at the scroll, but did not accept it.

"Ceres is my daughter, and as you know, she is to be wed to Prince Thanos," she said.

Sartes stood up and tiptoed to the shutter, listening intently.

"It has been ruled by the king that we recruit *all* firstborn males," the Empire soldier said.

"My eldest son is dead," she said, a tremble in her voice.

"And what of your other sons?" the Empire soldier asked.

"How dare you ask that of me?" Sartes's mother said.

"The king has not excused you or your family from serving him or the Empire. So I ask of you again, have you any other sons?" the Empire soldier continued.

"Even if I did have other sons, which I do not, he would soon be the prince's brother-in-law, and the royal army would not have claim upon him."

The Empire soldier took a threatening step toward her, and Sartes thought that he might strike his mother. He almost stormed outside, but he knew if he did, he would have to deal with his mother later, or he would be recruited to the royal army, and neither one of those options sounded tempting in the least.

- "Might I assume you are with the rebellion then?" the Empire soldier growled.
- "Why in heaven's name would you assume such a thing?" Sartes's mother asked.
- "Because you are resisting the king's commands."
- "I am not with the rebellion," she said.
- "Will you obey the king's orders, then?"
- "I will and I do."
- "Then step aside so I can search your house."
- "You have no right to search my home," she snapped.
- "I have orders to kill anyone who resists!" the soldier roared. "Now stand out of my way, wench!"

Sartes gasped, realizing if he didn't get away, the soldiers would seize him and he would be forced to fight for the royal army. He started toward the back room, but as he did, he bumped into a chair, causing it to tip over with a crash. Stumbling forward, he just made it into the back room when he heard the Empire soldier kicking the front door in.

But before Sartes could escape through the window, the Empire soldier was upon him. The brute clutched Sartes's arm, pulling him out into the main room again, but Sartes grabbed a chair and swung it at the soldier, hitting him in the head so blood oozed from his brow.

The soldier cried out and fell to the floor, releasing Sartes's arm, and Sartes dashed into the back room again.

He tore open the shutters and hopped out the window, his heart pounding like a wild beast against his sternum, nothing on his mind other than getting to the field. He passed the shack, the meadow so close, but then he heard his mother screaming.

Unable to continue on, he turned around, and to his horror, he saw the Empire soldier holding a dagger up to his mother's throat.

"Mother!" he yelled, horrified.

"Please don't kill me," his mother croaked. "Sartes, you wouldn't let your mother die, would you?"

For a split second Sartes was conflicted. If he went back, he would be forced to fight against his friends, against all he believed in, freedom, prosperity, fairness. He would kill those he loved. He would be compelled to destroy all he knew in his bones and blood was the truth. But if he kept running, the Empire soldiers might catch up with him still, and his mother would be dead.

He couldn't live with himself knowing he was the reason his mother's throat had been slit by the enemy.

As three Empire soldiers ran toward him, he lifted his hands in surrender, his gaze on his mother, the relief in her eyes as the dagger was removed from her throat somewhat comforting. But also bitter.

The soldiers forced Sartes to the ground, jerking his arms behind his back, binding his wrists with rope. They pulled him up and dragged him past his mother, her eyes filled with tears.

"Sartes," she cried. "My baby."

She started after him toward the wagon, her arms longingly reaching for him, fingers straining at his shirt.

A soldier hit her across the face and she fell to the parched grass with a yelp.

The soldiers threw Sartes into the cart with three other young men and locked the door.

"I will never forgive myself for this," his mother cried. "Never!"

The driver whipped the horses and the wagon moved forward with a sudden jerk. Sartes's mother staggered to her feet and clamped her hands around the bars, eyes filled with desperation. "Come back to me, Sartes, promise me this!"

But Sartes looked away and would not promise his mother anything. Because of her, he knew, his life was over. Because of her, he would have to fight on the side of the war that killed Nesos, on the side that stole Ceres from him, and on the side that had torn his family apart.

### CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

The wind tugged at Rexus's hair as he feverishly galloped toward the palace beneath a blanket of stars, Anka sitting behind him holding on for dear life. August and Crates rode after them, their horses heavily loaded with weapons and gear hidden beneath wool throws.

Rexus hadn't been able to sleep a wink since he found out Ceres was engaged to Prince Thanos, the thoughts of them together an inescapable torment. He had judged Ceres a liar and a traitor, and had never wanted to see her again. He had never even wanted to *think* of her again either, but every thought that had occupied his mind these past days and nights had only been of her.

However, after Anka had approached Rexus in Harbor Cave earlier, everything had changed. When she had informed him that Ceres was shackled in the tower and had nearly been raped the night before last, and that Ceres had refused to marry Prince Thanos, he had felt sick to his stomach. But when Anka had told him Ceres loved him—Rexus—and that Ceres spoke of no one other than him, Rexus's heart had stopped, and he had realized with great remorse that Ceres had been nothing but loyal to the rebellion. And to him. And he had been a fool.

He swore, the pain too much to contain on the inside. He had been so hard on Ceres, had turned her away when she had begged to join the rebellion. And here she was doing nothing but supporting the revolution, fulfilling her job. He vowed that as soon as he saw Ceres again, he would beg for her forgiveness. This was entirely his fault, that she had been imprisoned. His pride had gotten in the way. He should have listened to her when she came to Harbor Cave, but like always, he was too quick to judge and was too much of a hothead.

He glanced back, seeing his friends were still right behind him. He had considered bringing twice as many men, but he figured if he brought more than two strapping young revolutionaries, the group might cause suspicion amongst the Empire soldiers who patrolled the streets of Delos at night. If he brought fewer, they wouldn't be able to ward off any potential Empire soldiers guarding Ceres's tower and the rescue mission would be a failure.

August was a new friend, young, happy, and built like a combatlord. He had joined the rebellion a mere month ago, and had told Rexus that he left his father—an advisor to the king—because of the way his father mistreated their slaves. Crates was one of August's father's slaves, and the night August left, August took him with him, making Crates a free man.

Crates was tall and lanky, but exceptional with the bow and arrow, and having lived in lack his entire life, he had a fire about him that Rexus loved, the young man embodying the spirit of the revolution.

Clouds had started to roll in when they reached the city, and as the night darkened, Rexus led them through the back streets in silence, passing crowded houses, some intact, others demolished by the Empire.

By the time they paused in an alleyway across from the palace, the heavens had cleared again, the moon and stars bringing welcome light.

Anka descended from the horse, and peeking out from behind the wall, she pointed out the tower Ceres was imprisoned in.

"I have to go back inside," Anka said. "If anyone finds out I have been gone..."

"Yes, go," Rexus said. "And Anka..."

Anka turned around and looked at him.

"Thank you," he said.

She nodded, and he watched as Anka vanished into the night down the street, around the stone wall toward the back entrance of the palace.

Rexus took a moment to study the Empire soldiers who marched around the wall, noting that they passed by approximately every five minutes. It should give them ample time to climb the wall and not get caught.

Hurriedly, they tied up the horses, took the weapons and rope, and just as the next Empire soldier marched by, seeing the coast was clear, Rexus led August and Crates toward the outer wall.

The wall was slick, but with ropes tossed over the wall, anchored in the trees on the other side, the climb took no time at all.

After they had descended the wall, making no sound as they hopped down onto the soft, green lawn, they stole toward the palace, hiding behind trees and bushes.

Once at the bottom of the tower, Rexus peered up the side of the rounded wall. The structure was higher than what he had initially thought, but he was confident he would be able to climb it and bring Ceres down with him once he had freed her. Any thought of slipping and falling he forced away, knowing uncertainty could cause him to fall.

"Wait behind the bushes while I get her," Rexus said to August and Crates. "If any Empire soldiers approach, warn me with a quail call."

He removed his cloak and handed it to August.

"Be safe," August whispered, vanishing into the shadows with Crates.

Rexus attached a rope to the end of his arrow and shot it through the partially opened shutter. He paused, looking up, hoping Ceres would come to the window, but he saw no movement.

He tugged on the rope, and seeing it was secure, he wedged his foot between two rocks and started the climb. One foot after another, pulling on the cord, he inched his way upward, his hands clamping, the muscles in his arms flexing, his feet digging into the niches of the stone wall.

Halfway up the tower there was a generous ledge, and Rexus paused to rest, panting heavily. He looked down and saw nothing but bushes and trees and shadows. August and Crates were certainly hiding well, he noted.

Once he had caught his breath, he continued to climb, and soon his heart was again pounding from exertion. Or was it from the thought of seeing Ceres?

He strained, climbing faster, just trying to reach her, to see her smile again, her beautiful eyes, feeling her soft skin.

A few inches from the top, he stopped, thinking he heard something below, but when he looked, he saw nothing.

Finally, he reached the ledge of her window and peered into the room.

"Ceres," he whispered.

"Rexus?" he heard Ceres speak, amazement in her voice.

Then he saw her face—a desperate expression—and that she wore a royal gown that was torn and filthy. When she gripped his hands, he felt how cold she was, but how strong she was, too. She pulled him inside.

"You came for me," she said, throwing her arms around him.

"I'm sorry for what I said," he said, gripping her tightly, never wanting to let go. "I love you, with all that I am."

"I love you, too," she said. "I'm sorry."

He pulled back and stroked her hair, gazing into her eyes. She rose up onto the balls of her feet and pulled at the back of his head so their lips met. He kissed her passionately, pouring all of himself, all the longing and regret, into that kiss. Her lips were soft, and he knew they were destined to be together.

They parted.

"We have to hurry," he said. "There will be time later."

She nodded.

He drew the dagger from its sheath around his waist so he could free her from the shackles.

Suddenly Rexus felt an excruciating pain in his back. He couldn't breathe.

He looked down and, to his horror, saw an arrow tip protruding from his chest, running all the way through his body.

Then, before he could register what was happening, there came another.

He was being attacked from behind, he realized. The guards below must have spotted him. He had been shot from behind.

Rexus reached out for Ceres, but his world was already darkening. Before he could sever her bonds, he found himself instead losing balance, falling backwards.

And then he tumbled out the window.

Rexus fell as if in slow motion, the wind in his ears, the sound of Ceres's scream following him, the air so thin and warm. There was no resistance. It seemed a long way down, as if he were sinking into the earth and the earth swallowed him whole. Would not the ground soon come?

The last thing he saw before he hit the ground was Ceres's contorted face, looking down, wishing, as he, that everything had turned out differently.

### CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Thanos, standing at the bow of his ship, the scent of the ocean filling his nostrils, spotted Haylon in the distance, and immediately regret brewed in his chest. With every breath he had taken on this trip, every inch he had sailed, the regret had only grown stronger. Now, with the destination in plain sight, it suddenly became crystal clear: he knew he had made the wrong decision not to take Ceres from the castle and run from his uncle, from everything he knew.

And in this moment, his regret turned to shame. Yes, he felt ashamed for letting the king play him again, this time pitting Ceres and him against each other.

Waves crashed against the ship below, drops of salt water splashing onto his overheated face. A steady stream of brisk sea breeze ran through his hair as he watched the gulls dive into the sea only to rise from the ocean with fish in their beaks.

If only I were that free, he thought.

He still felt seasick, and had since the day the ship left the shores of Delos one week earlier to sail south. Now, seeing Haylon, it made him want to jump into the ocean, swim to shore, and worship the white sandy beaches surrounding the isle. Land, solid earth, he thought. He never realized he would miss it so much.

A sense of awe went through him as his eyes scanned the paradise in the near distance. The isle, a hub of trading between all western nations, was dramatically beautiful, he could see as they approached, with towering verdurous mountains behind the city, rising from the sea, the buildings glistening golden in the evening sunlight. It was his first time here, and the closer they sailed, the more he wished his first visit were under different circumstances completely—not to kill the inhabitants, or to destroy the beautiful architecture of their most magnificent buildings.

His eyes followed the snaking road that ran from the city entrance up past domes and towers, and all the way up to the castle, resting on a hill. That was the road General Draco had described in strategy meetings, the road they would travel to seize the castle. The road where blood would flow. The road that would be unrecognizable after they had marched through it. The wall around the city was tall, but with ladders, ropes, catapults, and flaming arrows, tens of thousands of Empire soldiers attacking at once, the city would be theirs soon enough, General Draco had said. And indeed it would, Thanos knew.

When he turned around to behold his crew, the tension on board had become so thick it felt like a wall around him. Was it more than just the nerves of the warriors he was detecting? The entire trip, Thanos had sensed someone or something watching him, although when he felt eyes burning at the back of his neck, he'd turn around to find no one and no thing. He would brush it off, thinking he was growing paranoid, but just when he had forgotten about it, again, it would suddenly be as if cold fingers were creeping down his spine.

He nodded toward General Draco, who stood by a giant of a man, wearing golden armor and a visored helmet. The hulk was the tallest Empire soldier Thanos had ever seen, a true giant. The Typhoon, the rest of the men on the ship called him, although Thanos doubted that was his real name. It was rumored the Typhoon had taken on a group of twenty wild northern warriors at once, and had killed them all in under five minutes.

General Draco and the Typhoon would lead the attack on the great city, and Thanos would bring in the second group of troops once the main gates had been opened. They would attack immediately, General Draco had ordered, not give the rebels of Haylon a chance to gather their armies, although Thanos didn't doubt they had already seen their fleet of ships and that their army was more than ready to defend the city. No one would be able to defend against the numbers King Claudius had sent, Thanos knew.

Hundreds of rowboats were lowered onto the choppy azure ocean, and the Empire soldiers descended into the vessels with weapons and heavy armor. Some larger boats carried catapults and boulders.

General Draco invited Thanos into his boat, and Thanos took a seat next to the Typhoon. He felt like a dwarf next to the beast.

"Remember, the goal is to take the city in under an hour, before nightfall," General Draco said. "Kill anyone who resists."

"We will spare the women and children, correct?" Thanos said.

"As long as they obey," General Draco said. "As long as they bow before the Empire's banner and pledge to submit to the king's laws."

"I don't see how the women and children will be a threat, even if they did resist," Thanos said.

"It is the king's orders. I do not question them," General Draco snapped, glaring at Thanos.

Thanos looked away, but he made a decision to not kill women or children—not even if they rebelled.

They arrived at shore and Thanos hopped out of the boat, the warm water reaching right above his knees as he hauled the heavy oak vessel toward land with other Empire soldiers. Just as he glanced back, Thanos noticed that General Draco and the Typhoon looked at each other, and then the general nodded before heading toward the white, sandy beach.

At first, Thanos considered the gesture somewhat suspicious, but when the general turned to him and nodded, too, he thought nothing more of it.

The boats were hauled ashore, the weapons and artillery placed into wagons, and the Empire soldiers organized into twelve battalions, Thanos to lead one of them.

He took his place in front of his men and led them southward, down the coastline, wading through ankle-high water. He felt that familiar sensation running through him, a combination of excitement, fear, and adrenaline: the battle was about to begin.

Yet Thanos had not gone very far, the water still splashing on his ankles, when suddenly, without warning, he felt a shooting pain in his upper back.

He dropped to his knees, stunned, not understanding what was happening.

He felt cold metal in his back, and with a start, he realized: he had been stabbed.

He knelt there, lightheaded, not understanding. They were still far off from reaching the enemy.

Then Thanos felt the sword being pulled out of him, and he shrieked, the pain unbearable. He looked up to see the Typhoon step in front of him, wiping the blade of his sword clean of Thanos's blood.

He grinned down, and that was when Thanos realized: he was being assassinated.

And no one was turning to help him.

"Any last words?" the Typhoon asked, his voice impossibly deep.

Thanos gasped for air.

"Who sent you?" he managed to ask.

"I will tell you," the Typhoon replied. "When you're dead."

### **CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE**

Ceres sat in the dungeon on the damp floor, her back against the cold stone wall, fully defeated as an endless stream of tears trailed down her face. How—how was she to continue on? Thanos had left her. Nesos was dead. And worst of all, Rexus...

She let out a faint sob and inhaled a jagged breath as the memory came rushing back. Rexus, shot in the back, falling from her reach, backwards, out of the tower window. Torn away from her when they had been so close, so close to starting a new life together.

It was too cruel.

Ceres sobbed. There was nothing more to fear now, she realized. Not even her life mattered anymore, it seemed.

She did not know how much time had passed when she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. She didn't move. She was beyond caring what the royals did to her, so much so that if they were coming to kill her, she would welcome the merciful death.

A woman and three men appeared on the other side of the bars. Ceres refused to look up, but she knew from the overly sweet rose perfume that the woman was Stephania.

An Empire soldier unlocked the cell, but Ceres's gaze remained on the floor. She would not acknowledge them.

"You have been ordered to the Stade," an Empire soldier said.

Ceres didn't move.

"You will compete in the Killings."

Ceres felt the life rush out of her. So. They would kill her after all.

The soldier grabbed her by the arm, jerked her to a standing position, and bound her wrists behind her back. When Ceres finally looked up, she saw Stephania smiling.

Stephania stepped forward.

"Before you die," she said, venom in her voice, "I thought you might like to know something."

She leaned in close, her breath uncomfortably hot on Ceres's neck.

"I sent a messenger to Haylon," she said, "bearing a very special message. I told Thanos never to defy me. Never to make a fool of me. Now, finally, he has learned why."

She beamed, satisfied, though Ceres did not know why.

"Thanos," she said, "is dead."

\*

The Empire soldiers hauled Ceres through the musty dungeon corridor and up the stairwell. They dragged Ceres outside and led her to an enclosed horse-pulled wagon. Once the door was locked and the soldiers had taken their seats at the front, the wagon rolled out of the palace courtyard and onto the streets of Delos. They passed houses, and weaved through hordes of citizens making their way to the Stade.

Ceres hardly took notice of her surroundings; everything passed by in a blur. Nothing mattered anymore. Everyone she loved was either far away or dead.

In a daze, she realized they were moving through Fountain Square, and Rexus's face flashed before her eyes. Just weeks ago they were here, happy, hopeful, free.

And just yesterday, he had been in her arms, professing his love; and a moment later, he had fallen to his death. How could a being so vibrant, so alive, now be nothing more than a memory?

Outside the Stade, the wagon creaked to a halt. An Empire soldier dragged her out of the cart and into the tunnels.

They marched past combatlords and weapon-keepers, the chants of the crowd reaching her all the way down here.

Finally, the soldier threw her into a small chamber and ordered her to change into the armor lying on the bench. He left, locking the door behind him.

Alone, Ceres undressed and slipped on the leather skirt and breastplate. They were studded with gold, and were soft and new, she could see, custom made for her, fitting perfectly. She pulled on the boots, noticing they were also her size, the leather supple, the ends of the laces embellished with gold.

All these years she had dreamt of becoming a combatlord, of wielding a sword in an arena in front of thousands of spectators.

And yet now, she hated being here. Somehow, the king and queen had stolen her dream, tarnished it, and had forced her to fight for the very people she despised.

Not a minute later, the Empire soldier returned and ordered her to follow.

They walked through the dim tunnel, past weapons, past dozens of fallen combatlords and their weapon-keepers. Arriving by the gate, Ceres heard the crowd roaring outside, and her stomach clenched tightly.

"Paulo will be your weapon-keeper," the Empire soldier said.

She turned to see Paulo, rather short in stature, nothing but a bundle of muscle with dark smooth skin. His black hair framed a heart-shaped face, and he had a few whiskers on his chin below full lips.

"It will be an honor to serve you," Paulo said with a nod, handing her a sword.

Ceres didn't want to reply. She didn't want this to be her reality.

"Ceres and Paulo are next!" an Empire soldier called.

Even though Ceres no longer feared for her life, her hands shook, as her throat dried up.

The iron gates opened with a rattle, and Ceres looked out into the arena and saw two Empire soldiers hauling a dead combatlord toward the tunnels.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the Stade.

The roar was deafening, the sunlight warm against her skin, the brightness stinging her eyes as she scanned the over-packed audience.

"Ceres! Ceres!" they chanted.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the sunlight, she let her gaze wander across the arena. On the other side of the stadium stood a barbarian of a combatlord, his arms as thick as Ceres's waist, the veins in his legs bulging on top of thick, swollen muscles.

She clenched the hilt of her sword and knew that this man would kill her. She glanced at Paulo, and saw his face had fallen.

But she would not back down.

With all the courage she had inside of her, she raised her sword.

Her entire life she had been a slave. And now, even though she may very well die, that part of her life, she realized, was over.

Now, finally, she would go from Slave to Warrior.

Now, death would come for her.

And now her life would begin.

The crowd roared. "CERES! CERES!"

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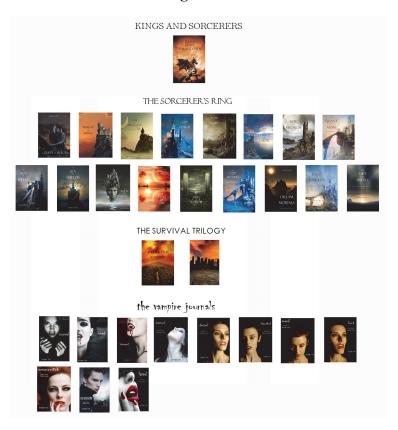


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### **About Morgan Rice**

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 three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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