

MORGAN RICE

BOOK #13 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

A
RULE
OF
QUEENS

The Sorcerer's Ring

Morgan Rice

A Rule of Queens

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Rice M.

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In A RULE OF QUEENS, Gwendolyn leads the remains of her nation in exile, as they sail into the hostile harbors of the Empire. Taken in by Sandara's people, they try to recover in hiding, to build a new home in the shadows of Volusia. Thor, determined to rescue Guwayne, continues with his Legion brothers on his quest far across the sea, to the massive caves that herald the Land of the Spirits, encountering unthinkable monsters and exotic landscapes. In the Southern Isles, Alistair sacrifices herself for Erec – and yet an unexpected twist might just save them both. Darius risks it all to save the love of his life, Loti, even if he must face the Empire alone. But his conflict with the Empire, he will find, is just beginning. And Volusia continues her rise, after her assassination of Romulus, to consolidate her hold on the Empire and become the ruthless queen she was meant to be. Will Gwen and her people survive? Will Guwayne be found? Will Alistair and Erec live? Will Darius rescue Loti? Will Thorgrin and his brothers survive? With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A RULE OF QUEENS is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders.

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A Rule of Queens

(Book #13 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

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

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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

– *Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

"Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting....Nicely written and an extremely fast read."

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“An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist... Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl... one extraordinary girl!... Easy to read but extremely fast-paced... Rated PG.”

– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Turned*)

“Grabbed my attention from the beginning and did not let go....This story is an amazing adventure that is fast paced and action packed from the very beginning. There is not a dull moment to be found.”

– *Paranormal Romance Guild* (regarding *Turned*)

“Jam packed with action, romance, adventure, and suspense. Get your hands on this one and fall in love all over again.”

– *vampirebooksite.com* (regarding *Turned*)

“A great plot, and this especially was the kind of book you will have trouble putting down at night. The ending was a cliffhanger that was so spectacular that you will immediately want to buy the next book, just to see what happens.”

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“Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller....This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked.”

– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Loved*)

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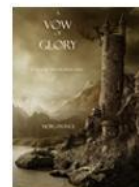
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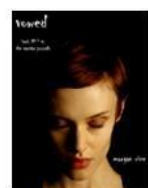
THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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Chapter One

Thorgrin's head slammed against rock and mud as he tumbled down the mountainside in free-fall, tumbling hundreds of feet as the mountain collapsed. His world spun end over end, and he tried to stop it, to orient himself, but he could not. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed his brothers tumbling, too, flipping end over end, all of them, like Thor, grasping desperately at roots, at rocks – at anything – trying to slow the fall.

Thor realized, with each passing moment, that he was getting farther and farther away from the peak of the volcano, from Guwayne. He thought of those savages up there, preparing to sacrifice his baby, and he burned with fury. He clawed at the mud, shrieking, desperate to get back up there.

But try as he did, there was little he could do. Thor could barely see or breathe, much less shield himself from the blows, as a mountain of dirt thundered down upon him. It felt as if the weight of the entire universe were on his shoulders.

It was all happening so fast, too fast for Thor to even process it, and as he caught a glimpse down below, he saw a field of jagged rocks. He knew that once they hit them, they would all be dead.

Thor closed his eyes and tried to recall his training, Argon's teachings, his mother's words, tried to find calm within the storm, to summon the warrior power within him. As he did, he felt his life flashing before his eyes. Was this, he wondered, his final test?

Please, God, Thor prayed, if you exist, save me. Do not allow me to die like this. Allow me to summon my power. Allow me to save my son.

As he thought the words, Thor felt that he was being tested, being forced to draw upon his faith, to summon a stronger faith than he'd ever had. As his mother had warned, he was a warrior now, and he was being put to a warrior's test.

As Thor closed his eyes, the world began to slow, and to his amazement, he began to feel a calm, a sense of peace, within the storm. He began to feel a heat rising within him, coursing through his veins, through his palms. He began to feel bigger than his body.

Thor felt himself outside of his body, looking down, saw himself tumbling down the mountainside. He realized in that moment that he was not his body. He was something greater.

Thor suddenly snapped back into his body, and as he did, he raised his palms high overhead, and watched as a shining white light emanated from them. He directed the light and created a bubble around himself and his brothers, and as he did, suddenly the mudslide stopped in its tracks, a wall of dirt bouncing off the shield and not coming at them any further.

They continued to slide, but now at a much slower rate, easing their way to a gradual stop on a small plateau near the base of the mountain. Thor looked down and saw he had come to a stop in shallow water, and as he stood, he saw it was up to his knees.

Thor looked around in amazement. He looked up the mountain, saw the wall of dirt frozen, hanging there in mid-air, as if ready to come back down at any second, still blocked by his bubble of light. He took it all in, amazed that he had done that.

"Anybody dead?" O'Connor called out.

Thor saw Reece, O'Connor, Conven, Matus, Elden, and Indra, all of them bruised and shaken, getting to their feet, but all miraculously alive, and none with major injuries. They rubbed their faces, covered in black dirt, all of them looking as if they'd crawled through a mine. Thor could see how grateful they were to be alive, and he could see in their eyes that they credited him with saving their lives.

Thor, remembering, turned and immediately looked up at the top of the mountain with only one thing on his mind: his son.

"How are we going to get back up –" Matus began.

But before he could finish his words, Thor suddenly felt something wrap around his ankles. He looked down, startled, and saw a thick, slimy, muscular creature, wrapping around his ankles and up his shins, again and again. He saw in horror that it was a long, eel-like creature, with two small heads, hissing with its long tongues as it looked up at him and wrapped its tentacles around him. Its skin began to burn Thor's legs.

Thor's reflexes kicked in, and he drew his sword and slashed, as did the others, also being attacked all around him. Thor tried to slash carefully so as not to slice his own leg, and as he chopped one off, the eel loosened and the horrific pain in his ankles subsided. The eel slithered back into the water, hissing.

O'Connor fumbled for his bow, firing down at them and missing, while Elden shrieked as three eels came upon him at once.

Thor raced forward and slashed the eel making its way up O'Connor's leg, while Indra stepped forward and yelled to Elden: "Don't move!"

She raised her bow and fired off three arrows in quick succession, killing each eel with a perfect shot, and just grazing Elden's skin.

He looked up at her, shocked.

"Are you mad?" he cried out. "You almost took out my leg!"

Indra smiled back.

"But I didn't, did I?" she replied.

Thor heard more splashing and looked all around at the water in shock to see dozens more eels rising up. He realized they had to make a move and get out of there quickly.

Thor felt drained, exhausted, from summoning his power, and he knew there was little of it left within him; he was not yet powerful enough, he knew, to summon his power continuously. Still, he knew he had to draw upon it one last time, whatever the cost. If he did not, he knew they'd never make it back, they would die here in his pool of eels, and there'd be no chance left for his son. It might take all his strength, it might leave him weak for days, but he did not care. He thought of Guwayne, up there, helpless, at the mercy of those savages, and knew he would do anything.

As another group of eels began to slither toward him, Thor closed his eyes and raised his palms to the sky.

"In the name of the one and only God," Thor said aloud, "I command you, skies, to part! I command you to send us clouds to lift us up!"

Thor uttered the words in a deep dark voice, no longer afraid to embrace the Druid he was, and he felt them vibrating in his chest, in the air. He felt a tremendous heat centering in his chest, and as he uttered the words, he felt with certainty that they would come to pass.

There came a great roar, and Thor looked up to see the skies began to change, to morph into a dark purple, the clouds swirling and frothing. There appeared a round hole, an opening in the sky, and suddenly, a scarlet light shot down, and it was followed by a funnel cloud, lowering right down to them.

In moments, Thor and the others found themselves swept up in a tornado. Thor felt the moisture of the soft clouds swirling all around him, felt himself immersed in the light, and moments later, he felt himself hoisted, lifted up into the air, feeling lighter than he'd ever had. He truly felt as one with the universe.

Thor felt himself rising higher and higher, up alongside the mountain, past the dirt, past his bubble, all the way to the top of the mountain. In moments, the cloud took them to the very top of the volcano and then deposited them gently. It then dissipated just as quickly.

Thor stood there with his brothers, and they all looked back at him in complete awe, as if he were a god.

But Thor was not thinking of them; he turned and quickly surveyed the plateau, and there was but one thing on his mind: the three savages standing before him. And the small bassinet in their arms, hovering over the edge of the volcano.

Thor let out a battle cry as he rushed forward. The first savage turned to face him, startled, and as he did, Thor did not hesitate, but rushed forward and decapitated him.

The other two turned to him with a horrified expression, and as they did, Thor stabbed one in the heart, then reached around with the back of his sword and butted the other one in the face, knocking him backwards, shrieking, over the edge of the volcano.

Thor turned and quickly snatched the bassinet before they could drop it. He looked down, his heart pounding with gratitude that he had caught it in time, prepared to lift Guwayne out and hold him in his arms.

But as Thor looked down into the bassinet, his entire world fell apart.

It was empty.

Thor's entire world froze, as he stood there, numb.

He looked down inside the volcano, and saw far below, the flames, rising high. And he knew his son was dead.

"NO!" Thor shrieked.

Thor dropped to his knees, shrieking to the heavens, letting out a tremendous cry that echoed off the mountains, the primal scream of a man who had lost everything he had to live for.

"GUWAYNE!"

Chapter Two

High above the lone isle in the center of the sea flew a lone dragon, a small dragon, not yet grown, his cry shrill and piercing, already hinting at the dragon he would one day become. He flew triumphantly, his small scales throbbing, growing by the minute, his wings flapping, his talons clutching the most precious thing he had felt in his short life.

The dragon looked down, feeling the warmth between his talons, and checked on his prized possession. He heard the crying, felt the squirming, and he was reassured to see the baby was still there in his talons, intact.

Guwayne, the man had called out.

The dragon could still hear the shouts echoing off the mountains as he flew high above. He was elated he had saved the baby in time, before those men could bring their daggers downward. He had snatched *Guwayne* from their hands without a second to spare. He had done well the job he was commanded to do.

The dragon flew higher and higher above the lone isle, into the clouds, already out of sight of all those humans below. He passed over the island, over the volcanoes and mountain ranges, through the mist, further and further away.

Soon he was flying out over the ocean, leaving the small island behind. Before him was a vast expanse of sea and sky, nothing to break up the monotony for a million miles.

The dragon knew exactly where he was going. He had a place to bring this child, this child whom he already loved more than he could say.

A very special place.

Chapter Three

Volusia stood over Romulus's body, looking down at his corpse with satisfaction, his blood, still warm, oozing over her feet, over her sandaled toes. She reveled in the feeling. She could not remember how many men, even at her young age, she had killed, had taken by surprise. They always underestimated her, and displaying just how brutal she could be was one of her greatest delights in life.

And now, to have killed the Great Romulus himself – and by her *own* hand, not by the hand of any of her men – the Great Romulus, man of legend, the warrior who killed Andronicus and who had taken the throne for himself. The Supreme Ruler of the Empire.

Volusia smiled in great delight. Here he was, the supreme ruler, reduced to a pool of blood on her bare feet. And all by her hand.

Volusia felt emboldened. She felt a fire burning in her veins, a fire to destroy everything. She felt her destiny rushing at her. She felt her time had come. She knew, just as clearly as she had known that she would murder her own mother by her own hand, that she would one day rule the Empire.

"You have killed our master!" came a shaky voice. "You have killed the Great Romulus!"

Volusia looked up to see the face of Romulus's commander standing there, staring back at her with a mixture of shock and fear and awe.

"You have killed," he said, despondent, "the Man Who Cannot be Killed."

Volusia stared back at him, hard and cold, and saw behind him the hundreds of Romulus's men, all bearing the finest armor, lined up on the ship, all watching, waiting to see what she would do next. All prepared to attack.

Romulus's commander stood on the docks with a dozen of his men, all awaiting his command. Behind Volusia, she knew, stood thousands of her own men. Romulus's ship, as fine as it was, was outnumbered, his men surrounded here in this harbor. They were trapped. This was Volusia's territory, and they knew it. They knew any attack, any escape, would be futile.

"This is not an act that can come without a response," the commander continued. "Romulus has one million men loyal to his command right now in the Ring. He has one million more loyal to his command in the south, in the Empire capital. When word reaches them of what you've done, they will mobilize, and they will march on you. You may have killed the Great Romulus, but you have not killed his men. And your thousands, even if they outman us here today, cannot stand up to his millions. They will seek vengeance. And vengeance will be theirs."

"Will it?" Volusia said, smiling, taking a step closer to him, feeling the blade crossing in her palm, visualizing herself slicing his throat and already feeling the craving to do it.

The commander looked down at the blade in her hand, the blade that had killed Romulus, and he gulped, as if reading her thoughts. She could see real fear in his eyes.

"Let us go," he said to her. "Send my men on their way. They have done nothing to harm you. Give us a ship filled with gold, and you will buy our silence. I will sail our men to the capital, and I will tell them that you are innocent. That Romulus tried to attack you. They will leave you be, you can have peace here in the north, and they will find a new Supreme Commander of the Empire."

Volusia smiled widely, amused.

"But are not already laying eye upon your new Supreme Commander?" she asked.

The commander looked back at her in shock, then finally burst out into short, mocking laughter.

"You?" he said. "You are but a girl, with but a few thousand men. Because you killed one man, do you really think you can crush Romulus's millions? You'd be lucky to escape with your life after what you've done today. I am offering you a gift. Be done with this foolish talk, accept it with gratitude, and send us on our way, before I change my mind."

"And if I do not wish to send you on your way?"

The commander looked her in the eye, and swallowed.

“You can kill us all here,” he said. “That is your choice. But if you do, you only kill yourself and your people. You will be crushed by the army that follows.”

“He speaks truly, my commander,” whispered a voice in her ear.

She turned to see Soku, her commanding general, coming up beside her, a tall man with green eyes, a warrior’s jaw, and short, curly red hair.

“Send them south,” he said. “Give them the gold. You’ve killed Romulus. Now you must broker a truce. We have no choice.”

Volusia turned back to Romulus’s man. She surveyed him, taking her time, relishing in the moment.

“I will do as you ask,” she said, “and send you to the capital.”

The commander smiled back, satisfied, and was about to go, when Volusia stepped forward and added:

“But not to hide what I’ve done,” she said.

He stopped and looked at her, confused.

“I will send you to the capital to deliver them a message: that they will know that I am the new Supreme Commander of the Empire. That if they all bow the knee to me now, they just might live.”

The commander looked at her, aghast, then slowly shook his head and smiled.

“You are as crazy as your mother was rumored to be,” he said, then turned away and began to march back up the long ramp, onto his ship. “Load the gold in the lower holds,” he called out, not even bothering to turn back and look at her.

Volusia turned to her commander of the bow, who stood there patiently awaiting her command, and she gave him a short nod.

The commander immediately turned and motioned to his men, and there came the sound of ten thousand arrows being lit, drawn, and fired.

They filled the sky, blackening it, sailing up in a high arc of flame, as the blazing arrows landed on Romulus’s ship. It all happened too quickly for any of his men to react, and soon the entire ship was ablaze, men shrieking, their commander most of all, as they flailed about with nowhere to run, trying to put out the flames.

But it was no use. Volusia nodded again, and volley after volley of arrows sailed through the air, covering the burning ship. Men shrieked as they were pierced, some stumbling to the decks, others falling overboard. It was a slaughter, with no survivors.

Volusia stood there and grinned, watching in satisfaction as the ship slowly burned from the bottom to the mast, soon, nothing left but a burning, blackened remnant of a boat.

All fell silent as Volusia’s men stopped, all lined up, all looking at her, patiently awaiting her command.

Volusia stepped forward, drew her sword, and chopped the thick cord holding the ship to the dock. It snapped, freeing the ship from shore, and Volusia raised one of her gold-plated boots, placed it on the bow, and shoved.

Volusia watched as the ship began to move, picking up the currents, the currents she knew would carry it south, right into the heart of the capital. They would all see this burnt ship, see Romulus’s corpses, see the Volusian arrows, and they would know it came from her. They would know that war had begun.

Volusia turned to Soku, standing beside her, mouth agape, and she smiled.

“That,” she said, “is how I offer peace.”

Chapter Four

Gwendolyn knelt on the bow of the deck, clutching the rail, her knuckles white as she mustered just enough strength to lean up and look out over at the horizon. Her entire body was trembling, weak from starvation, and as she looked out, she was dizzy, light-headed. She pulled herself to her feet, somehow finding the strength, and looked out in wonder at the sight before her.

Gwendolyn squinted through the mist and wondered if it was all real or just a mirage.

There, on the horizon, spread an endless shoreline, at its center a busy hub with a massive harbor, two huge, shining gold pillars framing the city behind it, rising up into the sky. The pillars and city took on yellowish-green tint as the sun moved. The clouds moved quickly here, Gwen realized. She did not know if it was due to the sky being so different here in this part of the world, or due to her drifting in and out of consciousness.

In the city's harbor sat a thousand proud ships, all with the tallest masts she'd ever seen, all plated with gold. This was the most prosperous city she had ever seen, built right on the shore and spreading out forever, the ocean breaking up against its vast metropolis. It made King's Court look like a village. Gwen did not know that so many buildings could be in one place. She wondered what sort of people lived here. It must be a great nation, she realized. The Empire nation.

Gwen felt a sudden pit in her stomach as she realized the currents were pulling them in; soon they would be sucked into that vast harbor, surrounded by all those ships, and taken prisoner, if not killed. Gwen thought of how cruel Andronicus had been, how cruel Romulus had been, and she knew it was the Empire way; perhaps it would have been better, she realized, to have died at sea.

Gwen heard a shuffling of feet on the deck, and she looked over and saw Sandara, faint from hunger but standing proudly at the rail and holding up a large golden relic, shaped in a bull's horns, and tilting it so that it caught the sun. Gwen watched the light catch it, again and again, and watched it flashing as it cast an unusual signal to the far shoreline. Sandara did not aim it toward the city, but rather north, toward what appeared to be an isolated copse of trees on the shoreline.

As Gwen's eyes, so heavy, began to close, drifting in and out of consciousness, as she began to feel herself slumping down toward the deck, images flashed through her mind. She was not sure anymore what was real and what was her food-starved consciousness. Gwen saw canoes, dozens of them, emerging from the dense jungle canopy and heading out, on the rolling sea, toward their ship. She caught a glimpse of them as they approached, and she was surprised to see not the Empire race, not massive warriors with horns and red skin, but rather a different race. She saw proud muscular men and women, with chocolate skin and glowing yellow eyes, with compassionate, intelligent faces, all rowing to greet her. Gwen saw Sandara looking at them in recognition, and she realized that these were Sandara's people.

Gwen heard a hollow thumping noise on the ship, and she saw grappling hooks on deck, ropes being cast, locking to the ship. She felt her ship change direction, and she looked down and saw the fleet of kayaks towing their boat, guiding it on the currents in the opposite direction of the Empire city. Gwen slowly realized that Sandara's people were coming to help them. To guide their ship toward another harbor, away from that of the Empire.

Gwen felt their ship veering sharply north, toward the dense canopy, toward a small, hidden harbor. She closed her eyes, filled with relief.

Soon Gwen opened her eyes to find herself standing, leaning over the rail, watching her ship getting towed. Overcome with exhaustion, Gwendolyn felt herself leaning too far forward, losing her grip and slipping; her eyes widened in panic as she realized that she was about to fall overboard. Gwen grasped at the rail, but it was too late, her momentum already carrying her over the edge.

Gwen's heart pounded in a panic; she could not believe that after all she'd been through, she would die this way, plunging silently into the sea when they were so close to land.

As she felt herself falling, Gwen heard a sudden snarling, and suddenly, she felt strong teeth biting into the back of her shirt, and she heard a whining noise as she felt herself being yanked backwards by her shirt, pulled back, away from the abyss, and finally back onto the deck. She landed on the wooden deck with a thump, on her back, safe and sound.

She looked up to see Krohn standing over her, and her heart lifted with joy. Krohn was alive, she was overjoyed to see. He looked so much thinner than the last time she'd seen him, emaciated, and she realized she had lost track of him in all the chaos. The last time she'd seen him was when he had descended below deck in a particularly bad storm. She realized now that he must have hidden somewhere below deck, starved himself so that others could eat. That was Krohn. Always so selfless. And now that they were nearing land again, he was resurfacing.

Krohn whined and licked her face, and Gwen hugged him with her last bit of strength. She lay back down, Krohn lying by her side, whining, laying his head on her chest, snuggling with her as if he had no other place left in the world.

* * *

Gwendolyn felt a liquid, sweet and cold, trickling on her lips, on her tongue, down her cheeks and neck. She opened her mouth and drank, swallowing eagerly, and as she did, the sensation woke her from her dreams.

Gwen opened her eyes, drinking greedily, unfamiliar faces hovering over her, and she drank and drank until she coughed.

Someone pulled her up, and she sat up, coughing uncontrollably, someone patting her on her back.

"Shhhh," came a voice. "Drink slowly."

It was a gentle voice, the voice of a healer. Gwen looked over to see an old man with a lined face, his entire face bunching up into wrinkles as he smiled.

Gwen looked out to see dozens of unfamiliar faces, Sandara's people, staring back at her quietly, examining her as if she were an oddity. Gwendolyn, overcome with thirst and hunger, reached out, and like a crazy woman, grabbed the sack of whatever it was and poured the sweet liquid into her mouth, drinking and drinking, biting down on the tip of it as if she would never drink again.

"Slowly now," came the man's voice. "Or you'll get sick."

Gwen looked over to see dozens of warriors, Sandara's people, occupying her ship. She saw her own people, the survivors of the Ring, lying or kneeling or sitting, each attended to by one of Sandara's people, each given a sack to drink. They were all coming back from the brink. Among them she saw Illepra, holding the baby Gwen had rescued on the Upper Isles, feeding her. Gwen was relieved to hear the baby's cries; she had passed her off to Illepra when she was too weak to hold her, and seeing her alive made Gwen think of Guwayne. Gwen was determined that this baby girl should live.

Gwen was feeling more restored with each passing moment, and she sat up and drank more of the liquid, wondering what was inside, her heart filled with gratitude toward these people. They had saved all of their lives.

Beside Gwen there came a whining, and she looked down and saw Krohn, still lying there, his head in her lap; she reached down and gave him drink from her sack, and he lapped at it thankfully. She stroked his head lovingly; she owed him her life, once again. And seeing him made her think of Thor.

Gwen looked up at all of Sandara's people, not knowing how to thank them.

"You have saved us," she said. "We owe you our lives."

Gwen turned and looked at Sandara, coming over and kneeling beside her, and Sandara shook her head.

“My people don’t believe in debts,” she said. “They believe it is an honor to save someone in distress.”

The crowd parted ways and Gwen looked over to see a stern man, who appeared to be their leader, perhaps in his fifties, with a set jaw and thin lips, approach. He squatted before her, wearing a large turquoise necklace made of shells that flashed in the sun, and bowed his head, his yellow eyes filled with compassion as he surveyed her.

“I am Bokbu,” he said, his voice deep and authoritative. “We answered Sandara’s call because she is one of us. We have taken you in at the risk of our lives. If the Empire should see us here now, with you, they would kill us all.”

Bokbu rose to his feet, hands on his hips, and Gwen herself slowly stood, helped by Sandara and their healer, and faced him. Bokbu sighed as he looked around at all the people, at the sorry state of her ship.

“Now they are better, now they must go,” came a voice.

Gwen turned and saw a muscular warrior holding a spear and wearing no shirt, as the others, coming over beside Bokbu, looking at him coldly.

“Send these foreigners back across the sea,” he added. “Why shall we shed blood for them?”

“I am of your blood,” Sandara said, stepping forward, sternly facing the warrior.

“Which is why you should have never brought these people here and endangered us all,” he snapped.

“You bring disgrace on our nation,” Sandara said. “Have you forgotten the laws of hospitality?”

“Your bringing them here is the disgrace,” he retorted.

Bokbu raised his palms at both sides, and they quieted.

Bokbu stood there, expressionless, and he seemed to be thinking. Gwendolyn stood there, watching it all, and realized the precarious situation they were in. Setting back out on the sea, she knew, would mean instant death; yet she did not want to endanger these people who had helped her.

“We meant you no harm,” Gwen said, turning to Bokbu. “I do not wish to endanger you. We can embark now.”

Bokbu shook his head.

“No,” he said. Then he looked at Gwen, studying her with what seemed to be wonder. “Why did you bring your people here?” he asked.

Gwen sighed.

“We fled a great army,” she said. “They destroyed our homeland. We came here to find a new home.”

“You’ve come to the wrong place,” said the warrior. “This will not be your home.”

“Silence!” Bokbu said to him, giving him a harsh look, and finally, the warrior fell silent.

Bokbu turned to look at Gwendolyn, his eyes locking with hers.

“You are a proud and noble woman,” he said. “I can see you are a leader. You have guided your people well. If I turn you back to the sea, you will surely die. Maybe not today, but certainly within a few days.”

Gwendolyn looked back at him, unyielding.

“Then we shall die,” she replied. “I will not have your people killed so that we should live.”

She stared at him firmly, expressionless, emboldened by her nobility and her pride. She could see that Bokbu studied her with a new respect. A tense silence filled the air.

“I can see the warrior blood runs in you,” he said. “You will stay with us. Your people will recover here until they are well and strong. However many moons it takes.”

“But my chief – ” the warrior began.

Bokbu turned and gave him a stern look.

“My decision is made.”

“But their ship!” he protested. “If it stays here in our harbor, the Empire will see it. We will all die before the moon has waned!”

The chief looked up at the mast, then at the ship, taking it all in. Gwen looked about and studied the landscape and saw they had been towed deep into a hidden harbor, surrounded by a dense canopy. She turned and saw behind them the open sea, and she knew the man was right.

The chief looked at her and nodded.

“You want to save your people?” he asked.

Gwen nodded back firmly.

“Yes.”

He nodded back at her.

“Leaders must make hard decisions,” he said. “Now is the time for you. You want to stay with us, but your ship will kill us all. We invite your people ashore, but your ship cannot remain. You will have to burn it. Then we shall take you in.”

Gwendolyn stood there, facing the chief, and her heart sank at the thought. She looked at her ship, the ship which had taken them across the sea, had saved her people from halfway across the world, and her heart sank. Her mind swirled with conflicting emotions. This ship was her only way out.

But then again, her way out of what? Heading back out into an endless ocean of death? Her people could barely walk; they needed to recover. They needed shelter and harbor and refuge. And if burning this ship was the price of life, then so be it. If they decided to head back out to sea, then they would find another ship, or build another ship, do whatever they had to do. For now, they had to live. That was what mattered most.

Gwendolyn looked at him and nodded solemnly.

“So be it,” she said.

Bokbu nodded back to her with a look of great respect. Then he turned and called out a command, and all around him, his men broke into action. They spread out throughout the ship, helping all the members of the Ring, getting them to their feet one at a time, guiding them down the plank to the sandy shore below. Gwen stood and watched Godfrey, Kendrick, Brandt, Atme, Aberthol, Illepra, Sandara, and all the people she loved most in the world pass by her.

She stood there and waited until every single last person left the ship, until she was the last one standing on it, just her, Krohn at her heels, and to her side, standing quietly, the chief.

Bokbu held a flaming torch, handed to him by one of his men. He reached out to touch the ship.

“No,” Gwen said, reaching out and clasping his wrist.

He looked over at her in surprise.

“A leader must destroy her own,” she said.

Gwen gingerly took the heavy, flaming torch from his hand, then turned and, wiping back a tear, held the flame to a canvas sail bunched up on deck.

Gwen stood there and watched as the flames caught, spreading faster and faster, reaching out across the ship.

She dropped the torch, the heat rising too fast, and she turned, Krohn and Bokbu following, and walked down the plank, heading to the beach, to her new home, to the last place they had left in the world.

As she looked around at the foreign jungle, heard the strange screeches of birds and animals she did not recognize, Gwen could only wonder:

Could they build a home here?

Chapter Five

Alistair knelt on the stone, her knees trembling from the cold, and looked out as the first light of the first sun of dawn crept over the Southern Isles, illuminating the mountains and valleys with a soft glow. Her hands trembled, shackled to the wooden stocks as she knelt, on her hands and knees, her neck resting over the place where so many necks had lain before her. She looked down and could see the bloodstains on the wood, see the nicks in the cedar where the blades had come down before. She could feel the tragic energy of this wood as her neck touched it, feel the last moments, the final emotions, of all the slain who had lain here before. Her heart dropped in misery.

Alistair looked up proudly and watched her final sun, watched a new day break, having the surreal feeling that she would never live to watch it again. She cherished it this time more than she'd ever had. As she looked out on this chilly morning, a gentle breeze stirring, the Southern Isles looked more beautiful than they'd ever had, the most beautiful place she'd ever seen, trees blossoming in bursts of oranges and reds and pinks and purples as their fruit hung abundantly in this bountiful place. Purple morning birds and large, orange bees were already buzzing in the air, the sweet fragrance of flowers wafting toward her. The mist sparkled in the light, giving everything a magical feel. She had never felt such an attachment to a place; it was a land, she knew, she would have been happy to live in forever.

Alistair heard a shuffling of boots on stone, and she glanced over to see Bowyer approaching, standing over her, his oversized boots scraping the stone. He held a huge double ax in his hand, loosely at his side, and he frowned down at her.

Beyond him, Alistair could see the hundreds of Southern Islanders, all lined up, all men loyal to him, arranged in a huge circle around her in the wide stone plaza. They were all a good twenty yards away from her, a wide clearing left just for her and Bowyer alone. No one wanted to be too close when the blood sprayed.

Bowyer held the ax with itchy fingers, clearly anxious to finish the business. She could see in his eyes how badly he wanted to be King.

Alistair took satisfaction in at least one thing: however unjust this was, her sacrifice would allow Erec to live. That meant more to her than her own life.

Bowyer stepped forward, leaned in close, and whispered to her, low enough that no one else could hear:

"Rest assured your death stroke will be a clean one," he said, his stale breath on her neck. "And so will Erec's."

Alistair looked up at him in alarm and confusion.

He smiled down at her, a small smile reserved just for her, that no one else could see.

"That's right," he whispered. "It may not happen today; it may not happen for many moons. But one day, when he least expects it, your husband will find my knife in his back. I want you know, before I ship you off to hell."

Bowyer took two steps back, squeezed his hands tight around the shaft of the ax, and cracked his neck, preparing to strike the blow.

Alistair's heart pounded as she knelt there, realizing the full depth of evil in this man. He was not only ambitious, but a coward and a liar.

"Set her free!" demanded a sudden voice, piercing the morning stillness.

Alistair turned as well as she could and saw the chaos as two figures suddenly came bursting through the crowd, to the edge of the clearing, until the beefy hands of Bowyer's guards held them back. Alistair was shocked and grateful to see Erec's mother and sister standing there, frantic looks across their faces.

"She's innocent!" Erec's mother yelled out. "You must not kill her!"

“Would you kill a woman!?” Dauphine cried out. “She’s a foreigner. Let her go. Send her back to her land. She need not be involved in our affairs.”

Bowyer turned to them and boomed:

“She is a foreigner who aspired to be our Queen. To murder our former King.”

“You are a liar!” Erec’s mother yelled. “You would not drink from the fountain of truth!”

Bowyer scanned the faces of the crowd.

“Is there anyone here who dares defy my claim?” he shouted, turning, meeting everyone’s gaze, defiant.

Alistair looked about, hopeful; but one by one, all the men, all brave warriors, mostly from Bowyer’s tribe, looked down, not one of them willing to challenge him in combat.

“I am your champion,” Bowyer boomed. “I defeated all opponents on tournament day. There is no one here who could beat me. Not one. If there is, I challenge you to step forward.”

“No one, save Erec!” Dauphine called out.

Bowyer turned and scowled at her.

“And where is he now? He lies dying. We Southern Islanders shall not have a cripple for a King. *I* am your King. I am your next best champion. By the laws of this land. As my father’s father was King before Erec’s father.”

Erec’s mother and Dauphine both lunged forward to stop him; but his men grabbed them and pulled them back, detaining them. Alistair saw beside them, Erec’s brother, Strom, wrists bound behind his back; he struggled, too, but could not break free.

“You shall pay for this, Bowyer!” Strom called out.

But Bowyer ignored him. Instead, he turned back to Alistair, and she could see from his eyes he was determined to proceed. Her time had come.

“Time is dangerous when deceit is on your side,” Alistair said to him.

He frowned down at her; clearly, she had struck a nerve.

“And those words will be your last,” he said.

Bowyer suddenly hoisted the ax, raising it high overhead.

Alistair closed her eyes, knowing that in but a moment, she would be gone from this world.

Eyes closed, Alistair felt time slow down. Images flashed before her. She saw the first time she had met Erec, back in the Ring, at the Duke’s castle, when she had been a serving girl and had fallen in love with him at first sight. She felt her love for him, a love she still felt to this day, burning inside her. She saw her brother, Thorgrin, saw his face, and for some reason, she did not see him in the Ring, in King’s Court, but rather in a distant land, on a distant ocean, exiled from the Ring. Most of all, she saw her mother. She saw her standing at the edge of a cliff, before her castle, high above an ocean, before a skywalk. She saw her holding out her arms and smiling sweetly at her.

“My daughter,” she said.

“Mother,” Alistair said, “I will come to join you.”

But to her surprise, her mother slowly shook her head.

“Your time is not now,” she said. “Your destiny on this earth is not yet complete. You still have a great destiny before you.”

“But how, Mother?” she asked. “How can I survive?”

“You are bigger than this earth,” her mother replied. “That blade, that metal of death, is of this earth. Your shackles are of this earth. Those are earthly limitations. They are only limitations if you believe in them, if you allow them to have authority over you. You are spirit and light and energy. That is where your real power is. You are above it all. You are allowing yourself to be held back by physical constraints. Your problem is not one of strength; it is one of faith. Faith in yourself. How strong is your faith?”

As Alistair knelt there, trembling, eyes shut, her mother’s question rang in her head.

How strong is your faith?

Alistair let herself go, forgot her shackles, put herself in the hands of her faith. She began to let go of her faith in the physical constraints of this planet, and instead shifted her faith to the supreme power, the one and only supreme power over everything else in the world. A power had created this world, she knew. A power had created all of this. That was the power she needed to align herself with.

As she did, all within a fraction of a second, Alistair felt a sudden warmth coursing through her body. She felt on fire, invincible, bigger than everything. She felt flames emanating from her palms, felt her mind buzzing and swarming, and felt a great heat rising up in her forehead, between her eyes. She felt herself stronger than everything, stronger than her shackles, stronger than all things material.

Alistair opened her eyes, and as time began to speed again, she looked up and saw Bowyer coming down with the ax, a scowl on his face.

In one motion, Alistair turned and raised her arms, and as she did, this time her shackles snapped as if they were twigs. In the same motion, lightning fast, she rose to her feet, raised one palm toward Bowyer, and as his ax came down, the most incredible thing happened: the ax dissolved. It turned to ashes and dust and fell at a heap at her feet.

Bowyer swung down, nothing in his hand, and he went stumbling, falling to his knees.

Alistair wheeled and her eyes were drawn to a sword on the far side of the clearing, in a soldier's belt. She reached out her other palm and commanded it come to her; as she did, it lifted from his scabbard and flew through the air, right into her outstretched palm.

In a single motion, Alistair grabbed hold of it, spun around, raised it high, and brought it down on the back of Bowyer's exposed neck.

The crowd gasped in shock as there came the sound of steel cutting through flesh and Bowyer, beheaded, collapsed to the ground, lifeless.

He lay there, dead, in the exact spot where, just moments before, he had wanted Alistair dead.

There came a cry from the crowd, and Alistair looked out to watch Dauphine break free of the soldier's grip, then grab the soldier's dagger from his belt and slice his throat. In the same motion, she spun around and cut loose Strom's ropes. Strom immediately reached back, grabbed a sword from a soldier's waist, spun and slashed, killing three of Bowyer's men before they could even react.

With Bowyer dead, there was a moment of hesitation, as the crowd clearly didn't know what to do next. Shouts rose up all amongst the crowd, as his death clearly emboldened all those who had been allied with him reluctantly. They were re-examining their alliance, especially as dozens of men loyal to Erec broke through the ranks and came charging forward to Strom's side, fighting with him, hand-to-hand, against those loyal to Bowyer.

The momentum quickly shifted in the favor of Erec's men, as man by man, row by row, alliances formed; Bowyer's men, caught off guard, turned and fled across the plateau to the rocky mountainside. Strom and his men chased closed behind.

Alistair stood there, sword still in hand, and watched as a great battle rose up, up and down the countryside, shouts and horns echoing as the entire island seemed to rally, to spill out to war on both sides. The sound of clanging armor, of the death cries of men, filled the morning, and Alistair knew a civil war had broken out.

Alistair held up her sword, the sun shining down on it, and knew she had been saved by the grace of God. She felt reborn, more powerful than she'd ever had, and she felt her destiny calling to her. She welled with optimism. Bowyer's men would be killed, she knew. Justice would prevail. Erec would rise. They would wed. And soon, she would be Queen of the Southern Isles.

Chapter Six

Darius ran down the dirt trail leading from his village, following the footprints toward Volusia, a determination in his heart to save Loti and murder the men who took her. He ran with a sword in his hand – a *real* sword, made of *real* metal – the first time he'd ever wielded real metal in his life. That alone, he knew, would be enough to have him, and his entire village, killed. Steel was taboo – even his father and his father's father feared to possess it – and Darius knew he had crossed a line in which there was now no turning back.

But Darius no longer cared. The injustice of his life had been too much. With Loti gone, he cared about nothing but retrieving her. He had hardly had a chance to know her, and yet paradoxically, he felt as if she were his whole life. It was one thing for he himself to be taken away as a slave; but for *her* to be taken away – that was too much. He could not allow her to go and still consider himself a man. He was a boy, he knew, and yet he was becoming a man. And it was these very decisions, he realized, these hard decisions that no one else was willing to make, that were the very things that made one a man.

Darius charged down the road alone, sweat blurring his eyes, breathing hard, one man ready to face an army, a city. There was no alternative. He needed to find Loti and bring her back, or die trying. He knew that if he failed – or even if he succeeded – it would bring vengeance on his entire village, his family, all his people. If he stopped to think about that, he might have even turned around.

But he was driven by something stronger than his own self-preservation, his family's and people's preservation. He was driven by a desire for justice. For freedom. By a desire to cast off his oppressor and to be free, even if for just one moment in his life. If not for himself, than for Loti. For her freedom.

Darius was driven by passion, not by logical thought. It was the love of his life out there, and he had suffered one time too many at the hands of the Empire. Whatever the consequences, he no longer cared. He needed to show them that there was one man amongst his people, even if it was just one man, even if just a boy, who would not suffer their treatment.

Darius ran and ran, twisting and turning his way out past the familiar fields, and into the outskirts of Volusian territory. He knew that just being found here, this close to Volusia, would alone merit his death. He followed the tracks, doubling his speed, seeing the zerta prints close together, and knowing they were moving slowly. If he went fast enough, he knew, he could catch them.

Darius rounded a hill, gasping, and finally, in the distance, he spotted what he was looking for: there, perhaps a hundred yards off, stood Loti, chained by her neck with thick iron shackles, from which led a long chain, a good twenty feet, to the back harness of a zerta. On the zerta rode the Empire taskmaster, the one who had taken her away, his back to her, and by his side, walking beside them, two more Empire soldiers, wearing the thick black and gold armor of the empire, glistening in the sun. They were nearly twice the size of Darius, formidable warriors, men with the finest weapons, and a zerta at their command. It would, Darius knew, take a host of slaves to overcome these men.

But Darius did not let fear get in his way. All he had to carry him was the strength of his spirit, and his fierce determination, and he knew he would have to find a way to make that be enough.

Darius ran and ran, catching up from behind on the unsuspecting caravan, and he soon caught up to them, racing up to Loti from behind, raising his sword high, and as she looked over at him with a startled expression, slashing down on the chain affixing her to the zerta.

Loti cried out and jumped back, shocked, as Darius severed her chains, freeing her, the distinctive ring of metal cutting through the air. Loti stood there, free, the shackles still around her neck, the chain dangling at her chest.

Darius turned and saw equal looks of astonishment on the face of the Empire taskmaster, looking down from his seat on the zerta. The soldiers walking on the ground beside him stopped, too, all of them stunned at the sight of Darius.

Darius stood there, arms trembling, holding out his steel sword before him and determined not to show fear as he stood between them and Loti.

“She does not belong to you,” Darius called out, his voice shaky. “She is a free woman. We are all free!”

The soldiers looked up to the taskmaster.

“Boy,” he called out to Darius, “you’ve just made the biggest mistake of your life.”

He nodded down to his soldiers, and they raised their swords and charged Darius.

Darius stood his ground, holding his sword in trembling hands, and as he did, he felt his ancestors looking down on him. He felt all the slaves who had ever been killed looking down on him, supporting him. And he began to feel a great heat rising up within him.

Darius felt his hidden power deep within beginning to stir, itching to be summoned. But he would not allow himself to go there. He wanted to fight them man to man, to beat them as any man would, to apply all of his training with his brothers in arms. He wanted to win as a man, fight like a man with real metal weapons, and defeat them on their own terms. He had always been faster than all of the older boys, with their long wooden swords and muscular frames, even boys twice his size. He dug in, and braced himself as they charged.

“Loti!” he called out, not turning, “RUN! Go back to the village!”

“NO!” she yelled back.

Darius knew he had to do something; he could not stand there and wait for them to reach him. He knew he had to surprise them, to do something they would not expect.

Darius suddenly charged, choosing one of the two soldiers and racing right for him. They met in the middle of the dirt clearing, Darius letting out a great battle cry. The soldier slashed his sword at Darius’s head, but Darius raised his sword and blocked it, their swords sparking, the impact of metal on metal the first Darius had ever felt. The blade was heavier than he thought, the soldier’s blow stronger, and he felt a great vibration, felt his entire arm shaking, up to his elbow and into his shoulder. It caught him off guard.

The soldier swung around quickly, aiming to strike Darius from the side, and Darius spun and blocked. This did not feel like sparring with his brothers; Darius felt himself moving slower than usual, the blade so heavy. It was taking some getting used to. It felt as if the other soldier were moving twice as fast as he.

The soldier swung again, and Darius realized he could not beat him blow for blow; he had to draw on his other skills.

Darius stepped sideways, ducking the blow instead of meeting it, and he then threw an elbow into the soldier’s throat. He caught it perfectly. The man gagged and stumbled back, hunched over, grasping his throat. Darius raised the butt of his sword and brought it down on his exposed back, sending him face down into the dirt.

At the same time the other soldier charged, and Darius spun, raised his sword, and blocked a mighty blow as it came down for his face. The soldier kept charging, though, driving Darius back and down to the ground, hard.

Darius felt his rib cage being crushed as the soldier lay on top of him, both of them landing on the hard dirt in a big cloud of dust. The soldier dropped his sword and reached out with his hands, trying to gouge out Darius’s eyes with his fingers.

Darius grabbed his wrists, holding them back with shaking hands, but losing ground. He knew he needed to do something fast.

Darius raised a knee and turned, managing to spin the man onto his side. In the same motion, Darius reached down and extracted the long dagger he spotted in the man's belt – and in the same motion, raised it high and plunged it into the man's chest, as they rolled on the ground,

The soldier cried out, and Darius lay there on top of him, and watched him die before his eyes. Darius lay there, frozen, shocked. It was the first time he had killed a man. It was a surreal experience. He felt victorious yet saddened at the same time.

Darius heard a cry from behind, snapping him out of it, and he turned to see the other soldier, the one he had knocked out, back on his feet, racing for him. He raised his sword and swung it for his head.

Darius waited, focused, then ducked at the last second; the soldier went stumbling past him.

Darius reached down and drew the dagger from the dead man's chest and spun around, and as the soldier turned back and charged again, Darius, on his knees, leaned forward and threw it.

He watched the blade spin end over end, then finally lodge itself into the soldier's heart, piercing his armor. The Empire's own steel, second to none, used against them. Perhaps, Darius thought, they should have crafted weapons less sharp.

The soldier sank to his knees, eyes bulging, and he fell sideways, dead.

Darius heard a great cry behind him, and he jumped to his feet and wheeled to see the taskmaster dismounting from his zerta. He scowled and drew his sword and bore down on Darius with a great cry.

"Now I shall have to kill you myself," he said. "But not only will I kill you, I shall torture you and your family and your entire village slowly!"

He charged for Darius.

This Empire taskmaster was obviously a greater soldier than the others, taller and broader, with greater armor. He was a hardened warrior, the greatest warrior Darius had ever fought. Darius had to admit he felt fear at this formidable foe – but he refused to show it. Instead, he was determined to fight through his fear, to refuse to allow himself to be intimidated. He was just a man, Darius told himself. And all men can fall.

All men can fall.

Darius raised his sword as the taskmaster bore down on him, swinging his great sword, flashing in the light, with both hands. Darius shifted and blocked; the man swung again.

Left and right, left and right, the soldier slashed and Darius blocked, the great clang of metal ringing in his ears, sparks flying everywhere. The man drove him back, further and further, and it took all of Darius's might just to block the blows. The man was strong and quick, and Darius was preoccupied with just staying alive.

Darius blocked one blow just a bit too slowly, and he cried out in pain as the taskmaster found an opening and slashed his bicep. It was a shallow wound, but a painful one, and Darius felt the blood, his first wound in battle, and was stunned by it.

It was a mistake. The taskmaster took advantage of his hesitation, and he backhanded him with his gauntlet. Darius felt a great pain in his cheek and jaw as the metal met his face, and as the blow knocked him backwards, sent him stumbling several feet, Darius took a mental note to never stop and check a wound anytime in battle.

As Darius tasted blood on his lips, a fury washed over him. The taskmaster, charging him again, bearing down on him, was big and strong, but this time, with pain ringing in his cheek and blood on his tongue, Darius didn't let that intimidate him. The first blows of battle had been struck, and Darius realized, as painful as they were, they were not that bad. He was still standing, still breathing, still living.

And that meant he still could fight. He could take blows, and he could still go on. Getting wounded was not as bad as he had feared. He might be smaller, less experienced, but he realized his skill was as sharp as any other man's – and it could be just as deadly.

Darius let out a guttural cry and lunged forward, embracing battle this time instead of shying away from it. No longer fearing being wounded, Darius raised his sword with a cry, and slashed down at his opponent. The man blocked it, but Darius did not give up, swinging again and again and again, driving the taskmaster back, despite his greater size and strength.

Darius fought for his life, fought for Loti, fought for all of his people, his brothers in arms, and, slashing left and right, faster than he'd ever had, not letting the weight of the steel slow him down any longer, he finally found an opening. The taskmaster screamed out in pain as Darius slashed his side.

He turned and scowled at Darius, first surprise, then vengeance in his eyes.

He shrieked like a wounded animal, and charged Darius. The taskmaster threw down his sword, raced forward, and embraced Darius in a bear hug. He heaved Darius up off the ground, squeezing him so tight, Darius dropped his sword. It all happened so fast, and it was such an unexpected move, that Darius could not react in time. He had expected his foe to use his sword in battle, not his fists.

Darius, dangling off the ground, groaning, felt as if every bone in his body was going to crack. He cried out in pain.

The taskmaster squeezed him harder, so hard Darius was sure he was going to die. He then leaned back and head-butted Darius, smashing his forehead into Darius's nose.

Darius felt blood gushing out, felt a horrible pain shoot through his face and eyes, stinging him, blinding him. It was a move he had not expected, and as the taskmaster leaned back to head-butt him again, Darius, defenseless, was certain he would be killed.

The noise of chains cut through the air, and suddenly the taskmaster's eyes bulged wide open, and his grip loosened on Darius. Darius, gasping, confused, looked up, wondering why he'd let go. Then he saw Loti, standing behind the taskmaster, wrapping her dangling shackles around his neck, again and again, and squeezing with all her might.

Darius stumbled back, trying to catch his breath again, and he watched as the taskmaster stumbled back several feet, then reached back over his shoulder, grabbed Loti from behind, leaned over, and flipped her over his head. Loti landed on her back, on the hard ground, in the dirt, with a cry.

The taskmaster stepped forward, lifted his leg, aimed his boot over her face, and Darius saw he was about to bring it down and crush her face. The taskmaster was a good ten feet away by now, too far for Darius to reach him in time.

"NO!" Darius yelled.

Darius thought quickly: he reached down, grabbed his sword, stepped forward, and in one swift motion, he threw it.

The sword went flying through the air, end over end, and Darius watched, transfixed, as the point pierced the taskmaster's armor, impaling him right through his heart.

His eyes bulged wide open again and Darius watched as he stumbled and fell, sinking to his knees, then to his face.

Loti quickly gained her feet, and Darius rushed to her side. He draped a reassuring hand over her shoulder, so grateful to her, so relieved she was okay.

Suddenly, a sharp whistle cut through the air; Darius turned and saw the taskmaster, lying on the ground, raise a hand to his mouth and whistle again, one last time, before he died.

A horrific roar shattered the silence, as the ground shook.

Darius looked over, and was terror-stricken to see the zerta suddenly charging right for them. It sprinted for them in a rage, lowering its sharp horns. Darius and Loti exchanged a look, knowing they had nowhere to run. Within moments, Darius knew, they would both be dead.

Darius looked all around, thinking quick, and he saw beside them the steep slope of the mountainside, littered with rocks and boulders. Darius raised his arm, his palm out, and draped his other arm around Loti, holding her close. Darius did not want to summon his power, but he knew that now, he had no choice, if he wanted to live.

Darius felt a tremendous heat rush through him, a power he could barely control, and he watched as a light shot forth through his open palm, onto the steep slope. There came a rumbling, gradual at first, then greater and greater, and Darius watched as boulders began tumbling down the steep mountainside, gaining steam.

An avalanche of boulders all rushed down on the zerta, crushing it just before it reached them. There was a huge cloud of dust, a tremendous noise, and finally, all was still.

Darius stood there, nothing but silence and dust swirling in the sun, hardly understanding what he had just done. He turned and saw Loti looking at him, saw the look of horror in her face, and he knew everything had changed. He had unleashed his secret. And now, there was no turning back.

Chapter Seven

Thor sat erect at the edge of their small boat, legs crossed, palms resting on his thighs, his back to the others as he stared out at the cold, cruel sea. His eyes were red from crying, and he did not want the others to see him like this. His tears had dried up long ago, but his eyes were still raw as he stared out, baffled, at the sea, wondering at the mysteries of life.

How could a son have been given to him, only to have been taken away? How could someone he loved so much disappear from him, be snatched away with no warning and no chance of return?

Life, Thor felt, was too relentlessly cruel. Where was the justice in it all? Why couldn't his son return to him?

Thor would give anything – *anything* – walk through fire himself, die a million deaths – to have Guwayne given back to him.

Thor closed his eyes and shook his head as he tried to blot out the image of that burning volcano, the empty bassinet, the flames. He tried to block out the idea of his son dying such a painful death. His heart burned with fury, but most of all, sorrow. And shame, for not reaching his little boy sooner.

Thor also felt a deep pit in his stomach as he tried to imagine his encounter with Gwendolyn, his telling her the news. She would surely never look him in the eyes again. And she would never be the same person again. It was as if Thorgrin's entire life had been snatched away from him. He did not know how to rebuild, how to pick up the pieces. How does one, he wondered, find another purpose for living?

Thor heard footsteps and felt the weight of a body beside him as the boat shifted, creaking. He looked over and was surprised to see Conven take a seat at his side, staring out. Thor felt as if he hadn't talked to Conven in ages, not since his twin's death. He welcomed seeing him here. As Thor looked at him, studied the sorrow in his face, for the first time, he understood. He really understood.

Conven didn't say a word. He didn't need to. His presence was enough. He sat beside him in sympathy, brothers in grief.

They sat there in silence for a long time, no noise but the sound of the wind ripping through, the sound of the waves lapping gently against the boat, this small boat of theirs adrift in an endless sea, their quest to find and rescue Guwayne taken away from all of them.

Finally Conven spoke:

"Not a day goes by when I don't think of Conval," he said, his voice somber.

They sat again in silence for a long time. Thor wanted to reply, but he could not, too choked up to speak.

Finally, Conven added: "I grieve for you for Guwayne. I would have liked to see him become a great warrior, like his father. I know he would have been. Life can be tragic and cruel. It can give only to take away. I wish I could tell you I have recovered from my sorrow – but I have not."

Thor looked at him, Conven's brutal honesty somehow giving him a sense of peace.

"What keeps you living?" Thor asked.

Conven looked out at the water for a long time, then finally sighed.

"I think it was what Conval would have wanted," he said. "He would have wanted me to go on. And so I go on. I do it for him. Not for myself. Sometimes we live a life for others. Sometimes we don't care enough to live it for ourselves, so we live it for them. But, I am coming to realize, sometimes that must be enough."

Thor thought of Guwayne, now dead, and he wondered what his son would have wanted. Of course, he would have wanted Thorgrin to live, to take care of his mother, Gwendolyn. Thor knew that logically. But in his heart, it was a hard concept to grasp.

Conven cleared his throat.

“We live for our parents,” he said. “For our siblings. For our wives and sons and daughters. We live for everybody else. And sometimes, when life has beaten you down so much that you don’t want to go on for yourself, that has to be enough.”

“I disagree,” came a voice.

Thor looked over to see Matus coming up on his other side, sitting and joining them. Matus looked out at the sea, stern and proud.

“I believe there is another thing we live for,” he added.

“And what is that?” Conven asked.

“Faith.” Matus sighed. “My people, the Upper Isle men, they pray to the four gods of the rocky shores. They pray to the gods of the water and wind and sky and rocks. Those gods have never answered my prayers. I pray to the ancient god of the Ring.”

Thor looked at him, surprised.

“I have never known an Upper Isle men to share the faith of the Ring,” Conven said.

Matus nodded.

“I am unlike my people,” he said. “I always have been. I wanted to enter the monastic order when I was young, but my father would never hear of it. He insisted I take up arms, like my brothers.”

He sighed.

“I believe we live for our faith, not for others,” he added. “That is what carries us through. If our faith is strong enough, *really* strong enough, then anything can happen. Even a miracle.”

“And can it return my son to me?” Thor asked.

Matus nodded back at him, unflinching, and Thor could see the certainty in his eyes.

“Yes,” Matus answered flatly. “Anything.”

“You lie,” Conven said, indignant. “You give him false hope.”

“I do not,” Matus retorted.

“Are you saying faith will return my dead brother to me?” Conven urged, angry.

Matus sighed.

“I am saying that all tragedy is a gift,” he said.

“A gift?” Thor asked, horrified. “Are you saying the loss of my son is a gift?”

Matus nodded back confidently.

“You are being given a gift, as tragic as that sounds. You can’t know what it is. You might not for a long time. But one day, you will see.”

Thor turned and looked out at the sea, confused, unsure. Was this all a test? he wondered. Was it one of the tests his mother had spoken of? Could faith alone bring his son back? He wanted to believe it. He really did. But he did not know if his faith was strong enough. When his mother had spoken of tests, Thor had been so sure he could pass anything that was thrown his way; yet now, feeling as he did, he did not know if he was strong enough to go on.

The boat rocked on the waves, and suddenly the tides turned, and Thor felt their small boat turning around and heading the opposite direction. He snapped out of it and checked back over his shoulder, wondering what was happening. Reece, Elden, Indra, and O’Connor were all still rowing and manning the sail, a confused look across their face, as their small sail flapped wildly in the wind.

“The Northern Tides,” Matus said, standing, hands on his hips and looking out, studying the waters. He shook his head. “This is not good.”

“What is it?” Indra asked. “We can’t control the boat.”

“They sometimes pass through the Upper Isles,” Matus explained. “I have never seen them myself, but I have heard about them, especially this far north. They are a riptide. Once you’re caught in them, they take you where they please. No matter how much rowing or sailing you try to do.”

Thor looked down, and saw the water below them rushing by at twice the speed. He looked out and saw they were heading toward a new, empty horizon, purple and white clouds spotting the sky, both beautiful and foreboding.

“But we’re heading east now,” Reece said, “and we need to head west. All of our people are west. The Empire is west.”

Matus shrugged.

“We head where the tides take us.”

Thor looked out in wonder and frustration, realizing that each passing moment was taking them further from Gwendolyn, further from their people.

“And where does it end?” O’Connor asked.

Matus shrugged.

“I know only the Upper Isles,” he said. “I have never been this far north. I know nothing of what lies beyond.”

“It does end,” Reece spoke up, darkly, and all eyes turned to him.

Reece looked back, grave.

“I was tutored on the tides years ago, at a young age. In the ancient book of Kings, we had an array of maps, covering every portion of the world. The Northern Tides lead to the eastern edge of the world.”

“The eastern edge?” Elden said, concern in his voice. “We’d be on the other end of the world from our people.”

Reece shrugged.

“The books were ancient, and I was young. All I really remember was that the tides were a portal to the Land of Spirits.”

Thor looked at Reece, wondering.

“Old wives’ tales and fairytales,” O’Connor said. “There is no portal to the Land of Spirits. It was sealed off centuries ago, before our fathers walked the earth.”

Reece shrugged, and they all fell silent as they turned and stared out at the seas. Thor examined the fast-moving waters, and he wondered: Where on earth were they being lead?

* * *

Thor sat alone, at the edge of the boat, staring into the waters as he had been for hours, the cold spray hitting him in the face. Numb to the world, he barely felt it. Thor wanted to be in action, to be hoisting sails, rowing – anything – but there was nothing for any them to do now. The Northern tides were taking them where they would, and all they could do was sit idly by and watch the currents, their boat rolling in the long waves, and wonder where they would end up. They were in the hands of the fates now.

As Thor sat there, studying the horizon, wondering where the sea would end, he felt himself drifting into nothingness, numb from the cold and the wind, lost in the monotony of the deep silence that hung over all of them. The seabirds that had at first circled them had disappeared long ago, and as the silence deepened, as the sky fell darker and darker, Thor felt as if they were sailing into nothingness, into the very ends of the earth.

It was hours later, as the last light of day was falling, that Thor sat upright, spotting something on the horizon. At first he was certain it was an illusion; but as the currents became stronger, the shape became more distinct. It was real.

Thor sat up straight, for the first time in hours, then rose to his feet. He stood there, boat swaying, hands on his hips, looking out.

“Is it real?” came a voice.

Thor looked over to see Reece stepping forward beside him. Elden, Indra, and the rest soon joined them, all staring out in wonder.

“An island?” O’Connor wondered aloud.

“Looks like a cave,” Matus said.

As they approached, Thor began to see the outline of it, and he saw that it was indeed a cave. It was a massive cave, an outcropping of rock that rose up from the sea, emerging here, in the midst of a cruel and endless ocean, rising hundreds of feet high, the opening shaped in a big arch. It looked like a giant mouth, ready to swallow all the world.

And the currents were taking their boat right toward it.

Thor stared at in wonder, and he knew it could only be one thing: the entrance to the Land of the Spirits.

Chapter Eight

Darius walked slowly down the dirt path, Loti by his side, the air filled with the tension of their silence. Neither had said a word since their encounter with the taskmaster and his men, and Darius's mind swarmed with a million thoughts as he walked beside her, accompanying her back to their village. Darius wanted to drape an arm around her, to tell her how grateful he was that she was alive, that she had saved him as he had saved her, how determined he was to never let her leave his side again. He wanted to see her eyes filled with joy and relief, he wanted to hear her say how much it meant to her that he had risked his life for her – or at the very least, that she was happy to see him.

Yet as they walked in the deep, awkward silence, Loti said nothing, would not even look at him. She had not said a word to him since he had caused the avalanche, had not even met his eyes. Darius's heart pounded, wondering what she was thinking. She had witnessed him summoning his power, had witnessed the avalanche. In its wake, she had given him a horrified look, and had not looked at him again since.

Perhaps, Darius thought, in her view, he had broken the sacred taboo of her people in drawing on magic, the one thing her people looked down upon more than anything. Perhaps she was afraid of him; or even worse, perhaps she no longer loved him. Perhaps she thought of him as some sort of freak.

Darius felt his heart breaking as they walked slowly back to the village, and wondered what it was all for. He had just risked his life to save a girl who no longer loved him. He would pay anything to read her thoughts, anything. But she would not even speak. Was she in shock?

Darius wanted to say something to her, anything to break the silence. But he did not know where to begin. He had thought he'd known her, but now he was not so sure. A part of him felt indignant, too proud to speak, given her reaction, and yet another part of him was somewhat ashamed. He knew what his people thought of the use of magic. Was his use of magic such a terrible thing? Even if he'd saved her life? Would she tell the others? If the villagers found out, he knew, they would surely exile him.

They walked and walked, and Darius finally could stand it no longer; he had to say something.

"I'm sure your family will be happy to see you back safely," Darius said.

Loti, to his disappointment, did not take the opportunity to look his way; instead, she just remained expressionless as they continued to walk in silence. Finally, after a long while, she shook her head.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I should think they will be more worried than anything. Our entire village will be."

"What do you mean?" Darius asked.

"You've killed a taskmaster. *We've* killed a taskmaster. The entire Empire will be out looking for us. They'll destroy our village. Our people. We have done a terrible, selfish thing."

"Terrible thing? I saved your life!" Darius said, exasperated.

She shrugged.

"My life is not worth the lives of all of our people."

Darius fumed, not knowing what to say as they walked. Loti, he was beginning to realize, was a difficult girl, hard to understand. She had been too indoctrinated with the rigid thought of her parents, of their people.

"So you hate me then," he said. "You hate me for saving you."

She refused to look at him, continued to walk.

"I saved you, too," she retorted proudly. "Don't you remember?"

Darius reddened; he could not understand her. She was too proud.

"I don't hate you," she finally added. "But I saw how you did it. I saw what you did."

Darius found himself shaking inside, hurt at her words. They came out like an accusation. It wasn't fair, especially after he had just saved her life.

"And is that such an awful thing?" he asked. "Whatever power it was that I used?"

Loti did not reply.

"I am who I am," Darius said. "I was born this way. I did not ask for it. I do not entirely understand it myself. I do not know when it comes and when it leaves. I do not know if I shall ever be able to use it again. I did not want to use it. It was as if... it used me."

Loti continued to look down, not responding, not meeting his eyes, and Darius felt a sinking feeling of regret. Had he made a mistake in rescuing her? Should he be ashamed of who he was?

"Would you rather be dead than for me to have used... whatever it was I used?" Darius asked.

Again Loti did not reply as they walked, and Darius's regret deepened.

"Do not speak of it to anyone," she said. "We must never speak of what happened here today. We will both be outcasts."

They turned the corner and their village came into view. They walked down the main pathway and as they did, they were spotted by villagers, who let out a great shout of joy.

Within moments there was a great commotion as villagers swarmed out to meet them, hundreds of them, excitedly rushing to embrace Loti and Darius. Breaking through the crowd was Loti's mother, joined by her father and two of her brothers, tall men with broad shoulders, short hair, and proud jaws. They all looked down at Darius, summing him up. Standing beside them was Loti's third brother, smaller than the others and lame in one leg.

"My love," Loti's mother said, rushing through the crowd and embracing her, hugging her tight.

Darius hung back, unsure what to do.

"What happened to you?" her mother demanded. "I thought the Empire took you away. How did you get free?"

The villagers all fell grave, silent, as all eyes turned to Darius. He stood there, not knowing what to say. This should be a moment, he felt, of great joy and celebration for what he did, a moment for him to take great pride, for him to be welcomed home as a hero. After all, he alone, of all of them, had had the courage to go after Loti.

Instead, it was a moment of confusion for him. And perhaps even shame. Loti gave him a meaningful look, as if to warn him not to reveal their secret.

"Nothing happened, Mother," Loti said. "The Empire changed their mind. They let me go."

"Let you go?" she echoed, flabbergasted.

Loti nodded.

"They let me go far from here. I was lost in the woods, and Darius found me. He led me back."

The villager, silent, all looked skeptically back and forth between Darius and Loti. Darius sensed they did not believe them.

"And what is that mark on your face?" her father asked, stepping forward, rubbing his thumb on her cheek, turning her head to examine it.

Darius looked over and saw a large black and blue welt.

Loti looked up at her father, unsure.

"I... tripped," she said. "On a root. As I said, I am fine," she insisted, defiant.

All eyes turned to Darius, and Bokbu, the village chief, stepped forward.

"Darius, is this true?" he asked, his voice somber. "You brought her back peacefully? You had no encounter with the Empire?"

Darius stood there, his heart pounding, hundreds of eyes staring at him. He knew if he told them of their encounter, told them what he had done, they would all fear the reprisal to come. And he would have no way to explain how he killed them all without speaking of his magic. He would be an outcast, and so would Loti – and he did not want to strike panic in all of the people's hearts.

Darius did not want to lie. But he did not know what else to do.

So instead, Darius merely nodded back to the elders, without speaking. Let them interpret that as they would, he thought.

Slowly, the people, relieved, all turned and looked to Loti. Finally, one of her brothers stepped forward and draped an arm around her.

“She’s safe!” he called out, breaking the tension. “That’s all that matters!”

There came a great shout in the village, as the tension broke, and Loti was embraced by her family and all the others.

Darius stood there and watched, receiving a few halfhearted pats of approval on his back, as Loti turned alone with her family, and was ushered off into the village. He watched her go, waiting, hoping she would turn around to look at him, just once.

But his heart dried up within him as he watched her disappear, folded into the crowd, and never turning back.

Chapter Nine

Volusia stood proudly atop her golden carriage, mounted atop her golden vessel gleaming in the sun, as she drifted her way slowly down the waterways of Volusia, her arms outstretched, taking in the adulation of her people. Thousands of them came out, rushed to the edge of the waterways, lined the streets and alleys, and shouted her name from all directions.

As she drifted down the narrow waterways that wound their way through the city, Volusia could almost reach out and touch her people, all hailing her name, crying and screaming in adulation as they threw torn-up shreds of scrolls of all different colors, sparkling in the light as they rained down on her. It was the greatest sign of respect their people could offer. It was their way of welcoming a returning hero.

“Long live Volusia! Long live Volusia!” came the chant, echoed down one alleyway after the next as she passed through the masses, the waterways taking her straight through her magnificent city, its streets and buildings all lined with gold.

Volusia leaned back and took it all in, thrilled that she had defeated Romulus, had slaughtered the Supreme Ruler of the Empire, and had murdered his contingent of soldiers. Her people were one with her, and they felt emboldened when she felt emboldened, and she had never felt stronger in her life – not since the day she’d murdered her mother.

Volusia looked up at her magnificent city, at the two towering pillars leading into it, shining gold and green in the sun; she took in the endless array of ancient buildings erected in her ancestors’ time, hundreds of years old, well worn. The shining, immaculate streets were bustling with thousands of people, guards on every corner, the precise waterways cut through them in perfect angles, connecting everything. There were small footbridges on which could be seen horses clomping, bearing golden carriages, people dressed in their finest silks and jewels. The entire city had declared a holiday, and all had come out to greet her, all calling her name on this holy day. She was more than a leader to them – she was a goddess.

It was even more auspicious that this day should coincide with a festival, the Day of Lights, the day in which they bowed to the seven gods of the sun. Volusia, as leader of the city, was always the one to initiate the festivities, and as she sailed through, the two immense golden torches burned brightly behind her, brighter than the day, ready to light the Grand Fountain.

All the people followed her, hurrying along the streets, chasing after her boat; she knew they would accompany her all the way, until she reached the center of the six circles of the city, where she would disembark and set fire to the fountains that would mark the day’s holiday and sacrifices. It was a glorious day for her city and her people, a day to praise the fourteen gods, the ones that were rumored to circle her city, to guard the fourteen entrances against all unwanted invaders. Her people prayed to all of them, and today, as on all days, thanks was due.

This year, her people would be in for a surprise: Volusia had added a fifteenth god, the first time in centuries, since the found of the city, that a god had been added. And that god was herself. Volusia had erected a towering golden statue of herself in the center of the seven circles, and she had declared this day her name day, her holiday. As it was unveiled, all her people would see it for the first time, would see that she, Volusia, was more than her mother, more than a leader, more than a mere human. She was a goddess, who deserved to be worshipped every day. They would pray and bow down to her along with all the others – they would do it, or she would have their blood.

Volusia smiled to herself as her boat drifted ever closer to the city center. She could hardly wait to see their expressions, to have them all worship her just as the other fourteen gods. They did not know it yet, but one day, she would destroy the other gods, one by one, until all that was left was her.

Volusia, excited, checked back over her shoulder and she saw behind her an endless array of vessels following, all carrying live bulls and goats and rams, shifting and noisy in the sun, all in

preparation of the day's sacrifice to the gods. She would slaughter the biggest and best one before her own statue.

Volusia's boat finally reached the open waterway to the seven golden circles, each one wider than the next, wide golden plazas that were separated by rings of water. Her boat made its way slowly through the circles, ever closer towards the center, passing each of the fourteen gods, and her heart pounded in excitement. Each god towered over them as they went, each statue gleaming gold, twenty feet high. In the very center of all this, in the plaza that had always been kept empty for sacrifice and congregation, there now stood a newly constructed golden pedestal, atop of which was a fifty-foot structure covered in a white silk cloth. Volusia smiled: she alone of all her people knew what lay beneath that cloth.

Volusia disembarked, her servants rushing forward to help her down, as they reached the innermost plaza. She watched as another vessel was brought forward, and the largest bull she had ever seen was taken off and led right to her by a dozen men. Each held a thick rope, leading the beast carefully. This bull was special, procured in the Lower Provinces: fifteen feet high, with bright red skin, it was a beacon of strength. It was also filled with fury. It resisted, but the men held it in place as they led it before her statue.

Volusia heard a sword being drawn, and she turned and saw Aksan, her personal assassin, standing beside her, holding out the ceremonial sword. Aksan was the most loyal man she'd ever met, willing to kill anyone she asked him with just so much as a nod of her head. He was also sadistic, which was why she liked him, and he had earned her respect many times. He was one of the few people she allowed to stay close to her side.

Aksan stared back at her, with his sunken, pockmarked face, his horns visible behind his thick, curly hair.

Volusia reached out and took the long, golden ceremonial sword, its blade six feet long, and tightened her grip on the hilt with both hands. A hushed silence fell over her people as she wheeled, raised it high, and brought it down on the back of bull's neck with all her might.

The blade, as sharp as could be, as thin as parchment, sliced right through, and Volusia grinned as she heard the satisfying sound of sword piercing flesh, felt it cutting all the way through, and felt its hot blood spraying her face. It gushed everywhere, a huge puddle oozing onto her feet, and the bull stumbled, headless, and fell at the base of her still-covered statue. The blood gushed all over the silk and the gold, staining it, as her people let out a great cheer.

"A great omen, my lady," Aksan leaned over and said.

The ceremonies had begun. All around her, trumpets sounded, and hundreds of animals were brought forth, as her officers began slaughtering them on all sides of her. It would be a long day of slaughtering and raping and gorging on food and wine – and then doing it all over again, for another day, and another. Volusia would make sure she joined them, would take some men and wine for herself, and would slit their throats as a sacrifice to her idols. She looked forward to a long day of sadism and brutality.

But first, there was one thing left to do.

The crowd quieted as Volusia ascended the pedestal at the base of her statue and turned and faced her people. Climbing up on the other side of her was Koolian, another trusted advisor, a dark sorcerer wearing a black hood and cloak, with glowing green eyes and a wart-lined face, the creature who had helped guide her to her own mother's assassination. It was he, Koolian, who had advised her to build this statue to herself.

The people stared at her, silent as could be. She waited, savoring the drama of the moment.

"Great people of Volusia!" she boomed. "I present to you the statue of your newest and greatest god!"

With a flourish Volusia pulled back the silk sheet, to a gasp of the crowd.

"Your new goddess, the fifteenth goddess, Volusia!" Koolian boomed to the people.

The people let out a hushed sound of awe, as they all looked up at it in wonder. Volusia looked up at the shining golden statue, twice as high as the others, a perfect model of her. She waited, nervous, to see how her people would react. It had been centuries since anyone had introduced a new god, and she was gambling to see if their love for her was as strong as she needed it to be. She didn't just need them to love her; she needed them to worship her.

To her great satisfaction, her people, as one, all suddenly dropped to their faces, bowing down, worshipping her idol.

"Volusia," they chanted sacredly, again and again. "Volusia. Volusia."

Volusia stood there, arms out wide, breathing deep, taking it all in. It was enough praise to satisfy any human. Any leader. Any god.

But it was still not enough for her.

* * *

Volusia walked through the wide, open-air arched entrance to her castle, passing marble columns a hundred feet high, the halls lined with gardens and guards, Empire soldiers, standing perfectly erect, holding golden spears, lined up as far as the eye could see. She walked slowly, the golden heels of her boots clicking, accompanied, on either side Koolian, her sorcerer, Aksan, her assassin, and Soku, the commander of her army.

"My lady, if I could just have a word with you," Soku said. He'd been trying to talk to her all day, and she'd been ignoring him, not interested in his fears, in his fixation on reality. She had her own reality, and she would address him when the time suited her.

Volusia continued marching until she reached another entrance to another corridor, this one bedecked with long strips of emerald beads. Immediately, soldiers rushed forward and pulled them to the side, allowing a passage for her.

As she entered, all the chanting and cheering and reveling of the sacred ceremonies outdoors began to fade away. She'd had a long day of slaughtering and drinking and raping and feasting, and Volusia wanted some time to collect herself. She would recharge, then go back for another round.

Volusia entered the solemn chambers, dark and heavy, just a few torches lighting it. What lit the room mostly was the sole shaft of green light, shooting down from the oculus high above in the center of the hundred-foot-high ceiling, straight down to a singular object that sat alone in the center of the room.

The emerald spear.

Volusia approached it, in awe, as it sat there, as it had for centuries, pointing straight up into the light. With its emerald shaft and emerald spear point, it glistened in the light, aimed straight up at the heavens, as if challenging the gods. It had always been a sacred object for her people, one that her people believed sustained the entire city. She stood before it in awe, watching the particles swirl about it in the green light.

"My lady," Soku said softly, his voice echoing in the silence. "May I speak?"

Volusia stood a long time, her back to him, examining the spear, admiring its craftsmanship as she had every day of her life, until finally she felt ready to hear her councilor's words.

"You may," she said.

"My lady," he said, "you have killed the ruler of the Empire. Surely, word has spread. Armies will be marching for Volusia right now. Massive armies, larger than we could ever defend against. We must prepare. What is your strategy?"

"Strategy?" Volusia asked, still not looking at him, annoyed.

"How will you broker peace?" he pressed. "How will you surrender?"

She turned to him and fixed her eyes on him coldly.

"There will be no peace," she said. "Until I accept their surrender and their oath of fealty to me."

He looked back, fear in his face.

“But my lady, they outnumber us a hundred to one,” he said. “We cannot possibly defend against them.”

She turned back to the spear, and he stepped forward, desperate.

“My Empress,” he persisted. “You’ve achieved a remarkable victory in usurping your mother’s throne. She was not loved by the people, and you are. They worship you. None will speak to you frankly. But I shall. You surround yourself by people who tell you what you wish to hear. Who fear you. But I shall tell you the truth, the reality of our situation. The Empire will surround us. And we will be crushed. There will be nothing left of us, of our city. You must take action. You must broker a truce. Pay whatever price they want. Before they kill us all.”

Volusia smiled as she studied the spear.

“Do you know what they said about my mother?” she asked.

Soku stood there and looked back at her blankly, and shook his head.

“They said she was the Chosen One. They said she would never be defeated. They said she would never die. Do you know why? Because no one had wielded this spear in six centuries. And she came along and wielded it with one hand. And she used it to kill her father and take his throne.”

Volusia turned to him, her eyes aglow with history and destiny.

“They said the spear would only be wielded once. By the Chosen One. They said my mother would live a thousand centuries, that the throne of Volusia would be hers forever. And do you know what happened? I wielded the spear myself – and I used it to kill my mother.”

She took a deep breath.

“What does that tell you, Lord Commander?”

He looked at her, confused, and shook his head, puzzled.

“We can either live in the shadow of other people’s legends,” Volusia said, “or we can create our own.”

She leaned in close, scowling, glaring back at him in fury.

“When I have crushed the entire Empire,” she said, “when everyone in this universe bends their knee to me, when there is not a single living person left that doesn’t know and scream and cry my name, you will know then that I am the one and only true leader – and that I am the one and only true god. I am the Chosen One. Because I have chosen myself.”

Chapter Ten

Gwendolyn walked through the village, accompanied by her brothers Kendrick and Godfrey, and by Sandara, Aberthol, Brandt and Atme, with hundreds of her people trailing her, as they all were welcomed here. They were led by Bokbu, the village chief, and Gwen walked beside him, filled with gratitude as she toured his village. His people had taken them in, had provided them safe harbor, and the chief had done so at his own risk, against some of his own people's will. He had saved them all, had pulled them all back from the dead. Gwen did not know what they would have done otherwise. They would probably all be dead at sea.

Gwen also felt a rush of gratitude for Sandara, who had vouched for them with her people, and who'd had the wisdom to bring them all here. Gwen looked about, taking in the scene as all the villagers swarmed them, watching them arrive like things of curiosity, and she felt like an animal on display. Gwen saw all the small, quaint, modeling clay cottages, and she saw a proud people, a nation of warriors with kind eyes, watching them. Clearly, they'd never seen anything like Gwen and her people. Though curious, they were also guarded. Gwen could not blame them. A lifetime of slavery had molded them to be cautious.

Gwen noticed all the bonfires being erected everywhere, and she wondered.

"Why all the fires?" she asked.

"You arrive at an auspicious day," Bokbu said. "It is our festival of the dead. A holy night for us, it arrives but once a sun cycle. We burn fires to honor the gods of the dead, and it is said that on this night, the gods visit us, and speak to us of what is to come."

"It is also said that our savior will arrive on this day," chimed in a voice.

Gwendolyn looked over to see an older man, perhaps in his seventies, tall, thin with a somber look to him, walk up beside them, carrying a long, yellow staff and wearing a yellow cloak.

"May I introduce you to Kalo," Bokbu said. "Our oracle."

Gwen nodded, and he nodded back, expressionless.

"Your village is beautiful," Gwendolyn remarked. "I can see the love of family here."

The chief smiled.

"You are young for a queen, but wise, gracious. It is true what they say about you from across the sea. I wish that you and your people could stay right here, in the village, with us; but you understand, we must hide you from the prying eyes of the Empire. You will be staying close, though; that will be your home, there."

Gwendolyn followed his gaze and looked up and saw a distant mountain, filled with holes.

"The caves," he said. "You will be safe there. The Empire will not look for you there, and you can burn your fires and cook your food and recover until you're well."

"And then?" Kendrick asked, joining them.

Bokbu looked over at him, but before he could respond, he suddenly came to a stop as before him there appeared a tall, muscular villager holding a spear, flanked by a dozen muscular men. It was the same man from the ship, the one that protested their arrival – and he did not look happy.

"You endanger all of our people by allowing the strangers here," he said darkly. "You must send them back to where they came from. It is not our job to take in every last race that washes up here."

Bokbu shook his head as he faced him.

"Your fathers are ashamed of you," he said. "The laws of our hospitality extend to all."

"And is it the burden of a slave to extend hospitality?" he retorted. "When we cannot even find it ourselves?"

"How we are treated has no bearing on how we treat others," the chief retorted. "And we shall not turn away those who need us."

The villager sneered back, glaring at Gwendolyn, Kendrick, the others, then back to the chief.

“We do not want them here,” he said, seething. “The caves are not far away enough, and every day they are here, we are a day closer to death.”

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