

Morgan Rice
A Charge of Valor
Серия «Sorcerer's Ring», книга 6

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Аннотация

In A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6 in the Sorcerer's Ring), Thor continues on his quest, deeper into the Empire, to retrieve the stolen Destiny Sword and save the Ring. As he and his friends meet unexpected tragedy and lose a member of their close-knit group, Thor and his remaining friends become closer than they ever were, learning that they must face and overcome adversity together. Their journey takes them to new and exotic terrains, including the desolate Salt Fields, the Great Tunnel, and the Mountains of Fire, as they face a host of unexpected monsters at every turn.

Thor's skills deepen as he undergoes his most advanced training yet, and he will need to draw on powers greater than he has ever used if he is to survive. They finally discover where the Sword has been taken, and they learn that, to retrieve it, they will have to venture to the most dreaded place in the Empire: the Land of the Dragons.

Back in the Ring, Gwendolyn recovers slowly and grapples with deep depression after her attack. Kendrick and the others vow to fight for her honor, despite the impossible odds. There follows one of the great battles in the history of the Ring, as they struggle to free Silesia and conquer Andronicus.

Meanwhile, Godfrey finds himself in disguise behind enemy lines and begins to come into his own, learning what it means to become a warrior, in his own, unique way. Gareth manages to stay alive, using all his cunning to avert capture by Andronicus, while Erec fights for his life to save Savaria from the oncoming invasion by Andronicus – and to save his love, Alistair. Argon pays a precious price for doing the forbidden: meddling in human affairs. And Gwendolyn must decide if she will give up on life, or take up the secluded life of a nun in the ancient Tower of Refuge.

But not before, in a shocking twist, Thor finally learns who his real father is.

Will Thor and the others survive the quest? Will they retrieve the Destiny Sword? Will the Ring survive Andronicus' invasion? What will become of Gwendolyn, Kendrick and Erec? And who is Thor's real father?

With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A CHARGE OF VALOR 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. It is 70,000 words.

Содержание

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Morgan Rice

A Charge of Valor

(Book #6 in the Sorcerer's Ring)

*"Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once."*

*– William Shakespeare
Julius Caesar*

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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, Portuguese, 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.”

– *Black Lagoon Reviews* (regarding *Turned*)

“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.”

– *The Dallas Examiner* (regarding *Loved*)

“A book to rival TWILIGHT and VAMPIRE DIARIES, and one that will have you wanting to keep reading until the very last page! If you are into adventure, love and vampires this book is the one for you!”

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

“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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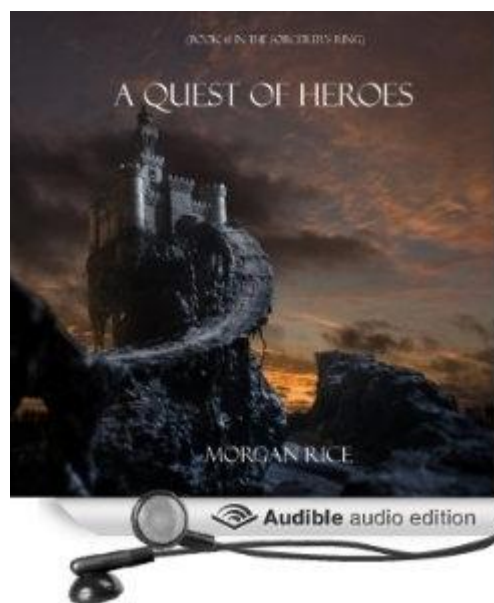
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Chapter One

Gwendolyn lay face down in the grass, feeling the cold winter breeze rush over her bare skin, and as her eyes fluttered open, slowly, distantly, the world came back into focus. She had been in some faraway place, in a field radiant with sunlight, flowers, Thor and her father by her side, all of them laughing and happy. Everything had been perfect in the world.

But now, as she peeled open her eyes, the world before her could not have been more different. The ground was hard, cold, and, standing over her, slowly gaining his feet, was not her father, not Thor – but a monster: McCloud. Done with her, he slowly rose, buckled his pants, and gazed down with a satisfied look.

In a rush, it all came back to her. Her surrender to Andronicus. His betrayal. Her being attacked by McCloud. Her cheeks flushed red as she realized how naive she had been.

She lay there, her whole body hurting, her heart breaking, and more than any time in her life, she wanted to die.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes further and saw Andronicus' army, scores of soldiers, all watching the scene, and her shame deepened. She should never have surrendered to this creature; she wished, instead, she had gone down fighting. She should have listened to Kendrick and the others. Andronicus had played to her sacrificial instincts, and she had fallen for it. She wished she would have met him in battle: even if she had died, at least then she could have gone down with her dignity, her honor, intact.

Gwendolyn knew with certainty, for the first time in her life, that she was about to die. But somehow, that no longer bothered her. She no longer cared about dying – she just cared about dying *her* way – and she wasn't ready to go down yet.

As she lay there, face down, Gwendolyn furtively reached out and grasped a clump of dirt in one hand.

"You can get up now, woman," McCloud ordered gruffly. "I'm through with you. It's time for others to have a turn."

Gwen clutched the dirt so hard her knuckles turned white, and prayed that this worked.

In one quick motion she spun around and threw the clump of dirt into McCloud's eyes.

He had not expected it, and he screamed and stumbled back, raising his hands to try to wipe the dirt out of his eyes.

Gwen took advantage of the moment. Raised in King's Castle, she had been reared by the King's warriors, and they had always taught her to attack a second time, before your enemy had a chance to recover. They had also taught her a lesson she had never forgotten: whether she carried a weapon or not, she was always armed. She could always use the enemy's weapon.

Gwen reached over, extracted the dagger from McCloud's belt, raised it high, and plunged it between his legs.

McCloud shrieked even louder, removing his hands from his eyes and grabbing his groin. Blood flowed between his legs as he reached down and pulled out the dagger, gasping.

She was thrilled with herself for landing the blow, for getting at least this small revenge. But to her surprise, the wound, which would have downed anyone else, did not slow him. This monster was unstoppable. She had wounded him badly, right where he deserved it, but had not killed him. It had not even made him sink to his knees.

Instead, McCloud extracted the dagger, dripping with blood, and sneered down at her with a look of death. He began to descend for her, clutching the dagger with shaking hands, and Gwendolyn knew her time had come. At least she would die with some small satisfaction.

"Now I'm going to carve out your heart and feed it to you," he said. "Prepare to learn what real pain means."

Gwendolyn braced herself for the dagger plunge, prepared to meet a painful death.

A scream rang out, and after a shocked moment, Gwendolyn was surprised to realize the scream was not her own. It was McCloud; he was shrieking in agony.

Gwen lowered her hands and looked up, confused. McCloud had dropped the dagger. She blinked several times, trying to understand the sight before her.

McCloud stood there with an arrow lodged in his eye. He shrieked, blood pouring from the socket as he raised a hand and grabbed at the arrow. She could not understand. He had been shot. But how? By whom?

Gwen turned in the direction from which the arrow had sailed, and her heart soared to see Steffen, standing there, holding a bow, hiding amidst a huge group of soldiers. Before anyone else could figure out what was going on, Steffen fired off six more arrows, and one by one, the six soldiers standing beside McCloud fell, arrows piercing through all of their throats.

Steffen reached back to fire more, but was finally spotted and pounced on by a large group of soldiers, who subdued him and pummeled him down to the ground.

McCloud, still shrieking, turned and ran off into the crowd. Amazingly, he was still not dead. She hoped that he would bleed to death.

Gwen's heart soared with gratitude for Steffen, more than he would ever know. She knew she would die here today by someone else's hand, but at least now it would not be by McCloud's.

The camp of soldiers quieted as Andronicus arose and marched slowly towards Gwendolyn. She lay there and watched him approach, impossibly tall, like a mountain moving her way. Soldiers fell in behind him as he came closer, the battlefield deathly silent, the only sound that of the whipping wind.

Andronicus stopped a few feet away, looming over her, looking down, expressionless. He reached up and slowly fingered the shrunken heads on his necklace, and an odd sound came from the bowels of his chest and throat, like a purring noise. He seemed to be both angry and intrigued at the same time.

"You have defied the great Andronicus," he said slowly, the entire camp listening to his every word, ancient and deep. His voice boomed with authority and resonated across the plains. "It would have been easier if you had submitted to your punishment. Now you will have to learn what real pain means."

Andronicus reached down and drew a sword longer than Gwen had ever seen. It must have been eight feet long, and its distinctive ring echoed across the battlefield. He held it high, turning it in the light, the reflection so strong that it blinded her. He examined it himself as he twisted it in his hands, as if seeing it for the first time.

"You are a woman of noble birth," he said. "It suits you that you should die by a noble sword."

Andronicus took two steps forward, grabbed the hilt with both hands, and raised the sword higher.

Gwendolyn closed her eyes. She heard the whistling of the wind, the movement of every blade of grass, and there came flashing through her mind random memories from her life. She felt the completion of her life, felt everything she had done, everyone she had loved. In her final thoughts, Gwen thought of Thor. She reached down to her neck and clasped the amulet he had given her, held it tight in her fist. She could feel the warm power radiating through it, this ancient red stone, and she remembered Thor's words as he had given it to her: this amulet can save your life. Once.

She clutched the amulet tighter, throbbing in her palm, and she prayed to God with every fiber of her being.

Please God, let this amulet work. Please, save me, just this one time. Let me see Thor again.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes, expecting to see Andronicus's sword flashing down at her – yet what she saw surprised her. Andronicus stood there, frozen, looking over her shoulder, as

if watching someone approach. He appeared to be surprised; even confused, and it was not an expression which she had ever expected to see him wear.

“You will lower your weapon now,” a voice rang out behind Gwendolyn.

Gwendolyn was electrified at the sound of that voice. It was a voice she knew. She spun, and she was shocked to see standing there a person who she knew as well as her own father.

Argon.

There he stood, dressed in his white robes and hood, his eyes shining with an intensity greater than she had ever seen, staring right at Andronicus. She and Steffen lay on the ground between these two titans. They were two creatures of incredible force, one of the darkness, and one of the light, standing off against each other. She could almost feel the spiritual war raging above her head.

“Will I?” Andronicus mocked, smiling back.

But in Andronicus’ smile, Gwen could see his lips tremble, could see, for the first time, something like fear in Andronicus’ eyes. She had never thought she would see that. Andronicus must have known of Argon. And whatever he knew, it was enough to make the most powerful man in the world afraid.

“You will harm the girl no further,” Argon said calmly. “You will accept her surrender,” he said, taking a step closer, his eyes shining, hypnotizing. “You will allow her to retreat to her people. And you will allow her people to surrender, if they choose. I will only tell you this one time. You would be wise to accept it.”

Andronicus stared back at Argon and blinked several times, as if undecided.

Then finally, he leaned back his head and roared with laughter. It was the loudest and darkest laughter Gwen had ever heard, filling the entire camp, seeming to reach up to the very sky.

“Your sorcerer’s tricks won’t work on me, old man,” Andronicus said. “I know of the Great Argon. There was a time when you were powerful. More powerful than man, than dragons, than the sky itself, or so they say. But your time has passed. Now it is a new time. Now it is a time for the great Andronicus. Now, you are but a relic, a remnant of some other time, when the MacGils ruled, when magic was strong. When the Ring was indefensible. But your fate is tied to the Ring. And now the Ring is weak. Like you.

“You are a fool to confront me, old man. Now you will suffer. Now you will learn the strength of the Great Andronicus.”

Andronicus sneered and raised his sword again, towards Gwendolyn, this time looking right at Argon.

“I’m going to kill the girl slowly, before your eyes,” Andronicus said. “Then I will kill the hunchback. Next, I will maim you, but leave you alive as a walking symbol of the power of my greatness.”

Gwendolyn braced herself and flinched as Andronicus brought the sword down for her head.

Suddenly, something happened. She heard a sound cut through the air, like that of a thousand fires, followed by Andronicus’ scream.

She opened her eyes in utter disbelief to see Andronicus’ face contorted in pain, dropping his sword and kneeling to the ground. She watched Argon take a step forward, then another, holding out a single palm, which was radiating a ball of violet light. The ball grew larger and larger, enveloping Andronicus as Argon continued walking forward, expressionless, getting closer and closer to Andronicus as he held out his palm.

Andronicus curled up into a ball on the ground as the light enveloped him.

A gasp erupted from his men, but none dared approach. Either they were afraid, or Argon had cast some sort of spell to make them powerless.

“MAKE IT STOP!” Andronicus screamed, reaching up and grabbing his ears. “I BEG YOU!”

“You will do no further harm to the girl,” Argon said slowly.

“I will do no further harm to the girl!” Andronicus repeated, as if in a trance.

“You will release her now and allow her to return to her people.”

“I will release her now and allow her to return to her people!”

“You will give her people a chance to surrender.”

“I will give her people a chance to surrender!” Andronicus shrieked. “Please! I will do anything!”

Argon breathed deep, then finally stopped. The light disappeared from his hand as he slowly lowered his arm.

Gwen looked up at him in shock; she had never seen Argon in action, and she could hardly comprehend his power. It was like watching the heavens open up.

“If we meet again, great Andronicus,” Argon said slowly, looking down as Andronicus lay there whimpering, “it will be on your way to the darkest realms of death.”

Chapter Two

Thor struggled, held firmly in place by the Empire soldiers, and watched helplessly as Durs, a man he once thought of as a brother, raised a sword to kill him.

Thor shut his eyes and braced himself, knowing his time had come. He kicked himself for being so stupid, so trusting. They had set him up all along, a lamb led to slaughter. Even worse, as the leader, the other boys had looked to Thor for guidance. He had not only let himself down, he had let all the others down with him. His naïveté, his trusting nature, had endangered them all.

As Thorgrin struggled, he tried with all he had to summon his power, to call it up from somewhere deep inside himself, just enough power to break free of his bonds, to fight back.

Yet, try as he did, it would not come. His own strength was just not enough to break free of all the soldiers holding him down.

Thor felt the wind caress his face as Durs lowered the sword, and braced himself for the imminent impact of steel. He was not ready to die. In his mind he saw Gwendolyn, in the Ring, waiting for him. He felt he had let her down, too.

Thor heard a sudden noise of flesh meeting flesh, and opened his eyes and was surprised to see that he was still alive. Durs' arm froze there, in mid-air, his wrist caught by the hand of a huge Empire soldier who towered over Durs – no easy feat, considering Durs' size. He held Durs' wrist just inches away from impaling Thor.

Durs turned to the Empire soldier, surprise in his face.

“Our leader does not want them dead,” the soldier muttered darkly to Durs. “He wants them alive. As prisoners.”

“No one told us that,” Durs protested.

“The deal was that we would get to kill them!” Dross added.

“The terms of the deal have changed,” the soldier answered.

“You can't do that!” Drake called out.

“Can't we?” he answered darkly, turning to him. “We can do anything we want. In fact, you are now our prisoners, too.” The soldier smiled. “The more Legion we have for ransom, the better.”

Durs looked back at the soldier, his face falling in outrage, and a moment later, chaos erupted as the three brothers were pounced upon by dozens of Empire soldiers, who tackled them down to the ground and bound their wrists.

Thor took advantage of the chaos and turned and searched for Krohn, who he spotted just a few feet away, lurking in the shadows, loyally close to his side.

“Krohn, help me!” Thor screamed. “NOW!”

Krohn leapt into action with a snarl, flying through the air, landing his fangs on the throat of the Empire soldier holding Thor's wrist. Thor wriggled free and Krohn leapt from one soldier to the next, biting and clawing them until Thor could break free and grab his sword. Thor then spun around and in a single blow, chopped off three of their heads.

Thor darted over to Reece, closest to him, and stabbed his captor in the heart, freeing him and allowing him to draw his sword and join the fight. The two of them fanned out and hurried to their Legion brothers, attacking their captors and freeing Elden, O'Connor, Conval and Conven.

The other soldiers were distracted by detaining Drake, Durs and Dross, and by the time they turned around and figured out what was going on, it was too late. Thor, Reece, O'Connor, Elden, Conval and Conven were free, all with weapons in hand. They were still badly outnumbered, and Thor knew the fight would not be easy. But at least now they had a fighting chance. Undaunted, they all charged the enemy with abandon.

The hundred Empire soldiers attacked and Thor heard a screech high overhead and looked up to see Estopheles. His falcon swooped down and scratched the eyes of the lead Empire soldier, who fell to the ground flailing. Estopheles then scratched several others, taking them down one at a time.

As they charged, Thor placed a rock in his sling and hurled it, striking one soldier in the temple and knocking him down before he could reach them; O'Connor managed to fire off two arrows, both landing with deadly precision, and Elden hurled a spear, impaling two soldiers, dropping at their feet. It was a good start – but there remained a hundred soldiers left to kill.

They met in the middle with a great battle cry. As he had been taught, Thor focused on one soldier in particular, choosing the biggest and meanest one he could find, and raising his sword high. There was a great clang of metal as Thor's sword was blocked by the man's shield, and the man immediately brought a hammer down for Thor's head.

Thor sidestepped, and as the hammer plunged down into the earth, Thor pulled the dagger from his belt and stabbed him; he collapsed, dead.

Thor raised his shield in time to block the sword blows of two attackers, then parried with his own, killing one of them. He was about to swing at the other when he caught a glimpse of a sword slashing down at him from behind; he had to spin around and block that with his shield.

Thor was getting attacked from all sides now, badly outnumbered, and it was all he could do just to keep the blows from raining down on him. He had no time or energy to attack – only to defend. And more and more soldiers kept coming at him.

Thor looked over and saw his Legion brothers in the same predicament: they each managed to kill one or two soldiers – but badly outnumbered, they paid a price, receiving minor wounds from all sides. Thor could tell that they were losing ground – even with Krohn jumping in and attacking, and even with Indra helping, picking up rocks and hurling them at the group of soldiers. It would only be a matter of time until they were surrounded and finished off.

“Free us!” came a voice.

Thor turned to see Drake, bound by ropes with his brothers, just a few feet away.

“Free us!” Drake repeated, “and we will help you fight them! We fight for the same cause!”

As Thor raised a shield to block yet another great blow, this from a battle axe, he realized that having three more hands would help greatly. Without them, they clearly had no chance of defeating all of these soldiers. Thor didn't feel he could trust the three brothers anymore, but at this point he felt he had nothing to lose by trying. After all, the three brothers had motivation to fight, too.

Thor blocked yet another sword blow, then dropped to his knees and rolled over, through the crowd, several feet, until he reached the three brothers. He jumped up and slashed their ropes one at a time, protecting them from blows, as they each drew their swords and jumped into the mix.

Drake, Dross and Durs charged the thick crowd of Empire soldiers and attacked, slashing, thrusting, jabbing. They were each large and skilled, and they caught the Empire soldiers off guard, immediately killing several of them and helping the odds. Thor felt mixed feelings about freeing them, after what they had done – but given the circumstances, it seemed to be the wisest choice. Better that than death.

Now there were nine of them against the remaining eighty or so soldiers. The odds were still terrible, but at least better than they were.

The Legion brothers fell back on their training skills, on the drills ingrained in them during the Hundred, the countless times they had been trained to fight while encircled and outnumbered; they did as Kolk and Brom had trained them to do: they fell back and formed a tight circle, backs to each other, and fought off the encroaching Empire soldiers as one unit. They were emboldened by the arrival of the three extra fighters, and they each caught a second wind, and fought back more vigorously than before.

Conval extracted his flail and swung it wide and struck the enemy again and again, managing to take out three Empire soldiers before the chain was snatched away from him. His brother Conven

used a regular mace, aiming low and taking out soldiers' legs with the studded metal ball. O'Connor couldn't use his bow at such short range, but he managed to extract two throwing daggers from his waist and threw them into the crowd, killing two soldiers. Elden wielded his two-handed war hammer ferociously, raining great blows all around him. And Thor and Reece blocked and parried with their swords expertly. For a moment, Thor was feeling optimistic.

Then, out of the corner of Thor's eye, he detected something that disturbed him. He spotted one of the three brothers turning and charging across the circle of Legion; Thor turned and saw Durs. He was charging, not for an Empire soldier, but for him. For Thor. Right for his back.

It happened too quickly, and Thor, fighting off two Empire soldiers before him, could not turn in time.

Thor knew he was about to die. About to be stabbed in the back by a boy he had once thought of as a brother, by a boy whom he had, naively, trusted twice.

Suddenly Conval appeared in front of Thor, to protect him.

And as Durs lowered his sword for Thor's back, it found a target in Conval's chest instead.

Thor turned and screamed: "CONVAL!"

Conval stood there, frozen, eyes wide in a death stare, as he looked down at the sword plunged through his heart, the blood gushing down his torso.

Durs stood there, staring back, equally surprised.

Conval collapsed to his knees, blood gushing from his chest. Thor watched, in slow motion, as Conval, a close Legion brother, a boy he had loved like a brother, fell face-first to the ground, dead. All to save Thor's life.

Durs stood over him, looking down, appearing shocked by what he had just done.

Thor lunged forward to kill Durs – but Conval beat him to it. Conval's twin rushed forward and swung his sword wide, decapitating Durs, whose limp body fell to the earth.

Thor stood there and felt hollowed out, crushed by guilt. He had made one too many mistakes in judgment. If he had not freed Durs, Conval might be alive right now.

With their backs exposed to the Empire, it gave the Empire soldiers an opportunity. They all rushed in through the open circle, and Thor felt a warhammer smash him on the back of the shoulder blade; the strength of the blow sent him down to the ground, face-first.

Before he could rise, several soldiers pounced on him; he felt their feet on his back, then felt one soldier reach down, grab his hair, and lean over him with a dagger.

"Say goodbye, young one," the soldier said.

Thor closed his eyes, and as he did, he felt himself transported to another world.

Please God, Thor said to himself. Allow me to live this day. Just give me the strength to kill these soldiers. To die some other day, in some other place, with honor. To live long enough to avenge these deaths. To see Gwendolyn one last time.

As Thor lay there, watching the dagger come down, he felt time slow to a near stop. He felt a sudden rush of heat, up his legs and torso and arms, all the way through his palms, to the tips of his fingers, a tingling so intense he could not even close his fingers. The incredible rush of heat and energy was ready to burst right through him.

Thor spun around, feeling charged with a new strength, and aimed his palm at his attacker. A white orb of light emanated from his palm and sent his attacker flying across the battlefield, knocking back several other soldiers with him.

Thor stood, overflowing with energy, and aimed his palms throughout the battlefield. As he did, white orbs of light went everywhere, creating waves of destruction, so fast and intense, that within minutes, all of the Empire soldiers lay in a great heap, dead.

As the heat of the moment calmed, Thor took stock. He, Reece, O'Connor, Elden, and Conval were alive. Nearby were Krohn and Indra, also alive, Krohn breathing hard. All the Empire soldiers were dead. And at their feet lay Conval, dead.

Dross was dead, too, an Empire sword thrust through his heart.

The only one left alive was Drake. He lay there, moaning on the ground with a stomach wound from an Empire dagger. Thor marched over to him as Reece, O'Connor and Elden dragged him roughly to his feet, groaning in pain.

Drake, wincing in pain, sneered back insolently, semi-conscious.

"You should have killed us from the start," Drake said, blood dripping from his mouth, breaking into a long cough. "You were always too naïve. Too stupid."

Thor felt his cheeks redden, even more furious at himself for believing them. He was furious, most of all, that his naïveté resulted in Conval's death.

"I'm only going to ask you this once," Thor growled. "Answer me truthfully, and we will let you live. Lie to us, and you will follow the way of your two brothers. The choice is yours."

Drake coughed several times.

"Where is the Sword?" Thor demanded. "The truth this time."

Drake coughed again and again, then finally lifted his head. He looked up and met Thor's eyes, and his stare was filled with hate.

"Neversink," Drake finally answered.

Thor looked at the others, who all looked back at him, confused.

"Neversink?" Thor asked.

"It is a bottomless lake," Indra chimed in, stepping forward. "On the far side of the Great Desert. It is a Lake of the deepest depths."

Thor scowled back at Drake.

"Why?" he asked.

Drake coughed, getting weaker.

"Gareth's orders," Drake said. "He wanted it cast into a place from which it would never return."

"But why?" Thor pressed, confused. "Why destroy the Sword?"

Drake looked up and met his eyes.

"If he could not wield it," Drake said. "Then no one could."

Thor looked at him long and hard, and finally, he felt satisfied that he was telling the truth.

"Then our time is short," Thor said, preparing to go.

Drake shook his head.

"You will never get there in time," Drake said. "They are days ahead of you. The Sword is already lost forever. Give up and return to the Ring and spare yourselves."

Thor shook his head.

"We don't think as you," he replied. "We don't live to save our lives. We live for valor, for our code. And we will go wherever that takes us."

"You see where your valor has taken you now," Drake said. "Even with your valor, you're a fool, just like the rest of them. Valor is worthless."

Thor sneered back at him. He could hardly believe that he'd been raised in a house, had spent his whole childhood, with this creature.

Thor's knuckles whitened as he squeezed his sword hilt, wanting more than ever to kill this boy. Drake's eyes followed his hands.

"Do it," Drake said. "Kill me. Do it once and for all."

Thor stared back long and hard, itching to do it. But he had given Drake his word that if he told the truth, he would not kill him. And Thor was always good to his word.

"I will not," Thor said finally. "As much as you may deserve it. You will not die by my hand, for then I would be as low as you."

As Thor began to turn away, Conven rushed forward and shrieked:

"For my brother!"

Before any of them could react, Conven raised his sword and thrust it through Drake's heart. Conven's eyes were alight with madness, with grief, as he held Drake in a death embrace and watched Drake's limp body fall to the ground, dead.

Thor looked down and knew the death would mean little consolation for Conven's loss. For all of their loss. But, at least, it was something.

Thor looked out at the vast stretch of desert before them and knew the Sword was somewhere beyond its borders. It seemed like a planet away. Just as he thought their journey was complete, he realized it had not yet even begun.

Chapter Three

Erec sat amongst the scores of knights in the Duke's hall of arms inside his castle, secure behind the gates of Savaria, all of them bruised and battered from their encounter with those monsters. Beside him sat his friend Brandt, who held his head in his hands, as did many of the others. The mood in the chamber was glum.

Erec felt it, too. Every muscle in his body ached from the day's battle with that lord's men and with the monsters. It had been one of the toughest days of battle he could remember, and the Duke had lost too many men. As Erec reflected, he realized that if it had not been for Alistair, he and Brandt and the others would be dead right now.

Erec was overwhelmed with gratitude for her – and even more, with a renewed love. He was also intrigued by her, more so than he had ever been. He had always sensed that she was special, even powerful. But this day's events had proved it to him. He had a burning desire to know more about who she was, about the secret of her lineage. But he had vowed not to pry – and he always kept his word.

Erec couldn't wait until this meeting was over so he could see her again.

The Duke's knights had all been sitting here for hours, recovering, trying to figure out what had happened, arguing about what to do next. The Shield was down, and Erec was still trying to wrap his mind around the ramifications. It meant that Savaria was now prone to attack; even worse, messengers had streamed in with news of Andronicus' invasion, of what had happened at King's Court, at Silesia. Erec's heart sank. His heart tugged at him to be with his brothers in the Silver, to defend his home cities. But here he was, in Savaria, where fate had put him. He was needed here, too: the Duke's city and people were, after all, a strategic part of the MacGil empire, and they also needed defending.

But with the new reports flooding in of Andronicus sending one of his battalions here, to attack Savaria, Erec knew that his million-man army would soon spread to every corner of the Ring. When he was done, Andronicus would leave nothing. Erec had heard stories of Andronicus' conquests his entire life, and he knew that he was a cruel man without equal. By the simple law of numbers, the Duke's few hundred men would be helpless to stand up against them. Savaria was a doomed city.

"I say we surrender," said the Duke's advisor, a grizzled old warrior who sat slumped over a long, rectangular wooden table, lost in a mug of ale, slamming his metal gauntlet on the wood. All the other soldiers quieted and looked to him.

"What choice do we have?" he added. "It is but a few hundred of us against a million of them."

"Perhaps we can defend, at least hold the city," said another soldier.

"But for how long?" asked another.

"Long enough for MacGil to send reinforcements, if we can hold out long enough."

"MacGil is dead," another warrior answered. "No one is coming to help us."

"But his daughter lives," another countered. "As do his men. They would not abandon us here!"

"They can barely defend themselves!" another protested.

The men broke out into agitated mumbling, all arguing with each other, speaking over each other, going around and around in circles.

Erec sat there, watching it all, and feeling hollowed out. A messenger had arrived but hours ago and had delivered the dreadful news of Andronicus' invasion – and also, for Erec, the even worse news, just reaching him now, that MacGil had been assassinated. Erec had been so far away from King's Court for so long, it was the first time he had received the news – and when he had,

he felt as if a dagger had been plunged into his heart. He had loved MacGil as a father, and the loss left him feeling more empty than he could say.

The room grew quiet as the Duke cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him.

“We can defend our city against an attack,” the Duke said slowly. “With our skills and the strength of these walls, we can hold it against an army even five times our numbers – perhaps an army even ten times our numbers. And we have enough provisions to withhold a siege for weeks. Against any regular army, we would win.”

He sighed.

“But the Empire boasts no regular army,” he added. “We cannot defend against one million men. It would be futile.”

He paused.

“But so would surrender. We all know what Andronicus does to his captors. It appears to me that we will all die either way. The question is whether we die on our feet or die on our backs. I say, we die on our feet!”

The room erupted into a cheer of approval. Erec couldn’t agree more.

“Then we have no other course of action left,” the Duke continued. “We will defend Savaria. We will never surrender. We may die, but we will all die together.”

The room fell into a heavy silence as the others gravely nodded to each other. It seemed as if they were all searching for another answer.

“There is one other way,” Erec said finally, speaking up.

He could feel all eyes turn and stare at him.

The Duke nodded his way, for him to speak.

“We can attack,” Erec said.

“Attack?” the soldiers called out in surprise. “The few hundred of us, attacking one million men? Erec, I know you are fearless. But are you mad?”

Erec shook his head, deadly serious.

“What you fail to consider is that Andronicus’ men would never expect an attack. We would gain the element of surprise. As you say, sitting here, defending, we will die. If we attack, we can take out a lot more of them; more importantly, if we attack in the right way, and at the right place, we might do more than just hold them back – we might actually win.”

“Win?!” they all called out, looking at Erec, completely bewildered.

“What do you mean?” asked the Duke.

“Andronicus will expect us to be here, to sit back and defend our city,” Erec explained. “His men will never expect us to be holding a random chokepoint outside our city’s gates. Here in the city, we have an advantage of strong walls – but out there, in the field, we have the advantage of surprise. And surprise is always greater than strength. If we can hold a natural chokepoint, we can funnel them all to one spot, and from there we can attack. I speak of the Eastern Gulch.”

“The Eastern Gulch?” a soldier asked.

Erec nodded.

“It is a steep crevice between two cliffs, the only pass-through in the Kavonia Mountains, a good day’s ride from here. If Andronicus’ men come to us, the most direct way will be through the Gulch. Otherwise, they will have to scale the mountains. The road from the north is too narrow and too muddy this time of year – he would lose weeks. And from the south he would have to breach the Fjord River.”

The Duke look admiringly at Erec, rubbing his beard, thinking.

“You may be right. Andronicus may just lead his men through the gulch. For any other army it would be an act of supreme hubris. But for him, with his million men, he might just do it.”

Erec nodded.

“If we can get there, if we can beat them to it, we can surprise them, ambush them. With a position like that, a few can hold back thousands.”

All the other soldiers looked at Erec with something like hope and awe, as the room was blanketed with a thick silence.

“A bold plan, my friend,” the Duke said. “But then again, you are a bold warrior. You always have been” The Duke gestured to an attendant. “Bring me a map!”

A boy ran from the room and came back through another door holding a large scroll of parchment. He rolled it out on the table, and the soldiers gathered around, studying it.

Erec reached out and found Savaria on the map and traced a line with his finger, east, stopping at the Eastern Gulch. A narrow crevice, it sat surrounded by mountains as far as the eye could see.

“It is perfect,” a soldier said.

The others nodded, rubbing their beards.

“I have heard stories of a few dozen men holding off thousands at the gulch,” one soldier said.

“That is an old wives’ tale,” another soldier said, cynically. “Yes, we will have the element of surprise. But what else? We will not have the protection of our walls.”

“We will have the protection of nature’s walls,” another soldier countered. “Those mountains, hundreds of feet of solid cliff.”

“Nothing is safe,” Erec added. “As the Duke said, we die here, or we die out there. I say we die out there. Victory favors the bold.”

The Duke, after a long time rubbing his beard, finally nodded, leaned back and rolled up the map.

“Prepare your arms!” he called out. “We ride tonight!”

* * *

Erec, dressed again in full armor, his sword swinging at his waist, marched down the hall of the Duke’s castle, going the opposite way of all the men. He had one important task left before he departed for what could be his final battle.

He had to see Alistair.

Since they had returned from the day’s battle, Alistair had waited in the castle, down the hall in her own chamber, waiting for Erec to come to her. She was waiting for a happy reunion, and his heart sank as he realized he would have to share with her the bad news that he would be leaving again. He felt some sense of peace knowing that she would at least be here, safe within these castle walls, and he felt more determined than ever to keep her safe, to keep back the Empire. His heart ached at the idea of leaving her – he had wanted nothing but to spend time with her since their vow to marry. But it just did not seem meant to be.

As Erec turned the corner, his spurs jingling, his boots echoing in the emptying castle halls, he braced himself for the goodbye, which he knew would be painful. He finally reached an ancient, arched wooden door, and knocked gently with his gauntlet.

There came the sound of footsteps crossing the room, and a moment later, the door opened. Erec’s heart soared, as it did every time he saw Alistair. There she stood, in the doorway, with her long, flowing blonde hair and large crystal eyes, staring back at him like an apparition. She seemed more beautiful every time he saw her.

Erec stepped inside and embraced her, and she hugged him back. She held him tightly, for a long time, not wanting to let go. He did not either. He wished more than anything that he could just shut the door behind him and stay here with her, for as long as he could. But it was not meant to be.

The warmth and feel of her made everything right in the world, and he was reluctant to let go. Finally, he pulled back and looked into her eyes, which were glistening. She glanced down at his armor, his weapons, and her face fell as she realized he was not staying.

“Are you leaving again, my Lord?” she asked.

Erec lowered his head.

“It is not my wish, my lady,” he replied. “The Empire approaches. If I stay here, we will all die.”

“And if you leave?” she asked.

“I will likely die either way,” he admitted. “But this will at least give us all a chance. A tiny chance, but a chance.”

Alistair turned and walked to the window, looking out over the Duke’s courtyard in the setting sun, her face lit by the soft light. Erec could see the sadness etched across it, and he came to her and brushed the hair off her neck, caressing her.

“Do not be sad, my lady,” he said. “If I survive this, I will return to you. And then we shall be together, forever, free from all dangers and threats. Free to finally live our lives together.”

Sadly, she shook her head.

“I’m afraid,” she said.

“Of the approaching armies?” he asked.

“No,” she said turning to him. “Of you.”

Erec looked back, puzzled.

“I’m afraid that you will think of me differently now,” she said, “since you saw what happened on the battlefield.”

Erec shook his head.

“I do not think of you differently at all,” he said. “You saved my life, and for that I’m grateful.”

She shook her head.

“But you also saw a different side of me,” she said. “You saw that I’m not normal. I’m not like everybody else. I have a power within me which I do not understand. And now I fear you will think of me as some sort of monster. As a woman you no longer want for your wife.”

Erec’s heart broke at her words, and he stepped forward, took her hands earnestly in his, and looked into her eyes with all the seriousness he could muster.

“Alistair,” he said. “I love you with everything that I am. There has never been a woman that I have loved more. And there never will be. I love all that you are. I see you no differently as anyone else. Whatever powers you have, whoever it is that you are – even if I do not understand it, I accept all of it. I’m grateful for all of it. I vowed not to pry, and I shall keep that vow. I will never ask you. Whatever it is that you are, I accept you.”

She stared back at him for a long time, then slowly broke into a smile, and her eyes fluttered with tears of relief and joy. She turned and embraced him, hugging him tightly, with everything she had.

She whispered in his ear: “Come back to me.”

Chapter Four

Gareth stood at the cave's edge, watching the sun fall, and waited. He licked his dry lips and tried to focus, the effects of the opium finally wearing off. He was lightheaded, and hadn't drank or eaten in days. Gareth thought back to his daring escape from the castle, slinking out through the secret passageway behind the fireplace, right before Lord Kultin had tried to ambush him, and he smiled. Kultin had been smart in his coup – but Gareth had been smarter. Like everyone else, he had underestimated Gareth; he hadn't realized that Gareth's spies were everywhere, and that he'd known about his plot almost instantly.

Gareth had escaped just in time, right before Kultin had ambushed him and before Andronicus had invaded King's Court and razed it to the ground. Lord Kultin had done him a favor.

Gareth had taken the ancient, secret passageways out of the castle, twisting and turning beneath the ground, finally letting him out in the countryside, surfacing in a remote village miles from King's Court. He had surfaced near this cave and had collapsed upon reaching it, sleeping throughout the day, huddled up and shivering in the relentless winter air. He wished that he had brought more layers of clothing.

Awake, Gareth crouched and spied, in the distance, a small farming village; there were a handful of cottages, smoke rising from their chimneys, and throughout were Andronicus' soldiers marching through the village and the countryside. Gareth had waited patiently until they dispersed. His stomach ached with hunger, and he knew he needed to make it to one of those houses. He could smell food cooking from here.

Gareth sprinted from the cave, looking every which way, breathing hard, frantic with fear. He hadn't run in years, and he gasped from the effort; it made him realize how thin and sickly he had become. The wound in his head, where his mother had hit him with the bust, throbbed. If he survived all this, he vowed to kill her himself.

Gareth ran into the town, luckily escaping detection from the few Empire soldiers who had their backs turned to him. He sprinted to the first cottage he saw, a simple one-room dwelling like the others, a warm glow coming from inside. He saw a teenage girl, perhaps his age, walking through the open door with a stack of meat, smiling, accompanied by a younger girl, perhaps her sister, maybe ten – and decided this was the place.

Gareth burst through the door with them, following them in, slamming the door behind them and grabbing hold of the younger girl from behind, his arm around her throat. The girl screamed out, and the older girl dropped her platter of food, as Gareth pulled a knife from his waist and held it to the young girl's throat.

She screamed and cried.

“PAPA!”

Gareth turned and looked around the cozy cottage, filled with candlelight and the smell of cooking, and saw, besides the teenage girl, a mother and a father, standing over a table, looking back at him, wide-eyed with fear and anger.

“Stay back and I won't kill her!” Gareth yelled out, desperate, backing away from them, holding the young girl tight.

“Who are you?” the teenage girl asked. “My name is Sarka. My sister's name is Larka. We are a peaceful family. What do you want with my sister? Leave her alone!”

“I know who you are,” the father squinted down at him in disapproval. “You were the former King. MacGil's son.”

“I am *still* King,” Gareth screamed. “And you are my subjects. You will do as I say!”

The father scowled down at him.

“If you are King, where is your army?” he asked. “And if you are King, what business have you taking hostage a young, innocent girl with a royal dagger? Perhaps the same royal dagger you used to kill your own father?” The man sneered. “I have heard the rumors.”

“You have a fresh tongue,” Gareth said. “Keep talking, and I will kill your little girl.”

The father swallowed, his eyes widening with fear, and he fell silent.

“What do you want from us?” the mother cried out.

“Food,” Gareth said. “And shelter. Alert the soldiers to my presence, and I promise I will kill her. No tricks, you understand? You let me be, and she will live. I want to spend the night here. You, Sarka, bring me that platter of meat. And you, woman, stoke the fire and bring me a mantle to drape over my shoulders. Move slowly!” he warned.

Gareth watched as the father nodded to the mother. Sarka gathered the meat back onto her platter, while the mother approached with a thick mantle and draped it over his shoulders. Gareth, still trembling, backed up slowly towards the fireplace, the roaring fire warming his back as he sat down on the floor beside it, holding Larka securely, who was still crying. Sarka approached with the platter.

“Set it down on the floor beside me!” Gareth ordered. “Slowly!”

Scowling, Sarka did so, looking down at her sister in concern and slamming it down on the floor beside him.

Gareth was overwhelmed by the smell. He reached down and grabbed a hunk of meat with his free hand, holding the dagger to Larka’s throat with the other; he chewed and chewed, closing his eyes, relishing each bite. He chewed faster than he could swallow, food hanging from his mouth.

“Wine!” he called out.

The mother brought him a skin of wine, and Gareth squeezed it into his full mouth, chasing it down. He breathed deeply, chewing and drinking, starting to feel himself again.

“Now let her go!” the father said.

“No chance,” Gareth answered. “I will sleep the night here, like this, with her in my arms. She will be safe, as long as I am. Do you want to be a hero? Or do you want your girl to live?”

The family looked at each other, speechless, hesitant.

“Can I ask you one question?” Sarka asked him. “If you are such a good king, why would you treat your subjects this way?”

Gareth stared back, puzzled, then finally leaned back and broke out into laughter.

“Whoever said I was a good king?”

Chapter Five

Gwendolyn opened her eyes, feeling the world moving around her, and struggled to figure out where she was. She saw, passing by her, the huge, arched red stone gates of Silesia, saw thousands of Empire soldiers watching her in wonder. She saw Steffen, walking beside her, and she watched as the sky, bounced up and down. She realized she was being carried. That she was in somebody's arms.

She craned her neck and saw the shining, intense eyes of Argon. She was being carried, she realized, by Argon, Steffen by their side, the three of them walking openly through the gates of Silesia, past thousands of Empire soldiers, who parted ways for them and stood there, staring. They were surrounded by a white glow, and Gwendolyn could feel herself immersed in some sort of protective energy shield in Argon's arms. She realized he was casting some sort of spell to keep all the soldiers at bay.

Gwen felt comforted, protected in Argon's arms. Every muscle in her body ached, she was exhausted, and she didn't know if she could walk if she tried. Her eyes fluttered as they went, and she watched the world pass by her in snippets. She saw a piece of a crumbling wall; a collapsed parapet; a burnt-out dwelling; a pile of rubble; she saw them cross through the courtyard, reach the farthest gates, at the edge of the Canyon; she saw them pass through these, too, the soldiers stepping aside.

They reached the Canyon's edge, the platform covered in metal spikes, and as Argon stood there, it lowered, taking them back into the depths of lower Silesia.

As they entered the lower city, Gwendolyn saw dozens of faces, the concerned, kind faces of Silesian citizens, watching her pass as if she were a spectacle. They all stared back with looks of wonder and concern as she kept descending to the main square of the city.

As they reached it, hundreds of people crowded around them. She looked out and saw familiar faces – Kendrick, Srog, Godfrey, Brom, Kolk, Atme, dozens of Silver and Legion she recognized.... They gathered around her, distress in their faces in the early morning sun, as the mist swirled in from the Canyon and a cold breeze stung her. She closed her eyes, trying to make all this go away. She felt as if she were a thing on display, and felt crushed to the depths. She felt humiliated. And she felt she had let them all down.

They continued, past all the people, through the narrow alleyways of the lower city, through another arched entranceway, and finally into the small palace of lower Silesia. Gwen faded in and out of consciousness as they entered a magnificent red castle, going up a set of stairs, down a long corridor, and through another high arched doorway. Finally, a small door opened and they entered a room.

The room was dim. It appeared to be a large bedroom, with an ancient four-poster bed in its center, a roaring fire in an ancient marble fireplace not far from it. Several attendants stood about the room, and Gwendolyn felt Argon bring her to the bed, laying her down gently on it. As he did, scores of people gathered, looking down at her with concern.

Argon withdrew, took several steps back and disappeared amidst the crowd. She looked for him, blinking several times, but she could no longer find him. He was gone. She felt the absence of his protective energy, which had been enveloping her like a shield. She felt colder, less protected, without him around.

Gwen licked her chapped lips, and a moment later felt her head being propped up from behind, set under a pillow, and a jug of water being put to her lips. She drank and drank, and realized how thirsty she was. She looked up and saw a woman she recognized.

Illepra, the royal healer. Illepra looked down, her soft hazel eyes filled with concern, giving her water, running a warm cloth over her forehead, wiping the hair out of her face. She lay a palm

on her forehead, and Gwen felt a healing energy pass through her. She felt her eyes getting heavy, and soon she found them closing against her will.

* * *

Gwendolyn did not know how much time had passed when she opened her eyes again. She still felt exhausted, disoriented. In her dreams she had heard a voice, and now she heard it again.

"Gwendolyn," came the voice. She heard it echo in her mind, and wondered how many times he had called her name.

She looked up and recognized Kendrick, looking down at her. Standing beside him was her brother Godfrey, along with Srog, Brom, Kolk and several others. On her other side stood Steffen. She hated the expressions in their faces. They looked at her as if she were a thing to pity, as if she had returned from the dead.

"My sister," Kendrick said, smiling. She could hear the concern in his voice. "Tell us what happened."

Gwen shook her head, too tired to recount everything.

"Andronicus," she said, her voice hoarse, coming out more like a whisper. She cleared her throat. "I tried... to surrender myself... in return for the city... I trusted him. Stupid..."

She shook her head again and again, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"No, you are *noble*," Kendrick corrected, clasping her hand. "You are the most courageous of us all."

"You did what any great leader would have done," Godfrey said, stepping forward.

Gwen shook her head.

"He tricked us..." Gwendolyn said, "... and he attacked me. He had McCloud attack me."

Gwen couldn't help it: she began to cry as she spoke the words, unable to hold it back. She knew it was not leader-like to do so, but she could not help herself.

Kendrick clasped her hand tighter.

"They were going to kill me..." she said. "... but Steffen saved me..."

The men all looked to Steffen with a new respect, who stood loyally by her side, bowing his head.

"What I did was too little and too late," he replied humbly. "I was one man against many."

"Even so, you saved our sister, and for that we shall always be in your debt," Kendrick said. Steffen shook his head.

"I owe her a far greater debt," he responded.

Gwen teared up.

"Argon saved us both," she concluded.

Kendrick's face darkened.

"We will avenge you," he said.

"It is not myself I'm worried about," she said. "It is the city ... our people ... Silesia ... Andronicus ... he will attack..."

Godfrey patted her hand.

"Don't you worry about that now," he said, stepping forward. "Rest. Let us discuss these things. You are safe now, here."

Gwen felt her eyes closing on her. She didn't know if she was awake or dreaming.

"She needs to sleep," Illepra said, stepping forward, protective.

Gwendolyn dimly heard all of this as she felt herself growing heavier and heavier, drifting in and out of consciousness. In her mind flashed images of Thor, and then, of her father. She was having a hard time discerning what was real and what was a dream, and she heard only snippets of the conversation above her head.

“How serious are her wounds?” came a voice, maybe Kendrick’s.

She felt Illepra run her palm across her forehead. And then the last words she heard, before her eyes closed on her, were Illepra’s:

“The wounds to the body are light, my Lord. It is the wounds to her spirit that run deep.”

* * *

When Gwen woke again, it was to the sound of a crackling fire. She could not tell how much time had passed. She blinked several times as she looked around the dim room, and saw the crowd had dispersed. The only people who remained were Steffen, sitting in a chair by her bedside, Illepra, who stood over her, applying a salve to her wrist, and just one other person. He was a kind, old man who looked down at her with worry. She almost recognized him, but had a hard time placing it. She felt so tired, too tired, as if she hadn’t slept in years.

“My lady?” the old man said, leaning over. He held something large in both hands, and she looked down and realized it was a leather-bound book.

“It is Aberthol,” he said. “Your old teacher. Can you hear me?”

Gwen swallowed and slowly nodded, opening her eyes just a bit.

“I have been waiting hours to see you,” he said. “I saw you stirring.”

Gwen nodded slowly, remembering, grateful for his presence.

Aberthol leaned over and opened his large book, and she could feel the weight of it on her lap. She heard the crackling of its heavy pages as he flipped them back.

“It is one of the few books that I salvaged,” he said, “before the burning of the House of Scholars. It is the fourth annal of the MacGils. You have read it. Hidden inside are stories of conquest and triumphs and defeats, of course – yet there are also other stories. Stories of great leaders wounded. Of wounds to the body, and wounds of the spirit. All sorts of injuries imaginable, my lady. And this is what I came to tell you: even the best of men and women have suffered the most unimaginable treatment, injuries and torture. You are not alone. You are but a speck in the wheel of time. There are countless others who suffered far worse than you – and many who survived and who went on to become great leaders.

“Do not feel ashamed,” he said, grasping her wrist. “That is what I want to tell you. *Never* be ashamed. There should be no shame in you – only honor and courage for what you have done. You are as great a leader as the Ring has ever seen. And this does not diminish it in any way.”

Gwen, touched by his words, felt a tear fell roll down her cheek. His words were just what she needed to hear, and she felt so grateful for them. Logically, she knew and understood he was correct.

Yet emotionally, she was still having a hard time feeling it. A part of her could not help but feel as if somehow she had been damaged forever. She knew it was not true, but that was how she felt.

Aberthol smiled, as he held out a smaller book.

“Remember this one?” he asked, turning back its red leather-bound cover. “It was your favorite, all through childhood. The legends of our fathers. There’s a particular story in here I thought I would read to you, to help you idle away the time.”

Gwen was touched by the gesture, but she could take no more. Sadly, she shook her head.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice hoarse, another tear rolling down her cheek. “But I can’t hear it right now.”

His face fell in disappointment, then he nodded, understanding.

“Another time,” she said, feeling despondent. “I need to be alone. If you would, please, leave me. All of you,” she said, turning and looking at Steffen and Illepra.

They all rose to their feet and bowed their heads, then turned and hurried from the room.

Gwen felt guilty, but she couldn't stop it; she wanted to crumple into a ball and die. She listened to their steps cross the room, heard the door close behind them, and looked up to make sure the room was empty.

But she was surprised to see that it was not: there stood a lone figure, standing inside the doorway, erect, with her posture perfect, as always. She walked slowly and stately towards Gwen, stopping a few feet from her bedside, staring down at her, expressionless.

Her mother.

Gwen was surprised to see her standing there, the former Queen, as stately and proud as ever, looking down at her with an expression as cool as ever. There was no compassion behind her eyes, as there were behind the eyes of other visitors.

"Why are you here?" Gwen asked.

"I've come to see you."

"But I don't want to see you," Gwen said. "I don't want to see anyone."

"I don't care what you want," her mother said, cool and confident. "I am your mother, and I have a right to see you when I wish."

Gwen felt her old anger towards her mother flare up; she was the last person she wanted to see at this moment. But she knew her mother and knew that she would not leave until she had spoken her mind.

"So speak then," Gwendolyn said. "Speak and leave and be done with me."

Her mother sighed.

"You don't know this," her mother said. "But when I was young, your age, I was attacked in the same way as you."

Gwen stared back, shocked; she'd had no idea.

"Your father knew of it," her mother continued. "And he did not care. He married me just the same. At the time, it felt as if my world had ended. But it had not."

Gwen closed her eyes, feeling another tear roll down her cheek, trying to block the topic out. She did not want to hear her mother's story. It was too little too late for her mother to give her any real compassion. Did she just expect she could waltz in here, after so many years of harsh treatment, and offer a sympathetic story and expect all to be mended in return?

"Are you done now?" Gwendolyn asked.

Her mother stepped forward, "No, I'm *not* done," she said firmly. "You are Queen now – it is time for you to act like one," her mother said, her voice as hard as steel. Gwen heard a strength in it she had never heard before. "You pity yourself. But women every day, everywhere, suffer far worse fates than you. What has happened to you is nothing in the scheme of life. Do you understand me? It is *nothing*."

Her mother sighed.

"If you want to survive and be at home in this world, you have to be strong. Stronger than the men. Men will get you, one way or another. It is not about what happens to you – it is about how you *perceive* it. How you *react* to it. That is what you have control over. You can crumple up and die. Or you can be strong. That is what separates girls from women."

Gwen knew her mother was trying to help, but she resented the lack of compassion in her approach. And she hated being lectured to.

"I hate you," Gwendolyn said to her. "I always have."

"I know you do," her mother said. "And I hate you, too. But that does not mean we cannot understand each other. I don't want your love – what I want is for you to be strong. This world isn't ruled by people who are weak and scared – it is ruled by those who shake their heads at adversity as if it were nothing. You can collapse and die if you like. There is plenty of time for that. But that is boring. Be strong and live. *Truly* live. Be an example for others. Because one day, I assure you, you will die anyway. And while you're alive, you might as well live."

“Leave me be!” Gwendolyn screamed, unable to hear another word.

Her mother stared down at her coldly, then finally, after an interminable silence, turned and strutted from the room, like a peacock, and slammed the door behind her.

In the empty silence, Gwen began to cry, and she cried and cried. More than ever, she wished all of this would just go away.

Chapter Six

Kendrick stood on the wide landing at the Canyon's edge, looking out over the swirling mist. As he looked out, his heart was breaking inside. It tore him up to see his sister like that, and he felt gutted, as if he himself had been the one attacked. He could see in the faces of all the Silesians that they viewed Gwen as more than just a leader – they all viewed her as family. They were despondent, too. It was as if Andronicus had hurt them all.

Kendrick felt as if he were to blame. He should have known his younger sister would do something like that, knowing how brave, how proud she was. He should have anticipated that she would try to surrender herself before any of them had a chance to stop her, and he should have found a way to prevent her from doing so. He knew her nature, knew how trusting she was, knew her good heart – and he also, as a warrior, knew, better than she, the brutality of certain leaders. He was older and wiser than she, and he felt he let her down.

Kendrick also felt to blame because all of this, this dire situation, was too much to put on the head of a single person, a newly crowned ruler, a 16-year-old girl. She shouldn't have had to bear the brunt of it alone. Such a weighty decision would have been hard even on his own head – even on his father's head. Gwendolyn did the best she could do in the circumstances, and perhaps better than any of them would have. Kendrick had had no ideas for how to deal with Andronicus himself. None of them had.

Kendrick thought of Andronicus, and his face reddened with anger. He was a leader with no morals, no principles, no humanity. It was clear to Kendrick that if they all surrendered now, they would all meet the same fate: Andronicus would kill or enslave each and every one of them.

Something had shifted in the air. Kendrick could see it in the eyes of all the men, and he could feel it in himself. Silesians were now no longer intent on just surviving, just defending. Now they wanted vengeance.

“SILESIAANS!” bellowed a voice.

The crowd quieted and looked up. In the upper city, at the edge of the Canyon, looking down at them, stood Andronicus, surrounded by his henchmen.

“I give you a choice!” he thundered. “Turn over Gwendolyn, and I will let you live! If not, I will rain down fire on you, starting at sunset, a fire so intense that not one of you will live.”

He paused, smiling.

“It is a very generous offer. Do not ponder it long.”

With that, Andronicus turned and stormed off.

The Silesians all gradually turned and looked back at each other.

Srog stepped forward.

“Fellow Silesians!” boomed Srog, to a huge, growing crowd of warriors, looking more serious than Kendrick had ever seen him. “Andronicus has attacked our very finest, our most cherished leader. The daughter of our beloved king MacGil, and a great Queen in her own right. He has attacked each and every one of us. He has tried to put a stain on our honor – but he has only stained his own!”

“AYE!” screamed the crowd, the men stirring, each grasping the hilts of their swords, fire in their eyes.

“Kendrick,” Srog said, turning to him. “What do you propose?”

Kendrick slowly looked into the eyes of all the men before them.

“WE ATTACK!” Kendrick screamed, fire in his veins.

The crowd screamed back in approval, a thicker and thicker crowd, fearlessness in their eyes. Each and every one of these people, he saw, was ready to fight to the death.

“WE DIE LIKE MEN, AND NOT LIKE DOGS!” Kendrick screamed again.

“AYE!” screamed back the crowd.

“WE WILL FIGHT FOR GWENDOLYN! FOR ALL OF OUR MOTHERS AND SISTERS AND WIVES!”

“AYE!”

“FOR GWENDOLYN!” Kendrick screamed.

“FOR GWENDOLYN!” the crowd screamed back.

The crowd roared in ecstasy, growing thicker with each passing moment.

With one final shout, they followed Kendrick and Srog as they led the way up the narrow landing, higher and higher, for Upper Silesia. The time had come to show Andronicus what the Silver was made of.

Chapter Seven

Thor stood with Reece, O'Connor, Elden, Conven, Indra and Krohn at the mouth of the river, all of them looking down at Conval's corpse. The mood in the air was somber. Thor felt it himself, the weight of it on his chest, pulling him down, as he stared down at his Legion brother. Conval. Dead. It did not seem possible. There had been six of them together on this journey for as long as Thor could remember. He had never imagined there would be five. It made him feel his mortality.

Thor thought of all the times that Conval had been there for him, remembered how he had always been there, every step of his journey, from the first day Thor had joined the Legion. He was like a brother to him. Conval had always stuck up for Thor, had always had a good word for him; unlike some of the others, he had accepted Thor as a friend from the very beginning. To see him lying there dead – and especially as a result of Thor's mistakes – made Thor feel sick to his stomach. If he had never trusted those three brothers, perhaps Conval would be standing alive today.

Thor could not think of Conval without Conven, the two identical twins, inseparable, always completing each other's thoughts. He could not imagine the pain Conven was feeling. Conven looked as if he was not in his right mind anymore; the happy, carefree Conven he once knew seemed to have departed in a single stroke.

They all still stood at the edge of the battlefield where it had taken place, the Empire corpses piled up around them. They stood there, rooted, looking down at Conval, none of them willing to move on until they had given him a proper burial. They had found some choice furs on some Empire officers, had stripped them, and had wrapped Conval's corpse in them. They had placed him on a small boat, the one they had used to get here, and his body lay in it, long, stiff, facing the sky. A warrior's burial. Conval already seemed so frozen, his body stiff and blue, as if he had never lived.

They had been standing there for Thor did not know how long, each of them lost in their own sorrows, none wanting to see his body go. Indra moved her palm over Conval's head in small circles, chanting something in a language that Thor did not understand, her eyes closed. He could tell how much she cared for him as she conducted the solemn funeral service, and Thor felt a sense of peace at the sound. None of the boys knew what to say, and they all stood there glumly, silent, letting Indra lead the service.

Finally, Indra finished and took a step back. Conven stepped forward, tears running down his cheeks, and knelt down beside his brother. He reached out and lay a hand on his, bowing his head.

Conven reached out and gave the boat a shove. It bobbed out into the still waters of the river, and then, as if the tides understood, the current suddenly picked up, pulling the boat away, slowly, gently. It drifted farther and farther away from the group, Krohn whining as it went. Out of nowhere there arose a mist, and it consumed the boat. It disappeared.

Thor felt as if his body, too, had been sucked into the underworld.

Slowly, the boys turned to each other and looked out, past the battlefield, and to the terrains beyond it. Behind them was the underworld from which they came; to one side was a vast plain of grass; and to the other side was an empty wasteland, a hard-baked desert. They stood at a crossroads.

Thor turned to Indra.

"To reach Neversink, we must cross that desert?" Thor asked.

She nodded.

"Is there no other way?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"There are other ways, but less direct. You would lose weeks. If you hope to beat the thieves, it is your only way."

The others stared long and hard at it, the suns baking off it, rippling in waves.

"It looks unforgiving," Reece said, coming up beside Thor.

“I know of no one who has ever crossed it and lived,” Indra said. “It is vast, filled with hostile creatures.”

“We don’t have enough provisions,” O’Connor said. “We wouldn’t make it.”

“Yet it is the way to the Sword,” Thor said.

“Assuming the Sword still exists,” Elden said.

“If the thieves have reached Neversink,” Indra said, “then your precious Sword is lost forever. You would risk your lives for a dream. The best thing you can do now is turn back to the Ring.”

“We will not turn back,” Thor said, determined.

“Especially not now,” Conven added, stepping forward, his eyes alight with fire and grief.

“We will find that Sword or die trying,” Reece said.

Indra shook her head and sighed.

“I didn’t expect any other answer from you boys,” she said. “Foolhardy to the last.”

* * *

Thor marched side by side with the others through the wasteland, squinting into the harsh sun, gasping in the relentless heat. He’d thought he would be thrilled to be rid of the underworld, of its ever-present gloom, of being unable to see the suns. But he had gone from one extreme to the other. Here, in this desert, there was nothing but sun: yellow sun and yellow sky, all beaming down on him and nowhere to go. His head hurt, and he was feeling dizzy. He was dragging his feet, and felt as if he had been marching a lifetime; as he looked over, he saw the others were, too.

They had been trekking half a day, and he did not know how they could possibly continue to keep this up. He looked over at Indra, holding her hood over her head, and wondered if she had been right. Maybe they had been foolhardy to attempt this. But he had vowed to find the Sword – and what choice did they have?

As they went, their feet stirred up clouds of dust, swirling everywhere, making it even harder to breathe. On the horizon there sat nothing but more sunbaked dirt, everything flat as far as the eye could see. There wasn’t the slightest glimmer of structure, or road, or mountain – or anything. Nothing but desert. Thor felt as if they had come to the very end of the world.

As they went, Thor took solace in one thing: at least now, for the first time, he trusted where they were going. No longer was he at the mercy of listening to those three brothers and their stupid map; now they listened to Indra, and he trusted her more than he had ever trusted them. He felt certain they were being led in the right direction – he just didn’t feel certain they would survive the journey.

Thor began to hear a subtle whooshing noise, and as he looked down, he saw the sand all around him swirling in circles. The others saw it, too, and Thor was confused as he watched the sand slowly gather, the circles growing more intense at his feet, then lift up into the sky. There soon arose a dust cloud, lifting off the desert floor, rising higher and higher.

Thor felt his entire body suddenly getting drier. He felt as if every drop of water was being pulled from his body, and he ached for water; he had never been so thirsty in his life.

He reached out in a panic, fumbling for his water skin, and raised it and squirted it towards his mouth. But as he did, the water turned and went upwards, towards the sky, never reaching his lips.

“What’s going on?” Thor yelled to Indra, gasping.

She watched the skies with fear, retracting her hood.

“A reverse rain!” she yelled.

“What’s that?” Elden yelled, gasping as he grabbed his throat.

“It’s raining upwards!” she yelled. “All the moisture is being sucked up to the sky!”

Thor watched as the rest of his water shot upwards from the skin, and then watched the skin itself crackle and turn dry, dropping down to the ground as a dry crisp.

Thor dropped to his knees, grabbing his throat, barely able to breathe. All around him, the others did the same.

“Water!” Elden pleaded beside him.

There came a great rumble, like the sound of a thousand thunders, and Thor looked up to watch the sky blacken. A single storm cloud appeared, racing towards them at incredible speed.

“GET DOWN!” Indra screamed. “The sky is reversing!”

She had barely finished speaking when the sky opened up and a wall of water came gushing down, knocking down Thor and the others with the force of a tidal wave.

Thor went rolling over and over in the wave of water, tumbling he did not know how long. Finally, he surfaced back on the desert floor, the wave rolling right past them. This was followed by sheets of pouring rain, and Thor threw his head back and drank and drank, as did the others, until finally he felt hydrated again.

Slowly, each of them regained their feet, breathing hard, looking beaten up. They turned to each other. They had survived. As their shock and fear subsided, slowly they burst out laughing.

“We’re alive!” O’Connor yelled out.

“Is that the worst this desert can give us?” Reece asked, joyful to be alive.

Indra shook her head, somber.

“You celebrate prematurely,” she said, looking very worried. “After the rains, the desert animals come out to drink.”

An awful noise arose, and Thor looked down and watched in horror as an army of small creatures arose from the sand and scurried their way towards them. Thor checked back over his shoulder and saw the lake of water the rains had left, and he realized that they were right in the path of the thirsty creatures.

Dozens of creatures which Thor had never laid eyes upon before raced his way. They were huge, yellow animals, resembling buffalo, yet twice as large, with four arms and four horns, running on two legs toward them. They charged in a funny way, every once a while pouncing down on all fours, then bouncing up again. They roared as they came for them, their vibrations shaking the ground.

Thor drew his sword, as did the others, and prepared to defend. As the first of the animals neared, Thor rolled to the side, out of the way, not striking it, hoping that it would just run right past them and go for the water.

The creature lowered its head to gouge Thor, and just missed as Thor rolled. To Thor’s dread, it was not content – it circled back, in a rage, and charged right for Thor. It seemed it wanted him dead more than it wanted water.

As it charged again, lowering its horns, Thor leapt high into the air and swung his sword, chopping off one of its horns as it rushed by. The animal shrieked, jumping up on two legs, and spun around, clipping Thor and knocking him to the ground.

The creature lifted its feet and tried to stomp Thor, but Thor rolled out of the way as its feet made an impression in the sand and stirred up a cloud of dust. The creature raised its feet again, and this time Thor raised his sword and plunged it into the creature’s chest.

The beast shrieked again, the sword plunging to the hilt, and Thor rolled out from under it right before it collapsed down to the ground, dead. He was lucky he did: the weight of it would have crushed him into the earth.

As Thor gained his feet another beast charged for him, and he leapt out of the way, but not before its horn grazed his arm, slicing it, making him scream out in pain and drop his sword. Swordless, Thor extracted his sling, placed a stone and hurled it at the beast.

The beast staggered and screamed as the stone impaled its eye – but still, it charged.

Thor ran to the left and to the right, trying to zigzag out of the way – but the creature was too fast. There was nowhere left to run, and he knew that in moments he would be gouged. As

he ran he glanced over at his Legion brothers and saw they were not faring much better, each on the run from a beast.

The beast neared, just inches away, its awful snorting and smell in Thor's ears, and it lowered its horns. Thor braced himself for the impact.

Suddenly the beast shrieked, and Thor turned to see it being lifted high into the air. Thor looked up, puzzled, not understanding what was happening – when he saw behind it a huge lime-green monster, the size of a dinosaur, a hundred feet tall, with rows of razor-sharp teeth. It held the beast in its jaw as if it were nothing, and leaned back scooped it up in its mouth. It held it there, squirming, then chewed it and gobbled it down in three huge bites, swallowing and licking its lips.

All around Thor the yellow creatures turned and ran from the beast. The beast chased after them, sliding and whipping its huge tail as it went; the tail caught Thor from behind, and sent him and the others landing hard on the ground. But the beast continued charging past them, more interested in the yellow creatures than in them.

Thor turned and looked at the others, who all sat there, dumbfounded, and looked back at him.

Indra stood there, shaking her head.

“Don't worry,” she said, “it gets much worse.”

Chapter Eight

Kendrick walked slowly through the burnt-out courtyard of Upper Silesia, at his side Srog, Brom, Kolk, Atme, Godfrey and a dozen Silver. They all marched slowly, deliberately, hands clasped behind their heads in a show of surrender.

The small group worked its way past the thousands of watching Empire soldiers, towards the waiting figure of Andronicus at the far city gate. Kendrick felt all eyes on them as they went, the tension thick in the air. The courtyard, despite being occupied by thousands of troops, was quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

An hour before, Kendrick had yelled up his surrender to Andronicus, and this group had ascended together, making a show of not carrying weapons as they had marched between the parting crowd of Empire soldiers, on their way to formally kneel before Andronicus. Kendrick's heart was pounding as they went, his throat dry as he saw how many thousands of hostile enemy surrounded them.

Kendrick and the others had rehearsed a scheme, and as they approached Andronicus, and Kendrick saw firsthand how huge and savage he looked, Kendrick prayed the scheme worked. If it did not, their lives were over.

They marched, spurs jingling, until finally one of Andronicus' generals stepped forward, an imposing creature with a deep scowl, and stuck out a rough palm, jabbing Kendrick in the chest. They were stopped about twenty feet away from Andronicus, presumably out of caution. Their soldiers were wiser than Kendrick had predicted; he had hoped to march all the way to Andronicus, but clearly that was something they would not allow. Kendrick's heart beat faster, as he hoped the distance did not put a wrinkle in their plan.

As they all stood there, silent, facing off with each other, Kendrick cleared his throat.

"We have come to surrender before the Great Andronicus," Kendrick announced, his voice booming, trying to use his most convincing tone as he stood with the others, unmoving, looking up into Andronicus' eyes.

Andronicus reached up and fingered the shrunken heads on his necklace, looking down at them with something like a snarl, or perhaps a smile.

"We accept your terms," Kendrick continued. "We admit defeat."

Andronicus leaned forward, just slightly, seated on a huge stone bench, and looked down at them with something like a smile.

"I know that you will," he said, his voice booming back across the courtyard. "Where's the girl?"

Kendrick was prepared for that.

"We have come as a contingent of our most senior and decorated officers," Kendrick responded. "We came first, to profess our surrender to you. When we are finished, the others will follow, with your permission."

Kendrick thought that adding "with your permission" was a nice touch, would help it seem even more plausible. He'd learned a great lesson long ago, from one of his military advisors: when dealing with a narcissistic commander, always appeal to his ego. There was no limit to the mistakes a commander might make when you flattered them, when you played up their greatness.

Andronicus leaned back just a bit, barely responding.

"Of course they will," Andronicus said. "Otherwise the group of you would be very foolish to appear here."

Andronicus sat there, staring down at them, as if trying to decide. He seemed as if he sensed something awry. Kendrick's heart pounded.

Finally, after a long wait, Andronicus seemed to decide.

“Step forward and kneel,” he said. “All of you.”

The others all looked to Kendrick, and Kendrick nodded.

They all took a step forward and knelt down, before Andronicus.

“Repeat after me,” the commander said. “We, representatives of Silesia....”

“We, representatives of Silesia....”

“Do hereby surrender to the Great Andronicus....”

“Do hereby surrender to the Great Andronicus....”

“and vow allegiance to him for the rest of our days and more....”

“and vow allegiance to him for the rest of our days and more....”

“And to serve as slaves to him for as long as our days endure.”

The final words were hard for Kendrick to get out and he swallowed hard, until he finally repeated them, word for word:

“And to serve as slaves to him for as long as our days endure.”

It made him nauseous to do so, and his heart was thumping in his ears. Finally, the pain of it was over.

A tense silence followed, and Andronicus finally smiled.

“You MacGils are weaker than I thought,” he snarled. “I shall take great pleasure in enslaving you, and in making you learn the ways of the Empire. Now go and fetch the girl, before I change my mind and kill all of you on the spot.”

As Kendrick knelt there, he saw his entire life flash before his eyes. He knew that this was one of those defining moments in his life. If all went as he hoped, he would live to tell the tale of this day to his grandchildren; if not, he would, in moments, be lying here a corpse. He knew the chances were stacked against him, but it was a chance he had to take. On behalf of himself; on behalf of the MacGils; and on behalf of Gwendolyn. It was now or never.

In one quick motion, Kendrick reached behind his back, grabbed a short sword hidden beneath his shirt, stood, and shouted as he hurled it with all his might.

“SILESIANS, ATTACK!”

Kendrick’s sword hurled end over end, heading right for Andronicus’ chest. It was a mighty throw, with true aim, a throw bold enough to kill any other warrior.

But Andronicus was not any other warrior. Kendrick was just a few yards too far, and Andronicus was just a touch too quick; Andronicus managed to duck out of the way with a moment to spare. He still screamed out in pain as the blade grazed his arm, drawing blood. It then continued through the air and killed the general standing beside him, lodging in his stomach instead.

On Kendrick’s shout, chaos erupted. All around him the others reached back and drew their hidden swords and decapitated the soldiers standing amidst them. Brom pulled a dagger from his belt, stepped to the side, and slashed it backwards through the throat of a soldier standing close by. Kolk removed a short sling from his waist, placed a rock, and hurled it, hitting a distant soldier, holding a bow, in the head, right before he could fire. Godfrey threw a dagger; his aim was not as true as the others, and the dagger missed its mark, impaling instead the leg of a young soldier.

All around them, screams erupted of the wounded Empire soldiers, none of them expecting the surprise attack.

On cue, at the same moment, on all sides of the courtyard Silesian soldiers suddenly emerged from the ground, from the walls. They came up with a great battle cry, aiming arrows, darkening the air with them. Thousands of arrows crossed the courtyard, felling Empire soldiers in every direction. They were attacked from so many sides, the soldiers were at a loss as to which way to turn; many of them, in their panic, ended up attacking each other.

Kendrick was thrilled to see his plan was working perfectly. Srog had informed him of the hidden tunnels connecting lower Silesia to the upper city, built in the case of a siege, for a last-

resort element of surprise. All the soldiers had waited patiently, all of them in place, waiting for Kendrick's cue.

Thousands of them now emerged, firing with such speed and aim that it gave the Empire soldiers no time to react. Kendrick charged forward and entered the fray, snatching a sword from a dead Empire soldier and attacking the soldiers nearest him, joined by his friend Atme and the others. The Empire soldiers, panicked in the chaos, turned and ran in every direction, not even sure which way to go.

The Silesians were gaining the advantage. Kendrick felled a dozen men before he even had to raise a shield in defense. Atme fought back to back with him, as he always had, doing equal damage. With every stroke he thought of Gwendolyn, thought of revenge.

The thousands of Empire soldiers were so flummoxed that they all ran back, heading for the set of gates to the outer courtyard. The mob rushed Andronicus and his men, stampeding them, who tried to stand firm but were forced back by the sheer numbers. Like cattle, they were all herded through the far gate, all desperately trying to get away from the arrows, which continued to hail down from all directions. As the Silesian soldiers ran out of arrows, they all drew their swords and charged, at their brothers' sides.

The number of Empire soldiers was vast, yet they were not well-trained warriors – most of them were just bodies, enslaved peoples in the service of Andronicus. The Silesians, on the other hand, were few in number, yet each and every one of them was an elite warrior, a hardened, well-trained soldier, each worth the weight of ten Empire men. They also had the element of surprise – and most of all, they had fire in the veins. Their backs against the wall. An urge to live. An urge to protect their loved ones. Fury for Gwendolyn. After all, this was *their* city. And they knew that if they did not win, it would be there their deaths.

Scores of Silesians sounded horns, the noise terrifying, sounded like a limitless army, and more and more of them emerged from the tunnels. They all charged forward as if their lives depended on it, thousands of them meeting the thousands of Empire soldiers.

The fighting was thick and fierce, blood covering the courtyard as sword met sword and dagger met dagger, as men grappled and looked into each other's eyes, struggling hand to hand and killing each other face to face. Quickly, the tide turned in the direction of the Silesians.

Another horn sounded, and out from the lower gates came charging the Legion, hundreds strong, screaming a fierce battle cry of their own. They raised slings and arrows and spears and swords, and charged into the fray, killing Empire soldiers left and right and helping to turn the tide. The Legion were hardened warriors already, even at a young age, and as they ran, they all cried out for Gwendolyn and for Thor.

The Legion did as much damage as the others as they all joined forces seamlessly, pushing the Empire farther and farther back towards the outer gate. Soon the tide of battle turned in their favor, as Empire corpses fell in every direction, and the ones who remained grew panic-stricken and ran. A million Empire soldiers awaited beyond the gates – but there was a bottleneck of soldiers fleeing, and they could not get in.

Andronicus rose in a rage, jumping into the mix, fighting back the fray of soldiers charging him, attacking his own people, grabbing soldiers with his bare hands and smashing their heads together, twisting their necks, killing them on the spot.

“WE DO NOT RETREAT!” he screamed.

He took swords from soldiers' hands and stabbed them in the hearts with their own weapons. He was a one-man wave of destruction, ironically, helping the Silesians.

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