

ONE

Simon's sixth name day was the greatest day of his life.

Prince Simon Morgenwraithe fidgeted as he waited in the hall outside of the throne room. The new robe that had been made for the day's ceremony made his skin itch.

It was customary in the Kingdom of Morgenwraithe that the heir to the throne was announced before the people on his seventh name day. But King Bailin took particular joy in creating his *own* traditions. And in his mind, his son was so gifted beyond his years that there was no need to wait.

"Be still, young prince!" his mother's handmaid whispered into Simon's ear. "You will soon wave from the balcony to the people who will bend their knees before you. If you spend the entire time *scratching*, that is all they will remember."

"If I had known the robe was going to itch so badly, I would have washed it myself," Simon said.

"There was no time," the handmaid said. "The King gave us little warning that he planned to make your announcement *today*. It *is so exciting!*"

The handmaid squeezed Simon's shoulders.

"We are so proud of you!"

Simon smiled, but his happiness was incomplete. He wished that these words came from his mother. But it had been so long since his mother had shown him any affection that he could hardly remember it.

Simon looked around the room.

"Where is Lucien? Will he not be coming to watch?"

Three-year-old Lucien was Simon's only sibling. Yet, Simon hardly saw

Lucien at all.

Lucien cried almost constantly, and spent most of his days attended by nursemaids. Simon had never seen the King hold the baby. The King and Queen spent virtually no time with their youngest son.

Simon had heard the stories, whispered among the castle servants.

The Queen was feeding the infant Lucien one day, when the King's beautiful young seer walked past. The girl smiled shyly at the Queen. The Queen flew into a rage.

The story whispered among the nursemaids was that the Queen had thrown baby Lucien across the floor. She never nursed the baby again.

Simon watched his mother as she crossed the room. He studied her eyes, as he always did, hoping to see something other than madness and hate. But that was all that he saw.

He watched her slip away from the frantic servants. She walked to a far wall and stood next to a dark and mysterious lady. They exchanged whispers and the Queen walked into the throne room.

Simon stared at the dark lady. She did not look at him. The woman was tall and thin. Her shiny black hair flowed into a lacy black dress that trailed the floor. Simon had never seen her dressed any other way. She had very long fingers, with long nails. And there was *something* about the woman that Simon did not like. She had never spoken directly to him. She smiled at him in passing, which always made his skin crawl.

Simon had seen his mother with the dark lady several times of late. This disturbed him greatly.

The dark lady's name was Magdalena. Simon did not believe that she deserved such a beautiful name. He thought it more fitting that she be called "spider" or "witch".

Simon heard his father before he saw him. King Bailin had the perfect voice for a King. From his balcony, he could speak to thousands without even shouting.

Simon's heart leaped when he saw his father.

When he saw his father's *brother*, his heart sank.

Simon had been determined to gain his father's love and affection for as long as he could remember. It fueled his every desire: his desire to walk, to talk, to master language, to master reading and writing, and to learn the history of the Kingdom. His earliest memories were of his desperate desire to gain his father's attention.

And his efforts had worked.

But the King's brother, Lord Sterling, also coveted the King's attention. Sterling always had a cup of wine or ale in his hand, and he was forever putting a cup into the hand of his brother.

And so, on Simon's sixth name day, Bailin and Sterling were reeling from the last night's drink.

Simon rubbed his sleeves briskly one more time. He stood straight and tall.

King Bailin walked toward the balcony. He waved and addressed the people. He turned and held out his hand for the Queen to join him—

And then *hell itself* descended upon Morgenwraithe Castle.

A dagger flashed—a young girl's throat exploded in an eruption of blood. People ran in every direction, screaming. The servants that had surrounded Simon were gone. He tried to see what was happening. He heard his father bellow in agony. His father came toward him—

But then the King's eyes grew wide and blood gushed from his chest.

Simon looked into the far corner where the dark lady had stood. She was still there.

And staring directly at him.

The dark lady held her fingers in the air and pointed at him. Her hair swirled around her head, crackling with light, without the aid of any wind. Her eyes flashed with the same madness as the Queen's. Her lips moved, but Simon could not make out any words.

The itching became intolerable. Simon tore off his robe. He opened his mouth to scream, but the sound that escaped was like nothing he had ever heard before.

The rush of screaming people halted and the screams died down. The crowd of people in front of Simon backed toward the walls, leaving Simon the view of a lone woman on her knees in the middle of the room.

His mother.

She was covered in blood from her hair to her feet. She clenched a dagger in her right hand. Her eyes were filled with ultimate madness. She pointed at him.

“Behold! Your new King!” she screamed—
Before she plunged the dagger into her heart.

Simon had no time to react. The screaming began again, and men ran at him. The King’s Guards charged him with hate-filled eyes and raised swords. Others reached to pull arrows from their quivers.

Simon turned to the side to seek his escape. He lifted his arm—

Only, it was *not* an arm.

It was a...a...

Simon saw the glint of steel as a sword swung down at his side.

He almost collapsed. His right side exploded in pain.

Simon turned and ran toward the balcony. He looked down.

His feet, were no longer *his* feet. He hovered above the floor.

This is not possible, he thought. *This is all a dream. A nightmare!*

Arrows flew past him.

Simon reached the balcony and threw himself off of it. The death from a fall had no face—and no name. The same brave men who had sworn on their lives to protect him were now chasing him with hatred in their eyes, and foul words on their lips.

Simon squeezed his eyes shut as he fell. His instinct to survive overtook him and his arms beat against the air.

He slowed. And then, he began to rise.

Simon opened his eyes.

He *had* no arms.

He had *wings*.

A flurry of arrows bounced off of his scaly body. The wing cut by the sword

had grown numb and stopped bleeding. Members of the King's Guard mounted horses and screamed with hate-filled voices as they chased after him.

Simon turned toward the west, and the setting sun.
He flew, and he cried.

TWO

TWELVE YEARS LATER

The dragon woke to the sound of barking hounds. He had flown many miles from the cave that was his current home. He dared not do what he was about to do anywhere near his secret lair.

He hid behind trees at the forest's edge. His scales faded to match the mottled gray of the tree bark.

He watched silently as the hunting party passed by and then continued to the north. The dragon moved carefully, keeping the dogs in sight. They sniffed at the ground and the air as they ran ahead of the men.

The dragon spotted the prey before the dogs did. When the hunters caught sight of the solitary bull elk, they quickened their pace. The dragon stepped out of the trees behind them, and quietly took flight in the opposite direction. He flew low over the trees and circled back in the direction of the elk. He heard the *thrum* of arrows, followed by the baying of the hounds and yells of men.

"I got him! The kill is *mine!*"

"You're off your *head*, Crager! You'll find *my* quill in the neck of that bull!"

The dragon tucked his wings and dove.

"Look there! The *dragon!*"

"Now *there's* the kill I've been waiting for! Out of my way!"

"*There* is one single hide that will feed me for the *rest of my days!*"

Arrows flew past the dragon. A dozen of them bounced off of his scales. He swooped low and latched onto the massive bull elk, whose life was already gone.

"Ooof!" the dragon strained at the elk's weight.

"I'm sorry," Simon whispered to the dead animal.

He flapped his wings with all his might, until the curses and screams of men and dogs faded into the silence of empty sky.

THREE

The dragon soared along the treetops with the setting sun at its back. The man was ignorant of the dragon's presence. His attention was focused on unhitching his horse from his plow. In the blink of an eye, the dragon swooped and wrapped his talons beneath the man's arms.

Four children screamed and ran to their father. Two young girls in long dresses huddled together as two older boys screamed curses and threw stones at the great flying beast. The dragon and its catch were out of sight within seconds.

"No!" the man screamed. "My children! Let me go, *foul creature!* My children — they are all I *have!*"

Seconds later, the dragon descended to the mouth of a cave. He released the man gently to the ground.

"Are you hurt?" the dragon asked.

"Y-you...you *speak?*" the man shuddered.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the dragon chuckled. "I am a *gifted foul creature!*"

The man spat on the ground and lifted his chin.

"What else but a *foul creature* would take a man from his family just to fill his belly? Well, get on with it! *Roast me with your demon breath!*"

He threw his arms out to his sides.

The dragon shook its head.

"Where is the children's mother?"

The man dropped his arms.

"*What?* You have *no right* to — do you mean to fill even my last moments with *torment?*"

"Where is their mother?" the dragon asked softly.

"She...died," the man said. "She took the fever — three winters past."

"I counted four children."

The man balled his fists.

"If you touch a *hair* on their heads, I will *haunt you from the grave!* I swear it!"

The dragon raised a leg and pointed a talon at the man. The man flinched and turned his head aside.

"I need your clothes," the dragon said.

The man blinked hard several times.

"What?"

"I said I need your clothes. Quickly, please."

"I do not underst—"

The dragon drew himself to his full height and spread his wings. His eyes changed from dull amber to a blaze of orange fire.

"I do not *HAVE ALL DAY!*" the dragon's voice shook the earth.

The man sat on the ground. He took off his boots and his socks. He stood and shucked his trousers and shirt.

The dragon raised his talon again. The man closed his eyes.

"Please..."

The man waited for death. When it did not come, he opened one eye.

A filthy old blanket hung from the tip of the dragon's talon.

"Take it," the dragon said. "You will suffer many thorns on your journey home."

The man took the blanket and put it around his shoulders. He looked around.

"Where *are* we?"

The dragon pointed.

"Walk due west. You will find an old path that will take you downhill to the river. Follow the river upstream. Your farm is not far."

The man stared at the dragon for a few seconds. He nodded and took a few steps west. He turned around.

"I don't suppose I could keep the boots? Or my short sword?"

The dragon shook his head.

"No. Sorry."

The man nodded. He took a few more steps and turned again.

"Any chance I could get my clothes back—when you're done with them? I don't have many."

The dragon raised his head into the air and breathed deeply. Four feet of

flames shot from his nostrils.

“Never mind! Never mind! I’m going!”

“*Stop!*” the dragon said. “I did not mean to threaten you. The fire—it happens at times without my intent.”

He hung his head.

“When I am done with the clothes, they won’t be worth having.”

The man started to walk.

“Could I ask a favor?” the dragon asked.

“You ask a *favor?*” the man said. “From *me?* Are you *serious?*”

“Please, speak of this to no one,” the dragon said.

The man shook his head and turned to leave for the final time.

“Who would believe me?”

The dragon watched the man disappear into the trees.

He spoke to himself.

“When I take my rightful place on the throne, then *all people* will believe you.

“And King Simon will never forget you.”

FOUR

Simon stepped outside of his cave just before sunset. He watched the last of the day's sun disappear. He focused on his breathing and tried to remain calm. And he waited.

The intense pain was something that he never grew accustomed to. As the full moon breached the horizon, his transformation began.

His wings drew inward. They shrank in from the tips with an awful cracking sound. The wings receded into his back and shoulder blades in a process that consumed two full minutes.

Simon tried to contain his cries, but he failed—as he always did. His anguish grew from a whimper to a scream and finally erupted into a blast of fire that reached forty feet into the night sky. With the full moon in place, Simon completed the transition from a two thousand pound dragon—

Into a one hundred and ninety pound man.

“There it is! There's the fire! Sound the horns!” the shouting came from the river, on the downstream side. Simon heard the voices and the blare of the horns in the darkness.

He trembled on the floor of the cave. His skin burned hot. His back and shoulders screamed out in pain as he pulled himself to his feet.

He would not have much time.

Simon hurried to pull on the clothes. The socks were threadbare and both of the boots had holes on the bottom. The boots fit loosely. He tied pieces of rope around their tops. He grabbed his only worldly possessions—his sack of borrowed books. The owners of the books would likely refer to them as “stolen”, but Simon had every intention of returning them one day. He fled the cave.

Simon lost one of the boots. When he doubled back to find it, he heard

someone yell.

“He was here! He was in this cave!”

Simon swore to himself. That was one more hideout that he could no longer trust. That list was growing too long.

The people of the kingdom figured out the secret of the full moon a year ago.

They had found him again.

Simon was about to give up when he spotted the shank of the boot. He grabbed it on the run. The hunters were far too close for him to take the time to put the boot on, so he held it against his chest as he made his way toward the tree-line. He had flown over this mountain many times in the dead of night and he knew it well. Unfortunately, his bare feet were now all-too human. He clenched his teeth together and ignored the pain. He planned to use the rock-face on this side of the mountain to avoid being tracked. This tactic had saved his skin more than once.

He heard the sounds of pursuit behind him. Simon knew that many others had heard the horns and were on their way. He scrambled into the rocks and ran parallel to the tree-line.

“I see him! Above the trees! Look at the moon!” the shouting came from below.

Simon looked up. The full moon was behind him—providing the perfect backdrop for his silhouette.

“*Is your only purpose to curse me?*” Simon said to the night sky. He turned to run again, but he stepped into a pile of loose stones. His right leg shot out from under him and he began to slide. Simon fought back a cry when his ankle twisted. He dropped the boot again. A strong hand grabbed his wrist.

It is finally over. Simon closed his eyes.

“Lousy time for a nap, Mate,” a voice said.

“Boone,” Simon said. “I had given up on you.”

“I can’t blame you, there,” Boone said. “I was a *member* of this hunting party ‘til an hour ago. I had to knock out two of my neighbors to get here.”

Boone pulled Simon to his feet. He gave him the boot.

"There are horses tied up less than a mile from here. We'd best be moving. They could be coming from all directions now."

Simon and Boone abandoned the rock-face and fled into the trees. There was no more reason to be quiet. They halted for a moment when they heard the unmistakable sound of hounds in the distance.

"They're getting better at this," Simon said.

"You *bet* they are," Boone said. "Every man in the Kingdom wants your head. And you have this nasty little habit of screaming loud and blowing flames into the air."

"Tell me about the Witch," Simon said as they dodged among the trees.

"Lady Magdalena was still—" Boone said.

"She's no *lady*," Simon spat. "And I'll have worse names for her than 'witch' when I get my hands around her neck. Will they still have her under the watch of the King's Guard?"

"They're posting only two or three of late," Boone said, breathing heavily. "They believe that you're no longer a threat. They think they're close to catching you. There are the horses. Hurry!"

Boone and Simon untied the reins and mounted the horses as arrows flew past their heads. The hounds drew nearer. The men leaned against their horse's necks and let them find their own way through the dense forest. The sounds of the hunting party grew faint and distant. The forest gave way to patches of green fields, and eventually small running streams. The horses slowed and drank. The barking of the dogs grew nearer again, and came from two directions.

"We can't let them surround us or we're done for," Boone said.

"How close are we to the main road?" Simon looked around.

An arrow struck a tree next to Simon's head.

"Not close enough," Boone said. He pointed back up the mountainside.

"We'll have to go back into the trees."

Once again they put distance between themselves and the hunters. The horses continued to weave through the trees until the forest grew sparser. Simon saw smoke in the distance. They were nearing the village. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"We're almost there, old frien—"

An arrow thrummed past Simon's head and pierced Boone's horse. A moment later, Boone cried out in pain. He clutched his side, and the quill of an arrow. His horse fell.

"NO!" Simon yelled.

Simon jumped to the ground. The hunters were closing in.

"Simon," Boone whispered. "I'm shot."

"I see that," Simon said. "But you're going to have to help me get you on my horse—or we're both dead."

"Go. I'm done for."

"Hold your tongue. I'm not leaving my only friend in the world to this bunch."

Boone looked down at his blood-soaked hand.

"I don't think a Healer can save me, Simon."

"No," Simon said. "We'll need magic this night."

The ground rumbled beneath them.

"We may have magic with us, after all," Boone said.

Simon's horse lowered itself to the ground. The horse nuzzled his companion as the wounded horse breathed its last. Simon hurried to help Boone onto his horse's back.

They reached a fast-running river without seeing more arrows. The horse tried to take them into the water. Simon pulled on the reins.

"The river is too deep here, Boy. Let's find shallow water."

The horse was insistent. It plunged them into the deep water and quickly covered a great distance. They heard no more sounds from the hunters. Simon patted the horse's side.

"I'm sorry I doubted your judgment, my good fellow. It won't happen again."

FIVE

The late night was silent except for the occasional distant wolf howl, barking dog, or whinny from a restless horse. Simon supported most of Boone's weight while Boone continued to bleed. They stopped in the shadows of a dwelling; the home of the Sorceress, Magdalena.

"It is true, then," Simon whispered. "Her home has been clad in the King's steel."

He rapped the wall with his knuckles.

"I suppose I should feel honored."

"Aye," Boone grimaced. "I see but two guards—and they are prepared for nothing, except to sleep."

"I'm going to have to lower you to the ground, my friend," Simon whispered. "Are you ready?"

Boone nodded. He whimpered and moaned as Simon lowered him to his backside. He exhaled and leaned against the wall.

"I am sorry, Simon. We were going to steal more books tonight—and I've gone and got myself shot."

"It is not *stealing*. I only mean to *borrow* them for a while. Your language skills still need work, but we will worry about that later."

Boone winced and nodded.

"Hold steady, Friend," Simon said. "I'll make quick work of these two."

"Wait," Boone said. "Take my sword. I have no use for it."

Simon showed Boone the farmer's short sword.

"I'm better off with *this*," Simon said. "I had one just like it in the days of—when I was just a boy."

"Where did you *get* that hideous thing? From some wash-woman?"

"That's not a bad guess."

Simon crept to the corner of the house. He picked up a stone and threw it

into the trees. The guards straightened up. One of them crept toward the edge of the woods. The other stayed and guarded the entrance.

Simon hugged the wall of the house and held the short sword in front of him. He grabbed the guard at the door around the head—covering his mouth. Simon started to whisper in the man's ear to be silent, but the man bit down on his hand. Simon cried out in surprise and pain. The guard's last decision had sealed his fate. Simon closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and drove the blade into the guard's back.

"Look out, Simon!" Boone said, weakly.

The other guard ran to his partner's aid. He raised his sword over his head. He paused when he heard Boone's cry.

"*Simon?*" the guard said.

His mouth was still open when the dagger flew into it. The guard crumpled to the ground.

The dagger throw took the last of Boone's strength. He toppled to his side—snapping the shaft of the arrow.

Simon slapped Boone's face and begged him to wake up, to no avail.

Simon stood. He walked to the door and stood to the side. He banged his fist against it. He flexed his fingers as he heard the door latch operate. A woman's head appeared.

Simon's long-time dream came true.

His fingers squeezed the neck of the sorceress who had cursed him.

Lady Magdalena fought against Simon as he pushed her inside. He shoved her into a chair and pulled a length of rope from his waist. Magdalena continued to struggle. Simon held her arms and looked about the room.

"I do not intend to hurt you. I need you *alive*. But I notice that the inside of your home is still quite....*vulnerable*. Quite... *flammable*. You do not *want* me to be here when tomorrow's moon rises."

"*What do you want?*" Magdalena spat.

Simon chuckled.

"I want *many* things—but not on this night!"

Simon continued to bind the woman to the chair.

"What do you think I can do while bound to a chair? Sing for you?"

"I have to go outside and get something," Simon said. "And I, of all people, know that you cannot be trusted."

"If you've killed my guards, you have little time to accomplish *anything*. We both know that you won't kill *me*—your *curse* is *bound* to me."

Simon leaned close to Magdalena's face. She turned away.

"It is true. I have considerable restraint while in my human form, *My Lady*. But remember this—countless days and nights I have shivered in an empty darkness. There have been nights when my hunger is so strong that *nothing* matters to me more than my next meal. In those moments, while my body regains strength by consuming another's flesh—when my thoughts grow still and I am aware of the innocent blood that drips from my mouth onto the cold ground—

"In those moments, my foul mood knows no limits and I *yearn* for death.

"In those moments, I could snap your neck without a second thought, and then plunge myself into the deepest sea."

Simon dragged Boone through the door and laid him on the floor in front of the sorceress.

"You will help him, or at the next moon we shall fly to Valhalla together."

"Untie me," Magdalena said. "Get him on the table and strip him down."

Simon drew Boone's sword. He stared at Magdalena as he leaned the sword against the hearth. He untied her. Magdalena examined Boone's wound.

"Don't even think about—"

Magdalena did not look up.

"I possess an outstanding memory. I have not forgotten your threats. I need for you to be *silent*."

Magdalena gathered containers from her cupboard and sprinkled them into a cauldron. She chanted unintelligible words. Boone began to stir, and to moan.

"Open his mouth," Magdalena said.

Simon lifted Boone's head with one hand. He spread Boone's jaws open with the other. Magdalena poured some liquid from a cup down Boone's throat while she continued to chant. Boone swallowed. He coughed. He began to shake.

"You will have to hold him," Magdalena said. "There will be a great deal of

pain.”

Simon held Boone’s hands and laid his weight across him. His face was inches from the shaft of the arrow. Magdalena resumed her chants. They became quicker and louder.

The sorceress dipped a ladle into the steaming cauldron. She held it above Boone’s side and began to pour. Her chants turned into shouts. The liquid sizzled as it hit Boone’s flesh. His back arched in agony. He screamed and bucked against Simon’s grip. It was all Simon could do to keep Boone on the table.

