

A young king and his queen, a beautiful sorceress, travel with a group of wizards to a mysterious cave, where they must overcome a magical barrier to discover what is within. The cave's secrets take them to a new land, where they uncover new magic and, inevitably, new evil.

SWORD AND SOUL III: WAKING POWER

by Thomas W. Brucato

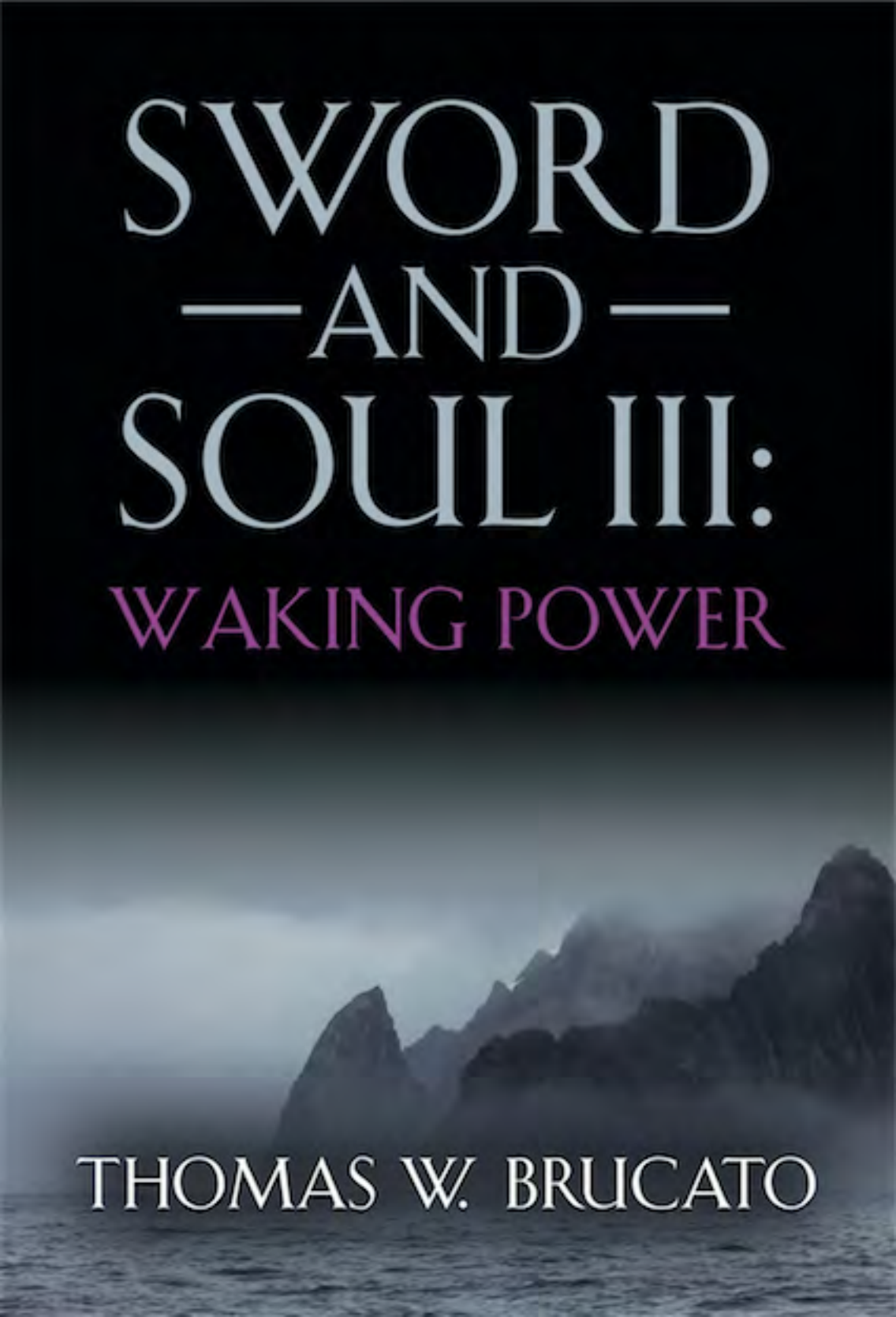
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The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric landscape. It features jagged, dark mountains or rock formations rising from a misty sea. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, creating a somber and mysterious mood. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with a touch of purple in the title text.

SWORD
—AND—
SOUL III:
WAKING POWER

THOMAS W. BRUCATO

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Chapter 1

The sky was gray, grayer than it had been for the past several days. The horizon, however, carried with it the promise of clearer, brighter things to come. Those things would not arrive until the following day because nightfall was rapidly approaching, but the clouds were not actually unpleasant and, as a matter of fact, had provided a shield from a somewhat oppressive sun.

The waves of the Sellian Sea were calm, and their quiet lapping against the hull created a peaceful susurrantion that threatened to lull their current observer into a well-deserved sleep. Reece Landlin smiled as he watched those waves, leaning with his elbows perched upon the rail of the aptly named ship *Regal Dolphin*. The breeze was cool and comforting, while the typical sounds aboard the vessel were nothing more than a background murmur that assured him all was well.

Having crossed what was considered the border of the Lacuran Ocean and traveled into these more northern waters over a week earlier, Reece was thankful it was the middle of summer. He did not know how cold the winter temperatures usually got where they were going, but, from what he had heard, summers were usually very pleasant.

Reece was the King of Fersstan, and that title still boggled his twenty-year-old mind. It had now been three years since he had helped topple the evil Empire of Penten vol Krellis, an empire that had stood for three hundred years and had been ruled for all of that time by the same nefarious necromancer. That wizard had survived for three centuries by using his vile magic to drain the life energy from sacrificial victims in order to sustain and prolong his own life.

Three years? Reece mused to himself. It seemed a lifetime ago.

A lifetime ago that his small village of Amber had been destroyed by Imperial troops for training soldiers for the rebellion. A lifetime ago that he had discovered the enchanted sword of Captain Evvan Stryker in the cave of long-departed war wizard Illic nas Verjil, and had been trained to be an expert swordsman by the spirit of the famous captain. A lifetime ago that he had helped save the entire continent of Davanon and restored the former kingdoms of the land.

He had never anticipated that he himself would have been lauded a hero and granted the throne of one of those kingdoms by an adoring populace. Oddly, he now ruled a kingdom in which he had not even been born.

One of the many, many things he had learned over the past three years was that the work of restoring kingdoms was not easy. Nor, for that matter, was the work of restoring magic.

As Reece gazed over the seascape before him, he mused that its vastness, and that of the sky above it, made him feel very, very small. The world was indeed a very large place, and he found himself reflecting on the idea that, if he were to accidentally plunge into that expansive sea, it would not be at all difficult for him to be suddenly, irretrievably lost.

Macabre, he mused. That thought was not an entertaining or even slightly pleasant one. He did, however, somehow like the feeling of being such a small piece of such a vast universe. Becoming a king had thrust him into a host of situations to which he thought he would never become accustomed, and did not necessarily *want* to become accustomed. True, not all of it was negative, but he did often yearn for the simpler days of anonymity. He had never been one to seek attention, much less acclaim, but doing what he considered his duty to the people of Davanon had brought him those things anyway.

Now, being a tiny speck gazing out over the vastness of creation, he somehow felt that he was in his rightful place. He *was* small, *was*, ultimately, a somewhat insignificant part of something far more majestic. He smiled at that thought. The term *Majesty* was applied to him on a daily basis by everyone from the wisest sages to the smallest, youngest children who were just learning to speak, and yet *this*—he almost wanted to spread his arms to take it all in—*this* was majesty. He felt at once humbled by its immensity and blessed by the opportunity to witness it.

He felt as if he could stand here for a very, very long time.

“Well,” came a lilting female voice from behind him, “you’re either seasick, or you’re *very* deep in thought.”

Reece turned at the very familiar, oh-so-pleasant sound, and he smiled automatically. “Ari,” he breathed.

Her long, flaming red hair wafting gently in the breeze, she stepped toward him and tapped him softly on the temple with the first finger of her left hand. “And since I know you’re not seasick,” she continued, “what’s going on up there?”

Still smiling, Reece wrapped both arms around the incredibly small waist of his beautiful wife and pulled her close. She did not resist, but did keep a rather sardonic smile on her own full lips as she looked him in the eye. There had been a time, when they had first met, that she had had to look slightly downward to meet his gaze. Now their eyes met perfectly.

“Just thinking,” Reece answered her. “It’s pleasant up here. Nice and quiet.”

“Oh. So I’m disturbing you, then. I’ll just—”

She made as if to pull away, but Reece knew she was goading him and held on even more tightly. “Not necessary,” he said. “You’re kind of a quiet girl sometimes. So I guess you can stay.”

He kissed her, and she said, “Kind of romantic, too, huh? Too bad there has to be an actual *crew* on deck.”

He laughed, enjoying the peachy scent of her brilliant hair. He had always loved that scent. Had always loved *her*. Adored her.

Ariana nas Landlin was the Queen of Fersstan, having married Reece on his coronation day a year previously. Of at least equal significance, however, was the fact that she was also the War Master of the Circle of Sorcery. Only a year Reece’s senior, she had nevertheless been found to be the most powerful war wizard in Davanon, and for the past three years had been working hard to restore all magic to the known world, magic that had been banned under the rule of Penten vol Krellis. When all the secret wizards of Davanon had come out into the open following the Emperor’s demise, the former Circle of Sorcery had been reestablished, and even now a new Wizard’s Academy was nearing completion in Fersstan.

Ari wore a black wizard’s robe of a fashion that had also been reestablished. Red stitching surrounding the hood indicated her status as a war wizard, as did a new addition to the style, a red cord cinched tightly at the waist.

“Seasick,” Reece chuckled. “I’m glad we didn’t have to deal with *that*. Remember Carson the first time we went to Stoman Island? I didn’t think he was going to make it.”

“Poor Carson,” Ari laughed, remembering. “He didn’t know the spell then, and it’s such a simple one. He actually turned green.”

Reece had referred to their friend Carson bin Haruld, a life wizard who had helped them defeat the Emperor. Life wizards were healers, and Carson had accompanied them from the coast of the city of Vormass, the capital of Fersstan, to the nearby Stoman Island, where the Emperor’s castle had been located. They had stolen away aboard a ship manned by skeletal warriors that Krellis had raised as his own protective force. Despite the closeness of the island, Carson had felt the ravages of seasickness almost immediately.

Since magic had been banned under the Emperor’s reign, wizards practicing in secret had not had access to as many spells as most of them

would have liked. After the fall of the Empire, Carson had discovered, to his chagrin, that there were other life wizards who knew a very simple spell that prevented seasickness.

On this voyage, Reece and his entire retinue had subjected themselves to the spell, and therefore not one of them had suffered the slightest ill effects, even in the roughest of seas. The crew of the *Regal Dolphin* was a little disappointed, for one of the favorite pastimes of many sailors was disparaging the so-called “landlubbers” when those inexperienced at sailing began suffering such effects. They felt a little robbed of one of their entertainments, although they would never have displayed such hauteur in the presence of royalty anyway...at least not openly.

“It’s going to get cool up here pretty soon,” Ari remarked, nodding toward the encroaching darkness.

“That’s okay,” Reece quipped. “I’ve got you to keep me warm now.”

Looking out at the clear sky on the distant horizon, the girl said, “Should be nice tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Reece agreed. “And that’s perfect timing. Captain Quarben says we should make landfall tomorrow.”

“Good. I have to admit, I’m feeling a little cooped up after being at sea for over two weeks. It’ll be a relief.”

“And more than a relief?” Reece’s eyebrows were raised.

Ari smiled. “Way more. I’m very excited to see what’s there. I just hope we can get in.”

It had been several weeks before that Reece and Ari had received a message from King Drullian Farsway, ruler of the northern island kingdom of Elsbett. All of Davanon knew of the efforts to reestablish the magical orders to the world, and King Drullian was no exception. He himself had chafed under the Emperor’s rule, particularly so because he was of formerly royal lineage and, like all of his ancestors before him dating back three hundred years, had had to live in secret hideaways in order to avoid the Emperor’s purge of all royal families. He had come forth after Krellis’s fall and had been accepted as the rightful ruler of Elsbett.

As he worked to restore his own kingdom to its former glory, Drullian had been cooperating with the Circle of Sorcery and urged wizards from his kingdom to travel to the mainland and make contact. His message to Ari and Reece had said that, during a seemingly unrelated mining

expedition, some workers had encountered a cave that they had been unable to enter.

In and of itself, that was not startling news. Caves could be difficult or even impossible to enter for any number of reasons. In this case, however, the workers seemed to have been hindered by a magical barrier.

The king had immediately dispatched some wizards to the site, and those wizards had discovered some magical runes etched into the stone. None had been powerful enough to get past the barrier, however.

Drullian's message admitted to knowing nothing of what might be inside the cave. It suggested that a more powerful wizard might be able to discover what secrets, if any, dwelled within, or perhaps that a combination of more powerful wizards might be able to do so. His workers had attempted to get at the cave from various directions and with various tools, but to no avail. The king did not want to do anything that might destroy or mar the site, and had therefore suggested bringing the matter to the Circle of Sorcery.

Ari had done just that, and the Circle had responded by authorizing a mission to Elsbett. Ari herself had volunteered to go, in part because she knew of no wizard more powerful than herself—and that was a simple truth that all wizards acknowledged, having absolutely nothing to do with any sense of conceit—and in part because she was curious and was always insatiably hungry for magical knowledge.

She was confident that she could find a way past the barrier and discover what was inside that cave. At the same time, she had not been so foolish as to think that she might not need help. She had brought an entourage with her consisting of wizards from all of the Five Orders—there were a couple of other war wizards along, as well as several life wizards, several sky wizards, several earth wizards, and even a death wizard.

The Four Orders of magic, which had once been the Five Orders until necromancy was outlawed even before the emergence of Penten vol Krellis, had once again been expanded to five. A year ago Ari had made an agreement with Barris vol Usten, a former servant of the evil necromancer Doren vol Ronak. Barris had agreed to help Ari defeat Doren in exchange for his order being considered for reinstatement. Ari had been true to her word and, ultimately, necromancy had been accepted once again under very strict guidelines and supervision.

Barris himself had been made the Death Master and had agreed to come along on this voyage.

Having made all of the necessary arrangements with the Circle of Sorcery, Ari had then set out to hire a ship when she had been accosted by Reece. Reece had asked her why she was apparently intending to make a lengthy voyage to the northern kingdoms without any kind of military escort. Ari had stated that it was an issue for wizards and that war wizards should be able to defend themselves perfectly well, and also that she felt she had no right to impose upon Fersstan's military for such an issue.

Reece had then, in no uncertain terms, pointed out three facts to her.

The first fact was that, since she was Queen of Fersstan as well as War Master of the Circle of Sorcery, she had every right to impose upon Fersstan's military.

The second was that, as evidenced by the treachery of Doren vol Ronak a year earlier, one never knew what could happen and when a good sword arm might come in handy. Ronak had been the head of a band of necromancers in the kingdom of Ev and had asked for reinstatement for his order and had invited a contingent of wizards to visit his people and observe them. Once they had reached his headquarters, however, he had waylaid them and had tortured Ari. His ultimate purpose had turned out to be the destruction of the Orb of the Dead, which had sent the former Emperor, Penten vol Krellis, to the afterlife. Ronak erroneously believed that, upon the Orb's destruction, he could raise Krellis and bind him to his will, thus forcing history's most powerful wizard to do his bidding and put him, Ronak, on the throne. He did not realize that he would not have been able to control Krellis at all, but fortunately events had not gone that far. Upon learning of the fate of the wizards, Reece had rushed to Ev and freed Ari, and ultimately the Orb had been saved and Doren vol Ronak had been stopped.

The third fact was that, since he loved and adored her and did not want to spend a single day away from her, Reece himself was going to accompany her with some of his men and that was that.

Ari had smiled and had stated that she could find no flaw in any of his three facts. She had kissed him long and passionately and had said that she was heartily grateful, because as much as he did not want to be away from her, that went double for her.

Pleasantly surprised by her easy acquiescence, Reece himself had then arranged for transport.

As a result they now stood on the deck of the newest vessel to come out of the Fersstian shipyards. Of an experimental design, the *Regal Dolphin* was a military craft that boasted a retractable ballista in its oddly

extended prow. Currently nestled beneath a trapdoor on the deck's surface, the weapon could be raised or lowered by a winch that required no fewer than three men to operate it. Reece was one of many who were at least mildly curious to see how quickly that ballista could be employed in a combat situation, and just how utile it might prove, but that curiosity in no way meant that he was hoping to see it used on this voyage. Fair seas and an uneventful trip suited him just fine.

The *Dolphin* carried a battalion of Fersstian soldiers, all of whom had received training in seamanship, and the crew itself had been trained in combat. The ultimate goal was also to have a war wizard stationed aboard each naval vessel.

Under the Empire, warships had been mainly used to combat pirates and barbarians. Since there had been no separate, independent kingdoms, there had been only the Imperial navy. That navy had been used to fight off freebooters attempting to prey on the shipping lanes between various "districts," and also to quell occasional maritime raids from coastal barbarians.

Reece recognized that, by dissolving the Empire and restoring the former kingdoms, he was taking a risk. What had once been a unified nation, albeit under the Emperor's evil and unforgiving fist, was now a multitude of independent governments. The worst the Empire had ever had to deal with was the threat of rebellion, and that rebellion had never gained a firm footing. With Davanon now consisting of independent governments, there would be an increased threat of violence between kingdoms.

Reece hoped it would never come to that, but human nature being what it was, he knew it was probably inevitable. Still, he felt that his efforts were bringing about something in the way of the natural order of things. The Emperor had ruled by force and by fear. If the citizens had truly been unified about anything, it was their hatred of the oppression that taxed them into poverty and made them scramble for every ounce of both survival and dignity. If freedom meant that people would occasionally be at odds, and would sometimes resolve their differences through unfortunate violence, then that was a sad but undeniable reality.

The Imperial military had been split into individual armies, and thus far that division had been peaceable. Each kingdom was now responsible for maintaining its own military, and many changes were occurring in the areas of tactics, weaponry, and even arms and armor designs.

For coastal kingdoms like Fersstan, the maintaining of a navy was also an important factor. This experimental warship was one of the results of

the new freedom enjoyed by military commanders. Reece had agreed to commission the ship, trusting that his commanders knew far more than he did about what Fersstan might need. In tribute those commanders had, in a sense, named the vessel in his honor.

Having grown up in the small, landlocked village of Amber, Reece had had to adjust to the many differences between life there and that in a large, coastal city like the Fersstian capital of Vormass. One of the many joys Reece had discovered was the ability to observe marine life from many different areas along the coast. He had developed a real affinity for dolphins, having initially been attracted by the animals' high, pleasantly squeaky voices, and then further by their intelligence and their incredibly playful natures. He loved to watch them swim and jump, and at times would do so for hours when he could sneak away from his responsibilities for that long. He had shared his experiences with Ari, who had then joined him when she was able and had laughed and seemed as mesmerized as he was while watching the creatures.

And so, when this ship had been christened, it had been named the *Regal Dolphin*. Reece truly appreciated the honor. At the same time, he had expressed his desire that the next ship in line, which was nearing completion, would be named the *Jasper Goodwind* in honor of Ari's late brother. Ari had been truly touched by his gesture, and had tearfully expressed her thanks.

During this two-week voyage, they had twice encountered pods of dolphins and had been able to enjoy their frivolity. Sailors in general considered the sighting of dolphins at sea good luck, and to do so aboard a vessel named for them was thus doubly encouraging.

"So what do you think's really in that cave?" Reece now asked his wife, not for the first time. "Books? Artifacts? A dead wizard?"

Ari shrugged, for she reconsidered her answer each time Reece asked the question. "Hard to say. All of them, maybe. At least King Drullian didn't say anything about traps this time. I'd much rather deal with some kind of magical barrier than with the traps we faced getting to the Orb of the Dead."

Reece nodded as he recalled their nearly fatal journey through the cave that had housed both the Orb and the body of Ajjen vol Yisha. "Didn't have to remind me about that," he muttered.

When he gave a slight shudder, Ari tightened her embrace and said, "Getting cold?"

“No,” Reece answered. “I just got the shivers when you reminded me about those traps.”

She chuckled. “Remember, we have a lot more help this time, and we’ve gained a lot of knowledge since then. We’ll be fine.” *I hope*, she thought, not caring to give voice to that sentiment.

“True,” Reece agreed with her. “Plus, the things you can do are just so incredible, I have no doubts.” *No doubts* was perhaps an exaggeration, he realized. Maybe *few doubts*, or a *couple of doubts*, or even *not too terribly many doubts* would have been more accurate, but Ari didn’t need to know that.

Treasure troves of magical books and artifacts had been found in only a few places. One of those places had been the cave of Illic nas Verjil, who had, when summoned from the afterlife, bequeathed all of his belongings to Ari. That very cave, in fact, had been where Reece had been set upon the path that would eventually lead to the fall of the Empire. It was there, very near his home village of Amber, that he had discovered the sword that was, at the time, enchanted by the spirit of Evvan Stryker.

It would have been a long journey to return to that cave from Vormass, but Illic, during his short stay from the afterlife, had taught Ari a transport spell. By using that spell, Ari and Reece had been able to travel to the ruins of Amber in mere seconds, and thence to the cave. It had been a strange, eerie feeling for Reece to return to what remained of his home village. He had found himself unable to cross its borders and enter, contenting himself with observing its burnt carcass from one of the nearby hills. The ashen remains of his brother, Terek, lay somewhere at rest therein, as well as those of many friends and acquaintances. Becka Revan, Cal Seppa, Fen Poval...he had watched most of them die. From the hilltop, it had not appeared that a single structure had survived unscathed. The few buildings that still bore testament to Amber’s existence were mere shells, skeletons that reminded Reece of the undead warriors that had once been animated by the evil Emperor.

Finding the cave had not been quite as simple as Reece had initially thought. When he had first discovered it, he had been running for his life from two very determined Imperial soldiers. He had found it by accident by falling and then rolling down a hill.

During his return with Ari, he had persisted and had eventually come upon the almost hidden opening. Entering that cave had brought him far more pleasant memories, for it was there that he had found his salvation and, ultimately, a new and great purpose to his life.

He had remembered fleeing the soldiers with almost crystal clarity. At times, as he had traversed the corridors that led to Illic's living chamber, it was as if he were reliving those events in slow motion, watching as he cowered behind a table and discovered the sword, rose to confront the evil minions and dropped that blade when Evvan had spoken in his mind, and then, after recovering the sword, had surrendered to Evvan's control and slain both soldiers with unbelievable ease. Well, he hadn't actually slain them; Evvan had, as the sword had actually guided Reece's hand.

Ari's presence beside him as he remembered had been almost surreal. He had suddenly felt a need to tell her of everything that had transpired here in great and minute detail, and she had listened with almost sacredly respectful attentiveness, her intense, shadowed blue eyes actively painting pictures for her as Reece described the events.

Outside, Reece had faced his ruined village, his decimated former life, with stoicism. He had gazed upon the destruction with steely eyes and a firm set to his jaw, remembering only that he had eventually managed to avenge the horrific suffering and deaths that had occurred around him and had done even more than that by freeing the entire known world from the evil that was ultimately responsible for this blackened desecration.

But in the cave, he had found himself getting choked up as he recounted that day to Ari. What affected him most was the emergence, the awakening, of Evvan Stryker within the sword. That singular event had not only saved him from certain death, but had, in a very short amount of time, reshaped his entire life. He had just witnessed horror on an unprecedented scale, and here was a hero from history taking charge and easily dispatching those who sought to similarly visit evil upon him. That moment had been a light shining in the deepest darkness, a sure hand reaching for a drowning man, a cooling balm to the hottest fire.

Ari had put her arms around him and continued to listen, and as the tale went on, Reece had gained more control of himself and had even managed to begin smiling. And when there was nothing left to tell, he had gestured at their surroundings and invited Ari to look around to her heart's content.

There was furniture in an advanced state of disrepair. There were two tables containing glass beakers and vials, but they were centuries old and whatever they had once contained had long since dried up. Most importantly, however, there were books—books on magic, books containing spells, books whose blank pages had been filled in by Illic nas Verjil himself when that famous war wizard had created new spells. There were books

randomly scattered on the tables, and an entire bookshelf full of them against one wall.

The books, as Illic had told her, were protected by preservation spells, so their advanced age mattered not at all. Ari had stood in wonder as she had leafed through them, scarcely daring to believe that all of this precious, once-forbidden knowledge was now hers. It was knowledge she would put to use and would share, and, as Illic had exhorted her, she intended to take every book.

The two of them had done just that, although it had taken two trips. Ari had been so eager to see the cave that neither of them, on their first trip, had thought to bring any kind of wagon or other means of transporting the volumes. Ari had clutched a handful of them to herself when they had returned to Vormass, and Reece had smiled at that, because she could have left them all behind and then immediately returned with a wagon. Something within her would not let her leave that cave empty-handed, however, so she had carried as much as she could and *then* they had returned with a wagon.

So Ari was now in possession of all of Illic nas Verjil's spells. She had not yet managed to learn all of them, or even to get through reading all of the books, but she was making progress.

"My biggest fear," said Reece, continuing to muse on the possibilities on the unknown cave in Elsbett, "is that that magical shield wasn't put there to keep people out."

Ari nodded knowingly. "But to keep something else *in*," she finished, and this was not a new thought. "But I don't know. Nobody claims to have heard anything odd, and you'd think that, after all this time, someone would have heard something, or smelled something, or seen something...." She paused. "I just don't think there's some horrible, magical creature imprisoned in there."

"We don't really know how long that shield has been there, though," Reece pointed out. "It could be new. Or at least, relatively new."

She pursed her lips doubtfully. "With magical runes carved into the stone? I'm thinking more along the lines of something that would be valuable to a wizard, but not to anyone else. Or at least not for the same reasons."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, like maybe there are enchanted items that are valuable on the outside—like, they're made of gold or silver or something—but more valuable on the inside, because of the enchantments and what they can do."

Reece nodded as he considered that, then Ari continued, “But I still think it’s what I’ve been saying all along. A cave like Illic nas Verjil’s, containing spell books and maybe some other magical items, with the barrier having been put there to protect a secret coven of wizards from being discovered by Imperial soldiers. The wizards eventually died off, but the barrier is still there.”

This was, indeed, the theory put forth by most of the wizards who had learned of the cave’s existence. “I hope you’re right,” Reece told her. “Because, you know, it *could* be some magical creature that’s been sleeping for hundreds of years, and if we go in and wake it up, all of a sudden it’s going to go on a rampage all over Davanon.”

“Oooh, scary,” Ari teased, chuckling.

Reece wished that she had not said that quite so lightly, especially given some of their past experiences. He did realize that he was probably imagining the worst-case scenario, but then, as a warrior, he also knew that it always helped to be prepared for the very worst.

And while they had been postulating different theories on what might be in the cave, a group of wizards back on the mainland was perusing newfound historical and magical texts in an effort to discover if anything had ever been written about a magical cave in the kingdom of Elsbett. If anyone came upon anything that seemed to be meaningful, that someone was under instructions to contact Ari via magical means immediately.

The breeze seemed to be picking up a bit, and Reece, who had not loosened his embrace of Ari in the slightest, enjoyed the way it caused her brilliant red hair to flutter. That hair was appearing a little more coppery in the gloaming, but its peachy scent remained ever the same. Reece rued the fact that he was standing upwind.

The ship was making its way northeastward, now passing between the northern edge of the mainland and the various island kingdoms. There were a dozen such kingdoms here, in total comprising several hundred islands. Elsbett itself consisted of more than a hundred such, although not even a third of those were actually inhabited. Most were only a few square miles in size, and some were not even close to that. The castle was situated on the island of Lekrett, which, at close to five hundred square miles, was the largest in the kingdom. King Drullian ruled here, from the identically named city of Lekrett.

The sound of the waves now had a romantic bearing to it, as did the gentle flapping of the sails above the two. Reece took his mind off the mysterious cave to which they were headed, and that task was virtually

effortless, because with Ari here in his arms and the salt air caressing them both, he could not help but think about how beautiful all of it was. He was about to make a remark to that effect when they were approached by a figure in a gray tabard, the front of which bore the emblem of Fersstan—a red cardinal upon a blue diamond.

“Lars,” Reece said pleasantly, acknowledging the general who was the head of his entire military as well as the mentor who had become his closest friend.

The general stopped and bowed. “King Reece, Queen Ariana,” he intoned. “I’m sorry to disturb your, ah...”

“Our romantic evening?” Reece teased him.

“Your respite,” Lars recovered. “I simply wanted to let you know that everything’s ready for tomorrow, and to see if there’s anything I can do for you before then.”

“Not that I can think of,” Reece replied, still deliberately not letting go of Ari. “Except um...I don’t know, maybe a blanket?”

He was joking and Lars knew it, but before the general could issue a rejoinder they were interrupted by two members of the crew, men that Reece was pretty sure worked in the galley. What did not escape the young king’s notice was the fact that each of the men bore a rather large, foaming mug.

The two bowed carefully so as not to spill anything, and one of them said, “King Reece, Queen Ariana, Captain Quarben sends his respects. In anticipation of tomorrow’s landfall, he has opened his personal stores and has invited you to partake of this ale. A Roonassian red.”

Now Reece did release Ari, and with wide eyes both king and queen reached forth with two hands to accept the proffered libations. Ale was one of their favorite things; Ari had long had an affinity for it, and had taught Reece all manner of things about its different varieties, including colors, textures, flavors, ingredients, and brewing processes. Reece was about to begin quaffing his immediately when he suddenly recalled his manners. “Wow, uh, give the captain our thanks,” he said. “He’s certainly a gracious host.”

Both men smiled slightly. “He also said,” the spokesman continued, “that if you would like more, he’ll be in his temporary quarters.”

“Oh...uh...thanks!”

The two men bowed and departed, and Reece and Ari both started drinking with gusto. Reece had taken several extremely gratifying swallows, enjoying the ale’s earthy, almost nutty flavor, when he spied Lars out of the corner of his eye and stopped.

“Oh, Lars, sorry,” he said. “Want some?” He offered the sizable mug to the general.

“Thank you, Your Majesty, but I’m preparing to retire. If you have no need of me, I’ll be on my way.”

“No need of me,” Reece mocked. “You’re always so formal, Lars, even after all this time. Come back if you change your mind!”

“I shall.” Bowing again, the general said, “My liege, my lady,” and made his departure.

Turning back toward the rail, Reece noticed Ari still in deep gulp mode and said, “Hope you have a spell for that, ’cause you’re not getting any air, you know.”

* * *

It was an embarrassingly short time later that Reece and Ari stood at that same rail, now gazing into the bottoms of sizable, completely empty mugs.

“Wow,” Ari muttered, just a bit disconsolately. “A Roonassian red. One of my absolute favorites.”

“Good stuff,” Reece agreed, morosely considering the lonely inside of his own vessel.

“I drank that way too fast,” Ari acknowledged. “Should have slowed down. Enjoyed it more.”

Reece was nodding. “And the good captain’s been holding out on us,” he commented. “Who could have known that *this* stuff was aboard?”

“He has good taste.”

Reece considered for a moment, then, glancing at his wife out of the corner of his eye, suggestively said, “Speaking of the captain...he did say...there’s more in his temporary cabin.”

Ari immediately shrugged that off. “Can’t do that,” she said a bit sadly. “Wouldn’t really be proper, would it?”

Reece raised one eyebrow. “Wouldn’t it? For a king and a queen?”

Ari glanced at him, a bit furtively. “Hm.”

“In fact...it might even be a bit rude to ignore his gracious invitation to us.”

She started to grin. “To be turned down by royal passengers...”

“Right. Exactly. Why would we want to make him the laughingstock of the fleet? Of his own crew, even.”

“Poor guy.”

“He needs us. For his own sake, for his own reputation.”

Ari fell silent for a moment, pretending to consider. Then she abruptly turned away, in the direction of the crew quarters, and, clutching her mug tightly, said, “Okay, just *one* more.”

* * *

The captain inhabited temporary quarters because, when Reece and Ari had boarded two weeks previously, he had announced to them that they would be taking his own cabin. He had had it prepared for the royal couple and had already moved his necessary personal items. Reece had wanted to object, but after observing the extremely tight confines of the other crew cabins, had realized that it was the only realistic arrangement that would accommodate both him and Ari. The only other solution would have been for them to stay in separate cabins, and *that* wasn't going to happen as long as Reece was king.

It was only the officers who had their own cabins, in fact; the rest of the crew and soldiers shared common quarters. And with this being a military ship, there were not many guest quarters, but Reece and Ari's entourage were gamely making do with what was available.

Reece was unsure of whether the relatively sizable bed—a bed that was anchored to the deck—in this cabin was the captain's usual. He suspected so, because while large compared to the bunks used by the rest of the crew, it was barely large enough for both him and Ari. That suited Reece fine, however, for he liked to sleep with his arms wrapped around as much of her as humanly possible.

The two had retired to this bed after one more sumptuous Roonassian red ale. The captain had been most gracious, and he had plenty of the stuff. He had been grateful for their company and had strongly encouraged them to accept more than one additional mug each. The pair had forced themselves to refuse despite the incredible temptation, however, for they were already feeling a little heady from the sheer quantity they had imbibed and the relative speed with which they had done so, and they wanted to be sharp for tomorrow's landfall. It wouldn't do to arrive as guests at another kingdom and be obviously suffering from the effects of a previous night's irresponsible gluttony.

On this night Reece was feeling galvanized by the ale and by the rather romantic, peaceful few minutes he had shared with his wife on the deck. As they lay, with Ari's back to Reece, Reece's right hand could feel

the contours of her left rib cage beneath her sleeping silks, his left resting gently on her right shoulder as his arm crossed just below her lovely throat. He slowly began to kiss the back of her neck, her warmth and the smoothness of her skin causing his heart to race, his blood to heat. Her flaming red hair was pooled on the pillow, and she slowly turned her head and began to accept his kisses on her full lips.

Reece breathed in the scent of her, and as she began to slowly roll over, a strange sound, something that might have been a shout, sounded from outside and caused them to stop. Ari's wrinkled brow was a mirror of Reece's own, and as they paused in the silence, there once more came something like a shout and then several distinct thuds.

"What's that?" Reece almost whispered.

They continued to listen, then there was a jolt that shook the entire quarterdeck and caused several objects to rattle where they were secured.

Reece started to sit up. "We've either landed early," he said, "or we've just hit an iceberg."

"In the summer?" Ari shook her head and looked toward the locked door.

"Do you feel anything?" Reece asked, because sometimes, if evil magic was afoot, Ari could sense it.

The girl shook her head. "No."

"Maybe we better go check it out."

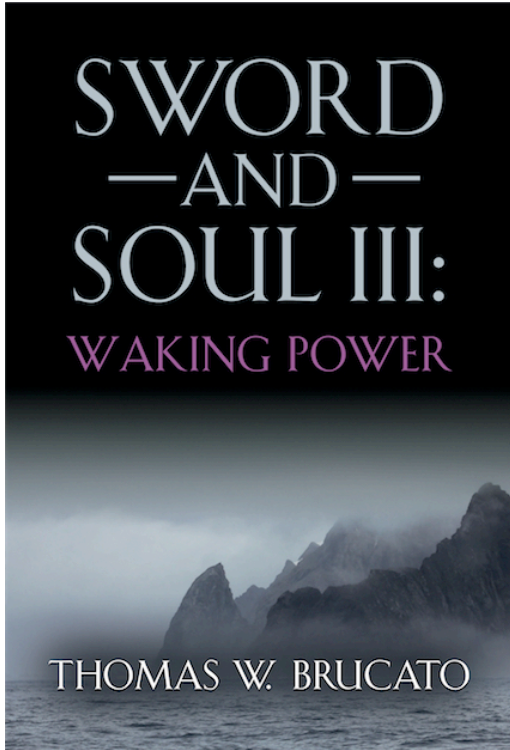
There were more shouts, although the words were unintelligible.

Ari agreed and they both swiftly rose. The girl quickly donned her wizard's robe and Reece his tunic and leggings, then at the last minute he remembered to grab his sword and belted it on.

The two emerged and beheld a scene of chaos below on the main deck. In the light of the ship's lanterns they could see figures running about, and the few shouts they had heard from inside quickly multiplied at an exponential rate. Swords flashed and created odd, writhing shadows, and the clash of steel began to ring out.

Reece heard someone shout a word that quickly roused him from his surprised stupor: "Pirates!" With that word he began to draw the sword of Evvan Stryker from its scabbard at his side.

He was not nearly fast enough, however, for he had completely failed to notice the brigand to Ari's left and the other sword that, with dizzying suddenness, was just reaching the top of her head.



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