

ONLY THE VALIANT

THE WAY OF STEEL--BOOK #2

MORGAN RICE



The Way of Steel

Морган Райс

Only the Valiant

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“Morgan Rice did it again! Building a strong set of characters, the author delivers another magical world. ONLY THE WORTHY is filled with intrigue, betrayals, unexpected friendship and all the good ingredients that will make you savor every turn of the pages. Packed with action, you will read this book on the edge of your seat.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos From Morgan Rice, #1 Bestselling author of THE QUEST OF HEROES (a free download with over 1,000 five star reviews), comes a riveting new fantasy series. In ONLY THE VALIANT (The Way of Steel—Book Two), Royce, 17, is on the run, fleeing for his freedom. He reunites with the peasant farmers as he attempts to rescue his brothers and flee for good. Genevieve, meanwhile, learns a shocking secret, one that will affect the rest of her life. She must decide whether to risk her own life to save Royce’s—even as he thinks she betrayed him. The aristocracy prepares for war against the peasantry, and only Royce can save them. But Royce’s only hope lies in his secret powers—powers he is not even sure he has. ONLY THE VALIANT weaves an epic tale of friends and lovers, of knights and honor, of betrayal, destiny and love. A tale of valor, it draws us into a fantasy world we will fall in love with, and appeals to all ages and genders. Book #3 in the series—ONLY THE DESTINED—is now also available for pre-order.

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Morgan Rice

Only the Valiant (The Way of Steel—Book 2)

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS, comprising eight books; of the new science fiction series THE INVASION CHRONICLES, comprising four books; of the new fantasy series OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS, comprising three books (and counting); and of the fantasy series THE WAY OF STEEL, comprising three books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

"If you thought that there was no reason left for living after the end of THE SORCERER'S RING series, you were wrong. In RISE OF THE DRAGONS Morgan Rice has come up with what promises to be another brilliant series, immersing us in a fantasy of trolls and dragons, of valor, honor, courage, magic and faith in your destiny. Morgan has managed again to produce a strong set of characters that make us cheer for them on every page....Recommended for the permanent library of all readers that love a well-written fantasy."

*--Books and Movie Reviews
Roberto Mattos*

"An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice's previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more."

--The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the Dragons)

"A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series."

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"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

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king.... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

--Publishers Weekly

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CHAPTER ONE

Royce grabbed the first horse he could find and rode, not caring about the shouts behind him, ducking low on the creature's back only when arrows flashed past. His mind raced almost as fast as the horse, thinking of the nobleman he'd just killed with a spear.

Worse, his mind flickered full of thoughts of Genevieve, unable to dismiss the image of her standing there above the fighting pit, right there with the man she had forsaken him for. *Those* thoughts were almost enough to make him stop and let the men behind him catch up. Only his anger pushed him on, making him heel his horse into a gallop.

More arrows came from behind, clattering off the stonework of the surrounding buildings and embedding in their wattle and daub. People threw themselves aside from the charging horse, and Royce did his best to keep it from crashing into any of them. It meant fighting against the reins, wrenching the horse's head this way and that as its hooves clattered across the cobbles.

More hooves joined in the staccato chorus as men on horseback raced to catch Royce. Some of them might have been knights, but more seemed like sergeants at arms, doing the work of their betters while the nobles stood by safely.

"After him!" one bellowed. "Kill the murderer!"

Royce knew there would be no hope for a peaceful resolution if they caught up with him. The penalty for murder was already death, and he'd slaughtered their duke right in front of them. They wouldn't give up until they were sure they'd caught him, or until there was no chance of finding him again.

For now, all he could do was keep ahead of them, trusting to a stolen horse, riding out the jolts and the changes in direction while he hoped against hope that he wouldn't fall. Royce clutched the crystal sword tight in his hand, not wanting his grip on it to falter even for an instant.

A rider got close, a spear leveled to lance into him. Royce hacked the head from the weapon and then struck out at the man wielding it. The pursuer toppled from his horse, and Royce kept riding.

There were more behind, far too many more. Even with the strength and skill he had, Royce doubted he could take on so many men at once. He fled on his stolen horse instead, and while he did so, he tried to work out how he was ever going to get away.

He fled from the town, the fort above receding as Royce's mount raced over open countryside, taking the ridges and furrows of farmland in its stride. Small streams lay in between, and Royce headed for the narrowest parts, pushing the horse to leap rather than splashing through. Every step it faltered would be one step that the pursuing group of horsemen closed on him.

He headed for farm walls next, the horse clearing the dry stone without touching it. Glancing back, Royce saw one of the pursuing horses clip the wall and tumble, bringing down another with it. It wasn't enough.

Another of the horsemen drew level with Royce, flinging himself across as if hoping to tumble Royce from his saddle. Royce clung to his horse fiercely, sheer strength keeping him in place as he struck at the soldier with his elbows and head. He saw the flash of a dagger as the man got ready to stab him from behind, and Royce turned hard, shoving at the man with all his strength.

The guardsman tumbled from the moving horse, crunching from the ground and lying still. Royce heeled his horse forward again, but the gap between him and the chasing group had narrowed now.

Royce knew that he couldn't hope to simply outrun the men behind him. They were too determined, and he had no way of knowing if his horse could outlast theirs. Even if it could, it was only a matter of time before an arrow from a hunting bow wounded the creature too badly for it to run.

He had to think of a better way.

Ahead, he saw a gorge spanned by a small bridge. Royce ignored the bridge, heading instead for a spot where a stout tree fell across the gap. As a child, he and his brothers had run back and forth across it on foot, to the small patch of woodland that lay beyond. Royce had no idea if the horse he rode would be able to make it.

It was his best chance, though, so he guided the animal in the direction of the trunk, forcing it out onto it without breaking from its run. Royce felt one of its hooves slip, and for a moment, his breath caught, but he managed to guide the animal back onto the partially rotten wood.

More arrows flashed by as Royce made his way back onto solid ground. Royce turned, seeing the chasing horses balking at the prospect of crossing the log. Royce hacked at it with the crystal sword, and he felt it give way, the trunk tumbling down to a waiting river below.

"That won't hold them long," Royce whispered to his horse, urging it forward again while the men on the other side of the gorge turned their horses, racing up toward the spot where the bridge sat.

It would buy him a minute or two at most, and Royce knew he would have to make the most of it to get away. At the same time, he knew that he *couldn't* just run. Running didn't achieve anything. Running didn't *change* anything.

He headed for the woods at full speed, trying to think while he ducked beneath the low branches, attempting to get out of sight. The woodland was quiet save for the sounds of small creatures and whistling birds, the rush of water and the rustle of the trees. Somewhere further off, he heard the sound of a forester playing a tin whistle. Royce hoped that he wouldn't lead the soldiers to him. He didn't want to bring trouble down on anyone else.

That thought made him pause among the trees. The men behind him would follow him to his village if he ran there, and yet, if he didn't, Royce might never be able to gather any support. Worse, the duke's men might descend on it anyway, determined to punish all those connected to the boy who had brought about his death.

He needed a way to distract the duke's men from the village, and buy himself time to do everything he needed to do.

The sound of the tin whistle came to Royce again, and he headed in that direction, guiding his horse between the trees. Royce pushed it through as quickly as he could. He was only too aware of how little time cutting away the log bridge would have bought him, and now, he felt as though he needed every second that he could find.

He came across the first pig less than a minute later, rooting among the litter of the woodland floor for fruit or mushrooms, or something else. It stood almost as high as Royce's waist would have been if he hadn't been on horseback, snuffling its way forward, apparently oblivious to him.

More wended their way through the trees, snuffling and hunting for anything they could eat, painted with the marks of at least a couple of farms. The music of the tin whistle was close now, and through a cluster of alder trees, Royce could make out the form of a young man sitting on the stump of a fallen oak.

"Hoi there," the young man called out as he saw Royce, waving with the arm that held the whistle. "Don't go riding too hard through here. The pigs are easygoing enough, but if you scare 'em, they be big enough to trip that horse of yours."

"There are men coming this way," Royce said, guessing that the best way to do this was to be direct. A young man like this wouldn't appreciate someone trying to trick him. "Men who want me dead or captured."

The pig herder looked a little worried by that. "And what's that to do with me?" he asked. "I'm just out here herding my pigs."

"Do you think men like that will care about that?" Royce asked. Every peasant knew what the duke's men could be like, and how dangerous it was to be in their way while they were hunting.

"No," the herder said. He looked Royce over. "What are they hunting you for, then?"

Royce suspected that if he told the boy the truth, it would be too much for him. Yet what else could he do? He could hardly claim to be a poacher.

"I'm... I killed the duke," Royce said, not knowing what else to say. He couldn't ask what he was about to ask without telling this boy the truth. "His men are chasing me, and if they catch me, then they'll kill me."

"So you're planning to lead them into my pigs?" the swineherd said. "And what happens to me if I'm still here when they get here?"

"I have an idea for that," Royce said. He jumped down from his horse, holding out the reins to the boy. "Take my horse. Ride away from here. It's the best chance both of us have."

"You want me to pretend to be you?" the swineherd demanded. "After what you did? Half the kingdom would be after me."

Royce nodded. The two of them didn't look alike; Royce was much bigger and more heavily muscled, and even though they both had blond hair to their shoulders, it would never be mistaken for the same. Their features were different too: the swine herder's round and homely where Royce's were square jawed and sharpened by violence.

"Not for long. You can ride, can't you?"

"Aye, my da insisted. I used to canter the cart horse over the fields."

"*This* horse will go a lot faster than a canter," Royce promised, still holding out the reins. "Take the horse, ride ahead of them for a while, and then let it go when they can't see you. They'll never know that it was you on the horse, and they will still be looking for me."

Royce was certain that it would work. If the swineherd kept ahead of the foe, then he would be safe the moment they lost sight of him.

"And that's all I would have to do?" the swineherd asked. Royce could see that he was considering it.

"Just lead them away from any of the villages," he said. "I need to get back to mine, and you can return to yours the moment you've lost them."

"So you're just looking for a way to get away with murder?" the boy asked.

Royce understood. The swineherd wouldn't want to help with anything so callous as that. It *wasn't* just that though. It hadn't been, even in the moment when he'd flung the spear.

"They oppress us in every way they can," Royce said. "They take and they take, and they never give anything back. The duke took the woman I loved and gave her to his son. He imprisoned me on an island where I saw boys my age slaughtered. I had to fight to the death in a pit! It's time that we changed things. It's time that we made things better."

He could see the boy considering it.

"If I don't get back to my village, a lot of people will die," Royce said. "But if I go and they follow, even more will. I need your help."

The swineherd took a step forward. "Will I be paid for this?"

Royce spread his hands. He didn't have anything. "If I can find you again afterward, I'll find a way to pay you back. How do I find you?"

"I'm Berwick, from Upper Lesham."

Royce nodded, and that seemed to be enough for the swineherd. He took Royce's horse and mounted it, heeling it forward and setting off through the trees in a direction that had nothing to do with any of the villages Royce knew. Royce breathed a sigh of relief.

It was short lived. He still needed to get out of sight. He moved back among the trees, finding a spot among the foliage where he could crouch down in the shadow of a trunk, surrounded by fronds of holly.

He crouched there, perfectly still, barely daring to breathe as he waited. Around him, the pigs continued to forage, and one of them got closer to him, nuzzling at the patch of foliage where he hid.

“Get away,” Royce whispered, willing the creature to move on. He fell into silence as he heard the sounds of hooves approaching.

Men came into view, all armored and armed, all looking even angrier than they had in the first flush of the chase. Royce truly hoped that he hadn’t put the swineherd in too much danger by making him a part of his escape.

The pig continued to move too close to him. Royce thought he could see one of the men there watching it, and he froze so still that he didn’t even risk blinking. If the pig reacted to his presence at all, he felt sure that the men would fall on him and kill him.

Then the man looked away, and the soldiers surged forward once again.

“Quickly now!” one of them called. “He can’t have gotten far!”

The soldiers thundered off, following the path that the swineherd had taken, presumably following his tracks. Even when they went, Royce held still, clutching the grip of his sword, making sure it wasn’t some kind of trap designed to lure him out.

Finally, he dared to move, emerging into the clearing and pushing the pigs away from him. He took a moment to look around, trying to get a sense of which direction his village lay in. The deception had bought him some time, but even so, he had to act fast.

He needed to get home before the duke’s men killed everyone there.

CHAPTER TWO

Genevieve could only stand silently in the castle's great hall as her husband raged. In the moments when he wasn't angry, Altfor was actually quite good looking, with longish, wavy brown hair, aquiline features, and deep, dark eyes. Genevieve always found herself picturing him like this, though, red-faced and furious, as if this was the real him, not the other.

She didn't dare to move, didn't dare to attract his ire, and she clearly wasn't the only one. Around her, the erstwhile duke's servants and hangers-on stood quietly, not wanting to be the first to attract his attention. Even Moira seemed to be hanging back, although she was still right there where Genevieve could see her, closer to Genevieve's husband than she was, in every sense.

"My father is dead!" Altfor yelled out, as if there was anyone there who wouldn't know by now what had happened in the fighting pit. "First my brother, and now my father stand murdered by a traitor, and none of you seem to have answers for me."

This anger felt dangerous to Genevieve, too wild and undirected, lashing out in the absence of Royce, trying to find someone to blame. She found herself wishing that Royce were there and grateful that he was not, all at once.

Worse, she felt her heart aching at his absence, wishing that she'd been able to do something other than stand alongside her husband and watch him from the side of the pit. A part of her longed to be with Royce right then, and Genevieve knew that she couldn't let Altfor see that. Altfor was angry enough, and she had felt all too clearly just how easily that anger could be directed at her.

"Will no one *deal* with this situation?" Altfor demanded.

"That is just what I was going to ask, nephew," a voice said, his voice hard.

The man who walked into the room made Genevieve want to pull back at least as much as Altfor did. With Altfor, she wanted to shy away from the heat of his rage, but with this man, there was something cold about him, something that seemed to be made of ice. He was older than Altfor by about twenty years, with thinning hair and a slender frame. He walked with what seemed at first glance to be a stick, but then Genevieve saw the hilt sticking out from a scabbard and realized that it was a longsword, still in its sheath. Something about the way he leaned on it said to Genevieve that it was injury, not age, that made him do it.

"Uncle Alistair," Altfor said. "We were... we were not expecting you."

Altfor actually sounded worried by the presence of the newcomer, and that came as a surprise to Genevieve. He had always seemed so perfectly in control before, but this man's presence seemed to fluster him completely.

"Clearly not," the slender man said. His hand strayed over the longsword he leaned on. "The part where you did not invite me to your wedding probably had you thinking that I would stay in my estates, avoid the town, and leave you to make a mess of things in the wake of my brother's death." He looked around to Genevieve, his gaze picking her out of the crowd as sharply as a hawk's. "Congratulations on your marriage, girl. I see that my nephew has a taste for the vacuous."

"I... you will not speak to me like that," Altfor said. It seemed to take him a moment to remember that he should stand up on Genevieve's behalf. "Or to my wife. I am the duke!"

Alistair stepped over to Genevieve, and now his sword cleared its sheath, looking light in his hands, broad and razor sharp. Genevieve froze in place, barely daring to breathe as Altfor's uncle held the blade an inch from her throat.

"I could cut this girl's throat, and not one of your men would lift a finger to stop me," Alistair said. "You certainly would not."

Genevieve didn't have to look across to Altfor to know that it was the truth. He wasn't the kind of husband who would care enough to try to defend her. None of the courtiers would help her, and Moira... Moira was staring at her as if she half hoped that Alistair would do it.

Genevieve would have to save herself. “Why would you stab me, my lord?” she asked.

“Why should I not?” he said. “I mean yes, you are pretty: blonde hair, green eyes, slender, what man would not want you? But peasant girls are hardly difficult to replace.”

“I was under the impression that my marriage made me more than that,” Genevieve said, trying to keep her voice steady in spite of the presence of the blade. “Have I done something to offend you?”

“I do not know, girl; have you?” he demanded, and his eyes seemed to be searching Genevieve’s for something. “There was a message sent, revealing the direction that the boy who murdered my brother went in, yet it did not reach me or anyone else until it was far too late. Do you know anything about that?”

Genevieve knew everything about that, since it had been she herself who delayed the message. It had been all she had been able to do, and yet it still hadn’t felt like enough given all that she felt for Royce. Even so, she managed to school her face to stillness, pretending innocence because that was literally the only defense she had right then.

“My lord, I don’t understand,” she said. “You said yourself that I am just a peasant girl; how could I do anything to stop a message like that?”

On instinct, she dropped to her knees, moving slowly so that there was no chance of impaling herself upon the blade.

“I have been honored by your family,” she said. “I have been chosen by your nephew, the duke. I have been made into his wife, and so raised in status. I live as I could never have hoped to before. Why would I jeopardize that? If you truly believe me to be a traitor, then strike, my lord. Strike.”

Genevieve wore her innocence like a shield, and she just hoped that it would be enough of one to turn aside the sword blow that might otherwise come. She hoped it, and she didn’t hope it, because right then maybe a thrust to the heart would have matched everything she felt given how badly things had gone with Royce. She looked up into the eyes of Altfor’s uncle, and she refused to look away, refused to give any hint of what she had done. He pulled back the sword as if he might make that fatal thrust... then lowered his blade.

“It seems, Altfor, that your wife has more steel in her than you.”

Genevieve managed to breathe again, and rose back to her feet while her husband stalked forward.

“Uncle, enough of these games. I am the duke here, and my father—”

“My brother was fool enough to pass on an estate to you, but let’s not pretend that makes you a real duke,” Alistair said. “That requires leadership, discipline, and the respect of your men. You have none of those.”

“I could order my men to drag you to a dungeon,” Altfor snapped.

“And I could order them to do the same,” Alistair retorted. “Tell me, which of us do you think they would obey? My brother’s least favorite son, or the brother who has commanded armies? The one who lost his killer, or the one who held the killing wall at Haldermark? A boy, or a man?”

Genevieve could guess the answer to that question, and she didn’t like the way it might turn out. Like it or not, she was Altfor’s wife, and if his uncle decided to get rid of him, she had no illusions about what might happen to her. Quickly, she moved across to her husband, putting a hand on his arm in what probably looked like a gesture of support, even as she tried to remind him to hold back.

“This duchy has been run into the ground,” Alistair said. “My brother made mistakes, and until they are corrected, I will see to it that things are run properly. Does any man here wish to dispute my right to do it?”

Genevieve couldn’t help noticing that his blade was still in his hand, obviously waiting for the first man to say something. Of course, that had to be Altfor.

“You expect me to swear fealty to you?” Altfor said. “You expect me to kneel before you when my father made me the duke?”

“Two things can make a duke,” Alistair snapped. “The command of the ruler, or the power to take it. Do you have either, nephew? Or will you kneel?”

Genevieve knelt before her husband did, tugging on his arm to pull him down beside her. It wasn't that she cared about Altfor's safety, not after all he'd done, but right then, she knew that his safety was hers.

“Very well, Uncle,” Altfor said, through obviously gritted teeth. “I will obey. It seems I have no choice.”

“No,” Lord Alistair agreed. “You don't have.”

His eyes swept around the room, and one by one, the people there knelt. Genevieve saw courtiers do it, and servants. She even saw Moira fall to her knees, and a small, angry part of her wondered if her so-called friend would try her luck seducing Altfor's uncle as well as Altfor.

“Better,” Lord Alistair said. “Now, I want more men out finding the boy who killed my brother. An example will be made. No games this time, just the death he deserves.”

A messenger ran in, wearing the livery of the household. Genevieve could see him looking back and forth between Altfor and Lord Alistair, obviously trying to decide to whom he should deliver his message. Finally, he made what Genevieve thought was the obvious choice, and turned to Altfor's uncle.

“My lord, forgive me,” he said, “but there is rioting in the streets below. People are rising up throughout the former duke's holdings. We need you.”

“To put down peasants?” Lord Alistair said, with a snort. “Very well. Gather such men as we can spare from the search, and have them meet me in the courtyard. We will show this rabble what a true duke can do!”

He marched from the room, leaning again on his sheathed longsword. Genevieve dared to breathe a sigh of relief as he went, but it was short lived. Altfor was already getting back to his feet, and his anger was palpable.

“Get out, all of you!” he yelled to the assembled courtiers. “Out, and help my uncle put down this revolt, or help in the search for the traitor, but do not be here for me to ask it again!”

They began to leave, and Genevieve started to rise to go with them, but she felt Altfor's hand on her shoulder, pushing her back down.

“Not you, wife.”

As Genevieve waited, the hall emptied, leaving only her, a couple of guards, and worse, Moira watching from the corner, with a look that wasn't even trying to pretend sympathy now.

“You,” Altfor said, “need to tell me what role you played in Royce getting away.”

“I... don't know what you mean,” Genevieve said. “I have been here the whole time. How could I—”

“Be quiet,” Altfor snapped. “If it wouldn't make me look like a man who can't control you, I would beat you for thinking me that stupid. Of *course* you did something; no one else who cares about that traitor is anywhere near here.”

“There are whole crowds in the streets who might prove otherwise,” Genevieve said, pushing herself to her feet. She wasn't scared of Altfor the way she was of his uncle.

No, that wasn't true. She was scared of him, but it was a different kind of fear. With Altfor, it was a fear of sudden violence and cruelty, but appearing to submit would do nothing to deflect it.

“The crowds?” Altfor said. “You're going to taunt me with mobs now? I thought you had learned your lesson about crossing me, but obviously not.”

Now fear *did* come back to Genevieve, because the look in Altfor's eye was one that promised something far worse than violence toward her.

“You think that you're so safe because I will not harm my wife,” Altfor said. “But I told you the things that would happen if you disobeyed me. Your beloved Royce will be found, and he will be killed, if I have anything to do with it, far more slowly than anything my uncle might have in mind.”

That part didn't scare Genevieve, although the thought of any harm coming to Royce hurt her like a physical blow. The fact was that he was gone from Altfor's grip; she had already seen to that. There was no way now that he or Lord Alistair would be able to catch him.

"Then there are his brothers," Altfor said, and Genevieve's breath caught.

"You told me you wouldn't kill them if I married you," she said.

"But now you *are* my wife, and you are a disobedient one," Altfor countered. "Already, the three are on their way to their place of execution, there to sit in a gibbet on the killing hill and starve until they are devoured by beasts."

"No," Genevieve said. "You promised."

"And *you* promised to be a faithful wife!" Altfor shouted back at her. "Instead, you continue to help the boy you should have put aside all thoughts for!"

"You... I didn't do anything," Genevieve insisted, knowing that admitting it would only make things worse. Altfor was a noble, and he couldn't do anything to her directly, not without proof, and a trial, and more.

"Oh, you still want to play these games," Altfor said. "Then the price for your betrayal has gone up. You have too many distractions in the outside world, so I will take them from you."

"What... what do you mean?" Genevieve asked.

"Your sister was an amusement for a brief moment the first time you disobeyed me. Now she will die for what you have done. So will your parents, and everyone else in the hovel you called home."

"No!" Genevieve shrieked, grabbing for the small eating knife that she wore. In that moment, all sense of restraint or need to be careful fled from her, driven out by the horror of what her husband was about to do. She would do anything to protect her sister. *Anything*.

Altfor was faster though, his hand closing over hers and dragging it away. He shoved her back to land heavily on the floor, standing over her. He glared down at her, and only Moira's touch pulled him away from doing more.

"Remember that while she is your wife she is noble," Moira whispered. "Harm her and you would be treated as a criminal."

"Do not presume to tell me what to do," Altfor snapped at Moira, who leaned in even closer.

"I am not telling, merely suggesting, my lord, my *duke*. With a wife, and in time an heir, and the law on your side, you will manage to take that all back."

"And why does that matter to *you*?" Altfor asked, looking over at her.

If Moira was hurt by that, she didn't show it. If anything, she looked triumphant as she looked over to where Genevieve lay.

"Because your brother, my husband, is gone, and I would rather continue to be the lover of a powerful man than a woman without power," Moira said. "And you... you are the most powerful man I have met."

"And I should want you, rather than my wife?" Altfor asked. "Why should I want my brother's cast-offs?"

Even to Genevieve, that seemed a cruel game to play when Genevieve had already caught him with Moira.

Again though, whatever Moira felt was carefully hidden.

"Come with me," she suggested, "and I'll remind you of the difference while your men go about killing all those who deserve it. Your men, not your uncle's."

That was enough for Altfor to pull her to him, kissing her even though Genevieve and the two guards were right there. He caught hold of Moira's arm, pulling her off in the direction of the great hall's exit. Genevieve saw Moira glance back, and the cruelty in her smile was enough to chill Genevieve to the bone.

Right then, Genevieve didn't care. She didn't care that Altfor was about to betray her in a way that he obviously already had so many times before. She didn't care that she'd nearly died at his uncle's hands, or that both of them clearly saw her as an inconvenience.

All she cared about then was that her sister was in danger, and she had, *had* to find some way to help her, before it was too late. Altfor was planning to kill her, and she had no way of knowing when it would happen.

CHAPTER THREE

Royce ran through the forest, feeling the crunch of branches underfoot, clutching his sheathed sword to his side so it wouldn't catch against any of the trees. Without the horse he'd stolen, he wasn't moving fast enough. He needed to go faster.

He ran faster, spurred on by the thought of getting back to the people he cared about. The Red Isle had taught him to keep running, regardless of the way his heart hammered in his chest, or his legs ached. He'd survived the trap-filled run across the island, so forcing himself to run further and faster through a forest was nothing.

The speed and strength that he possessed helped. Trees flashed by on either side, branches scraping at him and Royce ignoring them. He could hear woodland creatures scurrying to get clear of this thing running through their territory, and he knew that he had to find a better way to make progress than this. If he kept making this much noise, he would attract every soldier in the dukedom.

"Let them come," Royce whispered to himself. "I'll kill them all."

A part of him wanted to do that and more. He'd managed to kill the lord who'd put him and his friends in the fighting pit; he'd managed to kill those guards who had come at him... but he also knew that he couldn't take on a whole land's worth of enemies. The strongest, fastest, most dangerous of men couldn't fight more than a few enemies alone, because there would simply be too many places that a blade could come from unexpectedly.

"I'll find a way to do something," Royce said, but he slowed anyway, moving through the forest more carefully, trying not to disturb the peace of the trees around him. He could hear the birds and the creatures there now, the sounds turning what had felt like an empty space into a landscape of sounds that seemed to fill everything.

What could he do? His first instinct when he'd run had been to keep going, out into the wild spaces where men didn't live, and the Picti held sway. He'd thought about disappearing, simply vanishing, because what was there to hold him there?

Briefly, his mind flashed to an image of Genevieve, staring down from the stands of the fighting pit, apparently uncaring. He pushed that image aside, because he didn't want to think about Genevieve. It hurt too much to do it, when she'd done that. Why *shouldn't* he disappear into the spaces where men didn't live?

One reason was Mark. His friend had fallen in the pit, but Royce hadn't seen the moment of his death. A part of him wanted to believe that somehow Mark might have survived it when the games had been disrupted like that. Wouldn't the nobles want to see another fight from him if they could get it? Wouldn't they want to get all the entertainment that they could from his friend?

"He has to be alive," Royce said, "he has to be."

Even to him, it sounded as though he was trying to convince himself. Royce shook his head and kept going through the forest, trying to orient himself. He felt as though he wouldn't be able to do anything until he got home. He would get there, and then, once he was safe again, he would be able to make a plan about what to do next. He would be able to decide whether to run, or try to find Mark, or somehow magic up an army with which to take on the duke's men.

"And maybe I'll pull it out of thin air," Royce said, and kept moving. He moved with the speed of a hunted animal now, keeping low, ducking under foliage and picking his way over the leaf litter without slowing down.

He knew the forest. He knew the routes through it as well as anyone, because he'd spent more than enough time here with his brothers. They'd chased one another through it, and hunted small creatures. Now he was the one being chased, and hunted, and trying to find a way clear of it all. He was fairly sure that there was a hunting track not far from where he stood, that would lead down to a small brook, past a charcoal burner's hut, and then down toward the village.

Royce headed for it, picking his way through the forest, and was dragged from his thoughts by a sound in the distance. It was soft, but it was there: the sound of feet moving lightly over broken ground. He wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't spent so much time with his brothers in these forests, or if he hadn't learned on the Red Isle that there could be threats anywhere.

"Do I wait, or do I hide?" he asked himself. It would be easy to step out onto the track, because he could only hear a single person coming, and they didn't even sound like a soldier. Soldiers' steps had the crisp click of boots, the jangle of armor, and the scrape of spear hafts against the ground. These steps were different. Probably, it was just a crofter or a woodsman.

Even so, Royce hung back, crouching in the shadow of a tree, in a spot where its roots arched up to form a kind of natural enclosure that probably played host to animals when the light faded. Some of the branches nearby were low enough that Royce could pull them down in front of him to block sight there, but still be able to look out over the path. He crouched in place, staying still, his hand never straying far from his sword.

When Royce saw the single figure approaching along the track, he almost stepped out. The man there appeared to be unarmed and unarmored, wearing only loose-fitting gray silk clothing that seemed dark and shapeless. His feet were encased in slippers of equally gray hide, with wraps reaching up over his ankles. Something stopped him though, and as the man got closer, Royce could see that his skin was just as gray, marked by tattoos in purple and red that formed swirls and symbols, as though someone had used him as the only available surface to write some mad text on.

Royce wasn't sure what any of it meant, but there was something about this man that felt dangerous in a way he couldn't place. Suddenly he was grateful that he'd stayed where he was. He had the feeling that if he were standing on the track right then, conflict wouldn't be far behind.

He felt his hand tighten on his sword hilt, the urge to leap out there unbidden in his mind. Royce forced his hand to relax, remembering the field of deadfalls and tripwires on the Red Isle. The boys who had rushed in without thinking there had died before Royce could even begin to lead them across safely. This had the same feel. He wasn't afraid, exactly, but at the same time he could feel that this man was anything other than harmless.

For now, the sensible thing to do seemed to be to stay still; to not even breathe.

Even so, the man on the track stopped, cocking his head to one side as if listening to something. Royce saw the stranger crouch, frowning as he took a selection of objects from a pocket and cast them on the ground.

"You are fortunate," the stranger said, without looking up. "I only kill those the fates send me to kill, and the runes say that we are not to fight yet, stranger."

Royce didn't answer as one by one, the stranger picked up his stones.

"There is a boy who needs to die because the fates decree it," the man said. "But you should still know my name and know that eventually, fate comes for us all. I am Dust, an *angarthim* of the dead places. You should leave. The runes say that much death will follow in your wake. Oh, and do not head in the direction of the village that way," he added, as if it were an afterthought. "A large body of soldiers was heading for it when I left."

He stood and padded off, leaving Royce crouched there, breathing harder than he would have thought, given that all he had done was hide. There was something about that stranger's presence that had seemed to almost *crawl* over his skin, something wrong about him in ways that Royce couldn't begin to articulate.

If there had been more time, Royce might have kept crouching there, suspecting more danger from the man. Instead, the only things that mattered were his words. If soldiers were heading for the village, that could only mean one thing...

He started running again, faster than ever. On the right, he saw a charcoal burner's hut, smoke behind it suggesting that the owner was at work. A horse that looked as though it was more accustomed to drawing a cart than to being ridden stood in front of it, hitched to a post. The house seemed quiet,

and on another day maybe Royce might have wondered about that, or shouted for the owner to try to persuade them to let him borrow the horse.

As it was, he merely cut it free from the hitching post, leaping onto its back and heeling it forward. Almost miraculously, the creature seemed to know what was expected of it, galloping forward while Royce clung to its back, hoping that he would be in time.

It was sunset when Royce emerged from the forest, the red of the sky closing in on the world like a bloody hand. For a moment, the glare of the setting sun was enough that Royce couldn't see past the redness to the ground below, as the whole world appeared to be on fire.

Then he saw, and he realized that the flame red was no trick of the sunset. His village was on fire.

Parts of it burned brightly, thatched roofs turned into bonfires by the flames, so that the whole skyline seemed filled with it. More of it was blackened and smoking, soot-colored timbers standing like the skeletons of the lost buildings. One toppled over even as Royce watched, creaking and then falling, tumbling to the ground with a crash.

"No," he murmured, dismounting and leading his stolen horse forward. "No, I can't be too late."

He was though. The fires that burned were old ones, holding a grip now only on the largest buildings, where there was the most to burn. The rest of his village was a thing of charcoal and acrid smoke, so long from the point where the fire caught that Royce could never have hoped to get there. The man he'd passed on the road had said that soldiers were arriving as he left, but Royce had reckoned without the distance, and the time it would take to cover it.

Finally, he couldn't avoid it any longer, and looked down to where the bodies lay. There were so many of them: men and women, young and old, all killed indiscriminately, and clearly no mercy shown. Some of the bodies lay among the ruins, as blackened as the wood around them; others lay in the streets, with gaping wounds that told the story of how they had died. Royce saw some cut down from the front where they had tried to fight, some hacked down from behind when they had tried to run. He saw a cluster of the younger women, killed off to one side. Had they thought that this was just another raid for the nobles to take what they wanted from them all, right up to the moment when someone had cut their throats?

Pain flowed through Royce, and anger, and a hundred other things, all balled up into a knot that felt as though it might tear his heart in two. He staggered through the village, looking at death after death, barely able to believe that even the duke's men would do something like this.

They had, though, and there was no undoing it.

"Mother!" Royce called out. "Father!"

He dared to hope, in spite of the horrors around him. Some of the village's inhabitants must have made it to safety. Marauding soldiers were sloppy, and people could escape, couldn't they?

Royce saw another knot of bodies on the ground, and this one looked different, because there were no sword wounds on the bodies. Instead, they looked as though they had simply... died, killed with bare hands, perhaps, but even on the Red Isle, that was reckoned a difficult thing. Royce didn't care right then, because although these people were ones he knew, they weren't the ones he was trying to find. They weren't his parents.

"Mother!" Royce called out. "Father!"

He knew that soldiers might hear him if they were still there, but he didn't care. A part of Royce even welcomed the prospect of them coming, because it meant a chance to kill them, and make them pay.

"Are you there?" Royce called out, and a figure staggered from one of the buildings, soot-caked and haggard looking. For an instant, Royce's heart leapt, thinking that maybe his mother had heard

him, but then he realized that this wasn't her. Instead, he recognized the form of Old Lori, who had always terrified the children with her stories, and who sometimes claimed that she had the Sight.

"Your parents are dead, boy," she said, and in that moment the world seemed to break for Royce. The whole of it froze in place, caught between one heartbeat and the next.

"They can't be," Royce said, shaking his head, unwilling to believe it. "They can't be."

"They are." Lori moved to sit against the remains of a low wall. "As dead as I'll be soon."

Even as she said it, Royce saw the blood on her rough-spun gown, the hole where a sword had gone in and out.

"Let me help you," he said, starting toward her, in spite of the fresh surge of pain that had come from what she'd said about his parents. Focusing on her felt like the only way not to feel it in that moment.

"Don't you touch me!" she said, pointing a finger at him. "You think I don't see the darkness that follows you like a cloak? You think I don't see the death and destruction that seeks out everything you touch?"

"But you're dying," Royce said, trying to persuade her.

Old Lori shrugged. "Everything dies... well, nearly," she said. "Even you eventually, although you'll shake the world before then. How many more will die for your dreams?"

"I don't want anyone to die," Royce said.

"They will anyway," the old woman countered. "Your parents did."

Fresh anger flashed through Royce. "The soldiers. I'll—"

"Not the soldiers, not for them. It seems there's more who see the dangers that follow you, boy. A man came here, and I smelled the death on him so strong I hid. He killed strong men without trying, and when he went to your home..."

Royce could guess the rest. He realized something worse in that moment, the full horror of it striking him.

"I saw him. I saw him on the road," Royce said. His hand tightened on his sword. "I should have stepped out. I should have killed him there."

"I saw what he did," Old Lori said. "He'd have killed you as surely as you killed all of us just by being born. I'll give you a piece of advice, boy. Run. Run away into the wilds. Let no one see you again. Hide as I once hid, before I was this."

"After this?" Royce demanded, his anger flaring. He could feel hot tears on his face now, and he couldn't work out if they were grief, or anger, or something else. "You think I can walk away after all of this?"

The old woman closed her eyes and sighed. "No, no, I don't. I see... I see this whole land shifting, a king rising, a king falling. I see death, and more death, all because you can't be anyone but who you are."

"Let me help you," Royce said again, reaching out to help plug the wound in Lori's side. There was a flicker of something that felt like the shock from wool rubbed the wrong way, and Lori gasped.

"What have you done now?" she demanded. "Go, boy. Go! Leave an old woman to her death. I'm too tired for this. There's plenty more death waiting for you, wherever you try to walk."

She fell silent, and for a moment, Royce thought she might be resting, but she seemed too still for that. The village around him was still and silent once again. In that silence, Royce stood silently, not knowing what to do next.

Then he did know, and set off for the remains of his parents' home.

CHAPTER FOUR

Raymond groaned with every jolt of the cart that was carrying him and his brothers to the place where they were to be executed. He could feel every bounce and judder of the vehicle clashing against the bruises that covered his body, could hear the clink of the chains that held him as they moved against the wood.

He could feel his fear, although it seemed to be somewhere on the far side of the pain right then; the guards' beating had left him feeling as though his body was a broken thing, made of sharp edges. It was hard to concentrate, even on the terror of death, past that.

The fear he could find the way to was mostly for his brothers.

"How much further, do you think?" Gareth asked. Raymond's youngest brother had managed to sit up in the cart, and Raymond could see the bruises that covered his face.

Lofen sat up more slowly, looking emaciated after their time in the dungeon. "However far it is, it's not far enough."

"Where do you think they're taking us?" Gareth asked.

Raymond could understand why his little brother wanted to know. The thought of being executed was bad enough, but not knowing what was happening, where it would be, or how it would be done was worse.

"I don't know," Raymond managed, and it even hurt to talk. "We have to be brave, Gareth."

He saw his brother nod, looking determined in spite of the situation the three of them were in. Around them, he could see countryside passing by, with farms and fields on either side of the road and trees in the distance. A few hills stood there, and a few buildings, but it seemed like they were far from the town now. Their cart was being driven by one guard, while another sat beside him, crossbow at the ready. Two more rode beside the cart, flanking it and looking around as if expecting trouble at any moment.

"Quiet back there!" the one with the crossbow yelled back at them.

"What are you going to do?" Lofen demanded. "Execute us *more*?"

"It's probably those big mouths of yours that have earned you special treatment," the guard said. "Most of the ones out of the dungeon, we drag them out and we finish them the way the duke wants, no problems. You, though, you're going where the ones that have *really* upset him go."

"Where's that?" Raymond asked.

The guard smiled nastily in response. "Hear that, lads?" he said. "They want to know where they're going next."

"They'll see soon enough," the driver said, flicking the reins to move the horses forward a little faster. "Don't see why we should tell criminals anything except that they're going to get *everything* that they deserve."

"Deserve?" Gareth demanded from the back of the cart. "We don't deserve this. We haven't done anything wrong!"

Raymond heard his brother cry out as one of the riders beside them struck him across the shoulders.

"You think anyone cares what you have to say?" the man snapped. "You think everyone we've taken this way hasn't tried to declare their innocence? The duke has declared you traitors, so you'll have a traitor's death!"

Raymond wanted to go to his brother and make sure he was all right, but the chains that held him prevented it. He thought about insisting that they really *hadn't* done anything except try to stand up to a regime that had tried to take everything from them, but that was the point. The duke and the nobles did what they liked; they always had. Of course the duke could send them to die, because that was how things worked there.

Raymond strained against his chains at that thought, as if it might be possible to break free through sheer strength. The metal held him easily, wearing away the little that remained of his strength until he collapsed back against the wood.

“Look at them, trying to get free,” the crossbowman said with a laugh.

Raymond saw the driver shrug. “They’ll struggle better than that once it comes time.”

Raymond wanted to ask what the man meant by that, but he knew that there was no chance of getting an answer, and every chance of getting beaten just as his brother had been. All he could do was sit quietly while the cart continued on its rickety journey along the dirt road. That, he guessed, was a part of the torment of all of this: the not knowing, and the awareness of his own helplessness, with the complete inability to do anything to even find out where they were going, let alone turn the cart from its course.

It headed up through the fields, past clusters of trees and spaces where villages lay in subdued silence. The ground around them seemed to be rising, heading up to the spot where a fort almost as old as the kingdom itself sat atop one of the hills, the ruined stones standing as a kind of testament to the kingdom that had gone before.

“Almost there, boys,” the cart driver said, with a smile that said he was enjoying this far too much. “Ready to see what Duke Altfor has in mind for you?”

“Duke *Altfor*?” Raymond asked, barely able to believe it.

“That brother of yours managed to kill the old duke,” the crossbowman said. “Threw a spear through his heart back in the pit, then ran like the coward he is. Now, you’re going to pay for his crimes.”

The moment he said that, Raymond found both his thoughts and his feelings racing. If Royce had really done that, then it meant that his adopted brother had achieved something huge for the cause of freedom, and had gotten clear; both of those things were things to celebrate. At the same time, Raymond could only imagine the things that the former duke’s son would want done in revenge, and without Royce there to take it out on, they were the logical next targets.

He found himself cursing Genevieve then. If his brother had never seen her, none of this would have happened, and it wasn’t as if she even *cared* about Royce, was it?

“Ah,” the crossbowman said. “I think they’re starting to understand.”

The horses that drew that cart carried on, moving along with the steady pace of creatures that were far too used to their task, and that knew that they, at least, would be coming back from their destination.

They headed up the hill, and Raymond could feel the tension rising in his brothers. Gareth was shifting back and forth, as if he might be able to find a way to break free and jump from the cart. If he could, then Raymond hoped he would take the opportunity, running and not looking back, even as he knew that the riders would probably be able to cut him down before he’d gone a dozen steps. Lofen was clenching and unclenching his hands, whispering what sounded like a prayer. Raymond doubted it would do any good.

Finally, they reached the summit of the hill and Raymond saw everything that awaited them there. It was enough to make him slump back in the cart, unable to bring himself to move.

There were gibbets set around the hilltop, creaking in the wind as they dangled from chains in the shadow of the fallen tower. There were bodies in them, some picked clean by scavengers, others intact enough that Raymond could see the horrific wounds and bite marks that covered them, the burns and the places where the skin had been cut away by what looked like long knives. Symbols were cut into some of the flesh, and Raymond found himself recognizing a woman who had been dragged from their cell before, swirls and runes carved into her.

“Picti,” Lofen whispered in obvious horror, but Raymond could see that even that wasn’t the worst of it. The people in the gibbets had wounds that suggested they had been tortured and killed,

exposed to the fury of whatever wild folk came by, but what lay on the stone at the center of the hilltop was worse, far worse.

The stone itself was a slab that had been carved both with the symbols of the wild folk, and with signs that might have been magic if such things had been common in these days. The remains of a man lay chained on it, and the worst part, the *worst* part, was that he moaned with agonized life even though he had no right to. His body was laced with cuts and burns, bite marks and the tearing marks of claws, yet still, impossibly, he lived.

“They call it a life stone,” the driver said with a smirk that said he knew exactly how much horror Raymond was feeling right then. “They say that in the old days, healers would use them to hold men to life while they stitched and worked. We found a better use for this one.”

“Better?” Raymond said. “This is...” He didn’t even have the words for what it was. Evil wasn’t enough. This wasn’t some crime against the laws of men, but something that stood against everything that had ever been there in nature. It was wrong in a way that seemed to count against everything that was life, and sane, and ordered.

“This is what traitors get, unless they’re lucky enough to die first,” the driver said. He nodded to the two who had ridden with the cart. “Clear that off. Whatever he did, it’s not his turn anymore. Clear the cages so that it draws the animals.”

Grumbling, the two guards set about their work, and Raymond would have run then if he had been able to, but the truth was that his chains held him far too tightly. He couldn’t even raise himself over the lip of the cart, let alone lift himself beyond it. The guards seemed to know that, moving casually from gibbet to gibbet, pulling the corpses of men and women from them and flinging them to the ground. Some came apart as they dropped, body parts scattering across the hillside for whatever came to devour them.

The woman who had been in the cells with them brushed against the stone at the hillside’s heart as they threw her body aside, and her eyes opened wide. She let out a scream then that Raymond was sure would haunt him until the moment he died, so raw and full of pain that he couldn’t begin to guess at the agonies she had endured there.

“Must have still been alive,” the one with the crossbow said, as the others dragged her clear of the stone. She fell silent again as soon as she stopped touching it, and, just for good measure, the crossbowman put a bolt through her chest before they flung her aside.

They dragged the man on the stone clear next, and to Raymond, the worst part of it was that he thanked them when they did it. He thanked them for dragging him away to die. The moment he left the stone, Raymond saw him go from a struggling, screaming man to a lifeless lump of meat, so much so that it seemed redundant when one of the guards cut his throat, just to be sure.

Now, the hillside was silent, except for the calls of the carrion birds, and rustling that promised bigger predators further off. Maybe there were even human predators watching them there, because Raymond had heard that civilized men didn’t see the Picti out in their wild homes when they didn’t want to be seen. Just the not knowing made it worse.

“The duke says that you’re to die,” the driver said, “but he didn’t say how, so we’re going to play the game that traitors get to play. You’ll go in the gibbets, and maybe you’ll live, maybe you’ll die. Then, in a day or two, if I remember, we’ll be back, and we’ll pick one of you for the stone.”

He looked straight at Raymond. “Maybe it will be you. Maybe you can watch while your brothers die, and while the animals come to gnaw on you, and the Picti come to cut you. They hate the folk of the kingdom. They can’t attack the town, but you... you’d be fair game.”

He laughed at that, and the guards lifted Raymond down, disconnecting his chains from a bracket in the cart and hauling him from it bodily. For a moment, they headed toward the stone, and Raymond almost begged them not to put him on it, thinking that maybe they’d changed their minds and decided to put him there straight away. Instead, they took him to one of the dangling cages and

shoved him inside, closing the door behind him and locking it in place with a lock that it would take a hammer and chisel to cut through.

It was a tight fit in the cage, so that Raymond couldn't sit comfortably, couldn't even begin to think about lying down. The cage creaked and shifted with every movement of the wind, loud enough that it seemed like a torture in itself. All Raymond could do was sit there while the men dragged his brothers to other cages, unable to even begin to help.

Garet fought, because Garet always fought. It just earned him a blow to the guts before they lifted him and stuffed him into another of the gibbets, the way a farmer might have shoved an uncooperative sheep into a pen. They lifted Lofen just as easily, throwing him into another of the gibbets, so that they hung there with the stench of death all around them from the bodies abandoned on the hillside.

"How did you three ever think that you could fight against the duke?" the driver demanded. "Duke Altfor has said that you'll pay for what your brother did, and you will. Wait, and contemplate that, and suffer. We'll be back."

Without another word, he turned the cart and started to drive away, leaving Raymond and his brothers dangling there.

"If I can just..." Garet said, obviously trying to reach the lock on his gibbet.

"You don't know how to open a lock," Lofen said.

"I can try, can't I?" Garet shot back. "We have to try something. We have to—"

"There's nothing to try," Lofen said. "Maybe we can kill the guards when they come back, but we can't get through those locks."

Raymond shook his head. "Enough," he said. "This isn't the time for us to argue. There's nowhere for us to go, and nothing for us to do, so the least we can do is not fight with each other."

He knew what a place like this meant, and that there were no real chances of escape.

"Soon," he said, "there will be animals coming, or worse. Maybe I won't be able to talk after. Maybe I'll... maybe we'll all be dead."

"No," Garet said, shaking his head. "No, no, no."

"Yes," Raymond said. "We can't control that, but we *can* face our deaths bravely. We can show them how well honest people die. We can refuse to give them the fear they want."

He saw Garet pale, and then nod.

"Okay," his brother said. "Okay, I can do that."

"I know you can," Raymond said. "You can do anything, both of you. I want to say..." How could he say all of it? "I love you both, and I'm so grateful that I got to be your brother. If I have to die, I'm glad that I at least get to do it with the best people I know in the world."

"If," Lofen said. "It's not done yet."

"If," Raymond agreed, "but in case it happens, I wanted you to know."

"Yes," Lofen said. "I feel the same."

"Me too," Garet said.

Raymond sat there in his cage, trying to look brave for his brothers, and for anyone watching, because he was sure that there must be something or someone watching from the ruins of the tower. All the time, he tried to not to think of the truth:

There was no "if" to this. Already, Raymond could see the first flickers of carrion birds gathering in the trees. They were going to die. It was just a question of how quickly, and how horribly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Royce knelt among the ashes of his parents' house, charred fragments of wood falling from the frame in a way that matched the tears scouring their way down his cheeks. They scythed tracks through the soot and dirt that now covered his face, leaving him streaked and strange looking, but Royce didn't care.

All that mattered right then was that his parents were dead.

Grief filled Royce as he looked down on his parents' bodies, set out on the floor in surprisingly quiet repose, in spite of the effects of the flames. He felt as though he wanted to tear at the world the way his fingers sought out the increasingly ashen tangles of his hair. He wanted to find a way to make this right, but there was no way to make this right, and so Royce screamed out his anger and his grief to the heavens.

He'd seen the man who had done this to them. Royce had seen him out on the road, returning from this as calmly as if nothing had happened. The man had even warned him, unknowing, about the soldiers about to come down on the village. What kind of murderer did that? What kind of murderer killed and then set out his victims as if they were getting them ready for an honored grave?

This *wasn't* a grave though, so Royce went around to the back of the farm, finding an adze and a shovel, working at the dirt there, not wanting to leave his parents' flesh for the first scavengers that came by. Some of the ground was hard packed and charred, so that his muscles ached with the work, but right then, Royce felt as though he deserved that ache, and that pain. Old Lori had been right... all of this was because of him.

He dug the grave as deep as he could and then lifted his parents' charred bodies into it. He stood on the edge, trying to think of words to say, but he couldn't think of anything that made sense to send them up to the heavens with. He wasn't a priest to know the ways of the gods. He wasn't some traveling tale spinner, with all the right words for everything from a wild feast to a death.

"I love you both so much," he said instead. "I... I wish I could say more, but anything I could say would come down to that."

He buried them as carefully as he could, each shovelful of dirt feeling like a hammer blow when it landed. Above him, Royce could hear the shriek of a hawk, and he shooed it away, not caring if there were crows and jackdaws spread across the rest of the village. These were his *parents*.

Even as he thought it, Royce knew that it wasn't enough to bury just them. The duke's men had been there because of him; he couldn't just leave everyone they had killed for scavengers. He also knew that there was no chance of him digging a pit deep enough for all of the bodies alone.

The best he could hope to do was to build a pyre to finish what the burning buildings had started, so Royce began to work his way through the village, collecting wood, pulling it from winter stores, dragging it from the remains of buildings. The beams were the heaviest parts, but his strength was enough to drag them at least, letting him build them into great cross members for the pyre he was building.

By the time Royce was done, it was fully dark, but there was no way he wanted to sleep in a village of the dead like this. Instead, he searched until he found a lantern outside one of the buildings, only a little twisted by the heat of the fire that had wracked it. He lit it and, by that lantern light, he started to gather up the dead.

He collected them all, even though it broke his heart to do it. Young and old, man and woman, he collected them. He dragged the heaviest and carried the lightest, setting them in their places among the pyre and hoping that somehow it would mean they would get to be together in whatever came after this world.

He was almost ready to set his lantern to it when he remembered Old Lori; he hadn't collected her yet in his grim harvest, even though he'd been past the wall she had been leaning against a dozen

times or more. Perhaps she hadn't been quite dead when he'd left her after all. Perhaps she had crawled further back to die on her own terms, or perhaps Royce had just missed her. It seemed wrong to leave her apart from the others, so Royce went in search of her fallen form, returning to the spot where she had lain and searching the ground around by lamplight.

"Are you looking for someone?" a voice asked, and Royce spun, his hand going to his sword in the second before he recognized that voice.

It was Lori's, and not. There was something less cracked and papery about this voice, less ancient and wearied by time. When she stepped into the circle of his lamplight, Royce saw that was true of the rest of her too. Before, there had been an ancient, timeworn old woman. Now, the woman in front of him seemed almost young again, her hair lustrous, her eyes piercing, and her skin smooth.

"What are you?" Royce asked, his hand straying to his sword again.

"I am what I always was," Lori said. "Someone who watches, and someone who learns." Royce saw her look down at herself. "I told you not to touch me, boy, to just leave me be to die in peace. Couldn't you just *listen*? Why do all the men of your line never listen?"

"You think *I* did this?" Royce asked. Did this woman—he still had trouble thinking of her as Lori—think that he was some kind of sorcerer?

"No, stupid boy," Lori said. "*I* did this, with a body that won't let me die. Your touch, one of the Blood, was just enough to catalyze it. I should have known that something like this would happen from the moment you washed up close to the village as a baby. I should have walked away then, instead of staying to watch."

"You saw me arrive at the village?" Royce said. "Do you know who my father is?"

He thought back to the white-armored figure he had seen in dreams, and to the time the master of the Red Isle had said that the unknown man who had sired him had saved his life. Royce knew nothing about him, save that the symbol burned into his palm was supposedly his.

"I know enough," Lori said. "Your father was a great man, in the way that men call themselves great. He fought a lot, he won a lot. I suppose he was great in some of the other ways too: he tried to help people where he could, and he made sure those under his protection were safe. This pyre of yours... it's the kind of thing he would have done, brave and righteous and so utterly foolish."

"It's not foolish to want to keep our friends from the crows," Royce insisted, giving Lori a hard look.

"Friends?" She thought for a moment or two. "I suppose, after enough years, a few of them might have been. It's hard for me to truly be friends with anyone though, knowing how easily death comes to most. It will come to you too, if you insist on lighting a beacon so that everyone from here to the coast can see that the duke's men haven't finished their job."

Royce hadn't thought of that, only of what needed to be done for the people of his village, and what he owed them, after bringing this down on their heads.

"I don't care," he said. "Let them come."

"Yes, definitely your father's son," Lori said.

"You know who my father was?" Royce said. "Tell me. Please, tell me."

Lori shook her head. "You think I'll willingly hasten everything that's to come? From what I've seen, there will be death enough without that. I will tell you this: look to the symbol you bear. Now, will you give an old woman a head start before you do anything stupid like lighting that fire?"

Anger flickered in Royce, roiling up from within his grief. "Don't you care about any of the people here? You're just going to walk away before this is done?"

"It is done," Lori countered. "Dead is done. And don't you *dare* accuse me of not caring. I have seen things that... arrgh, what's the point!"

She flung a hand toward the pyre Royce had built, muttering words in a tongue that hurt his ears just to hear. Smoke started to billow up from it, and then the first small flickers of flame.

“There, does *that* make you feel better?” she demanded. “I managed to keep myself from resorting to that while a man stabbed me, I was going to let myself *die*, not that I had the power to do much else, being so old. Now *you* have me doing it in five minutes, damn you!”

Royce had to admit that her anger was quite impressive. There was something almost elemental about it. Even so, there was something he had to ask.

“Did you... did you have the power to save people here, Lori?”

“You’re going to try to make this my fault?” she demanded. She nodded over to the spot where the fire was just starting to catch. “Magic isn’t just wishing for sheets of fire or calling lightning from the sky, Royce. With a ritual long enough, maybe I can do some things that might impress you, but a spark like that is about the limit of what I can do as I am. Now, I’m going, and don’t you try to stop me, boy. You’re going to cause enough trouble for me as it is.”

She turned, and for a moment, Royce thought about catching hold of her arm, but something made him hold back, simply staring out as the fire grew in the dark instead. There ahead of him he could see the flickers and sparks of the conflagration as it grew, building up into something that looked as though it was consuming the entire sky with its heat.

Royce stood as still as he could, thinking of all the people committed to that fire, wanting to honor them by watching the last moments that their bodies had there. The blaze burned and burned, rising and falling with the wind and with the fuel beneath it, so that it seemed to Royce almost like a kind of symphony born out of the fire.

Something else came through the fire, dark against the flames, flitting through them as easily as if it didn’t feel them. Royce made out the shape of a great fishing hawk, of the kind that plunged into the lakes nearby, but this was no normal bird. Its feathers seemed tinged by the red of the fire where they weren’t a deep, sooty black, and there was something far too intelligent about the look it gave Royce as it circled him, glowing with embers in the dark.

On instinct, Royce held out an arm the way he’d seen falconers do, and the bird settled heavily on his forearm, working its way up to his shoulder and preening itself. It spoke, and Lori’s voice came out.

“This bird is a gift, although the gods alone know why I’m doing it. I will see what she sees, and tell you what I can. May she be your eyes, and stop some of what’s to come from being worse.”

“What?” Royce said. “What do you mean?”

There was no answer, beyond the shrill shriek of the hawk’s call as she took to the air. For a moment, Royce had an image of the fire below him, the circle of flames it formed seeming puny from so high above...

He came back to himself with a start and held out his arm for the bird. She landed as casually as if nothing had happened, but he found himself staring at her. There was a flicker of flame in her eye that made it clear that this was anything but a normal hawk.

“Ember,” Royce said. “I shall call you Ember.”

Royce stood with Ember through the night, ignoring the way his legs ached, and his body fought with him in the desire to move. They stood vigil over the fire while it burned, with the hawk flitting from time to time above the flames, soaring in the thermals they created.

He didn’t move; he felt as though he owed the dead that.

Eventually, the sun came over the horizon, and as it did, Royce saw the men and women on the edges of the trees near the village. He turned toward them, and he felt himself stumble, his legs unwilling to obey after so long standing in one place. If these were the duke’s people, then he was as dead as Lori had predicted he would be.

Strong hands caught him up as they came forward, and now, Royce recognized some of them. There were friends from the village, and others from villages further off, deeper in the dukedom. They were all about his age, some dressed as foresters, others just dressed in whatever they had on hand. All of them carried weapons.

Royce recognized one of the boys who held him up, a large young man called... it was Hendrik, wasn't it?

"What are you doing here?" Royce asked them. He looked at some of the ones who had come from his village. "I thought..."

"Some of them got away," Hendrik said. He was taller than Royce by a head, and there were those who joked that he must have the blood of some troll kin out of stories to be so large. "We heard what happened here, and when we saw the fire burning, we came."

"What you did, building the fire, standing there," a girl with short red hair said; Royce thought her name was Matilde. "It was *right* somehow, you know?"

Royce nodded, because he understood. He managed to stand now without help, looking round at all of the others.

"But what are you all doing here?" he asked.

"We're here to help you," Hendrik said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Help me?" Royce said. "Help me with what?"

"Help you overthrow the duke," Matilde said. "We heard what you did back in the pit, and there's a whole rebellion in the dukedom. We want to be part of it. We want to *help*."

Royce started to shake his head, wanting to tell them that he didn't intend to start a rebellion, wasn't planning to kill whoever the new duke was. Then he thought about all the people who had died in his village, and who must have sent the men to kill them, and he knew that wasn't true. He wanted the new duke dead, just as he wanted to kill the man who had slain his parents and then passed him by like it was nothing.

"It will be dangerous," Royce said. "Most of you... you aren't fighters."

"More dangerous than sitting at home waiting for some nobleman to decide he has taken a fancy to me?" Matilde demanded.

"More dangerous than just being less than them, when they come raiding?" Hendrik added. "We'll learn to fight. You can teach us. And then..."

And then, they would not just be a rabble, Royce knew. They would be exactly what he needed them to be if he was truly going to beat Altfor and his men. They would be an army.

CHAPTER SIX

Dust tracked his prey through the night, seeing well enough in the dark that he needed only the starlight, following the signs that the world presented to him with equanimity. A spider's web spun the wrong way had him split from the path. A tree whose knots looked like the ancient Gaath sign for travel told him that he was on the right route.

"Everything is right, because it cannot be other than as fate decrees," Dust reminded himself as he walked. Such were the words that the priests in his home had taught him, until no part of him could deny the truth of them. "Against the power of fate, all are small. Who would swim against an ocean?"

The truth of it seemed like an absolute to Dust; *was* an absolute, since those who questioned the will of fate's signs usually found themselves given up as sacrifices in his homeland, or provided as subjects on which to teach the Thousand Torments, or the many ways of death. Even so, he knew what the question was: if fate would happen as it must, why were the *angarthim* necessary? The answer was as well-worn as it was obvious.

"We are the tool through which fate corrects itself," Dust said. "We are the balancing hand on the scale, the correcting push against chaos."

He murmured these things like the prayers they were, along with other, older phrases as he walked. When the signs around him showed a place to rest, he sat cross-legged with his back against a tree and rested in a way that wasn't quite sleep until the fatigue drained from his body. Ready to continue, he started to walk again, down toward a place where a large pit sat, surrounded by a kind of stand. Dust had seen fighting pits before, although he doubted that this one saw anything so elegant as the duels through which he had been trained.

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