

THE WAY OF STEEL--BOOK #3

ONLY
THE
DESTINED



MORGAN RICE

Morgan Rice
Only the Destined
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Аннотация

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 four 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.”

--Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

“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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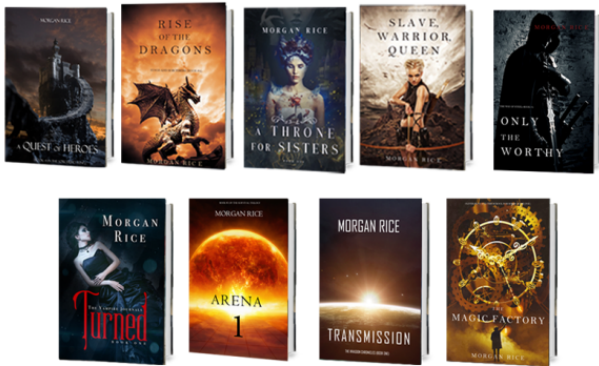
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CHAPTER ONE

Royce led the way across the heathlands, riding for the coast with the speed of a sent arrow, his hazel eyes fixed on his destination. His blond hair whipped around him while he rode, broad shoulders set with determination.

A quartet of figures rode with him, because more would have attracted too much attention. Mark rode next to him, his friend looking far stronger than he had at any point since Royce had found him, dark hair kept in place under a steel helmet, partial armor of one of the warriors of the Red Isle shining in the sun.

Matilde and Neave rode side by side, the former villager and the Picti girl occasionally glancing across to one another, looking very different. Matilde was red-haired and could have passed for angelic if she weren't so fierce, while Neave had braided dark hair, and slightly darker skin tattooed in blue. Once Matilde had declared that she was going, Neave's decision had been instant.

The one surprise came in the solid form of Sir Bolis, riding along in cobalt-edged armor that shone where its plates caught the sun and that proclaimed his wealth as much as his fighting skill. He was a year or two older than Royce, and Royce was certain that he only liked Royce a little better now than he had when Royce had first arrived at Earl Undine's home. Royce couldn't work out why he had come on this journey, but he couldn't turn down the help.

Above him, his hawk, Ember, wheeled above the heather, and through her eyes Royce saw the route ahead laid out clearly, safe and flat all the way to the harbor at Ablaver. Once they got there, Royce was sure they would be able to find a ship that would take them to the Seven Isles, where the witch Lori had said that the Mirror of Wisdom was hidden.

There, they would be able to find his father.

That was a prospect that filled Royce with both anticipation and dread. Anticipation, because he wanted to find his father more than anything right then; needed to find him if he was going to bring him back to lead the fight against the nobles. The dread was because of the place they would have to visit to find him.

“You’re certain that we have to go to the Seven Isles?” Sir Bolis said.

Royce shrugged. “That’s what Lori said.”

Above him, the hawk shrieked in confirmation. Earl Undine had been able to tell Royce that his father had gone looking for the mirror, while the witch had been able to give Royce a location for it.

“And you’re going to set off across the sea on the word of a witch?” Sir Bolis demanded.

“You can always stay behind if you like,” Mark suggested, in a tone that said he obviously didn’t trust the knight.

“And trust something this important to criminals and Picti?” Sir Bolis demanded. Royce found himself wondering how someone so young could still manage to sound so pompous.

“You have a problem with my people, interloper?” Neave demanded, reaching for a knife.

“That’s enough,” Royce said. “This is going to be difficult enough as it is. We need to work together.”

Almost to his surprise, the others stopped their bickering.

“They trust you,” Mark said, as the others rode clear of one another a little. “When you lead, people follow.”

“Is that why you’re coming with me?” Royce asked.

Mark shook his head. “You know it isn’t.”

“Even though you think the Seven Isles are dangerous?”

“They *are* dangerous,” Mark insisted. “There are creatures there that... they’re not even close to human. There are troll things and the wights of the dead, and worse. Are you *sure* this is where we have to go?”

How could Royce explain it? How could he explain what he’d seen with Lori, the old woman becoming young again and seeing so much? She’d told him where his father was, and Royce had to look, no matter how difficult it was.

“I’m sure,” he said instead.

“Well, you’ve saved my life often enough,” Mark said. “Where you go, I’ll follow.”

Royce couldn’t say how grateful he was to hear that. With everything that lay in front of them... except that it *wasn’t* what lay in front of him that worried him most. It was what he’d left behind. He’d only just become engaged to Olivia, and his thoughts kept drifting back to Earl Undine’s daughter, wishing

that they'd had more time together before he'd had to leave... and if her face sometimes shifted in his mind's eye, becoming closer to Genevieve's... well, he was at least able to push those thoughts from his mind.

Royce pressed on, focusing on the ride ahead so he wouldn't have to think about Genevieve, or the way she'd pushed him aside, or the speed with which everything with Olivia had happened.

He was still thinking about it when Ember swooped down, her claws digging into Royce's shoulder as she landed. She called out, but the voice Royce heard was Lori's, the witch's words coming through clearly into his mind.

"Follow the bird, Royce. She will lead you to someone you need to meet."

Ember took off, and Royce found himself following the hawk with his eyes, wondering just how much control of her the witch had, and just what Lori's intentions were. She'd already told him that she saw violence and death in his future, already blamed him in part for the things that had happened in the village. There was no reason for Royce to think that she wanted to help him.

Except she *did* seem to be helping, and since she knew where his father was, all Royce could do was trust her. Royce followed the hawk, riding as Ember flew out across the heather toward a spot where a single turf-topped longhouse stood, smoke pouring from a spot in front of it.

There was a fire there, and it looked as though everything

from furniture to clothing had been burned in it, the remains still smoking as it burned lower. Two bodies lay next to the fire, clad in the remains of what looked like soldiers' uniforms. They were so blood-soaked that it was hard to see which side they had been on. Royce couldn't see anyone around, though.

"Hello?" he called, dismounting. "Is there anybody there?"

He kept his hand on the hilt of the crystal sword by his side, not sure if there would be bandits here, or some other enemy. Clearly *someone* else had been here to kill the men, and not long ago, but now the house looked empty, the door hanging open as though it had been kicked in.

Then he heard growling from the open doorway, and turned to see a creature standing there, yellow-eyed and snarling.

"Wolf!" Matilde called out as her horse reared.

It *wasn't* quite a wolf, though. This creature was larger, and there was something almost as foxlike as lupine about it. Its teeth were just as long, though, and its claws looked sharp. It was covered in blood, and it seemed obvious that it was the blood of the men there.

"Not a wolf," Neave said. "A bhargir, a magical thing."

"Just a big wolf," Sir Bolis said, dismounting and drawing his sword.

"*Not* a wolf," Neave insisted. "My people have stories about these things. Some say that they're created by evil magicians, others say they're the souls of the dead, or men who wear the skins of stitched together beasts and become something more."

Whatever the creature was, it looked angry. It growled, pacing forward, and Royce found those great yellow eyes fixed on him. For a moment, Royce thought that maybe the creature would leap at him. Then Ember landed on his shoulder again.

“His name is Gwylim.”

“Who?” Royce asked. “What’s happening here, Lori?”

But the bird took flight again, and Royce suspected he wouldn’t have gotten any answers even if she hadn’t. He looked back to see Sir Bolis moving forward, sword raised as if to strike down the beast.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I’ll deal with it.”

The knight started to swing his blade, and almost without thinking, Royce leapt in the way, catching hold of the young knight’s arm.

“Wait,” he said. *“Wait, Bolis.”*

He felt the knight back down in the face of that, but Bolis still kept his blade at the ready.

“That thing has killed two men, and it’s threatening us,” Bolis said. “We should kill it so it doesn’t hurt anyone else!”

“Not yet,” Royce said. He looked over to the... what was it Neave had called it? A bhargir? He could see now that not all of the blood on it was the men’s. There was a wound on its side, running the length of its flank. No wonder the creature was snarling.

“Gwylim?” Royce asked.

Almost as soon as he said it, the growling stopped and the

bhargir cocked its head to one side, regarding him with far more intelligence than a wolf had a right to.

“You can understand some of what I’m saying, can’t you?” Royce guessed. “The witch Lori sent me. If she knows your name, maybe you know her?”

The creature clearly had no way of replying, but even so, it seemed to settle down, moving over to Royce and lying at his feet. As the bhargir did so, Royce noticed something that seemed impossible: the wound on its side was starting to close, knitting together with almost impossible speed. There was definitely nothing normal about this creature.

Royce wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. Lori had obviously directed him to this creature for a reason, but what reason? He looked in the house, trying to work it out, but the house seemed bare of everything, its contents clearly forming a part of the fire in front of it. Why would raiders like the two dead men do something like that?

Unsure of an answer, Royce moved back to his horse. He found the bhargir watching him, sitting behind the fire, close enough that its eyes glowed in the heat of it.

“I don’t know what to do with you,” he said. “But I guess you might be clever enough to decide that for yourself. Do you want to come with us?”

In answer to that, the wolf-like beast padded forward to sit beside Royce’s horse. Somehow, Royce suspected that it would have no problem in keeping up.

“We’re taking monsters with us now?” Sir Bolis asked.

“It’s no stranger than the rest of us,” Matilde said.

“It’s a lot more dangerous,” Neave said, her expression serious. “This is not a good idea.”

Good idea or not, Royce was sure that it was the thing he was meant to do. He pushed his horse forward, heading in the direction of Ablaver, with Ember above, leading the way. If the bird held any clue as to why he’d been brought to find the bhargir that followed now, it didn’t offer any answers.

The town of Ablaver hit Royce with its smell before he saw it, the scent of fish mixed in with the sea in a way that proclaimed what happened there. It was a smell that made him want to turn away and head back, but he kept going.

The sight of it wasn’t much of an improvement, made ugly by the whaling stations to one side, where something about the sight of such large, beautiful creatures being gutted made Royce want to retch. He didn’t, but it was an effort.

“We can’t tell people who we are,” he warned the others.

“Because a group with both Picti and knights could be *anyone*,” Mark pointed out.

“If people ask, we’re mercenaries leaving the war, looking for our next engagement,” Royce said. “People will probably assume that we’re deserters, or bandits, or something like that.”

“I don’t want people thinking that I’m a bandit,” Bolis said. “I’m a loyal warrior of Earl Undine!”

“And right now the best way you can be loyal is to pretend to be something else,” Royce said. The knight seemed to get the message. He even smeared mud on his shield, muttering all the while, so that no one would see the heraldry there. “Everyone keep your hoods up. Especially you, Neave.”

Royce wasn’t sure how the inhabitants of the town would react to one of the Picti among them. He didn’t want to have to fight his way through a whole town. It was bad enough that Gwyllim was still pacing beside them, looking far too large and frightening for a wolf.

They walked into the place, looking around the ramshackle buildings while heading down toward the docks and the waiting ships. Most of them were little more than fishing boats, but some of the whaling ships were larger, and in among them were cogs and long ships that looked as though they might have been there to trade.

There were taverns where Royce could hear the sounds of drunken celebration and occasional violence, and market stalls where it seemed that rancid meat and fine foreign goods were set side by side.

“We should spread out,” Matilde said. She seemed to be eyeing a tavern.

Royce shook his head. “We need to stay together. We’ll head to the docks, find a ship, and *then* we can explore.”

Matilde didn't look happy with that, but even so, they headed down to the docks. There, things appeared to be proceeding lazily, with sailors up on the decks of ships standing around or sitting in the sun.

"How do we do this?" Mark asked, looking around. "I guess finding a captain who will head to the Seven Isles won't be easy."

Royce wasn't sure there was a good answer to that. As far as he could see, there was only one option, and it was anything but subtle.

"Listen to me!" he called out over the vague hubbub of the docks. "I need a ship. Is there a captain here who is willing to sail to the Seven Isles?"

"Is this entirely wise?" Bolis asked.

"How else are we going to find someone?" Royce asked. Even if they walked into the taverns and asked quietly, the news would quickly get around. Maybe this way was even better. He raised his voice. "I'll ask again: who will take us to the Seven Isles?"

"Why do you want to go there?" a man's voice called. The man who strode forward wore the bright silks of a merchant, and was barrel bellied with too much good living.

"I've business there," Royce said, not wanting to give away more than that. "There are people who would hire my and my companions' skills."

The man came further forward. Royce watched his face, searching for any sign that the man had recognized them. There was nothing, though.

“As what?” the man asked. “Are you jesters, jugglers?”

Royce thought quickly. Maybe they *couldn't* pass for mercenaries so easily, but this...

“Of course,” he said. He very carefully didn't look Bolis in the eye. “We have an engagement in the Seven Isles.”

“The money must be good for you to go there,” the captain said. “Which means you can pay, yes?”

Royce took out a small pouch. “Up to a point.”

If it got them to where his father was, he would pay every crown in the purse and more. He threw the purse in the captain's direction. The other man caught it.

“Is that enough?” Royce asked.

That was the other danger. The captain could turn around and take the money, running back to his ship, and if Royce did anything to try to stop him, it would only make it clear who he was. For a moment, everything seemed to stop.

Then the captain nodded. “Aye, it's enough. I'll get you to the Seven Isles in one piece. After that though, you're on your own.”

CHAPTER TWO

Genevieve stumbled away from the town in a daze, barely able to believe what had happened back at Altfor's castle. She'd gone there full of hope, yet now she felt as though there was nothing left inside of her. She'd thought that with the duke's forces defeated, with Royce victorious, she might be able to go to him, might be able to *be* with him.

Instead, her mind's eye took her back to the sight of the ring on Olivia's finger, proclaiming her engagement to the man she loved.

Genevieve staggered as her foot caught on a rough patch of ground, pain flaring in her ankle as it twisted. She limped on, because what else was there for her to do? It wasn't as if there was anyone to help her out there on the heather.

"I should have listened to the witch," she said to herself as she kept walking. The woman, Lori, had tried to warn her that there would only be misery if she went to the castle. She had shown Genevieve two paths, and promised her that the one that didn't lead to Royce was the one that would make her happy. Genevieve hadn't believed her, but now... now it felt as though her heart was breaking.

A part of her wondered if it might still be possible to wander in the direction of that second path, but even as she thought it, Genevieve knew that the possibility was gone. It wasn't just that

she wasn't in the same place now. It was the fact that she'd seen what had happened with Royce, and she could never be happy with anyone else.

"I need to go to Fallsport," Genevieve said. Her hope was that the route she was taking would lead her to the coast. Eventually, she would get there, and there would be a boat that would take her where she needed to go.

Sheila would be in Fallsport by now. Genevieve could go there with her, and they could work out a way to make the best of everything that had happened, assuming that there *was* a best. Was there any way to bring something good out of a situation where she was pregnant with Altfor's child, and the man she loved had abandoned her, and the whole dukedom was in chaos?

Genevieve didn't know, but maybe with her sister's help, they would be able to think of something.

She continued across the heathlands, hunger gnawing at her, tiredness starting to build up in her bones. It might have been easier to bear if she had known exactly how far she had to go, or where she might next be able to find food, but instead, the heather just seemed to stretch on forever ahead of her.

"Maybe I should just lie down and die here," Genevieve said, and even though she didn't truly mean that, there was a part of her that... no, she wouldn't think like that. She wouldn't.

Off in the distance, Genevieve thought she saw people, but she walked away from them, because there was no way that meeting them could turn into anything good for her. As a woman alone in

the wilds, she was at risk from any group of deserters or soldiers or even rebels. As Altfor's bride, the people of Royce's army had no more reason to love her than anyone else.

She walked instead, heading away from them until she was certain they were out of sight. She would do this alone.

Except that she wasn't alone, was she? Genevieve put a hand to her belly, as if she could feel the life growing within. Altfor's baby, but also hers. She had to find a way to protect her child.

She kept walking, while the sun started to fade toward the horizon, lighting the heather in motes of fire. It was a fire that didn't do anything to keep Genevieve warm, though, and she could see her breath starting to mist the air in front of her. It was going to be a cold night. At best, that meant she would have to find some hole or ditch in which to huddle down, burning whatever peat or bracken she could put together to make a real fire.

At worst, it would mean her dead out here, frozen to death on a moor that had no kindness toward the people who tried to walk it. Maybe that was even better than wandering aimlessly until she starved to death. A part of Genevieve wanted to just sit there and watch the lights dancing off the heather until...

With a start, Genevieve realized that not all of the orange and red tints on the moorland around her were the reflection of the sunset. There, in the distance, she could see a light that looked as though it was coming from some kind of building. There were people out here.

Before, the sight of people had been enough to make Genevieve turn and walk away, but that had been in the daylight and the warmth, when people had represented nothing but danger. Now, in the dark and the cold, those dangers were balanced by the hope of shelter.

Genevieve limped toward the light, even though every step she took felt like a battle. She felt her feet sinking into the peaty soil of the heathlands, the thistles scratching at her legs as she kept going. It felt like some kind of barrier thrown up by the natural world, there to tangle and scratch and ultimately sap the will of anyone moving through it. In spite of that, Genevieve kept walking.

Slowly, the lights grew closer, and as the moon started to rise and illuminate more of the landscape, she saw that there was a farm down there. Genevieve walked a little faster, hurrying down toward it as quickly as she could with how exhausted and hurt she was. She got closer, and now there were people coming out of the building.

For a moment, Genevieve shrank back, a part of her wanting to run again. She knew she couldn't, though, so she kept staggering forward until she reached the farmyard, where a man and a woman stood, both holding farm implements as if expecting an attack at any moment. The man held a pitchfork, while the woman had a sickle. They quickly lowered them as they saw that Genevieve was alone.

The couple was older and weather-beaten, looking as though

they had worked this patch of ground for decades, growing a few vegetables and grazing a small number of animals on the heather. They wore simple peasant clothes and as they looked at her, their expressions turned from suspicion to sympathy.

“Oh, look at her, Thom,” the woman said. “The poor thing must be frozen.”

“Aye, I see, Anne,” the man said. He held out a hand toward Genevieve. “Come on, girl, we’d best get you inside.”

He led the way inside, into a low ceilinged farmhouse where a cauldron of stew bubbled in the corner. The man led Genevieve to a chair in front of the fire, and she slumped down in it, almost swallowed up by it. Its comfort only made her realize just how tired she was.

“You just sit there and get some rest,” the woman said.

“Here,” the man said. “She looks familiar, doesn’t she, Anne?”

“I’m no one,” Genevieve said quickly. When people had recognized her back in the village, they’d been angry at her just for being Altfor’s wife, even though she hadn’t had any control over what the duke’s son had done.

“No, I recognize you,” Anne said. “You’re Genevieve, the girl the duke’s son took.”

“I’m—”

“You don’t need to hide who you are with us,” Thom said. “We’re not going to judge you for being stolen away. We’ve lived long enough to see all the girls who have been taken by the nobles around here.”

“You’re safe here,” Anne said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Genevieve couldn’t begin to say how grateful she was for those words. When the farmer handed her a plate of stew, she ate it hungrily, not realizing until she did just how starving she was. They put a blanket over her, and Genevieve slept almost immediately, falling into the kind of darkness without dreams that she could only have hoped for before.

When she woke, daylight streamed in through the windows of the farmhouse, bright enough that Genevieve guessed it must be getting close to noon. Anne was there, but there was no sign of her husband.

“Ah, you’re awake,” she said. “There’s bread and cheese and small beer if you want it.”

Genevieve went to the kitchen table, eating hungrily.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” Anne asked her.

“Well, for just turning up like this,” Genevieve said. “And just wandering into your home, probably putting you in danger if anyone finds out I was here. And... well, all the things that happened while Altfor was in charge.”

“*You’re* not the one who needs to be sorry for that,” Anne insisted. “Do you think I don’t know how things are with nobles carrying girls away? Do you think I was always old?”

“You...” Genevieve began.

Anne nodded. “Things were better under the old king, but they weren’t perfect. There were always those nobles who thought they

could take what they wanted. It's part of what drove a wedge between them and him, from what I hear."

"I'm sorry," Genevieve said, realizing what the old woman was saying.

"Stop saying that," Anne replied. "You've nothing to be sorry for. I'm just telling you so you understand that you're safe here."

"Thank you," Genevieve said, because right then safety seemed like a commodity so precious that almost nobody could offer it to her. She looked around. "Where's your husband?"

"Oh, Thom's out tending the sheep. Not that sheep need much tending. Give them a place to graze and a place to sleep and they're happy. People are harder, always wanting more."

Genevieve could believe that. How much trouble had come because there were always some people in the world who thought they had a right to take everything, and then still wanted more?

"Have you thought about what you're going to do next?" Anne asked her.

"I thought... my sister is safe away in Fallsport," Genevieve said. "I thought I might go to her."

"That's quite a trip," Anne said. "Out across the sea, and I guess you don't have much coin to pay for a ship, either."

Genevieve shook her head. The more she thought about the idea, the less it seemed to make sense. Going to Sheila was the obvious reaction, but also a foolish one. It just meant both of them trying to live out their days on the run, always wondering when there would be a knife in the dark coming for them.

“Well, we’ve no money to help with that,” Anne said. “But you could stay here for a while if you wanted. We could do with the extra help around the farm, and no one would find you out here.”

The generosity of that was almost too much for Genevieve. She could even feel tears starting to prick at the corners of her eyes at the thought of it. What would it be like, just to stay there, just to let this end?

Thoughts of Olivia’s ring came to her then. She’d thought there would be some happiness to find with Royce, and look how badly that had turned out. She wasn’t made for some peaceful resolution to all of this.

And the truth was that she already had a plan. She’d made a plan with Sheila, except that in the rush of emotion, fleeing from the town, she’d forgotten all about it. Now that she’d had a chance to recover, and sleep, and even start to think, that plan was coming back to her again. It had been the best idea then, and it was the best one now.

“I can’t stay,” Genevieve said.

“Where will you go then?” Anne asked her. “What will you do? Are you so set on finding this sister of yours?”

Genevieve shook her head at that, because she knew it wouldn’t work. No, she couldn’t go looking for her sister. She had to go looking for her husband. She had to find him, and if she could stomach it, she had to play the part that fate had given her, as his wife. If she could bear to do that until her child was born and recognized, then she could be rid of Altfor and rule

as mother of the heir to the dukedom, for the good of everyone involved.

It was a desperate plan, but right then, it was the only one she had. Making it work would be the hard part. She didn't know where Altfor was. She knew where he would be going, though. he had lost, and so he would be seeking help, heading to the king. Genevieve knew then where she had to go.

“I need to get to the royal court,” she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Royce clung to the railing of the ship, willing it to move faster, his attention stretched out over the waves through Ember's eyes. Above him, the hawk wheeled and shrieked, calling out above the waves and occasionally plunging down toward them to take some small seabird that had become too tempting a target.

But Royce's attention was on more than that. He reached out as deep as he could into Ember's consciousness, searching for any sign of Lori, any chance to talk to the witch who had sent them this way and find out more about his father. There was nothing though, just the rolling of the sea and the glimmer of the sun.

"You've been standing up here for hours," Mark said, coming to join him.

"It hasn't been hours," Royce insisted.

"Since sunup," Mark said, looking a little concerned. "You and the wolf."

Gwylim huffed beside Royce, the bhargir clearly not liking being referred to as just a wolf. Royce found himself wondering just how much the creature understood as they traveled. Several times, Ember had landed beside him, and Royce had the impression of some silent communication going on.

"Gwylim isn't a wolf," Royce said. "And I was hoping that Lori would have another message for me."

"I know," Mark said.

“Has it caused problems?” Royce asked.

“It’s meant that I’ve been the one mediating all the arguments between the others.”

“There are enough of those,” Royce guessed.

“More than enough,” Mark said. “Neave and Matilde seem to have decided on arguing as the best way to declare their love. Bolis is so stuck up, and the presence of one of the Picti here is enough to rile him.”

“And you, Mark?” Royce asked. “What do you make of the others?”

“I think they’re good to have beside us,” Mark said. “The Picti girl seems fierce, and it’s obvious Matilde is a survivor. Bolis might be a knight, but at least that means he knows how to use that sword of his. But they only work so long as you’re there to lead, Royce, and you’ve been up here all day.”

He had. He’d been hoping to catch some glimpse of his father, or at least find a way to connect with the witch who had sent him this way in search of him. To do that, he’d been keeping his focus out in front of the ship, and not paying much attention to anything that had been going on aboard it. At least things seemed to be going well, because they were heading in the right direction.

“How do you think things are going back home?” Royce asked Mark.

“You’re worried about your brothers?” Mark asked.

Royce nodded. Lofen, Raymond, and Garet were brave, and they would do everything they could to help the fight, but they

could only do so much, and they'd already been captured once.

"Them, and Olivia," he said. He didn't mention that thoughts of his fiancée kept blending with thoughts of Genevieve, not even to Mark, because those thoughts felt like a betrayal of someone who was good, and pure, and whose father had given them so much for someone who had already pushed him away.

"We'll get back to her soon," Mark said, clapping Royce on the shoulder, and for a moment Royce couldn't remember which "her" he meant.

"I hope so," he said. He sent his awareness back up into Ember's eyes, and because of that, he saw the Seven Isles in the distance before anyone else.

They sat shrouded in banks of mist that shifted along with the seas. Jagged rocks punched up from the waters around them like the teeth of great beasts. There *were* great beasts, because Royce saw a whale breach as he watched, its bulk sliding from the water in a cascade of spray. The rocks were adorned with the wrecks of ships that had tried to get by them without knowing the safe routes. It was enough to make Royce grateful that they'd found a captain willing to take them at all.

The islands themselves seemed to be a mixture of greenery and black rock, clustered around a central lagoon with one of their number at their heart. Most of them were decorated with turf and trees and sand so dark it must have been worn down from the granite and basalt faces of the isles. The central island appeared to be a volcano, bubbling with an angry red glare, and

now Royce realized that the mist around them wasn't mist at all, but the falling smoke sinking so that it formed a kind of halo around the islands.

The Mirror of Wisdom would be there somewhere, and if he'd gone in search of it, Royce hoped his father would be here too.

"Land ahoy!" he called out to the others, pointing.

The ship's captain came up to them, smiling. "Where?"

Through Royce's own eyes, the islands were a series of dots that only slowly grew into more.

"We have made it," the captain said. He plucked a flask from his belt. "We must drink to such an occasion, and appease the spirits of the sea."

He held it out to Royce, who took it and sipped politely. The liquid within burned at his throat. Mark took it too, obviously looking for a way to decline, but the captain was too insistent for that. He sipped at it, coughing afterward.

"Now that we are closer," the captain said, "perhaps you will tell us more about why you are here. You are looking for your father, yes?"

It took Royce a moment to realize what the other man had just said.

"I never told you about that," Royce said.

"Oh, don't be coy," the captain said. "Did you think there wouldn't be rumors around all of the villages? You're Royce, the boy who overthrew the old duke. You're looking for your father, and if you've had me carry you all the way to the Seven Isles,

then he must be somewhere here.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Royce said, “we’re just—”

“Traveling players, I know,” the captain said. “Except you’re not. Do you think a little mud on your knight’s shield will disguise who he is, or get rid of the mark on your hand? You’re Royce, there’s no point denying it.”

The man stood staring at him, and Royce found the weight of expectation bearing down on him. He suspected there was no point trying to hide who he was anymore, but even so, he wasn’t comfortable merely admitting it.

“Why does it matter to you?” Mark asked beside him.

“Because I want to help,” the captain said. “You said you wanted to go to the Seven Isles, but that’s a lot of ground. I could take you to any of them. Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know,” Royce admitted. If he knew, this would be a lot simpler.

“There’s no need to be coy,” the captain said. “I want to help. Just tell me where your father is, and I’ll take you straight to him. Tell me where he is.”

There was a note of hardness in the captain’s tone then that caught Royce a little off guard. Royce looked at him, trying to work out what was going on, and reached out for Ember’s senses. He pulled her back toward the ship, and looked down on it from above in a way he hadn’t since they set off; he’d been too busy looking forward for the islands ahead, or trying to reach through

Ember to try to contact Lori.

If he'd looked back toward the ship, he would have seen his friends tied in the stern, their hands behind their backs with their armor and weapons off to one side and a clutch of sailors guarding them.

“What do you think you're doing?” Royce said. “Release my friends at once!”

The captain looked at him in obvious shock, as though only just realizing what Royce could do.

“Magic!” the captain said, taking a step back.

Royce reached for the crystal sword and staggered. Too late, he realized just how shaky and uncertain he felt on his feet. The flask! There had been something in the flask! Mark was already half-slumped against the railings.

“We'll take you to your friends,” the captain said, “and maybe we'll find a way to get you to talk if we hurt them enough. The king will pay handsomely for you, but them... we can cut them as much as we need to.”

He clapped his hands, and a couple of sailors came forward, grabbing Mark and Royce, dragging them back toward the stern of the ship.

“Why do this?” Royce demanded, the words seeming to come through a fog as thick as the one around the approaching Seven Isles.

“Why do anything?” the captain said with a shrug. “Money! I could take you all the way to the Seven Isles, risking my ship

on the rocks there, or I could take your money and then make whatever the reward is as well for bringing you to King Carris.”

“Help me, and I’ll find a way to reward you just as well,” Royce managed. It was desperate sounding even to his ears.

The captain laughed. “With what? You’ve no coin. Or are you planning to be king yourself? There’s no profit in starting a war, boy. I do comfortably enough as it is, taking a few people where they need to go, selling a few where there’s coin for them, robbing the odd ship that’s out alone. I do very nicely with things as they are.”

Royce wanted to strike out at the man, but sailors had him by the wrists now, and the lethargy spreading through him made it hard to fight back against them.

“Oh, you want to fight?” the captain asked. “Trust me, after the effort you’ve put me to, I wouldn’t. All this way... I only took you this far because I thought there was a chance of delivering the old king as well as you. I’m not breaking my ship on those rocks, though.”

A thought came to Royce; a desperate, dangerous thought.

“You’ll never find my father unless you’re willing to go there,” he said.

“So you’ll tell us where he is?” the captain asked.

“I...” Royce pretended broken exhaustion. “I can show you.”

The captain rubbed his hands together, nodding to the sailors with him. He led the way to the ship’s bridge, where Matilde, Neave, and Bolis were all tied while a sailor worked the wheel.

The sailors threw Mark down beside them, while Gwyllim padded along in their wake.

The captain took out a knife, heading across to Mark. “So, your friend is going to tell us where to find the old king, and if he gives us any trouble, I’m going to cut pieces off you until he does.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Royce said. The knife so close to Mark made this more dangerous, but there was no other option. “I’ll guide you.”

He gazed through Ember’s eyes, looking down on the rocks and the wrecks close to the first of the islands. Using her sight, he started to call out instructions.

“Left a little,” he said.

“You think you get to tell us where to go?” the captain demanded.

“Do you want me to guide you to my father or not?” Royce asked. He still felt so weak. If he had his strength, he would simply cut through the ship’s crew and save his friends. As it was... as it was, this was desperate. “If you don’t believe me, keep an eye on the bird. Ember is leading us.”

The captain looked up, and Royce looked over to Gwyllim, wondering just how much the wolf-like creature understood. He looked over to the captain pointedly, hoping it was enough. He kept looking through Ember’s eyes, letting the ship get closer to land and waiting for his chance...

“Now!” Royce called out, and the bhargir leapt, striking

the captain in the chest even as Royce grabbed the wheel and wrenched it around toward a set of rocks.

The ship lurched, and even as it did so, Royce was already lunging toward his friends. Drugged as he was, it felt as though he were moving in slow motion, sounds and sights distorted as he heard the noise of a vicious fight coming to him from just a little way away. He couldn't hope to join that fight, as unsteady as he was, but he *could* try to free his friends. He drew the crystal sword, leaning down to cut at the ropes holding Matilde's hands.

"Thanks," she said as she rubbed her wrists. "I'll... behind you!"

Royce spun and thrust his blade into the chest of a sailor who was running at him. Even unsteady, barely able to stand, Royce had the strength to drive the crystal sword right through the man. The sailor's sword cut down, and Royce felt something impact on his armor even as the sailor stood transfixed for a moment, and then collapsed.

Royce continued cutting the others free, and another sailor ran at them. This time, Ember swooped down to claw at his face, holding him still long enough for Bolis to kick him back over the side.

Then the ship hit the rocks with a screech of wood like a forest being uprooted, and the whole deck turned sideways.

Men screamed as they toppled from it, down into the waters below. Royce saw something rise up from that water, long and snakelike, fan-finned and knife-toothed, to meet them. The

creature came up out of the water, rising like a tower from it, a man caught in its mouth and screaming as those needle teeth clamped down. Another was wrapped in its coils, and Royce heard the crack of bones as the movement of the great beast crushed him.

Royce had a moment to simply stare at the cruelty of the death, then he slid along the deck toward the edge, toward the sea serpent's waiting maw.

He grabbed for the railings, barely holding himself in place. Beside him, Mark, Matilde, Bolis, and Neave clung on for their lives, while the ship continued to tear itself apart.

"What *exactly* was your plan?" Mark asked.

"This is pretty much it," Royce admitted. Crash the ship and then try to work out what to do next. It had been a move founded on nothing more than hope, and now it had left them on a ship that was slowly tearing in half, its two parts ready to topple them down to the rocks, or worse, drag them into the depths.

"What do we do now?" Neave asked. She had one arm wrapped around the railings, the other around Matilde.

"I think..." Royce said, trying to think through the fog of his thoughts. "I think we need to jump!"

"Jump in that?" Bolis said. "Are you mad?"

"If we stay, we'll be tangled in the wreckage and dragged down," Royce said. "We need to get clear, and the only way to do that is jump!"

There was another reason to jump, too. Men were advancing

along the deck, and there were too many to fight in his weakened state. In *any* state. Gwylim was there, blood around his mouth as he growled, but what could even a creature like him do about a situation like this?

There was only one choice left, so Royce made it for his friends. Without hesitating, he pushed Bolis and Mark over the side. Matilde looked as though she might try to stay, but Neave dragged her off the rail. Gwylim stepped up to it, the bhargir growling before it leapt clear.

That just left one thing to do. Royce stood up on the railing, looking down to where the water frothed and swirled below. He put the crystal sword back in its sheath, hoped the armor he'd found in the tower was as light as it felt...

...and leapt.

CHAPTER FOUR

Raymond stood at a crossroads on the edge of the old duke's territory with his brothers, knowing that he ought to press on, but at the same time not wanting to split away from the others just yet. Soon, he, Lofen, and Gareth would have to go off and undertake the things that Royce needed; that *all* of them needed.

"Nervous?" he asked the others.

"Of course not," Lofen said, the bravado obvious. Lofen was always ready for a fight, and maybe that would serve him well in going to seek out the Picti, but even so, Raymond found himself thinking that it would have been better if he'd had more than a map and a general idea.

"I'll do what we need," Gareth said, obviously trying to look as brave as his brothers. Raymond wanted to tell him that he *knew* Gareth was brave—he'd seen how strong the others had been when they'd been trapped down in Altfor's dungeon. "I'll get the bannermen for our cause."

"I'll find you the ones who will help," Moira said, her horse next to Gareth's. Raymond wasn't sure what to think about her presence there. The fact that she was a noble would help in getting the nobles on their side, and she *had* volunteered to help, but Raymond could already see the way Gareth was looking at her, and he just *knew* that was going to be complicated.

"See that you keep safe," Raymond said to his youngest

brother. He turned his attention to Moira. There was no denying she was beautiful, and he wasn't going to blame her for having been taken by the nobles, but even so, there was something about the way she'd volunteered for this that made him uneasy. "See that you *keep* him safe."

"I'm not a child," Gareth said. "I'm a man, and I'll do a man's work of this."

"Just so long as you get us the people we need," Raymond said.

"I've the easy part," Gareth insisted. "You're the one who has to persuade people to rise up."

Raymond nodded. "They'll rise. They'll do it for Royce."

He'd seen the way his brother had been able to persuade people to fight harder, and how Royce had been able to overcome the most dangerous of foes. He'd cut down a master warrior like Sir Alistair, and had rallied Earl Undine's forces. People would rise up in Royce's name.

"I guess this is goodbye then," Lofen said. There wasn't much emotion obvious in it, but Raymond knew it was there under the surface. Raymond just hoped his brother could make a more emotional plea when it came to the Picti. He also hoped his brother would be safe, because they'd all seen what the wild people of the land were capable of, up on the healing rock.

"It's not goodbye for long, I hope," Raymond said. "Just remember—"

"Gather them at Earl Undine's castle, not at the old duke's," Lofen said. "Aye, I know. You've said it enough times on the way

so far.”

“I was going to say remember that I love you both, brothers,” Raymond said. “Even if you are an idiot, Lofen, and Garet’s too wet behind the ears for any sense.”

“At least we’re not a mother hen clucking over everyone,” Garet shot back. He turned his horse and heeled it forward. “I’ll see you soon, brother, with an army!”

“I’ll keep him safe,” Moira said, turning her own horse to follow Garet.

“See that you do,” Raymond called after her.

“You’re being hard on her,” Lofen said, as the two rode away.

“It’s more the part where Garet’s *soft* on her that worries me,” Raymond said.

He saw his brother shrug. “At least he gets a beautiful woman with him who knows the people he’s going to see. Why I couldn’t have that Neave come with me...”

Raymond laughed at that. “You think she’d be interested in you? You’ve seen her with Matilde. Besides, Picti will be easy enough to find. Just wander the wild places until one of them shoots something at you.”

Lofen swallowed then. “You’re joking, but you’ll feel bad if I come back filled with arrows. Still, I’ll do it, and I’ll bring back my own army, see how people like fighting the wild folk.”

He turned and rode in the direction of what they thought would be Picti lands, which left Raymond waiting by the crossroads alone. Compared to his brothers, it felt as though

he had the easiest task: persuade people who were already discontented throughout the kingdom to join their cause. After so many years of being abused by nobles serving under King Carris, they should be tinder dry kindling, waiting for the spark of his words.

Even so, as Raymond turned his horse in the direction of one of the villages and kicked it into a canter, he found himself wishing that his brothers were coming with him.

The first village was a place so small that it probably wouldn't have shown up on most maps. It had a name, Byesby, and a few houses, and that was it. It was barely more than a glorified farmstead, really, without even an inn to draw the locals together. The best that could be said of it was that at least there weren't any guards around, serving some local ruler, who might try to stop Raymond in getting people to rise up.

He rode to the center of the place, which seemed to be marked by a low wooden post for messages, set next to a well that obviously hadn't been repaired in a while. There were a few people out in the street working, and more came out as Raymond sat there on his horse. They probably didn't see many people in armor out here. Possibly, they even thought he'd been sent by whichever nobleman claimed the place.

"Listen to me," Raymond called out from the back of his

horse. “Gather round, all of you!”

Slowly, people started to come forward. Raymond had seen more people in battles, but it occurred to him as they slowly surrounded him that he’d never had to speak in front of so many before. In that moment, his mouth felt dry, and his palms clammy.

“Who’re you?” one man, who looked burly enough to be a blacksmith, demanded. “We’ve no time for raiders and bandits out here.”

He hefted a hammer as if to emphasize the point that they weren’t defenseless.

“Then it’s just as well that I’m neither!” Raymond shouted back to the man. “I’m here to *help* you.”

“Unless you’re planning to lend a hand with the harvest, I don’t see how you can help us,” another man said.

One of the older women there looked Raymond up and down. “*I can think of a few ways.*”

Just the way she said it was enough to send the heat of embarrassment spreading through Raymond. He fought it back, and it felt at least as difficult as fighting a swordsman would have been.

“Haven’t you heard that the old duke and his son Altfor have been overthrown?” Raymond called out.

“What’s that to do with us?” the blacksmith called back. From the way people nodded as he spoke, Raymond had the feeling that he was the one there they listened to. “We’re on Lord Harrish’s

lands.”

“Lord Harrish, who takes from you the way the other nobles take,” Raymond said. He knew there were better, kinder nobles like Earl Undine, but from what he could remember of the ruler here, he wasn’t one of them. “How often do they have to ride into your villages, stealing from you, before you tell them that enough is enough?”

“We’d be pretty stupid to do that,” the blacksmith called back. “He has soldiers.”

“And we have an army!” Raymond called back. “You’ve heard that the old duke was overthrown? Well, we did it, in the name of the rightful king, Royce!”

In his imagination, his voice boomed out over the place. In practice, Raymond could see some of the people at the back straining to hear him.

“You’re Royce?” the blacksmith called back. “You’re the one claiming to be the son of the old king?”

“No, no,” Raymond explained quickly. “I’m his brother.”

“So *you’re* the son of the old king too?” the smith demanded.

“No, I’m not,” Raymond said. “I’m the son of a villager, but Royce is—”

“Well, make up your mind,” the old woman who’d embarrassed him said. “If this Royce is your brother, then he can’t be the son of the old king. It stands to reason.”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong,” Raymond said. “Please, just listen to me, give me a chance to explain it all, and—”

“And what?” the blacksmith said. “You’ll tell us how this Royce is worth us following him? You’ll tell us how we should go out and die in someone else’s war?”

“Yes!” Raymond said, and then realized how that must sound. “No, I mean... it *isn't* someone else’s war. It’s a war for everyone.”

The smith didn’t seem very convinced by that. He strode up to lean against the well, no longer a part of the crowd, but the one addressing it.

“Really?” he said, looking out to the others there. “You all know me, and I know you, and we *all* know what it’s like when nobles fight. They come and they take us for their armies, and they promise us all kinds of things, but when it’s all done, it’s us who’re dead, and they go back to doing what they want.”

“Royce is different!” Raymond insisted.

“Why is he different?” the smith shot back.

“Because he’s one of us,” Raymond said. “He was raised in a village. He knows what it’s like. He *cares*.”

The smith sneered at that. “If he cares so much, then where is he? Why is he not here, rather than some boy saying he’s his brother?”

Raymond knew then that there was no point in continuing. The people here weren’t going to listen to him, no matter what he said. They’d heard too many promises from too many other people, back in the days before King Carris had forbidden his nobles from fighting. Only the thought that Royce might actually

care for them would be enough to persuade people, and the smith was right: they had no reason to believe that when he wasn't even there.

Raymond turned his horse, riding out of the village with as much dignity as he could find right then. It wasn't much.

He rode out on the path in the direction of the next village, trying to think as he went, and ignoring the steady rain that started to fall around him.

He loved his brother, but he also wished that Royce hadn't felt the need to leave to find his father. Objectively, Raymond could understand how much finding the old king would help their cause, but it was Royce people would follow, Royce they needed to see in order to rise up. Without him there, Raymond wasn't sure if he would be able to pull together any kind of army for his brother.

That meant that when King Carris struck back, it would just be Earl Undine's forces against the full might of the royal army. Raymond didn't know how big that army would be, but since it would be composed of forces from every lord in the land... they would have no chance.

If only there were some way that Royce could be here, Raymond had no doubt he would be able to raise the army they needed. As it was, though, he found himself hoping that Lofen and Garet would have better luck.

"We can't leave it to luck though," Raymond said to himself. "Not when there are so many people who will die."

He'd seen firsthand what the nobles could do to those who crossed them. There were the gibbets, the tortures on the healing stone, and worse. At the very least, every village that stood would find itself ravaged, which only gave those that remained more reasons not to join in the revolt.

Raymond sighed. There was no way to square the circle: they needed Royce, but they couldn't have him while he went to find his father. Unless...

"No, that couldn't work," Raymond said to himself.

Except that maybe it could. It wasn't as though anyone here actually knew what Royce looked like. They might have heard of him, might even have heard a general description, but everyone knew how stories exaggerated.

"This is a stupid idea," Raymond said.

The trouble was that it was the only idea he could think of right then. Yes, it would be dangerous, because Royce was a hunted man. Yes, it would store up trouble for later: people would feel betrayed when they found out, some might even desert. More wouldn't though. More would feel too connected to the cause once they were a part of the army, or would be too busy fighting to think about it.

"They might not even *see* Royce close up," Raymond mused.

He realized that he had made a decision without exactly making it, and continued on his route toward another village. He chose one a couple of villages over, because he didn't want stories spreading from Byesby and spoiling what he was about to do.

This village was larger, with an inn and a great barn that served as a general store. It was large enough that the sight of one man riding into the village didn't bring people out of their houses with the sheer strangeness of it all. It meant that Raymond had to sit on horseback in the village square, calling out again and again until people came out to him.

"Everyone, listen. Listen to me! I have news!"

He waited until people gathered around before he started to speak.

"War is coming!" he said. "You've heard the stories: that the son of the true king has come back, and overthrown a duke who ravaged his own people! Well, it's true, and I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that this is just another squabble between nobles that you have no part of, but I'm here to tell you that you *do* have a part in it. That *this* is something different."

"Oh, and why's that?" a man demanded from the back of the growing crowd. Raymond had the feeling of things building up in the same way they had before.

"Because this is a chance to actually change things. Because this is *not* a squabble among nobles, but a chance to make a world that isn't about a few nobles holding us all down. Because this is one fight where the people involved actually *care* about people like you, people like all of us."

"Is that so?" the man asked. "Well then, stranger, who are you, that you know so much about it all?"

Raymond took a breath, knowing this was the moment when

he had to either do it or not do it, and once it was done, it couldn't be undone.

“Come on,” the man demanded. “Who are you, to say that some far off noble actually cares about any of the likes of us?”

“It's simple,” Raymond said, and this time, his voice *did* boom out over the village for everyone to hear. “My name is Royce, and I am the son of King Philip, the true and rightful king of this land!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Royce was padding through a forest, the trees blending into one another until it became impossible to know the path. He was lost, and somehow he knew that this was a place where to be lost was to die.

He continued onward, not knowing what else to do. Around him now, the trees closed in, and their branches whipped around in an unseen wind, buffeting Royce and lashing him. Their branches tore at his skin, and now there were brambles to go with the branches, ripping into him and holding him back. It took everything he had to keep going.

Why keep going, though? He didn't know where he was, so why press forward like this, through the darkness and the uncertainty of the forest? His energy was fading, so why not sit down on the stump of a tree, waiting until he got his breath back, and—

“To stop is to die, my son.” The voice came through the trees, and even though he had only heard it in dreams, Royce instantly recognized it as that of his father. He turned toward the sound, starting forward.

“Father, where are you?” he called out, pushing in the direction the voice seemed to have come from.

The way was, if anything, even harder here. There were fallen trees to contend with, and Royce found it harder to leap

over them each time. There were rocks protruding from the forest floor, and now it seemed that Royce had to climb as much as run just to get around them. The route ahead was still indistinguishable from the rest of the forest, and Royce could feel the despair of not knowing pressing down on him.

That was when he saw the white hart standing there, the deer waiting and looking at him expectantly. With the same strange certainty that he had felt before, Royce *knew* that this animal was there to show him the way. He turned to follow, running in its wake.

The white hart was fast, and Royce had to put everything he had into keeping up. It felt as though his lungs were exploding with the effort, and his limbs were on fire. Even so, he kept running, through the whipping branches of the trees and on into a space where the deer vanished, replaced by an armored figure rimmed in white light.

“Father,” Royce said, gasping the word. He felt as though he had no more breath, no more time.

His father nodded and smiled, then, inexplicably, pointed upward. “You need to go now, Royce. Kick, kick toward the light.”

Looking up, Royce saw a light above him, and as he tried to do as his father said, the light grew closer and closer...

Royce came to with a spluttering breath that seemed to involve as much water as air. He spat out sea water and started to sit up, but careful hands held him in place. Royce fought against them for a moment before he realized that it was Mark there, his hands pushing the water out of Royce's stomach.

"Careful," his friend said. "You'll tip the raft."

The "raft" in question was no more than a section of the ship's mast that had broken off in the chaos, and then tangled with enough other driftwood to form a kind of temporary floating platform, buoyed up and down by the waves.

Bolis, Neave, and Matilde knelt on the makeshift craft, with Gwylim a little way away toward the edge and Ember flying overhead. Matilde had a gash on her side that might have come from a knife or a piece of wood, but either way blood was leaking into the water while Neave fussed over her and cut lengths of sail cloth into bandages. Sir Bolis was hastily trying to lash a metal fitting to a length of wood, forming a crude harpoon. Of his own armor and weapons, there was no sign.

Royce looked down quickly, and saw that the crystal sword was still by his side, while he still wore the armor that he had taken from Earl Undine's tower.

"I don't know how you managed to swim in that," Mark said, "but you did. You popped up like a cork and I pulled you out."

“Thank you,” Royce said, offering his hand to his friend.

Mark clasped it firmly. “After all the times you’ve saved me, you don’t need to thank me. I’m just glad you survived.”

“For now,” Bolis said from the prow of their makeshift raft. “We’re still in danger.”

Royce looked around, trying to make sense of things beyond the raft. He could see that they’d been washed further out to sea, so that the Seven Isles were a speck in the distance once again. The sea was roiling too, as if a storm might follow. Their raft was creaking under the strain of it all.

“Forget a spear,” Royce said. “We need to focus on tying the raft together.”

“You didn’t see the creature devouring people,” Bolis said. “It must have killed every sailor who was caught in the main wreck. That sea-wyrm is nothing I want to face unarmed.”

“And do you want to face it in the water when the raft falls apart or sinks?” Royce countered. He’d seen the creature Bolis was worried about, and he knew how big a threat it would be, but right then, the sea could kill them just as certainly.

There were ropes attached to the masts, and Royce pointed to one of them. “Everyone try to grab pieces of rope that aren’t already tangling things and use them to tie the raft together. That’s the priority, then paddle so that we can get to land, *then* weapons.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Bolis said, but he did it anyway. So did Neave and Mark. When Matilde went to help, she slumped

back, grimacing in pain.

“We’ve got this,” Royce told her. “How bad is it?”

“I’m not going to die from it,” Matilde said. “At least... I don’t think I am.”

“Why does she get to sit there and rest?” Bolis asked.

Neave was immediately there in front of him, a dagger in her hand. “Give me one reason not to gut you and throw you to the fish, invader.”

Royce moved to step between them, but Gwyllim was there first, the bhargir’s bulk pushing them apart.

“We can’t afford to fight,” Royce said. “We have to work together, or we’ll all drown.”

They grumbled, but they went back to work, and soon, the raft felt a lot more stable than it had before. From where she sat, Matilde was already working on lashing a plank to a longer piece of wood, creating a kind of oar. Royce joined her, and soon, they had an oar for each of them.

“Which way?” Bolis asked, and Royce pointed. There was only one way possible on a makeshift craft like this.

“Back toward the isles,” he said.

“And the creature,” Mark pointed out.

“Maybe we’ll be lucky and slip by it,” Royce said.

“Maybe it will have eaten its fill,” Neave said with a look that said she hoped everyone on the ship had been a part of its meal.

Royce didn’t know how likely that was, but there didn’t seem to be any other option; they had to try to get back to the islands.

“Row together,” he said. “Ready?”

They paddled the raft in the direction of the islands. All of them, even Matilde, helped. Even with all of them paddling, it was still hard going, because their oars weren't really designed for the task, and because the waves seemed almost determined to pull them back out into the sea. Royce knew they couldn't let that happen. Out there, they would sink, or die of thirst, or fall prey to some other creature of the deep. Their only hope lay on land.

“Paddle harder,” Royce yelled, trying to encourage them. “We're making progress.”

They were, but it was slow. Through Ember's eyes, they were a mere dot against the vastness of the ocean. That dot was moving in the direction of the islands, but barely faster than it might have if it had been bobbing along on the tide. Even so, they *were* growing closer, in among the mist and the rocks and the rest of it.

“We're nearly there,” Mark said, and his friend sounded hopeful at the prospect. Looking at it all from above using Ember's sight, Royce could still see the jagged maze of rocks around the islands, the swirling tides around them seeming almost determined to drag any ship that came too close onto them.

The closest of the islands had beaches around its edges, but those beaches were ringed by rocks and reefs, with a tide before them that seemed to rush far too fast. Looking at it all, Royce thought that perhaps it might be better to head for another of the islands, avoiding this first one completely in spite of the danger

of their situation.

Then Gwylim howled, long and low and warning. The sound was enough to make Royce have Ember wheel back toward the raft, giving him the benefit of her view as she looked down. From up there, Royce could see the shadow in the water powering forward toward them...

“The creature!” he yelled, snapping back to himself just as the beast reared up out of the water in sinuous coils, eel-like and blade-finned, its teeth shining in the sun.

It plunged down into the water near the raft, and the wave plowed into them, almost tipping the tiny vessel. A part of Royce guessed it was what the creature intended; maybe it had worked out that people were easier to eat once they were in the water.

He drew the crystal sword, not knowing what else to do.

The creature flowed up out of the water once more, and Royce slashed at it, only able to graze it as it towered over him. The thing looked down at him, as if trying to work out what this thing was that was causing it pain. It struck out toward Royce, jaws gnashing, and Royce jumped back as far as the raft would allow, cutting at it. Gwylim was there, leaping at the beast and biting.

It lashed out again, and Royce spun away from the strike, feeling the force of the thing’s fins slam into his armor. Without it, he guessed they would have torn him in half, and even as it was, it knocked the breath from him, sending him to his knees for a moment.

The creature spun again, and Royce knew there would be no

chance to dodge this time.

Then Bolis was there, his improvised spear at the ready, flinging it like a harpoon at a whale, aiming for the beast's head. It struck the sea-wyrm in one of its massive eyes, bringing a shriek from it that echoed across the water even as the thing slammed into Bolis, knocking him from the raft.

To Royce's surprise, Neave threw herself flat, grabbing him and pulling him close to the raft. He saw Mark rush forward too, and they were just in time, hauling the knight bleeding from the water before great jaws came up in the spot where he had been. Royce stepped over, striking with the crystal sword again, and again blood flowed.

It wasn't enough; the sea-wyrm was simply too big to kill with a few strokes of even a sword like this. It plunged beneath the waves, and now Royce could see it backing away, its coils forming arches as it swam from wave to wave.

"It's running," Bolis said, clutching at the wounds across his chest.

Royce shook his head. "It won't give in that easily."

"But it's backing off," the knight insisted. "We fought it, and wounded it, and now it's going away in search of easier prey."

Royce shook his head. "There's no other prey to take, and we haven't hurt it *that* much. It's not running; it's building its strength back up."

Sure enough, Royce saw it turn, the coils heading back toward them now from a distance.

“Row!” Royce said. “Our only chance is to row!”

Sheathing the crystal sword, he grabbed an oar and started to paddle for the shore of the first island, not caring now if it took them into the riptide or not. Around him, the others seemed to get the message about what was happening, and paddled for their lives, regardless of how injured they were.

Royce felt the moment when the current caught their raft, dragging it in toward the shore. Behind them, the head of the sea-wyrm broke the surface and the thing’s maw opened wide, ready to swallow them.

He looked down through Ember’s eyes, spotting an outcrop of rocks ahead, obvious from above but hidden by the waves from the raft. Royce pointed.

“Right!”

Everyone dug in with their oars, sending the raft to the right even as the current continued to pull it forward. They skirted the rocks, avoiding them barely, and Royce glanced back to see the sea-wyrm caught on them, writhing to get free before turning and heading back into the depths.

By then, Royce was already looking out for more rocks. They were too close the island now to hope to go anywhere else, and the current dragged them forward inexorably. The only chance was to dodge the rocks as best they could.

“Left!” Royce called out.

They dug in their oars and managed to avoid another set of rocks, but now there was a reef ahead, and Royce couldn’t see

any way around it.

“Hold on!” he yelled to the others, and saw them grab hold of the raft just as it hit the rocks beneath the surface. Royce found himself thrown forward, and for the second time that day he was in the water, struggling to swim.

Mark had been right when it came to the armor—it was impossible that anyone should be able to swim in it, and yet it was no worse than swimming in ordinary clothes might have been. He kicked out for the surface, and broke through while the current continued to carry him forward.

The sea spat them out onto the land with bruising force, sand coming up to meet Royce as a wave carried him up onto the beach. It left him there, groaning in pain, and around him, he could see the others lying on the sand, Bolis and Matilde bleeding, Neave and Mark looking bruised, and even Gwyllim looking battered by the experience, in spite of the speed Royce had seen him heal.

“We’re alive,” Mark said, and Royce could hear the shock in his friend’s voice. He shared some of it, along with the elation behind it at the thought that his friends were safe.

No, not safe.

They were alive, that was true, but looking out on the water, Royce could see that their raft had already broken apart into fragments, carried away on the waves. They had no way of getting back now, or even of crossing over onto another of the islands.

They’d made it to one of the Seven Isles, but now, it seemed

that they were stuck.

CHAPTER SIX

Dust wandered down in the direction of the docks, signs filling the world around him. In the flight of birds, he saw that this was the route he had to take. In the bubbling of a stream, he saw that he would have to pass over the sea.

Then there were the images of Royce that stayed in front of him whenever he closed his eyes.

They had been there ever since he had inhaled so much of the priests' smoke, seeing future after future. He had seen what would happen if nothing altered, had seen the violence and the pain and the death.

"And I *chose*," Dust said to himself. The oddness of that took a moment to sink in. He was Angarthim, one of those who walked the world, setting the futures as the priests saw that they were supposed to run, giving those who needed to die over to the darkness that lay beyond life. Angarthim did not choose, did not seek to change fate.

"The priests did it first," Dust whispered. He looked up to try to find confirmation that he was doing the right things, and found it in the way clouds shifted, forming patterns that seemed to mirror the designs of the sacred books.

The priests had tried to change things, had tried to alter things to avoid their own destruction in what was going to come. Things were no longer running on the course that the fates had set, and

now someone had to choose, choose for everyone. That someone was Dust.

“I will stop this,” he said. “The devastation to come will be avoided. I will make the world *better*.”

Of course, to do that, he had to stop Royce. Dust had seen the futures, possibility after possibility lining up before him. He had seen a slender few where things turned out well, but the truth was that in too many, Royce’s actions brought about war and worse than war: they unleashed destruction on the land that had to be prevented.

Angarthim were not heroes; if anything, those who knew what they were seemed to think of them as monsters and murderers, not understanding that they were merely the well-trained hands of fate.

“I still listen to fate,” Dust said. It was just that now, instead of a single line given to him by the priests, all of the future was spread out in front of him to choose from. All of those possibilities seemed to point to the docks.

He walked down into the harbor town, and people stared, as people always stared. Children pointed, and some shrank back. A few men touched hands to weapons, and there was a time when Dust would have struck them down for doing it. The signs for death would have stood above them, and then...

“They didn’t stand above Royce,” Dust whispered to himself, trying to make sense of it all. They had been there together in a forest, him and the boy whose actions would simultaneously

overthrow the old order and bring about destruction. They had been there, and nothing had told him to strike, to act.

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