



MORGAN RICE

THE WAY OF STEEL--BOOK #4

ONLY

THE

BOLD

The Way of Steel

Morgan Rice

**Only the Bold**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Rice M.**

Only the Bold / M. Rice — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,  
— (The Way of Steel)

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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 BOLD**, the epic finale to the Way of Steel, Royce finds him transformed after looking into the magic mirror. Has he gained the ultimate wisdom? Or has he gone mad? The mirror reveals many secrets, and Royce finds himself heading towards his father’s hiding place. Will he meet his father for the first time? Genevieve and Royce’s tragic romance finally comes to a head, culminating in a surprise twist that will change both of their lives forever. And amidst all of this comes the epic battle with the king’s armies, one that will determine the fate of the land—and the kingship—once and for all. **ONLY THE BOLD** 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. Please visit [www.morganricebooks.com](http://www.morganricebooks.com) for updates about the release of Morgan’s forthcoming fantasy series.

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# Morgan Rice

## Only the Bold (The Way of Steel—Book 4)

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 four books; and of the fantasy series THE WAY OF STEEL, comprising four books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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*--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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## CHAPTER ONE

Royce stared into the Mirror of Wisdom, and for the first few moments, all he could see was the reflection of the world around him. He saw the collapsing shape of the first of the Seven Isles, the flow of the waves around the boat, the presence of Mark, Neave, Matilde, Ember the hawk, and Gwylim the wolf-like bhargir.

In those moments, it seemed impossible to understand why Dust had screamed on looking into it, why his father had warned Royce against looking, or why it had driven Barihash mad, down in his grotto beneath the volcano. It seemed like no more than an ordinary mirror.

“Royce, is this a good idea?” Mark demanded from further back in the boat. His friend sounded worried, and Royce could understand the reasons for it. They’d all been through so much, and the dangers of the Seven Isles were more than real. Mark had at least one fresh scar from the experience, while ash from the island sat in his dark hair.

Neave and Matilde sat at the heart of the boat, controlling the sail between them. Royce could see them in the mirror, the Picti girl dark-haired and tattooed in woad, Matilde’s red hair matted with what might have been blood from one of the many fights they’d had. In the mirror, Royce thought he caught a flicker of something: the two of them in a cottage somewhere...

Royce kept looking, determined to see all that the mirror would show him. Gwylim barked a warning, but Royce ignored the bhargir. He needed to know... he needed to see what had happened to his father.

The moment the mirror started to connect with him, it felt like the whole world coming into focus, the reflection from the glass spreading out so that it seemed to encompass everything Royce could see. Looking at the world in the mirror, he realized that he could make out every blade of grass on distant beaches, understand every movement of the currents that threatened to pull the boat this way and that. Almost without thinking about it, Royce moved to the tiller, making a small course correction that sent them past a spot where rocks waited just beneath the waves.

“Why did you do that?” Mark asked.

Royce opened his mouth to explain about the rocks, but even as he did, he could feel his grip on the mirror slipping away, the patterns there too complex to both hold and explain, the sight of which could be twisted too much by any attempt to explain it. Royce clamped his mouth shut, determined to keep looking.

Royce could see now how the Mirror of Wisdom might send men mad. Possibilities tumbled through his mind like the rocks that fell from the collapsing volcano they were putting further and further behind them with every moment. Even those rocks held possibilities, with Royce seeing the ways that every breath of wind or jolt of the earth might send them tumbling in a fractionally different direction.

“And they’re just rocks!” Royce exclaimed to himself, as he continued to stare into the mirror. There was a kind of clarity and focus there that he had never experienced before, but which threatened to overwhelm him if he wasn’t careful. There was so much of everything to see in the mirror that it was almost impossible to focus on *anything*, and Royce had to drag his attention back to what he wanted again and again.

The flight of birds distracted him for a moment, then the play of sunlight off of the waves. Each held so many secrets, and the sheer knowing of it all made Royce’s brain feel as though it was about to burst. He saw every possibility, and trying to narrow those down to just the ones that mattered was like trying to pick a single tree out of a forest, with all its branching paths.

“Show me the fight to come,” Royce demanded of the mirror. “Show me what I have to do. Show me my father.”

He saw then, and for a moment, the horror of it threatened to overwhelm him, threatened to make him cry out in despair the way Dust had done. He saw then all the reasons why Dust had come after him. He saw the death that would follow in the battles, the ways in which the war might drag on and on. Royce saw the fight against King Carris dragging the whole kingdom into bloody civil war, and the endless, *endless* deaths that might follow.

He saw the potential for victory, and attempts to make the kingdom a better place, but Royce also saw all the ways that it could go wrong. He saw venal courtiers, saw a son with Genevieve who would grow and...

“No,” Royce said, shaking his head, forcing himself to look more clearly. He had to remember that *this* was how the mirror worked: it didn’t show one set line, merely set out the consequences of actions. He could see dark paths, paths filled with death, but he could also see ways for the world to be so much more. He was less like a seer peering into entrails for an answer, and more like a navigator, trying to pick out a path based on a hundred sets of maps.

“We should pull him away from that thing,” Matilde said, her voice sounding distant even though it came to Royce as clearly as every other whisper of sound right then.

“No,” Royce said, holding up a hand. In the mirror, he could see that would be enough to stop her. Moments so close were easy to see, with so few decisions making the pathways branch. “No, I need to understand.”

“Leave him,” Neave said. “He made the stone sing and crossed the bridge to the tower. If anyone can make the old magic bend to his will, it’s Royce.”

Royce almost laughed at that, but he didn’t, because he could see that his friends would believe that he was mad if he did. This wasn’t about bending the mirror to his will, because that was the mistake people made with it. It wasn’t a thing of will, but a thing of clarity, of possibility. Barish had made it seem malice filled, Dust had recoiled in terror, but Royce saw just as many beautiful possibilities.

“Maybe that’s it,” Royce mused in something that was almost a whisper. “It’s a mirror, so maybe it gives you back what you bring to it?”

“Royce,” Mark said. Royce didn’t look up at his friend, because right then there was too much to see. “Royce, we’re going to steer the ship for home. Give me a sign that you can hear me.”

Of course Royce could hear him; why wouldn’t he be able to? Royce made himself nod, but then held still, because even that small movement seemed to send ripples through some of the possibilities there, and Royce needed all of them if he was going to chart a way for them to follow.

“What happens if things continue as they are?” Royce asked the mirror, trying to shape the vague thoughts he had into a question; trying to focus.

He saw the answer to that reflected in the glass. He saw people dying by the hundreds, by the thousands. He saw blood and more blood, with a war that never seemed to end.

He looked for a way to win that war, staring into the glass over and over, even though each attempt seemed to end worse than the last. He saw himself, and his friends, and the people who had come to support him die in a hundred different ways, and more. So many of the possibilities seemed to lead to blood.

The things he felt for Genevieve seemed to be a part of the problem. The love he felt, and the things he was prepared to do for her, only seemed to drag Royce away from doing the right thing. The paths that led to her seemed also to lead to some of the greatest pain. Despite that, Royce found that he couldn’t look away from them.

“I need to find a path where people live,” he insisted. He set his mind to it, even as he could feel his consciousness starting to fray around the edges.

There were so few good paths left. They seemed like a slender collection of silvery strands running through a world that was otherwise cloaked in darkness. The problem was simple: people like Altfor and his family, like the king, Carris, would do anything if it meant them holding onto power.

What hope was there to get them to relinquish that hold without a fight that would drag everyone else down with them?

The thread for that was so narrow that Royce could barely believe it existed at all. He could see the elements that made it up, though, the decisions that went together one after another, so many that it would almost be a miracle if they all came together. He could see where it started, though.

He needed to find his father.

“Where, though?” Royce muttered. He could imagine his friends staring at him, thinking how mad he must look. He briefly had a glimpse of them there, looking back across the boat, their looks suspicious. What would they be thinking? What might they be planning?

Royce caught himself in time. Was that how Barihash had started? Was the sheer ease of seeing so much enough to push someone into madness? Forcing himself to focus, Royce pushed his attention onto his father, trying to see where he had gone when he left the island. It took everything he had to do it, the mirror’s view seeming to curl away from that one thing into possibility after possibility. Royce waded through them like a man through a snowstorm, trying to pay attention.

Clarity flickered through him, and he realized that he already *knew* where his father had gone. There had been papers among his father’s things, torn into scraps and seen by Royce for a matter of moments. There had been words on them, and now Royce knew what they meant, *where* they meant.

Royce could see all of it then, everything that he needed to do. He looked up from the mirror. To his astonishment it was dark when he did so, the stars glinting down, moonlight spilling over the water, and the Seven Isles no more than a dot on the horizon.

“Are you all right?” Mark asked, looking worried.

Almost immediately, all the wondrous details that Royce had seen in the mirror started to fade. The complex web of choices and decisions was too much to hold at once.

“I know where we have to go,” Royce said. He set his hand to the tiller, moving it and setting the boat turning onto a new course. He knew as surely as he could see the moon that this was the correct direction, and that his father lay ahead.

“What are you doing?” Matilde demanded.

Royce didn’t have the words to explain it, or rather, he could, but even attempting to form the words made all that he knew feel soap bubble thin, ready to burst into nothingness and chaos. He *wanted* to tell his friends, but telling them would change things in and of itself.

“We need to go this way,” he said. “My father... I know where he is.”

“Are you sure?” Mark asked. “We thought he would be in the Seven Isles.”

“I...” Royce couldn’t explain. He *couldn’t*. “Do you trust me, Mark?”

“You know that I do,” Mark said. Around him, the others nodded, one by one.

“Then we need to go this way,” Royce said. “Please.”

For a moment, he thought they might argue, that they might try to turn the boat back toward the kingdom, or tell him that he’d been addled by the mirror. But one by one, they sat back in place, waiting while the boat continued on its course.

They were going to find Royce’s father, and this time, Royce knew where he would be.

## CHAPTER TWO

Dust wandered the island while chaos reigned around him, barely comprehending what was happening. Fire burst around his feet, and he simply didn't react. Instead, he staggered on, rocks tumbling around him, the whole island imploding in the kind of entropy that Dust would never have believed in before he looked in the mirror.

"I was wrong," he muttered to himself as he walked on. "So very wrong."

Once, he'd believed in a world where priests knew everything, and kept fate on its single, set course. Then, he'd been so sure that he could pick a path through fate. He'd seen the horrors to come, and he'd seen the death that was needed to stop it.

Now, Dust didn't know what to think.

He stumbled on, while boulders tumbled on around him. Dust didn't try to dodge them, but they missed him anyway, some hint of unreasoned knowledge putting his feet into the right spots.

"How?" he asked. "How can anyone comprehend the vastness of it?"

He understood now why the mirror was said to drive people mad, although no one had told him that, had they? It had just been another thing that he'd seen. He'd seen everything, and everything was far too much for one mind to hold. He'd seen all that he had seen before in the priests' smoke, and a million other things besides.

Lava burst near Dust, and he turned to face it almost blankly, eyes barely seeing it. There was no room for it when he could see all the things that might be, and had been, and would never be, tangled up in such a ball that it was impossible to pick them apart.

"I've done so much," he said, clambering unseeing over a stand of obsidian and not even feeling the spots where it cut into his palms. "I thought..."

He could see exactly what he'd thought. First, he'd thought that the priests were right, and he'd done what they commanded. He'd done what the signs had seemed to suggest, even when it had meant killing people who had not been his enemies, who would never have been a threat to him. Even when he'd realized the games of the priests, he'd made choices that would hurt people. He'd poured ill fortune into a ring to cause chaos. He'd come hunting Royce...

"I deserve to die," Dust said. "I deserve it."

He staggered on, trying to work out the best way to do it, trying to work out what he should do. He wandered through a field of glasslike shards, not caring if they cut his legs. From the corner of his eye, he saw something running at him.

Dust turned without thinking about it, swaying aside from a spear thrust aimed at his heart. A lizard creature hissed at him, drawing back its spear for another blow. Dust stepped in close to it, striking up with stiffened fingers into its throat. It stumbled back gasping, and now Dust was on it, stabbing into its heart with a knife, so close to it now that he could feel the heat of its blood on him. It seemed to be the only thing that he could feel right then.

Even as the beast toppled, Dust cursed himself for fighting back. He could have stood still then; could have let the creature kill him the way he deserved for everything that he had done.

"You can still do it," Dust said. He regarded the knife in his hands, the shine of the sun off its edge almost mesmerizing in spite of the dark blood that coated it now. It would be so easy to run the edge across his own throat, or across the spots where the body's blood ran close to the surface. Would-be Angarthim he had trained with had done it before, when the efforts of the priests had driven them to madness.

If not the knife, then there were a hundred other ways to die. He could lie down at the feet of the lizard beings, or throw himself from a cliff. He could stand in the path of a falling boulder, or walk into a field of fire. He could even simply sit where he was. On an island like this, it was harder to keep living than it was to die, and yet Dust somehow managed to keep going.

He wandered, and as he wandered, he tried to make sense of all that he had seen, but there was no making sense of it. He'd thought in terms of one pure line of fate that he could pick out, but instead, there were choices, spreading out in a latticework of possibilities, until no one could say that this thing or that would always happen.

He'd seen all that he had seen before, with Royce's brightness, and the darkness and blood that might follow, but Dust had also seen all the ways that it might not, and all the light that might lie beyond even that. He'd learned of his own freedom, but he'd forgotten that of every other being in the world.

He'd forgotten hope.

"Hope?" Dust demanded of the air. "What hope is there here, on an island falling into the sea? What hope is there to undo what I've done?"

He already knew the answer to that. He'd seen a moment more powerful than the ones he'd seen in the priests' smoke, more certain, more crucial. He'd seen a battle, and a figure standing in shining armor, wielding a crystal sword with almost impossible skill. He'd seen that figure cut down, and he'd known *that* moment was the one that mattered.

Dust looked around and realized that somehow he had reached the coast of the island. There was a boat there that wasn't his, but it was light, and it had oars, and it was easy for him to push into the water while behind him the island collapsed.

He bobbed in the boat, looking up at the sky, trying to decide what to do next, but in truth, Dust already knew what he had to do. He sat up, staring out over the water, looking at the island he had passed on his way here, and contemplating what would be needed to save the world.

He started to row.

While he rowed, he considered the central problem of the next thing that had to be dealt with: a foe who seemed so well protected that it would be impossible to defeat them, that even attempting it might destroy him.

Dust didn't care about that though; he craved that destruction. If it came to him, he would welcome it with open arms.

"No," he told himself, "not before I have done what I must do."

As for the prospect of actually doing it, he would find a way. He was Angarthim, with all the training that came with that. Perhaps he was the only one who *could* do this. He could slip silently onto the island, and...

"That will not work," Dust said. One glance at the clouds above the island he sought told him that. The signs there were filled with death and the prospect of it. He could be stealthy, but he would fail, and he would die. He needed to find another way.

Dust let the boat drift now, knowing that the currents from the spot he was in would take him to the island he sought. Taking one of the oars and the sharpest of his knives, he started to carve. He could make another if he survived this.

He whittled at the wood with steady hands, shaving curls of it from the oar's haft until it started to come to a point. Dust refined that point steadily as the current dragged him in toward the island, turning it into something almost as sharp as the steel he carried, producing a javelin that was light, and balanced, and deadly.

Taking a pouch from his belt, Dust mingled the contents with sea water, then dipped the tip of his makeshift spear into the results, the wood hissing as it contacted the potion he had produced. He threw the pouch out into the water, too dangerous to touch now that the powder had been wetted.

He came in close to the shore, and already, Dust could feel the pull from the island, in the heady, sweet scent that seemed to fill every pore, making him want to draw closer.

She stepped from the forest there, and she was the most beautiful woman Dust had ever seen, although a part of his brain also saw past that in the same moment. He saw a woman who was everything he had ever wanted, and at the same time saw the claws.

He flung his javelin. It sailed through the air, and she twisted, fast as a snake, so that his throw barely grazed her. The point did break the skin, and Dust could only hope that the poison on it did its job.

The creature didn't fall, though. Instead, the scent around Dust intensified, and he knew that he had to throw himself forward, diving into the water and dragging his boat to the beach.

She was waiting there for him, and now he realized that she simply *was*. She was impossible, because her beauty hurt Dust to look upon. He would have done anything for her in that moment. *Anything.*

"I am Lethe," she said, in a voice like molten honey. "What do they call you?"

"Dust," Dust said.

"And do you love me, Dust?"

"I love you," Dust agreed.

Lethe stepped toward him, arms open, her beauty complete, perfect, absolute.

"Did you really think that your little spear would kill me?" she asked. Her mouth was open in a smile that was both beautiful and too full of teeth, all at once.

"No," Dust admitted.

"No?" That seemed to take Lethe by surprise.

"The poison on it does not kill. I had nothing that would kill you. But I have things that can weaken you."

"Weaken me?" Dust heard the fear there now.

"I love you, but I am Angarthim, and we can kill what we love if the fates require it."

Dust struck out with a knife, the blade flashing across her throat. Lethe didn't even have time to cry out as she fell. Dust had made her end as painless as he could, because what more could he do for someone he loved so much?

He knelt there, and he wept in his grief. He wept both because of what he had lost in Lethe, and because he still needed to be the killer he had been made into for a little while longer.

It seemed to take forever before Dust felt strong enough to stand again and make his way around the island. The place felt different now, as dead as the creature that had run it, lifeless and silent as Dust searched.

He found what he was looking for set a little way from a cabin-like home, discarded in a pile together as if they simply didn't matter. Then, Dust guessed, they *hadn't* mattered compared to the love of Lethe. Dust took the crystal sword, unsheathing it only long enough to admire how the blade shone in the moonlight before he put it away again. He wrapped it in the armor, taking both and moving back in the direction of his boat.

It took him another hour to carve a replacement oar, an hour beyond that to gather fruits and fresh water from the forest. Dust piled it into his boat and pushed it out into the water.

He started to row for the mainland, knowing that destiny lay ahead, for him, for Royce, for *everyone*.

## CHAPTER THREE

Genevieve was finding that life in the king's court was very different from life in the palace of Altfor's father. For one thing, people actually looked at her as if she were noble, rather than giving her the looks of pity and disdain that had marked her out as a stolen peasant girl before.

For another, there was the constant sense of threat that came from knowing any misstep could get her killed.

"Will Lord Ber's men be here before the final push against the enemy?" King Carris demanded of an advisor, standing from his throne and pacing the width of the audience chamber where he was discussing plans.

"There is no news yet, my king," the man said.

"Which means that he doesn't plan to be here," King Carris snapped back. "He's waiting to see who will win. Do our chances look so bad?"

"No, my king," the man said. "Shall I send more messages to him?"

"Just one," King Carris said. "Tell him that if he does not have his men with my army in time, I will kill him, and his family, and anyone else who stands with him. This is a fight against people who would take my kingdom from me; if he is not with me in that fight, then he is my enemy."

"At once," the man said.

More advisors and messengers came, each one with some fragment of news about the coming conflict. One lord came forward and knelt.

"My king," he said. "I am Sir Verris of Yall. I have brought three hundred men with me to serve with your army."

"You have my thanks, Sir Verris," the king said. "You will be rewarded. Your place will be with the force that strikes from the north."

Genevieve stood toward the back of the crowd of people, trying to take note of the names and the numbers as men came to swear themselves to the king's cause. She would have written it all down to be sure that she got it, but someone would see.

Altfor would see. He stood toward the front of the room, where he could be seen by everyone there, as close to the king as possible. Even so, his eyes seemed to be following Genevieve, daring her to make a mistake in the dangerous game she was playing.

"Jani will return soon," Genevieve said to herself. "I will remember everything until then."

She had to hope that the spy who worked for her sister had gotten back to Sheila. With the information Genevieve had sent, maybe Royce would be able to win this without all the deaths that the coming battle promised. Genevieve had already sent information about the seaborne assault that would be coming from the north. Now, she hoped to be able to find something that would help them to win outright.

"Tell me about our flotilla," King Carris said.

A man in what looked like expensive versions of sailors' clothes stepped forward, jewelry adorning him that looked as though it had been stolen from a dozen different sources.

"We are ready and waiting to carry your forces, my king. Just as soon as we are paid."

"Money is traveling from my treasury as we speak," King Carris promised.

Genevieve found herself wondering if there might be some way to sabotage that delivery. If she could get *that* information to Sheila, then it might be possible to arrange for the money to be stolen, or at least delayed. She was about to find a reason to excuse herself from the hall when she stopped, feeling a wave of something like cold spreading through her.

It wasn't the kind of cold that had anything to do with the physical world, though. Instead, it felt to Genevieve as though something papery was whispering across her soul, and she found herself

turning automatically toward the door. Everyone else in the room did the same, moving as one mass to face the figures who walked in together.

There were a dozen of them, gray-skinned and shaven-headed, although several of them had beards, or golden chains wound around their skulls, or tattoos in the shapes of mystical symbols. They wore deep gray robes, some with the hoods up, and most of them looked around the room with piercing eyes. The one at their head was old enough that he had to walk with the aid of a staff, leaning on it with every step. His eyes caught Genevieve's for a moment, and Genevieve shuddered involuntarily.

"Who are you?" King Carris demanded. "And why are you here, in my court?"

"We are the priests of the Angarthim," their leader said. "We see all that must be, and we send the Angarthim to ensure that it happens as it should. I am Justinus, highest of the priests."

"That still doesn't tell me why you're here," King Carris said. "Or why I shouldn't have you killed."

"We are here because your cause is ours, King Carris," Justinus said. "The boy named Royce can never be allowed to be king."

"You've come across the sea to tell me this?" the king demanded, and for a moment, Genevieve thought he might react with all the anger she'd seen before, when he'd been killing prisoners himself.

"We looked into the futures, and we saw the destruction of our order in the rise of Royce as king," Justinus said. If he was scared of King Carris, he didn't show it. "We sent one of our Angarthim to kill him, but somehow, he has failed us."

"So your failures?" King Carris demanded.

The air rippled, and in that moment, it seemed to Genevieve that something was standing beside her; something with claws and teeth and hunger. It took everything Genevieve had not to scream. Many of those there were not so brave. Several drew blades, and one man fell, clutching his chest.

As suddenly as it had come, the sense of creatures there faded, leaving the Angarthim priests standing still and deadly looking.

"We are not without power," Justinus said. "When the time comes, we will bring that power to your aid."

He moved to stand beside the king without being asked, while the others formed a line in the first rank of the nobles. No one tried to argue.

Genevieve thought that might be it for the audience, but she saw King Carris collecting himself with an effort.

"What else?" he demanded. "What other news is there? What news is there of my enemies?"

A messenger came forward, visibly shaking. "We have news of Royce, my king," he said. "He travels the villages, recruiting the common folk to his cause. They are calling him an ancient king returned."

"Then they are fools," Lord Carris said. "And what is Royce trying to raise in the villages? An army of farmers?"

The nobles laughed, but not all of them. Some of them obviously understood that numbers would count, and Genevieve, at least, knew how hard people would fight to protect their homes.

"Still, knowing will be useful," King Carris said. "It will tell me which villages are filled with traitors, which must be destroyed and which can be rewarded for their loyalty." He looked around. "Have no doubt, this is a fight, not just against a usurper, but for our whole way of life. Years ago, we fought to overthrow Philip, and all his ways. We fought against a world where a man could claim kingship because of some dictate of magic, rather than because of the suitability learned from birth by a true noble. Will any of you go back to that? *Will you?*"

As the nobles roared their response, Genevieve began to see how King Carris had managed to become a king. He had the charisma to move people, and the ruthlessness to kill those who stood against him. It was a dangerous combination.

“Now, go to your tasks,” King Carris said. “And—”

“My king,” Altfor said. “There is one more thing.”

“What thing, Duke Altfor?” the king asked. Genevieve saw her husband preen at the use of his title. She wondered if he noticed the king’s impatience.

“A gift has come for you, my king,” Altfor said. “From Lord Aversham. I met him at the gate.”

“What gift?”

Altfor gestured to the door. As it opened, Genevieve’s heart leapt into her mouth. This wasn’t some collection of priests, wasn’t the deathly fear that had come with the Angarthim. This was worse.

Moira was there, along with a noble and a collection of knights. They pushed a figure in front of them, bound and bruised by violence, and Genevieve recognized Gareth instantly. He stumbled, and one of the knights kicked him, sending him sprawling forward. The man at the lead of the procession offered a courtly bow.

“Your majesty.”

“Lord Aversham, what have you brought me?”

“I have brought to you what Lady Moira has brought to me,” Lord Aversham said. Genevieve’s fingers twitched as he urged Moira forward. A part of her wanted to rush out and strangle her one-time friend for all that she’d done. This... this was worse than the rest of it put together.

“This is Royce’s brother,” Altfor said. “Or at least one of the boys he was raised with. He was seeking to subvert lords to Royce’s cause. Only Moira’s quick thinking brought him to Lord Aversham, who is loyal.”

“As you are loyal, Altfor,” King Carris said. “You have my thanks. And you, Lady Moira. Now, guards... take this boy and put him in chains. I want to know everything he knows.”

“I’ll tell you nothing,” Gareth said.

“Oh, you will,” King Carris promised. “Once the hot irons are applied to flesh, people talk quickly enough.”

The guards stepped in, grabbing Gareth. They dragged him away, even though he struggled, and Genevieve’s heart broke as she had to watch it. It was even worse watching the way Altfor moved over to Moira, putting an arm around her out in the open as if Genevieve weren’t there. Altfor looked Genevieve’s way, and he smiled cruelly, clearly knowing exactly what effect his actions would be having on her.

Genevieve fought not to show any reaction, in spite of the way her blood boiled. She headed from the hall, but only at the speed of the other nobles doing the same, making sure she didn’t run, didn’t fight to get out into the fresh air beyond the castle.

When she got there, though, she sucked down gasping breaths, trying not to scream out with everything that had just happened. The horrors the priests had inflicted had been bad enough, but seeing Gareth there, like that, had been far worse.

Genevieve knew what she was there for now, why she’d stayed in the court of the king when she could have run to be with her sister in Fallsport. She’d hoped that there would be something she could do here that would change it, and now she saw that there was something that went far beyond the information she could overhear.

She could save Gareth; she had to. If she could get to him, then she could try to find a way to get him clear of the keep. If she could save Royce’s brother, then maybe, just maybe, that would be enough to make up for everything else that had happened.

And if she could find a way to kill Moira while she was doing it, then that would only serve to make it perfect.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“There’s nothing out here, Royce,” Mark insisted, but Royce shook his head. He couldn’t explain all that he’d seen without risking changing it, but he knew that this was the right direction. He put his hand on the bag containing the mirror, feeling the reassurance of its presence.

“We’re going the right way,” Royce assured him.

“Then tell us *why*,” Mark asked.

Royce hesitated. “I... can’t. Please, you have to trust me.” He looked around at Matilde and Neave. “I know it’s hard, but I know what I’m doing.”

“It would be easier if there were any land in sight,” Matilde said, gesturing to the open expanse of the sea around them. “I don’t want to drift out here until we all starve, Royce.”

Gwylim barked something that might have been agreement.

“We can always eat you if we run out of food,” Neave said. It took Royce a moment to realize that it was her idea of a joke. She looked over to Royce. “If you say that this is the way we need to go... well, you’ve been right before.”

Royce was grateful for that, although he was all too aware that the Picti girl could have pointed out the times when he’d been wrong just as easily. Royce had already led them on one false trail, finding the mirror but not his father. What if this was the same? What if the mirror hadn’t shown him the truth?

That feeling gnawed at him while they continued to sail, because Royce knew how many people had been led astray by seeing too much, viewing possibilities as certainties. Barihash had destroyed a whole city because of it. Royce could just as easily lead his friends to their deaths.

That possibility made him want to turn the boat around. He wanted the others to be safe, wanted to do the right thing for them as well as for the kingdom, yet the things he’d seen kept him pressing forward. They weren’t the wide field of possibilities and nuances that he’d seen in the mirror, but he could still hold to the central strand of it, still remember the steps that he had to take. He looked out through Ember’s eyes, the hawk circling above the boat, and in the distance, he thought he could make out the green speck of an island.

“There,” he said. “There’s an island there!”

The others seemed to take heart from that news, Mark correcting the boat’s course just a touch, Matilde and Neave waiting eagerly as the wind pushed their vessel on. Gwylim moved to the prow of the boat, the wolf-like creature standing there like a figurehead. Soon, it was possible to see the island in the distance even without Ember’s vision.

It was small compared to the Seven Isles they’d left behind, but lush with grass and trees, so that it looked like a green jewel sticking out from the sea. It was fairly flat, the interior of the island disappearing in among the trees so that it was impossible to see much more from the boat. As they got closer, Royce could make out beaches of golden sand, brushing up against the woods like the white around a green eye.

“Let’s just hope there aren’t any magic women or lizard people on this one,” Matilde said.

Neave shrugged. “As I recall, you quite *liked* Lethe.”

“This isn’t the time for a fight,” Royce said. “But you’re right, there could be dangers.”

He sent Ember up over the beach, using the hawk to scout ahead, wanting to be sure he wasn’t leading his friends into yet another place of danger. He could have looked in the mirror, but that was a far more dangerous option; he needed to see what was, not what might be. Through her eyes, he saw that the trees formed a kind of outer ring around the interior of the island, while there was a broad inner circle of open ground there, covered in grass.

On it, he saw a whole herd of white deer grazing, and it seemed that one stag looked up as Ember passed, antlers majestic as it tracked the flight of the passing bird. Now, Royce knew without

a shadow of doubt that he was in the place that the mirror had promised. It also meant that he knew what he had to do next.

“We’re in the right place,” he said. “I need to go ashore alone.”

“Alone?” Mark said, the incredulity in his voice obvious. “After we’ve come all this way with you, you want to go *alone*?”

“I have to,” Royce said. “I...” Again, he felt the tension of the futures threatening to shift. If he explained, he didn’t know how, but it would change everything that he had seen. “I can’t explain the reasons, but I have to go onto this island without any other people.”

“Do you know how that sounds?” Matilde said.

“It sounds like nonsense, I know,” Royce agreed.

“No, Royce,” she replied. “It sounds as if you don’t *trust* us.”

“I would trust you with my life,” Royce said, “and when I can, I will explain, but I can’t right now.”

“And so you have to go onto an island alone, with only your obsidian sword to protect you?” Neave asked. It was clear that she disapproved as much as the others.

“I think... I think I can take Gwyllim and Ember with me,” Royce said. The shape of the potential future didn’t seem to be affected by the prospect of them being there. “Please, you’ve come this far trusting me. Just a little more.”

“Okay,” Mark said, with a sigh, “but I don’t like it.”

They brought the boat as close to the shore as they could without touching it, then dropped a small anchor to hold it in place. Royce checked that he had his sword and everything else he needed, while Gwyllim moved to his side, the bhargir’s presence a sense of power and safety that Royce was grateful for. Ember flew overhead, circling the island and looking for danger. Royce set the mirror in its velvet bag at his side.

“I will be back as soon as I can,” Royce promised.

Royce stepped off the boat, into the water. It was shallow here, only up to his waist, but even so he trod carefully as he made his way in toward the land. There was still the risk of dangerous creatures being in the water, or hidden drops, or sharp coral. Royce heard the splash as Gwyllim dove into the water, the bhargir paddling forward until he could walk beside Royce easily.

They made their way up onto the beach, the waves lapping gently at the shore. Looking back, Royce could see his friends still in the boat, waiting but looking worried. He knew that he would have to be quick here; leave it too long, and they would come looking for him simply to make sure he was all right.

He stepped into the cover of the trees with Ember flying above, glancing through her eyes every so often to make sure he was still going in the right direction. The canopy was thin enough that Royce could see himself in between the trees, looking down on himself and using Ember’s vision to guide him. Royce headed deeper into the interior of the island, heading for the spot where it opened out to flat ground.

Within the trees, he could see many plants he recognized: fruits and edible roots that suggested someone could live on this island for as long as they wished without having to leave it. Royce could hear the sound of a nearby spring, and going to it he found water bubbling up from among moss-covered boulders. More than that, he saw the small, crudely made bucket that had been set beside it, obviously designed to catch water for someone. For his father?

Royce dared to hope as he stepped from the trees out into the broad, grassy clearing. The grass was short, obviously kept that way by the efforts of the deer, while there were spots where there was none at all, because great slabs of rock sat there, marked with symbols and signs cut into their surface. Most of the deer there scattered, heading back into their woodland cover. Only one stood there: a stag larger than the others, its antlers magnificent, its white fur shining in the sun. It reared up, giving a

snorting bellow, then headed back in the direction of the trees with the others. If Royce hadn't known that he was in the right place before, he would have known it then.

Now that he was out in the large clearing at the heart of the island, Royce could see the hut that had been built, sheltered in among the trees at one edge. It was simply built, but looked sturdy, constructed from fallen and cut tree trunks by hands that clearly knew what they were doing.

Royce headed for that hut, reasoning that what he had come there to find could only be there. He stepped out over the ground of the clearing, past the stone slabs, and he found himself pausing, tracing the letters there. He found the words of the people who had gone before, and something about those words seemed to resonate deep inside him. Some remnant of the clarity he'd had from the mirror told him that these were stories in the old tongue about his ancestors, kings and queens for whom the stones had sung and whose kingdoms were filled with magic.

Royce walked over to the hut. It was simple, but he could see that someone had started to whittle carvings into the wood, working with a long life or perhaps a carefully held axe. Royce stared at those carvings, which seemed to tell the story of a man who had crossed the sea, and stared into a mirror, and...

Royce heard Gwyllim growl behind him, and he spun just in time to see an axe heading toward his face. Royce threw himself aside, and the weapon embedded itself in the wood, tearing free as a large man with wild hair and a wilder beard pulled it clear.

"Has Carris finally found me and sent an assassin?" the man demanded, aiming another swing of the axe.

Royce leapt back, dodging it only with an effort. He drew the obsidian sword, parrying the next blow, finding the strength to keep it from his head only barely. To his side, Gwyllim was growling, looking as though he might leap at any moment.

"No, Gwyllim, don't do it," Royce said. That distraction almost cost him as his foe struck him in the stomach with the haft of the axe, then brought it up for a killing blow. Royce rolled away, the axe striking the dirt where he had been.

"Father, please," Royce called out. He tossed the obsidian blade away from him, wanting to make it clear that he wasn't there to fight.

"You think I'm going to fall for a trick like that?" his father demanded. "You think that assassins haven't pretended to be *everyone* I care about by now? Do you plan to get me to embrace you and then stab me? I gave my son a necklace with my seal so that I would recognize him. Do you have *that*? No? I thought not!"

He stepped forward, his axe raised, and for a moment, Royce feared that the magic of the mirror had made him as mad as Barihash had been, only able to see enemies everywhere. Royce raised his hands in surrender, in the hope that his father was still a good enough man to recognize that, at least.

His father stood staring at Royce's palms, and it took a second for Royce to realize what he was looking at: the symbol burned there; the scars from when he had been a child, grabbing for the necklace amid the flames.

His father stopped and let the axe fall. "You... that's my symbol. That's the necklace I gave you. You *are* my son."

Royce smiled. "Hello, Father."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Royce stood there with his palm outstretched, and the wild-looking man stepped back.

“Royce? It *is* you?”

“Yes, Father,” Royce said, and even he could barely believe it. After all he’d been through to find him, his father was standing there. This wild man, with a beard so long it brushed his naval, was his father, was the king.

It was hard to believe, but Royce knew it was true. Royce could see it now in the similarity of their features, but it was more than that. His father wore a signet ring with the royal crest, and while his clothes were worn and sun-bleached, Royce could still see the richness of them.

“It’s you. It’s...”

His father rushed forward, embracing him, the grip tight. “I’ve waited... so long for this day.” His voice sounded dry and cracked, as if he hadn’t spoken for a long time. He seemed to be remembering the words only with difficulty. “Are you sure... are you sure you’re *you*? That you’re not a dream?”

It was the kind of question that could only come from being alone for so long.

“No, it doesn’t matter. You’re you. I saw this! Saw it all! From the moment I found your mother so long ago, I hoped so much that I would see you when you were grown.”

Royce hugged his father back. There were so many questions he wanted to ask him, so many things he wanted to say.

“Do you see the stones?” his father asked, with the pride of a man wanting to show off the little that he had. “The stories of your ancestors, Royce.”

He led the way around the side of the hut, to a spot where another section of stone sat, cracked and made up of separate pieces. It had the beginnings of another story on it.

“I’ve tried to add my own life to all of theirs,” King Philip said. “On an island like this, it’s easy to find the time to do it. I talked to them, though they didn’t answer. I didn’t want to forget how to speak.”

“Why come here, though?” Royce asked.

His father shrugged. “I looked into the mirror.”

It was an answer and not an answer, all at the same time. To anyone else, it wouldn’t have made sense, but Royce had looked too. He could understand having to do things without explaining them.

“There are things that you can’t say,” Royce guessed.

His father nodded. Pulling back from him, he moved to Gwyllim, bending down to him, not the way a man would with a dog, but the way he might have with a man sitting on the ground. He held out his arm, and Ember landed on it.

“These are strange companions you have found, my son,” he said. “The tool of a witch and a thing that wasn’t always a wolf.”

“They’re not the only ones,” Royce said. “My friends are still in the boat.”

“And if they’d come onto the island, I wouldn’t have shown myself,” his father said. “I would have slipped around behind you and stolen your boat to escape.”

Royce nodded, because he knew that part. He’d seen it in the mirror.

“Why did you leave?” he asked. “Why did you come here?”

“I had to leave, or they would have killed me,” his father said. “And they would have killed you too. I came here because this place used to be ours, our family’s.”

“And you left a trail for me because you knew I would come after you,” Royce said.

“I’m not sure,” his father explained. “Holding onto the things in the mirror is hard. I can remember doing it, but all the reasons, and all the things that it might lead to... you looked into the mirror, even though I warned you not to.”

“I did,” Royce said. “You must have seen that I would.”

His father smiled, as if Royce hadn’t quite gotten it right. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“I saw things,” Royce said. “I saw the way this has to go. You need to come back. The king has to return for all of this to end.”

Now his father’s smile became a laugh that echoed around the open space of the clearing, scattering the few deer that had started to return to it.

“It doesn’t work like that, either,” his father said.

“Then how *does* it work?” Royce asked.

“The mirror doesn’t give you wisdom, it shows you possibilities,” his father said. “So many that it is impossible to hold them all. Your mind picks out some of them, but what you get is what you bring to it. Barihash, the thing there, must have been suspicious before he looked, so he latched onto those possibilities that showed him being betrayed.”

That made a lot of sense to Royce. He had seen those possibilities, been able to start to pick through them. He’d picked out the one shining strand of things that might work, and even now it stood out in his mind, while the rest of it was impossible to hold.

“There was a... man,” Royce said. “I showed him the mirror in the moments before he was going to kill me and he... stopped. He begged me to kill him.”

“The gray man,” his father said. “The Angarthim.”

He didn’t say more for a moment, obviously struggling to find the words.

“What is the most horrifying thing that you can show a man who has been brainwashed all his life? You can show him the truth. And what possibilities will his mind have shown him, a man who has been shown only fragments before?”

Royce couldn’t begin to imagine it. More than that, he didn’t really *want* to imagine it, because there were too many possibilities already in his head without imagining more than that. He’d *seen* some of what could happen if he did anything wrong here, all the ways that the world could turn to blood and death and horror. He had to cling to the path through all that he’d seen, the only way it could turn out well.

“Why didn’t it turn me mad?” Royce said.

“Because you are strong enough to see it for what it is,” his father said. “Or because you were strong enough to pull back when you needed to. I got a glimpse. I could have fought Barihash for more than that, but I knew that I could never contain all of it.”

“I killed Barihash,” Royce said. He felt a flicker of guilt admitting that to his father.

But his father nodded. “Good. Sometimes evil must be fought. He was a thing of pain and hate and suspicion, who could never bring anything but hurt to the world. It is the same with King Carris, and the war that is to come. There will be violence, but it is needed violence.”

Royce could understand that. He’d fought against the old duke for exactly those reasons, had fought against Altfor and his uncle and everyone else who had come at them. He’d hoped that he could make everything better if only he could defeat them.

Now, the possibilities his brain could barely contain hinted that there needed to be more even than that. The clarity that the mirror had given him, the ability to look at the world and simply *see*, had shown him that there needed to be more than just the violence. Plunge only into that, and there would be nothing but years of death.

Of course, the balance to that was that if they didn’t fight at all, then things would continue as they were, with all the cruelty that came with it. The way between those two things was so narrow that it felt like a precipice, with danger far below.

“I’ve walked precipices before,” Royce said to himself.

“What’s that?” his father asked.

“I’m just trying to work out what to do next,” he said. That seemed wrong somehow. “Even with everything the mirror showed me, I still have to work it out.”

“The mirror doesn’t tell you what you ought to do,” his father said. “That’s the most dangerous mistake there is with it. You still have choices. You *always* have choices. Everyone does.”

That made more sense than Royce could have believed it would. He didn’t want to destroy the choices of the people who came with him; even asking the others to trust him enough to come here, he wouldn’t have forced them to do it, had only been able to hope that they believed in him enough to come here.

Now, he had another thing to ask.

“Father,” he said, “I’ve hunted for you across the sea. I found the mirror in the Seven Isles, but I was looking for you. I came here because I wanted to find my father, and because I believe that the kingdom needs its king.”

His father stood there for a moment or two, then shook his head. “I’m not sure I can do that, Royce.”

The disappointment that shot through Royce in that moment was absolute.

“But I’ve come so far!”

He could hear the pain in his own voice, and it mirrored that on his father’s face.

“I looked in the mirror,” his father said. “I saw myself here, not returning to the kingdom.”

“But that was so long ago,” Royce said. “Things have changed, Father.”

His father shook his head. “You know that there are things I can’t say.”

Things that he’d seen, Royce guessed. That gave him an idea, though. He reached for the pouch by his side.

“Will you look again?” he asked. He held out the mirror.

“You know the dangers there,” his father said, obviously concerned. “A man shouldn’t look too often, because of all the things it might change.”

“Please,” Royce begged.

His father hesitated, then nodded. Slowly, cautiously, he looked into the mirror. He seemed to stare into it forever, for so long in fact that Royce thought about pulling it away, hiding it from view so he wouldn’t have to look any longer.

Finally, his father closed his eyes.

“It seems that the kingdom will have its king,” his father said, with an expression that Royce couldn’t read. It said there was more that he had seen, things that Royce hadn’t. “And you shall have your father.”

That part, at least, made Royce’s breath catch.

“Then you’ll return to the kingdom with my friends and me?” Royce asked, barely daring to hope.

“I will,” his father promised. He went into the hut for a moment or two, collecting a small sack of belongings almost identical to the one Royce had found on the first of the Seven Isles. That seemed to be all that he wanted to take with him.

“I don’t have your armor or your sword,” Royce said. “I lost them back in the Seven Isles.”

“*That* doesn’t make sense,” his father said. “I saw... no, like I said, it doesn’t work like that.”

Royce knew better than to ask what he’d seen, but it was difficult as they set off through the trees on the edge of the island not to wonder about it. It was also hard not to wonder at the fact that he had finally found his father. The man who had left so long before was here, walking along beside him with Gwylim while Ember flitted through the trees.

The walk to the beach didn’t seem to take as long as the journey to the interior of the island. They covered the ground quickly, and soon, they were staring out at the spot where the boat lay anchored. His friends were still there waiting in the boat when Royce and his father returned to it, but they quickly leapt down to meet them when they saw that Royce was there with someone. They rushed to the beach, standing there expectantly.

“A Picti, a peasant girl, and a fighter from the Red Isle?” his father said.

“My friends,” Royce replied. “There was also a knight, but Sir Bolis died back in the Seven Isles, saving all of us.” He stepped forward to them, ready to introduce them one by one. “Everyone, this is my father, King Philip, the rightful king. We’ve found him.”

His friends reacted with surprising deference. Mark bowed, Matilde curtsayed, and even Neave managed a respectful nod.

“Father, this is Mark. He helped me to survive the Red Isle, and he’s my closest friend.”

His father took Mark’s hand. “A man who has saved my son’s life has my gratitude.”

“He’s saved mine far more,” Mark assured him.

Royce moved along the line. “This is Matilde, who has been a part of the resistance to the old duke’s rule almost since the beginning. She’s fiercer than she looks.”

“Really?” his father said. He looked at Matilde. “I would say that you already look quite fierce. I will be glad to fight beside you.”

“Thank you, your majesty,” Matilde said, looking pleased.

“And you?” his father said, turning to Neave.

“Neave, your majesty,” she said, and there was a note of respect there that Royce hadn’t expected.

“The Picti deserve a better place in the kingdom than I was able to give them,” he said. “They respect the magic that is in the world in a way people have forgotten. If you are here, does that mean that your tribe fights alongside my son?”

“We do,” Neave said. “He made the healing stone cry out. Others will join your cause too.”

“It sounds as though you have prepared quite the army,” Royce’s father said to him.

Royce nodded. “We’re working on it. By the time we get back, I hope that my brothers will have gathered enough to take on King Carris. We need a symbol though. We need the rightful king. We need *you*.”

“You have me,” his father promised. He waded out toward the boat. “We have a long way to go, though, and a hard fight once we get there.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Genevieve crept through the castle in the early morning light, afraid with every step, knowing that she was taking a risk just by doing this part. If Altfor realized she was here, then she would be in danger even though she was carrying his child, but he had left their rooms before she had, and Genevieve guessed that he was away somewhere with Moira.

“I’ll kill her,” Genevieve said, although even then, she knew that she would have a hard time killing anyone directly. She’d already proved that with Altfor, when she’d found herself unable to put a knife in him even when she had the chance.

“I’ll find something,” Genevieve promised herself, the same way she’d promised it when it came to Altfor. If she couldn’t do it directly, then she would help to bring them all down indirectly, and then she would see to it that they were executed for their crimes. They deserved it, and more.

She hated Moira more, if it was possible, than she hated Altfor. Altfor had never pretended to be her friend; had only betrayed her in ways that Genevieve had expected him to betray her. Moira had been in almost the same position as her, married to another of the duke’s sons and immersed in a world that she should never have been a part of. She *should* have been Genevieve’s ally, her friend. Instead, she’d gone to Altfor, and she’d betrayed Genevieve. She’d done worse than that when she’d handed over Gareth to the king’s forces.

At least Genevieve could start to undo *that*.

She continued forward, moving smoothly from hiding place to hiding place, trying to make it look as though she was running errands, off about legitimate business. Sneaking was no use in a keep building up to war, where there were too many people around and too much fear of spies to ever hope to hide completely. The best that Genevieve could hope for was to have people believe she was doing something she ought to be doing.

She approached the dungeons, knowing that her journey through the keep had been the easy part. People would imagine reasons for her to be in almost every part of the keep, and wouldn’t dare to question the noble wife of the king’s newest friend in any case, but Genevieve doubted that anything like that would work to get her into the dungeons.

She stood across from the entrance now, where a large guard sat as jailer on a stool, keys in his belt and a sword at his hip. Genevieve needed to find a way to get him away from that door, and right then, she couldn’t think of anything. What would move a man who had been commanded to remain in one spot?

The answer was that nothing would. There was no subtle way to do this, no way to distract him from his post cleanly and slip inside. The only option was the direct one, and if she took that, it would be obvious what had happened. There would be no way that she could remain there. Was Genevieve really ready to abandon everything and run, when there might still be a chance to find out more that might help to win this war?

“And what happens to Gareth if I wait?” she asked herself. She could already guess at the answer to that. She’d seen what the king did to those who opposed him, and had no doubt that he meant what he’d said about the torture. She had to get Royce’s brother out of there, even if that made it impossible for her to stay.

Maybe it would even be to her benefit. Genevieve would be able to head back to Royce’s forces if she had Gareth with her. It would be proof that she was on their side, and Royce might finally believe that she cared.

“I’m actually doing this,” Genevieve said to herself, and then strode forward to the guard at the dungeon door. The guard looked up at her with the lazy slowness of a man who had no intention of moving if he didn’t have to.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“What do you want, my lady,” Genevieve corrected him, adopting the haughtiest voice she could manage. “Or do you believe that we are somehow *equals*?”

It was easy to think of how to do this: she simply imagined the way Altfor would have said it. It was enough to make the guard’s eyes widen in fear, or at least shock.

“No, my lady. Forgive me, my lady.”

“Be quiet and open the door for me,” Genevieve said. “I’m here to see one of the prisoners.”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” the guard said. “But I’m not to let anyone in to see the prisoners. Not without permission from—”

“From the king?” Genevieve cut in. She summoned up the nastiest smile she could manage. “The king who is my husband’s closest friend right now? The king with whom I have spoken more times in the last day than you will have in your lifetime?”

“My lady,” the man said. He stood, but still, he hesitated.

“I want to speak with one of the prisoners,” Genevieve said. “The new one, Gareth, that’s all. I’m not planning to indulge in any torture, or demand that you escort him to the gate to free him. I want to *talk* to him. He knows me, and he’ll tell me far more than he ever would anyone else. Do you think the king will want to hear that you obstructed something to gain us information?”

Now Genevieve could see the fear on the man’s face. There was a kind of power in that, and in the things that it was possible to do with just words. He moved quickly now, hurrying to the door, unlocking it with one key, then another, lifting a bar before opening the portal there to reveal dark depths within. There was a candle set in a bracket by the door. The guard lifted it and offered it to Genevieve. Genevieve took it, moving close to the man, close enough that she could smell the rankness of his breath.

Close enough that her hand could snag his collection of keys.

“What—”

“I will need to go into the cell with him,” Genevieve said as the guard noticed. “I will let myself out when I am done. Unless you have an objection?”

It was obvious that he had plenty of objections, but didn’t dare to voice any of them.

“He’s in the cell at the end, my lady.”

Genevieve brushed past him before he could gather the courage to say anything. She set off into the depths of the dungeons, moving quickly, knowing that she would only have so much time before the guard realized that he should probably check if she was actually allowed down there. At some point, he would think to ask the king—probably he already wanted to—and Genevieve could only hope that it would be a long time before he summoned up the courage to abandon his post to do it.

Genevieve made her way down into the dungeons, down a winding set of stairs that was slippery in spots with mold, while she was sure she could hear water dripping from somewhere close to her. She could hear more than that too: screams came from somewhere deeper inside, and she just had to hope that they weren’t Gareth’s.

Genevieve could see nothing beyond the small circle of light that the candle offered her. It was a dim and flickering thing, providing her with a view of just a few yards of stony corridor in any direction. There were doors on either side, oak and with iron bars set at eye level so that the jailer could check on the prisoners.

There were probably prisoners in several of the cells, and a part of Genevieve wished that she could free all of them, but she knew that there would be no way to do it. She might, *might* be able to sneak Gareth out, especially if she could find a place to hide with him until her sister’s messenger returned. There was no way she would be able to get a procession of prisoners out of the place, though.

She made her way down to the last cell, grateful that she didn’t have to look into each one to try to find Gareth. Genevieve wasn’t sure she would be able to keep her heart from breaking if she had to see every person they had captured and tortured.

She reached the last cell in the line, holding the candle up and looking through the eye hole. Its light wasn't enough to see things clearly, but she could make out that there was a figure there, lit a little more by the light coming in through a narrow window. He was huddled over, half wrapped in a cloak that Genevieve thought might have been Gareth's. That was enough to make hope rise in her heart.

"Garet?" Genevieve called out to him. "Garet, it's Genevieve."

He didn't answer, but then, he and his brothers hadn't wanted to talk to her when she'd gone to them back in the old duke's castle. They thought she had betrayed them, betrayed Royce. Gareth probably thought she was helping Altfor now.

"Garet, please talk to me. I can help."

Genevieve fumbled at the keys she'd taken from the guard. It took her several attempts to find the correct one, and to hear the click of the lock as the door opened. Genevieve stepped into the cell, hoping that Gareth would see that she was alone; hoping that he would be willing to try to make an escape even if he didn't yet believe she was there to help.

"Garet, I know that you think I'm helping Altfor, but I'm not," Genevieve said. "I'm here to help *you*. I'm here to help you escape."

Still, there was no response from the figure huddled in the corner. Genevieve found herself hoping it wasn't because of what they'd done to Gareth here; that they hadn't tortured him to the point where he *couldn't* speak to her.

"Garet, please," Genevieve said. "I'm on your side. I want to get you out of here. I know that so many of the things I've done look like I'm with Altfor, but I can promise you that all of them have been because I love Royce. I've even sent messages to him, telling him about Altfor's plans. Do you know that he plans to make the southern attack a feint; that he will send an army around to the north in ships?"

"I do," the figure said, and just those two words were enough to make Genevieve's blood freeze in her veins. She knew that voice, and it wasn't Gareth's.

The figure stood up, letting the cloak fall from him. Altfor stood there in the half-light, his grin only made more evil by the candle's glow.

"I thought you might do this," he said, advancing on her. Genevieve was so stunned that she didn't even react as he plucked the keys from her hands. "I thought that the presence of the boy might get you to show your true colors, give me an excuse to do as I wished."

Genevieve knew what he was threatening, and instantly her mind fled to the one shield she knew she had. "I am your *wife*."

"A wife who loves my enemy!" Altfor roared. "And also a traitor. Being a noblewoman won't protect you now."

"I'm carrying your child," Genevieve pointed out.

"Yes," Altfor said. "Yes, you are."

He stepped past her to the door, through it and gone before Genevieve could react. His face appeared at the viewing slit.

"I will decide what to do with you," he said. "Maybe I'll wait until you bear my child and then have you executed. Maybe I won't. Rest assured though, Genevieve, that you *are* going to die for this."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

As they sailed, Royce was aware of the sense of hope on the boat. They'd found his father, the mirror sat in its bag in the bottom of the boat, and now they were heading for home. They'd actually done what they'd set out to do, in spite of all the challenges that the Seven Isles had put in their way. If they could do that, maybe they could do everything else that needed to be done as well.

"It's actually the king," Mark whispered to him, looking over to where Royce's father was sitting, looking out over the waves. His friend sounded awestruck, and seemed to follow King Philip's every move, as if waiting for instructions for him.

"And my father," Royce said. As far as he was concerned, that was the important part.

"Your father, the king," Mark agreed. "I'm sorry, I know how I sound, and you've done plenty of impressive things, but I *know* you."

"And in time, you'll know my father too," Royce said. *He* wanted to get to know his father better too. After all this time apart, they had a lot to catch up on. Royce wanted to know all that his father had done in the time since he'd left, and wanted to learn more about what kind of man he was.

He started to make his way forward, toward the spot where his father was sitting. That meant going past where Matilde and Neave were perched amidships. The two appeared to be bickering about some story of his father's exploits.

"I'm telling you," Matilde said. "He was a great hero. He fought the nobles."

"He *was* a noble," Neave countered, "and then he *lost* to the nobles."

"He fought monsters."

"*We've* fought monsters," Neave pointed out.

"He hunted bandits to keep the roads safe."

"Some of them were Picti."

"Is that what this is about? You don't like him because he's fought Picti? Because *I've* fought Picti. I beat you, remember."

"Is everything all right?" Royce asked, before the argument could take off into more. It was always hard to tell with these two whether they were truly arguing or not.

"Neave doesn't think that your father is someone worth following," Matilde said.

Neave shook her head. "*You're* the one who thinks that we should just follow him blindly, without thinking."

"Neave?" Royce said with a frown. Did the Picti girl have some kind of problem with the return of his father?

"I'm glad we found him," Neave said, "and I know that he'll be useful in the battles to come, but Mark and Matilde are looking at him like... it's almost as bad as the way we all looked at Lethe. No questioning, no *thinking*, just awe."

"Because the rightful king has been found again!" Matilde insisted. "What more do you want? I thought the Picti always followed those who could display the right magical signs."

"Those who can make the stones sing and make the old magic respond have our respect," Neave agreed. "But we do not follow blindly. Sometimes someone must lead, but that does not mean we follow without thought, without asking questions, without deciding for ourselves what is right."

"Is there going to be a problem among the Picti with my father coming back?" Royce asked her.

"I don't know," Neave admitted. "He is a man who has done many impressive things, but he was also the one who left the kingdom to King Carris and his nobles. He could have given us back our place in the world, and didn't. He could have done more."

"Perhaps he will this time," Royce suggested.

"Perhaps," Neave said. "In any case, I will continue to follow you. I heard you make the stones sing, at least, and you have shown me that you are someone who does what is right, Royce."

Royce felt a note of pride at that, grateful for Neave's trust after everything they'd been through. Maybe it was even good that someone was less in awe of his father than Mark and Matilde seemed to be, because it would help to keep things in check, help to make sure that they were all following along for the right reasons.

For now, he made his way further along the boat, to where his father was sitting, looking ahead at their progress with Gwylim the bhargir nearby. It almost looked as if his father was discussing something with the wolf-like beast, Gwylim's head turning in acknowledgment as his father spoke.

"If I can return you to what you were, I will," his father said. "But you must also know the dangers of the things that are to come. Without your skin, you may be trapped, but you are still powerful."

"Father?" Royce said, moving closer.

His father turned and smiled up at him. "It's so good to hear you call me that. I have just been discussing plans with our friend here."

"And do you think he understood all of it?" Royce asked. It seemed so strange to be talking to a thing that looked like a wolf.

"Do you understand what a bhargir is, Royce?" his father asked. "A man who could take the skin of a beast imbued with magic and *become* it. An old thing, and a powerful one. A creature like him can heal wounds that he suffers, can fight against the most ferocious foes, and then walk back into camp as the man he was. Except that this one cannot."

Royce nodded. He understood that. Even so, it was hard sometimes not to think of Gwylim as the creature he appeared to be.

"You have strange and powerful companions," his father said, with a gesture up toward the circling form of Ember. "You will need to speak to your witch soon, because I would like to know what she plans to do next. As for me... may I borrow your sword for a while?"

"It's yours, if you want it," Royce said. He took the obsidian blade from his belt and held it out almost reverently.

His father shook his head. "Not to keep. Living alone for so long has taught me a few skills, though, and I think that I can help make this blade better."

"Better?" Royce said.

"A warrior should have a good sword," his father said. "Go, speak with your witch. I will do what I can here."

Royce wanted to explain to his father that it wasn't that easy; that Lori was only there to speak to rarely, when she wanted. His father seemed so confident, though, that Royce reached up his senses toward Ember, calling out to Lori as he did so.

He had an image of a space out of doors, among a set of ancient stones. There was a fire set in the middle of it, slow burning with peat, but also with something that made the edges of the flames burn in shades of green and purple. Royce felt as if he were walking into that image then, moving forward to the edge of the firelight.

"I hoped you would come," Lori said, the witch looking up at him. "Come, Royce, sit by the fire. Tell me what is happening."

"Don't you *know*?" Royce asked. He moved to sit by the fire, in a spot where a low stone served as a seat. Royce could both feel it and not feel it, there and not there, all at once.

"No," Lori said, and now Royce could see just how worried the witch looked. "That's the problem." She cast something into the fire, the color of the flames changing once again, the edges burning with the orange heat of a forge. "Look into the fire, Royce, and tell me what you see."

Royce stared at the flames obediently, looking deeper and deeper, assuming that if he stared deep enough, it would give him visions of what was to come. Compared with the many possibilities of the mirror, it was a crude method, but Royce would welcome any guidance that he could get.

"I... just see flames," Royce admitted after a few minutes of staring.

“That’s the problem,” Lori said. “So do I. I should see more, I *have* seen more, but from the moment you looked into that mirror of yours, I have been able to catch only glimpses of things to come.”

“You’re saying that the mirror interferes with other magic?” Royce asked, thinking of the glass that even now sat safe in their boat.

“Maybe,” Lori said with a shrug. “Or maybe the fact that it has shown you so much makes my kind of prediction less certain.”

“Not being able to see anything might be disconcerting,” Royce said, “but it doesn’t have to be a problem. I’ve looked into the mirror. I’ve seen...” Even here, like this, he knew that he couldn’t admit exactly what he’d seen, and Lori was already holding up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t,” she said. “The future is too fragile. You’re treating it like some steel hawser, when it’s a gossamer thread. Be more careful, Royce.”

Now the worry in her voice seemed to have turned to outright fear.

“Lori,” Royce said, “I know you can’t see anything, but that doesn’t mean that anything’s wrong.”

“I didn’t say that I couldn’t see *anything*,” Lori said. “I told you, I still catch glimpses, and those glimpses are things of shadows and blood. I see violence, Royce, everywhere I look.”

Royce shook his head. “That’s one possibility, but it’s not the only one. I have found my father. We will return, and the people will follow him. They will see the true king returned, and everyone will understand that things have changed. If we’re lucky, even King Carris will back down and run.”

Lori laughed at that. “I sometimes forget how young you are, Royce, or maybe how old I am. Not everyone has seen... whatever you have seen. Not everyone has wisdom straight from a mirror, or your certainty that your father is the perfect king. People won’t just bow down to him because he returns.”

“I hope you’re wrong,” Royce said.

Lori smiled at that, but the smile was a brittle one. “So do I, Royce. So do I.”

The image of her by the fire faded, and Royce found himself back in the boat with the others. To his surprise, the sun had moved across the sky in the time he’d been conversing with the witch; much farther than it should have done in what had seemed like only a short time.

“You’re awake,” Matilde said. “That’s good. I think we’re getting close to shore, and we’re going to have to row when we get close.”

“You just don’t want to be the one doing it,” Royce guessed.

“After all the rowing in the Seven Isles?” Matilde shook her head. “I’ll leave it to you.”

Royce was happy that she and Neave seemed to have given up arguing for the moment. He went over to his father, who was still sitting in the prow of the boat, working on the obsidian sword.

Royce barely recognized it. His father had worked on the edges, turning the weapon into something smooth and sharp and deadly. He’d rewrapped the grip in leather, burning in wood above it to form a cross guard. Now he appeared to be fitting something into that cross guard, and it took Royce a moment to recognize—

“Your signet ring?” Royce said.

His father nodded, finishing pressing the symbol from it into a groove cut perfectly for the purpose.

“It’s not much, but I wanted the blade to be something personal, something that could only ever be yours,” his father said.

“It’s perfect,” Royce said, taking the blade from him. He tried the blade, and he could feel the adjustments that his father had made. It was lighter now, the balance refined, the blade singing through the air when Royce made an exploratory sweep with it. It wasn’t the shining perfection of the crystal sword, but it was something else in its own right, and it moved easily in Royce’s hand.

He stood there with his father, King Philip's hand resting on his shoulder as they looked out in the direction of the kingdom. Soon, the dark line of the coast started to come into view, and Royce looked over at his father.

“We're going home,” he promised.

“We are,” his father agreed. “And then the fight for it will begin.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Olivia wasn't sure why the need to find Genevieve drew her south quite so strongly. Sense dictated that she should have stayed with her father's forces, safe at the heart of a thousand men, rather than riding out here with only three.

Haam, Wells, and William looked nervous riding out like this into spaces that were still under the control of King Carris, but part of the reason Olivia had selected them for the task of protecting her was that they wouldn't try to go against what she wanted, what she *needed*, to do.

She had to find Genevieve; Olivia didn't know why, but she had to.

"Are you sure it's safe to be so far away from your father's forces, my lady?" Haam asked. Olivia knew he was just voicing the concerns the others had. She didn't even blame him for it. This was a dangerous place for all of them.

"I have you to protect me," she said to them.

That made them instantly sit up straighter with pride. These three weren't knights, and the difference was obvious. Their armor was battered and probably pieced together from a dozen different sources, their horses more suited to pulling a plow than to war. Their weapons were plain, functional things, and it was obvious that they were nervous, looking around at every noise from the side of the road as they continued heading south.

"How much further though?" William asked, as they reached a crossroads. They came to a halt, trying to work out which way to go.

"We should think about turning back," Haam said.

Olivia sat atop her steed, absentmindedly fiddling with the ring Royce had given her on their engagement; her family's ring, but the symbol of their love nonetheless. She stroked it, and as she did so, she thought of Genevieve. She thought of the way the other girl had looked at the castle, and about how much she had obviously meant to Royce.

"We keep going, as far as we need to go until we find her," Olivia said. "My guess is that she's heading for the king's encampment. We need to get to her before she reaches it."

"And if we can't?" Wells asked.

Olivia shrugged, but only because she knew she couldn't say what she was thinking: that if necessary, she would tear down any wall, find a way through any army, to find Genevieve. Just the thought of her was like a hint of grit at the back of her mind that wouldn't go away. Olivia knew she couldn't be happy with Royce knowing that things were unsettled with Genevieve, with her out there still feeling that way about him. She needed to find her.

"Genevieve will have gone to Altfor," Olivia said, dodging the question. "Altfor is with King Carris, so we know where she will be going. That gives us a chance to catch up with her before she can get there."

"I hope so," Wells said, "but we need to think about what point we turn back at. How far do we go before we need to return home?"

"We go as far as we need to," Olivia said, her determination absolute. Right then, she knew that she would follow Genevieve into the midst of a blazing fire if she had to. "And we're wasting time sitting here when we could be riding. Every moment we sit still on our horses is a moment when she is getting further away from us."

Olivia set off in the direction that their information had said King Carris's court was in, kicking her horse into a canter. She didn't care if the others managed to keep up or not. Their horses hurried into place next to hers, and from a distance, they probably *did* look like a noblewoman riding along with her protector knights.

Eventually, they rode through some stands of trees, and then up onto the brow of a hill. From up there, Olivia could see King Carris's army spread out below, banner after banner raised as nobles had

joined him to show their support. There were thousands of men there, ordinary soldiers and knights, archers and spearmen. The nobles and the knights had their tents separate from the others, each with their small entourages of servants and hangers-on.

There was a keep at the heart of it all, solid and imposing. Instinctively, Olivia knew that was where Genevieve would be. Alfor would have gone in there to find the king, and Genevieve would have gone in there to find Alfor. She might have spent a little time out in the camp below, but Olivia guessed that it would have been only a little. She would have marched up in the direction of the doors, the way...

...the way she had at Olivia's home.

Maybe that was part of what made her want to find Genevieve so badly. She knew that someone who would just come there like that, demanding to see Royce, wouldn't stop at that. She would never just go away. She rubbed the ring she wore again...

"I'm going down there," Olivia declared, kicking her horse forward once more.

Haam was there, grabbing for the horse's reins.

"My lady, you are *not* going down there," he said.

"You don't get to tell me what I will and won't do," Olivia snapped back, surprised by how she sounded, even to herself. "I have to do this. I need to—"

"We need to go *home*," William cut in. "We've come too far. We're right outside the enemy camp!"

"You can go home if you want," Olivia snapped. She dismounted, heading off in the direction of the keep. "I'll find a way to do this."

"No," Wells said. "It's suicide."

He and William dismounted and grabbed hold of Olivia, holding her back. It took everything Olivia had not to fight to break free and just run down there. She had to find Genevieve... she *had* to.

"My lady, this is not sensible!" Haam said. "We can't just walk into the camp of the enemy, no matter the reason. Think, we have already achieved something to get this far. We have seen the forces that they have. If we get back now, we will be able to tell the others what we will be facing in the battle."

"We don't even know that the woman you're looking for is there," Wells said.

Olivia felt herself calming a little, and she was ashamed to admit that Wells's point had a little more to do with it than Haam's. If she had been able to see Genevieve there, Olivia suspected that she would have run down there, and that nothing would be able to stop her.

As it was, she could at least seek out some kind of certainty.

"You're right," she said. "But that just means that we can't go back yet. We need proper sketches of what we've found, and we need to find out if there are any weaknesses to be seen. Come on."

Brushing them away, she started to lead the way around the encampment. It meant that Olivia could look down, trying to find the thing that she truly wanted: a safe way in. There had to be one; with an army that size, it was impossible that everyone would be accounted for. There would be coming and going, with people delivering food from the surrounding farms and messages from the world beyond.

Olivia thought of the challenges that faced *their* army. They were gathering people every day, and that process was one that brought risks with it. Already, there had been plenty of chances for spies to slip in, and controlling the flow of people here looked as if it would be almost as bad. Perhaps if they could find some way to fit in with a group trying to join the king's forces, she would be able to get into the keep, and from there, find her way to Genevieve...

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