



MORGAN RICE

ONLY
THE
WORTHY

THE WAY OF STEEL--BOOK #1

The Way of Steel

Морган Райс

Only the Worthy

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Only the Worthy / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (The Way of Steel)

ISBN 978-1-63-291649-5

ONLY THE WORTHY (The Way of Steel—Book 1) tells the epic coming of age story of Royce, 17, a peasant farmer who senses, with his special fighting skills, that he is different from all the other boys in his village. There resides within him a power he does not understand, and a hidden destiny he is afraid to face. On the day he is to be wed to his one true love, Genevieve, she is stolen away from him. Royce chooses to risk it all to confront the nobles who took her and to try to save his love. When he fails, he is sentenced to the infamous Red Isle, a barren island of warriors known for turning boys into men. Banished from his homeland, Royce must face trials beyond which he can imagine as he is taught to survive the notorious Pits—the kingdom's brutal bloodsport. Genevieve, meanwhile, desperate for Royce's return, is forced to navigate the cruel and conniving world of aristocracy as she finds herself immersed in a world she despises. Yet as Royce's powers become stronger and as he learns there is a secret behind the mysterious lineage of his father, he comes to realize that his destiny may be greater than he thought. He begins to wonder at the most terrifying question of all: who is he? ONLY THE WORTHY 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.

ISBN 978-1-63-291649-5

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Rice Morgan

ONLY THE WORTHY (THE WAY OF STEEL – BOOK 1)

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 two books (and counting); of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan’s books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

TURNED (Book #1 in the Vampire Journals), ARENA ONE (Book #1 of the Survival Trilogy), A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1 in the Sorcerer’s Ring) and RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Kings and Sorcerers – Book #1) are each available as a free download!

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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.”

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– *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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The word of the Lord came to me, saying: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

But I said: “Alas, my Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ Rather, wherever I shall send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not fear them, for I am with you and will rescue you.”

Jeremiah 1:4–7

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Rea sat upright in her simple bed, sweating, awakened by the shrieks that tore through the night. Her heart pounded as she sat in the dark, hoping it was nothing, that it was just another one of the nightmares that had been plaguing her. She gripped the edge of her cheap straw mattress and listened, praying, willing for the night to be silent.

Another shriek came, though, and Rea flinched.

Then another.

They were becoming more frequent – and getting closer.

Frozen in fear, Rea sat there and listened as they neared. Above the sound of the lashing rain there also came the sound of horses, faint at first, then the distinctive sound of swords being drawn. But none were louder than the shrieking.

And then a new sound arose, one which, if possible, was even worse: the crackle of flames. Rea's heart sank as she realized her village was being set ablaze. That could only mean one thing: the nobles had arrived.

Rea jumped from bed, banging her knee against the andirons, her only possession in her simple one-room cottage, and then running from the house. She emerged to the muddy street, into the warm rain of spring, the downpour getting her instantly wet. Yet she did not care. She blinked into the darkness, still trying to shake off her nightmare. All around her, shutters opened, doors opened, and her fellow villagers stepped tentatively from their cottages. They all stood and stared down the single simple road winding into the village. Rea stared with them and in the distance spotted a glow. Her heart sank. It was a spreading flame.

Living here, in the poorest part of the village, hidden behind the twisting labyrinths that wound their way from the main town square, was, at a time like this, a blessing: she would at least be safe back here. Nobody ever came back here, to this poorest part of town, to these ramshackle cottages where only the servants lived, where the stink of the streets forced people away. It had always felt like a ghetto that Rea could not get out of.

Yet as she watched the flames lick the night, Rea was relieved, for the first time, to live back here, hidden. The nobles would never bother trying to navigate the labyrinthine streets and back alleys that led here. There was nothing to pillage here, after all.

Rea knew that was why her destitute neighbors merely stood there outside their cottages, not panicking, but merely watching. That was why, too, none of them attempted to run to the aid of the villagers in the town center, those rich folk who had looked down upon them their entire lives. They owed them nothing. The poor were safe back here, at least, and they would not risk their lives to save those who had treated them as less than nothing.

And yet, as Rea studied the night, she was baffled to see the flames getting closer, the night brighter. The glow was clearly spreading, creeping its way toward her. She blinked, wondering if her eyes were deceiving her. It didn't make any sense: the marauders seemed to be heading her way.

The shrieks grew louder, she was certain of it, and she flinched as suddenly flames erupted hardly a hundred feet before her, emerging from the labyrinthine streets. She stood there, stunned: they were coming this way. But why?

Hardly had she finished the thought when a galloping warhorse thundered into the square, ridden by a fierce knight donned in all-black armor. His visor was lowered, his helmet drawn to a sinister point. Wielding a halberd, he looked like a messenger of death.

Barely had he entered the square than he lowered his halberd on the back of a portly old man who tried to run. The man hadn't even time to scream before the halberd severed his head.

Lightning filled the skies and thunder struck, the rain intensifying, as a dozen more knights burst into the square. One of them bore a standard. It glowed in the light of the torches, yet Rea could not make out the insignia.

Chaos ensued. Villagers panicked, turned and ran, shrieking, some running back into their cottages by some remote instinct, slipping in the mud, a few fleeing through back alleys. Yet even these did not get far before flying spears found a place in their backs. Death, she knew, would spare no one on this night.

Rea did not try to run. She merely stepped back calmly, reached inside the door of her cottage, and drew a sword, a long sword given to her ages ago, a beautiful work of craftsmanship. The sound of it being drawn from its scabbard made her heart beat faster. It was a masterpiece, a weapon she had no right to own, handed down by her father. She didn't know how he himself had gained it.

Rea walked slowly and resolutely into the center of the town square, the only one of her villagers brave enough to stand their ground, to face these men. She, a frail seventeen-year-old girl, and she alone, had the courage to fight in the face of fear. She didn't know where her courage came from. She wanted to flee, yet something deep inside her forbade it. Something within her had always driven her to face her fears, whatever the odds. It was not that she did not feel terror; she did. It was that another part of her allowed her to function in the face of it. Challenged her to be stronger than it.

Rea stood there, hands trembling, but forcing herself to stay focused. And as the first horse galloped for her, she raised her sword, stepped up, leaned low, and chopped off the horse's legs.

It pained her to do it, to maim this beautiful animal; she had, after all, spent most of her life caring for horses. But the man had raised his spear, and she knew her survival was at stake.

The horse shrieked an awful sound that she knew would stay with her the rest of her days. It fell to the ground, face-planting in the dirt and throwing its knight. The horses behind it rode into it, stumbling and crashing down in a pile around her.

In a cloud of dust and chaos, Kyle spun and faced them all, ready to die here.

A single knight, in all-white armor, riding a white horse, different from the others, suddenly charged right for her. She raised her sword to strike again, but this knight was too fast. He moved like lightning. Barely had she raised her sword than he swung his halberd in an upward arc, catching her blade, disarming her. A helpless feeling ran down her arm as her precious weapon was stripped away, sailing in a broad arc through the air and landing in the mud on the far side of the square. It might as well have been a million miles away.

Rea stood there, stunned to find herself defenseless, but most of all confused. That knight's blow had not been meant to kill her. *Why?*

Before she could finish the thought the knight, still riding, leaned low and grabbed her; she felt his metal gauntlet digging into her chest as he grabbed her shirt with two hands and in a single motion heaved her up onto his horse, seating her before him. She shrieked at the shock of it, landing roughly on his moving horse, planted firmly in front of him, his metal arms wrapped around her, holding her tight. She barely had time to think, much less to breathe, as he held her in a vise. Rea writhed, bucking side to side, but it was no use. He was too strong.

He continued on, galloping right through the village, weaving his way through the tortuous streets and away from her home.

They burst out of the village into the countryside, and suddenly, all was quiet. They rode farther and farther from the chaos, from the pillaging, the shrieking, and Rea could not help but feel guilty for her momentary sense of relief to have the world be at peace again. She felt she should have died back there, with her people. Yet as he held her tighter and tighter, she realized her fate might be even worse.

"Please," she struggled to say, finding it hard to get the word out.

But he only held her tighter and galloped faster into the open meadow, up and down rolling hills, in the pouring rain, until they were in a place of utter quiet. It was eerie, so quiet and peaceful here, as if nothing had ever been wrong in the world.

Finally he stopped on a broad plateau high above the countryside, beneath an ancient tree, a tree she instantly recognized. She had sat beneath it many times before.

In one quick motion he dismounted, keeping his grip on her and taking her with him. They landed in the wet grass, rolling, stumbling, and Rea felt winded as his weight landed beside her. She noted as they landed that he could have landed on top of her, could have really hurt her, but chose not to. In fact, he landed in a way that cushioned her fall.

The knight rolled on top of her, pinning her down, and she looked up at him, desperate to see his face. It was covered, though, the white visor down, only menacing eyes appearing from behind the slits of his helmet. On his horse she saw that banner again, and this time she got a good look at its insignia: two snakes, wrapped around a moon, a dagger between them, encased in a circle of gold.

Rea flailed, punching his armor. But it was useless. Hers were frail, small hands punching at a suit of metal. She might as well have been punching a boulder.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “What do you want of me?”

There came no response.

Instead, he grabbed her with his gauntlet, and the next thing she knew, he turned her around, face first in the grass, and was reaching, pulling at her dress.

Rea cried, realizing what was about to happen. She was seventeen. She had been saving herself for the perfect man. She did not want it to happen this way.

“No!” she cried out. “Please. Anything but that. Kill me first!”

But the knight would not listen, and she knew there was no stopping him.

Rea shut her eyes tight, trying to make it go away, trying to transport herself to another place, another time, anywhere but here. Her nightmare came back to her, the one she had been awakened from, the one she had been having for many moons. It was this, she realized with dread, that she had been seeing. This very scene. This tree, this grass, this plateau. This storm.

Somehow, she had foreseen it.

Rea shut her eyes tighter and tried to imagine this wasn't happening. She tried to determine if it was worse in the dream, or in real life.

Soon, it was over.

He stopped moving and lay on top of her, she too numb to move.

She heard the sound of metal rising, felt his weight finally off of her, and she braced herself, expecting him to kill her now. She anticipated the blow of his sword. It would be a welcome relief.

“Go on,” she said. “Do it.”

Yet to her surprise there came no sound of a sword, but instead the soft sound of a dainty chain. She felt something cold and light being placed into her palm, and she glanced over, confused.

She squinted in the rain and was stunned to see he had placed a gold necklace in her hand, a pendant at its end, two snakes, wrapped around a moon, a dagger between them.

Finally, he spoke his first words.

“When he is born,” came the dark, mysterious voice, a voice of authority, “give this to him. And send him to me.”

She heard the knight mounting his horse, and became dimly aware of the sound of his riding away.

Rea's eyes grew heavy. She was too exhausted to move as she lay there in the rain. Her heart shattered, she felt sweet sleep coming on and she allowed it to embrace her. Maybe now, at least, the nightmares would stop.

Before she let them close, she stared out at the necklace, the emblem. She squeezed it, feeling it in her hand, the gold so thick, thick enough to feed her entire village for a lifetime.

Why had he given it to her? Why hadn't he killed her?

Him, he had said. Not her. He knew she would be pregnant. And he knew it would be a boy.

How?

Suddenly, before sweet sleep took her, it all came rushing back to her. The last piece of her dream.

A boy. She had given birth to a boy. One born of fury. Of violence.

A boy destined to be king.

CHAPTER TWO

Three Moons Later

Rea stood alone in the forest clearing, in a daze, lost in her own world. She did not hear the stream trickling beneath her feet, did not hear the chirping of the birds in the thick wood around her, did not notice the sunlight shining through the branches, or the pack of deer that watched her close by. The entire world melted away as she stared at only one thing: the veins of the Ukanda leaf that she held in her trembling fingers. She removed her palm from the broad, green leaf, and slowly, to her horror, the color of its veins changed from green to white.

Watching it change was like a knife in her heart.

The Ukanda did not change colors unless the person who touched it was with child.

Rea's world reeled. She lost all sense of time and space as she stood there, her heart pounding in her ears, her hands trembling, and thought back to that fateful night three moons ago when her village had been pillaged, too many of her people killed to count. When *he* had taken her. She reached down and ran her hand over her stomach, feeling the slightest bump, feeling another wave of nausea, and finally, she understood why. She reached down and fingered the gold necklace she'd been hiding around her neck, deep beneath her clothes, of course, so that the others would not see it, and she wondered, for the millionth time, who that knight was.

Try as she did to block them out, his final words rang again and again in her head.

Send him to me.

There came a sudden rustling behind her and Rea turned, startled, to see the beady eyes of Prudence, her neighbor, staring back at her. A fourteen-year-old girl who lost her family in the attack, a busybody who had always been too eager to tattle on anyone, Prudence was the last person Rea wanted to see know her news. Rea watched with horror as Prudence's eyes drifted from Rea's hand to the changing leaf, then widened in recognition.

With a glare of disapproval, Prudence dropped her basket of sheets and turned and ran. Rea knew her running off could only mean one thing: she was going to inform the villagers.

Rea's heart sank, and she felt her first wave of fear. The villagers would demand she kill her baby, of course. They wanted no reminder of the nobles' attack. But why did that scare her? Did she really want to keep this child, the byproduct of that monster?

Rea's fear surprised her, and as she dwelled on it, she realized it was a fear to keep her baby safe. That floored her. Intellectually, she did not want to have it; to do so would be a betrayal to her village and herself. It would only embolden the nobles who had raided. And it would be so easy to lose the baby; she could merely chew the Yukaba root, and with her next bathing, the child would pass.

Yet viscerally, she felt the child inside her, and her body was telling her something that her mind was not: she wanted to keep it. To protect it. It was a child, after all.

Rea, an only child who had never known her parents, who had suffered in this world with no one to love and no one to love her, had always desperately wanted someone to love, and someone to love her back. She was tired of being alone, of being quarantined in the poorest section of the village, of scrubbing others' floors, doing hard labor from morning to night with no way out. She would never find a man, she knew, given her status. At least no man whom she didn't despise. And she would likely never have a child.

Rea felt a sudden surge of longing. This might be her only chance, she realized. And now that she was pregnant, she realized she hadn't known how badly she wanted this child. She wanted it more than anything.

Rea began the hike back to her village, on edge, caught up in a swirl of mixed emotions, hardly prepared to face the disapproval she knew would be awaiting her. The villagers would insist there be no surviving issue from the marauders of their town, from the men who had taken everything from

them. Rea could hardly blame them; it was a common tactic for marauders to impregnate women in order to dominate and control the villages throughout the kingdom. Sometimes they would even send for the child. And having a child only fueled their cycle of violence.

Yet still, none of that could change how she felt. A life lived inside her. She could feel it with each step she took, and she felt stronger for it. She could feel it with each heartbeat, pulsing through her own.

Rea walked down the center of the village streets, heading back to her one-room cottage, feeling her world upside down, wondering what to think. *Pregnant*. She did not know how to be pregnant. She did not know how to give birth to a child. Or how to raise one. She could barely feed herself. How would she even afford it?

Yet somehow she felt a new strength rising up within her. She felt it pumping in her veins, a strength she had only been dimly conscious of these last three moons, but which now came into crystal clear focus. It was a strength beyond hers. A strength of the future, of hope. Of possibility. Of a life she could never lead.

It was a strength that demanded her to be bigger than she could ever be.

As Rea walked slowly down the dirt street, she became dimly aware of her surroundings, and of the eyes of the villagers watching her. She turned, and on either side of the street saw the curious and disapproving eyes of old and young women, of old men and boys, of the lone survivors, maimed men who bore the scars of that night. They all held great suffering in their faces. And they all stared at her, at her stomach, as if she were somehow to blame.

She saw women her age amongst them, faces haunted, staring back with no compassion. Many of them, Rea knew, had been impregnated, too, and had already taken the root. She could see the grief in their eyes, and she could sense that they wanted her to share it.

Rea felt the crowd thicken around her and when she looked up she was surprised to see a wall of people blocking her path. The entire village seemed to have come out, men and women, old and young. She saw the agony in their faces, an agony she had shared, and she stopped and stared back at them. She knew what they wanted. They wanted to kill her boy.

She felt a sudden rush of defiance – and she resolved at that moment that she never would.

“Rea,” came a tough voice.

Severn, a middle-aged man with dark hair and beard, a scar across his cheek from that night, stood in their center and glared down at her. He looked her up and down as if she were a piece of cattle, and the thought crossed her mind that he was little better than the nobles. All of them were the same: all thought they had the right to control her body.

“You will take the root,” he commanded darkly. “You will take the root, and tomorrow this shall all be behind you.”

At Severn’s side, a woman stepped forward. Luca. She had also been attacked that night, and had taken the root the week before. Rea had heard her groaning all the night long, her wails of grief for her lost child.

Luca held out a sack, its yellow powder visible inside, and Rea recoiled. She felt the entire village looking to her, expecting her to reach out and take it.

“Luca will accompany you to the river,” Severn added. “She will stay with you through the night.”

Rea stared back, feeling a foreign energy rising within her as she looked at them all coldly.

She said nothing.

Their faces hardened.

“Do not defy us, girl,” another man said, stepping forward, tightening his grip on his sickle until his knuckles turned white. “Do not dishonor the memory of the men and women we lost that night by giving life to their issue. Do what you are expected. Do what is your place.”

Rea took a deep breath, and was surprised at the strength in her own voice as she answered:

“I will not.”

Her voice sounded foreign to her, deeper and more mature than she had ever heard it. It was as if she had become a woman overnight.

Rea watched their faces flash with anger, like a storm cloud passing over a sunny day. One man, Kavov, frowned and stepped forward, an air of authority about him. She looked down and saw the flogger in his hand.

“There’s an easy way to do this,” he said, his voice full of steel. “And a hard way.”

Rea felt her heart pounding as she stared back, looking him right in the eyes. She recalled what her father had told her once when she was a young girl: never back down. Not to anyone. Always stand up for yourself, even if the odds were against you. *Especially* if the odds were against you. Always set your sights on the biggest bully. Attack first. Even if it means your life.

Rea burst into action. Without thinking, she reached over, snatched a staff from one of the men’s hands, stepped forward, and with all her might jabbed Kavov in the solar plexus.

Kavov gasped as he keeled over, and Rea, not giving him another chance, drew it back and jabbed him in the face. His nose cracked and he dropped the flogger and fell to the ground, clutching his nose and groaning into the mud.

Rea, still gripping the staff, looked up and saw the group of horrified, shocked faces staring back. They all looked a bit less certain.

“It is *my* boy,” she spat. “I am keeping it. If you come for me, the next time it won’t be a staff in your belly, but a sword.”

With that, she tightened her grip on the staff, turned, and slowly walked away, elbowing her way through the crowd. Not one of them, she knew, would dare follow her. Not now, at least.

She walked away, her hands shaking, her heart pounding, knowing it would be a long six months until her baby came.

And knowing that the next time they came for her, they would come to kill.

CHAPTER THREE

Six Moons Later

Rea lay on the pile of furs beside her small, roaring fireplace, entirely and utterly alone, and groaned and shrieked in agony as her labor pains came. Outside, the winter wind howled as fierce gales slammed the shutters against the sides of the house and snow burst in drifts into the cottage. The raging storm matched her mood.

Rea's face was shiny with sweat as she sat beside the small fire, yet she could not get warm, despite the raging flames, despite the baby kicking and spinning in her stomach as if it were trying to leap out. She was wet and cold, shaking all over, and she felt certain that she would die on this night. Another labor pain came, and feeling the way she did, she wished the marauder had just killed her back then; it would have been more merciful. This slow prolonged torture, this night of sheer agony, was a thousand times worse than anything he could have ever done to her.

Suddenly, rising even over her shrieks, over the gales of wind, there came another sound – perhaps the only sound left that was capable of sending a jolt of fear up her spine.

It was the sound of a mob. An angry mob of villagers, coming, she knew, to kill her child.

Rea summoned every last ounce of strength, strength she did not even know she had left, and, shaking, somehow managed to lift herself up off the floor. Groaning and screaming, she landed on her knees, wobbling. She reached out for a wooden peg on the wall, and with everything she had, with one great shriek she rose to standing.

She could not tell if it hurt more to be lying down or on her feet. But she had no time to ponder it. The mob grew louder, closer, and she knew they would soon arrive. Her dying would not bother her. But her baby dying – that was another matter. She had to get this child safe, no matter what it took. It was the strangest thing, but she felt more attached to the baby's life than her own.

Rea managed to stumble to the door and crashed into it, using the knob to hold herself up. She stood there, breathing hard for several seconds, resting on the knob, bracing herself. Finally, she turned it. She grabbed the pitchfork leaning against the wall and, propping herself up on it, opened the door.

Rea was met by a sudden gale of wind and snow, cold enough to take her breath away. The shouts met her, too, rising even over the wind, and her heart dropped to see in the distance the torches, winding their way toward her like enraged fireflies in the night. She glanced up at the sky and between the clouds caught a glimpse of a huge blood red moon, filling the sky. She gasped. It was not possible. She had never seen the moon shine red, and had never seen it in a storm. She felt a sharp kick in her stomach, and she suddenly knew, without a doubt, that that moon was a sign. It was meant for the birth of her child.

Who is he? she wondered.

Rea reached down and held her stomach with both hands as another person writhed inside her. She could feel his power, aching to break through, as if he were eager to fight this mob himself.

Then they came. The flaming torches lit the night as a mob appeared before her, emerging from the alleys, heading right for her. If she had been her old self, strong, able, she would have made a stand. But she could barely walk – barely stand – and she could not face them now. Not with her child about to come.

Even so, Rea felt a primal rage course through her, along with a primal strength, the primal strength, she knew, of her baby. She received a jolt of adrenaline, too, and her labor pains momentarily subsided. For a brief moment, she felt back to herself.

The first of the villagers arrived, a short, fat man, running for her, holding out a sickle. As he neared, Rea reached back, grabbed the pitchfork with both hands, stepped sideways, and released a primal scream as she drove it right through his gut.

The man stopped in shock, then collapsed at her feet. The mob stopped, too, looking at her in shock, clearly not expecting that.

Rea did not wait. She extracted the pitchfork in one quick motion, spun it overhead, and smashed the next villager across the cheek as he lunged at her with his club. He, too, dropped, landing in the snow at her feet.

Rea felt an awful pain in her side as another man rushed forward and tackled her, driving her down into the snow. They slid several feet, Rea groaning in pain as she felt the baby kicking within her. She wrestled with the man in the snow, fighting for her life, and as his grip momentarily loosened, Rea, desperate, sank her teeth into his cheek. He shrieked as she bit down hard, drawing blood, tasting it, not willing to let go, thinking of her baby.

Finally he rolled off of her, grabbing his cheek, and Rea saw her opportunity. Slipping in the snow, she crawled to her feet, ready to run. She was nearly there when suddenly she felt a hand grab her hair from behind. This man nearly yanked her hair out of her head as he pulled her back down to the ground and dragged her along. She looked back to see Severn scowling down at her.

“You should have listened when you had the chance,” he seethed. “Now you will be killed, along with your baby.”

Rea heard a cheer from the mob, and she knew she had reached her end. She closed her eyes and prayed. She had never been a religious person, but at this moment, she found God.

I pray, with every ounce of who I am, that this child be saved. You can let me die. Just save the child.

As if her prayers were answered, she suddenly felt the release of pressure on her hair, while at the same time she heard a thump. She looked up, startled, wondering what could have happened.

When she saw who had come to her rescue, she was stunned. It was a boy – Nick – several years younger than her. The son of a peasant farmer, like she, he had never been that bright, always picked on by the others. Yet she had always been kind to him. Perhaps he remembered.

She watched as Nick raised a club and smashed Severn in the side of the head, knocking him off of her.

Nick then faced off with the mob, holding out his club and blocking her from the others.

“Go quickly!” he yelled to her. “Before they kill you!”

Rea stared back at him with gratitude and shock. This mob would surely pummel him.

She jumped to her feet and ran, slipping as she went, determined to get far while she still had time. She ducked into alleyways, and before she disappeared, she glanced back to see Nick swinging wildly at the villagers, clubbing several of them. Several men, though, pressed forward and tackled him to the ground. With him out of the way, they ran after her.

Rea ran. Gasping for breath, she twisted and turned through the alleys, looking for shelter. Heaving, in horrific pain, she did not know how much farther she could go.

She finally found herself exiting into the village proper, with its elegant stone houses, and she glanced back with dread to see they were closing in, hardly twenty feet away. She gasped, stumbling more than running. She knew she was reaching her end. Another labor pain was coming.

Suddenly there came a sharp creak, and Rea looked up to see an ancient oak door before her open wide. She was startled to see Fiorth, the old apothecary, peek out from his small stone fort, wide-eyed, beckoning her to enter quickly. Fiorth reached out and yanked her with a grip surprisingly strong for his old age, and Rea found herself stumbling through the door of the luxurious keep.

He slammed and bolted it behind her.

A moment later the thumping came, the hands and sickles of dozens of irate villagers trying to knock it down. Yet the door held, to Rea’s immense relief. It was a foot thick and centuries older than she. Its heavy iron bolts did not even bend.

Rea breathed deep. Her baby was safe.

Fioth leaned over and examined her, his face filled with compassion, and seeing his gentle look helped her more than anything else. No one had looked upon her with kindness in this village for months.

He removed her furs as she gasped from another labor pain. It was quiet in here, the gales of snow brushing the roof muted, and very warm.

Fioth led her to the fire's side and laid her down on a pile of furs. It was then that it all hit her: the running, the fighting, the pain. She collapsed. Even if there were a thousand men knocking down the door, she knew she could not move again.

She shrieked as a sharp labor pain tore through her.

"I can't run," Rea gasped, beginning to cry. "I cannot run anymore."

He ran a cool, damp cloth across her forehead.

"No need to run anymore," he said, his voice, ancient, reassuring, as if he had seen it all before. "I am here now."

She shrieked and groaned as another pain ripped through her. She felt as if she were being torn in two.

"Lean back!" he commanded.

She did as she was told – and a second later, she felt it. A tremendous pressure between her legs.

There suddenly came a sound that terrified her.

A wail.

The scream of a baby.

She nearly blacked out from the pain.

She watched the apothecary's expert hands, as she went in and out of consciousness, pulling the child from her, reaching out with something sharp, cutting the umbilical cord. She watched him wipe the baby with a cloth, clear its lungs, nose, throat.

The wail and scream came even louder.

Rea burst into tears. It was such a relief to hear the sound, penetrating her heart, rising even above the slamming of the villagers against the door. A child.

Her child.

He was alive. Against all odds, he had been born.

Rea was dimly aware of the apothecary wrapping him in a blanket, and then she felt the warmth as he placed him in her arms. She felt the weight of him on her chest, and she held him tight as he screamed and wailed. She had never been so overjoyed, tears gushing down her face.

Suddenly, there came a new sound: horses galloping. The clanging of armor. And then, shrieks. It was no longer the sound of the mob shouting to kill her – but rather, of the mob being killed itself.

Rea listened, baffled, trying to understand. Then she felt a wave of relief. Of course. The noble had come back to save her. To save his child.

"Thank God," she said. "The knights have come to my rescue."

Rea felt a sudden burst of optimism. Perhaps he would take her away from all this. Perhaps she would have a chance to start life over again. Her boy would grow up in a castle, become a great lord, and perhaps she would, too. Her baby would have a good life. *She* would have a good life.

Rea felt a flood of relief, tears of joy flooding her cheeks.

"No," the apothecary corrected, his voice heavy. "They have not come to save your baby."

She stared back, confused. "Then why have they come?"

He stared at her grimly.

"To kill it."

She stared back, aghast, feeling a cold dread run through her.

"They did not trust the job to a mob of villagers," he added. "They wanted to make sure it was done right, by their own hands."

Rea felt ice run through her veins.

“But...” she stammered, trying to understand, “...my baby belongs to the knight. Their commander. Why? Why would they want to kill it?”

Fioth shook his head grimly.

“Your knight, the baby’s father, was murdered,” he explained. “Many moons ago. Those men you hear are not his own. They are his rivals. They want his baby dead. They want *you* dead.”

He stared back with a panicked urgency and she knew, with dread, that he spoke the truth.

“You must both flee this place!” he urged. “Now!”

He had hardly finished uttering the words when there came the crash of an iron pole against the door. This time it was no mere farmer’s sickle – it was a professional knight’s battering ram. As it hit, the door buckled.

Fioth turned to her, eyes wide in panic.

“GO!” he shouted.

Rea looked back at him, terror-stricken, wondering, in her condition, if she could even stand.

He grabbed her, though, and yanked her to her feet. She shrieked in pain, the motion pure agony.

“Please!” she cried. “It hurts too much! Let me die!”

“Look in your arms!” he cried back. “Do you want him to die?”

Rea looked down at the boy wailing in her arms, and as another smash came against the door, she knew he was right. She could not let him die here.

“What about you?” she moaned, realizing. “They will kill you, too.”

He nodded with resignation.

“I have lived for many sun cycles,” he replied. “If I can delay them from finding you, to give you a chance for safety, I will gladly give up what remains of my life. Now go! Head for the river! Find a boat and flee from here! Quickly!”

He yanked her before she had a chance to think, and before she knew it he was leading her to the rear entrance of his fort. He pulled back a tapestry to reveal a hidden door carved into the stone. He leaned against it with all his might and it opened with a scraping sound, releasing ancient air. A burst of cold air rushed into the fort.

Barely had it opened than he pushed her and her baby out the back.

Rea found herself immersed in the snowstorm, stumbling down a steep, snowy riverbank, clutching her baby. She slipped and slid, feeling as if the world were collapsing beneath her, barely able to move. As she ran, lightning struck an immense tree close to her, lighting up the night, and sent it crashing down too close to her. The baby screamed. She was horrified: never would she have believed that lightning could strike in a snowstorm. This was indeed a night of omens.

Rea slipped again as the terrain grew steep, and this time she landed on her butt. She went flying, and she cried out as the slope took her all the way down toward the riverbank.

She breathed with relief to reach it and realized if she hadn’t slid all this way, she probably could not have made the run. She glanced back uphill, shocked at how far she had come, and watched in horror as the knights invaded Fioth’s fort and set it ablaze. The fire burned strongly, even in the snow, and she felt an awful wave of guilt, knowing the old man had died for her.

A moment later knights burst out the back door, while more horses galloped around it. She could see they’d spotted her, and without pausing raced for her.

Rea turned and tried to run, but there was nowhere left to go. She was in no condition to run, anyway. All she could do was drop to her knees before the riverbank. She knew she would die here. She had reached the end of her rope.

Yet hope remained for her baby. She looked out and saw a tangle of sticks, perhaps a beaver’s nest, so thick it resembled a basket. Driven by a mother’s love, she thought quickly. She reached over and grabbed it and quickly placed her baby inside it. She tested it, and to her relief, it floated.

Rea reached out and prepared to shove the basket into the calm river's waters. If the current caught it, it would float away from here. Somewhere down river. How far, and for how long, she did not know. But some chance of life was better than none.

Rea, weeping, leaned down and kissed her baby's forehead. She leaned back and shrieked with grief. Hands shaking, she removed the necklace from around her neck and placed it around her baby's. She clasped her hands over both of his.

"I love you," she said, between sobs. "Never forget me."

The baby shrieked as if he understood, a piercing cry, rising even above the new clap of thunder and lightning, even above the sound of approaching horses.

Rea knew she could wait no longer. She gave the basket a push, and soon, the current caught it. She watched, sobbing, as it disappeared into the blackness.

She had no sooner lost sight of it than the clanging of armor appeared behind her – and she wheeled to find several knights dismounting, but feet away.

"Where's the child?" one demanded, his visor lowered, his voice cutting through the storm. It was nothing like the visor of the man who had had her. This man wore red armor, of a different shape, and there was no kindness in his voice.

"I..." she began.

Then she felt a fury within her – the fury of a woman who knew she was about to die. Who had nothing left to lose.

"He's gone," she spat, defiant. She smiled. "And you shall never have him. *Never.*"

The man groaned in anger as he stepped forward, drew a sword, and stabbed her.

Rea felt the awful agony of steel in her chest, and she gasped, breathless. She felt her world becoming lighter, felt herself immersed in white light, and she knew that this was death.

Yet, she felt no fear. Indeed, she felt satisfaction. Her baby was safe.

And as she landed face-first in the river, the waters turning red, she knew it was over. Her short, hard life had ended.

But her boy would live forever.

*

The peasant woman, Mithka, knelt by the river's edge, her husband beside her, the two frantically reciting their prayers, feeling no other recourse during this uncanny storm. It felt as if the end of the world were upon them. The blood red moon was a dire omen in and of itself – but appearing together with a storm like this, well, it was more than uncanny. It was unheard of. Something momentous, she knew, was afoot.

They knelt there together, gales of wind and snow whipping their faces, and she prayed for protection for their family. For mercy. For forgiveness for anything she may have done wrong.

A pious woman, Mithka had lived many sun cycles, had several children, had a good life. A poor life, but a good one. She was a decent woman. She had minded her business, had looked after others, and had never done harm to anyone. She prayed that God would protect her children, her household, whatever meager belongings they had. She leaned over and placed her palms in the snow, closed her eyes, and then bent low, touching her head to the ground. She prayed to God to show her a sign.

Slowly, she lifted her head. As she did, her eyes widened and her heart slammed at the sight before her.

"Murka!" she hissed.

Her husband turned and looked at it, too, and both knelt there, frozen, staring in astonishment.

It couldn't be possible. She blinked several times, and yet there it was. Before them, carried in the water's current, was a floating basket.

And in that basket was a baby.

A boy.

His screams pierced the night, rose even above the storm, above the impossible claps of thunder and lightning, and each scream pierced her heart.

She jumped into the river, wading in deep, ignoring the icy waters, like knives on her skin, and grabbed the basket, fighting her way against the current and back toward shore. She looked down and saw the baby was meticulously wrapped in a blanket, and that he was, miraculously, dry.

She examined him more closely and was astonished to see a gold pendant around his neck, two snakes circling a moon, a dagger between them. She gasped; it was one she recognized immediately.

She turned to her husband.

“Who would do such a thing?” she asked, horrified, as she held him tight against her chest.

He could only shake his head in wonder.

“We must take him in,” she decided.

Her husband frowned and shook his head.

“How?” he snapped. “We cannot afford to feed him. We can barely afford to feed us. We have three boys already – what do we need with a fourth? Our time raising children is done.”

Mithka, thinking quick, snatched the thick gold pendant and placed it in his palm, knowing, after all these years, what would impress her husband. He felt the weight of the gold in his hand, and he clearly looked impressed.

“There,” she snapped back, disgusted. “There’s your gold. Enough gold to feed our family until we’re all old and dead,” she said sternly. “I am saving this baby – whether you like it or not. I will not leave him to die.”

He still frowned, though less certain, as another lightning bolt struck above and he studied the skies with fear.

“And do you think it’s a coincidence?” he asked. “A night like this, such a baby comes into this world? Have you any idea who you are holding?”

He looked down at the child with fear. And then he stood and backed away, finally turning his back and leaving, gripping the pendant, clearly displeased.

But Mithka would not give in. She smiled at the baby and rocked him to her chest, warming his cold face. Slowly, his crying calmed.

“A child unlike any of us,” she replied to no one, holding him tight. “A child who shall change the world. And one I shall name: Royce.”

PART TWO

CHAPTER FOUR

17 Sun Cycles later

Royce stood atop the hill, beneath the only oak tree in these fields of grain, an ancient thing whose limbs seemed to reach to the sky, and he looked deeply into Genevieve's eyes, deeply in love. They held hands as she smiled back at him, and as they leaned in and kissed, he felt in awe and gratitude that his heart could feel this full. As dawn broke over the fields of grain, Royce wished that he could freeze this moment forever.

Royce leaned back and looked at her. Genevieve was gorgeous. In her seventeenth year, as he was, she was tall, slim, with flowing blond hair and intelligent green eyes, a smattering of freckles across her dainty features. She had a smile that made him happy to be alive, and a laugh that put him at ease. More than that, she had a grace, a nobility, that far outmatched their peasant status.

Royce saw his own reflection in her eyes and he marveled that he looked as if he could be related to her. He was much bigger, of course, tall even for his age, with shoulders broader than even his older brothers', a strong chin, a noble nose, a proud forehead, an abundance of muscle which rippled beneath his frayed tunic, and light features, like hers. His longish blond hair fell just before his eyes, while his hazel-green eyes matched hers, albeit a shade darker. He'd been blessed with strength, and with a skill with the sword that matched his brothers', though he was the youngest of the four. His father had always joked that he had fallen from the sky, and Royce understood: he shared not his brothers' dark features or average frame. He was like a stranger in his own family.

They embraced, and it felt so good to be hugged so tightly, to have someone who loved him as much as he did her. The two of them had, in fact, been inseparable since they were children, had grown up together playing in these fields, had vowed even back then that on the summer solstice of their seventeenth year, they would wed. As children, it had been a deadly serious vow.

As they'd aged, year after year, they had not grown apart as most children do, but only closer together. Against all odds, their vow turned from a childish thing to something stronger, solemn, unbreakable, year after year after year. Their lives, it seemed, were never destined to grow apart.

Now, finally, unbelievably, the day had arrived. Both were seventeen, the summer solstice had arrived, they were adults now, free to choose for themselves, and as they stood there, beneath that tree, watching the sun rise, they each knew, with giddy excitement, what that meant.

"Is your mother excited?" she asked.

Royce smiled.

"I think she loves you more than I, if that is possible," he laughed.

Genevieve's laugh reached his soul.

"And your parents?" he asked.

Her face darkened, just for a flash, and his heart fell.

"Is it me?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"They love you," she replied. "They just..." she sighed. "We are not wed yet. For them it could not come soon enough. They fear for me."

Royce understood. Her parents feared the nobles. Unwed peasants like Royce and Genevieve had no rights; if the nobles chose, they could come and take their women away, claim them for themselves. Until, that is, they were married. Then they would be safe.

"Soon enough," Genevieve said, her smile brightening.

"Are they relieved because it's me, or because, once wed, you'll be safe from the nobles?"

She laughed and mock hit him.

“They love you as the son they never had!” she said.

He caught her arms and kissed her.

“Royce!” cried a voice.

Royce turned to find his three brothers striding up the hill, in a large group, Genevieve’s sisters and cousins climbing up with them. They all held sickles and pitchforks, all of them ready for the day’s labor, and Royce took a deep breath, knowing the time for parting had come. They were peasants, after all, and they could not afford to take an entire day off. The wedding would have to wait for sunset.

It did not bother Royce to work on this day, but he felt bad for Genevieve. He wished he could give her more.

“I wish you could take the day off,” Royce said.

She smiled and then laughed.

“Working makes me happy. It takes my mind off things. Especially,” she said, leaning in and kissing his nose, “of having to wait so long to see you again today.”

They kissed, and she turned with a giggle and linked arms with her sisters and cousins and was soon bounding off to the fields with them, all of them giddy with happiness on this spectacular summer day.

Royce’s brothers came up behind him, clasping his shoulders, and the four of them headed their own way, down the other side of the hill.

“Come on, loverboy!” Raymond said. The eldest son, he was like a father to Royce. “You can wait until tonight!”

His two other brothers laughed.

“She’s really got him good,” Lofen added, the middle of the bunch, shorter than the others but more stocky.

“There’s no hope for you,” Gareth chimed in. The youngest of the three, just a few years older than Royce, he was closest to Royce, yet also felt their sibling rivalry the most. “Not even married yet, and already he’s lost.”

The three laughed, teasing him, and Royce smiled with them as they all headed off, as one, for the fields. He took one last glance over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Genevieve disappearing down the hill. His heart lifted as she, too, looked back one last time and smiled at him from afar. The smile restored his soul.

Tonight, my love, he thought. Tonight.

*

Genevieve worked the fields, raising and swinging her sickle, surrounded by her sisters and cousins, a dozen of them, all laughing out loud on this auspicious day, as she worked halfheartedly. Genevieve stopped every few hacks to lean on the long shaft, look out at the blue skies and glorious yellow fields of wheat, and think of Royce. As she did, her heart beat faster. Today was the day she had always dreamt of, ever since she was a child. It was the most important day of her life. After today she and Royce would live together for the rest of their days; after this day, they would have their own cottage, a simple one-room dwelling on the edge of the fields, a humble place bequeathed to them by their parents. It would be a new beginning, a place to start life anew as husband and wife.

Genevieve beamed at the thought. There was nothing she had ever wanted more than to be with Royce. He had always been there, at her side, since she was a child, and she had never had eyes for anyone else. Though he was the youngest of his four brothers, she had always felt there was something special about Royce, something different about him. He was different from everyone around her, from anyone she had ever met. She did not know how, exactly, and she suspected that he did not

either. But she saw something in him, something bigger than this village, this countryside. It was as if his destiny lay elsewhere.

“And what of his brothers?” asked a voice.

Genevieve snapped out of it. She turned to see Sheila, her eldest sister, giggling, two of her cousins behind her.

“After all, he has three! You can’t have them all!” she added, laughing.

“Yes, what are you waiting for?” her cousin chimed in. “We’ve been waiting for an introduction.”

Genevieve laughed.

“I *have* introduced you,” she replied. “Many times.”

“Not enough!” Sheila answered as the others laughed.

“After all, should not your sister marry his brother?”

Genevieve smiled.

“There is nothing I would like more,” she replied. “But I cannot speak for them. I know only Royce’s heart.”

“Convince them!” her other cousin urged.

Genevieve laughed again. “I shall do my best.”

“And what will you wear?” her cousin interjected. “You still haven’t decided which dress you shall –”

A noise suddenly cut through the air, one which immediately filled Genevieve with a sense of dread, made her let go of her sickle and turn to the horizon. She knew before she even fully heard it that it was an ominous noise, the sound of trouble.

She turned and studied the horizon and as she did, her worst fears were confirmed. The sound of galloping became audible, and over the hill, there appeared an entourage of horses. Her heart lurched as she noticed their riders were clothed in the finest silks, as she saw their banner, the green and the gold, a bear in the center, heralding the house of Nors.

The nobles were coming.

Genevieve flushed with ire at the sight. These greedy men had tithe after tithe from her family, from all the peasants’ families. They sucked everyone dry while they lived like kings. And yet still, it was not enough.

Genevieve watched them ride, and she prayed with all she had that they were just riding by, that they would not turn her way. After all, she had not seen them in these fields for many sun cycles.

Yet Genevieve watched with despair as they suddenly turned and rode right for her.

No, she willed silently. Not now. Not here. Not today.

Yet they rode and rode, getting closer and closer, clearly coming for her. Word must have spread of her wedding day, and that always made them eager to take what they could, before it was too late.

The other girls gathered around her instinctively, coming close. Sheila turned to her and clutched her arm frantically.

“RUN!” she commanded, shoving her.

Genevieve turned and saw open fields before her for miles. She knew how foolish it would be – she would not get far. She would still be taken – but without dignity.

“No,” she replied, cool, calm.

Instead, she tightened her grip on her sickle and held it before her.

“I shall face them head-on.”

They looked back at her, clearly stunned.

“With your sickle?” her cousin asked doubtfully.

“Perhaps they do not come in malice,” her other cousin chimed in.

But Genevieve watched them come, and slowly, she shook her head.

“They do,” she replied.

She watched them near and expected them to slow – yet to her surprise, they did not. In their center rode Manfor, a privileged noble in his twentieth year, whom she despised, the duke of the kingdom, a boy with wide lips, light eyes, golden locks, and a permanent sneer. He appeared as if he were constantly looking down on the world.

As he neared, Genevieve saw he wore a cruel smile on his face, as he looked over her body as if it were a piece of meat. Hardly twenty yards away, Genevieve raised her sickle and stepped forward.

“They shall not take me,” she said, resigned, thinking of Royce. She wished more than anything that he was at her side right now.

“Genevieve, don’t!” Sheila cried.

Genevieve ran toward them with the sickle high, feeling the adrenaline course through her. She did not know how she summoned the courage, but she did. She charged forward, raised the sickle, and slashed it down at the first noble that came for her.

But they were too fast. They rode in like thunder, and as she swung, one merely raised his club, swung it around, and smashed the sickle from her hand. She felt an awful vibration through her hands and watched, hopeless, as her weapon went flying, landing in the stalks nearby.

A moment later, Manfor galloped past, leaned down, and backhanded her across the face with his metal gauntlet.

Genevieve cried out, spun around from the force of it, and landed face first in the stalks, stung by the searing pain.

The horses came to an abrupt stop, and as the riders dismounted all around her, Genevieve felt rough hands on her. She was yanked to her feet, delirious from the blow.

She stood there, wobbly, and looked up to see Manfor standing before her. He sneered down as he raised his helmet and removed it.

“Let go of me!” she hissed. “I am not your property!”

She heard cries and looked over to see her sister and cousins rushing forward, trying to save her – and she watched in horror as the knights backhanded each one, sending them to the ground.

Genevieve heard Manfor’s awful laughter as he grabbed her and threw her on the back of his horse, binding her wrists together. A moment later he mounted behind her, kicked, and rode off, the girls shrieking behind her as she rode further and further away. She tried to struggle but was helpless to fight back as he held her in a vise-like grip.

“How wrong you are, young girl,” he replied, laughing as he rode. “You are mine.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Royce stood amidst the wheat fields, hacking away with his sickle, his heart filled with joy as he thought of his bride. He could hardly believe his wedding day had arrived. He had loved Genevieve for as long as he could remember, and this day would be a day to rival no others. Tomorrow, he would wake with her by his side, in a new cottage of their own, with a new life ahead of them. He could feel the flurries in his stomach. There was nothing he wished for more.

As he swung the sickle, Royce thought of his nightly training with his brothers, the four of them sparring incessantly with wooden swords, and sometimes with real ones, double-weighted, nearly impossible to lift, to make them stronger, faster. Although he was younger than his three brothers, Royce realized he was already a better fighter than them all, more agile with the sword, faster to strike and to defend. It was as if he were cut from a different cloth. He was different, he knew that. Yet he did not know how. And that troubled him.

Where, he wondered, had his fighting talents come from? Why was he so different? It made little sense. They were all brothers, all of the same blood, the same family. Yet at the same time the four of them were inseparable, doing everything together, whether it was sparring or working the fields. That, in fact, was his one touch of apprehension to this joyful day: would his moving out be the beginning of their growing apart? He vowed silently that, no matter, he would not allow it to be.

Royce's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a sound at the edge of the field, an unusual sound for this time of day, a sound he did not want to hear on a perfect day like this. Horses. Galloping with urgency.

Royce turned and looked, instantly alarmed, and his brothers did, too. His alarm only deepened as he spotted Genevieve's sisters and cousins riding for him. Even from here Royce could see their faces etched with panic, with urgency.

Royce struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. Where was Genevieve? Why were they all riding for him?

And then his heart sank as he realized that clearly something terrible had happened.

He dropped his sickle, as did his brothers and the dozen other peasant farmers of their village, and ran out to meet them. The first to meet him was Sheila, Genevieve's sister, and she dismounted before her horse had come to a stop, clutching Royce's shoulders.

"What is it?" Royce called out. He grabbed her shoulders, and he could feel her shaking.

She could barely get the words out between her tears.

"Genevieve!" she cried out, terror in her voice. "They've taken her!"

Royce felt his stomach plummet at her words, as worst-case scenarios rushed into his mind.

"Who?" he demanded, as brothers ran up beside him.

"Manfor!" she cried. "Of the House of Nors!"

Royce felt his heart slamming in his chest, as waves of indignation coursed through him. His bride. Snatched away by the nobles, as if she were their property. His face burned red.

"When!?" he demanded, squeezing Sheila's arm harder than he meant to.

"Just now!" she replied. "We got these horses to come tell you as soon as we could!"

The others dismounted behind her, and as they did they all handed the reins to Royce and his brothers. Royce did not hesitate. In one quick motion he mounted her horse, kicked, and was tearing through the fields.

Behind him, he could hear his brothers riding, too, none missing a beat, all heading through the stalks and for the distant fort.

His eldest brother, Raymond, rode up beside him.

"You know the law is on his side," he called out. "He is a noble, and she is unwed – at least for now."

Royce nodded back.

“If we storm the fort and ask for her back, they will refuse,” Raymond added. “We have no legal grounds to demand her back.”

Royce gritted his teeth.

“I’m not going to ask for her back,” he replied. “I’m going to take her back.”

Lofen shook his head as he rode up beside them.

“You’ll never make it through those doors,” he called out. “A professional army awaits you. Knights. Armor. Weaponry. Gates.” He shook his head again. “And even if you somehow manage to get past them, even if you manage to rescue her, they will not let her go. They will hunt you down and kill you.”

“I know,” Royce called back.

“My brother,” Garet called out. “I love you. And I love Genevieve. But this will mean the death of you. The death of us all. Let her go. There is nothing you can do.”

Royce could hear how much his brothers cared for him, and he appreciated it – but he could not allow himself to listen. That was *his* bride, and whatever the stakes, he had no choice. He could not abandon her, even if it meant his death. It was who he was.

Royce kicked his horse harder, not wanting to hear anymore, and galloped faster through the fields, toward the horizon, toward the sprawling town where Manfor’s fort stood. Toward what would surely be his death.

Genevieve, Royce thought. I’m coming for you.

*

Royce rode with all he had across the fields, his three brothers at his side, cresting the final hill and then charging down for the sprawling town that lay below. In its center sat a massive fort, the home of the House of Nors, the nobles who ruled his land with an iron fist, who had bled his family dry, demanding tithe after tithe of everything they farmed. They had managed to keep the peasants poor for generations. They had dozens of knights at their disposal, in full armor, with real weapons and real horses; they had thick stone walls, a moat, a bridge, and they kept watch over the town like a jealous hen, under the pretense of keeping law and order – but really just to milk it dry.

They made the law. They enforced the cruel laws that were passed down by all the nobles throughout the land, laws that only benefited them. They operated in the guise of offering protection, yet all the peasants knew that the only protection they needed was from the nobles themselves. The kingdom of Sevania, after all, was a safe kingdom, isolated from other lands by water on three sides, at the northern tip of the Alufen continent. A strong ocean, rivers, and mountains offered thick walls of security. The land had not been invaded in centuries.

The only danger and tyranny lay from within, from the noble aristocracy and what they milked from the poor. People like Royce. Now even riches were not enough – they had to have their wives, too.

The thought brought color to Royce’s cheeks. He lowered his head and braced himself as he tightened his grip on his sword.

“The bridge is down!” Raymond called out. “The portcullis is open!”

Royce noticed it himself and took it as an encouraging sign.

“Of course it is!” Lofen called back. “Do you really think they are expecting an attack? Least of all from us?”

Royce rode faster, grateful for his brothers’ companionship, knowing all his brothers felt as strongly for Genevieve as he did. She was like a sister to them, and an affront to Royce was an affront to them all. He looked out ahead and on the drawbridge spotted a few of the castle’s knights,

halfheartedly looking at the pastures and fields surrounding the town. They were unprepared. They had not been attacked in centuries and had no reason to expect to be now.

Royce drew his sword with a distinctive ring, lowered his head and held the sword high. The sound of swords rang through the air as his brothers drew, too. Royce kicked out front to take the lead, wanting to be the first into battle. His heart pounded with excitement and fear – not fear for himself, but for Genevieve.

“I will get in and find her and get out!” Royce called out to his brothers, formulating a plan. “You all stay outside the perimeter. This is my fight.”

“We shall not let you go inside alone!” Garet called back.

Royce shook his head, adamant.

“If something goes wrong, I don’t want you paying the price,” he called back. “Stay out here and distract those guards. That is what I need the most.”

He pointed with his sword at a dozen knights standing at the gatehouse beside the moat. Royce knew that as soon as he rode over the bridge they would break into action; but if his brothers distracted them, it could perhaps keep them at bay just long enough for Royce to get inside and find her. All he needed, he figured, was a few minutes. If he could find her quickly, he could snatch her and ride away and be free of this place. He did not want to kill anyone if he could help it; he did not even want to harm them. He just wanted his bride back.

Royce lowered his head and galloped as fast as he possibly could, so fast he could hardly breathe, the wind whipping his hair and face. He closed in on the bridge, thirty yards away, twenty, ten, the sound of his horse and his heartbeat thundering in his ears. His heart slammed in his chest as he rode, realizing how insane this was. He was about to do what the peasant class would never dream of doing: attack the gentry. It was a war he could not possibly win, and a sure way to get killed. And yet his bride lay behind those gates, and that was enough for him.

Royce was so close now, but a few yards away from reaching the bridge, and he looked up and saw the knights’ eyes widen in surprise as they fumbled with their weapons, caught off guard, clearly not expecting anything like this.

Their delayed reaction was just what Royce needed. He raced forward and, as they raised their halberds, he lowered his sword and, aiming for the shafts, cut them in half. He slashed from side to side, destroying the weapons of the knights on either side of the bridge, careful not to harm them if he didn’t need to. He just wanted to disarm them, and not get bogged down in combat.

Royce gained speed, urging his horse on, and he rode even faster, using his horse as a weapon, bumping the remaining guards hard enough to send them flying, in their heavy armor, over the sides of the narrow bridge, and into the moat’s waters below. It would take them a long while, Royce realized, to get out. And that was all the time he needed.

Behind him, Royce could hear his brothers helping his cause; on the far side of the bridge they rode for the gatehouse, slashing at the guards, disarming them before they had a chance to rally. They managed to block and bar the gatehouse, keeping the flummoxed knights off guard, and giving Royce the cover he needed.

Royce lowered his head and charged for the open portcullis, riding faster as he watched it begin to lower. He lowered his head and managed to burst through the open arch right before the heavy portcullis closed for good.

Royce rode into the inner courtyard, heart pounding, and took stock, looking all around. He’d never been inside and was disoriented, finding himself surrounded by thick stone walls on all sides, several stories high. Servants and common folk bustled to and fro, carrying buckets of water and other wares. Luckily, no knights awaited him inside. Of course, they had no cause to expect an attack.

Royce scanned the walls, desperate for any sign of his bride.

Yet he found none. He received a jolt of panic. What if they had taken her elsewhere?

“GENEVIEVE!” he called out.

Royce looked everywhere, frantically turning on his neighing horse. He had no idea where to look, and had no plan. He had not even thought he would make it this far.

Royce racked his brain, needing to think quick. The nobles likely lived upstairs, he figured, away from the stench, the masses, where the wind and sunlight was strong. Naturally, that was where they would take Genevieve.

The thought inflamed him with rage.

Forcing his emotions in check, Royce kicked his horse and galloped across the courtyard, past shocked servants who stopped and stared, dropping their work as he raced by. He spotted a wide, spiral stone staircase across the way and he rode all the way to it, dismounting before the horse could even stop, hitting the ground at a run and sprinting up the stairs. He ran around and around the spirals, again and again, ascending flight after flight. He had no idea where he was going, but figured he would start at the top.

Royce finally exited the staircase at the highest landing, breathing hard.

“Genevieve!” he cried out, hoping, praying for a response.

There was none. His dread deepened.

He chose a corridor and ran down it, praying it was the right one. As he raced past, a man suddenly burst open a door and stuck his head out. It was a nobles, a short, fat man with a broad nose and thinning hair.

He scowled at Royce, clearly summing him up from his garb as a peasant; he wrinkled his nose as if something unpleasant had entered his midst.

“Hey!” he shouted. “What are you doing in our – ”

Royce did not hesitate. As the indignant noble lunged for him, he punched him in the face, knocking him flat on his back.

Royce checked quickly inside the open door, hoping for a glimpse of her. But it was empty.

He continued to run.

“GENEVIEVE!” Royce cried.

Suddenly, he heard a cry, far away, in response.

His heart stopped as he stood still and listened, wondering where it had come from. Aware that his time was limited, that an entire army would soon be chasing after him, he continued running, heart pounding, calling her name again and again.

Again there came a muffled cry, and Royce knew it was her. His heart slammed. She was up here. And he was getting closer.

Royce finally reached the end of the corridor and as he did, from behind the last door on the left, he heard a cry. He did not hesitate as he lowered his shoulder and smashed open the ancient oak door.

The door shattered and Royce stumbled inside and found himself standing in an opulent chamber, thirty by thirty feet, with soaring ceilings, windows carved into the stone walls, a massive fireplace and, in the center of the room, a huge, luxurious four-poster bed, unlike anything Royce had ever seen. He felt a surge of relief as he saw there, in a pile of furs, his love, Genevieve.

She was, he was relieved to see, fully clothed, still flailing, kicking, as Manfor tried to wrestle her from behind. Royce fumed. There he was, clawing at his bride, trying to strip her clothes. Royce was elated that he’d made it in time.

Genevieve writhed, trying valiantly to get him off her, but Manfor was too strong for her.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Royce burst into action. He rushed forward and pounced, just as Manfor spun to look. As his eyes widened in shock, Royce grabbed him by the shirt and threw him.

Manfor went flying across the room and landed hard on the cobblestone, groaning.

“Royce!” Genevieve called out, her voice filled with relief as she spun and faced him.

Royce knew he could not give Manfor a chance to recover. As he tried to rise, Royce jumped on top of him, pinning him down. Flooded with rage for what he had done to his wife, Royce pulled back his fist and punched him once, hard in the jaw.

Manfor bounced back, though, sitting up and reaching for a dagger. But Royce snatched it from his hand, and pounded him again and again. Manfor fell back, and Royce knocked the dagger away, sliding it across the floor.

He held Manfor in a lock and Manfor sneered back, ever defiant and superior.

“The law is on my side,” Manfor seethed. “I can take anyone I want. She is mine.”

Royce scowled.

“You cannot take my bride.”

“You’re mad,” Manfor countered. “*Mad*. You will be killed by the end of the day. There’s nowhere to hide. Don’t you know that? We own this country.”

Royce shook his head.

“What you don’t understand,” he said, “is that I don’t care.”

Manfor frowned.

“You won’t get away with this,” Manfor said. “I will see to it.”

Royce tightened his grip on Manfor’s wrists.

“You will do nothing of the sort. Genevieve and I will leave here today. If you come after her again, I will kill you.”

To Royce’s surprise, Manfor smiled an evil smile, blood trickling from his mouth.

“I will *never* let her be,” Manfor replied. “*Ever*. I will torment her the rest of her life. And I will hunt you down like a dog with all my father’s men. I will take her, and she will be mine. And you will be hanged on the gallows. So run now and remember her face – for soon enough, she will be mine.”

Royce felt a hot flush of rage. What was worse than these cruel words was that he knew them to be true. There was nowhere to run; the nobles owned the countryside. He could not fight an army. And Manfor, indeed, would never give up. For cruel sport – for no other reason. He had so much, and yet he could not help but deprive people who had nothing.

Royce looked down into this cruel noble’s eyes and he knew that Genevieve would be had by this man one day. And he knew he could not allow it to happen. He wanted to walk away, he really did. But he could not. To do so would mean Genevieve’s death.

Royce suddenly grabbed Manfor and threw him to his feet. He faced him and drew his sword.

“Draw!” Royce commanded, giving him a chance to fight honorably.

Manfor stared back, clearly surprised that he would be given this chance. Then he drew his sword.

Manfor charged, swinging down hard, and Royce raised his sword and blocked it, sparks flying. Royce, sensing he was stronger, raised his sword, pushing Manfor back, then spun with his elbow and smashed him in the face with the hilt.

There came a crack as Royce broke Manfor’s nose. Manfor stumbled back and stared, clearly stunned as he grabbed at his nose. Royce could have taken the moment to kill him, but again, he gave him another chance.

“Back down now,” Royce offered, “and I shall let you live.”

Manfor, though, let out a groan of fury. He raised his sword and charged again.

Royce blocked, while Manfor swung furiously, each slashing back and forth, swords clanging as sparks flew, driving each other back and forth across the room. Manfor might be a noble, raised with all the benefits of the royal class, yet still Royce had superior fighting talent.

As they fought, Royce’s heart sank as he heard distant horns, heard the sound of an army closing in on the castle, the horses’ hooves clomping on the cobblestone below. He knew his time was running out. Something had to be done fast.

Finally Royce spun Manfor’s sword around sharply and disarmed him, sending it flying through the air and across the room. Royce held his tip to Manfor’s throat.

“Back away, now,” Royce commanded.

Manfor slowly backed away, arms up. Yet when he reached a small wooden desk, he suddenly spun, grabbed something, and threw it at Royce's eyes.

Royce shrieked as he was suddenly blinded. His eyes stung as his world turned black and he realized, too late, as he groped at his eyes, what it was: ink. It was a dirty move, a move unbecoming a noble, or any fighter. But then again, Royce knew he should not be surprised.

Before he could regain his sight, Royce suddenly felt a sharp blow to his stomach as he was kicked. He keeled over, dropping to the floor, winded, and as he looked up, he regained just enough of his vision to watch Manfor smile as he extracted a hidden dagger from his cloak – and raised it for Royce's back.

“ROYCE!” Genevieve screamed out.

As the dagger plunged down for his back, Royce managed to collect himself, rising to one knee, raising his arm, and grabbing Manfor's wrist. Royce slowly stood, arms shaking, and as Manfor continued to lower the dagger, he suddenly sidestepped and spun Manfor's arm around, using his force against him. Manfor kept swinging, though, unwilling to stop, and this time, as Royce stepped aside, he plunged the dagger into his own stomach.

Manfor gasped. He stood there, staring back, eyes wide, blood trickling from his mouth. He was dying.

Royce felt the solemnity of the moment. He had killed a man. For the first time in his life, he had killed a man. And no ordinary man – but a noble.

Manfor's last gesture was a cruel smile, blood pouring from his mouth.

“You have won back your bride,” he gasped, “at the cost of your life. You'll be joining me soon enough.”

With that, Manfor collapsed and landed on the floor with a thump.

Dead.

Royce turned to look at Genevieve, who sat on the bed, stunned. He could see the relief and gratitude on her face. She jumped up from the bed, ran across the room, and into his arms. He embraced her tightly, and it felt so good. All made sense in the world again.

“Oh, Royce,” she said in his ear, and that was all she needed to say. He understood.

“Come, we must go,” Royce said. “Our time is short.”

He took her hand and the two of them burst out the open door of the chamber and into the corridors.

Royce ran down the hall, Genevieve beside him, his heart pounding as he heard the royal horns being sounded, again and again. He knew it was the sound of alarm – and he knew it was meant for him.

Hearing the clanging of armor down below, Royce knew the fort was sealed off, and that he was surrounded. His brothers had done a good job of holding them off, but Royce's raid had taken too long. As they ran he glanced down into the courtyard, and his heart dropped to see dozens of knights already pouring through the gates.

Royce knew there was no way out. Not only had he broken into their home, he had killed one of their own, a noble, a member of the royal family. They would not, he knew, let him live. Today would be the day his life changed forever. How ironic, he thought; this morning he had awakened so filled with joy, so anticipating the day. Now, before the sun had set on that same day, he would instead likely be facing the gallows.

Royce and Genevieve ran and ran, nearing the end of the hall and the entrance to the spiral staircase – when suddenly a half dozen knights appeared, emerging from the steps, blocking their way.

Royce and Genevieve stopped short, turned, and ran the other way, as the knights pursued them. Royce could hear their armor clanging behind him, and he knew his only advantage was his lack of armor, giving him just enough speed to keep ahead of them.

They ran and ran, twisting down corridors, Royce desperately hoping to find a rear staircase, another way out – when suddenly they turned down another corridor and found themselves facing a stone wall. Royce’s heart dropped as they slammed to a stop.

A dead end.

Royce spun and drew his sword while putting Genevieve behind him, prepared to make a stand against the knights even though he knew it would be his last.

Suddenly he felt Genevieve clutch his arm frantically as she cried: “Royce!”

He spun and saw what she was looking at: a large, open-air window beside them. He looked down and his stomach sank. It was a long drop, way too long to survive.

And yet he saw her pointing to a wagon full of hay ambling by beneath them.

“We can jump!” she cried.

She took his hand, and together, they stepped up toward the window. He turned and looked back, saw the knights closing in, and suddenly, before he had time to think through how crazy this was, he felt his hand yanked – and they were airborne.

Genevieve was even braver than he. She always had been, even as kids, he recalled.

They jumped, falling a good thirty feet through the air, Royce’s stomach in his throat, Genevieve shrieking, as they aimed for the wagon. Royce braced himself to die, and was grateful that he would not die, at least, at the hands of the nobles – and with his love at his side.

To Royce’s immense relief they landed in the pile of hay. It shot up in a huge cloud around them as they did, and while he was winded and bruised from the fall, to his amazement, he did not break anything. He sat up immediately and looked over to see if Genevieve was okay; she lay there in a daze, but she, too, sat up, and as she brushed off the hay, he saw with immense relief that she was unhurt.

Without a word they both at the same time remembered their predicament and jumped from the cart, Royce taking her hand. Royce ran to his horse, still awaiting him in the courtyard, mounted it, grabbed Genevieve, and helped her up behind him. With a kick the two of them took off at a gallop, Royce aiming for the open gate to the castle, as knights continued to flood in, racing past them, not even realizing it was them.

They neared the open gate and Royce’s heart pounded in his chest; they were so close. All they had to do was clear it, and with a few strides they would be out in the open countryside. From there they could rally with his brothers, his cousins, and men, and together, they could all flee from this place, and start life anew somewhere. Or better yet, they could amass their own army and fight these nobles once and for all. For one glorious moment time stood still, as Royce felt himself on the precipice of change, of victory, of everything he had known being turned upside down. The day for revolt had come. The day for their lives to never be the same again.

As Royce neared the gate, his veins filled with cold dread as he watched the portcullis, open again to let knights in, suddenly lowered, slamming shut before him. His horse reared, and they stopped short.

Royce turned around, looking back into the courtyard. There he saw fifty knights, now realizing who they were, closing in. Royce prepared to ride forward, to meet them in battle, however foolhardy it was, when suddenly, he felt a rope landing on him from behind, and heard Genevieve cry out.

The ropes tightened around his waist, and with a jerk, Royce felt himself thrown backwards from his horse. He landed on the ground hard, winded, bound from behind. He looked over and saw Genevieve bound by ropes, too, also yanked to the ground.

Royce rolled and stumbled, frantically trying to break free, the ropes tight around his arms and shoulders. He reached down to his waist, grabbed his dagger, and with one jerk, managed to cut them loose.

Free, he rolled out of the way of a club as it came down for his head. He reached out and grabbed his attacker’s sword, and then he wheeled, standing in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by what was now nearly a hundred knights. They closed in on him from all sides.

They charged. Royce raised his sword and fought back, defending as they slashed, slashing back himself, feeling invincible, stronger and faster than all of them. Still, they closed in tighter and tighter, their ranks growing thicker.

Royce raised his sword and blocked a blow aimed for his head; he then spun and slashed at another sword aiming for his back, and slashed up and knocked the sword from his attacker's hands. He then leaned back and kicked another knight in the chest as he neared, forcing him to drop his club.

Royce fought like a man possessed, slashing and parrying, managing to keep dozens of them at bay, as swords clanged and sparks showered down all around him. He breathed hard, barely able to see from the sweat stinging his eyes. And all the while he thought of only one thing: Genevieve. He would die here for her.

The ranks thickened even more, and soon, it was too much even for him. Royce's arms and shoulders ached, his breathing grew heavy, as he found the crowd so thick, so close, that he could barely maneuver to swing. He raised his sword one last time to slash, when suddenly, he felt an awful pain in the back of his head.

He dropped to the ground, dimly aware he had been clubbed. The next thing he knew he was lying sideways on the ground, unable to move, as dozens of knights pounced on him. It was a wall of metal pinning him to the ground, bending his arms, knees in his back, arms on his head.

It was over, he realized.

He had lost.

CHAPTER SIX

Royce woke, startled, to the feeling of ice water on his face, to the sounds of shouts and jeers, and he squinted in the light. One of his eyes, he realized right away, was sealed shut, the other barely open, just enough for him to see by. His head reeled from the pain, his body stiff, covered in lumps and bruises, and he felt as if he had been rolled down a mountain. He looked out at the world before him, and wished he hadn't.

A bustling mob encircled him, some shouting and jeering, others protesting, seemingly on his behalf. It was as though these people had erupted in civil war, he in the center. He struggled to make sense of what he saw. Was this, he wondered, a dream?

The pain was too intense for this to be a dream; the stabbing headache, the coarse ropes digging into his wrists. He struggled, to no avail, at the ropes binding his wrists and ankles and looked down to realize he was tied to a stake. His heart pounded to see a pile of wood beneath him, as if ready to be lit. Fear crept over him as he realized he was strung up in the castle courtyard.

Royce looked out and saw hundreds of villagers swarming into the courtyard, saw dozens of knights and guards standing along the walls; he saw a makeshift wooden stage, perhaps fifty feet away, and on it, tribunal judges, all nobles. In the center sat a man he recognized: Lord Nors. The head of the nobles' family. Manfor's father. He was the presiding judge of the countryside. And he sat in the center and stared down at Royce with a hatred unlike any Royce had seen.

It did not bode well.

All of it came rushing back to Royce. Genevieve. Breaking into the fort. Rescuing her. Killing Manfor. Jumping. Fighting off those knights. And then...

There came the slamming of a hammer on wood several times, and the crowd quieted. Lord Nors stood, glowering down at all, and he was even more fierce, more commanding, standing. He set his fury-filled eyes on Royce and Royce realized he was being put on trial. He had seen several trials before, and none had gone well for the prisoners.

Royce scanned the faces, desperate to find any glimpse of Genevieve, praying she was safe, away from all this.

Yet he found none. That was what worried him most of all. Had she been imprisoned? Killed? He tried to block out various nightmare scenarios from his mind.

"You hereby stand accused of the murder of Manfor of the House of Nors, son of Lord Nors, ruler of the South and the Woods of Segall," Lord Nors boomed out, and the crowd grew completely still. "What is your plea?"

Royce opened his mouth, struggled to speak – but his lips and throat were parched. His voice fell short, and he tried again.

"He stole my bride," Royce finally managed to reply.

There came a chorus of supportive cheers, and Royce looked out to see thousands of villagers, his countrymen, pouring in, wielding clubs and sickles and pitchforks. His heart leapt with hope and gratitude as he realized all his people had come to support him. They had all had enough.

Royce looked up at Lord Nors and saw him lose his conviction, just a touch. A nervous look spread across his face as he turned and looked to his fellow judges and they looked to the knights. It seemed as if they were beginning to realize that they might, if they condemned Royce to death, have a revolution on their hands.

Finally, Lord Nors slammed his hammer, and the crowd quieted.

"And yet," he boomed, "the law is clear: any peasant woman is the property of any noble until she is wed."

There came a loud chorus of boos and hisses from the crowd, and the mob surged forward. An anonymous person hurled a tomato toward the stage, and the crowd cheered, as it barely missed Lord Nors.

There came a horrified gasp amongst the nobles, and as Lord Nors nodded, the knights began to push into the crowd, eager to find the offender. Yet they soon stopped and thought better of it as they were swarmed by hundreds more villagers bustling into the square, making passage impossible. One knight attempted to elbow his way forward, but he soon found himself completely engulfed by the masses, shoved every which way, and amidst angry shouts and cheers, he backed away.

The crowd cheered. Finally, they were standing up for themselves.

Royce felt a surge of optimism. A turning point had arrived. All the peasants, like he, had had enough. No one wanted their women taken anymore. No one wanted to be thought of as property. All of them realized that they could be in Royce's position.

Royce scanned the mob, still desperate to find Genevieve – and his heart suddenly leapt as he spotted her at the edge of the courtyard, she, bound in ropes. Nearby stood his three brothers, they, too, bound as well. He was relieved to see that at least they were alive, and uninjured. But upset to see them bound. He wondered what would become of them, and he wished more than anything that he could take their punishment for them.

As the crowd swelled, the magistrates looked more nervous than before, and they looked to Lord Nors with uncertain glances.

“It is *your* law!” Royce called out, finding his voice, emboldened. “Not ours!”

The crowd let out an enormous roar of approval, as it surged forward dangerously, pitchforks and sickles raised high in the air.

Lord Nors, scowling back down at Royce, held up his hands, and the crowd finally quieted.

“My son is dead on this day,” he boomed, his voice heavy with grief. “And if I were to uphold the law, you would be killed, too.”

The crowd booed and swarmed threateningly.

“And yet,” Lord Nors boomed, raising his hands, “given the situation of our times, killing you would not be in the best interests of the crown. And thus,” he said, turning and looking to his fellow magistrates, “I have decided to grant you mercy!”

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