

IV – Richard

Age makes a man wise. If age doesn't, death sure will.

That's what his father had told him and Eric.

Eric.

He looked at the golden necklace lying on the bedside table next to him. Eric was dead now. Had he found wisdom? Had he learned to separate right from wrong, good from evil and foul from fair?

Sighing, King Richard LeGre of Gladstone grabbed for the nib again and continued with his notes.

He had spent a lifetime trying to figure out how to truly separate truth from lie, sound from silence and light from dark, but truth was that his efforts had been in vain. On the other hand: What was truth anyway?

The Ruby of Truth. Once again, he looked at it, how it lay glimmering, ancient and yet beautiful on the table. The Ruby of Truth together with the Shard of Truth was supposed to show the one and only truth. The things that were right. Pure. Good.

And yet, it could not speak. It could not tell anybody about the truths of life. It could uncover deception, show the truth by pointing out the lie.

So what if there was no difference? What if life and death, day and night, peace and war were all just two sides of a coin? What if one ruled out the other? How could you define what was positive, without a negative to compare it to? How could one say what happiness was without ever having experienced sorrow?

The king sighed again, this time from exhaustion. Why had it taken him all those long years to find out that the answer to all was nothing? His people considered him a great king, a wise king. It wasn't just one of those rumours that so often spread or one of these filthy lies people used to gain his trust or goodwill. Like Geron had done. It was the genuine confidence of his people that their king was the wisest mortal that currently set foot on earth.

But he himself felt that he was far away from this image of greatness and wisdom.

A faint knock could be heard. Then a second. Louder. Frowning, Richard laid aside the paper and welcomed whoever came to him in this dark hour of midnight.

It was Dawn. The frustration on her face changed into a smile so quickly that hardly anyone would have noticed. But he did. He knew her for years now. "Please, please come in, Dawn."

"I hope I do not bother your majesty with my presence at so late an hour." Dawn started apologizing, but he soon winked all her arguments down.

"Children and old men do never sleep quickly."

Dawn smiled briefly at the hint and sat down quietly on one of the chairs beside the window. The air was cold and without the slightest move. It felt dead. "Please, your majesty, you may have seen many decades, but you are certainly no cranky, old man."

A smile crept across his lips at the use of words. It was rare that someone would talk in so informal a language in his presence, yet sometimes Dawn and Copper dared. He savoured those moments of sincerity.

"That's what you and our good friend Josiah say" The king finally admitted. "But I am old Dawn. I can feel it. 72 years is it now and that's a formidable age for a man who has seen as many wars and dangers as I did. But I am growing old, Dawn. My body is slowly failing me. It has been long since I have last fought a battle and I'm not sure if I could anymore. Josiah's treatments are getting more and more frequent and intensive. And it is not just my bones and flesh. My sight has gotten worse, Dawn, as has my hearing. Don't deny it!" He watched her bite back the comment she had had on her tongue. "I know you knocked more than twice,

though I did only hear the two last. Tell me, Dawn, how many times have you knocked on that door?"

Dawn bit her lip with the most neutral look she could spare on her face. "Eight times, my lord."

"There." Satisfied, Richard sank into the pillows again. "I am heading towards my last journey, Dawn, and it is about time we learned to live with that thought."

"No!" She did see no use in hiding her disapproval. The tears almost in her eyes, Dawn jumped up from the chair and walked over to kneel next to her king's bed. "You will not die, your highness. You still have years to spend and so many things to do."

"With the second, you are right." Richard admitted bitterly before cupping one of her petite, fair hands. "But with the first you are wrong. I am going to die soon, Dawn. I can feel it." Smiling sadly, he watched the tears slowly roll down her face, felt their impact on his hands. He could not hear her, but the movement of her lips told him that she was whispering. No. "You should not grieve though, for you have an own life with yet so many years to come. Luther has been a good husband to you during those last seven years, but he needs you as much as you need him. And think about your daughter! You must be strong for them. You must continue your excellent work for our beautiful country under the rule of my heir."

"Copper."

"For the lack of an own child, yes. All my life I spent time fighting and travelling and leading and philosophising about the meaning of life, but I never created one of my own. I missed to settle for a life. But now my nephew shall be my son. And all of you shall regard him as such."

Pushing back the tears, Dawn turned to him again. "Have you told him already, your highness?"

"No." A short and sad smile flashed on Richard's face. "I forgot about that. I shall talk to him tomorrow."

"Dawn nodded shortly, then stood up again. Slowly, her hand slid out of his. "I shall leave you to rest now, my lord. The night has grown old and I'm sure you are tired. Good night, my lord." Tears coming up again, the leading magician of Gladstone hurried out of the room.

The following days flew by quickly, faster than all of his life, as it seemed to him. Frowning, King Richard got to bed and took the papers out of the drawer. It was about time to finish his life's work.

The message of the king's doubts about his own state of health had spread quickly. The backlash was enormous. Concern, disbelief and despair had soon blended into a dangerous mixture of emotions among his people and Richard had done his best to hide his concern from them. Soon, he had most people convinced that his words had been blindfolded lies, born out of a dark mood and bad temper. Truth had become a lie and lie a truth.

Wasn't it ironic?

What did it mean now - "truth" and "lie" - at the end of his life? Where were the definitions now, the science and the sophisticated words? What did it matter?

Old age makes a man wise. If it does not, death will.

He was not yet dead. But with every day Richard could feel his body grow older as life crept out of it. And besides, the faces of Dawn, Luther, Josiah and Copper did say more than a thousand words. The end was near.

And here he was, at the end of his life with all the riches and might and luxury that a man could wish for and yet troubled and lonely.

He had not managed to get an own life.

He had built lives for thousands, but his own little corner of privacy was dark and empty. Old age had made him wise. Old age had told him how to live and it had taught him how to

regret. Regret that there was no family, no wife, no child to stay at his side. And even though his friends and his nephew were there for him, they were not HIS flesh and blood.

Sighing, Richard looked at the blurred image in front of his eyes. His robe hung over a chair, a big “R” printed on the locket he always wore on his chest. Eric had had one with an “E”. He was dead, but he had not had to find wisdom. His brother had done the “right” thing. If there WAS anything like a right way.

He frowned again, then noted down the last lines in the book he had been working on for almost forty years now. Finally, he placed his signature beneath the words and sealed it with wax. Whoever was to find it in the morning, he would know what it meant. He didn’t care. It was no longer in his remit and it would never again be. Sighing, Richard sank back into the pillow. He was tired.

And all he longed for, was rest.