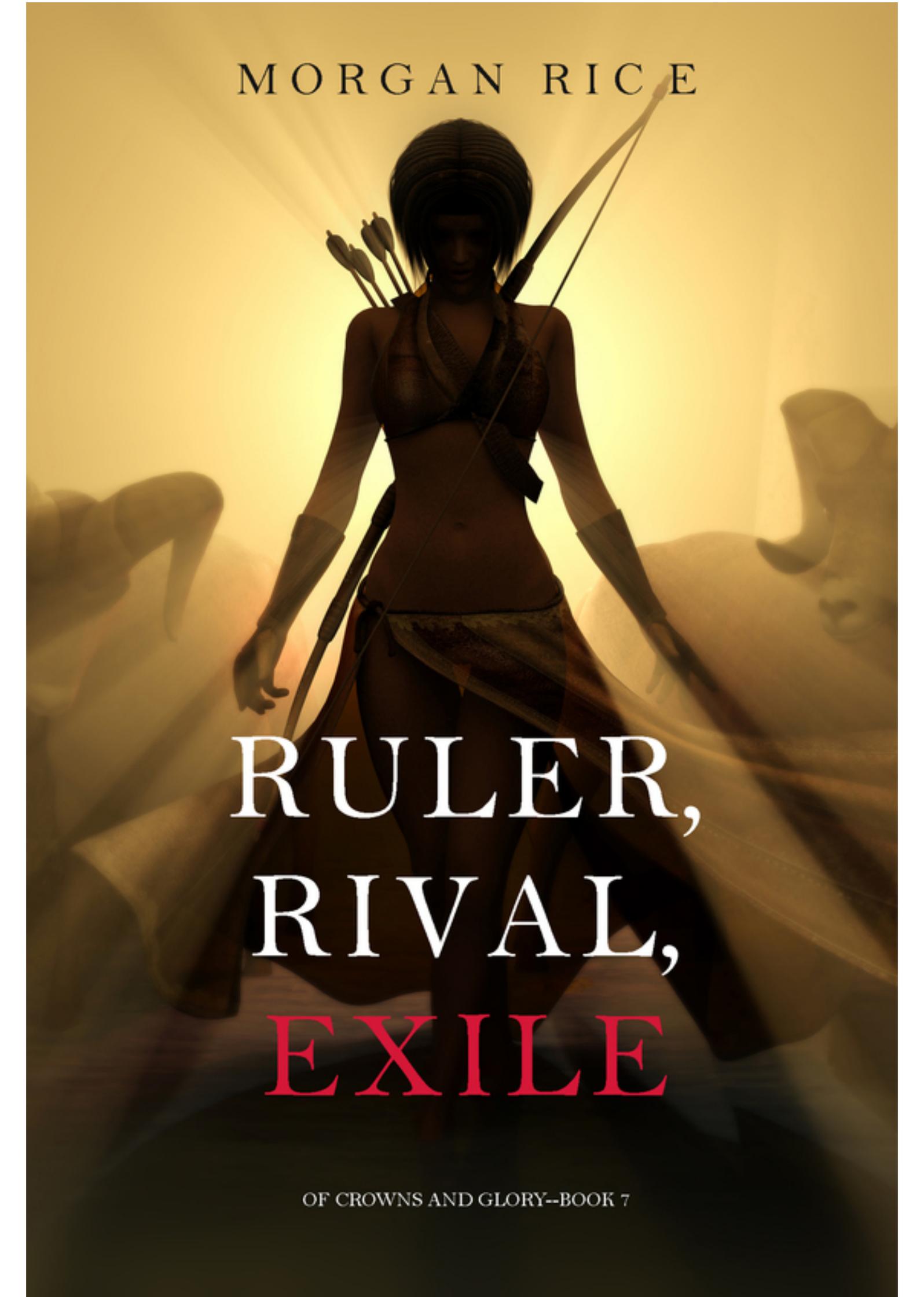


MORGAN RICE

A woman in a desert setting, holding a bow and arrows, with a sunset background. She is wearing a dark, form-fitting outfit with a headscarf. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a desert landscape with sand dunes and a camel. The woman is the central figure, holding a bow in her right hand and arrows in her left. The overall mood is dramatic and epic.

RULER,
RIVAL,
EXILE

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 7

Of Crowns and Glory

Морган Райс

Ruler, Rival, Exile

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Ruler, Rival, Exile / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (Of Crowns and Glory)

ISBN 978-1-64-029054-9

With Delos in ruins, Ceres, Thanos and the others set sail for the last corner of freedom in the Empire: the isle of Haylon. There, they hope to regroup with the few freedom fighters left, fortify the island, and make a spectacular defense against the hordes of Felldust. Ceres soon realizes that if they are to have any hope of defending the isle, she will need more than conventional skills: she will have to break the sorcerer's spell and regain the power of the Ancient Ones. And yet for this she must journey, alone, take the river of blood to the darkest cave in the realm, a place where neither life nor death exists, where she is more likely to come out dead than alive. The First Stone Irrien, meanwhile, is determined to keep Stephania as his slave and to oppress Delos. But the other Stones of Felldust may have other plans. RULER, RIVAL, EXILE tells an epic tale of tragic love, vengeance, betrayal, ambition, and destiny. Filled with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding action, it transports us into a world we will never forget, and makes us fall in love with fantasy all over again.

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Morgan Rice

Ruler, Rival, Exile

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising eight books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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

–*Books and Movie Reviews*

Roberto Mattos

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

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–*Books and Movie Reviews*, Roberto Mattos

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–*Publishers Weekly*

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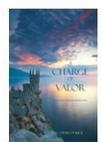
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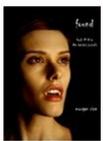
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Dedicated to the memory of Rebekah Barrett

A wonderful, loving soul, whose life on this earth was far too short-and a true warrior in her own right. May God grant your soul peace, and peace to Shania's soul and to that of your wonderful mother, Rhonda

CHAPTER ONE

Irrien loved the joy of battle, the thrill of knowing that he was stronger than a foe – yet seeing the aftermath of his conquest was far better.

He strode through the ruins of Delos, watching the looting, listening to the screams of the weak as his men killed and plundered, raped and smashed. Strings of new slaves walked in chains toward the docks, while already, a market in looted goods and captured peasants had sprung up in one of the squares. He forced himself to ignore the pain in his shoulder while he walked. His men couldn't see him weak.

So much of the city was broken now, but Irrien didn't care about that. What was broken could be rebuilt with enough slaves working under the lash. It could be rebuilt in the shape *he* wanted.

Of course, there were others who had their demands. Currently, they followed him like sharks following a trail of blood, warriors and priests and more. There were representatives from the other Stones of Felldust, chattering about the roles their masters could play in the looting. There were merchants, wanting to offer the most favorable rates for transporting Irrien's looted goods back to the lands of endless dust.

Irrien ignored them for the most part, but they kept coming.

"First Stone," a figure said. He wore the robes of a priest, complete with a belt made from finger bones and holy symbols twisted into his beard with silver wire. An amulet set with bloodstones marked him as one of the highest of his order.

"What is it you want, holy one?" Irrien asked. He rubbed his shoulder absently as he spoke, hoping no one would guess the reason.

The priest spread hands tattooed with runes that danced with every twitch of his fingers.

"It is not what I want, but what the gods require. They have given us victory. It is only right that we thank them with a suitable sacrifice."

"Are you saying that the victory was not due to the strength of my arm?" Irrien demanded. He let the threat seep into his voice. He used the priests when it suited him, but he would not let them control him.

"Even the strongest must acknowledge the favor of the gods."

"I will give it thought," Irrien said, which had been his answer to too many things already today. Demands for attention, demands for resources, a whole parade of people wanting to take portions of what he had won. It was the curse of a ruler, but also a symbol of his power. Every strong man who came begging to Irrien for his favor was an acknowledgment that he could not simply take what he wanted.

They started to walk back toward the castle, and Irrien found himself planning, calculating where repairs would be needed and where monuments to his power could be put in place. In Felldust, a statue would be stolen or broken before it was completed. Here it might stand as a reminder of his victory for the rest of time. When he had healed, there would be a lot to do.

He looked over the castle's defenses as he and the others returned to it. It was strong; strong enough that he could hold out against the world if he wanted. If someone hadn't opened the gates for his people, it genuinely could have held off his army until the inevitable conflicts of Felldust overtook it.

He snapped his fingers at a servant. "I want any tunnels beneath this place filled in. I don't care how many slaves die doing it. Then start on the ones in the city. I will not have a rat run where people can sneak without my knowledge."

"Yes, First Stone."

He continued into the castle. Already, servants were moving in the banners of Felldust. Yet there were others who didn't seem to have gotten the message. Three of his men were tearing at tapestries, pulling stones from the eyes of statues and stuffing the resulting loot into their belt pouches.

Irrien strode forward, and he saw them look around with the reverence that he liked to build in his men.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Continuing the looting of the city, First Stone," one answered. He was younger than the other two. Irrien guessed that he'd only joined the invasion force because of the promise of adventure. So many did.

"And did your commanders tell you to continue to loot within the castle?" Irrien asked. "Is this where you have been commanded to be?"

Their expressions told him everything he needed to know. He'd ordered his men to be systematic about the looting of the city, but this was not systematic. He demanded discipline from his warriors, and this was not disciplined.

"You thought that you would just take what you wanted," Irrien said.

"It is Felldust's way!" one of the men protested.

"Yes," Irrien agreed. "The strong take from the weak. That is why I took this castle. Now you are trying to take from me. Do you think *I* am weak?"

He didn't have his great sword anymore, and his wounded shoulder still ached too much for it even if he'd had it, so he pulled out a long knife instead. His first thrust caught the youngest of the three through the base of the jaw, driving up through his skull.

He spun, slamming the second of the three back into a wall as he scrambled for his own weapons. Irrien parried a sword stroke from the other, cutting his throat effortlessly on the backswing, shoving him away as he fell.

The one he'd pushed away was backing up now, his hands in the air.

"Please, Stone Irrien. It was a mistake. We didn't think."

Irrien stepped in and stabbed him without a word, striking again and again. He held the weakling up so that he wouldn't fall too soon, ignoring the way his wound hurt with the effort of it. This wasn't just a killing, it was a demonstration.

When he finally let the man collapse, Irrien turned to the others, spreading his hands, wanting to make the challenge obvious.

"Does *anyone* here think that I am weak enough that you can simply demand things of me? Does anyone think that they can take from me?"

They were silent, of course. Irrien left them trailing in his wake as he stalked toward the throne room.

His throne room.

Where even now, his prize awaited him.

*

Stephania cringed as Irrien came into the throne room, and she hated herself for it. She knelt next to the same throne that she'd occupied just a short time before, golden chains holding her in place. She'd pulled at them when the room had been empty, but there had been no give in them.

Irrien stalked toward her, and Stephania forced herself to push down her fear. He'd beaten her, he'd put her in chains, but she had a choice. She could let herself be broken, or she could turn this to her advantage. There would be a way to do that, even with this.

Being chained beside Irrien's throne had its advantages, after all. It meant that he planned to keep her. It meant that his men had left her alone, even as they'd dragged off Stephania's handmaidens

and servants for their pleasure. It meant that she was still at the heart of things, even if she didn't have control over them.

Yet.

Stephania watched Irrien as he sat, assessing every line of him, judging him the way a hunter might judge the ground on which her prey lived. It was obvious that he wanted her, or why would he keep her here instead of sending her to some slave pit? Stephania could work with that. He might think that she was his, but soon he would be doing everything she suggested.

She would play the part of the demur plaything, and she would take back what she'd worked for.

She waited, listening as Irrien started to deal with the business of the city. Most of it was mundane stuff. How much they had taken. How much there still was to take. How many guards they needed to secure the walls, and how the flow of food would be controlled.

"We have an offer from a merchant to supply our forces," one of the courtiers said. "A man named Grathir."

Stephania snorted at that, and found Irrien looking down at her.

"Do you have something to say, slave?"

She swallowed her urge to snap back at that. "Only that Grathir is notorious for supplying substandard goods. His former business partner is poised to take his business, though. Support *him* and you might get the supplies you need."

Irrien stared at her levelly. "And why are you telling me this?"

Stephania knew this was her chance, but she had to play it carefully. "I want to show you that I can be useful to you."

He didn't reply, but turned his attention back to the men there. "I will consider it. What is next?"

Next, it seemed, were petitions from the representatives of the other rulers of Felldust.

"The Second Stone would like to know when your return to Felldust will be," one representative said. "There are matters there that require the Five Stones to be together."

"Fourth Stone Vexa requires more space for her contingent of ships."

"Third Stone Kas sends his congratulations on our shared victory."

Stephania ran through the names of the other Stones of Felldust. Cunning Ulren, Kas Forkbeard, Vexa, the only female Stone, Borion the fop. Secondary names compared to Irrien, yet theoretically all but his equals. Only the fact that they weren't here gave Irrien so much power.

Along with names, Stephania's memory supplied interests, weaknesses, desires. Ulren was growing old in Irrien's shadow, and would have had the First Stone's seat if the warlord hadn't taken it. Kas was cautious, a lord of merchants who calculated every coin before he acted. Vexa kept a house beyond the city, where it was rumored her servants were all without tongues so that they could not speak of what they saw. Borion was the weakest, likely to lose his seat to the next challenger.

As she thought about the situation in Felldust, Stephania laid gentle fingers on Irrien's arm. She moved delicately, the touch barely there. She had learned the skills of seduction a long time ago, then spent time perfecting them on a string of useful lovers. She had brought around Thanos, hadn't she? How much more difficult could Irrien be?

She felt the moment when he tensed.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"You seem tense with all this talking," Stephania said. "I thought I could help. Maybe I could help relax you in... other ways?"

The key was not to push too hard. To hint and to offer, but never to demand outright. Stephania arranged her most innocent look, stared up into Irrien's eyes... then cried out as he slapped her casually.

Anger flared in her at that. Stephania's pride told her that she would find a way to make Irrien pay for that blow, that she would have revenge on him.

“Ah, there’s the real Stephania,” Irrien said. “Do you think I’m fooled by your pretense that you’re a humble slave? Do you think I’m stupid enough to believe you can be broken with one beating?”

Fear flashed again in Stephania. She could still remember the whistle of the whip as Irrien had struck her with it. Her back still burned with the memory of the blows. There had been a time when she had enjoyed punishing those servants who deserved it. Now, the thought just brought back the pain.

Even so, she would use the pain if she had to.

“No, but I’m sure you plan more,” Stephania said. She didn’t even try for innocence this time. “You’re going to enjoy trying to break me as much as I’m going to enjoy playing with you while you do it. Isn’t that half the fun?”

Irrien hit her again. Stephania let him see her defiance then. It was obviously what he wanted. She would do whatever she had to in order to bind Irrien to her. Once she’d done it, it wouldn’t matter what she’d suffered to get there.

“You think that you are special, don’t you?” Irrien said. “You are just a slave.”

“A slave you keep chained to your throne,” Stephania pointed out in her most sultry voice. “A slave you obviously plan to have in your bed. A slave who could be so much more. A partner. I know Delos like no one else. Why not just admit it?”

Irrien stood then.

“You’re right. I have made a mistake.”

He reached down, taking her chains and unlocking them from the throne. Stephania had a moment in which to feel a sense of triumph as he lifted her. Even if he was cruel to her now, even if he just dragged her to his chambers and threw her down there to claim as his own, she was making progress.

That wasn’t where he threw her, though. He cast Stephania down on the cold marble, and she felt the hardness of it under her knees as she skidded to a halt in front of one of the figures there.

The shock of that hit her more than the pain. How could Irrien do that? Hadn’t she been everything he could want? Stephania looked up to see a man in dark robes looking at her with obvious contempt.

“I made the mistake of thinking you were worth my time,” Irrien said. “You want a sacrifice, priest? Take her. Cut the babe from her and offer it up to your gods in my name. I’ll not have some mewling brat alive with a claim to this throne. When you’re done, throw what’s left of her for whatever scavengers will eat her.”

Stephania stared up at the priest, then looked over at Irrien, barely able to form the words. This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t. She wouldn’t let it.

“Please,” she said. “This is foolish. I can do so much more for you than this!”

They didn’t seem to care though. Panic flashed through her, along with the shocked thought that this was actually happening. They were actually going to do this.

No. No, they couldn’t!

She screamed as the priest grabbed her arms. Another caught her legs, and they carried her, still struggling, between them. Irrien and the others followed in their wake, but right then, Stephania didn’t care about them. She only cared about one thing:

They were going to kill her baby.

CHAPTER TWO

Ceres still couldn't believe that they'd escaped. She lay on the deck of the small boat she'd stolen, and it was impossible to think that she was actually there, rather than back in some fighting pit beneath the castle, waiting to die.

Not that they were safe yet. The flight of an arrow overhead made that much clear.

Ceres looked up over the boat's railing, trying to work out if there was anything she could do. Archers fired from the shore, most of their shafts striking the water around the boat, a few thudding into the wood to tremble there as they spent their energy.

"We need to move faster," Thanos said beside her. He rushed to one of the sails. "Help me get this up."

"Not... yet," a voice croaked from the other side of the deck.

Akila lay there, and to Ceres's eyes he looked terrible. The First Stone's sword had been sticking through him just minutes before, and now that Ceres had pulled it out, he was obviously losing blood. Even so, he managed to raise his head, looking at her with an urgency that was hard to ignore.

"Not yet," he repeated. "The ships around the harbor have our wind, and a sail will just make us a target. Use the oars."

Ceres nodded, pulling Thanos over to where the combatlords they'd rescued were rowing. It was hard to find space to fit in beside the heavily muscled men, but she squeezed into place and lent her little remaining strength to their efforts.

They pulled into the shadow of a moored galley and the arrows stopped.

"We need to be clever now," Ceres said. "They can't kill us if they can't find us."

She let go of her oar and the others did likewise for a moment or two, letting their boat drift in the wash of the bigger boat, impossible to see from the shore.

It gave her a moment to go over to Akila. Ceres had only known him briefly, but she could still feel guilt for what had happened to him. He'd been fighting for her cause when he'd suffered the wound that even now seemed like a gaping mouth in his side.

Sartes and Leyana knelt beside him, obviously trying to staunch the bleeding. Ceres found herself surprised by just how good a job they were doing of it. She guessed that the war had forced people to learn all kinds of skills that they otherwise might not have.

"Will he make it?" Ceres asked her brother.

Sartes looked up at her. There was blood on his hands. Beside him, Leyana looked pale with effort.

"I don't know," Sartes said. "I've seen enough sword wounds before, and I *think* this one missed the important organs, but I'm just basing that on the fact that he isn't dead yet."

"You're doing fine," Leyana said, reaching out to touch Sartes's hand. "But there's only so much anyone can do on a boat, and we need a real healer."

Ceres was happy that she was there. From the little she'd seen of the girl so far, Leyana and her brother seemed to be a good fit for one another. They certainly seemed to be doing a good job of keeping Akila alive between them.

"We'll get you to a healer," Ceres promised, although she wasn't sure how they could keep that promise right then. "Somehow."

Thanos was at the bow of the boat now. Ceres went to him, hoping that he had more of an idea than she did of how to get out of there. The harbor was full of boats right then, the invasion fleet standing like some floating city alongside the real one.

"It was worse than this in Felldust," Thanos said. "This is the main fleet, but there are more boats still waiting to come."

"Waiting to pick apart the Empire," Ceres guessed.

She wasn't sure what she felt about that. She'd been working to bring down the Empire, but this... this just meant more people suffering. Ordinary people and nobles alike would find themselves enslaved at the hands of the invaders, if they weren't killed outright. By now, they would probably have found Stephania too. Ceres should probably have felt some kind of satisfaction at that, but it was hard to feel much other than the relief that she was finally out of their lives.

"Do you regret leaving Stephania behind?" Ceres asked Thanos.

He reached out to put an arm around her. "I regret that it came to that," he said. "But after everything she did... no, I don't regret it. She deserved it and more."

He sounded as though he meant it, but Ceres knew how complicated things could be when it came to Stephania. Still, she was gone now, probably dead. They were free. Or they would be, if they could make it out of this harbor alive.

Across the deck, she saw her father nod, pointing.

"There, see those ships? They look as though they're leaving."

Sure enough, there were galleys and cogs leaving the harbor, clustered together in a group as though afraid that someone would take everything they had if they didn't. Given what Felldust was like, someone probably would.

"What are they?" Ceres asked. "Merchant ships?"

"Some might be," her father replied. "Filled with loot from the conquest. My guess is that several are slavers, too."

That was a thought that filled Ceres with disgust. That there would be ships there taking the people of her city away to live out lives in chains was something that made her feel as though she wanted to tear the ships apart with her hands. Yet she couldn't. They were just one boat.

Despite her anger, Ceres could see the opportunity they represented.

"If we can get over there, no one will question the fact that we're leaving," she said.

"We still have to get over there," Thanos pointed out, but Ceres could see him trying to pick out a route.

The packed ships were so tight together that it was more like guiding their boat down a series of canals than true sailing. They started to pick their way through the clustered boats, using their oars, trying not to attract attention to themselves. Now that they were out of sight of those firing from the shore, no one had any reason to think that they were out of place. They could lose themselves in the great mass of Felldust's fleet, using it as cover even as some within it hunted for them.

Ceres hefted the sword she'd pulled from Akila. It was large enough that she could barely lift it, but if the hunters came for them, they would soon find out how well she could wield it. Maybe she would even have an opportunity to give it back to its owner one day, point first through the First Stone's heart.

But for now, they couldn't afford a fight. It would mark them out as strangers, and bring down every boat around them on their heads. Instead, Ceres waited, feeling the tension as they slipped past the assorted landing craft, past the hulks of burnt out ships, and past boats where worse was happening. Ceres saw boats where people were being branded like cattle, saw one where two men were fighting to the death while sailors cheered them on, saw one where —

"Ceres, look," Thanos said, pointing to a ship near them.

Ceres looked, and it was just one more example of the horror around them. A strange-looking woman, her face covered in what looked like ash, had been tied to the prow of a ship like a figurehead. Two soldiers with lashes were taking it in turns to strike at her, slowly flaying her alive.

"There's nothing we can do," Ceres's father said. "We can't fight them all."

Ceres could understand the sentiment, but even so, she didn't like the idea of standing by while someone was tortured.

"But that's Jeva," Thanos replied. He obviously caught Ceres's look of confusion. "She led me to the Bone Folk who attacked the fleet so I could get into the city. It's my fault that this is happening."

That made Ceres's heart tighten in her chest, because Thanos had only come back to the city for her.

"Even so," her father said, "try to help and we put all of us at risk."

Ceres heard what he was saying, but she wanted to help anyway. It seemed that Thanos was a step ahead of her.

"We have to help," Thanos said. "I'm sorry."

Her father reached out to grab him, but Thanos was too quick. He dove into the water, swimming for the ship, apparently ignoring the threat of whatever predators were in the water. Ceres had a moment to consider the danger of it... and then she threw herself in after him.

It was hard to swim clutching the great sword that she'd stolen, but right then she needed any weapon she could get. She plunged through the cold of the waves, hoping that the sharks were already sated from the battle, and that she wouldn't die from whatever filth so many ships threw overboard. Her hands closed on the ropes of the moored galley, and Ceres started to climb.

It was hard. The side of the ship was slick, and the ropes would have been difficult to scramble up even if Ceres hadn't been exhausted by days of torment at Stephania's hands. Somehow, she managed to pull herself up onto the deck, throwing the great sword ahead of her the way a diver might have thrown a net of clams.

She came up in time to see a sailor rushing at her.

Ceres snatched up her stolen sword two-handed, thrusting and then pulling it clear. She swept it around in an arc, taking the sailor's head from his shoulders, then looked for the next threat. Thanos was already grappling with one of the sailors who had been attacking the Bone Folk woman, so Ceres ran to his aid. She cut across the sailor's back, and Thanos threw the dying man at the next sailor to come at them.

"You cut her free," Ceres said. "I'll hold them."

She swung her blade in arcs, holding the sailors at bay while Thanos worked to free Jeva. Up close, she was even stranger looking than she had been at a distance. Her soft, dark skin had blue swirls and patterns worked into it, creeping over her shaven skull like tendrils of smoke. Fragments of bone decorated her otherwise silken clothing, while her eyes blazed with defiance at her predicament.

Ceres had no time to watch as Thanos cut her free, because she had to concentrate on keeping back the sailors. One hacked at her with an axe, swinging it overhand. Ceres stepped into the space created by his swing, cutting as she moved past him and then swinging the sword in a circle to force the others back. She thrust it through the leg of one man, then kicked high, catching him under the jaw.

"I have her," Thanos said, and as Ceres glanced back, he had indeed freed the Bone Folk woman... who skipped past Ceres to snatch a knife from a fallen man.

She moved into the crowd of sailors like a whirlwind, cutting and killing. Ceres glanced across to Thanos, then went with her, trying to keep up with the progress of the woman they were supposed to be saving. She saw Thanos parry a sword stroke and then strike back, but Ceres had a blow of her own to deflect in that moment.

The three of them fought together, shifting places like participants in some formal dance where there never seemed to be a shortage of partners. The difference was that these partners were armed, and one misstep would mean death.

They fought hard, and Ceres shouted her defiance as they attacked her. She cut and moved and cut again, seeing Thanos fight with the square-edged strength of a nobleman, the Bone Folk woman beside him lashing out in a blur of vicious aggression.

Then the combatlords were there, and Ceres knew it was time to go.

"Over the side!" she yelled, running for the rail.

She dove, and felt the cold of the water again as she hit it. She swam, making for the boat, then hauled herself up over the side. Her father pulled her aboard, and then she helped the others one by one.

“What were you thinking?” her father asked as they reached the deck.

“I was thinking I couldn’t stand by,” Thanos replied.

Ceres wanted to argue with that, but she knew it was part of what made Thanos who he was. It was part of what she loved about him.

“Foolish,” the Bone Folk woman was saying with a smile. “Wonderfully foolish. Thank you.”

Ceres looked around at the boats nearest to them. All of them were up in arms now, many of the sailors aboard rushing for weapons. An arrow hit the water near them, then another.

“Row!” she yelled to the combatlords, but where could they row to? Already, she could see the other ships moving to intercept them. Soon, there would be no way out. It was the kind of situation where she might have used her powers before, but now she didn’t have them.

Please, Mother, she begged in the quiet of her mind, you helped me before. Help me now.

She felt her mother’s presence somewhere on the edge of her being, ephemeral and calming. She could feel her mother’s attention, looking through her, trying to work out what had happened to her.

“What have they done to you?” her mother’s voice whispered. “This is the sorcerer’s work.”

“Please,” Ceres said. “I don’t need my powers back forever, but I need help now.”

In the pause that followed, an arrow struck the deck between Ceres’s feet. It was too close by far.

“I cannot undo what has been done,” her mother said. “But I can lend you another gift, this one time. It will only be once, though. I do not think your body could stand more.”

Ceres didn’t care, so long as they escaped. Already, boats were closing in. They needed this.

“Touch the water, Ceres, and forgive me, because this will hurt.”

Ceres didn’t question it. Instead, she placed her hand on the waves, feeling the wetness flow around her skin. She braced herself...

...and she still had to fight to keep from screaming as something poured through her, shimmering out across the water, then up through the air. It seemed as though someone had drawn a gauze veil across the world.

Through it, Ceres could see archers and warriors staring in shock. She could hear them shouting in surprise, but the sounds seemed muted.

“They complain that they cannot see us,” Jeva said. “They say that it is dark magic.” She looked at Ceres with something like awe. “It seems that you are everything Thanos said you would be.”

Ceres wasn’t sure about that. Just holding this hurt more than she could believe. She wasn’t sure how long she would be able to keep it up.

“Row,” she said. “Row before it fades!”

CHAPTER THREE

In the high-roofed temple of the castle, Irrien watched impassively as the priests prepared Stephania for sacrifice. He stood unmoved while they bustled, tying her in place on the altar, securing her while she screamed and struggled.

Normally, Irrien had little time for such things. The priests were a bunch of blood-obsessed fools who seemed to think that placating death could fend it off. As if any man could hold off death except through the strength of his arm. Begging didn't work, not to the gods, and not, as Delos's brief ruler was finding out, to him.

"Please, Irrien, I will do anything you want! Do you want me to kneel before you? Please!"

Irrien stood like a statue, ignoring it the way he ignored the pain of his wound, while around him nobles and warriors stood watching. There was some value to be had in letting them see this, at least, just as there was value in placating the priests. Their favor was just another source of power to be taken, and Irrien was not so foolish as to ignore that.

"Don't you desire me?" Stephania begged. "I thought you wanted me for your plaything."

Irrien wasn't so foolish as to ignore Stephania's charms, either. That was part of the problem. When her hand had been on his arm, he'd felt something beyond the usual stirrings of desire he felt with beautiful slaves. He would not allow that. *Could* not allow that. No one would have power over him, even of the kind that came from within him.

He looked over the crowd. There were more than enough beautiful women there, Stephania's former handmaidens kneeling in their chains. Some of them wept at the sight of what was happening to their former ruler. He would distract himself with them soon enough. For now, he needed to get rid of the threat that Stephania posed with her ability to make him feel something.

The highest of the priests came forward, the gold and silver wires in his beard jangling as he moved.

"All is ready, my lord," he said. "We will cut the babe from its mother's belly, and then sacrifice it on the altar in the proper fashion."

"And your gods will find this pleasing?" Irrien asked. If the priest caught the slight note of derision there, he did not dare show it.

"Most pleasing, First Stone. Most pleasing indeed."

Irrien nodded.

"Then it will be done the way you suggest. But I will be the one to kill the child."

"You, First Stone?" the priest asked. He sounded surprised. "But why?"

Because it was *his* victory, not the priest's. Because Irrien had been the one fighting his way through the city, while these priests had probably been safe on the ships transporting them. Because he was the one who had suffered a wound for this. Because Irrien took the deaths that were his, rather than leaving them to lesser men. He didn't explain any of that, though. He didn't owe ones such as these explanations.

"Because I choose to," he said. "Do you have an objection?"

"No, First Stone, no objection."

Irrien enjoyed the note of fear there, not for its own sake, but because it was a reminder of his power. All of this was. It was a declaration of his victory as much as it was gratitude to any gods watching. It was a way of claiming this place at the same time as he rid himself of a child who might have tried to claim his throne when it was old enough.

Because it was a reminder of his power, he stood and watched the crowd while the priests began their butchery. They stood and knelt in neat rows, the warriors, the slaves, the merchants, and those who claimed noble blood. He watched their fear, their weeping, their revulsion.

Behind him, the priests chanted, speaking in ancient tongues meant to have been given by the gods themselves. Irrien glanced back to see the highest of the priests holding a blade over Stephania's exposed belly, poised to slice down while she fought to get away.

Irrien returned his attention to those watching. This was about them, not Stephania. He watched their horror as Stephania's begging turned to screams behind him. He watched their reactions, seeing who was awed, who was frightened, who looked at him with silent hatred, and who seemed to be enjoying the spectacle. He saw one of the handmaidens there faint at the sight of what was occurring behind him and resolved to have her punished. Another was weeping so hard that another had to hold her.

Irrien had found that watching those who served him told him more about them than any declaration of loyalty could. Silently, he marked out those among the slaves who had yet to be fully broken, those amongst the nobles who looked at him with too much jealousy. A wise man did not let his guard down, even when he had won.

Stephania's screams became sharper for a moment, rising to a crescendo that seemed perfectly timed to match the priests' chanting. It gave way to whimpers then, falling. Irrien doubted that she would live through this. Right then, he didn't care. She was fulfilling her purpose in showing the world that he ruled here. Anything beyond that was unnecessary. Almost inelegant.

Somewhere in it, fresh screams joined those of Delos's most beautiful noblewoman, her babe's cries intertwining with hers. Irrien stepped back toward the altar, spreading his arms, drawing in the attention of those who watched.

"We came here, and the Empire was weak, so we took it. *I* took it. The place of the weak is to serve or to die, and *I* decide which."

He turned to the altar where Stephania lay, her dress cut from her, clothed now in a mess of blood and caul as much as in silk or velvet. She was still breathing, but her breaths were ragged, and the wound was not one that a weak thing like her would survive.

Irrien caught the attention of the priests, then jerked his head at Stephania's prostrate form.

"Dispose of *that*."

They rushed to obey, carrying her away while one of the priests handed him the child as if presenting him with the greatest of gifts. Irrien stared at it. It was strange that such a tiny, fragile thing could potentially pose a threat to one such as him, but Irrien was not a man to take foolish risks. One day, this boy would have grown into a man, and Irrien had seen what happened when a man didn't feel he had what belonged to him. He'd had to kill more than a few in his time.

He placed the child on the altar, turning back to the audience while he drew a knife.

"Watch, all of you," he commanded. "Watch and remember what happens here. The other Stones are not here to take this victory. I am."

He turned back to the altar, and instantly he knew that something was wrong.

There was a figure there, a young-looking man with bone-white skin, pale hair, and eyes of a deep amber that reminded Irrien of a cat's. He wore robes, but these were pale where the priests' were dark. He ran a finger through the blood on the altar without apparent distaste, simply with interest.

"Ah, Lady Stephania," he said, in a voice that was even, and pleasant, and almost certainly a lie. "I offered her a chance to be my student before. She should have accepted my offer."

"Who are you?" Irrien asked. He shifted his grip on the knife he held, moving from a grip designed to plunge down to one that was better for fighting. "Why do you dare to interrupt my victory?"

The other man spread his hands. "I don't mean to interrupt, First Stone, but you were about to destroy something that belongs to me."

"Something..." Irrien felt a flash of surprise as he realized what this stranger meant. "No, you are not the child's father. That is a prince of this place."

“I never claimed to be,” the other man said. “But I was promised the child as payment, and I am here to collect that payment.”

Irrien could feel his anger rising, his grip tightening on the knife he held. He turned to order this fool seized, and it was only as he did so that he realized that the others there weren't moving now. They stood as if entranced.

“I suppose I should congratulate you, First Stone,” the stranger said. “I find that most men who claim to be powerful are actually quite weak willed, but you did not even notice my... small effort.”

Irrien turned back to him. He had Stephania's child in his arms now, cradling it in a surprisingly accurate facsimile of care.

“Who are you?” Irrien demanded. “Tell me so that I can write it on your gravestone.”

The other man didn't look up at him. “He has his mother's eyes, don't you think? Given his parents, I'm sure he'll grow up strong and handsome. I'll train him, of course. He will be a most skillful killer.”

Irrien made a sound of anger, low in his throat. “Who are you? *What* are you?”

The other man looked up at him then, and this time his eyes seemed to swim with depths of fire and heat.

“There are those who call me Daskalos,” he said. “But there are those who call me many other things. Sorcerer, of course. Killer of Ancient Ones. Weaver of shadows. Right now, I am a man collecting his debt. Allow me to do so and I will go in peace.”

“The mother of this child is my slave,” Irrien said. “The child is not hers to give.”

He heard the other man laugh then.

“It matters so much to you, doesn't it?” Daskalos said. “You must win, because you must be the strongest. Perhaps that can be my lesson to you, Irrien: there is always someone stronger.”

Irrien had put up with enough from this fool, sorcerer or not. He'd met men and women who had claimed to command magic before. Some of them had even been able to do things that Irrien couldn't explain. None of it had let them best him. Faced with magic, the best thing to do was strike first and strike hard.

He lunged forward, the knife in his hand flashing into the young man's chest. Daskalos looked down at it, then stepped away as calmly as if Irrien had merely brushed the edge of his robes.

“Lady Stephania tried something similar when I suggested taking her child,” Daskalos said, with a hint of amusement. “I'll tell you what I told her: there will be a price for attacking me. Perhaps I will even have the boy exact it.”

Irrien lunged again, this time going for the other man's throat to try to shut him up. He stumbled past the altar, almost overbalancing. The sorcerer wasn't there anymore. Irrien blinked, looking round. There was no sign of him.

“No!” Irrien bellowed. “I'll kill you for this. I'll hunt you down!”

“First Stone?” one of the priests said. “Is everything all right?”

Irrien struck him with his off hand, sending the man sprawling. He heard the others gasp. Apparently, they were all free from whatever spell the sorcerer had used to control them.

“Lord Irrien,” the highest of the priests said. “I must protest. To strike a priest is to invite the wrath of the gods.”

“The wrath of the gods?” Irrien repeated. He drew himself up to his full height, but apparently the old fool was too caught up in his self-righteousness to notice it.

“Do not mock it, First Stone,” the man said. “And where is the sacrifice?”

“Gone,” Irrien said. From the corner of his eye, he saw some of those there shifting in place. They at least seemed to recognize the dangerous nature of his anger.

The priest seemed too obsessed to notice. “The gods must be thanked for this victory, or there is a danger that they will not give you others. You may be the most powerful of men, but the gods – ”

Irrien pulled the other man close as he stabbed him. He'd been made to look weak by the sorcerer. He couldn't allow the priest to do the same. Irrien bent the older man back until he lay on the altar, in almost the spot where Stephania had been.

"I have this victory because I took it," Irrien said. "Do any of you think that you are stronger than me? Do you think that your gods will give you the strength to take what is mine? *Do you?*"

He looked around them in silent challenge, meeting their eyes and noting who looked away, how quickly, and how frightened they appeared when they did so. He picked out another of the priests, younger than the dead one had been.

"You, what is your name?"

"Antillion, First Stone." Irrien could hear the fear there. Good. A man should realize who could really take his life from him.

"You are now the highest priest in Delos. You will answer to me. Do you understand?"

The young man bowed. "Yes, First Stone. Do you have commands?"

Irrien looked around, getting his temper under control. A flash of it could terrify those who needed to be cowed, but a temper that was not under control was a weakness. It encouraged dissent, and emboldened those who mistook it for stupidity.

"Clear away that as you did the first sacrifice," Irrien answered, pointing to the dead priest. "Later, you will attend me in the royal chambers of this place."

He walked to the kneeling slaves, picking out two of Stephania's former handmaidens. They had much of the beauty of their now gone mistress, with a much more suitable level of fear. He drew them to their feet.

"Later," Irrien said. On impulse, he shoved one of them in the direction of the priest. "I will not have it said that I do not respect the gods. I will not be commanded, though. Take this one and sacrifice her. I take it that will please them?"

The priest bowed low again. "Whatever pleases you, First Stone, will please the gods."

That was a good answer. It was almost enough to soothe Irrien's mood. His hand closed on the forearm of the other woman. She looked shocked into silence, obviously realizing how close she'd just come to death.

The other started to scream as they dragged her to the altar.

Irrien didn't care about that. He didn't even particularly care about the slave he dragged along in his wake as he left the room. The weak didn't matter. What mattered was that there was a sorcerer entangled in his business. Irrien didn't know what that meant, and it irritated him that he couldn't see what this Daskalos intended.

It took him most of the journey to the royal chambers to convince himself that it didn't matter. Who could fathom the ways of those who dabbled in magic? What mattered was that Irrien had his own plans for the Empire, and so far, those plans were proceeding exactly as he wanted.

What came next would be even better, although there was one sour note in that. What did this sorcerer want with the boy? What had he meant about turning him into a weapon? Somehow, just the thought of him made Irrien shudder, and Irrien hated that. He claimed to fear no man, but this Daskalos...

He feared him greatly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thanos knew he should have been watching the horizon, but right then, all he could do was watch Ceres with a mixture of pride, love, and amazement. She stood at the prow of their small boat, her hand touching the water as they headed from the harbor into open water. Around them, the air continued to shimmer, the haze that marked their invisibility seeming to twist the light that passed through it.

One day, Thanos knew, he would marry her.

“I think that’s enough,” Thanos said to her softly. He could see the strain on her face from it. The power was obviously taking its toll.

“Just... a little... farther.”

Thanos laid a hand on her shoulder. Somewhere behind him, he heard Jeva gasp, as if the Bone Folk woman expected him to be flung back by the power. Thanos knew Ceres would never do that to him though.

“We’re clear,” he said. “There’s nobody behind us.”

He saw Ceres look around in obvious surprise as she saw the deeper water they were now rowing across. Had it taken that much concentration to hold the power in place? Either way, there was no one behind them now, just empty ocean.

Ceres lifted her hand from the water, staggering slightly. Thanos caught her, holding her up. After everything she’d been through, he was amazed that she’d managed to show this much strength. He wanted to be there for her then. Not just some of the time, but always.

“I’m all right,” Ceres said.

“You’re more than that,” Thanos assured her. “You’re amazing.”

More amazing than he could have believed. It wasn’t just that Ceres was beautiful and clever and strong. It wasn’t just that she was powerful, or that she seemed to put the good of others ahead of her own so consistently. It was all those things, but there was also something special beyond that.

She was the woman he loved, and after what had happened in the city, she was the *only* woman he loved. Thanos found himself thinking about what that meant. They could be together now. They *would* be together.

She looked up at him then, and she reached up to kiss him. It was a soft, gentle moment, full of tenderness. Thanos found himself wishing that it could fill the whole world, and that there was nothing else they had to deal with.

“You chose me,” Ceres said, touching his face as they pulled back.

“I will *always* choose you,” Thanos said. “I will always be there for you too.”

Ceres smiled at that, but Thanos could see the note of uncertainty there in her expression too. He couldn’t blame her for that, but at the same time he wished it weren’t there. He wished that he could chase that away, leaving everything all right between them. He’d been on the verge of asking her for more then, but he knew when not to press things.

“I choose you too,” Ceres assured him, but at the same time she pulled back. “I should go catch up with my brother and my father.”

She went over to where Berin stood with Sartes and Leyana. A family, all looking happy together. A part of Thanos wished that he could simply go there to be a part of it. He wanted to be a part of Ceres’s life, and he suspected that she wanted him to be too, but Thanos knew it would take time to heal things between them.

Because of that, he didn’t rush over to her. Instead, Thanos stood considering the rest of the boat’s inhabitants. For such a small boat, there were a lot. The three combatlords Ceres had saved were doing most of the rowing, although now that they were clear of the harbor, they would be able

to get the boat's small sail up. Akila lay to one side, a conscript Sartes had freed keeping pressure on the wound.

Jeva was coming toward him.

"You're an idiot if you're going to let her walk away," Jeva said.

"An idiot?" Thanos countered. "Is that any way to thank someone who just saved you?"

He saw the Bone Folk woman shrug. "You're an idiot for doing that too. Risking yourself to help another is stupid."

Thanos cocked his head to one side. He wasn't sure that he would ever understand her. Then again, he thought with a glance across to Ceres, that was something that applied to more than one person.

"Risking yourself is what you do for friends," Thanos said.

Jeva shook her head. "I wouldn't have put myself in danger for you. If it is your time to join with the spirits of your ancestors, it is your time. It is even an honor."

Thanos wasn't sure what to make of that. Was she serious? If so, it seemed a little ungrateful given the risk he and Ceres had taken in order to save her.

"If I'd known it was such an honor to be a figurehead for one of the First Stone's ships, I would have left you to it," Thanos said.

Jeva looked at him with a slight frown. It seemed to be her turn to try to work out if he was serious or not.

"You're joking," she said, "but you *should* have left me. I told you, only a fool risks his life for others."

It was too harsh a philosophy for Thanos.

"Well," he said. "I'm glad you're alive, at least."

Jeva seemed to think for a moment or two. "I'm glad too. Which is strange. The dead will be displeased with me. Perhaps I have more to do. I will follow you until I find out what."

She said it evenly, as though it was already a settled thing in which Thanos got no say. He wondered what it must be like, walking through the world with the certainty that the dead were in charge.

"Isn't it strange?" he asked her.

"What is strange?" Jeva replied.

"Living your life assuming that the dead make all the decisions."

She shook her head. "Not all of them. But they know more than we do. There *are* more of them than us. When they speak, we should listen. Look at you."

That made Thanos frown. He wasn't one of the Bone Folk, to be ordered about by their speakers of the dead.

"Me?"

"Would you be in the circumstances you are if it weren't for decisions your parents and your parents' parents made?" Jeva asked. "You are a prince. Your whole power rests on the dead."

She had a point, but Thanos wasn't sure that it was the same thing.

"I'll be deciding what to do next for the living, not the dead," he said.

Jeva laughed as though it was a particularly fine joke, then narrowed her eyes slightly. "Oh, you're serious. We have people who say that too. Mostly, they are madmen. But then, this is a world for the mad, so who am I to judge? Where will we go next?"

Thanos didn't have an answer for her when it came to that.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "My father told me where I might find out about my real mother, then the former queen told me that she was somewhere else."

"Well then," Jeva said. "We should go. Such news from the dead should not be ignored. Or we could return to the lands of my people. They would welcome us with the news of what happened to our fleet."

She didn't seem daunted by the prospect of reporting so many deaths to her people. She also seemed to be looking over at Ceres every so often, glancing at her with obvious awe.

"She is everything you said she would be. Whatever stands between you, solve it."

She made it sound so simple and direct, as if it were as simple as saying it. Thanos doubted that things were ever that easy.

"I'm trying."

"Try harder," she said.

Thanos wanted to. He wanted to go to Ceres and declare his love. More than that, he wanted to ask her to be his. It seemed as though they'd been waiting forever for that to happen.

She waved him away. "Go, go to her."

Thanos wasn't sure about being dismissed like that, but he had to admit that Jeva had the right idea when it came to going after Ceres. He went over to her and the others, finding her looking more serious than he'd expected.

Her father turned, clasping Thanos's hand.

"It's good to see you again, boy," he said. "If you hadn't come, things might have been difficult."

"You'd have found a way," Thanos guessed.

"Now, we need to find *our* way," Berin replied. "It seems everyone here wants to go somewhere different."

Thanos saw Ceres nod at that.

"The combatlords think we should go out to the free wastes to become mercenaries," she said. "Sartes is talking about slipping into the countryside around the Empire. I thought about maybe going back to the Isle of Mists."

"Jeva was talking about going back to her people," Thanos said.

"And you?" Ceres asked.

He thought about telling her about the lands of the cloud mountains, about his missing mother, and the chance to find her. He thought of living anywhere, *anywhere* with Ceres. But then he looked over to Akila.

"I'll go wherever you go," he said, "but I don't think Akila will survive a long journey."

"I don't either," Ceres said.

Thanos knew her well enough to know that she'd already thought of somewhere to go. Thanos was surprised that she hadn't already taken charge. He could guess why, though. The last time she'd been in charge, she'd lost Delos, first to Stephania, and then to the invaders.

"It's all right," Thanos said, reaching out to touch her arm. "I trust you. Wherever you decide, I'll follow."

He guessed that he wouldn't be the only one. Ceres's family would go with her, while the combatlords had sworn to follow her, whatever they were saying about running off to seek adventure elsewhere. As for Jeva... well, Thanos didn't claim to know the woman well enough to know what she would do, but they could always drop her off somewhere, if she wanted.

"We can't catch up to the smuggling boat that brought you to Delos," Ceres said. "Even if we knew where it was, this small boat won't move as fast as it can. And if we try to go too far... I think Akila won't make it."

Thanos nodded. He'd seen the wound that the First Stone had inflicted on their friend. Akila had survived as much through willpower as anything else, but he needed a real healer, and soon.

"Where then?" Thanos asked.

Ceres looked at him, then at the others. She still seemed almost frightened about saying what she needed to say.

"There's only one place," Ceres said. She raised her voice to a level where the whole ship could hear. "We need to get to Haylon."

Her father and her brother immediately started to shake their heads. Even some of the combatlords didn't look happy.

"Haylon won't be safe," Berin said. "Now that Delos has fallen, it will be a target."

"Then we need to help them to defend," Ceres said. "Maybe there won't be people trying to take it out from under us while we do it this time."

That was a good point. Delos had fallen for a lot of reasons: the sheer size of Felldust's fleet, the people who hadn't stayed to fight, the lack of stability as Stephania conducted her coup. Maybe things would be different on Haylon.

"It doesn't have its fleet," Thanos pointed out. "I persuaded most of them to help Delos."

He felt a wave of guilt over that. If he hadn't talked Akila into helping, a lot of good people wouldn't be dead, and Haylon would have the means to defend itself. His friend wouldn't be lying wounded on the deck of their boat, waiting for assistance.

"We... chose to come," Akila managed from where he lay.

"And if they don't have a fleet, it's all the more reason to try to help them," Ceres said. "All of you, think, it's the only friendly place nearby. It held off the Empire when it was strong enough that Felldust didn't dare to attack. It needs our help. So does Akila. We're *going* to Haylon."

Thanos couldn't argue with any of that. More than that, he could see the others coming around to it. Ceres had always had the ability to do that. It had been her name, not his, that had brought the Bone Folk. It had been she who had been able to persuade Lord West's men, and the rebellion. She impressed him more and more every time she did it.

It was enough that Thanos would follow wherever she wanted to go, to Haylon or beyond. He could put the attempt to find his parentage on hold for now. Ceres was what mattered; Ceres, and dealing with the damage that Felldust would do if they spread out beyond Delos. He'd heard it on the docks in Port Leyward: this wasn't going to be a quick raid.

"There's a problem if we want to go to Haylon," Sartes pointed out. "To get there, we would have to go through Felldust's fleet. That's the direction they were coming from, right? And I don't think they're all sitting in Delos's harbor."

"They aren't," Thanos agreed, thinking back to what he'd seen in Felldust. There had been whole flotillas of ships that hadn't set off for the Empire yet; the ships of the other Stones had sat waiting to see what would happen, or been there gathering supplies so that they could join in the process of raiding.

They would be a real threat if their small boat tried to sail to Haylon by the direct route. It would simply be a matter of luck whether they met with foes on the way, and Thanos wasn't sure whether Ceres would be able to pull off her disappearing trick for them again.

"We'll have to go around," he said. "We skirt the coast until we're well clear of any route they might take, then come around to Haylon from its far side."

He could see that the others weren't happy about that thought, and Thanos guessed that it wasn't just because of the extra time involved. He knew what that route meant.

Jeva was the one to say it.

"Taking that route would bring us through the Passage of Monsters," she said. "It might be better to take our chances with Felldust."

Thanos shook his head. "They'll hunt us down if they see us. At least this way, we have a chance of going undetected."

"We have a chance of getting eaten too," the Bone Folk woman pointed out.

Thanos shrugged. There were no better options that he could see. There was no time to go anywhere else, and no better way through. They could risk this, or sit there until Akila died, and Thanos wouldn't abandon his friend like that.

Ceres seemed to feel the same way.

"The Passage of Monsters it is. Let's get the sail up!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Ulren, the Second Stone, approached the five-sided tower with the calm determination of a man who had plotted everything that might happen next. Around him, the dust of the city swirled in its usual endless dance, making him want to cough or cover his mouth. Ulren did neither. This was a moment to appear strong.

There were guards on the doors, as there always were. Ostensibly paid by all five Stones, but Irrien's men in truth. That was why they crossed their pikes in challenge, a small reminder to any lesser Stone of their place.

"Who goes?" one called.

Ulren smiled at that. "The new First Stone of Felldust."

He had a moment to see the shock in their eyes before his men stepped from the dust, raising their crossbows. He did not have the sheer weight of arms that Irrien did or the cunning spies of Vexa, the wealth of Kas or the noble friends of Borion, but he had enough of each, and now, finally, he had the boldness to use them.

He enjoyed the sight of crossbow bolts feathering the guards' chests after they'd held him back so many times. It was petty, but this was a moment to give in to pettiness. This was the moment when he got to do *everything* he'd ever wanted.

He opened the door with his key, stepping inside into the light of the tower. What did it say about the city that the lamp smoke-filled air inside was still better than that outdoors? Still, even that seemed sweet today.

"Be swift," he said to the men and women who followed. "Strike quickly."

They spread out, the gleam of their weapons dulled with lamp black. When guards came from one of the corridors, they leapt forward in silence, striking out. Ulren didn't stop to watch the blood and the death. Right then, none of that mattered.

He set off up the seemingly endless flights of stairs that led to the top chamber. He'd done this so many times now, and each time, it had been in the expectation that he would be there as a lesser thing, second or third or less in a city where the First of Five was the one place that mattered.

That was the cruel joke of the city, in Ulren's eyes. Everyone fighting to be on top, five working in concert, but everyone knew that the First Stone was the strongest. Ulren had been plotting to be First for so long that he couldn't remember a time when he'd wanted anything else.

He'd been cautious, even though this should always have been his. He'd built his power, starting with the lands of his family but adding to them, tending his resources the way a gardener might have tended a plant. He'd been so patient, so very patient. He'd worked himself to the very edge of taking the First Stone's seat.

Then Irrien had come along, and he'd had to be patient again.

Around Ulren, the killings continued as he climbed. Servants in the First Stone's colors died, cut down by his men. No hesitation, no remorse. Felldust was a land where even an innocent-looking slave might hold a dagger, hoping to advance.

A soldier charged from the shadows, and Ulren grappled with him, looking for leverage.

The man was strong, although maybe that was simply age weighing against him. Ulren found that his body ached now when he'd been in the training ring in his home, and the slave girls who'd once come to him quite willingly now had to hide their looks of disgust and dismay. There were days when he walked into rooms and could barely remember why he'd bothered.

But he'd lost none of his cunning. He turned with the force of the other man's rush, hooking his foot behind his attacker's leg and pushing with what strength he had. The soldier stumbled, and then tumbled, going head over heels down the spiral stairs that led up the five-sided tower. Ulren left him for his warriors to finish. It was enough that he hadn't seemed weak.

“Everything is in place in the rest of the city?” he asked Travlen, the priest who had given up his order to walk beside him.

“Yes, my lord. Your warriors are hitting those of Irrien’s people who remain in the city even as we speak. A number of his business enterprises have offered to come over to your side, while in those that haven’t, I’m told the slaughter has been enough to please the gods themselves.”

Ulren nodded. “That’s good. Accept any who wish to join us, then see who can replace the ones who run them. I have no time for traitors.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Gods,” Ulren said, “will these stairs never end?”

Another man might have considered moving the heart of Felldust’s power once he had control of it, but Ulren knew better than that. In a land such as this, tradition was just one more way of keeping control.

They reached the highest floor, where servants and slaves cut fruit and carried water, waiting on any whim of the other Stones. Ulren stood there, his warriors spreading out around him.

“Are any here slaves or servants of the First Stone?” he demanded.

Some moved forward. How could they do anything else? Irrien had abandoned them here. Perhaps he wanted them in place when he came back. Perhaps he simply didn’t care. Ulren surveyed the men and women who stood there. He imagined that Irrien would be savoring the fear on their faces right then. He’d spent enough time around the First Stone to know exactly what kind of man his rival was.

Ulren simply didn’t care. “From this moment, you are all my slaves. My men will determine which of you are worth keeping, and which will be given to the temples for sacrifice.”

“But I am a free man,” one of the servants there complained.

Ulren stepped in and stabbed him with a serrated blade, up through the sternum and then out of his back.

“A free man who chose the wrong side. Does anyone else wish to die?”

They knelt instead. Ulren ignored them, stepping over to the great double doors that marked the main entrance to the council chamber. There were other entrances, one for each of the Stones. It was meant to show their independence. It certainly gave them a way to run if it came to it.

He didn’t think that they would run from this, though. Not if he did it properly. Ulren signaled for his people to hang back and wait. There were ways to do these things. It was something that Irrien had never understood, being a barbarian from the dust. It was the one advantage that the Second Stone had over the First, and he intended to make the most of it.

He held out his hand, and one of his servants passed him his dark robes of office. Ulren wrapped them around himself, keeping the hood pushed back as he made his way to the doors. The bloody sword was still in his hand. It was better to be clear about what this was.

He stepped over to one of the high windows there, looking out over the city. The dust made it hard to see anything, but he could imagine what would be happening below. Warriors would be moving through the streets, hunting those Irrien had left behind. Criers would be following them, proclaiming the change. Thugs would be telling merchants whom they now owed their taxes to. The city was shifting beneath that dust, and Ulren had made certain that it would shift his way.

Even so, he was cautious. He’d been ready to take the First Stone’s seat once before. He’d prepared the strongest mercenaries, built up a stock of secrets, only to find an upstart taking the throne before he could get to it.

Who had been the First Stone then? Maxim? Thessa? It was hard to remember, the rulership of the city had shifted so often in those days. The only part that mattered was that Irrien had come in and taken what should have been his. Ulren had survived by accepting that. Now, the First Stone had overreached, and it was time to do more.

He stepped into the room where the Five Stones made their decisions. The others were there already, as he'd hoped they would be. Kas was stroking his trident beard in worry. Vexa was reading through a report. Borion had the bravado of a man who knew that there was trouble.

"What is this?" he asked.

Ulren didn't waste time with pleasantries. "I have decided to challenge Irrien for his seat."

He watched the others' reactions. Kas continued to stroke his beard. Vexa raised an eyebrow. Borion was the one who reacted most, but then, Ulren had expected that. How many challengers had Irrien warned the fop about? How many times had he helped with the other man's gambling debts?

"Irrien is not here to challenge," Borion pointed out.

As if there was no precedent for that. Did he think that Ulren hadn't seen every permutation of the council in his time as one of its Stones?

"Then that should make it easier, shouldn't it?" Ulren said. He moved forward to take Irrien's seat.

To his surprise, Borion stepped in front of him, drawing a slender blade.

"And you think you'll make yourself First Stone?" he said. "An old man who took his position so long ago no one can even remember? Who keeps the Second Stone's spot mostly because Irrien doesn't want disruption?"

Ulren moved out into an open section of the floor, stripping off his formal robe and wrapping it loosely over one arm.

"Is that why you think I hold onto it?" he said. "Do you really want to try me, boy?"

"I've wanted it for years, but Irrien kept telling me no," Borion said. He lifted his blade into a duelist's posture. Ulren smiled at that.

"This is your last chance to live," Ulren said, although in truth that had passed the moment the other man lifted a blade against him. "Note that Kas and Vexa have more sense than to try this. Put your weapon aside, and take your seat. You should even be able to move up a place."

"Why move up one when I can kill an old man and move up three?" Borion countered.

He lunged forward, and Ulren had to admit that the boy was fast. Ulren had probably been faster in his youth, but that was a long time ago now. He'd had plenty of time to learn the skills of war, though, and a man who judged the distance right didn't *have* to be fast. He swept around his balled up cloak to swirl and tangle with Borion's sword.

"Is that all you have, old man?" the Fifth Stone demanded. "Tricks?"

Ulren laughed at that, then attacked in the middle of it. Borion was quick enough to jump back, but not without Ulren's blade scraping across his chest.

"Don't underestimate tricks, boy," Ulren said. "A man survives any way he can."

He stepped back, waiting.

Borion rushed in. Of course he rushed in. The young reacted, they moved in line with their emotions. They didn't think. Or they didn't think enough. Borion tried for a measure of cunning, with feints that Ulren had seen a hundred times before. That was the peril of being young: you thought you had invented things that had gotten many men killed before you.

Ulren stepped aside and threw his cloak over the younger man as he passed with his real stroke. Borion flailed at the fabric, trying to clear it, and in that moment, Ulren struck. He moved in close, gripping Borion's arm so that he couldn't bring his sword to bear, then started to stab.

He did it methodically, consistently, with the patience that he'd built up in years of fighting. Ulren could see the blood seeping through his cloak as it wrapped around Borion, but he didn't stop until the other man fell. He'd seen men come back from the worst of injuries. He wasn't going to risk anything.

He stood there, breathing hard. It had been bad enough climbing all the stairs. Killing a man felt as though his lungs might burst with the effort, but Ulren disguised it. He moved over to Irrien's seat, positioning himself behind it first.

“Do either of you wish to object?” he asked Kas and Vexa.

“Only to the mess,” Kas said. “But there are slaves for such things, I suppose.”

“Hail the First Stone,” Vexa said, without any particular enthusiasm.

It was a moment of triumph. More than that, it was the moment that Ulren had worked toward for years. Now that it was here, it felt strange to actually sit in the First Stone’s seat, lowering himself down onto the granite of it.

“I have already taken Irrien’s interests,” Ulren said. He waved his hand in Borion’s direction. “But feel free to help yourselves to the boy’s.”

They would. Ulren had no doubt that they would. That was what this city was, after all.

“And, of course, we will need new Fourth and Fifth Stones,” Ulren said.

That should have been their cue to move up a space. Neither did, though. They kept the seats that they’d fought for, leaving the Second Stone’s seat empty. Ulren wasn’t sure he liked that, even if he could understand the fear behind it. They weren’t coming for his new seat, but it was a sign that they didn’t consider this settled, and that they weren’t going to fall into line with the new order.

They were hanging back the way he’d hung back when Irrien had first come to power.

More than that, they were acting as if this wasn’t over.

CHAPTER SIX

Stephania woke to a world filled with agony. The whole universe seemed to have screwed itself up into a ball of pain wrapped up in her stomach. She felt as though she'd been torn to pieces... but then, she *had* been sliced open.

That thought was enough to make her scream again, and this time there weren't any priests or warriors there to hear her agony, only the open sky above her, visible through the blur of her tears. They'd dragged her outside somewhere and left her to die.

It took all of her strength to lift her head even enough to look around.

When she did, she quickly wished she hadn't. Trash surrounded her, as far as the eye could see. There was broken pottery, animal bones, glass and more. All the detritus of city life spread out in a seemingly endless landscape of despair.

The stink hit her in the same moment, fetid and overwhelming, seeming to fill the space around her. The stench of death was mixed in with it too, and Stephania saw the bodies then, simply abandoned as if they were nothing. In the distance, she thought she saw funeral fires, but she doubted they were the elegant pyres of funerals. They would simply be pits, waiting for more and more bodies to consume.

Stephania knew where she was now, in the garbage area beyond the city, where a thousand middens found themselves emptied, and the poorest of the poor scavenged for what they could find. Normally, the only bodies that ended up there were those of the people who couldn't afford a grave, or who were there to be lost in death, victims of criminals.

Stephania collapsed back for what seemed like an interminable time, the sky swimming above her in waves. Only strength of will kept her from giving in and succumbing to the blackness that threatened to consume her. She forced herself to raise her head again, ignoring the pain.

There were figures moving over the garbage heaps. They wore ragged clothes and their faces were smeared with dirt. Many of them were little more than children, their feet wrapped with rags against the sharp edges.

"Help... help me," Stephania called out.

It wasn't that she had much of a belief in the generosity of others. It was simply that she had no better choice. After everything that had happened to her, there was no way she could survive without help. They'd cut her child from her to sacrifice. They'd stolen him!

As if the thought summoned it, agony shot through the wound in her stomach, and Stephania screamed. Her cry for help hadn't brought the scavengers, but her scream did. They came stalking over the heaps of broken things as if certain that this was all some kind of trap. They didn't look like Felldust's people, though. It seemed that the lowest of the low could survive even a war with nothing changing.

Stephania wished that things had been so stable for her. She'd been so certain that she could control things in the city; that she could wait out the siege and come to an arrangement with Irrien. Now she was lying discarded on a garbage heap, and she barely had the strength to keep breathing.

"She's alive," someone said.

Stephania looked up, and the presence of the garbage pickers so close to her took her a little by surprise. Had she blacked out for a moment? They stood around her in a pack, seeming to tower over her even though most would have been smaller than her if she'd been standing. Some were children, some were people twisted by illness or war, missing limbs or bearing scars.

"Help me," Stephania said.

Maybe they wouldn't do it out of the goodness of their hearts. Most people didn't do that, in her experience. Even Thanos had abandoned her eventually. But there were other reasons to help

someone. Stephania knew that she was beautiful. Maybe they would want to sell her to a slaver for a profit. Maybe she could find one to seduce while she recovered.

The very fact that she was thinking it told Stephania just how desperate she was right then. It was true though. Give her any kind of chance, for any reason, and she would find a way to take control of the situation.

“I get her slippers,” one of the scavengers said.

“You do? Who says you do?”

There were hands on her then, a seeming horde of them. Every touch was agony, so that Stephania screamed and writhed. Worse, every touch seemed to ignore *her* completely. They tore at the few scraps of possessions she had left, tearing them from her while ignoring her completely.

She tried to fight, although the truth was that she couldn't have fought off so many even if she'd been well. As it was, they tore every scrap from her, even though she tried to fight back. She grabbed for a sharpened piece of pottery, swinging it at the nearest of them.

They danced back.

“We can't leave her like that,” one said.

For a brief moment, Stephania dared to feel hope. Maybe her few scraps of silk were the price for saving her.

“Throw her on one of the pyres,” another said. “No one will know.”

“No,” Stephania begged. “*No!*”

They grabbed her, ignoring the way she tried to fight as they lifted her. They carried her between them, and it was like being held aloft by a rolling wave of people. Stephania barely had the strength now to turn in their hands, but whichever way she turned, there seemed to be people there ready to hold her.

They carried her across the garbage the way servants might have hefted an old piece of furniture waiting to be demolished. There was no care to it, no gentleness, not even a fundamental acknowledgment that Stephania was alive. To them, she seemed to be nothing more than a thing to be disposed of.

She could see the fire pits ahead now, and that only fueled her struggles. They were big enough that each could have swallowed a house, flames coming up in spurts from them, as bodies broke down in their heat. There were corpses piled near them, each stripped of all valuables, while figures in the rags of the scavengers lifted them and threw them to the flames.

Stephania could feel the heat of the pit from here as they carried her toward it. It was like standing in front of a blacksmith's forge, or having the fire of an alchemist's burner skimming across every inch of her skin.

She didn't want to think about how much worse it would be if they threw her in there. *When* they threw her in there.

It was impossible not to think about it. Stephania had seen people burn before, in the middle of battles, or when she'd had them tortured. She knew the smells of burning hair and skin, and just the memory of those told her what her future would involve.

“Please,” Stephania begged. “You don't know who I am. You don't know what I can give you!”

“Doesn't look like you have much from here,” one of them said.

They lifted her higher above their heads, ready to fling her down into the pit. Stephania screamed even though she knew it wouldn't do any good. From there, she could see into the deep, white-hot heat of the pit's heart, where corpses were slowly turning to gray ash and charcoal.

They pulled Stephania back to throw her, and she knew then that she was going to die.

She found herself thinking of Thanos, despite herself. Part of it was hatred, because if it hadn't been for him, then she wouldn't have ended up here. That hatred had her thinking of Ceres too, and everything the pair of them had done to her.

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