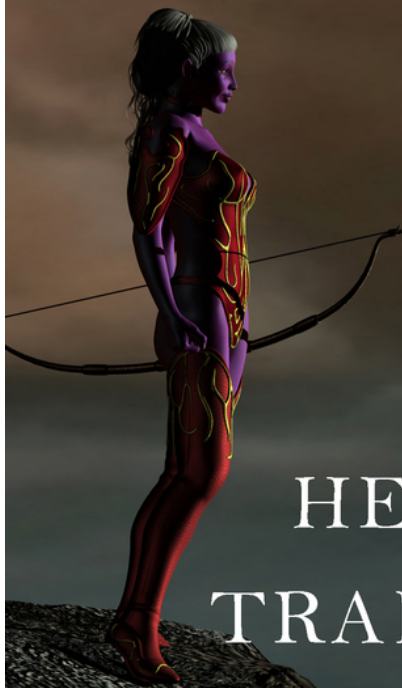


MORGAN RICE



HERO,
TRAITOR,
DAUGHTER

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 6

Морган Райс
Hero, Traitor, Daughter
Серия «Of Crowns and Glory», книга 6

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Аннотация

17 year old Ceres, a beautiful, poor girl from the Empire city of Delos, wakes to find herself powerless. Poisoned by the sorcerer's vial, held captive by Stephania, Ceres life reaches a low point as she is made cruel sport of—and is unable to do anything to stop it.

Thanos, after killing his brother Lucious, embarks for Delos, to save Ceres and to save his homeland. But the Felldust fleet has already set sail, and with the might of the world bearing down on it, it may be too late to save everything he holds dear. An epic battle ensues, one that may determine the fate of Delos forever.

HERO, TRAITOR, DAUGHTER 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

HERO, TRAITOR,

DAUGHTER

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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. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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—*Books and Movie Reviews*

Roberto Mattos

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

—*The Wanderer, A Literary Journal* (regarding *Rise of the Dragons*)

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence...For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide

a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival...Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

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

“THE SORCERER’S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

-Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

-Publishers Weekly

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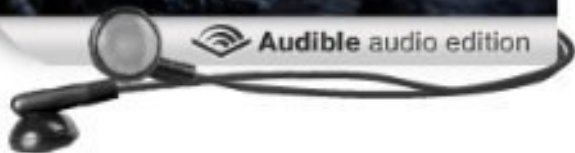
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CHAPTER ONE

Akila hung in the rigging of his ship and saw death approaching.

It terrified him. He'd never been one to believe in signs and omens, but there were some he couldn't ignore. Akila had been a fighting man most of his life in one form or another, yet still, he'd never seen a fleet like the one that approached now. It made the fleet the Empire had sent to Haylon look like a series of paper boats being floated across a pond by children.

It made what Akila had look like less than that.

"There's too many," one of the sailors near him in the rigging said.

Akila didn't reply, because right then he didn't have an answer. He'd have to think of one, though. One that didn't involve the leaden certainty that was crushing his chest. He was already running the things that needed to be done through his mind as he started to climb down. They would need to raise the harbor chain. They would need to get crews to catapults on the docks.

They needed to spread, because charging headlong into a fleet that size would be suicide. They needed to be the wolves hunting the great snow oxen, darting in, taking a bite here and there, wearing them down.

Akila smiled at that thought. He was almost planning as if they could win this. Who'd have taken *him* for an optimist?

“There’s so many,” one of the sailors said as he passed.

Akila heard the same words from others as he clambered back to the deck. By the time he reached the command deck again, there were a dozen rebels at least, all waiting for him with worried expressions.

“We can’t fight them,” one said.

“It would be like we weren’t even there,” another agreed.

“They’ll kill us all. We have to run.”

Akila could hear them. He could even understand what they wanted to do. Running made sense. Run while they still could. Form up their ships into a convoy line and go, running along the coast until they could break free and make it to Haylon.

A part of him even wanted to do it. Perhaps they would even be safe if they could get to Haylon. Felldust would see the forces they had, the defenses of their harbor, and would be wary of coming after them.

At least for a time.

“Friends,” he called, loud enough that everyone on the ship would be able to hear it. “You can see the threat that waits for us, and yes, I can hear the men who want to run.”

He spread his hands to quiet down the murmur that followed.

“I know. I hear you. I’ve sailed with you and you’re not cowards. No man could say that you are.”

But if they ran now, men *would* call them cowards. Akila knew that. They would blame the warriors of Haylon, in spite of all they’d done. He didn’t want to say that, though. He didn’t want

to force his men to do this.

“I want to run as well. We’ve done our part. We’ve beaten the Empire. We’ve earned the right to go home, rather than stay here dying for other people’s causes.”

That much was obvious. They’d only come here after Thanos had begged, after all.

He shook his head. “But I won’t. I won’t run when that means abandoning the people depending on me. I won’t run when we’ve been told what will happen to the people of Delos. I won’t run, because who are *they* to tell me to run?”

He jabbed a finger at the advancing fleet, then turned it into the rudest gesture he could think of on the spur of the moment. That, at least, got his men laughing. Good, they needed all the laughs they could get right then.

“The truth is that evil is everyone’s cause. A man tells me to kneel or die, then I punch him in the face!” That got them laughing harder. “And I don’t do it because he’s threatened me. I do it because the kind of man who tells people to kneel needs punching!”

That one got a cheer. It seemed that Akila had judged this right. He gestured to the spot where a scout ship sat, tied up alongside his flagship.

“Down there is one of us,” Akila said. “They took him and his crew. They whipped him until the blood poured from him. They lashed him to the wheel and they put his eyes out.”

Akila waited a moment to let the horror of that sink in.

“They did that because they thought it would scare us,” Akila said. “They did that because they thought it would make us run faster. I say that if a man harms one of my brothers like that, it makes me want to cut him down for the dog he is!”

That got a cheer.

“I’ll not order you, though,” Akila said. “You want to go home... well, no one can say you haven’t earned it. And when they come for you, maybe there will be someone left to help.” He made himself shrug. “I’ll be staying. If needs be, I’ll stay alone. I’ll stand on the docks, and their army can come to me one at a time to get cut down.”

He looked around them then, staring at men he knew, at brothers from Haylon and freed slaves, conscripts turned freedom fighters and men who had probably started off as little more than cutthroats.

He knew that if he asked these men to fight with him, most of them would probably die. He was probably never going to see the waterfalls that plunged through the hills of Haylon again. He’d probably die not even knowing if what he did was enough to save Delos or not. A part of him wished then that he’d never met Thanos, or been dragged into this wider rebellion.

Even so, he drew himself up.

“Will I be alone, lads?” he asked. “Will I have to punch my way to the stoniest-headed fool among them by myself?”

The roar of “No!” echoed across the water. He hoped the enemy fleet heard it. He hoped they heard it, and he hoped they

were terrified.

Gods knew he was.

“Well then, lads,” Akila bellowed, “get to your oars. We’ve a battle to win!”

He saw them run to it then, and he couldn’t have been more proud of them. He started to think, to give orders. There were messages to be sent back to the castle, defenses to be prepared.

Already, Akila could hear the sound of bells ringing out across the city in warning.

“You two, get the signal flags up! Scirrem, I want small boats and tar for fire ships at the harbor mouth! Am I talking to myself up here?”

“Quite possibly,” the sailor called back. “They say madmen do. But I’ll get it done.”

“You realize that in a real army, you’d be flogged?” Akila shot back, but he smiled as he did it. This was the strange part of being on the cusp of battle. They were so close to possible death now, and it was the moment when Akila felt most alive.

“Now, Akila,” the sailor said. “You know they’d never let the likes of us into a real army.”

Akila laughed then, and not just because it was probably true. How many generals could say that they had not just the respect of their men, but true camaraderie? How many could ask their troops to throw themselves into danger, not from loyalty, or fear, or discipline, but because it was them doing the asking? Akila felt that he could be proud of that part at least.

As the sailor rushed off, he had more orders to give.

“Once we’re clear, we’ll need to put the harbor chain up,” he said.

One of the young sailors near him looked worried by that. Akila could see the fear there in spite of his speeches. That was only normal.

“If we have the chain up, doesn’t that mean we can’t retreat into the harbor?” the boy asked.

Akila nodded. “Yes, but what good would it do, retreating to a city that’s open to the sea? If we fail out there, do you think the city will be a safe place to hide?”

He could see the boy thinking about it, trying to work out where he would be safest, most probably. Either that, or wishing that he’d never signed up.

“You can go be one of those who helps put the chains up if you want,” Akila offered. “Then head for the catapults. We’ll need good people firing them.”

The boy shook his head. “I’ll stay. I won’t run from them.”

“Don’t suppose you fancy taking over the fleet so *I* can run?” Akila asked.

That set the lad off laughing as he went about his duties, and laughter was always better than fear.

What else was there to do? There was always something else, always something to move to next. There were those who spoke about warfare being waiting, but Akila had found that waiting always contained a thousand smaller things. Preparation was the

mother of success, and Akila wasn't going to lose for lack of effort.

"No," he muttered as he checked the lines of his flagship. "The part where they have five times as many ships will do that."

The only hope was to hit and move. Draw them onto the fire ships. Crush them against the chain. Use the speed of their own ships to pick off what they could. Even then, it might not be enough.

Akila had never seen a force this size. He doubted anyone had. The fleet sent to Haylon had been one designed for punishment and destruction. The rebel army had been a coming together of at least three great forces.

This was bigger. This wasn't so much an army as an entire country on the move. This was conquest, and more than conquest. Felldust had seen an opportunity, and now it was going to take everything that the Empire had.

Unless we stop them, Akila thought.

Maybe his fleet wouldn't be the ones to stop them. Maybe the best they could hope for would be to slow down and weaken the invading army, yet maybe that would be enough. If they could buy Ceres time, she might be able to find a way to win against what was left. Akila had seen her do more impressive things with those powers of hers.

Perhaps she would take on Felldust's entire army and save them the trouble.

Most likely, Akila would die here. If that could save Delos,

would that be worth it? That wasn't the question. If it could save the people there, and the people of Haylon, would that? Yes, that was worth everything to Akila. Men like this didn't stop with what they had. They would descend on Haylon as soon as they were done here. If his sacrifice would keep the farmers of the island safe, Akila would make it a thousand times over.

He looked out over the water to where the fleet advanced, his voice softening.

"You owe me for this, Thanos," he said, just as the prince owed him for coming to Delos, and for not cutting him down on Haylon. Probably his life would have been a lot simpler if he'd done that.

Looking at the fleet ahead, Akila suspected it might have been longer, too.

"Right!" he yelled. "Get to your places, boys! We've a battle to win!"

CHAPTER TWO

Irrien sat at the prow of his flagship in a mixture of satisfaction and anticipation. Satisfaction because his fleet was advancing exactly as he'd ordered. Anticipation because of everything that would come next.

Around him, the fleet slid forward in near silence, as he'd ordered when they'd started to hug the coast. Silent as sharks coming after prey, silent as the moment after a man's death. Right then, Irrien was the glint of light on the point of a spear, the rest of his fleet following like its broad head.

His chair was not the dark stone one in which he sat in Felldust. Instead, it was a lighter framed thing, made from the bones of things he'd killed, the thigh bones of a dark-stalker forming the back, the finger bones of a man set in the arms. He'd covered it in the furs of animals he'd hunted. It was another lesson he had learned: In peace, a man should speak of his civility. In war, he should speak of his cruelty.

To that end, Irrien jerked on a chain connected to his chair. The other end held one of the so-called warriors of this rebellion, who had knelt rather than die in battle.

"We will arrive soon," he said.

"Y-yes, my lord," the man replied.

Irrien jerked the chain again. "Be silent unless commanded."

Irrien ignored the man as he started to beg forgiveness badly.

Instead, he watched the path ahead, although he'd set the metal surface of his shield so he could watch behind for assassins.

A wise man always did both. The other stones of Felldust probably thought that Irrien was mad, leaving for this dustless land while they remained behind. They probably thought he couldn't see their plots and machinations.

Irrien's smile widened at the thought of their faces when they realized what was really happening. His pleasure continued as he turned to the coast, seeing the fires that were springing up there as his raiding parties landed. Ordinarily, Irrien hated the wastefulness of burned buildings, but for war, they were a useful weapon.

No, the real weapon was fear. Fire and silent menace were just ways to sharpen it. Fear was a weapon as powerful as slow poison, dangerous as a blade. Fear could make a strong man run or yield without a fight. Fear could make foes choose stupid options, charging in rash bravado, or cowering when they should strike. Fear made men slaves, holding them in place even when there were more of them.

Irrien was not so arrogant as to believe he could never feel fear, but his first battle had not brought it the way men talked about, nor his fiftieth. He had fought men on burning sands and on the cobbles of back alleys, and while there had been anger, excitement, even desperation, he had never found the fear that other men felt. It was part of what made it so easy to take what he wanted.

What he wanted now swung into view almost as if summoned by the thought, the endless strokes of the oars pulling the harbor of Delos into Irrien's view. He'd waited for this moment, but it wasn't the one he'd dreamed of. That would only come once this was done, and he'd taken all that was worth taking.

The city was a low and stinking thing, in spite of its fame, like all the cities of men. It didn't have the grandeur of the endless dust, or the stark beauty of things made by Ancient Ones. As with all cities, when you crammed enough people together, it brought out their true baseness, their cruelty and their ugliness. No amount of elegant stonework could disguise that.

Still, the Empire for which it formed a lynchpin was a prize worth taking. Irrien wondered briefly if his fellow stones had realized their mistake yet in not coming. That they occupied the stone chairs at all spoke of their ambition and their power, their cunning and their ability to navigate political games.

For all that, though, they'd still thought too small. They'd thought in terms of a glorified raid, when this could be so much more. A fleet this size wasn't here just to bring back gold and slave lines, although both would come. It was here to take, and hold, and settle. What was gold next to fertile land, free from endless dust? Why drag slaves back to a land blasted by the wars of the Ancient Ones, when you could take the land on which they stood as well? And who would be there to ensure he got the largest portion of this new land?

Why raid and leave when you could wipe away what was there

and rule?

First, though, there were obstacles to overcome. A fleet stood in front of the city, if you could call it that. Irrien wondered if the scout ships they'd set loose had come back home yet. If they'd seen the things that awaited them. He might not feel the fear of battle, but he knew how to stoke it in weaker men.

He stood to get a better view, and so that those watching from the shore might see who ordered this. Only those with the sharpest eyes would make him out, but he wanted them to understand that this was *his* war, his fleet, and soon, his city.

His eyes made out the preparations that the defenders were starting to make. The small boats that would no doubt soon be aflame. The way the fleet was forming into groups, ready to harry them. The weapons on the docks, ready to target them as they came close.

"Your commander knows his business," Irrien said, dragging his latest captive to his feet by his chains. "Who is he?"

"Akila is the best general alive," the former sailor said, then caught Irrien's eye. "Forgive me, my lord."

Akila. Irrien had heard the name, and had heard more from Lucious. Akila, who had helped to free Haylon from the Empire, and held it against their fleet. Who, it was said, fought with all the cunning of a fox, striking and moving, hitting where foes least expected.

"I have always valued strong opponents," Irrien said. "A sword needs iron to sharpen it."

He took his sword from its black leather sheath as if to illustrate the point. The blade was blue-black with oil, the edge a razor's. It was the kind of thing that might have been a headsman's tool for another man, but he'd learned the balance of it, and built the strength to wield it well. He had other weapons: knives and strangling wires, a curved moon blade and a many-spiked sun dagger. But this was the one people knew. It had no name, but only because Irrien believed such things foolish.

He could see the fear on his new slave's face at the sight of it.

"In the old days, priests would offer up the life of a slave before battle, hoping to quench the thirst of death before it could settle on a general. Then, it came so that they offered the slave to the gods of war, in the hope that they would show favor to their side. *Kneel.*"

Irrien saw the man do it reflexively, in spite of his terror. Perhaps because of it.

"Please," he begged.

Irrien kicked him, hard enough that the slave fell to his belly, his head sticking out over the bow of the ship. "I told you to be silent. Remain there, and be grateful that I have no truck with priests and their foolishness. If there are gods of death their thirst cannot be slaked. If there are those of war, their favor goes to the man with the most troops."

He turned back to the rest of his ship. He hefted his sword one-handed, and slaves who had been waiting for his instructions rushed to grab horns. As he nodded, the horns blared once. Irrien

saw catapults and ballistae crank back, flames being set to their loads.

He stood, dark against the sunlight, his bronzed skin and dark clothes turning him into a patch of shadow before the city.

“I told you that we would come to Delos, and we have!” he called out. “I told you that we would take their city, and we will!”

He waited until the cheer that followed died down.

“I gave the scouts we sent back to them a message, and it is one I intend to fulfill!” This time, Irrien didn’t wait. “Every man, woman, and child of the Empire is now a slave. Any you meet without a master’s mark is there for you to catch and do with what you are strong enough to. Any who claims to have property is lying to you, and you may take it. Any who disobeys us is to be punished. Any who resists us is in rebellion, and will be treated without mercy!”

Mercy was another of those jokes that people liked to pretend was real, Irrien had found. Why would a man allow an enemy to live unless it gained him something? The dust taught simple lessons: If you were weak, you died. If you were strong, you took what you could from the world.

Now, Irrien intended to take everything.

The biggest part of this was how alive he felt right then. He’d fought his way up to become First Stone, only to realize there was nowhere left to go. He’d felt himself starting to stagnate in the politics of the city, playing out the petty squabbles of the other stones to amuse himself. This, though... this promised to be so

much more.

“Ready yourselves!” he shouted to his men. “Obey my orders, and we will succeed. Fail, and you will be less than dust to me.”

He stepped back over to the spot where the former sailor still lay, his head extended beyond the edge of the ship. He probably thought that was the extent of it. Irrien had found that they hoped things would get no worse, instead of seeing the danger and acting.

“You could have died fighting,” he said, his great sword still lifted. “You could have died a man, rather than a pitiful sacrifice.”

The man turned, staring up at him. “You said... you said that you didn’t believe in that.”

Irrien shrugged. “Priests are fools, but people believe their foolishness. If it will inspire them to fight harder, who am I to object?”

He pinned the slave in place with one boot, making sure that all those there could see it. He wanted everyone to see the moment when his conquest began.

“I give you to death,” he called out. “You, and all who stand against us!”

He brought his sword down, stabbing into the pitiful scum’s chest, spearing the heart. Irrien didn’t wait. He lifted it again, and for once, his headsman’s blade performed its original duty. It cleaved through the enslaved sailor’s neck cleanly. Not mercy, but pride, because the First Stone would never keep a weapon

with less than a perfect edge.

He lifted the blade with the edge still bloody.

“Begin!”

Horns sounded, the sky filled with fire as the catapults launched and archers shot arrows out toward their foes. Smaller ships snaked out toward their targets.

For a moment, Irrien found himself thinking of this “Akila,” the man who had to be standing there waiting for what was to come. He wondered if his would-be foe was afraid right then.

He should be.

CHAPTER THREE

Thanos knelt over the body of his brother, and for a moment or two it felt as though the world had stopped. He didn't know what to think or feel in that moment. He didn't know what to do next.

He'd been expecting some sense of triumph when he finally killed Lucious, or at least some sense of relief that it was finally all over. He'd been expecting to finally feel that the people he cared about were safe.

Instead, Thanos found grief welling up inside him, tears falling for a brother who had probably never deserved them. But that didn't matter now. What mattered was that Lucious *was* his half-brother, and he was gone.

He was dead, with Thanos's dagger in his heart. Thanos could feel Lucious's blood on his hands, and there seemed like so much of it to hold in one body. Some small part of him expected there to be something different about it all, for there to be some sign there of the madness that had gripped Lucious, or the grasping evil that had seemed to fill him. Instead, Lucious was just a silent, empty shell.

Thanos wanted to do something then for his brother; to see him buried, or hand him to a priest at least. Even as he thought of it, though, he knew that he couldn't. His brother's own words meant that it was impossible.

Felldust was invading the Empire, and if Thanos wanted to be able to do anything to help the people he cared about, he had to go *now*.

He stood, collecting his sword, ready to race for the door. He took Lucious's as well. Of all the things his brother had held close, the tools of violence had seemed like the closest. Thanos stood there with them both in his hands, surprised to find how well they matched. He was almost as surprised to find a collection of the inn's patrons blocking his way.

"He said you were Prince Thanos," a bushy-bearded man said, fingering the edge of a knife. "That true?"

"The stones will pay good money for a captive like you," another said.

A third nodded. "And if they don't, the slavers will."

They started forward, and Thanos didn't wait. Instead, he charged. His shoulder slammed into the nearest, knocking him back into a table. Thanos was already lashing out, cutting at the arm of the knifeman.

Thanos heard him cry out as the blade bit into his forearm, but he was already moving, kicking the third man back into a spot where four men hadn't stopped playing dice, even for the battle he'd just had with Lucious. One of them snarled and turned then, grabbing at the thug.

In moments, the inn managed to do what it hadn't when Lucious had been the one fighting: it erupted into a full-scale brawl. Men who had been content to stand by while Thanos

and his brother traded sword blows now threw punches and drew knives. One grabbed for a chair, swinging it at Thanos's head. Thanos sidestepped, hacking a lump from the wood as he redirected the swing into yet another of the patrons.

He could have stayed to fight, but the thought of the danger Ceres might be in pushed him into a run. He'd been so sure that he could stop the invasion if he only got to Lucious, and then there would be enough time to find the truth about his parentage, discover the proof he needed, and make his way back to Delos. Now, there was no time for any of it.

Thanos sprinted for the door. He dropped and skidded under the grabbing hands of a man who tried to stop him, scraping a shallow cut across his thigh. He ran out into the streets there...

...straight into some of the worst dust Thanos had seen since he'd come to the city. He didn't slow. He just jammed his twin blades into his belt, pulled up his scarf against the dust, and pushed forward as best he could.

Behind him, Thanos could hear the sounds of men trying to follow, although how they hoped to see him well enough to catch up in this weather, he didn't know. Thanos groped his way along like a blind man, passing a merchant who was packing away his cart, then a pair of soldiers who were cursing as they huddled in a doorway against the dust.

"Look at that madman!" Thanos heard one of them call in Felldust's tongue.

"Probably hurrying to join the invasion. I hear Fourth Stone

Vexa has started to send more of a fleet, while the other three are still plotting. The First Stone has stolen a march on them.”

“Always does,” the first replied.

Thanos was away into the dust by then though, seeking his route by the vague shapes of the buildings, watching out for the signs that hung above the streets, lit by oil lamps. There were stone carvings too, obviously intended so that the locals could find their way from the street of the carved bear to that of the knotted snakes by touch if they needed.

Thanos didn't know enough about the system to be able to use it, but even so, he pressed on through the dust.

There were others doing the same, and several times, Thanos stopped, trying to make out whether the booted feet he heard were those of pursuers or not. Once, he pressed in behind the curved iron bulk of a windbreak, his swords finding his way into his hands, certain that those following from the inn had caught up.

Instead, a team of slaves raced by, faces wrapped against the dust, carrying a palanquin from within which Thanos could hear a merchant urging them on.

“Faster, you curs! Faster, or I'll have you impaled. We need to get to the harbor before we miss the spoils.”

Thanos watched them, tracking along behind the palanquin on the basis that those carrying it probably knew the way better than he did. He couldn't track it too closely, because in a city like Port Leeward, everyone kept a watch for would-be robbers or killers,

but even so, he managed to follow it along the length of several streets before it disappeared into the dust.

Thanos stood there for a second or two, catching his breath, and as quickly as it had come, the dust storm lifted, giving him a view out over the harbor.

What he saw there made Thanos stand and stare.

He'd thought that there were plenty of ships in the harbor before. Now, it seemed that the water was full to brimming with them, until it appeared that Thanos could have walked to the horizon on their decks.

Many of them were warships, but many more now were merchant craft or smaller vessels. With the main fleet already gone from Felldust, the harbor should have been empty, yet it seemed to Thanos that there wouldn't be enough room for another boat there. It seemed that everyone in Felldust had come there, ready to take their piece of what was to be gained in the Empire.

Thanos started to see the scale of it then, and what it meant. This wasn't just an army invading, but a whole country. They'd seen an opportunity to take lands they'd long been denied, and they were going to acquire them by force now.

Regardless of what it meant for those already there.

"Who are you?" a soldier asked, coming up to him. "What fleet, what captain?"

Thanos thought quickly. The truth would mean another fight, and now there wasn't the welcoming veil of the dust in which to

hide. He had no doubt that he was as coated with it as any of the natives, but if anyone should guess who he was, or even just that he was from the Empire, this would not end well.

He briefly wondered what they did to spies in Felldust. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be pleasant.

"Whose fleet are you with?" the man demanded again, this time in a harsh voice.

"Fourth Stone Vexa's," Thanos shot back, making his voice equally harsh. He tried to inject the sense that he had no time for such interruptions. It wasn't hard to do right then, when he had so little time to get back to help Ceres. "Please tell me it's not true about her fleet leaving already."

The other man laughed in his face. "Looks like you're out of luck there. What, you thought you could sit around, saying farewell to your crew's favorite whore? You waste time, you waste your chance."

"Damn it!" Thanos said, trying to play his part. "They can't all be gone. What about other ships?"

That got another laugh. "You can ask if you want, but if you think there's not a crew that's full right now, you haven't been paying attention. Pickings like this, everyone wants a place. Half of them can barely fight. Tell you what, though, maybe I could find a place for you on one of Old Forkbeard's crews. The Third Stone is taking his time. I'd only ask half of any share you get."

"Maybe if I can't find the lads I'm supposed to be with," Thanos said. Every second he was there was a second in which

he wasn't sailing back toward Delos with the one crew there who wouldn't try to kill him the moment they found out who he was.

He saw the other man shrug. "You'll not get a better offer this late."

"We'll see," Thanos said, and set off amongst the boats.

From the outside, it must have looked as though he was looking for one of the rare boats from the fleet he'd claimed, although Thanos hoped that he didn't find one. The last thing he wanted was to find himself pressed into service in Felldust's navy.

He'd do it, though, if he had to. If it meant getting back to Ceres, if it meant being able to help her, he'd risk it. He'd play the part of some Felldust warrior, eager to catch up. If it had been main fleet sitting there, he might even have made it his first choice, trying to get as close to the First Stone as possible in order to kill him.

Now, though, if he drifted along with this second fleet, he wouldn't get there until it was far too late. He certainly wouldn't be able to help. So he walked the planks between the many ships, watching warriors carry on barrels of fresh water and crates of food. Thanos cut cracks in at least three casks, but no amount of petty sabotage would stop a fleet like this.

He kept looking, instead. He saw men and women honing weapons and chaining oar slaves into place. He saw dust-covered priests intoning prayers for good luck, sacrificing animals in ways that made the dust into blood-colored mud. He saw two groups

of soldiers under different banners arguing over which of them got to go along a wharf first.

Thanos saw plenty that made him angry, and more that made him scared for Delos. There was only one thing he couldn't find among the chaos of the docks, and it was the one thing that he'd come there to find. There were hundreds of boats there, of every shape, size, and design. There were boats filled to the brim with tough-looking warriors, and boats that looked like little more than glorified pleasure barges, there to take people to see the invasion as much as participate in it.

What he couldn't see was the boat that had brought him there. He needed to get back to Ceres, and right then, Thanos didn't know how he was going to do it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stephania ran through the castle, pushed on by the sound of the war horns, like a hart ahead of a hunting party. If she didn't get out now, there would be no escaping. She'd done enough when it came to Ceres.

"Let Felldust finish her off," Stephania said.

She retraced her steps through the castle, to the point where it connected with the tunnels beneath the city. She hoped that Elethe had kept her escape route open as Stephania had ordered. Now was a time to flee. If they were caught by the rebellion, that would be bad enough, but to be caught in the middle of a battle between it and Felldust's Five Stones would be far worse.

Except...

Stephania paused, looking out of a window toward the harbor. She could see the sky dark with missiles, ships on fire as a dark ribbon of invading vessels made its way closer. Stephania ran over to a spot where she could look out over the walls, and she could see fires beyond, too.

Whichever way she ran now, it seemed that there would be enemies. She couldn't just slip out over the water, the way she'd come into Delos. She couldn't risk slipping out into open countryside, because if it were her running the invasion, there would be raiding parties out to drive people back toward the city. She couldn't risk wandering Delos openly, because the rebellion's

forces would try to snatch her.

Yet, where were those soldiers? Stephania had passed a few guards on the way in, her disguise more than enough to let her slip by them. There hadn't been many though. The castle had the feel of a ghost ship, abandoned in the face of more pressing matters. Looking out, Stephania could see rebels moving through the streets in bright armor and patchwork stuff. There would be a few figures close by, but how many, and where?

The idea came to Stephania slowly, more as a possibility than a reality. Yet, the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like her best option. She wasn't one to dive in without thinking. In the circles of nobility, that was a way to put yourself in someone else's power, or find yourself cast out, or worse.

There were times, though, when decisive action was the answer. When a prize was there to take, hanging back could lose it as surely as overeagerness.

Stephania made her way down to Elethe, who was looking back and forth between the tunnels and the city as though she expected a horde of enemies to arrive at any moment.

"Is it time to leave, my lady?" Elethe said. "Is Ceres dead?"

Stephania shook her head. "There has been a change of plan. Come with me."

To her handmaiden's credit, Elethe didn't hesitate. She walked along with Stephania in spite of the worries she must have had.

"Where are we going?" Elethe asked.

Stephania smiled. "To the dungeons. I've decided that you're

handing me over to the rebellion.”

That got a shocked look from her handmaiden, although it was nothing compared to the surprise there when Stephania explained more of her plan.

“Are you ready?” Stephania asked, as they got closer to the dungeons.

“Yes, my lady,” Elethe said.

Stephania put her hands behind her back as if tied, then walked forward with what she hoped was a suitable show of fearful contrition. Elethe was doing a surprisingly good job of looking like a tough rebel with a freshly captured enemy.

There were a pair of guards near the main door, sitting behind a table with cards set out, showing how they were passing their time. Some things didn’t change, regardless of who was in charge.

They looked up as Stephania approached, and Stephania was quite amused by the surprise she saw there.

“Is that... you’ve captured Lady Stephania?” one asked.

“How did you do it?” the other said. “Where did you find her?”

Stephania could hear the disbelief, but also the sense that they didn’t know what to do next.

“She was creeping away from Ceres’s rooms,” Elethe answered smoothly. Her handmaiden was a good liar. “Can you... I need to tell someone, but I’m not sure who.”

That was a good move. They both looked over at Elethe then, as they tried to decide what to do next. That was when Stephania

brought out a needle with each of her hands, bringing it forward to strike the guards' necks. They spun, but the poison was a fast-acting one, and their hearts were already pumping it through their bodies. A breath or two later, and they collapsed.

"Fetch the keys," Stephania said, gesturing to one guard's belt.

Elethe did so, opening up the dungeons. They were full almost to bursting, as Stephania had suspected they might be. As she hoped, at least. There weren't any more guards, either. Apparently, all those with the ability to fight were on the walls.

There were men and women who were obviously soldiers and guards, torturers and simply loyal nobles. Stephania saw more than a few of her own handmaidens there, which struck her as a little foolish. The sensible move was not to insist on their loyalty, but to pretend to serve the new regime. The important thing was that they were there.

"Lady Stephania?" one said, as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing. As if she were their savior.

Stephania smiled at that. She liked the thought of people seeing her as their hero. They would probably do far more that way than simply from obedience, and she liked the idea of turning Ceres's weapons against her too.

"Listen to me," she said to them. "You've had a lot taken from you. You had so much, and those rebels, those *peasants*, dared to snatch it. I say it's time to snatch it back."

"You're here to get us out?" one former soldier asked.

"I'm here to do more than that," Stephania said. "We're going

to take back the castle.”

She hadn't expected cheers. She wasn't some romantic who needed fools to applaud her every decision. Still, the nervous muttering amongst them was a little grating.

“Are you afraid?” she demanded.

“There will be rebels up there!” a nobleman said. Stephania knew him. High Reeve Scarel had always been quick enough to challenge others to fights when he knew he could win.

“Not enough to hold this castle,” Stephania said. “Not now. Every rebel who can be spared is out on the walls, trying to hold back the invasion.”

“And what about the invasion?” a noblewoman demanded. She was little better than the man who had spoken. Stephania knew secrets about what she'd done before she married into wealth that would make most of the others there blush.

“Oh, I see,” Stephania said. “You'd rather wait in a nice, safe dungeon for it all to be over. Well, what then? At best, you spend the rest of your lives in this stinking hole, if the rebels don't decide to kill you quietly once they realize how inconvenient prisoners are. If the others win... do you think being in a cell will protect you? You won't be nobles to them in here, just amusements. *Brief* amusements.”

She paused to let that sink in. She needed them to feel like cowards for even considering it.

“Or we could go out there,” Stephania said. “We take the castle and we close it against our enemies. We kill those who oppose

us. I've already dealt with Ceres, so she won't be able to stop us. We hold this castle until the rebellion and the invaders kill one another, then we take Delos back."

"There are still guards," one said. "There are still combatlords here. We can't fight the combatlords and win."

Stephania gestured to Elethe, who started to open the locks on the cells. "There are ways. We'll gain more weapons with each guard we kill, and we all know where the armory is. Or you can stay here and rot. I'll close the doors and send a few torturers later. I don't care which."

They followed, as Stephania knew they would. It didn't matter whether they did it from fear, or pride, or even loyalty. What mattered was that they did it. They followed her up through the castle, and Stephania started to give orders, although she was careful to make it sound better than that, at least for now.

"Lord Hwel, would you mind taking some of the more able men and sealing the guard barracks?" Stephania said. "We don't want rebels getting out."

"And men loyal to the Empire?" the noble said.

"Can prove it by killing those other traitors," Stephania replied.

The noble hurried to meet her command. She sent one of her handmaidens to gather more, and asked a noblewoman to instruct those servants who would be obedient to Stephania's bidding.

Stephania looked around the group with her, judging who would be useful, who had secrets she could employ, whose

weaknesses made them easy to control and whose made them dangerous. She sent the noble who had been so keen to avoid a fight to control the gates, and a cantankerous dowager to the kitchens where she could do no harm.

They gathered people as they went. Guards and servants came to them as they heard, their loyalties changing with the wind. Stephania's handmaidens knelt before her, then rose at a touch to be sent about their next tasks.

Occasionally, they found rebels who wouldn't submit, and those died. Some died in a quick rush of nobles, their weapons seized, their bodies broken as they were beaten to death. Others died with a knife taking them from behind, or a poisoned dart sliding into their flesh. Stephania's handmaidens had learned to be good at their tasks.

When she saw Queen Athena, Stephania found herself wondering which it should be.

"What is this?" the queen demanded. "What's going on here?" Stephania ignored her bleating.

"Tia, I need you to find out how things are going at the armories. We need those weapons. I imagine High Reeve Scarel will have found a fight by now."

She kept walking in the direction of the great hall.

"Stephania," Queen Athena said. "I demand to know what's happening."

Stephania shrugged. "I have done what you should have. I freed these loyal people."

It was such a simple argument, and such a neat one, that it needed no more. Stephania had been the one to do the work of saving the nobles. *She* was the one they owed their freedom to, and perhaps their lives.

“I was locked up too,” the queen shot back.

“Ah, of course. Had I known, I would have rescued you along with the other nobles. Now, excuse me. I have a castle to take.”

Stephania strode off briskly, because the best way to win an argument was not to give one’s opponent a chance to speak. She wasn’t surprised when the others there continued to follow her.

Nearby, Stephania heard the sounds of a fight. Gesturing to those with her, she headed up a flight of stairs, searching for a balcony. She quickly found what she was looking for. Stephania knew the layout of the castle as well as anyone.

Below, she saw a fight that would probably have impressed most people. A dozen muscled men, no two of whose weapons or armor matched, were fighting in the courtyard before the main gate. They did so against at least twice as many guards, maybe three times as many before the battle started, all led by High Reeve Scarel. More than that, it seemed that they were winning. Stephania could see the bodies scattered across the cobbles in their imperial armor. The noble who loved to pick fights had picked one for the ages, it seemed.

“Foolish man,” Stephania said.

Stephania watched for a moment, and if she had seen more of a point in the Stade, she would probably have found some

kind of savage beauty in it all. As she watched, a man with a great axe slammed the haft into two men, then spun, catching one of them with the blade hard enough to nearly split him in two. A combatlord who fought with a chain leapt over a soldier, wrapping it around his neck.

It was a brave performance, and an impressive one. Perhaps if she'd thought, she could have bought a dozen combatlords sometime earlier and turned them into a suitably loyal bodyguard. The only difficulty would have been the lack of subtlety. Stephania winced as a spatter of blood managed to rise almost to the lip of the balcony.

"Aren't they magnificent?" one of the noblewomen said.

Stephania looked over at her with as much scorn as she could muster. "I think they're fools." She snapped her fingers in Elethe's direction. "Elethe, knives and bows. Now."

Her handmaiden nodded, and Stephania watched while she and some of the others there drew throwing weapons and darts. A few of the guards with them had short bows taken from the armory. One had a ship's crossbow, better fired braced on a deck than a balcony. They hesitated.

"Our people are down there," one of the noblemen said.

Stephania snatched a light bow from his hands. "And they were going to die anyway, fighting combatlords so poorly. At least this way, they give us a chance to win."

Winning was everything. Maybe one day, these others would understand that. Perhaps it was better if they didn't. Stephania

didn't want to have to kill them.

For now, she drew the bow as best she could with her swollen belly. Firing down like this, it almost didn't matter that she could barely pull it back halfway. It certainly didn't matter that she took no time to aim. With the mass of those struggling there below, it was enough that she would hit *something*.

More than that, it was enough to serve as a signal.

Arrows rained down. Stephania saw one punch through the meat of a combatlord's arm, and he roared like a wounded animal before another three slammed into his chest. Knives flashed down to cut and skim, dig and gouge. Darts carried poison that probably had no time to act before the targets were punctured by arrows.

Stephania saw imperial soldiers fall along with the combatlords. High Reeve Scarel looked up at her with accusing eyes as he pawed at a crossbow bolt that had struck him through the stomach. Men continued to fall under the combatlords' blades, or found gaps in their defenses, only to find their moment of victory cut short by arrow fire.

Stephania didn't care. Only when the last combatlord fell did she raise a hand for the assault to cease.

"So many..." one of the noblewomen started, and Stephania rounded on her.

"Don't be so foolish. We have taken Ceres's support, and we have taken the castle. Nothing else matters."

"What *about* Ceres?" one of the guards there asked. "Is she

dead?”

Stephania’s eyes narrowed at that question, because it was the one thing about this plan that irritated her.

“Not yet.”

They had to hold the castle until either the invasion was done or the rebels somehow found a way to beat it back. At that point, they might need Ceres as a bargaining chip, or even just a gift so that the Five Stones of Felldust could show their victory. Having her there might even draw in Thanos, letting Stephania have all her revenge at once.

For now, that meant that Ceres couldn’t die, but she could still suffer.

And she would.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ceres was floating above islands of smooth stone and beauty so exquisite she almost wanted to cry. She recognized the work of the Ancient Ones, and instantly she found herself thinking of her mother.

Ceres saw her then, somewhere ahead of her, still robed in a mist. Ceres sprinted after her, and she saw her mother turn, but she still didn't seem to be gaining on her quickly enough.

There was a gap between them now, and Ceres leapt, holding out her hand. She saw her mother reaching out for her, and just for a moment, Ceres thought that Lycine would catch her. Their fingers brushed, and then Ceres was falling.

She fell into the midst of a battle, figures flailing about her. The dead were there, their deaths apparently not stopping them from fighting. Lord West fought beside Anka, Rexus beside a hundred men Ceres had killed in as many different fights. They were all around Ceres, fighting one another, fighting the world...

The Last Breath was there in front of her, the former combatlord as bleak and terrifying as he had ever been. Ceres found herself jumping over the bladed staff he wielded, reaching out to turn him to stone as she had before.

Nothing happened this time. The Last Breath knocked her sprawling, standing over her in triumph, and now he was Stephania, holding a bottle in place of a staff, the fumes still acrid

in Ceres's nostrils.

Then she woke, and reality wasn't any better than her dreaming.

Ceres woke to the feel of rough stone. For a moment, she thought that maybe Stephania had left her on the floor of her room, or worse, that she might still be standing over her. Ceres spun, trying to come to her feet and continue the fight, only to realize that there was no room in which to do it.

Ceres had to force herself to breathe slowly, fighting down the panic that threatened to engulf her as she saw stone walls on every side. It was only when she looked up and saw a metal grille above her that she realized she was in a pit, not buried alive.

The pit was barely broad enough to sit in. There was certainly no way that she could lie full length. Ceres reached up, testing the bars of the grille above her, reaching down for the strength to bend or break them.

Nothing happened.

Now, Ceres felt the panic starting to rise. She tried reaching down for the power again, being gentle with it, remembering how her mother had corrected her after Ceres had burnt out her powers trying to take the city.

This felt the same in some ways, and yet different in so many more. Before, it had been as though the channels along which the power flowed had been burned through until they hurt too much to use, leaving Ceres hollowed out.

Now, it felt as though she was simply normal, although that

felt like less than nothing compared to what she'd been only a little while ago. There was no doubting what had done this either: Stephania and her poison. Somewhere, somehow, she had found a method to strip Ceres of the powers her Ancient One blood gave her.

Ceres could feel the difference between this and what had happened before. That had been like flash blindness: too much too soon, fading slowly with the right care. This was more like having her eyes pecked out by crows.

She reached up for the bars again anyway, hoping that she was wrong. She strained, putting all the strength she could muster into trying to move them. They didn't give in the slightest, even when Ceres pulled at them so hard her palms bled against the metal.

She cried out in surprise as someone threw water down into the pit, leaving her soaked and huddled against the stone of the wall. When Stephania stepped into view, standing over the grate, Ceres tried to glare at her in defiance, but right then she was too cold and wet and weak to do much of anything.

"The poison worked then," Stephania said without preamble. "Well, it should. I paid enough for it."

Ceres saw her touch her belly then, but Stephania went on before Ceres could ask what she meant.

"How does it feel to have the only thing that made you special taken away?" Stephania asked.

Like having been able to fly, but now barely being able to crawl. But Ceres wasn't going to give her that satisfaction.

“Haven’t we been here before, Stephania?” she demanded. “You know how it ends. With me escaping and giving you what you deserve.”

Stephania dumped another bucket of water on her then, and Ceres leapt at the bars. She heard Stephania’s laughter as she did it, and that just drove Ceres’s anger. She didn’t care if she had no powers right then. She still had a combatlord’s training, and she still had everything she’d learned from the Forest People. She would strangle Stephania with her bare hands if need be.

“Look at you. Like the animal you are,” Stephania said.

That was enough to slow Ceres a little, if only because she wouldn’t let herself be anything Stephania wanted her to be.

“You should have killed me when you had the chance,” Ceres said.

“I wanted to,” Stephania replied, “but events don’t always give us what we want. Just look at how things have gone with you and Thanos. Or me and Thanos. After all, I’m the one who’s actually married to him, aren’t I?”

Ceres had to put her hands against the stone of the walls to keep herself from leaping at Stephania again.

“I would have cut your throat if I hadn’t heard the war horns,” Stephania said. “And then it occurred to me that it would be an easy thing to take the castle back. So I did.”

Ceres shook her head. She couldn’t believe that.

“I freed the castle.”

She’d done more than that. She’d filled it with rebels. She’d

taken the people who were loyal to the Empire and she'd imprisoned them. The others, she'd given chances to, she'd...

"Ah, you're starting to see it now, aren't you?" Stephania said. "All those people who were so quick to thank you for their freedom turned back to me just as quickly. I'll have to watch them."

"You'll have to watch more than that," Ceres snapped back. "You think the rebellion's fighters will let you sit here playing queen? You think the combatlords will?"

"Ah," Stephania said, with an exaggerated show of embarrassment that made Ceres dread what was coming next. "I'm afraid I have some bad news about your combatlords. It turns out that the best of fighters still dies when you put an arrow in his heart."

She said that so casually, so tauntingly, yet if it was even half true it was enough to break Ceres's heart. She'd fought alongside the combatlords. She'd trained alongside them. They'd been her friends and her allies.

"You just enjoy being cruel," Ceres said.

To her surprise, she saw Stephania shake her head.

"Let me guess. You think I'm no better than that idiot, Lucious? A man who couldn't enjoy himself in the slightest unless someone else was screaming? You think I'm like that?"

It seemed like a fairly accurate description from where Ceres was standing. Especially given everything that was likely to happen next.

“Aren’t you?” Ceres demanded. “Oh, I’m sorry, and there I was thinking that you’d put me in a stone pit, waiting to die.”

“Waiting for torture, actually,” Stephania said. “But that’s just you. *You* deserve everything you get after all you tried to take from me. Thanos was mine.”

Perhaps she really believed that. Perhaps she honestly felt that it was normal to try to murder your rivals in relationships and life.

“And the rest of it?” Ceres said. “Are you going to try to convince me that you’re basically a nice person, Stephania? Because I’m pretty sure that ship sailed the moment you tried to send me to the Isle of Prisoners.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t have made fun of her like that, because Stephania hefted a third bucket of water. She appeared to consider it for a moment, shrugged, and dumped it over Ceres in a wash of freezing cold.

“I’m saying that nice doesn’t come into it, you stupid peasant,” she snapped as Ceres shivered. “We live in a world that will try to take all you have from you without asking. Particularly if you’re a woman. There are always thugs like Lucious. There are always those who want to take and take.”

“So we fight them,” Ceres said. “We set people free! We protect them.”

She heard Stephania laugh at that.

“You actually believe that foolishness works, don’t you?” Stephania said. “You think that people are basically good, and all will be well if you just give them a chance.”

She said it as though it were something to mock, rather than a good philosophy for a life.

“That is not life,” Stephania continued. “Life is a war, fought any way you can find to fight it. You give no one power over you, and you take all the power you can, because that way you have the strength to crush them when they try to betray you.”

“I’m not feeling very crushed,” Ceres retorted. She wasn’t going to let Stephania see how weak she felt in that moment, or how empty. She was going to create the pretense of strength, in the hope that she might find a way for reality to follow.

She saw Stephania shrug.

“You will. Your rebellion is currently fighting a battle with the army of Felldust. It might win, and then I will trade you for a path out of the city with all the wealth I can take. My guess, though, is that Felldust will wash through the city like a wave. I will let them break against the walls of this castle, until they are ready to talk.”

“You think men like that will just talk to you?” Ceres demanded. “They’ll kill you.”

Ceres wasn’t sure why she gave Stephania that much of a warning. The world would be a better place if someone killed her, even if it was the armies of Felldust.

“You think I haven’t thought it through?” Stephania countered. “Felldust is fractious. It cannot afford to have its soldiers sitting, laying siege to a castle it cannot take. They would fight amongst themselves in weeks, if not before. They will have to talk.”

“And you think they’ll play fair with you?” Ceres asked.

Sometimes, she could barely believe the arrogance Stephania showed.

“I am not a fool,” Stephania said. “I have one of my handmaidens preparing to play the part of me for the first meeting, so that if they try to betray us, I have time to flee the city through the tunnels. After that, I will present you, kneeling and in chains, to First Stone Irrien. An offering with which to begin peace negotiations. And who knows? Perhaps First Stone Irrien will find himself... amenable to joining our two nations together. I feel I could do a lot alongside someone like that.”

Ceres shook her head at that thought. She would no more kneel on Stephania’s command than on that of any other noble. “You think I’m going to give you the satisfaction – ”

“I think that I don’t have to wait for you to *give* anything,” Stephania snapped back. “I can take anything I want from you, including your life. Remember that, in what follows: if it weren’t for this war, I would have shown you mercy, and just killed you.”

It sounded as though Stephania had as strange an idea about mercy as about everything else in the world.

“What happened to you?” Ceres asked her. “What made you into this?”

Stephania smiled at that. “I saw the world as it was. And now, I think, the world will see you as you are. I can’t kill you, so I’ll destroy the symbol you made yourself into. You’re going to fight for me, Ceres. Again and again, without the strength that made

people think you were so special. In between, we'll find ways to make it worse."

That didn't sound so different from anything Lucious or the royals had tried to do.

"You're not going to break me," Ceres promised her. "I'm not going to collapse and beg just for your entertainment, or your petty revenge, or whatever else you want to call it."

"You will," Stephania promised her in return. "You're going to kneel before the First Stone of Felldust and beg to be his slave. I'll make sure of it."

CHAPTER SIX

Felene had stolen plenty of boats in her time, and she was pleased to find this one was one of the better ones. It wasn't much more than a skiff, but it sailed beautifully, seeming to respond as quick as thought, feeling like an extension of herself.

"It would need more holes in it for that," Felene said, moving to bail out water that had washed over the side. Even doing that hurt, and as for the times when she had to row because the wind had dropped...

Felene winced just thinking about that.

She tested the wound gingerly, moving her arm in every direction to stretch the muscles of her back. There were some movements where it almost seemed as though she could ignore its presence, but there were others —

"Depths take you!" Felene swore as pain flashed through her, white hot.

The worst part was that every flash of pain brought with it memories of being stabbed. Of looking into Elethe's eyes while Stephania stabbed her from behind. Every physical pain brought with it the agony of betrayal as well. She'd dared to think...

"What," Felene demanded. "That you might finally end up happy? That you'd float off with a princess and some lovely girl, and the world would just leave you alone?"

It was stupid thinking. The world didn't offer the happy

endings you got in singers' tales. Certainly not for a thief like her. No matter what happened, there would always be something else to steal, whether it was a jewel, or a slice of the map, or the heart of some girl who would then turn out to...

"Stop it," Felene told herself, but that was harder than it looked. Some wounds didn't just heal over.

Not that her physical one had, yet. She'd stitched it as best she could on the beach, but Felene was starting to worry about the puncture Stephania's knife had left in her back. She lifted her shirt high enough to douse it with sea water, gritting her teeth against the pain as she washed it clean.

Felene had been wounded before, and this felt like a bad one. She'd seen wounds like this among others, and generally it hadn't ended well. There had been that climbing guide who had found himself mauled by an ice leopard's claws when Felene had been trying to steal from one of the dead temples. There had been the slave girl Felene had rescued on a whim after her master had whipped her bloody, only to watch her waste and die. There had been that gambler who had insisted on staying at the table, even after he'd gashed his hand on a broken shard of glass.

The sensible thing to do right now, Felene knew, was to head back the way she had come, seek out a healer, and rest for as long as it took to get back to everything she had been. Of course, by that point, the invasion would probably be over, and everyone involved would be scattered to the wind, but Felene would be all right again, free to go off wherever she wanted.

It shouldn't make any difference to her how the invasion turned out, after all. She was a thief. There would always be things to steal, and there would always be those who wanted to hunt her down. There would probably even be more in the aftermath of a war, when things tended to get a little less tightly controlled, and there were always gaps for someone cunning enough to slip through.

She could go back to Felldust, rest up, and then find some fresh adventure to set out on. She could go off in search of long-lost islands, or head into the lands where ice closed over everything like a fist. There might be treasure and violence, women and drink. All the things that had tended to mix together so readily in her life to date.

What made her keep the small boat's tiller pointed toward Delos was simple: it was where Stephania and Elethe would be. Stephania had tricked her about Thanos. She'd used her to get to Felldust, and then she'd tried to kill her. More than that, she'd tried to kill Thanos, even if the rumors around Felldust suggested that he had at least survived through to the rebellion's capture of the city.

Felene found that she couldn't let what Stephania had done go. Felene had left plenty of enemies behind her when she sailed on, but she didn't like to leave unsettled debts. She'd fought a duel in Oakford once over an insult a year before, and once hunted down a locksmith who had tried to cut her out of her share, following him across half the Grasslands.

Stephania was going to die for what she'd done. As for Elethe...

In a lot of ways, that betrayal was worse. Stephania was a snake, and Felene had known it from the moment she set foot on the boat. Elethe had actually dared to make her feel something. For one of the first times in her life, Felene had dared to think beyond the next theft, and had started to dream.

"And what a dream," Felene said to herself. "Traveling the world, rescuing beautiful princesses and seducing fair maidens. Who do you think you are? Some kind of hero?"

It sounded more like the kind of thing Thanos might have done than something for the likes of her.

"My life would be so much easier if I hadn't met you, Prince Thanos," Felene said. She jerked on one of the lines for her boat, setting it skimming in a new direction.

She didn't mean it though. The main thing her life would have been if she hadn't met Thanos was shorter. She would have died on the Isle of Prisoners without him, and after that...

He was a man who seemed to have a cause. Who stood for something, even if it had taken Felene to remind him of what that was. He was a man who had been prepared to fight against everything he'd been brought up to be. He'd fought the Empire, even though it would have been easier for him not to do it. He'd been prepared to give his life to save the likes of Stephania, which was truly the kind of thing a hero did.

"I suppose if I had any sense, I'd be falling in love with you,"

Felene said as she thought about the prince. He was certainly a better person to fall for than the likes of Elethe. But you didn't get what you wanted in this life. You certainly didn't get to choose when it came to love.

It was enough that Thanos was a man to respect, even admire. It was enough that just thinking about the kind of thing he would do made Felene into a better person.

"If not necessarily a more sensible one."

Felene sighed. There was no point in all this trying to argue with herself. She knew what she was going to do.

She was going to Delos. She would find Thanos if by any stroke of luck he was still alive. She would find Stephania, she would find Elethe, and there would be blood for blood, death for death. Probably, Thanos would have argued for something kinder or more civilized, but there was only so far you could go in emulating people. Even princes.

Now, there was just the question of getting to Delos and getting inside. By the time she got there, Felene had no doubt that it would be a city at war, if it hadn't fallen outright. Felldust's fleet would probably be a floating barricade before the city, and it was a long established tactic in times of war to blockade ports.

Not that Felene cared about that kind of thing. She'd occasionally made quite a healthy profit from smuggling her way around blockades. Food, information, people who wanted to get out, it had all been the same.

Still, Felene couldn't imagine that Felldust's soldiers would be

very welcoming to her if she were stupid enough to just charge for the city. Already, Felene could see fragments of Felldust's fleet ahead of her, vessels strung out across the water from Felldust to the Empire like jet beads on a necklace. The main fleet had long since sailed, but they were going in clusters now, forming groups of three or four, setting off together as they tried to make the most of the invasion to come.

In a lot of ways, they were probably the sensible ones. Felene had always had more of an affinity for the people who came up after a fight to steal than for the ones risking their lives. They were the ones who understood about looking out for themselves. They were Felene's people.

An idea came to her then, and Felene steered her skiff in the direction of one of the groups. With her better arm, she pulled out a knife.

"Hoy there!" she called in her best Felldust dialect.

A man appeared over the railings, holding a bow aimed at her. "Think we'll take all you – "

He gurgled as Felene threw the blade, cutting him off mid-sentence. He tumbled from the boat, hitting the water with a splash.

"He was one of my best men," a man's voice said.

Felene laughed. "I doubt that, or you wouldn't have made him the one to lean out and see if I was a threat. You the captain here?"

"I am," he called back.

That was good. Felene didn't have time to waste negotiating with those who weren't in a position to do it.

"You all off to Delos?" she demanded.

"Where else would we be going?" the captain called back. "You think we're out catching fish?"

Felene thought of some of the sharks that had hunted her on the way in to the shore. She thought of the body tumbling among them now. "Might be. There's bait in the water, and there are some big prizes in these parts."

"And some bigger ones in Delos," the voice called back. "You looking to join our convoy?"

Felene made herself shrug as if she couldn't care either way. "I figure an extra sword is good for you."

"And an extra fifty is good for you. But it looks as though you can fight. You don't slow us down, and you eat your own supplies. Fair enough?"

More than fair, since Felene had found her way into Delos. However careful the cordon around the city, Felldust's fleet wouldn't look twice at her when she was a part of it.

"Fair enough," she called back. "Just so long as you don't slow *me* down!"

"Eager for gold. I like that."

They could like what they wanted, so long as they left Felene be. Let them think that she was there for gold. The only thing that mattered was —

The coughing fit caught Felene by surprise, almost doubling

her up with the force of it. It ripped through her, her lungs feeling as though they were on fire. She put a hand to her mouth, and it came away wet with blood.

“Are you all right down there?” the captain of the Felldust ship called, in a voice of clear suspicion. “Is that blood? You’re not carrying some plague, are you?”

Felene had no doubt that he would make her travel alone if he thought she did. That, or fire her ship just to be certain that no disease got close.

“Got gut punched in a fight on the docks,” she lied, wiping her hand on the railing. “It’s no big deal.”

“If you’re coughing blood, it sounds bad enough,” the captain called back. “You should go off and find a healer. Can’t spend gold if you’re dead.”

It was probably good advice, but then, Felene had never been one to listen to such things. Especially not when she had better things to do. If it had been just gold on the line, she might have done exactly what the man suggested.

“So they say,” Felene joked. “Me, I say they’re not trying hard enough.”

She let the other ship’s captain laugh. She had better things to do.

It was time to kill Stephania and Elethe.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Every day, the convoy of former conscripts made its way around the countryside surrounding Delos, and every day, Sartes found himself staring at Leyana, trying to find a way to tell her how he felt having her around.

Every day, Sartes spent time trying to put it into words, thinking of the things someone more eloquent might have come up with. What would Thanos have said, or Akila, or... or anyone else who was half in love and didn't know what to do next?

He spent his time caught between thinking about Leyana and thinking of the things he ought to be doing. They went from village to village, passing out what supplies they had, giving back conscripts who had been taken from their homes, and reassuring people as best they could that the rebellion would not be another set of tyrants.

Every day, he tried to compose something to say, and every day, he found himself getting to the point of making camp without having done it.

"Are you all right?" Leyana asked with a smile. She'd taken to riding on the same wagon as Sartes, and Sartes had to admit that he liked that. When they made camp every night, her tent was never far away from his. Sartes liked that too. He found himself grateful that if they were to be attacked, he would be able to rush out and save her.

He found himself half hoping that someone would attack so that he could.

Was this what being in love felt like? Sartes didn't know. He didn't have enough experience with girls to know for sure, and it wasn't as though he could just ask someone, because he was supposed to be the leader, and he'd learned from watching Anka that leaders couldn't afford to be that uncertain in public. He had to be strong, so that they could keep doing what Ceres had sent him to do.

He wished that Anka were there to talk to, rather than dead. He wished that Ceres were there too. Maybe his big sister would have been able to give him some advice. Maybe she could have told him how she knew what she felt about Thanos.

They traveled down through a village, handing out food. As seemed to happen in almost every village now, people started to appear the moment it was clear that the conscripts weren't there to attack them. Far too many looked painfully thin, starving after Lucious had burned the countryside.

There were more of them now. Sartes had seen the lines of refugees, some carrying everything they owned. Twice now, his conscripts had come across thieves or bandits trying to rob them. Twice, Sartes and the others had driven them off.

He hoped it would be that simple with the invasion. Every group of refugees they passed brought rumors with them, talking about the great fleet that was coming, the battles that were raging on the open water around the city as Akila's fleet tried to slow

the invasion.

A part of him wanted to rush back right then and help, but Sartes had to trust that his sister knew what she was doing. If Ceres had a role for him in the defense of the city, she would send a messenger. Until she did, the best thing Sartes could do was keep going, trying to make the countryside safer.

The next time they stopped, though, he took his sword from his belt, holding it up for everyone there to see.

“This is coming,” he called out to the refugees. “You’re running from it, but you won’t be able to run forever. The invasion will spread beyond the city, so you might as well learn how to protect yourselves. Grab whatever weapons you can find. You’re going to learn how to use them.”

He hoped that he sounded enough like a leader for them to believe it. Plenty of them grabbed what they could: knives and hatchets, hoes, and even the occasional sword. Sartes tried to remember what he could of the lessons they’d forced into him in the army.

“You need to stand together if soldiers come,” Sartes said, moving around the group of them. “You can’t just look after yourself; you look after the people next to you as well. No, hold it lightly, or you won’t be able to put the blade where you want. Stay in line. If you go off alone, you’ll be surrounded by anyone who attacks.”

To his surprise, he found Leyana at the end of the line, holding a knife as long as her forearm.

"I want to learn how to fight," she said. "The next time men come, I might not be able to hide."

"I won't let anything happen to you," Sartes promised.

She smiled at that. "That's sweet, but what if you aren't there?"

Sartes couldn't imagine not being there, because that would mean leaving Leyana's side.

"I'll be there," he promised. He realized what he was saying. "That is... I mean... if you want me to be."

"I want you to be," Leyana replied. "But if you're protecting me, it's only right that I should protect you, isn't it?"

That was a fair point, and Leyana seemed to get the basics of using the weapon quickly. Even so, Sartes hoped that she wouldn't have to fight anytime soon. He couldn't stand the thought of her potentially being hurt, and any fight came with risks.

To Sartes's surprise, when they left, a couple of men walked along with the wagons. Sartes frowned at that.

"They want to help fight the invasion," Leyana said beside him. "You said it yourself: we have to stand together."

"That wasn't what I meant," Sartes said.

Sometimes, though, it didn't matter what you were trying to do. It mattered what you did. Sartes just hoped that everything he did would prove to be enough.

They moved on, heading for the next village. There always seemed to be another village. When they finally stopped for the night, Sartes wandered from the road a little way. He spun at the sound of footsteps behind him, padding across the meadow grass, his hand already going to his sword.

He relaxed when he saw it was Leyana, although her presence brought nerves of a very different kind.

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