

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is seen from behind, standing in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. She is wearing a long, flowing white dress with long sleeves and a lace-up back. Her arms are outstretched, and she is holding the edges of her dress, which is billowing out around her. The background is a dramatic sky with dark, heavy clouds and a bright, low sun that creates a strong lens flare and illuminates the scene with a warm, golden light. The overall mood is one of hope, freedom, and triumph.

MORGAN RICE

VICTOR,
VANQUISHED,
SON

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 8

Морган Райс
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Аннотация

While Ceres battles in a mystical land to regain her lost powers—and to save her very life—Thanos, Akila, Lord West and the others dig in on the Isle of Haylon for their final stand against the might of Felldust's fleet. Jeva tries to rally her Bone Folk to come to Thanos' aid and join in the battle for Haylon.

An epic battle follows in wave after wave, and they all have limited time to hang on if Ceres does not return.

Stephania sails to Felldust to woo the Second Stone and lead him back to Delos, to reclaim the kingdom that was once hers. But in this new world of brutality, all may not go as she had planned.

Irrien, fresh from his victory in the North, gathers all the strength of the Felldust fleet to lead a final, crushing attack on Haylon. He also brings a surprise weapon—a monster of unfathomable power—to ensure Ceres is wiped out for good.

Meanwhile, the sorcerer Daskalos dispatches his ultimate weapon—Thanos and Stephania's son—on a mission to kill his father.

In the finale of the series, the most epic battle scene of all ensues, with the fate of the world hanging in the balance. Will Ceres live? Will Thanos? What will become of his son? Will freedom ever rise again? And will Ceres and Thanos finally find true love?

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MORGAN RICE VICTOR, VANQUISHED, SON

Morgan Rice

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– *Publishers Weekly*

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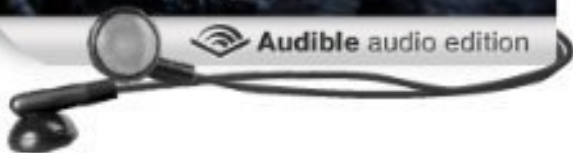
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CHAPTER ONE

Thanos ducked as an arrow flashed past him, hearing it ping from the stone walls of one of Haylon's houses. He hurried back through the streets, reached a junction, and spun, sword in hand.

A half dozen of Lord West's former men came in from one side, former Empire soldiers came in from the other, while the native soldiers of the island poured out of the surrounding houses. They caught the pursuing soldiers of Felldust between them, and Thanos charged.

Thanos thrust his sword over one man's shield, spun to parry a blow aimed at a man beside him, and kicked back a third soldier while Sir Justin stepped into the gap and killed another man.

"You're getting into the habit of saving me," Thanos said in a momentary lull in the fight.

"Just keep fighting and we'll call it even," Justin replied.

Thanos could do that part, at least. He caught an axe on his sword, holding it wide so that one of the Empire soldiers could stab into the space, then took the axe in his off hand.

There were more enemies coming now, pouring into the space as the invaders realized that there was a knot of defenders there. That meant that it was time to melt away again.

"Pull back!" he yelled, and the men around him ran into one of the houses, cutting through into another street. Thanos ran, and he found General Haven running along beside him, the old

man's face red with effort.

"Shouldn't you find a less... energetic place to fight, General?" Thanos asked.

Haven glowered back at him. "Don't tell me what to do, young man! You are not my prince!"

Despite his complaints, the old general seemed happy to fight beside Thanos and Justin as they fought their way up a set of stone steps and over one of the roofs in the city. It was impossible to tell which soldiers had come from which places; Thanos could only see that the men defending the island were doing so with bravery and tenacity.

From there, though, he could see the size of the fleet attacking the island. It wasn't the huge invasion fleet that had come to Delos, but it was still massive. It covered the space around the harbor like a dark stain on the water, jamming it with ships that were even now disgorging more and more soldiers onto Haylon's soil.

The only hope was to hit and run, drawing out pockets of attackers and then swarming them with greater numbers before fleeing deeper into the city. The native warriors of Haylon seemed to be more than used to such tactics, but Thanos found himself quite surprised by how well the former Empire's soldiers employed them. Probably it had something to do with the time they'd spent being hunted in the hills of the island.

"This way," Haven said, and Thanos followed the general on the basis that he probably knew the island the best of all those

there. Thanos found himself wishing that Akila or Iakos were there, but the deputy leader was dead, and Akila was too severely injured for such running tactics.

Thanos saw a set of streets that he recognized and gestured to the general.

“Here,” he called. “The alleys.”

To his surprise, they followed him. They ran down a set of narrow alleyways and turned again. Some of Sir Justin’s men looked as though they wanted to charge back at the enemy, but Thanos put his arm out to stop them.

“Wait for them,” Thanos said. “We can defend better at this end, and... well, watch.”

They might not know him yet, but even so, the men held their place. Felldust’s soldiers charged, and that was when the waiting islanders pushed in the walls on either side, showering them with rubble.

“Iakos trapped half the city,” Thanos explained. He was breathing hard now, and wished that they could pause just for a moment, but in a battle like this one, there was no time. “Come on, we need to keep moving.”

They gave more ground, this time picking their way among tripwires and deadfalls.

“This is a dirty way to fight,” Sir Justin said.

Thanos put a hand on his shoulder. He could see what the other man was going through. Lord West’s former man was probably used to sweeping charges and carefully organized duels,

not fights in alleyways and running away.

“We’re doing what we have to do to win,” he said. Thanos could still remember when he’d fought so carefully that he hadn’t killed his opponents, and he’d fought with honor. Those times seemed a long time ago now. “We’re keeping our families and friends safe. We’re saving the people of Haylon, and the Empire.”

He saw the warriors nod, and then they were away among the houses again, running in front of the advancing forces.

That was the worrying part in all of this. They were giving up ground with every encounter, unable to stand and fight in the face of so many opponents. Even when Thanos spun again, knocking aside a spear so that he could thrust his sword deep into its wielder, it was only so that he could set off running again, pulling back to the next position among the houses, and the next.

It seemed less like fighting to win than simply to hold off defeat for as long as possible.

Thanos was behind a barricade deeper in the city when a messenger came running up, bursting out of a nearby doorway. Thanos almost skewered him on instinct, but managed to pull back in time.

“Akila says that it’s time for the last people to pull back from the city. One of the beaches on the far side of the island has fallen, and we need everyone to reinforce the passes.”

Thanos nodded, trying to hide his disappointment at those words. He’d known that this was inevitable ever since Felldust’s forces had torn open the harbor gates, but he’d dared to hope

that it was because they'd committed everything to that attack. If they were able to take beaches across the island as well, things were worse than he'd thought.

"Pull back to the hills!" he yelled, and the men around him looked surprised for a moment, before taking off through the city in the direction of the mountain passes. General Haven's men did it as quickly as the men from Haylon, obviously having come to know the mountains over their time fighting there. Lord West's former men followed along, obviously taking their lead from Thanos. He just hoped that he wasn't leading them to their deaths.

They reached the rock walls and passes on the edge of the city. There were men there waiting with sledgehammers by great wooden wedges. Thanos guessed that when they drove them in, the rock walls around would come down, forming a natural wall. Thanos also guessed that unless they'd judged it very well, the men were risking being buried when the rocks came down. They were giving their lives to slow the advance.

Thanos couldn't let them do it alone.

He grabbed one of the hammers, ignoring the man's look of shock as he watched the troops with him filter through the gap. More of Haylon's warriors came, and more still, but now Thanos could see Felldust's men following close behind.

He found himself thinking of Ceres then. He hoped that she was doing better in her search than they were doing on the island. He'd wanted so much with her, and if he died here, that could

never happen, but he couldn't stand by and let these men do this alone.

"We need to do it," one of the men there said.

Thanos shook his head. "Not yet. There are still men to come."

"But if Felldust's men get through..."

"Not *yet*," Thanos repeated.

The warriors kept coming, and Thanos let through as many of his own people as he could. When the first of Felldust's warriors came at him, Thanos parried the blow with the haft of his sledgehammer, then struck back, feeling ribs give way under the strike. Another came forward, and Haven was there, cutting the man down.

"This is not the place for you, my prince," he said.

"I thought you said I wasn't your prince," Thanos pointed out.

He heard the other man sigh. "You're not, but you're right. I came to this island to be a butcher. Time to be something more."

He nodded, and Thanos felt strong hands closing over his arms. A pair of the Empire's soldiers pulled him back, while Haven took up the hammer Thanos had held.

"Haven, don't do this," Thanos said.

It was too late though. The old general was already swinging the hammer, alongside the few chosen men of Haylon. He swung it with all the strength of a much younger man, blows striking home on the wedge as above him, the rocks creaked.

When they gave way, it was like thunder, the whole world seeming to disappear under the falling rain of rocks. General

Haven disappeared under that avalanche, leaving nothing but a solid wall of boulders.

Thanos stared at the pile in awe.

Even so, he knew it had only bought them a little time.

Haylon was lost.

He only hoped that things were easier for Ceres.

CHAPTER TWO

Ceres looked up from the pit, to the ring of half-dead sorcerers who surrounded it, and she tried to hide her fear. She managed to summon defiance as she watched them gather, clutching the hilts of her twin swords, waiting for them. She would not let them see her scared down here.

“You could have freed us,” their leader said in a voice like old paper.

“Freed you to destroy things,” Ceres called back. “Never.”

“Then we’ll take your blood, and be what we were for a while at least.”

Ceres stood there, waiting for them. Which of them would attack first? Would they just fire their magic down into the pit and destroy her? No, they couldn’t, could they? Not when they needed her blood. An idea came to her then. A way she might actually get out of this pit. It would be dangerous though. Very dangerous.

“Do you think I’m scared of you?” Ceres demanded. “I’ve fought in pits before. Come on, all of you.”

This wouldn’t work unless they all came at her. Even so, it was terrifying as they dropped in silence, landing on the hard stone of the pit and hurrying forward to attack her.

Ceres cut and moved. There was so little room in the pit to fight that the danger was that she would be swarmed. She cut

off a hand that grabbed at her, ducked under the swipe of claws aimed at her throat. She felt the scrape of a hand on her side and kicked out, knocking one of the sorcerers back.

They weren't as strong as they had been. Ceres guessed that they'd used more power than they wanted, throwing magic after her. She kept cutting, kept dodging within the pit while she waited for the moment when some of them would line up the way she wanted.

Ceres saw it, and she didn't hesitate. She might not have the superior strength and speed that came from her blood, but she was still fast and strong enough for this. She cut one down to its knees in front of her, threw her swords out of the pit, and then used the sorcerer's back as a springboard as it was still recovering. She leapt up onto the shoulders of the next enemy and then jumped with all she had for the lip of the pit. If she got this wrong, she had just thrown away the only weapons she had to protect herself.

She slammed against the rock of the pit's wall, her hands catching on the lip as she struggled to pull herself up. Ceres felt something grabbing at her leg, and kicked back on instinct, feeling the crunch of bone as she connected with a sorcerer's skull. That push was all she needed to set her climbing, and quickly, Ceres pulled herself up over the rim of the pit she'd fallen into.

She snatched up her blades and stood as the sorcerers shrieked their anger.

“We will follow!” they promised.

One roared in anger then, throwing magic her way. Ceres dodged aside, but it was as if that was the signal for the others to strike as well. Flames and lightning followed her as she ran from the room that contained the pit, and around her, Ceres heard the walls rumbling. Small rocks started to fall, then bigger ones.

Ceres ran on desperately, while rocks fell around her, ricocheting as they struck the floor and rolling in the case of the bigger pieces. She flung herself forward, and stood to find that the tunnel behind her was now blocked.

Would it stop the former sorcerers? Probably not forever. If they couldn’t die, then they would eventually be able to break through, but that wasn’t the same thing as being able to chase after Ceres now. For now, at least, she was safe.

She continued through the tunnels, not knowing which way to go, but trusting to instinct in the soft glow of the cave light. Ahead, Ceres could see it opening out into a broader cavern with stalactites hanging down from the ceiling. There was also the sound of water there, and Ceres was surprised to see a broad stream running through the middle of it.

More than that, there was a small landing post with a flat-bottomed boat tied to it. Ceres guessed that the boat had been there for more years than she wanted to think about, but somehow it still looked strong. Downstream, Ceres could see a light that wasn’t present in the rest of the caves, and somehow she knew it would be what she needed to head toward.

She got in the boat, untying it and letting the current carry it along. The water lapped at the side of the small vessel, and Ceres could feel anticipation building in her as it went forward. On another occasion, she might have been worried by a current such as this one, thinking that it might lead to a weir, or worse, to a waterfall. Now, however, it felt as though the current was a deliberate thing, designed to carry her to her goal.

The boat passed through a tunnel narrow enough that Ceres could have touched the walls on either side. There was light ahead, bright after the half-light of the caves. The tunnel gave way to a space that was not rock, not stone. Instead, in a space where there should have been just another cavern, Ceres found herself floating through a patch of idyllic countryside.

Ceres recognized the work of the Ancient Ones instantly. Only they might have done something like this. Perhaps the sorcerers might have found the power for an illusion, but this felt real; it even smelled of fresh grass and dew drops. The boat bumped against the bank and Ceres saw a wide meadow ahead, filled with wildflowers whose scent was sweet and delicate. Some of them seemed to move with her as she passed, and Ceres felt the brush of thorns against her leg, drawing blood in a sharp sting of pain.

They pulled back after that, though. Apparently, whatever defenses were there, they weren't meant to keep *her* out.

It took Ceres a moment to realize that there were two strange things about the place she was walking through. Well, stranger

than a patch of countryside in the middle of a cavern complex was in the first place.

One strange thing was the way the visions of the past seemed to have stopped. In the caverns above, they had flickered in and out of existence, showing the final attack by the Ancient Ones on the sorcerers' home. Here, the world didn't seem to be caught halfway between two points. Here, it was as peaceful as it was fixed, without the constant shifts that the rest of the place experienced.

The second strange thing was the dome of light that rose up in the heart of it all, shining golden against the greenery of the rest of it. It was the size of a large house, or the tent of some nomad lord, yet it seemed to be composed almost entirely of energy. Looking at it, she thought at first the dome might have been a shield or a wall, but somehow Ceres knew it was more than that. It was a living place, a home.

It was also, she guessed, the place where whatever she sought might be found. For almost the first time since she'd set foot in the sorcerers' home, Ceres dared to feel a flicker of hope. Perhaps this was the place where she would recover her powers.

Perhaps she would be able to help save Haylon after all.

CHAPTER THREE

As she sailed in the direction of Felldust's Bone Coast, Jeva suffered the strangest sensation of her life: she worried that she was going to die.

It was a new sensation for her. It wasn't something that her people were used to experiencing. It certainly wasn't something that she'd ever wanted. It probably amounted to a kind of heresy, floating along, seeing the possibility of joining with the waiting dead and actually *worrying* about it. Her kind embraced death, even welcomed it as a chance to finally be one with the great wash of their ancestors. They did not fear the risk of it.

Yet that was exactly what Jeva was feeling now, as she saw the faint line of Felldust's shore appearing on the horizon. She feared the thought of being cut down for what she had to say. She feared being sent to join those ancestors, rather than being able to help on Haylon. She wondered what had changed.

The answer to that was easy enough: Thanos.

Jeva found herself thinking of him as she sailed toward land, watching the seabirds that gathered in floating flocks as they waited for their next chance at food. Before she had met him, she had been... well, perhaps not the same as all her people, because most of them didn't feel the need to wander all the way to Port Leeward and beyond. Even so, she had felt the same as them, *been* the same as them. She certainly didn't feel fear.

It wasn't fear for herself, exactly, although she knew perfectly well that her own life was at stake. She was more worried about what would happen to those left on Haylon if she didn't make it back; to Thanos.

That was another kind of heresy. The living didn't matter except as far as they were useful to fulfill the wishes of the dead. If a whole island of people died at the hands of an invader, that was a glorious honor for them, not something to treat as an impending disaster. All that mattered in life was fulfilling the wishes of the dead and achieving an end for oneself that was suitably glorious. The speakers of the dead had made that clear. Jeva had even heard the whispers of the dead herself, when the smoke rose from the seeing pyres.

She sailed on, ignoring that, feeling the pull of the waves against the tiller as she kept her small boat on course for her home. Now she found herself hearing other voices, arguing for compassion, for saving Haylon, for helping Thanos.

She had seen him risk his own life to help others for no good reason that Jeva could see. When she had been tied to a Felldust ship like a figurehead, waiting to be flayed, he had come to rescue her. When they had fought side by side, his shield had been her shield in a way never seen with her people.

She had seen in Thanos something to admire. Maybe more than admire. She had seen someone who was in the world to do the best that they could there, not just to find the most perfect way of exiting it. The new voices Jeva was hearing told her that

this was the way she ought to live, and that going to help Haylon was a part of it.

The trouble was that Jeva knew these only came from within herself. She shouldn't have been listening to them so strongly. Her people certainly wouldn't.

"What's left of them," Jeva said, the wind carrying her words away.

Her tribe's village was gone. Now she was going to go to another gathering place and ask another clutch of her people for their lives. Jeva looked up at the way the wind billowed the small sail of her boat, out at the play of foam over the ocean; anything to keep from thinking about what she would have to do to make that happen. Even so, the words came up, as inescapable as the end of life.

She would have to claim to speak for the dead.

It had taken the words of the dead to get them to Delos, although Jeva and Thanos had not claimed to speak for them with that. But Jeva couldn't just leave this to the speakers with this. There was too much of a chance that they would say no, and then what would happen?

The death of her friend. She couldn't allow that. Even if it meant doing the unthinkable.

Jeva guided her boat closer to shore, working her way in between the rocks and the wrecks that had foundered on them. This wasn't the beach nearest her old home, but a place a little further along the coast, in another of the great gathering places.

They had still managed to pick the wrecks clean, though. Jeva smiled at that, taking a little pride in it.

Boats came out onto the water to meet her. Mostly, these were light things, canoes with outriggers, designed to intercept what was obviously not one of the Bone Folk's craft. If Jeva had not obviously been one of them, she might have found herself fighting for her life then. Instead, they crowded around, laughing and joking the way they never did around strangers.

"A beautiful boat, sister. How many men did you kill for it?"

"Kill?" another said. "They probably went to the dead at the sight of her from fear!"

"They'd go to the dead at the sight of your ugliness," Jeva shot back, and the men laughed with her. It was how things were done here.

How things were done mattered. Her people might seem strange to outsiders, but they had their own rules, their own standards of behavior. Now, Jeva was going to go to them, and if she claimed to speak for the dead, then she would be breaking the most fundamental of those rules. She could be cut off from the communion of the dead for breaking it, slain without her ashes being mingled with the pyres to be consumed.

She brought her boat in to the shoreline, jumping from it and pulling it up onto the beach. There were more of her folk waiting there. A girl ran to her with a funerary urn, offering her a pinch of the village's ashes. Jeva took it, tasting it. Symbolically, she was one of the village now, a part of their communion with their

ancestors.

“Welcome, priestess,” one of the men on the beach said. He was an old man with papery skin, but he still deferred to Jeva because of the markings that proclaimed she had undergone the rites. “What brings a speaker of the dead to our shores?”

Jeva stood there, considering her answer. It would have been so easy then to claim that she spoke for those who were gone. She had seen her share of visions; when she’d been a girl, there were those who had thought that she would be a great speaker for the dead. One of the older speakers had proclaimed as much, saying that she would speak words that would shake her whole people.

If she claimed that the dead had called her there, and required her people to fight for Haylon, they might believe it without argument. They might obey her borrowed authority as they obeyed so little else.

If she did, she might actually be able to save Haylon. There might be a chance that her people would be enough to break the attack by Felldust’s fleet. They might be able to buy the defenders time, at least. If she lied.

Jeva couldn’t do it though. It wasn’t just the lie at the heart of it, although the fact that she was considering it horrified her. It wasn’t even the fact that it went against everything her people felt about the world. No, it was the fact that Thanos wouldn’t have wanted her to do it that way. He wouldn’t have wanted her to trick people to their deaths, or to force them to face up to the might of Felldust without knowing the truth of why they were going.

“Priestess?” the old man asked. “Are you here to speak for the dead?”

What would he do then? Jeva already had an answer to that, forged from the last time he’d been to her folk’s lands. Forged from everything he’d done since.

“No,” she said. “I am not here to speak for the dead. I am Jeva, and today I wish to speak for the living.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Irrien walked the fields of the dead, looking around at the slaughter his armies had wrought without any of the satisfaction that normally came from doing it. Around him, the men of the North lay dead or dying, crushed by his armies, slaughtered by his hunters. Irrien should have felt triumph in that moment. He should have felt joy in the scale of it, or power at seeing his enemies slain.

Instead, he felt as though he had been robbed of true victory.

A man in the shining armor of his foes groaned in the mud, trying to cling to life despite the wounds that had been torn in him. Irrien lifted a spear from another nearby corpse and thrust it through him. Even killing a weakling like that did nothing to lift his mood.

The truth was that it had been too easy. There had been too few enemies there to make this a fight worth having. They had raged across the North, cutting through the villages and the small castles, ripping through even Lord West's former fortress. In each place, they'd found empty dwellings and emptier castles, rooms people had abandoned in time to escape from the horde that had been descending on them.

That wasn't just frustrating because it meant that he couldn't have the meaningful victories he'd planned on. It was frustrating because it meant that his enemies were still out there. Irrien knew

where, too, because the coward who'd stayed behind in Lord West's castle had told him: they were on Haylon, reinforcing the island he'd only sent part of his forces to conquer.

That made every moment Irrien spent here feel as though he was chafing at the bit. Yet there were things that needed to be done here. He looked around to watch as his men worked alongside gangs of freshly taken slaves to tear down one of the castles that seemed to spring up here like mushrooms after rain. Irrien wouldn't leave such things unoccupied behind him, because that would mean giving his foes a place to gather.

More than that, his men seemed satisfied enough with the easy victory. Irrien could see the ones who hadn't been assigned to work gangs lazing in the sun, gambling with looted coins or tormenting prisoners they'd snatched for their amusement.

The usual hangers-on were there, of course. Someone had set up a slavers' camp at the edge of the army like its shadow, with its carts and its cages quickly filling up. There was a clear space in the middle where the slavers haggled over the best and the most beautiful, although the truth was that they took what the soldiers were prepared to sell them. The men there were scavengers, not warriors in their own right.

Then there were the death priests. They had set up their altar in the middle of the battlefield, as they so often did. Now, soldiers were bringing them the wounded enemies they found, dragging them over to the stone slab to have their throats cut or their hearts cut out. Their blood ran, and Irrien imagined that the priests' gods

were probably pleased by the whole thing. Certainly, the priests seemed to think so, exhorting the faithful to submit themselves completely to death, as it was the only way to earn its favor.

One man actually seemed to take them seriously. He'd obviously suffered wounds in the battle, ones serious enough that he needed his comrades' help to get to the slab. Irrien watched as he clambered up on top of it, exposing his chest so that the priests could stab into it with a knife of dark obsidian.

Irrien spat at the weakness of a man who would not fight his way back from his injuries. After all, Irrien was not letting his old wounds slow him, was he? His shoulder hurt with every movement, but he was not offering himself as a sacrifice to keep death at bay for others. In his experience, the only thing that kept death at bay was being the stronger of two warriors. Strength meant that you got to live. Strength meant that you could take what you wanted, be it a man's lands, or life, or women.

Briefly, Irrien wondered what the priests' gods of death would think of him. He didn't worship them except for the effect it had in bringing his men together. He wasn't even sure if such things existed, except as a way for priests who couldn't control men with their own strength to have power.

He imagined such things counted against him with any gods there were, yet hadn't Irrien sent more men, women, and children to their graves than anyone? Hadn't he given them their sacrifices, promoted their priesthood, and made this into a world they would approve of? Irrien might not have done it *for* them,

but he had done it, nonetheless.

He stood and listened for a moment to the priest speaking.

“Brothers! Sisters! Today is a great victory. Today, we have sent many through the black door to the world beyond. Today, we have sated the gods, so that we are not chosen by them tomorrow. Today’s victory—”

“It was not a victory,” Irrien said, and his voice carried effortlessly over that of the priest. “For there to be a victory, there must be a fight worth having. Is taking empty homes a victory? Is slaughtering fools who stayed behind when others had the sense to run?” Irrien looked around at them. “We have killed today, and that is good, but there is far more to be done. Today, we will finish things here. We will tear down their castles and give their families to the slavers. Tomorrow, though, we will go to the place where there *is* a victory to be won. To the place all their warriors have gone ahead of us. We will go to Haylon!”

He heard his men cheer at that, their lust for battle reignited by the killing. He turned to the priest there.

“What do you say? Is it the will of the gods?”

The priest didn’t hesitate. He took his knife and sliced open the dead man on the altar, pulling out his entrails to read them.

“It is, Lord Irrien. Their will follows yours in this! Irrien! Ir-ri-en!”

“Ir-ri-en!” the soldiers chanted.

The man knew his place, then. Irrien smiled and set off into the crowd. He wasn’t surprised when a robed figure slipped into

the space beside him, matching his step. Irrien drew a dagger, not knowing if he would need it.

“You have been quiet since we last talked, N’cho,” Irrien said. “I do not like to be kept waiting.”

The assassin bowed his head. “I have been researching what you required of me, First Stone, asking my fellow priests, reading forbidden scrolls, torturing those who would not speak.”

Irrien was sure that the leader of the Dozen Deaths had enjoyed himself immensely. Of all of them, N’cho had been the only one to survive attacking him. Irrien was starting to wonder if that had been the right choice to make.

“You heard what I told the men,” Irrien said. “We are going to Haylon. That means going up against the child of the Ancient Ones. Do you have a solution for me, or should I drag you back to be the next sacrifice?”

He saw the other man shake his head. “Alas, the gods are not so eager to meet me, First Stone.”

Irrien narrowed his eyes. “Meaning?”

N’cho stepped back. “I believe that I have found what you require.”

Irrien gestured for the other man to go with him, leading the way back to his tent. At a look from him, the guards and the slaves there left in a hurry, leaving the two of them alone.

“What have you found?” Irrien asked.

“There were... creatures employed in the war against the Ancient Ones,” N’cho said.

“Such things would be long dead,” Irrien pointed out.

N’cho shook his head. “They can still be summoned, and I believe I have *found* a spot to summon one. It will take many deaths, though.”

Irrien laughed at that. It was a small price to pay for Ceres’s life.

“Death,” he said, “is always the easiest thing to arrange.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Stephania watched Captain Kang sleep with a look of disgust that seeped deep down into her soul. The bulky form of the captain shifted as he snored, and Stephania had to shift back as he reached for her in his sleep. He'd done more than enough of that while waking.

Stephania had never had a problem with taking lovers to bend them to her will. It was what she was planning to do with the Second Stone, after all. Yet Kang had been far from a gentle man, and he'd seemed to take delight in finding new ways to humiliate Stephania on the way over. He'd treated her like the slave she'd briefly been with Irrien, and Stephania had sworn to herself that she would never be that again.

Then she'd heard the whispers among the crew: that perhaps she wouldn't be arriving safe after all. That maybe the captain would take all she'd given and sell her into slavery anyway at the end of it. That at the very least, he would share the bounty by giving her to them.

Stephania wouldn't allow that. She would rather die than that, but it was much easier to kill instead.

She slipped from the bed silently, looking out of one of the small windows of the captain's cabin. Port Leeward lay just a little way away, dust falling over it from the cliffs above even in the half-light of dawn. It was an ugly city, worn and cramped,

and even from here Stephania could tell that it would be a place of violence. Kang had said that he didn't dare to go in at night.

Stephania had guessed that had just been an excuse to use her one more time, but maybe it was more than that. The slave markets wouldn't be open in the dark, after all.

She made a decision and dressed quietly, wrapping herself up in her cloak and reaching into its folds. She drew out a bottle and some thread, moving with the care of someone who knew exactly what she was holding. If she made a mistake now, she was dead, either from the poison, or when Kang woke.

Stephania positioned herself over the bed, lining the thread up with Kang's mouth as best she could. He shifted and turned in his sleep, and Stephania went with him, being careful not to touch him. If he woke now, she was well within striking distance.

She dripped the poison along the thread, keeping her concentration as Kang murmured something in his sleep. One drop trickled down toward his lips, then a second. Stephania prepared herself for the moment when he would gasp and die, the poison claiming him.

Instead, his eyes snapped open, staring up at Stephania for a moment in incomprehension, then anger.

"Whore! Slave! You'll die for this."

In an instant, he was up on top of Stephania, pressing her down against the bed. He struck her once, and then she felt the crushing pressure of his hands fastening on her throat. Stephania gasped as she felt her breath cut off, thrashing around as she tried to get

him off her.

For his part, Kang bore down with all his great bulk, pinning Stephania beneath him. She fought and he just laughed, continuing to strangle her. He was still laughing when Stephania drew a knife from inside her cloak and stabbed him.

He gasped with the first thrust, but Stephania didn't feel the pressure on her throat ease. Blackness started to come in at the edges of her vision, but she kept stabbing, thrusting mechanically on instinct, doing it blindly because now she couldn't see anything beyond a faint haze.

The grip around her throat loosened, and Stephania felt Kang's bulk collapse on her.

It took far too long to fight her way out from beneath him, gasping for breath and trying to push her way back to consciousness. She all but fell from the bed, then stood, looking down at the ruin of Kang's body in disgust.

She had to be practical. She'd done what she intended, however difficult it had proved to be. Now for the rest.

She quickly rearranged the sheets to make it look more like he was sleeping at first glance. She went through the cabin quickly, finding the small chest where Kang kept gold. Stephania slipped out onto the deck, her hood up as she made her way to the ship's small landing boat at the stern.

Stephania stepped in, starting to work the pulleys to lower it. They creaked like a rusted gate, and from somewhere above her, she heard the shouts of sailors wanting to know what the noise

was. Stephania didn't hesitate. She drew a knife and started to saw at the rope holding the boat. It gave way and she plummeted the rest of the short distance to the waves.

Grabbing the oars, she started to row, heading for the harbor while behind her, the sailors realized that they had no way to follow her. Stephania rowed until she came up against the docks, then clambered up, not even bothering to tie the boat off. She wouldn't be going back that way.

Felldust's capital city was everything it had promised to be from the water. Dust fell on it in waves, while around her, figures moved through it with ominous intent. One closed on her, and Stephania flashed a knife until he backed off.

She went deeper into the city. Stephania knew that Lucious had come here, and she wondered how he'd felt while he was doing it. Probably helpless, because Lucious didn't know how to relate to people. He thought in terms of storming up to people and demanding, of threats and intimidation. He'd been a fool.

Stephania wasn't a fool. She looked around until she found the people who would have real information: the beggars and the whores. She went to them with her stolen gold and she asked the same question, again and again.

"Tell me about Ulren."

She asked it in alleys and she asked it in gambling houses where the stakes seemed to be blood as often as coin. She asked it in shops that sold layers of wraps against the dust and she asked it in the places where thieves gathered in the dark.

She picked an inn and settled herself there, sending word out into the city that there was gold for those who would talk to her. They came, telling her snippets of history and rumor, gossip and secrets in a mixture Stephania was more than used to sorting through.

She wasn't surprised when they came for her, two men and a woman, all in the wrappings the city used to keep off the dust, all wearing the emblem of the former Second Stone. They had the hard look of people used to violence, but that could have applied to almost anyone in Felldust.

"You've been asking a lot of questions," the woman said, leaning over the table. Close enough that Stephania could have put a knife in her easily. Close enough that they could have been confidantes sharing gossip at some courtly dance.

Stephania smiled. "I have."

"Did you think that those questions wouldn't attract attention? That the First Stone doesn't have listeners in the shadows?"

Stephania laughed then. Did they think that *she* hadn't considered the possibility of spies? She'd done more than that; she'd relied on it. She'd fished for answers in the city, but the truth of it was that she'd been fishing for attention as much as anything else. Any fool could walk up to a gate and be denied entry. A clever woman made it so that those within brought her inside.

After all, Stephania thought with more amusement, a woman should never be the one doing all the chasing in a romance.

“What’s so funny?” the woman demanded. “Are you mad, or just stupid? Who are you, anyway?”

Stephania pulled back her hood so that the other woman could see her features.

“I am Stephania,” she said. “Former bride of the heir to the Empire, former *ruler* of the Empire. I have survived the fall of Delos and Irrien’s best efforts to kill me. I think that your lord will want to talk to me, don’t you?”

She stood as the others looked at one another, obviously trying to decide what to do in the face of this. Finally, the woman made a decision.

“We bring her.”

They moved in on either side of Stephania, but she made a point of moving with them, so that it looked more like a noble escort than her being taken prisoner. She even reached out to rest her hand lightly on the woman’s arm, the way she might have with a companion walking around a garden.

They led the way across the city, and since it was one of the rare gaps in the dust storms off the cliffs, Stephania didn’t bother with the hood of her cloak. She let people see her, knowing that the rumors of who she was and where she was going would start.

Of course, in spite of what she made it look like, this was still a long way from a pleasant stroll. These were still killers beside her, who wouldn’t hesitate to murder her if Stephania gave them a reason. As they came toward a large compound in the heart of the city, Stephania could feel the fear knotting in her stomach,

pushed down only by her determination to do all the things she had come to Felldust for. She would have revenge on Irrien. She would get her son back from the sorcerer.

They marched her through the compound, past the working slaves and the training warriors, past statues depicting Ulren in his youth, standing over the bodies of slain enemies. Stephania had no doubt that this was a dangerous man. To be second only to Irrien meant that he had fought his way to the top of one of the most dangerous places there was.

To lose here was to die, or worse than die, but Stephania didn't intend to lose. She'd learned the lessons of the invasion, and even of her failure to control Irrien. This time, she had something to offer. Ulren wanted the same things that she did: power, and the death of the former First Stone.

Stephania had heard of people basing marriages on worse things.

CHAPTER SIX

Ceres stepped from the small boat onto the bank, in awe of the fact that a place like this could exist somewhere underground. She knew that the powers of the Ancient Ones were involved, but she couldn't see why they would do this. Why make a garden in the middle of a nightmare?

Of course, from the little she'd seen of the Ancient Ones, the fact that there was a nightmare might be a sufficient reason for the garden.

Then there was the dome, which seemed to be composed of pure golden light. Ceres walked closer to it. If there was an answer to be found here, she was sure that it was somewhere inside that dome.

There was a faint haze to the light, and inside, Ceres thought she could see a pair of figures. She just hoped they weren't more of the half-dead sorcerers. Ceres wasn't sure she had the strength to fight any more of them.

She pressed into the light, and Ceres couldn't help bracing herself for some kind of shock or force designed to fling her back. Instead, there was just a moment of pressure, and then she was through it, inside the dome and looking around.

Here, it looked like the interior of some opulent room, with rugs and divans, statues and ornaments that seemed to hang from the interior of the dome. There were other things too: glassware

and books that pointed to a sorcerer's art.

Two figures stood at the heart of it. The man had the same look of grace and peace that Ceres had seen in her mother, and he wore the pale robes that she had seen in the memories of the Ancient Ones. The woman wore the darker robes of a sorcerer, but unlike the ones above, she still seemed young, not desiccated by time.

Looking at them, Ceres realized that they also had the faintly translucent look she'd seen in other parts of the complex, in the memories there.

"They aren't real," she said.

The man laughed at that. "Do you hear that, Lin? We aren't real."

The woman reached out to touch his arm. "It's an understandable mistake to make. After all this time, I imagine we look mere shadows of what we were."

That took Ceres a little aback. On impulse, she reached out for the man. She found that her hand passed straight through his chest. She realized what she'd just done.

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't be," the man said. "I imagine it is a little disconcerting."

"What are you?" she asked. "I saw the sorcerers above, and you aren't like them, and you aren't like the memories either, because those are just images."

"We're something... else," the woman said. "I am Lin, and

this is Alteus.”

“I’m Ceres.”

Ceres noted how close the two stood to one another; the way Lin’s hand lingered on Alteus’s shoulder. The two had the look of a couple very much in love. Would she and Thanos ever end up like that? Presumably not that transparent, though.

“The battle raged,” Alteus said, “and we couldn’t stop it. What the sorcerers planned was evil.”

“Some of your kind were no better,” Lin said with a faint smile, as if they’d had that conversation many times. “It happened so fast. The Ancient Ones imprisoned the sorcerers as they were, their magic blended past and future together, and Alteus and I...”

“You became something else,” Ceres finished. Sentient memories. Ghosts of the past who could touch one another if nothing else.

“I get the feeling you didn’t fight your way through everything above just to find out about us,” Alteus said.

Ceres swallowed. She hadn’t expected this. She’d expected an object, perhaps something like the point of connection holding the spells above together. Still, the Ancient One in front of her was right: she had come there for a reason.

“I have the blood of the Ancient Ones,” she said.

She saw Alteus nod. “I can see that.”

“But something is restricting her,” Lin said. “Limiting her.”

“Someone poisoned me,” Ceres said. “She took away my powers. My mother was able to restore them for a little while,

but it didn't last."

"Daskalos's poison," Lin said, with a note of disgust.

"An evil thing," Alteus said.

"But a thing that can be undone," Lin added. She looked at Ceres. "If she is worthy of it. I'm sorry, but that is a lot of power for someone to have. We have seen what it can do."

"And given what we are, it would take a lot to undo it," Alteus said.

Lin reached out to touch his arm. "Maybe it's time to see new things. We've been here hundreds of years. Even given the things we can create, maybe it's time to see what is next."

Ceres paused as she heard that, the implications of it sinking in.

"Wait, healing me would kill you?" She shook her head, but then thoughts of Thanos, and all the others on Haylon, interrupted. If she didn't do this, they would die too. "I don't know what to say," she admitted. "I don't want someone to die for me, but a lot of people will die if I don't do this."

She saw the two spirits look at one another.

"That's a good start," Alteus said. "It means that there is a reason for this. Tell us the rest. Tell us everything that led up to this."

Ceres did her best. She explained all about the rebellion, and the war. About the invasion that had followed and her inability to stop it. About the attack on Haylon that was, even then, putting everyone she loved at risk.

"I understand," Lin said, reaching out to touch Ceres. To Ceres's surprise, there was a sensation of pressure there. "It reminds me a little of *our* war."

"The past proceeds in echoes of itself," Alteus said. "But there are some echoes that can't be repeated. We need to know if she understands."

Ceres saw Lin nod.

"That's true," the ghost said. "So, a question for you, Ceres. Let's see if you understand. Why is this still here? Why are the sorcerers trapped like this? Why didn't the Ancient Ones destroy them?"

The question had the feel of a test, and Ceres got the feeling that if she couldn't give a good answer to it, she wouldn't receive help from these two. Given what they'd said it might cost them, Ceres was astonished that they were considering it at all.

"*Could* the Ancient Ones have destroyed them?" Ceres asked.

Alteus paused for a moment, and then nodded. "It wasn't that. Think about the world."

Ceres thought. She thought about the effects of the war. About the blasted wastes of Felldust and the wreckage of the island above her. About how few of the Ancient Ones were left in the world. About the invasions, and the people who had died fighting the Empire.

"I think you didn't destroy them because of what it would take to do it," Ceres said. "What's the point of winning if there's nothing left after you do it?" She guessed that it was

more than that, though. “I was part of a rebellion. We fought against something that was large, and evil, and made people’s lives worse, but how many people have died now? You can’t solve something by just slaughtering everyone.”

She saw Lin and Alteus look at one another then. They nodded.

“We allowed the sorcerers’ rebellion at first,” Alteus said. “We thought it would amount to nothing. Then it grew, and we fought, but in fighting it, we did as much damage as they did. We had the power to wreck whole landscapes, and we used it. Oh, how we used it.”

“You have seen the things done to this island,” Lin said. When I heal you, *if* I heal you, you will have that kind of power. What will you do with it, Ceres?”

There was a time when the answer would have been simple. She would have brought down the Empire. She would have destroyed the nobles. Now, she just wanted people to be able to live their lives safely and happily; it didn’t seem like too much to ask.

“I just want to save the people I love,” she said. “I don’t want to destroy anyone. I just... I think I might have to. I hate that, I just want peace.”

Even Ceres was a little surprised by that. She didn’t want more violence. She simply had to do it to prevent innocent people being slaughtered. That earned her another nod.

“A good answer,” Lin said. “Come here.”

The former sorcerer went among the glass vials and the alchemical equipment that seemed to exist in illusory form. She moved among it, blending things and shifting things. Alteus went with her, and the two of them appeared to work in the kind of harmony that could only come over many years. They poured solutions into new containers, added ingredients, consulted books.

Ceres stood there to watch them, and she had to admit that she didn't understand half of what they were doing. When they stood in front of her with a glass vial, it almost didn't seem enough.

"Drink this," Lin said. She held it out to Ceres, and although it all seemed insubstantial, when Ceres took it, her hand met solid glass. She held it up, seeing the sparkle of golden liquid that matched the hue of the dome around her.

Ceres drank it, and it tasted like drinking starlight.

It seemed to wash through her then, and she could feel its progress in the relaxation of her muscles, and the easing of pains she hadn't known were there. She could feel something growing inside her too, spreading out like a system of roots running through her body as the channels along which her power had run regrew.

When it was done, Ceres felt better than she had since before the invasion. It felt like a deep sense of peace spreading through her.

"Is it done?" Ceres asked.

Alteus and Lin took one another's hands.

“Not quite,” Alteus said.

The dome around Ceres seemed to collapse inward, the contents disappearing as they turned into pure light. That light gathered on the spot where the Ancient One and the Sorceress stood, until Ceres couldn't make them out in it.

“It will be interesting to see what happens next,” Lin said.
“Goodbye, Ceres.”

The light burst toward her, filling Ceres, brimming through the channels of her body like water along freshly built aqueducts. It filled her, and it kept filling her, pouring in so that it seemed that there was more power resting within Ceres than there had ever been before. For the first time, she understood the true depths of the Ancient Ones' powers.

She stood there, pulsing with power, and she knew the time had come.

It was time for war.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jeva could feel the tension growing with every step as she made her way up toward the meeting hall. The people of the gathering place stared at her the way she would have expected people outside their lands to stare at one of their kind: as if she were something strange, different, even dangerous. It wasn't a sensation Jeva liked.

Was it just that they didn't see many with the markings of priestesses here, or was it something more? It wasn't until the first insults and accusations came from the gathering crowd that Jeva started to understand.

"Betrayer!"

"You took your tribe to the slaughter!"

A young man stepped out from the crowd with that swagger that only young men could manage. He strode as if he owned the path leading up to the house of the dead. When Jeva moved to step around him, he went to block her.

Jeva should have struck him just for that, but she was there for more important things.

"Step aside," she said. "I'm not here for violence."

"Have you forgotten the ways of our people that completely?" he demanded. "You dragged your tribe to die in Delos. How many came back?"

Jeva could hear the anger there. The kind of anger that even

her people felt when they lost someone close to them. Telling him that they had gone to the ancestors and that he should be happy would do no good. In any case, Jeva wasn't even sure that she believed that right then. She had seen the pointless deaths of the war.

"But you came back," the young man said. "You destroyed one of our tribes, and you came back, you *coward!*"

On another day, Jeva would have killed him for that, but the truth was that the mewling of an idiot didn't matter, not compared to everything else that was going on. She moved to step around him again.

Jeva paused as he drew a knife.

"You don't want to do this, boy," she said.

"Don't tell me what I want!" he screamed, and lunged at her.

Jeva reacted on instinct, swaying out of the way of the blow, while she lashed out with her bladed chains. One wrapped around his neck, wrenching as she moved with the speed of long practice. Blood sprayed as the young man clutched at the wound, collapsing to his knees.

"Damn you," Jeva said softly. "Why did you make me do it, you idiot?"

There was no answer, of course. There was never any answer. Jeva whispered the words of a prayer for the dead over the young man and then stood, lifting him. Other villagers followed her as she continued on her way, and Jeva could feel the tension there now where there had been jokes before. They followed her close

as an honor guard, or the escort of a prisoner to her execution.

When she reached the House of the Dead, the elders of the village were already waiting for her. Jeva padded in on bare feet, kneeling before the endlessly burning pyre and tumbling her attacker's body into it. She stood there as it started to burn, looking around at the people she had come to convince.

"You come here with blood on your hands," a Speaker of the Dead said, stepping forward with his robes swirling. "The dead told us that someone would come, but not that it would happen like this."

Jeva looked at him, wondering if it was true. There had been a time when she wouldn't have questioned it.

"He struck at me," Jeva said. "He was not as fast as he thought."

The others there nodded. Such things could happen, in these harshest parts of the world. Jeva let none of the guilt she felt show on her face.

"You have come to ask us something," the Speaker said.

Jeva nodded. "I have."

"Then ask."

Jeva stood there, collecting her thoughts. "I ask for aid for the island of Haylon. A great fleet attacks it, on the orders of the First Stone. I believe that our people can make a difference."

Voices called out then, speaking at once. There were questions and demands, accusations and opinions, all seeming to blur together.

“She wants us to go to die for her.”

“We’ve heard this before!”

“Why fight for people we don’t know?”

Jeva stood there, letting all of it wash over her. If this went wrong, there was every chance that she wouldn’t be walking out of this room. Given who she was, she should have felt a sense of peace at that, but she also found herself thinking about Thanos, who had saved her at risk to himself, and about all the people who were stuck on Haylon. They needed her to succeed.

“We should give her to the dead for all she’s done!” one called.

The Speaker of the Dead stepped next to Jeva then, holding up his hands for quiet.

“We know what our sister is asking,” the Speaker said. “Now is not the time for talking. We are just the living. Now is the time to listen to the dead.”

He reached down to his belt, pulling out a pouch of the sacred powders mixed with the ashes of the ancestors. He threw it onto the pyre, and the flames leapt up.

“Breathe, sister,” the Speaker said. “Breathe and see.”

Jeva breathed in the smoke, taking it deep into her lungs. The flames danced in the pit below her, and for the first time in years, Jeva saw the dead.

It started with the spirit of the man she’d killed. It stood from his burning corpse, walking through the flames to her.

“You killed me,” he said in something like shock. “You killed me!”

He struck her then, and though the dead shouldn't have been able to touch the living, Jeva still felt it as surely as if he'd slapped her while he was alive. He struck her, and then he stepped back, looking on expectantly.

The rest of the dead came to Jeva then, and they were no kinder than the young man she'd slain. They were all there: the people she'd killed by her own hand, the ones she'd led to their deaths on Haylon. They came to her one by one, and one by one, they struck out at Jeva, in blows that left her reeling, knocked her flat, reduced her to something holding herself on the ground.

It seemed to take forever before they stepped away from her, and Jeva was able to look up again. She found herself looking at Haylon, the island surrounded by ships, the battle raging.

She saw the ships of the Bone Folk slam into those attackers, punching a hole through, their warriors spilling out onto the shore. She saw them fighting, and killing, and dying. Jeva saw them dying in numbers that she had only seen once before, in Delos.

"If you take them to Haylon, they will die," a voice said, and that voice sounded as though it was composed of the voices of a thousand ancestors at once. "They will die as we died."

"Will they *win*?" Jeva asked.

There was a brief pause before the voice answered that. "It is possible that the island might be saved."

So it wouldn't be an empty gesture. It wouldn't be the same as on Delos.

“It will be the end for our people,” the voice said. “Some will survive, but our tribes will not. Our ways will not. There will be so many more joining us, waiting for you in death.”

That brought a flash of fear to Jeva. She’d felt the anger of those who had died, felt their blows. Was it worth it? Could she do it to her whole people?

“And you would die,” the voice continued. “Announce this to our people, and you will die for it.”

Slowly, she started to come back to herself, finding herself on the floor before the pyre. Jeva put a hand to her face and it came away bloody, although she didn’t know if that was the strain of the vision or the violence of the dead. She forced herself to stand, looking out over the assembled crowd.

“Tell us what you saw, sister,” the Speaker of the Dead said.

Jeva stood there, looking at him, trying to gauge how much, if anything, he’d seen. Could she lie in this moment? Could she tell the assembled crowd that the dead were all in favor of the plan?

Jeva knew that she couldn’t lie like that, even for Thanos.

“I saw death,” she said. “Your death, my death. The death of our whole people if we do this.”

A murmur went around the room. Her people had no fear of death, but the destruction of their whole way of life was something else.

“You have asked me to speak for the dead,” Jeva said, “and they have said that in Haylon, victory would be bought with our people’s lives.” She took a breath, thinking about what Thanos

would have done. "I don't want to speak for the dead. I want to speak for the living."

The murmurs changed tone, becoming more confused. Becoming angrier in some spaces too.

"I know what you think," Jeva said. "You think I am speaking sacrilege. But there is a whole island of people out there that needs our help. I saw the dead, and they cursed me for their deaths. Do you know what that tells me? That life *matters*! That the lives of all those who will die if we don't help matter. If we do not help, we allow evil to stand. We allow those who would live in peace to be slaughtered. I will stand against that, not because the dead require it, but because the living do!"

There was uproar then in the hall. The Speaker of the Dead looked at it all, then at Jeva. He pushed her toward the door.

"You should go," he said. "Go before they kill you for blasphemy."

Jeva didn't go, though. The dead had already told her that she would die for doing this. If that was the price of gaining help, she would pay it. She stood there as a point of silence in the middle of the arguments in the room. When a man ran at her, she kicked him back and kept standing. It was all she could do right then. She waited for the moment when one of them would finally kill her.

Jeva was quite confused when they didn't. Instead, the noise in the room died down, and the people there stood in front of her, looking her way. One by one, they fell to their knees, and

the Speaker of the Dead stepped forward.

“It seems that we will go with you to Haylon, sister.”

Jeva blinked. “I... don’t understand.”

She should have been dead then. The dead had told her that it was the sacrifice they wanted.

“Have you forgotten our ways so completely?” the priest said. “You have offered us a death worth having. Who are we to argue?”

Jeva fell to her knees with the others then. She didn’t know what to say. She’d been expecting death, and had life instead. Now, she just had to make it count for something.

“We’re coming, Thanos,” she promised.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Irrien ignored the pain of his wounds as he rode south along tracks already turned to mud by the passage of his army. He forced himself to stay tall in the saddle, not letting any of the agony he felt show. He didn't slow or stop, in spite of the many cuts, the bandages and the stitches. The things that lay at the end of this journey were too important to delay.

His men journeyed with him, making the ride back to Delos even faster than they had pursued their assault on the North. Some of them were moving slower, shepherding lines of slaves or wagons of looted goods, but most rode with their lord, ready for the battles that were still to come.

"You had better be right about this," Irrien snapped across to N'cho.

The assassin rode beside him with the seemingly infinite calm that he always projected, as if the rush of a horde of Irrien's finest warriors behind him was nothing.

"When we reach Delos, you will see, First Stone."

Reaching Delos did not take long, although by the time they did it, Irrien's horse was breathing hard, its flanks lathered with sweat. He followed as N'cho led the way away from the road, into a space filled with ruins and gravestones. When he finally stopped, Irrien looked around, unimpressed.

"This is it?" he demanded.

“This is it,” N’cho assured him. “A space where the world is weak enough to summon... other things. Things that might kill an Ancient One.”

Irrien dismounted. He should have been able to do it with grace and ease, but the pain of his wounds meant that he hit the ground heavy-footed. It was a reminder of what the assassin and his colleagues had done to him, and one that N’cho would pay for if he couldn’t deliver on his promise.

“It looks like a simple graveyard,” Irrien snapped.

“It has been a place of death since the time of the Ancient Ones,” N’cho answered. “There has been so much death here that it has left the way on the cusp of opening. It merely requires the right words, the right symbols. And of course, the right sacrifices.”

Irrien should have guessed that part from a man who dressed like one of the death priests. Still, if this one could give him the means to kill the Ancient Ones’ child, it would be worth it.

“Slaves will be brought,” he promised. “But if you fail in this, you will join them in death.”

The scariest part of it was that the assassin didn’t react to that. He kept his equanimity while he paced to a spot that looked as though it had been the site of a mass grave, while he took out powders and potions from his robes, while he started to make markings on the ground.

Irrien waited and watched, sitting in the shade of one of the tombs there and trying to disguise how much his body hurt after

the long ride. He would have liked to have ridden into Delos then, to bathe and dress his wounds, perhaps to rest a little. But then his men would ask questions about why he wasn't here, watching all that happened. It wouldn't look *strong*.

So he sent men instead to fetch sacrifices, and a list of other things that N'cho said he required. It took more than an hour for anything to come back from the city, and even then, it was a stranger collection than anything he'd demanded. A dozen death priests came along with the slaves and the unguents, the candles and the braziers.

Irrien saw N'cho smile at their presence, with a confidence that told Irrien that this was no trick.

"They want to see how this is done," he said. "They want to see if it is even possible. They believe, but they don't *believe*."

"I will believe when I see some results," Irrien said.

"Then you will have them, my lord," the assassin replied.

He went back to the space he'd marked with the symbols of his craft, setting up candles and lighting them. He gestured for slaves to be brought forward, and one by one he tied them in place, affixing them to stakes around the rim of the circle he'd drawn, anointing them with oils that made them squirm and beg.

It was nothing compared to their screams as the assassin set them alight. Irrien could hear some of his men gasping at the casual brutality of it all, or complaining about the waste. Irrien just stood there. If this did not work, there would be more than enough time to kill N'cho later.

It did work, though, and in a way that Irrien couldn't have predicted.

He saw N'cho step back from the circle, chanting. As he chanted, the ground within the circle seemed to crumble, giving way similar to how a sinkhole might have opened up in the dust wastes Irrien was used to. The screaming, flaming sacrifices tumbled into it, and still N'cho kept chanting.

Irrien heard the creaking and the cracks as the tombs started to break open. A grave near the spot where Irrien was standing tore apart with a sound of ripping earth, and Irrien saw bones being pulled from it as if by a whirlpool, sucked in toward the hole in the ground and disappearing without a trace.

More followed, pouring in as if drawn to the space, hammering toward it with the speed of thrown javelins. Irrien saw one man impaled by a thigh bone, then carried forward into the pit. He shrieked as he fell, and then it was quiet.

For several seconds, everything was still. N'cho gestured for the death priests to come forward. They came, joining him, obviously wanting to see whatever he was doing. Irrien thought they were fools for it, putting their desire for power in front of everything else, even their survival.

Irrien guessed what was coming, even before a great, clawed hand reached out of the cavern that had opened up and snatched at one of them. The claws punched through the priest, then started to drag him down into the hole while he begged for mercy.

N'cho was there while the creature clawed at the dying man,

wrapping a light silver chain around the creature's limb as easily as if he were hobbling a horse. He handed the chain to a group of soldiers, who held onto it gingerly, as if expecting to be the next victims.

"Pull," he ordered. "Pull for your lives."

The men looked over at Irrien, and Irrien nodded. If this cost a few lives, it would be worth it. He watched the men pull, straining the way they might while raising a heavy sail. They didn't drag the beast from its cave, but they seemed to be able to persuade it to move.

The creature clambered from the hole on clawed legs. It was a thing with paper thin, leathery skin over bones that were longer than any man was tall. Some of those bones protruded through the skin in spikes and spines that were as long as spear heads. It stood as high as the side of a tall ship, looking powerful and impossible to stop. Its head was crocodilian and scaled, a single large eye looking out of the middle of its skull with a baleful yellow glare.

N'cho was there with more chains, running around it and handing them to more men, so that soon, an entire company of warriors held onto the beast for dear life. Even chained like that, the creature was terrifyingly dangerous. It seemed to exude a sense of death, the grass around it turning brown simply with its presence there.

Irrien stood. He didn't draw his sword, but only because there was no point. How did you kill something that clearly wasn't

alive in any sense he understood? More to the point, why would he want to kill it, when it was exactly what he required to be able to deal with the defenders of Haylon, and the girl who was supposedly more dangerous than all of them?

“As promised, First Stone,” N’cho said, with a gesture like a slaver showing off a particularly expensive prize. “A creature more dangerous than any other.”

“Dangerous enough to kill an Ancient One?” Irrien demanded.

He saw the assassin nod like a bladesmith proud of his creation.

“This is a creature of pure death, First Stone,” he said. “It can kill anything that lives. I trust that is to your satisfaction?”

Irrien watched the men straining to contain it, trying to assess the sheer strength of the thing. He couldn’t imagine trying to fight it. He couldn’t imagine anyone surviving its assault. Briefly, that single eye met his, and the only impression Irrien had there was of hatred: a deep, abiding hatred of everything that lived.

“If you can put it back again afterwards,” Irrien said. “I have no wish to have that coming for me.”

N’cho nodded. “It is not a thing meant for this world, First Stone,” he said. “The power holding it together will burn out, given time.”

“Get it to the boats,” Irrien ordered.

N’cho nodded, gesturing to the men, issuing orders about where to pull and how hard. Irrien saw the moment when one of

the men misstepped, and the beast lashed out, tearing him in half.

Irrien wasn't scared of much, but this thing did it. That was a good thing though. It meant that it was powerful. Powerful enough to slaughter his enemies.

Powerful enough to finish this, once and for all.

CHAPTER NINE

Stephania stood impatiently in a receiving chamber within Ulren's vast home, keeping her features as perfectly expressionless as one of the statues there, regardless of the fear she felt then. There *was* fear, in spite of her planning for this moment, and in spite of everything she'd done to get there.

She knew from her attempt to seduce Irrien just how badly wrong this could go. One wrong step and she might end up dead, or worse, sold as some rich man's prize. Hopefully, the former Second Stone would be easier to woo than the first.

The continued presence of the thugs who had brought her there did nothing to calm Stephania's nerves. They did not talk to her or treat her with the deference that her position demanded. Instead, the two men stood by the door like jailers, while the woman had left, gone to tell Ulren that Stephania was there.

Stephania spent her time working out the best way to present herself. She chose a spot where a couch sat in the middle of the floor, reclining on it elegantly, even seductively. She wanted to make it clear to Ulren from the first moments what she was there for.

When the Second Stone walked into his receiving room, with the female thug walking beside him, it was all Stephania could do to keep from standing and walking away. Keeping a smile on her face was even harder, but Stephania had plenty of practice

when it came to disguising what she really felt.

The statues of Ulren might have shown a ruggedly attractive young man in his prime, but now the Second Stone was a long way from that. He was *old*. Worse than that, age had not been kind to him in its wrinkles and its liver spots, the thinning of his hair and the scars he had accumulated. This was the kind of man noble girls joked about the poorest among them having to marry for money, not someone Stephania should have been considering as a potential husband.

“First Stone Ulren,” Stephania said, smiling as she stood. “It is so good to finally meet you.”

She lied because something far more important than money was at stake. This man could give her back her kingdom. He could return to her what had been taken from her, and more.

“My servant tells me that you are Stephania, the noble who was briefly queen of the Empire,” Ulren said. “You planted rumors to attract my attention. Now you have it. I hope you don’t come to regret that.”

Stephania broadened her smile deliberately, reaching out to touch his arm. “How could I regret meeting the most powerful man in the world? Especially when I have a proposal for him?”

She watched Ulren’s face, trying to ignore the fact that it was hard to keep from picturing what it would be like having to bed him. That was a problem for another time, and in any case, Stephania would do what was necessary.

“What kind of proposal?” Ulren asked. Stephania could see

him looking her up and down with the kind of hunger men always had when they looked at her. She hid her revulsion.

“A *proposal*,” Stephanian said. “After all, who else is out there who would make a suitable husband for me?”

Ulren looked Stephanian over again, then snapped his fingers. “Oh, I see. A noblewoman looking for sanctuary. Chain her, strip her, brand her, and leave her in my chambers. I’ll enjoy her a little before she goes to the slave block.”

Stephanian saw the thugs step forward, and for a moment, her mind flashed back to all the ways Irrien had treated her. He’d been contemptuous of her too, but he had at least had the strength to claim her for himself, and this time, Stephanian wasn’t caught in the middle of an invasion.

The woman moved toward her, chains in her hands in a way that said she’d been expecting this outcome, and with a smile that said she’d been looking forward to it. Stephanian ignored her, walking toward the other guards instead.

“Don’t think you’re getting away,” the woman said.

The two guards moved to block Stephanian’s exit. That brought them closer together, which was all Stephanian had been waiting for. She lifted a hand, drawing a small fold of paper from inside her cloak, and blew.

Powder sprayed out, catching the thugs by surprise as it spread. Stephanian held her breath to be safe, but there was no need to worry. The guards gasped as they breathed in the powder, struggling for their next breath as it filled their lungs.

One scrabbled at his throat as if he could force it to open up. Another clutched at the wall to keep himself from falling.

Stephania ignored them, spinning back toward the woman with a knife in her hand. She rushed in, but the thug managed to knock aside her blow, knocking the blade from Stephania's nerveless fingers. She hit out, and Stephania winced in pain.

It didn't slow her, though. People made the mistake of thinking that because she was refined, she must be weak. Stephania stepped in close, striking the other woman with her forehead, then grabbing for the chains she held.

Stephania spun behind her, drawing the chains tight across her throat and pulling with all the strength she had. She kicked the thug in the back of her knee, dragging her off balance and continuing to strangle her. Stephania waited until she went limp, then threw her down on the floor, unconscious. She locked the chains on her pointedly.

She stood in front of Ulren then, drawing a dagger. "Your people were careless, letting me in armed. I'm not as helpless as you thought."

"I can see that," Ulren said, and now Stephania could see a note of respect on his face. "You're anything but helpless. Hmm..."

He was looking her up and down again. If he leapt at her, Stephania would stab him, and take her chances in trying to take his empire from him. It probably wouldn't work, but she would *not* be a slave again.

"It seems I underestimated you," Ulren said. "Tell me again why I should marry you."

He said it as though he hadn't just ordered her enslaved. Stephania swallowed her anger, just as she'd swallowed her disgust. If murdering two guards and strangling a third into a stupor was what it took to impress this man, so be it.

"You should marry me because I can give you the Empire," Stephania said.

"With what army?" Ulren countered. Of course he would think in those terms. Were all powerful men such fools?

"With your army," Stephania said. "Which will be seen as liberators, since they will support a rightful queen. Which will have the support of the Empire's people. Which will know every secret there. Think about it, Ulren. I know the Empire better than anyone."

"It's tempting," he said.

"I also know Irrien," Stephania went on. "I hear that you want him dead almost as much as me."

She saw the shift in his expression then, and she knew that she had him.

"He has weaknesses you don't know about," Stephania said. "Using them, we can kill him, and with me by your side, it will be obvious for us to command the Empire, as well as Felldust. Two countries, forming the greatest empire the world has seen."

It was the same offer that she had made Irrien, but Stephania could see immediately that Ulren was not the same as the

First Stone. Irrien had been so certain of his own power that Stephania's efforts had bounced from him like stones from armor. Ulren was anything but certain of his position.

"And in return for this you want marriage?" Ulren said.

Stephania smiled. "There are those who would regard it as a bonus, not a price. Think about it, First Stone. How long has it been since a woman *wanted* to come to your bed? How long has it been since you gave up hope of a son to follow you? A dynasty to remember your name?"

Ulren didn't need to know that Stephania's chances of having children now were almost certainly gone, just as he didn't need to see the obvious: that with a husband so old, it wouldn't be long before Stephania ruled by herself.

She could see his hunger for it, and when he caught her up in his arms, Stephania knew that she had him.

"Very well," Ulren said. "We will marry. I'll have a priest brought. We will have to marry quickly."

"Quickly, but as publicly as possible," Stephania said. It would be necessary to have the biggest impact, but it also meant that Ulren wouldn't be able to put her aside when it became inconvenient, the way Thanos had. "I think that we're going to do great things together."

Ulren kissed her then, and it was as terrible as Stephania could have imagined. She forced herself to think about how good revenge on Irrien would feel, and how much better it would be when she took her son back from Daskalos.

For that, she could put up with almost anything.

CHAPTER TEN

Daskalos took a moment or two to bask in satisfaction as Telum stood within his home, sharpening a blade with the expertise of a well-trained warrior, not a boy only a few days old. He was a honed thing now. A deadly thing. Daskalos's magic had failed so many times in this, but this time it had produced everything he could have hoped for.

In the space Daskalos's power had created, the boy had grown into a young man, hardened by training, sharpened as much as the sword he held. He had as much strength as any man, and more skill. His whole life was dedicated to the purpose Daskalos had given him: to kill.

Daskalos had given him more than that. Magic rippled through the boy's muscles, so that he would strike harder, heal faster. The blade he held was a thing of meteorite iron, carved with runes promising the death of its wielder's foes. Daskalos had given his creation armor of living crystal, strong as steel and filled with magic.

"Are you ready to do what I have commanded?" Daskalos asked. "Are you ready to kill?"

Telum rose to stand before him. "Yes, Father."

Daskalos nodded in satisfaction. He had seen too many attempts go wrong before this. He had watched boys twisted into dying, shapeless things. He had found some become physically

perfect, only for their minds to be weak, or torn apart by the power running through them. With Telum, with his weapon, he had succeeded.

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