



MORGAN RICE

SOLDIER,
BROTHER,
SORCERER

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 5

Of Crowns and Glory

Морган Райс

Soldier, Brother, Sorcerer

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

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17 year old Ceres, a beautiful, poor girl from the Empire city of Delos, has won the battle for Delos—and yet a complete victory still awaits her. As the rebellion looks to her as their new leader, Ceres must find a way to topple the Empire's royalty, and to defend Delos from the pending attack from a greater army than she has ever known. She must try to free Thanos before his execution, and help him clear his name in the murder of his father. Thanos himself is determined to hunt down Lucious across the sea, to avenge his father's murder, and to kill his brother before he can return with an army to Delos' shores. It will be a treacherous journey into hostile lands, one, he knows, that will result in his own death. But he is determined to sacrifice for his country. Yet all may not go as planned. Stephania travels to a distant land to find the sorcerer who can, once and for all, put a stop Ceres' powers. She is determined to enact a treachery that will kill Ceres, and instill herself—and her unborn child—as ruler of the Empire. **SOLDIER, BROTHER, SORCERER** 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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Rice Morgan

Soldier, Brother, Sorcerer

Morgan Rice

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

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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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

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

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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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CHAPTER ONE

Thanos was surprised to wake up at all. From what the queen had said before the soldiers had beaten him into unconsciousness, he'd expected that they would cut his throat and be done with it.

He didn't know whether it was a good thing or not that they'd changed their mind.

He must have slipped back out of consciousness, because he found himself looking at the blood that had covered the floor in his father's chambers. He could remember the sensation of holding his father in his arms, the once big man feeling as delicate as a child. In his dreams, his hands were covered in blood.

He blinked awake, and sunlight told him that this wasn't a dream anymore. But the blood was still there. His hands were still red with it, and now Thanos didn't know how much of it was his. He could feel the hardness of iron against his body, but it didn't feel right for chains.

He couldn't focus on it though, and Thanos found himself wondering just how badly he'd been beaten that he couldn't pull clear of the memories. They dragged him down again, into the moments where he was watching his father die, helpless to do anything to stop it.

"You need to be able to prove the truth of it. The whole truth."

It had taken so much of his father's strength to say those words. It had been so important to him, in that moment, that Thanos be able to prove that he was the king's son. Perhaps he had seen a way to undo some of the damage he had done in his life. Perhaps he had just seen the damage that Lucious might wreak given real power.

Thanos groaned at the thought of it all, sunlight streaming in through his dreams, while pain pushed them back more physically. Even so, his father's voice lingered.

"Felldust. You'll find the answers you need in Felldust. That's where she went after I..."

Even in his dreams, there was no conclusion to those words except the blank staring of his father's eyes. There was only the name of a place, a hint of a journey that might tell him everything.

If he lived long enough to make it.

Consciousness came back to him, and the full weight of the pain came with it. Thanos felt as though every part of him was bruised bone deep. He could barely lift his head, because it felt as though it might fall to pieces just with the effort of it. He knew from experience what broken ribs felt like, and far too many other places felt nearly the same.

The guards who had beaten him hadn't held back because of who he was. If anything, it felt as though they had hit him harder for it, either stung by the scale of his supposed betrayal or wanting to show that they weren't on the side of their rebel prince.

Thanos managed to sit up and look around. The world near him seemed to shift while he did it. For a moment, he thought it was some trick of the pain, vertigo caused by the blows to his head. Then he realized that he really was moving, vertical bars of iron providing a constant reference point as his movement made him set the rest of the world swinging.

"A gibbet," Thanos murmured, the words feeling thick in his throat. "They've hung me in a gibbet."

Looking again confirmed it. He was in a cage shaped like the ones some dainty noblewoman might have kept a bird inside, but this one was large enough for a man. Barely. Thanos's legs dangled down between the bars, although still well above the ground, thanks to the short chain attaching the cage to a post.

Beyond, there was a small, enclosed courtyard. The kind of place that might have been used by nobles about their sports, or where servants might have gathered for the kinds of tasks that were likely to be unpleasant. Drains in the cobbles showed where blood or worse could be washed away.

In one corner, guards were erecting a gallows platform, not even bothering to look over at Thanos. They weren't putting together a simple block for a beheading, either.

Thanos gripped at the bars in sudden anger. He wouldn't be caged like some beast waiting for slaughter. Wouldn't sit there while men prepared to execute him for something he hadn't even done.

He shook the bars, testing them, but they were strong. There was a door with a lock held in place with a chain, each link as thick around as Thanos's thumb. He tried it, looking for any weakness, any way of escaping from the confines of the gibbet that held him.

"Hey! Hands away from that!" one of the guards yelled, lashing out with a stick that cracked across Thanos's knuckles, bringing a gasp of pain as he tried to hold back the urge to cry out.

"Be as tough as you like," the guard said, looking at Thanos with obvious hatred. "When we get done with you, you'll scream."

"I'm still a noble," Thanos said. "I have the right to a trial before the nobles of the Empire, and to choose the manner of my execution if it comes to that."

This time, the stick cracked against the bars, just a handbreadth from his face.

"King killers get whatever's decided for them," the guard snapped back. "No quick axe stroke for you, traitor!"

Thanos could see the anger there. Real anger and what seemed like a sense of personal betrayal. Thanos could understand that. Maybe it even meant that this man had started off as a good man.

"You believed things could change, didn't you?" Thanos guessed. This was a huge risk to take, but he had to, if he was going to find a way to prove his innocence.

"I thought you could help make things better," the other man admitted. "Then it turned out you were working with the rebellion to kill the king!"

"I didn't kill him," Thanos said. "But I know who did. Help me to get out of here, and –"

This jab of the stick struck him hard in his injured ribs, and as the guard drew it back for another blow, Thanos tried to find a way to protect himself. But there was nowhere for him to go.

Even so, the blow didn't land. Thanos saw the guard stop short, lowering his stick and then dropping into a deep bow. Thanos tried to twist around to see what was happening, and that set his gibbet spinning.

By the time it finished, Queen Athena was already standing in front of him, dressed in mourning black that made her seem as though she could have been his executioner. Guards crowded around her, as though afraid that Thanos would somehow find a way to kill her the same way they believed he'd killed the king, in spite of the bars of the cage.

"Why is he hanging there?" Queen Athena demanded. "I thought I told you to simply execute him."

"Begging your majesty's pardon," one of the guards said, "but he wasn't awake, and it takes time to build an execution fit for a traitor like this."

"What do you have planned?" the queen asked.

"We were going to half-hang him, draw out his entrails, and then break him on the wheel to finish him. We couldn't just kill him quick, after all he'd done."

Thanos saw the queen consider it for a moment, and then nod. "Perhaps you're right. Has he even confessed his crimes yet?"

"No, your majesty. He even claims he didn't do it."

Thanos saw the queen shake her head. "Foolishness. He was found over my husband's body. I wish to speak with him, alone."

"Your majesty, is that entirely –"

"Alone, I said." Queen Athena's glare was enough that even Thanos felt a moment of pity for the man. "He's secure enough in this cage. Hurry your work on the gallows. I want the man who killed my husband dead!"

Thanos watched as the guards moved back, well away from him and the queen. Certainly well out of hearing distance. Thanos had no doubt that was deliberate.

"I didn't kill the king," Thanos insisted, even if he guessed that it wouldn't make any difference to his situation. Without proof, why would *anyone* believe him, let alone the queen, who had always disliked him?

For a moment, Queen Athena's expression was set. Thanos saw her glance around, almost furtively, as if worried about the prospect of being overheard. In that moment, Thanos understood.

"You already know, don't you?" Thanos said. "You know I didn't do this."

"How would I know a thing like that?" Queen Athena asked, but there was an edge to her voice as she said it. "You were caught with my beloved husband's blood on your hands, standing over his body."

"Beloved," Thanos echoed. "You only married the king because of a political alliance."

Thanos saw the queen clutch her hands to her heart. "And we couldn't come to love one another?"

Thanos shook his head. "You never loved my father. You just loved the power that being a king's wife brought you."

"Your father?" Queen Athena said. "It seems you found out a lot more than you should, Thanos. Claudius went to a lot of trouble to hide it. It's probably just as well you're going to die for this."

"For something Lucious did," Thanos shot back.

"Yes, for something Lucious did," Queen Athena replied, anger showing on her face. "Do you think you can tell me anything about my son that will shock me? Even this? He is my *son*!"

Thanos could hear the protectiveness there, iron hard and unshakeable. In that moment, he found himself thinking about the child he would never have with Stephania, and how protective he would have been toward their son or daughter. He wanted to think that he would have gone to any lengths for his child, yet looking at Queen Athena, he knew that wasn't true. There were some limits past which even a parent couldn't push.

"What about everyone else?" Thanos countered. "What will they do when they find out?"

"And how will they learn it?" Queen Athena asked. "Will you shout it to them now? Go ahead. Let everyone hear the traitor in the cage claiming that even though he was found standing over his murdered father, it was his brother who performed the deed. Do you think anyone will believe you?"

Thanos already knew the answer to that. The very fact of where he was told him the truth of it. To anyone with power in the Empire, he was already a traitor, and he had sneaked into the castle. No, if he tried to tell them the truth, they would never believe it.

He knew then that unless he escaped, he would die here. He would die, and Lucious would become king. What happened after that would be a thing out of nightmares. He had to find a way to stop it.

Surely even Queen Athena could see how bad things would be. He just had to make her understand.

"What do you think will happen when Lucious is king?" Thanos asked. "What do you think he will do?"

He saw Athena smile. "I think he will do as his mother suggests. Lucious has never had much time for the... dreary details of his role. In fact, I should probably thank you, Thanos. Claudius was too stubborn. He didn't listen to me when he should have done. Lucious will be more malleable."

"If you believe that," Thanos said, "you're as insane as he is. You've seen what Lucious did to his father. Do you think being his mother will keep you safe?"

"Power is the only safety there is," Queen Athena replied. "And you won't be around to see it, whatever happens. When the gallows is done, you will die, Thanos. Goodbye."

She turned to go, and as she did, all Thanos could think of was Lucious. Lucious being crowned. Lucious as he'd been in the village Thanos had saved. Lucious as he must have been when he killed their father.

I will get free, Thanos promised himself. I will escape, and I will kill Lucious.

CHAPTER TWO

Ceres came out from the Stade borne on the shoulders of the crowd, into the sunlight, and her heart soared. She looked out at the aftermath of the battle, and as she did, a wash of emotions fought for attention within her.

There was the joy of victory, of course. She heard the crowd shouting its victory as it poured from the Stade, the rebels of Haylon alongside the combatlords, the remnants of Lord West's forces, and the people of the city.

There was relief, that her desperate attempt to save the combatlords from Lucious's last Killing had succeeded, and that it was finally over.

There were bigger reliefs, too. Ceres scanned the crowd until she found her brother and her father, standing together arm in arm with a group of the rebels. She wanted to run to them then and make sure that they were all right, yet the crowd was determined to carry her halfway through the city. She had to make do with the fact that they appeared to be uninjured, walking together and cheering along with the others. Amazing that they could still cheer. So many of these people had been willing to die to stop the crushing tyranny of the Empire. So many had.

That brought the final emotion: sadness. Sadness that all of this had been needed, and that so many had to die on both sides. She could see the bodies in the streets where there had been clashes between the rebels and the soldiers. Most wore the red of the Empire, but that didn't make it better. Many were just ordinary people, conscripted against their will, or men who joined because it was better than a life of poverty and subjugation. And now they lay dead, staring at the sky with eyes that would never see anything again.

Ceres could feel the warmth of the blood on her skin, already drying in the heat of the sun. How many men had she killed today? Somewhere in the endless battle, she'd lost count. There had been only the need to keep going, keep fighting, because stopping meant dying. She'd been caught up in the smooth flow of the battle, carried along by the energy of it, with her *own* energy pulsing inside her.

"All of them," Ceres said.

She'd killed all of them, even if she hadn't done it with her own hands. She'd been the one to convince the people of the stands not to accept the Empire's idea of peace. She'd been the one to convince Lord West's men to assault the city. She looked around at the dead, determined to remember them, and what their victory had cost.

Even the city showed scars of violence: broken doorways, the remains of barricades. Yet there were also signs of joy spreading, too: people were coming out into the streets, joining up with the crowd that flowed down the streets in a sea of humanity.

It was hard to hear much over the yelling of the crowd, but distantly, Ceres thought she could hear the sounds of combat continuing. Part of her wanted to charge forward and deal with it herself, but more of her wanted to put a stop to it before it all spiraled out of control. The truth was that in that moment, she was too exhausted for it. It felt as though she'd been fighting forever. If the crowd hadn't been carrying her, Ceres suspected that she might have collapsed.

When they eventually did put her down in the main square, Ceres went looking for her brother and her father. She pushed her way toward them, and reached them only because the people there seemed to step aside in respect to let her through.

Ceres hugged them both.

They said nothing. Their silence, the feel of their hug, said it all. They had all survived, somehow, as a family. And the absence of her dead brothers was felt deeply.

Ceres wished that she could stay like that forever. Just stay safe with her brother and her father, and let this whole revolution run its own way. Yet even as she stood there with two of the people she cared about most in the world, she became aware of something else.

People were staring at her.

Ceres supposed that wasn't so strange after everything that had happened. She'd been the one at the heart of the fighting, and right now, between the blood, the dirt, and the exhaustion, she probably looked like some monster out of legend. Yet that wasn't the way people seemed to be staring.

No, they were staring as if they were waiting to be told what to do next.

Ceres saw figures pushing their way through the crowd. She recognized one as Akila, the wiry, muscled man who had been at the head of the last wave of rebels. More wore the colors of Lord West's men. There was at least one combatlord there, a large man holding a pair of fighting pickaxes, who seemed to be ignoring several wounds as he stood there.

"Ceres," Akila said, "the remaining imperial soldiers have either retreated to the castle or have started to look for ways to leave the city. My men have followed those they can, but they don't know this city well enough, and... well, there is a danger that people might take it the wrong way."

Ceres understood. If Akila's men hunted through Delos for fleeing soldiers, there was a danger that they would be seen as invaders. Even if they weren't, they might be ambushed, split up, and picked off.

Yet it seemed strange that so many people should be looking to her for answers. She cast around, looking for help, because there had to be someone there better qualified to take charge than she was. Ceres didn't want to assume that she could take charge just because her bloodline gave her a link to Delos's Ancient Ones' past.

"Who is in charge of the rebellion now?" Ceres called out. "Did any of the leaders survive?"

Around her, she saw people spreading their hands, shaking their heads. They didn't know. Of course they didn't. They wouldn't have seen any more than Ceres had. Ceres knew the part that mattered: Anka was gone, killed by Lucious's executioners. Probably, most of the other leaders were dead too. That or hiding.

"What about Lord West's cousin, Nyel?" Ceres asked.

"Lord Nyel did not accompany us in the assault," one of Lord West's former men said.

"No," Ceres said, "I guess he wouldn't have."

Maybe it was a good thing he wasn't there. The rebels and the people of Delos would have been wary enough of a noble like Lord West, given all that he represented, and *he* had been a brave and honorable man. His cousin hadn't been half the man he had been.

She didn't ask if the combatlords had a leader. That wasn't the kind of men they were. Ceres had come to know each of them in the training pits for the Stade, and she knew that while any one of them was worth a dozen or more normal men, they couldn't lead something like this.

She found herself looking to Akila. It was obvious that he was a leader, and his men clearly followed his example, yet he seemed to be looking for her to give the orders here.

Ceres felt her father's hand on her shoulder.

"You're wondering why they should listen to you," he guessed, and it was far too close to the mark.

"They shouldn't follow me just because I happen to have Ancient One blood," Ceres replied softly. "Who am I, really? How can I hope to lead them?"

She saw her father smile at that.

"They don't want to follow you just because of who your ancestors are. They'd follow Lucious if that were the case."

Her father spat into the dirt as if to emphasize what he thought of that.

Sartes nodded.

"Father's right, Ceres," he said. "They follow you because of everything you've done. Because of *who you are*."

She thought about that.

"You can draw them together," her father added. "You have to do it now."

Ceres knew they were right, but it was still hard to stand in the midst of so many people and know that they were waiting for her to make a decision. What happened if she didn't, though? What happened if she forced one of the others to lead?

Ceres could guess the answer to that. She could feel the energy of the crowd, held in check for now, but there nonetheless, like smoldering embers ready to burst into wildfire. Without direction, it would mean looting in the city, more death, more destruction, and maybe even defeat as the factions there found themselves at odds.

No, she couldn't allow that, even if she still wasn't sure she could do it.

"Brothers and sisters!" she called out, and to her surprise, the crowd around her fell silent.

Now the attention on her felt total, even compared to what had gone before.

"We've won a great victory, all of us! All of *you*! You faced the Empire, and you snatched victory from the jaws of death!"

The crowd cheered, and Ceres looked around, giving that a moment to sink in.

"But it's not enough," she continued. "Yes, we could all go home now, and we would have achieved a lot. We might even be safe for a while. Eventually, though, the Empire and its rulers would come for us, or for our children. It would go back to what it was, or worse. We need to finish this, once and for all!"

"And how do we do that?" a voice called out from the crowd.

"We take the castle," Ceres replied. "We take Delos. And we make it ours. We capture the royals, and we stop their cruelty. Akila, you came here by sea?"

"We did," the rebel leader said.

"Then go to the harbor with your men and make sure we have control of it. I don't want imperials escaping to fetch an army against us, or a fleet sneaking up on us."

She saw Akila nod.

"We'll do it," he assured her.

The second part of this was harder.

"Everyone else, come with me to the castle."

She pointed to where the fortification stood over the city.

"For too long, it has stood as a symbol of the power they have over you. Today, we take it."

She looked around at the crowd, trying to gauge their reaction.

"If you don't have a weapon, get one. If you're too injured, or you don't want to do this, there is no shame in staying, but if you come, you'll be able to say that you were there the day Delos got its freedom!"

She paused.

"People of Delos!" she cried, her voice booming. "Are you with me!?"

The crowd's answering roar was enough to deafen her.

CHAPTER THREE

Stephania clung to the rail of their boat, her knuckles as white as the spray coming off the ocean. She was not enjoying the ocean journey. Only the thought of the vengeance it might lead to made it palatable at all.

She was one of the high nobles of the Empire. When she'd undertaken long journeys before, it had been in the staterooms of great galleys, or cushioned carriages in the midst of well-guarded convoys, not sharing space on a boat that seemed far too tiny against the vast expanse of the ocean.

It wasn't just her comfort that made it difficult, though. Stephania prided herself on being tougher than people thought. She wasn't going to complain just because this leaky tub rolled with every wave, or because of a seemingly endless diet of fish and salt meat. She wasn't even going to complain about the stink of it. Under normal circumstances, Stephania would have plastered her face with her best fake smile and gotten on with it.

Her pregnancy made that harder. Stephania imagined that she could feel the child growing within her now. Thanos's child. Her perfect weapon against him. Hers. It was something that almost hadn't seemed real when she first heard it. Now, with the pregnancy exacerbating every hint of sickness and making the food taste even worse than usual, it all seemed far too real.

Stephania watched Felene working toward the front of the boat, along with Stephania's handmaiden, Elethe. The two made such a contrast to one another. The sailor, thief, and whatever else she was in her rough breeches and tunic, hair braided down her back. The handmaiden with her silks covered by a cloak, shorter hair framing softly dark features with an elegance to them the other woman couldn't hope for.

Felene seemed to be having a high old time of it, singing a sea shanty of such inventive vulgarity that Stephania was sure the other woman was doing it deliberately to bait her. Either that, or it was Felene's idea of courtship. She'd seen some of the looks the thief had given her handmaiden.

And her, but at least they were better than the looks of suspicion. Those had been rare enough at the start, but they had been growing more frequent, and Stephania could guess why. The message she'd sent to lure in Thanos had said that she'd taken Lucious's potion. At the time, it had seemed like the best way to hurt him, but now, it meant that she had to hide the signs of a pregnancy that seemed determined now to make itself known. Even if there weren't the near constant sickness to consider, Stephania was sure that she could feel herself swelling up like a whale, her dresses growing tighter by the day.

She couldn't hide it forever, which meant that she was probably going to have to kill Thanos's pet sailor at some point. Perhaps she could do it now, just walk up to the other woman and shove her over the bow rail of the boat. Or she could offer a water skin. Even given the hurry she'd left in, Stephania still had enough poisons on hand to deal with a legion of potential enemies.

She could even have her handmaiden do it. Elethe was good with knives, after all, although, given that she'd been the sailor's captive when Stephania had found them at the docks, maybe not quite good enough.

That uncertainty was enough to make Stephania pause. This wasn't the kind of thing that she could afford to get wrong. There would be one chance to get this right. So far from other resources, failure wouldn't mean a quiet retreat. It might mean her death.

In any case, they were still too far from land. Stephania couldn't steer the boat, and while her handmaiden would probably be a useful guide in the lands of Felldust, she probably couldn't get them across the ocean to it. They needed the skills of the sailor, both to find land safely again and to get them to the right piece of land. There were things Stephania needed to find, and she couldn't do it if she couldn't even get to the land that had been the Empire's ally for generations now.

Stephania walked over to the others, and for a moment she considered pushing Felene anyway, simply because she seemed surprisingly loyal to Thanos. It wasn't a trait Stephania expected in a self-confessed thief, and it meant that bribery probably wasn't an option. Which only left more violent means.

Still, as Felene turned toward her, Stephania forced a smile.

"How much further do we have to go?" she asked.

Felene lifted her hands like a merchant balancing scales. "A day or two, maybe. It depends on the winds. Resenting my company already, princess?"

"Well," Stephania said, "you are foul-mouthed, condescending, high-handed, and almost gleeful about the fact that you are a criminal."

"And those are just the start of my good points," Felene said with a laugh. "Still, I'll get you to Felldust easy enough. Have you thought about what you're going to do then? Friends at court, maybe, to help find this sorcerer of yours? Do you know where to find him?"

"Where the falling sun meets the skulls of the stone dead," Stephania said, recalling the directions Old Hara the witch had given her. Stephania had paid for those directions with the life of one of her other handmaidens. They hardly seemed like enough.

"It's always this kind of thing," Felene said with a sigh. "Trust me, I've stolen some pretty impressive things in my time, and it's never just straightforward directions. Never a street name and someone telling you to take the third door on the left. Sorcerers, witches, they're the worst. I'm surprised a noble lady like you wants to mess with anything like that."

That was because the sailor knew nothing about Stephania, really. Not the things she'd spent her time learning so that she would be more than just one more face in the background of royal occasions. Certainly not the lengths she was prepared to go to when it came to revenge.

"I will do whatever it takes," Stephania said. "The question is if I can rely on you."

Felene flashed her a smile. "So long as you mostly ask me to do things that include drinking, fighting, and occasional stealing." Her expression turned more serious. "I owe Thanos, and I gave him my word I'd see you safe. I keep my word."

Without that part, she might have been perfect for Stephania's plans. Oh, if only she'd been as open to bribery as the rest of her sort. Or even seduction. Stephania would have given her Elethe as easily as she'd given the old witch Hara her last handmaiden.

"What about when we get to Felldust?" Felene asked. "How do we go about finding this 'place where the sun meets the stone dead'?"

"The skulls of the stone dead are a thing I have heard of," Elethe supplied. "They are in the mountains."

Stephania would have preferred to discuss this privately, but the truth was that there *was* no privacy on their small boat. They needed to talk about it, and that meant talking about it in front of Felene.

"That means we will need to get to the mountains," Stephania said. "Will you be able to arrange it?"

Elethe nodded. "A friend of my family runs caravans that cut through the mountains. It should be easy to organize."

"Without attracting too much attention?" Stephania asked.

"A caravan master who attracts too much attention is one who gets robbed," Elethe assured her. "And we will be able to find more information once we reach the city. Felldust is my home, my lady."

"I am sure you will be most helpful," Stephania said, in a way that turned it into an expression of gratitude. Once, that would have had her handmaiden tripping over herself with joy, but now, she merely smiled. It probably had something to do with all the attention she'd been getting from Felene.

A thin thread of anger rose in Stephania at that. Not jealousy in the conventional sense, because she didn't feel that way about the girl, or anyone, now that Thanos was gone from her life. No, this

was simply because her handmaiden was *hers*. Once, the girl would have thrown herself to her doom at Stephania's command. Now, Stephania couldn't be sure, and that rankled. She would have to find a way to test it before this was through.

She would have to do a lot of things before she was finished in Felldust. She would have to find this sorcerer, and even if her handmaiden understood one of the clues to his location, that would still take time and effort. She would have to do it in a strange land, where the politics and the people would both be different, even if their weaknesses were generally the same the world over.

Even once she found the sorcerer, she would have to find a way to either learn what he knew or gain his aid. Perhaps it would only take money, or a little charm, but Stephania doubted it. Any sorcerer with the strength to stop one of the Ancient Ones would be able to take what he wanted from the world.

No, Stephania would have to be more creative than that, but she would find a way to make it work. Everyone wanted something, whether it was power, fame, knowledge, or simply safety. Stephania had always had a gift for finding out what people wanted; it was so often the lever that opened them up to doing what Stephania needed them to do.

"Tell me, Elethe," she said on impulse. "What is it that you want?"

"To serve you, my lady," the girl said immediately. It was the right answer, of course, but there was a note of sincerity to it that Stephania liked. She would find out the real answer in due course.

"And you, Felene?" Stephania asked.

She watched the thief shrug. "Whatever the world has to offer. Preferably with plenty of treasure, drink, companions, and enjoyment. Not necessarily in that order."

Stephania laughed softly, pretending that she didn't hear the lie there. "Of course. What else *could* someone want?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Felene countered. "What is it that you want, princess? Why go through all this?"

"I want to be safe," Stephania said. "And I want revenge on the ones who took Thanos from me."

"Revenge on the Empire?" Felene said. "I guess I could side with that. They threw me onto that island of theirs, after all."

If she wanted to believe that revenge on the Empire was what Stephania wanted, then let her believe it. The objects of Stephania's anger were more easily defined: Ceres, then Thanos, along with anyone who helped them.

Silently, Stephania repeated the vow she'd made back in Delos. She would raise her child to be the perfect weapon against its father. She would raise the child with love; certainly, she wasn't a monster. But it would have a purpose too. It would know what its father had done.

And that some things could never be forgiven.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lucious had spent most of the voyage to Felldust feeling like he wanted to stab someone. Now that he was getting closer, the feeling only intensified. He was standing there in filthy clothes, the sun baking down on him, fleeing an empire that should have been rushing to obey him.

“Watch where you’re going, boy,” one of the sailors said, pushing past Lucious so that he could fasten a line in place. Lucious hadn’t bothered to remember the man’s name, but right then he wished he had, if only so that he could complain to the captain of this tub about his crew.

“Boy? You know who I am and you dare to call me boy?” Lucious demanded. “I should go to Captain Arvan and have you whipped.”

“You do that,” the sailor said, in the bored tones of someone who knew he was perfectly safe. “See where it gets you.”

Lucious balled his fists. The worst part was the feeling of futility. Captain Arvan stood on the command deck with the boat’s wheel in his hand, the man’s bulk swaying with every wave that rocked the boat. He’d made it perfectly clear that Lucious mattered to him only as far as his money lasted.

As it had ever since he’d left, anger brought with it images of blood and stone. His father’s blood, smeared across the stone of his ancestor’s statue.

The one you killed me with.

Lucious started at that, even though the voice had been there, clear as a morning sky, deep as guilt, ever since he’d struck the first blow. Lucious didn’t believe in ghosts, but the memory of his father’s voice was still there, answering back whenever he was trying to think. Yes, it was just his own mind playing tricks, but that hardly made it better. It just meant that even his own thoughts wouldn’t do as he wished.

Nothing would, at the moment. The captain of the boat he’d found passage on had taken him on grudgingly, as though it wasn’t an honor to have Lucious aboard on his journey. His men treated Lucious with contempt, like some common criminal fleeing from justice, rather than the rightful ruler of the Empire, cruelly usurped from his throne.

From Thanos’s throne.

“Not Thanos’s throne,” Lucious snapped to the empty air. “Mine.”

“You say something?” the sailor asked, not bothering to look around.

Lucious stepped away from him, punching the wood of the mast in annoyance, but that only made pain flash through his knuckles as he took the skin off them. If he’d had his way, he’d have taken the skin off of one or two of the crew as well.

Still, Lucious kept his distance from them, keeping to the clear sections of deck where he’d been told he could go, as if he were some commoner to be instructed on to where to stand. As if he couldn’t rightfully lay claim to any and every vessel in the Empire if he wanted it.

Yet the captain of the boat had done exactly that. He’d left Lucious with clear instructions to stay away from the crew while they worked, and to cause no trouble.

“Otherwise you’ll be over the side and swimming to Felldust,” the man had said.

Perhaps you should have killed him like you did me.

“I am not mad,” Lucious said to himself. “I am not mad.”

He would not allow that, just as he would not allow men to continue to talk down to him as if he didn’t matter. He could still remember the cold state of fury he’d been in when he’d struck his father, feeling the weight of the statue in his hand, lashing out with it because it was the only way to keep hold of what was his.

“You made me do it,” Lucious muttered. “You gave me no choice.”

Just as I’m sure none of your victims gave you a choice, the inner voice said. How many have you killed now?

“What does it matter?” Lucious demanded. He strode to the rail and yelled out over the rush of the waves. “It doesn’t matter!”

“Be quiet, whelp, we’re trying to work here!” the captain of the ship called down from where he steered the thing.

You can’t even do the right thing in the middle of the ocean, the voice within him said.

“Shut up,” Lucious snapped. “Shut up!”

“You dare to talk to me like that, boy?” the captain demanded, stepping down onto the main deck to confront him. The man was larger than Lucious, and normally fear would have run through him then. There was no room for it right then, because memories pushed it out. Memories of violence. Memories of blood. “I am the captain of this vessel!”

“And I am a king!” Lucious shot back, lashing out with a punch that was intended to catch the other man on the jaw and send him reeling back. He’d never believed in fighting fair.

Instead, the captain stepped back, dodging the strike with ease. Lucious slipped on the wetness of the deck and in that moment the other man slapped him.

Slapped him! Like he was some whore who’d spoken out of turn, not a warrior worth fighting. Not a prince!

Even so, the blow was enough to drop him to the deck, and Lucious made a small sound of anger.

Better stay down, boy, his father’s voice whispered.

“Shut up!”

He reached into his tunic, searching for the knife he kept there. That was when Captain Arvan kicked him.

The first blow caught Lucious in the stomach, hard enough to roll him from his knees to his back. The second only clipped his head, but it was still enough to make him see stars. It didn’t do anything to silence his father’s voice.

Call yourself a warrior. I know you learned better than that.

Easy to say when he wasn’t the one being beaten to death on a ship’s deck.

“Think you can knife me, boy?” Captain Arvan demanded. “I’d sell your carcass if I thought anyone would pay for it. As it is, we’ll drop you in the water and see if even the sharks turn up their noses at you!” There was a pause, punctuated by another kick. “You two, grab him. We’ll see how well royalty floats.”

“I am a king!” Lucious complained as strong hands started to pick him up. “A king!”

And soon you’ll be an ex-king, his father’s voice supplied.

Lucious felt himself weightless as the men lifted him, high enough that he could see the endless water around them, into which he would soon be thrown to drown. Except that it wasn’t endless, was it? Could he see —

“Land ahoy!” their lookout yelled.

For a moment, the tension held, and Lucious was sure that he was going to be pitched into the water anyway.

Then Captain Arvan’s voice boomed out above all of it.

“Leave that royal waste of breath! We’ve all duties to get to, and we’ll be rid of him soon enough.”

The sailors didn’t question it. Instead, they threw Lucious down to the deck, leaving him while they set about hauling on ropes with the rest of the crew.

You should be grateful, his father’s voice whispered.

Lucious was anything but grateful, though. Instead, he mentally added this ship and its crew to the list of those who would pay once he had his throne back. He’d see them burn.

He’d see them all burn.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thanos sat in his cage and waited for death. He twisted and turned in the sun of Delos, slowly baking while across the courtyard, guards worked to build the gallows on which he would be killed. Thanos had never felt so helpless.

Or so thirsty. They'd ignored him there, giving him nothing to eat or drink, directing their attention Thanos's way only so that they could rattle their swords across the bars of his gibbet, taunting him.

Servants hurried back and forth across the courtyard, a sense of urgency to their errands that suggested something was happening in the castle Thanos didn't know about. Or perhaps this was simply the way things happened in the wake of a king's death. Perhaps all this activity was simply Queen Athena getting Delos to run the way she wanted.

Thanos could imagine the queen doing that. While someone else might have been caught up in their grief, barely able to function, Thanos could imagine her seeing her husband's death as an opportunity.

Thanos's hands tightened on the bars of the gibbet. There was every chance that he was the only one truly mourning his father's death right then. The servants and the people of Delos had every reason to hate their king. Athena was probably too caught up in her schemes to care. As for Lucious...

"I will find you," Thanos promised. "There will be justice for this. For everything."

"Oh, there will be justice, right enough," one of the guards said. "Just as soon as we gut you for what you did."

He lashed out at the bars, catching Thanos's fingers in a way that made him hiss with pain. Thanos made a grab for him, but the guard just laughed, dancing back out of range and going to help the others with the construction of the stage upon which Thanos would eventually be killed.

It was a stage. This whole thing was a show. In one instant of violence, Athena would take control of the Empire, both removing the main danger to her power and showing that she remained in charge, in spite of her son ascending to the crown.

Maybe she even really believed that would be the case. If so, Thanos wished her luck. Athena was evil and grasping, but her son was a madman without limits. He had already killed his father, and if his mother thought she could control him, then she would need all the help she could get.

So would everyone in Delos, from the least peasant all the way to Stephania, trapped and at the mercy of royalty that didn't have any.

The thought of his wife made Thanos wince. He'd come here to save her, and instead it had come to this. If he hadn't been there, perhaps things would have turned out better. Perhaps the guards would have realized that Lucious was the one who had killed the king. Perhaps they would have acted, rather than trying to sweep it all away.

"Or perhaps they would have blamed it on the rebellion," Thanos said, "and given Lucious another excuse."

He could imagine that. No matter how bad it all got, Lucious would always find a way to blame it on others. And if he hadn't been there at the end, he wouldn't have been able to hear his father acknowledge who he was. He wouldn't have learned that there was proof of it to be found in Felldust.

He wouldn't have had a chance to say goodbye, or hold his father as he died. His regrets now were all about the fact that he wouldn't get to see Stephania before they executed him, or get to make sure that she was all right. Even given all that she'd done, he shouldn't have abandoned her on that dock. It had been a selfish move, thinking only of his own anger and disgust. It had been a move that had cost him his wife, and the life of his child.

It was a move that was probably going to cost Thanos his own life, given that he was only there because Stephania was trapped. If he'd taken her with him, left her safe on Haylon, none of this would have happened.

Thanos knew then that there was one thing he needed to do before they executed him. He couldn't escape, couldn't hope to avoid what was waiting for him, but he could still try to make this right.

He waited for another of the servants crossing the courtyard to come close. The first one he signaled to kept walking.

"Please," he called over to the second, who glanced around before shaking his head and continuing on his way.

The third, a young woman, paused.

"We're not supposed to talk to you," she said. "We've been forbidden from bringing you food or water. The queen wants you to suffer for killing the king."

"I didn't kill him," Thanos said. He reached out as she started to turn away. "I don't expect you to believe that, and I'm not asking for water. Could you bring me charcoal and paper? The queen can't have forbidden that."

"Are you planning to write a message to the rebellion?" the servant asked.

Thanos shook his head. "Nothing like that. You can read what I write if you want to."

"I... I'll try." She looked as though she might have said more, but Thanos saw one of the guards glance their way, and the servant hurried off.

Waiting was hard. How was he meant to watch guards constructing the gallows from which he would be hanged until nearly dead, or the great wheel on which he would be broken afterwards? It was a small cruelty that said that even if Queen Athena managed to get a grip on her son, the Empire would be far from perfect.

He was still thinking about all the cruelties that Lucious and his mother might inflict on the land when the servant arrived with something tucked under her arm. It was only a scrap of parchment and the smallest stick of charcoal, but she still passed it to him as furtively as if it were the key to his freedom.

Thanos took it just as carefully. He had no doubt that the guards would take it from him, if only for the small opportunity to hurt him more. Even if there were any who weren't completely corrupted by the cruelty of the Empire, they believed him to be the worst of traitors, deserving all he got.

He hunched in over the scrap, whispering the words as he tried to write, trying to get it exactly as it should be. He wrote in tiny letters, knowing that there was a lot in his heart that he needed to get down there:

To my darling wife, Stephania. By the time you read this, I will have been executed. Perhaps you will feel that I deserve it, after the way I left you behind. Perhaps you will feel some of the pain that I feel knowing that you have been forced into too many things that you did not want.

Thanos tried to think of the words for everything he felt. It was hard to get it all down, or to make sense of the confusing mess of feelings swirling inside him:

I... did love you, and I came to Delos to try to save you. I am sorry that I could not, even if I am not sure we could ever have been together again. I... know how happy you were to learn about our child, and I was filled with joy as well. Even like this, my biggest regret is that we will never see the son or daughter who could have been.

Just the thought of that brought with it more pain than any of the blows the guards had inflicted. He should have come back sooner to free Stephania. He should never have left her behind.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing that there wouldn't be enough space to write everything he wanted to say. He certainly couldn't get his feelings down in something he was going to entrust a stranger to deliver. He just hoped that this would be enough.

He could have written so much more, but that was the heart of it. His sorrow that things had gone wrong. The fact that there had been love there. He hoped it would be enough.

Thanos waited for the servant to come near again, stopping her with an outstretched arm.

“Can you take this to Lady Stephania?” he asked.

The servant shook her head. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” Thanos said. He understood the risk he was asking the servant to take.

“But if anyone can get it to her while she’s still locked up – ”

“It’s not that,” the servant said. “Lady Stephania isn’t here. She left.”

“Left?” Thanos echoed. “When?”

The servant spread her hands. “I don’t know. I heard one of her handmaidens talking about it. She went off into the city, and she didn’t come back.”

Had she escaped? Had she made it out of there without his help? Her handmaiden had said it was impossible, but had Stephania found a way anyway? He could hope that it was possible, couldn’t he?

Thanos was still thinking about that when he realized that activity around the gallows had stopped. Looking at it, it was easy to see why. It was finished. Guards stood waiting beside it, obviously admiring their construction. A noose hung, dark against the skyline. A winding wheel and brazier stood nearby. Towering over it all was a great wheel, chains set into it, a huge hammer resting on the floor beside it.

He could see people gathering now. There were guards standing in a ring around the edges of the courtyard, looking both as though they were there to prevent others from interfering and as though they wanted to see Thanos’s death for themselves.

Above, looking from windows, Thanos could see servants and nobles, some looking down with what seemed like pity, others with blank faces or outright hatred. Thanos could see a few even perched on the rooftop, looking down from there since they couldn’t find another spot. They were treating this as if it were the social event of the season rather than an execution, and a thread of anger rose in Thanos at that.

“Traitor!”

“Murderer!”

The catcalls came down, insults followed by fruit from the windows, and that was the hardest part of it. Thanos had thought that these people respected him, and would know he could never do what he’d been accused of, but they jeered him as if he were the worst of criminals. Not all of them insulted him, but enough did, and Thanos found himself wondering if they really hated him that much, or if they just wanted to show the new king and his mother which side they were on.

He fought when they came for him, dragging him from his gibbet. He punched and he kicked, struck out and tried to twist free, yet whatever he did it wasn’t enough. The guards caught his arms, twisting them behind him and tying them in place. Thanos stopped fighting then, but only because he wanted to have *some* dignity in this moment.

They led him, step by step, to the gallows they’d built. Thanos climbed up without prompting onto the stool they’d set beneath the noose. If he was lucky, maybe the fall would snap his neck, depriving them of the rest of their cruel sport.

As they set the noose around his neck, he found himself thinking about Ceres. About everything that could have been different. He’d wanted to change things. He’d wanted things to be better, and to be with her. He wished...

There was no time for wishes though, because Thanos felt the guards kick the stool away, and the noose tightened around his neck.

CHAPTER SIX

Ceres didn't care that the castle was meant to be the Empire's last, impenetrable bastion. She didn't care that it had walls like sheer cliffs or doors that could withstand siege weapons. This ended here.

"Forward!" she yelled to her followers, and they surged in her wake. Maybe another general would have led from the rear, planning this carefully and letting others take the risks. Ceres couldn't do that. She wanted to take apart what was left of the Empire's power herself, and she suspected that half the reason so many people were following her was because of that.

There were more now even than there had been in the Stade. The people of the city had come out into the streets, the rebellion spreading again like burning embers given fresh fuel. There were people there in the clothes of dockhands and butchers, hostlers and merchants. There were even a few guards now, their imperial colors hurriedly torn away when they saw the tide of humanity approaching.

"They'll be ready for us," one of the combatlords beside Ceres said as they marched on the castle.

Ceres shook her head. "They'll see us coming. That's not the same thing as being ready."

No one could be ready for this. Ceres didn't care how many men the Empire had now, or how strong their walls were. She had a whole city on her side. She and the combatlords raced through the streets, along the wide promenade that led up toward the gates of the castle. They were the head of the spear, with the people of Delos and what was left of Lord West's men following along behind them on a tide of hope and popular anger.

Ceres heard shouting ahead as they neared the castle, and the sound of horns as soldiers tried to organize some kind of meaningful defense.

"It's too late," Ceres said. "They can't stop us now."

Yet there were things they could do even then, she knew. Arrows started to fall from the walls, not in the numbers that had formed such a deadly rain for Lord West's troops, but still more than dangerous enough for those with no armor. Ceres saw one take a man beside her through the chest. A woman went down screaming further back.

"Those with shields or protection, to me," Ceres called. "Everyone else, be ready to charge."

Yet the castle's gates were already closing. Ceres had a vision of her followers as a wave breaking on it as if it were the hull of some great ship, but she didn't slow. Waves could swamp ships, too. Even when the great gates slammed together with a sound like thunder, she didn't stop. She just knew there would be more effort involved in defeating the Empire's evil.

"Climb!" she yelled to the combatlords, sheathing her twin swords so that she could leap at the wall. The rough stone had enough handholds for anyone brave enough to try it, and the combatlords were more than brave enough for that. They followed her, their muscled frames pulling them up the stonework as if it were some training exercise ordered by their blade masters.

Ceres heard those behind her calling for ladders, and knew that the ordinary people of the rebellion would follow her soon enough. For now though, she just concentrated on the gritty feel of the stone under her hands, the effort needed to drag herself from one handhold to the next.

A spear flashed by her, obviously thrown by someone above. Ceres pressed herself flat to the wall, letting it go by, then kept climbing. She was a target as long as she was on the wall, and the only solution was to keep going. Ceres found herself feeling grateful that they wouldn't have enough time to prepare boiling oil or burning sand as a protection against climbing.

She reached the top of the wall, and instantly there was a guard there to defend. Ceres was glad she was the first one up there, because only her speed saved her, letting her reach out to grab her opponent and pull him from his perch atop the battlements. He fell with a scream, tumbling down into the seething mass of her followers.

Ceres leapt onto the wall then, drawing both her blades to cut left and right. A second man came at her, and she parried while she thrust, feeling the blade sink home. A spear came in from the side, glancing from her partial armor. Ceres cut back with brutal force. In seconds, she'd carved a clear space at the top of the wall, and combatlords poured over the edge then to fill it.

Some of the guards there tried to fight back. A man struck at Ceres with an axe. She ducked, hearing the thud as it struck stone behind her, then lanced one of her swords through his gut. She stepped around him, kicking him down toward the courtyard. She caught a slash against her blades and pushed another man back.

There weren't enough guards to hold the wall. Some ran. The ones who came forward died. One ran at Ceres with a spear, and she felt it nick her leg as she dodged with no space. She cut low to hamstring her attacker, and then brought her blades across at throat height.

Her brief beachhead atop the wall quickly expanded into something approaching a wave front. Ceres found steps leading down to the gates, and took them four at a time, pausing only to parry a thrust from a waiting guard and strike back with a kick that sent him sprawling. While the combatlord behind her leapt at the guard, Ceres's attention was on the gates.

A great wheel stood beside the gates, obviously there to open their bulk. There were almost a dozen guards beside it in a ring, trying to protect it and keep out the horde of people beyond. More stood with bows, ready to shoot down anyone who tried to open the gates.

Ceres charged at the wheel without pausing.

She thrust through the armor of one guard, drew out her sword, and ducked under a second's blow. She swept her sword across his thigh, leapt up to her feet, and cut down a third. She heard an arrow clatter from the cobbles, and threw one blade, hearing a scream as it connected. She snatched up a dying guard's sword, rejoined the battle, and in an instant, the others were with her.

It was chaos there in the next few moments, because the guards seemed to understand that this was their last chance to keep out the rebellion. One came at Ceres with two blades, and she matched him cut for cut, feeling the impact as she parried each one, probably faster than most of the others around them could follow. Then she thrust in between the strokes, catching the guard through the throat, moving on before he could even collapse so that she could parry an axe blow aimed at a combatlord.

She couldn't save all of them. Around her, Ceres saw violence that never seemed to stop. She saw one of the combatlords who had survived the Stade looking down at a sword that pierced his chest. He pulled in his attacker as he fell, hitting him with one final swipe of his own blade. Ceres saw another man fighting against three guards. He killed one, but as he did so, his blade caught, and another was able to stab him in the side.

Ceres charged forward, cutting down both of those who were left. Around her, the battle for the door wheel raged to its inevitable conclusion. It *was* inevitable, because faced with the combatlords, the guards there were like ripe corn, waiting to be cut down. That didn't make the violence any less real though, or the threat. Ceres dodged back just in time from a sword thrust and threw the wielder back into the others there. As soon as the space was clear, Ceres put her hands to the wheel and pushed with all the strength her powers gave her. She heard the creak of pulleys, and the slow groan of the doors as they started to part.

People poured in, flowing into the castle. Her father and brother were among the first through the gap, racing to join her. Ceres gestured with her sword.

"Spread out!" she yelled. "Take the castle. Kill only those you have to. This is a time for freedom, not butchery. The Empire falls today!"

Ceres went at the head of the wave of people, heading for the throne room. In times of crisis people would head there to try to learn what was happening, and Ceres guessed that those in charge of the castle would stay there as long as they dared, trying to maintain control.

Around her, she saw violence breaking out, impossible to contain, impossible to do more than slow down. She saw a young nobleman step out in front of them, and the crowd fell on him, beating him with whatever weapons they could grab. A servant got in their way, and Ceres saw her shoved against the wall and stabbed.

“No!” Ceres yelled as she saw some of the ordinary folk there starting to grab for tapestries or running after nobles. “We’re here to stop this, not loot!”

The truth was, though, that it was already too late. Ceres saw rebels chasing after one of the servants there, while others grabbed for the golden ornaments that filled the castle. She’d let a tidal wave into it, and now there was no hope of turning it back just with words.

A squadron of royal bodyguards stood in front of the doors to the great hall. They looked formidable in their gilt-edged armor, etched with false musculature and images designed to intimidate.

“Surrender and you will not be harmed,” Ceres promised them, hoping now that she would be able to keep that promise.

The royal bodyguards didn’t even pause. They charged forward with drawn blades, and in an instant, everything was chaos again. The royal bodyguards were among the finest warriors of the Empire, their skills honed through long hours of training. The first one to lunge at her was fast enough that even Ceres had to bring her blade up sharply to intercept the blow.

She parried again, her second blade slipping around the bodyguard’s weapon and darting into his throat. Beside her, she could hear the sounds of people fighting and dying, but she didn’t dare to look around. She was too busy pushing back another opponent, shoving him into the heaving mass of the melee.

It was nothing but crushing bodies then. Swords seemed to emerge from it as though from some great writhing pool of flesh. She saw a man crushed against the doors, the sheer weight of people behind him squashing him there, just as they carried her forward.

Ceres waited until she got closer, then kicked the door to the great hall. The castle gates had been solid, but these broke open under the power of her blow, rocking back until they slammed into the walls on either side.

Within the great hall, Ceres saw clusters of nobles, waiting as if unsure where to go. She heard several of the noblewomen there scream as if some horde of murderers had descended upon them. From where they stood, Ceres guessed it probably didn’t look too different from that at all.

She saw Queen Athena at the heart of it all, sitting on the high throne that should have been the king’s, flanked by a pair of the largest bodyguards there. They ran forward in unison, and Ceres stepped in to meet them.

She did more than step, she rolled.

She threw herself forward, diving under the sweeping blades of the attackers, tumbling and coming up in one smooth movement. She turned, striking out with both of her swords at once, catching the bodyguards with enough force to punch through their armor. They fell without a sound.

One sound did echo over the clashing blades at the door: the sound of Queen Athena clapping with deliberate slowness.

“Oh, very good,” she said as Ceres turned back to her. “Very elegant. Worthy of any jester. What will you do for your next trick?”

Ceres didn’t rise to the bait. She knew Athena had nothing but words left. Of course she was going to try to get all she could from them.

“Next, I bring the Empire to an end,” Ceres said.

She saw Queen Athena fix her with a level glare. “With yourself in its place? Here comes the new Empire, same as the old.”

That hit closer than Ceres would have liked. She’d heard the screams of the nobles as the rebels with her had spread like wildfire through the castle. She’d seen some of those they’d cut down.

“I’m nothing like you,” Ceres said.

The queen didn’t answer for a moment. Instead, she laughed, and some of the nobles joined in with her, obviously long accustomed to tittering along when their queen found something funny. Others seemed far too scared, cowering back.

She felt her father’s hand on her shoulder then. “You’re nothing like her at all.”

There was no time to think about that though, because the crowd around Ceres was getting restless.

“What are we going to do with them?” one of the combatlords demanded.

A rebel provided a quick answer. “Kill them!”

“Kill them! Kill them!” It became a chant, and Ceres could see the hatred rising there in the crowd. It felt far too much like the baying that had come in the Stade, waiting for blood. Demanding it.

A man stepped forward, heading for one of the noblewomen with a knife in his hand. Ceres reacted on instinct, and this time she was fast enough. She smashed into the would-be killer, knocking him sprawling so that he stared up at Ceres in shock.

“That’s *enough*!” Ceres yelled, and the room was silent in that moment.

She looked around at them, shaming them into stepping back, meeting their gazes regardless of who they were.

“No more killing,” she said. “*No more.*”

“What do we do with them, then?” a rebel demanded, gesturing at the nobles. He was obviously braver than the rest, or just hated the nobles more.

“We arrest them,” Ceres said. “Father, Sartes, can you see to that? Make sure that no one kills them, or harms anyone else here?”

She could guess at all the ways it might go wrong. There was so much anger among the people of the city, and among all those the Empire had wronged. It would be easy for this to turn into the kind of massacre worthy of Lucious, with horrors that Ceres would never want to be involved in.

“And what will you be doing?” Sartes asked her.

Ceres could understand the fear she heard in that. Her brother had probably thought that she would be there to organize all this, but the truth was that there was no one Ceres trusted more than him to do this.

“I need to finish taking the castle,” Ceres said. “My way.”

“Yes,” Queen Athena said, cutting in. “Coat your hands with more blood. How many people have died so far for your so-called ideals?”

Ceres could have ignored that. She could have just walked away, but there was something about the queen that was impossible to just leave be, like a wound that wasn’t quite healed over.

“How many have died so you could take what you wanted from them?” Ceres countered. “You’ve put so much into tearing down the rebellion, when you could have just *listened* and learned something. You’ve hurt so many people. You’ll pay for that.”

She saw Queen Athena’s tight smile. “No doubt with my head.”

Ceres ignored her, starting to walk away.

“Still,” Queen Athena said, “I won’t be alone. It’s too late for Thanos, dear.”

“Thanos?” Ceres said, and the word was enough to stop her. She turned back to where the queen still sat on the throne. “What have you done? Where is he?”

She saw Queen Athena’s smile widen. “You really don’t know, do you?”

Ceres could feel her anger and impatience building. Not at the way the queen was taunting her, but at what it might mean if Thanos were truly in danger.

The queen laughed again. This time, no one joined in. “You came all the way here, and you don’t even know that your favorite prince is about to die for the murder of his king.”

“Thanos wouldn’t murder anyone!” Ceres insisted.

She wasn't sure why she even had to say it. Surely no one truly believed that Thanos could ever do anything like that!

"He's still going to die for it," Queen Athena replied, with a note of calmness that made Ceres rush over to grab her, putting a blade to her throat.

In that moment, all thoughts of stopping the violence fell forgotten from her mind.

"Where is he?" she demanded. "Where *is he*?"

She saw the queen pale, and there was a part of Ceres that was happy about that. Queen Athena deserved to be frightened.

"The south courtyard, waiting for his execution. You see, you're no different from us."

Ceres threw her from the throne to the floor. "Someone take her before I do something I'll regret."

Ceres ran from the hall, pushing her way past the last dregs of the fight around her. Behind her, she heard Queen Athena laughing.

"You're too late! You'll never get there in time to save him."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stephania sat watching the horizon, doing her best to ignore the bouncing of the ship and trying to judge the moment when she would have to murder the boat's captain.

That she would have to do it was without doubt. Felene had been like a gift from the gods when Stephania and her handmaiden had met the captain in Delos. Felene had been a way out of the city, and a way to get to Felldust. All sent by Thanos's own hand.

But because she was Thanos's, she had to die. The very fact that she was loyal enough to convey them this far meant that she was too loyal to trust with everything Stephania intended to do next. The only question now was the timing.

That was a balancing act. Stephania looked up, seeing the sea birds flying overhead.

"They're a sign we're getting closer to shore, aren't they?" she asked.

"Very good, princess," Felene said, moving around from where she was trying to teach Elethe to fish off the bow rail, standing slightly closer than she needed to. The familiarity of her tone made Stephania's hackles rise, but she did her best to disguise it.

"So we'll be there soon?"

"A little while, and we'll sight land," Felene said. "Another after that, and we'll reach the fishing village where Elethe says we'll find her uncle's people. Why? Eager to stop throwing up?"

"Eager to do a lot of things," Stephania replied. Although putting her feet back on dry land was one of them. Morning sickness did not mix well with seasickness.

It was just one of the reasons she needed to kill Felene sooner rather than later. Sooner or later, she would realize that Stephania was pregnant, and that didn't fit with the story she'd told about Lucious forcing her to drink his potion.

When would she guess? It couldn't have been more obvious to Stephania that she was pregnant now, her dress feeling stretched tight across her expanding belly, her body seeming to change in so many ways as the life grew inside her. She put a hand on her abdomen automatically, wanting to protect the life inside her, wanting it to grow and become strong. Yet Felene continued to spend her time with Elethe, so easily distracted by a pretty face.

That was another thing to consider when judging when to act. Yes, Stephania needed to leave it long enough for them to close in on land, but the longer she left it, the greater the danger was that her handmaiden's loyalties might be tested. As useful as Felene might be, Elethe would be far more useful when it came to finding the sorcerer. More than that, the handmaiden was *hers*.

For now though, Stephania waited, because she didn't want to have to pilot this tub when there was no land in sight. She waited and she watched while Felene helped her handmaiden land a struggling fish, beheading it with a wickedly sharp-looking knife. That she looked over while she did it only told Stephania that she was running out of time.

Thoughts of what she was there to do drove Stephania on, hardening her resolve. Felldust held the sorcerer who had killed Ancient Ones. Felldust would provide her with a way to bring down Ceres. After that... after that, she could deal with Thanos, forging her child into the weapon she needed.

"It didn't need to come to this," Stephania said, standing so that she could look out over the rail.

"What's that, princess?" Felene asked.

"I said, is that land over there?" Stephania asked.

It was, the black dust of the coast rising up on the edge of the horizon. At first, it was just a faint line above the waves, rising up like some rocky sun until it started to fill Stephania's view.

"Aye," Felene said, moving to the rail and looking out. "We'll soon have you safe and sound on land, princess."

Stephania's hand dipped into her cloak. With the infinite care only known to those who worked with poisons, she palmed a dart. "Felene, there's something I've wanted to say to you since we set off."

“What’s that, princess?” Felene said with a mocking smile.

“It’s simple,” Stephania said with a smile of her own. “Do *not* call me princess!”

Her hand flashed around, the dart glinting in the sun as she went for the exposed skin of Felene’s face.

Pain flared in her wrist and it took Stephania a moment to realize that Felene had brought her elbow up, letting Stephania’s arm collide with it. Stephania’s hand spasmed open, and she saw the dart tumble over the side.

By then, pain was already flaring in her cheek as Felene slapped her, hard enough that Stephania reeled. This wasn’t the delicate, ladylike slap of some noble girl. It was a sailor’s blow, and it had weight behind it that sat Stephania down hard on the planks of the deck.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Felene demanded. “Do you think I don’t know you’ve been working up to this since we left?”

“I – ” Stephania began, but the ringing in her ears wouldn’t let her keep going.

“You’re lucky you’re carrying Thanos’s child, or I’d feed you to the sharks right now!” Felene snapped. “Oh yes, I’ve spotted the signs! And now I’m debating whether to sell you on to a slaver, kill you outright as soon as Thanos’s child is born, or just call the whole thing a bad deal and set off back for Delos!”

Stephania started to stand, and Felene pushed her back down. “Oh no, princess, you can stay where you’re put. It’s safer for all of us that way, until I find enough rope to lash you to the mast.”

Stephania looked past her then, to Elethe. She gave just the barest of nods, hoping that it would be enough.

It was. Her handmaiden drew a short, curved blade and leapt forward. It seemed that Felene was ready for that too, though, because she spun and parried the first stroke, her own knife in her hand again.

“Pity,” Felene said. “We could have had a lot of fun. I survived the Isle of Prisoners. You think I can’t handle you?”

Stephania had to sit and admire the fight that followed for a moment, and not just because her head was still ringing from Felene’s slap. Normally, she had no time for the play of blades, or the carefully honed skills of warriors. These two, however, made their knives dance in the sun as they fought, hands trapping one another’s arms, looking for angles. Stephania saw Felene go for a low kick, then dodge back from a swipe. She moved close to Elethe, grappling with her as they both sought to thrust their blades home.

That was when Stephania stood, drawing a knife of her own and thrusting it into Felene’s back.

Stephania saw her fall to her knees, her face a picture of surprise as she put her hand to the wound. Her knife clattered to the deck as her fingers opened.

“I wasn’t on the Isle of Prisoners at all,” Stephania said. “Which of us does that make the cleverest?”

Felene turned toward her, but Stephania could see even that was an effort for her. Stephania smiled over to Elethe.

“Well done. Your loyalty will be rewarded. Now, we should cut her throat and throw her over the side. We can’t show up in Felldust dragging a body with us, and after all she’s done, I’m sure you’ll want revenge.”

Stephania saw Elethe hesitate before she nodded, but that was only to be expected. Not everyone could be as practical about these things as she was. Stephania could understand that, and Elethe had already more than proved her loyalty. Perhaps she would do it herself. After all, Felene wasn’t armed anymore.

Stephania took a step forward.

“Until you hit me, this wasn’t personal,” she said. “It was simply necessary. Now... do you know there’s a poison they use in some of the southlands, that kills by stopping all the muscles? In

the right dose, it doesn't kill at all, merely leaves someone immobile. Should I give you that before I throw you in?"

She took another step and saw Felene struggling to her feet. That didn't matter; with Elethe's help, she would be easy to overpower again.

"No, I owe you more than that for bringing us all this way. A cut throat it is."

She saw Felene tense, as if ready to throw herself forward in one last burst of violence. Stephania readied herself, flinching back as she prepared for the onslaught of violence.

In that moment, the sailor did the one thing Stephania hadn't been prepared for. She flung herself sideways, over the boat's railing. Stephania heard the splash as she hit the water, and saw the foam of the waves rise up high enough to slop over the deck.

Stephania rushed to the railing, and Elethe was there beside her, looking down with an expression of worry that made Stephania glad it hadn't come to throat cutting after all, because that might have pushed her handmaiden a little too far.

"I know it's hard," Stephania said, putting a hand on Elethe's shoulder. "But sometimes, these things must be done. And you did well. I'm proud of you."

"What about Felene?" her handmaiden asked. "Do you think we should wait and see if she survives?"

There was a note of hope there that Stephania needed to quash quickly. "You heard her say that there were sharks. The wound was deep, and it's a long way to land. It's done."

She saw her handmaiden nod.

"Well done, Elethe," Stephania repeated. "You have been the most loyal of all of my handmaidens."

She needed to remind her handmaiden whose she was, but for now, there were more pressing concerns.

"We still need to find a way to get this boat to shore," Stephania said. "And then we have to find the sorcerer."

"I've learned a lot about piloting the boat from our time at sea," Elethe assured her. "Felene was eager to show me."

That probably hadn't been all of it, but it was over now. The sailor was dead. They were almost to Felldust, and after that, it was only a matter of time before they found the sorcerer.

Things were going well at last, especially since her handmaiden really did seem to know how to pilot the boat now, guiding it unerringly in the direction of the mainland. All Stephania had to do was sit at the stern of the boat, letting Elethe do the work.

Stephania smiled as she watched the blood float on the water behind them, and imagined the sharks starting to gather.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A king should have been greeted by trumpeters, heralds, and pageantry. Instead, there was only the thud of Port Leeward's dock as the sailors threw him onto it.

Lucious groaned, caught between pain and anger as he struck the wood.

"I am a king!" Lucious whimpered. "A king!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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