

MORGAN RICE

OF CROWNS AND GLORY—BOOK 2

ROGUE,
PRISONER,
PRINCESS

Of Crowns and Glory

Морган Райс

Rogue, Prisoner, Princess

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Rogue, Prisoner, Princess / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (Of Crowns and Glory)

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17 year old Ceres, a beautiful, poor girl from the Empire city of Delos, finds herself forced, by royal decree, to fight in the Stade, the brutal arena where warriors from all corners of the world come to kill each other. Pitted against ferocious opponents, her chances of survival are slim. Her only chance lies in drawing on her innermost powers, and making the transition, once and for all, from slave to warrior. 18 year old Prince Thanos wakes on the isle of Haylon to discover he has been stabbed in the back by his own people, left for dead on the blood-soaked beach. Captured by the rebels, he must crawl his way back to life, find who tried to assassinate him, and seek his revenge. Ceres and Thanos, a world apart, have not lost their love for each other; yet the Empire court teems with lies, betrayal and duplicity, and as jealous royals weave intricate lies, they each, in a tragic misunderstanding, are led to believe the other is dead. The choices they make will determine each other's fate. Will Ceres survive the Stade and become the warrior she was meant to be? Will Thanos heal and discover the secret being withheld from him? Will the two of them, forced apart, find each other again? **ROGUE, PRISONER, PRINCESS** 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

ROGUE, PRISONER, PRINCESS

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 two books (and counting); 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.”

– *Books and Movie Reviews*
Roberto Mattos

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

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

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

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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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KINGS AND SORCERERS



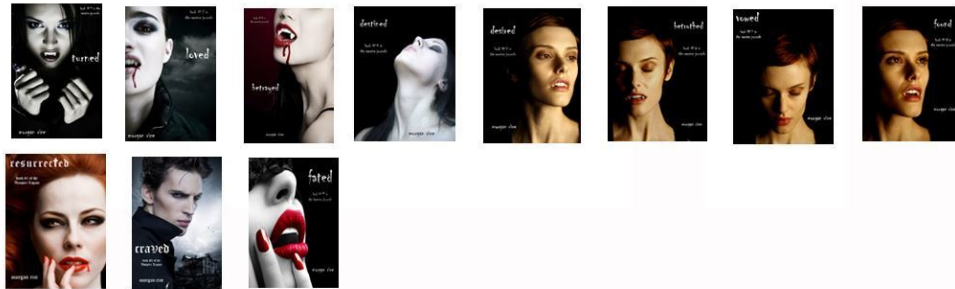
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CHAPTER ONE

“Ceres! Ceres! Ceres!”

Ceres could feel the chant of the crowd as clearly as her own thudding heartbeat. She raised her sword in acknowledgment, tightening her grip as she did, testing the leather. It didn't matter to her that they'd probably only learned her name a few moments ago. It was enough that they knew it, and that it was reverberating through her, so that she could feel it almost as a physical force.

Across the Stade, facing her, her opponent, the massive combatlord, paced the sands. Ceres swallowed at the sight of him, fear rising up in her, as much as she tried to suppress it. This, she knew, could very well be the last fight of her life.

The combatlord paced like a caged lion, swinging his sword through the air in arcs that seemed to be designed to show off his bulging muscles. With his breastplate and visored helmet, he looked as if he could have been carved from stone. It was hard for Ceres to believe that he was just flesh and blood.

Ceres closed her eyes and steeled herself.

You can do this, she told herself. You may not win, but you must face him valiantly. If you are to die, you must die with honor.

A trumpet blast rang in Ceres's ears, rising up even over the baying of the crowd. It filled the arena, and suddenly, her opponent was charging.

He was faster than she thought such a big man had any right to be, on her before she had a chance to react. It was all Ceres could do to dodge, kicking up dust as she got out of the warrior's path.

The combatlord swung his blade with two hands and Ceres ducked, feeling the rush of air as it passed. He hacked down like a butcher wielding a cleaver, and when she spun and blocked the stroke, the impact of metal on metal rang up her arms. She did not think it possible a warrior could be that strong.

She circled away, her opponent following with a grim inevitability.

Ceres heard her name mixed in with the cheers and boos of the crowd. She forced herself to stay focused; she kept her eyes fixed on her opponent and tried to remember her training, thinking through all the things that might happen next. She tried to slash, and then rolled her wrist to send her sword around the parry.

But the combatlord merely grunted as her blade took a nick out of his forearm.

He smiled as if he'd enjoyed it.

“You'll pay for that,” he warned. His accent was thick, from one of the far corners of the Empire.

He was on her again, forcing her to parry and dodge, and she knew she couldn't risk a head-on clash, not with someone this strong.

Ceres felt the ground give way beneath her right foot, a sensation of emptiness there where there should have been firm support. She glanced down and saw sand pouring down into a pit below. For a moment, her foot hung over empty space, and she thrust out blindly with her sword as she struggled to keep her balance.

The combatlord's parry was almost contemptuous. For an instant, Ceres was sure she was going to die, because there was no way to fully stop the answering stroke. She felt the jarring impact of the blow against her blade. It only slowed it, though, as it slammed into her armor. Her breastplate pressed back into her flesh with bruising force, while at the spot where it ended, she felt pain flare white hot as the sword cut along her collarbone.

She stumbled back and as she did, she saw more pits opening around the floor of the arena, like the mouths of hungry beasts. And then, desperate, she had an idea: maybe she could use them to her advantage.

Ceres skirted around the edges of the pits, hoping to slow his approach.

“Ceres!” Paulo called.

She turned and her weapon-keeper threw a short spear in her direction. Its shaft thudded into her slick palm as she caught it, the wood feeling rough. The spear was shorter than might have been used in a real battle, but it was still long enough to thrust its leaf-shaped head across the pits.

“I’ll take you a slice at a time,” the combatlord promised, edging his way around.

With an opponent this strong, Ceres thought, her best hope was to try to wear him down. How long could someone that huge keep fighting? Already, Ceres could feel the burn of her own muscles, and the sweat that dripped down her face. How much worse would it be for the combatlord she faced?

It was impossible to know for sure, but it had to be her best hope. So she dodged and she jabbed, using the length of the spear as best she could. She managed to slip through the massive warrior’s defenses, yet still, it only clattered off his armor.

The combatlord kicked up dust towards Ceres’s eyes, but she turned away in time. She spun back and swept the spear low, toward his unprotected legs. He jumped clear of that sweep, but she managed to slice another wound along his forearm as she drew the spear back.

Ceres jabbed low and high now, aiming for her opponent’s limbs. The big man parried and blocked, trying to find a way past the probing point, but Ceres kept it moving. She jabbed it in toward his face, hoping to at least distract him.

The combatlord caught the spear. He grabbed it behind the head, yanking it forward as he stepped aside. Ceres had to let go, because she didn’t want to risk being pulled onto the big man’s sword. Her opponent snapped the spear across his knee as easily as he might have broken a twig.

The crowd roared.

Ceres felt a cold sweat up her back. For an instant, she had the image of the big man breaking her body as easily. She swallowed at the thought and readied her sword again.

She grabbed the hilt with both hands as the next blows came, because it was the only way to absorb some of the power of the combatlord’s attacks. Even so, it was impossibly hard. Every blow felt like she was a bell being hit by a hammer. Every one sent shockwaves running through her arms.

Already, Ceres could feel herself tiring under the assault. Every breath came ragged, feeling like she dragged it in by force. There was no question now of trying to counterattack, or do anything but step back and hope.

And then it happened. Slowly, Ceres felt the power welling up inside her. It came with a warmth, like the first embers of a brush fire. It sat in the pit of her belly, waiting for her, and Ceres reached for it.

Energy flooded through her. The world slowed, moving at a crawl, and she suddenly felt she had all the time in the world to parry the next attack.

She had all the strength, too. She blocked it easily and then swung her sword around and slashed the combatlord’s arm in a blur of light and speed.

“Ceres! Ceres!” the crowd roared.

She saw the combatlord’s rage growing as the crowd’s chanting continued. She could understand why. They were meant to be chanting for *him*, proclaiming his victory, enjoying her death.

He bellowed and charged forward. Ceres waited as long as she dared, forcing herself to stay still until he nearly reached her.

Then she dropped. She felt the whisper of his blade passing over her head, then the rough sand as her knees touched down. She threw herself forward, swinging her sword around in an arc that slammed into the combatlord’s legs as he passed.

He tumbled face first, his sword spilling from his hand.

The crowd went wild.

Ceres stood over him, looking at the awful ruin her sword had made of his legs. For a moment, she wondered if he might manage to stand even like that, but he collapsed back, turning to his back and lifting one hand as he begged for mercy. Ceres held back, looking around for the royals who

would decide if the man in front of her lived or died. Either way, she resolved, she would not kill a helpless warrior.

Another trumpet blast came.

A roar followed it as the iron gates at the side of the arena opened, and the tone of it was enough to send a shiver through Ceres. In that moment, she felt like nothing more than prey, something to be hunted, something that had to run. She dared a glance up toward the royal enclosure, knowing this had to be deliberate. The fight had been over. She'd *won*. That wasn't good enough, though. They were going to kill her, she realized, one way or another. They would not let her leave the Stade alive.

A creature lumbered in, larger than a human, covered in shaggy fur. Fangs stuck out from a bearlike face, while spiny protrusions stuck out along the creature's back. Its feet held claws the length of daggers. Ceres didn't know what it was, but she didn't need to in order to know that it would be deadly.

The bear-like creature sank to all fours and ran forward, while Ceres readied her sword.

It reached the fallen combatlord first, and Ceres would have looked away if she'd dared. The man cried out as it pounced, but there was no way he could roll out of the way in time. Those giant paws smashed down, and Ceres heard the crunch of his breastplate giving way. The beast roared as it savaged her former opponent.

When it looked up, its fangs were wet with blood. It looked at Ceres, bared its teeth, and charged.

She barely managed to step aside in time, slashing with her sword as it passed. The creature gave a bellow of pain.

Yet sheer momentum tore the blade from her hands, feeling as though it would tear her arm away if she didn't let go. She watched with horror as her blade spun across the sand and into one of the pits.

The beast continued to advance, and Ceres, frantic, glanced down at the spot where the two broken sections of spear lay on the sand. She dove for them, grabbing a section and rolling in one movement.

As she rose to one knee, the creature was already charging. She couldn't run, she told herself. This was her only chance.

It slammed into her, the weight and speed of the thing lifting Ceres from her feet. There was no time to think, no time to be afraid. She thrust with the broken section of spear, striking with it again and again as the bear-beast's paws closed in on her.

Its strength was terrible, far too much to match. Ceres felt as though her ribs might burst with the pressure of it, the breastplate she wore creaking under the creature's strength. She felt its claws raking at her back and legs, agony searing across her.

Its hide was too thick. Ceres struck again and again, but she could feel the tip of the spear barely penetrating its flesh while it tore at her, its claws ripping across any exposed skin.

Ceres closed her eyes. With all she had, she reached for the power within her, not even knowing if it would work.

She felt herself surge with a ball of power. She then threw all her force into her spear, thrusting it up into the space where she hoped the creature's heart would be.

The beast shrieked as it reared back away from her.

The crowd roared.

Ceres, smarting from the pain of its scratches, scrambled out from under it and stood weakly. She looked down as the beast, the spear lodged in its heart, rolled and whined, making a sound that seemed far too small for something so large.

Then it stiffened, and died.

"Ceres! Ceres! Ceres!"

The Stade filled with cheers again. Everywhere Ceres looked, there were people calling out her name. Nobles and ordinary folk alike seemed to be joining in the chanting, losing themselves in that one moment of her victory.

“Ceres! Ceres! Ceres!”

She found herself drinking it in. It was impossible not to be caught up in the feeling of adulation. Her whole body seemed to pulse in time with the chanting that surrounded her and she spread her hands as if to welcome it all in. She turned in a slow circle, watching the faces of those who hadn't even heard of her a day ago, but who were now treating her as though she was the only person in the world who mattered.

Ceres was so caught up in that moment that she barely even felt the pain of the wounds she'd suffered anymore. Her shoulder hurt now, so she touched a hand to it. It came away wet, although her blood was still bright red in the sunlight.

Ceres stared at that stain for several seconds. The crowd was still chanting her name, but the pounding of her heart in her ears suddenly seemed far louder. She looked up at the crowd, and it took her a moment to realize that she was doing it from her knees. She couldn't remember falling to them.

From the corner of her eye, Ceres could see Paulo hurrying forward, but that seemed far too distant, as if it had nothing to do with her. Blood dripped from her fingers to the sand, darkening it where it touched. She had never felt so dizzy, so light-headed.

And the last thing she knew she was already falling, face-first, toward the floor of the arena, unable, she felt, to ever move again.

CHAPTER TWO

Thanos slowly opened his eyes, confused as he felt waves lapping at his ankles, his wrists. Beneath him, he could feel the gritty white sand of Haylon's beaches. Salt spray occasionally filled his mouth, making it hard to breathe.

Thanos looked out sideways along the beach, unable to do more than that. Even that was a struggle, as he drifted in and out of consciousness. In the distance, he thought he could make out flames and the sounds of violence. Screams came to him, along with the sound of steel clashing on steel.

The island, he remembered. Haylon. Their attack had begun.

So why was he lying on the sand?

It took a moment for the pain in his shoulder to answer that question. He remembered, and winced at the memory. He remembered the moment the sword had plunged into him, lancing into his upper back from behind. He remembered the shock of it as the Typhoon had betrayed him.

The pain burned through Thanos, expanding like a flower from the wound in his back. Every breath hurt. He tried to lift his head – but he only blacked out.

The next time Thanos woke, he was face-down on the sand again, and he was only able to tell that time had passed because the tide had risen a little, the water lapping at his waist now rather than his ankles. He was finally able to lift his head enough to see that there were other bodies on the beach. The dead seemed to cover the world, stretched out on the white beaches as far as he could see. He saw men in the armor of the Empire, sprawled where they had fallen, mixed in with the defenders who had died protecting their home.

The stench of death filled Thanos's nostrils, and it was all he could do not to throw up. No one had sorted the dead into friend and foe yet. Such niceties could wait until after the battle was done. Perhaps the Empire would leave it for the tide to do; a glance behind showed blood in the water, and Thanos could see the fins breaking through the waves. Not large sharks yet, scavengers rather than hunters – but how large would they need to be in order to devour him when the tide rose?

Thanos felt a wave of panic. He tried to haul himself up the beach, pulling with his arms as though trying to climb across the sand. He cried out in pain as he pulled himself forward, perhaps half the length of his body.

Blackness swam in his vision again.

When he came to, Thanos was on his side, looking up at figures who squatted over him, close enough that he could have reached out for them if he'd had the strength left to do it. They didn't look like soldiers of the Empire, didn't really look like soldiers at all, and Thanos had spent long enough around warriors to know the difference. These, a younger man and an older, looked more like farmers, ordinary men who had probably fled their homes to avoid the violence. That didn't mean they were less dangerous, though. Both held knives, and Thanos found himself wondering if they might be as much scavengers as the sharks. He knew there were always those looking to rob the dead after battles.

"This one's still breathing," the first of them said.

"I can see that. Just cut his throat and be done with it."

Thanos tensed, his body getting ready to fight even though there was nothing he could have done then.

"Look at him," the younger man insisted. "Someone stabbed him in the back."

Thanos saw the older man frown slightly at that. He moved around behind Thanos, out of his line of sight. Thanos managed to keep from crying out again as the man touched the spot where blood still flowed from the wound. He was a prince of the Empire. He wasn't going to show weakness.

"Looks like you're right. Help me get him up where the sharks won't get him. The others will want to see this."

Thanos saw the younger man nod, and together, they managed to lift him, armor and all. This time, Thanos did cry out, unable to stop the pain as they pulled him up over the beach.

They left him like driftwood, past the point where the tide had left seaweed behind, abandoning him on the dry sand. They hurried away, but Thanos was too caught up in the pain to watch them go.

There was no way for him to gauge the time that passed then. He could still hear the battle in the background, with its cries of violence and anger, its rallying cries and its signal horns. A battle could last minutes or hours, though. It could be over in the first rush, or keep going until neither side had the strength to do more than stumble away. Thanos had no way of knowing which this was.

Eventually, a group of men approached. These *did* look like soldiers, with that harder edge that only came to a man once he'd fought for his life. It was easy to see which of them was the leader. The tall, dark-haired man at the front didn't wear the elaborately worked armor that a general of the Empire might have, but everyone there looked to him as the group approached, obviously awaiting orders.

The newcomer was probably in his thirties, with a short beard as dark as the rest of his hair, and a spare frame that nevertheless held a sense of strength. He wore a short, stabbing sword on each hip, and Thanos guessed that it wasn't just for show, judging by the way his hands hovered next to the hilts automatically. His expression seemed to Thanos to be silently calculating every angle present on the beach, watching out for the possibility of an ambush, always thinking ahead. His eyes locked on to Thanos's, and the smile that followed had a strange kind of humor behind it, as though its owner had seen something in the world that no one else had.

"This is what you two have brought me out here to see?" he said, as the two who had found Thanos stepped forward. "One dying Imperial soldier in armor too shiny for his own good?"

"A noble though," the older one said. "You can see that by the armor."

"And he's been stabbed in the back," the younger pointed out. "By his own men, it seems."

"So he's not even good enough for the scum who are trying to take our island?" the leader said.

Thanos watched as the man moved closer, kneeling beside him. Maybe he intended to finish what the Typhoon had started. No soldier of Haylon would have any love for those on his side of the conflict.

"What did you do that your own side would try to kill you?" the newcomer asked, quietly enough that only Thanos could hear him.

Thanos managed to find the strength to shake his head. "I don't know." The words came out cracked and broken. Even if he hadn't been wounded, he'd been lying on the sand a long time. "But I didn't want this. I didn't want to fight here."

That earned another of those strange smiles that seemed to Thanos to be laughing at the world even though there was nothing to laugh at.

"And yet here you are," the newcomer said. "You didn't want to take part in an invasion, but you're on our beaches, rather than safe at home. You didn't want to offer us violence, but the Empire's army is burning homes as we speak. Do you know what's happening up that beach?"

Thanos shook his head. Even that hurt.

"We're losing," the man continued. "Oh, we're fighting hard enough, but that doesn't matter. Not with odds like this. The battle still rages, but that's just because half of my side are too stubborn to recognize the truth. We don't have enough time for distractions like this."

Thanos watched as the newcomer drew one of his swords. It looked wickedly sharp. So sharp that he probably wouldn't even feel it as it plunged into his heart. Instead, though, the other man gestured with it.

"*You* and *you*," he said to the men, "bring our new friend. Perhaps he's worth something to the other side." He grinned. "And if he's not, I shall kill him myself."

The last thing Thanos felt were strong hands gripping him under his arms, yanking him up, dragging him away, before he finally lapsed back into darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

Berin felt the ache of longing as he trekked along the route home to Delos, the only thing keeping him going, thoughts of his family – of Ceres. The thought of returning to his daughter was enough to make him press on, even though he'd found the days of walking tough, the roads beneath his feet rough with ruts and stones. His bones were not getting any younger, and already he could feel his knee aching from the journey, adding to the pains that came from a life of hammering and heating metal.

It was all worth it, though, to see home again, though. To see his family. All the time he'd been away, it was all Berin had wanted. He could picture it now. Marita would be cooking in the back of the humble wooden home, the scent of it wafting out past the front door. Sartes would be playing somewhere around the back, probably with Nasos watching him, even if his older son would be pretending that he wasn't.

And then there would be Ceres. He loved all his children, but with Ceres there had always been that extra connection. She had been the one to help out around his forge, the one who had taken after him most, and who seemed the most likely to follow in his footsteps. Leaving Marita and the boys had been a painful duty, necessary if he was to provide for his family. Leaving Ceres behind had felt as though he'd abandoned some part of himself when he left.

Now it was time to reclaim it.

Berin only wished he brought happier news. He walked along the gravel track that led back to their house, and he frowned; it wasn't winter yet, but it would be soon enough. The plan had been for him to leave and find work. Lords always needed bladesmiths to provide weapons for their guards, their wars, their Killings. Yet it turned out that they didn't need *him*. They had their own men. Younger, stronger men. Even the king who had seemed to want his work had turned out to want Berin as he had been ten years ago.

The thought hurt, yet he knew he should have guessed that they would have no need for a man with more gray in his beard than black.

It would have hurt more if it hadn't meant that he got to go home. Home was the thing that mattered for Berin, even when it was little more than a square of rough-sawn wooden walls, topped with a turf roof. Home was about the people waiting there, and the thought of them was enough to make him quicken his steps.

As he crested a hill, though, and the first view of it came, Berin knew that something was wrong. His stomach plunged. Berin knew what home felt like. For all the barrenness of the surrounding land, home was a place filled with life. There was always noise there, whether it was joyful or argumentative. At this time of year too, there would always have been at least a few crops growing in the plot around it, vegetables and small berry bushes, hardy things that always produced at least something to feed them.

That was not what he saw before him.

Berin broke into as much of a run then as he could manage after so long a walk, the sense of something wrong gnawing away at him, feeling like one of his vises clamped around his heart.

He reached the door and threw it wide. Maybe, he thought, everything would be all right. Maybe they had spotted him and were all just ensuring that his arrival would be a surprise.

It was dim inside, the windows crusted with grime. And there, a presence.

Marita stood in the main room, stirring a pot that smelled too sour to Berin. She turned toward him as he burst in, and as she did, Berin knew he'd been right. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

"Marita?" he began.

“Husband.” Even the flat way she said that told him that nothing was as it should be. Any other time he’d been away, Marita had thrown her arms around him as he’d come in the door. She’d always seemed full of life. Now, she seemed...empty.

“What’s going on here?” Berin asked.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Again, there was less emotion than there should have been, as though something in his wife had broken, letting all the joy out of her.

“Why is everything around here so... so *still*?” Berin demanded. “Where are our children?”

“They aren’t here right now,” Marita said. She moved back to the pot as though everything was perfectly normal.

“Where are they, then?” Berin wasn’t going to let it go. He could believe that the boys might have run down to the nearest stream or had errands to run, but one of his children at least would have seen him coming home and been there to meet him. “Where is Ceres?”

“Oh yes,” Marita said, and Berin could hear the bitterness there now. “Of course you would ask after *her*. Not how things are with me. Not your sons. Her.”

Berin had never heard his wife sound quite like this before. Oh, he’d always known there was something hard in Marita, more concerned for herself than for the rest of the world, but now it sounded as though her heart was ashes.

Marita seemed to calm down then, and the sheer speed with which she did it made it suspicious to Berin.

“You want to know what your precious daughter did?” she said. “She ran away.”

Berin’s apprehension deepened. He shook his head. “I don’t believe that.”

Marita kept going. “She ran away. Didn’t say where she was going, just stole what she could from us when she left.”

“We have no money to steal,” Berin said. “And Ceres would never do that.”

“Of course you’ll take her side,” Marita said. “But she took... things from around here, possessions. Anything she thought she could sell in the next town, knowing that girl. She abandoned us.”

If that was what Marita thought, then Berin was sure she’d never really known her daughter. Or him, if she thought he would believe such an obvious lie. He took her shoulders in his hands, and even though he didn’t possess all the strength he’d once had, Berin was still strong enough so that his wife felt fragile by comparison.

“Tell me the truth, Marita! What’s happened here?” Berin shook her, as if somehow that might jolt the old version of her back into being, and she might suddenly return to being the Marita he’d married all those years before. All it did was make her pull away.

“Your boys are dead!” Marita yelled back. The words filled the small space of their home, coming out in a snarl. Her voice dropped. “That’s what’s happened. Our sons are dead.”

The words hit Berin like a kick from a horse that didn’t want shoeing. “No,” he said. “It’s another lie. It has to be.”

He couldn’t think of another thing Marita could have said that would have hurt as much. She had to be just saying this to hurt him.

“When did you decide that you hated me so much?” Berin asked, because that was the only reason he could think of that his wife would throw something so vile at him, using the idea of their sons’ deaths as a weapon.

Now Berin could see tears in Marita’s eyes. There hadn’t been any when she’d been talking about their daughter supposedly running away.

“When you decided to abandon us,” his wife snapped back. “When I had to watch Nasos die!”

“Just Nasos?” Berin said.

“Isn’t that enough?” Marita shouted back. “Or don’t you care about your sons?”

“A moment ago you said that Sartes was dead too,” Berin said. “Stop lying to me, Marita!”

“Sartes is dead too,” his wife insisted. “Soldiers came and took him. They dragged him off to be a part of the Empire’s army, and he’s just a boy. How long do you think he will survive as a part of that? No, both of my boys are gone, while Ceres...”

“What?” Berin demanded.

Marita just shook her head. “If you’d been here, it might not even have happened.”

“*You* were here,” Berin spat back, trembling all over. “That had been the point. You think I wanted to go? You were meant to look after them while I found the money for us to eat.”

Despair gripped Berin then, and he could feel himself starting to weep, as he hadn’t wept since he was a child. His oldest son was dead. For all the other lies Marita had come out with, that sounded like the truth. The loss left a hole that seemed to be impossible to fill, even with the grief and anger that were welling up inside him. He forced himself to focus on the others, because it seemed like the only way to stop it from overwhelming him.

“Soldiers took Sartes?” he asked. “Imperial soldiers?”

“You think I’m lying to you about that?” Marita asked.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” Berin replied. “You didn’t even try to stop them?”

“They held a knife to my throat,” Marita said. “I had to.”

“You had to do what?” Berin asked.

Marita shook her head. “I had to call him outside. They would have killed me.”

“So you gave him to them instead?”

“What do you think I could do?” Marita demanded. “You weren’t here.”

And Berin would probably feel guilty about that for as long as he lived. Marita was right. Maybe if he had been here, this wouldn’t have happened. He’d gone off, looking to keep his family from starving, and while he’d been away, things had fallen apart. Feeling guilty didn’t replace the grief or the anger, though. It only added to it. It bubbled inside Berin, feeling like something alive and fighting to get out.

“What about Ceres?” he demanded. He shook Marita again. “Tell me! The truth this time. What did you do?”

Marita just pulled away again though, and this time she sank down on her haunches on the floor, curling up and not even looking at him. “Find out for yourself. I’ve been the one who’s had to live with this. Me, not you.”

There was a part of Berin that wanted to keep shaking her until she gave him an answer. That wanted to force the truth from her, whatever it took. Yet he wasn’t that kind of man, and knew he never could be. Even the thought of it disgusted him.

He didn’t take anything from the house when he left. There wasn’t anything he wanted there. As he looked back at Marita, so totally wrapped up in her own bitterness that she’d given up her son, tried to disguise what had happened to their children, it was hard to believe that there had ever been.

Berin stepped out into the open air, blinking away what was left of his tears. It was only when the brightness of the sun hit him that he realized he had no idea what he was going to do next. What could he do? There was no helping his oldest son, not now, while the others could be anywhere.

“That doesn’t matter,” Berin told himself. He could feel the determination within him turning into something like the iron he worked. “It won’t stop me.”

Perhaps someone nearby would have seen where they had gone. Certainly, someone would know where the army was, and Berin knew as well as anyone that a man who made blades could always find a way to get closer to the army.

As for Ceres... there would be something. She must be *somewhere*. Because the alternative was unthinkable.

Berin looked out over the countryside surrounding his home. Ceres was out there somewhere. So was Sartes. He said the next words aloud, because doing that seemed to turn it into a promise, to himself, to the world, to his children.

“I’ll find you both,” he vowed. “Whatever it takes.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Breathing hard, Sartes ran among the army's tents, clutching the scroll in his hand and wiping the sweat from his eyes, knowing that if he did not reach his commander's tent soon he would be flogged. He ducked and weaved as best he could, knowing his time was running out. He had been held up far too many times already.

Sartes already had burn marks on his shins from the times he'd gotten it wrong, their sting just one more among many by now. He blinked, desperate, looking around the army camp, trying to make out the correct direction to run among the endless grid of tents. There were signs and standards there to mark the way, but he was still trying to learn their pattern.

Sartes felt something catch his foot, and then he was tumbling, the world seeming to turn upside down as he fell. For a moment he thought he'd tripped on a rope, but then he looked up to see soldiers laughing. The one at their head was an older man, with stubble-short hair turning gray and scars from too many battles.

Fear filled Sartes then, but also a kind of resignation; this was just life in the army for a conscript like him. He didn't demand to know why the other man had done it, because saying anything was a sure way to a beating. As far as he could see, practically anything was.

Instead, he stood up, brushing away the worst of the mud from his tunic.

"What are you about, whelp?" the soldier who'd tripped him demanded.

"Running an errand for my commander, sir," Sartes said, lifting a scrap of parchment for the other man to see. He hoped it would be enough to keep him safe. Often it wasn't, in spite of the rules that said orders took precedence over anything else.

In the time since he'd arrived there, Sartes had learned that the Imperial army had plenty of rules. Some were official: leave the camp without permission, refuse to follow orders, betray the army, and you could be killed. March the wrong way, do anything without permission, and you could be beaten. There were other rules too, though. Less official ones that could be just as dangerous to break.

"What errand would that be?" the soldier demanded. Others were gathering around now. The army was always short of sources of entertainment, so if there was the prospect of a little fun at a conscript's expense, people paid attention.

Sartes did his best to look apologetic. "I don't know, sir. I just have orders to deliver this message. You can read it if you like."

That was a calculated risk. Most of the ordinary soldiers couldn't read. He hoped that the tone of it wouldn't earn him a cuff around the ear for insubordination, but tried not to show any fear. Not showing fear was one of the rules that wasn't written down. The army had at least as many of those rules as official ones. Rules about who you had to know to get better food. About who knew whom, and who you had to be careful of, regardless of rank. Knowing them seemed to be the only way to survive.

"Well, you'd better get on with it then!" the soldier roared, aiming a kick at Sartes to get him moving. The others there laughed as if it was the greatest joke they'd seen.

One of the biggest unwritten rules seemed to be that the new conscripts were fair game. Since he'd arrived, Sartes had been punched and slapped, beaten and shoved. He'd been made to run until he felt like collapsing, then run some more. He'd been laden with so much gear that he'd felt as though he could barely stand up, made to carry it, to dig holes in the ground for no apparent reason, to work. He'd heard stories of men in the ranks who liked to do worse to the new conscripts. Even if they died, what did it matter to the army? They were there to be thrown at the enemy. Everyone expected them to die.

Sartes had expected to die the first day. By the end of it, he'd even felt as though he wanted to. He'd curled up inside the too thin tent they'd assigned him and shivered, hoping that the ground

would swallow him up. Impossibly, the next day had been worse. Another new conscript, whose name Sartes hadn't even learned, had been killed that day. He'd been caught trying to run away, and they'd all had to watch his execution, as if it were some kind of lesson. The only lesson Sartes had been able to see was how cruel the army was to anyone who let it see that they were afraid. That was when he'd started trying to bury his fear, not showing it even though it was there in the background almost every moment he was awake.

He made a detour between the tents now, switching directions briefly to swing by one of the mess tents, where a day ago, one of the cooks had needed help composing a message home. The army barely fed its conscripts, and Sartes could feel his stomach rumbling at the prospect of food, but he didn't eat what he took with him as he ran for his commanding officer's tent.

"Where have you been?" the officer demanded. His tone made it clear that being slowed down by other soldiers wouldn't count as an excuse. But then, Sartes had known that. It was part of why he'd gone to the mess tent.

"Collecting this on the way, sir," Sartes said, holding out the apple tart that he'd heard was the officer's favorite. "I knew that there might not be an opportunity for you to get it yourself today."

The officer's demeanor changed instantly. "That's very thoughtful, conscript – "

"Sartes, sir." Sartes didn't dare to smile.

"Sartes. We could use some soldiers who know how to think. Although next time, remember that the orders have to come first."

"Yes sir," Sartes said. "Is there anything you require me to do, sir?"

The officer waved him away. "Not right now, but I'll remember your name. Dismissed."

Sartes left the commander's pavilion feeling a lot better than when he'd gone in. He hadn't been sure that the small act would be enough to save him after the delay the soldiers had caused. For now, though, he seemed to have avoided punishment, and had managed to get to the position where an officer knew who he was.

It felt like a knife edge, but the whole army felt like that to Sartes then. So far, he'd survived in the army by being clever, and keeping one step ahead of the worst of the violence there. He'd seen boys his age killed, or beaten so badly that it was obvious that they'd die soon. Even so, he wasn't sure how long he would be able to keep that up. For a conscript like him, this was the kind of place where violence and death could only be put off so long.

Sartes swallowed as he thought of all the things that could go wrong. A soldier might take a beating too far. An officer might take offense at any tiny action and order a punishment designed to deter the others with its cruelty. He might be pushed forward into battle at any moment, and he'd heard that conscripts went at the front of the line to "weed out the weak." Even training might prove deadly, when the army had little use for blunt weapons, and conscripts were given little real instruction.

The one fear that sat behind them all was that someone would find out he'd tried to join Rexus and the rebels. There should be no way that they could, but even the faintest possibility was enough to outweigh all the others. Sartes had seen the body of a soldier accused of having rebel sympathies. His own unit had been commanded to hack him to pieces to prove their loyalty. Sartes didn't want to end up like that. Just the thought of it was enough to make his stomach tighten over and above the hunger.

"You there!" a voice called, and Sartes started. It was impossible to shake the feeling that maybe someone had guessed what he was thinking. He forced himself to at least pretend to be calm. Sartes looked round to see a soldier in the elaborately muscled armor of a sergeant, with pockmarks on his cheeks so deep they were almost like another landscape. "You're the captain's messenger?"

"I've just come from carrying a message to him, sir," Sartes said. It wasn't quite a lie.

"Then you're good enough for me. Go find out where the carts with my timber supplies have gotten to. If anyone gives you trouble, tell them Venn sent you."

Sartes saluted hurriedly. "At once, sir."

He ran off on the errand, but as he went he did not focus on the mission at hand. He took a longer way, a more circuitous way. A way that would enable him to spy the camp's outskirts, their choke points, a way that would allow him to pry for any weak points.

Because, dead or not, Sartre would find a way to escape tonight.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lucious pushed his way through the crowds of nobles in the castle's throne room, fuming as he went. He fumed at the fact that he had to shove his way through, when everyone there should have stood aside and bowed down, making way for him. He fumed at the fact that Thanos was off getting all the glory, crushing the rebels on Haylon. Above all, though, he fumed at the way things had gone in the Stade. That wench Ceres had ruined his plans once again.

Ahead, Lucious could see the king and queen in deep conversation with Cosmas, the old fool from the library. Lucious had thought he'd seen the last of the aged scholar as a child, when they'd all been made to learn ludicrous facts about the world and its workings. But no, apparently, in the wake of the letter he had provided, showing Ceres's true treachery, Cosmas got to have the ear of his king.

Lucious kept pushing his way forward. Around him, he could hear the nobles of the court at their petty plotting. He could see his distant cousin Stephania not far away, laughing at some joke another perfectly presented noble girl had made. She looked over, catching Lucious's eye just long enough to smile at him. She really was, Lucious decided, quite an empty-headed thing. But a beautiful one. Perhaps in the future, he thought, there might be an opportunity to spend more time around the noble girl. He was at least as impressive as Thanos, by any estimation.

For now, though, Lucious's anger at what had happened was too great for even those thoughts to amuse him. He stalked to the foot of the thrones, right to the edge of the raised dais there.

"She still lives!" he blurted out as he neared the throne. It didn't matter to him that it was loud enough to carry to the whole room. Let them hear, he decided. It certainly made no difference that Cosmas was still whispering away to the king and queen. What, Lucious wondered, could a man who spent his time around scrolls possibly have that was worth saying?

"Did you hear me?" Lucious said. "The girl is –"

"Still alive, yes," the king said, stopping him with a hand held up for silence. "We are discussing more important matters. Thanos is missing in the battle for Haylon."

The gesture was just one more thing to add to Lucious's anger. He was being treated like some servant to be quieted, he thought. Even so, he waited. He couldn't afford the king's anger. Besides, it took a moment or two to digest what he'd just heard.

Thanos was missing? Lucious tried to work out how it affected him. Would it change his position within the court? He found himself glancing across at Stephania again, thoughtful.

"Thank you, Cosmas," the queen said at last.

Lucious watched as the scholar descended back into the crowd of watching nobles. Only then did the king and queen give him their attention. Lucious tried to stand straight. He would not let the others there see any of the resentment that burned through him at the small insult. If anyone else had treated him this way, Lucious told himself, he would have killed them by now.

"We are aware that Ceres survived the last Killing," King Claudius said. To Lucious, he barely even sounded annoyed by it, let alone as though he were burning with the same anger that flooded him at the thought of the peasant.

But then, Lucious thought, the king hadn't been the one who had been defeated by the girl. Not once, but twice now, because she'd bested him through some trickery when he'd gone to her room to teach her a lesson too. Lucious felt that he had every reason, every *right*, to take her survival personally.

"Then you're aware that it can't be allowed to continue," Lucious said. He couldn't keep his tone as courtly and even as it should be. "You must deal with her."

"Must?" Queen Athena said. "Careful, Lucious. We are still your rulers."

"With respect, your majesties," Stephania said, and Lucious watched her glide forward, her silk dress clinging to her. "Lucious is right. Ceres cannot be allowed to live."

Lucious saw the king's eyes narrow slightly.

"And what do you suggest we do?" King Claudius demanded. "Drag her out onto the sands and have her beheaded? You were the one who suggested that she should fight, Stephania. You can't complain if she isn't dying fast enough for your tastes."

Lucious understood that part, at least. There was no pretext for her death, and the people seemed to demand that for those they loved. Even more astonishingly, they *did* seem to love her. Why? Because she could fight a little? As far as Lucious could see, any fool could do that. Many fools did. If the people had any sense, they would give their love where it was deserved: to their rightful rulers.

"I understand that she cannot simply be executed, your majesty," Stephania said, with one of those innocent smiles that Lucious had noticed she did so well.

"I'm glad you understand it," the king said, with obvious annoyance. "Do you also understand what would happen if she *were* harmed now? Now that she has fought? Now that she has won?"

Of course Lucious understood. He wasn't some child for whom politics was an alien landscape.

Stephania summed it up. "It would fuel the revolution, your majesty. The people of the city might revolt."

"There is no 'might' about it," King Claudius said. "We have the Stade for a reason. The people have a thirst for blood, and we give them what they are looking for. That need for violence can turn against us just as easily."

Lucious laughed at that. It was hard to believe that the king really thought Delos's populace would ever be able to sweep them away. He had seen them, and they were not some blood-drenched tide. They were a rabble. Teach them a lesson, he thought. Kill enough of them, show them the consequences of their actions harshly enough, and they would soon fall into line.

"Is something funny, Lucious?" the queen asked him, and Lucious could hear the sharp edge there. The king and queen did not like being laughed at. Thankfully, though, he had an answer.

"It is just that the answer to all of this seems obvious," Lucious said. "I am not asking for Ceres to be executed. I am saying that we underestimated her abilities as a fighter. Next time, we must not."

"And give her an excuse to become more popular if she wins?" Stephania asked. "She has become beloved by the people because of her victory."

Lucious smiled at that. "Have you seen the way the commoners react in the Stade?" he asked. He understood this part, even if the others did not.

He saw Stephania sniff. "I try not to watch them, cousin."

"But you will have heard them. They call the names of their favorites. They bay for blood. And when their favorites fall, what then?" He looked around, half expecting someone to have an answer for him. To his disappointment, no one did. Perhaps Stephania wasn't bright enough to see it. Lucious didn't mind that.

"They call the names of the new winners," Lucious explained. "They love them just as much as they loved the last ones. Oh, they call for this girl now, but when she lies bleeding on the sand, they will bay for her death as quickly as for anyone else. We just have to stack the odds a little more against her."

The king looked thoughtful at that. "What did you have in mind?"

"If we get this wrong," the queen said, "they will just love her more."

Finally, Lucious could feel some of his anger being replaced by something else: satisfaction. He looked over to the doors to the throne room, where one of his attendants was standing waiting. A snap of his fingers was all it took to send the man running, but then, all Lucious's servants quickly learned that angering him was anything but wise.

"I have a remedy for that," Lucious said, gesturing toward the door.

The shackled man who walked in was easily more than seven feet tall, with ebony black skin and muscles that bulged above the short kilt he wore. Tattoos covered his flesh; the slaver who had

sold the combatlord had told Lucious that each one represented a foe he had slain in single combat, both within the Empire and in the lands far to the south where he had been found.

Even so, for Lucious, the most intimidating part of it all wasn't the size of the man or his strength. It was the look in his eyes. There was something there that simply didn't seem to understand things like compassion or mercy, pain or fear. That could happily have torn them all limb from limb without feeling a thing. There were scars on the warrior's torso where blades had struck him. Lucious couldn't imagine that expression changing even then.

Lucious enjoyed watching the reactions of the others there as they saw the fighter, chained like some wild beast and stalking through them. Some of the women made small sounds of fear, while the men stepped back hurriedly out of his path, seeming to sense instinctively just how dangerous this man was. Fear seemed to push emptiness ahead of him, and Lucious basked in the effect his combatlord had. He watched Stephania take a scurrying step back out of the way, and Lucious smiled.

"They call him the Last Breath," Lucious said. "He has never lost a bout, and never let a foe live. Say hello," he grinned, "to Ceres's next – and final – opponent."

CHAPTER SIX

Ceres woke to darkness, the room lit only by moonlight filtering in through the shutters, and by a single flickering candle. She struggled toward consciousness, remembering. She remembered the beast's claws ripping at her, and just the memory seemed to be enough to summon the pain to her. It flared in her back as she half turned to her side, hot and sudden enough to make her cry out. The pain was all-consuming.

"Oh," a voice said, "does it hurt?"

A figure stepped into view. Ceres couldn't make out the details at first, but slowly, they swam into place. Stephania stood there over her bed, as pale as the shafts of moonlight that surrounded her, forming a perfect picture of the innocent noble, there to visit the sick and injured. Ceres had no doubt that it was deliberate.

"Don't worry," Stephania said. To Ceres, the words still seemed to come from too far away, fighting their way through fog. "The healers here gave you something to help you sleep while they stitched you back together. They seemed quite impressed you're still alive, and they wanted to take away your pain."

Ceres saw her hold up a small bottle. It was a dull green against the paleness of Stephania's hand, stoppered with a cork and glistening around the rim. Ceres saw the noble girl smile, and that smile felt as though it was made of sharp edges.

"I am not impressed that you have managed to live," Stephania said. "That wasn't the idea at *all*."

Ceres tried to reach out for her. In theory, this should have been the moment to escape. If she had been stronger, she could have burst past Stephania and made for the door. If she could have found a way to fight past the cloudiness that felt as though it was filling her head to the breaking point, she might have been able to grab Stephania and force her to help in escaping.

Yet it seemed as if her body was only obeying her sluggishly, responding long after she wanted it to. It was all Ceres could do to sit up with the covers wrapped around her, and even that brought with it a fresh wave of agony.

She saw Stephania run a finger down the bottle she held. "Oh, don't worry, Ceres. There's a reason you're feeling so helpless. The healers asked me to make sure you got your dose of their drug, so I did. Some of it, anyway. Enough to keep you docile. Not enough to actually take away your pain."

"What did I do to make you hate me this much?" Ceres asked, although she already knew the answer. She'd been close to Thanos, and he'd rejected Stephania. "Does having Thanos for your husband really matter to you this much?"

"You're slurring your words, Ceres," Stephania said, with another of those smiles without any warmth behind it that Ceres could see. "And I don't hate you. Hate would imply that you were in some way worthy of being my enemy. Tell me, do you know anything about poison?"

Just the mention of it was enough to make Ceres's heart speed up, anxiety blossoming in her chest.

"Poison is such an elegant weapon," Stephania said, as though Ceres weren't even there. "Far more so than knives or spears. You think you are so strong because you get to play with swords with all the real combatlords? Yet I could have poisoned you while you slept, so easily. I could have added something to your sleeping draught. I could simply have given you too much of it, so that you never woke up."

"People would have known," Ceres managed.

Stephania shrugged. "Would they have cared? In any case, it would have been an accident. Poor Stephania, trying to help, but not really knowing what she was doing, gave our newest combatlord too much medicine."

She put a hand to her mouth in mock surprise. It was such a perfect mime of shocked remorse, even down to the tear that seemed to glisten at the corner of her eye. When she spoke again, she sounded different to Ceres. Her voice was thick with regret and disbelief. There was even a small catch there, as if she were struggling to hold back the urge to sob.

“Oh no. What have I done? I didn’t mean to. I thought... I thought I did everything exactly the way they told me to!”

She laughed then, and in that moment, Ceres saw her for what she was. She could see through the act that Stephania so carefully maintained all the time. How did no one notice? Ceres wondered. How could they not see what lay behind the beautiful smiles and the delicate laughter?

“They all think I’m stupid, you know,” Stephania said. She stood straighter now, looking a lot more dangerous to Ceres than she had. “I take great care to *ensure* that they think I’m stupid. Oh, don’t look so worried, I’m not going to poison you.”

“Why not?” Ceres asked. She knew there had to be a reason.

She saw Stephania’s expression harden in the candlelight, a frown creasing the otherwise smooth skin of her brow.

“Because that would be too easy,” Stephania said. “After the way you and Thanos humiliated me, I would rather see you suffer. You both deserve it.”

“There’s nothing else you can do to me,” Ceres said, although in that moment, it didn’t feel like it. Stephania could have walked over to the bed and hurt her a hundred different ways, and Ceres knew she would have been powerless to stop it. Ceres knew the noble would have no idea how to fight, but she could have bested Ceres easily right then.

“Of course there is,” Stephania said. “There are weapons in the world even better than poison. The right words, for instance. Let’s see now. Which of these will hurt most? Your beloved Rexus is dead, of course. Let’s start with that.”

Ceres tried not to let any of the shock she felt show on her face. She tried not to let the grief rise up enough that the noble girl could see it. Yet she knew from the look of satisfaction on Stephania’s face that there must have been some flicker.

“He died fighting for you,” Stephania said. “I thought you would want to know that part. It does make it so much more... romantic.”

“You’re lying,” Ceres insisted, but somewhere inside she knew that Stephania wouldn’t be. She would only say something like this if it was a truth Ceres could check, something that would hurt and go on hurting as she found out the reality of it.

“I don’t need to lie. Not when the truth is so much better,” Stephania said. “Thanos is dead too. He died in the fighting for Haylon, right there on the beaches.”

A fresh wave of grief hit Ceres, sweeping over her and threatening to wash away all sense of herself. She’d fought with Thanos before he’d left, about the death of her brother, and about what he was planning to do, fighting the rebellion. She had never thought they could be the last words she would say to him. She’d left a message with Cosmas specifically so that they wouldn’t be.

“There’s one more,” Stephania said. “Your younger brother? Sartes? He has been taken for the army. I made sure that the draft takers didn’t overlook him just because he was the brother of Thanos’s weapon keeper.”

Ceres did try to lunge at her this time, the anger that filled her fueling her leap for the noble girl. As weak as she was, though, there was no chance of success. She felt her legs tangling in the bed sheets, sending her tumbling to the floor, looking up at Stephania.

“How long do you think your brother will last in the army?” Stephania asked. Ceres saw her expression turn into something like a mockery of pity. “The poor boy. They are so cruel to the conscripts. They’re all practically traitors, after all.”

“Why?” Ceres managed.

Stephania spread her hands. “You took Thanos from me, and that was everything I had planned for my future. Now, I’m going to take everything from you.”

“I’ll kill you,” Ceres promised.

Stephania laughed. “You won’t have a chance. This” – she reached down to touch Ceres’s back, and Ceres had to bite her lip to keep from screaming – “is nothing. That little fight in the Stade was nothing. The worst fights imaginable will be there waiting for you, again and again, until you die.”

“You think people won’t notice?” Ceres said. “You think they won’t guess what you’re doing? You threw me in there because you thought they’d rise up. What will they do if they think you’re cheating them?”

She saw Stephania shake her head.

“People see what they want to see. With you, it seems as though they want to see their princess combatlord, the girl who can fight as well as any man. They’ll believe it, and they’ll love you, right up to the point where you’re turned into a laughing stock out on the sands. They’ll watch you torn to shreds, but before that, they’ll cheer for it to happen.”

Ceres could only watch as Stephania started for the door. The noble girl stopped, turning back toward her, and for a moment, she looked as sweet and innocent as ever.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I tried to give you your medicine, but I didn’t think you’d knock it from my hand before I could give you enough.”

She took out the vial she’d had before, and Ceres watched it tumble to the ground as she dropped it. It shattered, the pieces spinning across the floor of Ceres’s room in splinters that would make it both painful and dangerous for her to try to find her way back into her bed. Ceres had no doubt that Stephania intended it that way.

She saw the noble girl reach out for the candle that lit the room, and briefly, in the instant before she snuffed it out, Stephania’s sweet smile faded again, to be replaced by something cruel.

“I will be there to dance at your funeral, Ceres. I promise you that.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I still say that we should gut him and throw his body out for the other Empire soldiers to find.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot, Nico. Even if they noticed one more body among the rest, who’s to say they’d care? And then we’d have the trouble of bringing him down somewhere they’d see him. No. We should ransom him.”

Thanos sat in the cave where the rebels had holed up for the moment, listening to them argue about his fate. His hands were tied in front of him, but at least they’d done their best to patch and bandage his wounds, leaving him in front of a small fire so he wouldn’t freeze while they decided whether to kill him in cold blood or not.

The rebels sat at other fires, huddling around them, discussing what they could do to keep the island from falling to the Empire. They spoke quietly, so that Thanos couldn’t overhear the details, but he already knew the gist of it: they were losing, and losing badly. They were in the caves because there was nowhere else for them to go.

After a while, the one who was obviously their leader came and sat down opposite Thanos, crossing his legs on the hard stone of the cave floor. He pushed across a hunk of bread that Thanos devoured hungrily. He wasn’t sure how long it had been since he’d last eaten.

“I am Akila,” the other man said. “I command this rebellion.”

“Thanos.”

“Just Thanos?”

Thanos could hear the curiosity there, and the impatience. He wondered if the other man had guessed who he was. Either way, the truth seemed like the best option right then.

“Prince Thanos,” he admitted.

Akila sat there opposite him for several seconds, and Thanos found himself wondering if he was going to die then. It had been close enough when the rebels had thought he was just some noble without a name. Now that they knew he was one of the royal family, close to the king who had oppressed them so much, it seemed impossible that they would do anything else.

“A prince,” Akila said. He looked around at the others, and Thanos saw the flash of a smile there. “Hey, lads, we’ve got ourselves a prince here.”

“We should definitely ransom him then!” one of the rebels called out. “He’d be worth a fortune!”

“We should definitely kill him,” another snapped back. “Think about all his kind have done to us!”

“All right, that’s enough,” Akila said. “Concentrate on the fight ahead. It’s going to be a long night.”

Thanos heard a faint sigh from the other man as the men went back to their fires.

“It’s not going well, then?” Thanos said. “You said before that your side was losing.”

Akila gave him a sharp look. “I should know when to keep my mouth shut. Maybe so should you.”

“You’re wondering whether to kill me anyway,” Thanos pointed out. “I figure that I don’t have a lot to lose.”

Thanos waited. This wasn’t the kind of man he could push into giving him answers. There was something tough about Akila. Unyielding and straightforward. Thanos guessed that he would have liked him if they’d met under better circumstances.

“All right,” Akila said. “Yes, we’re losing. You Imperials have more men than we do, and you don’t care about the damage you do. The city is under siege from land and from water, so that no one can get away. We’ll fight from the hills, but when you can just resupply by water, there’s not a lot we can do. Draco may be a butcher, but he’s a clever one.”

Thanos nodded. “He is.”

“And of course, you were probably there when he planned all of it,” Akila said.

Now Thanos understood. “Is that what you’re hoping? That I know all of their plans?” He shook his head. “I wasn’t there when they made them. I didn’t want to be here, and I only came because they escorted me onto the ship under guard. Maybe if I had been there, I would have heard the part where they planned to stab me in the back.”

He thought of Ceres then, about the way he’d been forced to leave her behind. That hurt more than the rest of it put together. If someone in a position of power was going to try to have him killed, he wondered, what would they do to her?

“You have enemies,” Akila agreed. Thanos saw him clench and unclench one hand, as if the long battle for the city had started to make it cramp. “They’re even the same as my enemies. I don’t know if that makes you my friend, though.”

Thanos looked around pointedly at the rest of the cave. At the shockingly low numbers of soldiers left there. “Right now, it looks as though you could do with all the friends you can get.”

“You’re still a noble. You still have your position because of the blood of ordinary folk,” Akila said. He sighed again. “It looks as though if I kill you, I’m doing what Draco and his masters want, but you’ve as good as told me that if I ransom you, I get nothing for you. I have a fight to win, and no time to keep prisoners around if they don’t know anything. So, what am I supposed to do with you, Prince Thanos?”

Thanos got the impression that he was serious. That he actually wanted a better solution. Thanos thought quickly.

“I think your best choice is to let me go,” he said.

Akila laughed at that. “Nice try. If that’s the best you have, hold still. I’ll try to make this as painless as possible.”

Thanos saw his hand go to one of his swords.

“I’m serious,” Thanos said. “I can’t help you win the battle for the island if I’m here.”

He could see Akila’s disbelief, and the certainty that it had to be a trap. Thanos went on quickly, knowing that his best hope of surviving the next few minutes lay in convincing this man that he wanted to help the rebellion.

“You said yourself that one of the big problems is that the Empire has its fleet supporting the assault,” Thanos said. “I know that they left supplies on the ships because they were so eager to get on with the attack. So we take the ships.”

Akila stood up. “Have you heard this, lads? The prince here has a plan to take the Empire’s ships from them.”

Thanos saw the rebels start to gather round.

“What good would it do?” Akila asked. “We take their ships, but what then?”

Thanos did his best to explain. “At the very least, it will provide an escape route for some of the people of the city, and for more of your soldiers. It will take away supplies from the Empire’s soldiers too, so that they can’t keep going for long. And then there are the ballistae.”

“What are they?” one of the rebels called out. He didn’t look much like a long-term soldier. Very few of those in the room did, to Thanos’s eyes.

“Bolt throwers,” Thanos explained. “Weapons designed to damage other ships, but if they were turned against soldiers near the shore...”

Akila, at least, looked as though he was considering the possibilities. “That could be something,” he admitted. “And we can set light to any ships we can’t use. At the very least, Draco would pull his men back to try to get his ships back. But how do we get these ships in the first place, Prince Thanos? I know that where you come from, if a prince asks for something, he gets it, but I doubt that will apply to Draco’s fleet.”

Thanos forced himself to smile with a level of confidence he didn’t feel. “That’s almost exactly what we’re going to do.”

Again, Thanos had the impression of Akila working it out faster than any of his men could. The rebel leader smiled.

“You’re mad,” Akila said. Thanos couldn’t tell if it was intended as an insult or not.

“There are enough dead on the beaches,” Thanos explained, for the benefit of the others. “We take their armor and head to the ships. With me there, it will look like a company of soldiers returning from the battle for supplies.”

“What do you think?” Akila asked.

In the firelight that flickered inside the cave, Thanos couldn’t make out the men who spoke. Instead, their questions seemed to emerge from the darkness, so that he couldn’t tell who agreed with him, who doubted him, and who wanted him dead. Still, it was no worse than the politics back home. Better, in a lot of ways, since at least no one was smiling to his face while plotting to kill him.

“What about guards on the ships?” one of the rebels asked.

“There won’t be many,” Thanos said. “And they’ll know who I am.”

“What about all the people who will die in the city while we do this?” another called out.

“They’re dying now,” Thanos insisted. “At least this way, you have a way to fight back. Get this right, and we’ll have a way to save hundreds, if not thousands, of them.”

Silence fell, and the last question came out of it like an arrow.

“How can we trust him, Akila? He’s not just one of them, he’s a *noble*. A *prince*.”

Thanos whirled away from the direction the voice had come from, offering up his back for anyone to see. “They stabbed me in the back. They left me to die. I have as much reason to hate them as any man here.”

In that moment, he wasn’t just thinking about the Typhoon. He was thinking about everything his family had done to the people of Delos, and about everything they’d done to Ceres. If they hadn’t forced him to go to Fountain Square, he would never have been there when her brother died.

“We could sit here,” Thanos said, “or we could act. Yes, it will be dangerous. If they see through our disguise, we’re probably dead. I’m willing to risk it. Are you?” When no one answered, Thanos raised his voice. “*Are you?*”

That got a cheer in response. Akila stepped close to him, clapping a hand on Thanos’s shoulder.

“All right, Prince, it looks like we’re doing things your way. Pull this off, and you’ll have a friend for life.” His hand tightened until Thanos could feel pain shooting through his back. “Betray us, though, get my men killed, and I swear I’ll hunt you down.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

There were parts of Delos where Berin didn't normally go. They were parts that stank to him of sweat and desperation, as people did whatever they needed to in order to get by. He waved away offers from the shadows, giving the denizens there hard looks to keep them back.

If they'd known about the gold he carried, Berin knew he would have found himself with his throat cut, the purse beneath his tunic divided up and spent in the local taverns and gambling houses before the day was done. It was those places he sought out now, because where else was he going to find soldiers when they were off duty? As a bladesmith, Berin knew fighting men, and he knew the places they would go.

He had gold because he'd visited a merchant, taking with him two daggers he'd forged as examples for those who might have employed him. They'd been beautiful things, worthy of any noble's belt, worked with gold filigree and etched with hunting scenes on the blades. They were the last things of value he had left in the world. He'd stood in line with a dozen other people in front of the merchant's desk, and hadn't gotten half of what he knew they were worth.

To Berin, that didn't matter. All that mattered was finding his children, and that took gold. Gold he could use to buy ale for the right people, gold he could press into the right palms.

He made his way through Delos's taverns, and it was a slow process. He couldn't just come out and ask the questions he wanted to ask. He had to be careful. It helped that he had a few friends in the city, and a few more in the Empire's army. His blades had saved more than a few men's lives, over the years.

He found the man he was looking for half drunk in the middle of the afternoon, sitting in a tavern and stinking so much that he had clear space all around him. Berin guessed that it was only the uniform of the Empire's army that kept them from throwing him face first into the street. Well, that and the fact that Jacare was fat enough that it would have taken half the inn's patrons to lift him.

Berin saw the fat man's eyes lift up as he approached. "Berin? My old friend! Come and have a drink with me! Although you'll have to pay. I'm currently a little..."

"Fat? Drunk?" Berin guessed. He knew the other man wouldn't mind. The soldier seemed to make an effort to be the Imperial army's worst example. He even seemed to take a perverse kind of pride in it.

"...financially embarrassed," Jacare finished.

"I might be able to help with that," Berin said. He ordered drinks, but didn't touch his. He needed to keep a clear head if he was going to find Ceres and Sartes. Instead, he waited while Jacare downed his with a noise that sounded to Berin like a donkey at a water trough.

"So, what brings a man like you to my humble presence?" Jacare asked after a while.

"I'm looking for news," Berin said. "The kind of news a man in your position might have heard."

"Ah, well, *news*. News is a thirsty business. And possibly an expensive one."

"I'm looking for my son and daughter," Berin explained. With someone else, it might have gained him some sympathy, but he knew that with a man like this, it wouldn't have much effect.

"Your son? Nesos, right?"

Berin leaned across the table, his hand closing over Jacare's wrist as the man went to take another drink. He didn't have much of the old strength left that he'd built wielding forge hammers, but there was still enough to make the other man wince. Good, Berin thought.

"Sartes," Berin said. "My eldest son is dead. Sartes has been taken by the army. I know you hear things. I want to know where he is, and I want to know where my daughter, Ceres, is."

Jacare sat back, and Berin let him do it. He wasn't sure he could have held the other man in place much longer anyway.

“That’s the kind of thing I might have heard,” the soldier admitted, “but that kind of thing is difficult. I have expenses.”

Berin brought out the small pouch of gold. He poured it out onto the table, just far enough from the other man that Jacare couldn’t snatch it easily.

“Will this cover your ‘expenses’?” Berin asked, with a look at the other man’s drinking goblet. He saw the other man counting the gold, probably gauging whether there was any more to be had.

“Your daughter is the easy one,” Jacare said. “She’s up at the castle with the nobles. They announced that she was to marry Prince Thanos.”

Berin dared to breathe a sigh of relief at that, even though he wasn’t sure what to think. Thanos was one of the few royals with any decency to him, but marriage?

“Your son is trickier. Let me think. I heard that a few of the recruiters from the Twenty-third were doing the rounds down by your quarter, but there’s no guarantee that it’s them. If it is, they’re camped a little way to the south, trying to train up the conscripts to fight rebels.”

Bile rose in Berin’s mouth at that thought. He could guess how the army would treat Sartes, and just what that “training” would involve. He had to get his son back. But Ceres was closer, and the truth was that he had to at least see his daughter before he went after Sartes. He stood.

“Not going to finish your drink?” Jacare asked.

Berin didn’t answer. He was going to the castle.

It was easier for Berin to get into the castle than it would have been for almost anyone else. It had been a while, but he was still the one who had come there to discuss the requirements for combatlords’ weapons, or to bring special pieces for the nobles. It was simple enough to pretend that he was back in business, heading straight past the guards on the outer gates and into the space where the fighters prepared.

The next step was to get from there to wherever his daughter was. There was a barred gateway between the vaulted space where the warriors practiced and the rest of the castle. Berin had to wait for that to open from the other side, pushing past the servant who did it and trying to pretend that he had important business elsewhere in the building.

He did, just not the kind that most of the people there would understand.

“Hey, you! Where do you think you’re going?”

Berin froze at the rough tone of that. He knew before he turned that there would be a guard there, and he didn’t have an excuse that would satisfy them. The best he could hope for now would be to be thrown out of the castle before he could get close to seeing his daughter. The worst would involve the castle’s dungeons, or maybe just being dragged away to be executed where no one would ever know.

He turned and saw two guards who had obviously been soldiers of the Empire for a while. They had as much gray in their hair as Berin did these days, with the weathered look of men who’d spent too much time fighting in the sun over too many years. One was a good head taller than Berin, but stooped slightly over the spear he leaned on. The other had a beard that he’d oiled and waxed until it looked almost as sharp as the weapon he held. Relief flooded through Berin as he saw them, because he recognized them both.

“Varo, Caxus?” Berin said. “It’s me, Berin.”

The tension hung there for a moment, and Berin found himself hoping that the two would remember him. Then the guards laughed.

“So it is,” Varo said, unbending from over his spear for a moment. “We haven’t seen you in... how long has it been, Caxus?”

The other stroked his beard while he considered. "It's been months since he was last here. Haven't really talked since he delivered those bracers for me last summer."

"I've been away," Berin explained. He didn't say where. People might not pay their smiths much, but he doubted they would react well to him looking for work elsewhere. Soldiers didn't usually like the idea of their enemies receiving good blades. "Times have been hard."

"Times have been hard all around," Caxus agreed. Berin saw him frown slightly. "It still doesn't explain what you're doing in the main castle."

"You shouldn't be in here, bladesmith, and you know it," Varo agreed.

"What is it?" Caxus asked. "An emergency repair for some noble lad's favorite sword? I think we'd have heard if Lucious had snapped a blade. He'd probably have flogged his servants raw."

Berin knew he wouldn't be able to get away with a lie like that. Instead, he decided to try the one thing that might work: honesty. "I'm here to see my daughter."

He heard Varo suck in air between his teeth. "Ah, now that's a tricky one."

Caxus nodded. "Saw her fighting in the Stade the other day. Tough little thing. She killed a spiny bear and a combatlord. Hard fight though."

Berin's heart tightened in his chest as he heard that. They had Ceres fighting on the sands? Even though he knew it had been her dream to fight there, this didn't feel like the fulfillment of it. No, this was something else.

"I have to see her," Berin insisted.

Varo tilted his head to one side. "Like I said, tricky. No one gets in to see her now. Queen's orders."

"But I'm her father," Berin said.

Caxus spread his hands. "There's not a lot we can do."

Berin thought quickly. "Not a lot you can do? Was that what I said when you needed your spear re-hafting before your captain saw that you'd snapped it that time?"

"We said we wouldn't talk about that," the guard said, with a worried look.

"And what about you, Varo?" Berin continued, pressing his point home before the other could decide to throw him out. "Did I say that it was 'tricky' when you wanted a sword that would actually fit your hand, rather than army issue?"

"Well..."

Berin didn't stop. The important thing was to push forward past their objections. No, the *important* thing was to see his daughter.

"How many times has my work saved your lives?" he demanded. "Varo, you told me the story of that bandit chief your unit went after. Whose sword did you use to kill him?"

"Yours," Varo admitted.

"And Caxus, when you wanted all that filigree work on your greaves to impress that girl you married, who did you go to?"

"You," Caxus said. Berin could see him pondering.

"And that's before we get to the days when I was following you all around on campaign," Berin said. "What about –"

Caxus raised a hand. "All right, all right. You've made your point. Your daughter's room is further up. We'll show you the way. But if anyone asks, we're just escorting you *out* of the building."

Berin doubted anyone would ask, but that didn't matter right then. Only one thing did. He was going to see his daughter. He followed the two along the castle's corridors, finally coming to a door that was barred and locked from the outside. Since the key sat in the lock, he turned it.

Berin's heart nearly burst at his first sight of his daughter for months. She lay in bed, groaning as she came to, and looking at him with bleary eyes.

"Father?"

“Ceres!” Berin ran to her, throwing his arms around her and crushing her tight to him. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

He wanted to hold her tightly and never let her go right then, but he heard Ceres’s gasp of pain as he hugged her, and he pulled back hurriedly.

“What’s wrong?” Berin asked.

“No, it’s all right,” Ceres said. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Berin said. His daughter had always been so strong, so if she was in pain, it had to be bad. Berin never wanted to see his daughter hurt like that. “Let me look.”

Ceres let him, and Berin winced at what he saw. Tightly stitched wounds ran in parallel lines across his daughter’s back.

“How did you get in here?” Ceres asked while he did it. “How did you even find me?”

“I still have some friends,” her father said. “And I wasn’t going to give up without finding you.”

Ceres turned to him, and Berin could see the love there in her eyes. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I,” Berin said. “I should never have left you with your mother.”

Ceres reached out to take his hand, and Berin had forgotten quite how much he missed his daughter until then. “You’re here now.”

“I am,” Berin said. He took another look at her back. “They haven’t cleaned it properly. Here, let me find something to help.”

It was hard having to leave even for that short time. Varo and Caxus were still outside, and it didn’t take much to get them to bring food and water. Maybe they saw the look on his face when it came to things that involved Ceres’s well-being.

He passed her the bowl of food, and the speed with which Ceres devoured it told Berin everything he needed to know about how they’d been treating her here. He took the bowl of water, using it to clean out the wounds she’d gotten from her fight.

Ceres nodded. “I’m a lot better than I was.”

“Then I don’t want to think about how bad it was,” Berin said.

He couldn’t keep the guilt from washing up over him. If he hadn’t gone, then his children would never have gone through any of this.

“I’m sorry, I should have been here.”

“It might not have changed anything,” Ceres said, and Berin could tell that she was trying to reassure him. “The rebellion would still have happened. I might still have fought in the Stade.”

“Maybe.” Berin didn’t want to believe it. He knew Ceres had always had an attraction to the danger of the Stade, but that didn’t mean she would have fought there. She might have been safe. “I could have protected you and your brothers.”

Ceres took his hand again. “I think there are some things even you can’t protect us from.”

Berin smiled. “Do you remember when you were little? You used to think I was the strongest man in the world, and I could protect you from anything?”

Ceres smiled back. “Now I have to protect myself, and I’m strong enough to do it.”

There was a part of Berin that was happy it was true, but he still wanted to be there for his daughter. “Either way, it’s over. We’ll get you out of here.”

Berin thought about the guards. Exactly how much did they owe him? Exactly how much would they help before they decided it was easier to take him into custody?

“I’ll find a way,” Berin promised.

Ceres shook her head quickly. “No. I’m not running away.”

“I know you’re worried about being caught,” Berin said, covering her hand with his, “but I think I have enough friends in the castle to get us both out. We could join the rebellion.”

“It’s not about that,” Ceres said. “This is my path. I’m here to fight. I’m meant to fight.”

He stared back, stunned.

“You *want* to stay here?” That was hard to believe, especially when it had taken so much to find her. It had felt obvious that if he could only get inside, he could have his family back. “I thought you’d want to go. That we could find Sartes together, and everything would be all right.”

“Everything will be all right,” Ceres promised him. “And you should go to find Sartes. Get him safe.”

She stood and dressed in her training clothes. For a moment, Berin thought that she might come with him after all, but she showed no sign of doing so.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “If you’re not coming with me, you should rest.”

“I can’t,” Ceres said. She turned back toward him, determination set on her face. “I’m going to train. They want to kill me, but I’m not going to let them. I’m not going to give up, and I’m not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me run away.”

Berin swallowed at the strength there in his daughter. Even so, he didn’t want to just leave her. “I could come with you. I could help you.”

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