

The background of the cover is a dark, moody photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair. She is looking down and to her left. She has a small, triangular orange tattoo on her forehead. Her hair is adorned with several feathers and small orange beads. She is wearing a grey, sleeveless, crocheted top with a low neckline. A wide, dark leather belt with a large, ornate buckle is worn around her waist. On her right arm, there is a wide, torn, reddish-brown band. The overall atmosphere is somber and mysterious.

MORGAN RICE

REBEL,
PAWN,
KING

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 4

Of Crowns and Glory

Морган Райс

Rebel, Pawn, King

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Rebel, Pawn, King / 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, wakes to find herself imprisoned. Her army destroyed, her people captured, the rebellion quashed, she has to somehow pick up the pieces after being betrayed. Can her people ever rise again? Thanos sails for the Isle of Prisoners, thinking Ceres is alive, and finds himself in a trap of his own. In his dangerous voyage he remains tormented by the idea of Stephania, alone, with his child, and feels torn over his life's path. Yet as he struggles to return to Delos, to find both of his loves, he encounters a betrayal so great, his life can never be the same again. Stephania, a woman scorned, does not sit idly back. She turns all the power of her fury on the ones she loves the most—and her treachery, the most dangerous of all, may be what finally brings the kingdom down for good. REBEL, PAWN, KING 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 Rebel, Pawn, King

Morgan Rice

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CHAPTER ONE

Thanos felt a pit in his stomach as the ship rocked its way across the sea, each passing current taking him farther and farther from home. There had been no land in sight for days now. He stood at the prow of the boat, looking out at the water, waiting for the moment when he would finally spy something. Only the thought of what might lie ahead, *who* might lie ahead, kept him from ordering the captain to turn the ship around.

Ceres.

She was out there somewhere, and he would find her.

“You sure about this?” the captain asked, coming up beside him. “No one I know wants to take a trip to the Isle of Prisoners.”

What could Thanos say to that? That he didn’t know? That he felt a bit like the boat, pushed forward by its oars even as the wind tried to push it back?

The need to find Ceres, though, surpassed everything else. It drove Thanos, filling him with excitement at the prospect of finding her. He’d been so sure that she was gone, that he would never see her again. When he’d heard that she might be alive, the relief had flooded him, had made him feel as though he might collapse.

Yet he could not deny that thoughts of Stephania were there too, making him glance back, and even, for a flash, think about *going* back. She was his wife, after all, and he’d abandoned her. She was carrying his child, and he’d walked away. He’d left her there on the docks. What kind of man did that?

“She tried to kill me,” Thanos reminded himself.

“What’s that?” the captain asked, and Thanos realized he’d said it aloud.

“Nothing,” Thanos said. He sighed. “The truth is that I don’t know. I’m looking for someone, and the Isle of Prisoners is the only place she might have gone.”

He knew Ceres’s ship had sunk on the way to the island. If she’d survived, then it made sense that she might have made it there, didn’t it? That explained why Thanos hadn’t seen anything of her since, too. If she’d been able to get back to him, Thanos had to believe that she would have.

“Seems an awfully big risk to take for not knowing,” the captain said.

“She’s worth it,” Thanos assured him.

“She must be something special to be better than Lady Stephania,” the smuggler said with a leer that made Thanos want to punch him.

“That’s my wife you’re talking about,” Thanos said, and even he recognized the obvious problem with that. He couldn’t defend her when he was the one who had left her behind, and when she’d been the one to order his death. She probably deserved everything anyone said about her.

Now, if only he could convince himself of that. If only his thoughts of Ceres didn’t continue to be punctuated by thoughts of Stephania, as she’d been with him at the castle feasts, as she’d been in quiet moments, as she’d looked on the morning after their wedding night...

“Are you sure you can get me onto the Isle of Prisoners safely?” Thanos asked. He’d never been there, but the whole island was meant to be a well-guarded fortress of a place, inescapable for those who were brought there.

“Oh, that’s easy enough,” the captain assured him. “We go by there sometimes. The guards sell some of the prisoners they’ve broken as slaves. String them up on poles on the shore for us to see as we get close.”

Thanos had long since decided that he hated this man. He hid it, though, because right then the smuggler was the only chance he had to get to the island and find Ceres.

“I don’t exactly want to run into the guards,” he pointed out.

The other man shrugged. “That’s easy enough. We get close, drop you in a small boat, and keep going like it’s a normal visit. Then we’ll wait off the coast for you. Not long, mind you. Wait too long, and they might think we’re doing something suspicious.”

Thanos had no doubt that the smuggler would abandon him given any threat to his ship. Only the prospect of profit had brought him this far. A man like this wouldn’t understand love. For him, it was probably something you hired on the docks by the hour. But he’d gotten Thanos this far. That was what mattered.

“You realize that even if you find this woman on the Isle of Prisoners,” the captain said, “she might not be the way you remember.”

“Ceres will always be Ceres,” Thanos insisted.

He heard the other man snort. “Easy enough to say, but you don’t know the things they do there. Some of the ones they sell us as slaves, there’s barely enough of them left to do anything for themselves unless we tell them.”

“And I’m sure you’re happy to,” Thanos snapped back.

“Don’t like me much, do you?” the captain asked.

Thanos ignored the question, staring out to sea. They both knew the answer, and right then, he had better things to think about. He had to find a way to locate Ceres, whatever that —

“Is that land?” he asked, pointing.

It was no more than a dot on the horizon at first, but even like that, it looked bleak, surrounded by clouds and with roiling waves. As it grew closer, Thanos could feel a sense of brooding dread growing in him.

The island rose up in a series of gray granite spikes like the teeth of some great beast. A bastion sat on the topmost point of the island, a lighthouse above it burning constantly, as if to warn away all who might come there. Thanos could see trees on one side of the island, but most of it seemed to be bare.

As they came closer still, he could see windows that seemed to be carved straight into the rock of the island, as if the whole place had been hollowed out to make the prison bigger. He saw shale beaches too, with bleached white bones sticking out against them. Thanos heard shrieks, and he paled at the realization that he couldn’t tell if they were sea birds or people.

Thanos slid his small boat up the shale of the beach, wincing with disgust at the sight of manacles set there below the tide line. His imagination told him immediately what they were for: torturing or executing prisoners using the incoming waves. A set of abandoned bones on the shore told their own story.

The captain of the smuggling boat turned to him and smiled.

“Welcome to the Isle of Prisoners.”

CHAPTER TWO

To Stephania, the world felt bleak without Thanos there. It felt cold, despite the warmth of the sun. Empty, despite the bustle of people around the castle. She stared out over the city, and she could have happily burned it all down, because none of it meant anything. All she could do was sit by the windows of her rooms, feeling as though someone had ripped out her heart.

Maybe someone still would. She'd risked everything for Thanos, after all. What was the precise penalty for assisting a traitor? Stephania knew the answer to that, because it was the same as everything else in the Empire: whatever the king decided. She had little doubt that he would want her death for this.

One of her handmaids offered her a soothing herbal tonic. Stephania ignored it, even when the girl set it down on a small stone table beside her.

"My lady," the girl said. "Some of the others... they're wondering... shouldn't we be making preparations to leave the city?"

"To leave the city," Stephania said. She could hear how flat and stupid her own voice sounded.

"It's just... aren't we in danger? With everything that's happened, and all you had us do... to help Thanos."

"Thanos!" The name shocked her out of her stupor for a moment, and anger followed in its wake. Stephania picked up the herbal concoction. "Don't you dare mention his name, you stupid girl! Get out. Get *out*!"

Stephania threw the cup with its steaming brew. Her handmaid ducked, which was irritating in itself, but the sound of the cup shattering more than made up for it. Brown liquid spilled down the wall. Stephania ignored it.

"No one is to disturb me!" she yelled after the girl. "Or I'll have your skin for it."

Stephania needed to be alone with her thoughts, even if they were such dark thoughts that a part of her wanted to throw herself from the balcony of the rooms just to end it all. Thanos was gone. All she'd done, all she'd worked for, and Thanos was gone. She'd never believed in love before him; she'd been convinced it was a weakness that only opened you up to pain, but with him it had seemed worth the risk. Now, it turned out that she'd been right. Love only made it easier for the world to hurt you.

Stephania heard the sound of the door opening, and she whirled again, looking for something else to throw.

"I said I wasn't to be disturbed!" she snapped, before she saw who it was.

"That's hardly very grateful," Lucious said as he walked in, "when I had you escorted back here so carefully to ensure your safety."

Lucious was dressed like some storybook prince, in white velvet worked with gold designs and gemstones. He had his dagger at his belt, but he'd removed his golden armor and his sword. Even his hair looked freshly cleaned, free of any taint of the city. He looked, to Stephania, more like a man ready to sing songs beneath her window than one organizing the defense of the city.

"Escorted," Stephania said with a tight smile. "That's one word for it."

"I ensured you traveled safely through the war-torn streets of our city," Lucious said, "my men seeing that you didn't fall prey to rebels, or find yourself kidnapped by that murderous husband of yours. Did you know he'd escaped?"

Stephania frowned. What game was Lucious playing?

"Of course I know," Stephania snapped back. She stood, because she didn't like Lucious looming over her. "I was there."

She saw Lucious raise an eyebrow in mock surprise. "Why, Stephania, are you admitting to some role in your husband's escape? Because none of the evidence points that way."

Stephania looked at him levelly. "What did you do?"

“I did nothing,” Lucious said, obviously enjoying this far too much. “In fact, I’ve been arduously seeking out the truth of the matter. *Most* arduously.”

Which, for Lucious, meant torturing people. Stephania had no objection to cruelty, but she certainly didn’t take the pleasure in it that he did.

She sighed. “Stop playing games, Lucious. What have you done?”

Lucious shrugged. “I’ve seen to it that things work out the way I want,” he said. “When I speak to my father, I will tell him that Thanos killed a number of guards on the way out, while another admitted to assisting because of rebel sympathies. Sadly, he did not survive to tell his story again. A weak heart.”

Lucious clearly made sure that no one who had seen Stephania there survived. Even Stephania felt disgust at the callousness of it, although there was another part of her already working out what it meant for her in the context of everything else.

“Sadly, it seems that one of your handmaids was caught up in the plot,” Lucious said. “Thanos seduced her, it seems.”

Anger flashed through Stephania then. “They are *my* handmaidens!”

It wasn’t just the thought of women who’d served her so loyally being hurt, though that was bad enough. It was the thought that Lucious would dare to harm someone who was so obviously *hers*. It wasn’t just the thought of one of those who served her being harmed, it was the insult of it!

“And that was the point,” Lucious said. “Too many people had seen her about your errands. And when I offered the girl her life in exchange for everything she knew, she was most helpful.”

Stephania looked away. “Why do all this, Lucious? You could have left me to go with Thanos.”

“Thanos didn’t *deserve* you,” Lucious said. “He certainly didn’t deserve to be happy.”

“And why did you cover up my role in it?” Stephania asked. “You could have stood back and watched me executed.”

“I did think about it,” Lucious admitted. “Or at least, I thought about asking the king for you when we told him. But there was too much of a chance of him simply executing you out of hand, and we couldn’t have that.”

Only Lucious would speak about something like that so openly, or thought that Stephania was just something he could ask his father for like some precious bauble. Just the thought of it made Stephania’s skin crawl.

“But then it occurred to me,” Lucious said, “that I am enjoying the game between us far too much to do something like that. It isn’t the way I want you, anyway. I want you to be my equal, my partner. Truly mine.”

Stephania stepped over to the balcony, as much for fresh air as anything. This close, Lucious’s scent was of expensive rose water and perfumes obviously designed to disguise the blood beneath from the rest of his day’s exertions.

“What are you saying?” Stephania asked, although she already had a good idea of some of what Lucious would want from her. She’d made it her business to find out everything there was to know about the others at court, including Lucious’s appetites.

Although maybe she hadn’t done such a good job of it. She hadn’t realized that Lucious had been worming his way into her network of informants and spies. She hadn’t learned about the things Thanos was doing either, until it had been too late.

She couldn’t compare the two though. Lucious was utterly without morals or stopping points, actively seeking out new ways to hurt others. Thanos was strong and principled, loving and protective.

But he’d been the one to leave her. He’d abandoned her, knowing what might happen afterwards.

Lucious reached out for her hand, taking it in a grip that was gentler than anything he normally managed. Even so, Stephania had to fight the urge to cringe as he lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the inside of her wrist, right where the pulse throbbed.

“Lucious,” Stephania said, pulling her hand away. “I’m a married woman.”

"I've rarely found that to be a barrier," Lucious pointed out. "And let's be honest, Stephania, I doubt you have either."

Stephania's anger flared up again then. "You know nothing about me."

"I know everything about you," Lucious said. "And the more I see, the more I know that you and I are perfect for one another."

Stephania walked away, but Lucious followed. Of course he did. He wasn't a man who had ever been denied.

"Think about it, Stephania," Lucious said. "I thought you were nothing but empty headed, but then I learned about the spider's web you've woven in Delos. You know what I felt then?"

"Anger that you'd been made a fool of?" Stephania suggested.

"Careful," Lucious said. "You wouldn't want me angry with you. No, I felt admiration. Before, I thought you might be good to bed for a night or two. Afterwards, I thought you might be someone who truly understood how the world works."

Oh, Stephania understood, better than someone like Lucious could ever know. He had his position to protect him from whatever the world threw at him. Stephania had only her cleverness.

"And you decided we would be the perfect match," Stephania said. "Tell me then, what did you plan to do about my marriage to Thanos?"

"These things can be put aside," Lucious said, as if it were as simple as snapping his fingers. "After what he's done, I would have thought you'd be happy to be free of *that* attachment."

There would be an advantage to having the priests do it, because otherwise Stephania risked being tarnished with Thanos's crimes. She would always be the woman married to the traitor, even if Lucious had ensured that no one would ever be able to tie her to the crimes.

"Or, if you don't want that," Lucious said, "I'm sure it won't take much to ensure his demise. After all, you so nearly managed it before. Regardless of where he's gone, another assassin could be arranged. You could mourn for a... suitable period. I'm sure black would suit you. You look so lovely in everything else."

There was something about Lucious's look that made Stephania uncomfortable, as though he were trying to guess what she would look like without wearing anything at all. She looked him straight in the eyes, trying to keep her tone businesslike.

"And then what?" she demanded.

"And then you marry a more suitable prince," Lucious said. "Think of all we could do together, with the things you know, and the things I can do. We could rule the Empire together, and the rebellion would never even touch us. You have to admit, we would make a lovely couple."

Stephania laughed then. She couldn't help herself. "No, Lucious. We wouldn't, because I don't feel a thing for you beyond contempt. You're a thug, and worse, you're the reason I've lost everything. Why would I ever consider marrying you?"

She watched Lucious's face turn hard.

"I could make you," Lucious pointed out. "I could make you do whatever I want. Do you think I couldn't still let your part in Thanos's escape be known? Maybe I kept that handmaid of yours, for insurance."

"Trying to force me into marriage?" Stephania said. What kind of man would do that?

Lucious spread his hands. "You're not so unlike me, Stephania. You play the game. You wouldn't want some fool coming to you with flowers and jewels. Besides, you'd learn to love me. Whether you wanted to or not."

He reached out for her again, and Stephania put her hand on his chest. "Touch me, and you won't leave this room alive."

"Do you *want* me to reveal your part in helping Thanos escape?" he asked.

"You forget your own part," Stephania said. "After all, you knew all about it. How would the king react if I told him that?"

She expected anger from Lucious then, maybe even violence. Instead, she saw him smile.

“I knew you were perfect for me,” he said. “Even in your position, you find a way to fight back, and beautifully. Together, there will be nothing we can’t do. It will take you time to realize that though, I know that. You’ve been through a lot.”

He sounded exactly the way a concerned suitor should, which only made Stephania trust him less.

“Take the time to think about everything I’ve said,” Lucious said. “Think about everything a marriage to me could offer you. Certainly compared to being the woman who was married to a traitor. You might not love me yet, but people like us don’t make decisions based on that kind of foolishness. We make them because we are superior, and we recognize those like us when we see them.”

Stephania was nothing like Lucious, but she knew better than to say it. She just wanted him to go.

“In the meantime,” Lucious said when she didn’t answer, “I have a gift for you. That handmaiden of yours thought you might need it. She told me all *kinds* of things about you when she was begging for her life.”

He drew a vial from his belt pouch, setting it down on the small table by the window.

“She told me about the reason you had to run from the blood moon festival,” Lucious said. “About your pregnancy. Clearly, I could never bring up Thanos’s child. Drink this, and there will be no issue. In any sense.”

Stephania wanted to fling the vial at him. She picked it up to do just that, but he was already out the door.

She went to throw it anyway, but stopped herself, sitting back down at the window and staring at it.

It was clear, the sunlight shining through it in a way that made it seem far more innocent than it was. Drink this, and she would be free to marry Lucious, which was a horrible thought. Yet it would put her in one of the most powerful positions in the Empire. Drink this, and the last remnant of Thanos would be gone.

Stephania sat there, not knowing what to do, and slowly, the tears started to roll down her cheeks.

Maybe she would drink it after all.

CHAPTER THREE

Ceres fought desperately up toward consciousness, pushing through the veils of blackness that pinned her down, like a drowning woman flailing up through water. Even now, she could hear the screams of the dying. The ambush. The battle. She had to force herself to wake, or it would all be lost...

Her eyes snapped open, and she surged to her feet, ready to continue the fight. She tried to, anyway. Something caught at her wrists and ankles, holding her back. Sleep finally fled from her and Ceres saw where she was.

Stone walls surrounded her, curving in a space barely large enough for Ceres to lie down in. There was no bed, just a hard stone floor. A small window set with bars let in light. Ceres could feel the restrictive weight of steel around her wrists and ankles, and she could see the heavy bracket where chains connected her to the wall, the thick door bound with iron bands that proclaimed her a prisoner. The chain disappeared through a slot in the door, suggesting that she could be pulled back from outside, right to the bracket, to pin her against the wall.

Anger filled Ceres then at being caught there like that. She pulled at the bracket, trying to simply yank it from the wall with the strength her powers gave her. Nothing happened.

It was as though there was a fog inside her head, and she was trying to look through it to the landscape beyond. Here and there, the light of memory seemed to break through that fog, but it was a fragmented thing.

She could remember the gates to the city opening, the “rebels” waving them inside. Charging down there, throwing everything into what they’d thought would be the key battle for the city.

Ceres slumped back. She hurt, and some wounds were deeper than just the physical ones.

“Someone betrayed us,” Ceres said softly.

They’d been on the verge of victory, and someone had betrayed all of that. Because of money, or fear, or the need for power, someone had given away everything they’d worked for, and left them riding into a trap.

Ceres remembered then. She remembered the sight of Lord West’s nephew with an arrow sticking from his throat, the look of helplessness and disbelief that had crossed his face before he’d toppled from the saddle.

She remembered arrows blotting out the sun, and barricades, and fire.

Lord West’s men had tried to fire back at the archers assailing them. Ceres had seen their skills as horse archers on the ride to Delos, able to hunt with small bows and fire at a full gallop if they needed to. When they’d fired their first arrows in response, Ceres had even dared to feel hope, because it seemed as though these men would be able to overcome anything.

They hadn’t. With Lucious’s archers hidden on the rooftops, they’d been at too much of a disadvantage. Somewhere in the chaos, fire pots had joined the arrows, and Ceres had felt the horror of it as she’d seen men start to burn. Only Lucious would have used fire as a weapon in his own city, not caring if the flames spread to the surrounding houses. Ceres had seen horses rearing, men thrown as their mounts panicked.

Ceres should have been able to save them. She’d had reached for the power within her and found only emptiness, a bleak gap where there should have been ready strength and the power to destroy her foes.

She’d still been searching for it when her horse had bucked, sending her tumbling...

Ceres forced her mind back to the present, because there were some places her memory didn’t want to linger. The present wasn’t much better though, because outside, Ceres could hear the screams of a man who was obviously dying.

Ceres made her way to the window, fighting her way to the very limits of what her chains would allow. Even that was an effort. She felt as though something had scoured her inside, wiping away any of the strength that she might have had. It felt as though she could barely stand then, let alone fight her way clear of the chains that held her.

She managed to get there, wrapping her hands around the bars as if she might pull them out. In truth, though, they were almost the only thing holding her up right then. When she looked down at the courtyard that lay beyond her new cell, she needed that support.

Ceres saw Lord West's men there, standing in line after line of soldiers. Each still wore the remains of his armor, although in many cases pieces of it had been broken or torn from them, and none had their weapons. They had their hands bound, and many were kneeling. There was something sad about that sight. It spoke of their defeat more clearly than almost anything else could have.

Ceres recognized others there, rebels, and the sight of those faces brought an even more visceral reaction. Lord West's men had come with her willingly. They'd risked their lives for her, and Ceres felt responsibility for that, but the men and women below were ones she knew.

She saw Anka. Anka was tied at the heart of it all, her arms strapped behind her to a post, high enough that she couldn't possibly sit or kneel to rest. A rope at throat level threatened to start choking her every time she dared to relax. Ceres could see the blood on her face, left there casually, as if she didn't matter at all.

The sight of it all was enough to make Ceres feel sick. They were friends, people whom Ceres had known for years in some cases. Some of them were wounded. A flash of anger ran through Ceres at that, because no one was trying to help them. Instead, they knelt or stood, the same way the soldiers did.

Then there was the sight of the things they were waiting by. Ceres didn't know what many of them were for, but she could guess, based on the rest. There were impaling poles and blocks for beheading, gallows, and braziers with hot irons. And more. So much more that Ceres could barely begin to comprehend the mind that could decide to do all this.

Then she saw Lucious there amongst them, and she knew. This was down to him, and in a way, down to her. If only she'd been quicker chasing him down when he'd issued his challenge. If only she'd found some way to kill him before this.

Lucious stood over the soldier who was screaming, twisting a sword thrust through him to bring a fresh sound of agony from him. Ceres could see a small crowd of black-hooded torturers and executioners around him, looking on as though taking notes, or possibly just appreciating someone with a twisted flare for their profession. Ceres wished that she could reach out and kill all of them.

Lucious looked up, and Ceres felt the moment when his eyes met hers. It was something akin to the kind of thing bards sang about, with lovers' eyes meeting across a room, only here, there was only hatred. Right then, Ceres would have killed Lucious in any way she could, and she could see what he had in store for her.

She saw his smile spread slowly across his features, and he gave the sword one final twist, his eyes still on Ceres, before he straightened up, wiping bloodied hands absently on a cloth. He stood there like an actor about to deliver a speech to a waiting audience. To Ceres, he simply looked like a butcher.

"Every man and woman here is a traitor to the Empire," Lucious declared. "But I think we all know that it is not your fault. You have been misled. Corrupted by others. Corrupted by one in particular."

Ceres saw him shoot another look in her direction.

"So I am going to offer mercy to the ordinary ones among you. Crawl to me. Beg to be enslaved, and you will be permitted to live. The Empire always needs more drudges."

No one moved. Ceres didn't know whether to be proud or to scream at them to take the offer. After all, they had to know what was coming.

“No?” Lucious said, and there was a hint of surprise in his tone. Perhaps, Ceres thought, he genuinely had expected everyone there to willingly give themselves over into enslavement to save their lives. Perhaps he really didn’t understand what the rebellion was about, or that there were some things worse than death. “No one?”

Ceres saw the pretense of calm control slip away from him then like a mask, revealing what lay beneath.

“This is what happens when you fools start listening to scum who want to mislead you!” Lucious said. “You forget your places! You forget that there are consequences for everything you peasants do! Well, I’m going to remind you that there are consequences. You’re going to die, every last one of you, and you’re going to do it in ways that people will whisper about every time they so much as think of betraying their betters. And, to make sure of it, I’m going to bring your families here to watch. I’m going to burn them out of their pitiful hovels, and I’m going to make them pay attention while you scream!”

He would do it, too; Ceres had no doubt of that. She saw him point at one of the soldiers, then at one of the devices that were waiting.

“Start with this one. Start with any of them. I don’t care. Just make sure that they all suffer before they die.” He pointed a finger up toward Ceres’s cell. “And make sure that she’s last. Make her watch every last one of them die. I want her driven mad by it. I want her to understand just how helpless she really is, no matter how much of the blood of the Ancient Ones she boasts about to her men.”

Ceres threw herself back from the bars then, but there must have been men waiting on the other side of the door, because the chains at her wrists and ankles went tight, dragging her back to the wall and spreading her out so that she couldn’t move more than an inch or two in any direction. She certainly couldn’t look away from the window, through which she could see one of the executioners checking the sharpness of an axe.

“No,” she said, trying to fill herself with a confidence she didn’t feel right then. “No, I won’t let this happen. I’ll find a way to stop it.”

She didn’t just reach into herself then, looking for her power. She dove down into the space where she would normally have found the energy waiting for her. Ceres forced herself to go after the state of mind she’d learned from the Forest Folk. She hunted after the power that she’d gained as surely as if she were chasing after some hidden animal.

Yet it remained as elusive as one. Ceres tried everything she could think of. She tried to calm herself. She tried to remember the sensations that had been there before when she had used her power. She tried forcing it to flow through her with an effort of will. In desperation, Ceres even tried pleading with it, coaxing it as though it were truly some separate being, rather than just a fragment of herself.

None of it worked, and Ceres threw herself against the chains holding her. She felt them bite into her wrists and ankles as she threw herself forward, but she couldn’t succeed in gaining so much as an arm’s length of space.

Ceres should have been able to snap the steel easily. She should have been able to break free and save all of those there. She should have, but right then, she couldn’t, and the worst part was that she didn’t even know why. Why had powers she’d already used so much abandoned her so suddenly? Why had it come to this?

Why couldn’t she make it do what she wanted? Ceres felt tears touch the edges of her eyes as she fought desperately to be able to do something. To be able to help.

Outside, the executions began, and Ceres couldn’t do anything to stop them.

Worse, she knew that when Lucious was done with those outside, it would be her turn next.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sartes woke, ready to fight. He tried to stand, thrashed when he couldn't, and found himself shoved back down by the boot of a rough-looking figure opposite.

"Think there's room for you moving about in here?" he snapped.

The man was shaven-headed and tattooed, missing a finger from some brawl or other. There was a time when Sartes would probably have felt a thrill of fear at seeing a man like that. That was before the army, though, and the rebellion that had followed. It was before he'd seen what real evil looked like.

There were other men there, crammed into a wooden walled space, with light let in only through a few cracks. It was enough for Sartes to see them by, and what he saw was a long way from encouraging. The man opposite him was probably one of the least rough looking there, and the sheer number of them meant that for a moment, Sartes did feel fear, and not just because of what they could do to him. What could be in store if he was stuck in a space with men like this?

He could feel the sensation of movement, and Sartes risked turning his back on the crowd of thugs so that he could look out through one of the cracks in the wooden walls. Outside, he saw a dusty, rocky landscape going past. He didn't recognize the area, but how far away from Delos could he be?

"A cart," he said. "We're in a cart."

"Listen to the boy," the shaven-headed man said. He performed a rough approximation of Sartes's voice, twisted out of all recognition. "We're on a cart. Regular genius this boy is. Well, genius, how about you keep your mouth shut? Bad enough we're on our way to the tar pits without you going on."

"The tar pits?" Sartes said, and he saw a flash of anger cross the other man's face.

"Thought I told you to be quiet," the thug snapped. "Maybe if I shove a few of your teeth down your throat, it will remind you."

Another man stretched. The confined space seemed barely big enough to hold him. "Only one I hear talking is you. How about you both shut up?"

The speed with which the shaven-headed man did it told Sartes a lot about how dangerous this other man was. Sartes doubted that it was a moment that had made him any friends, but he knew from the army that men like this didn't have friends: they had hangers-on and they had victims.

It was hard to be quiet now that he knew where they were going. The tar pits were one of the worst punishments the Empire had; so dangerous and unpleasant that those sent there would be lucky to live out a year. They were hot, deadly places, where the bones of dead dragons could be seen sticking from the ground, and the guards thought nothing of throwing a sick or collapsing prisoner into the tar.

Sartes tried to remember how he'd gotten there. He'd been scouting for the rebellion, trying to find a gate that would let Ceres into the city with Lord West's men. He'd found it. Sartes could remember the elation that he'd felt then, because it had been perfect. He'd raced back to try to tell the others.

He'd been so close when the cloaked figure had grabbed him; close enough that he'd felt as though he could reach out and touch the entrance to the rebellion's hideaway. He'd felt as though he was finally safe, and they'd snatched it away from him.

"Lady Stephania sends her regards."

The words echoed in Sartes's memory. They'd been the last words he heard before they'd struck him unconscious. They'd simultaneously told him who was doing this and that he had failed. They'd let him get that close and then taken it away.

They'd left Ceres and the others without the information Sartes had been able to find. He found himself worrying about his sister, his father, Anka, and the rebellion, not knowing what would happen

to them without the gate he'd been able to find for them. Would they be able to get into the city without his help?

Had they been able to do it, Sartes corrected himself, because by now, one way or another, it would be done. They would have found another gate, or an alternative way into the city, wouldn't they? They had to have done, because what was the alternative?

Sartes didn't want to think about that, but it was impossible to avoid. The alternative was that they might have failed. At best, they might have realized that there was no way in without taking a gate, and found themselves trapped there while the army advanced. At worst... at worst, they might already be dead.

Sartes shook his head. He wouldn't believe that. He couldn't. Ceres would find a way to come through it all, and to win. Anka was as resourceful as anyone he'd met. His father was strong and solid, while the other rebels had the determination that came with knowing that their cause was a righteous one. They would find a way to prevail.

Sartes had to think that what was happening to him would be temporary too. The rebels would win, which meant that they would capture Stephania and she would tell them what she'd done. They would come for him, the way his father and Anka had come when he'd been stuck in the army camp.

But what a place they'd have to come to. Sartes looked out as the cart jolted its way across the landscape, and saw the flatness of it give way to pits and rocky surrounds, bubbling ponds of blackness and heat. Even from where he was, he could smell the sharp, bitter smell of the tar.

There were people there, working in lines. Sartes could see the chains connecting them in pairs as they dredged the tar with buckets and collected it so that others could use it. He could see the guards standing over them with whips, and as Sartes watched, a man collapsed under the beating he was receiving. The guards cut him loose from his chains and kicked him into the nearest tar pit. The tar took a long time to swallow his screams.

Sartes wanted to look away then, but couldn't. He couldn't take his eyes from the horror of it all. From the cages in the open air that were obviously the prisoners' homes. From the guards who treated them as nothing more than animals.

He watched until the cart drew to a halt, and soldiers opened it with weapons in one hand and chains in the other.

"Prisoners out," one called. "Out, or we'll set fire to that cart with you inside, you scum!"

Sartes shuffled out into the light with the others, and now he could take in the full horror of it. The fumes of the place were almost overwhelming. The tar pits around them bubbled in strange, unpredictable combinations. Even as Sartes watched, a patch of ground near one of the pits gave way, tumbling into the tar.

"These are the tar pits," the soldier who'd spoken announced. "Don't bother trying to get used to them. You'll all be dead long before that happens."

The worst part, Sartes suspected as they fitted a manacle to his ankle, was that they might be right.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thanos slid his small boat up the shale of the beach, looking away from the manacles set there below the tide line. He made his way up off the beach, feeling exposed with every step across the gray rock of the place. It would be far too easy to be seen there, and Thanos definitely didn't want to be spotted on a place like this.

He scrambled up a path and stopped, feeling anger join his disgust as he saw what lay along either side of the path. There were devices there, gibbets and spikes, breaking wheels and gallows, all obviously intended to give an unpleasant death to those within. Thanos had heard of the Isle of Prisoners, but even so, the evil of this place made him want to wipe it away.

He kept on up the path, thinking about how it would be for anyone led down there, hemmed in by rocky walls and knowing that only death awaited. Had Ceres really ended up in this place? Just the thought of it was enough to make Thanos's gut clench.

Ahead, Thanos heard shouts, whoops, and cries that sounded almost as much animal as human. There was something about the sound that made him freeze, his body telling him to be ready for violence. He hurried off the path, lifting his head over the level of the rocks that blocked his view.

What he saw beyond made him stare. A man was running, his bare feet leaving bloody smears on the stony ground. He wore clothes that were ripped and torn, one sleeve hanging loose from the shoulder, a great rent at his back showing a wound beneath. He had wild hair and a wilder beard. Only the fact that his torn clothes were silk showed that he hadn't lived wild all his life.

The man chasing him looked, if anything, even wilder, and there was something about him that made Thanos feel like the prey of some great animal just looking at him. He wore a mixture of leathers that looked as though they'd been stolen from a dozen different sources, and had features streaked with mud in a pattern that Thanos suspected was designed to let him blend in with the forest. He held a club and a short dagger, and the whoops he emitted while chasing the other man made Thanos's hair stand on end.

On instinct, Thanos started forward. He couldn't just stand by and watch someone be murdered, even here, where everyone had committed some crime to be sent here. He hurried over the rise, sprinting down to a spot the two would run past. The first of the men dodged around him. The second paused with a sharp-toothed grin.

"Looks like another one to hunt," he said, and lunged at Thanos.

Thanos reacted with the speed of long training, swaying out of the way of the first knife thrust. The club caught him on the shoulder, but he ignored the pain. He swung his fist around sharply, feeling the impact as he connected with the other man's jaw. The wild man fell, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Thanos looked round, and saw the first man staring at him.

"Don't worry," Thanos said, "I won't hurt you. I'm Thanos."

"Herek," the other man said. To Thanos, his voice sounded rusty, as though he hadn't spoken to anyone for a long time. "I –"

Another cry came from back toward the wooded section of the island. This one seemed to be many voices joined together into something that even Thanos found terrifying.

"Quick, this way."

The other man grabbed Thanos's arm, pulling him toward a series of higher rocks. Thanos followed, ducking down into a space that couldn't be seen from the main path, but where they could still watch for signs of danger. Thanos could feel the fear of the other man as they crouched there, and he tried to stay as still as possible.

Thanos wished he'd thought to grab the knife from the man he'd knocked down, but it was too late for that now. Instead, he could only stay there while they waited for the other hunters to descend on the spot where they'd been.

He saw them approach in a group, and no two of them were alike. They all held weapons that had obviously been crafted from whatever had been near to hand, while those who still wore more than the barest scraps of clothing wore an odd mix of obviously stolen things. There were men and women there, looking hungry and dangerous, half-starved and vicious.

Thanos saw one of the women there prod the unconscious man with her foot. He felt a thrill of fear then, because if the man woke, he would be able to tell the others what had happened, and that would set them searching.

Yet he didn't wake, because the woman knelt and cut his throat.

Thanos tensed at that. Beside him, Herek put a hand on his arm.

"The Abandoned have no time for weakness of any kind," he whispered. "They prey on anyone they can, because the ones up at the fortress don't give them anything."

"They're prisoners?" Thanos asked.

"We're all prisoners here," Herek replied. "Even the guards are just prisoners who rose to the top, and who enjoy the cruelty enough to do the Empire's work. Except you're not a prisoner, are you? You don't have the look of someone who's been through the fortress."

"I'm not," Thanos admitted. "This place... it's prisoners doing it to other prisoners?"

The worst part was that he could imagine it. It was the kind of thing the king, his father, might think of. Put prisoners into a kind of hell and then give them the chance to avoid more pain only if they ran it.

"The Abandoned are the worst," Herek said. "If prisoners won't submit, if they're too mad or too stubborn, if they won't work or they fight back too much, they're thrown out here with nothing. The wardens hunt them. Most beg to be brought back."

Thanos didn't want to think about it, but he had to, because Ceres might be here. He kept his eyes on the group of feral prisoners while he continued to whisper to Herek.

"I'm looking for someone," Thanos said. "She might have been brought here. Her name is Ceres. She fought in the Stade."

"The princess combatlord," Herek whispered back. "I saw her fight in the Stade. But no, I would have known if she'd been brought here. They liked to parade the new arrivals in front of us, so that they could see what was waiting for them. I would have remembered *her*."

Thanos's heart plunged like a stone thrown into a pool. He'd been so sure that Ceres would be here. He'd put everything he had into getting here, simply because it was the only clue he had to her whereabouts. If she wasn't there... where could he go?

The hope he'd had started to drip away, as surely as the blood from Herek's feet, where the rocks had cut them.

The blood that the Abandoned were staring at even now, following the trail of it...

"Run!" Thanos yelled, urgency overcoming his heartbreak as he dragged Herek with him.

He scrambled over the broken ground of the rocks, heading in the direction of the fortress simply because he guessed it was a direction those following wouldn't want to go. Yet they did follow, and Thanos had to pull Herek along to keep him running.

A spear flashed past his head, and Thanos flinched, but he didn't stop. He dared a glance back, and the lean forms of the prisoners were closing, hunting them as surely as a pack of wolves. Thanos knew he had to turn and fight, but he had no weapons. At best, he could grab a rock.

Figures in dark leathers and chain shirts rose from the rocks ahead, holding bows. Thanos reacted on instinct, dragging himself and Herek to the ground.

Arrows flew overhead, and Thanos saw the group of feral prisoners fall like cut corn. One turned to run, and an arrow took her in the back.

Thanos stood, as a trio of men walked toward them. The one at their head was silver-haired and angular, putting his bow across his back as he approached and drawing a long knife.

“You are Prince Thanos?” he demanded as he got closer.

In that moment, Thanos knew he’d been betrayed. The smuggling captain had given up his presence, either for gold or because he simply didn’t want the trouble.

He forced himself to stand tall. “Yes, I’m Thanos,” he said. “And you are?”

“I am Elsius, warden of this place. Once they called me Elsius the Butcher. Elsius the Killer. Now those I kill deserve their fate.”

Thanos had heard that name. It had been a name that the children he’d grown up with had used to try to frighten one another, that of a nobleman who had killed and killed until even the Empire had thought of him as too evil to allow to stay free. They’d made up stories of the things he’d done to those he caught. At least, Thanos had hoped they’d been made up.

“Are you going to try to kill me now?”

Thanos tried to sound defiant, even though he had no weapons.

“Oh no, my prince, we have much better plans for you. Your companion, though...”

Thanos saw Herek try to stand, but he wasn’t quick enough. The leader stepped forward and stabbed with brisk efficiency, the blade sliding in and out of the other man again and again. He held Herek up, as though to stop him dying before he was ready.

Finally, he let the prisoner’s corpse fall. When he turned to Thanos, his face was a rictus that had almost nothing human about it.

“How does it feel, Prince Thanos,” he asked, “to become a prisoner?”

CHAPTER SIX

Lucious had come to love the smell of burning homes. There was something soothing about it, something that built excitement in him too at the prospect of everything that was to come.

“Wait for them,” he said, from his perch atop a grand charger.

Around him, his men were spread out to surround the houses they were burning. They were barely houses, really, just peasant hovels so poor that it wouldn’t even be worth looting them. Perhaps they’d sift through the ashes later.

For now, though, there was fun to be had.

Lucious saw a flicker of movement as the first people ran screaming from their homes. He pointed one gauntleted hand, the sunlight catching on the gold of his armor.

“There!”

He heeled his horse into a run, lifting a spear and throwing it down at one of the running figures. Beside him, his men caught up with men and women, hacking and killing, only occasionally letting them live when it seemed obvious that they would fetch more in the slave markets.

There was, Lucious had found, an art to burning out a village. It was important not to just rush in blindly and set light to everything. That was what amateurs did. Rush in without preparation, and people just ran. Burn things in the wrong order, and there was the possibility that valuables would be left behind. Leave too many escape routes, and the slave lines would be shorter than they should be.

The key was preparation. He’d had his men arrange themselves in a cordon outside the village well before he’d ridden in wearing his oh so visible armor. Some of the peasants had run just at the sight of it, and Lucious had enjoyed that. It was good to be feared. It was right that he should be.

They were on the next stage now, where they burned some of the least valuable homes. From the top, of course, flinging torches into the thatch. People couldn’t run if you fired their hiding places at ground level, and if they didn’t run, there was no entertainment.

Later, there would be more traditional looting, followed by torture for those with suspected rebel sympathies, or who might simply be hiding valuables. And then the executions, of course. Lucious smiled at that thought. Normally, he just made examples. Today though, he was going to be more... extensive.

He found himself thinking of Stephania as he rode through the village, unsheathing his sword to hack left and right. Normally, he wouldn’t have reacted well to anyone rejecting him the way she had. If any of the young women of this village tried, Lucious would probably have them flayed alive, rather than simply sending them to the slave pits.

Stephania was different, though. It wasn’t just that she was beautiful and elegant. When he’d thought that was all she was, he’d thought nothing of the idea of simply bringing her to heel like some glorious pet.

Now that she’d turned out to be more than that, Lucious found his feelings changing, becoming more. She wasn’t just the perfect ornament for a future king; she was someone who understood the way the world worked, and who was prepared to scheme to get what she wanted.

That was a big part of why Lucious had decided to let her go; he was enjoying the game between them too much. He’d had her backed into a corner, and she’d been willing to bring him down along with her. He wondered what move she’d make next.

He was brought from his thoughts by the sight of two of his men holding a family at sword point: a fat man, an older woman, and three children.

“Why are they still breathing?” Lucious asked.

“Your highness,” the man begged, “please. My family have always been the most loyal subjects of your father. We have nothing to do with the rebellion.”

“So you’re saying that I’m mistaken?” Lucious asked.

“We are loyal, your highness. Please.”

Lucious cocked his head to one side. “Very well, in view of your loyalty, I will be generous. I will permit one of your children to live. I’ll even let you choose which one. In fact, I command you to.”

“B-but... we can’t choose between our children,” the man said.

Lucious turned to his men. “You see? Even when I give them commands, they don’t obey. Kill them all, and don’t waste my time with any more like this. Everyone in this village is either to be killed or put on the slave lines. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

He rode away toward the sight of more burning buildings while the screams started behind him. It really was turning out to be a beautiful morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Work faster, you lazy whelps!” the guard called, and Sartes winced at the sting of the whip across his back. If he could have, he would have spun and fought the guard, but without a weapon, it was suicide.

Rather than a weapon, he had a bucket. Chained to another prisoner, he was expected to collect the tar and pour it into large barrels to be hauled back up away from the pits, where it might be used to caulk boats and seal roofs, line the smoothest cobbles and waterproof walls. It was hard work, and having to do it chained to someone else only made it harder.

The boy he was chained to wasn’t any larger than Sartes was, and looked far thinner. Sartes didn’t know his name yet, because the guards punished anyone who talked too much. They probably thought they were plotting revolt, Sartes thought. Looking at some of the men around them, maybe they had a point.

The tar pits were a place where some of the worst people in Delos got sent, and it showed. There were fights over food, and simply over who was toughest, although none of them lasted long. Whenever guards were watching, the men kept their heads down. Those who didn’t quickly found themselves beaten or thrown into the tar.

The boy who was currently chained to Sartes didn’t seem to fit in with so many of the rest of them. He was stick thin and spindly, looking as though he might break under the effort of hauling tar from the pits. His skin was filthy with it, and covered in burns from where the tar had touched it.

A plume of gas drifted off the pit. Sartes managed to hold his breath, but his companion wasn’t so lucky. He started to hack and cough, and Sartes felt the jerk on the chain as he stumbled before he saw him start to fall.

Sartes didn’t have to think. He dropped his bucket, lunging forward and hoping that he would be quick enough. He felt his fingers close around the other boy’s arm, so thin that Sartes’s fingers fit all the way around it like a second shackle.

The boy tumbled toward the tar and Sartes hauled him back from it. Sartes could feel the heat of it there, and almost recoiled as he felt his skin burning. Instead, he kept his grip on the other boy, not letting him go until he’d pulled him safely back to solid ground.

The boy coughed and sputtered, but seemed to be trying to form words.

“It’s okay,” Sartes assured him. “You’re okay. Don’t try to speak.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Help... me... up. The guards – ”

“What’s going on here?” a guard bellowed, punctuating it with a blow of the lash that made Sartes cry out. “Why are you lazing about here?”

“It was the fumes, sir,” Sartes said. “They just overcame him for a moment.”

That earned him another blow. Sartes wished that he had a weapon then. Something he could use to fight back, but there was nothing other than his bucket, and there were far too many guards for that. Of course, Ceres would probably have found a way to fight them all with it, and that thought brought a smile to him.

“When I want you to speak, I’ll tell you,” the soldier said. He kicked the boy Sartes had saved. “Up, you. You can’t work, you’re no use. You’re no use, you can go into the tar like all the rest.”

“He can stand,” Sartes said, and quickly helped the other boy to do just that. “Look, he’s fine. It was just the fumes.”

This time, he didn’t mind the soldier hitting him, because at least it meant he wasn’t hitting the other boy.

“Get back to work then, both of you. You’ve already wasted too much time.”

They went back to collecting the tar, and Sartes did his best to collect as much as he could, because the other boy clearly wasn’t strong enough to do much yet.

"I'm Sartes," he whispered over, keeping a watch for the guards.

"Bryant," the other boy whispered back, although he looked nervous as he did it. Sartes heard him coughing again. "Thank you, you saved my life. If I can ever pay you back, I will."

He fell silent as the guards passed by again.

"The fumes are bad," Sartes said, as much to keep him talking as anything.

"They eat your lungs," Bryant replied. "Even some of the guards die."

He said it as though it was normal, but Sartes couldn't see anything normal about it.

Sartes looked at the other boy. "You don't look much like a criminal."

He could see the look of pain that crossed the other boy's face. "My family... Prince Lucious came to our farm and burned it. He killed my parents. He took my sister away. He sent me here for no reason."

It was far too familiar a story to Sartes. Lucious was evil. He took any excuse to cause misery. He tore families apart just because he could.

"So why not get justice?" Sartes suggested. He kept scooping tar out from the pit, making sure that no guard would come close.

The other boy looked at him as if he were mad. "How am I meant to do that? I'm just one person."

"The rebellion is far more than one person," Sartes pointed out.

"As if they'd care about what happens to me," Bryant countered. "They don't even know we're here."

"Then we'll have to go to them," Sartes whispered back.

Sartes saw panic cross the other boy's features.

"You can't. If you even talk about escape, the guards will hang us above the tar and lower us into it a little at a time. I've seen it. They'll kill us."

"And what will happen if we stay here?" Sartes demanded. "If you'd been chained to one of the others today, what would have happened?"

Bryant shook his head. "But there are the tar pits, and the guards, and I'm sure there are traps. The other prisoners won't help, either."

"But you're thinking about it now, aren't you?" Sartes said. "Yes, there will be risks, but a risk is better than dying for certain."

"How are we even supposed to do it?" Bryant asked. "They keep us in cages at night, and chain us together all day."

Sartes had an answer for that, at least. "Then we escape together. We find the right moment. Trust me, I know about getting out of bad situations."

He didn't say that this would be worse than anything he'd dealt with before, or let his new friend know just how bad the odds were. He didn't need to scare Bryant any more than he was already, but they did need to go.

If they stayed any longer, he knew, neither one of them would survive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thanos felt as tense as an animal about to leap as he walked between the trio of prisoners, back in the direction of the fortress that dominated the island. With every step, he found himself looking for an escape route, yet on open ground, with the bows his captors held, there was none.

"Might as well be sensible," Elsius said behind him. "I won't say that your fate will be any better if you go along with us, but you'll last longer. There's nowhere to run on the island except to the Abandoned, and I'll hunt you down long before that."

"Perhaps I ought to do it and make it quick then," Thanos said, trying to cover up his surprise that the other man had read his intentions so easily. "An arrow to the back can't be that bad."

"Not worse than a sword thrust," Elsius said. "Oh yes, we heard about that, even here. The guards bring us news when they throw us new people to punish. But believe me, if I hunt you, there will be nothing quick about it. Now, keep walking, prisoner."

Thanos did so, but he knew he couldn't make it all the way to the fortress part of the island. If he did that, he would never see daylight again. The best time to escape was always early, while you still had strength. So Thanos kept looking around, trying to gauge the terrain, and his moment.

"It won't work," Elsius said. "I know men. I know what they will do. It's amazing what you learn about them while you're cutting them. You see their real souls then, I think."

"You know what I think?" Thanos asked.

"Do tell me. I'm sure the insult will bring joy to my day. And pain to yours."

"I think that you're a coward," Thanos said. "I heard about your crimes. A few murders of people not able to fight back. A little time running a gang of bandits who did your fighting for you. You're pathetic."

Thanos heard the laughter behind him.

"Oh, is that the best you can do?" Elsius said. "I'm offended. What were you trying to do, lure me in close so you could strike? Do you really think I'm that *stupid*? You two, hold him. Prince Thanos, if you move, I'll put an arrow somewhere painful."

Thanos felt the arms of the two guards wrap around his, holding him tightly in place. They were strong men, obviously used to dealing with unruly prisoners. Thanos felt himself spun around to face Elsius, who was holding his bow absolutely level, ready to fire.

Just as Thanos had hoped.

Thanos surged against the guards who held him, then, and he heard Elsius laugh.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

He heard the twang of the bowstring, but Thanos wasn't working to break free the way they might have expected. Instead, he spun, dragging one of the guards into the path of the arrow, feeling the shock run through the other man as an arrowhead appeared on the far side of his chest.

Thanos felt his grip loosen as the guard clutched at the arrow, and he didn't hesitate. He surged into the other guard, snatching a knife from his belt and shoving him into Elsius. With the two tangled together, he grabbed the bow from the dying guard, snatching as many arrows as he could while he ran.

Thanos zigzagged as he made his way over broken rocks, sprinting for the nearest cover. It probably saved his life that he didn't try to run back in the direction of his boat yet, but instead made for the trees.

"Nothing that way but the Abandoned!" Elsius yelled after him.

Thanos ducked as an arrow whispered past his head. He felt it close enough to ruffle his hair. The killer hunting him was far too good a shot.

Thanos fired back, barely even looking. If he stopped for long enough to aim properly, he had no doubt that he would quickly find himself killed by one of the arrows that flashed past as he ran. Or

worse, he might find himself simply injured enough for Elsius to catch up to and drag to the fortified side of the island.

Thanos dove in behind a rock, hearing an arrow skitter off it. He fired again, went to run, then paused, some instinct making him wait as an arrow flashed past.

Now he ran, sprinting for the trees. He tried to make his run unpredictable, but mostly, he focused on speed. The quicker he could get to the cover of the trees, the better. He fired another arrow without looking, sidestepped on instinct as another arrow missed him, then threw himself behind the nearest of the trees just as a shaft pierced its trunk.

Thanos paused for a moment, listening. Over the beating of his heart, he could hear Elsius issuing orders.

“Go and get more wardens,” he commanded. “I will continue to hunt our prince myself.”

Thanos started to creep through the trees. He knew he had to cover ground now before more of the armored guards came. Enough of them, and they would easily be able to surround him. Then he wouldn’t be able to get away, no matter how well he fought.

Yet he still had to be careful. He could hear Elsius somewhere behind him, in the rustle of branches and the occasional breaking of twigs. The older man still had his bow, and he’d already proved just how willing he was to use it.

“I know you can hear me,” Elsius said behind him. His tone was conversational, as though it were the most normal thing in the world to talk like that to a man he was trying to kill. “You’ll have hunted, of course, being a prince.”

Thanos didn’t reply.

“Oh, I know,” Elsius said. “You don’t want to give away your position. You want to stay perfectly hidden, and hope you can stay ahead of me. The people I used to stalk out in the world used to try that. It didn’t work for them either.”

An arrow came out of the trees, barely missing Thanos as he ducked. He fired back, then set off running through the trees.

“That’s more like it,” Elsius replied. “Make sure the Abandoned don’t catch you. Me, they fear. You... you’re just prey.”

Thanos ignored him and ran on, taking twists and turns at random until he was sure he’d put enough distance between him and his pursuer.

He paused. He couldn’t hear Elsius anymore. He could, however, hear the sound of someone cursing to themselves, half angry, half sobbing. He made his way forward carefully, not trusting it. Not trusting anything out here.

He came to the edge of a small clearing. In it, to his shock, a woman dangled upside down by her ankle, caught in a snare. Her dark hair was tied in a braid that dangled down below her, brushing the floor. She wore the rough breeches and tunic of a sailor, tied with a sash. She was certainly cursing like a sailor while she tried to disentangle herself from the rope that held her, without any discernible success.

Every instinct Thanos had said that this was part of some bigger trap. Either this was a deliberate ploy to slow him down, or at the very least, the woman’s swearing would quickly bring the Abandoned.

Yet he couldn’t just leave her like that. Thanos stepped out into the clearing, hefting the knife he held.

“Who are you?” the woman demanded. “Stay back, you goat-bothering Abandoned scum! If I had my sword – ”

“You might want to be quiet before you attract every prisoner here,” Thanos said as he cut her down from the snare. “I’m Thanos.”

“Felene,” the woman replied. “What are you doing out here, Thanos?”

“Running from men who want to kill me, trying to get back to my boat,” Thanos said. An idea struck him, and he started to reset the snare.

“You have a boat?” Felene said. Thanos noticed that she kept her distance. “A way off this gods-forsaken rock? Looks like I’m coming with you then.”

Thanos shook his head. “You might not want to stay near me. The people chasing me will be here soon.”

“Can’t be any worse than what I’ve been dealing with here so far.”

Again, Thanos shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know you. You could be on this island for anything. For all I know, you’ll stab me in the back as soon as I give you the chance.”

The woman looked as though she might argue, but a sound from the trees made her look up like a startled deer and she sprinted deeper into the forest.

Thanos took his cue from her, slipping back into the trees. He saw Elsius come out into the clearing, bow drawn. Thanos reached for the one he’d taken, and realized that he had no arrows left. Without any better options, he stepped out from the tree he was hiding behind.

“I thought you’d be better prey than this,” Elsius said.

“Come closer, and you’ll find out just how dangerous I can be,” Thanos replied.

“Oh, that’s not how this works,” Elsius replied, but he took a step forward anyway.

Thanos heard the snap as the snare caught, and watched Elsius yanked upwards. Arrows tumbled down from his quiver. Thanos snatched them up and set off back into the trees. Already he could hear the sounds of others approaching; Abandoned or wardens, it didn’t matter.

Thanos hurried through the trees, able to head for his boat now that he wasn’t being followed. He thought he caught glimpses of figures through the foliage, and behind him, Thanos heard a cry that could only have been Elsius.

One of the Abandoned burst from the trees near Thanos, lunging forward. Thanos should have known that he couldn’t hope to avoid them all. The man swung an axe that seemed to have been made from the leg bone of a dead enemy. Thanos stepped inside the swing and stabbed him, shoving him away and continuing to run.

He could hear more of them now, hunting cries coming through the trees. He burst out onto open ground and saw a group of Elsius’s wardens approaching from the other direction. Thanos’s heart hammered as, behind him, at least a dozen figures in piecemeal armor burst from the trees. Thanos cut to the right, dodged past a charging figure, and kept running as the two groups crashed into one another.

Some kept chasing, but Thanos saw more of them fall to fighting amongst themselves. He saw the Abandoned crash into the wardens in a wave and break against them. They had the ferocity, but those from the fortified side of the island had real armor and better weapons. Thanos doubted that they had any chance of winning, and he wasn’t sure he would want them to.

He darted around the rocks of the island, trying to find his way back toward his boat. If he could make it there... well, it would be difficult, when the smugglers had betrayed him, but he would find a way off the island.

The difficult part was trying to find his way. If he’d run straight back along the route he’d first taken, retracing his steps, it would have been easy to find, but there would have been no way to evade the men hunting him. Thanos didn’t dare to stop completely either, even though the sounds of pursuit behind him had given way to sounds of battle.

He thought he recognized the beginnings of the path down to the beach, and hurried down it, keeping his eyes open for potential ambushers. There didn’t seem to be anyone there. Just a little further, and he’d be back to his boat, he’d be able to —

He rounded the corner to the beach and stopped. One of the Abandoned was there, massive and muscled. He was standing over Thanos’s boat, or at least, over what remained of it. Even as Thanos watched, the prisoner struck it with a sword that looked like a matchstick in his hands, shattering some of the planks that remained.

Thanos’s heart fell.

Now there was no way out.

CHAPTER NINE

When Lucious got back to the castle, the executions were still continuing. That was as it should be. He didn't want his men finishing this too quickly. He wanted to be there to enjoy it.

More than that, he wanted Ceres to be there to see it for as long as possible. Lucious made a point of looking up toward her window, where he knew she would be chained in place, forced to look out on the scene there for as long as possible. There was a certain satisfaction in that.

Far more than there was in looking back at the courtyard where the executions were to take place. There, men and women knelt in neat rows, while the executioners moved among them with axes. Even as he watched, he saw one push a man down, lifting the axe high overhead and swinging it in a neat arc that left a head rolling along the ground.

"What is this?" Lucious demanded, his voice rising in anger. He'd been away an hour or two at most. Already, though, it seemed that a whole line of Lord West's men had been killed, practically all of them beheaded.

"We're just doing what you said, your highness," the executioner said. "Executing these men."

"And making a complete mess of it!" Lucious snapped. Or rather, they weren't making *enough* of a mess of it. "Beheading them? I want them to suffer! I want you to be inventive. Didn't I tell you to use every means of execution you could think of?"

"Many of Lord West's men have pointed out that they are noblemen," the executioner explained. "And that as such, they have the right to choose death by the sword or axe instead of –"

Lucious hit him then, his armored hand sinking deep into the man's stomach. The executioner was a big man, but with Lucious hitting him that hard, he still doubled over. Lucious snatched his axe from his hands in a swift movement, then brought it round to slam into the executioner's back. As he fell, screaming, Lucious yanked the weapon out.

"They have no rights beyond the ones I say they do! And even with an axe, you should be able to give them a death that's a thing of horror. Here, let me show you!"

He struck again, then again, hacking down at the executioner until he was certain that all the others there understood what they faced if they didn't obey.

When he was done, Lucious looked around for a suitable target to begin with. Maybe if he gave them an example, these cretins would finally understand what he required of them.

"I want you to make this something people talk about a thousand years from now," he said. "Is that so hard to understand? I want you to make these men last days before they scream their last. I want anyone who hears their child talking about rebelling to cut their throat, because the alternative is so terrible. Now, bring me Lord West. We'll start with him."

The silence that reigned over the courtyard didn't do much for Lucious's mood.

"Don't tell me that you've already beheaded him." Lucious watched as one of the torturers was pushed forward. "Well, what is it?"

"Um... begging your highness's pardon, but the king sent for Lord West. He wanted to speak with him."

Of course he did. His father could never just keep out of the way of his fun. One day, he wouldn't have this kind of problem. One day, he would rule, and there wouldn't be anyone making things difficult. The traitors would all be dead, and the people would understand their place.

As slaves.

Lucious nodded to himself at that thought. The biggest problem with Delos was that it had lost clear divisions. The weak had come to believe that there was a whole graduated set of steps between the lowest serf and the king, and the problem with steps was that they created the impression they could be climbed. Well, Lucious would make it simpler when he was king. Those who were not of

the noble class would be the property of the noble class, as it should be. Those who argued would suffer for it.

Which reminded him of the *other* thing he had to do today.

“Begin the executions again,” Lucious commanded. “And this time, get it right. If I see any more merciful beheadings, it will be all of you in the gibbets. Do I make myself clear?”

There was a chorus of assent.

“Good. Now, open the gates. Let the common folk see. I have an announcement to make.”

The guards did as he commanded, and people poured into the courtyard. Lucious tried not to show his contempt. A day or two ago, and he would have slaughtered these people for daring to come together like this. He would have taken it as evidence that they intended to riot, or revolt, or march on the castle.

Even now, he looked round to ensure he knew where the guards were. Discreetly, of course. He didn’t want to suggest to these peasants that he was somehow afraid of them.

“Prince Lucious!” a voice called, and Lucious flinched automatically, his hand going to his sword hilt.

When a girl ran forward with a victor’s crown of laurel leaves, he guessed that one of his servants had arranged this. Lucious made himself stand straight as he received it, wishing for a moment that it were the real crown. He was made to rule, after all. Afterwards, he would find who had arranged this moment and punish them for not telling him about it.

Lucious stood before the crowd and tried to hide some of his disgust. Couldn’t they have found him a cleaner group of people to address? He supposed, though, that the point was to get his message across to as many as possible, so he ignored that aspect of it.

“People of Delos,” he began, and for once, he was glad that his father had made him take lessons in the proper way to speak and stand before a crowd. At the time, he’d thought it was a waste of time. After all, he was a prince, and people had to listen to him. Now, though, he was grateful that his voice carried. “My citizens. My people.”

They were, after all, very definitely *his*.

“You have seen the chaos that the rebellion has brought to our city in the last days. They sought allies from the far reaches of our lands to try to crush the rightful governance of the Empire. They brought an army to our very gates. They subverted those men whose honor it would normally have been to fight and die for you: the combatlords.”

Lucious heard a few in the crowd make noises of disapproval at that. He guessed that his people had planted loyalists there to show the people how they should react. Maybe he wouldn’t have them punished after all.

“Today, the threat from the rebellion has ended. I and my soldiers were able to face and defeat the enemy even as they attempted to enter our great city. The traitors are suffering their fates now, while my men are riding out to destroy the last bastions of this blight upon the Empire.”

Lucious brought his fist into his palm sharply. “We have crushed them. My ancestors overthrew the tyranny of the Ancient Ones. They claimed the Empire, and we will keep it. If there are any here who doubt our resolve, look upon the bodies of the traitors we are executing. See your fate if you act against us.”

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