

MORGAN RICE



KNIGHT,
HEIR,
PRINCE

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 3

Of Crowns and Glory

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Knight, Heir, Prince

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

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17 year old Ceres, a beautiful, poor girl from the Empire city of Delos, finds herself alone at sea, drifting towards the mythic Isle Beyond the Mist—and towards the mother she never met. She is ready to complete her training, to finally understand her power, and to become the warrior she was meant to be. But will her mother be there to greet her? Will she teach her all she needs to know? And will she reveal all of the secret of Ceres' identity? In Delos, Thanos, thinking Ceres is dead, finds himself wedded to Stephania, and immersed deeper in a court he cannot escape from and in a family he hates. He also finds himself in the midst of the erupting Revolution, which culminates in a daring attack on the Stade. As the one person who can stop—or aid—it, he will have to choose whether to put his own life at risk. With the kingdom collapsing, foes moving in on all sides, and assassination attempts abounding at court, Thanos cannot know who to trust. He is stuck in a game of pawns and kings, of traitors and queens, and it may be Ceres, after all, who is destined to change it all. Yet after a series of tragic misunderstandings, the romance that seemed fated may just slip away from both of their fingertips. KNIGHT, HEIR, PRINCE tells an epic tale of tragic love, vengeance, betrayal, ambition, and destiny. Filled with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding action, it transports us into a world we will never forget, and makes us fall in love with fantasy all over again.

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Morgan Rice

KNIGHT, HEIR, PRINCE (OF CROWNS AND GLORY—BOOK 3)

Morgan Rice

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

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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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

– *Books and Movie Reviews* Roberto Mattos

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

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

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

– *Midwest Book Review* (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

“THE SORCERER'S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete

with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

– *Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

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

– *Publishers Weekly*

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KINGS AND SORCERERS



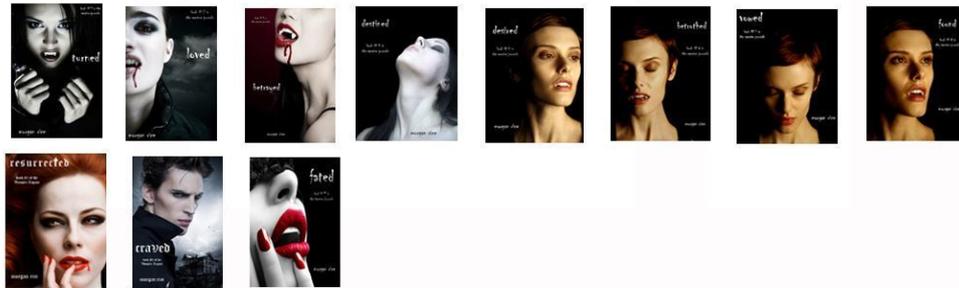
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CHAPTER ONE

Even without every noble in Delos staring at him, Thanos would have felt the nerves of a groom on his wedding day. He stood by the altar that had been set up in the castle's largest feast hall, and somehow he managed to stand perfectly still – but only because his soldier's training kept him from showing any fear. Standing out in front of all of them, he could feel his stomach knotting with the pressure of it.

Thanos looked about while awaiting his bride. The feast hall swam in white silk and shone with diamonds, hardly a surface there that didn't glitter. Even the servants attending the nobles wore clothes that would have shamed most merchants. As for the nobles themselves, today they looked like something out of a bard's tale, dressed in silk and velvet, dripping with gold and silver.

To Thanos, it was far too much; yet he hadn't exactly been given a say in it. Delos's royals had gotten the wedding the king and queen decided they should have, and anything less than perfection would have disappointed his bride. He glanced over and saw them: King Claudius and Queen Athena, sitting together on thrones carved from ironwood and covered in gold leaf. They sat proudly, obviously delighted by his decision to accept their choice of bride.

The high priest, decked in a robe of gold reflecting the rays of the sun, stood beside him. He seemed like a kindly man, and Thanos, feeling more alone than ever, wanted to take him aside and ask him: *What do you do when you aren't sure that you belong somewhere?*

Yet he could not.

It wasn't just that Thanos was nervous about the wedding. It was so many other things as well. There was the fact that back on Haylon, the rebels there were relying on him to help them to free the Empire. That thought brought a flash of determination with it, because he *would* help them, whatever it took. Yet here he stood in this hall, surrounded by the enemy.

There was also the fact that Lucious was here, standing in the corner, dressed in royal purple and silver, smirking as he eyed the serving girls. Thanos had to fight to keep from walking over there and strangling him with his bare hands.

And then there was the thought that would not let him be:

Ceres.

That brought with it a spike of pain that felt, even now, as though it might burst through his chest. He could still barely believe that she was dead and gone, lost on a prison ship while he'd been on Haylon. Just the thought of that threatened to drag him back toward the darkness that had consumed him when he'd heard the news.

Stephania had pulled him out of that. She'd been the one shining point in it all, the only person in Delos who had brought him any happiness when he had wanted to end it all, when he could not envision a life without Ceres.

It was not that he did not love Stephania; he did. He had come to love her. It was, rather, that he could not let himself forget Ceres. It was as if the two loves still co-existed in his heart. He could not understand it all. Why had Ceres been meant to come into his life only to leave it? Why had Stephania been meant to come into his life at the moment she had? Had Ceres come to him to somehow prepare him to accept Stephania? Or had the two nothing to do with one another?

Music stirred. Thanos turned and his heart caught to see Stephania arrive to the strains of lyre music. His heart beat faster as she walked, all the nobles standing as she went, accompanied by handmaidens who threw rose petals and rang bells to drive away any lingering bad luck. Her dress was a pure, elegant white that made it look as though the whole room had been designed around it. She wore a diamond-studded caul over her golden hair, flowers worked into it with elaborate grace. The veil that covered her face shimmered with silver thread and tiny sapphires that mirrored the shade of the eyes beneath.

Thanos felt his fears melt away.

He watched as she approached, seeming to glide her way through the hall to the altar. She stood before him, and Thanos lifted the veil from her features.

He felt his breath catch. She was always lovely, but today she looked so perfect Thanos could barely believe that she was real. He stood staring at her for so long that he barely heard the priest begin the ceremony.

“The gods have given us many feasts and ceremonies in which to reflect on their glory,” the high priest intoned. “Of these, marriage is the most sacred, for without it there would be no continuation of humankind. This marriage is an especially glorious one, between two of the great nobles of this realm. Yet it is also between a young man and a young woman who love one another deeply, and whose happiness should find a place in all our hearts.”

He paused to let the words sink in.

“Prince Thanos, will you present your arm to be bound to this woman for all time? To love her and honor her until the gods take you from one another, and to see your families made one?”

He’d hesitated before, but now he didn’t. He extended his arm toward the high priest, palm up. “I will.”

“And Lady Stephania,” the high priest continued, “will you present your arm to be bound to this man for all time? To love him and honor him until the gods take you from one another, and to see your families made one?”

Stephania’s smile was the most beautiful thing Thanos had ever seen. She placed her hand in his. “I will.”

The high priest wrapped a length of pure white cloth around and around their arms, the wrapping both traditional and elegant.

“Bound together in marriage, you are one flesh, one soul, one family,” the high priest said. “May you be happy together always. You may kiss.”

Thanos didn’t need to be told. It was awkward, bound together like that, but that was always one of the minor amusements of a wedding feast, and they found a way. Thanos tasted Stephania’s lips against his, melting into her, and for a moment at least, he could put aside all the other concerns in the world and just be there with her. Even thoughts of Ceres faded into the background, consumed in Stephania’s touch.

Of course, Lucious would be the one to break the magic of the moment.

“Well, I’m glad that’s done,” he said over the silence of the crowd. “Can we start the party now? I need a drink!”

If the wedding ceremony had been opulent, the feast that followed was spectacular. So much so that Thanos found himself wondering about the cost of it. It looked as though half the profits from the latest raids had gone into it, with no expense spared. He knew that the king and queen were paying, as a way of showing how happy they were about the wedding, but how many families in the city could something like this have fed?

A glance around let him see tumblers and dancers, musicians and jugglers entertaining knots of nobles. Nobles danced together in swirling circles, while food was spread out in what seemed to Thanos like small mountains of pastries and sweetmeats, oysters and rich desserts.

There was wine, of course, enough that as the festivities continued, things grew wilder. The dancing sped up, with people spinning between partners almost faster than Thanos could follow. The king and queen had already retired, along with some of the older nobles, leaving the room. It was like a signal to the partygoers to put aside those inhibitions that remained.

Stephania was currently being whirled around in the traditional farewell dance, where the bride danced quickly between all the eligible young men in the room, before she would head back to Thanos's arms at the finish. Traditionally, it was a way for the bride to show how happy she was with her choice compared to all she was rejecting. More informally, it gave the young men a chance to show off to any of the other young noble women watching.

To Thanos's surprise, Lucious didn't join in the dance. He'd half expected the prince to do something foolish like trying to steal a kiss. Although, compared to the part where he'd tried to have Thanos killed, that would have been relatively innocuous.

Instead, the prince swaggered over while the dance was still in progress, pushing his way through the crowd with casual arrogance as he held a crystal goblet of the finest wine. Thanos looked at him and tried to find any similarity between them. They were both the king's offspring, but Thanos could never imagine being anything like Lucious.

"It's a beautiful wedding," Lucious said to him. "All the things I like best: good food, better wine, plenty of serving girls around for later."

"Watch yourself, Lucious," Thanos said.

"I have a better idea," Lucious countered. "Why don't we both watch that lovely bride of yours, spinning between so many men? Of course, with it being Stephania, we could have a small wager on which of them she's slept with."

Thanos's hands clenched into fists. "Are you just here to cause trouble? Because if so, you can get out."

Lucious's smile widened. "And how would that look, you trying to throw out the heir to the throne from your wedding? That wouldn't go well."

"Not for you."

"Remember your place, Thanos," Lucious snapped back.

"Oh, I know my place," Thanos said in a dangerous voice. "We both do, don't we?"

That got a faint flicker of reaction from Lucious. Even if Thanos hadn't known it, it would have been confirmation: Lucious knew about the circumstances of Thanos's birth. He knew they were half-brothers.

"Curse you and your marriage," Lucious said.

"You're just jealous," Thanos countered. "I know you wanted Stephania for yourself, and now I'm the one marrying her. I'm the one who didn't run away in the Stade. I'm the one who actually fought on Haylon. We both know what else I am. So what's left for you, Lucious? You're just a thug the people of Delos need protecting from."

Thanos heard the crack as Lucious's hand tightened around his crystal goblet, squeezing until it shattered.

"You like to protect the lesser orders, don't you?" Lucious said. "Well, think about this: while you've been planning a wedding, I've been crushing villages. I will continue to do it. In fact, while you're still in your marriage bed tomorrow morning, I'll be riding out to teach another bunch of peasants a lesson. And there is *nothing* you can do about it, whoever you think you are."

Thanos wanted to hit Lucious then. He wanted to hit him and keep hitting him until there was nothing left but a bloody smear on the marble floor. The only thing that stopped him was the touch of Stephania's hand on his arm, approaching as her dance ended.

"Oh, Lucious, you've spilled your wine," she said with a smile that Thanos wished he could match. "That won't do at all. Allow one of my attendants to fetch you more."

"I'll get my own," Lucious replied with obvious bad grace. "They got me this one, and look what happened to it."

He stalked off, and only the pull of Stephania's hand on his arm stopped Thanos from following.

"Leave it," Stephania said. "I told you there are better ways, and there are. Trust me."

"He can't just get away with all he's done," Thanos insisted.

“He won’t. Look at it this way though,” she said. “Who would you rather spend the evening with? Lucious, or me?”

That brought a smile to Thanos’s lips. “You. Definitely you.”

Stephania kissed him. “Good answer.”

Thanos felt her hand slip into his, pulling him in the direction of the doors. The other nobles there let them pass, with occasional laughs about what would happen next. Thanos followed as Stephania led the way to Thanos’s rooms, pushing the door open and heading in the direction of the bed chamber. There, she turned to him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him deeply.

“You don’t have any regrets?” Stephania asked, as she stepped back from him. “You’re happy you married me?”

“I’m very happy,” Thanos assured her. “What about you?”

“It’s all I ever wanted,” Stephania said. “And you know what I want now?”

“What?”

Thanos saw her reach up, and her dress fell from her in waves.

“You.”

Thanos woke to the first rays of sunlight spilling through the windows. Beside him, he could feel the warm pressure of Stephania’s presence, one of her arms thrown across him as she slept curled against him. Thanos smiled at the love welling up inside him. He was happier right now than he had been in a long time.

If he hadn’t heard the clink of harness and the whinnying of horses, he might have curled up against Stephania again and gone back to sleep, or woken her with a kiss. As it was, he rose, heading over to the window.

He was just in time to see Lucious leaving the castle, riding at the head of a group of soldiers, pennants flying in the wind as if he were some knight-errant on a quest rather than a butcher preparing to attack a defenseless village. Thanos looked out at him, then over at where Stephania was still sleeping.

Silently, he started to dress.

He couldn’t stand by. He couldn’t, not even for Stephania. She’d talked about better ways of dealing with Lucious, but what did they involve? Politeness and offering him wine? No, Lucious had to be stopped, right now, and there was only one way to do it.

Quietly, taking care not to wake Stephania, Thanos slipped from the room. Once he was clear, he ran for the stables, shouting for a servant to bring him his armor.

It was time for justice.

CHAPTER TWO

Berin could feel the excitement, the nervous energy palpable in the air the moment he stepped into the tunnels. He weaved his way underground, following Anka, Sartes by his side, passing guards who nodded with respect, rebels who hurried every which way. He walked through the Watcher's Gate and felt the turn the Rebellion had taken.

Now, it seemed, they had a chance.

"This way," Anka said, waving to a lookout. "The others await us."

They walked down corridors of bare stone that looked as if they had stood forever. The Ruins of Delos, deep underground. Berin ran his hand along the smooth stone, admiring them as only a smith could, and marveled at how long these had stood, at who had built them. Maybe they even dated back to the days when the Ancient Ones had walked, long before anyone could remember.

And that made him think, with a pang, of the daughter he had lost.

Ceres.

Berin was yanked from that thought by the clang of hammers on metal, by the sudden heat of forge fires as they passed an opening. He saw a dozen men toiling away as they tried to produce breastplates and short swords. It reminded him of his old smithy, and brought back memories of the days when his family hadn't been torn apart.

Sartes seemed to be staring, too.

"Are you all right?" Berin asked.

He nodded.

"I miss her too," Berin replied, putting a hand on his shoulder, knowing he was thinking of Ceres, who always lingered by the forge.

"We all do," Anka chimed in.

For a moment the three of them stood there, and Berin knew that they all understood how much Ceres had meant to them.

He heard Anka sigh.

"All we can do is keep fighting," she added, "and keep forging weapons. We need you, Berin."

He tried to focus.

"Are they doing everything I instructed?" he asked. "Are they heating the metal enough before quenching? It won't harden otherwise."

Anka smiled.

"Check for yourself after the meeting."

Berin nodded. At least in some small way he could be useful.

Sartes walked by his father's side, following Anka as they continued past the forge and deeper through the tunnels. There were more people in them than he could have believed. Men and women were gathering supplies, practicing with weapons, pacing the halls. Sartes recognized several of them as former conscripts, freed from the army's clutches.

They finally came upon a cavernous space, set with stone plinths that might once have held statues. By the light of flickering candles, Sartes could see the leaders of the rebellion, awaiting them. Hannah, who had argued against the attack, now looked as happy as if she'd proposed it. Oreth, one of Anka's main deputies now, leaned his slender frame against the wall, smiling to himself. Sartes spotted the larger bulk of the former wharf hand Edrin on the edge of the candlelight, while Yeralt's

jewels shone in it, the merchant's son looking almost out of place among the rest as they laughed and joked among themselves.

They fell silent as the three of them approached, and Sartes could see the difference now. Before, they'd listened to Anka almost grudgingly. Now, after the ambush, there was respect there as she walked forward. She even looked more like a leader to Sartes, walking straighter, appearing more confident.

"Anka, Anka, Anka!" Oreth began, and soon the others took up the chant, as the rebels had after the battle.

Sartes joined in, hearing the rebel leader's name echo around the space. He only stopped when Anka gestured for silence.

"We did well," Anka said, with a smile of her own. It was one of the first Sartes had seen since the battle. She'd been too busy trying to arrange to get their casualties away from the burial ground safely. She had a talent for seeing to the details of things that had blossomed in the rebellion.

"Well?" Edrin asked. "We smashed them."

Sartes heard the thud of the man's fist against his palm as he emphasized the point.

"We destroyed them," Yeralt agreed, "thanks to your leadership."

Anka shook her head. "We beat them together. We beat them because we all did our parts. And because Sartes brought us the plans."

Sartes found himself pushed forward by his father. He hadn't been expecting this.

"Anka is right," Oreth said. "We owe Sartes our thanks. He brought us the plans, and he was the one to persuade the conscripts not to fight. The rebellion has more members, thanks to him."

"Half-trained conscripts though," Hannah said. "Not real soldiers."

Sartes looked around at her. She'd been quick to argue against him taking part at all. He didn't like her, but it wasn't about that in the rebellion. They were all a part of something bigger than themselves.

"We beat them," Anka said. "We won a battle, but that isn't the same thing as smashing the Empire. We still have a lot ahead of us."

"And they still have a lot of soldiers," Yeralt said. "A long war against them could prove costly for all of us."

"You're counting the cost now?" Oreth countered. "This isn't some business investment, where you want to see the balance sheets before you get involved."

Sartes could hear the annoyance there. When he'd first come to the rebels, he'd expected them to be some big, unified thing, thinking of nothing but the need to defeat the Empire. He'd found out that in a lot of ways they were just people, all with their own hopes and dreams, wishes and wants. It only made it more impressive that Anka had found ways to hold them together after Rexus died.

"It's the biggest investment there is," Yeralt said. "We put in all we have. We risk our lives in the hope that things will get better. I'm in as much danger as the rest of you if we fail."

"We won't fail," Edrin said. "We beat them once. We'll beat them again. We know where they're going to attack and when. We can be waiting for them every time."

"We can do more than that," Hannah said. "We've shown people that we can beat them, so why not go out and take things back from them?"

"What did you have in mind?" Anka asked. Sartes could see that she was considering it.

"We take villages back one by one," Hannah said. "We get rid of the Empire's soldiers in them before Lucious can get close. We show the people there what's possible, and he'll get a nasty surprise when they rise up against him."

"And when Lucious and his men kill them for rising up?" Oreth demanded. "What then?"

"Then it just shows how evil he is," Hannah insisted.

"Or people see that we can't protect them."

Sartes looked around, surprised they were taking the idea seriously.

“We could leave people in the villages so that they don’t fall,” Yeralt suggested. “We have the conscripts with us now.”

“They won’t stand against the army for long if it comes,” Oreth shot back. “They’d die along with the villagers.”

Sartes knew he was right. The conscripts hadn’t had the training that the toughest soldiers in the army had. Worse, they’d suffered so much at the hands of the army that most of them would probably be terrified.

He saw Anka gesture for silence. This time, it took a little longer in coming.

“Oreth has a point,” she said.

“Of course you’d agree with *him*,” Hannah shot back.

“I’m agreeing because he’s right,” Anka said. “We can’t just go into villages, declare them free, and hope for the best. Even with the conscripts, we don’t have enough fighters. If we join together in one place, we give the Empire an opportunity to crush us. If we go after every village, they’ll pick us apart piecemeal.”

“If enough villages can be persuaded to rise up, and I persuade my father to hire mercenaries...” Yeralt suggested. Sartes noted he didn’t finish the thought. The merchant’s son didn’t have an answer, not really.

“Then what?” Anka asked. “We’ll have the numbers? If it were that simple, we would have overthrown the Empire years ago.”

“We have better weapons now thanks to Berin,” Edrin pointed out. “We know their plans thanks to Sartes. We have the advantage! Tell her, Berin. Tell her about the blades you’ve made.”

Sartes looked around to his father, who shrugged.

“It’s true I’ve made good swords, and the others here have made plenty of passable ones. It’s true that some of you will have armor now, rather than being cut down. But I’ll tell you this: it’s about more than the sword. It’s about the hand that wields it. An army is like a blade. You can make it as big as you want, but without a core of good steel, it will break the first time you test it.”

Maybe if the others had spent more time making weapons, they would have understood how seriously his father meant his words. As it was, Sartes could see they weren’t convinced.

“What else can we do?” Edrin asked. “We’re not just going to throw away our advantage by sitting back and waiting. I say that we start making a list of villages to free. Unless you have a better idea, Anka?”

“I do,” Sartes said.

His voice was quieter than he intended. He stepped forward, his heart pounding, surprised that he had spoken. He was all too aware that he was far younger than anyone else there. He’d played his part in the battle, he’d even killed a man, but there was still a part of him that felt as though he shouldn’t be speaking there.

“So it’s settled,” Hannah started to say. “We – ”

“I said I have a better idea,” Sartes said, and this time, his voice carried.

The others looked over at him.

“Let my son speak,” his father said. “You’ve said yourselves that he helped to hand one victory to you. Maybe he can keep you from dying now.”

“What’s your idea, Sartes?” Anka asked.

They were all looking at him. Sartes forced himself to raise his voice, thinking about how Ceres would have spoken, but also about the confidence Anka had shown before.

“We can’t go to the villages,” Sartes said. “It’s what they want us to do. And we can’t just rely on the maps I brought, because even if they haven’t realized that we know their movements, they will soon. They’re trying to goad us out into the open.”

“We know all this,” Yeralt said. “I thought you said you had a plan.”

Sartes didn’t back down.

“What if there were a way to hit the Empire where they don’t expect it and gain tough fighters into the bargain? What if we could make people rise up with a symbolic victory that would be bigger than protecting a village?”

“What did you have in mind?” Anka asked.

“We free the combatlords in the Stade,” Sartes said.

A long, stunned silence followed, as the others stared at him. He could see the doubt in their faces, and Sartes knew he had to keep going.

“Think about it,” he said. “Almost all combatlords are slaves. The nobles throw them in to die like toys. Most of them would be grateful for the chance to get away, and they can fight better than any soldiers.”

“It’s insane,” Hannah said. “Attacking the heart of the city like that. There would be guards everywhere.”

“I like it,” Anka said.

The others looked at her, and Sartes felt a rush of gratitude for her support.

“They wouldn’t expect it,” she added.

Another silence fell over the room.

“We wouldn’t need mercenaries,” Yeralt finally chimed in, rubbing his chin.

“People would rise up,” Edrin added.

“We’d have to do it when the Killings were on,” Oreth pointed out. “That way, all the combatlords would be in one place, and there would be people there to see it happen.”

“There won’t be more Killings before the Blood Moon festival,” his father said. “That’s six weeks. In six weeks, I can make a lot of weapons.”

This time, Hannah fell silent, perhaps sensing the tide turn.

“So we’re agreed?” Anka asked. “We’ll free the combatlords during the Blood Moon festival?”

One by one, Sartes saw the others nod. Even Hannah did, eventually. He felt his father’s hand on his shoulder. He saw the approval in his eyes, and it meant the world to him.

He only prayed that his plan would not get them all killed.

CHAPTER THREE

Ceres dreamed, and in her dreams, she saw armies clashing. She saw herself fighting at their head, dressed in armor that shone in the sun. She saw herself leading a vast nation, fighting a war that would determine the very fate of mankind.

Yet in it all, she also saw herself squinting, searching for her mother. She reached for a sword, and looked down to see it was not yet there.

Ceres woke with a start. It was night, and the sea before her, lit by the moonlight, was endless. As she bobbed in her small ship, she saw no sign of land. Only the stars convinced her that she was still keeping her small craft on the right course.

Familiar constellations shone overhead. There was the Dragon's Tail, low in the sky beneath the moon. There was the Ancient's Eye, formed around one of the brightest stars in the stretch of blackness. The ship that the forest folk had half built, half grown seemed never to deviate from the route Ceres had picked out, even when she had to rest or eat.

Off the starboard side of the boat, Ceres saw lights in the water. Luminous jellyfish floated past like underwater clouds. Ceres saw the faster figure of some dart-like fish slipping through the shoal, snapping up jellyfish with every pass and hurrying through before the tendrils of the others could touch it. Ceres watched until they disappeared down into the depths.

She ate a piece of the sweet, succulent fruit the islanders had stocked her boat with. When she'd set off it had seemed as though there was enough to last for weeks. Now, it didn't seem like quite so much. She found herself thinking of the leader of the forest folk, so handsome in a strange, asymmetrical way, with his curse lending him patches where his skin was mossy green or roughened like bark. Would he be back on the island, playing his strange music and thinking of her?

Around Ceres, mist started to rise up from the water, thickening and reflecting fragments of the moonlight even as it blocked out her view of the night sky above. It swirled and shifted around the boat, tendrils of fog reaching out like fingers. Thoughts of Eoin seemed to lead inexorably to thoughts of Thanos. Thanos, who'd been killed on the shores of Haylon before Ceres could tell him that she hadn't meant any of the harsh things she'd said when he left. There in the boat alone, Ceres couldn't get away from just how much she missed him. The love she'd felt for him felt like a thread pulling her back toward Delos, even though Thanos was no longer there.

Thinking of Thanos hurt. The memory felt like an open wound that might never close. There were so many things she needed to do, but none of them would bring him back. There were so many things she would have said if he were there, but he wasn't. There was only the emptiness of the mist.

The mist continued to coil around the boat, and now Ceres could see shards of rock sticking up out of the water. Some were razor-edged black basalt, but others were in rainbow colors, seeming like giant precious stones set in the roiling blue of the ocean. Some had markings on them that swirled and spiraled, and Ceres wasn't sure whether they were natural, or if some long distant hand had carved them.

Did her mother lie somewhere beyond them?

The thought brought a thrill of excitement in Ceres, rising up through her like the mist that swirled around the boat. She was going to see her mother. Her real mother, not the one who had always hated her, and who had sold her to slavers at the first opportunity. Ceres didn't know what this woman would be like, but just the opportunity to find out filled her with excitement as she guided the small boat along past the rocks.

Strong currents pulled at her boat, threatening to pull the rudder from her hand. If she hadn't had the strength that came from the power within her, Ceres doubted that she would have been able to hold on. She pulled the rudder to the side, and her small boat responded with an almost living grace, slipping past one of the rocks almost close enough to touch it.

She sailed on through the rocks, and with every one she passed, she found herself thinking about how much closer she was getting to her mother. What kind of woman would she be? In her visions, she'd been indistinct, but Ceres could imagine, and hope. Maybe she would be kind, and gentle, and loving; all the things she'd never had from her supposed mother back in Delos.

What would her mother think of her? That thought caught at Ceres as she guided the boat onward through the mist. She didn't know what was ahead. Maybe her mother would look at her and see someone who hadn't been able to succeed in the Stade, who had been nothing more than a slave in the Empire, who had lost the person she loved most. What if her mother rejected her? What if she were harsh, or cruel, or unforgiving?

Or maybe, just maybe, she would be proud.

Ceres came out of the mist so suddenly that it might have been a curtain lifting, and now the sea was flat, free of the tooth-like rocks that had jutted from it before. Instantly, she could see that there was something different. The light of the moon seemed brighter somehow, and around it, nebulae spun in stains of color on the night. Even the stars seemed changed, so that now, Ceres couldn't pick out the familiar constellations there had been before. A comet streaked its way across the horizon, fiery red mixed with yellows and other colors that had no equivalent in the world below.

Stranger than that, Ceres felt the power within her pulse, as though responding to this place. It seemed to stretch within her, opening out and allowing her to experience this new place in a hundred ways she'd never thought of before.

Ceres saw a shape rise from the water, a long, serpentine neck rising up before plunging back beneath the waves with a splash of spray. The creature rose again briefly, and Ceres had the impression of something huge swimming past in the water before it was gone. What looked like birds flitted through the moonlight, and it was only as they got closer that Ceres saw that they were silvery moths, larger than her head.

Her eyes suddenly growing heavy with sleep, Ceres lashed the tiller in place, lay down, and let sleep overcome her.

Ceres woke to the shriek of birds. She blinked in the sunlight as she sat up, and saw that they weren't birds after all. Two creatures with the bodies of great cats wheeled overhead on eagle-like wings, raptor beaks wide as they called. They showed no signs of coming closer though, merely circling the boat before flying off into the distance.

Ceres watched them, and because she was watching them, she saw the tiny speck of an island they were heading for on the horizon. As quickly as she could, Ceres raised the small sail again, trying to catch the wind that rushed past her to push herself toward the island.

The speck grew larger, and what looked like more rocks rose out of the ocean as Ceres got closer, but these weren't the same as the ones that had been there in the mist. These were square-edged, built things, crafted in rainbow marble. Some of them looked like the spires of great buildings, long sunk beneath the waves.

Half an arch stuck out, so huge that Ceres couldn't imagine what might have passed beneath it. She looked down over the side of the boat, and the water was so clear that she could make out the sea bed below. It wasn't far to the bottom, and Ceres could see the wreckage of long past buildings down there. It was close enough that Ceres could have swum down to them just by holding her breath. She didn't, though, both because of the things she'd already seen in the water and because of what lay ahead.

This was it. The island where she would get the answers she needed. Where she would learn about her power.

Where she would, finally, meet her mother.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lucious swung his blade overhand, exulting in the way it glinted in the dawn light, in the instant before he cut down the old man who had dared to get in his way. Around him, more commoners fell at the hands of his men: the ones who dared to resist, and any stupid enough to simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He smiled as the screams echoed around him. He liked it when the peasants tried to fight, because it just gave his men an excuse to show them how weak they really were compared to their betters. How many had he killed now in raids like this? He hadn't bothered to keep count. Why should he save the least speck of attention for their kind?

Lucious looked around as peasants started to run, and gestured to a few of his men. They set off after them. Running was almost better than fighting, because there was a challenge to hunting them like the prey they were.

"Your horse, your highness?" one of the men asked, leading Lucious's stallion.

Lucious shook his head. "My bow, I think."

The man nodded and passed Lucious an elegant recurve bow of white ash, mixed with horn and set with silver. He nocked an arrow, drew back the string, and let it fly. Away in the distance, one of the running peasants went down.

There were no more to fight, but that didn't mean they were done here. Not by a long way. Hiding peasants, he'd found, could be as amusing as running or fighting ones in their way. There were so many different ways to torture the ones who looked as though they had gold, and so many ways to execute the ones who might have rebel sympathies. The burning wheel, the gibbet, the noose... what would it be today?

Lucious gestured to a couple of his men to start kicking open doors. Occasionally, he liked to burn out those who hid, but houses were more valuable than peasants. A woman came running out, and Lucious caught her, throwing her casually in the direction of one of the slavers who had taken to following him around like gulls after a fishing vessel.

He stalked into the village's temple. The priest was already on the ground, holding a broken nose, while Lucious's men gathered gold and silver ornaments into a sack. A woman in the robes of a priestess stood to confront him. Lucious noted a flicker of blonde hair straying from under her cowl, a certain fine-featured resemblance that made him pause.

"You can't do this," the woman insisted. "We are a temple!"

Lucious grabbed her, pulling away the hood of her robes to look at her. She wasn't the double of Stephania – no lower-born woman could manage that – but she was close enough to be worth keeping for a while. At least until he got bored.

"I have been sent by your king," Lucious said. "Do *not* try to tell me what I cannot do!"

Too many people had tried that in his life. They'd tried to put limits on him, when he was the one person in the Empire on whom there should be no limits. His parents tried, but he would be king one day. He *would* be king, whatever he'd found in the library when old Cosmas thought he was too stupid to understand it. Thanos would learn his place.

Lucious's hand tightened in the hair of the priestess. Stephania would learn her place as well. How dare she marry Thanos like that, as if he were the prince to be desired? No, Lucious would find a way to make that right. He would split Thanos and Stephania as easily as he split open the heads of those who came at him. He would claim Stephania in marriage, both because she was Thanos's and because she would make the perfect ornament for someone of his rank. He would enjoy that, and until then, the priestess he'd grabbed would make a suitable substitute.

He tossed her to one of his men to watch, and set out to see what other amusements he could find in the village. As he got outside, he saw two of his men tying one of the villagers who'd run to a tree, arms spread wide.

"Why have you let this one live?" Lucious demanded.

One of them smiled. "Tor here was telling me about something the northerners do. They call it the Blood Eagle."

Lucious liked the sound of that. He was about to ask what it involved when he heard the shout of one of the lookouts, there to watch for rebels. Lucious looked around, but instead of an approaching horde of common scum, he saw a single figure riding on a mount easily the size of his own. Lucious recognized the armor instantly.

"Thanos," he said. He snapped his fingers. "Well, it looks as though today is about to get more interesting than I thought. Bring me my bow again."

Thanos spurred his horse forward as he saw Lucious and what his half-brother was doing. Any lingering doubts he'd had about leaving Stephania behind burned away in the heat of his anger as he saw the dead peasants, the slavers, the man tied to the tree.

He saw Lucious step out and raise a bow. For a moment, Thanos couldn't believe that he would do it, but why not? Lucious had tried to kill him before.

He saw the arrow fly out from the bow and raised his shield just in time. The head struck the metal facing of his shield before clattering off. A second arrow followed, and this time it punched through, stopping only inches from Thanos's face.

Thanos forced his horse to a charge as a third arrow whizzed past him. He saw Lucious and his men diving out of the way as he careened through the spot where they'd been standing. He wheeled and drew his sword, just as Lucious regained his feet.

"Thanos, so fast. Anyone would think you were eager to see me."

Thanos leveled his sword at Lucious's heart. "This stops now, Lucious. I won't let you kill any more of our people."

"Our people?" Lucious countered. "They are *my* people, Thanos. Mine to do what I wish with. Allow me to demonstrate."

Thanos saw him draw his sword and start toward the man tied to the tree. Thanos realized what his half-brother was going to do and set his horse in motion once more.

"Stop him," Lucious commanded.

His men leapt to obey. One stepped toward Thanos, jabbing a spear up toward his face. Thanos deflected it with his shield, hacking the head from the weapon with his blade and then kicking out to send the man sprawling. He stabbed down as another ran at him, thrusting down through the shoulder of the man's mail and drawing his blade out again.

He forced himself forward, through the press of opponents. Lucious was still advancing on the victim he'd chosen. Thanos swung his sword down at one of Lucious's thugs and hurried forward as Lucious drew his own blade back. Thanos barely managed to interject his shield as the blow came in a ring of metal on metal.

Lucious grabbed his shield.

"You're predictable, Thanos," he said. "Compassion was always your weakness."

He pulled, hard enough that Thanos found himself yanked from the saddle. He rolled in time to avoid a sword blow, and pulled his arm free from the straps of his shield. He took a two-handed grip on his sword as Lucious's men closed in again. He saw his horse run clear, but that meant that now he didn't have the advantage of height.

"Kill him," Lucious said. "We'll blame it on the rebels."

“You’re good at trying that, aren’t you?” Thanos shot back. “It’s a pity you aren’t any good at finishing the job.”

One of Lucious’s men rushed him then, swinging a spiked mace. Thanos stepped inside the arc of the blow, cutting diagonally, then spinning away with his sword extended to keep the others at bay.

They came in quickly then, as if knowing that none of them could hope to defeat Thanos one on one. Thanos gave ground, putting his back against the wall of the nearest house so that his opponents couldn’t surround him. There were three men near him now, one with an axe, one with a short sword, and one with a curved blade like a sickle.

Thanos kept his sword close, watching them, not wanting to give any of the mercenaries a chance to tangle the blade long enough for the others to slip in.

The one on Thanos’s right tried a thrust with his short sword. Thanos partly parried it, feeling it clatter off his armor. Some instinct made him spin and drop, just in time for the left-hand man’s axe to pass overhead. Thanos slashed at ankle height to bring the thug down, then reversed his blade and thrust backward, hearing a cry as the first man ran in.

The one with the curved blade attacked more cautiously.

“Attack him! Kill him!” Lucious demanded, obviously impatient. “Oh, I’ll do it myself!”

Thanos parried as the prince joined the fight. He doubted that Lucious would have done it if there hadn’t been another man there to help him, and maybe there would be more on the way. Really, all Lucious had to do was delay things, and Thanos might find himself overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

So Thanos didn’t wait. Instead, he attacked. He threw blow after blow, alternating between Lucious and the thug Lucious had brought with him, building the rhythm of it. Then, suddenly, he paused. The sickle wielder parried empty air. Thanos cut into the gap, and the man’s head went flying.

He was on Lucious in an instant, binding blade to blade. Lucious kicked out at him, but Thanos swayed aside from the blow, reaching over the guard of Lucious’s sword to get one hand onto the pommel. Thanos yanked upward and wrenched the blade from Lucious’s hands, then struck sideways. His blade clanged from Lucious’s breastplate. Lucious drew a dagger and Thanos changed his grip on his blade, swinging low with the hilt end so that the cross-guard hooked around Lucious’s knee.

He pulled and Lucious went down. Thanos kicked the dagger from his hand with crunching force.

“Tell me again how compassion is my weakness,” Thanos said, lifting the point of his sword over Lucious’s throat.

“You wouldn’t,” Lucious said. “You’re just trying to frighten me.”

“Frighten you?” Thanos said. “If I thought frightening you would work, I’d have scared you half to death years ago. No, I’m going to end this.”

“End it?” Lucious said. “This doesn’t *end*, Thanos. Not until I’ve *won*.”

“You’d be waiting a long time for that,” Thanos assured him.

He raised the sword. He had to do this. Lucious had to be stopped.

“Thanos!”

Thanos looked over at the sound of Stephania’s voice. To his astonishment, he saw her approaching, riding alone at a full gallop. She wore a riding outfit that was a long way from her usual elegant dresses, and from the disheveled state of it, it looked as though she’d thrown it on in a hurry.

“Thanos, don’t!” she cried as she got closer.

Thanos gripped his sword tighter. “After all he’s done, do you think he doesn’t deserve it?”

“It’s not about what he deserves,” Stephania said, dismounting as she got closer. “It’s about what you deserve. If you kill him, they’ll kill you for it. That’s how it works, and I will *not* lose you like that.”

“Listen to her, Thanos,” Lucious said from the ground.

“Be quiet,” Stephania snapped. “Or do you want to goad him into killing you?”

“He has to be stopped,” Thanos said.

“Not like this,” Stephania insisted. Thanos felt her hand on his arm, pushing the sword away. “Not in a way that gets you killed. You swore you would be mine for the rest of our lives. Did you really mean for it to be so short?”

“Stephania –” Thanos began, but she didn’t let him finish.

“And what about me?” she asked. “How much danger will I be in if my husband kills the heir to the throne? No, Thanos. Stop this. Do it for me.”

If anyone else had asked, Thanos might still have gone through with it. There was too much at stake. But he couldn’t risk Stephania. He thrust down into the dirt, missing Lucious’s head by an inch. Lucious was already rolling away, running for a horse.

“You’ll regret this!” Lucious called back. “I promise you’ll regret this!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Thanos saw the guards awaiting him on the long run into the city gates, as he and Stephania returned home. He raised his chin and kept on riding. He had expected this. And he wouldn't run from it.

Stephania obviously saw them too. Thanos saw her stiffen in the saddle, going from relaxed to prim and formal in an instant. It was as though a mask had slid down in front of her features, and Thanos found himself reaching out automatically to slide a hand over hers as she held the reins.

The guards crossed their halberds to bar the way as they approached, and Thanos drew his horse to a halt. He kept it between Stephania and the guards, just in case Lucious had somehow bribed men to attack him. He saw an officer step out from the knot of guards and salute.

"Prince Thanos, welcome back to Delos. My men and I have been instructed to escort you to see the king."

"And if my husband does not wish to travel with you?" Stephania asked, in a tone that could have commanded the whole Empire.

"Forgive me, my lady," the officer said, "but the king has given us clear orders."

Thanos raised a hand before Stephania could argue.

"I understand," he said. "I'll go with you."

The guards led the way, and to their credit, they managed to make it look like the escort they claimed it was. They led the way through Delos, and Thanos noted that the route they picked was one through the most beautiful parts of the city, sticking to the tree-lined avenues that held noble houses, avoiding the worst parts even when they formed a more direct route. Perhaps they were simply trying to stick to the safer areas. Perhaps, though, they thought that nobles like Thanos and Stephania wouldn't want to see the misery elsewhere.

Soon, the walls of the castle towered above. The guards led the way through its gates, and grooms took their horses. The walk through the castle felt more confined, with so many guards surrounding them in the narrow spaces of the castle corridors. Stephania took Thanos's hand, and he squeezed it gently in reassurance.

When they reached the royal apartments, members of the royal bodyguard blocked the way at the door.

"The king wishes to speak to Prince Thanos alone," one said.

"I am his wife," Stephania said in a tone so cold Thanos suspected most people would have stepped aside instantly.

It didn't seem to affect the royal bodyguard at all. "Nevertheless."

"It will be all right," Thanos said.

When he stepped inside, the king was waiting for him. King Claudius stood, leaning on a sword whose hilt formed the tentacles of a twisting kraken. It came almost to the level of his chest, and Thanos had no doubt that the edge would be razor sharp. Thanos heard the click of the door shutting behind him.

"Lucious told me what you did," the king said.

"I'm sure he came running straight to you," Thanos replied. "Did he also tell you what he was doing at the time?"

"He was doing what he was commanded to," the king snapped, "in order to deal with the rebellion. Yet you went out and attacked him. You killed his men. He says you defeated him through trickery, and would have killed him too if Stephania hadn't intervened."

"How does butchering villagers stop the rebellion?" Thanos countered.

"You're more interested in peasants than in your own actions," King Claudius said. He lifted the sword he held as though weighing it. "It is treason to attack the king's son."

“I am the king’s son,” Thanos reminded him. “You didn’t execute Lucious when he tried to have me killed.”

“Your birth is the only reason you are still alive,” King Claudius replied. “You are my son, but so is Lucious. You do *not* get to threaten him.”

Anger rose up in Thanos then. “I don’t get anything that I can see. Not even the acknowledgment of who I am.”

There were statues in one corner of the room, depicting famous ancestors of the royal line. They were out of the way, almost hidden away, as if the king didn’t want to be reminded of them. Even so, Thanos pointed to them.

“Lucious can look at those and claim authority going back to the days when the Empire first rose,” he said. “He can claim the rights of all those who gained the throne when the Ancient Ones left Delos. What do I have? Vague rumors about my birth? Half-remembered images of parents that I’m not even sure are real?”

King Claudius strode to the spot in his rooms where his great chair sat. He sat upon it, cradling the sword he held across his knees.

“You have an honored place at court,” he said.

“An honored place at court?” Thanos replied. “I have a place as a spare prince no one wants. Lucious might have tried to have me killed on Haylon, but you were the one who sent me there.”

“Rebellion must be crushed, wherever it is found,” the king countered. Thanos saw him run his thumb along the edge of the sword he held. “You had to learn that.”

“Oh, I’ve learned,” Thanos said, moving across to stand in front of his father. “I’ve learned that you would rather be rid of me than acknowledge me. I am your eldest son. By the laws of the kingdom, I ought to be your heir. The eldest son has been the heir since the first days of Delos.”

“The eldest surviving son,” the king said quietly. “You think you would have lived if people knew?”

“Don’t pretend you were protecting me,” Thanos replied. “You were protecting yourself.”

“Better than spending my time fighting on behalf of people who don’t even deserve it,” the king said. “Do you know how it looks when you go around protecting peasants who should know their place?”

“It looks as though someone cares about them!” Thanos shouted. He couldn’t keep from raising his voice then, because it seemed like the only way to get through to his father. Maybe if he could make him understand, then the Empire might finally change for the better. “It looks as though their rulers aren’t enemies out to kill them, but people to be respected. It looks as though their lives mean something to us, rather than just being something for us to throw aside while we have glittering parties!”

The king was silent for a long time after that. Thanos could see the fury in his eyes. That was fine. It matched the anger Thanos felt almost perfectly.

“Kneel,” King Claudius said at last.

Thanos hesitated, only for a second, but it was apparently enough.

“Kneel!” the king bellowed. “Or do you wish me to have you made to? I am still the king here!”

Thanos knelt on the hard stone of the floor before the king’s chair. He saw the king raise the sword he held with difficulty, as though it had been a long time since he’d done it.

Thanos’s thoughts went to the sword at his own side. He had no doubt that if it came to a battle between him and the king, he would be the winner. He was younger, stronger, and had trained with the best the Stade had to offer. But that would mean killing his father. More than that, it really would be treason.

“I have learned many things in my life,” the king said, and the sword was still poised there. “When I was your age, I was like you. I was young, I was strong. I fought, and I fought well. I killed men in battle, and in duels in the Stade. I tried to fight for everything I believed to be right.”

“What happened to you?” Thanos asked.

The king’s lip curled into a sneer. “I learned better. I learned that if you give them a chance, people do not come together to lift you up. Instead, they try to tear you down. I have tried showing compassion, and the truth is that it is nothing more than foolishness. If a man stands against you, then you destroy him, because if you do not, he will destroy you.”

“Or you make him your friend,” Thanos said, “and he helps you to make things better.”

“Friends?” King Claudius raised his sword another inch. “Powerful men have no friends. They have allies, servants, and hangers-on, but do not think for a moment that they will not turn on you. A sensible man keeps them in their place, or he watches them rise up against him.”

“The people deserve better than that,” Thanos insisted.

“You think people get what they deserve?” King Claudius bellowed. “They get what they take! You’re talking as if you think the people are our equals. They aren’t. We are raised from birth to rule them. We are more educated, stronger, better in every way. You want to put pig farmers in castles beside you, when I want to show them that they belong in their sty. Lucious understands.”

“Lucious only understands cruelty,” Thanos said.

“And cruelty is what it takes to rule!”

Thanos saw the king swing the sword then. Perhaps he could have ducked. Perhaps he could even have made a move for his own blade. Instead, he knelt there and watched as the sword swept down toward his throat, tracking the arc of the steel in the sunlight.

It stopped short of cutting his throat, but not by much. Thanos felt the sting as the edge touched his flesh, but he didn’t react, no matter how much he wanted to.

“You didn’t flinch,” King Claudius said. “You barely even blinked. Lucious would have. Would probably have begged for his life. That is his weakness. But Lucious has the strength to do what is needed to hold our rule in place. *That* is why he is my heir. Until you can carve this weakness from your heart, I will not acknowledge you. I will not call you mine. And if you attack my acknowledged son again, I will have your head for it. Do you understand?”

Thanos stood. He’d had enough of kneeling to this man. “I understand, Father. I understand you perfectly.”

He turned and walked for the doors, not waiting for permission to do it. What could his father do? It would look weak to call him back. Thanos stepped out, and Stephania was waiting for him. She looked as though she’d maintained her image of composure for the benefit of the bodyguards there, but the moment Thanos came out, she hurried forward to him.

“Are you all right?” Stephania asked, raising a hand to his cheek. It dropped lower, and Thanos saw it come away with blood on it. “Thanos, you’re bleeding!”

“It’s only a scratch,” Thanos assured her. “I probably have worse from the fight earlier.”

“What happened in there?” she demanded.

Thanos forced a smile, but it came out tighter than he intended. “His majesty chose to remind me that prince or not, I am not worth as much to him as Lucious.”

Stephania put her hands on his shoulders. “I told you, Thanos. It was the wrong thing to do. You can’t put yourself at risk like that. You have to promise me that you will trust me, and never do anything so foolish again. Promise me.”

He nodded.

“For you, my love, I promise.”

He meant it, too. Going and fighting Lucious in the open like that wasn’t the right strategy, because it didn’t achieve enough. Lucious wasn’t the problem. The whole Empire was the problem. He’d briefly thought that he might be able to persuade the king to change things, but the truth was that his father didn’t *want* things to change.

No, the only thing to do now was to find ways to help the rebellion. Not just the rebels on Haylon, but all of them. Alone, Thanos couldn't accomplish much, but together, they might just bring down the Empire.

CHAPTER SIX

Everywhere Ceres looked on the Isle Beyond the Mist, she saw things that made her stop and stare at their strange beauty. Hawks with rainbow-colored feathers spun as they hunted things below, but were in turn hunted by a winged serpent that eventually settled on a spire of white marble.

She walked over the emerald grass of the island, and it seemed as if she knew exactly where she had to go. She'd seen herself in her vision, there atop the hill in the distance, where rainbow-colored towers stuck up like the spines of some great beast.

Flowers grew from the low rises on the way, and Ceres reached down to touch them. When her fingers brushed them, though, their petals were of paper-thin stone. Had someone carved them that fine, or were they somehow living rock? Just the fact that she could imagine that possibility told her how strange this place was.

Ceres kept walking, heading for the spot where she knew, where she hoped, her mother would be waiting.

She reached the lower slopes of the hill and started to climb. Around her, the island was full of life. Bees buzzed in the low grass. A creature like a deer, but with crystal tines where its antlers should have been, looked at Ceres for a long time before springing away.

Yet she saw no people there, despite the buildings that dotted the landscape around her. The ones closest to Ceres had a pristine, empty feel, like a room that had been stepped out from only moments before. Ceres kept going, up toward the top of the hill, to the spot where the towers formed a circle around a broad area of grass, letting her look out between them over the whole of the rest of the island.

Yet she didn't look that way. Instead, Ceres found herself staring at the center of the circle, where a single figure stood in a robe of pure white. Unlike her vision, the figure wasn't fuzzy or out of focus. She was there, as clear and real as Ceres was. Ceres stepped forward, almost to within touching distance. There was only one person it could be.

"Mother?"

"Ceres."

The robed figure threw herself forward at the same instant Ceres did, and they met in a crushing hug that seemed to express all the things Ceres didn't know how to say: how much she'd been looking forward to this moment, how much love there was there, how incredible it was to meet this woman she'd only met in a vision.

"I knew you would come," the woman, her *mother*, said as they stepped back, "but even knowing it is different from actually *seeing* you."

She pulled back the hood of her robe then, and it seemed almost impossible that this woman could be her mother. Her sister, perhaps, because she shared the same hair, the same features. It was almost like looking into a mirror for Ceres. Yet she seemed too young to be Ceres's mother.

"I don't understand," Ceres said. "You *are* my mother?"

"I am." She reached out to hug Ceres again. "I know it must seem strange, but it's true. My kind can live a long time. I am Lycine."

A name. Ceres finally had a name for her mother. Somehow, that meant more than all the rest of it put together. Just that was enough to make the journey worth it. She wanted to stand there and just stare at her mother forever. Even so, she had questions. So many that they spilled out in a rush.

"What is this place?" she asked. "Why are you here alone? Wait, what do you mean 'your kind'?"

Lycine smiled and sat down on the grass. Ceres joined her, and as she sat, she realized that it wasn't just grass. She could see fragments of stone beneath it, arranged in mosaic form, but long since covered over by the meadow around them.

“There’s no easy way to answer all of your questions,” Lycine said. “Especially not when I have so many questions of my own, about you, about your life. About everything, Ceres. But I’ll try. Shall we do this the old way? A question for a question?”

Ceres didn’t know what to say to that, but it seemed her mother wasn’t done yet.

“Do they still tell the stories of the Ancient Ones, out in the world?”

“Yes,” Ceres said. She’d always paid more attention to the stories of combatlords and their exploits in the Stade, but she knew some of what they said about the Ancient Ones: the ones who had come before humanity, who sometimes looked the same and sometimes looked like so much more. Who’d built so much and then lost it. “Wait, are you saying that you’re – ”

“One of the Ancient Ones, yes,” Lycine replied. “This was one of our places, before... well, there are some things that it is still best not to talk about. Besides, I’m owed an answer. So tell me what your life has been like. I couldn’t be there, but I spent so long trying to imagine what it would be like for you.”

Ceres did her best, even though she didn’t know where to start. She told Lycine about growing up around her father’s forge, about her brothers. She told her about the rebellion, and about the Stade. She even managed to tell her about Rexus and Thanos, though those words came out choking and fractured.

“Oh, darling,” her mother said, laying a hand over hers. “I wish I could have spared you some of that pain. I wish I could have been there for you.”

“Why couldn’t you?” Ceres asked. “Have you been here all this time?”

“I have,” Lycine said. “This used to be one of the places of my people, in the old days. The others left it behind. Even I did, for a time, but these past years it has been a kind of sanctuary. And a place to wait, of course.”

“To wait?” Ceres asked. “You mean for me?”

She saw her mother nod.

“People talk about seeing destiny as if it were a gift,” Lycine said, “but there is a kind of prison to it, too. Understand what must happen, and you lose the choices that come with not knowing, no matter how much you might wish...” Her mother shook her head, and Ceres could see the sadness there. “This isn’t the time for regret. I have my daughter here, and there is only so much time for you to learn what you came for.”

She smiled and took Ceres’s hand.

“Walk with me.”

Ceres felt like days had passed while she and her mother walked the magical isle. It was breathtaking, this vista, being here with her mother. It all felt like a dream.

As they walked, they spoke mostly of the power. Her mother tried to explain it to her, and Ceres tried to understand. The strangest thing happened: as her mother spoke, Ceres felt as if her words were actually imbuing her with the power.

Even now, as they walked, Ceres felt it rising up inside her, roiling like smoke as her mother touched her shoulder. She needed to learn to control it, she’d come here to learn to control it, but compared to meeting her mother, it didn’t seem important.

“Our blood has given you power,” Lycine said. “The islanders tried to help unlock it, didn’t they?”

Ceres thought of Eoin, and of all the strange exercises he’d had her doing. “Yes.”

“For people not of our blood, they understand the world well,” her mother said. “But there are things even they can’t show you. Have you made anything stone yet? It’s one of my talents, so I would guess it will be one of yours.”

“Made things stone?” Ceres asked. She didn’t understand. “So far, I’ve moved things. I’ve been faster and stronger. And – ”

She didn’t want to finish that. She didn’t want her mother to think badly of her.

“And your power has killed things that have tried to harm you?” Lycine said.

Ceres nodded.

“Do not be ashamed of that, daughter. I have only seen a little of you, but I know what you are destined to be. You are a fine person. All that I could hope. As for making things stone...”

They stopped in a meadow of purple and yellow flowers and Ceres watched her mother pluck a small flower from the meadow, with delicate, silken petals. Through the contact with her mother, she felt the way the power flickered within her, feeling familiar but much more directed, crafted, shaped.

Stone spread across the flower like frost over a window, but it wasn’t just on the surface. A second after it had begun, it was over, and her mother held one of the stone flowers Ceres had seen lower on the island.

“Did you feel it?” Lycine asked.

Ceres nodded. “But how did you do it?”

“Feel again.” She plucked another flower, and this time it was impossibly slow as she turned it to something with marble petals and a granite stem. Ceres tried to track the movement of the power within her, and it was as though her own moved in response, trying to copy it.

“Good,” Lycine said. “Your blood knows. Now you try.”

She passed a flower to Ceres. Ceres reached down, concentrating as she tried to grasp the power within her and push it into the form she’d felt her mother’s take.

The flower exploded.

“Well,” Lycine said with a laugh, “*that* was unexpected.”

It was so different from the way the mother she’d grown up with would have reacted. She’d beaten Ceres for the least failure. Lycine just passed her another flower.

“Relax,” she said. “You already know how it should feel. Take that feeling. Imagine it. Make it real.”

Ceres tried to do it, thinking about what she’d felt when her mother had transformed her flower. She took the feeling and filled it with power the way her father might have filled a mold at the forge with iron.

“Open your eyes, Ceres,” Lycine said.

Ceres hadn’t even realized that she’d closed them until her mother said the words. She forced herself to look, even though right then she was afraid to. Once she’d looked, she stared, because she could barely believe it. She held a single, perfectly formed, petrified bloom, transformed into something like basalt by her power.

“I did that?” Ceres asked. Even with everything else she could do, it still seemed nearly impossible.

“You did,” her mother said, and Ceres could hear the pride there. “Now we just need to get you to do it without your eyes closed.”

That took longer, and a lot more flowers. Yet Ceres found herself enjoying the practice. More than that, every time her mother smiled at her efforts, Ceres felt a burst of love expanding through her. Even as the minutes spilled into hours, she kept going.

“Yes,” her mother said at last, “that’s perfect.”

It was more than that; it was easy. Easy to reach out and pull power from inside her. Easy to channel it. Easy to leave behind a perfectly preserved stone flower. It was only as the rush of doing it faded that Ceres realized just how tired she was.

“It’s all right,” her mother said, taking her hand. “Your power takes energy and effort. Even the strongest of us could only do so much at once.” She smiled. “But your power knows what it is for now. It will rise up when someone threatens you, or when you summon it to you. It will do more, too.”

Ceres sensed a flicker of power from her mother, and she could see the full potential of her power. She saw the stone buildings and gardens in a new light, as things that had been built with that power, crafted in ways no human could understand. She felt full, somehow. Complete.

Some of the happiness seemed to fade from her mother's expression. Ceres heard her sigh.

"What is it?" Ceres asked.

"I just wish that we had more time together," Lycine said. "I would love to walk you through the towers here and tell you the history of my people. I would love to hear all about this Thanos you loved so much, and show you the gardens where the sun has never touched the trees."

"Then do it," Ceres said. She felt as though she might have stayed there forever. "Show me all of it. Tell me about the past. Tell me about my father, and what happened when I was born."

Her mother shook her head though.

"That is one thing you aren't ready for yet. As for time, I told you before that destiny can be a prison, darling, and you have a bigger destiny than most."

"I've seen flashes of it," Ceres admitted, thinking of the dreams that had come to her again and again on the boat.

"Then you know why we can't stay here and be a family, no matter how much either of us might wish it," her mother said. "Although maybe the future holds time for that. That and more."

"First, though, I have to go back, don't I?" Ceres said.

Her mother nodded.

"You do," she said. "You must return, Ceres. Return and free Delos from the Empire, as you were always meant to do."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was hard for Stephania to believe that she'd already been married to Thanos for six weeks. Yet with the feast of the Blood Moon here, that was how long it had been. Six weeks of bliss, every one as wonderful as she could have hoped for.

"You look amazing," she said, looking over at Thanos in the rooms they now shared in the castle. He was a vision in deep red silk, set off with red gold and rubies. She could hardly believe that he was hers, some days. "Red suits you."

"It makes me look as though I'm covered in blood," Thanos replied.

"Which is rather the point, given that it's the Blood Moon," Stephania pointed out. She leaned in to kiss him. She liked being able to do that when she wanted. If there were more time, she might have taken the moment to do a lot more.

"It hardly matters what I wear though," Thanos said. "There's no one in the room who will be looking at me when you're there beside me."

Perhaps another man could have put the compliment more elegantly, but there was something about the earnest way Thanos said it that meant more to Stephania than all the perfectly judged poems in the world.

Besides, she *had* worked rather hard on picking out the most beautiful dress in Delos. It shimmered in shades of red like a flame wrapped around her. She'd even bribed the dressmaker to ensure that the original, destined for a minor noblewoman lower in the city, was irretrievably delayed.

Stephania offered her arm, and Thanos took it, escorting her down toward the great feast hall where they'd had their wedding. Was it already six weeks that they'd been married? Six weeks of more bliss than Stephania could have believed, living together in apartments set aside for them by the queen within the castle. There were even rumors that the king was planning to bestow a new estate on Thanos, a little way from the city. For six weeks, they'd been the most watched couple in the city, lauded wherever they went. Stephania had enjoyed that.

"Do remember not to punch Lucious when you see him tonight," Stephania said.

"I've managed to keep from doing it so far," Thanos replied. "Don't worry."

Stephania did worry, though. She didn't want to risk losing Thanos now that she had him as her husband. She didn't want to find him executed for attacking the heir to the throne, and not just because of the position it would put her in. She might have set out to acquire him for a husband for the prestige it would bring, but now... now she was surprised to find that she loved him.

"Prince Thanos and his wife, Lady Stephania!" the herald at the door announced, and Stephania smiled, leaning her head against Thanos's shoulder. She always loved hearing that.

She looked around the room. For their wedding, it had been arranged in white, but now it shone in red and black. The wine in the glasses was a thick blood red, the feast tables had meat left just on the edge of bloody, and every noble in the place wore the colors of the shifting moon.

Stephania walked on Thanos's arm, parsing the relationships there, keeping track of the latest intrigues even as she simply enjoyed being seen. Was that Lady Christina, slipping off into the shadows to talk to a merchant prince from the Far Islands? Was Isolde's daughter wearing fewer jewels than usual?

Of course, she saw Lucious drinking too much, eating too much, and eyeing the women. Briefly, Stephania thought his eyes flickered to hers, his look one that would have guaranteed a fight if Thanos had seen it. It was a pity, really, that her attempt to poison him at the wedding feast had gone so badly. If Thanos hadn't made him so angry that he'd crushed his wine glass, then Lucious would have gone to sleep that night and not woken. It would have been done.

Since then, there had been no opportunity to deal with him. The usual people she might have employed were being more cautious now that the one she'd used for Thanos had gone missing, and

the trick with killing was never the act of it; it was always doing it in such a way that people didn't suspect. There had simply never been a chance to get close to Lucious without it being obvious.

"Ah, Prince Thanos," a white-whiskered man said, approaching them both, "Lady Stephania. You make such a wonderful couple!"

Stephania searched her memory for the man, coming up with the answer effortlessly. "General Haven, you're too kind. How is your wife doing?"

"Happy enough to spend my gold on new necklaces. I take it you'll be keeping Prince Thanos from the new expedition to Haylon?"

"There's a new expedition?" Thanos said. Stephania could hear the curiosity there. It was obviously the first her husband had heard of it.

"Heading out tomorrow," General Haven said. "I tried to persuade his majesty to let me head this one, but he decided on Olliant instead."

Probably because the man was capable of organizing something more than a long-winded speech. Stephania had heard that Haven had once been a competent general, but now he hung onto his role only through his connections.

"Well," Stephania said, "I'm sure your wife will be happy to have you home. I know I'm glad that Thanos isn't going anywhere."

The old man drifted away, and Stephania turned to Thanos.

"We should go and mingle," Stephania said. "I should go and hear all the gossip the women of the court have to tell, and tell them how glorious their choices of dress are. *You* should go and pay your respects to the king. People have been muttering about how little you've been there for formal audiences lately."

"I've just been busy," Thanos said. "Enjoying married life, for a start."

Stephania knew her husband better than that. She still laughed though. "I've been enjoying it too, but you know you can't afford to offend the king. Think of it as a game, Thanos. A big game, where the prize is getting to live happily, and where you don't get a choice if you play."

"Is that what you do?" Thanos asked.

Stephania spread her hands. "Why do you think I'm about to go and tell General Haven's wife how lovely her new necklace is?" She kissed his cheek. "Please, Thanos. I love how honest you are, but whatever happened when you spoke to the king, you can't get on his bad side."

"I'll try," Thanos said, heading off in the direction of the king and queen.

Stephania watched him go. She loved watching him. Even as she started making her way through the room, she kept glancing back to keep an eye on where Thanos had gotten to. She'd never thought that she would be like this, giddy as a milkmaid swooning over him. But that was love, and Stephania wasn't going to allow anything to jeopardize things.

"Do we have any information on the boy, Sartes, yet?" Stephania asked one of her handmaids in a whisper. She made sure that none of them ever knew all of her affairs, but she also made sure that she picked clever girls, drawn up from the lower end of the acceptable classes. Girls who would owe her everything, in other words.

"We know that after his escape from the army, he joined up with the rebellion," the handmaid said. "I believe I know which group, my lady."

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