

OF CROWNS AND GLORY--BOOK 1

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN

MORGAN RICE



Of Crowns and Glory

Морган Райс

Slave, Warrior, Queen

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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17 year old Ceres, a beautiful, poor girl in the Empire city of Delos, lives the harsh and unforgiving life of a commoner. By day she delivers her father's forged weapons to the palace training grounds, and by night she secretly trains with them, yearning to be a warrior in a land where girls are forbidden to fight. With her pending sale to slavehood, she is desperate. 18 year old Prince Thanos despises everything his royal family stands for. He abhors their harsh treatment of the masses, especially the brutal competition—The Killings—that lies at the heart of the city. He yearns to break free from the restraints of his upbringing, yet he, a fine warrior, sees no way out. When Ceres stuns the court with her hidden powers, she finds herself wrongfully imprisoned, doomed to an even worse life than she could imagine. Thanos, smitten, must choose if he will risk it all for her. Yet, thrust into a world of duplicity and deadly secrets, Ceres quickly learns there are those who rule, and those who are their pawns. And that sometimes, being chosen is the worst that can happen.

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Rice Morgan

SLAVE WARRIOR QUEEN

(Of Crowns and Glory–Book 1)

Morgan Rice

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

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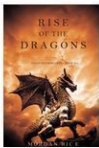
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“Come close, dear warrior, and I shall tell you a tale

A tale of battles distant

A tale of men and valor

A tale of crowns and glory.”

– The Forgotten Chronicles of Lysa

CHAPTER ONE

Ceres ran through the back alleys of Delos, excitement coursing through her veins, knowing she could not be late. The sun was barely rising, and yet the muggy, dust-filled air was already suffocating in the ancient stone city. Legs burning, lungs aching, she nonetheless pushed herself to run faster, and faster still, hopping over one of the countless rats that crept out of the gutters and refuse in the streets. She could already hear the distant rumble, and her heart pounded with anticipation. Somewhere ahead, she knew, the Festival of the Killings was about to begin.

Letting her hands drag along the stone walls as she twisted and turned down a narrow alley, Ceres glanced back to make certain her brothers were keeping up. There, she was relieved to see, were Nesos, at her heels, and Sartès, only a few feet behind. At nineteen, Nesos was just two sun cycles older than she, while Sartès, her baby brother, four sun cycles younger, was on the verge of manhood. The two of them, with their longish sandy hair and brown eyes, looked exactly like each other – and their parents – and yet nothing like her. Still, though Ceres might be a girl, they had never been able to keep pace with her.

“Hurry!” Ceres yelled over her shoulder.

Another rumble came, and although she had never been to the festival, she imagined it in vivid detail: the entire city, all three million citizens of Delos, crowding into the Stade on this summer solstice holiday. It would be unlike anything she had seen before, and if her brothers and she didn’t hurry, not a single seat would remain.

Picking up speed, Ceres wiped a drop of sweat off her brow and smeared it onto her frayed, ivory tunic, a hand-me-down from her mother. She had never been given new clothes. According to her mother, who doted on her brothers but seemed to reserve a special hatred and envy for her, she didn’t deserve it.

“Wait!” Sartès yelled, an edge of irritation in his cracking voice.

Ceres smiled.

“Shall I carry you, then?” she yelled back.

She knew that he hated it when she teased him, yet her snide remark would motivate him to keep up. Ceres didn’t mind his tagging along; she thought it was endearing how he, at thirteen, would do anything to be considered their peer. And even though she would never admit it openly, a huge part of her needed him to need her.

Sartès gave a loud grunt.

“Mother will kill you when she finds out you disobeyed her again!” he yelled back.

He was right. Indeed, she would – or give her a good flogging, at least.

The first time her mother had beaten her, at the age of five, it was the very moment Ceres lost her innocence. Before then, the world had been fun, kind, and good. After that, nothing had ever been safe again, and all that she had to hold onto was her hope of a future where she could get away from her. She was older now, close, and yet even that dream was slowly eroding in her heart.

Fortunately, Ceres knew her brothers would never tell on her. They were as loyal to her as she was to them.

“Then it’s a good thing Mother will never know!” she cried back.

“Father will find out, though!” Sartès snapped.

She chuckled. Father already knew. They had made a deal: if she stayed up late to finish sharpening the swords due for delivery at the palace, she could go see the Killings. And so she did.

Ceres reached the wall at the end of the lane and, without pausing, wedged her fingers in two cracks and began to climb. Her hands and feet moved swiftly, and up she went, a good twenty feet, until she scrambled to the top.

She stood, breathing hard, and the sun greeted her with its bright rays. She shaded her eyes with a hand.

She gasped. Normally, the Old City was dotted with a few citizens, a stray cat or dog here and there – yet today it was positively alive. It swarmed with people. Ceres could not even see the cobblestones beneath the sea of people pressing into Fountain Square.

In the distance the ocean shimmered a vivid blue, while the towering white Stade stood as a mountain amongst twisting roads and sardine-packed two- and three-story houses. Around the outer edge of the plaza merchants had lined up booths, each eager to sell food, jewelry, or clothes.

A gust of wind brushed against her face, and the smell of freshly baked goods seeped into her nostrils. What she wouldn't give for food that would satisfy that gnawing sensation. She wrapped her arms around her belly as she felt a hunger pang. Breakfast this morning had been a few spoonfuls of soggy porridge, which had somehow managed to leave her stomach feeling hungrier than before she ate it. Given that today was her eighteenth birthday, she had hoped for at least a little extra food in her bowl – or a hug or *something*.

But no one had mentioned a word. She doubted they even remembered.

Light caught her eyes, and Ceres looked down to spot a golden carriage weaving through the crowd like a bubble through honey, slow and shiny. She frowned. In her excitement, she had failed to consider that the royalty would be at the event, too. She despised them, their haughtiness, that their animals were better fed than most of the people of Delos. Her brothers were hopeful that one day, they would triumph over the class system. But Ceres did not share their optimism: if there were to be any sort of equality in the Empire, it would have to come by way of revolution.

“Do you see him?” Nesos panted as he climbed up beside her.

Ceres's heart quickened as she thought of him. Rexus. She, too, had been wondering if he was here yet, and had been scanning the crowds to no avail.

She shook her head.

“There.” Nesos pointed.

She followed his finger toward the fountain, squinting.

Suddenly she saw him, and could not suppress her burst of excitement. It was the same way she always felt when she saw him. There he was, sitting on the edge of the fountain, tightening his bow. Even from this distance, she could see his shoulder and chest muscles move beneath his tunic. Hardly a few years older than she, he had blond hair that stood out amongst heads of black and brown, and his tan skin glistened in the sun.

“Wait!” cried a voice.

Ceres glanced back down the wall to see Sartes, struggling with the climb.

“Hurry up or we'll leave you behind!” Nesos goaded.

Of course, they wouldn't dream of leaving their younger brother, although he did need to learn to keep up. In Delos, a moment of weakness could mean death.

Nesos ran a hand through his hair, catching his breath, too, as he surveyed the crowd.

“So who is your money on to win?” he asked.

Ceres turned to him and laughed.

“What money?” she asked.

He smiled.

“If you had any,” he answered.

“Brennius,” she replied without pausing.

His brow lifted in surprise.

“Really?” he asked. “Why?”

“I don't know.” She shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

But she did know. She knew very well, better than her brothers, better than all the boys of her city. Ceres had a secret: she hadn't told anyone she had, on occasion, dressed as a boy and trained at

the palace. It was forbidden by royal decree for girls – punishable by death – to learn the ways of the combatlords, yet male commoners were welcome to learn in exchange for equal amounts of work in the palace's stables, work which she did happily.

She'd watched Brennius and had been impressed by the way he fought. He wasn't the largest of the combatlords, yet his moves were calculated with precision.

"No chance," Nesos replied. "It'll be Stefanus."

She shook her head.

"Stefanus will be dead within the first ten minutes," she said flatly.

Stefanus was the obvious choice, the largest of the combatlords, and probably the strongest; yet he wasn't as calculating as Brennius or some of the other warriors she had watched.

Nesos barked a laugh.

"I'll give you my good sword if that's the case."

She glanced at the sword attached to his waist. He had no idea how jealous she had been when he received that masterpiece of a weapon as a birthday gift from Mother three years ago. Her sword was an old leftover one her father had tossed into the recycling pile. Oh, the things she'd be able to do if she had a weapon like Nesos's.

"I'm going to hold you to it, you know," Ceres said, smiling – although in reality, she would never take his sword from him.

"I'd expect nothing less," he smirked.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest as a dark thought crossed her mind.

"Mother wouldn't allow it," she said.

"But Father would," he said. "He's very proud of you, you know."

Nesos's kind comment took her off guard, and not knowing exactly how to accept it, she lowered her eyes. She loved her father dearly, and he loved her, she knew. Yet for some reason, her mother's face appeared before her. All she ever wanted was for her mother to accept her and love her as much as her brothers. But as hard as she tried, Ceres felt she could never be enough in her eyes.

Sartes grunted as he climbed the last step behind them. He was still about a head shorter than Ceres and as scrawny as a cricket, but she was convinced he'd sprout like a bamboo shoot any day now. That's what had happened to Nesos. Now he was a muscle-bound hunk, hovering at six foot three.

"And you?" Ceres turned to Sartes. "Who do you think will win?"

"I'm with you. Brennius."

She smiled and ruffled his hair. He always said whatever she said.

Another rumble came, the crowd thickened, and she felt the urgency.

"Let's go," she said, "no time to waste."

Without waiting, Ceres climbed down the wall and hit the ground running. Keeping the fountain in sight, she made her way across the plaza, eager to reach Rexus.

He turned and his eyes widened in delight as she neared. She rushed into him and felt his arms wrap around her waist, as he pressed a scruffy cheek against hers.

"Ciri," he said in his low, raspy voice.

A shiver ran through her spine as she spun around to meet Rexus's cobalt blue eyes. At six foot one, he was nearly a head taller than her, and blond, coarse hair framed his heart-shaped face. He smelled like soap and the outdoors. Heavens, it was good to see him again. Even though she could fend for herself in nearly any situation, his presence brought her a sense of calm.

Ceres raised herself up onto the balls of her feet and curled willing arms around his thick neck. She had never seen him as more than a friend until she heard him speak of the revolution, and of the underground army he was a member of. "We will fight to free ourselves from the yoke of oppression," he had said to her years ago. He had spoken with such passion about the rebellion that for a moment, she had really believed overthrowing the royals was possible.

"How was the hunt?" she asked with a smile, knowing he had been gone for days.

“I missed your smile.” He stroked her long, rose-gold hair back. “And your emerald eyes.”

Ceres had missed him, too, but she didn’t dare say. She was too afraid to lose the friendship they had if anything were to happen between them.

“Rexus,” Nesos said, catching up, Sartes at his heels, and clasping his arm.

“Nesos,” he said, in his deep, authoritative voice. “We have little time if we are to get in,” he added, nodding to the others.

They all hurried off, merging with the throng heading toward the Stade. Empire soldiers were everywhere, urging the crowds forward, sometimes with clubs and whips. The closer they came to the road that led to the Stade, the more the crowd thickened.

All of a sudden, Ceres heard a clamor by one of the booths and she instinctively turned toward the sound. She saw that a generous space had opened up around a small boy, flanked by two Empire soldiers and a merchant. A few onlookers fled, while others gawked in a circle.

Ceres rushed forward to see one of the soldiers slap an apple out of the boy’s hand as he grabbed the little one’s arm, shaking him violently.

“Thief!” the soldier growled.

“Mercy, please!” the boy screamed, tears streaming down his dirty, hollow cheeks. “I was... so hungry!”

Ceres felt her heart burst from compassion, as she had felt the same hunger – and she knew the soldiers would be nothing short of cruel.

“Let the boy go,” the heavysset merchant said calmly with the gesture of a hand, his gold ring catching the sunlight. “I can afford to give him an apple. I have hundreds of apples.” He chuckled a little, as if to make light of the situation.

But the crowd gathered around and quieted as the soldiers turned to confront the merchant, their shiny armor rattling. Ceres’s heart dropped for the merchant – she knew that one never risked confronting the Empire.

The soldier stepped forward menacingly toward the merchant.

“You defend a criminal?”

The merchant looked back and forth between the two of them, now seeming unsure. The soldier then turned and hit the boy across the face with a sickening crack that made Ceres shiver.

The boy fell to the ground with a thump as the crowd gasped.

Pointing at the merchant, the soldier said, “To prove your loyalty to the Empire, you will hold the boy while we flog him.”

The merchant’s eyes turned hard, his brow sweaty. To Ceres’s surprise, he held his ground.

“No,” he replied.

The second soldier took two threatening steps toward the merchant and his hand moved to the hilt of his sword.

“Do it, or you lose your head and we burn your shop down,” the soldier said.

The merchant’s round face went limp, and Ceres could tell he was defeated.

He slowly walked over to the boy and grabbed the boy’s arms, kneeling in front of him.

“Please forgive me,” he said, tears brimming in his eyes.

The boy whimpered and then started to scream as he tried to wring himself free from his grip.

Ceres could see the child was shaking. She wanted to keep moving toward the Stade, to avoid witnessing this, but instead, her feet stood frozen in the middle of the square, eyes glued to the brutality.

The first soldier tore the boy’s tunic open while the second soldier whirled a flogger above his head. Most onlookers cheered the soldiers on, although a few murmured and walked away with heads hung low.

None defended the thief.

With a greedy, almost maddening expression, the soldier thrashed the whip against the boy's back, causing him to shriek in pain as they flogged him. Blood oozed out of the fresh lacerations. Again and again, the soldier flogged until the boy's head was sagging backward and he no longer screamed.

Ceres felt the strong urge to rush forward and save the boy. Yet to do so, she knew, would mean her death, and the death of all those she loved. She slumped her shoulders, feeling hopeless and defeated. Inwardly, she resolved to take revenge one day.

She yanked Sartes toward her and covered his eyes, desperately wanting to protect him, to give him a few more years of innocence, even though there was no innocence to be had in this land. She forced herself not to act on her impulse. As a man, he needed to see these instances of cruelty, not only to adapt, but also to one day be a strong contender in the rebellion.

The soldiers grabbed the boy out of the merchant's hands and then tossed his lifeless body into the back of a wooden cart. The merchant pressed his hands to his face and sobbed.

Within seconds, the cart was on its way, and the previously open space was again filled with people meandering about the square as if nothing had happened.

Ceres felt an overwhelming sense of nausea well up inside. It was unjust. In this moment, she could pick out a half a dozen pickpockets – men and women who had perfected their art so well that not even the Empire soldiers could catch them. This poor boy's life was now ruined because of his lack of skill. If caught, thieves, young or old, would lose their limbs or more, depending on how the judges felt that day. If he were lucky, his life would be spared and he would be sentenced to work in the gold mines for life. Ceres would rather die than have to endure being imprisoned like that.

They continued along the street, their mood ruined, shoulder to shoulder with the others as the heat grew almost unbearable.

A golden carriage pulled up next to them, forcing everyone out of the way, shoving people up to the houses on the sides. Jostled roughly, Ceres looked up to see three teenage girls in colorful silk dresses, pins of gold and precious jewels adorning their intricate up-dos. One of the teenagers, laughing, tossed a coin out onto the street, and a handful of commoners stooped onto hands and knees, scrambling for a piece of metal that would feed a family for an entire month.

Ceres never stooped to pick up any handouts. She'd rather starve than take donations from the likes of those.

She watched a young man get hold of the coin and an older man drive him to the ground and clamp a stiff hand around his neck. With the other hand, the older man forced the coin out of the young man's hand.

The teenage girls laughed and pointed fingers before their carriage continued to weave through the masses.

Ceres's insides clenched with disgust.

"In the near future, inequality will vanish forever," Rexus said. "I will see to it."

Listening to him speak, Ceres's chest swelled. One day she would fight side by side with him and her brothers in the rebellion.

As they neared the Stade the streets widened, and Ceres felt like she could take a breath. The air buzzed. She felt she would rupture from excitement.

She walked through one of the dozens of arched entrances and looked up.

Thousands upon thousands of commoners teemed inside the magnificent Stade. The oval structure had collapsed on the top northern side, and the majority of the red awnings were torn and provided little protection from the sweltering sun. Wild beasts growled from behind iron gates and trap doors, and she could see the combatlords standing ready behind the gates.

Ceres gaped, taking it all in in wonder.

Before she knew it, Ceres looked up and realized she had fallen behind Rexus and her brothers. She rushed forward to catch up, yet as soon as she did, four burly men had surrounded her. She

smelled alcohol, rotting fish, and body odor as they pressed in too close, turning and gaping at her with rotted teeth and ugly smiles.

“You’re coming with us, pretty girl,” one of them said as they all strategically moved in on her. Ceres heart raced. She looked ahead for the others, but they were already lost in the thickening crowd.

She confronted the men, trying to put on her bravest face.

“Leave me be or I will...”

They burst into laughter.

“What?” one mocked. “A wee girl like you take us four?”

“We could carry you out of here kickin’ and screamin’ and not a soul would say nuttin’,” another added.

And it was true. From the corner of her eye, Ceres watched people rush by, pretending not to notice how these men were threatening her.

Suddenly, the leader’s face turned serious, and with one swift move, he grabbed her arms and pulled her close. She knew they could haul her away, never to be seen again, and that thought terrified her more than anything.

Trying to ignore her pounding heart, Ceres spun around, snatching her arm out of his stronghold. The other men hooted in amusement, but when she thrust the base of her palm into the leader’s nose, snapping his head back, they went silent.

The leader placed filthy hands over his nose and grunted.

She didn’t relent. Knowing she had one chance, she kicked him once in the stomach, remembering her days of sparring, and he keeled over as she connected.

Immediately, though, the other three were upon her, their strong hands grabbing her, yanking her away.

Suddenly, they relented. Ceres looked over with relief to see Rexus appear and punch one in the face, knocking him out.

Nesos then appeared and grabbed another and kneed him in the stomach before kicking him to the ground, leaving him in the red dirt.

The fourth man charged toward Ceres, but just as he was about to attack, she ducked, spun, and kicked him in the rear so he went flying into a pillar headfirst.

She stood there, breathing hard, taking it all in.

Rexus placed a hand on Ceres’s shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Ceres’s heart was still running wild, but a feeling of pride slowly replaced her fear. She had done well.

She nodded and Rexus wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they continued on, his full lips gliding into a smile.

“What?” Ceres asked.

“When I saw what was happening, I wanted to run my sword through each and every one of them. But then I saw how you defended yourself.” He shook his head and chuckled. “They didn’t expect that.”

She felt her cheeks flush. She wanted to say she had been fearless, but the truth was, she had not been.

“I was nervous,” she admitted.

“Ciri, nervous? Never.” He kissed Ceres on top of the head, and they continued into the Stade.

They found a few spots left at ground level and they took their seats, Ceres thrilled it was not too late as she put all the events of the day behind her and allowed herself to become caught up in the excitement of the cheering crowd.

“Do you see them?”

Ceres followed Rexus's finger and looked up to see a dozen or so teenagers sitting in a booth, sipping wine from silver goblets. She had never seen such fine clothing, so much food on one table, so much sparkling jewelry in her entire life. Not one of them had sunken cheeks or concave bellies.

"What are they doing?" she asked when she saw one of them collecting coins into a gold bowl.

"Each owns a combatlord," Rexus said, "and they place bets on who will win."

Ceres scoffed. This was just a game for them, she realized. Obviously, the spoiled teenagers didn't care about the warriors or about the art of combat. They just wanted to see if their combatlord would win. To Ceres, though, this event was about honor and courage and skill.

The royal banners were raised, trumpets blared, and as iron gates sprung open, one on each end of the Stade, combatlord after combatlord marched out of the black holes, their leather and iron armor catching the sunlight, emitting sparks of light.

The crowd roared as the brutes marched into the arena, and Ceres rose to her feet with them, applauding. The warriors ended in an outward-facing circle, their axes, swords, spears, shields, tridents, whips, and other weapons held to the sky.

"Hail, King Claudius," they yelled.

Trumpets blared again, and the golden chariot of King Claudius and Queen Athena whirled onto the arena from one of the entrances. Next, a chariot with Crown Prince Avilius, and Princess Floriana followed, and after them, an entire entourage of chariots carrying royals flooded the arena. Each chariot was towed by two snow white horses adorned with precious jewels and gold.

When Ceres spotted Prince Thanos amongst them, she became appalled at the nineteen-year-old boy's scowl. From time to time when she delivered swords for her father, she had seen him speak with the combatlords at the palace, and he always carried that sour expression of superiority. His physique lacked nothing when it came to the likes of a warrior – he could almost be mistaken for one – his arms bulging with muscle, his waist tight and muscular, and his legs hard as tree trunks. However, it infuriated her how he appeared to hold no respect or passion for his position.

As the royals paraded up to their places at the podium, trumpets blared again, signaling the Killings were about to begin.

The crowd roared as all but two combatlords vanished back into the iron gates.

Ceres recognized one of them as Stefanus, but she couldn't make out the other brute wearing nothing but a visored helmet and a loincloth secured by a leather belt. Perhaps he had traveled from afar to contend. His well-oiled skin was the color of fertile soil, and his hair as black as the darkest night. Through the slits in the helmet, Ceres could see the look of resolve in his eyes, and she knew in an instant that Stefanus wouldn't live to see another hour.

"Don't worry," Ceres said, glancing over at Nesos. "I'll let you keep your sword."

"He's not defeated yet," Nesos replied with a smirk. "Stefanus would not be everyone's favorite if he weren't superior."

When Stefanus lifted his trident and shield, the crowd went silent.

"Stefanus!" one of the wealthy male youths from the booth shouted with a raised clenched fist. "Power and bravery!"

Stefanus nodded toward the youth as the audience roared with approval, and then he came at the foreigner with full force. The foreigner swerved out of the way in a flash, spun around, and slashed at Stefanus with his sword, missing by a mere inch.

Ceres cringed. With reflexes like that, Stefanus wouldn't last long.

Hacking away at Stefanus's shield again and again, the foreigner roared while Stefanus retreated. Stefanus, desperate, finally flung the edge of his shield into his opponent's face, sending a spray of blood across the air as his foe fell.

Ceres thought that was a rather nice move. Maybe Stefanus had improved in his technique since she saw him in training last.

"Stefanus! Stefanus! Stefanus!" the spectators chanted.

Stefanus stood at the feet of the injured warrior, but just as he was about to stab him with the trident, the foreigner lifted his legs and kicked Stefanus so he tumbled backwards, landing on his behind. Both hopped to their feet as quick as cats and faced each other again.

Their eyes locked and they began circling one another, the danger in the air palpable, Ceres thought.

The foreigner snarled and lifted his sword high into the air as he ran toward Stefanus. Stefanus quickly veered to the side and jabbed him in the thigh. In return, the foreigner swung his sword around and sliced Stefanus's arm.

Both warriors grunted in pain, but it was as if the wounds drove their fury instead of slowing them. The foreigner peeled off his helmet and flung it to the ground. His black bearded chin was bloodied, his right eye swollen, but his expression made Ceres think he was done playing games with Stefanus and was going in for the kill. How quickly would he be able to slay him?

Stefanus charged toward the foreigner, and Ceres gasped as Stefanus's trident collided with his opponent's sword. Eyeball to eyeball the warriors strained against each other, grunting, panting, shoving, the blood vessels in their foreheads protruding and the muscles bulging beneath their sweaty skin.

The foreigner ducked and wringed out of the deadlock, and unexpected to Ceres, he spun around like a tornado, sliced through the air with his sword, and decapitated Stefanus.

After a few breaths, the foreigner triumphantly lifted his arm into the air.

For a second, the crowd went completely silent. Even Ceres. She glanced up at the teenage boy who was Stefanus's owner. His mouth was wide open, his eyebrows knit together in fury.

The teenage boy hurled his silver goblet into the arena and stormed out of the booth. Death is the great equalizer, Ceres thought as she suppressed a smile.

"August!" a man in the crowd yelled. "August! August!"

One after another the spectators joined in, until the entire stadium chanted the victor's name. The foreigner bowed to King Claudius, and then three other warriors came running from the iron gates, replacing him.

One fight after another ensued as the day grew long, and Ceres watched with eyes peeled. She couldn't quite make up her mind whether she hated the Killings or loved it. On one hand, she enjoyed watching the strategy, the skill, and the bravery of the contenders; yet on the other, she despised how the warriors were nothing but pawns to the wealthy.

As the last fight of the first round arrived, Brennius and another warrior fought right next to where Ceres, Rexus, and her brothers were sitting. Closer and closer they came, their swords clanking, sparks flying. It was thrilling.

Ceres watched as Sartes leaned over the railing, his eyes glued to the combatants.

"Lean back!" she yelled at him.

But before he could respond, all of a sudden, an omnicat jumped out from a hatch in the ground on the other side of the stadium. The huge beast licked its fangs and its claws dug into the red dirt as it made its way toward the warriors. The combatlords hadn't yet seen the animal, and the stadium held its breath.

"Brennius is dead," Nesos mumbled.

"Sartes!" Ceres yelled again. "I said get back –"

She didn't have a chance to finish her words. Just then, the rock beneath Sartes's hands loosened, and before anyone could react, he tumbled down, over the rail, and fell all the way into the pit, landing with a thud.

"Sartes!" Ceres yelled in horror as she shot to her feet.

Ceres looked down to see Sartes, ten feet below, sit up and lean his back against the wall. His lower lip quivered, but there were no tears. No words. Holding his arm, he looked upward, his face twisted in agony.

Seeing him down there was more than Ceres could bear. Without thinking, she drew Nesos's sword and leapt over the rail, hopping into the pit, landing right in front of her younger brother.

"Ceres!" Rexus yelled.

She glanced back up and saw guards hauling Rexus and Nesos away before they could follow.

Ceres stood in the pit, overcome with a surreal feeling to be down here with the fighters in the arena. She wanted to get Sartes out of there, but there was no time. So she stepped in front of him, determined to protect him as the omnicat roared at her. It hunched low, its wicked yellow eyes fixed on Ceres, and she could sense the danger.

She whipped Nesos's sword up with both hands and clenched it tight.

"Run, girl!" Brennius yelled.

But it was too late. Charging toward her, the omnicat was now only a few feet away. She stepped closer to Sartes and just before the animal attacked, Brennius came in from the side and sliced the beast's ear off.

The omnicat rose onto its hind legs and roared, clawing a chunk out of the wall behind Ceres as purple blood stained its fur.

The crowd roared.

The second combatlord approached, but before he could cause the beast any harm, the omnicat lifted its paw and slit the man's throat with its claws. Clamping his hands around his neck, the warrior collapsed to the ground, blood seeping through his fingers.

Hungry for blood, the crowd cheered.

Snarling, the omnicat hit Ceres so hard she went flying into the air, crashing to the ground. On impact, the sword went tumbling from her hand and landed several feet away.

Ceres lay there, her lungs refusing to open up. Dying for air, her head spinning, she tried to crawl up onto hands and knees, but quickly tumbled back down.

Lying breathless with her face pressed against the coarse sand, she saw the omnicat heading toward Sartes. Seeing her brother in such a defenseless state, she felt her insides ignite with fire. She forced herself to take a breath and she discerned with complete clarity what she needed to do to save her brother.

Energy rushed through her like a flood, giving her instant power, and she rose to her feet, picked up the sword, and dashed toward the beast so fast she was convinced she was flying.

The beast was ten feet away from her now. Eight. Six. Four.

Ceres gritted her teeth and flung herself onto the beast's back, digging insistent fingers into its bristly fur, desperate to distract it from her brother.

The omnicat stood up on hind legs and shook its upper body, jostling Ceres back and forth. But her iron grip and her resolve were stronger than the animal's attempts to throw her off.

As the creature lowered back onto all fours again, Ceres seized the opportunity. She raised her sword high into the air and stabbed the beast in the neck.

The animal screeched and rose onto hind legs, as the crowd roared.

Reaching a paw around to Ceres, the creature pierced her back with its claws, and Ceres screamed from the pain, the claws feeling like daggers through her flesh. The omnicat grabbed her and hurled her into the wall, and she landed several feet away from Sartes.

"Ceres!" Sartes yelled.

Ears ringing, Ceres struggled to sit up, the back of her head throbbing, warm liquid running down her neck. There was no time to assess how serious the wound was. The omnicat was charging her again.

As the beast bore down, Ceres was out of options. Not even thinking, she instinctively raised a palm and held it out before her. It was the last thing she thought she'd ever see.

Just as the omnicat pounced, Ceres felt as if a ball of fire ignited in her chest, and suddenly she felt a ball of energy shoot out of her hand.

Mid-air, the beast suddenly went limp.

It crashed to the ground, skidding to a halt on top of her legs. Half-expecting the animal to come to life again and finish her off, Ceres held her breath as she watched it lie there.

But the creature didn't move.

Baffled, Ceres glanced at her palm. Not having seen what transpired, the crowd probably thought the beast died because she had stabbed him with her sword earlier. But she knew better. Some mysterious force had left her hand and had killed the beast in an instant. What force was it? Never had anything like this occurred before, and she didn't quite know what to make of it.

Who was she to have this power?

Afraid, she let her hand fall to the earth.

She lifted hesitant eyes, and saw the stadium had gone silent.

And she could not help but wonder. Had they seen it, too?

CHAPTER TWO

For a second that seemed to stretch on and on, Ceres felt every eye upon her as she sat there, numb with pain and disbelief. More so than the repercussions to come, she feared the supernatural power that lurked within her, that had killed the omnicat. More than all the people surrounding her, she feared to face herself – a self she no longer knew.

Suddenly, the crowd, stunned into silence, roared. It took her a moment to realize that they were cheering for her.

A voice cut through the roars.

“Ceres!” Sartes yelled, beside her. “Are you hurt?”

She turned toward her brother, still lying there on the Stade floor, too, and opened her mouth. But not a single word came out. Her breath was spent and she felt dazed. Had he seen what had really happened? She didn’t know about the others, but at this distance, it would be a near miracle if he hadn’t.

Ceres heard footsteps, and suddenly two strong hands pulled her to a standing position.

“Get out now!” Brennius growled, shoving her toward the open gate to her left.

The puncture wounds in her back ached, but she forced herself back to reality and grabbed Sartes and pulled him to a standing position. Together, they darted toward the exit, trying to escape the cheers of the crowd.

They soon arrived in the dark, stuffy, tunnel, and as they did, Ceres saw dozens of combatlords inside, awaiting their turn for a few moments of glory in the arena. Some sat on benches in deep meditation, others were tensing their muscles, pumping their arms as they paced back and forth, and yet others were preparing their weapons for the imminent bloodbath. All of them, having just witnessed the fight, looked up and stared at her, curiosity in their eyes.

Ceres hurried down underground corridors lined with torches giving the gray bricks a warm glow, passing all manner of weapons leaning against the walls. She tried to ignore the pain in her back, but it was difficult to do so when with every step, the rough material in her dress chafed against the open wounds. The omnicat’s claws had felt like daggers going in, but it almost seemed worse now as each gash throbbed.

“Your back is bleeding,” Sartes said, a tremor in his voice.

“I’ll be fine. We need to find Nesos and Rexus. How is your arm?”

“It hurts.”

When they reached the exit, the door swung open, and two Empire soldiers stood there.

“Sartes!”

Before she could react a soldier seized her brother, and another grabbed her. It was no use resisting. The other soldier swung her over his shoulder as if she were a sack of grain, and carried her away. Fearing she had been arrested, she beat him on the back, to no avail.

Once they were just outside the Stade, he threw her onto the ground, and Sartes landed beside her. A few onlookers formed a half-circle around her, gawking, as if hungry for her blood to be spilt.

“Enter the Stade again,” the soldier snarled, “and you will be hanged.”

The soldiers, to her surprise, turned without another word and vanished back into the crowd.

“Ceres!” a deep voice yelled over the hum of the crowd.

Ceres looked up with relief to see Nesos and Rexus heading toward them. When Rexus threw his arms around her, she gasped. He pulled back, his eyes filled with concern.

“I’ll be okay,” she said.

As the throngs poured out of the Stade, Ceres and the others blended in and hurried off back into the streets, not wanting any more encounters. Walking toward Fountain Square, Ceres replayed in her mind all that had happened, still reeling. She noticed her brothers’ sideways glances, and wondered

what they were thinking. Had they witnessed her powers? Likely not. The omnicat had been too close. Yet at the same time they glanced at her with a new sense of respect. She wanted more than anything to tell them what had happened. Yet she knew she could not. She was not even sure herself.

There was so much unsaid between them, yet now, amidst this thick crowd, was not the time to say it. They needed to get home, and safe, first.

The streets became far less crowded the further away they traveled from the Stade. Walking next to her, Rexus took one of her hands and interlaced fingers with her.

"I'm proud of you," he said. "You saved your brother's life. I'm not sure how many sisters would do that."

He smiled, his eyes filled with compassion.

"Those wounds look deep," he remarked, glancing at her back.

"I'll be fine," she muttered.

It was a lie. She wasn't at all certain she would be fine, or that she could even make it back home. She felt quite dizzy from the blood loss, and it didn't help that her stomach rumbled, or that the sun was harassing her back, causing her to sweat bullets.

Finally, they reached Fountain Square. As soon as they walked by the booths, a merchant trailed after them, offering a large basket of food for half price.

Sartes grinned from ear to ear – which she thought was rather strange – and then he held up a copper coin with his healthy arm.

"I think I owe you some food," he said.

Ceres gasped in shock. "Where did you get that?"

"That rich girl in the golden carriage tossed out two coins, not one, but everyone was so focused on the fight between the men that they didn't even notice," Sartes replied, his smile still very much intact.

Ceres grew angry and prepared to confiscate the coin from Sartes and throw it. That was blood money, after all. They didn't need anything from rich people.

As she reached to grab it, suddenly, an old woman appeared and blocked her path.

"You!" she said, pointing at Ceres, her voice so loud Ceres felt as if it vibrated straight through her.

The woman's complexion was smooth, yet seemingly transparent, and her perfectly arched lips were tinted green. Acorns and mosses adorned her long, thick, black hair, and her brown eyes matched her long brown dress. She was beautiful to behold, Ceres thought, so much so that she became mesmerized for a moment.

Ceres blinked back, stunned, certain she had never met this woman before.

"How do you know my name?"

Her eyes locked with the woman's as she took a few steps toward her, and Ceres noticed the woman smelled heavily of myrrh.

"Vein of the stars," she said, her voice eerie.

When the woman lifted her arm in a graceful gesture, Ceres saw that a triquetra was branded on the inside of her wrist. A witch. Based on the scent of the gods, perhaps a fortune-telling one.

The woman took Ceres's rose gold hair in her hand and smelled it.

"You are no stranger to the sword," she said. "You are no stranger to the throne. Your destiny is very great, indeed. Mighty will the change be."

The woman suddenly turned and hurried away, disappearing behind her booth, and Ceres stood there, numb. She felt the woman's words penetrate her very soul. She felt that they had been more than an observation; they were a prophecy. *Mighty. Change. Throne. Destiny.* These were words she had never associated with herself before.

Could they be true? Or were they just the words of a madwoman?

Ceres looked over and saw Sartes holding a basket of food, his mouth already stuffed with more than enough bread. He held it out for her. She saw the baked good, fruits, and vegetables, and it was almost enough to break her resolve. Normally, she would have devoured it.

Yet now, for some reason, she had lost her appetite.

There was a future before her.

A destiny.

*

The walk home had taken almost an hour longer than usual, and they had all remained silent the entire way, each lost in their own thoughts. Ceres could only wonder what the people she loved most in the world thought of her. She hardly knew what to think of herself.

She looked up and saw her humble home, and she was surprised she had made it all the way, given how her head and back ached.

The others had parted with her some time ago, to run an errand for her father, and Ceres stepped alone across the creaky threshold, bracing herself, hoping she did not run into her mother.

She entered a bath of heat. She made her way over to the small vial of cleaning alcohol her mother had stored under her bed and uncorked it, careful not to use so much that it went noticed. Bracing herself for the sting, she pried her shirt and poured it down her back.

Ceres cried out from the pain, clenching her fist and leaning her head against the wall, feeling a thousand stings from the omnicat's claws. It felt as if this wound would never heal.

The door slammed open and Ceres flinched. She was relieved to see it was only Sartes.

"Father needs to see you, Ceres," he said.

Ceres noticed his eyes were slightly red.

"How's your arm?" she asked, assuming he was crying from the pain of his injured arm.

"It's not broken. Just sprained." He stepped closer and his face turned serious. "Thank you for saving me today."

She offered him a smile. "How could I be anywhere else?" she said.

He smiled.

"Go see Father now," he said. "I'll burn your dress and the cloth."

She didn't know how she'd be able to explain to her mother how her dress had suddenly vanished, but the hand-me-down definitely needed to be burned. If her mother found it in its current condition – bloodied and riddled with holes – there'd be no saying how severe her punishment would be.

Ceres left and walked down the downtrodden grass path toward the shed behind the house. There was one tree left on their humble lot – the others had been chopped into firewood and burned in the hearth to heat the house during cold winter nights – and its branches hovered over the house like a protecting energy. Every time Ceres saw it, it reminded her of her grandmother, who passed away the year before last. Her grandmother had been the one who had planted the tree when she was a child. It was her temple, in a way. And her father's too. When life was too much to handle, they would lie underneath the stars and open their hearts to Nana as if she were still alive.

Ceres entered the shed and greeted her father with a smile. To her surprise, she noticed that most of his tools had been cleared from the worktable, and that no swords waited by the hearth to be forged. She couldn't ever remember seeing the floor swept this clean, or the walls and ceiling so lacking in tools.

Her father's blue eyes lit up, the way they always did when he saw her.

"Ceres," he said, rising.

This past year, his dark hair had turned much grayer, his short beard, too, and the bags under his loving eyes had doubled in size. In the past, he had been large in stature and almost as muscular as Nesos; yet recently, Ceres noticed, he had lost weight and his formerly perfect posture was sagging.

He joined her at the door and placed a calloused hand to the small of her back.

“Walk with me.”

Her chest tightened a little. When he wanted to talk *and* walk, that meant he was about to share something significant.

Side by side, they meandered to the back of the shed and into the small field. Dark clouds loomed in the near distance, sending in gusts of warm, temperamental wind. She hoped they would produce the rain needed to recover from this seemingly never-ending drought, yet as before, they probably held just empty promises of showers.

The earth crunched beneath her feet as she walked, the soil dry, the plants yellow, brown, and dead. This patch of land behind their subdivision was King Claudius’s, yet it hadn’t been sowed for years.

They crested a hill and stopped, looking across the field. Her father remained silent, his hands clasped behind his back as he looked up into the sky. It was unlike him, and her dread deepened.

Then he spoke, seeming to select his words with care.

“Sometimes we don’t have the luxury of choosing our paths,” he said. “We must sacrifice all that we want for our loved ones. Even ourselves, if needed.”

He sighed, and in the long silence, interrupted only by the wind, Ceres’s heart pounded, wondering where he was going with this.

“What I wouldn’t give to hold onto your childhood forever,” he added, peering into the heavens, his face twisted in pain before it relaxed again.

“What’s wrong?” Ceres asked, placing a hand on his arm.

“I must leave for a while,” he said.

She felt as if she couldn’t take a breath.

“Leave?”

He turned and looked her in the eyes.

“As you know, the winter and spring were particularly hard this year. The past few years of drought have been difficult. We haven’t made enough money to get through the next winter, and if I don’t go, our family will starve to death. I have been commissioned by another king to be his head bladesmith. It will be good money.”

“You will take me with you, right?” Ceres said, a frantic tone in her voice.

He shook his head grimly.

“You must stay here and help your mother and brothers.”

The thought sent a wave of horror through her.

“You can’t leave me here with Mother,” she said. “You wouldn’t.”

“I have spoken to her, and she will take care of you. She will be kind.”

Ceres stomped her foot in the earth, the dust rising.

“No!”

Tears burst from her eyes and tumbled down her cheeks.

He took a small step toward her.

“Listen to me very carefully, Ceres. The palace still needs swords delivered from time to time. I have put in a good word for you, and if you make swords the way I have taught you, you could make a little money of your own.”

Making her own money might possibly allow her more freedom. She had found her small, dainty hands had come in handy when carving intricate designs and inscriptions on the blades and hilts. Her father’s hands were broad, his fingers thick and stubby, and few others had the skill she had.

Even so, she shook her head.

"I don't want to be a smith," she said.

"It runs in your blood, Ceres. And you have a gift for it."

She shook her head, adamant.

"I want to *wield* weapons," she said, "not *make* them."

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she regretted speaking them.

Her father furrowed his brow.

"You wish to be a warrior? A combatlord?"

He shook his head.

"One day it may be allowed for women to fight," she said. "You know I have practiced."

His eyebrows crinkled in worry.

"No," he commanded, firmly. "That is not your path."

Her heart sank. She felt as if her hopes and dreams of becoming a warrior were dissipating with his words. She knew he wasn't trying to be cruel – he was never cruel. It was just reality. And for them to stay alive, she would have to sacrifice her part, too.

She looked into the distance as the sky lit with a jolt of lightning. Three seconds later, thunder rumbled through the heavens.

Had she not realized how dire their circumstances were? She always assumed they would pull through together as a family, but this changed everything. Now she wouldn't have Father to hold onto, and there would be no person to stand as a shield between her and Mother.

One tear after another dropped onto the desolate earth as she remained immovable where she stood. Should she give up her dreams and follow her father's advice?

He pulled something out from behind his back, and her eyes widened to see a sword in his hand. He stepped closer, and she could see the details of the weapon.

It was awe-inspiring. The hilt was of pure gold, engraved with a serpent. The blade was two-edged and looked to be of the finest steel. Though the workmanship was foreign to Ceres, she could immediately tell it was of the finest quality. On the blade itself there was an inscription.

When heart and sword meet, there shall be the victory

She gasped, staring at it in awe.

"Did you forge that?" she asked, her eyes glued to the sword.

He nodded.

"After the manner of the northerners," he replied. "I have labored on it for three years. Indeed, this blade alone could feed our family for an entire year."

She looked at him.

"Then why not sell it?"

He shook his head firmly.

"It wasn't made for that purpose."

He stepped closer, and to her surprise, he held it out before him.

"It was made for you."

Ceres raised a hand to her mouth and let out a moan.

"Me?" she asked, stunned.

He smiled wide.

"Did you really think I forgot your eighteenth birthday?" he replied.

She felt tears flood her eyes. She had never been more touched.

But then she thought about what he had said earlier, about not wanting her to fight, and she felt confused.

"And yet," she replied, "you said I must not train."

“I don’t want you to die,” he explained. “But I see where your heart is. And that, I cannot control.”

He reached a hand underneath her chin and lifted her head until their eyes met.

“I am proud of you for it.”

He handed her the sword, and when she felt the cool metal against her palm, she became one with it. The weight was perfect for her, and the hilt felt like it had been molded to her hand.

All the hope that had died earlier now reawakened in her chest.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he warned. “Hide it where she cannot find it, or she will sell it.”

Ceres nodded.

“How long will you be gone?”

“I will try to be back for a visit before the first snowfall.”

“That’s months away!” she said, taking a step back.

“It is what I must do to – ”

“No. Sell the sword. Stay!”

He placed a hand on her cheek.

“Selling this sword might help us for this season. And perhaps next. But then what?” He shook his head. “No. We need a long-term solution.”

Long term? Suddenly, she realized his new job wasn’t just going to be for a few months. It might be years.

Her despondency deepened.

He stepped forward, as if sensing it, and hugged her.

She felt herself begin to cry in his arms.

“I will miss you, Ceres,” he said, over her shoulder. “You are different than all the others. Every day I will look up into the heavens and know you are beneath the same stars. Will you do the same?”

At first she wanted to yell at him, to say: how dare you leave me here alone.

But she felt it in her heart that he couldn’t stay, and she didn’t want to make it harder on him than it already was.

A tear rolled down her face. She sniffled and nodded her head.

“I will stand beneath our tree every night,” she said.

He kissed her on the forehead and wrapped tender arms around her. The wounds on her back felt like knives, but she gritted her teeth and remained silent.

“I love you, Ceres.”

She wanted to respond, and yet she couldn’t get herself to say anything – her words were stuck in her throat.

He fetched his horse from the stable, and Ceres helped him load it with food, tools, and supplies. He embraced her one last time, and she thought her chest might burst from sadness. Yet still, she couldn’t utter a single word.

He mounted the horse, and nodded before signaling to the animal to move.

Ceres waved as he rode away, and she watched with unwavering attention until he vanished behind the distant hill. The only true love she had ever known came from that man. And now he was gone.

Rain started to descend from the heavens, and it prickled against her face.

“Father!” she screamed as loudly as she could. “Father, I love you!”

She fell to her knees and buried her hands in her face, sobbing.

Life, she knew, would never be the same again.

CHAPTER THREE

With aching feet and burning lungs, Ceres climbed the steep hill as swiftly as she could without spilling a drop of water from either bucket by her sides. Normally she would pause for a break, but her mother had threatened no breakfast unless she was back by sunrise – and no breakfast meant she wouldn't eat until dinner. She didn't mind the pain, anyway – it, at least, allowed her to take her mind off her father, and the miserable new state of things since he had left.

The sun was just now cresting the Alva Mountains in the distance, painting the scattered clouds above golden-pink, and soft wind sighed through the tall, yellow grass on either side of the road. Ceres drew the fresh morning air in through her nose and willed herself faster. Her mother wouldn't find it an acceptable excuse that their regular well had dried up, or that there was a long line at the other one a half a mile away. Indeed, she did not stop until she reached the top of the hill – and once she did, she stopped in her tracks, stunned at the sight before her.

There, in the distance, was her house – and before it sat a bronze wagon. Her mother stood before it, conversing with a man who was so overweight, Ceres thought she had never seen anyone even half his size. He wore a burgundy linen tunic and a red silk hat, and his long beard was bushy and gray. She squinted, trying to understand. Was he a merchant?

Her mother was wearing her best dress, a green linen floor-length gown she had purchased years ago with money that was supposed to be used to buy Ceres new shoes. None of this made any sense.

Hesitantly, Ceres started down the hill. She kept her eyes trained on them, and when she saw the old man hand her mother a heavy leather pouch, saw her mother's emaciated face light up, she grew even more curious. Had their misfortune turned? Would Father be able to return home? The thoughts made her chest lighten a little, although she wouldn't allow herself to feel any excitement until she learned the details.

When Ceres neared their house, her mother turned and smiled at her warmly – and immediately Ceres felt a knot of worry in her stomach. The last time her mother had smiled at her like that – teeth gleaming, eyes bright – Ceres had received a flogging.

"Darling daughter," her mother said in an overly sweet tone, opening her arms toward her with a grin that made Ceres's blood curdle.

"*This* is the girl?" the old man said with an eager smile, his dark, beady eyes widening when he looked at Ceres.

Now up close, Ceres could see every wrinkle on the obese man's skin. His broad flat nose seemed to overtake his entire face, and when he took off his hat, his sweaty bald head glowed in the sunlight.

Her mother waltzed over to Ceres, took the buckets from her, and set them on the singed grass. That gesture alone confirmed to Ceres that something was severely wrong. She began to feel a panicky sensation rise in her chest.

"Meet my pride and joy, my only daughter, Ceres," her mother said, pretending to wipe a tear away from her eye when there was none. "Ceres, this is Lord Blaku. Please show your respects to your new master."

A jolt of fear stabbed Ceres through the chest. She sucked in a sudden breath. Ceres looked at her mother, and with her back to Lord Blaku, her mother gave her a smile that was as evil as she had ever seen.

"*Master?*" Ceres asked.

"To save our family from financial ruin and public embarrassment, the benevolent Lord Blaku offered your father and me a generous deal: a sack of gold in exchange for you."

"What?" Ceres gasped, feeling herself sinking into the earth.

“Now, be the good girl I know you are and show your respects,” her mother said, shooting Ceres a warning glance.

“I will not,” Ceres said, taking a step back as she puffed her chest up, feeling silly for not having immediately realized the man was a slaver, and that the transaction was for her life.

“Father would never sell me,” she added through clenched teeth, her horror and indignation rising.

Her mother scowled and grabbed her by the arm, her fingernails digging into Ceres’s skin.

“If you behave, this man might take you as his wife, and for you, that is a very lucky thing,” she muttered.

Lord Blaku licked his thin crusty lips as his puffy eyes greedily wandered up and down Ceres’s body. How could her mother do this to her? She knew her mother didn’t love her as much as her brothers – but this?

“Marita,” he said in a nasally voice. “You told me your daughter was fair, but you neglected to tell me what an utterly magnificent creature she is. Dare I say, I have yet to see a woman with lips as succulent as hers, and with eyes as passionate, and with a body as firm and exquisite.”

Ceres’s mother placed a hand over her heart with a sigh, and Ceres felt like she might just vomit right here. She clenched her hands into fists as she snapped her arm away from her mother’s grasp.

“Perhaps I should have asked for more, if she pleases you so much,” Ceres’s mother said, her eyes lowering in despondency. “She is, after all, our only beloved girl.”

“I am willing to pay good money for such a beauty. Will another five gold pieces suffice?” he asked.

“How generous of you,” her mother replied.

Lord Blaku ambled over to his wagon to fetch more gold.

“Father will never agree to this,” Ceres sneered.

Ceres’s mother took a threatening step toward her.

“Oh, but it was your father’s idea,” her mother snapped, with her eyebrows raised halfway up her forehead. Ceres knew she was lying now – whenever she did that, she was lying.

“Do you actually think your father loves you more than he loves me?” her mother asked.

Ceres blinked, wondering what that would have to do with anything.

“I could never love someone who thinks she is better than me,” she added.

“You never loved me?” Ceres asked, her anger morphing into hopelessness.

With the gold in hand, Lord Blaku waddled over to Ceres’s mother and handed it to her.

“Your daughter is worth every piece,” he said. “She will be a good wife and bear me many sons.”

Ceres bit the inside of her lips and shook her head over and over again.

“Lord Blaku will come for you in the morning, so go inside and pack your belongings,” Ceres’s mother said.

“I won’t!” Ceres screamed.

“That was always your problem, girl. You only ever think of yourself. This gold,” her mother said, jingling the purse in front of Ceres’s face, “will keep your brothers alive. It will keep our family intact, allowing us to remain in our home and make repairs. Did you fail to think about that?”

For a split second, Ceres thought maybe she was being selfish, but then she realized her mother was playing mind games again, using Ceres’s love for her brothers against her.

“Do not worry,” Ceres’s mother said, turning toward Lord Blaku. “Ceres will comply. All you need to do is be firm with her, and she becomes as meek as a lamb.”

Never. Never would she be that man’s wife or anyone’s property. And never would she let her mother or anyone exchange her life for fifty-five pieces of gold.

“I will never go with this slaver,” Ceres snapped, shooting him a look of disgust.

“Ungrateful child!” Ceres’s mother yelled. “If you do not do as I say, I will beat you so severely you will never walk again. Now get inside!”

The thought of being beaten by her mother brought back awful, visceral memories; she was taken back to that dreadful moment at five years old when her mother had beaten her until everything had gone black. The wounds from that beating and many others healed – yet the wounds in Ceres's heart had never stopped bleeding. And now that she knew for sure that her mother didn't love her, and never had, her heart split wide open for good.

Before she could respond, Ceres's mother stepped forward and slapped her across the face so hard her ear began ringing.

At first, Ceres was stunned by the sudden assault, and she almost backed down. But then something snapped inside her. She would not allow herself to cower as she always did.

Ceres smacked her mother back, across the cheek, so hard that she tumbled to the ground, gasping in horror.

Red-faced, her mother climbed to her feet, grabbed Ceres by the shoulder and hair, and knelt Ceres in the stomach. When Ceres stooped forward in agony, her mother jabbed her knee into Ceres's face, causing her to fall to the ground.

The slaver stood and watched, his eyes wide, chuckling, clearly taking delight in the fight.

Still coughing and gasping for air from the assault, Ceres staggered to her feet. Screaming, she flung herself toward her mother, driving her to the ground.

This ends today, was all Ceres could think. All the years of never being loved, of being treated with disdain, fueled her rage. Ceres smashed closed fists into her mother's face again and again as tears of fury rolled down her cheeks, sobs uncontrollably spilling out of her lips.

Finally, her mother went limp.

Ceres's shoulders shook with each cry, her insides wrung inside out. Blurred by tears, she looked up at the slaver with an even more intense hatred.

"You will make a good one," Lord Blaku said with a guileful grin, as he picked up the bag of gold from the ground and attached it to his leather belt.

Before she could react, suddenly his hands were upon her. He grabbed Ceres and climbed into the carriage, tossing her into the back in one quick motion, as if she were a bag of potatoes. His massive bulk and strength was too much for her to resist. Holding her wrist with one arm and taking hold of a chain with the other, he said, "I'm not stupid enough to think you would still be here in morning."

She glanced at the house that had been her home for eighteen years, and her eyes filled with tears as she thought of her brothers and her father. But she had to make a choice if she was to save herself, before the chain was around her ankle.

So in one quick motion, she mustered all of her strength and snatched her arm out of the slaver's grip, lifted her leg, and kicked him in the face as hard as she could. He fell backwards, out of the carriage, and tumbled onto the ground.

She jumped from the wagon and ran as fast as she could down the dirt road, away from the woman she vowed to never call mother again, away from everything she had ever known and loved.

CHAPTER FOUR

Surrounded by the royal family, Thanos tried hard to keep a pleasant expression on his face as he gripped the gold wine goblet – yet he could not. He hated being here. He hated these people, his family. And he hated attending royal gatherings – especially the ones following the Killings. He knew how the people lived, how poor they were, and he felt how senseless and unjust all this pomp and haughtiness really was. He would give anything to be far away from here.

Standing with his cousins Lucious, Aria, and Varius, Thanos didn't make the least bit of effort to engage in their petty conversation. Instead, he watched the imperial guests meander about in the palace gardens, wearing their togas and stolas, presenting fake grins and spewing false niceties. A few of his cousins were throwing food at each other as they ran across the manicured lawn and between tables stocked with food and wine. Others were reenacting their favorite scenes from the Killings, laughing at and mocking those who had lost their lives today.

Hundreds of people, Thanos thought, and not one was honorable.

"Next month, I will purchase three combatlords," Lucious, the eldest, said in a boisterous tone as he patted drops of sweat from his brow with a silk handkerchief. "Stefanus wasn't worth half of what I paid for him, and if he weren't dead already, I would have run a sword through him myself for having fought like a girl in the first round."

Aria and Varius laughed, but Thanos didn't find his comment amusing. Whether they considered the Killings a game or not, they should respect the brave and the dead.

"Well, did you see Brennius?" Aria asked, her large blue eyes widening. "I actually considered buying him, but he gave me this conceited look when I watched him rehearse. Can you believe it?" she added, as she rolled her eyes and huffed.

"And he stinks like a skunk," Lucious added.

Everyone except for Thanos laughed again.

"None of us would have picked him," Varius said. "Though he lasted longer than expected, his form was horrible."

Thanos couldn't keep quiet another second.

"Brennius had the best form in the entire arena," he interjected. "Don't talk about the art of combat as if you know anything about it."

The cousins grew quiet, and Aria's eyes became large as saucers as she looked toward the ground. Varius puffed out his chest and crossed his arms, scowling. He stepped closer to Thanos as if to challenge him, and the air thickened with tension.

"Well, never mind those self-important combatlords," Aria said, stepping between them, defusing the situation. She waved for the boys to gather around closer, and then she whispered, "I have heard an outlandish rumor. A little bee told me the king wants to have someone of royal birth compete in the Killings."

They all exchanged an uncomfortable look as they fell silent.

"Perhaps," Lucious said. "It won't be me, though. I'm not willing to risk my life for a stupid game."

Thanos knew he could beat out most combatlords, but killing another human wasn't something he wanted to do.

"You're just scared of dying," Aria said.

"I am not," Lucious retorted. "You take that back!"

Thanos's patience was spent. He walked away.

Thanos watched his distant cousin Stephanica wander about as if she were looking for someone – probably him. A few weeks back, the Queen had said he was fated to be with Stephanica, but Thanos felt otherwise. Stephanica was as spoiled as the rest of the cousins and he'd rather give up his name,

his inheritance, and even his sword to not have to marry her. She was beautiful to behold, true – her hair golden, her skin milky white, her lips blood-red – but if he had to listen to her talk about how life was so unfair one more time, he thought he might cut his ears off.

He scurried to the outskirts of the garden toward the rose bushes, avoiding eye contact with any of the attendees. But just as he rounded the corner, Stephania stepped in front of him, her brown eyes lighting up.

“Good evening, Thanos,” she said with a scintillating smile that would have most of the boys here drooling after her. Everyone but Thanos.

“Good evening to you, too,” Thanos said and skirted around her, continuing to walk.

She lifted up her stola and trailed after him like a pesky mosquito.

“Don’t you find it so unfair how – ” she began.

“I’m busy,” Thanos snapped in a tone harsher than he intended, causing her to gasp. He then turned toward her. “I’m sorry...I’m just tired of all these parties.”

“Perhaps you would like to stroll the gardens with me?” Stephania said, her right eyebrow peaking as she stepped closer.

That was the absolute last thing he wanted.

“Listen,” he said, “I know the queen and your mother have it in their minds that we somehow belong together, but – ”

“Thanos!” he heard behind him.

Thanos turned to see the king’s messenger.

“The king would like you to join him in the gazebo straightaway,” he said. “And you too, my lady.”

“Might I inquire why?” Thanos asked.

“There is much to discuss,” the messenger said.

Not having had regular conversations with the king in the past, Thanos wondered what that might entail.

“Of course,” Thanos said.

To his great dismay, a beaming Stephania hooked her arm around his, and together they followed the messenger over to the gazebo.

When Thanos noticed several of the king’s advisors and even the crown prince already sitting on benches and chairs, he found it odd that he had been invited, too. He would hardly have anything of value to offer in their conversation, as his opinions about how the Empire was ruled differed greatly from those of everyone here. The best thing he could do, he thought to himself, was to keep his mouth shut.

“What a lovely couple you make,” the queen said with a warm smile as they entered.

Thanos pinched his lips shut and offered Stephania to sit down next to him.

Once everyone had settled, the king rose to his feet and the gathering quieted down. His uncle wore a knee-length toga, but where the others were white, red, and blue, his was purple, a color reserved only for the king. Around his balding temple was a golden wreath, and his cheeks and eyes still drooped even though he was smiling.

“The masses grow unruly,” he said, his voice grave, slow. He slowly scanned all the faces with the authority of a king. “The time is past due to remind them who is king and enact harsher rules. From this day forward, I shall double tithes on all property and food.”

There came a surprised murmur, followed by nods of approval.

“An excellent choice, your grace,” said one of his advisors.

Thanos couldn’t believe his ears. Double the people’s taxes? Having mingled with commoners, he knew that the taxes required were already beyond what most commoners could afford. He had seen mothers mourn the loss of their children who died of starvation. As recently as yesterday, he had offered food to a homeless four-year-old girl whose every bone was visible beneath her skin.

Thanos had to look away or he would surely have to speak up against this insanity.

“And finally,” the king said, “from now on, to counterbalance the underground revolution that is fomenting, the firstborn son in every family will become a servant in the king’s army.”

One after another, the small crowd commended the king for his wise decision.

Finally, though, Thanos felt the king turn to him.

“Thanos,” the king finally said. “You have remained silent. Speak!”

Silence fell on the gazebo, as all eyes were on Thanos. He stood. He knew he had to speak up, for the emaciated girl, for the grieving mothers, for the voiceless whose lives seemed not to matter. He needed to represent them, because if he did not, no one would.

“Harsher rules will not crush the rebellion,” he said, his heart thumping in his chest. “It will only embolden it. Instilling fear into the citizens and denying them freedom will do nothing but compel them to rise against us and join the revolution.”

A few people laughed, while others talked amongst themselves. Stephania took his hand and tried to hush him, but he snatched it away.

“A great king uses love, as well as fear, to rule his subordinates,” Thanos said.

The king gave the queen an uneasy glance. He stood up, and then walked over to Thanos.

“Thanos, you are a brave young man for speaking up,” he said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “However, was your younger brother not murdered in cold blood by these same people, those who governed themselves, as you say?”

Thanos saw red. How dare his uncle bring up his brother’s death so flippantly? For years, Thanos had fallen asleep to his grief as he mourned the loss of his brother.

“Those who murdered my brother didn’t have enough food for themselves,” Thanos said. “A desperate man will seek desperate measures.”

“Do you question the king’s wisdom?” the queen asked.

Thanos couldn’t believe no one else was speaking up against this. Did they see not see how unjust it was? Did they not realize these new laws would breathe fire into the rebellion?

“Not for a moment will you be able to fool the people into believing you want anything other than their suffering and your profiting for yourselves,” Thanos said.

There came a gasp of disapproval amidst the group.

“You speak harsh words, nephew,” the king said, looking him in the eyes. “I would almost believe you mean to join the rebellion.”

“Or perhaps he is already a part of it?” the queen said, her eyebrows rising.

“I am not,” Thanos barked.

The air in the gazebo grew hotter, and Thanos realized if he wasn’t careful, he might be accused of treason – a crime punishable by death without trial.

Stephania stood up and took Thanos’s hand in hers – yet, agitated by her timing, he snapped his hand away.

Stephania’s expression fell, and she looked down.

“Perhaps in time you will see the weaknesses of your beliefs,” the king said to Thanos. “For now, our ruling will stand and shall be implemented immediately.”

“Good,” the queen said with a sudden smile. “Now, let us move onto the second item on our agenda. Thanos, as a young man of nineteen, we, your imperial sovereigns, have chosen a wife for you. We have decided you and Stephania are to be wed.”

Thanos glanced over at Stephania, whose eyes were glazed with tears, an expression of worry painting her face. He felt aghast. How could they demand this of him?

“I cannot marry her,” Thanos whispered, a knot forming in his belly.

Murmurs went through the crowd, and the queen shot to her feet so quickly that her chair fell backward with a crack.

“Thanos!” she yelled, hands clenched by her sides. “How dare you defy the king? You will marry Stephania whether or not you want to.”

Thanos looked at Stephania with saddened eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Do you imagine you are too good for me?” she asked, her bottom lip trembling.

He took a step toward Stephania to comfort her what little he could, but before he reached her, she ran out of the gazebo, hands covering her face as she cried.

The king stood, clearly angered.

“Deny her, son”, he said, his voice suddenly cold and hard, thundering through the gazebo, “and it will be the dungeon for you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Ceres sprinted, weaving through city streets, until she felt her legs would no longer hold her, until her lungs burned so much they might burst, and until she knew with absolute certainty the slaver would never find her.

Finally, she collapsed on the ground in a back alley amongst garbage and rats, arms wrapped around her legs, tears streaming down her hot cheeks. With her father away and her mother wanting to sell her, she had no one. If she remained on the streets and slept in the alleys, she would eventually die of starvation or freeze to death when winter came. Perhaps that would be best.

For hours she sat and cried, her eyes puffy, her mind muddled with despair. Where would she go now? How would she make money to survive?

The day had grown long when finally, she resolved to return home, sneak into the shed, take the few swords that were left, and sell them to the palace. They were expecting her today anyway. That way, she would have money for a few days at least until she could come up with a better plan.

She would also pick up the sword her father had given her and that she had hidden beneath the floorboards in the shed. But she wouldn't sell that, no. Not until she was staring death in the face would she give up her father's gift.

She jogged home, carefully watching for any familiar faces or for the slaver's wagon as she went. When she reached the last hill, she slunk behind the row of houses and into the field, tiptoeing across the parched earth, her eyes scanning for her mother.

A pang of guilt arose when she remembered how she had beaten her mother. She never wanted to hurt her, not even after how cruel her mother had been. Not even with her heart broken and unmendable.

Arriving at the back of their shed, she peeked in through a crack in the wall. Seeing it was empty, she stepped inside the dim shack and gathered the swords. But just as she was about to lift the floorboard where she had hidden the sword, she heard voices coming from outside.

When she stood up and glanced through a small hole in the wall, to her horror, she saw her mother and Sartes walking toward the shed. Her mother had a black eye and a bruise on her cheek, and now seeing her mother alive and well, it almost made Ceres smile knowing she had put it there. All the anger welled up again as she thought about how her mother wanted to sell her.

"If I catch you sneaking any food out to Ceres, I will flog you, do you understand?" her mother snapped as she and Sartes strode by her grandmother's tree.

When Sartes didn't answer, her mother slapped him across the face.

"Do you understand, boy?" she said.

"Yes," Sartes said, looking down, a tear in his eye.

"And if you ever see her, bring her home so I can give her a licking she will never forget."

They began walking toward the shed again, and Ceres's heart was suddenly thumping wildly. She gripped the swords and darted toward the back door as quickly and as quietly as she could. Just as she exited, the front door swung open, and she leaned against the outer wall and listened, the wounds from the omnicat's claws stinging her back.

"Who goes there?" her mother said.

Ceres held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I know you're there," her mother said and waited. "Sartes, go check the back door. It's ajar."

Ceres clenched the swords to her chest. She heard Sartes's footsteps as he walked toward her, and then the door opened with a creak.

Sartes's eyes widened when he saw her, and he gasped.

"Is there anyone there?" her mother asked.

"Um... no," Sartes said, his eyes filling with tears as they connected with Ceres's.

Ceres mouthed a “thank you,” and Sartes gestured with his hand for her to leave.

She nodded, and with a heavy heart, she stole toward the field as the back door to the shed slammed shut. She would come back for her sword later.

*

Ceres stopped at the palace gates sweating, famished, and exhausted, swords in hand. The Empire soldiers standing guard, clearly recognizing her as the girl who delivered her father’s swords, let her pass without questioning her.

She hurried through the cobblestone courtyard and then turned for the blacksmith’s stone cottage behind one of the four towers. She entered.

Standing by the anvil in front of the crackling furnace, the blacksmith hammered away at a glowing blade, the leather apron protecting his clothing from the flying sparks. The concerned expression on his face made Ceres wonder what was wrong. A jovial middle-aged man full of energy, he was rarely worried.

His bald, sweaty head greeted her before he noticed she had entered.

“Good morrow,” he said when he saw her, nodding for her to place the swords on the worktable.

She strode across the hot smoky room and set them down, the metal rattling against a surface of burnt, tattered wood.

He shook his head, clearly troubled.

“What is it?” she asked.

He looked up, concern in his eyes.

“Of all the days to fall ill,” he murmured.

“Bartholomew?” she asked, seeing that the young weapon-keeper of the combatlords wasn’t here as he usually was, frantically preparing the last few weapons before sparring practice.

The blacksmith stopped hammering and looked up with a vexed expression, his bushy eyebrows crinkling.

He shook his head.

“And on sparring day, of all days,” he said. “And not just any sparring day.” He stuffed the blade into the glowing coals in the furnace and wiped his dripping brow with the sleeve of his tunic. “Today, the royals will spar with the combatlords. The king has hand-picked twelve royals to train for the Killings. Three will go on to participate.”

She understood his worry. It was his responsibility to provide the weapon-keepers, and if he didn’t, his job was on the line. Hundreds of blacksmiths would be eager to take his position.

“The king won’t be happy if we are one weapon-keeper short,” she said.

He leaned his hands on his thick thighs and shook his head. Just then, two Empire soldiers entered.

“We are here to retrieve the weapons,” one said, scowling toward Ceres.

Even though it wasn’t forbidden, she knew it was frowned upon for girls to work in weaponry – a man’s field. Yet she had grown accustomed to snide remarks and hateful glares most every time she made deliveries to the palace.

The blacksmith stood up and walked over to three wooden buckets filled with weapons, all ready for the sparring match.

“You will find here the remainder of the weapons the king requested for today,” the blacksmith said to the Empire soldiers.

“And the weapon-keeper?” the Empire soldier demanded.

Just as the blacksmith opened his mouth to speak, Ceres had an idea.

“It is me,” she said, excitement rising in her chest. “I am the stand-in today and until Bartholomew returns.”

The Empire soldiers looked at her for a moment, startled.

Ceres pinched her lips together and took a step forward.

“I have been working with my father and with the palace my entire life, crafting swords, shields, and all manner of weapons,” she said.

She didn’t know where her courage came from, but she stood tall and stared the soldiers in the eye.

“Ceres...” the blacksmith said, giving her a look of pity.

“Try me,” she said, strengthening her resolve, wanting them to test her abilities. “There isn’t anyone who can take Bartholomew’s place but me. And if you lack a weapon-keeper today, wouldn’t that make the king rather upset?”

She wasn’t certain, but she figured the Empire soldiers and the blacksmith would do almost anything to keep the king happy. Especially today.

The Empire soldiers looked at the blacksmith, and the blacksmith back at them. The blacksmith thought for a moment. And then another. Finally, he nodded. He laid a plethora of weapons onto the table, after which he gestured to her to proceed.

“Show us, then, Ceres,” the blacksmith said, a twinkle in his eye. “Knowing your father, he probably taught you everything you are not supposed to know.”

“And more,” Ceres said, smiling inside.

She went over each weapon, explaining in great detail their uses and advantages, how one might be better in certain types of battles than others.

When she was finished, the Empire soldiers looked to the blacksmith.

“I suppose it is better to have a girl weapon-keeper than no weapon-keeper,” the blacksmith said. “Let us go and speak to the king. Perhaps he will allow it, seeing there is no other.”

Ceres was so excited she almost threw her arms around the blacksmith as he winked at her. The soldiers still seemed reluctant, but with no other apparent option, they agreed to take her along.

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