

CHAPTER ONE

House to Stadium

I've never seen the sun, they tell me it's out there though. I've seen its beams penetrating through the skylight in the roof of the dome. Its beams gleam on the glass spires and pinnacles in the Origin at the centre of the sanctuary, casting shadows out into the radii beyond. They say it is a giant ball of gas thousands of stadia away. It's one of the many things outside the dome that I long to see if only we could go out there one day, but it's just not safe out there with all the Mutos, wild animals, and radiation.

I like the light, I can't explain why but I hate to see it shining through my window at this time of the morning. It's beam outlines the residence towers of my sector and the Origin beyond. It's not

what I see that provokes my irritation, the view is actually quite beautiful, but it means I have to get out of bed. Normally it takes a huge effort to lift my self off the thin mattress of my bed but not today, I've been awake for hours. Today is the day that I join the Agoge, the mighty army of Katan.

The hammer on the round-faced metal alarm clock rings repeatedly striking the bells. I lunge for it and, in my excitement, it falls to the floor and stops. I throw myself out of bed, move across my small spartan cabin and over to the cupboard which contains my morning food ration, wheat biscuits again... I quickly eat three packs because I know I'll need the energy for today.

Throwing on one of my scarlet robes and sandals and slip out of my cabin, touching the ID chip in my wrist on the plate by my door. The corridor that greets me is the same as ever: dark, damp, and covered with the same russet brown wallpaper that I'm sure hasn't been replaced since the sanctuary was built. Damp has been gradually rising since I arrived and in places the bare concrete is showing the and the light closest to the lift has been flickering ever since I moved here five years ago.

Touching my chip to another plate, the elevator begins its climb to the forty second floor. The time seems to drag on forever before the steel doors slide open. I step inside to the stainless steel box and stare into the mirror. Looking back at me is a boy of about 170 cm with short dark hair and deep brown eyes. Despite the fact that as part of my daily training I spent two hours a day in the School Gym I still retain my slight built.

Staring into my stern reflection I visualise the events of today, as I have been for as long as I can remember, when the door opens and the lift is filled with the scent of jasmine as a fresh-faced girl a little shorter than me walks into the lift, her fiery red hair blown by the wind as she walks. I have known her since we were children; we lived next door to each other as we grew up and were inducted together into the Antartis clan as part of the same cohort when we were twelve. Of all in my residence she is the only one I have ever spoken to, she's one of the few people who makes living in this place tolerable.

I force a smile at her. She knows it's fake and just nods in acknowledgement. "Are you nervous

Xanthe?" I ask, even though I know the answer.

"No," she lies "and stop it with this Xanthe thing Cassius." She deliberately over-pronouncing each syllable of my name.

"Sorry Xan."

"Do you think you'll get into the Praetorians?"

"Yeah, it will be no problem." I respond.

"It's what we've been training for for such a long time. What is the point of joining the Agoge if you stay in the sanctuary the whole time? It's out there where the action is! It's out there where you can risk your life for the glory of Katan and for Emperor Laconicus." A warm feeling emanates from my chest in knowing that the our Supreme Leader of the lineage of Antartis the eternal who founded and built our great sanctuary, will be in attendance at the assessment today.

The lift reaches the ground floor and we step out of the darkened lobby and inhale the musty smell of the dome. I step out into the road watching my step as I pass around the many cracks and potholes passing between burnt out cars are strewn along the length of the street. I look around and take in the familiar surroundings, from either side of

the street are the residences, their monolithic shapes reaching high into the dome. The familiar rattle from the north of the street accompanies the arrival of an approaching tram. From the shadows a crowd surges forth clustering around the side of the tracks, awaiting the rusting hulk that approaches and grinds to a halt in front of us. The tram itself was once a marvel of technology; its micro fusion reactor could power it for decades with no need for refuelling. That was the one part that was still maintained, the rest was a wreck. Some of the carriages still contain seating but most had been destroyed. What little glass remained in the windows was in shards around the edge that sliced into the skin of anyone foolish enough to lean on them, and many of the walls and floors had rusted through. The worst trams in the fleet were missing all of the walls and ceiling and the passengers crowded on to the flat bed of the carriage.

Xan and I climb up into the carriage and I take my usual spot next to a shattered window as we are jerked backward by a sudden burst of speed and the carriage rapidly accelerates to its cruising speed causing a freezing wind to tear through the carriage

and all conversation is silenced. It would have been silent even if there were no wind; in Katan breath is considered valuable and should not be wasted on idle conversation. Many more sanctuaries and public buildings pass by as we travel clockwise along our radius. Each residence is identical, the countless windows representing one of the countless people living their life as we have done since before anyone can remember. I sense a great futility whenever I travel this route, but today is different. Today, I have the chance to make a difference, to become a glorious citizen of Katan, and to serve her and our Supreme Leader in glorious battle.

We are thrown to the side as the tram reaches the spur, the main access route between the origin and the gate, and take our place alongside three other trams, countless cars, and a few hover ships and motorcycles in their procession towards the origin. Most of the vehicles are electric or nuclear powered, but there are still some decrepit old petrol cars belching their fumes into the air of the sanctuary. As the great governmental towers begin to fill the horizon, the tram rapidly slows to halt as we approach radius two. To my right are the twin

concrete towers which were the destination of my daily transit for the last five years, I hated arriving at this station but thats not where I am going today, today I will continue centre ward to the Stadium in radius one. Few people travel into the origin as only the top government officials work there, but today all of the people of Katan will be at the assessment. The bursts to its cruising speed again, and within seconds it grinds to a halt and a swarm of people burst forth from the opening doors and begin make their way across the marble columned square.

I glance towards the hexagonal windows above me that form the skylight and am amazed to see through the thick glass the greenish blue sky above. I long to see the sky in its entirety. The origin is totally different to radius fourteen where I live now, or twelve where I grew up, it's clean, the buildings are formed from shimmering glass, and sleek cars and hover ships jostle for position around them silently, the air even smells fresher. As I walk across the plaza I pass between the three great stone hands holding the symbols of Katan: The sword symbolising the the strength of our military, the hammer representing the will of our workers and the

missile which speaks of the past we have risen from and what our dome protects us from. I glance behind me checking that Xan is still with me and I see the nervous excitement that we both share in her iridescent green eyes. I'm glad she's here with me. We cross the polished marble floor and salute the the twin golden statues of our eternal leader and are shaken as overhead a monorail hurtles from the northern outer radii towards the glass pinnacles in the origin. It's there, the great building stands before me its walls curving away from me and I continue to approach the stone columns on the building that I have observed longingly from a distance and ascend the stairs to the stadium, to my destiny.

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CHAPTER TWO

Assesment admittance

I have seen the brutality of the annual assessment process for the Agoge; only the very best of the graduating class will be selected for service, and only those who complete their training will be granted full Katanian citizenship.

Each of the candidates know what will be

waiting for us when we spill forth from the vomitorium into the arena. Since childhood I have watched from the stands and have dedicated countless hours training in my free time at the gym in preparation. A knot of fear tightens in my stomach as I remember the bruised and broken bodies dragged from the arena after they failed their assessment.

After a few moments queuing I find myself at the admission desk, confronted by a tall dark-haired man with eyes so piercing it feels like they could penetrate stone: Ariston Maxton, Chief Ephora of the Praetorian Guard. The weight of his years of experience and responsibility are carved in creases across his brow and etched in the corners of his eyes, which have seen more than anyone would ever dare to ask. The final decision about who would serve in the honourable Praetorian Guard rests with him and him alone.

"Name?" He asks, not wasting breath on any unnecessary pleasantries.

"Cassius Pandora."

"Chip?" he demands.

I present my arm and he scans the mark in my forearm that bears my identification chip, holding

my personal details and biometric data.

"Proceed to holding room 4."

I nod and make my way down the marble columned corridor to the waiting room on the left glancing behind me watching as Xan has her chip scanned. I approach the holding room and the door slides open. Inside the plain white room is a middle-aged woman sitting at a desk. She passes me a stack of clothing and directs me to a bank of doors behind her. I enter, remove my scarlet robe, place it into a receptacle on the wall, and start to put on the uniform. It is a tight-fitting red and gold jumpsuit and athletic shoes. After dressing, I press a green glowing pad next to the door and it opens into a room filled with the rest of this year's assessment group.

Milling around the room are most of my assessment class of 30 waiting there on the rows of benches. Some are doing warm up exercises, others are in groups laughing and joking, but many are sitting in a stony silence mentally preparing for the ordeal to come.

I make my way over to my colleagues from the Doxa House. I wouldn't call them friends, but

there is a bond between us that only exists between Doxans.

There are 6 of us in this year's class.

Brutus is a monster of a man, considerably taller than me, with short black hair, and he could well be twice my weight. Despite his size, he doesn't often use his strength to his advantage. I had only once seen him in a fight and that didn't last long. When we were thirteen some of the kids from (another hallhall) who were about to be assessed were picking fights at random to train for the assessment, and one of them threw a large rock at him whilst hurling abuse. Just one punch hospitalised him and he ended up missing his assessment and having to wait until the next year.

Chiron really doesn't have much of a physical presence. He's about my size and definitely not built for combat. The one thing he does have in his favour is his intellect. There are few who can match his tactical brilliance. Whenever he finds himself in danger, he makes use of his environment and the surrounding objects to great advantage. Cunning, stealth, and ingenuity are his greatest strengths.

Cassandra is one of the most beautiful girls

in the sanctuary: blonde, slim, buxom and she knows it. She often uses this to her advantage. Those of us who know her find it hilarious when we see her taking advantage of her looks and using her girlish charms on unsuspecting guys before her viper-like instincts move her in for the kill. She used to try that sort of thing with us, but the more we got to know her the less it works. Despite her beauty, I don't really have interest in her sexually.

Apollo is an amazing orator. He could talk his way out of anything. He isn't really a violent man, but he is one of the most ambitious I have met. The Agoge to him is a chance to prove himself worthy of a position in the government. I wouldn't put it past him of one day achieving the position of chancellor.

Then there's Xan: sweet, girlish, and unassuming, but susceptible to the most violent rages. When she is pushed to her limit there is no going back. A fury erupts and she becomes a banshee. Her eyes burn like fire, and I would hate to be standing in her way because I fear I'd be ripped to shreds.

I take my seat alongside Chiron who I can sense is running through his mind every possible

scenario that will be placed before us. "What do you think, Chi?" I ask, even a small amount of Chi's wisdom will definitely be of value in the stadium.

"You know what's going to happen, Cas. You've been to countless assessments before."

"Yeah, but it's different when it's us."

"True, but you remember those who were selected before. You know what you need to do." He clearly doesn't want to go talk at this point. Talking doesn't help anyway. I just have to do what I have to do. I close my eyes and try to focus. The room disappears, replaced with blackness, visions of past trials fill my mind, combat, endurance, pain and loyalty. The darkness surrounding me retreats and I see a crowd of thousands, baying for blood and I stand alone in the arena. It felt like hours had passed before a loud siren sounds and the doors swing open.

I pass through into the darkness, towards the arena, towards my destiny.

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CHAPTER THREE

Entering the Arena First Fights

As I walk through the tunnel, I feel the knot

in my stomach tighten. I can hear the crowd in the stands above me and the roar increases to a deafening level as I enter the vast horseshoe-shaped stadium, its white marble stands filled to capacity with all of the sanctuary's important families, nobility, and government officials. The feelings of pride, fear, and duty fight a great battle within my heart. I feel like I could throw up. I fall into my place in the line and march over to my position, doing my best to ignore the crowd and follow the candidate in front between the two columns of heavily armoured Praetorian guards that line the route to the parade ground. I reach my pre assigned position in the arena and turn towards the head of the stadium, towards the royal box heads bowed, averting our gaze from the worshipful emperor and his chancellors.

As soon as we have taken our places, Ariston Maxton, standing in alongside the emporer, raises his hand and instantly silence falls. Our worshipful Supreme Leader, Emperor Laconicus stands and the crowd follows suit as the national anthem begins to play from unseen sources. It is a knee jerk reaction that brings my hand into a salute with my right arm out to the side and my hand pointing towards but slightly

over my head with the palm downwards. As the anthem plays, the stadium is filled with a crowd of respectful statues, hearts swollen with pride for our great sanctuary and its magnificent leader.

The anthem progresses and the last few bars resonate within my mind as I find myself silently repeating the words.

As the music fades on the 4th beat of the grand drum, in unison each of the thousands of people in the stadium beat our chests, stamp, and raise our hands to face our Worshipful Emperor.

Raising both hands, he prepares to speak.

"People of Katan: Citizens, Civilians, Soldiers: Let us take a moment to remember the desolation that came upon our ancestors so many years ago--the great suffering, hunger, and disease. The bombs destroyed everything that humanity had built up over thousands of years. Death, famine, sickness, and war swept over the face of the earth. But we overcame!!!"

"From the ashes of the destruction we rose. Under the leadership of our Eternal Emperor, our ancestors found the strength to endure the dark times. Their spirit gave them the fortitude to unite into a

community of survivors from different nationalities, races, and cultures with a united will to survive."

"Over the decades our tribe grew, taking in those who were pure: the un-mutated and the strong. Only the best were accepted into our society. We built up our city, and it grew stronger and stronger, but then war returned to us. The despicable Canthians attacked us! They killed our brothers and we swore that never again would Katanian blood be spilled by foreign sword within our great city, our sanctuary!"

"The Agoge are the embodiment of that promise we made. They were formed in the early days of re-civilisation in response to the dangers our forefathers faced from beast, mutant, and man. The other cities of the Decapolis protected themselves behind walls of wood and stone. We Katanians were different; our walls were formed from the greatest strength, Men."

"Candidates! You stand on the threshold of acceptance to the Agoge, and for your valour, I salute you. Prove yourself to Katan. Prove yourself to me!"

"For the glory of Katan, let the assessments begin."

Saluting once again, suppressing tears of

pride, I turn to the side of the arena and take my place on benches waiting to be called.

Ariston ascends to the podium of the royal box again "Candidates, you are aware that only the finest will be accepted into the Agoge and fight for our great sanctuary in service of our worshipful Emperor. The tests that you will endure today will assess every aspect of your capacity as a warrior, your strengths and weaknesses, your character and your loyalty. They will also determine where your skills will place you, the Frumentarii; tasked with policing our sanctuary, maintaining order, loyalty and honour, the Equites; the masters of the technological arts developing our weapons and tactics, the Hoplites; the last line of defence of our great city or the Praetorian Guard; the pride of Katane masters of all aspects of combat, defenders of our assets in the far reaches of the empire."

"Over the years," Ariston continued, "you may have witnessed many assessments and have seen how the assessments are done differently each year. This year we will begin by testing your combat proficiency. You will be assigned an opponent and weapon at random and scored not only on victory but on courage, tactical

expertise, and technique. Victors will progress instantly to the next round of testing, remaining candidates, if deemed fit, will be reassessed in a second bout.

"Let us waste no more time" He fumbles in a bowl and pulls out a piece of paper. "Our first combatants fighting with dual batons will be Apollos [surname] and Agacia Actus."

Sitting on the sidelines I watch as Apollos approaches the sandy square at the centre of the stadium where the referee hands him and his opponent each a pair of 50cm batons with their handle at a right angle from the body. His opponent is a sturdy looking girl with short black hair and a vicious look in her eyes as she twirls the batons and immediately takes a squatting stance with her right hand towards Apollos, who, as a left-hander, holds the left baton on guard across his body.

At the call of "Ready!" they both nod to the referee who holds his staff at length between them. "Fight!" he shouts. He withdraws the staff and the short haired girl immediately throws herself at Apollos, her right baton swinging down diagonally towards his head. Bracing for the impact, he holds up

his baton and deflects the blow before levelling a swift kick to the girl's abdomen, knocking her back. She retreats for a moment and, after a few small attacks and parries from both sides, leaping into the air, she flings both batons towards Apollo's' head. Anticipating the attack, he was prepared and held his batons in an inverted V shape, again deflecting her attack. Then he throws himself at her and lands a solid lunge with one baton hitting her neck and the other her shoulder. Grimacing in pain, she falls to the ground.

At this point, the rules of valour declare that you must let your opponent stand and Apollos steps back. Raising his baton and acknowledging the crowd, he allows her time to stand. Slowly standing and taking up her guarded position, she stares venomously into the eyes of Apollos who makes a few short lunges into her reach before quickly stepping back.

After a few attempts, his plan worked. His lunge lured her in, and she made a single handed lunge. Apollos reacts instantly by striking the hand holdind the baton, releasing his left baton. Before it hit the ground, he had seized her hand. Then, using her forward momentum, he threw her over his shoulder and

had her pinned to the floor with his remaining baton to her neck.

"Halt!!!" yells the referee as the crowd roared. Apollos stands, raising his baton in triumph, breathing in the rapturous applause. Collecting the other baton, he returned it to the weapon table and took his seat on the victors' bench.

Ariston briefly applauds from the balcony before raising his hand, "Next will be Chiron and Persus fighting with the staff."

Chiron approaches the arena his eyes scanning his opponent, a taller stronger boy who you would think was sure to defeat him, but you can never bet against Chiron's brain. After receiving the 2m staff they took up their guards. Chiron was the first to move, apparently throwing all of his weight behind a lateral blow, which his opponent anticipated and guarded himself. What he hasn't anticipated is that Chiron expects the parry and suddenly changes his line of attack, looping over the staff and bringing it crashing down on Persus' shoulder. The sickening crack echoes around the arena, Persus is clearly hurt but grimaces resisting showing any reaction. Chiron withdraws after the strike to what he feels is a

good distance but Persus steps in and makes a stroke at Chiron's feet, striking just above the right ankle. Chiron staggers but maintains his balance until a straight thrust to his chest knocks him to the ground; Persus then leaps into the air planting a vicious swipe on Chiron's chest as he lays panting for breath.

Amid the boos of the crowd for the villainous act, Chiron regains his composure raising to his feet leaning heavily on his staff. Persus leaps and fiercely swipes over his head. Chiron anticipates this and, holding his staff horizontally above his head, he comfortably absorbed the impact. His staff, however, does not and snaps in half. Reacting instantly Chiron made a downward sweep with the two halves of the staff, striking Persus on both sides of his rib cage and knocking the wind out of him.

Chiron then commits himself to a flurry of blows to the abdomen and head of Persus with seemingly little effect.

Struggling to land any attacks on his opponent at short range, Persus throws his staff behind him and flies Chiron, taking hold of his wrists and wrenching them so that the broken staff falls to the ground.

Then throws Chiron across the field of play landing in a heap on the floor. Knowing Persus won't grant him the privilege of a moment to stand, he closes his hand on the ground, taking up some sand as he does so. As Persus stepped over to him, Chiron hurled the sand into his eyes, temporally blinding him, and then lands a series of calculated body blows before delivering a knockout blow with his elbow, striking the jaw with a sickening crack. After the bout, he takes his seat next to Apollos who punches him in the arm to congratulate him. He watched from a distance as Persus has to be carried from the field of play.

The bouts continued with Brutus fighting a girl half his size. Turning down the wooden sword he was offered, he floored her with a single punch. Cassandra was not so fortunate. She was matched up against a smaller girl whom no one had ever seen fight, which led Cassandra to severely underestimate her. By making stupid mistakes in her fight with bull whips and leaving herself within range, she was tripped soon afterward and she found herself in an inescapable choke hold. The referee had to step in and stop before Cassandra lost consciousness. She would

have to fight again. Next it would be Xan's turn.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Xan and Cas fight

"Xanthe Alexandra will be fighting Arkantos Tatum"
Maxton's voice carries across the arena. I glance over at her and catch the glint of fear and trepidation in her eyes. Arkantos is not who I was hoping she would be against. Over the years Tatum had a developed a reputation as a brutal vicious thug. He has already accumulated more scars than most praetorians gain in their entire careers. He isn't t all that big, but Xan was at a clear physical disadvantage.

The weapon that was selected for combat was the Karif, a wooden glove and arm guard with a protruding wooden sword blade. The Karif is based on a similar design to weapons used by many assassins in the wilderness.

After equipping the Karif, the referee makes his call and the fight began. Arkantos advanced slowly, his back hunched over, blades crossed defending his face. Xan remained motionless. Anticipating an

attack, he continues his slow advance. The watching crowd sits in hushed amazement at the larger stronger candidate's trepidation but each of the candidates understood having seen Xan in one of her rages and know what she is capable of. Arkantos bears many a scar from driving her into one of her outbursts. Further he advanced, yet Xan remained motionless. He lunges swinging his Karif in an upper cutting motion whilst guarding himself with the other hand. Xan lurches to the side but Arkantos reacts quickly and barreles his attack to the left, missing with his hand but striking her in the chest with his shoulder, he proceeds to lift her over his head to throw her. In a swift motion, she threw her shoulders back, pivoted, breaking free from the grip of one of his hands, drops her legs around his neck, gripping his head with her thighs, and began slamming the base of her Karif into his skull. After a brief stagger, Arkantos recovers and with his hands free he drives his blades over his head into Xan's chest causing her to release her grip and fall to the ground with a sickening thud. Regaining his composure he callously lashed out and sharply kicks at her shoulder, sending her flying across the field of battle. The crowd

roars both in admiration and in condemnation before the referee steps in to allow her to rise. Holding a bloody wound on her shoulder, she rises spitting blood onto the floor. The expression in her eyes was one of pure rage as she screeches flinging herself at him with her hands flailing so quickly there was little he can to repel the onslaught. She lashes his chest, shoulder, groin, face, and back before bringing a double handed leaping strike on his head as he doubles over. Oblivious to his calls to halt the referee has to drag her away to rescue him from further onslaught.

The audience sat stunned for the duration of her frenzy and erupts as Arkantos falls to the ground, as do I.

It was probably a few minutes but it seemed like hours before I was finally called to my bout; the preparation benches had almost completely cleared when I was called. The only other candidate left is Priscus so it is clear who I will be fighting, I can also see that the only weapon left on the table is a long spear with a rounded tip and a shield. I had fought Priscus a few times before in the drills at school; he is one of the most slippery

fighters I have ever had to deal with, even when the fight seemed to be won, he found some way to escape from a hold, knock an attacker off balance, or land an unseen attack and claim victory.

We approach the centre of the arena saluted each other and the emperor before I lined up my spear over my shield. This is it: my chance to prove myself before the people, the chancellors, and the emperor.

My heart is pounding. The sound of the crowd withdraws into a hiss as I focus on the task in hand. My heart beat is throbbing inside my head as I see the referee withdraw his staff signalling the start of combat. I hold the round steel shield in my left arm guarding my body from thigh to neck. We circle each other, watching for any lapse in defence. Eyeing him, I look for flesh: his head protruding from the top of his shield would be the obvious choice, but he'd expect that. Stepping around his shield could work. I make a number of strafing runs around him hoping that he won't react quickly enough and leave some space for me to strike but as I do so, he takes this opportunity to attack. I have just enough time to raise my shield and duck for the

spear to only slightly grace my scalp. Throwing myself backwards, I ensure that my shield is correctly positioned to deflect the next thrust which comes moments later. Deflecting it, I see my chance, close the distance, and land a solid kick against his shield knocking him backwards. Taking advantage of my destabilised opponent, I leap and aim a thrust downward over his shield that lands on his left shoulder. He recoils, punching with his shield arm, striking me on my chest under the armpit. Pain etched in both of our faces we both withdraw to a more defensive position and continue circling regaining our breath.

The blow to my chest throbs and my breath is short. I fight for every breath of air. Staring into Priscus' eyes, I can see his frustration at allowing me to land that hit. His defence has risen a little and he is holding the shield slightly higher and firmer. I can use this. I take a couple of steps forward and launch myself into a lunge, aiming the spear at his chest as he lifts the shield to defend himself. Then I drop the point and drive it into his thigh which elicits a loud grunt, I then proceed to slam my shield against his, pushing him to

the ground. He tries to regain his balance, but a firm kick to his shield sends him flailing across the floor, losing his shield in the process.

Stepping back to allow him to stand, I see the referee in my peripheral vision giving me the signal to drop my shield. I willingly oblige; I have the upper hand anyway. The shield crashes to the floor and I take up my stance with the spear in both hands.

He arises, leaving his shield on the ground. He is moving less smoothly now, but the strike doesn't seem to have caused that much damage. We circle each other. With the occasional thrust and parry we try to lure an attack, but neither of us are buying it. Whilst watching his footwork I notice from the way he is squatting that his knee is in a very forward position. I find it impossible to resist; I loop my spear up beating his away and drive the point of my spear at his knee. Missed! The spear buries its head in the ground, breaking in half, and in an instant Priscus swings his left foot toward me in a roundhouse kick. With a bright red flash, the world goes dark. I stagger and fall to my knees, fighting to retain consciousness. I shake my head to

clear my vision and finally stand in time to see that the referee has demanded that Priscus drops his spear as well.

"The fight will continue with no weapons," we are told by the referee. Feeling groggy, I slowly stand and raise my fists to shield my head. I fire off a few range finding jabs, but his arms are longer. I'm in trouble. He launches a flurry of blows at me and I draw my arms around my head, feeling the full force of each blow to my arms and shoulders. Somehow, my head remains undamaged. I open my guard to see that his head is within centimetres or mine so I take my chance. Putting all of my weight behind it, I throw my head forward and lunge. The crack that reverberates around my skull is incredible as the world flashes red before my eyes. It seems he took the impact more severely than me as he crouches down, clutching his head in his hands. Knowing he wouldnt give me the chance to recover I lunge and tackle him to the ground, pin him down, and start to pound on his face. I manage to land only a couple of hits before he escapes between my legs, punching my groin for good measure. We both force ourselves to a standing position and I reach

out and grapple with him trying to lock a choke hold onto him. We both fight to grip each other's throat and are gasping for air when a staff appears between us. "HALT!!!" The referee gestures towards the emperor who has one finger raised. The Emperor begins to speak, but it takes a moment for my hearing to return, "...and that is the reason that I called an end to this trial: for equally they fought, equally they yielded. Each is worthy of victory. As is our custom, valour and skill have their reward. Two fought and both won." He says raising both hands. My head begins to clear as the crowd erupts in praise.

I won... it takes a moment to sink in. I step back from Priscus and recover my breath. My senses return to normal and the hiss of the crowd returns to a great roar, deafening. I give my salutations to the Emperor and hobble over to the victor's bench with my head throbbing, lungs burning, and limbs aching. Approaching my victorious clan mates, I crash on the bench.

Apollos slaps me on the back, hitting a raw wound; I have no strength to react, "Great fight bro! You should have heard the crowd! The Emperor was on his feet ever since you kicked Priscus's shield out

of his hand."

"Thanks," I gasp, exhausted.

Over the course of the first 2 hours of competition there were 15 fights and 16 victors. From my clan, only Cassandra failed to make it through the first round, but in the second round she won with no problems and joined the ranks of the 4 second round victors. 30 entered the stadium. Now only 20 remain.

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CHAPTER FIVE

first creature fights

We have only an hour to rest in the waiting room before we are called back into the arena; we take our positions in the line facing Emperor Laconicus. Maxton rises and the crowd falls silent. "Candidates, you have shown your strength and valour when faced with a familiar foe. In the wasteland, you will encounter dangers you could never imagine. For this test we have brought in a selection of vicious wild beasts from the furthest reaches of the wilderness."

"You will be divided into pairs and then you must defeat whatever may come your way."

"The first competitors will be Chiron and

Cassandra!"

Moments later, I am in the stands at a safe distance from the arena as Chiron, wilding a whip in his right hand and a short sword in his left, takes his place a short distance from Cassandra, who wields a bow with two daggers strapped to her belt.

A metallic clattering fills the arena as the door releasing the beasts is opened. Immediately the silver creatures surge forth. They run on all fours with powerful hind legs, their savage yellow fangs dripping with the blood from their last meal. They are at least a meter in length, and they move so quickly in a circle around the edge of the arena that Cassandra has little chance of hitting her mark with her bow. She fires a barrage of arrows which ricochet off the walls of the arena.

The beasts take notice of this and turn their attention to the competitors. One of them makes a lunge at Chiron who swiftly lashes his whip, leaving a crimson streak across the back of the animal which quickly retreats to the edge of the arena. Another beast charges towards Cassandra who manages to land an arrow in its shoulder but the beast's momentum continues as it leaps into the air.

Cassandra curls up into a ball knives outstretched preparing for the attack. The fanged mouth opens, prepared to tear flesh from bone but suddenly the beast recoils as Cassandra looks up to see a whip encircling the beast's neck. Chiron jerks back on the whip and impales the snared beast on his sword. "You owe me for that one!" he calls. He looks up just in time to see another beast charging at him! Moments before it has a chance to attack, an arrow strikes its head and causes it to fall, tumbling to a halt in a cloud of dust at his feet.

"I pay my debts," she replies.

Chiron runs at one of the beasts and hurls the whip forcefully. Releasing the handle, it binds the wounded beast's front legs and causes it to fall in tumbling to a halt in a crowd of dust, just as the dust clears the beast howls after receiving an arrow to the heart.

Chiron shouts something indistinguishable from the noise of the crowd and the pair take up their blades and charge at the remaining pair of beasts, who are a few meters from the door to the arena. Chiron cleaves the head from one and the other flees at the oncoming attack, receiving Cassandra's blades in

its back as a parting gift.

The crowd roars at their victory as Cassandra casually strides over, retrieves her knives, and holds them aloft, accepting the crowd's applause before embracing Chiron. Chiron more humbly offers a small wave in acknowledgement as they make their way into the stands.

Brutus is teamed with Priscus and they make short work of a few dozen half-meter spiders.

Apollo is teamed with the girl who beat Cassandra in their first round bout. His weapon of choice is a trident and net, with which he expertly ensnares several of the lizard-like creatures before impaling them. The girl, whose name is Ephany, shows her expertise with a [long handled sword or blade ended staff].

Several more fights progress with the candidates facing unspeakable beasts before my name is called. I await to hear who I will be fighting with when Ariston draws the name from the bowl: "Xanthe Alexandra". I glance over at her and see the glint in her eye. We don't need to say anything; we both know this couldn't be any better. We have fought together countless times and know each other's rhythms

so clearly it is like we are fighting as a single unit. We descend the stairs and approach the weapon table. I take 3 spears and a short sword, whilst Xan takes a handful of throwing knives and her trademark weapon: 30cm steel cat claws. I have seen her do so much damage with them in training; they suit her frenzied fighting style well. I take a breath as we approach the centre. I glance over at her, and I know that I can trust her in this. "Stay close Xan," I whisper. I didn't need to say it, but she gives a focused nod anyway. We take our guarded position and fix our gaze beneath the royal box as the steel door opens and the beast springs forth.

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CHAPTER SIX

Cas and Xan creature fight

The monstrosity that storms towards us, hissing and roaring in anger, is definitely the biggest animal I've ever seen. Its horned head and massive body sow seeds of terror that almost overcome me. How is it possible to defeat something like that? We are Katanian nothing can defeat us.

As the beast roars towards us I glance at

Xan, nodding my head in a manner that suggests we should divide. As the beast is about to hit, she nods in agreement.

When the beast is only meters away we leap to the side, the beast's jaws snapping at where Xan and I were moments before. I take a slash at its back with my sword. The tip of my blade passes within millimeters of the beast's neck, as I gather myself I notice that Xan's claws have streaks of blood running down them as the beast rears up stomping on the ground.

Again it charges. Leaping aside, I aim a thrust of my spear at its heart but its skin is so thick it makes little impact. The beast circles around to attack again. This time I aim the spear at the beast's legs, aiming to trip it. As he charges me, I match his pace, sprint across the arena, and hurl my spear. It strikes the sand just in front of the beast, and the beast just smashes right through it, sending splinters of wood everywhere! As I turn, I see that Xan is lying on the floor with the end of one of the 4 claws on her left hand snapped off. I'm unclear as to what happened. I run over to help her to her feet, "Are you ok?"

"Distract it!" she snarls through gritted teeth whilst nursing a gash on her left arm.

Knowing that she must have some sort of plan, I reach down and take one of the knives that she has strapped to her thigh. "Ok, but I'll need this"

"Draw it towards me," she says as I pull her to her feet. I begin running to the part of the arena where the beast is standing licking its wounds. I streak past its right shoulder, aiming the knife to hit its neck, but I misjudge and the knife lands in its chest. Wailing, the beast turns towards me and tries to charge, but I run in a tight circle so that the animal, with its great weight, can't follow me and it slams into the side of the arena. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Xan run across and take a flying leap through the air directly towards the beast. Her claws dig firmly into the beast's flank and it rears up onto its hind legs as Xan fights to stay attached. Once the beast returns to all fours, I see Xan repeatedly stabbing and slashing at the back of the beast tearing flesh from bone. The beast starts to run, trying to dislodge her from its back. Halfway across the arena, Xan loses her grip on the

claws, which stay impaled in the beast's back as she falls to the ground with a sickening crack.

"XAN!!!" I charge across to the arena towards her and at that moment I realize that the beast is making another run. With my lungs burning, I give everything; I have to get there first. I detach one of spears from my back and throw it. It slides through the air and firmly embeds itself into the beast's back to the sound of a great howl. I am sprinting only meters from where Xan is lying, but I have to stop the beast's charge. I leap over her as she lies on the ground and run a few more meters, stopping between her and the beast. Removing my last spear, I brace its end in the sand and stand my ground, aiming the point at the neck of the charging beast.

Staring me in the eyes, the beast continues its charge until it is upon me.

Crack!!!

The spear embeds itself in the throat of the beast, sending wood splintering everywhere as I am thrown to the side. The beast crashes down to the ground, rolling just to the side of where Xan is lying.

My head throbs as I lift myself up from the ground and run over to Xan where she lies on the ground. "Xan!!! Are you ok?" I exclaim.

She rolls over and looks into my eyes, "Finish him!" she gasps spitting blood on to the ground.

I look over and see the monstrous animal panting for breath a few meters away. I stride over to it, take the short sword in my hand, and, with all of my remaining strength, I drive my blade between the two ribs into the heart. The creature makes one last breath before its head hits the ground.

Xan was sitting up by the time I got back to her, "I don't know what happened, but thank you Cas."

I smiled as I helped her to her feet, "Any time."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Execution, escape and assassination

Shortly after the last bout finishes, the victorious candidates are called down to the arena floor to await the final task; usually a task of

loyalty or pain endurance. I know that I would be willing to do anything for Katan, willing to perform any task, endure any torture for our sanctuary and our Supreme Leader.

As Maxton takes to the podium I fantasise about the final selection and receiving the wooden sword, the symbol of an Agoge cadet.

"This morning you have shown both your strength and valour, in the face of the enemy and in the face of the unknown. The Emperor requires your total loyalty, up to and beyond the point of death. You must now show that you are willing to do His will which will be required during your time serving Katan." I notice behind us that some of the police are shepherding a line of people in ragged clothes into a line behind us. "These men have all been found guilty of treason against Katan and have been deemed worthy of death. It will be your duty to bring the Supreme Leader's wrath down upon traitors like these. Today you must prove you are willing to kill for our emperor a rifle from the stand and take your positions in line. If you are unable to complete this task you will be rejected."

I walk forward towards the stand and take

the cold steel rifle from the rack that has been placed in front of the arena door. I take my place at the end of the line, facing a teenage girl with long auburn hair. I swallow hard and try to focus on the task in hand. She looks like Xan... I shake my head trying to get these thoughts out of my head. She's a traitor and deserves to die. I grit my teeth and prep my gun.

"Candidates," I hear Maxton's voice over the muted crowd. "Take your stance!" Cocking the gun and raising it to my eye line, I press the butt against my shoulder. I've never even fired a gun with real ammunition before; they are too expensive as no one has made any since the desolation. "Take aim!" Closing one eye, I look through the quivering iron sights of my gun at the girl beyond who has tears in her eyes. "On my count discharge your weapon. Three" My palms are sweating. I've never killed anyone before; can I really do this...? The Supreme Leader has called for it, so I must. "Two" She locks her eyes on mine with a tearful yet belligerent look in her eyes. "One" I take a breath as the image of her face etches itself further into my mind. "Fire!" My finger presses against the trigger, the crack of

bullets fills the arena, and the tip of my gun glows red, but the girl stays standing. I Missed! No, I couldn't have. I glance along the line to see that all remain standing, relief filling their eyes as they look to their sides and see that none of the prisoners have fallen. In the faces of the candidates the mixed emotions of despair and confusion can be clearly seen, except for those who are filled with fear, knowing that were too weak to the shot.

Maxton's voice pierces the confusion "The guns you have been given are training replicas. We would not waste valuable ammunition on traitors like these. Those of you who fired will be eligible for selection by the forces of the Agoge. The following candidates who did not fire will be eliminated: Candidates Caspa, Vespasian, Agacius and Sagcia, you may exit the arena. Guards, dismiss the prisoners."

The police who have been guarding the prisoners draw their swords, advance towards their prisoner, and swing. In seconds the floor lies littered with the heads and bodies that moments before were our targets. I look at the girl who I fired at and see something unexpected. She grapples with the sanctuary guard, who seconds later falls down with a

bloodcurdling scream grasping at a wound in his chest. The girl flees, blood dripping from her stolen blade. The other guards make chase as she makes her way up the steps into the crowd, cutting down another guard as she nears the exit. She disappears into one of the spectator concourses and she is gone.

The confusion of what just happened sends the crowd into a frenzy. Some join in the chase, others express their fury, and some just stand confused. A horn blast from the royal box to calm the situation and the emperor stands willing the crowd to be silent. "Bring him to me," he says to the guards in the arena. Two guards lift the fallen guard to his feet and slowly carry him to up the stairs towards the royal box. As they pass the crowd many of them hurl insults and stones at the man. Some even step up and spit at him; it takes a full minute before he stands before the Supreme Leader. "Katan is the greatest city of the Decapolis. We do not tolerate anything other than perfection! This man has been granted the honourable position of Sanctuary Guard and has failed in his duty, allowing a traitor to escape. In doing this, he has failed Katan, he has failed me, and he has failed each one of you. The penalty

for failure is death!!!" The crowd roars in agreement. "But wait... this man is a soldier of Katan. He has earned the right to avoid execution as a common prisoner. He has the right to choose his own path." Throwing a sheathed knife to his feet, the emperor looks him in the eye "Do the honorable thing."

The guard looks tentatively at the weapon and slowly bends to take the dagger in his hand. He removes the sheath and it drops to the floor. For a few seconds he toys with the blade in his hand, observes his reflection between the beautiful engravings on the blade, and plays the jewel encrusted handle. Lifting the dagger over his head, he raises his voice, "I do this not for my own glory, but for the good of the people of Katan. Carnis vel mortem!!! He lurches forward, and with a burst of speed he sprints towards the Supreme Leader before the guards can stop him.

A shot rings out around the arena, echoing around the walls as he falls down, blood streaming from his chest. The emperor lowers his gun and approaches the guard. "Rebel scum!" he spits, kicking him across the royal box.

"You will be defeated," pants the guard.

"They will see the truth and your line will fall; you cannot contain the people forever. The people will rise!" Another shot rings out... silence follows.

The emperor ascends the podium at the edge of the balcony and speaks coldly. "People of Katan, you have seen today the fate of traitors. Let this be a warning to any of you who might consider acting against me or against the people of Katan, as no traitor shall live! Maxton, continue!"

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